

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

# Thirty Years of Remarkable Progress and Fundamental Change

by W. Michael McCabe

**A**s we celebrate the 30th anniversary of Earth Day on April 22 and the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in December, Americans have much to be proud of. We've come a long way in our journey as world pioneers of environmental protection.

During the 1970s public demands for cleaner air and water, safer food and the responsible disposal of wastes led Congress to enact a series of environmental laws that gave the American people a powerful set of tools to achieve the nation's environmental goals.

The highlights of our 30-year report card would confirm that our nation's environment is far cleaner

and safer today, despite enormous growth in our population and economy. Millions of Americans in dozens of cities are breathing cleaner air that meets public health standards. We no longer have rivers so polluted they burst into flames, and almost every American gets

drinking water that meets all health-based standards. We are cleaning up hazardous waste sites faster than ever before and helping to revitalize our urban communities through our brownfields redevelopment efforts.

These accomplishments have been hard fought and hard won. At various times over the past three decades, vested interests have sought to derail and rollback the significant advances made to protect public health and the environment. The foundation of public support built over the years, however, has proven immovable, and the rallying cry of opponents to strong protections—that environmental protection costs jobs and economic prosperity—has been thoroughly discredited in the wake of the strongest economic performance in our nation's history.

To its credit, American industry has proven it can meet the challenge of producing goods and services with less pollution and fewer natural resources and grow stronger and more efficient in the process. Not only has meeting the environmental challenge made American industry more competitive, it has spawned a \$180 billion per year

industry built on innovation and new technologies, and now employs 1.3 million U.S. workers.

## New Ways of Thinking at EPA

In the wake of this remarkable success story, EPA has changed as we have learned more about the causes and impacts of pollution. Under the unprecedented continuity of leadership provided by Administrator Carol Browner, new ways of thinking about the causes of pollution, and new approaches to controlling them, are reshaping EPA and transforming the organizational culture that marked our first two decades. Non-traditional thinking is changing—and strengthening—our

relationships with regulated businesses, state and local governments and the American public as a whole.

It is a source of national pride that the United States was the first country to enact comprehensive national laws to protect virtually every aspect

of environmental quality. And at first those laws were the only mechanism available for the purpose. This virtually complete reliance on a set of prescriptive, nationally-uniform laws set the tone for much of the 1970s and 1980s: a federal agency as the locus of government power, state and local agencies as the sometimes unwilling implementors of federal dictates, private businesses as legal adversaries and reluctant compliers and the American public as interested bystanders, watching for results but relatively uninvolved in the action.

In the 1990s all this began to change in significant ways, and for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the new generation of political leadership with strong state experiences—appointed by President Clinton and Vice President Gore. Because of the limitations and costs associated with prescriptive, nationwide controls, we looked for a broader array of tools to do the job. We began to see our job differently. Similarly, many private businesses began to realize that their

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responsibilities went beyond mere compliance with environmental law. State governments began to be more than conduits for federal policy and began developing unique environmental expertise that could serve their communities in unique ways. The relationship between EPA and the States with their expanded capacity became more cooperative and collaborative.

As a result of this new thinking, EPA, state and local agencies and private businesses now are developing together new, more effective and less costly ways of achieving environmental goals. We are working together to test those ideas and refine them. We are providing the American people with the information they need to better understand their local environment, and act to better protect it. In short, in the 1990s the “us vs. them” thinking that characterized EPA’s first two decades broadened to include a spirit of innovative thinking and partnership that promises to achieve even greater environmental benefits.

There is no doubt that EPA today is a much different agency than it was 20 or 30 years ago. The innovative thinking of the past several years is changing EPA at its core, not at the margins. These changes are readily apparent in the Agency’s daily operations, and they already are leading to measurable improvements in environmental quality. Today the environmental protection system in this country is not only different than it was in the past, it is more constructive, less adversarial, more participatory and far healthier and stronger.

The results of innovation at the Agency are having a dramatic impact. Environmental information is being transformed into one of our most powerful tools for protecting the environment. Information is helping communities make decisions and choices that reduce environmental risk. Our national Superfund program for cleaning up dangerously contaminated waste sites is operating far more quickly, and at less cost, than ever in the past. In conjunction with state voluntary cleanup programs, hundreds of other contaminated “brownfield” sites, principally in urban areas, have been cleaned up for redevelopment through a unique, broadly participatory program. The Agency’s working relationship with the business community has improved and is more productive. We have included all stakeholders earlier and more extensively

as we propose regulations, and we are turning to market-based trading programs to reduce the costs of controlling pollution. New kinds of flexibility, like in permitting requirements, have been tested under Project XL. EPA’s traditional tough enforcement of environmental laws has been augmented by several new mechanisms that assist businesses in their compliance efforts by providing more information in more accessible, understandable formats. And EPA is developing a new

“Performance Track” program to recognize and reward businesses that show leadership by going beyond the requirements of environmental laws.

More than ever before, EPA is tailoring its programs to meet the unique circumstances of specific sources and receptors of risk. A new children’s program is bringing together a variety of activities within and outside EPA to better protect America’s children. And a new program has been initiated to augment traditional regulatory requirements for specific industries with ambitious, voluntary commitments to reduce pollution still further.

### The Expansion of the State Role

Among the greatest milestones of the past three decades is the enormous capacity States have developed in providing effective environmental protection for their residents. Five years ago, in recognition of the critical role States have come to play in environmental protection, EPA joined with our state partners to establish the National Environmental Performance Partnership System (NEPPS). NEPPS promotes a strategic approach to environmental protection which is driven by the environmental priorities of both federal and state government, and which targets our mutual efforts toward the best results. Our traditional stovepipe approach to conducting the business of environmental protection is being replaced gradually with a more flexible, collaborative framework based on mutual respect and trust. NEPPS gives participating States and the EPA regional offices flexibility in designing partnerships that best respond to their individual environmental conditions and protection priorities, and that efficiently allocate and leverage limited resources.

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EPA remains committed to the NEPPS framework, especially the increased use of outcome-oriented environmental performance measures, state self-assessment of programs, joint planning and priority-setting, performance partnership agreements and public involvement. Our goals for the coming year are to jointly improve the quality and usefulness of performance partnership agreements and grants, act quickly on burden reduction opportunities for States and continue efforts to enhance the use of outcome-oriented performance measures.

As the Environmental Protection Agency nears its 30th Anniversary, we are an organization in transition. New ways of thinking have been developed and tested while EPA continues to fulfill its more traditional responsibilities mandated by law. This process—the expansion and improvement of a complicated system which at the same time must continue to operate effectively—is not unlike the renovation of a major airport: business cannot be interrupted, and public safety must remain

assured, despite the noise and upheaval. EPA's customers—particularly state and local governments and regulated businesses—no doubt have experienced the frustration that necessarily accompanies a work in progress. Sometimes promising new ideas are not as successful as hoped when put into practice and tested, but we learn from our efforts and become better.

Innovative ways of protecting the environment are flourishing at EPA; in States, towns and cities; and in business. Most important, innovation is leading to real improvements in environmental quality, and it is preparing EPA, in concert with our state partners, to respond more effectively to the environmental challenges of the next century. America's environmental protection system—and the health of our people and ecosystems—will continue this record of remarkable progress.

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*W. Michael McCabe is Acting Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.*

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