

DETERMINATION OF TECHNETIUM-99 IN AQUEOUS SAMPLES BY ISOTOPE DILUTION INDUCTIVELY COUPLED PLASMA-MASS SPECTROMETRY

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Abstract

An isotope dilution/inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometric method (ID/ICP-MS) for measuring the concentration of Technetium-99 in aqueous samples was developed at the Savannah River Technology Center (SRTC). The procedure is faster than radiometric techniques, is less subject to interferences, and has equal or better detection limits. It is currently being used to measure the concentration of ^{99}Tc in samples of Savannah River water collected in the vicinity of the Savannah River Site.

In this method, one liter samples of water are spiked with ^{97}Tc . After equilibration, the technetium is extracted from the sample with a chromatographic resin. Interfering elements, molybdenum and ruthenium, are either not retained by the resin or are washed off with dilute nitric acid. The technetium is then eluted with more concentrated nitric acid, and the $^{97}\text{Tc}/^{99}\text{Tc}$ ratio in the eluant is measured with an ICP-MS. The ^{99}Tc concentration in the original sample is calculated from the $^{99}\text{Tc}/^{97}\text{Tc}$ ratio. The chemical recovery of the extraction procedure is greater than 90%. The detection limit of the instrument, taken as three times the background counts at $m/z = 99$, is 0.6 part per trillion (ppt). The detection limit of the procedure, taken as three times the standard deviation of several reagent blank analyses, is 0.33 pCi/L.

Introduction

Technetium-99 is produced by the fission of ^{235}U and ^{239}Pu . It is primarily released to the environment through nuclear fuel processing and nuclear weapons testing. Technetium-99 has a half life of 2.12×10^5 years. It is a beta emitter with an E_{max} of 0.292 MeV. In an oxidizing environment technetium exists as the pertechnetate ion, TcO_4^- .¹ This ion is very mobile in the ground and surface water. Technetium behaves as a nutrient analog and may be concentrated by plants² either through their roots or by absorbing technetium which had been deposited on their outer membranes. In humans and animals the pertechnetate ion localizes in the gastrointestinal tract and thyroid gland.³ Analyses of environmental samples are therefore routinely performed near nuclear facilities to monitor the concentration of ^{99}Tc in the environment.

Several methods have been used to analyze for ^{99}Tc in the environment. These methods include concentration of the technetium by an ion exchange^{4,5} organic extraction^{6,7} and/or selective precipitation.³ Technetium-99 activities are often determined with a liquid scintillation spectrometer or gas-flow beta proportional detector. Chemically, technetium is similar to rhenium, another group VIIB element, thus they are difficult to separate from each other. Ruthenium is also difficult to separate from technetium. Ruthenium-106, also a beta emitter, may be released with

technetium during nuclear fuel processing. Any radioactive rhenium or ruthenium not separated from technetium may bias results if samples are counted by liquid scintillation or beta proportional detection.

The technetium separation and concentration techniques mentioned above are not quantitative. Chemical recovery of technetium is difficult to determine because technetium has no stable isotope with which to perform gravimetric yield determinations. Technetium-99m (half life of six hours) has been used as a yield tracer.⁵ The ^{99m}Tc recovery is measured by gamma spectrometry followed by beta counting of the ⁹⁹Tc one week later. Other procedures call for the analysis of duplicate samples, one spiked with ⁹⁹Tc. The chemical yield is assumed to be the same for the spiked and the unspiked sample.

Anderson and Walker developed a procedure⁸ to measure ⁹⁹Tc by thermal-ionization mass spectrometry. Technetium-97 could then be used as a yield tracer and concentration determination by isotope dilution. Recently, Morita measured ⁹⁹Tc by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS).⁹ They performed a chemical separation of the technetium to remove the isobaric interference of ⁹⁹Ru. Chemical yield was determined by gamma spectrometry using ^{95m}Tc as a yield monitor. Crain and Gallimore measured ⁹⁹Tc by ICP-MS in unconcentrated samples¹⁰ with a reported detection limit of 6 ppt (part per trillion). However they were measuring the technetium in spiked solutions free of ruthenium.

At the Savannah River Technology Center (SRTC), part of the Savannah River Site (SRS) in Aiken South Carolina, USA, operated by the Westinghouse Savannah River Company for the U.S. Department of Energy, we have developed a procedure to measure ⁹⁹Tc by ICP-MS, employing a ⁹⁷Tc tracer for determination of concentration by isotope dilution. A chemical separation technique has been developed which concentrates technetium from one liter water samples. The developed technique also offers decontamination of technetium from ruthenium and molybdenum, which have isobaric interferences at mass 99 and 97, respectively. Using this new technique we have analyzed river water samples from near the SRS, as well as reagent blank and spike samples.

