

Science Foundation to leave the Foundation better attuned to the needs of both science and society. And the present public interest in technology assessment is to a large degree a product of the subcommittee's efforts.

Much of this achievement is attributed to Daddario personally. Dr. Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Sciences, traces the origin of the phrase "technology assessment" directly to Daddario, and calls him "the first real Congressional student of science policy since the exercise that led to the creation of the National Science Foundation." The Daddario

subcommittee's two reports on technology assessment, Dr. Handler says, were a pleasant surprise to scientists who doubted that such studies were even possible. "But through Daddario," he states, "they came to feel that these studies are not only feasible, but imperative."

**Daddario hopes** to leave behind a well-worked-out system of understanding science policy matters on Capitol Hill. He will soon introduce legislation to establish a special committee in Congress to alert the traditional committees to technical problems affecting their jurisdictions. □

#### MOUSE ERUPTION

### Unexplained Australian plague

Australia, which has had its trouble in the past with rabbits, now is suffering from an outbreak of mice. In recent weeks, great numbers of mice have been spreading through northwestern Victoria. The rodents have been eating crops, obstructing highway traffic, entering private homes and public institutions and otherwise generally making a nuisance of themselves.

**At Ouyen** the mice attacked the wheat stubble to such an extent that farmers had to feed their sheep by hand. The Ouyen Hospital placed tin cans around the legs of the patients' beds after a 24-year-old woman was bitten while asleep. At Hopetown people coming back from holidays were finding mice crawling in their beds. At Sea Lake the mice were like a moving carpet in some areas, infesting grape orchards and gardens. On occasion cars had to reduce their speed to 20 miles an hour.

The Victoria Department of Agriculture is unable to provide an estimate of crop damage, but the Australia Museum in Sidney estimates a 20 percent damage to rice, maize and sorghum. It estimates the mouse density at greater than 200 per acre.

This week a farmer at Smithville reported that 29,000 mice killed by poisoning had been picked up on his property in a two-day period. Other farmers in the region were measuring their kills by the number of 44-gallon drums filled.

Rodent specialists in the United States are curious and puzzled. The outbreak calls to mind the Appalachian squirrel eruption in the fall of 1968, when an estimated 20 million gray squirrels left their home territories and moved in all directions in a desperate search for mast (SN: 10/12/68, p. 359). But a mammal ecologist who has published a study of that event, Dr. Vagn Flyger of the University of

Maryland's Institute of Natural Resources, says that the Victorian mouse outbreak seems to be much more intense.

"I just don't have any idea what could be the cause of such a thing," he says. "The squirrel migration wasn't anything compared to this mouse plague."

The squirrel migration was triggered by a poor crop of acorns in the Appalachian region in 1968. The squirrels were well fed and had no immediate food shortage. But in the fall they search for acorns to store for the winter. When they didn't find enough to keep themselves occupied they moved on to other areas, sometimes with suicidal purposefulness.

Dr. Frank A. Pitelka, a research ecologist in the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California at Berkeley, is also mystified by the mouse outbreak. "These sporadic outbreaks are often associated with the effects of man's activities," he says, "There must have been a good sequence of weather and crop production."

**What puzzles him** is that the rodents most commonly subject to population eruptions, such as the lemming, an Arctic mouse, belong to the rodent subfamily Microtinae, animals characterized by continually growing teeth—an adaptive trait giving them an advantage over animals whose teeth gradually wear down. But the microtines are confined to the Northern Hemisphere.

The common house mouse, however, which has spread throughout the world, is known for its prolific tendencies. In a mouse plague in the Central Valley of California in 1926-27, a population of more than 82,000 per acre was estimated. The mice worked the sparsely vegetated soil until it appeared to be cultivated. Millions of them swarmed through the area until the population trend was reversed. □

#### OIL SPILL

### Precautions and liability

This month's oil spill off the coast of Louisiana (SN: 3/14, p. 263) still has a potential for being one of the worst in history. A change in the wind at midweek increased the fear the oil may get ashore where it can kill waterfowl. Meanwhile Interior Secretary Walter Hickel sternly told the Chevron Oil Co., owner of the wells involved, that the spill could have been avoided and that the company will bear full liability.

Even if the oil does little local damage, scientists are now concerned about more subtle and widespread oil pollution effects. A Federal Water Pollution Control Administration team was preparing to look at these in connection with the 600- to 1,000-barrel-a-day Louisiana spill. The spill began March 10 after a fire atop a drilling platform was blown out with a dynamite blast.

While the Louisiana disaster had the limelight this week, a Senate-House conference committee staff worked on a final report which would assign liability to the source of a spill whether or not negligence was involved. The legislation would also establish a \$35 million revolving fund to enable FWPCA to move in quickly to clean up a spill. □

#### NEWSBRIEFS

### Visible comet; space funds

A visible comet, named Bennett after its Australian discoverer, will become prominent in the last days of March as it recedes from the sun. It is the year's second visible comet (SN: 3/7, p. 241). According to Dr. Tobias C. Owen, a visiting professor at California Institute of Technology, Bennett should be visible about an hour or more before sunrise. Its maximum predicted magnitude is 1.5, equal to some of the brightest stars. By early April it will rise three hours before the sun, but will have faded to second magnitude. It is now moving north through Aquarius toward Pegasus. □

**Manned flight** has received less emphasis in Administration planning after the moon program (SN: 3/14, p. 264), but the House Science and Astronautics Committee is resisting the trend. It voted last week to authorize \$3.6 billion for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, \$300 million more than requested. Included is \$45 million for two more Apollo flights, \$100 million for suspended Saturn 5 production, \$75 million for another orbiting workshop and \$80 million more for the space shuttle and space station. □