

IN BRIEF

NIH budget veto overridden

A few days before it adjourned for the November elections, the US Congress firmly overrode a Presidential veto of a budget bill for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), thereby increasing NIH's biomedical research funds by more than \$200 million in the fiscal year which began on October 1. The bulk of the increase will go to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), whose budget will soar from \$762 million to \$815 million. Also set for a large increase is the National Heart and Lung Institute, which will get \$397 million, up from \$370 million last year. The final budget levels represent a considerable victory for supporters of the cancer programme, for the Ford Administration had recommended that the NCI's budget be held approximately

constant and that the other NIH institutes be given modest increases.

Air Act problem

The US Congress has handed the automobile industry a tangled legal problem by failing to pass amendments to the Clean Air Act before it adjourned last week. The amendments would have relaxed emission control standards for 1978 model cars, which the industry is already gearing up to produce. Members of Congress failed to agree on the bill, and it died when the session ended in the early hours of Saturday morning. Thus, unless the new Congress approved laxer standards when it convenes next January, the industry will be faced with the choice of producing illegal cars or closing down. That, in fact, is exactly the situation that the

industry has been trying to engineer. It believes that the threat of wholesale closures and high unemployment in Detroit will be sufficient to force the new Congress to meet its various demands.

UK changes

Under the rearranged provisions for science policy formulation in Britain, the UK government has appointed a 37-year-old biochemist from Essex University, Professor John Ashworth, to the Cabinet Office's Central Policy Review Staff for a two-year period.

Elsewhere, Professor J. L. Gowans, 52, will be the next Secretary of the UK Medical Research Council, taking over from Sir John Gray in April 1977. He is presently Director of the MRC's Cellular Immunology Unit.

ALTHOUGH the sixth report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, and various informed comments on it, have shown that there is widespread concern in Britain about the rapid development of nuclear power in general, and of the fast breeder reactor in particular, those responsible for the safety of atomic energy and nuclear fuels have come well out of the controversy. Engineers, scientists and those working in nuclear power stations have behaved responsibly in this respect, and have scrupulously observed the most rigorous safety precautions. Many of us may doubt whether we need this massive development in electrical generation which the Department of Energy thinks necessary, when we already have 50% more capacity than the peak load, and when demand is falling, but that is another matter. There is little doubt that if the nuclear generating industry is expanded as planned (*sic*) the same high standards of care will continue to be exercised, though the statistical chances of accidents must inevitably increase.

Therefore if we are to have more nuclear power stations, we must constantly review and improve safety precautions. At present there is a series of safety regulations laid down and agreed internationally; unfortunately some of these are not entirely practical. Thus the specifications for the containers, each weighing some 45 tonnes, in which nuclear fuel is shipped around the country, are intended to ensure that the risks of an escape of radiation or radioactive materials are very small indeed. The vessels are designed to resist such mishaps as a fall of several metres, though there is doubt whether they

are strong enough to remain intact if the train carrying them was derailed at a high speed.

The regulations state that they must be able to resist a temperature of 800 °C, uniformly applied to the

Protection practice

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whole of their surface. Unfortunately the experts of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd have found it impossible to devise a technique by which the containers can be subjected to the conditions laid down by the international authorities. They have spent—or wasted—some half a million pounds trying to devise a method of giving exactly the correct exposure to this high temperature. As this sort of temperature exposure appears to be impossible to produce, it is difficult to understand why this particular standard was set. We wish to be sure that our nuclear fuel is safe when the containers are

exposed to the sort of hazard which, in practice, is likely to be encountered. Uniform conditions of 800 °C continued for twenty minutes do not constitute one of these. It would surely be better to devise a "standard fire" similar to one likely to be experienced by the nuclear fuel when in transit, and to put the containers into it.

A similar attitude to that which sets up these unreal safety standards may sometimes be demonstrated by those responsible for our defence. Some years ago conservationists were urging the War Office to give up an area of Britain's coastline, where the sand dunes were of great natural history interest. The War Office was reluctant to part with the land, giving as an excuse that it was of the greatest importance for military training because it was "unique" and irreplaceable by any other area which was available. When I heard this I could not help wondering how it was to be used for training our forces. If it was indeed unique, then any military exercise performed there would have little relevance to those done on other, quite different, terrains. In fact the only value of this special piece of coastline would be in order to train our forces to defend it. Surely training would be better done on a more typical area, with conditions similar to those found in many parts of the globe?

We need to be protected from danger by safety standards for hazardous industrial processes, and by the possession of efficient military defences. In both cases we should first decide exactly what we need to be protected from, and then we can set up practicable standards to which we can work.