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Weak Knees in EPA

EVER since Appalachian Power Co. enlarged on its plan for creating a hydroelectric reservoir in the New River valley environmentalists have argued that the proposed water-storage requirements and anticipated drawdowns would have a detrimental effect on fish and wildlife and on the river itself.

But the Interior Department keeps telling them not to worry. Interior is anxious to have the power company store huge amounts of water for purposes of controlling pollution downstream—that is, in West Virginia's Kanawha River basin—and every other consideration has been sacrificed to this end. Department officials refuse to consider the possibility that they might be wrong even though the proposed "flushing" technique is untried and has been rejected by a former Secretary of Interior, Stewart Udall, who originally believed it to be a workable concept.

What we have here, then, is a conflict which all but cries for intervention by the Environmental Protection Agency. Yet when the time came for EPA officials to go before the Federal Power Commission and make themselves heard they were forced to admit that they had nothing to say. Would the FPC kindly permit an Interior Department spokesman to appear in the agency's behalf? Permission granted.

That spokesman turned out to be Curtis H. Bell, a department attorney long known to favor the storage of

water for purposes of pollution control.

Thus there is every reason for questioning the legality of the procedure; and if the FPC votes to license the project we can be certain that attorneys representing the opposition will make this a key argument in their appeal to the federal courts.

And there may be other lines of attack. The main argument perhaps is that there is no precedent for requiring one state—in this case, North Carolina—to store water for the purpose of flushing pollution in another state.

If the licensing is upheld and the precedent established, Interior will no doubt move at once to try the same thing in other parts of the country—perhaps in West Virginia on the headquarters of the Potomac. Instead of the wild and scenic river system envisioned by the Johnson administration we may have a system of warm-water basins where fish can neither spawn nor live and where "white water" canoeing—not to mention assorted other forms of recreation—is all but impossible.

If there were no other way of ridding ourselves of pollution, there might be a hint of rationality in what the Interior Department proposes. A better way, however, would be to require the polluters to treat their waste adequately before dumping it into our creeks and rivers.

Isn't it time we began to attack the pollution problem by putting the blame where it belongs?