

A Healthy and Sustainable Environment – Background

January 4, 2022



Top Line

1. The environment is a major concern for Americans
2. The US has made major progress on our environment over time, and governmental policies have helped
3. However, the environment remains a serious issue in the US

America's environment needs work, but we have shown that we can make progress if we choose to. We should aim for responsible environmental policies that protect the environment and the economy.

Backup

1. The environment is a major concern for Americans

- An April 2021 Gallup poll shows that a solid majority of Americans are concerned about environmental issues, including clean air and water and climate change.
(1)

Americans' Level of Concern About Environmental Problems

	A Great Deal	A Fair Amount	Total Concerned
Pollution of Rivers, Lakes and Reservoirs	53%	30%	83%
Pollution of Drinking Water	56%	24%	80%
Air Pollution	41%	32%	73%
Loss of tropical Rain Forests	45%	27%	72%
Extinction of plant and animal species	40%	30%	70%
Global warming/climate change	43%	22%	65%

Source: Gallup, April 19, 2021 - <https://news.gallup.com/poll/347735/water-pollution-remains-top-environmental-concern.aspx>

- A Pew survey in June 2020 found that a solid majority of Americans support a range of actions to address climate change. (2)

Americans' support for climate initiatives:

	Total	Dem	Rep
Planting about a trillion trees to absorb climate emissions	90%	92%	88%
Providing a tax credit to business for developing carbon capture/storage	84%	90%	78%
Tougher restrictions on power plant emissions	80%	93%	64%
Prioritize developing alternative energy sources	79%	91%	65%
Taxing corporations based on their carbon emissions	73%	89%	55%
Tougher fuel efficiency standards for cars	71%	86%	52%

Source: Pew Research, June 23, 2020, Two-Thirds of Americans Think Government Should Do More on Climate, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/23/two-thirds-of-americans-think-government-should-do-more-on-climate/>

- i. Although support is lower among Republicans than Democrats, a majority of Republicans support these actions.
- ii. That same Pew survey found that **65% of Americans believe the government should be doing more to reduce the effects of climate change.**

2. The US has made major progress on environmental issues over time, and governmental policies have helped

- a. The Environmental Protection Agency reports on air quality trends using measurements from monitors located across the country. (3)
 - Air quality based on concentrations of the common pollutants has improved nationally since 1980.
 - Between 1980 and 2020, Carbon Monoxide levels declined by 81%, Lead by 98%, and Sulfur Dioxide by 94%.
 - Fine particulate matter levels (PM2.5) have declined by 30% between 2000 and 2020. (PM2.5 is a commonly reported measure of particulate pollution and refers to particles less than 2.5 microns in diameter, which are a concern because they can penetrate deep into the lungs and cause damage).
- b. The Environmental Protection Agency was established by Congress in 1970, based on recommendations from President Nixon.

- The EPA was charged with doing research on pollutants, monitoring pollution levels, and setting standards for air and water pollution. (8)
 - Accomplishments during its 50 years include: (8)
 - i. Banning the use of DDT
 - ii. Cleaning up toxic waste sites
 - iii. Banning the use of lead in paint
 - iv. Banning chemical dumping in the ocean
 - v. Banning cancer-causing pesticides, including heptachlor and chlordane. Before this ban, medical studies revealed that “virtually every person in the U.S. had residue of the chemical in their bodies, including unborn babies.”
 - vi. Protecting the ozone layer (in concert with other countries) by banning the use of fluorocarbon gases
 - vii. Phasing out leaded gasoline
 - viii. Cleaner air and water
- c. Although there are legitimate concerns about whether environmental regulations are worth their associated costs, most Americans believe the tradeoff is worth it (9):
- In 2019, **63% of Americans say “stricter environmental laws and regulations are worth the cost”**. Only 30% say “stricter environmental laws hurt the economy.”
 - 81% of Democrats and 45% of Republicans say environmental regulations are worth the cost.

3. However, despite the progress over the past 50 years, the environment remains a serious issue in the US

a. Pollution is responsible for almost 200,000 deaths per year in the US

- Pollution and Health metrics reported by the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution shows the US experienced an estimated 196,930 deaths from pollution in 2017. (4)
 - o This report draws its data from the Institute for Health Metric’s (IHME’s) 2017 Global Burden of Disease Study.
 - o US deaths from pollution include 107,506 deaths from air pollution, 1,628 deaths from water pollution, 59,536 deaths from occupational pollution, and 28,260 deaths from exposure to lead.

b. The environment in the US is also less healthy than in most other large, advanced countries. (See Appendix 1)

- The Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy reports scores for a number of environmental categories for most countries in the world. (3)
- The Yale Center measures environmental performance in 32 categories, including air, water, airborne particulates, sanitation, and waste management.
- The scores for each of the categories are combined into an overall “Environmental Performance Index Score”.
- **Among the 17 large, advanced countries, the US ranks 8th in water quality, 14th in air quality, and 15th in overall environmental performance.**

c. The Trump Administration has severely weakened our environmental protections:

- Brookings reports that the Trump Administration (5):
 - i. “...has replaced the Clean Power Plan, redefined critical terms under the Endangered Species Act, lifted oil and natural gas extraction bans, weakened the Coal Ash Rule, which regulates the disposal of toxic coal waste, and revised Mercury and Air Toxic Standards—just to name a few”
 - ii. Removed several bodies of water from the protection of the Clean Water Act.
 - iii. Weakened protections against toxic chemicals, including emissions of mercury and rules that reduced the use of Chlorpyrifos, a pesticide which has been found to impair child brain development and damage adults’ cognitive function.
- Yale’s Climate Connections program states that **the Trump Administration is likely to be considered “the most anti-climate, anti-science, and anti-environment” in US history.** (6)
- Yale identifies five broad areas in which the Trump Administration has weakened environmental protections (6):
 - i. Abandoning the Paris Climate Accord
 - ii. Weakening fuel efficiency standards
 - iii. Replacing the Clean Power Plan with new rules that eliminate carbon dioxide reduction requirements
 - iv. Preventing the EPA from using scientific research that includes confidential information (many health-related studies rely on confidential data from individuals). These restrictions significantly reduce the amount of research that can be used in environmental decisions.
 - v. Weakening regulation of fine particulate matter, which is a major cause of lung damage in people.

More Information

1. US Environmental Protection Agency, “EPA’s Report on the Environment”, October 2021, <https://www.epa.gov/report-environment>
2. Brookings – The Trump Administration’s major environmental deregulations – December 15, 2020 - <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/12/15/the-trump-administrations-major-environmental-deregulations/>.
3. Yale Climate Connections – “Most Trump environmental rollbacks will take years to be reversed”, June 3, 2020 - <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2020/06/most-trump-environmental-rollbacks-will-take-years-to-be-reversed/>. (lists areas in which the Trump Administration has weakened environmental protections).
4. Brookings – “How the US can return to credible climate leadership”, March 1, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/us-action-is-the-lynchpin-for-successful-international-climate-policy-in-2021/>

Sources

1. Gallup, April 19, 2021 - <https://news.gallup.com/poll/347735/water-pollution-remains-top-environmental-concern.aspx>Source 2
2. Pew Research, June 23, 2020, Two-Thirds of Americans Think Government Should Do More on Climate, <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/23/two-thirds-of-americans-think-government-should-do-more-on-climate/>
3. US Environmental Protection Agency, Air Quality National Summary, <https://www.epa.gov/air-trends/air-quality-national-summary>
4. Global Alliance on Health and Pollution, December 2019, https://gahp.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/PollutionandHealthMetrics-final-12_18_2019.pdf
5. Brookings – The Trump Administration’s major environmental deregulations – December 15, 2020 - <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/12/15/the-trump-administrations-major-environmental-deregulations/>.
6. Yale Climate Connections – “Most Trump environmental rollbacks will take years to be reversed”, June 3, 2020 -

<https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2020/06/most-trump-environmental-rollbacks-will-take-years-to-be-reversed/>.

7. Brookings – “How the US can return to credible climate leadership”, March 1, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/us-action-is-the-lynchpin-for-successful-international-climate-policy-in-2021/>
8. EPA Website, Milestones - <https://www.epa.gov/history/milestones-epa-and-environmental-history>
9. Pew Research, February 7, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/07/more-republicans-say-stricter-environmental-regulations-are-worth-the-cost/>

Appendix 1 - Environmental Health by Country

See note on metrics and source below

Country	Environmental Performance Index Score	Air Quality	Drinking Water	Rank among 17 large advanced		
				Environmental Performance Index Score	Air Quality	Drinking Water
Switzerland	81.5	90.6	100	1	4	1
United Kingdom	81.3	84.7	100	2	7	1
France	80	88.1	93.6	3	5	9
Austria	79.6	81.3	100	4	10	1
Sweden	78.7	98.2	97.7	5	1	6
Germany	77.2	81.1	98.4	6	11	5
Netherlands	75.3	82.4	100	7	9	1
Japan	75.1	85.9	91.6	8	6	12
Australia	74.9	98.2	81	9	1	16
Spain	74.3	80.2	94.6	10	13	8
Belgium	73.3	80.7	92.9	11	12	11
Italy	71	75.9	97.6	14	15	7
Canada	71	94.8	90.8	12	3	13
Czechia	71	58.8	65	13	17	17
United States	69.3	84.2	89.2	15	8	14
Korea (Republic of)	66.5	71.1	84.4	16	16	15
Israel	65.8	76.5	93.6	17	14	9

Source: Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy - <https://epi.yale.edu/epi->

Environmental Performance Index - includes 32 metrics encompassing air and water quality, climate change, and biodiversity.

Air Quality - measures the direct impacts of air pollution on human health in each country. It consists of three indicators: PM2.5 exposure, household solid fuels, and ozone exposure.

Drinking Water - based on number of age-standardized disability-adjusted life-years lost per 100,000