A Time Projection Chamber for precision 239Pu(n,f) cross section measurement

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January 15, 2008

Compound-Nuclear Reactions and Related Topics
Fish Camp, CA, United States
October 22, 2007 through October 26, 2007
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A Time Projection Chamber for Precision $^{239}\text{Pu}(n,f)$ Cross Section Measurement

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**Abstract.** High precision measurements of the $^{239}\text{Pu}(n,f)$ cross section have been identified as important for the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) and other programs. Currently the uncertainty on this cross section is of the order 2-3% for neutron energies below 14 MeV and the goal is to reduce this to less than 1%. The Time Projection Chamber (TPC) has been identified as a possible tool to make this high precision measurement.

**Keywords:** TPC fission cross section Pu

**PACS:** 25.85.Ec

**INTRODUCTION**

The measurement of the $^{239}\text{Pu}(n,f)$ cross section has been carried out many times over the last 50 years [1]. Despite this large effort, the uncertainty on this cross section remains in the range of 2-3%. Individual experiments quote smaller errors, but when a collection of experiments are considered, it is clear that some systematic error remains in the 2-3% range [1]. Although the precise origin of the remaining error has yet to be discovered, many possible sources have been enumerated and it is the goal of the fission TPC project to uncover the sources of error and to drive down the uncertainty of the $^{239}\text{Pu}(n,f)$ cross section to 1%.

The GNEP program was designed to aid in the deployment of more nuclear power reactors world wide [2]. This program has a number of goals such as reducing cost, increasing safety, reducing proliferation, and reducing radioactive waste. A part of the program is to develop fast spectrum fission reactors to reduce generation of waste though increased burn-up and burning of transuranics. These new Gen IV reactors are in the design stage and it has been recognized that improved nuclear data is needed to achieve the required accuracy in the simulation of these reactors [3, 4]. A number of cross sections have been identified for each of the designs, and the requirements vary from design to design. In particular, $^{239}\text{Pu}(n,f)$ has very strict requirements, demanding errors less than about 1%.

Most $^{239}\text{Pu}(n,f)$ cross section measurements have been conducted with a fission chamber. This simple parallel plate chamber is easy to construct and has been effective in many cross section measurements. Studying $^{239}\text{Pu}(n,f)$ experiments, in detail, reveals that the error achievable with the fission chamber is reaching a limit. This is understandable given the very simple nature of the device.

The fission chamber measures only the total energy of the fission fragment.

**TIME PROJECTION CHAMBER (TPC)**

The TPC is a sophisticated drift chamber detector that was revolutionary in the expansion of detailed tracking information that could be collected in one gas volume. It was invented in the late 1970s by David Nygren at LBL [5]. The TPC has found many application in the accelerator physics, dark matter searches, neutrinoless double beta decay, and even homeland security projects.

Applying the TPC to low energy nuclear physics problems is a natural extension of the fission chamber work. The TPC shares major features with the fission chamber such as the active gas volume and electron drift, but deviates in the complexity of the readout. The fission chamber has one channel to readout per fission, where the fission TPC will have about 12,000. This large increase in channels results in a very powerful detector that will enable the experimenter to address the remaining errors in the cross section measurement. The key improvement is that the fission chamber returns only the energy deposited in the active gas volume, while the TPC returns a full 3D reconstruction of the event. Figure 1 shows and example event in the EOS TPC.

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1 In the case of a white neutron source the time-of-flight of the neutron is also measured.
How the TPC Works

A TPC is a gas ionization detector similar to a fission chamber. A TPC, however, measures charged particle trajectories in the active volume in three dimensions. In simple terms, the TPC can be thought of as a 3D digital camera which makes a 3D "picture" or "image" of the event. In reality it can do more than take pictures; it can read continuously, and can use the specific ionization information to distinguish the different particle species within an event.

