Clearing the Air

How federal policies address different kinds of pollution

9-12.US2.45 "Examine United States policy on environmental issues."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each environmental problem and circle the policy action taken in response. Write R beside an action that sets a requirement and I beside an action that offers an incentive.

Three Approaches to Cleaner Air

1 In the summer of 1970, a driver entering Los Angeles could see a brown haze over the city. Car exhaust and factory emissions helped create smog that irritated lungs and limited visibility. Earlier air laws had left most decisions to state and local governments, but dirty air did not stop at state borders. Congress strengthened the Clean Air Act in 1970, and President Richard Nixon signed it. The law directed the new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set national air quality standards for common pollutants. States then had to write plans to meet those standards, giving federal and state governments different jobs.

2 Two decades later, lawmakers targeted a different air problem. Sulfur dioxide released by coal-burning power plants contributed to acid rain, which damaged lakes and forests. The 1990 Clean Air Act amendments set a declining national limit on sulfur dioxide emissions from power plants. Under a trading system, a plant needed an allowance for each ton it emitted and could buy or sell allowances. A plant that cut emissions below its allotment could sell unused allowances. This policy kept an overall limit while letting companies choose how to reduce pollution. Sulfur dioxide emissions from power plants fell substantially after the program began.

3 Climate change presents another policy challenge because carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels accumulates in the atmosphere. Rather than imposing a nationwide cap on carbon dioxide, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 expanded federal tax credits for clean electricity and qualifying electric vehicles. These incentives aim to make lower-emission choices less expensive, but they do not require every power plant or driver to switch. Rules can set enforceable limits, while incentives can encourage choices without mandating them. Both approaches involve public costs and benefits: tax credits use federal funds, and pollution controls can cost businesses money, while reduced pollution can protect health and ecosystems.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did Congress take a stronger federal role in air pollution policy in 1970?

2. How did the 1970 Clean Air Act divide responsibility between the EPA and the states?

3. How did the 1990 policy limit sulfur dioxide while giving power plants flexibility?

4. How does the 2022 policy differ from the 1990 sulfur dioxide policy, and what is one limitation of the 2022 approach?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Fertilizer runoff is polluting rivers near farms. In four sentences, propose a federal policy using a requirement or an incentive, explain how it could reduce pollution, connect it to one approach in the passage, and identify one cost or limitation.

ANSWER KEY

Clearing the Air

HIGH SCHOOL · 9-12.US2.45

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each environmental problem and circle the policy action taken in response. Write R beside an action that sets a requirement and I beside an action that offers an incentive. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did Congress take a stronger federal role in air pollution policy in 1970?	**Air pollution crossed state borders, so decisions made only by state and local governments could not fully address it.**
2	How did the 1970 Clean Air Act divide responsibility between the EPA and the states?	**The EPA set national air quality standards, and states wrote plans to meet them.**
3	How did the 1990 policy limit sulfur dioxide while giving power plants flexibility?	**It set a declining national emissions limit and required plants to hold allowances for their emissions. Plants could buy or sell allowances and choose how to cut pollution.**
4	How does the 2022 policy differ from the 1990 sulfur dioxide policy, and what is one limitation of the 2022 approach?	**The 2022 law uses tax credits to encourage lower-emission choices, while the 1990 policy set an emissions limit. The credits do not require every power plant or driver to switch.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would offer federal payments to farms that plant strips of vegetation beside streams. The strips could catch some fertilizer before it reaches rivers. Like the tax credits in the 2022 law, this policy would reward a choice rather than require every farm to act. Taxpayers would fund the payments, and farms that decline the offer might continue to pollute.

Accept proposals that clearly identify a federal requirement or incentive and explain a plausible effect on fertilizer runoff. The connection to the passage must name an approach, and the response must identify a relevant cost or limitation.