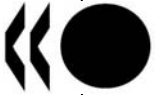


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Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques
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**NUCLEAR ENERGY AGENCY
COMMITTEE ON NUCLEAR REGULATORY ACTIVITIES**

Working Group on Public Communication of Nuclear Regulatory Organisations

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION DURING ABNORMAL SITUATIONS

**NEA/SEN/NRA/WGPC(2006)5
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The OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) was established on 1st February 1958 under the name of the OEEC European Nuclear Energy Agency. It received its present designation on 20th April 1972, when Japan became its first non-European full Member. NEA membership today consists of 28 OECD Member countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. The Commission of the European Communities also takes part in the work of the Agency.

The mission of the NEA is:

- to assist its Member countries in maintaining and further developing, through international co-operation, the scientific, technological and legal bases required for a safe, environmentally friendly and economical use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, as well as
- to provide authoritative assessments and to forge common understandings on key issues, as input to government decisions on nuclear energy policy and to broader OECD policy analyses in areas such as energy and sustainable development.

Specific areas of competence of the NEA include safety and regulation of nuclear activities, radioactive waste management, radiological protection, nuclear science, economic and technical analyses of the nuclear fuel cycle, nuclear law and liability, and public information. The NEA Data Bank provides nuclear data and computer program services for participating countries.

In these and related tasks, the NEA works in close collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, with which it has a Co-operation Agreement, as well as with other international organisations in the nuclear field.

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COMMITTEE ON NUCLEAR REGULATORY ACTIVITIES

The Committee on Nuclear Regulatory Activities (CNRA) of the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) is an international committee made up primarily of senior nuclear regulators. It was set up in 1989 as a forum for the exchange of information and experience among regulatory organisations.

The committee is responsible for the programme of the NEA, concerning the regulation, licensing and inspection of nuclear installations with regard to safety. The committee's purpose is to promote cooperation among member countries to feedback the experience to safety improving measures, enhance efficiency and effectiveness in the regulatory process and to maintain adequate infrastructure and competence in the nuclear safety field. The CNRA's main tasks are to review developments which could affect regulatory requirements with the objective of providing members with an understanding of the motivation for new regulatory requirements under consideration and an opportunity to offer suggestions that might improve them or avoid disparities among member countries. In particular, the committee reviews current management strategies and safety management practices and operating experiences at nuclear facilities with a view to disseminating lessons learned.

The committee focuses primarily on existing power reactors and other nuclear installations; it may also consider the regulatory implications of new designs of power reactors and other types of nuclear installations.

In implementing its programme, the CNRA establishes cooperative mechanisms with the Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations (CSNI) responsible for the programme of the Agency concerning the technical aspects of the design, construction and operation of nuclear installations. The committee also co-operates with NEA's Committee on Radiation Protection and Public Health (CRPPH) and NEA's Radioactive Waste Management Committee (RWMC) on matters of common interest.

WORKING GROUP ON PUBLIC COMMUNICATION OF REGULATORY ORGANISATIONS

The Working Group on Public Communication of nuclear regulatory organisations (WGPC) was set up in 2001. The mandate is as follows:

1. The Working Group **will share** information, news, documents, data, views, ideas, and experiences in the field of public communication and stakeholder involvement. **It will keep abreast** of activities of a similar or related nature undertaken by other parts of the NEA.
2. The Working Group **will review** developments, progress, techniques, tools, procedures and achievements in the area of nuclear regulatory communication with the public and stakeholders. It **will highlight** lessons learned and good practices.
3. The Working Group **will provide assistance** to CNRA members, through technical notes and workshops, by addressing specific issues and practices.
4. The Working Group **will co-operate**, internally and externally, with other organisations in regulatory public communication and stakeholder interaction matters, in line with the NEA policy.”

