

# Nuclear regulatory communication with the public: 10 years of progress

J. Gauvain, A. Jörle, L. Chaniel\*

**T**he NEA has an acknowledged role to assist its member countries in maintaining and developing, through international co-operation, the scientific, technological and legal bases required for a safe, environmentally friendly and economical use of nuclear energy. In this context, the NEA Committee on Nuclear Regulatory Activities (CNRA) provides a forum for senior representatives from nuclear regulatory bodies to exchange information and experience on nuclear regulatory policies and practices in NEA member countries and to review developments which could affect regulatory requirements.

Public confidence in government and in risk management structures is important to all developed countries with an open society. The use of nuclear power in a democracy is built upon a certain trust in the political system and the national authorities. To foster and maintain such trust in a period of greater public scrutiny of nuclear activities, a number of nuclear regulatory organisations (NROs) initiated various processes to proactively inform the public about their supervision and control of nuclear activities, or when appropriate to involve the public in decision making.

*\* Mr. Anders Jörle ([anders.jorle@foreign.ministry.se](mailto:anders.jorle@foreign.ministry.se)), currently Information Officer at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was Information Head at the Swedish Nuclear Power Inspectorate (SKI) and chaired the CNRA public communication activity from its inception until early 2008 when the chairmanship was transferred to Mr. Luc Chaniel ([luc.chaniel@asn.fr](mailto:luc.chaniel@asn.fr)), tasked with communication at the French Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN). Mr. Jean Gauvain ([jean.gauvain@oecd.org](mailto:jean.gauvain@oecd.org)) works in the NEA Nuclear Safety Division.*

In 1998 the question was raised within the CNRA of whether public trust in the regulator might be very different from one country to another, and an activity was started among member countries to exchange experience and best practices and to learn lessons about NRO communication with their publics. Three workshops were organised by the NEA, and a Working Group on Public Communication of Nuclear Regulatory Organisations was set up in 2001. The activities and findings are summarised below.

## Current societal expectations regarding information and nuclear energy

Public concern about the use of nuclear energy has long been present, probably due to its first application in military contexts. However, the 1979 Three Mile Island 2 accident is seen as a turning point in public opinion in many countries. Public demand for information about nuclear activities and assurance of their proper management grew from that time.

In modern societies, the public is inclined to request justification of the decisions taken by governments, but most nations' constitutions do not provide strong guarantees for such transparency. This is why in many countries specific laws have emerged related to the freedom of information (FOI). Such laws ensure public access to any official information or records held by government bodies, with only limited restrictions that are variable from one country to another. If the oldest such law was enacted as far back as 1766 (Sweden's Freedom of the Press Act), the second one appeared only in 1966 (United States) and only five other OECD countries had passed an

FOI law before the Chernobyl accident occurred in 1986. This issue of every citizen's access to government documents gave rise to lengthy discussions in many countries and it was only in 2006 (with legislation in Germany and Switzerland) that specific FOI acts came into force.

Furthermore, in some countries, specific acts or regulations give the public the right of access to all types of recorded information without restriction due to nationality or geographical location of the claimant, or to the age of the information. As a public body, a nuclear regulatory organisation must tell applicants whether the information sought is held by the NRO. If information is held it must be provided to the applicant unless it is subject to one of the exemptions or exceptions provided for in the legal texts.

### **Main findings from the CNRA workshops on nuclear regulatory communication**

Three international workshops have been organised by the CNRA since 2000 to support the exchange of reflection and best practice as NROs turn their attention to activities which inform and engage the public:

- Investing in Trust: Nuclear Regulators and the Public, Paris, December 2000;
- Building, Measuring and Improving Public Confidence, Ottawa, May 2004;
- Transparency of Nuclear Regulatory Activities, Tokyo, May 2007.

The high degree of interest in the topics was demonstrated by the extensive participation of top regulators and of members of their staff as of the very first workshop. One of the key findings was that the participating countries had different approaches to public communication but could benefit from exchange of experience and feedback. The CNRA responded with the creation in 2001 of the Working Group on Public Communication of Nuclear Regulatory Organisations (WGPC) which discussed a number of communication topics, set up a rapid information exchange system and published commendable communication practices.

A first general observation stemming from the workshops is that freedom of information acts in force in OECD countries have direct or indirect impacts on regulatory activity, and in some countries they have been supplemented by specific acts highlighting the importance of nuclear regulatory transparency and providing for its implementation.

