When Barack Obama was elected president of the United States on 4 November 2008, he immediately faced an abundance of suggestions, demands, and wish lists from his new constituents. The requests rolled in from advocates of new roads and safer bridges, more equitable health and medicine programs, changes in military policy, and demands for more help for the environment. Both of the major presidential candidates had promised a more harmonious relationship with science, and researchers,smarting under what many of them felt were eight years of neglect of environmental science, wanted big-time change.

Much of the criticism concerned climate change and global warming, the existence of which the Bush administration had all but denied. But environmentalists and environmental scientists also were anxious over issues such as endangered and threatened species. George W. Bush reduced the role that federal scientific experts could play in designating species as imperiled; scientific integrity was abandoned as administration operatives edited and censored scientists’ conclusions on atmospheric change; and agency decisions routinely favored industry over environment. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is charged with protecting the nation’s waters, land, air, and many aspects of human health, was the object of special outrage. While the administration’s approach to environmental science rankled many researchers to the point of speaking out, many others, concerned that public advocacy would damage science’s credibility, kept quiet.

The campaign for president and the election of Barack Obama changed all that. The leading candidates acknowledged that environmental matters, especially climate change, were important. A scandal involving sex, drugs, and illegal industry payments to a Department of the Interior (DOI) official reduced the administration’s own credibility greatly, as did the refusal of the Department of Justice to prosecute those involved. The outgoing administration’s efforts to push through at least 20 “midnight regulations,” many of them reducing environmental protections, enraged many scientists, their professional societies, policymakers, and others.

With the criticism mounting amid growing concerns about the effects of climate change on the nation and the world, the transition to a new administration took on special importance. Even the normally cautious National Academy of Sciences (NAS) began studying ways to ensure the best presidential appointments in the environmental field and elsewhere. A leisurely appointment process was not an option for the new president, said the academy. President-elect Obama apparently understood that; by the time of his inauguration, on 20 January 2009, he had made all his major Cabinet choices and quite a few appointments to his corps of advisers. Many of the newcomers weren’t new; they had served in the Clinton administration and were known to appreciate the input of scientists on environmental matters.

And, as it turned out, Obama’s environmental appointees and congressional friends seemed eager to restore science’s prominence in government. Senator Barbara Boxer (D–CA), who heads the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, proposed legislation that, in her words, would be “guided by science to avoid dangerous climate change.” Shortly after Ken Salazar became Obama’s secretary of the interior, he reversed the Bush administration’s last-minute awards of lucrative oil and gas drilling leases in some of the West’s most picturesque country. He ordered his employees not to cash checks from winning bidders for the sites.

Complaints

The list of complaints about the outgoing administration’s treatment of environmental science was lengthy. Wash-