

international news

Frameworks for energy in the US...

by Colin Norman, Washington

ON THE eve of its recess for the November elections, the US Congress approved what could turn out to be the most significant piece of energy-related legislation to reach the lawbooks since the oil crisis began to bite.

Minutes before President Ford appeared before a joint session of Congress to deliver his economic pep talk, a House-Senate Conference committee reached agreement on a bill which will abolish the Atomic Energy Commission and replace it with a Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and an independent Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA). Two days later, the bill was sitting on Ford's desk awaiting his signature. Until last week, the bill had been making glacial passage through the Congressional mill, and there were fears that no agreement would be reached on the measure before the end of the session.

The importance of the legislation is that it consolidates energy research and development programmes which are now spread out over a host of federal departments and agencies into a single agency. Furthermore, it removes a long standing complaint that the Atomic Energy Commission suffers from a conflict of interest by both promoting and regulating nuclear energy, because it splits those functions into separate agencies. Furthermore, the bill considerably elevates the status of research programmes concerned with nuclear safety and the safeguarding of nuclear materials.

The bill, which was originally proposed by former President Nixon's Administration, sets up the NRC to take over virtually all of the regulatory functions that are now performed by the Atomic Energy Commission, but it also completely alters the present bureaucratic structure. The NRC will consist of three co-equal offices, each of which will report to a 5-member commission. The Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation will be concerned with licensing nuclear reactors. The Office of Material Safety and Safeguards will license reprocessing facilities and facilities associated with transporting nuclear materials, and it will also make sure that nuclear materials are adequately safeguarded.

The third, the Office of Nuclear Regulatory Research, will perform backup research for evaluating licence applications to ensure that safety and safeguards criteria are met.

As for ERDA, it will take over virtually all the energy research and development activities performed by the federal government, using the laboratories of the Atomic Energy Commission as the base of its operations. It will be split into six divisions, each of which will be headed by an Assistant Administrator, concerned with fossil fuels; nuclear energy; environmental safety; conservation, solar, geothermal, and advanced energy systems; and nuclear security.

ERDA will carry out all the energy programmes related to Project Independence—the much vaunted drive to make the United States self-sufficient in energy supplies—and it will be armed with a huge budget, amounting at present to about \$2,000 million a year. Nuclear energy will soak up nearly half of the ERDA funds, with the breeder reactor getting the biggest single slice. But it will also take over such programmes as the solar energy research effort which was recently launched by Congress (see *Nature*, 251, 368, 1974), as well as Congressionally inspired research and development programs concerned with geothermal energy and other longer-term energy options. □

... and in Holland

from Arie de Kool, Amsterdam

THE Netherlands are going nuclear, but slowly, and with a maximum of government control. In fact, the government will increase its influence in the whole of the energy field considerably—if possible, together with other European countries, if not, alone.

Its proposals are set out in a long-awaited White Book on Energy. Several of these are concerned with getting the government a measure of control in the privately owned energy supply sector. As far as nuclear power is concerned, the government proposes to establish a monopoly for the exploitation of nuclear power stations and promises to undertake studies on overall nuclear safety within two years. It plans to build three 1,000 MW nuclear power stations, to be on stream by 1985 or when the establishment of the government nuclear monopoly and the safety studies permit.

The government also wants to negotiate a say in the managerial conditions of energy supply corporations, and by bringing the planning of all types of power stations under government responsibility, ensure that electrical power supply is discussed in parliament. To stimulate the use of coal for electricity generation the government will stipulate that all new power plants shall be fitted for oil and coal firing. The Dutch will also continue to participate in the German-Belgian-Dutch prototype sodium-cooled fast breeder reactor at Kalkar in Germany, although the government is strongly considering pulling out of the next phase, the construction of a 1,000 MW demonstration reactor.

Looking outwards, the government plans to take a 40% share in all natural gas and oil exploitations on the Dutch part of the continental shelf, with the condition that the government share in the profit may rise as high as 80% if conditions allow “without impeding the attractiveness to the oil companies”. The Dutch government also plans to build up a “strategic reserve” of natural gas by stimulating exploration and exploitation of smaller fields in order to have the major source at Slochteren available in case of another oil crisis.

It is no secret, that the cabinet has been highly divided, especially over the use of nuclear energy. A couple of days before the White Book was officially released, it leaked out that the government proposed a considerable delay in the construction of nuclear power plants. This was the interpretation the ‘progressive’ members of the cabinet were giving (and were supposed to give) to the delay that is bound to result from the establishment of the government monopoly and the requirements of an overall safety report.

However, Dr Lubbers, Minister of Economic Affairs, maintained at a press conference, that the three plants should be ready by 1985. The safety reports might lead to a change in reactor type, a change of site, even to a postponement of the start of the first reactor, but not to the goal of 3,500 MW of nuclear energy in 1985.

Naturally, the opponents of nuclear energy are not very happy with the White Book. Some 10,000 people biked and bussed to Kalkar in protest, three days after the White Book was published. □