

A POTENT GREENHOUSE GAS IDENTIFIED IN THE ATMOSPHERE: SF₅CF₃

Sturges, W. T., Wallington, T. J., Hurley, M. D., Shine, K. P., Sihra, K., Engel, A., Oram, D. E., Penkett, S. A., Mulvaney, R., Brenninkmeijer, C. A. M.

We detected a compound previously unreported in the atmosphere, trifluoromethyl sulfur pentafluoride (SF₅CF₃). Measurements of its infrared absorption cross section show SF₅CF₃ to have a radiative forcing of 0.57 watt per square meter per parts per billion. This is the largest radiative forcing, on a per molecule basis, of any gas found in the atmosphere to date. Antarctic firn measurements show it to have grown from near zero in the late 1960s to about 0.12 part per trillion in 1999. It is presently growing by about 0.008 part per trillion per year, or 6% per year. Stratospheric profiles of SF₅CF₃ suggest that it is long-lived in the atmosphere (on the order of 1000 years).

The Kyoto Protocol highlighted the need to assess a broad range of greenhouse gases for their contribution to radiative forcing. Whereas most attention has been placed on the major greenhouse gases (CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O), it is clear that some gases that are present at much lower concentrations can contribute to global warming because of their exceptionally large infrared (IR) absorption. A notable example is SF₆, which is closely chemically related to the "new" molecule SF₅CF₃. SF₆ is of almost exclusively anthropogenic origin, currently present in the atmosphere at only is similar to 4 parts per trillion (ppt), but with a global warming potential (GWP) of 22,200 relative to CO₂ over a 100-year time horizon ([1](#)). SF₆ is one of the greenhouse gases that the Kyoto Protocol seeks to control.

We first noted SF₅CF₃ as an unidentified chromatographic peak that eluted shortly after SF₆ in gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) analysis of stratospheric air samples. The identity of the peak was determined by the presence of ions with masses of 68.995 (CF₃,^{sup +}), 88.967 (SF₃,^{sup +}), and 126.964 (SF₅CF₃,^{sup +}) in their correct relative abundances, and the identity was then confirmed by an exact GC retention time match with a sample of pure compound (from Flura Corporation, Newport, Tennessee) diluted in nitrogen. The mass spectrum (comprising almost exclusively the three above-mentioned ions) was obtained from the pure compound because no library spectrum could be found.

Air samples were analyzed with the GC-MS system operated in single-ion mode (a mass of 88.967 was used to monitor SF₅CF₃), giving a detection limit of is similar to 1 part per 10¹⁵ for 800-ml air volumes ([2](#), [3](#)). SF₆ concentrations were referenced to a calibrated ambient air standard (Colorado Mountains, 1994; SF₆ = 3.39 ppt) ([4](#)). SF₅CF₃ was calibrated by two separate methods ([5](#)), giving a mean concentration in the same air standard of 0.094 +/- 0.020 ppt.

Samples of air were pumped out of deep consolidated snow (firn) at Dome Concordia in eastern Antarctica (75 Degrees S, 123 Degrees E; 3233 m above sea level) in January 1999 ([6](#)) at various depths from the surface to pore close-off at is similar to 100 m. Mean equilibration times between changing surface concentrations and air at depth in the firn can be on the order of years or even decades, depending on the diffusivity of the particular gas and its concentration gradient. This was calculated with the aid of a diffusive transport model constrained by measured profiles of gases with well-known atmospheric trends (e.g., CO₂) ([7](#)).

Profiles of SF₅CF₃ and SF₆ with depth in the firn are shown in Fig. 1. They are remarkably similar in form, leading to the suspicion that their growth rates are closely related. Published measurements and emission estimates for SF₆ were combined ([8](#)) to give the global SF₆ trend shown in the inset of Fig. 1. Modeling this trend gave an excellent match to the observed SF₆ concentrations in the firn, except for a possible slight overestimate from extrapolating the trend from 1997 to 1999. A hypothetical trend for SF₅CF₃ was then constructed with the SF₆ trend scaled to the mean relative concentration of SF₅CF₃ to SF₆ in surface air at Dome Concordia (0.122 to 4.00 ppt) (Fig. 1). This trend was modeled with a diffusion coefficient for SF₅CF₃ in air estimated from molecular volume calculations ([9](#)). The resulting fit to the observed SF₅CF₃ profile is very good (Fig. 1), with most measurements falling within an envelope of concentrations 10% above and below the mean. We therefore think that this time trend for SF₅CF₃ is a good representation of its actual atmospheric growth and suggests that emissions began in the late 1950s.

