Monitoring Salt Domes Used for Energy Storage with Microseismicity: Insights for a Carbon-Neutral Future

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Key Points:

- Passive seismic monitoring with surface arrays is a non-invasive approach for identifying subsurface hazards in salt domes.
- Clustered microearthquakes detected with our finetuned machine learning model illuminate shear zone geometries and structural hazards.
- Cavern storage wells drilled within proximity of shear zones are at risk of safety incidents.

Abstract

Underground storage in geologic formations will play a key role in the energy transition by providing low-cost storage of renewable fuels like hydrogen. The sealing qualities of caverns leached in salt and availability of domal salt bodies make them ideal for energy storage. However, unstable boundary shear zones of anomalous friable salt can enhance internal shearing and pose a structural hazard to storage operations. Considering the indistinct nature of internal salt heterogeneities when imaged with conventional techniques like reflection seismic surveys, we develop a method to map shear zones using seismicity patterns in the US Gulf Coast, the region with the world's largest underground crude oil emergency supply. We developed and finetuned a machine learning algorithm using tectonic and local microearthquakes. The finetuned model was applied to detect microearthquakes in a 12-month nodal seismic dataset from the Sorrento salt dome. Clustered microearthquake locations reveal the three-dimensional geometry of two anomalous salt shear zones and their orientations were determined using probabilistic hypocenter imaging. The seismicity pattern, combined with borehole pressure measurements, and sonar surveys show the spatio-temporal evolution of cavern shapes within the salt dome. We describe how shear zone seismicity contributed to a cavern well failure and gas release incident that occurred during monitoring. Our findings show that caverns placed close to shear zones are more susceptible to structural damage. We propose a non-invasive technique for mapping hazards related to internal salt dome deformation that can be employed in high-noise industrial settings to characterize salt domes used for storage.

Plain Language Summary

In the shift towards renewable energy, underground storage is vital for increasing the feasibility of fuels like hydrogen. Salt formations are ideal for storage, and caverns in salt domes are used worldwide to store vast amounts of energy reserves. But salt domes can become unstable and lead to cavern collapse, posing risks to the environment and nearby communities. Traditional methods are expensive, often require drilled wells, and do not always spot hazards. We instead used recordings of ground shaking from small earthquakes to identify them. By collecting these recordings for over a year with an array of instruments installed at the surface over a Louisiana salt dome, we were able to develop a new method for identifying very small earthquakes allowing us to pinpoint hazardous areas. Our approach offers a non-invasive way for scientists and engineers to assess hazards and mitigate risks associated with drilling and underground storage operations in salt domes..

1 Introduction

The expansion of underground facilities capable of safely storing vast amounts of renewable energy sources is a key component of the energy transition. Storage plays an important role in balancing supply and demand by stockpiling excess energy and providing a reliable backup during peak demand periods (Juez-Larré et al., 2019). Seasonal energy demands have driven the need for underground storage facilities since 1915, e.g., over 20% of the natural gas consumed in the United States each winter comes from underground storage facilities (Beckman et al., 1995). Globally, over 148 sedimentary basins have salt formations suitable for underground storage of fuels such as hydrogen, natural gas, and unrefined petroleum products. However, most of the storage activity has been limited to technologically advanced countries in Europe, Asia, and North America (Gillhaus & Horvath, 2008). In the United States, underground storage is utilized in three major types of subsurface environments: depleted oil and gas fields, aquifers, and salt caverns. The Gulf Coast states of Louisiana (Figure 1a) and Texas have numerous salt domes (>90% of cavern fields in the US) and the largest facilities for state-level gas storage in the country (Lord, 2009). They have the world's largest supply of emergency crude oil, which is stored underground at four sites of the United States Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR, 2022), and are well positioned to expand salt cavern capacity to meet increasing energy demand.

Salt domes are extensively used for underground storage because of their favorable geomechanical properties, large storage capacity, and low cushion gas requirements (Caglayan et al., 2020). They are relatively safe, however, the presence of internal shear zones within these salt structures can potentially compromise their stability and long-term functionality (Bérest et al., 2019; Looff, 2017). The non-optimal placement of caverns in salt domes has led to numerous incidents that exceed the number of safety incidents recorded in oil and gas fields, and aquifers. A study of safety incidents at underground storage facilities across the United States determined that subsurface and well integrity problems contributed to 89% of recorded incidents in salt caverns, compared to 44% in depleted oil and gas fields and 68% in aquifers (Evans & Schultz, 2017). Subsurface incidents in salt domes have been linked to caprock instability, overburden faulting, and boundary shear zones (Evans, 2007; Looff, 2017; Warren, 2017). Boundary shear zones in salt domes are generally zones of impurities where surface water and hydrocarbons have led to the formation of vugs, voids, or recrystallization of salt, making it weak and friable under moderate conditions, or volatile and explosive under extreme conditons, where the rock salt has been infused with gas (popping salt) (Davison, 2009; Jacoby, 1977; Warren, 2017). Laboratory studies of normal Gulf Coast salt reveal that it is dominated by uniform grain sizes (~3-10 mm diameter) of halite with banded layers or structureless features (Kupfer, 1990). Deviations from this norm, such as high concentrations of anhydrite, potash salts, and impurities, can create anomalous salt features (Davison, 2009; Looff, 2017). Multiple anomalous features aligned within a zone can form boundary shear zones (BSZs). Field studies of boundary shear zones exposed within salt mines reveal that they can range in size from several meters to kilometers and may traverse entire salt domes (Davison, 2009; Jackson et al., 2015; Jacoby, 1977) (Figure 1d). Unlike faults, BSZs can form through independent processes like hydrocarbon generation within embedded shales that are not necessarily related to tectonic events. They often occur at salt spine boundaries (see Figure 1c) due to differential upward movement of the spines. Using current techniques, little to no information on shear zone emplacement is known at the onset of underground storage projects, and wells are drilled using geomechanical models that are focused on optimizing cavern design while overlooking shear zone hazards.

