Nuclear Fuel Performance

NE 533 Spring 2023

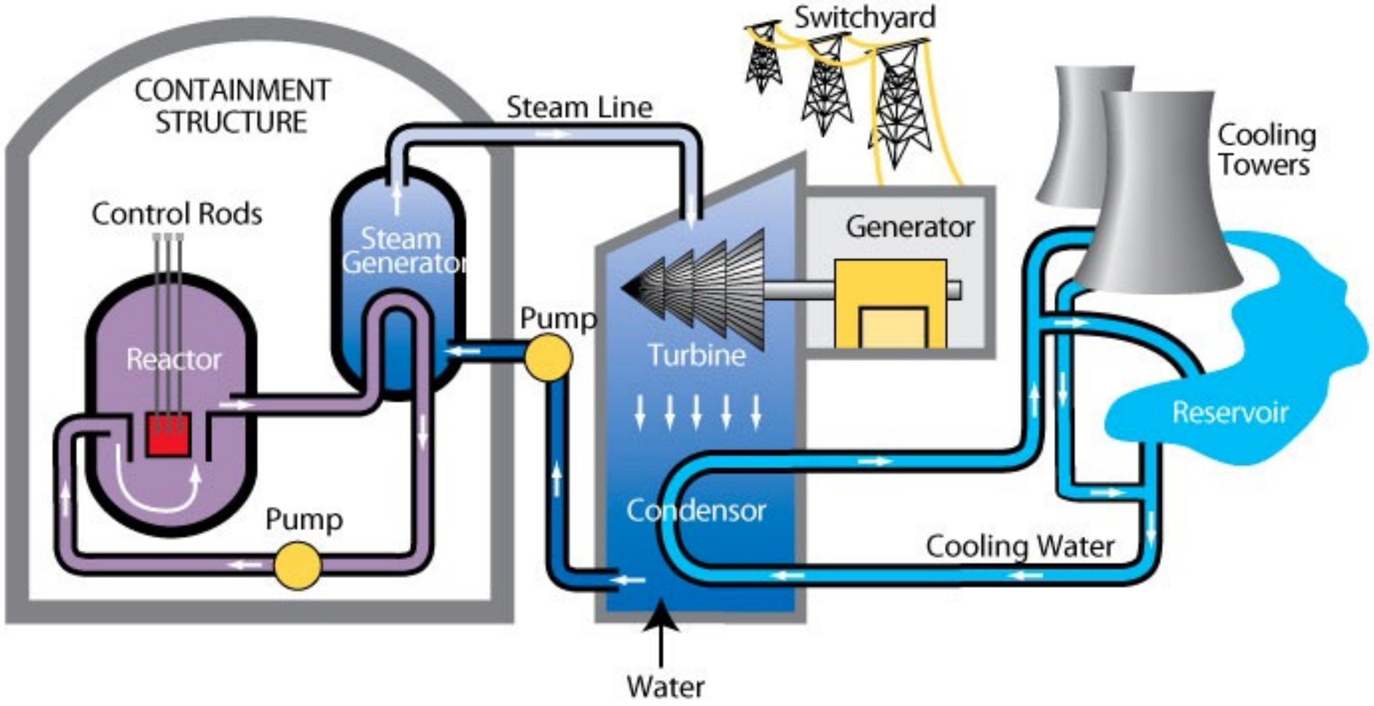
Last Time

- Finished fuel type overview
- Uranium is combined with O, C, N, transition metals for a variety of fuel types
- UO2: ceramic, commercial reactor fuel, light water reactors
- ATF: U3Si2 and Cr-doped UO2
- UZr: fast reactor fuel
- UMo: research reactor fuel
- UC/UCO: high temperature gas reactors

REACTOR SYSTEMS

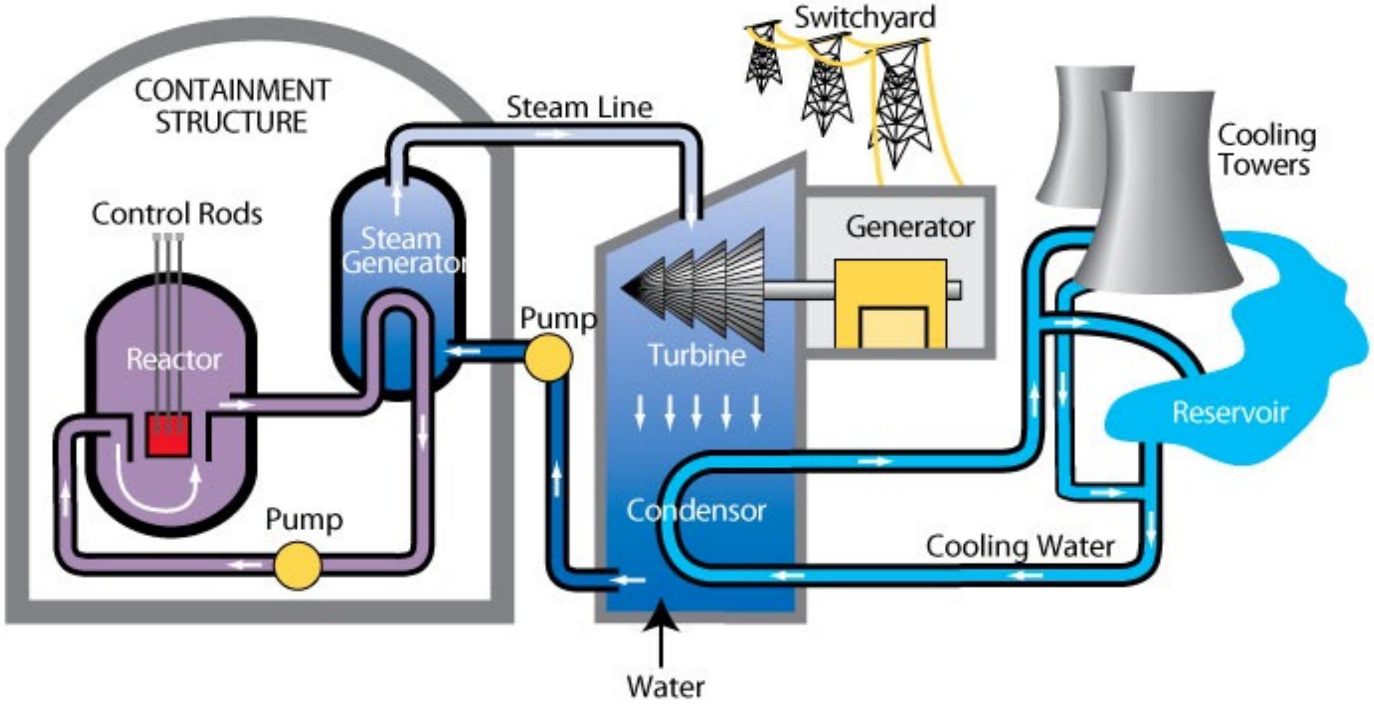
Heat removal systems

- Now we touch on how heat is removed from the fuel
- Primary mechanism to remove heat directly from fuel is a coolant
- Various coolant types, most common is water



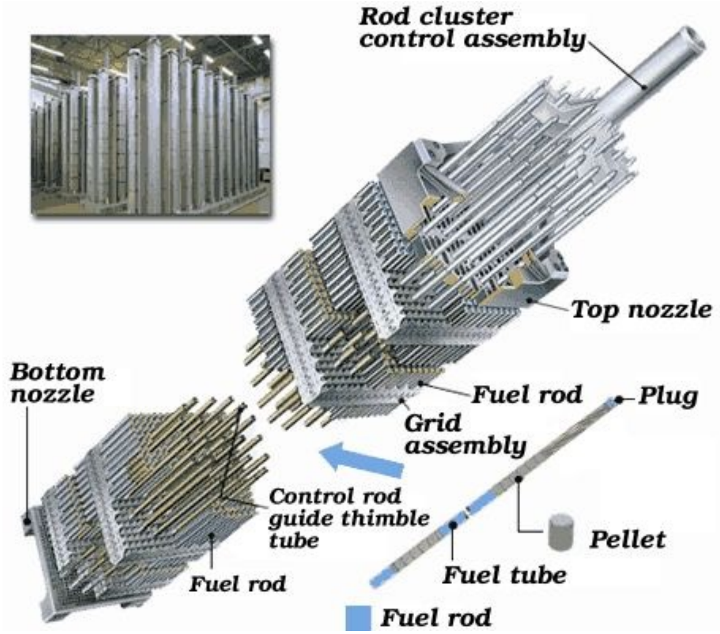
Heat removal systems

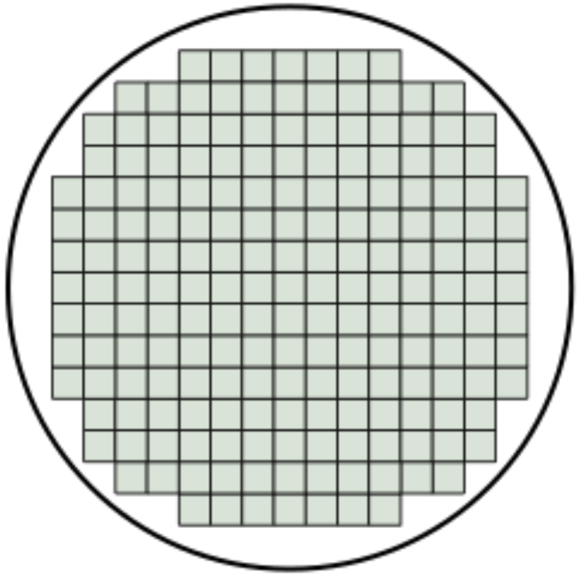
- Primary loop water runs through the core, transporting heat generated by the fuel, to a steam generator in a secondary water loop
- Steam drives a turbine, generating electricity
- A tertiary water loop helps to condense residual steam from the secondary loop via cooling towers and a water reservoir



