

**Season 3, Episode 1: BONUS Episode**

**Host:** ESF President Joanie Mahoney

**Guest:** NYS Senator Rachel May

**Senator May:** We did a bunch of research and talked to experts at ESF and really got the verdict that the more habitat we can create for pollinators, the better. So fresh water issues are really, really important to me. And the intersection of climate and fresh water, I think, is also absolutely critical. I think we live in a region that's going to become a magnet for people from all around the world because we have fresh water.

**Joanie Mahoney:** Hello, this is Joanie Mahoney. I have the honor of being the president at SUNY ESF in Syracuse, and I have been enjoying Campus Conversations, the podcast, for the last couple seasons. And we're doing a bonus today and we're going to talk to somebody who's very much part of the ESF community, but not actually a member of our faculty, staff, or student body anymore, but very much working on behalf of the college. And I think it would be interesting for people to meet you, Senator May, if they haven't yet had the chance. And for those of you that already know you, they will be interested to hear the work that you're continuing to do that supports the mission of the college.

So I will just ask you, Senator May, if you want to take a couple minutes and introduce yourself. I will say that you represent New York's 53rd District, which includes most of the city of Syracuse, parts of Onondaga and Oneida Counties and all of Madison County. But I will just turn it over to you if you'd like to introduce yourself to the audience of ESF listeners.

**Senator May:** Thank you, Joanie. I'm excited to be here. And as a ESF alum, doubly excited. So I'll just say I got a master's in the GPES program in 2003 and it was focused on environmental communications, but I really focused on urban ecology and I feel like that has shaped a lot of what I do ever since. And I then worked at Syracuse University for 15 years in sustainability education, working with students and faculty on trying to get a sustainability lens on a lot of their research, on teaching, on the student experience too. And I've been in the Senate since 2019. So I serve on the Environmental Conservation Committee in the Senate and have worked really hard on things like the Climate Bill that we passed in 2019, which is probably the strongest state level climate legislation that there is and I'm really proud of that. But on a lot of other legislation as well. And I was actually named Environmental Legislator of the Year in 2020. So pretty proud of that. I feel like I've taken my ESF training and put it to good use in the Senate.

**Joanie Mahoney:** Well, that's terrific. Congratulations. Environmental Legislator of the Year for 2020. That's fantastic. So let's back up just a little bit. Let's start with your path here, your role as a student at ESF and then an employee at Syracuse University

and now in the New York State Senate. Where was childhood? Where would you say that you grew up?

**Senator May:** I grew up in Massachusetts. My father was a professor at Harvard, so I was sort of in the orbit of that university and definitely came out of that intellectual tradition, but have tried to kind of expand my view, really be out there in communities. I've lived all over the country and all over the world actually in my lifetime. And I like to think that I bring to the government the idea that there may be places on earth that do things better than we do, and we can always take a lesson from other folks who have better ideas than we do.

**Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah, I don't think there's a better teacher than travel. It's such a wonderful way to learn and to see the places around the world, as you say, that are doing things well that we might learn from. And also we've had the experience of sharing some of the great things that we've done with other parts of the country. So what then brought you to Central New York?

**Senator May:** My field was Russian literature and I was teaching at first at Stony Brook, and then I got a job out in Minnesota at Macalaster College in St. Paul. But my husband got a job at Le Moyne and we were commuting between St. Paul and Syracuse for about nine years before our daughter was born, at which point we decided we had to at least be in the same time zone. And so I moved here and went to ESF. I gave up tenure and switched careers all together and it was a great decision, actually. I loved it at ESF.

**Joanie Mahoney:** It's something that has certainly benefited ESF that you made that decision. And I will say that your husband was a professor of my sons at Le Moyne. So it's one of the nice things about this community that we're in is everybody kind of crossed paths with everybody along the way. And even before we were formally working together, I knew who you were. And when you threw your hat in the ring for the Senate, you certainly weren't an unknown. So you came here and entered the Master's Program, and I'm interested in some of your memories of your time here at ESF.

