

NONPOINT SOURCE POLLUTION

The Largest Remaining Cause of Water Pollution in the U.S.

Why the Nonpoint Source Program Is Important

Nonpoint source pollution occurs when rain runs off city streets, construction sites, farmlands and suburban lawns, roofs and driveways and washes into lakes, rivers, wetlands, coastal waters, groundwater and the oceans. It is called “nonpoint” source pollution because it does not come from a single source or “point” such as a sewage treatment plant or an industrial discharge pipe. This runoff often contains harmful substances, such as toxic chemicals, pathogens, excess nutrients that stimulate the growth of algae and sediment, which affect drinking water supplies, recreation, fisheries and wildlife. Nonpoint source pollution is the greatest remaining water quality problem faced by our nation.

Pollution from nitrogen and phosphorus – nutrients found in excess in many bodies of water – is widespread and one of the most challenging nonpoint source problems. When nitrogen and phosphorus from agriculture, wastewater discharges, fertilizers, yard and even pet waste is washed into rivers, lakes, streams and other water bodies, it can cause an overgrowth of algae that decreases the oxygen needed by fish and other aquatic organisms to survive. It can also make people sick. Drinking polluted water, direct skin contact or eating contaminated fish can cause serious health problems.

- Nutrient pollution in the Great Lakes resulted in a persistent and harmful algae bloom, which caused a \$37-\$47 million loss in local tourism revenue over two years.
- A single harmful algae bloom in Maine caused a loss of almost \$3 million in shellfish revenues.
- In 2014, the city of Toledo, Ohio, had to shut down its drinking water supply for almost half a million people for three days due to a toxic algae bloom in Lake Erie.
- Sarasota County, Florida, has incurred health costs of up to \$130,000 per year for respiratory illnesses related to algae blooms.

Nonpoint source pollution is also connected to reductions in property values, with losses of up to \$85,000 per property as a result of reduced water clarity.

How the Nonpoint Source Program Works

The need to address nonpoint source pollution was recognized by Congress in 1987 when the Clean Water Act was amended to establish the [Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management Program](#). It assisted state and local efforts to address the problem and encouraged states to implement practices to manage nonpoint source pollution on a watershed-by-watershed basis. Watersheds are areas that drain to a common waterway, such as a stream, lake, estuary, wetland, aquifer or even the ocean; they provide drinking water, support recreation and sustain life. Under Section 319, states, territories and Tribes receive millions of dollars in grants that support watershed projects, technical and financial assistance, education, training, technology transfer and monitoring to assess the success of specific projects that address nonpoint source pollution.

Consequences if the Program Is Eliminated or Inadequately Funded

- People will continue to face health threats from polluted drinking water, poor water quality at bathing beaches and the consumption of contaminated shellfish.

- The pace of progress in reducing water pollution from both urban and rural runoff will be significantly hampered.
- States, tribal and local governments, which largely depend on federal funding to address nonpoint source pollution, will be stymied in their efforts to protect watersheds and restore impaired waters.

Demonstrated Successes

Actions taken under the program have resulted in improvements in 779 watersheds across the country. The following are a few examples among many that highlight the strong state, federal and local partnerships developed in communities across the country to address nonpoint source pollution:

- **The Upper Little Bear River, Utah** – Much of this watershed corridor is used for livestock grazing and crop production, which caused high levels of phosphorus in the river. In addition, engineering modifications to the riverbed caused severe streambank erosion and high amounts of sediment going into the river during storms. The river was unable to fully support aquatic life, including a healthy trout fishery. In 1989, a group of federal, state and local partners established the Little Bear River Steering Committee and developed a watershed plan to address the water pollution problems. Over 15 years, this partnership implemented over 100 water quality improvement projects, including the management of livestock grazing along the river and efforts to stabilize streambanks. It also established successful education and outreach programs and completed several fishery improvement projects. These efforts were made possible by \$1.6 million in grants to the state under Section 319 of the Clean Water Act, and were matched by \$1 million in non-federal and \$1.5 million in additional federal funding. In 2004, Utah removed the Upper Little Bear River from the list of impaired water bodies. It has remained unpolluted and currently supports a healthy fly-fishery.
- **Cuyahoga River, Ohio** – Located in Northeast Ohio, the Cuyahoga River is perhaps best known for catching on fire in 1969, helping to spur the environmental movement in the U.S. By the late 1990s, the Kent Dam on the Middle Cuyahoga River was contributing to poor water quality by causing water flows to stagnate in the dam pool and had become a barrier to fish migration. Water quality in the river was also affected by municipal facility discharges, overflows from combined sewer systems that carry wastewater from homes and businesses and storm drains, failing septic systems and urban runoff. When the state of Ohio decided to remove the dam, it was faced with fierce public resistance due to its historic value. A successful resolution required consideration of complex science and engineering, cultural and archaeological sensitivity, regulatory finesse and public involvement. An independent committee representing a broad range of stakeholders determined that the dam could be successfully modified without destroying its historic character, and a federal, state and local partnership secured more than \$5 million for the project. Today, the Middle Cuyahoga River has been transformed. Oxygen levels in the river have increased while pollutant and bacteria levels have decreased. One portion of the river now supports robust populations of northern hogsucker, greenside darters and rock bass; northern pike, smallmouth and rock bass are large enough to support excellent recreational fishing.

Funding for Categorical Grants: Nonpoint Source Pollution

FY2016 Baseline Budget: \$164.915 million

FY2017 President’s Budget Proposal: \$164.915 million

FY2017 Amount Appropriated: \$164.601 million

FY2018 President’s Budget Proposal: \$0

FY2018 Amount Appropriated: \$169.754 million

FY2019 President's Budget Proposal: \$0
FY2019 Amount Appropriated: \$170.915 million

FY2020 President's Budget Proposal: \$0