

P ROTECTING THE OZONE

On September 15 in Montreal, Canada, diplomats from around the world agreed on a treaty that will protect the earth's ozone layer.

More than 200 scientists, technical experts and politicians from more than 60 countries met to hammer out the agreement that calls for a major reduction of chemical pollutants that have been eroding the protective ring around the globe. Scientists have warned that if unchecked this pollution could result in an environmental catastrophe.

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The draft treaty, negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Program, would cut down on ozone-depleting chemicals by up to 50 per cent by the turn of the century.

"It is a historic first," said Canadian Environment Minister Thomas McMillan who was a member of the negotiating team. "On a global basis we will now have a law of the atmosphere that deals with extremely important planetary problems."

The stratospheric ozone layer is a fragile blanket of gases that lies above the

clouds. Without it, life on earth could not survive, as it shields both humans and the environment from the sun's dangerous ultraviolet rays.

In recent years, scientists have proven that the ozone layer is getting thinner, and environmentalists the world over fear that this could have disastrous consequences.

A few years ago, satellite pictures revealed a hole in the ozone layer that had been growing for some time above the South Pole. The issue became more urgent when last year a second hole was found above the Arctic.

The black area denotes the growing ozone hole over the Antarctic.

Ozone is being destroyed by chemicals called chlorofluorocarbons or CFCs. They are used in refrigeration and air conditioning, in foam and plastic manufacturing, and in aerosols.

As CFC molecules move towards the ozone layer, they eat at it until the ozone is so thin that it can no longer bend back ultraviolet rays. This could lead to the "greenhouse effect" — without the ozone's protective shield, the earth's atmosphere would warm up drastically, changing the planet's climate.

It could also lead to increased ultraviolet radiation. In fact, scientists predict that in 20 years, if radiation levels go unchecked, world crop

production will drop by 10 per cent, delicate ocean life will die, and there will be millions of new cases of skin cancer.

"We have time to anticipate and prevent disaster," said Mr. McMillan to the Montreal conference. "But we do not have years or even months to waste. A planetary time bomb is ticking away and the pace is accelerating."

Indeed, there is good reason to rejoice over the signing of this international treaty to protect the earth's ozone layer. The grounds for celebration lie not only in what the agreement will accomplish but also in the fact that it marks the first concerted attempt to control a global pollutant.

