

### Characteristics of Airgun Pulses

Airguns function by venting high-pressure air into the water. The pressure signature of an individual airgun consists of a sharp rise and then fall in pressure, followed by several positive and negative pressure excursions caused by oscillation of the resulting air bubble. The sizes, arrangement and firing times of the individual airguns in an array are designed and synchronized to suppress the pressure oscillations subsequent to the first cycle. The resulting downward-directed pulse has a duration of only 10 to 20 ms, with only one strong positive and one strong negative peak pressure (Caldwell and Dragoset, 2000). Most energy emitted from airguns is at relatively low frequencies. For example, typical high-energy airgun arrays emit most energy at 10–120 Hz. However, the pulses contain some energy up to 500–1000 Hz and above (Goold and Fish, 1998). The pulsed sounds associated with seismic exploration have higher peak levels than other industrial sounds to which whales and other marine mammals are routinely exposed. The P-P source levels of the 20-gun array (not proposed to be used for the Hess Deep work), and the 12-gun array and 10-gun arrays (that will be used for the Hess Deep), are 262, 257, and 255 dB re 1  $\mu\text{Pa}\cdot\text{m}$ , respectively. These are the nominal source levels applicable to downward propagation. (The effective source level for horizontal propagation is lower.) The only sources with higher or comparable effective source levels are explosions and high-power sonars operating near maximum power.

Several important mitigating factors need to be kept in mind. (1) Airgun arrays produce intermittent sounds, involving emission of a strong sound pulse for a small fraction of a second followed by several seconds of near silence. In contrast, some other acoustic sources produce sounds with lower peak levels, but their sounds are continuous or discontinuous but continuing for much longer durations than seismic pulses. (2) Airgun arrays are designed to transmit strong sounds downward through the seafloor, and the amount of sound transmitted in near-horizontal directions is considerably

reduced. Nonetheless, they also emit sounds that travel horizontally toward non-target areas. (3) An airgun array is a distributed source, not a point source. The nominal source level is an estimate of the sound that would be measured from a theoretical point source emitting the same total energy as the airgun array. That figure is useful in calculating the expected received levels in the far field (i.e., at moderate and long distances). Because the airgun array is not a single point source, there is no one location within the near field (or anywhere else) where the received level is as high as the nominal source level.

The strengths of airgun pulses can be measured in different ways, and it is important to know which method is being used when interpreting quoted source or received levels. Geophysicists usually quote P-P levels, in bar-meters or dB re 1  $\mu\text{Pa}\cdot\text{m}$ . The peak (= zero-to-peak) level for the same pulse is typically about 6 dB less. In the biological literature, levels of received airgun pulses are often described based on the “average” or “root-mean-square” (rms) level over the duration of the pulse. The rms value for a given pulse is typically about 10 dB lower than the peak level, and 16 dB lower than the P-P value (Greene, 1997; McCauley *et al.*, 1998, 2000a). A fourth measure that is sometimes used is the energy level, in dB re 1  $\mu\text{Pa}^2\cdot\text{s}$ . Because the pulses are >1 sec in duration, the numerical value of the energy is lower than the rms pressure level (but the units are different). Because the level of a given pulse will differ substantially depending on which of these measures is being applied, it is important to be aware which measure is in use when interpreting any quoted pulse level. In the past, NMFS has commonly referenced the rms levels when discussing levels of pulsed sounds that might “harass” marine mammals.

Seismic sound received at any given point will arrive via a direct path, indirect paths that include reflection from the sea surface and bottom, and often indirect paths including segments through the bottom sediments. Sounds propagating via indirect paths travel longer distances and often arrive later

than sounds arriving via a direct path. (However, sound travel in the bottom may travel faster than that in the water, and thus may arrive earlier than the direct arrival despite traveling a greater distance.) These variations in travel time have the effect of lengthening the duration of the received pulse. At the source, seismic pulses are about 10 to 20 ms in duration. In comparison, the pulse duration as received at long horizontal distances can be much greater. For example, for one airgun array operating in the Beaufort Sea, pulse duration was about 300 ms at a distance of 8 km (4.3 nm), 500 ms at 20 km (10.8 nm), and 850 ms at 73 km (39.4 nm) (Greene and Richardson, 1988).

Another important aspect of sound propagation is that received levels of low-frequency underwater sounds diminish close to the surface because of pressure-release and interference phenomena that occur at and near the surface (Urick, 1983; Richardson *et al.*, 1995). Paired measurements of received airgun sounds at depths of 3 m (9.8 ft) vs. 9 or 18 m (29.5 or 59 ft) have shown that received levels are typically several decibels lower at 3 m (9.8 ft) (Greene and Richardson, 1988). For a mammal whose auditory organs are within 1/2 or 1 m (1.6 or 3.3 ft) of the surface, the received level of the predominant low-frequency components of the airgun pulses would be further reduced.

Pulses of underwater sound from open-water seismic exploration are often detected 50 to 100 km (30 to 54 nm) from the source location, even during operations in nearshore waters (Greene and Richardson, 1988; Burgess and Greene, 1999). At those distances, the received levels on an approximate rms basis are low (below 120 dB re 1 mPa). However, faint seismic pulses are sometimes detectable at even greater ranges (e.g., Bowles *et al.*, 1994; Fox *et al.*, 2002). Considerably higher levels can occur at distances out to several kms from an operating airgun array. With 12-gun and 10-gun arrays, the distances at which seismic pulses are expected to diminish to received levels of 190, 180, 170 dB and 160 dB re 1  $\mu\text{Pa}$ , on an rms basis) are as follows:

Airgun Array	RMS Radii (m/ft)			
	190 dB	180 dB	170 dB	160 dB
12 airguns .....	300/984	880/2887	2680/ 8793	7250/ 23786
10 airguns .....	250/820	830/2723	2330/ 7644	6500/ 21325