



# Materials for nuclear fission and fusion reactors

Pär Olsson

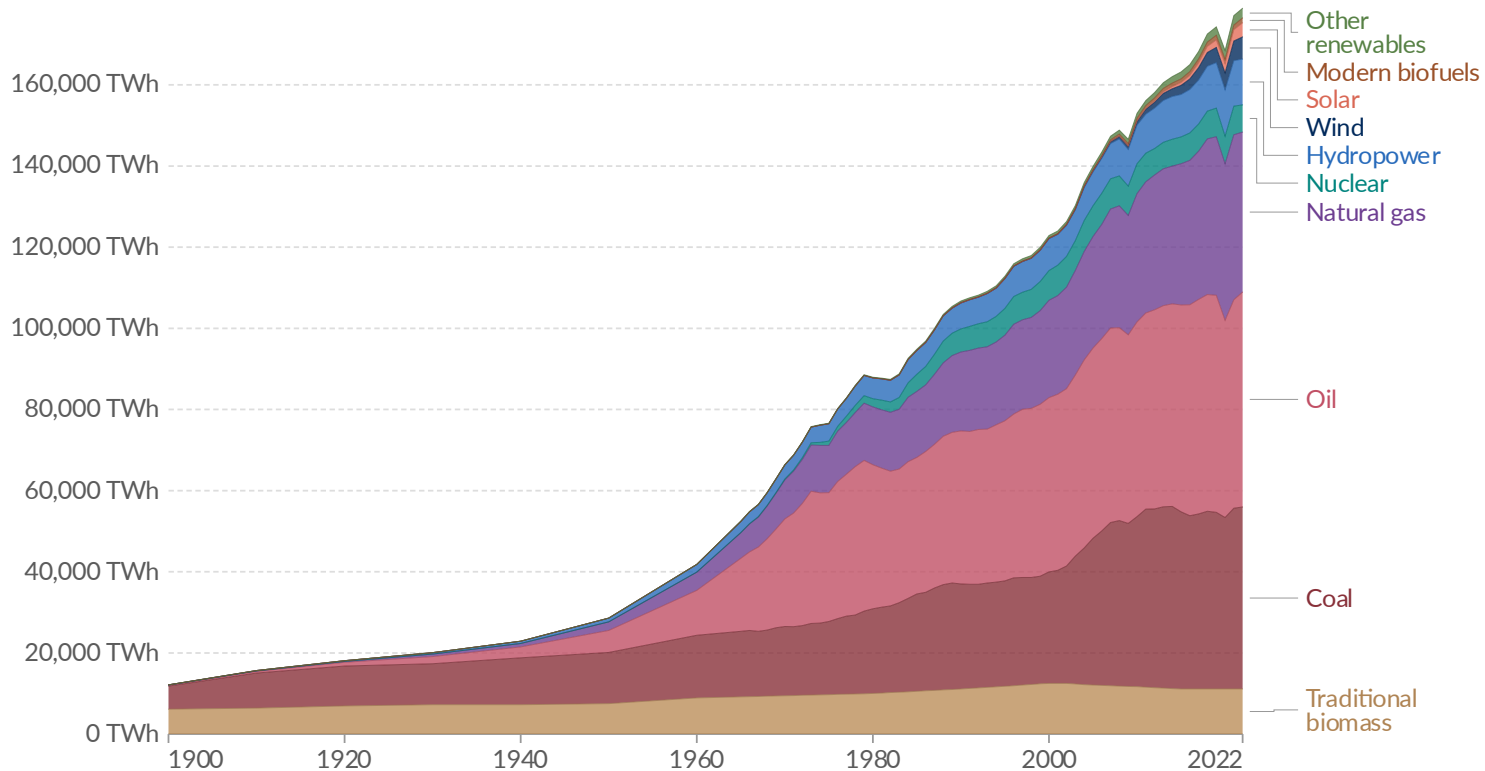
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## Global primary energy consumption by source

Primary energy is based on the substitution method and measured in terawatt-hours.

Our World in Data



**Data source:** Energy Institute - Statistical Review of World Energy (2023); Smil (2017)  
**Note:** In the absence of more recent data, traditional biomass is assumed constant since 2015.  
[OurWorldInData.org/energy](https://OurWorldInData.org/energy) | [CC BY](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

The sun does not always shine and the wind does not always blow, so we need a mix of low carbon energy sources.

**CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of different production modes during their lifecycle**

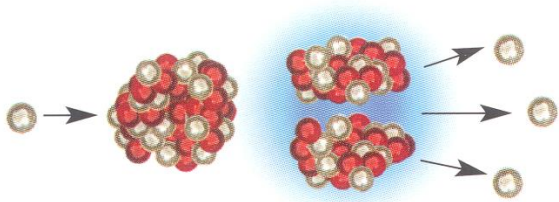
Amount of carbon dioxide produced per 1 kWh of energy:

<b>Solar</b>	<b>Nuclear power</b>	<b>Wind</b>	<b>Gas</b>	<b>Coal</b>
<b>48 g</b>	<b>12 g</b>	<b>12 g</b>	<b>490 g</b>	<b>820 g</b>

Nuclear energy: Low-carbon source of energy, Nearly emission free operation, generate 1/3 of low-carbon electricity

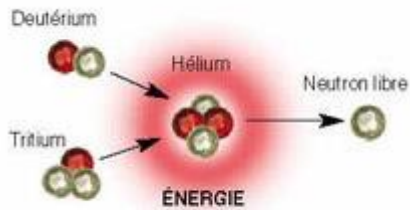
# Nuclear energy: Fission and fusion

## Fission



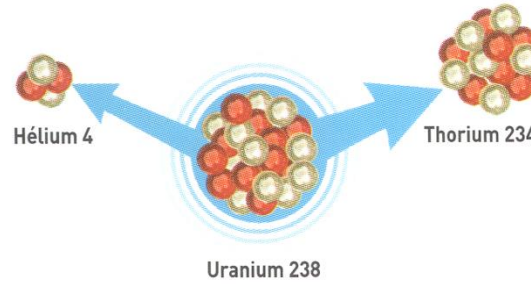
Neutron damage, Fission products in fuel, in particular volatile elements (Kr, Xe, I, Cs...)

## Fusion

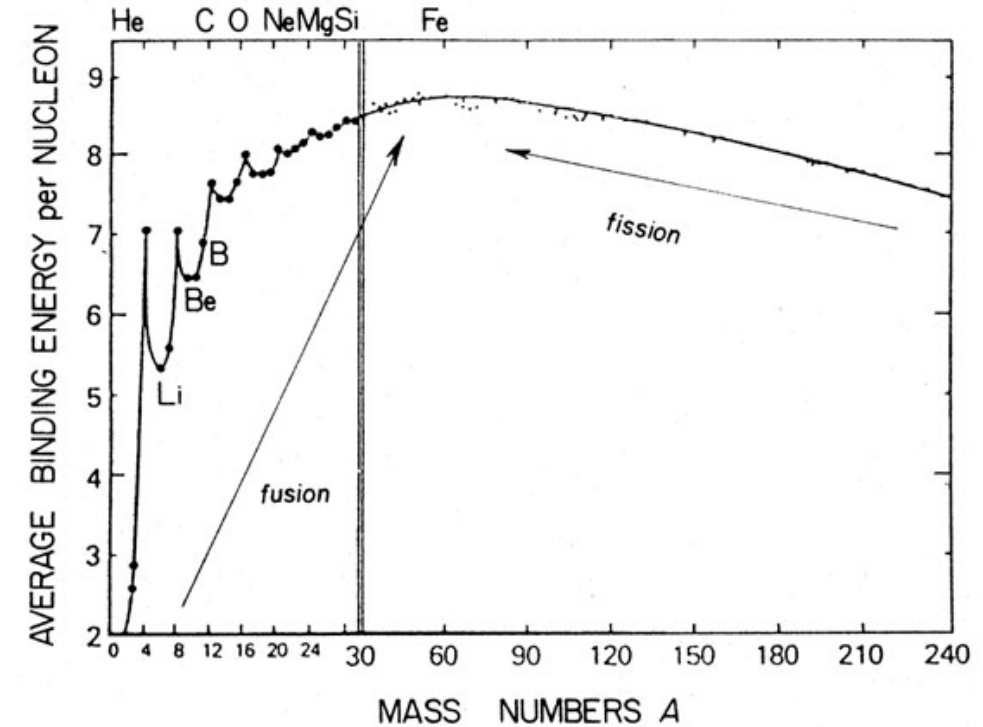
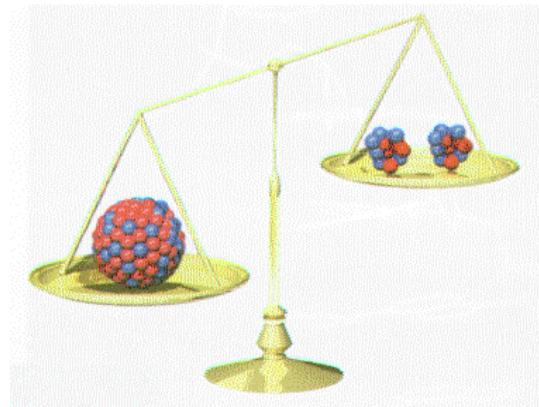


Neutron damage, Activated materials

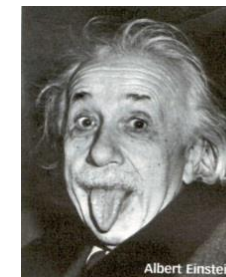
## Alpha decay

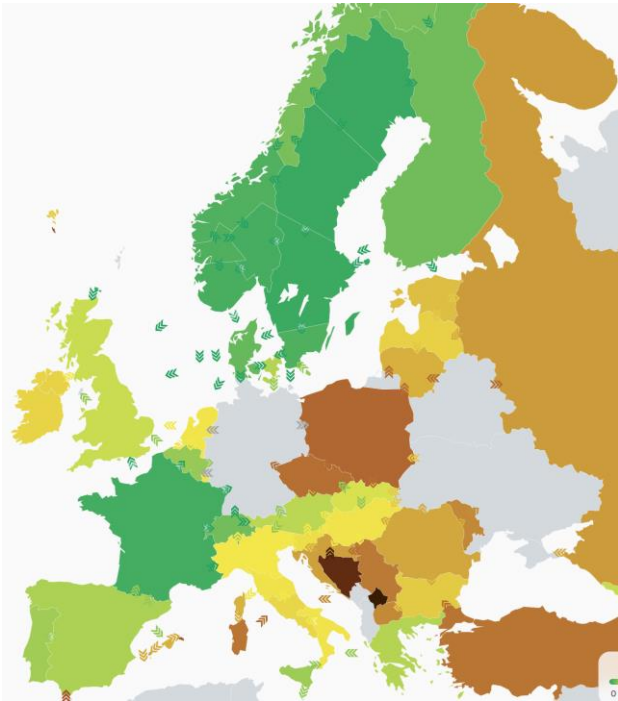


Helium + Recoil nuclei  
Collision cascades → Defects



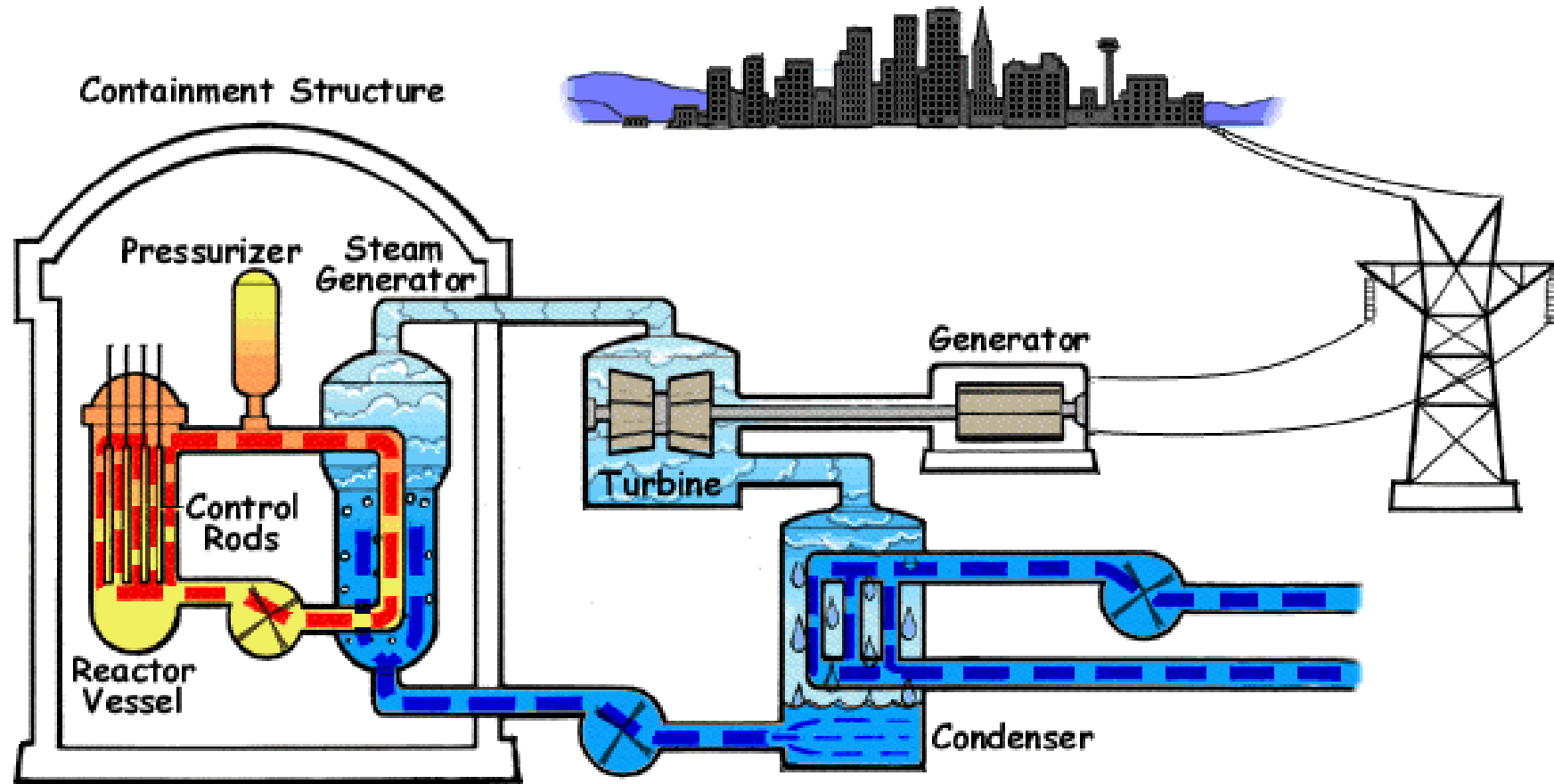
$$E=mc^2$$





- Negligible emission of CO<sub>2</sub>: As low as wind, with much higher availability
- Dense energy source
  - Fission produces 1 million times more energy than a chemical reaction such as the burning of coal, oil or gas (at equal mass)
  - Fusion produces four times as much as nuclear fission
- Nuclear fission energy exists and produces >1/4 of the baseload electricity in Europe and ~50% of low CO<sub>2</sub> electricity
- Other strengths
  - Stable prices, comparable to other sources
  - Stable supply of energy: high availability and reliability
  - Security of supply: uranium available in many and stable countries, easily stored, currently abundant + possibility of producing more fissile than used in fast reactors
- To limit the global temperature increase to the 2°C mark, the International Energy Agency suggests that carbon intensity of electricity generation must decrease by 90 % by 2050
- Nuclear must continue to play a role in electricity production to counteract climate change

# How does a current nuclear power plant work (fission)?



90 % of NPP around the world are pressurized light water reactors (LWRs)  
GenII / III / III+ reactors

# Challenges for sustainable nuclear fission

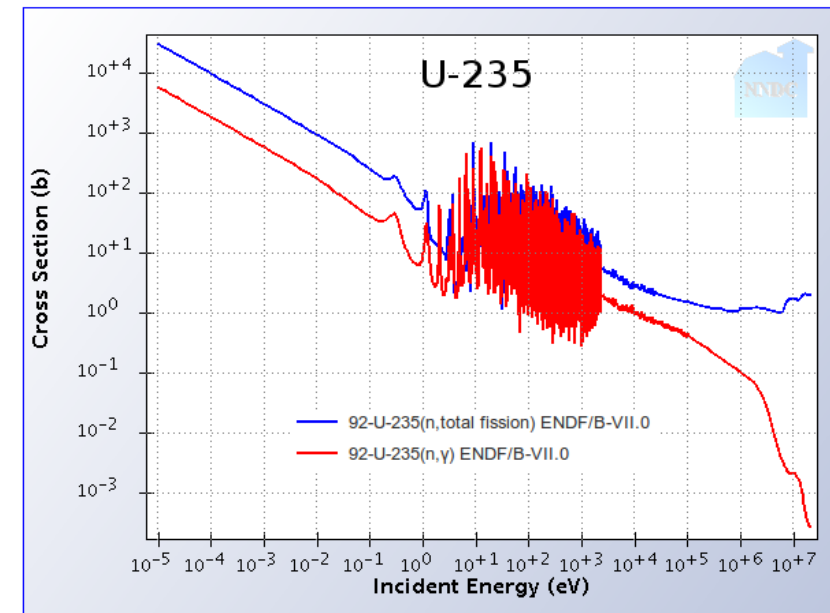
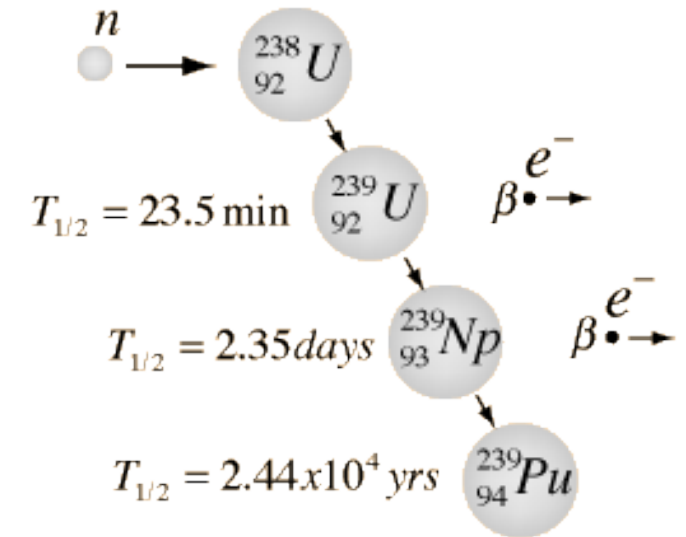
- Long-lived nuclear waste (highly radioactive)
- Consequences of severe accidents (e.g. Fukushima)
- Exhaustion of resources (non-renewability)
- Proliferation (misuse to build weapons)

