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Environmental Sciences

One of the newest fads in Washington—and elsewhere—is "environmental science." The term has political potency even if its meaning is vague and questionable. Lacking specific definition, it embraces every science—physical, natural, social—for all of them deal with man's surroundings and their influence and impact upon him.

An observer of the Government scene gets the impression that the title of a new agency in the Department of Commerce may be an astute response to the flexibility and hence the promotional value of the term "environmental science" in building a new empire in science and technology. The acronym ESSA, easily pronounced and remembered, and already imprinted on two orbiting satellites, stands for "Environmental Science Services Administration," truly a ponderous, hard-to-remember, and hard-to-define title, of puzzling import.

ESSA is within the Department of Commerce, presumably because the Weather Bureau was its nucleus. But, assuming the possibility of unlimited expansion, is Commerce logically the trustee and guardian of all human environment? Will ESSA's service extend to influencing all the phenomena with which science deals—in the heavens, beneath the sea, and upon and under the dry land—to protect man and, hopefully, to benefit him? Can one escape visualizing a vast rising tide of dollars deemed essential for guarding man against the threats of nature or for assuring him of nature's benign contributions to his well-being?

The various Government agencies with well-understood functions have, on the whole, performed creditably. They have taken seriously their responsibilities to the public. They have been doing research and development in scientific and technological areas to improve their competence in public services. Basic research in all fields is being well supported and well administered in NIH, NSF, AEC, ARPA, and other agencies. It seems reasonable to believe that all the agencies, with appropriations commensurate with needs, will continue creditably to perform their respective services.

What assurance is there that an agency put together out of parts heretofore existing and functioning in other agencies will provide more and better services? At least one consequence is assured: in an organization so vast within the possible interpretation of its name, the cost will be immeasurably greater.

The answers to the questions posed are not obvious, nor can they be deduced from observable events. One answer which may be proffered is that the purpose was "better coordination" among the component agencies. This, as may be recalled, was an objective in the creation of the Federal Council of Science and Technology, and of Interdepartmental Committees.

ESSA's establishment is a *fait accompli*. Fortunately its direction is in most capable hands. Its director has our best wishes for success in his difficult task. At the same time, the citizenry comprised of the scientists and technologists merits being told what "environmental science" means, and assured that ESSA is not to assume responsibility for all of science and technology in Government. Without such assurance, vigorous and sustained opposition to such unlimited expansion as is implied in "environmental science" is strongly indicated.

—PAUL E. KLOPSTEG