

# EPA History

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**Origins of EPA**

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## The Origins of EPA

The American conversation about protecting the environment began in the 1960s. Rachel Carson had published her attack on the indiscriminate use of pesticides, *Silent Spring*, in 1962. Concern about air and water pollution had spread in the wake of disasters. An offshore oil rig in California fouled beaches with millions of gallons of spilled oil. Near Cleveland, Ohio, the Cuyahoga River, choking with chemical contaminants, had spontaneously burst into flames. Astronauts had begun photographing the Earth from space, heightening awareness that the Earth's resources are finite.

In early 1970, as a result of heightened public concerns about deteriorating city air, natural areas littered with debris, and urban water supplies contaminated with dangerous impurities, President Richard Nixon presented the House and Senate a groundbreaking 37-point message on the environment. These points included:

- requesting four billion dollars for the improvement of water treatment facilities;
- asking for national air quality standards and stringent guidelines to lower motor vehicle emissions;
- launching federally-funded research to reduce automobile pollution;
- ordering a clean-up of federal facilities that had fouled air and water;
- seeking legislation to end the dumping of wastes into the Great Lakes;
- proposing a tax on lead additives in gasoline;
- forwarding to Congress a plan to tighten safeguards on the seaborne transportation of oil; and
- approving a National Contingency Plan for the treatment of oil spills.

Around the same time, President Nixon also created a council in part to consider how to organize federal government programs designed to reduce pollution, so that those programs could efficiently address the goals laid out in his message on the environment.

Following the council's recommendations, the president sent to Congress a plan to consolidate many environmental responsibilities of the federal government under one agency, a new Environmental Protection Agency. This reorganization would permit response to environmental problems in a manner beyond the previous capability of government pollution control programs:

- The EPA would have the capacity to do research on important pollutants irrespective of the media in which they appear, and on the impact of these pollutants on the total environment.
- Both by itself and together with other agencies, the EPA would monitor the condition of the environment--biological as well as physical.
- With these data, the EPA would be able to establish quantitative "environmental baselines"--critical for efforts to measure adequately the success or failure of pollution abatement efforts.
- The EPA would be able--in concert with the states--to set and enforce standards for air and water quality and for individual pollutants.
- Industries seeking to minimize the adverse impact of their activities on the environment would be assured of consistent standards covering the full range of their waste disposal problems.
- As states developed and expanded their own pollution control programs, they would be able to look to one agency to support their efforts with financial and technical assistance and training.

After conducting hearings during that summer, the House and Senate approved the proposal. The agency's first Administrator, William Ruckelshaus, took the oath of office on December 4, 1970.

The documents below shed more light on EPA's birth and early years. **Note that these documents are now in EPA's archive. To find one, click on the Search EPA Archive button and copy the name of the document into the search box on the archive home page. To ensure the best search results, be sure to put quotes around the name of the document.**

SEARCH EPA ARCHIVE

- **Article "Origins of the EPA" in the Spring 1992 issue of *The Guardian*** -- provides background on conservation, ecology and early environmental movements, the first Earth Day, and the establishment of EPA.
- **President's Advisory Council on Executive Organization ("Ash Council") memo** (April 1970) advising President Nixon to form EPA
- **Reorganization Plan No. 3 of 1970** (July 9, 1970) - message from President Nixon to Congress about reorganization plans to establish EPA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- **EPA Order 1110.2** (December 4, 1970) - initial organization of EPA
- **Article "The Birth of EPA" in the November 1985 issue of *EPA Journal***
- **December 1970 press release "First Administrator Ruckelshaus on the establishment of EPA"**
- **Document: Duties Transferred to EPA from Other Agencies**
- **Document: Origin of the EPA Seal**
- **Article "EPA's Formative Years, 1970-1973" in the September 1993 issue of *The Guardian*** (EPA publications number 202-K-93-002) -- provides details on
  - the early years of EPA, including functions transferred from other agencies;
  - EPA's early organization; EPA's enforcement strategy;
  - early air pollution control efforts;
  - the banning of DDT; and
  - the leadership of EPA Administrators William D. Ruckelshaus and Russell E. Train.
- **Article "EPA History (1970-1985)" prepared in November 1985 by the EPA Office of Public Awareness** on the occasion of EPA's 15th anniversary

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**We celebrate EPA's "birthday" every December 2. What actually happened on December 2, 1970?**

- A.** President Nixon signed Reorganization Plan No. 3 calling for the establishment of an Environmental Protection Agency.
- B.** The U.S. Senate confirmed William Ruckelshaus as EPA's first Administrator.
- C.** Administrator Ruckelshaus signed EPA Order 1110.2 creating the initial organization of EPA.

**Check Answer**

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