

# Determination of Total Mercury in Environmental Samples

Utilizing Direct Analysis for Mercury Detection in Soil, Sediment, and Waste Water Samples



## Summary

*As more emphasis is placed on the monitoring of mercury emissions, both private and public institutions are looking at characterizing soil, sediments and waste water samples.*

*Contaminated soil has to be excavated and remediated, or depending on the level of contamination, disposed of as hazardous waste. Several methods are available for mercury analysis in environmental samples like waste water and soil.*

*Most of these methods however, require elaborate preparation procedures that are labor intensive and subsequently expensive.*

*Direct mercury analysis, as described in EPA Method 7473, is an alternative to these methods and has been used successfully to determine total mercury in environmental samples.*

*This technique requires no sample preparation and delivers results in as little as six (6) minutes per sample making it significantly faster than traditional wet chemistry.*

## Introduction

Mercury is naturally present in the earth and enters the air and water streams through the burning of fossil fuels, discharge of industrial waste and use of pesticides. Companies have also discharged mercury onto their property via production by-products. Now, with more emphasis being placed on the monitoring of this neurotoxin, both private and public institutions are looking at characterizing the soil, sediment and waste water, on their property.

Contaminated soil has to be excavated and remediated, or depending on the level of contamination, disposed of as hazardous waste.

Several methods exist for the determination of mercury in environmental samples. Traditional analytical methods such as Cold Vapor Atomic Absorption (CVAA) and ICP-

MS both require sample preparation prior to analysis. This results in both techniques being costly, labor-intensive and subsequently, having a long turnaround time.

Direct mercury analysis, as described in EPA Method 7473, is a cost-effective, proven alternative to these labor-intensive, wet chemistry techniques.

Direct analysis affords the laboratory many benefits including:

- Reduced Sample Turnaround (6 Minutes)
- No Sample Preparation
- Reduced Hazardous Waste Generation
- Reduction of Analytical Errors
- General Cost Savings (70 % versus CVAA)

### Instrumentation

The DMA-80, Direct Mercury Analyzer, as referenced in EPA Method 7473, from Milestone Inc ([www.milestonesci.com/direct-mercury-analyzer](http://www.milestonesci.com/direct-mercury-analyzer)) was used in this study.



Figure 1. Milestone's DMA-80 Direct Mercury Analyzer

The DMA-80 features a circular, stainless steel, interchangeable 40 position autosampler for virtually limitless throughput and can accommodate both nickel (500 mg) and quartz boats (1500 uL) depending on the requirements of the application. It operates from a single-phase 110/220V, 50/60 Hz power supply and requires regular grade oxygen as a carrier gas.

As the process does not require the conversion of mercury to mercuric ions, both solid and liquid matrices can be analyzed without the need for acid digestion or other sample preparation. The fact that zero sample preparation is required also eliminates all hazardous waste generation. All results, instrument parameters including furnace

temperatures, are controlled and saved with easy export capabilities to Excel or LIMS.

### Principles of Operation

Direct mercury analysis incorporates the following sequence: Thermal Decomposition, Catalytic Conversion, Amalgamation, and Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometry. Controlled heating stages are implemented to first dry and then thermally decompose a sample introduced into a quartz tube. A continuous flow of oxygen carries the decomposition products through a hot catalyst bed where halogens, nitrogen, and sulfur oxides are trapped. All mercury species are reduced to Hg(0) and are then carried along with reaction gases to a gold amalgamator where the mercury is selectively trapped. All non-mercury vapors and decomposition products are flushed from the system by the continuous flow of gas. The amalgamator is subsequently heated and releases all trapped mercury to the single beam, fixed wavelength atomic absorption spectrophotometer. Absorbance is measured at 253.7 nm as a function of mercury content.

