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Conceptual Model for Integrated Heavy-Metal Risk Assessment and Control in Oilfield Produced Water

OLUWAGBEMISOLA CYNTHIA FALEGAN[1], SABASTINE OBUM ANIEBONAM[2]
[1]*Nexus Alliance Ltd, Lagos, Nigeria*
[2]*Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam*

Abstract- ***Produced water from oil and gas operations contains a complex mixture of dissolved salts, hydrocarbons, and toxic heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, barium, and zinc, posing significant environmental and human health risks. Conventional treatment and risk management approaches often lack integration, resulting in incomplete contaminant removal, inefficient monitoring, and regulatory non-compliance. This presents a conceptual model for integrated heavy-metal risk assessment and control in oilfield produced water, combining systematic risk evaluation with sustainable treatment strategies to enhance environmental protection and operational efficiency. The model adopts a multi-stage framework, beginning with risk identification, which maps heavy-metal sources, exposure pathways, and ecological or human health hazards. Risk quantification incorporates contaminant concentrations, toxicity coefficients, and regulatory thresholds, followed by prioritization to guide intervention strategies. Control measures are integrated within the model, emphasizing both conventional treatment technologies such as chemical precipitation, membrane filtration, and ion exchange and innovative approaches, including bio-based adsorbents derived from agricultural waste. Hybrid system configurations are proposed to maximize removal efficiency, adaptability, and cost-effectiveness. The framework also incorporates monitoring and data integration, leveraging real-time sensors, predictive modeling, and decision-support tools to enable dynamic control and adaptive management. Sustainability and lifecycle considerations are embedded, addressing energy and material efficiency, adsorbent regeneration, carbon footprint reduction, and socio-economic benefits, such as local value creation and employment opportunities. Policy alignment with environmental regulations and circular economy principles ensures practical applicability and regulatory compliance across onshore and offshore operations. This conceptual model provides a comprehensive and scalable approach for heavy-metal risk management in produced water, supporting safe discharge, reuse, or reinjection while reducing environmental and operational risks. It also establishes a foundation for pilot-scale validation, long-term performance assessment, and integration with digital monitoring tools, enabling more efficient, sustainable, and adaptive water management in oilfield operations.***

Keywords: Produced Water, Heavy Metals, Risk Assessment, Agricultural Waste Adsorbents, Integrated Control, Sustainability, Oil And Gas Wastewater, Environmental Management

I. INTRODUCTION

Produced water is the largest by-product of oil and gas exploration and production, often exceeding the volume of extracted hydrocarbons, particularly in mature reservoirs with high water-to-oil ratios (Awe, 2017; Akpan *et al*., 2017). It consists of a complex mixture of formation water, injected fluids, hydrocarbons, salts, suspended solids, and chemical additives used during drilling and production processes (Odejobi and Ahmed, 2018). The composition of produced water is highly variable, influenced by factors such as reservoir geology, production methods, and operational practices. Heavy metals, including lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, barium, and zinc, are of particular concern due to their persistence, toxicity, and potential to bioaccumulate in the environment (Adebiyi *et al*., 2017; Awe *et al*., 2017). These contaminants pose significant challenges for safe disposal, treatment, and reuse of produced water.

The environmental and health risks associated with heavy metals in produced water are substantial. Heavy metals are non-biodegradable and can accumulate in sediments, soil, and aquatic organisms, ultimately entering food chains and affecting human and ecological health (Akinrinoye *et al*., 2015; Osabuohien, 2017). Chronic exposure to metals such as cadmium and lead is associated with kidney damage, neurological disorders, and cardiovascular complications, while certain forms of chromium and nickel are recognized as potential carcinogens. Improperly managed produced water discharged into surface water or soil can impair ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and threaten drinking water quality. These risks are exacerbated by the complex interactions among multiple contaminants present in produced water, which can increase overall toxicity and complicate treatment efforts (Awe and Akpan, 2017; Efobi *et al*., 2017).

Conventional approaches to heavy-metal risk assessment and treatment have notable limitations. Traditional risk assessments often focus on individual contaminants or regulatory thresholds without considering cumulative exposure, site-specific variability, or dynamic interactions between multiple pollutants (Adebiyi *et al*., 2014; Oni *et al*., 2018). Similarly, conventional treatment technologies including chemical precipitation, ion exchange, membrane filtration, and adsorption using commercial activated carbon—typically target specific contaminants, lack flexibility, and may generate secondary waste streams. High capital and operational costs, energy-intensive processes, and limited scalability reduce the feasibility of these methods, particularly in resource-constrained and developing regions where infrastructure and technical expertise are limited (Odejobi and Ahmed, 2018; Nwafor *et al*., 2018).

