1968

Sources, abundance, and fate of atmospheric pollutants.

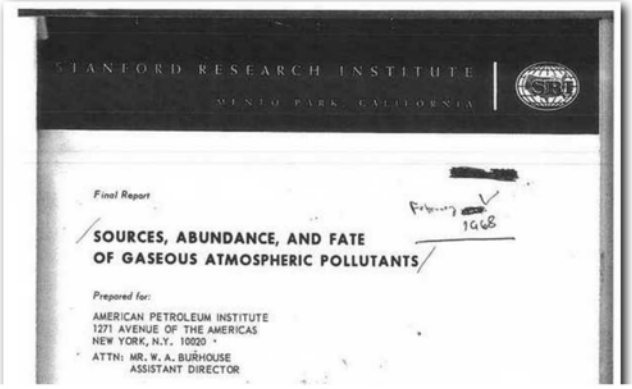
1968 Author: E. Robinson, & R.C. Robbins

In 1968, Stanford Reseach Institute (SRI) scientists Elmer Robinson and R.C. Robbins

the sources, abundance, and fate of gaseous pollutants in the atmosphere. They reserved their starkest warnings to industry leaders for carbon dioxide. Robinson observed that, among the pollutants reviewed, carbon dioxide "is the only air pollutant which has been proven to be global importance to man's environment on the basis of a long period of scientific investigation." Summarizing the findings of the President's Science Advisory Council, Robinson noted that CO2 emissions from fossil fuels were outstripping the natural CO2 removal processes that keep the atmosphere in equilibrium. He noted that the speed of CO2 accumulation would depend on fossil fuel consumption and projected that, on then-present trends, atmospheric CO2 could reach 400ppm by 2000, and that exploiting all then-recoverable fossil fuel would lead to concentrations of 830ppm. The report warned that rising CO2 would result in increases in temperature at the earth's surface, and that significant temperature increase could lead to melting ice caps, rising seas, and potentially serious environmental damage worldwide. It noted that, even if Antarctic ice caps took 1000

than observed changes." Importantly, SRI acknowledged that of the various sources proposed for rising atmospheric CO2, "none seems to fit the presently observed situation as well as the fossil fuel emanation theory." Noting uncertainties about whether particulate pollution would offset some of this warming, SRI warned "…there seems to be no doubt that the potential damage to our environment could be severe…" The industry's own consulting scientists then confirmed that the most urgent research need was into technologies that could bring CO2 emissions under control.

Excerpts



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Final Report

SOURCES, ABUNDANCE, AND FATE
OF GASEOUS ATMOSPHERIC POLLUTANTS

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18 μ. As such CO_2 prevents the loss of considerable heat energy from the earth and radiates it back to the lower atmosphere, the so-called "greenhouse" effect. Thus the major changes which are speculated about as possibly resulting from a change in atmospheric CO_2 are related to a change in the earth's temperature.

The latest data available for estimating CO_2 temperature effects are those of Moller (1963). From Möller's data a CO_2 increase of 25% would result in an increase in temperature at the earth's surface of between 1.1 and 7°F, depending on the assumption made regarding the likely humidity changes accompanying this temperature change. If the amount of water vapor in the atmosphere remained unchanged, the smaller increase would occur, but if the relative humidity were to remain constant then the larger calculated increase would prevail. If, instead of a 25% increase, the CO_2 content were to double, the expected change would be about three times this figure. For atmospheric calculations, Möller's model is still a relatively simple one and has not included all of the possible major interactions occurring in the atmosphere. For this reason it is likely that Möller's calculations overestimate the effects on temperature of an increase in CO_2. More comprehensive models are under development and should be available shortly.

If the earth's temperature increases significantly, a number of events might be expected to occur, including the melting of the Antarctic ice cap, a rise in sea levels, warming of the oceans, and an increase in photosynthesis. The first two items are of course related since the increase in sea level would be mainly due to the added water from the ice cap. Estimates of the possible rate at which the Antarctic ice cap might melt have been made. If the poleward heat flux were increased 10%, the ice cap could disappear in about 4000 years. A shorter time, about 400 years, is estimated if it is considered that half the energy associated with a 2% increase in radiation were used to melt the polar ice cap. A 2% increase might result from a 25% increase in CO_2 by the year 2000.

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With regard to sea level changes, if 1000 years were required to melt the Antarctic ice cap, the resulting 400 foot rise in sea level would occur at a rate of 4 feet per 10 years. This is 100 times greater than presently observed changes.

Changes in ocean temperature would change the distribution of fish and cause a retreat in the polar sea ice. This has happened in recent time on a very limited scale.

Changes in CO_2 might also bring about increased photosynthesis in areas where CO_2 might be a limiting factor in present growth patterns. Where temperature has been a limiting factor to growth and development, an increase in biological activity might be expected.

Although there are other possible sources for the additional CO_2 now being observed in the atmosphere, none seems to fit the presently observed situation as well as the fossil fuel emanation theory.

C. Summary of Carbon Dioxide in the Atmosphere

In summary, Revelle makes the point that man is now engaged in a vast geophysical experiment with his environment, the earth. Significant temperature changes are almost certain to occur by the year 2000 and these could bring about climatic changes.

Since Revelle's report, McCormick and Ludwig (1966) have studied the possible world-wide change of atmospheric fine particles. An increase in

It is clear that we are unsure as to what our long-lived pollutants are doing to our environment; however, there seems to be no doubt that the potential damage to our environment could be severe. Whether one chooses the CO_2 warming theory as described in detail by Revelle and others or the newer cooling prospect indicated by McCormick and Ludwig, the prospect for the future must be of serious concern.

It seems ironic that in our view of air pollution technology we take such a serious concern with small-scale events such as the photochemical reactions of trace concentrations of hydrocarbons, the effect on vegetation of a fraction of a part per million of SO_2, when the abundant pollutants which we generally ignore because they have little local effect, CO_2 and submicron particles, may be the cause of serious world-wide environmental changes.

the ambient atmosphere should be carefully checked, but probably the most important feature as far as atmospheric chemistry is concerned is to determine the source of the nitrate in the atmosphere. The source, on the basis of our analysis of the atmospheric nitrogen cycle, seems to be by the oxidation of NH_3. The oxidation mechanism for atmospheric NH_3 is unknown. This is a very difficult problem which has been evaded or ignored for several years. If NH_3 cannot be shown to be the source of the nitrate, then it will be necessary to find a sufficient natural source of NO or NO_2 to provide the nitrate.

In the area of atmospheric organic gases the almost complete absence of information on all the possible components except CH_4 should be remedied. Proven analytical techniques are available for such studies. While there may be some doubt in the cases of SO_2, H_2S, and other compounds that available techniques are sufficiently sensitive for use in the ambient atmosphere, this is not the case for the low molecular weight organics. Here, gas chromatography is presently capable of detecting the trace levels of many atmospheric organics present in the fractional part-per-billion range. Although the ambient concentrations are known, methane is in the same category as CO in that there is a major need to determine the sink or scavenging mechanism. At present this can only be guessed at.

Past and present studies of CO_2 are detailed and seem to explain adequately the present state of CO_2 in the atmosphere. What is lacking, however, is an application of these atmospheric CO_2 data to air pollution technology and work toward systems in which CO_2 emissions would be brought under control.

Another point which has been made in our discussion is that N_2O, CO, CH_4, and CO_2 have essentially the same atmospheric residence times because, we believe, vegetation plays a major role in the scavenging cycle for each of the materials. This postulate should obviously be carefully checked by

Citation & Link

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