

Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale Turns 20

INES Helps Authorities Rate Events and Communicate Their Significance

Whether in the case of a major international accident or a small incident of no consequences for people and the environment, the clear communication of nuclear events is crucial to maintaining people's trust in nuclear technology.

For 20 years now, the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale (INES) has been used to help authorities worldwide rate nuclear and radiological events and communicate their significance to the general public, the media and the technical community.

INES has often been compared to other scales used to measure physical properties such as temperature, as the Celsius, Kelvin or Fahrenheit scales, or rate events such as earthquakes, as Richter scale. Like these scales, INES also has a sound technical background and can be easily understood.

At a briefing held on 21 September 2010 during the 54th IAEA General Conference, experts explained why the use of INES is crucial to public understanding of nuclear events. "INES conveys the proper significance of an event and helps its common understanding," says Tony Stott, who has been chairing the INES Committee over the last six years. "Even in the case of a radiological or nuclear event with no consequence for people and the environment, public perception might be different," explains Rejane Spiegelberg Planer, Senior Safety Officer and INES Coordinator at the IAEA. "Rumours, miscommunication and misunderstandings are all factors that could influence public perception of events."

The adoption and use of INES helps authorities to promptly assess events through a common system and terminology, ultimately reinforcing their credibility in the public eye.

"We welcome all states that have yet to do so to join INES and start using it," says the IAEA's Spiegelberg Planer.

Background

Originally developed in the 1990s jointly by IAEA and Nuclear Energy Agency of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/NEA) and Member States experts, INES was last revised in 2008 to become a more versatile and informative tool.

INES is now designed to address events associated with the transport, storage and use of radioactive material and radiation sources, whether they occur at a nuclear installation or not.

-- By Giovanni Verlini, IAEA Division of Public Information
