

Greater Impact Sought for Bureau of Standards

Representative James W. Symington (D-Mo.), chairman of the House subcommittee on science, research, and technology, has introduced a bill that would enhance the status of the National Bureau of Standards (NBS), a technical agency that has labored in relative obscurity at the lower bureaucratic levels of the Commerce Department.

On 17 December, in the closing days of the last Congress, Symington introduced a bill that would sever the Bureau from Commerce and make it an independent agency. The bill would also elevate the Bureau's director in the federal hierarchy to a level III position, paying \$42,000 annually, up from the current level V, paying \$37,800. That would put him a notch below the director of the National Science Foundation, who is at level II.

Symington said that the Bureau has been "relegated to a rather obscure position and has experienced only marginal growth or change," possibly even "stagnation," under the aegis of Commerce. Moreover, the political weight of its director "tends to be minimal," he said, which may be one reason its last two directors—Lewis Branscomb and Richard Roberts—resigned after brief terms in office. "This sort of trend is often catching," Symington said, "and there are signals that it may be turning up at other levels in NBS where the Bureau can least afford it."

Symington also suggested that the Commerce Department, which "functions as an advocate for the business world," may not be the most hospitable setting for a bureau that is supposed to develop factual baselines for federal regulations on controversial issues, such as the environment.

The bill took most observers by surprise. Symington said he had not discussed it with other members of his subcommittee and that no decision had been made on whether to hold hearings on the measure. He said he introduced it to "provoke careful thought." Officials at NBS, apparently unaware of Symington's plans, had no public reaction to the bill, but some privately expressed delight at the idea of enhancing their agency's status.

The Bureau currently employs some 3600 persons. It receives an appropriate

tion of \$65 million from the federal government, plus \$46 million in funds transferred from other agencies that use its services, plus another \$7 million from nongovernmental organizations that buy its services.

Symington speculated—though he did not specifically advocate—that the Bureau, if independent, might handle some of the applied research which has become a growing part of the programs of the National Science Foundation.

—P.M.B.

FAS Poll Favors Nuclear Slowdown

Some 62 percent of the members of the Federation of American Scientists who responded to a poll on nuclear power favored either a moratorium on construction of new nuclear plants or a phaseout of existing reactors.

"The results were considerably more negative about nuclear power than I had anticipated," commented Jeremy J. Stone, the organization's director.

The ballots were sent to the Federation's 7000 members in the October issue of the organization's newsletter. About 10 percent of the members replied, a response rate that the Federation called "normal" for a mailing in which there was no return envelope enclosed.

The ballot asked members to choose among four different positions on nuclear power, which were described in capsule summaries drafted under the supervision of a champion of each position.

Those responding voted as follows: "Rapid Advance," 16 percent; "Go Slow," 21 percent; "Moratorium," 36 percent; and "Phaseout," 26 percent.

"Rapid Advance" was defined as a growth rate for nuclear power plants of 10 percent or more per year; "Go Slow" meant a growth rate of 3 to 7 percent per year; "Moratorium" meant a zero growth rate for a number of years while maintaining plants now under construction; and "Phaseout" meant a halt in construction of nuclear plants and the phasing out of existing commercial nuclear reactors.

The Federation was previously known as the Federation of Atomic Scientists; it was formed by nuclear specialists who were concerned about the spread and use of nuclear weapons. But its

membership has diversified in recent years; it now includes "scientists of all kinds." A recent survey suggests that about 20 percent are physicists, 16 percent medical scientists, 15 percent chemists, 15 percent biologists, 7 percent psychologists, 7 percent engineers, and the remainder scattered in other disciplines.—P.M.B.

Academy Schedules Public Hearings on Energy Study

The National Academy of Sciences will hold public hearings in five cities to obtain the views of citizens and interested scientists on plans for a major study of nuclear power and alternative energy systems.

The 2-year study, commissioned by the Energy Research and Development Administration, will attempt to set forth the current and likely future states of energy technologies through the year 2010, the various policy options, the likely consequences of each, and the uncertainties of those consequences.

The hearing schedule is 22 January in New York City (Classroom C, Columbia University Law School, 435 West 116 Street); 27 January in Atlanta (Georgia Institute of Technology, student center theater, 225 North Avenue); 29 January in Minneapolis (University of Minnesota, Murphy Hall on the main campus); 3 February in San Francisco (the extension center auditorium operated by the University of California at Berkeley, 55 Laguna Street); and 5 February in Denver (Colorado Women's College).

Individuals or organizations interested in appearing at one of the hearings must provide a written request to the Assembly of Engineering, National Research Council, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20418, marked "Attn: Energy Hearings," not later than 10 days before the date of the appropriate hearing. Statements up to ten pages long may be submitted for the record.

The hearings are aimed at receiving comments on the issues the study should address and the plans for the study.

The Academy says this is the first time in its 112-year history "that such an extensive effort is being made to solicit the views of the informed public on a projected study."—P.M.B.