These limitations highlight the need for an integrated, systematic model for heavy-metal management in produced water. Such a model combines comprehensive risk assessment with adaptive treatment strategies, linking contaminant identification, quantification, and prioritization to appropriate control measures. Integration of innovative, sustainable technologies, such as bio-based adsorbents derived from agricultural residues, offers low-cost, environmentally friendly solutions that align with circular economy principles. Incorporating real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and adaptive decision-support tools further enhances operational efficiency and ensures consistent contaminant removal (Nwafor *et al*., 2018; Seyi-Lande *et al*., 2018).

An integrated conceptual model provides a structured approach to address the multifaceted challenges of heavy-metal contamination in produced water. It enables safe discharge, reuse, or reinjection while minimizing environmental and health risks (Ahmed and Odejobi, 2018; Seyi-Lande *et al*., 2018). By combining risk evaluation, sustainable treatment strategies, and digital monitoring, the model offers a scalable, cost-effective, and environmentally responsible pathway for produced water management in oil and gas operations, particularly in regions with limited resources and stringent regulatory requirements.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology to systematically identify, screen, and synthesize relevant literature on heavy-metal contamination, risk assessment, and treatment strategies in oilfield produced water. The PRISMA framework was selected to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and rigor in developing a conceptual model that integrates both risk evaluation and control measures for heavy metals in complex produced water matrices.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major scientific databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Keywords and Boolean operators were used in combination to capture studies relevant to heavy-metal management, including “produced water,” “oilfield wastewater,” “heavy metal contamination,” “risk assessment,” “adsorption,” “bio-based adsorbents,” “treatment technologies,” “environmental monitoring,” and “integrated control systems.” The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2000 and 2025 to encompass both foundational research and contemporary technological advancements. Additional records were identified through backward and forward citation tracking of key publications.

All retrieved articles were exported into reference management software, and duplicates were removed. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, excluding studies unrelated to heavy-metal contamination in produced water, non-oilfield wastewater streams, or purely theoretical models without practical treatment application. Full texts of potentially relevant articles were then assessed against predefined inclusion criteria, focusing on studies that reported contaminant characterization, risk assessment methodologies, treatment performance, or monitoring strategies relevant to heavy-metal control in produced water.

Data extraction followed a standardized template to capture critical information, including heavy-metal concentrations, exposure pathways, treatment technologies, adsorption mechanisms, system configurations, and monitoring approaches. Both qualitative and quantitative data were synthesized to identify trends in risk assessment practices, treatment efficiencies, and integrated control strategies. The evidence was analyzed to inform the development of a conceptual model linking heavy-metal identification, prioritization, and risk mitigation with sustainable treatment approaches, including bio-based and hybrid technologies.

This PRISMA-guided methodology ensures that the conceptual model for integrated heavy-metal risk assessment and control in oilfield produced water is grounded in systematically collected, high-quality evidence, providing a robust framework for future pilot-scale validation, operational optimization, and policy-oriented implementation.

2.1 Heavy Metal Contamination in Produced Water

Produced water is a major by-product of oil and gas extraction, characterized by a highly complex chemical composition that often includes elevated concentrations of heavy metals. These metals, including lead (Pb), cadmium (Cd), chromium (Cr), nickel (Ni), barium (Ba), zinc (Zn), and others, pose significant environmental and human health risks due to their persistence, bioaccumulative potential, and toxicity. Understanding the occurrence, sources, variability, and impacts of heavy metals in produced water is essential for developing effective risk management and treatment strategies.

Lead is commonly present in produced water and originates from the natural mineral composition of the reservoir and corrosion of drilling and production equipment. Cadmium, though typically present at lower concentrations, is highly toxic and can accumulate in sediments and aquatic organisms, making it a critical contaminant to monitor (Farounbi *et al*., 2018; Akinola *et al*., 2018). Chromium exists in multiple oxidation states, with hexavalent chromium (Cr^{6+}) being particularly hazardous due to its carcinogenic properties. Nickel and barium are also frequently detected in produced water, with barium often exceeding regulatory discharge limits due to its high solubility in saline formation water. Zinc, while an essential trace element, can be toxic at elevated levels and is commonly introduced through corrosion of steel infrastructure and production additives. Other heavy metals, including copper, arsenic, and mercury, may also be present depending on geological formations and production practices, further complicating treatment and management efforts.

The sources and pathways of heavy metals in produced water are multifactorial. Primary sources include natural formation water, which contains metals leached from reservoir rock over geological timescales. Secondary contributions arise from production chemicals, such as corrosion inhibitors, scale-preventing agents, biocides, and other additives, which may introduce metals directly or interact with existing metals to increase mobility. Equipment and pipeline corrosion, especially in onshore and offshore installations exposed to high-pressure saline environments, represents another significant pathway for metal contamination (Ahmed and Odejobi, 2018). The combination of these sources leads to variable and site-specific heavy-metal profiles in produced water, highlighting the need for tailored monitoring and treatment approaches.

