

# The Clean Air Act

In the United States, clean air has become something many of us take for granted. We expect the air we breathe to be healthy, to not make us sick, and to have as few pollutants as possible. That hasn't always been the case. Air is a mix of several different gases (mostly nitrogen and oxygen), water vapor, and particles like dust. But with the onset of industrialization, humans started adding other compounds and particles to the air, some of which had very harmful consequences. Thankfully, a series of acts and laws has done wonders to protect the air for humans, plants, animals, and the overall environment.

*Industrialization* refers to the period of time in American history when we saw a dramatic increase in manufacturing. After the end of the Civil War in 1865, many new machines were invented that made the manufacture of goods faster, easier, and cheaper. This industrialization encouraged more people to live in cities and take jobs based on production rather than agriculture. With the help of the railroad, goods could be transported across the country in a short period of time. And with the invention and spread of the automobile in the late 1800s, people were able to move with ease as well. Industrialization changed our country into the modern society we know today.

Industrialization wasn't without its downfalls, however. With the boom in manufacturing, factories, and travel, pollution also began to increase. Our still-young country had no laws in place to protect air quality. Before long, polluted air wasn't just a nuisance—it was a health risk. In 1948, over 7,000 people became sick when dense smog covered the town of Donora, Pennsylvania. The smog was from industrial factories and was full of harmful chemicals.

By the 1950s, Americans started expressing more concern about environmental health. People began pressuring the government to enact laws to ensure that the air and water would not be polluted. In 1955, Congress passed the Air Pollution Control Act,



Industrialization helped our country grow, but damaged air quality and helped create smog.

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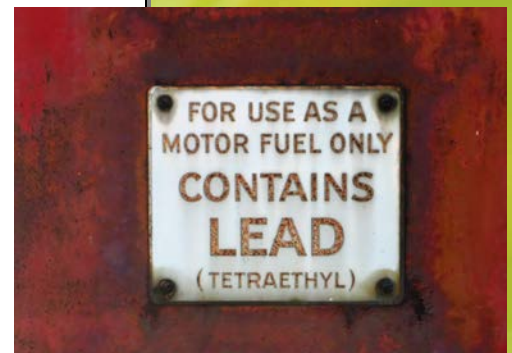
the first act meant to protect the air. The Air Pollution Control Act allocated money to study the impacts of air pollution. This act was a good first step in raising awareness of air pollution; unfortunately, the act did nothing to actually limit the amount of hazardous pollutants that factories released into the air.

Additional Clean Air Acts were passed in 1963 and 1967. These acts called for more research into the problem of air pollution and allowed for laws to ban the transportation of some hazardous pollutants on the interstate highways. As with the earlier act, these acts were good starting points, but still did not offer much in the way of enforcement. Power plants, factories, and automobile makers had no limits on the amounts of pollutants they could release into the air.

This all changed when the Clean Air Act of 1970 was passed. This act finally gave the government the power to control pollution sources. The act identified six harmful pollutants, including carbon monoxide and lead. New limits were set, and anyone who did not obey those limits was subject to serious penalties. Leaded gas, which introduced harmful toxins into the air, was outlawed. Emission levels were also set for cars and factories.

The Clean Air Act of 1970 ushered in a new era of environmental awareness. With it, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created. After the Clean Air Act of 1970, the public and the government began to work together, especially in urban areas, to improve air health. The Clean Air Act has had several amendments over the years, but many of the laws are the same as when they were passed in 1970.

It's important to note that not all countries enjoy the same quality of air as the United States. Some countries, like China, are still undergoing industrialization. Their governments and citizens are dealing with the same issues that the United States began to confront decades ago. Hopefully, all countries will enact laws to protect air quality and keep the air clean.



The Clean Air Act of 1970 phased out lead in gasoline. Lead causes air pollution and health problems.