



**Recap of 4/2/26 Conversation with Steve McDuffie,
International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)**

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

The brainpower and aggregate accomplishment in our recent Zoom gathering with Steve McDuffie was breathtaking. As one participant later said, it was "an amazing group of people." The only people we were missing were aspiring leaders who need mentors. Since I'm not meeting as many young people at the moment, please know that I'll add your mentees to the mailing list if you (or they) want to email me.

The collage above includes photos taken in the course of Steve's work in Vienna. The IAEA's reason for being can be summed up as "Atoms for peace and development: We are the world's centre for cooperation in the nuclear field and seek to promote the safe, secure and peaceful use of nuclear technologies." That includes everything from reactors to medical isotopes. The photo at bottom is touching - don't miss it. Steve was in Chernobyl for 3 weeks last fall.

Steve shared the practical arrangements that enabled his detail to the IAEA via a State Department contract made possible by the fact that IAEA donor countries sometimes fund extra positions (one person can fill one of them for a maximum of 7 years). He has been a nuclear safety executive for a long time at the Hanford Site in southeastern Washington State, overseeing lab operations and other activities. When his work in Vienna was extended recently, he was told that the Department of Energy would continue holding his job for him (if that were to change, he could retire). Steve's wife, a math ed professor at Washington State University, teaches remotely from Vienna most of the time, commuting to Pullman, WA when she needs to be on campus. Steve has a UN passport that enables him to travel as needed.

Steve's position is in the Division of Nuclear Installation Safety. As he explains his division's focus, they're not regulators. Instead, their advisory work helps governments understand what a good regulatory program looks like. That's different from the more well-known Office of Safeguards, which is focused on making sure nuclear materials aren't being diverted for non-peaceful purposes and which also inspects programs, including here in the U.S. His office puts out guidance mostly about natural hazards, such as ash from volcanoes. When a country invites them to visit, they put together a small team with the appropriate expertise and write Terms of Reference (i.e., what we'll talk about while we're there) before they travel. A big reason staff are traveling is to help countries site SMRs, or Small Modular Reactors safely, based on the topography, seismic activity, etc. The office maintains a presence at all the nuclear sites in war zones.

One participant, thinking back to an old debate case, asked how important the norm-setting was. I had to look that up later - it's the process of establishing guidelines, standards, and behavioral expectations that structure how debaters interact, construct arguments, and evaluate rounds. The norms, or ground rules, can be explicit (formal rules) or implicit (customs) and are designed to foster productive, fair, and orderly competition. While I didn't capture Steve's answer, it's a great question and I found myself hoping that established debate programs continue to thrive.

At the end, there was brief mention of the Netflix series about the Fukushima disaster, "The Days," which explored the friction between business and regulatory mindsets. Another participant, who has been to Fukushima, also mentioned the rise of nuclear tourism. All in all, this was a fascinating conversation and I was so glad to be in the room for it.

Participant affiliations

American Society for Public Administration (ASPA)
ASPA National Capital Area Chapter
Georgia Institute of Technology (former CIO, Dept. of Energy)
Indeed
International Atomic Energy Agency
KM/HR Systems Auditors (former Sr. Advisor for Knowledge Management, Nuclear Regulatory Commission)

People joined from Vienna, Austria, Colorado Springs, CO, Atlanta, GA, and the DC/MD/VA Metro Area.

Each time, we begin with a round of introductions to warm up the space. Afterward, participants are sent a "Who was in the room" message to facilitate ongoing connection. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley
kittywooley5@gmail.com



Steve at the memorial to the firefighters of Chernobyl, a monument that pays tribute to the first responders to the disaster in April 1986. See more at <https://www.un.org/en/observances/chernobyl-remembrance-day>.



