

CITY
ENERGY

A JOINT PROJECT of NRDC + IMT

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CREATING AND RUNNING A BUILDING PERFORMANCE HELP CENTER



ABOUT CITY ENERGY PROJECT AND THE CITY ENERGY PROJECT RESOURCE LIBRARY

A joint initiative of the Institute for Market Transformation and the Natural Resources Defense Council, the City Energy Project supported bold yet practical ways to deploy energy efficiency at the city level to boost local economies, reduce pollution, and create healthier, more prosperous communities nationwide.

The project partnered with 20 local governments across the U.S. from 2013–2018 to design locally appropriate energy efficiency policies and programs. Building upon the past successes and innovation of cities, the City Energy Project established best-in-class practices for energy efficiency to be customized and replicated nationwide. Models and recommendations have been distilled into the City Energy Project Resource Library. This curated set of resources contains the necessary blueprints for a city government to craft and implement customized solutions to productively manage energy efficiency initiatives across commercial, multifamily, and public buildings in its jurisdiction.

For more information on the participating cities and counties in the City Energy Project, and to search the City Energy Project Resource Library, visit cityenergyproject.org.

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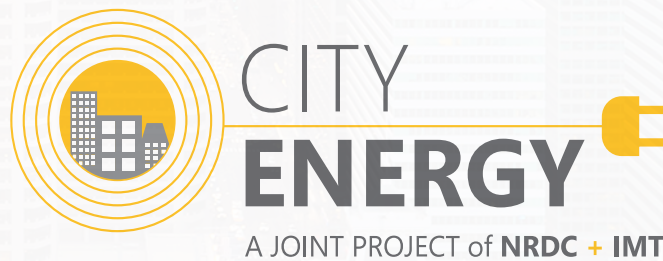




TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
BENEFITS OF A HELP CENTER.....	5
SETTING UP A HELP CENTER	6
PLANNING HELP CENTER SERVICES	6
PROMOTING YOUR HELP CENTER	14



INTRODUCTION

Whether your city has adopted a benchmarking and transparency ordinance or a full building performance ordinance requiring energy audits or retuning, it must have a system in place to help building owners and their representatives comply with their new legal obligations. In addition to sending notifications, conducting outreach, offering training events, and publishing compliance guides and checklists, cities need to establish a help center to offer stakeholders direct support as they navigate the compliance process. A help center not only improves the compliance experience for building owners and managers; it also serves as a piece of foundational infrastructure from which the city can offer deeper support to help stakeholders act to reduce their energy consumption.

Help centers generally consist of one or more trained staff that are available by phone and email to provide building owners and their representatives with technical assistance (e.g., acquiring utility bill data, troubleshooting in ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager, spotting and correcting data errors) and help them understand their responsibilities under the ordinance.

The level of service offered by a help center will vary from city to city, but their purpose is the same: to make the compliance process as easy and stress-free as possible and to help owners understand and improve their building's performance.

This resource describes what a benchmarking help center does and guides city government staff in developing a help center to meet their city's needs and improve benchmarking compliance rates.

BENEFITS OF A HELP CENTER

Help centers are not only beneficial for building owners and managers. They also offer several important benefits to city governments, including improved compliance rates, higher-quality data, increased goodwill, and the opportunity to encourage energy improvements.



CITY EXAMPLE

Denver

The City and County of Denver, which offers a high level of support through its help center, achieved a 90 percent overall compliance rate with its benchmarking ordinance in 2018, despite the fact that smaller buildings, which often have very low compliance rates in the early years of an benchmarking program, reported for the first time that year. To achieve this high rate of compliance, Denver's help center took 5,662 phone calls and answered 1,044 emails from January to September 2018.

IMPROVED COMPLIANCE RATES

Help centers can drive higher compliance with building performance ordinances. The direct assistance help centers provide means that building owners or managers that are confused by ordinance requirements or by technical aspects of the benchmarking and reporting process have somewhere to turn for help, increasing the likelihood that they will comply. Some help centers take a more proactive approach to policy compliance, sending automated reminder emails to contacts at non-compliant buildings as often as every day in the weeks leading up to and following a compliance deadline.

