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Acid Rain

Effects on Surface Water.

The ecological effects of acid rain are most clearly seen in the aquatic, or water, environments, such as streams, lakes, and marshes. Acid rain flows to streams, lakes, and marshes after falling on forests, fields, buildings, and roads. Acid rain also falls directly on aquatic habitats. Most lakes and streams have a pH between 6 and 8, although some lakes are naturally acidic even without the effects of acid rain. Acid rain primarily affects sensitive bodies of water, which are located in watersheds whose soils have a limited ability to neutralize acidic compounds. Lakes and streams become acidic (pH value goes down) when the water itself and its surrounding soil cannot buffer the acid rain enough to neutralize it. In areas where buffering capacity is low, acid rain also releases aluminum from soils into lakes and streams; aluminum is highly toxic to many species of aquatic organisms.

Where Does Acid Rain Affect Lakes and Streams?

Many lakes and streams examined in a National Surface Water Survey (NSWS) suffer from chronic acidity, a condition in which water has a constant low pH level. The survey investigated the effects of acidic deposition in over one thousand lakes larger than ten acres and in thousands of miles of streams believed

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to be sensitive to acidification. Of the lakes and streams surveyed, acid rain caused acidity in seventy five percent of the acidic lakes and about 50 percent of the acidic streams.

Several regions in the United States were identified as containing many of the surface waters sensitive to acidification. They include the Adirondacks and Catskill Mountains in New York state, the mid-Appalachian highlands along the east coast, the upper Midwest, and mountainous areas of the Western United States. In areas like the Northeastern United States, where soil buffering capacity is poor, some lakes now have a pH value of less than 5. One of the most acidic lakes reported is Little Echo Pond in Franklin, New York. Little Echo Pond has a pH of 4.2.

Acidification is also a problem in lakes that were not surveyed in federal research projects. For example, although lakes smaller than ten acres were not included in the NSWS, there are from one to four times as many of these small lakes as there are larger lakes. In the Adirondacks, the percentage of acidic lakes is significantly higher when it includes smaller lakes.

Streams flowing over soil with low buffering capacity are as susceptible to damage from acid rain as lakes. Approximately 580 of the streams in the Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain are acidic primarily due to acidic deposition. In the New Jersey Pine Barrens, for example, over 90 percent of the streams are acidic, which is the highest rate of acidic streams in the nation. Over 1,350 of the streams in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands (mid-Appalachia) are acidic, primarily due to acidic deposition.

The acidification problem in both the United States and Canada grows in magnitude if "episodic acidification" is taken into account. Episodic acidification refers to brief periods during which pH levels decrease due to runoff from melting snow or heavy downpours. Lakes and streams in many areas throughout the United States are sensitive to episodic acidification. In the Mid-Appalachians, the Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain, and the Adirondack Mountains, many additional lakes and streams become temporarily acidic during storms and spring snowmelt. For example, approximately seventy percent of sensitive lakes in the Adirondacks are at risk of episodic acidification. This amount is over three times the amount of chronically acidic lakes. In the mid-Appalachians, approximately thirty percent of sensitive streams are likely to become acidic during an episode. This level is seven times the number of chronically acidic streams in that area.

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Episodic acidification can cause "fish kills."

Emissions from United States sources also contribute to acidic deposition in eastern Canada, where the soil is very similar to the soil of the Adirondack Mountains, and the lakes are consequently extremely vulnerable to chronic acidification problems. The Canadian government has estimated that 14,000 lakes in eastern Canada are acidic.

How Does Acid Rain Affect Fish and Other Aquatic Organisms?

Acid rain causes a cascade of effects that harm or kill individual fish, reduce fish population numbers, completely eliminate fish species from a waterbody, and decrease biodiversity. As acid rain flows through soils in a watershed, aluminum is released from soils into the lakes and streams located in that watershed. So, as pH in a lake or stream decreases, aluminum levels increase. Both low pH and increased aluminum levels are directly toxic to fish. In addition, low pH and increased aluminum levels cause chronic stress that may not kill individual fish, but leads to lower body weight and smaller size and makes fish less able to compete for food and habitat.

Some types of plants and animals are able to tolerate acidic waters. Others, however, are acid-sensitive and will be lost as the pH declines. Generally, the young of most species are more sensitive to environmental conditions than adults. At pH 5, most fish eggs cannot hatch. At lower pH levels, some adult fish die. Some acid lakes have no fish. The chart below shows that not all fish, shellfish, or the insects that they eat can tolerate the same amount of acid; for example, frogs can tolerate water that is more acidic (has lower pH) than trout.

How Does Acid Rain Affect Ecosystems?

Together, biological organisms and the environment in which they live are called an ecosystem. The plants and animals living within an ecosystem are highly interdependent. For example, frogs may tolerate relatively high levels of acidity, but if they eat insects like the mayfly, they may be affected because part of their food supply may disappear. Because of the connections between the many fish, plants, and other organisms living in an aquatic ecosystem, changes in pH or aluminum levels affect biodiversity as well. Thus, as lakes and streams become more acidic, the numbers and types of fish and other aquatic plants and animals that live in these waters decrease.

What is the Role of Nitrogen in Acid Rain and other Environmental Problems?

The impact of nitrogen on surface waters is also critical. Nitrogen plays a significant role in episodic acidification and new research recognizes the importance of nitrogen in long-term chronic acidification as well. Furthermore, the adverse impact of atmospheric nitrogen deposition on estuaries and near-coastal water bodies is significant. Scientists estimate that from ten to forty five percent of the nitrogen produced by various human activities that reaches estuaries and coastal ecosystems is transported and deposited via the atmosphere.

For example, about thirty percent of the nitrogen in the Chesapeake Bay comes from atmospheric deposition. Nitrogen is an important factor in causing eutrophication (oxygen depletion) of water bodies. The symptoms of eutrophication include blooms of algae (both toxic and non-toxic), declines in the health of fish and shellfish, loss of seagrass beds and coral reefs, and ecological changes in food webs. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, these conditions are common in many of our nation's coastal ecosystems. These ecological changes impact human populations by changing the availability of seafood and creating a risk of consuming contaminated fish or shellfish, reducing our ability to use and enjoy our coastal ecosystems, and causing economic impact on people who rely on healthy coastal ecosystems, such as fishermen and those who cater to tourists.

Source: United States Environmental Protection Agency.

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