

Counter-evidence still unchallenged

Sir, – Taryn Rock, Nirex's publicity manager, pads out her team by including the Nirex witnesses for surface planning and amenity issues within the scientific debate (Letters, 27 November).

The fact is that Nirex produced only seven witnesses for the science and policy part of the inquiry; all but one were Nirex employees. Their case, including geology, groundwater flow, site engineering methods and long-term safety predictions, was far from "persuasive". It was a shambles, and the 500 pages of detailed scientific counter-evidence to the inquiry, which we have now published, remains unchallenged.

She ducks my assertion that Nirex has already broken its promises to the inquiry inspector about further research at the Sellafield potential repository site, but assures us instead that such work is "going to schedule". Let us examine this schedule.

Nirex promises that if the research to be carried out in its proposed Sellafield underground rock laboratory shows the site to be unsuitable, it will abandon the site. This decision is realistically about a decade ahead. No alternative sites are being investigated.

The Defence Secretary, Michael Portillo, told the Commons defence select committee last June that the ultimate plan for disposal of nuclear submarines is through the "Nirex deep nuclear repository", which he hopes would be operational in 2012. I find it difficult to reconcile his expectation with Nirex's supposedly open-ended underground investigation plans; either the decision to use Sellafield has already been taken, or there must be the other sites we don't yet know about.

She did not respond to my suggestion that other candidate sites such as Dounreay might come into the reckoning again. 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?

(Prof) David K Smythe
DEPT OF GEOLOGY AND
APPLIED GEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW
LILYBANK GARDENS, GLASGOW