Figure 2 shows a conceptual design of a TPC for the proposed fission measurement. The isotope to be studied (e.g. $^{239}\text{Pu}$) is located in the center of the TPC. The neutron beam enters from the left through the end plate and induces fissions in the target. The resulting fission fragments exit either side of the target and ionize the gas, typically P10 (90%Ar +10%CH$_4$), or, in this case, hydrogen. As in a fission chamber, an electric field between the target plane and the readout planes (labeled "gain, pad, and readout" in the figure) prevents the ions and electrons from recombining and causes the electrons to drift, in a predictable way, to the readout plane. The transverse coordinates are determined by using a segmented readout plane. By timing the arrival of the charge and knowing the electron drift velocity in the gas, one can calculate the spatial coordinate of the ionization in the direction of the drift.

Wire amplification has been the most common method used in Particle Physics to produce gas gain. Developments over the last 10 years have led to better solutions, such as MICROMEGAS [7], GEMs and LEMs [8], which provide better spacial resolution, less ion feedback from the avalanche into the drift volume, are more robust, and should hold up well to radiation damage. Because of the nature of the fission fragments as highly ionizing short-range particles, these new methods are most likely the best gas amplifier technology for this measurement.

SYSTEMATIC ERRORS

There are a number of known systematic errors that contribute to the total error of the fission measurements. The three dominate errors are related to, particle identification, target thickness, and the use of $^{235}\text{U}$ as a normalizing reference. These three alone have precluded sub-1% measurements with standard fission chambers. While all of the known, suspected and subsequently discovered systematic errors can be fully investigated and addressed in a TPC experiment, the focus here is on these three limiting uncertainties.

The Particle Identification uncertainty is the largest of the fission chamber errors and one where the TPC will have the most significant impact in error reduction. The amount of ionization from a charged particle traversing the active gas volume is proportional to the total energy of the charged particle. Fission fragments are highly charged and have typical energies around 100 MeV, therefore, they typically leave a large signature in the gas volume. Spontaneous decay backgrounds from the sample or sample contaminants typically have energies around 5 MeV and are not highly charged - their signature is small in comparison. However, multiple scattering of the fission fragments through the sample itself and the support backing can cause extreme straggling, particularly for the lower energy, higher Z fragments that have trajectories at large angles from the target normal.

At low measured energies, the two signatures overlap and result in one of the largest systematics associated with these types of measurements because assumptions have to made about the shape of the straggling fission fragments energy distribution. The problem is exacerbated by (n,n$\alpha$) and other scattering reactions on the target backing, chamber entrance window material and the drift...
gas itself. These particles can have even larger energies than the decay αs and further increase the systematic errors.

A simulation of this effect was carried out with the GEANT4 particle transport software. [6] The most significant effects have been included: alpha decay of the target, neutron scatters on chamber materials, and the fissions themselves. Figure 3 shows the results of the simulation. The horizontal axis is the energy deposited in ionization for each particle that enters the active gas volume. The top line is the net energy distribution one would measure. The lines below show the contribution from the scatters and alphas, and the fission fragments. Fission fragments leaving the target at large angles lose a significant amount of energy, which leads to the long low-energy tail to the fission fragment spectrum. It is clear from this plot that the fragments overlap with the scatters. In a fission chamber measurement, this is addressed by setting a cut in energy to remove scatters, and then correcting for the fission fragments removed by the cut (and alpha particles and beam-gas scatters that were included).

The situation is considerably different in a TPC. Figure 4 shows the same simulation in a TPC. The horizontal axis is the same as in figure 3, but the TPC also measures the track length which is now plotted on the y-axis. The fission fragments are the right most bands, and the bands to the left are alphas and scatters on the chamber materials. It is clear from this plot that separating the particles is much easier in the TPC.

The Target Thickness error is the error in assaying the quantity of isotopes in the target sample and determining the homogeneity. In preparation for a fission chamber measurement, the mass of the target is usually determined by counting the spontaneous alphas. The total mass is usually measured by viewing the entire sample. The thickness and homogeneity determination is usually carried out using a masked detector. The thickness determination is limited by three systematic errors: uncertainties in the alpha counter calibration; averaging over variations across the full target; and alpha counting inefficiency due to high-angle alphas losing significant energy in the target itself, which depends on the thickness.

