Policy Brief Assignment
Natural Resources 4300, Spring 2015

1. **Topic**

The policy brief is the key focus of your work in this course and will constitute the greatest proportion of your final grade. Therefore, it is important for you to choose a public policy issue or problem that has clear national (U.S.) environmental or natural resource implications, as well as the attention of policy makers working in Washington, D.C. During our time there (January 5-14), you will have unique opportunities to meet and interview these policy actors for their insights into the elements of the policy process as these influence the policy topic that you will be studying. Ideally, the topic should be one in which you have a serious enough interest to become thoroughly and enthusiastically engaged. Please feel free to consult with the instructors about your proposed policy topic; they may be able to help you get started and/or avoid unusually difficult topics.

Topics that can provide an effective focus are those that: (1) are likely to receive attention by Congress during its current session, (2) are currently receiving active attention by staff from at least one federal agency, and (3) have been receiving ongoing attention from at least one type of interest group. In past years, students have typically focused on topics receiving attention in Congress. But as we will discuss during this course, most recent active developments in environmental policy are taking place within executive branch agencies, in the courts, and in interactions between the states and federal government, i.e., outside of the legislative branch of government. Therefore, you might find it fruitful to pursue an environmental policy topic that currently is subject to pending or recent action by a federal agency as an administrative ruling or regulatory guidance, or one for which stakeholders with substantial interests are implementing a long-term strategy, including judicial review of existing statutes. In recent years, some students have focused on environmental problems that are emerging rapidly, are clearly on the policy horizon, and for which legislative or administrative action undoubtedly will be required to solve the problem.

Topics that do not work well are those focused mostly on local or state-level problems, or solely international topics for which no discrete U.S. role has developed. International topics may be selected, but only if the U.S. has had clear and meaningful involvement. We will talk about appropriate topics during our fall meetings, but again, meet with the instructors to discuss any questions you have regarding possible term paper topics.

2. **Key dates for topic selection**

a) November 20, 2014 (third fall planning meeting):
   - Come prepared to discuss three potential topics for your policy brief; e-mail a list of these topics to Drs. Bedford (blb4@cornell.edu) and Kraft (cek7@cornell.edu) by 5:00 p.m.

b) December 5, 2014:
   - Submit a two-page written description of the proposed topic for your policy brief via Turnitin (in Blackboard) no later than 4:00 p.m. This description should identify stakeholders in this issue and include full citations for three references that demonstrate you have located relevant information about your proposed topic. You
may include a mass media source as one of your citations. This requirement for citations ensures that you have selected a topic for which information is available.

c) December 8 - 12, 2014:
   - Each student is expected to meet with Dr. Kraft (cek7@cornell.edu) and Dr. Bedford (bbl4@cornell.edu) to discuss their proposed paper topic. Arrange these meetings by e-mail through Catherine Smith (rcs338@cornell.edu).

3. Sources of Information

You will use a combination of information sources for your policy brief, such as on-line and print library resources, web sites of various governmental and non-governmental organizations, the mass media and alternative media, etc. One of the richest sources of information available to understand your topic will be obtained during interviews you conduct while in Washington, D.C. Careful planning and preparation for these interviews is essential. You are required to conduct at least three interviews, including: (1) a staff member from the legislative branch; (2) an interest group/lobbyist staff from a non-governmental organization; and (3) a scientist or manager/ regulator from a federal agency. Most students complete many more than this minimal requirement for interviews. We strongly recommend that you set up one or two of these meetings before you arrive in Washington, D.C.

4. Content of the Final Policy Brief

Also please see the “Guidelines for Policy Briefs” posted in the assignments folder on Blackboard for additional information. Remember that the guidelines are just that, guidelines to help you organize your information gathering and thinking about your policy topic. We do not expect you to adhere to them strictly. You will be the best judge of the order in which to present information to effectively convince the reader of your objectivity and thoroughness in making your overall argument.

   a) Describe the issue you have chosen, its history, present status, stakeholder groups involved and affected, reasons for various pressures and interests; any reasoned arguments, information, data or other forms of evidence relevant to the issue; and the associated ecological and socio-political environment.

   b) Describe this issue by framing it with regard to key elements of the policy process (see assigned readings and class notes). Consider questions such as the following: What stage(s) has your issue moved through? How does the process surrounding your issue mimic or differ from the idealized model discussed in class? How and why did your issue make it onto the public agenda? What individuals and groups provided input into the formulation of policy options? What types of policy instruments were considered (or are being considered) to address your policy topic, and how were they (or are they being) assessed? How were (or are) implementation programs and other elements of the policy process being evaluated in this situation, and what implications does this have for future policy cycles?

   c) Describe the likely future of this issue, including proposals by key stakeholders regarding how the issue should be addressed or resolved. Present a balanced perspective, discussing various "sides" or viewpoints and the potential advantages and disadvantages of various possible or proposed solutions.

   d) Include citations of your source materials throughout the text using the author, year format (Kraft & Bedford, 2000). List all cited works in a "Literature Cited" section at the end. Use of any on-line sources
should include the date of the site’s last update and the date visited, as well as the full URL or DOI. References may include peer-reviewed journal articles; the web sites of federal agencies, federal institutions, and non-governmental organizations involved in environmental policy issues; and print media such as national newspapers and magazines. Be especially careful with use of the print media; confirm any statements of fact against supporting documents that provide the underlying information. If in doubt about use of a source, ask Barbara or Cliff.

e) Include a separate list of all personal contacts you made in Washington for this project (name, title, organization, location, date and time of meeting).

f) In general, your term paper should provide a substantive treatment of policy questions surrounding an important national environmental policy issue. Do not overemphasize historical or technical aspects of a particular subject or get too deeply involved in reporting detailed data, yet make sure to provide sufficient information to support your observations. Balance is important in achieving a clear and strong line of argument in your brief and we will try to guide you in achieving an effective balance between detail and clarity.

h) Both course instructors place a premium on clarity in writing. Organization, coherence, and clarity of your writing will influence your grade, as will use of proper grammar, punctuation, and syntax.

5. **Length**

Your term paper should consist of no more than 15 pages of text (single-spaced, 12-point font), plus any additional pages for figures and tables, literature citations, a title page, list of contacts, and any appendices or other secondary material you consider important. Be both complete and concise.

6. **Due Dates**

**February 23, 2015 (4:00 p.m.).** Short objective briefs due as a Word document via Turnitin (in Blackboard).

**Late February/early March, 2015.** We will use our spring class sessions as an opportunity for you to present your briefs and receive feedback from Barbara and Cliff, as well as your fellow students, before your long brief is due. Dates for individual presentations will be arranged through Catherine (rcs338@cornell.edu) once we know the dates of those sessions.

**April 24, 2015 (4:00 p.m.).** Long objective brief due as a Word document via Turnitin (in Blackboard). If you find that this completion date is not convenient for you, arrange an alternative due date with either Cliff or Barbara – prior to April 10, 2015. Plan your spring semester accordingly, i.e., knowing that you have a substantial commitment of time to this course after we return from Washington, D.C.