

AC 2009-1314: SIMULATOR FOR TEACHING PROCESS HEATER OPERATING PRINCIPLES

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Simulator for Teaching Process Heater Operating Principles

Abstract

Process heaters are used in the hydrocarbon and chemical processing industries (HPI/CPI) to heat hydrocarbon fluids that are being converted into fuels like gasoline or chemicals like ethylene. Process heater operation involves combustion, heat transfer, and fluid flow principles. It is not practical to use an actual working heater to teach these principles. This paper describes an electronic process heater simulator that was developed for instructing engineers and operators on heater and burner operation.

Introduction

Simulators have been used for many years, for example, in the nuclear and aerospace industries to simulate both normal operating conditions as well as potentially dangerous situations. The latter may rarely if ever be seen in actual practice, but it is imperative that operators be prepared for them in the event they ever do occur. In either case, it is generally not practical or preferable to let new operators learn initially on the actual equipment because of the potentially dangerous consequences of making a mistake. Even if an operating error did not result in an unsafe condition, it could result in lost production, reduced efficiency, or increased pollutant emissions that could have detrimental economic ramifications for a plant. For these reasons, most new operators would not be permitted to make adjustments on this type of equipment until they have had sufficient training. The challenge is to give them realistic training before they work with the actual equipment.

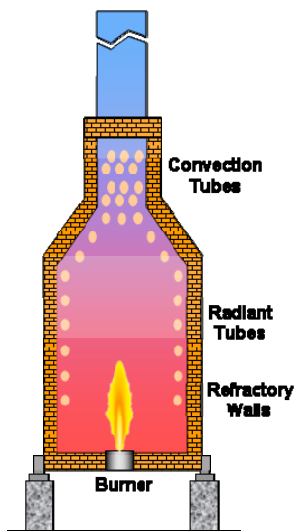


Figure 1. Schematic of a typical process heater.

Process heaters (see Figure 1) are used in the chemical and refining industries to heat hydrocarbon fluids flowing through tubes inside the radiant and convection sections. These

heaters are designed to increase the fluid temperature for further processing in some type of downstream reactor. Most plants have numerous heaters in a variety of configurations operating under a range of conditions. The basic job of the operator is to make sure the heaters safely elevate the process fluid temperature to the target level, while maximizing thermal efficiency and minimizing pollution emissions. The main adjustments made to the heater are the fuel and combustion air flow rates and the pressure levels inside the heater. The adjustments are made by adjusting the fuel flow control valves, the burner dampers, and the stack damper. The latter two are frequently manually controlled.

Process Heater Operating Principles

Combustion

Large amounts of fuel are combusted to convert the chemical energy into useful thermal energy to heat the fluids flowing through the process heaters.¹ Burners are used to safely control the combustion process to maximize thermal efficiency, while minimizing pollutant emissions.

One aspect of this combustion process that differs from nearly all other types of industrial combustion processes is the varying fuel composition. In most cases, the fuels used in process heaters in refineries and chemical plants are waste gases generated during the production of liquid fuels such as diesel and chemicals such as ethylene. These waste gases may consist of a dozen or more components and usually contain significant amounts of methane (CH_4), propane (C_3H_8), and hydrogen (H_2). Further complicating the situation is that different fuels may be used in a given heater depending on the type of operation and on the products being made in the plant at the time. For example, natural gas may be used during startup until enough refinery gas is produced to fuel the heaters. One normal operation fuel may contain very little H_2 , while another normal operation fuel may have very high concentrations of H_2 . Fuel composition has a significant impact on burner design and performance.

Since most process heaters are natural draft, there is not a convenient way to directly measure the combustion air flow rate. Instead, the amount of O_2 in the exhaust gases, termed the excess O_2 , is measured and then the air flow rate is calculated. Excess O_2 levels must be closely controlled to ensure safe operations, maximize thermal efficiency and productivity, and minimize pollution emissions. Figure 2 shows how available heat varies with excess air, based on theoretical equilibrium calculations for ambient air reacting with methane. The exhaust products are assumed to be at 2000°F . Available heat is defined as the energy in the fuel gas minus the energy in the exhaust products leaving the combustor. Although not all of the available energy actually goes into the process as some of it is lost (e.g., conduction through the furnace walls), it is closely related to thermal efficiency.

