

Even the West Must Pay to End Acid Rain

By HENRY A. WAXMAN

Acid rain historically has been looked on as the best kind of problem for Californians—somebody else's.

Usually portrayed as a plague visited on the Northeast, acid rain was something we didn't have to protect our borders from.

We were wrong, and now it may be too late for precautions.

Acid rain is falling in California, as it is in virtually every other state. It is corrupting our natural resources—lakes, farm lands and forests—and eating away at our buildings, automobiles and monuments.

Even worse, scientists now suspect that acid rain may pose a direct threat to our health. It adds poisonous metals to our drinking water with unknown results; some studies suggest that it may be linked to Alzheimer's disease, a form of premature senility caused by degeneration of brain cells.

With the entire nation having a stake in correcting this devastating problem, why has Congress been unable to adopt legislation to deal with it?

To begin with, those for and against acid-rain controls have managed to reach only one consensus: that acid rain is formed when sulfuric and nitrogen oxides are emitted into the atmosphere and converted into sulfuric and nitric acids, which then descend upon us in the form of rain, fog or snow.

The controversy heats up when controls are considered. Although the National Academy of Sciences has reported that the only way to curb acid rain is to impose tighter controls on the pollutants loosed by power plants, cars and trucks, bitter disagreements dominate the questions of how much control and which form of control.

This is due to the expense of controlling power-plant pollutants, whether by using "scrubber" technologies that remove pollutants or by prohibiting the use of high-sulfur coal as fuel. Opponents have been successful with the economic argument that controls will cause an unacceptable number of lost jobs or equally unacceptable utility rate increases.

To deal with these arguments, Rep. Gerry Sikorski (D-Minn.) and I sought to devise a legislative approach that would meet the national goal of reducing acid rain without causing widespread unemployment or large rate increases. The result is our National Acid Deposition Control Act, which proposes that sulfur dioxide emissions be reduced by 10 million tons and nitrogen oxide emissions by 4 million tons. These reductions would virtually eliminate the problem.

To reach this goal, the 50 largest emission sources among coal-burning power plants would be required to install scrubber technology by 1990. This would reduce sulfur dioxide levels by 7 million tons. At the same

time it would preserve the jobs of 80,000 coal miners in the East and Midwest and the jobs of an additional 200,000 workers in related industries.

The states involved would be required to pursue the remaining 3-million-ton goal for sulfur-dioxide reduction in proportion to the amount of emissions from plants within their borders. These reductions would be required by 1993 and could be met by scrubbing, fuel switching or other methods.

The 4-million-ton reduction in nitrogen oxide would be accomplished by strict controls on emissions from new trucks and new power plants. This would give California added protection from ozone as well as acid rain.

As for financing, a fee of one mill—one-tenth of a cent—would be imposed on most electrical generation nationwide during the next decade. This would cost the average residential household about 50 cents to \$1 a month. The fee would help finance the cost of installing scrubbers on power plants, thus preventing huge rate hikes in any one region. But the areas that pollute the most would still bear the principal cost burden of clean-up.

In taking a national approach, this bill is the only proposal to curb acid rain that has a real chance of passage. Once this is achieved, it will boost our chances of moving ahead with other Clean Air Act amendments and fine-tuning changes to increase the law's simplicity and effectiveness. We will then be able to end the Environmental Protection Agency's shameful record of ignoring cancer-causing air pollutants.

Still, we face an uphill battle.

Some utilities—particularly those in the West—are enraged over the fee-sharing provision and are committed to opposing the legislation. They are joining with some coal-mining interests in an attempt to divide the country along regional lines and to persuade people in our region that we have no stake in controlling acid rain.

There is, of course, nothing new about spreading the cost of alleviating a localized problem, whether it is pollution control, highway construction, water projects or bailing out a troubled industry.

We all recognize that national efforts are needed to solve problems with national impact. Acid rain is no different. It is no respecter of state lines, and its economic fallout affects Californians as well as Vermonters. Correcting the ecological damage that acid rain has done, and continues to do, to this country requires the immediate cooperation of all Americans.

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