

Briefings

edited by IVAN AMATO

Oil and Water

Oil may have sparked the latest Mideast war, but water—or the lack of it—may be a cause of the next one. “Water security will soon rank with military security in the war rooms of defense ministries,” says Joyce Starr, head of a 3-year-old Washington, D.C. group called the Global Water Summit Initiative.

Starr, a sociologist formerly with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, also in Washington, says that most countries in the Middle East deplete water supplies faster than they can be replenished. The need for remedies is urgent; the region’s population growth exceeds 3% a year.

In the spring issue of *Foreign Policy*, Starr argues that water shortages will breed instability. Much of the Middle East depends on the same few rivers and aquifers, but cooperation on any matter—let alone water—is not the region’s strong point. Israel, which is already overdrawing its water supplies, relies heavily on an aquifer partly underlying the West Bank. Turkey is busily damming the Tigris and Euphrates, lifelines for Syria and Iraq. Egyptians fear what countries upstream from them will do to the Nile, already depleted by a decade-long drought.

In recognition of the fact that water may soon replace oil as a major source of conflict, Starr’s group—which has on its board experts such as geologist Farouk El-Baz of Boston University—is sponsoring a Middle East Water Summit, to be held in Istanbul next November. The United States has failed to recognize the key role water resources play in regional stability, says Starr. She says that summit organizers, including the World Bank, believe that “a passive governmental approach to Middle East water scarcity will doom any future peace initiative.”

Senate Boosts SSC, Main Injector Funding

In sharp contrast to the budget-trimming in the House of Representatives last month (*Science*, 24 May, p. 1058), the Senate Appropriations Committee recently voted \$508.7 million for the SSC next year, just \$25 million shy of the Administration’s request. If the vote holds up in the full Senate, and then in conference with the House, it will nearly double last year’s SSC budget allocation.

The committee also approved \$25 million to begin construction of Fermilab’s main injector, a long-anticipated upgrade to the laboratory’s Tevatron accelerator—still shy of the \$43 million sought by DOE, but more than the \$10 million approved by the House.

Borderless Grants

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) has awarded grants worth \$10.8 million to 21 biomedical research teams working in Canada and Mexico. The 5-year grants, most between \$450,000 and \$500,000, mark the beginning of a new international program to complement HHMI’s support of about 220 full-time investigators at research facilities in the United States.

“These grants represent an exciting new direction for the institute,” said HHMI president Purnell W. Choppin in announcing the initiative. “The boundaries of science are not constrained by national borders.”

Next year, HHMI expects to broaden the program by doling out grants to scientists in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

Can-do Bugs

Everyone is in favor of recycling—but recycling can create problems of its own. That, unfortunately, has been the case for aluminum cans. It takes partial incineration to strip them of colorful paints and coatings, which pollutes the air and also destroys 15% of the metal, valued at \$75 million annually.

Now, Technical Research Associates (TRA) of Salt Lake City says it has a way around the snag. In the course of an Air Force-supported project to find a way to degrade polyurethane paints, the company found a natural microbial brew that also strips paints, epoxies, and polymeric coatings from aluminum cans. The process can strip a batch of

cans to bare metal in 30 minutes.

TRA won’t reveal details about its microbial swabbers. “Let’s just say we are good at finding organisms to do what has to be done,” says TRA’s Gale Bowers-Irons.

Logger’s Dismay

The spotted owl has a new comrade in the logging wars of the Northwest: a robin-sized seabird called the marbled murrelet, which nests in the high, mossy branches of coastal old-growth forests.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last week proposed listing the bird as a threatened species in Washington, Oregon, and California, a move that could restrict logging in the bird’s domain.

The murrelet’s range extends from Alaska, where its population numbers 50,000 to 250,000, to central California. But whereas the northern murrelets nest in burrows and rocks along the shore, the U.S. populations commute to the water from bedroom communities in the canopies of old-growth forests. The wildlife service blames logging for the scarcity of murrelets in the Pacific Northwest—2000 are estimated to remain in California, 2000 in Oregon, and 5000 in Washington.

Neither the Fish and Wildlife Service nor the Audubon Society, which first documented the bird’s dependence on old-growth forests, will venture a guess about the amount of forest that might go off limits to

logging if the bird’s proposed status as a threatened species is approved. But any newly restricted area could be large. There is little overlap between its habitat, which is within 50 miles of the coast, and that of the spotted owl, which lives farther inland.

This is the second blow to the Northwest timber industry in recent weeks: Three weeks ago the Federal District Court in Seattle halted 171 federal timber sales that it judged to be in violation of laws protecting habitats of the spotted owl. With three federal agencies, three courts, and three states all making conflicting regulations on spotted-owl protection, “nothing is making sense right now,” according to Sharla



Another spoiler. Marbled murrelet flies into logging dispute.

Moffett, spokeswoman for the Port-

land-based American Forest Resource Alliance. “And then they propose listing the marbled murrelet!”

Can PR Cool the Greenhouse?

If a slick ad campaign can cool Americans’ enthusiasm for controls on greenhouse warming, stand by for a big chill. “Some scientists say the earth’s temperature is rising. They say that catastrophic global warming will take place in the years ahead,” reads one of the ads, test-marketed this spring by the Information Council for the Environment. “Yet, average temperature records show Minneapolis has actually gotten

National Audubon Society