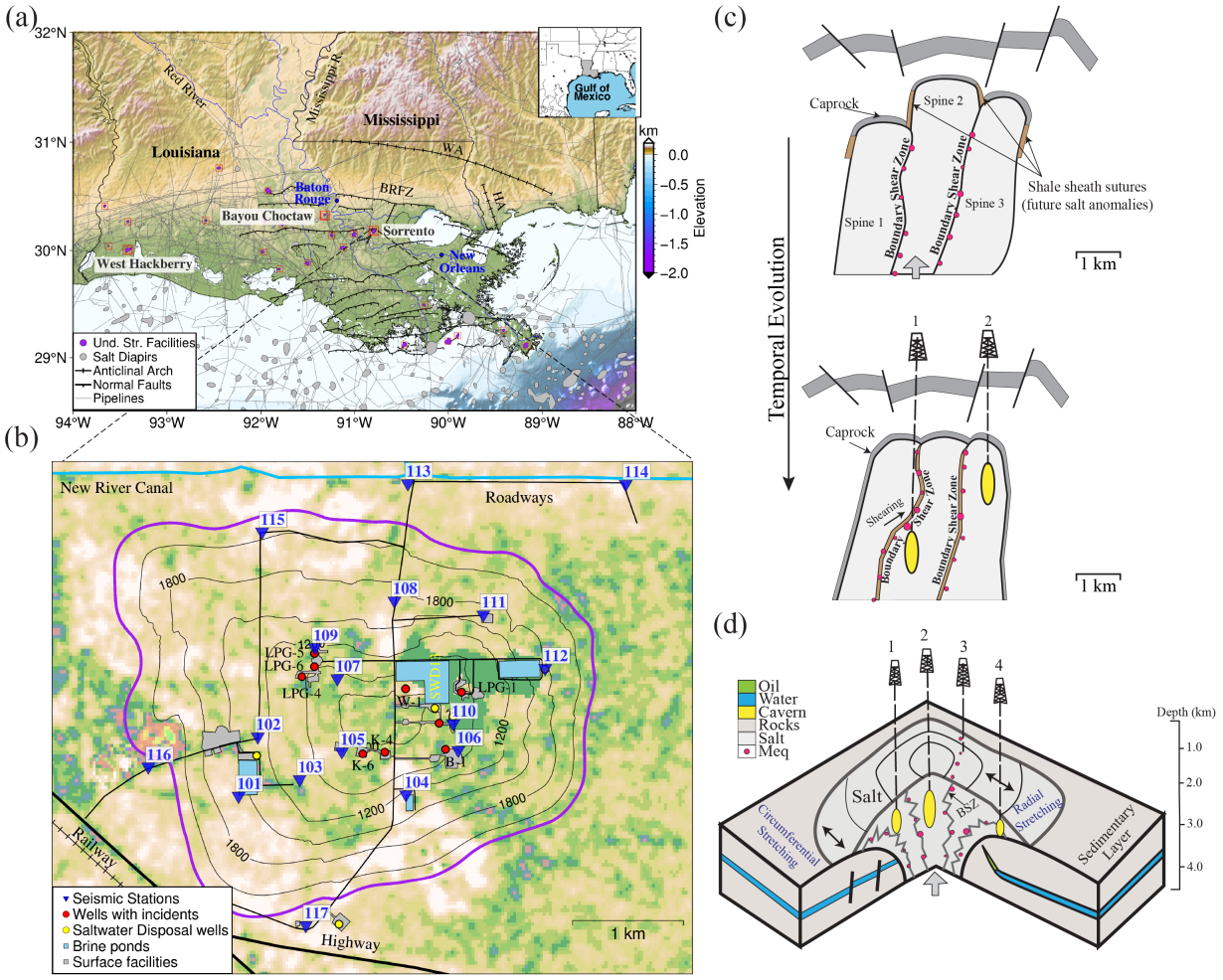


Figure 1. Overview of the Sorrento salt dome location and the evolution of boundary shear zones. (a) Regional map of salt domes in the US Gulf Coast, Louisiana and northern Gulf of Mexico. Domes used for underground storage are highlighted with red squares. The two US Strategic Petroleum Reserves and Sorrento domes are annotated. The map also shows regional structural features from Gillhaus and Horvath (2008) and gas pipelines with gray lines (EIA, 2012). (b) Expanded map of the Sorrento salt dome showing the locations of the stations in the seismic array, and wells discussed in the text. Black contour lines indicate the top of the salt (Looff, 2017), and the outline of the dome is in purple. (c) Sketch depicting the development of shear zones in salt domes through time (Warren, 2017). Microearthquakes (meq) are shown with red circles. (d) 2.5D schematic representation of shear zone extent in a salt dome with overlying graben mimicking the Sorrento dome's geology.

The study of boundary shear zones (BSZ) in salt domes is crucial for various reasons. Firstly, accurate mapping and characterization of BSZs helps improve development strategies for early-stage underground storage projects by helping operators optimize cavern placement. Secondly, understanding the seismic behavior of shear zones is essential for assessing the risk of failure or leakage of wellbores in developed facilities, and early detection of casing or cavern collapse because placement near or within BSZs increases the potential for accidents due to reduced salt-structure quality (Jacoby, 1977). Accidents in salt domes highlight the critical

importance of studying subsurface hazards for both residents and the environment alike. Between 1959 and 2012, over 26 incidents occurred at salt domes in the US (Ford & Dreger, 2020; Warren, 2017). Casing failures at salt domes have caused fires, resident evacuations, and extensive damage to infrastructure and the environment amounting to millions of dollars (Evans, 2007). A cavern collapse along a disturbed rock zone at the Napoleonville salt dome in Bayou Corne, Louisiana, in 2012 destroyed cypress trees within a 12-acre sinkhole, forced evacuations of nearby residents due to gas leaks from collapsed caverns, and cost the operating company over $225 million in buyouts, remediation, and monitoring costs (Hanusik, 2019; Mitchell, 2018). In 1992, subsurface instability at the Weeks Island salt mine, Louisiana, resulted in the formation of a 10-m wide sinkhole, requiring $100 million for draining and remediation of existing caverns (Bauer et al., 1997; Neal & Myers, 1994; Warren, 2017). They are also prone to outbursts, which can be as large as the Belle Isle and Morton mine incidents that released over 220,000,000 standard cubic feet (scf) of gas and led to the loss of miners' lives (Ehgartner et al., 1998; Plimpton et al., 1980; Warren, 2017).

To mitigate incidents in salt domes, shear zone mapping can be conducted using various techniques. Sonar measurements and well logs have been utilized to identify boundary shear zones (BSZs) in salt domes (Looff, 2017). 3D and 2D seismic surveys have been used to characterize caprock geometric anomalies at domes and assess their potential seismic hazards (Neal et al., 1993; Rautman et al., 2010). Foliation of halite crystals from cores have helped map boundary shear zones that were not detected by reflection seismic surveys (Seni et al., 1984). However, some of the shortcomings associated with mapping shear zones using the techniques above are limited spatial samples from well data, and insufficient 3D seismic resolution within salt deposits, which limits mapping of the shear zone outline to only along the overlying caprock (Looff, 2017; Neal et al., 1993; Rautman et al., 2010). One way of constraining the location of boundary shear zones is microearthquake monitoring. Passive seismic monitoring has been used to detect seismic events such as rock falls, sliding motion, and fault movement within salt domes (Ford & Dreger, 2020; Fortier et al., 2006). Although more affordable than borehole installations, one challenge with surface seismic monitoring is the recordings of small magnitude events can be masked by local equipment noise and anthropogenic sources which severely inhibits event detection and location methods using travel-time techniques (Kinscher et al., 2015; Mercerat et al., 2009). Post accident investigations of some safety incidents at salt domes have detected seismicity prior to cavern collapse (Dreger & Ford, 2020; Mercerat et al., 2009), however, the connection between shear zones and seismicity remains unclear.

Cavern operator reports of ground shaking at the Sorrento salt dome in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, in January 2020 motivated us to install the SORRENTO array and investigate the subsurface hazards and physical processes affecting drilled wells and excavated caverns. The Sorrento salt dome is a slightly elongated salt diapir with an overlying graben system. The salt body has a spatial extent of approximately 5 km by 4 km (Looff, 2017) (Figure 1b). It is located in the Pontchartrain basin where over one third of Louisiana's population lives. Surface conditions are swampy with an average elevation of 5 m above sea level. The area gets flooded regularly following heavy rainfall and storms, sometimes restricting physical access to deploy and retrieve seismometers. The dome is 40 km SE of the state capital, 70 km NW of New Orleans, Louisiana and <19 km from the Maurepas swamp and wildlife management area (Figure 1a). Salt layers are relatively shallow (1524 m depth), and oil and gas production occur in flank traps to the north and south. The field has produced over 750 billion cubic feet (bcf) of gas and 5000 million barrels of oil (mbo) (Petroleum, 2009), and saltwater is being disposed in

layers between 310 - 495 m depth on the eastern and western flanks of the dome (Consultants, 1990).

