

Original article

Investigating the Ground Deformation During and After CO₂ Sequestration in Deep Saline Aquifers

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Abstract

CO₂ injection in saline aquifers is a crucial method for carbon sequestration, reducing atmospheric CO₂ levels and mitigating climate change. Saline aquifers, due to their large capacity and widespread availability, serve as effective storage sites for CO₂, helping to isolate it long-term and prevent its release back into the atmosphere. This study investigates the uplift of the top surface of a deep saline aquifer due to CO₂ injection, using the finite element numerical approach. The density and viscosity of the injected supercritical CO₂ were considered as functions of temperature and pressure, while the density and viscosity of saline water were similarly modeled as temperature- and pressure-dependent. Geothermal temperature variations were also incorporated into the model. Additionally, the effects of halting injection after a certain period and the subsequent spread of injected CO₂ in the aquifer, driven by capillary and gravitational forces, were examined in relation to the displacements. Both horizontal and vertical well configurations were studied. The modeling results indicated that with a vertical well, the CO₂ plume extended to higher levels and farther distances from the injection point compared to a horizontal well, resulting in greater surface uplift with the horizontal well configuration. The impact of permeability anisotropy was also analyzed, revealing that when horizontal permeability is ten times greater than vertical permeability, the CO₂ plume spreads horizontally, substantially reducing the aquifer surface uplift.

1. Introduction

With the increasing concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, particularly carbon dioxide (CO₂), global warming and climate change have become one of the most significant environmental challenges of the 21st century. Carbon dioxide, as the primary greenhouse gas, plays a prominent role in raising global temperatures, and controlling its emissions has become one of the key objectives of scientific and industrial communities. One promising solution for reducing CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere is Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies [1,2]. These technologies enable the capture of carbon dioxide from emission sources such as fossil fuel power plants and heavy

industries, followed by its safe storage underground.

Among these methods, the sequestration of carbon dioxide in saline aquifers has emerged as one of the most attractive options [3,4]. Saline reservoirs, which consist of porous rocks containing salty water deep underground, are considered suitable for this process due to their large capacity, geographical extent, and ability to provide long-term storage of CO₂ [5]. In this method, CO₂ is injected in a compressed state and under pressure into the reservoirs, where it interacts with the porous rocks and saline water, resulting in its mechanical, solution, and mineral trapping.

While this method is considered a promising

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approach for mitigating climate change, it can cause several geological consequences, especially ground deformations. When CO₂ is injected into a deep saline aquifer, it displaces the brine, leading to a significant increase in pore pressure in the reservoir. This increase in pressure can cause the rock matrix to expand and result in surface uplift. The degree of uplift depends on factors such as the volume of CO₂ injected, the depth and thickness of the aquifer, the rock's mechanical properties, and the permeability of the surrounding formations. Although surface uplift is generally small (on the order of millimeters to a few centimeters), it could be problematic in areas with sensitive infrastructure [6,7]. For instance, injection-induced uplift has been observed in some sequestration projects, such as the In Salah Project in Algeria, where satellite measurements recorded an uplift of a few millimeters per year [8,9]. The injection of CO₂ into a saline aquifer can also deform the overlying caprock, which is critical for trapping the CO₂ and preventing it from migrating to the surface. If the caprock fractures due to stress changes from the injection, it could create leakage pathways for CO₂ to escape, compromising the storage integrity [10]. Furthermore, increased pore pressure from CO₂ injection can reduce the effective normal stress on pre-existing faults, potentially causing them to slip and reactivate. This process, known as injection-induced seismicity, can lead to small to moderate earthquakes. If a fault slip occurs near the surface, it can result in localized ground deformations [11,12]. The mechanical properties of the reservoir rock (elasticity and compressibility), as well as the aquifer's porosity and permeability, strongly influence the extent of ground deformation. The total volume of CO₂ injected, and the rate of injection are major factors. Higher volumes and pressures increase the likelihood of deformation [13].

Once injection is stopped, the pore pressure in the aquifer may gradually decrease over time as CO₂ diffuses throughout the reservoir. This can lead to long-term settling or re-equilibration of ground deformation, reducing the immediate effects of uplift or subsidence.

