

US Congress plans greenhouse legislation

- Tough measures on global warming
- Scientific opinions differ

Washington

THE new US Congress has begun with a stampede by legislators introducing bills meant to respond to the perceived threat of global warming. But researchers at congressional hearings last week seemed much more cautious than the legislators in estimating what the future holds for the world's climate.

Several wide-ranging bills on global warming have been introduced since the Congress opened on 25 January. The most recent, the "Global Warming Prevention Act of 1989", was announced by Claudine Schneider (Republican, Rhode Island) of the House of Representatives on 21 February, and has 50 co-sponsors.

Schneider's bill embodies many of the elements of those launched a few weeks ago by Senator Timothy Wirth (Democrat, Colorado) and Senator Albert Gore (Democrat, Tennessee). It calls for an international agreement on a 20 per cent reduction in global carbon dioxide concentrations by the year 2000 and the revision of the Montreal Protocol to phase out all chlorofluorocarbon production within five to seven years. Under the legislation, US aid for family planning services in developing nations is doubled to help reduce population growth (and hence energy demand) and recipients of foreign aid will be required to practise sustainable forest management. Tropical timber imports will be banned from countries that do not comply.

On the domestic front, the bill would provide hundreds of millions of extra dollars for research and development on energy-efficient technology, solar and renewable energy resources and solar-generated hydrogen fuels. There would be tax rebates for fuel-efficient cars, and increased 'gas guzzler' taxes.

The drive to legislate stems from widespread public concern about global warming, and the greenhouse effect. The issue caught the attention of the media during last summer's drought in the United States. But, ironically, few if any researchers attribute the drought to the greenhouse effect. Stephen Schneider of the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), giving evidence to the House of Representatives' subcommittee on Energy and Power last week, said it is "absurd" to suggest a direct causal link. But he welcomes the attention global warming is receiving in Congress even if it is "for the wrong reasons".

NCAR's Schneider strongly suspects

that the high average global temperatures of the 1980s, which are about half a degree Celsius higher than at the end of the last century, are a greenhouse signal; he advocates action now instead of later.

But Robert Correll, of the National Science Foundation, in evidence last week to the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, noted that the increase of temperature over the past century has not been steady, in contrast to model predictions of the greenhouse effect. And Correll says that the current differences of opinion among scientists as to whether there is now a greenhouse

warming are "substantial".

Some members of both committees seemed irritated by the lack of consensus and warned the scientific witnesses that their uncertainty might be used by some congressmen as an excuse for no action.

Regardless of uncertainty, opposition to the new legislation is bound to be strong. The powerful automobile industry will oppose legislation that favours more fuel-efficient imports, and the coal industry will object to action that might substantially reduce coal consumption. The new bills are expected to have a particularly rough passage through the Senate Energy Committee, where these interest groups have a strong voice. But there is considerable public pressure on Congress to "do something", and if the heat waves strike again this summer — particularly if they strike Washington — it is almost certain that some of the new legislation will be passed.

David Swinbanks

■ See also pages 15 and 54.

US REACTORS

Shoreham plant to be revived?

Boston

NEW YORK'S never-licensed Shoreham Nuclear Power Station may be rising from its grave, if its parent utility's stock is any indication. The stock of the Long Island Lighting Company (LILCO) has recently been the third most actively traded of the stocks, on the New York Stock Exchange.

The speculative flurry has been caused by two developments in the tangled but continuing saga of the nuclear plant. A federal judge has thrown out a case brought by the local legislature which accused LILCO of "racketeering" and corruption, and the US Nuclear Regulatory

also have raised electricity rates, even though it would have restricted the utility's right to pass on costs to ratepayers (see *Nature* 333, 588; 1988).

The plan was sanctioned by all the major parties involved, but was derailed unexpectedly when the New York State legislature refused to ratify it out of fear of political reprisals.

Ironically, Long Island constituents, whose electricity rates are already the second highest in the United States, will now face even greater cost increases, whether or not the plant goes into operation.

There are still many hurdles ahead for the Shoreham reactor, most notably the strong local and state-based political opposition.

Shoreham's local Suffolk County legislature voted unanimously to appeal against the rejection of its racketeering and corruption suit against LILCO, turning down a settlement of nearly \$400 million offered by the utility in reduced electric rates. The legislature said it would not settle the case unless the utility promised that it would "irrevocably close, shutdown and decommission" Shoreham.

But despite their differences, all the parties involved agree that Shoreham's fate is highly uncertain. Even LILCO representatives say that they are now following a "two-track" strategy: moving ahead to license the reactor, and trying to negotiate a scheme to shut the plant down. What they find intolerable is the waiting and indecision, which they claim has cost the utility \$1.700 million in interest and finance charges since the plant was completed.

Seth Shulman



Commission is expected to rule soon upon whether to grant the Shoreham reactor a low-power operating licence. Both developments promise a future for the power station, which was completed four years ago.

The Shoreham plant was widely pronounced dead last spring, when New York State authorized a plan to close and decommission the reactor, but which would