

## 2.4: Environmental Pollution

Environmental chemistry has developed in response to problems and concerns regarding environmental pollution. Although awareness of chemical pollution had increased significantly in the two decades following World War II, the modern environmental movement dates from the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's classic book *Silent Spring*. The main theme of this book was the accumulation of DDT and other persistent, mostly pesticidal, chemicals through the food chain, which caused birds at the end of the chain to produce eggs with soft shells that failed to produce viable baby birds. The implication was that substances harming bird populations might harm humans as well.

Around the time of the publication of *Silent Spring* another tragedy caused great concern regarding the potential effects of chemicals. This was the occurrence of approximately 10,000 births of children with badly deformed or missing limbs as a result of their mothers having taken the pharmaceutical thalidomide to alleviate the effects of morning sickness at an early stage of pregnancy.

The 1960s were a decade of high concern and significant legislative action in the environmental arena aimed particularly at the control of water and air pollutants. By around 1970, it had become evident that the improper disposal of chemicals to the geosphere was also a matter of significant concern. Although many incidents of such disposal were revealed, the one that really brought the problem into sharp focus was the Love Canal site in Niagara Falls, New York. This waste dump was constructed in an old abandoned canal in which large quantities of approximately 80 waste chemicals had been placed for about two decades starting in the 1930s. It had been sealed with a clay cap and given to the city. A school had been built on the site and housing constructed around it. By 1971 it became obvious that the discarded chemicals were leaking through the cap. This problem led eventually to the expenditure of many millions of dollars to remediate the site and to buy out and relocate approximately one thousand households. More than any other single incident the Love Canal problem was responsible for the passage of legislation in the U.S., including Superfund, to clean up hazardous waste sites and to prevent their production in the future.

By about 1970 it was generally recognized that pollution of air, water, and land was reaching intolerable levels. As a result, various countries passed and implemented laws designed to reduce pollutants and to clean up waste chemical sites at a cost that has easily exceeded one trillion dollars globally. In many respects, this investment has been strikingly successful. Streams that had deteriorated to little more than stinking waste drainage ditches (the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio, once caught on fire from petroleum waste floating on its surface) have been restored to a healthy and productive condition. Despite a much increased population, the air quality in smog-prone Southern California has improved markedly. A number of dangerous waste disposal sites have been cleaned up. Human exposure to toxic substances in the workplace, in the environment, and in consumer products has been greatly reduced. The measures taken and regulations put in place have prevented devastating environmental problems from occurring.

Initially, serious efforts to control pollution were based on a **command and control** approach, which specifies maximum concentration guideline levels of substances that can be allowed in the atmosphere or water and places limits on the amounts or concentrations of pollutants that can be discharged in waste streams. Command and control efforts to diminish pollution have resulted in implementation of various technologies to remove or neutralize pollutants in potential waste streams and stack gases. These are so-called end-of-pipe measures. As a result, numerous techniques, such as chemical precipitation of water pollutants, neutralization of acidic pollutants, stack gas scrubbing, and waste immobilization have been developed and refined to deal with pollutants after they are produced.

Release of chemicals to the environment is now tracked in the U.S. through the Toxics Release Inventory TRI, under requirements of the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act, which requires that information be provided regarding the release of more than 300 chemicals. The release of as much as one billion kilograms of these chemicals has been reported in the U.S. during a single year. Not surprisingly, the chemical industry produces the most such substances, followed by primary metals and paper manufacture. Significant amounts are emitted from transportation equipment, plastics, and fabricated metals, with smaller quantities from a variety of other enterprises. Although the quantities of chemicals released are high, they are decreasing, and the publicity resulting from the required publication of these releases has been a major factor in decreasing the amounts of chemicals released.

Although much maligned, various pollution control measures implemented in response to command and control regulation have reduced wastes and improved environmental quality. Regulation-based pollution control has clearly been a success and well worth the expense and effort. However, it is much better to prevent the production of pollutants rather than having to deal with them after they are made. This was recognized in United States with the passage of the 1990 Pollution Prevention Act, which recognized that

source reduction is fundamentally different and more desirable than waste management and pollution control. This act explicitly states that, wherever possible, wastes are not to be generated and their quantities are to be minimized. The means for accomplishing this objective can range from very simple measures, such as careful inventory control and reduction of solvent losses due to evaporation, to much more sophisticated and drastic approaches including complete redesign of manufacturing processes with waste minimization as a top priority. The means for preventing pollution are best implemented through the practice of green chemistry, which is discussed in detail in the following section.

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