

Clinch River reactor

Congress still evenly split

Washington

SUPPORT for the Clinch River breeder reactor project technically ran out with the close of the fiscal year last week, and Congress has approved a continuing resolution for 1984 containing no money for the beleaguered project. But the reactor's fate has by no means been sealed. Its supporters hope to squeeze enough money into a supplemental appropriations bill to keep work going until Congress can be persuaded to change its mind. And if they fail, the Department of Energy (DOE) may be able to continue the project by using money carried over from last year.

Even opponents of the fast breeder reactor programme concede that the absence of support for Clinch River in last week's continuing resolution was something of a fluke. The reactor was one of many government projects that would almost certainly have received some funds had not the congressional leadership decided this year to hurry through a "clean" continuing resolution without the usual bundle of last-minute amendments. Many of the unsupported activities are likely to be salvaged by a supplemental spending bill within the next few weeks. And the reactor's supporters — notably Senate majority leader Howard Baker — made it clear during the budget debate that Clinch River would be among them.

The question now is whether the project will be salvaged for good or given just enough money to limp along for a few more months until Congress decides it no longer wants to build a breeder reactor. The Reagan Administration remains strongly committed to Clinch River but Congress has become increasingly worried about its escalating costs. The original cost was estimated in 1972 to be \$699 million, of which industry would pay \$257 million plus interest. The estimated cost is now over \$4,000 million, of which \$1,700 million has already been spent.

What now most irritates Congress is that industry has not volunteered to pick up more of the extra cost. Although interest payments have raised its contribution to more than \$340 million, industry's share of the burden has fallen from nearly a half to less than a tenth. Last year Congress agreed to keep money flowing into Clinch River only on the understanding that the utilities, in cooperation with DOE, would work out a new financing scheme to reduce the federal burden.

The new scheme surfaced only last August, too late to prevent Clinch River's detractors from eliminating support from the 1984 energy appropriation. The Taxpayers' Coalition against Clinch River argued last week that by dawdling for a year, industry had muffed its last chance to save the reactor. But in view of the massive public investment already and the admini-

stration's support, Congress is unlikely to agree to kill off the project just because of a missed deadline.

So far, the financing scheme has received a mixed reception. Rather than requiring the utilities to invest more of their own money, it would depend on a government guarantee of revenues from the sale of electricity from the plant to raise \$1,000 million in bonds. The bonds would also be backed by an indirect government contribution of another \$150 million in tax credits and depreciation benefits. DOE claims the scheme is persuasive. It argues that it makes more sense to spend the \$150 million government contribution required over the next seven years than to write off an investment of \$2,000 million (including the money needed to close the project).

Opinion in Congress, however, is divided. The House of Representatives' subcommittee on energy conservation and power opposes Clinch River, but the subcommittee on energy research and production (chaired by a Tennessee Democrat) favours pressing on. In the Senate the energy and natural resources

committee strongly supports Clinch River but a prominent minority member, Dale Bumpers of Arkansas, is a vigorous opponent.

If the outcome in Congress is dependent only on financial issues, the prospects for Clinch River look grim. Wavering voters are likely to be influenced by a Congressional Budget Office review of the industry's financing scheme which concludes that the new private investors will share "virtually no risk" in the project. More damning still, the review finds that because of the guarantees the government would have to give, the administration could end up paying almost \$250 million more than if it decided to complete the project with government funds alone.

But the administration is lobbying hard to persuade doubters in Congress that Clinch River is essential if the United States is to develop a diverse mix of energy resources and, in the words of energy secretary Donald Hodel, "demonstrate to a sceptical world that the United States has the political will to complete its nuclear development commitments". The antiquity of the design is hardly mentioned. Clinch River may be closer than ever before to using up the last of its nine lives, but it is still too early to count on its demise. **Peter David**

Soviet-US relations

Exchange scholars recalled

Washington

TWENTY Soviet scholars who arrived here on 5 September for a year-long exchange programme have been recalled to the Soviet Union. Citing bomb threats and demonstrations at the Soviet embassy in Washington and consulate in San Francisco following the shooting-down of the Korean airliner, the embassy said it was concerned for the "physical security" of the visiting scholars. The decision follows closely on the dispute about Mr Andrei Gromyko's intended visit to the UN.

The move adds to the strain over US-Soviet exchange programmes that has been growing since the airliner incident. Among the sanctions that President Reagan recently ordered was a freeze on negotiations to renew the "umbrella" cultural exchange agreement between the two countries that lapsed in 1979; only a few weeks before, the United States had indicated its willingness to reopen the negotiations.

Most of the 20 Soviet scholars, who were here under a programme for graduate students and young faculty members administered by the non-profit International Research and Exchange Board, are scientists and engineers. The 20 American scholars now in the Soviet Union under the programme — who have not been affected by the Soviet recall or American sanctions — are for the most part specialists in Soviet studies in such fields as history and sociology.

Seven government-sponsored bilateral cooperative programmes, on atomic energy, agriculture, environmental protection, and other technical subjects, remain in effect. Four of the cooperative programmes out of the original 11 established in 1972 had been allowed to lapse by the United States when they came up for renewal in 1982 in a show of displeasure with events in Poland. Since then, however, several of the seven remaining programmes have come up for renewal and been continued.

The US government has also taken no official action against informal private exchanges, although these had already dropped off considerably in recent years.

Individual sanctions have appeared, however. Most notably, the director of Los Alamos National Laboratory last week ordered a ban on travel to the Soviet Union by laboratory scientists, several of whom had been involved in the bilateral cooperative programmes.

The State Department also reports that a number of Soviet scientists who had been scheduled to attend scientific meetings in the United States have cancelled. According to a State Department official, this may in part be a consequence of the ban on Aeroflot flights to Canada (flights to the United States had been banned under earlier sanctions) and in part a reluctance by the Soviet Government to expose its scientists to discussion of the airliner incident. **Stephen Budiansky**