**It is imperative that these issues be faced**



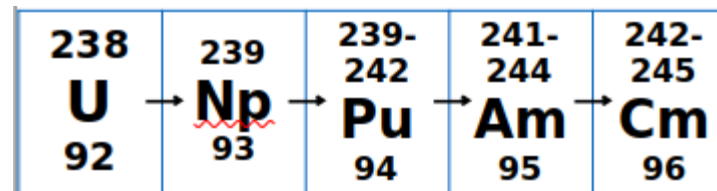
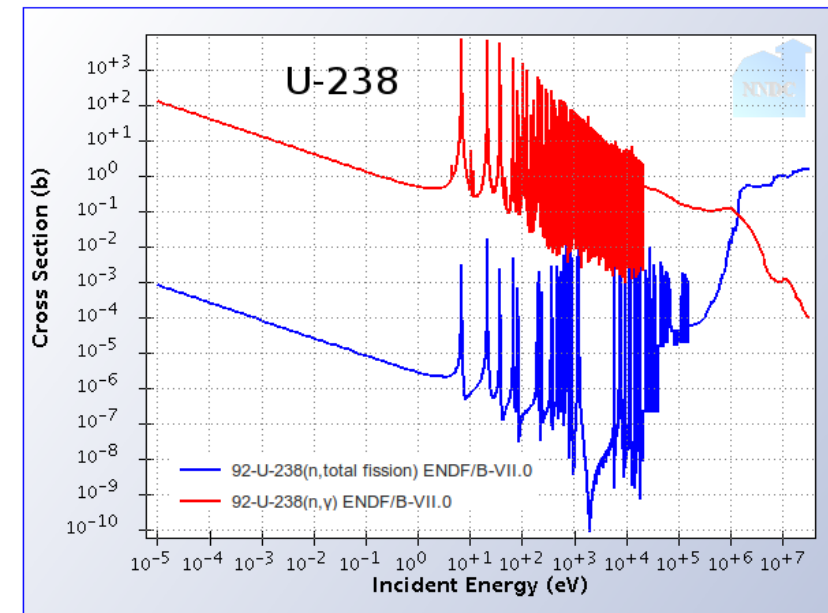
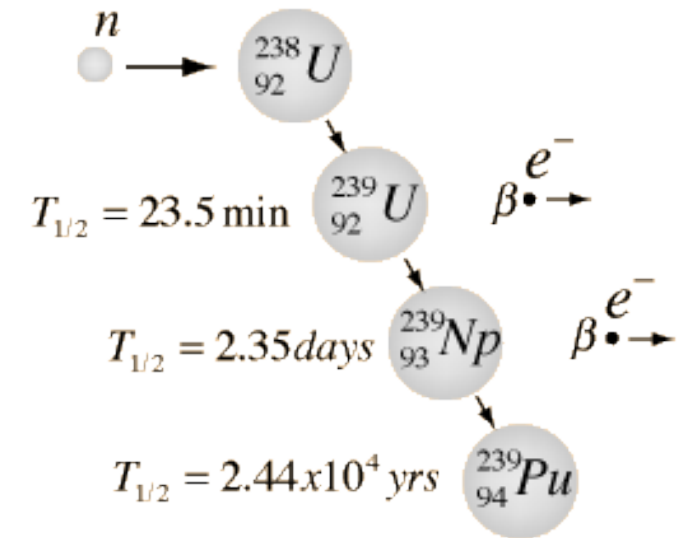
# Sustainable nuclear energy: fast reactors

- In addition to fission reactions, use of fertile nucleus reaction:  
 $n + {}^{238}\text{U} \rightarrow {}^{239}\text{Pu}$  fissile nucleus
- For transuranics, neutron energy needs to be  $>\sim 100$  keV (instead of 0.025 eV for thermal neutrons)
- Neutrons must NOT be slowed down (moderated)!  $\rightarrow$  Water cannot be used as coolant
- Neutron density (flux) must be high
- Push the burnup of fuel as high as possible  $\rightarrow$  very high irradiation dose (0.1  $\rightarrow$   $>100$  dpa)
- Push the coolant temperature as high as possible from  $\sim 300^\circ\text{C}$  to 500-1000 $^\circ\text{C}$
- Possible coolants: gases, liquid metals, molten salts, (Supercritical water)  $\rightarrow$  problems of corrosion, erosion, embrittlement, dissolution



# Sustainable nuclear energy: fast reactors

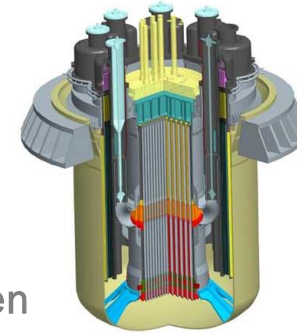
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# Sustainable nuclear energy: fast reactors

- Produce more fuel than they use → recycling in a logic of circular economy ensures energy for millennia without mining + recycling on-site increases proliferation resistance
- Work at higher temperature → are energetically more efficient, allow use of gas turbines instead of steam turbines, produce industrial heat, ...
- Burn spent nuclear fuel while producing energy → minimisation of quantities, reduction of waste quantity, lifetime (< 1000 years) and hazard
- Use passive safety systems (based on physical laws rather than human/computer intervention) → ☿■◆□☿■◆☿♫☉●●☒ safer

Lead Cooled Fast Reactor (LFR)



e.g.  
ALFRED  
BREST  
SEALER  
Newcleo  
...

Accelerator driven system (ADS)



MYRRHA  
...

Gas Cooled Fast Reactor (GFR)

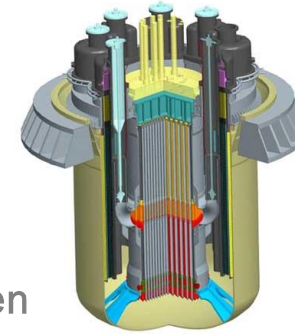
e.g. ALLEGRO  
HTR-PM  
HTGR  
...



# Sustainable nuclear energy: fast reactors

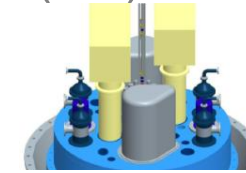
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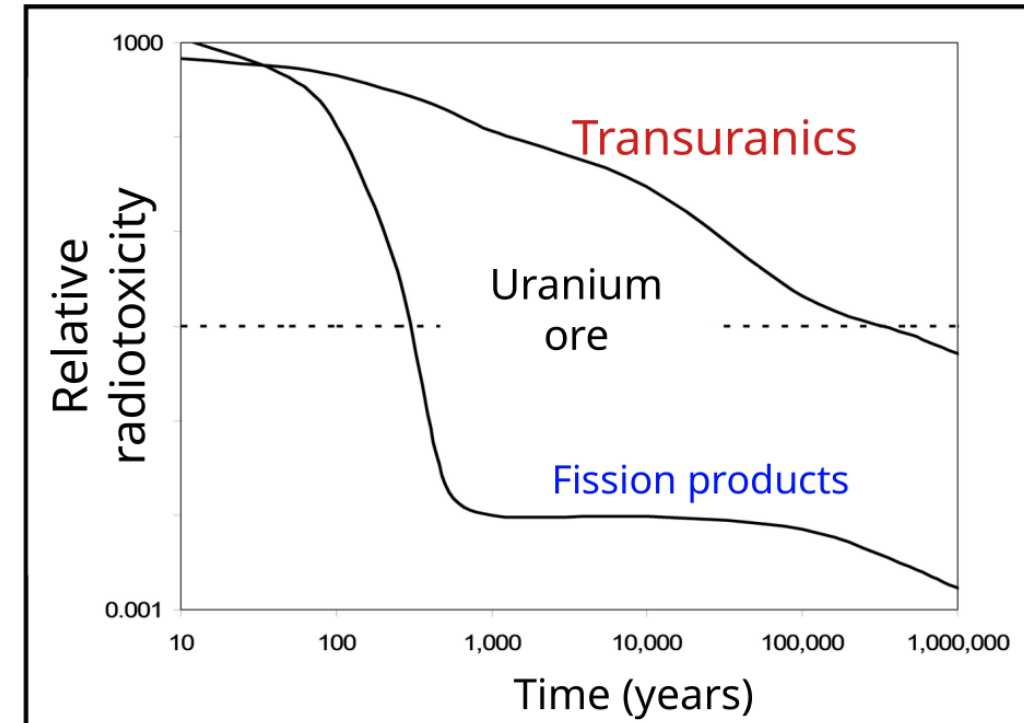


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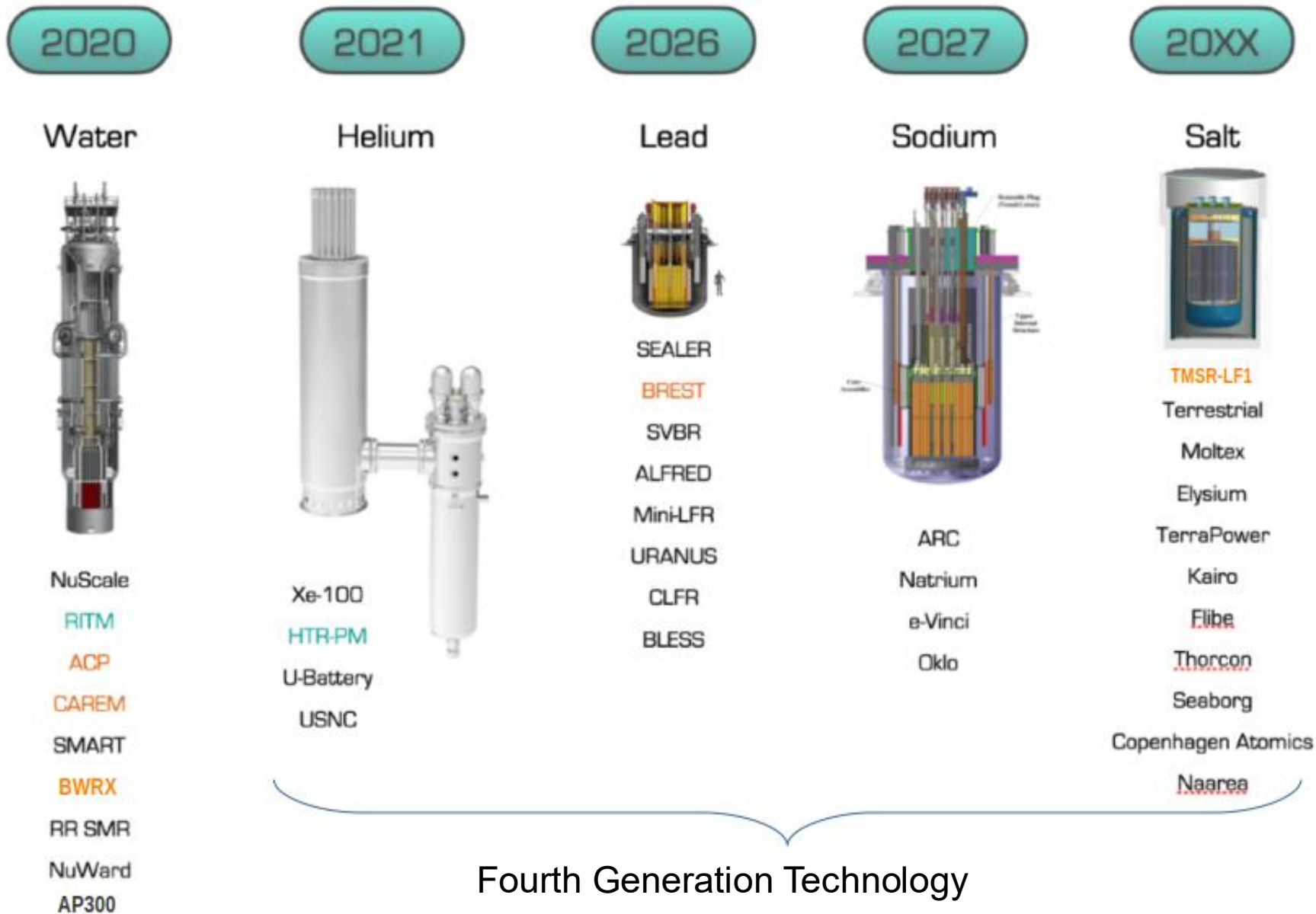
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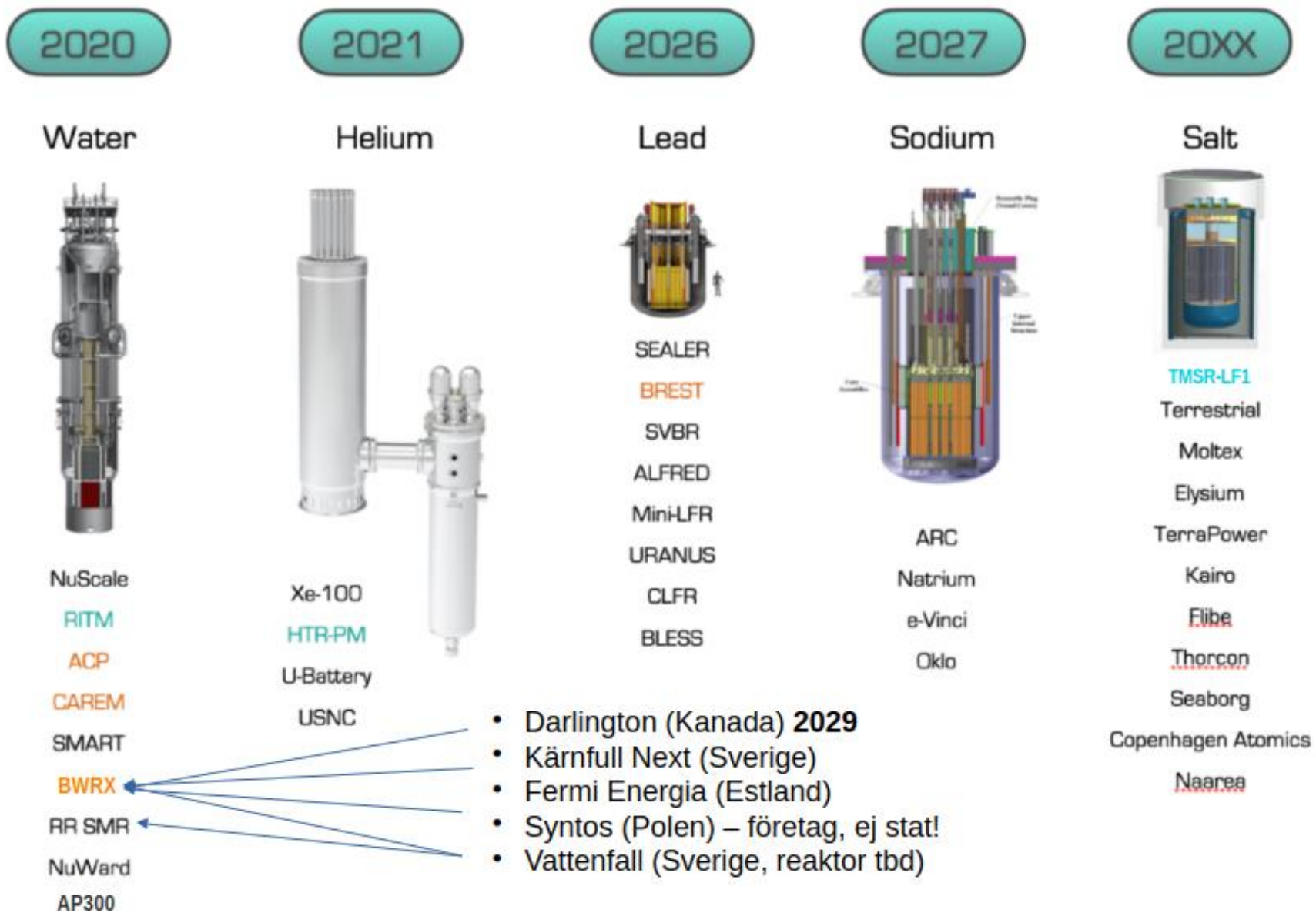
## The NEA Small Modular Reactor Dashboard: Second Edition



# SMR in the world



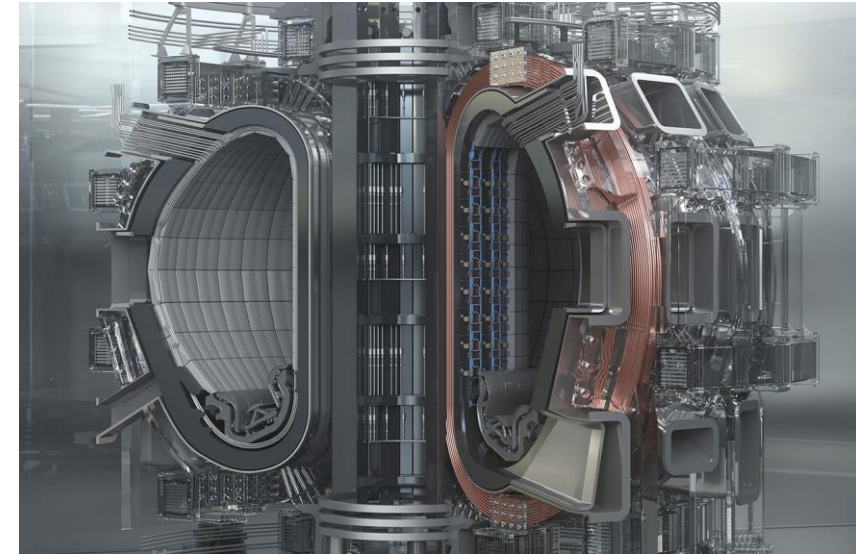
# SMR in the world



- Darlington (Kanada) 2029
- Kärnfull Next (Sverige)
- Fermi Energia (Estland)
- Syntos (Polen) – företag, ej stat!
- Vattenfall (Sverige, reaktor tbd)

## What about fusion?

- Abundant fuel
- Sustainability: Fusion fuels are deuterium and tritium:
- $D + T \rightarrow He + n + 17.6 \text{ MeV}$ 
  - Deuterium can be distilled from all forms of water
  - Tritium does not exist in nature ( $t_{1/2}=12\text{y}$ ), but can be produced by nuclear reaction of neutrons with lithium:
  - ${}^6\text{Li} + n \rightarrow He + T \rightarrow$  isotopically enriched lithium is the actual fusion fuel (7.5% abundance)
- However lithium is widely available: terrestrial reserves of lithium would permit the operation of fusion power plants for more than 1,000 years, sea-based reserves of lithium would fulfill needs for millions of years
- Fusion reaction does not emit carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere - Its major by-product is helium: an inert, non-toxic and reasonably valuable gas



- Nuclear fusion reactors produce no high-level long-lived nuclear waste
- However, radiation damage and activation are serious issues. Tons of structural materials become activated. The activation of components in a fusion reactor are challenging from a recycling perspective – certain materials could need cooling for > 1000 years
- Limited risk of proliferation: Fusion does not employ fissile materials like uranium and plutonium. There are no enriched materials in a fusion reactor like ITER that could be exploited for nuclear weapons. Tritium could be extracted from fusion power plant
- No risk of meltdown: A Fukushima-type nuclear accident is not possible in a tokamak fusion device. It is difficult enough to reach and maintain the precise conditions necessary for fusion – if any disturbance occurs, the plasma cools within seconds and the reaction stops
- The quantity of fuel present in the vessel at any one time is enough for a few seconds only and there is no risk of a chain reaction. However, tritium inventory needs to be kept ALARA. Most fusion safety issues come from the need of tritium containment
- Like GenIV fission, thermonuclear fusion is another approach towards **sustainable nuclear energy**

