Clinton's green think-tank under a cloud

Chicago. A new alliance between scientists and the private sector can solve some of America's most intractable environmental problems, Bruce Babbitt, the US interior secretary, told the President's Council on Sustainable Development last week when it visited the mid-West to see for itself how such problems are afflicting the country's heartland.

But the high-powered council, established last year by President Bill Clinton to help him to develop new and convincing environmental policies, was starkly confronted with the limitations of the Babbitt approach on the banks of Lake Michigan.

In particular, it faced the clear dichotomy between the shiny statements it has been polishing in Washington, and the dirty reality of life for those left to rot on what is known as the 'rustbelt'.

The Chicago meeting was the second such mission for the 25-strong council, made up of cabinet members, chief executives of leading industrial companies and the heads of the main environmental pressure groups. The council has drafted a 'vision statement' and 15 proposed principles, and is to report to the president in a year's time.

After field trips to Chicago's decrepit south side and to the steel town of Gary, Indiana, Jonathan Lash, co-chairman of the council and president of the World Resources Institute, said that the trips had stimulated "a very strong reaction" in council members. "A lot of people saw and heard things they hadn't seen before."

Lash says that the new experiences con-

cern "the whole question of brownfields and environmental equity". He was referring to the stalemate over the fate of disused industrial land that is adversely affecting people's lives, particularly those of the black people who live next door to it.

Gary was once the home of the world's largest integrated steel mill. The council's visit was intended to see local "ecological restoration activities", including the 20-year-old 15,000-acre Indiana Dunes National Lake Shore. This is the world's first national park on industrial land, and is a key site in the development of ecological science.

But the council heard of what Carlos Tolliver, a local activist, called "a city under economic and environmental siege". His description was hard to dispute at a public meeting held beneath the pall of thick black smoke from a local tyre dump, where 70,000 tonnes of rubber had been burning out of control for three days.

More landfill dumps are planned for Gary, where a quarter of households have an income of less than \$10,000 a year, and the city council is keen for any development it can get, sustainable or otherwise.

If there is a traditional US model for resource management, it is one in which environmentalists fight industrialists or landowners in the courts until an expensive stalemate is reached. Babbitt thinks that

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more thorough ecological science, together with greater cooperation from industrialists or landowners, can break the deadlock.

But even if his approach offers a way forward for resource-rich rural regions, it offers little for America's extensive areas of urban blight. One problem for the President's Council on Sustainable Development is that its tortuously wide brief covers both sets of problems.

Another is the recurrent allegation that the council is a cover for inaction on key areas of environmental policy. "We don't want fuzzy commissions — we want hard commitments," says Brett Hulsey of the Sierra Club, a powerful environmental organization, who complains that Congress is preparing legislation on clean water and wetlands conservation that is weaker than existing law.

Lash says that the council's brief is to do the kind of strategic thinking that government agencies cannot do on their own. Madeleine Kunin, the deputy education secretary, says: "The very fact that these groups are all collaborating for the first time gives us a chance to create a vision, and not just react to crises."

Some want the council to raise its profile. But environmentalists are enthusiastic about the council's endorsement of the so-called "precautionary principle" stating that "where public health may be adversely affected, or environmental damage may be serious or irreversible, prudent action is required even in the face of scientific uncertainty".

Sustainable development already means different things to different people. Asked what it meant to Chicago, Richard Daley, the city's mayor, said: "It's how you are going to deal with those wastelands." To Clinton, it means keeping faith with a sizeable constituency that voted for him partly or wholly on environmental grounds, without sacrificing jobs or growth. The council is to tell him how to reconcile these two goals. As Daley said: "It's a very, very difficult assignment, but people here appreciate your commitment to it."

Colin Macilwain

EPA pledges more long-term research

Chicago. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has announced plans to allocate half of its annual research budget to long-term research, to ensure that a greater proportion of its research funds is made available to universities and to improve standards of peer review.

In addition, the agency's laboratories will be reorganized into four sections dealing with risk management, risk assessment, exposure hazards, and health and environment issues.

The reforms were announced last week by Carol Browner, the EPA administrator, to a meeting of the President's Council on Sustainable Development in Chicago. At present, the bulk of the EPA's widely criticized research programme is short-term work needed to support the \$7.2-billion agency's regulatory function.

Browner hopes that the changes will head off calls for a free-standing National Institute for the Environment (NIE) aimed at raising the standards of federally funded environmental research.

The EPA was founded in the early 1970s as an amalgam of existing regulatory agencies, but has never established a significant track record in supporting environmental research. Its intramural programme is split up between a large number of laboratories, and 90 per cent of its \$350-million extramural programme is spent on routine contract research.

The reorganization of EPA's laboratories is intended to address the problems caused by fragmentation. But the largest changes will be those needed to achieve a 50:50 balance between short-term and long-term research; Neil Dobbs of the Campaign for an NIE claims the present balance is about 85:15 in favour of regulatory work.

The agency is promising to raise its annual funding for competitive, peer-reviewed, investigator-initiated grants from \$20 million to \$100 million annually, although no timescale for achieving this has been announced, nor was an EPA spokesman able to say where the money would come from.

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