In Figure 2, the thermal efficiency decreases when excess air increases above 0%. This decrease occurs because of the added heat load from the O_2 and N_2 in the excess air that absorbs heat which is carried out with the flue gases. The thermal efficiency decreases when the “excess” is below 0%. This decrease occurs because there is insufficient oxygen to completely combust all of the fuel, which means that not all of the chemical energy is converted into thermal energy. Insufficient air is also potentially unsafe because the unburned fuel could be ignited somewhere

else inside the heater. For example, if air is leaking into the convection section, the unburned fuel could mix with that air, which could lead to burning in the convection section (afterburning) that could damage the convection tubes. Note that although the maximum available heat is at 0% excess air, heaters are normally operated with some amount of excess air for safety reasons to ensure there is sufficient O₂ to fully combust the fuel, even if there are minor changes in fuel composition or combustion air properties.

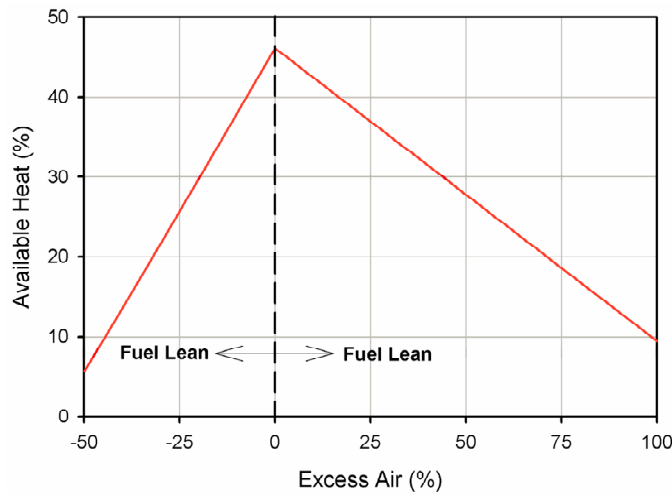


Figure 2. Available heat vs. excess O₂ for methane combusted with ambient air (2000°F flue gas temperature).

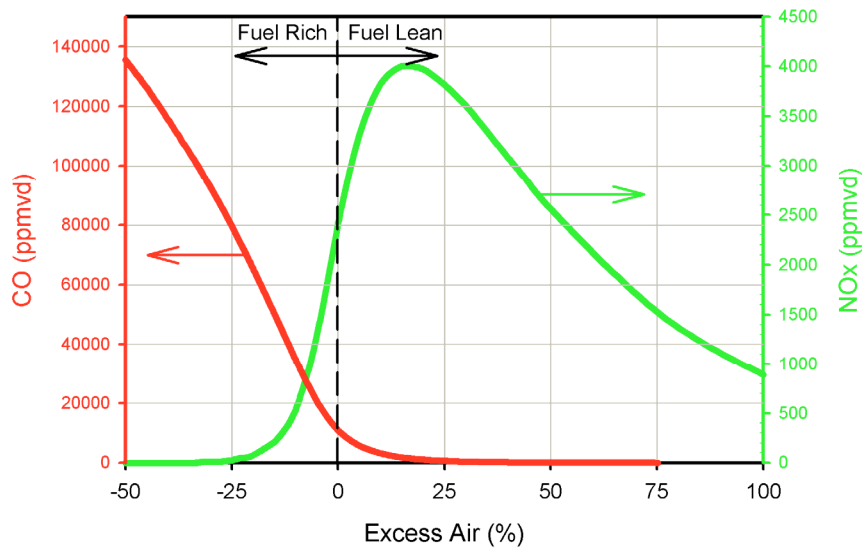


Figure 3. NO_x and CO vs. excess O₂ for methane combusted with ambient air.

The two most common pollutants regulated in process heaters are carbon monoxide (CO) and nitrogen oxides (NO_x).² These pollutants are sensitive to the amount of excess O₂. Figure 3 shows that with increasing excess air levels above 0%, the CO decreases and NO_x increases.

Ideally, the goal is to minimize both pollutants, which can be challenging since each reacts oppositely to excess air levels. Ultra low NO_x burners use a variety of strategies to minimize both pollutants.³ High levels of CO indicate incomplete combustion and improper burner operation. High NO_x emissions are a problem because of permitted limits for the plant. Therefore, heater O₂ levels are typically controlled as low as possible, without forming high levels of CO, to maximize thermal efficiency and minimize NO_x emissions. For safety reasons, a manually-operated heater is operated with some excess O₂. Variations in ambient air (e.g., temperature and humidity), fuel (e.g., temperature and composition), and process operating conditions (e.g., process fluid flow rate) can cause excess O₂ to fall below acceptable levels.⁴ For this reason, O₂ is closely monitored.

