

# Sellafield's Trojan horse

Britain's nuclear industry wants to build a depository under Sellafield for its waste. But this month, seven scientists will tell a public inquiry that the industry's case is far from rock solid



Grim tidings: environmental protesters greeted the opening of the public inquiry at Cleator Moor

John Giles/PA Photo Library

## Rob Edwards

IN 1977, when David Smythe played bass for a punk rock band called the Rezillos, he took a principled stand in favour of nuclear power. He refused to join the band when they played an antinuclear benefit concert in Edinburgh. Now professor of geology at Glasgow University, he is leading Friends of the Earth's attack on the nuclear industry's plans to build an underground rock laboratory near Sellafield in Cumbria.

But Smythe's conversion from nuclear admirer to critic is symptomatic of the daunting problems now dogging the Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste Executive (Nirex), the company that has the task of disposing of Britain's nuclear waste. Over the next few weeks, the company's plan to excavate a "rock characterisation facility" (RCF) at Longlands Farm in Gosforth will face its greatest challenge. Instinctively sympathetic scientists such

as Smythe are going to accuse Nirex of fundamental bungling.

"I'm certainly not an antinuclear greenie. In fact I am naturally predisposed in favour of what Nirex has to do," says Smythe. "But at present they are in a complete mess. Their surveys and interpretation are inconsistent, the data are mutually contradictory." Nirex's responses to his criticisms are, he maintains, "flaccid, flabby and weak".

Nirex wants to build a £195-million RCF to see if the site is suitable for the construction of a £1.8-billion repository for radioactive waste created by Britain's nuclear power programme. The RCF would consist of two 680-metre deep shafts down to an underground gallery designed to be used as a laboratory for testing the surrounding rock. Nirex eventually aims to dispose of up to 275 000 cubic metres of low and intermediate-level nuclear waste before 2060 in sealed tunnels drilled into the rock.

Nirex originally intended to submit a single planning application back in 1990 for both exploratory excavations and the final repository. But the company had to rethink its strategy after Cumbria County Council and independent experts expressed concern that radioactivity could leak out through the movement of groundwater.

In 1992, according to Nirex's director Michael Folger, the company decided to make a separate application for a RCF because an application for a repository "would be unlikely to be approved".

The county council and environmentalists accuse Nirex of "salami tactics"—slicing up an unpalatable proposal into more digestible chunks. If Nirex builds the RCF and it is a success, opponents will find it very difficult to argue against a repository at the site. "The RCF is a Trojan horse. We should not be fooled by it," says FoE's Patrick Green.

This month, in a drab civic hall in the