**Senator May:** Probably the most influential... Although the faculty were fantastic and I studied in landscape architecture and in biology as well as in environmental science, but I'd say Myrna Hall, who taught urban ecology, really influential. Just that whole idea of a discipline that was bringing together the biological and the social dimensions of urban spaces and really trying to understand how they interact. That was really important. And she went on leave for a year and I taught her urban ecology class and learned as you do when you teach something, you learn it way better than when you're just in the class. Really got a grounding in that field. So that was very exciting.

**Joanie Mahoney:** I would imagine, knowing you as well as I have come to know you, that an academic program that combines the biological with the social in the urban

environment must have just set off so many bells and whistles and light bulbs in your head. You had this whole long path in a Russian literature tenured faculty out in Minnesota and I really know you for the environmental work that you do. I'll say your work now with the Senate is an extension of all of that. And all of that experience that you bring with your path to where you are today, I'm curious whether you are aware of other scientists that are members of the New York State Legislature? Do you have any kind of caucus among scientists?

**Senator May:** So Anna Kelles, who is the Assembly member from Ithaca, is a scientist and she was just elected two years ago. But she and I have collaborated on a number of pieces of legislation because we kind of see the world the same way. So yeah, that's been really nice to have a partner that way in the Legislature.

**Joanie Mahoney:** So walk people through that process. It's a foreign world to a lot of people. And how does an idea, when you have information that you think legislatively can bring improvement to the environment, how does it go from that idea into something that affects the people who live in the state once it's passed?

**Senator May:** It's a very long and difficult process actually. And one thing I've come to understand is the whole system within the Senate is completely different from the system within the Assembly. So even if it seems easy to get something passed through the Senate, that doesn't mean it's going to be easy to pass it through the Assembly and let alone to get the governor to sign it. So there are many, many stages to the process.

**Joanie Mahoney:** Does your staff write the initial piece of legislation to introduce at the committee level?

**Senator May:** Sometimes. Sometimes people bring us legislation. More often people come to us with a problem and we say, well, is this a problem that can be solved through legislation? Or is it something where we need to find a line in the budget for it? Or is it just something where I need to pick up the phone and call somebody who might be able to influence it? People bring us all kinds of things.

One of the ones that my staff brought to me was a pollinator friendly medians bill. This is something that Anna Kelles and I carried together. So it was about making sure that state roads were managing their verges and their medians in a way that was friendly to pollinators and not just mowing the grass all the time or allowing a lot of invasive species to come in. So it doesn't seem like that big a deal. And in fact, on a lot of a roads, they're already doing it and it's cost effective and it's beautiful and it makes perfect sense. But we introduced the bill. I asked Anna to pick it up, and then someone came to her and said, "Oh no, this is a really bad idea because if you bring all those pollinators in close proximity with high speed traffic, they're going to be killed." And that's making the problem worse rather than better.

And we did a bunch of research and talked to experts at ESF like Melissa Fierke, who is an entomologist, and really got the verdict that, no, the more habitat we can create for pollinators the better. And so in the end there was a little wrangling between me and Anna, and then there was the wrangling that each of us had to do with our respective houses of the Legislature to get it passed.

So there's always a lot of stages to this and various kinds of amendments that get introduced and ways that you have to get it right. And now I want to say, I then toured the Bee Campus initiative at ESF and we're working on trying to extend that to all the SUNY campuses and making sure that our state run landscapes are pollinator friendly wherever they are. So that's been one. One of my staff members just got really excited about this and has become a real champion for pollinators everywhere.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

We were really honored to have you here on campus this past spring because you planted the first Bee trillium on our campus because we are now designated as a Bee Campus USA landscape to use your word. And I'm thrilled to hear that you're going to take that across SUNY and I would imagine the Department of Transportation and where I am at the Thruway Authority. And it's got to be satisfying to see that you have this idea and you're able to usher it through this very difficult Senate process. You have a partner in the Assembly that's doing something similar on her end. Then synthesizing those and getting something passed by both houses and signed by the governor's got to be very satisfying. But then it's also got to be a little bit frustrating knowing what's happening in our environment and how much more there is to do. That's why there's a need for the legislation. People aren't just going to absorb this magically. There are going to have to be policies in place that lead us in this direction. And I'm thrilled that you've said that it was ESF faculty, including Dr. Melissa Fierke, who gave you the research and the information that you needed to make it happen.

