

# Uranium Enrichment Plant Characteristics—A Training Manual for the IAEA



J. M. Whitaker

**October 2019**

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Nuclear Nonproliferation Division

**URANIUM ENRICHMENT PLANT CHARACTERISTICS—  
A TRAINING MANUAL FOR THE IAEA**

J. M. Whitaker

October 2019

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## ACRONYMS

AVLIS	atomic vapor laser isotope separation
DU	depleted uranium
EMIS	electromagnetic isotope separation
HEU	highly enriched uranium
HF	hydrogen fluoride
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAS	Introductory Course on Agency Safeguards
LEU	low-enriched uranium
ORNL	Oak Ridge National Laboratory
MBA	material balance area
MLIS	molecular laser isotope separation
SWU	separative work unit



## FOREWORD

The initial version of this training manual was prepared in 1985 to compliment a series of training manuals issued by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to provide organized information on the major types of facilities in the nuclear fuel cycle. The other training manuals in this series are:

- Fuel Fabrication Plant
- Research Reactor
- Critical Assembly
- Nuclear Power Plant
- Reprocessing Plant

The information in these training manuals was specifically prepared for private study by new inspectors about to undergo training in the Introductory Course on Agency Safeguards (ICAS). The training manuals are intended to give prospective ICAS students the necessary background information needed in the training course. Financial support for this manual was provided by the Program for Technical Assistance to IAEA Safeguards.

Revision 1, ORNL/TM-2005/43, was produced in May 2005 to update current enrichment capacities and to reflect current practices. This revision was published in September 2019 to address questions raised during US-sponsored training classes for IAEA staff on nuclear material safeguards for uranium enrichment plants.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *Objectives*

After completing this section, readers should be able to

1. relate the scope and level of the material in this manual to their background and experience,
2. understand the relationship between this manual and the material they will encounter in their training program, and
3. understand how to use this manual effectively along with other manuals in this series to supplement their prior knowledge.

One of the primary objectives of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safeguards Training Program is to help new inspectors gain knowledge and develop skills that will be required for them to carry out their duties. The formal instructional program for inspectors within the Agency begins with the Introductory Course on Agency Safeguards (ICAS). Time and resource constraints dictate that this course is devoted specifically to safeguards-related information with the assumption that the students have a basic familiarity with nuclear technology. In some cases, a new inspector's prior experience may have been specialized to the extent that he is unfamiliar with the basic technology of some of the types of nuclear facilities he will be inspecting. In other cases, a student may find it useful to review the English vocabulary for technical terms he may have encountered in another language. A glossary of important terms is provided in Appendix A.

This manual and the five others in this series are intended to provide the student with an overview of the technology involved in the nuclear facility types most often encountered in safeguards inspections. This particular manual addresses uranium enrichment plants and processes. The other manuals consider fuel fabrication plants, research reactors, critical assembly facilities, nuclear power plants, and reprocessing plants.

The primary objective of this training manual is to familiarize an inspector with the basic principles, concepts, structure, and operation of uranium enrichment plants necessary for conducting inspections. Although the principal enrichment methods are discussed, this manual focuses on the gas centrifuge enrichment method because it is the only type of operating enrichment facility currently under IAEA safeguards. Typical plant operating procedures are described and safeguards-relevant features are emphasized.

Section 2 of the manual provides a discussion of the fundamentals of uranium enrichment. The function of uranium enrichment in the nuclear fuel cycle is discussed, basic isotope separation and cascade theory are presented, current uranium enrichment technologies are described, and the concepts of material balance and separative work are introduced. This discussion is intended to be introductory rather than exhaustive. Example problems are included to illustrate the application of the concepts introduced.

Section 3 of the manual focuses on the gas centrifuge enrichment technique. The gas centrifuge design history and background are presented, the components and operating parameters of a modern gas centrifuge are described, and the cascade arrangement is explained. Using the fundamental concepts introduced in Section 2, equations are developed to compute cascade enrichments and flow rates.

The general features of a typical gas centrifuge enrichment plant are described in Section 4. The major process and support facilities, the process material, the process equipment arrangement, the major on-site nuclear material flows, and the materials accounting system are described.

The specific activities and procedures involved in safeguards activities are not considered in this manual. These are included in the inspectors' training activities in the ICAS and in other follow-up courses.

## 2. URANIUM ENRICHMENT FUNDAMENTALS

### 2.1 ENRICHMENT AND THE NUCLEAR FUEL CYCLE

#### *Objectives*

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. identify the isotopes present in natural uranium,
2. describe the fuel enrichments required in different types of reactors, and
3. understand the function of enrichment in the nuclear fuel cycle.

Isotopes are atoms of the same element that differ from each other only in the number of neutrons contained in their nuclei (i.e., same atomic number but different atomic weights). Even though the chemical and physical properties of isotopes differ only slightly, they behave quite differently in nuclear reactions. Uranium as found in nature is called ***natural*** uranium. Natural uranium is comprised of three isotopes that have mass numbers of 234, 235, and 238. Table 1 shows the weight percent of each isotope present in natural uranium. The isotope  $^{238}\text{U}$ , the parent of the uranium series, is present in the amount of 99.3% and is in equilibrium with its great-granddaughter  $^{234}\text{U}$ , which is present in the amount of 0.0054%. The principal nuclide utilized in the fission process is  $^{235}\text{U}$ , which is present in the amount of 0.71%.

**Table 1. Isotopes present in natural uranium**

Isotope	Typical concentration (wt %)
$^{234}\text{U}$	0.0054
$^{235}\text{U}$	0.71
$^{238}\text{U}$	99.3

Increasing the  $^{235}\text{U}$  isotope above its natural concentration of 0.71% is called ***uranium enrichment***. Light-water reactor nuclear power plants (e.g., pressurized-water reactors and boiling-water reactors) require fuel enriched to 2–5%  $^{235}\text{U}$ , and research reactors may require enrichments ranging from natural to greater than 90%  $^{235}\text{U}$ . Uranium enriched above natural uranium but less than 20%  $^{235}\text{U}$  is called ***low-enriched uranium*** (LEU), and uranium enriched to 20%  $^{235}\text{U}$  or greater is called ***highly enriched uranium*** (HEU). Uranium that has  $^{235}\text{U}$  content less than natural uranium is called ***depleted uranium*** (DU).

Isotopic enrichment of  $^{235}\text{U}$  takes place at a uranium enrichment plant. Enrichment, however, is only one step in the processing and the use of uranium as a fuel (Figure 1). To provide feed material to an enrichment plant, uranium must be mined, milled, and converted to the appropriate chemical form used in enrichment operations. In the first step of the fuel cycle, ore containing small quantities of uranium compounds (e.g., <0.2 wt %) is mined. In the milling operation, the uranium is extracted from the ore. The resulting product is a concentrate of uranium oxide known as yellow cake consisting of 70–90 wt %  $\text{U}_3\text{O}_8$ . In the conversion plant, the yellow cake is converted to uranium hexafluoride ( $\text{UF}_6$ ), the feed material for most enrichment plants. The yellow cake is first refined to a high purity by solvent extraction and calcination, and then it is converted to uranium dioxide ( $\text{UO}_2$ ) by reduction with hydrogen gas. The  $\text{UO}_2$  is converted to uranium tetrafluoride ( $\text{UF}_4$ ), called green salt, by reaction with hydrogen fluoride

(HF); the  $\text{UF}_4$  is then combined with fluorine gas to produce the compound  $\text{UF}_6$ . This compound is a solid at atmospheric pressure and normal ambient temperatures, but it sublimates to the gaseous phase at relatively low temperatures.

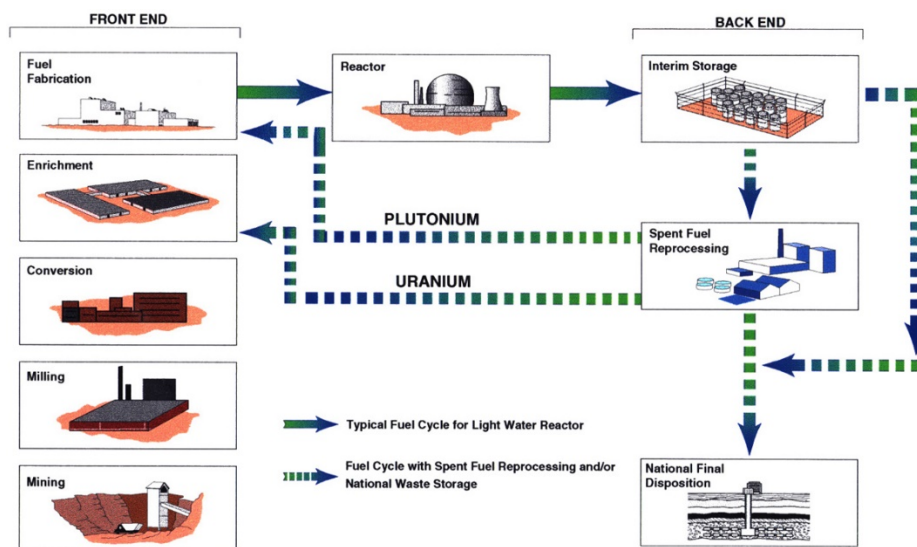


Figure 1. Nuclear fuel cycle.

At an enrichment plant the  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentration of the  $\text{UF}_6$  is altered. The output streams of an enrichment facility are (1) enriched  $\text{UF}_6$  and (2) depleted  $\text{UF}_6$ . The enriched product stream normally serves as the feed material for a fuel fabrication facility, which chemically and mechanically converts the  $\text{UF}_6$  into forms usable in nuclear reactors such as  $\text{UO}_2$  or uranium carbide (UC). The depleted stream, called tails or waste, is normally stored at the enrichment plant. However, it can also be converted and fabricated into a form for use as fertile material in a breeder reactor. For use in nuclear power plants,  $\text{UO}_2$  pellets are loaded into alloy tubes, and the tubes are assembled into fuel bundles. These fuel bundles are loaded into a power reactor where the  $^{235}\text{U}$  is fissioned with the release of energy in the form of heat. The heat is transformed into electrical energy through steam generators and turbines.

Spent fuel elements removed from the power reactor contain unfissioned  $^{235}\text{U}$ ,  $^{238}\text{U}$ , heavy-element isotopes resulting from neutron irradiation (e.g., plutonium), and a variety of radioactive fission products. Following discharge from the reactor, the spent fuel is placed in on-site interim storage for cooling and to await further disposition. After a sufficient cooling period, the spent fuel elements can be shipped to a spent fuel reprocessing plant, to an off-site interim storage facility, or to a nuclear waste repository. During reprocessing, the residual uranium, plutonium, and fission products are chemically separated. The uranium recovered during reprocessing may be recycled to the isotope enrichment step and then returned to reactor service.

### Review Questions for Section 2.1

1. What are the isotopes contained in natural uranium?
2. What is uranium enrichment?
3. What is the  $^{235}\text{U}$  enrichment range of the fuel required by most light-water nuclear power plants?
4. What is the typical chemical form of uranium after it has been mined and milled? When it is processed in an enrichment plant?



## 2.2 BASIC SEPARATION AND CASCADE THEORY

### Objectives

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. define the separation element of an enrichment plant,
2. describe how material throughput affects the arrangement of the separation equipment, and
3. explain why separation elements are combined in series.

The function of a uranium enrichment plant is to increase the concentration of the  $^{235}\text{U}$  isotope in the material being processed. Because the chemical and physical properties of isotopes differ only slightly, the separation of isotopes cannot be accomplished using the kind of techniques normally used to purify substances. Isotopic separation has required development of processes specially designed for this purpose that efficiently use the small chemical and physical differences among isotopes.

The basic component of an enrichment plant is the separation element. A **separation element** (Figure 2) is a device that separates the incoming feed stream into two outgoing streams: an enriched stream, in which the process material is enriched to some degree in the desired isotope, and a depleted stream that is somewhat depleted in this isotope.<sup>1</sup>

An important feature of a separation element is the **throughput**, the rate at which feed material can be processed. Some elements can process kilograms of material per minute, whereas others might process only a few grams per minute. Separation elements are connected in parallel to form **stages** to achieve the necessary flow throughput. For separation elements with high throughput (such as the gaseous diffusion diffuser), each stage is comprised of only one separation element. For separation elements with low throughput (such as the gas centrifuge), each stage is comprised of multiple separation elements.

The degree of separation that can be achieved in a given separation element or stage is measured by a parameter called the **separation factor**,  $\alpha$ . The magnitude of  $\alpha$  is determined by process physics and engineering and varies widely among separation methods. The separation factor is approximately the ratio of the concentration of the enriched stream to the concentration of the depleted stream [Eq. (1)]. (The separation factor is more precisely defined in Section 3.3.)

$$\alpha = \frac{[\% ^{235}\text{U} \div (100 - \% ^{235}\text{U})] \text{ for enriched stream}}{[\% ^{235}\text{U} \div (100 - \% ^{235}\text{U})] \text{ for depleted stream}} \quad (1)$$

To achieve useful enrichments, stages are connected in series to form a **cascade** (Figure 3). The feed to a stage is comprised of the enriched stream from the previous stage and the depleted stream from the next stage. The enriched stream withdrawn from the top stage is called the cascade **product**, and the depleted stream withdrawn from the bottom stage is called the cascade **tails** or **waste**.

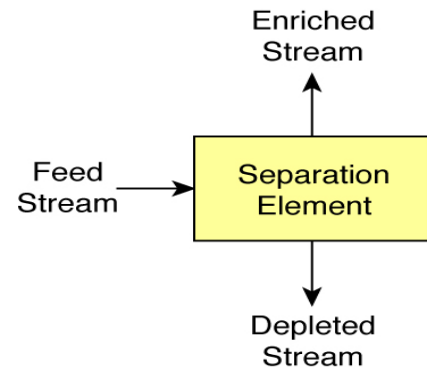
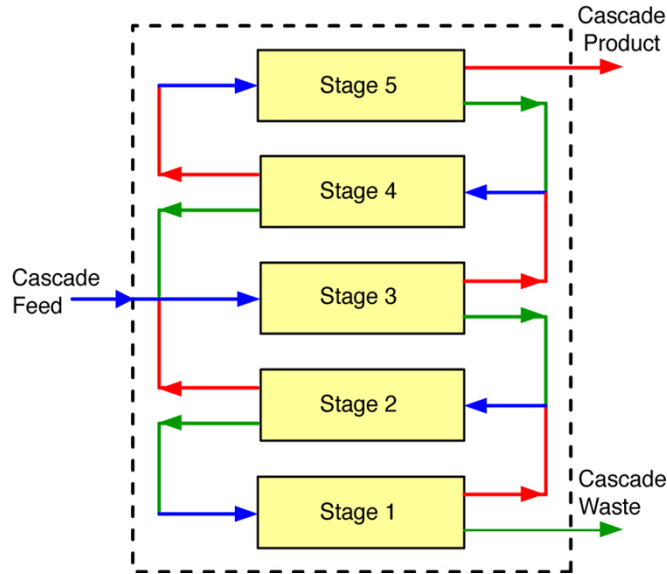


Figure 2. Basic separation element.

<sup>1</sup>Note that the separation element does not create material; it partitions the material into two streams.



**Figure 3. Stages are connected in a series to multiply the separation effect.**

When the separation factor is very small ( $\alpha \sim 1$ ), only a small degree of enrichment is achieved in a stage. Therefore, the process material must pass through many stages to multiply the separation effect. When the separation factor is larger, fewer stages are required to achieve useful enrichments. Figure 4 shows that if the separation factor is 1.004, it takes hundreds of stages to enrich material from 0.71–3%  $^{235}\text{U}$ ; if the separation factor is 1.5, approximately 10 stages are required. In designing an enrichment plant, the separation factor and throughput of the selected separation element are used to determine the arrangement of the process equipment.

For most enrichment techniques there is a time delay between startup of the cascade and withdrawal of enriched product material. The time required for a cascade to reach its steady-state, designed operating condition is called its **equilibrium time**. Initially the entire cascade is filled with feed material at one concentration. Cascade withdrawal valves remain closed while the process material is recycled through the separation elements to increase the initial product concentration from the feed concentration to the desired product concentration ( $y_P$ ). During this time the cascade is said to be operating in **total reflux** or **recycle mode**.

Figure 5 shows that no product material is withdrawn until the concentration gradient is established at time  $t_1$ . This time depends on the product and feed concentrations, on the time required for material to pass through a separating element or stage (i.e., stage holdup time), and on the stage separation factor. When the designed product concentration is achieved, the cascade withdrawal valve is opened slightly, and a small flow of product is withdrawn. The product withdrawal rate is gradually increased until the designed withdrawal rate ( $P$ ) is achieved at time  $t_3$ . The cascade is now operating at steady-state. The equilibrium time is defined as the time until the product withdrawal rate reaches approximately half of its steady-state value ( $t_2$ ). At time  $t_2$ , the area beneath the curve (area 1) equals the area above the curve (area 2), and the quantity of product material withdrawn from the cascade during the period from  $t_1$  to  $t_3$  is equal to the amount that could be withdrawn if the cascade were operated at steady-state between  $t_2$  and  $t_3$ .

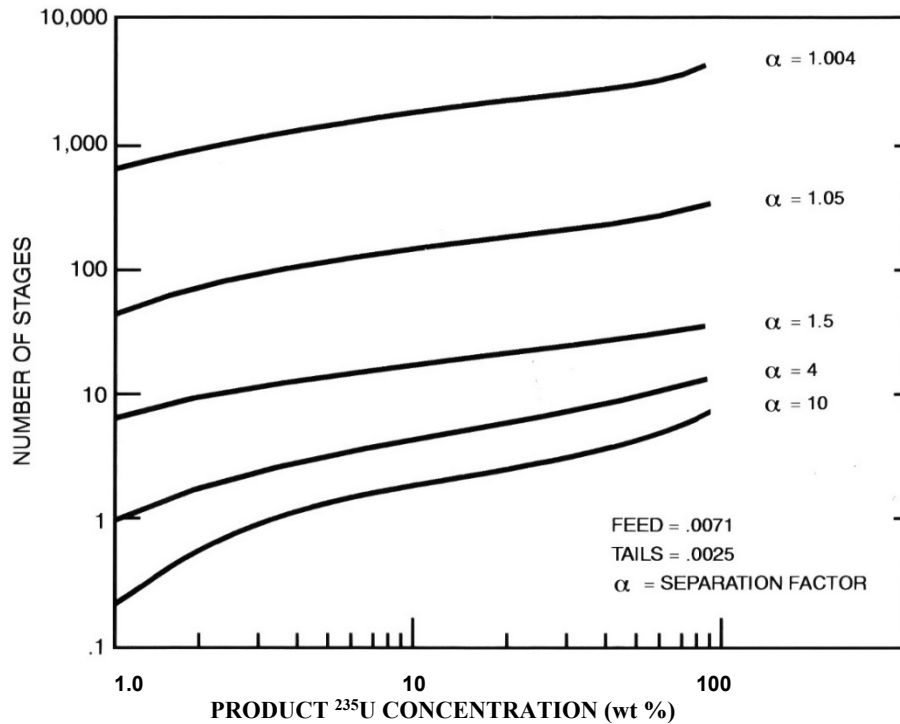


Figure 4. The number of stages required to provide a desired product concentration increases as the separation factor decreases. (For illustrative purposes, fractional stages are shown in this figure.)

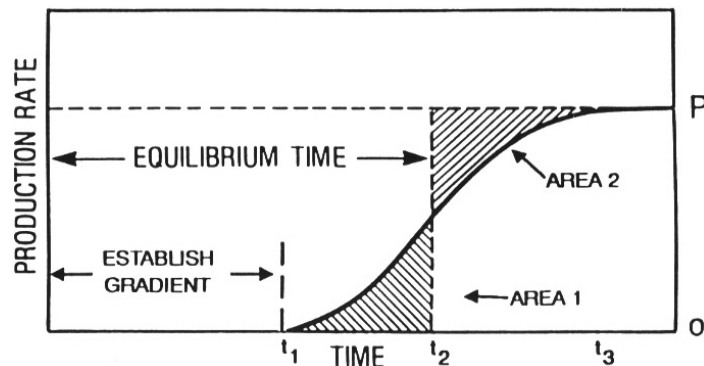


Figure 5. Cascade equilibrium time.

