DEPARTMENT OF OCEANOGRAPHY
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Technical Reports
Nos. 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, and 220

A compilation of articles reporting research
Sponsored jointly by

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and

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U.S. Atomic Energy Commission
Contract AT(45-1)-1725
and
Office of Naval Research
Contracts Nonr-477(37)
and Nonr-477(10)
Project NR 083 012

Reference M68-32
April 1968

SEATTLE 5, WASHINGTON
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SONAR REFLECTION PROFILING ON THE COLUMBIA RIVER AND IN LAKE WASHINGTON,
by C. R. B. Lister, John T. Whetten, and Bates McKee. Northwest Science

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NORTHWESTERN UNITED STATES, by M. Grant Gross. Collected Preprints of
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Technical Report No. 217

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A DEVICE FOR RELEASING A PISTON CORER AND DEACTIVATING THE PISTON, by James

Technical Report No. 220

SINKING RATES OF RADIOACTIVE Fallout PARTICLES IN THE NORTH EAST PACIFIC
Sinking Rates of Radioactive Fallout Particles in the North East Pacific Ocean, 1961-62

The resumption of nuclear weapon testing in the atmosphere in September 1961 provided an opportunity to investigate the sinking rate of radioactive fallout particles in the North East Pacific Ocean. The stopping of weapon testing in the atmosphere between November 1958 and September 1, 1961, gave sufficient time for radionuclides with relatively short half-lives which were released by tests before 1958 to decay. Weapon testing began in the Soviet Union on September 1, 1961, and by November 4, 1961, at least fifty nuclear devices had been detonated in the atmosphere, including fifteen megaton or multimegaton devices. In the North East Pacific Ocean, the beginning of the 1961 test series coincided closely with the beginning of the winter storms and their heavy rainfall. This provided a mechanism for quickly depositing the fallout nuclides, rainfall being the principal mechanism for removing such particles from the atmosphere. Radioactive fallout material from these tests was detected in marine samples in mid-September 1961.

The gamma-ray activity was analysed in samples of sediment collected in July and August 1961 and in the summer of 1962. No activity caused by the presence of radionuclides from fallout was detected in thirty-nine samples collected in 1961 (general area sampled shown in Fig. 1), while twelve samples collected in June 1962 from this area contained detectable amounts of several radionuclides from fallout.

Special sediment samples were collected in August and September 1962 for analysis of their gamma-ray activity. These samples were collected by siphoning off the muddy water above the interface between water and sediment in open gravity cores. I assume that the sediment particles suspended in the water were resuspended during the coring and retrieval operations and that this sediment was the most recently deposited material.

The muddy water recovered was transferred to a plastic container in which it was dried under infrared lamps aboard ship without washing or further handling, to
Fig. 1. Locations of sediment samples in which fallout radionuclides were detected (●) and not detected (○) in 1962. Sediment samples collected in July and August 1961 (area shown by horizontal rules) near the continent had no detectable quantities of radionuclides from fall out.

minimize contamination. When the samples were dry the containers were sealed and wrapped in plastic which was changed just before analysing the gamma radiation. Depending on the amount of sediment recovered, the gamma radiation was analysed for 100–1,000 min using a 3 × 3 in. (7.6 × 7.6 cm) sodium iodide (thallium) crystal connected to a photomultiplier and a multichannel analyser. The gamma-ray spectra obtained were analysed using a computer programme which estimated the abundance of eight radionuclides (potassium-40, cobalt-60, zinc-65, zirconium-95–niobium-95, ruthenium-103–106, bismuth-214, chromium-51, cerium-141) and estimated the 95 per cent confidence interval based on counting stat-
istics. The sample was considered to have no significant activity if the calculated activity was equal to or less than the estimated 95 per cent confidence interval.

Of the various radionuclides from fallout detected, the pair zirconium-95–niobium-95 was selected as the best for this study because of its relative short half-life (65 days), its abundance in fallout and its known association with particles in sea water. The apparent absence of zirconium-95–niobium-95 in sediments collected in July and August 1961, just before the resumption of testing, and its presence in shallow water deposits nearly everywhere in 1962 provides convincing evidence that the radioactivity detected was caused not by fallout derived from earlier weapons tested nor by the misidentification of the gamma-ray spectra of radionuclides occurring naturally in these sediments, but by fallout particles deposited after September 1961.

In the locations nearest the continent, the radioactive particles could have been transported and deposited either by processes near the ocean floor, or by sinking through the overlying sea water or by both. Thus the data for sample locations near the continent provide little information about sinking rates of the radioactive particles.

