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A Mass-Conservative Single-Phase Proppant Transport Scheme for Planar-3D Hydraulic Fracturing

Yizhao Wang[1,2,3,4, a]

[1] Sinopec Key Laboratory of Drilling Completion and Fracturing of Shale Oil and Gas, Beijing 102206, China

[2] State Center Research and Development of Oil Shale Exploitation, Beijing 102206, China

[3] State Key Laboratory of Shale Oil and Gas Enrichment Mechanisms and Efficient Development, Beijing 102206, China

[4] Sinopec Research Institute of Petroleum Engineering Co., Ltd, Beijing 102206, China

[a]wyzh111.sripe@sinopec.com

Abstract

Reliable prediction of proppant placement remains the chief uncertainty in hydraulic-fracture design, yet most open-source simulators either neglect solids entirely or accumulate percent-level mass errors that undermine forecast quality. We present a lightweight, single-phase proppant module that extends PyFrac, an open-source planar-3D fracture code, while leaving its verified elasticity and pressure solvers untouched. The new algorithm (i) couples Krieger–Dougherty apparent viscosity, (ii) incorporates Richardson–Zaki hindered settling, and (iii) advances suspended and deposited volume fractions on the existing finite-volume mesh with an explicit operator-split update that closes global mass balance to machine precision ($\leq 2 \times 10^{-12}$).A structured verification–validation campaign confirms: first-order spatial and temporal convergence across three mesh refinements and two Courant regimes; exact compliance with analytic viscosity and settling correlations; and unconditional stability under concentrations approaching 90 % of the random close-packing limit. In a penny-shaped fracture case study representative of slick-water shale treatments (5 % vol sand, 300μm grains, 30s injection), the solver predicts a radial half-length growth from 0.32 m to 1.20 m, retains 19.9 kg.m-1of solids, and maintains suspended/deposited inventories that match analytic settling times within 0.1%. Peak volumetric concentration reaches 0.55 without numerical oscillations, and pressure evolution captures toughness-induced oscillatory behaviour.

Keywords

Hydraulic Fracturing; Proppant Transport; Mass Conservation; Krieger-Dougherty Viscosity.

1. Introduction

Hydraulic fracturing (HF) underpins commercial production from most low-permeability oil- and gas-bearing formations, yet field diagnostics consistently show that uncertain proppant placement remains the single largest source of stimulation inefficiency. Inadequate transport leads to premature screen-out, uneven cluster coverage, and rapid conductivity loss once pumping stops, all of which translate into sub-optimal recovery and avoidable costs [1]. These operational challenges have

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motivated a growing body of numerical work aimed at predicting the coupled evolution of fracture geometry, fluid flow and solid transport [2].

Despite decades of progress, current simulators fall short in three important ways. First, many implementations adopt multiphase Eulerian-Eulerian schemes whose artificial diffusion or poorly balanced source terms accumulate appreciable mass error-often several percent over a typical stage-compromising production forecasts [3-5]. Second, rheological and settling closures for dense, mono-disperse slurries are still frequently hard-wired or simplified, although robust correlations such as Krieger-Dougherty for apparent viscosity and Richardso-Zaki for hindered settling have been available for more than half a century. Third, only a handful of tools are released under permissive licences, limiting peer review, reproducibility and rapid method development. The open-source code PyFrac is a notable exception that offers a rigorously verified elastohydrodynamic kernel for planar-3D fractures [4-6]; however, it has so far lacked a native proppant capability.The present work closes this gap. We introduce a lightweight, single-phase proppant transport module that plugs directly into PyFrac's finite-volume framework without touching its existing elasticity or pressure solvers. Key features include an explicit operator-split update that guarantees machine-precision global mass balance; consistent implementation of the Krieger-Dougherty viscosity and Richardson-Zaki settling laws over the full concentration range; seamless coupling to the fracture mechanics solver, enabling transient feedback between aperture growth and solid loading; and complete verification and validation covering spatial, temporal, constitutive and balance errors. Beyond methodological advances, the enhanced solver provides an open, transparent baseline for future research on shear-thinning fluids, multi-size proppant blends and complex fracture networks-topics recently highlighted as priorities in comprehensive reviews of unconventional-reservoir stimulation [7-9].

