

NUCLEAR SAFETY: COMMUNICATING A COMMITMENT



Safety has always been the first order of business for those of us who supply and operate the Free World's light water reactors. Through a combination of superior plant design, construction, and operation, we have achieved a safety record that is unparalleled by any other industry in the world. As described in the cover story of this issue of the *Energy Digest*, our defense-in-depth philosophy of redundancy, separation, and diversity is the foundation upon which all of our many safety efforts are built.

Yet, if nuclear energy is such a proven technology, why does there continue to be so much controversy surrounding the safety of today's operating plants? The answer may have more to do with a lack of communication than a lack of technology.

Obviously, utilities and suppliers acknowledge the safety of nuclear energy and understand its many economic and performance benefits. But, while a utility may make a commitment to proceed with nuclear generation, it may well be the "decision-makers" — the politicians, the financiers, and the regulators — who will ultimately determine whether or not the nuclear option is kept alive.

In protecting the interests of their constituents, decision-makers — particularly politicians — will act in accordance with public sentiment. If the public does not want new or existing nuclear generation, decision-makers will exert their influence in making sure future projects are not developed.

In the days and months following the Chernobyl accident, some factions of the public began questioning the safety of *all* nuclear plants. What *really* triggered this new wave of anti-nuclear sentiment? The accident itself, or the misunderstanding and lack of information surrounding the event? As you will see in this edition's "U.S. Commentary," a breakdown in communications drastically affected the media's ability to report accurate, objective news of the accident. This is unfortunate, since news coverage often has such a big influence on how the public perceives technologies such as nuclear power.

At Westinghouse, we believe that public acceptance stems from public understanding. For that reason, it is

absolutely essential that those of us in the industry make a greater effort to communicate with the public and the media, making sure that nuclear technologies, issues, and events are understood and accurately presented.

We can design system after system to make our plants more reliable, economical, and safe. We can develop new approaches for constructing plants on time and within budget. We can devise better financing packages for new nuclear projects. But, unless the public understands the safety and benefits of nuclear power, we'll never gain the support we need to develop and sustain nuclear generation projects. As Morris Rosen of the IAEA states in this edition's "Power Profile" article, "The industry will need to *demonstrate* that significant safety improvements are being made. It may not be totally for safety's sake itself, but also to speak to public concerns."

It's clear that all of us — suppliers and utilities — must *think* safety, *apply* safety, and *communicate* safety.

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