# Nuclear Materials

# Which materials?

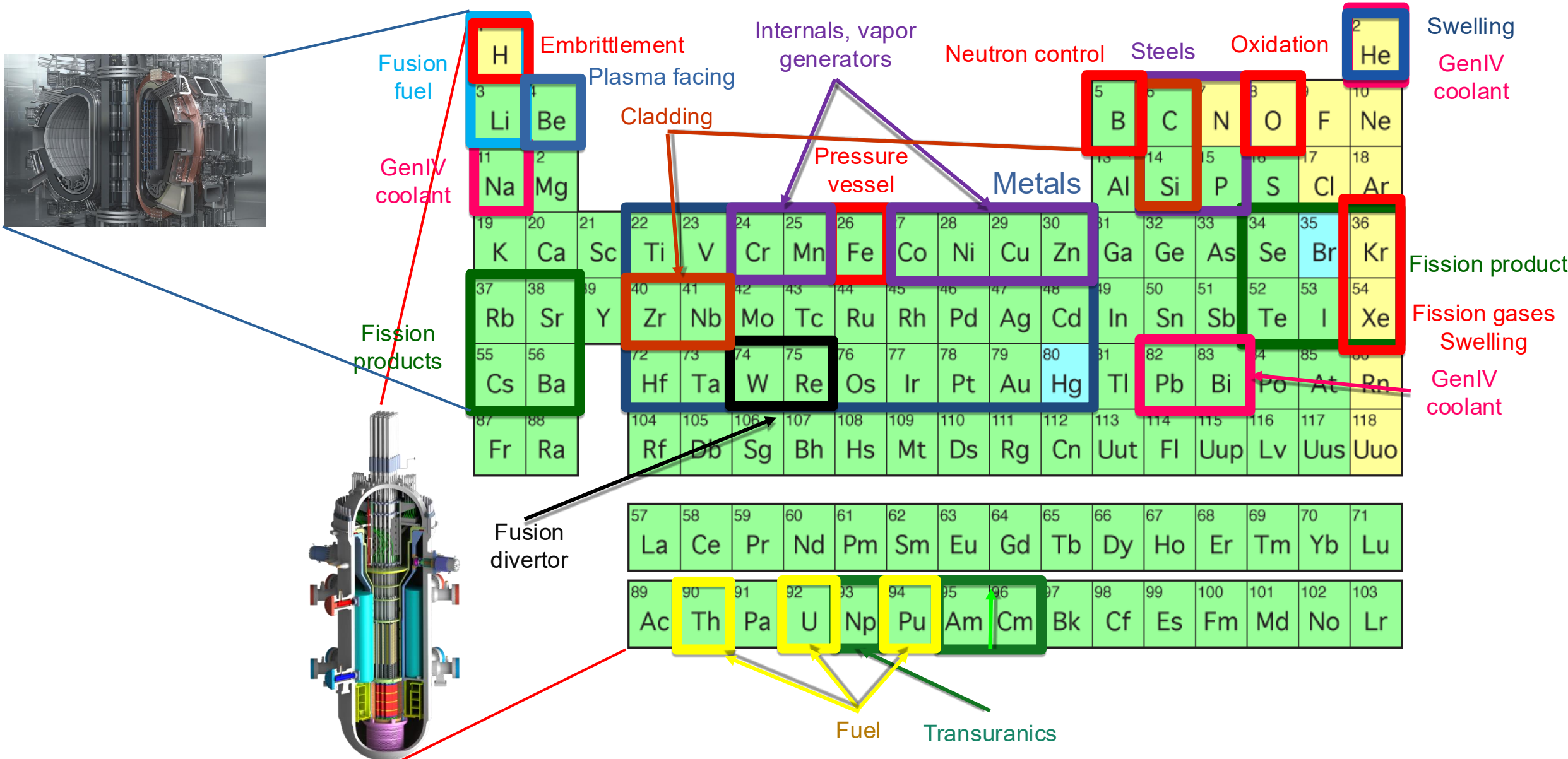
Materials present in a fission or fusion reactor: several families of materials with various functions

## Examples for fission

- Concrete
- Polymers for structural applications
- Metallic alloys for structural components
- Refractory materials for structural components
- Fuel cladding materials
- Nuclear fuel materials (fissile and fertile)
- Materials for neutron control: absorbers, moderators, reflectors



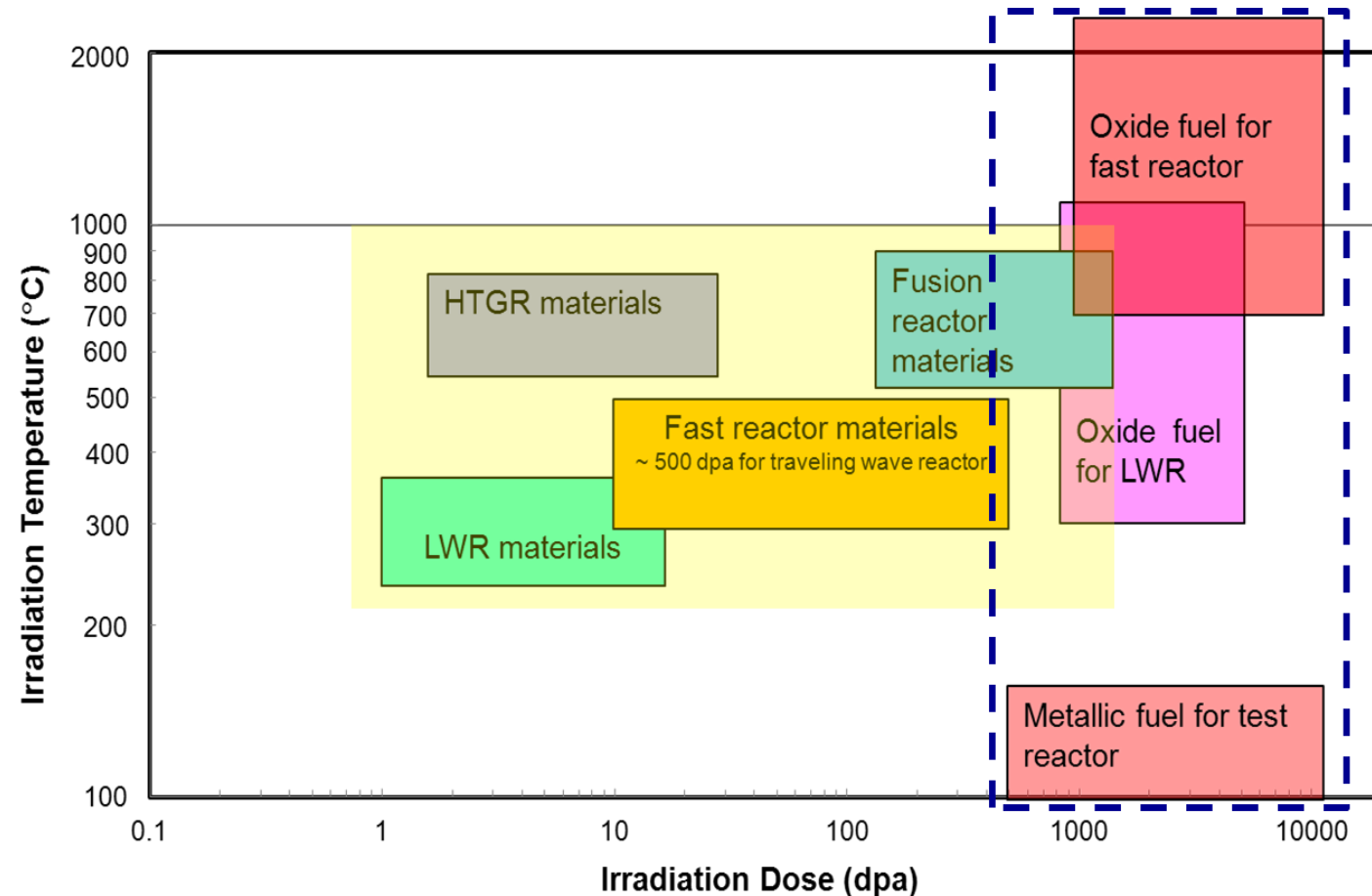
# Elements of interest



# Properties required for nuclear materials

## Structural materials

- Radiation resistance
  - Low swelling / Irradiation creep
  - Limited embrittlement
  - For fusion, limited He effect
- High temperature-resistance: creep strength, creep-fatigue resistance
- Compatibility with (Heavy) liquid metals (Na liq, Pb liq, PbBi, PbLi), gas (He), molten salts, supercritical water

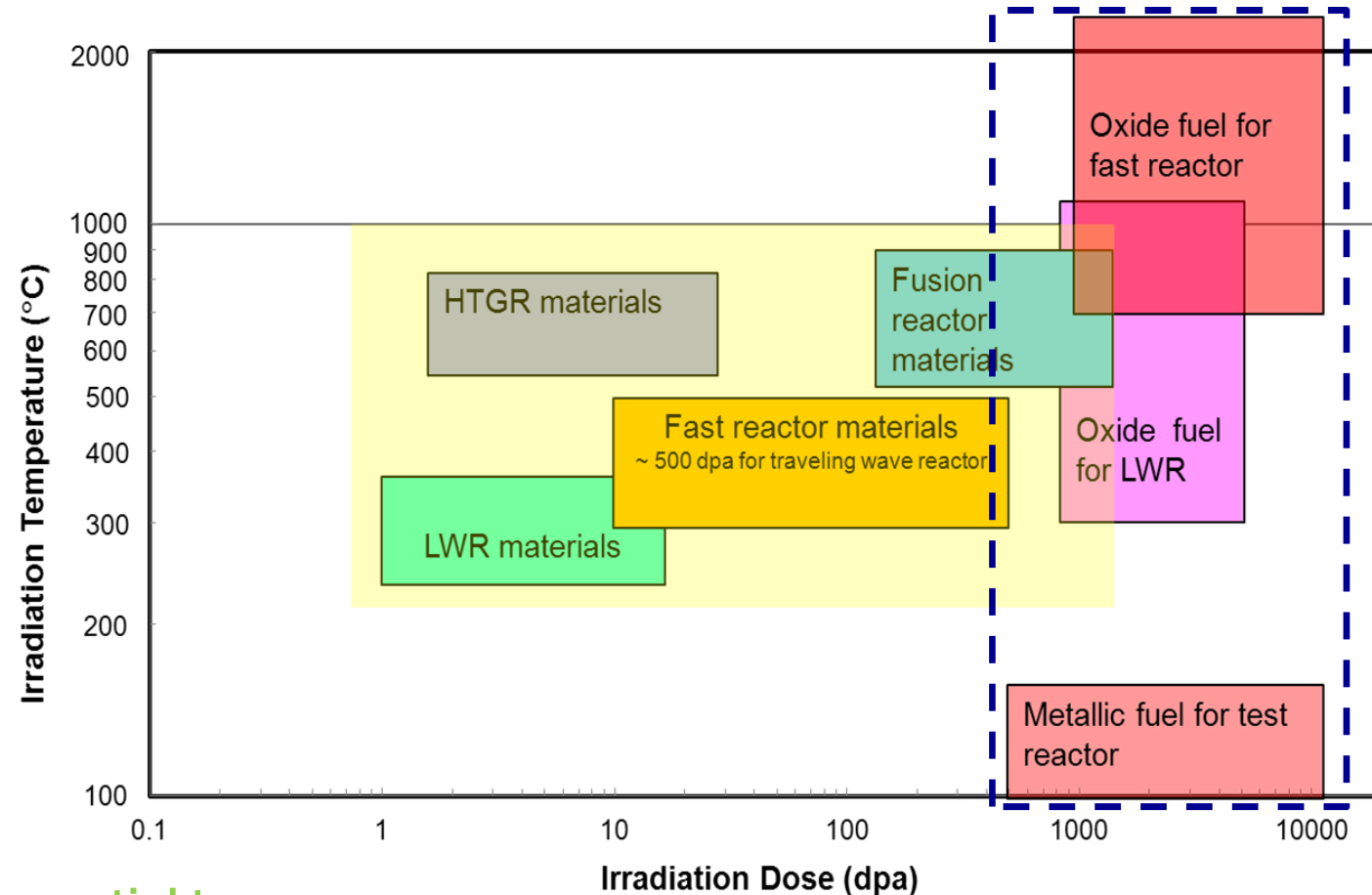


# Properties required for nuclear materials

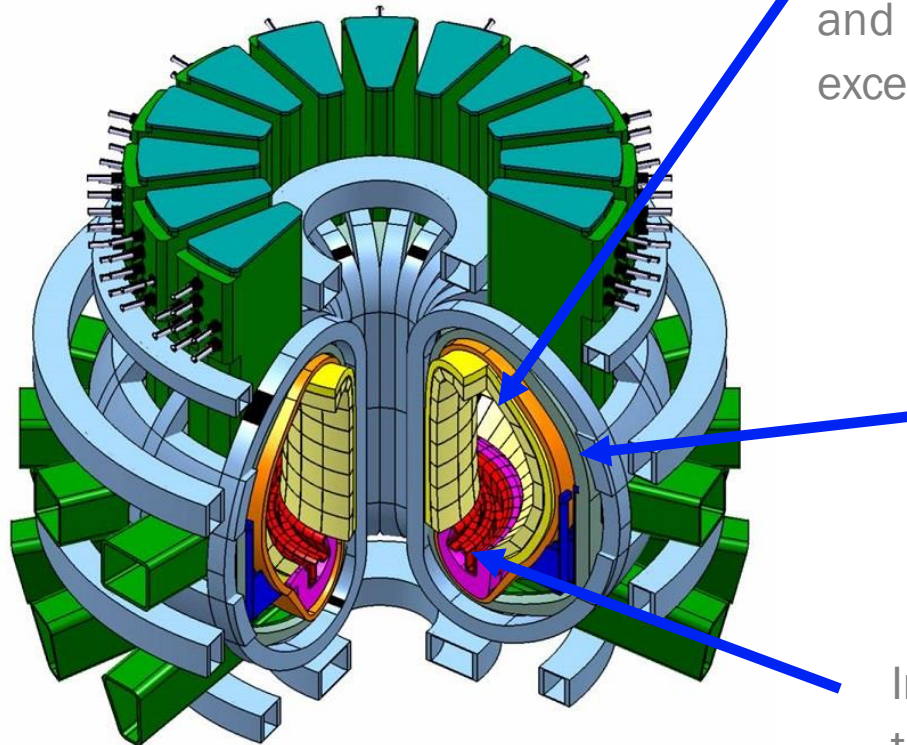
## Fuels

- Homogeneous compositions, especially for high Pu contents
- High melting temperatures
- High thermal conductivity
- Good mechanical properties: creep
- Resistance to corrosion from fission products
- Low swelling

The performance of nuclear materials is essential to make Gen IV and fusion reactors a reality



## Fusion DEMO design



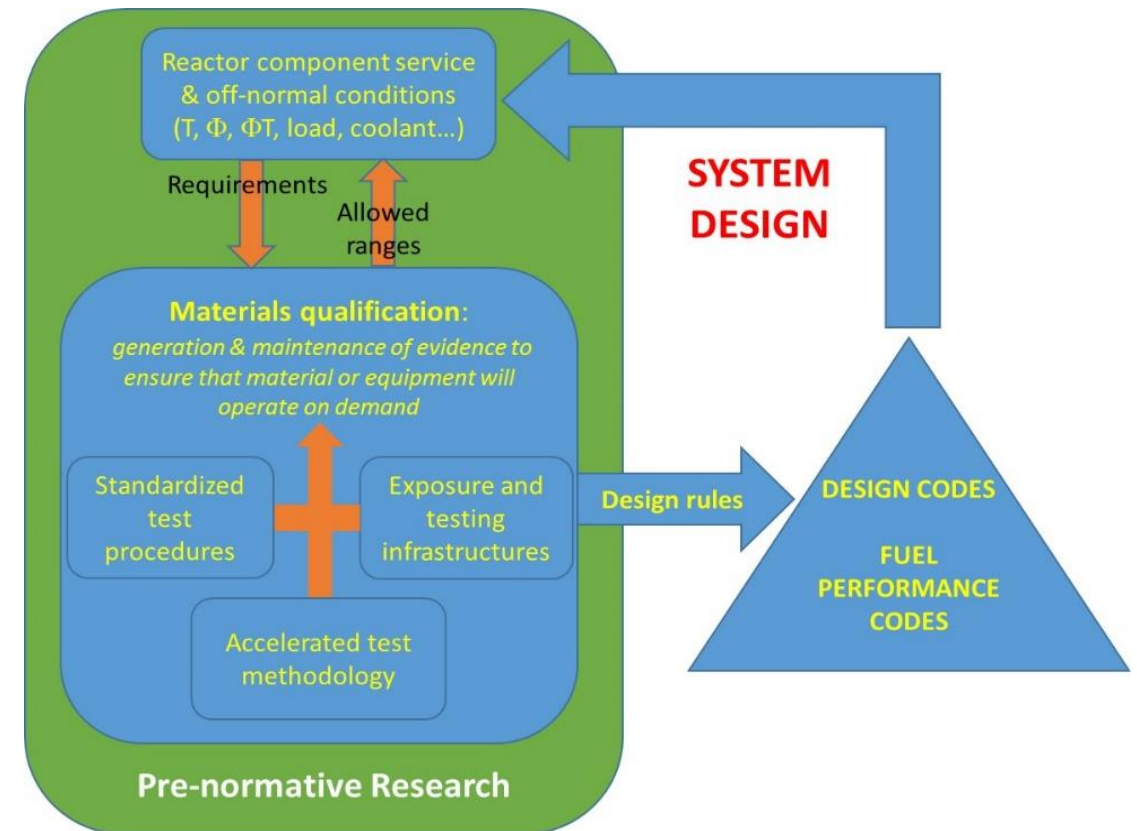
First wall materials will receive around 10 dpa/fpy (displacements per atom per full-power year)

Plasma facing materials will be subjected to plasma erosion and receive 5-10 MW/m<sup>2</sup> heat, reaching temperatures in excess of 1000°C

Structural materials will also receive high doses of neutrons, ~4 dpa/fpy and will be in contact with flowing water (~300°C) or He (~500°C) for heat extraction and in some designs with liquid PbLi for tritium breeding

In the divertor the dpa/fpy may be somewhat less but the thermal shocks may reach 15-20 MW/m<sup>2</sup>, with serious erosion problems that may be the real technological bottleneck

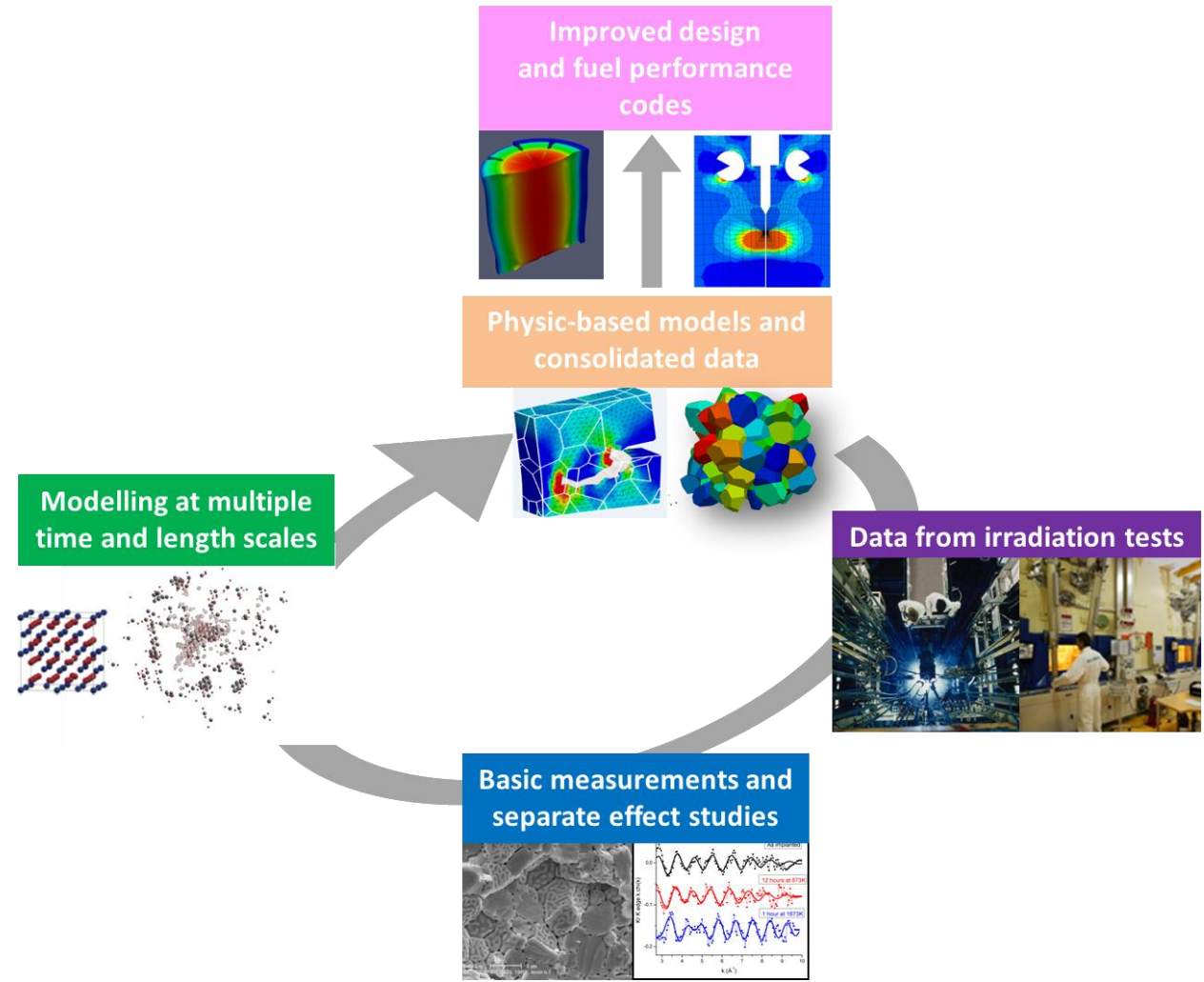
- Materials with the required properties must be selected, optimized or developed
- One of the main tasks of materials engineers: define lifetime of systems and components
- It implies knowing what happens to materials and how properties change in normal operating but also in off-normal conditions
- This qualification of the material has traditionally relied upon testing materials or components under relevant conditions, as well as by monitoring it during operation
- Acquired knowledge of the behaviour of a material is then transferred to models, more or less detailed, specific or general, which are capitalized in design codes (for structural materials and components) or fuel performance codes (fuel elements)



