

# An innovative approach for DEMO core fuelling by inboard injection of high-speed pellets



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Effective core fuelling in DEMO requires launching pellets from the High Field Side.
- Injection speeds not less than 1 km/s will be necessary, even from the HFS.
- Guiding tracks with a bend radius  $\geq 6$  m are envisaged to deliver intact pellets.
- Injection of high-speed pellets from the HFS along free-flight paths, is proposed.
- Outboard high-speed injection is still being considered, instead, for JT-60SA.

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## ABSTRACT

Core fuelling of DEMO tokamak fusion reactor is under investigation within the EUROfusion Work Package “Tritium, Fuelling and Vacuum”. An extensive analysis of fuelling requirements and technologies, suggests that pellet injection still represents, to date, the most realistic option. Modelling of both pellet penetration and fuel deposition profiles for different injection locations, assuming a specific plasma reference scenario and the ITER reference pellet mass ( $6 \times 10^{21}$  atoms), indicates that: 1) Low Field Side (LFS) injection is inadequate; 2) Vertical injection may be effective only provided that pellets are injected at  $\sim 10$  km/s from a radial position  $\leq \sim 8$  m; 3) effective core fuelling can be achieved launching pellets from the High Field Side (HFS) at  $\sim 1$  km/s. HFS injection was therefore selected as the reference scheme, though scenarios featuring less steep density and temperature gradients at the plasma edge could induce to reconsider vertical injection at speeds in the range of 4–5 km/s. To deliver intact pellets at 1 km/s from the HFS, the use of guide tubes with a bend radius  $\geq 6$  m is envisaged. The results of above simulations rely on the hypothesis that pellets are delivered at the plasma edge with the desired mass and speed. However, mass erosion and fracturing of pellets inside the guide tube (severely limiting the transfer speed), as well as pressure build up and speed losses at relevant injection rates, might hamper the use of curved guide tubes. An additional innovative approach, aimed at identifying inboard straight “free flight” injection paths, to inject pellets from the HFS at significantly higher speeds, is proposed and discussed as a backup solution. Outboard high-speed injection is still being considered, instead, for JT-60SA.

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## 1. Introduction

Core fuelling of the Demonstration Fusion Power Tokamak Reactor DEMO is being investigated, as part of the Eurofusion work package Tritium, Fuelling and Vacuum (WP-TFV) [1]. An extensive

analysis of fuelling requirements and technologies, suggests that pellet injection still represents, to date, the most realistic option for deep fuel (or impurities) deposition in DEMO.

Modelling of both pellet penetration and fuel deposition profiles, for pellets launched from different injection locations, has been performed using the pellet ablation-deposition code HP12 [2]. For these simulation, the DEMO1noCD scenario (June 2014) [3] has been adopted, featuring a very narrow pedestal width  $\Delta$  (5% of the normalized minor radius). For the pellet mass, the ITER reference value of  $N_p = 6 \times 10^{21}$  D-atoms has been assumed.

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While in present day tokamaks the pellet penetration  $\lambda_p$  can contribute to the fuel deposition depth, in DEMO the simulations indicate that, for the adopted reference scenario, the fuel deposition is dominated by the  $\nabla B$ -induced displacement, thus leading to the following conclusions [4]:

1. Low Field Side (LFS) injection is inadequate, even at speeds  $\geq 10$  km/s, due to the unfavourable drift;
2. Suitable particle deposition profiles can be achieved launching pellets from the High Field Side (HFS) at speeds of  $\sim 1$  km/s, almost regardless of the vertical injection position  $z_{inj}$ .
3. Vertical injection at  $\sim 1$  km/s can grant significant particle deposition inside the pedestal area only provided that pellets are injected from a radial position  $R_{inj} \leq \sim 8$  m. Such an injection scheme is referred to as Vertical-HFS (VHFS).

To inject pellets from the HFS, use of guiding transfer systems is envisaged. At the state of the art, however, this technology suffers of many issues, which might hamper its use at speeds of  $\sim 1$  km/s.