Heat Transfer

Heat transfer in a heater is critical to proper operation.⁵ The bulk of the heat transfer in the radiant section is by radiation, hence the name *radiant section*. The bulk of the heat transfer in the convection section is by convection, hence the name *convection section*. Conduction losses through the heater walls reduce the thermal efficiency. The heat flux pattern inside the heater from the burners is also a critical parameter. Too much heat in a localized area can cause damage. Flame impingement on process tubes can cause the hydrocarbon fluids being heated to form coke layers inside the tubes.⁶ These layers reduce the heat transfer through the tubes which causes the tubes to overheat and can ultimately lead to a rupture. Ruptured process tubes allow hydrocarbon fluids to flow into a hot heater and are potentially very dangerous as they can cause very large fires. Engineers need to know the basic principles of heat transfer in a heater to maximize performance and avoid unsafe operating conditions.

Fluid Flow

Most process heaters are natural draft, which means no fans or blowers are used to supply the combustion air to the burners or to remove the combustion products from the heaters. Heater draft refers to the negative pressure that develops when hot gases rise inside the heater. Draft pulls in the air needed for combustion and pushes out the products of combustion such as CO₂, H₂O, O₂ and N₂. Ideally, the excess O₂ should come from the air being pulled through the burners, although some also comes from air leaking into the heater through cracks and openings, which is called *tramp air*.

Figure 4 shows burners firing across the floor from both sides of a process heater. The figure on the left shows the heater before the O₂ and draft were properly adjusted. Notice how ill-defined the flames were and how relatively cold the heater was because of incomplete combustion. The figure on the right shows the flames after the O₂ and draft were properly adjusted. The fuel composition and firing rates were essentially the same in both cases. The flames in the right photo were well-defined and the heater was hotter which means more throughput of hydrocarbon fluids. The photos in Figure 4 show how proper adjustments improved flame quality.

An operator can control the heater draft and excess O₂ by adjusting the damper on the heater exhaust stack, referred to as the stack damper, and on each burner, referred to as the burner damper (sometimes referred to as an air register). Although both the stack and burner dampers

impact the draft and O₂, the stack damper should be primarily used to control the draft while the burner dampers should be primarily used to control the excess O₂.

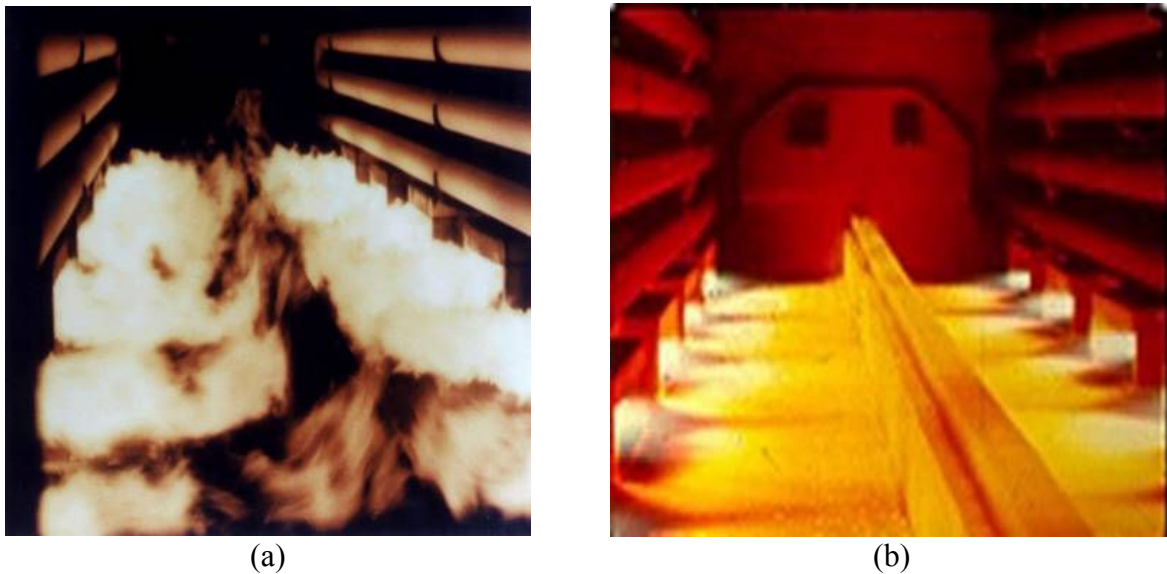


Figure 4. (a) Before and (b) after adjusting the O₂ and draft in a process heater.

