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## MODELING THE THERMAL PERFORMANCE OF FALLING PARTICLE RECEIVERS SUBJECT TO EXTERNAL WIND

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### ABSTRACT

*Falling particle receivers (FPRs) are an important component of future falling particle concentrating solar power plants to enable next-generation energy generation. Achieving high thermal efficiencies in a FPR is critical to support high thermodynamic efficiencies of the system. External winds can significantly impact the thermal performance of cavity-type FPRs primarily through changing the air flow in and out of the aperture. A numerical parametric study is performed in this paper to quantify the effect of wind on the thermal performance of a FPR. Wind direction was found to be a significant parameter that can affect the receiver thermal efficiency. The particle mass flow rate and particle diameter down to 350 microns did not significantly change the effect of wind on the receiver. Finally, the model was used to demonstrate that receiver efficiencies of 90% were achievable under the assumption that the effect of wind/advective losses were mitigated.*

Keywords: concentrating solar power, falling particle, receiver, thermal efficiency, wind.

### INTRODUCTION

Among the candidates for next generation concentrating solar power (CSP), falling particle technology is a promising contender to deliver sustainable baseload energy generation [1,2]. Falling particles offer numerous advantages over more traditional CSP designs including: the ability to directly irradiate the heat transfer medium over a larger temperature range, the use of a low-cost, commercially available medium, and the enabling of long-term energy storage of the particles during off-peak hours. In particular, the ability to directly irradiate falling particles facilitates higher temperatures and higher overall thermal efficiencies without the need to consider structural temperature limits that are normally required to safely confine the heat transfer medium.

The falling particle receiver (FPR) is a critical component to consider in a CSP falling particle system in order to achieve high

thermal efficiencies. Receiver efficiencies of ~90% have been targeted with particle outlet temperatures  $>700^{\circ}\text{C}$  for existing falling particle receiver designs, and many of these designs have focused on cavity receivers that limit losses both radiatively and convectively. Cavity type receivers also have the advantage of providing more obstructions to external winds on the falling particle curtain.

At the National Solar Thermal Test Facility (NSTTF) at Sandia National Laboratories (SNL), a north-facing cavity FPR has been tested and shown to achieve particle outlet temperatures  $>700^{\circ}\text{C}$  [3]. However, despite more precise control of the particle mass flow rate [4], a recent series of tests and subsequent analysis [5] has suggested that external winds and advective losses out of the cavity aperture must be mitigated to achieve high thermal efficiencies. Several strategies have been identified to mitigate these effects and are the subject of present research, but a study of the effects of wind on this present receiver design is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies.

Previous studies have been performed on FPRs of different sizes to identify the relevant effects from wind speed and direction [6,7]. Tan et al. [7] found that for some wind directions that efficiency can be improved by inhibiting hot air from escaping the receiver. However, often these results are very dependent on the shape of the cavity and a hopper might be excluded that could otherwise affect the flow in and out of the cavity. A complementary analysis of these works is performed in this paper using an existing computational fluid dynamics (CFD) model developed in ANSYS Fluent<sup>®</sup> to evaluate wind on an existing, well-defined FPR design with dimensions similar to those at the NSTTF. This study helps to inform future design efforts of the most critical wind conditions that affect the receiver performance.

Due to limitations in computational resources, an assumption is made in this analysis that supporting structures around the receiver do not change the effect of wind on the

thermal performance. Despite these limitations, several important conclusions are still gleaned about the effect of wind on FPRs. Nevertheless, future modeling efforts are underway to complement this study that will enable higher fidelity models of the receiver by taking advantage of Sandia’s High-Performance Computing (HPC) platforms. This future modeling strategy is also more suitable for large scale parametric studies that can feed future solar receiver design and wind mitigation strategies.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the physics implemented in the CFD model is described. Next, the model’s spatial discretization and domain size are varied to support the number of elements used and extent of the boundaries, respectively. Then, the effect of wind on the receiver efficiency is computed at various wind speeds and directions. A subsequent analysis is repeated for the particle mass flow rate and for different particle sizes. Then, the model is used to evaluate the efficiency of the receiver if wind and advective losses were mitigated. Finally, the results and future work are summarized.

