Welcome to 2020. Before we start worrying about the year ahead, it's worth taking a look backward. Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act, usually called NEPA for short.

When he signed NEPA into law, President Nixon said:

> "It is particularly fitting that my first official act in the new decade is to approve the National Environmental Policy Act. … I [am] convinced that the 1970s absolutely must be the years when America pays its debt to the past by reclaiming the purity of its air, its waters, and our living environment. It is literally now or never."

NEPA is now best remembered for requiring environmental impacts statements for major federal actions. That requirement remains in effect today. In fact, the Trump Administration's actions have sometimes been blocked by the courts because of defective impact statements. According to one list, there have been a dozen of these Trump Administration losses in court involving fossil fuel extraction or transportation. .

NEPA should also be remembered for the broad policies that it articulated, policies which remain equally relevant today. Among other things, it called on the federal government to "fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations," a goal that is all the more important in the era of climate change. NEPA also calls on the government to "recognize the worldwide and long-range character of environmental problems," and subject to foreign policy constraints, support "cooperation in anticipating and preventing a decline in the quality of mankind's world environment." It's a pity that these policies are so often honored in the breach.

NEPA marked the beginning of the modern environmental era. It was followed that same year by the Clean Air Act, and then by a wave of federal legislation that came to an end with the passage of the Superfund law eleven years later. That wave of legislation remains the basis for U.S. environmental law today. Despite ceaseless attacks by business interests and their ideological allies, the legal framework has proved remarkably resilient.