

Perspective

A forum—ideas, analysis, opinion

Chicago Tribune, Wednesday, March 14, 1984

Section 1 15

One way to control acid rain

By Henry A. Waxman

Many Midwesterners who recognize the need to solve the problems of acid rain nonetheless fear that job losses and electricity rate increases are an inevitable part of a solution.

Their concerns are reflected in the growing debate over how to stop acid rain from destroying invaluable natural resources in the Midwest and all other regions of the United States. The key policy question has moved from whether we should control acid rain to who will pay for control.

The Reagan administration's decision to ignore the problem despite accumulating evidence of its damage has left Congress with the formidable task of passing legislation that provides health and environmental protections against acid rain while protecting Midwestern workers and consumers.

Although some advocates of acid rain control may take comfort in statistics showing that a reduction of 10 million tons of sulfur dioxide emissions can be achieved at a cost of only several thousand jobs, there is no comfort in those cold numbers for mine workers and their families, who will find themselves without jobs and maybe homes. But legislation to control acid rain need not, and should not, cause either regional unemployment or skyrocketing utility rates.

In fact, previous efforts to deal with the hazard could have hurt the Midwest economically, because they dealt only with emission reductions, not the effect reduction measures would have on Midwestern jobs and electricity rates.

But last year Rep. Gerry Sikorski (D., Minn.) and I developed legislation that for the first time reconciles environmental and economic concerns. Our bill, HR 3400, requires 10 million tons of sulfur dioxide emission reductions and 4 million tons of nitrogen oxide emission reductions. This clean-up would be a significant beginning in our battle against acid rain.

To reach this goal, the 50 largest emission sources among coal-burning power plants would have to install scrubber technology by 1990. This technology allows the continued use of Midwestern coal to generate electricity.

To help pay for these controls and soften any potential rate increase, the bill provides for a 90 percent subsidy for the capital costs of installing control technology. This means that not only would sulfur dioxide emissions be reduced by 7 million tons in the Midwest, but thousands of Midwestern jobs would be preserved and large rate hikes averted.

Not surprisingly, almost all of the dirtiest plants are in the Midwest, where most high-sulfur coal is mined. This helps explain why Ohio's utilities emit more sulfur dioxide in one day than Vermont and Maine combined emit in a year.

But HR 3400 doesn't just call for Midwestern reductions. Northeastern utilities would have to cut emissions almost in half as part of the remaining 3-million-ton goal. These reductions would be required by 1993, and capital subsidies would again be available for reductions achieved through the use of technology.

The bill's capital subsidy would be financed by imposing a small fee on most electrical generation nationwide during the next decade. In years past, utilities have claimed acid rain controls would cause tremendous electricity rate hikes. But HR 3400's cost-sharing mechanism ensures that Illinois' residential consumers would face a rate increase of only 3 percent, or about \$1.25.

In short, we have found a way to clean the environment, avoid significant rate increases and actually create almost 20,000 direct and indirect jobs in Illinois.

But passage of the acid rain bill is far from assured. We can expect President Reagan to ignore Congress' bipartisan effort and oppose the legislation. And the Midwestern utilities, which would rather switch to low-sulfur coal from the West, will continue to work with low-sulfur coal companies in opposing the legislation.

Despite these obstacles, we will keep fighting for national acid rain legislation that treats each region of the nation fairly. We cannot sit by while our health and environment are imperiled.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D., Calif.) is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Health and Environment.