

# Environmental Policy

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will discuss the topic of environmental policy. We will learn about the different levels of government and how they interact with environmental policy. We will explore different approaches to environmental policy, the federal agencies involved in environmental policy, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Specifically, this lesson will cover the following:

## 1. Levels of Government

The government exists at four main levels. The national, or federal, level is made up of states. The state level is composed of counties, and the county level is composed of cities and townships.

### Levels of Government

National



State



County



City

Each level has a different role in environmental policy. Before 1970, it was the responsibility of state and local governments to regulate natural resources in their jurisdiction. However, in the 1970s, there was a spike in national awareness around environmental issues, and since then, the regulation of natural resources has become a federal responsibility. With this shift, the implementation of national policy is taken care of at the state and local levels.

## 2. Approaches to Environmental Policy

The table below summarizes the three approaches that government can take toward environmental policy.

### Environmental

Policy Approaches	Description
Total free market	This approach leaves regulation in the hands of businesses and industries themselves to manage. This was historically the case for the United States; however, since 1970, that has changed. This approach is more common in other countries now.
Free market with some government control	This approach strikes a balance between total free market and total government control. Various levels of government employ tactics like control of emissions, taxes, and tradable permits to regulate industries without taking too much control.
Total government control	This approach utilizes government at every level to manage and regulate environmental impacts of all kinds.

Over the past few decades, the United States has shifted away from the total free market approach toward the approach of free market with some government control. Certain areas have become regulated at a national level, while others have been left to the free market.

### 3. Federal Agencies

The following are some important regulating federal agencies to note.

- National Institutes of Health (NIH), or the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS)
- Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Each regulates, monitors, and controls different issues, using various approaches dependent on the agency's goals.

### 4. National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970 required federal government to allocate funds and time in order to do the following:

- Identify negative effects from unavoidable human activities on the environment; negative effects may fall into categories such as safety, health, aesthetics, or ecological
- Consider and assess alternative actions to any federal actions and projects
- Identify resources necessary for the project

NEPA does not forbid any actions from being taken; it only requires that an assessment of potential impacts be undertaken and disseminated for public knowledge. NEPA is beneficial because it arms decision-makers with adequate knowledge of the impacts of their actions in the hopes that they will make educated decisions instead of discovering significant environmental impacts from actions taken after the fact.

It also warns the public of actions and their potential impacts being considered by the federal government, so

that the public can monitor and object if necessary.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, we learned about environmental policy and how different **levels of government** interact with it. We learned about three different **approaches government can take with environmental policy**: total free market, free market with some governmental control, and total government control. We learned about the different **federal agencies** in the United States that are currently responsible for environmental regulation and the role of **NEPA**.

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