



# Dynamic Radioisotope Power Systems (DRPS)

For more than five decades, Radioisotope Power Systems (RPS) have been a steady source of electrical power for NASA space missions to some of the most distant, darkest, and dustiest locations in our solar system. Radioisotope thermoelectric generators (RTGs) convert heat from the natural decay of plutonium dioxide into useful electrical power by means of the thermoelectric effect between carefully chosen dissimilar semiconductor materials.

With no moving parts, RTGs are a proven robust and reliable power source over long mission durations. Another promising approach for converting radioisotope heat to electrical power is to harness the work produced in certain thermodynamic cycles by using engines with moving parts to generate electrical power.

## Why does NASA need a Dynamic RPS?

NASA and the Department of Energy (DOE) are working together to enable more capable space missions through the development of Dynamic Radioisotope Power Systems (DRPS). Such systems can achieve overall efficiencies at least three times greater than current state-of-the-art RTGs.

This increase in efficiency provides more power per kilogram of fuel than RTGs, meaning that a mission could have more power and use less radioisotope fuel, while limiting the amount of radiation and waste heat that they produce. These options make a DRPS ideal for certain human exploration missions and a viable option for specialized science missions lasting 14 years or longer.

Various heat engine cycles can be employed to convert heat from the decay of plutonium

into electricity. Stirling and Brayton heat-engine cycles can be utilized in dynamic power convertors to convert thermal energy to electrical energy. The first Stirling-cycle engines were invented two hundred years ago during the Industrial Revolution. Several Stirling convertors operating at the NASA Glenn Research Center have passed 15 years of operation, with multiple units each breaking the previous world record for the longest-running heat engines in history.



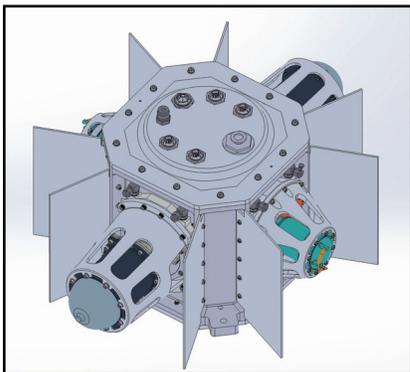
NASA engineers have tested several Stirling Convertors in ground-based labs, each surpassing 130,000 hours of operation with no degradation or component maintenance.

## How does a DRPS generate electricity?

A free-piston Stirling cycle convertor works by transforming the thermal energy from the hot radioisotope fuel into oscillating kinetic motion of a small piston. It does this by continuously shuttling the gas between the hot end and cold end, which creates a pressure wave acting on the piston. In turn, a magnet fixed to the piston moves through a coil of wire, thereby inducing a flow of alternating electric current (the ability of a moving magnet

NASAfacts

to cause a flow of electrons within a wire is a property of physics known as Faraday's Law). The addition of an internal regenerator heat exchanger greatly improves the efficiency of the cycle, by storing and releasing heat as the gas moves between the hot end to the cold end.



A 3D model of an upcoming DRPS testbed: NASA GRC

A Brayton-cycle convertor works in a different way. The thermal energy from the radioisotope fuel heats a gas that flows through a turbine, causing it to turn more than 160,000 revolutions per minute. The gas transfers some of its thermal energy into rotational kinetic energy of the turbine. Waste heat is then rejected through radiator panels. This cooler gas is then flowed through a compressor that is on the same rotational shaft as the turbine, which increases the pressure and temperature of the gas. The gas is then flowed past the RPS heat source to further increase its energy, and back to the inlet of the turbine to repeat the cycle.

This continual movement of the working gas in the Brayton convertor provides constant rotational energy on the shaft that connects the turbine and compressor. At the center of the shaft an installed magnet spins at high speed within a coil of wire. Faraday's law is used again here to generate alternating current. For both the Stirling and Brayton options, the alternating current needs to be converted into direct current by a controller unit, which provides power to support spacecraft operations and scientific observations.

Stirling and Brayton convertors are under development for potential future use in space applications. A Brayton-cycle prototype was recently developed for NASA by Creare, LLC based on the cryogenic cooler flown in the NICMOS (Near Infrared Camera and Multi-Object Spectrometer) instrument installed in the Hubble Space Telescope. Brayton-cycle machines use hydrodynamic journal bearings to keep the turbine and compressor shaft aligned and free from friction, also eliminating wear and enabling a long mission life.

Stirling-cycle convertors have been in development for space mission applications since the early 2000's. Two companies, Sunpower Inc. and American Superconductor

### DRPS Generator Goals

Design lifetime: At least 14 years in space  
Electrical power output: 300 to 400 Watts  
RPS thermal to electric efficiency: > 20%  
Fuel: Plutonium dioxide in General Purpose Heat Source (GPHS) modules  
Capability: On the lunar surface, in the vacuum of deep space, in the atmospheres of planets such as Mars and Titan, and on distant icy moons such as Enceladus

(AMSC), have recently developed the latest iteration of their free-piston Stirling convertors. Each uses a different non-contacting piston bearing technique. Sunpower's design uses gas bearings to prevent the moving piston from rubbing, thus eliminating wear that could shorten the lifetime of the convertor. AMSC's design uses a thin metallic planar spring called a flexure that prevents side motion and rubbing of the piston.



Sunpower Robust Stirling Convertor (SRSC): Sunpower, Inc. (left)  
Turbo-Brayton Convertor: Creare, LLC (right)

Earlier Stirling designs using both bearing techniques have successfully demonstrated performance and life in the laboratory and have the potential to allow a DRPS generator to last for at least 17 years, the amount of time typically necessary for long transit times to the outer planets and their moons. While Stirling convertors have yet to be flown in space, Stirling cryocoolers paired with similar supporting technologies have been used very successfully on many space missions, including the 16-year-long RHESSI solar flare observatory. AMSC and Sunpower have provided prototype convertors to NASA Glenn, with several having completed more than 4,000 hours of operations and testing. The units will undergo environmental testing to demonstrate robustness to the harsh conditions anticipated during space missions.

The DOE's Idaho National Laboratory, with Aerojet Rocketdyne as its industrial partner, is working in collaboration with NASA's Glenn Research Center to design a flight-quality DRPS. The goal of this technology development activity is to provide a DRPS flight unit by the end of this decade toward a demonstration mission on the Moon as part of NASA's Artemis program.

For more information about radioisotope power systems, visit [rps.nasa.gov](https://rps.nasa.gov) or write to [NASA-RPS@mail.nasa.gov](mailto:NASA-RPS@mail.nasa.gov).