Monitoring Preferential Flow of Water in Sand Using Thermoacoustics Wave Imaging

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Key Points:

- The relationship between water saturation in sand and the resultant thermoacoustics wave amplitude is monotonic.
- The reconstructed thermoacoustics images match well with the optical ground truth for water-saturated sand.
- Thermoacoustics imaging enables real-time monitoring of water distribution in subsurface sand.

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Abstract

Accurate predictions of fluid flow, mass transport, and reaction rates critically impact the efficiency and reliability of subsurface exploration and sustainable use of subsurface resources. Quantitative dynamical sensing and imaging can play a pivotal role in the ability to make such predictions. Geophysical thermoacoustic technology has the potential to provide the aforementioned capabilities, since it builds upon the principle that electromagnetic and mechanical wave fields can be coupled through a thermodynamic process. In this letter, we present laboratory experiments featuring the efficacy of thermoacoustic imaging in the monitoring of preferential flow of water in porous media. Our laboratory experimental equipment can be readily packaged in a form factor that fits in a borehole, and the use of multiple acoustic transducers—which can be combined with volumetric coding techniques—has the potential to provide quasi-real-time imaging (0.5 Hertz video rate) of regions in close proximity (a few meters) of an open field well.

Plain Language Summary

Multiphysics subsurface sensing and imaging technology has the potential to provide unique insights to better understand multiphase flow and transport in porous media in 4D (time and space). Conventional high-resolution, laboratory-based imaging technology—such as X-ray or MRI—require power-hungry and often bulky equipment; the latter limits their use in open field experiments and challenges their ability to perform real-time image reconstruction. Acoustics Doppler imaging has been used for real-time flow velocity monitoring in biomedical applications; however, the relationship between fluid saturation in porous media and measured acoustic pressure still requires further investigation. In this letter we show how microwave-induced thermoacoustic (TA) imaging technology can be applied to monitor water distribution in sand. In contrast to traditional acoustic imaging, the proposed TA method exhibits a dominant monotonic relationship between the degree of water saturation and the measured amplitude of the TA pressure. Our experimental results show the efficacy of TA technology for imaging 2D water distribution profiles in sand. The reconstructed TA images are in good agreement with the optical ground truth water distribution map, thus illustrating the feasibility of the proposed method for real-world field applications in agricultural and hydrological sciences.

1 Introduction

Understanding the distribution of fluid phases during multiphase flow in porous media is critical in a wide array of subsurface natural processes and engineering applications (Jarvis, 2007; Blunt et al., 2013; Berg et al., 2013). Optical imaging, X-ray tomography, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) are just a few of the most commonly used non-invasive, high-resolution imaging techniques (Katuwal et al., 2018; Pohlmeier et al., 2018; Cnudde & Boone, 2013). However, these methods are subject to important drawbacks that not only limit their use in field applications but also in controlled laboratory environments (Werth et al., 2010; Wildenschild et al., 2002). Optical imaging techniques are well suited to reconstruct fluid distribution in a real-time fashion; however, their use is mostly limited to 2D geometries due reduced penetration on light in highly opaque media and fluid saturation cannot be easily quantified (Moebius & Or, 2012; Roman et al., 2020), although advances such as refraction-index matching, planar laser-induced fluorescence and confocal microscopy have extended the range of application of 3D optical (Kong et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2011; Krummel et al., 2013; Dalbe & Juanes, 2018). In contrast, X-ray and MRI methods can provide a quantified high-resolution image of 3D geometries (Pohlmeier et al., 2018; Liyanage et al., 2019); however, these methods are limited in their ability to capture the transient behavior of fast fluid flow due to its intrinsic slow scanning speed (Luo et al., 2008; Koestel & Larsbo, 2014). For example, preferential flow, which refers to the phenomenon of channeling in-

filtrating water as a result of 'macropores' (Beven & Germann, 1982) or gravitational instability (Glass et al., 1989; Wei et al., 2014; Liyanage & Juanes, 2021), can reach a wetting front velocity up several millimeters per second, calling for a real-time imaging method in 3D (Zhang et al., 2018; Jarvis et al., 2016; Beven & Germann, 2013).

