

High Intensity, Pulsed, D-D Neutron Generator

D. L. Williams, J. H. Vainionpaa, G. Jones, M. A. Piestrup, C. K. Gary, J. L. Harris, M. J. Fuller, J. T. Cremer
Adelphi Technology, Inc., 2003 E Bayshore Rd, Redwood City, CA 94063

B. A. Ludewigt, J. W. Kwan, J. Reijonen¹, K.-N. Leung, R. A. Gough
Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, 1 Cyclotron Rd. Berkeley CA 94720

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by the US Department of Homeland Security under Contract no. HSHQDC-08-C-00022 and the US Department of Energy under contract no. DE-FG02-04ER86177, and DE-AC02-05CH11231.

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1 **Manuscript ID:** 525

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4 Cremer

5 **Affiliation:** Adelphi Technology, Inc., 2003 E Bayshore Rd, Redwood City, CA 94063

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7 **Affiliation:** Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, 1 Cyclotron Rd. Berkeley CA 94720

8

9 **Abstract:**

10 Single ion-beam RF-plasma neutron generators are presented as a laboratory source of intense neutrons. The
11 continuous and pulsed operations of such a neutron generator using the deuterium-deuterium fusion reaction are
12 reported. The neutron beam can be pulsed by switching the RF plasma and/or a gate electrode. These generators are
13 actively vacuum pumped so that a continuous supply of deuterium gas is present for the production of ions and
14 neutrons. This contributes to the generator's long life. These single-beam generators are capable of producing up to
15 10^{10} n/s. Previously, Adelphi and LBNL have demonstrated these generators' applications in fast neutron
16 radiography, Prompt Gamma Neutron Activation Analysis (PGNAA) and Neutron Activation Analysis (NAA).
17 Together with an inexpensive compact moderator, these high-output neutron generators extend useful applications to
18 home laboratory operations.

19

20 **Keywords:** neutron generator, prompt gamma activation analysis, neutron spectroscopy, neutron source.

21 **PACS codes:**29.25.Dz, 28.20.-v, 14.20.Dh

22

23 **Plasma Neutron Generators**

24 RFI plasma neutron generators can produce intense neutron outputs of 10^{10} n/s or greater with the deuterium-
25 deuterium (D-D) reaction [1]. Based on core technology originally developed at Lawrence Berkeley National
26 Laboratory [1-3] and further developed by Adelphi, these generators provide many times greater neutron output than
27 other portable/transportable systems and have proven to be reliable and easily serviced.

¹ Now at Schlumberger

1 As shown in Fig. 1, plasma ion source neutron generators are either simple diodes or triodes with an RF ion
2 plasma source. This source generates the D^+ ions that are then accelerated across a potential of ~120 kV to a
3 titanium target. In the triode, the ion beam can be gated as is the case in Fig. 1. The target is biased to a negative
4 voltage, while the plasma is at ground. The negative potential will then 'attract' the positively charged particles to
5 the target. The accelerated ions impinge onto a titanium coated copper target where 2.5-MeV D-D neutrons are
6 generated through fusion reactions. The implanted deuterium ions form titanium hydrates in the titanium matrix,
7 thus 'trapping' the deuterium atoms. When the generator is operating, the titanium layer is initially being loaded
8 with deuterium and the neutron output is increasing with time; then after some minutes of operation the target is
9 loaded by the incoming ions and the neutron output saturates to a stable level. While the ions are implanted to the
10 target, heat is also deposited, which is removed from the target by water-cooling it.

11 Advantages of using the RF-induction method compared to other types of discharge, like the penning and
12 filament discharge, are (1) its ability to generate high plasma densities for a high intensity ion beam production, (2)
13 its ability to generate a high percentage of atomic ion species, and (3) its long lifetime operation. A high atomic ion
14 species fraction is important for the overall efficiency of the neutron generator. Neutron output increases by a factor
15 of 3-4 if one uses a 100% atomic ion beam in comparison to a 100% molecular ion beam. The RF-induction
16 discharge generates more than 95% of atomic ion species at about 2 kW of discharge power [1-4].

17 These generators use an active pumping method wherein the deuterium is continually replenished to maintain
18 continuous operation with no loss of neutron yield over many thousands of hours of operation. Other generators
19 currently available on the market use radioactive tritium gas, are sealed, and have a lifetime of between 1000-2000
20 hours, depending upon the maximum yield being used.