A related observation is that public expectations regarding communication by the NRO have significantly increased in every country during the last 20 years and in turn most NROs have tremendously developed their activities with the goal of informing the public.

Conclusions of workshops and WGPC discussions have identified stakeholder involvement in nuclear safety as a necessary practice which helps enhance safety and support public confidence. It requires the establishment of communication mechanisms and tools for discussions between the interested parties and those responsible for decision making. It has been highlighted that stakeholder involvement policy needs dedicated resources to be efficiently implemented.

The internet, in allowing the public to gain direct access to documentation, has dramatically changed the audience of original written materials held by NROs. Nuclear regulators' websites have dramatically improved in the past decade, such that the mass media are no longer the major vector for the interpretation and transfer of decisions and technical documents to the public. This is a radical change in the possibility for direct communication with the public and for confidence building.

The workshops and ongoing activities of the working group have gradually disproved the formerly prevailing opinion that NRO communication was highly dependent on cultural context and that very little feedback could be exchanged amongst countries. CNRA/WGPC exchanges and studies show that more and more principles and practices for public communication about nuclear regulatory activities are now shared across OECD countries. Indeed, the NEA working group has directly contributed to this movement. Public communication of NROs is clearly an area where the experience of the more advanced has been used to help the less advanced.

### **Influence of CNRA activities upon convergence in communication practices**

It is difficult to quantify the impact of WGPC activities in the various countries and among the participating regulators. However, the working group has proven itself to be a useful forum for discussing mutual difficulties and challenges, as well as for comparing the different solutions found. Initiatives like the "Flashnews" platform mentioned below make a direct contribution to communication readiness.

The WGPC observes that most OECD NROs now have a communication department or at least press officers, reflecting the fact that public communication is identified as an integral part of the NRO's mission. To this end formal communication plans have been developed by NROs in many countries, defining the mission statement of the organisations, their communication strategy, objectives and targets.

While communication practices are driven by the cultural context of a country, NROs recognise that many lessons can be taken from abroad. In today's global village the public is interested in and has access to information about what is happening in other countries. Divergent messages, or delay in information from any national authority, could affect confidence in regulators everywhere. It is paramount that NRO communicators maintain close contact to ensure that they are fully aware of any safety events, and can properly act in their own context as the primary source of information about nuclear safety. Thus, the CNRA communicators' network, supported by the electronic "Flashnews" platform, has become an essential instrument for consistently informing the public. In case of an event in one country, NRO professionals in other countries are now informed in advance of the media with the result that they can provide a consistent, reliable message to the public.

### Remaining challenges for public communication

Some challenges nevertheless remain for the NRO, such as how to develop efficient and timely communication with the public in case of crisis, for instance when an event occurs in a nuclear facility. Another challenge is to set a proper balance between the need to strive for transparency and the need to cope with restrictions in disclosure of information which may arise for security reasons. A last challenge is how to measure public confidence in NROs and satisfaction with their performance as information providers, so that they can continue improving their public communication.

In summary, as a consequence of increasing convergence among OECD countries on communication principles and practices, new areas of practical interest are emerging for nuclear regulators. Continuous attention must be given to informing and educating the public about how NROs carry out their responsibility for the supervision of nuclear safety and for the protection of public health and the environment. Demonstrating good

performance and dialoguing with the public are key to building confidence.

The WGPC has covered much ground and come a long way since its inception. However, there is still work left for the group to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public communication and to contribute to gaining a high level of public confidence in the nuclear regulators across OECD countries. The WGPC has stressed the fact that the existing exchanges between countries are useful and should be made as visible as possible within nuclear regulatory organisations, to foster continued sharing of good practices and practical advice on implementation. In addition to maintaining networking on events of media interest, the WGPC has identified local public information, surveying public perceptions, transparency in NRO activities and emergency communication as topics of primary interest for regulatory communication and is now structuring its work in an integrated plan to further assist in the improvement of nuclear regulatory organisations' public communication. ■

### References

1. NEA (2001), *Investing in Trust: Nuclear Regulators and the Public*, Workshop Proceedings, Paris, France, 29 November-1 December 2000, OECD, Paris.
2. NEA (2006), *Building, Measuring and Improving Public Confidence in the Nuclear Regulator*, Workshop Proceedings, Ottawa, Canada, 18-20 May 2004, OECD, Paris.
3. NEA (2007), *Transparency of Nuclear Regulatory Activities*, Workshop Proceedings, Tokyo and Tokai-Mura, Japan, 22-24 May 2007, OECD, Paris.