Numerous studies have been conducted on various aspects of CO₂ sequestration in saline aquifers. Including fieldwork and laboratory experiments [14,15], as well as analytical, and numerical investigations [8,16–19].

In this study, the ground deformation during and

after carbon dioxide injection in an anisotropic saline aquifer is investigated through the numerical finite element method. Throughout the paper, ground displacement refers specifically to the displacement of the upper surface of the aquifer. In this study, the primary focus is on quantifying the displacement of the aquifer's upper surface. This displacement may extend to the ground surface, which is significant as it could lead to fractures in the caprock, potentially compromising its integrity. The term "anisotropy" refers to anisotropy in intrinsic permeability. The injection is assumed to occur at a constant rate for a specific period, followed by the spreading and diffusion of CO₂ through the aquifer due to gravity and capillary forces. The effects of pressure and temperature on the density and dynamic viscosity of brine and supercritical CO₂ are also considered. Additionally, the ground deformation profile is examined for both horizontal and vertical injection wells. It is worth noting that the numerical simulations were performed using the commercial software COMSOL Multiphysics, which is based on the finite element method.

In the following, first the equations governing the flow of two immiscible fluids through porous media along with the solid deformation are presented. This is followed by the problem definition and key assumptions. The numerical results and discussions are then presented, and the paper concludes with final remarks.

2. Formulation

The process of injecting carbon dioxide into a saline aquifer involves the flow of two immiscible fluids: brine and CO₂. Additionally, the deformation of the solid matrix must be considered to analyze the ground deformation induced by CO₂ injection. Therefore, the following equations govern this phenomenon [20].

(i) The linear momentum balance equation for the whole mixture:

$$\sigma_{ij,j} + \rho g_i = 0 \quad (1)$$

(ii) The mass conservation equation for each fluid phase:

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t}(n s_\pi \rho_\pi) + \nabla \cdot (n \rho_\pi s_\pi \mathbf{u}_i^\pi) = Q_\pi \quad (2)$$

(iii) The mass conservation equation for solid phase:

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t} [(1-n)\rho_s] + \nabla \cdot [(1-n)\rho_s \dot{\mathbf{u}}_i] = 0 \quad (3)$$

(iv) The extended Darcy's law:

$$ns_\pi \dot{\mathbf{u}}_i^\pi = \frac{\mathbf{K}_{ij} k_{r\pi}}{\mu_\pi} (-p_{\pi,j} + \rho_\pi \mathbf{g}_j) \quad (4)$$

Where $\boldsymbol{\sigma}_{ij}$ is the total stress tensor, ρ is the average density of the mixture, ρ_s is the solid phase density, and n denotes the porosity. The subscript π stands for w or nw which represents wetting and non-wetting fluids. Therefore, s_π , ρ_π , μ_π , and p_π denote the degree of saturation, density, dynamic viscosity, and pressure for fluid phases, respectively. \mathbf{g}_j is the gravity acceleration vector and Q_π denotes the fluid mass source or sink. \mathbf{K}_{ij} is the intrinsic permeability tensor and $k_{r\pi}$ is the relative permeability coefficient of each fluid phase. $\dot{\mathbf{u}}_i$ and $\dot{\mathbf{u}}_i^\pi$ are the solid phase and fluid phase velocity vectors, respectively. In addition, the relationship between the degrees of fluid saturations can be written as:

$$s_w + s_{nw} = 1 \quad (5)$$

The pore fluid pressures are related to each other via capillary pressure (p_c) as:

$$p_c = p_{nw} - p_w \quad (6)$$

The relationships between wetting-phase saturation and capillary pressure, as well as between saturations and relative permeabilities, are described using empirical functions:

$$\begin{aligned} s_w &= f(p_c) \\ k_{r\pi} &= f(s_\pi) \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

In this study, experimental relations proposed by Brooks and Corey [21,22] are exploited to describe the saturation-capillary pressure and saturation-relative permeabilities equations:

$$\begin{aligned} s_e &= (s_w - s_{wr}) / (1 - s_{wr}) \\ p_c &= p_b s_e^{(-1/\lambda)} \\ k_{rw} &= s_e^{(2+3\lambda)/\lambda} \end{aligned} \quad (8)$$

Where s_e is the effective wetting phase saturation, s_{wr} is the residual wetting phase saturation, λ is the pore size distribution index and p_b is the bubbling pressure.

