

I keep hearing this term and so have been trying to demystify it for myself. It really is a large topic, enough for at least one book, but here I will try to explain as much as I have come to understand the term and how Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) affect our daily lives.

According to [Environment Canada](#) VOCs are “organic compounds containing one or more carbon atoms that have high vapour pressures and therefore evaporate readily to the atmosphere.” In other words, it is the new car smell, which is a compound slowly becoming a gas as it is released into the air.

There are two types of VOCs, natural such as manure (as we politely called it on the farm) and man made such as those you smell as that lovely coat of paint dries on your child’s bedroom wall. When you can’t smell it anymore, it doesn’t mean it is gone from the environment, it is just that we all become accustomed to it and that it moves on into the atmosphere and our water.

Some VOCs, when they react in the sunlight form ozone, which as we know protects us from the sun’s radiation, if we have a good layer of it in the upper atmosphere. In the lower atmosphere, however, these same VOCs pollute the water, create smog and are inhaled by earthlings. Some VOCs are acceptable at certain levels while others are toxic and shouldn’t exist.

For example, trees and butterflies give off VOCs, but as long as neither trees nor butterflies take over the earth, we should be safe. Now there’s a horror flick for you. [Air fresheners](#) and some detergents on the other hand have been found to contain undeclared and potentially toxic VOCs which one would think contribute to the current number of children with asthma and other related health issues. Hmm?

According to [Environment Canada](#), transportation is the main concern for VOCs in Canada at 42%, when you don’t take upstream oil and gas and the oil sands development into consideration. After transportation, solvent use is the next largest concern at 28%. Solvents

include both consumer and commercial products.

[Consumer products](#) are also of great concern and include personal care products, cleaning products, air fresheners, and the list goes on.

So what is the Canadian Government doing?

The Ministry of the Environment is creating regulations to establish concentration limits for VOCs for “certain consumer products.” The proposed regulations would reduce VOC emissions by 33% per year over 25 years according to the article in the [Canada Gazette](#) for the products affected by the regulations. The article goes on to state that the benefits of these reductions would include

- human health—reduced incidence of premature death, hospital admissions, doctor visits, emergency room visits, lost work and school days, etc.;
- agriculture and forestry—improved yields; and
- environment—reduced damage to the ecosystems.

The sectors that will be affected by the regulations include personal care; soap and cleaning compounds; consumer and institutional adhesives; and other somewhat allusive sectors such as Other Miscellaneous Chemicals.

When will all of this be implemented? The goal is to implement it by 2010.

I don't think I'll wait. I would rather leave the VOCs to the trees and butterflies and I'll use more natural products to make me and my house smell clean and fresh. I might just open my windows or hang my clothes to dry outside. Or I'll try some more of the old fashioned cleaning products, such as baking soda, lemon or vinegar.

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