
An Introduction to Air Sparging for Soil Remediation

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1. TECHNOLOGY DESCRIPTION.

1.1 INTRODUCTION. This discussion provides an overview of air sparging, describes various applications of the technology, and discusses the underlying physical processes that occur during in-situ air sparging (IAS).

IAS.

2. OVERVIEW OF AIR SPARGING.

2.1 INTRODUCTION. Air sparging is the process of injecting air into the saturated subsurface to treat contaminated soil and groundwater. Air sparging mechanisms include partitioning of volatile contaminants from the aqueous phase to the vapor phase (stripping), for their subsequent transfer to and removal from the unsaturated zone, and transfer of oxygen from the injected air to the aqueous phase to enhance aerobic microbial degradation of contaminants in the saturated zone, termed biosparging. Air sparging may be used for these diverse applications, which are addressed.

2.1.1 TREAT SATURATED ZONE CONTAMINATION in a source area (although its effectiveness in remediating non-aqueous phase liquids [NAPL] is subject to some fundamental physical limitations, especially with respect to dense NAPL [DNAPL]).

2.1.2 TREAT DISSOLVED PHASE contamination in a plume.

2.1.3 CONTAIN A DISSOLVED-phase plume.

2.1.4 IMMOBILIZE CONTAMINANTS through chemical changes.

2.2 TREAT SATURATED ZONE IN A SOURCE AREA.

2.2.1 SATURATED ZONE CONTAMINATION exists at many locations where fuel hydrocarbons or organic solvents have been released into the subsurface. Such “source”

areas contain contaminants dissolved in the aqueous phase and also typically contain NAPL. Groundwater pump-and-treat, which until recently was often relied upon to treat such saturated zone contaminants, is a very slow remediation process and has been judged as having met with little success except as a containment tool (NRC 1994). With the dawning of this recognition, attention turned to alternative technologies. Although air-based remediation technologies, such as Soil Vapor Extraction (SVE) and Bioventing (BV), gained favor for treatment of unsaturated zone contamination, they do not apply to the saturated zone. IAS, however, is an air-based technology that is meant to be applied within the saturated zone. The view was widely expressed by early practitioners that IAS can achieve site closure—implying treatment of both dissolved-phase and non-aqueous phase contaminants if present—much more rapidly than pump-and-treat. As more experience was gleaned from applying IAS at numerous sites, these and other practitioners have tended to adopt a somewhat more circumspect view, especially with respect to its effectiveness in treating NAPL in the saturated zone and the capillary fringe.

2.2.2 THERE ARE FUNDAMENTAL physical limitations on the effectiveness of air sparging for treating light NAPLs (LNAPLs). LNAPLs tend to form pools above the water table or discontinuous ganglia throughout the capillary fringe and smear zone. These LNAPL pools and ganglia represent potentially large sources of VOCs with relatively limited surface areas. The small surface area of such NAPL bodies limits the rate of interphase mass transfer of VOCs from NAPL into sparge air, in much the same way as it limits the transfer of VOCs from NAPL into groundwater. However, over time, pooled volatile LNAPL, such as gasoline or jet fuel, and residual NAPL in the smear zone may be remediated by combined IAS/SVE approaches. Laboratory experiments performed with poorly graded coarse sand imbued with benzene NAPL “pools” demonstrated fairly rapid NAPL removal. The potential for remediation of less volatile LNAPLs (e.g., diesel or fuel oils) is less promising, relying more on biodegradation potential than enhanced volatilization of the LNAPL.

2.2.3 AIR SPARGING IS PARTICULARLY challenged to remediate dense non-aqueous phase liquid (DNAPL) sites. In addition to the limitations of interphase mass transfer, the

effect of capillary pressures on DNAPLs and sparged air operates to inhibit these two phases from contacting one another in the subsurface. In even moderately heterogeneous aquifers, DNAPLs tend to pool atop low-permeability lenses when they lack the entry pressure to penetrate the lower-permeability lens. Sparged air likewise often fails to enter lower-permeability lenses from below, because the capillary pressure resisting air flow through low-permeability units is even greater than that resisting the DNAPL. As a result, the sparged air tends to flow around the lower-permeability lens before continuing upward, never contacting the DNAPL resting atop the lens. Modeling suggest that DNAPL can be remediated by IAS in homogeneous media. These results have been confirmed in a laboratory setting, where TCE NAPL was removed by IAS from uniform coarse sands, though at slower removal rates than benzene LNAPL in an equivalent setting (Adams and Reddy 1999). However, numerical simulation of IAS in heterogeneous media concluded that DNAPL remediation by IAS is not favored, although it may be possible (if not cost effective) with extremely detailed site characterization information and carefully positioned well screens.

2.2.4 A SECONDARY EFFECT of applying IAS in a source area is that the resulting reduction in hydraulic conductivity in the source area reduces the rate at which groundwater flows through that area, thereby reducing the rate at which contaminants migrate from the source area, which in turn reduces the rate at which a downgradient plume is supplied with contaminants.

2.3 TREAT DISSOLVED PHASE IN A PLUME AREA. Another common application of IAS is for the treatment of dissolved phase contamination in a plume, downgradient of source areas. Configurations used for aqueous-phase treatment include the installation of an array of air sparging points, spaced so that each individual ZOI overlaps. When the source is a release of light non-aqueous phase liquid (LNAPL) (e.g., gasoline, fuel oil), the dissolved plume is often primarily situated near the water table surface of an unconfined aquifer. In such cases IAS points can be conveniently located just below the plume to obtain the desired coverage. In a survey of 32 IAS case studies, Bass and Brown

(1996) concluded that performance of IAS systems was generally better in systems treating dissolved-phase plumes than in systems treating adsorbed contaminants.

2.4 CONTAIN A DISSOLVED PHASE PLUME.

2.4.1 A THIRD TYPE OF APPLICATION of IAS is to contain a dissolved-phase plume. A series of sparge points with overlapping zones of influence can be arrayed along a line perpendicular to the plume axis and within or just downgradient of the leading edge of the plume, so as to intercept it. This approach can also be incorporated within a funnel-and-gate configuration, in a manner similar to the placement of a permeable barrier or reactive wall, although use of impermeable funneling barriers, such as sheet walls, are not necessarily required with sparge curtains. The objective of this approach is to halt contaminant migration.