The relationship between the stress tensor and pore pressures is governed by Terzaghi's well-known effective stress principle, as follows:

$$\boldsymbol{\sigma}_{ij}^n = \boldsymbol{\sigma}_{ij} + \alpha p \boldsymbol{\delta}_{ij} \quad (9)$$

Where $\boldsymbol{\sigma}_{ij}^n$ is the effective stress tensor, α is the Biot's parameter, p is the average pore pressure and $\boldsymbol{\delta}_{ij}$ is the Kronecker delta.

3. Problem Definition and assumptions

To examine the impact of CO₂ injection on ground deformation, a part of a saline aquifer with dimensions of 5000 meters by 5000 meters and a constant thickness of 300 meters at a depth of 3000 meters from the surface is considered. The aquifer's upper boundary is located 2700 meters below the ground surface. In the center of the aquifer, an injection well introduces CO₂ into the reservoir over a length of 100 meters at a constant rate.

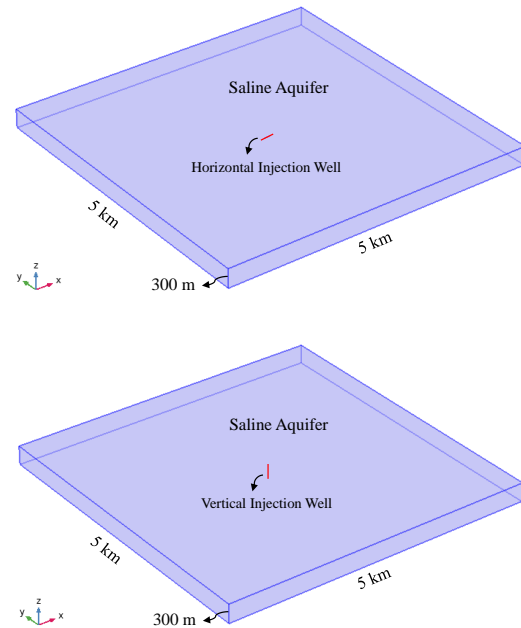


Fig. 1. Geometry of the saline aquifer along with the location of horizontal and vertical wells.

Both horizontal and vertical well configurations are modeled, allowing for an assessment of how well orientation affects the parameters under study. Fig. 1 illustrates the aquifer geometry and the location of the injection wells in both vertical and horizontal configurations. It should be noted that the vertical well is aligned along the z-axis, while the horizontal well is oriented along the x-

axis. The initial CO₂ saturation and hydraulic head are assumed to be zero across the entire aquifer. Boundary conditions are set such that CO₂ saturation and hydraulic head are also zero along the lateral boundaries. The top and bottom boundaries are considered impervious. Additionally, a boundary load equivalent to the effective weight of the overlying caprock is applied at the top boundary of the aquifer. The lateral boundaries are constrained in the horizontal directions, while the bottom boundary is fixed against displacement in all directions. Temperature variations with depth are also considered, with a temperature of 100°C assumed at a depth of 3000 meters, decreasing by 0.03°C per meter toward the surface.

