

weapons plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The report notes that a preoccupation with national defense may have diverted attention from these problems in the early years. But it concludes that "DOE exercised poor judgment and did not act responsibly" between 1977 and 1982 when top agency officials must have known that there was a potentially severe ground water contamination problem which they did not study or correct. Furthermore, the report says, "DOE released incomplete and misleading information about mercury to the public and to other governmental agencies and failed to cooperate" with outside inquiries.

These are among the harshest findings of an investigation conducted jointly by Representative Albert Gore's subcommittee on investigations and oversight and Representative Marilyn Lloyd's subcommittee on energy research and production. Both chairpersons are Democrats from Tennessee, and the federal facilities in question—the Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) and the Y-12 hydrogen bomb fuel plant—fall within Lloyd's district. They held a public hearing on the controversy in Oak Ridge on 11 June, for which this report is the summary.

The committees came up with two encouraging but tentative findings: (i) none of the mercury or other pollutants appears to have entered the drinking water or local food sources, and (ii) "DOE has recently acknowledged its shortcomings and has made increased efforts to become a good environmental neighbor." However, the study recommends that a new group of outside scientists be established to oversee future monitoring and cleanup efforts, a panel that might be chosen by the National Academy of Sciences or a "similarly prestigious" outfit.

These problems began to make their way into public view in 1982 when a staff environmental scientist at ORNL, Stephen Gough, began working during free time on a survey of mercury pollution in a local creek. He was reprimanded for this and left the lab under a cloud (*Science*, 8 July 1983, p. 130). When Gough left, the laboratory staff began an intense but brief survey into mercury pollution on its own. The House report backs the opinion of several witnesses at the

hearing who said that the "DOE was only stirred into action in 1982 by the impending possibility that the public might become aware" of Gough's work.

A local newspaper learned of the mercury problems and, through a freedom of information request, obtained a censored version of a secret 1977 study reporting that as many as 2.4 million pounds of mercury had been lost in spills at Oak Ridge. Another report in 1977 done by a staff scientist found significant mercury pollution in fish and recommended follow-up studies. That report was made secret, too. There was no follow-up until 1982. "These two documents," the House report says, "leave no doubt that the responsible persons at DOE and UCND [Union Carbide, which ran the laboratory] knew or should have known that a potentially serious mercury problem existed." It goes on to say that the secrecy label on the 1977 environmental study "provided a convenient shield behind which the nonsensitive but politically volatile data on the quantity of mercury releases could be buried and obscured."

Perhaps the most damning new information in the report is the fact that, at the same time these reports were being hidden, DOE was requesting and receiving from Congress funds to build a new central pollution control facility. Yet, according to the report, DOE officials "reprogrammed" money appropriated for this purpose for other uses.—ELIOT MARSHALL

Revision of Pesticide Law Put on Hold

Congress has been pressured this year to reform the laws governing pesticide testing and licensing, but now it is clear that the proposals will not make it to the floor in this session. Neither Congress nor the Administration seems ready to act.

"There is no official Administration position as yet," said William Ruckelshaus, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). He was speaking on 2 November before the House agriculture subcommittee on department operations, research, and foreign agriculture, which is con-

sidering several reform proposals. One (HR 3818) would increase the EPA's power to control domestic pesticides and another (HR 3254) would focus on exports.

The subcommittee was meeting to begin marking up legislation, but chairman George Brown (D-Calif.) announced at the outset that he did not really expect a bill to get to the floor until next spring at the earliest. This reading of the situation jibed with Ruckelshaus' view, for he said he had not even had time to analyze the proposed reforms, but would submit comments in writing, if asked. "Do you want us to mark up a bill now, or do you want us to wait?" one congressman asked in exasperation. "My own preference," Ruckelshaus replied, "would be to wait until we get the administrative changes in place," and until the Supreme Court has ruled on the public's right to see company pesticide data in the Monsanto case (*Science*, 28 October, p. 401).

This news was not a total surprise; indeed, the National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides had already scheduled a press conference to protest the delay.

Most of Ruckelshaus' talk was aimed at defusing the criticism that has built up over the last 3 years and proving to a skeptical audience that the EPA's new managers are sincerely trying to make amends. The EPA chief listed several steps the agency has taken to improve pesticide regulation, including one he endorsed just the day before he testified. This was his decision to sign into law some "good laboratory practices" rules which have been pending approval for years. These rules require that labs testing pesticides meet some general quality standards which were first conceived in 1978 (and were put into effect that year at the Food and Drug Administration) following discovery of a major testing fraud in Chicago.

In addition, Ruckelshaus said the agency is increasing the number of staffers auditing test data, seeking more advice from the Food and Drug Administration and the National Toxicology Program, planning a public review of its policy of granting emergency exemptions for pesticide use, and considering a new, broad ban on certain pesticides in areas where ground water could be affected.

—ELIOT MARSHALL