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Keynote Remarks at the University of Michigan Environmental Law and Public Health Conference

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KEYNOTE SPEECH

KEYNOTE REMARKS AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND PUBLIC
HEALTH CONFERENCE

*Gina McCarthy**

It's great to be here at the University of Michigan.

I wish I could have come here sooner, but as many of you know, I didn't have the smoothest confirmation process. There were times I felt like I was in hostile territory; I wasn't sure I'd make it through—even though I knew I was up to the task. But in the end, my team prevailed, and here I am today. So, I guess you could say my confirmation process was a lot like the Michigan-UConn game last week. But you, too, came out on top!

As an avid Boston sports fan, I can appreciate the school spirit here. I just had an exciting conversation with some of your fellow students. I learned all about the amazing "Planet Blue" sustainability initiatives here on campus. Equally amazing was the enthusiasm for action—never lose sight of that.

Before I speak to the theme of this conference, I want to make mention of a conference held here some years ago. A conference that helped extend the University of Michigan's environmental legacy well beyond this campus.

It was two Wolverine professors—Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai—who literally wrote the book on environmental justice. Back in 1990, they organized a conference titled "Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards." The conference—the first of its kind—spurred the creation of the "Michigan Coalition"—a group that advocated principles of environmental justice across the country. It was those advocacy efforts that inspired the formation of EPA's Office of Environmental Justice.

Today, the University of Michigan continues to lead in scholarship and teaching on EJ issues. In fact, you have the nation's only Environmental

* Administrator, United States Environmental Protection Agency. The following are the prepared remarks delivered at the University of Michigan Law School's 2013 Environmental Law and Public Health Conference on September 26, 2013.

Justice PhD program. The EPA—and all communities especially vulnerable to environmental harms—will always be thankful for your leadership.

Today's conference may not be the first of its kind, but your conversations over the next two days couldn't be more important. The focus of this conference is "the relationship between environmental protection and public health."

I've worked for over two decades on issues that exist within the broad confines of that relationship. Some of you may know that I started my career as a public health professional. Early on, I was a health agent in the town of Canton, Massachusetts—and later worked for the Stoughton Board of Health. The thing is, the word 'relationship' is too neutral. The link between the health of our planet and the health of our families is inextricable. The quality of our environment dictates the quality of our well-being, and our lives.

That's why—since the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency more than forty years ago—our mission has been to protect public health and the environment.

We have a lot of important issues to tackle—from protecting water to taking on toxics and chemical safety. But a top priority for us—and for President Obama—is taking on climate change. Make no mistake about it—climate change is one of the most significant public health threats of our time.

The overwhelming judgment of science tells us that climate change is real, human activities are fueling that change, and we must act now to avoid its most devastating consequences.

That's why a few months ago—speaking to students like you—President Obama unveiled his Climate Action Plan. A plan to protect the health of our families and future generations by taking responsible steps to cut the carbon pollution that fuels climate change. A plan to prepare communities for the climate impacts we're suffering today and to establish U.S. leadership abroad in our global climate fight.

As part of that plan, the President directed the EPA to complete carbon pollution standards for new and existing power plants. I don't have to remind the scholars in the room, but our directive is rooted in legal authority granted by Congress through the Clean Air Act. In 2007, the Supreme

Court underscored that authority when it determined that carbon pollution is, quote, “unambiguously” covered by the Clean Air Act. Carbon pollution and climate change—without question—endanger public health and welfare. Not just today, but for generations to come.

And power plants are the single largest sources of carbon pollution in the United States. Each year, they account for about 40 percent of the nation’s carbon pollution. To put that in context, power plants emit more carbon pollution than every boat, plane, train, and car in the United States combined.

That’s not safe and it’s not fair. We limit other forms of pollution, like mercury and arsenic—why should carbon polluters get a free pass? In fact, it’s our job to do something about it. Ensuring clean air, clean water, and livable land for all is our promise to the American people. And last week we took a step forward in making good on that promise. Following the President’s directive—and our legal obligation—we proposed standards to limit carbon pollution from new power plants.

Let me take a moment to explain why our action is so vital to protecting public health.

Climate change is about water. It’s about ensuring clean drinking water. It’s about storm surges and floods that overwhelm stormwater systems, letting pollution attack sensitive regions, spoiling our nation’s iconic ecosystems. That’s something to be especially concerned about here in the “Great Lakes State.” Troves of research—including from right here at the University of Michigan—shows how a changing climate threatens Great Lakes fish and wildlife. Let’s not forget the economic harms that accompany lost tourism and recreation. Protecting precious resources like the Great Lakes gives a whole new meaning to “Go Blue.”¹

Climate change is also about extreme weather. It’s about record droughts that drive up food prices and rampant wildfires that burn down towns, destroying property and polluting the air. It’s about extreme storms laying waste to our mightiest cities. And we are paying the price; in 2012 alone, the cost of weather disasters exceeded \$110 billion in the United States, the second costliest year on record.