Heavy-metal concentrations and composition in produced water vary widely across onshore and offshore operations. Onshore reservoirs may produce water with higher total dissolved solids and elevated barium and lead concentrations due to specific lithologies, whereas offshore operations often experience lower volumes of produced water but increased complexity due to combined effects of chemical additives, deepwater pressure, and temperature variations. Seasonal variations, production techniques, and well age also influence the composition and concentration of metals (Rakonjac *et al*., 2018; Prinsloo and Nogemane, 2018). For example, early-life wells may exhibit higher corrosion-derived metal content, while mature wells may present elevated levels of naturally occurring metals due to prolonged water-rock interaction. Such variability necessitates adaptive treatment strategies and comprehensive risk assessments that account for both spatial and temporal changes in produced water composition.

The potential ecological and human health impacts of heavy-metal contamination in produced water are profound. Discharge of untreated or partially treated water into surface water or soil can result in bioaccumulation of metals in aquatic organisms, with cascading effects through food chains. Sediment-bound metals can persist for decades, altering benthic habitats and reducing biodiversity. In humans, chronic exposure to heavy metals such as cadmium, lead, and hexavalent chromium can cause severe health outcomes, including kidney damage, neurological disorders, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Acute exposures, though less common, may occur through direct contact during handling of produced water or accidental spills, further emphasizing the need for stringent management. Additionally, heavy metals can interact synergistically with other contaminants in produced water, such as hydrocarbons and dissolved salts, potentially exacerbating toxicity and complicating remediation efforts.

Heavy-metal contamination in produced water represents a complex and significant environmental and public health challenge. Metals such as lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, barium, and zinc are derived from multiple sources, including reservoir formation water, chemical additives, and infrastructure corrosion. Their concentrations and profiles vary across onshore and offshore operations, influenced by geological, operational, and temporal factors. The ecological and human health risks associated with these metals necessitate robust monitoring, comprehensive risk assessment, and effective treatment strategies (Hassaan *et al.*, 2016; Pan *et al.*, 2018). Addressing heavy-metal contamination is critical for sustainable produced water management, regulatory compliance, and protection of ecosystems and human populations in oil- and gas-producing regions.

2.2 Framework for Integrated Risk Assessment

The management of heavy-metal contamination in oilfield produced water requires a systematic and comprehensive approach that addresses both environmental and human health risks. An integrated risk assessment framework provides a structured methodology for identifying, quantifying, and prioritizing hazards while guiding the implementation of effective control and treatment strategies. Such a framework ensures that risk management is evidence-based, transparent, and adaptable to varying operational and environmental contexts.

The conceptual model architecture for integrated risk assessment is designed as a multi-layered system encompassing contaminant characterization, exposure assessment, hazard evaluation, and risk mitigation. At its core, the framework links the identification of contaminants to their sources, transport pathways, and potential impacts on ecological and human receptors. The architecture incorporates iterative feedback loops, allowing real-time data from monitoring systems to inform adaptive management and optimize control measures. Integration with predictive models and decision-support tools enhances the framework's capacity to handle complex produced water matrices and dynamic operational conditions, such as fluctuations in heavy-metal concentrations due to changing reservoir chemistry or production practices (Adesanwo *et al.*, 2017; Bello *et al.*, 2017).

Defining system boundaries is a critical step in constructing the risk assessment framework. Boundaries are established to delineate the scope of analysis and clarify the spatial and temporal extent of potential impacts. The framework considers four primary components: source, transport, treatment, and disposal or reuse. The source includes reservoir formation water, injected fluids, and chemical additives, as well as corrosion of pipelines and equipment. Transport encompasses movement through pipelines, separation facilities, and temporary storage systems, which may influence metal speciation, solubility, and mobility. Treatment involves physical, chemical, and biological processes aimed at reducing contaminant concentrations, while disposal or reuse includes surface discharge, reinjection into reservoirs, or beneficial reuse in industrial processes (Mokonyama *et al*., 2017; Sharma and Kennedy, 2017). Defining these boundaries allows the assessment to capture all critical stages where exposure to heavy metals may occur.

Risk identification focuses on mapping contaminants and their exposure pathways to receptors. Produced water may contain multiple heavy metals at varying concentrations, each with distinct toxicity profiles. Exposure pathways include direct contact by workers, accidental spills, and release into aquatic or terrestrial ecosystems. Mapping these pathways helps determine potential points of interaction between metals and receptors, highlighting where intervention may be most effective. This stage also considers secondary exposure routes, such as bioaccumulation in aquatic organisms and subsequent ingestion by humans, to ensure a holistic assessment of environmental and health risks.

Risk quantification involves determining the magnitude and probability of adverse effects associated with identified contaminants. Concentration thresholds, derived from environmental quality standards or toxicity data, establish safe levels for human and ecological exposure. Toxicity coefficients, including reference doses and slope factors, are used to translate measured concentrations into risk metrics such as hazard quotients or carcinogenic probabilities (Miri *et al*., 2017; Wang *et al*., 2018). Regulatory limits provide a benchmark for compliance and inform operational decisions regarding treatment efficiency and residual contaminant levels. Quantitative assessment allows comparison between different metals, exposure scenarios, and operational sites, facilitating data-driven decision-making.

