

Florida A & M University Law Review

Volume 6

Number 2 *New Directions in Environmental Law and
Justice Symposium Edition*

Article 3

Spring 2011

Remarks to the Florida A&M University College of Law Environmental Law and Justice Symposium

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Recommended Citation

Gwendolyn K. Fleming, *Remarks to the Florida A&M University College of Law Environmental Law and Justice Symposium*, 6 Fla. A&M U. L. Rev. (2011).

Available at: <http://commons.law.famu.edu/famulawreview/vol6/iss2/3>

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REMARKS TO THE FLORIDA A&M
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND JUSTICE
SYMPOSIUM

Delivered by: Gwendolyn Keyes Fleming

I have spent much of my 17-year professional life protecting communities and children against crime so it is especially pleasing to see that FAMU has joined with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice to open the Juvenile Justice Research Institute. An Institute aimed at identifying research, implementing cutting edge juvenile justice services to address the needs of youths at greatest risk of delinquency, and providing non-traditional strategies that will enhance youth and family development, public safety, and the effectiveness of existing juvenile services.

I applaud this important effort to reach out to those who haven't been able to find a path that would make them more productive citizens. We recognize that sometimes folks need a little extra help and guidance.

Inculcating sustainability into the ethic of colleges and universities that serve these communities is of great importance to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). By fostering the environmental sustainability conversation at colleges and universities, the EPA can support the growth of a universe of diverse graduates and potentially engage these graduates to address our succession needs.

Other federal agencies and our State counterparts also benefit from building a critical mass of people educated and motivated to engage in environmental careers, environmental protection and environmental policy formulation. Why even our economy can be a benefactor as businesses search for innovative ways to address more demanding and sustainable environmental goals. These businesses will need a work force better able to understand just what it means to have a sustainable product.

I welcome this opportunity and am truly honored to speak at FAMU. Congratulations to the Law School; how proud you must be of having a Law School that achieved ABA accreditation in 2009 and, in response, saw a 10% increase in the bar passage rate of your graduates last year. Then add to this, having US World and News Report rate the

Law School the most diverse school in the US. You all are not only setting new directions but are leaders paving the way and building leadership by example.

Talking about new direction and a case for environmental justice; there is a new direction with the first African-American President. There is a new direction with the first African-American EPA Administrator. Now, I am so proud to be, the first African-American Regional Administrator. It's time for the EPA to move in a new direction, as well.

A new direction our Administrator has set is to expand the conversation of environmentalism while working for environmental justice. We all know the old way of thinking didn't work. The old way of marginalizing communities while profits soared didn't work, and that's why the EPA is placing a new focus on environmental justice.

Earlier this year, Lisa Jackson asked every staff member at the EPA to make environmental justice part of every decision we make and to bring their creativity and innovation to ensure that our efforts reach every community.

In the last 68 days, I have held 4 public environmental justice events; discussed Environmental Justice (EJ) with all of the State Commissioners, and held extensive meetings with senior EPA officials, nationally and in the region, on EJ issues. This constitutes a first step. I want my actions to be congruent with my words; environmental justice will be a top priority while I am Regional Administrator.

Environmental justice is about educating, engaging, and empowering communities. These are the same lessons that I learned as a prosecutor.

It speaks to my heart because in DeKalb County, GA, we utilized non-traditional strategies to reach out to communities to educate, engage, and empower those in need to help prevent and prosecute crimes (Can't be worse than building trust in a county that sent Rev. Dr. Martin L. King to jail.)

On a broader scale, when the opportunity as Regional Administrator came to reach out and protect communities and children here in the Southeast from harmful environmental burdens, there seemed to be a natural fit.

We want communities to become engaged, ask the right tough questions, collaborate with others; they become empowered to make their communities safer and better.

Just like all projects at the EPA, Administrator Jackson, relies on three principles to guide EPA discussions: Science must be the

backbone for EPA programs; the EPA must follow the rule of law; and the EPA's actions must be transparent.

The EPA appreciates that at FAMU, the merits of these principles are well represented. For those of you working for environmental justice these principles must resonate with familiarity.

In 1990, some of the earliest environmental justice advocates, many of whom are in the room and affiliated with this program, came together at the Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards in Ann Arbor, MI. At that meeting, they recommended that "racial and socioeconomic equity considerations be included in Regulatory Impact Assessments."

Administrator Jackson recently pointed out that: "Historically, the low-income and minority communities that carry the greatest environmental burdens haven't had a voice in our policy development or rulemaking."

We want to change that. But, those of you who have been working and striving for environmental justice for decades know that change doesn't come over night because we are still working to integrate the consideration of these principles into environmental programs.

Communities have known and lived with environmental issues for years. The EPA wants to establish the scientific foundation of this collective community knowledge to lay the groundwork for new policies and new initiatives that will make environmental justice part of everyday environmental action in this country.

Although a country of laws tested over 230 years; environmental law has only been around for the last forty of those years. This is still a developing field.

This offers Universities, like FAMU, a significant role to play in developing the human and intellectual capital that will make our society more environmentally savvy especially with environmental justice.

I must congratulate you once again for being named the #1 institution of origin for African-Americans who earn doctoral degrees in natural sciences and engineering. You have set many students on the right path to working in fields that lend themselves to achieving EPA's mission, protection of human health and the environment.

