

GLOSSARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL TERMS

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

act - in the legislative sense, a bill or measure passed by both houses of Congress; a law.

adjournment - the end of a legislative day or session.

aerosol - a suspension of small liquid or solid particles in gas.

air pollution - toxic or radioactive gases or particulate matter introduced into the atmosphere, usually as a result of human activity.

alternative energy - energy that is not popularly used and is usually environmentally sound, such as solar or wind energy (as opposed to fossil fuels).

appropriation - the setting aside of funds for a designated purpose (e.g., there is an appropriation of \$7 billion to build 5 new submarines).

aquaculture - the controlled rearing of fish or shellfish by people or corporations who own the harvestable product, often involving the capture of the eggs or young of a species from wild sources, followed by rearing more intensively than possible in nature.

aquifer - underground source of water.

atmosphere - the 500 km thick layer of air surrounding the earth which supports the existence of all flora and fauna.

atomic energy - energy released in nuclear reactions. When a neutron splits an atom's nucleus into smaller pieces it is called fission. When two nuclei are joined together under millions of degrees of heat it is called fusion.

B

beach closure - the closing of a beach to swimming, usually because of pollution.

bill - a proposed law, to be debated and voted on.

billfish - pelagic fish with long, spear-like protrusions at their snouts, such as swordfish and marlin.

biodegradable - waste material composed primarily of naturally-occurring constituent parts, able to be broken down and absorbed into the ecosystem. Wood, for example, is biodegradable, for example, while plastics are not.

biodiversity - a large number and wide range of species of animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms. Ecologically, wide biodiversity is conducive to the development of all species.

biomass - (1) the amount of living matter in an area, including plants, large animals and insects; (2) plant materials and animal waste used as fuel.

biosphere - (1) the part of the earth and its atmosphere in which living organisms exist or that is capable of supporting life; (2) the living organisms and their environment composing the biosphere.

Biosphere Reserve - a part of an international network of preserved areas designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Biosphere Reserves are vital centers of biodiversity where research and monitoring activities are conducted, with the participation of local communities, to protect and preserve healthy natural systems threatened by development. The global system currently includes 324 reserves in 83 countries.

biotic - of or relating to life.

birth control - preventing birth or reducing frequency of birth, primarily by preventing conception.

birth defects - unhealthy defects found in newborns, often caused by the mother's exposure to environmental hazards or the intake of drugs or alcohol during pregnancy.

birth rate - the number of babies born annually per 1,000 women of reproductive age in any given set of people.

bloc - a group of people with the same interest or goal (usually used to describe a voting bloc, a group of representatives intending to vote the same way).

blood lead levels - the amount of lead in the blood. Human exposure to lead in blood can cause brain damage, especially in children.

bottled water - purchased water sold in bottles.

brownfields - abandoned, idled, or under-used industrial and commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination.

budget - a formal projection of spending and income for an upcoming period of time, traditionally submitted by the President or Executive for consideration and approval.

budget reconciliation - legislation making changes to existing law (such as entitlements under Social Security or Medicare) so that it conforms to numbers in the budget resolution.

budget resolution - the first step in the annual budget process. This resolution must be agreed to by the House and Senate. It is not signed by the President and does not have the effect of law, but instead sets out the targets and assumptions that will guide Congress as it passes the annual appropriations and other budget bills.

bycatch - fish and/or other marine life that are incidentally caught with the targeted species. Most of the time bycatch is discarded at sea.

bycatch reduction device (bdr) - a device used to cut bycatch while fishing. These gear modifications are most commonly used with shrimp trawls. They are also called "finfish excluder devices" (feds) or, when specifically designed to exclude sea turtles, they are called "turtle excluder devices" (teds).

C

calendar - in the legislative sense, a group of bills or proposals to be discussed or considered in a legislative committee or on the floor of the House or Senate.

cancer - unregulated growth of changed cells; a group of changed, growing cells (tumor).

carbon dioxide (CO₂) - a naturally occurring greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, concentrations of which have increased (from 280 parts per million in preindustrial times to over 350 parts per million today) as a result of humans' burning of coal, oil, natural gas and organic matter (e.g., wood and crop wastes).

carbon tax - a charge on fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) based on their carbon content. When burned, the carbon in these fuels becomes carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the chief greenhouse gas.

carcinogens - substances that cause cancer, such as tar.

carpooling - sharing a car to a destination to reduce fuel use, pollution and travel costs.

caucus - a meeting of a political party, usually to appoint representatives to party positions.

