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Earth Day: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Earth Day is an annual event to raise awareness about environmental issues. First held on April 22, 1970, it is celebrated each year on April 22.

This fact sheet assists congressional offices with work related to Earth Day. It contains historical information, links to legislation, sample speeches and remarks from the *Congressional Record*, presidential proclamations and statements, and web resources.

History

The first Earth Day was observed on April 22, 1970, after Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin called for teach-ins on college campuses nationwide to raise awareness of environmental issues. "I am convinced that the same concern the youth of this nation took in changing this country's priorities on the war in Vietnam and on civil rights can be shown for the problems of the environment," he told an audience in Seattle, WA, on September 20, 1969.[1]

Planning began in Senator Nelson's office and was handed off to a nonprofit organization, Environmental Teach-In, Inc., staffed by "a group of twentysomething activists."[2] Organizers selected April 22, a weekday after the end of winter weather but before the start of final exams, to maximize students' participation.[3] Millions of Americans participated in rallies, teach-ins, speeches, and other locally organized events across the country on Earth Day, attracting significant news coverage.[4]

Senator Nelson initially intended Earth Day to be a one-time event. "I did not plan another Earth Day because it could not be duplicated and there would be no special purpose in attempting it. The objective of Earth Day was fully accomplished," he wrote in 1971.[5] Over time, April 22 became an annual celebration of the environment and the environmental movement marked by volunteer work, educational programs, and other events.

Washington, DC, hosted anniversary rallies in 1990, 1995, and 2000. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of online events marked Earth Day's 50th anniversary in 2020.[6]

Earth Day is not a federal holiday, though public laws designated Earth Day on March 21, 1975 (P.L. 94-8); April 22, 1990 (P.L. 101-186); and April 22, 1991 (P.L. 102-34). Resolutions introduced in the 92nd Congress (1971-1972) and 93rd Congress (1973-1974) would have designated either April 22, the third Wednesday of April, or March 21 (the vernal equinox) as

[1] Charles Russell, "College Teach-ins On Environment Crisis Proposed," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 21, 1969, p. 10.

[2] Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), p. 58.

[3] Lewis G. Regenstein, "Earth Day," in *Environmental Encyclopedia*, eds. Marci Bortman, Peter Brimblecombe, and Mary Ann Cunningham, 3rd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2003), pp. 399-401.

[4] Gladwin Hill, "Millions Join Earth Day Observances Across the Nation; Activity Ranges From Oratory to Legislation," *The New York Times*, April 23, 1970, p. A1.

[5] Letter from Gaylord Nelson, U.S. Senator, to Frank Stanton, CBS president, April 7, 1971, http://www.nelsonearthday.net/docs/nelson_2-15_CBS_news_letter.pdf.

[6] Library of Congress, "Earth Day 2020 Web Archive," https://www.loc.gov/collections/earth-day-2020-web-archive/about-this-collection.

Earth Day on an annual basis, but no further action was taken.[7] Legislation introduced in the 106th Congress (1999-2000) would have designated April 22 as Earth Day, but no further action was taken.[8]

The United Nations designated April 22 as International Mother Earth Day in 2009. The United Nations also has designated June 5 as World Environment Day since 1974.

Recent Commemorative Legislation

H.Res. 346 (2021) would have expressed support for honoring Earth Day, and for other purposes.

S.Res. 593 (2020) would have recognized the 50th anniversary of Earth Day and the leadership of its founder, Senator Gaylord Nelson.

H.Res. 932 (2020) would have expressed support for honoring the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, and for other purposes.

H.Res. 330 (2019) would have expressed support for honoring Earth Day, and for other purposes.

Related CRS Report

CRS Report R44431, *Commemorative Days, Weeks, and Months: Background and Current Practice*, by Jacob R. Straus and Jared C. Nagel.

Sample Speeches and Recognitions

Senator Ben Cardin, "Earth Day," remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167 (April 22, 2021), pp. S2162-S2163.

Representative Glenn Thompson, "Celebrating Earth Day with Ferndale Area Elementary School," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167 (April 22, 2021), p. H2059.

Representative Harley Rouda, "Honoring the Bolsa Chica Land Trust and the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day," Extension of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166 (April 17, 2020), p. E369.

Representative Brian Fitzpatrick, "Recognizing Earth Day and Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 164 (April 18, 2018), p. H3404.

Representative Bob Dold, "Earth Day," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 162 (April 21, 2016), pp. H1914-H1915.

Representative Loretta Sanchez, "Earth Day," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 162 (April 20, 2016), p. H1878.

[7] H.Res. 93, H.J.Res. 112, H.J.Res. 134, H.J.Res. 406, and H.J.Res. 418 of the 92nd Congress and H.Con.Res. 106 of the 93rd Congress.

[8] S. 864, 106th Congress.

Presidential Proclamations and Remarks

Presidents often release statements or issue proclamations to mark Earth Day. Some recent messages from the *Compilation of Presidential Documents* include the following:

- Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2021-)
- Presidential Statements and Messages—President Donald J. Trump (2017-2020)
- Presidential Proclamations and Remarks—President Barack H. Obama (2009-2016)
- Presidential Statements and Remarks—President George W. Bush (2001-2008)
- Presidential Statements and Remarks—President William J. Clinton (1993-2000)

Earlier presidential statements and proclamations related to Earth Day are available through the American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Web Resources

Earth Day Network, "Earth Day: The Official Site"

Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE) Program, "Earth Day"

Library of Congress, "Earth Day: Selected Resources"

National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), "Earth Day 2020: 50th Anniversary Toolkit"

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), "Earth Day"

National Park Service (NPS), "Earth Day"

Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and Wisconsin Historical Society, "Gaylord Nelson and Earth Day: The Making of the Modern Environmental Movement"

U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), "Earth Day"

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), "Earth Day"

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, "Earth Day"

U.S. Senate, "Gaylord Nelson Promotes the First Earth Day"

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This fact sheet was originally authored by Ben Leubsdorf, former Reference and Data Services Librarian.

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