

04.2021

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

THE FIGHT FOR CLEAN AIR

Air pollution causes 7 million
premature deaths a year.
But we can fix it.



HOW THE U.S. CLEARED THE AIR

50 YEARS AGO THE CLEAN AIR ACT FOLLOWED THE SCIENCE—AND BECAME A MODEL FOR THE WORLD.

LONGTIME RESIDENTS of Los Angeles remember the days when the mountains around the city were all but invisible. Today they're a central part of its craggy beauty.

It's not just Southern California. **Thanks to the Clean Air Act of 1970, air across the United States has gotten 77 percent cleaner**—even as the population, the economy, and the number of cars on the road have grown. That improvement has lengthened millions of lives, saved trillions of dollars, and made the country a global air pollution success story.

The landmark law was a bipartisan achievement, **winning unanimous Senate approval and passing the House of Representatives with just one "no" vote.**

Its success stems from its focus on scientific evidence, accountability, and ambitious, health-based goals.

"The Clean Air Act remains the most powerful public health law enacted in the 20th century in the United States," said Paul Billings of the American Lung Association.

Among its provisions were a requirement that carmakers reduce tailpipe pollution by 90 percent. Today's cars are 99 percent cleaner than pre-1970 models. And it all came at a bargain: Researchers have estimated **the law's overall benefits have been more than 40 times as great as its cost.** That success is **a reminder of how capable we are of cleaning up pollution, and of solving problems that seem intractable,** when our political leaders are prepared to act on scientific evidence.

But it's still a work in progress, said Mustafa Santiago Ali, a vice president of the National Wildlife Federation: "I hope we'll come to a point in our history, sometime soon, where not only do we understand the value of [the act], but we're willing to do the hard work of enhancing it." —**BETH GARDINER**



ABOVE

From the Griffith Observatory, you can now reliably get a clear view of the Los Angeles skyline—a dramatic illustration of how much cleaner the city's air has gotten. But it's still among the nation's dirtiest.

MARIO TAMA, GETTY IMAGES

RIGHT

Smog hangs over Los Angeles in 1957. Southern California's air was so unhealthy that parents routinely kept children indoors. The sky often glowed orange. Traffic was a big part of the problem—and it still is.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA/GETTY IMAGES

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Walk, bike, drive an electric car—avoid burning gasoline or diesel.
2. Avoid burning other stuff, especially in cities—wood, charcoal, leaves, trash, fireworks.
3. Protect yourself from bad air: When possible, walk and bike on roads with less traffic.
4. Support leaders who vote for clean energy and tight rules on air pollution.



A CLEANER COUNTRY

Air quality in the United States has improved dramatically since the Clean Air Act was passed in 1970. Concentrations of PM2.5 (hazardous fine particles with diameters under 2.5 micrometers) have decreased broadly, thanks largely to regulations adopted under the landmark law.

PM2.5 air pollution concentration, estimated
(micrograms per cubic meter)



RYAN MORRIS, NGM STAFF
 *POPULATION-WEIGHTED AVERAGE. LONG-TERM ESTIMATES NOT AVAILABLE FOR ALASKA AND HAWAII
 SOURCES: JUN MENG, DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICS AND ATMOSPHERIC SCIENCE, DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY; CHEN, RANDALL V. MARTIN; AARON VAN DONKELAAR; PERRY HYSTAD; MICHAEL BRAUER

