

USA

AFTER several months of negotiations richly laced with minor squabbles, key Senators and Congressmen have at last reached agreement on a bill to reestablish a science policy office in the White House. Final Congressional approval of the measure is generally deemed imminent, and the office will probably be off and running by the end of May—nearly three and a half years after Mr Nixon, arguing that he no longer required the services of a full-time science adviser, dismantled the former White House office of Science and Technology.

The bill has been in limbo for weeks while Congressional staff members and their bosses have been trying to work out a compromise between three conflicting versions of the legislation—a modest proposal put forward last June by President Ford, a slightly more ambitious measure approved in November by the House and a more substantial bill passed by the Senate in February. A compromise was finally struck in mid-April, and its swift approval by the House and the Senate is virtually assured.

It would establish a small office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) in the White House, headed by a director who would also double as the President's Science Adviser, and four associate directors.

Though it has always been assumed that the office would provide advice and assistance to the President and other White House bodies on matters involving science and technology, its exact role and scope have been in dispute. The compromise version of the bill specifies that the Director of OSTP will be a member of the Domestic Council, a top-level White House policy-making body for domestic affairs, and he will also be a statutory adviser to the National Security Council, the powerful defence and foreign policy committee formerly headed by Henry Kissinger. Those roles will at least ensure that the office will have a voice in both civilian and defence policy.

As for budgetary matters, the bill simply requires OSTP to assist the Office of Management and Budget in preparing the Administration's annual budget request, a role which falls far short of the powerful voice in fiscal matters for which many scientists had hoped. The bill does, however, provide two other mechanisms for OSTP to influence budgetary policies. First, it requires the office to prepare a five-year forecast of emerging national problems and provide a set of programme options to every government science agency at the

start of each budget cycle. Secondly, it requires OSTP to publish an annual report on federal science and technology, a mechanism which should allow the office to make public its views on the budgetary state of science.

Another important provision in the bill will create a President's Committee on Science and Technology,



consisting of between 8 and 14 prominent people, to conduct a two-year survey of the entire federal science and technology enterprise. The President will have the option of making the committee into a permanent body when it has completed its study.

Though the office has yet to be formally established, there is considerable speculation about who President Ford will choose to head OSTP. According to Congressional and Administration sources, there are three potential candidates: Dr Simon Ramo, Vice President of TRW Inc., Dr William O. Baker, President of Bell Labs, and Dr H. Guyford Stever, Director of the National Science Foundation, who now doubles as the President's part-time science adviser.

● The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has, as expected, denied a petition seeking a drastic tightening of federal standards governing permissible levels of exposure to plutonium. The petition, filed in February 1974 by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), was based on the so-called "hot particle" theory which suggests that tiny particles of inhaled plutonium pose a severe health hazard because they lodge in the lung and deliver a prolonged, intense dose of radioactivity to the surrounding tissue. Since present plutonium exposure standards are based on the average dose of radioactivity to the whole lung, rather than to tissue around inhaled particles, the NRDC petition argued that the standards are too lax and should be tightened by a factor of 115,000. The matter has been a subject of considerable debate.

The NRC turned the petition down, and denied NRDC's request for public hearings on the matter, however, because it found that "scientific evidence does not support the technical position upon which the NRDC petition is based". Drawing upon several studies, including reports by the UK Medical Research Council and the former Atomic Energy Commission, the NRC believes that the hot particle theory is flawed in several respects and does not provide a valid basis for establishing exposure standards.

NRDC has also petitioned the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with a similar request. EPA is awaiting a report on the hot particle theory from the National Academy of Sciences (expected in about a month) before issuing its reply.

● Following much prodding from Congress and a good deal of agitation from a number of independent expert groups, the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) last week placed increased emphasis on energy conservation in its overall plan for decreasing the United States' dependence on foreign sources of oil. The new emphasis is incorporated in an updated plan for energy research and development, published last week by ERDA, which spells out in some detail the agency's goals and strategies.

The plan, an expanded and revamped version of a document published by ERDA on June 30 last year, ranks the development of technologies to increase energy efficiency and conservation among ERDA's highest priorities. Unveiling the plan at a press conference, Dr Robert C. Seamans, Jr, ERDA's Administrator, said he believed it was "impossible to exaggerate the need and desirability to make more efficient use of energy".

Though the plan isn't very specific about the exact strategies envisaged for conservation, Seamans said that the agency would be putting together "some very significant projects" in the next six months. He added that conservation efforts could save up to five million barrels of oil by 1985.

In other respects, the plan is similar in balance to last year's version, placing heavy emphasis on nuclear energy, coal and production of synthetic oil and gas from coal and shale in the medium term.

As for nuclear power, the plan anticipates that installed capacity will grow from its present level of 39.6 GW to 70–76 GW by 1980, 160–185 GW by 1985, 265–340 GW by 1990 and 450–800 GW by 2000.