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ENSURING ENVIRONMENTAL SAFETY IN OIL AND GAS PRODUCT PROCESSING

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Abstract: This article examines technological, organizational, and monitoring approaches to ensuring environmental safety in oil and gas product processing. Atmospheric emissions, fugitive leaks, flaring, wastewater, oily sludge, hazardous waste, soil and groundwater protection, as well as odor and noise issues are analyzed. An integrated environmental management model is proposed that combines pollution prevention at source, the use of closed systems, progressive treatment technologies, continuous monitoring, emergency preparedness, and systematic environmental management.

Keywords: environmental safety, oil refining, gas processing, emissions, wastewater, LDAR, hazardous waste.

Introduction

Oil and gas processing enterprises, in addition to producing finished products, generate atmospheric emissions, wastewater, solid and liquid wastes, as well as odor, noise, and thermal impacts. If these streams are inadequately managed, they may create risks for employees, surrounding communities, ambient air, water bodies, and soils.

Environmental safety does not imply shutting down production. Its objective is to ensure sustainable plant operation through the rational use of resources, prevention of pollution at source, and reliable treatment of residual waste streams.

Atmospheric emissions include CO2, NOx, and SO2 from combustion processes; fugitive emissions of volatile organic compounds and methane from equipment; process releases to vent systems; flare emissions; and storage tank vapors. Benzene and hydrogen sulfide require particular attention because of their elevated risks to health and process safety.

Wastewater is generated during crude oil desalting, sour-water treatment, cooling, process drainage, removal of bottom water from storage tanks, and precipitation falling on industrial areas. Such streams may contain oil, phenols, sulfides, ammonium, suspended solids, and other contaminants.[1]

Oily sludges, spent catalysts, adsorbents, filtration residues, and contaminated soils may be classified as hazardous wastes. Reuse or disposal without prior characterization of their composition increases environmental risks.

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The purpose of this article is to systematize the environmental risks associated with oil and gas processing and to develop an integrated methodological approach to their prevention, treatment, monitoring, and emergency management.

Research Methodology

The study is theoretical and applied in nature. Official and scientific sources concerning refinery emissions, wastewater treatment technologies, waste management, process safety, and environmental management were analyzed.

The units of analysis included the emission source, type of pollutant, transport pathway, affected receptor, prevention method, treatment technology, monitoring point, and emergency-response procedure.

Environmental measures were evaluated according to the following hierarchy: prevention at source, reduction of generation, reuse, recycling, treatment, and safe disposal. [2]

Table 1. Main Sources of Environmental Impact in Oil and Gas Processing

Source	Main pollutant	Impact pathway	Priority control
Furnaces and boilers	CO2, NOx, SO2, CO	Atmosphere	Fuel quality and combustion control
Valves, pumps, flanges	VOC, methane, benzene, H2S	Fugitive emissions	LDAR and low-emission seals
Flares and vent releases	CO2, CO, smoke, VOC, methane	Atmosphere and light impact	Flare minimization and gas recovery
Wastewater system	Oil, phenols, sulfides, ammonium	Water and air	Closed drainage and multi-stage treatment
Storage tanks	VOC and odor	Atmosphere	Floating roof and vapor recovery
Sludges and catalysts	Hydrocarbons, metals, sulfur	Soil and waste	Classification, recycling, safe storage
Spills and emergencies	Oil and chemicals	Soil and groundwater	Secondary containment and emergency response

Management of Atmospheric Emissions

Reducing emissions from combustion sources begins with fuel preparation, improved burner design, control of the air-to-fuel ratio, and increased energy efficiency. The use of lower-sulfur fuels contributes to lower SO2 emissions, while low-emission burners help reduce NOx formation. [3]

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Fugitive emissions originate from numerous small equipment components. A leak detection and repair (LDAR) program includes regular monitoring of valves, pumps, compressor seals, and flanges, timely repair of leaks, and documentation of the results.

Optical gas imaging enables rapid detection of large or otherwise invisible hydrocarbon plumes, but it does not replace quantitative measurement. Instrument calibration and meteorological conditions must be considered when applying this method.

In storage tanks, floating roofs, effective deck-seal systems, and vapor-recovery systems reduce evaporative losses. Emission volumes are also influenced by filling rate and product temperature.

