

NEW WORLD

Agricultural Chemicals Fall Foul of Nader's Raiders

by our Washington Correspondent

A BITING attack on the US Department of Agriculture and on some meat and agricultural chemicals corporations was made last week by Ralph Nader's Center for Study of Responsive Law. Two years' work by a task force of scientists and lawyers working under Nader's auspices has uncovered a wealth of alleged malpractices and shortcomings in the machinery for enforcing standards of meat quality which seem to have made the Wholesome Meat Act of 1967 something of a misnomer. The task force charges, in a report made public last week*, that residues of pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, bacteria and other hidden contaminants may have found their way into meat and meat products because (1) monitoring of such contaminants is totally inadequate; (2) tests sufficiently sensitive to detect potentially harmful levels of such contaminants are not available; (3) pesticides are often misused—frequently with the connivance of the chemicals companies—and the machinery for banning potentially harmful pesticides is cumbersome and heavily biased in favour of the manufacturer; and (4) there is a confusing and damaging division of responsibility between different agencies in the Federal government for setting and enforcing quality control standards. But the chief complaint of the task force is that the combined lobby of the meat and chemicals industries is so powerful that regulatory agencies are firmly in their control.

The chief focus of discontent in this sorry catalogue of woes is the Department of Agriculture, described by Nader at a press conference last week as "ridden with crime". And, according to Harrison Wellford, who directed the study, "the most challenging and risky decision-making outside of national defence is often found in federal regulation of the technology and corporate practices of food production, particularly the application of chemical technology to food and agriculture". But the Department of Agriculture does not see it that way, for it put out a statement last week in reply to the report which suggested that the task force dealt with "certain specific problem areas which are not typical either of the conditions that exist in the depart-

ment or in the food industry". Typical or not, some of the problems discussed in the task force report cut right across the work of the department and are a cause of concern to scientists and, increasingly, to the public.

One such problem is the use of antibiotics in animal feedstuffs. Nearly 80 per cent of the meat, eggs and milk consumed in the United States comes from animals that have been fed for all or part of their lives on medicated feeds, and the stake that the drugs industry now has in this business is such that more antibiotics are sold to farmers than to hospitals. Concern over the use of antibiotics in agriculture centres around the possibility that drug resistant strains of bacteria may develop in animals, and that their resistance may be transferred to human germs. What the task force is particularly concerned about is that the regulatory controls are more than shaky: "while the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) must approve each antibiotic for safety and efficacy, farm use of these drugs is hardly controlled at all". The FDA approves the use of drugs and sets a safe level of tolerance in meat and meat products which the Department of Agriculture analysts then monitor. But what sometimes happens in practice is that drugs are approved by the FDA before the Department of Agriculture has developed techniques to test for their presence in meat. Such is the case with the nitrofurans which are used to control coccidiosis in poultry, and this situation of the right hand not knowing what the left is doing is made more alarming by the fact that the FDA now believes that some nitrofurans may be carcinogenic.

The task force recommends that in view of these occurrences, the FDA should not allow the use of any drug in animal feeds for which the Department of Agriculture has not developed sufficiently sensitive detection techniques, and in the long run, monitoring of food for poisonous contaminants should be centralized in one health-oriented agency. Moreover, like the Swann Report in the UK, the task force suggests that the use of "human antibiotics such as penicillin and tetracyclines as growth promoters and stress relievers for livestock poses an avoidable human hazard which the public should not tolerate, particularly when

there are substitutes available which have no use in human medicine".

The use in the United States of a hormone, diethylstilboestrol (DES), is an even more clear-cut example of commercial profits being weighed against potential human health hazards. DES is mixed with the feed of nearly three-quarters of the cattle slaughtered in the US, and it is used to promote growth. It has been estimated that DES adds \$90 million a year to the profits of cattle growers, and the task force quotes the National Cattlemen's Association as saying that beef prices would increase by up to ten per cent if DES were banned. Yet it is the only chemical that is widely used as an animal drug for which there is strong evidence that it is carcinogenic both in test animals and in man.

McElroy Leaves NSF

by our Washington Correspondent

DR WILLIAM D. McELROY is to leave his post as Director of the National Science Foundation on February 1, 1972, to become Chancellor of the University of California at San Diego. He will leave the NSF after only two and a half years in office; the usual term is six years. Spokesmen for the NSF emphasize, however, that McElroy is not leaving because of any major disagreement with the Administration, and he has in fact decided to stay until the Administration budget for 1973 has been completed.

Since taking office in 1969, McElroy has presided over an expanding budget which has risen from \$432 million in 1969 to about \$600 million for 1972; the 1972 budget alone represented an increase of \$100 million over 1971, chiefly to salvage some projects abandoned by other agencies. His appointment to the chancellorship of San Diego was unanimously agreed at a meeting last week. McElroy is a biologist, and headed the biology department at Johns Hopkins University before he was appointed by Nixon to the NSF in 1969.

**Sowing the Wind*, by Harrison Wellford. Center for Study of Responsive Law.