

Clean Water Act- Overview

Let's begin by looking at some seminal events in recent water history, focusing on the condition of surface waters-

- Potomac River- Take a look at [this timeline of events on the Potomac](#). Note the difference in the descriptions between the 1830s and 1969.
- Cuyahoga River- [Timeline of the Cuyahoga](#)- Note the first fire in 1868
- Lake Erie and Ontario- [short article on Lake Erie](#)
- Soybean oil spill in MN River- See below in the module. I have linked to a short article about the oil spill below.



It's hard to imagine now how bad our rivers had gotten just a few short decades ago.

This was the era in which the Cuyahoga River caught on fire due to industrial wastes and toxics.

In the late 1960's President Johnson declared the Potomac River a national disgrace. You needed a tetanus shot if you fell in.

In the same time frame, Lake Erie and Ontario had so much nutrient run off that the algae blooms clogged drinking water intakes and there were many fish that suffocated and died.

In Minnesota, we had our own issues. In 1962 and 1963 there was an oil



pipeline break and a soybean oil tank failure, both sending oil into the Minnesota River – documented in [an interesting paper](#) at the Historical Society by Steven Lee. (NOTE: You can also download this article from the Course Materials for this topic.) [Wisconsin sued MN](#) over the floating sludge mats from the Pig's Eye treatment plant.

Learning Activity

Read the articles linked above to get a sense of the condition of rivers in the 1960s. Then look through this brief history of wastewater treatment in the Twin Cities.

<http://www.metrocouncil.org/METC/files/50/505844ce-b611-433c-b351-6f754410fa5d.pdf>

The cultural context of America in the 1960s gave rise to a growing environmental movement. Protests over social causes had become part of the landscape. There was an upsurge in citizen lawsuits over industrial waste discharges. Outrage over degraded environmental conditions was building.

The first Earth Day was held in 1970, inspired by Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson.

Prior to the 1960s, the focus of society and federal agencies on water quality was for human health concerns. There were laws that were marginally effective prior to the Clean Water Act.

- [Water Quality Act of 1965](#) – sought to protect aquatic life and recreation
- 1970 executive order – [Refuse Act Permit Program](#)

In the 1960s, US citizens had more leisure time and started to spend more time in recreation involving water, so the emphasis shifted to include recreation, as seen by the Water Quality Act of 1965. President Nixon was beleaguered by these issues, so issued an executive order to bring back the Refuse Act Permit program, but it wasn't very effective.

The time was right for a major policy action to protect water.



Earth Day - 1970

Mass Movement Begins

In New York City, thousands of persons thronged in the warm Spring sunshine, and the world-famous Fifth Avenue belonged to the people. For a few hours, a small portion of the great city banned motor vehicles, and people promenaded on a proud boulevard usually congested with buses, taxis and cars. It was April 22--Earth Day in New York--and it was a holiday. Assistant Chief Inspector Arthur Morgan, who was in charge of the police on the scene, observed:

"Everyone's Beautiful"

"Everyone's beautiful. Just look at them. We're actually enjoying it."

In Madison, Wis., Earth Day was observed at sunrise over Lake Mendota with a Sanskrit invocation and a reading of the last chapter of the Book of Genesis with an apology to God for man's assaults on the

landscape. Earth Day observers in Milwaukee nominated the toad, the praying mantis and the ladybug as substitutes for DDT.

Thousands Marched

In Greensboro, N.C., in Atlanta, Ga., and in Miami, Fla., thousands marched in demonstrations for a clean environment. The Governor of Maine called for the Earth Day commitment to be "a truly lasting one," and the mighty Chicago Tribune observed incredulously that, after demonstrations on the city's broad new Civic Center Plaza, "there was no post-rally litter remaining to be cleaned up."

A new movement had begun, and uncounted millions--students, laborers, farmers, housewives, politicians, professional people, liberals and conservatives--who might have

found it difficult to find common agreement on any other subject, were gathering together in a massive educational effort to talk about survival and the quality of survival in a world they all share.

In the little more than seven months after Sen. Gaylord Nelson suggested the idea of national teach-ins to discuss the crisis of the environment, the movement grew rapidly through March and April. On Earth Day, it was estimated that 2,500 college campuses, 1,000 community groups and 10,000 elementary and secondary schools were holding events.

In some places it was as the poet exclaimed while watching a rally of 30,000 in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, an "educational picnic;" in others it was the serious business of government.

Special Legislation

During April, the state legislature of Massachusetts and the House of Representatives in Pennsylvania set aside time for important addresses on the environment and the introduction and passage of legislation aimed at protecting, preserving and restoring the environment.

Scientists, ecologists, environmentalists, educators and political leaders warned darkly before massive gatherings and small meetings that time was running out for the world and that all men had a responsibility to themselves and to leave a legacy of life for their children.

500 Invitations

Senator Nelson, who received nearly 500 invitations to speak at Earth Day observances, described the national teach-ins as "dramatic and successful" in their educational value, but warned that Earth Day