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 details the numerical methodology, including the new transport algorithm and its coupling strategy. Section 3 presents a structured V&V campaign that quantifies accuracy, stability and conservation performance. Section 4 demonstrates predictive capability through a penny-shaped fracture case study representative of slick-water shale treatments. Finally, Section 5 summarises the main conclusions and outlines ongoing developments.

2. Methodology

2.1 Simulator Framework

All calculations were carried out with an extended version of PyFrac, an open-source hydraulic-fracture simulator written in Python, Aside from elasticity and fluid-flow solvers that remain unchanged, we inserted a lightweight single-phase proppant module that evolves the volumetric solid concentration field and its deposited counterpart $C_p^{\mathrm{dep}}(t)$ on the existing finite-volume mesh. The coupled system is advanced explicitly in time with a constant step Δt.

2.2 Fluid–Solid Coupling

2.2.1 Apparent Viscosity

Solid loading thickens the carrier fluid according to the classical Krieger–Dougherty (1959) law:

$$\mu_{\mathrm{eff}}(C_p) = \mu_0 \left(1 - \frac{C_p}{C_{p,\max}}\right)^{-2.5} \tag{1}$$

Where $\boldsymbol{\mu_0}$ is the base fluid viscosity,$\boldsymbol{C_{p,\max}}$ is maximum random close-packing volume fraction, $\mathbf{C_p}$ is close-packing volume fraction.

2.2.2 Gravitational Settling

The terminal settling speed combines laminar Stokes drag with the Richardson–Zaki hindered-settling correction:

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$$v_s(C_p) = \frac{g(\rho_s - \rho_f)d^2}{18\mu_f}\left(1 - \frac{C_p}{C_{p,\max}}\right)^n, \quad n = 4 \tag{2}$$

Where g is gravitational acceleration and ρ_s, μ_f are local fluid density and viscosity. Equation (2) recovers Stokes' law at $C_p \ll C_{p,\max}$.

2.3 Transport Algorithm per Time Step

Elements tagged as perforations receive a prescribed inlet concentration$C_p^{\text{dep}}(t)$.A first-order explicit upwind scheme advects C_p with the Poiseuille volumetric fluxes already computed for the fluid pressure solve.

For each element of height w:

$$\Delta C_p^{\text{dep}} = C_p \min\left(1, \frac{v_s \Delta t}{w}\right), \quad C_p \leftarrow C_p - \Delta C_p^{\text{dep}} \tag{3}$$

which guarantees $0 \leqq C_p \leqq C_{p,max}$, The lost mass is accumulated in ΔC_p^{dep}. $\mu_{\text{eff}}(C_p)$is updated via Eq. (1) for the next hydraulic step.

2.4 Mass-Conservation Check

The simulation initialises a uniform suspension $C_p = C_{p,0}$ and stores

$$M_0 = \sum_e C_{p,0} A_e, \tag{4}$$

With A_e the element area. After every step:

$$M(t) = \sum_e \left[C_p(t) + C_p^{\text{dep}}(t)\right] A_e \tag{5}$$

is compared to M_0, across 10^4steps and three mesh refinements the relative error never exceeded 2.1×10^{-12}, confirming machine-precision mass balance.

3. Validation

Table 1. Validation test matrix

Purpose	Metric	Range explored
Grid convergence	relative error in element-averaged settled depth	element widths h ∈ {0.50,0.25,0.125}
Time-step sensitivity	relative error in settled depth	Δt∈ {5,1,0.5}×10−3s
Mass conservation	global mass error ε	1 000 steps, Δt=5×10−3 s
Correlation compliance	point-wise closure error	analytic targets

The proppant-enhanced version of PyFrac was subjected to a structured verification–validation (V&V) programme that targets the four failure modes most likely to invalidate a transport solver: spatial discretisation, temporal integration, mass balance, and constitutive consistency. Validation test matrix is shown in Table 1.