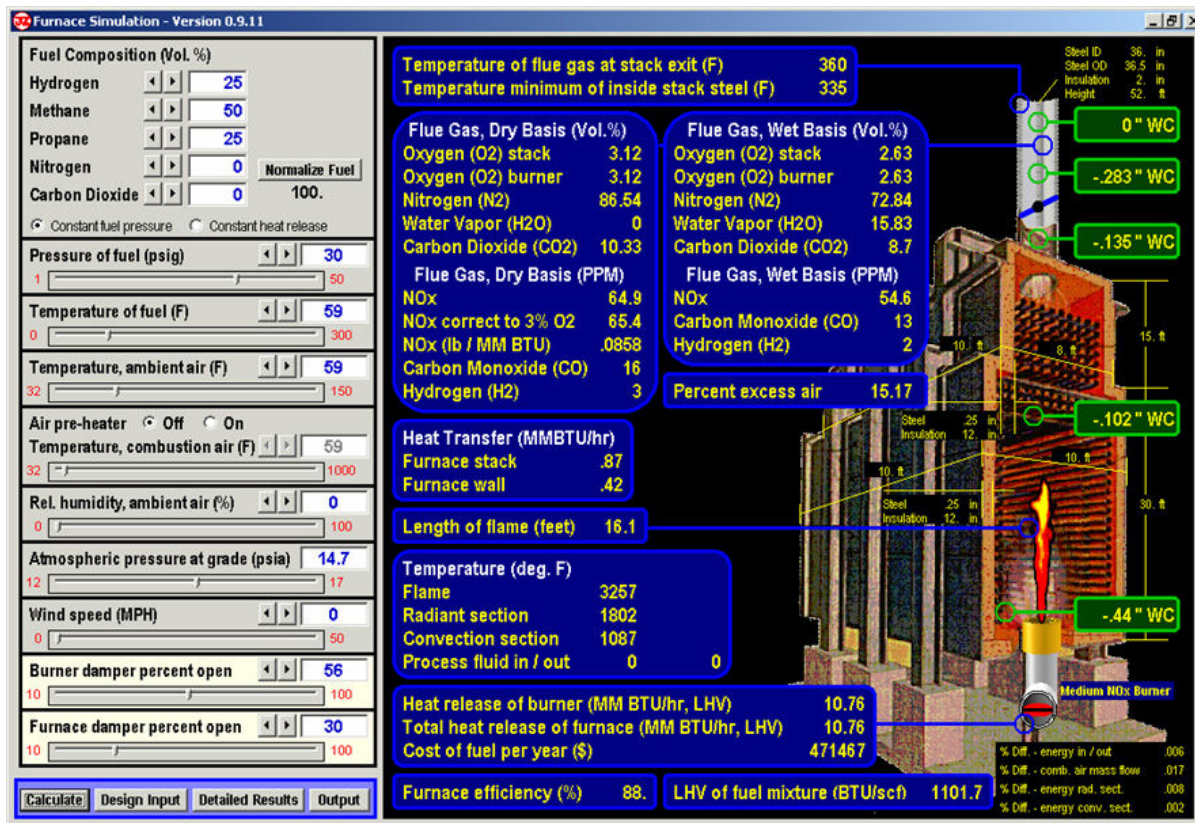


Figure 5. Example screen from heater simulator.

Heater Simulator

Figure 5 shows an example screen from an electronic heater simulator that was developed primarily as a teaching tool. The simulator has numerous inputs that can be varied to demonstrate the effects of a variety of parameters related to fluid flow, heat transfer, thermal efficiency, pollution emissions, and operating conditions. The simulator is semi-analytical as most of the calculations are based on well-defined physics. There are also some empirical equations built into the model to calculate, for example, NO_x emissions that have been measured for a wide range of burner types.

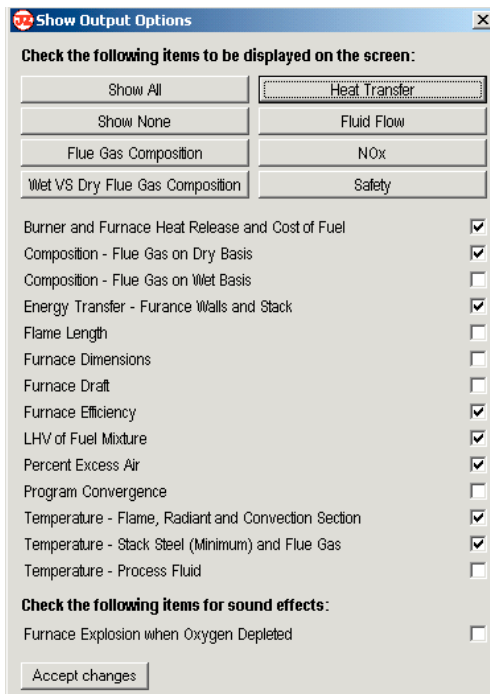
The primary inputs are shown on the left in Figure 5. Many other more detailed inputs can be modified on a secondary screen. Those inputs are not typically adjusted in the classroom because they do not directly concern the principles being taught with the simulator and would take valuable class time to explain. Some of the secondary inputs include design information on the burner, the radiant and convection sections in the heater, and the process fluid.

