

## NEW WORLD

# Eclipse of the Stinging Fire Ant

by our Washington Correspondent

A SIGNIFICANT victory in the Department of Agriculture's fourteen year war against the imported fire ant was won last week. A scientific advisory committee recommended to William D. Ruckelshaus, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, that the controversial pesticide known as 'Mirex' be continued to be used to control the ant in the southern United States. 'Mirex', the chief weapon used against the fire ant, has been criticized because of its persistence in the environment and its possible toxicity to animals and fish and in March last year Ruckelshaus moved to have its registration cancelled.

In support of its recommendation that Ruckelshaus reverse his execution order on the pesticide, the scientific advisory committee suggests that a programme to control the fire ant is necessary, and that 'Mirex' seems to be the least damaging weapon at hand. But the committee did not, however, give the pesticide a completely clean bill of health, suggesting that there are still some unknowns as far as its long-term toxicity is concerned, and recommended that its use should be restricted to areas where the ant is a special nuisance and where environmental damage would be minimal.

First introduced into the United States from South America in about 1920, the fire ant is objectionable chiefly because of its painful sting. It is also said to hamper agriculture because its mounds damage agricultural implements, and it now infests some 126 million acres in the south-eastern United States. It is a scavenger and a predator of other insects, killing both pests and beneficial species, but it is not a major pest of either plants or animals.

The campaign, which was originally aimed at eradicating the fire ant in the southern states, has, however, come up against considerable opposition both from environmental groups and from scientists. The chief charge levelled against the eradication programme was that the fire ant is not a major pest species and, although a nuisance, it does not merit the concentrated attack it has received and the consequent environmental damage that has been caused. In 1967, a committee of the National Research Council concluded that eradication of the fire ant is not biologically feasible, and suggested that even if eradication were feasible it would not be desirable. The issue finally came

to a head when the Environmental Defense Fund sought a court injunction last year to prevent the Department of Agriculture from using 'Mirex' in an attempt to eradicate the insect. The injunction was denied, but the Department of Agriculture was forced to abandon its goal of eradication and instead concentrated on a control programme, avoiding application of 'Mirex' to estuarine and forested regions.

The EPA's decision to cancel the registration of 'Mirex' was taken on the basis of doubts concerning the safety of the pesticide and its persistence in the environment. The Allied Chemical Corporation, exercising its rights under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act, however, asked for a scientific review of the pesticide, and it is the fruit of that which has produced the recommendation to Ruckelshaus that the use of 'Mirex' be continued.

The committee, of which the chairman was Dr C. H. Van Middleem of the University of Florida, bases its recommendation on the fact that no instances of acute toxicity have been reported, there is no evidence of damage to vegetation and there is no significant build up of the pesticide in the human food chain. Moreover, the committee states "most investigations of the effect of 'Mirex' on invertebrates and vertebrates in the natural habitat have failed to demonstrate any significant changes in their populations", but there has been evidence of 'Mirex' residue build-up in crustaceans and in some vertebrates that are predatory on ants. As for chronic toxicity, the committee suggests that insufficient studies have been made, and although 'Mirex' has been found to be carcinogenic in mice when fed in high doses, "no conclusions can be reached concerning the carcinogenicity of 'Mirex' for man until it has been studied in other mammalian species".

The committee therefore concludes that use of 'Mirex' is justified since it is not a proven health hazard and because environmental damage seems to be relatively insignificant. The clear inference is that until the hazards are fully evaluated by future chronic toxicity studies, the public can justifiably be exposed to the pesticide.

The Department of Agriculture's plans for the use of 'Mirex' to control the fire ant were made clear in the Administration's budget message. They entail a level of effort in 1973 that is essentially the same as the present year,

with some 20 million acres being treated with 'Mirex' bait, at a cost of about \$7 million. Mr Leo Iverson, of the Animal and Plant Health Service, who is in charge of the Federal programme, said last week that if use of 'Mirex' is denied, the programme would have to rely on less effective pesticides and that these may be more damaging to the environment.

## ENVIRONMENT

## Pollution Tax

by our Washington Correspondent

PRESIDENT NIXON last week sent to Congress his third and so far his most modest message on the environment. A declaration of the Administration's intent to introduce a variety of legislation to curb pollution and protect the environment, the message included two measures that have grabbed the headlines—a tax on emission of sulphur dioxide from smokestacks and a ban on poisoning predators on Federal lands—but few other far-reaching measures.

In his message to Congress, President Nixon called his proposed legislation a plan to build on the base of environmental legislation that he has already introduced and which is at present mostly bottled up in Congressional committees or awaiting final passage through the Congressional mill. The controversial water pollution control legislation, which was introduced by the Administration last year, and which has since been considerably toughened by Senator Muskie's committee in the Senate and by the House Public Works committee, is a case in point.

The item in the proposed legislation that is likely to spark off the most discussion and the most opposition from industry is the long-awaited proposal to impose a tax on the emission of sulphur dioxide by factories. Billed as a measure that will ensure "application of the principle that the costs of pollution should be included in the price of the product", the proposed tax is, however, much less ambitious than the measure touted by the Administration in last year's environmental message and again when President Nixon transferred to Congress the second annual report of the Council on Environmental Quality. Environmentalists are already accusing the Administration of bending to industrial pressure by weakening the legislation in election year, but the very fact that President Nixon has proposed taxing sulphur emissions at all is a bold stroke. Even his most ardent critics