

# THE NATIONAL ACADEMIES

Advisers to the Nation on Science, Engineering, and Medicine

National Academy of Sciences  
National Academy of Engineering  
Institute of Medicine  
National Research Council

August 31, 1999

Dr. Martha Krebs  
Director  
Office of Science  
Department of Energy  
Washington, DC 20550

Dear Dr. Krebs:

National Research Council Chair Dr. Bruce Alberts, in response to your letter requesting a judgement on the quality of the science in the program of the Office of Fusion Energy Sciences (OFES), has established the Fusion Science Assessment Committee (FuSAC). The committee's study will focus primarily on the science of magnetically confined plasmas and the programmatic strategy for long-term progress in this area. The Department of Energy's defense programs also sponsor major inertial-confinement research for stockpile stewardship purposes. Some of the plasma-science issues are common to both magnetic and inertial confinement, but the program structures are quite different. The committee does not directly address inertially confined plasmas in the attached interim report.

The committee prepared the interim report to fulfill the commitment to provide OFES with some initial comments on the quality of the science in its program in time for inclusion in OFES's plans for the next year. A final report will provide a more comprehensive assessment and will address long-term issues facing the field.

In response to congressional direction in 1996, OFES has shifted the focus of its program, emphasizing the effort to build the science and technological foundations for fusion energy and moving the energy technology development effort into the background. The redirection of funds into a broader range of science and technology issues, and to a broader community, is responsive to the report *Plasma Science: From Fundamental Research to Technological Applications*.<sup>1</sup> The committee finds that this new approach is enabled by recent advances in experiment, diagnostics, theory, and computational modeling.

FuSAC initiated its efforts with a meeting in mid-May 1999 that convened a number of experts on various aspects of the fusion research effort. Discussions with the experts on critical aspects of the program were followed by closed-session discussion by members of the committee about their impressions of the program. On the basis of that work, subsequent telephone conferences, and especially further community inputs and committee discussion at the July 1999 Snowmass meeting, the committee offers a number of observations about the science in the fusion program and about critical unresolved problems. These observations focus on the conceptual advances and the challenges in the program. The connections

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<sup>1</sup> National Research Council, *Plasma Science: From Fundamental Research to Technological Applications*, National Academy Press, Washington D.C., 1995. A new decadal survey of physics entitled *Physics in a New Era* is now in progress; the *Plasma Science* report is part of the series.

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between experiment, computation, and theory will be discussed in greater depth in the final report.

The committee's final report will be based on an assessment of the past achievements, current strengths and weaknesses, and future prospects of the field. Development of the final report will be guided by broad questions such as: Does the program ask deep physics questions? What are the current role and future potential of a scientific predictive capability for advancing fusion energy? How does one guide the directions of a fusion energy science program if the ultimate goal is to develop a commercially viable fusion reactor? How can the connectivity of fusion science with other scientific disciplines be strengthened? What structural, programmatic, and institutional innovations and international initiatives might strengthen the scientific approach to fusion energy?

FuSAC's Steering Group joins me in transmitting the committee's interim report to you. The committee members have enjoyed interacting with and learning from the fusion community during the past few months. We look forward to continuing these fruitful interactions as we prepare our final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles F. Kennel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "K".

Charles F. Kennel  
Chair, FuSAC

Cc: Anne Davies, Director, OFES  
Bruce Alberts, Chair, NRC  
Peter Banks, Co-Chair, CPSMA  
Carl Lineberger, Co-Chair, CPSMA  
Robert C. Dynes, Chair, BPA

Enclosures:

Interim Assessment  
FuSAC Roster  
May 16-19 Meeting Agenda and Attendance List

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## **Fusion Science Assessment Committee** **Interim Assessment**

### **The birth of modern plasma science**

The development of a practical fusion energy source remains one of the most challenging scientific endeavors undertaken by mankind. The early predictions of tabletop-scale fusion energy machines based on “back of the envelope” calculations very quickly confronted the reality of the plasma state as a complex nonlinear medium. Early plasma experiments more often than not ended with the plasma splattered against the walls of the containment vessels rather than confined within the magnetic bottle as intended. The production of a fusion-grade plasma at a temperature of 100 million Kelvin required the development of the field of plasma science. Scientific tools had to be developed to describe plasma equilibrium, the balance between plasma pressure forces and the confining magnetic forces, and stability. Why do large-scale instabilities cause the plasma to break up and why do instabilities at small scale cause the energy to leak across the magnetic field? How do you heat an essentially collisionless plasma to the temperatures required for fusion and how do you accurately remotely diagnose the complex dynamics of the plasma at both large and small scales to test your understanding of the system? These questions and many more must be answered to establish the firm knowledge base required for the achievement of practical fusion energy production.

