



Standard Test Method for ^{238}Pu Isotopic Abundance By Alpha Spectrometry¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This test method covers the use of alpha spectrometry for determining the ^{238}Pu isotopic abundance in plutonium samples. It is particularly useful for samples in which the ^{238}Pu content is less than 1 % of the total plutonium content. For such samples, mass spectrometric results are less reliable than those from alpha spectrometry because of interference from any ^{238}U isobar remaining after ion exchange.

1.2 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 ASTM Standards:

- C 697 Test Method for Chemical, Mass Spectrometric, and Spectrochemical Analysis of Nuclear-Grade Plutonium Dioxide Powders and Pellets²
- C 1168 Practice for Preparation and Dissolution of Plutonium Materials for Analysis²
- D 1193 Specification for Reagent Water³

3. Summary of Test Method

3.1 This determination method involves the measurement of the alpha-activity ratio of ^{238}Pu and $^{239}\text{Pu} + ^{240}\text{Pu}$. The isotopic analysis of plutonium for the ^{238}Pu isotope requires the prior separation of interferences. After dissolution of the sample (see Practice C 1168), the plutonium is separated from interferences by an anion-exchange purification technique. Nitric acid (HNO_3) is used to adsorb the plutonium fraction on the resin. Interfering ions, principally uranium and americium, are not adsorbed. The plutonium is then eluted with dilute HNO_3 (0.1 M). Because an alpha-activity ratio is used, quantitative recovery of the plutonium is not required. The alpha spectrum in the 5 to 6-MeV region is obtained. The total counts in the ^{238}Pu and the $^{239}\text{Pu} + ^{240}\text{Pu}$ peaks are obtained and corrected for background. The ^{238}Pu abundance is calculated from the ratio of the

alpha activity due to ^{238}Pu and that due to $^{239}\text{Pu} + ^{240}\text{Pu}$. The abundance of ^{239}Pu and ^{240}Pu is determined by mass spectrometry (see Test Methods C 697) on a separate portion of the purified sample.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 This test method is used when the determined of ^{238}Pu isotopic abundance is required for plutonium samples.

5. Interferences

^{241}Am is always present as a result of ^{241}Pu decay and is a direct interference that must be removed prior to the determination of ^{238}Pu . The very small amount of ^{230}Th and ^{232}Th which could be present causes insignificant interference with the determination of ^{238}Pu at the level of uncertainty of this test method. Other nuclides that would interfere, such as ^{238}U , ^{243}Am , ^{245}Cm , and ^{249}Bk , are removed by the anion-exchange separation. Any residual uranium, while it does not directly interfere with the alpha-pulse height determination, can raise the salt content of the sample. A high salt content can decrease the resolution of the alpha spectra, and, consequently, decrease the sensitivity of the test method.

6. Apparatus

6.1 *Counting disks of polished platinum, tantalum, or stainless steel*, sized to fit the detection chamber. A disk 25 mm in diameter and 0.5 mm thick has been found to be acceptable.

6.2 *Alpha spectrometer*. This instrument should typically consist of the following components:

6.2.1 *Silicon surface barrier detector*, with an active area of at least 100 mm², a depletion depth of greater than 100 μm , and a resolution of 30 keV or less full width at half maximum (FWHM) (for ^{241}Am 5.486 MeV alpha).

6.2.2 *Evacuatable, light-tight chamber* in which the detector and the counting plate on its support can be mounted.

6.2.3 *Preamplifier (charge-sensitive field-effect transistor)* with noise less than 4.6 keV when used with above detector (100 pF capacitance).

6.2.4 *Detector bias supply*, 0 to 150 V, continuously variable, well-regulated and stable, with noise and ripple less than 0.0002 %.

6.2.5 *Main spectroscopy amplifier*, low noise, with variable shaping constants and baseline restoration.

6.2.6 *Biased amplifier and pulse stretcher*, with continuously adjustable post-gain and automatic pile-up rejection.

¹ This test method is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee C26 on Nuclear Fuel Cycle and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee C26.05 on Methods of Test.

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² *Annual Book of ASTM Standards*, Vol 12.01.

³ *Annual Book of ASTM Standards*, Vol 11.01.

