The following was written by Andrew Cohen for Berkeley Law's Newsroom.

As the new enforcement chief for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Cynthia Giles [Berkeley Law alum of] '78 is anything but naïve about the enormity of her position and the pressure it brings.

"We have a lot of important work to do," says Giles, nominated by President Obama as head of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance and confirmed by the Senate in May. "Our Administrator has outlined five key goals for the agency and each one has a compliance component."

The EPA's priority list includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving air quality, managing chemical risks, cleaning up waste sites, and protecting water. On a more macro level, Giles says the agency is "recommitting to the rule of law, scientific integrity, and transparency."

It's no secret that the EPA under Obama will take a far different approach than it did under President Bush. Case in point: its recent decision clearing California to impose strict greenhouse gas limits on new motor vehicles. This opens the door for several other states to follow suit, and will form the basis of new national rules to take effect in 2012.

"We must be guided by the facts to make sure we're addressing the nation's biggest public health problems," says Giles. "And the more access the public has about what we're doing, the better informed they are and the more pressure they can create for better compliance."

A Learning Environment

Giles has immersed herself in a wide swath of environmental legal work since graduating from Berkeley Law three decades ago.

She served as head of the Massachusetts EPA's Bureau of Resource Protection, and worked for the U.S. EPA in several capacities from 1991 to 1997—overseeing enforcement of federal laws regulating toxics and protecting air, drinking water, and surface water in the EPA's Region 3 in Philadelphia. Prior to joining the EPA, Giles was an Assistant United States Attorney who prosecuted violations of federal environmental laws.

More recently, as Vice President and Director of the Conservation Law Foundation's

Rhode Island Advocacy Center, she pushed the state to join the Northeast states' greenhouse gas cap-and-trade program, and initiated several improvements to Rhode Island's water-management policies.

"I think having multiple perspectives is a great asset because environmental regulatory control and enforcement is a complicated area," says Giles. "Some issues are very local in nature, with specific pollutants that put specific communities at risk. But we also have to look at many problems that are larger in scope."

Her early interest in solving such problems helped blaze a trail toward Berkeley. "I was focused on environmental work before I came to law school," she says. "But the presence of ELQ (*Ecology Law Quarterly*), a publication that showed a real commitment to environmental law, was definitely a big factor in deciding where to attend law school."

Forging New Connections

Giles says news stories and opinion polls show that the public now recognizes a real connection between environmental issues and economic vitality: "The country is moving away from the old-fashion paradigm that these things are in conflict and starting to realize that pursuing a clean energy economy is pursuing economic strength."

Meanwhile, the strength of her office is largely linked to a tricky set of variables: how well the EPA imposes penalties, provides compliance assistance, and otherwise encourages governments, businesses, and other regulated organizations to meet their environmental obligations.

Giles brings a strong California connection to the EPA, along with new EPA assistant administrator for international affairs Michele DePass, former assistant to the San Jose City Manager. She even influenced Rhode Island to adopt California's progressive car emission standards, and defended those standards in federal court.

"Our relationship with California is a great example of how federalism works," says Giles. "Sometimes the federal government takes the lead to make things happen, and sometimes states show us how things can be. The way California addressed greenhouse gas emissions is a perfect example. The state was a leader and a beacon when times were tough at the federal level."

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