### **Fundamental scientific insights from plasma physics and their impact on other scientific disciplines and industry**

The historical development of the fusion program has involved both basic physics and the applied and engineering sciences. Because of the explicitly applied goal of the fusion program, the larger scientific community can lose sight of the contributions the program has made to our understanding of fundamental physics. Basic plasma experiments elucidated the nonlinear properties of the plasma medium. As a consequence, a number of areas in modern nonlinear physics found some of their principal applications in fusion plasma science. In some of these cases, plasma scientists became leaders of these emerging fields—solitons, chaos, and stochasticity are noteworthy examples. Basic tools developed in the fusion program ranging from computer-based algebra to particle simulation techniques have found widespread applications in allied fields.

One measure of the quality of a scientific field is its impact on and acceptance by other fields. Some examples of important topical areas that have had a broad impact on the broader scientific and industrial community include:

**Stability:** The understanding of the complex plasma dynamics observed in early plasma experiments was initiated with the development of powerful energy principles and eigenmode techniques to explore the linear stability of plasma equilibria. The

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wide variety of instabilities in plasma with an enormous range of spatial scales serves to define the richness of the plasma medium and the challenge to understand its dynamics. Predictions for the thermal pressure beyond which the plasma will disassemble have been confirmed in experiments in which the temperatures of the plasmas are in excess of those found on the surface of the Sun. In addition, experimental explorations have led to the development of methods that significantly increase the plasma pressure limits set by stability. Many of these stability analysis techniques are now essential tools not only in the field of plasma science but also in allied fields such as astrophysics and solar, ionospheric, and magnetospheric physics.

Stochasticity and chaos: The effort to understand how the magnetic surfaces that confine hot plasma in fusion experiments break up led to the development of the standard map, which allowed the generic exploration of the onset of stochasticity. Understanding of the onset of stochasticity in velocity space was also intrinsic to modeling heating in essentially collisionless plasmas. Finally, senior scientists trained in the physics of plasmas developed the first published method for controlling chaos.

Reconnection, field topology, and magnetic dynamos: A three-decade challenge of plasma physicists has been to explain the very short time scales that characterize the release of magnetic energy in the solar corona, in planetary magnetospheres (including Earth's), and in fusion experiments. Classical collisional dissipative processes are orders of magnitude too weak to explain the time scales observed. The difficulty lies in the extreme range in the spatial scales, from the macroscopic to the microscales associated with kinetic boundary layers, and in the necessity to include kinetic processes to provide collisionless dissipation. An emerging understanding based on theory, computation, and basic experiments is linked to the mediating role of dispersive waves, which act at the small scales where the "frozen-in" condition is broken. For the first time the predictions of energy release rates in fusion experiments are consistent with observations. A consequence of the fast release of magnetic energy associated with magnetic reconnection in some fusion experiments is the evolution to a minimum energy state where the magnetic field is partially self-generated by the plasma. The resulting "dynamo" action is related to magnetic dynamo processes in astrophysical systems such as the Sun and the planets. These fusion-sponsored experiments remain among the few laboratory demonstrations of a turbulent dynamo.

Wave dynamics: The plasma state is unique in the rich variety of waves that are supported by the medium. Waves in plasmas not only appear spontaneously as a consequence of instabilities, but also can be generated to control plasma temperature and currents. Understanding how waves propagate and are absorbed in nearly collisionless plasma was a scientific challenge. Building on Landau's idea of the wave-particle resonance as a mechanism for collisionless dissipation, fusion scientists developed models to describe the absorption of high-power radio frequency waves and benchmarked the predictions in fusion experiments. Waves could then be used to engineer the phase space of particle distribution functions. Waves can now be excited in plasmas to generate intense current or to accelerate particles to high energies—a technique that can be applied to the next generation of high-energy accelerators. The nonlinear behavior of waves has also been an intrinsic component of the science of plasma wave dynamics, and knowledge of this phenomenon has spread widely to many other branches of physics. Indeed, such ubiquitous concepts as absolute and convective instabilities, solitons (nonlinear waves that persist through collisions), and parametric instabilities saw extensive development in the fusion context. Important industrial applications include the use of radio frequency technologies for plasma processing in semiconductor manufacturing. Finally, plasma physicists introduced the idea of using solitons in commercial high-speed communications.

