Environmental groups, scientists cheer Obama appointments

With a Nobel physicist and a former EPA chief on board, some expect Obama's White House to break from what they see as the Bush administration's record of overlooking science in favor of politics.

By Jim Tankersley and Tom Hamburger
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Reporting from Washington -- With the nomination of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Chu for Energy secretary, President-elect Barack Obama made sure no one missed the message in the resume.

"His appointment should send a signal to all that my administration will value science," Obama said during a Chicago news conference Monday. "We will make decisions based on facts, and we understand that the facts demand bold action."

Chu, director of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, headlines a quartet of appointments that includes former Environmental Protection Agency chief Carol Browner as a coordinator of energy and climate policy, former New Jersey environmental protection commissioner Lisa Jackson as EPA director, and Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley to run the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

With this team, some environmentalists and former federal research scientists expect Obama's White House to break from what they view as the Bush administration's record of overlooking science in favor of politics.

"It's such an incredible contrast, compared to the years of darkness under the current administration, to see a scientist in such a position of authority and influence in the Cabinet," said Alan Nogee, who directs the Clean Energy Program for the Union of Concerned Scientists, which has accused the administration of silencing and overruling scientists in policy-making. "It's night and day."

Critics -- including Nogee's organization and former EPA Administrator Christie Todd Whitman -- have complained about the influence of industry lobbyists and ideologues on Bush administration decision-making.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman of Beverly Hills is among the Democrats who repeatedly have accused top Bush officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney and political advisor Karl Rove, with pressing federal agencies to take positions that put them at odds with their own scientists on energy, global warming and stem cell research.

The critics say many high-ranking scientists have fled federal jobs or have been forced from advisory panels in an effort to tilt agency decision-making to be more favorable to corporate interests or, in at least one case, to help secure reelection of Republicans.

In 2001, Waxman issued a 40-page report accusing the administration of having "manipulated the scientific process and distorted or suppressed scientific findings." In 2004, 60 prominent scientists accused the
administration of "misrepresenting and suppressing scientific knowledge for political purposes."

In 2006, the top climate scientist at NASA, James Hansen, said the Bush administration tried to gag him from speaking publicly after he gave an academic lecture calling for prompt reductions in greenhouse gases.

On Monday, the Interior Department’s inspector general issued a report detailing how one administrator intervened in at least 13 decisions under the Endangered Species Act. The official’s “zeal to advance her agenda has caused considerable harm to the integrity” of the Endangered Species Act program, the report said, "as well as potential harm to individual species. Her heavy-handedness has cast doubt on nearly every ESA decision issued during her tenure."

Jeremy Symons, former climate policy advisor at the EPA, was so shaken after representing the EPA on Cheney's Energy Task Force in 2001 that he left government to become a vice president at the National Wildlife Federation.

"There was no interest in considering the scientific evidence of the impact our energy policy would have on the environment," Symons said in an interview on Monday. "When science was brought up for discussion, it was dismissed as not important to developing the energy plan."

Obama stressed the importance of energy and climate policy to the nation's economy and security on Monday -- though he declined to say when he plans to grant a waiver for California to begin regulating greenhouse gas emissions.

Chu, who won his Nobel Prize for developing methods to trap atoms with lasers, has oriented the Berkeley lab to focus on renewable energy and climate change. On Monday he stressed the Energy Department's role in supporting scientists, public and private, and innovations that he said "can transform the entire landscape of energy demand and supply."

His appointment has won wide praise across industries and party lines. Current Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman said in a statement that Chu "understands the significance of our energy and environmental challenges, and more importantly, understands the technical solutions necessary to address them. . . . I hold him in the highest regard."

A leading energy lobbyist said he was "cautiously optimistic" about Chu and his fellow appointees. "I hope they do welcome science first," said Scott Segal of Bracewell and Giuliani in Washington. "But that means being clear about it when the technology isn't ready to solve climate issues. Good science cuts both ways. It also cuts against unrealistic policy proposals that could endanger the U.S. economy."

Environmental groups lauded the appointees for their commitment to alternative fuels and fighting global warming. They welcomed them as symbols of science ascendant.

"I'm quite sure we'll have policy disputes with the Obama administration," said Michael Hirshfield, chief scientist at Oceana, a nonprofit organization dedicated to ocean protection. "But we expect that the facts of the case, whatever the issue is, will be out there more. We expect more transparency. We expect scientists to be able to speak more."

Reid Detchon, executive director of the nonpartisan Energy Future Coalition, which advocates for renewable energy, said he expected Chu to be the first in a succession of “first-rate scientists” to advise Obama and help restore what he calls eight years of damage to the "scientific apparatus" of the federal government.

"What political appointments can do," Detchon said, "political appointments can undo."

Tankersley and Hamburger are writers in our Washington bureau.

jtankersley@tribune.com
tom.hamburger@latimes.com