There are also numerous outputs. The example shown is for a simulated refinery fuel consisting of 50% CH₄, 25% C₃H₈, and 25% H₂ at 30 psig supply pressure combusted with ambient air. The burner and stack dampers were adjusted to 56% and 30% open respectively so the excess O₂ and draft at the top of the radiant section were approximately 3% (dry basis) and -0.1" water column, respectively. These are common operating conditions for these heaters. Students see how both variables are affected by changes in the positions of those dampers, since those are the primary adjustments made by the heater operators. If the O₂ level gets too low, a warning appears on the screen stating that the heater is running out of air.

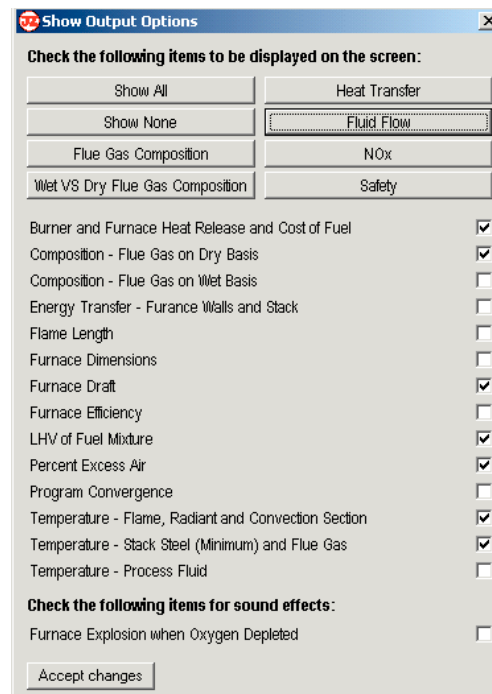
Displaying all outputs as shown in Figure 5 is too busy for instructional purposes, so reduced sets of outputs are available depending on what principle is being discussed. Figure 6 shows two examples of screens used to control the outputs. The instructor can individually check boxes to see specific outputs, or can select categories at the top of the screen to make the selection process faster and easier. The left and right figures show which outputs are displayed when the "Heat Transfer" and "Fluid Flow" categories are selected, respectively.

Combustion

There are several parameters of particular interest in heater operation related to combustion. One is the excess O₂ level which is an indicator of thermal efficiency as shown in Figure 2 and pollution emissions as shown in Figure 3. Other combustion parameters of great importance are CO and NO_x emissions. O₂, CO, and NO_x are all part of the combustion products in the exhaust gas. Figure 7 shows the predicted combustion products on both a wet and dry basis, where the water has been removed in the latter case. These two bases are displayed because flue gas analyses reported in plants may be on either a wet or dry basis, depending on the type of analyzer used.



(a)



(b)

Figure 6. Screen for controlling outputs displayed on main screen: (a) heat transfer outputs and (b) fluid flow outputs.

