Search for Active Neutrino Disappearance Using Neutral-Current Interactions in the MINOS Long-Baseline Experiment


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Several experiments observing charged-current (CC) interactions of neutrinos have provided compelling evidence for $\nu_\mu$ and $\nu_e$ disappearance as the neutrinos propagate from the point of production [1–5]. The Super-Kamiokande experiment has reported extensively on the disappearance of $\nu_\mu$ produced in the atmosphere [2]. Measurements of solar $\nu_e$ showed that the disappearance of those neutrinos is due to matter enhanced conversions [3]. The KamLAND reactor experiment provided clear evidence for $\bar{\nu}_e$ mixing [4].

These results are conventionally interpreted as mixing among the active neutrino flavors that couple to the electroweak current. Precise measurements of the Z boson decay width indicate there are only three light active neutrinos [6], but they do not exclude the existence of “sterile” neutrinos $\nu_s$ that do not couple to the electroweak current. Sterile neutrinos could help resolve several outstanding problems in particle physics and astrophysics. For example, sterile neutrinos with masses on the order of 1 eV can participate in the seesaw mechanism to introduce neutrino masses [7] and can also aid in heavy element nucleosynthesis in supernovae [8]. The SNO experiment has shown that the total flux of active neutrinos from the sun agrees with the expectation from solar models [9], thereby limiting the extent to which the first or second neutrino mass eigenstates could couple to a sterile neutrino. While the Super-Kamiokande experiment excludes pure $\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_s$, and favors pure $\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_e$ oscillations in its analysis of atmospheric neutrinos, an admixture of the two possibilities is allowed [10] and has attracted considerable attention in the literature [11].

The MINOS experiment has reported a significant deficit of $\nu_\mu$ at its far detector relative to the near detector through measurement of the rate of $\nu_\mu$ CC interactions [5,12]. If this deficit is due solely to conversions of $\nu_\mu$ to $\nu_\tau + \nu_e$, then the rate of neutral-current (NC) interactions at the far detector remains unchanged from the nonoscillation prediction. Alternatively, if any $\nu_\mu$ convert to a sterile state, then the NC rate would be suppressed and the reconstructed energy spectrum would be distorted. In this Letter we report the first measurement of the total active neutrino rate using a precisely known long baseline and neutrinos produced with an accelerator. The reconstructed energy spectra for NC and CC interactions are used to limit the fraction of $\nu_\mu$ oscillating to a sterile neutrino to be below 0.68 at 90% confidence level. A less stringent limit due to a possible contribution to the measured neutral-current event rate at the far site from $\nu_s$ appearance at the current experimental limit is also presented.

We report the first detailed comparisons of the rates and spectra of neutral-current neutrino interactions at two widely separated locations. A depletion in the rate at the far site would indicate mixing between $\nu_\mu$ and a sterile particle. No anomalous depletion in the reconstructed energy spectrum is observed. Assuming oscillations occur at a single mass-squared splitting, a fit to the neutral- and charged-current energy spectra limits the fraction of $\nu_\mu$ oscillating to a sterile neutrino to be below 0.68 at 90% confidence level. A less stringent limit due to a possible contribution to the measured neutral-current event rate at the far site from $\nu_s$ appearance at the current experimental limit is also presented.

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this prediction is complicated by the high rate environment at the near detector. At an intensity of $2.2 \times 10^{13}$ protons on target, an average of 16 neutrino interactions are produced in the near detector for each spill [5]. The reconstruction program separates individual neutrino interactions that occur within the same spill. This initial pass overestimates the number of NC interactions having reconstructed energy, $E_{\text{reco}}$, $< 1$ GeV by 36%; above 1 GeV the estimate is as expected. Additional selections making use of event topology and timing are then used to decrease this background. Events must be separated by at least 40 ns, and events that occur within 120 ns of each other must have vertices separated by at least 1 m in the longitudinal direction [14]. After applying these criteria, the remaining background from poorly reconstructed events with $E_{\text{reco}} < 1$ GeV is 7%.

The rate of neutrino interactions from the neutrino beam in the far detector is much lower than in the near detector, with approximately 1 interaction for every $10^4$ spills. Interactions from the beam neutrinos are identified using a window around the global positioning system time stamp of the spills of $-2 < t < 12 \mu$s, where $t = 0$ is the expected start time of the 10 $\mu$s spill at the far detector. Given the low rate of neutrino interactions in the far detector, spurious events that are coincident with the beam spills from noise, cosmic-ray muons, or poor event reconstruction can introduce backgrounds to the analysis. Additional criteria are used to remove such events, leaving a residual background of $<1\%$ of the signal [15].

Charged-current interactions are identified by the presence of a track that may or may not be associated with a shower. Neutral-current interactions typically have a single hadronic shower, although the reconstruction may identify a track in the event; such tracks could come from pions, but are mostly reconstruction artifacts. An event is classified as NC-like if it has a reconstructed shower, is shorter than 60 planes, and has no track extending more than 5 consecutive planes beyond the shower [16]. The principal background in the spectrum of NC-like events comes from highly inelastic $\nu_\mu$-CC interactions. The $E_{\text{reco}}$ spectrum of NC-like events in the near detector is shown in Fig. 1.