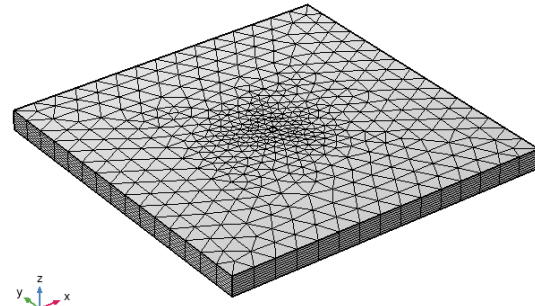
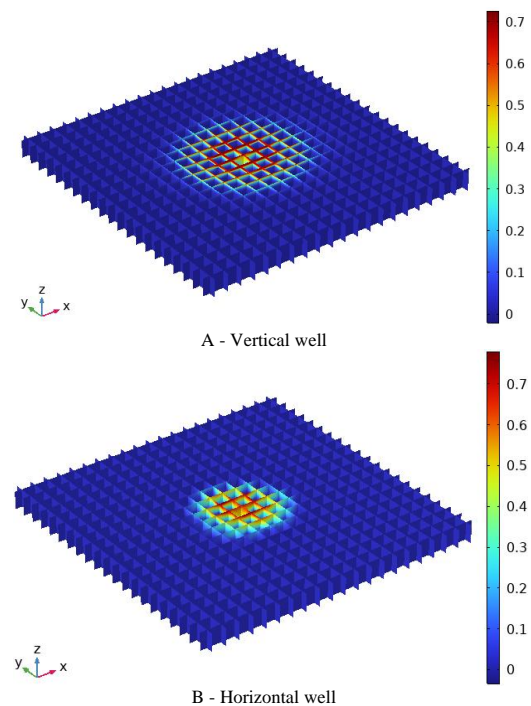
The model incorporates the effects of pressure and temperature on the viscosity and density of saline water. Additionally, variations in the density of supercritical CO₂ with temperature and pressure are accounted for by using the Peng-Robinson equation of state, and the Brokaw model is applied to capture changes in the viscosity of supercritical CO₂ [23]. The Peng-Robinson equation of state (PR EOS) is a widely used thermodynamic model for describing the behavior of fluids, particularly in petroleum and chemical engineering. It is commonly applied to predict the properties of gases and liquids under varying pressure and temperature conditions. It is used for calculating the properties of CO₂ and other gases at high pressures and temperatures, especially in enhanced oil recovery (EOR) and carbon sequestration.

Table 1. Physical and mechanical properties

| Property | Value | Unit |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Elastic young modulus | 1.0 | GPa |
| Poisson's ratio | 0.25 | - |
| Biot's parameter | 1.0 | - |
| Solid phase density | 2100 | Kg/m ³ |
| Porosity | 0.23 | - |
| Intrinsic permeability | 4e-14 | m ² |
| Brine compressibility | 4e-10 | 1/Pa |
| Brine thermal expansion coefficient | 6e-4 | 1/K |
| Constant injection rate | 10 | kg/s |
| Well length | 100 | m |
| Residual brine saturation | 0.2 | - |
| Residual CO ₂ saturation | 0.0 | - |
| Entry pressure | 10 | kPa |
| Brooks-Corey parameter | 2.0 | - |

The details of this equation are beyond the scope of this paper. The other physical and mechanical properties of the reservoir rock and fluids are assumed as specified in Table 1. The sensitivity

analysis was conducted to achieve a balance between computational cost and accuracy in the results. The finite element mesh, with optimized minimum and maximum mesh sizes, was selected as shown in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. Finite element mesh for CO₂ injection with vertical well.Fig. 3. Contours of CO₂ saturation after 50 years of injection for A) vertical well and B) horizontal well.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents numerical results and discussions for both vertical and horizontal well conditions. Fig. 3 shows the contour of the distribution of injected CO₂ saturation after 50 years of injection in both vertical and horizontal

wells. It can be observed that, due to its lower density compared to saline water, the injected CO₂ is positioned at higher levels than the saline water. Additionally, comparing the two contours presented in Fig. 3 reveals that, in the case of the vertical well, the CO₂ plume has spread over a wider area compared to the horizontal well, extending at higher levels in the aquifer. This is better illustrated in Fig. 5, which shows the CO₂ saturation after 50 years in a cross-section passing through the center of the aquifer along the x-axis (aligned with the horizontal well and intersecting the vertical well as shown in Fig. 4).

