

Laura Schroeder's Expertise Addresses Water Use in the U.S. and Abroad

Country Lawyer Goes Global

By Melody Finnemore



From working on a farm near the Idaho border to helping the Armenian government update the republic's water system, Portland attorney Laura Schroeder has witnessed the myriad ways in which access to water impacts people's lives.

She learned early on the power of natural resources law from her father, Bill Schroeder, who is renowned for his expertise. Of Bill Schroeder's six children, four became attorneys (one is an accountant and the other is a doctor). While growing up in the small town of Vale didn't exactly expose them to a broad array of career options, Laura, the eldest of Schroeder's children, says she and her lawyer-siblings admired their father's work enough to know they wanted to follow in his footsteps.

"We always tell my dad that it took four of us to replace him," she says.

Laura earned a bachelor's degree in teaching, speech and theater from the University of Oregon in 1969, training

she says enhances her legal arguments. Shortly after graduating, she and her first husband moved to Nyssa where they grew potatoes, onions, sugar beets and other vegetables on a farm his family had run for three generations.

"I loved working on a farm. We had always lived in the country and my German relatives were all farmers, so it's in the blood. I love harvesting and planting. There's something very soothing and comforting and rewarding about that," she says.

During that time, Schroeder managed a preschool that she initially established so her children would have someone to play with, given that rural neighbors aren't generally right next door. She worked as a substitute teacher at the local high school, and also worked nights as a quality control supervisor at Ore-Ida's food processing plant.

"I didn't get much sleep then, but it was great because I could still teach preschool and be with my children," she says. "It was interesting working on the clock and inside of a union. It was a different experience. I was working with a lot of men, though most of the people I supervised were women. There was a lot of discrimination against women, but if you wanted to keep your job you just put up with it."

After observing her father's law practice and seeing firsthand how important irrigation is to rural communities, Schroeder decided to go to law school. By then a 32-year-old single mom raising three young children, she chose Lewis & Clark Law School because her younger sister, Kathy, already was a third-year student there. Laura knew she needed that family support nearby.

She worked for her father during law school and for a year after graduating in

1987. She then joined Bullivant Houser Bailey and, during her three years there, began doing environmental insurance defense work. Natural resources was not a core practice area for the firm, however.

"I knew that if I really wanted to do that kind of law I had to leave, but I didn't want to leave because it was a good job with a good paycheck. I had three kids and was a single mom by then. Leaving Bullivants was a big decision for me. Jim Knoll, the managing partner, was really supportive of my decision [to go]."

While the move gave her greater flexibility in raising her kids, it had its difficulties. "That was in 1991 and it was a struggle to pay the mortgage and buy paper clips," she says, noting she used \$10,000 from her retirement fund to buy the office equipment and supplies for a home office.

Today, Schroeder Law Offices has 15 employees at offices in Portland and Reno. Laura frequently works out of her brother's law office in Boise, Idaho, and partners with an attorney in Walla Walla, Wash. Laura's daughter, Therese Ure, is an attorney and manages the firm's Reno office. Laura's second husband, Scott, manages the practice and her sister handles the firm's financials.

The recession did force Schroeder to lay off two attorneys, but revenue has been steady since 2008 and she recently hired a new lawyer. Farm and ranch income is up right now and that makes up about half of her firm's business, so she is optimistic about its potential for future growth.

"Irrigation is a nice niche, and I've always been interested in it," she says. "The only drawback is that it's geographically challenging because you can't just sit in Portland and do water law. You have to be able to work throughout the region and represent a wide geographic area."



Schroeder (left) dines with irrigation specialist Sergey Meloyan (right, seen here with his wife) during a mission to Armenia. Meloyan was a key player in helping to develop Armenia's agricultural water policy.

Along with frequent travel to speak at various venues, Schroeder has had to pass the bar exams to become licensed in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Nevada. She also is consistently engaged in client development efforts, particularly when it comes to municipalities and other organizations that manage water resources.

"I like the people I work with who are interested in water," she says. "It's also rewarding because I'm actually moving the world forward by helping people produce food, water and fiber products. It's a law practice that encourages sustainability."

She also enjoys the historical element involved in her practice. For example, a case may require her to show how water has been used on a particular ranch for the last 50 years. When she needed an easement right for Baker City to deliver water from federal land, Schroeder hired an historian to research how the city had used water back to the 1800s.

"I find all of that extremely fascinating. It's kind of cultural resource work."

After 20 years of practicing, though, Schroeder found herself becoming a little intellectually stilted. She loves to travel and wanted to use her skills overseas, so she joined the U.S. Committee on Irrigation and Drainage and began working with the U.S. Agency for International Development. She has traveled to Yerevan, Armenia, several times to help the republic's government draft and adopt a modern water code.

Schroeder also recently accepted an assignment with the United Nations' Mil-

lennium Challenge Corporation to assist Armenia in combining its agricultural, drainage and irrigation regulations into one comprehensive policy so it can compete for international funding.

"I get to work with the highest levels of government in another country, and that part is interesting because I don't work at that level in the United States, where our water quantity issues are decided by the states and not at the federal level," she says.

Schroeder may be headed to Afghanistan soon. If the Afghan government agrees to it, she and a group of colleagues will help with negotiations to set up water treaties with neighboring countries that would forge the way for the construction of new dams and other infrastructure improvements in the region.

"I'm hoping that will come to fruition," she says. "That's kind of the fun part of the job. It doesn't pay my bills, but the international work pays my expenses for travel. It's a different kind of work than billing every six minutes."

Whether at home or abroad, Schroeder's water resources work addresses a growing global crisis. With the world's population at 7 billion, and expected to reach 9 billion by 2050, the United Nations estimates that at our current usage rates, almost 3 billion people will face severe water shortages by 2025.

Melody Finnemore is a Portland-area freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the Bulletin.