The total amount of material required to fill the entire cascade is called the *in-process inventory*. The in-process inventory is highly dependent on process design including the physical state of the uranium-bearing material; equipment volume; and, if the material is in the gaseous phase, its pressure and temperature.

### Review Questions for Section 2.2

1. What is the basic component of an enrichment plant?
2. Why are separation elements connected in series? In parallel?
3. Can material at the desired product enrichment be withdrawn from a cascade immediately after startup?

## 2.3 URANIUM ENRICHMENT TECHNOLOGIES

### Objectives

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. describe uranium enrichment processes that are in commercial use or in advanced degrees of development and
2. explain advantages and disadvantages of each uranium enrichment process.

Many techniques for enriching uranium have been investigated. Table 2 lists the uranium enrichment processes that are either in commercial use or have been subject to intense research and development for possible use in large-scale production facilities. These processes include gaseous diffusion, gas centrifugation, nozzle separation, the vortex tube process, chemical exchange, ion exchange, atomic vapor laser isotope separation (AVLIS), and molecular laser isotope separation (MLIS). This section provides a brief description of each process followed by a comparison of the processes.

**Table 2. Uranium enrichment processes**

Based on	Examples
Diffusion in a pressure gradient	Gas centrifuge Separation nozzle Vortex tube
Diffusion principles	Gaseous diffusion Mass diffusion Thermal diffusion
Phase equilibrium principles	Distillation
Chemical equilibrium principles	Chemical exchange Ion exchange
Photo excitation principles	Atomic vapor laser isotope separation (AVLIS) Molecular laser isotope separation (MLIS)
Electromagnetic principles	Plasma separation process (PSP) Electromagnetic isotope separation (EMIS) Plasma centrifuge

### 2.3.1 Gas Centrifugation

The gas centrifuge separation process uses the principle of centrifugal force to create a density gradient in a gas containing components of different molecular weights. Centrifugal force causes the heavier molecules to move closer to the outer wall of the centrifuge than the lighter molecules. The gas centrifuge is essentially a hollow, vertical cylinder (i.e., rotor) that is spun about its axis at a high angular velocity inside an evacuated casing (Figure 6). Gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  is fed into the rotor and accelerates to the angular speed of the rotor. Centrifugal force causes the heavier  $^{238}\text{UF}_6$  molecules to move closer to the wall of the rotor and produces partial separation of the  $^{235}\text{U}$  and  $^{238}\text{U}$  isotopes. This separative effect is increased by an axial countercurrent flow of gas within the centrifuge that moves the enriched and depleted streams to opposite ends of the rotor. The introduction of feed gas and the withdrawal of enriched and depleted streams are accomplished by means of stationary tubes at the axis of the rotor; stationary scoops at the ends of the rotor extend into the rotating gas. The countercurrent circulation may be induced by the mechanical action of the unshielded scoop or by temperature differences between the ends of the rotor.

The rotor, driven by an electric motor, is supported at the top by a magnetic bearing and at the bottom by a needle bearing.

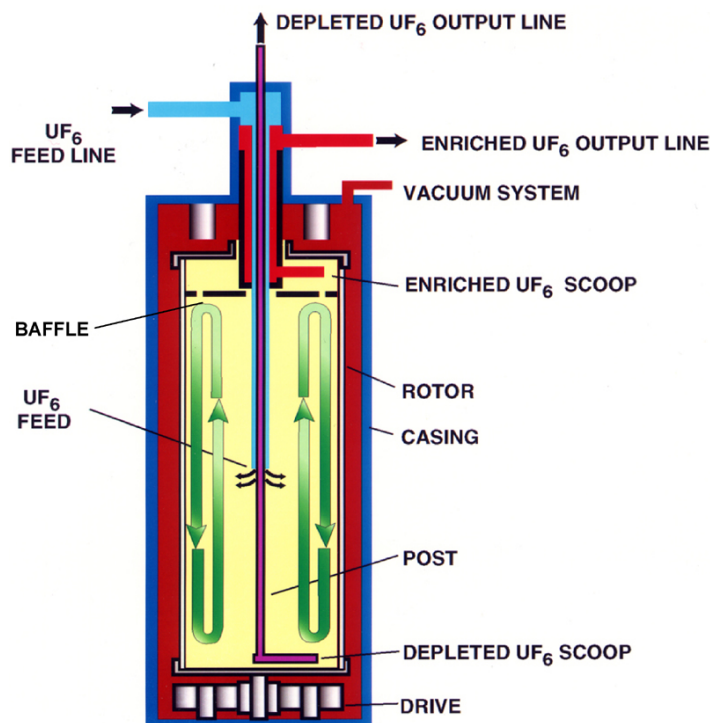


Figure 6. Schematic diagram of a gas centrifuge.

### 2.3.2 Gaseous Diffusion

The gaseous diffusion separation process depends on the separation effect arising from molecular effusion (i.e., the flow of gas through small holes). When a mixture of gas molecules is confined in a vessel and is in thermal equilibrium with its surroundings, the average thermal velocity of the lighter molecules is greater than that of the heavier molecules. Therefore, the molecules of the lighter gas strike the vessel walls more frequently (relative to its concentration) than the molecules of the heavier gas. If the walls of the container are porous with holes large enough to permit the escape of individual molecules, but sufficiently small so that bulk flow of the gas is prevented, then the lighter molecules escape more readily than the heavier ones. The escaped gas is then enriched with respect to the lighter component of the mixture, and the remaining gas is depleted.

The basic unit of the gaseous diffusion process is the gaseous diffusion diffuser (commonly known as a converter) (Figure 7). Compressed UF<sub>6</sub> feed gas is made to flow inside a porous membrane or barrier tube. Approximately one-half of the gas passes through the barrier into a region of lower pressure. This gas is enriched in the component of lower molecular weight (<sup>235</sup>U) and is sent to the next higher stage of the cascade. The gas that does not pass through the barrier is depleted with respect to <sup>235</sup>U and is sent back to the previous stage. Upon leaving the diffusion chamber, the enriched and depleted streams are recompressed to the barrier high-side pressure to make up for the pressure losses.

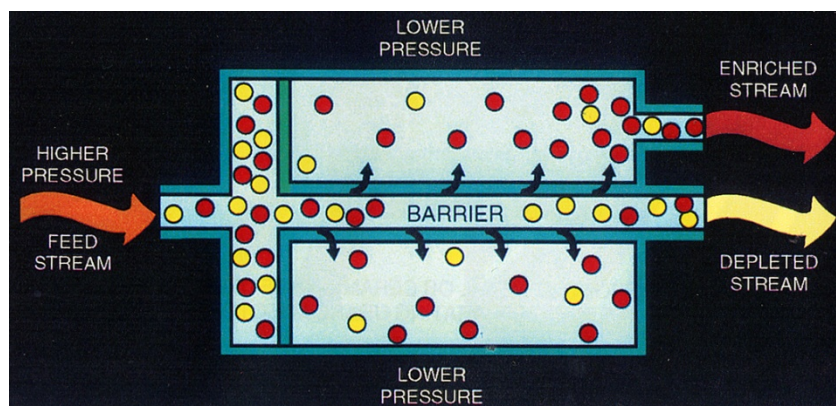


Figure 7. Gaseous diffusion diffuser.

### 2.3.3 Separation Nozzle

The nozzle process is based on the centrifugal effect obtained by pumping a gas containing two components of differing molecular weights through a nozzle into an evacuated volume bounded by a curved surface. To use the separation nozzle process for uranium enrichment, a mixture of gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  and hydrogen ( $\text{H}_2$ ) is compressed and then directed along a curved wall at high velocity (Figure 8). The  $\text{UF}_6$  gas is mixed with lighter  $\text{H}_2$  gas to achieve the high velocities that are required. The heavier  $^{238}\text{U}$ -bearing molecules move to the wall relative to those containing  $^{235}\text{U}$ . At the end of the deflection, the gas jet is split by a knife edge into a light fraction and a heavy fraction, which are withdrawn separately. This process is referred to as a stationary-wall centrifuge.

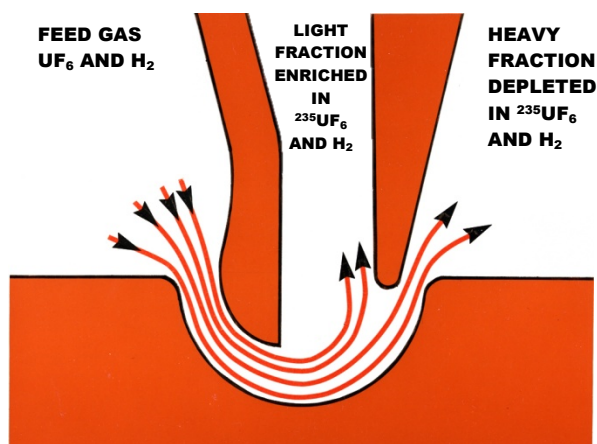


Figure 8. Separation nozzle process.

### 2.3.4 Vortex Tube Process

The vortex tube process is an aerodynamic separation method, developed by South Africa, which depends upon establishing a pressure gradient, as does the gas centrifuge. This process is also referred to as a stationary-wall centrifuge. In the vortex tube process, feed gas (a mixture of 1–2%  $\text{UF}_6$  and 98–99%  $\text{H}_2$ ) is compressed and tangentially enters the vortex tube, traveling at a velocity close to the speed of sound, through nozzles or holes (Figure 9). This tangential injection of gas results in a spiral or vortex motion within the tube, and two streams are withdrawn at opposite ends. In general, the spiral swirling flow decays downstream of the feed inlet because of friction of the wall. This particular design shows a tapered inside diameter that is intended to reduce the decay in the swirling flow as the gas moves away from the tangential inlet stream.

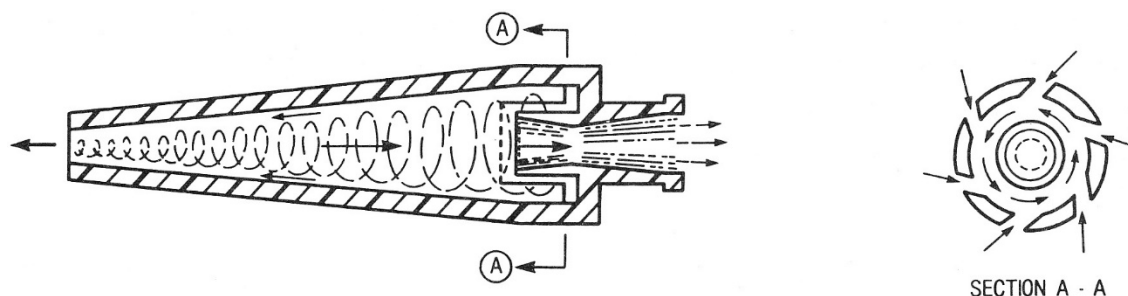


Figure 9. Vortex tube separation principle, showing a cross section of a tangential end-drive tapered vortex tube. (From Wikdahl patent.)

### 2.3.5 Chemical and Ion Exchange

France has developed a chemical exchange enrichment process called “CHEMEX.” The process is based on the isotopic effect obtained from the equilibrium exchange reaction between trivalent uranium ( $U^{+3}$ ) and tetravalent uranium ( $U^{+4}$ ). Immiscible liquid phases (i.e., aqueous and organic) are counter-currently contacted in pulsed columns producing the cascading effect of thousands of separation stages (Figure 10). In these columns the heavier aqueous solution is fed in the top of the column, and the lighter organic phase is fed into the bottom of the column. A rapid reciprocating motion is applied to the contents of the column, which leads to efficient and intimate contact of the two phases. Separation is achieved because  $^{235}U$  prefers the  $U^{+4}$  state (residing in an organic phase) and  $^{238}U$  prefers the  $U^{+3}$  state (residing in an aqueous phase). After passing through the column, the enriched and depleted streams must be chemically treated so that they can be recirculated through the column (refluxed) or sent to another column for additional enrichment.

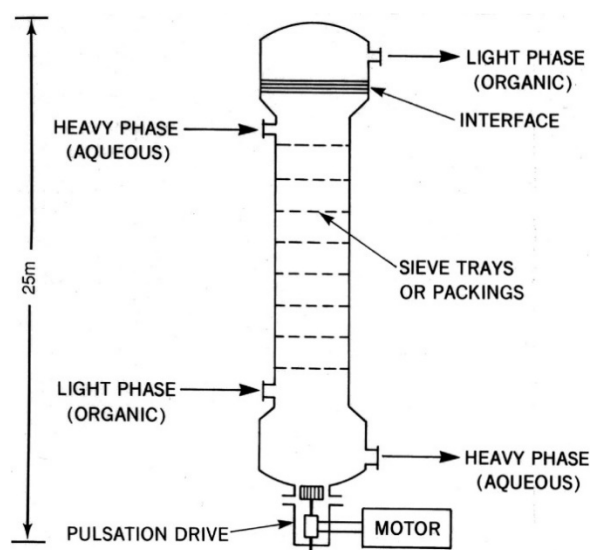


Figure 10. Chemical exchange process.

The Asahi Chemical Industry Company of Japan has developed an analogous process based on uranium valence states of  $U^{+4}$  and hexavalent uranium ( $U^{+6}$ ). The process uses a cylindrical enrichment column packed with a fine spherical adsorbent (ion-exchange resin). When an acidic uranium solution flows through the adsorbent-packed column,  $U^{+6}$  ions are selectively removed from the solution and retained by the adsorbent (as a “fixed phase”), whereas  $U^{+4}$  ions in the solution (as a “moving phase”) flow between the adsorbent spheres (Figure 11). The adsorbent must have a very high ion-exchange rate to allow achievement of isotope equilibrium within a short time. The isotope exchange equilibria are thus established between the fixed phase and the moving phase throughout the enrichment column.

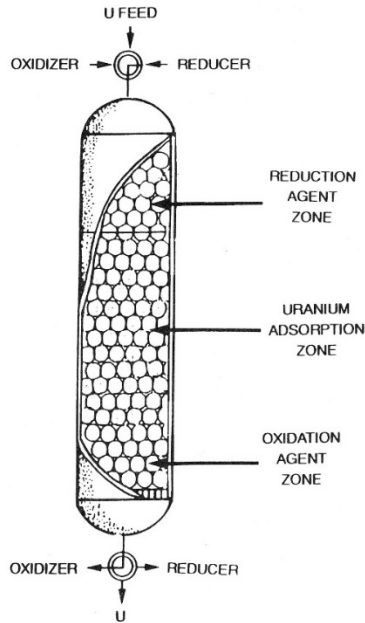


Figure 11. Ion exchange process.

### 2.3.6 Atomic Vapor Laser Isotope Separation

The AVLIS technique is based on the fact that the electron energy states of the uranium atom are very precisely defined and depend on the mass of the nucleus. These energies give rise to light absorption characteristics that are unique to each isotope. The process material for AVLIS is uranium vapor. Figure 12 is an illustration of how one isotope ( $^{235}\text{U}$ ) can be selected for photoionization and extraction to the exclusion of the other ( $^{238}\text{U}$ ) by proper tuning of a laser system. When the laser light illuminates the uranium vapor, the  $^{235}\text{U}$  vapor absorbs the light, but  $^{238}\text{U}$  does not. The now excited  $^{235}\text{U}$  ejects an electron thus becoming a positively charged atom or ion, which is deflected by an electromagnetic field to the product collector. The  $^{238}\text{U}$  remains uncharged and passes through the collector section to the tails collector.

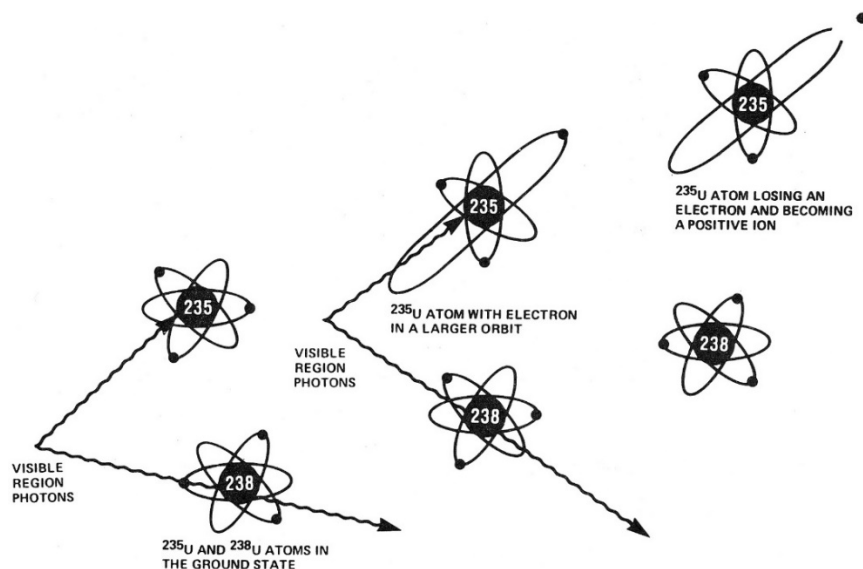


Figure 12. Atomic vapor laser isotope separation process.



### 2.3.7 Molecular Laser Isotope Separation

Uranium in the  $\text{UF}_6$  molecule is at the center of an octahedron; the six fluorine atoms are equally spaced at the corners (Figure 13). In the MLIS process, the  $^{235}\text{UF}_6$  is selectively excited with an infrared laser. The absorption of one or more infrared photons by the  $\text{UF}_6$  results in a broadening and red shift of the vibrational absorption spectra. The absorption of many additional infrared photons can cause the excited  $^{235}\text{UF}_6$  molecules to dissociate, yielding  $^{235}\text{UF}_5$ . Alternatively, an increase in the ultraviolet absorption cross section of the excited  $^{235}\text{UF}_6$  can result in the preferential dissociation of the excited molecules to  $^{235}\text{UF}_5$  when illuminated with an ultraviolet laser. Once the dissociation of the  $\text{UF}_6$  takes place, the  $^{235}\text{UF}_5$  can be collected as a powder on a product collector.

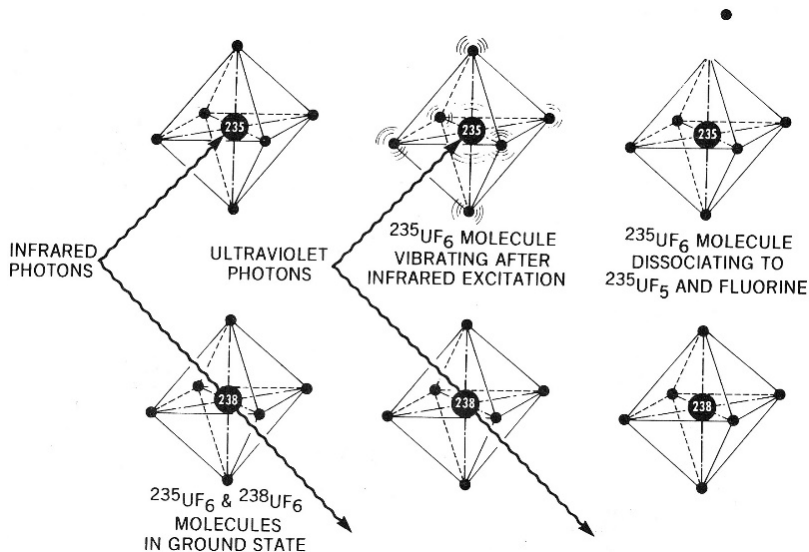


Figure 13. Molecular laser isotope separation process.

### 2.3.8 Comparison of Processes

Major factors important to the selection of a uranium enrichment process include the separation factor (how many stages), throughput (how many equipment units per stage), in-process inventory, equilibrium time, energy requirement, capital costs, and operating costs. The ideal enrichment process would have a very high separation factor, a high throughput, a small in-process inventory, low energy consumption, low capital costs, and low operating costs. The perfect process does not exist, however, and tradeoffs among these factors must be accepted.

