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## MATHEMATICAL MODELING FOR CARBON DIOXIDE LEVEL WITHIN CONFINED SPACES

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### ABSTRACT

Federal regulations require refuge alternatives (RAs) in underground coal mines to provide a life-sustaining environment for miners trapped underground when escape is impossible. A breathable air supply is among those requirements. For built-in-place (BIP) RAs, a borehole air supply (BAS) is commonly used to supply fresh air from the surface. It is assumed that the fresh air has an oxygen concentration of 20.9%. Federal regulations require that such a BAS must supply fresh air at 12.5 cfm or more per person to maintain the oxygen concentration between 18.5% to 23% and carbon dioxide level below the 1% limit specified. However, it is unclear whether 12.5 cfm is indeed needed to maintain this carbon dioxide level. The minimal fresh air flow (FAF) rate needed to maintain the 1% CO<sub>2</sub> level will depend on multiple factors, including the number of people and the volume of the BIP RA. In the past, to predict the interior CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in an occupied RA, 96-hour tests were performed using a physical human breathing simulator. However, given the infinite possibility of the combinations (number of people, size of the BIP RA), it would be impractical to fully investigate the range of parameters that can affect the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration using physical tests.

In this paper, researchers at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) developed a model that can predict how the %CO<sub>2</sub> in an occupied confined space changes with time given the number of occupants and the fresh air flow (FAF) rate. The model was then compared to and validated with test data. The benchmarked model can be used to predict the %CO<sub>2</sub> for any number of people and FAF rate without conducting a 96-hour test. The methodology used in this model can also be used to estimate other gas levels within a confined space.

Keywords: Confined space, gas concentration, breathing air, mathematical model

### NOMENCLATURE

$t$	time after test starts
$x$	%CO <sub>2</sub> (by mass) at time $t$ within the confined space
$x_0$	%CO <sub>2</sub> (by mass) in the atmosphere
$\rho$	air density within the confined space
$m$	total air mass within the confined space
$G$	CO <sub>2</sub> generation rate due to breathing
$f$	fresh air flow rate
$P$	air pressure in the confined space
$R$	universal gas constant
$T$	air temperature in the confined space
CO <sub>2</sub>	carbon dioxide
%CO <sub>2v</sub>	CO <sub>2</sub> gas concentration by volume
%CO <sub>2m</sub>	CO <sub>2</sub> gas concentration by mass
%O <sub>2m</sub>	O <sub>2</sub> gas concentration by mass
%N <sub>2m</sub>	N <sub>2</sub> gas concentration by mass
$M_{CO_2}$	the molar mass for CO <sub>2</sub> gas
$M_{O_2}$	the molar mass for O <sub>2</sub> gas
$M_{N_2}$	the molar mass for N <sub>2</sub> gas
MSHA	Mine Safety and Health Administration
NIOSH	the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
BIP	built-in-place
RA	refuge alternative
BAS	borehole air supply
FAF	fresh air flow

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human breathing generates a significant amount of carbon dioxide. High levels of carbon dioxide can be extremely hazardous [1]. Carbon dioxide mitigation methods, such as soda lime carbon dioxide scrubber curtains and purging with high volume air flows, can prevent carbon dioxide levels from reaching dangerous levels. This is especially critical for confined spaces, such as refuge chambers—also known as refuge alternatives (RAs)—that federal regulations require in underground coal mines to provide miners with a life-sustaining environment in case of an inescapable mine disaster [2] [3]. According to federal regulations, the average carbon dioxide concentration in the occupied structure shall not exceed 1.0%, and excursions shall not exceed 2.5% while maintaining the oxygen concentration between 18.5 and 23%. A 1.0% carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) atmosphere is the threshold of a serious health risk [2] [3]. The 15-minute short-term exposure limit (STEL) for carbon dioxide set by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) is 3% [4]. Therefore, excursions to 2.5% carbon dioxide must be mitigated quickly.

While occupied and without a breathable air supply, the RA interior oxygen level will decrease, and the carbon dioxide level will increase quickly due to breathing [5]. For built-in-place (BIP) RAs, one mitigation strategy is to implement a borehole air supply (BAS) to supply fresh air from the surface. Federal regulations require the supply of fresh air of 12.5 cfm or more per person to maintain the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels within the safety range as specified in the RA regulations [2] [3]. While the oxygen level is mainly determined by the fresh air flow rate, the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration within the RA will depend on multiple factors including the number of occupants, the volume of the BIP, and the fresh air flow (FAF) rate. The CO<sub>2</sub> concentration can exceed the 1% limit even the oxygen level is within the 18.5% - 23% range. It is crucial to estimate or predict the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration before the RA or other confined being occupied.

