

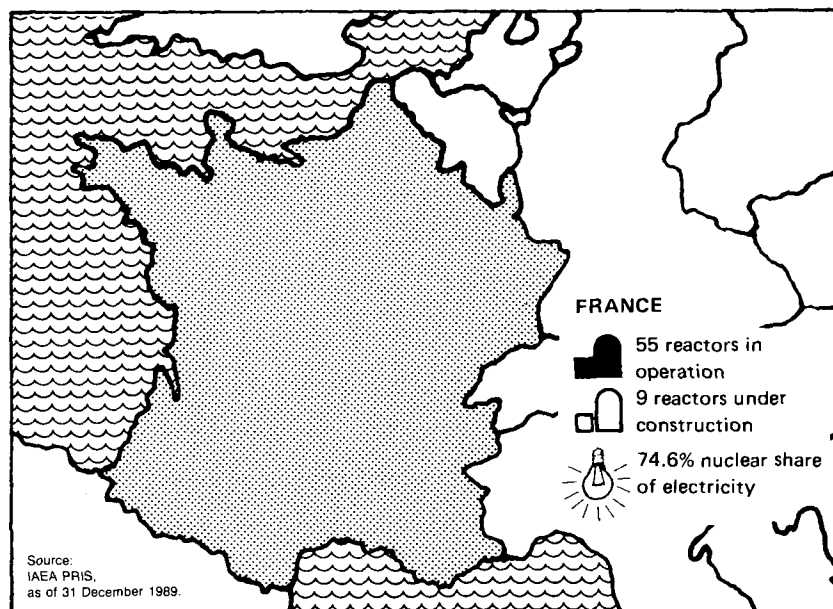
## National reports:

### FRANCE

# Public confidence and nuclear energy

*Nuclear power plants have become a fact of life*

by Jean-Pierre Chaussade



The main objective of the French nuclear power programme, which was to replace the use of oil and coal in electricity production, has now been achieved. Today there are 54 units in operation at 18 sites spread throughout France. They supply 75% of all electricity produced, 12% of which is exported to neighbouring countries, and play an important role in the French economy.

For the French, nuclear power is a fact of life, and most accept it. However, the accident at Chernobyl has made public opinion more sensitive, and we cannot afford to take the confidence of the public for granted.

Mr Chaussade is responsible for Communication, Environment and Nuclear, at Electricité de France in Paris.

We have had to reconsider our public relations work carefully with a view to increasing the confidence of the French public in nuclear power, anticipating media crises and being equipped to deal with such crises.

### Public opinion and attitudes

Nuclear power has always been perceived favourably in France. The only period of doubt was a few months between spring 1977 and the end of 1978. This period was followed by a recovery of public confidence (62% in favour and 35% against) at the end of 1985.

Since the Chernobyl accident in April 1986, public attitudes have changed considerably. There was a sudden loss of confidence after the

accident: those in favour fell from 62% in December 1985 to 51% in May 1986, then to 46% in November 1986 before rising again to 51% in May 1987. During the same period, those against increased from 35% to 47%, and then to 52% before falling again to 46% in May 1987.

Chernobyl also implanted in the public mind the idea that a serious accident at a nuclear power plant was possible, and this view has not weakened with time.

**Nuclear power concerns.** According to a public opinion poll carried out in October 1989, industrial and nuclear risks rank ninth among things that worry the French public: they were mentioned in 3.35% of all responses, far behind illness (36%), unemployment (16%) and drugs (11%).

With regard to the environment, the French are most concerned about the depletion of the ozone layer (45.3%), the destruction of forests (16.5%), and oil slicks (7.8%); only then come radioactive wastes (7.6%) and chemical wastes (7.1%). Nuclear power plants were the most worrying factor for 2.6% of those polled, i.e. a small number of people.

**Public perception.** Although public support for the expansion or construction of nuclear power plants has dropped significantly since 1987, the French public has not questioned the operation of existing power plants. It should be borne in mind that nuclear power generated 75% of all electricity in France in 1989 and that the public

## Features

### FRENCH PUBLIC OPINION AND NUCLEAR POWER

Question: Which of these three options would you prefer for France?

	Nov. 1986	May 1987	Oct. 1988	Oct. 1989
Nuclear power plants should continue to be built	19	19	15	14
No new nuclear power plants should be built, but existing plants should continue to operate	63	60	65	67
All nuclear power plants should be shut down	14	16	17	15
No opinion	4	5	3	4
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

Polls by SOFRES (the French Opinion Poll Organization) reflect the attitudes of the French public to nuclear power plants. Results have been stable for the past 3 years.

considers the nuclear power programme to be completed. The export of 12% of our electricity output to neighbouring countries is sometimes interpreted as the result of over-capacity.

Furthermore, 63% of the French public believe that nuclear power plants operate efficiently and 65% that plant safety regulations are properly observed.

#### Meeting expectations of different groups

The new strategy of Electricité de France (EdF) has been to adapt its public information work to the new expectations of the public. The three main approaches are outlined below.

● **Keeping the public better informed.** The staff of EdF are the first target. They are addressed mainly through internal newsletters and publications designed for the general public but which are also distributed widely in-house.

The main outside activities have concentrated on groups which help shape public opinion, particularly doctors, teachers, and elected representatives.