CFC - see chlorofluorocarbons.

clean fuel - fuels which have lower emissions than conventional gasoline and diesel. Refers to alternative fuels as well as to reformulated gasoline and diesel.

cleanup - treatment, remediation, or destruction of contaminated material.

clearcutting - a logging technique in which all trees are removed from an area, typically 20 acres or larger, with little regard for long-term forest health.

climate change - a regional change in temperature and weather patterns. Current science indicates a discernible link between climate change over the last century and human activity, specifically the burning of fossil fuels.

cloture - the formal end to a debate or filibuster in the Senate requiring a three-fifths vote.

coastal pelagic - fish that live in the open ocean at or near the water's surface but remain relatively close to the coast. Mackerel, anchovies, and sardines are examples of coastal pelagic fish.

compost - process whereby organic wastes, including food wastes, paper, and yard wastes, decompose naturally, resulting in a product rich in minerals and ideal for gardening and farming as a soil conditioners, mulch, resurfacing material, or landfill cover.

contamination - pollution.

D

Demand Side Management (DSM) - an attempt by utilities to reduce customers' demand for electricity or energy by encouraging efficiency.

demersal - fish that live on or near the ocean bottom. They are often called benthic fish, groundfish, or bottom fish.

development - (1) a developed tract of land (with houses or structures); (2) the act, process or result of developing.

dump sites - waste disposal grounds.

E

ecologist - a scientist concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environment.

ecology - a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environment.

ecosystem - an interconnected and symbiotic grouping of animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms.

edge cities - cities bounded by water, usually with eroding or polluted waterfront areas.

efficiency - see energy efficiency.

energy conservation - using energy efficiently or prudently; saving energy.

energy efficiency - technologies and measures that reduce the amount of electricity and/or fuel required to do the same work, such as powering homes, offices and industries.

enrolled bill - the final, certified bill sent to the President; House and Senate versions of a bill must match exactly in order to be enrolled.

equity - in the environmental sense, the planned dispersment of toxic or waste facilities in regions throughout the socioeconomic strata.

F

factory farming - large-scale, industrialized agriculture.

factory ships - industrial-style ships used for the large-scale collection and processing of fish.

family planning - a system of limiting family size and the frequency of childbearing by the appropriate use of contraceptive techniques.

fauna - the total animal population that inhabits an area.

fiscal year - a financial term referring to any twelve-month period, usually to set a budget. The federal government's fiscal year begins October 1.

fisheries - an established area where fish species are cultivated and caught.

fissile material - material fissionable by slow neutrons. The fission process and the fissile isotopes are the source of energy in nuclear weapons and nuclear reactors.

fission - the process whereby the nucleus of a particular heavy element splits into (generally) two nuclei of lighter elements, with the release of substantial amounts of energy.

flora - the total vegetation assemblage that inhabits an area.

forests - lands on which trees are the principal plant life, usually conducive to wide biodiversity.

fossil fuel - a fuel, such as coal, oil, and natural gas, produced by the decomposition of ancient (fossilized) plants and animals; compare to alternative energy.

G

gas - natural gas, used as fuel.

gasoline - petroleum fuel, used to power cars, trucks, lawn mowers, etc.

geothermal - literally, heat from the earth; energy obtained from the hot areas under the surface of the earth.

gillnets - walls of netting that are usually staked to the sea floor. Fish become entangled or caught by their gills. (See also driftnets).

global warming - increase in the average temperature of the earth's surface.

green design - a design, usually architectural, conforming to environmentally sound principles of building, material and energy use. A green building, for example, might make use of solar panels, skylights, and recycled building materials.

greenhouse - a building made with translucent (light transparent, usually glass or fiberglass) walls conducive to plant growth.

greenhouse effect - the process that raises the temperature of air in the lower atmosphere due to heat trapped by greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, chlorofluorocarbons, and ozone.

greenhouse gas - a gas involved in the greenhouse effect.

greenway - undeveloped land usually in cities, set aside or used for recreation or conservation.

groundfish - a general term referring to fish that live on or near the sea floor. Groundfish are also called bottom fish or demersal fish.

groundwater - water below the earth's surface; the source of water for wells and springs.

growth overfishing - the process of catching fish before they are fully grown resulting in a decrease in the average size of the fish population.

