

Nuclear waste dump chiefs 'have got to go'

AVRIL STEPHENS
and **MIKE MERRITT**

MANAGERS of a nuclear waste agency accused of squandering money in its attempt to bury waste underground at Sellafield were told yesterday "to go" by a former top adviser.

John Gummer, the Environment Secretary, told Nirex, the national nuclear waste agency, last week that it had failed in its appeal against Cumbria County Council's planning refusal for the pilot scheme.

Yesterday, experts criticised Nirex for the way it handled the issue, adding that those responsible should be replaced.

Sir John Knill, a former chairman of the Government's radioactive waste management advisory committee, told the Radio 4 programme *The World this Weekend*: "It has acted in a secretive manner. Material

which is of importance has been held back. The management, the board of Nirex, has got to be looked at and probably to a large extent replaced."

His comments were backed by Professor David Smythe, of Glasgow University's geophysics department. He said: "Nirex's integrity has been questioned by the result of this inquiry. My view is that Nirex should be wound up and replaced by some kind of successor body."

Nirex has spent 15 years and an estimated £200 million of public money on research but the question of what to do with Britain's nuclear waste remains unanswered.

It had wanted to set up a laboratory to explore whether a long-term deposit at Sellafield would have been safe.

It applied for planning permission in August 1994 and

was turned down by the council in December 1994.

Opponents argued that such work was a "Trojan horse" because the cost of development would have been so high that the dump would be inevitable.

After a six-month public inquiry which ended last year, Mr Gummer said he accepted the inspector's recommendation that the appeal be dismissed.

Meanwhile, fears have been voiced that nuclear waste may be dumped on remote Scottish islands.

Nirex has repeatedly named Dounreay as its second preferred option as a potential site for underground storage, but has refused to comment on Dounreay until it has studied the DoE's report in detail.

But Labour's Highlands spokesman, Calum MacDonald, is concerned that Nirex may now reactivate plans to store

radioactive material on islands off the west coast of Scotland.

Nirex admitted that a number of islands were on the secret shortlist of 12 sites - which was led by Sellafield - for the dump.

Mr MacDonald, the MP for the Western Isles, is writing to ask Mr Gummer whether his department is again considering putting the dump on Scottish islands.

"It worries and alarms me. The Government are clearly back to the drawing board for finding a dump site for nuclear waste - and that means again looking at the island sites which have the right geological conditions," he said.

In 1987 the Government confirmed that Nirex had identified 124 islands around Britain as possible stores for nuclear waste. Most were off the west coast and in the Hebrides, in-

cluding Berneray, Mingulay, Pabbay, Sandray, Isay, Raasay, Scalpay, Pabay, Coll, near Skye, and several islands off Shetland and Orkney.

The list was reduced to 20 after ruling out islands on population, topography and planning constraints, but several made their way on to the shortlist of 12 sites.

A copy of the 1987 Nirex report that started the hunt for the dump said most of the suitable islands were off the west coast of Scotland and small parts of Wales.

A physicist and oceanographer, Dr Helen Wallace, who is senior scientist at Greenpeace, said she was aware that Nirex had considered dumping nuclear waste on remote Scottish islands.

A spokesman at the DoE said that the next move was with Nirex.