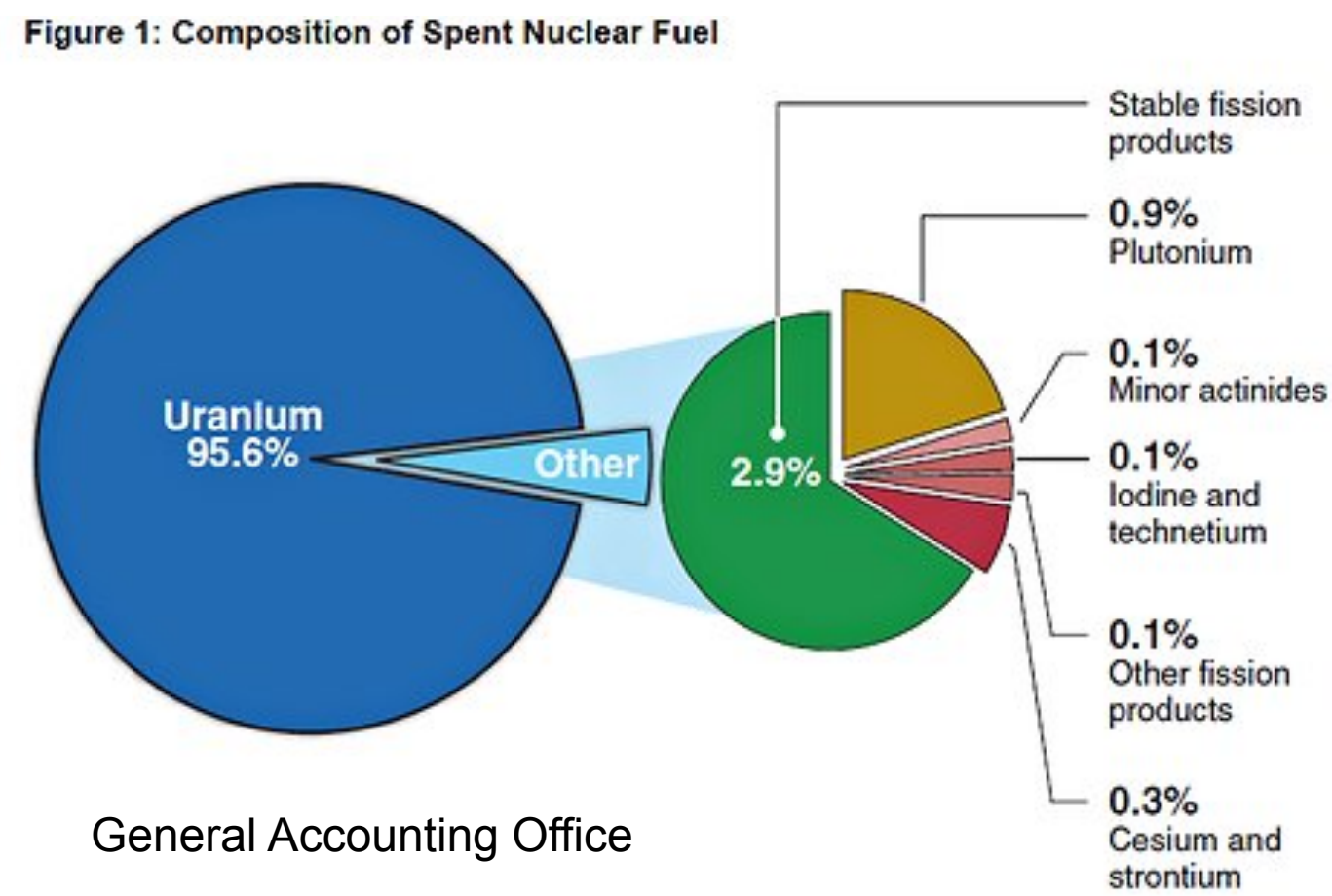
Science and Technology

Solutions, Separation Techniques, and the PUREX Process for Reprocessing Nuclear Waste

Spent Fuel Rods



General Accounting Office

- Fission products that emit beta and gamma radiation
- Some fissionable U-235 and Pu-239
- Alpha emitters, such as uranium-234, neptunium-237, plutonium-238 and americium-241
- Sometimes some neutron emitters such as californium (Cf).

