The United States is Prepared to Accept International Queries to its National Nuclear Forensics Library

Nuclear forensic science, referred to as nuclear forensics, is the comprehensive scientific analysis of nuclear and other radioactive material, or of evidence contaminated by radioactive material, in the context of national or international law and nuclear security. The utility and effectiveness of nuclear forensics – particularly in assisting investigations related to nuclear security – may be strengthened by access to reference information on nuclear and other radioactive materials within a State. This reference information may be compiled in a National Nuclear Forensics Library (NNFL), which consists of information and expertise necessary to identify materials produced, used, or stored within a State. An NNFL may serve as a reference for the comparative analysis of unknown materials and enhances a government’s capability to make timely and confident assessments of provenance for materials found outside of regulatory control. An NNFL also provides a common framework for cooperation between governments investigating the origins of illicit material.

A country’s NNFL will likely contain sensitive or proprietary information and thus NNFL content and access must be protected by the government. At the same time, exchanging queries about the material information or expertise maintained in a library – without divulging detailed information on library or database content – is an effective means to facilitate a more comprehensive approach to using materials information to support an investigation. To facilitate such cooperation, a government may identify a national Point of Contact (POC) who can communicate through official channels and serve as an interface to its NNFL. As part of this capacity, the national POC should be prepared to receive and reply to requests/queries from other governments about material information in his or her country’s NNFL.

To promote cooperation between governments when investigating the origins of material found outside of regulatory control, the United States (U.S.) offers its process as a model for receiving other governments’ queries about nuclear and other radioactive material that may have been produced, used, or stored within the U.S. The U.S. Department of State is the national POC for the U.S. NNFL and is ready to receive queries through diplomatic channels. Any query pertaining to the U.S. NNFL submitted through the POC will receive an official U.S. government response. Queries submitted to the U.S. NNFL should be official in nature and support such
efforts as law enforcement or regulatory investigations. All U.S. diplomatic posts are prepared to communicate such queries to Washington.

When submitting queries pertaining to the U.S. NNFL, the U.S. Government (USG) requests that the government submitting the query provide details about the material in question and a statement that the query is in support of a law enforcement or regulatory investigation (please see the accompanying query template). These details may include categorization information such as, but not limited to, a physical description of the material (amount, color, physical form, etc.), a radiological assessment (type/s of radiation present, total activity, dose rate, etc.), a description of any containment or packaging, and copies of any accompanying documentation or identifying information. Additional characterization information such as analysis details, isotopics, and chemical composition may also be requested, but are not always required. Logistical details regarding the specific format of the response will be coordinated on a case by case basis through the U.S. POC. Any additional investigative and/or prosecutorial assistance will also be coordinated on a case by case basis through established law enforcement and diplomatic channels.

Since queries may involve law enforcement, regulatory, treaty, or other equities, all queries to the U.S. NNFL are reviewed before being processed. If a query cannot be processed due to extenuating circumstances, the querying government will be advised accordingly. If it is deemed that a query can be processed, the request is handled by the administrator of the U.S. NNFL. After processing a query, the results are transmitted back to the querying government through the U.S. POC in a manner consistent with bi-lateral agreements allowing for the exchange of information.

For further information concerning the query process or the accompanying query template, please contact USNuclearLibraryPOC@state.gov.