

THORIUM

(Data in metric tons of thorium oxide (ThO₂) equivalent, unless otherwise noted)

Domestic Production and Use: The primary source of the world's thorium is the rare-earth and thorium phosphate mineral, monazite. In the United States, thorium has been a byproduct of refining monazite for its rare-earth content. Monazite itself is recovered as a byproduct of processing heavy-mineral sands for titanium and zirconium minerals. In 2003, monazite was not recovered domestically as a salable product. Essentially all thorium compounds and alloys consumed by the domestic industry were derived from imports, stocks of previously imported materials, or materials shipped from U.S. Government stockpiles. About eight companies processed or fabricated various forms of thorium for nonenergy uses, such as high-temperature ceramics, catalysts, and welding electrodes. Thorium's use in most products has decreased because of its naturally occurring radioactivity. The value of thorium alloys, compounds, and metal used by the domestic industry was estimated to have increased to about \$180,000.

Salient Statistics—United States:	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003^e
Production, refinery ¹	—	—	—	—	—
Imports for consumption:					
Thorium ore and concentrates (monazite), gross weight	—	—	—	—	—
Thorium ore and concentrates (monazite), ThO ₂ content	—	—	—	—	—
Thorium compounds (oxide, nitrate, etc.), gross weight	5.29	11.10	1.85	0.65	4.14
Thorium compounds (oxide, nitrate, etc.), ThO ₂ content	3.91	8.20	1.37	0.48	3.06
Exports:					
Thorium ore and concentrates (monazite), gross weight	—	—	—	—	—
Thorium ore and concentrates (monazite), ThO ₂ content	—	—	—	—	—
Thorium compounds (oxide, nitrate, etc.), gross weight	2.52	4.64	7.30	1.93	2.42
Thorium compounds (oxide, nitrate, etc.), ThO ₂ content	1.86	3.43	5.40	1.43	1.79
Shipments from Government stockpile excesses (ThNO ₃)	—	—	—	—	—
Consumption:					
Reported, (ThO ₂ content ^e)	7.0	6.0	—	NA	NA
Apparent	3.1	7.7	NA	NA	NA
Price, yearend, dollars per kilogram:					
Nitrate, welding-grade ²	5.46	5.46	5.46	5.46	5.46
Nitrate, mantle-grade ³	27.00	27.00	27.00	27.00	27.00
Oxide, yearend:					
99.9% purity ⁴	82.50	82.50	82.50	82.50	82.50
99.99% purity ⁴	107.25	107.25	107.25	107.25	107.25
Net import reliance ⁵ as a percentage of apparent consumption	100	100	NA	NA	NA

Recycling: None.

Import Sources (1999-2002): Monazite: None. Thorium compounds: France, 99.4%; Netherlands, 0.4%; and other, 0.2%.

Tariff: Item	Number	Normal Trade Relations 12/31/03
Thorium ores and concentrates (monazite)	2612.20.0000	Free.
Thorium compounds	2844.30.1000	5.5% ad val.

Depletion Allowance: Monazite, 23% on thorium content, 15% on rare-earth and yttrium content (Domestic); 14% (Foreign).

Government Stockpile:

Material	Stockpile Status—9-30-03⁶				
	Uncommitted inventory	Committed inventory	Authorized for disposal	Disposal plan FY 2003	Disposals FY 2003
Thorium nitrate (gross weight)	3,219	—	3,219	3,221	0.154

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Events, Trends, and Issues: Domestic mine production of thorium-bearing monazite ceased at the end of 1994 as world demand for ores containing naturally occurring radioactive thorium declined. Imports and existing stocks supplied essentially all thorium consumed in the United States in 2003. Domestic demand for thorium ores, compounds, metals, and alloys has exhibited a long-term declining trend. No thorium consumption was reported in the United States in 2003. In 2003, apparent consumption, primarily for use in catalyst applications, is estimated to have decreased. On the basis of data through August 2003, the average value of imported thorium compounds increased to \$40.23 per kilogram from the 2003 average of \$34.00 per kilogram (gross weight). The average value of exported thorium compounds was \$136.45 per kilogram based on data through August 2003. Price increases were the result of real and potential costs associated with handling and shipping radioactive materials and not based on supply-demand factors. The use of thorium in the United States decreased significantly since the 1980s, when consumption averaged 45 tons per year. Increased costs to monitor and dispose of thorium have caused domestic processors to switch to thorium-free materials. Real and potential costs related to compliance with State and Federal regulations, proper disposal, and monitoring of thorium's radioactivity have limited its commercial value. It is forecast that thorium's use will continue to decline unless a low-cost disposal process is developed or new technology creates renewed demand.

World Refinery Production, Reserves, and Reserve Base:⁷

	Refinery production		Reserves ⁸	Reserve base ⁸
	2002	2003		
United States	—	—	160,000	300,000
Australia	—	—	300,000	340,000
Brazil	NA	NA	16,000	18,000
Canada	NA	NA	100,000	100,000
India	NA	NA	290,000	300,000
Malaysia	—	—	4,500	4,500
Norway	—	—	170,000	180,000
South Africa	—	—	35,000	39,000
Other countries	NA	NA	90,000	100,000
World total	NA	NA	1,200,000	1,400,000

Reserves and reserve base are contained primarily in the rare-earth ore mineral, monazite. Without demand for the rare earths, monazite would probably not be recovered for its thorium content. Other ore minerals with higher thorium contents, such as thorite, would be more likely sources if demand significantly increased. No new demand, however, is expected. Reserves exist primarily in recent and ancient placer deposits. Lesser quantities of thorium-bearing monazite reserves occur in vein deposits and carbonatites.

World Resources: Thorium resources occur in geologic provinces similar to those that contain reserves. The largest share is contained in placer deposits. Resources of more than 500,000 tons are contained in placer, vein, and carbonatite deposits. Disseminated deposits in various other alkaline igneous rocks contain additional resources of more than 2 million tons. Large thorium resources are found in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Greenland, India, South Africa, and the United States.

Substitutes: Nonradioactive substitutes have been developed for many applications of thorium. Yttrium compounds have replaced thorium compounds in incandescent lamp mantles. A magnesium alloy containing lanthanides, zirconium, and yttrium can substitute for magnesium-thorium alloys in aerospace applications.

⁶Estimated. E Net exporter. NA Not available. — Zero.

¹All domestically consumed thorium was derived from imported materials.

²Source: U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Logistics Agency. Based on sales from the National Defense Stockpile.

³Source: Rhodia Canada, Inc., f.o.b. port of entry, duty paid, ThO₂ basis.

⁴Source: Rhodia Electronics and Catalysis, Inc., 1-950 kilogram quantities, f.o.b. port of entry, duty paid.

⁵Defined as imports – exports + adjustments for Government and industry stock changes.

⁶See Appendix B for definitions.

⁷Estimates, based on thorium contents of rare-earth ores.

⁸See Appendix C for definitions.