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National Institute for the Environment -- Update

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A National Institute for the Environment (NIE) has been proposed as a new federal agency to bridge, strengthen, and enhance the environmental efforts of existing agencies. The proposed NIE would create new mechanisms for setting research priorities and funding mechanisms for basic research in the environmental and ecological sciences. A National Library for the Environment (NLE) within the NIE would facilitate and expand access to environmental information and better communicate scientific and technical results to a broad, multidisciplinary community of users.

NIE Goes to Congress

Legislation to create a National Institute for the Environment (NIE) was introduced into both houses of the 103rd Congress. Legislation was proposed by the Chair of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee as H.R. 2918 - The National Institute for the Environment Act. Introduced on August 6 by Rep. George Brown (D-CA), chairman of the science panel, and Rep. James Saxton (R-N.J.), the bill has broad, bipartisan support in the House of Representatives and has considerable backing in the environmental, scientific, and special libraries communities.

The bill was backed by a bipartisan group of 75 House members - now House Majority Leader, Newt Gingrich, was one of the original seven cosponsors of the bill - 71 scientific groups and 17 environmental organizations, including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the Sierra Club, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Through efforts initiated by the Environment and Resource Management Division in 1992, the Special Libraries Association in January 1993 became the first professional association of librarians and information professionals to endorse the NIE and the proposed creation of a National Library for the Environment.

In news accounts provided after the bill's introduction, Peter Saundry, Executive Director of the Committee for the NIE said, "What is going to be difficult is implementing a structure. We are working on educating people, building a nationwide network, working to build a constituency to bring about this change."

On June 24, 1993, Senator Tom Daschle (D-SD) and nine bipartisan cosponsors introduced bill S. 2242 as companion legislation to the earlier House bill. Three former EPA Administrators, Russel E. Train, William D. Ruckelshaus, and William K. Reilly, have called on the the Clinton Administration to support these bills. Their letter to CNIE President, Ambassador Richard Benedick, was presented during the May 4 Congressional hearings before the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee. While no action was taken on either bill, supporters remained optimistic about the future of the proposed initiative, and the CNIE is looking forward to renewing its Congressional efforts in the months ahead.

The Environmental Information Connection

The information component of the NIE would be included as a significant program element in the NIE's stipulated duties, which are: - Providing and facilitating access to credible environmental information (including scientific and technological results of environmental research) for relevant Federal, State, and local government decisionmakers, policy analysts, researchers, resource managers, educators, information professionals (including computer and telecommunications specialists), and the general public. - Establishing an electronic network that-- (i) uses existing telecommunications infrastructures to provide single-point access to environmental information; and (ii) includes existing collections of environmental information, such as libraries, specialized information centers, data and statistical centers, and government and private sector repositories of regional, event-driven, or ecosystem information. - Identifying and encouraging the effective application of state of the art information technologies to promote the availability and use of, and access to, environmental knowledge. - Providing long term stewardship of the environmental information resources of the United States, including efforts to ensure the continued usefulness of such resources, through the promotion and development of policies and standards for providing access to environmental information, and through the support of relevant research and development.

The Committee for the National Institute for the Environment (CNIE) was created in 1989 by Dr. Stephen Hubbell of Princeton University and Dr. Henry Howe of the University of Illinois - Chicago to raise public awareness about ecological and environmental issues not being adequately addressed and dramatically underfunded the existing federal environmental research infrastructure.

The proposed NIE would address issues where there are information gaps, such as the effects of ozone depletion on agricultural crops, causes and consequences of loss of biological diversity, the impact of climate change on ecosystems, and the environmental effects of manufacturing and the distribution of environmental risks among different population groups. Areas related to environmental health and occupational health and safety will not be addressed by the proposed NIE. (These environmental areas are adequately funded and supported by existing federal legislation and through programs in the National Institute of Health, the EPA, and other regulatory agencies).

CNIE and other supporters of the legislation argue that credible scientific results and information would improve regulatory and management decisions which affect the health of the environment and the welfare and economic security of future generations. Under the proposal, an Interagency Advisory Committee would ensure that NIE does not duplicate other federal activities, and that it would target those issues that might benefit from additional research. NIE would not have its own laboratories but would fund research at existing facilities. Such research funding could include support of efforts to enhance the identification, organization, and dissemination of environmental information.

Peter Saundry, the new Executive Director of the CNIE replaced David Blockstein, who still works for CNIE as Senior Scientist, gathering support for the proposed legislation and other outreach and networking tasks.

Additional background reading on the need and rationale for redirecting the US focus on environmental research can be found in a book from the Committee on Environmental Research (National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences). The book, RESEARCH TO PROTECT, RESTORE, AND MANAGE THE ENVIRONMENT, (ISBN: 0-309-04929-6, pp. 242) is published by National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20055. TEL: 800-624-6242 or 202-334-3313.

Readers who would like a copy of "A Proposal for a National Institute for the Environment" and other information related to the NIE and the NLE, including newsletters, can contact the Committee for the NIE at 730 11th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001-4521. TEL: 202-628-4303, FAX: 202-628-4311.