INTRODUCTION

EPRI has performed work in the past on SF\textsubscript{6}. A review of this body of work sets a strong foundation for discussions on the present and future research in EPRI. Starting as far back as 1978, EPRI began work on a dielectric fill gauge that would perform the dual function of providing an early warning of gas leaks – plus continuously monitor for moisture in the SF\textsubscript{6} [1]. In the 1980’s, research was conducted on arc by-products in Gas-Insulated Equipment [2]. This foundational work set out to develop a database for SF\textsubscript{6} decomposition products generated by electrical discharges within gas insulated equipment. As early as 1981, EPRI held a workshop on Users Experience with Gas-Insulated Substations [3] where the topics of SF\textsubscript{6} Handling Safety and SF\textsubscript{6} Gas Analysis were presented and debated. 1982 saw EPRI publish two and a half years of theoretical and experimental research looking for a possible replacement for SF\textsubscript{6} [4]. No single gas was found to be superior to SF\textsubscript{6} – but a few promising gas mixtures were identified for further examination.

From 1985, the focus of the SF\textsubscript{6} research shifted towards Gas Insulated Substations – but continued the research into the Handling of Arcing By-products and the use of SF\textsubscript{6} [5,6]. The work was summarized in a two-volume report on GIS reliability. The research was complimented by the 1985 International Symposium on Gas Insulated Substations – Sponsored by Ontario Hydro, Canadian Electrical Association and EPRI.

In the 1990’s, the research focused on three areas:

1. Aging of Spacer Insulators in SF\textsubscript{6} Insulated Bus.
2. Fault location techniques for GIS using IR (infra-red).
3. Research on SF\textsubscript{6} Handling and Recycling that lead to the publishing of the first version of the EPRI Practical Guide to SF\textsubscript{6} Handling Practices [7]. This document is updated every two years to remain abreast with the latest technology and practices.
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The drivers for the present-day EPRI SF₆ Research program can be summarized under the following broad headings:

- **Reduce Operating Costs.** For a utility, this is achieved through lower SF₆ loss and fewer call-outs. Manpower for unnecessary SF₆ top-ups is a large, avoidable cost that this research aims at reducing.
- **Improve Reliability.** For a utility, this is achieved through reducing risk through having fewer live top-ups. Any activity performed on in-service, energized equipment creates an elevated risk of failure. Research is aimed at reducing the attention SF₆ filled equipment needs in service.
- **Extend equipment life.** For a utility, this is achieved through improved gas quality and improved diagnostic capabilities.
- **Protect the environment.** Through reduced SF₆ emissions.
- **Improve Safety.** For a utility, this is achieved through two routes. The first is through effective on-site SF₆ analysis – which provides an early warning of hazardous by-products before a compartment is opened for maintenance. The second is through improved, safer SF₆ Handling Practices. The EPRI Practical Guide to SF₆ Handling Practices [8] presents utilities with up-to-date knowledge in this area.

The above research objectives are met through research into 3 key areas:
- SF₆ Leak Research,
- SF₆ Analysis Research
- SF₆ Handling Research

Each area of research is discussed in detail below:

SF₆ LEAK RESEARCH

The focus of this research has been the EPRI SF₆ Camera – a collaborative development together with LIS (Laser Imaging Systems), Punta Georgia, Florida.

The EPRI SF₆ Camera allows the visualization of SF₆ leak sites using a unique video detection system. The main benefits over traditional SF₆ leak detection (halogen detectors and soapy water) are twofold: Firstly the ability to perform leak detection without having to take equipment out of service and secondly the dramatic reduction in time necessary to detect a leak site. Improved SF₆ leak detection is important due to:

- The potential impact of released SF₆ on the environment,
- The increased cost of SF₆ and,
- The increased operational risk from regularly filling live equipment [9].
The technology exploits the strong IR (Infra-red) absorption of SF₆ gas to make it visible to the camera operator. A laser illuminates the leak area at a wavelength that coincides with strong spectral absorption of SF₆. An IR camera focused on this same area displays a real-time image. Areas of the image where SF₆ is present strongly absorb the reflected IR – and this allows SF₆ leaks to be visualized in real-time as a plume of black gas. Because of the strength of the optical absorption by SF₆, the laser camera is sensitive to SF₆ leaks as small as 2lbs/yr, viewed at distances as far as 100ft [10].

Traditional techniques require the operator to be in close proximity to the leak. With the EPRI SF₆ Camera equipment may be inspected from ground level. This long range makes it possible to rapidly inspect substation equipment while energized [10].

