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Top News

Monitoring CNY's acid rain

August 12, 2003

Acid in the atmosphere falls on Central New York more heavily than almost anywhere in the nation.

"New York state has some of the most sensitive and highly impacted areas in the country," said Rona Birnbaum, chief of assessment and communications for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's acid rain program.

The nation's highest levels of nitrates, a key contributor to acid rain, are recorded at a monitoring station in Bennett Bridges, Oswego County, according to the National Atmospheric Deposition Program, which tracks acid rain data.

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The program has more than 200 monitoring sites nationwide and nine in New York. Among them are sites at Aurora Research Farm in Cayuga County and Bennett Bridges. The state Department of Environmental Conservation runs 19 similar monitoring sites, with three in Central New York: Camp Georgetown, Madison County; Altmar, Oswego County; and DeWitt, Onondaga County.

Among the measurements taken is the acidity of precipitation, which is measured on the pH scale. Liquids are neutral when they have a pH of 7; the more acidic, the lower the pH measurement. Normal rain is slightly acidic, with a pH of 5.7, said Dudley J. Raynal, a professor at the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

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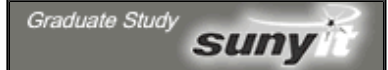
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How acidic are the rain and snow falling on Central New York? The short answer: very acidic. The average pH for the region was 4.4 in 2001, the most recent year available. Georgetown recorded an average pH of 4.43, according to the DEC. The pH was measured at 4.44 in DeWitt; Altmar, at 4.32, was the most acidic.

Although acid rain is often thought of as a problem mainly affecting the Adirondacks, the average pH that same year was 4.56 at Whiteface Mountain, in the heart of the high peaks.

The problems caused by acid rain, however, are more severe in the Adirondacks. That's because in Central New York limestone in the soil acts as a buffer that protects lakes and waterways from becoming acidic.

"The load of acid in Central New York is similar to the Adirondacks, but there is not as much rain in Central New York," said Peter Murdoch, a research hydrologist for the U.S. Geological Survey in Troy.

Most of New York's acid rain originates in the Midwest, where power plants and heavy industry along the Ohio River Valley produce more than 40 percent of the nation's sulfur emissions.

The two main pollutants responsible for acid rain are sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, which are released as exhaust primarily from coal-burning plants and automobiles. They react in the environment to form sulfates and nitrates, both acids.

"Theoretically, if you threw something up into the air in San Diego, it would come across, roll up over the Appalachian Mountains, and come through Massachusetts and Maine," Murdoch said. "It's just because of jet streams and weather patterns."

Acid rain is not directly harmful to humans, but the pollutants that cause it, when inhaled, can lead to lung problems such as asthma and bronchitis.

"There is a definite connection between nitrogen oxides, ozone air pollution and harm to human health," said Susan Christman, of the American Lung Association.

The pollutants can also do localized damage to property. In Syracuse, black scabs scar the 100-year-old Redfield Memorial in Forman Park, transformed by the barrage of car exhaust rolling off Interstate 81.

"It eats away at the fabric of buildings, cars and monuments," said Ted Bartlett, an associate at Crawford and Stearns, Syracuse-based consultants.

Ozone is the focus of the lung association's State of the Air report because it is considered the most pervasive and damaging pollutant.

In the 2003 report, Onondaga County received a D for air quality. Madison County scored a C. Cayuga and Oswego counties were not part of the report, but neighboring Wayne and Jefferson counties received an F.

Acid rain has improved under the Clean Air Act. According to the EPA, sulfur dioxide emissions were reduced by 39 percent from 1980 to 2001. That is reflected in improved pH levels in the Adirondacks, Raynal said.

In 1979, a pH of 4.1 was recorded at Whiteface Mountain. In 2001, it was 4.5.

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"Those are pretty significant changes," Raynal said.

The lung association cautions, however, that improvements in acid rain have been flattening.

"During the '90s, there was no doubt that sulfuric deposition was decreasing and that the pH improved," Murdoch said. "Whether or not that's continuing to improve is difficult to say."

According to EPA's Birnbaum, improvements in acid rain have kept pace with legislation. More laws are needed, she said.

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