

## Environmental Protection Agency

## Pesticide approval challenged

## Washington

As the new administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), William Ruckelshaus, was ordering equal access for all interested groups to the agency's policy-making, the legacy of Anne Gorsuch's controversial reign was being challenged in court. In a suit filed by an environmental group and AFL-CIO (a federation of labour unions) late last month, the agency was accused of holding secret meetings with pesticide manufacturers at which key decisions on the approval and retesting of their products were made.

The suit, which will be heard in the federal district court here, seeks to invalidate decisions that the plaintiffs say ignored adverse safety data and to require a court-supervised review of all agency actions on pesticides taken over the past 18 months.

According to Jackie Warren of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the environmental group involved in the suit, the agency held so-called "decision conferences" with the manufacturers under a policy adopted by Gorsuch and the former assistant administrator for pesticides, John Todhunter. Warren said the action violated statutory requirements for open hearings and public comment.

NRDC also charges that through these conferences, manufacturers were allowed to write entire sections of registration standards for certain chemicals. These standards review health and safety data for a chemical, and provide the framework for subsequent registrations of pesticides containing that chemical. A separate registration is required for each specific formulation and for each intended use of a pesticide.

The suit specifically mentions permethrin, a pesticide approved for use on cotton and for which manufacturers are seeking registration for use on edible crops; and two herbicides, picloram and glean.

Another target of the suit is EPA's decisions on whether to order in-depth reviews of data on already-registered pesticides. NRDC says that no reviews were ordered in fiscal year 1982, and further that several chemicals on a preliminary list for review were removed after meetings with manufacturers. NRDC says the agency has backed down on earlier proposals to restrict the use of Lindane, a pesticide, and pentachlorophenol, a wood preservative. EPA's decision on the latter, NRDC says, was announced after ten closed meetings with manufacturers; a single public meeting to receive comment on the decision was announced on the stationery of the wood preservation industry.

EPA counters that all registrations have been published as proposed rules, with an

opportunity for public comment before being made final. Jim Roelofs of the agency's office of pesticides said that discussion with manufacturers is "a way of doing business that seems reasonable to us — we do it on a daily basis". He added that

## Australian animal virology

## Politicians fear foot and mouth

## Canberra

THE federal caucus (consisting of all Labor Party members of parliament) last month (24 May) banned the import of live foot and mouth disease virus (FMDV) into Australia for five years. The decision, expected to be endorsed by the cabinet, thus agrees with a recommendation by the Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC) that the new Australian National Animal Health Laboratory (ANAHL) should not work with the live virus, the task for which it had been built at a cost of A\$150 million (see *Nature* 19 May, p.190).

Pending the cabinet decision, Dr Ken Ferguson, director of the Institute of Animal and Food Sciences of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), the body which will run ANAHL, said that CSIRO would "broadly accept the recommendation". In any event, an internal review of the Division of Animal Health shows that CSIRO would not be in a position to handle live virulent virus until mid-1986, and the ASTEC recommendation delays this schedule only by about eighteen months.

The controversy about the import of

such conferences have been routine since long before the Reagan Administration.

Roelofs said the purpose of the meetings was mainly to establish what data the manufacturers would need to show in support of a particular registration. And while acknowledging that 5 of the 40 registration standards so far issued had been written in collaboration with manufacturers, he said that this was a limited "experiment". **Stephen Budiansky**

FMDV has riven the scientific community, at least in Canberra, and both sides derive tempered support from the caucus decision. Ferguson claims that the opponents of FMDV importation in fact begrudge the money being spent on the new laboratory, and that they have taken up the importation issue as a tactical manoeuvre to win community support after finding the expense argument politically unsaleable.

Another disputed issue is whether live virus would be needed for diagnosis should a putative outbreak occur. Ferguson says that people actually working with FMDV would not feel happy about making a diagnosis without live virus controls, particularly in the sensitive virus neutralization test. On the other hand, Dr Graeme Laver of the department of microbiology at John Curtin School of Medical Research, Australian National University, a virologist opposed to importation, is adamant that he himself could make a definite diagnosis using other tests not requiring live virus, given a little practice. However, even if diagnosis could be made without live virus, Australia's trading partners would need to be convinced that the disease had been eradicated. Laver concedes that this would be difficult without live virus.

The need to use live virus for research, particularly to develop new diagnostic techniques, is also a contentious issue. ASTEC dealt with this need by proposing that a small research group be set up in an overseas laboratory with access to live virus but with ANAHL carrying "the main research load". This proposal puts CSIRO in an invidious position. It would be difficult if not impossible to sustain a research programme on this basis, and the overseas group would probably finish up carrying the entire research load.

Meanwhile, the maximum containment facilities at ANAHL will be used for research and diagnosis of other exotic viruses and as an investment against a foot and mouth outbreak, when it would be required to handle numerous samples for diagnosis. **Vimala Sarma**

## Costly knowledge

**YUGOSLAV scientists seem to have been "particularly badly hit" by foreign currency restrictions, according to the Federal Executive Council's Coordination Committee for Science, Technology and Education. The present policy of retrenchment officially called "economic consolidation" has in particular meant the cancellation of virtually all subscriptions to foreign periodicals. Now, the committee says, it has become clear that this consequence is at odds with the government's plan to build up Yugoslavia's own science base and to reduce the country's dependence on imported technology. But since it is cheaper to import journals than to remain dependent on foreign know-how, the coordinating committee has appealed to the government to allot special hard currency funds for subscriptions to science journals and has also begun work on a catalogue of journals in descending order of priority.**

Vera Rich

## Correction

In the account of work on *in vitro* fertilization in Australia (12 May, p.103), the cost per couple should have read A\$2,500, not A\$42,500. □