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Public Acceptance: A Wake-up Call from the People of Europe

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Introduction

The European Commission has presented a highly significant picture of the state of public opinion across the European Union regarding radioactive waste management and the use of nuclear energy.

For the nuclear industry, the results of the latest independent 'Eurobarometer' poll contained some real surprises – both pleasant and unpleasant.

The nuclear energy sector in Europe has some important lessons to learn from these new figures, and it is my firm belief that the poll results show the need for the major players in the nuclear energy sector in Europe – and probably elsewhere – to review and refocus their communications strategies.

The EU-wide survey showed that an alarmingly large majority of the Community's citizens feel poorly informed about radioactive waste – one of the main issues directly linked to the public acceptance of nuclear energy. This, of course, does not really mean there is a lack of information – it simply reflects a lack of public trust in the sources of that information. The survey in fact showed that the nuclear industry is not perceived as a well-trusted source of information on radwaste matters. Furthermore, the general view is that the nuclear industry is not open enough about providing information about radioactive waste.

On the credit side of the balance sheet, there is a 2:1 majority in favour of maintaining the nuclear energy option, provided all radioactive wastes can be safely managed. But, in spite of this important and positive result, lack of public awareness clearly remains a cause for concern. What comes through from the figures is the alarming proportion of 'don't knows'.

Wake-up call

The results of the poll should represent a wake-up call for the nuclear energy sector in Europe and for anyone concerned about the public acceptance of nuclear. Probably this lack of awareness and lack of trust is prevalent throughout the world. This may not be just a European problem.

On the positive side, the poll results showed that most Europeans believe:

- nuclear power should remain an option for electricity production, provided that all the waste is safely managed;
- the present generation using nuclear energy should be responsible for dealing with the waste, without leaving this task to future generations;
- each country producing highly radioactive waste should develop its own disposal site.

But on the downside, the survey highlighted:

- a lack of public awareness regarding existing programmes for radioactive waste management;
- limited knowledge of the fact that nuclear power plants emit virtually no greenhouse gases; and
- major differences in perceptions from one EU state to another.

A report on the survey, entitled 'Europeans and Radioactive Waste', has been published by the European Commission, and the document is available online at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/energy/nuclear/pdf/eb56_radwaste_en.pdf.

The organisation I represent, FORATOM, has welcomed publication of the new findings and has acknowledged the European Commission's work to promote a dispassionate debate on the future use of nuclear power in the EU. The radwaste issue is a key element of that discussion.

Political will

As most nuclear specialists recognise, all categories of radioactive waste from the power generation sector are already being safely managed on a continuous basis and under strict regulatory controls. FORATOM argues that the main priority now is to take steps to ensure that spent nuclear fuel and high-level waste are permanently isolated from the biosphere in deep underground repositories. The technology and funding mechanisms for these installations already exist, but political will is needed to make further progress.

Finland and Sweden can be congratulated for the progress they have made in this regard. The US is also showing many other countries the right way forward, with Congress and President Bush having given their backing to the Yucca Mountain repository.

But there still remains a clear need for the radwaste issue to be clarified in the minds of both the public and politicians. The nuclear industry and national radwaste management agencies are doing an enormous amount of work to bring the facts about radioactive waste management to the attention of politicians, the media and the public. The European Commission and national government departments also have a communications role to play in this area.

High-level radioactive material exists, whether it comes from power generation or from the medical, industrial or research uses of nuclear technology. Policy-makers

at national and EU level must now start making a serious and determined attempt to resolve this important environmental issue politically. If they can see no further than the next election, they will end up passing their responsibilities over to the next generation.

Solutions

In trying to improve public awareness and public acceptance, the way ahead may not mean having to try to grow crops in a desert, as there is the 2:1 majority with a favourable attitude to nuclear, conditional on the safe management of all radioactive wastes. So already there seems to be an area of fertile land that can be developed.

How we approach this challenge is something the nuclear sector will have to explore. One starting point would be to examine carefully the strategies and methods adopted by nuclear communicators in those countries where acceptance is at its highest. There are good opportunities for sharing experience, one of them being the annual PIME conferences, organised by the European Nuclear Society. Certain sessions at PIME feature contributors from outside the nuclear energy sector, and this enables nuclear communicators to gain new insights from their counterparts working in other fields. Sharing experience is a useful starting point, but it will still have to be followed up by devoting the right level of resources to the communications process. This will probably involve new investment, but I believe it will ultimately be money well spent.

However, it will not simply be a question of throwing money at the problem through advertising campaigns, publications and getting key messages across to the media. We have to constantly keep in mind where those messages are coming from. Where the message comes from can be just as important as the message itself.

