

The Clean Water Act of 1972

Congress had tackled water pollution as early as 1899, but most legislation lacked teeth. In 1948, Congress acted for the first time to comprehensively address water quality with passage of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1948, but enforcement was restricted to interstate waterways.

It wasn't until Rachel Carson's landmark book - *Silent Spring* - was published 50 years ago that the public became aware of and energized over drinking water and wastewater treatment.

Sweeping changes to the 1948 law were proposed in the 1960s, but in 1972, Congress finally approved amendments which became known as the Clean Water Act.

The 1972 reforms:

- Established a basic structure for regulating pollutants in U.S. waterways;
- Gave the United States Environmental Protection Agency the authority to implement pollution control programs such as setting wastewater standards for industry;
- Made it unlawful for any person to discharge any pollutant from a point source into navigable waters without a permit, and
- Funded construction of sewage treatment plants.

President Richard Nixon opposed the legislation, calling it too costly. In a rare bipartisan move, Congress voted to overturn Nixon's veto by wide margins and the bill was enacted in October 1972.

What were the outcomes of the Clean Water Act of 1972?

- It stopped billions of tons of pollutants from fouling U.S. waterways and dramatically increased the number of waterways safe for fishing and swimming.
- It became a model of Federal-state cooperation.
- The Federal Government set up a revolving fund which paid for up to 75 percent of water infrastructure projects.
- Countless wastewater treatment facilities and miles of pipelines were constructed, many of which replaced systems built in the 19th Century.
- It paved the way for the Clean Air Act and other environmental measures.