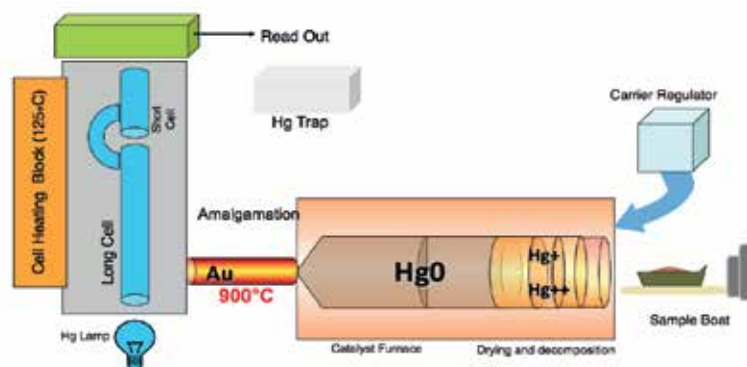


Figure 2. An Internal Schematic of Milestone's DMA-80.

### Experimental Discussion

The goal of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the DMA-80 to analyze both soil, waste water and sludge samples – three vastly different matrices.



All soil, sludge and water samples were obtained from an independent contract laboratory that had already analyzed the samples via CVAA. For this study, the three samples were analyzed at various weights in nickel and quartz sample boats.

### Calibration

Calibration standards were prepared using a NIST traceable stock solution of 1000 ppm Hg preserved in 5 % HNO<sub>3</sub>. Working standards of 100 ppb and 1 ppm were prepared and preserved in 37% HCl and stored in amber glass vials. By injecting increasing sample volumes of standard into the quartz sample boats, calibration graphs of 0 – 20 ng (Figure 3) and 20– 1500 ng (Figure 4) of mercury were created using the 100 ppb and 1 ppm standards respectively.

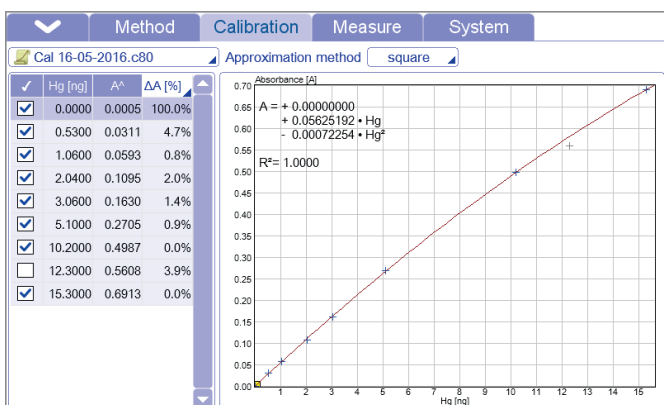


Figure 3. 0 ng – 20 ng Calibration Graph for ultra-level analysis (ppt; ppb)

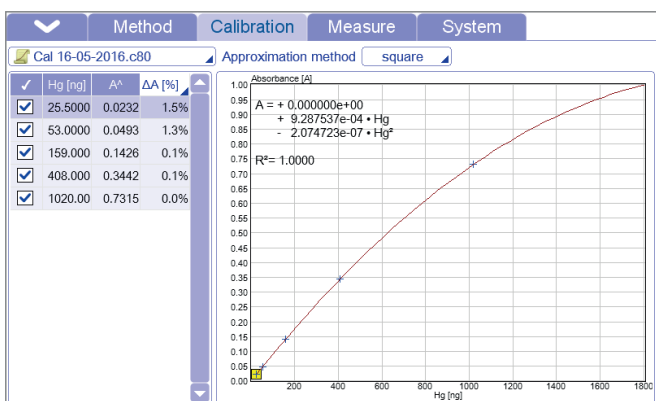


Figure 4. 20 ng – 1500 ng Calibration Graph for low to mid-level analysis (ppb; ppm)

### Operating Conditions

The DMA-80's operating conditions for all analyses are shown in Table 1.