## 2. Performance limits of present HFS injection technology

In present tokamaks, HFS pellet injection is commonly performed by means of special transfer systems, redirecting the cryogenic projectiles delivered by the launcher to their inboard injection locations. Such systems constrain the pellets to travel inside a guiding tube, usually featuring several bends having different curvature radii. Due to centrifugal stress and to friction, as well as to the poor mechanical properties of the hydrogen isotopes ice, the cryogenic projectiles may break and partially vaporize inside the tube, causing severe restriction to the injection speed. Even a very short section of the guide, featuring a too small curvature radius, has dramatic effects on the pellet integrity. Depending on the minimum curvature radius all along the guide tube, the speed limit may be as low as a few hundred m/s [5,6]. Lacking a proper model, this speed limit is usually estimated using the empirical AUG scaling law:

$$v_p (m/s) = 1150 \sqrt{R(m)/L(mm)} \quad (1)$$

relating the minimum curvature radius  $R$  (m) of the guiding tube to the maximum speed  $v_p$  (m/s) that a cubic pellet, having side length  $L$  (mm), can withstand without fracturing [7]. At speeds  $v > v_p$ , the fraction of pellets that are delivered intact downstream of the transfer system, gradually drops to zero within a few hundred m/s (transition region) [5,6]. Eq. (1) suggests that large curvature radii may help improving to some extent the speed limit, but such an option also leads to increase the tube length. However, increasing the launching speed and the distance to be travelled by the pellet inside the guide tube, are both factors that contribute to intensify the mass erosion. In experiments carried out at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) with a 15 m long ITER mock-up test tube with a minimum curvature radius of 800 mm, the fraction of pellet mass that vaporizes inside the guide is found to range from  $\sim 10\%$  at 300 m/s (where the pellet survivability is  $\sim 100\%$ ) up to  $\sim 20\%$  at 450–500 m/s (survivability  $\sim 10\%$ ), [5] but grows up to about 80% at speeds approaching 1000 m/s, in the case of a 17 m long system for ASDEX Upgrade, featuring significantly larger bend radii [8]. It should be noted, however, that in this latter case, the increased curvature radius essentially results in a wider transition region, which extends toward higher speeds as compared to results of ORNL experiment. Nonetheless, its lower limit (corresponding to 100% pellets survivability) is still in the order of 300 m/s, while at  $\sim 1$  km/s only  $\sim 55\%$  of launched pellets are delivered intact.

Moreover, to ensure an adequate fuel flux, pellets are to be injected at some suitable rate (usually in the order of several Hz up

to a few tens of Hz). Consequently, due to mass erosion, gas pressure may build up inside the transfer system, unless sufficiently fast evacuation is ensured. This is, however, a rather challenging issue, due to the high impedance commonly associated with such long and narrow ducts, and represents in any case a substantial additional load for the vacuum system. In the case of a D-T burning reactor, such as DEMO, this also burdens the fuel cycle systems and generates an undesired significant growth of the overall tritium inventory. Pressure build up, on the other hand, further limits the performance of guiding systems. Experiments at ORNL [5] show that increasing the base pressure from  $10^{-4}$  Torr to 10 Torr, besides slightly decreasing the speed limit (with a transition region going from  $\sim 250$  to  $\sim 450$  m/s), makes the mass loss unpredictable; at a base pressure of 100 Torr, these effects further grow up and, moreover, a significant speed loss (ranging from  $\sim 15\%$  at 100 m/s to  $\sim 10\%$  at 350 m/s) is observed.

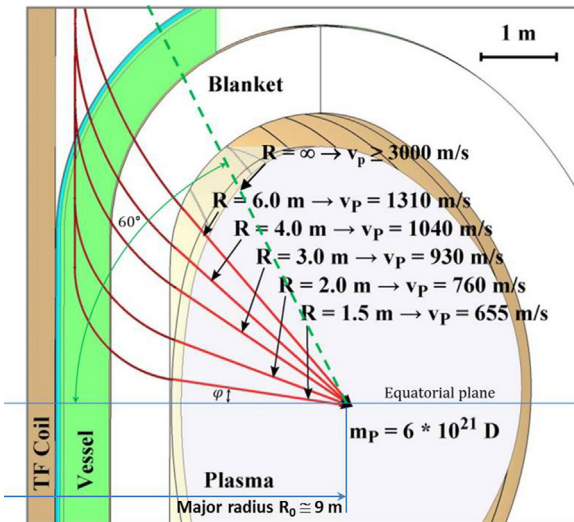
Finally, when pellets are launched at suitable repetition rates, fragments of a broken pellet inside the guide tube may cause fragmentation of subsequent pellets, perhaps resulting in a sort of avalanche effect. To avoid this problem, the launching speed should not exceed the lower limit of the transition region ( $\sim 250$ – $300$  m/s), to ensure 100% pellet integrity.