Currently, underground storage caverns within the Sorrento salt dome have a storage capacity of 8.92 (bcf) of gas (SONRIS, 2022). Prior incidents resulted in the abandonment of two early cavern wells (Looff, 2017) when anomalous salt features were encountered during drilling and leaching. In May 2021, during monitoring, ground movement along a shear zone damaged the LPG-5 cavern (Figure 1b), releasing 220,000 scf of nitrogen during a mechanical integrity test, and creating a 6-9 m wide by 1.5 m deep crater on the ground surface beneath the wellhead (LADNR, 2020a, 2021a).

In this study, we focus on monitoring seismic activity to identify zones of inferior salt quality that can impact the integrity of well and cavern operations. We demonstrate with a 12-month-long seismic dataset that seismicity can be linked to boundary shear zones at the Sorrento dome, and analyze its connection to a recent storage cavern failure. We located clusters of seismicity that can be used to identify unstable zones within salt, and extended mapping of known shear zones away from well control. We believe this study can serve as an analog for how storage caverns at other salt domes may be monitored to prevent future accidents, and highlight the importance of understanding subsurface hazards as more cavern facilities are being developed to meet rising energy storage needs.

2 Data

Our analysis was conducted using a combination of waveforms from nodal seismometers, sonar surveys, and well data. The SORRENTO array was comprised of 17 stations installed across the dome (Figure 1b) to record seismic data for 12 months. Each station was occupied with a three-component SmartSolo 5 Hz nodal seismometers with self-contained GPS antenna and battery that recorded at 500 Hz. Nodal seismometers were selected because of their ability to be submerged underwater and deployed without the need for solar panels. We buried the nodes in ~20-cm deep holes, covered with a couple of centimeters of soil to reduce the impact of noise from the nearby highway, oilfield equipment, and frequent storms. The nodes were deployed in a loosely circular grid depending on site accessibility to provide coverage around the flanks and major cavern clusters near the center of the dome. Interstation distances varied between 0.2 - 1.9 km, and most sites were re-occupied during the 12 one-month installations that occurred between February 2020 to July 2022 (Table S1).

Sonar surveys are acquired by cavern operators every 5 years in line with compliance requirements dictated by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (LADNR), and we digitized sonar surveys for caverns with available reports. Additionally, we analyzed the survey reports and well data available at the LADNR SONRIS website (SONRIS, 2022). Event information for regional and teleseismic earthquakes with magnitudes >M_w 5 were obtained from IRIS and the USGS to evaluate the possibility of external triggering of salt dome microearthquakes.

198 # 3 Methodology

199 ## 3.1 Event Detection and Phase Picking

200 We initially employed the traditional short-term-average / long-term-average (STA/LTA)
201 methods for event detection with limited success. The STA/LTA technique resulted in a high
202 number of false positive detections originating from operating equipment around the dome. We
203 proceeded to test popular machine learning phase-pickers like EQTransformer, and PhaseNet
204 (Mousavi et al., 2020; Zhu & Beroza, 2019) for microearthquake detection. Adjusting the
205 parameters of the machine learning models reduced some of the false positive detections but
206 limited detection of many of the small microearthquakes (Supplementary Text S2). To achieve a
207 balance between microearthquake detection and minimizing false positives, we developed and
208 trained a hybrid U-Net model described below (Figure 2a) for event detection and phase picking
209 on salt dome microearthquakes. We trained the base hybrid U-Net model using a subset of the
210 Stanford Earthquake Dataset (STEAD) (Mousavi et al., 2019), and finetuned the model weights
211 using manually selected saltdome microearthquakes from the initial recordings at Sorrento. The
212 finetuned model predicts event detection probabilities and the position of body wave arrivals
213 simultaneously.

214 The finetuned model was applied to 6 s long sliding windows with a step size of 4 s
215 extracted from the Sorrento array. An event was recorded when a minimum of four adjacent
216 stations were triggered (detection probability from the hybrid U-Net > 95%, and phase
217 probabilities > 50%) within a 6 s time window. This served as a simple association method, and
218 thresholding the detections across both the array and at each individual station helped with
219 eliminating false positive detections or spikes that could be localized at individual stations.
220 Associated picks were manually quality checked to remove outlier detections, and improve the
221 quality of the event location process.

222 ### 3.1.1 Waveform Preprocessing

223 Training data for the base model was obtained from subset of the Stanford Earthquake
224 Dataset (STEAD) (Mousavi et al., 2019). We filtered the STEAD catalog to select only events
225 with magnitudes M_w <3 and epicentral distances < 5.5 km to mimic the expected seismic activity
226 at Sorrento (Figure S4a). The subset included (200 K) event and noise waveforms randomly
227 split into training, validation, and test sets (90%, 5%, 5%).

228 Raw waveforms in counts were downloaded from the nodes and the corresponding
229 instrument response file was obtained from the IRIS Nominal Response Library. We detrended
230 the waveforms and converted them to displacement amplitudes using standard procedures from
231 the ObsPy package (Krischer et al., 2017). We manually selected 500 salt dome event and noise
232 waveforms to finetune the model and downsampled the data to 100 Hz. The finetuning
233 waveform data were split in a similar manner to the base model waveforms. Binary labels were
234 used for event detection, and phase pick labels were generated by convolving a triangular
235 function with the onset time of the phase picks (Figure 2a).

