Plutonium and Strontium in Soil Near Technical Area 21, Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, Los Alamos, New Mexico

by

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .............................................................................. 1

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

II. RADIOCHEMICAL ANALYSES ............................................. 2
   A. January-February Analytical Results ....................... 2
   B. November Analytical Results ................................. 3

III. DEPOSITION OF PLUTONIUM ........................................... 3

IV. CONCLUSIONS ................................................................. 4

REFERENCES ................................................................. 5

FIGURES

Fig. 1. Soil sampling stations near DP-West stacks ... 2
Fig. 2. Isoplutonium $^{239}$Pu contours around DP-West stacks, contour values in $\mu$Ci/m$^3$ .... 4

TABLES

I. Analytical Results of Soil Samples Collected in January-February 1970 .................. 3

II. Analytical Results of Soil Samples Collected in November 1970 ......................... 4
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TECHNICAL AREA 21, LOS ALAMOS SCIENTIFIC LABORATORY,
LOS ALAMOS, NEW MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

A study was made of plutonium in soil around TA-21 to
determine amounts of plutonium deposited from laboratory
ventilation stack emission. In general the plutonium con-
centrations decrease with increased distance from the
stacks.

Results are similar insofar as locations of maximum
concentrations to those found by Jordan and Black in 1956.
Calculations as to total amounts deposited within a radius
of approximately 1 mile give approximately 2% of the total
released from the stacks in the 24 year period of operation.

Strontium analyses were made to possibly distinguish
fallout from atmospheric tests from stack emission material
by use of the $^{238}$Pu/$^{90}$Sr ratio method. The method proved
invalid due to trace deposition of $^{90}$Sr in the soil from
past activities in the area.

I. INTRODUCTION

Soil samples were collected and ana-
lyzed for plutonium and strontium in an area
in and adjacent to Technical Area 21 (DP-
West Plant) of the Los Alamos Scientific
Laboratory (LASL). Two sets of samples were
taken from the same locations in 1970. One
set was collected in January-February and
the other set in November to determine the
isotope levels in the top soil, possibly
from stack emissions. Plutonium isotopes
are among the materials processed at TA-21.
After filtration, the plant and process exa-
haust air released from the stack contains
traces of plutonium. Analyses were made for
$^{238}$Pu and $^{239}$Pu. $^{90}$Sr analyses were done on
soils taken in January-February.

Jordan and Black (1958), evaluated the
air pollution problem relative to the emis-
tion of plutonium from the stacks at TA-21.
Their study of air and soil in the area
indicated that air concentrations of pluto-
nium did not exceed permissible values.

TA-21 is located on a long narrow mesa
that is a part of the Pajarito Plateau.
The plateau is formed by a series of ash-
flow and ashfalls or rhyolite tuffs. The
soil is derived from the tuff. The fine-
to-coarse sand-size fraction is composed
of quartz, sanidine crystals and crystal
fragments, and of minor amounts of rock
fragments of rhyolite, latite, tuff and
pumice. The silt and clay size fraction
is composed of the clay minerals of mont-
morillonite and illite. The silt and
clays constitute between 20 and 30 wt% of
the soil in the samples collected.

The precipitation on the mesa averages about 18 in./yr, the greater part occurring in July, August, and September. The predominant winds are southerly and carry the fine particles from the stacks toward the north.

II. RADIOCHEMICAL ANALYSES

Referenced soil samples were collected and analyzed from the Los Alamos, Espanola, and Santa Fe areas to establish background of $^{238}\text{Pu}$, $^{239}\text{Pu}$, and $^{90}\text{Sr}$ in soil from world-wide fallout as the result of atmospheric nuclear tests. The following table presents the range and average concentrations of $^{238}\text{Pu}$, $^{239}\text{Pu}$, $^{90}\text{Sr}$, and $^{238}\text{Pu}/^{90}\text{Sr}$ activity ratio in referenced soils that could be attributed to world-wide fallout in the area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isotope or Activity Ratio</th>
<th>Number of Samples</th>
<th>Concentrations Range/dpm/g</th>
<th>Average/dpm/g</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$^{238}\text{Pu}$</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.001-0.008</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$^{239}\text{Pu}$</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.001-0.051</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$^{90}\text{Sr}$</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.152-1.921</td>
<td>0.711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$^{238}\text{Pu}/^{90}\text{Sr}$</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.003-0.138</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The referenced soils were compared to the results obtained from soils collected near TA-21.

A. January-February Analytical Results

Soil samples were collected from locations 1 through 12 in January-February 1970 (Fig. 1). The samples were taken from flat undisturbed areas to avoid concentration or dilution by wash from storm runoff, or contribution by past LASL activities. The samples were collected from a 4 by 4 in. area to a depth of 2 in. The preparation and analyses of the soil samples were done as outlined in Ref. 4 (1970). The major difference in the preparation for analysis to the method found in Ref. 5 (1970) is that hot 6N hydrochloric acid was used to leach the soil rather than hydrofluoric and nitric or perchloric acids.

The analytical results of soils for $^{238}\text{Pu}$ indicated that samples from locations 3, 4, 5, 8, and 11 contained concentrations of $^{238}\text{Pu}$ in excess of that expected from world-wide fallout (Table I). The locations of these sampling stations show that the source of the $^{238}\text{Pu}$ may be from stack emissions at TA-21.

