

Lawyer puts environmental beliefs into real practice

Wayne State University Law School alumnus Steven Chester was a teenager when the energy crisis of the 1970s was looming. He took notice as oil prices soared and political leaders urged Americans to conserve energy, and the seed was planted for a career path that would include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, as well as private practice. The foundation for that path was laid at Wayne Law.

"While I was in high school, pollution and environmental degradation began to emerge as pressing social issues warranting government and citizen action," Chester recalled. "I decided to

attend law school as environmental law was just becoming a specialty practice area." He was attracted to Wayne Law because of one of the environmental law faculty members, Zygmunt Plater, who had been an attorney on the "snail darter case" — the Supreme Court's first decision interpreting the Endangered Species Act and one of the most important cases involving environmental law.



Steven
Chester

Since graduating from Wayne Law in 1981, Chester has built an impressive career as an environmental law expert. He has worked both in private practice and for governmental agencies managing regulatory programs, developing environmental policies and strategies, and interpreting and applying environmental laws.

Chester spent three years at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the early 1990s as deputy enforcement counsel for the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act and then as deputy director of the Office of Criminal Enforcement. Chester also provided counsel to Fortune 500 companies and municipalities on environmental matters while of counsel with Miller Canfield Paddock and Stone PLC.

This past January, Chester finished a seven-year stint as director of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), overseeing the agency's management of Michigan's air quality, water resources, solid and hazardous waste, and land use. There, he chaired the 35-member Michigan Climate Change Action Council, which developed a Climate Change Action Plan for the state.

Now into his third decade practicing environmental law, Chester feels there are still many critical environmental policy issues facing the state and the country. "Whether you believe that climate change is occurring or you don't — and the scientific evidence in support is overwhelming — federal and state environmental policy will be dominated by, and preoccupied with, responding to a changing climate," he said. "Among other things, it will influence energy policy, water use law and practices, air

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Michigan's landscape is a major attraction

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pollution law, and land use policy and urban development.”

According to Chester, these issues are particularly relevant for our state. “Michigan has great natural wealth — more than 10,000 inland lakes and ponds, 36,000 miles of rivers and streams, and hundreds of thousands of acres of forestland and trails,” he said. “Our state’s landscape is a major attraction that is keeping young people from relocating. If we don’t sufficiently protect these resources, there will be less reason for young people to

stay in this great state.”

Chester challenges the idea that strong environmental policy comes at the expense of profitable businesses. “While I was MDEQ director, I repeatedly said that we can have both a healthy economy and a healthy environment — these concepts are not mutually exclusive. I would suggest that we cannot long prosper economically if we have a sick work force, depleted resources and weak environmental regulatory programs. The strongest economies are those that have robust environmental programs — not the other way around,” Chester said.

“Human history is one of resource exploitation and cost externalization,” he added. “Environmental laws are intended to prevent such exploitation and preserve what is vital to a healthy, sustainable and enjoyable human existence.”

Today, Chester is an attorney with Foley and Lardner specializing in environmental law and renewable/alternative energy. He recently helped the state of New York develop a climate change action plan, facilitating the technical workgroup discussions on adaptation. He will teach a climate change law course at Michigan State University beginning in January.

In addition to his demanding professional work, Chester has devoted much time to civic and service organizations. He spent four years as a school board trustee for the Williamston Community Schools, and has served on the boards of the Ingham East Habitat for Humanity and Michigan Campaign Finance Network, among others.

He believes his education at Wayne Law served as excellent preparation for his legal career. “The instruction, both from a theoretical and practical perspective, was outstanding,” he said. “Not just the environmental classes, but also the administrative, contracts, torts and civil procedure courses.”

His advice to today’s law students reflects his commitment to the community and to his ideals. “Follow your passion — life is too short to not enjoy what you are doing,” he said. “And give public service serious consideration. The financial rewards may not be as great, but the experience and personal satisfaction are unequalled.”