Light Water Reactor Core Design

- An LWR core is comprised of fuel assemblies
- Each assembly contains a grid of fuel pins
  - In typical commercial LWR fuel designs, a 17x17 grid
  - Some pins are replaced by control rods
- Water flows from bottom to top

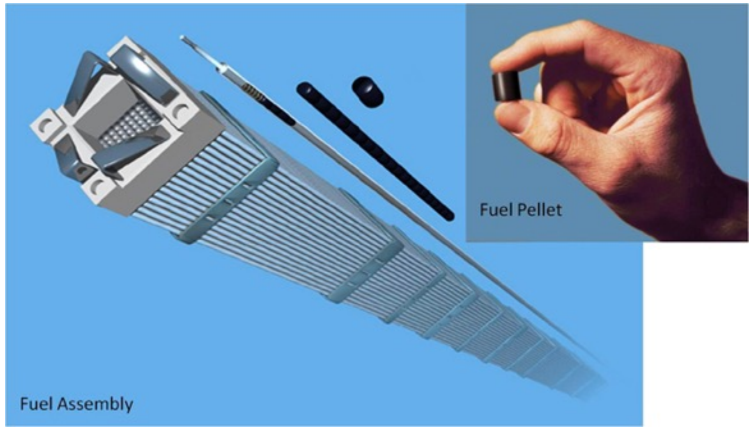


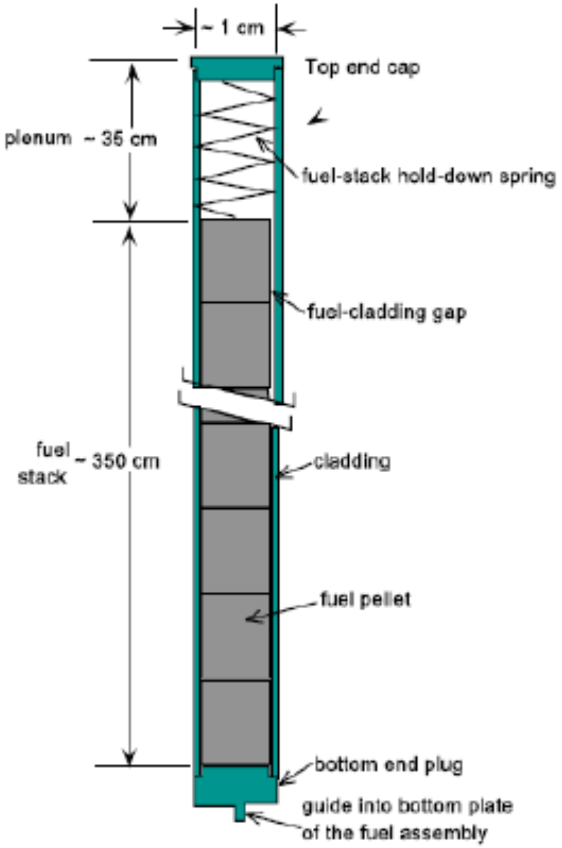


Westinghouse 4-loop PWR

LWR Fuel Pins

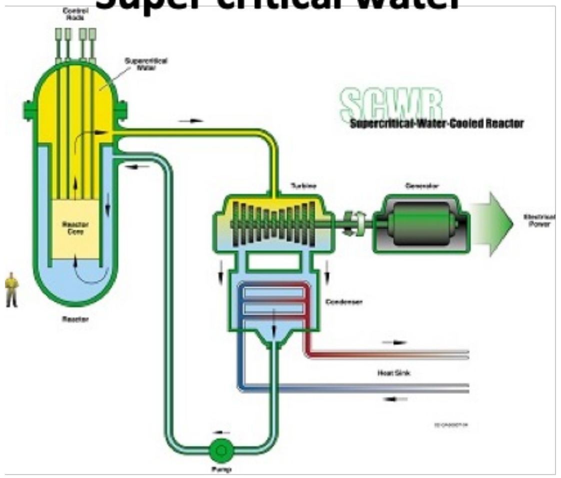
- LWR fuel pins are comprised of a hollow Zircaloy tube
  - This is the cladding
  - Zircaloy is a type of Zr alloy
- Inside the cladding are stacked UO2 pellets
- Each pellet is a cylinder about 1 cm in diameter and 1 cm in height



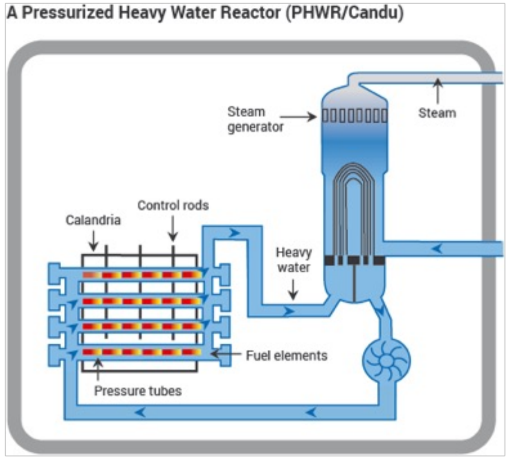


Not only water-cooled reactor designs

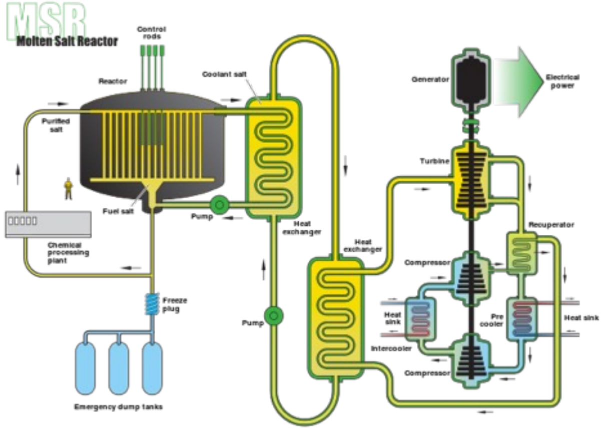
Super critical water



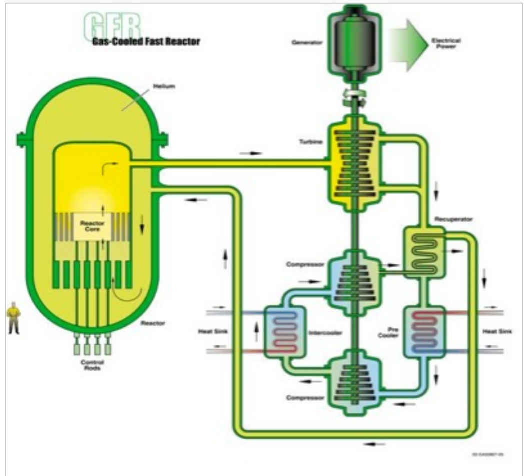
Heavy water



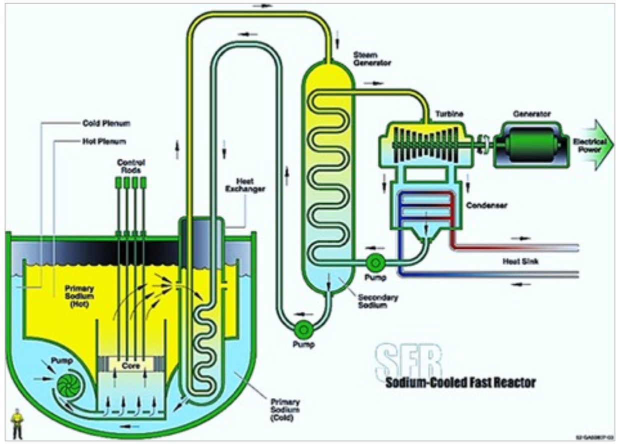
Molten salt



Gas

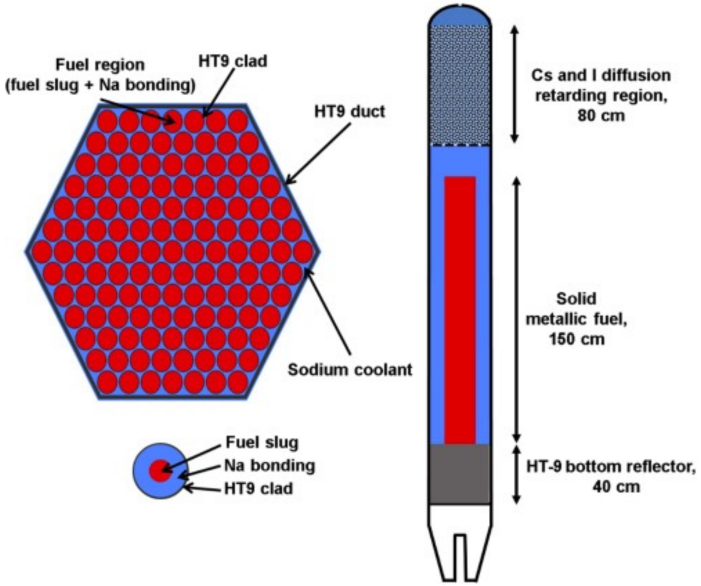


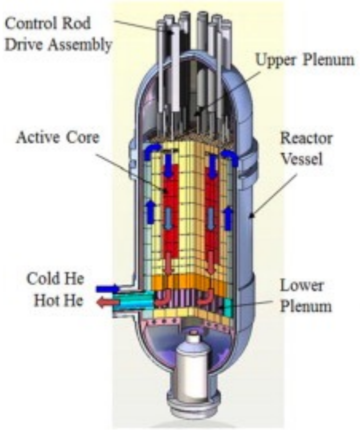
Liquid metal

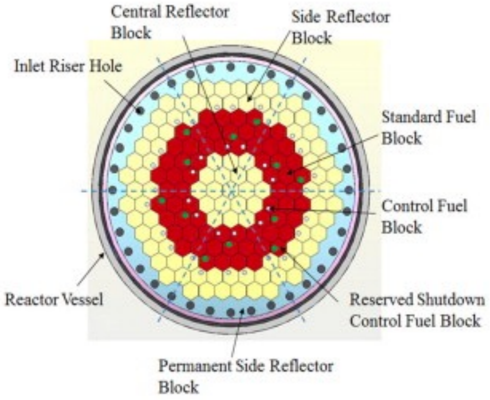


Not all fuel is pellet-based

- Metallic fuel is a solid fuel slug
  - Utilized an Fe-based cladding, such as HT-9 or SS
- TRISO particles are formed into spherical compacts, or can be formed into pellet compacts
- UMo and USi have been used in plate fuels
- Assemblies are often hex-shaped and can included reflectors

