News of Science

Conservation Bill Faces Test in Senate—Committee Asks Whether We Need the "Tonic of the Wilderness."

After 10 years of talk and two of Congressional committee hearings, a bill designed to preserve some of the country's major wilderness areas may come before the Senate this month. The wilderness bill, on which the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee has recently completed hearings, would set aside certain primitive park and forest areas now under federal administration control to make up a national wilderness preservation system. In the language of the bill, S. 1123, a wilderness is "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Under the provisions of the bill, such areas would be preserved in their natural state for future generations.

Interest Dates From 1949

Legislation for this purpose has been under consideration in Congress since 1949, but the first committee hearings were not held until 1957. Two bills—S. 1176 and S. 4028—have been introduced and examined by the committee since that time. The bill currently under consideration, which was introduced by Senator Humphrey (D-Minn.) and 17 other senators, has been modified as a result of these earlier sessions. Field hearings on the Humphrey bill were held 30 March to 2 April in Seattle, Wash., and Phoenix, Ariz. One other action—a review of the modified bill by the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of the Budget—will clear the way for a vote of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee as to whether to send the bill to the Senate floor. It is expected that the vote will take place this month.

Provisions Explained

The bill would not add any new land to the amount now owned by the government. Rather, it would identify certain sections of that land as "wilderness" areas and provide a sound legal basis for their protection and administration. As things now stand, such a basis is lacking, and proponents of the bill feel that, without it, economic pressures will eventually result in the exploitation of these areas.

If the bill were passed tomorrow, the only change from present practice would be that the wilderness areas would have this new legal status, and that they would be consciously preserved as wilderness areas by the administrative agency involved. Some existing rights, for example grazing rights, would be continued. However, mining and forestry rights, where they now exist, would be terminated in the designated lands.

The wilderness areas, which, it is estimated, comprise 5.2 percent of the land now owned by the government, are scattered throughout the country, although the majority of them are in the West. They include the Teton Wilderness Area in Wyoming, the Gila Wilderness area, parts of Superior National Forest in Minnesota, Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina, Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon, and a great many others. All told, it is estimated that the bill would put between 50 and 55 million acres of the nation's 2.3 billion into the wilderness system.

Other provisions of the bill would give the Secretary of Agriculture 20 years to determine which parts of the national forests should go into the system, the Secretary of the Interior 10 years to determine which parts of the national parks should be included, and would give the Congress the right to veto any proposed increases or reductions in the wilderness system after its establishment. In addition to these provisions, allowance is made for the inclusion of lands belonging to other governmental departments, Indians, and private individuals if the involved parties choose to donate them.

Commercial Groups Opposed

Opposition to the wilderness bill comes from two main centers—industrial and agricultural associations such as the American Mining Congress and the American National Cattlemen's Association, and the various chambers of commerce from the local level up to the national. The arguments these groups put forth vary, but three main points seem to form the burden of their case. The first is that the establishment of a wilderness system would benefit only a small fraction of the country's people—those with the time, money, inclination, and, as many witnesses noted, the physical stamina, necessary to reach and explore such areas. A second point of the opponents maintains that pressure of population will require the exploitation of these lands if needs for basic resources and employment are to be met in the future. This point is particularly stressed by representatives of commercial interests in the western states who say that their growth and that of the states will be impeded if the wilderness lands cannot be used. Violation of existing practices is the core of the third major point of the opponents of the bill. According to this view, the current policy of the government—"multiple use," is working well in the administration of forests and parks. The multiple-use policy—a direct application of the doctrine of the "greatest good for the greatest number"—allows many interested groups to use federal land if, in the opinion of the secretary of the relevant department, such use will not significantly alter it.

As an argument, not against the bill, but favoring a delay in any action on it, many witnesses cited the work of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission. This group, appointed in 1958, is studying the country's recreational needs and potential under the chairmanship of Lawrence Rockefeller. Because its report is to be given to Congress in 1961, many witnesses suggested that that year would be the proper time to initiate any legislative action.

Conservationists Favor Passage

The bases of the case for the wilderness bill, which has wide popular support, particularly in the West, according to many witnesses, range from Thoreau's cry "We need the tonic of the wilderness" to Senator Humphrey's more prosaic point that the "hue and cry" of the commercial interests is "way out of proportion to the area of land involved and to the value of these lands in the potential production of commercial resources." The centers of support for the bill are the conservation groups, outdoor and sport groups, and, as the Seattle testimony seemed to indicate, the people of the areas involved. One other major organization, the AFL-CIO, has also taken a supporting position. Some observers suggest this may reflect the fact that the National Association of Manufacturers is opposed to the bill.

The proponents of the bill seem to feel that their case is self-evident, and for this reason, perhaps, tend to content themselves with criticism of the opposing case. Supporting Humphrey's claim of exaggeration, Senator Proxmire (D-Wis.) said during last year's hearings: "We no more need the 14 million acres

in the national wilderness forest areas for the few commodities they may yield than we need to melt down the bronze in our monuments or to grow crops on historic battlefields." Put somewhat more seriously, the conservationist's reply to the need-for-resources argument runs like this, according to a staff member of the Senate committee: Should we destroy the remaining wilderness areas just to delay for a decade or so the inevitable shift from current sources of basic materials to the new ones the future will surely demand?

