

Developer of proposed nuclear waste dump is accused of ignoring its own figures

Scientists warn of leak danger

By **ELIZABETH BUIE**
Environment Correspondent

TWO senior geophysicists at Glasgow University warned yesterday that dangerous levels of iodine and chlorine could leak from a proposed waste repository at Sellafield in West Cumbria within 40 years if the development went ahead.

Dr Stuart Haszeldine, senior geology lecturer, and professor of geophysics David Smythe, accuse the developers of the proposed nuclear dump, Nirex, of ignoring its own information and measurements that give an "adverse result".

The geologists, working from figures and information submitted by Nirex in a report to the public planning inquiry into the project last year, have carried out computerised safety simulations of the leakage potential of radioactive iodine and chlorine in recent weeks.

They claim the chemicals could leak to the earth's surface within 40 years, producing double the level of iodine the Government considers safe, and eight times the level of chlorine.

The effects of iodine leaks would be particularly worrying, said Dr Haszeldine yesterday, because following the

Chernobyl accident thyroid cancers in children rose to 30 times the normal level and were linked to exposure to radioactive iodine.

He also claimed Nirex was ignoring international scientific advice that the best method for excavating was to use tunnelling machines, whereas Nirex proposed using explosives, which could do twice as much damage to rock.

Dr Haszeldine and Professor Smythe have consistently opposed Nirex's chosen site at Sellafield, claiming other sites would be more suitable. They are joint authors of a book, Radioactive Waste Disposal at

Sellafield UK, which puts the case against the proposal.

Dr Haszeldine said: "Nirex has always said that if the site was not suitable it would walk away." However, it was choosing to highlight simulations which did not give an "adverse result", he claimed.

"I am trying to debate this scientifically. I am not criticising the scientists in Nirex. I am criticising the way they are putting the measurements together," said Dr Haszeldine.

Nirex, however, described the geophysicists' claims as "science by press release".

A spokesman for the company said: "The report is over 200

pages long and Haszeldine and Smythe have deliberately taken the worst case from 20 models, ignoring all the rest.

"If Nirex cannot show that a repository will be safe, then the company will not be allowed to build it. So if dangerous levels of radioactivity could travel through half a mile of rock in 40 years, then Nirex could not proceed. If Haszeldine or Smythe had read the evidence they would see that the waste canisters would last at least 1000 years and possibly up to 10,000 years."

Nirex Director for Science, Dr John Holmes, attacked Dr Haszeldine and Dr Smythe for

choosing to outline their concerns in a press release, describing their actions as debasing a serious debate to "science by press release".

The company added that the two men had neglected to mention that they had given evidence at the public inquiry on behalf of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

Meanwhile, British Energy, the privatised company comprising Scottish Nuclear and Nuclear Electric, dismissed as "simply wrong and seriously misleading" a newspaper report that the company had secret plans to build eight more nuclear power stations.

According to the report, Scottish Nuclear and Nuclear Electric had schemes to construct two new stations in Scotland and six in England to replace plants to be shut down from about 2006 onwards, and had alerted Nirex about the amount of radioactive waste they would expect to produce.

A British Energy spokeswoman said: "British Energy has no such plans. Our position remains as described in our privatisation prospectus. We plan to retain the option to construct further nuclear generating plant and keep under review prospects for such plans."