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Joshua Daw
Joy Rempe
Keith Condie
Darrell Knudson
S. Curtis Wilkins
Brandon S. Fox
Heng Ban

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Joshua Daw, Joy Rempe, Keith Condie, and Darrell Knudson
Idaho National Laboratory
INL BEA
PO Box 1625
Mail Stop 4112
Idaho Falls, ID 83415
Joshua.Daw@inl.gov; Joy.Rempe@inl.gov; Keith.Condie@inl.gov; Darrell.Knudson@inl.gov

S. Curtis Wilkins
Private Consultant

Brandon S. Fox and Heng Ban
Utah State University
4130 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-4130
b.fox@aggiemail.usu.edu; heng.ban@usu.edu

ABSTRACT

Thermal conductivity is a key property that must be known for proper design, test, and application of new fuels and structural materials in nuclear reactors. Thermal conductivity is highly dependent on the physical structure, chemical composition, and the state of the material. Typically, thermal conductivity changes that occur during irradiation are measured out-of-pile by Post Irradiated Examination (PIE) using a “cook and look” approach in hot-cells. Repeatedly removing samples from a test reactor to make out-of-pile measurements is expensive, has the potential to disturb phenomena of interest, and only provides understanding of the sample's end state at the time each measurement is made. There are also limited thermophysical property data for advanced fuels. Such data are needed for simulation design codes, the development of next generation reactors, and advanced fuels for existing nuclear plants. Being able to quickly characterize fuel thermal conductivity during irradiation can improve the fidelity of data, reduce costs of post-irradiation examinations, increase understanding of how fuels behave under irradiation, and confirm or improve existing thermal conductivity measurement techniques. This paper discusses recent efforts to develop and evaluate an in-pile thermal conductivity sensor based on a hot wire needle probe. Testing has been performed on samples with thermal conductivities ranging from 0.2 W/m-K to 16 W-m-K in temperatures ranging from 20 °C to 600 °C. Thermal conductivity values measured using the needle probe match data found in the literature to within 5% for samples tested at room temperature, 5.67% for low thermal conductivity samples tested at high temperatures, and 12% for high thermal conductivity samples tested at high temperatures. Experimental results also show that this sensor is capable of operating in various test conditions and of surviving long duration irradiations.

Key Words: Thermal Conductivity Measurement, In-Pile Instrumentation, Nuclear Fuel Properties

1 INTRODUCTION

Thermal properties of materials must be known for proper design, test, and application of new fuels and structural materials in nuclear reactors. In the case of nuclear fuels during irradiation, the physical structure and chemical composition change as a function of time and position within the rod. There are limited thermal property data for advanced fuels. Such data are needed for simulation design codes, used in the development of next generation reactors. Being able to quickly characterize fuel thermal conductivity during irradiation can reduce costs from PIE examinations, increase understanding of how fuels behave under irradiation, and confirm or improve existing thermal conductivity measurement techniques.

An effort has been initiated by the Idaho National Laboratory (INL) and Utah State University (USU) to investigate the viability of an in-pile thermal conductivity probe based on the Transient Hot Wire Method (THWM), which is an adaptation of the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) needle probe method [1]. The needle probe method is based on the theory of an infinite line heat source applying a constant heat flux to the center of a semi-infinite solid. The probe contains a heating element and a temperature sensor inserted into a material whose thermal conductivity is to be measured. The thermal conductivity is calculated from the thermal response of the sample. Preliminary investigations by INL indicate that this approach may offer advantages over steady state techniques [2].

1.1 Background

Measuring thermal conductivity of materials in-pile poses significant challenges. Any sensor used in-pile must be robust, as it is subjected to very high temperatures, high pressures, and thermal and fast neutron fluxes. The sensor also must be minimally intrusive, such that it does not affect the measurement.

