ACID RAIN LEVELS DROPPING RAPIDLY IN MIDWEST,
SULFUR & NITROGEN AIR POLLUTION HIT RECORD LOWS
Acid Rain & Smog-Causing Pollution Falls Below Federal Limits, Additional Cleanup Still Needed Before Adirondacks, Catskills and Other Sensitive Areas Can Recover

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The federal acid rain control program operated since 1995 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been an irrefutable success, reaching its pollution-reduction goals two years ahead of schedule in 2008 and with a compliance rate of nearly 100 percent, according to a report just released by the EPA.

Power plants across the county decreased emissions of sulfur dioxide to 7.6 million tons in 2008. This level is well below the 2008 government-imposed annual cap of 9.5 million tons. In fact, it was also already below the statutory annual cap of 8.95 million tons set for compliance in 2010, according to the EPA.

Sulfur dioxide pollution fell another 25 percent in 2009, or 1.85 million tons, to 5.75 million tons nationwide. At the same time, nitrogen oxide pollution fell by 1 million tons, or more than 30 percent, to 2 million tons. These levels are record low emissions of both pollutants from coal-fired power plants.

“These results are worth celebrating. The cap-and-trade program created by the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 worked better than anyone had predicted,” said Brian L. Houseal, Executive Director of the Adirondack Council, an organization that has been fighting against acid rain since 1975. “It worked faster than the law required and it cost far less money than anyone had projected. Today, more than 100 million Americans are breathing much cleaner, healthier air than they were five years ago. And the Adirondack Park is beginning to show signs of recovery.

“However,” Houseal cautioned, “we still need to take some additional steps to control the sulfur, nitrogen and mercury pollution associated with acid rain. The Adirondack Park and other sensitive areas of the eastern United States cannot fully recover from the damage done by decades of acid rain until pollution levels drop to the limits that would be imposed by legislation now pending in Congress.”

Houseal noted that a bill proposed in February by Sen. Thomas Carper, D-Delaware, entitled the Clean Air Act Amendments of 2010&SHY;, would reduce the amount of sulfur dioxide (SO2) permitted each year to 1.5 million tons by 2018. It would also reduce nitrogen oxides (NOx) emissions to 1.6 million tons by 2015. Importantly, it would also require new regulations to decrease mercury emissions by at least 90 percent by 2015.

“We are thankful to Senator Carper for introducing this much needed bill,” continued Houseal. “Our New York Senators, Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer, are co-sponsors. They have long recognized how much acid rain and mercury have done to harm the Adirondacks. We hope they push for its inclusion in the upcoming climate and energy legislation, which the Senate will consider in the upcoming months.”

For several years, New York has warned anglers to avoid eating predator species of fish from the waters of the Adirondack and Catskill parks – its two most pristine forest regions. Bass, pike, walleye, perch, pickerel and other fish that eat other fish have shown elevated mercury content, due to the combined effects of acid rain and mercury pollution.

Acid rain changes soil chemistry. The results show themselves most quickly in these mountainous areas where thin soils and hard, weather-resistant bedrock have little capacity to buffer the effects of acidic rain and snow. Mercury creeps into the picture when acidic water alters its form, changing harmless inorganic mercury – very common in the soil – to an organic form that can be absorbed into living tissue.

Once ingested, mercury doesn't go away. It continues to harm internal organs and kill nerve and brain cells and cause birth defects. Predator fish that consume nothing but mercury contaminated small fish retain all of that mercury, passing it up the food chain to large mammals, such as people. Studies have shown that mercury levels will decline in Adirondack fish populations if acid rain and mercury emissions are curtailed to the levels contained in the Carper bill.

"But we still have far to go before the Adirondack Park will fully recover from decades of acid rain," said Houseal. "Hundreds of lakes and ponds remain too acidic to support their native wildlife. But we are confident they will recover their vitality once pollution is lower. These results reported by EPA are encouraging. They prove we can get there."

Web links to the EPA data are:
http://www.epa.gov/airmarkets/quarterlytracking.html and
http://www.epa.gov/airmarkets/progress/progress-reports.html

New York's 9,300-square-mile Adirondack Park is the largest American park outside of Alaska. Its mountain ranges shelter the world's largest intact deciduous forest, containing more than 2,800 lakes and ponds, more than 2,000 miles of navigable rivers and an estimated 30,000 miles of brooks and streams. It is the source of five major river systems, whose waters spread like the spokes of a wheel, providing fresh water to Canada, New England, the Great Lakes region and New York City.

The Adirondack Council is a privately funded, not-for-profit organization whose mission is to ensure the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park. Founded in 1975, the Council doesn't accept government funding or taxpayer-supported donation of any kind. The Council has members in all 50 United States and carries out its mission through research, education