

GLYCOL MUD IMPROVES WELLBORE STABILITY AND RATE OF PENETRATION

Chang Hong Gao

American University of Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Growing demand for oil and gas has driven drilling activities to deep formations and complex well structures. Drilling fluid must be able to maintain wellbore integrity and thermal stability over extended drilling time. Besides, drilling fluid should produce a high rate of penetration (ROP) and low damage to formation rock. Glycol mud satisfies these criteria thanks to its unique cloud point phenomenon. When temperature exceeds cloud point temperature (CPT), glycol separates from mud, coats the rock surface, and plugs the small fractures in rocks. As a result, the flow of mud into rocks is restricted, and wellbore stability is improved. This paper surveys more than 40 wells that were drilled with glycol mud. Field cases reported good wellbore integrity, thermal stability, high ROP, and low formation damage. Glycol mud is an excellent choice for battling well instability and high temperatures.

Keywords: *Drilling fluid; Glycol; Wellbore stability; Shale, Survey.*

1. Introduction

Despite many years of research and practices, wellbore instability remains a major challenge for drilling oil and gas wells. Wellbore instability may result in well pack-off, stuck pipe, lost borehole, and costly sidetracking. Wellbore stability is controlled by complex mechanical and chemical factors such as earth stresses, rock strength, pore pressure, mud pressure, and mud chemistry [1]. The problem of wellbore instability due to reactive shale is well-known in the drilling industry. It is estimated that 75% of the formations consist of shale rocks. Shales are mainly composed of mud, silts, and clays. Clay minerals are flaky, mica-type crystalline in nature. Among the clay minerals, smectite has a high cation exchange capacity (CEC); therefore it is prone to swelling and dispersion when in contact with water [2]. Illite, chlorite, and kaolinite have low CEC and low tendency to swell. However, another type of illite is produced by the transformation of smectite under high pressure and high temperature. This mixed layer illite has more tendency to swell than its original form.

Oil-based Mud (OBM) is widely used for drilling through troublesome shale formations. OBM contains a small fraction of water, therefore reducing the swelling and dispersion of shale due to water invasion. However, the use of OBM is often restricted due to its environmental impacts (particularly in offshore drilling), high costs and safety issue [3]. Therefore, the design and development of water-based mud (WBM) with OBM performance is currently seen as an area of great interest in the oil industry.

One of the high-performance WBM is glycol mud. A glycol is soluble at low temperatures but starts to form micelles (molecular agglomerates) as the temperature is raised, thus becoming cloudy. The temperature at which this phenomenon occurs is named the cloud point temperature (CPT). Glycols, usually polyethylene glycol (PEG), are often used as shale inhibitors. The purported mechanism is that the glycol clouds out at higher downhole temperatures, coating the surface of clays and preventing shale hydration [4]. Research also revealed that glycol effectively improved the thermal stability of certain polymers, thus reducing fluid loss and enhancing wellbore stability under high temperatures [5].

The cloud point temperature is influenced by glycol concentration. As shown in Fig. 1, when glycol concentration increases, CPT first declines then recovers. Accordingly, the glycol concentration of 2-5% is recommended in field implementation to take advantage of low CPT [4]. Moreover, inorganic salts depress the CPT of glycol. For instance, when NaCl concentration increases to 10%, CPT drops from 75 to 65°C. When CaCl₂ concentration reaches 10%, CPT is depressed to 60°C.

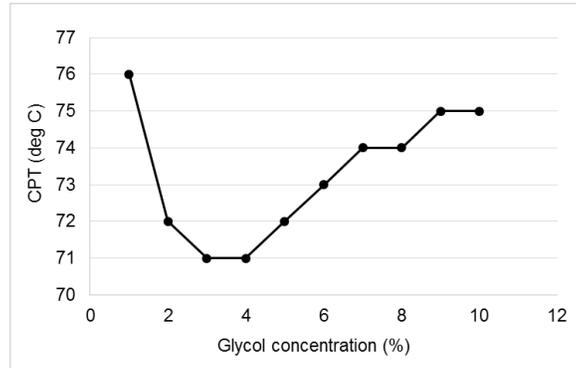


Fig. 1. Effect of glycol concentration on CPT

2. Field cases

In recent years, glycol mud gained popular field implementations, especially in China. Some typical field cases are surveyed in this section. These valuable field experiences can improve our understanding of glycol mud, and serve as the guidance for future implementations of glycol mud.

2.1. Bohai Bay, China

Well Boshen-8 was an exploration well drilled by Sinopec in Bohai Bay. The well was completed at 5,307m, where the bottom-hole temperature reached 200°C [6]. The drilling program is given in Table 1. Brittle shale was encountered below 3,200m TVD, which resulted in high risk of shale sloughing. Therefore, the mud system must effectively reduce filtrate loss and inhibit shale swelling. Moreover, relatively low pore pressure zone lay above the shale zone. High density mud may fracture the upper zone and result in lost circulation. As a result, mud density must be controlled carefully not to exceed formation fracturing pressure.

