Toe-To-Heel Air Injection (THAI) Process

A pseudo-gravity stable displacement in-situ combustion process operating over short reservoir distance. It has a proven record of producing partially upgraded oil in case of extra-heavy oil reservoirs and oil sands.

Toe-To-Heel Air Injection (THAI)* is a newly developed in-situ combustion (ISC) technology for recovery of a partially upgraded oil from heavy oil reservoirs.

In the conventional ISC process, which uses vertical injectors and producers, the volumetric sweep is very limited due to pronounced channeling and/or over-running. These deficiencies are overcome by using horizontal producers placed at the bottom of the oil zone, so that a special toe-to-heel (TTH) well configuration enables a controlled flow pattern to develop in the reservoir.

The new technology can be applied in two well configurations: either direct line drive (DLD), where the vertical injector is placed in front of the toe of the horizontal producer, or in a staggered line drive (SLD), where the toe of the horizontal producer is located close to the line of vertical injectors, but is laterally off-set (Fig. 1). THAI consists of at least one vertical air or air/water injector, perforated in the upper part of the oil layer, and a horizontal producer placed at the lowest possible part of the oil layer, with its toe facing the injector (Fig. 2). It is a pseudo-gravity stable, short-distance oil displacement (SDOD) process. The advantage of SDOD is that in situ upgrading of heavy oil occurring within the ISC process (the so-called first upgrading) is preserved and some hydrogen is produced. There may be a coke-like plug travelling with the ISC front (Fig. 2). Laboratory tests and field scale simulations have shown this occurrence provides for localized blocking, in or around the horizontal well and constitutes one of the self-healing features of the process; the second one is the controlled over-ridding of the ISC front. Due to these two effects, any potential oxygen short-circuiting is totally eliminated.

CAPRI (CAtalytic upgradinG PRocess In-situ) is an add-on process to the THAI process, in which the horizontal section of the horizontal producer is surrounded by a catalyst-activated gravel packing (not-pictured) or something similar. CAPRI is therefore a catalytic version of THAI**. All of the physical phenomena (thermal, hydrodynamic, etc) are the same as in THAI, the only difference is that a secondary upgrading occurs when the partially upgraded THAI oil flows into the horizontal producer. In laboratory testing, the CAPRI process was able to achieve upgrading of up to 14 API degrees. However, compared to THAI, the CAPRI process is much less developed; theoretically, it has a high potential.

Fig 1: Staggered line drive (SLD) and direct line drive (DLD) THAI schematics. Legend: VI=Vertical injector

* US patent: 6,167,966 and Canadian patent: 2,246,461; the US patent expired in 2015, while Canadian patent expired in 2016.

Benefits

- increased control over the ISC front propagation, compared to conventional ISC process; ISC front break-through in general at the toe and progressive advancement towards the heel
- relatively less sensitive to rock heterogeneity (mainly to stratification)
- easier to implement when heavy oil has some mobility at reservoir conditions, otherwise initial hot communication is needed
- more resilient to thermal production operations (if damage is occurring it is progressive from toe to heel)
- easy to implement using existing facilities and horizontal wells (HW); especially if HWs are placed near the bottom of the oil layer
same routine laboratory tests required as for conventional ISC

Fig. 2: THAI schematics; cross-section

**Laboratory and Simulation Results**

Over 100 3-D model (box style 60cm*40cm* 20cm) laboratory investigations have been carried out at the University of Bath (U of B), UK over 12 years. Generally, the volumetric sweep efficiency and oil recovery were better using an SLD well configuration (SLD-THAI process). In all the laboratory tests, intensive heating of the entrance face/start-up region was performed, prior to ignition. The U of B results were confirmed by several other organizations using similar 3D combustion cell arrangements. The oil upgrading obtained during a laboratory test with Wolf Lake oil (viscosity 44,000 mPa.s) was substantial; 44-fold permanent decrease of the oil viscosity and 4-5 API points upgrading (Fig. 3). Figure 4a shows the temperature isotherms from a 3D combustion cell test on Wolf Lake crude, while Fig. 4b shows a CMG-STAR simulation of the same test. STAR simulations were also conducted for some simplified field situations.