So you have this piece of legislation, how do you get it... You're the chair of the environmental conservation or are you just a member of the Environmental Conservation Committee?

**Senator May:**

Yeah, I'm just a member. I chair the Committee on aging.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

Okay. All right. So you have to go to that committee chair then and say, I'd like this? And is that just a unilateral decision on that person's part about whether to put this on the agenda for the committee?

**Senator May:**

So there's a whole staff of lawyers for the Senate who review all the different bills and decide if they are ready for prime time basically. And I think I had the bill, I asked the chair of the committee to put it on his agenda, but then at that point, that triggers a review by the internal lawyers. And one of the things I like about my collaborations with Anna Kelles is because we have this scientific background, we at least do our due diligence about is this a good idea, which

not everybody does. I think legislators, somebody brings them an idea and they say, "Oh, that sounds good to me." But they don't really plumb the depths of whether it's going to work or not. But that's kind of in our DNA to actually poke around a little more in detail.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

I'll just say on a little tangent that last week I had the honor of speaking to the students who were graduating from the internship program at Brookhaven National Lab, Dr. Lee Newman, the chair of our chemistry department, and our provost, Dr. Sam Mukasa and I had the benefit of going to Brookhaven and touring, and then it happened to fall on the day that the internships were ending. And I was saying how great it would be if students like them would get involved in the political process. And I said, when I go out and I talk to people about throwing their hat in the ring or being involved in the political process, most of the time I'm met with no way, I would never do that. And then I ask them, well, if you don't, who's going to? Can you imagine how much better off we would be if a group like you was deciding the climate policies for the country or the state? So you can't be above the politics.

And from being a member of the Senate, it's not all fun in games. But if you don't do it, if you and assembly member Kelles are the only scientists, it doesn't bode well for the political process. We definitely need that scientific perspective among our legislators. And I'm trying to encourage people to get involved. How lucky are we that we have somebody like you representing the district that includes this environmental science college and values the research that's coming from here and lets it inform the legislation. It's been great for us. So I'm imagining those lawyers that are reviewing it are reviewing it for things like its legality. But once you get the clean bill of health on the legislation itself, is it then up to the committee chair or is there some majority rule among members about what gets pushed forward?

**Senator May:**

The chair gets to decide what goes on the agenda, but that's just for the committee. And then once it gets through the committee, then the central staff and the leadership, the majority leader, have the say about whether it actually comes to the floor. A lot of things pass through committee and never come to the floor of the Senate. And that is mostly a calculation, well, in addition to, is it a good idea, will it have enough votes to pass? They don't want to bring bills up that are going to fail.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

And how would you describe the sentiment among the New York State Senate members on issues surrounding climate change and the environment? Do you have a good audience for that in 2022?

**Senator May:**

Oh yeah, absolutely. I think people are very eager to see, especially the climate law that we passed in 2019, see it be implemented fully. And that involves not just having the Climate Action Council figure out what needs to be done, but there's a lot of legislation that has to be passed in addition to that. Things like

making sure we have money in the budget to actually implement it, which is a very heavy lift and not something we've been able to achieve so far. But it raises, then, lots of issues about green energy and about electrification of buildings and of transportation and just a lot of things that are hard. They involve a massive amount of negotiation because different legislators have different pressures on them. But also things that cost a lot. There's always a trade off, Are we going to put the money here? Are we going to put it into affordable housing? There's just lots and lots of those kinds of issues that you have to decide about.