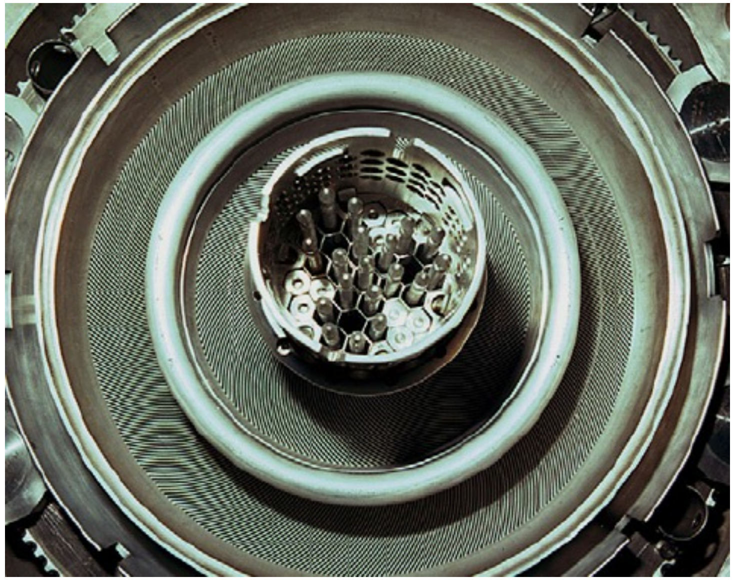




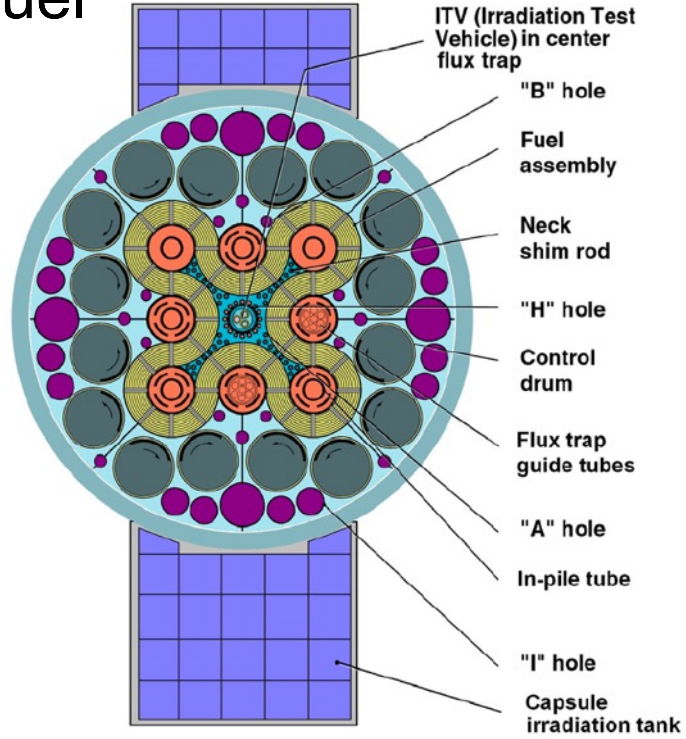


ATR and HFIR Core design

- HFIR combines curved plates in concentric regions



- The ATR core is a unique curved design with plate type fuel

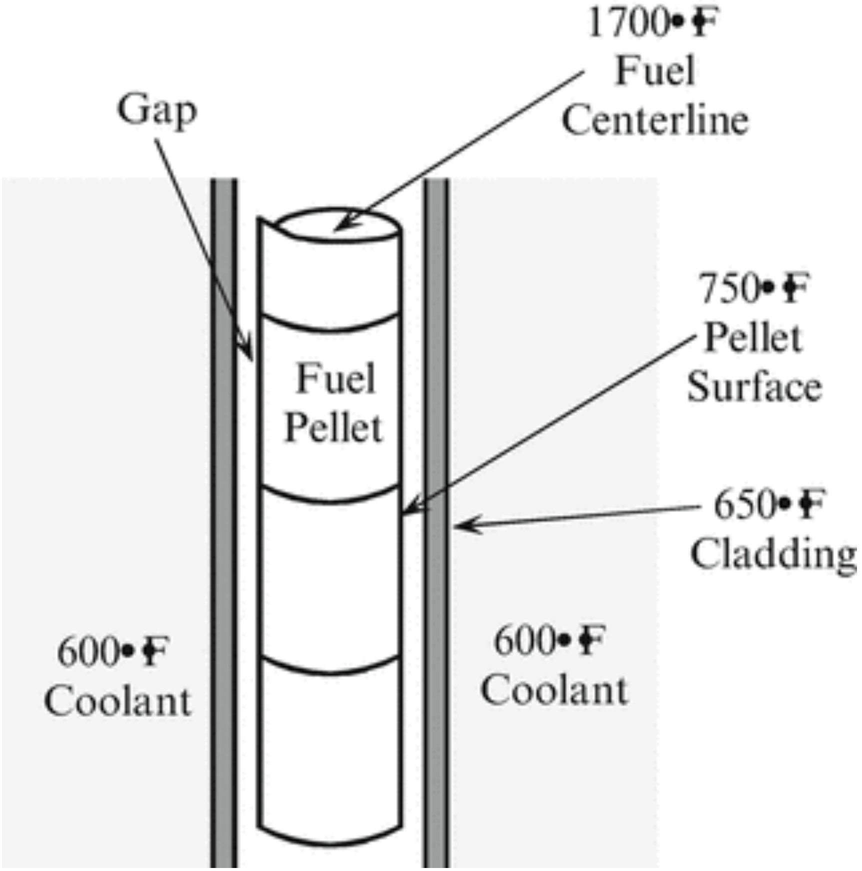


Most fuel designs employ some type of cladding

- The primary focus of the cladding is to separate the fuel from the coolant
  - Fuel contains radioactive fission products
  - Avoids corrosion of the fuel by the coolant
  - Keeps the fuel together, not blocking coolant flow
- The cladding should be thin and have a high thermal conductivity, so it doesn't trap any of the heat produced by the fuel
- Cladding should also be neutron transparent

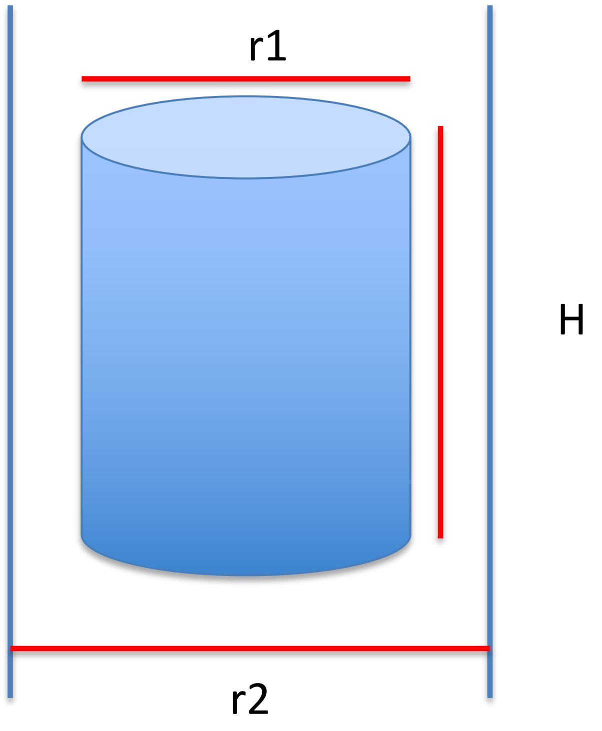
Fuel/Cladding Gap

- Fuel swells during reactor operation and the cladding creeps down around the fuel
- To avoid/limit both chemical and mechanical interaction, the pellet radius is smaller that the inner radius of the cladding
- In LWRs, the gap is filled with gas, significantly impacting the heat transport
- In metal fuels, the gap is filled with liquid sodium, so there is little impact on the heat transport



Smear Density

- Smear density is the ratio of fuel volume to total internal volume of the fuel element
- Cylinder volume = $\pi r^2 h$
- Smear density = $\pi r_1^2 h / \pi r_2^2 h$
- Smear density = r_1^2 / r_2^2
- Typical smear densities:
  - Oxides ~ 90+%
  - Metallic ~ 75%