The TPC will measure the alphas produced from the target and use this to produce an in situ autoradiograph of the target. This can then be used to determine the homogeneity of the target. There is no mask to confuse the measurement, the TPC is 100% efficient in measuring the alphas and the detailed tracking removes the need to average over the target.

The $^{235}\text{U}$ Reference error refers to the conventional method used to measure the beam flux in fission experiments. The beam flux from a typical neutron source is not known directly at the percent level. The conventional solution is to place a reference target of a known cross section in the beam simultaneously with the material under study. Given the cross section, the total number of events from the reference material is a measure of the flux. For fission measurements the reference is usually $^{235}\text{U}$, which has the best measured $(n,f)$ cross section, but even this cross section is only known, optimistically, to about 1% in some incident energy regions. Measuring a fission cross section ratio in this way minimizes all the beam related uncertainties since they will nearly cancel in the ratio.

An improvement would be to use hydrogen as a reference since the $(n,p)$ cross section is known much better than $^{235}\text{U}$. In some portions of the phase space the $(n,p)$ is known to 0.2%. A prime candidate for the drift gas of the fission TPC is hydrogen for the low multiple scattering and decent properties as a drift gas. The drift gas also

![FIGURE 3. Simulation of particle identification in a fission chamber. The top line is what would be measured in an experiment. The lines below show the components: alphas, scatters, and fission fragments.](image1)

![FIGURE 4. Simulation of particle identification in a TPC. The right most band is the fission fragments. The alphas and scatters are on the left.](image2)
experiences the neutron beam, so if the density was well
controlled it could also serve as the reference target. This
has a number of advantages such as the simplicity, and
no target straggling.

FISSION TPC DESIGN
CONSIDERATIONS

A TPC designed for fission measurements should have
enough gas (pressure and path length) that the fission
fragments range out, so that the full energy of the particle
is measured. The gas gain and readout have to handle the
very high specific ionization of the fission fragments, and
the dynamic range to simultaneously measure protons.
Finally, the measurement of fission neutrons is of interest
in the fission measurements. Some of these requirements
can be met in a two-sided TPC using a solid target at the
cathode, as sketched in Figure 2. This detector, however,
is not the best that can be done using a TPC. Though
this detector will be a huge improvement over a fission
chamber, the use of a solid target will likely still be the
source of the limiting systematic errors, in measuring the
target mass and the acceptance for high angle fission
fragments and alphas. To remove the issues related to
the target, ideally one would use a gaseous target, and
measure the fission events free in the drift gas.

The optimum design parameters are a trade-off be-
tween competing effects and depend on the properties of
the neutron beam. For this design the beam requirements
are, less than 2cm spot size on the target, less than 1500
neutrons/cm² per pulse and pulse spacing no closer than
1.8ms. These requirements can be met by the LANSCE
facility.

PROJECT STATUS

The fission TPC concept entered a feasibility study in
Feb 2004, and has received substantial money starting in
fiscal year 2008. The projection is that the TPC will be
built and the 239Pu(n,f) measurement made in 5.5years.

We have started detailed designed of both the TPC
chamber and the electronics. Figure 5 shows the current
3D model of the TPC. The center is a pressure vessel
that holds the hydrogen working gas with pressures from
0 to 5bar. The fan like structure is an extension of the pad
plane and the fins are the readout cards that plug in to the
pad plane. Each readout card sends data from 64 pads on
a standard Ethernet cable to the event builder computers
for event reconstruction.

CONCLUSION

There is a need for precision measurement of the
239Pu(n,f) cross section and the TPC has been selected
to make this measurement. The utility of the TPC should
extent beyond this measurement to the basic physics of
fission and it is expected that the TPC should make sig-
ificant contributions to the understanding of fission in
the near future.

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This work performed under the auspices of the U.S. Department of
Energy by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory under Contract
DE-AC52-07NA27344.