Historically, fuel thermal conductivity has been measured using either Post Irradiation Examination (PIE) measurements or in pile using a two thermocouple method. Repeatedly removing samples from a test reactor to make out-of-pile measurements during PIE is expensive, has the potential to disturb phenomena of interest, and only provides understanding of the sample's end state at the time each measurement is made. The two thermocouple method uses one or more thermocouples inserted near the center of the fuel rod and one exterior to the fuel (in the coolant or a structure outside the fuel element). Thermal conductivity is derived from the temperature difference between the two thermocouples at steady-state. Currently, the Halden Boiling Water Reactor (HBWR) is the only test reactor where in-pile fuel thermal conductivity measurements are still performed [3-5]. The Institute for Energy Technology at Norway's Halden Reactor Project (IFE/HRP) uses this technique to assess the effect of burnup on thermal conductivity. However, this method requires several assumptions, such as uniform fuel composition, uniform fuel density, minimal gap conductance effects, and uniform heat generation in the fuel rod. IFE/HRP tests are typically performed with specially-designed fuel rods with a small as-fabricated fuel-to-clad gap to minimize the influence of gap conductance change (densification/swelling, fission gas release) on the fuel centerline temperature during irradiation.

1.2 Principles of Technique

The temperature rise from an internal heat source in a material is dependent on the material's thermal conductivity [6,7]. In a solid, this method may be applied by embedding a line heat source in the material whose thermal conductivity is to be measured. From a condition of thermal equilibrium, the heat source is energized and heats the sample with constant power. The temperature response of the sample is a function of its thermal properties, and the thermal conductivity is calculated from the temperature rise detected in the sample. Following a brief transient period, a plot of the temperature versus the natural logarithm of time becomes linear, as shown in Figure 1 (linear region of the time period between times t_1 and t_2 and temperatures T_1 and T_2). The slope of the linear region is used to calculate the test material thermal conductivity.

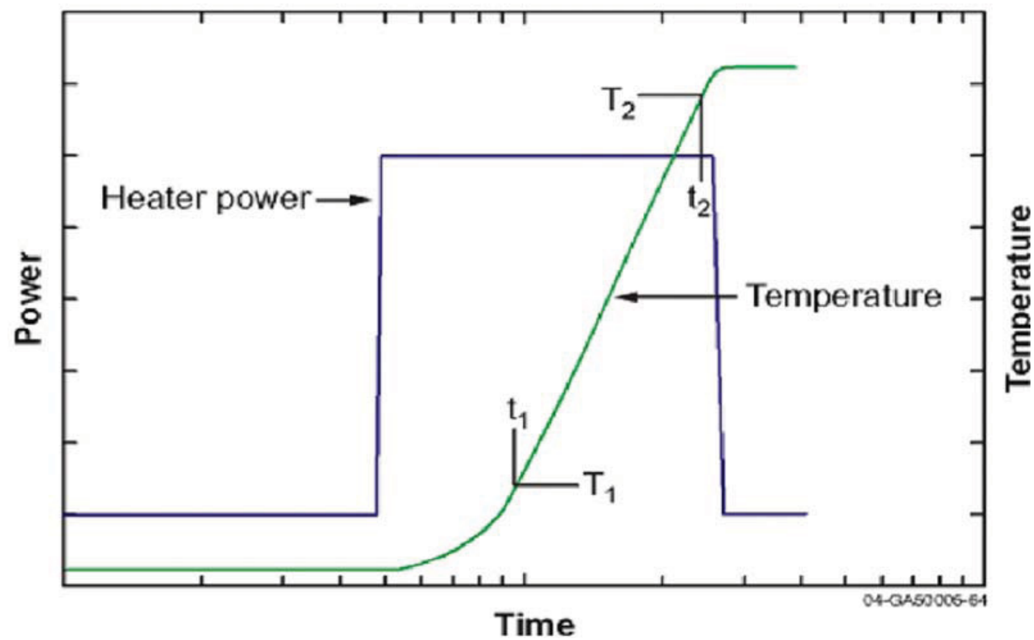

Figure 1. Semi-log temperature rise plot for transient methods.