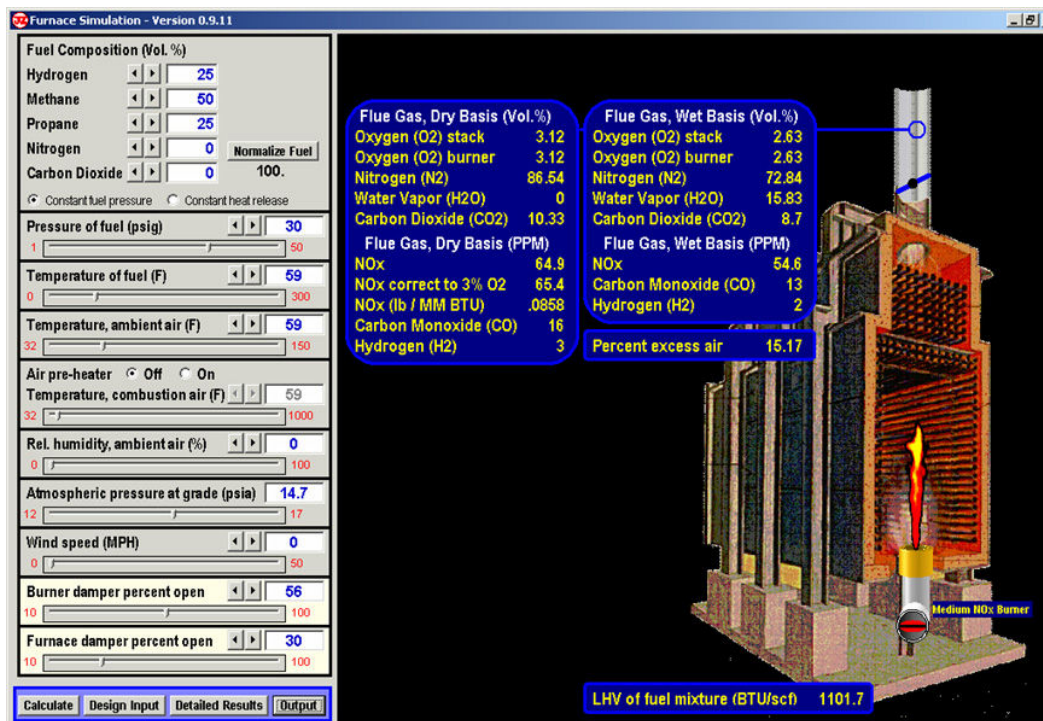


Figure 7. Flue gas composition predictions.

Heat Transfer

Figure 8 shows predicted heat transfer parameters for the sample case being considered here. Some of these parameters include the heat lost through the heater walls, the heat lost out the stack, the overall heater efficiency, and some selected temperatures. Engineers and operators can see what happens, for example, to the heater efficiency as important parameters such as excess O₂ are varied. Although it is not the normal instructional purpose of the simulator, it can be used to vary burner and heater design parameters to study the effects on heat transfer.

