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Enhancement of ion generation in femtosecond ultraintense laser-foil interactions by defocusing

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A simple method to enhance ion generation with femtosecond ultraintense lasers is demonstrated experimentally by defocusing laser beams on target surface. When the laser is optimally defocused, we find that the population of medium and low energy protons from ultra-thin foils is increased significantly while the proton cutoff energy is almost unchanged. In this way, the total proton yield can be enhanced by more than 1 order, even though the peak laser intensity drops. The depression of the amplified spontaneous emission (ASE) effect and the population increase of moderate-energy electrons are believed to be the main reasons for the effective enhancement. © 2012 American Institute of Physics. [doi:10.1063/1.3688027]

The generation of ion and proton beams in the ultraintense laser-plasma interactions has attracted much interest due to a variety of potential applications.1–9 The target normal laser-plasma interactions has attracted much interest of order of 105 W/cm² to the order of 1016 W/cm² by changing the offset from 0 (best focus position) to 500 μm, while the laser energy was kept as constant, with a shot to shot fluctuation less than 7%.

Figure 1 shows the energy spectra of the proton beams in the target normal direction when the laser is best focused mirror was introduced into the beam path, which increased the ASE contrast by 2 orders of magnitude (10−6).17 The polarization laser pulse was focused with an f/3 off-axis parabolic (OAP) mirror on aluminum foils at an incidence angle of 30°. The FWHM of the focal spot was measured to be around 5–6 μm when the laser was tightly focused. The targets used in the experiment were 50 nm and 2 μm Al foils.

The energy spectra of the proton beams were measured using two Thomson parabola spectrometers with a solid angle of 1.3 × 10−6 sr. One of them was aligned in the target normal direction and the other 8° away from the normal. The protons were recorded with a high-efficiency scintillator detector, which was optically coupled to an electron multiplying charge coupled device (EMCCD). In this case, real-time ion spectra over a range of 150 keV–6 MeV with an energy resolution of 100 keV at 1 MeV for protons were achieved. The spatial distributions of the proton beams were also measured with a real-time footprint image system, which consisted of a fast scintillator detector, optical imaging components and an intensified charge coupled device (ICCD) camera. The intensified gated camera was utilized to distinguish the proton signals from hot electrons and x rays with the time-of-flight method. Note only the lower half part of the proton beams was sampled [see Fig. 3(a)]. An electron magnetic spectrometer equipped with image plates was set in the laser propagation direction with a solid angle of 6.1 × 10−3 sr to measure the energy spectra of fast electrons. The defocusing scan was carried out by moving the OAP mirror. The peak laser intensity was reduced from 5 × 1019 W/cm² to the order of 1016 W/cm² by changing the offset from 0 (best focus position) to 500 μm, while the laser energy was kept as constant, with a shot to shot fluctuation less than 7%.

Figure 1 shows the energy spectra of the proton beams in the target normal direction when the laser is best focused.
on a 50 nm aluminum foil. The $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ for the high contrast shots (with plasma mirror) is about 6 MeV, while it is reduced to 2.4 MeV when no plasma mirror is utilized. Note that the laser energy for the low contrast shot is even larger than that for the high contrast. The spatial distributions of the proton beam generated from the 50 nm Al foils for different contrast laser pulses were also investigated. The results show similar depression of the proton flux when low contrast laser pulses are utilized.

Such a phenomenon can be understood by taking the ASE effect on the ion acceleration into account. For the low contrast laser beam, the intensity of the ASE pedestal is of an order of $10^{13}$ W/cm$^2$. This is high enough to create plasma at the front surface. In the case of the ultra-thin foils, the TNSA mechanism will become ineffective due to the preionization and the plasma expansion of the rear surface caused by the ASE pedestal.

In order to depress the ASE effect on the ion acceleration, we reduce the ASE intensity by defocusing the laser beam. The on-axis energy spectra of the proton beams emitted in the normal direction with various focal offsets are shown in Fig. 2(a). The cutoff energy is shown in Fig. 2(b). We find that the $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ can be effectively increased by properly defocusing. When the laser is tightly focused, the $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ is about 2.4 MeV. It reaches 3.5 MeV when the foil is 50 μm away from the best focal position. After that, the $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ retained around 3 MeV even when the laser intensity is decreased substantially to $1.3 \times 10^{18}$ W/cm$^2$ (300 μm offset). Finally, it rapidly drops down to 0.9 MeV when the offset is 500 μm. The maximum cutoff energy is achieved when the laser intensity is around $2.8 \times 10^{18}$ W/cm$^2$ (50 μm offset). Similar phenomena are also observed by the off-axis Thomson spectrometer.