# Why Nuclear Materials Science?

# Science-based approach for materials qualification

- Though successfully deployed for thermal and fast reactors operated in Europe thus far, empirical qualification is neither reliable, nor easily, extrapolated to other conditions
- Operation conditions more stringent, very few materials testing reactors in Europe, and none in fast spectrum, safety requirements much stricter after Fukushima accident
- A better understanding of the underlying phenomena of materials behaviour is a prerequisite for a significant improvement of codes and effective qualification of materials for Gen IV and fusion reactors
- Shift in paradigm from "Observe and qualify" to "Design and control"

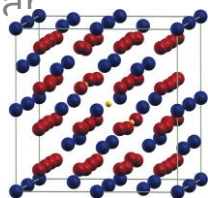


# Main methods and techniques applied

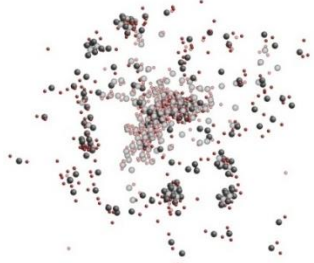
## Modelling

- Electronic structure calculations (energy minimizations, molecular dynamics)

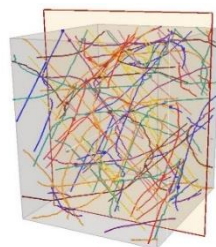
**ML/AI methods!**



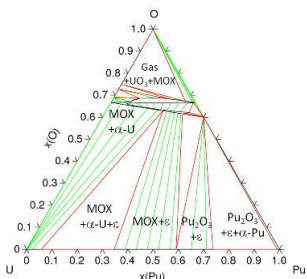
- Empirical interatomic potential (MD, MC energy minimizations)



- Models at the mesoscopic scale: rate theory methods, dislocation dynamics



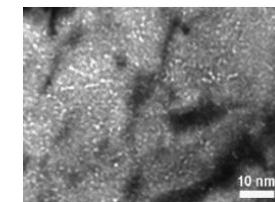
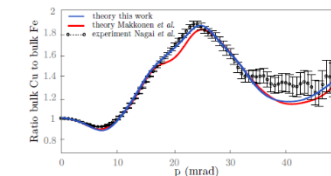
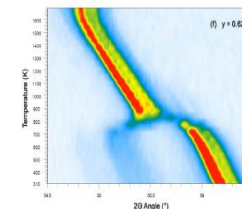
- Thermodynamic modelling: CALPHAD method
- Finite elements methods



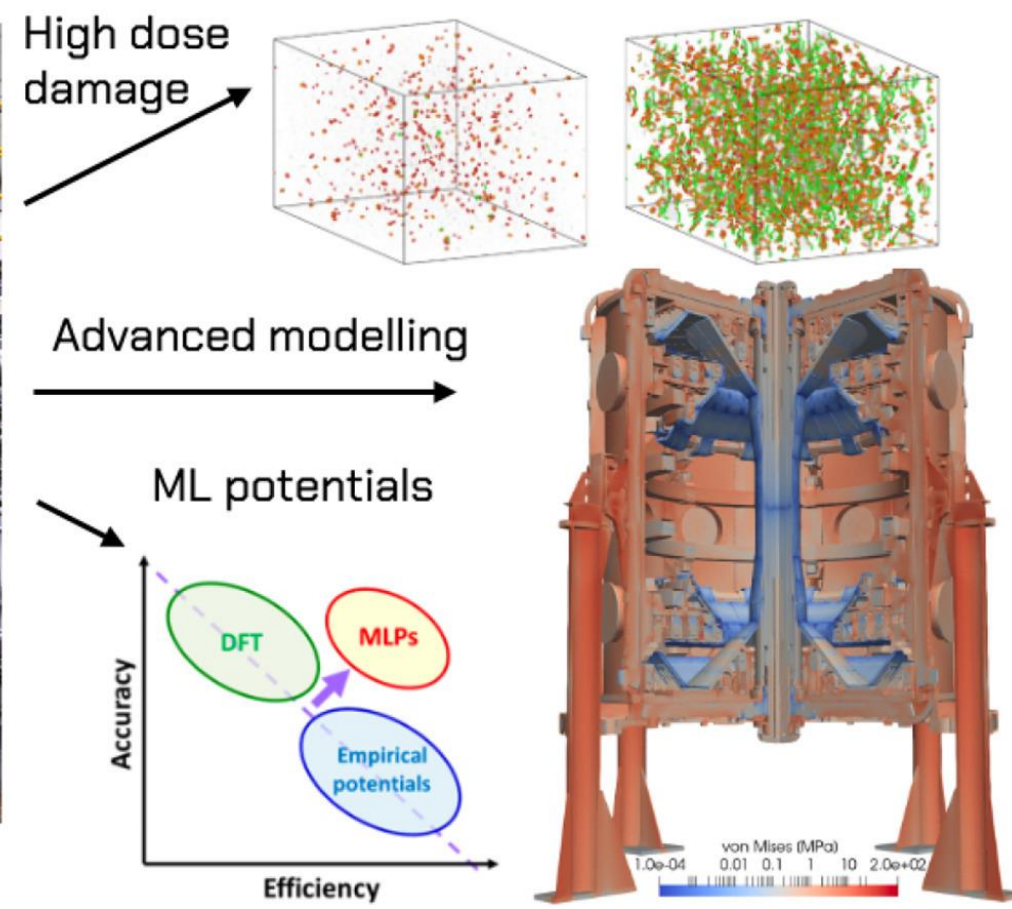
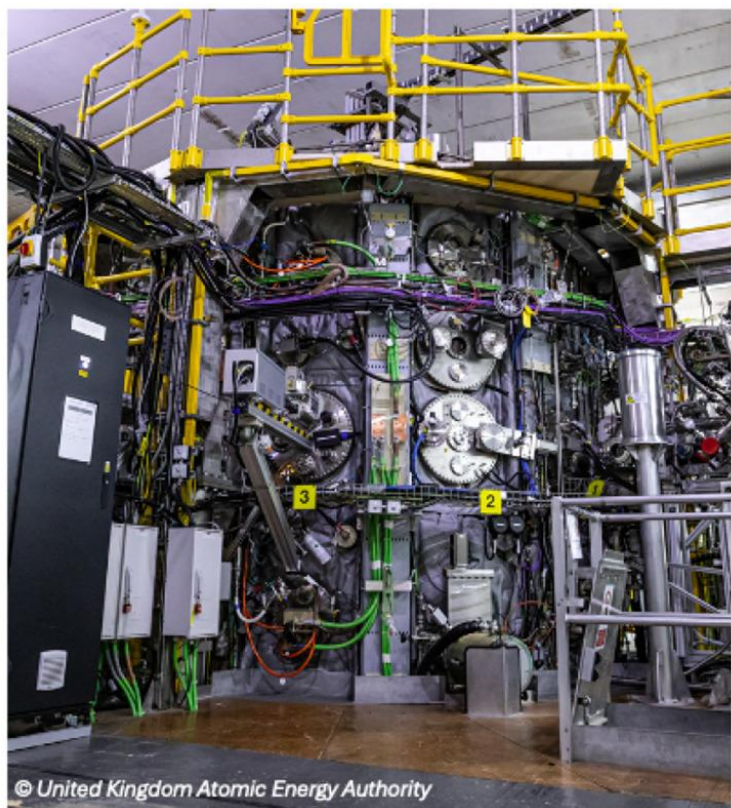
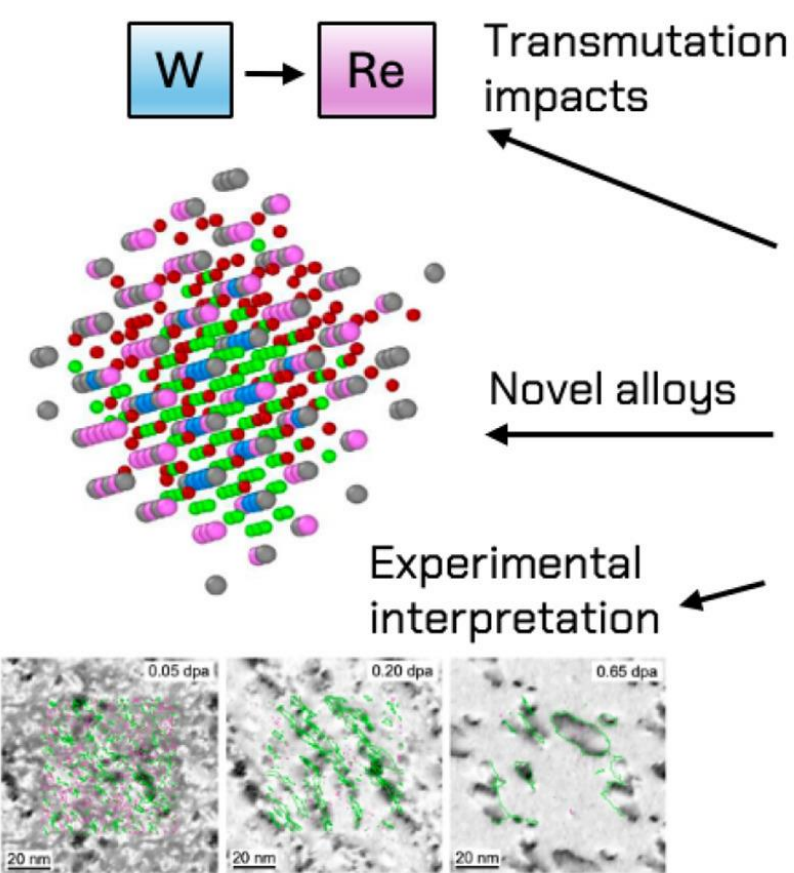
## Experimental techniques

Detailed characterisation at relevant scale of materials, including surrogates, ion irradiated, implanted or model materials to simulate specific aspects of irradiation

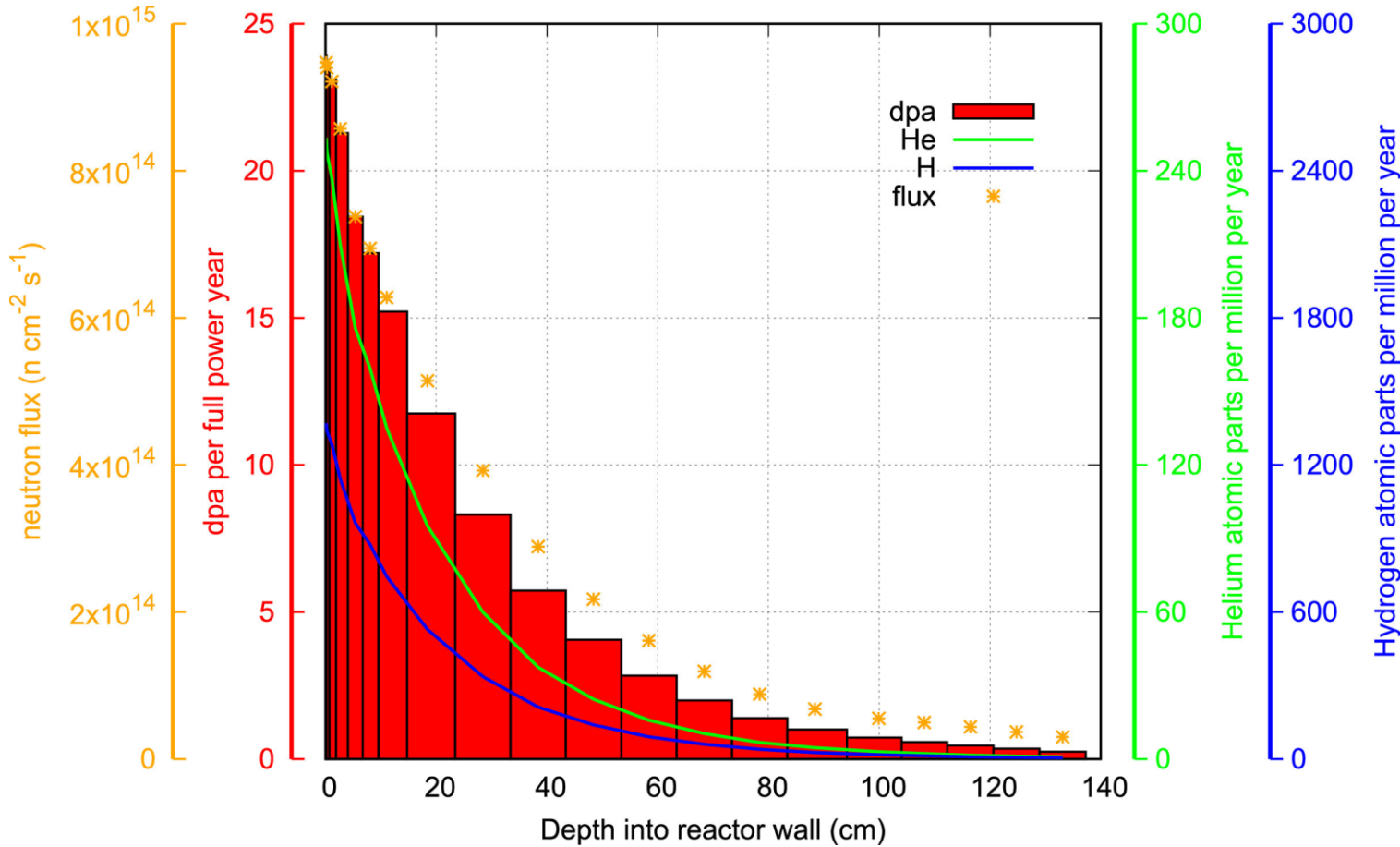
- X-Ray diffraction and absorption
- Positron annihilation spectroscopy
- Small angle neutron scattering
- Atom Probe tomography
- Raman spectroscopy
- Thermal desorption spectrometry
- High temperature mass spectrometry
- Electrical conductivity measurement
- Transmission and Scanning Electron Microscopy
- Electron Back Scatter Diffraction
- Electron energy loss spectroscopy
- Atomic Force Microscopy
- Atom probe tomography
- Nano and micro-indentation
- Mechanical testing on miniature or components
- Differential scanning and drop calorimetry



## Fusion materials modelling: present gaps and future opportunities



# Radiation damage in fusion reactors



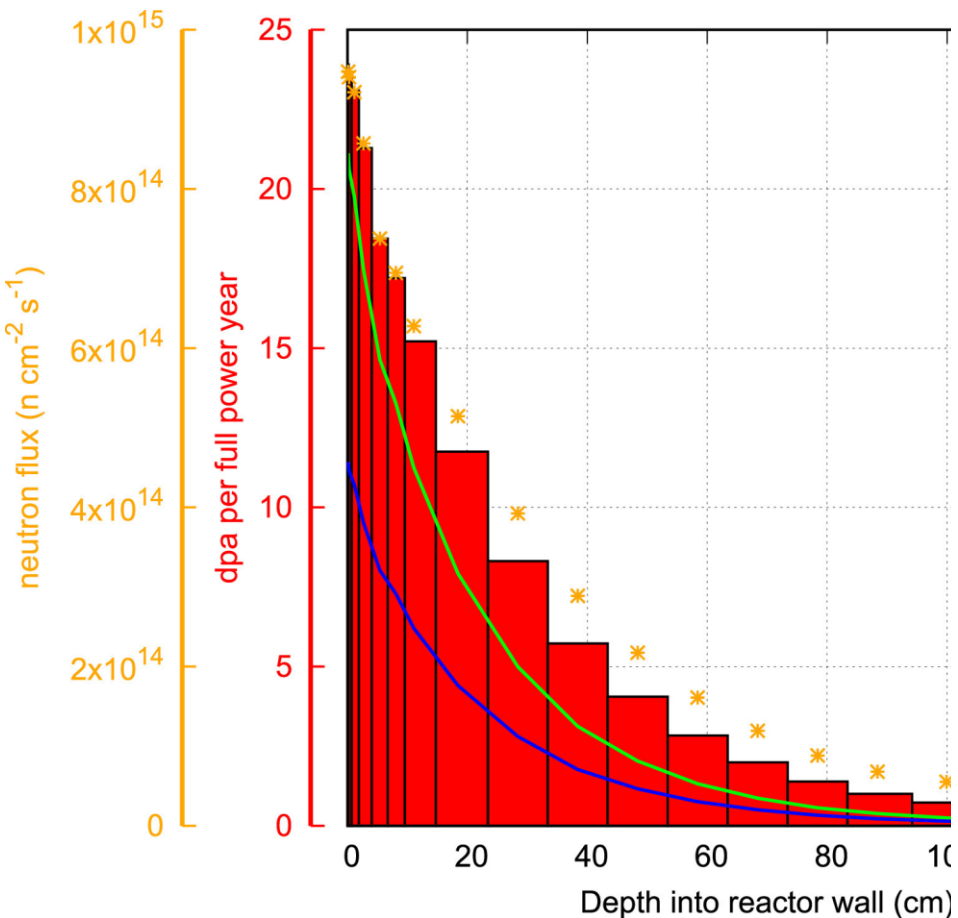
**STEP tokamak design:**

**Assuming reactor wall is pure Fe**

**Intense radiation damage (in dpa)**

**Significant light element build up**

# Microstructural evolution in fusion reactors

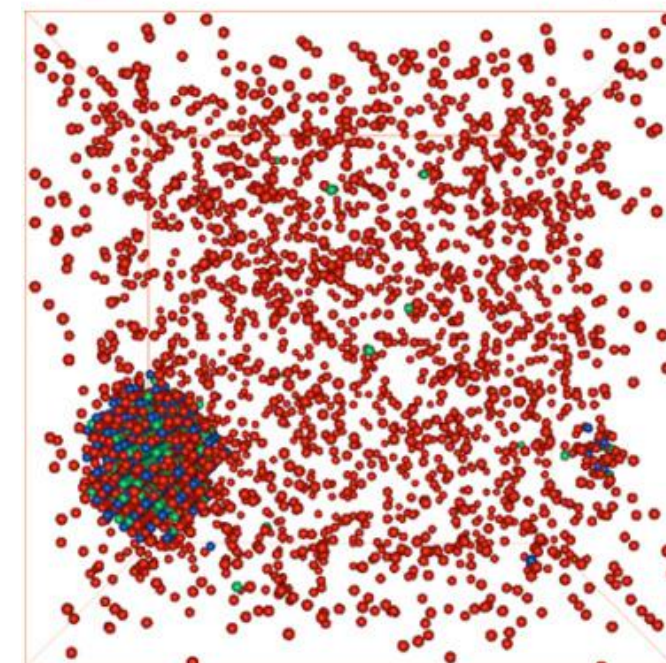
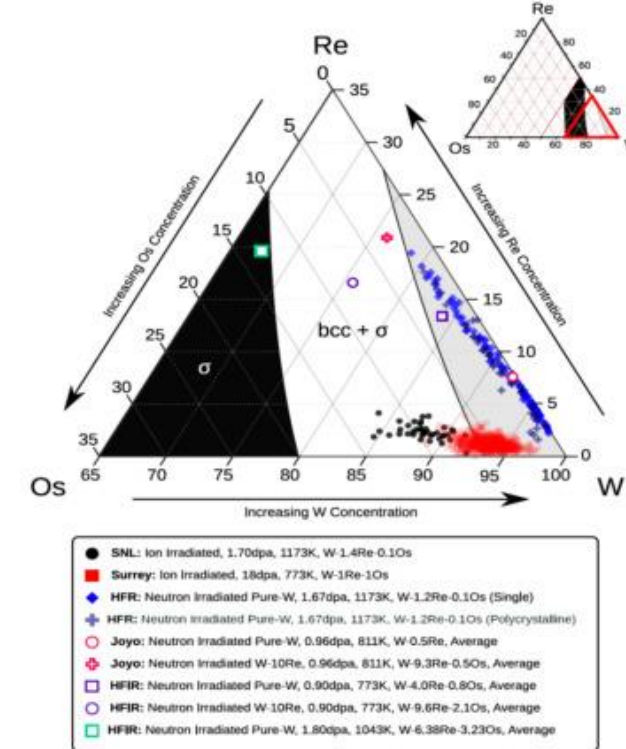