ABSTRACT

There is an increasing expectation from the general public for information on abnormal situations occurring at a nuclear or a radiation facility. Historically communication of this information was restricted to highly technical experts. This report, established by communicators of Nuclear Regulatory Organisations is specifically dedicated to "communication in abnormal situations", that are defined as unexpected events or any situation likely to raise media and public concerns ("on the spot communication"). This report, resulting from exchange of experience between the WGPC members, highlights the main challenges to be addressed for communication in abnormal situation, other than emergency, indicates some prerequisite for an efficient strategy and the various means implemented in member countries to reach this objective.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The fundamental objective of all nuclear regulatory organisations (NRO) is to ensure that nuclear licensees operate their plants at all times in a safe manner so that the health of the population and the environment is not challenged beyond the agreed limits. In the case of an abnormal situation occurring at such a facility, one of the missions of the regulatory organisation is to provide the public with information which is technically sound, consistent, and timely. In addition, the NRO must be aware that its communication and the circumstances surrounding it can affect how its stakeholders, such as government policy makers, the industry it regulates, and the public, view it as an effective and credible NRO.

In order to maintain the confidence of those stakeholders and to meet an increased public expectation on safety in the use of nuclear power, the NRO should make sure that its information is timely, transparent, meaningful, impartial and that it has a clear basis in regulation. The credibility of public communication by governmental authorities, especially in the case of abnormal situations, is more and more challenging to the public trust towards the overall regulated activity. Public communication during such situations is one of the keys to the future of nuclear activities.

1.2 Purpose and delivery of this document

This document is intended to share experience among communicators of nuclear regulatory organisations that includes successes as well as challenges in communicating in case of abnormal situation. It is not a handbook or a guide on how to communicate in such conditions. Each nation's laws, culture and administrative processes are specific, and the range of situations potentially encountered by a NRO is so large that such a goal would simply be not achievable. However, the exchange of experience among communicators of nuclear regulatory organisations during the last years has shown its usefulness.

This document is also targeted at operational staff in the NROs who are required to engage with stakeholders on a regular basis and therefore it should be communicated to them and its principles should be incorporated in the Organisation's system and procedures.

1.3 Scope of the document

This document does not intend to cover nuclear emergency or crisis communication. NROs must refer to their respective guidelines for emergency arrangements.

1.4 Structure of the document

The first chapter of this document summarises the main aspects of the context of public communication of Nuclear Regulatory Organisations in abnormal situations. The second chapter presents the main challenges related to communicating in such conditions. The third and last chapter presents the effective approaches used in Member countries.

2. MAIN CHALLENGES TO COMMUNICATION IN ABNORMAL SITUATIONS

2.1 General context

It is widely acknowledged that good governance by governmental authorities is increasingly dependent on mutual trust and confidence between those authorities and the public. In that context, there is an increasing expectation from the general public for information on abnormal situations occurring at a nuclear or a radiation facility. Historically, communication of this information was restricted to highly technical experts.

The main challenges related to the communication of NROs' decisions to the general public are addressed in another WGPC report [5]. This report is specifically dedicated to "communication in abnormal situations", that are defined as unexpected events or any situation likely to raise media and public concerns ("on the spot communication").

In most countries, when there are failures or troubles in nuclear installations, information is provided to the public by the operator of the nuclear installation and by the regulatory authority according to the prescribed rules. In many countries, regarding nuclear hazard events, the rules for informing the public are stipulated in the legislation and, based on these rules, the relevant organisations communicate with the public according to their respective roles.

2.2 The INES scale

Since its introduction in 1990 there cannot be a relevant discussion of the public communication for an abnormal situation in nuclear activities without first mentioning the International Nuclear Event Scale (INES) [6].

The INES scale is a means for promptly communicating to the public in consistent terms the safety significance of events reported at nuclear installations or at facilities using radiation sources. By putting events into proper perspective, its primary purpose is to facilitate common understanding and communication among the nuclear experts, the media and the public on the safety significance of such events.

The INES scale was adopted in March 1990 as the result of the work by an international group of experts convened jointly in 1989 by the IAEA and the Nuclear Energy Agency of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/NEA). It also reflected the experience gained from the use of similar scales in France and Japan as well as from the consideration of possible scales in several other countries. The scale was refined in 1992 in the light of the experience gained and was extended so as to be applicable to any event associated with radioactive material and/or radiation, including the transport of radioactive materials (see INES additional guidance on rating of transport and radiation source events).

