

Clearing the Air

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By Melanie Lenart

When the first Earth Day took place on April 22, 1970, pollution clouded and clogged the American landscape. Black billows of smoke erupted from factories and trucks. Sewage and chemicals drained directly into many of the nation's rivers.

As kid growing up on the South Side of Chicago at the time, I joined in taking dares to dangle from a rope over the toxic stew of the neighborhood waterway, the Cal Sag Canal. We had heard that if we dipped our toes in the water, they would dissolve from all the chemicals.

An urban myth? No doubt. Yet not so far-fetched as it sounds today, as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. In 1969, a coating of oil and chemicals caused Cleveland's Cuyahoga River to burst into flames. The image of water on fire burned into the American consciousness as a rallying cry for the first Earth Day.

Months after that April day of nationwide rallies, the government created the Environmental Protection Agency. Congress gave it some teeth with The Clean Air Act of 1970. Within a few more years, the Clean Water Act joined the pantheon of U.S. pollution control laws.

It wasn't easy to get these acts into place, despite the public support demonstrated by Earth Day and other activities. Companies and utilities complained about how expensive it would be to clear the air and clean the water.

"Pollution Solutions Called Expensive." "Pollution Fight to Cost \$105 Billion." "Pollution Control Will Be Costly to Oil Firms." These are all headlines from the early 1970s.

Sound familiar? We're hearing the same refrain as the government readies its response to recent legal actions declaring carbon dioxide a pollutant.

Some companies protest that such regulations will cost too much. They appeal to every American's concern about our current weak economy, and ask us to put up with pollution and the problems it creates.

Companies didn't want to pay for the pollution controls required when the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act first passed. But the economy took the cleanup in stride. The economic recession of the mid-1970s related mainly to escalating prices of imported oil, not to regulating air and water pollution. Some forms of pollution control, such as energy conservation, even ended up saving money.

They paid off in other ways, too.

By the time I finished college in the mid-1980s, that canal near my childhood home was clean enough to fish in. They said you could even eat the fish.

It wasn't cheap to clean up the water. But the benefits outweighed the cost. It won't be cheap to clean the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases out of the air. But, again, the benefits will outweigh the cost.

Carbon dioxide emissions from industry and cars require regulation under the Clean Air Act because they are associated with warming temperatures, the Supreme Court concluded in 2007 after hearing evidence compiled in part by University of Arizona faculty. Late last year, the EPA reached its own conclusion that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases threaten human health and welfare.

So, while the costs of cleaning up carbon dioxide pollution are measured in dollars, the savings are measured in lives.

Improvements in quality of life also factor in. Keeping some of the heat-trapping carbon dioxide out of the air will keep city air cleaner in the long run, because high temperatures boost smog formation.

This air pollution control will even help clean rivers and coastal areas, because high water temperatures push out oxygen, allowing algae to take over where fish once swam. Cooler, oxygenated waters allow fish to thrive.

Decades from now, maybe we'll look back at the changes that followed the 40th anniversary of Earth Day and reminisce about how the Clean Air Act and the money dedicated to pollution control helped make this country a better place to live and breathe, and swim and eat.

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