

Season 6, Episode 1: A Career in Environmental Service

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Basil Seggos, Former Commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Commissioner: The students come here and they're functioning, high-performing staff right away, almost without exception. For the last several years, we've been leaning forward on our relationship with indigenous peoples here in New York and looking for ways to change that dialogue, change the relationship. This is a crisis. We're at war with this contaminant, and we've got to go parachute in and fix this problem. I just felt outraged by what was going on and I just couldn't sit down. I couldn't sit on the sidelines. But I mean, I got angry. And you convert that into action, I think. And I just wanted to help in any way possible. The science matters.

Joanie Mahoney: Welcome back listeners to a fresh new season of Campus Conversations, the podcast. I'm Joanie Mahoney, president of SUNY ESF, and excited to be kicking off season six of the podcast. I invite you to join me as we hear stories from the people working with and at ESF, who are committed to improving our world. Each of them play a role in propelling ESF forward as we strive to fulfill our mission. And today, I'm really honored to be welcoming Basil Seggos, commissioner of the New York State DEC. I thank you very much for joining me here today. And as I warned you, I have a little bit of one of those bios that probably you've endured a million times in your career, but they're really important things that I want to share with our listeners.

Basil Seggos was appointed DEC commissioner in October of 2015, leading an agency of over 3,000 professionals as the longest serving DEC commissioner. He oversees programs that promote a clean, healthy, and accessible environment, including protecting and restoring New York's air, lands, and waters, combating climate change, enforcing state environmental laws and regulations, responding to natural and manmade disasters, and supporting world-class outdoor recreation on state lands and waters, including hunting, fishing, hiking, and paddling. Seggos was instrumental in the passage of the state's nation leading climate change law, the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. And now serves as co-chair of its implementing body, the Climate Action Council. Basil also devised and is responsible for the two and a half billion dollars Clean Water Infrastructure Act, and spearheaded the reauthorization of the state's Super fund law and reforms of the Brownfield Tax Credit program. As co-chair of the state's Drinking Water Quality Council, Basil oversaw the establishment of the most protective water quality standards for PFAS and 1,4-dioxane. I hope I got that right.

Commissioner: You nailed it.

Joanie Mahoney: In addition to leading DEC, Commissioner Seggos advises the governor on environmental policy and issues. He serves on a variety of boards, including as chair of the Environmental Facilities Corporation, chair of the Hudson River Park Trust and the Adirondack Park Agency, the Delaware River Basin Commission, the Great Lakes Commission, and the NYSERDA Board, the Olympic Regional Development Authority, the Susquehanna River Basin Commission, the New York State Energy Planning Board, and others, including the role that we have that we are most fond of. And that is a member of the ESF Board of Trustees. Prior to becoming DEC Commissioner, Basil served as the depth secretary for the environment for the governor, where he counseled the governor on environmental policy and the operations of New York's environmental agencies, including DEC, the Office of State Parks and Rec and Historic Preservation, EFC, and the Adirondack Park Association was a liaison to the state legislature on environmental issues and legislation.

And before he came to state government, Basil served as Vice President of business development at Hugo New Corporation, a clean tech private equity company. He served as the chief investigator and attorney for Riverkeeper. During law school, he was a legal clerk on the President's Council on Environmental Quality. And you began your career as an associate at the Natural Resources Defense Council at RDC. You are a bachelor holding alum from Trinity College and earned your law degree from PACE Law School in 2001, where you received the Environmental Law Award and Alumni Achievement Award. And if you think that it's not possible to do all that, Basil also served as an officer in the US Army Reserve. When not in office, Basil can be found adventuring with his family, hunting or fishing in New York's outdoors, and restoring his old house. And I think people would imagine that. I'm talking to a person who's about 120. I don't know how you have done as much as you've done. Do you feel 120?

Commissioner: After eight and a half years at DEC, I think so, yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: I don't think you ever set out to be the longest serving commissioner. If I'm not mistaken, you did try to get out at some point along the way.

Commissioner: I did. Well, my predecessor, Joe Martens, also an ESF grad, I wanted to beat Joe. Joe and I were very competitive and we still are.

Joanie Mahoney: It's important. That's important to beat Joe.

Commissioner: Joe hit four years. So, once I hit four, I felt pretty good. And then everything else was just sweetener on top, just sealing the deal.