HIGHER-QUALITY DATA

Errors and omissions in benchmarking reports are unavoidable, as benchmarking data is self-reported, often by non-energy experts. Data quality is inevitably worse in the early years of policy implementation when many, if not most, people submitting reports are doing it for the first time. By scanning submitted data for suspicious or missing values, help center staff can send customized follow-up messages to submitters instructing them on how to correct or verify their reports.

INCREASED GOODWILL

By providing friendly technical assistance and prompt follow-up to inquiries, help centers show stakeholders that they are not alone in dealing with policy requirements. This builds goodwill among the real estate industry, which supports city efforts to develop positive working relationships with building owners and managers through other energy efficiency programs and initiatives.

OPPORTUNITY TO ENCOURAGE ENERGY IMPROVEMENT

Depending on the level of service offered, a help center can guide building owners toward next steps to improving the performance of their buildings. This could involve referring them to utility programs or explaining the benefits of energy actions such as audits, retuning, or equipment upgrades.

SETTING UP A HELP CENTER

Help centers can be managed as internal city programs staffed by staff or volunteers, or they can be outsourced to private firms or nonprofit organizations. Large cities with many covered buildings should strongly consider bringing on a third party to provide help center services. A qualified nonprofit or private firm will often be better equipped with the resources and technical infrastructure needed to manage a help center. This frees up city government staff time for other activities such as developing complementary energy efficiency programs or policies.

PLANNING HELP CENTER SERVICES

At its most basic, a help center is a phone number or email address that building owners and managers can use to get answers to questions concerning the compliance process for the city's building performance ordinance. However, a high-functioning help center requires a number of other administrative and technical activities. [Table 1 on page 7](#) explains the recommended functions a help center should have to deliver the most benefit to city government and stakeholders alike. For externally managed help centers, the city may have to authorize certain administrative activities such as updating the covered buildings list or processing exemptions.



LEARN MORE

Communications Materials: Compliance Templates

The City Energy Project Resource Library features the [COMMUNICATIONS MATERIALS: COMPLIANCE TEMPLATES](#), which are designed to help a city create outreach and communications materials to provide stakeholders with the information they need to comply with policy requirements.

[VIEW TEMPLATES >](#)

Table 1. Recommended Help Center Functions

FUNCTION	DESCRIPTION
Produce compliance guides and checklists	Help center staff should create written documents that walk readers through the compliance process.
Provide technical assistance by phone and email to owners and managers seeking support	Help center staff should be trained to answer detailed questions about ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager, utility data access, and the ordinance’s overall reporting and compliance processes.
Manage and update the list of covered buildings and their compliance status	Help center operators should have access to the covered buildings list and authorization to edit it where appropriate (e.g., record compliance status, add contact information, correcting addresses, etc.).
Scan submitted benchmarking reports for missing or erroneous data	At the point of submission, help center staff should flag important data fields that are empty or that contain values outside the expected range. Ideally, help center staff should automatically return reports with suspected errors to submitters to be corrected or verified.
Track all contacts and interactions with building owners and managers	Help center staff should log all correspondence with building owners and managers, including phone calls, emails, and meetings.
Process exemption requests	Help center staff should process routine exemption requests where the necessary conditions are straightforward to confirm. For more complex cases, help center staff should direct owners and managers to the appropriate city staff person.

ADDITIONAL HELP CENTER FUNCTIONS

Some of the cities that have used third-party providers to manage their help centers have tasked those contractors with fulfilling other ordinance implementation activities, such as notifying stakeholders of ordinance requirements, running live training sessions, and producing compliance guidance documents. This chart lists additional implementation activities that cities may consider assigning to a third-party help center provider. These activities are described in detail in the City Energy Project resource, [Implementing Building Performance Policies: How Cities Can Apply Legislation for Maximum Impact](#).