Passage Held Possible

The Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, in voting whether to send the wilderness bill to the Senate floor, will provide the first test of strength on the measure. The committee is comprised of ten Democrats and five Republicans, all of whom live west of the Mississippi River. Because the commerce of the West has most to lose through passage of the bill, it is expected that the Senators from this area will attempt to amend the measure in such a way as to protect commercial interests. With this general revision, according to informed sources, the bill will have an even chance of getting from the committee to the Senate floor. Once there, according to these sources, it has a better-than-even chance of passage. However, the House of Representatives, which has the companion bill, HR 1960, before it, is expected to wait until the Senate acts before starting hearings. This delay, in addition to the fact that 26 of the 31 members of House Interior Committee are also from middle and far western states, makes passage of the wilderness bill by the whole Congress this year a chancy business.

Compton Criticizes Secrecy in Science

The Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary held its first public hearing on secrecy in science on 28 April. The hearing was a phase of the subcommittee's continuing study of freedom of information and secrecy in government. Arthur H. Compton, Nobel-Prize-winning physicist of Washington University, presented the day's testimony.

In opening the session, Senator Thomas C. Hennings, Jr. (D-Mo.), chairman of the subcommittee, explained that the purpose of the new hearings was to explore the extent to which restrictions on the free dissemination of scientific information may be interfering with scientific development and progress in the United States. He commented that the subcommittee, in the course of its work in the field of freedom of information, had heard many complaints to the effect that undue secrecy has been hindering the work of scientists and has even caused many young people to avoid science as a career. He emphasized that the aim of the subcommittee's present study is to seek the views of the scientists themselves in an attempt to determine whether or not this actually is so. Hennings said: "If this is so, it is stupid and shortsighted, and something should be done about it immediately."

As a preliminary step in the subcommittee's study of secrecy and science, Hennings has written to all American Nobel-Prize-winning scientists to ask for their comments. As soon as these have been received and collated, they will be made a part of the record of the hearings. In the course of its present study, the subcommittee plans to consider the opinions of as many scientists in as many different fields as possible.

As the first witness in the new hearings, Compton opened his remarks by observing that the situation relating to secrecy in science had improved substantially since 4 years earlier, when he had testified before Congress on the subject. He referred to the difficulties that some scientists had encountered in applying for passports to attend meetings abroad, mentioning especially Linus Pauling's passport problems before he went to Europe to receive the Nobel Prize in 1954. He also described briefly the obstacles that arose from the requirement for political screening of visiting scientists, when international meetings were held in this country. He observed that the present policy, which requires a strong reason for denial of passports and visas, has eased the situation and represents a "substantial advance."

He pointed out that at the time of his earlier testimony there was a rather "loose and indiscriminate questioning of the loyalty of many, many scientists." He said that although this situation has also been alleviated, the effect of the questionings of past years is still considerable. He commented: "I find that there are, particularly among younger men, doubts about the advisabiliy of entering the scientific professions for fear that they will be considered as persons unloyal to the United States."

The Scientist's Role

After these preliminary remarks, Compton described for the subcommittee some of the ways in which secrecy in science can retard scientific advance. He urged that the ultimate responsibility for security in a research program rest with the scientist-administrator of that program. Excerpts from his testimony follow.

"A point which I would like to emphasize today is the importance of putting the responsibility for loyalty and maintenance of appropriate security in the hands of those who are responsible for conducting research. This would apply not only for research, which is my own special interest but, as far as I can see, likewise to such matters as conducting the work on the national defense or on the international policy of the United States. . . .

"Fifty years ago it was the common practice in science for a man to put a trademark, so to speak, on a certain aspect of science which he himself had started to investigate. If he would publish a paper, it was notice to his scientific colleagues that this was his little private province and that other people should keep off the ground and let him develop it and see what he could do.

"This is a point of view which has almost completely disappeared within the last generation. And it has disappeared because it has been found that the speed of advance has been much greater when a number of people approach the same problem from different points of view and compare ideas so that each can contribute, can fill in gaps in the other person's information, and thus the information grows more rapidly.

"This has been found mutually so advantageous that it has become the modern pattern of science, and the openness of information in science is a part of this same process that has been going on with the development of patents in industry and so on.

"It has come in recent years, since World War II, also into the field even of national defense, which is perhaps the most sensitive field that we have, where the present standard is generally accepted that the things of fundamental scientific interest, meaning by 'fundamental' science the science which is basic to the development of various aspects of weapons, will be made open but one will retain for one's self, that is, for the welfare of the nation, information with regard to the particular methods of application of this scientific knowledge which would involve special techniques for development of weapons or development of tactical use of weapons and things of that kind. These are things which are of such immediate importance to the nation concerned that they will be maintained. . . .

Clearance Procedure Inefficient

"One of the real difficulties that has come in connection with the development of the scientific aspects of national defense has been the question of clearance. . . .

"This has become really a highly organized—I think I would describe it as a 'bureaucratic'—matter in which there is a significant part of the responsibility