

THE SUNDAY STAR

July 23, 1989

U.S., Canadian cities join together to launch battle against air pollution

By Olivia Ward Toronto Star

In the choking heat of a Washington summer, the U.S. Congress is going to battle over President George Bush's clean-air proposals to cut toxic pollutants that cause smog and acid rain.

But meanwhile, city officials from Canada and the U.S. — weary of lengthy national and international debates over urgent pollution issues — held their own conference this weekend to save the environment.

"Toronto, with thousands of other cities in the world, is slowly destroying the environment we need for life," Alderman Tony O'Donohue told the North American Conference for a Stratospheric

Special Report

Protection Accord, in Irvine, Calif. yesterday.

"The burning of fossil fuels to produce electricity for our homes, businesses and factories, to heat and cool our buildings and to move the hundreds of thousands of cars, trucks and buses each day, contribute to the constant production of urban air pollution."

Air pollution usually means ozone, a lung-irritating ingredient of smog. When ozone is high up in the atmosphere, it protects the earth from harmful ultraviolet rays. But near the ground, it inflames the lungs of people and ani-

mals and slows the growth of plants.

Toronto began to take ozone seriously last year when levels of the pollutant soared above federal health guidelines. But some other areas of the province had worse readings as smog drifted across the border from heavily industrialized U.S. cities.

Canadian officials are particularly aware of the impossibility of solving air pollution problems through single-country action.

But, O'Donohue said, Canadian and U.S. cities can use their bylaws and police powers to clean up poisonous air. Working together, they could cut through red tape and

Please see U.S./page A18

U.S., Canadian cities join forces to battle air pollution

Continued from page A1

Each anti-pollution goal much quicker than federal programs allow.

"Toronto could become the model for world cities if we show leadership to ensure that immediate steps are taken to prevent the further deterioration of land, air and water around us," he said.

One million tonnes of toxic pollutants are circulating over Metro each year. And Environment Canada scientist Tom Dann says the situation will worsen unless present controls are tightened dramatically.

Ozone is produced when sunlight develops a toxic mixture of volatile organic compounds from car exhaust combined with nitrogen oxides from burning of petroleum, coal and other fossil fuels.

When ozone levels are high in New York state and Ontario, Dann says, pollution flows over the border relentlessly.

Lung problems

Ottawa's tougher auto emission standards will bring down the smog level until 1990. But without more cuts and controls in Canada and the United States, levels will start to rise again in 1995.

Ozone thrives in hot weather. And, ironically, the pollution we're producing also helps to trap heat under a blanket of "greenhouse" gases to make the planet warmer. That deadly combination could make for uncomfortable and even dangerous summers for Metro and other cities.

Dr. David Bates, a leading Canadian expert on medical effects of ozone pollution, said asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia strike more often when smog levels rise above guidelines of 80 parts per billion.

When sulphur dioxide is included in the airborne broth, Bates said, "what you get is the acid summer haze effect."

The noxious gases we breathe in smog are also basic ingredients of acid rain. Once in the lungs, they cause inflammation that gets worse throughout the summer. During fall and winter, ozone decomposes and disappears.

Long-term effects

American studies have already shown some startling health effects in people and animals.

In one study, New Jersey children breathing only low amounts of ozone at rural camps had their lungs impaired for days or weeks. Severe lung lesions and chronic respiratory disease were found in a quarter of 15-to-25-year-olds studied in Los Angeles County, the most heavily polluted region of the United States. And lab animals exposed to L.A.-level smog developed severe lung ailments usually found only in heavy cigarette smokers.

On the worst of days, Toronto's ozone pollution is about half that of Los Angeles or Mexico City. But children, and adults with lung problems, used to breathing less-polluted air, are vulnerable to illness.

Those who argue against drastic changes in pollution standards to

combat ozone smog say that it only affects portions of the country, and only at certain times of year. But no one yet knows what its long-term health effects may be.

Ontario and other provinces can reduce summer "acid haze effect" by cracking down on auto emissions and burning of fossil fuels, as long as the neighboring cities in the U.S. keep pace.

Playing legislative tag with emission standards may be inevitable, unless the two countries can agree on pollution-fighting goals.

In the U.S., lobby groups like the powerful auto industry are gearing up for a fight over Bush's new package of clean-air legislation, which headed to Congress this weekend. Critics say his weakened proposals of just slowing the growth of auto emissions, rather than cutting them, won't do much to combat smog and that the cost to consumers would be untenable.

But even so, Canada — which only caught up with America's current emission standards in 1987 — will be lagging again if Bush's proposals succeed. In Metro alone drivers burn more than 3 billion litres (660 million gallons) of fuel a year, and Queen's Park has ordered Ontario refiners to cut down on the smog-forming butane they use in gasoline for the summer months.

In both Canada and the United States, the problem of co-ordinating pollution rules is a continuing one. This fall, environment ministers are to meet and develop a

strategy to control nitrogen oxides and other causes of ozone pollution.

Most of the pollution comes from urban centres, and cities are producing an increasing amount of it as population grows and the roads clog with bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Nevertheless, city officials often feel higher levels of government give them little support in reducing pollution.

"We're the final link in the chain," says Jeb Brugmann, field programs director of the Centre for Innovative Diplomacy, and a planner of the Irvine conference this weekend. "Most of us don't see international agreements going as far as they should to mitigate our problems. We're on the receiving end."

Action plan

Brugmann and Irvine Mayor Larry Agran have lobbied cities for years to get involved in global problems. As a result, 2,500 civic officials have joined them in pushing their councils to deal with issues from South African investment to nuclear war.

Now they believe the environment should have urgent priority. And they want conference members to come back to their cities this week with a plan of action that will bring pollution control to a local level.

(Toronto has already set up a special committee on the environment and passed a bylaw to prohibit manufacture, sale and use of products containing chlorofluo-



REUTERS FILE PHOTO

SMOGGY SCENE: Alexander Mitchell, a Houston native, tries to block Mexico City's pollution. As North American ozone levels rise, cities have joined forces to find solutions.

rocarbons and halons.)

The cities' plan of action includes:

□ Local environmental protection agencies to deal with hazardous waste and toxic chemicals, including storage and disposal.

□ Using police powers when necessary to protect the environment.

□ Working with other levels of government to expand recycling projects.

□ Technological aid for Third World cities with severe environmental problems.

□ Setting up a secretariat for co-ordinating local initiatives and inter-city programs.