Turbulent transport: Understanding transport driven by turbulence is critical to solving such important problems as the accretion of matter into black holes, energy transport in the solar convection zone, and energy confinement in fusion

experiments. Gradients in pressure, angular momentum, or other free energy sources drive small-scale turbulent flows that act to relax the gradient. This “anomalous transport” process should be contrasted with classical transport, which arises from two particle coulomb interactions in magnetic fusion plasmas and can include photon diffusion in astrophysical systems. The identification of anomalous transport in fusion experiments (and the corresponding theoretical work) sparked the recognition of its importance in space science and astrophysics, fields in which concepts such as anomalous transport and heat flux inhibition are now common language. Because of its fundamentally nonlinear and turbulent nature, understanding anomalous transport has been one of the significant scientific challenges of the fusion program. Diagnostics to remotely measure turbulent fluctuations as well as computer codes to describe the nonlinear dynamics of small-scale flows in a collisionless medium were developed. Experimental work in fusion has shown that turbulence can be spontaneously suppressed and a transport barrier formed, and that the mechanism was linked to the development of local zonal flows, which shred the vortices driving transport. The dynamics of this process parallels that of zonal flows in Jupiter’s atmosphere.

### **Outstanding problems**

In its preliminary discussions, the committee has begun to identify critical unresolved problems in fusion science. The following includes some examples.

**Turbulence and transport:** Despite the scientific success in understanding the turbulent transport of ion thermal energy in magnetic containers, formidable challenges remain. The mechanism by which particles and electron thermal energy are lost from magnetic containers has not yet been clearly identified. This is a key issue for an energy-producing plasma, in which high-energy alpha particles produced during fusion deposit their energy in electrons. A paradox is that the electron energy-loss rate appears to be greatest in the core region of tokamak plasmas where theories based on linearization of equations for small-amplitude disturbances predict no linear instabilities. The source of the turbulence driving transport remains a mystery. The present experiments in tokamaks are in a regime in which magnetic field fluctuations associated with small-scale vortices driving transport are important, yet progress has been slow in developing the computational and diagnostic tools required to include these effects. The exploration of the role of magnetic fluctuations is especially critical for modeling experiments in the innovative magnetic containers now coming on line. Predictions of performance in proposed magnetic confinement experiments have traditionally been based on scaling laws deduced from existing and previous experiments rather than from first-principles theories of turbulent transport. The reliance on this approach over the long term, though previously grounded in necessity since there were no reliable theories of transport, should be re-evaluated in light of the new developments in theory and computation and the emergence of control techniques for manipulating transport. Finally, the role of alpha particles in turbulence and transport, which will be an important issue for burning plasmas, is not well understood.

**Energy density limits:** The success in understanding pressure limits in confined plasma has been based largely on the ideal (dissipation-free) magnetohydrodynamic description. There is now substantial experimental evidence that, under some circumstances, the plasma pressure can be limited below these “ideal” limits by instabilities whose growth is facilitated by resistive or kinetic effects. Nonlinear instabilities, which self-sustain only when their amplitudes exceed a threshold value, are being studied as a possible mechanism for such limits. A major challenge for the field is to develop the computational tools to study the macroscopic nonlinear development of instabilities that constrain the global pressure of a system and that at the same time resolve the small time and space scales required to describe critical kinetic features. Until this challenge is met, numerical models of the large-scale

plasma dynamics will be subject to the criticism that they are too primitive to fully describe the high-temperature regime of present and future fusion-grade plasmas. The duality of a medium that behaves like a continuum fluid at large scales and yet displays the effects of discrete particles at small scales is a recurring theme of plasma science.

