



CRS Report for Congress

National Environmental Education Act of 1990: Overview, Implementation, and Issues for Congress

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Summary

The role of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in supporting environmental education has been an ongoing issue. For nearly two decades, EPA has been the primary federal agency responsible for assisting schools in improving the quality of environmental education. The National Environmental Education Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-619) established a program within EPA to award grants for educating elementary and secondary school students and training teachers in environmental subjects, to support fellowships for post-secondary students, and to fund other related activities. The Administration has proposed to eliminate this program each year since FY2003, but Congress has continued its funding. Although the President's FY2008 budget request for EPA did not include any funding for the program, it did include \$1 million for unspecified environmental education activities. Whether those activities would continue certain aspects of the existing program is unclear. As passed by the House, the FY2008 Interior appropriations bill (H.R. 2643, H.Rept. 110-187) would provide \$9 million to continue the existing program, similar to past funding levels. The Senate Appropriations Committee recommended the same amount in reporting its version of the bill (S. 1696, S.Rept. 110-91). The reauthorization of the program also has been an issue, as the original funding authorization expired at the end of FY1996. Legislation to reauthorize EPA's program has not been introduced in the 110th Congress, but two bills (H.R. 3036 and S. 1981) would authorize a new grant program in the Department of Education to expand the federal role in environmental education.

Introduction

The Environmental Education Act of 1970 (P.L. 91-516) established an Office of Environmental Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to award grants for developing environmental curricula and training teachers. Congress moved the office to the newly formed Department of Education in 1979. However, in response to the Reagan Administration's efforts to transfer the federal role in many programs to the

states, Congress eliminated the Office of Environmental Education in 1981. Several years later, the 101st Congress enacted the National Environmental Education Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-619) to renew the federal role in environmental education and reestablish an office of environmental education within EPA. In the law's findings, the 101st Congress stated that existing federal programs to educate the public about environmental problems and train environmental professionals were inadequate at that time and that increasing the federal role in this area was therefore necessary.

P.L. 101-619 authorizes EPA to work with educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, tribal governments, and state and local environmental agencies to educate the public about environmental problems and encourage students to pursue environmental careers. Environmental education involves learning ecological concepts to understand the relation between human behavior and environmental quality, and developing the knowledge and skills to analyze environmental problems and create solutions. The goal of EPA's environmental education program is to increase public knowledge about environmental issues and provide the public with the skills necessary to make informed decisions and take responsible actions to protect the environment. The program supports activities to achieve these goals primarily through the awarding of grants. Since the beginning of the program in FY1992, EPA has awarded grants for environmental education projects in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories for educating elementary and secondary school students, training teachers, purchasing textbooks, developing curricula, and other educational activities.

This report summarizes major provisions of the National Environmental Education Act of 1990, discusses appropriations for programs authorized in that statute, examines the implementation of these programs, and analyzes key issues and relevant legislation.

Appropriations

The original funding authorization for EPA's environmental education program expired at the end of FY1996. However, Congress has continued to fund the program since then without enacting reauthorizing legislation, appropriating around \$9 million annually in recent years. Early in its first session, the 110th Congress completed action on FY2007 appropriations for EPA and many other federal agencies with the enactment of the Revised Continuing Appropriations Resolution for FY2007 (P.L. 110-5, H.J.Res. 20). However, the law did not specify a dollar amount for many individual agency activities, including EPA's environmental education program. P.L. 110-5 generally provided funding at the same level as enacted for FY2006, unless otherwise specified in the law. However, agencies had discretion to determine funding levels for many activities within their statutory accounts, such as EPA's environmental education program.

Absent specific dollar amounts for most programs and activities, P.L. 110-5 required the federal departments and agencies funded in that law to submit their allocations of funding to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees within 30 days of enactment. EPA reported its funding allocations in mid-March in its FY2007 Operating Plan. EPA's plan indicated that the agency allocated \$5.6 million for the environmental education program, \$3.3 million less than the \$8.9 million provided for FY2006. The amount EPA allocated for FY2007 also is lower than what Congress originally considered in the 109th Congress. The House had proposed \$9 million in passing the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for FY2007 (H.R. 5386, H.Rept.

109-465), and the Senate Appropriations Committee had proposed \$7 million in reporting its version of the bill (S.Rept. 109-275).

While funding for the program has continued, the Administration has proposed to eliminate its funding each year since FY2003. The President's FY2008 budget request did not include any funding for the program either, but EPA's budget justification did include \$1 million for unspecified environmental education activities. It is unclear from the agency's justification as to what those activities would entail, and whether those activities would replace or continue a portion of the existing program's functions. In its consideration of appropriations for FY2008, Congress has again opposed the Administration's proposal to terminate the program. The House proposed \$9 million to continue the program in passing the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for FY2008 (H.R. 2643, H.Rept. 110-187) on June 27, 2007. The Senate Appropriations Committee also recommended \$9 million to continue the program in reporting its version of the bill (S. 1696, S.Rept. 110-91) on June 26, 2007.

