

public forum on the trans-Alaskan route, but the ensuing torrent of conflicting commentary, reviews, and criticism has not abated yet.

The impact report concluded that environmental damage caused by the line could be held to an "acceptable minimum" and that the project should proceed. Dismissing out of hand any alternative routes or modes of transporting oil down from Alaska's North Slope, the Interior Department's statement contended that prompt construction of the pipeline would reduce the nation's need for imported oil, thereby helping to stem the flow of dollars abroad and to bolster the national security by lessening U.S. dependence on the "politically unstable" nations of the Middle East.

Interior hearings on the pipeline project held in Washington and Anchorage last month produced some 400 witnesses and several thousand pages of testimony favoring and opposing the line. Since January, the report has drawn a continuing barrage of criticism from predictably outraged conservationists, and even from the Alaska district of the Army Corps of Engineers, which supports the idea of a trans-Alaska pipeline but which had few kind words for Interior's evaluation of its effects. In an acerbic review dated 5 February, the Alaska district accused the Interior Department of understating the real and potential environmental dangers of the pipeline system, found Interior's dismissal of alternatives "unconvincing," and judged that the report generally "fails to fully comply with the letter and the spirit of the Environmental Policy Act."

"It contains limited detailed analyses," the Corp's Alaska district said, adding that "Without this information conclusions on environmental effects appear to be unsupported opinions which, in fact, in many instances they indeed are."

The Defense Department's over-all review, though more diplomatic, was no less critical. Dated 3 March, the 15-page review challenged Interior's assertion that enough was known of Alaskan geology and permafrost to assess the pipeline's effects; it contradicted Interior's claims that oil spills on land can be effectively removed and the land rehabilitated; it accused Interior of "understating" the project's impact on Valdez, which probably would become an industrial center; and it asked for more discussion of alternatives to the trans-Alaska pipeline.

Up to now, the pipeline report has been faulted chiefly for its short shrift of environmental hazards. But recently the report has drawn some new and very different fire, aimed this time at

the economic arguments it advanced for the Alaskan line.

The new criticism comes from economists Charles J. Cicchetti and John V. Krutilla at Resources for the Future,

Fire Ant Control under Fire

The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) took the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to court last week in an attempt to halt Agriculture's proposed program to control the imported fire ant by spraying the pesticide Mirex—a program once estimated to cost \$200 million over 12 years.

Questioning the harmfulness of the ants and the safety of Mirex, EDF filed a complaint against USDA last August. USDA had then already begun application of Mirex, but stopped in mid-November and announced the program would be resumed on 15 March. But in court on 10 March, attorneys for the department maintained that spraying would not begin until 1 April.

The imported fire ant, *Solenopsis saevissima*, is found in nine southern states from Florida to Texas, EDF witnesses told Judge Oliver Gasch of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Its original home is South America and it was first recognized in the United States in Alabama in 1918. It is only one of a number of species of fire ants, and the United States has three that are native. The ant, which inhabits mainly pastureland, may spread as far west as California. It also stings, and there have been substantiated reports of two human deaths. Since the 1940's, its population has peaked to nuisance levels—hence the rationale for a program of control.

EDF maintains that the imported fire ant is not harmful enough as a pest to justify the massive control program; they say there are 100 times as many human deaths from bees and wasps each year as there are from these fire ants.

Moreover, Mirex, a chlorinated hydrocarbon, has been shown to be "moderately" carcinogenic in laboratory mice. It is a persistent chemical and will enter the food chain uncontrollably, passing to ever larger organisms, just as mercury is passed from small fish along the food chain where it accumulates in big fish, and may subsequently be consumed by animals and humans.

The USDA has been trying to eradicate, or at least control, the imported fire ant for more than a decade. A massive program in which heptachlor and dieldrin were used as the pesticides was attempted during the 1950's—but this undertaking is generally acknowledged to have been a failure. Under federal-state contracts, the pesticide Mirex has been used against these ants since 1962. At one point during this latest episode, USDA was contemplating a full eradication program in which Mirex would be used as an air spray for the next 12 years over an area of 126 million acres, at a cost estimated at \$200 million. Most recently, however, USDA claims it only wishes to "control" the ants, although the proposed method is the same.

The Agriculture Department has made other shifts. Under the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act, it was required to file a final environmental impact statement before the Mirex program began. Last week in court, USDA attorneys maintained that its environmental impact statement was only a preliminary document, despite the fact that spraying was to have started within a week.

USDA told the court it would file a final environmental impact statement by 18 March, and, unless restrained by the court, commence spraying on 1 April. Judge Gasch continued the case until 26 March, when the government's testimony will be heard.—D.S.