Information provided on the INES rating form includes a brief description of the event, its general impact and its relative level of severity for any abnormal situation that is broadly used in most countries. However, public communication about abnormal situations cannot limit itself to this useful but somewhat "dry" rating. Additional information is usually developed and communicated to complement the INES rating. Some abnormal situations may not be covered by the INES rating (e.g. event with no safety-related aspects such as "classical" injuries of workers).

In some countries most events are reported to the public, no matter what the INES level, by a press release, while in other countries only incidents rated at INES level 1 and above are systematically reported to the public and incidents at level 2 and above are subject to a press release. However while it may be quite straightforward to rate an event reaching level 3 or above, it appears that there are very different practices in rating a lower level event. This explains the large difference in the number of such events which are yearly reported in countries having nevertheless nuclear activities of similar importance.

2.3 Main challenges

The first challenge to any NRO for communication to the public in case of abnormal situations is timeliness. When such situations occur, the media is always very quick to react and to make use of the first information they can obtain, from any source: the operator, the regulator, a local or a national group of "concerned citizens" or even another media. Since most NROs and their communication staffs are not very large organisations, the event occurring during the night, the week-end or during holidays, may provide additional challenge.

The second challenge is to properly and quickly characterise the abnormal situation which is of concern. An "event" may range from a simple "non conformance" (deviation from strict application of rules or standards but no immediate important consequences are expected) up to that of an "emergency" (important consequences may occur) or even to that of a "crisis" (important consequences have occurred). Depending on the case, the information to be provided by the NRO is not of the same nature and they should be aware that the situation may evolve from one category to another and therefore imply a change in the communication strategy.

The third challenge to NRO is ensuring the appropriateness and the exhaustiveness of the information that they provide. In this context it is very important that the NRO provides information independently from the operator, respecting the responsibility of each organisation. The responsibility of the NRO is to provide its own assessment of the situation, taking into account the information provided by the operator as well as its own findings.

The fourth challenge is transparency, which may be particularly difficult to comply with since the information obtained is usually incomplete due to the time necessary to fully understand what has happened. Communications have to be handled with care in order to ensure that lack of information is not interpreted as trying to hide something from the public, which would impact negatively on the NRO's credibility.

The fifth challenge is to ensure proper coordination in the communication between governmental or official bodies that are likely to interact with the public. Any lack of coordination may result in critical inconsistencies between the various official sources of information, which again would have a negative impact of the trust of the public towards these governmental bodies. These inconsistencies can also arise at different levels from the local officials to the national/federal organisations.

The final challenge is communication across the national border as some events may lead to concerns, if not consequences, in neighbouring countries (e.g. in case of a radioactive transport event). In the case of a "transboundary event", any inconsistency between the information given for the same event by nuclear NROs from different countries may cause high concern to the public of the "affected" countries. International cooperation is especially needed to mutually reinforce the credibility of national NRO in case of a transboundary event as seen by the ill effects that non-communication had among many countries at the time of the Chernobyl accident.

3. SOME PREREQUISITES FOR AN EFFICIENT STRATEGY

3.1 Legal framework for informing the public in the case of abnormal situations

The actions taken concerning public information in the case of a nuclear incident or accident, including related notifications and warnings are generally set down by the regulation on emergency planning for an incident or accident or within the license operating conditions (technical specifications, INES application...) [7]. First the operator/licensee has to inform the NRO of incidents/accidents without delay by appropriate predetermined means. These may be different depending on the severity of the event. The regulations also specify the main type of events for which the NRO has to provide information to the public such as, whether the event occurred in the country or abroad, and the measures intended for eliminating the deficiencies or restoring a proper situation. Finally there is generally guidance (if not a regulation) setting the maximum time allowed before informing the NRO. This may be related to the INES level of the event. However, this may not be always simple for incidents rated around level 1 (it may range from 0 to 2). This is because the experience has proven that the final rating of such events may need several months of investigation so as to make sure that all the parameters (including the consideration of additional factors such as the "lack of safety culture") have been properly considered.

