

ACID RAIN'S POLITICAL WEB

Development of a policy to control acid rain
is lagging behind the pace of research

By IVARS PETERSON

The beginning of summer seems to bring with it an annual flood of acid rain research reports and policy pronouncements. Yet despite this rapidly growing flow of data, efforts within both the Reagan administration and Congress to develop a policy for mitigating the effects of acid rain are moving at a glacial pace.

On one side, the policymakers face evidence of acid rain damage to lakes and streams and possibly to forests; they also see contradictory or ambiguous information about effects on agricultural crops and human health (SN: 6/23/84, p. 392). On the other side, both the administration and Congress fear a deepening of regional divisions while the issue of "who pays?" remains unresolved.

Environmental groups such as the New York-based Environmental Defense Fund argue that current scientific understanding strongly indicates that the Reagan administration's "wait and see" policy may result in irreversible ecological damage. The Canadian government complains about the administration's "passive, even negative, attitude" toward international cooperation in coming to grips with the problem. "Canada has been very frustrated by developments over the past few years," says Allan E. Gottlieb, Canada's ambassador to the United States, "and deeply disappointed that the administration has chosen not to consider a control program in the foreseeable future."

The administration's response has been to accelerate federal efforts by doubling the budget for acid rain research. President Reagan also proposed an increase in the liming of sensitive lakes to "buy time" for further research and the development of improved control technologies (SN: 2/4/84, p. 68).

Within Congress, a variety of bills have surfaced, including several that set limits specifically on sulfur dioxide emissions from power plants and other large sources.

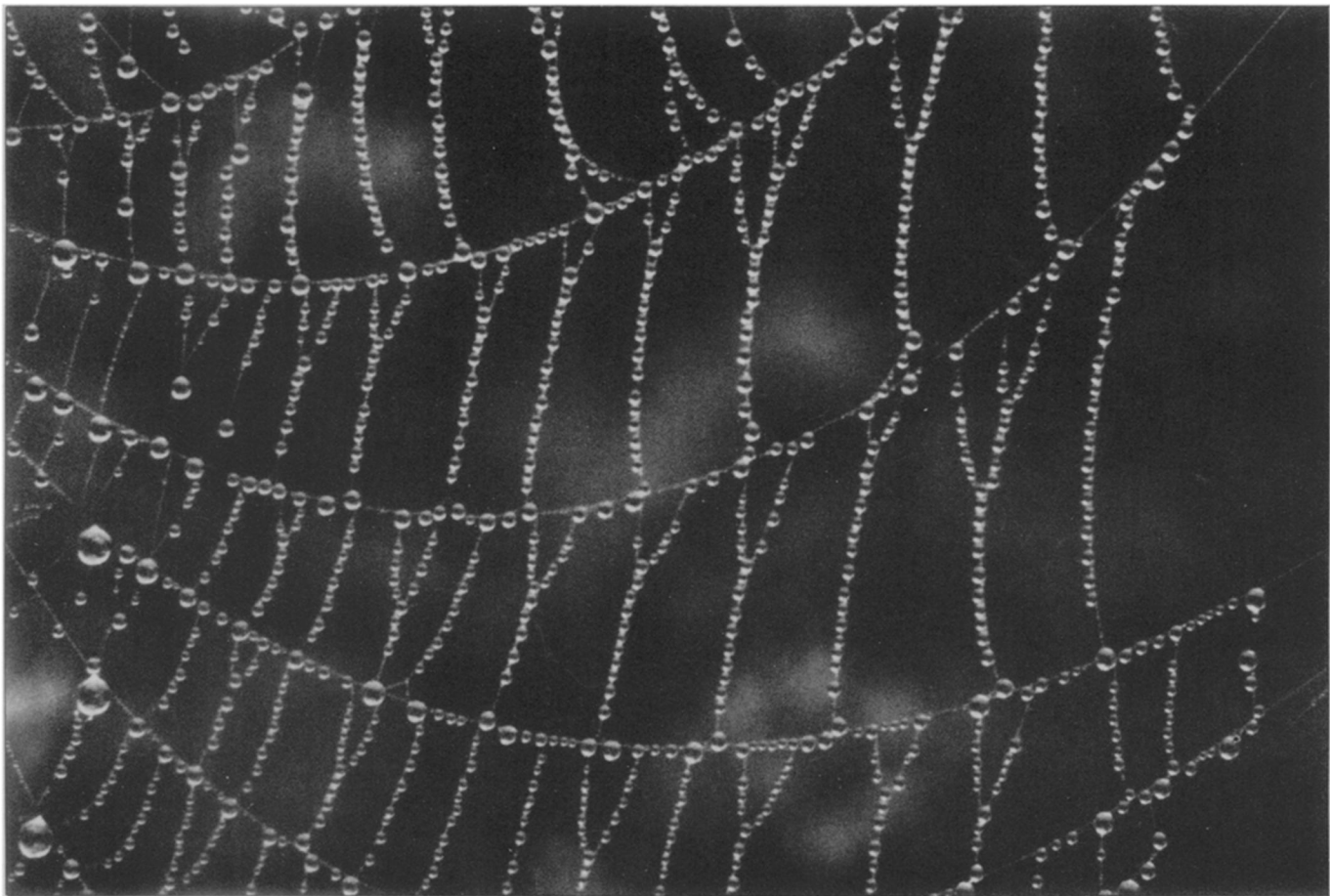
Delaying action will allow emissions to remain high for a decade longer with the risk of further ecological damage.

