

Clean Air + Health! (Ed. Climate) Dec. 13, 1980

Clear The Air

ENVIRONMENTAL regulations are on the scales as never before, hanging in a precarious balance between the costs to enforce and effect them and the benefits of their cleanup efforts.

And as the air clears between presidential administrations the most costly of all pollution fighting weapons goes on the cost-benefits auction block of the '80s. Ronald Reagan has promised to collaborate with industry in rewriting the Clean Air Act and its amendments when they come up for review next year. In Congress, the advantage will shift to opponents of government regulation.

It is not a subject that we treat lightly. Reagan can perhaps be forgiven for his off-the-cuff campaign remarks about trees, volcanoes and other "major" natural pollution sources. It was a casual remark, simply restating the same claims dismissed as ludicrous when they came up over auto industry emission standards a few years ago. This time, students dressed as trees and urging, "Stop Me Before I Kill Again," helped impress the fact that natural pollutants are not the point at all and that many Americans are not willing to settle for even casual hot air as a substitute for clean air.

IN HIS CAMPAIGN, Reagan often attributed problems in the steel, coal and utility industries to heavy government regulation. Conversely, he reminded us that as governor of California from 1967 to 1975 he signed one of the nation's "toughest" air pollution laws.

The steel, coal and utility industries, like the chemical and other manufacturing industries, are anxious to see Reagan's overtures to them carried out. It is a traditional complaint by business that government over-regulates, and industry always hastens to warn us — often in full-color brochures — that the cost of those regulations are being passed on to us in the form of higher costs for consumer goods.

According to the Iron and Steel Institute, air pollution controls have driven up steel prices by roughly 6 per cent during the decade. The Council on Environmental Quality has estimated total public and private expenditures on air pollution in 1978 came to \$19.3 billion, about half that year's overall cost for environmental compliance.

Those are considerations that do weigh heavily. At the same time, a closer look at Reagan's record as governor shows that in 1971 he blocked enactment of strict auto emission controls, and in 1975 he vetoed a bill that would have given Southern California a unified air pollution control authority. In 1974, when the state's Air Resources Board tried to outfit cars already on the road with pollution control devices, Reagan fired two board members and replaced them with what environmentalists called "industry hacks."

OBVIOUSLY, THOSE examples do not automatically qualify Reagan as a rhetorical hypocrite, but his record does indicate a willingness to compromise the environment in favor of industry.

Environmentalists may rightfully claim that new industry is growing up around pollution control technology, actually stimulating the economy by creating jobs and, in some instances, conserving energy.

But more important is the reason for it all. A 50-per-cent reduction in urban air pollution could save between \$250 million and \$500 million in costs to treat bronchitis, \$1.2 billion to care for lung cancer and \$68 million to fight cardiovascular diseases, says a study by Resources for the Future, Inc., a Washington think tank. That same study claimed a 30-per-cent improvement in Los Angeles' air quality would boost real estate values \$950 million a year, or \$500 per household.

All the facts and figures are in obvious dispute, but the message is that any savings in health and preservation of a livable environment for future generations are extra ounces on the "benefits" side of this precarious balance.

And when we consider industry's argument and tactics we have to wonder how much of its savings would be passed along to us as consumers?

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