2.4.2 CARE MUST BE TAKEN TO PREVENT diversion of a groundwater plume around a sparge curtain or sparge gate. Groundwater can be diverted with implementation of IAS if air saturation values increase within the sparge zone, causing marked reductions in hydraulic conductivity there. This problem can be avoided by cycling or pulsing the IAS system, as is discussed in greater detail in paragraph 6-6b. With sparging trenches, the use of high permeability material can offset to some degree the loss of hydraulic conductivity attributable to air saturation.

2.4.3 SEE “DESIGN GUIDANCE FOR Application of Permeable Barriers to Remediate Dissolved Chlorinated Solvents” for information on funnel-and-gate systems or contact the USEPA Remediation Technologies Development Forum (RTDF) Permeable Barriers Working Group through USEPA’s Technology Innovation Office, 401 M Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20460. e. Immobilize Contaminants through Chemical Changes. A fourth way to potentially use IAS is to immobilize contaminants through chemical changes (e.g., oxidation of arsenic, its subsequent complexation with iron hydroxides, and precipitation). Aeration increases dissolved oxygen concentration in the groundwater, and causes an accompanying increase in oxidation reduction potential (redox). Consequently,

redox reactions can occur at or near IAS wells. While iron fouling of the IAS well screen would represent an adverse result, which would need to be avoided, immobilization within the aquifer of unwanted inorganic compounds, such as heavy metals, is a beneficial, although potentially reversible, effect (Marley and Hall 1996).

3. AIR SPARGING TECHNOLOGY OPTIONS. Air sparging can be performed by any of the following techniques.

3.1 INJECTION INTO THE SATURATED ZONE. Injecting air directly into the saturated zone, termed in-situ air sparging, shall be emphasized in this EM. SVE often accompanies IAS to control fugitive emissions of the VOCs that are carried to the unsaturated zone by IAS.

3.2 VERTICAL OR HORIZONTAL WELLS. IAS has been performed using horizontal sparging and venting wells at numerous sites, including at the USDOE Savannah River Site demonstration (Lombard et al. 1994). At the Hastings East Industrial Park, Hastings, NE, USACE U.S. Army Engineer District, Kansas City, employed a horizontal sparging well to intercept a dissolved plume downgradient of a source area, as well as a vertical sparging well within the source area itself. Horizontal and vertical wells can also be mixed within a single sparge and vent well field to give greater control of injection or extraction rates at various locations, and to optimize costs.

3.3 INJECTING GASES OTHER THAN AIR. Injecting gases other than air (e.g., pure oxygen, ozone, methane, butane, propane, pure nitrogen, or nitrous oxide) may enhance the speed at which bioremediation proceeds or alter the conditions under which it occurs. The USDOE Savannah River Site demonstration (Lombard et al. 1994, Hazen et al. 1994) successfully injected gaseous nutrients to stimulate aerobic methanotrophic cometabolic biodegradation of trichloroethylene (TCE). Methane was injected to serve as a source of carbon (injected continuously at a level of 1% methane in air, or intermittently at 4% methane in air), along with nitrous oxide (0.07%) and triethyl phosphate (0.007%) to serve as gaseous sources of nitrogen and phosphorus, respectively. Over the period of the multiyear demonstration, the majority of the estimated contaminant mass was removed.

3.4 OZONE SPARGING. Sparging with a mixture of air and ozone has been used to address organic contamination in ground water through chemical oxidation. Contaminants treated have included TCE and methyl-tert-butyl ether (MTBE). Though

anecdotal reports suggest contaminant removal, the contribution from chemical oxidation is difficult to quantify. The stability of the ozone in a natural aquifer environment may be quite limited and the short half-life for ozone greatly limits the distance ozone can diffuse from channels of coarser grained soils. Oxidation in saturated pores is therefore quite limited in most circumstances. Contaminants may also diffuse to coarse-grained channels and oxidation may occur in the vapor phase. Whether the contaminant removal is through volatilization and capture in the vadose zone (the case with common insitu air sparging) or through chemical oxidation in the channels, the contaminant removal is limited by the diffusion to the channels. The benefit of ozone injection is not clear for readily volatilized contaminants and would likely be limited for less volatile contaminants if the oxidation is to occur in the vapor phase. Some vendors of ozone sparging claim the ozone travels as microbubbles through the formation, but other work clearly shows that gases travel through saturated porous media in channels. The basis of the vendors' claims of microbubble transport has not been well documented. The advantage of gas transport as microbubbles, if such occurs, is an increase in the air-to-liquid interfacial area that increases the rate of partitioning of the contaminant out of solution.

3.5 INJECTING STEAM.

3.5.1 STEAM CAN BE INJECTED in conjunction with, or instead of, air to incorporate a thermal treatment element to traditional air sparging technology. Steam injection has been employed successfully to remediate VOC-contaminated aquifers that would otherwise be difficult to remediate using traditional IAS and to remediate contaminants not amenable to traditional IAS (EPA 1997a,b, 1998).

3.5.2 STEAM INJECTION DESIGN and operation are subject to many of the same constraints as air stripping. Considerations related to multi-phase flow (i.e., preferential flow paths) are important in determining whether steam injection has the potential to succeed at a site. However, because steam incorporates an element of thermal treatment, the necessary vapor-water contact area can be substantially less than for traditional air sparging. Because the thermal conductivity rates are much higher than

diffusive mass transfer between vapor filled pores and the surrounding water filled pores, steam injection can affect a larger volume of soil for a given vapor-phase saturation. The lateral distribution of heat is further enhanced by the horizontal flow of hot condensate from injection wells. As steam will condense in the cooler parts of the subsurface, the vapor phase will not initially reach the vadose zone and this condensation front will migrate from the steam sparging/injection well until breaking through to extraction wells or the water table. To enhance vapor-phase transfer of contaminants and to provide oxygen for destructive oxidation processes, the steam is sometimes amended with air.

4. RELATED TECHNOLOGIES.

4.1 IAS IS RELATED TO SEVERAL other recognized remediation technologies, either as earlier versions or complementary techniques.