Air was also collected from the stratosphere by using a balloon-borne liquid neon-based cryogenic sampler ([10](#)). Vertical profiles of SF₅CF₃ are shown in Fig. 2 for both mid-latitude and Arctic vortex flights, launched from Aire sur l'Adour, France (44 Degrees N), and Kiruna, Sweden (68 Degrees N), respectively. At both latitudes, the concentrations declined monotonically with altitude. Measurements of SF₆ were used to determine the mean age of air ([11](#)) for each sample. The mean ages at maximum altitude were 4 and 7 years for the mid-latitude and Arctic vortex flights, respectively. The greater decline in SF₅CF₃ with altitude observed for the high-latitude flight can be explained by subsidence of older air in the polar vortex. The SF₅CF₃ concentrations expected on the basis of the mean age of air and the atmospheric trend of SF₅CF₃ (from Fig. 1) are shown as thick lines in Fig. 2. Agreement between the predicted and measured SF₅CF₃ is very good within the errors of the measurements, at least at lower altitudes. We therefore expect the upper limit of the lifetime of SF₅CF₃ to approach that of SF₆ [3200 years ([12](#))]. By analogy with SF₆, we do not expect any substantial sinks of SF₅CF₃ in the troposphere nor do we expect uptake by soils, plants, or the ocean ([12](#)).

Toward the top of the stratospheric profiles (Fig. 2), there is evidence of a possible divergence toward observed SF₅CF₃ concentrations that are lower than those predicted. This is, however, very sensitive to the accuracy of the reconstructed atmospheric trend and the assumption of a constant SF₅CF₃-to-SF₆ ratio over time (the small offset between measured and predicted concentrations at all altitudes in the later flight suggests some deviation from these assumptions). In the top few kilometers of the profiles, measured N₂O concentrations averaged is similar to 50

parts per billion (ppb). This means that is similar to 80 to 90% of the N₂O that originally entered the stratosphere [is similar to 310 ppb in the early 1990s ([1](#))] had been destroyed in this "old" air. If measured SF₅CF₃ concentrations were, on average, 10% lower than those predicted from SF₆, then by analogy to N₂O [lifetime of is similar to 120 years ([1](#))], the stratospheric lifetime of SF₅CF₃ would be on the order of 1000 years. We therefore expect the lifetime of this molecule to be somewhere between several hundred and a few thousand years.

The radiative forcing due to SF₅CF₃ has not previously been evaluated. The IR absorption spectrum of SF₅CF₃, measured over the range from 600 to 3800 cm⁻¹ with a Fourier transform IR spectrometer (FTIR), is shown in Fig. 3. IR bands were observed at 755, 884, 889, 903, 1172, and 1257 cm⁻¹. IR absorption increased linearly with SF₅CF₃ concentration. Absorption cross sections (base e, in units of square centimeters per molecule of 7.6 x 10⁻¹⁸ at 903 cm⁻¹ and 6.6 x 10⁻¹⁸ at 1257 cm⁻¹ and integrated band strengths (units of centimeters per molecule of 1.24 x 10⁻¹⁷ (670 to 780 cm⁻¹), 1.45 x 10⁻¹⁶ (840 to 960 cm⁻¹), and 9.63 x 10⁻¹⁷ (1125 to 1325 cm⁻¹) were derived. These are believed to be accurate to 5% ([13](#)). The strength of the IR absorption lines and the fact that 60% of the integrated cross section lies in the atmospheric IR "window" between 800 and 1200 cm⁻¹ make SF₅CF₃ a very effective greenhouse gas on a per molecule basis.

