

HEW Assaults Air Pollution In U.S. Cities

by Barbara J. Culliton

The Federal Government is stepping up efforts to force industry to reduce the deadly poisons polluting the air.

In a move that will stimulate research by the coal and petroleum industries or send new business to competitive natural gas companies poised to leap, Secretary John W. Gardner of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare named sulfur oxides as one of the most widespread and harmful of all air poisons. Sulfur oxides, which come mainly from the combustion of coal and heavy fuel oils containing sulfur, are associated with chronic respiratory diseases and with damage to property and vegetation.

In a double-barreled assault, the Secretary announced proposed regulation for the control of sulfur oxide fumes at federal installations in the New York, Chicago and Philadelphia areas, and enforcement conferences aimed at polluters in New York, New Jersey, West Virginia, Ohio, Idaho and Washington.

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Last June, under Executive Order, Secretary Gardner issued standards for pollution control from other federal operations. The regulations for the three big city areas are considerably more stringent than the others. In the New York area, for example, the sulfur oxide levels may have to be reduced by 50 to 80 percent in order to meet the standards.

The pollution caused by the federal installations in these three areas accounts for less than one-half of one percent of all sulfur oxide pollution, so HEW's action will not have any dramatic effect in itself. The idea is, however, that since the government is "cleaning house," industry will follow suit and not have to be forced to heel. The federal installations will also be a test bed in the effort to determine what is possible with existing technology.

At the present time, there is no economical technique for removing sulfur oxides from the fuels used in industrial operations. Therefore, reliance must be placed on the use of low-sulfur fuels that can be obtained in most places, but also at a higher price than available coal and oil fuel.

Secretary Gardner places the burden of responsibility for pollution problems on industry, where little research has been done on economically feasible and effective methods of pollution control.

At the moment, virtually all research and development efforts are in industry's hands. It is likely, however, that the Secretary may ask Congress to support expanded Federal searches for cheap ways to make fuels sulfur-free.

Legislation passed within the last three years gives HEW sufficient authority to deal with the problems now before it, considering the present state of technical knowledge, Mr. Gardner said, adding that he anticipates no reduction in legislative or financial support from the newly elected Congress.

Along with the problems of gross sulfur oxides pollution, HEW officials are also concerned about pollution from such atmospheric "trace" contaminants as lead, beryllium, molybdenum, chromium, nickel and other metals discharged by industrial and combustion processes. Legislative authority is expected to be sought soon to introduce research, if not controls, for these contaminants too.

Lead is also a problem of automotive pollution. Research is already underway to determine the levels of human tolerance and acceptable background levels of lead in the environment.

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