

Sustaining shipments of radioactive materials

Over recent years the radioactive material transport industry has, in certain instances, faced a reduced availability of transport routes and carriers as a result of decisions by commercial carriers, ports and handling facilities not to accept radioactive cargoes.

Transport plays an essential role in bringing the benefits of the atom to people the world over. The safe, efficient transport of radioactive materials is vital to many aspects of modern life, from the generation of electricity, to medicine and health, scientific research and agriculture.

As with any product, radioactive material has to be transported from producer to end user. In fact, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) estimates that over ten million packages of radioactive materials are routinely transported each year. For decades the radioactive material transport sector has safely and securely managed such shipments; this record of success is due primarily to the effectiveness of the regulatory regime and the collective competence of the entities performing packaging and transport activities.

Yet despite this excellent safety and security record a worrisome trend for global supply is that some shipping companies, air carriers, ports and countries have instituted policies of not accepting radioactive (or Class 7) materials.

The reasons for delays and denials of shipments are manifold and often have their origin in misperceptions about the nature of the materials and the requirements for their safe handling and carriage. Delays and denials of Class 7 shipments may have an impact on safety and public health while also creating economic burdens and logistical problems for transports. There is growing recognition internationally of the problems created by shipment delays and denials and they now are being addressed in a more concerted way by such organisations as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

Now more than ever it is important that industry share its experiences and ideas. WNTI is committed to do all it can to address these issues and recently established an Industry-led Task Force for this very purpose. This Task Force has been analysing the issues surrounding delays and denials, examining specific incidents and potential causes, to allow full consideration of appropriate industry actions and responses. The Task Force is now moving beyond the problem definition stage to the development of effective industry responses.

All stakeholders in the transport of radioactive materials share a common interest in protecting and promoting safe, cost-efficient and secure transport.