The Administration has used the environmental education program's performance rating by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the main justification for its recurring proposal to eliminate the program's funding. OMB has repeatedly given the program a "Results Not Demonstrated" rating as part of its annual government-wide assessment of federal programs with its Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART). OMB gave the program the same PART rating again in the President's FY2008 budget request. OMB asserts that the absence of performance metrics for grant activities supported by the environmental education program makes it difficult to determine whether the program is achieving its goal of improving the quality of environmental education.

Opponents of the Administration's proposal to eliminate the program's funding have noted that there are long-standing disagreements among educators about how to evaluate the quality of education, and that the lack of performance metrics for educational activities is not unique to EPA's environmental education program. Such critics have countered OMB's characterization of the program's effectiveness by arguing that grant awards have had a national impact with a small amount of funding relative to EPA's total budget. The activities supported by these grants also have generated significant state and local support. In response, Congress has continued the program's funding each year.

Overview and Implementation

The National Environmental Education Act authorizes EPA to award grants for developing environmental curricula and training teachers, support fellowships to encourage the pursuit of environmental professions, and select individuals for environmental awards. EPA also consults with the National Environmental Education Advisory Council and the Federal Task Force on Environmental Education in conducting the above activities and coordinating its efforts with related federal programs. The act also established a nonprofit foundation to encourage cooperation between the public and private sectors to support environmental education. Each activity is discussed below.¹

¹ For more information, see EPA's website at [<http://www.epa.gov/enviroed>].

Office of Environmental Education. Section 4 of the act directed EPA to establish an “office” of environmental education to implement programs authorized under the act and to coordinate its activities with related federal programs. EPA originally established an Office of Environmental Education within the Office of Public Affairs to perform these functions. The agency has since reorganized these functions into an Environmental Education Division within the Office of Children’s Health Protection and Environmental Education.

Environmental Education and Training Program. EPA developed the Environmental Education and Training Program to train education professionals to develop and teach environmental curricula. Section 5 of the act directs EPA to award an annual grant to a higher educational institution or nonprofit organization to operate the program under a multiple-year agreement. The act requires EPA to reserve 25% of the annual funding for its environmental education program to support the Environmental Education and Training Program. Teachers, administrators, and related staff of educational institutions as well as staff of state and local environmental agencies, tribal governments, and nonprofit organizations are eligible to participate. The University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point has been implementing this training program, under agreement with EPA, since October 2000.²

Environmental Education Grants. The Environmental Education Grant Program supports activities that would educate elementary and secondary school students, train teachers, increase understanding of environmental issues, and accomplish related goals. Educational institutions, state and local agencies, tribal governments, and nonprofit organizations are eligible to apply for these grants. Section 6 of the act requires EPA to reserve 38% of the environmental education program’s annual funding to support these grants. The act limits a single grant to \$250,000, and requires EPA to award 25% of the grants for amounts of \$5,000 or less, to ensure a greater number of grant awards among recipients. In practice, EPA reports that few grant awards exceed \$100,000 and that over 75% of the grants are for less than \$15,000. The act requires each grant recipient to provide at least 25% of a project’s costs in matching funds.

EPA reports that it has awarded \$40.6 million in grants since FY1992 for nearly 3,200 environmental education projects in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories, of which \$2.7 million was awarded with FY2006 funds.³ EPA reports that grant recipients have exceeded matching funds requirements, providing at least \$1 for every \$3 awarded by EPA, underscoring the importance of these activities to school districts and communities. The competition for these grants has been fairly stiff. In recent years, EPA has had the resources to award grants to approximately 30% of those who applied for smaller grants issued by its regional offices, and to less than 10% of those who applied for larger grants issued by its headquarters office.

EPA has decided not to accept new environmental education grant proposals at this time because of reduced and delayed funding in FY2007. Rather, EPA plans to select a limited number of proposals from those received in response to its FY2006 grant solicitation notice. EPA indicates that it will select and fund additional grants with

² For more information, see the University’s website at [<http://www.eetap.org>].

³ For more information, see EPA’s website at [<http://www.epa.gov/enviroed/grants/index.html>].

limited FY2007 funds from the most highly qualified and highly scored proposals that were not funded in the FY2006 cycle. EPA anticipates fewer grant awards in FY2007 because of the reduction in funding for the program. The agency plans to post another grant solicitation notice to receive new grant proposals in the future, if Congress enacts funding for FY2008.⁴

Environmental Fellowships. With authority provided in Section 7 of the act, EPA administers the National Network for Environmental Management Studies to encourage post-secondary students to pursue environmental careers. Students work with an environmental professional at EPA on a specific project or conduct university research under EPA's direction. In recent years, EPA has awarded approximately 40 fellowships annually to students at more than 400 participating universities.

