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Florida environmental secretary Sole stepping down

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08/03/2010

Palm Beach Post

Dara Kam

TALLAHASSEE — Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Mike Sole, the state's lead official on the BP oil crisis, is stepping down.

Sole, a marine biologist, worked his way up through the ranks during more than two decades at the agency before Gov. Charlie Crist tapped him as secretary shortly after taking office in 2007.

For the past three months, Sole has been the chief of the state's response to the massive Gulf of Mexico oil spill, participating in daily conference calls with federal officials and BP executives and traveling throughout the Panhandle and to the Deepwater Horizon response headquarters in Louisiana.

Sole announced his resignation Monday.

"Now that the Deepwater Horizon well has been capped, and Florida is on the road to recovery, it is necessary for me to announce my departure date," Sole wrote in his resignation letter to Crist.

He did not say what his plans are, but sources close to the agency say he may be under consideration to be the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's regional administrator, where his duties would include overseeing water and air pollution regulation.

Sole is the latest agency head to leave the Crist administration. The governor, who is running for U.S. Senate, leaves office in January.

But as head of the oil spill recovery, Sole has been the most visible of Crist's chiefs. Since taking over at DEP, Sole has been at the forefront of a number of other controversial issues.

"He was thrown the heaviest workload of any DEP person I've seen," said Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon Florida, who has worked beside Sole for 20 years. "We're losing one of Florida's best agency leaders."

Sole was in charge of Crist's ambitious climate change agenda, which included cap-and-trade, renewable energy standards and clean cars. But the GOP-dominated legislature blocked Crist's proposal for clean energy and greenhouse gas limits for electric utilities.

Sole then went to work on Crist's U.S. Sugar deal, another grand proposal, in which Crist originally planned to pay the sugar giant \$1.75 billion for more than 180,000 acres of land in South Florida to be used for Everglades restoration. But after less than a year, the deal was down-sized to less than half the original plan: the state would give U.S. Sugar \$536 million for about 72,800 acres of citrus groves with the possibility of buying 100,000 more.

Critics accused Sole, who negotiated the deal, of relying on outdated property appraisals in agreeing to pay U.S. Sugar

what some considered a vastly inflated price.

Sole is also involved in litigation over water quality standards proposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Environmentalists filed a lawsuit accusing Sole of failing to clean up polluted waters, forcing the EPA to begin setting hard limits on nutrient pollution in state waters.

"I know that that knocked the wind out of Mike," Draper said. "Because he was already negotiating with the regulated community about Florida's approach to the water quality standards, then all of a sudden he felt like the EPA pulled the rug out from under him."

Now, Sole, a former Marine and veteran of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, is handling what may be Florida's worst environmental disaster.

Environmentalists have criticized Sole for failing to recommend closing Panhandle waters to swimming and fishing even as oil was washing ashore.

Sole occasionally used his wartime experiences to demonstrate that the water was safe.

"I've been covered head to toe in oil," Sole told The Palm Beach Post in an interview in May. "And I am perfectly fine."

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Florida DEP chief to step down

08/03/2010

St. Petersburg Times

Pittman, Craig

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Capping a tumultuous four years in office, Florida's point man on dealing with the Deepwater Horizon disaster, Mike Sole, handed in his resignation Monday as secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection.

His last day will be Sept. 10. Gov. Charlie Crist has named Mimi Drew, the agency's deputy secretary of regulatory programs, as an interim replacement to oversee the department, which is responsible for everything from the state park system to the water supply.

A spokeswoman said Sole has no other job lined up yet. His predecessor, Colleen Castille, suggested Sole is quitting now because state law "prohibits you from discussing employment opportunities with those you regulate or have contracts with while you are in office."

He may also need a break. Sole, 46, "had more work to do in a shorter period of time than any previous DEP secretary," quipped Eric Draper of Audubon of Florida.

After Gov. Charlie Crist tapped Sole as DEP chief in 2006, he put him in charge of carrying out a raft of state programs designed to combat climate change. Although those programs were initially hailed by environmental groups, they repeatedly ran into trouble with the Legislature.

Then Sole became Crist's top negotiator for working out a deal to buy U.S. Sugar's property and use it for Everglades restoration. The purchase, initially hailed by environmental groups, ran into trouble with financing and political opposition, requiring it to be drastically scaled back.

"There were problems with execution on each one," said Frank Jackalone of the Sierra Club.

For the past three months, Sole said he has been laboring from 6:45 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. each day overseeing Florida's response to the oil washing ashore from the Deepwater Horizon spill. He spent much of that time at the center of a bureaucratic tug-of-war, trying to balance the needs of local officials with the resources available from the Coast Guard and BP.

Sole, in his resignation letter, tied his departure from his \$123,000-a-year job to the recent good news about the spill — although he has previously predicted that oil will continue washing ashore for at least two more months.

"Now that the Deepwater Horizon well has been capped, and Florida is on the road to recovery, it is necessary for me

to announce my departure," he wrote.

In an e-mail sent to the agency's 3,500 employees, Sole said that during his time at the DEP he learned that government agencies have customers who need help, "whether it be the developer seeking a permit, a visitor to our parks, a concerned citizen reporting a potential violation, or someone reading about our progress (or lack thereof) in the local newspaper."

Sole counts himself as a Fort Pierce native. He is the son of a Marine officer who made sure the family spent every summer visiting family in Florida no matter where he was stationed.

Growing up around the water led him to earn a bachelor's degree in marine biology at the Florida Institute of Technology, where he studied the population and migration of manatees. He still enjoys scuba diving and snorkeling in Florida's waters with his wife, Jeannie, and daughter, Samantha.

He achieved the rank of captain in the Marine Corps and served during the Persian Gulf War, but otherwise has worked only for the DEP or its predecessor agency for the past 19 years, rising through the ranks.

Barney Bishop of the probusiness Associated Industries of Florida, which battled Sole and Crist over climate change issues, hailed Sole as "an extraordinarily great secretary of the DEP." Environmental leaders offered a less enthusiastic perspective.

Jerry Phillips of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, for instance, noted that the state's own figures show "there was a continual decline in civil enforcement penalties" against polluters while Sole was in charge.

And Linda Young of the Clean Water Network pointed out that Sole strongly opposed tough new water pollution standards that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency plans to impose on Florida's waterways — a position he shared with, among others, paper mill and sewer plant operators.

"He really did surrender Florida's water policy to polluters," she said. "He gave them everything they had been asking for."

Now that he's leaving the agency where he's worked for so long, Castille predicted Sole will find "there is great life after public service. It is well deserved. Family appreciates having you home more as well."

Times staff researchers Caryn Baird and Natalie Watson contributed to this report. Craig Pittman can be reached at craig@sptimes.com.

