

## SECTION 2

# Environmental Policies in the United States

Many people in the United States have demonstrated a concern about environmental problems. In both local and national elections in the United States, candidates often talk about environmental issues in their campaigns. Each year, millions of dollars are donated to environmental causes by U.S. citizens and businesses, and billions of federal tax dollars are spent to uphold environmental policies and to manage resources. In recent decades, the United States has reduced many types of pollution and improved water quality in many places. But the United States is still struggling to use its resources in a sustainable way and to preserve its unique ecosystems.

## History of U.S. Environmental Policy

During the 1800s, people in the United States made use of the country's vast resources. Prairies were turned into cropland, ancient forests were cut down, and several species of animals were hunted to extinction. By the 1900s, citizens began to realize the consequences of these actions, and the citizens' attitudes started to change. Leaders such as President Theodore Roosevelt and conservationist John Muir, shown in **Figure 4**, called for increased protection and management of the nation's resources. Many national forests and parks, and agencies to manage them, were established around the early 1900s.

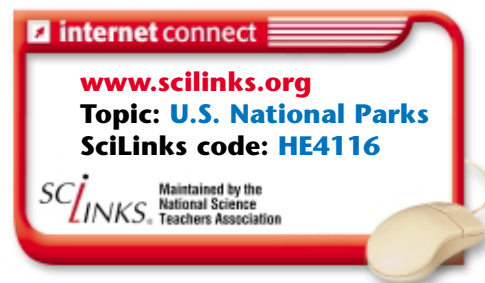


## Objectives

- ▶ Describe two major developments in U.S. environmental history.
- ▶ Give examples of three federal agencies that have environmental responsibilities.
- ▶ Explain the purpose of Environmental Impact Statements.
- ▶ Give an example of how citizens can affect environmental policy at each level of government—local, state, and national.
- ▶ Evaluate the media as a source of information about the environment.

## Key Terms

**Environmental Impact Statement**  
**lobbying**



**Figure 4** ▶ In the late 1800s and early 1900s, President Theodore Roosevelt (on left) and naturalist John Muir (on right) were leaders in the conservation of natural areas. They are shown here at Yosemite National Park, one of the first national parks.

## Connection to Law

**Inherited Laws** In parts of the United States that were previously under the control of European countries, some of the old laws regarding property and land use are still in effect. In Texas and California, many provisions of Spanish land law still apply to the states' water sources. Most rivers and creeks in these states are public property. Also, Texas has ownership of coastal areas stretching 10.4 mi from its shores. This gives Texas the ownership of many offshore oil deposits. Other coastal states own only 3 mi, as established by English common law in those states.

**Environmental Agencies and Laws** Throughout the 1900s, U.S. citizens became more aware of environmental problems. Widespread crop disasters in the 1930s showed the country that poor farming practices were causing soil erosion and poverty. Policies to encourage soil conservation were adopted. People objected to living near smelly garbage dumps, so research on better methods of waste disposal began. The public began to complain about pollution. The first Earth Day, celebrated around the world in 1970, was a sign of widespread environmental awareness. In the same year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created.

U.S. lawmakers have created many policies and federal agencies to manage environmental affairs, as shown in **Table 3**. For example, the EPA enforces the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. These acts set standards for acceptable levels of pollutants in air and water. The EPA uses regulations and economic incentives to encourage individuals and businesses to meet these standards. Many of these laws continue to cause debate among citizens. Some citizens debate whether economic and personal freedoms are equal to long-term social interests. Some debate whether policies are based on science or on political trends. Meanwhile, many citizens are equally concerned about international politics, migration, and trade.

**Table 3** ▼

U.S. Federal Agencies and Their Environmental Responsibilities	
Department or Agency	Responsibilities
<b>Environmental Protection Agency</b>	enforces National Environmental Policy Act; Clean Water Act; Clean Air Act; Solid Waste Disposal Act; Superfund; Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Control Act; Waste Reduction Act; Toxic Substances Control Act
<b>Department of the Interior</b>	enforces Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (managed across several agencies)
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	enforces Endangered Species Act, National Wildlife Refuge System Act, Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Species Conservation Act, Fish and Wildlife Improvement Act, Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act
Bureau of Land Management	enforces Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Taylor Grazing Act
National Parks Service	manages national parks
Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement	enforces Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act
<b>Department of Agriculture</b>	enforces Soil and Water Conservation Act, National Forests Management Act
<b>Department of Commerce</b>	
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	monitors international atmosphere, climate, and oceans
National Marine Fisheries Service	enforces Marine Mammal Protection Act
<b>Nuclear Regulatory Commission</b>	regulates nuclear power stations and nuclear waste
<b>Department of Energy</b>	enforces National Energy Act, Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act



**Environmental Impact Statements** Most government agencies are required to file an **Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)** for any proposed project or policy that would have a significant effect on the environment. Proposals for the construction of dams, highways, airports, and other projects that the federal government controls or funds must be evaluated with an EIS.

An EIS states the need for a project, the project's impact on the environment, and how any negative impact can be minimized. The public can comment on an EIS. For example, if a new dam is proposed, scientists and citizens may comment on any problems they foresee. Although public comment on an EIS rarely stops a project, the feedback may cause changes in the project's plans.

Federal agencies may also conduct an EIS when they plan changes in the regulation of public resources. Usually, several alternative actions are evaluated. For example, an EIS was conducted in the 1980s to evaluate alternative ways to release water from Glen Canyon Dam. Federal agencies were looking for ways to restore natural conditions downstream in the Grand Canyon, shown in **Figure 5**.