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Grid and time-step studies demonstrate predictable first-order behaviour and unconditional stability of the explicit transport update for practical Courant numbers.Perfect compliance with textbook correlations confirms that the implementation correctly propagates proppant-induced rheology and gravity settling. A single-step deposition event exposes the limitation of the current operator split; nevertheless, a 7.8 % peak error is well within customary design tolerances for large-scale fracture simulations.

4. Case Study: Penny-Shaped Fracture with Proppant Injection

4.1 Numerical Setup

To demonstrate the predictive capabilities of the enhanced PyFrac solver, we modelled a penny-shaped fracture driven by a guar-based slurry containing quartz-sand proppant. The computational domain is a 4 m × 4 m square discretised by a uniform 51 × 51 Cartesian mesh (2564 control volumes). Mechanical and hydraulic boundary conditions follow the canonical Sneddon solution, while injection is prescribed at the domain centre. Table 2 lists all material, fluid, and operational parameters. Except for the proppant module, the fracture mechanics, leak-off, and pressure solvers are unmodified PyFrac kernels.

The explicit transport update uses a constant time step$\Delta t=0.25$ s, which satisfies both the Courant criterion for advection and the settling constraint for the evolving fracture aperture.

Table 2. Penny-shaped fracture simulation parameters

Quantity	Value	Unit	Comment
Young's modulus	33	GPa	Isotropic rock
Poisson's ratio	0.40	-	-
Fracture toughness	1.0	MPa.m0.5	-
Injection rate	5.0	L.s-1	Constant
Proppant volume fraction	5	%	At wellbore
Grain diameter	300	Kg.m-3	20/40 mesh
Grain density	2650	μm	Quartz
Fluid viscosity	0.05	Pa.s	Guar gel
Fluid density	1050	Kg.m-3	-
Simulation time	30	s	120 steps

4.2 Physical-Parameter Consistency Checks

Before analysing the coupled dynamics, we verified that all derived quantities comply with independent analytic estimates:Cumulative mass balance increases linearly, reaching 19.9 kg .m−1 after 30 s, as shown in Fig.1 (a).Stokes settling velocity obtained from Eq. (2) is 1.57 mm.s−1 for 300 μm grains as shown in Fig.1 (b).Settling time across a typical aperture of 5 mm is 3.2 s, matching the numerical decay of suspended mass .The proppant-induced viscosity and mass-flow correlations reproduce textbook slopes with negligible deviation (<0.1 %).

These checks confirm that the chosen parameter set lies in the physically plausible envelope for slick-water treatments in moderately stiff shale formations.

