House Committee Bars Plutonium Transfers

In spite of stiff opposition from the Department of Energy, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce has voted to prohibit the routine transfer of plutonium from civilian R&D programs to weapons production. The committee was persuaded that strict separation of civilian and military programs is needed to support U.S. nonproliferation objectives, and included the prohibition in a budget bill for the department.

The department fought the measure on the grounds that R&D plutonium will eventually be needed for the Reagan Administration's military buildup. In a letter to committee chairman John Dingell (D–Mich.), Secretary of Energy Donald Hodel warned that if Congress puts the material off limits for weapons fabrication, the department "would require additional billions of dollars" for increased plutonium production.

The committee bent to these concerns a little by permitting the department to transfer some plutonium currently in the civilian R&D program to military programs, on the grounds that the material was originally produced in defense reactors. But the bill would outlaw future transfers. The department was unhappy even with this compromise.

One bone of contention, apparently, is that the bill would make it illegal for the department to produce weapons from some 4 metric tons of plutonium imported from Britain in the 1960's. The material, which was exchanged for highly enriched uranium and tritium under a mutual defense agreement, is mostly being used in the breeder reactor program.

Although the British government has been given repeated assurances that the material is not being used for military purposes, Hodel says in his letter to Dingell that the mutual defense agreement "stipulates that the plutonium . . . is to be used for defense activities," and contends that it is simply on loan to the R&D program from the weapons program. "The loan of this plutonium during the past two decades has been with the understanding that, if required, it would be returned to its owners—Defense Programs," his letter states. Energy Department officials have privately told members of Congress that they did not want to relinquish the option of using the British plutonium for weapons (*Science*, 27 April, p. 365), but Hodel's letter is believed to be the first public statement of that position.

Supporters of the measure believe it has a good chance of being approved by the House, but prospects in the Senate are uncertain chiefly because no similar budget bill for the Energy Department is likely to be approved there this year. A provision outlawing plutonium transfers from civilian R&D to military programs may, however, be inserted in another bill currently before the Senate Appropriations Committee.—**COLIN NORMAN**

Medical School Dean Chosen to Head FDA

Frank E. Young, dean of the University of Rochester's School of Medicine and Dentistry, has been named commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and will assume his post on 15 July. The appointment of the 52-year-old microbiologist was announced on 9 May by Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler.

Frank E. Young

The appointment of a commissioner surprised many because the presidential elections are so close at hand. Since Arthur Hull Hayes, Jr., stepped down as commissioner in September to become dean of New York Medical College, the Administration had been scouting for a woman as a successor. At least two women are said to have turned down a job offer.

Young has both a medical degree from the University of the State of New York at Syracuse and a doctorate in microbiology from Western Reserve University, where he assumed his first faculty position in the early 1960's. In the late 1960's, he was a professor at Scripps Clinic and Research Fund at La Jolla and at the University of California at San Diego.

He has spent most of his career at the University of Rochester, however. In 1970, he joined the university as chairman of the microbiology department and, in 1979, became dean of the medical school. He is a member of the Institute of Medicine and has held various executive positions with the American Society for Microbiology. He was a member of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee from 1979 to 1980, a background that may prove to be helpful as FDA, other federal regulatory agencies, and the NIH committee sort out their roles in monitoring biotechnology products.

—**MARJORIE SUN**

A "Death Knell" for Acid Rain Bill in 1984

Legislation to control acid rain seems headed for oblivion this year as a result of a defeat in the House subcommittee on environment and health. The best hope for a compromise among competing interests died on 2 May when the subcommittee voted 10 to 9 to kill a proposal sponsored by the chairman, Representative Henry Waxman (D–Calif.). After the vote, Waxman described the decision as the "likely death knell" for legislation in this Congress.

The bill (H.R. 3400) aimed to reduce annual U.S. emissions of sulfur dioxide—a source of acid precipitation—by 10 million tons through 1993. The plan was to focus special attention on the top 50 polluting power plants and to require other polluters to cut emissions in a second phase of enforcement. The industrial Midwest will bear the greatest economic burden in any attempt to reduce SO_2 pollution. Recognizing this fact, H.R.