## COMPUTATIONAL MODEL

The follow section describes the computational model that was utilized to investigate the effect of external wind on a FPR. Solution verification tests were also performed to confirm sufficient spatial discretization and mesh domain size.

### 2.1 Model Description

A CFD model of a previously tested FPR design at the NSTTF was utilized to study the effect of wind. This model, developed in ANSYS Fluent®, has been discussed thoroughly in the literature [5,8,9], but a brief summary of the modeling strategy is provided here for reference. A solid model of the receiver itself is depicted in Figure 1.

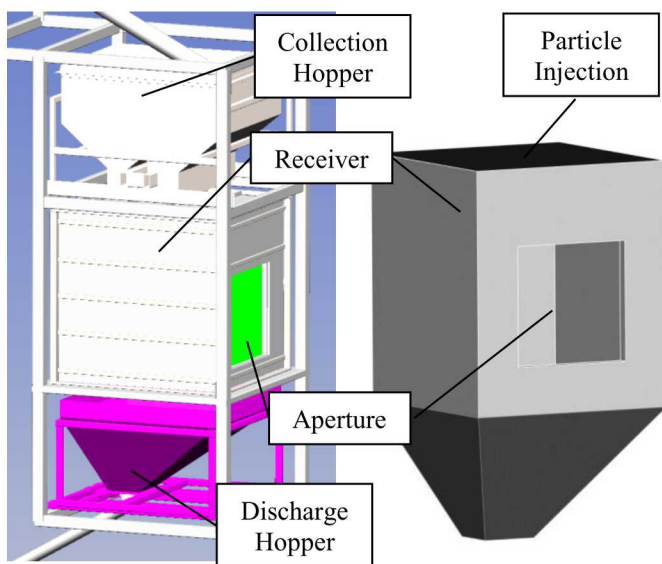


Figure 1. Solid model of the NSTTF receiver (left) and the solid geometry used in the parametric study (right)

The air volume inside and outside the receiver were modeled with a nominal domain size of 14x14x10 m. Conduction through

the mostly Duraboard® receiver walls was modeled (as shown in Figure 1), and the receiver walls were convectively and radiatively coupled with the surrounding environment. Lagrangian particles were released in a curtain with the same dimensions and at the same location as the particle curtain used at the NSTTF FPR. The particles fell through the domain under the force of gravity and were coupled with the surrounding air through drag and heat transfer. The realizable k-ε turbulence model [10] was applied using Fluent’s ‘scalable’ wall functions to be more robust at the wall with regards to the mesh size.

The particles exited the domain when they came into contact with the hopper walls at the bottom of the receiver. Note that particle bouncing was not included in the model to limit computational expense. The particles used in the model, CARBO HSP (82% Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, 5% SiO<sub>2</sub>, 3.5% TiO<sub>2</sub>) with ~7% iron oxide and particle diameters of 350 μm, were those that were used at the NSTTF, and their material properties were taken from Reference [11]. Particle to particle interaction was not included under the assumption that the particle volume fraction is less than 10% which has been established for other FPRs [12].

A non-grey discrete ordinates (DO) radiation model was coupled with the CFD model to include the effects of the incident solar radiation from the heliostat field and thermal emissions. The radiation was divided into three bands: 0.1 – 2.5 μm, 2.5 – 4.5 μm, and 4.5 – 100 μm. The incident radiation enters entirely in the smallest wavelength band where the two larger bands are indicative of thermal emissions. The distinction in the thermal wavelengths is used to account for differences in the emissive properties of Duraboard®. Note the radiative losses from the smallest wavelength band is more representative of reflected solar radiation out of the domain.