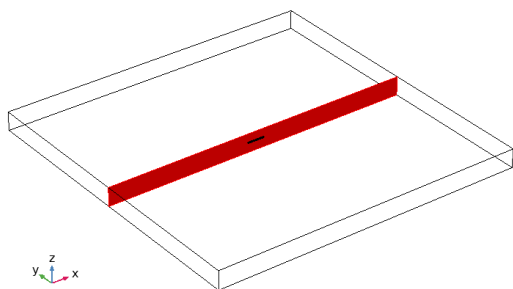


Fig. 4. Definition of the cross section along the x-axis

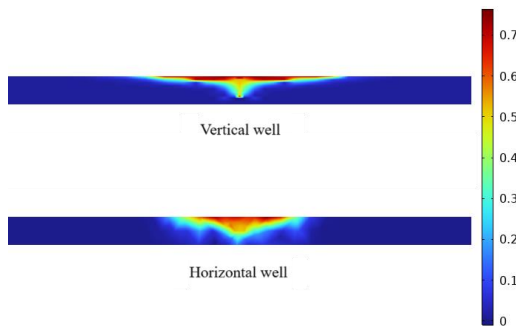


Fig. 5. Comparison of CO₂ saturations at cross section along the x-axis, after 50 years of injection for vertical and horizontal wells.

Fig. 7 illustrates the vertical displacement at the top surface of the aquifer along the line shown in Fig. 6 after 50 years of injection in vertical and horizontal wells. It can be observed that, due to the higher concentration of the CO₂ plume around the horizontal injection well, the uplift at the top surface of the aquifer above the horizontal well is greater than that above the vertical well. However, the spread of uplift over greater distances from the well is more pronounced in the case of the vertical well.

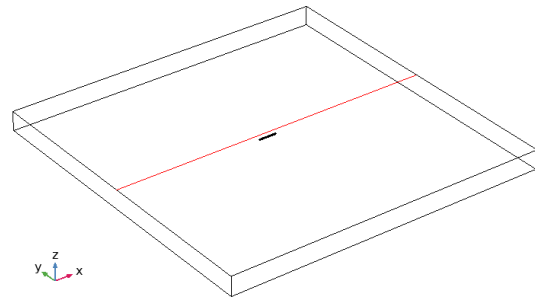


Fig. 6. Definition of the cut line along the x-axis at the top surface of the aquifer above the horizontal or vertical wells.

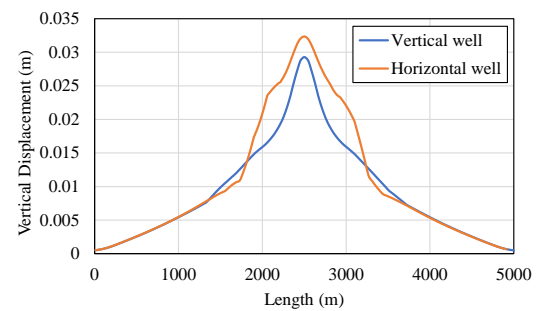


Fig. 7. Vertical displacement at the top surface of the aquifer along the x-axis above the horizontal and vertical wells.

Injected CO₂ disperses and expands within the reservoir due to capillary forces and the density difference between saline water and CO₂. As a result, if the injection ceases, the pressure from the injection gradually decreases, partially offsetting the deformation caused by the injection. To examine this, CO₂ is injected at a constant rate of 10 kg/s up to 20 years, after which the modeling continues to observe subsequent ground displacement changes due to the free diffusion of CO₂ throughout the aquifer. Fig. 8 shows the distribution of injected CO₂ in the aquifer for Case A, with injection over 50 years, and Case B, with injection over 20 years followed by CO₂ diffusion in the aquifer for 30 years. It is observed that in the second case, the injected CO₂ spreads within the aquifer due to capillary and gravitational forces, leading to a reduction in the saturation level around the injection well. This is more clearly seen in Fig. 9, which shows the CO₂ saturation on the cross-section of the aquifer along the x-axis.

Also, as observed in Fig. 10, with the start of injection, upper boundary deformation reaches its maximum within a short period (about 2 years) after the initiation of injection. However, subsequently, due to the dispersion of CO₂ in the aquifer, the uplift amount decreases from its initial maximum value. The reason for this is the sudden increase in aquifer pressure due to injection in the early stages, which later declines as CO₂ spreads to regions farther from the well within the aquifer, thereby reducing the initial pressure and resulting in decreased uplift.