The needle probe method is based on the theory of an infinite line heat source embedded within a semi-infinite solid. In this configuration, the thermal response is detected by a sensor (such as a thermocouple) located a finite distance from the heat source. The needle probe is designed such that the heat source and thermocouple are both located within the probe. A schematic diagram showing components of a thermal conductivity needle probe is shown in Figure 2.

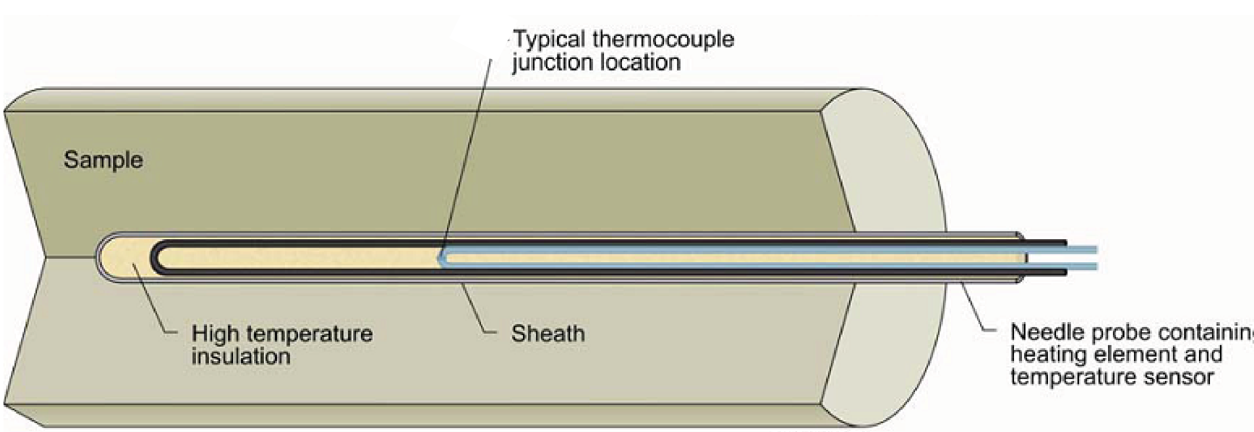

Figure 2. Schematic diagram of thermal conductivity needle probe.

The thermal conductivity of the sample material is derived from the slope of the thermal transient using the following relation from the ASTM needle probe testing standard [1]:

$$k = \frac{CQ}{4\pi LS} \tag{1}$$

where k is the thermal conductivity, C is a calibration factor, Q is power dissipated by the heater, L is the heater length, and S is the slope of the linear portion of the transient response. Note that for a small probe (less than 2.5 mm in diameter) C may be neglected. As discussed previously (see Figure 1), the slope of the linear section of the transient response is given by:

$$S = \frac{T_2 - T_2}{\ln \frac{t_2}{t_1}} \tag{2}$$

1.3 Selection of Time Interval

The theoretical model described in Figure 1 implies that this technique is relatively simple. However, practical testing reveals that this is not always the case. For materials with low thermal conductivity, the linear segment of the thermal response is easy to identify, as the duration and temperature rise are relatively large. For high conductivity materials, this is not the case; both duration and temperature rise are greatly reduced. This problem is compounded if the sample diameter is reduced. The ability to select a proper time interval is critical for accurate calculation of thermal conductivity as Equation 1 requires that the effect of boundary heat transfer conditions not be reflected in the measured temperature data (including this data will yield inaccurate results). For this reason, a hot wire probe and test sample must be tested under a variety of conditions prior to deployment. For example, the earliest transient portion of the response curve is primarily dependant on the probe characteristics. Each probe must be tested to quantify its time constant, so that the portion of the thermal response due to the probe may be neglected. Identifying the time constant of the probe is accomplished by testing the probe in two samples with different conductivities. Figures 3 and 4 show the results of this test performed on two probes (one with a length of 6 inches and one with a length of 2.5 inches). The time prior to divergence of the data for different materials is attributable to the response of the probe, approximately 6 seconds for the longer probe and slightly over 1 second for the short probe.