Risk prioritization is the final component of the integrated framework and involves ranking hazards based on their severity, likelihood, and vulnerability of affected receptors. Metals with high toxicity, mobility, and persistence are assigned higher priority, as are pathways with elevated exposure potential, such as effluent discharge into sensitive aquatic ecosystems. Vulnerability assessment incorporates ecological sensitivity, human population density, and socio-economic factors to ensure that resource allocation for treatment and mitigation is optimized (Shen *et al*., 2016; He *et al*., 2018). Prioritization enables operators and regulators to focus on the most critical risks while maintaining overall system efficiency.

The framework for integrated risk assessment provides a structured and adaptable methodology for managing heavy-metal contamination in oilfield produced water. By combining a comprehensive conceptual architecture, clearly defined system boundaries, systematic contaminant mapping, quantitative risk evaluation, and strategic prioritization, the model enables evidence-based decision-making and efficient allocation of treatment resources. This integrated approach is essential for ensuring environmental protection, regulatory compliance, and public health safety in both onshore and offshore oil and gas operations.

2.3 Heavy-Metal Control Strategies

Effective management of heavy-metal contamination in oilfield produced water requires the deployment of control strategies that are both technically robust and economically feasible. Heavy metals, including lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, barium, and zinc, pose significant environmental and human health risks due to their persistence, bioaccumulative potential, and toxicity (Sharifuzzaman *et al*., 2016; Suvarapu and Baek, 2017). A comprehensive heavy-metal control strategy integrates proven treatment technologies, innovative materials such as bio-based adsorbents, and hybrid system configurations, while also considering operational and scalability factors to ensure sustainable and efficient treatment.

Conventional treatment technologies remain central to heavy-metal removal and provide a foundation upon which integrated strategies can be built. Adsorption is one of the most widely used methods due to its versatility and effectiveness in removing both dissolved and particulate metals. Activated carbon, zeolites, and other high-surface-area materials act by binding metal ions through surface complexation, electrostatic interactions, or pore entrapment. Chemical precipitation is another commonly employed technique, whereby metal ions are converted into insoluble compounds, often hydroxides, sulfides, or carbonates, which can be removed via sedimentation or filtration. This approach is particularly effective for barium and zinc, which readily form precipitates under controlled pH conditions. Ion exchange processes allow selective removal of target metals using resins or polymeric materials with high affinity for specific cations, providing precise control over effluent quality. Membrane filtration, including reverse osmosis, nanofiltration, and ultrafiltration, enables physical separation of dissolved metals from water but is energy-intensive and sensitive to fouling, limiting standalone applicability in high-volume produced water streams (Schneider *et al*., 2017; Roy and Ragunath, 2018).

Innovative approaches, particularly the integration of bio-based and low-cost adsorbents, enhance sustainability and reduce treatment costs. Agricultural residues, including rice husks, maize cobs, coconut shells, sugarcane bagasse, and groundnut shells, can be transformed into adsorbents through physical, chemical, or thermochemical activation. These materials offer high surface area, tunable pore structures, and functional groups capable of complexing with heavy metals. Their advantages include low cost, local availability, and alignment with circular economy principles, reducing environmental burdens associated with conventional activated carbons. Surface modifications or chemical functionalization can further increase metal-binding efficiency, enabling the removal of multiple contaminants in complex produced water matrices (Ramrakhiani *et al*., 2016; Uygun *et al*., 2016).

Hybrid systems that combine conventional and innovative treatment technologies provide a versatile strategy for addressing the diverse composition of produced water. For instance, chemical precipitation can be used to remove bulk metals, followed by adsorption using bio-based materials to polish residual contaminants. Membrane filtration or ion exchange can then provide final effluent quality control, ensuring compliance with regulatory standards. Such integrated approaches balance treatment efficiency, operational cost, and sustainability by leveraging the strengths of each method while compensating for individual limitations. Hybrid systems are particularly valuable in offshore or remote onshore operations where space, energy, and resource constraints necessitate compact, adaptable treatment solutions (Vasileiou *et al*., 2017; Jepma and Van Schot, 2017).

Operational considerations are critical for the successful implementation of heavy-metal control strategies. Scalability is essential to accommodate varying produced water volumes, from small-scale onshore wells to high-volume offshore platforms. Modular units, such as fixed-bed or fluidized-bed adsorption columns, allow incremental scaling without extensive infrastructure modification. Flow configurations batch, continuous-flow, or recirculating systems must be optimized to balance contact time, adsorption efficiency, and hydraulic management. Batch systems offer simplicity and adaptability for intermittent operations, whereas continuous-flow configurations support consistent treatment for large volumes. Process optimization includes monitoring pH, temperature, flow rates, and adsorbent regeneration schedules to maximize removal efficiency and extend material lifespan. Real-time monitoring and feedback control can further improve operational reliability, reduce energy consumption, and minimize secondary waste generation.

