

## Environmental Law

### 1. What is *environmental law*? What does it cover?

Environmental law is anything that is directly or indirectly related to “the environment.” This includes natural resource law, including mining, oil and gas, etc., environmental remediation, hazardous waste treatment, storage and disposal, cases with endangered species, the environmental impacts of real estate development, energy production, business mergers and acquisitions, and compliances with and responses to violations of state and federal environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, etc. Environmental law also deals with statutes through the Department of the Interior, Park Services, Indian Affairs, Bureau of Management, and Forest services in the Department of Agriculture.

### 2. What does an attorney do who works in *environmental law*?

Depending upon the degree of specialization, an environmental attorney might specialize in one area or generalize in many areas. The work involves understanding complex and constantly changing rules and regulations. The work involves counseling clients, meeting with regulators, drafting permit applications, responding to resource agency inquiries, inspections, and notices of violation. There are also many attorneys who are employed by state and federal resource agencies like the U.S. EPA and/or U.S. DOJ and their state equivalents. In the private sector some attorneys represent environmental organizations, businesses, or individuals and advise them on how to comply with various state or federal environmental laws. Other attorneys work for various government organizations to defend the state agencies.

### 3. What is an average day like for an attorney who practices *environmental law*?

A typical day would include drafting provisions of acquisition agreements that relate to environmental issues or counseling clients about how to comply with environmental laws. We also spend a lot of time preparing and appearing before administrative and judicial forums where environmental issues are being contested by state or federal resource agencies. We also work with private parties and advise clients regarding the environmental risks of acquiring assets that may have significant environmental liabilities. Some attorneys are more involved in lobbying and work closely with government agencies. Some of them are members of the legislature staff.

### 4. What is the average salary for an attorney who practices *environmental law*?

The starting salary depends a lot on who you work for. If you are involved with environmental organizations or the government, the starting salaries are typically less. They start at around \$50,000 and with seniority can go up to \$75,000 on the federal level. If you work for non-profit organizations or for the state, starting salaries can start between \$30,000 - \$40,000. Starting salaries at bigger firms in more populated cities are typically highest. For example, at Foley & Lardner LLP the starting salary is about \$110,000, which is on the high end.

### 5. Is there currently a demand for *environmental law* attorneys?

Yes, there is a demand for environmental law attorneys because more people are becoming interested in it. Because of this, job placement is very competitive.

### 6. Is there more of a demand for *environmental law* attorneys in one area of the country over another?

Environmental law issues typically increase as the population increases. Also, much environmental law is about regulating manufacturing facilities, energy producing facilities and natural resource exploration and development. Typically, the greater the population the greater the environmental disputes and work opportunities for attorneys. Much of the work is in Washington D.C. and in the West.

### 7. How difficult is it for students right out of law school to get a job in *environmental law*?

Employment in environmental law for students right out of law school is dependent substantially on academic performance. Aside from this, some other factors include what kind and size of firm you want to work for. Some firms don't want law school graduates who have already specialized because they want you to try different specialties before settling.

### 8. In what type of a work situation can an attorney practice *environmental law*? Big firm? Small firm? Government work?

Environmental law attorneys can practice in small firms, big firms and work for the government. There are also some environmental law solo practitioners and others who work as in-house counsel for corporations and government organizations.

9. What are the most rewarding things about practicing *environmental law*?

Environmental law tends to be a very interesting practice because some people like to feel like they're protecting the environment. The issues you face are frequently complex and challenging, so it's difficult to get bored.

10. What are the most difficult things about practicing *environmental law*?

Clients sometimes view environmental legal issues as necessary, but undesirable impediments to transactions, development, and operations. Some difficult aspects of practicing this type of law include getting used to losing cases since most of them are against the government. Also, sometimes the deadlines are short and attorneys are required to work hard and spend late nights in the office getting the job done. Government and non-profit employers allow a better balance with family. Larger firms expect their attorneys to put in a lot of hours so some attorneys would rather take the pay cut and work for the government so they can spend more time with their families.

11. For students who are interested in practicing *environmental law*, are there certain undergraduate classes they should take? Majors that are better? Minors that are better?

My experience has been that academic performance in law school is more important, by far, than any specific major, minor or undergraduate class. That being said, a solid background in a natural or environmental science will help the student more quickly understand many of the technical aspects of environmental law. A major that requires you to do a lot of reasoning and writing is good. Just make sure that it forces you to write down and grapple with various arguments. A lot of English majors do well in law school.

12. For students who are interested in practicing *environmental law*, would it be better to go to a school that holds itself out as having a specialty in *environmental law* or just the best ranked law school the student can get into?

As a priority, it is better to try to get into the best ranked school first. Next, it's important to go to a school that is located in an area the student would like to end up living and working. Getting into a specialty school is third on the priority list. A lot of the larger firms are more impressed if you go to a really good school than if you specialized in environmental law. If you're going to an environmental law organization, they'd be more impressed if you have that specialty. Government agencies want to see if you've taken some course work that deals with environmental law even if you didn't specialize in it.

13. For students who are interested in practicing *environmental law*, are there certain law school classes they should take?

Taking environmental legal classes will help the student decide if this area of law is for them. Administrative law, litigation, federal courts, classes on the national environmental policy act, clear air and clean water acts are all good to take.

14. For students who are interested in practicing *environmental law* is there anything else they should do to prepare themselves for that field of law?

Summer clerkships that involve practicing environmental law are more impressive for environmental organizations, and will show them that you have interest. Law schools don't care what you're interested in; they just care about how good of a prospect you are. Anything you can do to differentiate yourself from the crowd can help because you need to show admission committees that you're a real person that has done something different.

15. Other Comments

Talk to people who practice this type of law or to law students who are studying this type of law.

Information compiled based on interviews with the following attorneys

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