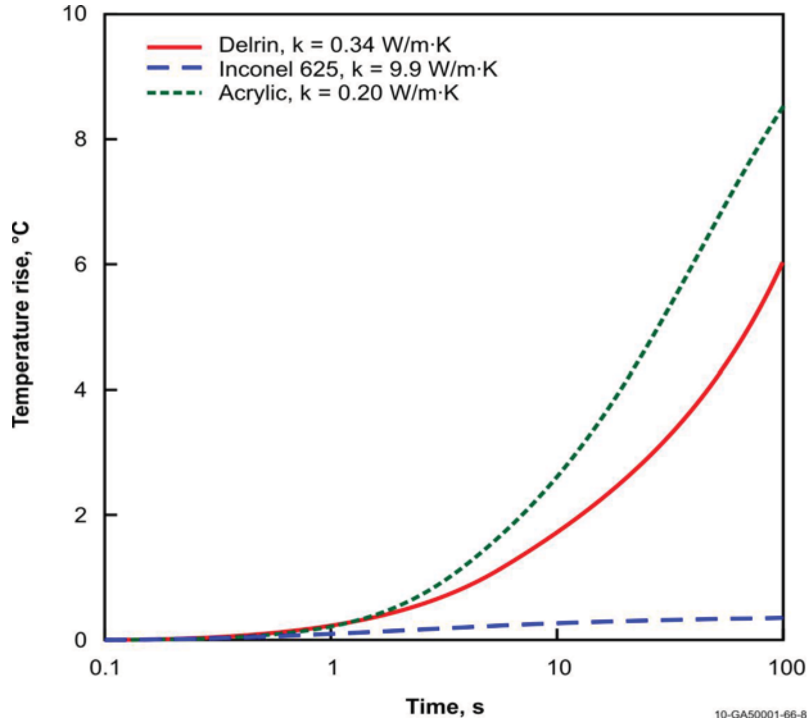

Figure 3. Test results identifying time constant of a 2.5 inch long needle probe at room temperature.

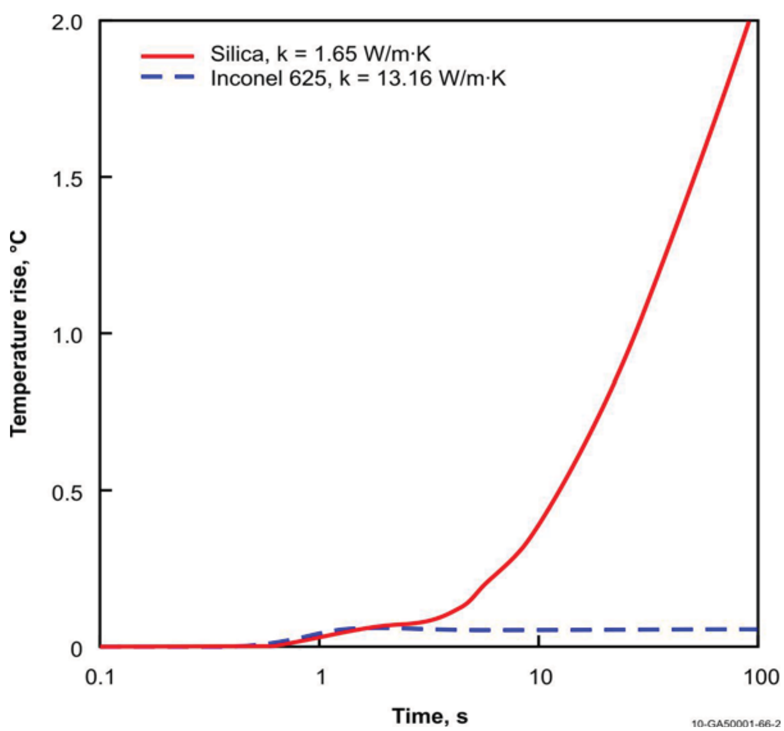

Figure 4. Test results identifying time constant of a 6 inch needle probe at 250 °C.

