

Q&A

First White House water adviser talks NEPA, climate

Hannah Northey, E&E News reporter • Published: Thursday, February 25, 2021



Sara Gonzalez-Rothi is the first senior water adviser at the Council on Environmental Quality, where she's focusing on infrastructure, climate and other critical issues. Hillary Turlington Climate change will be a top priority for Sara Gonzalez-Rothi, the White House's first adviser focused solely on water.

When asked about the role of water in President Biden's climate agenda, Gonzalez-Rothi framed it as the "temperature regulator for the Earth." Just as a swim or rainstorm can cool off an overheating human body, the ocean can save our warming planet, said Gonzalez-Rothi.

"The ocean has been doing the same for our planet — absorbing carbon dioxide and heat and regulating temperatures," she said in a written interview with E&E News. "But its capacity to do that is limited."

As the first senior director for water at the Council on Environmental Quality, Gonzalez-Rothi will tackle everything from permitting and infrastructure to environmental justice, climate change, water quality and ocean health.

The 36-year-old Florida native, whose mother is Norwegian and a scientist and father is a doctor from Cuba, grew up in Gainesville and earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Florida and a law degree from the University of Miami.

Before joining CEQ, Gonzalez-Rothi was senior counsel on the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, working on policy and oversight for oceans, fisheries, clean energy and other climate issues.

She also worked as legislative counsel and Everglades fellow to then-Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), and helped craft the RESTORE Act in response to the Deepwater Horizon spill to ensure federal fines resulting from the 2010 disaster are sent back to the Gulf Coast to restore its environment and economy.

Gonzalez-Rothi also worked as senior policy specialist on Gulf and coastal restoration with the National Wildlife Federation and as interim policy director for its campaign to restore the Mississippi River Delta.

She talked to E&E News about her new gig, the future of environmental reviews and growing up floating on Florida rivers.

Is the role of senior director for water new at CEQ?

There has always been someone at CEQ tasked with working on water policy, but not solely on water.

Previous iterations grouped this work with "lands" work or in "natural resources" — and certainly, what we do on land affects water, and water is an essential natural resource — but my role focusing entirely on water is new.

What does your job entail?

The places where CEQ will focus are those where the science indicates the greatest need, the law indicates a federal role, and where I believe we can make measurable progress in improving our lives and livelihoods in relation to water.

Why did CEQ decide it needed an expert solely focused on water?

Water does not respect boundaries. Just as an example, the warmth of seawater in the Caribbean basin can directly affect the severity of hurricanes that impact the continental United States. And even within the federal government itself, roles around water straddle dozens of agencies.

Each agency has its own mission and purpose, and it's important to have a place to think at a more macro level about how it all relates. CEQ is that place, and for my role, water is the subject.

How will CEQ address climate change, infrastructure and environmental justice through the lens of water issues?

At its simplest, most water issues can be distilled (pun intended) to four questions: how much, how clean, when and where? If you have salt water where you need fresh water, if there is too much water where it shouldn't be, if there is not enough water where you need it, if water isn't clean enough to safely sustain health of people or critters or an ecosystem — you have major problems.

When I say "major," I mean that people lose their livelihoods, their health and even their lives. And these hazards, exacerbated by climate change, have disproportionately affected overburdened communities — communities of color, immigrant communities, low-income communities, Native and Indigenous communities — the same folks who have been underrepresented where decisions are being made.

Think about the disparities in safe drinking water access and affordability in Native and Indigenous communities and urban areas like Flint. To make progress on water quality, quantity, distribution and timing, we must work hand in glove, especially with those most affected when those things go wrong.

Where does the issue of water fit into the Biden administration's climate policy goals?

Broadly, we can think of the ocean as the temperature regulator for the Earth. On the hottest of days, a drink of water, a swim or a rainstorm can cool you off, preventing the most serious effects of heat on your body. The ocean has been doing the same for our planet — absorbing carbon dioxide and heat and regulating temperatures.

But its capacity to do that is limited. Water must be an integral pillar of a coordinated climate policy — from restoring more natural function of aquatic ecosystems to staving off sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion, holding back floodwaters, sequestering carbon, and creating more opportunities for clean power, clean transportation and the jobs of the future.

What policy changes do you envision under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) while protecting water resources?

Because water is really everywhere, if you get a traditional infrastructure project wrong, the consequences can be serious.

Effective and efficient planning on the front end will result in better decisions that save money and time. CEQ will be working closely with interagency partners to identify the best ways to move good infrastructure projects through the permitting process efficiently, while also fully vetting and accounting for impacts on water quality and quantity, the environment, and communities.

You have extensive Hill experience. Why is that important in your position? Will you interact with the Hill?

When I first came to Capitol Hill, I had intended to stay a year and then head back to sunny Florida. During that year, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, triggering the largest oil disaster in U.S. history. For me, seeing the rig on fire was a life-changing event.

What I found while working on Capitol Hill is that it was a life-changing event for millions of Americans. The letters we received from constituents drove home for me that environmental policy on the federal level matters.

What personally motivated you to get into the field of water policy? Are there any personal experiences that are relevant?

Water has inspired me since I was a little girl, growing up in the tannic spring-fed rivers of north-central Florida and then heading to Miami to live in the only place in the world where alligators and crocodiles live side by side: America's Everglades. My parents made it a priority for us to visit national parks when we were young, and those were some of my most formative memories.

In 2010, I went to Pensacola the very weekend the oil came into Perdido Bay. I will never forget being there with my feet in the sugar-white sand and smelling the oil. Years later, I had the chance to see Cat Island in Louisiana, which was particularly affected by Deepwater Horizon. And now, I live between the Patuxent and South rivers, 15 minutes from the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. I feel most at home when I'm close to water.

What was it like growing up in Florida?

We swam, canoed and floated on spring-fed rivers. When you float those rivers, you know the feeling of eelgrass wrapping around your ankle and spooking you into thinking a swamp creature is near. As the years went, there was less eelgrass and more lyngbya, a blue-green algae that doesn't spook you the same way eelgrass will, but it should.

The water levels on those same rivers began to drop, we saw less pink lichen on the trees and less snail eggs on the reeds, and I wondered why. My own traditions began to change because of too much pollution going into the system and too much water being taken out.

What's been the most challenging point in your career? What was your favorite day on the job or favorite job?

The bar exam stands out as quite the gauntlet, and balancing work and family life has challenged me to grow and find strategies to succeed in my career and in my home.

My favorite work moment so far was sitting on the Senate floor counting "yays" and "nays" as the RESTORE Act passed by an overwhelming bipartisan vote.

What do you do for fun?

My husband and I are on the barbecue team at our church. I enjoy mentoring folks in my field. If I had the time, I'd be at the beach or the river playing with my son (and very soon, a second son), husband and our dog.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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