The Monte Carlo simulation is used to make an initial estimate of the ratio of event yields in the far and near detectors as a function of $E_{\text{reco}}$. This ratio is multiplied by the observed energy spectrum in the near detector to produce a far detector prediction of the NC-like event spectrum. The true energy of the simulated neutrinos in each reconstructed energy bin of the prediction is used to determine the effect of oscillations for that range of reconstructed energy. To avoid biases, the methods for identifying NC-like events and predicting the far detector spectrum were developed using only the near detector data and Monte Carlo simulation. The analysis procedures were finalized prior to examining far detector data.

The rate of neutrino interactions from the neutrino beam at the near detector. At an intensity of $3.5 \times 10^{21}$ protons on target, an average of about 16 neutrino interactions are produced in the near detector for each spill [5]. The reconstruction program separates individual neutrino interactions that occur within the same spill. This initial pass overestimates the number of NC interactions having reconstructed energy, $E_{\text{reco}}$, $< 1$ GeV by 36%; above 1 GeV the estimate is as expected. Additional selections making use of event topology and timing are then used to decrease this background. Events must be separated by at least 40 ns, and events that occur within 120 ns of each other must have vertices separated by at least 1 m in the longitudinal direction [14]. After applying these criteria, the remaining background from poorly reconstructed events with $E_{\text{reco}} < 1$ GeV is 7%.

The rate of neutrino interactions from the neutrino beam in the far detector is much lower than in the near detector, with approximately 1 interaction for every $10^4$ spills. Interactions from the beam neutrinos are identified using a window around the global positioning system time stamp of the spills of $-2 < t < 12 \mu$s, where $t = 0$ is the expected start time of the 10 $\mu$s spill at the far detector. Given the low rate of neutrino interactions in the far detector, spurious events that are coincident with the beam spills from noise, cosmic-ray muons, or poor event reconstruction can introduce backgrounds to the analysis. Additional criteria are used to remove such events, leaving a residual background of $<1\%$ of the signal [15].

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The Monte Carlo simulation is used to make an initial estimate of the ratio of event yields in the far and near detectors as a function of $E_{\text{reco}}$. This ratio is multiplied by the observed energy spectrum in the near detector to produce a far detector prediction of the NC-like event spectrum. The true energy of the simulated neutrinos in each reconstructed energy bin of the prediction is used to determine the effect of oscillations for that range of reconstructed energy. To avoid biases, the methods for identifying NC-like events and predicting the far detector spectrum were developed using only the near detector data and Monte Carlo simulation. The analysis procedures were finalized prior to examining far detector data.

FIG. 1 (color online). The reconstructed energy spectrum for NC-like events in the near detector. Data (solid points) are shown superposed on the total Monte Carlo expectation including systematic uncertainties (solid line with shaded band). The hatched distribution shows the $\nu_\mu$-CC background as determined by the simulation.

Figure 2 shows the measured and predicted $E_{\text{reco}}$ spectra at the far detector. The spectra are compared using a statistic, $R$, which expresses the agreement between the predicted and observed number of events:

$$R \equiv \frac{N_{\text{data}} - B_{\text{CC}}}{S_{\text{NC}}}$$

where, within a given energy range, $N_{\text{data}}$ is the measured event count, $B_{\text{CC}}$ is the extrapolated CC background from all flavors, and $S_{\text{NC}}$ is the extrapolated number of NC interactions. The values of $S_{\text{NC}}$ and contributions to $B_{\text{CC}}$ are calculated in the framework of three neutrino oscillations and are shown in Table I. Because the disappearance of $\nu_\mu$ occurs mainly for true neutrino energies $<6$ GeV [12], the data are separated into two samples. Events with $E_{\text{reco}} < 3$ GeV are grouped into a low-energy sample while events with $3 < E_{\text{reco}} < 120$ GeV are grouped into a high-
energy sample. The median true neutrino energies of the low and high energy samples are 3.1 and 7.9 GeV, respectively. The values of $R$ calculated for these ranges in $E_{\text{reco}}$ are shown in Table I. In the region with $E_{\text{reco}} < 3$ GeV, $R$ differs from 1 by $\Delta R = 1.3\sigma$. Over the full energy range, 0–120 GeV, the depletion of the total NC event rate is limited to be below 17% at 90% confidence level.

The principal sources of systematic uncertainty in $R$ are listed in Table II. The absolute scale of the hadronic energy is known to within 12%, of which 10% reflects uncertainties in the final-state interactions in the nucleus and 6% results from uncertainty in the detector response to single hadrons. The relative calibration of the hadronic energy between the detectors has an uncertainty of 3% [5], and the relative normalization between them has an uncertainty of 4%. The uncertainty in the near detector event count due to the selection criteria is 15% for $E_{\text{reco}} < 0.5$ GeV, 3% for events with $0.5 < E_{\text{reco}} < 1$ GeV, and is negligible for $E_{\text{reco}} > 1$ GeV. Table II shows the effect of these uncertainties on $R$.

