

Abstract Submitted
for the MAR09 Meeting of
The American Physical Society

Alpha particle spectrometry using superconducting microcalorimeters ROBERT HORANSKY, JOEL ULLOM, JAMES BEALL, GENE HILTON, GREGORY STIEHL, KENT IRWIN, NIST, ALEXANDER PLIONIS, STEPHEN LAMONT, CLIFFORD RUDY, MICHAEL RABIN, LANL — Alpha spectrometry is the preferred technique for analyzing trace samples of radioactive material because the alpha particle flux can be significantly higher than the gamma-ray flux from nuclear materials of interest. Traditionally, alpha spectrometry is performed with Si detectors whose resolution is at best 8 keV FWHM. Here, we describe the design and operation of a microcalorimeter alpha detector with an energy resolution of 1.06 keV FWHM at 5 MeV. We demonstrate the ability of the microcalorimeter to clearly resolve the alpha particles from Pu-239 and Pu-240, whose ratio differentiates reactor-grade Pu from weapons-grade. We also show the first direct observation of the decay of Po-209 to the ground state of Pb-205 which has traditionally been obscured by a much stronger alpha line 2 keV away. Finally, the 1.06 keV resolution observed for alpha particles is far worse than the 0.12 keV resolution predicted from thermal fluctuations and measurement of gamma-rays. The cause of the resolution degradation may be ion damage in the tin. Hence, alpha particle microcalorimeters may provide a novel tool for studying ion damage and lattice displacement energies in bulk materials.

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Date submitted: 21 Nov 2008

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