Modelling indicates that, in DEMO, pellets should be delivered at the inboard plasma edge (i.e. downstream of the transfer system) with final speed and mass respectively of  $\sim 1$  km/s and  $6 \times 10^{21}$  atoms; this pellet size corresponds, for  $D_2$  ice, to a cube with a side length of  $\sim 4.7$  mm. Therefore, for a speed limit of 1 km/s, Eq. (1) predicts a minimum curvature radius of  $\sim 3.5$  m. Due to mass erosion, however, pellets have to be injected, upstream of the transfer system, with a correspondingly larger mass. Since experiments indicate that, at speeds of  $\sim 1$  km/s, about 80% of the pellet vaporizes in the transfer system [8], its original mass (upstream of the guide) should be 5 times larger, i.e.  $\sim 3 \times 10^{22}$  D atoms, corresponding to a side length  $L \sim 8$  mm. For the same speed limit, Eq. (1) then predicts a minimum curvature radius of  $\sim 6$  m. About  $2.4 \times 10^{22}$  D atoms ( $1.2 \times 10^{22}$   $D_2$  molecules corresponding to  $\sim 48$  Pa  $m^3_{NTP}$ ) are expected to be vaporized inside the tube for each launched pellet. On the other hand, in DEMO, the requested fuel replenishment flux at the SOL, may be as high as  $1.2 \times 10^{23}$  atoms/s [9], so that pellets injection rates of up to 20 Hz may be required. If so, the average amount of  $D_2$  gas vaporized per unit time inside the tube, can be estimated in the order of up to  $\sim 1$  kPa  $m^3/s$ . If we finally consider speed losses, pellets should be launched at a somewhat higher upstream velocity, resulting in a further increase of mass erosion and curvature radius  $R$ .

It is quite evident that a dedicated R&D effort will be necessary, to try filling the substantial gap between the performance of present transfer systems and DEMO requirements. However, in case this technology will prove inadequate for DEMO, alternative approaches to implement HFS injection should be investigated as backup solutions.

## 3. An innovative approach for high-speed HFS pellet injection in DEMO

As a matter of fact, injection along straight “free-flight” lines is the only realistic alternative to guiding tubes that inherently gets rid of all related issues. Possible straight paths accessing the plasma from the HFS (or from the VHFS), compatible with present DEMO engineering constraints or involving an acceptable revision of current DEMO design, are still to be identified. This may lead, as in the case of curved tubes, to compromise on the injection configurations; however, such a “free-flight” launching scheme allows injecting pellets at significantly higher speeds, that could partially compensate for less favourable arrangements. The technology of



**Fig. 1.** First set of HFS injection tracks (continuous red lines) considered for DEMO. For each option, the minimum bend radius  $R$  and the maximum expected transfer speed  $v_p$  (estimated by Eq. (1)) are indicated. A pellet mass of  $6 \times 10^{21}$  D atoms is assumed. The green dashed line refers to an hypothetical free-flight injection path, aiming at plasma center.

two-stage pneumatic launchers has already demonstrated its ability to reliably accelerate solid  $D_2$  pellets in the 3–4 km/s range [10,11], and has perhaps the potential to provide even better performance with some suitable and simple improvements [12]. It represents, therefore, a realistic candidate for high-speed pellet launching.

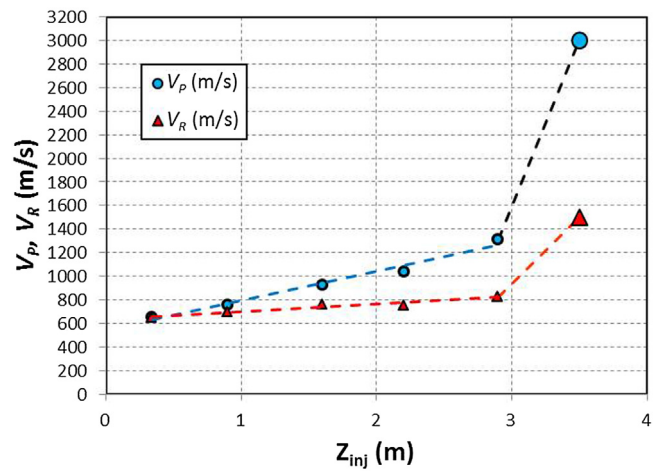
To briefly address the potential of this innovative proposal, we will make use once again of the results of modelling, including those of a comparative study aimed at identifying optimal solutions for the inboard guide system, compatible with constraints of present DEMO design. Five different possible options (Fig. 1) have been first considered, but no significant impact of the specific injection solution is predicted. This can be ascribed to several factors:

- i At speeds in the range considered here ( $\leq 1300$  m/s), the penetration of pellets is too small to contribute to the fuel deposition depth in DEMO;
- ii All five proposed injection paths aim at the plasma centre, so that the projection  $V_R$  of the pellet velocity along the major radius is roughly constant ( $\leq 800$  m/s) for all the considered injection lines (first five points in Fig. 2);
- iii The HFS drift displacement is almost independent on  $z_{inj}$  for pellets having the same radial speed.