Incident solar radiation to the domain was defined using the NSTTF heliostat field as the nominal case providing approximately 1 MW/m<sup>2</sup> of radiative power to the receiver. The entire aperture is defined to emit the concentrated solar radiation with a flux profile determined from measurements taken during a representative NSTTF experiment. The incident beam direction emitted from a cell face on the aperture was determined using the method described by Khalsa and Ho [13].

### 2.2 Solution Verification

To provide more confidence in the results of the parametric study, two additional verification tests were performed on the model. First, the model was confirmed to have adequate spatial resolution using a series of meshes with an increasing number of elements. Next, the model was confirmed to have an adequate domain size such that the boundary conditions don’t adversely affect the solution. For this study, a series of meshes were generated using a comparable element size from the discretization study for various domain sizes.

For the spatial discretization study, cell size varied considerably throughout the mesh depending on the proximity to walls. Therefore, as a surrogate for cell size, the total number of elements was evaluated for a nominal domain size of 14x14x10 m (where the smaller dimension is the top/bottom dimension). Six hexahedral meshes were then generated with total number of

cells ranging from  $1.673 \times 10^5$  cells to  $2.364 \times 10^6$ . The thermal efficiency of the receiver is then plotted against the number of cells in Figure 2, where the vertical dashed line indicates the number of elements chosen nominally.

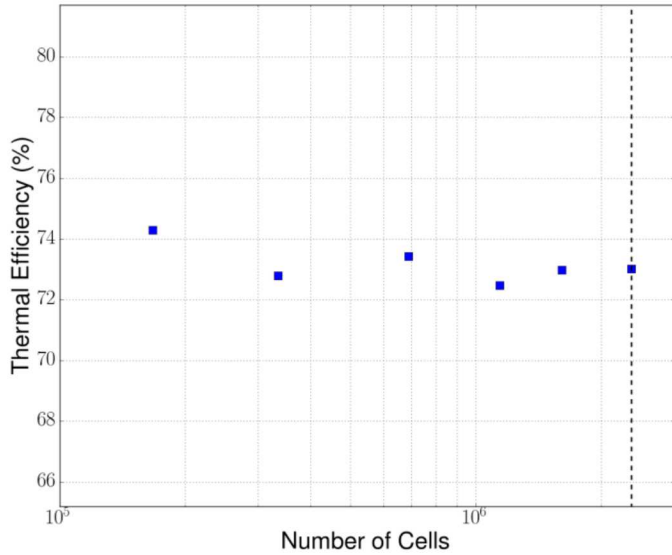


Figure 2. Receiver efficiency versus the number of cells in the mesh

As shown in the above figure, the spatial discretization of the geometry is more than sufficient to adequately resolve the physics. Likewise, the thermal efficiency is plotted for a series of meshes of various domain sizes ranging from the smallest size of  $10 \times 10 \times 6$  m to the largest size  $18 \times 18 \times 14$  m. For each successive mesh, the domain size is increased by 2 m for each coordinate direction. The results are plotted in Figure 3, where the vertical dashed line again indicates the nominal domain size. As before, the plot indicates the nominal domain size is sufficient (likely within other unquantified numerical uncertainties) to not adversely affect the solution from the boundaries.

