



XA04N1201

PAGS - Public Perception and Acceptance

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While Protective Action Guides or PAGs have been a part of the lexicon of the radiation protection field for several decades, the concept of accepting higher levels of risk under certain situations has not received adequate scrutiny by the general public, the media or elected officials.

Consequently there is a question as to how implementation of PAGs would be perceived by the above groups in the event that such implementation became necessary. A personal case in point involves the response of an executive in the food industry. When the concept of selling a food product meeting the PAGs was explained his response was, "we won't sell a contaminated product, we would dump the unprocessed raw food. Our industry image is that of a natural unadulterated food". While this may be an isolated view, there is a need to determine what is the perception and consequently what would be the response if PAGs were implemented today. If the response was negative by anyone of the three groups listed previously, then there is an obvious need for a program to assure receptiveness by those concerned. However, this may face formidable obstacles. This is because the terms radiation and radioactive have gained generally negative word associations, e.g. "deadly" radiation and radioactive "desert". The former term was recently heard in a taped presentation at a Museum of Natural History on a completely unrelated subject. The latter term was part of a recent article heading in the Wall Street Journal. Incidentally the article was discussing television.

Thus beyond the scientific issues of setting PAGs and the administrative and procedural issues of implementing PAGs there is the issue of society's understanding and acceptance of PAGs. Particularly, how can such understanding and acceptance be achieved in a situation which is associated with an actual or perceived radiation emergency?

These are not questions that radiation or agricultural scientists can answer alone. These are questions requiring the additional input of social scientists. These are questions that also require the sponsorship of more than one particular discipline, agency or organization. This is to achieve a broader perspective and understanding of the issue and to stimulate creative ways of making PAGs work effectively if the need ever arises for their actual use. While PAGs may have a sound technical base, this is not sufficient alone to assure that they will work in today's sociopolitical environment.

