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Native American protesters march against the Dakota Access oil pipeline near Cannon Ball, N

Native American protesters march against the Dakota Access oil pipeline near Cannon Ball, North Dakota, in January 2019. Appointment of a Native American interior secretary could change the government's relationship with the country's original peoples. (CNS photo/Terray Sylvester, Reuters)



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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the Dec. 18 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

This week saw trailblazing choices by President-elect Joe Biden for leaders of U.S. government agencies that are key for action on climate change, land use, pollution and — especially — environmental justice.

If confirmed by the Senate, U.S. Rep. Deb Haaland, a Democrat from New Mexico who is a member of the Laguna Pueblo, would become the first Native American Cabinet secretary, as head of Interior Department, which manages the nation's public lands — 20% of the country — the government's often-contentious relationship with Native American tribes.

Haaland campaigned for Congress on a climate-conscious platform that included shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy; protecting indigenous rights, which she links to climate justice; and ensuring access to clean air, water and housing for all. As a member of the House Natural Resources Committee, she has been critical of Trump administration policies aimed at making it easier to mine and drill for oil on public lands.

After her selection was announced, Haaland tweeted, "A voice like mine has never been a Cabinet secretary or at the head of the Department of Interior. Growing up in my mother's Pueblo household made me fierce. I'll be fierce for all of us, our planet, and all of our protected land. I am honored and ready to serve."

Robert Bullard, who is often described as the father of the environmental justice movement, tweeted praise for Biden for "listening to frontline communities" and making justice a "core principle" in his Cabinet choices.

Climate change and land rights are issues facing indigenous people outside of the U.S., as well. Could having a Native American in the Cabinet have an influence beyond U.S. borders? Andrew Miller, advocacy director for the non-profit Amazon Watch, told EarthBeat that the Interior Department has an international program that could support indigenous movements elsewhere.

But he added, "That said, over the last two years Representative Haaland was one of the main champions in the House of Representatives for Indigenous rights and protection of the Amazon rainforest, and her active voice on those international issues will be greatly missed. There are of course other Congressional proponents on those issues but few have the same credibility she does as an Indigenous woman who fought for Native American rights in her own territories prior to joining Congress

in 2019."

In another first in the incoming administration, Michael S. Regan would become the first Black man to head the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Regan, who has headed the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality since 2017, previously led the southeast regional office of the non-profit Environmental Defense Fund.

He was chosen over Mary Nichols, chair of the California Air Resources Board, who was criticized by environmental justice groups who said California's carbon cap-and-trade policy, which she engineered, allowed industries to continue to pollute low-income neighborhoods.

Another pick that signals a strong focus on environmental justice is the choice of environmental lawyer Brenda Mallory to head the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Mallory served as counsel for that office during the Obama administration and has also worked in the EPA.

Most recently, Mallory has been director of regulatory policy at the non-profit Southern Environmental Law Center. She also worked with the Climate 21 Project to draft recommendations on environmental issues for the incoming administration.

Biden's environmental and climate team will also feature other Obama administration officials in new roles. They include former Secretary of State John Kerry, who will lead on international climate issues as special president envoy on climate, a newly created Cabinet-level position, and Gina McCarthy, who will take the lead on the domestic climate front. McCarthy, a past EPA administrator, has most recently been president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a non-profit environmental group that has filed numerous lawsuits against the Trump administration in an effort to block its dismantling of the country's environmental safeguards.

That effort will undoubtedly continue. The Trump administration has rolled back at least 100 environmental regulations, and although Biden has pledged to undo the damage, that may be an uphill battle, as University of California, Irvine law professor Alex Camacho explains in this podcast and transcript.

As for the Department of Energy, Biden has chosen former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who would be just the second woman to lead the department that

oversees the nation's nuclear arsenal and also plays a major role in developing renewable energy technology and improving energy efficiency in buildings and appliances. Granholm's experience with Detroit's auto industry is expected to be key in the expansion of electric vehicles and charging stations, an effort that would also be supported by Pete Buttigieg as transportation secretary. If confirmed, Buttigieg would also become the first openly gay Cabinet member.