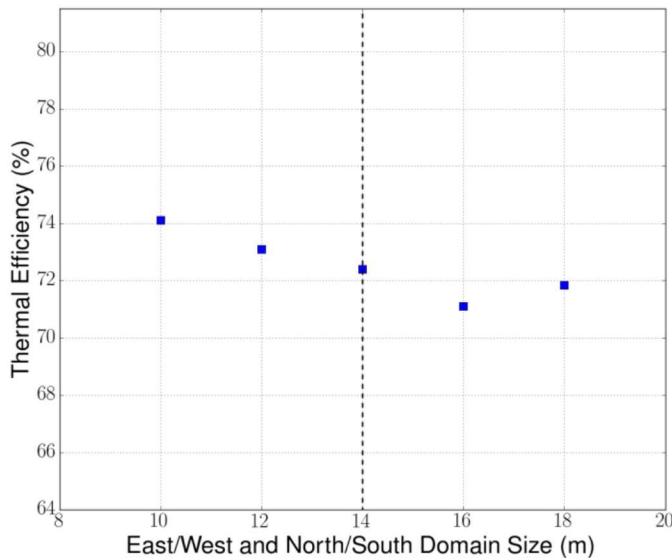


Figure 3. Receiver efficiency versus the domain size of the model

## PARAMETRIC WIND STUDY

To ascertain the effects of wind on this FPR, a parametric study is pursued investigating a range of wind speeds and directions. This being a north-facing receiver, requires that directions from North to South are considered. The receiver is evaluated at roughly nominal conditions from the set of NSTTF experiments for an incident flux of  $1 \text{ MW/m}^2$ , inlet particle temperature of  $600^\circ\text{C}$ , and particle mass flow rate of  $10 \text{ kg/s}$ . This study is repeated later for a lower particle mass flow rate. Next, the effect of varying particle diameter in the curtain is also evaluated. Finally, the receiver is evaluated for conditions where the effects of external winds and advective losses are mitigated.

The thermal efficiency of the receiver is used as the primary metric to evaluate the effect of the wind. The thermal efficiency is defined as:

$$\eta_{th} = \frac{Q_a}{Q_i} = \frac{\dot{m}_p (h_{o,p} - h_{i,p})}{Q_i} = \frac{\dot{m}_p \int_{T_{i,p}}^{T_{o,p}} c_p(T) dT}{Q_i} \quad (1)$$

where  $Q_a$  was the absorbed thermal power in the particles,  $Q_i$  was the incident thermal radiative power,  $\dot{m}_p$  was the total particle mass flow rate,  $h_p$  as the enthalpy of the particles, and  $c_p(T)$  was the specific heat of the particles ( $\text{J/kg} \cdot \text{K}$ ) as a function of temperature  $T$  defined as:

$$c_p(T) = 365 \cdot T^{0.18} \quad (2)$$

where  $T$  was the mean particle temperature ( $^\circ\text{C}$ ) for  $50^\circ\text{C} \leq T \leq 1100^\circ\text{C}$ . Essentially, the thermal efficiency is the fraction of incident radiative power that is transferred to the particles divided by the total radiative power.

The particle outlet temperature was computed using an average of particle temperatures passing through a plane just below the aperture. This location corresponds to where particle temperatures are measured in the NSTTF experiment and this keeps the reported efficiency consistent with values calculated experimentally. However, heat transfer will continue to occur as the particles continue to fall before they exit the receiver. Therefore, the sum of the reported losses from each loss mechanism plus the efficiency will not add up one exactly.

### 3.1 Effect of Wind Speed/Direction

Three separate wind speeds, 5, 10, and 15 m/s, are evaluated at six different wind directions, N, NNW, NW, W, SW, and S. This leads to a total of 18 cases with one additional case without wind to evaluate a baseline thermal efficiency of the receiver. The thermal efficiency of the receiver for each scenario is plotted against the wind direction for all explored wind speeds in Figure 4.

