



BSI Standards Publication

Measurement of fluid flow rate in closed conduits — Radioactive tracer methods

National foreword

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Measurement of fluid flow rate in closed conduits — Radioactive tracer methods

*Mesure du débit des fluides dans des conduites fermées — Méthodes
par traceur radioactif*



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ISO copyright office
Ch. de Blandonnet 8 • CP 401
CH-1214 Vernier, Geneva, Switzerland
Tel. +41 22 749 01 11
Fax +41 22 749 09 47
copyright@iso.org
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Foreword

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This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 30, *Measurement of fluid flow in closed conduits*, Subcommittee SC 5, *Velocity and mass methods*.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at www.iso.org/members.html.

Introduction

The accurate knowledge of fluid flow rates (liquid and gas) in industrial systems is an essential requirement of processing industries. The fluid flow rate measurement is usually needed for various reasons i.e. calibration of installed flow meters, fluid balance, measurement of efficacy of pumps or turbines, distribution of flow in a network of pipes, etc. Generally, the industrial systems where the flow rates are needed to be measured are classified into two categories, namely open channels and closed conduits. Closed conduits are conveyance systems where the flow of fluid is confined on all boundaries (i.e. pipe systems) while open channels are systems where the stream has a free surface open to the atmosphere such as canals, rivers, streams, sewer lines, effluent channels, partly filled conduits.

This document deals with single phase fluid flow rate measurement in closed conduits only, by using the radioactive tracer method. Flow in closed conduits is caused by an axial pressure difference. Various types of flow meters, such as ultrasonic, electromagnetic, acoustic, Venturi, Pitot tube, and gamma transmission, are routinely used for flow rate measurements in closed conduits in industry. The selection of a suitable method for a particular application depends on the type and nature of the system, physical properties of the flowing fluid, flow patterns of the fluid, limitations imposed by the design and operating condition of the plant, cost and installation of the equipment. One advantage of the radioactive tracer methods is that measurement can be carried out online in harsh industrial environment, from outside of the conduits while the process is in operation, with no disruption, and with a high accuracy. This document treats radioactive tracer methods only.

The use of radioactive tracer methods for the measurement of fluid flow rates in closed conduits is one of the most common and well-established application of the radioactive tracer technology in industry. The major methods that have been found to be particularly applicable for online flow rate measurement and flowmeter calibration are the pulse velocity or transit time method, as well as dilution methods, known as constant rate injection method and integration method.

This document is developed to fill the need for a generalized reference based on fundamental principles to measure fluid flow using radioactive tracer methods.

For single phase steady-state flow of fluid in a closed conduit, the volumetric flow rate can be measured using this method. If the mass density is known, the mass flow rate can be deduced from the volume flow rate.

The accuracy of flow rate measurement with the radioactive tracer methods depends on how well the injected tracer material mixes with the flowing fluid before the measuring section. It depends on the amount of tracer injected and the accuracy of the measurement devices.

Measurement of fluid flow rate in closed conduits — Radioactive tracer methods

1 Scope

This document defines the measurement of single phase fluid flow rate in closed conduits using radioactive tracer methods.

2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

- ISO Online browsing platform: available at <https://www.iso.org/obp>
- IEC Electropedia: available at <https://www.electropedia.org/>

3.1

closed conduit

conveyance system where the flow of fluid is confined on all boundaries (i.e. pipe systems)

3.2

mixing length

l_m

shortest distance at which the variation in concentration of the tracer over the cross-section is less than some pre-determined value (for example 0,5 %)

4 Principles of radioactive tracer methods

4.1 General

Three radioactive tracer methods for flow rate measurement have been used:

- transit time method;
- constant rate injection method;
- integration method.

Both the constant rate injection method and the integration method are part of the dilution methods. Radiation dose considerations are given in [Annex B](#).

4.2 Transit time method

4.2.1 Principle

In the transit time method, a quantity of a radioactive tracer is injected instantaneously into a flowing stream. Two detection cross-sections downstream the injection cross-section are commonly used

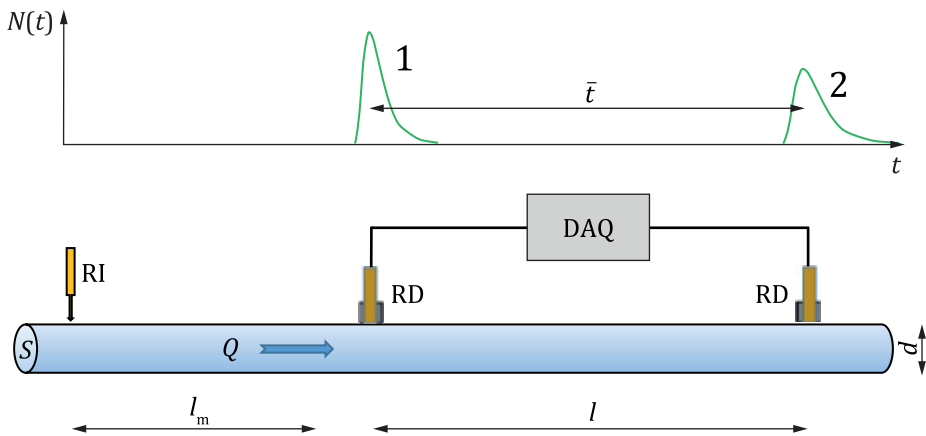
for registration of the gamma radiation emitted from the radioactive tracer in the flow. Both cross-sections are sufficiently far from the injection cross-section to allow adequate (homogeneous) mixing of the tracer with the fluid flow. Each detector registers a response curve when the tracer cloud crosses the detection cross-section. The two response curves are compared to provide the transit time of the tracer or fluid between the two detection cross-sections. Under these conditions, the volumetric flow rate Q is given by [Formula \(1\)](#):

$$Q = \frac{V}{\bar{t}} \tag{1}$$

where

- Q is the volumetric flow rate;
- V is the volume of the conduit between the detection cross-sections;
- $\bar{t}$ is the transit time of the tracer between the two detection cross-sections.

The value of $\bar{t}$ is obtained by measuring the difference in the centre of gravity, i.e. the first moment of the two response curves as shown in [Figure 1](#).



- Key**
- 1 response curve of 1st detector
 - 2 response curve of 2nd detector
 - t time
 - $\bar{t}$ transit time of the tracer between the two detection cross-sections
 - Q volumetric flow rate
 - DAQ data acquisition system
 - S area of across-section
 - RI radioactive tracer injector
 - RD radiation detector
 - l_m mixing length
 - l distance between the two detection cross-sections
 - d inner diameter of conduit
 - $N(t)$ measured radiation count rate

Figure 1 — Principle of transit time method

The volume of the measuring section, V , and the volume flow rate, Q , are given respectively by [Formulae \(2\)](#) and [\(3\)](#):

$$V = S \cdot l \tag{2}$$

$$Q = \frac{V}{\bar{t}} = \frac{S \cdot l}{\bar{t}} \quad (3)$$

where

- V is the volume of the conduit between the detection cross-sections;
- S is the cross-section of the fluid in the closed conduit;
- l is the distance between the two detection cross-sections;
- $\bar{t}$ is the transit time of the tracer between the two detection cross-sections.

The transit time, $\bar{t}$, is calculated by the difference in the mean residence times (first moments) between the two response curves, as given by [Formula \(4\)](#):

$$\bar{t} = \tau_2 - \tau_1 = \frac{\sum t_{2i} n_{2i}}{\sum n_{2i}} - \frac{\sum t_{1i} n_{1i}}{\sum n_{1i}} \quad (4)$$

where

- $\bar{t}$ is the transit time of the tracer between the two detection cross-sections;
- τ is the mean residence time, and the indexes 1 and 2 refer to the 1st and 2nd detector, respectively;
- n is the corrected count per count time, and the indexes 1 and 2 refer to the 1st and 2nd detector, respectively.

4.2.2 Special recommendation for the transit time method

For this method, a conduit length of constant cross-section between the two detection cross-sections should be ensured, so that the flow parameters are constant over the measuring length. The internal volume of the measuring section shall be determined with sufficient accuracy.

4.2.3 Advantages of transit time method

The radioactive tracer transit time method seems to provide the most effective field calibration method for flow rate measurement in closed conduits. It is suitable for both liquid and gas flows and covers a large range of flow rates with a small uncertainty (see [Annex A](#)).

The main advantages of this method are as follows:

- it is only necessary to determine the response curve at two detection cross-sections;
- it is not necessary to know activity, volume or flow rates of the injected radioactive tracer;
- it is not necessary to collect any samples;
- the activity of the radioactive tracer used by this method is considerably smaller than needed for other methods.

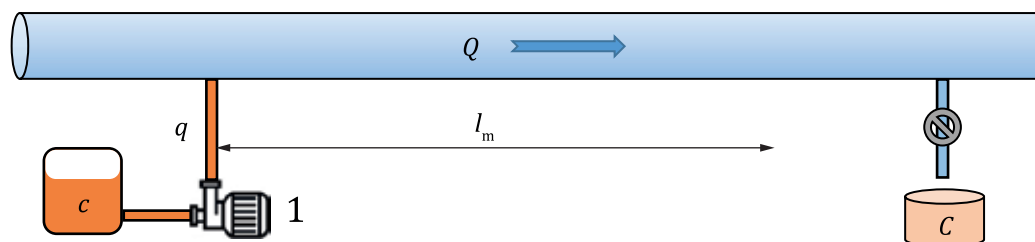
4.3 Constant rate injection method

4.3.1 Principle

The constant rate injection method is based on the principle of conservation of tracer activity. A tracer of activity concentration c is injected with constant volume flow rate q to the main flow with volume flow rate Q . As there is no gain or loss of tracer in the measuring section, the injected tracer shall eventually appear with the same total activity (but with a different activity concentration, C , because of dilution in the main flow) at any downstream detection point, as given by [Formula \(5\)](#):

$$q \times c = Q \times C \quad (5)$$

Figure 2 shows the principle of constant rate injection method.



Key

- 1 constant rate injection pump
- Q volumetric flow rate in closed conduit
- q volumetric flow rate of tracer solution
- l_m mixing length
- c activity concentration of tracer solution
- C activity concentration of collected sample

Figure 2 — Principle of constant rate injection method

The volumetric flow rate of the mainstream can be calculated by [Formula \(6\)](#):

$$Q = q \frac{c}{C} \quad (6)$$

4.3.2 Duration of injection

The duration of injection shall be such that stable concentration conditions are established at all points of the sampling cross-section over a sufficient period of time. A suitable duration of injection may be determined by a preliminary investigation involving a pulse injection of a radioactive tracer. The response curve (curve 2 of [Figure 3](#)) of the pulse injection is obtained at the sampling cross-section. The curve starts at time t_1 after the injection and the duration of the curve is t_2 .