The NASA Advanced Exploration Systems
Nuclear Thermal Propulsion Project

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Nuclear thermal propulsion (NTP) is a fundamentally new capability

- Energy comes from fission, not chemical reactions
- Virtually unlimited energy density

Initial systems will have specific impulses roughly twice that of the best chemical systems

- Reduced propellant (launch) requirements, reduced trip time
- Beneficial to near-term/far-term missions currently under consideration

Advanced nuclear propulsion systems could have extremely high performance and unique capabilities

The goal of the AES NTP project is to establish adequate confidence in the affordability and viability of NTP such that NTP is seriously considered as a baseline technology for future NASA human exploration missions
AES NTP Project Recent Activities

Fabrication of 16” coated graphite composite fuel elements (hafnium surrogate in place of uranium)

Fabrication of short (<6”) W/\(\text{UO}_2\) cermet fuel element segments (depleted uranium) / testing in Compact Fuel Element Environmental Tester (CFEET)

Completion of Nuclear Thermal Rocket Element Environmental Simulator (NTREES) 1.2 MW upgrade

Preparation for NTREES test of 16” coated graphite composite fuel element (hafnium surrogate) by end of FY15.

Additional AES NTP project emphasis on potential early flight demonstration engine using highly enriched uranium (HEU) fuel. Coated graphite composite selected as the “lead” fuel for that engine.

Additional work related to early flight (or ground) demonstration includes facility identification, schedule generation, and cost estimation.
Short, 7 Channel W/\text{UO}_2\text{ Element Fabricated and Tested in Compact Fuel Element Environmental Tester (CFEET)}

**CFEET System 50 kW Buildup & Checkout**

Completed CFEET system

Left: View looking down into the CFEET chamber during shakeout run 1. BN insulator and bright orange sample inside

**Initial Testing of Short W/\text{UO}_2\text{ Element**}

Above/left: Pure W sample post shakeout run 2. Sample reached melting point (3695K) and was held in place by the BN insulator.
CERMET W Powder Coated UO$_2$ HIP Sample

Micrograph of W powder coated UO$_2$ HIP sample showing improved distribution of UO$_2$ (dark phase) spheres in the W (light phase) matrix.

Crimp and sealing of W powder coated UO$_2$ sample in glovebox.

SEM phase map of W powder coated UO$_2$ HIP sample showing improved distribution of UO$_2$ (blue phase) spheres in the W (red phase) matrix.
CERMET W-UO$_2$ 6” 19-Hole Fuel Sample

Images showing the 6” long 19-hole W-UO$_2$ HIP can assembly prior to, during, and after welding

19 Hole HIP can W-UO$_2$ powder fill in glovebox
NTP CERMET Fuel Element Development

- Completed fabrication, assembly, welding of two 4.5” HIP cans for pure W samples (one with internal cladding/one without)
  - Change to 4.5” from 6” was due to availability of the W cladding
- Filled two HIP cans with pure W powder
  - Achieved ~65% packing density in each can
- Completed HIP cycle for the pure W sample with internal cladding
  - Sample appears to be near full consolidation without can failure
  - Pure W samples will be used to evaluate shrinkage, etching, and machining
- Full length HIP can for pure W sample has been fabricated
- March, 2015 AES NTP project decision to defer additional cermet fuel work until FY16 or beyond.
Compact Fuel Element Environmental Test (CFEET)
System and Etch System Upgrades

W susceptor and BN Pedestal

Thermal Model of W susceptor and BN Pedestal

Full Length Fuel Element Etch System
ORNL Graphite Composite Fuel Element Development

MSFC High Temperature Furnace

MSFC High Temperature Furnace. Licensed for depleted uranium

ORNL Fuels Dev. Team from left to right: Jim Miller, Brian Jolly, Mike Trammel. ORNL multi-zone coating furnace shown in background.

Initial ORNL graphite composite samples after the final heat treatment to 2700 C. Long sample is a section from an extrusion run. Short one is run out material left over from extrusion run. (Heat treated to have some extra material)
Above: Members of Oak Ridge National Laboratory fuels team with the graphite extruder; Left: Graphite extruder with vent lines installed for DU capability

Above and Left: Extrusion samples using carbon-matrix/Hf blend .75” across flats, .125” coolant channels

Above: Test Piece highlighting ZrC Coating
Right: Coating primarily on external surface

Right: Layoff base / Graphite insert

Uncoated graphite

ZrC coating

Substrate
Internal face of graphite
Beginning of internal channel

200 μm
ORNL Graphite Composite Development

Backscattered SEM

Before heat treatment, 2000x

After heat treatment, 2000x

EDS analysis - Zr (green), Hf (blue)
Testing in NTREES

- NTREES has been modified to allow much higher power operation – achieved > 200kW
- Check out testing uncovered design deficiencies which limited the power that could be applied to test elements
- Design deficiencies have been corrected
- Modifications to coils needed prior to very high power testing – pursuing designs to allow greater test fidelity
- NTREES fully operational for testing fuel elements with prototypic surrogate or depleted uranium loading
General Description:

- Water cooled ASME coded test vessel rated for 1100 psi
- GN₂ (facility) and GH₂ (trailer) gas supply systems
- Vent system (combined GN₂/GH₂ flow)
- 1.2 MW RF power supply with new inductive coil
- Water cooling system (test chamber, exhaust mixer and RF system)
- Control & Data Acquisition implemented via LabVIEW program
- Extensive H₂ leak detection system and O₂ monitoring system
- Data acquisition system consists of a pyrometer suite for axial temperature measurements and a mass spectrometer
- “Fail Safe” design

New Cooling Water System now provides 2 separate systems that cool induction coil and power feedthrough, induction heater and H₂N₂ mixer respectively.
Observations / Summary

Since FY 2012, the NASA AES NTP project has made progress in certain key areas.

Safety is the highest priority for NTP (as with other space systems). After safety comes affordability.

No centralized capability for developing, qualifying, and utilizing an NTP system. Will require a strong, closely integrated team.

Tremendous potential benefits from NTP and other space fission systems. No fundamental reason these systems cannot be developed and utilized in a safe, affordable fashion.