



On Tuesday, Feb. 28, Lisa P. Jackson was sworn in as Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection. Governor Jon S. Corzine administered the oath of office before a capacity crowd in the DEP's Public Hearing Room. Guests included Cabinet members, Commissioner Jackson's family and friends and scores of DEP employees. Commissioner Jackson's speech follows:

**Swearing-in Speech
February 28, 2006**

Thank you very much, Governor, for your kind remarks. Given your schedule and commitments these days, I am deeply honored that you are here this afternoon to administer the oath of office. And I thank you for your confidence in my ability to lead the DEP as your new commissioner.

I am delighted so many distinguished colleagues and friends were able to join us, including Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman, Deputy Chief of Staff Jeanine LaRue, Attorney General Zulima Farber, Commerce Secretary Virginia Bauer, Community Affairs Commissioner Susan Bass Levin, Acting Commissioner for Banking and Insurance Steve Goldman, Acting Commissioner for Corrections George Hayman, Office of Smart Growth Executive Director Eileen Swan, former Attorney General David Samson, as well as our colleagues from environmental and business groups from across the state. I would also like to offer a special greeting to my colleagues from EPA in New York City and Washington, DC who made the trip here today and to our many DEP alumni in the audience.

My appreciation also to my dear friend, my sounding board and my conscience, Deputy Commissioner Jay Watson, for doing a fine job as master of ceremonies.

And for those who haven't yet had the pleasure to meet him, I'll take this opportunity to introduce Deputy Commissioner Adam Zellner. Adam left a nice, cushy job as Director of the Highlands Council to join DEP. He's still trying to find the gym, sauna and running track I promised him.

I also want to express my appreciation to our Director of Operations, Gary Sondermeyer. A font of institutional knowledge, Gary is patience personified. Every day, he proves himself to be indispensable to me and my exceptional senior staff.

My reasons for wanting to hold this ceremony here at DEP headquarters numbered roughly 3,400— they are the Department’s outstanding professionals who are dedicated to advancing the cause of environmental protection on behalf of the people of New Jersey. Thank you for being here to share my joy. This is not so much my moment in the sun as it is the beginning of our special time to shine. Your good wishes and your support mean far more than I can say.

Now is a pivotal time for us as environmentalists in New Jersey. First and foremost, we have a governor whose record of environmental protection is exemplary as he enters office. Folks— he gets it. He intends to redouble New Jersey’s efforts to improve the quality of life in low-income and urban communities overburdened by industrial pollution; enact tough, mandatory safety standards for New Jerseys chemical plants; strengthen safeguards for precious drinking-water supplies; and preserve open space and our wealth of natural resources.

Working with him during these past few weeks, I have been impressed with the strength of his leadership, his heart for people and the depth of his resolve to do what is best for New Jersey. He motivates us all to reach higher by making it clear he will accept nothing less than excellence. As Commissioner of this department, I assure you, Governor—neither will we because the eight-and-a-half million people who call New Jersey home deserve nothing less.

It’s Governor Corzine’s goal to govern New Jersey as one community with one future. Yet, he truly understands that the diversity of our people is our strength. Today is the last day of Black History Month. Here at the Department, our Black Environmental Solidarity Team —employees committed to fostering environmental awareness in New Jerseys urban and minority communities — has done a magnificent job organizing our month-long celebration. I hope all of you have viewed the Malloy painting exhibit on the 7th floor and participated in the month’s events.

I chose to take the oath of office today because I am the first African-American woman to head a state environmental agency. Tomorrow just happens to be the beginning of Women’s History Month. Here, at DEP and thanks to Governor Corzine, we are making a bit of history of our own.

Earlier today, I was proud to announce the DEP’s purchase of the former Medford office and homestead of medical practitioner James Still, the son of former slaves who was renowned for his botanical remedies.

The 8-acre parcel, of great historic and cultural value, was at risk of being demolished to make way for a commercial development. Today, it belongs to the people of New Jersey. Well done, DEP.

Here with me today are members of my family. In just a few short weeks, my wonderful, patient, supportive husband Kenny and our two sons, Marcus and Brian, have come to recognize that my responsibilities as Commissioner will demand some sacrifice. I am very blessed to have their love and their support. Watching our boys lead us all in prayer this afternoon was a particularly proud moment for Kenny and me.