Nuclear Reprocessing

- Process to chemically separate and recover fissionable plutonium and uranium from irradiated nuclear fuel.
- Purposes
  - Originally reprocessing was used solely to extract plutonium for producing nuclear weapons.
  - The reprocessed plutonium can be recycled back into fuel for nuclear reactors.
  - The reprocessed uranium, which constitutes the bulk of the spent fuel material, can in principle also be re-used as fuel, but that is only economic when uranium prices are high.
- Nuclear reprocessing reduces the volume of high-level waste, but by itself does not reduce radioactivity or heat generation and therefore does not eliminate the need for a geological waste repository.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_reprocessing

Nuclear Reprocessing

- Reprocessing of civilian fuel has long been employed in France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Japan, and India
- Briefly done at the West Valley Reprocessing Plant in the United States.
- In October 1976, concerned about nuclear weapons proliferation, President Gerald Ford indefinitely suspended the commercial reprocessing and recycling of plutonium in the U.S.
- In March 1999, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) reversed its policy and signed a contract with a consortium to design and operate a mixed oxide (MOX) fuel fabrication facility. There are no customers yet.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_reprocessing

PUREX Process

- **PUREX** is a chemical method used to purify fuel for nuclear reactors or nuclear weapons.
- It is an acronym standing for **P**lutonium **U**ranium **R**edox by **Ex**traction or **P**lutonium **U**ranium **R**ecovery by **Ex**traction.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PUREX

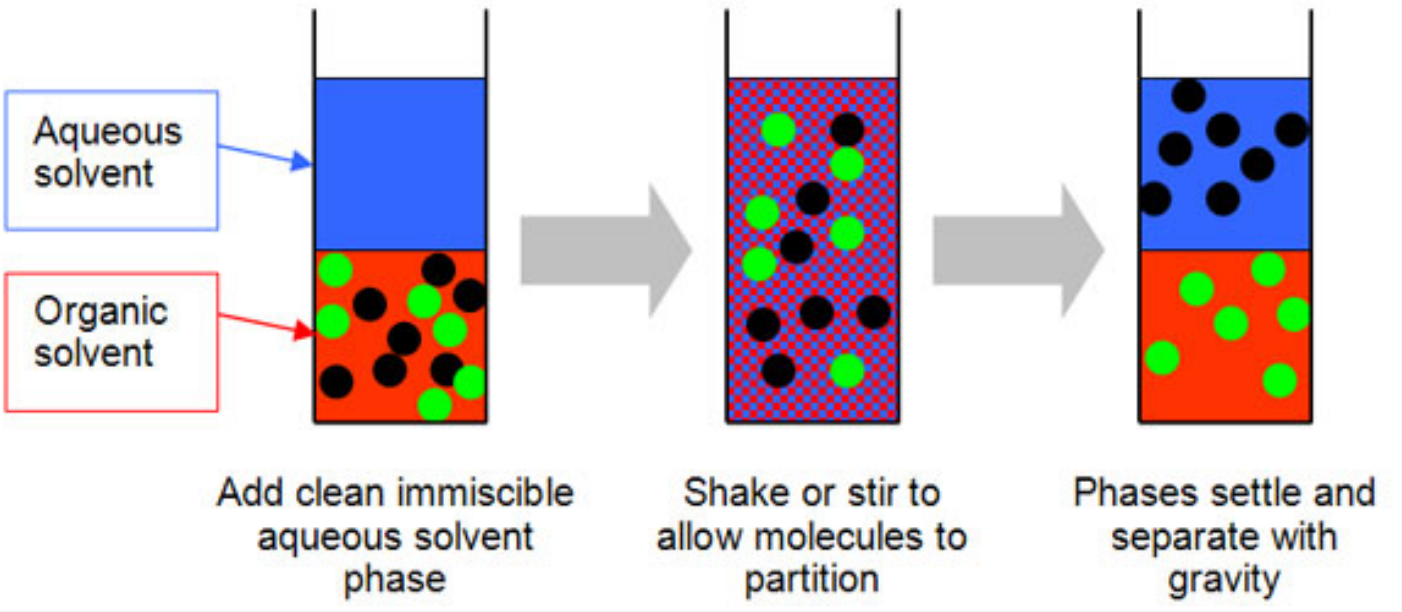
“Like Dissolves Like”

- Polar substances are expected to dissolve in polar solvents.
  - For example, ionic compounds, which are very polar, are often soluble in the polar solvent water.
- Nonpolar substances are expected to dissolve in nonpolar solvents.
  - For example, nonpolar molecular substances are expected to dissolve in hexane, a common nonpolar solvent.

