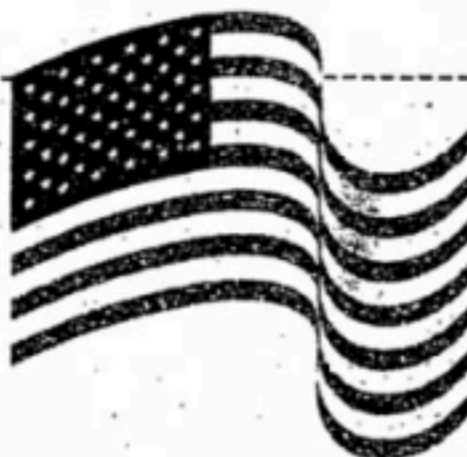


US soundings

Sad news from the World Commission on **Dams**, a group created by the World Bank and International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to conduct "the first-ever independent review of the costs and benefits of large **dam** projects". Its launch has been postponed because environmentalists and social activists object to its make-up. They seem to think that a group whose members include the head of the international **dam** builders' association, a Brazilian advocate of nuclear and **hydro**-power, a Chinese Ministry of Water official responsible for the Three Gorges **dam**, and the chief cheerleader for the massive Lesotho Highlands Water Project might not be all that independent.

The World Bank and IUCN admitted, in a letter circulated over the weekend, that the commission has "a number of substantial deficiencies, for example, in environmental sciences, hydrology, alternatives assessment, and financing", but says that it will go ahead with or without the endorsement of environmentalists and human rights activists.

With just a few days now before the opening of the Kyoto climate summit, US under-secretary of state Tim Wirth, the country's lead negotiator on the global warming treaty, has announced that he's quitting. When the news first came through, it seemed for a brief and shining moment that Wirth might be taking a public stand against the Clinton administration's position on carbon reduction — which is that American consumers shouldn't be



hassled by a bunch of whining foreigners. But the tall, handsome and deeply caring former Colorado senator assured reporters that it wasn't his conscience that caused him to leave his colleagues in the lurch. Er, it's just that something better came along.

Odds are that his fellow under-secretary of state, Stuart Eizenstat, will head the US delegation in Kyoto. This is the same Stuart Eizenstat who sits on the board of the Overseas Private Investment Agency, the government department that provides loans and political risk insurance to US businesses in developing countries. For several months now, OPIC has been big on the environment, especially on the need to reduce greenhouse gases. It has pledged to support only projects that meet US environmental standards. So how thrilling it will be when, just days after the Kyoto meeting finishes, OPIC will announce that it is underwriting a 575 megawatt coal-fired power station in India — which will have no pollution "scrubbers" and fails to meet US environmental standards.

Catherine Caufield

