

State of the Union: An Upbeat Message on Environment

We are well on the way to winning the war against environmental degradation—well on the way to making our peace with nature.—Richard M. Nixon, 15 February 1973

Although he called it the “first substantive policy discussion” of his installment-plan State of the Union message, President’s Nixon’s fourth environmental message in 4 years seemed longer on oratory and shorter on new initiatives than in years past—an aspect that one White House source attributed to the difficulty of assembling an aggressive package of proposals in the midst of the turmoil of personnel purges that ushered in the second Nixon Administration.

The tone of the message was decidedly upbeat. “Day by day our air is getting cleaner,” the President said. “Month by month our water pollution problems are also being conquered, our noise and pesticide problems are coming under control, and our parklands and protected wilderness areas are increasing.”

The major policy revelation of the message came in a brief discussion of the state of American agriculture. The President said he favored dismantling the structure of crop acreage allotments and price supports erected in the Administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, although he outlined no alternative farm legislation. For the most part, the Administration’s environmental program in 1973 will consist of resubmitting 19 bills—most of them with some revisions—that Congress failed to act on in the last session. The White House is, however, proposing several new pieces of legislation, among them a bill to establish federal standards for drinking water; another to expand federal management of coastal fisheries; and a third to make more wild lands in the Eastern states eligible for inclusion in the national wilderness system, established in 1964.

Following are highlights of the environmental message and the presidential priorities it seemed to communicate:

Land Management. Noting that “our greatest need” is for omnibus legislation to encourage land use planning, the President said he would resubmit an Administration bill to provide \$170 million over 3 years to help states develop land use management plans and to penalize them by withholding federal aid for highways, parks, and airports if they failed to do so. The White House will also try again with its power plant siting bill to provide a “one-stop” process for site selection. Both bills have several competitors in Congress and both are likely to be the center of major congressional debate in this session.

In addition, the White House will resubmit its strip mining control bill, bearing what White House spokesmen describe as major strengthening changes—mainly in the form of “performance standards” requiring the reclamation of land, as it is mined, to a “reasonable approximation” of its original topography and condition. Details of these and other revisions of Administration bills were not made public with the message.

The White House also will support a repeal of the 1872 Mining Act, which requires that public lands be

turned over to private discoverers of mineral wealth and affords no environmental protection of such lands; the 1872 law would be replaced with one containing reclamation requirements similar to those proposed for strip mining.

Pollution Control. The President lent his backing to an effort pressed by conservationists last year, and thwarted by Congress, to give states and cities the option of using some Highway Trust Fund money for the construction of urban mass transit systems. Hitherto the fund has been available only for highway construction and the “bust the fund” movement led by conservation and urban groups had been vigorously opposed by the highway lobby; doubtless it will be again.

Also prominent on the list of legislative leftovers is a rewarmed version of the toxic chemicals control bill that died in Congress last year. A new version would give the Environmental Protection Agency authority to curb the manufacture or distribution of both existing and new chemicals judged harmful to man or environment, rather than limiting EPA authority to newly introduced chemicals, as previously proposed. The Administration also wants a law empowering EPA to draw up standards for state regulation of land-disposal of “hazardous wastes.”

Environmental Tax Incentives. Stymied in the last session of Congress by the House Ways and Means Committee, and by a philosophy prevalent in Congress that tax reform is not a tool for social reform, the White House will nevertheless have a second go at passing three such tax reforms. One is meant to discourage private development of coastal wetlands; a second would seek to make rehabilitation of old and historic buildings more attractive to private developers; and a third would create an emission tax to discourage the use of high-sulfur fuels. A fourth set of tax incentives, intended to foster recycling of solid wastes, has been proposed by the EPA but is being held up by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Parks and Recreation. In a move that some conservationists regard with mild suspicion, the President said he will ask Congress to let the Interior Department channel more money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund—a \$180-million purse from which state and federal parklands are purchased—into states with large urban populations. The goal, in an oft-heard Administration phrase, is to create more “parks where the people are.” While conservationists have voiced no objection to that, some Washington lobbyists are worried that the money may be used to buy swimming pools and golf courses, whereas the fund’s original purpose was to preserve wild lands.

In one of the few new environmental bills advanced by the White House this year, Congress will be asked to extend by 5 years a moratorium on dam construction and other water projects along rivers being studied for possible inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System; also requested is an increase in funds from \$17 million to \$37.6 million to purchase lands along protected rivers.—ROBERT GILLETTE