Comparisons of some of the more important parameters of the enrichment processes just described are provided in Table 3. The gaseous diffusion process was the first commercial-scale process developed, and it remains the standard for comparison. Relative to other enrichment methods, the gaseous diffusion process has a very high energy consumption (and consequently high operating costs), a small stage separation factor (which implies many stages), a large in-process inventory of  $\text{UF}_6$ , and stage units with high throughput. By contrast, the gas centrifuge process has low energy consumption, stage separation factors that are moderate to high, a very small in-process inventory of  $\text{UF}_6$ , and equipment units with low flow throughput.

**Table 3. Comparison of the enrichment processes**

Enrichment process	Separation factor	Throughput	Specific inventory (kgU/SWU/year)	Specific energy consumption (kWh/SWU)	Equilibrium time	Capital costs
Gaseous diffusion	1.004	High	0.1–0.3	2400	10–40 days	Reference
Gas centrifuge	>1.3	Low	0.0005	100	~1 hour	Comparable
Aerodynamic						
—Vortex tube	1.03	High	0.003	3500	~1 day	Comparable
—Separation nozzle	1.015	High	0.002	2500–3500	1–2 days	Comparable
Chemical exchange	1.0026	High	1.1	360 <sup>a</sup>	>150 days	Lower
Ion exchange	1.001	High	0.1–0.4	140 <sup>a</sup>	20–90 days	Lower
Laser						
—Molecular	2–6	Moderate	Low	150	~1 day	Lower
—Atomic vapor	2–6	Moderate	Low	150	~1 day	Lower
Electromagnetic isotope separation (EMIS)	~30	Very low	N/A	High	5–15 days	Much higher

<sup>a</sup>For ion and chemical exchange, this is equivalent electrical energy consumption.

As of 2015, the production capacity of the world market is entirely gas centrifuge. As recently as 2012, gaseous diffusion had comprised 35% of the world production capacity, but the remaining large diffusion plants in France and the United States were shut down in 2012 and 2013, respectively. The locations of existing commercial enrichment plants are listed in Table 4. Although the laser isotope separation technologies, as well as the chemical and ion-exchange processes, appeared to be very promising and were intensely investigated at one time, they have yet to be deployed.

**Table 4. Locations of existing commercial enrichment plants (2015)**

Nation or group	Plant name/location	Enrichment process	Completion date	Nominal Capacity (t SWU/year)
Brazil	Resende	Centrifuge	2009–continuing	100
China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC)	CNNC/Shaanxi	Centrifuge	1996–continuing	2,200
	CNNC/Lanzhou	Centrifuge	2002–continuing	3,500+
	CNNC/Emeishan	Centrifuge	2013–continuing	1,600
EURODIF	Georges Besse II/Tricastin	Centrifuge	2011–continuing	7,500
Japan	Rokkasho-mura	Centrifuge	1992–continuing	1,500
Russia	Ural Electrochemical Combine/Novouralsk	Centrifuge	1980s–continuing	13,800
	Angarsk Electrolyzing Chemical Combine	Centrifuge		2,800
	Siberian Group of Chemical Enterprises/Seversk	Centrifuge	1990–continuing	4,100
	Electrochemical Plant/Zelenogorsk	Centrifuge		8,200
				All increasing
United States	URENCO USA National Enrichment Facility/Eunice, NM	Centrifuge	2010–continuing	4,900
URENCO	Almelo/Netherlands	Centrifuge	1980–continuing	5,300
	Capenhurst/UK	Centrifuge	1980–continuing	4,700
	Gronau/Germany	Centrifuge	1985–continuing	4,000

**Note:** Continuing completion date denotes that construction or upgrades to the plant continue.

### ***Review Questions for Section 2.3***

1. What are some of the uranium enrichment processes that have been developed?
2. What is the most prevalent process used for enriching uranium?
3. What are desirable characteristics of an enrichment process?
4. How does the gas centrifuge enrichment process compare with the other enrichment processes (i.e., advantages versus disadvantages)?

## 2.4 MATERIAL BALANCE AND SEPARATIVE CAPACITY

### Objectives

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. describe the material balance concept for the external streams of a cascade,
2. describe the importance of separative work, and
3. calculate material and separative work balances for a cascade.

A simple cascade (or three-stream cascade) divides a feed stream into two streams—one enriched and one depleted in the desired component with respect to the feed composition. Figure 14 shows a schematic diagram of a simple cascade and introduces the nomenclature. The mass flow rates of the product, feed, and waste (tails) streams are identified as  $P$ ,  $F$ , and  $W$ , respectively. The  $^{235}\text{U}$  content, or concentration, of each stream is identified as  $y_P$ ,  $x_F$ , and  $x_W$ , respectively. These concentrations can be expressed in terms of the weight (or mass) fraction of each component or the atom fraction of each component. Because the atomic weights of  $^{235}\text{U}$  and  $^{238}\text{U}$  are close, for practical applications atom fractions and weight fractions can be used interchangeably for cascade calculations.

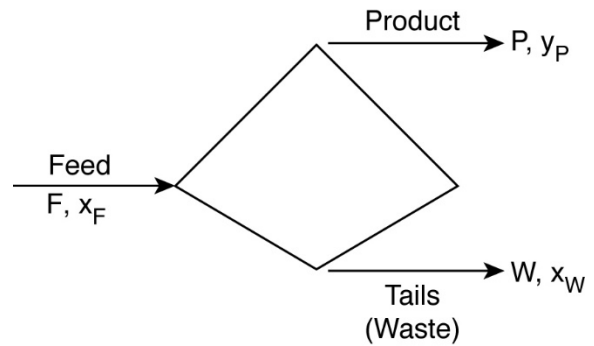


Figure 14. Simple cascade.

### 2.4.1 Material Balance

During the enrichment process the total quantity of uranium remains constant even though the concentrations of the product and tails streams are different from the feed stream concentration. In other words, “what goes in must come out.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the total quantity of uranium [Eq. (2)] and the total quantity of each isotope [Eq. (3)] contained in the feed, product, and tails streams must balance. These balance equations apply to the separation element, stage, or cascade regardless of the enrichment method used.

$$\text{Uranium balance: } F = P + W \quad (2)$$

$$^{235}\text{U balance: } F(x_F) = P(y_P) + W(x_W) \quad (3)$$

These equations can be rearranged and solved to obtain the feed per unit product ratio [Eq. (4)].

$$\frac{F}{P} = \frac{y_P - x_W}{x_F - x_W} \quad (4)$$

<sup>2</sup>In an actual enriching process, very small quantities of uranium are consumed and do not exit the process (e.g., deposits in the process equipment).

### Problem 1. Material balance calculation

**Problem 1:** How much natural uranium is required to produce 1 kg of 3% enriched product material if the tails concentration is 0.25%?

**Solution:** The required mass for the feed stream can be calculated using Eq. (4).

$$\frac{F}{1 \text{ kg U}} = \frac{0.03 - 0.0025}{0.0071 - 0.0025} = 5.98$$

or, 5.98 kg U of natural feed is required.

(Note that the  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentrations are always expressed in decimal form; e.g., 3% is 0.03.)

In addition, the mass of the tails stream can be calculated using Eq. (2).

$$5.98 \text{ kg U} = 1 \text{ kg U} + W$$

or, 4.98 kg U of 0.25% tails will be generated.

### 2.4.2 Separative Capacity

Separative capacity is the best quantitative measure of a separation element, cascade, or plant's capability to enrich uranium. The concept of separative capacity is important because it is a good measure of the scale of operations (e.g., number of machines) required to perform a separation task. Many of the design parameters of an enrichment plant that affect the initial capital cost are proportional to the plant's separative capacity, and the annual operating costs are proportional to the amount of separative work done per year. For example, in a gas centrifuge plant, the number of gas centrifuges (of a particular design) required in a plant is proportional to the plant's separative capacity. In a gaseous diffusion plant, the total flow rate, the total compressor capacity, the total power consumption, and the total barrier area are proportional to the separative capacity of the facility.

Separative work is customarily measured in separative work units (SWU). The separative work can be calculated in units of kg SWU or, simply, SWU when the product, feed, and tails streams are given in kg U (not kg  $\text{UF}_6$ ). The separative capacity is the amount of separative work produced in a given time period and is computed by constructing a value balance of the input and output streams. Equation (5) is used to calculate the separative work ( $\Delta U$  in units of SWU) required to produce the resulting product and tails streams.<sup>3</sup> The value function  $V(x)$  used in Eq. (5) is described in the next section.

$$\text{Separative work: } \Delta U = PV(y_P) + WV(x_W) - FV(x_F) \quad (5)$$

---

<sup>3</sup>In this equation,  $U$  does not refer to uranium but to a work function.

### 2.4.3 Value Function

The value function was developed in the 1940s and is a function of the  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentration,  $x$ , in the uranium (expressed as a weight or atom fraction, rather than as a percentage). The standard form of the value function is given in Eq. (6).

$$\text{Value function: } V(x) = (2x - 1) \ln \left( \frac{x}{1-x} \right) \quad (6)$$

**Value** is an abstract property of a quantity of uranium that is independent of cost and price. There is no physical interpretation to value of uranium. The value of the output streams increases when isotopes are separated because work is done to affect the separation. The magnitude of the separation task can be characterized by the overall increase in value of the final materials compared with the starting material.

The value function  $V(x)$  is plotted in Figure 15. It is nonlinear and has the property that  $V(0)$  and  $V(1)$  are infinite. The value function for any  $^{235}\text{U}$  enrichment can be calculated using Eq. (6) by replacing  $x$  with the  $^{235}\text{U}$  enrichment (in decimal form). This figure also demonstrates that value is lost when two samples of uranium with unequal concentrations of  $^{235}\text{U}$  are mixed. Let a chord (i.e., a straight line) connect the  $V(a)$  and  $V(b)$  of two samples of uranium-bearing concentrations  $a$  and  $b$ , respectively, in  $^{235}\text{U}$ . If the amounts of each sample are equal, for example, the concentration of the blend will be at the midpoint of the chord. Notice that for any pair of concentrations,  $a$  and  $b$ , every point on the  $V(x)$  curve lies below the corresponding point on the chord, indicating that the value has decreased relative to the average value of the samples before mixing.

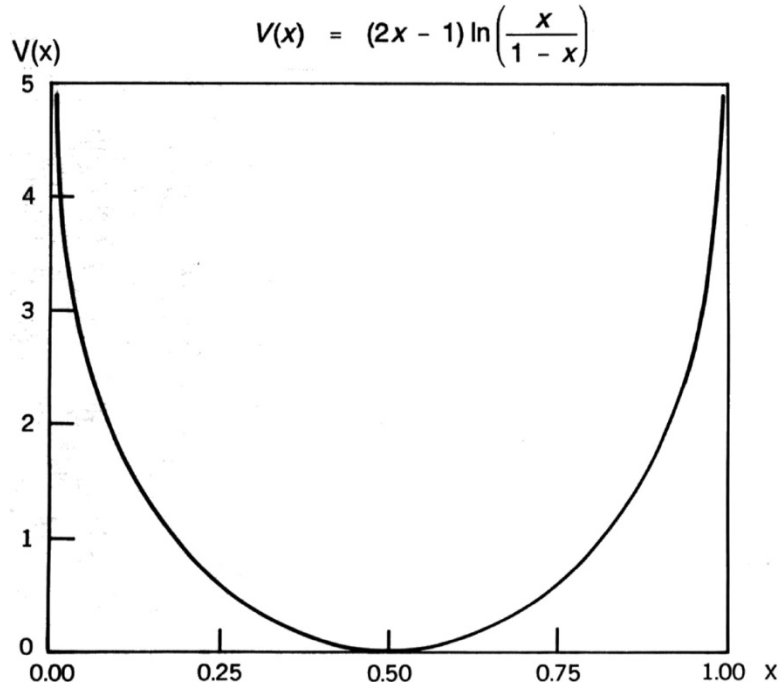


Figure 15. Value function.

### Problem 2. Value function

**Problem 2:** What is the value function for (a) natural uranium, (b) 3%  $^{235}\text{U}$  enriched product material, and (c) 0.25%  $^{235}\text{U}$  depleted tails material?

**Solution:** Using Eq. (6), the  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentration is substituted (in decimal form) for  $x$  as follows:

$$\text{a. } V(0.0071) = [2(0.0071) - 1] \ln \frac{0.0071}{(1 - 0.0071)} = 4.870$$

$$\text{b. } V(0.03) = [2(0.03) - 1] \ln \frac{0.03}{(1 - 0.03)} = 3.268$$

$$\text{c. } V(0.0025) = [2(0.0025) - 1] \ln \frac{0.0025}{(1 - 0.0025)} = 5.959$$

The significance of value is its usefulness to form balances and to compute separative work as demonstrated in Problem 3.

Now that the value function has been discussed, let us solve a separative work problem, Problem 3.

### Problem 3. Separative work

**Problem 3:** How much separative work is required to accomplish the separation task identified in Problem 1?

**Solution:** The separative work is calculated using Eq. (5). Substituting the uranium masses and enrichments from Problem 1 yields:

$$\Delta U = 1 V(0.03) + 4.98 V(0.0025) - 5.98 V(0.0071)$$

(Note that the uranium masses are provided in kg U.) Substituting the values calculated in Problem 2 yields:

$$\Delta U = 1 (3.268) + 4.98 (5.959) - 5.98 (4.870) = 3.821 \text{ SWU}.$$

Thus, 3.821 SWU are required to produce 1 kg U of 3% enriched product from 5.98 kg U natural uranium with a tails concentration of 0.25%.

Listed below are some ***rules of thumb*** regarding separative work. The quantities shown are dependent on exact product and tails concentrations.

Based on a 0.25%  $^{235}\text{U}$  tails concentration, it takes:

~100,000–150,000 SWU to fuel a 1000-MW light-water reactor for 1 year's operation,

~4 SWU to produce 1 kg of LEU (3%) from ~6 kg of natural uranium, and

~200 SWU to produce 1 kg of HEU (90%) from ~200 kg of natural uranium.

~5000 SWU to produce a safeguards significant quantity<sup>4</sup> of HEU.

### ***Review Questions for Section 2.4***

1. What are the fundamental material balance equations?
2. What are the customary units used to measure separative capacity?
3. Does the value function provide the cost incurred during uranium enrichment?

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<sup>4</sup>The IAEA safeguards glossary defines a significant quantity of HEU as 25 kg  $^{235}\text{U}$ .



### 3. GAS CENTRIFUGE ENRICHMENT PROCESS

#### 3.1 DESIGN HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

##### *Objectives*

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. understand the history of isotope separation technology and
2. describe the trend toward commercialization of the gas centrifuge enrichment process.

The general principles on which many of the uranium enrichment methods of current interest are based were first recognized in the early parts of the twentieth century. Following the discovery of radioactivity at the turn of the century, the existence of isotopes was recognized, and the word “isotope” was coined by Soddy (England) in 1913. In 1919 Aston and Lindemann (England) identified four distinct principles on which separation of isotopes could be based: distillation, diffusion, density (gravitational or centrifugal fields), and electromagnetic methods.

Laboratory experiments on several specific methods of isotope separation were carried out in the 1920s and 1930s. This included work on gaseous diffusion by Aston, who separated neon isotopes in a single stage in 1920, and later by Hertz (Germany), who used a 24-stage cascade to separate neon isotopes in 1932 and soon thereafter separated isotopes of hydrogen, nitrogen, and carbon. Laboratory experiments on thermal diffusion were conducted in the 1930s, most notably by Clausius and Dickel (Germany), who built the first thermal diffusion column in 1938. Thermal diffusion arises when a mixture is subjected to a temperature gradient leading to partial separation of the components. Beams (United States) developed the first convection-free vacuum gas centrifuge in 1934 and soon thereafter used it to separate chlorine isotopes. From the earliest days of work with isotopes, the electromagnetic method of separation and detection has been widely used in laboratories (universally). Mass spectrometer instruments developed by Thompson, Aston, Dempster, Nier, and others were used for research. By the late 1930s Lawrence (United States) had developed the forerunner of the calutron, the cyclotron, a device used for accelerating charged particles to high energy for physics research.

Attempts at development of industrial-scale processes did not occur until the rush to build the atomic bomb during World War II. The need for large amounts of  $^{235}\text{U}$  stimulated intense research and development efforts by Germany, England, and the United States on methods suitable for uranium isotope separation.

In Germany, initial emphasis was placed on the liquid thermal diffusion process. Beginning in 1941, attention centered on the gas centrifuge process. Subsequently, progress was made on centrifuge machine design, but the effort was greatly hampered by Allied bombing, and the process was not taken beyond a very small pilot scale.

In the United Kingdom, the gaseous diffusion process was being developed for large-scale separation of  $^{235}\text{U}$  under the British Tube Alloys Directorate Project. By the end of 1943, US and British scientists and engineers were freely sharing information on the gaseous diffusion process, and the decision to build a large-scale plant in the United States had already been made. Early British work on the gas centrifuge had been dropped in 1940 in favor of the centrifuge effort under way in the United States.

In the United States, under the Manhattan Project, virtually every possible process known at the time was considered and evaluated. Preliminary research was conducted on many processes. Four processes were

carried through or beyond the large pilot stage: gaseous diffusion, thermal diffusion, electromagnetic separation, and gas centrifugation. Beams first separated uranium isotopes using experimental centrifuge machines in 1940. However, a number of technical disadvantages associated with gas centrifuge were discovered and, after the gaseous diffusion process proved reliable in 1944, work on the centrifuge process was suspended. Nevertheless, the basic theory had been developed.

Development of the gas centrifuge continued after the conclusion of the war, and several major breakthroughs in machine size, speed, and efficiency made centrifugation an attractive process for uranium enrichment. In the early 1950s, one such development was the novel bearing design, which replaced the conventional oil bearings with pivot and magnetic bearings. These bearings hold the rotating shaft in suspension and dampen vibrations. In addition, new high-strength, light-weight materials were created to handle the severe mechanical stresses generated in the outer wall. These new construction materials and bearings allowed the centrifuges to spin at extremely high speeds.

It was not until the 1970s that the gas centrifuge enrichment process began to challenge the dominance of gaseous diffusion. Perhaps the most significant difference between these processes is power usage. A centrifuge plant requires only about 5% of the power needed for a diffusion plant to perform an equivalent separative task. Other advantages that make the gas centrifuge process more competitive than gaseous diffusion include smaller floor space requirements, the capability to expand the plant capacity in increments, and the flexibility to design and operate a cascade or module of cascades for specified product enrichment.

### ***Review Questions for Section 3.1***

1. When was the existence of isotopes first recognized?
2. What stimulated worldwide efforts to develop an industrial-scale uranium enrichment process?
3. What factors make the gas centrifuge enrichment process more attractive than the gaseous diffusion process?

## **3.2 MODERN GAS CENTRIFUGE**

### ***Objectives***

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. identify the major components of a gas centrifuge and
2. describe the operating characteristics of a gas centrifuge.

A gas centrifuge is essentially a hollow, vertical cylinder that is spun about its axis at a high angular velocity (Figure 16). For the centrifuge detailed in the figure, the enriched stream is withdrawn from the top of the rotor, and the depleted stream is withdrawn from the bottom of the rotor. Depending on the centrifuge design, the flow may be reversed.

A centrifuge includes six principal parts:

1. Center post and scoops
2. Rotor, baffle, and end caps
3. Molecular pump
4. Top and bottom suspension systems
5. Electric motor
6. Casing

The gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  feed, enriched, and depleted streams are introduced and withdrawn through a stationary center post. The post penetrates into the centrifuge through an axial hole in the top end cap. The feed stream is introduced at a constant rate into the rotor through the center post. The enriched and depleted fractions are withdrawn at opposite ends of the rotor through stationary scoops that extend into the spinning gas. The scoop tip also introduces aerodynamic drag, which induces a circulatory countercurrent  $\text{UF}_6$  gas flow.

The rotating components include the rotor, baffle, and end caps (top and bottom). The rotor is a thin-walled cylinder that is rotated inside the casing. The baffle is disc shaped and has holes to allow the gas to leak from the main rotor cavity into the area near the scoop. A baffle is needed at one end to keep the scoop from imposing a circulatory flow that would counteract the corresponding flow generated by the scoop at the other end. The rotor is sealed at the top and bottom with disc-shaped end caps. The caps are specially designed to fit the ends of the rotor so that the  $\text{UF}_6$  cannot escape from the rotor.

