

Gov. Kevin Stitt accused employees of the Commissioners of the Land Office of playing politics after his pick to run the agency was approved in a special meeting Tuesday morning where two of the five commissioners were absent. Former energy executive Elliot Chambers will start as interim secretary Aug. 3 at a salary of \$170,000. Lt. Gov. Matt Pinnell and Secretary of Agriculture Blayne Arthur joined Stitt in approving the hire. Not attending the meeting were State Auditor and Inspector Cindy Byrd and Superintendent of Public Instruction Joy Hofmeister. Chambers is former CEO of White Star Petroleum LLC, which filed for bankruptcy in May 2019 and owed the Land Office more than \$207,000 in underpayments and interest for oil and gas deductions and valuations on its leases. "We know he's the right guy for this service," Stitt said after the meeting, which was delayed by about 30 minutes as Pinnell and Arthur waited for the governor to arrive. "Unfortunately, sometimes politics get involved and people inside the agency are pushing for one of their people and they end up causing some controversy."

Through a spokesman, Byrd said she had a conflict and couldn't make the meeting. She had no comment on the vote. Hofmeister could not immediately be reached for comment. Stitt said he wasn't concerned about White Star's bankruptcy and underpayments to the agency. He said Chambers had the right mix of real-world experience to run the Commissioners of the Land Office, which manages a \$2.3 billion portfolio of oil and gas leases and commercial and agricultural property. It distributed about \$132 million to Oklahoma education in fiscal year 2019. "He is a proven leader, a CEO-quality person, great financial background, a great Oklahoman," Stitt said. "We know there's been some problems in the oil and gas industry and there's been some oil and gas companies that have worked on settlements because they filed bankruptcy." In their February meeting, the commissioners approved a settlement with White Star, whose assets were bought out of bankruptcy by Contango Oil and Gas Co. in September. Records show CLO settled for about \$176,000. "He was already long gone from the CEO position, and we weren't even thinking

about him for this position at that time," Stitt said of the settlement approval.

Stitt's last pick for secretary, A. Brandt Vawter, left the position abruptly in March.

He was appointed without meeting the statutory qualifications for the job, and lawmakers were unwilling to change the requirements as requested by the governor in a COVID-19 shortened session. Vawter's company, Monticello Investments, had been sued over discrepancies with oil and gas leases. Assistant Secretary Keith Kuhlman has been running the agency since Vawter's departure. Chambers, 46, has degrees from Oklahoma State University and New York University and is a certified public accountant. He was named CEO of White Star in 2016 and was a former vice president and treasurer at Chesapeake Energy Corp. from 2008 to 2015.

Chambers also was chief financial officer for American Energy-Woodford and several related companies, which were started by Chesapeake co-founder Aubrey McClendon after he left Chesapeake. In 2013, CLO approved an \$18 million settlement with Chesapeake over underpayment of natural gas royalties from hundreds of wells in Roger Mills County. Chesapeake denied wrongdoing in the matter. Featured video: Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board in disarray Gallery: COVID-19 basics everyone needs to know as the pandemic continues