

Radium balance in discharge waters from coal mines in Poland the ecological impact of underground water treatment

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Abstract

Saline waters from underground coal mines in Poland often contain natural radioactive isotopes, mainly ^{226}Ra from the uranium decay series and ^{228}Ra from the thorium series. More than 70% of the total amount of radium remains underground as radioactive deposits due to spontaneous co-precipitation or water treatment technologies, but several tens of MBq of ^{226}Ra and even higher activity of ^{228}Ra are released daily into the rivers along with the other mine effluents from all Polish coal mines.

Mine waters can have a severe impact on the natural environment, mainly due to its salinity. Additionally high levels of radium concentration in river waters, bottom sediments and vegetation were also observed. Sometimes radium concentrations in rivers exceeded 0.7 kBq/m^3 , which was the permitted level for waste waters under Polish law. The investigations described here were carried out for all coal mines and on this basis the total radium balance in effluents has been calculated. Measurements in the vicinity of mine settling ponds and in rivers have given us an opportunity to study radium behaviour in river waters and to assess the degree of contamination.

For removal of radium from saline waters a method of purification has been developed and implemented in full technical scale in two of Polish coal mines. The purification station in Piast Colliery was unique, the first underground installation for the removal of radium isotopes from saline waters. Very good results have been achieved - approximately $6 \text{ m}^3/\text{min}$ of radium-bearing waters were treated there, more than 100 MBq of ^{226}Ra and ^{228}Ra remained underground each day. Purification has been started in 1999, therefore a lot of experiences have been gathered during this period. Since year 2006, a new purification station is working in another colliery, Ziemowit, at the level -650 meters. Barium chloride is used as a cleaning agent, and amount of water to be purified is reaching $9 \text{ m}^3/\text{min}$.

Technical measures such as inducing the precipitation of radium in gobs, decreasing the amount of meteoric inflow water into underground workings etc., have been undertaken in several coal mines, and as a result of these measures the total amount of radium released to the surface waters is much has diminished significantly during the last 15 years.

Introduction

Upper Silesian Coal Basin (USCB) is located in the Southern-West part of Poland. Presently there are 35 underground coal mines there extracting approximately 100 mln tons of coal per year. The depth of mine workings is from 350 to 1050 m. Upper Silesia is characterized by a very complicated and differentiated geological structure with numerous faults and other tectonic dislocations. Additionally, the area is very affected by mining.

Two hydrological regions of the Coal Basin have been distinguished. First region is located in southern and western Silesia with thick strata of sediments covering carboniferous formation. This overlay is built mainly by Miocene clays and silts. The thickness of these rocks is up to 700 m. Such strata make almost impossible migration of water and gases. In the second region Miocene clays do not occur. Carboniferous strata are covered by and Quaternary sediments, slightly compacted.

The oldest formations of this area form isolated sediments of Permian or Triassic limestone strongly fissured. There are numerous outcrops of coal seams. These formations enable very easy migration of water and gases.

An additional and unexpected component of the radioactive contamination of the natural environment, and different from that usually associated with this kind of industry, is caused by underground coal exploitation. In many of coal mines, located in Upper Silesian Coal Basin waters with enhanced radium content occur. Sometimes in radium-bearing brines barium ions are also present, in concentrations up to 2 g/l. Such waters were classified as radium-bearing type A waters. On the other hand, in the second kind of waters, which have been called type B, no barium can be found but radium and sulphate ions are present.

System of monitoring in the vicinity of coal mines

In the mining industry in Poland, monitoring of the radioactivity of mine waters, precipitates as well as gamma doses was obligatory since 1989 till 2003.

Monitoring of radioactive contamination caused by effluents and tailings from coal mines must be done since 1986. Due to these regulations the following measurements must be done in mine's vicinity:

- I. The concentration of ^{226}Ra and ^{228}Ra in effluent from the settlement pond, in river above and below the discharge point, in water supplies nearby discharge point.
- II. The concentrations of natural radionuclides in solid waste, dumped onto the surface piles.

