Communications Workshop
26 February 2009

Health Protection Agency, Centre for Radiation, Chemical & Environmental Hazards, Chilton, Didcot, Oxon OX11 0RQ.

Organised by the Agriculture and Food Countermeasures Working Group (AFCWG) with input from the National Dose Assessments Working Group (NDAWG)

Workshop Team
Anne Nisbet (Health Protection Agency)
Louisa Chrisostomou and Carol Attwood (Environment Agency)
David Collier and Stephanie Tuffee (Golder Associates)

Workshop Sponsors

www.ndawg.org
Radiation and radiation emergencies are considered as hot topics by the media. The challenges faced by organisations responding to these events are significant. Therefore, it is important to get the right message across. If organisations are not ready for this challenge when a radiation incident occurs, there may be genuine risks to people and communities, as well as to the reputations of responders. All organisations have crisis communications plans to address their communication needs. These are often developed in isolation and without reference to partners. The issues faced in a radiation emergency are complex and inter-related. Different organisations are responsible for different parts of the response, and ‘own’ different issues. This makes communications with the public, media and communities complicated.

The Communications Workshop was prompted by a need to bring planners and communication specialists together to understand their roles and responsibilities, the communications challenges they face and to start planning effective communications together. The principle aims of the workshop were to:

- explore how responding organisations would work together to inform, advise and communicate with communities and the media in the event of a radiation emergency;
- to raise awareness of the risks, pitfalls and best practices through the assessment of existing procedures and the sharing of experiences;
- to offer an opportunity for emergency planners and communications professionals to meet and work together.

Twenty two organisations were invited to participate in the workshop and of these; nine took part on the day. These included representatives from central and local government and the nuclear industry. Emergency planners and communications specialists were both well represented, making the total number of participants 20. The event was attended by individuals with good experience of crisis communications and this was shared throughout the day.

The workshop achieved a balanced mix of briefing, facilitated group work and feedback sessions and was organised around three themes:

- Communication challenges
- Roles, responsibilities, messages and audiences
- Working together to communicate effectively

The themes were explored in the context of a hypothetical nuclear emergency scenario. This provided a common thread throughout the day and a focus for discussion.

Some sixty communication challenges were identified by delegates covering a wide range of topic areas including: diversity, reaction and perceptions of the audience; media management; quality, consistency and presentation of the messages; and complexity of roles and responsibilities of responding organisations. Discussion distinguished between challenges that could be resolved relatively easily, from those that would require considerable resources and multi-agency buy-in e.g. dealing with the burden of public enquiry or the management of a minor radiation incident when public perception is of a major risk. The latter types of challenges were explored in terms of the actions needed to progress a solution, the resources that might be required, organisations to lead the work and a timeline for completing it. Many of these challenges require engagement, planning and project management at a national level.
The scenario itself highlighted numerous issues concerning recovery from a nuclear accident. Some of these issues were grouped into key messages that would be given, including the audiences for each message, who owned it and how it could be delivered. The need for sharing intelligence was identified so that consistent messages would be given to the public and other key stakeholders during all stages of an incident. It was agreed that further work on partnership communication plans need to be grounded in and around the major incident work which is already in place and to feed communications planning into emergency planning. Some ideas that were put forward included a shared Q&A brief, a single point of contact for public and media enquiries (i.e. a sufficiently informed expert spokesperson) and developing a joint website to help organisations share information during an incident. Furthermore, Regional Resilience Fora were identified as a possible vehicle for taking forward partnership working on communications.

Feedback from delegates suggested that the workshop provided a good opportunity for networking with technical and communication leads from other responding agencies. The event was also successful in highlighting the importance of communications and the need to act now so that communications professionals are better able to respond to a radiation incident in the future. There was a clear buy-in to this need and an eagerness to work together in resolving the outstanding communication challenges. An action plan was produced to advance work in this area according to the priorities agreed at the workshop.