

# Snowmass 2021 Letter of Interest: Cosmological Neutrinos

## Primary topical groups:

NF08/TF11 (Theory of Neutrino Physics)  
NF04 (Neutrinos From Natural Sources)

## Other topical groups:

NF01 (Neutrino Oscillations)  
NF02 (Sterile Neutrinos)  
NF03 (BSM)  
NF05 (Neutrino properties)  
CF1 (Dark Matter: Particle-like)  
CF7 (Cosmic Probes of Fundamental Physics)

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## Overview

The physics surrounding neutrino mass and neutrino interactions presents key research opportunities in elementary particle physics, both in theory and in experiment. Paralleling the developments in those fields, advances in observational astrophysics and cosmology promise unprecedented precision in the measurement of cosmological quantities. Since those quantities in many cases are shaped by how the physics of neutrinos plays out in the cauldron of the very early universe, and its aftermath, we can expect synergistic advances in both the fundamental physics of neutrinos and in cosmology. In what follows we point out several areas ripe for future investigation.

(1) **Neutrino Mass:** The known, standard model “active” neutrinos are very light compared to the charged leptons and quarks in their respective families. The neutrino mass-squared differences are known from neutrino flavor oscillation experiments and observations [1, 2]. The neutrino mass hierarchy and the absolute masses remain unknown. However, the hierarchy likely will be inferred experimentally (e.g., via DUNE [3]) to  $5\sigma$  within 6 years, with good hints within 3 years. The “sum of the light neutrino masses,”  $\sum m_\nu$ , is a prime target for Stage-4 CMB experiments [4], with an uncertainty that could reach  $\sim 15$  meV [5], providing an independent handle on the neutrino mass hierarchy and the neutrino collision-less damping scale [6]. A positive signal in forthcoming tonne-scale neutrino-less double beta decay experiments [7–11] would mean lepton number violation and that neutrinos are Majorana in character, the decay being enabled by either neutrino mass-mediated chirality flip [12] or by BSM physics. If the hierarchy is “normal,” the mass-mediated channel might imply that the lightest neutrino mass eigenvalue is  $m_1 > 10$  meV, in turn implying  $\sum m_\nu > 75$  meV which would be  $\sim 15$  meV above the  $m_1 = 0$  case. Moreover, the  $0\nu\beta\beta$  nuclear matrix element – which also may be altered by BSM physics – is a frontier issue even in standard model physics [13]. In any case, tension between cosmological and experimental handles on neutrino mass physics could give new insights into elementary particle physics, astrophysics, or both. KATRIN [14, 15], Project 8 [16], and similar tritium endpoint experiments may eventually provide probes of the “ $\nu_e$  mass” in the  $\sim 100$  meV range. Direct detection of cosmological neutrinos would also yield measurements of the  $\nu_e$  mass [17]. Charge-less neutrinos may acquire mass differently than do charged particles in the standard model Higgs paradigm [18]. That invites new, potentially testable BSM alternatives.

(2) **Flavor Physics and Additional States:** The neutrino weak interaction states,  $\nu_e, \nu_\mu, \nu_\tau$ , are not coincident with the mass states,  $\nu_1, \nu_2, \nu_3$ , enabling neutrino oscillations/ flavor transformation. The three vacuum mixing angles in the PMNS transformation between these bases are measured [19]; the Dirac and (for Majorana) two Majorana CP-violating phases in this unitary transformation remain unmeasured. CP-violation will be probed in long baseline oscillation experiments [20, 21] and, to some extent, in  $0\nu\beta\beta$  experiments. Any additional neutrino flavors, a feature of many neutrino mass and dark sector physics models, must have sub-weak interactions, hence they are labeled “sterile.” However, their mass scales are completely unknown, with see-saw-like mass schemes suggesting large scales [22], and other schemes suggesting both large  $> \text{GeV}$ , intermediate  $\sim \text{keV}$ , and  $\sim \text{eV}$  mass regimes [23–26]. Though their vacuum mixing with active states is constrained by experiment and astrophysical considerations [27], sterile neutrinos could be copiously produced in the early universe through lepton number-driven medium-enhanced oscillations [28] and decoherence [29] and by a variety of nonstandard neutrino interactions (NSI) [30, 31], some involving dark sector physics. For example, the  $\sim \text{keV}$  mass scale sterile states make for intriguing dark matter candidates [32–34], potentially probable with next generation X-ray observatories, e.g., ATHENA and XRISM, whose energy resolution will be sufficient to resolve the virial width of X-ray lines originating from decay of a dark matter constituent. Heavier sterile states produced in the early universe may comprise relatively long lived non-thermal relics, whose decays may