In this paper, researchers at NIOSH developed a model that can predict the %CO<sub>2</sub> within an occupied confined space. The model was then compared and validated with test data. The benchmarked model was used to predict the %CO<sub>2</sub> given the number of people and FAF rate without conducting physical test. The methodology used in this model can also be used to estimate other types of gas levels within a confined space.

## 2. MATHEMATIC MODELING

As illustrated in Figure 1, a confined space has an inward fresh air flow. The confined space is also equipped with a pressure relief valve which allows air to release to outside of the space when the internal pressure reaches the set point of the relief valve. The variables involved in determining the carbon dioxide concentration are defined as in the Nomenclature section. Two models were developed to represent the change in %CO<sub>2</sub> over time. The simplified model relies on a number of assumptions to provide an approximation of the %CO<sub>2</sub> level. The differential

model uses differential equations to more accurately represent the change in %CO<sub>2</sub> over time. In the following sections, these two models are described.

### 2.1 Simplified model

At the point when the test starts,  $t=0$ ,  $x=x_0$ , and the total CO<sub>2</sub> mass within the confined space is  $mx_0$ . As shown in Figure 1, there are two sources that bring CO<sub>2</sub> into the confined space: the fresh air flow and the breathing. There is one outward flow that allows CO<sub>2</sub> to exit the confined space through the exhaust pipe. It is reasonable to assume that the amount of the air exiting the space equals the amount of air entering the space, i.e., the outward air flow rate and inward air flow rate both have a value of  $f$ . At time  $t$ , the total CO<sub>2</sub> mass,  $mx$ , within the confined space is given by

$$mx = mx_0 + x_0 ft + Gt - \mu x ft \quad (1)$$

Where  $\mu$  is a coefficient to average the %CO<sub>2</sub> (by mass) value from time  $t=0$  to time  $t$ ,  $0 < \mu < 1$ . Consider  $x_0 \rightarrow 0$ , (1) can be rewritten as:

$$x \approx \frac{Gt}{m + \mu ft} \quad (2)$$

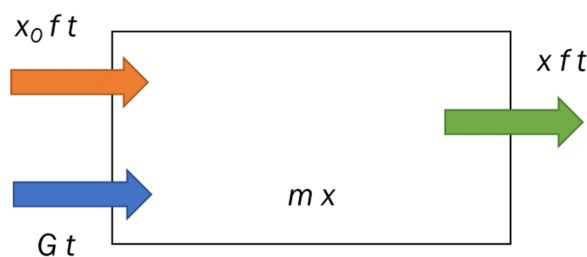


Figure 1. The gas (CO<sub>2</sub>) movement into and out of a confined space (dimension of  $a \times b \times c$ ) with fresh air flow. The CO<sub>2</sub> gas moving into the confined space includes breathing (blue) and fresh air flow (orange). The CO<sub>2</sub> gas moves out of the confined space through the exhaust pipe (green).

### 2.2 Differential model

Define  $x_{ini}$  as the initial %CO<sub>2</sub> by mass in the confined space. At the point when the test starts,  $t=0$  and  $x=x_{ini}$  (refer to Figure 1). For a small time interval,  $\Delta t = t_2 - t_1$ , the CO<sub>2</sub> mass change within the confined space from  $t_1$  to  $t_2$  is given by:

$$\Delta(mx) = \Delta(Gt + x_0 ft - xft) \quad (3)$$

Equation (3) can be rewritten as:

$$m\Delta x = G\Delta t + x_0 f\Delta t - x f\Delta t \quad (4)$$

Let  $\Delta t = dt \rightarrow 0$ , then  $\Delta x = dx \rightarrow 0$ . Equation 4 can be rewritten as:

$$mdx = Gdt + x_0 f dt - x f dt \quad (5)$$

$$m \frac{dx}{dt} = G + x_0 f - x f \quad (6)$$

$$m x'(t) + f x(t) = G + x_0 f \quad (7)$$

Equation (7) is the boundary value problem with the boundary condition:  $x(t = 0) = x_{ini}$ . Equation (7) is the mathematical and accurate description of the event. Solving the boundary value problem above will give the analytical solution of  $x$  as a function of  $t$ .