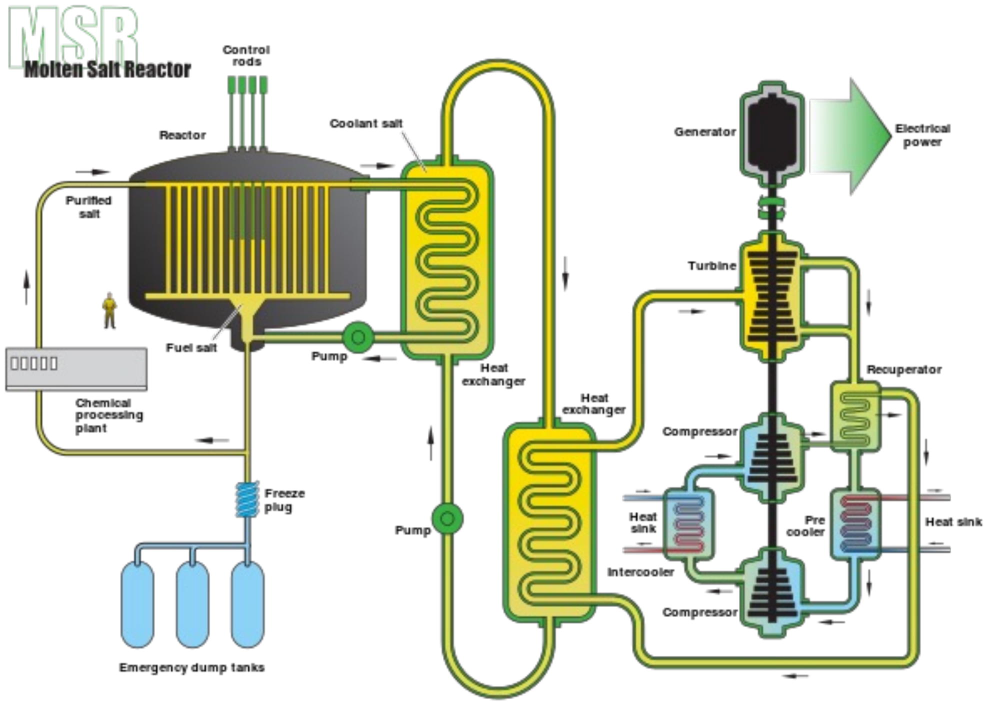


Cladding material selection

- Cladding must be compatible with the coolant, reasonably compatible with the fuel, have good thermal conductivity and reasonable radiation resistance
- Zirconium is used because of its
  - Low neutron cross section
  - Corrosion resistance in 300 C water
  - Resistance to void swelling
  - Adequate mechanical properties
  - Good thermal conductivity
  - Affordable cost
  - Available in large quantities
- Other cladding materials in use include
  - Stainless steel
  - Silicon Carbide
  - Ferritic-Martensitic steels like Fe-Cr and Fe-Cr-Al
  - Oxide dispersion strengthened (ODS) ferritic steels

Molten Salt Reactors w/o cladding

- Some MSRs plan to utilize liquid molten salts as the fuel, flowing continuously through the core
- Secondary loop comprised of coolant salt, such as FLiBe
- Example was the MSRE from ORNL, which utilized LiF-BeF2-ZrF4-UF4 as the fuel
- Cladding is the flow piping

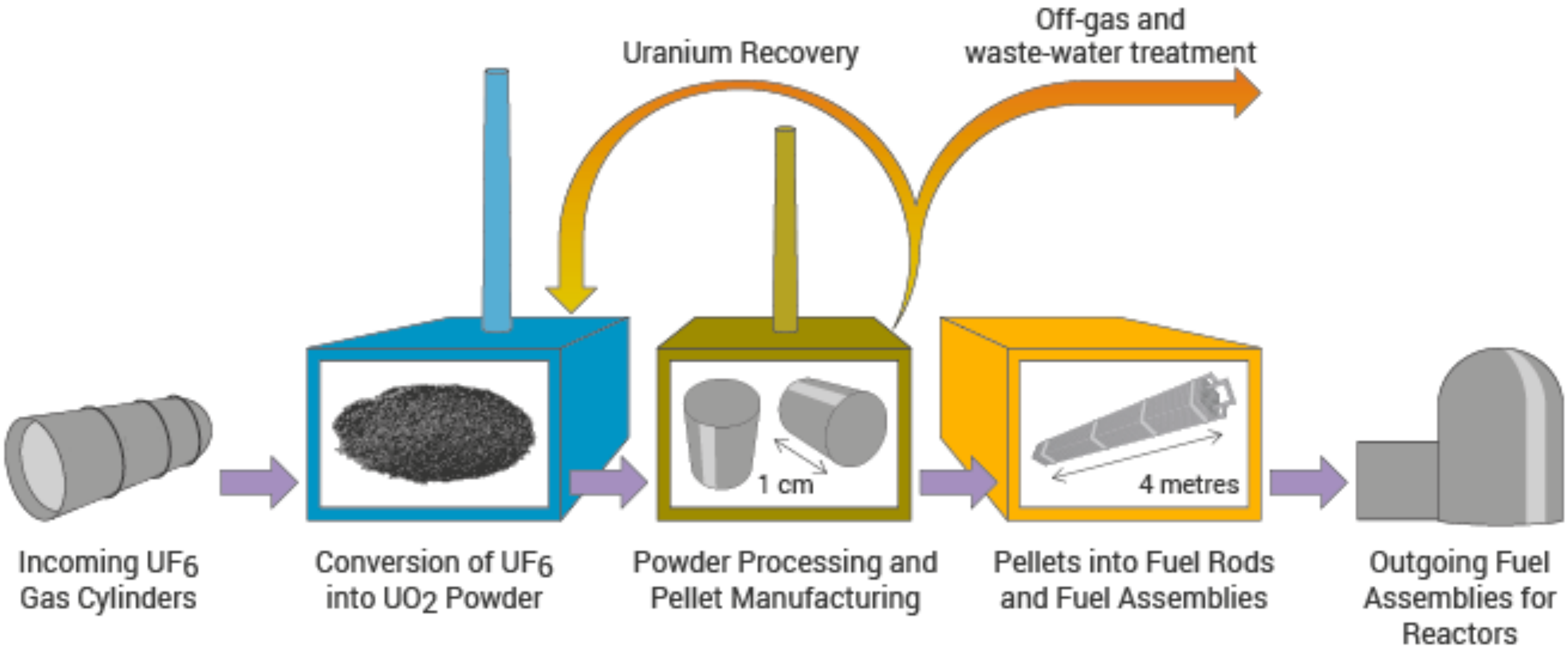


Reactor Systems Wrap-up

- All reactors have basic requirements they must meet
  - An approach to remove the heat from the fuel
  - A method to convert heat to electricity
  - An approach to prevent radioactive products from leaving the fuel
  - A method to cycle the fuel
  - Containment in case something goes very wrong
- LWRs have a certain way of meeting these requirements, but there are other options
- Typically, the “fuel system” is thought to consist of the fuel itself, the gap, the cladding, and the coolant

FUEL FABRICATION

Fabrication Process



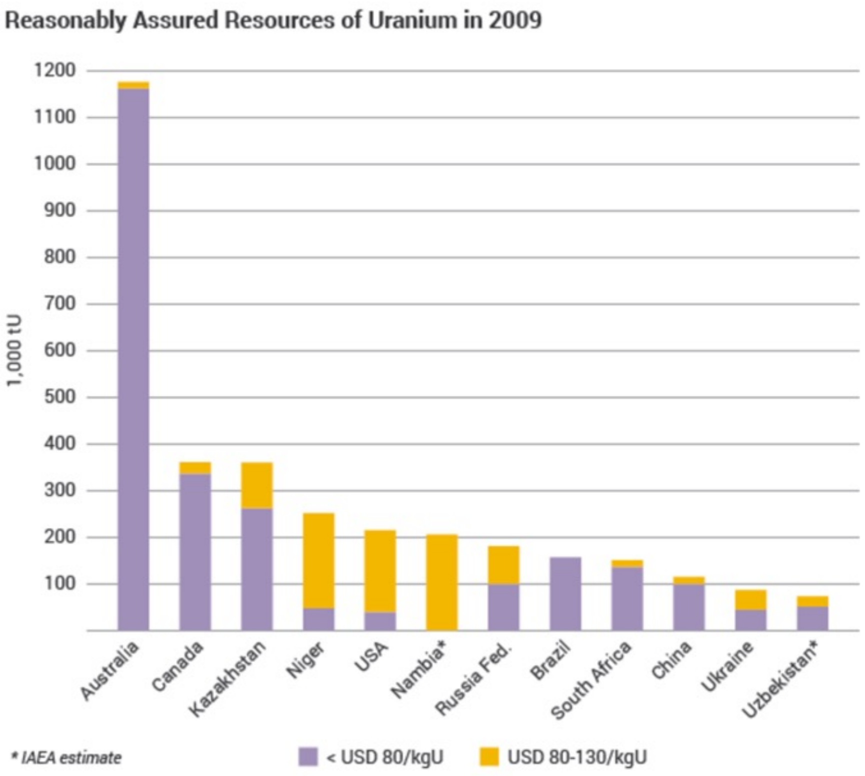
Uranium deposit types

- There are mainly three types of uranium deposits
  - Sedimentary
    - Often found in sandstone; common in Canada and western US
  - Igneous/hydrothermal
    - Vein-type uranium ores from geothermal activity; Greenland and Namibia
  - Breccial
    - found in rocks that have been broken due to tectonic fracturing, or weathering; common in India, Australia and the US
- Less common means of uranium mining include seawater recovery, where U concentrations is 3.3 micrograms per liter

Global Uranium Resources

Table 1: Typical natural uranium concentrations

Very high-grade ore (Canada) – 20% U	200,000 ppm U
High-grade ore – 2% U	20,000 ppm U
Low-grade ore – 0.1% U	1000 ppm U
Very low-grade ore* (Namibia) – 0.01% U	100 ppm U
Granite	3-5 ppm U
Sedimentary rock	2-3 ppm U
Earth's continental crust (av)	2.8 ppm U
Seawater	0.003 ppm U



Known Recoverable Resources of Uranium 2015

	tonnes U	percentage of world
Australia	1,664,100	29%
Kazakhstan	745,300	13%
Canada	509,000	9%
Russian Fed	507,800	9%
South Africa	322,400	6%
Niger	291,500	5%
Brazil	276,800	5%
China	272,500	5%
Namibia	267,000	5%
Mongolia	141,500	2%
Uzbekistan	130,100	2%
Ukraine	115,800	2%
Botswana	73,500	1%
USA	62,900	1%
Tanzania	58,100	1%
Jordan	47,700	1%
Other	232,400	4%
World total	5,718,400	

Uranium mining/processing

- Uranium ores are normally processed by grinding the ore materials to a uniform particle size and then treating the ore to extract the uranium by chemical leaching
- The milling process commonly yields dry powder-form material consisting of “yellowcake”, which is U_3O_8

