

Interior alumni eye return for a second Trump term

By Michael Doyle | 04/24/2024 01:42 PM EDT

E&E News via Politico/Greenwire (April 24, 2024) - A Trump administration Interior Department 2.0 — if it happens — could well turn out to be a reboot of the original.

Particularly at the department's upper levels, Interior veterans of the first Trump administration are being cited by their former colleagues and others with skin in the game as strong potential candidates to serve again, if former President Donald Trump wins against President Joe Biden in November.

"I think there are going to be a lot of familiar faces that will want to go back," said Cole Rojewski, Interior's congressional liaison between 2019 and 2021. "I think a lot of people enjoyed their experience in the Trump administration."



Then-Interior Secretary David Bernhardt speaks during an event while serving under then-President Donald Trump.

Many remain hesitant to publicly 'fess up to specific Interior ambitions right now. But in interviews with former Trump administration officials, Capitol Hill veterans, GOP-connected lobbyists and others, a number of names keep popping up.

Those among the frequently mentioned range from former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt down to other political appointees now leading agencies in Republican-led states.

“I think there are some great people,” Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-Mont.), Trump’s first Interior secretary, told E&E News, adding that “there are a lot of areas where the president is going to need some help [and] there are some folks that served before and understand the issues.”

Zinke stepped down after two years in the top job in the face of ethics inquiries that he called partisan and unfounded. He was subsequently elected to a House seat that he had held previously. Zinke said both that he has “not been asked” about a possible second appointment and that a “president is hard to say no to.”

The former Navy SEAL officer further stressed that “there are a lot of variables” affecting the decisionmaking both of an incoming president and a potential appointee. Down-ballot election results, partisan balances in the House and Senate and the idiosyncrasies of Trump’s approach to team-building all play a role.

“There are a lot of people who [were] involved in his first term and played a significant role and made a great contribution. I’m sure they’d be keen on going back and completing the work that we began,” said former Trump-era Bureau of Land Management official William Perry Pendley.

Pendley recently authored [Interior policy recommendations](#) as part of Project 2025, an initiative organized by the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank to support the next administration. They reflect the kind of energy-focused, resource-extracting and deregulatory playbook that is expected to dominate a potential second Trump term.

“You bet,” Pendley said when asked if he would be interested in a return engagement. The 78-year-old attorney and author associated with the Reagan-era Sagebrush Rebellion was nominated by Trump to be bureau director, but only led in an acting capacity after he failed to secure Senate confirmation.

The conversations about who might go where can take on a bit of a government-in-exile feel, as veterans of the first Trump administration bide their time and stay in touch. Rojewski noted that “we basically do a bi-monthly happy hour with the old Trump Interior team,” where alliances may be cemented and future scenarios may be bandied about.

“Yeah, it’s been happening,” former Interior chief of staff Todd Willens told E&E News. “I mean, for some people, they started the day after they left the Trump administration, thinking there would be a second one.”

Willens and a number of other Interior alumni identified former Deputy Interior Secretary Katharine MacGregor as a possibility for the top job.

MacGregor, 41, rose through several high-pressure Capitol Hill and Interior jobs before [she was confirmed as deputy](#) by the Senate on a 58-38 vote in February 2020. She joined Florida Power & Light when she left the department and is now vice president for environmental services with NextEra Energy, of which Florida Power & Light is a subsidiary.

MacGregor declined to comment on the speculation about a future appointment.

Plum spots

Potentially, a lot of positions are in play.

The 2020 edition of the "[Plum Book](#)," a quadrennial listing of presidential-appointed positions in federal agencies, listed upward of 100 Trump appointees in the Interior Department. These positions range from an assortment of special advisers to a five-person crew in the Office of Scheduling and Advance and up to the heavy-duty policy positions that require Senate confirmation.

"There are going to be a lot of people competing for these jobs," said one Republican former official, granted anonymity to speak freely because of the sensitivity of personnel decisions. "For a job like Interior, there are going to be a lot of governors and senators and former officials all very, very interested in that great job."

Two GOP governors from the Dakotas, Gov. Kristi Noem from South Dakota and Gov. Doug Burgum from North Dakota, epitomize to some fellow Republicans the kind of energy-minded state executive who could land atop Interior or another department. Noem has been particularly enthusiastic in her support for Trump, while the Stanford Business School-educated Burgum has offered support since ending his own short-lived presidential bid.

Zinke's successor as Interior secretary, David Bernhardt, has returned to his law firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck while keeping close to the Trump circle in several ways. He has joined other Trump administration alumni in the America First Policy Institute, as chair of its Center for American Freedom.

His name repeatedly pops up as a contender for a key spot in a second Trump administration, and the speculation extends beyond Interior, where the [54-year-old attorney](#) has already served a total of about 12 years under two presidents.

"I have been asked by folks out there what was my opinion of David," Willens said. "They're interested in, 'Do you think he would look at other positions, adviser to the president or DOJ or anything like that?' My viewpoint is that he's qualified for all of those."

Bernhardt told E&E News in an email that "only the campaign, or former President Trump, have the ability to suggest who might be asked to serve in a second Trump administration," while also adding that he expects considerable interest among others eager to serve.

“Given the damage caused by the Biden administration’s out of control border policies, relentless inflation, and ridiculous energy policy, many former Trump administration officials, and multitudes of individuals who did not previously serve, are working to help elect former President Trump,” Bernhardt said. “Many will be interested in serving in a future Trump administration.”

The Trump campaign did not respond to several requests for comment.

Some potential candidates who previously served in the Trump administration are now working outside the Beltway.

Several Interior Trump veterans, for instance, suggested Amanda Kaster for a slot such as assistant secretary for lands and mineral management. Kaster is now director of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, after having served in the first Trump administration in several Interior spots.

Kaster declined to comment.

One of her former colleagues at Interior, Andrea Travnicek, is likewise now serving as North Dakota’s head of the Department of Water Resources.

At Interior, Travnicek served as deputy assistant secretary for land and minerals management, as well as principal deputy assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks. Other Republicans see her as a future candidate to return with a higher rank. She could not be reached to comment.

Zinke also suggested Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Cam Sholly, a career staffer who he called “the best there is in the park system” as a possible National Park Service director. Sholly declined to comment on the speculation.

“I think you’re going to see a huge run after the convention,” Rojewski said. “Once [Trump] secures that nomination, I think that’s when everything will kick off very quickly, and things are going to start moving.”

Reporter Hannah Northey contributed.