

Radioactive waste disposal issue

Sir, - The Nirex PR machine now seems to be resorting to distortion in attempts to justify its unique brand of "safe science" for radioactive waste disposal. Taryn Rock, in a recent letter on behalf of Nirex, claims that several countries in addition to the UK are siting their underground rock laboratories at the same place as their proposed final dumps. Let us examine one of her examples.

Sweden has not chosen a final disposal site. After 12 years of research at a disused iron ore mine, it has opened a specially-built underground hard rock laboratory. This is quite different from Nirex's proposed site-specific rock characterisation facility.

The Swedish operator has stressed that, even if suitable geological conditions were later found in the vicinity of the hard rock laboratory, the final site - at a new location - would then have to be subjected to detailed characterisation. The Swedish laboratory, which took five years just to build, is thus in no way considered to be part of the site characterisation of a final repository.

In contrast to Sweden's thoroughness, with that country's open-ended investigations extending over 30 years or more, Nirex expects to go straight to site-specific underground studies, starting and finishing work in seven years, and then switching to final repository construction at the same location in 2004.

When my colleague, Stuart Haszeldine, and I released our book in November, summarising the objections to Nirex's proposals as presented at the public inquiry early last year, Nirex's chief executive, Michael Folger, saw fit to write a three-page letter of complaint to our principal.

If you wish to acquire a copy of any data Nirex has obtained so that you can study it independently of any possible bias, Nirex will indeed make the data available. However, it will charge you several times the actual commercial reproduction costs, and, for good measure, you have to sign a secrecy agreement first.

Lastly, Nirex promised the inquiry inspector that crucial new data would be obtained in 1996, be independently peer-reviewed, and be presented to the Environment Secretary by November. The report has yet to reach him!

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