

TIME REQUIREMENT FOR INITIAL PRESS RELEASE

QUESTION: How long does a DOE/NNSA site/facility have before notifying the public and the media of an emergency?

ANSWER: DOE O 151.1C requires: “Each DOE/NNSA site/facility must provide accurate, candid, and timely information about emergencies to workers and the public” (Section 4. a [21]); and, “Accurate, candid, and timely information must be provided to workers, the news media, and the public during an emergency to establish facts and avoid speculation” (CRD, paragraph 16, 1st sentence). DOE G 151.1-4 (Chapter 9, Section 9.5.2) provides guidance regarding what constitutes “timely information” stating: “While the DOE Order does not stipulate that news releases and other associated notifications or news conferences occur in a specific time frame, DOE/NNSA should adhere to the standards of other Federal agencies and private industry by releasing information within one (1) hour of the declaration of the event.”

Considering that information concerning the emergency event is included in notifications provided to state and local officials within 15-30 minutes, news media are likely to know about the event shortly thereafter and will be interested in obtaining information as soon as possible. In some situations, local officials may use the news media to communicate the need for protective actions for the general public. DOE/NNSA site emergency public information organizations need to be proactive in media relations in an emergency to maintain credibility concerning the emergency response and associated protective actions, and to discourage rumors and speculation about the event. Prompt, accurate, and concise media releases will allow the news media to focus on the event and the facts. The site emergency public information organization needs to communicate quickly that an emergency response is underway, describe the nature of that emergency (to the extent known), indicate that offsite agencies have been notified as required, and state that details are being gathered to keep the media and public informed. In doing so, the site identifies itself as the source of emergency information and demonstrates commitment to keeping the public informed.

Understandably, a site emergency public information organization may have difficulty in obtaining significant details about an emergency to communicate to the news media in the first hour. DOE G 151.1-4, Chapter 9, Section 9.5.2, recognizes this and recommends using “fill-in-the-blank,” pre-formatted news releases to accomplish the initial news release. Because information that has been provided to offsite agencies via emergency notification forms should be considered as having been approved, these pre-formatted news releases can draw information directly from the emergency notifications that have already been completed. In addition, model pre-formatted press releases are available for reference from the EMI SIG Emergency Public Information Subcommittee website (<http://orise.orau.gov/emi/epi/resources.htm>).