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Acid Rain 30 Years On

Just over 30 years ago, a skeptical Daniel Patrick Moynihan persuaded his Senate colleagues to approve a major study to see whether a relatively unknown phenomenon called acid rain was worth worrying about. The study, completed in 1990, showed that pollution blowing eastward from coal-fired power plants was killing off aquatic life. One-quarter of the Adirondacks' 3,000 lakes and streams had become too acidic to support fish life, or were headed that way.

Mr. Moynihan became a believer. And the study helped usher in two decades worth of laws and regulations — most important, the 1990 Clean Air Act — requiring major reductions in power plant emissions of sulfur dioxide. Evidence suggests that in the last decade pollution levels have dropped and that streams, lakes and forests have rebounded.

More can be done. The Environmental Protection Agency recently proposed a sound new regulation, which aims, over the next four years, to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions by about 70 percent from 2005 levels and cut nitrogen oxide emissions in half. It would require utilities to install pollution controls, retire their oldest plants or switch to cleaner fuels like natural gas.

Senator Thomas Carper, Democrat of Delaware, has proposed a bill that would trim sulfur dioxide emissions by 80 percent, cut nitrogen oxides by half and, for the first time, mandate reductions in mercury pollution. The E.P.A. rule is almost a sure thing, but could be vulnerable to court challenge. A law would be even better.

The Senate, which so far has shown little interest in environmental legislation, needs to pick up Mr. Moynihan's mantle. The lesson of acid rain and the Adirondacks is that good legislation can deflect and even reverse an environmental disaster.

