

Public relations in the Field of RADIOACTIVE WASTE MANAGEMENT

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1. Introduction

Today, radiation safety is one of the most urgent ecological topics.

In Russia the problem of radiation safety is vital in the regions with nuclear facilities or sites that pose radiation risk. These regions are the Northwest and the Far East of the Russian Federation. It is in these regions that the ATOMFLOT (the Russian Atomic Fleet) has been storing its radioactive waste; also, there are towns and villages neighboring repositories of radioactive waste, nuclear power plants and enterprises dealing with nuclear and radioactive materials.

The issue of radiation safety is most frequently brought up for public discussion in the Moscow region. This can be explained by the presence of some 2 thousand enterprises working with radioactive materials in the capital: research institutions, healthcare organizations, industrial enterprises, all of them using sources of ionizing radiation. Radiation situation in Moscow is a potential hazard and demands constant attention.

The public regards radiation as an “invisible enemy”: tasteless, colorless, odorless, and at the same time highly dangerous. The grave and sometimes fatal consequences of radiation exposure are well-known today. The Chernobyl disaster increased this fear of radiation greatly, turning it into radiophobia.

Although the fear can easily be explained, since the aftermath of the accident was truly disastrous, at the same time this phobia to a large degree was caused by the wrong PR policy applied by the country leaders of that period. Withholding and delaying information on the accident and its consequences gave rise to suspicion towards all organizations dealing with radiation. People, fearing that should another radiation accident happen, no information would be available so no adequate safety measures could be taken in time, started to oppose the use of nuclear and radioactive materials in the economy altogether.

Thus, it is obvious that in the field of radioecology there is an acute need for open information policy. The population of a particular region should be informed of the radioecological situation

in the neighborhood, especially in the areas where nuclear and radiation dangerous sites are located.

2. Openness as the main principle of the SIA Radon informational policy

Public interests must be the priority in the sphere of radiation safety information, taking into account the attention public pays to this topic.

At the same time, former "closed" organizations often oppose open information policy on the pretext of departmental interests. But withholding information not only restricts people's rights, it is damaging to the reputation of such organizations themselves.

On the contrary, openness together with timely and accurate delivery of relevant information to the society speaks of high professional level of the company's specialists and gives the public confidence in their work.

The position of the State Unitary Enterprise, Scientific and Industrial Association Radon can be given as an example.

The Radon Association specializes in treatment of low and intermediate radioactive wastes produced in research institutions, industry, agriculture and medicine. The enterprise deals with collection, transportation, processing and disposal of radioactive waste from the Moscow region and 9 other regions of Central Russia. The Association's main line of activity is radiation safety control in Moscow. An automated system of radioecological monitoring has been launched in the city, and there is a radiation emergency service operating in emergency situations. Besides, Radon carries out monitoring of construction sites, radiation dangerous objects and the environment, and also organizes educational programs.

Radon follows a well-directed informational policy designed to provide accurate information on its activities. Every three months about a hundred reports on their work appear in the national mass media. They include reports of news agencies, articles in print and electronic publications, TV and radio programs, all of them giving a positive evaluation of the company's work.

Such policy is necessary for the enterprise to refute various speculations on potential radiation danger of Radon. As world experience shows, such speculations are commonly used during election campaigns, and the staff of Radon have come to know it from experience. In the 1990's,

when political life in the country became laden with intrigue, a number of illiterate, and sometimes totally absurd reports about allegedly harmful Radon's activities appeared in the media (including the national press). Sometimes, after mass media had announced that dangerous substances were about to be delivered and buried at the Sergiev Posad site belonging to Radon, and, as a result, irreparable damage would be inflicted upon the environment and the local residents' health, people would block the roads leading to the repository. Hostility was further fueled by some politicians, who promised to get the enterprise shut down if elected.

These developments urged the Radon Association to employ active information policy – a policy that would give a clear idea of the enterprise's activities. Such policy proved to be the most effective remedy for both radiation phobia and political speculations on the topic of radiation safety.

At a meeting with journalists Sergei Dmitriev, General Director of the company, answering their question about his attitude to the Green movement said: “We are the “greenest” of all”. This is the underlying principle of the entire informational policy of Radon. The population must be thoroughly informed about the specifics of the activities of the enterprise: it does not pollute the environment - on the contrary, it cleans the territory from radioactive pollution.

3. The activity of RADON-PRESS information agency: aims and principles

To carry out the informational policy of Radon, in 1996 the RADON-PRESS information agency was set up. The agency disseminates radioecological information and is guided in its activity by the principles of efficiency, reliability and clarity.

The core of our activity lies in informing the residents of Moscow on radiation background in the city and Radon's activities. RADON-PRESS regularly, 2-3 times a month, issues press-releases on the activities of the company. They are distributed among major Russian information agencies, central and city press and leading Internet sources, thus supplying information to various strata of the Moscow residents.

