
ORIGIN & FUNCTIONS

In 1987, the Department of the Environment was created to protect and preserve the State's environmental resources. Prior to 1987, enforcement of laws and regulations pertaining to air and water quality, solid and toxic waste, sedimentation and stormwater runoff, and environmental health was delegated to units in the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Department of Natural Resources.

The first State agency to have any of the responsibilities now overseen by the Department of the Environment was the Department of Health, created in 1874 and the precursor of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Under the Department of Health, the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering protected water purity, oversaw sewerage and water supply projects, and in time became concerned with industrial waste and air pollution. The Bureau was reformed as the Bureau of Environmental Hygiene in 1951 with divisions for sanitary engineering, industrial health, and air pollution (Chapter 75, Acts of 1951). When the Department of Health was reorganized in 1966, Environmental Health Services was created with a Bureau of Resource Protection overseeing water supply, sewage disposal, air quality, and solid waste disposal, while the Bureau of Consumer Protection was responsible for drug control, radiological health, and general sanitation.

Earlier, concern over Maryland's water resources had prompted formation of the Maryland Water Front Commission in 1929, and the Water Resources Commission of Maryland in 1933 (Chapter 522, Acts of 1929; Chapter 526, Acts of 1933). Both commissions in 1941 were absorbed into the Department of Geology, Mines, and Water Resources, which shared responsibilities for water supply with the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering (Chapter 508, Acts of 1941). In 1947, the Water Pollution Control Commission began to analyze and prevent pollution of streams and waters. These duties, in 1964, were assigned to the Department of Water Resources, as were water resource responsibilities, including oversight of well drillers, from the Department of Geology, Mines, and Water Resources (Chapter 73, Acts of 1964). The Department of Water Resources, like its predecessor the Water Pollution Control Commission, came under the jurisdiction of the Board of Natural Resources. In 1969, the departments under that board were consolidated to form the Department of Natural Resources.

Between 1960 and 1980 environmental groups, commissions, and councils alerted the public to the perils of pollution and uncontrolled growth. The General Assembly created the Radiation Control Advisory Board in 1960, the Air Pollution Control Council in 1963, the Air Quality Control Advisory Council and the Board of Certification of Water Works in 1967, the Water Sciences Advisory Board and the Board of Well Drillers in 1968, and the Board of Sanitarian Registration in 1969. Creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 made more federal programs and funds available, and new State agencies with environmental responsibilities were formed: the Maryland Environmental Service and Maryland Council on the Environment in 1970, the Noise Pollution Control Advisory Council in 1973, the Hazardous Substances Advisory Council in 1976, and the Council on Toxic Substances in 1979. To safeguard the environment, the General Assembly divided enforcement powers and planning capabilities mainly between units of the Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Environmental programs were consolidated into one executive level department when the Department of the Environment was created in 1987.

The Department of the Environment protects and restores Maryland's environment and safeguards the environmental health of Maryland citizens. These responsibilities encompass enforcement and regulation, long-term planning and research, and technical assistance to industry and communities in their efforts to handle pollution, waste disposal, and emergency spills.

The Department's five key program areas are Air Management; Hazardous and Solid Waste Management; Sediment and Stormwater; Toxics, Environmental Science and Health; and Water Management. Since these areas all affect the health of the Chesapeake Bay, the Department of the Environment has a crucial role in all initiatives to restore the Bay.