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TRAILBLAZERS

PLAINTIFFS' LAWYERS

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PIONEER SPIRIT John Sheehan started his career with an insurance defense firm before working at the Department of Justice for 13 years. In 2004, he moved to private practice, where he continued to work on the defense side. "When the per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) issue started gaining steam, I moved to Cohen Milstein to be able to represent municipalities against PFAS manufacturers."

TRAILS BLAZED Leveraging his experiences as a senior trial lawyer at the Environmental Natural Resources Division of the Department of Justice, including cases under the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, Sheehan joined Cohen Milstein in 2019 to launch the PFAS advisory and litigation group. "I was at a conference doing work with the American Water Works Association when some executives wanted a briefing about PFAS. One of the attorneys present was Rob Bilott, who was featured in the film 'Dark Waters,' and we started to think about municipalities as plaintiffs." A joint venture between law firms, including Susman Godfrey, Levin Sedran & Berman and the Earth & Water Law Group, the group advises local communities, water utilities and other entities in holding manufacturers of PFAS accountable for contamination. "Several states have already filed suit, and we've been meeting with a lot of communities that are considering actions."

FUTURE EXPLORATIONS Sheehan believes we are at the beginning stages of PFAS-related issues. "The EPA recently made the determination they would regulate two of the chemicals: PFOA and PFOS. They hadn't added a chemical to their safe drinking water list in decades. The Department of Defense is conducting more studies now that are showing high levels. There may be thousands of communities that will have this issue going forward."

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