

## **Promoting Eurofab: Communications on a Sensitive International Project**

J. Duperray  
COGEMA LOGISTICS (AREVA Group)  
1 rue des Herons - BP 309, St. Quentin en Yvelnes  
France

### **ABSTRACT**

To reduce the risk of nuclear weapons materials falling into the wrong hands, the United States and the Russian Federation agreed in September 2000 on the disposition of 68 metric tons of surplus weapons-grade plutonium, 34 tons from each side. Both countries are to dispose of their plutonium by converting it to mixed oxide fuel (MOX) to be used to generate electricity in existing reactors.

Before significant quantities of MOX fuel can be used in U.S. reactors, the performance of this European technology must be verified by the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). The construction of a U.S. MOX fuel fabrication facility is under way, but the United States does not currently have the capability to produce MOX fuel. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) therefore made arrangements with the AREVA group to have four MOX assemblies fabricated in France from U.S. weapons-grade plutonium. In October 2004, 140 kilograms of defense plutonium powder were shipped from Charleston, South Carolina, to Cherbourg, France. Five months later, four lead assemblies, fabricated at COGEMA's Cadarache and MELOX sites in southern France, were transported back to the United States for loading in the Catawba nuclear station in North Carolina operated by Duke Power.

This transportation and fabrication operation, code-named Eurofab, brought us face-to-face with major communications issues, and all the more so in that special nuclear materials were involved against a backdrop of bilateral non-proliferation agreements. From the very beginning of Eurofab, we expected this project to be the object of much media interest – which certainly came true! – and the importance of a dedicated, multilateral communications policy was obvious to all partners. Nuclear opponents in the U.S. and France were mobilizing well in advance to thwart the operation. Early on, to provide the media and the general public with objective information and squelch misinformation, the parties set up a communications task force that took on several critical assignments, including developing and updating position papers on sensitive topics, monitoring media coverage, disseminating factual information, coordinating the information release policy, and organizing media events.

Through the Eurofab experience, this paper takes a look at the special aspects of communications on industrial operations when implemented in a sensitive geopolitical environment and involving multiple partners, each with its own communications culture. Eurofab showed that what might seem to be an unusual alliance – a communications group made of government and industry representatives from several countries – proved to be extremely efficient. We will especially focus on the lessons learned in the field of public acceptance.

## **Different Parties, Different Approaches to Communications**

As a world-ranked nuclear group, AREVA was understandably interested in making known its involvement in the Eurofab project through the Duke-Cogema-Stone & Webster consortium, known as DCS. After all, it was unprecedented to have the group's *savoir faire* acknowledged and sought by the U.S. Department of Energy – why not make it known? For a while, the United States had not considered power generation to be the most relevant answer in the debate over the disposition of weapons-grade plutonium. Yet this recent technical choice led to an operation that clearly constitutes the best example of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

In addition, AREVA is highly committed to the U.S. energy market, where it has strong ties with local industries and operators. Eurofab and the surplus plutonium disposition program have obviously drawn attention to the group in America and given it opportunities to strengthen its mutually beneficial relationships with the U.S. government and commercial partners. In fact, AREVA is already a major player in North America, ranking among the United States' largest employers in the nuclear sector, with 5,300 employees.

For the group, Eurofab was not only a newsworthy project, it was symbolic of its multicultural profile. Our promotion of the project was far from being an advertising campaign: it was about providing information to the general public on nuclear energy's contribution to world peace. There were concerns that nuclear opponents, especially in France, would launch a major misinformation campaign when the project was launched: all the more reason to communicate proactively.

The U.S. Department of Energy, a key stakeholder in the Eurofab project and a customer of the AREVA group, worked diligently to give the general public information on this unique effort to produce civilian power from weapons-grade nuclear materials. The DOE took steps early in the project to develop and implement a communications plan with its commercial partners, and it provided significant financial support to the related communications activities. Nonetheless, the Department of Energy and the National Nuclear Security Agency (NNSA) are primarily tasked with enhancing the United States' security through nuclear defense applications. For decades, the institutions and laboratories that are now part of the DOE – the Department was created in 1977 – have been involved in scientific projects requiring a high level of security and compartmentalization of information. With the emergence of nonproliferation as the main security issue for the nuclear community, the DOE's role is to ensure the security of nuclear sites and of special nuclear materials stockpiles. Information disclosure is sometimes incompatible with this mission.

