Thermal Expansion of Polyurethane Foam

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Research Engineer  Research Engineer

Closed cell foams are often used for thermal insulation. In the case of the Space Shuttle, the External Tank uses several thermal protection systems to maintain the temperature of the cryogenic fuels. A few of these systems are polyurethane, closed cell foams. In an attempt to better understand the foam behavior on the tank, we are in the process of developing and improving thermal-mechanical models for the foams. These models will start at the microstructural level and progress to the overall structural behavior of the foams on the tank.

One of the key properties for model characterization and verification is thermal expansion. Since the foam is not a material, but a structure, the modeling of the expansion is complex. It is also exacerbated by the anisotropy of the material. During the spraying and foaming process, the cells become elongated in the rise direction and this imparts different properties in the rise direction than in the transverse directions. Our approach is to treat the foam as a two part structure consisting of the polymeric cell structure and the gas inside the cells. The polymeric skeleton has a thermal expansion of its own which is derived from the basic polymer chemistry. However, a major contributor to the thermal expansion is the volume change associated with the gas inside of the closed cells. As this gas expands it exerts pressure on the cell walls and changes the shape and size of the cells. The amount that this occurs depends on the elastic and viscoplastic properties of the polymer skeleton. The more compliant the polymeric skeleton, the more influence the gas pressure has on the expansion.

An additional influence on the expansion process is that the polymeric skeleton begins to breakdown at elevated temperatures and releases additional gas species into the cell interiors, adding to the gas pressure. The fact that this is such a complex process makes thermal expansion ideal for testing the models.

This report focuses on the thermal expansion tests and the response of the microstructure. A novel optical method is described which is appropriate for measuring thermal expansion at high temperatures without influencing the thermal expansion measurement. Detailed microstructural investigations will also be described which show cell expansion as a function of temperature. Finally, a phenomenological model on thermal expansion will be described.

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**Expected Foam Temperature Profile**

**Temperatures**

- **> 500 °F**
- **200 - 500 °F**
- **70 - 200 °F**
- **-423 – 70 °F**
- **-423 °F**

- **Ablated Material**
- **Char Layer**
- **Heat Affected**
- **Virgin SOFI Foam**
- **Tank Wall**

**Aerodynamic Heating**
Importance of CTE

• Al-substrate has a CTE of \(2 \times 10^{-5}/^\circ C\)
• Polymer foams have an approximate CTE of \(1 \times 10^{-4}/^\circ C\)
• Thermal strain \((\varepsilon)\) equals:
  \[
  \varepsilon = \Delta \alpha \Delta T = 0.045
  \]
  where \(\Delta T = 580 \, ^\circ C\)
  \[
  \sigma_{\text{foam}} \sim UTS_{\text{foam}}
  \]
• Thermal strains are significant and can cause cracking
Goal

The purpose of this study is to investigate the mechanisms of foam thermal expansion to guide model development.
Measurement of Thermal Expansion

Conventional CTE Rig

Non-Contacting CTE Rig

LVDT

Force

Ceramic Rod

Furnace

Foam

Laser

Foam

Heat Lamps

Detector
Distortion of Foam Due to Temperature Changes

As-cut

Heated to 170 C

Heated to 300 C
Problems Associated With Thermal Measurements

• Temperature measurements and thermal gradients
  - Foam is a thermal insulator

• Anisotropy of foam microstructure
  - Elongated cellular structure
  - Knit Lines
  - Large cells and voids

➢ Twisting, warping, and distortion of foam samples
Foam Microstructure

- 97% air; density = 0.03 g/cc
- Polymeric cell walls
- Due to its microstructure, material is anisotropic (possess different material properties in different directions)

Parallel-to-rise direction

Perpendicular-to-rise direction
Results
Thermal Expansion Perpendicular to Rise Direction

- Block 3
- Block 2F
- KSC-1

Permanent volume change

\( \alpha = 0.005/°C \)

\( \alpha = 0.0002/°C \)
Thermal Expansion Parallel to Rise Direction

\[ \alpha = 0/°C \]
\[ \alpha = 0.003/°C \]

Permanent volume change

Temperature (°C) vs. Strain
Thermal Expansion in Both Directions

![Graph showing thermal expansion in both directions. The x-axis represents temperature (°C), and the y-axis represents strain. The graph indicates the expansion of a material in two perpendicular directions as the temperature increases.](image-url)
Mechanism of Foam Expansion

- Hot stage experiments conducted on foam samples
- Individual foam cells examined in SEM during heating and cooling
- Expansion and contraction of cells observed as a function of temperature
- Both whole cells and faces were examined
Hot Stage Experiments

After heating

Cell expansion due to thermal exposure

Cell expands mostly in the width direction (perpendicular to rise)

Before test

Rise direction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temp (° C)</th>
<th>block</th>
<th>cell</th>
<th>length</th>
<th>width</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150</td>
<td>15-25</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>5-13</td>
<td>-4.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
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</table>
Cell Length Thermal Expansion
(Parallel to Rise)

Strain (mm/mm)

Temperature (C)

Cell 1 length
Cell 2 length
Cell 3 length
Cell 4 length
Cell 5 length
Face 6 length
Cell 7 length
Cell 8 length
Face 9 length
Face 10 length
Cell 11 length
Cell 12 length
Basis for Model Development

- Elongated cell structure
- Pore pressure increases with temperature
- Polymer softens with temperature
## Thermal Behavior of Polymer Skeleton

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temp. (°C)</th>
<th>Ligament 1</th>
<th>Ligament 9</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>length (μm)</td>
<td>strain (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Portions of cells with no influence from pore pressure.
Thermal Behavior of Polymer Skeleton

\[ \alpha = -0.00029/\degree C \]

Strain (mm/mm) vs. Temperature (C)

Ligament No.

[Graph showing data points and a linear fit line with label \( \alpha = -0.00029/\degree C \)]
Conclusions

• High temperature thermal behavior of the foam is a complex process driven by:
  - Cell anisotropy
  - Pore pressure
  - Polymer degradation
• Modeled using soils pore pressure approach and micromechanics
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