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Assessment of radioactivity levels in some oil samples from the western desert, Egypt

A. ABBADY* A.M. EL-ARABI W. RASHED
(Physics Department, Faculty of Science, South Valley University, Qena, Egypt)

Abstract Distributions of natural gamma-emitting radionuclides were determined in 93 oil samples collected from some petroleum fields in the western desert of Egypt. The radioisotope activities in the area under investigation lay in the range of (21 ± 4) to (38 ± 13) Bq•L^{-1} for ^{226}Ra, (9 ± 2) to (15 ± 5) Bq•L^{-1} for ^{232}Th, and (154 ± 28) to (303 ± 54) Bq•L^{-1} for ^{40}K. The mean values were 27, 12, and 201 Bq•L^{-1}, respectively. Among oils, variations in radionuclide activities could be on account of differences in TDS, HCO_3, and Ba, with high or low pH. In this environment, oil properties differently affected the mobilization of natural radionuclides. The range of ^{226}Ra variation had been compared with available data from other countries. The calculated absorbed dose rate ranged from 22.33 to 32.66 nGy•h^{-1} in location (B) and (E) respectively, which was less than the accepted value.

Keywords Radionuclides, Oil, Activities, Absorbed dose rate
CLC numbers TE622.1+4, TB98, O615.3

1 Introduction

Petroleum is a naturally occurring liquid with widely different compositions of very great complexity. Although there are a few surface seepages, the vast majority of petroleum is found well below the surface of the earth and can be reached only by drilling. Oil wells tap into pools of oil, or into porous rock containing the oil, called reservoirs or fields. The oil is sometimes found, under sufficiently high pressure, to flow to the surface without pumping, but for most wells pumping is required. The amount of oil recoverable from a field by pumping may be only 5%, more frequently 25-30 %, of the oil believed to be present. In fields where the oil is very heavy, steam injection may be used. Complete removal of the oil from a field is not possible even with enhanced recovery methods.

Radioactive substances occur naturally in the environment, but can also result from human activity. Until about a century ago the only sources of exposure to radioactive substances were those that existed in their undisturbed natural state. There were a few exceptions such as the use of uranium oxide as a coloring agent for ceramic glazes[1], and thorium in gas mantles[2], but these were exposed to relatively few people and to only a moderate degree.

Naturally occurring radioactive material (NORM) has been recognized since the early 1930s in petroleum reservoirs, in oil and gas production, and in processing facilities. NORM is typically observed in the barite scale that accumulates on the interior of oil production tubing and in storage tanks and heater-treated separation sludge. Recently, concern has been expressed about the impact on health, from the uncontrolled release of NORM[3]. Trace quantities of the radioactive elements ^{238}U and ^{232}Th as well as ^{40}K have been present in the earth's crust since its formation. Both ^{238}U and ^{232}Th are parents of a complex series of successive decays, producing many radioactive daughters. Some of these daughters may be coproduced with oil/gas well fluids and may concentrate in ordinary deposits (e.g. scale, sludge) and/or be leached in production water. There are several potential exposure pathways to humans from oil field NORM, such

*Corresponding author: E-mail: mousa_19@yahoo.com
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NORM, such as, inhalation of radon gas. From the radiological point of view, the only important isotope of radium is ^{226}Ra, which has an average concentration in the earth's crust of about 10^{-12} g/g (40 Bq•kg^{-1}).

The source of most oil and gas NORM is dissolved radium that is transported to the surface in the produced water waste stream. Radium dissolution and precipitation depend on the formation of water salinity, pH, temperature, and pressure. Dissolved radium either remains in solution in the produced water, or under proper conditions, coprecipitates with barium, strontium, or calcium to form either hard sulfate scales or more granular silicate and carbonate sludge[4-6]. The presence of a technologically enhanced naturally occurring radioactive material (TENORM) in the petroleum industry equipment and wastes can be extensively found in literatures[4,5].

The present paper reports a study carried out to determine the concentrations of natural radionuclides ^{226}Ra, ^{232}Th, and ^{40}K, in oil samples from oilfields in the western desert of Egypt.

2 Sample preparation

Ninety-three oil samples were collected from different fields in the western desert of Egypt and analyzed by means of scintillation spectrometry. These fields were Wadi El Rayan, Qarun, Harun, Karama, and Beni Suef [Location (A), (B), (D), (E), and (F)] respectively. The oil samples that were collected from a depth that ranged from 9000 to 10000 feet were pure oil, without any water in it. The oil samples were packed in 100 mL cylindrical containers and closed tightly. To reach the radioactive equilibrium between ^{226}Ra and ^{222}Rn and their progenies, the containers were kept sealed for four weeks.

3 Measuring system

Gamma-ray spectrometry is a commonly used technique for direct determination of radionuclides in crystal and extra-terrestrial materials[7]. It is a relative method of analysis and has the advantage of being simple and essentially nondestructive.

The methodology for natural gamma-emitting radionuclide analysis is well described in the literature, for example, Qunidos[8]. The applied low level gamma-ray spectrometer basically consists of a sodium iodide detector (3" × 3", ORTEC model 266) and electronic circuits. The applied detector has the following characteristics: resolution 7.5% for 662 keV, peak efficiency at 1.33 MeV ^{60}Co γ-ray is 4.8×10^{-5}, and operation bias voltage is 700 V dc. The system automatically computes and displays the elapsed real-time and life-time, the total counts including the background, net total counts, and the counting rate in each peak.

The background was measured frequently and subtracted from the net count for all measured samples. To get reasonable counting statistics, the measuring time was at least 12 hours.

4 Analytical methods

The primary assessment of radiation exposure of individuals should be carried out in terms of the absorbed dose. In respect of exposure to radiation it is important to assess the gamma- ray hazards because of the specified radionuclides, Ra, Th, and K. This is done by calculating the absorbed dose rate.

The average absorbed dose rate (nGy•h^{-1}), in air one meter above the ground level, in each location, is calculated using the following equation[9]:

$$D = 0.427\,A_{Ra} + 0.662\,A_{Th} + 0.043\,A_{K}$$

To estimate the annual effective dose, account must be taken of the conversion coefficient from the absorbed dose in air to the effective dose. The average numerical values of those parameters vary with the age of the population and the climate at the location considered. In the UNSCEAR[10], the committee used 0.7 Sv/Gy as the conversion coefficient from the absorbed dose in air to the effective dose received by adults[11] and 0.8 as the indoor occupancy factor, that is, the fraction of time spent indoors and outdoors is 0.8 and 0.2, respectively.

5 Results and discussion

The amount of radioactivity that accumulates in oil depends on a variety of factors including the amount of uranium and thorium present in the subsurface formation, the formation fluid chemistry, extraction and treatment processes, and the age of the production well. In all regions under investigation the