

Introduction

Worldwide, natural gas is a popular fuel due to its abundance and clean burning properties. There are many methods of extracting natural gas including offshore drilling, hydraulic fracturing (fracking), and traditional land based dry wells. In addition, natural gas is often a sub-component from crude oil extraction. No matter what source it is derived from, natural gas must go through processing and transportation before it can be used in household and industrial applications. In this paper we will explore the initial processing of natural gas and the critical effect that oxygen (O_2) measurement plays in this process.

Extraction

We know natural gas as methane (CH_4) however the raw gas from the wellhead is actually a mixture of many components. These include the following:

Methane (CH_4)	70 – 90 %
Ethane (C_2H_6)	5 – 15 %
Propane & Butane	< 5%
(CO_2) (N_2) (H_2S) (O_2) (He)	Balance

The additional hydrocarbon in the raw gas are referred to as Natural Gas Liquids (NGL's). Collection of the natural gas is done from multiple wellheads. The gas is funneled through feeder pipelines to production manifolds where it can go through multi-stage separation. Separation involves removal of NGL's, contaminating gases such as CO_2 and Helium, and dehydration of any moisture present in the gas. The NGL gases such as propane and butane are valued and will be sold off as feedstock to petrochemical facilities.

Corrosion Concerns

When the raw gas contains excess levels > 4ppm of hydrogen sulfide (H_2S) then it is considered "Sour Gas". H_2S combined with oxygen and moisture greatly increases potential corrosion in the form of Sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4). The corrosion is detrimental to the piping and valves leading up the separation plant.

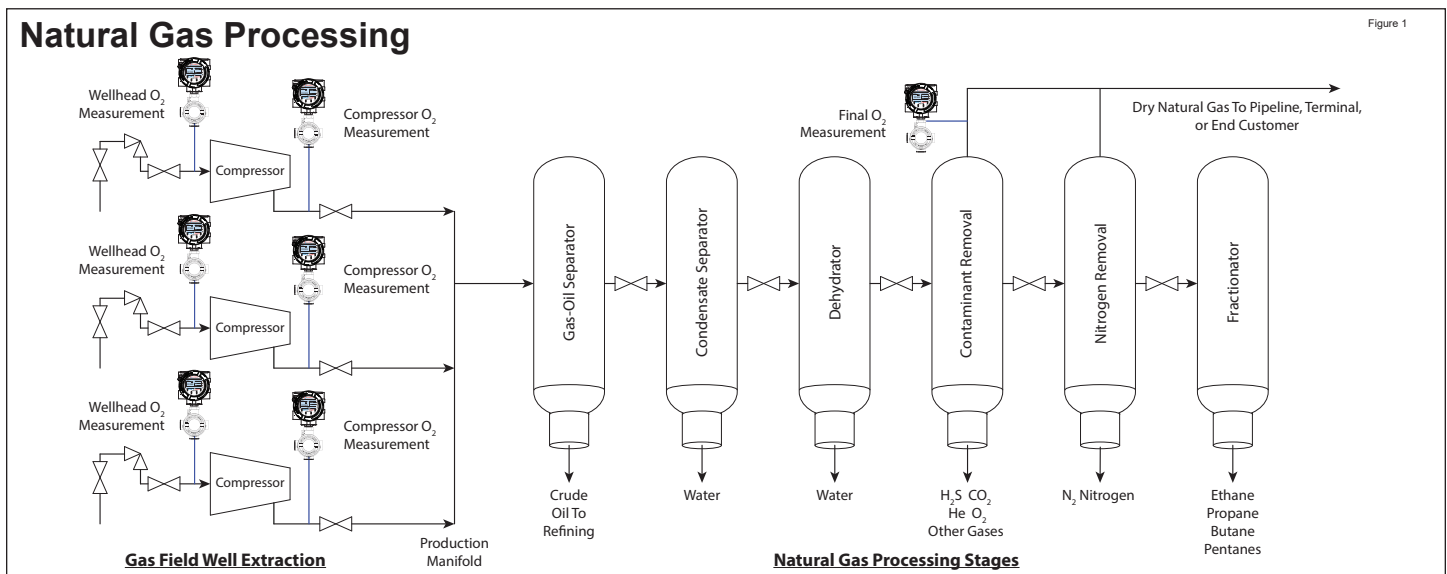
Monitoring of oxygen is often done at the wellhead piping leading to production manifolds. If the gas field is a long distance from the separation plant then compressors are used to increase the gas flow. Compressors have a potential for leakage at the seals allowing the ingress of outside air. Once this air is mixed with the sour gas the potential for corrosion greatly increases. Downstream oxygen measurement provides the additional benefit leak detection when compressor seals fail.

Measurement Challenges

Measuring trace ppm oxygen (<100 ppm) in natural gas pipelines is traditionally done by utilizing an electrochemical sensor referred to as a Clark Cell. A gas sample is extracted from the pipeline with either a portable or on-line analyzer mounted next to a slip stream. The sensor requires a sophisticated sample conditioning system to remove moisture, control the pressure and flow, and most importantly, remove H_2S . Moisture will interfere and clog the sample lines to the sensor requiring frequent maintenance of the system. Changes in pressure and flow will affect the readings of the membrane so the sample must be controlled. H_2S will quickly contaminate the sensor. If the H_2S level are high, the life of the sensor will be destroyed in a matter of hours. H_2S is one of the greatest challenges when using a membrane sensor