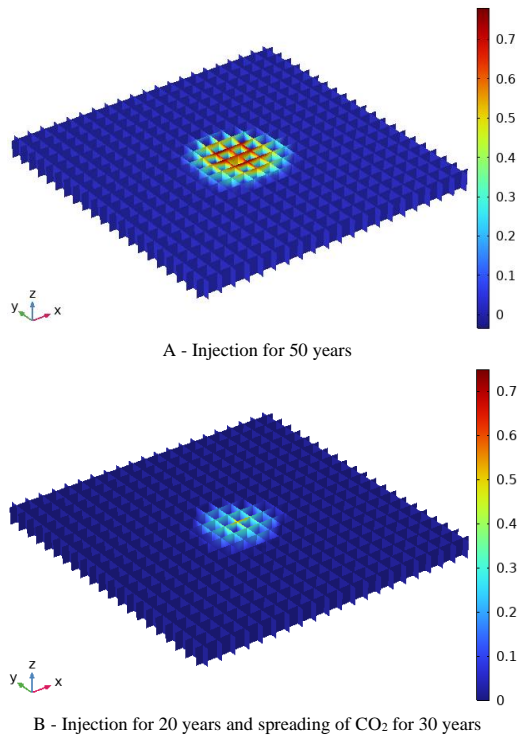


Fig. 8. Contours of CO₂ saturation for horizontal well. A) 50 years of injection and B) Injecting for 20 years and spreading of CO₂ for 30 years.

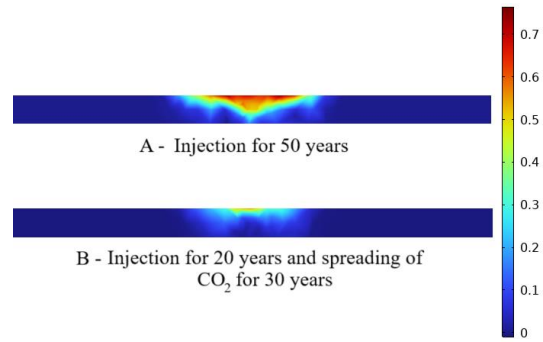


Fig. 9. Comparison of CO₂ saturations at cross section along the x-axis, A) 50 years of injection and B) Injecting for 20 years and spreading of CO₂ for 30 years (horizontal well).

Additionally, Fig. 10 shows that, with the cessation of injection at the 20-year mark, a significant portion of the induced uplift diminishes within a short period; however, a small amount of uplift still remains. The residual uplift in the horizontal well is greater than the residual uplift in the vertical well.

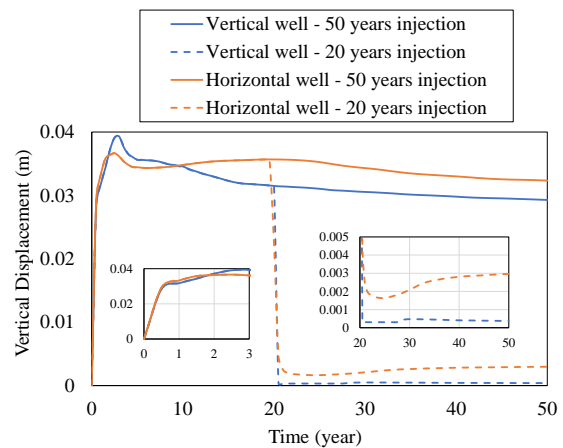


Fig. 10. Time variations of vertical displacement at the point above the center of injection wells.

To investigate the effects of anisotropy in the aquifer's intrinsic permeability on ground deformation, it is assumed that horizontal permeability is 10 times greater than vertical permeability (i.e., horizontal permeability is set to $4 \times 10^{-13} \text{ m}^2$).

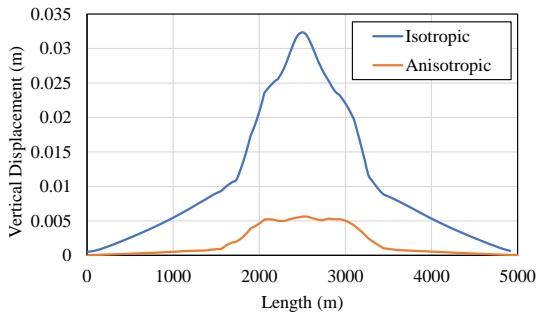


Fig. 11. Vertical displacement at the top surface of aquifer along the x-axis above the horizontal well for isotropic and anisotropic permeability.

