

International Symposium on Communicating Nuclear and Radiological Emergencies to the Public, 1–5 October 2018, Vienna

The Management of Uncertainty in Public Communication of the Ru-106 Case

V. Tafili, C. Potiriadis, C. Housiadas

Patriarchou Grigoriou & Neapoleos, P.O Box 60092, 15341, Agia Paraskevi – Athens

Abstract: In the case of the detection of Ruthenium 106 (Ru-106) in the atmosphere of Greece and in other European countries, the uncertainty about the origin of the radioactivity posed a challenge for the public communication. At national level, the media interest was high, while it was clear that there was no concern about potential radiological consequences.

This paper presents details of the EEAE communication strategy on this specific case: an “extreme graded approach” based on transparency and on the minimum media exposure, which had as main goal to overcome the uncertainty connected with the unknown source of radioactivity.

1. Introduction

The Greek Atomic Energy Commission (EEAE), the national radiation safety authority, announced the detection of Ruthenium 106 (Ru-106) in the atmosphere of Greece (end of September-beginning of October 2017), making available the measurements data. The levels of atmospheric contamination by Ru-106, observed in Greece and in other European countries, had no radiological significance and no measures were required for the protection of the public.

Notwithstanding this, the abnormal radioactivity detection attracted a lot of media attention at national level; the media and the public showed high interest, although at the same time there was no concern about potential radiological consequences. In other words, the actual radiation risk and the perceived radiation risk were the same. In a typical emergency case, this would facilitate the public communication; however the uncertainty due to the unknown origin of the Ru-106 release and the overall unprecedented nature of this event, made the public communication challenging.

2. Method

EEAE issued two announcements regarding the detection of Ru-106 in the atmosphere of Greece: the first one on October 9 and the second one on October 12. Both announcements were published at EEAE website and social media accounts (Facebook, twitter) in Greek and English language. The main messages were the following:

- the radioactivity levels detected are extremely low;
- there is no concern from the radiation protection point of view;
- the origin of the release is unknown;
- an accident in a nuclear power plant can be ruled out;
- there are similar findings in other European countries;
- further investigation on the origin of radioactivity is required.

The journalists were given all the necessary information or clarifications by phone or email.

EEAE decided to keep the media exposure to the minimum level, due to the fact that there was no radiological risk. The decision made was to communicate only the available facts and avoid any comment on possible scenarios. Thus, at the same time this approach helped to overcome the uncertainty about the origin of the Ru-106.

3. Results

It was an extraordinary news story that caused a lot of media attention, mainly by TV stations and news websites. Broad media coverage was observed from 10 to 12 October. The news story about the Ru-106 detection in Greece and in Europe appeared in most of the Greek newspapers on October 11 and it was among the top stories in the national news websites on October 10 and 11.

The points made by EEAE were well-communicated to the public through the media, since EEAE responded to all media requests by repeatedly communicating with consistency the main messages about the case.

The pressure on behalf of the media towards EEAE to escalate its media exposure was high and the firm denial for appearances in the media was challenging. EEAE did not accept interview proposals and avoided any involvement in scenario-based discussions regarding the origin of the Ru-106, by explaining that there is no radiological risk that justifies any further information actions.

4. Conclusions

Aiming at dealing with uncertainty in the public communication of the Ru-106 case, EEAE tested an “extreme graded approach” with main axes: a) the immediate announcement of the measurements results about the Ru-106 detection in the atmosphere of the country, which confirmed the adherence of EEAE to the transparency principle and framed the situation, and b) the minimum media exposure of the regulatory authority based on the actual radiation exposure risk for the public. We believe that such an approach is effective, provided that there is no difference among the actual and the perceived risks. Responding in reserved manner to media demand resulted in temporary loss of media visibility, but the advantage in the long-term is the promotion of a risk-based, graded approach in addressing the public communication needs in an emergency situation.