21 **Present Adelphi Commercial Generators**

22 Adelphi Technology produces high intensity neutron generators based on this technology. Adelphi currently
23 makes devices with outputs of 10^8 (DD-108), 10^9 (DD-109) and 10^{10} (DD-110) fast neutrons per second (Figs. 2, 3).
24 In addition, Adelphi has built a neutron generator specialized for the production of thermal neutrons for both prompt
25 and delayed gamma neutron activation studies. The generators all have single ion beam sources and are contained in
26 stainless steel containers. The current products can either be operated continuously or pulsed. Using both a foil
27 activation technique and a neutron detector, the measured yield of the DD-109 generator is 2×10^9 n/s, while the
28 maximum measured yield of the DD-108 is 1×10^8 n/s. These generators are supported by a single chiller and

1 standard 24" rack of power supplies and controls. The entire system is computer controlled. At the time of this
2 writing, the maximum measure yield of the DD-110 is also 2×10^9 n/s, but higher yields are expected soon. The
3 original DD-110 has experienced some problems with high voltage breakdown because of its unusual rectangular
4 beam optics (e.g. 2 mm x 30 mm). The full 10^{10} n/s are expected based on the expected beam current and voltage.

5 The neutron flux depends on the ion current and acceleration voltage. The voltage is easily controlled, and the
6 current can be controlled by varying the plasma density (both by varying the excitation and gas density). This allows
7 continuous and precise control of the neutron output, and if the output is measured, a feedback loop can maintain a
8 constant output flux over extended times. Because the voltage, gas pressure and RF excitation can be computer
9 controlled, the neutron generators have been equipped with software to allow their control remotely and even over
10 an internet connection. Generators using the D-D reaction have the further advantage that the system can be opened
11 and serviced, greatly increasing their lifetime. The generator head uses a serviceable stainless steel housing with
12 conflate copper-gasket seals that can be easily removed, permitting most of the components in the generator head to
13 be easily serviced and replaced (as long as these components have not become too radioactive). All high voltage
14 and RF power are safely sealed away, permitting safe operation.

15 The compactness of the generators permits them to be safely housed in polyethylene moderators measuring
16 roughly $60 \times 60 \times 80 \text{ cm}^3$ with additional lead and borated polyethylene. The moderators for the DD-110 and DD-
17 109 are shown in Fig. 2 and 3a. The head is partially surrounded by 3 mm thick lead to shield the spurious x-rays
18 generated by electrons emitted back to the plasma source from the primary ion interaction at the titanium target.
19 Surrounding the polyethylene moderator is borated polyethylene to minimize any thermal neutrons and reduce the
20 2.2 MeV gamma emission from neutron capture in hydrogen. Additional ports can be machined into the
21 polyethylene for the optimal placement of materials to be irradiated or for the extraction of either thermal or fast
22 neutrons for example PGNAAs. Such arrangements have been done for PGNAAs by us and LBNL [4].

23 **Pulse Generation**

24 There are numerous applications that can benefit from the production of pulsed neutron sources, such as
25 differential die-away measurements of special nuclear materials and, generally, the separation of thermal and fast
26 neutron induced signals. A plasma neutron generator can be pulsed either by varying the excitation of the plasma or
27 the acceleration field.

1 One means of pulsing the neutron generator is to pulse the RF power to the plasma. We have measured the
2 pulse length using the RF plasma light output and the thermal and fast neutron output from the generator. A light
3 pipe was used to gather light from the RF chamber so it could be measured with a fast photodiode. Using a BC-
4 208 fast neutron scintillator made by ELJEN Technologies and a photomultiplier, we also measured the neutron flux
5 per pulse and pulse structure. This is shown in Fig. 4, where we plotted the number of neutrons and photodiode
6 signal (plasma light) as a function of time.

7 Following earlier research by LBNL [3], we achieved pulse lengths from 20 μ s to 1 ms with duty factors as low
8 as 7% as measured both by a photodiode observing the plasma and the neutron output. Using the photon plasma
9 detector we observed 6 μ s pulse fall times, and with the fast neutron detector a 8- μ s fall-off time was measured.
10 Again this is shown in Fig. 4. One can also see a plasma and neutron emission (“afterglow”) after the RF pulse is
11 extinguished that last 20 to 50 μ s.