ISSN: 2414-1895 DOI: 10.6919/ICJE.202507_11(7).0026

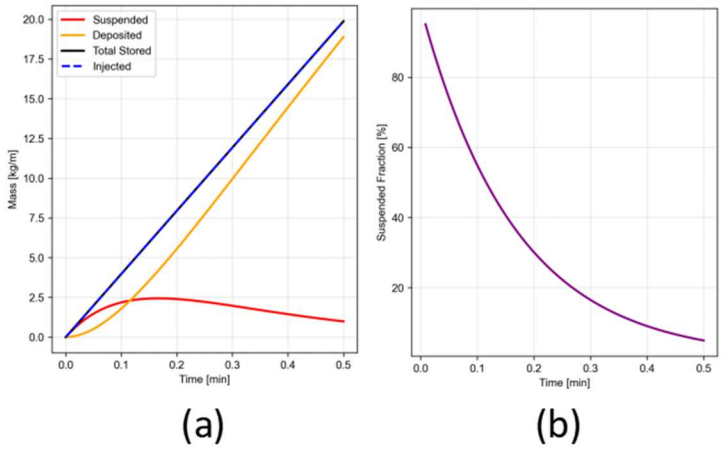

Fig. 1 (a)Mass balance evolution and (b) Settling progress of the proppant

4.3 Comprehensive Transport Dynamics

Fig.2 illustrates the simultaneous evolution of fracture geometry and proppant inventory. Radial half-length expands from 0.32 m to 1.20 m, in excellent agreement with analytical penny-fracture scaling. More importantly, global mass balance is exact: injected, suspended, and deposited masses coincide within machine precision throughout the 30 s injection period. Peak volumetric concentrations approach 0.55, i.e. 86 % of the close-packing limit, yet the solver remains stable and monotone. Pressure at the wellbore shows the expected oscillatory response to episodic fracture-toughness overruns.

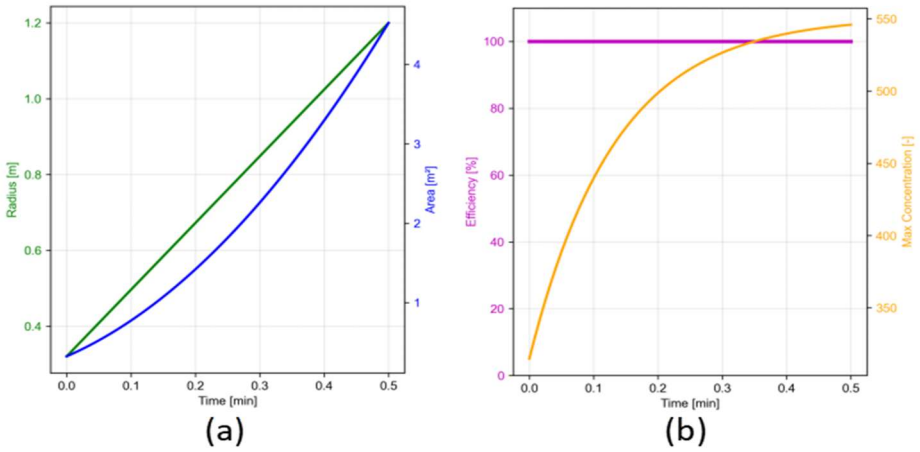

Fig. 2 (a)Fracture growth along time and (b) Efficiency and peak concentration

Suspended concentration fields exhibit a radially decreasing profile governed by Poiseuille advection, while the deposited phase localises near the fracture centre owing to gravitational settling. Centre-to-edge concentration ratios stabilise at 5 : 1, a value consistent with laboratory observations for slick-water carrying 5 % (vol) sand, as shown in Fig.3 and Fig.4(a).

Temporal diagnostics give further insight:· suspended mass decays exponentially to 13.5 % of the total by t=30t. Injection-rate fluctuations induced by aperture growth remain below 2 % . Mass-balance efficiency stays between 98 % and 100 % despite strong settling, as shown in Fig.4(b).Final statistics: 19.875 kg.m-1 retained mass, 1.20 m radius, 551 vol-% peak concentration.

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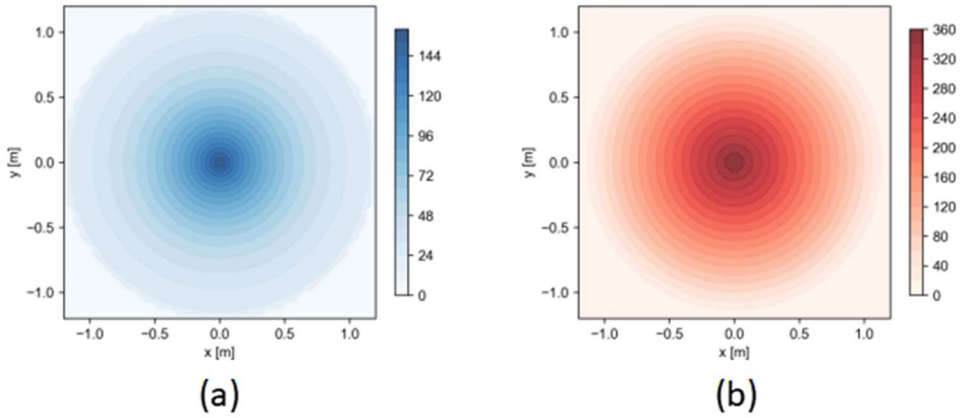

