Exploring Space Through MATH

Applications in Algebra 2

STUDENT EDITION

Recycling Urine In Space

Background

This problem applies mathematical principles in NASA's human spaceflight.

The International Space Station (ISS) can accommodate up to six crewmembers for an extended period of time. During crewmember stays, basic resources such as air, food, and water (which are critical to crew survival and mission success) must be resupplied from the ground. Resupply of these resources, especially water, can be very costly. In an effort to allow humans to venture further into space without the need for resupply, NASA has developed innovative ways to use systems onboard the vehicle.

One such ISS system is the Water Recovery System. In this system, the Urine Processor Assembly (UPA) recovers water from the crew's urine so that it can be processed using the Water Processor Assembly (WPA). The WPA mixes this water with condensed atmospheric moisture to process water that is suitable for drinking by the crew.

During this process, urine is collected, preserved, and then boiled and condensed to produce pure water and a concentrated salt solution called brine. The pure water is fed into the WPA while the brine is collected in a tank called the Advanced Recycle Filter Tank Assembly (ARFTA). At the end of each process cycle, the ARFTA is removed from the system and is drained. If the concentration of salts in the brine solutions gets too high, precipitates (or solids) can form. These solids can potentially obstruct the plumbing in the UPA, causing damage to other system components.

An example of this occurred on the ISS in 2009, when calcium sulfate precipitation formed in the distillation assembly, requiring a shutdown of the UPA. While the UPA was offline, the crew was required to use the reserve water supply—replenished only by the launch of additional water. Prevention of precipitate formation in the UPA is critical because replenishing the water and repairing the system can prove to be extremely costly.

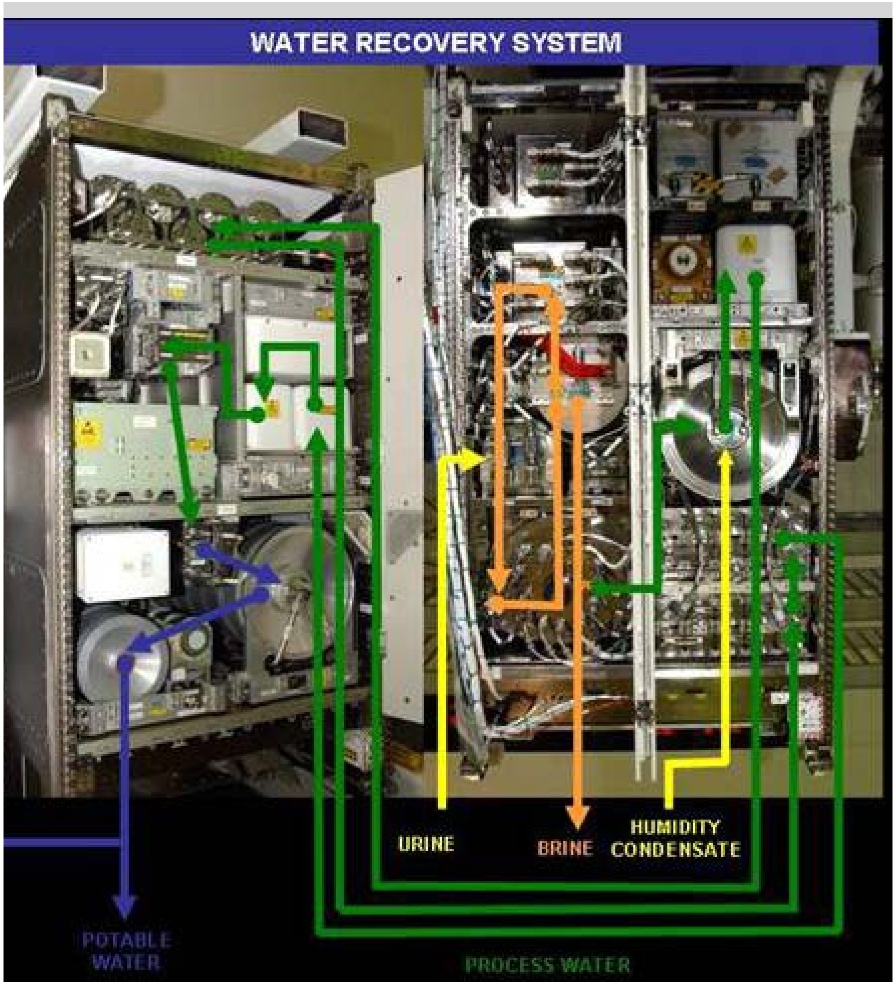


Figure 1: Water Recovery System

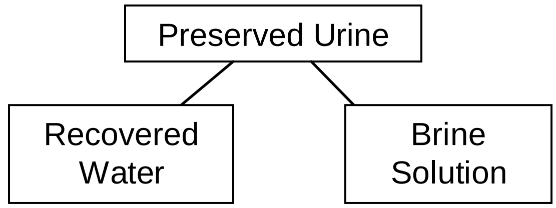
Instructional Objectives

- You will create and solve equations to make decision,
- You will simulate probabilistic situations, and
- You will make decisions based on probabilistic outcomes.

Directions: On the TI-Nspire handheld, open the document, Alg2-ST_RecUrine. Read through the problem set-up (page 1.2) and complete the embedded questions.

