



UNECE

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

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UNECE Releases Recommendations on Radioactive Scrap

The first set of internationally agreed Recommendations to monitor and reduce the risks involving radioactivity in scrap metal has been published by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) in Geneva.

Recycled scrap metal is a commodity that crosses most of the world's borders, with 184 million tonnes traded internationally in 2004.¹ Up until now however, no unified guidelines on checking for radioactivity in recycled scrap metal have existed. The UNECE Recommendations represent a critical first step to address this problem.

A UNECE survey of 55 countries² found that while a growing number of States are checking imports and exports of scrap metal for radiation, less than half of the scrap yards do so, and there is no consistency in the approaches. Yet with 50% of steel being produced from numerous recycled sources, monitors are increasingly detecting radiation in scrap metal. In the US alone over 5000 radiation monitor alarms rang in 2004 as a result of detections in metal scrap³. Many of these detections are from natural sources and represent low levels of radiation. Others, however, may be from losses, accidents or inadvertent disposal of radioactive material. All alarms must be taken seriously.

In addition to potential health and environmental risks, the economic ramifications involved are significant. The cost of search, decontamination and clean up can amount to millions of US dollars and put companies out of business altogether. In the words of a representative from the scrap metal processing industry "*not a single normal client in the world has any interest in scrap with radioactively contaminated material.*"

The UNECE Recommendations provide an important tool for scrap yards, metal smelters, Customs, regulatory authorities and transporters, amongst others, to prevent incidents and better deal with them should they happen. While these Recommendations are not legally binding, they provide guidance to all interested parties based on existing best practice. The UNECE has already received requests for capacity building to better implement these Recommendations and is currently working with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) to support countries in this respect.

The Recommendations are available in English, French and Russian and may be obtained from the UNECE secretariat. They can also be downloaded from the UNECE website (see contacts below). Their production was made possible thanks to support from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

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¹ Bureau of International Recycling (BIR).

² UNECE, 2006, Monitoring and Response Procedures for Radioactive Scrap Metal. Proceedings of the UNECE Group of Experts on Monitoring Radioactive Scrap Metal (Geneva, 12-14 June, 2006).

³ UNECE, 2006, Recommendations on Monitoring and Response Procedures for Radioactive Scrap Metal. Report of an International Group of Experts convened by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

Additional background Information

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has been involved in the topic of radioactive scrap metal since 2001. It defines radioactive scrap metal as comprising *“radioactively contaminated scrap metal, activated scrap metal and scrap metal with radioactive source(s) or substances contained within it. It may include both radioactive substances that are subject to regulatory control and radioactive substances that are outside regulatory control”*[1]. While UNECE’s constituency rests essentially within Europe and North America, this particular work is global.

In 2002, together with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the European Commission, the UNECE published a report on the *“Improvement of the Management of Radiation Protection Aspects in the Recycling of Metal Scrap”*[2]. The report recommended measures to avoid the introduction of radiation sources into the metal recycling stream. As a result of that report, and on the initiative of the USA and the Russian Federation, a UNECE Expert Group was set up, which met for the first time in 2004 and again in 2006. The aim of the Expert Group was to encourage exchanges of experiences and practices with a view to promoting the harmonisation of best practices in preventing incidents from radioactive scrap metal and in dealing promptly and effectively with any such incidents. In 2004, the Group recommended to undertake the following three activities: 1. The development of a *“Protocol”* or *“Recommendations”* to increase the capture of radioactive material in scrap metal, to reduce potential contamination and to aid in the disposition of found materials, 2. To improve information exchange via an international web portal and, 3. To support international training and capacity-building programmes on the topic of monitoring and responding to radioactive scrap metal.

As a first step and in order to obtain a better understanding of the current international situation concerning radioactive scrap metal, a detailed questionnaire was sent out to over 60 countries in 2004 and 2006. Questions covered the areas of regulation, monitoring, dispositioning, contracts and reporting. An analysis of the responses from 55 countries helped to identify best practices and areas requiring further attention under three fields of action: prevention, detection and response. The detailed analysis was presented at the UNECE Expert Group meeting in June 2006 [3].

At this same meeting the *“Recommendations on Monitoring and Response Procedures for Radioactive Scrap Metal”* [1] were discussed and agreed.

These Recommendations provide concrete guidance based, to the extent possible, on existing national, regional and international instruments and standards and on national experience. They are intended to support States in developing their own national systems of monitoring and response while encouraging further cooperation, coordination and harmonization at the international level. They are also intended to facilitate international trade in, and the use of, recycled scrap metal without compromising safety. The Recommendations cover both radioactive substances that are subject to regulatory control and radioactive substances that are outside such control and should be seen as complementary to existing programmes. The IAEA will use the UNECE Recommendations to further develop its safety guides and standards allowing regulatory authorities to deal effectively in particular with orphan radioactive sources in the metal recycling industry.

In an effort to support international capacity to implement the Recommendations, the UNECE has undertaken a survey [4] of existing materials within 20 countries, a number of international organizations and the industry. The aim of the survey was to identify main focus areas and gaps. Leading from this UNECE survey, the United Nations Institute on Training and Research (UNITAR) has developed a training and capacity building strategy that will support States to define their training gaps and address them.

All relevant activities can be found on a dedicated section of the main UNECE website (see: <http://www.unece.org/trans/radiation/radiation.html>).

The site contains the UNECE Recommendations, a series of tools, national best practices provided by different countries, publications and some training and capacity materials.

References:

[1] UNECE, 2006, Recommendations on Monitoring and Response Procedures for Radioactive Scrap Metal. Report of an International Group of Experts convened by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), UNECE, Geneva, Switzerland.

[2] UNECE, 2002, Report on the Improvement of the Management of Radiation Protection Aspects in the Recycling of Metal Scrap, co-sponsored by the International Atomic Energy Agency and the European Commission, UNECE, Geneva, Switzerland.

[3] UNECE, 2006, Monitoring and Response Procedures for Radioactive Scrap Metal. Proceedings of the UNECE Group of Experts on Monitoring Radioactive Scrap Metal (Geneva, 12-14 June, 2006).

[4] See UNECE website: http://www.unece.org/trans/radiation/tools_training.html