Base mud contained clay and mud additives for HTHP applications, as shown in Table 2. The polymer and resin additives were applied to reduce filtrate loss, improve shale stability, and provide lubrication for a drill bit and drill string. The base mud samples were aged at high temperatures for 16 hours, and the mud properties were tested and presented in Table 3. Test data revealed the base mud maintained high viscosity and moderate filtrate loss. In other words, the base mud was able to function properly under high temperatures.

Glycol and salt, such as NaCl and KCl, are often added to mud to inhibit shale swelling. Their effects on mud properties are presented in Table 4. After NaCl was added, both mud gel strength and filtrate loss increased. On the other hand, filtrate loss declined after glycol is applied, which revealed glycol reduced shale swelling by effectively reducing filtrate loss. With the selected mud system, the filtrate loss remained less than 12mL during drilling, which leads to good wellbore integrity. The mud achieved good stability and lubricity at 200°C. As a result, the drilling and tripping operations were smooth without incidents.

Table 1. Drilling program for Boshen-8

Casing program	Casing setting depth (m)	Bit size (mm)
Conductor casing	357	444.5
Surface casing	3.228	311.2
Intermediate casing	4.860	177.8
Production casing	5.307	165.1

Table 2. Base mud formula

Material	Concentration	Function
Clay	3%	To provide initial viscosity
PA-1 (modified polyamide)	2%	To reduce filtrate loss at HPHT
SPNH (lignite resin)	1%	To inhibit shale and provide lubrication
SPC (modified resin)	3%	To reduce filtrate loss at HPHT

Table 3. Effect of temperature on mud properties

Test sample	Aging conditions	PV (cP)	YP (Pa)	Gel strength 10 min (Pa)	Filtrate (mL)
Base mud	No aging	30	3	4	5
Base mud	180°C/16hr	20	2	1	4
Base mud	220°C/16hr	32	6	5	4
Base mud	250°C/16hr	25	11	5	7

Table 4. Effect of salt and glycol on mud properties

Test sample	Aging condition	PV (cP)	YP (Pa)	Gel strength (Pa)	Filtrate loss (mL)
Base mud	250°C/16hr	25	11	5	7
Salt mud (base mud + 5% NaCl)	No aging	23	10	35	9
Salt mud (base mud + 5% NaCl)	250°C/16hr	44	27	50	7
Glycol mud (base mud + 5% glycol)	No aging	12	2	25	2
Glycol mud (base mud + 5% glycol)	250°C/16hr	13	2	23	3

Three wells were drilled at Yuedong block of Bohai Bay from an artificial island [7]. It was a challenge to maintain wellbore stability because unconsolidated mudstone was encountered at several depths. The drilling mud contained 3% PEG, 4% KCl, and necessary additives to control filtrate loss under 4 mL. While drilling, mud funnel viscosity was around 56-62 sec, and mud YP was around 11 Pa. Solid control equipment was operated at high capacity. The wellbore drilled with PEG mud measured lower washout (15-18%) than nearby wells drilled with other muds (23-25%). It proved that PEG was effective at enhancing wellbore stability.

Seven directional wells were drilled with glycol mud at BZ251 block in Bohai Bay [8]. The reservoir featured low porosity, low permeability, and abnormal pore pressure. Drilling was faced with high risks of formation damage and lost circulation. The mud was formulated with sea water, 3% glycol, 5% potassium formate, and other chemicals. While drilling, mud funnel viscosity was 40-45 sec, mud PV was 14-24 cP, mud YP was 9-15 Pa, API filtrate loss was below 3 mL, and HTHP filtrate loss was less than 10 ml. Drilling was successful without accidents. Among the seven wells, five wells were flowing naturally upon completion, which indicated that glycol mud effectively protected formation permeability. Glycol mud achieved higher ROP than nearby wells drilled with OBM, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Comparison of glycol mud and oil-based mud

Well No.	Mud type	Interval	Inclination angle (deg.)	ROP (m/h)	Mud specific gravity
A7	Glycol mud	3636-4206	20.25	18.00	1.46
A11	Glycol mud	3483-4106	24.87	16.93	1.45
A23	Glycol mud	3728-4181	46.00	13.32	1.15
A17	Glycol mud	3847-4860	36.91	10.58	1.54
A15	Glycol mud	4038-5060	47.80	11.78	1.52
A1	OBM	3654-5010	36.32	10.47	1.53
A2	OBM	3442-4398	21.00	9.91	1.54
A5	OBM	3077-4073	0	9.51	1.61
A18	OBM	3277-3730	12.22	4.00	1.52

2.2. Jidong Field, China

Jidong field occupies the northern part of Bohai Bay. Well Nanpu-54 at the field was completed at 5,500m TVD, where the bottom-hole temperature reached 195°C [9]. The drilling program is given in Table 6. Drilling through layers of unconsolidated sands and brittle shales presented challenges for drilling mud. The drilling mud must generate low filtrate loss and high competence in shale stability. As such, the mud was formulated with sea water, formate salt, and glycol to achieve the desired performance. The detailed mud formula is presented in Table 7.