Joanie Mahoney: I think that when the timing came for you to start talking about a transition was the same time that New York State was putting its stake in the ground as a

nation leader in the environment. I'm sure there was a lot of pressure on you to stay and put your expertise to work in fulfilling the promises the state is now making.

Commissioner:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, look, there's been cycles in the environment over the years. The big boom in the '70s of awareness. And then even in the '90s with some of the reauthorizations of federal laws under then President Bush. And I think you started to see these paradigm shifts like when I first came into state government in 2012, Superstorm Sandy with all the harbor water flowing into tunnels and into the World Trade Center pit was one of those big eye-openers for people that the planet was changing. And that's, I think, in some ways that crisis that happened in the terrible events in some ways characterized the rebirth of some investment and some forward leaning momentum for our work at the state level. And I guess in some ways a crisis. But I was a bit of a beneficiary of that in my role because the legislature and the governor, now two governors in a row have really given us fantastic resources to do big things.

And we as an agency now 53 years into our agency, we've never had more resources to do the work that we're doing. And we've had more staff. Unfortunately we lost staff in the late 2000s. We lost almost a 1,000 staff, if you can imagine it. But this governor, Governor Hochul, has given us now we're at a high watermark in 15 years. So, I feel really good about this agency and about the last eight and a half years is, everything is a bit ascendant. It's no easier, but it's ascendant, in part because we've got awesome people coming to our agency now. Many of them are ESF grads.

Joanie Mahoney:

I know. And that is something that I have repeated many times when I go to the state legislature and try to advocate for ESF. One of the things that has really opened their eyes and been impressive to them is what you told us about the number of ESF grads that you have working currently at DEC. It is remarkable. I think you said 660. Some of our ESF alum are with you currently at DEC. That's amazing

Commissioner:

I checked it this morning, it's 662. And there's 358 alumni who list DEC as a past employer. So, it's a huge number. And that's got to be a record for DEC. I don't think there's another school. I mean you, Albany obviously is a bit of a feeder in a state government. But to have this many from ESF, I think shows that amazing relationship over time.

Joanie Mahoney:

And we attract these fantastic students that I describe as wise beyond their years. They are tuned in a way that we would all be better off if the whole world was, but we attract these students, and they get a lot of field experience, and they get training from some of the best faculty. So, when they graduate from ESF, they are ready to make an impact with an agency like DEC. And it's just been a really great partnership for us.

Commissioner: Yeah, a 100%. I see that whatever you're doing is working. I mean, the students come here and they're functioning high-performing staff right away. I mean almost without exception. And I've had a chance to see some of these incoming classes, students jumping into the biggest problems of the day, climate change, becoming forest rangers or ECOs. I mean, it's really astounding what ESF students can do.

Joanie Mahoney: And I want to give credit to the faculty, to the teaching, to the research. But it's the students. I mean, we really attract a mature, smart, hardworking student here at ESF. So, I'm curious. I grew up in Syracuse, so I have a different impression. But before you got to state government and particularly DEC, did you know about ESF?

Commissioner: I did not. No, I didn't. It really wasn't until I got into a few, maybe even a year plus into the governor's office honestly. So, it was, I think at the time, not broadcasted beyond the core traditional interested student outside of New York. I mean, I was coming from downstate New York City, even Connecticut when I was a kid. I mean, I think that's changed now. I do. I mean my niece went to Syracuse. She spent some time at ESF. Her longtime boyfriend was from ESF. I mean you guys are a few years ago. But she talked to me about when she was looking at schools, about how excited she was about SUNY ESF there. And I think she was making some decisions about her career, ultimately wanted to go in a different direction. But so obviously there's been a change in the last 10 years.

So, I think SUNY writ larges on the map in part because the state's put so much money, I think into the system. But it's professionalism. The students coming out now, they're out competing. They're Ivy Leaguers. We know that when we get an ESF app here that it's somebody who's really ready to go. And then we as an agency try to put a face on our staff. It's not just the commissioner or the logo. It's like literally we found that transparency, and accountability, and trust in government is in part due to the people that work here. And the only way to get that out there is to put the people out there. So, we've put an emphasis on talking about people that come through our agency who come from places like ESF. And that I think has this feedback loop. It spreads the message about pathways into the agency, but also how awesome the school is for us.

