

Effect of Overburden Pressure and Water Saturation on Gas Permeability of Tight Sandstone Cores

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Introduction

Research on the potential of nuclear explosions to stimulate gas production from low-permeability (tight) sandstone reservoirs is being conducted by the U. S. Bureau of Mines in cooperation with the Atomic Energy Commission. This report describes the part of that research that was conducted to establish correlation between permeability measured on dry cores at low external pressure (routine analysis) and permeability at reservoir conditions.

Cores used in this research were obtained from two Plowshare gas-stimulation projects. Project Gasbuggy cores from the Pictured Cliffs formation, Choza Mesa field, Rio Arriba County, N. M., can be described as very fine grained, slightly calcareous, well indurated sandstone. Project Wagon Wheel cores from the Fort Union formation, Pinedale field, Sublette County, Wyo., can be described as very fine grained, slightly calcareous, very well indurated sandstone.

Underground reservoirs are under considerable compressive stress as a result of the weight of overlying rocks (offset somewhat by internal-fluid pressure). The resultant net confining pressure or effective overburden pressure is referred to in this report simply as overburden pressure. The resulting effects on the physical properties of the reservoir rock have been studied.¹⁻³ Overburden pressure causes only a small decrease in porosity, which can usually be ignored.³ This was confirmed for Project Gasbuggy and Project Wagon Wheel cores. A commercial laboratory found that the porosity of these cores is reduced by about 5

percent of the original porosity. The effect of overburden pressure on permeability, however, is appreciable and varies considerably for different reservoir rocks,^{1,2} causing greater reductions in permeability for low-permeability rocks.^{2,3} The effect of overburden pressure on relative permeability has been found to be small⁴ or nonexistent.⁵

This report presents material that confirms and extends previous research findings on the effect that overburden pressure has upon the permeability of dry cores. Also presented are the results of research on the relative gas permeability of low-permeability cores under overburden pressure.

Apparatus and Procedure

Cylindrical cores 2.0 to 7.5 cm long and 2.5 cm in diameter were cut parallel to the bedding plane. After the cores were dried overnight in a vacuum oven (4.5 psia, 70°C), the gas (N_2) permeability of each core was measured in a Hassler cell. An external pressure of 100 psi over the inlet pressure was used to maintain a good seal between the rubber sleeve and the core.⁶ Permeability was measured at inlet pressures of 45, 60, and 100 psia, with atmospheric pressure at the outlet. A bubble tube and timer were used to measure gas flow rate. Initial permeability (k_i) then was calculated by the Klinkenberg technique to correct for the effect of gas slippage. All other permeabilities reported here were calculated by this method.

In the same manner, permeability was measured at

Research conducted to determine the potential of nuclear explosions to stimulate gas production verifies that the gas permeability of tight sandstone cores is markedly decreased with increasing overburden pressure. Water saturation also reduces the gas permeability by a large amount. The relative permeability, however, does not change significantly with overburden pressure.

increasing external pressures of about 500, 1,000, 2,000, 3,000, 4,000, 5,000, and 6,000 psi. External pressures actually were somewhat higher to compensate for internal pressure. The core and stainless steel end pieces were placed in a rubber sleeve (piece of bicycle innertube) 0.1 cm thick. Rubber cement was used to seal the stainless steel end pieces to the rubber sleeve. Shrinkable plastic tubing proved unsatisfactory because high pressure was required to seal the core. The jacketed core was mounted in a high-pressure cell with distilled water as the external fluid.

Cores used in relative permeability studies were first subjected to high external pressure and then allowed to recover their initial permeability. Bulk volume, dry weight, and porosity were measured by conventional gas-expansion techniques. Cores then were subjected to a vacuum (0.3 psia) for 2 hours, immersed in water, and allowed to stand under a vacuum overnight. The cores were weighed and again subjected to vacuum overnight and weighed again to assure complete saturation. Most of the cores were completely saturated after one night. Porosity values calculated on the basis of water saturation are in good agreement with those measured by conventional gas-expansion techniques.

