The NOvA Experiment

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NOvA is a long-baseline accelerator neutrino experiment that studies neutrino oscillation phenomena governed by the atmospheric mass squared splitting. NOvA has the potential to resolve the neutrino mass hierarchy and the octant of $\theta_{23}$ at the 3$\sigma$ level. The NOvA collaboration is expected to release its first oscillation results this year (2015).

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1. Introduction

Although the past two decades have seen unprecedented advancement in the field of neutrino physics, many fundamental questions remain about the nature of neutrinos. Is there CP violation in the lepton sector? What is the neutrino mass ordering? Is $\theta_{23}$ maximal, and if not, then what is the octant of $\theta_{23}$? The NOvA experiment is capable of probing these questions by studying the transition of muon neutrinos (antineutrinos) to the other neutrino (antineutrinos) flavors along a baseline of 810 km at an energy near 2 GeV.

The experiment uses two functionally identical detectors to measure the transition rate. The first detector, referred to as the near detector (ND) is 0.3 kt and is located less than 1 km from the production target at Fermilab. The ND is used to measure the neutrino energy spectrum before the neutrinos have oscillated. The second detector, referred to as the far detector (FD), is 14 kt and located at Ash River, Minnesota a distance of 810 km from the production target. The FD is used to measure the effect of oscillation on the neutrino energy spectrum. Because the detectors are functionally identical, systematic effects from flux, cross-section, and detector efficiencies are greatly reduced when comparing the event yields in the two detectors.

2. Beam

The neutrino beam is created in the NuMI facility [1] by colliding 120 GeV protons from the Fermilab Main Injector with a graphite target. The collision products are focused by two magnetic horns and directed down a 0.68 km decay pipe where the resulting decays produce the neutrino beam. The polarity of the horns can be reversed to run in a neutrino-enhanced or an antineutrino-enhanced beam. The NOvA detectors are located at a 14 mrad off-axis angle which results in a narrow-band neutrino energy spectrum that is peaked near 2 GeV. The resulting NuMI energy spectra for various off-axis angles is shown in Fig. 1. The narrow band beam operation reduces the neutral-current (NC) backgrounds to the identification of $\nu_e$ charged-current (CC) and $\nu_\mu$ CC events.

The NUMI design goal is run at a 700 kW beam power with $6 \times 10^{20}$ protons on target (POT) being delivered to NOvA each year. The nominal plan is to accumulate $18 \times 10^{20}$ POT in neutrino mode and $18 \times 10^{20}$ POT in antineutrino mode. To date, $6 \times 10^{20}$ POT in neutrino mode have been delivered to NOvA. However, about half of the beam data was collected with a variable-fraction of the final FD mass as the FD was being assembled.

3. Detectors

The NOvA detectors are liquid scintillator tracking calorimeters. The FD is composed of extruded PVC cells that are 4 cm x 6 cm x 15.6 m. The cells are grouped into 15.6 m x 15.6 m x 6 cm planes with the cells in an individual plane running parallel to each other. The FD is composed of 896 planes that are layered so that the orientation of cells in each successive plane are rotated by 90°. The cells are filled with a liquid scintillator that is composed of mineral oil and a pseudocumene scintillant. In order to collect the light that is produced in the scintillator, a single wavelength shifting fiber runs down the length of the cell. The fiber wraps around at one end of
Figure 1: The neutrino spectra (flux times cross-section) for various angles. The NOvA detectors are located at 14 mrad which corresponds to a peak neutrino energy that is located near the first oscillation maximum.

The cell and is readout by both ends by a single APD pixel. The FD is 77% active by mass with a radiation length of 38 cm which corresponds to a distance of 6 planes along the beam direction and a distance of 10 cells transverse to the beam direction.

The ND is based on the same design as the FD, but is smaller than FD. The planes are 4.1 m x 4.1 m x 6 cm, and there are only 206 planes. In order to range out muons, the end of the ND contains ten 10-cm wide steel planes that are interspersed with active scintillator planes.