A molecular pump is used to maintain a low pressure between the rotor and the casing. Trace amounts of gas may leak from the interior of the rotor through the small annular gap around the stationary central post at the top of the centrifuge. This gas is confined to the cavity above the rotor by a close-fitting, spiral-grooved sleeve, which serves as a very efficient pump.

The top and bottom suspension systems serve several functions: (1) reliably support the rotor at full speed, (2) control the rotor at startup and run-down speeds, (3) allow the rotor to rotate about its center of mass, and (4) dampen rotor vibrations. The suspension consists of an oil-lubricated pivot and cup bearing at the bottom of the rotor and a magnetic bearing at the top of the rotor. The bottom bearing assembly includes a mechanism for damping radial and axial rotor vibrations. The magnetic bearing supports and centers the top end of the rotor without touching the rotating components. It provides some lift to relieve the load on the bottom bearing and dampens vibration by providing radial stabilizing forces.

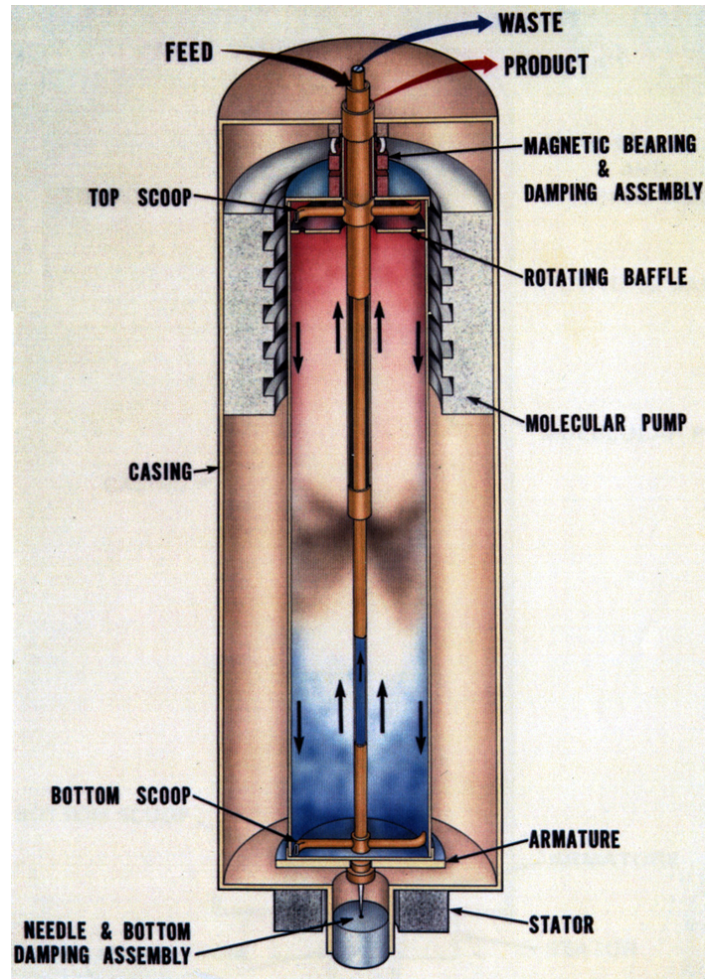


Figure 16. Modern gas centrifuge.

The rotor is driven by a rotating magnetic field produced in the stator located at the bottom of the rotor. The stator's magnetic field is fed by a variable frequency electrical power supply operating at a frequency synchronous with the rotor speed.

The outer casing provides a vacuum-tight enclosure for the rotor to minimize the drag on the rotating parts. This reduces the power consumption resulting from gas friction when the rotor is spinning. In addition, the casing must be leak proof and provide a physical barrier for containment of rotor debris in the event of a machine failure. It is important to the operation of the plant that the failure of one machine does not injure personnel nor cause the failure of adjacent machines.

### **3.2.1 Separative Capacity**

The separative capacity of a gas centrifuge is greatly influenced by its rotational speed and the length of the rotor. Separative capacity is proportional to the rotor length and increases rapidly with rotor speed. The basic objective in designing a centrifuge is to produce the fastest and longest rotor possible at the lowest price.

The peripheral speed of the rotor is limited by the strength-to-density ratio of the rotor construction materials. The very high rotational speed of the centrifuge causes mechanical stresses in the outer wall. Aluminum alloys and stainless steels are capable of rotor peripheral speeds in excess of 350 m/s. Even higher speeds can be achieved using maraging steels (strong, low-carbon steels that contain up to 25% nickel), glass-fiber, and carbon-fiber composites. The choice of materials suitable for centrifuge components is limited, however, because the  $\text{UF}_6$  process gas (described in Section 4.2) is extremely corrosive.

The length of the rotor is limited by rotor dynamics. The rotor must be carefully balanced and damped to prevent wobbling and vibration. Major factors affecting the rotor dynamics include the straightness of the rotor, the uniformity of the wall, and the durability of the bottom bearing. Another concern with centrifuges that have a large length-to-diameter ratio is the problem of bringing them to operating speed. During acceleration, the rotor must transverse critical speeds at which severe vibrations can occur. Unless the vibration can be controlled by the use of damping bearings in the rotor suspension system, a centrifuge rotor might destroy itself while passing through the resonant speeds.

The physical size and separative capacity of gas centrifuges vary. Some centrifuges are relatively small and have separative capacities in the range of 5–30 SWU/year. Other centrifuges are substantially larger and may have separative capacities up to 10 times larger.

### ***Review Questions for Section 3.2***

1. What are the major components of a gas centrifuge?
2. What physical parameters greatly influence the separative capacity of a gas centrifuge?

### 3.3 GAS CENTRIFUGE CASCADE

#### *Objectives*

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. describe a centrifuge cascade,
2. compute the number of stages and stage concentrations to achieve a desired concentration span in a simple cascade, and
3. compute the material flow rate for each stage of a simple cascade and the number of centrifuges required per stage.

The capacity of a single gas centrifuge is limited (in terms both of separation factor and throughput) by mechanical considerations and is generally insufficient to produce LEU. Therefore, centrifuges are connected in series to achieve the desired concentration change and are connected in parallel to provide the desired material flow rate.

Figure 17 illustrates the series and parallel arrangement of centrifuges in a cascade. The stages between the points where the feed is introduced and the product is withdrawn are called the “enriching stages” or more simply the “enricher.” The stages between the points where the feed is introduced and the depleted stream is withdrawn are called the “stripping stages” or the “stripper.”

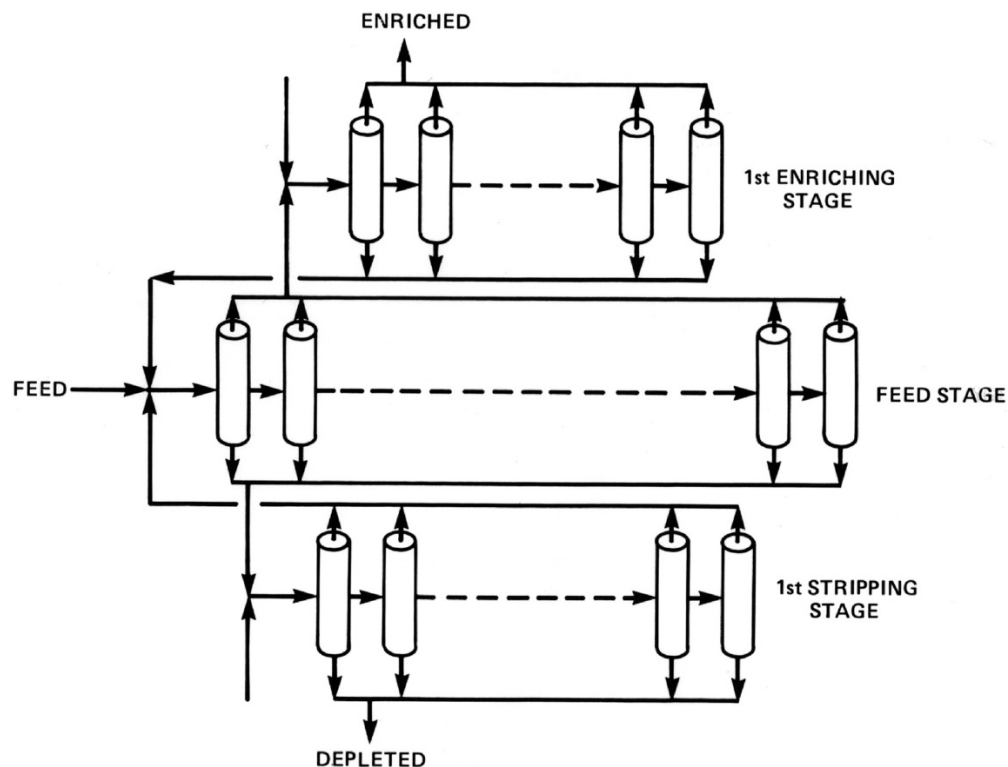


Figure 17. Centrifuge cascade.

### 3.3.1 Series Connections

The number of stages that are connected in series to form a cascade depends on the desired feed concentrate, the  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentration of the product and tails streams, and the magnitude of the stage separation factor. To illustrate cascade arrangement, let us design a simple gas centrifuge cascade to produce nominal 3% product material and 0.25% tails material from natural feed. (These represent typical feed, product, and tails  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentrations of a uranium enrichment plant supporting light-water reactor fuel production.) A separation factor of 1.5 is used for the example cascade.

In defining the separation factor, it is convenient to use the convention of abundance ratio to represent the ratio of the desired isotope concentration to the concentration of the non-desired isotope (i.e., the  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentration divided by the  $^{238}\text{U}$  concentration).

Because  $^{235}\text{U}$  and  $^{238}\text{U}$  are the dominant isotopes present, the  $^{238}\text{U}$  concentration is approximated by 1 minus the  $^{235}\text{U}$  concentration. Using the nomenclature introduced in Section 2.4, the relevant abundance ratios are defined as:

$$R_{x_F} = \frac{x_F}{1 - x_F}, \quad (7a)$$

$$R_{y_P} = \frac{y_P}{1 - y_P}, \quad (7b)$$

$$R_{x_W} = \frac{x_W}{1 - x_W}. \quad (7c)$$

In terms of abundance ratios, the stage separation factor ( $\alpha$ ) is defined as

$$\alpha = \frac{R_{y_P}}{R_{x_W}}, \quad (8a)$$

which can be expressed as

$$\alpha = \left( \frac{R_{y_P}}{R_{x_F}} \right) \left( \frac{R_{x_F}}{R_{x_W}} \right) = (\alpha_E) (\alpha_S). \quad (8b)$$

In this form, the first term represents the enriching factor  $\alpha_E$  (the degree of separation between the feed and the product) and the second term, the stripping factor  $\alpha_S$  (the degree of separation between the feed and the tails). If the product and tails abundance ratios for the two separation factors ( $\alpha_E$  and  $\alpha_S$ ) are replaced by the relationships from the definitions above, and if the resulting expressions are solved for the product and tails concentrations,  $y_P$  and  $x_W$ , respectively, the following expressions result.

$$y_P = \frac{\alpha_E R_{x_F}}{(1 + \alpha_E R_{x_F})} \quad (9a)$$

$$x_W = \frac{R_{x_F}}{(\alpha_S + R_{x_F})} \quad (9b)$$

To illustrate the degree of separation that occurs in a single stage, let us calculate the enrichments of the product and tails streams of the feed stage in our centrifuge cascade. For calculational purposes, it is assumed that the separation is symmetric in an individual centrifuge. That is, the degree of enriching ( $\alpha_E$ ) is equivalent to the degree of stripping ( $\alpha_S$ ). Assuming symmetrical separation and  $\alpha$  of 1.5, both  $\alpha_E$  and  $\alpha_S$  are  $(1.5)^{1/2}$ .

$$y_P = \frac{\sqrt{1.5} \left( \frac{0.0071}{1 - 0.0071} \right)}{1 + \sqrt{1.5} \left( \frac{0.0071}{1 - 0.0071} \right)} = 0.0087$$

$$x_W = \frac{\left( \frac{0.0071}{1 - 0.0071} \right)}{\sqrt{1.5} + \left( \frac{0.0071}{1 - 0.0071} \right)} = 0.0058$$

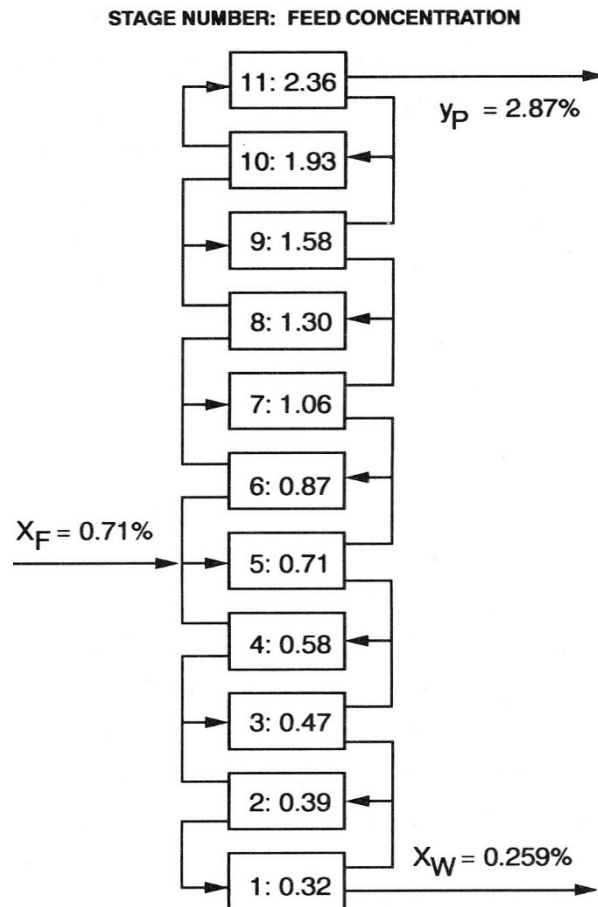


Figure 18. Stage enrichments for a gas centrifuge cascade

In a single gas centrifuge with a separation factor of 1.5, natural feed (with a concentration of 0.71%) will be enriched to 0.87% and stripped to 0.58%.

**with a separation factor of 1.5.**

Equation (9a) can be used to calculate the product enrichment of each successive enriching stage of our cascade, and

Eq. (9b) can be used to calculate the tails

concentration of each stripping stage. As shown in Figure 18, 11 stages are required to achieve the desired concentration span. Using natural feed material, the product concentration of the cascade is 2.87% <sup>235</sup>U, and the tails concentration is 0.259% <sup>235</sup>U.

Stages are configured in series or “cascaded” so that the enriched stream of a stage is introduced as feed material to the next stage, and the depleted stream is introduced as feed material to the previous stage. In other words, the feed material to a specific stage is composed of enriched material from the previous stage and depleted material from the next stage. With this arrangement, only streams of identical isotopic concentrations are blended, which minimizes separative work losses resulting from mixing streams of differing concentrations. The enriched stream concentration from a stage matches the feed stream concentration to the next stage, and the depleted stream concentration matches the feed stream concentration to the previous stage.

### 3.3.2 Parallel Connections

The number of centrifuges that are connected in parallel in each stage depends on the desired product withdrawal rate from the cascade and the throughput of the individual centrifuges. Each centrifuge connected in parallel has the same values for the feed stream rate and concentration, enriched stream rate and concentration, and depleted stream rate and concentration. A representative throughput for a modern gas centrifuge is 0.02 g U/s or 1.728 kg U/day.

The material flow rates (and the number of centrifuges connected in parallel) are different for each stage to ensure that the streams between stages match concentrations. The material feed rate to a specific stage is dependent on the separation factor, the isotopic concentrations of the streams, and the flow rates of the exiting streams. Equations (10a) and (10b) are simplified equations for calculating the feed flow rates in the enriching and stripping sections, respectively.

In the enriching section,

$$F_{Stage} = P_{Stage} \left( \frac{a_E + 1}{a_E - 1} \right) \left( \frac{y_P - x_F}{x_F(1 - x_F)} \right). \quad (10a)$$

In the stripping section,

$$F_{Stage} = W_{Stage} \left( \frac{a_S + 1}{a_S - 1} \right) \left( \frac{x_F - x_W}{x_F(1 - x_F)} \right). \quad (10b)$$

To illustrate the difference in flow rates between stages, let us calculate the flow rate and determine how many centrifuges are required for each stage of our example centrifuge cascade. The first step is to establish the quantity of material to be withdrawn from the cascade. Let us assume that the desired cascade product withdrawal rate is 80 kg U/day. Knowing that the desired product rate for the top stage



(stage 11) is 80 kg U/day and the feed and product concentrations are 2.357% and 2.87%, respectively, the required feed flow rate to the top stage can be calculated from Eq. (10a):

$$F_{Top\ stage} = 80\text{ kg U/day} \left( \frac{\sqrt{1.5} + 1}{\sqrt{1.5} - 1} \right) \left( \frac{0.0287 - 0.02357}{0.02357 (1 - 0.02357)} \right) = 177\text{ kg U/day}.$$

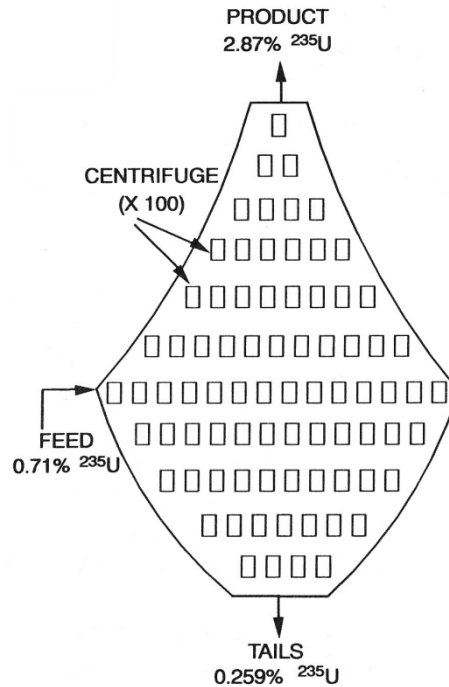
To achieve a product withdrawal rate of 80 kg U/day, the required feed flow rate for stage 11 is 177 kg U/day. The number of centrifuges required to be connected in parallel in stage 11 is calculated by dividing the desired material flow rate by the centrifuge throughput.

$$\frac{177\text{ kg U/day}}{1.728\text{ kg U/day/centrifuge}} = 102\text{ centrifuges}$$

A total of 102 centrifuges must be connected in parallel in stage 11 to carry a material flow rate of 177 kg U/day. Figure 19 shows the basic arrangement of our cascade and Table 5 lists the feed flow rate and number of centrifuges required for each stage. The cascade is composed of 7,896 centrifuges arranged in 11 stages. Because the amount of material fed into each stage is different, the width of each stage (i.e., number of centrifuges in parallel) is different. Note that the feed stage to the cascade (stage 5) has the largest material flow rate and, therefore, has the greatest number of centrifuges connected in parallel. One additional point to note is that all individual centrifuges in a cascade are physically identical. From visual observation, one cannot distinguish the isotopic concentrations or flow rate of the process gas contained within a centrifuge, stage, or cascade.

