

Proxmire blasts, Stever defends NSF

Sen. William W. Proxmire (D.-Wis.) sharply criticized the National Science Foundation, at budget hearings last week, for continuing to pour money into an academic oligarchy of the large universities and for having one of the worst Equal Employment Opportunity profiles for black and female professionals in the federal government. He also chided the agency for continuing to fund a number of projects that are, at best, of nominal value to the U.S. taxpayer, who foots the bill. Proxmire is chairman of the Senate subcommittee that reviews NSF's budget requests.

Specifically, Proxmire says that NSF advisory panels, which review programs and projects, are packed with people from the same universities that get the grants. Proxmire also doesn't like NSF grants being so concentrated on the East and West coasts.

In reply, NSF director H. Guyford Stever points out that his agency receives about 24,000 requests for funding each year and that more than 25,000 scientists help review these requests. Although admitting that many grants do go to large universities and to schools on both coasts, Stever says that that is where the scientists doing the work are located. And other areas do receive their share of the grants. For instance, in fiscal 1974, about 15% of NSF's grants went to the South Atlantic states, about 11% to the Mountain states, and about 13% to the East North Central states. These figures compare favorably with the percentage of total population in these areas as shown in the 1970 census.

Another area of concern to Proxmire is that for the past three years, an average of about 69% of the female employees and more than 80% of NSF's black employees work at grade GS-7 or below. Stever admits that the situation, especially for blacks, is not good—there are only 14 blacks and 49 women in GS-13 to GS-15 jobs at NSF out of a total of 428. He says that NSF is trying to improve the situation.

Some of the areas in which NSF funds research also are questioned by Proxmire. He thinks that projects such as an evaluation of revenue sharing could and should be handled by other federal agencies. He is particularly annoyed by projects with such titles as Hitchhiking—a Viable Addition to a Multi-



Proxmire: bark is worse than bite

modal Transportation System. Stever admits that NSF has a problem with project titles and doesn't quite know what to do about them. But he says that the projects are substantive and do serve a useful purpose.

On balance, Proxmire's bark usually is much worse than his bite. This isn't the first time he has criticized NSF harshly, raised substantive questions about its operations, and rearranged its funding. But so far, he has not substantially slashed its budget. □

EPA chief asks delay of auto exhaust rules

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell E. Train has recommended freezing the current 1975 nationwide standards for auto emissions of hydrocarbons (1.5 grams per mile) and carbon monoxide (15 grams per mile) through the 1979 model year. Train says his decision rests on a "judgment" that the catalytic converters used to control hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide may be causing more health problems than they are solving.

In addition, he recommends adopting current 1975 California standards of 0.9 gram per mile hydrocarbons and 9.0 grams per mile carbon monoxide for the 1980 and 1981 model years, and statutory standards originally set for 1977 of 0.41 gram per mile hydrocarbons and 3.4 grams per mile carbon monoxide in 1982. However, he suggests that 1977 standards for nitro-

gen oxides (2.0 grams per mile) go into effect on schedule. Earlier, President Ford proposed a five-year freeze (1977-81) on emission standards, but at current 1975 California levels.

Last month, EPA released data that indicate that sulfuric acid (and sulfates) emitted from catalytic converters can cause respiratory problems (C&EN, Feb. 3, page 15). About 85% of the 6 million new 1975 cars nationwide are catalytically equipped, although current 1975 standards can be met without catalysts. Train expects to set a standard for sulfuric acid emissions for the 1979 models.

In a car not equipped with a catalytic converter sulfur in gasoline is converted into sulfur dioxide in the engine and emitted from the tailpipe. The amount of sulfur dioxide that is converted into some form of sulfate before it leaves the



Train: sulfuric acid a problem

exhaust is negligible. In a catalytically equipped car, the sulfur dioxide is oxidized by the catalyst to sulfur trioxide, which combines with the water vapor in the exhaust to yield sulfuric acid (and sulfates) before it leaves the exhaust.

Train points out that a catalyst-equipped car emits about 35 times more sulfuric acid per mile than a car without the catalyst. However, no one has determined a threshold level of sulfuric acid above which the public health is endangered, Train says. Hence, to be "prudent," he must hold sulfuric acid emissions at an "absolute minimum."

It is hoped, the administrator says, that by 1980 the sulfuric acid emissions will no longer be a problem. He anticipates the implementation of alternative emission control technologies, such as the lean-burn system and the installation of sulfur traps in catalyst systems. □