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Cleanups of Spill and an Agency Test Salazar



Aaron M. Sprecher/Bloomberg News; Roger L. Wollenberg/Pool, via Getty Images (left)

From left, Ken Salazar, Steven Chu and Carol M. Browner form part of a "green dream team" appointed by President Obama. But Mr. Salazar has since faced criticism from environmentalists.

By JOHN M. BRODER and GARDINER HARRIS
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WASHINGTON — When [President Obama](#) boasted in his [televised address](#) on Tuesday about his team of leaders fighting the [oil spill](#) in the Gulf of Mexico, he spoke glowingly of his energy secretary, his Coast Guard commander, even his Navy secretary.

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Then he turned to [Ken Salazar](#), his interior secretary. "When Ken Salazar became my secretary of the interior, one of his very first acts was to clean up the worst of the corruption at this agency," Mr. Obama said, referring to Mr. Salazar's oversight of the [Minerals Management Service](#), the agency responsible for regulating [offshore drilling](#). "But it's now clear that the problem there ran much deeper, and the pace of reform was just too slow."

Shortly before the speech, the White House announced that Mr. Salazar would be getting a powerful new deputy, [Michael R. Bromwich](#), a veteran investigator and former prosecutor, to supervise the remaking of the minerals service. What was not mentioned was that Mr. Salazar had appointed two aides to do the same job just a month before, and that Mr. Bromwich's new assignment essentially reversed not only that move but also perhaps Mr. Salazar's entire overhaul plan for the minerals service.

Mr. Salazar's job is not in immediate jeopardy, and the

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president values the work he has done and will continue to do at the [Interior Department](#), said [Robert Gibbs](#), the White House press secretary.

But a senior administration official, who spoke of a delicate personnel matter only on the condition of anonymity said, "The president and the White House are watching very, very closely the pace of reform at Interior to see that progress is being made that truly cleans it up."

Mr. Salazar is a core member of what some environmentalists called a "green dream team" of environmental advisers appointed by Mr. Obama shortly after his [inauguration](#). Others include [Steven Chu](#), the energy secretary; [Lisa P. Jackson](#), the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) administrator; and [Carol M. Browner](#), a White House adviser.

But the Deepwater Horizon disaster and its fallout appear to have shifted the roles of the team members. Mr. Salazar, who started his job billing himself as the "new sheriff in town," has become noticeably less visible since the minerals agency's regulatory laxity came under attack, while Dr. Chu and Ms. Browner have moved to the fore. Ms. Jackson has focused closely on issues of air and water quality relating to the spill and has remained largely out of the limelight.

In the first weeks after the oil rig exploded on April 20, Mr. Salazar was one of the administration's chief spokesmen on the disaster. On May 2, he sat for interviews with four Sunday morning TV talk shows. For weeks, he appeared routinely at hearings on Capitol Hill, often saying of [BP](#) that "we have our boot on their neck to make sure they get the job done."

But in a [May 27 news conference](#), Mr. Obama scolded Mr. Salazar for his cowboy rhetoric and acknowledged his impatience with the pace of change at the minerals service. In his address last week, Mr. Obama singled out Dr. Chu for praise, pointing out that he was a [Nobel Prize](#) winner leading a team of scientists and engineers working on the leak.

Meanwhile, criticism of the interior secretary by some environmental advocates has mounted since the spill. A group of [scientists and conservation organizations](#) wrote to Mr. Obama last week demanding Mr. Salazar's resignation, citing what they called his "flawed record on natural resources issues," including oil drilling, endangered species and [coal](#) leasing decisions.

Even former Interior Secretary [Bruce Babbitt](#), who described himself as a friend of Mr. Salazar, said in an interview that the administration's response to the disaster had been slow and that its reform proposals too tepid.

"The administration took way too long getting its act together and in mounting a coordinated, aggressive response to the spill," Mr. Babbitt said.

In an interview Wednesday, Mr. Salazar defended his actions and said he continued to have Mr. Obama's support.

"I feel good about what I'm doing," he said, "and I'm very confident and I'm very resolute in our ability to get the job done, and I feel very good about my relationship with President Obama."

Mr. Salazar said that Mr. Bromwich was his choice for the job to overhaul the minerals service, although he said that Mr. Bromwich's name along with nine others had been given to him by the White House. "It was my decision and my offer," Mr. Salazar said.

And while he acknowledged that his overhaul of the service had been too slow, he said quicker moves would not have changed the outcome of the spill. "BP is the culprit here," he

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said.

Perhaps in response to the criticism, a posse of senators rode to Mr. Salazar's defense last week in a rescue operation coordinated by the administration.

Senator [Richard J. Durbin](#), a powerful Illinois Democrat, noted in an interview that the president and Mr. Salazar had joined the Senate at the same time.

"There is a special bond there when you come in new to the Senate," Mr. Durbin said. "You're making the same mistakes and asking the same naïve questions. They went through that together. They trust one another and like one another."

The Senate majority leader, [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada, said Mr. Salazar was invaluable in lobbying senators during the health care debate and continued to have great support in the Senate.

"I don't think Ken Salazar has been taken to the woodshed or reprimanded," Mr. Reid said. "Salazar is someone who is held in high esteem by the White House."

Several officials painted Mr. Salazar as a tireless worker operating behind the scenes to stop the leaking oil well. "He's a workhorse," said Kendra Barkoff, the Interior Department press secretary. "Just because he's not out there doing TV doesn't mean he's not working his tail off."

Among the defenders was Mr. Salazar's older brother, Representative. John Salazar, Democrat of Colorado, who said the two of them had been visiting their ailing mother when the rig exploded.

"Ken was on his way back to D.C. the following morning to meet with BP and the other oil companies," Mr. Salazar said. "That night I called him at 10 and he was still working with them trying to figure out a strategy to best fix this situation."

He added, "He's actually enjoying the fight."

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