Joanie Mahoney: I'm happy to hear you say that you feel like it's been changing. That has been one of my biggest goals. And whenever I get invited, like just in the last week, I think I've talked to three or four different groups. I'm taking every opportunity I can to talk about ESF because I think we have taken for granted at ESF that we've always been the best in the environmental space. And if a student is interested, they'll find us. But now with the news, Hurricane Sandy starting it probably in New York State. But a lot more interest in the environment, a lot more schools are getting into the environmental space with majors and programs. But you won't find another college that has been dedicated to this

environmental science work. Its entire existence since 1911 and one of the best in the country.

And to be part of SUNY and be so affordable is really incredible. We get about 25% of our students these days from out of state. I think that could be increased, but our mission is to be accessible to New Yorkers. But I think people in further areas have started to see the program that we have here at ESF. So, I'm curious as long as I have you and I haven't mentioned that unfortunately, but you are retiring from DEC. And I am happy for you because you have more than done your fair share for us. But when are you done? When are you leaving?

Commissioner:

I'm leaving mid-April. So, I'm a short timer right now. Big time. First, I had to beat Joe Martens. And then I stuck around because there was so much exciting work going on. Some of these in government, Joanie. I mean, it's such an honor and privilege to be in these jobs. And you have a chance to do more in a day than you could in months, years on the outside. I mean literally through some decisions that you can make in these positions. So, that kept me coming back and the people kept me coming back.

And then some of these accomplishments, these things we can do together. Maybe it's a one-off on a permit decision, or construction project, or something, which is exciting. You get that done. And then maybe there's a few things that are maybe a year that will take to get done. But then there are these things that'll take 20, 30, 40 years to get done, like climate change. And I kept trying to do as much as I could. But you get to the point with our climate efforts, I mean I felt like I set the table for it started some of the early actions. But I'm not going to be around in this job on the 2050 target that we have. This nation leading 2050 target. I think I'm going to try something else between now and then. But yeah, April. Mid-April.

Joanie Mahoney:

And you've left or are leaving the agency just far better off than how you found it. And that work will continue because of the job you've done building a team there. But I know you'll miss it, you having been county executive. I think for the most part, I am really happy with my decision to move. It is hard to walk away from the ability to influence things the way you can in some of these roles. For me, it's running into somebody in the grocery store who has a problem. And I still try to help, but for me, it's picking up the phone and calling somebody the same as it is for you. I'm no longer sitting in that chair and able to do it. But I think it's exciting that you are able to look at this body of work that you've accomplished and then go see what the next adventure is for you in your life. And we are sorry to see you go, but I'm guessing that you will not be leaving the environmental space, so we'll still have some ability to see you and talk to you.

Commissioner:

Yeah, 100%. Listen, it's a career. I mean there are a lot of other things that interest me of course. But I truly love what I've done. Like ESF itself. I mean ESF

is not a newcomer to the environment. You've built this foundation over decades and now the environmental movement is upon us, this modern movement. In some ways that's like my career. I made the decision to not follow my friends into Wall Street or whatever else they did back after graduation. Just now it's I'm in the middle of some really important times and I'm not going to walk away from this for sure.

Joanie Mahoney: One of the really cool things you've done as commissioner is the land back in Tully. So, just tell people what that was and the fact that I think that's the first one ever, isn't it?

Commissioner: It's certainly the most significant ever. This is a 1,000 acres south of Syracuse that has its roots in at least our discussion in the Honeywell settlement on Onondaga Lake, the big cleanup of Onondaga Lake, and then a parcel of land that was identified in that negotiation that would be given back to the state in order to compensate for the damage over the years in the lake itself. And I think our team was wrestling with what do we do with it? How do we get through the negotiation to acquire the land? And how do we manage it moving forward? And for the last several years, we've been leaning forward on our relationship with indigenous peoples here in New York and looking for ways to change that dialogue, change the relationship. We've been engaged several years in the conversation on treaty rights, hunting and fishing rights.