6.2.7 *Multichannel pulse-height analyzer.* A multichannel analyzer is most versatile and convenient, since it can be used for the acquisition of data from one to four detectors, simultaneously. Even if only one detector is used, such an analyzer has the advantages that background may be stored in another subgroup and subtracted electronically from the spectrum of interest, and that several spectra can be stored and compared. An analyzer that permits the analyst to set windows around the peaks of interest and perform electronic integration is especially convenient. The analyzer should accept pulses 0 to 10 V and 3 to 6 μ s in width and should have a capacity of at least 10^6 counts full scale per channel.

6.2.8 *A computer printer* for output printing of the data from the multichannel analyzer (optional).

6.3 *Heat lamp.*

6.4 *Bunsen burner.*

6.5 *Sample beaker, 30-mL, borosilicate glass.*

6.6 *Bottles or vials.*

7. Reagents and Materials

7.1 *Purity of Reagents*—Reagent grade chemicals are used in all tests and conform to the specifications of the Committee on Analytical Reagents of the American Chemical Society.⁴

7.2 *Purity of Water*— Unless otherwise indicated, references to water shall be understood to mean distilled or deionized water (Specification D 1193).

7.3 *Nitric acid (HNO₃).* Concentrated (sp gr 1.42).

7.4 *Nitric acid, 4 M.* Add 250 mL of nitric acid (sp gr 1.42) to <750 mL of water and dilute to 1 L.

7.5 *Nitric acid, 0.1 M.* Add 6.2 mL of nitric acid (sp gr 1.42) to <950 mL of water and dilute to 1 L.

7.6 *Anion-exchange resin and column,*⁵ 100-200 mesh, containing quaternary ammonium function groups.

8. Calibration of the Alpha Spectrometer

8.1 *Initial Alignment*—Set the amplifier so that channel zero is about 4.75 MeV. Use a standard alpha source such as the 5.30 MeV particle of ²¹⁰Po, or the 5.49 MeV particle of ²⁴¹Am, for calibration. Establish the system gain at some convenient value, such as 5 keV per channel.

8.2 *Resolution*—Count the standard source and determine the energy span at half the peak height. A full width half maximum of 30 keV or less is desirable, but a FWHM up to 50 keV can be tolerated.

8.3 *Background*—Obtain a background spectrum with a clean counting disk in the chamber.

8.4 *Frequency of Calibration*—The system gain and resolution should be checked periodically, to maintain the same operating conditions and to check whether the spectrometer has deteriorated. Daily background counting is advisable, to ensure that neither the chamber nor the detector has been contaminated.

⁴ *Reagent Chemicals, American Chemical Society Specifications,* American Chemical Society, Washington, DC. For suggestions on the testing of reagents not listed by the American Chemical Society, see *Analar Standards for Laboratory Chemicals,* BDH Ltd. Poole, Dorset, U.K., and the *United States Pharmacopeia and National Formulary,* U.S. Pharmaceutical Convention, Inc. (USPC), Rockville, MD.

⁵ Disposable, prefilled columns packed with AG 1-X 8, available from Bio-Rad, Richmond, CA, have been found to be acceptable.

9. Procedure

9.1 Transfer an aliquot of approximately 1 mg Pu from a sample obtained from Practice C 1168 or equivalent procedure into a 30-mL beaker and take to dryness on a hot plate.

9.2 Add 3-4 mL of 4 M HNO₃ and take to dryness on a hot plate. Cool to room temperature. Repeat this process two more times.

9.3 Add 15 mL of 4 M HNO₃ to an anion-exchange column to precondition it.

9.4 Dissolve the sample with 2-3 mL 4 M HNO₃ and transfer it to the preconditioned anion-exchange column. Let the effluent drain into another beaker; the effluent will be discarded according to the disposal requirements of the specific site.

9.5 Rinse the sample beaker with 2-3 mL of 4 M HNO₃ and transfer the rinse to the column; allow the rinsate to drain. Repeat this rinse step once more.

9.6 Add 5 mL of 4 M HNO₃ to wash the column and allow the column to drain. This waste will be added to the waste already accumulated in 9.4 and 9.5. Repeat this wash step three more times.

9.7 Place a clean bottle or vial under the column and elute the plutonium from the column with two 5-mL portions of 0.1 M HNO₃. The eluant will be used for both alpha and mass spectrometry.

