



CRS Report for Congress

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

David M. Bearden
Specialist in Environmental Policy
Resources, Science, and Industry Division

Summary

The role of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in environmental education has been an ongoing issue. For nearly two decades, EPA has been the primary federal agency responsible for providing financial assistance to schools to support 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 President has proposed to eliminate this program in his annual budget requests each year since FY2003, and did not include any funding for the program in his FY2009 budget request. In response to strong interest at the state and local level, Congress has continued to fund the program each year, appropriating \$8.9 million for FY2008.

Although Congress has continued to fund the program through the appropriations process, the original funding authorization in the National Environmental Education Act of 1990 expired at the end of FY1996. As reported, H.R. 3036 would reauthorize funding for EPA's environmental education program in FY2009, amend various program elements aimed at training teachers, and expand the federal role in environmental education by authorizing a new grant program within the Department of Education. As introduced, S. 1981 also would create a new role for the Department of Education in supporting environmental education, but would not reauthorize funding for EPA's existing program nor amend any aspects of it.

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 activities authorized in that statute, examines the implementation of these activities, and analyzes key issues and relevant legislation.

Appropriations

The original funding authorization for EPA's environmental education program expired at the end of FY1996. Congress has continued to fund the program since then through the annual appropriations process without enacting reauthorizing legislation. Congress has appropriated approximately \$9 million annually in recent years, with the exception of \$5.6 million in FY2007. Congress returned funding to previous levels in FY2008, appropriating \$8.9 million. Although funding for the program has continued, the President has proposed to eliminate its funding in his annual budget requests each year since FY2003, including his FY2009 budget request.

The President has used the environmental education program's performance rating by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the main justification for his 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 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 President'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

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, part of the Office of the EPA Administrator.

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

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

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

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 generally requires each grant recipient to provide at least 25% of a project's costs in matching funds, but allows EPA the discretion to provide up to full federal funding if the proposed project merits it and cannot be undertaken without a higher rate of federal support. EPA reports that it has awarded nearly \$42 million in grants since FY1992 for more than 3,200 environmental education projects in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories.³

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 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 2005.⁴ The task force coordinates EPA's environmental education and training activities with related federal programs.

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.⁵ Section 10 of the act established the foundation as a private, nonprofit organization with 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

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

⁴ 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>].

⁵ For more information, see the foundation's website at [<http://www.neefusa.org/index.htm>].

health and the environment, “green” business, environmental literacy of secondary school students, 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 an issue.

Interest in the federal government’s role in environmental education has become broader in response to public desire for better 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 or other federal agencies should play a more prominent role in environmental education.

In the 110th Congress, at two bills would address the federal role in environmental education. As reported on July 10, 2008, the No Child Left Inside Act of 2008 (H.R. 3036, H.Rept. 110-754) would reauthorize funding for EPA’s environmental education program in FY2009, amend various program elements aimed at training teachers, and expand the federal role in environmental education by authorizing a new grant program within the Department of Education. This new program would differ from EPA’s existing program by focusing more on the outcome of environmental education in terms of achieving academic standards and demonstrating environmental literacy. As introduced on August 2, 2007, the No Child Left Inside Act of 2007 (S. 1981) would create a new role for the Department of Education in supporting environmental education, but would not reauthorize funding for EPA’s existing program nor amend any aspects of it.