Such complex monitoring system gives an opportunity to obtain a complete picture of the influence of a certain mine on the underground and surface employees as well as on inhabitants of adjoining areas. Basing on the results of measurements of radium concentration in the original waters inflows into the mine workings and on data on the flow rates of water provided by the mine hydrologists, the total activities of both radioisotopes of radium flowing with water to different parts of mines and to different mines were calculated. These results were compared with values obtained using radium concentrations in mixed waters taken from the drainage system (from gutters) in different parts of mines. The difference is indicating the activity of radium remaining in underground mine workings due to spontaneous precipitation of radium and barium sulphates or due to applied purification of water. The calculated activity of radium remaining in underground mine workings as deposits in all Upper Silesian coal mines is 580 MBq/day of ^{226}Ra and 530 MBq/day of ^{228}Ra . These values can not be considered as very accurate, since the uncertainty of measurements of flow rates of small inflows is rather large. The approximate amount of ^{226}Ra in **water inflows in coal mines** in USCIB have been calculated as high as 650 MBq/day (i.e. 230 GBq per year) while for ^{228}Ra this value is of about 700 MBq/day or 255 GBq per year. Although radium concentrations in waters type B were usually lower than in waters type A the total inflows to mines where radium-bearing waters type B occur were much higher. As a result the total activity of radium carried with water type B was higher. The highest values for a single mine (with waters type B) were: 78 MBq per day of ^{226}Ra and 145 MBq per day of ^{228}Ra .

In comparison corresponding values of inflows of radium with saline waters in 4 copper mines in Poland were: 31 MBq of ^{226}Ra and 3 MBq of ^{228}Ra per day.

One of the biggest advantages of the monitoring system in Upper Silesia region is a possibility to make an assessment of radium balance in discharge waters periodically. For instance in years 1987, 1995, 2003 and 2006 such assessments have been prepared. For the calculations of about 300 results of mine waters have been taken as well as 40 analyses of river waters have been done. The term „mine waters” means not only mine waters but also river waters close to the discharge points. Term “river waters” is used for the samples taken at the sampling points of regional monitoring system of water quality. All the data are included in the mine waters database in the Laboratory of Radiometry as the element of the radiation hazard monitoring and environmental monitoring. A comparison of assessment results in chosen periods is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of radium balance assessment in rivers from Upper Silesia region

| Catchment area | Total activity 1995 [MBq/day] | | Total activity 2003 [MBq/day] | | Total activity 2006 [MBq/day] | |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| | ^{226}Ra | ^{228}Ra | ^{226}Ra | ^{228}Ra | ^{226}Ra | ^{228}Ra |
| Inflows into “OLZA” pipeline from 11 mines | 9.8 | 6.7 | 6.8 | 6.8 | 6.5 | 6.5 |
| Olza River – discharge of „Olza” pipeline | 1.6 | 1.4 | 2.5 | 1.8 | 2.3 | 1.6 |
| Ruda-Nacyna Rivers (3 mines) | 2.2 | 1.4 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 1.2 | 1.1 |
| Bierawka River (5 mines) | 1.6 | 1.2 | 2.7 | 3.2 | 1.8 | 1.4 |
| Bytomka River (5 mines) | 0.4 | 0.5 | 1.5 | 3.0 | 1.2 | 1.9 |
| Kłodnica River (7 mines) | 2.6 | 2.9 | 2.6 | 3.7 | 2.8 | 2.9 |
| Rawa River (4 mines) | 0.2 | 0.2 | 1.2 | 2.7 | 0.6 | 2.1 |
| Black Przemsza River (4 mines) | 1.6 | 3.1 | 1.3 | 2.3 | 1.5 | 2.8 |
| Gostynka River (3 mines) | 133.9 | 248.1 | 61.1 | 147.6 | 52.4 | 128.5 |
| Mleczna River (2 mines) | 1.3 | 2.4 | 1.5 | 3.3 | 1.5 | 3.3 |

