Thornburgh Gets a Hearing

When Pennsylvania Governor Richard Thornburgh came to Congress on 22 September to ask for money, he urged his listeners not to think of his request as a form of "charity" or a "bailout." He wanted financial help for the utility that must clean up the damaged nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island. This is not an onerous duty, Thornburgh said, but a national opportunity "that no one . . . can afford to lose." It is a chance to finance a "national college of nuclear crisis management." Thornburgh pleaded: "Our college is going broke, Mr. Chairman, and it needs help in the form of tuition."

The sales pitch did not go over well. Members of the House subcommittee on energy conservation and power, chaired by Representative Richard Ottinger (D–N.Y.), did not leap at the opportunity to fund a nuclear crisis management college. They were not persuaded, either, by the accusatory side of Thornburgh's presentation. The governor said that the accident "might never have taken place, in fact, without the major federal role in the creation, development, and promotion of commercial nuclear power in America—a role that will always make this industry unique among the many" that may come to Congress seeking help. The congressmen brushed aside this claim. Several even found themselves using the term "bailout," then politely corrected themselves and used "assistance" in its place.

It will cost $1 billion or more to clean up the damaged reactor. The insurance funds are beginning to run out, and roughly $800 million worth of cleaning remains to be done. The local utility, Metropolitan Edison, cannot support the work. Its parent company, General Public Utilities (GPU) of Parsippany, New Jersey, is financially pinched as well and is paying for the cleanup at a slow pace. The rate-setting commission in Pennsylvania refuses to increase charges to electric customers to cover these costs. As a result, the governor took it upon himself to propose a plan for joint financing of the cleanup, to be shared by the federal government ($190 million), GPU ($245 million), the nation's electric and nuclear industries ($190 million), Pennsylvania ($30 million), and New Jersey ($15 million).

The governing board of the Edison Electric Institute (EEI), which represents the investor-owned utilities, met on 10 September and pledged to raise $32 million annually for the next 6 years to support Thornburgh's plan. The pledge is not contingent on federal participation, EEI says. However, a staffer for the House points out that it is contingent on the cooperation of individual companies. The EEI board does not speak for all utilities, nor for all members of EEI on this matter.

Members of the House subcommittee came away from the hearing, according to one subcommittee staff member, with the impression that Governor Thornburgh's plan was still "mushy." The members focused their questions on the small size of the states' contribution. The $45 million offered by Pennsylvania and New Jersey, as it turns out, is simply an offer to forgo windfall tax income on the gross receipts of GPU. Because of the accident, GPU is buying power from out of state and passing the cost along to customers. Higher charges produce higher revenues, and thus higher tax income for the state. Thornburgh has offered to give up this income, but he has not asked the state legislature to appropriate new funds for the cleanup.

Several members of the subcommittee urged Thornburgh to do some more arm-twisting in the state legislature and at the state public utility commission before asking for federal aid. Edward Markey (D–Mass.) claimed that it would be possible to finance the entire cleanup simply by raising local electric rates one cent per kilowatt hour—an increase that would still leave the rates lower than those in surrounding areas.

Although the hearing resolved none of the financing problems, it demonstrated clearly that Congress is in no mood to lend a helping hand. The committee members agreed that something must be done soon to clean up the mess at Three Mile Island and to remedy the generally underinsured condition of the nuclear electric industry. But no one suggested that Congress would lead the way.—ELIOT MARSHALL

revived, but sufficient seed was available by the spring of 1971 to plant virtually all areas vulnerable to the blight.

William L. Brown, chairman of Pioneer Hi-Bred International, notes that the quick recovery from the leaf blight episode could not have occurred if Pioneer and other seed companies had not maintained reserves of inbred lines and thus been able to move into quick production of adequate supplies of hybrid seed without the male sterile trait.

Pioneer developed from a company founded in the 1920's by Henry A. Wallace and associates to produce and market hybrid corn seed. Pioneer still dominates seed sales for corn with about a third of the market and is viewed by the industry as having a leading plant breeding and research program.

Brown started out as a cytogeneticist with USDA in the early 1940's. At Pioneer he came up through the rows, so to speak, starting as a corn breeder and serving as director of research on his way to becoming president, chief executive officer, and now chairman. In recent years Brown has been identified with national efforts to respond to concern about genetic vulnerability in food crops and to take specific steps to broaden germplasm resources.

At Pioneer, the blight episode led the company to enlarge its own reserve of crop species. At its plant breeding center outside Des Moines, all inbred lines are preserved in cold storage and "increased" by periodic replanting. Also at Brown's urging Pioneer is involved in efforts to introduce genes from exotic lines outside the United States into corn and other food plants.

Brown and others have expressed concern that some seed companies are again selling seed with male sterile cytoplasm, though not the Texas sterile trait. An American Seed Trade Association survey showed that the use of male sterile cytoplasm in leading seed lines increased from 5.9 percent in 1975 to 18 percent in 1979.

Brown was on the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) committee that produced a report, *Genetic Vulnerability of Major Crops*, in 1972 in the wake of the leaf blight. The report became a benchmark in discussions of the problem. Brown also served as a member of a subcommittee of the USDA's National Plant Germplasm Committee, itself a by-product of the epidemic, that a year ago published a report anticipating the main criticisms of the GAO report on the National Germplasm System.

In its summary, the GAO report charged, "As currently organized and

0036-8075/81/1009-0162$01.00/0