4.1.1 THE AERATION OF A WELL BORE or a tank is similar to air stripping for removal of VOCs from water, except that the stripping process is conducted within the well or container instead of in a packaged tower or tray tower.

4.1.2 THE INTRODUCTION OF OXYGEN to the region below the water table is directly related to insitu bioremediation. IAS can be an alternative to other means of introducing oxygen into the saturated zone.

4.1.3 THE USE OF AIR FOR CONVEYANCE OF VOCs is related to the process of SVE, which is often used in the vadose zone above IAS to recover the stripped VOCs.

4.2 IN-WELL AERATION IS A METHOD that introduces air into the lower portion of a submerged well pipe, so that air bubbles rise within the pipe, with associated vapor-to-liquid and liquid-to-vapor mass transfer. This groundwater circulation well (GCW) technology has been termed in-well aeration and is related to airlift pumping. In its most common configurations, placement of two screens, one at the bottom of the pipe and a second at the water table surface, enables aquifer water to be drawn into the pipe at its lower end and aerated and stripped water to exit at or above the ambient water table. Depending on the degree of anisotropy (i.e., provided the anisotropy is not too great), this circulation may create a widespread toroidal convection cell within the aquifer. As with IAS, SVE is often employed to extract and treat the vapors brought upward within the well pipe. All of the factors that limit the effectiveness of pump-and-treat also limit the effectiveness of GCW technology. Recent demonstrations of the GCW technologies have shown mixed success. Though definite contaminant concentration reductions have been observed, the hydraulic performance has been difficult to evaluate. The performance has been particularly disappointing in highly anisotropic (vertical/horizontal) aquifers

(NRL/PU/6115-99-384). Paragraph 8-3 describes patents on several potential configurations of in-well aeration. Otherwise this EM focuses on IAS, rather than GCW, technology.

4.3 PNEUMATIC FRACTURING, a technique of injecting a high-pressure gas or liquid into the subsurface to enhance airflow in tighter formations (e.g., silt and clay), may not be beneficial to IAS unless fractures can be controlled so as to be closely spaced. Otherwise, diffusion-limited mass transfer in low-permeability strata will limit IAS effectiveness. However, pneumatic fracturing has greater potential for steam applications, for which conductive heat transfer reduces the need for closely spaced fractures.

4.4 OTHER ENHANCEMENTS TO IAS have also been introduced. This EM attempts to encompass a broad view of IAS's potential capabilities and its limitations, as currently understood.

5. SUMMARY OF PHYSICAL PROCESSES.

5.1 DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF the pneumatics and hydraulics of IAS have been presented by several authors a somewhat abbreviated discussion will be offered here. During the early years of IAS, it was commonly assumed that IAS produces small air bubbles that rise within the aquifer, which we may think of as “the aquarium model.” Illustrations of the aquarium model frequently showed a conical distribution of air bubbles originating at the sparge point and moving upward and outward to the water table. It was later demonstrated in bench-scale research that bubble flow can occur, but only in porous media having relatively large (more than 1- to 2-mm diameter) soil grains and correspondingly large interconnected pores, such as in deposits consisting entirely of coarse sands or gravels. In finer-grained soils, saturated zone airflow resulting from air injection occurs in discrete pore-scale or larger-scale channels, rather than as uniform bubbles. More recently, researchers have described a third airflow geometry, termed “chamber flow,” that they have observed in soils with grain size of approximately 0.2 mm. Chamber flow is characterized by much higher air-filled volumes than would be expected from channel flow. Each of these geometries has different implications for the amount of air-to-water contact that governs the effectiveness of IAS.

5.1.1 THE SITUATIONS IN WHICH BUBBLE FLOW is the dominant airflow geometry are infrequent in actual IAS implementations. Aquifers with grain sizes exceeding 2 mm are not common. In addition, these aquifers must not have significant silt contents to fill the pores between the larger grains. However, in aquifers that are composed of large particle sizes, with associated large pore sizes, bubble flow dominates. Bubble flow, in which discrete air bubbles migrate upwards through the porous medium via a tortuous path, results in good air-to-water surficial contact and reasonably uniform distribution throughout the soil. Researchers observed in laboratory experiments using gravel-sized media (4 mm glass beads) that the rate of bubble rise is a function of the bubble size, is relatively constant once the bubble is formed, and is not a function of the depth in the water column.

5.1.2 FIGURE 2-2 DEPICTS CHANNEL FLOW at the pore scale, and Figure 2-3 illustrates channels at a larger scale for the cases of (a) IAS in homogeneous sand, and (b) IAS in heterogeneous sand. This airflow geometry can be described as air flow through distinct “capillary tubes” or interconnected gas filled pores. This view of IAS describes it as a type of multiphase flow, in which a continuous gaseous phase under pressure displaces the liquid phase from a sequence of pores and pore throats to create bundles of capillary tubes. Channel flow occurs if the resistance to flow in a pore throat (i.e., capillary pressure) is larger than the buoyancy forces associated with a bubble the size of the associated pores. In this case, the air present in an air-filled pore will remain stationary, until sufficient air pressure builds “behind” the bubble to overcome the capillary resistance. The additional pressure is provided by the air connection to the air source (i.e., the sparge well) through a channel that “grows” as additional pores are added to the channel or capillary tube. The larger-scale channels depicted in Figure 2-3 represent a longitudinal extension of the pore-scale displacement process, and are most apparent when airflow occurs predominantly within preferred pathways. In the case of IAS in uniform, unstructured silt or fine sand, large-scale channels will not be evident, although air displacement at the pore-scale still takes the form of capillary fingering. In the more common case of IAS in non-uniform soil, large-scale channels appear to predominate. Note that, for channel flow, the air and water saturations appear to conform to conventional pressure-saturation theory described by researchers. The implication is that air flow can be reasonably simulated for this particle-size range by existing multiphase models.

5.1.3 CHAMBER FLOW is a new concept that describes an IAS airflow geometry that is different than channel flow and is characterized by researchers.

- Significant horizontal flow component.
- Air-filled porosity within a region that is demarcated by a distinct, irregular boundary.
- Predominantly vertical inlet and outlet channels between horizontal “chambers”.

