

‘Climate Comments’ Website Translates Complex Climate Change Policy into Plain Language

Wednesday, January 17, 2018, *By Martin Walls*

“*Climate Comments*,” a website designed to make accessible complex environmental regulations and proposals and to inspire individuals to participate in public policy decisions about climate change that affect their lives, has been published by Emily Brown, assistant teaching professor in the *College of Law*. Developed with a Syracuse University Campus as a Laboratory for Sustainability (CALs) grant, the site currently explores the proposed repeal of the Clean Power Plan (CPP).



Emily Brown

The site not only encourages individuals to learn about climate change regulations and proposals, it facilitates interacting with them via the website regulations.gov and provides examples of comments both for and against new proposals. The comment period for the CPP repeal proposal ends on Jan. 16.

The CALs grant enabled Brown to work with three law student

research assistants and four undergraduates from the *S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications* to review climate change regulations and to distill proposed rules into accessible summaries on the website. These short, plain English policy analyses also are being shared via Twitter ([@Climate Comment](https://twitter.com/ClimateComment)) and Facebook (facebook.com/ClimateComments) in a social media campaign that aims to harness the potential of college student engagement in public policy debates surrounding climate change rule-making.

On the website, the law students and undergraduates have summarized pertinent information about critical climate change policies put forward by previous administrations and now under review by President Donald J. Trump. The CPP—developed by the Obama Administration—aims to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from electrical power generation by 32 percent by 2030, but the current administration is proposing to repeal CPP in its entirety.

Another regulation under review is the Clean Air Act (CAA), one of the most comprehensive air quality laws in the world, which was first enacted in 1963 and which has been through several amendments. The Trump Administration proposes to return to an interpretation that limits emission-reduction measures applied to individual sources rather than whole industries. Also on the website is a summary of the 2009 EPA “Endangerment Finding,” which was a result of the Massachusetts v. EPA (2007) Supreme Court decision holding that greenhouse gases (GHGs) are pollutants under the CAA and that current and projected levels of six GHGs threaten the health and human welfare of current and future generations.

Brown’s project was one of five selected by the University during the latest round of CALS funding, which called for projects that address climate disruption and that offer an opportunity for communication and outreach to the campus and wider community. Funding for CALS grants comes from the Syracuse University Climate Action Plan. As energy efficiency efforts have been implemented on the Syracuse campus in recent years, some of the savings have gone into this research fund. The selection committee was drawn from an advisory group of faculty from all University schools and colleges.