Heavy-metal control in produced water requires a multi-faceted strategy that combines conventional treatment technologies, innovative bio-based adsorbents, and hybrid system designs. Adsorption, chemical precipitation, ion exchange, and membrane filtration provide proven mechanisms for contaminant removal, while agricultural waste-derived materials offer cost-effective and sustainable alternatives. Hybrid configurations and operational optimization ensure adaptability, scalability, and compliance with regulatory standards. By integrating these elements, oil and gas operators can achieve efficient, environmentally responsible, and economically feasible heavy-metal management in produced water, supporting long-term sustainability and protection of human and ecological health (Ebin and Isik, 2016; Temizel *et al*., 2018).

2.4 Monitoring and Data Integration

Effective management of heavy-metal contamination in oilfield produced water depends not only on treatment technologies but also on robust monitoring and data integration systems. Heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, barium, and zinc are persistent and bioaccumulative, posing significant environmental and human health risks. Monitoring strategies provide critical data for understanding contaminant distribution, evaluating treatment efficiency, ensuring regulatory compliance, and supporting adaptive management. Integrating these data streams into predictive models and decision-support frameworks enables operators to optimize treatment processes, respond dynamically to changing water quality, and reduce operational and environmental risks.

Sampling strategies are fundamental to accurate monitoring of produced water and treated effluents. Effective sampling must account for the variability of produced water composition, which can fluctuate due to reservoir heterogeneity, production methods, seasonal effects, and operational changes. Representative sampling locations include the wellhead, separator units, storage tanks, and points of effluent discharge or reuse. Temporal sampling is equally important, with both continuous and periodic sampling regimes providing complementary insights: periodic sampling allows for trend analysis and regulatory reporting, while intensive sampling during high-risk operations, such as well stimulation or equipment maintenance, captures transient spikes in heavy-metal concentrations. Samples must be collected following standardized protocols to preserve chemical integrity, prevent contamination, and ensure accurate quantification of dissolved and particulate metals (Alamgir, 2017; Knoerr *et al*., 2017). Analytical methods such as inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS), atomic absorption spectroscopy (AAS), and colorimetric assays are commonly employed to measure metal concentrations with high sensitivity.

Real-time monitoring using sensors and automated data acquisition enhances the ability to track heavy-metal concentrations continuously and detect deviations from expected levels. Advances in sensor technology have enabled the development of electrochemical sensors, optical probes, and biosensors capable of detecting specific metals at low concentrations in produced water streams. These sensors can be integrated with data loggers and remote telemetry systems, providing immediate feedback to operators and enabling early intervention before contaminant levels exceed regulatory limits. Real-time monitoring is particularly valuable in offshore platforms or remote operations where manual sampling may be infrequent, costly, or hazardous. Integration with automated alarms and control systems further allows for rapid adjustments to treatment processes, such as modifying chemical dosing or flow rates in response to elevated contaminant concentrations (Giuffrida and Spoto, 2017; Al-Nakeeb *et al*., 2018).

Predictive modeling and decision-support tools complement real-time monitoring by providing a forward-looking approach to risk management. Statistical models, machine learning algorithms, and mechanistic simulations can predict heavy-metal behavior under varying production conditions, accounting for factors such as pH, temperature, salinity, and interactions with other contaminants. These models allow operators to estimate future contaminant loads, optimize treatment scheduling, and assess the potential effectiveness of different remediation strategies. Decision-support systems integrate predictive outputs with operational and environmental data, offering actionable recommendations for process adjustments, resource allocation, and compliance assurance. For example, predictive models can identify wells or process units likely to produce higher heavy-metal concentrations, enabling targeted intervention and efficient allocation of treatment resources.

Feedback loops for adaptive management and process optimization ensure that monitoring and modeling efforts translate into improved treatment performance and risk mitigation. Data from sensors, laboratory analyses, and predictive models are continuously evaluated to refine operational parameters, such as adsorbent dosage, retention time, chemical treatment concentrations, and flow configurations. Adaptive management allows for real-time adjustments to address fluctuations in produced water composition, equipment performance, and environmental conditions. Over time, these feedback loops also contribute to the optimization of long-term operational strategies, including preventive maintenance schedules, adsorbent regeneration protocols, and system upgrades, thereby enhancing efficiency and reducing cost (Hannan *et al*., 2018; Khor *et al*., 2018). Furthermore, integrated data systems facilitate regulatory reporting, provide transparency for environmental audits, and support research initiatives aimed at improving heavy-metal management in oilfield operations.

