

# ACID RAIN

We know the costs. We need the cure.

By Rep. Henry A. Waxman

**I**t is time that we listened to our scientists and did something about acid rain.

Years ago, researchers told us about acid rain's effects in the Adirondack Mountains, where hundreds of lakes that once teemed with fish and other wildlife now lie empty. But now researchers are warning that the damages go much further.

A 1982 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study found that lakes in large sections of New England, the upper Midwest, the Mountain West, and the Southeast are vulnerable to acid rain. Surprisingly, the region with the largest sensitive area is not New England, but the Southeast, where acid-forming sulfur dioxide emissions have increased more than five-fold since 1950.

Spruce and fir stands in many areas, such as Camel's Hump Mountain in Vermont and Mount Mitchell in North Carolina, are now littered with dead or dying trees. The loblolly pine, which is vital to the economies of several southern states, has declined dramatically in the past decade. Trees in the Midwest are also showing signs of damage, especially in the heavily polluted Ohio River Basin, where much of the acid rain in the East originates.

The warning signs are clear. What we risk by ignoring the acid rain

problem is an environmental and economic tragedy of historic proportions.

Those who label such concern alarmist have only to consider the acid devastation that has befallen Central Europe and Scandinavia. In Sweden and Norway more than 30,000 lakes have been acidified. Last year, the West German government reported that fully one-half of that nation's trees have been damaged by air pollution.

In the United States, acid damage could have enormous implications for the \$49-billion forestry and forest products industry. This industry employs 1.2 million people nationwide, and is a centerpiece of commerce in the Southeast, the Northwest, and New England.

In fact, German researchers have warned that the symptoms we see today in our forests resemble those observed five years ago in West Germany. Since then, Germany's forests have decayed at a breathtaking pace.

According to German government surveys, in a single year—from 1982 to 1983—pollution damage spread from 8 percent to a staggering 34 percent of the nation's forests. The next year, damages increased from 34 percent to 50 percent.

Those seeking to dismiss such warnings as environmental propaganda might be surprised to learn that the Wall Street investment

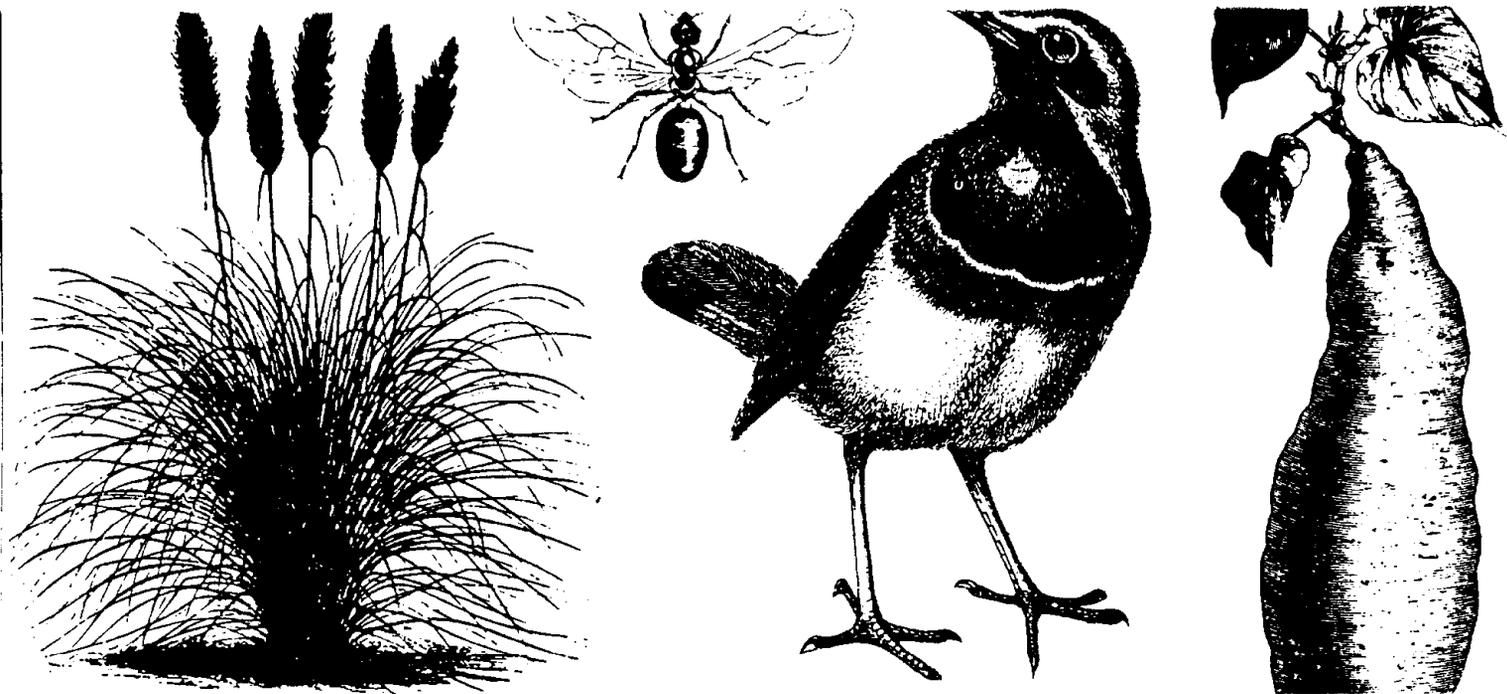
analysts at Standard and Poors have added their voice to the chorus of concern.

