

## Most Admired Attorneys: Hunton & Williams' Bill Brownell

By **Nick Malinowski**

Law360, New York (September 01, 2010) -- Exceptional expertise on environmental statutes, regulations and the administrative process, combined with a low-key demeanor and a knack for persuasion, have gained Hunton & Williams LLP's Bill Brownell respect from both friends and foes and a place on Law360's list of the Five Most Admired Environmental Attorneys.

Brownell, who joined the firm in 1978 right out of law school, has helped build Hunton & Williams' environmental group into one of the true national powerhouses.

He focuses his own practice on litigation and regulatory matters, including climate change regulation, clean air regulation and environmental licensing. His reputation is particularly strong from years of representing the utility industry in matters involving the Clean Air Act.

"Generally, Bill is simply better than the rest of us at many things. His legal skill and versatility I liken to the all-time great tennis pros — brilliant on any surface in any weather conditions," said Bingham McCutchen LLP attorney Chuck Knauss, who has known Brownell for more than 30 years.

In what is a relatively small environmental bar in Washington, Brownell stands out for his dominance across a range of issues, Knauss said.

"Many of us are good at one thing, but he's good at everything," Knauss added. "When I first met him 30 years ago, he was doing Clean Air Act work, and he's moved into new substantive areas and shown the same ability to master the law and the policy. The depth of his understanding of the law is just different from others'."

While many attorneys "dabble" and technically cover a number of different areas, Brownell is equally effective in all his undertakings, Knauss said.

Garry Rice, associate general counsel at Duke Energy, which Brownell represents in ongoing New Source Review litigation under the CAA, said Brownell's knowledge makes him an easy dial whenever the company has a difficult air regulation question.

"He knows the rules off the top of his head, and that's helpful," Rice said. "Bill is a smart guy, we have a lot of smart lawyers, but he was there, he's been involved in every rule and has an institutional knowledge of the cases and rules."

“It's just like anything else: Would you rather have your car repaired by someone who is so experienced, and knows the make and model well, or a team of four mechanics who are all good but not very experienced with your car?” Rice said.

One reason for his success is his ability to see every side of an issue, said Roger Martella of Sidley Austin LLP, who sparred with Brownell in his former gig as a general counsel at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

“From the perspective of a government attorney, Bill was ideal to work with on the other side,” Martella said. “A lot of attorneys in private practice aren't strategic; Bill was very strategic. Rather than ignore any weaknesses of his position, he would explain to us why that weakness shouldn't change the outcome.”

Government attorneys have to listen to Brownell because he knows what he is talking about, Knauss said.

“He's very well prepared, and they know he's thought through the issues from every angle,” Knauss said. “They also know he's thought through the issues from their perspective and from that of the other stakeholders.”

Bob Martineau Jr., an attorney at Waller Lansden Dortch & Davis LLP, formerly of the EPA general counsel's office, worked across the table from Brownell in a couple of cases where he was representing utility interests challenging an EPA rule.

Agency lawyers often face attorneys who assume they are incompetent and that the rules are wrong, Martineau said, but Brownell listens to his opponent's side and describes why he disagrees with it.

“He's had great success, and his low-key, understated approach is very effective and refreshing,” Martineau said. “You can be a forceful advocate without being the loudest person in the room.”

Working on rulemaking for greenhouse gases or climate change can involve a lot of lawyers and a lot of egos, but Brownell can generally move everyone toward a consensus, and more times than not it is his perspective that eventually carries the day, Knauss said.

“It's a measure of his standing and widespread respect that everyone wants to know what Bill thinks,” Knauss said. “And that's everyone; friends, foes decision makers, all want to know what he thinks, and when he speaks they take notice, they take notes.”

That decisions eventually get made close to how Brownell envisioned them is both because others trust that he's making the right decision from the start and because everyone knows he knows the law and that, as far as the application of the law, he's thought it through, Knauss said.

In a joint defense situation, Brownell immediately stands out as a leader because of his knowledge of the policy issues, but he takes over in a soft-spoken, engaging way that makes it clear that he respects everyone's opinion, Martineau said.

It's a style that is not threatening to colleagues and engenders confidence and trust in those working with him, Knauss said.

"Bill is a brain surgeon with the bedside manner of the family doctor. If there is a crisis anywhere, anytime, we want Bill," said Ed Holland, executive vice president and general counsel of The Southern Co.

These same traits make him a successful mentor within Hunton & Williams, according to environmental partner Brooks Smith.

"One of the reasons that Bill is a team head and an influential partner in our firm is, he doesn't dictate how a lawyer should develop," Smith said. "He's committed to asking each lawyer, 'What is it that you want to do with your practice?'"

In private practice there is a philosophy that how managers became successful is how young attorneys should become successful, but Brownell nurtures each attorney differently, developing personal strengths and interests, and this diversity has given Hunton & Williams an edge, Smith said.

He is also one of the hardest-working lawyers at the firm, leading by example, Smith said.

"You look at what he has done in his career, and it's easy to follow along," he said. "It's empowering because here you have a guy who knows more about administrative law than anyone I know, and he's down to earth, a good guy who works hard, and a nice guy to be around."

This interest extends well beyond his firm to the greater bar as a whole and to public service, said Martella, who recently organized a climate change conference with Brownell.

"Bill is someone who wants to foster a lot of cooperation and congeniality among the profession as a whole and strives to be cooperative," Martella said.

One exciting thing about this practice area is that an attorney gets to see the importance of the environmental programs and the impact they have across a broad swath of industries and the economy as a whole, Brownell said.

"We have a very active practice, but we also have opportunities to think and speak and write about these issues," Brownell said.

In addition to the intellectual work he pursues outside the office, Brownell is an avid outdoorsman and has carved out a rounded lifestyle that his peers envy.

"I and many other folks in town try to emulate Bill. Putting the legal stuff aside, he also, more than most others, is able to achieve the balance — community service, outside interests, family — that is important to staying at this for the long haul," Knauss said.

Martineau added, "He's a good example of what's good about lawyers in the profession, a skilled advocate that represents their clients' interests but in a courteous, civil manner and with respect for the attorneys working on the other side."

*Methodology: From May 25 through June 11, Law360 invited readers to nominate attorneys they admire to be profiled for the "Most Admired" series. Readers were asked: "Is there an attorney you've argued against in court who you respect — or whose briefs you fear? What about a lawyer whose views on the latest hot-button issues you eagerly seek out? Or a former classmate who is practicing the law in novel*

*ways?" Survey participants were not permitted to nominate attorneys from their own firms and submissions from public relations and marketing professionals were not considered.*

*Separately, Law360 sought out nominations from practice group heads at the 100 largest law firms in the United States. In total, 1,016 nominations were received.*

*Nominations were reviewed by a board comprising experienced lawyers and Law360 editorial staff. Sixty-five attorneys covering seven practice areas of the law were then selected to be profiled for the "Most Admired" series.*