Monitoring and data integration are critical components of an effective heavy-metal risk management strategy for produced water. Comprehensive sampling strategies provide baseline and trend information, while real-time sensors enable rapid detection of anomalies and immediate operational response. Predictive modeling and decision-support tools allow operators to anticipate risks, optimize treatment processes, and plan interventions proactively. Feedback loops ensure continuous process improvement, adaptive management, and enhanced compliance with environmental standards. Together, these elements create an integrated monitoring and data system that strengthens the sustainability, efficiency, and reliability of heavy-metal control strategies in oilfield produced water treatment.

2.5 Sustainability and Lifecycle Considerations

Sustainability and lifecycle considerations are critical for evaluating the long-term viability of heavy-metal control strategies in oilfield produced water. Traditional treatment methods, such as chemical precipitation, ion exchange, and membrane filtration, are effective at reducing contaminant concentrations but often incur significant environmental and economic costs, including high energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and secondary waste generation. By integrating sustainability principles into the design, operation, and management of treatment systems, operators can achieve more environmentally responsible, economically feasible, and socially beneficial outcomes.

Environmental impact assessment is a fundamental component of lifecycle evaluation, encompassing emissions, energy use, and generation of secondary waste. Conventional treatment technologies frequently require high operational energy inputs; for example, membrane processes demand continuous pumping and pressure, while thermal or chemical regeneration of adsorbents can produce substantial carbon emissions. Additionally, chemical precipitation and ion exchange often generate sludge or spent resins that require safe disposal or treatment, potentially creating environmental liabilities. A systematic environmental impact assessment enables quantification of these burdens and identification of hotspots where improvements can reduce emissions and resource use (Michailidou *et al*., 2017; Moretti *et al*., 2017). Life cycle assessment (LCA) methodologies can evaluate the full cradle-to-grave impact of treatment technologies, including feedstock acquisition, adsorbent preparation, operation, regeneration, and disposal. This approach allows comparison between conventional and innovative treatment strategies, guiding the selection of environmentally optimal solutions.

Resource efficiency is another key aspect of sustainability. Agricultural waste–derived adsorbents, produced from rice husks, maize cobs, coconut shells, or sugarcane bagasse, exemplify efficient use of locally available feedstocks. Valorizing these residues reduces environmental burdens associated with open burning or landfill disposal while providing a renewable source of treatment media. Adsorbent regeneration, through chemical, thermal, or mechanical processes, extends material lifespan, decreases the need for continuous raw material production, and reduces operational costs. Moreover, spent adsorbents can be further valorized, for example, as soil amendments or carbonaceous fuel sources, closing the resource loop and minimizing waste. Efficient material utilization not only reduces environmental impact but also enhances system resilience, enabling sustainable operation under variable produced water volumes and compositions.

Socio-economic implications are integral to lifecycle considerations. Low-cost bio-based adsorbents reduce capital and operational expenditure compared to conventional activated carbons or synthetic resins. Additionally, the use of locally sourced agricultural residues fosters value creation within rural communities, generating income for farmers and small-scale enterprises involved in feedstock collection, pretreatment, and adsorbent production. Employment opportunities extend to the operation, maintenance, and regeneration of treatment systems, stimulating local economies and promoting social acceptance of sustainable technologies. The economic advantages of resource-efficient, renewable feedstocks combined with low-energy treatment processes contribute to cost-effectiveness and scalability, particularly in developing regions where access to conventional treatment materials may be limited.

Alignment with circular economy principles and environmental regulations further enhances sustainability. By converting agricultural waste into functional adsorbents, the treatment system promotes waste-to-resource strategies, minimizes environmental impact, and supports national and international sustainability goals (Chiang and Pan, 2017; Dashwood *et al*., 2018). Regulatory compliance is facilitated through consistent removal of heavy metals to meet discharge or reuse standards, while the reuse of spent adsorbents and reduction of secondary waste contribute to environmental stewardship. Integration of monitoring and feedback mechanisms ensures adaptive management, maintaining compliance and operational efficiency over the lifecycle of the treatment system.

Sustainability and lifecycle considerations provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating and optimizing heavy-metal control strategies in produced water management. Environmental impact assessment identifies emissions, energy use, and waste generation, guiding the selection of low-impact technologies. Resource-efficient practices, including feedstock valorization, adsorbent regeneration, and waste reuse, enhance operational sustainability and resilience. Socio-economic benefits, such as cost reduction, local value creation, and employment, strengthen community engagement and support scalable implementation. Alignment with circular economy principles and regulatory standards ensures that heavy-metal control strategies not only mitigate environmental and health risks but also promote sustainable development in oilfield operations. Integrating these considerations into treatment design and management is essential for achieving long-term environmental, economic, and social benefits in produced water management.

2.6 Policy and Regulatory Integration

The management of heavy-metal contamination in oilfield produced water requires not only effective treatment technologies but also robust policy and regulatory integration. Regulatory frameworks guide the allowable limits of contaminants, define compliance obligations for operators, and ensure the protection of environmental and public health. Aligning an integrated heavy-metal risk assessment and control model with these regulations is essential for achieving operational legitimacy, long-term sustainability, and social acceptance. Policy integration also provides a structured foundation for monitoring, reporting, and adaptive management, facilitating consistent and standardized approaches across diverse oil and gas operations.

