

Poland

Environment at long-term risk

POLAND will need at least two decades of "huge social efforts and financial outlay" to restore an ecological balance that will satisfy the nation, according to Stefan Jarzebski, head of the Office of Environmental Protection and Water Economy. Presenting a report on the state of the environment over the past five years, Jarzebski told the Sejm (Parliament) last month that the losses caused by the degradation of the environment are now considerably greater than what is spent on attempting to counteract them. Decades of neglect of the environment have produced "calculable economic losses" — smaller crops, smaller yields of forest products, higher costs of water treatment for industry and domestic use.

A state inspectorate of environmental protection established in January 1980 has been insufficient, as the Sejm debate and resolution on the report made clear, to halt the deterioration of the environment. Since the law came into force, "extraordinary threats" to the environment have almost quadrupled, from 396 incidents in 1981 to 1,395 in 1984. Factories find it cheaper to pay fines for emitting pollutants than to take steps to eliminate the sources of pollution. (In 1984, almost 3,000 enterprises were fined a total of more than 2,500 million zloty.) Many important anti-pollution measures recommended under the 1980 law could not be put into practice, or even started, the Sejm noted, presumably as a result of the economic crisis. It should be noted, incidentally, that the closing of the Skawina aluminium refinery near Kraków in January 1981, an achievement to which Jarzebski attached great importance in his report, was not a government initiative at all. Demands to close the plant (which was discharging hydrogen fluoride into the atmosphere) came from the Kraków Ecological Club, one of the many private initiatives which sprang up in the wake of Solidarity, and which, with the backing of the Archbishop of Kraków, Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, managed to convince the relevant authorities that the cost of keeping the plant open, in terms of damage to the local environment and to the health of the population, was greater than the loss to the economy produced by closing it.

In spite of the closure of the Skawina plant, the Kraków area still remains one of Poland's black spots, the others being the Upper Silesian industrial belt (centred on Katowice), the Legnica-Glogow copper belt and the Gdańsk and Puck gulfs. Here, the Sejm decided, the deterioration may be classed as "ecological calamity". Twenty-three areas were designated as being at ecological risk. Even in the capital, Warsaw, householders have to boil their drinking water, and in spite of this

precautionary measure, digestive disorders, urinary tract illness and cancer are on the increase.

The law of January 1980 was one of the few positive responses to environmental problems of the Gierek regime which tended to deal with such matters by censoring public discussion of them. The present government seems at least prepared to discuss them, perhaps because it has a ready-made excuse in Poland's continuing economic problems for any failure of delay in taking action. The Sejm's response to Jarzebski's data was to call for a national programme on the protection of the environment up to the year 2010, a plan which is expected to take at least two years to complete. In the meantime, "undertakings serving protection of the environ-

ment", says the Sejm, should be written into the 1986-90 Five Year Plan.

How far these recommendations will be accepted and implemented is, of course, a matter for the government and the industrial managers.

● Three leading Polish dissidents, Jacek Kuron, Adam Michnik and Tadeusz Jędrzak suggested, last February, that independent Committees for the Protection of the Environment of Silesia should be established, the underground newsletter *Przegląd Wiadomości Agencyjnych* reported on 2 June. The report drew special attention to the high child death rate from cancer in Silesia due to the pollution of the environment, but noted that the majority of the population seemed unwilling to face the reality of the threat. No concrete action seems to have been taken on the proposal, and Michnik is now serving a prison sentence and Jędrzak awaiting trial on political charges. **Vera Rich**

Soil Survey**Budget squeeze hurts projects**

THE dwindling staff of the Soil Survey of England and Wales is still in the dark about its future. The unit, based at the Rothamsted Agricultural Station, will nevertheless have to decide by the end of October how many members of its staff will be retained beyond the beginning of the next financial year on 1 April 1986, when its budget will be cut in half.

The problems at the Soil Survey appear to be an almost classic illustration of how the Rothschild principle for research support can turn sour. The survey, formally established in 1939, and now constitutionally a part of the British Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC), has been supported since 1972 by research commissioned from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, most recently (in 1983-84) to the tune of £1.8 million a year. In January this year, however, the ministry let it be known that the annual grant would be cut in half (to £850,000) in the year beginning next April. Nothing has been proposed for the succeeding year.

One inevitable consequence of this uncertainty is that the survey is losing staff. By the beginning of this year, largely because of declining research commissions, the staff at the survey had shrunk to 70 (from a peak of 85 in 1976); now it has fallen to 64, largely by allowing vacancies to go unfilled.

The decision about next year's budget was announced by Lord Belstead, an agriculture minister, in the House of Lords on 29 January, who explained that the objective of the reduced grant from next year was the British government's belief that "this is an area which ought to be commissioned by those who use the work". Much in that spirit, AFRC has commissioned a consultants' study of the opportunities for

persuading the Soil Survey's users to pay for the work it does. The report of that study, not yet formally presented, is understood to take the view that the survey could become self-supporting only on a smaller scale, but that a full 50 per cent reduction would not be needed.

The Soil Survey appears thus to be one of the first casualties of the work of the Agricultural Priorities Board, appointed a year ago to replace the previous Joint Consultative Organisation for agricultural research. Lord Belstead said last January that the decision to cut the budget of the Soil Survey had been taken after consultation with the board.

In the past few months, some outside contract work has come the way of the Soil Survey, which says it has been able to raise £175,000 to support certain aspects of its work. "That's six people's jobs for a year", one staff member said. Meanwhile, the pattern of the survey's work has been modified so as to concentrate on projects that could be rounded off by next year. For the time being, work on the 1:50,000 soil map of England and Wales, a project planned to be completed only in the 1990s, has been put on the back burner.

In principle, according to ministry sources, there is no reason why AFRC should not shoulder some of the burden of keeping the Soil Survey alive, although the council itself is under serious pressure from a reduction of its budget. The most likely help from the survey is some adjustment of the cost of premises at Rothamsted, now valued at some £350,000 a year. Paradoxically, nothing has yet been said about the comparable soil survey operation in Scotland, based at the Macaulay Institute, which was reduced by a fifth in 1982 but whose more distant fate will not be decided until the end of August. □