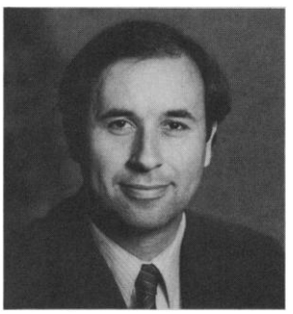
House Reviews EPA's Record on Pesticides

While political shells were bursting in several other offices of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the assistant administrator for pesticides and toxic substances, John A. Todhunter, made his way to Capitol Hill on 22 February for a subdued discussion of his agency's handling of carcinogenic materials. "There has been no radical change in policy," he told the House agricultural subcommittee on departmental organization, research, and foreign agriculture. The subcommittee followed the advice of the chairman, Representative George Brown, Jr. (D–Calif.), and took pains to avoid making these oversight hearings rancorous.

However, the subcommittee did produce a report in December which reached a conclusion just the opposite of Todhunter's. The report found that the Office of Pesticide Programs has been compelled to "make several major changes in its cancer policy," and that the EPA is "ill prepared scientifically or otherwise to defend these decisions." The result, according to the report, is that the public may lose confidence in EPA's integrity, leading to a "sense of panic" and "hastily conceived" efforts to reorganize the pesticide office. The report specifically recommended that EPA not reduce its scientific staff in this area and that it be more forthcoming in releasing pesticide data.

Under questioning by several congressmen, Todhunter insisted that there has been no change in the way EPA handles public health risks, only a "continuing evolution" in the way it reaches a judgment. "The difference is that we are trying to take a case-by-case approach, a more open approach. We are trying to let the scientific community decide," he said.

The government-wide review of cancer policy launched last year by the White House, Todhunter said, has been delayed. The first installment, dealing with the scientific basis for the policy, will not be ready until the summer, at least 4 months behind the original schedule. The portion that sets out the policy itself will not be ready until 1984. Todhunter said that EPA has not adopted a relaxed attitude toward cancer risk, and he disavowed a proposed new method for ranking hazardous substances made last year by EPA's carcinogen assessment group (*Science*, 3 December 1982, p. 975, and 18 February, 1983, pp. 794–798). He told the subcommittee that he never discussed the proposal with subordinates.



John A. Todhunter

On the staffing question, Todhunter reported that the number of employees under his direction has declined from around 635 to 537 since 1981, and that the number of new chemical applications has increased significantly. During this time, he said, the backlog of unfinished work has decreased 97 percent. Brown asked whether this phenomenal speedup had not led to a "fast and dirty treatment" of health safety reviews. Todhunter said that it had not, and that the quality of work had been maintained by making the staff more productive.

Speaking the following day, Edwin Johnson, who serves under Todhunter as director of the Office of Pesticide Programs, mentioned that auditors had come across one case of sloppy work. A toxicology reviewer had lifted portions of an industry publication and made them part of his own commentary. It was a rare case, Johnson said. Nevertheless, he is about to begin an audit of all extramural toxicology research to find out whether there have been other instances of "cut and paste" reviewing and whether any EPA decisions were affected.

Todhunter's testimony was challenged by witnesses from two environmental groups. Karim Ahmed of the Natural Resources Defense Council said: "Despite Dr. Todhunter's assurances to the contrary, EPA as an agency seems to have taken the lead in revising present cancer policy." In regulating pesticides, Ahmed charged, EPA has "raised its acceptance of cancer risks for the U.S. population to at least 100 times the levels which were sanctioned by former administrations." For evidence, he contrasted the statistical risk estimates given in recent decisions on benomyl and permethrin with earlier rulings on DBCP, dieldrin, and heptachlor.

Maureen Hinkle of the National Audubon Society told the subcommittee that her group, like other public lobbies, has been "fenced out" of EPA proceedings. "Rumors circulate that risk calculations are altered from time to time" in private negotiations between EPA and the affected industries. With no way to participate in these meetings, Hinkle said, outsiders must rely on the courts and Congress to obtain detailed data on lab tests and risk estimates. This does not inspire confidence in EPA, she concluded.—**ELIOT MARSHALL**

Landsat, Space Telescope Suffer Setbacks

Even as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) struggles with leaky space shuttle engines, embarrassing glitches have appeared in two of the agency's major scientific missions. Failed transmitters on the Landsat 4 satellite have cut off remote sensing data from the advanced Thematic Mapper instrument, while difficulties with the optical system of the Space Telescope have threatened the project with cost overruns and a delay of the scheduled 1985 launch.

The Landsat 4 problem appeared on 20 February, 7 months after the satellite's launch and, ironically, just a few days before scientists were to meet at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center outside Washington, D.C., for their first review of the Thematic Mapper's scientific output. The mapper, which returns high-resolution images of the earth in seven spectral bands, is considered a major advance over the sensors flown on the first three Landsats in the 1970's. The spacecraft itself is quite sophisticated, with the ability to protect the instruments by going into a "safe mode" at the first sign of an anomaly.

That happened (not for the first