5.1.4 THE LABORATORY RESEARCH THAT LED TO THESE characterizations was done in visualization tanks, 127 cm high × 252 cm wide × 9 cm deep, filled with fine sand (grain size ~ 0.2 mm) mixed with reduced iron filings (10:1 volume ratio). After a period of sparging, the extent of air saturation within the soil was determined by sectioning the soil and visually observing oxidized iron (Peterson et al. 2001.) These experiments concluded that the spatial extent to which chamber flow affects the sediment column is highly variable, but its effect may exceed 50% on an area basis, or nearly 30% on a volume basis. These values appeared to be higher than observed in similar laboratory experiments using larger grain-sized media with resulting channel or bubble flow (Peterson et al. 2001).

5.2 BOTH SOIL STRATIGRAPHY AND HETEROGENEITY have a profound influence on the location of air flowpaths and density (i.e., air-filled porosity). For example, air injected into moderately permeable soil beneath laterally continuous, low permeability layers will tend to induce horizontal airflow through the higher permeability layer. This will result in little or no air flow into the lower permeability (i.e., confining) layer and possibly air pocket formation beneath the confining layer (Figure 2-3b). Soil layers characterized by low hydraulic conductivity, even if thin, can have very high entry pressure requirements and may permit very little upward movement of air through the aquifer. Soil layers characterized by high permeability can also prevent upward movement of air beyond them, because the entry pressure from the high permeability layer to the overlying lower permeability strata will likewise favor lateral movement of air over continued upward movement. Based on laboratory tank experiments, Reddy and Adams (2001) concluded that a permeability difference of one order-of-magnitude is sufficient to prevent migration of air from the higher permeability strata into the overlying lower permeability. This principle held true, even when the overlying layer was coarse uniform sand ($K = 4.6 \times 10^{-2}$ cm/s) and the sparged layer was coarse gravel ($K = 1.6$ cm/s).

6. COMPONENTS OF INJECTION PRESSURE. Whatever the geometry of the displacement, the injection pressure measured at the well head required to accomplish it has several components, as will be presented in the following. Note that the friction loss between well head and screen is only part of the injection pressure requirements —there is also the loss in the piping to the well and all the fittings. The following subparagraphs emphasize the loss between the well head and the screen because that is the portion that affects the injection pressure that can be measured at the well head.

6.1 HYDROSTATIC PRESSURE. A key component of the injection pressure is the hydrostatic pressure needed to displace the column of water standing in the well pipe:

$$P_h = \rho_w g (z_s - z_w) \quad (2-1)$$

where

- P_h = hydrostatic pressure ($\text{g cm}^{-1} \text{s}^{-2}$)
- ρ_w = density (g cm^{-3}) of the water
- g = gravitational acceleration (cm s^{-2})
- z_w = pre-sparging depth (cm) to the free-water surface within the sparge well
- z_s = depth (cm) to the top of the IAS well screen.

Considering that $1.01 \times 10^6 \text{ g cm}^{-1} \text{s}^{-2} = 101 \text{ kPa} = 14.7 \text{ psi}$, and that at typical values of water temperature and density, $14.7 \text{ psi} = 33.8 \text{ ft H}_2\text{O}$, it is useful to note that a hydrostatic pressure of 0.43 psi is required per foot of water column, i.e.,

$$P_h = 0.43 (z_s - z_w) \quad (2-2)$$

for P_h expressed in psig and z_w and z_s in feet. Table 2-1 presents conversions among various other units of pressure and pressure head.

6.2 FRICTIONAL LOSSES IN PIPE. The second component of the injection pressure is the headloss due to friction of fluid moving between the well head and the IAS well screen. Although the magnitude of friction loss can be significant, it may be neglected for typical applications of IAS such as ones that combine the following conditions: sparge well diameter > 5 cm (2 in.), well pipe length < 30 m (100 ft), and airflow rate < 0.4 m³/min (15 cfm). For smaller sparge well diameters, longer well pipe lengths, or higher airflow rates, frictional losses will be more significant. Similar losses may also occur in aboveground piping and should be anticipated.

6.3 FILTER PACK AIR-ENTRY PRESSURE. The third component of the injection pressure is the air-entry pressure of the filter pack, if present between the well screen and the formation. This value tends to be quite small, i.e., < 10 cm H₂O (0.14 psi) for uniform sands (uniformity coefficient, $C_u < 2.5$) commonly used as filter pack. This will be so even in cases where the filter pack in a developed well is adequately preventing fines from the formation from entering the well. Therefore, once there is sufficient applied pressure to displace all the water within the sparge well down to the top of the sparge screen, air readily enters the filter pack and displaces water from it. Buoyant forces are expected to cause the air to accumulate first at the top of the filter pack.

1 bar	<p>Units of Pressure</p> <p>= 10^5 N m^{-2}</p> <p>= 0.987 atmospheres</p> <p>= 14.5 psi</p> <p>= $10^6 \text{ dynes cm}^{-2}$</p> <p>= 100 kPa</p>
<hr/>	
and is equivalent to:	<p>Units of Pressure Head</p> <p>1020 cm column of water</p> <p>75.01 cm column of Hg</p>

Table 2-1

Pressure/Pressure Head Conversions

6.4 FORMATION AIR-ENTRY PRESSURE. The fourth component of the injection pressure is the air-entry pressure of the formation, P_e which is related using capillary theory to the pore size of the largest pores adjacent to the filter pack:

$$P_e = 2\sigma/r = 4\sigma/d \quad (2-3)$$

where:

- P_e = air-entry pressure (dynes/cm² = g cm⁻¹ s⁻²)
- σ = surface tension (g s⁻²) of water in air
- r = radius (cm) of the constrictions along the largest pores of entry
- d = diameter (cm) of the constrictions along the largest pores of entry.

