

NEWS IN BRIEF

US produces draft climate plan

RESEARCH into the impact on the environment and society of increased carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, and into the effects of climatic change on world food production, are two of the top priorities that have been selected for attention under the draft of a National Climate Plan, published in Washington last week.

The plan presents a five-year programme for climate research, as required by the National Climate Programme Act of 1978. The carbon dioxide study has been selected as a "principal thrust" by the Department of Energy and the Department of Agriculture.

Also under the proposed climate plan, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration will give priority to efforts at understanding how the climate system gains and loses radiant energy. And the National Science Foundation will lead a major coordinated effort to understand the oceans' role in climate, in particular with heat-flux experiments planned in the Atlantic Ocean, perhaps leading to "a series of major international experiments in the late 1980s and early 1990s". The climate programme will coordinate the research efforts of all federal agencies, with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) acting as the lead agency. NOAA's principal thrusts will be in the generation and dissemination of climate information and climate prediction.

US agency denies Agent Orange cover up

OFFICIALS of the Veterans Administration denied congressional charges last week that an official of the administration had referred to the herbicide 2,4,5-T as carcinogenic and mutagenic in a memorandum written in 1977. The charge had been made by two congressmen last month, who had obtained a copy of a memorandum with 'US government' written across the top, which said that the herbicide, known as Agent Orange, had been shown to "intercept the genetic DNA message process to an unborn fetus, thereby resulting in deformed children being born".

In producing the memorandum, the congressmen accused the administration of giving misleading information when it had earlier testified that there was no evidence linking the herbicide with human health problems. However, in a reply, Mr Max Cleland, administrator of the Veterans Administration, said that the VA official, whose telephone conversation was supposed to be the source of the memoran-

dum, had pointed out that it was "inaccurate in numerous points". Mr Cleland said that no-one in the VA had seen the memo before, and that it had been impossible to identify the author.

Australia orders Agent Orange inquiry

THE Australian government announced last week its intention to study the effects of Agent Orange, the dioxin containing herbicide used by the US to defoliate the countryside in Vietnam. Following a campaign by community and servicemen's groups, the government has granted \$2 million to survey the health of 41,000 Australian servicemen who were exposed to the chemical during the Vietnam war. In addition, the health of the families of the exposed servicemen will be studied. The study will be carried out by the Commonwealth Institute of Health of Sydney University. Veterans organisations have criticised the proposal saying that the survey will take too long to complete to prevent injury to those exposed. Mr K.G. Schultz, national secretary of the Returned Services League, said that a smaller sample would provide sufficient information about ill effects faster than the full survey. The Vietnam Veterans Action Association said it already had an overwhelming case for compensation with cases of birth defects that included missing limbs, club feet and cleft palates.

UK minister welcomes ASTMS cancer document

THE UK Secretary of State for Employment stated in parliament that he welcomed the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs document on occupational carcinogens (*Nature*, 20 March, page 203). In a written response to a parliamentary question by Renee Short asking if the government will take action "as a matter of urgency" on the document the minister said: "I welcome the initiative this union has taken in preparing the document, which I understand is to provide safety representatives and union officers with information. I propose to await advice from the chairman of the Health and Safety Executive before deciding whether discussions with the HSE or other interested parties are necessary".

UKAEA agrees PWR cracks a hazard

In a supplementary memorandum to the select committee on energy, the UK Atomic Energy Authority has agreed that the possibility of pressure vessel cracks

constitutes an insufficiently explored hazard of pressurised water reactors according to a report in *The Times*. The memorandum agrees with the analysis of Sir Alan Cottrell (*Nature*, 28 February page 803) that cracks as long as one inch could develop without detection in the pressure vessel which could lead to a rapid uncontrollable break resulting in a complete loss of coolant accident. Development of more advanced detection techniques than were previously thought necessary is required before the American design PWRs can be used in the UK. "It is vital that the necessary development work be undertaken as a matter of urgency" the memorandum is reported as saying.

In the meantime, Britain's ten year plan to introduce PWRs starting in 1982 may be delayed for another reason. The Nuclear Installations Inspectorate told the select committee last week that the Central Electricity Generating Board had yet to present its PWR design for safety clearance and to conclude a licensing agreement with Westinghouse. The delay, senior NII officials said, meant that the necessary safety studies could not be completed by the 1982 deadline.

In related developments, the Prime Minister is withholding approval for the construction of two scheduled advanced gas cooled reactors. The Prime Minister is a strong advocate of the PWR and has ordered further studies of the AGR proposal.

● Mr David Steel, leader of the Liberal Party, criticised Mrs Thatcher's "nuclear obsession" at the UK's largest ever anti-nuclear rally last week held on the anniversary of the Harrisburg accident. Fifteen thousand demonstrators from many British anti-nuclear groups attended.

Debendox safe, says UK committee

THE UK committee on the Safety of Medicines has found no evidence that the drug Debendox, an anti-nausea drug used by pregnant women, causes birth defects. The committee completed its third review of the drug at the end of last month. Two previous reviews in 1978 and 1979 had also found that the drug was safe.

Concern about Debendox has been stimulated by the recent court case in the US — where the drug is manufactured under the name Bendectin — which found that it had caused congenital abnormalities in a boy. The UK Minister of Health asked the committee to review its safety.

The committee has said that the level of abnormalities in the children of the 3,500,000 women who have taken the drug in the UK over the past 20 years, is no more than in the population as a whole.