12 We also found that we could operate at low pressures and still reignite the plasma at each pulse. The minimum
13 operating pressure depends on the duty cycle. The minimum pressure is around 10 mTorr at large duty cycles, but
14 beginning below a 10-15% duty cycle the minimum pressure required to reignite the plasma dramatically increases.
15 We also demonstrated that we could maintain plasma ignition between pulses by pre-igniting the plasma with short
16 electrical pulses. We positioned a small arc electrode (“sparkplug”) in the back of the RF plasma chamber. We
17 reignited the plasma with a 10 kV, 10 μ s pulse to the sparkplug electrode. This HV pulse was synchronized with the
18 RF plasma pulse. This technique permitted us to have longer neutron pulses > 1ms with duty factors < 10 % while
19 still maintaining pressures below 50 mTorr inside the plasma chamber.

20 In order to shorten the fall-off further (< 1 μ s) and eliminate the afterglow, we used a gate electrode to quench
21 the plasma meniscus quickly. This blocks the ion extraction and eliminates the neutron production between pulses
22 due to afterglow and pulse falloff. In Fig. 1 the gate electrode is shown positioned just after the plasma extraction
23 iris . The gate works as follows: The ion source is at ground potential with positive ions streaming out of the
24 extraction aperture. If the gate electrode is biased positively (+200V), it will repel the ions and prevent them from
25 entering the shroud aperture and striking the Ti target. If the gate is biased to -2 kV the ions are accelerated to the
26 target. We fabricated the gate electrode and placed it in an Adelphi neutron generator. The neutron counts increased
27 with increasing gate voltage. Also, a +200V was sufficient to stop the beam entirely. With the gate electrode set to -
28 2 kV, the generator produced a neutron pulse that matched the RF pulse structure. The neutron-pulse falloff was ~

1 10 μs in Fig. 4. When a 15- μs pulse reverse biases the gate to + 200 V, the neutron pulse is truncated and the
2 afterglow neutrons are eliminated. This is shown in Fig. 5. The ion afterglow is eliminated and the neutron pulse
3 falloff is truncated to < 1 μs . The afterglow is eliminated for the duration of the 15 μs pulse.

4 **Applications**

5 The high neutron yield offered by Adelphi's plasma sources offers a larger range of laboratory research
6 opportunities, including neutron activation studies, explosives detection, detection of special nuclear materials,
7 neutron radiography, and chemical analysis.

8 *Detection of Conventional Explosives:* Neutron interrogation is a valid method for determining the presence of
9 concealed conventional explosives. There are several different techniques used, with effectiveness depending on
10 the particular application. Whether thermal activation (measuring prompt or delayed gammas), fast neutron excited
11 emission, or neutron radiography are used, increased flux will increase the range of detection – a critical parameter.
12 Some of these projects have benefited from Adelphi high-output source technology. The research efforts should
13 yield a viable solution for shipping containers in the next few years.

14 *Special Nuclear Material (SNM) detection:* Today, the detection and verification of SNM is an important challenge
15 for the world community. The prevention of terrorists' smuggling of nuclear materials across borders will employ
16 new detection strategies. While advances in passive detection systems will enhance the probability of detecting
17 non-shielded or weakly shielded radioactive materials, the detection of shielded SNM and in particular shielded
18 HEU poses a significant challenge that is best addressed using active detection systems. These systems can be
19 utilized to inspect cargo in shipping containers at seaports, border crossings, and air transport containers, or be
20 deployed as mobile inspection systems. For the pulse-die away technique for locating SNM, pulsing with no
21 neutrons between pulses, as demonstrated here, is important for detection of the resultant delayed fission neutrons
22 [5].

23 *Chemical Industry:* PGNAA and NAA are established tools for elemental analysis and can potentially provide a
24 complete picture of all contaminants in inorganic chemicals. Importantly, many applications require a higher
25 neutron flux than currently possible with economically viable (much less than \$1M) sources.

26 **Acknowledgements**

27 This work was supported by the US Department of Homeland Security under Contract no. HSHQDC-08-C-00022
28 and the US Department of Energy under contract no. DE-FG02-04ER86177.

