



# At a Glance

*Catalyst for Improving the Environment*

## Why We Did This Review

For the past 11 years, EPA has been promoting State adoption of numeric nutrient water quality standards. In 2007, EPA recognized that State progress needs to be accelerated. We evaluated the effectiveness of EPA's strategy to determine what improvements EPA can make to accelerate progress.

## Background

The 1972 Clean Water Act established a goal of maintaining the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation's waters. Decades later, States have reported more than 14,000 nutrient-related impairments. Excess nutrients create dead zones in waters. In 1998, EPA issued a strategy recommending that States adopt numeric nutrient water quality standards. Such standards are cost effective and help develop improved wastewater treatment facility permits and limits of nutrient loadings.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:  
[www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2009/20090826-09-P-0223.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2009/20090826-09-P-0223.pdf)

## **EPA Needs to Accelerate Adoption of Numeric Nutrient Water Quality Standards**

### **What We Found**

EPA's 1998 National Strategy and Plan to promote State adoption of nutrient water quality standards (which better protect aquatic life and human health) has been ineffective. In 1998, EPA stated that a critical need existed for improved water quality standards, given the number of waters that were impaired from nutrients. In the 11 years since EPA issued its strategy, half the States still had no numeric nutrient standards. States have not been motivated to create these standards because implementing them is costly and often unpopular with various constituencies. EPA has not held the States accountable to committed milestones. The current approach does not assure that States will develop standards that provide adequate protection for downstream waters. Until recently, EPA has not used its Clean Water Act authority to promulgate water quality standards for States.

EPA cannot rely on the States alone to ensure that numeric nutrient standards are established. EPA should prioritize States/waters significantly impacted by excess nutrients and determine if it should set the standards. EPA also needs to establish effective monitoring and measures so that accurate program progress is reported. This will assist EPA management in program decision-making.

### **What We Recommend**

We recommend that the Assistant Administrator for Water:

- Select significant waters of national value which need numeric nutrient water quality standards to meet the requirements of the Clean Water Act.
- Set numeric nutrient water quality standards for the waters identified in the first recommendation to meet the requirements of the Clean Water Act.
- Establish EPA and State accountability for adopting numeric nutrient standards for the rest of the Nation's waters.
- Establish metrics to gauge the actual progress made by the States.

We discussed our findings and recommendations with Agency officials. The Agency agreed with some but not all of the recommendations.