Ultralow-velocity zones possibly explained by light element-enriched iron compounds

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The core–mantle boundary (CMB) is the most fundamental chemical discontinuity in the Earth. Recent experiments showed that, when water meets iron at the CMB, hydrogen-bearing iron peroxide FeO_2H_x can be produced. The results indicate that water can interact with iron metal very differently than it does on the surface of the earth. Seismic waves speeds in this hydrogen bearing iron peroxide are much slower compared with lower-mantle silicate solid phases, and therefore it may help explain the seismic anomalies at the CMB.

Given the steep geothermal gradient across the CMB, the hydrogen-bearing iron peroxide FeO_2H_x likely undergoes high-temperature decomposition into anhydrous iron oxides (e.g., Fe_2O_3) and fluids. We measured the sound velocity of Fe_2O_3 post-perovskite (ppv) through inelastic X-ray scattering up to 132 GPa and 1,800 K, relevant to the lowermost mantle. Combined with first-principles investigations, we are able to show that Fe_2O_3 ppv has very low sound velocities and strong anisotropy with respect to lower-mantle silicates. Therefore, both hydrogen-bearing iron peroxide FeO_2H_x and post-perovskite Fe_2O_3 are candidate phases for ultralow-velocity zones at the CMB.

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