### 3. TEST SETUP

In order to conduct testing to examine the  $\text{CO}_2$  levels inside an occupied confined space, a test lab was created using a 20-ft-long by 8-ft-wide by 8-ft-high shipping container and a human breathing simulator (HBS) was created to consume oxygen and generate  $\text{CO}_2$  to represent human breathing. For the HBS, the concept was to burn propane at the rate necessary to match the rate of human oxygen consumption. Because burning propane generates less  $\text{CO}_2$  than human breathing for a set oxygen consumption rate, supplemental  $\text{CO}_2$  would have to be added to match both oxygen consumption and  $\text{CO}_2$  generation.

To create the HBS, a commercially available propane smoker was modified, and additional test equipment were used to create a well-controlled combustion device. A sealed combustion chamber was created by sealing the bottom of the propane smoker to the floor of the shipping container. Propane was delivered to the sealed combustion chamber from tanks stored outside the shipping container via a gas line that passed through a pressure regulator and a propane mass flow controller. An air pump was used to deliver air from inside the shipping container to the sealed combustion chamber via an airline that was connected to an air mass flow controller. The mass flow rate of propane was determined based on the desired number of people to represent. The air mass flow rate was set 20% higher than the rate needed to provide enough oxygen to support complete propane combustion. To match the  $\text{CO}_2$  generation, supplemental  $\text{CO}_2$  was provided from a cylinder outside the test lab. A  $\text{CO}_2$  mass flow controller was used to provide the additional  $\text{CO}_2$  needed to match the  $\text{CO}_2$  generated by people.

A previously developed pressure relief valve test stand (PRVTS) was used as the source of fresh air. The PRVTS uses a centrifugal fan connected to a variable frequency drive (VFD) to allow for adjustment of the fresh air provided to the test lab. The PRVTS uses a VELTRON airflow measurement station to measure the provided volume flow of air corrected based on standard atmospheric conditions. The VFD keypad was used to set the FAF to the desired value for a given test.

Multiple gas monitors were used to measure the  $\%\text{CO}_2$  and  $\%\text{O}_2$  inside the test lab. To measure the  $\%\text{CO}_2$ , two CTI GG- $\text{CO}_2$

carbon dioxide sensors were positioned within the shipping container. The two sensors were located approximately 6 inches and 3 inches from the floor and positioned around 6.5 feet and 13 feet from the end-wall of the laboratory, respectively. To measure the  $\%\text{O}_2$ , two Macurco OX-6 oxygen sensors were positioned approximately 6 inches and 3 inches from the floor and positioned around 6.5 feet and 13 feet from the end-wall of the laboratory, respectively. One additional  $\text{O}_2$  monitor was positioned near the air pump to document the  $\%\text{O}_2$  in the combustion air.

To record the FAF rate, the  $\text{CO}_2$  concentrations, and the oxygen concentrations, a Data Translation DT-9874 data acquisition system was used. All data were recorded at a sample rate of 2 samples per second with 24-bit resolution.

Multiple steps were taken to ensure research safety during the tests. The propane delivery line and the interior of the HBS were checked with a gas leak detector before lighting the propane burner. A Beacon 800 gas monitoring system with multiple  $\text{CO}_2$  sensors, an  $\text{O}_2$  sensor, a carbon monoxide sensor, and % lower explosive limit sensor was used to ensure all gases within the test lab were at safe levels. If the gas levels exceeded predetermined levels, the Beacon 800 would activate an audible alarm to alert researchers. The presence of a flame in the HBS was monitored using a flame detector and a video camera. If the flame went out, the flame detector would activate an audible alarm and automatically turn off the propane flow via a solenoid valve. Gas monitors at the data acquisition table were used to ensure the  $\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{CO}_2$ , CO, and propane levels were at safe levels.

For each test, all flow rates were set based on an assumed number of occupants. The propane flow rate was set based on the rate needed to consume the oxygen of the assumed number of occupants. The combustion air flow rate was set at 1.2 times the air flow rate needed to provide sufficient oxygen to achieve complete combustion. The supplemental  $\text{CO}_2$  flow rate was set based on the total  $\text{CO}_2$  generation of the assumed number of occupants less the  $\text{CO}_2$  generated due to burning propane. The FAF provided by the PRVTS was varied to examine the resulting  $\text{CO}_2$  concentration for FAF rates based on dividing the RA regulation requirement of 12.5 cfm per person by integer values from 2 through 7. For each FAF rate, individual tests were conducted until the  $\%\text{CO}_2$  inside the test lab stabilized.

