Radioactivity level of soil around a coal-fired thermal power plant of northwest China

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▶ Short Report

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ABSTRACT

Background: The activity concentrations of natural radionuclides in soil around a coal-fired thermal power plant of northwest China were investigated for assessing the radioactivity level. *Materials and Methods:* Soil samples were collected around the coal-fired thermal power plant and their radioactivity levels were determined using gamma ray spectrometry. Radiation hazards were assessed by radium equivalent activity (Ra_{eq}), air absorbed dose rate (*D*) and annual effective dose equivalent (*AEDE*). *Results*The activity concentrations of ²²⁶Ra, ²³²Th and ⁴⁰K ranged from 24.7 to 89.8, 38.4 to 122.3 and 206.7 to 573.8 Bq kg⁻¹ with an average of 49.7, 63.5 and 396.3 Bq kg⁻¹, respectively. The mean Ra_{eq} value was less than the recommended limit, while the mean values of *D* and *AEDE* were slightly higher than the corresponding world average. *Conclusion:* The coal-fired thermal power plant enhanced the natural radiation of surrounding soil environment.

Keywords: Radioactivity, gamma ray spectrometry, radiation hazard, soil; coal-fired thermal power plant.

INTRODUCTION

All living organisms are continuously exposed to ambient ionizing radiation, which has always existed naturally ⁽¹⁾. Natural radionuclides are widely spread in rock, soil and sediment ⁽¹⁻³⁾. Natural radioactivity of soil and associated radiation hazard depend primarily on geological and geographic conditions of the region ⁽¹⁻⁴⁾. Moreover, human activities can influence the radioactivity level of soil. The knowledge of natural radioactivity in soil is important for evaluating the radiation exposure to the population and is useful to set the standards and national guidelines in the light of international recommendations ⁽⁵⁾.

In modern times, the demand for electricity throughout the world is ever increasing with the economic growth and advanced standard of human living ^(5,6). Coal, the most abundant natural resource, plays an important role in electricity generation. Natural radionuclides will discharge into the surrounding of coal-fired

thermal power plant (CFTPP) with coal combustion. In recent decades, numerous works were conducted on natural radioactivity of soil around CFTPP (5,7-12). Due to the diversity of coal and deducting technology in each power plant, as well as the difference of the meteorological conditions, it is necessary to investigate the natural radioactivity of soil around different CFTPP.

Xitulvye CFTPP with a 120 m stack is situated at southwest of Baotou city (figure 1). Baotou, an important industrial city in northern China, has a typical temperate continental semi-arid climate, with annual average temperature and precipitation of 6.5°C and 240-400 mm, respectively. ²²⁶Ra, ²³²Th and ⁴⁰K activity concentrations in soil around Xitulvye CFTPP were determined in the study for evaluating the influence of thermal power plant on local environmental radioactivity. The results could be useful for radiation protection and environmental management.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Samples

Soil samples were collected around Xitulvye CFTPP, China (figure 1). At every sampling location, four samples were collected from the surface layer (0-15 cm) of four corners of a square area (2 m \times 2 m) and then mixed. Each sample weighed 1.5 kg. Thirty-six samples were collected around the CFTPP, at a distance of 300, 800 and 1500 m in this manner (figure 1). At the

lab, the collected samples were dried in an oven at 105-110 °C until a constant weight was achieved. The dried samples were ground and sieved through a fine mesh to remove plant materials and pebbles etc. The ground samples were weighed and stored in cylindrical plastic containers. The containers were sealed and stored for at least four weeks to reach secular equilibrium between ²²⁶Ra and ²³²Th and their progenies ⁽⁶⁾.

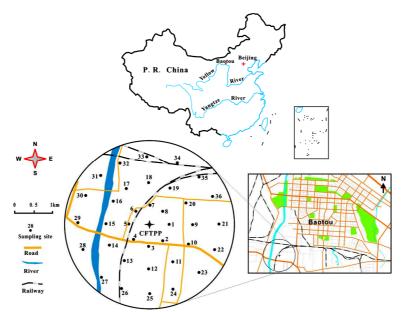


Figure 1. Location of Xitulvye coal-fired thermal power plant (CFTPP) and sampling site.

Radioactivity measurement

A 3×3 inch NaI (Tl) detector with excel 8% energy resolution (137Cs 661.6 keV) and 20% efficiency coupled counting to a 1024 multichannel analyzer was used for radioactivity measurement (5). The activity of 232Th was determined by 238.6 keV and 2614 keV gamma emitted 212Pb 208T]. from and activity of 226Ra was respectively. The measured by 609.3 and 1764.5 keV gamma rays emitted from ²¹⁴Bi, whereas ⁴⁰K activity was measured directly through its gamma ray energy peak of 1460.8 keV. All samples were counted for 300 min (5). Each sample was counted four times before an average was calculated. Excel 2010 and SPSS 19.0 for windows were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the activity concentrations of ²²⁶Ra, ²³²Th and ⁴⁰K in soil around Xitulvye CFTPP. It can be found that ⁴⁰K was the major contributor (50.3-89.4%) of the total activity (the sum of ²²⁶Ra, ²³²Th and ⁴⁰K) in the samples. ²²⁶Ra and ²³²Th mean concentrations in the investigated soil were higher than the soil average of Baotou ⁽¹³⁾, China and World ⁽¹⁾, while ⁴⁰K mean concentration was lower than the soil average of Baotou ⁽¹³⁾, China and World ⁽¹⁾. The concentrations of ²²⁶Ra and ²³²Th in the soil decrease with the distance increasing from sampling sites to the CFTPP, whereas ⁴⁰K is contrary (table 1). This is particularly evident in the samples collected from the southeast of

Xitulvye CFTPP. These may be related with wind direction and the deposition of fly ash. The predominant wind direction of the study area is northwest. Four fly ash samples were simultaneously collected from Xitulvye CFTPP and their ²²⁶Ra, ²³²Th and ⁴⁰K activity concentrations varied from 85.7 to 93.7, 124.5 to 132.3 and 143.2 to 290.9 Bq kg-1 with an average of 89.9, 128.6 and 165.6 Bq kg-1, respectively.

