AEC Laboratories Would Be Core of Energy R & D Agency

Change now appears to be coming in a rush at the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), an agency that only a few years ago seemed to be settling into complacent middle age. As this is written, a White House announcement may be imminent of a major reorganization that would divide the AEC into two parts, one being an independent nuclear regulatory agency, the other an agency built around the AEC national laboratories and made responsible for research and development in all fields of energy. These changes affecting the AEC would be part of an executive reorganization plan that would also include the establishment of a Department of Energy and Natural Resources, to consist largely of the existing Department of the Interior. "Operating" energy programs such as that of the Bonneville Power Administration would remain in the department, but activities such as coal gasification research would be transferred to the new energy R & D agency.

A little-noticed amendment to the Atomic Energy Act two years ago gave the AEC authority to undertake research in nonnuclear as well as nuclear energy. Given the sweeping nature of the reorganization plan about to be proposed, however, the Nixon Administration is expected to await congressional approval before proceeding with any major part of it. What shape the reorganization will ultimately take once Congress has had its say is by no means certain. Deep concern is felt by some people in Congress and elsewhere that the AEC's present preoccupation with the development of nuclear energy would be carried over into a new energy R & D agency that should give equal if not greater emphasis to coal and possibly other sources of energy.

By coincidence, however, even as the advance reports of the White House proposal on energy R & D reorganization circulate, two other new happenings are worth noting as possible signs of a significant change of attitude and approach at the AEC.

- Faced with the order of 12 June by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia to prepare an environmental impact statement on its overall Liquid Metal Fast Breeder Reactor (LMFBR) program, the AEC is electing not to appeal the decision but to take immediate steps to comply with it. If the agency does undertake this impact study in a searching and thoroughgoing manner, this could constitute an important first step toward the kind of objectivity appropriate to an agency broadly concerned with energy R & D.
- Milton Shaw, the controversial director of the AEC's civilian reactor development program since 1964 and exponent of rapid development of the "fast breeder," is retiring at the end of this month. Shaw is leaving voluntarily, after 30 years of federal service, but his decision to go at this particular time was almost certainly influenced by the rebuff he suffered on 15 May when the commission announced that reactor safety research would be removed from Shaw's division and given separate division status (*Science*, 1 June 1973). For more than 2 years, citizens' groups and researchers in the AEC national laboratories had been protesting that such research was being neglected at the very time dozens of new commercial power reactors were coming on the line, with some disquieting questions as to reactor safety still not having been satisfactorily answered.

In its precedent-setting decision, the court of appeals, rejecting AEC arguments to the contrary, concluded that (i) the LMFBR program, a $2 billion R & D effort aimed at establishing an entirely new nuclear power technology, must at some point be the subject of an environmental impact statement (EIS) that considers the program's total scope and objectives and not merely the impact of specific demonstration plants; and (ii) the time for the EIS on the breeder project has, in fact, already arrived—which is to say, breeder research is deemed sufficiently advanced that evaluation of the impact of commercial use of breeder reactors is possible.

The court indicated that, at some point, an impact statement should be written on every large federal R & D project. As to just when, it suggested that these are the pertinent questions: Is the technology likely to be commercially feasible, and, if so, how soon? How much meaningful information is available about the technology's environmental effects and about the effects of alternative technologies? Are irretrievable commitments being made and options being precluded?

These are precisely the kind of questions the Scientists' Institute for Public Information, Inc., (SIPI) of New York had in mind in going to court in May 1971 to demand that an EIS be prepared. Neither Glenn T. Seaborg, chairman of the AEC when the suit was brought, nor his successor, James R. Schlesinger, saw fit to accede to SIPI's demands. For whatever its worth, Dixy Lee Ray, who replaced Schlesinger earlier this year, not only decided against appealing the court order but made a point of announcing as much.

Ray also took the lead, over substantial opposition within the AEC and in the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, in the recent internal reorganization that removed safety research from Milton Shaw's jurisdiction. Schlesinger, though he too took steps to broaden the concerns of the AEC, had vigorously defended Shaw from criticism of the kind implicit in the reorganization.

For anyone eager to see a rapid expansion of energy R & D, the proposal to have that effort led by a new agency built around the AEC national laboratories raises a close question. Given the AEC's history and the fact that three-fourths of every federal dollar for energy R & D is for nuclear energy, there is reason enough to fear that a new agency drawing heavily on the present AEC establishment might perpetuate the present imbalance in favor of nuclear power. Nor is it reassuring to note the repressive atmosphere that has often stifled dissent within the AEC.

On the other hand, the laboratories are a substantial resource that could be used to give a lift to energy R & D generally. Furthermore, Congress can put more money into nonnuclear energy research and direct that such research have a status coequal with that of nuclear R & D. This possibility, along with the changes at AEC noted here, suggests that the proposed reorganization might yield better results than many believe.—L.J.C.