

NEW WORLD

Clean Air or Warm Homes?

by our Washington Correspondent

A YEAR ago, the environmentalist movement in the United States was able to point to a series of spectacular achievements and stunning victories over the federal government and other despoilers of the natural environment. Among its more prominent victims it could count the Alaska pipeline, which had been held up for three years by legal tangles; the Atomic Energy Commission, which had been forced to consider environmental factors before granting licences for construction and operation of nuclear power plants; DDT, which had been banned; automobile manufacturers, who had been denied their request for an extra year in which to develop clean cars; and polluters of air and water who had been put under the gun by strong legislation passed by Congress. Then came the energy crisis.

Although it would be overstating the case to say that the environmental bandwagon has been derailed by the barrage of publicity and widespread concern about fuel supplies, there is no question that it has lost momentum and that it is facing an even tougher period in the months immediately ahead. A series of setbacks in the past few weeks and impending battles over the development of energy resources attest to that. All of which puts Russell Train, whose appointment as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency was approved by the Senate last week, in one of the hottest seats in the federal government.

Train held his first press conference as EPA Administrator last week, and for more than an hour he was faced with a barrage of questions about whether energy policy dictated by the White House would castrate the EPA's drive to clean up air pollution. In particular, he was repeatedly questioned about a meeting held in the White House on September 8, after which President Nixon and Governor John Love, the head of the White House Office of Energy Policy, announced that some air pollution controls will have to be lifted this winter to prevent power blackouts. That decision, perhaps more than any other, is being seized upon as a signal that the environmental movement has come up against the energy crunch.

In short, the White House is putting pressure on state governors to adopt contingency plans to lift pollution control requirements on power plants by allowing them to burn fuels containing relatively high quantities of sulphur if

supplies of low-sulphur oil dry up this winter. Train emphasized that lifting the regulations would be a temporary solution to an acute problem, and that it in no way signals long term relaxation of air pollution controls. In two or three years' time, he argued, the technology for removing sulphur from oil and sulphur dioxide from stack gases will be more widely available, and fuel supplies will be stepped up.

Unfortunately, however, a couple of days before the White House announced the need for relaxing controls, the EPA itself proposed that some controls be lifted on coal burning power plants and copper smelters because stack gas cleaning technology is not widely available. And, last week, officials from oil and gas corporations were arguing, in a set of public hearings concerned with off-shore production of oil and gas, that there is little prospect of a letup in fuel shortages for the next few years. Thus it can be safely assumed that, in the absence of adequate clean-up technology, a trade-off between air pollution controls and oil shortages will have to be faced not just this winter, but for many years to come.

SCIENCE POLICY

Informal Advice

by our Washington Correspondent

SINCE the President's Science Advisory Committee last met in December 1972, before it was abolished by President Nixon, there has been no provision for the scientific community in the United States to have a formal voice in the federal government's science policy apparatus. Last week, however, Dr H. Guyford Stever, Director of the National Science Foundation and now the President's Science Adviser, took the first step towards setting up a mechanism for sounding out the views of the scientific community. He called together the heads of 19 of the largest scientific and engineering societies in the United States to discuss "whether the views, hopes and needs of the professional scientific community can be introduced into the science policy-making process".

The meeting was closed to the press, but Stever said afterwards that there was general agreement that contact between the science adviser and the heads of scientific organizations should be developed. Consequently, Stever said that he will call similar meetings

The Energy Policy Office says that it has not received a deluge of complaints about its proposal, which is probably fair indication of public reaction to the energy crisis. (Indeed, it would be remarkable if there were no public concern about the matter, since the oil companies are spending millions of dollars advertising the seriousness of the situation—ecopornography has given way to thermopornography.) But that is not to say that the office is getting away with its proposal without raising some opposition. Senator Edmund Muskie and his Air and Water Pollution subcommittee is not happy about it, nor is the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), a public interest law group which has fought many a legal battle with the government and won.

NRDC lawyers fired off a letter to Love's office last week, suggesting that his proposal is "a shocking attempt to make Americans' lungs bear the burden of the Administration's failure to take meaningful steps to improve our short-term energy situation". Not only that, but the energy office has acted illegally in failing to produce a statement giving

on an informal, but fairly regular, basis in the future, and he also said that he hopes to be able to incorporate in science policy decisions the work that the societies themselves are doing on such problems as manpower planning. There are also plans to call together a group of representatives from industry in October, to discuss means for bringing the industrial viewpoint to bear on science policy.

For their part, the scientific societies had already begun to consider how they could make the views of their members known to the Washington decision makers, well before Stever called them to a meeting. Early in July, for example, the heads of some 13 societies formed a Committee of Scientific Society Presidents, under the chairmanship of Dr Alan Nixon, President of the American Chemical Society, with the intention of working for "a constructive national science policy". Although the committee has no paid staff and no budget, the newly opened lines to Stever and his staff could strengthen its voice in national affairs. Nevertheless, an informal committee giving informal advice to the science adviser still does not give the scientific community a powerful and continuing voice in the corridors of power.