science news
OF THE WEEK

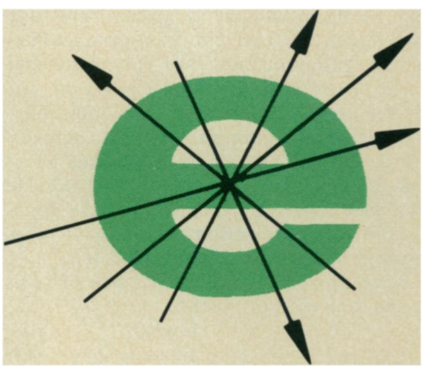
The country that went out in the cold

The energy crisis comes home to a darker and chillier America

As the first chill breath of arctic air begins to drive across the northern Great Plains, the long anticipated shortages of petroleum loom as imminent realities and the energy crisis has started to compete with Watergate as the nation's leading political hot potato.

In his somber televised address to the nation, President Nixon warned of impending fuel shortages ranging from 10 to 20 percent of demand, and urged citizens to conserve what fuel they have by driving more slowly, lowering their thermostats and curtailing unnecessary energy uses such as outdoor advertising. But unlike previous Presidential energy initiatives (SN: 9/15/73, p. 163) this message contained the explicit warning that things could get much worse. The President asked Congress immediately for powers to exempt industries from environmental controls, impose taxes or rationing on gasoline, regulate public transportation schedules and decree reduced nationwide highway speed limits.

While generally supporting the specific recommendations, Congressmen of both parties bridle at the President's suggestion that they had been too "distracted in this period by other matters" to "get on with this urgent business." Their own efforts to reach a compromise with the White House on energy, they say, went largely unheeded. Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.) first approached the President on developing alternatives to Mideast oil in June 1972, but his warning of impending danger was ignored, they claim. One Republican Congressional aide told SCIENCE NEWS the feeling on Capitol Hill is that "if the President had started rationing two months ago, as we requested, we'd be in a lot better shape today."



Rationing, or severe taxes on fuel, or both, now seem almost inevitable. Already some users in the tail end of the distribution system are feeling the pinch. But fuel itself is just the beginning of the problem. Fuel shortages, no matter how they are distributed, will result in higher prices for electricity, manufactured goods and possibly farm products—the so-called "cost-push" road to inflation. Similarly, a reduction of goods produced and demands by workers for higher wages to meet increased costs could quickly add a "demand-pull" force to the inflationary spiral.

Wherever the blame for delay may rest, some of the emergency measures now being suggested to suddenly cut down on energy consumption bear many signs of hastiness. The suggested 50-mile-an-hour speed limit, for example, could actually increase the fuel consumed by heavy trucks and cause serious freight delays resulting in higher costs, according to an industry spokesman. A study by the Arthur D. Little Co. reported that as little as 15 percent reduction of petroleum raw materials going to the plastics industry could have a snowball effect on all the industries that depend on it, creating a production loss of $23 billion. Yet the whole petrochemical industry, including plastics manufacturers, was not classified as a "priority" user of petroleum to assure them of adequate raw materials.

The cost in human terms may be even more severe. Public officials in Minnesota estimate that 40 to 50 school districts will have to close for periods of up to three months because they can use only No. 2 heating oil, which will be practically impossible to get. Two plastics manufacturers in the state have already closed down, throwing their employees out of work. Restaurants there depending on propane are expected to have only enough of the fuel to last about half the winter at three-quarters normal operation and many closings are anticipated. Some homes may also have to go without heat. A scientist at the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration predicted at slightly better than even odds that the East Coast and Ohio Valley would have a relatively mild winter but that the Great Plains, which can afford it the least, can expect to be "on the cool side."

If anger were fuel, Washington, at least, would not have to worry about a cold winter. Wrangling between the White House and Capitol Hill over what to do about energy has reached a crescendo. John Love, the President's energy adviser, deeply angered some Congressmen when he reportedly stalked out of a meeting with them, in what one eyewitness called a wave of "blasphemous language." The Congressmen accuse Love of not really understanding the situation and having made promises he has not kept. The White House argues that its energy legislation proposals of last April (SN: 4/28/73, p. 269) have gotten nowhere on the Hill. In the latest confrontation, Congress this week sent the President his long-sought-after Alaska pipeline authorization, but tacked on a rider that almost taunts a veto. (The rider increases the Federal Trade Commission's power to investigate—without White House approval—situations like the one that arose earlier this year in which several small independent gasoline dealers were forced out of business.)

SCIENCE NEWS has learned that even stronger measures to control energy in the United States are being considered. Faced with the problem of oil still not getting to refineries far from wells or ports—meaning that some refineries are working below capacity while others have stockpiles—the Administration is reportedly considering imposing mandatory allocations of crude oil to all refineries in the country, controlling costs and profits in the process. Major oil companies reportedly violently oppose the move as a virtual nationalization of the industry, but informed sources predict the move may have to come in as little as two months. In the meantime, the Administration is publicly placing its trust in increased use of coal, faster development of atomic power and voluntary conservation to slow the use of fuel.

"We have an energy crisis," the President finally admitted, but there is no crisis of the American spirit." But then winter hasn't come. Yet. ☐