Acoustic (AC) and seismic waves are commonly used for subsurface situational awareness (Müller et al., 2012; David et al., 2015); however, the intrinsic relationship between acoustic properties of rocks and fluid saturation remains poorly understood. Nevertheless, it has been shown that an increase in water saturation modulates the amplitude of P-waves, which ultimately gives form to the acoustics signature of heterogeneous mixtures of rocks and fluids (Pimienta et al., 2019; David et al., 2017). While ultrasound imaging has been applied in geophysics, the vague relationship between the morphology of the sample under test and ultrasound image suggests that further advances are needed before this methodology can be used in quantitative dynamical imaging applications (Zou et al., 2016, 2018).

TA sensing and imaging presents a new opportunity to better characterize the subsurface due to its inherent multiphysics nature, in which elastic waves are created due to the thermal expansion and contraction of a target when it is illuminated by a high intensity microwave source (Liu et al., 2018). This technology, originally used for breast cancer detection, leverages on the high contrast existing between healthy and cancerous tissues at microwaves frequencies and the high resolution of AC technology to create images with a pixel resolution of tens of micrometers (Lou et al., 2012). Such a thermodynamics-driven coupling of electromagnetic and mechanical waves overcomes the intrinsic poor resolution of electromagnetic images and the low contrast of AC images when used in a standalone fashion (Cui et al., 2017; Xu & Wang, 2006). At particular spatial scales, there are certain similarities amongst the constitutive properties of biological and geological materials—suggesting that TA technology may be used for geophysical imaging applications. The latter assumption was experimentally tested and validated in (Liu et al., 2019); the authors demonstrated that geological materials, such as sand and rocks, can indeed generate detectable TA pressure waves. Moreover, the significant contrast existing between the dielectric constants of water and quartz sand enables the monitoring of fluid distribution in sandy environments.

Conventional real-time imaging systems use arrays of transducers, often involving over 100 receivers, to collect large amounts of information in a reduced amount of time; however, these bulky, power-hungry, and often expensive devices constrain the use of TA imaging in open field scenarios (Yin et al., 2004). TA technology is well poised to enable real-time imaging while using a reduced number of receivers. The latter is afforded by performing volumetric spatial coding of the wave fields (Lorenzo et al., 2015) to maximize the sensing capacity of the imaging system, which is defined as the information-transfer efficiency between imaging domain and the measured data. Volumetric coding can be performed using artificial metamaterials, holey cavities, and compressive reflectors; this reduces the mutual information among successive measurements and increase the sensing capacity of the imaging system (Mao et al., 2020).

In this letter we present the first study showing the efficacy of microwave-induced thermoacoustics imaging to monitor fluid distribution in geological media. This technique has the potential to offer real-time reconstruction of fluid flow in 4D, at distance, and using non-contact sensors—an ability that could prove instrumental to extend our understanding of water distribution and heterogeneous infiltration in the Earth's critical zone (Richter & Mobley, 2009). This letter is structured as follows: In Section 2 we introduce the background theory of applying TA waves to monitor water distribution in sand. Based on this, we establish a simulation model to predict the relationship between water saturation and the TA signal strength. We design an experiment to validate this principle. In Section 3, we analyze the data from the simulation and experiment, both showing a monotonic relationship between water saturation and TA signal amplitude.

Table 1: Material properties used in simulation

Material	ϵ_r	σ [S/m]	ρ [kg/m^3]	κ [GPa]	β [10^{-6}/K]	C_p [J/(kg· K)]
Quartz Sand	4.27	0	2650	37	1	743
Water	80	0.05	1000	2.25	210	4180
Air	1	0	-	-	-	-
Oil	2.6	0.01	-	-	-	-
Acrylic Sheet	3.4	6.7×10^{-15}	-	-	-	-

In Section 4 we present the experimental results of recovering the water distribution profile in a quasi-3D sand cell (in which one dimension is smaller than the other two), and in Section 5 we summarize the main outcomes of our study.