One that I'm really focused on right now, and partly you talked about my district at the outset, but redistricting gave me a district that no longer has Madison or Oneida County in it. And now I have all of Cayuga County and Southwestern Onondaga County, which I didn't have before. And that means I have four Finger Lakes and a piece of the Lake Ontario shoreline. And so fresh water issues are really, really important to me. And the intersection of climate in fresh water I think is also absolutely critical. I think we live in a region that's going to become a magnet for people from all around the world because we have fresh water and many parts of the planet are losing their fresh water. And so taking things like fresh water governance and how we protect this incredible treasure we have here in Central New York has to move to the forefront of the agenda and I'm working really hard to do that. So I think there are shifts in focus that the climate issue is forcing us into.

**Joanie Mahoney:** What are the pieces of legislation that you're working on now that protect freshwater?

**Senator May:** So I have one to require any company that is discharging PFAS into waterways to disclose that. Right now, they don't have to do that, but municipalities can't manage these forever chemicals, which are really dangerous, unless they know where they're coming from. So that's one. I have one to just require data collection. And this is something I think ESF can be really involved in. There are so many agencies across the state government and collect data about water, about watersheds, that kind of thing, but they don't necessarily collect the same data or in a form where they can communicate with each other or they can standardize it or just communicate with each other. So you mentioned the Thruway Authority and there's the Canal Corporation, there's the Power Authority, there's DEC, there are lots of different agencies. But then also citizen scientists and researchers who are amassing data. And if we can't bring all that together for the sake of our watersheds, then we're in trouble.

And then the last one was about privatization of our water supply. There are hundreds of water bottling facilities in New York State, most of them owned by companies that aren't even from New York or many of them, not even from the United States. And so they're regulated by the Department of Health to make sure that the water in the bottles is safe to drink, but not by the Department of

Environmental Conservation to make sure that they're not harming the water supply. And so I want to make sure that they are paying a piece of the profits they make into protection of those water supplies. So those are a few. Those are the three that I've just introduced recently.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

And we will certainly be watching those and offer up enthusiastic support for the science behind those where it can be helpful to you. You've been talking a little bit about the climate legislation that passed and that it is among the strongest of the states. That has colloquially become known as the CLCPA. And there are many faculty members here at ESF that are on subcommittees trying to inform that future legislation and make the arguments about where the funding should go to move the needle. So it's encouraging to know that people like the faculty here at ESF are playing that kind of role. But I hadn't stopped to think about the fact that there's all these other state agencies that are also collecting data and that it would be wonderful if we were able to speak the same language and access that data among state agencies.

When the resources are limited and you have to decide among affordable housing and environmental work, you're funding DEC, you're funding SUNY, you're funding other agencies, that we're talking to each other, and were maximizing that investment because there's not unlimited dollars. So I hadn't considered that we are not able to talk to each other. So what-

**Senator May:**

Can I tell a ESF story about the CLCPA? Because this was one of my favorite things that happened my first year. The chair of the Environmental Conservation Committee at the time said he was going to hold hearings all across the state about the CLCPA. And that was an innovation back then. People didn't hold a lot of hearings before we took the majority in the Senate, and we really wanted to hold hearings outside of Albany to make sure that people could have their voices heard. So he got up and he said, I'm going to hold hearings all across the state. I have one in Albany, one in New York City and one on Long Island. And I was one of the very few Democrats who represented upstate at that time in the Senate and I sort of started waving my hands and saying, "Wait a minute, that's not how I define all across this state. Can we come up with a better definition of that?" And we ended up having one of the hearings at ESF. And it wasn't just about the geography, it was about having forestry experts be able to testify. And we had a wine grower from the Finger Lakes testify. And people who were representing perspectives that you wouldn't get if you were just listening to Long Island, New York City and all the... So I have felt like that was really important too, to make sure that the real diversity of expertise in the state is represented in these discussions too.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

That's terrific. And we are very grateful. That was an honor for us to host that hearing here at ESF. So before we conclude, I'm interested in a little bit different perspective. You talked about the fact that you'd been redistricted and you have been somebody that has spoken on the redistricting process. So you want to

give people a little bit of an overview of how that happens and what the effect of that is and why we should care?