"Like Does Not Dissolve Unlike"

- Nonpolar substances are not expected to dissolve to a significant degree in polar solvents.
  - For example, nonpolar molecular substances are expected to be insoluble in water.
- Polar substances are not expected to dissolve to a significant degree in nonpolar solvents.
  - For example, ionic compounds are insoluble in hexane.

Liquid-Liquid Extraction



Polar compounds will congregate in "aqueous" layer

Non-polar compounds will congregate in "organic" layer

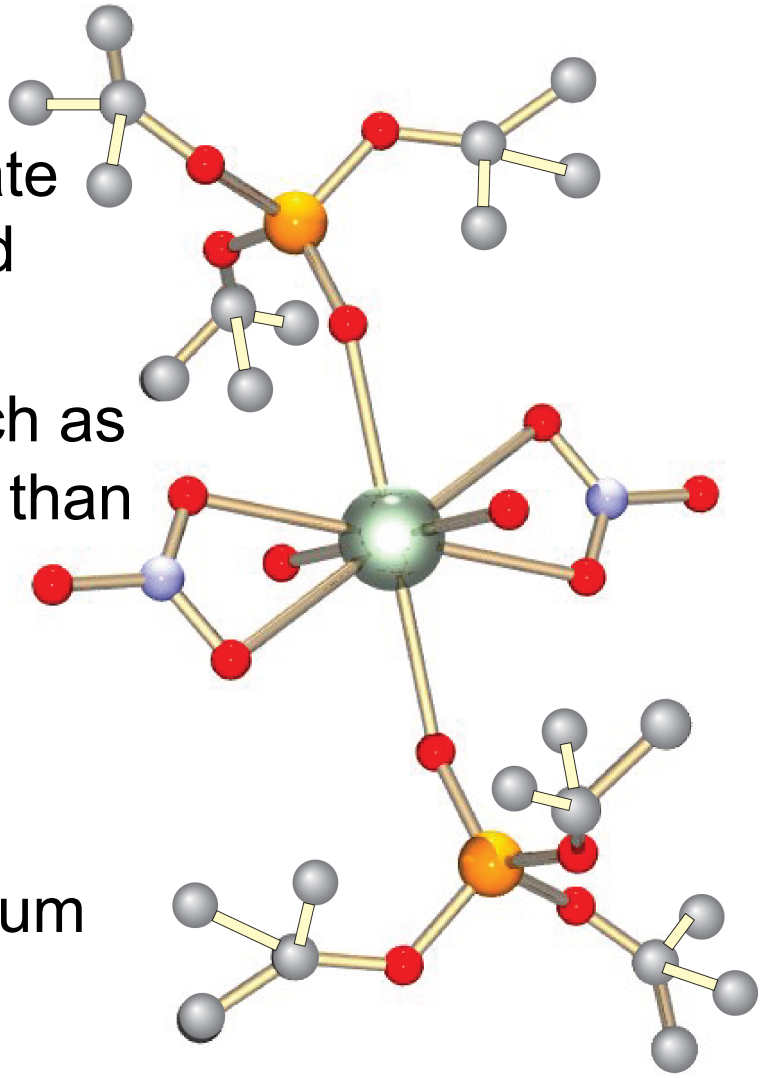
Typically performed in a separatory funnel:

Aqueous layer (polar things)

Organic layer (non-polar things)