Chemical evolution of fusion materials:

Significant cross sections for transmutation from fast neutrons (2.5 and 14 MeV)

W plasma facing wall slowly turning into W-Re-Os-... alloy

Phase- and microstructure evolution affected



- SUNRISE was formed by KTH, UU and LTU together with large parts of the Swedish nuclear and steel industry (and global partners).
- **Goals:**
  - Design a lead-cooled research reactor to be ready by 2030.
- **Stages:**
  - Stage 1: Research and development to license the research reactor
  - Stage 2: Build an electrically heated prototype and conduct experiments
  - Stage 3: Build and operate the SUNRISE reactor
- International academic partners, Industry stakeholders, Societal stakeholders



UPPSALA  
UNIVERSITET



UNSW  
AUSTRALIA



Part of Sandvik Group





## Motivation for SUNRISE

- Nuclear power is the only carbon neutral and long-term, sustainable source of base load electricity that can be scaled up slow-down the changing climate
- Recent constructions of large NPPs turned out to be expensive and run over budget
- Automated serial production can be utilised
- The use of lead coolant implies that passive safety can be achieved in the most compact format.
- Can be included in a circular Gen-IV for increased long-term sustainability

Stainless steel



Steel alloys developed at KTH

## Five Work Packages within SUNRISE

- **WP1:** Design and safety analysis of research reactor (LFR)
- **WP2:** Steel performance and testing
- **WP3:** Manufacturing methods and testing on reactor components
- **WP4:** Nuclear fuel development
- **WP5:** Erosion-corrosion test facility



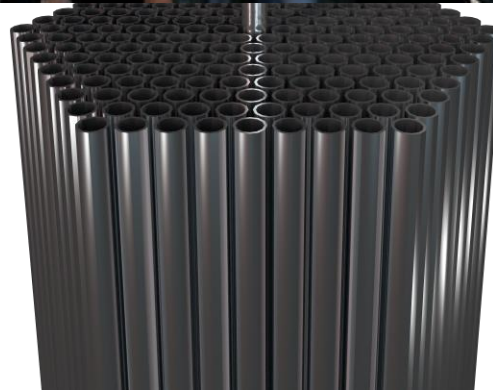


## Motivation for SUNRISE

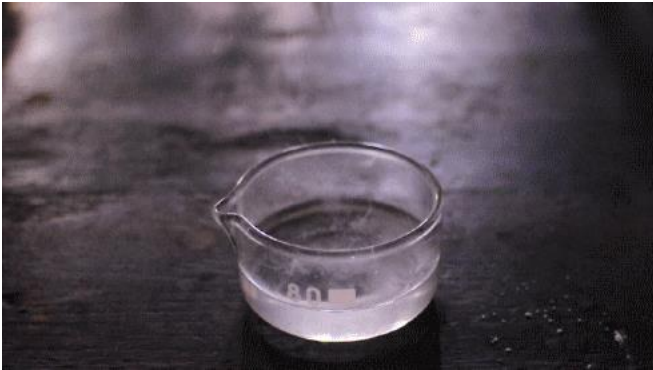
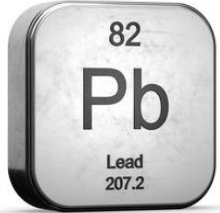
- Nuclear power is the only carbon neutral and **Stainless**



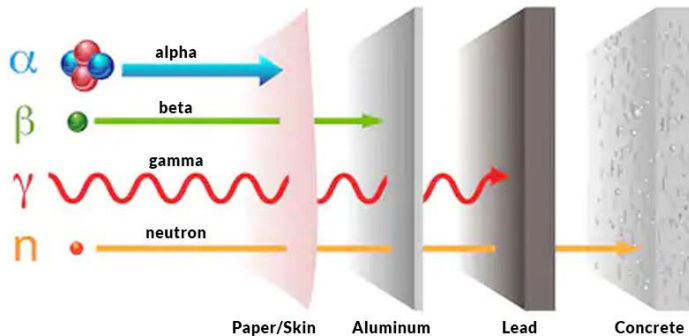
**Steel alloys developed at KTH**



- WP5:** Erosion-corrosion test facility



Sodium in water



- No need to pressurise the reactor → Thinner reactor vessel → lower cost and manufacturing complexity
- High boiling point (1749 °C), no coolant loss
- No high-energetic exothermic reaction in contact with water or structural material
- Passive safety through natural circulation is achievable in a compact format
- Fast neutron spectrum, higher fuel yield
- In case of fuel rod damage, iodine and cesium will form compounds with lead, reducing their release to environment
- Efficient shielding from gamma radiation



- Opaque – visual inspections impossible. New methods must be developed
- High melting point (327 °C)
  - Maintenance at high temperatures.
  - Risk of freezing issues. Design must mitigate risks with “overcooling”
- Nickel dissolution from steels in lead - requires a stable oxide layer for protection
  - Erosion of the oxide layer must be avoided
- High density – many components float



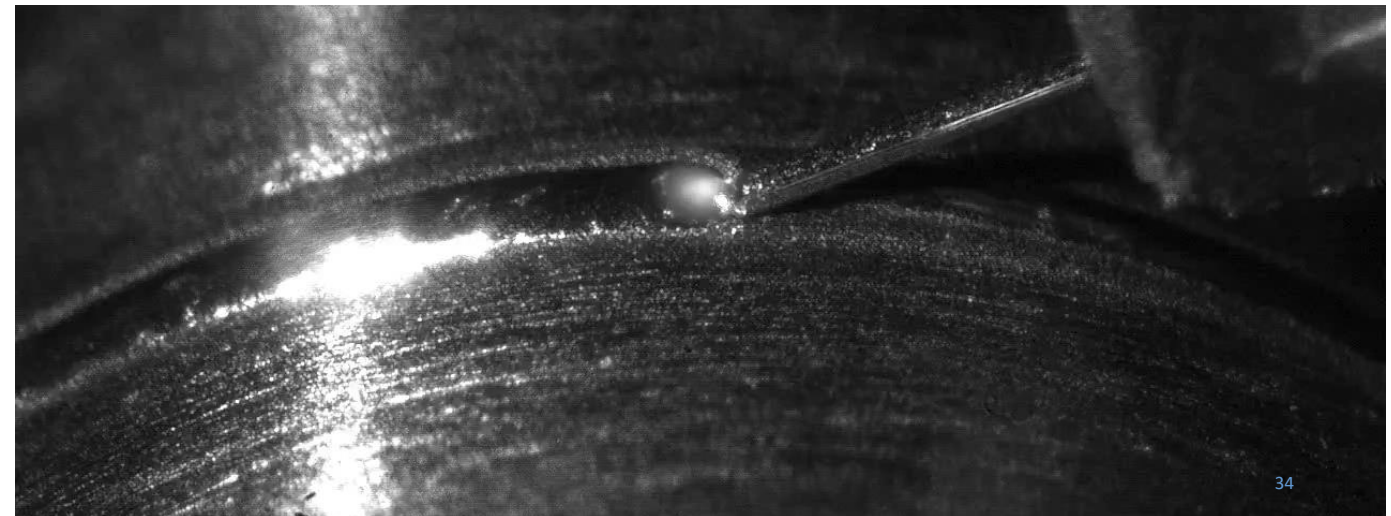
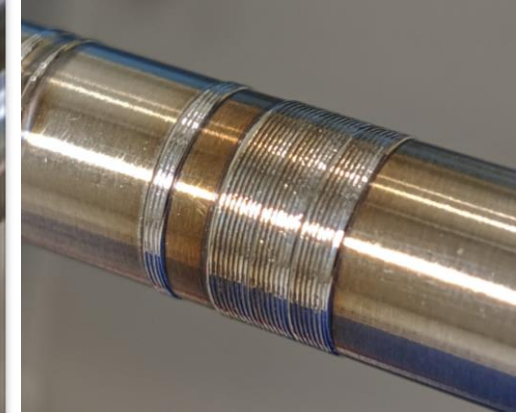
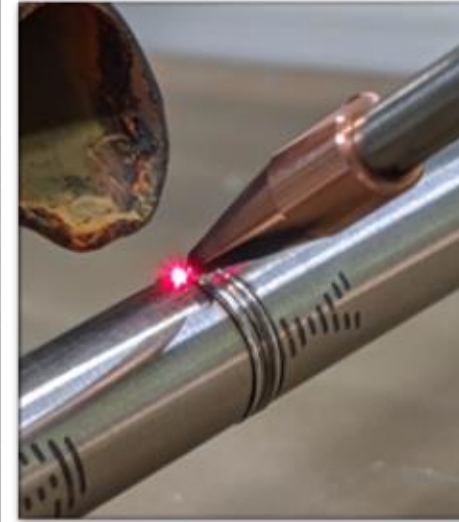
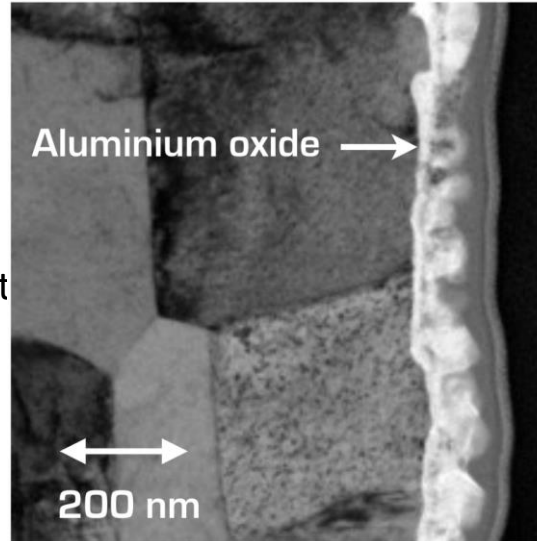
Anvil floating in mercury

**SOLUTIONS ARE NEEDED..**

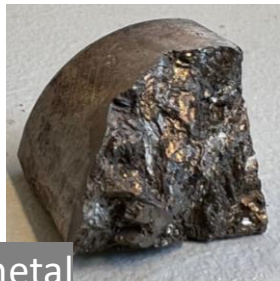
**NEW ADVANCED MATERIALS AND PROCESSES!**

## Development of a lead-compatible steel

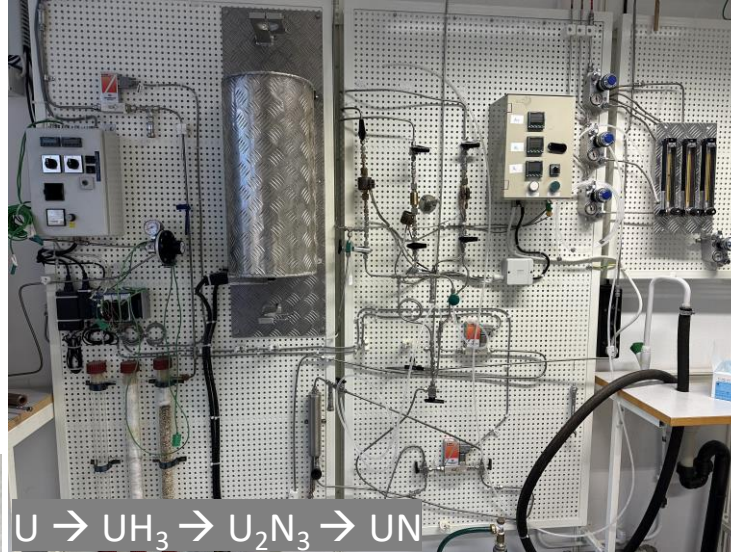
- **FeCrAl** steel alloy developed at KTH forms thin, self-healing and protecting, layers of alumina (sapphire) on the surface.
- Reactive elements have been added to ensure the oxide layer stable of a high quality.
- **FeCrAl** alloys have demonstrated exceptional performance in high-temperature lead.
  - **2 years at 550 °C**
  - **10 weeks at 850 °C**
- Laser welding of FeCrAl on bulk 15-15Ti
  - Process development ongoing at LTU
- Development ongoing of other alumina forming steels for other applications (AFA)



- + Higher uranium density (40 % compared to  $UO_2$ )
  - ↻ Allows 20 years of operation in a SMRs
- + Higher ability to conduct heat compared with  $UO_2$
- + High melting temperature (2850 °C)
- + Sintering fuel in a few minutes
- + Study of the simulated fuel
  - $^{15}N$  enrichment required, as a reaction of  $^{14}N$  with neutrons produces radioactive  $^{14}C$
  - Low operational experience – additional time to qualify



U metal



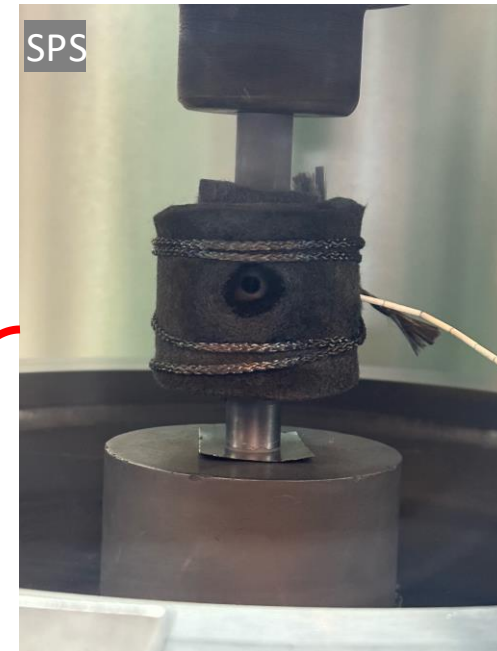
$U \rightarrow UH_3 \rightarrow U_2N_3 \rightarrow UN$



UN powder



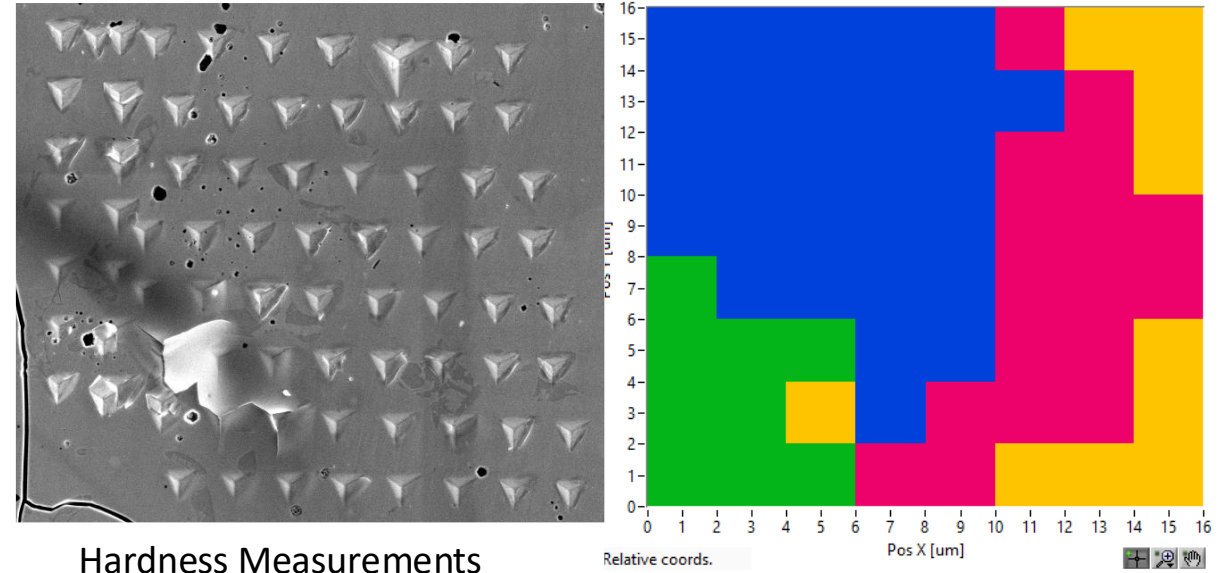
UN pellet



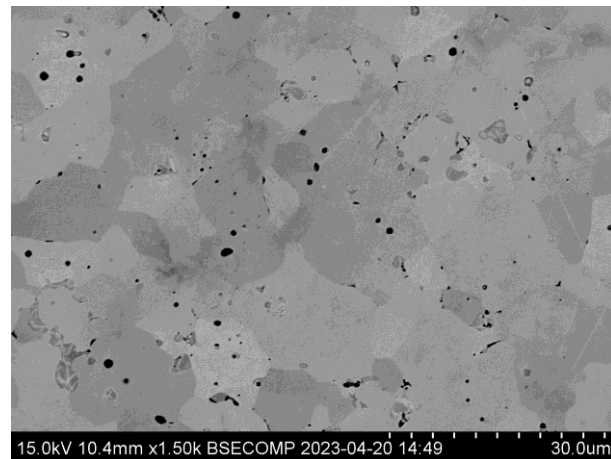
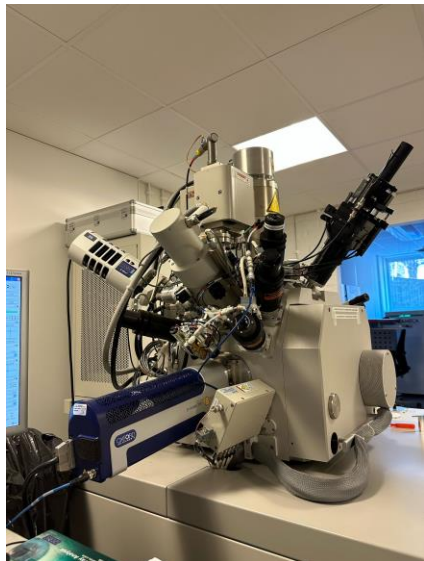
SPS