The flare system is an essential safety element and cannot be eliminated entirely. Nevertheless, routine venting and purging flows can be reduced, flare gas can be recovered, and the causes of process upsets can be systematically analyzed.

Flare combustion efficiency depends on adequate gas heating value, proper mixing with steam or air, and flame stability. Excessive steam injection may cool the flame and reduce combustion completeness.

Wastewater Collection and Treatment

Effective wastewater treatment begins with segregation of streams. Mixing clean stormwater, oil-contaminated drainage, sour water, and highly concentrated process streams increases the load on treatment facilities.

API separators or plate-type oil-water separators remove free oil and coarse suspended solids by gravity. Dissolved air flotation may be used for emulsified oil and fine dispersed particles.

Sour-water stripping removes H2S and ammonia from water by means of steam. The separated gas is routed to a sulfur-recovery unit or an appropriate combustion system, while the treated water is directed to subsequent biological treatment.

Biological treatment reduces dissolved organic matter, phenols, and ammonium nitrogen through microbial activity. Toxic loads, temperature, pH, and oxygen conditions must be carefully controlled. [4]

At the polishing stage, depending on water-quality requirements and reuse objectives, filtration, activated carbon, membrane processes, or advanced oxidation may be applied.

Open surfaces in wastewater systems may act as sources of VOC and H2S emissions. In such cases, covering tanks, collecting vapors, and subsequently treating them are advisable.

Table 2. Stages of Wastewater Treatment

Stage	Main objective	Technology	Control parameter
Source segregation	Prevent mixing of high-load streams	Separate drainage system	Flow rate and composition
Primary treatment	Remove free oil and suspended solids	API/CPI separators	Oil and grease, TSS

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Stage	Main objective	Technology	Control parameter
Physicochemical treatment	Reduce emulsions and colloids	DAF, coagulation	Turbidity, oil
Sour water treatment	Remove H2S and NH3	Steam stripping	Sulfides, ammonium
Biological treatment	Reduce organics and nitrogen	Activated sludge/MBR	COD, BOD, NH4-N
Polishing	Final treatment and reuse	Filters, carbon, membranes	COD, TDS, specific indicators
Sludge management	Dewatering and disposal	Thickening, centrifugation	Moisture and hazardous composition

Waste Management and Protection of Soil and Groundwater

Oily sludges are generated during tank cleaning and in separator and wastewater-treatment systems. They contain hydrocarbons, water, mineral particles, and metals. Thermal desorption, centrifugation, bioremediation, or safe disposal is selected according to waste composition.

Spent catalysts may contain nickel, vanadium, molybdenum, cobalt, and residual hydrocarbons. Recovery of valuable metals and assessment of hazardous properties are important management directions.

Waste-storage areas should be covered, clearly labeled, equipped with chemically resistant surfaces, and provided with secondary containment. Mixing incompatible wastes may cause chemical reactions or fire. [5]

Leaks from tanks and pipelines may contaminate soil and groundwater. Double bottoms, leak-detection systems, cathodic protection, and periodic inspections are key preventive measures.

Groundwater monitoring wells should be located with consideration of the direction of hydrogeological flow. Results from background and downgradient points should be analyzed over time.

At sites affected by historical spills, the extent of contamination is determined through analysis of soil gas, soil, and groundwater. The remediation method is selected according to contaminant properties and geological conditions.

Environmental Monitoring and Management

Environmental monitoring should not be limited to checking compliance with emission and discharge standards. It should also include process indicators, equipment integrity, resource consumption, and emergency events.

Continuous emissions monitoring systems may be used on furnaces, sulfur-recovery units, and incinerators to measure SO2, NOx, CO, and O2. Reliable data require calibration and quality assurance/quality control procedures.

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Perimeter monitoring helps control concentrations of benzene and other substances at the plant boundary. Results should be interpreted together with wind direction and other meteorological data.

In wastewater systems, flow-proportional sampling and online monitoring of pH, conductivity, and oil content allow deviations to be detected rapidly. Laboratory analyses confirm a broader set of parameters.

An environmental management system based on ISO 14001 structures the identification of environmental aspects, consideration of legal requirements, setting of objectives, auditing, and continual improvement.