Natural Gas Processing

Figure 1

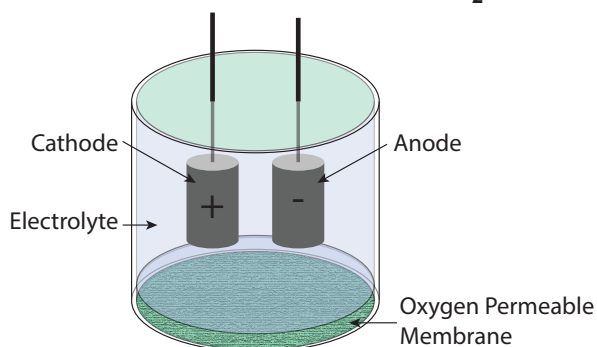


Application Note

Natural Gas Production

technology. The sample system will use an upstream H_2S scrubber to prevent the gas from harming the sensor. If the sulfide concentrations are consistent then these scrubbers must be serviced weekly and sometimes daily to maintain reliable oxygen readings from the Clark Cell. Because these measurements are often made at remote wellhead sites the on-going maintenance and expense of the sample system can be problematic.

Electrochemical Clark Cell O_2 Sensor



- Sensitive to flow and pressure changes
- Membrane sensitive to fouling, coating and attack
- Electrolyte poisoning

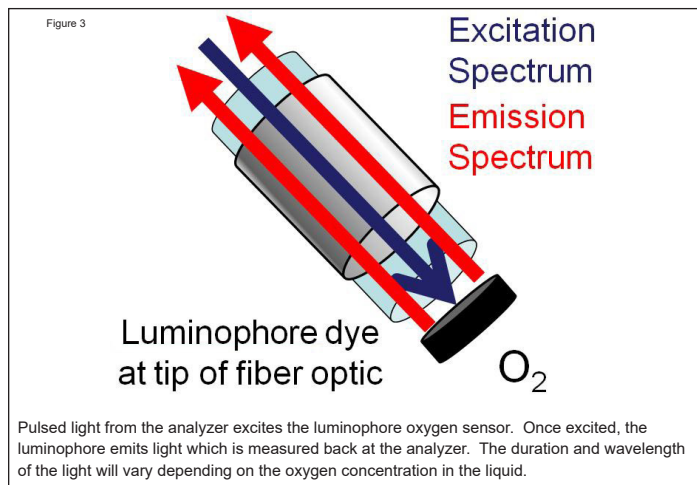
Figure 2

A secondary concern is sensor accuracy. All Clark Cell sensors generate output current similar to a battery. Since the Clark Cell output is based on oxygen concentration, high levels of oxygen will shorten sensor lifespan. The aforementioned contamination due to H_2S will also influence the output giving a false readings. Both of these issues prevent an continuous, accurate measurement.

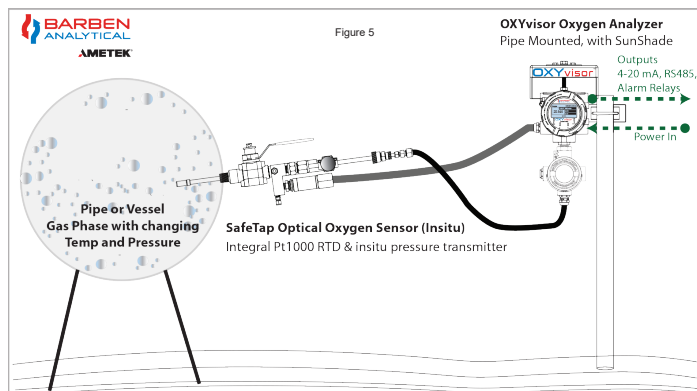
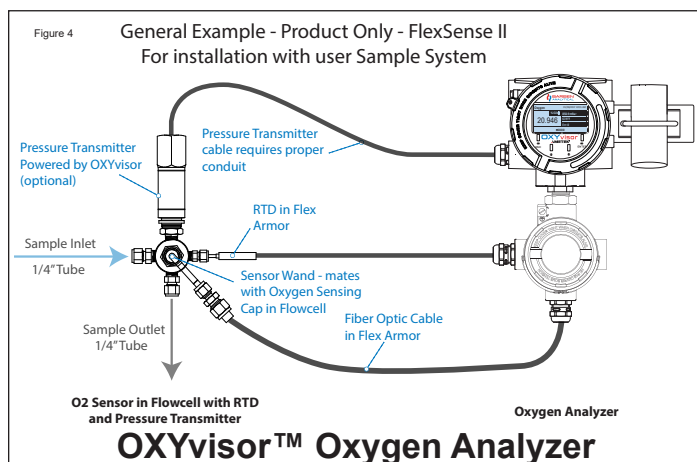
A final concern regarding the use of electrochemical Clark Cell sensors is the requirement for periodic calibration using air (20.9% O_2). Since natural gas measurements are at levels < 100 ppm, there is considerable lag time after calibration for the sensor to consume excess oxygen which permeated through the membrane during calibration. Often stabilization will not occur for 30 minutes or longer depending on the age of the cell. This wait time adds to loss of reading as well as using up valuable personnel time.

Oxygen Measurement Solutions

Recent advancements in optical fluorescence quenching technology now allows an Oxygen measurement at trace ppm levels. An illustration of the measurement principle of these sensors can be seen in Figure 3. Using an optical sensor (0 – 300 ppm) will allow accurate oxygen measurement without degradation due to over exposure of high oxygen or cross sensitivity at % level H_2S or CO_2 concentrations.



Barben's OXYvisor flowcell can be retrofitted to your existing sample system panel (see Figure 4). Alternatively, expensive sample conditioning systems can be eliminated by using Barben's SafeTap Insertion/Retraction Insitu Assembly for insertion directly into the process piping (see Figure 5). Advantages over traditional measurements include greater accuracy, much faster response, simplified calibration, and virtually no maintenance.



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