These choices signal a stronger approach to environmental justice by the incoming Biden administration — developments that we'll be following on EarthBeat in the months ahead.

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Here's what else is new on EarthBeat:

We've been following the news and analysis around the U.N.'s virtual Climate Ambition Summit on Dec. 12, when countries were expected to step up their commitments to reducing greenhouse gas emissions:

- Pope Francis pledged to make the Vatican carbon neutral by 2050. But faith leaders say stronger action is needed, especially from wealthy nations, to end fossil fuel use and help poor countries mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts.
- Before the summit, Chiara Martinelli of CIDSE, the coalition of Catholic social justice groups, outlined five key elements that countries should include in their climate pledges. And after the summit, Dan Misleh, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, reminded us that seeds of a brighter future are taking root, little by little — an Advent sign of hope.
- Meanwhile, the Pacific Climate Warriors, a group of young people from 17 Pacific islands — where they're already feeling the impact of rising sea levels — won Pax Christi International's peace prize.
- And NCR environment correspondent Brian Roewe took a look at Loyola University Chicago's new School of Environmental Sustainability, which practices what it teaches — from turning used cooking oil into fuel to heating and cooling with water from deep underground.

- Roewe also talked with two experts about how people of faith around the world are helping to defuse the violent conflict that accompanies climate change in some places. Besides reading the question-and-answer story, we hope you'll take a few extra minutes to watch the video interview, which includes more detail about some inspiring examples.

- And Roewe reports that Boston College came under fire from alumni and other groups who filed a complaint with the Massachusetts attorney general in an effort to pressure the university to divest its endowment fund of fossil fuel stocks.

Elsewhere in climate news this week:

Not surprisingly, there's been a lot of coverage of — and advice for — the incoming Biden administration as the president-elect chooses Cabinet members and agency chiefs.

- Evelyn Nieves at InsideClimate News reports that environmental justice advocates want the incoming administration to focus especially on communities of color, which suffer most from climate change and pollution. And at The Washington Post, Dino Grandoni and Alexandra Ellerbeck look at what it will take for President-elect Joe Biden to reverse the outgoing Trump administration's campaign against science in government agencies.

- David Iaconangelo of E&E News explains how the U.S. could make the transition to zero-carbon electricity by using existing technology and rethinking the way electricity is distributed around the country. And at The Washington Post, Chris Mooney reports on a detailed Princeton University study of the steps needed for the U.S. to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

- As the planet warms, human productivity is likely to be highest at latitudes north of the northern U.S. border — that means Canada, Iceland, the Scandinavian countries and Russia. The latter has the largest land mass and is banking on becoming a major food producer. Abrahm Lustgarten reports for ProPublica.

- Also at ProPublica, Ken Ward Jr. writes that a federal appeals court has twice blocked construction of a major oil pipeline in West Virginia — so federal and

state regulators are rewriting environmental laws to circumvent the decisions.

- And you can add Asian honey bees to the growing list of animals that use tools. Scientists have found that they forage for animal dung and decorate their nests with it to ward off attacks by giant killer hornets, reports Damian Carrington at The Guardian.

Closing beat:

As we enter the last week of Advent, we hope you continue to find EarthBeat's Simple Advent, Abundant Life reflections a source of introspection and inspiration.

Brenna Davis of the Ignatian Solidarity Network, who has written the reflections — and who also invited students to contribute — struck a particular chord with this week's question about what it means to have four spatulas in the kitchen. A few of you wrote us to comment about it.

Which other reflections have been especially meaningful for you? Drop us a line and let us know at earthbeat@ncronline.org. We always appreciate hearing from you. And please join us for the rest of the series this week, as we prepare for the arrival of the Light in our midst.

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