The analytical results of soils for $^{239}\text{Pu}$ indicated that samples from locations 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 12, and perhaps 7, contained concentrations of $^{239}\text{Pu}$ in excess of that expected from world-wide fallout. The location of the sampling stations in relation to the concentrations indicates that stack emissions are the source of the $^{239}\text{Pu}$. The concentrations decrease with increased distance from the stacks.

![Fig. 1. Soil sampling stations near DP-West stacks.](image)

Initially, the $^{90}\text{Sr}$ analyses were performed to distinguish world-wide fallout from local material by activity ratio $^{239}\text{Pu}/^{90}\text{Sr}$. The ratio method proved invalid for this area because of traces of $^{90}\text{Sr}$ added to the soils by activities in the area many years ago. Short-lived gamma emitting isotopes were used as tracers in atmospheric release experiments done before 1962. These were separated from mixed fission products and contained a trace of $^{90}\text{Sr}$ that was carried over into the experiment. This same $^{90}\text{Sr}$ was also released to the atmosphere along with the gamma tracer. Any $^{90}\text{Sr}$ found locally is under suspicion of originating from other than world-wide fallout. Samples from locations 4 and 5 contain concentrations of $^{90}\text{Sr}$ that cannot be attributed to world-wide fallout or stack emissions from TA-50.
The $^{239}\text{Pu}/{}^{137}\text{Sr}$ activity ratios in samples from locations 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 are generally equivalent to ratios found by other laboratories in world-wide fallout. \(^7\)

The activity ratios in samples from locations 1, 2, 3, 8, and 12 reflect the $^{239}\text{Pu}$ emissions from stacks at TA-21. The ratio from the samples from locations 4 and 5 are anomalous due to excessive $^{90}\text{Sr}$.

### B. November Analytical Results

Soil samples were collected from locations 1 through 13 in November 1970 (Fig. 1). The samples were taken from near previous locations, except for location 13 that was added for control. The samples were taken with a sampler 5.5 in. in diameter to a depth of 2 in. Five samples at each location were collected in an area of about 30 sq ft. The five samples at each location represent a surface area of about 1/3 sq ft. The analyses were done as outlined in Ref. 4 (1970). A mixture of hot concentrated nitric and hydrochloric acids was used to leach the soil in sample preparation as described by Harley. \(^9\)

Analytical results of soils for $^{239}\text{Pu}$ indicate that samples from locations 3 and 8 contained concentrations of $^{239}\text{Pu}$ in excess of that expected from world-wide fallout (Table II).

Samples from locations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 13 contained concentrations of $^{239}\text{Pu}$ in excess of that expected in world-wide fallout. As in previous samples analyzed, the concentrations decreased with increased distance from the stacks.

A comparison of results of the soils collected in January-February to those collected in November show variations in concentrations. This is as expected from a nonuniform deposition of particles from the stacks.

### III. DEPOSITION OF PLUTONIUM

Jordan and Black\(^1\) in 1958 estimated that 13.1 g of plutonium had been released to the atmosphere from the stacks at TA-21 during the previous 9 years. They also estimated that of the 13 g only about 0.5\% (or 0.065 g of plutonium) was retained in the soil within a 1-mile radius of the stacks.

An estimate of the $^{239}\text{Pu}$ deposition in soils was made by using average concentrations in $\mu$Ci/m$^2$ of the two sets of samples collected at each location during 1970. Isoplutonium contours were constructed at 0.005, 0.01, and 0.05 $\mu$Ci/m$^2$ (Fig. 2). The estimated deposition of $^{239}\text{Pu}$ within the 0.005 $\mu$Ci/m$^2$ contour was 0.026 Ci or about 0.42 g.

J. Healy\(^6\) used stack concentration...
values to estimate the total release from the stacks through 1969 as 24 g. The total deposition of \( ^{239}\text{Pu} \) in soil within the 0.005 \( \mu \text{Ci/m}^2 \) contour is about 2% of the total estimated release.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that plutonium is being deposited from stack emissions at TA-21. In general, the plutonium concentrations decrease with increased distance from the stacks. The deposition of \( ^{239}\text{Pu} \) in the area is estimated to be 0.42 g or about 2% of the total released from the stacks through 1969.

Traces of strontium above world-wide fallout values occurred in soils at some of the locations. The strontium is not from stack emission but is the result of past activities that have now been suspended.

![Fig. 2. Isoplotonium \( ^{239}\text{Pu} \) contours around DP-West stacks, contour values in \( \mu \text{Ci/m}^2 \).](image)

**TABLE II**

**ANALYTICAL RESULTS OF SOIL SAMPLES COLLECTED IN NOVEMBER 1970**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Location Numbers</th>
<th>Date Collected</th>
<th>dpm/g (Top 2 in.) ( ^{239}\text{Pu} )</th>
<th>dpm/g (Top 2 in.) ( ^{239}\text{Pu} )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.005 ± 0.000</td>
<td>0.475 ± 0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.002 ± 0.002</td>
<td>1.115 ± 0.121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.024 ± 0.005</td>
<td>0.879 ± 0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.008 ± 0.003</td>
<td>1.041 ± 0.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.011 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.121 ± 0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.000 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.254 ± 0.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.008 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.178 ± 0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.016 ± 0.004</td>
<td>1.017 ± 0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.000 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.135 ± 0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.010 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.047 ± 0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.001 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.079 ± 0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.009 ± 0.004</td>
<td>0.215 ± 0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>11-9-70</td>
<td>0.002 ± 0.003</td>
<td>0.194 ± 0.020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


8. J. Healy, LASL Group H-1, personal communication.