Communications also had to be coordinated with the governmental authorities involved in the Eurofab project, including the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Ministry of Industry, which provided full media support. When the time came for the sensitive sea shipments between the United States and Europe and road transfers of plutonium on French soil, all of the partners involved in the public information campaign and a multinational staff were ready to implement the dedicated communication plans.

## **A Sensitive Geopolitical Background**

In September 2003, when AREVA issued its first press release on the Eurofab project, the group was quite new to providing information on a surplus plutonium disposition program. Unlike any other communications campaign, the plan was to write and talk about an industrial program of the U.S. and Russian governments, which jointly agreed in 2000 to dispose of 34 tons of weapons-grade plutonium on each side. Creativity was not advisable in this situation. From 2003 to 2005, all speeches and communication materials had to comply with the various requirements of this sensitive governmental framework and political background. For example, the word “disarmament” to refer to the disposition of weapons-grade nuclear materials was banished. Sometimes, wording really matters.

## **To Make Things Tougher: Motivated Opponents**

Starting in the summer of 2004, when preparations began for the first maritime shipment, antinuclear activists constantly tried to stir up public opinion and keep Eurofab in the media. The topic was hardly noticed by the media in 2003 and during the first half of 2004, even though AREVA announced in September 2003 that it had won a MOX fuel fabrication contract from the DOE.

By August 2004, organizations like Greenpeace France and Sortir du Nucléaire (“Let’s Get Out of Nuclear”) had mustered their troops. Demonstrators were standing along the access road to the COGEMA La Hague site, where the U.S. weapons-grade plutonium was headed, sailboats were gathering off the coast of Normandy near Cherbourg to form a Nuclear-Free Seas Fleet, concerts were organized, and so on. When the weapons-grade plutonium arrived in France, a few demonstrators illegally hoisted their sails in the perimeter of the Cherbourg naval defense harbor. Yet the demonstrations didn’t attract as many people as expected, and it quickly became apparent that the opponents would have a hard time eliciting a popular uprising out of their campaign. But they never lost heart. Until March 2005, with the end of Eurofab operations in France and the return shipment, they kept protesting in a variety of ways.

In the United States, where a MOX fuel fabrication facility will be built over the coming years, the environmentalists were less media-oriented. They relied mainly on the strong “localism” of concerned communities. Around Charleston, the port of departure for the plutonium bound for France, and Savannah River, the DOE site chosen to host the MOX fuel fabrication facility, they held a few demonstrations, which did not attract the local population, and participated in public hearings, one of the mainstays of American democracy. The Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League (BREDL) and the Nuclear Information & Resource Service (NIRS) argued against the impending loading of French-origin MOX fuel at the Catawba power plant in North Carolina before the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board (ASLB), a panel of judges specialized in disputes concerning nuclear programs.

It is also relevant to mention the role of the “opponents in disguise”. These are so-called experts that the “antis” called on to discuss the scientific and technical merits of the Eurofab project. John Large, a controversial engineer, issued a report on the safety of nuclear road transportation in March 2004. A few months later, the Wise agency published a report violently criticizing the purported risks of the Eurofab operation; this document went totally unnoticed.

### To Make Things Exciting: The Media Frenzy

The media coverage of the activists' deeds was impressive, though all out of proportion. The local media in Normandy and southern France and France's national media scurried at every announcement of a demonstration. From Charleston to Cherbourg, cameramen carefully chose their angles to make the protesters look like a big crowd. Even British papers focused on the environmentalists ("Protesters Ready to Chase Plutonium Ships"; *The Times*, October 1, 2004). In the States, *The Charleston Post and Courier* in South Carolina and *The Charlotte Observer* in North Carolina devoted a lot of space to the topic, but the leading national newspapers covered it sparingly. The French media craze that followed the outward-bound shipment to Europe reflected a wide range of opinions on the project, from approval to skepticism. The French daily *Le Figaro* acknowledged "the continuation of atomic disarmament" and underscored that it was "not very often that the American administration recognizes the quality of French know-how." The French weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* was more emotional: "Plutonium: the Scary Shipment". Most of the audiovisual media also milked the topic. As a result, the press officers and spokespersons AREVA had appointed to the project received up to fifty media requests per day.



