

OptiNet™ Applications

Dynamic Variation of Laboratory Air Change Rates:

A New Approach to Save Energy & Enhance Safety

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The Lab Air Change Rate Dilemma

Over the past 5 to 10 years research facility design has been adapting to changing laboratory practices. Today's modern laboratory, especially in the life sciences, operates with fewer fume hoods due to the prevalence of microchemistry, or the use of minute quantities of chemicals, and computational chemistry. Additionally, thermal loads in labs have dropped due to the reduced plug loads of more energy efficient equipment such as LCD monitors instead of CRT's, more efficient freezers, and higher efficiency lighting. The result of all these changes is that the minimum air change rate is now often the dominant or controlling factor for determining average, and in many cases, design values for supply and exhaust air flow volumes in laboratories.

While acknowledging the increasing importance of this factor, there continues to be great debate over the correct value for the minimum air change rates (ACH) for laboratories. Air change rates are often set to a single value between 6 and 12 ACH for a laboratory with no hard guidelines or standards to rely on. The truth is there is no single correct rate of air changes for even a specific lab room. The dynamic nature of any individual lab space precludes that one "correct" value is appropriate at all times or for all conditions.

The "correct" value varies based on the specific conditions of the lab at a given point in time. For example, if a spill of a solvent or volatile chemical occurs, or chemists are doing work on a bench top that should be done in a hood, a higher room air change rate is desirable. In a spill situation, a rate far above 6 or 8 ACH's, such as 16 ACH's, can provide superior dilution performance at the time of the incident and for a period time afterwards. When the situation calls for it, a higher air change rate is much more effective in reducing contaminant levels quickly. However, the majority of the time, under normal operating conditions, lab room air is typically clean, and a minimum of 2 ACH would be "correct". Diluting clean room air with clean supply air achieves no benefit and wastes significant amounts of energy.

Consequently, the best theoretical approach regarding minimum air change rates for labs would be to determine the rate based on the real-time quality of the air in the laboratory. This would allow airflow in a lab to vary based on all the situational factors affecting lab airflow, as opposed to only the status of the hoods and the thermal load. Implementing a dynamic approach to controlling minimum air change rates requires the ability to measure a

unique set of indoor air parameters, such as total volatile organic compounds (TVOCs), particles, carbon dioxide, and humidity and to integrate this information with the building management system.

Until now such an approach has not been feasible or cost effective primarily due to the quality and quantity of sensors necessary to safely implement this approach. In addition, the associated calibration and maintenance costs rendered it impractical to populate a large number of sensors throughout a facility.

A New Technology Provides a Solution

A new sensing architecture has been developed that can now implement the dynamic control of laboratory room air change rates in a practical, reliable and cost effective manner. This new sensing approach changes the age old paradigm of sensing and minimizes calibration and maintenance expenses. Instead of placing multiple sensors in each sensed space or area of a building, this networked system routes packets or samples of air sequentially in a multiplexed fashion to a shared set of sensors. Every 30 to 40 seconds a sample of air from a different area is routed on a common air sampling backbone to the same set of sensors, known as a sensor suite, for measurement. These sequential measurements are then “demultiplexed” for each sampled area to create distinct sensor signals used for traditional monitoring and control. Typically 20 to 30 areas can be sampled, with one set of sensors, approximately every 15 minutes depending on the requirements for those spaces.

Calibration and maintenance expense is minimized due to the limited number of sensors and their centralized grouping in one location. The calibration process is easily accomplished through an exchange program whereby a set of factory calibrated sensors from the manufacturer periodically replaces the on site sensors, such as every 6 months. The system is therefore assured to operate at peak performance with minimal, or no disruption to the facility’s operation.

A key innovation in this multiplexed sensing system is the development of a structured cable containing low voltage power and signal conductors, data communications, and a unique, one quarter inch hollow conduit. This sample conduit provides the transport media through which the air packets are passed one after another, similar to data packets on the communications network used in building management systems. To prevent air packets from contaminating subsequent packets, the inner walls of the air sample conduit are made of a mixture of inert Kynar® and a unique nanotechnology material known as carbon nanotubes. These micron long chains of carbon atoms form inert, electrically conductive strands that, when mixed with the Kynar, form an electrically conductive matrix that prevents the build up of static charges that might impede the flow of particles and aerosols. The resultant sample conduit can accurately transport and preserve the air sample’s properties to support accurate measurement up to 500 feet away from the centrally located sensor suite.

