



Statements and Speeches

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THE CHALLENGE OF ACID RAIN

An Address by the Honourable John Roberts, Minister of the Environment, to the Sierra Club Environmental Forum, Boston, Massachusetts, March 29, 1981

...Acid rain is the most serious air pollution problem facing our two countries today. The situation is already bad and it promises to get much worse in the future.

We Canadians are now impatient about the acid rain issue. We know how dangerous acid rain is. We know that the technology exists to stop the emissions that cause acid rain. Still, thousands of tons of acid-causing chemicals are being exported to Canada by the United States every day. The impatience of Canadians showed through when President Reagan visited Ottawa earlier this month. Thousands of demonstrators protested on Parliament Hill while the President was conferring with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. They were there to make the point that the United States should move, and move quickly, to prevent emissions of sulphur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen which produce acid rain in my country. I was with them in spirit, if not in the flesh.

I would like to take a moment to explain why there was a protest.

The fact is that about eight million tons of sulphur dioxide and close to four million tons of oxides of nitrogen are falling on Canada every year. At least half of that load is sent to us by the United States. In certain particularly sensitive areas, the proportion of pollution of U.S. origin rises to 70 per cent. We send some back, perhaps 10 per cent of the total falling here. We have moved to reduce our own emissions in Canada, but, as must be clear from the figures I have given you, we cannot address this problem without massive co-operation from the United States.

The situation is already intolerable. Unless we take swift action, it's going to get worse instead of better in the years ahead. Both of our countries are switching from oil to coal in the thermal generation of electricity, and that means we will be sending far more SO₂ and NO_x into the atmosphere unless we install equipment to scrub it out of our emissions.

Evidence of
damage

There is ample evidence to show that the acid rain problem is real, that it's widespread and that the effects are worsening. A large and growing number of lakes have reached levels of acidity which render them incapable of supporting fish and other related forms of life. A much larger number of lakes have displayed steady reductions in their alkalinity, that is, in their capacity to buffer or neutralize acid. This gives rise to the prediction that the acidity of many lakes will increase rapidly over the next few years. Literally hundreds of thousands of Canadian lakes are located in geological formations which offer little resistance to acid and such resistance as is now being offered is being rapidly worn down. The impact of acid deposition is, in this sense, cumulative, which means the effects will worsen even if there is no increase in emissions.
