

Energy and the Environment TIMELINE

Ben Franklin, Early Environmentalist

1739

Benjamin Franklin and his Philadelphia neighbors petition the Pennsylvania Assembly to stop waste dumping and remove tanneries from the city's commercial district. Franklin argues for "public rights" against the smell, lower property values and disease and for public safety. Franklin wins a symbolic battle, but the dumping continues.



Benjamin Franklin

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Environment Focus of Progressive Era

1890s

New organizations such as the Sierra Club and the General Federation of Women's Clubs champion conservation causes during the Progressive era. Wilderness preservation and reform of drinking water and industry pollution are at the forefront of reformers' efforts. President Theodore Roosevelt makes forest and water conservation a priority of his administration.

Deadly Smog in Steel Town

1948

National attention is focused on the hazards of air pollution after 20 people die over three days when air inversion traps emissions from steel mills in Donora, Pa.



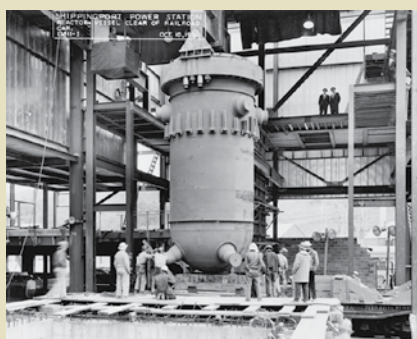
Theodore Roosevelt with John Muir,
founder of the Sierra Club

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Nuclear Era Is Launched

1950s

In the new "atomic age" launched by the bombing of the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, the Atomic Energy Act provides for the monitoring of all commercial and military nuclear materials and facilities. In 1957, the first U.S. commercial nuclear reactor begins operations in Shippingport, Pa., signaling the start of a new environmental challenge: disposal of radioactive waste.



Nuclear reactor at Shippingport under
construction, 1956

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Clean Air Act Signed

1963

The Clean Air Act of 1963 is the first federal law to address air pollution control. It creates a national program and authorizes research into techniques for controlling air pollution. Its predecessor, the Air Pollution Control Act of 1955, funded research into air pollution. In subsequent years, several laws and amendments will broaden federal authority and set air quality standards.

Federal Protection for Endangered Species

1966

The plight of the whooping crane leads Congress to pass the Endangered Species Preservation Act. Rewritten in 1973, the law distinguishes threatened from endangered species, includes plants and invertebrates, authorizes unlimited funds for protection, and makes it illegal to kill, harm, or "take" a listed species. The law draws controversy when environmental and commercial interests clash over protection of various species, such as the northern spotted owl.



Whooping cranes

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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Earth Day Celebrated; EPA Created

1970

The first Earth Day is celebrated by millions of Americans. Later in the year, President Richard Nixon creates the Environmental Protection Agency to consolidate environmental programs and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to focus on air and sea research.



EPA Logo

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Clean Water Act Passed

1972

The Clean Water Act establishes standards for water quality and goals for future water purity, and creates mechanisms to reduce discharges or pollutants into waterways. The law is amended several times to deal with new environmental hazards such as toxic pollutants and oil spills.

Oil Embargo Creates Energy Crisis

1970s

In retaliation for support of Israel during the Arab-Israeli war, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries cuts off exports to many nations, including the U.S. Facing a severe energy shortage, the U.S. reacts with calls for energy conservation, a reduction of the speed limit to 55 m.p.h. and pressure for more domestic exploration of oil and research into new technologies, including solar and wind power.



Cars line up for fuel at a service station in Maryland, 1979

Photo: Library of Congress

Department of Energy Created

1977

President Jimmy Carter creates the Department of Energy to provide a framework for a national energy plan by coordinating and administering the federal government's energy functions. Energy efficiency and renewable energy programs begin to receive funding support.

Toxic Legacy of Love Canal

1978

A federal health emergency is declared in Niagara Falls, N.Y., where hundreds of families in the Love Canal area are evacuated because of toxic sludge leaking into their homes. The community was built over an abandoned canal that had been filled with nearly 22,000 tons of hazardous waste over a decade. For years, families suffer health problems, including birth defects, cancers and autoimmune disorders. In response, Congress passes the Superfund law, which requires companies responsible for toxic waste sites to clean them up.



Love Canal resident protests contamination

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Three Mile Island Nuclear Disaster

1979

The worst nuclear disaster in U.S. history occurs at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Dauphin County, Pa., when the core of a reactor undergoes a partial meltdown. Blame is placed on the nuclear industry and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for failing to have proper regard for nuclear safety and worker training. The \$1 billion cleanup takes more than six years. In 1986, an explosion and fire at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the Ukraine spread tons of radioactive material, killing 31 people immediately and affecting thousands more.



Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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Exxon Valdez Oil Spill in Alaska

1989

The Exxon Valdez tanker runs into a reef on Alaska's southern coast, spilling nearly 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound. The oil spreads to 1,300 miles of shoreline and causes the deaths of more than 250,000 birds, sea otters, fish, and other marine animals. A year later, Congress passes the Oil Pollution Act, which increases how much companies must pay to clean up oil spills and restore natural resources.



Workers clean oil spilled by the Exxon Valdez

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Energy Policy Act Becomes Law

1992

The Energy Policy Act deregulates the utility industry (with the hope of increasing competition and lowering consumer energy costs), and calls for increased energy efficiency. The law also reforms the process for licensing nuclear power plants and allows the public to participate in the process.

Major Agreements on Global Warming

1992

At the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, more than 170 nations gather to rethink economic development and find ways to halt the destruction of the Earth's natural resources. The U.S. refuses to sign agreements on protecting rare and endangered plants and animals or preventing global warming. In a follow-up treaty in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol makes emissions reductions legally binding. Most industrialized nations, except the U.S., support the treaty.

Supreme Court Acts on Emission Regulation

2007

In one of its most important environmental decisions in years, the Supreme Court rules that the Environmental Protection Agency has the authority to regulate greenhouse gases in vehicle emissions that contribute to global climate change. The court adds that the EPA cannot sidestep its authority unless it provides scientific proof for its refusal. The Bush administration had argued that it did not have the right to regulate emissions and that even if it did, it would not do so.

Massive Oil Spill Off Gulf Coast

2010

A drilling rig leased by British Petroleum catches fire and sinks off the Louisiana coast in April, killing 11 people. A massive spill develops when a joint government and industry effort is unable to plug the underwater well for 86 days. Oil slicks cover thousands of square miles of ocean and coastal areas. Five million barrels of oil gushed from the well before it was capped, causing the worst accidental ocean spill in history.



Coast Guard ship skims oil from the Gulf of Mexico, May 2010

Photo: Wikimedia Commons