Transparent public reporting increases trust; however, data should be understandable, comparable, and accompanied by a clear description of the methodology used.

Table 3. Key Environmental Monitoring Indicators

Area	Indicator	Method	Response action
Stack emissions	SO2, NOx, CO, O2, opacity	CEMS and periodic testing	Burner and process adjustment
Fugitive emissions	VOC, methane, H2S	Method 21, OGI, sensors	Repair under LDAR program
Plant boundary	Benzene, H2S, meteorological data	Passive/continuous monitoring	Source investigation
Wastewater	Flow, pH, COD, oil, sulfides, NH4	Online and laboratory analysis	Stream diversion and process adjustment
Groundwater	TPH, BTEX, conductivity	Monitoring wells	Leak investigation and remediation
Waste	Mass, composition, destination	Waste profile and laboratory analysis	Minimization and recycling
Resources	Water, energy, flare streams	Metering and balance	Efficiency-improvement projects

Emergency Situations and Environmental Response

A major spill, fire, flare-system malfunction, H2S release, or wastewater-treatment failure can simultaneously affect environmental and process safety. The response plan should clearly define roles, communication channels, isolation procedures, and notification requirements.

In the event of a spill, the source should first be stopped safely, the spread should be contained using bunds, booms, or sorbents, and then the released material and contaminated materials should be recovered and managed appropriately.

If firefighting water is not directed to a dedicated containment system, pollutants may leave the facility boundary. Emergency holding basins and controlled drainage valves are therefore important.

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In the event of an H2S or other toxic-gas release, wind direction must be considered when deciding whether to shelter in place or evacuate; gas monitoring and communication with surrounding communities should also be ensured.

After an emergency is controlled, it is necessary not only to restore equipment but also to conduct root-cause analysis, assess environmental damage, and implement measures to prevent recurrence.

Table 4. Environmental Emergencies and Initial Response Measures

Situation	Primary risk	Initial response	Follow-up stage
Oil spill	Soil/water contamination, fire	Stop source and contain release	Recovery, analysis, remediation
H2S release	Acute poisoning	Alarm, evacuation, respiratory protection	Source isolation and monitoring
Wastewater-treatment bypass	High load to receiving water	Emergency holding and stop discharge	Restore treatment and sampling
Flare malfunction	Smoke, CO/VOC and noise	Stabilize the process	Cause analysis and minimization
Tank fire	Emissions and contaminated firefighting water	Emergency response, foam suppression	Firewater management and treatment
Waste reaction	Heat, gas, or fire	Isolate area	Safe removal and review procedures

Discussion

The most effective environmental-safety strategy is not to clean up pollution after it has already been generated, but to reduce its formation during design and operation. Closed systems, energy efficiency, and feedstock control can simultaneously reduce several types of environmental impact.

Managing air, water, and waste separately may result in transferring pollution from one environmental medium to another. For example, separating oily sludge from water does not solve the environmental problem unless the sludge is subsequently processed or disposed of safely.

A large number of measurements does not by itself guarantee environmental safety. Each indicator should have defined response thresholds, responsible personnel, and corrective actions.

Conclusion

Environmental safety in oil and gas processing requires integrated management of atmospheric emissions, wastewater, waste, soil, groundwater, and emergency situations.

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Key technical priorities include pollution prevention at source, equipment-integrity assurance, LDAR programs, closed drainage systems, flare minimization, multi-stage wastewater treatment, and waste recycling.

Effective monitoring, environmental management, transparent reporting, and emergency preparedness ensure the sustained effectiveness of technological measures.

Practical Recommendations

1. Prepare a complete inventory of all emission sources, wastewater streams, and waste-generation points at the enterprise.

2. Implement a risk-based LDAR program with systematic inspections and prompt repair of detected leaks.

3. Establish accounting for flare and vent streams and reduce routine operational losses.

4. Separate clean and contaminated drainage and ensure closed management of wastewater streams.

5. Strengthen online monitoring at sour-water stripping, DAF, and biological-treatment stages.

6. Recycle or dispose of sludges and spent catalysts only after laboratory characterization and classification.

7. Integrate monitoring of tanks, pipelines, and groundwater with the equipment-integrity management program.

8. Regularly conduct drills for spills, H2S releases, firefighting-water management, and wastewater-treatment failures.

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