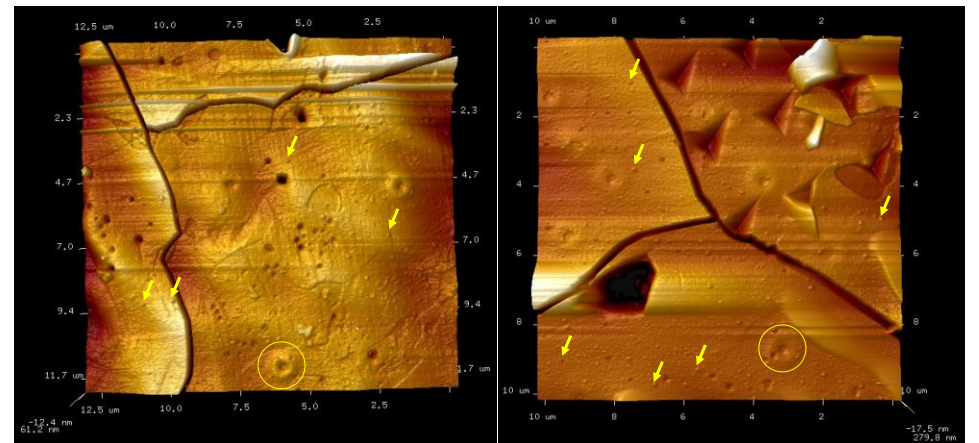
Irradiation facility



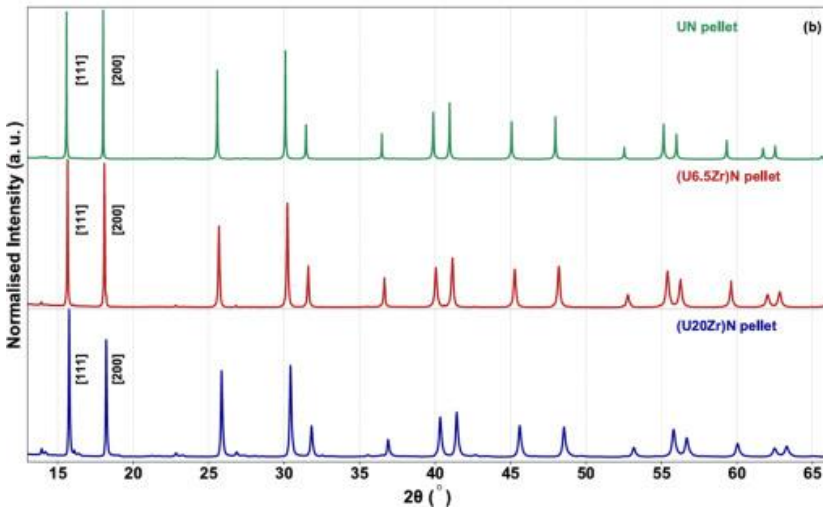
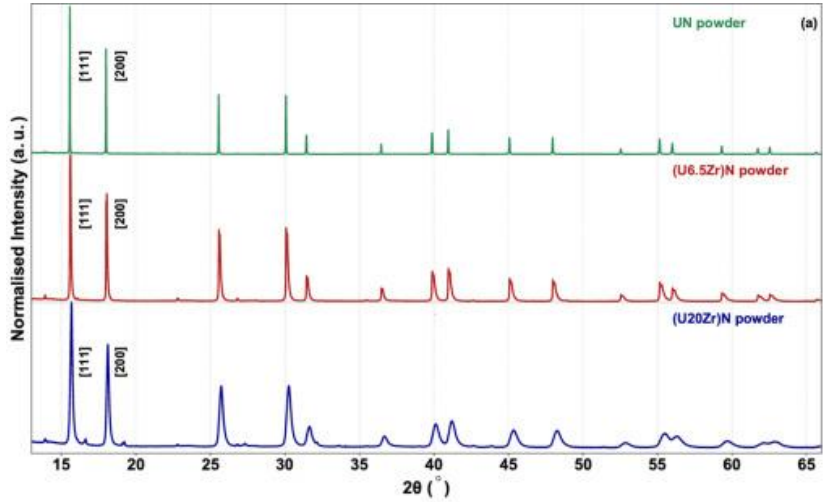
Hardness Measurements



Microscopy



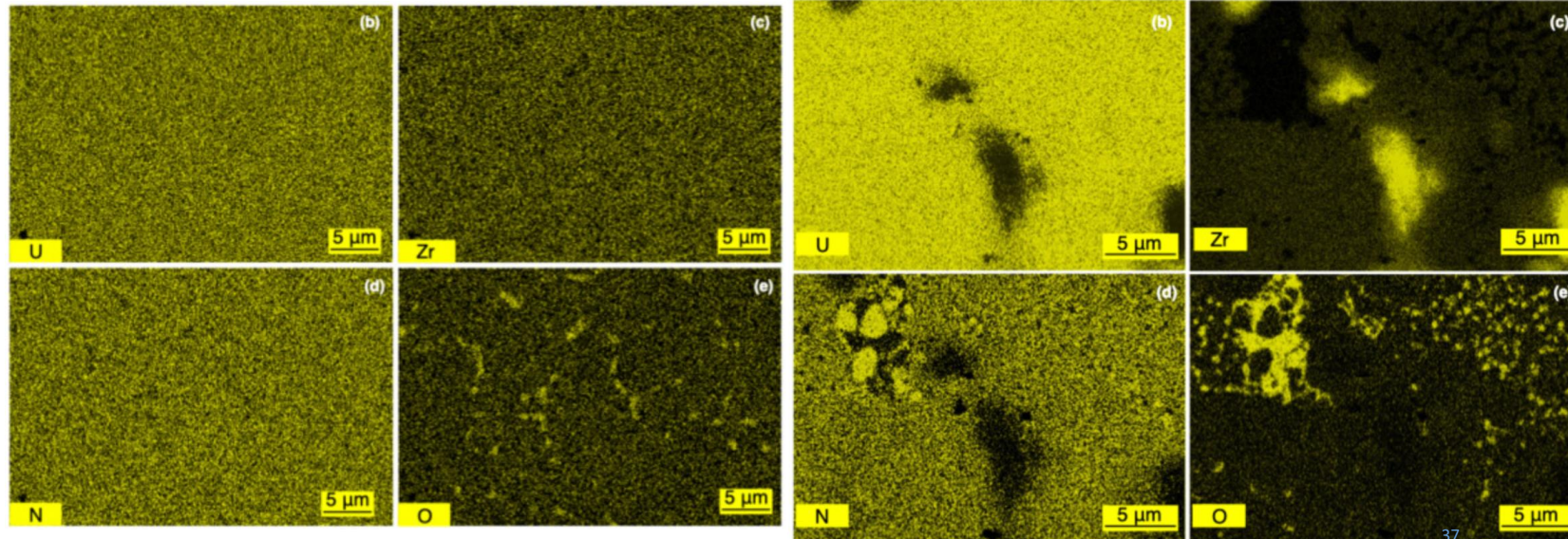
Charatsidou et al, J Materiomics 10 (2024) 906

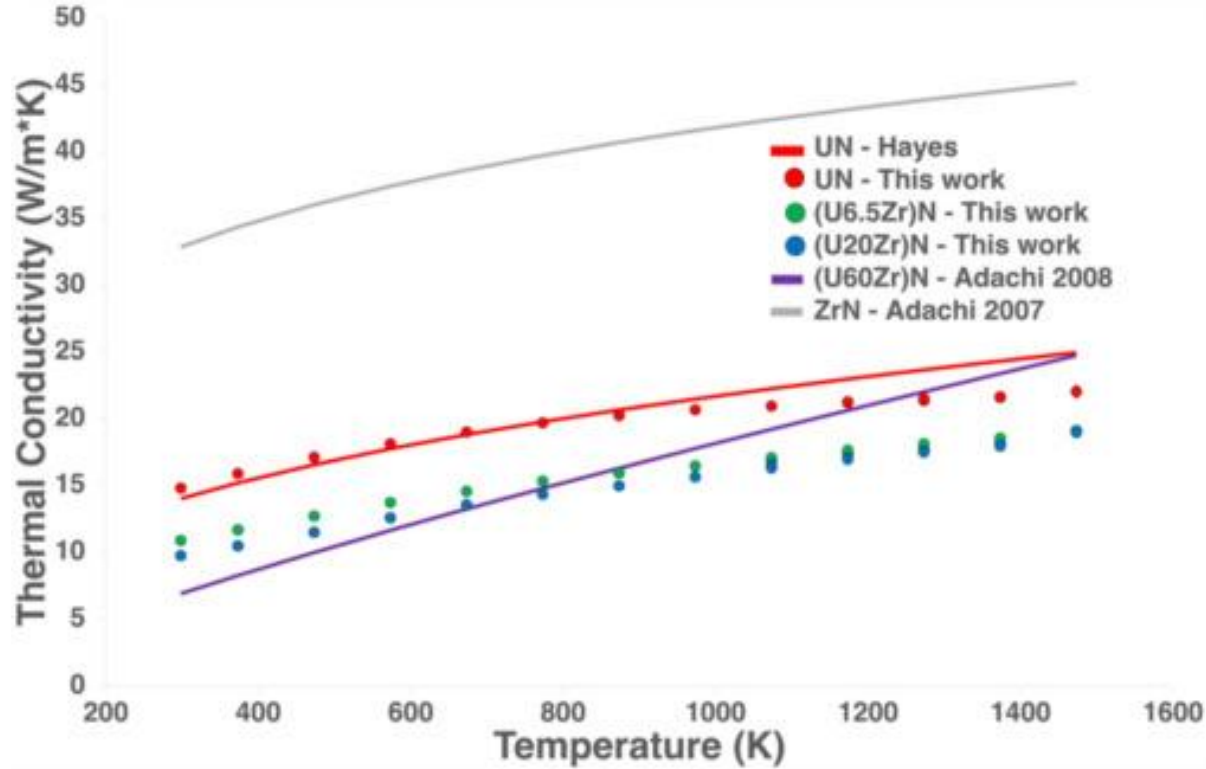


- Separate effect studies on simulated burn-up UN fuels
- Doping UN with Th, Zr, Mo, Ru, Xe, Kr, ...
  - Powder mixing, precursor alloying, ion implantation, ...
- Secondary phase formation, swelling, shrinkage, etc

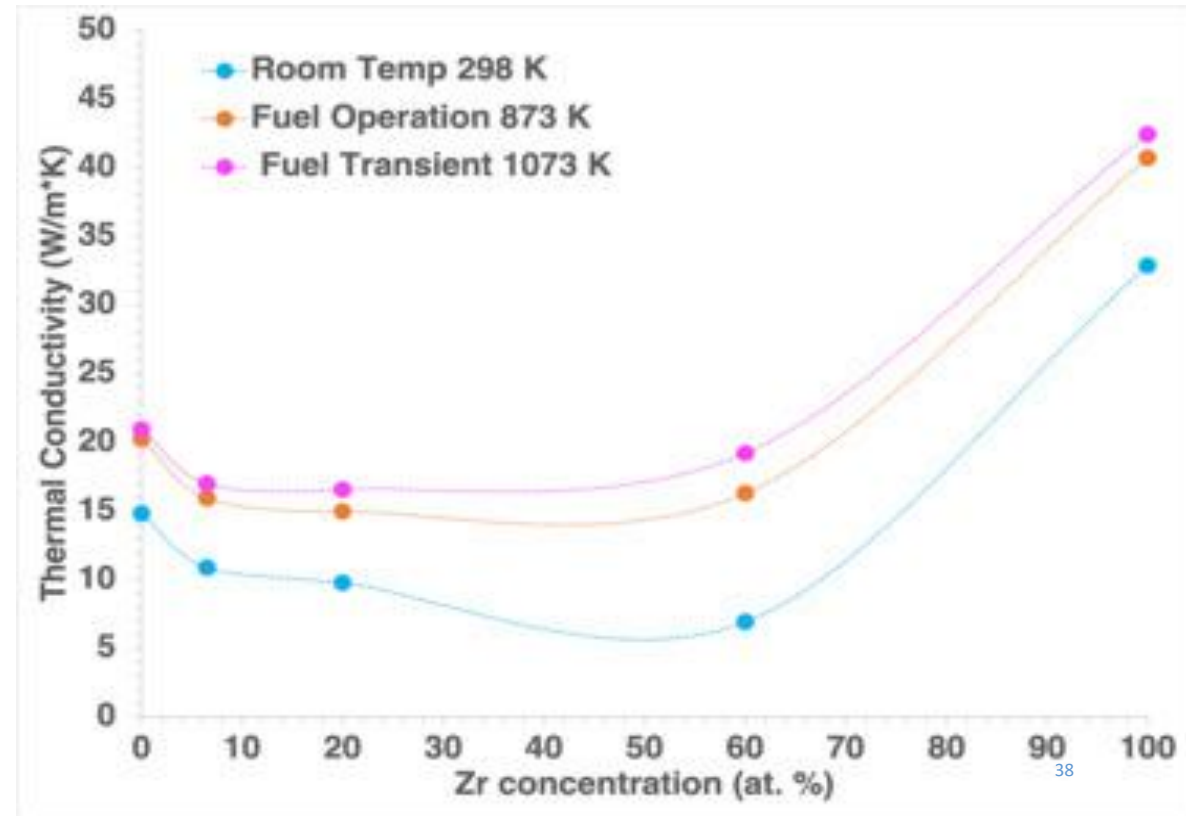
• 6.5 at.% Zr in UN

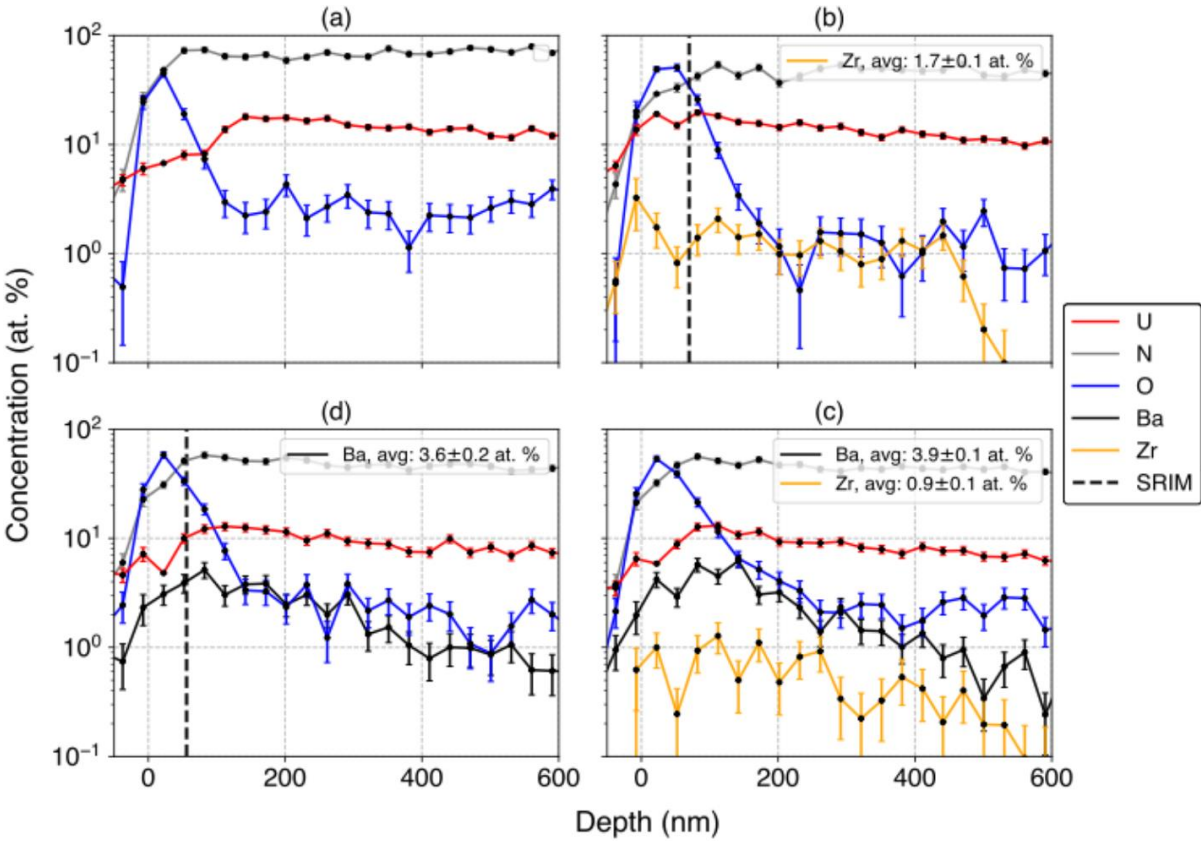
20 at.% Zr in UN



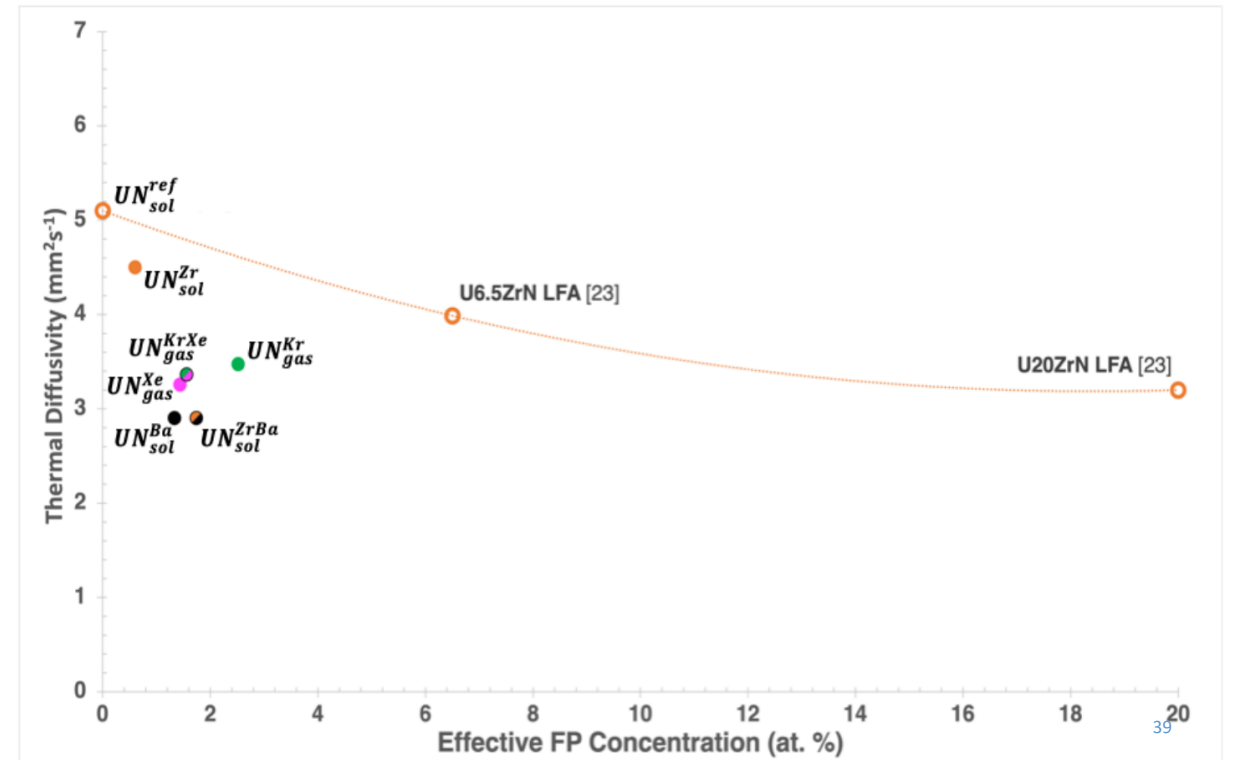


- Zr doping generally lowers thermal diffusivity and conductivity, degrades the fuel safety margins
- Surprising given the high  $k$  of ZrN!
- Impurity scattering dominant effect



