

Performance of a borehole heat exchanger under the influence of geothermal gradient, an exploration of BHE optimization alternatives

Hongshan Guo^a, Forrest Meggers^{b,*}, James Tinjum¹, Xiaobing Liu¹

^a*Andlinger Center for Energy and the Environment, Princeton University, Princeton, United States*

^b*School of Architecture, Princeton University, Princeton, United States*

Abstract

This paper will primarily focus on the possible consequences of considering geothermal gradient when attempting to optimize the geothermal borehole heat exchangers. Based on previous studies on the distributed thermal response test, an adaptation of an existing analytical solution of coaxial borehole heat exchanger (CBHE) is proposed. We believe it is crucial to estimate the added thermal benefit from geothermal gradient, especially when there are needs to achieve better thermal performance of the boreholes. Understanding the growing demand of geothermal energy for district systems, this paper examines the possibility of incorporating the geothermal gradient in estimating the performance of borehole heat exchangers, and subsequently the optimization of borehole heat exchanger configurations through the proposed analytical model. According to our results, the adapted analytical model was adequate to estimate the thermal responses from the test well, and can be used as a tool to estimate different coaxial borehole heat exchanger configurations. We estimate adding insulation and changing diameters of CBHEs could improve the heat extraction by up to 60%(What's the actual number?).

Keywords:

1. Introduction

Geothermal energy is gradually becoming a much more popular option amongst other renewable energy sources. Its abundance in near-earth surface and reliable nature during long-term operation has attracted researchers from geophysical, geotechnical and building engineering. A particular challenging task during the design of borehole heat exchangers is the estimation of desired borehole length, which is often achieved using single in-situ thermal response tests happening at or close to the site of the project. This is often achieved by averaging the thermal conductivity of the overall borehole during the entire thermal response test, which is further used in estimating the overall borehole thermal resistance, and thus ultimately the necessary length of boreholes. The most prevalent method currently used in this process was first proposed by Ingersoll in 1954. His method helped engineers to estimate the total required length of borehole heat exchanger under some common simplifications, and three hypothetical energy injection stages and assumed ground thermal resistance over time. A few fundamental assumptions of this method included homogeneous ground (temperature and geological conditions), constant heat injection rate and therefore limited emphasis on the vertical variation of heat exchange along borehole heat exchangers.

*Corresponding author

Email addresses: hongshan@princeton.edu (Hongshan Guo), fmeggers@princeton.edu (Forrest Meggers)

To characterise the thermal potentials of boreholes, thermal response tests (TRTs) are often used when estimating the borehole resistances. Following the ASHARE guidelines, the inlet and outlet temperature at the borehole are recorded. The thermal conductivity of the borehole is the mean rate of temperature change over the natural logarithmic time of either the inlet or outlet temperature beyond the initial period of heat injection. The thermal conductivities are further used to estimate the borehole resistance and other parameters to evaluate potential borehole field designs. This method clearly does not provide enough information regarding the temperature evolution along the depth of borehole, i.e. the geothermal gradient situation of individual boreholes.

The state-of-the-art methods used in estimating the thermal properties during thermal response tests (TRTs) were first proposed by Ingersol in 1954, and further expanded into ASHRAE guidelines in ASHRAE Handbooks. This method attempt to estimate the borehole resistance through three hypothetical stages of heat injection. The total required length of borehole heat exchangers are therefore determined through the borehole thermal resistance determined through the in-situ TRT, which is based on the assumption of the ground being completely homogenous. For district-level systems with larger heating/cooling demands, this could mean up to 4,000 boreholes (Liu, Conference proceeding 2019). As geothermal energy sources become more popular, it might be beneficial for new geothermal installations to seek alternative solutions that requires fewer boreholes due to space constraints where fewer boreholes at larger depths should ideally yield similar heat extraction/removal results.