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I

incinerators - disposal systems that burn solid waste or other materials and reduce volume of waste. Air pollution and toxic ash are problems associated with incineration.

industrialized countries - nations whose economies are based on industrial production and the conversion of raw materials into products and services, mainly with the use of machinery and artificial energy (fossil fuels and nuclear fission); generally located in the northern and western hemispheres (e.g., U.S., Japan, the countries of Europe).

insecticides - substances used to kill insects and prevent infestation.

J

K

L

lakes - substantial inland bodies of standing water.

landfill - disposal area where garbage is piled up and eventually covered with dirt and topsoil.

landings - the amount of fish brought back to the docks and marketed. Landings can describe the kept catch of one vessel, of an entire fishery, or of several fisheries combined.

land use - the way in which land is used, especially in farming and city planning.

law - an act or bill which has become part of the legal code through passage by Congress and approval by the President (or via Congressional override).

lead - a naturally-occurring heavy, soft metallic element; human exposure can cause brain and nervous system damage, especially in children.

lead poisoning - damaging the body (specifically the brain) by absorbing lead through the skin or by swallowing.

life cycle assessment - methodology developed to assess a product's full environmental costs, from raw material to final disposal.

light pollution - environmental pollution consisting of harmful or annoying light.

litter - waste material which is discarded on the ground or otherwise disposed of improperly or thoughtlessly.

logging - cutting down trees for commodity use.

longlines - fishing lines stretching for dozens of miles and baited with hundreds of hooks. Longlines are indiscriminate and unintentionally catch and kill immature fish along with a wide variety of other animals in the Atlantic including tunas, sharks, marlins, sailfish, sea turtles and occasionally pilot whales and dolphins.

low-emission vehicles - vehicles which emit little air pollution compared to conventional internal combustion engines.

low-impact camping - camping that does not damage or change the land, where campers leave no sign that they were on the land.

M

mammal - an animal that feeds its young with milk secreted from mammary glands and has hair on its skin.

managed growth - growth or expansion that is controlled so as not to be harmful.

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mining - the removal of minerals (like coal , gold, or silver) from the ground.

moratorium - legislative action which prevents a federal agency from taking a specific action or implementing a specific law.

nitrogen oxides - harmful gases (which contribute to acid rain and global warming) emitted as a byproduct of fossil fuel combustion.

noise pollution - environmental pollution made up of harmful or annoying noise.

O

oil - a black, sticky substance used to produce fuel (petroleum) and materials (plastics).

oil spills - the harmful release of oil into the environment, usually in the water, sometimes killing area flora and fauna. Oil spills are very difficult to clean up.

old growth forests - see ancient forests.

P

paper - thin sheet of material made of cellulose pulp, derived mainly from wood, but also from rags and certain grasses, and processed into flexible leaves or rolls. Used primarily for writing, printing, drawing, wrapping, and covering walls.

paper mills - mills (factories) that produce paper from wood pulp.

paper products - materials such as paper and cardboard, produced from trees.

particulate - of or relating to minute discrete particles; a particulate substance.

particulate pollution - pollution made up of small liquid or solid particles suspended in the atmosphere or water supply.

pesticides - chemical agents used to destroy pests.

plastics - durable and flexible synthetic-based products, some of which are difficult to recycle and pose problems with toxic properties, especially PVC plastic.