Under the assumption that pores are cylindrical and the solid-liquid contact angle is zero, Equation 2-3 can be used to calculate the air-entry pressures of pores of various size (Table 2-2). Air entry pressures of formations range from negligible for coarse-textured media, such as coarse sands and gravels, to values of > 1 m H₂O (1.4 psi) for medium-textured soils, such as silts. Care needs to be exercised when using Equation 2-3 or Table 2-2 to predict air-entry pressures in soils consisting of a variety of pore-sizes, because the largest pores may not necessarily be continuous throughout the soil matrix. The inflection point, P_{infl} of a Van Genuchten curve fitted to the soil moisture retention data, which represents the predominant pore size within the soil, is therefore the recommended parameter to employ when estimating P_e . Under dynamic conditions, an initially saturated soil undergoing air entry will first begin to be permeable to air at this inflection point P_{infl} . P_{infl} is thus the effective air entry pressure that should be used for design.

6.5 AIR ENTRY PROCESS. Where a range of pore sizes is present in the subsurface, which is almost always the case even in seemingly uniform sands, silts, or clays, initial air entry naturally takes place via the largest pores available. The largest pores are the paths of least resistance, owing to both higher intrinsic permeability and lower entry pressures. If the largest network of pores is capable of conducting all the air that is injected into the well, then the pressure will not rise above the air-entry pressure, and smaller pores will remain liquid-filled. If, however, the combined conductivity of the largest pores is insufficient to convey away from the well all the air that is being injected, the applied pressure will rise, exceeding the air-entry pressures of the next smaller pore-size class. As the capillary pressure of the soil rises (as it must with higher air saturations and lower water saturations), the air permeability also increases. If the airflow being conveyed

into the well can now be accommodated, the air-filled porosity will not increase further; otherwise, the process of displacement of water from smaller pores will continue until a dynamic equilibrium is attained between applied pressure and airflow. Given that higher injection pressures are required to inject higher flow rates, higher air saturations and a wider extent of water displacement are therefore expected at higher injection flow rates. This is limited by the degree to which the stratigraphy will allow air penetration. Clay lenses and layers may still not allow further expansion of the zone of influence or air saturation in portions of the target treatment volume. Adams and Reddy (2000) observed in laboratory sand tanks filled with coarse sand that increased airflow increases the rate of contaminant removal. They concluded that the zone affected by IAS did not change, but air saturation within the zone increased with increased flow. Additional air flow enhanced the mass transfer and transport mechanisms, but a limit was reached where additional increases in the rate of air injection did not yield faster contaminant removal.

Typical Soil Description	Diameter of Largest Pore (μm)	Air-Entry Pressure (psi)	Air-Entry Pressure (kPa)
Coarse sand, macropores	>1000	<0.044	<0.3
Fine to med. sand	100	0.44	3.0
Silt	10	4.4	30
Silty clay	<1	>44	>300

Table 2-2
Representative Values of Air-Entry Pressure

6.6 IMPLICATIONS. Unless the resulting air-flow channels are small, close together, and well-distributed, mass-transfer external to them of i) contaminants into the air-filled channels, and ii) oxygen in the reverse direction for aerobic biodegradation, will both be limited by aqueous-phase diffusion. Researchers proposed a conceptual model of the mass transfer across the air/water interface and the associated oxygen and hydrocarbon concentration profiles (Figure 2-4), and concluded that unless air-filled channels are small and well-distributed, diffusion-limited transfer will limit the effectiveness of IAS (Figure 2-5). The degree of soil homogeneity and isotropy are the most important determinants of

air channel distribution during IAS. Soils such as interbedded sands and silts or other types of stratified deposits in which air permeability varies with direction or depth tend to sustain preferential airflow within the zones of higher permeability, which may or may not coincide with locations or layers having elevated contaminant concentrations. Uniform fine sandy or silty zones generally possess the most isotropic air permeabilities, and consequently are most appropriate for IAS as they are capable of producing a uniform and reasonably predictable ZOI. Conversely, soils such as massive clays having low values of air permeability are not amenable to IAS as excessively high air entry pressures can lead to soil fracturing and a low number of preferential flow channels conducting the entire air flow. An exception may be clays that are highly fractured. A recent API project completed in clay till produced significant mass removal with IAS. The till was highly fractured and as a result both NAPL and the IAS air flowed through the fractures. Research into the relationship between soil type, applied pressure, and airflow distribution is ongoing.

7. GROUNDWATER MIXING.

7.1 MIXING THROUGH DISPLACEMENT.

7.1.1 THE INTRODUCTION OF AIR INTO a water-saturated formation displaces some of the water (Figure 2-6). The upward displacement of the water grows (“the expansion phase”), while air makes its way to the water table surface, creating a transient groundwater mound. Researchers using geophysical visualization tools have observed a tendency in uniform sands for some portions of the initially dewatered zone to resaturate while stable airflow patterns become established (“onset of collapse”). Meanwhile, the mound dissipates radially outward (Figure 2-7) until a stable water table condition presents itself. Upon depressurization of the sparging, such as when the compressor is turned off, many of the air-filled channels will resaturate as the formation reimbibes water, and the water table is seen to collapse temporarily. This condition too is transient and will not result in significant groundwater flow. Turning the IAS system alternately on and off (“pulsing”) is a method of increasing air/water contact and groundwater mixing. Each displacement of water represents more vertical (and horizontal) mixing than is normally seen in groundwater, although the magnitude of the mixing effect appears to be relatively small. This is a significant issue for cleanup because most subsurface processes are intrinsically mixing-limited, i.e., they are not fully mixed and thus are not well modeled as fully mixed reactors, to use chemical engineering terminology. The potential benefits of pulsing and associated mixing phenomena are described elsewhere. It has been suggested that if the duration of the transient mounding period can be measured (i.e., by monitoring hydraulic head changes during IAS), this period may provide an estimate of the design duration and frequency of pulsing to deliberately maximize mixing of groundwater (Wisconsin DNR 1995). The degree to which mixing extends away from air-filled channels and thus helps overcome diffusion limitations is a matter of current research and debate.

7.1.2 PULSED INJECTION CAN BE CONDUCTED BY cycling injection on a single-well IAS system or by altering flow in adjacent injection wells in a field. Pulsed injection is most

effective for mobile dissolved phase contaminants because of the induced mixing. It is uncertain whether pulsed injection is effective for sorbed contaminants, or for residual (immobile) NAPL, which, being immiscible with water, is not readily mixed. It has been observed that preferential flow channels tend to be re-established at the same locations during each pulse. These reappearing pathways may represent those that consolidate after each expansion phase.