The end of the linear region can also be difficult to identify, as it is strongly influenced by conductivity, sample diameter, and surface conditions. Identifying the approximate time of thermal dissipation through the sample yields an upper bound on useful data as well as necessary test duration. Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate the effects of varied sample diameters and surface conditions.

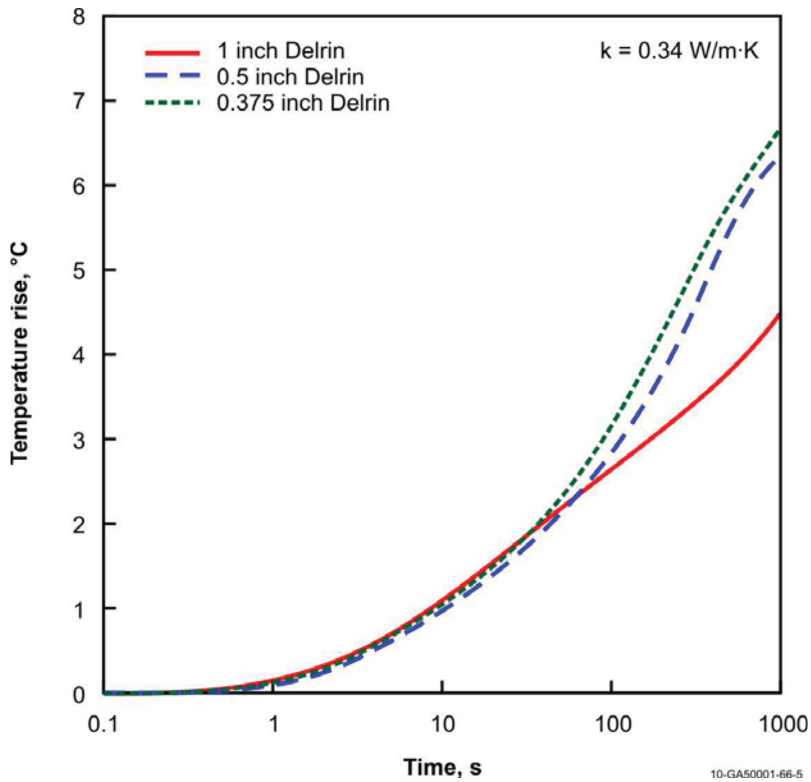

Figure 5. Test results demonstrating effect of sample diameter.

