

Washington report

A quiet, damaging punch for big cars?

Transportation Sec. Claude S. Brinegar may be giving a quiet but damaging karate chop to his department's love affair with the big automobile. The possibility cannot be discounted that his recent speeches about big and inefficient "gas hogs" represent lip service to lingering fears of a recurrence of winter's energy crisis. However he has started quizzing his research managers in the National Highway Traffic Safety Adm. about the future of the safety research programs for large automobiles. A few engineers have thought they would get a favorable reception if they proposed shifting funds into more work on the compact and minicar vehicles and into anticipating safety problems on electric vehicles. If makers continue cutting back production of large cars, Brinegar's political antennae may be pointing to the day when highways are filled with smaller cars and bigger trucks, a development Brinegar favors for their efficiency alone.

Vinyl chloride warnings may herald new curbs

Prudent designers will take cautious new looks at any critical element containing polyvinyl chloride parts. PVC usage may involve tubing, pipes, covers, fittings, etc. The whole range of PVC applications has been brought under question at the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, The Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration. Cases of a rare liver cancer have now been reported with people turning the plastic into floor tiles as well as those working directly with the basic monomer. Any use that exposes the plastic to temperatures over 150 degrees, hot or corrosive liquids and gases, or high pressures may be suspect of distributing unacceptable amounts of the plastic into the product, into the process or into the environment. Such uses may be forbidden when the many study teams wind up their work this fall.

Standards volunteers sought by CPSC

Individuals as well as companies are being sought as consumer product safety volunteers to help set the thousands of standards now required by law. Volunteers will go onto a list designed to counter claims by regular standards-setting organizations that no qualified personnel exist outside the standards bodies' membership. You will get full copies of official notices and other relevant material, even if you do not serve. Service well could bring you a few expense-paid trips to Washington. The Consumer Product Safety Commission promises that sessions will not drag out for years and years; the law does not allow that much time. If the idea interests you, send a covering letter and a resume to the Secretary, CPSC, Washington, D.C. 20207.

Those inventive fellows from Delaware

Delaware continues to lead in the number of patents granted on a per capita basis, one for every 1052 persons. California (7036) and New York (5411) lead in totals, however. Germany (5661) and Japan (5157) took out nearly twice as many U.S. patents as any other foreign countries. Of the 78,304 patents issued in 1974, nearly 55,000 went to U. S. inventors. Although the patent activity continues increasing each year, the revisions that would speed the patenting process appear unlikely to pass into law this year. Like the demand for subsidies to buy new tools that balked passage of the metric conversion legislation, the patent law revisions contain too heavy a freight of special interest provisions for Congress to carry into an election year.

Computer study stresses social impact

Thoughtful engineers squeezed between the realities of technological solutions for social problems might well gain some new insights from a National Science Foundation study by the Institute for the Future. "Toward Understanding the Social Impact of Computers" tackles the gut questions of how much and how little people understand their intuitive reactions to the infusion of computers into daily living. Dr. Roy Amara, Institute president, sees this reaction becoming more and more an uneasy accommodation. Copies may be obtained from the Institute, 2725 Sand Hill Road, Menlo Park, Calif. Warren Burkett

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