The  $\text{CO}_2$  concentration was measured using two carbon dioxide sensors located within the shipping container. The average  $\%\text{CO}_2$  was calculated from the readings of the two sensors. All the gas concentrations in Section 3 and Section 4 were either measured or calculated by volume. However, the gas concentration in this section was denoted by mass. For  $\text{CO}_2$ , the volume concentration relates to the mass concentration through

$$\%C O_{2v} = \frac{\%C O_{2m} / M_{C O_2}}{\frac{\%O_{2m}}{M_{O_2}} + \frac{\%N_{2m}}{M_{N_2}} + \frac{\%C O_{2m}}{M_{C O_2}}} \quad (8)$$

where

$\%C O_{2v}$ : the  $\text{CO}_2$  gas concentration by volume

$\%C O_{2m}$ : the  $\text{CO}_2$  gas concentration by mass

$\%O_{2m}$ : the  $\text{O}_2$  gas concentration by mass

$\%N_{2m}$ : the  $N_2$  gas concentration by mass  
 $M_{CO_2}$ : the molar mass for  $CO_2$  gas  
 $M_{O_2}$ : the molar mass for  $O_2$  gas  
 $M_{N_2}$ : the molar mass for  $N_2$  gas.

#### 4. RESULTS

A series of tests was conducted for various numbers of people and FAF rates to observe the  $CO_2$  concentration within the confined space (the shipping container). The first run of the test was to look at the  $\%CO_2$  by volume with 40 people and various FAF rates. Two FAF rates were chosen, one low rate (100 cfm) and one high rate (500 cfm). Since the air flow meter did not have the capacity of measuring flow rate below 100 cfm, a large number of people (in our case, a higher propane burning rate to simulate more human breathing) was selected in order to bring down the FAF rate/person.

The first test was to look at the  $\%CO_2$  level at various FAF rates for 40 people. The  $\%CO_2$  test data was plotted in Figure 2 for FAF rates of 100 cfm (Figure 2a) and 500 cfm (Figure 2b). For 40 people and 100 cfm, the FAF rate is 2.5 cfm/person. For 40 people and 500 cfm, the FAF rate is 12.5 cfm/person. The model prediction of  $\%CO_2$  value was also plotted and compared with test data in Figure 2. The figure clearly shows that for both the low FAF rate and high FAF rate, the differential model agrees with test data better than the simplified model. Both the test data and the differential model prediction show that the  $\%CO_2$  reaches a steady level in about one hour. For the high FAF rate (500 cfm), the test data and the differential model show the  $\%CO_2$  reaches a steady level within 15 minutes.

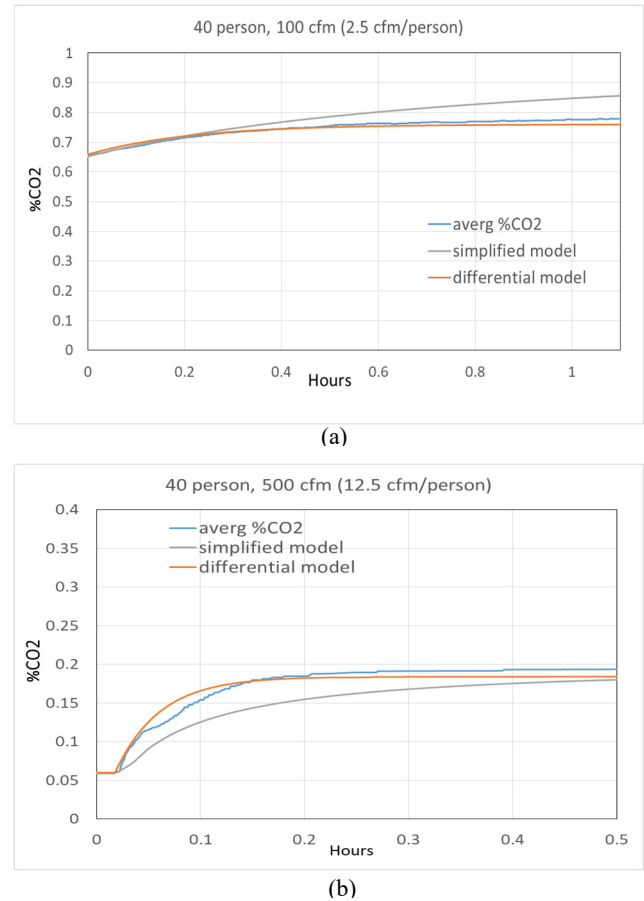


Figure 2. The  $\%CO_2$  (by volume) based on test data and model prediction for 40 people and 100 cfm (a) or 500 cfm (b) FAF rate.