The detection limit of the developed procedure is less than 0.5 pCi/L. This is similar to procedures which use liquid scintillation or beta proportional counting to measure the ⁹⁹Tc concentration. However, with this mass spectrometric technique, isotope dilution can be used to correct for chemical recovery through the separation procedure. Also, any ruthenium not separated from the technetium may be identified using mass spectrometry so as not to bias the ⁹⁹Tc calculated result; rhenium will not interfere with the mass spectrometric measurement of ⁹⁹Tc. The chemical separation procedure takes approximately one day. Using the auto sampler on the ICP-MS, up to four samples per hour can be analyzed which is much faster than counting techniques.

Procedure Development

Reagents Used

The ⁹⁷Tc tracer used for sample analyses was prepared at the SRS by neutron activation of cauldron enriched ⁹⁶Ru obtained from Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Approximately 400 ng of ⁹⁷Tc were produced from the ruthenium. After a cool down period the ⁹⁷Tc was separated from the ruthenium. The ⁹⁷Tc concentration of the final solution was calibrated by thermal ionization mass spectrometry and ICP-MS against a dilution of a National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) ⁹⁹Tc standard reference material. All reagents used in the ⁹⁷Tc separation were ACS reagent grade. De ionized water, when used in this paper, was purified through a Millipore RO unit, providing ASTM type I water. The ⁹⁹Tc from NIST was diluted to a working concentration with 0.15M NH₄OH, reagent grade NH₄OH in deionized water.

The TEVA-Spec chromatographic resin is commercially supplied by EIChroM Industries, Inc., Darien, IL, with a particle size of 80-160 microns. Columns used to hold the chromatographic resin were Bio-Rad Poly-Prep Chromatography Columns, Richmond, CA. The nitric acid used in the technetium separation procedure was purchased from Seastar Chemicals (Seattle, WA). The Seastar acid was found to have the lowest molybdenum concentration of the commercial acid suppliers.

Equipment Used

ICP-MS measurements were made with a Turner Scientific TS Sola (Manchester England), equipped with both a Faraday detector and an electron multiplier. Due to the unique design features of this instrument detection limits for many elements are in the low to sub ppt range. A Meinhard Type C nebulizer (Precision Glassblowing, Englewood, CO) is used for sample introduction into a Scotts water-cooled spray chamber.

The ICP-MS is housed in a facility operating under class 1000 specifications. A class 100 work area is available for preparing standard dilutions. Argon gas, which has less than 0.001% oxidizable impurities, is supplied to the ICP-MS for use as the plasma gas.

Technetium-99 was used as a spike during procedure development. Mass scans were performed using the electron multiplier detector with a 32 msec dwell time, 16 channels per amu and 16 passes per scan. The instrument sensitivities for technetium, ruthenium and molybdenum were calculated daily. The "direct concentration match" option of the TS Sola software was used to calculate the test samples' concentrations. Test results were averaged over four successive scans. For sample analyses a 16 msec dwell time is used, 16 channels per amu, and 10 passes per scan. The isotope ratio of $^{99}\text{Tc}/^{97}\text{Tc}$ is determined in 10 successive scans. The TS Sola software allows the use of custom elemental equations. A ^{97}Mo correction is made on the ^{97}Tc based on the ^{95}Mo peak. A correction for ^{99}Ru is made on the ^{99}Tc peak based on the ^{102}Ru peak.

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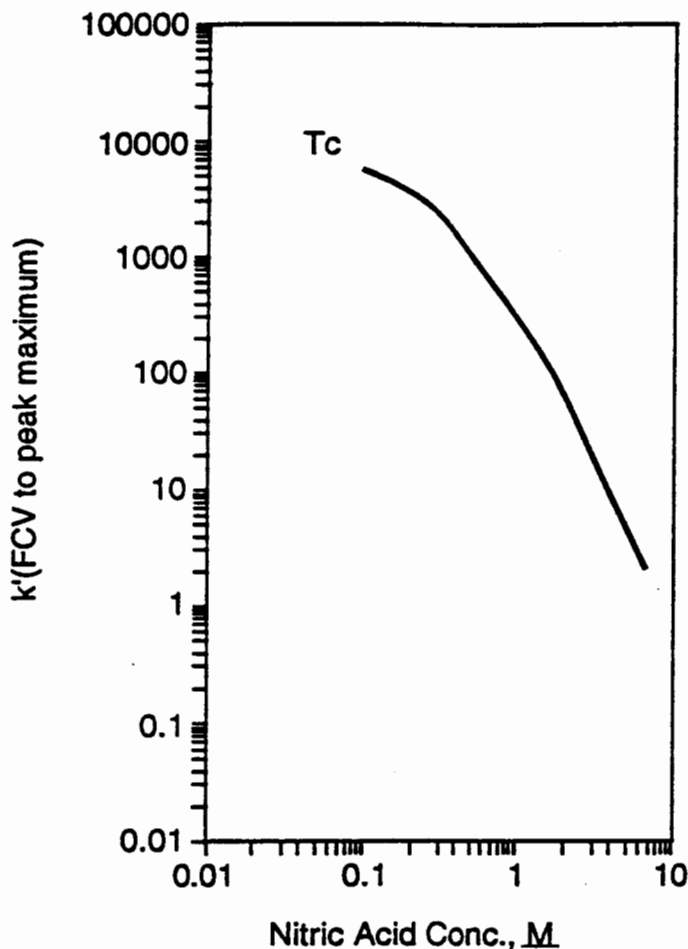


Figure 1. Acid Dependency of Tc Retention TEVA-Spec Resin

Separation Procedure

A chromatographic extraction resin is used to separate technetium from ruthenium and molybdenum. As seen in Figure 1 TEVA-Spec chromatographic extraction resin has a very high distribution coefficient for retention of technetium at low acid concentrations. Sullivan used this property to concentrate technetium from borehole waters.¹¹ In our initial tests de ionized water was spiked with 25 pCi of ⁹⁹Tc. The laboratory in which this work was performed is not permitted to use higher level radioactive spikes. Following Sullivan, et al. (1991), hydrogen peroxide was added to the sample to ensure the technetium existed as the pertechnetate ion. The samples were then boiled for one hour to decompose the hydrogen peroxide. Samples of up to several hundred milliliters were passed through a column containing two milliliters of the TEVA-Spec resin. The flow rate through the column is extremely slow, thus for 1L or greater samples a batch extraction technique is used. A two milliliter equivalent amount of TEVA-Spec resin is added to the sample and the solution is stirred overnight. More than 95% of the technetium was absorbed onto the resin as confirmed by analyzing the waste solution on the ICP-MS for remaining ⁹⁹Tc.

Sullivan rinsed the TEVA-Spec resin¹¹ with 1M HNO₃ prior to counting the resin for ⁹⁹Tc. The EIChroM Industries product literature states that molybdenum will be eluted off the resin with 2M HNO₃. After the sample had passed through the resin, the column was washed with 50 mL of 1M HNO₃. If the sample was batch extracted with the resin, the resin was allowed to settle and the supernate decanted. The remaining solution and resin were then transferred to a column for the 1M HNO₃ rinse and elution. Less than 5% of the technetium was eluted with 50 mL of 1M HNO₃.

To elute the technetium from the resin various concentrations of nitric acid were tested. More than 60% of the technetium was eluted using 20 mL of 4M HNO₃, more than 90% of the technetium was eluted using either 20 mL of 6 or 8M HNO₃. By increasing the 4M HNO₃ volume to 30 mL more than 90% of the technetium was eluted from the resin (Table 1).

Table 1

Elution of Tc from TEVA-Spec Resin

Acid Concentration	Volume (mL)	% Tc removed (average)
4M HNO ₃	20	74
6M HNO ₃	20	91
8M HNO ₃	20	93
4M HNO ₃	30	91

Decontamination Studies

Due to the isobaric interferences of ⁹⁷Mo with the ⁹⁷Tc tracer and ⁹⁹Ru with the ⁹⁹Tc to be measured the decontamination factors for these elements for the previously described procedure were determined. Molybdenum and ruthenium were added to de ionized water to make the final concentration 10 ppb of each element. The initial solution contained 1.4 ppt of ⁹⁹Tc (24 pCi/L). The instrument is sensitive enough to measure ⁹⁹Tc at 1.4 ppt, but the signal would be masked by the ⁹⁹Ru peak. The samples were then passed through the TEVA-Spec column, washed with 50 mL of 1M HNO₃, and finally eluted with 30 mL of 4M HNO₃. All fractions were analyzed by ICP-MS.

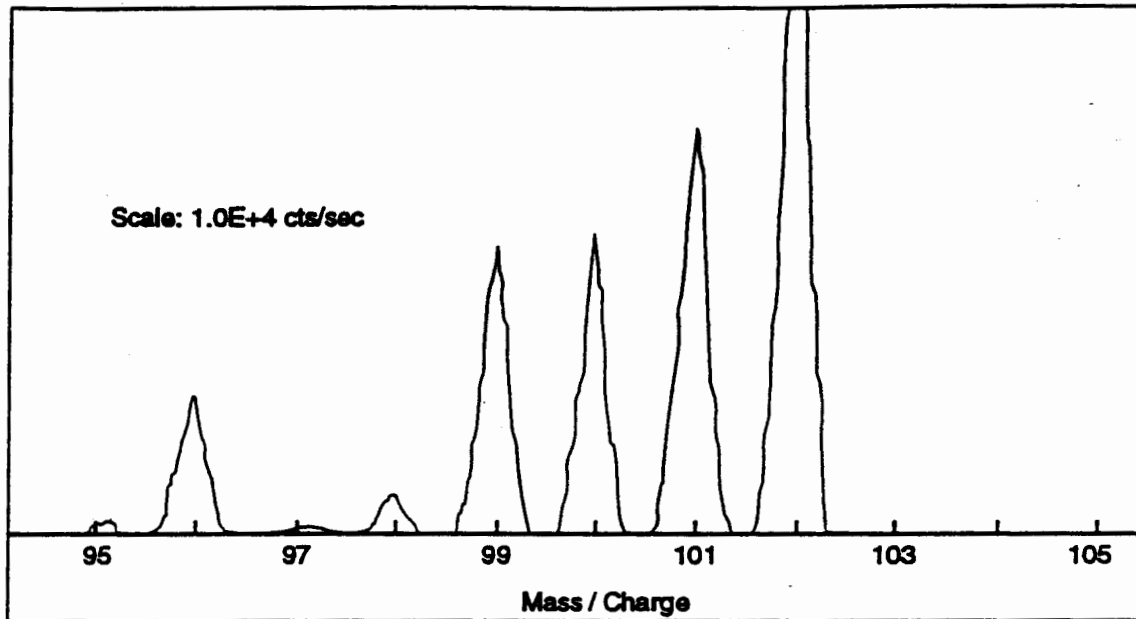


Figure 2. Column Waste

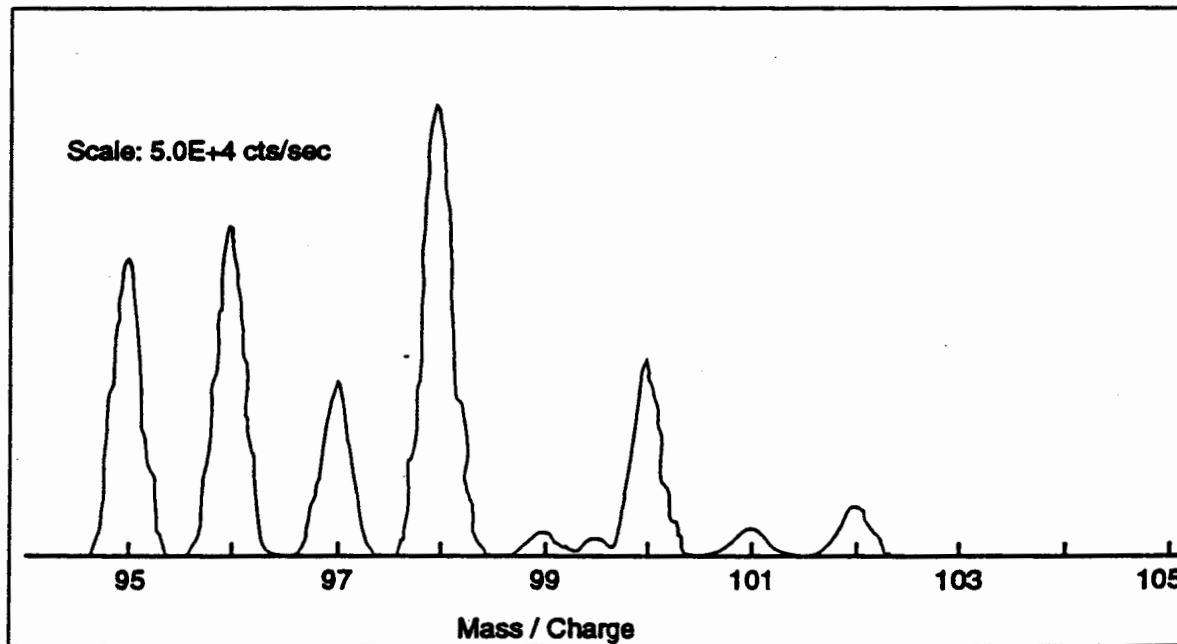


Figure 3. 1M HNO₃ Wash

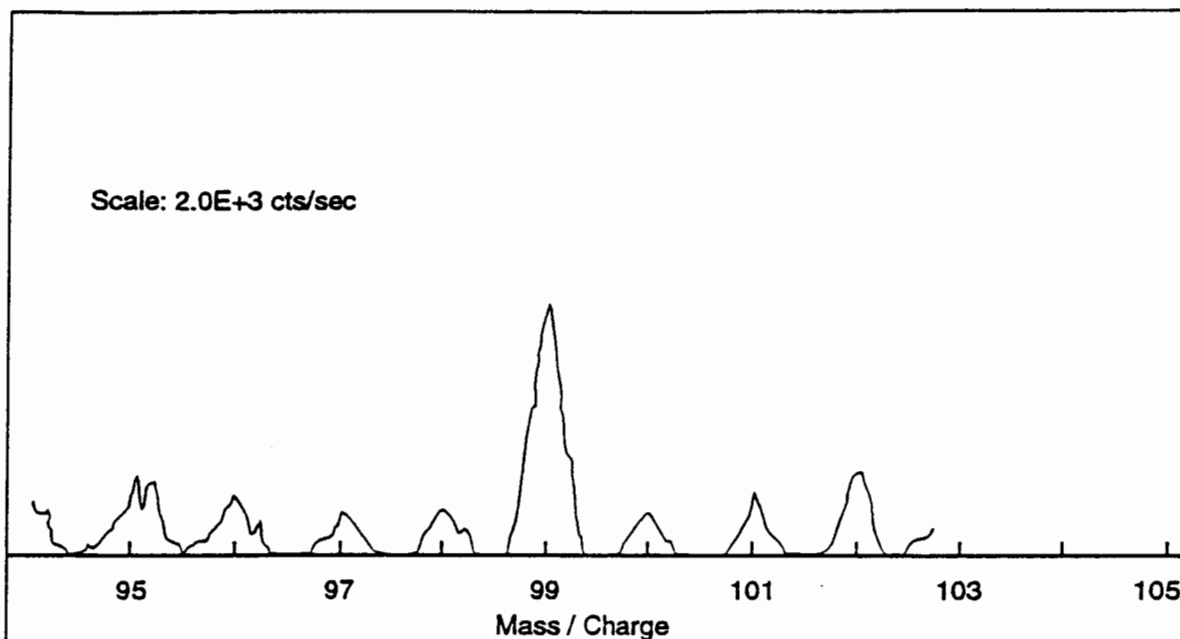


Figure. 4 4M HNO₃ Elution

An ICP-MS mass spectrum from each fraction is shown in Figures 2-4. As seen in Figure 2 ruthenium was not retained by the TEVA-Spec resin. The major peaks of ruthenium are present in the correct ratios in the column waste solution (the 18.7% peak at mass 104 was not measured). Upon washing the column molybdenum was eluted from the resin but not technetium as shown in Figure 3. The ⁹²Mo and ⁹⁴Mo peaks were not measured but all other molybdenum peaks are present in the correct ratios in the 1M HNO₃ wash solution. A small amount of ruthenium was also present in the wash solution. Figure 4 shows the recovered ⁹⁹Tc spike peak in the final 4M HNO₃ elution solution. More than 99% of the starting molybdenum was separated from the final technetium elution, more than 99.6% of the initial ruthenium was separated.

In an attempt to improve the decontamination factors for ruthenium and molybdenum from technetium some variations on the above separation scheme were performed. 1M HCl was substituted for the 1M HNO₃ column wash. The ruthenium decontamination was unchanged however only 10% of the molybdenum was washed from the column with the dilute HCl. The remaining molybdenum eluted off the column with the technetium in the 4M HNO₃ solution. The chemical recovery of the technetium was decreased by increasing the 1M HNO₃ to 100 mL or using 50 mL of 2M HNO₃ as a wash solution. The decrease in yield was not offset by a significant increase in molybdenum decontamination.

The procedure was chosen that resulted in high chemical recoveries of technetium and acceptable decontamination from ruthenium and molybdenum, as described below. The sample is passed through a column containing two milliliters of TEVA-Spec resin, washed with 50 mL of 1M HNO₃, eluted with 30 mL of 4M HNO₃. Depending on the starting solution a small amount of ruthenium and molybdenum may remain in the final solution to be analyzed by ICP-MS, as seen in Figure 4. The molybdenum and ruthenium concentration, as well as isotopic ratios, of a sample can be determined prior to sample analysis. Then the appropriate amount of ⁹⁷Tc tracer to be added to the sample can be calculated such that the final molybdenum contribution at m/z = 97 can be kept to less than 10% of the ⁹⁷Tc contribution. If a large amount of ruthenium is present in

the starting solution an additional ruthenium decontamination by organic extraction is needed to achieve the desired detection limit. In stream samples collected near the SRS the initial ruthenium and molybdenum concentrations are less than 1 ppb and so additional ruthenium decontamination was not required.

Results

The instrument response factor (RF) for technetium was determined by measuring the counts per second at $m/z = 99$ of a solution of known ^{99}Tc concentration.

$$\text{RF} = (\text{counts/second})(\text{mass})/(\text{concentration in ppm})$$

Under our operating conditions of the TS Sola the response factor for ^{99}Tc on the electron multiplier detector averages 1.2×10^9 . The instrument detection limit, defined as three times the background counts/second at $m/z = 99$, was calculated to be 0.6 ppt. A typical scan of deionized water in the technetium mass region is shown in Figure 5. The peak at mass $m/z = 96$ is most likely Ar_2O^+ . The peak at $m/z = 104$ is suspected to be SrO^+ .

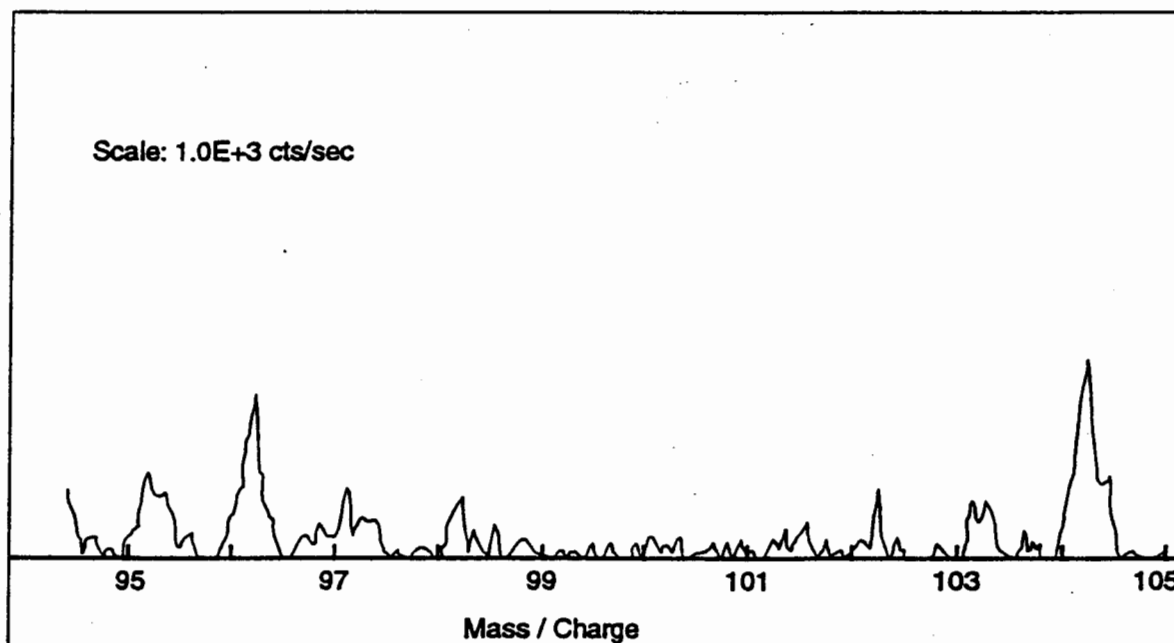


Figure 5. Deionized Water Blank

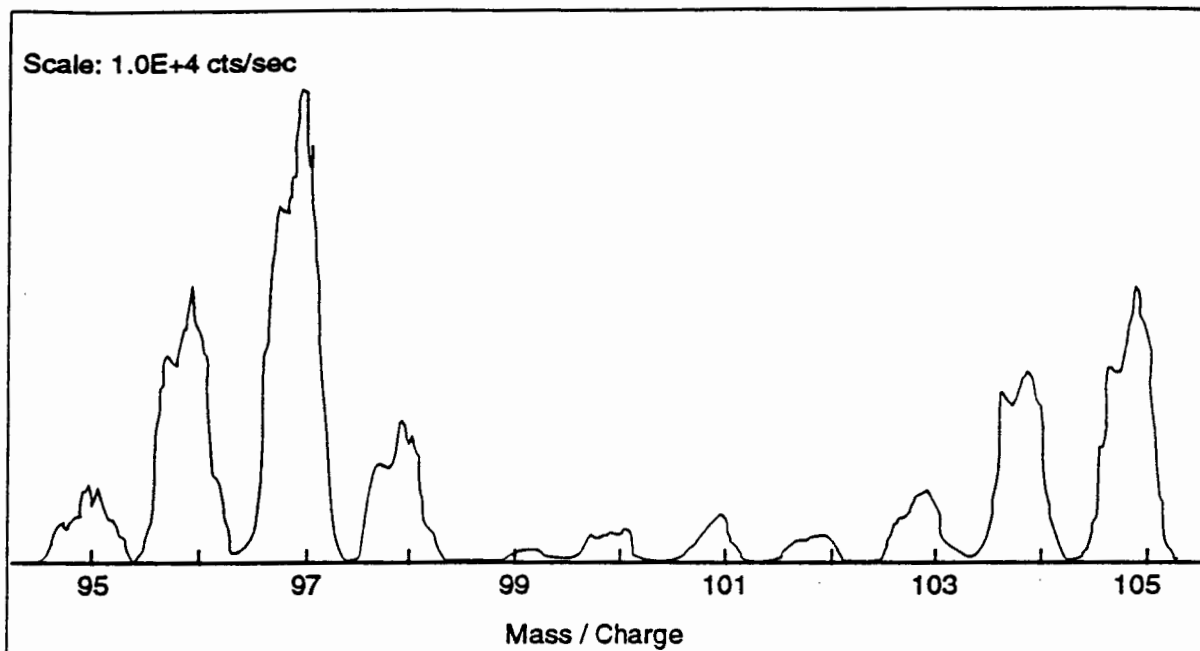


Figure 6. Process Reagent Blank

Figure 6 shows a spectra of a reagent blank prepared by the procedure discussed above. The ^{97}Tc tracer peak is more than ten times greater than the ^{97}Mo at $m/z = 97$ based on the ^{95}Mo peak. The source of the molybdenum contamination in this blank is not clear. After correcting the peak at $m/z = 99$ for ruthenium, based on the ^{102}Ru peak, and correcting the $m/z = 97$ peak for molybdenum, the $^{99}\text{Tc}/^{97}\text{Tc}$ is 0.0025. The calculated ^{99}Tc concentration for this blank is 3 pg per sample, or 0.05 pCi/L.

When analyzing several samples consecutively it was noted the background at $m/z = 99$ rose steadily. Between sample analyses 10% HNO_3 and deionized water washes were each passed through the tubing of the auto sampler to the nebulizer and the spray chamber for three minutes. Crain and Gallimore noted a memory effect¹⁰ when analyzing higher levels of ^{99}Tc but believed it to be a chemical effect as changing from 10% HNO_3 to 2% HNO_3 lowered the $m/z = 99$ background. Decreasing the nitric acid concentration did not reduce the apparent background, however we found that rinsing the sample intake tubing, nebulizer and spray chamber with 10% NH_4OH decreased the $m/z = 99$ background to baseline values.

The sample analysis procedure at the SRTC consists of purging the auto sampler tubing, nebulizer and spray chamber with 10% HNO_3 , deionized water, 10% NH_4OH , and then again deionized water (three minutes each) prior to introducing the sample to the plasma for the $^{99}\text{Tc}/^{97}\text{Tc}$ measurement. The actual sample analysis, including sample introduction, takes approximately three minutes resulting in four samples analyzed per hour. As the ICP-MS is easily programmed for automatic analysis this is an acceptable sample throughput.

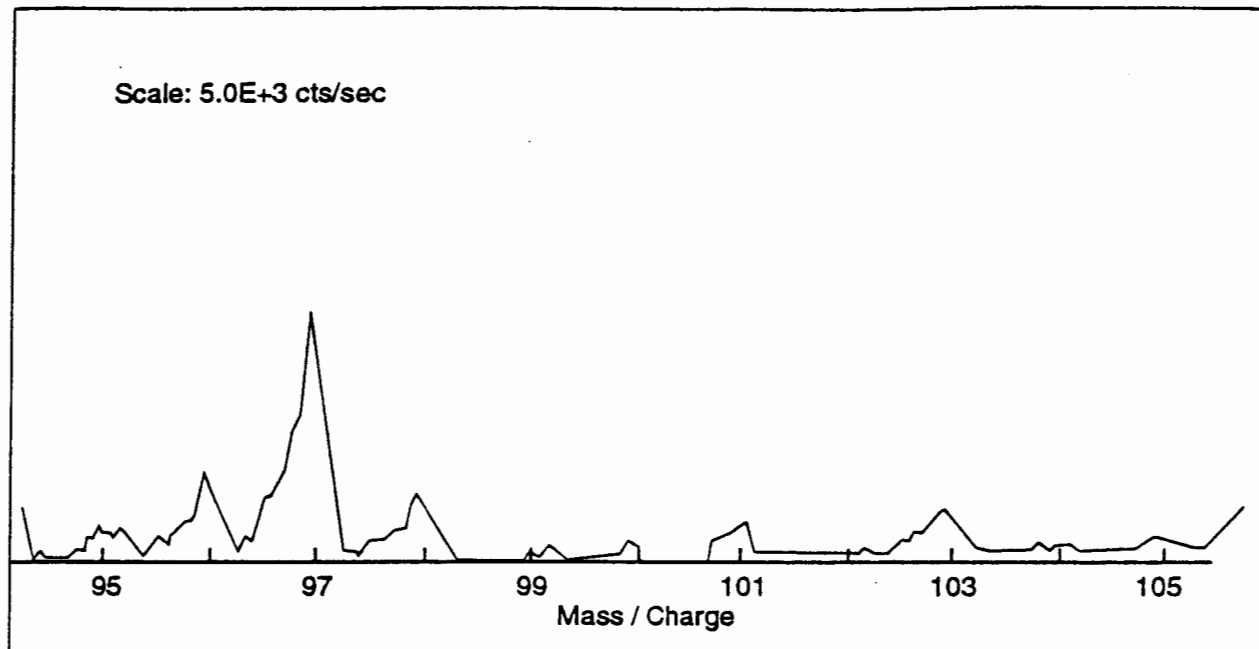


Figure 7. Typical Sample Spectra

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River samples to be analyzed for ^{99}Tc by the SRTC are collected in precleaned plastic bottles by hand dipping the mouth of the bottle below the water surface. Upon returning to the lab the sample volume is measured; typically 1 L of sample is used for analysis. The sample is transferred to a glass beaker and a known quantity of ^{97}Tc (1.2 ng for 1 L stream samples) is added to the sample. Hydrogen peroxide is added to the sample in an amount equal to 1% by volume. The sample beaker is covered with a watch glass and brought to a boil for one hour. After cooling, the technetium is adsorbed onto the TEVA-Spec resin. The resin is washed with 50 mL of 1M HNO_3 and the technetium is eluted with 30 mL of 4M HNO_3 . The diluted nitric acid is made with the Seastar acid. The eluant is collected in precleaned plastic bottles and transferred to the ICP-MS lab to be analyzed as described above.

Table 2
 ^{99}Tc Results from the Savannah River

<u>location</u>	<u>concentration (at 95% CL)</u>
Shell Bluff	0.31 ± 0.21 pCi/L
Above Vogtle	0.65 ± 0.13 pCi/L
Below Vogtle	0.53 ± 0.27 pCi/L
Hwy 301	0.72 ± 0.46 pCi/L

Samples collected from the Savannah River, which flows along the border of the SRS, were analyzed by the above procedure. Technetium-99 concentrations varied from 0.31 to 0.72 pCi/L as shown in Table 2. The mean and standard deviation (1 sigma) of several blank samples are 0.22 ± 0.11 pCi/L. Some samples of deionized water were spiked with known amounts of ^{99}Tc and then analyzed by the developed procedure. The calculated and the expected results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

<u>expected</u>	<u>⁹⁹Tc Spike Results calculated (at 95% CL)</u>
0.48 pCi/L	0.57 ± 0.20 pCi/L
2.39 pCi/L	2.12 ± 0.50 pCi/L
9.58 pCi/L	6.74 ± 1.57 pCi/L

A procedure is also being developed to analyze acid digested samples for ⁹⁹Tc. Air filters, that had been digested in strong acids, were spiked with ⁹⁹Tc, neutralized with NH₄OH and analyzed by the above procedure. The chemical recovery of the technetium appears to be similar to that of the water samples. There is also an interest in analyzing the leachate from vegetation and soil samples for ⁹⁹Tc. It appears that after leaching, the acid may be neutralized with NH₄OH and then analyzed as a water sample.

Conclusions

A procedure was developed at the SRTC to determine the ⁹⁹Tc concentration in aqueous samples. We are currently measuring the ⁹⁹Tc concentration in streams in the vicinity of the SRS in South Carolina, USA, using ID/ICP-MS. We plan to extend the technique to measure ⁹⁹Tc concentrations in air filters, stack monitors, vegetation and soil. The procedure detection limit, while sensitive enough for environmental monitoring purposes, may be made more sensitive by increasing the sample size or using an ultrasonic nebulizer for sample introduction into the ICP-MS. ID/ICP-MS can be used to map the global distribution of ⁹⁹Tc. It can be used to measure fallout from nuclear weapons testing and to monitor the release of ⁹⁹Tc to the environment from nuclear facilities.

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