Parameter	Setting
Drying Temp/Time	90 seconds to 200°C
Decomposition Ramp	120 seconds to 650°C
Decomposition Hold	90 seconds at 650°C
Catalyst Temp	565°C
Purge Time	60 seconds
Amalgamation Time	12 seconds at 900°C
Recording Time	30 seconds
Oxygen Flow	120 mL/min

Table 1. Analysis Operating Parameters

### Results

Sample	Concentration DMA-80 (µg/Kg)	Contract Laboratory CVAA/ICP (µg/Kg)
Standard 0.2 (µg/Kg)	0.211	0.205
Standard 1 (µg/Kg)	0.915	1.05
Standard 5 (µg/Kg)	4.72	5.04
Standard 10 (µg/Kg)	9.717	10.3
ICV (5 µg/Kg)	5.446	5.2
Blank	0.01	0.03
LCS (5 µg/Kg)	5.773	5.1
Soil (1)	0.663	0.9
Soil (2)	5.092	5.01
Soil (3)	0.535	0.63
CCV (5 µg/Kg)	5.765	5.5
LCS (5 µg/Kg)	5.54	5.9
Sludge (1)	398.01	520.08
Sludge (2)	7684.28	6590.69
Sludge (3)	8408.25	7630.25
Control Check (2 µg/Kg)	2.1	1.96
Waste Water (1)	15.15	14.55
Waste Water (2)	32.56	29.35
Waste Water (3)	18.52	15.25

Table 2. Environmental Samples on DMA-80 vs. Contract Laboratory and Calibration Control Check



Table 2 shows the results for all samples analyzed on the DMA-80. The far column indicates the results previously obtained via CVAA. All sample results were within satisfactory range of previous analyses. In addition to these environmental samples, NIST 2709 San Joaquin Soil and BCR 277R Estaurine Sediment Certified Material, two matrix-matched Standard Reference Material (SRM) were periodically analyzed.

Sample	Concentration DMA-80 (mg/Kg)	Certified (mg/Kg)
NIST 2709	1.378	1.40 ± 0.08
NIST 2709	1.404	1.40 ± 0.08
NIST 2709	1.406	1.40 ± 0.08
NIST 2709	1.404	1.40 ± 0.08
NIST 2709	1.424	1.40 ± 0.08

Table 3. Summary of results of QA/QC analysis (NIST 2709)

RSD 1.17%

Mean: 1.40 mg/Kg

SD: 0.016

Sample	Concentration DMA-80 (mg/Kg)	Certified (mg/Kg)
BCR 277R	0.125	0.128 ± 0.017
BCR 277R	0.122	0.128 ± 0.017
BCR 277R	0.123	0.128 ± 0.017
BCR 277R	0.127	0.128 ± 0.017
BCR 277R	0.127	0.128 ± 0.017

Table 4. BCR 277R Estaurine Sediment Certified Material

RSD 1.83%

Mean: 0.124 mg/Kg

SD: 0.0023

### About Milestone

Established in 1998, Milestone is headquartered in Italy and has offices in Germany, Switzerland, the United States, China, Japan and Korea. We operate worldwide through a network of over 100 exclusive distributors, all providing our customers premium application and service support. Milestone's mission is to help chemists by offering them the most advanced instrumentation for sample preparation and direct mercury analysis in the world. Our industry-leading technology, in combination with fast, responsive service and applications support, allows Milestone to support our goal of providing you the highest return on investment possible.

### Conclusions

All results obtained on the DMA-80 were in good agreement with the previous CVAA results.

The DMA-80, direct mercury analyzer, successfully analyzed five replicates of the NIST 2709 SRM and BCR 277R SRM. Similar success can be expected when analyzing other soil and sludge-type samples. All the liquid standard results were within their expected range.

The DMA-80 is a fast, reliable alternative to wet chemistry techniques. No sample preparation enables quick sample turnaround which enable higher throughput for environmental contract laboratories.

### Further Reading

Please visit our Hg info center for complete access to application notes, technical papers, as well as links to valuable resources for mercury testing.

Go to <http://www.milestonesci.com>

To learn more about mercury and other related topics, feel free to visit these websites.

#### EPA Method 7473

<http://www.epa.gov/waste/hazard/testmethods/sw846/pdfs/7473.pdf>

#### ASTM Method D6722-01

<http://www.astm.org/Standards/D6722.htm> EPA Mercury  
<http://www.epa.gov/mercury/>

#### Methyl Mercury

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methylmercury>

#### Mercury in Fish

<http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/fish/advice/mercupd.pdf>

#### Mercury in Coal

[http://energy.er.usgs.gov/health\\_environment/mercury/](http://energy.er.usgs.gov/health_environment/mercury/)