

# Freezers best practice



This paper summarises the findings of research undertaken by the University of Edinburgh's Social Responsibility and Sustainability Department into best practice in Ultra Low Temperature (ULT) freezer management. It incorporates international best practice as published on the websites of various universities, as well as information gained through judging applications for the Edinburgh Sustainability Awards 2015.

This document describes a number of actions and the potential savings, including:

## Out with the old, in with new...

### The problem

Older freezers can use as much as £1000 annually in 'plug load' electricity (i.e. not including their impact on room air cooling systems, while new freezers can use less than £600 plug load annually).

Investigations at the National Institutes of Health in the United States of America have indicated that for every year of a ULT freezer's life its energy consumption increases by 3%<sup>1</sup>.

### The solution

The Roslin Institute has an ongoing replacement of their oldest ULT freezers, with a requirement that new purchases are energy efficient. This approach is also being taken by the National Institutes of Health.

## Choked up with ice and dust...

### The problem

Freezers which are not regularly defrosted accumulate frost and ice, reducing internal space (and thus exacerbating the problem of a continual demand for more and more ULT freezers). In addition to reducing the available space for sample storage, poorly defrosted ULT freezers use more energy to operate. Investigations at the National

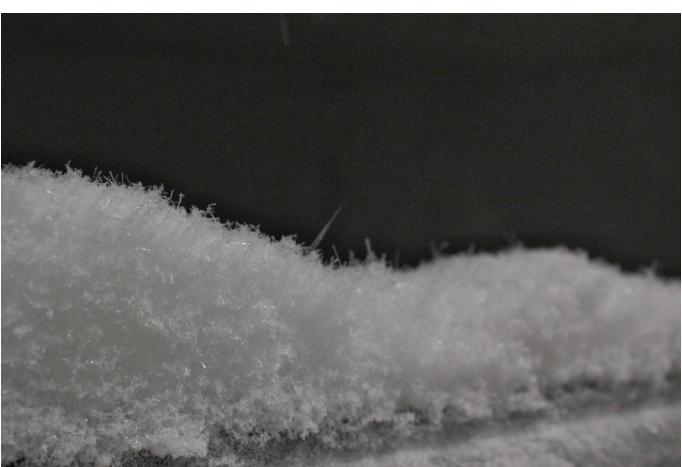
Page	Action	Saving/freezer
1	Replace old freezers	£400/year
1	Defrost freezers regularly	£200/year
2	Clear out old samples	£1,000/year
3	Run freezers a bit warmer	£300/year

Institutes of Health in the United States of America have indicated that there is a difference in annual operating costs of the equivalent of around £160 between an ice free freezer and a severely iced up freezer<sup>2</sup>.

Freezers draw air through a filter to cool condenser fins, helping the removal of heat from the internal space. If these filters and/or fins are dusty the removal of heat is less effective and the mechanisms for removal need to work harder. Investigations at the National Institutes of Health in the United States of America have indicated that there is a difference in annual operating costs of the equivalent of around £230 between freezer with clean filters and fins and a freezer with severely dusty filters and fins<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



A poorly defrosted freezer.

<sup>1</sup> Gumpas & Simons, World Review of Science, Technology and Sustainable Development, Vol 10, No.s 1/2/3, 2013



Freezer defrosting and cleaning filters and fins requires planning and staff time. Reductions in lab technical support staff numbers shifts the onus onto researchers.

## The solution

Site visits and auditing for the Edinburgh Sustainability Awards indicated that most of the labs involved outsource mechanical maintenance of freezers - it should be checked what actions are included in these maintenance contracts to ensure filters and fins are cleaned.

The awards audits also showed that good defrosting practices were in place at The Roslin Institute, the Biology Teaching Organisation, the School of Chemistry, the Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Facility, SynthSys labs, and the Institute of Genetic and Molecular Medicine.

Typically these labs undertake regular and planned defrosting schedules, and/or audits from senior lab staff.

