

Letter: Flaws in search for nuclear waste site

The Guardian, Thursday 28 June 2007

As the lead inspector (now retired) of the 1995-96 public inquiry into the proposed nuclear waste facility in west Cumbria, I was concerned by a couple of points in your piece on the new site search (Report, June 26). The relevant geology in west Cumbria is apparently now claimed to be "stable, although imperfect". But 10 years ago the nuclear industry had not found a way of maintaining the stability of that geology when physically exploring the underground site.

This difficulty was linked to the second issue of "imperfection", because the imperfection consists of simply failing to meet the internationally agreed criteria on the suitability of rocks for nuclear waste deposit. The site should be in a region of low groundwater flow, and the geology should be readily characterisable and predictable, whereas the rocks there are actually of a complex volcanic nature, with significant faulting. Also, the industry was relying on an overlying layer of sedimentary strata to dilute and disperse any groundwater leakage, when the international criteria require such a layer to act instead as a barrier. The comprehensive assessment that reports the deficiencies in detail is available on the internet (jpb.co.uk/nirexinquiry/nirex.htm). The site is not suitable and investigations should be moved elsewhere.

The site selection process was flawed, not treating safety as the most important factor, and irrationally affected by a strong desire to locate close to Sellafield. A final point - the sketch design for the repository has not been newly revealed. It was submitted to the 1995-96 inquiry, and has subsequently been discussed in technical journals.

Chris McDonald

Camberley, Surrey