9.8 Mix eluant and transfer a 10 μ L aliquot of this solution to a counting disk. Dry under a heat lamp.

9.9 Fire the disk by slowly heating it to dull redness in a Bunsen burner.

9.10 Place the counting disk in a chamber of the alpha spectrometer and evacuate the chamber. Count until sufficient counts are accumulated for desired precision.

9.11 Obtain the total count for a sufficient number of channels to include the ²³⁸Pu peaks (5.50 + 5.46 MeV) and

the ²³⁹Pu + ²⁴⁰Pu peaks (5.10 to 5.17 MeV). To obtain the net counts, subtract the background counts in the same channels, adjusted for the same counting time, from the total counts in the peaks, to obtain the net counts.

9.12 Using the aliquot from the purified sample obtained in 9.7, perform mass spectrometric analysis for ²³⁹Pu, ²⁴⁰Pu, ²⁴¹Pu, and ²⁴²Pu in accordance with Test Methods C 697, Sections 139-147.

10. Calculation

10.1 Calculate the weight percent of ²³⁸Pu as follows:

$$W_8 = \frac{C_8 (W_9 A_9 + W_0 A_0)}{A_8 C_9} \quad (1)$$

where:

W_8 = weight percent of ²³⁸Pu,

W_9 = weight percent of ²³⁹Pu from mass spectrometry (normalized),

W_0 = weight percent of ²⁴⁰Pu from mass spectrometry (normalized),

A_8 = alpha specific activity of ²³⁸Pu,

A_9 = alpha specific activity of ²³⁹Pu,

A_0 = alpha specific activity of ²⁴⁰Pu,

C_8 = observed counts in ^{238}Pu peaks, and
 C_9 = observed counts in ^{239}Pu peaks + ^{240}Pu peaks.

10.2 The specific activity of a nuclide (in disintegrations per minute per microgram) is calculated from its half-life by the formula:

$$\text{Specific activity, d/min}/\mu\text{g} = \frac{7.937 \times 10^{11}}{A_w t_{1/2}} \quad (2)$$

where:

A_w = atomic weight of the nuclide, and
 $t_{1/2}$ = half-life years, (see Table 1).

11. Precision and Bias

11.1 New Brunswick Laboratory Certified Reference Material 137, Plutonium Isotopic Standard, was measured for ^{238}Pu

TABLE 1 Principal Alpha Peaks of Interest^A

Nuclide	$t_{1/2}$, years	Alpha-Particle Energy, MeV	Alpha-Particle Abundances, %
^{238}Pu	87.7 ± 0.3	5.50	70.9
		5.46	29.0
^{239}Pu	24,110 ± 30	5.16	73.3
		5.14	15.1
		5.10	11.5
^{240}Pu	6563 ± 7	5.17	72.8
		5.12	27.1
^{241}Am	432.2 ± 0.7	5.49	85.3
		5.44	13.0
		5.39	1.6

^AData taken from S.Y.F. Chu, L.P. Ekstrom, and R.B. Firestone, *The Lund/LBNL Nuclear Data Search*, April 1998.

content 36 times by one analyst on 6 different days over a period of 10 months. For each measurement, approximately 10 000 counts were collected in the ^{238}Pu alpha peak. The percent relative difference from the reference value (defined as (observed value - reference value)/reference value (100)), was calculated for each determination. One determination's value was an apparent statistical outlier (its magnitude was over 4 times greater than any of the other 35 values). All results were calculated both with and without the suspected outlier (results without the value are indicated by parenthesis). The mean percent relative difference of the data is 1.26 (0.64) which serves as an estimate of bias. The simple standard deviation of the data is 4.18 (1.94) which, in the absence of statistically significant sources of variation, serves as an estimate of precision. Removing the suspect data point from calculations however, gives a statistically significant day-to-day variation in the data. Variance component techniques⁶ give an overall estimate of precision without the outlier of 2.00 which includes a component due to day-to-day variation.

11.2 At the time of analysis, the ^{238}Pu content of CRM 137 constituted 0.25 weight percent of the total plutonium content, with an uncertainty (95 % confidence interval for a single determination) on that content of 0.006 weight percent, or 2.4 % of the value.

12. Keywords

12.1 alpha spectrometry; ion exchange; plutonium-238 abundance

⁶ *Statistical Methods for Nuclear Material Management*, W. Michael Bowen and Carl A. Bennett, Eds., NUREG/CR-4604, PNL-5849 (US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Washington, DC, 1988), pp. 265-269.

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