The significant decrease of daily discharge of radium was observed in the period 1987-1995. Very first assessment of radium ^{226}Ra in mine affluents has been done in 1987, giving the value of the daily release at level 400 MBq. At that time no results of ^{228}Ra measurements were available. Results of another assessment, prepared in 1995 showed a significant decrease of radium activity in mine waters, released into natural environment, roughly by factor 2. There were two reason of this effect. Firstly, the purification of A type mine waters has been

started in several coal mines in catchment areas of Olza river and Upper Vistula. The another reason was due to economical changes in the mining industry – dewatering of deep mines was more and more expensive and hydro-technical solutions have been applied in numerous mines to reduce water inflows into underground galleries, with special emphasis on brines.

In the last period the decrease of radium activity in discharge waters is mainly due to the purification of B type brines in Piast Colliery (started in 1999) and construction of another treatment station in the year 2006 in Ziemowit Mine. In Piast Mine the implementation of the treatment technology on deeper of the horizons in the mine caused the decrease of radium release from the mine at level 150 MBq/day – 60 MBq/day of ^{226}Ra and 90 MBq/day of ^{228}Ra . The application of the purification technology in another mine should further reduce radium discharge. Additionally, purification system for second horizon of Piast mine is under designing, and it will solve most of the problems with radium contamination of river waters in Upper Silesia region.

One of the collieries, releasing radium isotopes into surface settling pond and finally into Vistula River was Ziemowit Mine. In this mine saline brines are very common, and the total inflow into mine galleries exceeds 20 m³/min. Radium concentration in these brines is as high as 12 kBq/m³ for ^{226}Ra and 20 kBq/m³ for ^{228}Ra . Due to the lack of barium in brines (type B waters) from Ziemowit Mine the spontaneous coprecipitation of radium was negligible and only small part of radium remained underground as a result of adsorption on bottom sediments in underground water galleries. Therefore Ziemowit Colliery was the main source of the contamination of small brook, called Potok Golawiecki, a tributary of Vistula River and Vistula itself. In 2003 almost 50% of total activity released from all mines in USCB was dumped into surface waters from Ziemowit. Of about 60 MBq of ^{226}Ra and 100 MBq of ^{228}Ra was released daily, despite the fact, that concentrations of radium isotopes in effluents from Ziemowit Mine weren't very high, reaching 1.3 kBq/m³ in case of ^{226}Ra and for ^{228}Ra - 2.5 kBq/m³.

The ecological effect of the purification is the most important issue. At the outflow from the purification system, at the level -650m the removal efficiency is above 95%. On the surface the efficiency is lower, due to mixing with untreated waters from level -500m, But at the inflow of saline waters into the settling pond, as well as at the outflow from that pond, concentrations of radium isotopes are approximately 80-85% lower than before purification. It corresponds to the decrease of about 40 MBq for ^{226}Ra and 60 MBq for isotope ^{228}Ra of daily release from the Ziemowit Mine. It means, that the total amount of radium, discharged into the Potok Golawiecki and Vistula rivers is much lower, by a value 100 MBq/day. This station is still in preliminary period of activity and more detailed reports will be published later.

SUMMARY

- Coal mining may cause significant pollution of the natural environment due to release of waste waters with enhanced concentrations of natural radionuclides (mainly radium isotopes). This phenomenon is well known not only in Upper Silesian Coal Basin but also in other regions of underground exploitation of coal (Ruhr Basin), oil and gas or other resources.
- Due to mitigation measures, undertaken by mines, the significant improvement can be observed during last two decades. In most cases radium concentrations in discharge waters are low and surface waters are not contaminated. Moreover, further decrease of radium release is predicted as a result of underground mine water purification in two collieries.

- Monitoring system of natural radionuclides in waste waters and river waters is an important element of the prevention against the pollution of the natural environment. Moreover, it is a source of data for optimization of ground reclamation of previously contaminated areas (mainly settling ponds) of abandoned coal mines.

Of course, further improvement of the system is required as well as solution of important legal problems, related with liquidation of coal mines, harmonization with EU regulations etc.