

A History of Water Pollution Events

The Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century and early 19th century brought about large-scale use of coal and intensified air and water pollution. Here are some of the significant water pollution events and trends of the 20th and 21st century:

- 1895 US Attorney General Judson Harmon tells Mexico that the US will "do whatever it pleases" with water from the Rio Grande.
- 1900 The State of Missouri sues the State of Illinois and the City of Chicago's sewer system for polluting the Mississippi
- 1910 The amazing Lakeview Gusher spews crude oil in the air of the San Joaquin Valley in California. Half the oil is captured and processed but the rest flows into local rivers, agricultural land, the air and the water table.
- 1914 The Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Mines and Public Health Service begin pollution surveys of streams and harbors. Reports show an accumulation of heavy damage from oil dumping, mine runoff, untreated sewage and industrial waste.
- The Corps of Engineers begins an extensive investigation of acid mine runoff in the Ohio River Basin.
- 1921 The US Supreme Court allows New Jersey to dump sewage into New York Harbor but recommends cooperative study, conference and mutual concession.
- The US Commerce Department holds a conference to consider "the subject of water pollution and its relation to the fisheries," while the Corps of Engineers begins an investigation of oil pollution in harbors. Oil waste, industrial waste and sewage threaten some varieties of migratory fish with extinction.
- 1922 Corps of Engineers harbormasters report the dismal condition of harbors on both coasts. The National Coast Anti Pollution League is formed by state and municipal officials at Atlantic City to stop oil dumping.
- 1930 County and city officials of the Harbor Pollution Committee of Annapolis, Maryland draw up a joint resolution urging Congress to stop pollution of the harbor and neighboring estuaries. According to the Committee, a solution can be found in the construction of modern sewage plants.
- 1941 "Action Club" is formed to combat pollution from paper mills near Augusta, Maine.
- 1945 President Harry Truman issues a Proclamation on the Continental Shelf clearing the way for oil drilling offshore.
- 1949 Canadian complaints about pollution from Detroit, Michigan launches a Public Health Survey of the Detroit-Windsor area.
- 1962 The Washington Post documents that oil pollution at sea is a serious issue, with oil tankers at sea, the dumping of old crankcase oil and the pumping of oily water from bilges as the major causes. While it is illegal to dump oil within 50 miles of the coastline, ships continue to do so.

- Rachel Carson publishes *Silent Spring*, a book that highlights the dangers of insecticides and other chemicals and helps influence the burgeoning environmental movement in the US.
- 1968 According to a survey, pollution in the Chesapeake Bay causes \$3 million annually in losses to the fishing industry. Meanwhile, the US Bureau of Sport Fisheries measures DDT in 584 of 590 samples, with levels up to nine times the FDA limit.
- 1969 Bacteria levels in the Hudson River are at 170 times the safe limit.
- A chemical waste discharge of "highly volatile petroleum derivatives" is ignited by a "chance occurrence," such as a spark from a passing train, and Ohio's Cuyahoga River bursts into flames, raising public awareness of the condition of the nation's water resources.
- Union Oil's offshore wells spill 235,000 gallons of oil, fouling 30 miles of beach and arousing public anger against pollution.
- 1970 April 22, the first nationwide Earth Day celebration is organized by Senator Gaylord Nelson and Dennis Hayes. Millions of Americans demonstrate for air and water cleanup and preservation of nature.
- The Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Bureau of Water Hygiene reports that 30 percent of drinking water samples had chemicals exceeding the recommended Public Health Service limits.
- 1971 The FDA reports that 87% of swordfish samples had mercury at levels that were unfit for human consumption.
- The Chamber of Commerce Director warns of the potential collapse of entire industries from pollution regulation, especially oil and automotive.
- The Presidents' Council on Environmental Quality acknowledges racial discrimination adversely affects the urban poor and the quality of their environment.
- 1976 Liberian tanker *Argo Merchant* crashes 27 miles off Nantucket Island leaking 9 million gallons of oil.
- 1977 Allied Chemical Company and the State of Virginia settle a lawsuit over extensive kepone (a carcinogenic insecticide) contamination of the James River for \$5 million.
- 1978 Residents discover that Love Canal, New York is contaminated by buried, leaking chemical containers from a major toxic waste dump used by the Hooker Chemicals and Plastics Corporation in the 1940s and 1950s.
- 1980 Seven hundred families from Love Canal are relocated after being exposed to the toxic wastes dumped by the Hooker Chemical Company.
- 1982 Dioxin contamination forces the government to purchase homes in Times Beach, Missouri. The Federal Government and the responsible polluters share the clean up costs.

