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# A Water Legacy

It is officially hiking season in the U.S. Midwest where I am based, and if you are a regular reader of my column, then you know I've been itching to get outside. Recently, I donned my well-worn hiking boots and visited a true hidden gem — Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

This often overlooked National Park boasts the tallest waterfall in Ohio and water is a focal point of many of the site's most popular trails. Yet as I hiked through the quiet valley and traversed softly babbling tributaries and the roaring whirl of the mighty Cuyahoga River alike, its vitally important history was top-of-mind. The Cuyahoga River didn't always run so clear or support such a vivacious ecosystem. In fact, at least 13 fires have been reported on the river, with the first occurring in 1868 and the most historically noteworthy occurring in 1969.

That 1969 river fire, triggered by a spark from a passing rail car igniting an oil slick, was a catalyst for an environmental movement and call to preserve water quality across the U.S. The mayor of nearby Cleveland at the time, Carl Stokes, led a crusade to rehabilitate Cleveland's rivers and draw attention to industrial pollution of waterways across the nation. And as Time magazine happened to report on the incident in the same issue it reported on astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landing on the



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moon in Apollo 11, public awareness grew. Coupled with other compounding issues, the Cuyahoga River fire helped spur the creation of the U.S. EPA, the Clean Water Act and even Earth Day, now a nationally recognized holiday.

Circling back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century though, we've come a long way but national and global water quality still faces some major obstacles. Just this spring, the U.S. Senate

passed the Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Act of 2021, authorizing more than \$35 billion for water resource development projects across the country and zeroing in on small systems, in particular. If the bill continues on to pass both the U.S. House and Senate, it may be enacted as early as this summer. This latest news, compounded with buzz surrounding a proposed U.S. infrastructure package, could spell a major step forward for U.S. water quality and infrastructure.

Reflecting from that fateful river fire of 1969 where water quality appeared to be an after-thought, to now as drinking water concerns are increasingly gaining a seat at the table in terms of public awareness, we've come so far. And we've only made it this far by raising our collective voices as one in the name of change. Change is possible, but now it is time to roll up our sleeves and get to work. Here's hoping for 50 more years of water quality improvements to come.

*Lauren Del Ciello*



The now restored Cuyahoga River contributed to the development of the U.S. EPA, Clean Water Act and Earth Day, following its historic pollution in the late 1960s.

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