

# LIGO Beam Tube Component and Module Leak Testing

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## Abstract:

LIGO (Laser Interferometer Gravitational-wave Observatory) is a joint project of the California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology funded by the National Science Foundation. The project is designed to detect gravitational waves from astrophysical sources such as supernova and black holes. The LIGO project constructed observatories at two sites in the U.S. Each site includes two beam tubes (each 4 km long) joined to form an "L" shape. The beam tube is a 1.25 m diameter 304L stainless steel, ultra high vacuum tube that will operate at  $1 \times 10^{-9}$  torr or better. The beam tube was manufactured using a custom spiral weld tube mill from material processed to reduce the outgassing rate in order to minimize pumping costs. The integrity of the beam tube was assured by Helium Mass Spectrometer (HMS) leak testing each component of the beam tube system prior to installation. Each 2 kilometer long, isolatable beam tube module was then leak tested after completion.

This paper discusses the leak detection procedures used to test the 16 km of 1.25 m diameter UHV beam tube used in the LIGO project. The beam tube was leak tested in four steps including:

- Leak testing fabricated 20 m long tube sections
- Local leak testing of 250 mm diameter valves and valve nozzles
- Leak testing circumferential welds joining tube sections together
- Final leak testing of the installed 2 km long beam tube modules.

The component leak testing included 800 tube sections (20 m long), 808 circumferential welds and 72 valved nozzles. Each component was tested to a sensitivity of better than  $1 \times 10^{-10}$  atm. cc/sec of helium.

The leak test of the 2 km long beam tube modules would have been extremely difficult and expensive using standard helium leak detection techniques. Therefore, a method was developed utilizing a Residual Gas Analyzer (RGA) to measure the leak tightness of the beam tube module. Another method was developed to locate leaks from the pressure gradients in the beam tube using nine RGAs distributed along the length of the beam tube.

## Project Background:

The LIGO (Laser Interferometer Gravitational-wave Observatory) Project's mission is to detect gravitational waves from astrophysical sources such as a supernova or the formation of black holes. Two LIGO sites have been constructed in the U. S., one near Richland, Washington on the Hanford Reservation and another at Livingston, Louisiana.

The initial detectors are currently being installed and commissioned and the entire system is planned to be operating at design sensitivity by 2002.

At each site the beam tubes have a diameter of 1.25 m and are configured as an "L" with 4 km long arms. The tube along each arm is divided into 2 km isolatable beam tube modules. The entire project required 16 km of beam tube. The tubes are covered

with an arch shaped concrete cover to protect them from the environment and to reduce their wind driven motion. A view of the Hanford facility is provided in Figure 1.

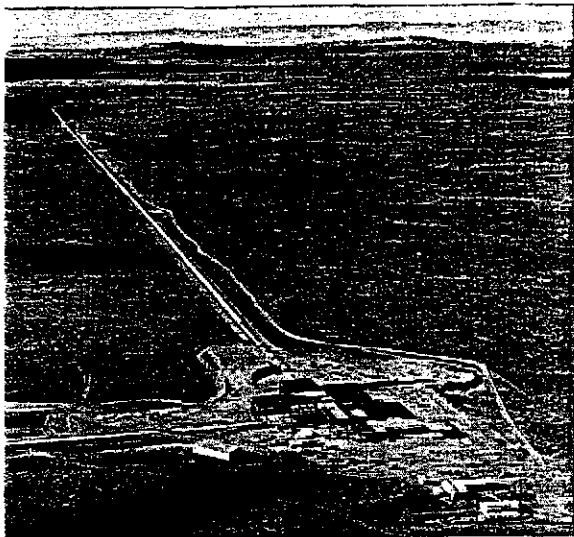


Figure 1 Aerial view of the LIGO site at Richland, Washington

The concept of the LIGO detector is to sense the distortions of space induced by incoming gravitational waves with laser interferometry between suspended mirrors (test masses). The test masses are placed in vacuum chambers at the vertex and ends of the "L". The gravitational wave will shorten the time it takes light to travel between test masses along one arm of the "L" while lengthening the time in the other arm. The difference in travel time along the arms is proportional to the strength of the gravitational wave. Laser light enters the system at the vertex of the L and is split between the two arms. After traversing the arms multiple times by bouncing between the test masses, the beams are recombined at the vertex to measure the difference in travel time.

The changes in length of the 4 km arms due to gravitational waves of astrophysical origin are expected to be less than  $10^{-17}$  meters so that significant effort is required to minimize the perturbations on the test masses from seismic and thermally induced (Brownian) motion. In order to sense such small motions, the laser beams must propagate in a good vacuum and the effect of light scattering from the beam tube walls needs to be controlled. The outgassing of the beam tube material and the baffling strategy as well as the surface treatment of the beam tubes is determined by the goal of accommodating future interferometers operating at the quantum limit.

