Suggested Speaking Points

ENSREG

Second European Safety Conference

11-12 June 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to address this conference on nuclear safety in Europe today on behalf of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. I would like to thank ENSREG, the European Commission and all those involved in the organisation of the conference for putting together such an extensive programme in relation to this important subject.

Whilst it is the right of each country to determine their individual energy mix where nuclear power is part of the equation, there is an equal duty that where a State does choose to develop its nuclear industry, this will be done in line with the highest international standards with respect to human safety and environmental protection.

The issue of nuclear safety has consistently been central to European nuclear policy. However, this has gained even further urgency and impetus after the tragic events at Fukushima, Japan, caused by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami of March, 2011.

Fukushima, along with the previous Chernobyl accident, has served to demonstrate that the choice to develop a nuclear industry can ultimately have implications and repercussions for neighbouring countries and beyond when accidents or extreme natural events occur.

As a result, the citizens of Europe require, and deserve, reassurance that the highest achievable standards are being met in terms of nuclear safety across Europe.

The importance of openness and honesty in this area cannot be understated. The reality is that for a multiplicity of reasons, over the decades, the issue of nuclear energy, more so than any other energy generation method, continues to divide public opinion. Some public fears in relation to nuclear energy may be understandable, while others are more difficult to justify, but it remains the case that the onus is on us all to clearly show the Community's strong commitment to ensuring that the highest standards of nuclear safety are in place. It is not enough simply to tell people their fears are unfounded, we need to be able to show them in clear and practical terms what we are doing to minimise the risk of accidents and ensure their safety.

The primary responsibility for safety lies first and foremost with those who operate nuclear facilities. However, the potential trans-boundary impact of a nuclear accident, whether to human health, life, property or the environment, means that nuclear safety in one country is a matter of concern to all others, whether or not they have chosen to develop a nuclear energy industry of their own.

We need to reassess the definition of risk in assessing nuclear facilities. Unfortunately, with tragic consequences, there was an underestimation of the risk in the case of Fukushima. Therefore all nuclear facilities must be ready to deal with severe external hazards that might potentially have catastrophic consequences, including situations involving cumulative or unusual confluence of threats. If there is a lesson to be learnt from these terrible events, it is that nuclear safety is a matter for all.

There is also a need to look at the wider legal framework and seek to reinforce it, where appropriately. Also, where programmes of new builds of nuclear facilities are envisaged, all aspects of safety should be incorporated as a matter of priority from inception to decommissioning.

Multilateral co-ordination, and more importantly, co-operation, is vital to ensure that the right safety measures are in place and that they are effectively implemented in order to provide reassurance to civilians worldwide. It is not only important that we do the right thing in this regard, but that we are openly and visibly seen to be doing the right thing.

The establishment of ENSREG in 2007 represented a clear commitment by the EU Commission to the principle of continuous improvements in radiation safety standards and emphasising the importance of an effective European framework to ensure implementation of the highest standards of nuclear safety.

ENSREG, on which Ireland is strongly represented by the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland (RPII), provides a powerful forum for information exchange, establishment of best practice, and for an EU wide co-ordinated response to any potential risk, threat, incident, or accident that may arise. The recent ‘stress tests’ exercise, designed and co-ordinated by ENSREG, present an excellent example of such collaboration.

These safety audits, carried out to ENSREG’s specifications at all of the EU's 143 nuclear power plants, as well as those in non-EU Switzerland and Ukraine, provided invaluable in-depth reassessments in the event of extraordinary incidents such as earthquakes or floods occurring and were conducted in a thorough and transparent manner. They also provided a useful examination of the ability to cope with other circumstances that could potentially lead to the loss of safety systems

As we are aware, the stress tests were, by their nature, a reassessment that had to be performed over quite a limited time period. As such, it was not possible for them to examine all aspects of nuclear safety at all nuclear facilities. Notwithstanding this, the national assessments brought considerable value to the whole process – both within Europe and as an example for other countries and international bodies.