generate dilution sufficient to be revealed in  $N_{\text{eff}}$  or BBN. Short baseline oscillation experiment (e.g., MiniBooNE [35]) and reactor neutrino [36, 37] anomalies have been interpreted as active-sterile oscillation with large mixing at the  $\sim 1$  eV mass scale. This is incompatible with cosmological bounds, resulting in an explosion of speculation about neutrino NSIs [38] and dark sector physics [39–41]. Likewise, the discordance in the Hubble parameter determinations has led to many ideas invoking the similar neutrino-sector BSM considerations [42–45].

(3) **Weak Decoupling/BBN and CMB Probes:** The next generation Stage-4 CMB experiments promise  $\mathcal{O}(1\%)$  precision in measurements of the non-photon radiation energy density [46], e.g.,  $N_{\text{eff}}$ , at photon decoupling and in the primordial helium abundance. Comparable precision in the primordial deuterium abundance can be attained with the advent of 30m-class telescopes [47–50]. These measurements, when combined with high precision simulations of the evolution of the early universe through the weak decoupling and BBN epochs [51–55], may provide new probes of many of the issues discussed above, including neutrino NSIs, dilution from non-thermal relic particle decays [56–59], inhomogeneous entropy distributions from a variety of BSM physics issues, etc. In turn, the salient issue in simulating physics (standard model and BSM) in the weak decoupling and BBN regimes is providing a complete quantum kinetic treatment of neutrino scattering [60, 61], entropy flow, and flavor transformation. These calculations, pushing the boundaries of high performance computing, will enable future cosmological observations to provide probes of subtle BSM physics, in some cases complementary to accelerator-based experiments, and in other cases unique. Enabling this probe will be facilitated by better measurements of nuclear reaction physics associated with deuterium production, e.g.,  $n(p, \gamma)d$  [62], and deuterium destruction, e.g.,  $d(p, \gamma)^3\text{He}$  [63]. Disentangling signatures of BSM physics from standard model nuclear uncertainties [64–67] is an important goal. This includes resolving the beam [68] versus bottle [69] measurements of neutron lifetime (hence, the axial vector weak coupling), and the nuclear reactions that may accompany BSM physics attempts at resolving the  $^7\text{Li}/^7\text{Be}$  problem in standard BBN [70, 71].

(4) **Neutrino Portal to Dark Matter/Dark Sector Physics:** Models for dark matter and dark sector physics may have implications for the interactions of neutrinos in the early universe [72], as well as in experimental settings [73, 74], as described above. A dark sector that broadly mimics the standard model, save for masses and couplings, is a case in point. One or more of the particles, elementary or composite, in that sector may comprise a dark matter constituent. Though gravitation is the one commonality between the standard model and dark sectors (e.g., black holes could be created in either sector) very small couplings may enable communication between the sectors. For example, dark neutrinos and dark Zs may appear in the standard model sector as sterile neutrinos and NSIs, respectively. Models along these lines have been invoked to explain short baseline neutrino oscillation anomalies [75–77], and may have significant, or subtle effects in early universe or compact object physics. Moreover, the evolution of the dark sector itself, e.g., in darkleptogenesis-like models [78, 79], etc., may figure in both dark matter and in structure formation [80–84].

**In Summary:** Considerations of cosmological neutrinos comprise a promising frontier in elementary particle physics, rife with opportunities in theory, experiment, and observation.

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