ticularly interesting to industry because of the potentially large work volume involved (Rio Blanco is being conducted in conjunction with a company called CER Geonuclear Corporation). But the project's trump card is clearly the energy crisis.

ENVIRONMENT

Nixon's Plans

by our Washington Correspondent

LAST week President Nixon sent to Congress a message outlining his Administration's plans to clean up and protect the environment. The message was accompanied by a package of bills and by some sharp criticism of Congress for foot-dragging on key environmental legislation. But soon after the message was received on Capitol Hill, Senator Edmund S. Muskie, who has long been at odds with the Administration over environmental matters, erupted with a statement of his own in which he lambasted Nixon for being long on rhetoric but short on commitment to environmental quality.

Claiming that the Administration is "well on the way to winning the war against environmental degradation—well on the way to making our peace with Nature", Nixon sent to Congress some 22 bills, 19 of which are reformulations of bills which were introduced last session, but which either languished in committees or got lost in the backlog of legislation awaiting final action when Congress adjourned for the elections.

A chief aim of the Administration's environmental plans is the development of policies for better use of the land—the proposals submitted to Congress last week include a new power plant siting law which sets out procedures for public review and comment, a measure to protect coastal wetlands and a new bill to regulate strip mining more closely. Other bills include a proposal for regulating toxic substances, a tax on industrial plants which emit sulphur oxides in regions in which the primary air quality standards are not being met, and a sheaf of legislation designed to protect wildlife.

Muskie is upset not because the Administration is proposing all these bills, but because he feels that it is not moving forcefully enough in implementing legislation which has already been passed. He is, of course, particularly irked by the fact that Nixon tried to veto the Water Pollution Control Bill last year, and when his veto was overridden, announced that he would not spend more than half of the money which it authorized. In the light of such action, Muskie says that he is "amazed that the President expects us to believe that under his leadership the Federal Government will 'play an active, positive role'".

Among the new initiatives proposed in the Administration's package of bills are the following:

- The Administration will again ask Congress to provide authority for states and local governments to use highway trust funds for the development of mass transit systems. The Highway Trust Fund consists of special highway taxes which at present can only be used for building and improving highways, but Senator Muskie has already introduced a bill aimed at changing the law so that the funds can be tapped for mass transit systems. Although the Administration has supported such moves in the past, Russell Train, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, said last week that President Nixon now considers it "one of the highest priorities for action this year". The bill is, of course, being opposed by the so-called highway lobby—motorist organizations and construction companies which have consistently argued that the solution to the United States' transport problems is to bury more of the country under concrete.

- New legislation has been introduced which would give the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency power to establish safe standards for drinking water. Water suppliers would be required to notify customers whenever the standards are not met, and although the states would retain the chief enforcement powers, the Federal Government would step in if a hazard seems imminent.

- The sulphur tax proposal is being reintroduced this year, after a thorough review within the Administration and in spite of the fact that it has little support within the House Ways and Means Committee, to which it will be referred. Late last year, it seemed likely that the proposal would be dropped because of the shortage of low-sulphur fuels, but the Administration now believes that the technology for scrubbing stack gases will be available by 1976, a year after the primary air quality standards must be met. The proposal is to levy a tax of 20 cents per pound of sulphur emitted and the tax would come into effect in 1976 only in those areas in which the primary air quality standards—which are designed to protect health—are not being met. In addition, the Administration is proposing that the tax should be imposed in 1979 in those areas in which the secondary air quality standards—which are designed to protect vegetation, property and aesthetic values—are not being met. The idea is to provide an extra incentive for companies to clean up their smoke stacks and also to force low-sulphur fuels to be allocated to regions where they are most required.

Although the message and the pack-

age of bills provides a blueprint for the Administration's environmental policies, a more important message in this area will be submitted to Congress in the next few weeks. It will be President Nixon's long-awaited message on energy policy, in which he is expected to outline plans for meeting the energy crisis. The environmental impact of such plans—for example, he is expected to recommend increased use of coal—will be watched closely, but of more far reaching import will be the Administration's revised plans to revamp the federal bureaucracy along functional lines. One of the proposals will be the creation of a Department of Natural Resources, but exactly what such a department would contain is still an open question. The environmental message made no mention of bureaucratic reorganization, and it is now expected to come with the energy message.

Short Notes

Technology Assessment Board

Now that the House of Representatives has finally got round to sorting out its committees for this session, the board of the Office of Technology Assessment has finally been appointed. It was announced recently that Mr Olin Teague has been appointed to take the place of Mr Earle Cabell, now departed from Congress, and that Mr Morris Udall of Arizona will take the place of Mike McCormack, who has relinquished his place on the board because of his commitments on the new subcommittee on energy.

HEAO

WHAT is left of the High Energy Astronomy Observatory programme, already a casualty of budget cuts (see *Nature*, 241, 83 and 306; 1973), may now be a pawn in further political moves. Originally envisaged as a very large automatic observatory, HEAO has been deferred while attempts are made to find ways in which some of the original objectives could be achieved more cheaply. The obvious way to do this would be by a continuation of the Orbiting Astronomical Observatory series, with which the Goddard Space Flight Center has now achieved a degree of success, notably with Copernicus (OAO-C). But if rumours now circulating are to be believed, the rump of the HEAO programme will be taken over by the Huntsville team who have great experience of developing large rockets (such as Saturn) but none of scientific satellites. The reason for the switch? To avoid embarrassing layoffs at Huntsville, now there are few big rockets wanted.