2 Materials and Methods

Microwave induced TA pressure waves are generated due to the thermal expansion of an object when it is illuminated by a short, intense microwave pulse. The governing equations for TA wave are:

$$\nabla^2 p(\mathbf{r},t) - \frac{1}{c^2(\mathbf{r})}\frac{\partial^2}{\partial t^2}p(\mathbf{r},t) = -\frac{\beta(\mathbf{r})}{C_p(\mathbf{r})}\frac{\partial Q(\mathbf{r},t)}{\partial t} \tag{1a}$$

$$Q(\mathbf{r},t) \approx \sigma(\mathbf{r})||E(\mathbf{r})||^2 f^2(t) \tag{1b}$$

where $p(\mathbf{r},t)$ is the pressure, $c(\mathbf{r})$ is the sound speed, $\beta(\mathbf{r})$ is the thermal expansion rate, $C_p(\mathbf{r})$ is the heat capacity, and $Q(\mathbf{r},t)$ is the heat source. This term is defined in Eq. (1b), where $\sigma(\mathbf{r})$ is the electric conductivity, $\mathbf{E}(\mathbf{r})$ is the electric field, and $f(t)$ is the excitation pulse function. According to Eq. (1b), the right hand side of Eq. (1a) can be written as $-\frac{\beta(\mathbf{r})}{C_p(\mathbf{r})}\sigma(\mathbf{r})||E(\mathbf{r})||^2\frac{\partial}{\partial t}f^2(t)$. This term can be decomposed as the product of two functions: one is a time varying modulating signal $\frac{\partial}{\partial t}f^2(t)$; and the other is a material-dependent space varying distribution $S(\mathbf{r}) = -\frac{\beta(\mathbf{r})}{C_p(\mathbf{r})}\sigma(\mathbf{r})||E(\mathbf{r})||^2$. The constitutive properties within the source term $S(\mathbf{r})$ are affected by the water saturation of the sandy porous medium, and their value can be approximated by empirical rock physics models (RPMs). The latter provides an estimation of the constitutive properties of the compound mixture and the volume fraction of each one of its individual components.

Our first experiment is aimed at the computational modeling and experimental testing of the effect of water saturation on the signal strength. A multiphysics engine (Inc., 2020) was used to reveal such relationship. Figure 1a displays the baseline geometry of the simulation; the material properties are predicted using the RPMs described in (Shen et al., 1985; Troschke & Burkhardt, 1998; Waples & Waples, 2004) and summarized in Table 1—where ϵ_r is the relative permittivity, ρ is the density, and κ is the bulk modulus. TA pressure signals as well as the source strength predicted by the computational models are contrasted with those experimentally measured in the first of our TA imaging testbeds. Six sand samples having different quantitatively-controlled saturation levels are prepared for the experiment.

The second experiment is aimed at demonstrating that TA imaging can effectively be used to monitor fingered water infiltration in a quasi-3D sand cell. The testbed is shown in Fig. 1c. Since only one transducer is applied in the experiment, the sand cell with static water distribution is imaged.

