

[Citizens in Tokyo have discovered patches of radiation](#) that are comparable to some of the evacuated areas near Chernobyl, radiation that presumably came from the recent nuclear power plant accident.

[The EPA has recently reported that the number of waterways in California](#) that exceed water quality standards are 170 percent higher today than in 2006.

In both cases, the results contradict prior findings by government agencies. In Japan, the government has contended that any risks from radiation in Tokyo are minimal and had no plans to conduct monitoring for radiation in Tokyo as a result. The increase in polluted California waterways is (probably) not the result of a spike in pollution in California, but instead because of better monitoring of California's waterways. Before, many waterways had not been assessed at all, and EPA discovered that these newly assessed waterways were in fact polluted.

Both incidents highlight two points: First, the essential role that monitoring of ambient environmental conditions (the state and quality of the world around us) in environmental law and policy. Without information about how much radiation is present in Tokyo, government agencies can't pursue adequate responses, and the public can't hold the government responsible for its response (or lack thereof). Without information about how polluted California waterways are, we can't decide how much more pollution we want to allow, or how many clean-up activities we must pursue. In particular, information about water quality for California is part of the implementation of the federal Clean Water Act: Under the law, waterways that are polluted require more stringent regulations for polluters.

Second, there is no guarantee that government agencies will necessarily want to pursue effective monitoring of ambient environmental conditions. In Japan, there is substantial evidence that the government has underplayed the severity of the Fukushima Daiichi accident, in part to help protect both the nuclear regulatory agency and the electric utility that operated the facility. Thus, it is no surprise that the government might not have been eager to develop information that would make the situation look even worse.

In California, the situation is more complicated. EPA has now reported better data, but it took many, many years to develop it. (The original requirements for monitoring have been in place for decades under the Clean Water Act.) Here, the problem might be related to a variety of factors: Good quality data in this context might lead to more regulation, and that might be resisted by interest groups that

don't want greater regulation. Those interest groups might place pressure on the agency to avoid monitoring. Alternatively, monitoring might just be a low priority for a cash-strapped agency. Monitoring isn't sexy politically. It doesn't directly result in cleaner waterways, unlike other actions the agency might take and so the agency might systematically underinvest in monitoring.

Monitoring matters. But we can't assume government agencies will always want to do it. Thinking about the problem of monitoring will be essential if we want to avoid more problems like these, and get better environmental quality in the long run. (I've developed these points in much more detail [here](#).)