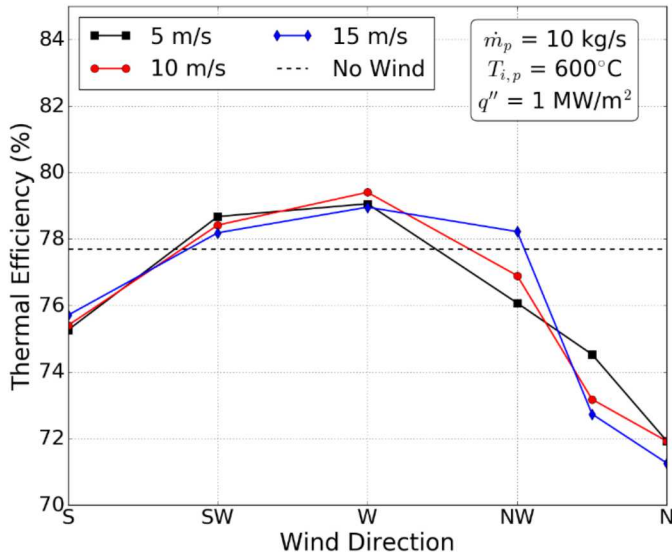


Figure 4. Receiver efficiency at various wind speeds and directions

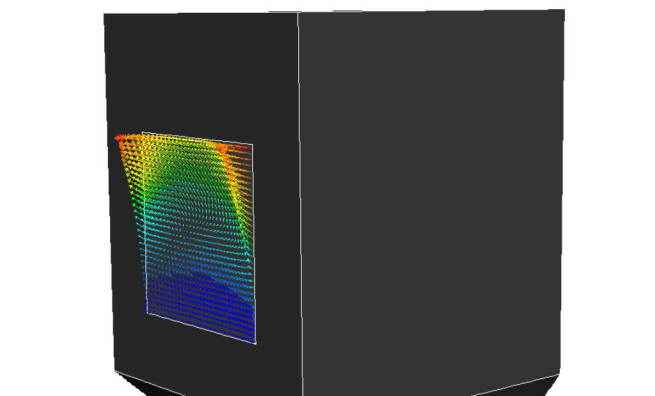
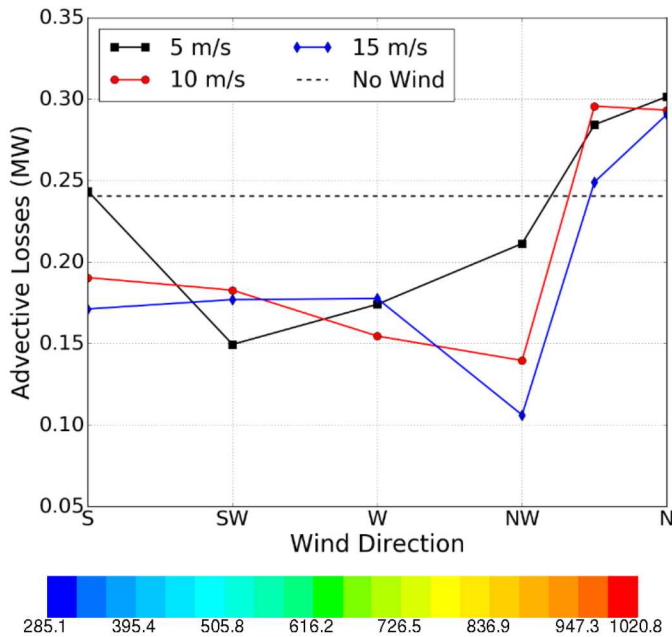


Figure 5. Advective losses at different wind speeds and directions (top) and a vector plot of air colored by temperature in K (bottom)

As shown in the above figure, the receiver thermal efficiency is marginally affected by the wind speed for a given direction. However, the wind direction has the most significant impact on the efficiency with the most northern winds having the largest impact. To understand how wind is affecting the thermal efficiency of the receiver, the total advective losses from the receiver is plotted in Figure 5 for all wind directions and speeds. For clarity, advective losses here refer to the fraction of incident thermal power that is lost from hot air escaping the receiver aperture to be replaced by cooler ambient air. Recall, that the advective losses may be larger than the losses reported by the efficiency due to how the thermal efficiency is being calculated. Also shown in Figure 5 is a velocity vector plot of the air flow at the aperture colored by the air temperature for a northern wind at 10 m/s.

As shown in the Figure 5, increased advective losses are inversely proportional to the thermal efficiency suggesting that the main effect of wind is to change how hot air is exchanged with cooler ambient air through the aperture. Whereas, the shape and location of the falling particle curtain is minimally affected by wind even at the highest speeds. Two particle curtains are shown visually without wind and with a northbound wind of 15 m/s in Figure 6. Note that this simulation does not include particle ‘fines’ which would undoubtedly be more susceptible to the effect of wind.