The two sites will operate in coincidence, exploiting the property that a gravitational wave from an astrophysical event will distort the space almost simultaneously at the two sites, while most of the perturbing noise is uncorrelated. The LIGO detectors will comprise one element of a worldwide network of detectors with additional sites in Italy, Germany, Japan and Australia. The network, using the slight variations in the arrival time of the waves over the Earth, will determine the position of the sources in the sky.

The tubes are manufactured of 3 mm thick, 304 L stainless steel coils, specially treated to reduce hydrogen outgassing to a rate of  $1 \times 10^{-13}$  torr liter / sec  $\text{cm}^2$  or less. During operation, the beam tubes will be evacuated to a partial pressure of  $1 \times 10^{-9}$  torr of Hydrogen and 1/10 of this partial pressure for water, carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide to minimize the propagation time fluctuations due to molecular density fluctuations in the laser beam.

A custom designed tube mill was used to manufacture the specially treated stainless steel coil material into 20 m long spiral welded tube sections. External stainless steel stiffeners were welded to the beam tube sections at 0.75 m intervals along the tube length to resist buckling due to the external pressure. A bellows was added to half of the beam tube sections to allow for tube length changes when the system is baked out and to accommodate daily and seasonal temperature variations. About 10% of the tube sections were also provided with a 250 mm port and high vacuum valve. The valves are located about every 250 m along the beam tube modules for diagnostic purposes and as pump ports for the system bakeout. The beam tube sections were then welded at the site into the 2 km beam tube modules with 44 inch (1120 mm) diameter high vacuum valves at each module end. A photo of the beam tube module assembly is provided in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Beam tube module assembly

The beam tubes are passive components and, providing there are no leaks, the gas load is determined entirely by the outgassing of the material. The aim is to achieve the required pressures by end

pumping only to minimize the pumping costs. The outgassing by water vapor and hydrocarbons is reduced by a factor of at least a 1000 by a 30 day bake at 168C. The outgassing of hydrogen is unaffected by the low temperature bake and is reduced by processing the stainless steel at 444C in a low humidity atmosphere for 36 hours while still in the form of coils prior to fabricating the tube sections. Coupon tests were performed to establish the low hydrogen outgassing of each coil of steel used in fabricating the tube. The welding of the tube was carried out in a low humidity purge to reduce the reintroduction of hydrogen by the dissociation of water during the heating.

Maintaining a total leak rate of  $1 \times 10^{-9}$  Std cc / sec. or less in a 2 km module was considered an extremely difficult task unless a systematic approach was taken to the leak testing. The decision was made to leak test each component, to better than  $1 \times 10^{-10}$  Std. cc / sec., prior to installation into the beam tube module. A final leak test was then performed to confirm that the module in its entirety met the required leak rate. The 16 km. of beam tube contained over 70 km of weld, divided into 800 tube sections, each needing to be leak tested. Leak tests were also required of the 808 field welded circumferential joints and the 72 ports and valves.

The leak testing of components had to be done in a timely manner to be economical and to prevent delaying the installation. It was essential that the component leak testing activities be operated on an efficient, production line basis.

### Visual Inspection and Repair of Welding

The initial weld quality test was a visual inspection by a weld supervisor of every inch of both weld passes, inside and out. The weld supervisors were highly trained in the art of automatic and manual welding and visual inspection of the finished weld. All questionable areas of the weld were rewelded prior to any leak test activity.

The rate of tube repairs or "pick-ups" detected by visual inspection slowly improved throughout the project. Some of the early tubes at Hanford had as many as twenty to forty pick-ups while the Livingston job site produced 50 of its 400 tubes which were completely free of pick-ups. The majority of these pick-ups were small weld defects or areas of concern resulting from weld starts and stops or other welding abnormalities.

### Leak Testing Tube Sections

A sensitive leak test (less than  $1 \times 10^{-10}$  std. cc /sec of He) was performed on each 20 m long tube section. The tube section leak test was accomplished in a separate leak detection room housing three identical test stations. The leak test was accomplished by machining the ends of the tube section (required for welding and alignment as well as leak testing) and sealing the tube between the two end heads. Seals were a butt gasket and an outer O-ring at each end, with a nitrogen purged annulus between. One of the end head assemblies contained the calibrated helium leak and the other end head assembly contained the pumping and leak detection systems. Prior to testing, a blind flange was installed on the tube sections having a 250 mm port.