Fig. 1. October 2004: as 140 kilograms of U.S. weapons-grade plutonium are unloaded on a French wharf, the media interest reaches its peak

### **A Dedicated Communications Plan: Networking Before Acting**

With the full support of the DOE, a task force was formed well in advance, in 2003, to handle public information and communications activities related to the Eurofab project. Preparedness, being proactive and coordination were seen as key values early on. Representatives of the DOE, the DCS consortium and AREVA conferred regularly, joined by representatives of PNTL, the company chosen for the maritime shipment. Their association helped to coordinate communications on the project. There was an absolute obligation to have materials and speeches approved in advance by the DOE. The association also allowed communications staffs to benefit from their foreign partners' knowledge and reply to a wider range of media requests.

The group "met" during weekly conference calls, during which the members shared the local news. The rest of the time, the staff members dealt with temporary or minor subjects through less formal exchanges. This working arrangement was convenient, but it would have not been efficient in critical periods without the real meetings and working sessions that were held prior to operations. The first contacts were made in the U.S. exactly one year before the plutonium was to be shipped from the United States to France, and they rapidly led to the production of a common language and databases. From that point forward, meetings took place in Washington, D.C. or in Paris whenever Eurofab operations so required.

### **A Dedicated Communications Plan: Key Public Affairs Activities**

From the drafting of common language to media crisis preparedness, the communications officers of the government agencies and companies involved in the project tackled a wide range of activities:

- Language and communications material: It was an obvious necessity to use the same facts, figures and language. Throughout the project, joint materials were prepared and various documents were made available to the media, mainly by the U.S. DOE and the AREVA group. The leading French daily newspaper, *Le Monde*, once published graphics that had been designed in this context.
- Information disclosure: An imperfect information disclosure policy can lead to real media trouble. For all of the parties involved, it was of utmost importance to deliver the right information at the right time, and to be certain that no member of the network would contradict their speech. To that end, press releases on Eurofab operations – especially transportation – were reviewed by the task force, and their publication was scrupulously synchronized.
- Organization of media events: From the summer of 2004, when the Eurofab project began to be a reality – maritime shipment, preparations for the receiving of U.S. plutonium in Normandy, etc. – AREVA welcomed leading journalists at the two sites involved, Cadarache and the port of Cherbourg. This was designed to take the lead on the media scene and outdistance groups like Greenpeace, whose misinformation campaign was already in full swing. At COGEMA's Cadarache site, on September 22, 2004, three spokesmen told the press about the project's general features, the safety of maritime shipments of plutonium and the details of MOX fuel fabrication. The journalists were allowed to bring their cameras

inside the very facility that would receive U.S. plutonium a few weeks later. The approach was successful, and confirmed that being proactive definitely pays in the field of public affairs.

- Crisis preparedness: In addition to routine communications activities, all of the parties agreed on the need to prepare for a potential media crisis. Crisis management cells were set up in Washington, D.C and Paris for the outward-bound shipment of plutonium and inward-bound shipment of MOX fuel. The cells were manned twenty-four hours a day by a public affairs officer and technical experts, and remained in constant contact with the DOE and the French authorities in charge of the materials' security.

In most circumstances, preparedness consisted of monitoring the legal scene and the media – for example, having a Duke / DCS spokesperson at the ASLB hearings – to identify current topics and quickly consider alternatives for related actions or reactions.

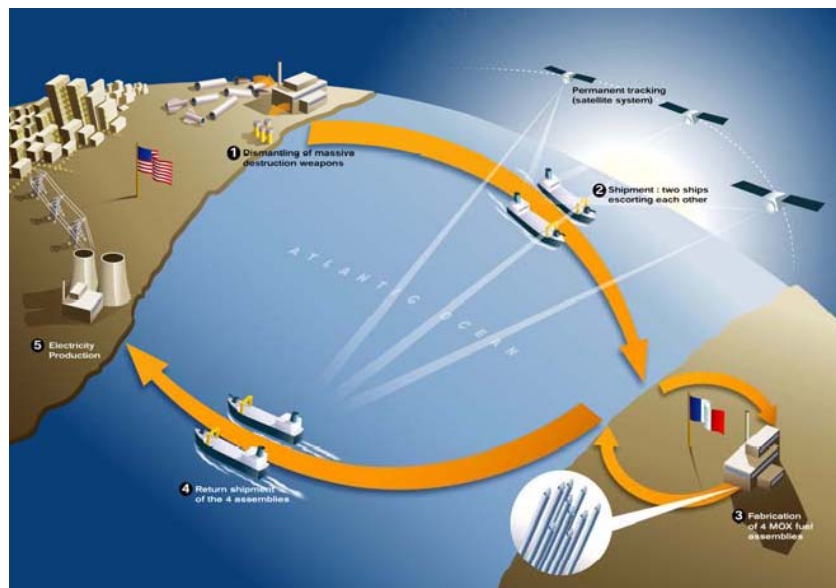


Fig. 2. Communication materials: graphics describing the Eurofab transportation and manufacturing operations