Mud samples were aged at 200°C for 16 hours in a laboratory, and the mud properties are presented in Table 8. After aging, the mud still demonstrated good performance, especially the very low filtrate loss. During drilling, mud samples were taken at various depths, and the properties were measured and presented in Table 9. While drilling progressed deeper, mud plastic viscosity and yield point declined, but remained at an acceptable level, while the mud filtrate loss remained low. The drilling, logging, and cementing operations were successful without accidents. Caliper log showed the wellbore was only 1.8-4.5% larger than bit size, indicating excellent wellbore integrity.

Table 6. Drilling program for Nanpu-54

Casing program	Casing setting depth (m)	Bit size (mm)
Conductor casing	300	660.4
Surface casing	2340	444.5
Intermediate casing	4421	311.2
Intermediate casing	5359	215.9
Production casing	5500	152.4

Table 7. Mud formula for Nanpu-54

Material	Concentration	Function
Clay	5%	To provide initial viscosity
Potassium Formate	5%	To inhibit shale swelling
Glycol	2%	To inhibit shale swelling and reduce filtrate loss
SMP	2%	To reduce filtrate loss
SPNH	2%	To inhibit shale swelling and provide lubrication
DSP	2%	To reduce filtrate loss
A-20	0.1%	To maintain mud performance at high temperature
SP-80	0.3%	To maintain mud performance at high temperature

Table 8. Mud properties after aging

Mud sample	Density (g/mL)	PV (cP)	YP (Pa)	Gel at 10 min (Pa)	Filtrate loss (mL)
Before aging	1.5	80	24	8	3
After aging	1.5	45	12	20	4

Table 9. Mud properties at various depths

Well depth (m)	PV (cP)	YP (Pa)	Gel strength (Pa)	Filtrate loss (mL)
4,600	40	20	12	5
4,800	40	17	18	4
4,900	45	16	11	4
5,000	33	10	5	6
5,200	26	9	5	6

2.3. Jilin Field, China

Four wells at Jilin field in northern China were drilled with solid-free glycol mud [10]. The sandstone field was characterized by low porosity (4%), low permeability (50 md), and high bottom-hole temperature (160°C). Therefore, a solid-free mud was designed to drill through the pay zone to reduce formation damage. The mud was formulated with water, 3% glycol,

sodium formate, biopolymer as thickener, and PAM as filtrate depressant. The mud was first tested in laboratory, and the results are given in Table 10. It can be seen the mud system maintained good viscosity and low filtrate loss at high temperature. The mud also demonstrated good performance under contamination of calcium ions, as shown in Table 11.

The wells were drilled to 4,100m. While drilling the wells, mud properties were carefully controlled with mud additives. The mud properties at various depths are presented in Table 12. Moreover, the mud density was controlled at 1.05-1.15 g/mL to achieve an underbalanced drilling condition. The solid-free mud system required solid-control equipment working at high efficiency. On the other hand, corrosion inhibitors were applied to reduce corrosion from sodium formate. Compared with nearby wells drilled with clay mud, glycol mud achieved high ROP and high gas production rates after wells came on stream, as shown in Table 13.

Table 10. Mud properties at various temperatures

Test temperature (°C)	PV (cP)	Filtrate loss (mL)	Gel 10s (Pa)
25	25	6.0	0.5
120	30	5.6	1.5
140	31	5.8	1.5
160	32	5.9	2.0

Table 11. Mud properties under the effects of aging and calcium ions

Test Sample	Test Condition	PV (cP)	Filtrate loss (mL)	Gel at 10s (Pa)
Base mud	25°C/no aging	23	6.0	1
Base mud	160°C/24hour aging	28	6.0	2
Base mud+2%CaCl ₂	25°C/no aging	23	6.5	1
Base mud+2%CaCl ₂	160°C/24hour aging	30	6.0	2.5

Table 12. Mud properties at various depths during drilling of well No. 6

Depth (m)	Density (g/mL)	PV (cP)	YP (Pa)	Gel at 10s (Pa)	Funnel viscosity (s)	Filtrate loss (mL)
3100	1.05	22	8	0.5	75	7
3500	1.10	29	11	1.5	86	5
3800	1.11	31	12	1.5	82	4
4200	1.11	32	13	2.0	85	4