## Best use of valuable space...

### The problem

ULT freezers are expensive to purchase and have high operational costs due to their plug-load and air conditioning energy consumptions. However the number of ULT freezers across the University of Edinburgh is growing, adding strain to departmental budgets and diverting money away from other uses.

### The solution

Lab users/lab groups should ensure they only use ULT freezers to store items which absolutely must be stored at these temperatures. There are three factors to consider here:

#### Do you need to keep all of those samples?

If you are a lab user who stores samples in ULT freezers you can help to reduce significant departmental costs of purchasing and running ULT freezers by regularly checking the samples you are storing and removing those which are now redundant/no longer needed.

### Do your samples need to be stored in ULT freezers?

There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that some sample types can safely be stored in non-ULT freezers (i.e. at -40°C, -20°C, +4°C or even room temperature)<sup>4,5</sup> resulting in significant energy savings. Stanford University found that up to 25% of their biological samples (DNA/RNA/bacteria) could be stored at room temperature after a successful trial<sup>6</sup>.

The University of Boulder, Colorado have produced a list of 119 biological samples which can be stored at -70°C or warmer - contact our department for a copy of this, or find it online. Typically the suitability of a temperature for sample storage depends on the length of the storage time - if you are storing samples for only a short amount of time it may be safe to store them at a higher temperature. Freeze-thaw cycles may be more important than the storage temperature for degrading samples<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>.

#### Are you making best use of storage space?

Efficient use of space in ULT freezers can help to reduce the demand for additional units. Ensuring that your samples are neatly stored in appropriate storage solutions (racks/boxes) for the type and size of material will allow more items to be stored in the existing number of freezers. Where possible try to avoid storing bulky items in freezers if you can divide them up into more easily stored small samples/aliquots. Storing your samples in racks/boxes can also make them easier to quickly transfer in the event of a freezer failure.

4 Collins et al, (1993), "Storage temperature and differing methods of sample preparation in the measurement of urinary albumin" Diabetologica, vol 36, issue 10, pp 993-997

5 [http://apps1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/publications/pdfs/alliances/ulf\\_freezer\\_user\\_guide.pdf](http://apps1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/publications/pdfs/alliances/ulf_freezer_user_guide.pdf) (U.S. Dept of Energy "Store Smart" ULT freezer guide)

6 [http://www.goodcampus.org/uploads/DOCS/106-case\\_10\\_-\\_uni\\_california\\_final\\_25\\_2\\_11.pdf](http://www.goodcampus.org/uploads/DOCS/106-case_10_-_uni_california_final_25_2_11.pdf) and [http://sustainable.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Stanford\\_Room\\_Temp\\_Pilot\\_May09.pdf](http://sustainable.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Stanford_Room_Temp_Pilot_May09.pdf)

7 <http://bitesizebio.com/19700/freeze-thaw-cycles-and-why-we-shouldnt-do-it/>

8 M. S. Charde et al. (2014) "Review: The procurement, storage and quality assurance of frozen blood and tissue biospecimens" International Journal of Pharmacological Research Volume 4 Issue 2 (2014)

9 Brand, J.J., "Cryopreservation of Cyanobacteria" <http://www-cyanosite.bio.purdue.edu/protocols/cryo.html>

10 B. L. Mitchell et al., (2005) "Impact of Freeze-thaw Cycles and Storage Time on Plasma Samples Used in Mass Spectrometry Based Biomarker Discovery Projects", Cancer Informatics 1(1): 98–104.



Good practice has been observed around the University of Edinburgh including:

- Hugh Robson Building charge for space in the Hotel Freezer
- BTO consolidate their materials into fewer fridges/freezers over the summer holiday and switch off extraneous ones
- Wellcome Trust have good racking to make best use of space, and control samples using a LIMS (providing Biobank storage for researchers)
- IGMM consolidated the contents of c.40 small LN<sub>2</sub> storage tanks into 2 large ones saving c.£18k annually in LN<sub>2</sub> refill costs
- SynthSys allocate specific shelves/space in ULT freezers to lab groups
- QMRI biobanking is done on a 'cost recovery' basis
- Chemistry use modular storage containers in fridges and freezers to improve efficiency of space use
- Chancellors' Building are investigating room temperature storage of DNA



Better organised ULT freezer space.

