

Editorial

Put the lid on environmental hoaxes

We welcome the news that the U.S. House of Representatives has so far refused to take up the idea of elevating the Environmental Protection Agency to cabinet status. That decision should be the starting point for a thorough review of our policies toward the environment, and related issues of energy, infrastructure, and industrial development.

As shown by the recent shutdown of Washington, D.C. as a result of an overtaxed electricity grid, there is a real shortfall of electrical power, and a need to reconsider our energy policy. This is not only true in the United States. The task at hand worldwide is massive infrastructure development, based upon the frontier technologies such as magnetic levitation for rail transport.

Given that priority, the proliferation of scare stories about environmental pollution, ozone holes, an out-of-control greenhouse effect, and the like, relies on a misdirected emphasis upon conservation at whatever the cost. This is being fed by a deliberate campaign of exaggerations and lies.

One example of this has been the recent "revelation" that innocent victims, mainly from minority groups and disadvantaged children, were used in radiation tests without their consent. This was revealed by Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary, although the documentation of the reported instances, which occurred at the close of World War II, has been in the public record for at least ten years.

At first glance, the allegations were shocking. Since there is evidence that soldiers and mental patients have been administered hallucinogenic drugs without their consent, we could not dismiss out of hand the charge that young children and pregnant women were subject to doses of radiation.

But now we learn that these tests were not performed under the aegis of the Atomic Energy Commission, precursor to the Department of Energy, to examine human response to radiation, but rather that low doses of tracer isotopes were given to individuals to test how they absorbed nutrients. Energy agencies were brought in to certify that the dosages would not be

harmful. A different case entirely!

In a letter to the *New York Times* of Jan. 31, a retired scientist, Norman Fine, who was the radiation protection officer of Middlesex County, New Jersey, went right to the point:

"News reports on human radiation experiments have been long on sensationalism but short on facts. . . . One case in the headlines concerns retarded boys to whom radioactive calcium was administered in the 1950s. . . .

"It appears from the open literature that the investigators met all the ethical and medical safety standards applicable at the time. The purpose of the research was in general to study the metabolism of calcium, an essential element in the diet."

The level of radioactive calcium used, according to Fine, was "many orders of magnitude lower than the international radiation committee's permissible body-burden standards for humans and could not conceivably have harmed the subjects in any way."

The issue of informed consent cannot be taken lightly. It was certainly wrong if people were experimented upon without their permission, or without their (or their guardians') understanding of the implications of the experiment; however, the use of tracer isotopes to understand the body's metabolism is well-accepted medical technology, just as use of isotopes for cancer detection and treatment is standard medical technology. Studies such as these have led to enhanced understanding of the nutritional requirements of young children and of pregnant women.

Most recently we are seeing the emergence of a new scare story, the "chlorine scare." The claim is made that chlorine is a hormonal toxicant which particularly affects male sexual organs. If a ban on chlorine were imposed, so that it can no longer be used to purify water or for industrial processes, the consequences to human health and well-being will be severe.

Giving free rein to environmental scare stories is a far greater danger to human welfare than the environmental horrors which we are constantly being warned about.