PM10 - particulate matter less than 10 microns in diameter.

poison runoff - see polluted runoff.

poison - a chemical that adversely affects health by causing injury, illness, or death.

polluted runoff - precipitation that captures pollution from agricultural lands, urban streets, parking lots and suburban lawns, and transports it to rivers, lakes or oceans.

pollution prevention - techniques that eliminate waste prior to treatment, such as by changing ingredients in a chemical reaction.

population - (1) the whole number of inhabitants in a country, region or area; (2) a set of individuals having a quality or characteristic in common.

post consumer waste - waste collected after the consumer has used and disposed of it (e.g., the wrapper from an eaten candy bar).

power plants - facilities (plants) that produce energy.

public estate - public land

public health - the health or physical well-being of a whole community.

public land - land owned in common by all, represented by the government (town, county, state, or federal).

public transportation - various forms of shared-ride services, including buses, vans, trolleys, and subways, which are intended for conveying the public.

pulp - raw material made from trees used in producing paper products.

Q

quorum - minimum number of people who must be present before a specified event can commence (for Congress to vote, at least half the members must be present).

R

radon - a cancer-causing radioactive gas found in many communities' ground water.

rainforest - a large, dense forest in a hot, humid region (tropical or subtropical). Rainforests have an abundance of diverse plant and animal life, much of which is still uncatalogued by the scientific community.

ranking member - the lead member of a Congressional committee from the minority party, usually chosen on the basis of seniority.

recess - ending a legislative session with a set time to reconvene.

recycling - system of collecting, sorting, and reprocessing old material into usable raw materials.

reduce - act of purchasing or consuming less to begin with, so as not to have to reuse or recycle later.

refrigerants - cooling substances, many of which contain CFCs and are harmful to the earth's ozone layer.

renewable energy - energy resources such as windpower or solar energy that can keep producing indefinitely without being depleted.

reservoir - an artificial lake created and used for the storage of water.

resolution - a formal statement from Congress.

reuse - cleaning and/or refurbishing an old product to be used again.

rider - usually unrelated provisions tacked onto an existing Congressional bill. Since bills must pass or fail in their entirety, riders containing otherwise unpopular language are often added to popular bills.

riparian - located alongside a watercourse, typically a river.

risk assessment - methods used to quantify risks to human health and the environment.

run-off - precipitation that the ground does not absorb and that ultimately reaches rivers, lakes or oceans.

S

smog - a dense, discolored radiation fog containing large quantities of soot, ash, and gaseous pollutants such as sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide, responsible for human respiratory ailments. Most industrialized nations have implemented legislation to promote the use of smokeless fuel and reduce emission of toxic gases into the atmosphere.

surface water - water located above ground (e.g., rivers, lakes).

sustainable communities - communities capable of maintaining their present levels of growth without damaging effects.

T

table - in the legislative sense, an action taken to halt debate on a bill.

tap water - drinking water monitored (and often filtered) for protection against contamination and available for public consumption from sources within the home.

U

urban planning - the science of managing and directing city growth.

uranium - a heavy, radioactive metal (atomic number 92) used in the explosion of nuclear weapons (especially one isotope, U-235).

urban parks - parks in cities and areas of high population concentration.

utilities - companies (usually power distributors) permitted by a government agency to provide important public services (such as energy or water) to a region; as utilities are provided with a local monopoly, their prices are regulated by the permitting government agency.

V

virgin forest - a forest never logged.

voice vote - a vote where members vote by saying either "yes" or "no" together; individual member's votes are not placed on record.

W

warhead - the part of a missile which contains the nuclear explosive.

waste - garbage, trash.

waste site - dumping ground.

waste stream - overall waste disposal cycle for a given population.

waterborne contaminants - unhealthy chemicals, microorganisms (like bacteria) or radiation, found in tap water.

water filters - substances (such as charcoal) or fine membrane structures used to remove impurities from water.

water quality - the level of purity of water; the safety or purity of drinking water.

water quality testing - monitoring water for various contaminants to make sure it is safe for fish protection, drinking, and swimming.

watershed - a region or area over which water flows into a particular lake, reservoir, stream, or river.

well - a dug or drilled hole used to get water from the earth.

wetland - land (marshes or swamps) saturated with water constantly or recurrently; conducive to wide biodiversity.

wilderness - land remaining in basically wild (i.e., undisturbed) condition, with few if any traces of human activities.

X

Y

Z

zero emission vehicles - vehicles (usually powered by electricity) with no direct emissions from tailpipes or fuel evaporation.

zoning - the arrangement or partitioning of land areas for various types of usage in cities, boroughs or townships.