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Proposed Presentation Abstract
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The Lilliputians of Environmental Regulation: On the Front-lines of Environmental Protection

In an era of partisan rancor and distrust in government, it is unsurprising to encounter rampant negative perceptions about the day-to-day activities of government. In the realm of environmental protection, one either conjures images of rigid bureaucrats who are tree-huggers bent on curbing the productive work of American industry, or in the wake of recent environmental spills in the Elk River in West Virginia and in the Dan River in North Carolina, images of lazy bureaucrats who cannot adequately monitor negligent, profit-driven industry. While such images seem plausible, what is the nature of regulatory interactions between environmental regulators and members of the regulated community? What are the experiences of those regulators on the front-lines of environmental protection?

The day-to-day realities of environmental protection are not what one might expect. First, most of the work protecting the nation's environment is done at the state level, not the federal level—indeed, states issue more than 90 percent of all environmental permits and complete more than 75 percent of all enforcement actions. Even though the states conduct the preponderance of the work of ensuring compliance with environmental laws, states are infrequently studied. My ongoing research examines the critical role the states play in environmental protection and tells the stories of those regulators who are tasked with ensuring the protection of the nation's environment. Data gathered from a nation-wide study of more than 1,200 state environmental regulators reveal committed civil servants that work well with their counterparts in the regulated community and want to work collaboratively with them. These data are supplemented with interviews of regulators who provide firsthand stories of their work.

Such productive working relationships are paramount to the future of environmental policy in the US. Traditional, command and control regulations have resulted in significant improvements to the nation's environment, but they are increasingly at the end of their useful life since environmental challenges today do not lend themselves to this sort of regulation. Indeed, growing calls for “next-generation” environmental policies are getting louder which require collaboration and cooperation on the part of both regulators and the regulated community. This research demonstrates that the building blocks for such policies may already be in place among state regulators if the political will is there to restructure the environmental regulatory regime in the US.