

## Why are All These Government Agencies Regulating Farms and Gardens?

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The news has been filled lately with reports of various governmental agencies being restructured, downsized, and even abolished. Some folks think this is a good thing, others don't. I think it's important to know some of the history of why these agencies were created, and what they actually do.

Through most of the early years of the United States, farming was the most important industry, not only to feed our own citizens and the immigrants coming to our country, but for export and international economics. The Irish Potato Famine of 1840 showed the world how vulnerable we were to pest problems and crop failures.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed several pieces of legislation, to increase our knowledge of agriculture science, and to disseminate it to the public: the Morrill Act, which created the land grant university system, allowing the development of agriculture research colleges such as Purdue and the University of Kentucky; and the Department of Agriculture, an agency which was created to preserve and distribute new seeds and plants, collect agricultural statistics and statewide reports about crops in different regions, and the application of chemistry to agriculture.

Under the regulation of the young US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Hatch Act of 1887 provided for the federal funding of agricultural experiment stations in each state. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 then funded cooperative extension services in each state to teach agriculture, home economics, and other subjects to the public. These federal laws brought education, research, and extension outreach under one umbrella, and so the USDA could reach out to every county of every state.

During the late 1800s, there were many medicinal remedies being sold without any research or data to prove they were effective or safe to use. You might remember the old Wild West "snake oil salesman" as an example. Additionally, foods and medicines were being adulterated and misbranded with all sorts of chemical additives. In 1906, President Teddy Roosevelt signed the Food and Drug Act, which gave the USDA responsibility to regulate chemical additives. This eventually morphed into the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which ultimately became a separate agency from the USDA.

During the late 1800s, as farming became more of a financial industry, farmers turned increasingly to chemical pesticides to protect their crops. One of the most effective and

popular products was arsenic, a naturally occurring heavy metal. Calcium arsenate (Paris Green) and lead arsenate were used extensively, with over 10 million pounds of calcium arsenate dust applied by farmers in 1920 to control boll weevil on cotton. So much arsenic was being used that in 1925, Great Britain began to reject all American apples because the arsenic residue on the fruit was making people sick. In 1926, the FDA created the first legal tolerances for arsenic and other poisons on food items.

After the successful use of DDT to protect soldiers from lice and malaria-carrying mosquitoes in World War II, organic pesticides (chemicals containing carbon) began to proliferate for agriculture and urban uses. Many scientists and writers, including Rachel Carson, began to notice serious harmful effects to birds, bees, fish, and other non-target organisms. Additionally, industrial pollutants were fouling the air and water, and killing off entire species of wildlife.

In response, President Richard Nixon signed into law the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. The EPA was soon charged with regulating the Clean Air Act (1970), Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act (1972), Endangered Species Act (1973), and the Clean Water Act (1977).

Whether you believe these agencies are serving a necessary function or are simply out of control, it's important to understand where they came from, and why. People mustn't make hasty decisions to shut down agencies that have protected people, wildlife, and the environment for a century. But they should demand that the agencies do what they can to streamline the paperwork and to have regulations in place that actually protect people and the environment. Do your own research from a variety of sources, and not just from groups who obviously stand to benefit from the removal of these laws, acts, and agencies. You can also contact me at the Purdue Extension office in Vanderburgh County to get my list of resources that I used to create this article.