

Priceless proposals

Recommendations for a reorganization of US research on the environment are vitiated by the absence of any indication of the likely costs.

ENVIRONMENTAL research in the United States is carried out by a number of government and private organizations that are not in any serious way coordinated with each other. The demands for such research in the 1990s, and for channelling its findings to the makers of policy, are of a different order from those of the 1960s and 1970s that spawned the current system. Then, worry about energy and pollution was especially high in the public consciousness; now it is, for instance, climate change and groundwater contamination, along with a catalogue of other insults to the natural world too depressing to recite. So there is a crying need for a restructuring of US government support for work on environmental issues, not least to take account of their increasingly global aspects.

These are the premises of a task force set up by the Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology, and Government, an independent advisory body, which after two years' gestation has now given birth to its report *Environmental Research and Development: Strengthening the Federal Infrastructure*. An ambitious document it is too.

The report leaves no stone unturned. Most notable among the recommendations are that an Institute for Environmental Assessment should be established to provide the analysis necessary for policy formulation; that the 12 national laboratories of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should be consolidated into four, with the creation of some six other research institutes in universities and elsewhere; and the merger of the US Geological Survey with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to create a US Environmental Monitoring Agency. In essence, this last is an old chestnut, having been first mooted during the Nixon years.

Here, then, the Carnegie Commission has tackled some pressing matters of high significance. But, sad to say, it has ducked the two big questions.

The first is what research needs to be done, and what can now be dispensed with (or, put brutally, is second rate). The explicit concern of the report is process and organization, but that is a crippling restrictive mandate. The commission points, for instance, to the widely acknowledged shortcomings of the EPA's programmes but charitably puts them down to inadequate organization and funding. The agency's incoming administrator, Carol Browner, will have to be harder-headed on that score and place quality of science at the top of the EPA's agenda.

The second is the question of cost — both of whether the

estimated \$5 billion spent on environmental research and development in 1992 is enough for the tasks to be undertaken, and of how much the restructuring would itself consume. What realism there is on that score is of the vaguest kind. "Many of the recommendations ... can be implemented without significant new federal expenditures ...". Really? And with "large [budget] deficits expected in future years, the federal government will be constrained in its ability to address environmental needs". There is the rub.

As President-elect Bill Clinton puts together his new administration, the United States has paused for contemplation of the future, economic affairs being at the centre of the navel-gazing. This well-intentioned and otherwise sensible document will find its way into many a waste bin before the year is out. That is a pity, but will be a consequence of the commission's failure to put a price tag on its proposals. Other groups are now labouring on similar reports that will have to plunge into the treacherous waters of identifying what science is to be done, and what the cost will be, if they are to carry any clout. □

Norplant for teenagers

The city of Baltimore will offer Norplant in health clinics affiliated with public schools.

THE incidence of teenage pregnancy in the United States (and in other nations as well) can be described as a public health crisis. The woman whom US President-elect Bill Clinton has designated as the next Surgeon General says that even in Arkansas (a midwestern state of 2,372,000) some 8,000 teenage girls have unwanted pregnancies in any given year. Stemming this epidemic of children having children has been difficult for a number of reasons, among them the fact that many teenagers fail to use birth control pills, condoms and other available contraceptive methods consistently.

Norplant, Baltimore city health officials decided, may be the answer — at least for girls who are willing to choose long-term contraception. Pellets surgically injected under the skin will release contraceptive hormones for five years.

Although the cost of Norplant, at anywhere from \$350 to \$500, may seem high, it is actually less than a five-year supply of the pill and is a wise investment of public funds as long as teenagers are not coerced into accepting it. Other school systems should follow Baltimore's example. □