3.2 General strategy for communication in abnormal situations

The general policy for public communication by the NRO should have specific guidelines regarding communication in abnormal situations. These guidelines may be derived from communication policy guidelines of the government for crisis and emergency situations or be specific to the NRO. They should also reflect the relevant core values of the NRO, such as competence, independence, rigor, effectiveness and transparency.

A key element in such guidelines is to make a clear distinction between the terms "abnormal situation", "emergency" and "crisis", which are not interchangeable. Abnormal situations, although being generally without important consequences, may require "on-the-spot communication" for which the NRO has therefore to be prepared. An "emergency" is an abnormal situation that requires prompt action, beyond normal procedures, in order to limit damage to people, property or the environment. During an emergency, concerned members of the public are required to make judgments to protect themselves, their families, their assets and the environment in most cases without a full understanding of what is happening. A "crisis" is a situation that somehow challenges the public's sense of appropriateness, tradition, values, safety, security or the integrity of the government. An emergency can rapidly develop into a crisis if the public perceives that the authorities do not have the situation under control.

Furthermore, the Government should employ a continuum of coordination between the various governmental bodies likely to be concerned by the abnormal situation, which recognizes that the degree of coordination must escalate depending on the nature of the event. The escalation occurs as the seriousness of the event evolves into an emergency and will require more involvement of the Government if the emergency tends towards a crisis.

A predetermined communication scheme depending on the most likely types of situations likely to occur is important. In particular updated basic information about the safety features of the regulated facilities should be available to the NRO's public communication team.

The usual practice in most countries for public communication using INES is that the operator/licensee makes the initial proposal on the classification of the event and submits it to the NRO with all the necessary related information. The public is informed in a given time period depending on the severity of the event. The NRO may, on the basis of its own assessment, confirm or modify the initial

event rating provided by the operator and then makes its final assessment public. In addition, according to the INES notification rules, the relevant international organisations should also be informed through the INES National Officer.

4. MAIN ELEMENTS FOR COMMUNICATION IN ABNORMAL SITUATIONS

4.1 Preparedness for communication in abnormal situation

One of the most important elements during in abnormal situations, if not the most important, is to have effective communication, what is commonly called "Communication preparedness". By definition an abnormal situation is an unexpected one and often there is very little time available before the first media or public inquiry is received. At this point the ability for the NRO to provide clear, if not precise, information that is known at the time is a key element. Several different practices may be used to build and maintain this communication preparedness, which may require more or less time to be implemented but should all be considered on a long term basis.

Another important aspect is to maintain regular communication with the public and the media throughout the year, so that they will naturally ask the NRO for information during any abnormal situation. A "proactive communication" such as this can be defined by taking steps to generate and disseminate up-to-date information before inquiries for information are made by the media or the public. "Training sessions" could be organised for the media in order to help them to understand nuclear technology and specific topics (for example: how does a reactor work? What emergency plans are there? How is a nuclear power plant inspected? Basic facts about radiation and its health effects and how will the NRO and other officials communicate with the media and the public?). The media is generally considered the primary source of information to the public, although the Internet is gaining in importance in providing this information and should be utilised by the NRO if feasible. It appears also important to maintain the information flow after the media concern has fall back.

Another aspect for NROs is to develop and maintain updated information likely to be used by their communicators in case of abnormal situations (including FAQs). In some countries most of the regulatory documents are written so they may be directly used for public communication, should an abnormal situation occur. In other countries communicators prefer to elaborate short and tailored informative notes aiming to reach the largest audiences. It is generally considered that these approaches are complementary and may depend upon specific national contexts.

Finally, it is generally recognised that any delay in providing clear and verified information to the mass media and the public creates the atmosphere for the generation and spreading of rumours and information without evidence. These are very difficult to correct later on since they may be more emotional than rational. As information will vary or change over time it is highly important for the NRO to always remain in a position to answer journalists' questions as much as possible in order to meet their expectation.