The bills propose various schemes to pay for the cost of controls. However, no legislation appears to have a chance of being enacted this year. Earlier in the spring, for example, the House health and environment subcommittee rejected a bill that called for a nationwide tax on electricity to finance pollution controls. Rep. Dennis E. Eckart (D-Ohio), who voted against the bill, said many people in his area would not have been able to afford the higher electricity rates required by the new controls.

It took the congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) about four years to examine many of these issues and to come up with a set of policy options. The results appeared last month in OTA's long-awaited report, "Acid Rain and Transported Air Pollutants: Implications for Public Policy." Perhaps the statement with the broadest implications for policymakers came from John H. Gibbons, OTA's director: "In OTA's judgment, even substantial additional scientific research is unlikely to provide significant, near-term policy guidance, or resolve value conflicts." In other words, waiting for more definitive research results is a way of avoiding the painful task of making decisions that are bound to upset someone, somewhere.

The OTA report concludes that air pollutants, including sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and ozone, transported over long distances "pose substantial risks to American resources." But it also recognizes that "the costs of reducing pollutant emissions are likewise substantial." Most current legislative proposals to control acid deposition would cost between \$3 billion and \$6 billion per year, the report says, and raise electricity costs by as much as 10 or 15 percent. At the same time, coal mining jobs in the East would be lost, and Midwestern industries and utilities that use a great deal of energy would suffer.

The report outlines the dilemma facing Congress: Most of the proposals for controlling acid deposition require gradual im-



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plementation that may stretch over as many as 40 years, and this time scale is long enough to permit natural ecosystems to be harmed. Delaying action will allow emissions to remain high for a decade longer with the risk of further ecological damage. Acting now involves the risk that the control program would be less cost effective or efficient than one designed later.

OTA suggests four approaches for congressional action to control transported air pollutants (including those contributing to acid rain):

- Control the sources of pollutants by mandating further reductions in emissions, implementing the program as soon as possible and focusing first on sulfur dioxide. The report notes that letting utilities devise their own strategies to control sulfur dioxide emissions instead of specifying the types of technology to be used could save hundreds of millions of dollars in such a program.

- Use chemicals like lime as a temporary measure to treat lakes and streams where the damaging effects of acid deposition are most clearly documented.

- Modify the current 10-year research program, now in its second year, to speed up research so that an integrated, policy-related assessment of the problem is completed before the current 1987 deadline.

- Amend the existing provisions of the Clean Air Act so that the Environmental Protection Agency and other government bodies can control air pollutants trans-

ported over long distances. (The present act focuses on local sources and pollutants in the air rather than on their transport and deposition.)

"The report presents the risks of controlling and the risks of not controlling these pollutants," says Robert M. Friedman, OTA project director. It lays out the possible policy options, and "lets the policymakers decide" on what combination of measures to take.

That's easier said than done. Sen. Robert

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T. Stafford (R-Vt.) praises the report and says that it clearly indicates that "the time to act is now." In contrast, Rep. Edward R. Madigan (R-Ill.), after reading the same document, comments, "There is no additional evidence in this report to warrant a massive new emissions program to control acid rain." Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.) admits that acid rain is "undeniably a problem." But he adds, "It is only one Clean Air Act problem. There are others, including some that I consider more important from a

health standpoint, that must be resolved as part of a comprehensive legislative approach."

This also leaves open the issue of how to deal with the problem without unnecessarily harming particular regions of the country more than others. Efforts to come up with a nationwide solution are bringing protests from several areas, including the West and Southwest. Evorn R. Wall, president of the El Paso Electric Co. in Texas, for example, complains, "Acid rain cost-sharing proposals which fail to account for critical regional differences, and discriminate against consumers of one region for the benefit of another, are bad public policy.... This violates the well-established principle of requiring the polluter to pay."

Environmental groups argue that even if the costs of a control program fall principally on the Midwest, the benefits will not go just to the Northeast to save a few lakes and streams. According to the National Clean Air Coalition (NCAC), based in Washington, D.C., the benefits will be much more widespread, partly by reducing local pollution in the Midwest itself. Recently, NCAC tried to bolster its argument in another way by releasing a report that summarized research indicating that acid rain was a widespread problem that threatened Southern states, too.

At the moment, a legislative solution seems far away. Meanwhile, the research continues, and the rain falls. □