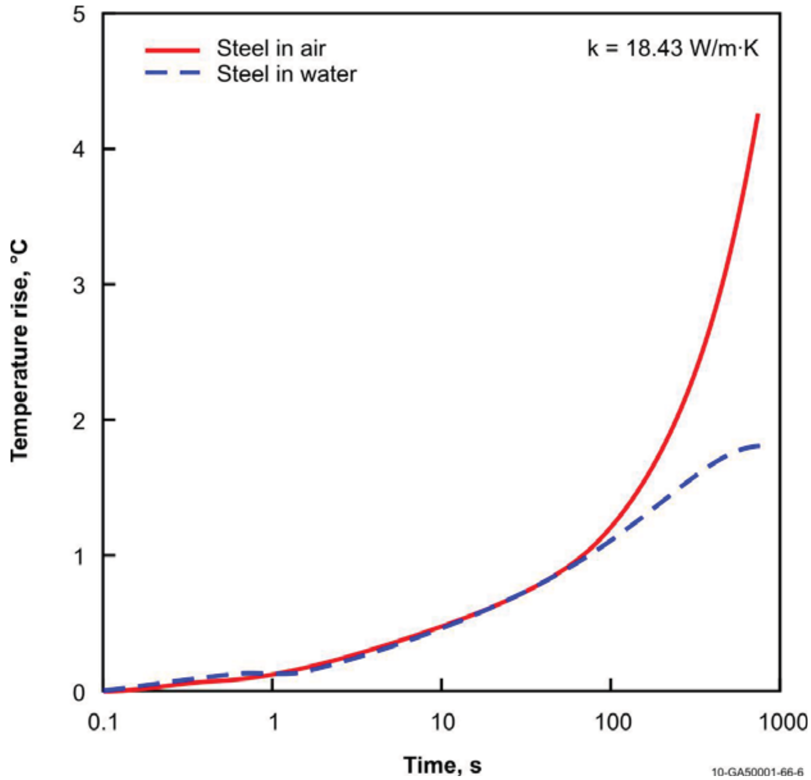

Figure 6. Test results demonstrating effect of surface conditions.

In summary, evaluations to evaluate the range of applicability for the hot needle probe have led to the following insights:

- *The probe time constant dominates initial probe response.* Thermal conductivity evaluations must only consider data obtained after the probe response time.
- Shorter test durations must be used in tests with the following conditions:
  - smaller diameter samples
  - higher thermal conductivity samples

  Thermal conductivity evaluations must be completed prior to when the boundary conditions begin to affect the temperature response.

Work is continuing to develop improved methods of isolating the linear segment of the sample's thermal response. Primarily this work involves improved signal processing methods to reduce signal noise and uncertainty in slope calculations.

2 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The following section details results of preliminary tests that have been carried out in order to test the needle probe method and design. Table I shows data acquired at room temperature for materials of various conductivity values as well as values for each material reported in the literature. Results show that the probe is able to measure thermal conductivity within the range of 0.2-16 W/m-K with and uncertainty range of less than 5%.

Table I. Room Temperature Testing Results

Material	INL Average (W/m·K)	Reported (W/m·K)	% Difference
Fused Silica	1.4	1.4 [8]	0
304L Stainless Steel	15.9	15.3 [8]	3.5
Titanium-6%Al-4%V	7.3	7.2 [9]	1.3
Inconel 625	10.3	9.9 [10]	3.7
Delrin	0.33	0.34 [11,12]	2.9
Acrylic	0.21	0.20 [13]	5.0

Thermal conductivity values for fused silica have also been acquired as a function of temperature and are shown in Figure 7. The needle probe data varies from the Touloukian data [8] by a maximum of 5.7%.

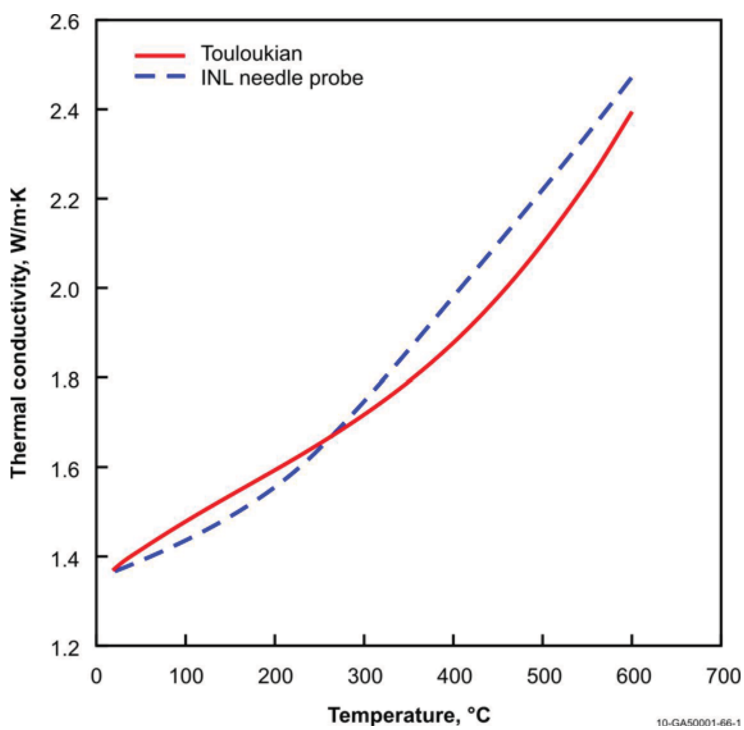

Figure 7. Temperature dependant thermal conductivity of fused silica.

