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INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ASSESSED NUCLEAR REGULATORY EFFECTIVENESS

Nuclear regulators, industry representatives, governmental officials and representatives from public interest organisations met in Paris at the end of June under the auspices of the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) to discuss regulatory effectiveness including its characteristics and ways to develop and measure it. The main objective was to improve understanding of regulatory effectiveness in relation to nuclear installations, and to share experience on how to enhance it. The meeting was chaired by Dr. Serge Prêtre, Director of the Swiss Federal Nuclear Safety Inspectorate (HSK).

Nuclear regulatory effectiveness was discussed from the viewpoints of industry, government, public perception, and regulation. Because regulatory effectiveness plays a critical role in the safety, operational performance and economics of the nuclear industry, success may be measured through an assessment of industry operating experience and data. The Workshop concluded, in particular, that a free and open dialogue between the regulator and the industry plays a vital role in maintaining regulatory effectiveness.

From a government viewpoint, the current environment which necessitates both openness and transparency presents new challenges to regulators. Dr. Agnes Bishop, President of Atomic Energy Control Board of Canada, stated, "Our decision-making process must be free of undue political interference, and there must be an effective separation between the functions of the regulatory body and those bodies concerned with the promotion of nuclear energy". It was also noted that there is a need to ensure that government agencies will be able to fulfil effectively their safety responsibilities with reduced resources. A consensus emerged on the need for regulators to adjust to the requirements of government programmes while at the same time maintaining a neutral role in national energy policy questions.

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News Media Contact: Jacques de la Ferté - Tel. 33 (0)1 4524 1010 - Fax 33 (0)1 4524 1110
e-mail: news.contact@nea.fr - web site: <http://www.nea.fr>

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In many countries there is insufficient interaction between regulatory bodies and the public for a variety of reasons. In those countries where there is already an active interface, it may take different forms. Mr. Colin Duncan, Director of Public Affairs of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL), pointed out that credibility and trust are essential factors to develop and maintain, especially with respect to an “emotional” issue such as nuclear power. Dr. Jill Lipoti of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection stated “the public wants a simple, clear, unambiguous message from a trustworthy spokesperson”. The workshop participants noted that there is a need for real dialogue between regulatory authorities and stakeholders. It was also concluded that this topic merits further discussion and thus, it endorsed the organisation, in 2000, of another workshop by the NEA on interfacing with the public.

The identification of specific attributes of regulatory effectiveness and how they can be measured was a key topic. Dr. Bishop noted “...it is often difficult to attribute good industry performance to the actions of the regulator. Is the industry doing well because of the regulator, or despite the regulator? Is a particular licensee performing well because it is a good operator, or because it is well regulated?” The meeting reviewed the initiatives being undertaken by regulatory bodies to look critically at their own methods in a rapidly changing environment. The improving performance of the industry, along with results of numerous recent reviews, show that, in general, regulators are effective and efficient, but as Dr. Malcolm Knapp, Deputy Executive Director at the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission pointed out “.. our efforts towards regulatory effectiveness are very much a work in progress”. He added that, while striving for continuous improvement may not be explicitly regarded by some as an attribute of regulatory effectiveness, continuous improvement is a major goal at the NRC.

An additional area of importance noted was assuring nuclear safety competence into the 21st century. As Dr. Bishop stated, “...we have noted a distinct lack of interest among young people in the whole area of nuclear technology,.... What effect will this have on our regulatory effectiveness 10 or 20 years down the road? ...how can the regulator attract and retain competent staff?” These questions must be addressed to ensure regulatory effectiveness over the long term. The participants endorsed the upcoming NEA workshop on this topic in October.

The proceedings of the workshop on nuclear regulatory effectiveness will be published by the Nuclear Energy Agency.