Problem

To recover water from urine, the Urine Processor Assembly uses a purification process, where water is evaporated from the urine. The residual remaining from this process is called brine—a solution that contains a small amount of water and high concentrations of salts, like calcium and sulfate. The UPA can be set to recover different amounts of water from the urine. For example, if it is set at 80 percent water recovery, then 80% of the water will be removed from the urine processed. When the percentage of water recovered increases, the concentrations of the salts in the brine increase. If the concentration of calcium in the brine reaches 950 mg/L, it will form calcium sulfate and precipitate (or fall out of solution).



Embedded Questions

Since successful operation of the UPA is critical to the safety and health of the crewmembers on the ISS, NASA scientists are researching ways to predict when calcium sulfate might cause a problem with the UPA. Urine samples from one hundred ISS astronauts have been collected and analyzed to measure urinary calcium concentrations.

The data provided in the table on page 2.2 models the calcium concentrations in the urine of one hundred astronauts. Because concentrations can vary greatly throughout the day, each value is expressed as the average concentration in a 24-hour period. Concentrations of calcium are provided as mg/L.

It is not practical to compute the exact probability of exceeding the calcium concentration. Instead simulate the random selection of three astronauts for a mission, and then determine the probability of having a calcium concentration too high for successful UPA operation.

1.8 Why is it important to randomize when simulating samples from a population?

1.9 Should sampling be performed with or without replacement from this population of astronauts? Explain your response.

1.10 What other assumptions must be made when taking samples from the inflight calcium concentration data?

Directions: Answer questions 2.1–2.6 in your group. Discuss answers to be sure everyone understands and agrees on the solutions. Round all answers to the nearest thousandth, and label with the appropriate units.

2.1 Since there are at least three astronauts on the ISS for any given mission, on page 2.2, generate the random samples of calcium concentrations of three astronauts and calculate the arithmetic mean of your three astronauts. Generate the sample by typing the command **=randsamp(cal_in_urine,3,1)** in the formula cell in column B.

2.3 Calculate the arithmetic mean concentration of calcium in mg/L for the three astronauts.

2.4 Calculate the theoretical probability of exceeding a certain concentration by summing the number of sample mean concentrations and dividing by the total number of samples in the simulation. To do this, randomly select five hundred groups of three astronauts and compute the average calcium concentration for each group of three.

In the table, on page 2.2, enter **=mean(randsamp(cal_in_urine,3,1))** in cell C1. With your mouse still in C1, select **menu > data > fill**, and press the down arrow until you have selected down to row 500. Then press enter.

2.5 Create a histogram on page 2.6 using your list of samples. Set the bin width at 10, and align the graph in multiples of 10. Do this by selecting **ctrl > menu > Bin Settings**.

Directions: Answer questions 2.7–2.12 in your group. Discuss answers to be sure everyone understands and agrees on the solutions. Round all answers to the nearest thousandth, and label with the appropriate units.

2.7 To compute the probability of exceeding the calcium concentration required to cause a failure, use the histogram to count the number of times the average concentration exceeds the threshold value on page 2.8. The threshold value in column B refers to the maximum concentration of calcium in the urine that would cause precipitation to occur. Complete the percent risk column for each level of percent recovery listed in the table. Use the number of times an average greater than the threshold occurred divided by the total number of samples in the simulation.

2.9 What is the probability of UPA failure if the water recovery rate is 85%?

2.10 What is the probability of UPA failure if the water recovery rate is 70%?

Failure of the UPA is attributed to precipitation in the Advanced Recycle Filter Tank Assembly (ARFTA). Since the ARFTA is changed every 15 days, the risks that were calculated on page 2.8 pertain to a 15-day period.

2.11 Using your answers from page 2.8, compute the probability of *not* having an ARFTA failure during a 6-month mission if the recovery rate is 70%.

2.12 The UPA operated for six months on the ISS without a failure while recovering 85% of the urine volume as water. Given the probability of failure you calculated using 85% recovery, is it surprising the ISS did not experience a failure? Explain your answer.

Directions: Complete questions 3.3–3.5 independently. Round all answers to the nearest whole number, and label with the appropriate units.

Use the following information to answer the questions. Decide the percent recovery at which the UPA should operate to save the most time for the astronauts, but still have the least risk of failure.

- It costs $50,000 per kilogram of mass moved from Earth to the ISS.
- Water weighs 1 kilogram per liter.
- Each astronaut needs 2.5 liters of water per day.
- Each ARFTA costs approximately $1 million dollars to produce.
- Only three ARFTAs exist and all three are located on the ISS.
- Each ARFTA has a mass of about 50 kilograms.
- An additional 50 kilograms of mass is added to each ARFTA when taking one from Earth to the ISS.

3.3 How much would it cost to replenish the water consumed from the reserves if an ARFTA failed and was down for two days before the three-person crew could replace it?

3.4 How much would it cost to replace the failed ARFTA with a new one from Earth?

3.5 Using the probabilities of failure for each recovery percentage, and assuming six months between replenishing missions from Earth, decide the percent recovery at which the UPA should operate to maximize the efficiency, while keeping in mind the consequences of a failed ARFTA. Justify your response using the probabilities you calculated in the table on page 2.8.