

Rising Star: Latham & Watkins' Laura Godfrey

By Allison Grande

Law360, New York (March 27, 2012, 8:52 PM ET) -- Latham & Watkins LLP partner Laura Godfrey has helped Southern California Edison Co. and other companies in the western U.S. fend off federal and local environmental challenges — both inside and outside court — on their way to gaining regulatory approval for large-scale transmission capacity projects, earning her a place among Law360's five rising environmental stars under 40.



Laura Godfrey

The 35-year-old Godfrey, who works in the firm's San Diego office, leads utilities and renewable energy developers over the environmental hurdles facing their projects, from addressing the concerns of federal and state regulators such as the U.S. Forest Service and the California Public Utilities Commission to defending the project from legal attacks brought by environmental groups and community advocates.

Godfrey's hybrid practice requires her to not only be comfortable in a variety of settings, but also to be well-versed on statutes ranging from the Clean Air Act and Federal Aviation Act to the California Endangered Species Act and California Environmental Standards Act.

"She's extremely versatile — unusually so — for her young age and young seniority," Bob Wyman, global co-chair of the firm's air quality and climate change practice group, told Law360. "Usually lawyers specialize in individual statutes and venues, but Laura has demonstrated her prowess with many different statutes and is just as comfortable before the Public Utilities Commission as she is in a court of law."

Godfrey has demonstrated this versatility in working as lead counsel for SCE's Tehachapi Renewable Transmission Project, the largest renewable transmission project currently under construction, which will provide up to 4,500 megawatts of transmission capacity for new generation in Kern County, Calif., and for delivery to the Los Angeles basin.

During her five years of work on the more than \$2 billion project that crosses more than 20 communities, a national forest, U.S. Army corollaries and national species concerns, Godfrey helped SCE win regulatory approval from the state Public Utilities Commission over the objections of several community groups in 2009, and continues to work with federal agencies such as the Forest Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to address environmental concerns.

Godfrey also shielded the project from a collateral attack filed in California state court by a community group seeking to block its construction, taking the unique strategy of successfully arguing for the dismissal of the case in a motion for judgment on the pleadings. The dismissal was recently affirmed by the California Court of Appeal, and the California Supreme Court subsequently denied review of the case.

While balancing this litany of demands can be a challenge, Godfrey — who joined the firm in 2004 and became a partner Jan. 1 — thrives on the variety and unpredictability of her work.

“You never know when a desert tortoise is going to wander into your project and change the scope of [your permitting requests],” Godfrey said. “There’s never a dull moment because you’re constantly balancing the different interests and needs of these projects that can cross so many different lands, and I love that chaos.”

The desert tortoise made its appearance during Godfrey’s work for SCE on the Eldorado-Ivanpah Transmission Project, which will provide up to 1,400 MW of transmission capacity for new renewable energy projects around the California/Nevada border.

The project faced strong opposition from environmental groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, that were concerned about the safety of the desert tortoise and other species, but it ultimately received approval from the Public Utilities Commission and is projected to be completed in 2013.

Godfrey also works as lead outside counsel for SCE on the Red Bluff Substation Project, which will interconnect numerous renewable energy projects in the Mojave Desert area, and helped the utility stave off an argument that it needed to apply for a more time-consuming full certificate of public capacity.

Her unrelenting work ethic and strong grasp of clients’ needs has made SCE and others continue to tap her for assistance with their projects, according to Wyman. For instance, Godfrey is currently advising Iberdrola Renewables Inc. on issues including the protection of bald and golden eagles for a 200-MW wind power project in Eastern San Diego.

“She cuts right to the heart of the issue,” Wyman said. “You get a sense that she sees the facts, understands the problems, and gets right to the bottom line. Clients love having someone like Laura, who understands at the end of the day what it will take to make a project succeed.”

After graduating from the UCLA School of Law in 2002, Godfrey clerked for U.S. District Judge Nora M. Manella and Ninth Circuit Judge James R. Browning, positions where she gained insight into the court system and became comfortable with writing briefs and interacting with judges.

Following these clerkships, Godfrey joined Latham as a general complex litigator, but volunteered to work on a renewable energy project in 2007 because “people were busy with so many other projects and I wanted a break from the cases I was working on,” she recalled.

While Godfrey recently used her mass tort experience in helping Montrose Chemical Corp. of California reach a settlement in Texas litigation involving more than 1,900 plaintiffs with claims over alleged occupational and environmental exposures, her practice mainly focuses on ensuring that projects remain compliant with environmental regulations, and she credits Latham’s flexibility and support with helping her to thrive in this space.

“The most important aspect for a young attorney choosing a firm is the flexibility that the firm has in your practice area,” she said. “I didn't necessarily know what area I wanted to work in at first, but I never felt pigeonholed and was allowed to do the work that interested me.”

With her talents, Wyman believes, Godfrey will be able to ride this interest to a long and successful career.

“The legal marketplace is calling for multifaceted expertise in the energy practice, and Laura has risen to the top,” he said. “I think she's going to be one of the most successful lawyers in our firm; she's a very talented lawyer and the sky's the limit for her.”

--Editing by Elizabeth Bowen.

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