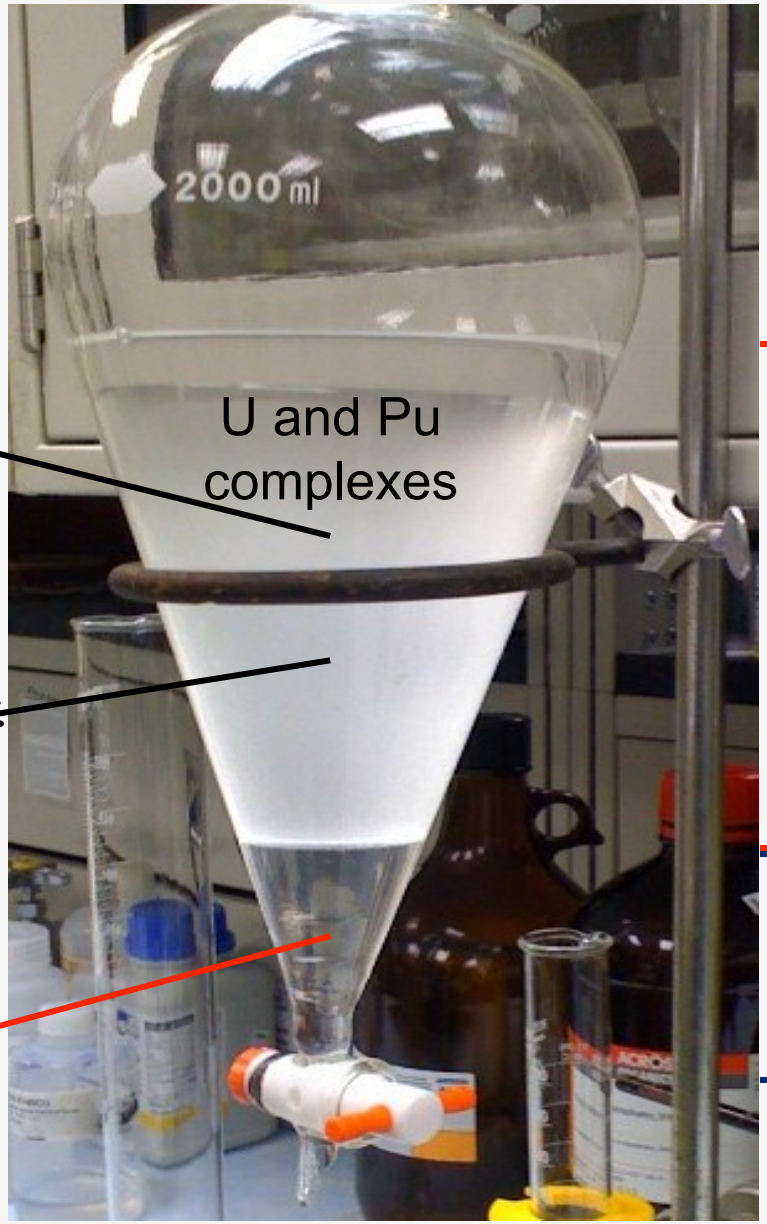
PUREX Process

- Dissolve in 7 M HNO_3.
- Filter out solids
- Combine with 30% tributyl phosphate (TBP) to form $UO_2(NO_3)_2 \cdot 2TBP$ and $PuO_2(NO_3)_2 \cdot 2TBP$ complexes.
- Extract with an organic solvent, such as kerosene. (It is normal to use more than one extraction cycle.)
  - $UO_2(NO_3)_2 \cdot 2TBP$ and $PuO_2(NO_3)_2 \cdot 2TBP$ complexes in nonpolar organic solvent
  - Fission products, and transuranium elements americium and curium remain in the aqueous phase.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PUREX

Separation of U, Pu, and Fission Products



PUREX Process

- Plutonium is separated from uranium in a separate extraction by treating the kerosene solution with aqueous iron(II) sulfamate, $Fe(SO_3NH_2)_2$, which reduces the plutonium to the +3 oxidation state. The plutonium passes into the aqueous phase.
- Variations on the PUREX process have been developed.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PUREX

One Sign of Reprocessing of Nuclear Wastes

- 2002 – China shipped about 20 tons of tributyl phosphate (TBP) to North Korea.
- Considered to be sufficient to extract enough material for three to five nuclear weapons