**Table 5. Basic cascade arrangement**

Stage number	Feed concentration (% $^{235}\text{U}$ )	Feed flow rate (kg U/day)	Number of centrifuges
11	2.36	177	102
10	1.93	392	227
9	1.58	654	379
8	1.30	974	564
7	1.06	1,365	790
6	0.87	1,843	1,066
5	0.71	2,428	1,405
4	0.58	2,115	1,224
3	0.47	1,733	1,003
2	0.39	1,266	733
1	0.32	697	403
Total			7,896



**Figure 19. Basic cascade arrangement.**

The remaining operating parameters of the example cascade can be defined using the material balance equations in Section 2.4. The cascade feed and tails flow rates can be calculated using Eqs. (4) and (2),

respectively, by substituting the desired product withdrawal rate for the cascade and calculated cascade product and tails concentrations:

$$F_{\text{Cascade}} = 80 \text{ kg U/day} \left( \frac{0.0287 - 0.00259}{0.0071 - 0.00259} \right) = 463 \text{ kg U/day} ,$$

$$W_{\text{Cascade}} = 463 \text{ kg U/day} - 80 \text{ kg U/day} = 383 \text{ kg U/day} .$$

The separative work is computed using Eq. (5):

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta U &= 80 V(0.0287) + 383 V(0.00259) - 463 V(0.0071) \\ &= 80 (3.319) + 383 (5.923) - 463 (4.870) \\ &= 279 \text{ SWU/day, or } \sim 102,000 \text{ SWU/year} . \end{aligned}$$

The average separative work of an individual centrifuge is approximated by dividing the separative work of the cascade by the number of centrifuges:

$$\frac{102,000 \text{ SWU/year}}{7,896 \text{ centrifuges}} = 12.9 \frac{\text{SWU/year}}{\text{centrifuge}} .$$

The equations for flow rates and stage concentrations presented in this section assume a simple three-stream cascade in which streams of differing isotopic concentration are never mixed together. In practice, cascades may have more than one feed point as well as more than one product withdrawal point, and some separative work losses due to mixing are sustained. In addition, operating centrifuges differ slightly in manufacturing characteristics or operating conditions and therefore may differ slightly in flow rates or composition. Great care is taken to minimize differences between centrifuges during the design and manufacturing so that the concentrations of the enriched and depleted streams withdrawn from individual centrifuges connected in parallel are equal.

A plant designed for the production of 100,000 SWU/year can be arranged as a single high-throughput cascade or as multiple low-throughput cascades connected in parallel. The plant, in either arrangement, contains the same number of stages to span a desired enrichment range. However, each stage in the single high-throughput cascade is comprised of hundreds to thousands of centrifuges. This cascade arrangement has the advantage that the random failure of a few centrifuges does not affect the overall cascade performance. The disadvantage, however, is that one large cascade does not permit production flexibility. In practice, the 100,000-SWU/year plant would be composed of a number of small cascades operating in parallel. The individual stages of these small cascades are comprised of tens to hundreds of machines. If each small cascade is identical and produces the same product and tails concentrations as the described single large cascade, the sum of the outputs from each small cascade is equivalent to the output of the single large cascade. The advantages of multiple parallel cascades are easier maintenance (e.g., a single cascade can be taken off-stream for repairs) and production flexibility (e.g., a variety of product enrichments can be produced). The disadvantage is that the failure of several machines may affect cascade performance. In practice, the operational flexibility of a multiple cascade plant far outweighs the disadvantage of reduced cascade performance due to failed machines.

### ***Review Questions for Section 3.3***

1. Why are centrifuges connected in series to form cascades?

2. Why are centrifuges connected in parallel to form stages?
3. Are the centrifuges located at the product end of the cascade physically different from those at the tails end?
4. What stage in a simple cascade contains the most centrifuges?
5. What are the advantages of using multiple small cascades connected in parallel?

## 4. GAS CENTRIFUGE ENRICHMENT PLANT DESCRIPTIONS

### 4.1 FACILITY FUNCTIONAL LAYOUT

#### *Objectives*

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. identify the support facilities required for a gas centrifuge enrichment plant,
2. describe the material flows between the process buildings and support facilities of a centrifuge plant, and
3. understand the forms and concentrations of the nuclear material flows between process and support areas.

The operation of a gas centrifuge enrichment plant requires many process and support facilities and involves a variety of nuclear materials flows. Figure 20 is a functional layout of a typical gas centrifuge enrichment plant showing the process and support facilities and depicting material flows between these areas.

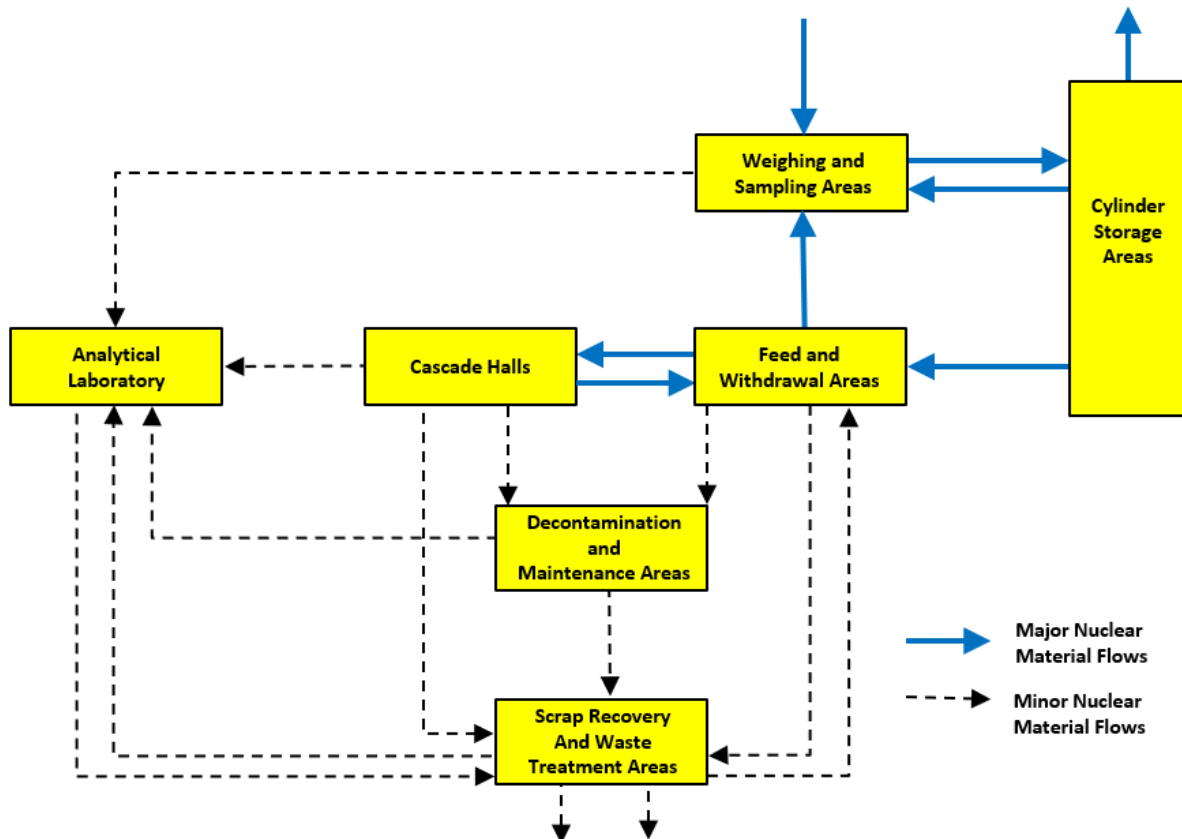


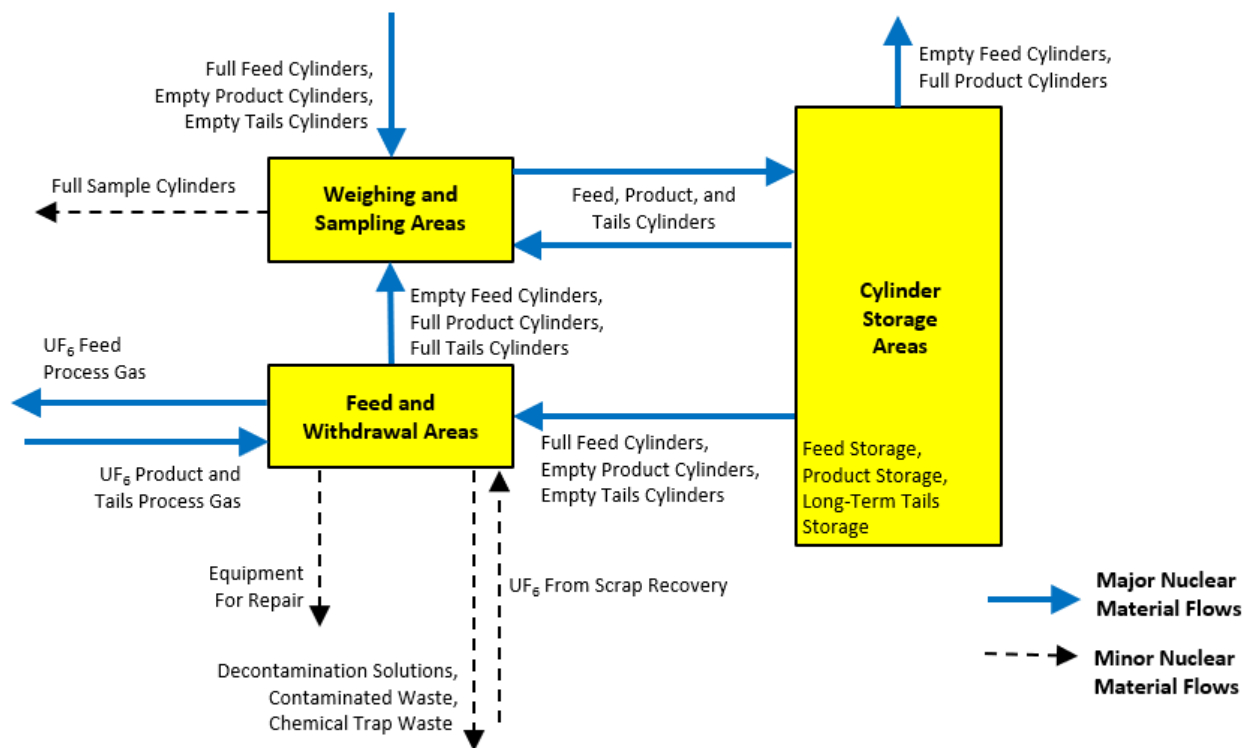
Figure 20. Process and support facilities at a typical gas centrifuge enrichment plant.

A gas centrifuge enrichment facility includes the following process and support facilities:

- Weighing and sampling
- Cylinder storage areas
- Feed and withdrawal areas
- Cascade halls
- Analytical laboratory
- Decontamination and maintenance areas
- Scrap recovery and waste treatment areas

These are the major functions supporting an enrichment facility. Details of physical location, size, and number of buildings are matters of choice or economics for the builders. Great variability in physical layout is possible for the same functionality.

Major nuclear material flows at a gas centrifuge enrichment facility include receipt of  $\text{UF}_6$  feed material on-site, transfer of feed material from  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders to the process system, transfer of enriched and depleted process gas to product and tails cylinders, and shipment of product cylinders off-site (Figure 21). Minor material flows include sample transfers to the analytical laboratory, process equipment transfers for decontamination and repair, and waste transfers to the scrap recovery and waste treatment areas (Figures 22 and 23). Note, not all identified flows or areas will exist at every centrifuge facility.



**Figure 21. Major nuclear material flows involving  $\text{UF}_6$ .**

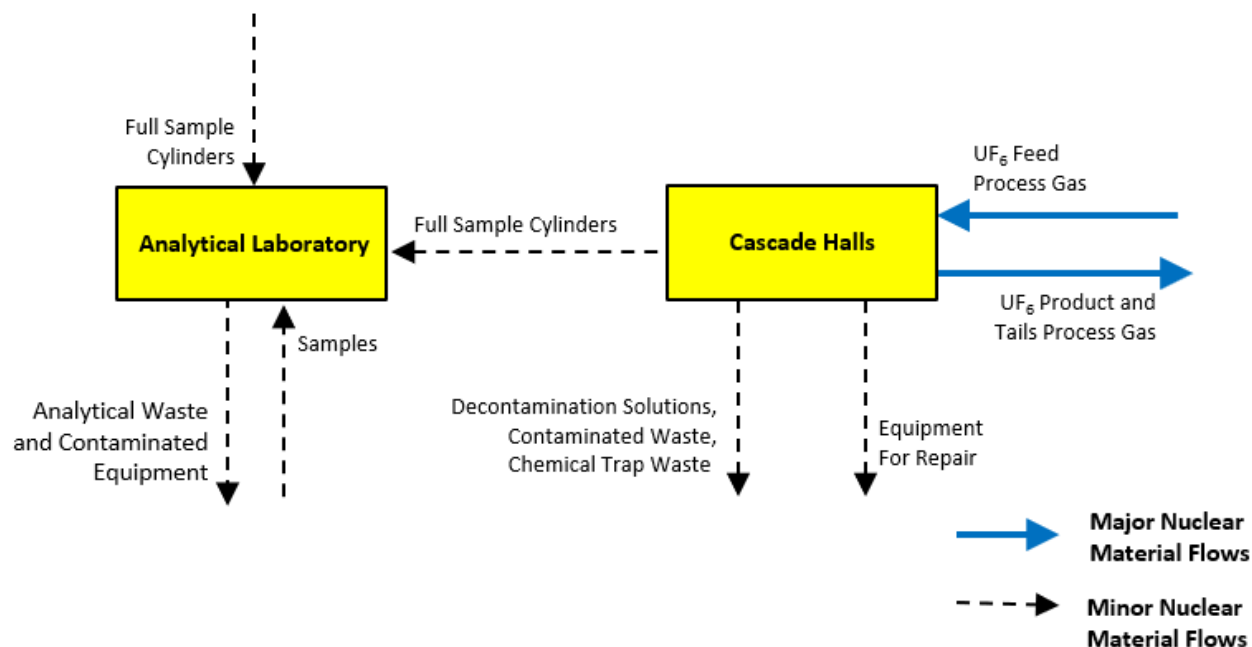


Figure 22. Minor nuclear material flows involving sample containers and contaminated equipment.

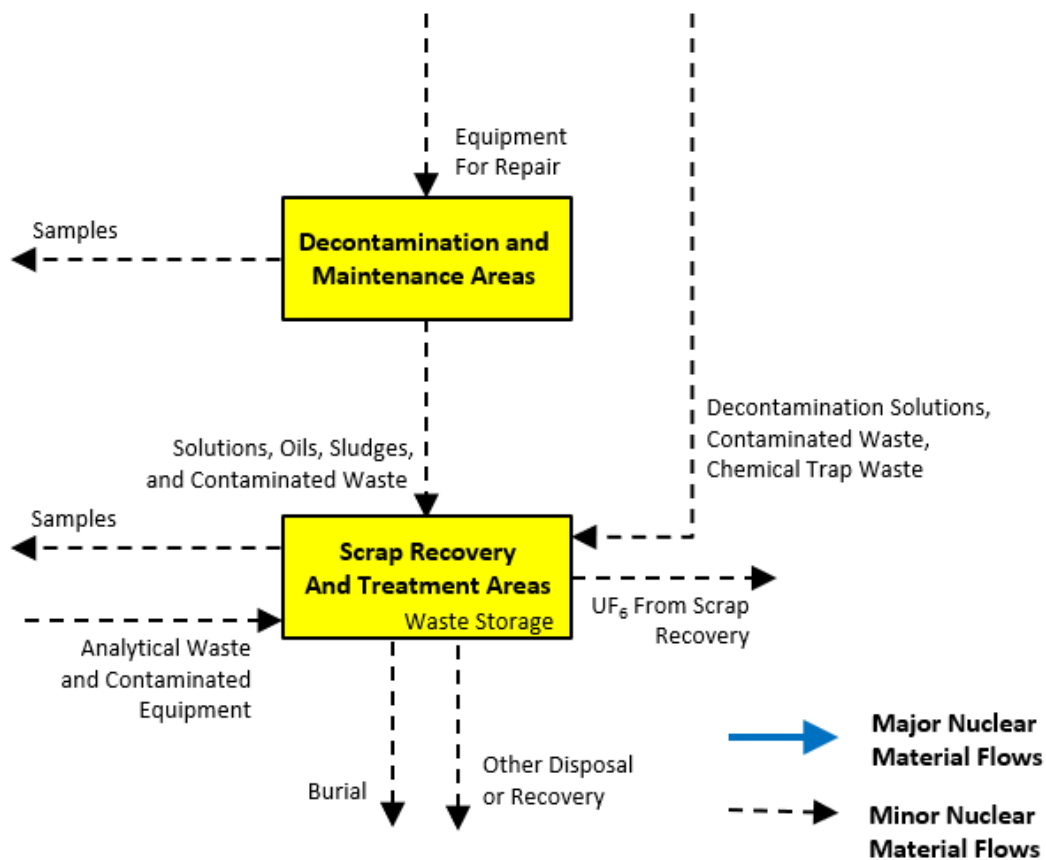


Figure 23. Minor nuclear material flows involving waste transfers.

#### 4.1.1 Weighing and Sampling Areas

In the weighing and sampling areas,  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders are weighed and sampled to establish nuclear materials accountability values and to verify customer product specifications. Full and empty  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders are weighed before transfer to the cylinder storage areas. Samples are withdrawn from full cylinders (generally product and feed) and sent to the analytical laboratory for destructive analysis to determine the isotopic composition. Also, the  $\text{UF}_6$  from several cylinders of varying enrichment may be blended in this area to customize the product concentration.

#### 4.1.2 Cylinder Storage Areas

A single centrifuge plant may have multiple storage areas (both indoors and outdoors) for its on-site cylinder inventory. The cylinder inventory supporting the major  $\text{UF}_6$  flows consists of (1) full feed cylinders waiting to be fed to the process; (2) empty feed cylinders awaiting shipment off-site; (3) empty product and tails cylinders for filling; (4) full product cylinders for further processing (e.g., blending or rebatching), storage, or shipment off-site; and (5) full tails cylinders, which generally remain in an outdoor cylinder yard at the plant for long-term storage. Full feed, product, and tails cylinders contain  $\text{UF}_6$  in the solid state. The empty product and tails cylinders are usually clean (i.e., contain no residual uranium or contaminants). The empty feed cylinders, however, contain a residual amount of  $\text{UF}_6$  and nonvolatile reaction products of uranium called *heels*. Heels material is present because it is not practical to completely empty the  $\text{UF}_6$  from a cylinder during the feeding process. Heels material usually contains uranium decay products and is radioactive. Increasingly, operators are withdrawing the tails stream directly into the emptied feed cylinders, which still contains a small heel quantity.

#### 4.1.3 Feed and Withdrawal Areas

In the feed area, cylinders containing feed material are placed in heating stations where they are heated to convert the  $\text{UF}_6$  from solid to gas. The gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  passes through piping to a pressure-reduction station and flows into pipes leading into the cascade halls. The pressure-reduction station and the piping leading to it are heated to prevent the gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  from cooling and solidifying in the pipes and valves. Heating is not required downstream from this station because the  $\text{UF}_6$  is maintained at low pressures and remains gaseous at ambient temperatures.

In the withdrawal areas, cylinders are filled with the product and tails material. After the enriched and depleted streams leave the cascades, they are collected in desublimers where the gas solidifies. When full, the desublimers are heated and the  $\text{UF}_6$  is transferred, either as a gas or liquid (depending on the system), to empty cylinders where it solidifies. At some facilities, a compressor system may be used instead of desublimers to collect the product and/or tails material.

#### 4.1.4 Cascade Halls

The cascade halls contain the centrifuge machines arranged in cascades. Each hall may house a number of cascades connected in parallel. Feed material is transferred to the cascade halls from the feed stations in process header piping. Likewise, enriched and depleted process material is transferred separately from the cascades to the desublimer stations in product and tails header piping. Because the process gas remains at low pressures in the cascade header piping and centrifuge machines, it is not necessary to heat the cascade hall process system to keep the  $\text{UF}_6$  in the gas-phase. Because a parallel grouping of cascades can be operated independently to produce a specific product enrichment, separate product desublimer stations may service a single cascade hall.

#### 4.1.5 Analytical Laboratory

The analytical laboratory provides on-site capability to destructively and nondestructively analyze process and waste materials. Standard analyses performed on a sample include: (1) the determination of the uranium concentration by the gravimetric method, (2) the determination of the isotopic abundances and  $^{235}\text{U}$  content by gas-phase mass spectrometry, and (3) the determination of impurity content by a variety of techniques. Samples that may require analyses include  $\text{UF}_6$  samples from feed, product, and tails cylinders; process gas samples from the cascades; and other uranium-bearing samples from scrap materials.

