

Spread of acid rain burns farms, fish, buildings

BY BARBARA S. MOFFET
National Geographic News
WASHINGTON, D.C. — Those sweet spring showers and pure fluffy snowfalls turn out not to be so sweet and pure after all. In fact, some rain and snow are downright filthy.

High in the sky, before falling to earth, rain and snow often mix with pollutants — mainly sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide — and through a series of chemical changes become acidic. By the time it reaches earth, the stuff farmers and skiers are calling a godsend scientists are calling "acid precipitation." Some rain

and snow that have made their way to earth in recent years in this country have been almost as acidic as vinegar, and the acid precipitation problem seems to be spreading. About 50 million metric tons of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide are spewed into the air every year in the

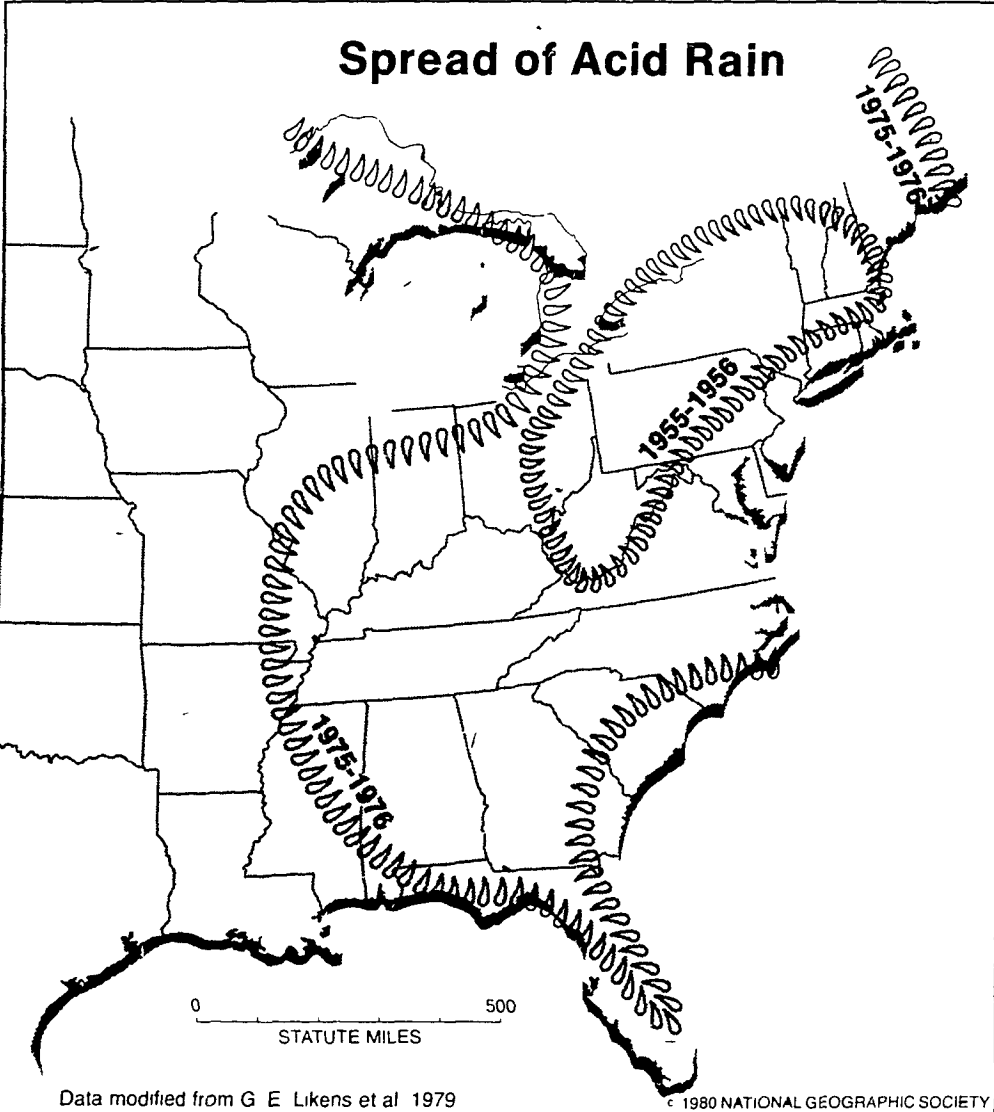
United States, as byproducts of fossil fuel combustion. Car engines, home furnaces, coal-burning power plants, and smelters all contribute. As the use of coal increases, these pollutants could intensify, an idea that worries scientists because they really don't know how the pollutants travel or what happens after they come down.

Many do believe that acid precipitation can wipe the fish from lakes, corrode buildings and statues, leach minerals from soil, and possibly slow tree growth, damage crops, and taint drinking water. "The phenomenon of rather direct damage caused by what once was thought to be pristine rain and snow is appalling," said Dr. Kenneth J. Hood of the Council on Environmental Quality. "Acid sprinkled all over the land just doesn't sound good."

But what we all agree on is that we don't know exactly what kind or how much damage acid rain is doing. Hood is being paid to try to find out. He is executive secretary of the Acid Rain Coordination Committee, set up last year by President Carter to manage a 10-year research effort. Ten million dollars is budgeted for several government agencies in their first year of tackling the problem.

Researchers already know that almost 200 lakes in New York's Adirondack Mountains that once drew

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Confined to a few states in 1955-56, acid precipitation's range grew drastically in two decades. The map's outlined areas represent regions receiving precipitation at least 10 times as acidic as unpolluted rain or snow. Acid rain has been detected as far west as Los Angeles and Seattle, but most of it falls to earth in the East after being carried by prevailing winds.

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