

# Newsom's picks for environmental protection and water chiefs will reveal his priorities

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By Richard M. Frank Jan. 15, 2019 Updated: Jan. 15, 2019 9:20 p.m.

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1of5Jared Blumenfeld, the former regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, was named the California secretary for environmental protection. Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle 2016 file photo



2of5California Air Resources Board Chair Mary Nichols, former Gov. Jerry Brown and California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, center, have sued the Trump administration over plans to freeze vehicle emissions standards, setting back clean air efforts.Photo: Rich Pedroncelli / Associated Press 2018



3of5California Gov. Gavin Newsom, show here with his son Dutch at his Jan. 7 inauguration in Sacramento, gets his chance this week to show what he will prioritize during his term. Photo: Eric Risberg / Associated Press

One of the keys to former Gov. Jerry Brown's success as California's chief executive over the past eight years was the stellar group of individuals he recruited as his top environmental and water officials. Gov. Gavin Newsom's initial, senior environmental appointments suggest that he is wisely following in Brown's footsteps. Californians can only hope his water leadership team turns out to be equally strong.

Newsom's first two environmental appointments are his most important, and his choices are impressive indeed.

Jared Blumenfeld will serve as his secretary for environmental protection. Blumenfeld and the governor have a long history together: After working in Newsom's mayoral administration as San Francisco's director of the environment, Blumenfeld served with distinction as Region IX (West Coast/Pacific Rim) administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the Obama administration. In his new state role — a Cabinet position in the Newsom administration — Blumenfeld will oversee the sprawling California Environmental Protection Agency, supervising California's pollution control, toxic waste management and water rights programs.

Wade Crowfoot was named secretary for natural resources. Crowfoot, another alum of Newsom's mayoral administration, also previously served as deputy Cabinet secretary and senior adviser to Brown. Most recently, Crowfoot has been the chief executive of the Water

Foundation, a think tank focused on water issues in California and the American West. At the Natural Resources Agency, Crowfoot will lead California's natural resource management efforts, including the state's climate change adaptation planning initiatives.

Also, California Air Resources Board Chair Mary Nichols – perhaps the single most high-profile and widely respected environmental official in the Brown administration – has agreed to continue in that role for at least the first phase of Newsom's administration. That's very good news, especially because it assures Nichols' continuing leadership in achieving California's ambitious, pioneering greenhouse gas reduction goals. Nichols has guided the air board since 2007 and served an earlier stint in the 1980s.

Far less settled is how Newsom will fill his administration's most important positions regarding state water policy. One of Newsom's key tests confronts him immediately: State Water Resources Control Board Chair Felicia Marcus' term expires this week. Newsom should reappoint Marcus to another term as chair of the water board, which both oversees California's multifaceted water pollution control programs and administers the state's always fractious water rights system. She's done a masterful job over the past six years – most prominently in leading California's successful efforts to respond to the unprecedented 2012-2017 drought. Marcus has the experience, leadership ability and people skills to continue to lead the board effectively in the coming years as the state works to craft regulations to protect cities, farms and fish.

Another critical decision for the new governor is whom to appoint as director of the state Department of Water Resources. In the past, the department director's most important job was to oversee operation of the State Water Project. In recent years, that role had become more complicated – and contentious – because of Brown's support of California Water Fix (also known as the delta tunnels) project. Brown proved unable to get his legacy water initiative to the finish line. It's still an open question whether Newsom will continue to pursue or abandon the controversial tunnels.

In either case, Newsom's water resources director will be the state's point person in addressing a State Water Project that's in precarious shape – both as an unreliable water delivery system and because of its undisputed, deleterious effect on a delta ecosystem in a state of ecological collapse.

The Department of Water Resources recently has taken on an increasingly prominent role under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, a law passed in 2014 that sets in motion a plan to manage the state's groundwater basins, which supply a significant amount of the state's water. That landmark legislation gives the department a lead role in assisting regional "groundwater sustainability agencies" to formulate plans to make California's chronically over-drafted groundwater basins sustainable in the future. It will be the department's job to evaluate those plans over the next several years to ensure that the water pumped out doesn't exceed the amount recharged by nature or man.

To fulfill these responsibilities, Newsom's director of water resources will have to command the respect of state water agencies, agribusiness and environmental groups. That, in turn, will require technical ability, vision, leadership and extraordinary diplomatic skills.

Newsom's selection will serve as an early indicator of the governor's water policy priorities.

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