Water in the core was allowed to evaporate at atmospheric conditions to a saturation of about 70 percent and the core was placed in the holder for 2 hours under external pressure (100 psi above inlet) only so the water saturation was uniform. Gas permeability then was measured at three inlet pressures between 30 and 100 psia with atmospheric pressure at the outlet. This procedure was repeated for decreasing water saturations at the same external pressure. After the permeability was measured the core was weighed to determine if any water was lost. In all cases the amount lost was negligible. After the core was dried in a vacuum oven, the gas permeability at this external pressure was measured. The procedure was repeated for external pressures of 3,000 and 6,000 psi.

Results and Discussion

Effect of Overburden Pressure on Permeability

Core number, length, porosity, and initial permeability of the cores used in this research are shown in Table 1. The core number refers to the depth in feet at which the core was obtained. Typical plots of the effect of simulated overburden pressure on Gasbuggy cores are shown in Fig. 1. The permeability is decreased by about 75 percent at an overburden pressure of 3,000 psi and by 90 percent at 6,000 psi. The hydrostatic loading used in these experiments does not reproduce subsurface conditions exactly; in an actual reservoir the horizontal component of stress is usually less than the vertical component. Since the actual loading is not known, this method probably is as realistic as any other. Cores that contain microfractures are affected to a greater extent, as shown in Fig. 2. In these cores the permeability is decreased by about 95 percent at a simulated overburden pressure of 3,000 psi, with most of the reduction occurring below 2,000 psi.

The data shown in Table 1 and Figs. 1 and 2 were obtained by subjecting the core to successive incre-

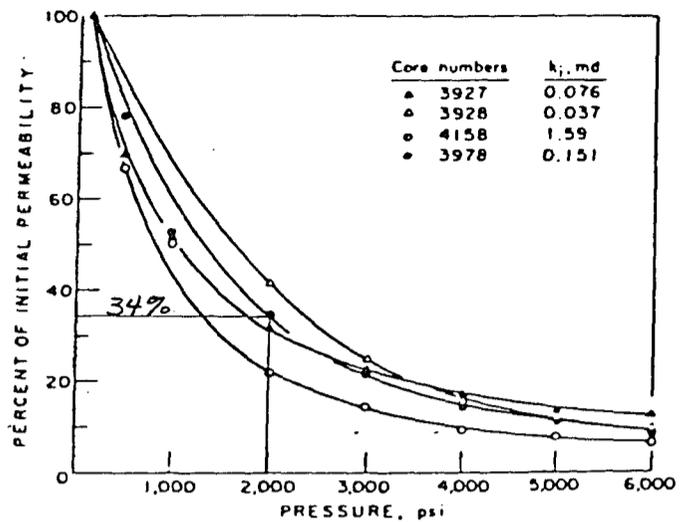


Fig. 1—Effect of overburden pressure on gas permeability of Gasbuggy cores.

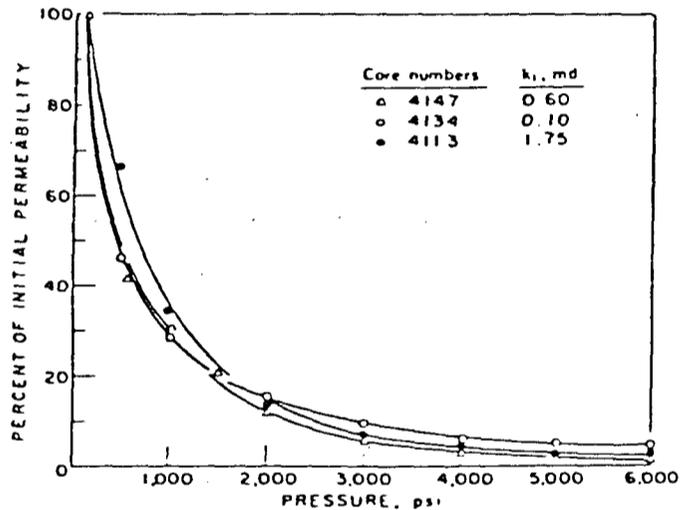


Fig. 2—Effect of overburden pressure on gas permeability of fractured Gasbuggy cores.