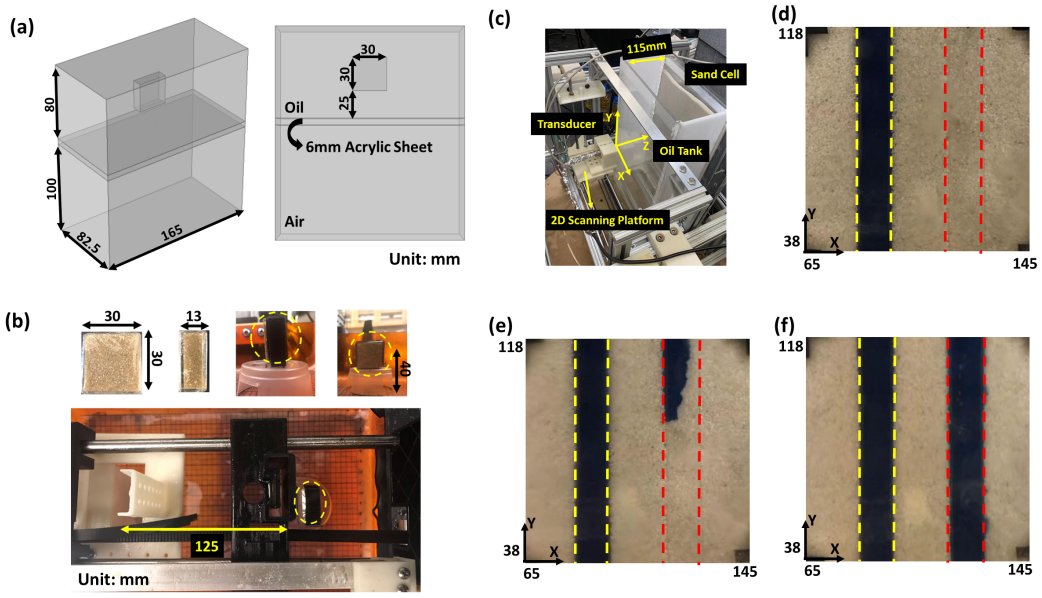

Figure 1: Monitoring water distribution profile in sand using the TA wave: (a) RPM-driven simulation geometry, (b) the testbed for the first experiment, (c) the testbed for the second experiment, (d) water distribution inside the marker, (e) water distribution after the first injection, and (f) water distribution after the second injection.

3 Data Collection

In the first experiment, a plastic box with one facet removed is filled with 12.5g of sand (#20 graded). The size of the sand box is 30mm×30mm×13mm, as shown in Fig. 1b. While keeping the dry sample for comparison, the other five samples are injected with different amounts of water: 0.7g, 1.4g, 2.1g, 2.8g, and 3.5g, separately. Provided that the porosity of sand sample is $\Phi = 30\%$, this results in water saturations of 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, and 100% for each sample, respectively. Later, the sand box is sealed with a thin layer of plastic wrap and black waterproof tape. Finally, the sand box is held still for 1 hour to allow for the water to spread through the sample, since the water is injected from the opening facet of the sample. As it can be seen in Fig. 1b, the sand sample is placed parallel to the transducer in the oil bath at a distance of 125mm away from the transducer. Moreover, the center of the sand sample is lifted 40mm to match the height of the transducer. After one measurement is finished, the previous sand box is replaced with another sand sample with different saturation level.

In the second experiment, the quasi-3D sand cell (10mm thickness) is separated from the acoustic transducer by an oil tank. The distance between the sand cell and the transducer is 115mm. The sand sample under test is geometrically constrained to a small narrow region using a plastic enclosure, and two such enclosures are prepared: the left one is fully saturated as the marker for reference (yellow dashed line in Fig. 1d), and the right one is for dynamic water distribution imaging (red dashed line in Fig. 1d). In the first part of this experiment, 1.5mL of blue-dyed water is injected from the top into the right enclosure, which is shown in Fig. 1e. In the second part of this experiment, additional amount of 3.9mL of blue-dyed water is injected into the right enclosure, and the final water distribution is shown in Fig. 1f. In this experiment, the selected imaging area ranges from X = 65mm to X = 145mm, Y = 38mm to Y = 118mm, and Z = 100mm to Z = 140mm. The scanning range of transducer is slightly larger than the imaging area to achieve

