

Session V. Improving Confidence and Protecting the Interests of Stakeholders

This, the final session of the conference, was focused on the important topic of public perception. The public in most countries is concerned about the hazards of ionising radiation and when there is a risk that radioactive material can be present in close proximity to them, for example, in metal products, that concern becomes magnified. The session contained presentations on the views of the recycling industry, of a national regulator, of an expert in risk perception and communication and of a journalist.

The recycling industry has already worked considerably on the issue of radioactive material in metal scrap and over the years has been in dialogue with various national and international organisations concerned with radiation protection. National solutions are necessary but insufficient, and the international market requires international approaches and solutions considering all the agents involved. The demand from the industry for a certificate to be issued with each load relating to the absence of radioactivity has proved difficult for several reasons - mainly related to the presence in metals of naturally occurring radionuclides. The recycling industry contributes to solving some of the real problems of society and its efforts should be looked upon positively by the Governments and not hindered or paralysed.

In the USA, the regulator has tried on several occasions to introduce general legislation concerned with controlling the release of materials from regulatory control. Despite great transparency in approach, it has failed, mainly because of the public perception that this was a device for releasing radioactive materials to the general environment. At present, a case by case approach has to be used.

People's perception of risk is not generally only 'rational' but also contains 'emotional' elements that depend on a number of factors. Good communications must fully respect the attitudes and evaluations of all the persons/organizations involved in decision making. Some important components in human perception and assessment of risk are:

- Trust in the person issuing the information or performing the action.
- Personal assessment of risk and corresponding benefit.
- Voluntary acceptance versus imposition of the decision.
- Whether the risk factor is perceived as natural or man-made
- Sensations regarding the pain or suffering that might be received.
- Catastrophic versus chronic nature of the effects.
- Concern about uncertainties; there is more fear of uncertain things.

The media transmits information to the public about events happening in the world. The way in which it does this can obviously affect public opinion. In this sense it performs a public service but it also needs to be successful and therefore it is aware that the nature and form of presentation of 'news' will attract attention and sell its product.

Society will react to the information received in a highly variable manner, depending on numerous factors, among them its perception of anything that might affect its safety. This perception depends on its perception of the level of responsibility and trust associated with the organisation concerned and also the level of trust it has in those issuing the information.

As regards the title of this Conference, which refers to the existence of radioactive material 'inadvertently' found in scrap, it is in itself a factor of social concern that makes it difficult for the public to have 'a priori', a positive perception.

The media itself must form a judgement about the information that it receives and the validity of the information, as regards both day-to-day activities and in the event of a crisis. The media has to regulate itself and to be responsible. Generally speaking, there are no external regulatory systems for media activities in any country.