Conversion

- Uranium enrichment requires uranium as uranium hexafluoride, which is obtained from converting uranium oxide to UF_6
- Uranium oxide can be reduced by hydrogen to produce UO2
  - $U_3O_8 + 2H_2 ===> 3UO_2 + 2H_2O$
- The oxide is then reacted with hydrogen fluoride to form uranium tetrafluoride (UF4)
  - $UO_2 + 4HF ===> UF_4 + 2H_2O$
- The tetrafluoride is then fed into a fluidized bed reactor with gaseous fluorine to produce uranium hexafluoride, UF6
  - $UF_4 + F_2 ===> UF_6$

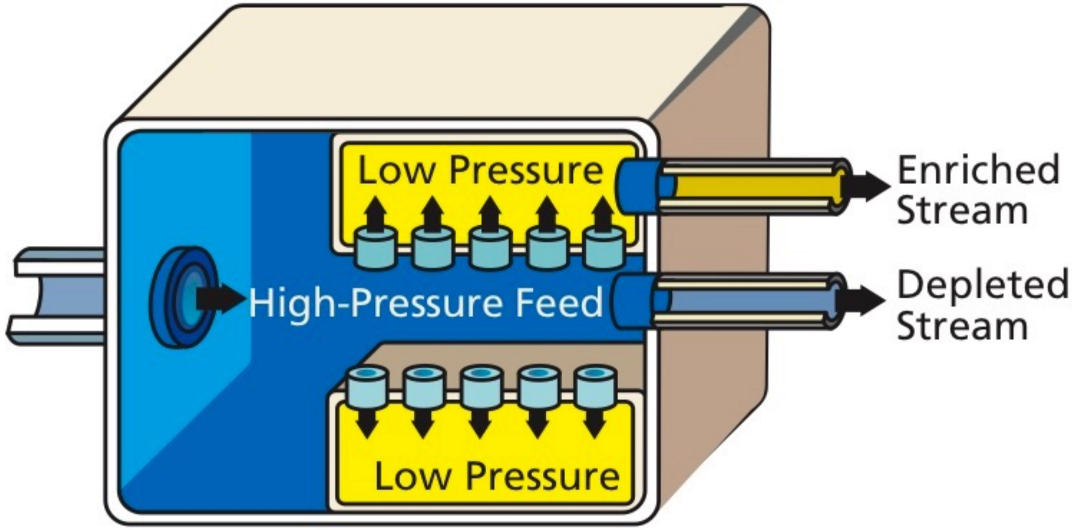
Enrichment

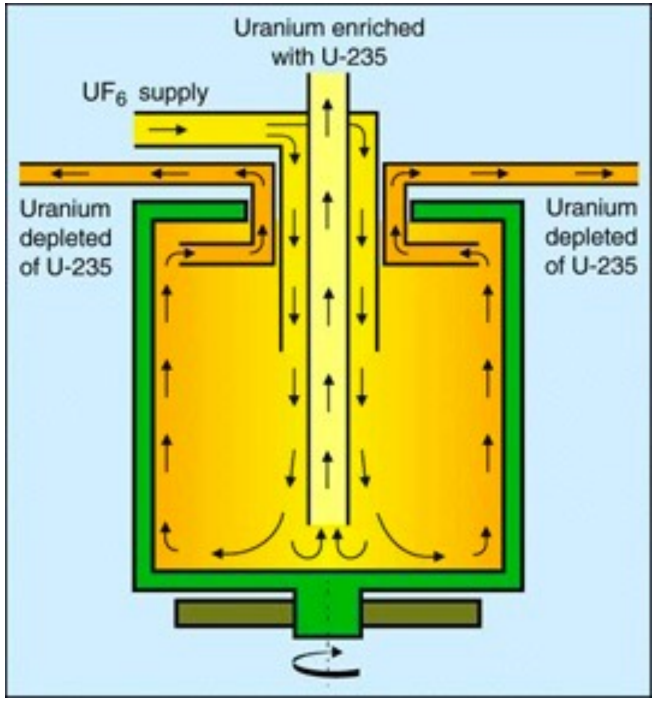
- Natural uranium only contains 0.7% U-235, and therefore must be enriched to obtain suitable fissile material for fuel (for most reactors)
- The difference in mass between U-235 and U-238 allows the isotopes to be separated and makes it possible to enrich the percentage of U-235
- The capacity of enrichment plants is measured in terms of 'separative work units' or SWU
- Two main enrichment processes
  - Gaseous diffusion: 2500 kWh per SWU
  - Centrifuge: 50 kWh per SWU

Enrichment

– Gaseous diffusion
  - Pushes UF6 through porous membrane
  - U235-F6 travels slightly faster
  - First Gen. technology, historical, but now outdated

– Centrifuge
  - gas is placed in a gas centrifuge cylinder and rotated at a high speed
  - strong centrifugal force, heavier gas molecules move towards the outside of the cylinder





SWUs

- The work W_{SWU} necessary to separate a mass F of feed of assay x_f into a mass P of product assay xp and tails of mass T and assay x_t is given by:

$$W_{\mathrm{SWU}} = P \cdot V\left(x_p\right) + T \cdot V(x_t) - F \cdot V(x_f)$$

- V is the value function:

$$V(x) = (2x - 1)\ln\left(\frac{x}{1-x}\right)$$

- The feed to product ratio is given by the expression

$$\frac{F}{P} = \frac{x_p - x_t}{x_f - x_t}$$

- The tails to product ratio is given by the expression

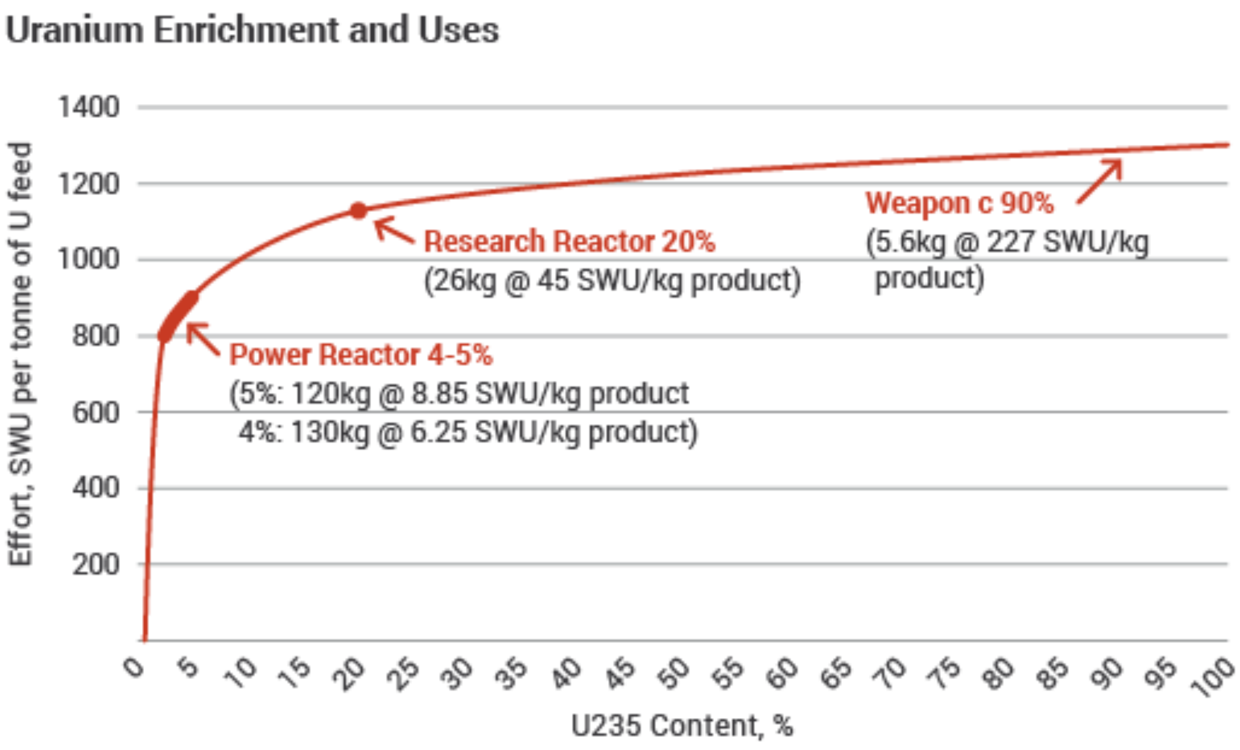
$$\frac{T}{P} = \frac{x_p - x_f}{x_f - x_t}$$

- The same amount of separative work will require different amounts of energy depending on the efficiency of the separation technology

