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A Fortune Proposition:

We Can Afford Clean Air

by Edmund K. Faltermayer

Polluted air is corroding metals, menacing health, and degrading the human spirit. For around \$3 billion a year, equitably shared, we can erase the outrage.

An astounding 133 million tons of aerial garbage is now being dumped into the U.S. atmosphere each year. If it could be placed on a giant scale, it would outweigh the country's annual steel production. The charts on the opposite page, based on estimates by the U.S. Public Health Service, show which human activities are responsible for this rising torrent of contamination, and what each activity's ugly brew consists of. The charts show only the five pollutants that account for most of the over-all tonnage; not shown are scores of other gases and stinks that defile the nation's air.

These pollutants are eating away at fabrics and metals. They are defacing buildings and spoiling crops. The government estimates the property damage alone at \$11 billion a year, and this does not include the decline in real-estate values in neighborhoods with air that is second class or worse. Air pollution also represents a prodigious waste of potentially valuable resources: the harmful sulfur dioxide that is vented to the atmosphere each year, for example, contains about \$300 million worth of sulfur at today's prices. While medical researchers have not proved that any of these pollutants is injuring large numbers of people, this junk obviously is doing our systems no good. "There is no longer any doubt," Surgeon General Luther L. Terry declared nearly three years ago, "that air pollution is a hazard to health." In agreement, the American Medical Association recently called for "maximum feasible reduction of all forms of air pollution."

Besides damaging health and property and wasting resources, air pollution defaces and degrades the human spirit in ways that a civilized society should not tolerate. The acrid smog associated with automobile exhausts, once confined to Los Angeles but now turning up elsewhere, probably does not kill people. It merely envelops them in an ugly yellow haze that blots out the view and smarts the eyes. The pride of Denver—the prospect of the Rocky Mountains from downtown streets—is often obscured these days by a man-made cloud of pollution. New Yorkers,

plagued with 12,000 soot-spewing apartment-house incinerators, literally inhale a portion of their own garbage. In St. Louis, a survey showed, 39 percent of the people are dogged by noisome odors. After poor schools and inadequate play space, air pollution is probably the most important single factor driving the middle class to the suburbs, and a portion of the country's commuting woes must be ascribed to it. Renascent cities are trying to lure these citizens back, but they recoil from air that is dirty, malodorous, and menacing.

The U.S. has both the technology and the wealth to reduce pollution drastically. Even though thousands of factories are still discharging their wastes into the public air, most of the devices for controlling emissions from industrial plants were invented years ago. "We can handle just about any pollution-control demand that is likely to be made," says John E. Schork, president of Research-Cottrell, Inc., a leading maker of pollution-abating devices. Cleaning up automobile emissions and the sulfur dioxide from electric power stations still presents engineering problems, but solutions will undoubtedly be found in the next few years.

Money is not a problem, either. The nationwide application of the best techniques either already or soon to be available would cost the country far less than is generally believed. An expenditure of less than one-half of 1 percent of the gross national product—probably about \$3 billion a year—would reduce air pollution by at least two-thirds. By drastically reducing that \$11 billion a year of property damage, the expenditure would easily pay for itself.

With the technical skills and the monetary means at hand, it is incredible that we put up with this needless outrage. With an awakened public, there would be no need to employ subsidies and other economic gimmicks to hasten industry's cleanup, as some experts have proposed. Corporations can absorb many of these expenditures anyway, and consumers would not notice them in the prices of the things they buy. Indeed, households would probably feel the costs of a national rollback of air pollution only in the prices of two items, electricity and new cars. But these two items are so universal that price increases, rather than subsidies, would be a perfectly equitable way to distribute the burden. The role of the federal government, *FORTUNE* believes, can largely be confined to the setting of standards, and to aiding state and local governments in enforcement.