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Dean's Column: Natural Resources Law at UNLV and Beyond

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“Perhaps no single resource is more important to Nevada’s future than water, especially with looming challenges of drought and climate change.”

Dean’s Column

BY DEAN DANIEL W. HAMILTON AND PROF. ANNE R. TRAUM

NATURAL RESOURCES LAW AT UNLV AND BEYOND

For more than 150 years, natural resources have been critically important in the Silver State. Peruse the headlines lately and it’s clear that natural resources are as integral to our economy today as at any time in the state’s history. Water scarcity is a critical concern. Mining is a key industry. Some 500,000 cattle graze on federal and private land in the state. Renewable energy – solar, wind and geothermal – is a promising energy alternative and economic growth area.

At the law school, our mission is to educate our students to navigate the complex landscape of natural resources law and policy, at the local, regional and national levels. We are committed to generating discussion and knowledge, so that our students and the community can solve problems and innovate on these important issues. This work plays out on many stages, with our full-time and adjunct faculty, community partners and students all playing an important role. And this fall we will launch an annual natural resources lecture in northern Nevada.

Faculty Leadership in the Field

We are proud that UNLV faculty members are national leaders in natural resources law. Currently, Professor Bret Birdsong is serving in the Obama Administration as Deputy Solicitor for Land to the Secretary of the Interior. A natural resource scholar at the law school since 2000, Professor Birdsong teaches property, natural resources, environmental, administrative and water law, and created an experiential field course on resource management in the Grand Canyon region. Now he is playing a key role at the national level on solar energy development, resource protection and regulatory challenges all over the west. “My in-depth knowledge of Nevada and the west is an important asset inside the beltway,” Professor Birdsong observes, “because I not only draw on my

legal expertise, but also have a practical sense of how policy works on the ground, and the people and resources it impacts.”

Connecting with Practitioners

Perhaps no single resource is more important to Nevada’s future than water, especially with looming challenges of drought and climate change. At UNLV, we tap the key players in regional water policy to host a dialogue on these live issues. Last fall, the Saltman Center for Dispute Resolution hosted “Water Law in the West: A Panel Discussion with Patricia Mulroy,” past-general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority and recently appointed Senior Fellow at UNLV’s Brookings Mountain West. The program convened water law and dispute resolution experts from Nevada, Utah and California. This spring, SNWA’s General Manager John Entsminger and General Counsel Gregory Walch co-taught Water Law with Attorney Brin Gibson from Lionel Sawyer and Collins. For our students, these practicing attorneys bring a unique, on-the-ground perspective to the classroom. One student, Justin Allsop, even landed a job at SNWA to start in the fall.

In the north and south, we are privileged to be able to draw on the expertise of natural resource attorneys. This fall, Blaine Welsh, chief of the Civil Division at the United States Attorney’s Office and a veteran natural resources litigator, will join our adjunct faculty to teach natural resources law. Regent Rick Trachok, who interacts with our students regularly, is an energy law expert. At Parsons, Behle and Latimer, John Zimmerman (BSL ’05) specializes in natural resources law; Ashley Nikkel (BSL ’12) will join him in the fall. We are also working with Jim Butler, partner at Parsons, Behle and Latimer, on developing a course on mining law.

Students on the Ground

Students interested in natural resource law are inspired in the classroom, but explore their own paths by gaining real-world experience. Because the law school is a member of the Trustees Council to the Rocky Mountain Mineral Law Foundation (RMMLF), select students receive funding to attend foundation conferences with leaders in the industry. This past year, three students (Bradley Bellesario, Katelyn Cantu and Drew Wheaton) received funding to attend an RMMLF Special Institute on International Energy and Minerals Arbitration in Toronto, Canada, and eight students attended an RMMLF solar energy conference in Las Vegas.

Brittany Cermack, who attended the RMMLF conference last fall, spent her spring semester externing at the U.S. Department of Justice Environment and Natural Resources Division in Washington, D.C., and will work as a paid intern this summer in the General Counsel's office at the Las Vegas Valley Water District.

This summer, three students were awarded public-interest grants to pursue natural resource-related work in Hawaii, California and Washington, D.C.: Rhiannon Chandler will return to Hawaii to work at the Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation, which works to protect Hawaiian lands, water and access rights. Amy Horne will intern for the Delta Watermaster in Sacramento, California, navigating the complex water, contractual and management issues affecting the Bay Delta. And Kostan Lathouris will intern at the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Solicitor, Division of Indian Affairs.

We are proud to see UNLV students make such important contributions to natural resources work across the country. When Kostan starts his summer job in Washington, D.C., he will be far from UNLV, but just down the hall from his property professor, Bret Birdsong.

Natural resources law often involves thorny issues within a complex legal and societal framework. At UNLV, our faculty, community partners and students are engaging those challenging issues on campus and on the ground at the local, regional and national levels. ■



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