

# Efforts to Address Water Pollution in the United States

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will discuss the efforts to address water pollution in the United States. We will explore the historical background of environmental regulation, including relevant laws and policies that resulted from pressure on the federal government to act on environmental issues. We will discuss point and nonpoint source water pollutants and the outcomes of efforts to address water pollution nationally and internationally. Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

## 1. Historical Background of Water Regulation

Water pollution issues were originally handled by state governments, but widespread public environmental concern in the late 1960s and early 1970s changed this. The federal government began to play a more active role.

Date	Event
1962	Rachel Carson's book <i>Silent Spring</i> was published in 1962. In the book, she discussed various problems caused by pollution, particularly the effects of agricultural practices on waterways.
1969	The Cuyahoga River caught fire in Northeast Ohio because of water pollution. The cover photo and article in <i>Time</i> magazine about the river caught public attention and led to a call for water pollution control measures.
1969	A large oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara spiked media coverage, increased public concern, and resulted in political action.
1970	Earth Day was declared a national holiday in 1970 in an attempt to promote ecological stewardship.

## 2. Water Pollution Laws and Regulations

There have been several important laws and regulations about water quality in the United States. The following sections will cover some of them.

### 2a. Refuse Act of 1899

In 1969, citizen groups began taking advantage of the Refuse Act of 1899, which prohibited water pollution discharge if it was not approved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Citizen groups used it to sue hundreds of industrial companies that were discharging pollutants into waterways. Even though it allowed citizen groups to advocate for better water quality, the Refuse Act was not intended for environmental regulation. Its purpose was to keep waterways clear enough to allow naval navigation.

## **2b. Clean Water Act of 1972**

In 1972, the Clean Water Act was passed by President Nixon's administration as a result of public pressure. The goals of the Act were to manage U.S. waterways so that by July 1, 1983, it would be possible to fish and swim in all waters while also eliminating the discharge of pollutants into waters by 1985.



The Clean Water Act originally only accounted for point source polluters. When states set water quality standards, they usually organize by uses, such as the following:

- Public water supply
- Bathing
- Coldwater habitat
- Warmwater habitat

Now, the Environmental Protection Agency gives different industries water pollution limits.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Section 404 of the Clean Water Act regulates dredging and filling of navigable waters, which includes wetlands. This is done by issuing permits to industries through the Army Corps of Engineers in order to assess negative impacts to wetlands.

## **2c. Clean Water Act Amendment of 1987**

In 1987, the Clean Water Act was amended to account for nonpoint source polluters. States are now required to assess if their waterways are impacted by nonpoint polluters, as well as to develop programs to address problems. The amendment mostly granted funds and information for state projects to carry out the following activities:

- Create riparian buffer zones
- Educate citizens about not dumping certain types of waste into their water systems
- Training watershed partnership leaders

Addressing nonpoint source pollution is much more difficult than addressing point source pollution because it comes from sources that are widely distributed. It is therefore hard to target the polluter. Efforts to mitigate nonpoint source pollution include the following:

- Land use planning
- Voluntary best management practices
- Technical assistance for landowners
- Cost sharing between landowners for things like riparian buffer zones

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## 3. Outcomes of Water Regulation

Efforts to address water pollution in the United States have resulted in sewage treatment plants dramatically reducing water pollution. About half of U.S. waterways are now considered clean, and the most severe cases have been substantially improved and cleaned. International efforts have been primarily focused on agreements around protecting international waterways. While dozens of countries have signed agreements between each other to prevent water pollution, few have included any agreed-upon standards or requirements.





## SUMMARY

In this lesson, we learned about the **historical background of water regulation**. We learned about the **laws and regulations** that resulted from public pressure for cleaner waterways. We learned about the **Refuse Act of 1989**, the **Clean Water Act of 1972**, and how it only addressed point source polluters until the **Clean Water Act Amendment of 1987**, which included nonpoint sources as well. Finally, we discussed **outcomes of water regulation** and other efforts to address water pollution within the United States, as well as international efforts to do so.

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