We opened my office here, established our first ever office of Indian Nation Affairs. We fund the center for Native Peoples in the environment at SUNY ESF and are increasing those contributions to that program. So, I think we built a bit of a foundation to change our relationship. And this opportunity came along with the state acquiring this land. And of course it's the state acquiring land that was somebody else's land many years ago. Taken forcibly, as we all know. Not unique to New York, but nationally. So, I credit my staff on this. I mean there's team wrestling with it and coming up with some new approaches to how we interact with nations. And it was a good idea that I was able to grab onto and push forward this concept of effectively giving the land back to the nation.

Joanie Mahoney: It really is amazing. I mean, it'll be written about in books for a long time. And the land happens to be the headwater of the Onondaga Creek, which is one of the main tributaries for the lake. And it's a very significant, important part of the history of the Onondaga nation. And it's not practical in most situations to undo a lot of the damage that's been done.

But when you have the opportunity in front of you to say, this is land that's important to the Onondagas. It's not land that the State of New York had previously, but was getting it as part of that Honeywell settlement. To turn that land now back over to the Onondagas goes a long way toward healing that relationship. And we here in Central New York will be the beneficiaries of that decision For a long time. There were a lot of people in that room that haven't

agreed on things in the past that all came together under your leadership. And I've talked about that land back being just the fact that it happened here at ESF is something we're proud of, but it was you that made it happen and we're really grateful for that.

Commissioner: Thank you. I mean, look, I got to tell you, it's probably one of the most gratifying things I've done as commissioner, is it really was one of those inflection points, I think in perhaps our agency's history, where we thought we began to think differently about the future of our state and that we can begin taking chances on things. And we should take chances on these things like managing this property. Ultimately, it's going to be managed in a different way using traditional ecological knowledge as opposed to the typical DEC approach to conservation management. So, we're actually not just giving it to the Onondaga nation, but doing so with the understanding that it'll be managed differently. And we've stopped stocking the creek with brown trout as we've typically been doing for many years in order to enable maybe a new management of the fishery. So, my hope is that this is precedent setting for the state that we can do this right, build some success, build some trust between governments, and use it to continue land backs elsewhere in the state. And maybe that sets a better tone nationally as well.

Joanie Mahoney: Absolutely. And that's the kind of thing I think people are going to miss the most about you being there, is just that global view that we can do things differently. It's hard, and for a lot of valid reasons and good intentions. But we've created a morass of bureaucracy. And to be able to see the big picture and have that moral compass that you have, you know where you want to go, and then the leadership to say, "We can do something different." That's the big thing that I think the agency, the state is going to miss when you're gone. And I'm hoping whoever comes behind you learns that you can do things that are not in a book anywhere. You can tackle some of these big issues and be guided by the notion of what the right thing is to do. So, I'm curious on that note, if you were to say to the Basil Seggos that was appointed in 2015, what advice would you be giving your younger self headed into this agency?

Commissioner: I think it's never stop learning in a way. And one should never be arrogant coming into these jobs, that one knows everything. And you do see those people in government and they're almost unbearable. You want to shake them to say, "Hey, the world is changing around us every day. History is being made every day, and you have to adapt to it." I mean, geez, if I could tell myself things that would've happened over time, I mean, I certainly would've been smarter and been better at the job. But I think it's just this quest for doing better. So, never stop learning is one. And part of that is reading, also reading history and getting out of just the environmental mindset, and into a global mindset about things that are happening around the world and how that interrelates with the government, and learning about economics and transportation.

And we are in these jobs, I think to effectuate the mission of the agency, but also to interrelated with other agencies and other missions out there. Because ultimately, I look at my job is to clean the environment, keep it clean. But at the same point, we need a strong economy and we can't have a strong economy without a clean environment. You can't have investment in the environment without economic returns through taxes and economic revenue. So, for me, it's looking outside the box, being smart, reading, talking to lots of people. The second thing I think is just getting away from the desk and going out, being present in communities. I think this is one of those really forward leaning jobs that people expect you to be out in the field listening. And not just in the woods looking at the various species as great as that is, but actually out where people are experiencing problems.

I think I felt that coming in, I would emphasize it to myself now, to just not get comfortable in your office. Even my office here is on the 14th floor of this building in Albany. And if I'm not stepping downstairs and walking around talking to people, if I don't get out to the nine regions on a regular basis, which I try to do, if I don't go visit SUNY ESF where I sit on the board of Trustees, then I'm not doing my job well. So, I think that's a big thing is just get uncomfortable and put yourself in really uncomfortable positions.