Table 2. Additional Implementation Functions Managed by Help Centers

FUNCTION	DESCRIPTION
Make proactive calls and send emails to non-compliant buildings	Prior to the compliance deadline, help center staff reach out to building contacts to remind them of the need to comply.
Notify building owners and managers of ordinance requirements	Help center staff draft and send notification letters to contacts at buildings covered by the ordinance.
Provide presentations or trainings on benchmarking and compliance	Training events and workshops are organized and led by the help center contractor.
Offer drop-in appointments for building owners and managers	Building owners and managers are invited to receive in-person assistance from help center staff.
Visualize public benchmarking data (e.g., interactive maps, graphics)	If the help center provider has the capability to create data visualization applications, cities may wish to contract this service to them.
Direct building owners and managers to utility programs, incentives, and other resources that can help them improve their performance.	Cities could task help centers with steering building owners and managers toward opportunities to increase their energy efficiency.

HELP CENTER SERVICES EXAMPLES

The extent of a help center’s services depends on the funding, staff time, and pool of contractors it has at its disposal. The following chart summarizes the services offered by a handful of CEP cities’ help centers. For each city, the chart indicates whether the help center is managed in-house by city staff or by an external contractor; the services offered by the help center; and whether those services meet a low, medium, or high level.

Table 3. Help Center Services Examples

CITY	IN-HOUSE OR CONTRACTED	SERVICES	LEVEL OF SERVICE
Chicago	Contracted to nonprofit, Elevate Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive website • Full-time email and phone support • Free trainings and guidance materials • Data-quality reviews and pro bono energy data verification • Resource page with incentive and rebate programs • Annual reports on progress, building data portal for market comparison, and an energy performance map 	HIGH
Denver	Contracted to Overlay Consulting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive website • Full-time email and phone support, and support by appointment • Free trainings and guidance materials • Automatic data-quality reviews • Compliance and violation notifications and exemption processing 	HIGH
Seattle	Staffing and management contracted to Northwest Energy Efficiency Council, a business association of the energy efficiency industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive website • Full-time email and phone support, and drop ins by appointment • Coordination with utilities to provide automated data upload • Data-quality reviews • Free trainings and guidance materials • Monthly benchmarking E-Newsletter • Data set on energy performance ranges, building data portal for market comparison, and an energy performance map 	HIGH
Los Angeles	Contracted to the Los Angeles Better Buildings Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive website • Specific information/requests assigned to specific partners • Online assistance request system • FAQs, guides, primers, and videos • Email/newsletter and public archive • Resource page with incentive and rebate programs 	MEDIUM
Philadelphia	Managed in-house by Philadelphia’s Office of Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive website • Guides and resources to benchmark and understand the results • Email assistance • Annual reports on efficiency improvements • Interactive map and charts visualizing building type and energy use 	LOW

STAFFING AND TRAINING

Some cities such as Washington, DC and Philadelphia have staffed their help centers using government employees. The benefit of this approach is that the city gets direct contact with building owners and managers, allowing them to hear direct feedback on the compliance process and understand where stakeholders are having difficulty; however, this more labor-intensive approach can have its drawbacks. It can be more costly and pull limited staff time away from potentially more valuable activities. Some cities such as New York City and Seattle have used interns or college students to staff their help centers. While this approach lowers the labor costs, it requires more extensive training on the technical aspects of ordinance compliance and on the customer services skills needed to work with frustrated callers.

The following table, adapted from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory's [Evaluation of U.S. Building Energy Benchmarking and Transparency Programs: Attributes, Impacts, and Best Practices](#) (page 26), summarizes the staffing commitments for nine compliance help centers and describes the activities of each. While staffing needs vary by city, depending on the number of covered buildings and the sizes and types of buildings required to comply, cities should generally plan to dedicate at least one full-time equivalent (FTE) employee to help center duties, with additional help likely needed during reporting season.

