

consumer mailbag

There has been a lot of concern over the "Greenhouse Effect" recently. Exactly what is the Greenhouse effect? What causes it? What environmental problems are related to it? Many of our readers have had similar questions about this issue. Here are some answers to your questions.

Q. What is the Greenhouse Effect?
A. During the last 15 years scientists have been monitoring the earth's atmosphere to determine if industrial processes are affecting the world's temperatures. Their conclusions are that the earth is moving into the early stages of an unprecedented climate shift -- a global warming. This global warming is called "the Greenhouse Effect."

Throughout much of the earth's history there has been a natural greenhouse effect. Certain gases have always formed a blanket around the earth, letting the sun's rays through while absorbing some of the reflected heat. This trapped heat insulates the earth, providing a warm temperature band. Now, however, more and more gases are thickening around the earth's surface which traps more heat around the earth.



Terry Gibb

Some scientists predict that if current trends in pollution continue, there will be a global temperature rise of four to nine degrees Fahrenheit in the next 70 years. A temperature rise of this amount would exceed the total increase in global temperature since the last Ice Age. In comparison, the average temperature of the earth has not changed more than 3.5 degrees Fahrenheit in the 18,000 years during which human civilization appeared.

Q. What are these gases that trap the sun's heat? How are they produced?
A. There are five primary gases known as the "greenhouse gases":

1) Carbon Dioxide (CO₂)
CO₂ causes about 50 percent of the greenhouse effect. Every year 5.5 billion tons of CO₂ are produced. CO₂ is produced primarily when fossil

fuels, such as coal, oil and natural gas, are burned. Deforestation through the burning of trees is another significant cause of CO₂.

2) Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)
CFCs are industrial chemicals used in solvents, plastic packaging and plastic foam products, air conditioners and refrigerator coolant. Many CFCs hold heat in the atmosphere at a rate several 1,000 times greater than CO₂ and can remain in the atmosphere over 100 years. CFCs are responsible for 15-20 percent of the greenhouse effect.

3) Methane
Methane is a gas produced by cattle, rice fields and landfills as the organic waste breaks down. Methane adds 18 percent to the greenhouse effect.

4) Nitrous Oxide
This gas is formed by the burning

of fossil fuels, natural microbial activity in the soil, and by the breakdown of chemical fertilizers. Nitrous oxides contribute approximately 10 percent of the greenhouse effect.

5) Ozone
Ozone is vital atmospheric component. Ozone is the protective layer around the earth's surface that prevents the sun's ultraviolet rays from reaching the earth's surface. However, at ground level, ozone is a dangerous pollutant that accounts for about 5 percent of the greenhouse effect. Ozone is produced by motor vehicles, power plants and oil refineries.

The U.S. because of its highly technological society, produces a significant amount of these greenhouse gases. The U.S. contributes 26 percent of the total CO₂ produced and 27 percent of the world's CFCs.

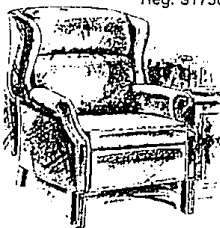
NEXT WEEK: Other environmental problems related to the Greenhouse Effect and ways we can help reduce greenhouse gases.

The Consumer Mailbag answers your questions. Address mail to The Consumer Mailbag, Concern Detroit, One Kennedy Square, 4th Floor, Detroit, MI 48226.

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