However, the homogeneity assumption completely disregards the geothermal gradient of the ground, particularly at a larger depth. This is a temperature increase along the depth of wells at the rate of an average 25 to 30 °C per kilometer due to absorbed solar power. Under different circumstances, the geothermal gradient could vary between significantly: from as little as 1 °C to as much as 5 °C. While the ground temperature of GSHP are often considered to be around 15 °C, the temperature at the bottom of borehole could be up to 25 °C for a 500 m deep borehole heat exchanger(citation). However, as the existing thermal response tests only requires a single undisturbed ground temperature, this thermal potential may very much be overlooked since only the mean temperature of the ground is necessary for conventional TRT calculation.

Recent research have pointed out possibilities to use distributed TRTs that utilise fibre optic sensors that produces depth-specific temperature measurement along the borehole. This approach is currently understood as the Distributed Thermal Response Test (DTRT). This approach acknowledges the temperature variations along the depth of borehole heat exchanger through the measurement of fiber optic cables, where the optic signals are interpreted as temperature distribution along the cables. This approach has been helping researchers improving their models and evaluation methods of borehole resistances (Meyer 2013) and analytical solutions (Walker 2015). A few pioneering researchers even proposed distributed thermal response test, which is essentially adding a distributed temperature sensing (DTS) cable to the borehole heat exchanger during the investigation. However, while most of these investigations were successful, the driving force of the differences between heat fluxes at different depths remains to be further understood: the heterogeneity of the ground is still oversimplified within the existing DTRT methods, particularly with respect to the different underground water flow and thermal properties of different ground layers.

This paper aims at changing this status-quo by adapting an existing analytical solution of coaxial borehole heat exchanger under the influence of geothermal gradient. We will validate the adapted model through the experimental data collected during a recent test well drilled on campus at Princeton University, which provide further validation for the model's usage in predicting the thermal responses of borehole heat exchangers under the influence of geothermal gradient. We also aim at generating the potential changes in performance when alternative designs of coaxial borehole heat exchangers' (CBHEs) configurations and insulation levels are considreed. We hope this paper is the first of many to set the ground for future comparison with DTRT methods used and designed for coaxial borehole heat exchangers proposed by McDaniel.

2. Method

2.1. Experiment

2.1.1. Site and Borehole Heat Exchanger

Need for geothermal district heating/cooling demand for potentially the entire campus. It is crucial to assess the possibilities of using deeper geothermal heat exchangers.

The drilling of the well took place beginning August 8th, 2019. To characterize the formation layering at the drill site, a geological survey was performed immediately after the drilling. On top of The drilling of the site identified began on August 12th, 2019, and encountered significant amount of underground water upon reaching approximately 150 feet (45.7 meters) depth. The composition of the ground was primarily sand stone and mudstone until hitting gravel at approximately 1000 feet (300 meters) depth. The remainder of the drilling to approximately 1400 feet (430 meters) took significantly longer, and appeared to have hit quartz and hence halted the drilling of the test bore at 1440 feet the subsequent day. USGS (United States Geological Survey) performed a geophysics survey on the test bore immediately after the drillers pulled out, and determined similar geological make up of the test bore, and determined the actual length of the borehole to be approximately 1340 feet (410 meters). The hydro-geological conditions of the drill site is shown in Figure 1.

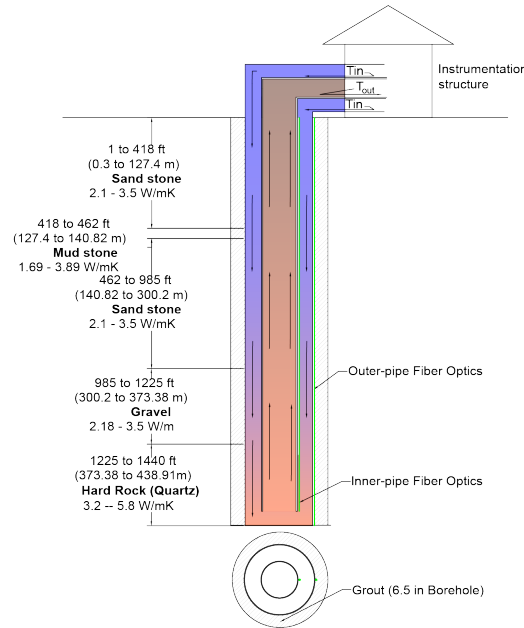


Figure 1: Hydro-geological condition estimated through USGS survey immediately taken after the drilling of the well estimated at 1440 ft(438.9 m).

