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annually. More research is needed on fire control systems, architectural designs, medical treatment for smoke and burns, fire detection devices, the dynamics of how fires spread under various circumstances, and so on. The \$27 million now spent each year in federal fire research goes mostly to agencies, such as the Atomic Energy Commission, in connection with their particular missions, says the report. So there is not much money left for the two major general research programs conducted by the National Science Foundation and the National Bureau of Standards (NBS) Fire Research and Safety Program.

The commission points out that many of today's fires, because of the variety of new chemicals and flammable fabrics and materials in existence, and the unique problems posed by high-rise buildings, are not like the fires of yesteryear. New fire-fighting technology has been developed, but it hasn't been disseminated. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for example, has developed a fire coat that can withstand temperatures up to 1500°F. But no one has figured out how to adapt the coat for firemen's use and put it into mass production.

Congress seems sensitive to the urgency of the problem, judging from the fact that 72 fire-related bills have been introduced in the House this year. The science subcommittee of the House Science and Astronautics Committee, headed by Representative John W. Davis (D-Ga.), recently held 5 days of hearings on the report and on the legislative proposals. They boil down to several basic bills, which call for a fire academy, a new research program, a grant program, and a national data system.

Fire officials are ecstatic at the prospect of such a program, which one called "a fire fighter's dream come true." At the hearings, they compared the whole package to the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, which is supposed to supply training and technical assistance to police without meddling in their affairs. They see the academy as being parallel to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Police Academy.

However, a few differences of opinion will have to be ironed out before the dream becomes reality. Where, for

example, should the new fire administration be located? The commission and the National Fire Protection Association (a research and information organization) want it to be in HUD because they believe this department has the greatest expertise in community-based work and planning, as well as familiarity with sociological and economic patterns in cities. They are also eager to keep decision-making locally based.

Others, including Davis, think the place for a new fire program is in the Commerce Department, where it could keep in touch with the fire research and building standards divisions of the NBS.

The extent to which the research of the fire program would be integrated with or supersede other federal research programs is totally unclear. In addition, the grant idea may require major revision in view of the fact that the Nixon Administration is phasing out direct grants to groups and individuals in favor of federal revenue-sharing. Fire funds could go to localities under revenue-sharing plans, but states and cities might choose not to allocate them, and, if they did, departments might decide to buy some more of the same old equipment instead of improving the quality.

Representative Jerry Pettis (R-Calif.), one of the commission's congressional advisers, warned that there is no time to waste on quibbling, since it has already taken 5 years to obtain the commission's report. He might have added that this is the first time Congress has seriously considered a national fire program in the 14 years since one was first recommended by the National Academy of Sciences.

One reason the going has been so slow is the nature of the fire-fighting business. Unlike police departments, it produces no revenue for local governments, and no one appreciates firemen very much between fires. Furthermore, there has been little in the way of national organization to generate political pressure. On the contrary, local fire departments have been jealous of their prerogatives and have tended to fight change rather than seek it.

This attitude, no doubt caused in large part by the strain on municipal budgets, is now markedly shifting. And in view of the fact that this country suffers more deaths and property loss from fire than does any other major industrialized country, change seems clearly in order.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

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