Mapping the model to existing environmental and industrial water quality standards is the first step in regulatory integration. Produced water is subject to multiple regulatory frameworks depending on its intended fate—discharge, reuse, or reinjection. Environmental standards typically define maximum permissible concentrations for heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, barium, and zinc, as well as total dissolved solids, pH, and other water quality parameters (Akharame *et al*., 2017; Sharaky *et al*., 2017). Examples include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Effluent Guidelines and State-specific regulations, the European Union Water Framework Directive (WFD), and regional oil and gas wastewater management policies in countries such as Australia, Canada, and Nigeria. Industrial standards may also apply for water intended for reinjection into reservoirs, requiring strict limits to prevent scaling, equipment corrosion, or reservoir damage. By mapping the conceptual model to these standards, operators can ensure that risk identification, treatment design, and monitoring protocols directly align with compliance requirements. This alignment also facilitates benchmarking of treatment performance and identification of gaps in current practices.

Compliance strategies for discharge, reuse, or reinjection are integral to policy integration. For discharge into surface waters, the model must ensure that heavy-metal concentrations consistently meet effluent standards, often requiring multistage treatment approaches such as chemical precipitation, adsorption, and membrane filtration. For reuse in industrial applications or agricultural irrigation, additional considerations such as cumulative toxicity, bioaccumulation potential, and seasonal variability in water quality must be addressed to avoid ecological or human health impacts. Reinjection into reservoirs for secondary recovery imposes stricter constraints, as heavy metals can induce scaling, clogging, or microbial growth that impairs reservoir performance. Compliance strategies therefore include optimized treatment sequences, regular monitoring, adaptive adjustment of operational parameters, and periodic audits to confirm regulatory adherence. Operators may also implement preventive measures such as pre-treatment of high-metal-content water, blending with low-metal streams, or using predictive models to anticipate spikes in contamination.

Guidelines for standardizing heavy-metal monitoring and treatment protocols are crucial for consistency, reproducibility, and regulatory transparency. Standardized sampling procedures ensure representative data collection from wells, separators, storage tanks, and effluent discharge points, accounting for spatial and temporal variability in produced water composition. Laboratory analyses should follow validated methods such as inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS), atomic absorption spectroscopy (AAS), or standardized colorimetric assays, with clearly defined detection limits and quality control procedures. Treatment protocols should include minimum performance criteria for removal efficiency, adsorbent regeneration, secondary waste management, and process safety. The integration of real-time monitoring sensors and automated data acquisition systems further enhances the reliability of compliance, enabling immediate corrective actions when heavy-metal concentrations approach regulatory limits. Decision-support tools and predictive modeling can be incorporated to forecast treatment requirements, optimize operational parameters, and support reporting to regulatory authorities.

Beyond operational and technical alignment, policy integration also emphasizes environmental stewardship and sustainable development. By adopting standardized monitoring and treatment protocols, operators contribute to transparency, accountability, and risk reduction, which are increasingly required under national and international sustainability frameworks. Regulatory alignment also encourages the adoption of low-impact, circular economy approaches, such as the use of agricultural waste–derived adsorbents and adsorbent regeneration strategies, which minimize secondary waste and reduce environmental footprints (Santos *et al*., 2016; Portion *et al*., 2016).

Policy and regulatory integration is a critical component of sustainable heavy-metal management in oilfield produced water. Mapping the conceptual model to existing environmental and industrial water quality standards ensures regulatory compliance and protects environmental and human health. Compliance strategies tailored for discharge, reuse, and reinjection facilitate operational effectiveness while meeting legal obligations. Standardized monitoring and treatment protocols promote consistency, reliability, and transparency, enabling adaptive management and optimization of treatment systems. Integrating regulatory and policy considerations with technical and operational strategies ensures that heavy-metal control measures are not only effective but also legally compliant, environmentally responsible, and socially acceptable, establishing a foundation for sustainable produced water management in diverse oil and gas production contexts.

2.7 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite significant advances in heavy-metal treatment technologies and integrated risk assessment frameworks, several research gaps remain in the management of oilfield produced water. Most studies to date have focused on laboratory-scale experiments, with limited attention to pilot-scale implementation, long-term operational performance, and integration with digital and predictive tools. Addressing these gaps is essential to move from conceptual models to practical, sustainable, and scalable solutions that can be deployed in diverse onshore and offshore oil and gas operations.