As is shown in Figure 1, the geological conditions around the borehole varies significantly inside the BHE. This phenomenon is not very well-represented in conventional thermal response tests.

2.1.2. Experimental Setup

To characterise the thermal potentials of boreholes, thermal response tests (TRTs) are often used when estimating the borehole resistances. Following the ASHARE guidelines, the inlet and outlet temperature at the borehole are recorded. The thermal conductivity of the borehole is the mean rate of temperature

change over the natural logarithmic time of either the inlet or outlet temperature beyond the initial period of heat injection. The thermal conductivities are further used to estimate the borehole resistance and other parameters to evaluate potential borehole field designs. This method clearly does not provide enough information regarding the temperature evolution along the depth of borehole, i.e. the geothermal gradient situation of individual boreholes. Recent research have pointed out possibilities to use distributed TRTs that utilise fibre optic sensors that produces depth-specific temperature measurement along the borehole.

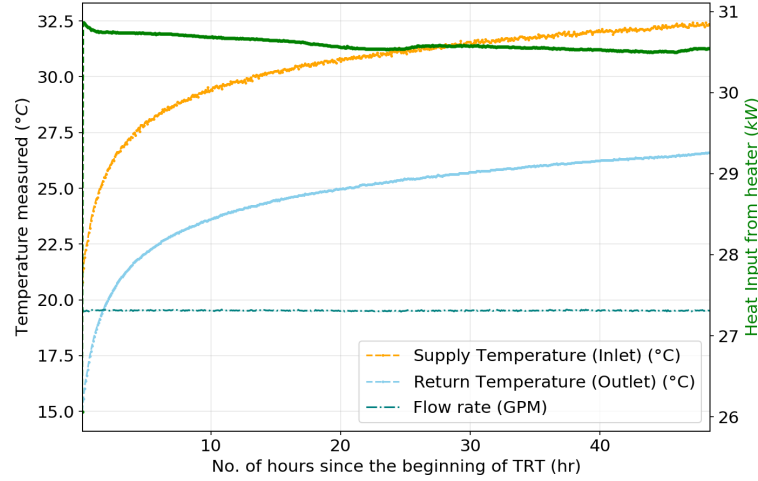


Figure 2: Temperature measured at the inlet and outlet of the well site during the thermal response test.

As we have previously suggested in the introduction, we are particularly interested in the effect of geothermal gradient in this study, for which we would be more interested in using coaxial borehole heat exchangers over conventional U-tube borehole heat exchangers. The CBHE option the test well project was able to procure is a Ryan borehole heat exchanger. Upon finishing the drilling and USGS geological survey, the outer pipe of the CBHE is first inserted into the test bore before it was grouted. The grout was left to set for over 24 hours until the next step of heat exchanger installation. A Ryan concentric heat exchanger was then installed into the drilled test bore, and grouted with a GeoPro TG select/PowerTEC 1.6, whose target thermal conductivity was 0.78W/m-K at a density of 1.2kg/L. The borehole heat exchanger has a diameter of 6.5 inch (16.5 cm) from 380 to 1340 feet. The inner diameter of the CBHE, or the OD (outer diameter) of the Ryan tube was a 2.66 inch (6.76 cm) and corrugated. Although this will obviously change the fluid dynamics of the flow in the annulus, we will assume the outer surface of the Ryan heat exchanger (inner tube of CBHE, not to be confused with CBHE outer tube) to be smooth within the scope of this research.

