



By Elliott P. Laws

Why There's Hope For Next Generation

As we get ready to begin the histrionics that will lead us into next year's midterm elections, I cannot help but wonder what is going to happen to environmental law and policymaking in the United States over the next decade or so. We seem to have lost the ability to compromise, to see the other side's position, to value what is truly important and give up that which we can to reach it. Perhaps the increasing failure to do this in the environmental arena is just a microcosm of a greater schism in American society in general. I hope not, but as we see on a daily basis the inability of opposing sides to communicate civilly, let alone reach mutually agreeable compromises, I have to wonder what's going to happen.

As much as many of us might hate to admit it, the real future of environmental law and policy will be decided not by us and our peers, but by the next generation of attorneys, engineers, activists, and policy wonks. I often wonder where this new group will come from. Will they have chosen the environment as their area of expertise, or will they fall into it by chance and opportunity, as happened to so many of us who have lived this life for the past quarter century or more? Will they capitalize on our successes and avoid the disastrous pitfalls that have marked this vital area of law and policy? But most importantly, will they be able to forge the compromises needed to move ahead, to end the gridlock?

I have had the opportunity to be associated with a group of "the future" and am amazed at the seriousness

with which many of them see their commitment to the environment, even before they enter the workforce. The project is Campus Climate Neutral, or CCN, which I have come to know over the past two years while on the board of its sponsor, the National Association of Environmental Law Societies. This association of over 50 law school environmental societies is dedicated to "educating, inspiring, and mobilizing the next generation of environmental leaders."

CCN impresses me equally for what it is trying to achieve, as well as for the thought and creativity that have gone into the development of the process under which this ambitious project will function. To my mind's eye, these students have, at least on paper, taken a major step toward creating a framework that the leaders of today have only used intermittently, and even then with a less than full effort and success.

In short, CCN is a national effort aimed at attracting graduate students from a wide range of disciplines to work on projects (for academic credit) that will research, design, and implement creative solutions to climate-related problems. The students will be the laboring oar for universities, state and local governments, corporations, and not-for-profits that are looking at innovative climate projects. The benefits to all are patently obvious: the sponsor company or organization will receive an enthusiastic, energetic, capable, and economical workforce to assist in project research, development, testing, and implementation. The students will receive training, real life experiences, networking opportunities, and academic credit as they help develop long-range solutions to real problems. This type of partnership has benefits that can transcend the relatively minor scope of specific projects that may be developed.

While NAELS is taking a decidedly pro-climate change approach in its development of CCN, the framework developed and the potential for success is without challenge. CCN looks to bring to bear a wide range of disciplines — from law and policy, to science, to economics, to engineering. It looks to partner with a varied roster of players, including

corporations, religious leaders, minority groups, conservative environmental organizations, environmental activists, and labor. It seeks to be open-minded in identifying opportunities for students who have decided that working on environmental issues will be part of their futures — opportunities that may have a major impact on the future of the United States and the rest of the world. These experiences will go a long way toward starting the real-life education of our future environmental leaders.

It is a sad fact that absent some level of controversy, environmental issues tend to languish. William Hazlitt, the 19th century English essayist, wrote, "When a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a subject of interest." At a minimum, the ongoing controversy on climate change between the U.S. government and much of the rest of the world has presented an opportunity that may benefit us in the long run. If our environmental leaders of tomorrow, some of whom will likely participate in the NAELS project, can learn how to work together with "responsible spokesmen of opposing viewpoints"; can learn to understand and value the positions of those who differ from their own; and can take that understanding and translate it into a position that, while not perfect from their parochial point of view, spans enough common ground to resolve an issue, then that is something to be truly hopeful for.

I don't know how many cities or states can overcome bureaucratic inertia to take advantage of CCN. I don't know if many corporations will look past the obvious conclusions that NAELS has made in introducing this project to see the long-term benefits the concept offers. What I do know is that these law students, perhaps unburdened by the cynicism that often comes with age and experience, have attempted to tackle a monumental problem that has yet to be resolved by our leaders, in a manner that is honest, creative, open, and promising. I wish them the best.

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