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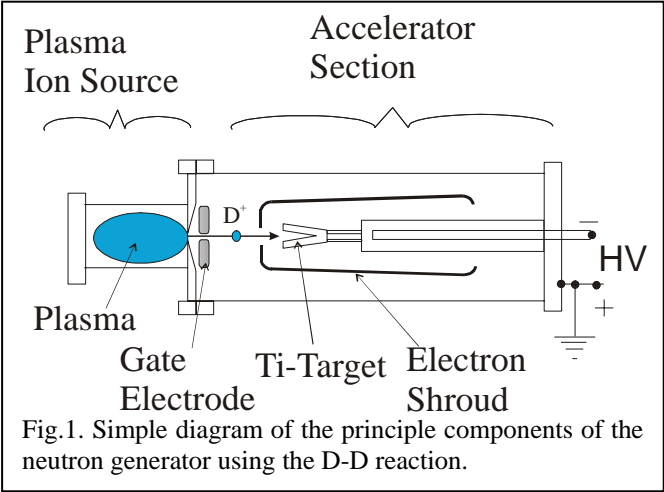


Fig.1. Simple diagram of the principle components of the neutron generator using the D-D reaction.

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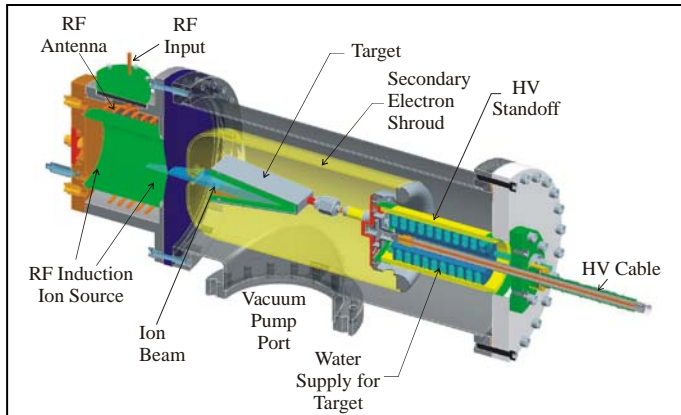


Fig. 2.a. The model DD-110 generator. This generator is expected to achieve 10^{10} n/sec.

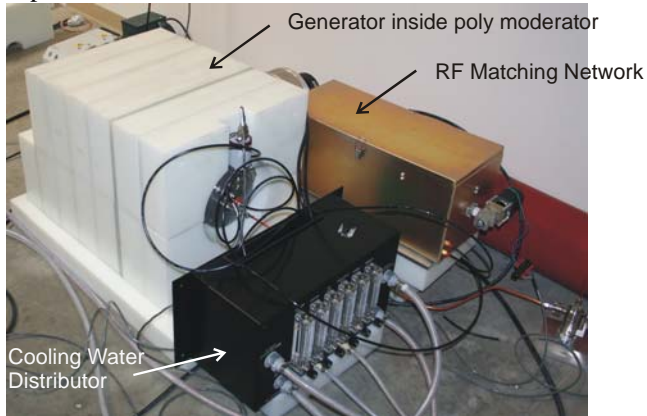


Fig. 2.b. The DD-110 surrounded by its support systems and enclosed in a polyethylene moderator.

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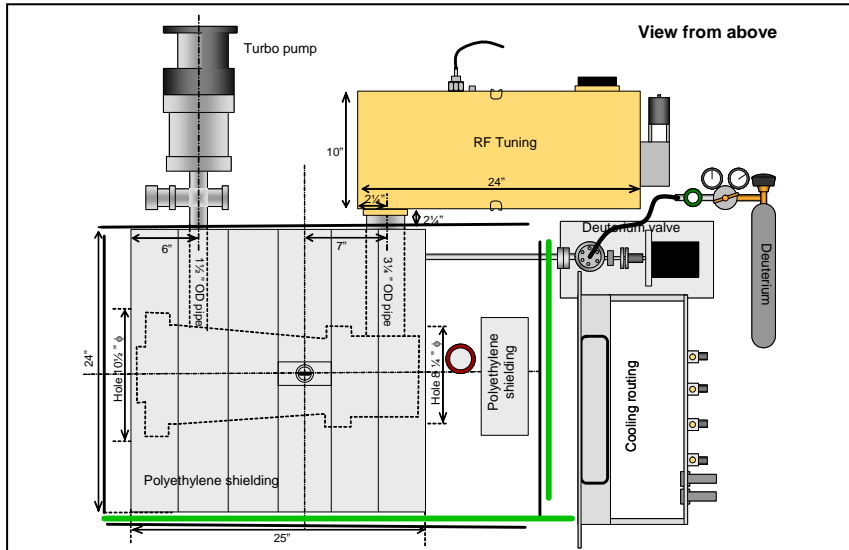


Fig. 3.a. The DD-109 enclosed in its polyethylene shield and surrounded by its support system of cooling water and deuterium gas delivery system.

