

POLICY POSITION

24. Control and Mitigation of Acid Deposition (Acid Rain)

Background

Significant public concern over the possible effects of acid deposition, popularly characterized as acid rain, has generated intense Congressional debate over the appropriate federal response to potential harm to the environment. In particular, regional interest groups in the Northeast have alleged that powerplants in the Midwest are emitting sulphur dioxide which is then transported through the atmosphere and deposited in other regions as sulfate. These groups allege that the Midwest emissions are causing extensive and irreparable harm to the environment of the Northeast.

Acid rain may be a serious environmental problem in some regions of the nation. However, concern that acid rain is a serious problem does not guarantee that policy makers know how to construct an appropriate program in response to it. Unfortunately, some members of Congress have found it politically expedient to champion locally popular legislative responses that are based upon speculative theories rather than on scientific knowledge.

Several bills in the Ninety-eighth Congress were proposed that assumed, without any credible scientific basis, reduced powerplant emissions of sulphur dioxide would automatically result in reduced acid deposition. A great deal of controversy raged around the proper method of controlling emissions and the allocation of the costs of emissions control. The Southern Legislative Conference believes that it is inappropriate to argue about how to correct a problem before the problem is adequately defined and its cause accurately assessed.

Before Congress can fashion a control program that will actually reduce acid rain, we must learn what is actually causing acid deposition. There is documented evidence of some types of environmental harm in the eastern United States. We do not know the true extent or meaning of this damage, the rate at which it is taking place, or what factor or combination of factors is causing it. Many investigators believe that several interconnected factors are at work and that air pollution of some sort may be important among them. Our current knowledge, however, does not tell us whether the offending pollutants are sulfates, nitrates, oxidants, heavy metals, or some combination of these pollutants. If Congress acts hastily, before we can determine which pollutants are causing the environmental damage, it increases the probability that we may not solve the problem. And, while the data are sparse, they tend to show that the acidity of rainfall in the eastern United States has stayed essentially level for the past twenty years.

Recommendation

The Southern Legislative Conference urges Congress to accelerate research to answer the basic questions of cause and effect of regional acidification and not to mandate a control program until there is a reasonable certainty that an effective program can be designed.

The Southern Legislative Conference joins the Southwest Regional Energy Council in urging Congress to accelerate research on acid deposition rather than initiating a costly control program that would provide uncertain benefits.

Adopted by the Southern Legislative Conference on July 24, 1985.