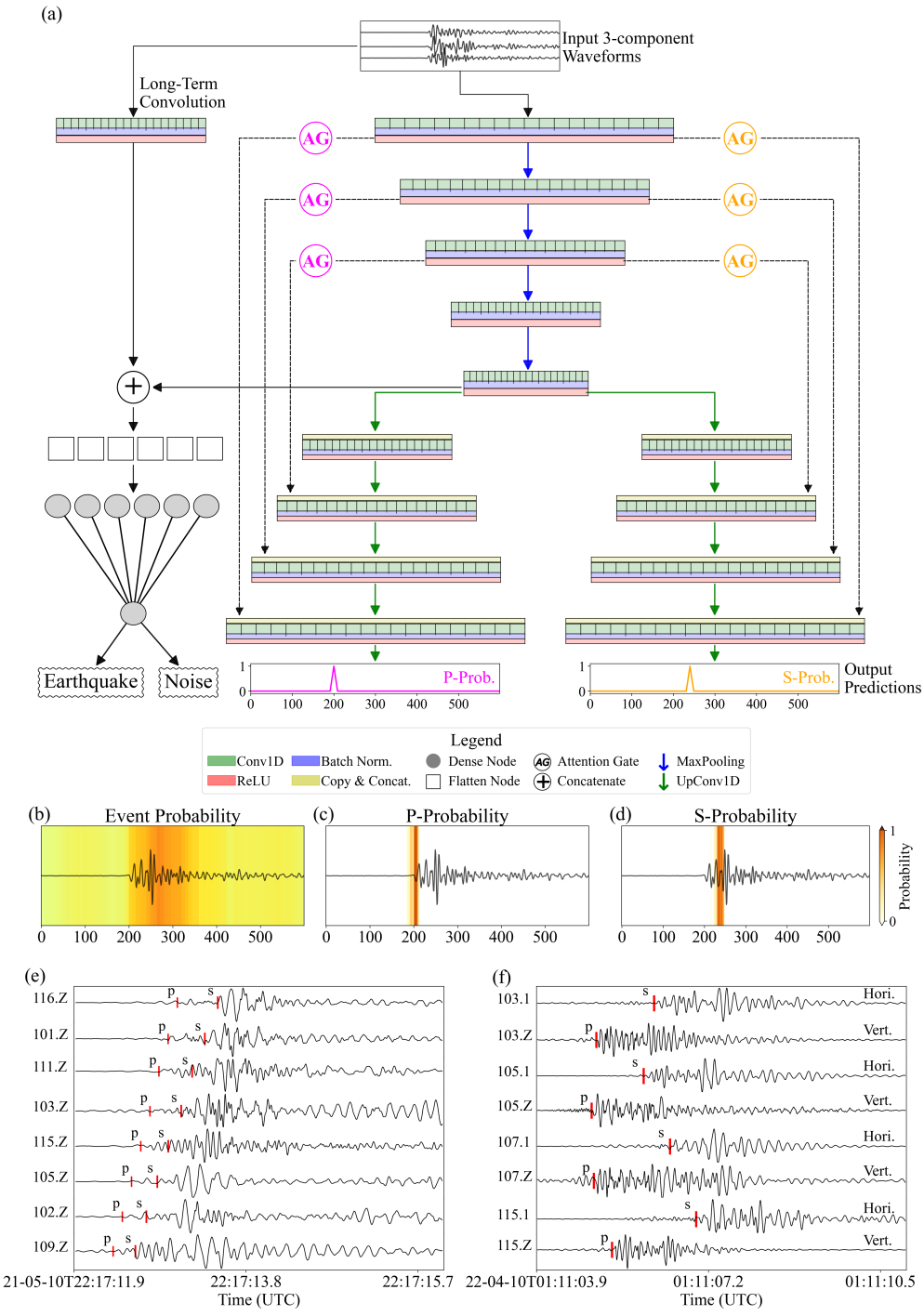


Figure 2. The hybrid U-Net model for seismic event detection. (a) Architecture of the detection model showing input waveforms and output predictions. (b-d) Gradient class activation map (Grad-CAM) of the model's event, P-wave, and S-wave detection probability. Hot colors have higher probabilities. (e) Vertical displacement waveforms from the microearthquake recorded during the mechanical integrity test (MIT) at the LPG-5 cavern, showing impulsive P-wave arrivals. (f) Examples of vertical and horizontal waveforms from a microearthquake detected with the hybrid model showing P- and S-wave arrivals, respectively.

3.1.2 Model Training and Evaluation

We modify the Attention U-Net (Oktay et al., 2018; Ronneberger et al., 2015) for 1D convolution (Figure 2a). The input for the model consisted of 3-component waveforms cropped into 6-s long recordings and downsampled to 100 Hz. The training data was augmented by randomly shifting the event origin within the 6-s window. A single convolution layer with longer kernels was appended to the vanilla Attention U-Net to mimic the LTA and we refer to this layer as a long-term-average convolution (LTC) layer (Figure 2a). Using the LTC layer further stabilized the event detection weights during training and improved the validation loss (Figure S4b). The input waveforms were passed through four down-sampling convolution layers, and rectified linear unit (ReLU) activation, batch normalization and same padding were applied to each layer. We split the bottle-neck convolution output into three, where one of the outputs was concatenated with the LTC output and passed through a series of dense layers to produce a binary classification of either event or noise. The remaining two outputs from the bottle-neck layer were concatenated with skip connections from attention gates and upsampled to match the number of triangular label samples used for P- and S- arrivals (Figure 2a). We used the sigmoid activation function to set probabilities for the final layers of all the model outputs

$$S(x) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-x}} = \frac{e^{x}}{e^{x} + 1} = 1 - S(-x) \quad (1)$$

We used the binary cross-entropy loss function which computes the following average:

$$Loss = -\frac{1}{output\ size} \sum_{i=1}^{output\ size} y_i \,.\, log\, \hat{y}_i + (1 - y_i)\,.\log(1 - \hat{y}_i) \quad (2)$$

where $\hat{y}_i$ is the i-th scalar in the model output, y_i is the corresponding target value, and the output size is the number of scalar values in the model output. The output from the phase picker model head is a probability distribution for all points in the input timeseries. We stopped training after the validation loss did not improve for 10 consecutive epochs. The diagnostic accuracy of the model measured with the Area under the Curve (AUC) for the Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) was 1 on the STEAD data, and 0.996 on the Sorrento events. Additional evaluation metrics used to assess model performance are described in Supplementary Text S2. Grad-CAM maps show segments of a waveform that the finetuned model pays attention to for classifying events and picking phase arrivals (Figure 2b-d).

3.2 Event Location

The events were located using the HYPOINVERSE 1.40 software (Klein, 2002) with a 1D velocity model (Table S2) because of ease of computation. Velocities for the shallow part of the 1D velocity model were obtained from the sonic logs of the Exxon SWD-13 well (Schlumberger, 2004), and a constant velocity of 4.0 km/s was used for the salt layers. A V_P/V_S ratio of 1.72 was selected based on previous salt dome studies (Kinscher et al., 2015; Nayak, 2014). A minimum of 4 stations were required to locate an event and a starting trial depth of 500 m was used in the event location workflow.

The HYPODD program (Waldhauser, 2001) was used to obtain the double-difference locations from the initial HYPOINVERSE catalog. The difference in absolute travel times from different events at the same station were optimized with the conjugate gradient method and

damping. The degree of damping was determined by adjusting the system to obtain a stable condition number (Waldhauser, 2001). Phases for events separated by a maximum distance of 5 km were linked, and a minimum of four observartions per event was required to obtain the final relocated event catalog. Monte Carlo simulations of best fit fault planes through the clustered relocated catalog were calculated using a hypocenter-based 3D imaging program (Truttmann et al., 2023). Additional details are provided in Supplementary Text S3.

3.3 Event Magnitudes

We calculated the local earthquake magnitude (M_L) by removing the instrument response to obtain displacement waveforms. The seismograms were bandpass filtered between 0.1 and 50 Hz and windowed 0.5 s before and 2 s after the P-arrival. The peak amplitude A_{max} is computed within this window and the local magnitude is expressed as follows:

$$M_L = \log_{10}(2800.A_{max}) + 1.27.\log_{10} D + a \quad (3)$$

Where A_{max} is the maximum displacement in mm, D is the hypocentral distance in km and a=0.377 for events located <40 km from the station (Di Grazia et al., 2001). The local magnitude for each station was estimated, and the median of all stations was selected as the final magnitude for each event. Since a magnitude scale has not been developed for the Louisiana Gulf Coast, the absolute values of the magnitudes may vary, however, they provide a good indication of the relative size of events.

3.4 Focal Mechanisms

We computed focal mechanisms for the relocated events by inverting manually picked first motion P-wave polarity amplitudes. Spectral gates were used to denoise raw waveforms and improve identification of P-wave polarities (Figure S6) (Sainburg et al., 2020). A minimum of 8 stations were required for calculating focal mechanisms. We performed a grid search every 5° to obtain solutions with the HASH program (Hardebeck & Shearer, 2008). Fault plane solution uncertainties which can be affected by polarity errors, takeoff angles and event location errors, were calculated by perturbing the input velocity model over multiple iterations.

4 Results

We use waveform duration, event onset, and apparent velocities to classify the events detected by our hybrid U-Net model into two main types of microseismic (MS) events and designated them MS-I and MS-II. The MS-I events have high-frequencies (5 - 40 Hz), and fast P-wave travel-times of <1 second across the array (Figure 2 e-f) and their temporal distribution is shown in Figure 3a. The 152 MS-I events exhibit a combination of emergent and impulsive waveform onsets with attenuated amplitudes over short distances suggestive of local scattering and potential absorption from gas-filled caverns. Local magnitudes for these events range between M_L -3 to 2, with an average magnitude of -1.54, and a median of -1.68. The MS-I events were relocated using the HYPODD program (Waldhauser, 2001). In contrast, the 1019 MS-II events (Figure 3b) have impulsive waveforms (Figure S7) with slower seismic wave travel-times of <500 m/s. These events have higher frequencies (70 - 100 Hz) compared to MS-I events and were not located. The event amplitudes were large enough to be recorded across the dome which is indicative of a significant energy source.