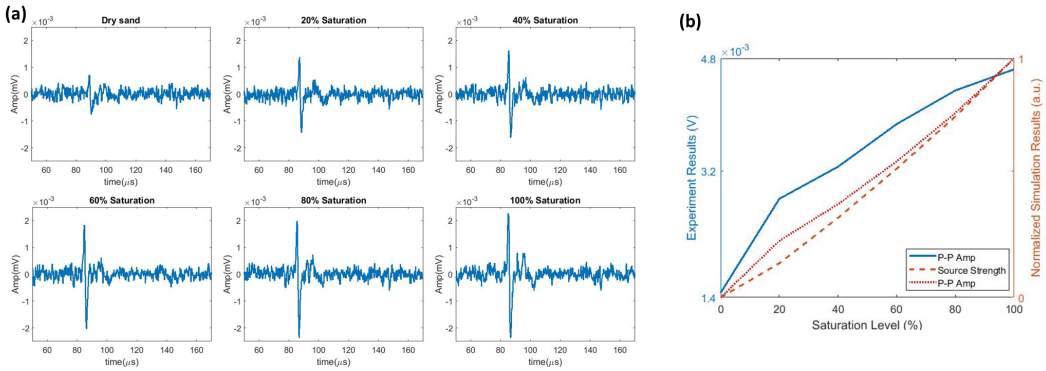

Figure 2: The monotonic relationship between water saturation and the TA amplitude: (a) measured signals of the sand box saturated by different amount of water, and (b) the peak-peak amplitude of the collected signals (solid line), the simulated source strength (dashed line) and the peak-peak amplitude (dotted line) after normalization.

better resolution in X-Y plane, ranging from X = 53mm to X = 157mm in X-direction and Y = 26mm to Y = 130mm in Y-direction. The raster scan is conducted four times: dry sand, after the preparation of the marker, after the first injection and after the second injection into the right enclosure. Moreover, to guarantee the fully spread of water, the raster scan starts after the water profile stops moving. The measurements are collected with 4mm spatial separation for every measured point, thus making a total number of 729 measurements for each scan. During these scans, the power of the EM wave remains constant, and the difference between the successive measurements should be the effect of the injected water.

4 Results

In the first experiment, the collected TA signals for samples with different water saturations are plotted in Fig. 2a. As it can be seen, the amplitudes of the measured signals depend on the amount of water in the sand. The peak-peak value of those signals are plotted in Fig. 2b, and the simulated source strengths as well as the peak-peak amplitudes are also shown for comparison after normalization. Several points in Fig. 2b deserve discussion. All results in Fig. 2b exhibit a strictly monotonic relationship between the TA signal amplitude with the amount of injected water, which reveals the feasibility of distinguishing the water saturation in sand using TA waves. The simulated results of peak-peak amplitude and source strength both show a nearly linear relationship against the saturation level, which can be used as a prediction for the water saturation level in the following experiment. We also observe that the dry sand can transmit a detectable TA wave in the experiment while the simulation result shows a zero source strength. This is because the sand used in the experiment is not fully dehydrated. Furthermore, the trend of the experimental measurements exhibit a reversed curvature when compared to that of the simulated results, which may be attributed to by several factors. Firstly, the numerical simulation considers the sample to have a homogeneous distribution of water saturation; while the experiment may have a heterogeneous one due to the water injection in the open facet of the box. Secondly, there may exist important differences between the material properties predicted by the selected RPM and the sand sample used in the experiment.

