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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excess Air</th>
<th>Flue Gas Temperature Less Combustion Air Temp, °F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>84.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

\[
\text{Cost Savings} = \text{Fuel Consumption} \times (1 - E1/E2) \times \text{steam cost} \\
= 29,482 \text{ MMBtu/yr} \times 4.50/\text{MMBtu} = 132,671 \text{ annually}
\]

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.
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FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Peter Salmon-Cox
Office of Industrial Technologies
Phone: (202) 586-2380
Fax: (202) 586-6507
Peter.Salmon-Cox@hq.doe.gov
www.oit.doe.gov/bestpractices

OIT Clearinghouse
Phone: (800) 862-2086
Fax: (360) 586-8303
clearinghouse@ee.doe.gov

Please send any comments, questions, or suggestions to webmaster.oit@ee.doe.gov

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Office of Industrial Technologies
Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy
U.S. Department of Energy
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