

## ***Environmental Quality: A Great Disappearing Act***

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The government document *Environmental Quality* is the annual report to Congress produced within the Executive Office of the President by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). The CEQ's *Environmental Quality* report is required to be prepared for the president under section 201 of the landmark legislation, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4341). This annual report represents an overview of the nation's environment and provides a general outline of achievements in protecting and assuring the quality of the environment. Specific sections of the report address a variety of strategies for improving the quality of the environment, outline the goals for implementing those strategies, and provide a basis for further analyses and evaluations of the most important issues related to air and water quality and issues related to ecological viability of land resources.

CEQ is responsible for developing national policies related to ensuring the quality of the environment and for determining the environmental impact of federal government programs and initiatives. CEQ is also responsible for overseeing implementation and enforcement of NEPA.

*Environmental Quality* also provides a concise overview of the activities of the previous years and current issues related to the implementation of provisions of the NEPA and a summary of selected judicial rulings on NEPA and related legislation. Every issue of *Environmental Quality* provides an inventory of national statistics on the environment; it is a source of environmental data and information on current conditions and trends for energy (use and consumption), land use, discharge of chemicals and other materials in ground and surface waters, emissions of air pollutants, U.S. population trends, economic indicators, recreation, aquatic and terrestrial resources, biodiversity, recycling, transportation, and toxic substances control.

Given the importance of this annual report, *Environmental Quality* **WAS** one of the most important government documents bridging the scientific and technical underpinnings with the policy and decision-making aspects related to assuring the quality of our national and global commitments to environmental quality. *Environmental Quality* **WAS** one of the most useful ready-reference sources for statistics related to ecological and environmental topics, overviews of major government initiatives, and synopses of critical national and global environmental issues. *Environmental Quality* **WAS** an important compilation of data and information provided by the Executive

Office.

The reason why such an important and landmark reference work **WAS**, relates directly to the fact that the last year for which *Environmental Quality* was prepared was 1997. The 1997 CEQ report on the environment was a special issue devoted to "Using Information Technology to Improve NEPA Decisionmaking and Management."

How could such an important document simply disappear and, moreover, why has this disappearance gone virtually unnoticed by the environmental community for so long? The history of the demise of this critical environmental report is closely attached to the controversial history of the CEQ itself, a history that has included times when CEQ was allowed to flourish and its annual report contributed to the archive of American history.

The Council on Environmental Quality was founded in 1970 and enjoyed a fledgling's support during the Nixon and Ford administrations as it filled the niche created by NEPA. During the presidency of Jimmy Carter, CEQ maintained a staff of about 40 scientists, attorneys, economists, and support personnel. Things changed dramatically when President Ronald Reagan tried to eliminate CEQ in 1981 by firing the entire professional staff and cutting its budget by 80%. Another attempt to eliminate CEQ, in 1983, was thwarted by a group of key senators. During the administration of President George H. W. Bush, the CEQ staff and budget were increased. President Bill Clinton tried to abolish CEQ in 1993 and replace it with a new Office of Environmental Policy. Congressman John Dingell (D-Michigan) tried to abolish CEQ in 2000. On May 20, 2002, CEQ formed a task force to review and streamline the NEPA process, which to some environmental organizations was seen as an attempt to weaken the NEPA.

During the Clinton Administration CEQ failed to produce an annual report (a combined 1994-1995 report was produced) and since 1998, CEQ has failed to produce its mandated report to Congress. Under current leadership of mining and chemical industry lobbyists, it is apparent that CEQ is not in any hurry to reverse the trend of its missing annual *Environmental Quality* reports. A phone call to the Council in early December of 2003 revealed that there is some sort of a plan for issuing a report on environmental quality, but the date of its release was not known. When asked if this was going to be an attempt to restore the production of an annual report to Congress as the *Environmental Quality* report, the answer was, "I do not know."

I have asked my congressional representative about the status of the CEQ's annual report and requested an explanation as to why the congressional mandate for this report has been ignored by two administrations. To find the

name and address of your congressional representative, go to the House of Representative's website at <http://www.house.gov/> . You can contact your senators through the Senate's site at <http://www.senate.gov>.

### **CEQ Websites of Note**

Council on Environmental Quality  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/>

*NEPANet* -- CEQ National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Task Force  
<http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/nepa/nepanet.htm>

*The 1997 Annual Report of the Council on Environmental Quality*  
<http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/nepa/reports/1997/index.html>

*The 1996 Annual Report of the Council on Environmental Quality*  
<http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/reports/1996/toc.htm>

*25th Anniversary Report of the Council on Environmental Quality (1994-1995)*  
<http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/reports/reports.htm>

*The Twenty-fourth Annual Report of the Council on Environmental Quality (1993)*  
<http://ceq.eh.doe.gov/reports/1993/toc.htm>

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