7.2 CONVECTION CURRENTS. It has been suggested that convection currents may develop during IAS which could cause groundwater to circulate near the sparge well. Such currents would form if the low density of the air stream causes the effective density of the fluid phase (air plus groundwater) near the well to be less than that of the groundwater at distances removed from the well, which would be anticipated only if air moves as discrete bubbles rather than in air-filled channels. Such currents would provide a mechanism for circulating water. These features may help move oxygenated water, but only if there is sufficient mass transfer from the vapor phase to oxygenate the groundwater. Convection currents are not viewed as a significant mechanism during IAS, however, because the effective density of water is not reduced except for the exceptional case of bubble flow (Wisconsin DNR 1993). Figure 2-6. Schematic representation of the behavioral stages occurring during continuous air sparging. Black arrows indicate air flow; white arrows indicate water flow. Mounding first develops during the transient expansion stage, dissipates during the collapse stage, and is generally negligible at steady state. Figure 2-7. Schematic cross section representing progressive mounding behavior at three successive times: (1) expansion; (2) onset of collapse; (3) approach to steady state.

8. ASSOCIATED TECHNICAL ISSUES. Aside from the issues described above that relate to conveying vapor through an aquifer, there are issues related to conveying the air to the injection points and from the vadose zone. At sites having very shallow water tables, the difficulties of capturing the vapors with SVE may result in fugitive releases of untreated VOCs. Care needs to be taken in handling the exhaust air to ensure that such releases are minimized. In particular, migration of vapors into occupied buildings must be prevented to avoid health or explosion risks. Although the equipment used for IAS is almost entirely “off-the-shelf,” the design must tie the individual items together into a system that moves the air in a controlled fashion. The control system requires careful consideration to meet this need. Also, the operational design can influence the need for operating permits, and these permits can affect the timing and schedule for a project.

8.1 ZONE OF INFLUENCE.

8.1.1 THE AREA SUFFICIENTLY AFFECTED BY a sparge well or well field is a primary design concern. Techniques applied to estimate the Zone of Influence (ZOI) include identifying the extent of measurable differences in pressure, dissolved gas concentrations, and air-filled channels within the saturated zone. Gas composition or pressure distribution in the unsaturated zone can also be indicators of ZOI. In this EM, ZOI is preferred over the more widely used “radius of influence” (ROI) in recognition that the effects of IAS tend to be non-uniform with respect to distance, depth, and direction relative to a sparge screen. Researchers proposed a working definition of the ZOI as the volume of the saturated zone with air-filled channels that are relatively closely spaced, and suggested this occurs where air saturation exceeds 10%. This discussion recommends a similar definition of ZOI, but the suggested minimum air saturation that indicates an adequate density of air channels is instead 3% (paragraph 5-3b). The effective ZOI radial distance is likely to be no more than 5 m (or approximately 15 ft). This saturated zone ZOI may be substantially smaller than that indicated by changes in pressure or gas composition in the unsaturated zone. Other potentially erroneous indications of ZOI also need to be discounted, such as evidence from monitoring wells that are serving as a conduit for injected air and therefore are subject to in-well aeration

and evidence based on mounding that has been observed to extend far beyond locations of air channels. In some cases, although a few air pathways may extend >30 m from the IAS well, they may not be within the zone where treatment is needed (i.e., the air may spread under confining layers.)

8.1.2 PULSED OPERATION IS DESIGNED so as to take advantage of the recurrence of the expansion phase during which the ZOI is somewhat larger than during steady state IAS. Pulsing and cycling are discussed further in paragraph 6-6b.

8.1.3 CONSIDERATION SHOULD BE GIVEN to the fact that not all hydrocarbons contained within the ZOI will be removed at the same rate. For example, at increasing distances from the sparge well, air flow velocities within a given channel must decrease because of frictional losses and accompanying pressure drop, in accordance with Darcy's Law or models of pipe flow, depending upon the scale. As a result, the rates of interphase mass transfer and hence hydrocarbon recovery and enhanced biodegradation are reduced.

8.2 PROMOTION OF BIODEGRADATION.

8.2.1 IN ADDITION TO IAS STRIPPING VOC from the groundwater, air sparging also stimulates aerobic biodegradation of many volatile and semi-volatile contaminants. Biodegradation will decrease or potentially eliminate the amount of VOC that must be captured and treated at the surface. When enhanced biodegradation is the primary intent of the air sparging system, then this technique is termed biosparging.

8.2.2 DISSOLVED OXYGEN is often the factor that limits biodegradation in the saturated zone. IAS is potentially a very cost-effective way to increase dissolved oxygen (DO) levels in the desired zone. However, as the solubility of oxygen from air is rather low at normal groundwater temperatures (ranging from 8 ppm at 25°C to 13 ppm at 5°C), the rate that

oxygen can be dissolved into groundwater is often slower than the rate that microbes consume the oxygen. Thus, it may be difficult to deliver adequate levels of oxygen to optimize biodegradation in contaminated regions.

8.2.3 DESPITE THIS MASS TRANSFER LIMITATION, IAS is generally the most cost-effective method available to introduce oxygen into the saturated zone. Other oxygen delivery mechanisms include injection of liquid hydrogen peroxide; sparging with pure oxygen; and slow release solid peroxide products such as Oxygen Release Compound (ORC). Per kilogram of oxygen delivered, IAS is typically orders of magnitude less expensive than other oxygen delivery methods.

8.2.4 WHEN CONSIDERING BIOSPARGING, it is important to evaluate the relative masses of: i) oxygen that can be sparged and dissolved into the groundwater, and ii) degradable hydrocarbons present in the saturated zone. Estimating the mass of contaminant below the smear zone (i.e., the mass of dissolved contaminant and the mass of sorbed contaminant), the mass of oxygen necessary for biodegradation can be calculated. Typically, approximately 3 g of oxygen are necessary to biodegrade 1 g of petroleum hydrocarbon. A comparison of the mass of oxygen necessary for biodegradation and an estimate of the rate of oxygen dissolution into groundwater during biosparging should be included as part of the evaluation of biosparging. This mass comparison can also be used to check design parameters of a biosparging system (such as the number of sparge points and the anticipated period of system operation) as developed.