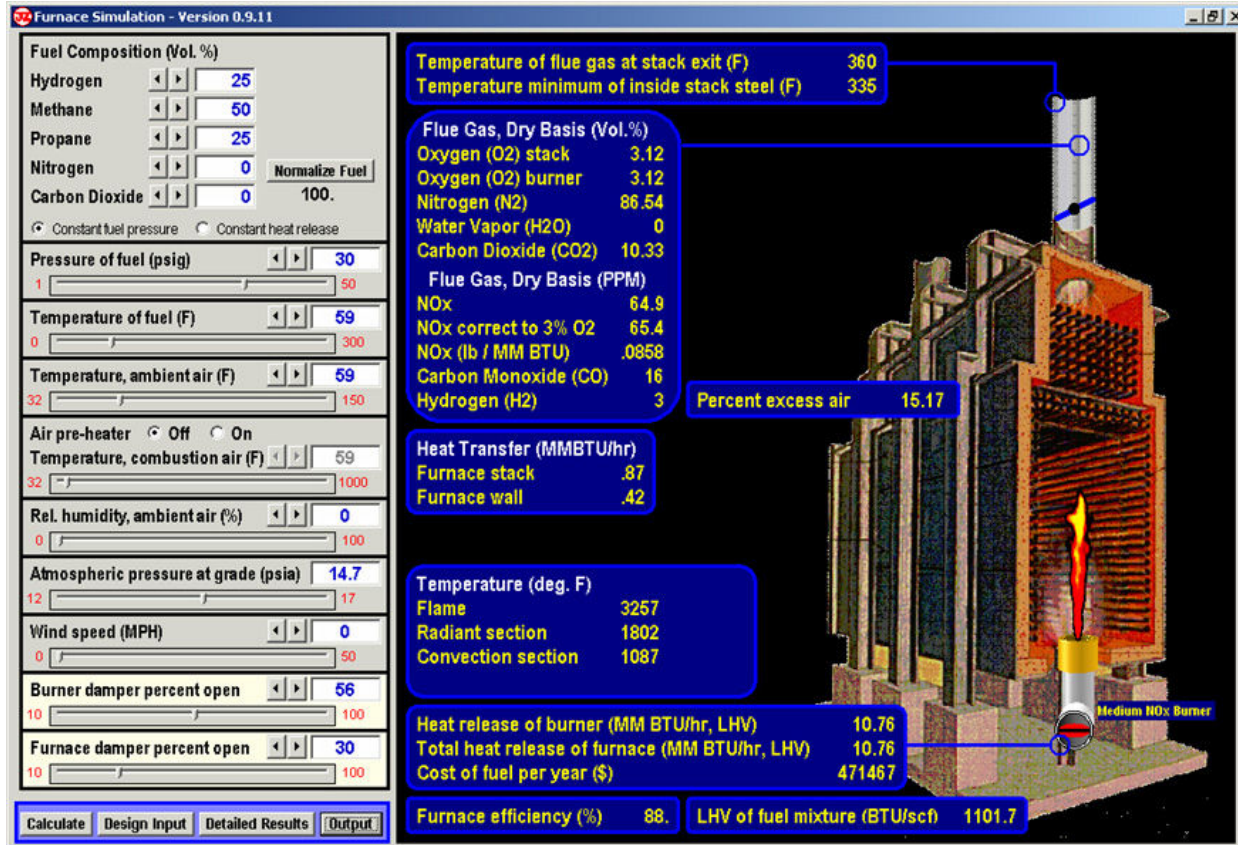


Figure 8. Heat transfer predictions.

Fluid Flow

Figure 9 shows the various predicted draft levels inside the sample case heater. The two most important levels are at the top of the radiant section and at the heater floor level. Process heaters are typically designed where the former is at approximately -0.1 inches of water column. This is the least amount of suction inside the heater. The draft is designed to be slightly negative there so no flue gases leak from the furnace. If flue gases do leak out there, heater damage often results as well as the potential exposure of hot flue gas to personnel working nearby. The draft level at the floor is critical for properly sizing the burners to get the necessary combustion air flow based on the available pressure drop.

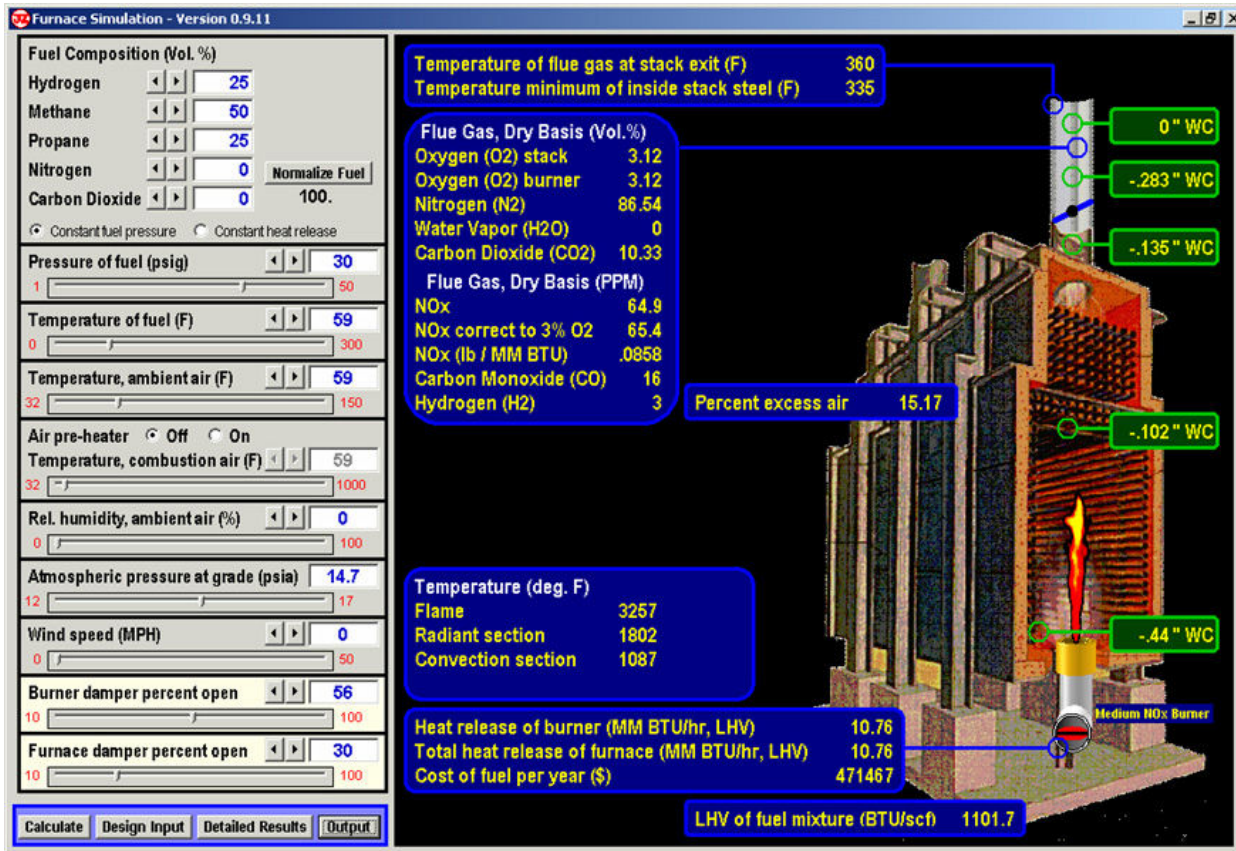


Figure 9. Fluid flow predictions.

