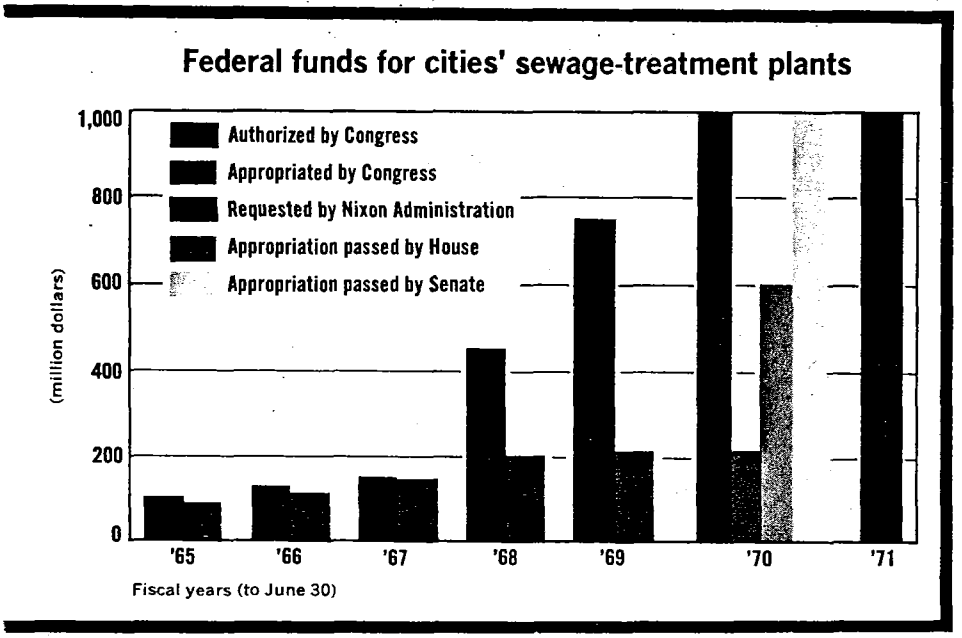

Next in the line of fire?

Industry is only grazed by new criticisms on stream pollution, but may have to work faster to match U.S. abatement efforts

Industries whose plants contribute to the nation's water-pollution problem appear to be only one step away from the wrath of Congress.

As of last week, a big and bipartisan majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives—despite a generally firm commitment to an austere budget for the U.S. government this fiscal year—were angrily advocating that federal outlays for water-pollution control should be 3-5 times greater than the $214 million proposed by the Nixon Administration (*chart, above*).

Right now, the lawmakers—irked at a newly disclosed finding that U.S. rivers are about as badly polluted as they were 12 years ago, despite the expenditure of $1.2 billion in federal funds for sewage-treatment plants—are heaping most of the blame on the Interior Dept. and its Federal Water Pollution Control Administration (FWPCA).

But the new report also points an accusing finger at industry; and Capitol Hill observers are predicting that if the beefed-up appropriations fail to achieve a substantial improvement in U.S. water quality during the next few years, industry might well be the next big target of Congressional ire.

Sharing the Scolding: Chemical process plants came in for a share of the fault-finding in the new report, which stems from a series of on-the-spot investigations by the General Accounting Office (the agency that reports to Congress on how effectively and thriftily all other federal agencies do their jobs).

Among GAO's comments and criticisms relating to industrial pollution in interstate streams:

(1) An increase in the quantity of effluents from industrial plants has been a major factor in the lack of river clean-up progress. In many of the instances in which federal funds have helped finance the construction of municipal sewage-treatment plants, according to GAO, those plants have been relatively small facilities in small towns; and the decrease in pollution from those towns has been offset by larger volumes of both industrial and municipal wastes from new factories and growing residential communities elsewhere in the same river drainage basins.

(2) Inadequate control over industrial wastes has prevented some municipal sewage-treatment plants from operating efficiently. Sometimes the municipal plants are overloaded with

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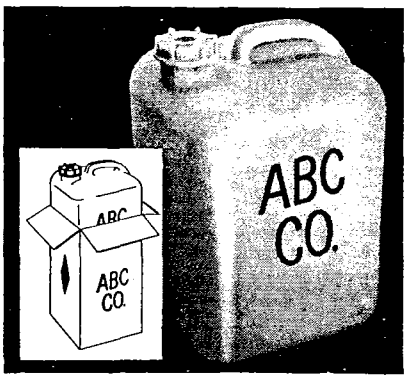

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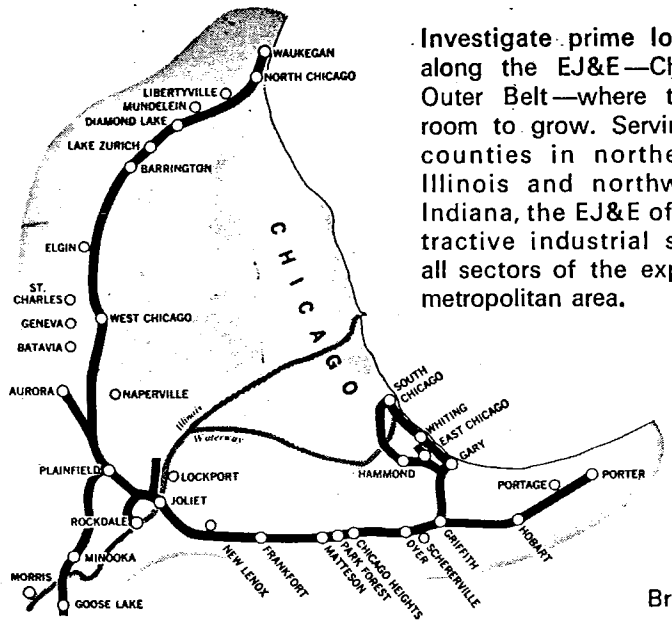

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industrial wastes; frequently the industrial wastes should be pre-treated before being discharged into the municipal plants. Also, GAO's inspectors reported, managers of industrial plants often fail to monitor their waste streams.

(3) Industry should be brought into all phases—planning, construction, and operation—of regional, state and local abatement programs. In the first place, says GAO, a new system of pollution-control priorities should be set up by the states and FWPCA; and two of the principal points that should be considered are the benefits to be derived by building the proposed facilities, and "the actions taken, or planned, by other polluters of the waterways." In another section, the report states: "Federal and state water pollution control agencies should more effectively coordinate the planning and construction of municipal and industrial waste-treatment facilities on individual waterways." In addition, the agency sees a trend toward the construction of joint-service plants to treat both industrial and municipal wastes together.

Gaining Velocity: The big message for industry—both those plants that will have to reduce their waste emissions and those that manufacture chemicals and equipment for waste treatment—is that the nation's water pollution-abatement program is picking up speed. Recent Congressional action makes it highly probable that federal grants for construction of treatment plants will take a big jump this year—quite possibly to the $1-billion level voted by the Senate. If so, this will be the first time since '63 that Congress has actually appropriated as much money as it has authorized for this program.

Part of the reason for Congressmen's rising fervor for accelerating the pace of the plant construction program is the series of GAO reports, some of which were done at the request of Senator Edmund Muskie (D., Me.), chairman of the Senate's subcommittee on pollution.

GAO reserved its harshest criticism for the way in which FWPCA has parcelled out the funds appropriated by Congress. Construction grants in past years, asserts GAO, have been given to the various states on the basis of first-come, first-served, with little consideration given to the benefits that would come from building the particular plants requested on the earliest application lists. END

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