To estimate the thermal conductivity of the formation, a thermal response test was performed on the drill site on September 10th, 2019. The test follows the guidelines recommended by the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) in its HVAC Applications Handbook, Geothermal Energy Chapter. The borehole was uniformly grouted from the bottom to the top via premix pipe, and had a delay of more than five days between loop installation and test startup. The undisturbed formation temperature was estimated through the recorded temperature from the fiber optic cable installed along and around the borehole heat exchanger. The duration of the test was 48.5 hours, where the data (inlet, outlet temperature and heat injection rates) was collected every five minutes. The heat injected was estimated to be 51 to 85 Btu/hr (or 15 to 25 W) per foot of the borehole, which averaged to be approximately 30.5 kW total heat input throughout the test. By taking the natural log time rate of change of the temperature of either the inlet and the outlet, and can be further expanded into the thermal diffusivity of the formation through an estimated heat capacity of the borehole. The estimated heat capacity of the

bore can be estimated through the geological conditions previously confirmed through drilling (as shown in Figure 1).

A very important parameter to complete the TRT calculation is the undisturbed ground temperature, which we obtained by taking the average of the temperature measured by the fiber optic (DTS) cable during the TRT.

We positioned two fiber optics cable along the outer surface of both the inner and the outer pipe of the CBHE, i.e. the corrugated outer surface of the Rygan heat exchanger, and the CBHE outer tube. Fiber optic distributed temperature sensing has been previously used by many researchers to perform measurement on the therm-physical properties around boreholes in previous research (Fujii et al. 2009, Beier 2012, Acuna 2013). This is a technique that utilize the optic power measured through silica core in fiber optic cables, applying time-domain reflectometry principles and output temperatures at discrete locations adjacent to the fiber itself. Previous studies have shown the benefits of employing DTS in TRT testings, and even pointed to enhanced versions of TRT (known as DTRT) and were able to interpolate the DTS readings into depth-specific thermal conductivities (McDaniel). We installed a similar setup during our experiment, using two type-T (copper/constantan) thermocouple was attached to the data logger to monitor the reference temperature used to calibrate the readings coming in through the data logger. We used an Oryx interrogator (Sensornet, London, UK) to interpolate the data from the fiber optic cable. As the interrogator provided temperature resolution as fine as 0.01 C, and a spatial resolution as fine as 1m, we opted for various sample interval during the TRT test. During the first 10 hours of the test, we used 1 minute intervals, which was extended to 2 minutes for the subsequent measurements, including the decay test.

The overall borehole resistance R_b may therefore be estimated through Equation 1 [1]. The ersulting temperature profile that may lead to the improvement of the temperature can therefore be

$$R_b = \frac{H}{Q} \left\{ T(t) - T_g - \frac{Q}{4\pi\lambda_g H} [E_i(\frac{r_b}{4\alpha_g t})] \right\} \quad (1)$$

However, there are some inherent limitations of this method. First and foremost is the homogeneity assumption of the ground. The conventional method clearly assumes the ground to be at a homogeneous temperature along the depth of the heat exchanger, where the thermal conductivity, thermal diffusivity are also constants. However, as can be observed from Figure 1 produced from the USGS measurement, it was clearly not the case. In particular, the hard rock or quartz at the bottom of the borehole will likely lead to a much larger thermal conductivity of the borehole, allowing the working fluid to extract more heat at the same flow rate. Within the scope of this paper, we will continue to use a single thermal conductivity calculated from the thermal response test (and the time log temperature gradient thereof) at the top of the heat exchanger to continue our analysis. However, for future research, it is desirable to expand this into a more detailed DTRT study.

2.2. Analytical Model

We will be adapting the analytical model from Beier et al., which was developed to predict the thermal response from a CBHE with known geological parameters. This model was developed to adopt undisturbed ground temperature measurement from fiber optic temperature sensors (also referred to as distributed temperature sensor, or DTS).