8.2.5 A POSSIBLE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF the growth of aerobic microorganisms is the potential for biofouling of IAS well screens or filter pack materials near the sparge well. Although biofouling is not typically a major problem.

8.2.6 AT SOME SITES, anaerobic dechlorination of chlorinated ethenes (e.g., TCE) that occurs naturally in groundwater produces vinyl chloride (VC). IAS can inhibit the production of VC by maintaining aerobic conditions and can also strip the VC from the

groundwater. Anaerobic dechlorination of chlorinated ethenes and the conditions that affect this process are discussed at length in the U.S. Air Force's protocol on natural attenuation of chlorinated solvents.

8.2.7 IN GENERAL, IAS STRIPPING OF VOCS is the dominant means of removing contaminant mass during the early stages of system operation, whereas biodegradation is more likely to be the dominant process of removing mass of aerobically degradable compounds later in an IAS system's operational period (Leeson et al. 2002). Modeling studies suggest that enhanced biodegradation has the potential to contribute a significant portion of mass removal for aerobically degradable compounds when contaminant concentrations are less than 1 mg/L. Otherwise, volatilization effects predominate. The implication is that in source areas, volatilization is the initially dominant mode of mass removal, whereas in downgradient plumes, both volatilization and biodegradation can be important modes of mass removal.

9. TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT: EFFECTIVENESS AND LIMITATIONS.

9.1 ADVANTAGES OF IAS. The primary advantages of IAS over alternate remedial technologies are relative simplicity and low cost. IAS equipment is readily available and easy to install with minimal disturbance to site operations.

9.1.1 IAS COMPONENTS CAN BE INSTALLED during site investigations by completing borings as sparge wells, SVE wells, or monitoring points. Additional subsurface components can be installed cost-effectively via direct push methods, where the soil geology and required installation depth will permit their use.

9.1.2 FOR CERTAIN CONTAMINANTS, IAS can remediate through both in-situ stripping and promoting biodegradation.

9.1.3 IAS IS COMPATIBLE WITH other remedial methods, such as those employed to treat vadose zone contamination (e.g., SVE, and bioventing [BV]).

9.1.4 IAS CAN BE EMPLOYED TO effectively limit off-site migration of dissolved contaminants.

9.1.5 ONCE IMPLEMENTED, IAS systems require minimal operational oversight vs. SVE systems.

9.1.6 FOR IAS SYSTEMS NOT MATCHED with SVE, waste streams are not generated, and therefore do not need to be treated.

9.1.7 THE TECHNOLOGY IS JUDGED BY many practitioners as being a potentially effective method available for treating smear zone contamination.

9.2 DISADVANTAGES OF IAS. Disadvantages to IAS over alternate remedial technologies are primarily related to site physical or chemical characteristics that either

preclude contaminant removal or alter contaminant mobility to threaten potential receptors.

9.2.1 CONTAMINANTS ARE NOT EFFECTIVELY removed by IAS when, because of low Henry's Law constants or low volatilities, they are not amenable to air stripping.

9.2.2 TREATMENT IS NOT EFFECTIVE FOR semi-volatile contaminants that do not readily degrade aerobically.

9.2.3 GEOLOGICAL CONDITIONS, such as stratification, heterogeneity, and anisotropy, will prevent uniform air flow and cause IAS to be ineffective. The deeper below the water table that IAS wells are installed, the more likely it is that stratification will be encountered that will divert the airflow laterally.

9.2.4 FREE PRODUCT (NAPL) present in amounts significantly greater than residual saturation may constitute a virtually inexhaustible source of dissolved VOCs that may come only into limited contact with injected air. This is especially likely to be a concern relative to DNAPLs that will generally be present farther below the water table than LNAPLs, and thus will tend to have even less contact with sparged air. Thus, the presence of significant amounts of NAPL can inhibit successful remediation by IAS. The likelihood of success is lower for sites that are more heterogeneous with broadly distributed NAPL.

9.2.5 WHEN A SPARGE CURTAIN is used in an effort to contain a dissolved phase plume, the resulting zone of reduced hydraulic conductivity, can, if not managed, promote redirection of groundwater flow and allow the plume to bypass the IAS treatment zone.

9.2.6 POTENTIAL EXISTS FOR IAS to induce migration of contaminants, and to generate fugitive emissions. Fugitive emissions are not observed often, but are more problematic when IAS is used in shallow soil or bedrock.

9.2.7 ADDITIONALLY, A SINGLE IAS WELL has a limited areal coverage, and, consequently, a significant number of injection wells are commonly required.

9.2.8 IAS POSES THE RISK OF FORCING CONTAMINANT VAPORS into utility conduits, buildings, and sewer lines. Such vapors may, in extreme cases at petroleum-contaminated sites, represent explosion hazards. In many cases, the intrusion of uncontrolled contaminant vapors into buildings may represent health risks. As such, careful consideration and design of soil vapor extraction systems must be conducted where such risks may occur.

10. TECHNOLOGY STATUS. IAS has been implemented over the past decade at thousands of locations to address a variety of contaminants. IAS can currently be considered a mature remediation technology. Early research into IAS had primarily focused on defining air and groundwater physical dynamics. More recently, research has been focused on the development of practical approaches to implementation, including evaluating “rules of thumb,” particularly for enhancing mass removal, reducing rebound effects, and enhancing bioremediation. Questions still remain about treatment duration, the impacts of site heterogeneities, and site closure, particularly at locations where regulatory targets require that sorbed contaminants must be removed.

11. CONDITIONS AMENABLE TO IAS. Primary considerations for sites amenable to IAS include the site geology and contaminant type and phase. Table 2-3 provides a general summary of these considerations. Secondary considerations include adjacent receptors, whether currently threatened or potentially threatened after installing IAS, and infrastructure concerns, such as power availability, access, and proximity of active installations. It should be noted that Henry's Law constants for various contaminants are specified for steady state conditions between phases. These may be optimistic indicators for actual IAS systems, in which dissolved concentrations in groundwater adjacent to air channels are not in equilibrium with groundwater concentrations distant from air channels. Figure 2-9, IAS Implementation Decision Tree, displays a generalized description of the process of evaluating and implementing IAS.