As shown in Fig. 11 and Fig. 12, anisotropy in relative permeability, as defined previously, leads to a reduction in the uplift of the upper surface of the aquifer. This is due to the absolute permeability in the horizontal directions being 10 times greater than in the vertical direction, which causes the CO₂ plume to spread more laterally, as shown in Fig. 13. Consequently, the pressure induced by CO₂ injection is lower than in the isotropic case, resulting in a significant reduction in uplift.

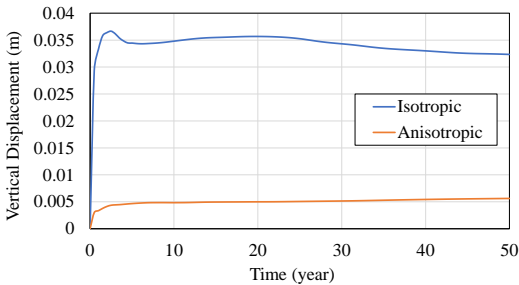


Fig. 12. Time variations of vertical displacement at the point above the center of horizontal well for isotropic and anisotropic permeability.

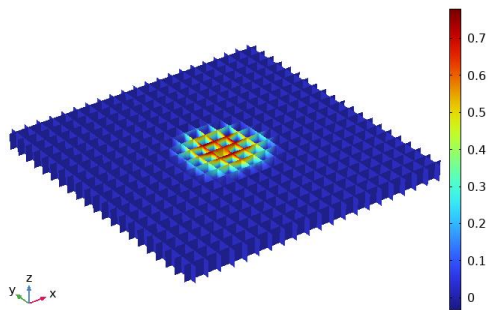


Fig. 13. A – Isotropic permeability

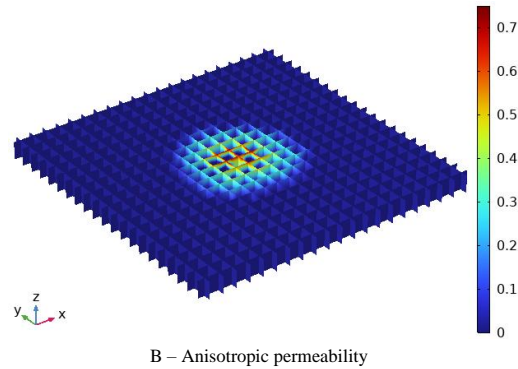


Fig. 14. Contours of CO₂ saturation for horizontal well. A) Isotropic permeability and B) Anisotropic permeability.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to examine the uplift profile of the top surface of a deep saline aquifer layer as a result of CO₂ injection. For this purpose, a 300-meter-thick aquifer layer at a depth of approximately 3000 meters below the ground surface was investigated using the finite element numerical method. Variations in the density and viscosity of the injected supercritical CO₂ were considered as functions of temperature and pressure, and the density and viscosity of saline water were also treated as temperature- and pressure-dependent. Additionally, geothermal temperature variations (constant over time) were included in the model. In analyzing ground uplift at the top surface of the aquifer, both horizontal and vertical well configurations were examined. The modeling results showed that with a vertical well, the CO₂ plume extended to higher levels and farther regions from the injection well compared to a horizontal well. Consequently, the aquifer surface uplift was greater for the horizontal well than for the vertical well. The impact of injection cessation after a certain period, as well as the spread of injected CO₂ in the aquifer due to capillary and gravitational forces, was also investigated concerning the displacements induced during injection. Furthermore, it was observed that anisotropy in permeability, where the intrinsic horizontal permeability was ten times the vertical permeability, led to a horizontal spread of the CO₂ plume and significantly reduced the aquifer surface uplift. Numerical modeling, incorporating the complexities of the aquifer and the fluids involved, enables accurate engineering predictions and designs.

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