



Backgrounder

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A Brief History of the Clean Water Act

Growing public awareness and concern for controlling water pollution led to enactment of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972 – more commonly known as the Clean Water Act. There have been dramatic improvements in the health of our nation's waters since then, with the majority of our waterways now safe for fishing and swimming. The specter of Cleveland's Cuyahoga River catching fire and burning, a Potomac River too dirty for swimming, or Lake Erie devoid of life are now fading in our memories. The Clean Water Act is what made this a reality. But despite this great progress there are still many challenges left unmet. Many of the nation's waters currently do not meet water quality goals.

The Clean Water Act established the basic structure for regulating water pollution in the United States. It gave the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency the authority to implement pollution control programs such as setting wastewater standards for industry. The Clean Water Act continued requirements to set water quality standards for all contaminants in surface waters, and made it unlawful for anyone to discharge any pollutant from a point source into the water without a highly restrictive permit.

The Clean Water Act also funded the construction and upgrading of wastewater treatment plants, more than doubling the number of Americans served by these facilities. The vast majority of the 305 largest wastewater treatment plants in the Chesapeake Bay's 64,000-square-mile watershed were either constructed or upgraded with money authorized by the Clean Water Act. And Section 404 of the Act has been the primary tool to help stem the loss of wetlands nationwide and in the Bay region. The Act also recognized the need for planning to address the critical problems posed by nonpoint source pollution.

Subsequent enactments modified some of the earlier Clean Water Act provisions. Revisions in 1981 streamlined the municipal construction grants process, improving the capabilities of treatment plants built under the program. Changes in 1987 phased out the construction grants program, replacing it with the State Water Pollution Control Revolving Fund, more commonly known as the Clean Water State Revolving Fund. This new funding strategy addressed water quality needs by building on EPA-State partnerships. The 1987 amendments added a new Section 117, which authorized the Chesapeake Bay Program, and was further updated in 2000 by the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Act amendment. Based on the Chesapeake Bay Program model, the 1987 amendments also created and authorized the National Estuary Program, which now includes 28 estuaries targeted for restoration and protection throughout the United States.

Anniversaries provide a good opportunity to reflect on progress made and to renew commitments to future improvement. As we look back at the important work done under the authority of the Clean Water Act, we can take pride in all that has been accomplished throughout the nation and in the Chesapeake Bay. Yet we know that much remains to be done. Nonpoint pollution from runoff from our streets, lawns, and farms must be further reduced. Those waters that are still impaired must be restored. The Chesapeake Bay Program has pledged, through the signing and implementation of its landmark *Chesapeake 2000* agreement, to take on this challenge and to work cooperatively to meet its many goals to restore this nation's largest and most productive estuary.