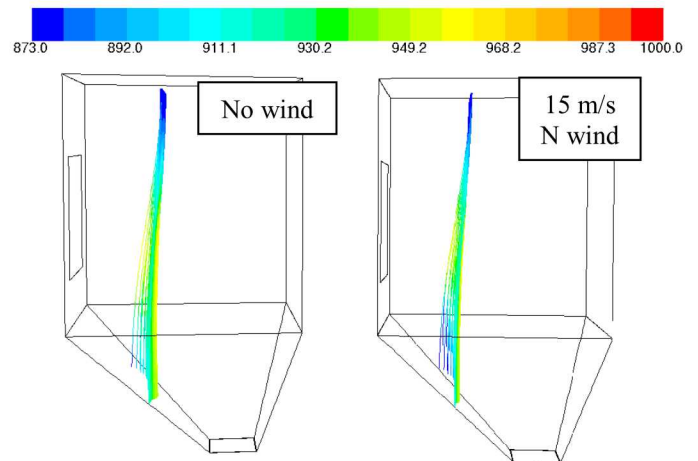


Figure 6. Effect of wind on the particle curtain for no wind (left) and 15 m/s north wind (right) colored by temperature in K

An implication of this finding is that wind can have very complicated effects on the performance of a FPR and universal design guidance that is applicable to all receivers is difficult to find. For example, the impact of wind can be a function of structural elements around the receiver, the shape of the receiver cavity, the location of the falling particle curtain/curtains, the particle diameter, the nod angle of the aperture. As shown in other studies on the subject [7] as well as this one, external winds on a FPR can even improve the performance if the wind inhibits hot air from escaping the receiver.

### 3.2 Effect of Particle Mass Flow Rate and Diameter

The parametric study was repeated for the same wind speeds and directions at a lower mass flow rate of 5 kg/s. The results are provided in Figure 7.

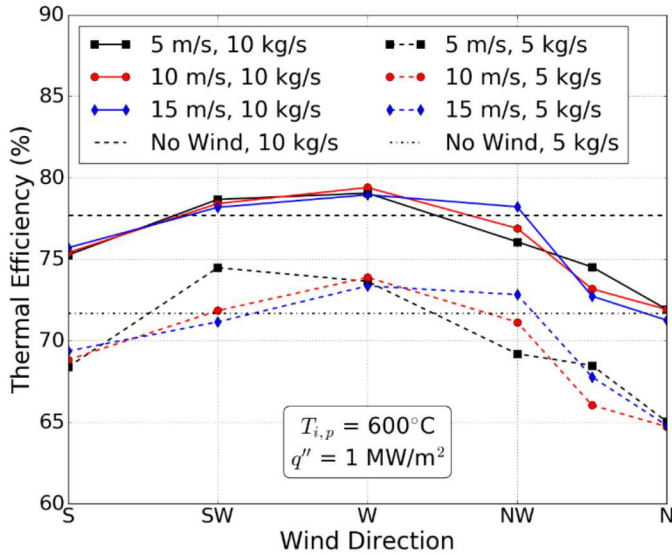


Figure 7. Effect of winds on particle mass flow rates of 5 and 10 kg/s

Given that the falling particle curtain appeared minimally altered by wind in Figure 6, it is unsurprising that the effect of wind on a 5 kg/s curtain is similar to that of a 10 kg/s curtain as shown in Figure 7. The effect of wind for all directions and speeds up to 15 m/s on the advective losses is largely the same. Ultimately, the decrease in overall performance at 5 kg/s is simply from a more transmissive falling particle curtain. This is shown in Figure 8 where the advective losses are very similar for the two particle mass flow rates.