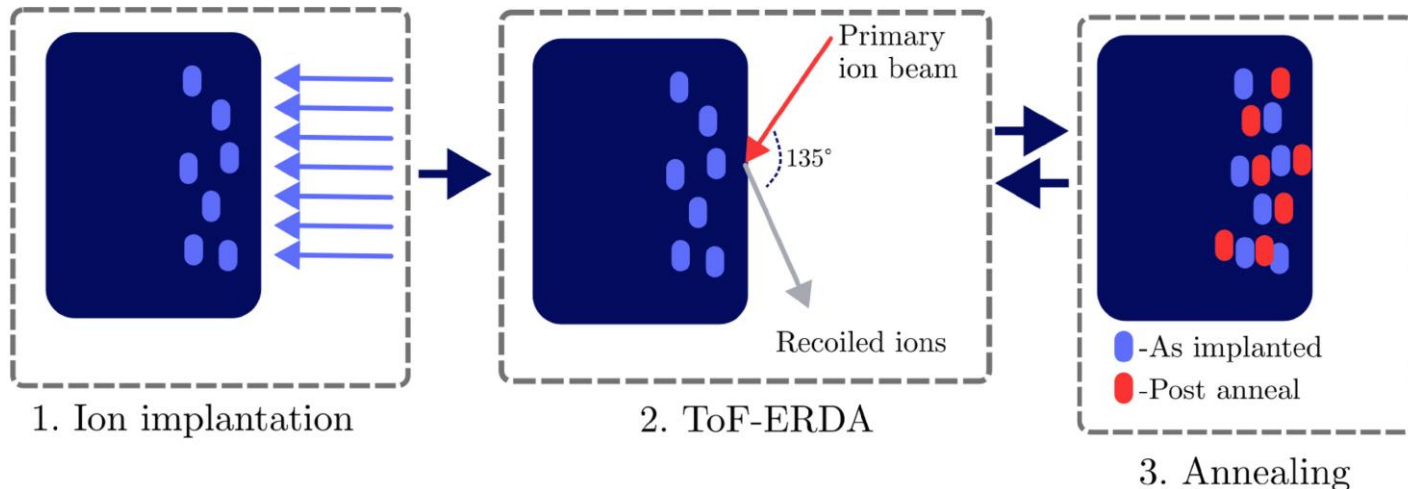


- Ion implantation give uniform chemical distribution, but significant damage doses as well
- Decoupling effects of chemistry and damage shows clear effect of chemical affinity on thermal property degradation



ZrO<sub>2</sub> samples were used as surrogates to UO<sub>2</sub> to study gaseous fission product diffusion:

- The samples were Xe implanted @TANDEM Lab, UU
- Time of flight measurements performed to identify depth of irradiation and concentration of Xe
- Annealing was performed to enhance Xe diffusion
- ToF-ERDA used again to measure the depth and concentration of Xe
- Model built to predict and estimate rate of diffusion of FP in fuels



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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

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journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/nimb](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/nimb)



Full length article

Assessing the near-surface diffusion of Xe and Kr in Zirconia by time-of-flight elastic recoil detection analysis

N. Wikström<sup>a,b</sup>, M. Giamouridou<sup>b</sup>, E. Charatsidou<sup>b</sup>, P. Olsson<sup>b</sup>, J. Oscarsson<sup>c</sup>,  
D. Primetzhofer<sup>a,c</sup>, R.J.W. Frost<sup>a,b,\*</sup>

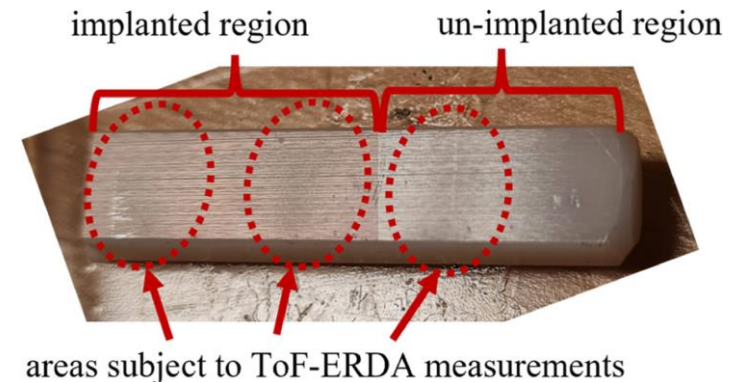
<sup>a</sup> Department of Physics and Astronomy, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden  
<sup>b</sup> Department of Physics, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden  
<sup>c</sup> The Tandem Laboratory, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

## ARTICLE INFO

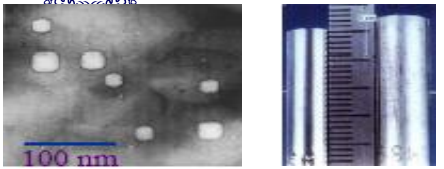
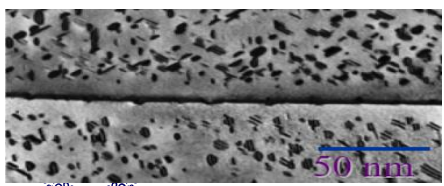
Keywords:  
ToF-ERDA  
Fission product  
Nuclear fuel  
Fick's law  
Radiation Damage

## ABSTRACT

The diffusion of two volatile fission products, xenon (Xe) and krypton (Kr), in zirconia (ZrO<sub>2</sub>) is investigated. Samples of Yttria (Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>)-stabilised tetragonal ZrO<sub>2</sub> were implanted with either Xe or Kr, at 300 keV, with a fluence of 10<sup>17</sup> at./cm<sup>2</sup>, and subsequently analysed with time-of-flight elastic recoil detection analysis (ToF-ERDA) to obtain elemental composition depth profiles. Samples were then annealed at 1200 °C for 9 h, and the effect of the annealing was assessed by ToF-ERDA measurements. From these measurements, first-order approximations of diffusion coefficients for Xe and Kr in ZrO<sub>2</sub> were derived, using a model based on Fick's second law, these being  $(1.36 \pm 0.87) \times 10^{-19}$  m<sup>2</sup>/s and  $(2.94 \pm 1.96) \times 10^{-19}$  m<sup>2</sup>/s at 1200 °C for Kr and Xe respectively. It was shown that ToF-ERDA can provide data to analyse the diffusion of elements in solid sample matrices and that a model based on Fick's Law can predict the diffusion of the implanted ions.



# Radiation effects in structural materials



**>10 dpa,  $0.3T_M < T < 0.6T_M$**   
Phase instabilities from radiation-induced segregation and precipitation

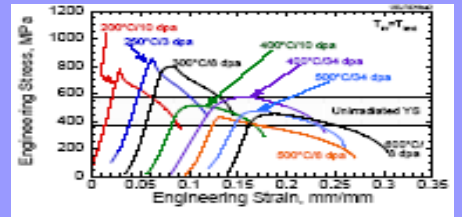
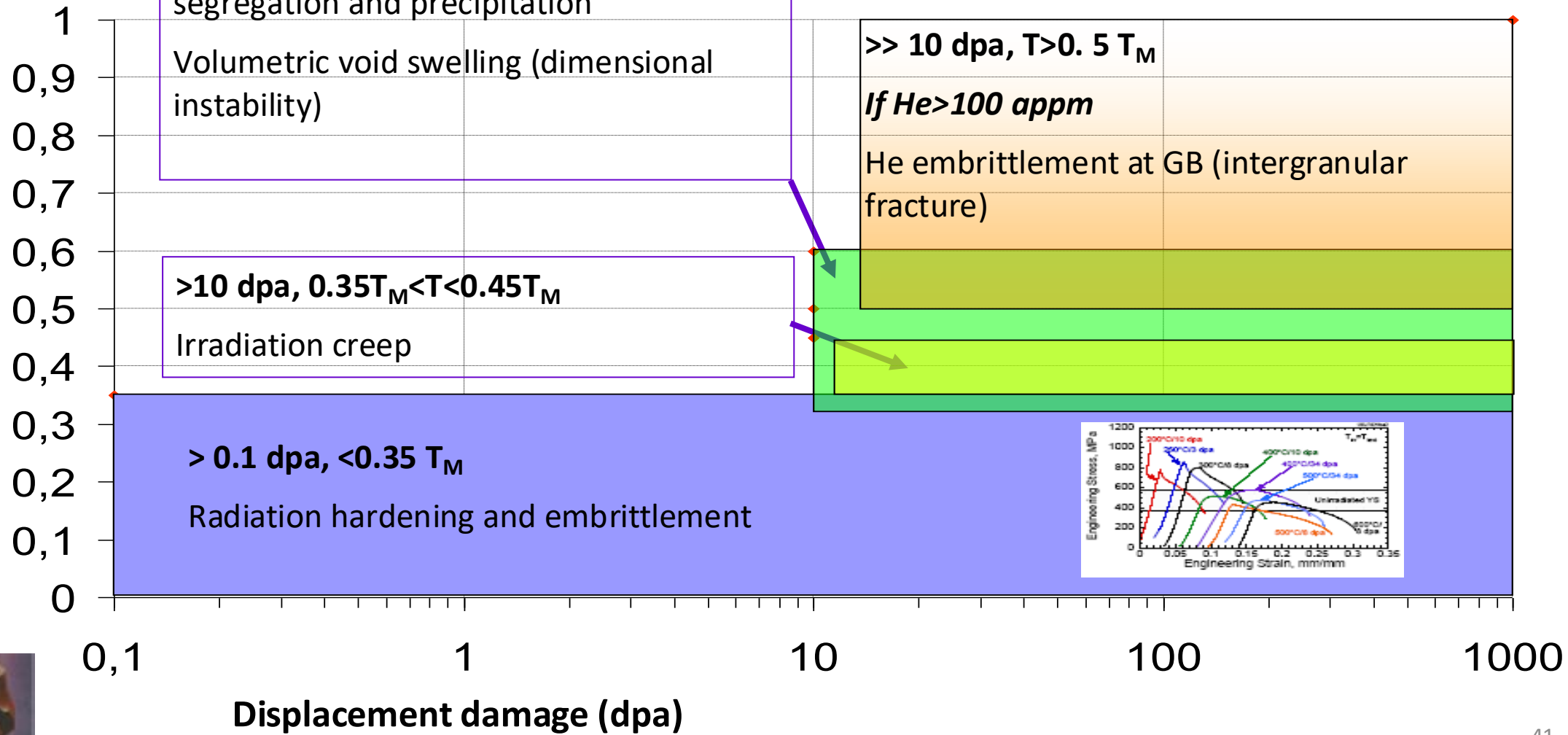
Volumetric void swelling (dimensional instability)

**>10 dpa,  $0.35T_M < T < 0.45T_M$**   
Irradiation creep

**> 0.1 dpa,  $< 0.35 T_M$**   
Radiation hardening and embrittlement

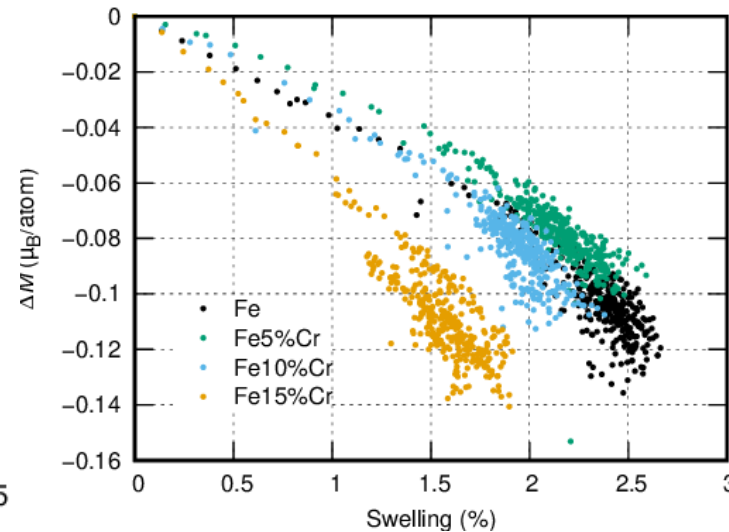
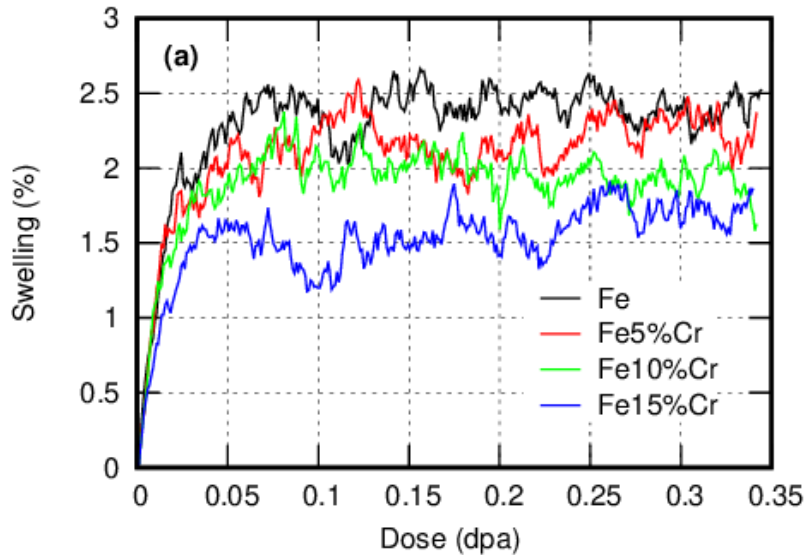
**>> 10 dpa,  $T > 0.5 T_M$**   
*If He > 100 appm*  
He embrittlement at GB (intergranular fracture)

Temperature  
Fraction of  $T_M$ , melting point



## ➤ Modeling irradiation-induced microstructure evolutions in Fe and FeCr

- The linear accumulation of defects and the achievement of steady-state saturation in microstructure evolution observed experimentally were theoretically replicated
- Experimental evidence and DFT-CRA simulations both show a decrease in total magnetization
- Alloying effects are significant and correlated with irradiation-induced changes in magnetization



## Publications

- *Nature Scientific Reports* 15 (2025) 35050
- *Materials Research Letters* 12 (2024) 477
- *Computational Materials Science* 236 (2024) 112852
- *Physical Review Materials* 7 (2023) 123604
- *Journal of Nuclear Materials* 588 (2024) 154829
- *Nuclear Materials and Energy* 34 (2023) 101403

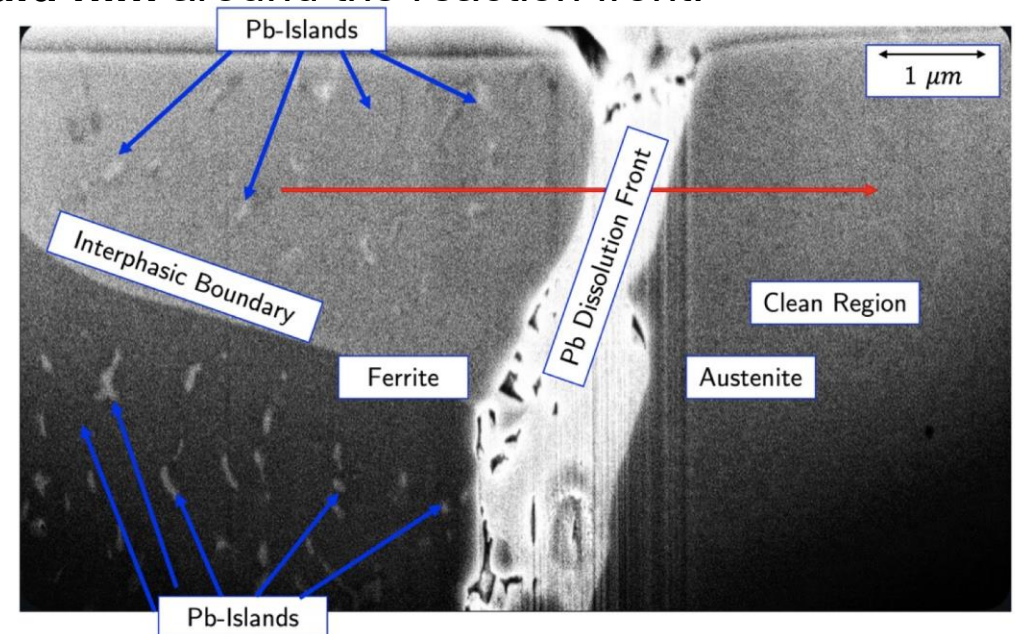
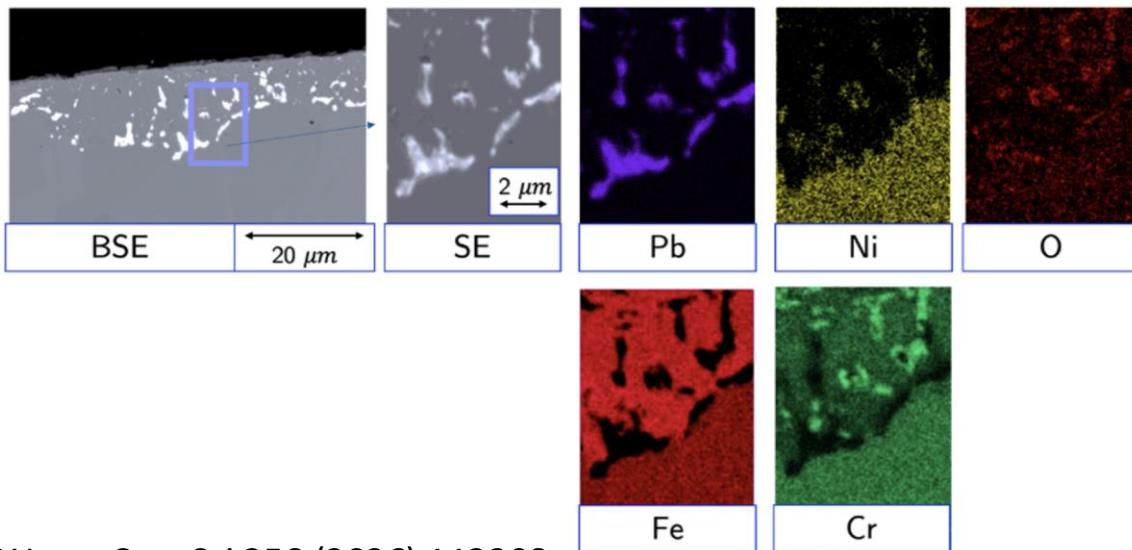
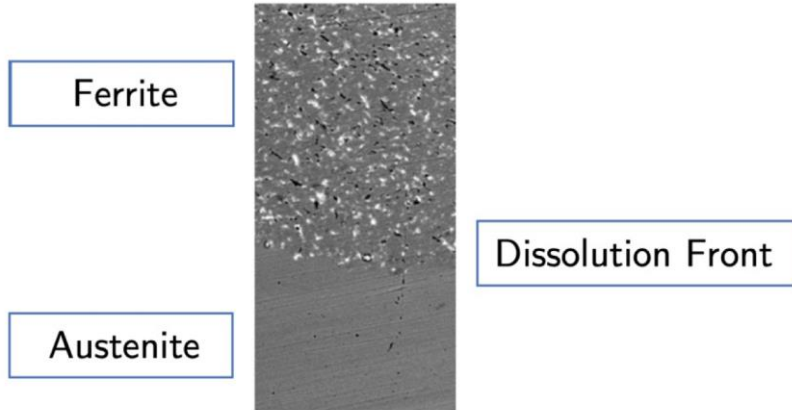
## Studies outlook

- Multi-scale simulation of LME in FeCrAl
- Effect of radiation on LME
- Publication of mechanical testing of AFA
- Mechanical testing on AFM alloys

