

RADIOLOGICAL DOSE ASSESSMENTS IN THE NORTHERN MARSHALL ISLANDS (1989-1991)^a

L.C. Sun, C.B. Meinhold, A.R. Moorthy,
J.H. Clinton, and E. Kaplan

Radiological Science Division,
Department of Nuclear Energy,
Brookhaven National Laboratory, Upton, NY 11973

Introduction

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is located in the central Pacific Ocean about 3,500 km southwest of Hawaii and 4,500 km east of Manila, Philippines. It consists of 34 atolls and 2 coral islands, having a total land area of about 180 km², distributed over more than 2.5×10^6 km² of ocean. Between 1946 and 1958 the United States conducted nuclear tests there: 43 at Enewetak and 23 at Bikini. Thirty-three years after the cessation of nuclear testing in the RMI, the impact of these operations on the health and radiological safety of the people living in or planning to return to their contaminated homelands is still an important concern⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾.

The present Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL) Marshall Islands Radiological Safety Program (MIRSP) began in 1987 with funding from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). The objectives of the MIRSP are to determine the radionuclides present in the bodies of those people potentially exposed to residual radionuclide from weapon tests and fallout, and to assess their present and lifetime dose from external and internal sources. Field bioassay missions involving whole-body counting (WBC) and urine sample collection have, therefore, been important components of the program. WBC is used to measure γ -emitters, such as ⁴⁰K, ⁶⁰Co and ¹³⁷Cs, present in individuals. Urine samples are used to measure α and β -emitting nuclides, such as ²³⁹Pu and ⁹⁰Sr, that are undetectable by WBC routine methods.

Whole-Body Counting Program

Whole-body counting measurements are conducted on a voluntary basis. Two complete counting systems are operated simultaneously and independently during daily WBC operations. The counting time is 15 minutes per measurement. About 50 to 60 measurements could be completed in a working day. A total of 916 persons were counted in 1989. This group included 216 the people of (dri-) Enewetak, 258 dri-Rongelap, and 414 dri-Utirik. Also included were 28 visitors, workers, and DOE personnel, listed as "Others". A total of 1,051 persons participated in the WBC in 1991; 311 dri-Enewetak, 272 dri-Utirik, 427 dri-Rongelap, and 41 Others. Since 1985, when

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dri-Rongelap self-exiled to Mejjatto Island, all Rongelap measurements were obtained at Mejjatto.

¹³⁷Cs is the only fallout nuclide detected in the WBC measurements. The highest value from any of the three missions was 14 kBq. Except at Enewetak, all measurements showed a decrease from 1989 to 1991. Dose calculations from the ¹³⁷Cs body counts were based on an ICRP-56 tabulation of conversion factors⁽³⁾ used to compute the committed effective dose equivalents (CEDE) following acute exposures to cesium at different ages. The conversion factor of 1.4×10^{-8} Sv/Bq for 15 year old individuals was used for conservative reasons. The ICRP-30 retention function⁽⁴⁾ indicates that 90% of the CEDE is received within the first year of exposure, and that a 2.8 ratio exists if a constant level of ¹³⁷Cs is maintained as opposed to its being eliminated from the body in one year. Therefore, the annual effective dose equivalents (AEDE) were calculated by multiplying the CEDE by factors of 0.9 and 2.8. Table 1 shows the AEDE that an individual would receive due to uniform chronic exposure throughout an entire year.