### Industry's Key Messages: One Event, Several Topics

In France, communication tools prepared for Eurofab and related speeches addressed the following topics, among others:

- The purpose of the operation: disposition of plutonium of defense origin and power generation.
- AREVA's unique know how: the ability to fabricate MOX fuel from this special nuclear material in the group's high-tech facilities.
- The safety of nuclear materials transportation and of COGEMA's Cadarache and MELOX sites, where the MOX fuel was fabricated and assembled.

- The inconsistency of the environmentalists, who fought for years to eliminate weapons-grade nuclear materials, but suddenly protested against an approach that was clearly contributing to that elimination.
- The confidentiality of certain aspects of the project: even before public acceptance of the Eurofab project, the safety and security of the U.S. weapons-grade plutonium had top priority for all of the parties involved. From the early days of the program, spokesmen publicly admitted that some of its technical and logistical components should remain secret “because of security issues.” Surprisingly, this “restricted communications” stand didn’t spark any controversy, apart from the opponents’ usual rumblings. At the same time, unclassified facts and figures concerning nuclear materials, nuclear shipments, etc., were disclosed to the public, contributing to acceptance of the confidentiality of some topics.

The co-existence of so many issues meant that several specialized spokesmen had to be mobilized, one for media questions relating to nuclear shipments, another to deal with MOX fuel fabrication, etc. With everyone speaking within the scope of his or her own knowledge, communications on quite a complex project were under control.

## **LEARNING THE LESSONS**

What is the point of implementing a massive communications plan if there is no tool to quantify its results and question its efficiency? When all was said and done over the Eurofab project, AREVA commissioned a telephone survey from the French polling company, IPSOS Institute. The survey was conducted on October 15 and 16, 2004, with a sample of 930 people representative of the French population.

The survey showed that awareness of the U.S. plutonium transportation operation was particularly high in France: around 9 French people out of 10, or 86%, had seen, read or heard about the transport. The most informed categories were men, upper income levels, upper educational levels, and people aged 35 years or older, especially retired people.

It also appeared that most respondents correctly interpreted the nature of the operation: when asked about its purpose, 55% of the respondents spontaneously spoke of treatment, recycling or nuclear waste processing in France. The concept behind the operation thus seems to have been well understood. Only 9% gave wrong answers, which is exceptional for such a demanding question.

So the operation was understood as a technological feat. However, the nature and origin of the processed material posed problems, with 68% of the respondents in favor of the idea of a demonstration of “reliability” and “technological advance”, but 57% of the opinion that it is “not normal” to have U.S. defense plutonium processed in France.

In addition, 47% of the respondents were in favor of “stopping operations of this kind”, but the same number were not opposed to their continuation. It was observed, once again, that French opinion is divided when nuclear energy is at stake. But one must keep in mind the fact that Eurofab was limited to shipping weapons-grade plutonium to France within the current context of French-American relations... To rally half of the public around such a topic would have been

out of the question without a specially-designed public outreach campaign.

Another nice surprise was the general public's reaction to the confidentiality measures and restrictions on our industry's transparency. Since the priority of the governments involved was the physical protection of the shipped materials, we knew from the beginning that information disclosure would be strictly controlled. There were concerns that people would misunderstand these constraints. In the end, 82% of the respondents said that it was "normal for some transportation data to remain confidential." People are definitely accustomed to security matters, and they tolerate confidentiality when the facts support it.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through coordination among the various players involved in the Eurofab project, globally consistent and synchronized communications were produced. Despite the many difficulties – the geopolitical environment, the complexity of the topics to be dealt with, the misinformation campaign orchestrated by the opponents, and the media frenzy – the dedicated communications plan led to public acceptance of the operation. No massive demonstrations were held against the Eurofab project, despite the environmentalists' numerous calls for strong "civic opposition". Furthermore, the media that covered the Eurofab case rarely made emotionally-driven judgments. In other words, the working relationship among communications staffs from both government and industry proved to be critical to promoting this ambitious program. Some of the good practices – preparation of communications plans well in advance, proactive information disclosure designed to pre-empt the opponents, and coordination among spokespersons – can now be pointed to as key success factors transferable to any other multilateral communications campaign.