Fracture Capture of Organic-Hosted Pores During Shale Deformation: An Explanation for Permeability and Production Enhancement?

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ABSTRACT

Mudrocks are fine grained sedimentary rocks that are the dominant rock type in shale reservoirs currently targeted for gas and liquid exploration and production. A mixture of silt and clay-sized materials from a variety of geological sources, mudrocks can host hydrocarbon-rich pores that generally are at a sub- micron scale. Given the size and heterogeneous distribution of mudrock pores, corresponding matrix permeabilities tend to be in the sub-microdarcy range. Therefore, most research on both production and contaminant transport has focused on fractures that provide fluid-flow pathways potentially leading to relatively high bulk permeabilities.

Mudrocks can fracture, as illustrated by: (i) largely cemented natural fractures that formed during their diagenetic histories, (ii) generally open fractures formed during core recovery and subsequent sample storage, and (iii) induced fractures that form during production (and waste-water injection) as monitored by production curves and seismic responses. Yet, as documented throughout the cited literature, core descriptions and quantitative microscopy of mudrock samples from a wide variety of basins exhibit fractures with predominantly -centimeter spacing rather than over a complete range of fracture sizes and spaces. Notably, the microfractures that could enhance flow from the otherwise isolated pores appear to be scarce. We, therefore, ask the question: Following primary hydraulic fracture stimulation, is production possible only from larger-scale porosity, or is nano-scale porosity connected by networks of smaller fractures that develop during production?

To answer this question, we performed confined compressive strength tests on samples of Eagle Ford shale and a siliceous, liquid-rich shale from the Rocky Mountains. The experiments were designed to replicate the stresses experienced by the unfractured rock during a hydraulic fracture stimulation -that is, unidirectional loading under constant confinement. In association with these measurements, we extracted material to perform low-pressure nitrogen adsorption and high-resolution scanning-electron microscopy on ion-milled samples of undeformed, intact cores and deformed cores that had been failed.

We found that, in most cases, the porosity of the failed samples was larger than that of the intact samples, and pore size distributions extracted from the nitrogen adsorption isotherms indicated that most of the increase in pore volume occurred in pores from 10-100 nm in width. The effect tended to be more pronounced in the Rocky Mountain samples than in the Eagle Ford. The SEM images indicated not only the presence of subcentimeter-scale fracture spacing (-20-200)liD), but also that in many cases fractures propagated through the organic matter and

connected organic-hosted pores with the inorganic matrix. This apparent "fracture-capture" may explain permeability enhancement and the observations in the nitrogen sorption data.

Our results are intriguing in that there appears to be fracture-pore interaction in the organic matter, and future work will seek to quantify this behavior better. The bulk rheology of the samples was elasto-plastic as evidenced by typical linear stress-strain curves leading up to nonlinear behavior at failure, but there was considerable variation in mechanical anisotropy. Permanent pore changes therefore seem likely to be due to the fracture-pore relationships, but we cannot rule out some mixed rheology at the nano-to- microscale. Recent work by Emmanuel et al. (2016) indicates that kerogen is a linear-elastic material, but it is possible that some mixture of brittle and ductile behavior may be present, especially if some bitumen is mixed in with the kerogen. Additional changes in deformation style may be brought about by large strains associated with hydraulic fracturing which may not be captured in laboratory tests such as nanoindentation or atomic force microscopy.

Overall our work demonstrates that sub-micron-scale cracks may develop in kerogen during deformation, and the fracture-capture mechanism may provide an explanation for the observed production rates and necessary increase in permeability in otherwise unfractured rock. Future work will help quantify the deformation behavior and its relationship with mineralogy and organic maturity.