The deepest localities are apparently shielded from the accumulation of sediment by transport along the bottom of the ocean by the irregular bottom topography associated with the oceanic rise and fracture zones (Fig. 1). Thus the presence and abundance of fallout radionuclides in the sediment from these areas provide information about the sinking rates of the radioactive particles.

If we assume that the first radioactive fallout arrived in the area immediately after the testing began (September 1, 1961), the radioactive particles must have settled about 13 m/day to have reached a depth of 4.4 km (Fig. 2) by the time the sample was collected on August 8, 1962. Even if we discard the data for the deepest station because of possible contamination (for which there is no evidence) we must still assume sinking rates of at least 9 m/day to account for the radioactivity from fallout detected in three samples from depths between 2.6 and 2.9 km (Fig. 2). In short, it seems that the radioactive particles sank at rates near 10 m/day to account for the presence of zirconium-95–niobium-95 (half-life 65 days) in the sediment at these depths.

It is also interesting to note that the observed decrease in activity of zirconium-95–niobium-95 (Fig. 2) with depth corresponds rather closely to the expected decrease resulting from a steady state injection of fallout with the particles sinking at a rate of 10 m/day. This apparent relationship may be entirely fortuitous because it would demand not only a quasi steady state input of fallout
particles, which seems scarcely likely, but also an absence of appreciable dilution of the recently deposited fallout particles by non-radioactive sediment during deposition and during the coring operations.

I have no data on the grain size, composition or density of these radioactive particles although fallout from other weapon tests has been studied. It is possible to calculate the probable grain size of the radioactive particles, having sinking rates of 10–13 m/day, by assuming that the particles are spherical, have a density of 2.5 g/cm² (typical of fused silicate glass), and obey Stokes law during gravitational settling through sea water (S = 35 p.p.t., T = 5°C). Such a calculation shows that a sinking rate of 10 m/day corresponds to grains 16µ in diameter, and 13 m/day corresponds to grains 18µ in diameter.

These calculated grain sizes are consistent with the known behaviour of fallout particles where grains less than about 20µ in diameter tend to be transported primarily by atmospheric motions. Such grains could easily have been transported long distances from the test sites in the USSR and widely dispersed in the surface layers of the North East Pacific Ocean.

No doubt smaller particles also fell into the ocean surface layers, but my data do not provide any information about possible size distribution in the fallout. Not only do the larger particles sink more rapidly but they also have greater activities than the smaller particles because
the activity of fallout particles is proportional to the volume of the particle. Thus the larger particles probably contributed the bulk of the radionuclides from fallout in these sediments when collected in 1962.

I thank A. H. Seymour, C. A. Barnes, D. A. McManus, D. E. Engstrom and the captain and crew of the R.V. Brown Bear for their assistance. This work was supported by the US Atomic Energy Commission and the US Office of Naval Research.

M. GRANT GROSS

Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC,
and
Department of Oceanography,
University of Washington, Seattle.

Received October 9, 1967.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

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Fish and Wildlife Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

1 Bureau of Commercial Fisheries
Biological Laboratory, Oceanography
2725 Montlake Boulevard, East
Seattle, Washington 98102

1 Dr. Gene A. Rusnak
U.S. Geological Survey
Marine Geology & Hydrology
345 Middlefiled Road
Menlo Park, California 94025

1 Head, Office of Oceanography & Limnology
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560

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2 Head, Department of Oceanography & Meteorology
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas 77843

1 Director
Scripps Institution of Oceanography
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, California 92038

1 Allen Hancock Foundation
University Park
Los Angeles, California 90007

1 Head, Department of Oceanography
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon 97331
1 Director, Arctic Research Laboratory
Pt. Barrow, Alaska  99723

1 Head, Department of Oceanography
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington  98105

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Buenos Aires, Argentina

1 Lieutenant Nestor C. L. Granelli
Head, Geophysics Branch
Montevideo 459, 4° "A"
Buenos Aires, Argentina

1 Oceanographische Forschungsantalt der Bundeswehr
Lornsenstrasse 7
Kiel, Federal Republic of Germany

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Karljohansvern, Horten, Norway

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Columbia University
Cambridge, England

1 Institute of Oceanography
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, B.C., Canada

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University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois  60637

1 Coastal Engineering Laboratory
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida  32601

1 Institute of Geophysics
University of Hawaii
Honolulu, Hawaii  96825

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Wildlife Building
Humboldt State College
Arcata, California  95521
1 Department of Geology & Geophysics
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

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Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

1 Department of Geology
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut 06520

1 Westinghouse Electric Corporation
1625 K Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20006

1 Great Lakes Studies
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201
Attn: Dr. C. H. Mortimer