In the second experiment, the left enclosure, as shown in Fig. 1d, is fully saturated to determine the saturation level of the dynamic water distribution inside the right en-

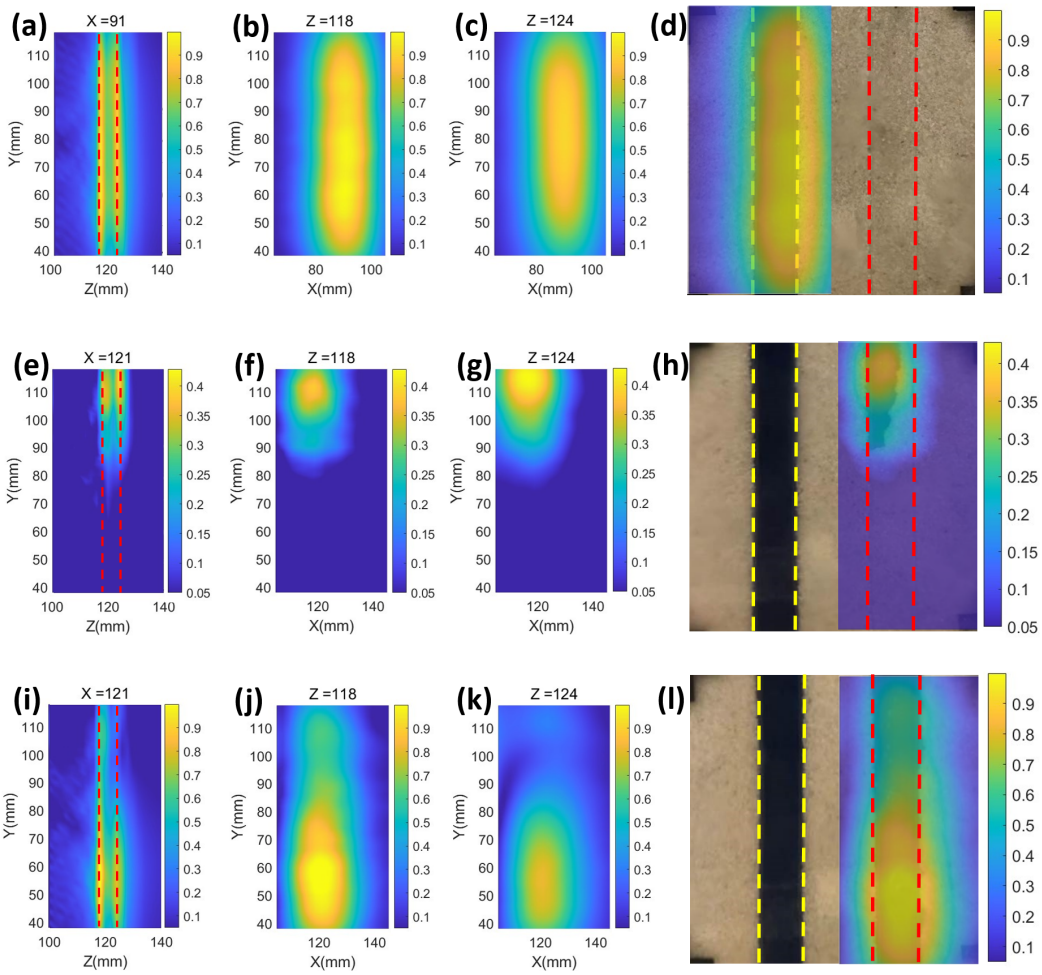

Figure 3: Water distribution reconstruction using the TA waves: (a) slice taken at X = 91mm for marker, (b) slice taken at Z = 118mm for marker, (c) slice taken at Z = 124mm for marker, (d) overlapping marker image with ground truth, (e) slice taken at X = 121mm for the first injection, (f) slice taken at Z = 118mm for the first injection, (g) slice taken at Z = 124mm for the first injection, (h) overlapping the first injection image with ground truth, (i) slice taken at X = 121mm for the second injection, (j) slice taken at Z = 118mm for the second injection, (k) slice taken at Z = 124mm for the second injection, and (l) overlapping the second injection image with ground truth.

closure based on the simulated results presented in the first experiment. The images after first infiltration—Fig. 1e—show that the color intensity of the fluid map is mainly remained on the top. Moreover, the fluid distribution after the second injection has spread to the whole area of the enclosure compared with the first injection. This visual information is used as optical ground truth to drive the comparison with the TA image.