These spaces have large louvered vents and fans which allow external air to be used either passively (fans switched off, air moves with convection and pressure differentials/wind) or actively (fans switched on to drive air through the space) to remove hot air from the freezers. If external air temperature rises above a certain level the louvers are closed and the room cooled with air conditioning (this is not required very often in the Edinburgh area!). This significantly reduces the amount of air conditioning required to keep the air temperature of the freezer space at a level which allows the freezers to operate safely and with low energy consumption.

## Space to breathe...

### The problem

ULT freezers operate by removing heat from inside the freezer cabinet and expelling it (usually through heat dissipation mechanisms at the back of the freezer). In an enclosed space this quickly results in the air temperature of the room rising to temperatures which are uncomfortable for the users and also cause the freezer to work harder to maintain a set internal temperature. To counteract this, energy intensive air cooling/mechanical ventilation equipment is installed and operated, adding further to the energy consumption of operating freezers.

### The solution

Dedicated spaces with abundant 'natural ventilation' have been constructed at the Roslin Institute to house the majority of their ULT freezers.

## Too Cool...?

### The problem

Ten or fifteen years ago the lowest temperature achievable by most lab freezers was -70°C. Technology improved and newer freezers were able to achieve temperatures of -86°C.

The lower temperature (often -80°C) was then adopted by many lab users/groups as a new standard operating practice. The technological advance which led to freezers achieving lower temperatures came at a price - higher energy consumption in terms of both plug-load and impact on air conditioning loads.

There has been little evidence produced which shows that operating ULT freezers at -80°C has any benefit for lab research, and, in fact some sources show that a variety of samples are stable at



-70°C<sup>11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21</sup>.

Even if your samples do benefit from being stored at -80°C it is a good idea to run your back-up freezers ("hotel freezers") at -70°C or even -60°C to reduce energy consumption, and then adjust them to -80°C when required. Many freezers around the campus have temperature monitors hooked up to remote alarms which are activated if the temperature rises above a threshold and alert a nominated member of staff. This reduces the need to store samples at a lower temperature in order to have a 'buffer' to give more time between a freezer failure and the internal freezer temperature exceeding a threshold temperature.

Running a freezer at -70°C instead of -80°C can produce almost 30% plug-load energy savings<sup>22</sup> equating to up to £300 annually, as well as further savings on room air conditioning. A number of lab users around the University are running freezers at -70° including Roslin, IGMM and BTO.

11 [http://apps1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/publications/pdfs/alliances/ulf\\_freezer\\_user\\_guide.pdf](http://apps1.eere.energy.gov/buildings/publications/pdfs/alliances/ulf_freezer_user_guide.pdf) (U.S. Dept of Energy "Store Smart" ULT freezer guide)

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21 Mitchell, B.L. et al, (2005) "Impact of Freeze-thaw Cycles and Storage Time on Plasma Samples Used in Mass Spectrometry Based Biomarker Discovery Projects" *Cancer Informatics* 98–104

22 Farley M., et. Al., (2013) "Freezer Energy Consumption Report"

## Freezers Best Practice

Andrew Arnott, October 2015

Please get in touch with us if you're interested in implementing any of these recommendations.



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### The University of Edinburgh

Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability,  
9 Hope Park Square,  
Edinburgh EH8 9NP  
T: +44 (0)131 651 5588  
E: [sustainability.department@ed.ac.uk](mailto:sustainability.department@ed.ac.uk)

[www.ed.ac.uk/sustainability](http://www.ed.ac.uk/sustainability)

Photography by:  
S. Ford-Hutchinson

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