Acid Rain and Transported Air Pollutants: Implications for Public Policy

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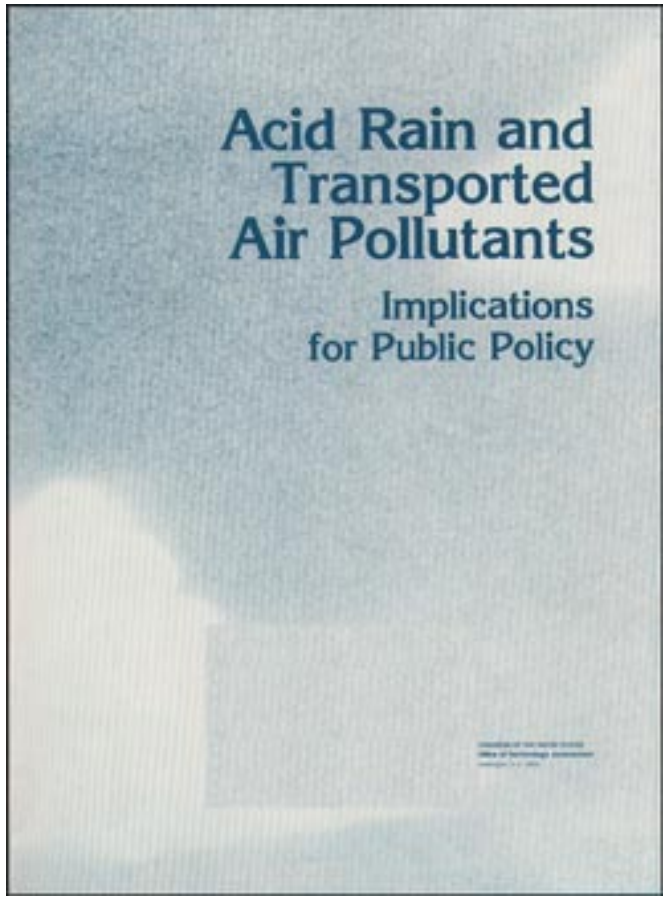

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Foreword

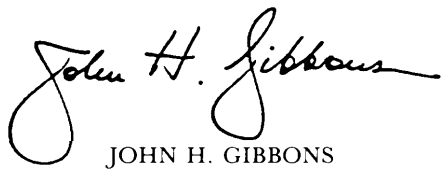
Transported air pollutants have been the topic of much debate during the Clean Air Act deliberations of the 97th and 98th Congresses. The current controversy over acid rain—the most publicized example of transported pollutants—focuses on the risks to our environment and ourselves versus the costs of cleanup. Since 1980, the committees responsible for reauthorizing the Clean Air Act—the House Committee on Energy and Commerce and the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works—have called on OTA many times for information about the movements, fate, and effects of airborne pollutants, the risks that these transported air pollutants pose to sensitive resources, and the likely costs of various proposals to control them. Over the course of the debate, OTA has provided extensive testimony and staff memoranda to the requesting committees, and published a two-volume technical analysis, The *Regional Implications of Transported Air Pollutants,* in July 1982. This report synthesizes OTA's technical analyses of acid rain and other transported pollutants, and presents policy alternatives for congressional consideration.

OTA's work over the last several years has enabled us to forecast with reasonable accuracy the cost of controlling pollutant emissions, and, for each of the many pending legislative proposals, who will pay those costs. We also know a great deal about the transport, fate, and effects of t rans - ported air pollutants—vastly more than was known several years ago when Congress last considered the Clean Air Act. Still, it is not yet possible to accurately evaluate the damages wrought by the pollutants or the benefits to be gained by reducing emissions, though we can say that both the risks of harm and the costs of control are substantial.

The issue of transported pollutants poses a special problem for policy makers: assuring regional equity while balancing concerns for economic well-being with concerns for natural and human resources across large regions of the Nation. Scientific uncertainties surrounding many aspects of the problem complicate the decision of whether, or when, to control transported air pollutants. Additional complexities arise from our inability to treat costs, damages, and benefits in a uniform, quantitative way. Moreover, in OTA's judgment, even substantial additional scientific research is unlikely to provide significant, near-term policy guidance, or resolve value conflicts.

How, then, can Congress address *current damage,* consider *potential harm* to recipients of transported air pollutants, yet not enforce an *unnecessarily high cost* on those who would be required to reduce pollutant emissions? OTA's analysis cannot provide an unambiguous answer to this dilemma. It does, however, lay out some carefully weighed estimates of costs, some carefully reasoned conclusions about the nature and extent of downwind damages and risks, and several policy options that merit consideration. We hope that this information will help to narrow the issues of contention for this important environmental concern.

OTA is grateful for the assistance of the advisory panel, contractors, and the over 200 reviewers who provided advice and information throughout the course of this assessment.



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