Typically, the overall thermal resistance of a geothermal bore can be considered as the combined resistance of the bore and the ground. The bore thermal resistance can be affected by many parameters, including the pipe material, configuration of the heat exchanger as well as the thermal conductivity of the grout/backfill in the bore annulus. The ground resistance is dependent primarily on the thermal conductivity and the diffusivity of the surrounding formation. For a vertical BHE, its thermal resistance is the combined effect

of pipe resistance and bore annulus grout resistance. As Kavanaugh and Rafferty pointed out, the terms of pipe and grout resistance can be combined into a single Equation 1.

$$R_b = R_p + R_{grt} = R_{film} + R_{tube} + R_{grt} = \frac{1}{\pi d_i h_{conv}} \frac{\ln(d_o/d_i)}{2\pi k_p} + \frac{\ln(d_b/d_o)}{2\pi k_{grt}} \quad (2)$$

This equation translates the thermal resistance of the pipe to the combination of the pipe resistances and the fluid film resistance inside the pipe wall. For coaxial borehole heat exchanger, this translates to both the film resistance at the inner pipe and the borehole wall, as well as the tube thermal resistance of both the outer and inner pipes. Calculation of the tube thermal resistance is relatively straight forward as the values required includes the diameter of the tubes and the thermal conductivity of it. However, as we are more interested in varying the configuration and insulation level at the borehole as we are showing conceptually in the section of the CBHE, we need to expand the existing definition of the shunt resistance of the borehole heat exchanger. Building on the existing expressions from Kavanaugh and Rafferty (2014) as well as Beier et al. (2012), we have a new expression of the shunt resistance of the borehole R_{12} .

More specifically, the shunt resistance R_p , or sometimes referred to as R_{12} of the CBHE is a parameter that we can modify to achieve different yield from a known location with certain geological condition. From the schematic diagram, it is evident that any design intervention to change the performance of a CBHE needs to happen at the level that affect the shunt resistance. This expression allows us to evaluate the thermal resistances of CBHEs, we group the contributing variables into two categories: direct and indirect. Direct variables are the diameters of the inner and outer pipes, thermal conductivity of the pipe material, and the thickness and material of the insulation material inside the inner pipe. The flow rate entering the CBHE is the indirect variable, which not only affect the convective heat transfer coefficients contributing to the film thermal resistances.

As we are interested in the possible benefits of designing CBHEs better through different combinations of configurations, we are primarily interested in creating a lightweight algorithm that allows us to compare the expected thermal response outcomes (particularly the thermal resistances or heat extracted) between the different configurations. We therefore adapted the analytical method from Beier et al. (2014) with the following modifications: expanded the shunt resistance expression to allow for extra thermal insulation inside the inner pipe; adopted geothermal gradient into the undisturbed ground temperature during the solving of the target temperature function and translated the original analytical model from MathCAD into Python as a class that allows parallel comparison of the resulting thermal resistance of the boreholes.

2.2.1. Diameter, insulation level, and flow rates

Diameters, insulation level and flow rates are parameters that we may subjectively alter to modify the performance of borehole heat exchangers.

2.2.2. Geothermal gradient, thermal conductivity

Geothermal gradient, thermal conductivity, are parameters that varies objectively, but varies significantly enough spatially that could also affect the performance of a CBHE. Understanding the geothermal gradient better may, in particular, help us better understand the importance of having multiple

2.3. Analytical Solution

For each time step, a new analytical solution can be solved along different t, r and ???(What was this other parameter?)

3. Results

3.1. Measured results from TRT

4. Discussion and Further Optimization

5. Optimization

As we have

Importance - and shortcomings of having the

- [1] R. Beier, A. G. Ewbank, In-Situ Test Thermal Response Tests Interpretations, OG&E Ground Source Heat Exchange Study, Tech. rep. (Aug. 2012).
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