Example

High Enriched Uranium

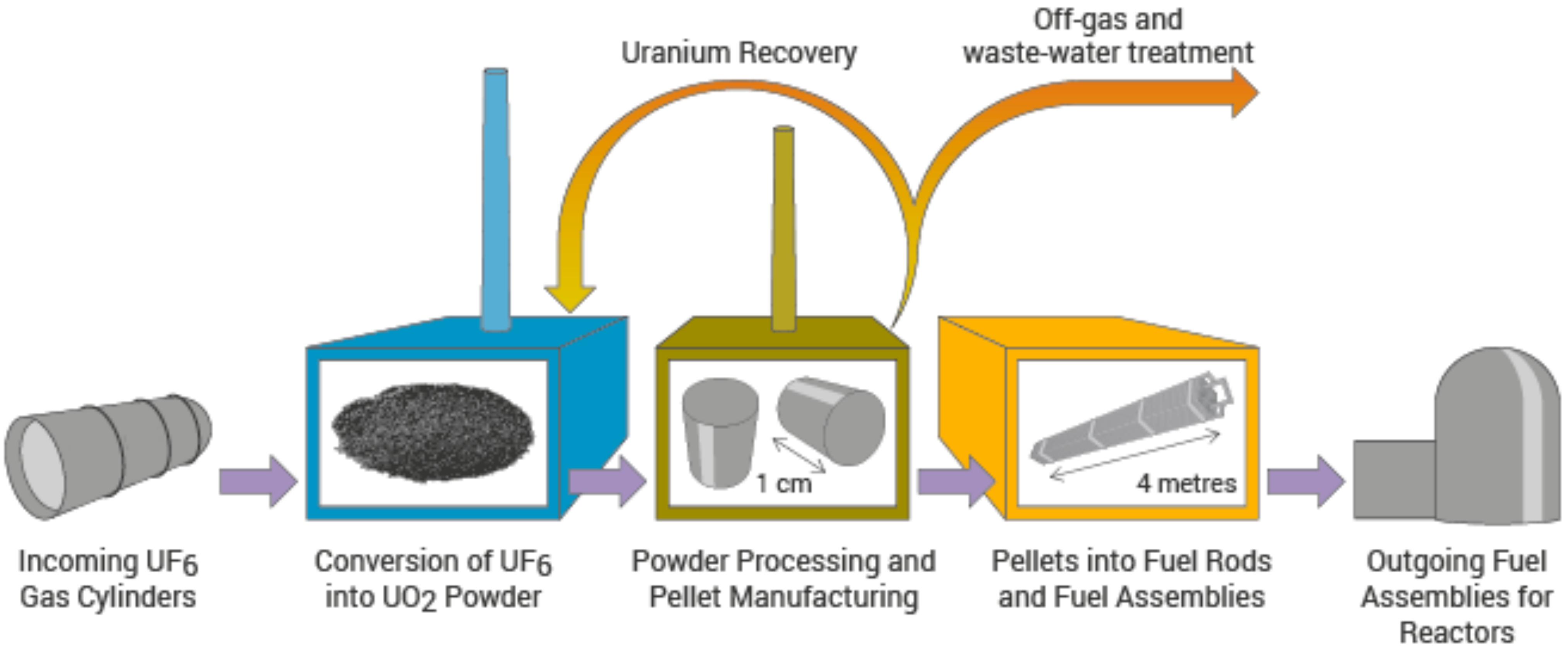
- One ton of natural uranium feedstock might end up: as 120-130 kg of uranium for power reactor fuel, as 26 kg of typical research reactor fuel, or conceivably as 5.6 kg of weapons-grade material
- The curve flattens out so much because the mass of material being enriched progressively diminishes, so requires less effort relative to what has already been applied to progress a lot further in percentage enrichment



Enrichment

- Enrichment accounts for almost half of the cost of nuclear fuel and about 5% of the total cost of the electricity generated
- It is also the main greenhouse gas impact from the nuclear fuel cycle where the electricity used for enrichment is typically generated from coal or natural gas
- However, it still only amounts to 0.1% of the carbon dioxide from equivalent coal-fired electricity generation if modern gas centrifuge plants are used

Fabrication Process



Powder Processing

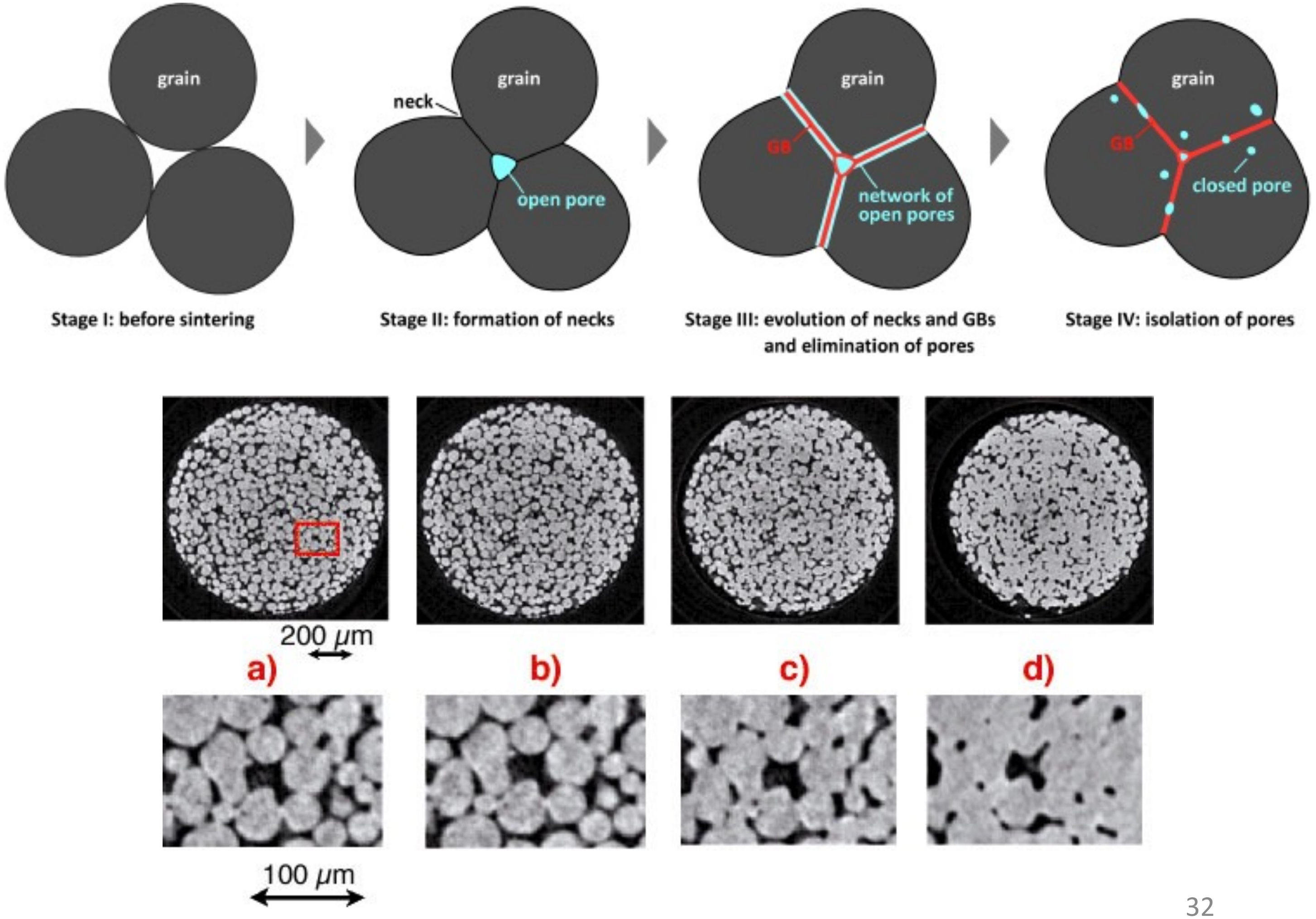
- Uranium typically arrives at a fuel manufacturing plant as uranium hexafluoride (UF_6) and needs to be converted to uranium dioxide (UO_2) prior to pellet fabrication
- An example conversion process injects UF_6 into water to form a UO_2F_2 particulate slurry, ammonia (NH3) is added to this mixture and the UO_2F_2 reacts to produce ammonium diuranate (ADU, $(NH_3)2U_2O_7$), after which the slurry is filtered, dried and heated in a reducing atmosphere to pure UO_2
  - A reducing atmosphere is one in which oxidation is prevented by removal of oxygen and other oxidizing gases, and which may contain actively reducing gases such as hydrogen

Powder/Pellet Processing

- The UO_2 powder may need further processing or conditioning before it can be formed into pellets:
  - Homogenization: powders may need to be blended to ensure uniformity in terms of particle size distribution and specific surface area
  - Additives: U_3O_8 may be added to ensure satisfactory microstructure and density for the pellets and other fuel ingredients, such as lubricants, burnable absorbers (e.g., gadolinium) and pore-formers may also need to be added
- UO_2 powder is fed into dies and pressed biaxially into cylindrical pellet form using a load of several hundred MPa
- Pellets are then sintered in a heating furnace
  - Sintering is the process of compacting and forming a solid mass of material by heat or pressure

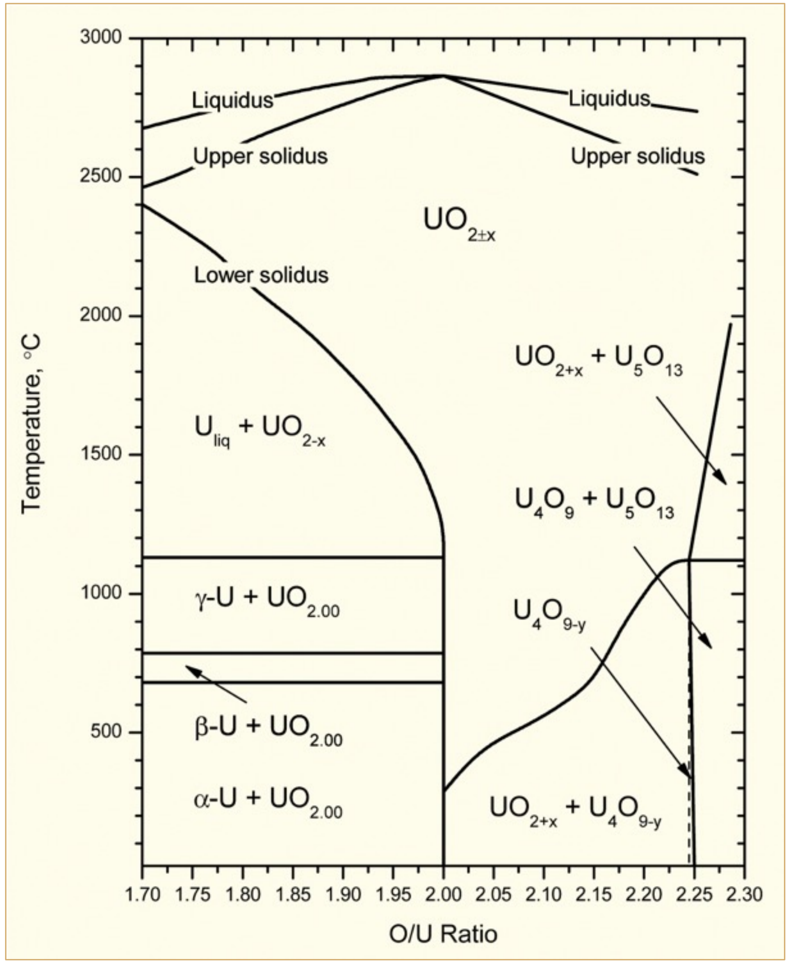
Sintering Process

- During sintering, atoms in the materials diffuse across the boundaries of the particles, fusing the particles together and creating one solid piece
- The final fuel pellets are nearly fully dense with a uniform microstructure: grain size ~ 10 μm; pore size ~ 3 μm; density ~ 95 - 99%
- A single pellet in a typical reactor yields about the same amount of energy as one ton of coal