4.2 Timeliness of the communication in abnormal situations

As already mentioned, an abnormal situation is likely to occur without notice. In some cases the NRO may be aware that an existing situation in a facility may give rise to concern to the public. Delay of response for accidents and others by the NRO may expand unnecessarily these public concerns. For accidents or situations that have a high social impact, the NRO should consider establishing an investigation committee at an early stage, in such form that is visual to the public. The NRO should make every effort to release the information as soon as possible, so that the public does not believe something is being hidden intentionally and distrust starts to build up.

In this context, it appears that the timeliness of the NRO's communication can only be achieved if it has already built and maintained a good "communication preparedness" allowing it to adequately react to any abnormal situation in one of its regulated facilities or activities.

4.3 Comprehensiveness and transparency of the communication in abnormal situations

In order to ensure public confidence in the NRO, it is important for the NRO to demonstrate this by releasing as much information as possible. This includes information regarding the establishment, activities and findings (including the determination of causes and the establishment of countermeasures) of the investigation team and for other independent commissions.

Release of information provided to the mass media should also be given to the public in a manner that can be easily accessed and understood. "Easily understood" is generally defined by as using plain but meaningful language. Transparency by the NRO is broadly accepted when it makes all technical reports available. Because of the complexity of the technology the NRO often has to go one step further and provide meaningful interpretation of these reports. It is also important to categorise and arrange the information on the NRO website as well so as to quickly update with new information as soon as possible.

4.4 Coordination with other national regulatory organisations

As long as an event reaches a certain extent, its management may concern several regulatory organisations, depending on the seriousness of the event, of the concerned facility or activity involved and of national organisation. A practice used by some NROs for abnormal situations which occur on nuclear sites is to issue a "facilitating" report, which is sent to other governmental departments (e.g. environmental, transportation, etc.) in order to alert Ministers with different or other responsibilities for the nuclear sites. It can be sent on occasion to other national Agencies and NROs for information.

Better ways on how to use and disseminate these facilitating reports outside the NRO to other parts of the government needs to be explored in order to ensure better coordination and cooperation in communication activities.

4.5 Addressing local as well as national concerns

People in the area where an incident or an accident occurs feel strong anxiety and have great expectations of the NRO. Therefore, their disappointment and distrust of the NRO will increase if these expectations are not fulfilled. The local government or administration which is directly in contact with the population also expects significant support by the NRO. In particular efforts should be made, as far as possible, to ensure that information is made available at both national and local level at the same time.

If not already located there, the NROs should go to the site as necessary and explain directly to the local government, administration and/or assembly. In some countries, Local Information Committees, made up of representatives of all local stakeholders as well as of the NRO and the licensee, have been set up in the area of each major nuclear facility for the purpose of facilitating local information.

The regional staff of the NRO, which is located at or near the nuclear installations, is well suited for addressing such concerns. They can establish relations with the local government and others, and it is, therefore, beneficial for these staffs to provide information to the local people as appropriate. However, an important condition for effectiveness is to perform the duty in close coordination with the NRO's headquarters office.

This close cooperation with headquarters is especially important for communicating with local authorities and people at other nuclear installations than where the incident/accident site is, since they may

feel anxiety that a similar accident may occur at their area. Therefore, it is advisable to notify other plants as soon as possible.

4.6 Diversity of communication tools

There are a variety of communication means available now ranging from the classical ones (press release, press conference, TV interviews) to those using modern information technology (website, e-mails, SMS on mobile, etc). The use of the internet appears to be effective in getting unfiltered information quickly and broadly to both the media and the general public.

Furthermore, if the local government or others operate local TV, it is more effective to explain directly to the people by actively using such communication tools, in order to get a good understanding of the people. Some NROs use Text Message Service via mobile phone to an officer of local Government for abnormal situations, such as a reactor trip and later for alerting them of updates to the NRO's website. These officers of local government then provide the information to the public.

