Improve Your Boiler's Combustion Efficiency

Combustion Efficiency

Operating your boiler with an optimum amount of excess air will minimize heat loss up the stack and improve combustion efficiency. Combustion efficiency is a measure of how effectively the heat content of a fuel is transferred into usable heat. The stack temperature and flue gas oxygen (or carbon dioxide) concentrations are primary indicators of combustion efficiency.

Given complete mixing, a precise or stoichiometric amount of air is required to completely react with a given quantity of fuel. In practice, combustion conditions are never ideal, and additional or "excess" air must be supplied to completely burn the fuel.

The correct amount of excess air is determined from analyzing flue gas oxygen or carbon dioxide concentrations. Inadequate excess air results in unburned combustibles (fuel, soot, smoke, and carbon monoxide) while too much results in heat lost due to the increased flue gas flow—thus lowering the overall boiler fuel-to-steam efficiency. The table relates stack readings to boiler performance.

Combustion Efficiency for Natural Gas

Excess %		Combustion Efficiency				
		Flue gas temperature less combustion air temp, °F				
Air	Oxygen	200	300	400	500	600
9.5	2.0	85.4	83.1	80.8	78.4	76.0
15.0	3.0	85.2	82.8	80.4	77.9	75.4
28.1	5.0	84.7	82.1	79.5	76.7	74.0
44.9	7.0	84.1	81.2	78.2	75.2	72.1
81.6	10.0	82.8	79.3	75.6	71.9	68.2

Assumes complete combustion with no water vapor in the combustion air.

On well-designed natural gas-fired systems, an excess air level of 10% is attainable. An often stated rule of thumb is that boiler efficiency can be increased by 1% for each 15% reduction in excess air or 40°F reduction in stack gas temperature.

Example

A boiler operates for 8,000 hours per year and consumes 500,000 MMBtu of natural gas while producing 45,000 lb/hr of 150 psig steam. Stack gas measurements indicate an excess air level of 44.9% with a flue gas less combustion air temperature of 400°F. From the table, the boiler combustion efficiency is 78.2% (E1). Tuning the boiler reduces the excess air to 9.5% with a flue gas less combustion air temperature of 300°F. The boiler combustion efficiency increases to 83.1% (E2). Assuming a steam value of $4.50/MMBtu, the annual cost savings are:

Cost Savings = Fuel Consumption x (1 - E1/E2) x steam cost
= 29,482 MMBtu/yr x $4.50/MMBtu = $132,671 annually

Suggested Actions

Boilers often operate at excess air levels higher than the optimum. Periodically monitor flue gas composition and tune your boilers to maintain excess air at optimum levels.

Flue Gas Analyzers

The percentage of oxygen in the flue gas can be measured by inexpensive gas-absorbing test kits. More expensive ($500-$1,000) hand-held, computer-based analyzers display percent oxygen, stack gas temperature, and boiler efficiency. They are a recommended investment for any boiler system with annual fuel costs exceeding $50,000.

Oxygen Trim Systems

When fuel composition is highly variable (such as refinery gas, hog fuel, or multi-fuel boilers), or where steam flows are highly variable, an on-line oxygen analyzer should be considered. The oxygen "trim" system provides feedback to the burner controls to automatically minimize excess combustion air and optimize the air-to-fuel ratio.

Adapted from an Energy TIPS fact sheet that was originally published by the Industrial Energy Extension Service of Georgia Tech. For additional information on industrial energy efficiency measures, contact the Information Clearinghouse at (800) 862-2086.

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