It’s a warm beautiful day, you have the entire day to enjoy the beach, lake or river. However, there is one thing standing in your way—the biggest buzz killer a water lover can experience, an ugly red and white water contamination sign. A perfect day destroyed by the threat of fish dying, pollution, and the tremendous loss of wetlands every year, that no government regulation exists.

However, there is an Act, which was created twenty years ago, to prevent such pollution—The Clean Water Act.

The Clean Water Act, officially known as the The Federal Water Pollution Control Act, is the principal federal law designed to protect the waters of the Nation’s rivers, lakes and coastal waters. The Act enacted in 1972, has since experienced a mixed success in its progress and fulfilled promises.

Twenty years ago, the Clean Water Act established broad goals for the nation’s waters, including: a national goal that the discharge of pollutants into the nation’s waters be eliminated by 1983; a national goal of achieving “fishable and swimable” waters by 1983; and a national goal to maintain and restore the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the nation’s waters. As anyone who has spent any time in our Nation’s waters knows, these goals are far from being met.

Even though the Act has made some progress in cleaning up the nation’s waters, a lot of work still needs to be done. According to the EPA’s most recent (1990) National Water Quality Inventory, at least a third of our rivers, half of our lakes, and far too many areas of coastal waters remain unsafe for swimming. In 1992, on more than 2,600 occasions U.S. ocean and bay beaches were closed. Over 7,200 beach closures or advisories occurred between 1980 and 1988. High bacteria levels from sewer overflows and polluted runoff were responsible for the over 100,000 closures. Exposure to high levels of these pathogens pose serious health threats including hepatitis and gastroenteritis. Some enteric bacteria are at a higher risk of getting sick from water pollution due to the extended period of time spent in the water.

Recently, a bill (H.R. 31) was introduced by Representative David Obey (D-WI) on January 5, 1993. The R.E.A.C.H. Act (Reaches Environmental Assessment, Closer, and Health Act of 1993) requires states to follow uniform beach tracking procedures to protect public safety, avoid health risks, and improve the environmental quality of coastal recreation waters. This bill directly affects surfers and beach goers. It would protect our coastlines from further contamination and lower the “Ro-Sham-Bo” risk one takes every time they enter the ocean.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, in 1981, calculated that only 26 percent of the 36.5 million acres of riparian ecosystems remained in the contiguous states and Hawaii. The majority of the riparian habitat in the continental United States has been inundated, channelized, dammed, realigned, or altered by other land uses. Many of the polluted rivers flow into the oceans resulting in even further pollution.

The Estuary and Delta Source Water Pollution Prevention Act of 1993, popularly known as the “Estuary Bill,” is an important and necessary set of changes in the Clean Water Act, particularly the source point management provision of the Act. This bill is in response to the failure of State Nonpoint Source programs to heal our nation’s fouled and degraded waters. Since 1987, the Clean Water Act has developed programs, largely drawn along watershed lines, to stem the flow of polluted runoff using both regulatory and non-regulatory means.

The heart of the Estuary Bill is a requirement that States revise their nonpoint source management programs to target watersheds that are stressed and degraded by polluted runoff, and to reduce those wasteloads to full compliance with water quality standards and other applicable requirements. The draft bill also requires federal land managers to adopt minimum, water-sensible practices. It also boosts the volunteer citizen’s water quality monitoring movement, making volunteer monitoring a required, federally financed component of water quality monitoring programs in all 50 States. In 1993, Dr. Donald Jellings, a cooperating scientist (Environmental Director of the Surfrider Foundation) testified on behalf of the Surfrider Foundation before the House Committee on Resources and Full the Act. Significant improvements in the laws are needed to reach three overall goals:

1. Prevent pollution—by eliminating the use and release of harmful substances into our rivers and streams. The Clean Water Act is essential to achieving this goal.
2. Protect Wetlands and Aquatic Ecosystems—which includes keeping clean waters clean, cleaning up contaminated sediments and restoring urban watersheds.
3. Enforce the law and protect habitat—which includes enforcing the public right to know, creating standards for beach closures, and funding clean water programs adequately.

Now is the time for you to influence the substance of the Clean Water Act. Both the House and Senate have held their hearings, and they are now drafting or re-doing the overall pollution bill. It is up to you to show your support and let your lawmaker to support a strengthened Clean Water Act.

In the reauthorization of the Clean Water Act, it is essential that both the House and Senate strengthen, reauthorize and fully fund the Act. Significant improvements in the laws are needed to reach three overall goals: