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Standard Guide for Determination of Various Elements by Direct Current Plasma Atomic Emission Spectrometry¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This guide covers procedures for using a Direct Current Plasma atomic emission spectrometer (DCP-AES) to determine the concentration of elements in solution. Recommendations are provided for preparing and calibrating the instrument, assessing instrument performance, diagnosing and correcting for interferences, measuring test solutions, and calculating results. A method to correct for instrument drift is included.

1.2 This guide does not specify all the operating conditions for a DCP-AES because of the differences between models of these instruments. Analysts should follow instructions provided by the manufacturer of the particular instrument.

1.3 This guide does not attempt to specify in detail all of the hardware components and computer software of the instrument. It is assumed that the instrument, whether commercially available, modified, or custom built, will be capable of performing the analyses for which it is intended, and that the analyst has verified this before performing the analysis.

1.4 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.* Specific precautionary statements are given in Section 7.

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 ASTM Standards:²

[E29 Practice for Using Significant Digits in Test Data to Determine Conformance with Specifications](#)

[E50 Practices for Apparatus, Reagents, and Safety Considerations for Chemical Analysis of Metals, Ores, and Related Materials](#)

¹ This guide is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee E01 on Analytical Chemistry for Metals, Ores, and Related Materials and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee E01.20 on Fundamental Practices.

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² For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

[E135 Terminology Relating to Analytical Chemistry for Metals, Ores, and Related Materials](#)

[E882 Guide for Accountability and Quality Control in the Chemical Analysis Laboratory](#)

[E1601 Practice for Conducting an Interlaboratory Study to Evaluate the Performance of an Analytical Method](#)

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions:* For definitions of terms used in this guide, refer to Terminology [E135](#).

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *background equivalent concentration (BEC), n—in DCP-AES,* the analyte concentration whose signal is equivalent to the signal generated by the plasma and matrix at the analyte line when the actual analyte concentration is zero.

3.2.2 *detection limit (DL), n—in addition to the DL defined in Terminology E135,* the following detection limits are described and used in this guide:

3.2.2.1 *instrumental detection limit (IDL), n—in DCP-AES,* the analyte concentration corresponding to three times the standard deviation of the background noise beneath the analyte line on a set of nine consecutive 10-s measurements of the background intensity of the blank.

3.2.2.2 *method detection limit (MDL), n—in DCP-AES,* the detection limit measured on the matrix blank.

3.2.3 *equivalent analyte concentration, n—the apparent concentration of an interfering element on an analyte.*

3.2.4 *linear dynamic range, n—the concentration range from the limit of quantification to the highest concentration that remains within $\pm 10\%$ of linearity based on lower concentrations.*

3.2.5 *limit of quantification (LOQ), n—the lowest concentration at which the instrument can measure reliably with a defined error and confidence level.*

3.2.6 *sensitivity, n—the slope of the analytical curve, which is the ratio of the change in emission intensity to the change in concentration.*

4. Summary of Guide

4.1 Direct Current Plasma atomic emission spectrometers, either simultaneous or sequential, measure the concentration of

elements in solution. Samples, calibration and other solutions are nebulized and the aerosol is transported to the direct current plasma jet where excitation occurs and characteristic emission spectra are produced. The spectra are dispersed by an echelle grating and cross-dispersed by a prism or grating. The spectra then impinge on photomultiplier tubes, whose outputs are interpreted by a microprocessor/PC as emission intensities. Background correction can be used to compensate for some interferences. The microprocessor/PC generates calibration curves and calculates analyte concentration.

5. Significance and Use

5.1 Analyses using DCP-AES require proper preparation of test solutions, accurate calibration, and control of analytical procedures. ASTM test methods that refer to this guide shall provide specifics on test solutions, calibration, and procedures.

5.2 DCP-AES analysis is primarily concerned with testing materials for compliance with specifications, but may range from qualitative estimations to umpire analysis. These may involve measuring major and minor constituents or trace impurities, or both. This guide suggests some approaches to these different analytical needs.

5.3 This guide assists analysts in developing new methods.

5.4 It is assumed that the users of this guide will be trained analysts capable of performing common laboratory procedures skillfully and safely. It is expected that the work will be performed in a properly equipped laboratory.

5.5 This guide does not purport to define all of the quality assurance parameters necessary for DCP-AES analysis. Analysts should ensure that proper quality assurance procedures are followed, especially those defined by the test method. Refer to Guide E882.

6. Preparation of Solutions

6.1 Solutions are prepared for different purposes. Not all may be necessary for every test. Prepare only those directed by the method or required to meet specific experimental objectives.

6.2 *Rinse Solution*—Prepare a rinse solution to contain the acids or bases present in the test solution at the same concentration. Prepare a quantity sufficient to clean the end of the sample uptake tubing and to flush the sample introduction system between each determination of calibration solutions and test solutions. Occasionally, an analyte requires a conditioning time in the aspiration/nebulization system of the instrument. In this case, use the test solution as a rinse and allow a sufficient residence time before taking a reading.

6.3 *Reagent Blank Solution*—This solution consists of all reagents and other additions at the same concentration used in preparing the test solution. Carry this solution through the entire sample preparation procedure.

6.4 *Matrix Blank Solution*—Prepare this solution to be as close in composition to the test solution as possible (including dissolution reagents and matrix elements), but omitting the elements to be determined. The matrix elements should be of high purity.

6.5 *Control*—Select a reference material or other material of known composition and prepare it as directed in the test method. Analyze the control regularly as a blind sample and use the results for quality control as directed in Guide E882.

6.6 *Calibration Solutions*—The number and type of these solutions will depend on the method, and on the type of DCP-AES instrument and its microprocessor/PC. Generally, prepare two instrument calibration solutions, one high concentration, and one low concentration or a blank, that bracket the expected concentration range of the sample test solutions. More may be prepared if the microprocessor/PC can utilize them, especially if the analyte composition of the test solutions is expected to cover a wide range or if the calibration curve is non-linear. Prepare the calibration solutions by adding aliquots from stock solutions to solutions that are similar to the matrix of the test sample.

6.6.1 Match the matrix of the calibration solutions as closely as possible to that of the test solution in acidity, total solids, reagents, and matrix elements, especially if easily ionized elements (EIE) are present. Some matrix elements may be eliminated if it can be shown by spike addition or standard additions that the effect on the test solution analytes is insignificant. Use stock solutions or pure elements prepared by a method similar to that used to prepare the test solutions. If the composition of the test solution is unknown to the extent that matrix-matched solutions cannot be prepared, or if a sufficiently pure matrix material is not available, refer to the method of standard additions described in 6.7 and 10.6.

NOTE 1—If the instrument is designed to use a blank as the low concentration calibration solution, prepare it the same way as the high concentration calibration solution is prepared, omitting the elements to be determined. Where matrix-matched calibration solutions are employed, this will be the matrix blank solution.

6.6.2 *Optimum Calibration Solution Concentration Range*—For calibration in the linear range, the highest concentration should be no more than 85 % of the upper limit of the calibration curve linearity. For an instrument that accepts a low concentration calibration solution, its concentration should be at least four times the method detection limit and above the limit of quantification (LOQ).

6.7 *Standard Additions Solutions*—Prepare as directed in either 6.7.1 or 6.7.2 as follows:

6.7.1 Prepare four separate test solutions of the sample. To all but one, add known amounts of the analyte equal to (0.5, 1.0, and 1.5) times or (1.0, 2.0, and 3.0) times the expected concentration of the analyte(s) in the test solution. The original analyte concentration must be at or above its LOQ. The final analyte concentration in the highest spike must not be greater than the linear range of the emission line used. Dilute all solutions to the mark and mix. Prepare an equal volume of the reagent blank solution when using 10.6.2.

6.7.2 Transfer four equal volumes of a test solution to four volumetric flasks of the same size. To all but one, add known amounts of the analyte equal to 0.5, 1.0, and 1.5, or 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 times the expected concentration of the analyte(s) in the test solution. The final analyte concentration in the test solution should be at or above the LOQ. The final analyte concentration in the highest spike should not exceed the linear

dynamic range of the emission line used. Dilute all solutions to the mark and mix. Prepare an equal volume of the reagent blank solution if using 10.6.2. Multiply the final value by a factor to compensate for dilution.

6.8 *Calibration Verification Solution*—To verify the calibration, prepare one or more solutions whose concentrations are between the highest concentration calibration solution and the LOQ.

6.9 *Spike Recovery Sample*—Prepare a test solution as directed in the method. Add a spike of the analyte(s) equal to at least 5 times each analyte's LOQ.

6.10 *Limit of Quantification (LOQ) Solution*—Prepare a solution containing amounts of analyte three to six times the method detection limit or 10 % to 20 % of the BEC and matched as closely to the matrix as possible.

7. Hazards

7.1 Protect eyes from the intense ultraviolet (UV) radiation of the plasma.

7.2 Follow the manufacturer's recommended operating practices for initiating the plasma and operating the instrument.

7.3 Ensure that HF-resistant materials are used when analyzing solutions containing hydrofluoric acid. Avoid strongly caustic solutions that may cause the ceramic sleeves of the electrodes to fuse.

7.4 For other safety precautions, refer to Practice E50.

8. Characterization of Analytical Lines

8.1 Overview:

8.1.1 When researching a new method, use the recommendations in this section to select a wavelength and evaluate the possible interferences. Measure the approximate linear range, background equivalent concentration, sensitivity, LOQ detection limit experimentally, and ascertain that they are adequate for the analysis. Once these have been established for a specific instrument, periodic confirmation is recommended and especially whenever a change is made in the hardware (for example, transport or detection devices) or optics. Confirm by analysis of controls, including limit of quantification measurements when required, that the daily performance of the instrument meets the criteria of the method.

8.1.2 When adapting a documented test method for the first time, confirm that freedom from interferences, linearity, detection limit, LOQ and sensitivity meet the criteria of the method.

8.1.3 For lists of wavelengths and information on their characteristics, refer to Harrison,³ Meggers,⁴ Phelps,⁵ Reader,⁶ or Winge.⁷

8.1.3.1 In the ladder array of spectra from the DCP's echelle grating, some wavelengths appear in two adjacent orders. These wavelengths usually have similar intensities. Occasionally, one may prove more useful for a specific application.

8.2 *Interferences*—Several types of interferences may affect measurements. This is especially true for test solutions containing high concentrations of solids or acids or containing elements having intense emission, a large number of atomic emission lines, or high concentrations of easily ionized elements (EIEs). The presence of interferences should be considered when selecting calibration solutions and the method of analysis. See 8.2.3 for suggestions on how to compensate for interferences.

8.2.1 Types of Interference:

8.2.1.1 *Chemical Interferences*—Effects from excitation, molecular compound formation, and solvent vaporization.

8.2.1.2 *Physical Interferences*—Factors that change the rate of sample delivery such as viscosity, surface tension, and reaction with parts of the sample delivery system.

8.2.1.3 *Spectral Interferences*—Spectral line or molecular band overlap from the matrix or solvents, background resulting from continuum radiation, or stray light.

8.2.2 *Diagnosis of Interferences*—Use the following procedures for each new sample matrix:

8.2.2.1 *Comparison with Alternative Method(s) of Analysis*—Use established methods to compare analytical results where possible.

8.2.2.2 *Wavelength Scanning*—If possible, scan the wavelength region near the analyte emission to detect spectral interferences and high background in calibration solutions, test solutions, and solutions containing suspected interfering elements.

8.2.2.3 *Spike Recovery*—Add a known quantity or spike of the analyte equal to at least five times the LOQ. It should be recovered to within $\pm 2 \sigma$ of 100 %, where σ is the standard deviation of at least three replicate measurements. If not, a matrix effect or other interference may be present.

8.2.2.4 *Serial Dilution*—If the analyte concentration is sufficiently high, analysis of a ten-fold dilution should agree with the expected concentration to within 5 %. If not, a chemical or physical interference may be present.

⁴ Meggers, W. F., Corliss, C. H., and Scribner, B. F., *Table of Spectral Intensities: Part I—Arranged by Elements: Part II—Arranged by Wavelengths*, NBS Monograph No. 145, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. (1975).

⁵ Phelps, F. M., *MIT Wavelength Tables, Vol. II, Wavelengths by Element*, MIT Press, November 1982.

⁶ Reader, J. and Corliss, C. H., *NSRDS-NBS 68, Wavelengths and Transition Probabilities for Atoms and Atomic Ions*, Washington, D. C., 1980.

⁷ Winge, R. K., Fassel, V. A., Peterson, V. J., and Floyd, M. A., *Inductively Coupled Plasma-Atomic Emission Spectroscopy: An Atlas of Spectral Information*, Elsevier Science Publishers, Amsterdam, 1985.

³ Harrison, G. R., *MIT Wavelength Tables Vol. 1, 2nd Edition*, MIT Press, August 1969.

8.2.2.5 *Equivalent Analyte Concentration*—To obtain a quantitative measurement of the amount of interference from individual elements, measure the equivalent analyte concentration by testing 1000-mg/L solutions of these elements without using background correction.

8.2.3 *Correction for Interference Effects*—If interference effects are indicated, use one or more of the following techniques:

8.2.3.1 *Alternative Wavelength*—Select an analyte emission line free from spectral interferences and having the required sensitivity, linear range and detection limits if one can be found.

8.2.3.2 *Background Correction*—If the instrument is equipped for background correction, scan the samples and calibration solutions. Select one or more background correction positions in a level area of the background, preferably at a low point. Refer to instrument operating manuals for specific background correction procedures. Confirm with spikes and controls that background correction is working properly.

8.2.3.3 *Standard Additions*—Prepare the standard addition test solutions by adding known increments of analyte(s) as directed in 6.7. Test as directed in 10.6. In most cases, this will compensate for chemical and physical interferences, but not for spectral interferences.

8.2.3.4 *Dilution*—If the analyte concentration is sufficiently high, the analyte can be determined on a dilution. A ten-fold dilution may reduce the effect of some interferences, especially matrix enhancement. Prepare different calibration solutions as required. Dilution will not reduce spectral interferences if the analyte and interfering wavelength are close or coincident.

8.2.3.5 *Matrix-Matching*—Match the matrix of the calibration solutions to that of the test solution as closely as possible. Ascertain that the matrix is free of the analyte. If the matrix has a well-defined, small amount of analyte, add this to the amount measured by the instrument when the results are calculated or add it to the nominal concentration of the calibration solutions.

8.2.3.6 *Calculated Compensation*—Use equivalent analyte concentrations to correct for known amounts of interfering elements.

8.2.3.7 *Buffers*—Additions of lithium, sodium, potassium, and lanthanum, alone or in combination, have been reported to significantly reduce chemical interferences. Buffer concentrations normally range from 0.1 % to 3 % w/v.

8.3 *Linear Dynamic Range*—Prepare a known solution of high concentration, a blank, and others at approximately (0.01, 0.1, 0.3, and 0.7) times the concentration of the high concentration solution. Selection of the high concentration is somewhat arbitrary: it may range from 1000 mg/L or more for a relatively weak emission line to 10 mg/L for an exceedingly strong line.

8.3.1 *Upper Limit*—Calibrate the instrument using the highest concentration calibration solution and the blank. Analyze the other solutions as test solutions, monitoring the calibration solutions for drift and correcting as necessary. If the linearity solutions show a deviation from the expected value of more than 10 %, repeat the process using one of the lower concentrations as the high calibration solution. The upper limit of the

linear range is established when the less concentrated solutions deviate from the expected value by less than 10 %.

8.3.2 *Lower Limit*—The lower end of the linear range is the LOQ.

8.3.3 The linear range can vary with the matrix.

8.4 *Background Equivalent Concentration (BEC)*—Calibrate the DCP with a high concentration calibration solution that is approximately 20 times the expected BEC and a blank. Block the entrance slit and measure while in the sample analysis mode. Record the absolute value of the resulting negative concentration as the BEC. The BEC is approximately equal to the intercept of a linear calibration curve.

8.5 *Detection Limits (DL)*—Follow the directions in the test method for determining and interpreting detection limit(s). If no instructions are available, determine the detection limit(s) as follows:

8.5.1 *Instrument Detection Limit (IDL)*—The IDL is used for characterizing and comparing analytical lines. Calibrate the instrument with a high concentration single-element calibration solution and a blank. The calibration solution should be between three and ten times the BEC. Set the instrument to take nine 10-*s* integrations and display the standard deviation. Measure the blank solution as a test solution three times. Calculate the instrument detection limit as follows:

$$IDL = 3\sqrt{(\sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2 + \sigma_3^2)/3} \quad (1)$$

where σ_1 , σ_2 , and σ_3 are the standard deviations obtained on the three replicate readings of the blank.

NOTE 2—The detection limit described by the instrument manufacturer was calculated as three times the average of the three standard deviations. Pooling the standard deviations yields slightly higher detection limits than those calculated by averaging.

8.5.2 *Method Detection Limit (MDL)*—The detection limit for an analyte in a given matrix is often different from what is reported in the literature. For an indication of the effect of the matrix, compare the MDL with the IDL. Follow the instructions of 8.5.1, taking the measurements on the matrix blank. Calculate the MDL as follows:

$$MDL = 3\sqrt{(\sigma_1^2 + \sigma_2^2 + \sigma_3^2)/3} \quad (2)$$

where σ_1 , σ_2 , and σ_3 are the standard deviations of the three replicate readings on the matrix blank.

8.5.2.1 An approximate MDL can be calculated as 3 % of the matrix-matched BEC or the matrix-matched calibration curve intercept when no background correction is used.

8.6 *Limit of Quantification (LOQ)*—Measure the LOQ as directed in the method of analysis.

8.6.1 If no directions are given, one approach is to calculate LOQ as directed in the following equation:

$$LOQ = 2t\sigma_c/\sqrt{np} \quad (3)$$

where:

- t = multiplier from the student's t table,
- σ_c = standard deviation in terms of concentration,
- n = number of replicate readings, and