

## **A History of Water Pollution Legislation**

- 1899 Rivers and Harbors Act (also called the Refuse Act) is passed by Congress. The Act is aimed at the preservation of navigable waters but prohibits throwing garbage and refuse into these waters except with a permit and dumping of oil, acids or other chemicals which obstruct navigation. Sewage is exempt
- 1901 President Teddy Roosevelt's first message to Congress includes strong recommendations for forest and water conservation and reclamation.
- 1913 Congress considers a bill to prevent dumping of sewage into the Great Lakes and its tributaries, but the Public Health Service objects because bill would be enforced by localities of questionable jurisdiction. Newly-formed US-Canada Boundary Pollution Commission is greatly weakened.
- 1924 Oil Pollution Act is finally passed in weakened form, prohibiting discharge from any vessel within the three-mile limit of shore, except by accident. A stronger act would have prohibited discharges from oil refineries.
- 1938 Congress approves the Federal Stream Pollution Bill, which simply funds further Public Health Service Investigations into stream purity instead of originally proposed enforcement measures.
- 1948 Congress passes the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, the first major legislation to focus on water pollution, which authorizes the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service to prepare comprehensive programs for eliminating or reducing pollution of interstate water and tributaries and improve the sanitary condition of surface water and groundwater. It also authorizes the Federal Works Administrator to assist states, municipalities and agencies in constructing treatment plants. The House and Senate Public Works Committee first exhibits active interest in water pollution.
- 1956 Congress amends the Water Pollution Control Act to strengthen enforcement provisions by providing for an abatement suit at the request of a State pollution control agency where health is endangered. The approval of other States is not required.
- 1965 Congress passes the Water Quality Act, setting water quality standards that are state and federally enforceable.
- 1966 The Clean Water Restoration Act is passed and imposes a \$100 per day fine on a polluter who fails to submit a required report.
- 1969 The National Environmental Policy Act is passed, creating the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to give the President advice on environmental issues and review Environmental Impact Statements. Congress declares "that it is the continuing policy of the Federal Government, in cooperation with State and local governments, and other concerned public and private organizations, to use all practicable means and measures, including financial and technical assistance, in a manner calculated to foster and promote the general welfare, to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans." The bill is signed into law by President Richard Nixon on January 1, 1970.

- 1970 The Environmental Protection Agency is signed into law. The EPA brings together key federal programs including the Health Education and Welfare National Air Pollution Control Administration (NAPCA) and the Department of Interior's Water Quality Administration (FWQA).
- 1971 The Federal Water Pollution Control Act is amended over a presidential veto to regulate pollutant discharges into US waterways and to fund construction of sewage treatment facilities, among other priorities. Congress also passes the Coastal Zone Management Act, the Ocean Dumping Act, and the Marine Mammal Protection Act.
- Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, Rodenticide Act (FIFRA) amendments transfer responsibility for the 1947 act from USDA to the EPA and provide that pesticides developed after 1972, before being commercially produced or sold for the US market have no unreasonable adverse effects on public health or the environment. Some 50,000 pesticides manufactured before 1972 are to be reviewed for safety by 1976 but deadlines are pushed back.
- 1973 The EPA issues its first permit limiting a factory's polluted discharges into waterways.
- 1974 Congress passes the Safe Drinking Water Act, allowing the EPA to regulate the quality of public drinking water.
- 1976 Congress passes the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, regulating hazardous waste from its production to its disposal.
- President Gerald Ford signs the Toxic Substance Control Act (TSCA) to reduce environmental and human health risks. The Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) requires testing for health and environmental effects prior to a chemical's manufacture or distribution. The law also requires records to be kept and allows EPA enforcement through civil proceedings. However, of 2,300 new substances reviewed by EPA between 1972 and 1992, only 13 are stopped. Among 60,000 existing chemicals in the TSCA inventory, only four are regulated by 1991 (PCBs, CFCs, dioxin and asbestos).
- EPA begins to phase out PCB production and use.
- 1977 The Federal Water Pollution Control Act is amended and renamed the Clean Water Act. The amended act provides long-term funding to the municipal sewage treatment program and gives priority to the control of toxic pollutant discharges.
- 1979 Congressmen John LaFalce and Daniel Patrick Moynihan propose legislation that includes a new concept of dealing with toxic waste dumps that they call "the Superfund."
- 1980 The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, "the Superfund" or CERCLA, directs EPA to clean up abandoned toxic waste dumps. The Superfund is initially designed to spend \$1.6 billion over five years and to be funded by new taxes on the chemical industry. Polluters are responsible for cleaning up most hazardous sites.

- 1986 The Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act passes in the wake of Bhopal, India and other chemical disasters despite opposition from chemical companies and the EPA. The act requires manufacturers to report releases and transfers of 330 toxic chemicals to EPA for entry into a public database.
- The Safe Drinking Water Act is amended to set standards for 83 contaminants and ban use of lead pipes and solder in new drinking water systems.
- 1987 Congress passes the Plastic Pollution Research and Control Act, forbidding ocean dumping of plastic materials.
- The Clean Water Act is amended and includes provisions to address the environmental impact of stormwater by establishing a comprehensive, two-phase approach to stormwater control. Stormwater discharges from municipalities are treated as point sources of pollution.
- 1988 Congress passes the Ocean Dumping Ban Act, which outlaws dumping of municipal sewage and industrial and medical waste into ocean waters. An international treaty bans all ocean dumping of wastes.
- 1989 Administrator William Reilly establishes an Environmental Equity Group to deal with environmental justice issues.
- President George Bush, Sr., signs the Pollution Prevention Act, emphasizing the importance of preventing – not just correcting – environmental damage, and the National Environmental Education Act signifying the importance of education the public to ensure scientifically sound, balanced and responsible decisions about the environment.
- 1990 Phase I of the stormwater control regulations takes effect. Large sources, namely medium and large municipal storm sewer systems serving 100,000 people or more, several categories of industrial activity and construction activity disturbing five or more acres of land are required to apply for NPDES permits.
- 1992 The Environmental Justice Act is introduced by Congressman John Lewis and Senator Al Gore.
- 1996 Public drinking water suppliers are required to inform customers about chemicals and microbes in their water, and funding is made available to upgrade water treatment plants.
- 1998 President Bill Clinton announces the Clean Water Action Plan to continue making America's waterways safe for swimming and fishing.
- 1999 Phase II of the stormwater control regulations takes effect and requires smaller local governments operating storm sewer systems to get NPDES permits and sets requirements for construction activity that disturbs one to five acres. Municipalities that operate industrial activities have their deadline extended.
- 2005 The EPA establishes the Community Action for Renewed Environment (CARE) program. Through CARE, 860 local organizations work together to reduce local releases of toxic pollutants.

2006

The EPA initiates the National Mercury Switch Vehicle Recovery Program, which has removed over one million mercury-containing automotive switches, reducing mercury emissions by one ton.

The EPA recommends new limits on the use of thousands of pesticides due to their ill effects on human health following a Congressionally mandated review of more than 230 chemicals. The first to be banned is lindane, a toxic insecticide used for agricultural purposes.

**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](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>