



# At a Glance

## Why We Did This Audit

We conducted this audit to identify the extent to which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's existing Clean Water Act programs and Office of Research and Development initiatives address threats and risks to public health and the environment from trash, including plastic, within the waters of the United States.

This report focuses on our audit findings related to the Office of Water's Clean Water Act programs. We issued Report No. [21-N-0052](#) on January 6, 2021, to summarize our audit findings related to the Office of Research and Development's initiatives.

Improperly handled trash, which includes plastic, can enter fresh water and marine ecosystems, thereby posing risks to human health and the environment.

### This audit addresses the following:

- *Ensuring clean and safe water.*

### This audit addresses a key EPA management challenge:

- *Overseeing states implementing EPA programs.*

Address inquiries to our public affairs office at (202) 566-2391 or [OIG\\_WEBCOMMENTS@epa.gov](mailto:OIG_WEBCOMMENTS@epa.gov).

List of [OIG reports](#).

## ***EPA Helps States Reduce Trash, Including Plastic, in U.S. Waterways but Needs to Identify Obstacles and Develop Strategies for Further Progress***

### What We Found

The EPA and states have not widely applied all the tools established by the Clean Water Act to reduce the trash, including plastic, in U.S. waterways. Trash pollution in water bodies is challenging to control because:

- It is made up of many substances.
- It is both a point- and nonpoint-source pollutant.
- The EPA has not established consistent methods for measuring it.

**The EPA and states can reduce the volume of trash, including plastics, in U.S. waterways by evaluating barriers to implementing the Clean Water Act and developing strategies to overcome those barriers.**

Despite these challenges, thousands of municipalities across the United States control stormwater discharges of trash through the Clean Water Act's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System program, specifically through permits for municipal separate storm sewer systems. In addition, the EPA, states, and municipalities implement a variety of nonregulatory initiatives to prevent and remove trash from waterways.

The EPA can further improve its efforts to reduce trash, including plastic, in U.S. waterways by evaluating the regulatory and nonregulatory obstacles facing states and municipalities and by continuing its support of trash-reduction initiatives.

### Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We make three recommendations to the assistant administrator for Water:

- Evaluate the obstacles to implementing the Clean Water Act to control trash in U.S. waterways and provide a public report describing those obstacles.
- Develop and disseminate strategies to states and municipalities for addressing the obstacles identified in the evaluation.
- Support state and local municipalities' efforts to control trash through National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits for municipal separate sewer systems by publishing guidance documents such as the *Trash Stormwater Permit Compendium* and the *U.S. EPA Escaped Trash Assessment Protocol*.

The EPA agreed with our recommendations and proposed acceptable corrective actions and estimated completed dates. Recommendations 1 and 2 are resolved with corrective actions pending, and Recommendation 3 is completed.