Table 13. Comparison of clay mud and glycol mud

Well No.	Mud Type	Solid fraction (%)	ROP (m/hour)	Gas production rate (1000 m ³ /day)
101	Emulsion mud	17 to 31	1.65	110
301	Polymer mud	15 to 26	1.26	89
006	Glycol mud	0	1.95	150
304	Glycol mud	0	2.01	120
204	Glycol mud	0	2.03	130

2.4. Huaz Field, China

The Huaz field is located in Jiangsu basin in southeast China. The field features thin pay zones with low permeability. At the early stage of field development, KCl-Polymer mud was used in drilling, but 3 wells experienced severe lost circulation, and 6 wells encountered well-bore sloughing, which resulted in stuck pipe, formation damage, and more than 100 hours of non-productive [11].

In 2007, glycol mud was used in drilling 21 wells at the field. The mud was made of 5% clay, 3% glycol, and other chemicals. While drilling, mud funnel viscosity was controlled at

45-50 sec, mud PV was 18-20 cP, and fluid loss was below 5 mL. The mud solid content was controlled below 10% with solid control equipment. With glycol mud, average drilling time reduced by 10 days, wellbore washout was less than 6%, and very low formation damage was observed.

2.5. Changning Field, China

The Changning and Weiyuan shale gas fields are located in south Sichuan basin, west to the city of Chongqing with 10 Bcm gas reserve [12]. The primary producing zone is the Longmaxi (LMX) formation about 300-400 m in thickness. XRD analysis showed the mineralogy was mainly clay, quartz, and dolomite. Drilling started in 2009, and 127 wells were producing a total of 8.14 million m³/day of gas from the two shale plays in late 2018.

Even though OBM has dominated the shale drilling market, innovations in WBM lead to a few successful field applications at major shale plays [13]. Well Ning206 was drilled with mud made of 3% clay, 4% glycol, 10% organic salt, and other chemicals. The glycol mud was used to drill from 1680m to 1920m. While drilling, the funnel viscosity was around 41 sec, mud PV was 12-16 cP, mud YP was 1-4 Pa, and fluid loss was less than 4 mL. Mud rheology was stable over long drilling time. Glycol mud produced very good wellbore stability with 1.2% washout and high rate of penetration (ROP). PDC bit achieved ROP of 11 m/h with glycol mud, while ROP was 6.3 m/h with three-cone bit [14].

3. Summary and discussions

The field cases surveyed are summarized in Table 14. According to field cases, glycol mud demonstrated 4 advantages. (1) The primary purpose of glycol mud is to battle wellbore instability. Most field cases reported that glycol mud produced excellent wellbore integrity. When temperature exceeds CPT, glycol separates from mud, coats rock surface and plugs the small fractures in shales. This process reduces the contact between mud and reactive shale, thus enhancing wellbore stability. (2) Several field cases reported that glycol mud maintained excellent stability under high BHT up to 200°C. This proves glycol is able to enhance the thermal stability of mud chemicals. (3) Some wells drilled with glycol mud reported excellent ROP. The high ROP is attributed to the good lubricity, low solid contents, and reduced bit balling when glycol mud is used. (4) Several field cases reported low skin factors and high production rates. After glycol forms a barrier on rock surface, the flow of mud into the rock is restricted, leading to low formation damage and low skin factors.

Table 14. Summary of field cases with glycol mud

Location	Number of wells	Challenges	Drilling results
Bohai Bay	1	High temperature (200°C); Brittle shale;	Good well stability; Good lubricity;
Yuedong block in Bohai Bay	7	High risk of lost circulation; High risk of wellbore instability	Good wellbore integrity
BZ251 block in Bohai Bay	7	High risks of formation damage; High risk of lost circulation;	ROP higher than OBM; Low formation damage;
Jidong field	1	High temperature (195°C);	Excellent wellbore integrity
Jilin field	4	High temperature (165°C); Low porosity and low permeability;	High ROP; High production rates;
Huaz field	21	Low permeability; Lost circulation;	Good wellbore integrity; Reduced drilling time;
Changning field	1	Wellbore instability; Reactive clay; Shale sloughing;	Low formation damage; High ROP; Good wellbore integrity;

4. Conclusions

Glycol demonstrates a unique cloud point phenomenon. When the temperature exceeds CPT, glycol separates out from mud. Glycol then forms a coat on rock surface and plugs the small rock fractures. As a result, contact between mud and rock is reduced, and wellbore stability is enhanced. In recent years, glycol mud gained popularity in Chinese fields. This paper surveys more than 40 wells drilled with glycol mud. According to field experiences, glycol mud led to excellent wellbore integrity, good thermal stability, high ROP, and low formation damage.

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To whom correspondence should be addressed: Associate professor Chang Hong Gao, American University of Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates, E-mail Changhong.gao@aurak.ac.ae