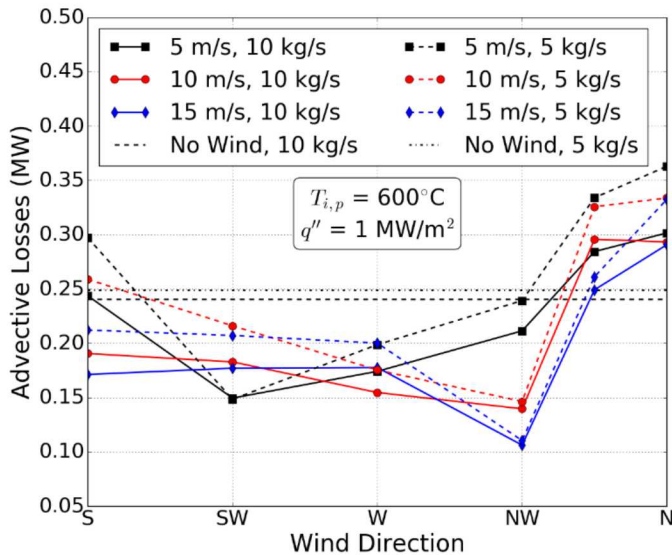


Figure 8. Effect of winds on particle diameters from 200 to 700  $\mu\text{m}$

Finally, the thermal efficiency of the receiver is evaluated for four different particle diameters subject to a NNW wind of 10 m/s. The particle mass flow rate was 10 kg/s and the particle

inlet temperature was 600°C. A NNW wind was chosen as it was originally believed it might be the most influential on a falling particle curtain. Particle diameters of 200, 350, 500, and 700  $\mu\text{m}$  were selected for this study.

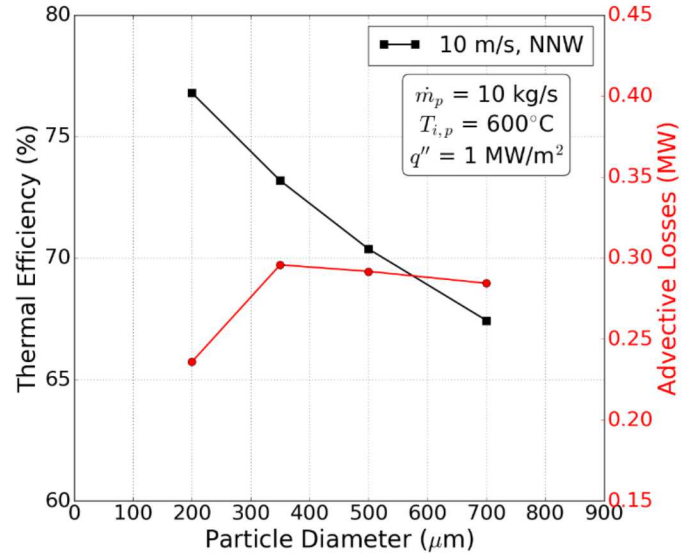


Figure 9. Effect of winds on particle diameters from 200 to 700  $\mu\text{m}$

As shown above, the thermal efficiency of the receiver was a strong function of the particle diameters, but the gains in thermal efficiency were not a result of the effect of wind as shown by the relatively flat curve for the advective losses (except for the smallest particle diameters). Instead, the gains in efficiency were primarily a result of increased curtain opacity for an equivalent mass flow rate which has been observed in other works in the literature. However, at a particle diameter of 200  $\mu\text{m}$ , the advective losses are significantly changed by the effect of the wind indicating the curtain is susceptible to the effect of wind. In this instance, the advective losses significantly decrease also contributing to a higher thermal efficiency.

### 3.3 Mitigating Wind/Advective Losses

Finally, additional cases are considered under the assumption that wind effects could be eliminated from the FPR design. The existing receiver model is modified such that flow in and out of the aperture is obstructed. This might be accomplished with the aid of a quartz window or forced air curtain (ignoring various effects that accompany these mechanisms), but the specific technique is not the focus of this analysis. The primary purpose is to determine the receiver efficiency that might be achievable with the present design if advective losses were mitigated. Four additional simulations are performed restricting flow in and out of the aperture for 5 and 10 kg/s and 1 and 1.5 MW/m<sup>2</sup>. The thermal efficiency for each case and the thermal losses from each remaining mechanism are plotted in Figure 10.