**Unfunded Mandates and Economic Impacts** Some limits have been placed on federal government's power to pass environmental laws. In 1995, Congress passed a law to prevent *unfunded mandates*, which are federal regulations that do not provide funds for state or local governments to implement the regulations. The federal government must now provide funding for any new laws that will cost more than 50 million dollars to implement. Congress can no longer pass laws such as the Clean Water Act, which requires local communities to conduct their own tests of public water supplies. Another limit being placed on many federal agencies requires the agencies to evaluate both the economic and environmental impacts of their policies.

**Figure 5** ▶ The Grand Canyon ecosystem was changed when the Glen Canyon Dam was built upstream in 1962. An Environmental Impact Statement in the 1980s evaluated alternative ways to operate the dam.



**U.S. Public Lands** Twenty-eight percent of the area of the United States is publicly owned. This means that local, state, or federal governments hold the land in the public interest. Most of this public land is federally controlled and is in the western states. 80 percent of Nevada is publicly owned, and more than 60 percent of Alaska, Utah, and Idaho are publicly owned.



## FIELD ACTIVITY

**Local Policies** Use newspapers, TV, or the Internet to find out about a local environmental issue or policy that is currently being debated. Write a short newspaper article about this issue. Make sure to describe the problem, give some factual information, and state both sides of the debate or argument. Complete the article with your own opinion about what should be done. Write the article in your *EcoLog*. Make sure to consider what individuals should do as well as what the government, businesses, and the legal system should do. You might want to send the article to your school newspaper or to a local newspaper for publication.

**Figure 6** ► Many environmental decisions are made at the local level. Citizens can participate in local government at public meetings (below). Some communities set aside local wildlife habitat and green spaces, such as the Barton Creek Greenbelt in Austin, Texas (right).



## Influencing Environmental Policy

You can have more influence on environmental policy than you may realize. For example, as a citizen, you can contact your elected representatives to tell them your opinion on issues. There are also many other ways that consumers, businesses, the media, and organizations can influence policy at all levels of government.

Many laws related to the environment are created at the national level. However, there are also many state and local laws that affect the environment. It is easier for an individual to influence policy at the local level than at the national level. Local government is more responsive to citizen input than state or federal government is. It is also usually easier for citizens to organize and contact their representatives at the local level.

**Local Governments** Local governments and planning boards make many decisions for their communities. City councils and governmental agencies hold public meetings in which citizens may participate, such as the meeting shown in **Figure 6**. Local governments can decide how land may be used and developed, and where businesses and housing may be located. Local governments and agencies also create plans for public facilities, for waste disposal and recycling, and for many other facets of local life.

One common problem with local environmental planning is that communities often do not coordinate planning with each other. For example, your community may try to plan for clean air or water, but a neighboring community may allow development that creates pollution in your area. On the other hand, sometimes several local communities work together. For example, towns along the Hudson River in New York are cooperating to provide a “greenway” of natural areas for public use that stretch hundreds of miles along the river.



**State Governments** Environmental policy is also strongly influenced at the state level. The federal government passes laws that set environmental standards, but often these laws are minimum standards. Individual states are usually free to create laws that set higher standards. California's vehicle emission standards are higher than the federal standards because that state wants to control its problems with air pollution caused by traffic. States also have a lot of independent control over how to implement laws and manage public resources. For example, Ohio's Department of Natural Resources has used the state's endangered plant law to acquire habitats and to educate the public about the state's 350 endangered plant species. Many Ohio citizens voluntarily contribute to these conservation efforts as part of their income tax payments.

**Lobbying** Lawmakers are heavily influenced by lobbying on many sides of issues. **Lobbying** is an organized attempt to influence the decisions of lawmakers. Both environmental and industry groups hire lobbyists to provide information to lawmakers and urge them to vote a certain way. One way to influence policy is to support an organization that lobbies for the policies that you agree with.

**The Media and Sources of Information** The media, especially television news, as shown in **Figure 7**, is the main source of information about environmental topics for most of us. Popular TV, radio, and newspapers tell us, for example, when Congress is debating about oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or when our local government is planning to build a new sewage plant. However, media reports are usually brief and leave out information.

If you want to understand environmental problems, you will want to find information from sources other than popular media. Many other sources are available, and you should evaluate all sources for bias and accuracy. Scientists and others who are familiar with environmental issues produce reports, magazines, and Web sites that contain in-depth information. Local organizations hold public meetings and produce newsletters. And through the Internet, you can get first-hand information from people all over the world.



**Figure 7** ▶ A news broadcast may be the only way that many people learn about an environmental problem. From what other sources can people get information?

## SECTION 2 Review

1. **Describe** two major developments in U.S. environmental history from each of the past two centuries.
2. **Give examples** of at least three federal agencies with environmental responsibilities.
3. **Explain** the purpose of Environmental Impact Statements. In what ways are citizens allowed to respond to an Environmental Impact Statement?

### CRITICAL THINKING

4. **Relating Concepts** Describe three environmental issues that are important to people in your community.
5. **Expressing Viewpoints** Read about the ways of influencing environmental policy. Explain which of these ways you think is most effective. **READING SKILLS**
6. **Evaluating Information** Write a paragraph that evaluates an environmental news story from a newspaper, the radio, or TV. **WRITING SKILLS**