#### 4.1.6 Decontamination and Maintenance Areas

The decontamination and maintenance areas provide facilities where plant equipment that has been in contact with  $\text{UF}_6$  (e.g., containers, pumps, and valves) is stored, disassembled, decontaminated, repaired, and tested as needed. Other operational materials that have been in contact with  $\text{UF}_6$  (e.g., vacuum pump oil) may also be decontaminated before further use or disposition. Only small quantities of uranium are contained in these areas.

#### 4.1.7 Scrap Recovery and Waste Treatment Area

The scrap recovery and waste treatment areas serve as the collection and processing point for all scrap and waste streams. Scrap and waste materials from all areas in the plant are collected and stored until recovery or disposal occurs. Typical materials include contaminated burnable and non-burnable wastes; alumina and/or sodium fluoride from chemical traps; decontamination solutions, other solutions, oils, and sludges from the decontamination and maintenance areas; and samples and analytical wastes from the analytical laboratory.

Summarized in Table 6 are the form, containment, and enrichment of the process material contained in each of the typical areas described for a gas centrifuge enrichment plant.

**Table 6. Process material form, containment, and enrichment**

Building or area	Form and containment	Enrichment
Weighing and sampling	Solid, liquid, and gaseous $\text{UF}_6$ in cylinders	Feed, product, or tails
Cylinder storage	Solid $\text{UF}_6$ in cylinders	Feed, product, or tails
Feed and withdrawal	Solid, liquid, and gaseous $\text{UF}_6$ in desublimers and cylinders	Feed, product, or tails
Cascade halls	Gaseous $\text{UF}_6$ in process piping	All enrichments ranging from tails to product
Analytical laboratory	Solid and liquid solutions	All enrichments ranging from tails to product
Decontamination and maintenance	Wide variety of solid uranyl compounds and solutions	All enrichments ranging from tails to product
Scrap recovery and waste treatment	Solids and solutions	All enrichments ranging from tails to product

As noted by the title of this section, these are the major functions supporting an enrichment facility. Details of physical location, size, and number of buildings are matters of choice or economics for the builders. Great variability in physical layout is possible for the same functionality.



### ***Review Questions for Section 4.1***

1. What process and support facilities would you expect to see at a gas centrifuge enrichment facility?
2. What are the major nuclear material flows at a gas centrifuge enrichment plant? What are typical minor nuclear material flows?
3. What is the form of the process material when it is in the cascade hall?

## **4.2 PROCESS MATERIAL**

### ***Objectives***

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

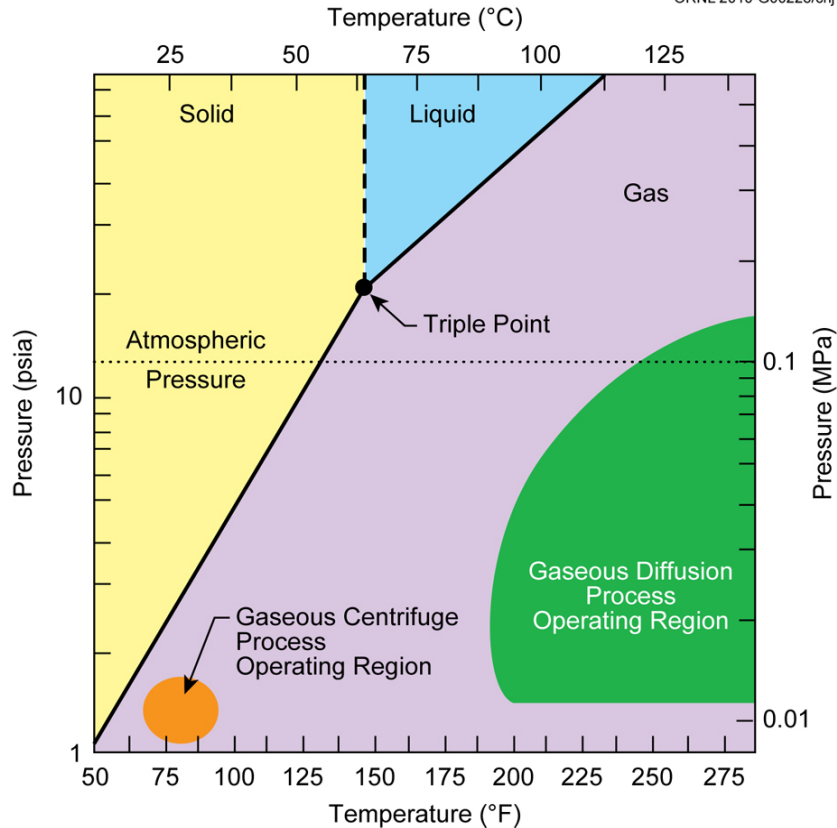
1. describe the physical, chemical, and toxic properties of  $\text{UF}_6$ ,
2. identify the advantages of using  $\text{UF}_6$  as a process gas, and
3. understand the safety concerns associated with handling  $\text{UF}_6$ .

As described in Section 2.3, uranium isotope separation using the gas centrifuge enrichment technique relies on the difference in the mass of the  $^{235}\text{UF}_6$  and  $^{238}\text{UF}_6$  molecules that are mixed together in the process gas. The advantages of  $\text{UF}_6$  as a process gas for uranium enrichment are (1) the difference in mass between the  $^{235}\text{UF}_6$  and  $^{238}\text{UF}_6$  molecules is due entirely to the uranium isotopes because fluorine has only one natural isotope; (2)  $\text{UF}_6$  exists in a gaseous form at practical operating temperatures and pressures; and (3)  $\text{UF}_6$  has a single molecular structure so it is easy to produce at high purity levels. The disadvantages of  $\text{UF}_6$  are that it is very reactive chemically and highly corrosive. Its use in uranium enrichment requires special materials of construction, entails special operating techniques, and places limitations on operating temperatures and pressures.

### **4.2.1 Physical Properties**

At room temperature,  $\text{UF}_6$  is a white, high-molecular-weight solid with significant vapor pressure. Consequently, it is typically transported as a condensed solid contained in a metal or Teflon tube sealed by a valve or clamp.

As indicated in the phase diagram of pure  $\text{UF}_6$  (Figure 24), the sublimation temperature of  $\text{UF}_6$  is below the triple point. The ***sublimation temperature*** is the temperature at which the vapor pressure of the solid equals atmospheric pressure. When  $\text{UF}_6$  is in equilibrium at atmospheric pressure, solid  $\text{UF}_6$  sublimates directly to the gaseous state without passing through the liquid state. The ***triple point*** is the temperature and pressure at which solid, liquid, and vapor exist in equilibrium. To handle  $\text{UF}_6$  as liquid, the pressure must be above 0.15 MPa (1137.5 torr), and the temperature must be above 64°C. Thus, any liquid process (e.g., feed cylinder heating, product cylinder liquid filling) will be subject to leakage of the  $\text{UF}_6$  to the atmosphere if equipment is breached. Transfer below 0.15 MPa or below 64°C involves the formation of the gas through sublimation and desublimation of the gas to a solid on a cooled surface. The critical point is the temperature and pressure above which liquid and vapor are indistinguishable.



**Figure 24.  $\text{UF}_6$  phase diagram.**

The physical characteristics and phase-change conditions of  $\text{UF}_6$  are summarized in Table 7. The large difference in density between solid and liquid  $\text{UF}_6$  has implications for filling  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders. Sufficient space must be maintained in a  $\text{UF}_6$  container to provide for liquid expansion for the temperature range over which the liquid is to be heated. Particular attention must be paid to the fill limits of containers when  $\text{UF}_6$  is desublimed as solid, liquid filled in layers, or liquid filled at lower than normal temperatures. When the contents are liquefied for removal, the volume required for liquid  $\text{UF}_6$  at  $100^\circ\text{C}$  is 50% greater than the volume of  $\text{UF}_6$  in the solid state. If this difference in volume is not accounted for, the cylinder may rupture when it is heated.

**Table 7. Physical characteristics and phase change conditions of  $\text{UF}_6$ .**

Physical state	Appearance	Density
Solid	White	$5.09 \text{ g/cm}^3 @ 20^\circ\text{C}$
Liquid	Clear	$3.40 \text{ g/cm}^3 @ 100^\circ\text{C}$
Gas	Colorless	
Sublimation point		$56.4^\circ\text{C} @ 0.10 \text{ MPa (760 torr)}$
Triple point		$64.02^\circ\text{C} @ 0.152 \text{ MPa (1,137.5 torr)}$
Critical point		$230.2^\circ\text{C} @ 4.61 \text{ MPa (34,600 torr)}$

#### 4.2.2 Chemical Properties

UF<sub>6</sub> is a stable chemical if contained in a scrupulously clean system. It is also a mild fluorinating agent that reacts vigorously with many chemicals that might be encountered. UF<sub>6</sub> reacts chemically with water, ether, and alcohol, forming soluble reaction products. It reacts with most organic compounds, glass, rubber, and many metals. UF<sub>6</sub> does not react with oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, or dry air at room temperature. UF<sub>6</sub> is relatively inert to clean and dry aluminum, copper, nickel, Monel, and Teflon; consequently, these materials can be exposed to UF<sub>6</sub> without excessive corrosion.

The most common UF<sub>6</sub> reaction is with water, which is commonly present in moist air and on the interior surfaces of metal containments previously exposed to moist air. UF<sub>6</sub> reacts with the water vapor to form solid uranyl fluoride (UO<sub>2</sub>F<sub>2</sub>) and toxic HF gas. The inner surfaces of metals used to contain UF<sub>6</sub> may be coated with oxides and hydroxides with which UF<sub>6</sub> will react at rates that depend on temperature. UF<sub>6</sub> can also react with pure metal. Possible reaction products include UF<sub>5</sub>, U<sub>2</sub>F<sub>9</sub>, and UF<sub>4</sub>. Finally, UF<sub>6</sub> reacts with many other chemicals that might be encountered during its transport through metal components such as grease, organic chemicals introduced during manufacturing, or solvents used to clean the metal.

The chemical reactions of UF<sub>6</sub> are a very important aspect of uranium enrichment because these reactions lead to the loss of process material. These losses are usually defined as corrosion and consumption losses. **Corrosion** losses are due to the reaction of UF<sub>6</sub> with the metal within which it is contained. Materials resistant to corrosion include stainless steel, aluminum, aluminum alloys, nickel, and alloys containing greater than 60% nickel. **Consumption** is the term applied to losses that are due to all mechanisms such as the reaction of UF<sub>6</sub> with surface impurities, water, organic compounds, and inorganic materials, as well as metal corrosion. Consumption is affected by several variables including temperature, UF<sub>6</sub> pressure, prior exposure of the equipment to air or other gases, the environment of this exposure (e.g., dry or wet gas), and the interior surface areas.

#### 4.2.3 Toxic Properties

UF<sub>6</sub> as a gas is a moderately toxic material, partly because uranium is a heavy-metal poison and partly because its reaction with water in the respiratory system produces the irritating and burning hydrofluoric acid. When released to the atmosphere, gaseous UF<sub>6</sub> quickly reacts with atmospheric moisture to form a visible white cloud consisting of HF gas and particulate UO<sub>2</sub>F<sub>2</sub>, which tends to settle on surfaces. The corrosive properties of UF<sub>6</sub> and HF are such that exposure to a severe release can result in skin burns and temporary lung impairment. Like most heavy-metal compounds, water-soluble uranium compounds such as UO<sub>2</sub>F<sub>2</sub> are toxic to the kidneys when inhaled or ingested in large quantities. Fortunately, uranium has a very short biological half-life of ~15 days and is rapidly eliminated from the body by kidney action.

Exposure to UF<sub>6</sub> is also a radiological concern because UF<sub>6</sub> is an alpha, beta, and gamma-ray emitter. Alpha particles resulting from the primary disintegration of uranium present no external radiation problem because they do not penetrate the skin. However, the decay products of uranium found in process piping and UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders include isotopes that emit mildly penetrating beta rays and highly penetrating gamma rays. The UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders are the greatest radiological concern because they contain a large quantity of UF<sub>6</sub>. In addition, the nonvolatile materials concentrate in the cylinder heels. Ironically, the radiation level emanating from a full cylinder may be less than that from an empty cylinder with a heel because the decay products are dispersed through the UF<sub>6</sub> in a full cylinder and are shielded to some extent. Radiation exposures of employees working around UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders are easily controlled at very low levels through conventional distance-time limitations.

#### 4.2.4 Safety Guidelines

The implications of the properties of  $\text{UF}_6$  can be summarized in terms of the following rules:

1.  $\text{UF}_6$  should not be exposed to moisture; it should be handled in a sealed system (preferably a metal system) having vacuum capability to aid in transfers. Liquid transfers are possible in a system that can be operated above  $\sim 0.152$  MPa (1137.5 torr) and  $64^\circ\text{C}$ .
2. In the event of a release,  $\text{UF}_6$  or its reaction products should not be inhaled because they are toxic.
3. It is extremely important that  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders not be overfilled because the volume required for liquid  $\text{UF}_6$  is greater than the volume required for solid  $\text{UF}_6$ .
4.  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders should not be connected directly to vacuum pumps because of the possibility for hydrocarbon oil to contaminate the cylinder. Liquid  $\text{UF}_6$  and organic materials, other than fluoroplastics, can react violently.

$\text{UF}_6$  can be handled safely by careful attention to the suggested precautions.

#### *Review Questions for Section 4.2*

1. What characteristics make  $\text{UF}_6$  attractive for use as a process gas?
2. What are the physical characteristics of  $\text{UF}_6$  in the solid, liquid, and gaseous states?
3. What is the most common  $\text{UF}_6$  reaction?
4. What are the chemical and radiological concerns with  $\text{UF}_6$ ?
5. What safety precautions does an enrichment plant operator follow in handling  $\text{UF}_6$ ?

## 4.3 CASCADE ENRICHMENT

### *Objectives*

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. describe the piping arrangements in a gas centrifuge cascade and cascade hall and
2. describe the typical operations in a cascade hall.

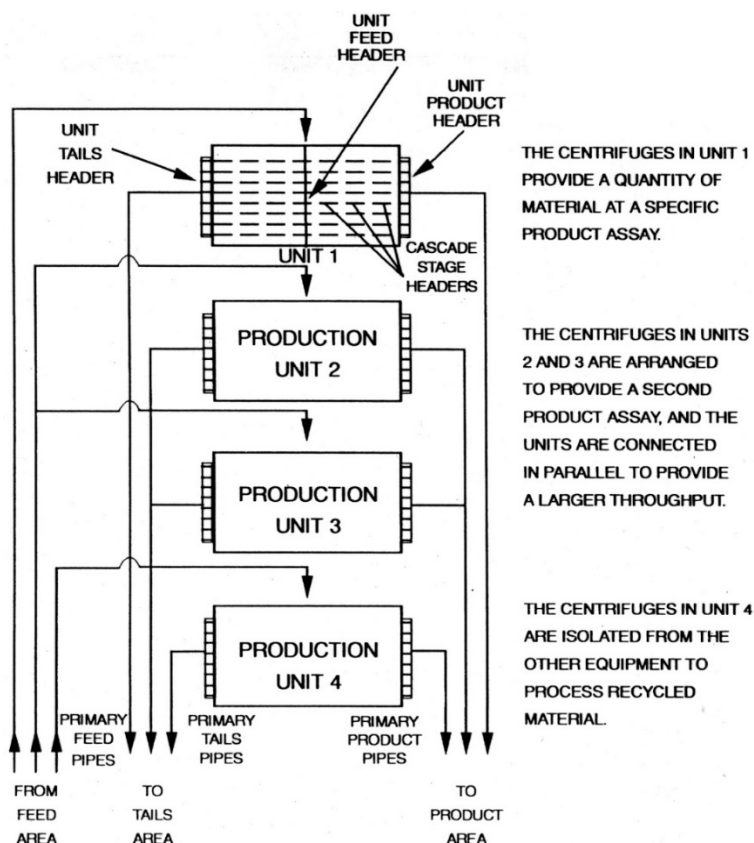
### 4.3.1 Process Equipment

The actual work of enriching the  $\text{UF}_6$  gas occurs in the cascade halls of the centrifuge enrichment plant. The major process equipment found in every cascade hall includes the centrifuge machines and the process piping. Most cascade halls also contain machine-cooling water pipes (to control the temperature in the centrifuges), vacuum lines (to evacuate and to maintain the vacuum in the centrifuge casings), and plant support systems (e.g., fire water, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning pipes). Some cascade halls may contain the vacuum pumps and chemical traps of the centrifuge casing evacuation system and sampling lines for an automated process monitoring system.

During facility startup, portable  $\text{UF}_6$  feed and/or withdrawal carts may be used in the cascade halls to evacuate the cascades and to fill the cascades with  $\text{UF}_6$ . This permits the cascade to be operated in the recycle mode to achieve its designed product enrichment before  $\text{UF}_6$  is introduced to the process system through the feed and withdrawal system. The portable carts are necessary to respond to severe abnormal conditions and for cascade maintenance activities. Note, these carts could potentially be used to operate individual cascades independently from the rest of the plant. The equipment on a feed cart includes a cylinder heating enclosure, air heater and blower, temperature sensor, vacuum pump, chemical trap, pressure sensors, piping, and valving. The equipment on a withdrawal cart includes a cold trap, refrigeration unit, evacuation pump, chemical trap, pressure gages, and connectors. The carts are typically mounted on wheels and are equipped with interfaces to the building's electrical and instrument air systems.

### 4.3.2 Cascade Arrangement

In practice, the cascades in a centrifuge plant are arranged to balance performance efficiency and operational flexibility. To produce a product flow rate that is practical for withdrawal, several cascades with identical arrangements are connected in parallel to form production units. Each cascade of a production unit contains a few thousand (or fewer) centrifuges, receives the same feed concentration, and produces the same product and tails concentrations. The current commercial centrifuge enrichment plants contain multiple production units, each comprised of fewer than 10 cascades. Production units may be operated independently to provide a quantity of material at specific product enrichment or in parallel to increase the throughput at that product enrichment (Figure 25).



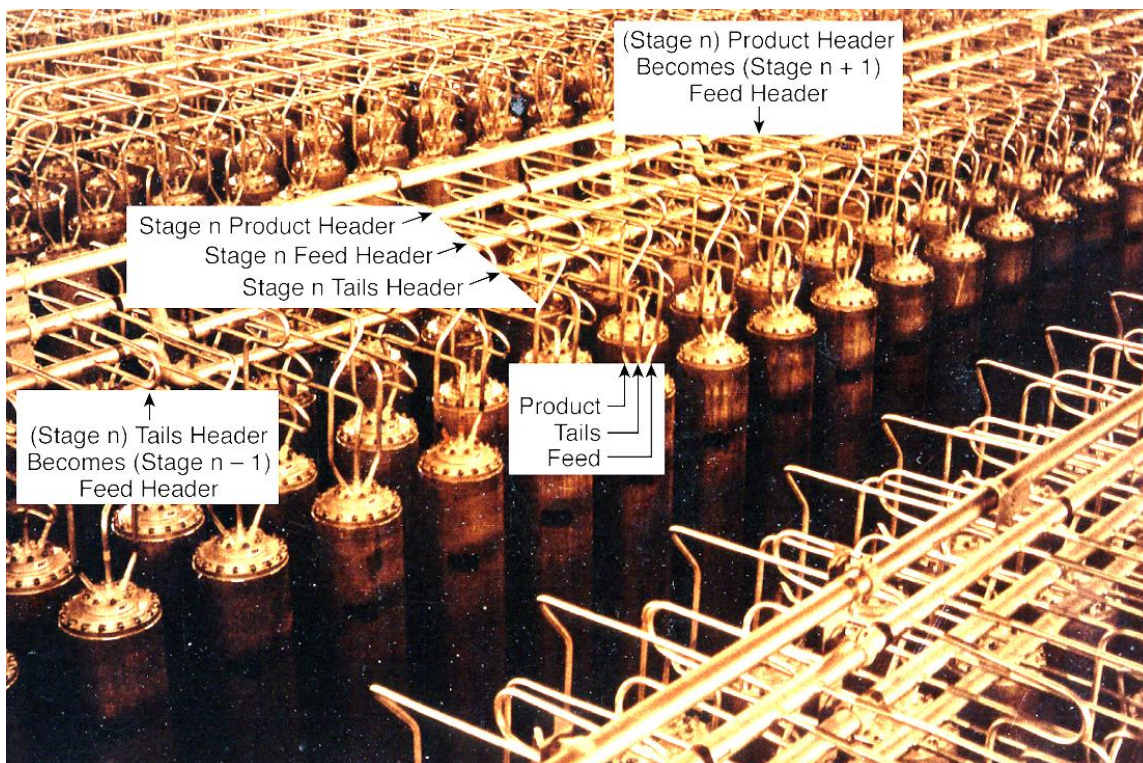
**Figure 25. Schematic illustrating how production units can be operated independently or in parallel.** Each unit contains multiple cascades connected in parallel.

