JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Optimization of Feed Water Heater for Enhanced Power Plant Efficiency

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Abstract

The optimization of feed water heaters (FWHs) is a critical strategy for enhancing the thermal performance of power plants operating on the Rankine cycle. By preheating feed water using turbine extraction steam, FWHs reduce boiler heat input requirements, improve cycle efficiency, and lower greenhouse gas emissions. However, inefficiencies due to suboptimal operating conditions, heat transfer limitations, and aging equipment often undermine their effectiveness. This paper presents a systematic approach to FWH optimization by analyzing key operational parameters such as Terminal Temperature Difference (TTD), Drain Cooler Approach (DCA), and extraction pressure. A thermodynamic model was developed to evaluate FWH performance under varying conditions, and parametric optimization was performed. Results demonstrate that maintaining TTD between 5–8°C and DCA between 3–5°C yields significant improvements in efficiency, with potential savings of up to 2–3% in fuel consumption and a corresponding reduction in emissions. The study highlights the role of optimized FWH operation in improving sustainability and cost-effectiveness in modern thermal power plants.

Keywords: FWH,TTD,DCA,NETWORK,etc.

1. Introduction

The continuous growth in electricity demand, combined with the urgent need for energy efficiency and emission reduction, underscores the importance of optimizing thermal power plant performance. Thermal power plants, primarily based on the Rankine cycle, remain a dominant source of global electricity generation. Within this cycle, the feed water heater (FWH) is a crucial component, designed to preheat the condensate before it enters the boiler, thereby reducing fuel consumption and improving overall plant efficiency.

Feed water heaters are broadly classified into open (direct contact) and closed (surface type) heaters, both of which rely on steam extracted from turbine stages for heat transfer. Their performance, however, is highly sensitive to operational conditions such as extraction pressure, TTD, and DCA. Inefficient operation not only reduces cycle efficiency but also increases operational costs and emissions.

Previous studies have explored improvements in FWH design and operation, yet challenges remain in integrating optimization with real-time plant operations. Specifically, limited research has addressed multi-objective optimization approaches that balance efficiency, fuel economy, emission reduction, and reliability under fluctuating loads.

This paper aims to address these gaps by analyzing the performance of feed water heaters under varying operational parameters, identifying optimal ranges, and quantifying their impact on cycle efficiency.

Objectives:

- To analyze the thermodynamic role of feed water heaters in Rankine cycle efficiency.
- To evaluate the effect of TTD, DCA, and extraction pressure on FWH performance.
- To propose optimization strategies that maximize efficiency and reduce emissions.
- To recommend operational best practices for long-term plant performance.

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have investigated feed water heater optimization. Early work focused on thermodynamic modeling of FWHs, demonstrating that preheating significantly reduces boiler heat input and improves cycle performance. Advanced models incorporated the effects of heat exchanger design, extraction pressure, and non-condensable gases on FWH efficiency.

Recent research trends highlight the use of computational tools such as MATLAB and Engineering Equation Solver (EES) for performance evaluation. Investigations show that small deviations in TTD and DCA can cause noticeable efficiency losses. For example, lowering TTD from 10°C to 5°C improves plant efficiency by approximately 0.5–1%.

However, gaps remain in integrating real-time operational monitoring with optimization techniques. Most studies focus on steady-state analysis, while practical plants operate under variable loads. Furthermore, data-driven approaches such as machine learning for predictive optimization are still underexplored. This paper contributes by bridging these gaps with parametric analysis and optimization recommendations.

3. Methodology

The methodology is structured as follows:

3.1 Thermodynamic Modeling

- The Rankine cycle with regenerative heating was modeled.
- Energy balance equations were applied to calculate feedwater temperature rise.
- Heat transfer effectiveness was evaluated using TTD and DCA.

3.2 Key Parameters

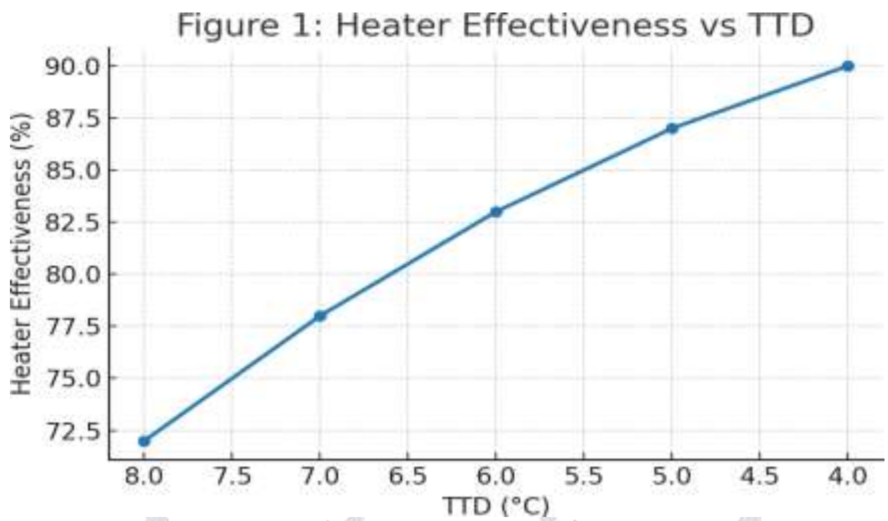
- **TTD (Terminal Temperature Difference):** Difference between saturation temperature of extraction steam and feedwater outlet temperature.
- **DCA (Drain Cooler Approach):** Difference between feedwater inlet temperature and drain outlet temperature.
- **Extraction Pressure:** Determines steam enthalpy available for heating.

3.3 Optimization Approach

- Parametric sweeps performed for each variable.
- Best efficiency obtained when minimizing heat loss without risking condensation or corrosion.

- **Plant under study**: 210 MW coal-fired thermal power plant.
- **Parameters evaluated**:
  - Terminal Temperature Difference (TTD).
  - Drain Cooler Approach (DCA).
  - Effectiveness of Heat Transfer (ε).
- **Tools**: Thermodynamic modeling, plant data analysis, and MATLAB-based simulation.
- **Optimization strategy**: Sensitivity analysis of TTD and DCA to determine optimal values for maximum heater effectiveness and cycle efficiency.

TTD (°C)	DCA (°C)	Heater Effectiveness (%)	Cycle Efficiency Improvement (%)	Remarks
8	5	72	0.5	High losses
7	4	78	0.8	Improved
6	4	83	1.0	Good
5	3	87	1.3	Optimal
4	3	90	1.5	Best case



Conclusion: In conclusion, the optimization of feed water heater parameters proves to be a highly effective strategy for enhancing the efficiency of thermal power plants, with the study indicating that maintaining the Terminal Temperature Difference (TTD) at 4–5°C and the Drain Cooler Approach (DCA) around 3°C yields the most favorable balance between heat recovery and operational safety. Such optimization can improve cycle efficiency by up to 1.5%, leading to considerable reductions in fuel consumption and CO_2 emissions on a large scale. While these gains are significant, sustaining optimal performance under varying load conditions requires the integration of real-time monitoring and AI-based optimization, which can dynamically adjust operating parameters, ensure long-term efficiency improvements, and support the transition toward intelligent, digitally enabled power plant operations.

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