

EVALUATION OF FOAMED WELLBORE CEMENT STABILITY UNDER DEEPWATER CONDITIONS



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BACKGROUND

Foamed cement is a gas-liquid dispersion that is produced when an inert gas, typically nitrogen, is injected into a conventional cement slurry (a mixture of cement, water and various chemical additives) to form microscopic bubbles. Foamed cements are ultralow-density systems typically employed in formations that are unable to support the annular hydrostatic pressure exerted by conventional cement slurries.

The use of foamed cement has expanded into regions with high-stress environments, for example isolating problem formations that are typical in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to its lightweight application, foamed cement has a unique resistance to temperature and pressure-induced stresses. Foamed cement exhibits superior fluid displacement, gas-migration control and long-term sealing through resistance to cement-sheath stress cracking. As a result, it is often the system of choice for shallow flow conditions and the prevention of compaction damage in deepwater production in offshore environments.



The increased use of foamed cement systems in high-stress environments makes understanding their stability in the wellbore vital. Current testing methods are limited to atmospheric conditions, and there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the stability and properties of foamed cement as it is placed in the well and postplacement. Foamed cement stability depends on time evolution of the gas bubble-size distribution and varies as it is pumped in the well. Unstable foams can result in uncemented sections or channels and failure to achieve zonal isolation. A stable foam provides the desired zonal isolation and casing support when installed properly in the wellbore.

OBJECTIVES

- Address current lack of knowledge and understanding of the stability of foamed cements as they are placed in the well.
- Evaluate foam stability, bubble size and channeling (bubble coalescence) as they are affected by pressure, flow rate and cement design.
- Correlate atmospheric, laboratory-pressure and field-generated foamed cements.

PRIMARY PROJECT GOAL

The overall goal of this work is to develop a sufficient scientific base to be able to apply quantitative risk assessment formalism to evaluate the exploration and production of deepwater and ultra-deepwater resources. Adequate definition of materials performance and properties is critical to this effort. The outcome of this project is to develop a dataset comprising laboratory and field observations to develop an understanding of the stability and properties of foamed cement as it is placed in the well and postplacement.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

NETL completed an assessment report to identify research needs in the cementing of offshore wells, **An Assessment of Research Needs Related to Improving Primary Cement Isolation in Deep Offshore Wells**. The information developed for this report was drawn from a literature search, contacts at various industry professional organizations and interviews with industry experts associated with the cementing of offshore wells. NETL technical reports can be accessed at the following site: http://netl.doe.gov/onsite_research

NETL is partnering with the American Petroleum Institute (API) and industry to investigate the properties of foamed cements at various pressures, shear rates and foam qualities. This study is utilizing NETL's geomechanical testing laboratory and industrial computer tomography (CT) scanner to correlate 3D image datasets of bubble size distribution of foamed cement with materials properties. Sample datasets include: (1) atmospheric foamed cement generated using the current API Recommended Practice 10B-4 test method across a range of foam qualities, (2) laboratory-generated foamed cement under a range of pressures across a similar range of foam qualities, and (3) field-generated foamed cements from three major service companies. A unique methodology was developed and implemented to capture the cement under representative field pressure conditions. Foamed cement was collected into pressurized sampling vessels utilizing the same full-scale industrial equipment used to execute wellbore cementing field operations.