The advantages of production units include the capabilities (1) to produce enrichment revenue before the entire plant is completely operational, (2) to produce a variety of product enrichments to meet customer product specifications, and (3) to enrich recycled material (i.e.,  $UF_6$  from reprocessed uranium) separately. In addition, the size of the plant can be tailored to meet current and future market needs.

### 4.3.3 Process Piping

The process gas transferred to the cascades halls from the feed area is contained in primary feed pipes at low pressures. Multiple feed pipes may be present to supply material at different concentrations to separate production units or set of production units (one pipe may be used to feed all of the production units if the feed material is of the same concentration and purity). The unit feed header pipe is connected to the cascade feed header pipes for each of the parallel cascades in that production unit. Here the gas pressure is further reduced to achieve cascade operating pressure.

The feed gas to the cascade enters the feed stage header and is distributed to each centrifuge in the stage. After processing, the enriched gas from each centrifuge in the feed stage enters the stage product header; simultaneously, the depleted gas from each feed stage centrifuge enters the stage tails header (Figure 26). The stage product header becomes the feed header for the next stage in the cascade; the stage tails header becomes the feed header for the previous stage. The gas is similarly processed through the enriching and stripping stages to achieve the desired concentration range. The product header of the top stage in the cascade is the cascade product header and empties into the unit product header; the tails header of the bottom stage is the cascade tails header and empties into the unit tails header.



**Figure 26. Stage header piping in centrifuge cascade.**

The material in the unit headers is transferred directly to the withdrawal areas through primary product and tails withdrawal pipes. (If the product and tails concentrations for the production units are identical, there may be only one primary product pipe and one primary tails pipe.)

Each cascade contains two additional piping-structure components of safeguards interest. First are the evacuation and sampling ports. These ports are used to evacuate the process system before operation begins, to remove process samples from the cascade while it is operating, and to remove process gas before maintenance activities. The cascade feed header port can also be used to fill the cascade with process gas. Depending on the design of the cascade, only one port may be present on each header or there may be multiple ports throughout the cascade to permit the withdrawal of samples from individual stages. Second is the cascade recycling line that joins the cascade product and tails headers to the feed header. With proper setting of the header pipe valves, the cascade can run indefinitely on the same process gas by continuously recycling it. The recycle mode of operation is generally used to permit a cascade to reach the design product and tails concentrations (e.g., initial startup or restart following maintenance) before the cascade output is introduced to the process system and when the cascade is in standby mode.

#### **4.3.4 Observables in the Cascade Hall**

When entering the cascade halls, what would one expect to see? Assuming that the cascade halls are fully operational and no maintenance or construction work is occurring one would see parallel rows of centrifuges with stage header piping, casing evacuation piping, and utility piping running parallel to the rows. Unit header pipes (feed, product, and tails) run perpendicular to the end of each row. If a centrifuge casing evacuation system is located in the cascade hall, one would also see vacuum pumps and chemical traps at the ends of the rows of centrifuges. If not, evacuation headers would be located with the other unit header pipes. One would not expect to see personnel, UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders, portable feed and withdrawal carts,

or any other process or maintenance equipment. One might also observe failed centrifuges (with crimped process piping) that were left in place after failure. No manual operations, except occasional inspections and process sampling, are routinely performed in a completed cascade hall.

### ***Review Questions for Section 4.3***

1. Describe the flow path of  $\text{UF}_6$  gas from the moment it enters a production unit feed header until it leaves the unit product header.
2. Describe personnel operations performed in a fully operational cascade hall.
3. How many product enrichments can be produced in an enrichment plant composed of 100 cascades (assuming product is removed only at the top of the cascade)? How many enrichments can be produced if all 100 cascades are connected in parallel?

## **4.4 $\text{UF}_6$ CYLINDER HANDLING**

### ***Objectives***

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. describe the cylinders used to store and transport  $\text{UF}_6$ ,
2. explain the typical  $\text{UF}_6$  operations in an enrichment plant, and
3. understand the techniques and activities involved in feeding and withdrawing  $\text{UF}_6$  from the process.

The  $\text{UF}_6$  at a gas centrifuge enrichment plant is contained in internationally standardized  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders when it is not being processed in the piping or centrifuges of the process system. These cylinders are used for on-site long-term storage and to transport the process material to and from the site and between on-site facilities. Figure 27 depicts the  $\text{UF}_6$  handling operations in an enrichment plant.

Full feed cylinders are brought on-site, weighed, inspected, liquid sampled or nondestructively assayed (optional), and placed in a storage area. When it is time for the contents of a full feed cylinder to be fed into the process, the cylinder is moved from the storage area to the feed area, placed in a heating station, and heated to convert the cylinder contents from solid to gas. The gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  is then transferred through piping to the cascade halls for processing. Simultaneously, enriched and depleted process gas streams are withdrawn from the cascades into separate desublimers where the material solidifies. The desublimers are subsequently heated to transfer the material to product and tails  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders. The tails cylinders containing the depleted material are weighed and then moved to an on-site storage yard for long-term storage. A statistical portion of the tails cylinders are sampled for accounting purposes. The product cylinders containing the enriched material are weighed, liquid sampled, possibly blended or rebatched, and then transferred to a storage area to await shipment off-site.



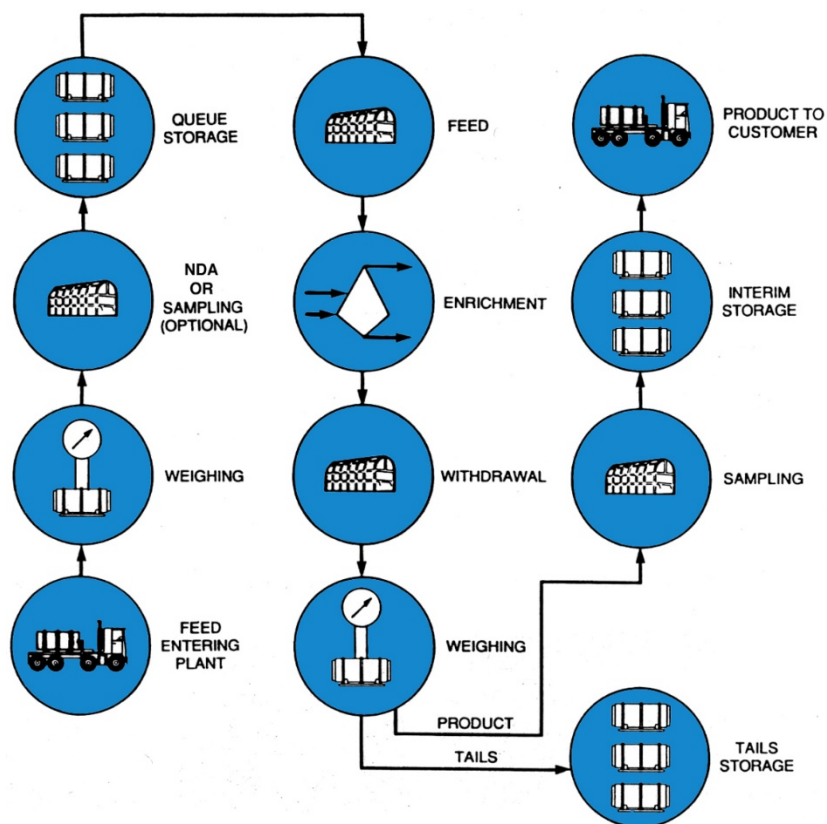


Figure 27. UF<sub>6</sub> operations in an enrichment plant.

#### 4.4.1 Cylinder Names

Cylinder sizes and names (i.e., model numbers) are relatively standard across the UF<sub>6</sub>-handling industry. The most commonly used cylinders for UF<sub>6</sub> containment and transport in a commercial-scale enrichment facility are the 30 in. diam (Model 30B, 2.5 ton) cylinders for low-enriched product, 48 in. diam (Models 48X and 48Y, 10 and 14 ton) cylinders for natural feed, and 48 in. diam, thin-wall (Model 48G, 14 ton) cylinders for long-term tails storage. The Models 48X and 48Y cylinders are sometimes used for on-site containment of low-enriched product, although enriched material is usually shipped in Model 30B cylinders. General data for these cylinders are provided in Table 8.

Table 8. General data on feed, product, and tails cylinders

	Cylinder model			
	30B	48X	48Y	48G
Basic material of construction	Steel	Steel	Steel	Steel
Maximum isotopic content	5.0% <sup>a</sup> <sup>235</sup> U	4.5% <sup>a</sup> <sup>235</sup> U	4.5% <sup>a</sup> <sup>235</sup> U	1.0% <sup>a</sup> <sup>235</sup> U
Nominal diameter: cm (in.)	76.2 (30)	121.9 (48)	121.9 (48)	121.9 (48)
Nominal length: cm (in.)	205.7 (81)	302 (119)	381 (150)	370.8 (146)
Wall thickness: cm (in.)	1.27 (0.5)	1.59 (0.625)	1.59 (0.625)	0.79 (0.31)
Nominal tare weight: kg (lb)	635 (1,400)	2,041 (4,500)	2,359 (5,200)	1,179 (2,600)
Nominal net weight: kg (lb)	2,277 (5,020)	9,539 (21,030)	12,501 (27,560)	12,701 (28,000)
Nominal gross weight: kg (lb)	2,912 (6,420)	11,580 (25,530)	14,860 (32,760)	13,880 (30,600)

<sup>a</sup> <sup>235</sup>U maximum with moderation control

The basic material of construction for these cylinders is steel. The maximum isotopic content limit for 30B cylinders is 5%  $^{235}\text{U}$ ; for 48X and 48Y cylinders, 4.5%  $^{235}\text{U}$ ; and for 48G cylinders, 1.0%  $^{235}\text{U}$ . The maximum permissible enrichment levels stated for the 30B, 48X, and 48Y cylinders apply to  $\text{UF}_6$  with a minimum purity of 99.5%, which provides moderation control. The **tare weight** refers to the weight of an empty, clean cylinder; the **gross weight** is the weight of a cylinder filled with  $\text{UF}_6$ ; and the **net weight** is the difference between the gross weight and the tare weight. The net weight is the weight of the  $\text{UF}_6$  contained in the cylinder, assuming the cylinder contains only  $\text{UF}_6$  and the actual weight of the clean, empty cylinder matches the stamped tare weight when the cylinder was fabricated.

#### Problem 4. Net weight calculation

Problem 4a:	How much $\text{UF}_6$ is contained in a Model 30B cylinder if the gross weight is measured to be 2,900 kg and the tare weight stamped on the cylinder's nameplate is 640 kg?
Solution:	<p>The net weight of the cylinder's contents is calculated by subtracting the tare weight from the gross weight.</p> $\begin{aligned}\text{Net weight} &= \text{gross weight} - \text{tare weight} \\ &= 2,900 \text{ kg} - 640 \text{ kg} \\ &= 2,260 \text{ kg } \text{UF}_6\end{aligned}$
Problem 4b:	How much $^{235}\text{U}$ is contained in a Model 30B cylinder in Problem 4a if the average enrichment is 4.25% $^{235}\text{U}$ ?
Solution:	<p>The quantity of <math>^{235}\text{U}</math> is calculated by converting the <math>\text{UF}_6</math> weight to the weight of the uranium and then multiplying by its enrichment.</p> $\begin{aligned}^{235}\text{U} \text{ content} &= \text{net weight } \text{UF}_6 \times \text{purity of } \text{UF}_6 \times ^{235}\text{U} \text{ enrichment} \\ &= 2,260 \text{ kg} \times 0.6761 \times 0.0425 \text{ kg } ^{235}\text{U}/\text{kg U} \\ &= 64.94 \text{ kg } ^{235}\text{U}\end{aligned}$

Model 1S and Model 2S cylinders are the most commonly used cylinders for collecting liquid  $\text{UF}_6$  samples and for transporting  $\text{UF}_6$  samples. General data on these cylinders are provided in Table 9. These cylinders are constructed of nickel and are approved to contain a maximum net  $\text{UF}_6$  weight of 0.45 kg and 2.2 kg, respectively, at any enrichment level.

**Table 9. General data sample cylinders**

	Cylinder model	
	1S	2S
Basic material of construction	Nickel	Nickel
Maximum isotopic content	100% $^{235}\text{U}$	100% $^{235}\text{U}$
Nominal diameter: cm (in.)	3.8 (1.5)	8.9 (3.5)
Nominal length: cm (in.)	27.9 (11)	29.2 (11.5)
Wall thickness: cm (in.)	0.16 (0.063)	0.28 (0.112)
Nominal tare weight: kg (lb)	0.79 (1.75)	1.91 (4.2)
Nominal net weight: kg (lb)	0.45 (1.00)	2.22 (4.9)
Nominal gross weight: kg (lb)	1.25 (2.75)	4.13 (9.1)

#### 4.4.2 Cylinder Movement and Storage

Cylinders of  $\text{UF}_6$  are shipped on-site and off-site by rail or by truck. Cylinders containing  $\text{UF}_6$  enriched to greater than 1%  $^{235}\text{U}$  must be shipped in protective shipping packages (Figure 28). Centrifuge facilities have a variety of on-site cylinder-handling capabilities to unload incoming cylinders and load outgoing cylinders as well as for moving cylinders within the facility. These capabilities include forklifts, cranes, and specialized cylinder-handling machinery (Figures 29 and 30).



Figure 28. Truck shipment of five 2.5 ton  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders in protective shipping packages.



Figure 29. Urenco on-site feed cylinder transporter.



Figure 30. Overhead double-hook crane moving a 14 ton cylinder.

Because of the hazards associated with moving cylinders of liquid  $\text{UF}_6$ , movement and operations involving large cylinders containing liquid material are kept to a minimum. The  $\text{UF}_6$  in these cylinders is allowed to cool and solidify before the cylinders are placed in storage or shipped off-site. Solidification of liquid  $\text{UF}_6$  under ambient building conditions requires approximately 5 days for a 48 in. cylinder and 3 days for a 30 in. cylinder.

The common practice is to store cylinders of natural  $\text{UF}_6$  horizontally and in a single layer or tier. No special storage configuration is required for criticality safety. Spacing of arrays is generally dictated by the accessibility of the cylinder-handling equipment. Depending upon the feed source and operating philosophy of the enrichment plant operator, the facility will maintain a stockpile of feed cylinders. Because tails material remains on-site in long-term storage, tails cylinders are packed in tighter storage arrays to conserve space. Sufficient clearance must be provided, however, so that the tails cylinders are visually accessible for periodic monitoring of their physical condition as well as for inventory-taking purposes (Figure 31). At some facilities, tails cylinders are stacked in the storage yards. Enriched material is stored in cylinders of suitable geometry and/or with suitable moderation control.



**Figure 31. Long-term tails cylinder storage yard.**

To illustrate the number of  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders that are received and shipped from a centrifuge plant; consider a 1 million SWU/year facility. Each year the contents of approximately 200 Model 48Y feed cylinders is fed into the process. During the same period, 190 Model 30B product cylinders and 170 Model 48G tails cylinders are filled. If cylinder shipments occur weekly, approximately four feed cylinders are brought on-site, four product cylinders are shipped off-site, and three tails cylinders are moved to long-term storage each week. In addition to these full cylinder movements, shipments of empty feed cylinders and receipts of empty product and tails cylinders also occur.

#### **4.4.3 Cylinder Weighing**

Accurate measurements of  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders are required to account for the quantity of process material being fed to and withdrawn from the cascades. These data are important to both materials accounting and operations personnel. All  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders are weighed (1) when they are received on-site, (2) after being filled or emptied, and (3) after they are sampled (or after material is removed for any other reason).

The quantity of  $\text{UF}_6$  feed material introduced into the process is the difference between the feed cylinder weights before and after feeding. The weight of the cylinder after feeding consists of the empty cylinder weight and the weight of the remaining heel material. An acceptable heel weight for a 48 in. feed cylinder is 23 kg or less. Likewise, the net weight of  $\text{UF}_6$  product or tails material is the difference between the weights of the product or tails cylinder before and after filling. If recycled product cylinders are being



filled, they may contain a heel quantity of material remaining from the previous cylinder evacuation. An acceptable heel weight for a 30 in. product cylinder is 11 kg or less.

A variety of scales exist for weighing the different types of UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders. Load-cell scales or platform scales are used to weigh 2.5 ton, 10 ton, and 14 ton cylinders (Figure 32). These scales are capable of indicating a difference as small as 1 kg even with loads up to 14,000 kg. The smaller sample cylinders can be weighed on laboratory scales, such as an equal-arm balance, with even greater measurement accuracy.

To ensure continuous accuracy of the weight measurements, scale calibration and operating procedures are developed and implemented by the facility operator. Operating procedures provide for the proper and consistent use of the scales for weighing UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders and establish the requirements for control checks and scale calibration. Scales are calibrated on a routine basis and at other times as the need arises (e.g., when the control checks do not meet established criteria) with standards traceable to a national or international standards organization. To ensure that the scales are functioning properly between calibrations, check weights that are the same size and weight as the typical empty and full production cylinders are weighed.



**Figure 32. Platform scale.**

#### 4.4.4 Cylinder Sampling and Blending

Sampling of  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinders is necessary to ascertain the chemical purity (i.e., percent uranium) and the isotopic concentration (i.e., weight percent  $^{235}\text{U}$ ) of the process material. These data are used (1) to determine if the material meets the feed and product specifications and (2) to quantify the nuclear material contained in the cylinder for materials accounting. To establish the quantity of uranium contained in a cylinder, the net weight of  $\text{UF}_6$  is multiplied by the percent uranium; the quantity of  $^{235}\text{U}$  is determined by multiplying the uranium weight by the weight percent  $^{235}\text{U}$ .  $\text{UF}_6$  feed cylinders may be sampled upon receipt into



Figure 33. Pulling an S2 sample at an autoclave.

the enrichment plant. Nondestructive assays may also be performed to verify the enrichment level of  $^{235}\text{U}$ . Product cylinders are sampled after being filled. Tails cylinders are usually not subject to sampling because they remain on-site in long-term storage.

The most representative sample of the  $\text{UF}_6$  in a cylinder is a sample withdrawn from the liquid phase after the cylinder contents are completely homogenized. Because impurities concentrate in the vapor, gas-phase samples cannot be used to determine the chemical purity of the  $\text{UF}_6$ . The  $\text{UF}_6$  contained in a cylinder may be stratified because of cooling of the  $\text{UF}_6$  between intermittent fillings of the cylinder and/or heel material may be present in the cylinder before filling. The cylinder is heated to homogenize the contents, which are mixed by thermal action of the liquid. Homogenization requires approximately 8 hours for a 30 in. cylinder and 12 hours for a 48 in. cylinder. A liquid sample is withdrawn into a sample cylinder and is solidified with liquid nitrogen (Figure 33). The sample cylinder is then weighed and transferred to the analytical laboratory for subsampling and analysis. The parent cylinder is removed from the heating station and placed in a storage area for cooling.

The enrichment requested by the customer cannot always be precisely obtained directly from the cascades. To achieve the desired enrichment, two containers with  $\text{UF}_6$  enriched to different levels are heated in autoclaves, and their contents transferred and blended in a third cylinder. Sampling of the new product cylinder occurs after the blending operation.