A Standard and Poors report of last June warned that acid rain presents a clear danger to the forest products industry. The report cautioned that "if acid rain kills an appreciable number of trees on the millions of acres owned by the forest products companies, the companies' stock prices will die faster than the trees."

If lakes and forests are damaged, our nation's fishing, recreation, and tourism industries will also be put in jeopardy.

Moreover, the pollutants that cause acid rain are a proven threat to human health, agricultural productivity, and man-made materials. A recent Office of Technology Assessment report estimates that these pollutants may be responsible for 50,000 premature deaths per year—particularly among people with respiratory or cardiac problems.

Despite all of these consequences, President Reagan has joined with midwestern coal companies and utilities in opposing any control program. Although the President originally argued that there was no acid rain problem, his Administration now asserts that the problem exists but is so complex and poorly understood that scientists cannot agree on a solution.



But this position ignores scientific consensus. Thousands of acid rain studies have reached the same conclusion: If we do not act now to reduce the sulfur and nitrogen oxide pollutants that cause acid rain, we risk widespread, irreversible damage to the ecosystems upon which our economy and our well-being depend.

The National Academy of Sciences, our nation's most prestigious scientific organization, has unambiguously recommended a "prompt tightening of restrictions on atmospheric emissions."

The Academy warns that "continued emissions of sulfur and nitrogen oxides, in the face of clear evidence of serious hazard to human health and to the biosphere, will be extremely risky from a long-term economic standpoint, as well as from the standpoint of biosphere protection."

Even President Reagan's own handpicked panel of scientists affirmed the Academy's call for control action. But the Administration suppressed the White House Science Advisor's report last year while actively opposing congressional efforts to enact an acid rain control program.

In opposing legislation, the Administration argued that acid rain controls would unfairly penalize some states and favor one region of

the country over another. In fact, just the opposite is true.

The Administration's "do nothing" policy is environmentally and economically unfair to states with strong control programs. By doing nothing, the Administration actually favors polluting states that have fought emission reductions for more than a decade.

Legislation can and has been drafted to achieve significant reductions without causing midwestern unemployment or expensive utility-rate increases. According to the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, a ten-million-ton sulfur dioxide reduction program could be paid for if electricity rates in the 48 states were increased by an average of only 3 percent.

This program would rely on pollution control technologies that would protect the jobs of coal miners by institutionalizing the use of high sulfur coals. Scientists agree that such a program would greatly reduce the threat to our lakes and forests and to our health.

When Reagan's first EPA administrator, Anne Gorsuch Burford, resigned under fire in early 1983, her acid rain policy was a major focus of public criticism.

Seeking to quiet the storm, Reagan announced that acid rain control would be a top priority for Burford's successor, William Ruckelshaus. But

Ruckelshaus' widely reported effort to secure Administration support for even a modest acid rain control effort has been a dismal failure.

Clearly, neither the EPA nor America's scientists have any voice in our country's acid rain policy. Rather, it is David Stockman and the accountants at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) who set environmental policies.

Healthy lakes and forests and reduced incidences of respiratory ailments such as asthma cannot easily be given a dollar value. So OMB has concluded that acid rain control is not worth the costs.

The President's knee-jerk opposition to acid rain controls ignores the thoroughness of research, and reflects an ideology that equates environmental protection with bad economics. Yet, his reluctance to act is causing human suffering, and it is costing our economy billions of dollars in economic damage.

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Congressman *Henry A. Waxman*, a Democrat from Los Angeles, is in his sixth term in the House of Representatives. As chairman of the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, Waxman has spearheaded the drive for an acid rain control program. In the aftermath of the tragedy in Bhopal, India, Waxman recently held hearings on the matter near Union Carbide's plant in West Virginia.