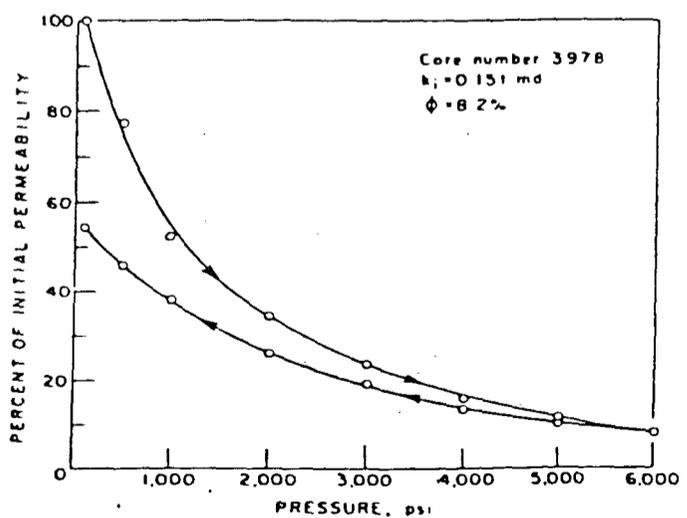


Fig. 3—Hysteresis effect at decreasing confining pressures.

TABLE 1—EFFECT OF OVERBURDEN PRESSURE ON GAS PERMEABILITY

Effective Overburden Pressure (psi):			500	1,000	2,000	3,000	4,000	5,000	6,000	
Core Number*	Length (cm)	Porosity (percent)	k,†	Permeability (md)						
Gasbuggy										
3927	2.1	8.1	0.076	0.053	0.040	0.024	0.0175	0.0132	0.0105	0.0095
3928	7.5	8.3	0.037	0.031	0.024	0.015	0.0093	0.0059	0.0046	0.0035
3978	2.1	8.2	0.151	0.118	0.078	0.052	0.036	0.024	0.0175	0.0132
4113**	2.1	10.1	1.75	1.16	0.602	0.252	0.113	0.068	0.042	0.029
4134**	2.1	11.6	0.10	0.046	0.029	0.0153	0.0095	0.0065	0.0055	0.0047
4146**	7.5	11.6	2.40	1.73	1.32	0.31	0.14	0.069	0.052	0.022
4147**	7.5	11.3	0.60	0.247	0.181	0.071	0.034	0.0186	0.0118	0.0082
4158	2.1	13.6	1.59	1.06	0.80	0.35	0.225	0.152	0.116	0.100
Wagon Wheel										
8084	3.8	7.7	0.028	0.022	0.020	0.010	0.0070	0.0047	0.0035	0.0030
8122	3.8	11.4	0.071	0.055	0.048	0.034	0.027	0.024	0.021	0.019
8975**	3.8	8.7	0.039	0.029	0.024	0.0114	0.0073	0.0048	0.0032	0.0025
10156	3.8	8.5	0.088	0.067	0.051	0.032	0.025	0.022	0.018	0.016
10990**	3.8	9.0	0.048	0.020	0.0175	0.0080	0.0050	0.0040	0.0025	0.0019

*Number denotes depth in feet.

**Slightly fractured.

†Initial permeability.

mental increases in external pressure. The core was assumed to be in equilibrium at each pressure when permeability measurements remained constant for 15 minutes, which required between 1 and 2 hours. A period of 30 minutes to an hour was required to attain equilibrium when the inlet pressure was changed. Consequently, each external pressure was maintained for a minimum of 2 hours.

The effect of decreasing external pressure was determined on a few cores, and typical results are shown in Fig. 3. Other researchers²⁻³ have observed and shown that this hysteresis is mainly dependent on the stress history of the core. Cores generally recover their original permeability after 3 to 6 weeks at atmospheric conditions. This time could be shortened by storing the core in an oven at 70°C.