In fact, two (2) of your current students, Sophomores Kevin Baker and Daniel Ware, are already helping the EPA by being selected to the EPA Ambassadors Pilot Program. This program is aimed at our young people and asking that they get involved in EPA programs to

solicit and encourage their peers in programs consistent with the values promoted at the EPA.

We hope that by engaging and educating these students their actions will in turn motivate their fellow students to join us in inviting new voices into the conversation on environmental issues.

Together we can give new hope to communities laboring under the burden of environmental degradation. The real life issues that communities are facing need the strong foundations of sound science. They need stronger partnerships that capitalize on our strengths and have us all pulling in the same direction.

One example to that end, the EPA is implementing the EJ Showcase Community in Jacksonville. This collaboration is one of the creative steps this administration has taken to accelerate job growth and rebuild the foundations for prosperity. Through the Showcase Community, HUD and DOT, for the first time, have joined the EPA in making sustainability an agency-wide initiative.

EPA Region 4 believes that one vehicle to promote an educated and engaged empowered public is the development of active, on-going relationships with colleges and universities which have an expressed interest in environmental issues and the value of environmental sustainability. FAMU is at the top of our list; perfectly positioned given the establishment of the FAMU Center of Environmental Equity and Justice. The Center can provide and facilitate the education of students, citizens, and local and state governments on environmental equity and justice issues.

Early next year, EPA Region 4 is anticipating the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding with FAMU to strengthen and expand our existing relationships to enhance our abilities to reach out to communities. This agreement will strengthen and expand a relationship that has fostered collaborative efforts like: the EPA's Air Division Director, Beverly Banister, being a member of the Professional Advisory Board for FAMU's Biological and Agricultural Systems Engineering Program (BASE); EPA's Agriculture Program Coordinator, Ms. Denise Tennessee, being a member of the Advisory Council for the Center for Water and Air Quality. Denise encouraged the faculty to be a leader in climate change mitigation and adaptation planning for the Gulf Coast and they subsequently co-hosted the FAMU 2010-Climate Change Forum; and the EPA's Gulf of Mexico program granting almost \$500,000 to the Center for an Environmental Education Program for Expanding the Conversation and Stewardship of the Gulf of Mexico.

We are excited FAMU will join another 37 academic institutions in a collaborative consortium built on common themes aimed at strengthening environmental protection.

This is another step in an ongoing process — and an opportunity to bring multiple sets of skills, passions and resources together to confront this shared challenge.

By opening channels for communication through other stakeholders, like FAMU, communities can find the resources to design and implement strategies that will allow them to be more successful in addressing the issues affecting them. It's the right thing to do. Obviously, it's the morally right thing to do and, economically, it's the right thing to do. We thrive as a nation when our communities thrive.

The Administrator tells the story of a man who said to her, "Businesses come to communities like parents come to colleges. They look at the environment to make sure it's healthy. They look at the people to make sure they're getting what they need to thrive. They want to know that this place means a better future and they don't put their money down if they don't like what they see."

This is something we see all the time in our work on environmental justice. A weak environment means a weak consumer base and unhealthy air means an unhealthy atmosphere for investments.

But a clean, green, healthy community is a better place to buy a home and raise a family. It's more attractive to new businesses and it builds a foundation for prosperity.

I ask you to remember the famous line from the movie the "Field of Dreams" with Kevin Costner.

A person hit hard economically, almost losing his farm, but he built a regulation-sized baseball diamond in the middle of a corn field, because: "if you build it, they will come"; in the end, cars line up along the side of the road.

If we provide a stable foundation: dependable, secure, contaminant-free, high quality schools; nontoxic, protected, high quality recreational areas; sound, dependable, environmentally friendly, transportation corridors; crime-free residential and business areas powered by efficient, plentiful, clean and green energy; then business *will* come.

By using the best science, we can inform decision makers so they have the data in hand that best represents the neighborhoods where the air and water are polluted. We want to show that these are the same neighborhoods with increased emergency room visits — that are in turn driving up health care costs for everyone.

When we talk about the economy, and the need for more jobs and small businesses in our urban centers and metropolitan regions, the EPA wants the studies that show how dirty air, pollution in the water, and contaminated lots in our neighborhoods can stifle economic growth or community revitalization efforts.

Poison in the ground means poison in the economy. A weak environment means a weak consumer base. And unhealthy air means an unhealthy atmosphere for investments.

And — frankly — it doesn't take a scientist to see that when health and economic possibilities are limited, other problems are compounded. Crime is higher, violence is higher — often times, drugs use is rampant- and the vicious cycle continues.

CLOSING

As Administrator Jackson is fond of saying, “. . .we are all environmentalists. When it comes to people's health, everyone wants strong environmental protection.”

- We all want kids to breathe clean air
- We all want kids to drink clean water
- We all want kids to play on safe clean playgrounds

Environmental protection, energy management, and economic growth can all play to America's greatest strengths—ingenuity, invention, and innovation.

These things empower us to take the lead in the global push for economic growth, because expanding economic opportunity is not possible without sustainability, and it is not sustainable without our communities.

Without protection for the water, air, and land, we can only go so far. Without clean energy, the global economy will be running on empty within our lifetimes. We are all counting on the ingenuity and the creativity of all the American people.

And where better to plant the seeds for America's creativity, ingenuity, and invention needed to meet today's and tomorrow's environmental challenges than in the colleges and universities.

I would like to thank all those at FAMU that have made it possible for me to join you here tonight. I look forward to working with FAMU and others here tonight as we form this new partnership and move in this new direction.