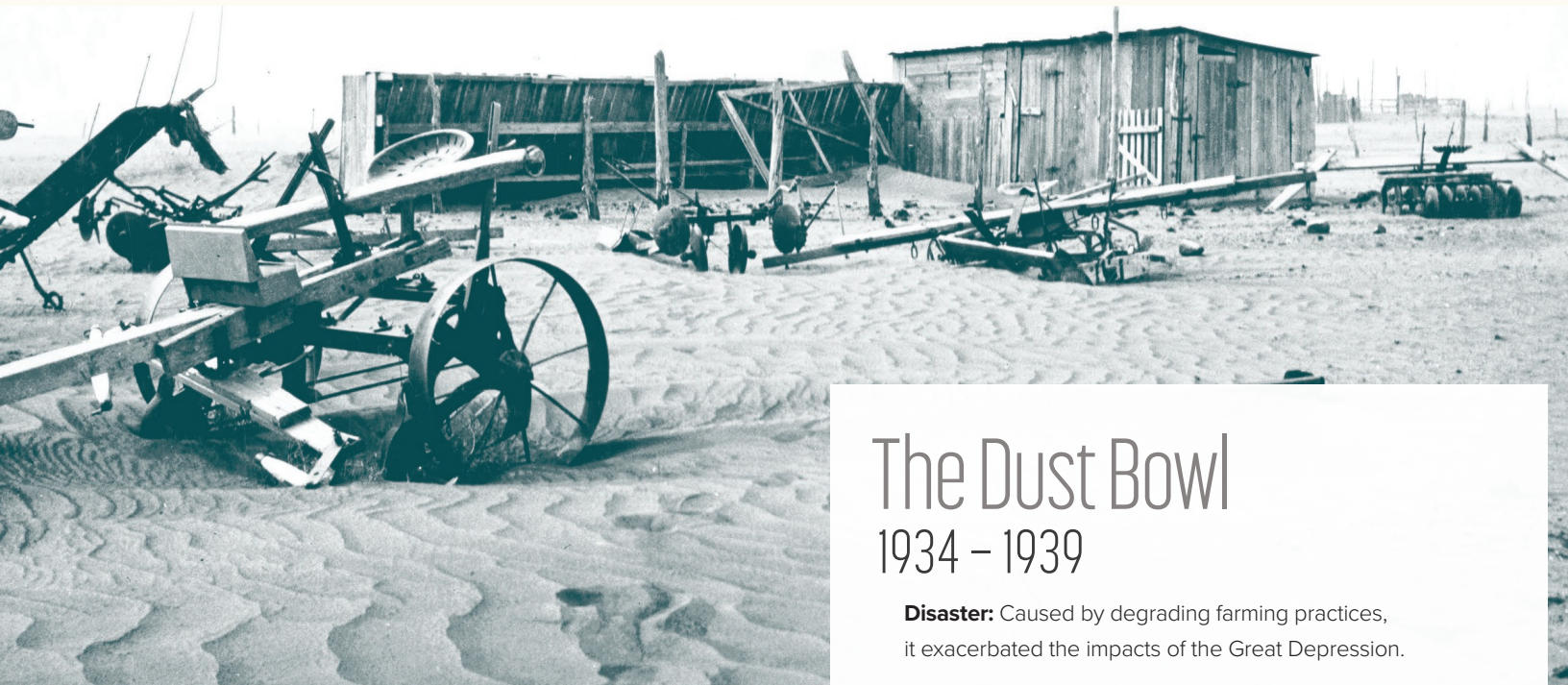


Disaster As Catalyst

The year 2020 has been marked by disasters. Australia caught fire, coronavirus has killed hundreds of thousands, shut down the economy, and kept us home scared, and instances of police brutality have roiled our towns and cities and called greater attention to the deep racial inequities in our society. Let's reflect back on another set of crises—environmental disasters—and the major changes in national law and policy that followed. Moments of great disruption are often moments where great change is possible.



The Dust Bowl 1934 – 1939

Disaster: Caused by degrading farming practices, it exacerbated the impacts of the Great Depression.

Upside: Greatly expanded government participation in land management and soil conservation through multiple New Deal acts and initiatives.



Cuyahoga River Fire 1969

Disaster: The river blaze in Cleveland got national attention in 1969 but was actually one of many times oil slicks on the river caught fire since 1868.

Upside: A contributing factor to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Water Act in 1972.

Energy Crisis 1973 – 1979

Disaster: The price of oil skyrocketed due to decreases in supply brought on by the Yom Kippur War and the Iranian Revolution.

Upside: Led to the Public Utility Regulatory Policy Act (PURPA) in 1978 that created a market for non-utility power producers and paved the way for renewable energy.

Donora Smog 1948

Disaster: Considered one of the greatest air pollution disasters. The smog, caused by environmental factors combined with zinc smelting, killed 70 and sickened 7,000.

Upside: Helped trigger the clean-air movement that led to the Clean Air Act of 1963.

DDT Poisoning 1973

Disaster: Documented in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, DDT poisoning led to the loss of birds of prey including bald eagles.

Upside: Outcry about the plight of bald eagles contributed to the passing of the Endangered Species Act, considered among the strongest US environmental laws.

Love Canal 1978

Disaster: Hundreds of Niagara Falls, New York residents fell ill due to companies dumping toxic chemicals over decades.

