



50th Anniversary of the Clean Water Act

Celebrating Progress and Charting Our Future



The Clean Water Act has been the foundation for prioritizing water restoration and recovery across the country. Fifty years ago, rivers were ablaze, and wildlife abandoned their polluted ecosystems. Thanks to the progress we have made, waters that were once polluted are now boatable, fishable, and even swimmable.

Clean water and a growing economy go hand-in-hand. We all need water. From our local coffee shop to microprocessor manufacturers to the beach or lake town shops to the National Hockey League. For these and other industries, clean water means both fishing with your grandkids at the lake and job-creation. The Clean Water Act has made our water and our lives safer and more prosperous.

Achieving Healthy Waterways through Partnership, Innovation, Funding, Law and Policy

- The CWA has helped us manage pollution entering waterways through pipes and storm drains. It requires wastewater treatment facilities to clean wastewater before safely releasing it back into our rivers, creeks, and streams. Through treatment, stormwater management, and combined sewer overflow controls, water discharging from storm drains is also cleaner.
- The CWA has helped communities finance improved water infrastructure through the Clean Water State Revolving Funds. This has invested over \$153 billion through over 44,500 low-cost loans since 1988.
- The CWA has advanced pollution reductions from runoff and other non-point sources. EPA provides federal leadership, technical assistance—and much needed money—to states and tribes to assess and advance projects that reduce non-source pollution.
- The CWA helps us protect important ecosystems around the country. The launch of holistic Geographic Programs and National Estuary Programs have enabled focused recovery efforts in these places.
- The CWA helped us coordinate with the states, territories, and Tribes to develop, approve, and uphold legally grounded water quality standards to help control pollutants entering water bodies.
- The CWA has been foundational in efforts by federal, state, and tribal governments to use the best available science to assess the quality of our waters.
- The CWA grounds the approach to modern day challenges like excess nutrients in waterways that cause harmful algal blooms and other water quality challenges limiting the use of our waterways. Additionally, the 2022 Nutrients Memo accelerates progress in controlling nutrient pollution in our nation's waters.
- Water and agriculture are inextricably linked. EPA works with farmers to encourage adoption of regenerative practices and innovative technologies that reduce agricultural runoff, improve water quality, and increase water use efficiency. EPA's Farm, Ranch, and Rural Communities Committee provides policy advice to the Agency on how to accelerate these important goals.
- The National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits, authorized by the CWA, ensure wastewater is treated to stringent federal and state standards by municipalities and industry. This program has advanced wastewater treatment technology for 50 years. These technological improvements have been driven by EPA's Clean Water Act Effluent Guidelines, which require the best treatment technology available for entire industrial sectors of our economy, ensuring that Industries use the most up-to-date technologies.

The Clean Water Act Timeline: An Abbreviated History

BEFORE

Prior to the Clean Water Act, there were several laws that attempted to protect water quality, such as the Rivers and Harbors Act (1899), the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (1948), the Water Quality Act (1965), and the Refuse Act (1970).

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JUNE 1969

Oil slick catches fire on the polluted Cuyahoga River in Ohio, mobilizing public concern across the nation.

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JANUARY 1970

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is established.

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OCTOBER 18, 1972 – CLEAN WATER ACT SIGNED INTO LAW:

The CWA aimed to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the nation's waters. It established National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permitting program for discharges to navigable waters, required states to establish water quality standards for their waterbodies, required municipal facilities to meet secondary treatment standards, required industrial facilities to meet technology standards, and announced a national goal of eliminating discharges of pollutants to navigable waters by 1985.

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1977

CWA Amendments: Reduced toxic pollutants being discharged into waterways through a series of technology-based standards and a deadline for industrial sources to comply.

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1981

Revisions in 1981 streamlined the municipal construction grants process, including prioritizing projects that will contribute the most to improve water quality.

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1987

Water Quality Act of 1987: Replaced the construction grants program with the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, addressing water quality through EPA-state partnerships. The 1987 Amendments also provided a framework for permitting stormwater discharges, including municipal separate storm sewer systems, and addressed toxics in sewer sludge.

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1990

Title I of the Great Lakes Critical Programs Act put into place parts of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement of 1978, signed by the U.S. and Canada, where the two nations agreed to reduce certain toxic pollutants in the Great Lakes.

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1994

The Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) Control Policy establishes a national approach under the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit program for controlling discharges into the nation's waters from combined sewer systems.

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2000

The Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health (BEACH) Act reduces the risk of disease to users of the Nation's coastal recreation waters. It also established a grant program to support testing and monitoring of coastal waters and support public notification programs for when the water is not safe to recreate in.

The Wet Weather Water Quality Act amended the Clean Water Act to require that each permit related to CSOs provide for plans that would dramatically reduce CSO discharges and meet stringent federal and state water quality standards.

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2022

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law invests more than \$50 billion through EPA's established water financing programs – including over \$14 billion for programs under the Clean Water Act.