

New rules for carcinogens

Berkeley

CALIFORNIAN voters' attempt to take regulation of toxic chemicals into their own hands is off to a troubled start.

On 27 February, Proposition 65 comes into effect, requiring blanket regulation of all suspected carcinogens and teratogens. But critics argue that many of the proposition's regulatory teeth have been drawn since it became law in November 1986.

The impetus for Proposition 65 grew out of mistrust of the federal regulatory process, which has identified more than 200 compounds as potential carcinogens, but fails to regulate most of them (see *Nature* 330, 200; 1987).

Proposition 65 provides for regulation of all listed chemicals occurring at levels above the "level of no significant risk". That is defined as concentrations predicted to cause one additional cancer in 100,000 individuals over a lifetime of exposure for carcinogens, and as one-thousandth of the level producing no observable effects for teratogens. The accused violator has to prove no significant risk, and the law includes a bounty clause that encourages people to expose violations by giving them a share in any fines imposed.

Since the proposition was passed, controversy has centred on the list of chemicals to be regulated. Environmental groups were angered that the original list contained only the 29 chemicals known to cause cancer in humans. Over the past year, a scientific advisory panel has added most of the more than 230 chemicals named as possible carcinogens or teratogens by the National Toxicology Program and the International Agency for Research on Cancer, based on animal studies.

Despite that victory, environmental groups failed to secure a requirement that warning labels be carried on all products containing potential toxins. Instead, state guidelines allow posters advertising a toll-free telephone number which consumers can call for product information.

Many products have been exempted, in defiance of environmental groups' protests. The state exempted naturally occurring carcinogens after food producers complained that 15,000 produce items would require warnings because of trace levels of naturally occurring arsenic and other compounds. And the state guidelines rule that any food, drug or cosmetic product in compliance with federal regulations automatically meets the law's no-significant-risk standard, and need not carry a warning. That, critics say, defeats the whole purpose of stronger local regulations.

Marcia Barinaga

Appeal for computer facilities in West German universities

Munich

THIS is a critical year for the research budget in West Germany. Funds to the West German Education Ministry for medium-term university support are due to be cut by 20 per cent, some of the *Länder* (states) have been hit hard by losses in tax revenue from ageing industries such as coal-mining and steel and final preparations are being made for a sweeping 1990 tax reform.

One result is that research organizations such as the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and the Wissenschaftsrat have been raising their voices ever higher for the maintenance of public funding. The DFG is the primary supporter of basic research in West German universities, and the Wissenschaftsrat a council of researchers from all fields that advises the federal and *Länder* governments, always partners in research support.

In a January report sponsored by the DFG, a commission of 12 West German academics called for increased support for computing facilities in universities. Without it, says the report, "adequate research and teaching will be impossible". The commission is particularly afraid that West Germany will be left behind by the rapid upgrading of computer facilities at universities in other countries.

The report calls for investments of at least DM 400 million a year until 1991 for everything from mainframes to personal computers, as well as computer networks.

The report says that the largest single amount should go into scientific workstations (DM 83 million a year), with DM 60 million for mainframe computers and DM 60-65 million for the establishment and maintenance of computer networks.

The figure is significantly higher than what was called for in the 1988 "framework plan" for university investment, the latest of the Wissenschaftsrat's annual documents which is meant as a guideline for both federal and *Länder* governments on higher education support.

The document says that, to make good the disparity between West Germany and other countries, the expected cut in the West German Education Ministry budget must be restored and that even the north German *Länder* in the direst financial straits must submit more applications for computer facilities.

The triennial commission report, the third of its kind, may be well timed. All the science organizations can do, said the DFG's Alfred Küllmer, "is to make the politicians aware of the consequences" of budget cuts.

So far, West Germany has kept up with advances in computer technology elsewhere, says the report. But now there must be a push, as in the United States, to bring more students in more subject areas into contact with computers and to increase the use of computers in society at large.

Steven Dickman

Ministers act to reduce industrial accidents

Paris

ACCORDING to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), there are about 20 major accidents* involving hazardous (non-radioactive) substances each year in OECD countries and as many as 200 accidents "causing significant damage to health, environment or property". Over the past 14 years, such accidents have caused more than 4,100 deaths and almost 56,000 injuries. Against this background, environment ministers and high-level representatives of 24 OECD countries met in Paris on 9-10 February to propose new, legally binding guidelines on accident prevention and emergency measures.

To attack the anomaly that it is often a neighbouring country that bears the brunt of pollution, two council acts were put forward at the conference. First, mutual consultation arrangements were advocated for siting new installations in frontier regions. There should also be an exchange of information about the safety of existing

installations and the obligation to inform neighbouring countries immediately in the event of an accident. Second, the public was felt to have a right to information, both what to do in case of an accident and in relation to the prevention of risks.

If the OECD council approves the proposed acts at its meeting in the summer, they will immediately become legally binding. Not legally binding, however, is the recommendation of a "polluter pays" principle. In the event of a major accident, the company responsible may be sued for compensation.

There was unanimous agreement at the meeting that safety precautions should be the same irrespective of the economic status of the country. It was also recommended that OECD should link up with the United Nations Environment Programme and other international organizations to study this issue in greater depth.

Peter Coles

* A major accident is defined as causing at least 5 deaths, 25 people injured and/or evacuation of 400 people.