

Pruitt taps controversial former Alabama official to lead Region 4

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EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has named former Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) chief Trey Glenn to head the agency's Region 4, marking Pruitt's first appointment of a regional administrator.

But Glenn's ADEM tenure was marked by charges of inadequate regulatory oversight and an investigation of potential criminal ethics violations, which could highlight criticisms of Pruitt's alleged ethical violations and provide fodder for critics.

EPA announced Glenn's appointment in an Aug. 21 press release, touting his experience as ADEM director from 2005-2009 and his prior position as the head of the state's office of water resources. "Trey Glenn will bring invaluable experience as regional administrator having spent over two decades working in the field of environmental and regulatory policy," the release quotes Pruitt as saying.

Since leaving ADEM, Glenn has been working as an environmental engineer and consultant. As Region 4 administrator, Glenn will oversee EPA's operations in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee.

Regional administrators are not subject to Senate confirmation, meaning Glenn can start in his new position quickly, replacing acting regional head Anne Heard. That could be especially welcome for EPA as Pruitt has struggled to have senior appointees cleared by the White House; Glenn is the first regional administrator to be named.

But Glenn's record in Alabama could fuel criticism of the pick from environmentalists and other opponents of the Trump administration. Following his departure from ADEM, environmentalists petitioned EPA Region 4 to withdraw the state's delegated Clean Water Act permitting powers, arguing in the 2010 document that Alabama's water program was "fundamentally broken" in part because it was failing to properly assess penalties against facilities that violate permit requirements.

EPA rejected the petition in the final weeks of the Obama administration, and the groups are now suing in federal district court to overturn that decision.

Opponents could also bring up alleged improprieties in how Glenn won the top position at ADEM. According to a 2009 article in The Birmingham News, Glenn was investigated by local prosecutors for potential criminal ethics violations because, while applying to be ADEM director, he approved payments to the environmental engineering firm Malcolm Pirnie -- which employed one of the officials on the commission that oversees ADEM and selects its director.

The case eventually went to a grand jury which declined to indict Glenn.

But the case could highlight criticisms from Democrats and environmentalists that Pruitt has his own ethics problems. For example, Pruitt is facing an investigation by the Oklahoma Bar Association for allegedly lying in his confirmation hearing about his use of private email while he served as the state's attorney general.