

Is the Stratosphere Half Empty or Half Full?

In Montreal this September, the world community took what might be called a giant half-step toward protecting the stratospheric ozone layer, the thin shield that safeguards life on the planet from lethal ultraviolet radiation. Thirteen years after two American scientists discovered that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) could deplete the ozone layer, the United States and twenty-three other nations signed an agreement to reduce consumption of these chemicals in the industrial world by 50 percent by the year 2000.

In a world not given to cooperation on environmental matters, the accord is a major diplomatic achievement. It is the first global agreement to curb an air pollutant. It will stop the frightfully fast growth in CFCs and start them on a downward course.

But substantial as the planned reductions may seem, they will only slow down the damage. Counting CFC growth permitted in the third world and a decision only to freeze, not reduce, related chemicals called halons, the net global reduction in ozone depleters is likely to be only 35-40 percent. Meanwhile, even while diplomats were negotiating, scientists reached the consensus that ozone depletion has already begun and that only a virtually complete phase-out of these chemicals will stop it.

The United States is the world's single greatest emitter of CFCs and related ozone-depleting gases. It has also been the world leader in pursuit of the new ozone protection accord. Led by EPA Administrator Lee M. Thomas and high State Department officials, the United States opened the negotiations last year by proposing a 95 percent phase-out of the key ozone-depleting chemicals over a ten-to-fourteen-year period. Early U.S. insistence on deep

cuts was the major factor in moving the other producer nations (principally the Common Market, Japan, and the U.S.S.R.) away from continued CFC growth or a mere freeze. Though there's not much to compare it with, the ozone agreement is clearly the Reagan administration's finest environmental achievement.

But what a struggle it was to keep administration hard-liners from blowing the opportunity. The most ridiculous suggestion came from Interior Secretary Donald Hodel, who pushed a policy of "personal protection" (read: hats, sunglasses, and suntan lotions) in lieu of a meaningful accord. American officials spent nearly as much time negotiating with themselves as they did with other countries. NRDC, along with other environmentalists and a watchful press, can claim credit for keeping EPA and State from capitulating totally. In the end, the United States accepted an accord that will cut global CFC emissions by less than half and only freeze levels of other halons.

Though it is clearly a good beginning, the ozone accord does not finish the job. Even with the planned reductions, there still will be more ozone depletion. CFCs are incredibly long-lived, remaining in the air for 100 years or more. As a result, there is a huge stockpile of them in the atmosphere. The scientific consensus is that just to stabilize CFC levels would require at least an 85 percent cut in emissions.

So, the Montreal accord is a first step. Further action is required. Will the administration rest on its laurels, or will it order the further reductions of CFCs under the Clean Air Act? We will see very soon, for under a court order obtained by NRDC, December 1 is the deadline for EPA's next move.