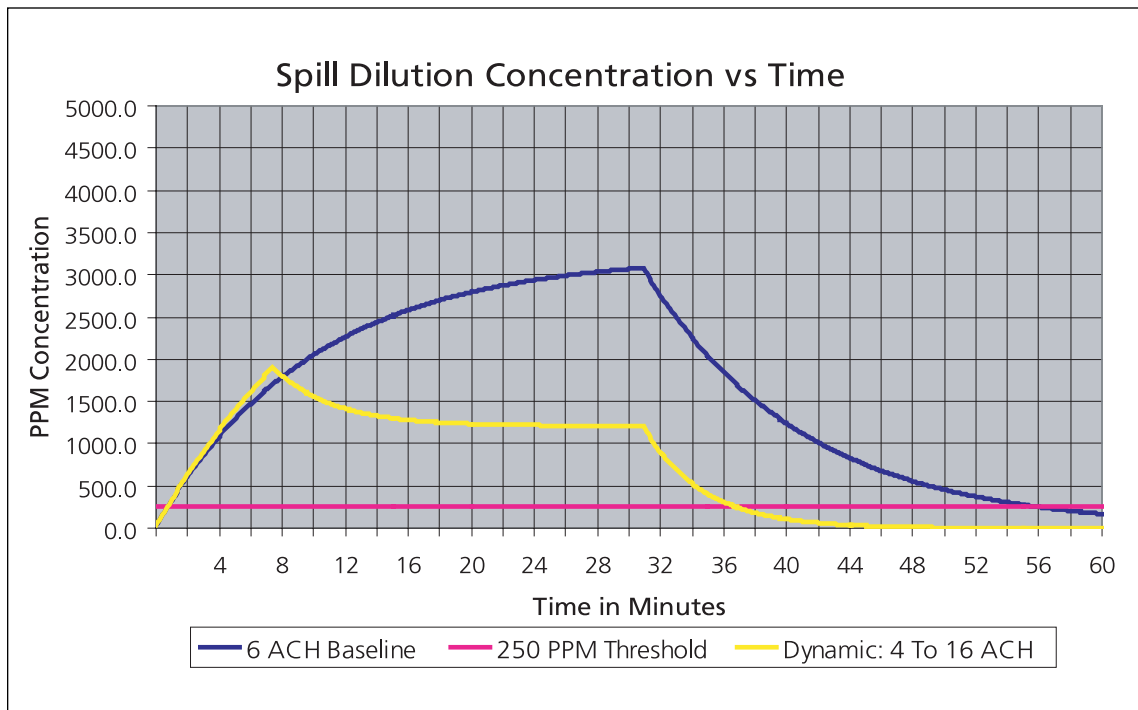


Fig. 2 Comparison of dilution rates of acetone as a function of air change rates.

The graph (Fig. 2) illustrates the significant benefits of operating at higher ACH rates during a spill. Figure 2 illustrates what happens during a National Institutes of Health (NIH) handbook dilution ventilation test of spilling a 1.5 liter container of acetone on the floor of a single 250 sq ft lab module.²

The figure of merit evaluated by NIH is the length of time it takes to reduce the contaminant to a safe level, shown in the above figure as 250 PPM or 1/3 of the threshold limit value (TLV). After approximately 7.5 minutes from the point of occurrence, the dynamic control system senses a spill and increases the air change rate from 4 ACH to 16 ACH, which reduces the peak concentration reached versus the 6 ACH baseline ventilation case. Additionally, after 31 minutes, the solvent has evaporated and the dynamic system takes only 5 minutes to reach the 250 PPM threshold, whereas the 6 ACH baseline takes 5 times longer or 25 minutes to reach this same level. Even more

interesting, is that after one hour the dynamic dilution control system reduces the background level of acetone vapors to 0.53 PPM whereas the 6 ACH baseline is still at 169.0 PPM or 320 times greater.

Regarding animal facilities, this approach is an excellent means to both safely vary and often-times reduce air changes, while providing real time monitoring and documentation of the quality of the room environment in which the animals are housed. Air quality problems that could affect research results can be quickly detected and remedied before the animals are substantially impacted. The ability to reduce an animal room's air changes from perhaps 10 or 15 ACH to 6 or 8 ACH is not only now practical but allowed.

