RESEARCH INSTITUTES REMAIN ESSENTIAL TO MAINTAIN SCIENTIFIC
AND TECHNICAL EXPERTISE IN THE NUCLEAR FIELD

A new study released by the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) warns against the risk of a loss of nuclear expertise and know-how resulting from a general trend among OECD countries towards the non-renewal of ageing research facilities, a lack of qualified personnel to replace those reaching retirement, and reduced operating R&D budgets in the nuclear field.

The study “Trends in Nuclear Research Institutes”, notes that at the beginning of the search for peaceful applications of nuclear technology several decades ago, there were many scientific and technological obstacles that required research and development (R&D) efforts in order to bring the benefits of nuclear science and technology to society. Nuclear research institutes (NRIs), most of which were established by central governments in the 1950s or 1960s, have played an indispensable role in the implementation of technological and regulatory infrastructure for nuclear science and technology, including development of nuclear technology expertise, both at national and international levels and also in the creation of the nuclear power industry. They have also contributed to the development of applications of nuclear science and technology in many other areas, such as materials, environmental health and safety, medicine and agriculture.

Today, NRIs find themselves in very different circumstances than during their initial years. The nuclear industry has matured, and many companies are now undertaking their own development. The evolution of public interest in nuclear power has influenced government policies on nuclear matters, and this in turn has affected NRIs. The question arises as to how these changing conditions may influence our ability to maintain vital scientific and technological assets, e.g., the R&D facilities and expertise needed for the future in nuclear and other fields.

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The future role of NRIs in OECD countries will depend on a number of strategic choices, involving the relative emphasis on nuclear R&D versus other energy technologies. However, the NEA study notes that NRIs will have important nuclear-related work to do in the future, including R&D on the improved operation of existing nuclear reactors, the next generation of reactors, the decommissioning of nuclear facilities, processes for the management of radioactive waste, the restoration of contaminated sites, nuclear non-proliferation technology, etc.

Since nuclear power is international in scope, increased co-ordination among NRIs in OECD Member countries, or even worldwide, would be valuable in optimising nuclear expertise and facilities. There are many excellent examples of international collaboration between NRIs or joint R&D programmes, as well as joint international sponsorship of R&D programmes and facilities at selected NRIs.

For the purposes of this study, some 40 nuclear NRIs in 17 countries, plus the European Commission were involved, and their experiences, benefits and projected future are presented in this new NEA publication.

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