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Acid Rain: The Time to Act is Now



Acid Rain Conference with the States
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Our knowledge of acid deposition is not perfect. As one scientist recently put it to me, the problem has gradually "snuck up" on us in the last few years. Extensive research is now underway by government, industry and independent scientists both in the United States and abroad. For example, last August, the President intensified federal research efforts by establishing the Acid Rain Coordination Committee to oversee a ten year, \$100 million budget. Many states have set up monitoring programs to assess the impact of acid deposition within their borders. And several other countries, particularly the Scandinavians, already have compiled some complete and dramatic information about acid deposition effects.

While there is much we do not know:

- We **know** acid deposition can and has destroyed lake and stream ecosystems, killing fish and other water life. Lakes in northern Minnesota, about 200 lakes in New York and many hundreds of lakes in Canada already are acidified and their fish populations are shrinking or are extinct. Headwater streams in the Appalachian chain from Georgia to Maine are becoming acidified.
- We **know** some soils are being damaged over time due to leaching of minerals and nutrients.
- We **know** stone buildings and monuments are eroded more rapidly by acid rain.
- We **know** sulfur mist from power plants is contributing significantly to poor visibility in the northeast, which averages less than eight miles.
- We **suspect** some important crops could be damaged by acid deposition and that others may be injured by acidified soil.
- We **suspect** growth of some forests may be reduced.
- We **suspect** that in the long term some drinking water supplies may be contaminated by toxic metals leached from the soils by acid deposition.

What we know and what we suspect about acid deposition tell us we are faced with a genuine and serious environmental problem. It is a problem which will—if allowed to grow unchecked—carry substantial economic cost. Further research and development of new control technologies must

continue. But in my judgment, we should not let the problem get worse while we learn how to make it better.

I have discussed my concerns about acid rain with the President. The President shares my belief that acid rain is a serious problem and one that must be addressed. He has asked me to propose solutions—which I intend to do. In formulating those solutions, I want—and I intend—to consult widely with various interested groups.

As a practical matter, the only way to reduce acid deposition is to reduce emissions of sulfur and nitrogen oxides, the pollutants that cause the problem. Among the major sources of these pollutants are utility power plants. Last year we set emission standards for new power plants which will prevent them from contributing significantly to the problem of acid deposition. However, there are hundreds of older power plants that are either uncontrolled or poorly controlled. Any effective plan to reduce acid deposition will, of necessity require reducing emissions from these older plants.

As the nation backs away from oil and turns to coal for its energy needs, reducing total regional emissions will not be easy; but it can be done. I wholeheartedly support coal conversion. It is essential that this nation reduce its dependence on imported oil. I strongly believe, and have consistently stated publicly, that we can switch to coal and, at the same time, protect against environmental degradation. As we do so, we must realize that the distribution of coal reserves in this country precludes us from relying simply on low-sulfur coal. The welfare of our miners and the economies of our eastern and midwestern coal-producing states require that we find ways to use all our coal. The New Source Performance Standard for coal-fired power plants allows for just that.

I know many of you are also concerned with the economic effects of being downwind of interstate transport of air pollutants. In reality, states both import and export air pollution. When one state is forced to clamp down on sources within its borders to compensate for pollution coming from a neighboring state, however, its

industry unfairly may bear an inequitable share of the costs for dealing with what is in reality a larger, regional problem. Moreover, the state's margin for economic growth may be unfairly reduced.

In the future, EPA intends to involve itself more directly in these issues. Where states are unable to resolve these inequities among themselves, we will use our authority in favor of the state imposing more stringent controls when it is being adversely affected by another state with relatively lax controls.

Our goals are clear. The best means to achieve them is not. As we chart a course of action, we must face the fact that the Clean Air Act has been used primarily to protect air quality near major pollution sources on a state-by-state basis. The Act has not been fully tested in dealing with regional pollution problems such as acid deposition. However, if we are to do anything in the very near term, we must work within its current structure.

We intend to put the provisions of the law that allow us to address regional problems to the test. The effectiveness of these provisions remains to be seen. They simply may offer more opportunity for debate and prolonged litigation without providing any real benefits. Although it is still too early to draw definite conclusions, we may need legislative help.

I am convinced that there will be no obvious, easy or cheap solutions. There will inevitably be debate over both the significance of acid deposition and the mechanisms for its control.

I am persuaded that the time has come to make the transition from research to action. My bottom line is to accomplish, in the near term, a real reduction in emissions from current levels. As a first step, we must act now to avoid, wherever possible, significant increases in emissions of sulfur and nitrogen compounds which are causing the acid deposition problem to increase both in severity and in geographic extent. We can then turn to the question of reducing atmospheric loadings from current levels. I look at this conference as a first step toward building substantial agreements between the States on the seriousness of the problem and on the kinds of near-term and long-term remedial actions that are appropriate.