

NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT

The United States is rich in natural resources and beauty and, at the same time, home to a modern economy and high standard of living. These features underlie a way of life that is the envy of much of the world. However, they also pose a challenge to the American people and their elected officials—namely, how to balance the need to protect these resources for future generations with the need to use them for current economic growth? Every year, Congress faces this difficult question as it considers various bills related to natural resource and environmental issues that affect the lives of the American people on a daily basis.

Our Work

The Natural Resources and Environment team contributes to these deliberations by providing fact-based analyses on a wide range of issues. We are particularly focused on helping Congress's efforts to

- improve the safety and security of the nation's food supply;
- enhance the farm economy while maintaining stable and affordable food prices;
- manage and protect critical environmental and resources systems in the nation's forests, parks, lands, and waters;
- enhance efforts to restore damaged or depleted ecosystems;
- ensure secure sources of energy for Americans at stable and affordable prices;
- improve and protect the nation's air and water quality and associated critical infrastructure;
- enhance efforts to clean up hazardous wastes;
- provide for safe and secure storage of nuclear wastes;
- prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons;
- oversee the government's nuclear weapons stockpile; and
- address science, technology, and intellectual property rights issues.

In doing this work, our headquarters and field analysts concentrate mainly on the programs of the Departments of Agriculture, Energy, and the Interior; the Environmental Protection Agency; the Nuclear Regulatory Commission; the Army Corps of Engineers; the National Science Foundation; the National Marine Fisheries Service; and the Patent and Trademark Office.

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Accomplishments and Key Projects

Our recent reports and testimonies have helped to frame the challenging and complex choices associated with managing our nation's natural resources and have also identified emerging and equally challenging issues regarding securing the nation's critical infrastructure. For example, our work has resulted in significant improvements to the management of key environmental regions, such as the Great Lakes and the Everglades, and has also demonstrated a greater need to secure our nation's food supply, chemical plants, nuclear power plants, and nuclear weapons labs.

Our work was also instrumental in bringing about the following improvements:

- The Department of Defense has taken action to better manage its efforts to clean-up over 9,000 former defense sites, many of which are contaminated with hazardous and toxic wastes and unexploded ordinances.
- The Departments of State, Energy, and Defense undertook important steps to better coordinate and manage their nuclear nonproliferation activities, such as consolidating duplicative programs.
- The U.S. Forest Service and the Department of the Interior are responding more effectively to wildland fires that consume millions of acres of land and result in catastrophic losses to communities and resources.
- The Environmental Protection Agency is working with states to locate underground storage tanks that pose the greatest potential risk of leaking. Our work has also led to proposed legislation to shore up systemic weaknesses and reduce the risk that these tanks will leak and cause significant environmental and health risks.
- Reductions in the number of many foodborne illnesses following the implementation of more science-based inspection systems by the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Projects recently completed or now under way include studies on

- defending against terrorist attacks on nuclear plants,
- lead in drinking water,
- the overlap of federal food safety programs,
- the proposed Yucca Mountain repository for storing nuclear waste,
- the factors that affect the pricing of gasoline,
- the Fish and Wildlife Service's oversight of endangered species programs,
- the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay,
- U.S. efforts to combat nuclear smuggling,
- the effects of climate change on federal lands, and
- the condition and management of U.S. fisheries.