The effect of overburden pressure on the permeability of cores from Project Wagon Wheel is similar to that on cores from Project Gasbuggy, and typical results are shown in Fig. 6. The permeability is decreased to about 30 percent of initial permeability at an overburden pressure of 3,000 psi and to 20 percent at 6,000.

A study of the data in Table 1 indicates that the original porosity of the core and the reduction in permeability caused by overburden pressure are not related. Pore structure (fractures to uniform pores) is probably the governing factor.

Water Saturation Effects

The data in Table 2 show that the permeability decreased with increasing water saturation. The values at 20-, 40-, and 60-percent water saturation were obtained from individual relative-permeability curves for Gasbuggy and Wagon Wheel cores. Relative-permeability curves for three cores from Project Gasbuggy are shown in Fig. 4 with the data points for Core 3978. Data points were omitted for the other cores to avoid confusion. This figure shows that al-

though gas permeability is reduced, the relative gas permeability of Gasbuggy cores is not significantly affected by increased overburden pressure. This conclusion is in agreement with the results of others.^{4,5}

Extremely low values of permeability that resulted from water saturation and overburden pressure required that either long flow times or high inlet pressures (high differential across the core) be used. Since a high inlet pressure increases the end effects by changing the distribution of water in the core, long flow times were required. Although end-effect problems were encountered with the short cores (Cores 3978 and 4158), the permeability of these cores was

TABLE 2—EFFECT OF OVERBURDEN PRESSURE AND WATER SATURATION ON GAS PERMEABILITY

Water Saturation (percent):		0	20	40	60
Core Number	Pressure (psi)	Permeability (md)			
Gasbuggy					
3927	100	0.115	0.099	0.041	0.0023
3927	3,000	0.026	0.023	0.009	0.0005
3927	6,000	0.012	0.010	0.003	0.0002
3978	100	0.112	0.080	0.034	0.011
3978	3,000	0.036	0.026	0.011	0.004
3978	6,000	0.013	0.009	0.004	0.0013
4158	100	0.447	0.335	0.156	0.045
4158	3,000	0.075	0.056	0.026	0.0074
4158	6,000	0.027	0.020	0.010	0.0026
Wagon Wheel					
8084	100	0.038	0.030	0.014	0.0042
8084	3,000	0.012	0.0096	0.0043	0.0013
8084	6,000	0.0070	0.0056	0.0025	0.0008
8122	100	0.074	0.054	0.017	0.006
8122	3,000	0.027	0.020	0.008	0.002
8122	6,000	0.020	0.015	0.006	0.002
10156	100	0.100	0.074	0.029	0.003
10156	3,000	0.028	0.020	0.008	0.0008
10156	6,000	0.017	0.013	0.005	0.0005

high enough to yield reasonable results. Permeability measurements for Core 4161 (7.5 cm long, 0.053 md) required more than 2 hours per reading. These extremely long flow times can cause errors.

End effects, long flow times, and changes in permeability due to water saturation tend to decrease the accuracy of permeability measurements, especially at the higher water saturations.

The initial permeability of many of the dry cores used in this research was not reproducible following saturation and drying. The changes probably were caused by solution of material in the pores and by particle movement. These caused both increases and decreases in permeability. The variation, although sometimes large, usually was less than 5 percent; however, we feel that the relative permeability curves are essentially correct. To eliminate the effects of solution and particle movement, the permeability of the dry core following saturation, rather than the permeability initially measured, was used in calculating relative permeability.

A composite of the relative permeability curves for Gasbuggy cores is shown in Fig. 5. These curves are representative of permeabilities encountered in this formation. At a water saturation of 50 percent, the relative permeability of the cores ranges from 15 to 20 percent and is not affected by overburden pressure.