Irradiation-induced structural change (swelling) and global magnetization (M) in Fe and FeCr alloys

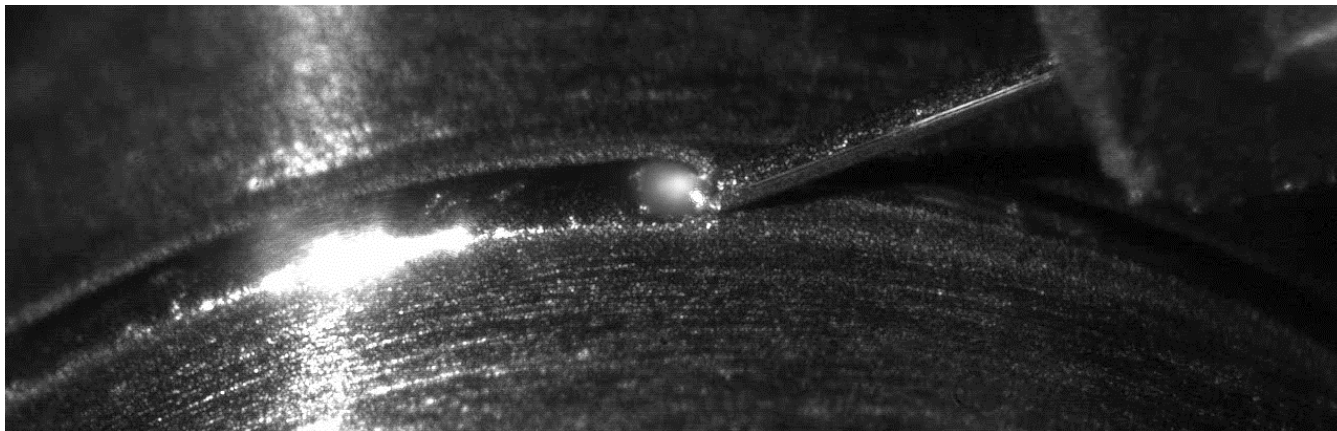
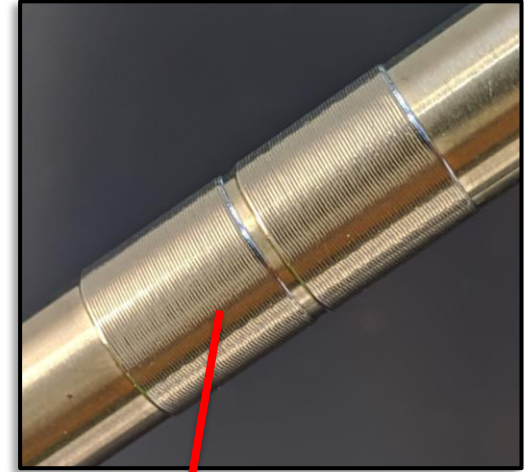
## ➤ Improved understanding of ferritization of austenitic steel in liquid Pb

- **Austenitic steels** are widely employed in industrial applications.
- When exposed to **direct contact with liquid Pb-alloys**, they undergo a phenomenon known as **ferritization**.
- At the **dissolution front**, a **discontinuous elemental profile** is observed.
- To date, **no comprehensive theory** has been able to fully explain this phase transformation.
- **Focused Ion Beam (FIB) analysis** provides clear evidence of the formation of a **Pb liquid film** around the reaction front.

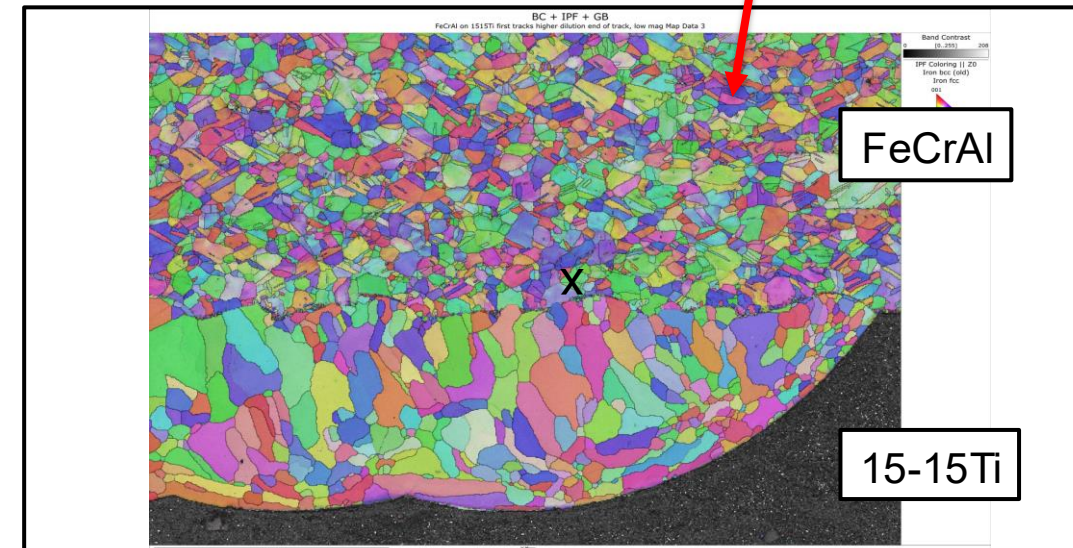


# Fuel cladding tube protection

- Development of Laser Micro Wire Cladding (LMWC) process
- Manufacturing of test samples using **15-15Ti** and **316L** tubes with **Fe-10Cr-4Al** clad



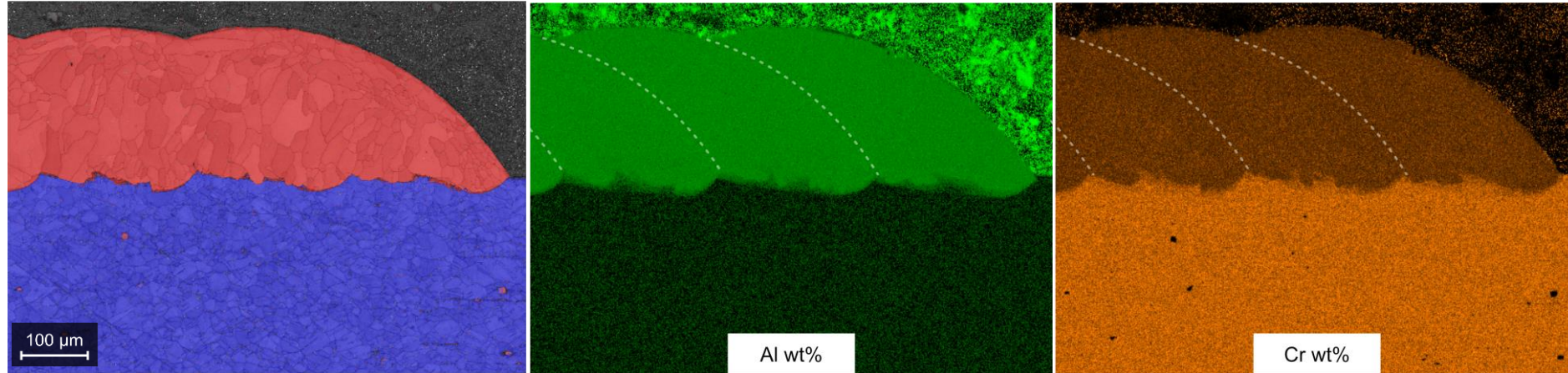
*Laser micro wire cladding (LMWC) process filmed using high-speed imaging.*



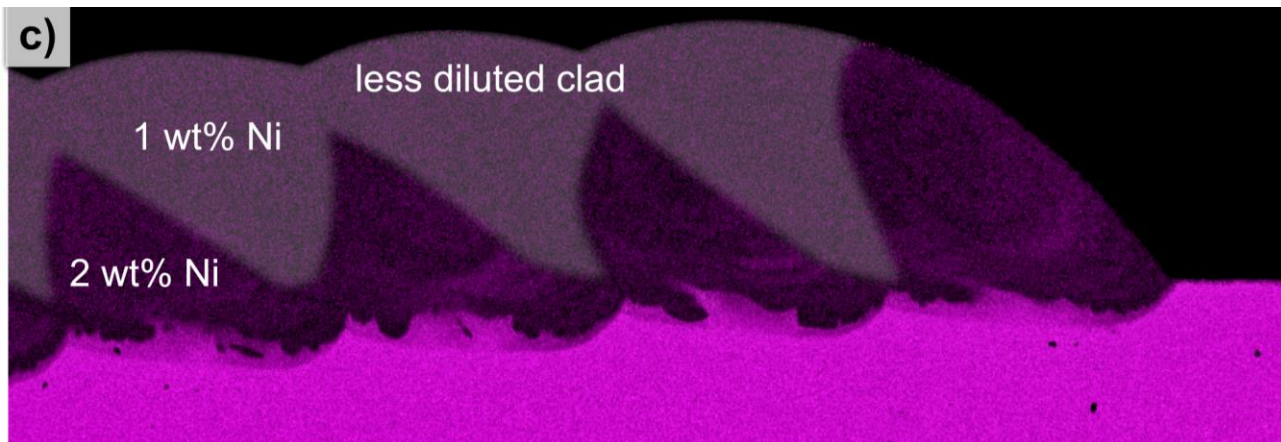
*Cross-section of cladded fuel tube manufactured by laser micro wire cladding (LMWC).*

# Fuel cladding tube protection

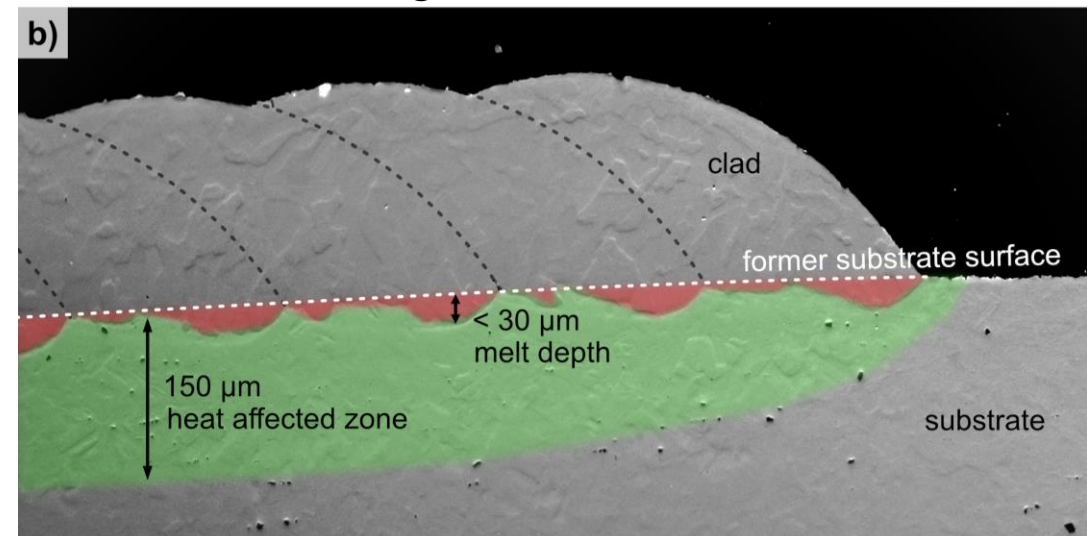
## Homogeneous Cr and Al distribution in clad

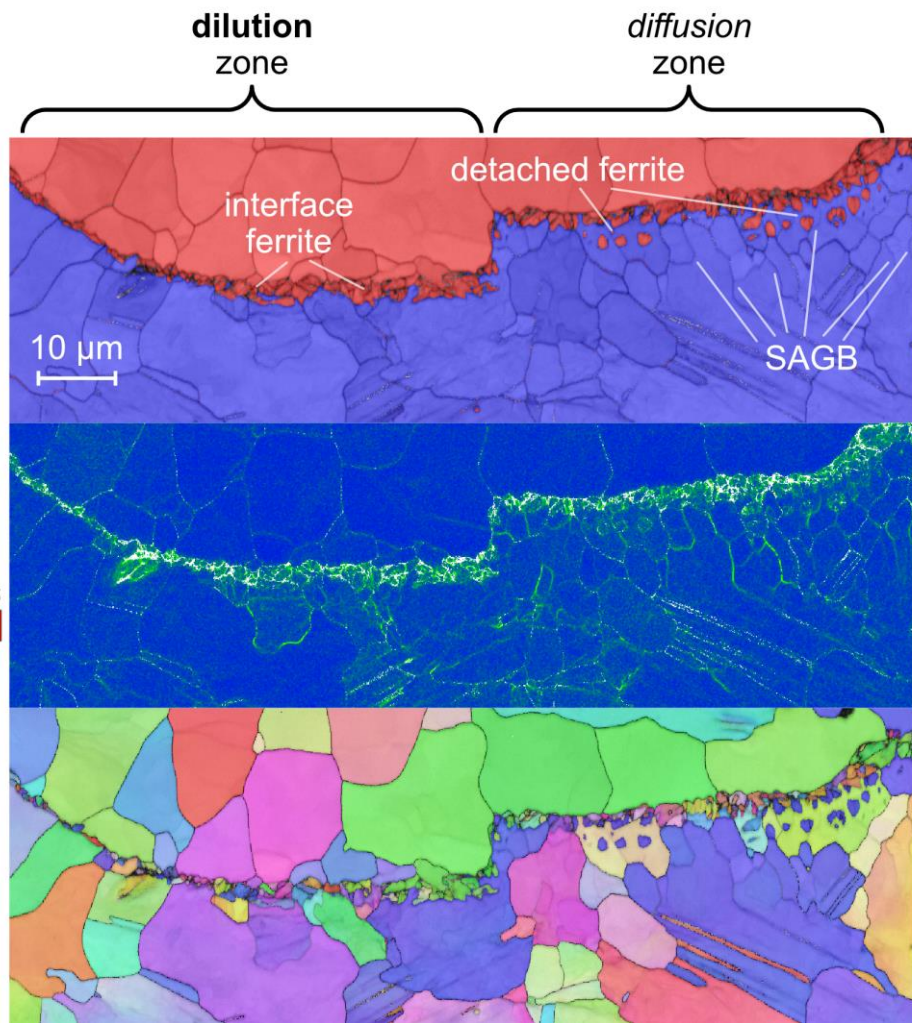


## Less diluted outer layer

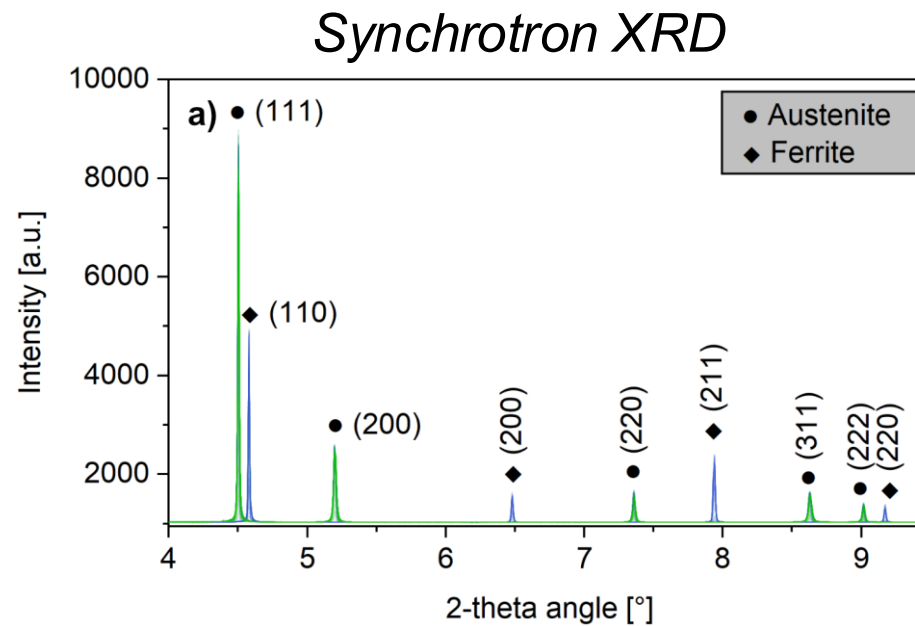


## Changes in the base tube

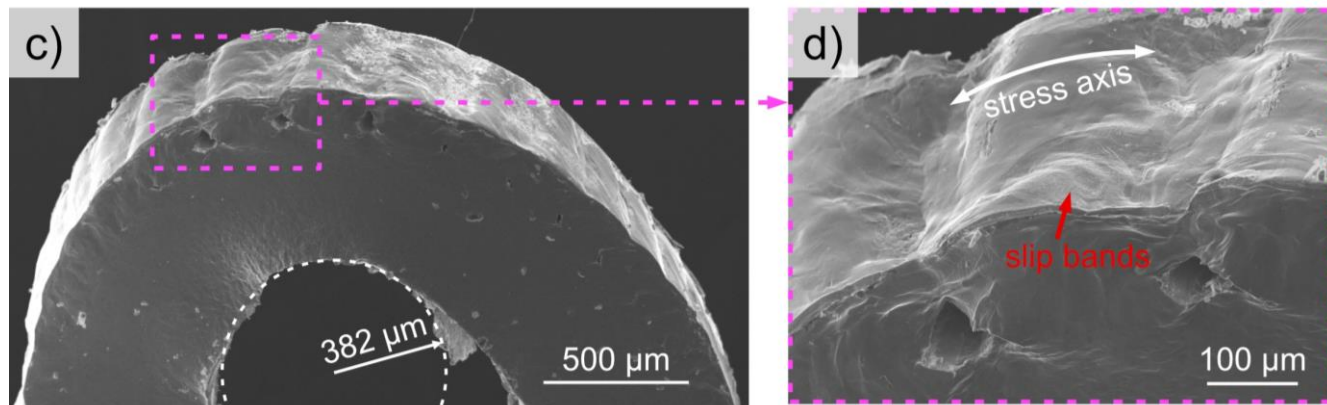




*Interface characteristics*

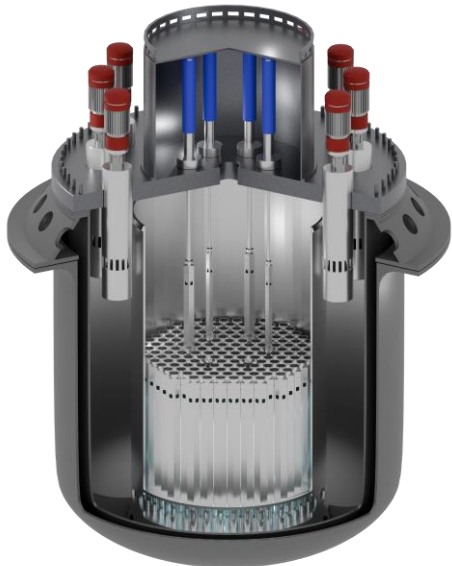


*Mechanical behaviour under stress*

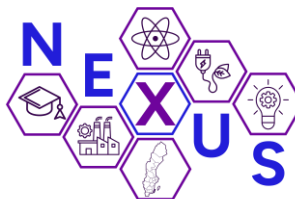




- Nuclear energy promising for climate action
- Industry and society needs fossil free energy
- Nuclear materials are complex and under intense research and development – both for fission and fusion
- Rapid momentum building in EU and Sweden, advancing nuclear engineering research
- CET conference, Oskarshamn 29/9-1/10 – high-level conference on the role of nuclear in the future energy system ([cetconference.org](http://cetconference.org))
- Reach out if you want to collaborate!



**NuMaP**  
The Nuclear Materials Platform



# Thanks for listening! Questions?



Animation: Eloi Pallares Abril

Contact: [polsson@kth.se](mailto:polsson@kth.se)