The uncertainty on the size of the $\nu_\mu$-CC background was determined by comparing the near detector NC-like reconstructed energy spectrum from the low-energy beam configuration used in this analysis with the spectra from three other beam configurations having higher average neutrino energy. In each reconstructed energy bin, $i$, of the low-energy beam the total number of events is the sum of the NC and CC interactions, $N_i = N_{i\text{NC}} + N_{i\text{CC}}$. The quantity $r_i^{\text{NC}}$ ($r_i^{\text{CC}}$) is the ratio of the number of NC (CC) interactions in each energy bin in an alternative beam configuration to the corresponding number in the low-energy beam configuration. The value of $N_i$ can be calculated from the spectrum in another beam,

$$CC_i = \frac{r_i^{\text{NC}}N_i - N_i^{\text{A}}}{r_i^{\text{CC}} - r_i^{\text{NC}}}.$$  

where $N_i^{\text{A}}$ is the total number of events observed in the alternate beam configuration. The values of $r_i^{\text{NC}}$ and $r_i^{\text{CC}}$ are taken from the Monte Carlo simulation. The uncertainty in the $\nu_\mu$-CC background is taken as the difference between the uncertainty-weighted average value of $CC_i$ measured using the different beam configurations and the value predicted by the Monte Carlo simulation. That difference is consistent within 15% for all reconstructed energies. The size of the $\nu_\mu$-CC background at the far detector depends on the parameters for $\nu_\mu \to \nu_e$ oscillations used in the prediction. The MINOS measured values of $\Delta m^2_{32} = 2.43 \times 10^{-3}$ eV$^2$/c$^4$ and $\theta_{13} = \pi/4$ [12] were used for the prediction, and variations within the 1$\sigma$ range of these parameters change the $\nu_\mu$-CC background in the far detector by less than 10%.

Because the selection criteria identify $\nu_\mu$-CC interactions as NC-like with nearly 100% efficiency, the background from $\nu_e$ inherent in the beam and $\nu_\mu \to \nu_e$ oscillations is also considered. An upper limit for the $\nu_\mu$-CC rate in the far detector was estimated using the normal mass hierarchy with $\theta_{13} = 0.21$ rad and $\delta = 3\pi/2$ rad. The choice of $\theta_{13}$ corresponds to the 90% confidence level upper limit for the MINOS measured value of $\Delta m^2_{32}$ [17]. The contribution to $B_{\text{CC}}$ from $\nu_e$ and the values of $R$ under these assumptions are shown in Table I.

The data shown in Fig. 2 are combined with the data from CC interactions to determine the fraction of the previously observed $\nu_\mu$ disappearance that could be due to oscillations between active and sterile neutrinos. The data are fit to a model that assumes oscillations between $\nu_\mu$, $\nu_\tau$, and $\nu_s$ occur at a single mass-squared splitting. The probabilities for $\nu_\mu$ to remain $\nu_\mu$ or convert to $\nu_s$ are

$$P_{\nu_\mu \to \nu_\mu} = 1 - \alpha_{\mu} \sin^2(1.27 \Delta m^2 L/E)$$

and

$$P_{\nu_\mu \to \nu_s} = \alpha_s \sin^2(1.27 \Delta m^2 L/E),$$

where $\Delta m^2$ is the atmospheric mass-squared splitting in eV$^2$/c$^4$, $L = 735$ km, $E$ is the neutrino energy in GeV, and $\alpha_{\mu}$ and $\alpha_s$ are phenomenological parameters related to the mixing angles. A simultaneous fit to the NC-like and $\nu_\mu$-CC energy spectra yields the energy independent fraction of $\nu_\mu$ oscillating to $\nu_s$,

$$f_s \equiv \frac{P_{\nu_\mu \to \nu_s}}{1 - P_{\nu_\mu \to \nu_\mu}} = 0.28^{+0.25}_{-0.26}\text{(stat + syst)},$$

with $\chi^2 = 46.5$ for 43 degrees of freedom and $f_s < 0.68$ at 90% confidence level. The fit includes the systematic un-
certainties in Table II as nuisance parameters. Including electron neutrino appearance at the previously discussed upper limit results in $f_s = 0.43^{+0.23}_{-0.27}$ (stat + syst) with $\chi^2 = 46.6$ and $f_s < 0.80$ at 90% confidence level. The $\chi^2$ values for $f_s = 0$ are 47.4 without $\nu_e$ appearance and 49.0 with $\nu_e$ appearance.

In summary, we have reported the first measurements of neutrino neutral-current rates and spectra in an accelerator long-baseline neutrino experiment. The rates at the near and far detectors are consistent with expectations from decay kinematics and geometry, providing new support for the interpretation of muon neutrino disappearance as oscillations among the three active neutrinos. This result provides one of the best limits to date on the fraction of muon neutrinos which may convert to sterile neutrinos in oscillations associated with the atmospheric mass-squared splitting.

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*Deceased.