Environmental Education Awards. EPA administers the Presidential Environmental Youth Awards Program to recognize outstanding projects that promote local environmental awareness. Elementary and high school students are eligible to compete annually to receive these awards from the EPA regional offices. The award recipients receive national recognition from the President or Vice President of the United States and the EPA Administrator. Section 8 of the act also created four national awards to recognize outstanding contributions to environmental education and training. EPA announced the first recipients in 1993. The awards commemorate Theodore Roosevelt for teaching, Henry David Thoreau for literature, Rachael Carson for communications media, and Gifford Pinchot for natural resources management.

Environmental Education Advisory Council and Federal Task Force on Environmental Education. EPA established a National Environmental Education Advisory Council and a Federal Task Force on Environmental Education under Section 9 of the act. The council consists of members representing a diverse range of public and private expertise in environmental education and training. The council consults with EPA and reports to Congress periodically on the quality of environmental education, the implementation of the act, and its recommendations to improve environmental education and training. The council's most recent report was released in 2005.⁵ The task force coordinates EPA's environmental education and training activities with related federal programs. EPA chairs the task force, and its members have included representatives from the Departments of Agriculture, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, and Interior, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the National Science Foundation.

National Environmental Education and Training Foundation. The National Environmental Education and Training Foundation encourages cooperation between the public and private sectors to support environmental education and training.⁶ Section 10 of the act established the foundation as a private, nonprofit organization with

⁴ For more information on the status of environmental education grants, see EPA's website at [<http://www.epa.gov/enviroed/grants.html#alert>].

⁵ For the full text of the Council's 2005 report on the quality of environmental education, see EPA's website at [<http://www.epa.gov/enviroed/pdf/reporttocongress2005.pdf>].

⁶ For more information, see the Foundation's website at [<http://www.neefusa.org/index.htm>].

a board of 13 directors responsible for ensuring that its activities adhere to EPA's policies. The foundation operates several priority programs, including those that focus on public health and the environment, "green" business, environmental education at the K-12 level, and weather and the environment.

The foundation also awards competitive challenge grants to encourage innovative activities in environmental education and presents National Environmental Education Achievement Awards to honor outstanding and scientifically accurate environmental education programs. Additionally, the foundation supports annual research projects which examine the public's perception, awareness, and action regarding the environment, pollution control regulations, and personal responsibility. The act requires EPA to reserve 10% of the environmental education program's annual funding to award a noncompetitive grant to help support the foundation's activities.

Issues for Congress and Relevant Legislation

Although Members of Congress have broadly supported the role of the federal government in environmental education on a bipartisan basis, there has been continuing controversy at the local level over its role in the classroom. There appears to be general consensus that educating students in the ecological sciences and examining the potential impacts of human behavior on the environment is appropriate for instruction. However, some critics argue that certain textbooks and curricula misinform students by advocating specific measures to address environmental problems, or by presenting unbalanced or scientifically inaccurate data.

In response, EPA has issued guidelines specifying that the environmental education grants it awards cannot be used for projects that would recommend a specific course of action or advocate a particular viewpoint, and that activities must be based on "objective and scientifically sound information" to be eligible for funding. However, the National Environmental Education Act does not include requirements to insure that activities funded by EPA adhere to these guidelines. Whether to include such requirements in federal statute has been a prominent consideration in past debate over the reauthorization of the act. Legislation to reauthorize funding for EPA's environmental education program was considered, but not enacted, in each Congress from the 104th to the 107th. Reauthorizing legislation has not been introduced in the 110th Congress so far.

Interest in the federal government's role in environmental education also has become broader in conjunction with a desire by some for improved understanding of complex environmental issues affecting human health, sustainability of natural resources, biological diversity, and other societal objectives. The complexity of such issues, and the ability of schools to address them, have motivated some educators to question whether EPA's program can ensure the quality of environmental education, considering its size and funding. Whether EPA or other federal agencies should play a more prominent role in environmental education is a growing issue. In the 110th Congress, at least two bills would expand the federal role in environmental education. As introduced, H.R. 3036 and S. 1981 would authorize \$100 million annually from FY2008 through FY2012 for the Department of Education to award grants that would promote environmental education in elementary and secondary schools. Both bills also would require states to develop plans to improve the "environmental literacy" of elementary and secondary school students, as a condition of receiving certain federal education funds.