Figure 3a presents the imaging result of a cross section (X = 91mm) for the marker area, which shows the capability of TA imaging to recover subsurface information of the sandy medium. It is noteworthy that the position of the selected cross section is not at the center of the imaging area but, rather, at the center of the marker area. As shown in Fig. 3a, the intensity of the image stays constant from top to the bottom of the enclosure, in agreement with the optical ground truth of Fig. 1d. Furthermore, the first peak appears at Z = 118mm and the second peak appears at Z = 124mm in the image, corresponding to the front and back boundary of the sand cell, individually. In addition, the image strength at the first and second peaks is similar because the EM wave is transmitted from the back (negative X direction), which partly compensates for the attenuation effect. The reconstructed images of the water infiltration profile in the X-Y plane are shown in Figs. 3b and 3c, which correspond to the slice taken at Z = 118mm and Z = 124mm, respectively. Both recovered images show an uniform distribution inside the area of the enclosure. Figure 3d overlaps the ground truth of marker with the front boundary image. Figures 3e-h present the imaging results after the first injection. In contrast with Fig. 3a, the image strength in Fig. 3e stays on the top part of the enclosure, which agrees with the ground truth in Fig. 3h. Compared with those results of the first injection, the recovered images for the second injection in Figs. 3i-l show an increased concentration in the bottom part of the enclosure. It is also noticed that Figs. 3j and 3k slightly differ from each other because the water distribution is not uniform in the thickness direction.

Additionally, it is also observed that there exists about 3mm difference between the ground truth and the image in Z-direction as shown in Fig. 3a, which is due to the device delay. In addition, Figs. 3e and 3i also recover the front and back boundaries at Z = 118mm and Z = 124mm, which proves that 3mm's delay is constant for different scans. Furthermore, the distance between two boundaries is just 6mm, smaller than thickness of the sand cell. There are two factors contributing to this result: firstly, the acoustics properties of water-saturated sand are assumed to be unknown during the image reconstruction, and the properties of oil are used instead; secondly, the thickness of marker enclosure is smaller than the thickness of sand cell, which is about 6.5mm. Despite these precision tolerances, our TA imaging accurately recovers the shape of the water distribution in the testbed.

5 Conclusions

In this letter, we have demonstrated that thermoacoustic pressure waves, which result from the thermodynamic coupling of electromagnetic and mechanical waves, can be used for detecting and discerning water saturation in the subsurface. Moreover, the relationship between the amplitude of the thermoacustic pressure wave and the water saturation level is strictly monotonic, as predicted by our computational simulation and validated by the experimental data. On the basis of this result, we conducted a second experiment that demonstrated the feasibility of using thermoacustic waves to reconstruct fluid distribution in a quasi-3D sand cell. The superficial water saturation levels inferred from the optical ground truth images are in good agreement with the images reconstructed with our thermoacustic data. Both optical and thermoacustic images reveal the intrinsic effect of gravity on the distribution of the fluid on the porous media; however thermoacoustic imaging have the ability to do so quantitatively and in 3D. For the sake of reliability and simplicity in this first demonstration, only one mechanically scanned transducer was used to collect the TA data; a choice that limits the scanning speed and does

not have the temporal resolution necessary to track the dynamic gravity-driven fluid motion. Ongoing efforts in our lab are currently geared towards performing real-time imaging of fluid flow in porous media by using arrays of receiving transducers and volumetric coding fused with compressive imaging.

Open Research

The imaging algorithm is introduced in the supplementary file, and the experiment data is available on the Zenodo platform via https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7465796.

Acknowledgments

This work has been partially funded by the Department of Energy (Award DE-SC0017614) and the NSF CAREER program (Award No. 1653671). RL was partly supported by the Abdul Latif Jameel World Water and Food Security Lab (J-WAFS) at MIT. RJ acknowledges funding from the US Department of Energy (Award DE-SC0018357).

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