The third thing I think is don't be too grandiose and always remember about the small stuff. I always say, and this is in the military when I went through boot camp, don't sweat the small stuff. I think that works getting through boot camp. I don't think it really works at the agency level. I mean, you want to do really big things and think globally about climate and all of that. But honestly for me, the most important things were the smallest things. And it was a little village in Rensselaer County losing its water supply right after I started this job. And had I been really more sympathetic to the grandiose stuff at the time, I wouldn't have recognized how scary that was for this community, and for this agency, and the government at large. We had to parachute in to fix this micro problem of water for 4,000 people. And that ultimately changed me, changed my agency, and I think it really changed the way we operate completely.

Joanie Mahoney: I remember that. And I remember being fearful of that happening because you talk about it being one of the small things. But for those 4,000 people, there wasn't anything bigger. They did not have clean water coming out of their taps. And that must've been very scary for them and a relief to have you show up with the agency to solve the problem, which you did.

Commissioner: I think we did, but I mean literally just broke ground on a new water supply last week. So, that took eight and a half years of just running a marathon. And it's not that I would've thought that a village losing water supply wasn't a big deal. But I think just structurally as an agency at the time, we were more reactive than proactive. We were more, well, let's look at the water contaminant levels. Are they really a concern or not? I think what we said was, well, it's

contamination in water. And people are scared. You can't go to them and say, "Don't worry-"

Joanie Mahoney: "It's only a little bad."

Commissioner: "It's only a little bad. It's only this emerging contaminant that you'll be fine. Studies have shown X, Y and Z." It's just not how that operates. So, I mean, we didn't just jump in there. Historically, I think we would've just gone in and gotten bottled water in and eventually rebuilt the system. We went in with 600 staff. And it was in day one figuring out what the problem was. By day 30, we had 600 people on the ground there going door to door, rebuilding plumbing systems in people's houses so that they could have fresh water, clean water coming in.

Our forest rangers, who are search and rescue, many of them come through ESF, police officers, they put in place an instant command system so that we could get plumbers through our building that we rented out to the treatment tanks, to supply of carbon filtration, and then out into the field with our trucks to go into people's basements. And I mean, that to me was like government at its finest in the worst possible, scariest time for the community. I think we succeeded with that. We used the crisis to ask for more money, which we had \$0 to give on these things except for Superfund money. And we went from almost \$0 to now \$5.5 billion for clean water.

Joanie Mahoney: Amazing. And that operation is not something that very many people can do. People can know where they need to go. But to actually build that command center and have all of those functions go the way they went, I wonder whether your military training was something you were able to call upon in that time, because that seems like a military operation.

Commissioner: I think it was a military operation. But honestly, I can't take a lot of credit for the way it was assembled. For example, I did not think, let's put in place an incident command system. I asked all my staff, "What the hell do we do about this?" And it was the forest ranger director at that time who came forward and said, "Let's put in place a paramilitary operation." I said, "Yeah, that makes sense. That's what we have. This is a crisis. We're at war with this contaminant. And we've got to go parachute in and fix this problem." So, for me, I think my role is to just again, be like, be open-eared and open-minded about creative ways to solve problems. And that was just this huge light bulb that went off.

And I think my role was to having the courage to ask my team basically better ways to do things. And people have that knowledge. That's DEC. The old DEC is you've got amazing individuals who often aren't asked to do big things because it's stove piped. The new DEC now is, everyone is in this together. Anyone here can come up with an idea. Pitch it, sell it, and we'll implement it. And I think

that's in part because we've been successful on that. But that's what I wanted to bring in to the agency was just the creativity and then just empowering people.

Joanie Mahoney: It must be a fun place to work knowing that any of your ideas will get a fair shake.

Commissioner: Yeah,.

Joanie Mahoney: It's pretty cool. So, I want to ask you, I see the Ukraine flag up above your head. And I know that you have taken at least a couple leaves of absence from your job at DEC to go to Ukraine. What prompted you to do that?