Integrated physics of self-heated plasmas: While the past DT tokamak experiments that produced weakly burning plasma were a milestone, a broad range of scientific and technological issues nevertheless remain to be explored in the strong self-heating regime, where the local energy deposited by fusion-produced alpha particles exceeds the energy from external sources. Key scientific questions concern the stability of the profiles, including transport barriers, in the self-heating regime. As the plasma pressure exceeds stability limits because of self-heating, will transport rise to balance the source in a benign manner or will large-scale instabilities lead to a loss of global confinement? Will a high density of energetic alpha particles destabilize waves and degrade alpha confinement so as to reduce the efficiency of alpha particle heating? Will helium ash accumulation continue to be minimal? On the positive side, will ideas for channeling alpha-particle energy directly into ions rather than electrons be successful and therefore ultimately lead to a more attractive fusion energy source? Conclusive answers to such questions will require experiments in the burning plasma regime.

## **Summary**

The worldwide fusion energy program, with vigorous U.S. participation in all areas and leadership in many, has achieved much in its 40-year history. The fusion energy goal also has driven the development of the modern phase of plasma science. Plasma science, in turn, has contributed to many fields of science and technology during this time.

The reorientation of the U.S. fusion program in 1996 had as its aims the stimulation of innovation and the strengthening of the scientific focus of the program. The extent to which the full promise of this approach has begun to be realized will be addressed in the committee's final report. FuSAC can say with confidence now that the technology needed to create, diagnose, and model sophisticated experiments on fusion-grade plasmas has been developed. The critical materials science issues of fusion energy have been scoped. The progress can be measured in other ways as well: The first preliminary fusion-burning experiments were recently completed. Scientific and engineering understanding of the concepts required for future fusion energy systems is being continually deepened. Nonetheless, the distance to the ultimate goal remains large.

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## Fusion Science Assessment Committee Meeting

May 16-19, 1999  
Hotel La Jolla  
La Jolla, CA

### Agenda\*

**Sunday, May 16**

#### PLENARY SESSION

Room: Bistro

- 4:00 pm Study Overview  
*Charles Kennel, Committee Chair*  
*Robert Rosner, Head, Theory and Computation Working Group*  
*Claudio Pellegrini, Head, Experiment Working Group*  
*James Drake, Head, Program Architecture Working Group*
- 4:30 pm Talk by and discussion with DOE  
*John Willis, DOE*
- 5:00 pm WORKING DINNER -- Discussion
- 5:30 pm Overview of the goals of fusion theory and computation  
and linkage with experiments  
*Bill Nevins, Lawrence Livermore National Lab*
- 6:00 pm Discussion
- 6:20 pm Overview of Experimental Portfolio  
*Mike Mael, Columbia University*
- 6:50 pm Discussion
- 7:10 pm International standing of the US fusion physics experiment program  
*Hiroshi Kishimoto, Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute, Japan*
- 7:40 pm Discussion
- 8:00 pm International standing of the US fusion physics theory program  
*Predhiman Kaw, Institute for Plasma Research, India*
- 8:30 pm Discussion

#### CONCURRENT WORK GROUP SESSIONS (NEXT PAGE)

\*Invited respondent: *Bruno Coppi, MIT*

**Sunday, May 16 (Continued)**

**CONCURRENT WORK GROUP SESSIONS**

**Theory & Computation Working Group Session**

**Room: McKenzie**

8:50 pm Contributions of fusion theory to other disciplines  
*Steve Cowley, UCLA*

9:20 pm Discussion

9:50 pm ADJOURN

**Experiment Working Group Session**

**Room: Ashley**

8:50 pm Experimental Tests of Neoclassical Theory  
*Michael Zarnstorff, Princeton*

9:15 pm Turbulence and Transport - Understanding & Control  
*Michael Zarnstorff, Princeton*

9:40 pm Discussion

10:00 pm ADJOURN

**Monday, May 17**

**PLENARY SESSION**

**Room: Bistro**

7:00 am CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST

7:30 am Bias Discussion (CLOSED)

**CONCURRENT WORK GROUP SESSIONS**

**Theory & Computation Working Group Session**

**Room: McKenzie**

8:00 am Development of computational models for understanding  
complex plasma dynamics  
*Bill Dorland, University of Maryland*