The energy spectra for 2 μm thick Al foils were also investigated. The $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ for 2 μm Al foil is also plotted in Fig. 2(b). When the laser is tightly focused, the $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ for the 2 μm foil is around 6 MeV, which much exceed the $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ for 50 nm foil. The reason is that when thicker foils are utilized, plasma formation at the rear surface induced by the ASE pedestal can be effectively suppressed, thus achieving a stronger acceleration field. Another feature revealed in Fig. 2(b) is that when the laser intensity gradually drops, a broad “plateau” region is presented between $2.7 \times 10^{18}$ W/cm$^2$ and $1.7 \times 10^{17}$ W/cm$^2$ for both targets, where the $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ is retained around 3 MeV. The $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ of 50 nm Al and 2 μm Al almost coincide with each other when the intensity is below $2.7 \times 10^{18}$ W/cm$^2$.

We can also observe from Fig. 2(a) that when the focal offset increases, the population of the medium-energy and low-energy protons grows significantly. The population of the protons at 1 MeV with varied focal offsets is investigated and compared. It is found that for the 50 nm foil, the population of 1 MeV protons is enhanced by 90 times when the offset is 300 μm compared with that when the laser is tightly focused.

**FIG. 1.** (Color online) Energy spectra of proton beams with high contrast ($10^{-8}$) and low contrast ($10^{-5}$) laser pulses for the tight focus on 50 nm Al foils.

**FIG. 2.** (Color online) (a) Energy spectra of proton beams for 50 nm Al foils vs. laser intensities (focal offsets) for low contrast ($10^{-5}$) laser pulses. Laser energy is kept as constant. (b) The $E_{\text{cutoff}}$ of proton beams vs. varied focal intensities for 50 nm (black star) and 2 μm (red dot) foils.

**FIG. 3.** (Color online) (a) Schematics of the ion beam footprint imaging system, which measures the spatial distribution of the lower part of the ion beam. The detector is covered by a set of filters with different thickness, which provide a rough energy resolution. (b) The spatial distributions of the proton beams from 50 nm foils for varied laser intensities. All the images are under the same color scale. The black gap shown in each image is due to the proton fluence reduction by the filters.
energy and low energy is generated because of the large focal area. Figure 5(a) shows the energy spectra of hot electrons in the forward direction when the laser intensity is reduced from $5 \times 10^{19} \text{W/cm}^2$ to $1.6 \times 10^{17} \text{W/cm}^2$ in the experiment. The graph shows that although the number of high energy electrons decreases when the laser intensity drops, the number of electrons with lower energy (less than 250 keV) increases. 2D particle-in-cell (PIC) simulations are also utilized to study the electron spectra under different focal offsets, which confirm the increase of population of moderate and low energy electrons as well. In the simulations, a p-polarized laser irradiates the target with an incidence angle of $25^\circ$. The normalized amplitude of the laser electric field at the focus is $a = a_0 \sin^2(\pi t/T)$, where $a_0$ is 2.0. The FWHM of the pulse is $10T_0$ and the duration is $24T_0$, where $T_0$ is the laser cycle. The thickness of the target is $2.5\lambda$. The number of protons accelerated from the rear surface can be approximately described by $N_p = \hat{N}_p L \rho_p p$, where $d_L$ is the transverse size of the sheath field, $\rho_p$ is the thickness of the sheath, and $n_p$ is the density of protons being ionized. The large population of electrons for large focal spots can induce a sheath field over a large area on the rear surface. This may be one of the reasons for the intensity increase of medium-energy and low-energy protons in Fig. 2(c) and the broad “plateau” region in Fig. 2(b).

The role of the focal spot size plays in the proton acceleration process is not limited by just acting as a factor in determining the laser intensity. Brenner et al.\textsuperscript{18} investigated the effect of the focal size separately using the high contrast Astra laser (to exclude the ASE effect). By comparing the datasets with the same laser intensity and different focal size, we can see that the maximum energy and the proton flux are closely related to the spot diameter. Another experiment carried on XL-II (Ref. 19) has found that the beam quality can be improved by defocusing the laser beam. Further investigations are needed to fully evaluate and understand the effect of spot size on the proton properties.

In conclusion, a simple method to enhance ion generation for low contrast ($10^{-6}$) lasers is demonstrated. The total
yield and the cutoff energy of the proton beams from ultra-thin foils can be effectively enhanced when the laser beams are optimally defocused. The depression of the influence of the ASE pedestal and the generation of large population of moderate-energy electrons are believed to be the main reasons for the enhancement.

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