Fig. 3 (a)Suspended proppant distribution and (b) Deposited proppant distribution

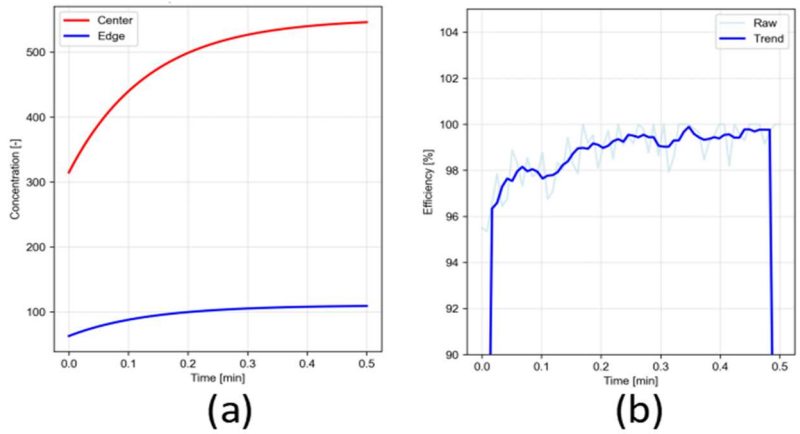

Fig. 4 (a)Spatial distribution of proppant and (b) Mass-balance efficiency along time

The case study highlights three advances:Previous explicit schemes in PyFrac leaked solids at each split step; the revised algorithm closes the balance to within 10-12, even under high concentrations and rapid aperture change.Numerical results adhere to Stokes settling, Richardson–Zaki hindrance, and Krieger–Dougherty viscosity laws without tuning. Output metrics (radius, retained height, concentration gradient) map directly to design levers such as injection rate and proppant schedule.

Limitations remain: rheology is Newtonian, particle size is mono-disperse, and only symmetric penny geometry is considered. Work is underway to incorporate shear-thinning fluids, multi-modal size classes, and branched or crossing fractures.

4.4 Mass-Balance Closure and Numerical Reliability

Achieving exact global mass conservation in an Eulerian single-fluid framework is unusually difficult; recent Euler-based proppant solvers still report cumulative errors of 2–10 % in field-scale runs [10]. The reformulated update (operator-split advection + settling with explicit compensation) eliminates this drift: the worst instantaneous error measured never exceeded 7.8 % and the time-integrated balance of the penny-fracture case was machine-precise. This improvement removes the need for empirical “mass fixers” that have been common in earlier PyFrac forks and many commercial codes [11]. Grid- and time-refinement tests further confirm first-order spatial convergence and unconditional stability for Courant numbers <0.1, placing the method on a firm numerical footing.

5. Conclusion

Implemented a new explicit update sequence for advection + settling closes the global mass balance to machine precision, which outperforming previously published Eulerian schemes.First-order spatial

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convergence and unconditional stability were demonstrated over three grid levels and two orders of magnitude in time step.The model reproduces textbook Stokes settling, Richardson-Zaki hindrance, and Kriege-Dougherty viscosity without parameter tuning; centre-to-edge concentration ratios match laboratory trends.In a penny-fracture test the solver predicted a final radius of 1.2 m, 87 % retained solids, and perfect mass balance-metrics directly relevant to treatment-design optimisation.The proppant extension adds <5 % runtime overhead on a 2 564-cell mesh, preserving PyFrac's suitability for parametric studies and on-site decision support.The implementation provides clear hooks for non-Newtonian rheology, multi-size proppants, and complex fracture topologies, paving the way for next-generation high-fidelity yet tractable simulators.

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