12. RESULTS IN REGULATORY “CLOSURE”, i.e., no further remediation work is required by the appropriate agency. Specifically, success consists of the following.

12.1 EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF AIR or other gases into the desired zone.

12.2 DISTRIBUTION OF THE INTRODUCED GAS through the saturated subsurface at the design ZOI.

12.3 ACHIEVEMENT OF THE DESIGN LOADING of the vapor with VOC, or of the design biodegradation rate in the groundwater (which will vary depending upon concentration and dominant phase of remaining contaminant).

12.4 EFFECTIVE CAPTURE AND TREATMENT of the sparged vapor in the vadose zone near the water table (particularly to prevent intrusion of vapors into buildings at the site).

12.5 ATTAINMENT OF THE DESIGN hydrocarbon removal rates from the subsurface.

12.6 REMOVAL OF CONTAMINATION to below regulatory levels.

12.7 ACHIEVEMENT OF A NEGOTIATED, risk-based closure following IAS can also be considered a successful outcome even if cleanup standards have not been met (paragraph 7-2). Other success criteria include achievement of the project objectives within the allotted schedule and budget.

13. IAS MODELS.

13.1 ALTHOUGH THERE ARE an increasing number of operational data available to evaluate the effectiveness of IAS systems, mathematical models may be useful in the design process. Information (i.e., site data acquired from laboratory and field-scale pilot tests) would be used as input parameters in a given analytical or numerical model. Several attempts have been made to generate mathematical and computer models that describe the processes associated with IAS. Most met with little success because little was known about the actual rate of mass transfer that was occurring during air sparging, and it was impossible to validate model results when compared to field data.

Parameter	-	o	+
Contaminant Type	Weathered Fuels Lubricating Oils Hydraulic Fluids Dielectric Fluids PCBs	Diesel Fuel Jet Fuel Acetone MTBE	MOGAS AVGAS Halogenated Solvents ¹ BTEX
Geology	Silt and clay (interbedded) Massive clay Highly organic soils Fractured bedrock Stratified soil Confining layers	Weakly stratified soils Sandy silt Gravelly silt Highly fractured clay	Uniform coarse-grained soils (gravels, sands) Uniform silts
Contaminant Phase	Free product	Sorbed	Dissolved
Contaminant Location	Within confined aquifer: near bottom of unconfined aquifer	Within shallow aquifer	Near water table
Contaminant Extent	Large plumes ²	Modest-size plumes	Small plumes
Hydraulic Conductivity (cm/s)	<10 ⁻⁵	10 ⁻⁵ to 10 ⁻⁴	>10 ⁻⁴
Anisotropy	High degree of anisotropy	Moderate degree of anisotropy	Isotropic
<p>- IAS likely to have limited effectiveness o IAS likely to provide some benefit + Well suited for IAS ¹ IAS is generally applicable to halogenated ethenes, ethanes, and methanes. ² Sparge curtains may be effective in managing migration within large plumes</p>			

Table 2-3
Conditions Amenable to IAS

13.2 PRIOR TO MODEL DEVELOPMENT, a conceptual model must first be proposed. Early modelers assumed the injected air moved as isolated, random bubbles. With the recognition that injected air actually moves through discrete, continuous, air-filled channels separated by regions of complete water saturation, IAS models incorporating multiphase flow have been developed.

13.3 A NUMBER OF INVESTIGATORS have advanced the principles associated with these conceptual models and have developed mathematical models to assist in the design of air sparging systems. Several noteworthy IAS models have been developed and are presented in the literature. Several are cited below:

13.3.1 NORRIS AND WILSON (1996) present the results of a sparging model based on air channeling and a biosparging model based on air channeling and VOC and oxygen transport driven by dispersion.

13.3.2 MOHR (1995) presents an analytical solution for estimating the rate of biodegradation associated with air sparging.

13.3.3 RUTHERFORD ET AL. (1996) present the results of a one-dimensional finite difference model based on the equations for a cross-flow bubble column, which was used to calculate a lumped value of liquid mass transfer coefficient and interfacial surface area.

13.4 THE U.S. ARMY ENGINEER DISTRICT, SEATTLE, has, in the past, used a numerical model called POREFLOW® to simulate air sparging. A public domain version of the model, POREFLO-3© is available, however, the distributor has upgraded a proprietary version of the model (ACRI 1996). POREFLOW® runs on most any platform; the PC code is less than 1 Mb in size, but requires at least 10 Mb to operate the pre- and post-processor. POREFLOW® is a three-dimensional finite difference model that accounts for losses attributable to decay, solute transport, and partitioning. It is capable of simulating compressible fluids (e.g., air) and heat transport. Input parameters include the following.

13.4.1 POROUS MEDIA PROPERTIES (e.g., hydraulic conductivity, permeability versus saturation relationships, pressure–saturation relationships, storage values, and density).

13.4.2 FLUID PROPERTIES (mass, density, viscosity as a function of pressure and mole weight of gases).

13.5 TETRAD (DYAD 88 SOFTWARE, INC.) is a finite difference simulator, originally developed for the study of multiphase fluid flow and heat flow problems associated with petroleum and geothermal resource evaluation. Researchers modified the code for IAS applications to account for an air-soil, constant pressure, and surface boundary condition. TETRAD is capable of simulating three-dimensional, multiphase flow in complex, heterogeneous, anisotropic systems.

13.6 THE NUFT (Non-Isothermal, Unsaturated Flow and Transport) code is a multi-phase, non-isothermal, saturated/unsaturated, numerical transport model that would be very suitable for IAS modeling. It can be obtained with the DoD Groundwater Modeling System that would serve as a pre- and post-processor. Figure 2-9. IAS implementation decision tree.

13.7 TOUGH2/TMVOC is also a multi-phase, non-isothermal, saturated and unsaturated numerical transport model that can be applied to IAS simulations. The model is available from the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory. More information is available at <http://www.esd.lbl.gov>.

13.8 A LIMITATION ASSOCIATED WITH IAS MODELS is that the heterogeneities that control airflow paths are on a scale much finer than the available site characterization data. The processes that IAS models must incorporate include multiphase flow, buoyancy and capillary forces acting on air, and soil variability on a small and large scale (perhaps by stochastic methods).