The Commission decision to publish its views on the stress tests as well as on other on-going and planned activities around nuclear safety and related issues was a welcome decision. It demonstrated to a concerned public that the authorities were not only responding to their safety concerns and learning from the lessons of Fukushima, but were also willing to share the results of their learning to the community as a whole. This is vital to ensure public confidence.

ENSREG provides an excellent medium for the sharing of information to this end. The sharing of knowledge and lessons learned is fundamental to further development of nuclear safety. It is invaluable when it comes to maximising the effectiveness of nuclear safety measures, and improving them. But information sharing is of the utmost importance in co-ordinating any response to any accident or incident involving radioactive materials, particularly in order to ensure adequate emergency planning for incidents are put in place.

The value of a well-co-ordinated network of regulators with such expertise cannot be overestimated. However, such a response must be planned for in advance in order to be effective. On-going dialogue is imperative for any co-ordinated emergency planning. ENSREG can facilitate such a process.

Ensuring safety requires an on-going process of continuous improvement, and the findings from the stress tests, in common with

findings from national regulatory inspections and peer reviews, continue to demonstrate there is never room for complacency in this vitally important area.

As well as providing a forum for sharing of expertise and knowledge, ENSREG also provides a mechanism for the co-ordinated response in the event of an accident or disaster leading to a significant release of radioactive materials. The value of a well-co-ordinated network of regulators with such expertise cannot be over-estimated.

In addition to the nuclear stress tests and follow up processes, there are a number of other EU initiatives in train which have the potential to significantly increase safety margins.

One notable example, perhaps, is the recast of the Basic Safety Standards (BSS) directive which will regulate for significant safeguards and techniques to protect workers and members of the public, and patients from the negative effects of radioactive materials generally.

This Directive signals the importance of radiation protection in an international context, demonstrating not only Europe's commitment but also leadership in this area. Agreement on the BSS was the key priority of the Irish Presidency team and at its meeting on 29th May the Working Party on Atomic Questions concluded discussions and approved the text of the Proposal for a Council Directive laying down basic safety standards for protection against the dangers from exposure to ionising radiation.

The success in progressing the BSS was an excellent example of Member States working effectively, collectively, to deliver improvements to nuclear safety across Europe.

However, such constructive cooperation on matters of nuclear safety is also possible between individual Member States. A recent example of this involved the Irish Government's project to assess the potential risks to Ireland associated with the Sellafield Site and the Low-Level Waste Repository in the UK.

This assessment, carried out over 4 years, was conducted by a team of independent, international experts commissioned by the Irish Government, and facilitated by the UK authorities. The key output was a Probabilistic Risk Assessment (PRA) report of the risks to Ireland and Irish interests from incidents at the Sellafield site.

This initiative represented a significant advance in addressing Ireland's concerns about Sellafield, and is an example of how close co-operation and partnership by neighbouring countries in a spirit of sharing, of information, data and skills can help alleviate concerns and enhance trust.

To conclude, Europe is linked not only by history, culture, economic and financial interests, but also by a shared physical environment.

Thus, in making key decisions, such as the form of energy to be generated in the future, it is incumbent on Member States to consider not alone the implications for their own citizens and their own environment, but also the potential consequences for their neighbours as a result of their decision. It is essential that all member states work together, with commitment and determination, including through the medium of ENSREG, to address these issues and engage in constructive bilateral and multilateral dialogue based on mutual respect and acknowledgement of one another's legitimate concerns.

Nuclear technology, whether for energy, medical or other uses, will continue to impact on our daily lives in increasingly sophisticated ways, adding layers of complexity to the range of roles and challenges facing the European Atomic Community.

The sharing of experience along with the development of best practices at both the European and international level will help to improve nuclear safety into the future.

Transparency instils confidence and can be a source of considerable reassurance for the citizens of Europe, including those in States bordering those utilising nuclear energy.

I hope that you will take this opportunity to explore areas for further sharing of information and discussion to develop nuclear safety, and that this ultimately leads to greater transparency, trust, and mutual understanding and cooperation amongst Member States.

I look forward to the output of the various sessions and discussions that have been scheduled later today and tomorrow and wish all participants well in these engagements.

Ends