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EPA's new Dallas Chief (Online Version – print version will be coming)

Written by
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The long, slow effort to appoint new leaders for federal agencies by President Donald Trump has now reached Dallas' Environmental Protection Agency office.
EPA Region 6, which serves Texas and its four neighboring states, will be headed by Austin's Anne Idsal, who was George P. Bush's deputy at the Texas General Land Office.
A lawyer, former general counsel of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and member of a prominent ranching family, Idsal said she's now "off to the races." Idsal started her new job as EPA regional administrator on Monday and plans to move to Dallas soon.
In a 30-minute interview with *The Dallas Morning News* Tuesday, Idsal said she wasn't prepared to answer some specific questions given she's been on the job for only 24 hours. But she did address her uncertainty about climate change, concerns about regulatory overreach, prioritizing the cleanup of so-called Superfund sites and collaboration with state governments.
Edited excerpts from the interview:

On climate change

A polar bear walks over sea ice floating in the Victoria Strait in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago.
(File Photo/The Associated Press)

"The climate's been changing since the dawn of time," Idsal said. "I wouldn't rush into making any quick decisions based on current or pre-existing climate change. I want to see what continues to come out."
EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and many other Trump administration environment officials have either rejected mainstream climate science or questioned whether there was enough evidence to take dramatic action. A recent U.S. government report — reaffirming many international reports — concluded that it's "extremely likely" that humans are the dominant cause of global warming since the mid-20th century.
"The science is never settled in any particular field," Idsal said. "I don't necessarily think that it is settled here. ... I think it's possible that humans have some impact on climate change, the extent of which I have not made up my mind on."

On regulatory overreach

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EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt was a critic of former President Barack Obama's EPA.
(File Photo/Getty Images)

Trump and Pruitt — who has sued the EPA more than a dozen times — have been critical of President Barack Obama’s EPA for pushing regulatory boundaries. Idsal said regulatory applications that meet the letter and spirit of the law should be approved and the regulated entities should “go forth and conquer.”
“If not, you're going to have to go back to the drawing board,” she said. “But a matter of personal preference or a political agenda is not what needs to be pushed in order to otherwise regulate an industry, a sector, beyond what is already legally required."
Idsal did not cite an example of EPA overreach during the Obama administration.
“I'm going to refrain from any of that,” she said. “I want to make sure I go into it [new job] with a clean slate and without any biases."

On being qualified

Cheri Deatsch (left) and Missy Hargraves put a lead on a dog rescued from Hurricane Harvey floodwaters in Vidor.
(File Photo/Nathan Hunsinger)

Idsal said her work at TCEQ — the state’s environmental agency — and at the General Land Office, which manages state land and mineral leases, created a strong foundation.
"I know I don't have a technical background. I'm not a hard scientist,” she said. “But I understand the air issues, the water issues, the waste issues. Having been at the GLO, I understand the oil and gas industry very well, natural resources and land issues as well as all of the stakeholders.”
Idsal also noted that she helped coordinate the land office’s response to Hurricane Harvey, which devastated the Texas Gulf Coast in August. Environmental impacts from that disaster are expected to keep the Region 6 office busy.

On regional priorities

A recreational area is fenced off in an area where high levels of lead were recorded following Superstorm Sandy in Laurence Harbor, N.J.
(2012 File Photo/The Associated Press)

“Looking at water infrastructure, water quality ... I don't think it's a surprise to anybody that we have aging water infrastructure throughout the region and quite frankly, throughout the United States,” Idsal said.
She also mentioned prioritizing the cleanup of toxic Superfund sites, which the Trump administration has emphasized as a priority.
Also, Idsal said she wants the agency to be more collaborative.
"I would like to see the EPA and Region 6 work more closely and really take into consideration the needs, the wants, the budgets, the capacity of local governments,” she said.
“Too often in the past, you'd have federal agencies ... handing down very prescriptive mandates that, quite frankly, a community was not in any position either financially or from a capacity standpoint to implement. ... I'd like to ensure that we're not setting communities up for failure."
That also extends to making sure that state research is considered alongside EPA data, she said. State officials — including those in Texas and Pruitt when he was Oklahoma’s attorney general — rejected the conclusions of EPA research.

On her biggest challenges

Anne Idsal, the new regional administrator for Region 6 with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, discussed her new role Tuesday morning.
(Ben Torres/Special Contributor)

Aside from “getting up to speed,” Idsal said her top priority is “building trust with the staff."
"I firmly believe I'm going to have to work very hard to earn that trust as I should. But the Region 6 staff does have an outstanding reputation for working very well with the regulated community, with the environmental communities, with state and local governments. It will be a hurdle but a natural one for anyone coming into this position. ... Change is difficult from one administration to the next.”