

## Water Resources: Congress Favors Taking a New Look

Early in 1966 the Johnson administration, prompted in part by a political struggle between the water-hungry Southwest and the water-rich Northwest, asked Congress to establish a temporary National Water Commission to search for new answers to the nation's water problems. Now, finally, passage of legislation to set up this new body seems near.

The Senate and House have both passed water commission bills, and the difference between their two versions is not great. However, the motives of the chief House and Senate sponsors of the bills are by no means identical. On the one hand there is Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington, chairman of the Senate Interior Committee. He wants water problems to be considered in a national rather than a western regional context. Jackson and his colleagues from the Northwest are aware of the growing political power of the Colorado-basin area (California and six other Southwestern states) and of what this could mean for their region in a competition for water resources.

On the other hand there is Representative Wayne N. Aspinall of Colorado, chairman of the House Interior Committee. His interest in the water commission study appears to derive partly from the hope that it might lead to steps to augment the Colorado basin's water supply—if necessary, by importing water from the Columbia River. In fact, last year Aspinall wanted establishment of the commission linked to an ambitious package of Colorado-basin proposals. These included controversial proposals for a detailed feasibility study (by the Department of the Interior) of water augmentation through importation and other means and for construction of two Grand Canyon power dams for production of revenues for a number of basin projects. Senator Jackson, however, was strongly opposed to the augmentation study by Interior. He even refused to go along with senators from the Southwest who wanted the proposed national water commission to give priority consideration to their region's water needs.

For a variety of reasons, the Colorado legislation is stymied, and there are no immediate prospects of its passage. Aspinall seems to have concluded that, at this point, there is little to be lost in going along with a water commission study and that possibly some good will come of it. The commission would consider a wide range of possible solutions to water needs: for example, policy innovations to encourage the highest economic use of water; technological advances such as desalination, weather modification, and waste water purification; and interbasin transfers. The commission would be expected to bear in mind the economic and social impact of water development projects, such as their effect on regional growth and on esthetic values.

Evidence that suspicions still abound in dealings between the Northwest and the Southwest on water questions is evident in a comparatively minor change which the Aspinall committee made in the Senate's water commission bill. The Senate bill provided that the



Henry M. Jackson



Wayne N. Aspinall

seven members of the commission be appointed from outside the government by the President, with the advice and consent of the Senate. The House Interior Committee, dominated by Aspinall and other Southwesterners, struck out the "advice and consent" clause, obviously believing that Jackson might otherwise have too much influence over appointments.

Although a major purpose in setting up the commission is to break the hold of tradition and find some new approaches to water resource problems, Aspinall quite clearly does not want the commission's imagination to wander too far. Both the House and Senate bills require that the commission consult with the Water Resources Council, the cabinet-level body headed by Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall. But in discussing the proper attitude for the commission to take, the reports of the House and Senate Interior committees are quite different in tone.

Jackson's committee urges that the commission exercise independence of judgment. Aspinall's committee indicates that the commission should lean heavily on the established water resource agencies, such as the Bureau of Reclamation. It says, too, that the commission should try to "forge a consensus" among all water resource interests. This is not precisely a mandate for the commission to upset Colorado farmers, for example, by declaring that the highly subsidized rates at which they buy irrigation water fly in the face of good economics. Moreover, the House report makes it clear that the commission should not take a position on specific proposals.

Assuming that the water commission bill is enacted, the tip-off as to whether the commission study will produce useful results is likely to come when the appointment of the members is announced. If knowledgeable people, including a few economists who have explored the mysteries of water project cost-benefit analysis, are named to this body, then perhaps a firmer intellectual foundation will be laid for government efforts in the water resources field.—LUTHER J. CARTER