These press-releases are the primary source for the subsequent publications in mass media.

The information offered by RADON-PRESS covers the radioecological situation in Moscow and the Moscow region, as well as the current activities of the company. RADON-PRESS regularly informs Muscovites on the following:

- radiation accidents on the territory of Moscow and the region;
- radiation background in different Moscow districts;
- results of radon surveys of living quarters, school and preschool buildings;
- liquidation of radioactive pollution.

Besides, the press releases cover significant events in the sphere of radiation safety (such as the annual issue of the Moscow Radiation and Hygienic survey).

To be trustworthy, information releases on radioecology are prepared with the cooperation of scientists and experts. Well-founded expert opinion gives the information releases not only the most reliable but also convincing character.

At the same time, radiation safety information should be comprehensible and not overloaded with terminology. Journalists working at RADON-PRESS strive to make their reports clear not only for experts, but for a wide audience as well.

However, making the reports understandable to the public does not mean over-simplifying them. Each press release, being informative, should carry a certain educational component, since it might be difficult for an average reader to grasp such kind of information without expert explanation.

RADON-PRESS staff arrange regular press tours for TV, press and electronic mass-media journalists. They also take part in radio programs on radioecological topics.

Experience shows that radiological information is in demand with Muscovites. RADON-PRESS staff stay in close contact with the community, answering phone calls and letters from not only mass media representatives, but ordinary people, interested in getting radiological information. Points of their concerns usually are connected with personal safety: what the radiological background in a particular district is, where one can buy a dose-rate meter or radiation-safe berries and mushrooms, etc.

Another way of getting feedback from the population is via our Internet site, where all the interested persons can get an answer to their questions from both the RADON-PRESS agency staff and Radon specialists.

4. Educating the public in radioecology

Starting from 2001, RADON-PRESS published a full-color ecological magazine *Safety Barrier*. For three years, the magazine highlighted ecological topics; the bigger part of the materials covered radioecological topics in popular scientific style. The magazine used to be a subscription edition.

At the end of 2004, taking into consideration the acuteness of radiation waste management problem in Russia, as well as the high level of public interest, we changed the profile of the Safety Barrier magazine. Now the publication specialises in radiation safety issues and radwaste management. It gives space to radioactive waste management policy and strategy, including feasible technical, economic, legal and social approaches to solving these problems.

The subjects of the magazine include:

- urgent issues of radioecology;
- problems of the radiation safety of population;
- safety issues in radioactive waste management;
- promising technologies of RW treatment and disposal;
- problems of radioecology of big cities and industrial centers;
- legal aspects of radiation safety and radioactive waste management;
- major events in the field of radioecology (e.g. exhibitions, conferences, symposiums, etc.);
- international radioecological news.

The magazine has a Scientific Board, which helps to handle the covered issues comprehensively and with expertise. The Scientific Board includes a number of prominent Russian scientists, experts and representatives of governmental regulatory and supervisory bodies.

The leading Russian and foreign experts cooperate with RADON-PRESS as authors and scientific advisers. Outstanding scientists, lawyers, public figures and statesmen answer the questions of our journalists.

The *Safety Barrier* is published in two languages (Russian and English). This enables us to involve a great number of experts from other countries in discussing the issues of radiation safety and radioactive waste treatment, tackle the problems in a comprehensive way and serve as a forum for informational and experience exchange.

At present the magazine is distributed at specialized exhibitions and conferences, as well as by special distribution in Moscow government offices, the Russian State Duma, the Moscow City

Council, international and Russian organisations dealing with radiation issues, research and educational institutions (including special schools) and public libraries. This kind of distribution allows us to inform practically all population segments and involve the public in discussion, thus building up ecological knowledge of the population and giving the opportunity to attract decision makers' attention to radioecological problems. In future, we are planning to open a subscription to the magazine.

5. Conclusion

Thus, RADON-PRESS, being the instrument of Radon's active and open information policy, helps to spread radioecological knowledge among all segments of the population and form a favorable opinion of the company's activities.

In future RADON-PRESS is planning to continue its activities of radioecological information dissemination with the help the *Safety Barrier* magazine. We will highlight the radiation safety and radwaste management issues using not only Russian but international experience. This will enable us to employ a more comprehensive approach to the problems covered and find efficient ways of solving them..

Besides, the agency plans to hold regular round-table discussions on vital problems of radioecology with the participation of prominent Russian and foreign experts. These events will be given space on the pages of the *Safety Barrier* publication. We also hope that these events will attract the attention of the mass-media and the community. We are ready to cooperate with all the interested parties in the field of radiation safety.