For that reason, I believe we need to put the emphasis on third-party contributions to this effort. The Eurobarometer poll showed that the nuclear sector was well down towards 'the bottom of the league' in terms of credibility, and this is something we may have to live with for a very long time.

Call for action

Earlier, I used the term 'wake-up call' to characterise the results of the Eurobarometer survey. But I firmly believe that the results constitute much more than this. I see the poll's results as a 'call for action', as well as a wake-up call. Improving public awareness of nuclear can be achieved by various sections of society, such as teachers and government decision-makers, as well as the nuclear industry.

Therefore, it is imperative for the industry to take decisive action in response to the outcome of the Eurobarometer poll. It is in the interests of the industry and in the interests of society at large for the public to be properly informed about nuclear power. People must make up their own minds about the use of nuclear. They need to be given both sides of the story. They need to be told about the different advantages and disadvantages of the full range of available energy

sources. Through this balanced approach, people will come to see that all these sources have certain potentially negative aspects. In the case of nuclear, plant operators and regulators have shown that those aspects can be carefully and safely controlled.

Conclusion

In concluding, I would like to make the following points.

- The results of the Eurobarometer survey confirm an awareness deficit among the general public on the subject of radioactive waste management.
- They show that the nuclear energy sector, governments and educators need to do much more to raise public awareness of the issues involved.
- There is a clear need for all those with a communications role to play in this area to re-examine what actions they are taking now and explore how they can make their work more effective. Nuclear communicators will have to start ‘thinking outside of the box’ and will need to be more innovative regarding communications methods.
- The development of nuclear worldwide was launched in an era in which public consultation and consensus were not the priorities that they are today. Now things are different. Governments may introduce fast-track, streamlined planning and licensing procedures for new nuclear power plants for the time when new-build becomes essential. However, political and public support will still be needed. At the very least, the public and politicians should be capable of understanding the role played by nuclear in modern-day society. The opponents of nuclear power rely on fear and ignorance to strengthen their cause. Improving awareness and combating ignorance should go a long way towards easing people’s fears about nuclear.
- There has been a great deal of discussion – in the media and in the political arena – about a nuclear energy revival. However, I am convinced that this will simply not happen unless the public and politicians are properly informed about nuclear in general and radwaste in particular – well before the time comes round to announce plans for new nuclear plants. Governments, elected representatives and communities will have to face up to taking some difficult decisions in the future. In order to take those decisions, they will need to have a good grasp of the various issues that will need to be weighed in the balance.
- I believe that another pre-requisite for a nuclear revival is a publicly accepted resolution of the waste issue. The industry has argued so far that waste solutions either already exist or are awaiting implementation. This is a strong argument to support the continued use of nuclear. But in the context of plans for new-build, national governments and parliaments will have to show the public that a programme is in place for the final storage of high-level waste and spent nuclear fuel. This was done in Finland. The waste management programme there created the basis for approval of the fifth reactor unit. The same is likely to happen in the US. The approval earlier this year of the Yucca Mountain project will certainly put nuclear power on a new and firmer footing in the United States. This does not mean that deep underground repositories must be in operation before a new nuclear power plant can be started up. But the public and politicians will need clear assurances that there is a definite

plan to permanently isolate high-level waste and spent nuclear fuel from the biosphere.

- In my view, one key message needs to be conveyed regarding radioactive waste. This waste is not someone else's problem. It is not something that someone else caused and will have to deal with. Nor is it something that power companies are to be blamed for. Enormous numbers of people have benefited and are continuing to benefit from having nuclear electricity available. Even countries with no nuclear power plants have certain amounts of high-level radioactive waste, at least from the use of nuclear technology in the medical field. This waste will not go away, and a safe final resting-place will have to be created for it. This is a responsibility that everyone should share and take seriously, if we are not to impose an unfair burden on future generations.
- It would be unacceptable for me to speak of responsibility and of the need for action, without proposing to take some form of action myself. For that reason, I will suggest bringing forward a new initiative, related to nuclear's public acceptance, at a meeting next month of the European Nuclear Council, which brings together the CEOs from the region's major companies active in the nuclear energy field. That meeting will take place in Lille, France, during the ENC 2002 European Nuclear Conference. In general, the initiative will involve suggestions for a common plan of action for communicating on the issue of radioactive waste. Details are still being worked out, but one thing remains certain – the need for determined action by the industry to tackle the lack of public awareness, especially in this particular area. This is a problem that threatens to hinder nuclear energy's future development. Just like radioactive waste itself, the public awareness problem will not go away of its own accord and will have to be addressed with actions, rather than words.