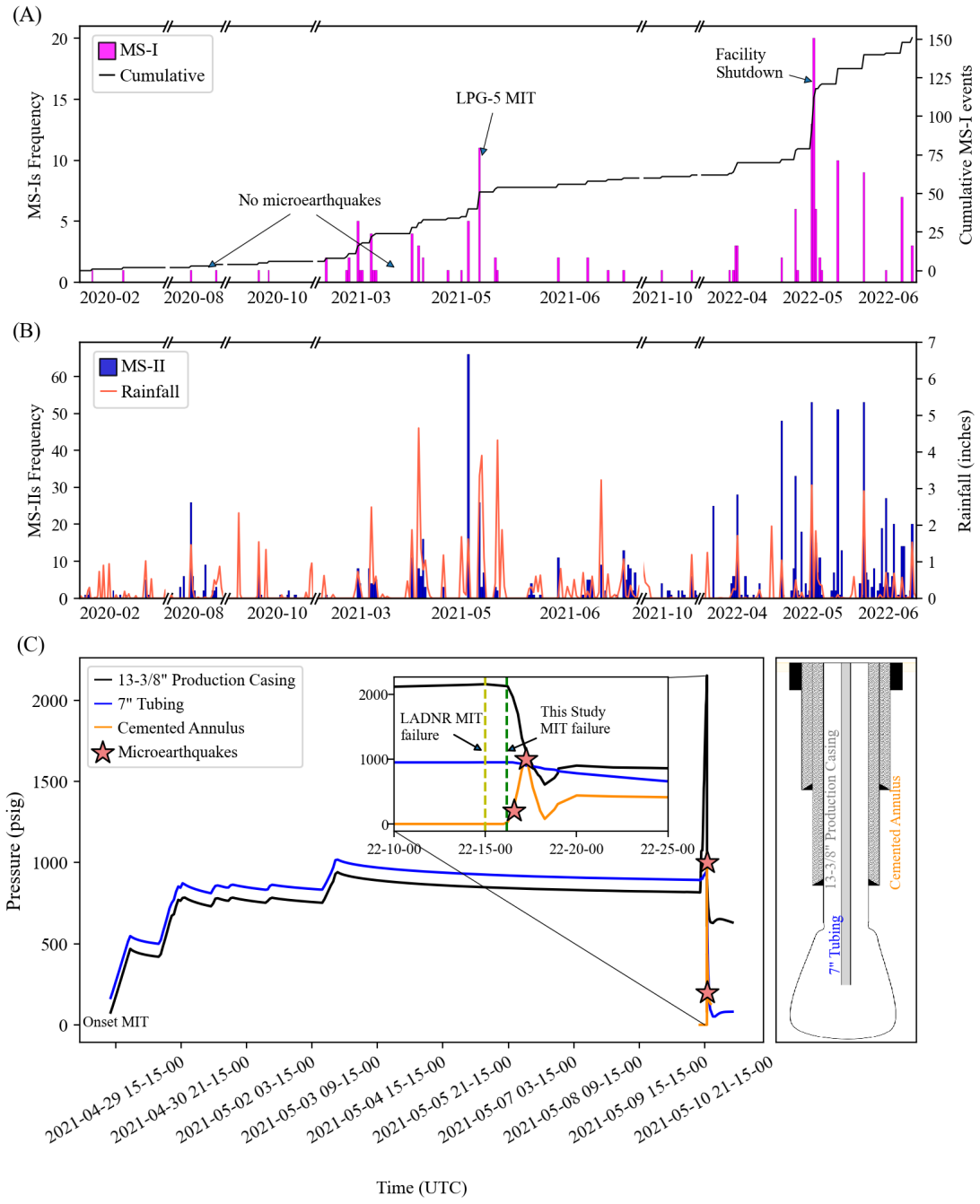


Figure 3. Temporal distribution of microearthquakes and cavern pressure. (a) Histogram of daily number of MS-I (microearthquakes) recorded at Sorrento (magenta) showing the mechanical integrity test (MIT) failure and facility shutdown. (b) Histogram of daily number of MS-II events (blue) with rainfall overlay (red lines). (c) Pressure profile of the LPG-5 cavern during the MIT showing coincidence between the microearthquake timing and annulus pressure spike.

4.1 Temporal Seismicity Trend

The MS-I events exhibit random cascade-like peaks followed by periods of quiescence (Figure 3a). The rate of activity for MS-I was less than 5 events per day for most of the study period, however the seismicity rate doubled on May 10, 2021, when the LPG-5 well failed a mechanical integrity test. We also observed a second spike in the number of microearthquakes when background noise levels decreased due to a facility shutdown and workover activity at the W-5 well (LADNR, 2022b). No aftershock sequences were observed in the catalog which is suggestive of intermittent deformation pulses that weaken over time (Nayak & Dreger, 2018). Swarms of MS-II events were observed to coincide with heavy rainfall periods (Figure 3b), and further investigation into potential sources is planned for a subsequent study.

4.2 Local Seismicity along Shear Zones

Prior to making any geological interpretations, we evaluated the reliability of the event locations. An event location is considered reliable if it was recorded by a minimum of four stations with computed location errors <50 m and travel time residuals <30 ms. We obtained high-quality hypocenter locations for 129 of the 152 detected MS-I microearthquakes. A large number of events originate within the dome at depths between 0.2 – 4 km, spread out along two zones in a N-S direction, and are separated by a noticeable gap in seismicity around the W-1 cavern (Figure 4a). Normal faults above the salt also strike N-S but the clustered events are not aligned along any of these faults. Large magnitude events were detected close to caverns with well incidents (Figure 4a) and few events are observed outside the salt boundaries.

The two zones of clustered seismicity (dashed lines in Figure 4a and 4c) have dimensions of ~2 km along strike, that extend to ~1-3 km depth with varying widths. Reports from the LPG-2 well (Looff, 2017), that was drilled between two salt spines and intersects the western cluster of seismicity, confirm the presence of two salt walls that are indicative of boundary shear zones (BSZ) (Figure 5b). We therefore interpret that the two clusters of seismicity are associated with salt movement along boundary shear zones that we abbreviate as the west and east BSZs. Both shear zones have near-vertical dips that are confirmed by the focal mechanism solutions (>80˚E).

Seismicity along the west BSZ is diffuse and twice as dense as seismicity in the east BSZ. In the east BSZ, the miroearthquakes are clustered within a 200 m wide zone (Figure 4c), that is significantly wider than the spatial location uncertainty of ±50 m and is thus indicative of real features and not location artifacts. The seismicity cluster clearly outlines an almost planar feature that dips to the east (Figures 4c and S2b).