Another test was conducted for 48 people, with FAF rates of 120 cfm and 600 cfm. The  $\%CO_2$  test data was plotted in Figure 3 for FAF rates of 120 cfm (Figure 3a) and 600 cfm (Figure 3b). For 48 people and 120 cfm, the FAF rate is 2.5 cfm/person. For 48 people and 600 cfm, the FAF rate is 12.5 cfm/person. The predicted  $\%CO_2$  values based on the simplified model and the differential model were also plotted and compared with test data in Figure 3. Again, the figure shows that the differential model predicts the  $\%CO_2$  value better than the simplified model. For 120 cfm (Figure 3a), both the test data and the differential model show that the  $\%CO_2$  would reach a steady level within one hour. For 600 cfm (Figure 3b), both the test data, the simplified model, and the differential model show that the  $\%CO_2$  would reach to a steady level within 0.5 hour.

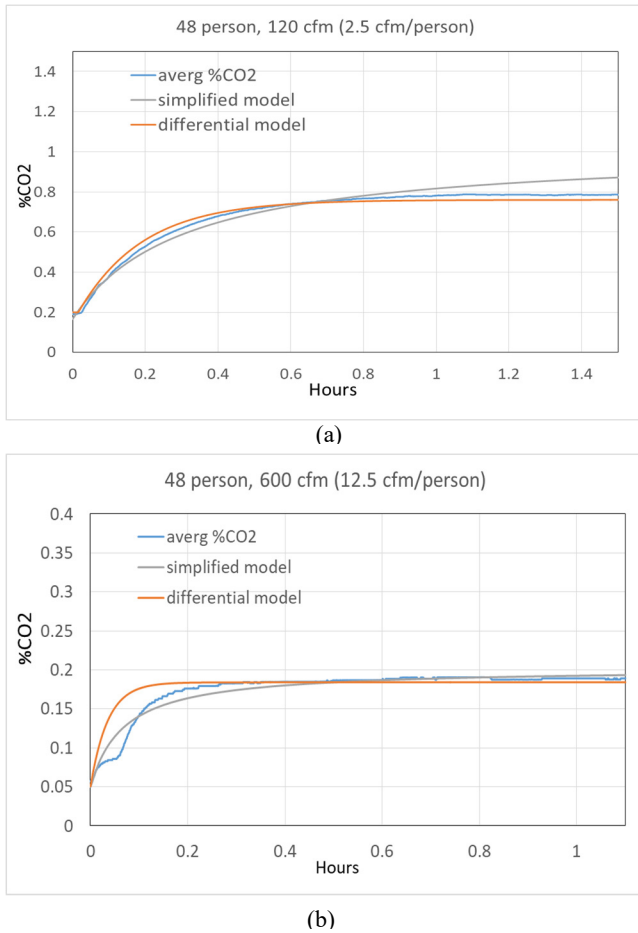


Figure 3. The %CO<sub>2</sub> (by volume) based on test data and model prediction for 48 people and 120 cfm (a) or 600 cfm (b) FAF rate.

The test data and the differential model show that for FAF rates higher than 2.5 cfm/person, the %CO<sub>2</sub> level within the shipping container will stabilize below 1% (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

An additional test was conducted with smaller cfm/person value (less than 2.5 cfm/person) by increasing the number of people. Figure 4 shows the differential model validated by test data for 58 people with 105 cfm (Figure 4a) and 725 cfm (Figure 4b) FAF rate. For 58 people, the FAF rate is 1.81 cfm/person for 105 cfm and 12.5 cfm/person for 725 cfm.

