AIR POLLUTION: A DIFFERENT VIEW*

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Abstract. A decade of study of the air pollution problem has revealed so little support for our air pollution control program and the popular consensus that supports it that the author has had difficulty in even communicating on the subject. An effort is made herein to state what can only be described at present as a minority viewpoint in such a way as to penetrate the mindset usually encountered when the subject of air pollution is broached.

Prologue

Air pollution is a subject on which I have found it difficult to communicate; primarily because the currently prevailing viewpoints in this field appear to me to be unsupported by, if not in actual conflict with, the available data. To attempt to make this clear by reviewing the record requires more time and space than are generally available. Alternatively, simply to state my views, clearly and succinctly, places me in the unfavorable position of appearing polemic, against the consensus, radical. If my views so appear to you I can only point out that they were not adopted on the spur of the moment but have been under development and test for more than a decade. Prior reviews reaching similar conclusions appeared as Ellsaesser (1971, 1975a). As an example, it is my opinion that the present AQSs (Air Quality Standards) of this state and nation are invalid. They may well have been adopted by sincere and well-intentioned people, but they are nonetheless invalid. They were introduced and are defended as essential to protect public health. This, in my opinion and in the opinion of many whom I respect, is not supported by the available data.

1. Introduction

The bulk of our population now lives in urban cocoons on food produced by about 4% of our population. This was made possible by our technology which in turn is based on exploitation of fossil fuels and on structuring our society to take advantage of economies of scale and of specialization. The continued existence of our present numbers is dependent on continued availability of energy at an affordable cost and reliance on specialists for essential functions. Yet we so take our present molly-

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coddling for granted that most of us never stop to realize how much our continued survival depends on the efforts of others who isolate us from our hostile natural environment with its extremes of temperature, vagaries of food and water and competing hostile life forms. Most of us rarely experience any stress in securing the necessities of life and even less often realize the luxury this implies compared to earlier generations and less developed countries. Instead we complain of the quality of life and attack the very infrastructure that makes our luxury possible. We attack most vehemently those people and industries which produce, process and transport our energy, food, water, housing, clothes, and medicine. We are putting the squeeze on every form of energy production; not because of the clearly apparent yearly fatalities numbering 50,000 in transportation, 8,000 in structural fires, 5,000 in drownings, 3,000 in mining and drilling and 1,000 by electrocution, but because of the presumption that gases and particulates released by combustion must be harmful to health. Contemplation of the environmental and other impacts of no energy, i.e. a return to reliance on muscle—including draft animals and slavery—could hardly help but provide part of the catharsis that is so sorely needed.

Our present AQS’s, by legislative fiat, were designed to protect public health. This they do; just as would standards mandating zero levels of pollution. What is left unconsidered in both cases is the question as to whether such standards are necessary to protect public health. In actuality they go so far beyond what is necessary in this respect that they violate the requirement of reasonableness of due process. This is a subject on which we have been so thoroughly brainwashed that many people are incapable of rational thought on the subject. Let me try to bring the point home by an analogy: Suppose the environmentalists and consumer and public interest groups, aided by the news media, launched an all out condemnation of our society for the 5,000 odd drownings that occur in this country each year. After a few years of continuous harangue on the subject they get Congress to create a Drowning Prevention Agency with appropriate powers. The newly formed agency launches a survey into past drownings and tabulates the minimum water depths in which any person or animal was observed to be a presumed victim of drowning. The list includes cases of people slipping and knocking themselves unconscious face down in a bathtub, Mafia victims whose heads were held in a wash basin and mice and rats who, for whatever reason, happened to fall into a puddle with just enough life left to draw water into their lungs. Once the list is begun, each new case claiming a shallower drowning depth is accorded automatic publication in our most prestigious scientific publications. By omitting the ‘analysis and critical review’ supposed to accompany the drafting of criteria documents (just as was done in the preparation of our present National Air Quality Criteria Documents) all of these details will simply be ignored. A mere tabulation of the minimum water depths in which cadavers were found will appear as the Drowning Criteria Document. Thereafter, the minimum drowning depth found, reduced by an ‘adequate margin of safety’ (which may be orders of magnitude because there are no strictures or warnings against going overboard) will