



Environment Canada photo

The genesis of Acid rain: sulphur dioxide and sulphuric acid are emitted into the atmosphere by industrial pollutants and automobile exhaust. After condensation, the chemicals fall with the rainwater, endangering lakes and aquatic life.

Roberts met with Costle in April and again in June when both delivered hard-hitting speeches to an air pollution conference in Montreal. This meeting, following on the heels of an official meeting a few days earlier, finally led to a procedural breakthrough.

It was agreed the two governments would formally establish a technical-level working group structure to lay the ground work on the various aspects of an eventual agreement. A more senior coordinating committee to which the five groups were to report would evolve into formal negotiating teams within a year. An official Memorandum of Intent was eventually signed on August 5, 1980. It specified these procedures, outlined certain features of the agreement, committed both sides to negotiations and also called for vigorous enforcement of existing air pollution standards in the interim.

Working groups

Members were named to the joint working groups in the early fall and they began assessing the scientific and technical questions of emission controls, atmospheric modelling and environmental impact. In November, the second report of the Research Consultation Group was completed and released to the public.

The report was issued only after political "negotiations" over whether reference would be made to more speculative and particularly sensitive scientific findings about the human health effects of air pollution. The new document largely confirmed the findings of the first report concerning "serious environmental consequences." Particularly emphasized this time were the deleterious effects of acid rain on some agricultural and forested areas.

At the time of writing, the preliminary reports from most of the joint working groups were scheduled for release early in 1981. Despite the anti-environmental control bias of the new conservative Reagan administration, the planned formal negotiations were scheduled to begin in June 1981.

The slow progress in these discussions tends to obscure the fact that the two countries have essentially maintained the differing positions with which they began their lengthy consultation process. Concerns Canadian officials focus mainly on the continental acid rain problem and on securing a reduction in emissions originating from the United States. As in the case of water pollution in the Great Lakes, Canada's lesser contribution means that any unilateral Canadian effort to control acid rain would be relatively ineffective.