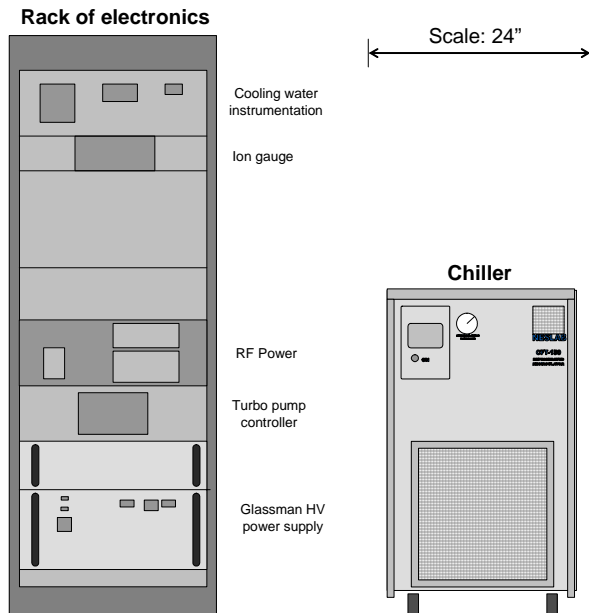
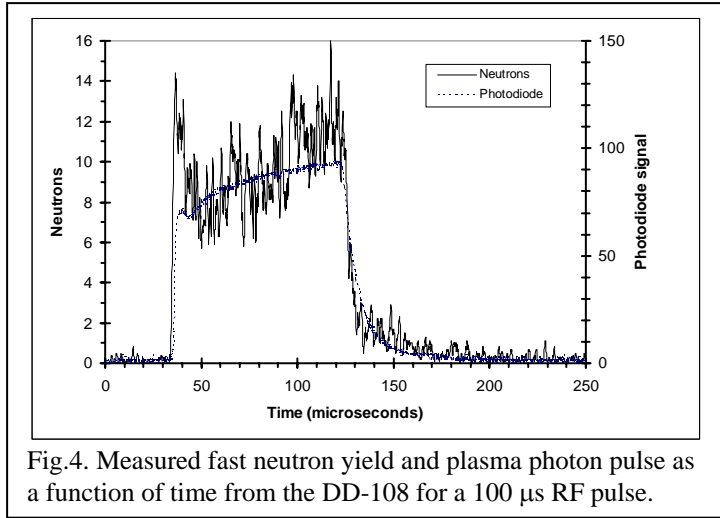


Fig. 3.b. The supporting power supply and chiller.



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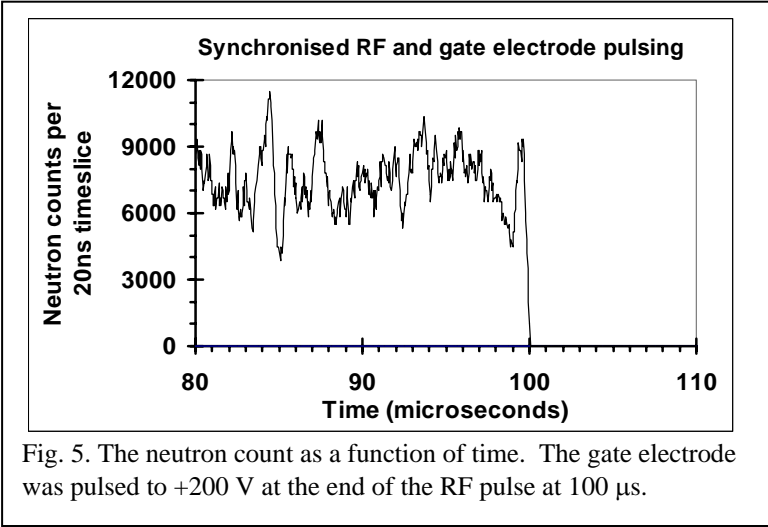


Fig. 5. The neutron count as a function of time. The gate electrode was pulsed to +200 V at the end of the RF pulse at 100 μ s.

1