

Two landmark science bills pass Senate

Kennedy's science priorities act (S. 32) wins passage

Despite having near-unanimous opposition from existing Government agencies, including the National Science Foundation, the far-reaching National Science Policy and Priorities Act of 1972 (S.32) easily passed the Senate 70-8 last week and went on to the House, where it faces an uncertain future.

The vote came only after Sen. Peter H. Dominick (R-Colo.) successfully amended the bill to reduce the total appropriations it would authorize over a three-year period from \$1.8 billion to \$1.025 billion. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), chief sponsor of the bill, reluctantly agreed to the reduction, despite having stated before the amendment was introduced, "... the \$1.8 billion is an absolute minimum figure in relationship, for example, to the start-up cost of NASA in its first years."

The bill (SN: 8/12/72, p. 102) would set up a NASA-like Civil Science Systems Administration within NSF to direct civilian research and engineering programs in solving problems of society. It would also initiate programs of research, financial assistance, and training to assist the transition of out-of-work or underemployed scientists and engineers "to other civilian-oriented research and engineering activities." It would also declare as a matter of national policy that Federal expenditures in science and technology should be raised to a level "adequate to the human needs of the nation" and then grow in proportion to the gross national product. It would require expenditures in civilian R&D to equal or exceed those for defense R&D, and it would declare that civilian research should focus on "such priority problem areas as health care, poverty, public safety, pollution, unemployment, productivity, housing, education, transportation, nutrition, communications and energy resources."

Dominick also sought to delete the sections tying civilian R&D expenditures to the GNP and requiring they be maintained at least in parity with defense R&D, but those amendments were defeated.

In his remarks, Dominick commended the idealism in the bill but criticized specifics. "The chances for wasteful duplication are not only sub-

stantial but they are also inevitable if we pass this bill in its present form." He also expressed concern about placing the CSSA within NSF while exempting it from control by NSF's National Science Board. "I am concerned about the deleterious effect this provision would have by decreasing the National Science Board's autonomy and impartiality. . . ." And Dominick added a general complaint: "Why do we constantly proliferate programs with cross-jurisdiction, creating problems between agencies, with no one in the outside world having the foggiest idea where to go to find where they can get help and assistance?"

But Dominick had little support on the floor of the Senate. Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey (D-Minn.), one of the bill's 45 co-sponsors, said it was a "national tragedy that we have literally thousands of highly skilled and talented people idle or unemployed" and told of encountering a former aerospace worker with a Ph.D. "running a fishing tackle shop along a highway." Kennedy chose to emphasize the other aspect of the bill. "... The potential of science is nowhere being matched by its performance. . . . This bill is not primarily directed at solving the technical unemployment problem. It is directed at focusing the nation's technical talent on the solution of our pressing national problems." Added Kennedy: "The lesson is clear: We have the scientific knowledge, but we have not made the concerted effort necessary to put it to use for all our people." And he quoted Shakespeare: "The fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves."

Statements supporting the bill from Sens. George McGovern (D-S.D.), Thomas F. Eagleton (D-Mo.) and John G. Tower (R-Tex.) were also read into the record. In the end even Dominick voted for the amended bill, saying that with the cut to \$1.025 billion "we are approaching a level where this program might be made to work. . . ."

In the House, not even a decision on whether to hold hearings on the bill this session has been made. In view of the elections, action this year seems doubtful. A House staffer also noted that a bill last year similar to the technical-conversion part of S.32 never made it out of committee. □

Metric bill finally voted

The Senate of the United States has finally decided that the country should convert its commonly used weights and measures from the traditional or "English" system to the metric system (Système International). On Aug. 18 after more than a hundred years of agitation and the defeat of many previous metrication bills, the Senate approved S.2483, the Metric Conversion Act of 1972. The Senate Commerce Committee had rewritten the bill to make it agree with a measure before the House of Representatives, H. J. Res.1092. According to a member of the staff of the House Science and Astronautics Committee, the House resolution embodies the policy of the Administration. The Senate bill as amended is close but not identical to it. Both items are now before the Science and Astronautics Committee. Because of conventions and elections the committee is not likely to take any action before the end of the year.

The key point in the legislation is that the changeover, though planned, will not be compulsory. The bill would set up a metrication board appointed by the President to plan and oversee a 10-year conversion program, but compliance with its plans would be voluntary. The bill specifically denies any powers of compulsion to the metrication board.

Congress has the constitutional power to prescribe certain weights and measures in interstate commerce (even though it appears to be choosing not to exercise it), but it has no power to prescribe for local markets. Those are state matters. A number of possible confusions and difficulties could arise from the division of powers and the reluctance to compel. It could happen that a canner, following recommendations of the metrication board, was packing tomatoes by the kilogram, while in the same stores fresh tomatoes were being weighed by the pound because state law prescribed it. In discussing the possible difficulties, officials of the Department of Commerce have said they are certain the states will come along—the national economy is so integrated that holdouts are unthinkable. Still, getting 50 legislatures to pass the necessary enabling acts is a formidable problem in orchestration. □