



Faculty Sound Off Buchanan On Air

By Dr. James W. Buchanan

It is sometimes hard to make chemistry interesting, even to other chemists. Atmospheric chemistry has the considerable advantage of being potentially interesting to anyone who enjoys breathing, or a clear, pretty day, or any of the pleasures associated with pure air.

Unfortunately, chemical reactions occurring in the open air are extremely difficult to study. The laboratory chemist is able to control the conditions under which he runs an experiment, so that the effects of temperature, pressure, composition, etc., can be determined. Such things as cloud formations, air currents or time of day are of little consequence in the lab, but will generally have a significant effect on chemistry occurring in the air. It is not surprising, then, that much remains to be learned about this part of our ecosystem.

The recent spasm of interest and concern about the environment is encouraging, but so far the interest and talk has not resulted in an equivalent amount of money. Of great importance at this time is education of the public, to prevent hysterical over-reaction to the problem and to generate a climate of opinion within the context of which the much-needed funding of research may be facilitated. It probably is reasonable to be optimistic about the future of atmospheric science, provided some of the current interest is retained over the next few years. The re-ordering priorities on the Federal level takes time, and may require an initial public reaction through the electoral process.

At any rate, something is known presently about the effects of certain atmospheric contaminants. We know, for example, that certain oxides of sulfur and nitrogen can be activated by sunlight and further oxidized so that highly undesirable aerosols (smogs) are created. These oxides originate largely via high temperature processes, including as a primary source those occurring in internal combustion engines. Control of the concentrations of such materials is clearly desirable, although there is still debate as to the maximum "safe" amounts to be permitted in the atmosphere.

The rate with which a chemical reaction proceeds is a function of the concentrations of reactants, and until research indicates the nature of that function, it will be largely a guess as to how much pollution of various types can be tolerated. Unreasonable controls on automobile and industrial emissions can result in economically impractical demands on our society, the brunt of which would presently be borne by the taxpayer. Research requires money and is always a risky investment, but if it can prevent the expenditure of vast amounts of unduly strict control measures, it will probably pay for itself many times over. It is also conceivable that research will uncover other aspects of our atmospheric environment which have been totally overlooked, and which need regulation.

As concerned citizens with a better-than-average opportunity to make that concern as intelligent and as productive as possible, college students may make a positive contribution by taking the time to educate themselves and others to the importance of research in and control of our environment. Only a determined electorate can force the restructuring of our national (and local) objectives.

More Names

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