Table 4. Help Center Staffing and Activities by Number of Buildings

JURISDICTION	STAFFING	ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF BUILDINGS
Boston	In-house and interns: during peak hours between 1.5 and 2 FTEs; other times <1 FTE.	For the 2016 reporting year: 284 unique individuals, 217 emails, 216 phone calls. Most common topics: (1) getting started; (2) Portfolio Manager; (3) exemptions; (4) obtaining utility data; (5) submission process.	1,600
Cambridge, MA	Primarily an external consultant with oversight and some supplemental assistance from in-house staffing.	Data unavailable.	1,121
Chicago	Nonprofit partner, Elevate Energy, runs the help center; 1.5 FTEs, including preparing activity and compliance reports.	Fielded more than 10,000 phone calls in 2014–2016, and 4,600 interactions (email, phone) in 2016 alone.	3,500
Montgomery County	In-house staff (0.5-0.75 FTE). Staff offer monthly office hours to help with questions about the benchmarking law at the County Department of Environmental Protection, but reported in interviews with Berkeley Lab that a staffed help center could make policy more effective.	Data unavailable.	750
New York City	In-house staff help center; 2 FTEs.	Fielded nearly 1,000 calls and emails in 2016.	~14,000 buildings in 2016
Philadelphia	In-house staff; no breakout provided for help desk. Philadelphia has worked to develop materials that minimize the need for help desk services.	Fielded 978 phone calls and 2,393 emails from 2013–2015.	2,900

JURISDICTION	STAFFING	ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF BUILDINGS
San Francisco	In-house staff; no breakout provided for help desk; PG&E also staffs a help desk that focuses on data access	Data unavailable.	2,312
Seattle	Outsourced help desk services; 1.5 FTEs	In 2013, the help desk responded to 9,695 calls and emails; 64 percent of the owners or managers requires to report received assistance. The City of Seattle has indicated that the help desk has continued to provide support through 2016.	3,250
Washington, DC	One FTE and 1 to 2 half-time interns or contractors during the reporting season	In 2013 and 2014, the first two years of reporting, the help center assisted over 70 percent of buildings with reporting. In 2015, the help center fielded over 2,000 calls and emails.	2,000

ALLOCATING STAFF TIME

Help centers require their heaviest staffing during the first compliance cycle (or cycles for cities phasing in their ordinance requirements) when building owners and managers are least familiar with the compliance process. You should plan to dedicate more staff time to providing technical assistance in these early years, gradually reducing staff investment in later years as complying becomes routine for building owners and managers.

Staffing requirements for help centers do not hold constant throughout the year. Demand for technical assistance will rise dramatically in the days and weeks preceding the compliance deadline and will likely remain high until after the deadline, particularly in the early years of ordinance implementation. Plan to have a higher level of staffing for 6–8 weeks before and after the compliance deadline to handle a high volume of requests for assistance.

The following [Figures on page 12](#), both created by the City of Chicago, show the dynamic demand for help center assistance. Figure 1 illustrates the increased demand for help center services in the months leading up to and just after the compliance deadline, with another uptick after violation notices are distributed. Figure 2 shows the decreasing demand for help center assistance year over year. As building owners and managers acquire more experience complying with Chicago’s benchmarking ordinance, they need less attention from help center staff.