One of the most critical gaps is the need for pilot-scale and field validation of integrated control systems. Laboratory experiments often employ small volumes of produced water under controlled conditions, which may not accurately represent the complexity, variability, and operational challenges encountered in real-world oilfield operations. Produced water varies in composition due to differences in reservoir geology, production methods, chemical additives, and seasonal fluctuations. Pilot-scale studies are necessary to evaluate the hydraulic performance, flow distribution, contaminant removal efficiency, and operational stability of integrated treatment systems under field conditions. These studies can also identify unforeseen issues such as fouling, scaling, or uneven distribution of adsorbents and chemical reagents. Field validation provides essential data to inform system design, optimize process parameters, and establish confidence in the efficacy and feasibility of integrated heavy-metal control strategies (Masucci *et al*., 2016; Zheng *et al*., 2018).

Another significant research gap lies in the long-term performance and lifecycle assessment of treatment technologies. Many studies focus on single-use or short-term evaluations, neglecting the durability, regeneration potential, and cumulative environmental impacts of treatment materials. Adsorbents, whether bio-based or synthetic, may experience declining capacity over multiple adsorption-regeneration cycles, and their disposal can generate secondary environmental burdens. Lifecycle assessment (LCA) approaches are necessary to evaluate energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, material usage, waste generation, and overall sustainability of treatment technologies. Long-term performance studies provide insights into maintenance requirements, cost-effectiveness, and operational reliability, enabling informed decision-making for large-scale and long-term deployments.

The incorporation of advanced analytics, digital monitoring, and machine learning for predictive risk management represents a forward-looking research direction. Real-time sensors and automated data acquisition enable continuous monitoring of heavy-metal concentrations, pH, and other water quality parameters. Machine learning algorithms can analyze these data streams to identify patterns, predict spikes in contamination, and optimize operational parameters dynamically. Predictive analytics also support adaptive management, allowing operators to anticipate risks and implement preemptive interventions, reducing treatment failures, downtime, and environmental impacts. Integration of digital tools with traditional monitoring enhances responsiveness, improves resource efficiency, and strengthens regulatory compliance.

There is a need to expand risk assessment frameworks to multi-contaminant and site-specific models. Produced water contains a mixture of metals, hydrocarbons, salts, and other chemical additives that interact in complex ways, influencing toxicity and treatment efficacy. Current models often focus on individual contaminants, which may underestimate cumulative risk. Multi-contaminant models, combined with site-specific parameters such as reservoir characteristics, flow dynamics, and environmental sensitivity, would enable more accurate prioritization of risks and targeted intervention strategies. Such models would also allow integration with digital monitoring and predictive tools, supporting real-time decision-making tailored to specific operational contexts.

Advancing integrated heavy-metal management in produced water requires addressing key research gaps in pilot-scale validation, long-term performance assessment, digital integration, and multi-contaminant modeling. Field-scale studies provide critical insights into operational feasibility and system reliability, while lifecycle assessments ensure environmental and economic sustainability (Suthersan *et al*., 2016; Corsi *et al*., 2018). Advanced analytics and machine learning enhance predictive risk management, enabling proactive and adaptive treatment strategies. Expanding frameworks to account for multiple contaminants and site-specific conditions ensures that risk assessments and control measures are accurate, targeted, and effective. Addressing these research gaps will bridge the divide between laboratory innovation and field application, enabling scalable, sustainable, and technologically advanced solutions for heavy-metal control in oilfield produced water.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual model for integrated heavy-metal risk assessment and control in oilfield produced water offers a comprehensive framework for addressing one of the most pressing environmental and operational challenges in oil and gas production. By combining systematic risk identification, quantification, and prioritization with robust control strategies, the model provides a structured pathway for managing contaminants such as lead, cadmium, chromium, nickel, barium, and zinc. The framework incorporates multiple treatment mechanisms—including chemical precipitation, ion exchange, membrane filtration, and adsorption—while emphasizing the integration of low-cost, bio-based adsorbents derived from agricultural waste. This dual focus on risk assessment and treatment ensures that both environmental and human health hazards are addressed in a targeted and evidence-based manner.

Strategically, the conceptual model is highly relevant for sustainable produced water management. Its multi-stage architecture, spanning contaminant mapping, treatment system design, monitoring, and adaptive management, supports regulatory compliance, operational efficiency, and environmental protection. The model's emphasis on lifecycle assessment, resource efficiency, and integration of circular economy principles ensures that treatment systems minimize secondary waste, reduce energy consumption, and valorize local agricultural resources. Real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and feedback mechanisms enhance adaptive management, enabling operators to respond dynamically to variations in produced water composition and maintain consistent treatment performance.

The model also demonstrates strong potential for adoption, scalability, and integration into regulatory frameworks. Its modular design allows implementation in both onshore and offshore operations, while standardized monitoring protocols facilitate compliance with environmental and industrial water quality standards. By bridging laboratory research, pilot-scale validation, and operational application, the framework provides a practical pathway for oilfield operators, regulators, and stakeholders to implement sustainable, cost-effective, and technically robust heavy-metal management strategies. Overall, the conceptual model advances the science and practice of produced water treatment, offering a scalable, environmentally responsible, and regulatory-aligned approach to mitigating heavy-metal risks in oilfield operations.

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