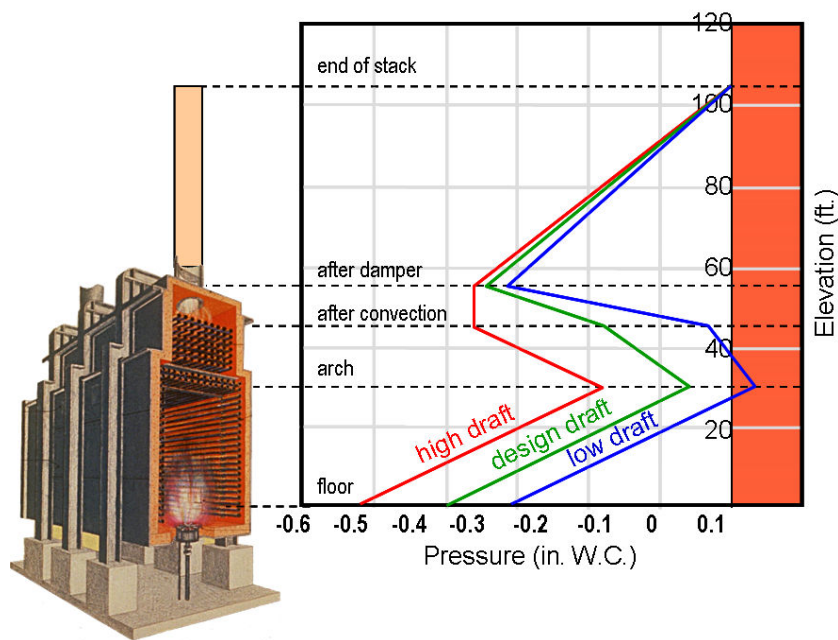


Figure 10. Draft variation with elevation in a process heater.

Figure 10 shows the predicted draft levels inside a heater using the simulator. The green line shows the design conditions, while the red and blue lines show high and low draft conditions, respectively. If the draft is too high, then too much tramp air will be pulled into the heater which can reduce efficiency or cause poor burner operation because the correct amount of air is not coming through the burners. If the draft is too low, then hot gases can leak out of the heater causing the problems previously discussed.

Assessment

A detailed assessment of the effect on learning of incorporating the simulator into a continuing education course was not done for several reasons. The course was undergoing major changes during the time the simulator was implemented, so it would have been difficult to separate the effects of the simulator itself. The simulator was also continuously improved over a period of several years. A pre- and post-test were given to measure what was learned in the course. While the test scores are available, data were not collected on the specific questions affected by the simulator, so test scores alone are not appropriate measures of the changes due to using the simulator.

A post course assessment was given where students used a Likert scale to numerically rate the benefit of and their interest in each topic covered. They also had the opportunity to provide written comments. Some selected comments related to the simulator were as follows:

- “. . . simulation was good.”
- “Simulator best part yet . . .”
- “Would really be happy to see Furnace Simulator offered online.”
- “Furnace simulator was the best.”

In addition, anecdotal feedback suggests the simulator has been helpful to the students. Many have asked if they could get a copy. As a result of these requests, a non-proprietary version of the simulator will be put on line and will be available at no charge to all alumni and to others who request and are approved for access. This will allow students to further test their knowledge and apply the information learned in the course in a safe virtual environment without the fear of causing unsafe conditions in an actual operating heater.

Conclusions

Using a simulator is not only safer than making adjustments on a production heater, it is also much faster and easier for instructional purposes. Real heaters take some time to react to changes in damper positions where the simulator reacts immediately. Also, noise levels are often high around operating heaters making it difficult to communicate with a group of students, which is not the case using a simulator in a classroom.

Some important principles that need to be taught related to process heater operation include combustion, heat transfer, and fluid flow. Excess O₂, CO and NO_x are important combustion parameters. Heat losses and overall furnace efficiency are important heat transfer parameters.

Draft is the primary fluid flow parameter of interest in process heaters. An electronic simulator has been developed to teach and demonstrate these principles in a continuing engineering education course.

At the current time the simulator is strictly instructor led, but in the near future this tool will be put online for use by past and current students at no charge. This will allow the students to test their knowledge in a safe environment prior to working on actual production units.

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