

Congress delays and defers decisions

With the U.S. Congress nearing the end of its current session, decisions on major scientific issues still appear to be far away. Some issues, including nuclear waste and pesticide controls, languish in committees. Decisions on others, like chemical weapons production, have been deferred.

- Three months after the Senate passed a comprehensive nuclear waste management bill (SN: 5/8/82, p. 308), members of the House of Representatives have failed to bring an equivalent bill to the House floor for a vote. The House Rules Committee, where ground rules for floor debate are determined, has before it three bills proposed by various committees. The bills are similar in setting up a schedule and a process for selecting a site and building an underground repository for high-level radioactive waste. They differ on how strong a state's objection to a chosen site can be, on whether military nuclear waste should be included, and on the need for a test burial facility.

Another contentious issue is away-from-reactor storage of spent fuel from nuclear power plants that may run out of storage space before a permanent repository is established. Rep. Butler Derrick (D-S.C.), a key member of the Rules Committee, promises to hold up legislation until he is assured no spent fuel will end up in South Carolina. Derrick opposes away-from-reactor storage as an unnecessary bailout for the nuclear industry, and also because the industry has had its eye on using a closed reprocessing center in Barnwell, S.C. He argues that South Carolina already has its share of nuclear facilities, including a low-level waste dump and a military facility.

With behind-the-scenes negotiations continuing, committee staff members expect little to happen until next month. Even if the House manages to debate and pass a bill before the end of the current session of Congress, Senate-House discussions to reconcile differences could still sink the legislation, again leaving the country without a firm nuclear waste policy. A 1980 try failed because of disagreements over including nuclear waste.

- Much to the dismay of intensely-lobbying chemical manufacturers, the House has approved a two-year extension of the basic federal pesticide control law — the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act. In a surprise move, the House dropped from this FIFRA bill some hotly contested, pro-industry amendments that would have restricted public and state access to pesticide companies' health and safety data.

Last week, the Senate Agriculture Committee began to consider possible amendments to the act, using four proposed bills (including the House-passed

bill) as the basis for its actions. Industry groups are trying to persuade the legislators to include the restrictions originally backed by the House Agriculture Committee but later knocked out on the House floor.

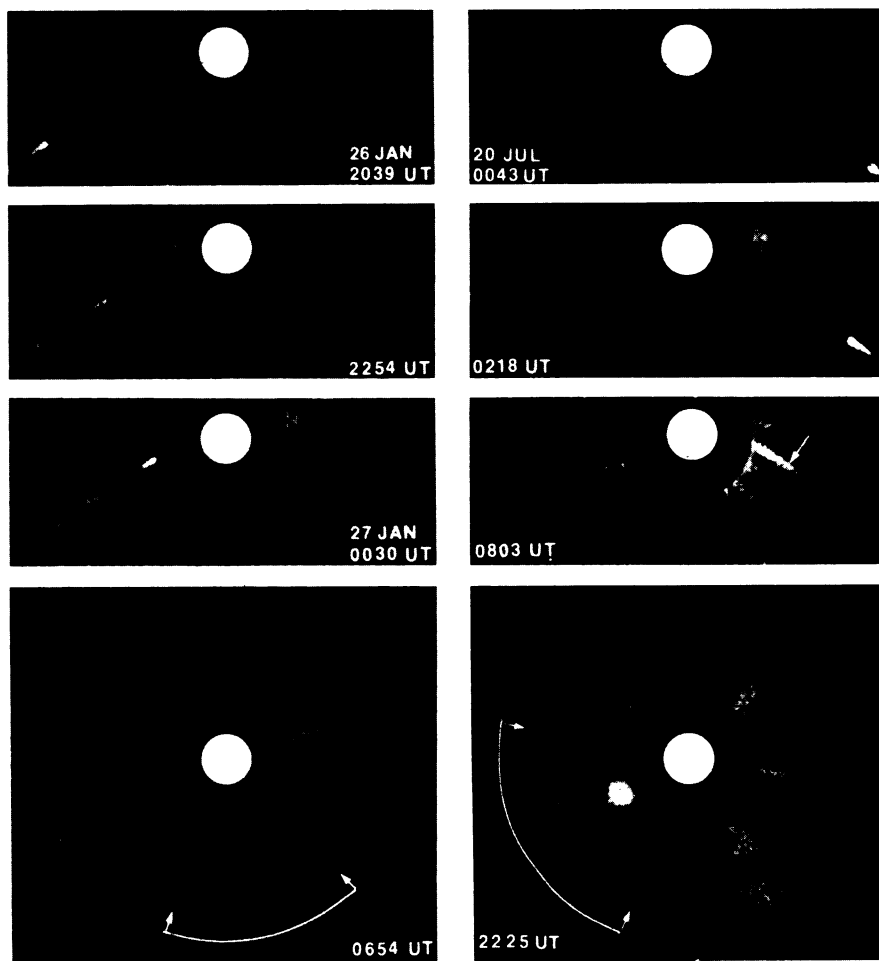
- Earlier this year, the Senate said "yes" and the House said "no" to the Reagan administration's request for funds that would be used for the first U.S. production of chemical weapons in 13 years (SN: 7/31/82, p. 68; 4/3/82, p. 230). That particular request was a \$54 million slice of a \$178 billion pie: the Defense Authorization Bill. Because the House and Senate disagreed on several portions of the bill, it was sent

to a joint Armed Services Committee conference. Last week, that conference ended —but there still is no clue as to the fate of U.S. chemical weapons production.

"The conferees deferred without prejudice the request for funds for production of ... chemical munitions in view of the sharp divisions on this issue which exist in the Congress," reported Sen. John Tower (R-Tex.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. In other words, Congress is not giving the administration money for chemical weapons production now but is leaving open the possibility of a new program next year.

—I. Peterson, L. Garmon

SOLWIND spots two more sungrazers



Naval Research Laboratory

A reckless breed of comet that speeds on an apparent collision course with the sun appears to be more common than scientists previously believed. The latest evidence of such "sungrazers" was recorded from the Defense Department's P78-1 research satellite on July 20 and Jan. 26; the satellite's first such sighting, on Feb. 24, 1979, was reported last year by scientists at the Naval Research Laboratory, which operates the SOLWIND coronagraph experiment aboard P78-1 (SN: 10/17/81, p. 244). According to NRL researchers, the newly-discovered comets followed normal orbits, except their perihelion (distance of closest approach to the sun) was so small that they either collided with the sun or were incinerated by intense solar radiation. This view is supported by the observation that none of the comets reappeared after passing through the lowest point of their orbits around the sun. In the two latest sightings, the comet is seen approaching the sun (both are following essentially the same path, but the orbital movement of the earth over six months gave SOLWIND a different perspective); hours after the calculated collision (bottom), neither comet is seen re-emerging. The time of each frame is indicated in Universal Time (UT), which is equivalent to Greenwich Mean Time.