

Diluting Dirty Water Is 'a Mistake'

Stewart Udall, was secretary of the Interior Department in 1968 at a time when the lengthy battle over Appalachian Power Company's proposed Blue Ridge Project took a significant turn that brought about a complete overhaul of the original proposal. As secretary, Udall had to voice the department's position setting forth new demands for water storage in the project. The water was to be used to dilute pollution down stream in the Kanawha River in West Virginia. Udall, who now writes a syndicated newspaper column, says this decision by the Interior Department was wrong and Interior should change its position. Udall gives his reasons in this column:



STANSBURY

A controversy with omens for water quality throughout the nation is rolling toward a climax before the Federal Power Commission. At issue is a basic question: Should water be dammed and released during low flows to dilute industrial pollution, or should industry be forced to clean up its wastes at their source?

The controversy began nine years ago when Appalachian Power Co. of Roanoke, Va., asked the FPC to license a tandem of pumped-storage dams in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and North Carolina. Power generation was the principal aim of the project, which nobody opposed in 1962. Indeed, to this day the original purpose of the dams is backed by environmentalists.

Events in 1966, however, complicated the plot. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations both wanted to help Appalachians pull their region out of poverty. Quickened industrialization of West Virginia's Kanawha River Valley seemed one good way to do it. As a result, the Interior Department intervened in the Blue Ridge hydroelectric project. It called for higher dams which could store extra water and send it gushing 250 miles down the New and Kanawha rivers during the low-flow months of July and August. In this way, it was argued, the effects of gross pollution from the Kanawha Valley chemical industry would be mitigated.

The senior author of this column, who was then Secretary of the Interior, now agrees that this argument was misguided. It delayed a useful, relatively clean hydroelectric project. It raised the odds that reservoir drawdowns would expose acres of unsightly mudflats. It jeopardized one of the East's finest wild fishing and boating streams — the New River. And it improperly shifted the onus of pollution control away from the polluters. Fortunately, not even the Kanawha chemical companies argue that dilution is a desirable pollution control tactic today.

What went wrong? Between 1966

and 1970, we believe, Interior's Federal Water Quality Administration made five serious errors.

First, it predicted a threefold growth of Kanawha Valley industry by the year 2000 — a feat which now seems unattainable.

Second, in forecasting pollution loads along a 56-mile stretch of the Kanawha River above and below Charleston, it assumed that industry would dump virtually all its wastes into the river; almost none would be recycled, buried or otherwise disposed of. Indeed, nothing in the agency's

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plans showed that it intended to tell the Kanawha chemical companies to clean up most of their wastes. A key interior witness admitted: "It would be fatal for me to tell them to do anything."

Third, the agency's knowledge of Kanawha Valley pollution was badly flawed by a lack of research into the kinds, amounts and effects of chemicals which industry was already dumping into the river. Without this baseline information, the agency could not convincingly argue for dilution.

Fourth, the agency underestimated the advance of waste treatment technology. This conservative approach cannot be justified when the burden of proving the need for "low-flow augmentation" lies so squarely on the government.

Fifth, the Interior Department inexcusably failed to study the impact of heavy summertime water discharges on the unique New River ecosystem. Research by West Virginia scientists strongly suggests that low-flow slugs of water from the Blue

Ridge project will wipe out many stream organisms and imperil fishing and boating. In view of this compelling evidence, the FPC reopened hearings on the project last winter — even though an FPC examiner had recommended issuing Appalachian Power a 50-year license in 1969.

In the new hearings, environmentalists and the three riparian states roundly attacked the pollution dilution features of the Blue Ridge dams. Testimony from the water quality agency was weak. A critical event lies just ahead: The Environmental Protection Agency will render its opinion on the case this month. Then it will be up to the FPC to issue a final verdict.

Whatever the outcome, it will influence antipollution strategy for at least a decade. Will pollution dilution remain an acceptable practice, or will it be cast aside in favor of methods which bar pollutants from our streams? Will we go on sending toxic chemicals downstream to menace other aquatic and human communities? Will we bring pressure on industries not only to install the latest available pollution control technology but to bend their genius to the invention of even better techniques?

Reason dictates that the responsibility for industrial pollution must rest on polluters, not on consumers who, as in the Blue Ridge, face higher electric power rates to pay for the low-flow augmentation features of the dams.

Thus, the FPC stands challenged in its Blue Ridge case to reject the pollution dilution approach. If it fumbles the challenge, it will needlessly delay the only kind of water quality controls that can clean up the rivers of this country.