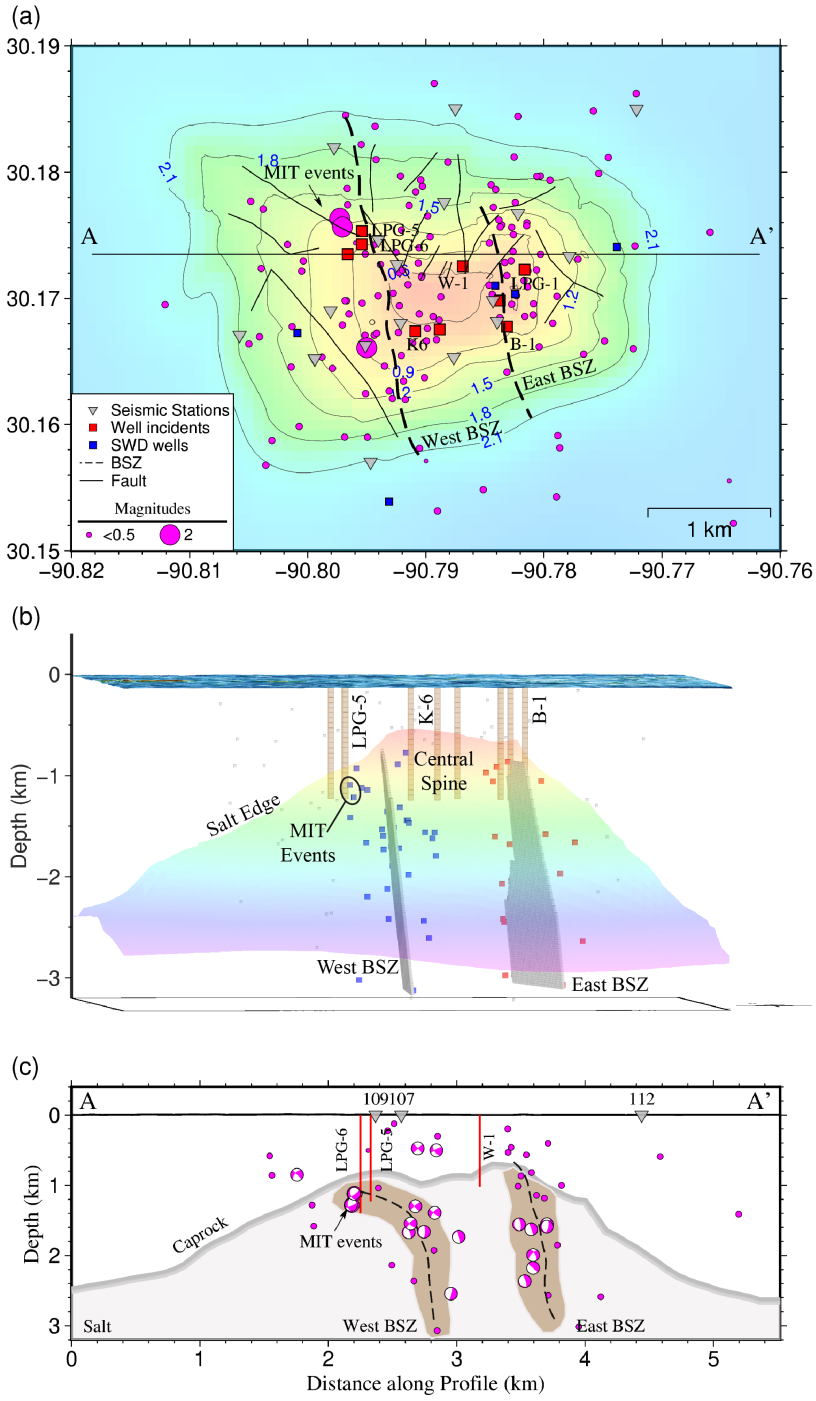
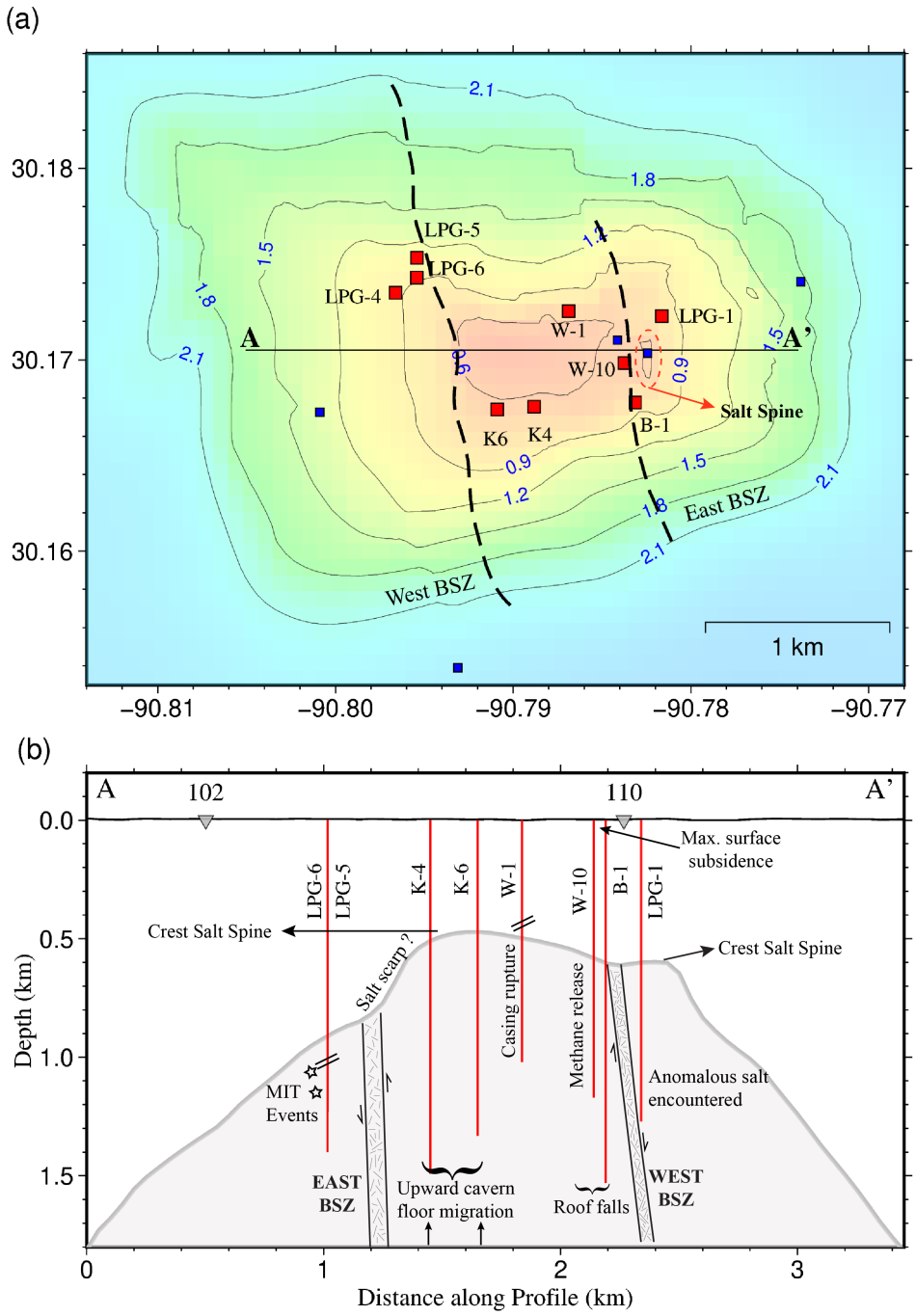


Figure 4. Microearthquake distribution across the dome. (a) Spatial distribution of microearthquakes (magenta circles) scaled by their local magnitudes. The east (Looff, 2017) and west BSZ are shown with black dashed lines. Caprock faults are shown as solid gray lines, and background shaded contours of the top of salt are modified after Looff (2017). (b) View from the south showing the three-dimensional salt structure, cavern outlines (yellow), microearthquakes, and the extent of the two boundary shear zones. Planes of best fit through the clustered seismicity help to differentiate the boundaries between salt spines. (c) Cross-section A-A' showing estimated widths of the shear zones based on clustered seismicity. The

371 microearthquakes within 300 m of the profile are shown and the focal mechanisms are viewed
372 from the south.