The pumping of the tube was accomplished using a valved and LN<sub>2</sub> trapped 20 inch diameter diffusion pump backed by a rotary vane roughing pump. The helium mass spectrometer leak detector (HMS) was connected to the foreline of the diffusion pump such that either the main roughing pump, or a very small roughing pump, or the HMS could back the diffusion pump. A non-silicon diffusion pump oil (Santovac 5<sup>®</sup>) was chosen to permit easier cleaning of the tube if a backstreaming episode resulted from an equipment failure or operator error. See figure 3 for the tube section pumping system.

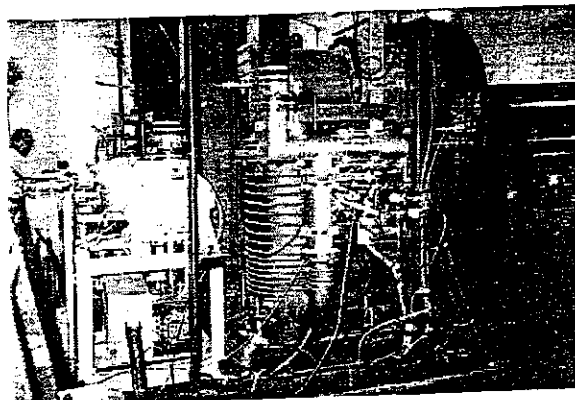


Figure 3 Tube section leak test apparatus pumping system

A clam shell type outer vessel enclosed the entire tube and was sealed to the tube at the ends of the tube section. In this manner, the tube section could be evacuated and the clam shell outer vessel, which completely surrounded the beam tube section, provided a space which could be flooded with helium to perform a "Hood" type HMS leak test. A view of

the tube section leak test facility is provided in Figure 4.

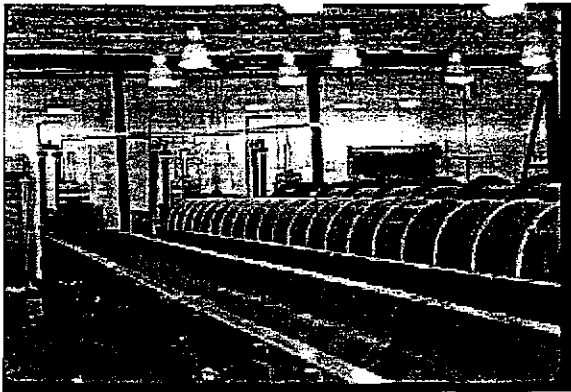


Figure 4 Tube section leak test facility

A major issue which drove the design of the tube section leak test apparatus was to prevent the build up of helium background in the testing room which can migrate to the HMS via the pump exhaust system. The second issue was to be aware that leak testing and leak hunting are time consuming and costly. Therefore, everything that could be done to prevent leaks, the false indication of leaks and helium saturation of the HMS units was essential to the economic success of the project.

The clam shell outer vessel was sealed along all joints to prevent leakage of helium. It was provided with a roughing pump used first to evacuate the outer vessel prior to a back fill with helium and secondly (after the leak test), to evacuate the helium from the outer vessel and exhaust the helium outside of the building.

A separate HVAC system was installed in the tube section leak detection room. The HVAC system was fed with fresh air drawn from outside of the building to minimize the helium background within the room. The outside air was required due to the use of helium in the welding processes, which were performed in different sections of the fabrication building. In addition, a separate small room was erected adjacent to the leak detection room, housing the three HMS leak detectors. This room was also equipped with a separate HVAC system, with outside makeup air to minimize backstreaming of helium into the leak detectors.

The leak detector was equipped with a manual zero adjustment which was used to zero the indicated helium background within the test volume in order to be able to measure the sensitive helium leak rate within a reasonable amount of time. Testing indicated that helium backgrounds as high as the low

to mid  $10^{-8}$  std cc/sec of helium could be manually zeroed from the leak detector without effecting the sensitivity of the leak test. This was reconfirmed throughout the project by performing calibrations before and after every test.

Several steps were taken to ensure that an accurate leak test was performed. One of these steps was to locate a calibrated helium leak (low  $10^{-10}$  Std. cc / sec. leak rate) on the opposite end of the tube from the pumping and leak detection systems. This allowed the measure of true system sensitivity as opposed to machine sensitivity, which is measured if the calibrated leak is placed directly on the HMS. With large pumping volumes or high helium backgrounds, the true system sensitivity will be much less than the machine sensitivity. CB&I has utilized this principal on all of their large volume leak testing projects for structures such as vacuum insulated spheres for the storage of various cryogens, space simulation chambers and a project which involved 1000 feet of 24 inch diameter high vacuum tube.