Subsequently, the IR absorption spectrum was used to calculate an adjusted cloudy sky radiative forcing ([14](#), [15](#)) of 0.57 W m⁻² ppb⁻¹ for SF₅CF₃. This is the strongest radiative forcing, on a per molecule basis, of any molecule found in the global atmosphere to date ([1](#)). Indeed, only one of the more than 100 known or potentially occurring manmade gases surveyed in ([1](#)) has a stronger radiative forcing than SF₅CF₃. The forcing due to SF₆ is slightly weaker at 0.52 W m⁻² ppb⁻¹.

Without better knowledge of the lifetime of SF₅CF₃, it is not possible to calculate the GWP with confidence, but assuming that it has the same lifetime as SF₆, we estimate that its 100-year mass-normalized GWP relative to CO₂ ([1](#)) would be 18,000. If the lifetime were 1000 years, the GWP would be only marginally smaller at 17,500. SF₆, which has a slightly higher GWP of 22,200, is the only molecule listed by the World Meteorological Organization/United Nations Environment Programme with a stronger GWP than SF₅CF₃ ([1](#)).

It is remarkable that the trends of SF₆ and SF₅CF₃ have tracked each other so closely over the past 30 years. SF₅CF₃ may be a by-product of the manufacture of SF₆, but we have not detected any in a sample of pure SF₆. One of the dominant uses of SF₆ is in gas-insulated switchgear, transformers, accelerators, and other high-voltage equipment. These uses have accounted for an almost constant 80% of SF₆ sales ([8](#)); the increasing use by the electronics industry has been largely compensated by the decreasing use in magnesium smelting ([8](#)). We speculate that SF₅CF₃ originates as a breakdown product of SF₆ in high-voltage equipment. Such systems likely contain fluoropolymers, which provide a source of CF₃ groups that may be attacked by SF₅ radicals formed by high-voltage discharges.

Despite the large GWP of SF₅CF₃, the amount currently in the atmosphere is so small that the contribution of this molecule to overall radiative forcing is very minor (<10⁻⁴ W m⁻²). The present-day burden of SF₅CF₃ is similar to 3.9 x 10³ metric tons, with emissions rising by is similar to 270 metric tons year⁻¹ (from the trend shown in Fig. 1 and assuming negligible atmospheric loss). This emission is equivalent in GWP terms (for a 100-year time horizon) to is similar to 1% of the annual UK emission of CO₂ ([16](#)). SF₅CF₃, however, has a much longer lifetime than that of CO₂ (atmospheric CO₂ equilibration time of 50 to 200 years), and its rate of growth may be accelerating. There is, therefore, potential for an almost irreversible accumulation of this gas in the atmosphere. SF₅CF₃, unlike CO₂, has no natural sources and therefore has the potential for substantial emission control after its sources have been identified. If it is indeed formed in high-voltage equipment, then there may already be substantial amounts "stored" in electrical installations worldwide. We think that it is important to continue monitoring the atmospheric concentration of SF₅CF₃ in order to determine and control its sources and to guard against an undesirable accumulation of this strong greenhouse gas in the atmosphere.

GRAPH: Fig. 1. Measurements of SF₅CF₃ (triangles) and SF₆ (circles) in air extracted from firn at Dome Concordia, Antarctica, in January 1999 and firn modeling (SF₅CF₃, thick solid line; SF₆, thin solid line) of expected depth profiles based on the atmospheric scenarios shown in the inset. The dotted lines shown for SF₅CF₃ denote concentrations that are +/- 10% of the modeled line. Error bars on the symbols are 1 Sigma of the total accumulated analytical precision values (the bars are smaller than the symbols for SF₆). The SF₆ trend for 1978 to 1997 was derived from the quadratic fit to measurements made at Cape Grim, Tasmania ([8](#)), extrapolated to 1999. To estimate the trend before 1978, we converted global emission estimates of SF₆ from 1953 to 1985 to global average concentrations using SF₆ concentration (ppt) approximately equal to metric tons of SF₆/25000 ([8](#)). These values were adjusted to equivalent Cape Grim concentrations using the calculated annual growth rate and a time tag of half the interhemispheric exchange time of 1.35 years ([17](#)). A third-order polynomial fit to the data yielded SF₆ concentrations for 1953 to 1978.

