

The Cuyahoga River Fire (1969)

On June 22, 1969, just before noon, an oil slick and assorted debris caught fire under a railroad trestle on the Cuyahoga River. The fire attracted national media attention, including stories in *Time* and *National Geographic*. The image of a river ablaze seared into the nation's emerging environmental consciousness. Former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Carol Browner probably spoke for many Americans when she said "I will never forget a photograph of flames, fire, shooting right out of the water in downtown Cleveland. It was the summer of 1969 and the Cuyahoga River was burning."

The Cuyahoga fire was a powerful symbol of a planet in disrepair and an ever-deepening environmental crisis, and it remains so to this day. That a river could become so polluted to ignite proved the need for federal environmental regulation. Following on the heels of several best-selling books warning of ecological apocalypse and other high-profile events such as the Santa Barbara oil spill, the 1969 Cuyahoga fire spurred efforts to enact sweeping federal environmental legislation. "The burning river mobilized the nation and became a rallying point for passage of the Clean Water Act," noted one environmental group on the fire's 30th anniversary. The fire even inspired a song by Randy Newman, "Burn On" (see lyrics below):

Artist: **Randy Newman**

Album: *Sail Away*

There's a red moon rising
On the Cuyahoga River
Rolling into Cleveland to the lake

There's a red moon rising
ON the Cuyahoga River
Rolling into Cleveland to the lake

There's an oil barge winding
Down the Cuyahoga River
Rolling into Cleveland to the lake

There's an oil barge winding
Down the Cuyahoga River
Rolling into Cleveland to the lake

Cleveland city of light city of magic
Cleveland city of light you're calling me
Cleveland, even now I can remember
'Cause the Cuyahoga River
Goes smokin' through my dreams

Burn on, big river, burn on
Burn on, big river, burn on
Now the Lord can make you tumble
And the Lord can make you turn
And the Lord can make you overflow
But the Lord can't make you burn

Burn on, big river, burn on
Burn on, big river, burn on

The 1969 fire was not the first time the Cuyahoga had caught fire. At least a dozen fires had raged on the Cuyahoga since 1868. Witnesses recount that fires on the river were a regular occurrence due to a persistent scum on the surface of the river from refuse oil discharged by refineries. Sparks from passing tugboats, trains, hot coal and welders' torches regularly turned the crooked river into a raging torrent of flames.

It is often thought that the 1969 Cuyahoga River fire became ingrained into the public consciousness because it was particularly fatal or devastating. Neither is true. In 1912, five men were killed in a river fire, whereas there was no loss of human life in 1969. A fire in 1952 caused

\$1.5 million dollars worth of damage. Contrast that with the 1969 fire damages estimated at only \$85,000.

Fires also occurred on other rivers during the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. Fires on the North, Chicago, Buffalo, Fallsaway, Passiac and Rogue rivers, as well as the Houston Ship Channel, went unnoticed because they burned in a time in America's history when concerns for industrial production and growth were first and foremost. The subsequent pollution created by that production and growth was merely considered an unfortunate side effect. Sludge-producing factories were signs of “progress” and employment for the American people.

Concerns for sanitation and navigability also took precedence over consideration of polluted waters during this era of rapid industrial growth. Outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and yellow fever were common, killing thousands of people at a time. Not until the discovery of germ theory by Frenchman Louis Pasteur in the latter half of the 19th century did the threat of water-borne diseases lessen through the subsequent use of water-treatment facilities. Concerns for the navigability or usability of the Cuyahoga River for shipping and travel was reflected in the Refuse Act of 1890, which only prohibited river dumping that would “impede or obstruct navigation.”



Following the 1969 Cuyahoga River fire, the Plain Dealer ran a picture of the burnt railroad line that had spanned the river – charred black from the oil slick fire. In the accompanying article, the Fire Chief said that, “Waterfront industries are responsible, dumping oil wastes into the river rather than reclaiming them.” The following day the Cleveland Press covered the press conference that Mayor Carl Stokes held on the very dramatic backdrop of the charred railroad lines. A long time clean-up advocate, Mayor

Stokes criticized the federal government, which had jurisdiction over the river because of the interstate commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution. Stokes promised to fight for a cleaner river and planned to address the State of Ohio on this pressing issue.

The 1969 Cuyahoga River fire elevated industrial pollution awareness to a national level. Cleveland's river was condemned in an article on August 1, 1969 in Time Magazine, titled “The Price of Optimism.” “Some river!” the article exclaimed.

On August 1, 1969, *Time* magazine reported on the fire and on the condition of the Cuyahoga River. The magazine stated,

Some River! Chocolate-brown, oily, bubbling with subsurface gases, it oozes rather than flows. "Anyone who falls into the Cuyahoga does not drown," Cleveland's citizens joke grimly. "He decays". . . The Federal Water Pollution Control Administration dryly notes: "The lower Cuyahoga has no visible signs of life, not even low forms such as leeches and sludge worms that usually thrive on wastes." It is also -- literally -- a fire hazard.

Essentially, Congress was in the hot seat to do something about the desperate and dilapidated conditions of America's water systems. Earlier that year, a ground-breaking piece of environmental legislation had passed in Congress. As a consequence, the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) helped to establish the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA later passed the Water Pollution Control Act, commonly known as the Clean Water Act of 1972. The Clean Water Act mandated that all rivers be “fishable and swimmable” by 1983. Fortunately, the 1969 river fire marked the end of a long period of industrial pollution both in Cleveland and across the nation.

The good news is that the river is now much cleaner and it continues to improve. Fish populations are back. However, they are the pollution-tolerant species such as carp, suckers and bottom feeders, and, unfortunately, they have tumors, eroded fins, deformities and lesions. Also, it still is not advisable to eat fish caught in the river more than once or twice a month, depending on the species, because of the PCB and mercury levels found in the fish. That said, there still is much to celebrate about our river and its improving condition.

Source: *Balanced Living Magazine*