



California Gov. Gavin Newsom Taps New Top Utilities Regulator

SACRAMENTO (AP) – California Gov. Gavin Newsom said Friday he is tapping Marybel Batjer, a veteran of state government, to serve as the state’s top utilities regulator.

Batjer will serve as president of the California Public Utilities Commission, overseeing power companies and other services ranging from water systems to telecommunications and limousines.

The commission has a particularly daunting job as the state grapples with big goals for reducing carbon emissions and seeks to curb the threat of wildfires caused by electric utility equipment. Power lines have sparked catastrophic fires in recent years and the state’s largest electric utility, Pacific Gas & Electric Corp., has filed for bankruptcy in the face of billions of dollars in claims for damage as well as questions about the company’s neglect of its aging equipment.

Newsom said he is confident Batjer will challenge utilities to embrace reforms. But plenty at the state Capitol will be watching to see if Batjer can also reform the commission itself, which critics say is too slow and inefficient.

Batjer is currently secretary of the California Government Operations Agency. Former Gov. Jerry Brown appointed her to that post in 2013. She is a veteran of state government, previously working as cabinet secretary to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and as chief of staff to Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn. Batjer worked in the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, too, and was later vice president for public policy at Caesars Entertainment Inc.

Batjer declined to comment for this story.

In Newsom’s administration, she is quickly gaining a reputation as a person to call when dealing with big bureaucracies.

Newsom, who took office in January, named Batjer earlier this year to head a strike team focusing on the state’s beleaguered Department of Motor Vehicles.

“We’re very encouraged that the governor has chosen someone with a strong background in managing and transforming large government institutions. We think the PUC needs that right now,” said Mark Toney, executive director of The Utility Reform Network, an advocacy group based in San Francisco.

Legislators are already skeptical about the commission's capacity to effectively oversee the services it regulates.

Sen. John Moorlach, a Republican from Costa Mesa and vice-chair of the Senate Energy, Utilities and Communications Commission, said he hopes Batjer will be a "change agent."

"I think there's some signals this Legislature — and certainly this legislator — would like to see the (commission) trimmed down," he said.

Batjer will succeed Michael Picker, who announced in May that he would retire after almost five years in the post.

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