GRAPH: Fig. 2. Measurements of SF₅CF₃ from stratospheric balloon flights launched from (A) Kiruna, Sweden (68 Degrees N), in February 1997 (diamonds) and (B) Aire sur l'Adour, France (44 Degrees N), in May 1999 (squares). Error bars are 1 Sigma of the total accumulated analytical precision values. Predicted values are shown as thick lines, based on scaling measured SF₆ concentrations to the constant ratio used to derive the SF₅CF₃ trend in Fig. 1. Because both compounds are growing at essentially the same rate, it is not necessary to correct for nonlinear growth ([22](#)). Envelopes of +/- 10% the predicted concentrations (compare Fig. 1) are shown as thin lines.

GRAPH: Fig. 3. IR spectrum of SF₅CF₃. Samples (from Flura Corporation, Newport, Tennessee) of 0.7 to 3.1 mtorr of SF₅CF₃, purified by repeated freeze-pump-thaw cycling to remove an is similar to 2% SF₆ impurity, were mixed with 700 torr of ultrahigh purity synthetic air (N₂/O₂) and introduced into a 140-liter, 2-m-long, evacuable Pyrex chamber ([13](#)). The FTIR was operated at a resolution of 0.5 cm⁻¹, and measurements were made at 296 +/- 2 K. Sigma_e, absorption cross section (base e).

References and Notes

(1.) Scientific Assessment of Ozone Depletion: 1998, Global Ozone Research and Monitoring Project, Rep. 44 (World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, 1999).

(2.) Air samples (200 to 800 ml) were cryofocused at -186 Celsius with liquid argon, desorbed at 90 Celsius, and separated on a temperature-controlled alumina PLOT capillary column. The Micromass "AutoSpec" configuration comprised an electron ionization source, a magnetic field sector, pre- and post-electric field focusing sectors, and a photomultiplier detector.

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(4.) The air standard was obtained from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Boulder, CO. The NOAA scale agrees to within 1% of that of the University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany (1, 17).

(5.) First, pure SF₅CF₃ (Flura Corporation, Newport, TN) was successively diluted in large stirred aluminum drums to 1 part per billion by volume, followed by injection of microliter amounts into the GC-MS using a small sample loop filled to varying pressures to span the range of concentrations that we measured in ambient air. These measurements were referenced to a synthetic calibrated 10-ppb SF₆-in-nitrogen standard ["Heidelberg" scale (17)] that was prepared and analyzed in the same way. Second, the relative abundances of two ions common to both SF₆ and SF₅CF₃ (masses of 89 and 127) were determined from full-scan mass spectra of diluted pure gases and compared with the relative peak areas in the NOAA standard. The second method is independent of errors arising from dilution effects, but it assumes invariant ionization efficiency. The first method yielded a concentration in the NOAA standard (collected at Niwot Ridge, CO, in spring 1994) of 0.072 +/- 0.009 ppt, whereas the second method gave a concentration of 0.116 +/- 0.018 ppt.

(6.) Air was extracted by drilling a bore hole to successive depths, each time getting down an inflatable sleeve to seal off the hole near the bottom, and then pumping air out from beneath the seal (18) into fused silica-lined stainless steel sample flasks (SilcoCan canisters, Restek Corporation, Bellefonte, PA). Integrity of the pumped air was assured by continuous in situ monitoring of CO₂.

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By W. T. Sturges, School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.; T. J. Wallington, Ford Motor Company, Mail Drop SRL-3083, Dearborn, MI 48121-2053, USA.; M. D. Hurley, Ford Motor Company, Mail Drop SRL-3083, Dearborn, MI 48121-2053, USA.; K. P. Shine, Department of Meteorology, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6BB, UK.; K. Sihra, Department of Meteorology, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6BB, UK.; A. Engel, Institute for Meteorology and Geophysics, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt, D-60325 Frankfurt, Germany. and D. E. Oram, School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.; S. A. Penkett, School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.; R. Mulvaney, British Antarctic Survey, Natural Environment Research Council, Cambridge CB3 0ET, UK. and C. A. M. Brenninkmeijer, Atmospheric Chemistry Division, Max Planck Institute for Chemistry, D-55060 Mainz, Germany.

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