PIPELINE APPROVED

Oil across Alaska

In 1970 the United States used about 15 million barrels of petroleum daily. The figure is expected to be 22 million barrels in 1980, and about 27 million in 1985. Domestic production of oil in relation to total demand is decreasing. In 1970 it was 77 percent and in 1985 it is expected to be only 56 percent, if present trends continue.

These figures form the main basis for the Department of Interior's proposal last week to approve construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System to carry oil from the rich North Slope field south across Alaska to the ice-free port of Valdez. According to Interior, the United States must not become overly reliant on foreign sources of oil; national security demands that we exploit close-to-home resources first. The same argument has been used by oil companies for years to justify the costly—to the consumer—oil import quota system.

The Interior decision was a foregone conclusion. Former Interior Secretary Walter Hickel made this clear in his Earth Day speech last April 22. Beneath all the rhetoric about security, there was little doubt that the real reason for the decision was that when the oil industry gets moving on a project, the inertia of that movement is irresistible.

It may be that North Shore oil—expected to come into the continental United States at the daily rate of half a million barrels in 1975, two million barrels in 1980 and three million barrels in 1985—is the very best way of meeting the nation's needs, both from the point of view of the environment and the consumer. But there is no way presently to be certain. There are possible alternatives: Utilization of vast Western coal and oil shale reserves for synthetic petroleum is one. Another is development of alternative modes of transportation that have less of a gargantuan appetite for petroleum products than the private automobile. But the Federal Government lacks a comprehensive energy planning body that could weigh these alternatives, let alone enforce them.

The Interior Department recommendation is backed by a 196-page environmental impact draft report, which establishes some of the most comprehensive environmental guidelines ever laid down for a major construction project. They are aimed mainly at protecting the delicate tundra and other terrain over, or under, which the 800-mile pipeline will pass. Although the report was in the works earlier, it might have become a dead letter or been less restrictive except for the efforts of three environmental organizations, the Friends of the Earth, the Wilderness Society and the Environmental Defense Fund.

Early last year Interior was preparing to issue the permit for the pipeline to the consortium of seven oil companies that will build it. But the three environmental organizations obtained a Federal court injunction (SN: 4/18/70, p. 389) to halt action until Interior had produced the report—a requirement of the new Environmental Policy Act. Interior officials acknowledge that the elaborate safeguards called for in the report are largely a product of this action.

Among these safeguards is a requirement that about 48 percent of the pipeline be above ground instead of buried in the delicate permafrost, where melting produced by the hot oil could cause ecological damage. Also called for is an elaborate, computerized monitoring system for leaks, as well as frequent visual checking for corrosion. And the pipeline will have to be engineered to withstand the earthquakes that are common in the region. In addition, the pipeline would be patrolled by air, and a pipeline leak detecting device would periodically be pumped through the line.

The report acknowledges that despite these safeguards, there will undoubtedly be spills and consequent ecological effects. But officials contend these will be relatively minor. The pipeline consortium would have to pay all cleanup costs and damages.

Public hearings on the pipeline are scheduled in Washington and Alaska next month, after which the draft report will be amended to its final form. But Interior officials say there is little likelihood of major change. Construction of the pipeline may begin this spring. □

TRANSFER DELAYED

Ft. Detrick's uncertain fate

It has been more than a year since President Nixon ordered the Department of Defense to discontinue research on offensive bacteriological weapons (SN: 11/29/69, p. 495). But the fate of the Army's chief biological warfare research laboratory, Ft. Detrick, Md., is no more certain than it was then.

The choices are either to disband the center's team of more than a thousand scientists and technicians and close the laboratories or to convert the installation to peaceful purposes, such as medical or environmental research.

A number of Government departments had said that they could use Ft. Detrick's facilities with little modification, and early this fall it looked as if the problem might be solved when the Departments of Defense and Health, Education and Welfare began seriously negotiating the transfer of Ft. Detrick to biomedical research under the authority of the National Institutes of Health (SN: 8/29/70, p. 174).

There is little doubt that Ft. Detrick's impressive facilities, valued at $250 million, are admirably suited to such research. Special facilities, such as negative pressure rooms designed to prevent dangerous microorganisms from being blown out of laboratories, and plants for production of bacteria and viruses, would be invaluable in the study of dangerous viruses. There are also separate laboratories for biological sciences, plant sciences and medical sciences, and several laboratories devoted to microbiology. Another division, for research in aerobiology, includes a million-liter aerosol test sphere. In addition, the installation has extensive animal farms that could be used for the study of slow viruses that require long-term observation of test animals.

Last month, however, this balloon was burst. The proposal for transfer of Ft. Detrick to NIH had finally taken the form of a Senate amendment to the appropriations bill for the Departments of Labor and Health, Education and Welfare granting the $15 million needed for the conversion. But House-Senate conferees struck out the amendment and said the matter should be given further study by HEW officials, who should be prepared to testify before Congressional appropriations committees for the next fiscal year.

A spokesman for Sen. Charles Mathias (R-Md.), who had introduced the appropriations amendment, says the Senator has by no means given up and is presently trying to interest other Government agencies in taking over the installation's resources. One possibility under study is for agencies that already have facilities at Detrick, such as the Department of Agriculture and Walter Reed Army Medical Center, to expand its role. The Agriculture Department already has taken over a few additional facilities.

The Army itself also has plans to convert Ft. Detrick to peaceful uses, but as yet is reluctant to discuss any of them, beyond saying that any alternative adopted will involve only unclassified work.

In the meantime, the civilian staff of Ft. Detrick has been cut three times —to the tune of 550 people—and several buildings have been closed. Morale among the staff is reported to be extremely low.

Research on defensive biological warfare will continue, however. Some of the staff of 300 scientists have been transferred to various defensive projects, such as a program to provide early warning of biological attack on the United States. □