Commissioner: Three periods of leave. I've been there three times since the war kicked off. I just felt outraged by what was going on, and I just couldn't sit down. I couldn't sit on the sidelines. Maybe it's like a fault in my system a little bit. But I got angry and you convert that into action, I think. And I just wanted to help in any way possible. It started by just obviously rage tweeting. And that's not enough to just go to social media. And then raising some funds. I was able to do that right off the bat for aid, humanitarian aid. That felt good, but it wasn't enough. And it's just one of these things where I felt like we were witnessing in real time. One of those moments in history, those pivotal moments in history where our futures were very much visible in two different ways.

The one way of Russia steamrolls through Ukraine, and then what's next, of course, the erosion of world order. Everything we've been working for and perhaps other countries invaded. And then this other future where we say, no, we are a democracy. Of course, with all of our faults, we're still working hard to be perfect and better. And we should protect our neighbors, protect our democratic allies in their times of need. And to me, I wanted to be a part of that and do what I could to help. And my little sliver of it was just bringing in medical and humanitarian support to people who needed it. And I was lucky to link up with an amazing team over there. We've since brought in 165 ambulances, 170 ambulances, thousands and thousands of these battlefield first aid kits, wheelchairs for many of the wounded soldiers. I brought doctors over there to advise on battlefield medicine and prosthetics.

I was able to go all the way to the very active front a number of times and see what is actually happening there and actually bring some support down to the soldiers who are coming off the front lines on a regular basis. And in the trenches having meals with some of the soldiers in trenches. And also looking at the big picture as well, and trying to influence some decision-making at the medical level at a higher level back in Kiev as well. So, it's been awesome. I mean, really probably one of the most meaningful things I've ever done other than having kids.

- Joanie Mahoney:** So, this wasn't part of your reserve work, this was just Basil Seggos' private citizen, figuring out how to help?
- Commissioner:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. There were a lot of people over there like that who are there for the right reasons trying to help. And I put my time here aside. My wife said, "Go." My kids, I don't think they totally understood what I was doing, but they were supportive also. And now I'm really active. Even from here, I'm doing stuff on my off hours.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's fantastic. Your kids and your grandkids are going to be able to say, "Well, my dad went. He did everything he could do and more." I mean, I don't think anybody would expect you to do what you have done. So, I know you're doing it for the right reasons, but you're also going to be one of the people that's going to be able to answer that question for generations. What did you do when this happened? So, thank you very much for spending your personal time and putting yourself at risk to do the right thing.
- Commissioner:** Thank you, Joanie. I mean, look, I just hope that America's on the right side of history on this. We were so strong in the beginning. And the first time I went there, it was September, 2022. The feeling that I got from the locals was just this absolute love for America. The most prevalent hat was the Yankees hat. And I don't think any of them knew who the players were. It was the symbol of America. And, man, if I've ever felt this love for our nation, I feel it all the time, but I mean feeling it through the eyes of locals over there was incredible. And now here we are two years later and there's possibility of us failing to provide aid when they're running out of ammunition. It really hurts to see that happening right now.
- Joanie Mahoney:** This ties back to the beginning of our conversation. Hurricane Sandy brought the climate crisis to people's basements, to their doorsteps, to their subways. And the decades of warning that scientists and others were trying to give the public about what was happening if we didn't change our behavior, didn't affect people until the water was in their basement, until the hurricane ripped through their neighborhoods. And I don't know how we get people to act before that, because now what's it going to take for people to get what's happening in Ukraine without us having some horrible crisis on our doorstep for us to wake up and say we had an opportunity to do something when there was time to do something? And for whatever reason, we just always have to wait until the crisis is right at our doorstep before we're willing to see it or act on it.
- I feel like we just have this privilege here of being removed from things until we're not. But I have an uncle who worked in the federal government. He was one of the scientists who worked on the acid rain problem in the Adirondacks. And every time he came to town, I'm talking about the '70s, '80s, we talked about what was happening in the climate. He had his PhD in meteorology, and so what was happening in the atmosphere. And he was on 60 minutes trying to

tell people, I mean, decades. Can you imagine if someone handed you the CLCPA and all the funding that you have back in the '70s and '80s and said, prevent this? But we just don't jump in at that point. We have to wait until it's like all hands on deck because we have a crisis. And I think climate change and what's happening in Ukraine both fall into that category for a lot of people that until the crisis is hitting them right in the nose, they're just not engaging. There's an ambivalence or an apathy that is dangerous.