Figure 1. 2016 Chicago Energy Benchmarking Report

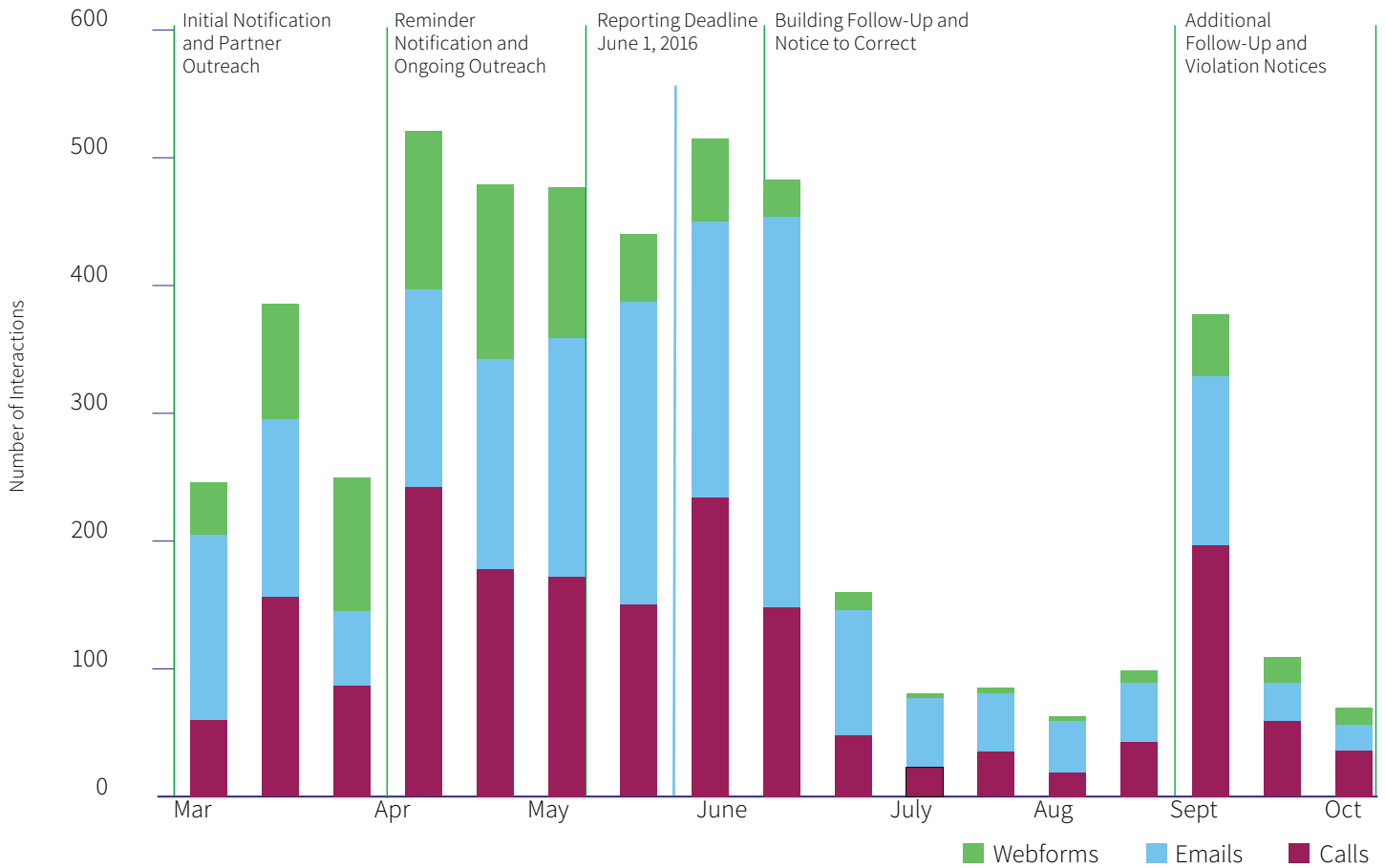
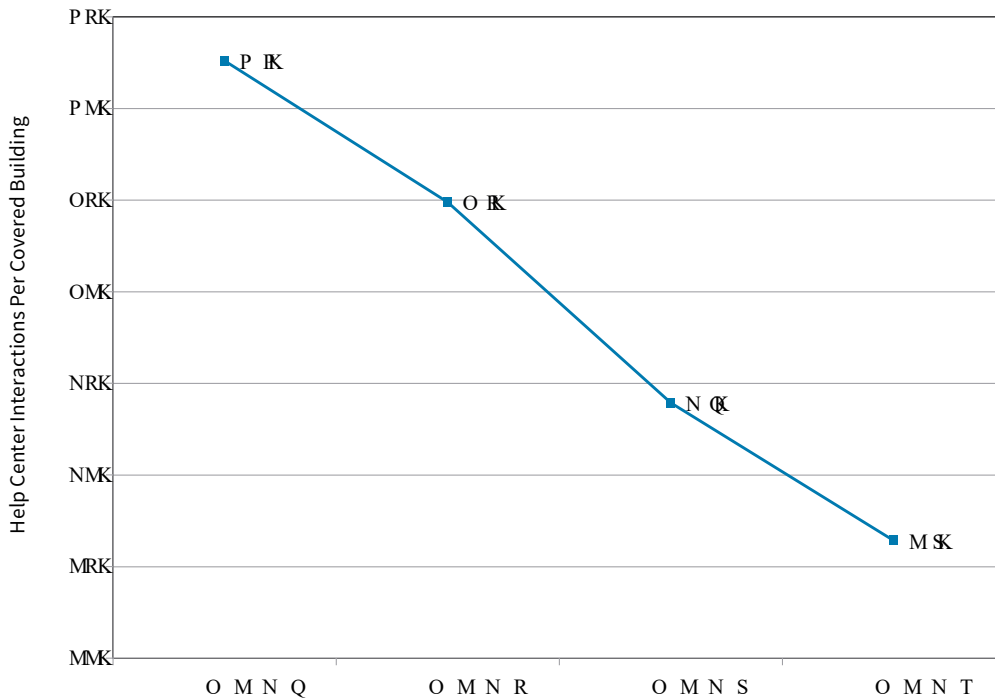