373

374 **Figure 5**. Independent shear zone identification with well and cavern data. (a) Map view of
375 caverns with prior incidents relative to shear zone traces. (b) Representative planar features of
376 shear zones with labeled cavern incidents. Caverns are project onto the cross-section.

377

4.3 Focal Mechanisms and Hypocenter Imaging

Microearthquake focal mechanisms are useful for understanding relative shearing motions. Reliable focal mechanism solutions with maximum azimuthal gaps ≤ 90° and maximum takeoff angles ≤ 60°, were obtained for thirty events. Fourteen events with weighted polarity errors ≤ 15% and station distribution ratios ≥ 50% were classified as improved quality solutions. Figure S3 shows the uncertainty estimates for the obtained solutions.

The microearthquakes were distributed across both boundary shear zones and their focal mechanisms exhibit north-northwest to south-southeast strikes, oblique left-lateral and normal shearing with dominant dips between 50 - 85° (Figure 4c). Estimated fault planes from the hypocenter imaging (details in Text S3) are aligned parallel to local normal faults that intersect the top of the salt structural model of Looff (2017) (Figure 4a), and perpendicular to the regional east-west striking normal faults. The dip angles of 83-86˚ obtained from best fit rupture planes were validated using focal mechanism solutions.

4.4 Changes in Cavern Shapes from Sonar Measurements

We further investigate intra-salt deformation by comparing time-lapse sonar measurements to estimate the change in cavern volumes through time. Sonar surveys are an expensive way to estimate cavern volumes and cavern operators are required to acquire them every 5 years for routine monitoring or before and after workover activity (SONRIS, 2022). On the western edge of the dome, sonar measurements acquired within the LPG-5 and LPG-6 caverns from 2017 to 2021 or 2022 show small floor changes of 6 and 9 m, respectively that translates to an average salt closure rate 1-2 m/year (Figure 6a-b). Within the central spine sonar measurements of the K-4 and K-6 caverns acquired in 2015 and 2021 show major changes in cavern floor height of 43 and 40 m, respectively with minimal roof migration (Figure 5b; Figure 6c-d). This translates to an average salt closure rate of nearly 8 m/year. The magnitude of salt creep in different spines can influence variations in cavern closure rates, causing some caverns to close faster than others (Bettin et al., 2017; Cyran, 2021), which is evident in the different closure rates observed at these four caverns located less than a kilometer from each other.

In the eastern part of the dome, salt creep is not as pronounced, and time-lapse sonar measurements from the B-1 cavern (Figure 6g) show evidence of roof falls instead. The cavern roof and sides expand which consequently fills up the cavern floor and is indicative of brittle salt behavior associated with roof falls around the east BSZ. Roof falls have also been reported within the W-10 cavern by operators (Figure 6f) (LADNR, 2022a). To the NE, the impact of lateral salt movement can also be observed in sonar measurements of the W-1 cavern (Figure 6e) which can cause casing and liner ruptures. These variations in the cavern deformation determined from sonar measurement from west to east across the dome is indicative of differential salt movement across different spines that are separated by shear zones (Figure 5b). Transient creep along salt shear zones can lead to large deformations over short periods of time, generating the detected microearthquakes (Figure 1c-d; 4b-c; 5b) (Cyran, 2021).

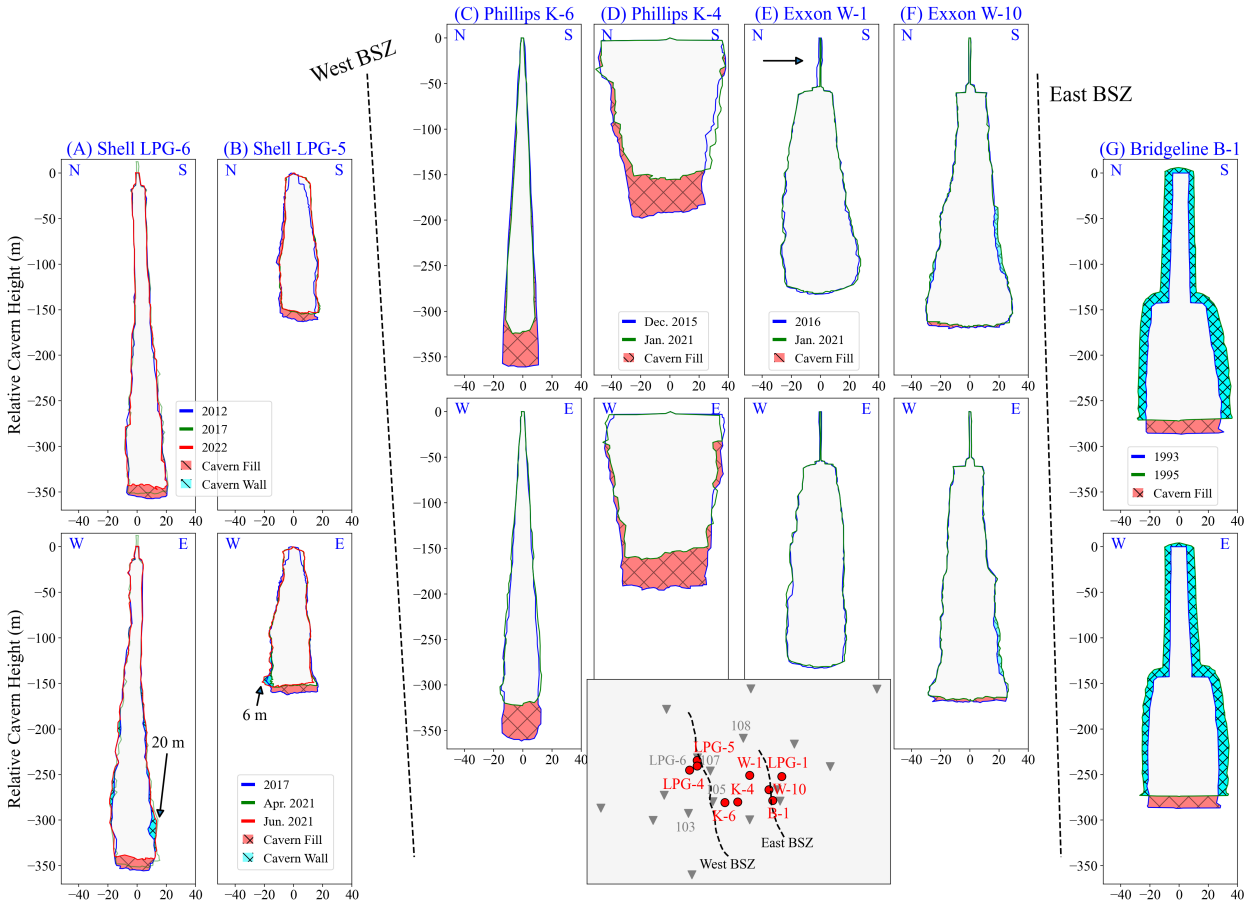


Figure 6. Timelapse cross-sections of cavern geometry obtained from sonar measurements (SONRIS, 2022). All caverns are plotted at the same scale, names are indicated above each panel, and cavern locations are shown in the inset map. Top panels show N-S cross-sections and bottom panels show W-E sections, with the legends indicating the year of the sonar surveys. Changes in the cavern shape through time are indicated with cyan and red patterns

