

Oil Industry Buys a Place in the Sun

Standard Oil of Indiana (Amoco) may be about to complete the oil industry's dominance of the fledgling photovoltaics industry. It has put in a bid to take over Solarex, the second largest manufacturer of solar cells in the United States. If Solarex's shareholders approve the deal next month, the oil industry would then own every major photovoltaics company in the nation.

Amoco, which already owns a 30 percent stake in Solarex, has been bankrolling the company for some time. Last year, Solarex lost about \$10 million and it has faced some serious cash-flow problems in the past few months. Because it has been paying most of the bills, Amoco apparently decided it wanted a stronger hand in running the company and offered some \$12.2 million to buy up the shares it does not already own.

The offer amounts to only \$2.50 a share, which is one-eighth the price Amoco paid for some shares last December, according to Walter Ames, a longtime stockholder and former member of Solarex's board. Ames says he is considering filing suit to try to block the takeover at the price Amoco is offering. "My contention is that [Amoco] has run the company into the ground, has frittered away all the assets, and now wants to pick it up at almost one-tenth the price [Amoco paid] just last December," says Ames.

Last year, ARCO Solar, a wholly owned subsidiary of Atlantic Richfield, was the leading producer of solar cells in the United States. Solarex was the second largest, followed by Solar Power Corp., a wholly owned subsidiary of Exxon, according to estimates by Paul Maycock, a consultant to the photovoltaics industry. Thus, if Amoco does win control of Solarex, oil companies will completely dominate the industry.

This trend has raised some concern among solar advocates. Last year, for example, Solar Lobby, a Washington, D.C.-based organization, warned that "As a result of being concentrated and primarily controlled by major oil companies, the photovoltaics industry lacks the necessary incentives for expansion, innovation, and lower

prices." Others have pointed out, however, that the industry is now at the point where some major investment is needed in production capacity, and at least the oil companies have plenty of cash.

Earlier this year, for example, RCA decided that it could not afford the investment needed to commercialize the technology it had developed to make amorphous silicon solar cells and last month sold the technology to Solarex (*Science*, 5 August, p. 532). The deal apparently had Amoco's blessing. Similarly, Energy Conversion Devices, a company based in Troy, Michigan, recently formed a joint venture with Standard Oil of Ohio to develop its amorphous silicon photovoltaics technology.—COLIN NORMAN

Monkey Researcher's Cruelty Verdict Reversed

Edward Taub, the Maryland scientist convicted in 1981 for neglect of his research monkeys, recently had his conviction overturned by the state appeals court. The state is asking for reconsideration of the decision.

Taub had been working at the Institute for Behavioral Research in Silver Spring, severing the afferent nerves to monkeys' limbs for research on treatment of stroke victims. Animal welfare activists infiltrated the lab and precipitated an unprecedented seizure of the research animals by local law enforcement officials. There followed a much-publicized trial and the National Institutes of Health, after its own investigation, suspended Taub's grant.

Although the charges focused on Taub's apparent negligence, he sees the case as an ominous sign that antivivisectionists are making inroads on scientific freedom. He thinks their actions will have a particularly "chilling effect" on deafferentation experiments, and says he knows at least one investigator who is changing fields rather than risk becoming another martyr for science.

Taub, no longer with the institute, is currently writing a two-volume opus on deafferentation with a grant of \$20,000 from the Guggenheim Foundation. He says he still hopes to complete his interrupted experiments using the laboratory of an unnamed col-

laborator. He hopes the Maryland circuit court, which turned his animals over to NIH, will release them as a result of the latest ruling. But he stands little chance of retrieving the rest of his grant (\$109,000) which was terminated last year.

Taub very much wants to get back into the monkey business but believes his career—although not his reputation—has been "destroyed."

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

DOE Chooses Idaho for New Weapons Plant

The Department of Energy (DOE) has touched off a potentially bitter struggle with an announcement on 11 August that it wants to build a new defense reactor in Idaho. The struggle is likely to revolve around two issues: whether the plant is needed, and why this massive federal project should go to Idaho.

On the first question, DOE says that the reactor, which will produce mostly tritium for nuclear warheads, is needed because its existing reactors are getting old. Three reactors are currently in operation at DOE's Savannah River plant in South Carolina and a fourth is located at Richland, Washington. In addition, DOE is bringing a reactor at Savannah River out of mothballs and hopes to get it into production early next year. All five reactors were built in the 1940's.

The need for another reactor has, however, been questioned by some observers, including the House Armed Services Committee. Earlier this year, the committee reduced the budget for designing the new plant, suggesting, in effect, that DOE has enough capacity to meet demand for weapons material through the 1990's.

As for the site of the proposed reactor, congressional delegations from South Carolina and Washington are likely to fight hard for this huge construction project, arguing that it would be cheaper to put it at an existing production facility. (The total cost of the plant is expected to be between \$3 billion and \$6 billion.) Idaho, however, happens to be represented by Senator James McClure (R), chairman of the Senate energy committee.—COLIN NORMAN