Commissioner: Yeah, I think that's such a good observation, Joanie. I think it comes down to willingness to listen to experts.

Joanie Mahoney: Yes, the science matters.

Commissioner: The science matters. And there's atmospheric scientists who can warn about acid rain. We're talking about that and who've been talking about climate change. And there are the political scientists who are explaining the potential implications of our failure to defend Ukraine. And all of that is wrapped up in politics. And the influences on that are extraordinary. In the case of climate science, we all know, the approach that climate science has taken akin to the tobacco wars. I mean, the war in Ukraine, the political scientists who are explaining what will happen to our planet if we do not have respect for world order. The political implications there that we are already feeling here. I mean, we are already feeling it.

It takes having to peel yourself away from whatever you're binge-watching and recognizing our elections were already tampered with. The price of our commodities went up last year because of the war. Our ability to negotiate international agreements to forestall other invasions. All of it relates to our strength right now, our projection of strength. And I'm a peace lover. But I am firmly in the camp of you have to project strength to have peace. You can't just say, "We're going to back off and be a wallflower to the world." That's just not how it works. And I think we all have an obligation. You don't have to go drive an ambulance like I did in Ukraine. You just have to ask the questions of the experts and then agree perhaps that that can influence your thinking. And that's where we are today, I think, is just having the courage to shed the politics away from questions like these and make courageous decisions.

Joanie Mahoney: Imagine yourself answering your grandchildren about what you did in this moment. You have a good answer. So, before I let you go, I'm curious, there's one question that I wanted to ask you. Seeing what you're seeing right now about what professionals are doing in this environmental space, if you could design a class at ESF for us and said, this is the skill set that would just be fantastic for us, for you to be teaching people that are coming through here right now, that are going to be on the front lines in this for their whole careers, what are the skills that you're seeing that you're hoping we're sending our students out with?

Commissioner: That's a good one. Is this an offer to be a professor, Joanie?

Joanie Mahoney: Well, actually, when can you start is my last question.

Commissioner: That's awesome.

Joanie Mahoney: You have an open offer.

Commissioner: Thank you. Thank you. I think having the broken siloed approach to the profession is really important. Right off the bat is, I think I came out years ago with public policy, environmental science, minor public policy major. And that was my stove-pipe. And those are broad liberal arts learnings, but I think you still stove-pipe.

If a student is coming out right now who's environmentally focused coming out of ESF, I would certainly say, here's a class in not thinking about the environment, thinking about the other disciplines that are so interrelated to the environment, and that's history. The reading of history, because we repeat our mistakes all the time. The reading of history integral to the environmental experience. The economic learnings, it all fits in to the environmental major as well. And I think you are graduating students who have those skills. And I would say they should be emphasized moving forward because all of us now have this obligation in this field to connect ourselves to other facets of society and economy so that we're more effective at carrying out solutions. We just can't expect to come out as regulators only and think that's going to solve these problems.

Joanie Mahoney: I think that's a really good way of thinking about it. We talk here at ESF about how we can't have a sustainability department. We need sustainability to be part of everything that everybody is doing. And that class, I can just imagine light bulbs going off for students thinking, "Oh, yeah, you could do that." In your world, that would be affecting what it is we're trying to accomplish here. And just see that there's potential in what everybody is doing to contribute to the overall goal. So, the door is open for Professor Seggos. When you're ready, let me know.

Commissioner: That's scary. I'll have to pull out my tweed jacket with the arm patches. Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: And we will have to make that bio just a little bit longer, right?

Commissioner: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: When I was reading it, I was like, there's none of this that I would cut out. It's just amazing what you've done. And I'm glad that we were able to schedule this before you were officially done at the agency. On behalf of everybody here at

ESF, I want to thank you for how much you have done for us as an institution. Your affection for your attention to your support for us here at ESF has made a lot of difference. So, thank you very much.

Commissioner: Joanie, thank you. And it's been so awesome working with you in this capacity over the years. First, when you're a county exec, and, of course, now in this. I mean a transformative force in this SUNY system. I'm so glad that you're in this job and I can't wait to see what you do with the school. It's blessed to have you.

Joanie Mahoney: Thank you so much. And I will see you around, but I wish you all the best in your next adventure.

Commissioner: Thanks, Joanie. See you soon.