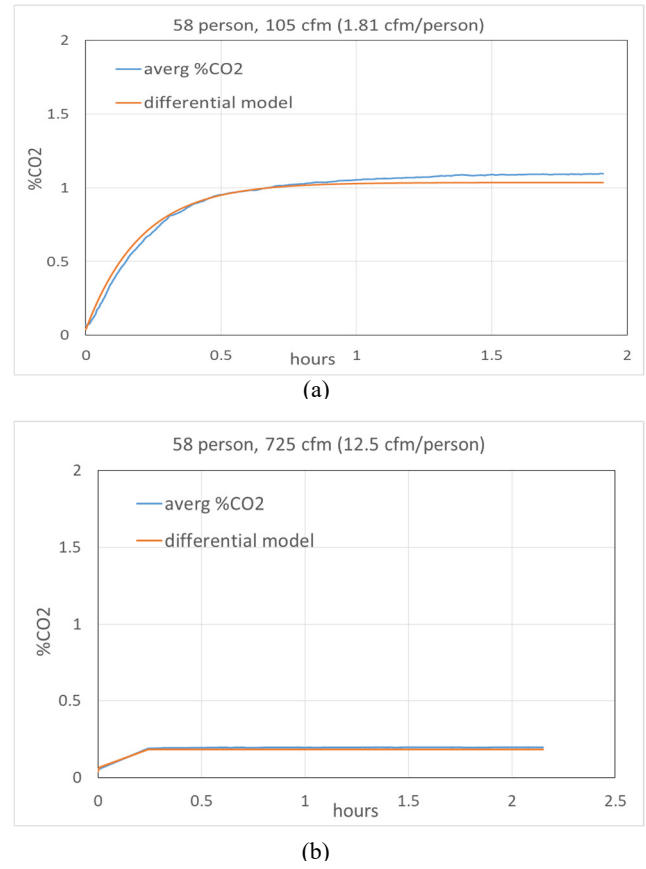


Figure 4. The %CO<sub>2</sub> (by volume) based on test data and model prediction for 58 people and 105 cfm (a) or 725 cfm (b) FAF rate.

## 5. DISCUSSION

While fresh air was delivered to the shipping container, the interior pressure would increase until the exhaust valve opened to release the air out. When stabilized, the differential pressure gauge read about 0.3–0.5 inch-of-water (74.7–124.4 Pa) of the interior air pressure. The interior air temperature also increased due to propane burning. It could reach to ~85°F (302.6°K) from ambient temperature (~75°F or 297°K) when the test started. For ideal gas (air),

$$P = \rho RT = \frac{m}{abc} RT \quad (9)$$

where  $P$  is the air pressure,  $R$  is the universal gas constant,  $T$  is the air temperature, and  $\rho$  is the air density.

Equation (9) can be rewritten as:

$$m = \frac{Pabc}{RT} \quad (10)$$

The pressure fluctuation has a range of 0.074% – 0.123%. The temperature fluctuated at about 1.89% [(302.6°K-297°K)/297°K]. So, the total air mass  $m$  should have a fluctuation less than 1.89% due to interior air pressure and temperature



increasing. It is reasonable to assume the total air mass remained the same during the test and the pressure/temperature fluctuation can be ignored.

Another observation based on Figure 2–Figure 4 is that the steady state %CO<sub>2</sub> level depended on the cfm/person value rather than the number of people or the total FAF rate, given other parameters are unchanged. For example, the %CO<sub>2</sub> level stabilized at ~0.8% for 2.5 cfm/person as shown in Figure 2a and Figure 3a, regardless of the number of people and the total FAF rate.

Figure 5 shows the %CO<sub>2</sub> predicted by the differential model for various number of people and total FAF rate. The model predicted that the %CO<sub>2</sub> level will approach to 1% for 60 people and 110 cfm or 54 people and 100 cfm. The simulation results for the minimum FAF rate for different numbers of people to maintain %CO<sub>2</sub> < 1% are listed in Table 1. The model predicts the minimal FAF rate to maintain 1% CO<sub>2</sub> to be ~1.87 cfm/person, regardless of the number of people and the total FAF rate.

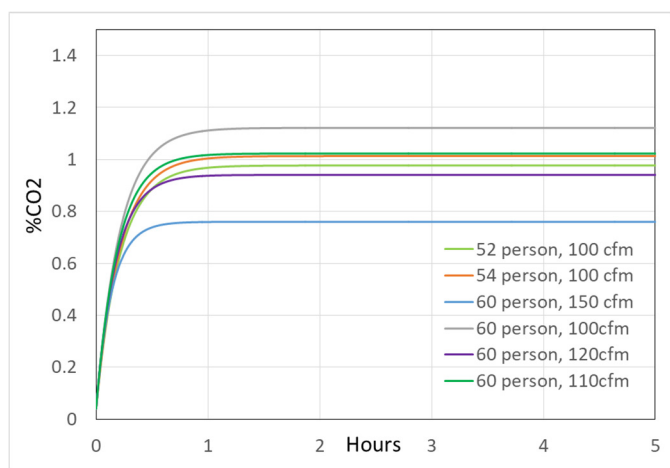


Figure 5. The %CO<sub>2</sub> by volume predicted by the differential model for various numbers of people and FAF rates.