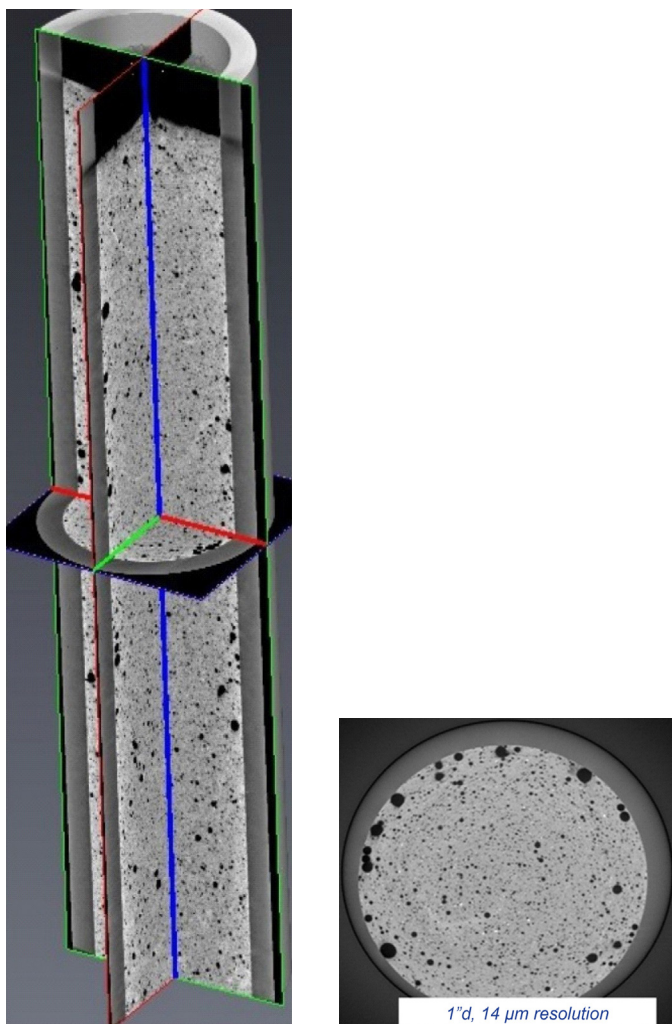


Figure 1. 3D CT scans of a 1-inch cement core.

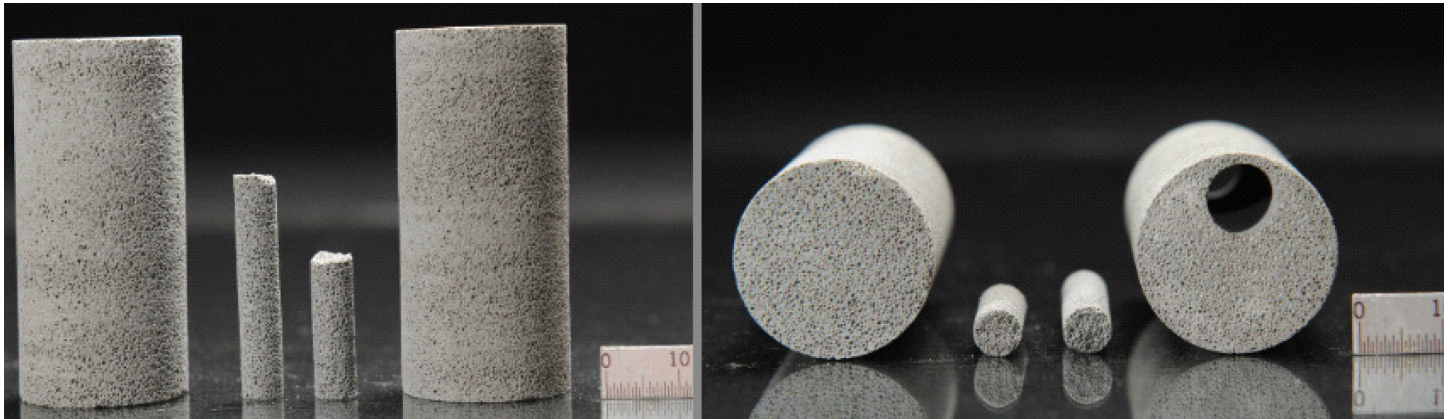


Figure 2. Lab-generated atmospheric 40% quality foamed cement samples.