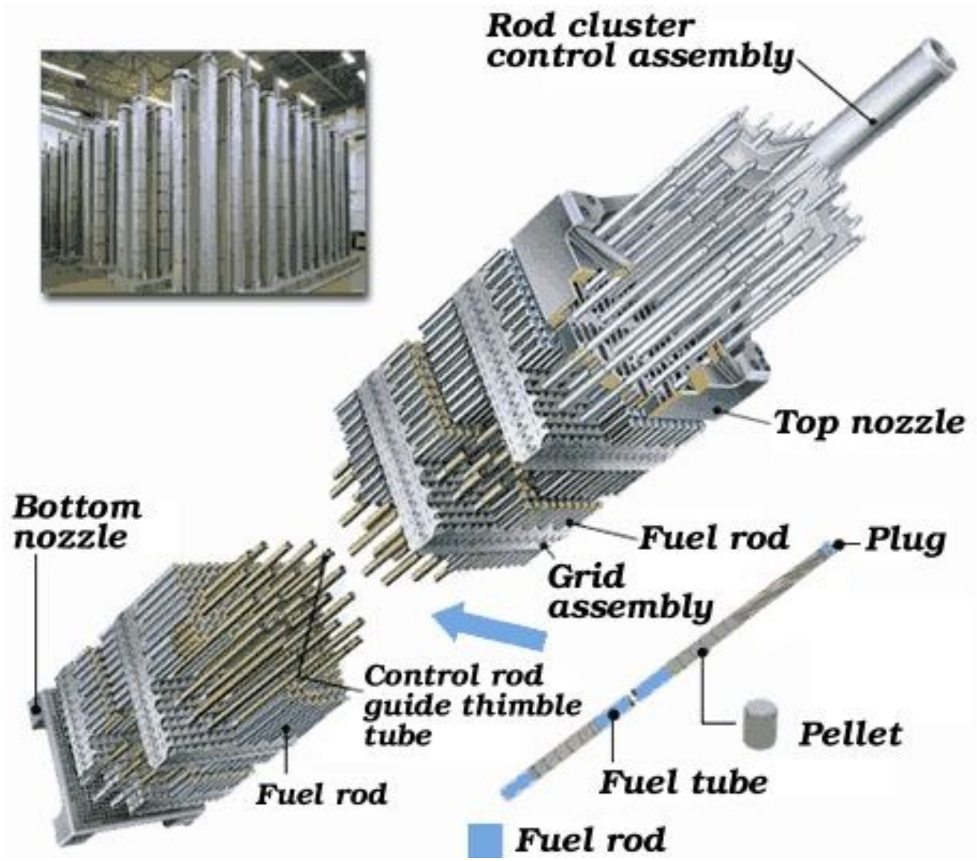
Fuel strictly manufactured to be UO_2

- Fuel fabricated to be nearly stoichiometric; i.e., $UO_{2.00\pm}$
  - Structure stable to T_{melt}
  - Maximum T_{melt}
- O/M ratio varies slightly during irradiation
- Large deviations from stoichiometry relevant to
  - Fabrication
  - Defected fuel behavior
  - Reprocessing
  - Accident conditions during dry storage or shipment of used nuclear fuel



Rods and Assemblies

- The fuel pellets are assembled in fuel rods and then put together in fuel assemblies
- Designs dictate that the pellet-filled rods have a precise physical arrangement in terms of their lattice pitch (spacing), and their relation to other features such as water (moderator) channels and control-rod channels
- Physical structures for holding the fuel rods are therefore engineered with extremely tight tolerances and are largely constructed of steel and zirconium alloys



Global Fuel Fabrication

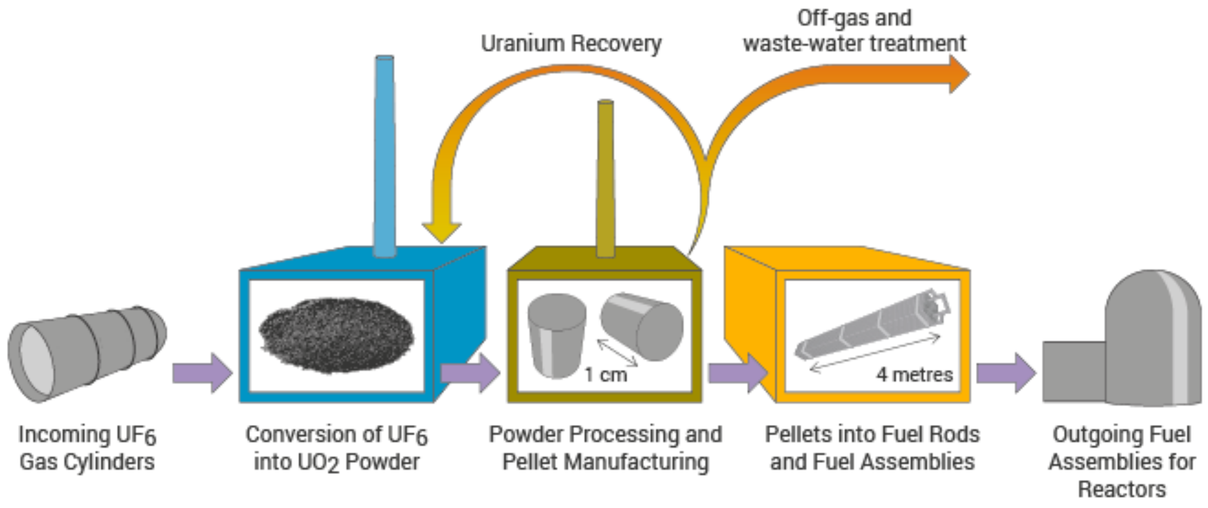
- Uranium is mined and converted into fuel in a number of countries
- USA, Russia, Kazakhstan and France are leaders
- There is a growing need for HALEU
  - High assay low enriched uranium
  - Uranium with 19.7% enrichment

Table 1: World LWR fuel fabrication capacity, tonnes/yr

	Fabricator	Location	Conversion	Pelletizing	Rod/assembly
Brazil	INB	Resende	160	160	240
China	CNNC	Yibin	400	400	450
		Baotou	200	200	200
France	AREVA NP-FBFC	Romans	1800	1400	1400
Germany	AREVA NP-ANF	Lingen	800	650	650
India	DAE Nuclear Fuel Complex	Hyderabad	48	48	48
Japan	NFI (PWR)	Kumatori	0	360	284
	NFI (BWR)	Tokai-Mura	0	250	250
	Mitsubishi Nuclear Fuel	Tokai-Mura	450	440	440
	Global NF-J	Kurihama	0	750	750
Kazakhstan	Ulba	Ust Kamenogorsk	2000	2000	0
Korea	KNFC	Daejeon	700	700	700
Russia	TVEL-MSZ*	Elektrostal	1500	1500	1560
	TVEL-NCCP	Novosibirsk	450	1200	1200
Spain	ENUSA	Juzbado	0	500	500
Sweden	Westinghouse AB	Västeras	600	600	600
UK	Westinghouse**	Springfields	950	600	860
USA	AREVA Inc	Richland	1200	1200	1200
	Global NF-A	Wilmington	1200	1000	1000
	Westinghouse	Columbia	1500	1500	1500
Total			13958	15418	13832

Fuel Fabrication Summary

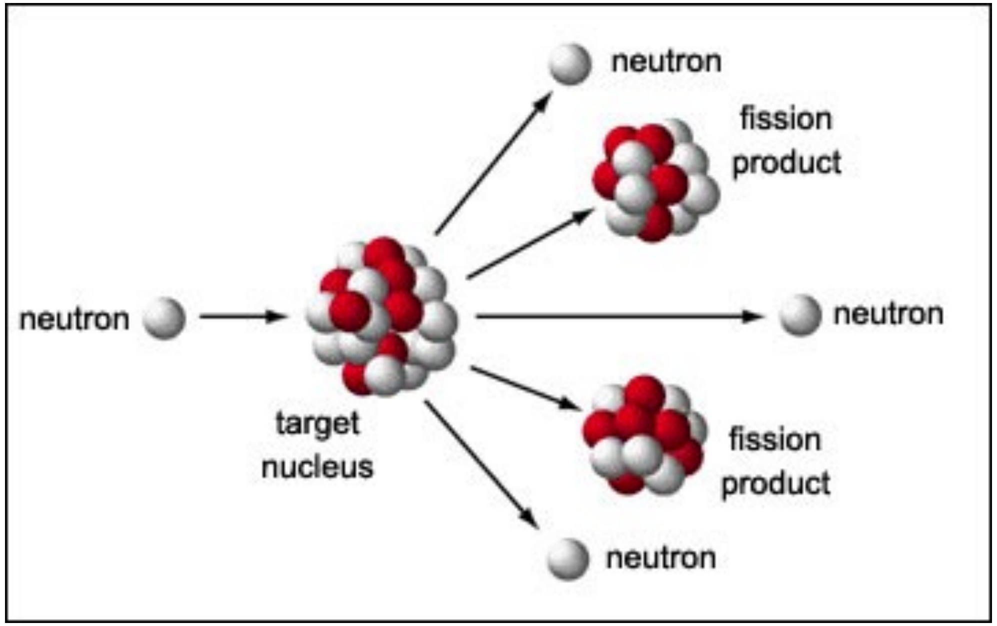
- Mining -> Processing -> Conversion -> Enrichment -> Powder -> Compaction/Sintering -> Rod/Assembly
- U_3O_8 must be converted to UF_6 for enrichment, which is then converted to UO_2 powder for pellet manufacture
- For different fuel types, enriched UF_6 follows a different path