Table 1. The simulation results for the minimum FAF rate for different numbers of people to maintain %CO<sub>2</sub> < 1%.

N	Federal regulation of CFR FAF at 12.5 cfm/person (cfm)	Model Min FAF for CO <sub>2</sub> < 1% (cfm)	Model Min FAF for CO <sub>2</sub> < 1% (cfm/person)
1	12.5	NA	NA
54	675	101	1.87
55	687.5	103	1.87
56	700	105	1.88
57	712.5	107	1.88
58	725	108	1.86
59	737.5	110	1.86
60	750	112	1.87

## 6. CONCLUSION

The mathematical models presented in this study agree with test data well. They can be used to predict the %CO<sub>2</sub> level based

on the parameters of confined space such as the dimension of the confined space, the number of occupants, and the FAF rate. The differential model predicts that a FAF of about 1.87 cfm/person is needed for the %CO<sub>2</sub> to stabilize below 1%. However, safety factors must be taken into consideration when implementing regulations [3]. Because of that, the minimal FAF of 12.5 cfm specified in federal regulations is indeed needed to maintain this carbon dioxide and other gases level within the safe range for 96 hours. The model also predicts the %CO<sub>2</sub> level will reach to steady state within 1 hour or less. Another observation is that the %CO<sub>2</sub> level depends on the cfm/person value rather than the number of people or the total FAF rate. Additionally, the %CO<sub>2</sub> level is more sensitive to the total FAF rate variation than to the number of people.

The benchmarked model can be used to predict the %CO<sub>2</sub> for various numbers of occupants, size of the confined space, and FAF rate without conducting a 96-hour test for every scenario. The model and testing confirm 12.5 cfm of supplied air will sustain miners for 96 hours and comply with the federal regulations. The model may also be useful to help manufacturers and mines to make decisions on RA design and implementation to comply with federal regulations.

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- Dr. Mehrdad Zangeneh, Founding Director of Advanced Design Technology, Ltd (Fluids Track Plenary)
- Dr. Yi Cui, one of the world's most cited scientists (Materials Track Plenary)

And these are just a few of the amazing speakers that will be available to you! Go to (<https://event.asme.org/IMECE/Keynote-Speakers>) and (<https://event.asme.org/IMECE/Program/Track-Plenary>) for the full list.

*Technical Connections: 2,000+ attendees.* The primary benefit of a conference is in meeting and interacting with fellow technical experts. As worldwide health conditions have forced us to remain virtual for a second year, we have implemented several new approaches to enable those interactions, and I invite you to fully participate. Our technical sessions have increased time scheduled for introductions and conversation before, during, and after the technical presentations (pre-recorded with live Q&A). And we have introduced a new series of special technical panels and roundtables designed to be technically focused informal gatherings. Topics for these 30–60-minute sessions range from “Nuclear Power in Space Applications: Promise, Practice, and Challenges” to “New Trends in Lung Therapies” to “Why Thermal Properties Still Matter”, to “Advanced Manufacturing Education”, “Beyond GPS: Advancing MEMS/NEMS Sensors for Inertial Navigation Only” and many more. The full list of Roundtables and Special Panels are on the congress website. Of course, nothing happens until you push the button. So, please join us! Whether in a technical session or special technical event, Turn on your camera, make a comment, ask a question, share an opinion, and build those connections!

Finally, on behalf of the IMECE Congress Steering Committee, I express my sincere thanks to and recognition of the hundreds of volunteers and the ASME staff that have dedicated time and effort to strengthening the fields of Mechanical Engineering R&D through organizing and leading sessions, topics, and tracks at this year's IMECE. It is never convenient to serve, and we have all continued to face frustrations of schedule, deadlines, conference websites, and more. Thank

you for your service. Your efforts have resulted in a strong congress that will continue to drive research forward both now and in the next generation. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Marriner H. Merrill, PhD  
IMECE 2021 Technical Program Chair  
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