

## History of Earth Day by Micki Varney

### AAUW Salem Branch Earth Day & Tree Planting Event

April 22, 2024

It's an honor to be here with all of you here today to plant trees, dedicate this special plaque and to recognize Earth Day; A Day that commemorates the anniversary of the environmental movement.

Earth Day holds a special place in my heart. When I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I organized a group of my classmates to go out and pick up litter every week. We called ourselves "The Litter Spitters". It was similar to the programs we have now where groups adopt roads or highways and periodically go out and pick up trash. But what was it back in 1970 that motivated people to get involved in cleaning up our planet? A little history.....

Following the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 1850's, our country experienced exponential growth of factories, chemical manufacturing and technology. The automobile was invented and we developed a thirst for fossil fuel to power our machines, move our vehicles and heat our homes.

By the 1960's the accumulated effects were destroying our planet.

I remember hearing the news reports and viewing scenes on the television:

- Pesticides like DDT and oil spills were killing wildlife
- Toxic chemicals were spewing into our air from factories and seeping into groundwater and into our waterways
- litter collected along our roadways.
- And combustion of fossil fuels released smoke into our air and created smog and acid rain that fell and corroded surfaces it coated

It was called **pollution** and we were killing us and the living things around us.

### **Our world was in CRISIS**

And then, a growing body of concerned citizens joined together to bring awareness to the issue and to take action. Throughout our nation and the

world, millions of people participated in rallies, marches and educational programs and clean-up events.

and..... **Earth Day**— was born on April 22, 1970. A day to appreciate and recognize both the fragility and the resiliency of the planet on which we live.

—back then, we and our actions, made a difference:

In 1970, the EPA was formed, followed by the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Here in Oregon, we passed the nation's first Bottle Bill and we cleaned up the Willamette River.

As a result of these and similar actions worldwide, much of the contamination was removed and we could breathe a sigh of relief.

Jump forward to today, 54 years later. **Our planet is once again in CRISIS.** Globally we are experiencing a quickly changing climate. Our oceans are warming and becoming less productive, there is less fresh water for salmon to spawn in, our forests are burning up and storms are becoming more powerful and more frequent.

Climate Change is not a distant threat, it is here NOW and the urgency is not unlike what it was back in 1970.

**The difference today is, we won't be able to just regulate our way out of it this time. We have to change our attitudes, and our actions.**

We need to change how we get to work, how we fuel our vehicles, and how we heat our homes. It is going to take each and every one of us--our co-workers, our friends, and our families to join together collectively with a common goal to ensure that future generations will have green spaces and climate stability. It's up to us to make sure that the flora and fauna we know today will still have a home on our earth tomorrow.

Today we are gathering together to commemorate Earth Day and to plant trees for our Earth's Future. Trees clean our air, shade our streams cool our backyards and connect us to nature. Collectively, community events like this one today not only help mitigate the effects of climate change, but they can inspire others to take action as well.

Earth Day is a reminder that each and every one of us has a role to play in protecting our environment and leaving a sustainable legacy to future generations.

We accomplished that when we came together back in 1970; and I have faith we can do it again. Let's go plant trees!