**Senator May:**

Sure. I hope how it happened this year, it never happens that way again because it was really a fiasco. But the reality is it every 10 years when there's a new census, they have to do redistricting because populations shift and you can't have the same lines as before. It's also the case that 10 years ago when the Republican leadership that was in control of the Senate at the time drew their lines, they did everything they possibly could to gain advantage, including creating an extra upstate district and also making sure that to the extent they had leeway in the districts, they made all of the New York City districts as big as possible. So they would have fewer New York City senators and all the upstate districts as small as possible so there would be more upstate senators. Which worked to their advantage for a while, but eventually they just couldn't maintain the majority.

And so there was a constitutional amendment in the mid... It was like 2014 I think, that changed the process so that they couldn't just game the system quite as much and created supposedly an independent redistrict and commission. But that commission was evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. And this year they were not able to find agreement. They just couldn't come up with a map that they all would sign off on. And so we were stuck without a map to vote on when we had to vote on the maps from this commission. So we created our own maps and a judge decided that we had violated the law because we didn't vote on a map from the commission, even though that map didn't exist. We were just in a total catch 22.

And so it had ended up being decided by the judge that the judge just appointed somebody from Pennsylvania to draw the maps. And they were done in a very, I would say, I think that person was trying to be fair, but they were extremely arbitrary. And it wasn't somebody who, I think, gave much thought to the actual act of governing because my district was changed almost completely. And I don't think that's good for the people of the district because we've worked really hard to represent Madison County, for example, and to get to know all the communities and what the issues are and to have that just completely swept aside and to get a whole new county in the district is not just a challenge for me, I think it's a challenge for the people of these counties that have to adjust to a whole new structure of their government.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

They've spent a lot of time informing you about the things that are important to them, and now you're moved and they have to start all over and repeat that work again because they have to inform somebody else about what's important in Madison County. So I can definitely see that. Redistricting is one of those conversations that there is a small subset of people that I think understand why we do it and what the goal of it is. But for the most part, I think it kind of goes right by people. And I don't think that they fully appreciate how dramatic an



effect that redistricting process has on their lives. And I don't really know how to get people to engage more in it and to engage more in the primary process. Because you draw these districts and if they're very lopsided for one party or the other, that's pretty much the general election. And if you don't participate in that primary, you're just, for all intents and purposes, letting someone else pick who your representative is going to be in the New York State Legislature.

**Senator May:**

And in New York, you can't vote in a primary unless you're registered in that party. And you have to do that in advance of the primary. So there are a lot of people, in fact in my district, there are as many people who are unaffiliated with a party as there are in either of the major parties. And I understand why people don't want to associate their name necessarily with a party, but they are giving up a major piece of their voice by not choosing. And I don't know how to explain to people, it doesn't really matter, nobody's going to go look up your party affiliation and right. It's not like a scarlet letter that you wear around or something like that. But it is a way that you can have a voice in the government. And it is a shame, I think that so many people choose not to.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

In my little world, watching my sons who are all of voting age now, I think that it's going even further in that direction of not being interested in affiliating with one of the parties or the other. They pride themselves on being registered voters who aren't in a party. But as you've said, they give up a lot when they do that. And the system's going to have to change, but it always seems to lag the popular opinion.

Speaking of one unpopular thing that I did was I was part of the Moreland Commission that ended up being very controversial. But what I thought we were going to do, what I thought a goal of that commission was, was to address things like this, like who can vote in a primary. But also, it becomes very much inside baseball, but the tail wagging the dog of these minor parties. And so fusion voting, which is not something that happens all across the country where Senator May can have her name on the Democratic line, you could also have it on the Republican line if they wanted to put you on their line. You could have it on the Working Families or the Conservatives. You can have your name on the ballot multiple times. And we see that when we go into vote.