With me today in spirit is my beloved father, Benjamin Perez, who passed away when I was in high school. A postal worker until the day he died, my dad’s example of hard work and sacrifice for the public good inspires me today.

My mother, Marie Perez Rieras; my stepfather, George Rieras; and my godmother, Carolyn Hewlett, are here as well. Their trip up here began August 29, when they left our native New Orleans, where I grew up in the 9th Ward—a tightly-knit, African-American community hardest hit by the ravages of Hurricane Katrina.

My family escaped with their lives, but everything else—their homes and possessions—even the family Bible—was lost. We were among the lucky ones.

As they, like so many others battle back from the catastrophe, I am moved by the strength, grace and resilience my mother and my godmother have shown our family. Today, I want to tell you both that the simple eloquence of your example will serve as a constant source of inspiration in whatever challenges life may send my way.

To you both and to my stepfather, whose great stories and passion for life are at the heart of what it means to be from New Orleans, I say that most assuredly New Orleans lives in you, wherever it is that you may be.

The shameful failures of government that the world witnessed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina have given me a special appreciation for the importance of public service. Those failures have galvanized my commitment to working tirelessly to protect the health and safety of the people of New Jersey and to enhancing our quality of life.

For me, my family and countless other native New Orleanians, today is a particularly meaningful day for another reason. It is Mardi Gras. Coming the day before Ash Wednesday, it is a time for celebration and partying. Simply put, Mardi Gras is about living life to its fullest in anticipation of the 40 days of Lent.

Understandably, New Orleans this year is somewhat torn over whether the traditional Carnival atmosphere could be considered disrespectful in light of both the lives lost and those still seeking relief from the suffering.

For many of us, Mardi Gras is woven into the fabric of who we are. And in choosing to celebrate, we do not forget those who need our help nor do we forget our obligation to help them.

And so it all comes back to those of us here. Today is our celebration. Let's give real meaning to our celebration by renewing our sense of purpose as public servants and reminding ourselves that millions of lives depend on the work we do. The people of New Jersey entrust us with an extraordinary responsibility: Protection of the air we all breathe, the water we drink and the land and natural resources that nourish us—body and soul. New Jersey is regarded once again as a national leader in environmental protection thanks to your expertise and hard work.

From the Highlands to the shores of Cape May, we are sowing the seeds of environmental stewardship so future generations can reap the harvest—cleaner, healthier communities and a desirable quality of life.

But the fact remains, our environment is fragile. We must be vigilant. All across our state, we face some sobering challenges.

Until we have mandatory measures to ensure all chemical plants in New Jersey meet the highest safety standards, hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans are vulnerable to the threat of terrorism.

We've made steady progress on a wide range of critical issues in recent years. But poorly planned development still threatens our drinking water supplies and other precious natural resources.

Hundreds of New Jerseyans still die prematurely every year from breathing unhealthy air. And far too many families in our urban communities still dream of raising their children in safe and healthy neighborhoods.

I have a lot of questions about how we will make things right. And I need every single one of you to help me find the answers. I need your minds—I also need your hearts.

It has been said that one of the best ways to predict the future is to help shape it. Each of you will have that opportunity. In the coming weeks, all of us will be part of a department-wide conversation. Through task forces and work groups, we will challenge each other to identify the most important things we should be doing to advance environmental protection in New Jersey and enhance our quality of life.

Very soon, you will hear more about the kickoff of this collaboration that ultimately will yield an ambitious agenda for the next four years and enable us to discover new and exciting ways of working together.

It's not about crafting a strategic plan. I am asking you to share your passion for our cause. Use your imagination. Be creative. Embrace change. Offer up your best ideas. Getting there from here sometimes can be a bumpy ride, but I am confident it will be worth the trip.

The people of New Jersey count on us. Let's continue to work every day to earn their trust, not only by showing them how much we know about environmental protection but by showing them how much we care.

So in the end, my message is nothing unusual for DEP. It is a call to action and hard work on behalf of our governor, our families, our children and the people of our state. I know that you will answer that call and I look forward to working with you during the next four years.

Once again, I thank you all for being here. Please stay a while for our reception and enjoy refreshments provided by our very generous staff in the front office and by Henry's Coffee Shop.

If you haven't yet had an opportunity to see in our lobby the environmental displays presented by our Mentor Power students led by Maureen Quinn, please don't miss them. Finally, Lois Alexander—another beautiful performance—and my heartfelt thanks to everyone who worked hard to make this ceremony so special.