**Field Testing**

THAI heavy oil technology has been tested in the Athabasca Oil Sands of Alberta (Whitesands Pilot, near Conklin) and also in a conventional heavy oil reservoir (Kerrobart, Saskatchewan). In both of these Canadian projects only the direct line drive (DLD) configuration was tested. The Whitesands Pilot, which was conducted over 5 years (2006-2011) in the McMurray B formation at a depth of 380m, consisted of three well pairs. The Kerrobart Pilot was conducted in the Wasseca Channel (Manville Sand of Lower Cretacic) at a depth of 780m; initially, the project consisted of a two-well
pairs pilot, which was expanded in 2011 to 12 well pairs, as a semi-commercial operation. Five more pilots have been conducted outside Canada: in China (starting in 2012) and India (starting in 2016).

**Whitesands THAI Pilot:** startup was straightforward, and day-to-day operation was robust and easily maintained. Restarting the process after a long period of air injection interruption, was also easy. Consistent partial in situ upgrading of approximately 4 API points increase was achieved; also, hydrogen production (up to 16% in the produced gas) was recorded. The operational performance (Fig. 5) shows a good quality of burning as witnessed by produced gas composition. Some operational problems occurred, such as sand influx and oil lifting problems, while using PCP for production. All of the horizontal producers were re-drilled. Good results from the first three years of the pilot resulted in a large scale commercial design (May River), which, later on, was cancelled.

**Kerrobert Project (initiated in 2009):** Heavy oil reservoir with bottom water (BW). The thickness of the BW zone was almost equal to that of the oil zone (25 m). Generally, there were fewer operating problems than in Whitesands Pilot. BW had a negative effect (high water cuts). The project has been operated for 12 years and it still ongoing, as of March 2021. The operational performance (Fig. 6) does not show a proportionality between air injection and oil production. The produced oil from the Kerrobert Pilot/semi-commercial project consistently averaged 14 API to 17 API upgrading during its entire operation; Fig. 7, shows a 3 to 7 API point increase for the Pilot. The THAI process provided sustained in-situ upgrading of heavy oil and hydrogen production (1.5-3%); the obtained upgrading is a partial upgrading.

So far, from both Canadian projects (Whitesands and Kerrobert), over half of million barrels of partially upgraded oil has been produced. However, the oil rate per well was lower than in the steam assisted gravity drainage (SAGD) process. It was, generally, in the range of 10-30 m³/day (63-190 bbls/day).
Outside Canada THAI pilots: Besides the important learnings from the two Canadian projects, other learnings came from three Chinese THAI pilots [(one pilot in Shuiguang (Liaohe) and two pilots in Fengcheng (Xinjiang Oilfield)] and two THAI pilots carried out in India (Balol Field and Lanwa Field). Based on the learnings from these seven pilots, mentioned in this brochure, it can be concluded that presently the technical validity of THAI applied in a DLD configuration (DLD-THAI process) is validated. However, its economic performance needs to be improved if it is to take its place as a major oil recovery/upgrading technology. So far, the SLD-THAI process has been field tested only in India, and it showed that it could provide a much better practical solution; that is the reason that SLD-THAI is called I-THAI (improved THAI).

Criteria for THAI Application: The following set of screening criteria are based on results from laboratory tests, numerical simulation studies and data from 7 THAI field tests.

The candidate reservoir should meet the following conditions:

- No extensive bottom water (BW); thickness of BW zone less than 70% of that of the oil zone
- No extensive fracturing (natural or induced)
- Formation type: sand or sandstone
- Pay thickness > 6 m
- Oil viscosity (reservoir conditions) > 200 mPa.s
- Oil density (surface conditions) > 900 kg/m³
- Horizontal permeability \(K_H\) > 200 mD
- \(K_V/K_H > 0.25\)
- Water cut < 70%

The last three conditions (permeability and water cut) can be relaxed, if it is known that the permeability is increasing downwards (fluvial deposition); for a final decision about THAI feasibility, reservoir simulation is highly recommended. THAI may be applicable to reservoirs with small gas cap reservoirs, including gas-over-bitumen (GOB) situations; this condition is practically equivalent to a high permeability streak at the top of formation and the performance will be slightly lower.

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