Tests are currently being conducted to measure the temperature dependant thermal conductivity of several metallic samples. Data collected for Inconel 625 are shown in Figure 8. INL data vary from reference data [10] by a maximum of 12%.

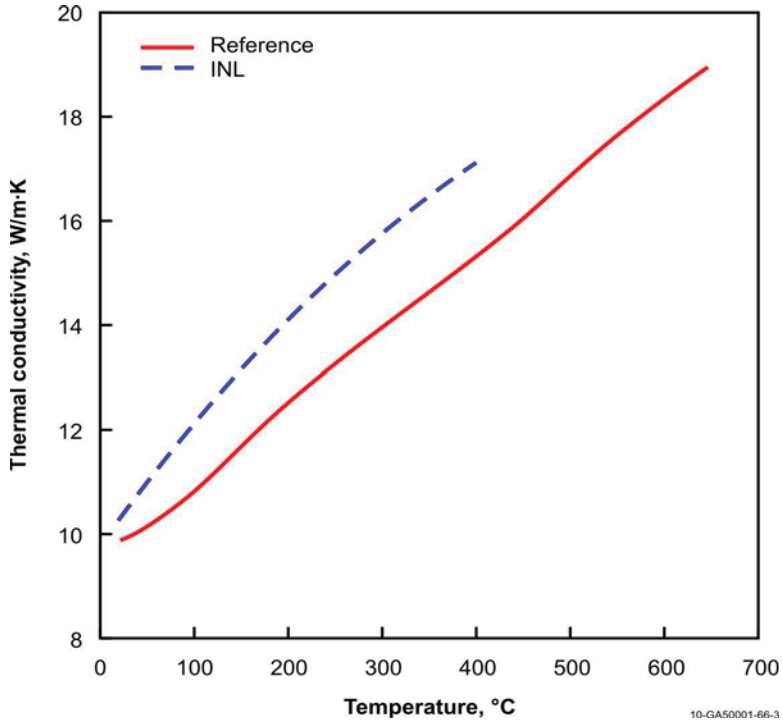

Figure 8. Temperature dependant thermal conductivity of Inconel 625.

A long duration test has been initiated to assess the robustness of the needle probe. In this test, three needle probes are heated at 600 ^{o}C for over 1000 hours. The heating elements are energized with 1.5 volts for several minutes daily to simulate use in a test. Both temperature response of the thermocouples and resistance of the heating elements are monitored. Figure 9 shows temperature data for the three tested probes as well as the test furnace temperature. Results show that the design is robust yielding consistent temperature readings. Resistance values shown in Figure 10 for the heating elements are also very stable, indicating consistent power input (note that differences in resistance values are due to different diameter wires used in the probes, as each probe is slightly different in design).