**SF₆ ANALYSIS RESEARCH**

The analysis of SF₆ by-products is important for the following reasons:

- SF₆ by-products are toxic and corrosive. SF₆ analysis before opening of SF₆ equipment can provide valuable guidance on the personal protection to apply.

- The purity of SF₆ is important for the long-term performance of SF₆ insulated equipment. SF₆ Analysis after commissioning or after maintenance is an important step in confirming that the SF₆ meets the purity requirements of the equipment manufacturer.

- SF₆ analysis can serve as a valuable diagnostic tool. Problems within SF₆ insulated equipment such as sparking, arcing or overheating generate specific and known by-products. SF₆ analysis can quantify these by-products through taking a small sample of SF₆ gas while the equipment is in service. Through this non-invasive technique, early warnings can be obtained about internal problems that could lead to eventual failure of the equipment.

EPRI sponsored research in collaboration with Powertech Labs (Vancouver) has resulted in the development of two devices for detection of SF₆ byproducts:

- The first is a portable SF₆ (DPD) Decomposition Products Detector. The major application of the DPD is to provide a quick and accurate measurement of the sum of the dominant SF₆ decomposition products. This instrument is portable, rugged and easy to operate and is able to handle sampling from energized equipment at system pressure. It is advantageous to test the gas at the source due to the unstable nature of low level decomposition products and to detect faults quickly without having to wait for lab analysis. With this detector, rapid screening of SF₆ by-products is possible to quickly locate problems and minimize outages. Personnel safety can also be rapidly assessed before maintenance begins so that appropriate procedures and precautions can be implemented. The final advantage of the DPD is its high sensitivity – allowing the testing of new gas against the standards for by-product limits [11].
- The second product is a more sophisticated, tailored commercial MicroGC (Gas Chromatograph). The MicroGC is complimentary to the DPD. If, in its quick scan of the equipment, the DPD indicates a problem with the SF$_6$ by-product level, the MicroGC can be used to fully investigate the levels of each individual contaminant – and more accurately predict the cause of the problem and the course of action required. The MicroGC is sensitive enough to provide an answer on whether SF$_6$ is fit for reuse or fit to stay in service. In conjunction with the DPD, a full assessment of both in-service and new SF$_6$ can be performed.

SF$_6$ HANDLING RESEARCH

A large volume of SF$_6$ research has been conducted by EPRI – and a need was identified to distill many of the practical lessons learned into a Practical Guide to SF$_6$ Handling. The guide was originally developed in 1999 [7] – and has been revised every 2 years to keep it relevant to utilities [8].

The guide is not intended as an industry standard— but is intended for use as a reference in formulating utility-specific policies. The guidelines are used in conjunction with manufacturers’ recommendations, and where applicable, with national, state or provincial, and local regulations.

The handling guide applies to electrical equipment employing SF$_6$ gas as an insulating and/or interrupting medium. The guide specifically addresses:

- Classifications for switching and non-switching equipment types along with indoor and outdoor applications
- Risks, warning signs, and written instructions for various low-, intermediate-, and high-risk situations as well as abnormal operating conditions
- Handling procedures for equipment commissioning, maintenance, and failure situations, with information on the use of gas carts for temporary SF$_6$ storage during maintenance tasks
- Personal protective equipment, with emphasis on clothing and respiratory devices
- Disposal and environmental protection practices for clean and contaminated SF$_6$ gas as well as solid decomposition products under normal and abnormal conditions
- Cylinder transportation, handling, and storage, focusing on U.S. Department of Transportation Regulations
- Latest and emerging techniques dealing with utility related SF$_6$ handling, recycling and analysis issues
The topical organization of this material keeps information at a practical level for easy field access. Supplemental appendices offer further explanatory and background information on SF₆ handling.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the near future, EPRI Research is planning to address the following needs:

- **Improved Leak Location.** EPRI is constantly tracking the development of improved SF₆ Camera leak location techniques. There are some promising developments on the horizon that are under investigation for 2003.

- **GIS Condition Monitoring.** GIS stations are at critical nodes in the grid and a failure has a large impact on a utility’s performance. GIS stations are SF₆ insulated – so the SF₆ Analysis technique developed in past research can be effectively applied to predict failures in GIS. The focus for research will be on this and two other diagnostic techniques:
  - UHF Detection
  - Acoustic Emission

- **EPRI is taking a leading role in tracking developments in SF₆ replacements, SF₆ legislation and alternative technologies that could impact future utility usage of SF₆ in their business. EPRI’s role in this regard is to keep the members abreast of developments – providing them with the technical tools and know-how to meet these challenges.**

**REFERENCES**