Attempts to build a PCB landfill in an African American neighborhood in Warren County, NC result in demonstrations and trigger a nationwide movement for environmental justice.

- 1983 Cleanup actions begin to rid the Chesapeake Bay of pollution stemming from sewage treatment plants, urban runoff and farm waste.
- Black residents of Triana, Alabama settle a \$25 million lawsuit against EPA, the Department of Defense and Olin Chemical Company over DDT from Redstone Arsenal Army Base.
- 1987 A US General Accounting Office shows a strong correlation between the location of toxic waste dump sites and the location of minority communities.
- 1988 Syringes and other medical waste washes up onto beaches in New Jersey and New York closing them. Few realize that pollution had also closed beaches in the 1920s and 1930s.
- 1989 The oil tanker Exxon Valdez spills approximately 11 million gallons of crude oil into the sea off Alaska's Prince William Sound. The event, which causes a 3000-square-mile oil slick, kills hundreds of thousands of birds, fish and other wildlife and has a long-term impact.
- The Louisiana Toxic March is held protesting conditions in "Cancer Alley" (from Baton Rouge to New Orleans).
- 1991 A judge rules that failure to translate documents into Spanish excluded citizens from environmental review and overturns a permit for a toxic waste incinerator.
- 1993 A cryptosporidium outbreak in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's drinking water sickens 400,000 people and kills more than 100.
- A documentary entitled "Toxic Racism" is produced for the US Broadcasting Service.
- 1994 An 8.5-million-gallon spill of diluent, a thinner used to aid the transport of crude oil, is discovered at Unocal's Guadalupe oil field. This is the second largest known spill in California history.
- 1995 Occidental Chemical Corporation agrees to pay \$129 million to the Federal Government "Superfund" to cover toxic waste cleanup costs Love Canal, New York.
- 2000 A Massey Energy Company impoundment dam collapses near Inez, Kentucky, releasing 300 million gallons of thick, black coal slurry sludge into the Big Sandy River's Tug Fork and its tributaries. The spill destroyed 100 miles of streams and killed millions of fish.
- 2001 The Environmental Working Group reports that sources of drinking water for more than 7 million Californians and millions of others are contaminated with perchlorate, a chemical that disrupts child development and may cause thyroid cancer.

The US Supreme Court issues a 5-to-4 opinion that denied Federal Clean Water Act protection for thousands of wetlands that serve as habitat for migratory birds.

The Court ruled that the law was being applied too broadly – “an impingement of states’ power” and cannot be used to protect isolated wetlands.

- 2002 A jury in Anniston, Alabama rules that Monsanto Chemical Company is responsible for pollution the town with tons of toxic PCBs. Among the counts proven is conduct “so outrageous in character and extreme in degree as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency so as to be regarded as atrocious and utterly intolerable in civilized society.”
- 2003 The US Court of Appeals rules in favor of companies engaged in mountaintop removal mining, a practice in which large slabs of mountains are dynamited and the resulting tons of rock and dirt, dumped into valleys and streams. About twenty new permits are pending in West Virginia and Kentucky.
- 2006 US ranks 28th out of 133 countries on the Environmental Performance Index. Researchers say the US’s ranking was lowered by its unsustainable agricultural practices, excessive release of greenhouse gases and poor water management.
- 2007 The US Interior Department’s office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement proposes easing environmental requirements for mountaintop removal mining. The proposal outrages many people in Appalachia.
- US Supreme Court agrees to hear an appeal of the fines levied on Exxon Mobil Corporation for the Exxon-Valdez oil spill in 1989.
- 2008 Over a billion gallons of coal fly ash sludge spills out of a holding dam near Kinsport, Tennessee. The TVA informs consumers that fly ash is similar to gypsum and that they should boil their water. Discrete sampling reveals that the sludge contains toxic metals, dioxins and PAH compounds. A federal investigation is pending.
- 2009 US reverses its opposition to a new international protocol on mercury pollution and will help to lead negotiations.
Protests accelerate over mountaintop removal mining in the coal fields of Appalachia. Protesters demand an end to the destruction, safe containment for sludge dams and a shift to renewable energy.

SOURCES:

Air and Water Pollution Timeline

http://www.history.com/states.do?action=detail&state=Air%20and%20Water%20Pollution&contentType=State_Generic&contentId=58538&parentId=earth

Environmental History Timeline

<http://www.runet.edu/~wkovarik/envhist/>

A Brief History of the Clean Water Act

<http://www.pbs.org/now/science/cleanwater.html>