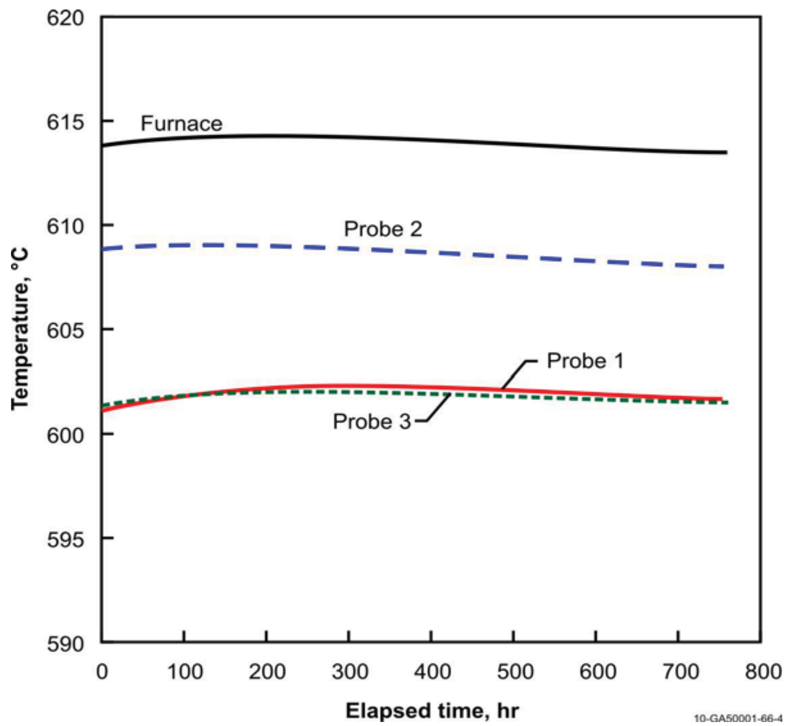

Figure 9. Temperature data collected during long duration testing.

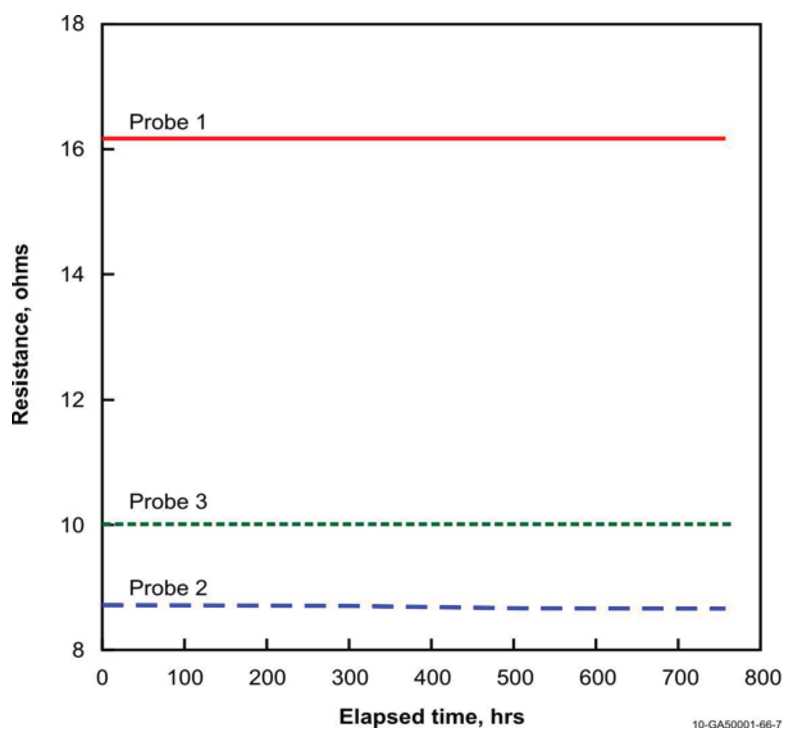

Figure 10. Resistance values of heating elements in long duration test.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

An effort has been initiated to develop and assess the performance of an in-pile sensor, based on needle probe techniques, for detecting thermal conductivity. To date, results from evaluations of a proposed needle probe design are very promising The needle probe has been demonstrated to work very well for materials with thermal conductivity ranges from 0.2 to 16 W/m-K with measurement errors of less than 5%, delivering thermal conductivity measurements with a high degree of accuracy. The test results indicated that special design considerations are needed for materials with a high thermal conductivity, or samples with a small diameter. High thermal conductivity and small diameter sample materials pose some challenges, but methods for improving the technique are being developed, primarily to reduce signal noise and better characterization of the probe response time Results from long term evaluations indicate that the needle probe is a robust sensor that could survive in harsh environments, such as measuring fuel conductivity in-pile. Future evaluations will include in-pile fuel conductivity measurement in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Test Reactor, where small diameter high conductivity hydride fuel will be evaluated.

4 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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4.1 Product Disclaimer

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