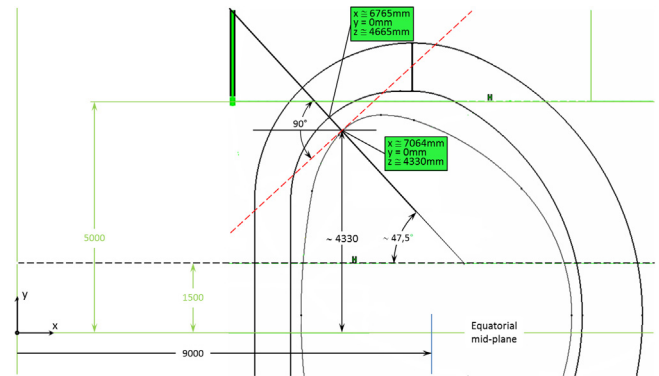
Actually, the only parameter which seems to play an important role in determining the fuel deposition profile for pellets injected from the HFS and aiming at the plasma centre, is the radial component  $v_R$  of the injection speed.

As an example, Fig. 1 also shows an additional hypothetical straight injection path (green dashed line), still aiming at the plasma centre, and forming an angle of  $60^\circ$  (or possibly less) with the horizontal mid-plane. Pellets injected along this line at speeds  $\geq 3$  km/s would have a radial velocity  $v_R \geq 0.5$  km/s (last point in Fig. 2), i.e. more than twice than achievable by the previous five curved guide tubes.

In present tokamaks pellet penetration is comparable or even larger than the drift displacement, so that aiming at the plasma centre may help improving the fuel deposition depth; in the case of DEMO, however, this is no more true, so this constraint can be released. It is instead more convenient that pellets are injected from a vertical injection position  $z_{inj}$  distant less than  $\pm 2a/3$  from the



**Fig. 2.** The pellet speed  $v_p$  and its projection  $v_R$  along the major radius, for the first set of five different injection paths considered for DEMO, and (last point on the right) for the additional hypothetical free-flight path (green dashed line in Fig. 1).



**Fig. 3.** An example of a straight injection path almost perpendicular to the flux surfaces (compromising on  $z_{inj}$ ). The coordinates of the intersection point with the separatrix and the angle  $\varphi$  are roughly estimated.

equatorial plane, in order the drift displacement, which is directed outward along the major radius, can pass through the flux surfaces almost perpendicularly, and thus perform more efficiently. Similarly, pellet penetration improves, to some little extent, if pellets are injected almost perpendicularly to flux surfaces. An example of an hypothetical free-flight path, complying with this latter constraint and compromising on  $z_{inj}$ , is shown in Fig. 3.

The coordinates of the intersection point with the separatrix may be allowed to change within some suitable range, trying to keep the angle  $\alpha$  as close as possible to  $90^\circ$ . The angle  $\varphi$  that the injection pattern forms with the horizontal mid plane, will also change accordingly. For the case shown,  $\varphi \sim 47.5^\circ$  so that, assuming once again a pellet speed  $v_p \geq 3$  km/s, the radial component  $v_R$  of the velocity is roughly given by  $v_R = v_p \times \cos \varphi \geq 3 \times 0.676 \cong 2,03$  km/s.

#### 4. Potential of high-speed VHFS pellet injection

VHFS launch option also allows the pellets to travel along a straight path, with no other restriction on the injection velocity than that imposed by the launching technology. The results of modelling [4] indicate that pellets launched from the VHFS at  $\sim 1$  km/s can achieve a penetration  $\lambda_p \sim 0.95$ , comparable to that of pellets injected at the same speed from the HFS. The barycentre  $\lambda_{<D>}$  of the fuel deposition profile may instead be worse, due to the lower efficiency of drift displacement (which, in this case, is almost tangential to the flux surfaces), unless pellets are injected from