Our information policy for the general public relies mainly on visits to nuclear power plants and information centres.

● **Providing clear information at times of crisis.** The possibility of an accident occurring at a nuclear power plant is what worries the public most. In an emergency, it is public confidence in nuclear power — and therefore its very existence — which will be jeopardized. With so much at stake, high standards of communication are essential and full preparations must be made in advance.

● **International activities.** Where public opinion is concerned, national boundaries are disappearing as ideas are transferred from one country to another through the media. This new situation should be taken into account and countries should work together to co-ordinate information activities. The most important aspect of this work is to continue to increase the safety of our installations and to share our experience.

#### Ways of keeping the public better informed

**Information on safety, economics, and the environment.** Information should be provided in a disciplined manner without any distortions or condescension to the public, and should reply to all questions without exception. It should be objective and unequivocally

positive, and presented without aggression, but also without self-consciousness. It should point out the advantages of nuclear power and why it is necessary, and not merely respond to the arguments of the anti-nuclear lobby. The information provided should emphasize the positive aspects without, of course, refusing to reply to the public's objections or fears.

The content should focus on safety, which is a prerequisite for the future of nuclear power; the economic advantages of nuclear power compared with other energy sources such as coal and oil; and the beneficial effects for the environment which makes nuclear power a possible answer to global concerns.

The above method of presentation should be used both for publications for general distribution to the public at large and for those aimed at specific segments of the public.

#### Information for the general public

**Visits to power plants and information centres.** From the point of view of the general public, confidence in nuclear energy is mainly a question of nuclear sites. In France,

priority has therefore been given to public relations activities centred on these sites. Visits are the basis of our public relations strategy — they are the ideal way to meet the public and to acquaint them with nuclear energy and nuclear power plants, to reply to people's questions. Local and national campaigns are carried out every year, and have kept the number of visitors at about 300 000 per year, 40% of whom are school children.

We have also established information centres next to each nuclear site, and these are open every day. The centres have numerous teaching aids which help explain the role of nuclear energy in relation to other forms of energy and provide information on the operation and safety of nuclear power plants and the place of the individual plant in a local and regional context.

The centres are equipped with models, video tapes, and computers. They are visited by around 200 000 people.

**Information for the medical professions.** Chernobyl highlighted the need for information on the effects of radiation and revealed significant demand from the medical profession for such information.

Special publications have been produced and are sent out free of charge on request.

All doctors in the neighbourhood of every nuclear plant are invited on at least one occasion to obtain information through lectures and visits to nuclear installations. Approximately 10 000 doctors attended information meetings in 1988 and 1989.

Activities aimed at pharmacists, veterinary surgeons, and nurses have begun.

**Teachers and school children.** Information packs aimed at primary and secondary schools have been produced and offered to these establishments. Leaflets on various aspects of nuclear energy (technical, economic, historical, etc.) are distributed to teachers of physics, geography, and economic sciences.

Films and videos are also made available to educational establishments.

A large number of talks (over 2500 a year) are organized in France at the request of teachers.

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### **Emergency communication: "Minitel"**

Confidence and credibility can be built up through the everyday operation of nuclear power stations.

The extreme sensitivity of the public, and hence the media, to anything to do with nuclear power plants has led EdF to keep the press and elected representatives informed about incidents at nuclear power plants.

The ministries for energy and health have established a permanent information system using "Minitel", a small videotext terminal attached to the telephone network. Each owner of a Minitel terminal (there are four million in France) can obtain comprehensive information on the operation of each nuclear power plant. Since July 1989, all radioactivity measurements in the area surrounding nuclear sites have been made available on Minitel. They are also sent out to elected representatives and the media.

One of the most serious problems with this information policy is the gap between the level of knowledge of the general public and the technical complexity of the subject being explained. This problem may be partially overcome by providing training for power plant directors and public relations officers. A considerable effort has already been made, but much remains to be done. In the past few years, local officers have been trained in audio-visual techniques by press, radio, and television experts. In the past 2 years, this basic training has been supplemented by a special course on communication in an emergency.

The Ministry of Energy has established a six-level severity scale for incidents or accidents, the main

aim of which is to help journalists and the public understand the importance of the information supplied to them. Many countries — and also the IAEA — have shown a keen interest in this concept. The general application of this scale, with a few adjustments, is currently being studied within the IAEA.\*

**Providing information in an emergency — the objectives.** In an emergency, it is our ability to provide rapid and reliable information which will retain public confidence. This will require good co-ordination between the teams responsible for technical management of the emergency and those in charge of public information.

The information strategy is tailored to suit the needs of the following target audiences:

- The personnel of the company;
- The media and, through them, the public;
- The authorities (Prefect, Ministry, etc.);
- Elected representatives;
- Other industrial partners (Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique, Framatome).

The reliability of the information depends on the quality of the permanent links established between all parties concerned, particularly at the local level between the Prefect and the director of the power plant, and at the national level between the Ministry of Industry and the emergency director in the EdF management. Local and national agreements define the roles of each.

Regular emergency exercises, including a media simulation, are carried out in order to test the organizational arrangements and

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\* At the global level, it is called the International Nuclear Event Scale. It has been introduced for a 1-year trial period and was developed by experts convened jointly by the IAEA and Nuclear Energy Agency of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.