ERDA Shelves a Nuclear Waste Storage Plan

The Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) has abruptly shelved its controversial plan—inherited from the extinct Atomic Energy Commission—to build a $55-million surface storage facility for the nation's nuclear wastes. ERDA apparently will proceed with its long-range plan of developing a permanent burial site for nuclear waste in southern New Mexico, but wants to undertake a "comprehensive re-evaluation" of the surface storage idea, which was to have been an "interim" solution to the nuclear waste problem over the next 20 or 30 years.

Conservation groups and the Environmental Protection Agency had criticized the so-called Retrievable Surface Storage Facility (RSSF) when the AEC formally proposed it last fall in an environmental impact statement. Basically, the RSSF was to have been a massively engineered and heavily guarded concrete storage house, complete with cooling facilities, for the most intensely radioactive wastes generated by nuclear power plants. The AEC argued that it would be sufficiently secure as an interim repository until a permanent solution could be found to the nagging waste problem.

Critics, including the EPA, said the AEC seemed to have its priorities upside down in that it was emphasizing a temporary fix to the problem of work on a long-range solution. Although quantities of high-level wastes from civilian reactors are small now, the nation will need something like 200,000 cubic feet of storage space for solidified reactor wastes by the year 2000 and half a million by 2010.

The first indication that ERDA was having second thoughts about the interim facility came in a letter from the agency's administrator, Robert C. Seamans, Jr., to the congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy on 9 April. Seamans told the committee that ERDA wouldn't need the $5-million appropriation it had initially requested for the RSSF this year (the site for which has not yet been chosen). Seamans also said that ERDA would withdraw its environmental impact statement from last fall—which the EPA had labeled "inadequate"—and substitute for it a comprehensive new study of nuclear waste management, to be ready sometime next year.

The delay no doubt will devalue the waste issue as source of grist for nuclear critics. But it also means that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission may have to rethink one of its rules (also inherited from the AEC) requiring nuclear fuel reprocessing plants to transfer their hottest wastes to a federal repository.—R.G.

This Oil Not Wanted

When an oil tanker or cargo vessel flushes its bilge and ballast waste waters, Environmental Protection Agency and Coast Guard regulations require only that an oil film or sheen not be visible on the surface of the waste water. Two scientists at the Philadelphia meeting of the American Chemical Society suggested, however, that these regulations may be grossly inadequate because they do not control the unexpectedly high concentration of dissolved organic compounds found in such water.

Alerted by high concentrations of soluble organic materials in recycled water used in experiments on the separation of oil from water, Ihor Lysyj of Rockwell International and Edward C. Russell of the U.S. Army Mobility Research and Development Center investigated the dissolution of common petroleum products in water. They found that many organic materials from lubricating oils, fuel oils, and especially gasoline dissolve in water quite rapidly and that the concentrations of dissolved substances increase with time as a result of chemical and biological oxidation of insoluble materials. Even after less than an hour of contact, the amount of dissolved organic materials may be much larger than the minimum amount of undissolved organic materials that will produce a sheen.

They found, furthermore, that the dissolved chemicals are the very ones that have been shown by several investigators to be most harmful to marine biota. Some inhibit the growth of phytoplankton and others have been found to interfere with the metabolism of necessary species in the lower part of the food chain. Although many of these species have presumably already been damaged by pollution in the areas of the ocean adjacent to U.S. shores, the common practice of discharging wastes from ships in the same area could make the problem even more severe. Little is known about the persistence of such chemicals.

The results obtained by Lysyj and Russell obviously need to be confirmed with actual waste waters from ships. Many of the toxicological effects also need a more thorough investigation. But if the presumed effects are found to occur, it appears that the two responsible agencies may have to promulgate a completely new set of regulations for monitoring and controlling the discharge of dissolved pollutions.—T.H.M.

GAO Gets a New R&D Chief

The General Accounting Office (GAO) which, as the auditing arm of Congress, often has uncovered waste or mismanagement in federal spending, has decided to focus many of its research-related inquiries in a single office with a new chief. Morton A. Myers, a long-term GAO official who previously analyzed programs in the health and biomedical research fields, has been named Deputy Director, Science and Technology. The 40-member professional staff under Myers has been given responsibility for looking at research and development issues, such as technology transfer, food, and materials, which cut across agency bounds. Previously, the office was smaller and limited to military and space matters.—D.S.

Buoys Will Be Buoys

Although the oceanographic buoy programs of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are targeted for an 8.2 percent budget cut in fiscal 1976, they will not, contrary to a report in the 7 March issue of *Science*, be canceled.

Support of NOAA's data buoy programs is scheduled in the Administration's proposed budget to drop from $7.6 million this year to $7 million next fiscal year. By 1977 NOAA expects to have a system of nine automatic buoys gathering environmental data—two in the Atlantic, one in the Gulf of Mexico, and six in the Pacific.—R.G.