

'Fundamental flaw' in Nirex attitude

Sir, - Taryn Rock, of Nirex, appears (*Letters*, 6 December) to be unable to answer my question: "Can she confirm that Nirex's current long-term plans allow for one (and only one) operational repository, and that this will be at the Sellafield Longlands Farm site?"

My query arose from the implications of the expectation of the Defence Secretary, Michael Portillo, of an operational "deep nuclear repository" by 2012. Unless he has been misinformed, Nirex has to start building a final repository now to meet this timetable.

That is why eminent experts such as Sir John Knill, the former chairman of the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee and the Natural Environment Research Council, refer to the proposed underground research laboratory as a "Trojan horse". It is, in reality, phase one of construction of the final dump, and Nirex is trying to subvert both the scientific and the planning process.

The Nirex version of science is fundamentally flawed. Why is this the only country in the world to be siting its rock laboratory at the same place as its final repository? Excavations will not enable Nirex to obtain data of any significant value; on the contrary, they will destroy the natural groundwater flow conditions which need to be studied for a much longer period than Nirex is allowing.

This will permit Nirex to concoct a spurious safety case at its next planning application for a final dump, based on "elicited", not observed data. "Data elicitation" is simply Orwell-speak for gathering experts round a table to guess some figures which are then fed into computer models. Unless they have a reliable body of real data to consider, the exercise has no scientific value. Nirex evidently does not have time to collect such data, and we can guess why.

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