

news in brief

New agency proposed to handle nuclear waste: A loss of confidence in the US Department of Energy's ability to come up with a co-ordinated nuclear waste disposal programme means that the problem should be handed over to a new committee of federal and state representatives, the General Accounting Office, the investigatory arm of the US Congress, announced last week. In a report prepared at the request of Senator John Glenn, the GAO pointed out that a number of states had already passed various forms of legislation concerning how nuclear waste issues should be handled, but that the federal government had so far failed to come up with an acceptable permanent storage plan for high level wastes. This was becoming a growing obstacle to the development of nuclear power. "We believe it is very unlikely that making the Department of Energy the responsible lead agency to plan and co-ordinate the programme will establish public trust and confidence", the GAO report states.

German mathematician fights 'Berufsverbote': The case of Horst Eckart Gross, 36, who was excluded from a job as assistant professor at the University of Oldenburg, has entered a new phase. West German authorities are now arguing that the recent public campaign in support of Gross' employment is further evidence of his "unconstitutional behaviour". Gross was nominated for a position teaching the history and professional practice of mathematics by the normal university committees in February 1977. The Verfassungsschutz, the West German body responsible for vetting political opinions of government employees, delayed the appointment for almost a year and then said in its final report that there was information which gave reason to doubt Gross' loyalty to the "Freiheitliche Demokratische Grundordnung" (free and democratic constitution). The information in question consisted of Gross' activities in a German-Cuban friendship society which has local groups in more than 30 West German cities. Members of the organisation include trade unionists and members of parliament. Gross is also accused of membership of the German Communist Party and of past membership (1967/68) in the SDS.

The council of the University of Oldenburg passed a strong resolution in support of Gross on 11 January 1978 protesting at his examination by the Verfassungsschutz and calling for his immediate employment. "This Berufsverbote case shows perhaps more clearly than any other the unconstitutional methods used by the political police", it said.

Cuba to build nuclear reactor: Cuba is proceeding with a plan to build the first nuclear power plant in the Caribbean. Mr Luis Beltran, minister in charge of the electrical power industry, announced last week that construction on the Soviet-designed reactor would start this year at Cienfuegos on Cuba's southern coast. The reactor is of the pressurised water type similar to the one involved in the Harrisburg accident. Mr Jorge Perez-Lopez, a US government economist, claims that the Soviet design lacks two safety features which are common to PWRs built in Western Europe and the US. Writing in the magazine *Cuban Studies*, Perez-Lopez says that Soviet PWRs lack a backup cooling system and an outer casing to contain possible leaks. Perez-Lopez suggests that Cuba and the Soviet Union have a mutual interest in developing Cuban nuclear power at this time. The Soviet Union conserves its oil supplies for trade on the world market and Cuba lessens its financial dependence on Soviet oil.

'Plenty of jobs in the UK': According to Neil Macfarlane, minister of science in the new Conservative government, jobs are going begging in the UK. Speaking at an Association of British Science Writers lunch, Macfarlane stated that "for people with the right skills there are plenty of jobs". When asked whether this included scientists on short-term contracts, Macfarlane declined to comment, agreeing with his host, Roger Lewin, deputy editor

of *New Scientist*, that "the issue was too complicated for a brief discussion".

Meanwhile, the Department of Education and Science has just released a recruiting pamphlet, *Science at Work*, intended to attract school students to science careers. The pamphlet is one of a DES series whose "main emphasis is on educational courses and qualifications that lead to jobs". It will be circulated to all schools, colleges and careers offices in the UK. The booklet specifically cites teaching as a career option. "To ensure the continuity of science progress, there is always a need for scientists as teachers in schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities." Also listed are possible careers in microelectronics and librarianship. *Science at Work*, Department of Education and Science, Room 2/11 Elizabeth House, York Rd, London SE 7PH. Free.

Europeans are afraid of new science and technology:

A public opinion poll shows that 80% of the people in the EEC fear for the future of the world they live in because of the "despoiling of natural life and the countryside through pollution of all kinds". A second major fear (67%) is of widespread unemployment caused by automation. A majority (53%) also expressed concern about new technologies in housing, traffic and food and the introduction of drugs



"And just how long have you had this fear of unemployment caused by automation?"

that "may severely affect the human personality". The study had been requested by the EEC Commission from European Omnibus Survey, a group of eight specialised institutes in the member countries. Four countries — Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK — rank pollution as their number one concern and four others — France, Belgium, Ireland and Luxembourg — rank unemployment first. The Italian public fears an overall deterioration of living conditions. This includes the conviction that science is not being used for the benefit of the population as a whole.

The poll shows that even though only 10% considered themselves sufficiently educated to discuss science competently, the majority insisted on being involved in major development choices. The nuclear power questions show that the public has been convinced that curtailing nuclear power could mean loss of electricity. But at the same time, 36% are still opposed to nuclear power compared to 44% who favour it. The poll disagrees sharply with a 1977 survey, which showed "clearly" that there was no mistrust of science. *The European Public's Attitudes to Scientific and Technical Development*. Commission of the European Communities. Brussels.

ETSU finds most renewable energy sources safe: The UK's Energy Technology Support Unit has given an environmental clean bill of health to most renewable energy sources. In a preliminary report to the Department of Energy, the unit finds that the impact of solar and wind energy conversion is "likely to be relatively small". The impact of tidal energy and wave energy is considered to be more complex. Wave energy converters could interfere with herring and salmon migration paths and with ship navigation.

The report lists 13 areas of concern about tidal energy conversion, including effects on ports, freshwater fisheries, pollution dispersion and agriculture; £1.5m has been devoted to the further study of these effects. *Environmental impact of the renewable energy sources*. ETSU, Harwell, OX11 0RA.