

Vermont Law School Environmental Director Resigns



Summary: *During its restructuring process, Vermont Law School's Environmental Law Director has resigned in order to pursue other opportunities.*

Vermont Law School is going through some big changes as they prepare to overcome deficits in their finances. The “restructuring” happening at the law school is likely the reason for Environmental Law Center Director David Mears to decide to step down.

Mears told *E&E News*, “I’m leaving because I want to pursue other opportunities. I’m looking forward for a chance to move back into working in public policy or environmental advocacy, work that I love. ... It’s been a joy to be able to train law students and future environmental leaders as they kind of get the tools to go out and make a difference.”

Mears, who has been with the law school since 2005 except for a four-year term as commissioner of the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, will leave at the end of the month. Mears has also directed Vermont Law School’s Environmental and Nature Resources Law Clinic. There he worked with law students in helping individuals and nonprofit organizations with environmental legal matters and conservation projects.

Before joining Vermont Law, Mears spent time as a trial attorney for the Department of Justice and in various positions with the Texas state government. Vermont Law named him as the director of their environmental law program in August 2017, replacing Melissa Scanlan. She left to direct the New Economy Law Center, which she co-founded at the law school in 2015.

Mears returned to the law school after his job as commissioner out of “a deep, shared sense of commitment to using our democratic processes and rule of law and good public policymaking strategy and tools to solve environmental problems.”

Vermont Law School, founded in 1972, has been known as the top environmental law school for ten years, according to U.S. News & World Report. In the past 28 years, the school has been No. 1 twenty times. Mears added, “There’s really just a diverse set of backgrounds and perspectives among the faculty here, and the programs have grown up to be really fascinating. It’s hard to be a law student and a master’s student at Vermont Law School and not come away with some real skills and interest in trying to engage in environmental public policy.”

Since the recession hit law schools, independent law schools like Vermont Law have struggled to keep their finances in check. With the drop in enrollment dropping the amount the money law schools receive from tuition, law schools like Vermont Law have had to have rounds of layoffs and buyouts to get through.

In 2014, Moody Investors Service downgraded Vermont Law’s bond rating due to “continued substantial declines in JD enrollment given reduced national demand, expectations for lower net tuition revenue that will pressure cash flow and debt service coverage, and modest projected headroom on a financial covenant that may require an extraordinary release of net assets to remain compliant in the near term.”

Vermont Law tried to explore an option of getting absorbed by the University of Vermont for financial stability. This plan never happened. Vermont Law President and Dean Thomas McHenry said, “It’s no secret that VLS, like many institutions of higher education (and particularly law schools), has been facing considerable financial pressures for most of this decade.”

In order to decrease costs, there will be several changes to faculty. McHenry said, “Some current faculty and staff will move on and pursue other opportunities. They will always have our utmost respect and gratitude for the time they have served the VLS community.”

He added, “Some discussions with faculty are still underway and confidential, and we are respecting the privacy of our community. However, we are pleased that the vast majority of environmental faculty will continue teaching in our environmental program, and we will also be welcoming some new additions.”

“The strength of the Environmental Law Center is a top priority to us at Vermont Law School and when we come out of this restructuring process, we will continue to have the deepest roster of environmental law faculty and the largest catalog of environmental law courses in the country.” The law school also operates an Institute for Energy and the Environment, an Environmental Tax Policy Institute, and a Center for Agriculture and Food Systems.

Do you think it is better to resign or to be laid-off? Share your thoughts with us in the comments below.

To learn more about Vermont Law School, read these articles:

- [Vermont Law Undergoes Faculty Changes](#)
- [Vermont Law Hosts "Hazing in Sports" Panel](#)
- [Thomas McHenry Welcomed as Dean and President at Vermont Law School](#)