3400 offered a large monetary incentive to the states that would be hardest hit by the new law. For example, Ohio alone would have been entitled to $3 billion in special federal assistance. However, this carrot was not alluring enough, for it was a congressman from Ohio, Dennis Eckart (D), who cast the deciding negative vote.

Eckhart says he intends to come up with a new approach to acid rain control, but environmental lobbyists are skeptical. As the National Clean Air Coalition points out, the momentum needed to carry a difficult compromise to fruition has been dissipated. It seems unlikely that Eckhart will be able quickly to devise a solution that is markedly different from or more attractive than the one that has been rejected.—**ELIOT MARSHALL**

Sakharov Hunger Strike Casts Doubt on NAS Plans

The news that Andrei Sakharov began a hunger strike in early May has come at an awkward time for the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. A delegation led by Academy president Frank Press is scheduled to visit Moscow in June to seek broader ties with Soviet scientists (*Science*, 18 May, p. 696), but there is now some doubt whether the trip will take place as planned. Press, who was traveling abroad last week, left word through a spokesman that the Academy would simply "continue to monitor the situation."

The Moscow visit is intended to seek new arrangements to supersede an agreement between the Academy and the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which lapsed in 1982. The Academy decided in 1980 not to renew the agreement, in part to protest the banishing of Sakharov to Gorki. Thus, Sakharov's current plight sharply underlines the fact that one of the major reasons for the current strained relations has not been resolved.

According to interviews given to Western journalists by a friend of Sakharov's, he decided to begin a hunger strike after Soviet authorities imposed restrictions on his wife, Elena Bonner. Sakharov has long sought permission for Bonner to leave the Soviet Union for treatment of a severe heart problem. She has suffered two heart attacks and, according to reports that have reached the West, her medical condition is becoming critical. Soviet authorities have not granted the permission, however, and in late April they revoked her rights even to leave Gorki.

Sakharov has apparently been contemplating going on a hunger strike for some time. In a letter to Jeremy J. Stone, director of the Federation of

Andrei Sakharov

American Scientists, dated 13 January, for example, he said that a trip abroad for medical attention had become a "question of life and death" for Bonner. "I have less and less hope that this problem will be solved by 'usual' means," he wrote, thus "I've been thinking of a hunger strike again, however monstrous it may sound. But is there any other way?"

—**COLIN NORMAN**

Obsolete Equipment

University researchers in computer sciences, physical sciences, and engineering have told the National Science Foundation (NSF) that one-fourth of their research equipment is obsolete. More than 90 percent of the department chairmen in these disciplines also reported that lack of equipment inhibited the conduct of critical research. Moreover, although half the equipment was purchased in the past 5 years, only 16 percent was classified as "state of the art."

These findings are part of a survey by NSF, which is a major funder of academic equipment. A similar survey covering the biological sciences is currently under way.—**COLIN NORMAN**

White House Enters Fray on DNA Regulation

Biotechnology has become a hot topic in the Reagan Administration. On 9 May, the Administration convened a working group with representatives from 15 federal agencies to discuss the regulation of biotechnology. The session was called at the behest of the Cabinet Council on Natural Resources and the Office of Management and Budget, which has shown increasing interest in this issue (*Science*, 4 May, p. 472).

The President's science adviser, George A. Keyworth, II, presided over the session, which was described by one participant as an organizational meeting. Keyworth's main message was "Let's maintain our competitiveness. Don't unwittingly do anything to stifle the technology," said John Moore, assistant administrator at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

EPA is in the thick of things because it is currently developing a proposal for publication in the *Federal Register* that would describe its role in monitoring biotechnology products such as pesticides and toxic substances. EPA has claimed authority to regulate under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act and the Toxic Substances Control Act. Moore last week reviewed the first draft of the agency's proposal.

Moore said Keyworth asked the agencies to figure out what jurisdiction they think they have to regulate biotechnology and to report back at the next meeting, which is to be held within 4 weeks.

During the past year, various federal agencies, including the Commerce Department, have met with industry representatives to ask how the federal government can help maintain the United States' lead in biotechnology. Not surprisingly, industry has warned against overregulation. But Cetus chairman Ronald Cape made an additional plea to the federal government at a meeting held on 8 May by the Industrial Biotechnology Association by calling for a major budget increase for the National Institutes of Health. "This is where government could help and it is not," Cape said.

—**MARJORIE SUN**