Donora, Pennsylvania Smog Disaster, October 1948  
Pollutants from the burning of coal become trapped in the Monongahela River Valley south of Pittsburgh for five days. Half of Donora's population of 14,000 become sick and 22 die.

Toxic London Fog: 1952  
Coal smoke and fog in London lasts for five days and kills 4,000 citizens. The deaths resulted in the British Clean Air Act of 1956.

Minamata Bay Mercury Poisoning: 1956+  
Widespread mercury is poisoning discovered in the Japanese fishing village of Minamata. Industrial discharge from the Chisso Corporation introduces mercury into the food chain through fish. People in Minamata Bay who eat the fish suffer effects of Mercury poisoning. The poisoning causes more than 100 deaths and several hundred cases of illness, including brain damage and birth defects.

Burning of the Cuyahoga River, Ohio: 1969  
Cuyahoga River flowing through Cleveland, Ohio is so polluted that it catches fire and burns for several days. Images of the burning river help to build up public pressure for environmental laws.

Santa Barbara Oil Spill: 1969  
Union Oil Company platform off the coast of California suffers natural gas blowout. The hole caused by the blowout is capped leading to a buildup of pressure and a break in the ocean floor, releasing oil and gas from deep beneath the earth. 200,000 gallons spread into a 800 square mile slick that affects 35 miles of coastline. Dolphins, seals, and diving birds and shorebirds all affected.

Love Canal: 1976-78  
An old canal in Niagara Falls, N.Y. was used by Hooker Chemical (1942-1953) to dump solvents, acids, PCB's, and pesticides. A school and subdivision are built on top of this dump (unknowingly) and in the late 70's, high rates of birth defects and miscarriages appear in the local populations. The chemicals drain into the Niagara River and Lake Ontario, causing concerns about safe drinking water.

Three-Mile Island: 1979  
Three-Mile Island reactor near Harrisburg, PA loses coolant water due to mechanical failures and human error. The core is partially uncovered and partially melts down. Unknown levels (though estimated to be low) of radioactive material are released.

Bhopal Disaster: 1984  
In Bhopal, India, a ruptured storage tank at a Union Carbide pesticide plant releases about 40 tons of methyl isocyanate, a lethal gas used in making insecticides. The methyl isocyanate converts to hydrogen cyanide in the atmosphere. The toxic cloud spreads over 30 square miles, killing between 6,000 and 20,000 people and causes blindness, lung and neurological damage in three times as many people.

Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: 1986  
Explosion and fire in a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine (part of USSR at the time) ejects about seven tons of radioactive material into the atmosphere. Thousands are killed in the immediate region and numerous others live to suffer radiation poisoning. Estimates of those killed immediately and afterwards range from 3,000 to 30,000.

Exxon Valdez Oil Spill: 1989  
The Exxon Valdez oil tanker hits a reef in Prince William Sound near the town of Valdez, Alaska and spills more than 11 million gallons of oil. More than 1,000 miles of shoreline are coated with oil. Shorebirds, whales, seals, diving birds, and fish are affected. Results in the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 requiring strengthened Coast Guard Regulations on tankards.

Gulf War Oil Spills: 1991  
Iraqis retreating from Kuwait set fire to hundreds of oil wells and intentionally spills oil in the Persian Gulf as troops from the United States invade. Smoke and pollution from fires have worldwide effects.

*Gulf of Mexico/BP Oil Spill: 2010  
The Deepwater Horizon spill released almost 5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico (over 200 million gallons), making it the worst accidental spill in history. The impacts of the spill on the region, including valuable estuaries, wildlife and human activities will become clearer over the next few months and years.

*Fukushima Nuclear Accident: 2011  
A series of equipment failures, reactor meltdowns, and nuclear releases following an earthquake and tsunami off the coast of northern Japan.