

Executive Summary

Roundtable Meeting on the Upsurge of the Uranium Mining and Production Industry

The meeting took place on the 30th September during the General Conference of the IAEA and was organized by the Agency in cooperation with the Australian Permanent Mission to the IAEA. The purpose of the meeting was to identify and discuss key safety and environmental issues associated with the recent upsurge in the Uranium Mining and Production Industry. The programme comprised four presentations followed by a discussion session and a summing up.

The presentations provided overviews of the IAEA perspective, the Australian regulatory and industry perspectives and the Malawian resource development perspective. During the presentations and the extended discussion a variety of issues were identified and addressed by the panel and participants.

Key issues include the legacy issues in the industry arising from poor past practice and the lack of an adequate regulatory structure in many developing countries that are now involved in the exploitation of uranium for the first time. This lack of resources was illustrated by the specific case of one African country in the presentation session and a number of other examples were raised during the discussion session.

As a result of the upsurge in uranium demand there are numerous small, inexperienced exploration and uranium mining companies entering the business for the first time. These operators lack the knowledge and experience of the major uranium players. There is now a danger that additional legacy issues may be created by these new operators unless they are mentored and informed of best practice by the more senior companies in the market.

It is acknowledged that there is a critical global shortage of skilled personnel in the industry, both on the operator and regulatory side.

A number of programmes have been initiated by the IAEA to assist Member States involved in uranium exploration and production. In addition to the Agency initiatives, the industry in conjunction with the IAEA has developed its own initiatives to assist the industry in moving towards the goal of consistent global “best practice” and social responsibility in the uranium production industry.

A key element in achieving “best practice” is the promotion of the concept of lifecycle planning at an early stage of a uranium mining project.

A recent Agency initiative has been launched in conjunction with the industry through the World Nuclear Association (WNA) publication on Sustainable Global Best Practice in the uranium industry. This publication is complimented by a major industry initiative on the development of a Global Stewardship Programme for the Uranium Industry by the Uranium Stewardship Working Group of the WNA.

The Agency is actively pursuing cooperative approaches with other organizations such as the World Bank, the OSCE, and the UNDP. The Agency has also adopted Regional approaches to assist Member States in addressing common problems in remediation and developing regulatory control and monitoring systems in Africa, Asia and South America.

Another important Agency initiative is the resurrection of the UPSAT (Uranium Production Site Assessment Team) peer review programme coordinated by the IAEA. The programme provides a mechanism for the transfer of “best practice” principles from experienced operators to smaller less experienced operators.

In the future the development of international networks of regulators and operators will play a key role in spreading the principles of “Best Practice” to uranium producers across the world.

Currently the major limitations on the IAEA in assisting Member States revolve around the need for significant additional funding and human resources to tackle the issues arising from the upsurge in uranium exploration and production. It is generally recognized that there is a lack of financial and human resources. It is clear that significant additional resources are required at the Agency in order to address the concerns and needs of the Member States. The Agency should be doing more in the area of uranium production safety and this issue is currently being examined in the Scientific Forum of the General Conference.

At the present time the Agency can only prioritize issues in terms of the currently available resources. The Member States can assist the Secretariat in this prioritization process by communicating their needs.

More requires to be done internationally to pressurize rogue uranium producers to behave responsibly in developing countries. As an example it was suggested that the country Governments should have a social obligation to ensure that their mining companies were acting responsibly in developing countries.

It was suggested by the Agency that countries should delay the implementation of uranium projects until their regulatory infrastructure was fully in place. Another possible alternative for developing countries was for the operators to commit to use the WNA principles and Stewardship programme in conjunction with Codes of Practice to implement a form of self regulation until a regulatory infrastructure could be developed.