Washington newsletter

Senator William Spong, Jr. (D., Va.) wants to toughen the Administration's proposed toxic substances control act (S. 1478). The proposal and Spong's suggested extensive amendment were aired in a first round of hearings last week. Tabbed for certain regulation in any case are such substances as mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls and asbestos, says Spong.

The Administration bill would allow the Environmental Protection Agency administrator to restrict or even prohibit use of hazardous chemicals in industry or commerce to protect health and environment. Spong's amendment would require premarket clearance for all new chemicals and for any existing chemical products, as determined by EPA. Russell Train, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, opposed Spong's amendment, saying it would impose a "substantial administrative burden on government" and impede technological innovation in industry. The amendment would also give EPA power to summarily seize chemical substances deemed to be imminent hazards. The Administration bill would have the EPA administrator first go to the Attorney General to petition the district court to restrain use or distribution of a hazardous substance.

As expected, representatives of environmental and consumer groups such as Ralph Nader's Center for the Study of Responsive Law, the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth, were unanimous in their support of the tougher version.

Meanwhile, EPA Administrator William Ruckelshaus said he would hold off his decision on whether to uphold the cancellation notice on food crop use of 2,4,5-T until late fall. It was slated to come out this week following receipt by Ruckelshaus of the scientific advisory committee report on the material. Dow and Hercules had requested the study. Ruckelshaus reportedly feels he does not have enough information yet on the benefits and risks of 2,4,5-T to make a decision. Since the public hearings requested by Amchem and Thompson-Hayward Chemical (following the same notice) won't be held until late fall, Ruckelshaus says he will then make a decision regarding all four companies' requests.

A Congressional committee studying the nation's fuels and minerals supply was told last week that the downtrend in domestic oil refining capacity must be quickly reversed or the U.S. will find itself dependent on foreign refineries. John Ricca, acting director of Interior's Office of Oil and Gas, noted that there is a serious deficiency in planned expansion and new refineries and predicted that "by '75 at the latest, we may reach the point when refinery products must be imported instead of crude oil." Ricca says two circumstances are responsible: (1) it's tougher for oil companies to get sites because of environmental concerns, and (2) the prevailing uncertainty on what future energy policy in general will be, especially oil import policy.

It will take a staggering $105.2 billion to clean up pollution in the U.S. The five-year cost estimate ('71-'75) is the key figure in the Council on Environmental Quality's report that's expected to be sent to President Nixon in the next few weeks. The total includes $43.5 billion for solid-waste treatment, $38 billion for water pollution and $23.7 billion for air pollution. About $12 billion of the total estimate will go for private manufacturing water pollution problems. One of the largest individual items cited in the upcoming study is $22.4 billion needed for municipal sewage treatment systems.

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