The Institute for Laboratory Animal Research (ILAR) guide used by the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Lab Animal Care (AAALAC) for vivarium accreditation

permits lower air change rates as long as good, or specifically non-harmful levels of room air quality are maintained. In particular, the ILAR Guide to the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals is a performance-based standard that specifically states that fixed air change rate guidelines such as 10 to 15 ACH although being generally accepted, “...*might pose a problem by over ventilating a secondary [room] enclosure that contains few animals and thereby wasting energy or by under ventilating a secondary enclosure that contains many animals and thereby allowing heat and odor accumulation.*”²⁵ Additionally, the ILAR Guide states that lower room ventilation rates can be appropriate, “...*provided that they do not result in harmful or unacceptable concentrations of toxic gases, odors, or particles in the primary [animal cage] enclosure.*”²⁶ By directly measuring and controlling room particle levels, as well as odors/TVOC’s and ammonia, good room air quality levels can be maintained energy efficiently.

Application Examples

A case study example of the impact of dynamically varying air changes in labs and vivariums can be illustrated by the GreenLab project in Seattle, Washington. GreenLab is a prototype lab project in the design process that is being developed by Vulcan, Inc. The architect is Perkins + Will, and the consulting engineer is Keen Engineering (now Stantec Engineering). The 215,000 sq. ft. project is called GreenLab to reflect Vulcan’s interest in making this lab as energy efficient and sustainable as possible. A full concept design and thorough energy analysis was completed on this project,

including the use of the previously described multiplexed sensing system to dynamically vary the air changes in both a 75,000 sq. ft lab area and a 25,000 sq. ft. animal facility. This analysis assumed changing the previously fixed design air change rate of 8 ACH to a variable rate of between 4 and 16 ACH in the lab areas, and from a fixed 15 ACH to a range of from 8 to 16 ACH in the vivarium. The result was a \$250,000 reduction in annual energy costs or 20% of the total utility bill for the entire 215,000 sq. ft. facility. This represented a 1.5 year payback in Seattle’s mild climate and according to the design team, the IEQ monitoring and dynamic ACH control system represented, “*the single largest energy conservation measure of the project.*”

This system also generated a net reduction of first cost in the GreenLab project. For the 75,000 sq ft. lab area, a gross reduction of approximately \$1,025,000 of HVAC system first cost was achieved by reducing the minimum air change levels in the labs and using a more realistic thermal load assessment. The result was a reduction in the design capacity of the HVAC system from supplying all labs simultaneously with approximately 16 ACH of air flow to a reduced level of 9 ACH. In total the gross first cost reduction in the HVAC System (air handlers, exhaust fans, furnace, VFD’s and chiller) was approximately \$13.68 per square feet of lab space.

Multiplexed sensing technology can also be used in offices, classrooms, healthcare facilities, and many other buildings where the control of outside air is important to save energy. Strategies such as demand control ventilation and differential enthalpy control can now be applied accurately, cost effectively, and reliably.

The developer of the Bank of America Tower in New York City recently awarded a contract to apply this technology in this high profile project. Described as “the world’s greenest skyscraper”, this 2.1 million square foot building is designed to be one of the most ecologically friendly and highly efficient buildings in the world.

References

¹Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)
29 CFR Part 1910.1450. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001. p.492.

²National Institutes of Health
Design Policy and Guidelines
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^{3,4}Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Lab Animal Care.
Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (NRC1996), p.32.

About Aircuity

Founded in 2000, Aircuity is the leading manufacturer of facility monitoring systems that cost-effectively reduce facility energy and operating expenses while simultaneously improving its indoor environmental quality. The company’s portable system earned R&D magazine’s prestigious R&D100 Technology Award (2002), which annually recognizes the 100 most technologically significant new products and processes.

In 2005 the company introduced OptiNet™, a permanently installed facility monitoring system. OptiNet provides continuous measurement and analysis of changing building environmental conditions which can be reported to the building’s control system for optimized ventilation control. This networked system is suitable for a broad range of commercial building applications where energy savings and enhanced indoor environmental quality are important, including offices, laboratories, hospitals, educational institutions, museums, convention centers and sports arenas. Aircuity’s goal is to optimize building ventilation performance for energy efficient operation without sacrificing occupant comfort, health or productivity.

Aircuity, Inc.

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