

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohn

Water for development

A new bill passing the house by enough votes to override a veto could pull the plug on Carter's water resources policy.

House passage on Feb. 5 of the public works authorization bill, the Water Resources Development Act of 1979 (HR-4788), by a whopping 283-127 majority vote has defeated Jimmy Carter's water resources policy. The bill authorizes approximately \$3-4 billion for construction of new and modified irrigation, hydroelectric power generation and water transport projects as well as for feasibility studies for future water development projects throughout the country.

Carter lamely blasted the bill as a "threat to the federal budget" and said he "intends" to veto. The bill is currently in Senate committee (S-703), with hearings to be held soon. Efforts on the part of Senators Moynihan (D-N.Y.) and Domenici (R-N.M.) to tack on some of the Carter provisions in amendment form were rejected in committee, and knowledgeable sources characterize reports that the Carter program will be melded into the Senate version of the legislation as "highly speculative."

Capitol Hill observers expect that Carter will have to decide whether or not to follow through on his veto threat by August. While a veto is possible, the margin of victory of the House vote virtually assures the success of an override.

Passage of the House bill is the first break in the deadlock over water policy that has persisted since President Carter launched his attack in April 1977. Carter pro-

posed to scrap outright 18 water development projects already in progress and to significantly curtail five more. The "hit list" was backed up with a set of "comprehensive water policy reforms" designed to transform American water policy from an instrument of industrial and agricultural development into a Malthusian concoction of austerity cutbacks, and bureaucratic and environmentalist strangulation of water development—a program Carter unveiled in mid-1978.

Bill HR-4788 provides authorization to the Army Corps of Engineers for work to be done on 47 new projects, 31 feasibility studies of future projects and 77 modifications of existing projects from Mobile, Alabama to Buffalo, New York, to Oregon and Galveston, Texas. The work ranges from construction of locks and dams, to harbor expansions, flood control structure erection, river dredging and channelizations, pumping stations construction and the restoration of beach erosion. While House Public Works Committee staffers have put the total cost of the legislation at about \$2.7 billion, the Congressional Budget Office insists the price tag will top \$4 billion.

Altogether the package is a point-for-point repudiation of the Carter water policy plan. The bill does not require state cost-sharing. The bill waives Carter's cost-effec-

tiveness requirements and authorizes projects lacking "completed" feasibility studies.

As Senator Jennings Randolph (D-W.Va.) insisted during the 1977 debates on water policy, the proponents of a water *development* policy explicitly reject the austerity, "conservation" approach epitomized in the "cost effectiveness" criteria Carter would impose. "We do not receive back dollar for dollar," Randolph stated. "It is not an expenditure. It is an investment in the area and the country."

The Carter water policy's aims are most explicit in the administration's "160-acre" campaign against Western producers using federally irrigated land, a campaign led by Interior Department chief Cecil Andrus. The campaign sought to arbitrarily enforce the 160-acre limitation on federally irrigated landholdings by a single producer stipulated in the 1902 reclamation law, in effect seeking to turn the advanced, high-technology Imperial Valley agricultural economy back to the 1900 mode of small-plot farming powered by animals and human muscle.

Significantly, not only is Andrus' Water Resource Council presently hoping for a renewal of funding before May 15 lest it officially go out of business, but certain Representatives in the House have already provided for its early replacement. The Water Resources Development Act of 1979 also contains a provision establishing a 29-member Commission on Federal Water Policy made up of members of both houses that is to report to Congress by June 30, 1981 on what the nation's water policy should be.