

Conflict of interest?

The Nirex radioactive waste disposal contract was apparently worth £3 million a year to the British Geological Survey. Peter Cook, the BGS director, appears to be complaining that the gravy train has now come to a halt as a result of Nirex's failure to get planning permission for its ill-conceived plans to develop a repository at Sellafield (Letters, 21 June, p 54).

The BGS should be a public service body, acting in the national interest. However, it was unable to participate in the Sellafield planning inquiry because of its commercial relationship with Nirex. With a better arrangement than exists now, BGS scientists could have been there to point out the misrepresentation of the geological understanding of the area as presented by Nirex. Instead, it was left to individuals like myself to do this. The absence of BGS representation was unfortunate, since much of the crucial evidence was to be found in the BGS reports to Nirex, which conflicted with Nirex's public stance.

There is a clear conflict of interest in permitting a supposedly public service

organisation such as the BGS to undertake commercial contracts on behalf of organisations like Nirex. Much of the future geological research into British radioactive waste disposal issues should continue to be carried out by the BGS, but the funding must be at arm's length from "customers" such as Nirex. The real customers are us, the public.

I am surprised that Cook appears to be trying to rehabilitate West Cumbria as a potential site for deep radioactive waste disposal. It is clear that a fundamental rethink of British policy on deep radioactive waste disposal is now required. In the meantime, Cook should be patient, and keep his BGS expert group usefully employed by publishing its work to date for Nirex in the proper peer-reviewed scientific literature.

Lastly, I understand that Cook will soon be retiring as BGS director. It is to be hoped that a new director will have the vision and independence to reestablish the BGS's reputation for strict impartiality.

Dave Smythe
University of Glasgow