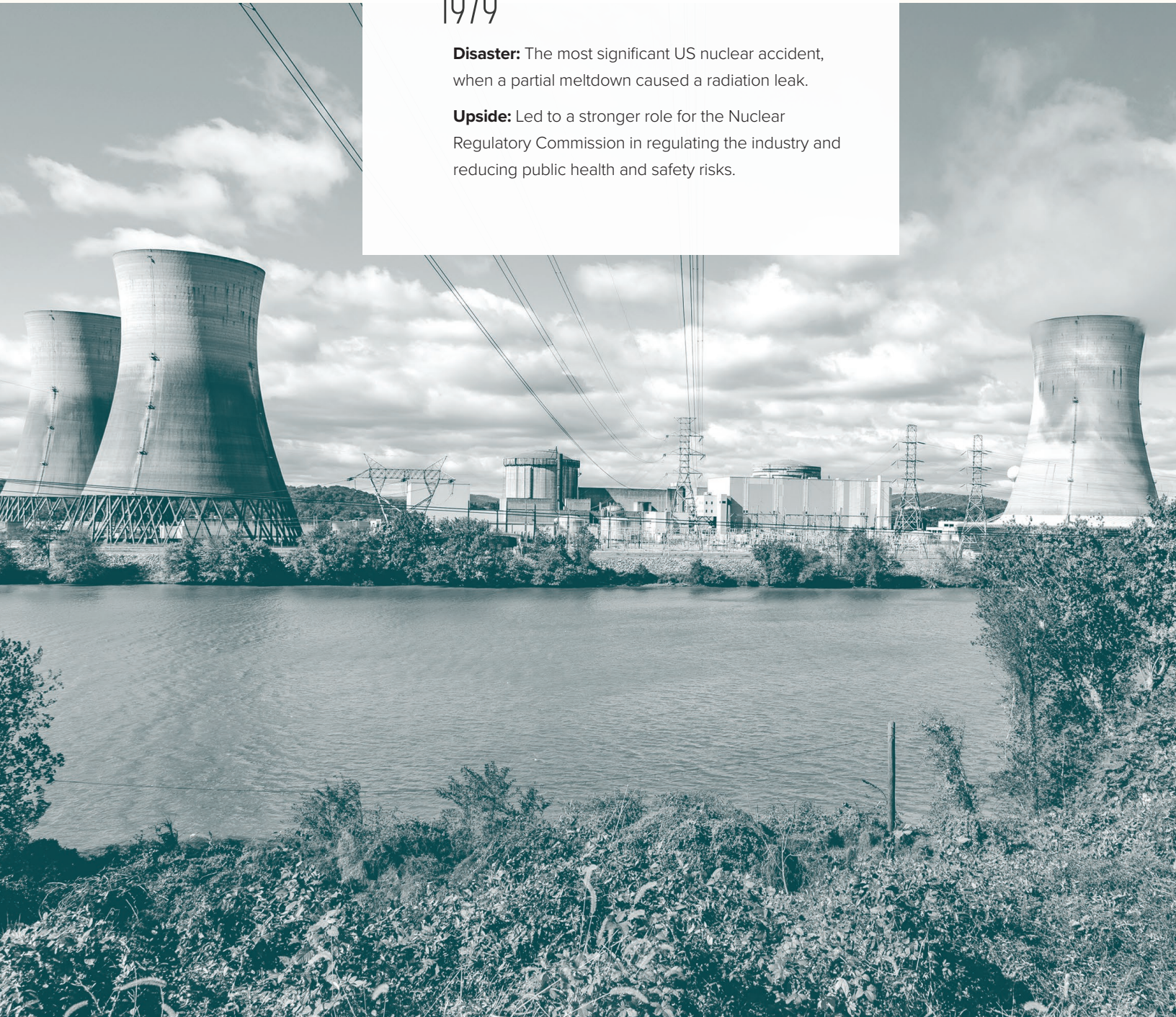
Upside: Led to the Superfund law to designate and clean up toxic sites all over the country.

Three Mile Island

1979

Disaster: The most significant US nuclear accident, when a partial meltdown caused a radiation leak.

Upside: Led to a stronger role for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in regulating the industry and reducing public health and safety risks.





Ozone Layer Hole

1985

Disaster: Caused by manufactured chemicals, depleted ozone increases cancer and other health risks.

Upside: Led to the Montreal Protocol which phased out and banned chemicals such as CFCs.

Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

2010

Disaster: Industrial disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, it was the largest marine oil spill in history.

Upside: Led President Obama to issue an executive order establishing the National Ocean Council to work on conservation and resource management (revoked by President Trump in 2018).

Climate Change

2016

Disaster: Though a slow-moving crisis, climate change is causing devastating impacts such as extreme heat, coral bleaching, and deadlier and more frequent natural disasters. Africa is anticipated to be among the hardest hit continents where countries are already experiencing extreme drought, dust storms, flooding, and landslides attributed to climate change.

Upside: In 2016, countries around the world signed the Paris Agreement to address greenhouse-gas emissions mitigation, adaptation, and finance. US cities and municipalities have taken on aggressive climate goals, and now expect the Biden administration to re-join the agreement in 2021. Combating the climate crisis will require individual, state, federal, and international action for decades to come.