Another accuracy check was the use of an instrument to measure the concentration of helium within the outer vessel. The measured value of the helium concentration was then used in the equation to determine the actual leak rate.

It was essential, in order to maintain a production line type leak testing program, to protect the HMS units from as much contamination as possible. A LN2 trap was provided on the inlet of the leak detectors to minimize contamination from the uncleaned beam tube sections (testing was performed prior to cleaning to eliminate the possibility of the cleaning water temporarily sealing a tiny leak). The leak detectors were also isolated from the pumping system for the majority of the time and connected to the system only immediately before the test. At all other times, the diffusion pump was backed by one of the roughing pumps.

The duration of a beam tube section test, including pumpdown of the beam tube section, could be as much as 8 hours (or, more commonly, overnight pumpdown with about a one hour test duration). It was therefore essential to the schedule that repeat tests were not required. A pre-test and post test calibration procedure was initiated in order to ensure that the accuracy of the test was confirmed and that failed equipment could be identified and moved offline and repaired.

The initial goal of the tube section leak test facility was to complete two tube section leak tests per day with the three leak test stations. The third tube section leak test station was envisioned to be utilized for leak hunting. Fortunately, no leaks were found in the beam tube sections and the third station was used continuously to increase the frequency of tube section tests. The tube section leak test facility was eventually capable of a maximum sustainable productivity of 5 tube section leak tests per day. This rate utilized a two man crew for one 10 hour shift per day.

### Valve and Port Tests

The welding of the 250 mm ports to the beam tube sections were checked during the tube section test. However, the high vacuum valve and its flange connection to the port were tested in a separate test. The valve and flange leak tightness was demonstrated by traditional bagging (Hood Test) technique. The port was sealed by a custom made plug on the inboard end of the port where it attached to the beam tube. This plug sealed against the inside of the port nozzle neck and was provided with a calibrated leak and a helium feed connection. The pumping system and HMS were attached to a port in the blind flange on the outboard end of the valve. The leak test started with the valve open and the entire valve/port assembly under vacuum from the inboard plug to the outboard blind flange. A pre-test calibration was accomplished using the calibrated leak on the inboard plug. The flange connections and valve were leak checked by bagging the entire outside of the valve/port assembly and injecting helium into the bag. The valve was then closed and the inboard side of the valve was backfilled with helium through the plug helium connection. Using this technique, the valve was leak tested "the hard way" with vacuum trying to force the valve disk away from the sealing surface. This is the most severe method of leak testing a high vacuum valve. Helium concentration in the bag and behind the valve disk was determined by measuring the oxygen concentration. Leak rate calculations were corrected for the helium concentration. See figure 5

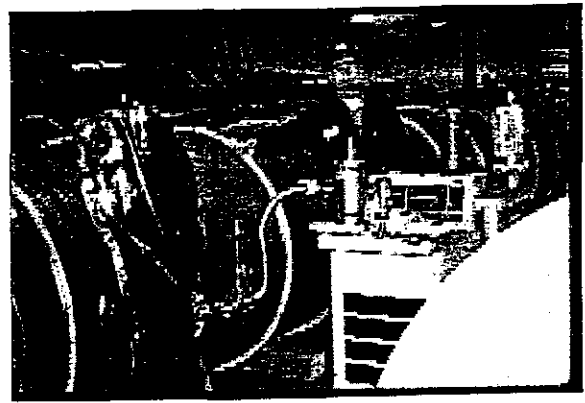


Figure 5 Valve and port leak test apparatus

### Tube Section to Tube Section Circumferential Weld Tests

The last group of welds, which had to be tested prior to the final module leak test, were the circumferential welds between tube sections. As soon as a tube section was set in place during installation, it was provided with an initial alignment and then welded to the preceding tube section. The weld was then tested as a part of the tube section installation procedure.

The leak testing hardware consisted of two 180° vacuum channels which were hooked together to cover the full 360° circumferential weld. This vacuum channel was sealed to the outside of the beam tube and evacuated with a small turbomolecular pump and roughing pump combination. An LN<sub>2</sub> trapped HMS was used, after isolation of the turbomolecular and roughing pump combination, during the leak test. An elastomeric ring was installed on the inside of the beam tube at the circumferential weld such that the space between the ring and the inside of the beam tube could be filled with helium. The leak test was a local, sensitive test and proved a leak rate of  $1 \times 10^{-10}$  std. cc / sec of helium or less. See Figure 6 for a view of the leak test vacuum channel.