

BPA: Elliot Mainzer officially named administrator; looks to firm up leadership team

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These are tumultuous times for the Bonneville Power Administration, which markets power from 31 federal hydroelectric dams in the region, including its namesake dam near Cascade Locks. The Department of Energy has appointed Elliot Mainzer as administrator of BPA. *(AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)*

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The U.S. Department of Energy said Monday that Elliot Mainzer has officially been appointed administrator of the Bonneville Power Administration.

Mainzer's appointment begins the process of re-establishing a permanent senior management team in the wake of a hiring scandal that has consumed the Portland-based power marketing agency since July and ultimately led to the resignation of its top two executives.



Elliot Mainzer, BPA administrator

Courtesy of
BPA

Bonneville is the largest utility in the region, selling power from 31 federal hydroelectric dams and a nuclear plant and operating the bulk of its high voltage transmission grid. That makes its administrator one of the most important federal officials in the Northwest, with an impact on everything from electricity prices and energy efficiency to renewables policy and salmon restoration.

Mainzer has been in an acting capacity as administrator since July, when his predecessor Bill Drummond was put on administrative leave amid investigations into discriminatory hiring practices at BPA and allegations that senior managers had retaliated against whistleblowers who brought the problems to light.

Drummond and BPA's Chief Operating Officer Anita Decker were subsequently offered new positions within the Department of Energy. But both resigned rather than accept reassignment.

The ensuing reshuffle has left six of the eight executives directly under Mainzer in an acting capacity. A seventh, BPA General Counsel Randy Roach, has also announced his retirement. That leaves a significant opening in an area of some concern to customers, who want Bonneville to retain its regional focus, its legal authority and its decision making autonomy from the DOE.

BPA has also reassigned, or seen resign, several managers who oversaw or were connected to the human resources debacle.

Customers and other stakeholders in the region have been urging the DOE to act quickly and appoint Mainzer as the official replacement so that BPA can get on with its "get well plan" and address pressing regional issues without a leadership vacuum. Public power groups were adamant that Drummond's replacement come from within the region.

Scott Corwin, executive director of the Public Power Council, said Monday that his group was pleased with the outcome. "It is helpful to see BPA moving toward stability," Corwin said. "This is a useful step, and Elliot will have a good team working with him."

U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz said in a news release, "Elliot Mainzer has the proven experience to lead BPA during this important time and I look forward to working with him to serve BPA's customers, constituents and employees in the months and years to come."

Mainzer has served in various management capacities with BPA during the last 12 years, including trading floor manager, manager of transmission policy and strategy, and executive vice president of corporate strategy. He applied for the top job when Steve Wright retired as administrator in 2012, and was appointed as acting deputy administrator when Drummond got the position.

In those roles, he has been at the center of some of the agency's highest profile strategic initiatives. Those include Bonneville's efforts to integrate the vast amounts of wind energy flooding onto the grid, its efforts to subscribe and finance new transmission, the evaluation of a regional energy imbalance market, climate change initiatives and recent work around the Columbia River Treaty. Those issues will continue to occupy his time, along with rate cases and a procession of other policy issues.

Mainzer said Monday that a team from the Energy Department is in town this week to finalize the agency's "get well plan." The personnel moves resulting directly from the agency's hiring problems are complete, he said, and BPA is about a quarter way through its reconstruction of hiring cases in which veterans may have been discriminated against. So far it has made 50 offers of employment and had 33 acceptances.

With that process moving forward, he said he was now turning his attention to "firing up the team" and putting a more permanent management team in place. "Many" of those hiring decisions, he said, are his to

make as administrator.

"I'm honored and excited," he said. "Obviously these problems with our human resources department will take some more time to solve, but we're on the right path."

Prior to BPA, Mainzer worked on the trading floor at Enron Corp. in Portland. It's a resume item that has raised eyebrows in the past, as he worked among the Enron traders who manipulated Western power markets and pushed the region into a full scale energy crisis in 2000 and 2001.

Mainzer says he was never a power trader, or connected with any of Enron's illegal transactions. He established Enron's renewable power desk, which marketed green power products and services throughout the Western U.S.

"I think people know me for my character and for the fact that I have very high ethical standards," he said.

Mainzer is not mentioned in any of the forensic reviews dissecting the energy giant's trading activities, and one of the most prominent investigators says his firm never found any connection.

"On all the searches we did, he was not involved in the California trading activity or the Canadian activity," said Robert McCullough, managing partner of McCullough Research, which helped numerous public and private clients unwind Enron's accounting, decipher tapes and document trading after Enron's collapse. "He has a clean bill of health in terms of the 10 million Enron documents we have in our files."

Mainzer has an undergraduate degree in geography from the University of California Berkeley and master's degrees in Business and Environmental Studies from Yale University. He lives in Portland with his wife and twin sons.

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