ERIS ORIGINALS
THE ENVIRONMENTAL DUE DILIGENCE BLOG

SPECIAL SERIES

BREAKING GROUND

A Spotlight on Six Women in the U.S. Environmental Industry

MEAGHAN COLLIGAN HEMBREE

FROM CURIOSITY TO COUNSEL: FOLLOWING QUESTIONS, FINDING PURPOSE



How early lessons in judgment shaped a complex environmental legal practice

Curiosity, connection, and a love of problem-solving have shaped Meaghan Colligan Hembree's path from a New York City detective's granddaughter to a partner advising global companies on environmental risk. Her investigative streak showed up early, in long conversations with her grandfather about integrity and judgment in difficult situations. Together they walked through scenarios, weighing facts and consequences, which trained her to ask hard questions, look for what was missing, and never accept the obvious answer. That mindset sits at the core of how she practices law today.

Finding Purpose in the Classroom

Meaghan's interest in environmental issues emerged in a classroom far from a law firm. After earning her undergraduate degree in sociology, she joined Teach for America and taught elementary school students in Little Haiti, a neighborhood in Miami-Dade, Florida. Following a devastating hurricane and earthquake that struck Haiti, many of her students were worried and confused by what they were seeing in the news. Meaghan responded by creating a reading and science module on environmental disasters and Superfund sites, helping her students build comprehension while making sense of how environmental events could affect their communities. It was the first time she saw, up close, how environmental issues, human rights, and health and safety intersect in people's everyday lives — and it stayed with her.

Inspired by a Different Kind of Lawyer

Law entered the picture when Meaghan was 16. She began working summers for Jeanne Bonney, a solo practitioner with a sharp mind, irreverent sense of humor, and unconventional style. Jeanne did not look or act like any lawyer Meaghan had seen before, and that difference was powerful. Watching Jeanne run her own practice, advocate

for clients, and show up fully as herself expanded Meaghan's sense of what was possible. It also cemented her decision to pursue law and gave her an early view into the realities of client service, case preparation, and professional judgment.

Building a Scientific Foundation

Recognizing that environmental work would require more than legal acumen, Meaghan built a strong scientific foundation alongside her legal training. She completed a joint program at the Elisabeth Haub School of Law at Pace University and Bard College's graduate program in sustainability, earning a law degree with a certificate in environmental law and a Master of Science in environmental policy. The interdisciplinary program exposed her to science, policy, economics, statistics, and GIS (Geographic Information System). It taught her how to connect technical data with statutory and regulatory frameworks to build strong, defensible arguments — skills she relies on every day in her practice.



From Emerging Contaminants to Enterprise Risk

Through internships and early roles, Meaghan gained experience in municipal work and at the United Nations before moving to boutique law firms, followed by national and now a global law firm. While she was a junior associate, she crafted a complaint in one of the first PFAS lawsuits related to drinking water including claims under citizen suit provisions under the Clean Water Act and Resource Conservation Act, as well as claims under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act. That early experience with emerging contaminants set the tone for the work she does now and sparked a decade-long emphasis on PFAS and chemical regulation and litigation.

What began as a focus on chemicals in soil and water has grown into a broader practice that includes chemical and waste management and enforcement; risk assessment and compliance; health and safety; litigation; and transactional support. Today, at DLA Piper, Meaghan's practice spans integrated services for clients across industries and geographies, often involving multiple business units and jurisdictions. Concerns about PFAS and other chemicals continue to escalate, and she is frequently called upon to help clients understand evolving regulatory requirements, revise standard operating procedures, and respond to investigations and disputes.

At its core, Meaghan's work is about enterprise risk management. She helps clients see the full lifecycle of their environmental and sustainability obligations — from regulatory strategy and permitting to day-to-day operations, incident response, and long-term remediation. She starts by learning how a business actually operates. Understanding business models, pressure points, and operational realities allows her to translate regulatory language and scientific uncertainty into practical strategies that work on the ground.

The Thrill of Problem-Solving

Meaghan is known for her persistence in the details to develop practical solutions to solve problems. She spends significant time in the record reconstructing what really happened at a facility or within a process. "That's why they call it a law practice — the more experience, the more practice, the better your judgment." The thrill of uncovering the one document, email, or clue that shows her client is not liable still keeps her energized.

> "That's why they call it a law practice — the more experience, the more practice, the better your judgment."

For Meaghan, law is fundamentally a problem-solving profession. She is drawn to matters that require her to analyze multiple types of law — environmental, health and

safety, corporate, employment, even cyber — to build a cohesive strategy. There are moments in lawyering, she notes, when everything comes together: the facts, the law, the science, and the business context align to create a practical solution that works for the client and is defensible in the long term.

A Team Sport Approach

Teamwork is central to how Meaghan operates. A former athlete, she often thinks about basketball when she describes her work. She likes the fast pace, the need for strategic plays, and the importance of clear communication on the court. At DLA Piper, she brings that same mindset to cross-functional teams, drawing on the firm's global resources and multidisciplinary capabilities to address complex challenges. Many of her matters involve coordination across practice groups and offices, requiring the same blend of strategy, adaptability, and trust that made team sports so formative for her.

> "...Meaghan values colleagues who are willing to challenge assumptions, bring specialized expertise, and move quickly..."

In this collaborative environment, Meaghan values colleagues who are willing to challenge assumptions, bring specialized expertise, and move quickly when clients face time-sensitive issues. She sees her role as part strategist and part point guard — helping to set the play, anticipate where the matter needs to go next, and collaborate with the right people to execute.

Looking Ahead

Self-reflection, listening, and drawing from past experiences continue to shape Meaghan's leadership style and professional growth. In her role as the environmental lead for DLA Piper's Environmental and Natural Disasters Task Force in Washington, D.C., she focuses on helping clients build resilient, audit-ready systems that function across jurisdictions and business units. Her work increasingly integrates environmental, health and safety, and sustainability considerations into broader business operations, reflecting the growing complexity of enterprise risk and the need for coordinated, practical solutions.



As regulatory frameworks evolve and expectations around corporate responsibility rise, Meaghan remains committed to helping clients navigate uncertainty with clear judgment, strong science, and practical strategies. Whether she is counseling on emerging contaminants like PFAS, updating standard operating procedures, or responding to a crisis, she returns to the principles she learned early on: ask the right questions, dig into the details, and never lose sight of the human and practical impact behind the legal issues. Looking ahead, she sees her role as both advocate and problem-solver — partnering with clients to anticipate what is coming next and to build systems that can withstand whatever challenges the future may bring.

Special thanks to DLA Piper

Want more from the industry's leading authorities on property due diligence?

Check out the ERIS InfoHUB for the latest blogs, webinars, podcasts, news and updates.

ERIS

ONE-STOP SHOP FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROPERTY DUE DILIGENCE

1-866-517-5204 | info@erisinfo.com | erisinfo.com