Energy nominee favors all-of the-above approach(2)

MATTHEW DALY - Associated Press - Associated Press

President Barack Obama's choice to lead the Energy Department advocates an all-of-the-above approach to energy and favors natural gas as a "bridge fuel" to reduce emissions that contribute to global warming.

Ernest Moniz, a physics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, leads the MIT Energy Initiative, a research group that gets funding from BP, Chevron and other oil industry heavyweights for academic work aimed at reducing greenhouse gases blamed for global warming. A former energy undersecretary, Moniz has advised Obama on numerous energy topics, including how to handle the country's nuclear waste and the natural gas produced by the controversial technique of hydraulic fracturing.

"Ernie knows that we can produce more energy and grow our economy while still taking care of our air, our water and our climate," Obama said Monday as he introduced Moniz and two other candidates for top-level positions.

Gina McCarthy, an assistant EPA administrator, was chosen to lead the Environmental Protection Agency. A 25-year veteran of environmental policy and politics, McCarthy has worked for Republicans and Democrats, including Obama's presidential rival, Mitt Romney, who tapped her to help draft state plans for curbing the pollution linked to global warming when he was governor of Massachusetts.

Sylvia Mathews Burwell was nominated to direct the White House Office of Management and Budget. Burwell held several posts during the Clinton administration, including deputy director of the OMB. She currently heads the Wal-Mart Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the retail giant, and previously served as president of the Gates Foundation's Global Development Program.

Moniz, 68, whose specialty is nuclear physics, has drawn fire from some environmental groups for his views on natural gas, especially that produced from shale, a gas-rich rock formation thousands of feet underground. The gas is freed through a process called hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in which large volumes of water, plus sand and chemicals, are injected to break the rock apart. Advances in technology have unlocked billions of dollars of gas reserves, leading to a boom in production, jobs and profits, as well as concerns about pollution and public health.

At a forum last year at the University of Texas, Moniz said natural gas, which emits fewer greenhouse gases than oil or coal, is likely to be part of the nation's energy solution for years to come.

As a nation, the U.S. "should take advantage of the time to innovate and bring down

the cost of renewables," Moniz said. "The worst thing would be to get time and not use it."

Those and other comments have made some environmental groups wary of Moniz, who also has supported development of nuclear power, along with renewable energy sources such as wind and solar.

"Ernest Moniz has a history of supporting dirty and dangerous energy sources like gas and nuclear power with polluting partners including BP, Shell, Chevron and Saudi Aramco," said Courtney Abrams of the group Environment America. "Given this concerning track record, we hope Dr. Moniz will focus on clean, renewable ways to get our energy that don't put our families and our environment in harm's way."

Fred Krupp, president of the Environmental Defense Fund, said Moniz "has recognized that there are environmental issues — real issues, serious issues — with natural gas."

When Moniz says issues with natural gas are manageable, "he quickly adds that just because they are manageable doesn't mean they are managed," Krupp said. "To me that's actually a very full understanding that he brings to this role."

As energy secretary, Moniz would not have direct oversight over fracking, which is primarily left to state and local governments. Even so, the Energy Department has a huge research budget, and current Energy Secretary Steven Chu has been criticized for focusing too much on renewables such as wind and solar and not enough on natural gas, which has emerged in recent years as an energy powerhouse that has threatened the dominance of coal, the leading source of electricity in the U.S.

Like Chu, Moniz is an academic with a doctorate in physics. Unlike Chu, who led an Energy Department lab before becoming energy secretary, Moniz has extensive political experience, having served in the Clinton administration as undersecretary of energy and as a White House science adviser.

"The really good thing about Ernie is he's been there, so he can hit the ground running," said Carol Browner, a former Obama energy adviser who worked with Moniz when she headed the Environmental Protection Agency under President Bill Clinton.

John Deutch, an MIT colleague and former CIA director, called Moniz a "brilliant choice" to lead the Energy Department.

"I think that President Obama has chosen the most qualified individual in the United States for the position of secretary of energy," said Deutch, who led a review of shale-gas drilling for the Energy Department in Obama's first term.

Thomas Pyle, president of the Institute for Energy Research, a conservative advocacy group, set his sights a little lower.

If confirmed, Moniz will "inherit an agency with a tarnished record for picking losers

and not winners in the energy market," Pyle said. "It is our hope that Dr. Moniz will avoid opportunities to repeat the well-documented mistakes of his predecessor and refuse the temptation to let political pressure trump sound science and economics."

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Associated Press writer Dina Cappiello contributed to this report.

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