Similar results were obtained on cores from Project Wagon Wheel, as shown in Table 2 and Fig. 6 with data points for Core 8122. These cores were cut to a length of 3.8 cm to alleviate some of the long flow time and end-effect difficulties encountered with Gasbuggy cores. These curves are representative of the permeabilities encountered in the formation. At a water saturation of 50 percent, the relative permeability of these cores ranges from 12 to 21 percent. The data in these figures show, as do the data from Gasbuggy cores, that relative gas permeability is not significantly affected by increased overburden pressure.

Correlation with Nuclear Stimulation Projects

Many of the basin areas of the Rocky Mountain region consist of thick, low-permeability sandstones containing large quantities of natural gas. This type of reservoir has been the object of the AEC's Plowshare Program experiments, Projects Gasbuggy and Rulison, and proposed Projects Wagon Wheel, WASP, and Rio Blanco. Because most wells in these reservoirs have not been commercial, only limited reservoir-analysis and production-test data are available. Reservoir analysis is most difficult because low permeability requires long-term testing. Also, it is difficult to determine permeability and net pay from these tests. Knowledge of the gas permeability is necessary in predicting gas recovery, and because it is not economical to define the characteristics of different strata by well test, it is desirable to be able to relate laboratory-measured permeability to the true in-situ permeability.

Conventional analysis by a commercial laboratory (confirmed in our laboratory) of about 200 Gasbuggy cores gave an average initial gas permeability of 0.16 md on dry cores and an average water saturation of 48 percent. The effective overburden pressure of this

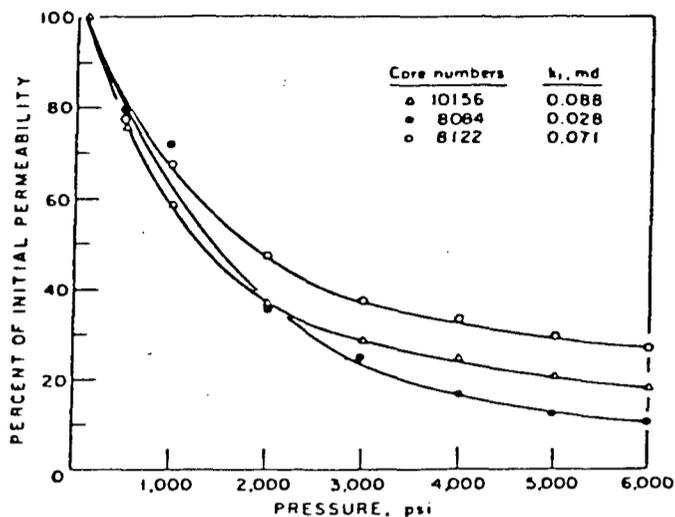


Fig. 4—Effect of overburden pressure on gas permeability of Wagon Wheel cores.

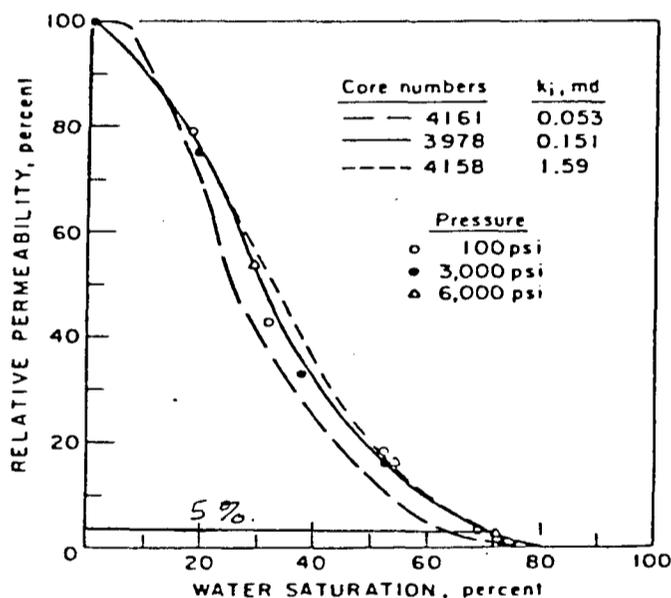


Fig. 5—Relative gas permeability of Gasbuggy cores.