HEAT GENERATION

Fission basics

- Impinging neutron of a given energy
  - Neutron energy determines cross section which determines probability of fission event
- Neutron + Target Nucleus -> Two fission products, 2-3 neutrons
- Fission releases around 210 MeV of energy
  - 170 MeV to fission fragments
  - 2 MeV per neutron
  - 7 MeV gamma rays
  - Balance radioactive decay



Energy release with different nuclei

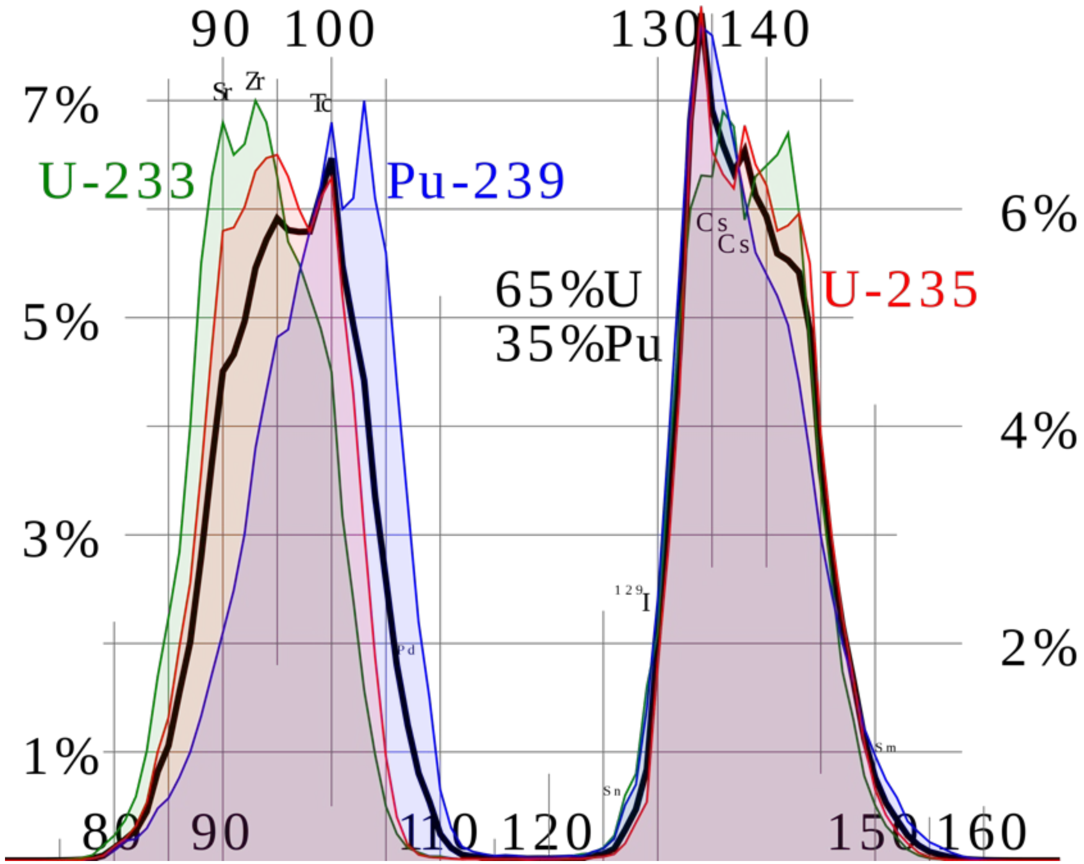
- Energy release is effectively agnostic with regards to the fissioning species
- Comparing U-235 with Pu-239 on the right
  - Pu releases about 9 MeV more usable energy per fission
  - Less than a 5% difference
- Partition of energy is largely identical as well

Source	Energy, MeV/f	
	^{235}U	^{239}Pu
Energy released instantaneously		
Kinetic energy of fission fragments	169.1	175.8
Kinetic energy of prompt neutrons	4.8	5.9
Energy of prompt γ-rays	7	7.8
Energy of γ-rays from nγ capture	8.8	11.5
Energy from decay of fission products		
Energy of β^--particles	6.5	5.3
Energy of delayed γ-rays	6.3	5.2
Energy of anti-neutrinos[1]	8.8	7.1
Total available energy	202.5	211.5

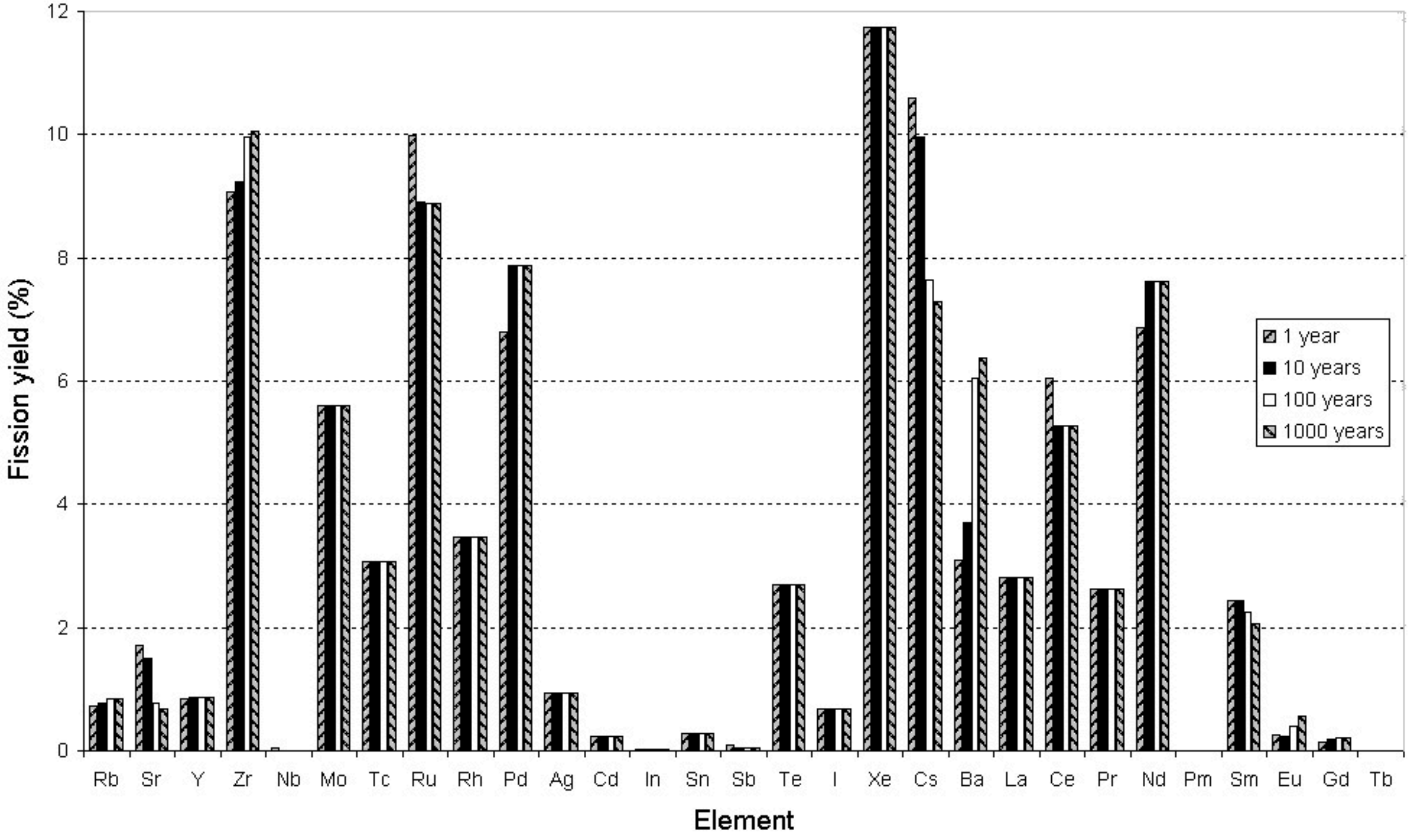
Note 1: Anti-neutrino energy is not absorbed in the reactor and does not contribute to the total available yield.

Fission product yield

- Regardless of fissioning isotope, fission product yields are effectively the same, in this double hump distribution
- One broad peak centered around A=95, the other around A=135
- Examples:
  - Mo (Z=42, A=96)
  - Cs (Z=55, A=133)



Fission Product Yields



Calculating heat generation rate for a given fuel

- We know about 200 MeV of energy is available due to a fission (210 MeV minus neutrinos)
- We know the fission cross section of the target nuclide (tabulated)
- We can calculate the fission atom density
- The heat generation rate, Q is given by:
  - $Q = E_f \times N_f \times \sigma_f \times \phi$
  - Where E_f is the fission energy, N_f is the fission atom density, σ_f is the fission cross section, and ϕ is the neutron flux
  - Units: J/fission x atoms/cm^3 x (fission/neutron)*(cm^2/atom) x (neutron/cm^2-s) = J/cm^3-s = W/cm^3

Calculating heat generation rate for a given fuel

- Cross sections:
  - ENDF database: Nuclear Data Sheets 148 (2018) 1–142
  - Thermal neutron (E=0.025 eV) U235 fission cross section: ~586.8 barns
    - 1 barn = 10^{-24} cm^2
- Fission atom density
  - Atom density of U-235 = UO2 density x 1/molar mass x Avogadro's number x atom fraction x enrichment

Example

Some notes

- Fast neutron cross section ~100x less than thermal neutron cross section
- Fuels for fast neutron spectrum typically have high enrichments, 19.7% U-235
- Historical research reactor fuels, such as UMo and USi, have had an enrichment of 90+%
- Neutron flux will vary depending on the reactor
  - HFIR has a peak neutron flux of 3E15 n/cm^2/s
  - PULSTAR has a peak neutron flux of 1E13 n/cm^2/s
- Significant variability in heat generation depending on fuel type and reactor conditions