Geophysical Research Abstracts
Vol. 19, EGU2017-11478-2, 2017
EGU General Assembly 2017

Reactive nitrogen chemistry in aerosol water as a source of sulfate during haze events in China

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Fine-particle pollution associated with winter haze threatens the health of more than 400 million people in the North China Plain. Sulfate is a major component of fine haze particles. Record sulfate concentrations of up to $\sim$300 μg m$-$3 were observed during the January 2013 winter haze event in Beijing. State-of-the-art air quality models that rely on sulfate production mechanisms requiring photochemical oxidants cannot predict these high levels because of the weak photochemistry activity during haze events. We find that the missing source of sulfate and particulate matter can be explained by reactive nitrogen chemistry in aerosol water. The aerosol water serves as a reactor, where the alkaline aerosol components trap SO_2, which is oxidized by NO_2 to form sulfate, whereby high reaction rates are sustained by the high neutralizing capacity of the atmosphere in northern China. This mechanism is self-amplifying because higher aerosol mass concentration corresponds to higher aerosol water content, leading to faster sulfate production and more severe haze pollution.

Reference:
Cheng, Y., Zheng, G., Wei, C., Mu, Q., Zheng, B., Wang, Z., Gao, M., Zhang, Q., He, K., Carmichael, G., Pöschl, U., and Su, H.: Reactive nitrogen chemistry in aerosol water as a source of sulfate during haze events in China, Science Advances, 2, 10.1126/sciadv.1601530, 2016.