#### 4.4.5 Cylinder Heating

Cylinders are heated to convert their  $\text{UF}_6$  contents from solid to liquid for sampling or from solid to gas for feeding into the process. Before heating a cylinder of  $\text{UF}_6$ , the cylinder is inspected for any physical defects, weighed to ensure that it adheres to fill limits, and cold-pressure checked for light gas contaminants. The cylinder is then transferred to a containment-type autoclave. A **containment autoclave** is a steam or electrically heated pressure vessel, of sufficient structural strength and with the necessary instrumentation, for sensing and confining any inadvertent  $\text{UF}_6$  release that might occur from a cylinder when  $\text{UF}_6$  is being heated, fed, or transferred.

Once the cylinder has been placed in the autoclave, it is connected to the feed or sampling system. All connections are leak-tested, the cylinder valve is opened, and the containment autoclave is closed and locked before the cylinder is heated. When heat in the containment autoclave is applied to a cylinder, the cylinder pressure is monitored continuously so that an automatic shutdown can be performed if an abnormal sequence or an abnormally high cylinder pressure is observed. Instrumentation is present to quickly indicate an inadvertent  $\text{UF}_6$  release. As additional safety factors, the autoclaves have redundant isolation valves, and the amount of water allowed to be present in the autoclave (if steam heated) is controlled.

#### 4.4.6 Cylinder Feeding

The function of the feed system is to convert the solid  $\text{UF}_6$  in a cylinder to a gas and to transfer the gas to the centrifuge cascades for processing. To maintain a continuous feed rate to the cascades, the feed system contains a number of autoclaves in parallel (Figure 34). Once the  $\text{UF}_6$  cylinder has been placed and positioned in the containment autoclave, the low-molecular-weight contaminant gases (e.g., HF and air) contained in the cylinder are withdrawn through a series of desublimers and chemical traps.

The feed cylinder is heated to convert the  $\text{UF}_6$  from a solid to a gas. For rapid transfer, the cylinder is heated to a temperature greater than the triple point of  $\text{UF}_6$  so that the solid  $\text{UF}_6$  melts into a liquid and then evaporates into a gas. For slower transfer, the cylinder may be heated to a temperature less than the triple point and the solid  $\text{UF}_6$  sublimates directly into a gas. The  $\text{UF}_6$  gas, from either transfer technique, is fed into a hold-up drum (i.e., surge tank). The hold-up drum serves as a buffer to enable the operator to maintain a continuous gas flow during cylinder changeovers and feed system process upsets. After leaving the hold-up drum, the gas may flow into a mixing drum that provides the capability of mixing  $\text{UF}_6$  gas from several autoclaves before feeding the gas to the cascade. The gas is fed into the process system at the point where the feed concentration matches the cascade concentration. When the cylinder is nearing empty, a constant feed rate can no longer be maintained. Alternative evacuation procedures, using cold traps, vacuum pumps, or other low-pressure systems, may be used to minimize the residual quantity of material that remains in the cylinder.

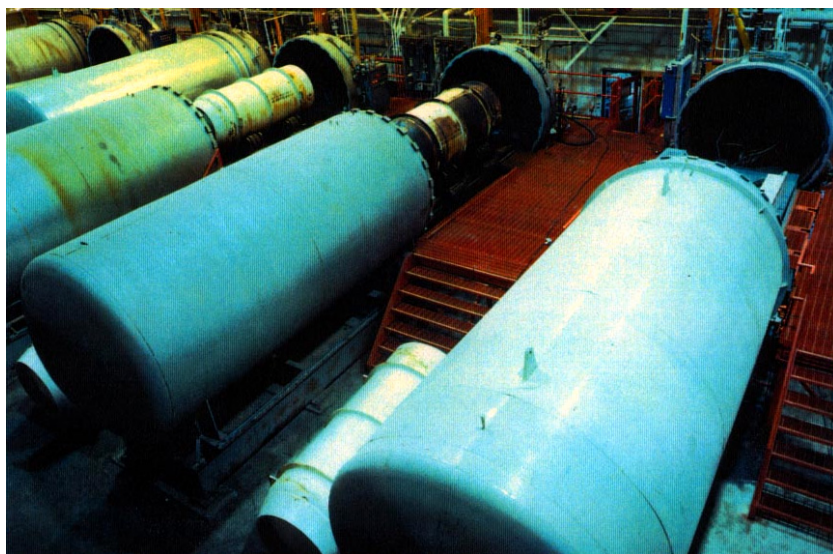


Figure 34. Steam autoclaves for  $\text{UF}_6$  feeding.



#### 4.4.7 Cylinder Filling

The function of the  $\text{UF}_6$  withdrawal system is to collect the enriched and depleted gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  streams from the cascades, to remove the light gas impurities, and to transfer the remaining material to product and tails cylinders. Product and tails concentrations can be adjusted by varying the withdrawal rates or by changing the withdrawal points from the cascade. Two techniques can be used for collecting and transferring  $\text{UF}_6$  gas to the product and tails cylinders: desublimation or compression.

In the **desublimation** technique, gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  flows through a desublimer where it desublimates (solidifies) on the cooled walls and internal elements. To maintain a continuous withdrawal rate, multiple desublimers are connected in parallel (Figure 35). When one desublimer is filled, the gas flowing from the cascades is diverted to the next empty desublimer. The contents of the full desublimer are then transferred to an empty cylinder as either a liquid or a gas. For liquid transfer, the desublimer is heated to a temperature greater than the triple point. The solid  $\text{UF}_6$  melts into a liquid, drains into the cylinder, and solidifies. Liquid  $\text{UF}_6$  in product and tails cylinders requires 3–5 days to solidify at ambient temperatures.

For a gas transfer system, the desublimer is heated to a temperature less than the triple point. The  $\text{UF}_6$  sublimates from a solid to a gas, is transferred to the cylinder that is cooled by air or water, and desublimates on the cold walls of the cylinder. In either technique, the product and tails cylinders being filled are positioned on scales to prevent overfilling.



Figure 35. Desublimers for  $\text{UF}_6$  removal.

In the **compression** technique, the  $\text{UF}_6$  gas is compressed and cooled by a series of compressors and interstage coolers to increase the  $\text{UF}_6$  pressure and decrease the gas temperature. The gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  can be compressed to a point below or above the triple point so that the material is collected as either a gas or liquid, respectively. For a gas transfer system, the gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  is routed to an empty cylinder where the gas desublimates on the cold walls of the cylinder, which can be cooled by air or water. If the compressed gas is liquefied in the condenser, it is drained through accumulators into empty cylinders where it cools and solidifies. The accumulators serve as a buffer and can store  $\text{UF}_6$  during steady-state flow disruptions (e.g., cylinder changes).



***Review Questions for Section 4.4***

1. What is the state of  $\text{UF}_6$  when it is shipped?
2. How much material is contained in typical feed, product, and tails cylinders?
3. What is a containment autoclave used for?
4. What is the function of the feed system?
5. What activities are involved in feeding a cylinder?
6. How are product and tails cylinders filled?
7. What operations are performed on a feed cylinder when it arrives on-site?
8. How do you determine the quantity of process material fed to or withdrawn from the process?

## 4.5 MATERIALS ACCOUNTING RECORDS

### *Objectives*

After completing this section, the reader should be able to

1. describe the key elements of facility nuclear materials accounting consisting of record keeping, accounting reports, and measurement assurance,
2. explain material balance area (MBA) structure and activities associated with physical inventory taking and material balance closure, and
3. identify measurement techniques used by the facility operator for material balance activities.

### 4.5.1 Nuclear Materials Accountability

A centrifuge enrichment plant operator needs to establish an effective nuclear materials accounting system to ensure efficient operation; to satisfy health, safety, and safeguards requirements; and to fulfill contractual obligations. Nuclear materials accounting refers to those activities performed to establish (1) the quantities of nuclear material present within defined areas and (2) the changes in quantities of nuclear material occurring within a defined period of time. Key elements of nuclear materials accounting include record keeping (and reporting, as necessary), inventory taking, measurements, verification of the accuracy of the accounting data (including auditing and measurement control programs), and evaluation of inventory differences.

### 4.5.2 Material Balance Area Structure

The starting point for a nuclear materials accountability system is the MBA structure and the account structure within an MBA. Each facility develops an MBA and account structure that is tailored to its organization and facility operations. The generic MBA structure for safeguards at centrifuge enrichment facilities is two MBAs: a process MBA and a storage MBA. The MBA structure is chosen so that

1. the quantity of nuclear material in each transfer into or out of each MBA can be determined, and
2. the physical inventory of nuclear material in each MBA can be determined when necessary, in accordance with specified procedures.

Following these guidelines, the storage MBA is generally defined to include all UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders not attached to the process system. The process MBA has been defined to include the process system, UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders attached to the process system, the decontamination and maintenance operations, and the scrap recovery and waste treatment operations. The analytical laboratory and the weighing and sampling areas may belong to either MBA or may belong to a separate MBA. As stated previously, each facility develops an MBA and account structure tailored to meet its specific needs.

The storage MBA inventory is composed of items (i.e., UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders). Items residing in this MBA are stored, shipped to other facilities, and transferred to the process MBA. Rebatching, blending, and cylinder sampling that may be performed in this area would be the only activities that would change the accountability records for an item in residence.

The process MBA inventory is composed of process, scrap, and waste materials contained in a variety of configurations. The inventory is contained in the process system, decontamination solution containers,

chemical traps, removed process equipment, and a variety of containers for scrap and waste materials. The magnitude of this inventory is constantly changing. Removals from this MBA are generally limited to transfers of UF<sub>6</sub> in cylinders to the storage MBA, scrap and waste materials shipped to another facility for recovery and/or disposal, and measured discards that are disposed of to the environment.

#### 4.5.3 Records and Reports

Source documentation, records, and reports are generated whenever nuclear material passes through a key measurement point. A **key measurement point** is a location where nuclear material appears in such a form that it may be measured to determine material flow or inventory. Key measurement points include, but are not limited to, the input and output streams of each MBA (including measured discards) and the storage items in each MBA. Flow key measurement points are identified for all nuclear material transfers between MBAs and facilities, for nuclear material category changes, and for rebatching and blending operations. Inventory key measurement points are identified for all material types on the facility inventory.

The source documents are the data records used to prepare the change and inventory records and reports. Source documents include weight tickets, elemental and isotopic concentration reports from the analytical laboratory, shipping papers, inventory lists, nuclear material transfer forms, accountability procedures, and explanatory reports. The records include nuclear material transaction journals and ledgers. The reports include inventory change and material balance reports and physical inventory listings.

#### 4.5.4 Inventory and Material Balance Closure

Material balance closures are performed at most centrifuge enrichment facilities on an annual basis and involve the determination of the actual inventory in each MBA and the comparison of this inventory to the facility's book inventory. The result of a material balance closure is a statement of "material unaccounted for" (MUF), that is, the difference between the book inventory (beginning inventory + receipts – shipments) and the actual inventory. If this difference falls within the calculated uncertainty limits for the material balance, the material balance is accepted; if not, the difference requires resolution. Most enrichment facilities also perform a less detailed monthly book inventory.

Physical inventories are performed in the storage and process MBAs and involve the use of very different techniques. The storage MBA inventory involves the verification of the number of items and the verification of the identity of each item. Characteristics of some of the UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders (e.g., weight and isotopic concentration) may also be verified. Verification of the process MBA inventory is much more difficult.

The process system is a continuous operation and cannot be shut down or cleaned out for the inventory. Therefore, the process system inventory is reduced as much as possible by minimizing the inventory in the desublimers and the attached, partially fed cylinders. This is performed by redirecting the process gas flow from on-line desublimers and feed cylinders to empty desublimers and preweighed feed cylinders. The desublimers are emptied to withdrawal cylinders that are then removed and inventoried. The cylinders are moved from the feed and withdrawal stations and weighed. Samples may be withdrawn from the cylinders to determine the uranium and isotopic concentrations. The remaining process system inventory consists of the gas-phase inventory and the solids inventory. The gas-phase inventory is estimated using volume, temperature, and pressure calculations, and the solids inventory is estimated using expected rates of deposition and reaction of UF<sub>6</sub> in the process system. The inventory of scrap and waste materials (including laboratory sample materials) is usually reduced to the minimum feasible level before the physical inventory is performed, and the remainder is measured by the best available destructive or nondestructive analysis techniques.

### Problem 5. Inventory calculation

**Problem 5a:** Given a 1-million-SWU/year gas centrifuge plant and assuming a specific inventory of 0.0005 kg U/SWU/year (Table 3, Section 2.3), how much uranium might be expected to be contained in the gas-phase inventory?

**Solution:** The amount of uranium in the gas-phase inventory can be estimated by multiplying the enrichment capacity of the gas centrifuge plant by the specific inventory.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Gas-phase inventory} &= \text{enrichment capacity} \times \text{specific inventory} \\ &= 1,000,000 \text{ SWU/year} \times 0.0005 \text{ kg U/SWU/year} \\ &= 500 \text{ kg U}\end{aligned}$$

Note that this gas-phase inventory would be distributed throughout all the processing piping and equipment.

**Problem 5b:** Assuming the average enrichment of the gas-phase inventory is 1.0%  $^{235}\text{U}$ , how much  $^{235}\text{U}$  would be contained in the gas-phase inventory?

**Solution:** The amount of  $^{235}\text{U}$  in the gas-phase inventory is calculated by multiplying the U in the gas-phase inventory by the average  $^{235}\text{U}$  enrichment.

$$\begin{aligned}^{235}\text{U inventory} &= \text{gas-phase inventory} \times ^{235}\text{U enrichment} \\ &= 500 \text{ kg U} \times 0.01 \text{ kg } ^{235}\text{U/kg U} \\ &= 5 \text{ kg } ^{235}\text{U}\end{aligned}$$

#### 4.5.5 Measurement and Measurement Control Systems

Enrichment facilities essentially handle one type of material (i.e.,  $\text{UF}_6$ ) of at least three different isotopic concentrations (i.e., natural feed, enriched product, and depleted tails). Depending on the plant operation, multiple product and tails streams with different isotopic concentrations may be withdrawn. The majority of the  $\text{UF}_6$  is contained in the cylinders described in Sect 4.4. The remaining material is contained in the cascades with a small amount contained in unmeasured discards.

All items received into or removed from an MBA are measured to determine the uranium and/or  $^{235}\text{U}$  content. These measurements are performed on the item or on samples withdrawn from the item. Items that were accurately measured in the MBA from which they are received are generally accepted on that measured value. All cylinders (feed, product, and tails) received at an enrichment facility are weighed on receipt to verify the gross weight or to establish (if an empty cylinder) the cylinder's tare weight. Depending on the operator's confidence in the quality of the received  $\text{UF}_6$ , each feed cylinder may be sampled, accepted on shipper's values, or sampled on a random basis. Transfers from the storage MBA to the process MBA and vice versa are measured in only one of the MBAs. These measurements include total weight of contained  $\text{UF}_6$ , uranium concentration (generally by ignition gravimetry), isotopic abundances and  $^{235}\text{U}$  content (generally by gas source mass spectrometry), and impurity concentrations (by assorted techniques). Scrap and waste materials may be measured for the contained uranium and  $^{235}\text{U}$  contents by an assortment of destructive and nondestructive analysis techniques.

Approximate measurement uncertainties are provided in Table 10. Using platform scales, 10 and 14 ton UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders can be weighed very accurately. The relative limit of error (95% confidence level) for the net weight of UF<sub>6</sub> in these cylinders is less than 0.05%. Depending on the degree of heterogeneity, the sampling error for UF<sub>6</sub> cylinders is generally less than 0.10% after homogenization. UF<sub>6</sub> can be analyzed very accurately for uranium and isotopic concentrations by well-established destructive chemical methods. At a 95% confidence level, subsampling and analysis for both uranium content and <sup>235</sup>U isotopic concentration have a relative limit of error that is less than 0.05%. Heterogeneous waste materials from which representative samples are difficult to obtain generally can be measured with a measurement uncertainty of less than 10%. The in-process inventory is calculated from process system volumes, pressures, temperatures, and models of material deposition and holdup. The uncertainty of this inventory is approximately 10% of the quantity obtained; of this, the random error component would amount to only a few percent.

**Table 10. Measurement uncertainties**

Measurement	Uncertainty <sup>a</sup> (%)
Weight	<0.05
Sampling	<0.10
Uranium content	<0.05
Isotopic concentration	<0.05
In-process inventory	~10
Waste materials	<10

<sup>a</sup>At 95% confidence level.

Confidence in the measurement results is ensured through the effective application of a measurement control program. The program includes (1) the qualification of measurement systems and of the measurement personnel that use the systems and (2) the periodic measurement of control samples and reference materials to verify that the measurement system meets required accuracy specifications. The control programs also include procedures for the calibration and requalification of the measurement systems following out-of-control occurrences. The calibration and control procedures utilize certified reference materials and ensure traceability of the measurement results to the national system.

#### ***Review Questions for Section 4.5***

1. What are the MBAs in the standard MBA structure at a centrifuge enrichment plant?
2. How often are material balance closures performed at a centrifuge enrichment plant?
3. How do the inventories of the storage and process MBAs differ?
4. What measurements are made on the UF<sub>6</sub> contained in a full product cylinder when it is transferred from the process to the storage MBA?

## **APPENDIX A. GLOSSARY**



## APPENDIX A. GLOSSARY

- cascade**—Stages of separation elements connected in series to achieve useful enrichments.
- compression**—Technique where  $\text{UF}_6$  gas is compressed and cooled by a series of compressors and interstage coolers to increase the  $\text{UF}_6$  pressure and decrease the gas temperature.
- consumption**—Losses that are due to all mechanisms such as the reaction of  $\text{UF}_6$  with surface impurities, water, organic compounds, and inorganic materials, as well as metal corrosion.
- containment autoclave**—Steam or electrically heated pressure vessel of sufficient structural strength and with the necessary instrumentation for sensing and confining any inadvertent  $\text{UF}_6$  release that might occur from a cylinder when  $\text{UF}_6$  is being heated, fed, or transferred.
- corrosion**—Losses due to the reaction of  $\text{UF}_6$  with the metal within which it is contained.
- depleted uranium**—Uranium content less than natural uranium.
- desublimation**—Technique where gaseous  $\text{UF}_6$  flows through a desublimer where it desublimates (solidifies) on the cooled walls and internal elements.
- equilibrium time**—Time required for a cascade to reach its steady-state, designed operating condition.
- gross weight**—Weight of a cylinder filled with  $\text{UF}_6$ .
- heels**—Residual amount of  $\text{UF}_6$  and nonvolatile reaction products of uranium contained in empty feed cylinders.
- highly enriched uranium**—Enriched uranium above 20%  $^{235}\text{U}$  or greater
- in-process inventory**—Total amount of material required to fill the entire cascade while in process.
- key measurement point**—Location where nuclear material appears in a form where it may be measured to determine material flow or inventory.
- low-enriched uranium**—Enriched uranium above natural uranium but less than 20%  $^{235}\text{U}$ .
- natural**—Uranium as found in nature.
- net weight**—Difference between the gross weight and tare weight of all  $\text{UF}_6$  within a cylinder.
- product**—Enriched stream withdrawn from the top cascade stage.
- separation element**—A device that separates the incoming feed stream into two outgoing streams, enriched and depleted.
- separation factor**—Degree of separation that can be achieved in a given separation element or stage measured by a parameter.
- stages**—Separation elements connected in parallel to achieve the necessary flow throughput.
- sublimation temperature**—Temperature where the vapor pressure of the solid equals atmospheric pressure.
- tails/waste**—Depleted stream withdrawn from the bottom cascade stage.
- tare weight**—Weight of an empty, clean cylinder.
- throughput**—Rate feed material can be processed.
- total reflux/recycle mode**—Time cascade withdrawal valves remain closed while the process material is recycled through the separation elements to increase the initial product concentration from the feed concentration to the desired product concentration.



**triple point**—Temperature and pressure at which solid, liquid, and vapor exist in equilibrium.

**value**—An abstract property of a quantity of uranium that is independent of cost and price.

**uranium enrichment**—Increase of  $^{235}\text{U}$  isotope above its natural concentration of 0.71%.