4. Event Selection

The survival probability for muon neutrinos is determined by comparing the energy dependent event yield for $\nu_\mu$-CC interactions in the FD with respect to the ND. The $\nu_\mu$-CC events are selected by identifying contained neutrino interactions that have a reconstructed muon track. The muon track is identified by using a kNN algorithm that uses information about the the track length, scattering, dE/dx, and fraction of the track hits (in number of planes) without overlapping hadronic activity. The performance of the $\nu_\mu$-CC selector is shown in Fig. 2. The events with a kNN value greater than 0.75 are selected which results in a 15 to 1 signal to background ratio. The $\nu_\mu$-CC events are further separated into quasielastic and non-quasielastic events by another kNN algorithm. The kNN algorithm has been trained separately based on the number of reconstructed tracks in the event. The performance of the quasielastic classifier is shown in Fig. 3. The events are separated by quasielastic and non-quasielastic topologies to increase the sensitivity of the final fit to the reconstruction energy spectrum. The quasielastic events have a 4% energy resolution while the non-quasielastic have a 6% energy resolution.
The NOvA Experiment

G. Pawloski

Figure 2: The kNN output of the $\nu_\mu$-CC selector. Values near 0 are background-like, and values near 1 are signal-like.

Figure 3: The kNN output for the quasielastic classifier for $\nu_\mu$-CC events. Values near 0 are non-quasielastic-like, and values near 1 are quasielastic-like. The figure on the left is for events with one reconstructed track, and the figure on the right is for events with two reconstructed tracks. If more than two tracks are present in the event, then it is considered non-quasielastic.

The appearance probability for electron neutrinos is determined by selecting $\nu_e$-CC events. These events are identified by finding contained neutrino interactions that have an electron. The electron is identified by using a multivariate technique that looks for a cluster of hits that are consistent with an electromagnetic shower from an electron. Two $\nu_e$-CC selectors are used to test for consistency among the methods. The performance of the $\nu_e$-CC selectors are shown in Fig. 4. Both $\nu_e$-CC selectors which result in a 2 to 1 signal to background ratio.

5. Physics Sensitivity

The expected reconstructed energy distributions of selected FD $\nu_\mu$-CC events collected over the final beam exposure of $18 \times 10^{20}$ POT of neutrino running and $18 \times 10^{20}$ POT of antineutrino running are shown in Fig. 5 for the selected quasielastic events and in Fig. 6 for the selected non-quasielastic events. Based on these expected energy distributions the sensitivity to $\theta_{23}$ and $\Delta m_{32}^2$ is shown in Fig. 7.
The NOvA Experiment

Figure 4: The output of the two $\nu_e$-CC selectors, referred to as LEM and EID. Values near 0 are background-like, and values near 1 are signal-like. The vertical dashed red lines indicate the corresponding cut values for each selector.

Figure 5: The simulated reconstructed energy distribution for selected quasielastic events. The plot on the left (right) is for events collected with a neutrino-enhanced (antineutrino-enhanced) beam.

Figure 6: The simulated reconstructed energy distribution for selected non-quasielastic events. The plot on the left (right) is for events collected with a neutrino-enhanced (antineutrino-enhanced) beam.
The NOvA Experiment

G. Pawloski

6. Summary

To date, \(6 \times 10^{20}\) POT have been delivered to NOvA with a neutrino beam. The nominal plan is for NOvA to accumulate a total of \(18 \times 10^{20}\) POT in neutrino mode and \(18 \times 10^{20}\) POT in antineutrino mode. With the total data set, NOvA will make precision measurements of \(\theta_{23}\) and \(\Delta m^2_{32}\). Depending on the value of \(\theta_{23}\) and \(\delta_{CP}\), NOvA has the potential to resolve the neutrino mass hierarchy and the octant of \(\theta_{23}\) at the 3\(\sigma\) level.
The NOvA Experiment

G. Pawloski

Figure 9: The NOvA sensitivity to mass hierarchy using the expected final NOvA data sample. The plot shows the significance to which the hierarchy can be resolved as a function of the true value of $\delta_{CP}$.

Figure 10: The NOvA sensitivity to the octant of $\theta_{23}$ using the expected final NOvA data sample. The plot shows the significance to which the octant can be resolved as a function of the true value of $\delta_{CP}$ assuming $\sin^2(2\theta_{23}) = 0.95$. If $\sin^2(2\theta_{23})$ is greater than 0.95 the sensitivity degrades as $\theta_{23}$ becomes closer to maximal.

References