8:30 am Discussion

9:00 am Theory of electric field shear generation and its role in transport  
barriers  
*Patrick Diamond, UCSD*

9:30 am Discussion

10:00 am BREAK

10:30 am The theoretical framework for fusion and plasma science  
*Liu Chen, UC Irvine*

11:00 am Discussion

11:30 am Magnetic reconnection and dynamos  
*Amitava Bhattacharjee, University of Iowa*

Noon Discussion

12:30 pm LUNCH

1:30 pm Future directions for fusion theory and computation  
*Bill Tang, PPPL*

2:00 pm Discussion

**CLOSED SESSION**

2:30 pm Outline Report Section on Theory & Computation

4:30 pm Discuss plans for next workgroup session

5:30 pm ADJOURN

**Monday, May 17 (Continued)**

**Experiment Working Group Session**

**Room: Ashley**

8:00 am Ideal MHD

*Tony Taylor, General Atomics*

- 8:20 am MHD, Relaxation, Reconnection  
*John Sarff, University of Wisconsin*
- 8:40 am Discussion
- 9:00 am Burning Plasma Physics  
*Dale Meade, Princeton*
- 9:30 am Discussion
- 10:00 am BREAK
- 10:30 am Wave Interaction with and Manipulation of Plasmas  
*Miklos Porkolab, MIT*
- 11:00am Discussion
- 11:30 am Facilities/Diagnostics Needs  
*Earl Marmor, MIT*
- Noon Discussion
- 12:30 pm LUNCH
- 1:30 pm Basic Plasma Experiments  
*Cliff Surko, UCSD*
- 2:00 pm Discussion
- CLOSED SESSION**
- 2:30 pm Outline Report Section on Experiment
- 4:30 pm Discuss plans for next workgroup session
- 5:30 pm ADJOURN

**END OF CONCURRENT WORKGROUP SESSIONS**

**Room: T-29, Martin Johnson House, Scripps Institution of Oceanography**

6:00 RECEPTION (Open)

7:00 DINNER (Open)

**Tuesday, May 18**

**THE ENTIRE DAY IS CLOSED**

7:00 am CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST

**CONCURRENT WORK GROUP SESSIONS**

**Theory & Computation Working Group Session**

**Room: McKenzie**

7:30 am -- 12:00 Noon Outline Interim Report Section

12:00 Noon                      LUNCH

**Experiment Working Group Session**  
**Room: Ashley**

7:30 am -- 12:00 Noon              Outline Interim Report Section

12:00 Noon                      LUNCH

**PLENARY SESSION**  
**Room: Bistro**

1:00 pm              Review of the draft sections

3:00 pm              General Discussion, Plans for Snowmass

5:00 pm              ADJOURN

6:00 pm              DINNER

**Wednesday, May 19**  
**THE ENTIRE DAY IS CLOSED**

**STEERING GROUP MEETING**  
**Room: Bistro**

8:00 am	Continental Breakfast
8:30 am	Steering Group introductions
9:00 am	Presentation by the Theory and Computation Working Group
9:45 am	Discussion -- Input from the Experiment Working Group
10:15 am	BREAK
10:30 am	Presentation by the Experiment Working Group
11:15 am	Discussion -- Input from the Theory & Computation Working Group
11:45 am	General Discussion -- Feedback and guidance from Steering Group
12:30 pm	LUNCH
1:30 pm	ADJOURN

**Fusion Science Assessment Committee Meeting**  
**May 16-19, 1999**  
**Attendance List**

Amitava Bhattacharjee, University of Iowa  
Liu Chen, UC Irvine  
Bruno Coppi, MIT  
Steve Cowley, UCLA  
Patrick Diamond, UCSD  
Bill Dorland, University of Maryland  
Predhiman Kaw, Institute for Plasma Research, India  
Hiroshi Kishimoto, Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute, Japan  
Earl Marmor, MIT  
Dale Meade, Princeton  
Mike Mauer, Columbia University  
Bill Nevins, Lawrence Livermore National Lab  
Miklos Porkolab, MIT  
Marschall Rosenbluth, University of California, San Diego  
John Sarff, University of Wisconsin  
Cliff Surko, UCSD  
Bill Tang, PPPL  
Tony Taylor, General Atomics  
John Willis, DOE  
Michael Zarnstorff, Princeton