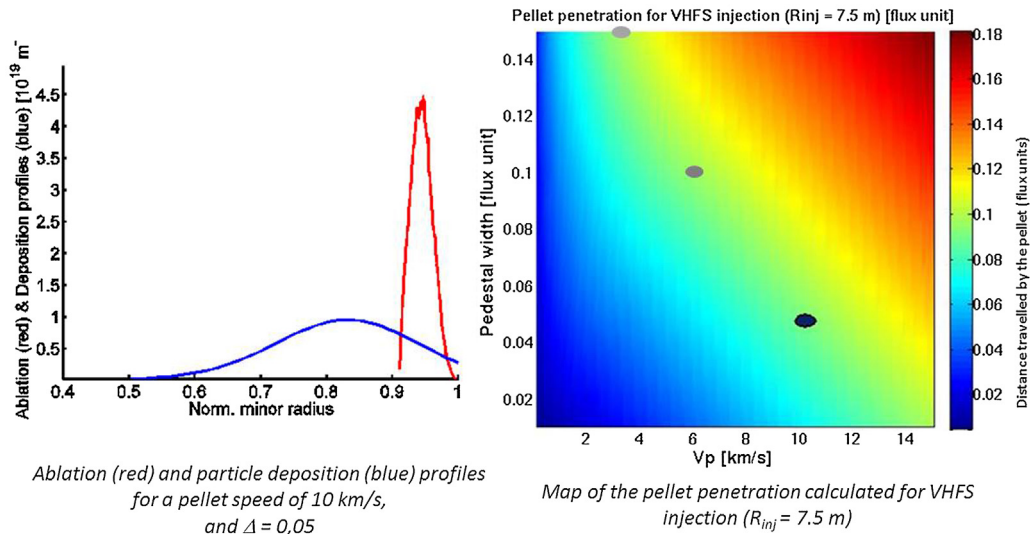


Fig. 4. Pellet penetration for VHFS injection ( $R_{inj}$  0 7.5 m).

a radial position  $R_{inj} < 8$  m. The best performance is predicted for  $R_{inj} = 7.5$  m, where  $\lambda_{<D>}$  exhibits the same maximum of  $\sim 0.84$ , as compared to pellets launched from the HFS with  $z_{inj} < 1.4$  m. VHFS injection from  $R_{inj} = 7.5$  m has therefore, in principle, the potential to provide deeper fuel deposition than optimal (i.e.  $z_{inj} \leq 1.5$  m) HFS arrangements, since pellets can be injected from the VHFS at significantly higher speeds. One could rise the objection that, in this case, the pellet penetration is not expected to increase appreciably with the speed, being penalized by the plasma elongation. Modelling indeed shows that, for the very narrow pedestal ( $\Delta = 0.05$ ) adopted as reference case, the injection velocity required in order a pellet, launched from the VHFS with  $R_{inj} = 7.5$  m, can penetrate up to  $\lambda_p \sim 0.9$  (i.e. a pellet path of  $\sim 0.1$ ), is of the order of  $\sim 10$  km/s, out of the performance of present injectors (Fig. 4). However, the pedestal width turns out to be a key parameter in determining the pellet penetration, and the above value of  $\Delta$  may be rather pessimistic. Fig. 4 shows, on the other hand, that the injection speed required to achieve  $\lambda_p \sim 0.9$  drops down to  $\sim 6$  km/s for  $\Delta = 0.1$ , and becomes less than  $\sim 4$  km/s for  $\Delta = 0.15$ . So, particularly for scenarios featuring less steep temperature and density gradients at the plasma edge, high-speed VHFS injection may still represent a practical option.

## 5. Outboard high-speed injection for JT60-SA

Evidently, it appears eligible to make proper use of a technology already at hand allowing access to a pellet speed range of 3–4 km/s, currently even progressing with the aim to provide even better performance. On the one hand it is desirable to use this technology in actual projects in order to apply pellet performance parameters at the ultimate achievable limits. Thus, it is expected to gain insight into physics processes not accessible so far, in particular the interaction of pellets with very hot core plasmas. In turn, a project aiming on the application of such an advanced high speed system under the real harsh operational conditions of a fusion oriented research device could significantly foster the according technology robustness and gain practical experience.

As a possible project suitable for such an approach, the superconducting coil tokamak JT-60SA [13] has been chosen. Currently already under construction, JT-60SA is a project with the mission to contribute to early realization of fusion energy by supporting the exploitation of ITER and by resolving key physics and engineering issues for DEMO reactors. The project therefore necessitates a suit-

able pellet injection system serving for efficient particle fuelling and for control and mitigation of edge localized modes (ELMs).

A conceptual design for a suitable JT-60SA pellet injection system will be worked out in the time period 2015–2017, taking into account the status of the torus vessel assembly [14]. It is proposed to consist basically of components already routinely used for conventional pellet systems. For the main unit serving all requirements expressed in the JT-60SA research program, a steady state fuel ice extruder feeding a mechanical centrifuge launching pellets finally through a guiding system from the torus inboard side is proposed. However, since the guiding tube system is expected to impose rather pronounced speed restrictions, as an additional option a dedicated system is suggested for high speed outboard launch, covering the potential for an injection of different pellet species at a speed significantly beyond 2000 m/s. The only technical feasible solution considered for this option is the two-stage pneumatic launchers, however requested to cover the need for a suitable pellet repetition rate in the range of about 10 Hz.

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