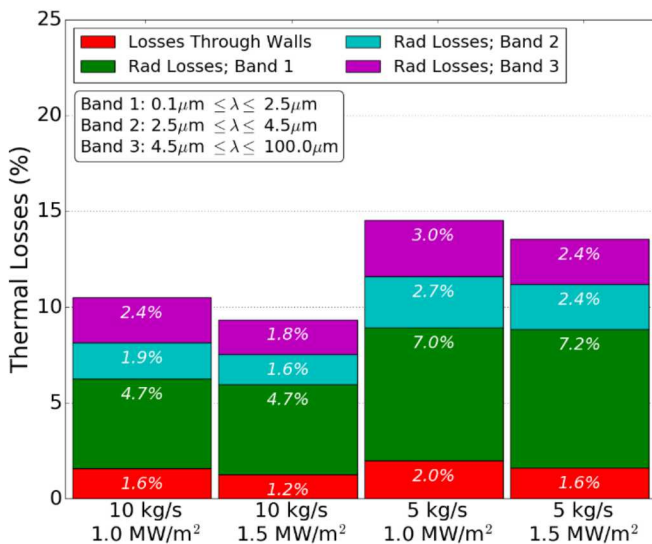
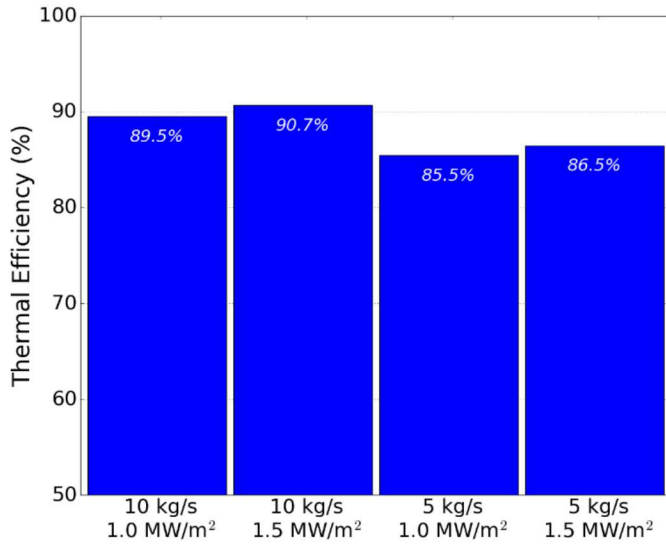


Figure 10. Receiver thermal efficiency and losses at nominal conditions mitigating the effect of wind/advective losses

As shown above, for nominal conditions with the effects of wind/advective losses mitigated from the receiver, the model predicts that receiver efficiencies of 90% are achievable. Several mechanisms are currently being considered to achieve these efficiencies including aperture hoods, quartz-half shells on the aperture, controlled air flow through the receiver, and recirculating air curtains over the aperture (also referred to as an aerowindow). These techniques are the focus of many present and future research efforts.

## CONCLUSIONS

A parametric numerical study was performed using a well-developed CFD model of a north-facing FPR design previously tested at the NSTTF at Sandia National Laboratories. The purpose of this effort was to quantify the effect of wind speed and direction on the thermal efficiency of the receiver. The model was exercised for different wind speeds ranging from 5-15 m/s and all cardinal wind directions. A solution verification

study was performed on the model that demonstrated sufficient spatial discretization and domain size of the model for the range of wind conditions explored.

The parametric study showed that for nominal operating conditions, the wind direction was the dominant factor affecting the thermal efficiency. The wind speed had minimal impact. The primary process through which the wind affected the thermal efficiency was through changing the advective losses. The particle mass flow rate had a negligible impact on the effect of wind. The thermal efficiency of the receiver was a strong function of the particle diameter. However, for all but the smallest diameter particles this improvement was primarily a function of increased curtain opacity than from changes in the falling curtain due to wind. Finally, the model was used to show that when wind/advective losses from the receiver could be mitigated from the FPR design, receiver efficiencies of approximately 90% were achievable.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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