4.7 Addressing Public concern abroad – International cooperation

Due to the location of some nuclear facilities close to the country's border, there is a heightened interest in neighbouring countries about events which occur on these sites. The international Convention on Nuclear Safety, as well as regional regulations, such as that of the European Union, and other international agreements require exchange of information in those countries. In addition the NROs of most countries with nuclear installations generally have regular bilateral liaison meetings with the relevant foreign NROs, either directly or through a higher level (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Systems for notifying governments as a result of abnormal situations should be regularly exercised, and when malfunctioning or unacceptable delay is observed, lessons should be learnt and should be taken to improve the communication processes.

In addition, the NRO is obliged to keep neighbouring countries informed, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and additional bodies of the European Union, as applicable, of cases of unauthorised seizure of nuclear material, sources of radiation, incidents and accidents at nuclear installations on their territory, as well as of events involving shipment of radioactive material.

In the case of an accident at a nuclear installation, the information is immediately reported by the media in the other countries and the people of these countries may be concerned about it. Any inconsistency in the information about a given abnormal situation provided by NROs of different countries could impact the credibility of some of them, particularly those who appear less transparent and forthcoming. Therefore, it is beneficial to provide timely and accurate information on abnormal situations to the regulatory bodies of other countries. From this viewpoint, in addition to bilateral exchange with immediate neighbouring countries, it is useful to utilize the existing international reporting mechanism such as those of IAEA, NEA and EC. Countries expect to be informed on accidents abroad through the same mechanisms so as to be ready to activate and prepare necessary response arrangements.

In order to facilitate rapid communication between countries in case of an abnormal event, especially since the official notification mechanism may take time, due to the constraint of going through the official Foreign Ministers channels, the Nuclear Events Web-based System (NEWS) was developed in early 2001 by the IAEA, the OECD/NEA and WANO and has been in operation since March 2002. NEWS has been established to cover all significant events in nuclear power plants, research reactors and nuclear fuel cycle facilities as well as events involving the misuse of radiation sources or the transport of radioactive material. NEWS is also the official system to exchange INES (International Nuclear Event Scale) related information. This information is now also made available to the general public and the media at www-news.iaea.org/news/ and is intended to:

- provide authoritative information quickly on the occurrence of nuclear events that are of interest to the international community; and
- promote a dialogue among experts allowing for a flexible and rapid information exchange between NROs, operators, Technical Safety Organisations, etc.

Finally, ongoing work within the IAEA as part of the 2004 action plan is intended to "strengthen the international preparedness and response system for nuclear and radiological emergencies". One of the desired outcomes is "Enhanced and recognized arrangements (including strategy, procedures, information formats and symbology) for harmonized and timely provision of consistent media information for responding to incorrect information and rumours and to requests from the public and news media".

5. OUTLOOK

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend by Nuclear Regulatory Organisations to provide information to the public for any abnormal situation as well as an increasing demand by the public for this type of information. Whatever actions may be undertaken by the NRO, they are strongly influenced by cultural and social aspects of each country and by perception of the public of nuclear events. This is why many and various practices are followed by NROs to improve their communication so as to address concerns of the public.

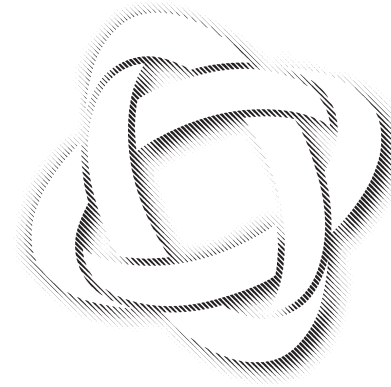
The various ways to address the public communications challenges of NRO in the case of abnormal situations appear to complement one another. Each is more or less implemented in member countries, with some adjustments to reflect cultural contexts. However, the need for better "communication preparedness" appears to be common to all. While each NRO has to build its own communication plan, there would be benefit to benchmark it against practices of other countries particularly those which have a more open communication.

The transparency of a NRO in NEA member countries has not been fully achieved. Communicators of NROs should continue their exchange of experience in order to build on other's success and to continue to bolster the public's trust and confidence in NROs, to protect them and ensure their safety.

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Public Communication During Abnormal Situations



Working Group on Public
Communications of Nuclear
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