The increased use of foamed cement systems in high-stress environments makes understanding their stability in the wellbore vital. If the foamed cement is unstable, gas can coalesce and bubbles will increase in size, causing gas pockets to form and rise in the cement column. Unstable foams can result in failure to achieve zonal isolation. A stable foam will be able to provide the desired zonal isolation when installed properly in the wellbore. This research will help bridge the disconnect that is prevalent between cement as tested in the laboratory and cement as mixed and pumped in the field. Ultimately, this research will provide industry with the knowledge needed to ensure the safe operation of deep and ultra-deep offshore wells in which foamed cement systems are used.

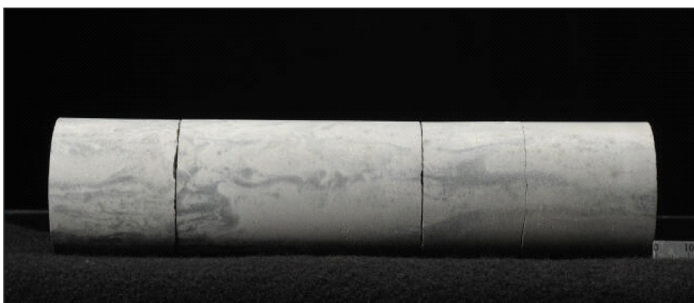


Figure 3. Field-generated, 2-inch diameter foamed cement sample collected at 500 psi with an overall quality of 20%. Outer portion of core shows heterogeneity from emplacement processes.

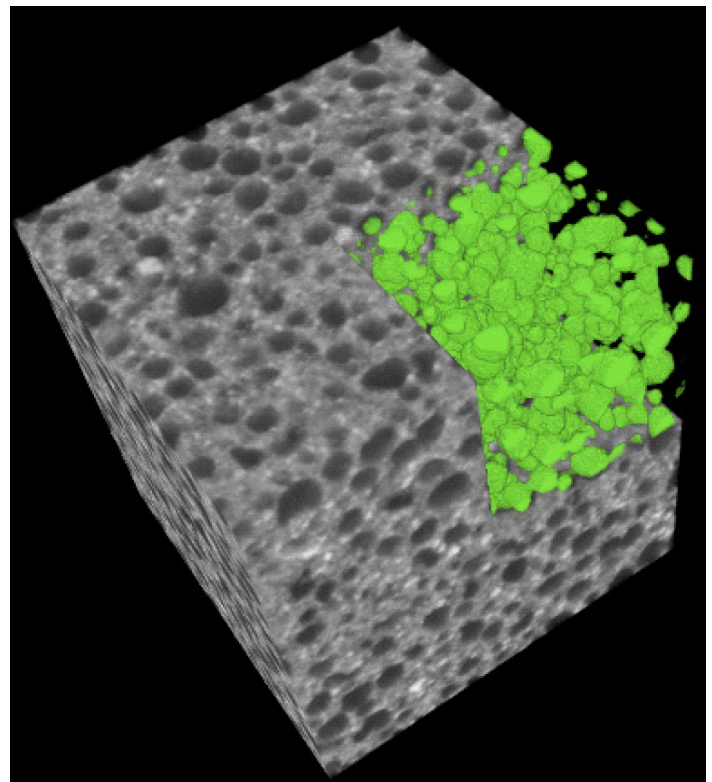


Figure 4. Segmented portion of 30% quality atmospherically generated foamed cement scanned with NETL's high-resolution industrial CT scanner. Cement displays fairly homogeneous distribution of voids.



NETL is a U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) national laboratory dedicated to advancing the nation's energy future by creating innovative solutions that strengthen the security, affordability and reliability of energy systems and natural resources. With laboratories and computational capabilities at research facilities in Albany, Oregon; Morgantown, West Virginia; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, NETL addresses energy challenges through implementing DOE programs across the nation and advancing energy technologies related to fossil fuels. By fostering collaborations and conducting world-class research, NETL strives to strengthen national energy security through energy technology development.

Research partners

Benge Consulting | BP | Schlumberger | Baker Hughes | Halliburton | Chevron | American Petroleum Institute Cement Subcommittee 10C

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