Table 1, Average AEDE [μSv] from WBC Measurements		
Population	1989	1991
Enewetak	11 ± 3	22 ± 4
Rongelap	3 ± 2	2 ± 2
Utirik	39 ± 2	35 ± 3

Plutonium Measurements and Urinalysis Program

In 1983, a Photon Electron Rejection Alpha Liquid Scintillation (PERALS) system was used for ²³⁹Pu urinalysis for the Marshallese. Unexpectedly high apparent ²³⁹Pu activities (130 μBq) in samples collected from a location that should not have been affected by the Bravo fallout were obtained. It was subsequently shown that most of the measured ²³⁹Pu was actually ²¹⁰Po which could not be differentiated by the PERALS system. These findings prompted development of a fission track analytical (FTA) technique⁽⁵⁾ that would be capable of detecting very low-levels of ²³⁹Pu without interference from ²¹⁰Po. By 1987, FTA could be used to detect values as low as 4 μBq per sample of ²³⁹Pu. With further improvements, a sensitivity of about 2 μBq was achieved in 1989.

As of December 1988, a total of 195 Rongelap and 300 Utirik urine samples were analyzed at BNL. These 495 samples were collected from volunteers during field missions conducted between 1981 to 1984. The frequency distribution for the ²³⁹Pu values from the Marshallese urine were log-normal with the 50 percentile (geometric mean) at about 9 μBq per sample for Rongelap and 4 μBq for Utirik. The 95% of the results were below 37 μBq for both populations. The highest value measured was 174 μBq.

Among the 195 Rongelap FTA results, 22 cases were found with inconsistent results from individuals who participated in the urine program more than once during the 1981-1984 missions. Three potential causes for these disparities were investigated: (1) was it possible that small amounts of contaminated soil were getting into the urine samples and thereby resulting in false estimates of plutonium excreted by the individual? (2) were the 24-h urine volumes used in the calculations appropriate and did each sample contain the entire 24 hour urine output as required for a proper systemic burden estimate? (3) were the other metabolic parameters used in this calculation appropriate for the Marshall Islanders?

In September 1988, urine samples were collected from individuals residing on Mejjatto, Utirik, and Majuro. FTA values from the 146 urine measurements (67 Rongelap and 79 Utirik) and urine-blanks (26 synthetic and 76 composite human urine from a BNL employee) are shown in Table 2. For dri-Utirik, the values of mean (μ) and standard deviation (σ) were higher than those of Rongelap because of one sample containing 742 tracks (about 50 μBq of ^{239}Pu). Since samples collected from this same person in 1981 and 1989 were both less than the minimum detection limit (MDL), we concluded that the 1988 reading was due to contamination.

Table 2, Statistical Summary of the 1988 Data (Tracks)				
	n	μ	σ	median
Dri-Rongelap	67	59	34	56
Dri-Utirik	79	64	82	54
BNL-Employee	76	54	29	49
Synthetic-Urine	44	37	15	43

The MDL ($\mu + 3\sigma$) derived from the synthetic urine data was 82 tracks. All samples greater than 82 tracks are considered to have statistically significant levels of ^{239}Pu activity. Otherwise, less than MDL was reported.

In 1989, a new urine collection protocol was developed which approximates the precision and accuracy obtainable in a hospital. Collection bottles were no longer distributed to participants for use at their homes. Instead, all samples were taken on the mission vessel over a controlled 24-h period, and were acidified (16N HNO_3 , 10% by volume) within 24 hours of the collection period. A group of 32 individuals who previously had ^{239}Pu readings greater than 11 μBq were resampled in 1989. Only two of these samples were above the MDL of 2 μBq (i.e., 2.8 and 2.4 μBq). These data lead to the conclusion that soil contamination was the cause of earlier abnormally high readings, and provided confidence in the new urine collection protocol. The 2.8 μBq is equivalent to a CEDE of 0.4 mSv.

Interlaboratory Comparison of ^{137}Cs and ^{239}Pu Data

For ^{137}Cs , BNL whole-body counts yielded an average of 3.7 kBq in 1984; Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) estimated 5.9 kBq could be expected using their environmental sample measurements and availability of imported foods. For ^{239}Pu , BNL estimated an CEDE of 0.40 mSv from the interpretation of Rongelap urine data; and LLNL estimated 0.46 mSv from dietary assumptions, intake pathway analysis, and Pu activities measured in foods, dust and soil⁽⁶⁾.

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