November 2020

Nuclear safety management in France in the context related to Covid-19

November 2020 update

This document, prepared for the 48th meeting of the IAEA Commission on Safety Standards, provides an update on the situation in France since the beginning of June 2020.

National context

As in most European countries, the epidemic situation ceased in France during the summer, then gradually resumed in the autumn. The significant spread of the virus and the risk of saturation of the hospital system led the government to put in place, since 28 October, a public lockdown which imposes, in particular, teleworking wherever possible and the closure of businesses considered as non-essential. For the time being, the measures are substantially less restrictive than the first lockdown which took place from 17 March to 11 May. In particular, it allows schools to operate face-to-face.

Situation at the licensees'

Nuclear power plants

Currently, the operator EDF maintains a normal operating regime for its reactors. As previously mentioned, some of the reactor shutdowns for maintenance and refuelling initially planned for the spring had been postponed. The reactor shutdowns that have been carried out have lasted 15 to 20% longer due to social distancing measures and the lesser availability of subcontracted personnel. In order to have sufficient production capacity during the winter, which in France corresponds to the period of highest demand for electricity, some reactors were preventively shut down during the summer to save fuel and allow reloading to be postponed to next spring.

Other nuclear installations

Many of the facilities that were shut down in the spring were gradually restarted during the summer.

Since the introduction of the new lockdown measures, operators have been using teleworking for their tertiary staff, mainly in central services.

On the whole, nuclear installations are operating normally. This is also the case for decommissioning sites as well as waste management sites.

Organisation of the ASN and consequences for the conduct of its missions

Following the introduction of the new governmental lockdown measures, the ASN has introduced a five-day teleworking regime for all its staff. Nonetheless, specific activities requiring face-to-face interaction are still possible. On this basis, the continuity of the ASN's missions is maintained.

Regulations and licensing

In general, regulatory and licensing activities are continuing in a normal manner.

Oversight

The inspection programme for the year 2020 was revised in June to prioritise high-stakes inspections. The ASN estimates that around 400 out of a total of 1,900 planned inspections will not be carried out in 2020, mainly in areas other than nuclear safety.

After a return to a near-normal situation at the end of summer in terms of on-site inspections, inspectors are now again being asked to favour remote monitoring where possible. In practice, the documentary verification parts of inspections are carried out remotely and on-site travel is largely limited to field inspection.

On site, the wearing of masks, the application of barrier gestures and compliance with the measures put in place by the operator are de rigueur.

Particular attention is paid to the medical sector. Inspectors are asked to ensure that both on-site and remote inspections do not disrupt the activities of this sector, which is under stress due to the health crisis.

Emergency

Crisis organisation has remained fully operational and able to be activated at any time.

Public information

Relations with the press have continued normally since July.

The assessment of nuclear safety and radiation protection in France in 2019 was presented in the regions by means of video press conferences and press releases.

Dematerialised resources now constitute an additional media relations tool whose deployment has been accelerated by the crisis.

International relations

Most international meetings now take place remotely.

Work within the various international frameworks continues in a more or less degraded mode.

Bilateral relations are more impacted by the situation since face-to-face meetings (high-level meetings, technical meetings, cross inspections, etc.) are their primary vector.

Consequences on the ASN's strategy

The Covid-19 crisis will have lasting consequences in the short and medium terms. It will take time to have a complete and definitive feedback.

ASN is currently carrying out a two-level reflection, at the operational level for the short term, and at the strategic level for the medium and long terms. Thus, ASN has taken into account preliminary feedback from the health crisis in its operational orientation plan for 2021. Subjects such as remote management, maintaining social ties and internal culture through extended teleworking, the use of new IT and communication tools and changes in inspection practices have been taken into account.

In addition, reflection at the strategic level will be integrated into the ASN's next multi-year strategic plan. Among the key topics that will be explored in greater depth are the strengthening of confidence in the regulator and experts, the development of better knowledge and awareness of risks, the regular sharing of feedback, the establishment of links with local relays trusted by the public, the setting up of regular emergency drills involving the public, the early involvement of the national education system, the involvement of the public and local representatives in crises management. International exchanges will enrich this reflection.