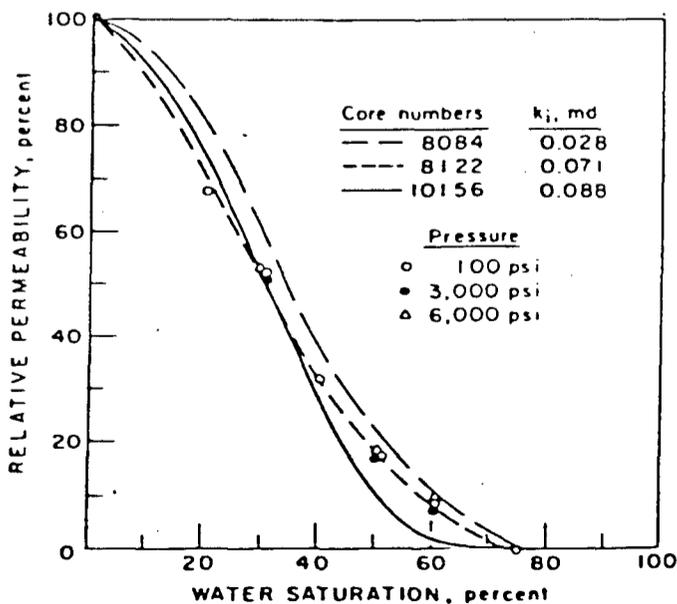


Fig. 6—Relative gas permeability of Wagon Wheel cores.

reservoir is about 3,000 psi. From Fig. 1, the reduction factor resulting from the overburden pressure is 0.25, and the reduction factor for a water saturation of 48 percent (Fig. 5) is 0.20; thus the total reduction is 5 percent of the initial permeability, or 0.008 md. This value compares favorably with permeability determinations of about 0.01 md from both preshot and postshot flow testing at Gasbuggy. The gas reservoir at Project Rulison is similar to that at Gasbuggy, having an average initial dry permeability of 0.11 md and an average water saturation of 45 percent. Simulated in-situ permeability has not yet been measured in the laboratory on Rulison cores; however, using an effective overburden pressure of 5,000 psi and curves of Gasbuggy core data (Figs. 1 and 5), the reduction factor because of overburden pressure would be 0.12 and that for water saturation 0.24. This results in a combined reduction to 3 percent of the initial permeability, or 0.003 md. Postshot production testing at Rulison is not complete, and the only preshot determination of permeability was made from tests of a 32-ft isolated zone that gave an average value of 0.008 md. No cores are available from this zone. Rulison reservoir rock is said to be less compressible than that of Gasbuggy; therefore Gasbuggy pressure-effect data would be expected to indicate a greater reduction for Rulison than actually exists.

The average initial permeability of dry Wagon Wheel cores is 0.068 md, with an average water saturation of 50 percent. An estimated effective overburden pressure of 3,000 psi gives a reduction factor of 0.28 (Fig. 4). Water saturation further reduces permeability by a factor of 0.18 (Fig. 6). Therefore, the total reduction in permeability is to approximately 5 percent of the initial permeability, or 0.0034 md.

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This value can be used to predict postshot gas recovery from the proposed Wagon Wheel experiment.

Cores are not yet available from Projects Rio Blanco and WASP.

Conclusions

The gas permeability of tight sandstone cores is markedly decreased with increasing overburden pressure. Most of the decrease takes place at pressures to 3,000 psi. At 3,000 psi, the permeability of unfractured samples ranges from 14 to 37 percent of the initial permeability. In fractured samples, permeability may be reduced to as low as 6 percent of initial permeability.

Water saturation also reduces the gas permeability greatly; however, the relative permeability does not change significantly with overburden pressure.

Permeability calculated from laboratory results are in good agreement with in-situ permeabilities determined from production test data. Although not confirmed, predictions for other projects appear to be reasonable.

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