The discharging and depositing of fly ash to the surrounding environment during coal combustion will enhance ²²⁶Ra and ²³²Th and dilute ⁴⁰K in the surrounding soil of the CFTPP. Comparison of natural radionuclide in soil around Xitulvye CFTPP with other CFTPPs from different countries including China ^(5,7-12,14,15) is in table 2.

Table 1. Natural radioactivity in soil samples around Xitulvye coal-fired thermal power plant (CFTPP).

Soil	Activity concentration (Bq kg ⁻¹)			Ra _{eq}	<i>D</i> (nGy h ⁻¹)	AEDE
	²²⁶ Ra	²³² Th	⁴⁰ K	(Bq kg ⁻¹)	D (ngy n)	(mSv y ⁻¹)
300 m to CFTPP	66.5-89.8	89.2-122.3	206.7-254.7	213.7-281.2	96.8-126.5	0.119-0.155
	(77.4±8.6)	(102.1±11.0)	(226.4±16.7)	(240.8±22.6)	(108.6±10.0)	(0.133±0.012)
800 m to CFTPP	42.6-71.3	47.9-92.1	246.9-389.8	141.1-224.8	65.6-102.0	0.080-0.125
	(56.2±10.7)	(65.4±15.9)	(329.8±41.3)	(175.1±30.5)	(80.3±13.3)	(0.098±0.016)
1500 m to CFTPP	24.7-42.3	38.4-47.9	436.9-573.8	121.9-146.9	57.9-69.1	0.071-0.085
	(30.2±6.2)	(42.8±3.1)	(531.2±39.9)	(132.2±7.3)	(62.6±3.2)	(0.077±0.004)
Study area	24.7-89.8	38.4-122.3	206.7-573.8	121.9-281.2	57.9-126.5	0.071-0.155
	(49.4±20.8)	(63.5±25.4)	(396.3±133.0)	(170.6±47.2)	(78.7±20.1)	(0.097±0.025)
Baotou (13)	25.9	37.4	530.8	120.3 a	60.7 ^b	0.074 ^a
China (1)	32	41	440	124.5 ^a	62	0.076 ^a
World ⁽¹⁾	32	45	420	128.7 ^a	59	0.07

The digit in parenthesis is mean±SD

Table 2. Comparison of natural radioactivity in soil around different coal-fired thermal power plant.

CETUR Country	Activity	References			
CFTPP, Country	²²⁶ Ra	²³² Th	⁴⁰ K	References	
Cayırhan, Turkey	47.00	32.54	646.29	(7)	
Afsin-Elbistan, Turkey	33	36	379	(8)	
Agios Dimitrios, Greece	26.8	36.8	492.6	(9)	
West Macedonia, Greece	24.3	21.3	340.7	(12)	
Ajka, Hungary	129	26.9	337	(11)	
India	37.0	69.6	396.0	(10)	
Phalai, Vietnam	76	235	850	(14)	
Ninhbinh, Vietnam	70	230	830	(14)	
Baoji, China	32.12	49.77	720.57	(15)	
Baqiao, China	36.1	51.1	733.9	(5)	
Xitulvye, China	49.7	63.5	396.3	Present study	

Radium equivalent activity (Ra_{eq}) $^{(3-5)}$, outdoor air absorbed dose rate (D) $^{(4,5)}$ and annual effective dose equivalent (AEDE) $^{(3-5)}$ were calculated to evaluate the radiological hazard of radionuclides in soil to local inhabitants and the results are shown in table 1. The Ra_{eq} values in the soil were lower than the

recommended limit of 370 Bq kg⁻¹ (1), while exceeded the mean Ra_{eq} values of Baotou soil, Chinese soil and worldwide soil, calculated by the mean activity concentrations of 226 Ra, 232 Th and 40 K. The D values in most samples were higher than the population-weighted average of global primordial radiation of 59 nGy h⁻¹ (1), the

^a The value was calculated by the mean activity of radionucles in soil; ^b Li et al. (1990) ⁽¹⁶⁾.

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means of natural gamma radiation dose rate of China (62.0 nGy h⁻¹) $^{(1)}$ and Baotou (60.7 nGy h⁻¹) $^{(16)}$. The *AEDE* values in the investigated soil varied from 0.071 to 0.155 mSv y⁻¹ with mean of 0.097 mSv y⁻¹, which was slightly higher than the mean value of Baotou and China, as well as the external worldwide average annual effective dose rate (0.07 mSv y⁻¹). 226 Ra and 232 Th were significantly correlated with *D* and *AEDE* at P<0.01, indicating that the radiological hazard of the soil were mainly caused by 226 Ra and 232 Th.

CONCLUSION

²³²Th and ²²⁶Ra mean concentrations in soil around Xitulvye CFTPP were higher than, while ⁴⁰K mean concentration was lower than the concentration of Baotou soil and average Chinese worldwide soil and the population-weighted average in soil. The study showed that Xitulvye CFTPP influenced its surrounding soil radioactivity level enhanced the local natural radiation. So the emissions management of CFTPP ash should be strengthened and the natural radioactivity of soil around Xitulvye CFTPP should be monitored periodically.

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Conflicts of interest: Declared none.

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