Figure 2. Annual Help Center Interactions Per Covered Building



13,385 interactions
from 2014–2017 (phone calls, emails, and webforms)

Average 2017 call time:
6 minutes, 30 seconds

Average 2017 caller wait time: 17 seconds

Total 2017 phone support:
117 hours, 17 minutes

CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

Help centers need a system for tracking interactions with building representatives. Private firms now offer customized software platforms to help city governments manage benchmarking and building performance ordinance data. Many of these platforms are also capable of tracking the contact between help center staff and building representatives. In Colorado, the City and County of Denver as well as the City of Boulder each pay for a custom software solution that tracks help center interactions with stakeholders and automates many of the help center's communications. City Energy Project estimates that this relationship tracking saves cities 20–30 hours per week in staff time at the peak of compliance season. Some cities have worked with their internal IT departments to develop applications based on customer relationship management software used for other city programs, while others have used on off the shelf programs such as Microsoft Access.

Cities should avoid data tracking systems that rely on manually moving information between different applications using CSV files or other protocols, as this type of software solution is inefficient and prone to error.



PROMOTING YOUR HELP CENTER

For a help center to be effective, there must be general awareness among stakeholders of its existence, purpose, and operating hours. Information about a help center should be included in all notices about a city's benchmarking requirement, as well as on the city website. In addition, information on the help center should be included in outreach materials, including the materials targeted at service providers and at trade and real estate associations.



BUILDING PERFORMANCE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

Getting an efficiency policy passed to improve the energy performance of buildings is no easy feat. The City Energy Project resource, [**IMPLEMENTING BUILDING PERFORMANCE POLICIES: HOW CITIES APPLY LEGISLATION FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT**](#), helps any city government staff in implementation of a policy from outreach to building owners to helping them meet compliance requirements.

- Engage the community
- Develop an inventory of covered buildings
- Collect and manage building data
- Engage utilities
- Improve compliance with support resources
- Communicate results

[VIEW GUIDE >](#)

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR MARKET TRANSFORMATION AND THE NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR MARKET TRANSFORMATION

The Institute for Market Transformation (IMT) is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that catalyzes widespread and sustained demand for energy-efficient buildings. Founded in 1996 and based in Washington, D.C., IMT specializes in driving the intersection of real estate and public policy to make buildings more productive, affordable, valuable, and resilient. A trusted, non-partisan leader, IMT focuses on innovative and pragmatic solutions that fuel greater investment in energy-efficient buildings to meet local market priorities. IMT offers hands-on technical assistance and market research, alongside expertise in policy and program development and deployment and promotion of best practices and knowledge exchange. Its efforts lead to important policy outcomes, widespread changes in real estate practices, and lasting market demand for energy efficiency—resulting in greater benefits for all people, the economy, and the environment. Visit us at www.imt.org and follow us on Twitter [@IMT_speaks](https://twitter.com/IMT_speaks).



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The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is an international nonprofit environmental organization with more than 3 million members and online activists. Since 1970, our lawyers, scientists, and other environmental specialists have worked to protect the world's natural resources, public health, and the environment. NRDC has offices in New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Bozeman, MT, and Beijing. Visit us at www.nrdc.org and follow us on Twitter [@NRDC](https://twitter.com/NRDC).





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