And that ability for those cross endorsements is a very much a game of chess that people in the know maximize and it harms the process sometimes. So one of the things I thought we were going to do in that Moreland Commission was take that issue up about whether you could cross endorse and be on multiple lines. These are things that I am confident are going to change. I don't know when they're going to change, but at some point I think they're going to have to because it doesn't work when the minority extreme views are able to have such an outsized influence. I think if we just looked at 80% probably of our population, we'd find that we agree on a lot more than we disagree on. But that's not what comes through in the noise.

**Senator May:**

Oh, it's true. Well, we tried to get same day registration to happen in New York. It required a constitutional amendment and the voters voted it down, sadly, last time around. But that would've allowed people to show up on primary day and register right there and have a voice if there was a primary race they were really interested in.

One of the things that I strongly support, there is a bill, and I'm not sure where it is, I'm not sure if the governor has signed it, but to eliminate the Independence Party to say you can't have a party with the word independent in it. Because there are a lot of people who registered in the Independence Party who thought they were registering as independent or unaffiliated with a party. And that became a kind of sham party that was really confusing a lot of voters.

And one of the things you mentioned, the whole issue about redistricting, I have to say, as a member of the Elections Committee, someone who's worked really hard on improving our election system in New York state, the worst thing you can do to suppress the vote is confuse the voters. It's the absolute most deadly thing for an election is if people are so confused, they just don't know how to vote. What, when to vote. And so this year with the redistricting happening so late, and people just, they don't know how to be good citizens in this system. And it's our job. We need to improve that so that people have a simple understanding of how they can participate in the electoral process.

**Joanie Mahoney:**

Yeah, I know from personal experience, knocking on the doors of people registered in the Independence Party to let them know that they're in that party and that we're collecting signatures from people that are in that party. And at least half, if not more, were trying to convince me that I was mistaken, that they were not in a party, they were independent. And I said, well, it was sinister motives and wildly successful on the part of the people who deliberately confused people. And it probably worked to their advantage to some extent. I hadn't heard that the legislation is pending and how to address that, but there are people who are very confused about the independent and the Independence difference in how you register to vote.

Well, this has been an interesting conversation. I just wonder whether you have any words of encouragement for people here at ESF about how they might get involved in the process?

**Senator May:**

Oh, absolutely. At lots of different levels. I encourage people to run for office, but if that's not your thing, and I will say I'm an introvert, it's not that easy for me to do it, but there are a lot of other ways to do public service, to get on boards. When I was at ESF and did all that work with Urban Ecology, I then got on the board of OCCRA and helped shape the policy on composting in the county. And I got to, on the Onondaga Lake Watershed Partnership and there are a lot of things that you can do in the community.

For me, of course, I always welcome people coming to my office, bringing me good ideas. I want to put one out there that I know ESF has done incredible work on the American Chestnut. I am just in mourning about the American Beech Tree, which seems to be under threat now too. And I hope that ESF is thinking about research about protecting, saving the American Beech and that maybe we and the legislature can help with funding or any way that we can help. So please reach out to my office about those kinds of issues as they come up. I would love to have as many connections with ESF as I can on all the hats that I wear right now.

**Joanie Mahoney:** Well, thank you very much, Senator May. And I would also say to anyone listening that I'm also happy to help. You gave us some great ideas about the OCCRA Board and other ways that you can get involved. And I would be happy if anybody reached out to me to try to put them in touch with the people that can make that kind of thing happen. Because it's only going to benefit all of us, the more people from the ESF community that get involved in our local and state government. So thank you very much. I've really enjoyed our conversation this morning, and I hope I see you live and in person very soon.

**Senator May:** Likewise. This has been really fun. Thanks, Joanie.

**Joanie Mahoney:** Bye now.

**Senator May:** Bye-bye.