

Dear Russell . . .

Dear Dixie . . .

by Colin Norman, Washington

A COUPLE of months ago, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) received a rude shock from a sister agency in the federal government when the Environmental Protection Agency published a blistering critique of some of the AEC's key justifications for pushing ahead at breakneck speed with the breeder reactor programme. EPA's temerity in questioning some of the arguments made in support of the most important energy research and development programme in the United States evidently hit a raw nerve in the AEC for it has prompted a frosty letter from AEC chairman Dixie Lee Ray to EPA administrator Russell E. Train, and a polite but equally frosty defence of EPA's actions in a reply from Train to Ray.

EPA's critique, which was published on May 4, tore to pieces many of the arguments put forward by AEC in a draft report on the environmental impact of the breeder reactor programme, and EPA gave the report the lowest possible rating of "inadequate". AEC was under court order to put the draft report into final form by June 14, but following EPA's criticisms, AEC sought and received an extension of the deadline. A final environmental impact statement is now expected sometime late in the summer or early autumn.

The dispute between the two agencies could later play an even more important part in the fierce battle now being waged over the breeder reactor, however, for EPA's criticisms may provide the basis for legal action to delay or block the programme by nuclear critics if AEC's final impact statement fails to respond adequately to the points raised by EPA.

But what seems to have offended AEC officials in particular is the manner in which the criticisms were delivered. According to Dixie Lee Ray's letter, the criticisms came as a shock because the two agencies had previously agreed to cooperate in preparing the draft environmental impact statement, and EPA officials had given "repeated telephonic assurances throughout (the) drafting period that there were no problems" with AEC's analyses. "We cannot understand the way in which EPA handled its recent comments" Ray said, and added that "surely there are more constructive ways of handling this and similar situations".

Train replied that although he shares Ray's concern that the two agencies should work constructively together, effective coordination in

producing the statement proved to be impossible, and he said that when differences of opinion arise on impact statements, "our official comments must and will identify these issues and EPA's concerns". In other words Train made it perfectly clear that when his agency believes that another agency in the federal government has produced a poor environmental impact statement, EPA will continue to speak out.

Because of the importance of the fast breeder reactor programme—it is the largest single energy research and development programme in the United States and it will provide the keystone to the entire nuclear power programme in the 1990s and beyond—officials of the AEC, EPA and the White House Council on Environmental Quality met in September last year to try to ensure that the drafting stage of the impact statement would proceed as smoothly as possible. It was agreed at that meeting that AEC would provide EPA with draft copies of chapters of the statement as soon as they were written.

But, according to Train's letter, although AEC supplied EPA with material beginning in December last year, the three most controversial aspects of the statement—those dealing with plutonium toxicity, safety and cost-benefit analysis—were not com-

pleted until February. As far as the cost benefit material was concerned, EPA in fact received no draft at all. Thus EPA had little or no input into those parts of the statement, and as it turned out they were the most heavily criticised parts. Train also pointed out that in the September meeting last year EPA officials identified 14 topics which should be discussed in the impact statement, but only two were addressed in full and five were addressed in part.

Although AEC's pique and EPA's defence of its actions represent little more on the surface than a bureaucratic squabble, they do underline a couple of important points. The first is that with the White House beleaguered by calls for President Nixon's impeachment and resignation, federal agencies are taking an independent line on many issues which would normally be under tight White House control—the EPA, for example, has been taking a stand against several administration policies and several top administration officials have even said in public that they have no fear of White House pressures any more. And the second point is that EPA's independent stand on the breeder reactor statement, which would have been much more difficult in pre-Watergate days, is a vital part of the procedure laid down by the National Environmental Policy Act for ensuring that environmental concerns are taken fully into account in decisions made by the federal government.

Test ban soon?

MR BREZHNEV has now indicated that the Soviet Union is prepared to discuss a ban on underground nuclear weapons tests when Mr Nixon visits Moscow in late June. This together with the continued interest in Washington makes some sort of agreement, even if only an agreement to agree, a near certainty this summer. A treaty is likely to take the form of a threshold agreement in which tests are forbidden only if they produce a seismic signal larger than a specified value. This concept has been strongly criticised in recent weeks; the sort of value being talked about would permit explosions of up to fifty kilotons to be fired if appropriately muffled. A large majority of all tests fired at present are below that level of yield, so the threat to a weapons programme of a threshold treaty could be modest. The speech of Mr Brezhnev does however mention the question of a timetable for phasing out weapons tests entirely, an idea that will be much more difficult to sell to the United States. It will be interesting to see whether the Soviet Union insists on such an addition to any treaty that is signed, as it is potentially embarrassing to the United States and could endanger the talks.

Nuclear safeguards

STUNG by a series of public criticisms of the adequacy of its safeguards against the theft of nuclear materials, the Atomic Energy Commission has elevated nuclear security to a higher position in its bureaucratic hierarchy. The move is, however, unlikely to satisfy the AEC's critics in Congress who are pushing ahead with a bill to force the commission to pay much more attention to nuclear safeguards than it has in the past.

The move consists of amalgamating the present Division of Nuclear Security and the Division of Nuclear Materials Security into a single entity whose job will be to prevent the theft of weapons-grade plutonium and enriched uranium from AEC facilities and in transportation. Critics have long argued that responsibilities for preventing nuclear theft have been fragmented, and so the reorganisation at least helps to answer some of the complaints.

But it falls far short of recommendations contained in two recent studies of the AEC's safeguard regulations, and it also addresses only part of the safeguard problem, for the new division will be responsible only for