And, of course, climate change is about clean, healthy air for us to breathe. Carbon pollution and hotter weather can worsen levels of pollen and smog,

1. “Go Blue” is the University of Michigan cheer. —Eds.

leading to longer allergy seasons, increased heat-related deaths, and direct threats to those who suffer from lung and heart illnesses. And it's not just adults and the elderly that suffer from air pollution, so do children—especially children in lower income families and communities of color. Did you know that today, one in ten children in the United States live with asthma? That's right, one in ten. The urgency to act on climate change couldn't be more clear.

But I know that here at the University of Michigan, you get it. You're beyond recognizing—you're taking action. Leading the way as Michigan knows how. "Planet Blue" is just the tip of the iceberg. After all—you live in a state and a city that have Climate Action Plans of their own.

Let me just say how important it is that our work in Washington be informed by your work—here at the ground level—where real change happens. Back in 2003, it was a handful of Wolverine masters students that provided the city of Ann Arbor with its first Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Strategy.

In part informed by that strategy, a landfill methane capture project here in city has been reducing pollution and saving money. For a period of seven years, that project reduced the yearly carbon pollution equivalent of about 8,000 passenger vehicles—all while selling two and a half million dollars of electricity back to Detroit Edison. Cities—and campuses—like yours are incubators for innovation. Our country's progress depends on the progress made here in your classrooms and in your city halls.

Although our climate challenge is steep, decades of Clean Air Act history prove we can protect public health and grow a strong economy. We've already set reasonable limits for toxic pollutants like mercury, lead, and arsenic from power plants—which, among other things, will prevent as many as 130,000 cases of childhood asthma symptoms each year. That's more annual cases than seats in The Big House.²

Since 1970, every dollar invested to comply with Clean Air Act standards has returned four to eight dollars in economic benefits. And by 2020, benefits from the Clean Air Act will outweigh the costs thirty to one. We've also established historic fuel economy standards for cars and trucks—saving families money and saving the planet.

2. The Michigan Stadium, also known as the "Big House," seats 109,901. *Michigan Stadium*, MGOBLUE.com, <http://www.mgoblue.com/facilities/michigan-stadium.html> (last visited Dec. 4, 2013). —Eds.

Today, American consumers save about \$8,000 dollars at the pump over the life of their vehicle. And we're on track to cut carbon pollution from passenger vehicles in half by 2025. Most importantly—far from collapsing as the cynics predicted—the auto industry is back on its feet. Here in the state of Michigan—home of the Motor City—no one has felt that more. The auto industry's comeback from the brink of collapse has kept businesses alive and families fed.

The urgency and enormity of our climate challenge demands we take responsible action. That's what our proposed carbon pollution standards for new power plants represent. They'll minimize carbon pollution by taking advantage of modern, cleaner energy technologies to build the next generation of power plants. The standards are flexible and achievable. They set different limits for different types of natural gas and coal plants—and they're based on the performance of efficient, clean, home-grown technologies. We're also committed to proposing standards for existing power plants. However, that process has a longer timeline, and we plan to release those proposed standards by June of 2014. In the mean time, we've begun speaking to industry, NGOs, businesses, academics, and students like you—to make sure folks who want to weigh in have the opportunity to do so.

It's no coincidence the President chose to unveil his Climate Action Plan to an audience much like this one. Acting on climate change is about fulfilling an obligation to safeguard the health and welfare of future generations—of *your* generation—and beyond. That's what's at stake.

We can't solve climate change overnight, but with an adherence to the law, an open process, and good science, we can take commonsense steps toward a solution. Although the road may be long, what keeps me going is my faith in all of you.

A faith that you'll challenge ideas and push the envelope—improving and inventing tomorrow's low carbon energy solutions.

A faith that you'll engage fellow students, friends and family, and government leaders at all levels—because you know the integrity of our democracy demands it.

A faith that you'll be the key that unlocks that uniquely American spirit of innovation and ingenuity. The same spirit that has made the Michigan Solar Car Team world renowned for their success. A spirit that will drive

forward a sustainable, world-leading, clean energy economy for the United States.

Our goals of protecting our environment and public health are not distinct—they're joined at the hip. The future vitality of our lives and our economy depends on clean air, clean water, and a stable climate. And make no mistake about it—the power to shape that future is in your hands.

Thank you very much.