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Sonny Perdue Is Trump's Choice for Agriculture Secretary

By JULIE HIRSCHFELD DAVIS and MAGGIE HABERMANJAN. 18, 2017

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald J. Trump on Wednesday selected Sonny Perdue, the former governor of Georgia, to be his secretary of agriculture, two senior transition officials said, making his final cabinet selection two days before he is to be sworn in as president.

Mr. Perdue, a onetime veterinarian who was elected in 2003 as Georgia's first Republican governor since Reconstruction, campaigned heavily for Mr. Trump in the final months of the presidential race, although he had initially backed a rival, former Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas.

His selection ensures that Mr. Trump will enter office with a full complement of chosen cabinet officials, although none have been confirmed. Senators are wrangling over how many nominees can be confirmed by the time Mr. Trump is sworn in on Friday, with Republicans insisting on a series of quick votes and Democrats objecting that they have not had adequate time to vet the candidates, many of whom submitted ethics disclosures late.

The two officials confirmed the decision on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment on it before the formal announcement.

Mr. Perdue has spoken with Mr. Trump in detail about his views on agriculture and trade, including ways to ensure American producers are not placed at a disadvantage in international agreements. In an interview in December, Mr. Perdue said Mr. Trump had quizzed him on what he would do about unfair trade deals. He said the president-elect "believes that we in the U.S. have been sort of patsies over the years in the way we've dealt with our foreign competitors and international trade."

Mr. Perdue, who once ran a grain and fertilizer business, was among the first candidates Mr. Trump interviewed for the post. But the process dragged on for weeks as the president-elect's team debated whether it would be better off choosing someone from a different part of the country or selecting an ethnic minority to balance out an overwhelmingly white, male and wealthy cabinet.

Mr. Perdue, though, pitched himself as an asset with the business and governmental experience to be successful in the post. He spent much of his career in the agriculture business before being elected governor, he told Mr. Trump, and returned to the field in 2011 after leaving office.

“Most people focus on the governor term of eight years, but for me, that was an interruption,” Mr. Perdue said in December. Mr. Trump, he said, “wants people who are experts in the field.”

As governor, amid a record-setting drought in Georgia in 2007, Mr. Perdue led several hundred people at the State Capitol in a prayer for rain, asking God to forgive Georgia for being wasteful with its water. He also called for strict water usage restrictions.

Eric Tanenblatt, Mr. Perdue’s former chief of staff, called him highly qualified for the post in a statement on Wednesday night.

“As a successful governor, Perdue has the requisite experience to direct a massive bureaucracy of the sort necessary to conduct the department’s many programs,” Mr. Tanenblatt said. He praised Mr. Perdue’s ability to shape agricultural policy and business.

Mr. Perdue, he said, “knows the challenges facing today’s farmers.”

Environmental activists condemned Mr. Trump’s choice, saying that Mr. Perdue had received hundreds of thousands of dollars in federal farm subsidies that help chemical companies and large agriculture conglomerates at the expense of small farmers and the environment.

“It’s certainly hard to imagine that a former fertilizer salesman will tackle the unregulated farm pollution that poisons our drinking water, turns Lake Erie green, and fouls the Chesapeake Bay and the Gulf of Mexico,” said Scott Faber, senior vice president of government affairs at EWG, an environmental research group.

If confirmed, Mr. Perdue would oversee an agency with a \$150 billion budget. The Agriculture Department is in charge of farm policy and food safety, and it funds food stamps, other nutrition programs and the Forest Service.

A conservative Republican, Mr. Perdue has ties to at least one senator who will vote on his confirmation. Senator David Perdue, Republican of Georgia, is his cousin.