4.5 Well Incidents

Cavern wells drilled near boundary shear zones (BSZ) and the salt edge are at risk of developing complications (Bérest et al., 2013; Ford & Dreger, 2020). One such incident along the west BSZ occurred in the LPG-5 cavern well. The LPG-5 well was drilled between the west BSZ and salt edge in 1973 and shut-in for several years (Figure 4c and 5b). A mechanical integrity test (MIT) was performed in 2021 to assess its stability for renewed cavern operations, and on May 3, 2021, brine was injected to raise the cavern pressure to 6.48 MPa (941.09 psi) in the production annulus followed by a 7-day stabilization period until the pressure decline reached 0.03 MPa (5.1 psi) per day (Figure 3c). The cavern lost integrity during the nitrogen injection phase of the MIT on May 10, 2021, and the casing pressure changed by more than 5%, which constitutes a well failure incident. Casing pressures dropped from 14.86 MPa (2156 psi) to 4.62 MPa (670 psi) in less than two minutes and site workers recall feeling ground movement, hearing an audible pop, and observing the release of 220,000 scf of nitrogen at the surface (LADNR, 2021a). Following the drop in cavern pressures, two MS-I type events occurred at

22:16:34.72 UTC and 22:17:11.96 UTC respectively, within proximity of the LPG-5 cavern (MIT events 18 and 19 in A-A' in Figure 2e; 3c; 4c; 6b), and post-accident reports indicate casing cracks at 1131-1136 m depth around the microearthquake hypocentral depths of 1259 and 1149 m respectively (Solutions, 2021). The microearthquakes were located west of the inferred west BSZ core (Figure 5b), within a potential damage zone where salt shearing can trigger seismicity. Additional damage was identified at the base of the cavern with sonar surveys (Figure 6b), and a 6-9 m wide by 1.5 m deep crater was observed around the well head (LADNR, 2021b).

Other incidents near the west BSZ include an emergency workover to replace the brine string in LPG-4 following its failure in Q2 2020 (LADNR, 2020b). Near the east BSZ, our review of historical well reports indicate that liner ruptures were documented three times between 1960-1966 in the W-5 saltwater disposal well (Consultants, 1990). Methane blowouts have also been recorded at the W-9 cavern and anomalous salt deposits were encountered within the LPG-1 and LPG-2 caverns (Figure 5b)(Looff, 2017).

4.6 Subsidence Surveys

To investigate the effect of salt migration on surface infrastructure, we reviewed subsidence measurements acquired by the salt dome operators between 2015 to 2019. Five precision level surveys were conducted using a combination of 57 monuments and wellheads (USA, 2019). We estimated relative subsidence by measuring the elevation differences between a reference benchmark (SD-01 monument) and the level-survey monuments. Changes in annual elevation were derived from elevation differences and a subsidence map was generated by linearly interpolating points between monuments (Figure S5). A maximum subsidence of ~0.81 inches/year was observed west of the eastern BSZ around the Kaiser 1 well which is plugged and abandoned (LADNR, 1986), and 320 m southwest of the Bridgeline B-1 cavern. Other notable caverns with high rates of elevation change include LPG-5, W-4, W-6, and W-7 (Figure S1). All these caverns occur within proximity of the shear zones, and the brittle behaviour of anomalous salt can accelerate roof falls, which influences surface subsidence if cavern pressures are not properly managed. At the time of writing, no surface facilities face critical endangerment but periodic monitoring of these caverns are recommended even after they have been plugged and abandoned.

5 Discussion

In this section, we combine observations from our microearthquake catalog with associated well data. We analyze the variations in seismicity across the salt dome and evaluate potential source mechanisms. We proceed to integrate the spatial and temporal seismicity patterns with the geological context around the salt dome which helps us unlock new insights and evaluate the contributions of our dataset and methods.

5.1 Microearthquake Source Mechanisms in Salt domes

Previous studies have investigated the factors that can trigger microearthquakes in salt-domes. E.g., at the Cerville-Buissoncourt salt mine in France, more than 200 events per hour were reported following the M_w 7.2 Kepulauan Talaud earthquake in Indonesia, and it was concluded that the events were triggered by passing surface waves (Jousset & Rohmer, 2012).

We investigate the possibility of triggering from passing surface waves from remote-large earthquakes by analyzing 1820 teleseismic earthquakes with magnitudes M_w >5 that occurred during the monitoring period. On the day of the well failure (May 10, 2021), three teleseismic events (M_w 5-5.4, located 82 – 115˚ away) occurred within 5 minutes of the well failure, however our seismic array did not detect the ground motion. Analysis of regional earthquake catalogs show that large events occur almost daily, in contrast to our local catalog of microearthquakes that exhibit cascade-like peaks in seismicity separated by several days of no activity (Figures 3a-b). Subsequently, we did not find evidence of our observed microearthquakes being triggered by passing surface waves from of remote large earthquakes.

For caverns located close to the edge of the salt-sediment boundary, caprock movement from salt creep near the boundary can trigger microearthquakes (Fortier et al., 2006) and in extreme cases, sidewall cavern collapse can trigger microearthquakes as sediments flow along the disturbed rock zone into breached caverns (Chicago Bridge, 2013; Ford & Dreger, 2020). However, our cross-section of the salt structural map with projected microearthquakes located within 300 m (Figure 4c) shows that few events occur near the salt-sediment boundary. But the majority of the microearthquakes occur deeper within the dome. The sonar surveys of caverns close to the salt edge (< 125 m, LPG-5 and 6) show no indications of major sidewall damage (Figure 6a-b) and the subsidence values above those caverns (Figure S5) are within relatively safe thresholds (USA, 2019). While the predominant source mechanism for the identified events does not appear to be caprock movement or sidewall collapse, we advocate for the continuous seismic and sonar monitoring of the LPG-5 cavern considering that it sustained sidewall damage during the well failure event (Figure 6b), and its proximity to the salt-sediment boundary (Figure 5b).

We investigated the plausibility of the microearthquakes being generated by roof falls within the caverns. Roof falls modify the geometry of caverns and can be monitored using sonar surveys. Falling blocks of salt or overlying sediment in caverns generate high frequency microearthquakes upon impact with the bottom of the cavern that can be recorded by nearby seismometers. The soluble portions of the blocks are dissolved in cavern brines while the insoluble blocks fill the base of the cavern. This effect has been observed at the Geosel-Manosque, Cerville-Buissoncourt, Verkhnekamskoye salt deposits in Europe, and sinkholes around the Dead Sea region (Fortier et al., 2006; Malovichko, 2009; Mercerat et al., 2009; Wust-Bloch & Joswig, 2006). For example, well logs at the Cerville-Buissoncourt dome recorded a roof migration of 6 m in one year, and a final roof height difference of 25 m over the operating period of the cavern. At Sorrento, timelapse sonar surveys of the B-1 cavern revealed a 4 m roof migration and 6 m wall widening before its abandonment, and roof falls were reported in the W-10 cavern (Figure 5b and 6f-g) (LADNR, 2022a). These observations suggest possible block drop seismicity. However, the location of our microearthquakes at depths below and outside the caverns (Figure 4b), along with sonar surveys in other caverns displaying relative roof stability while exhibiting cavern floor migration (Figure 6a-d) implies the existence of other source mechanisms within the Sorrento dome.

Although rocks falling from the roof cannot explain upward cavern floor migration with a stable roof, upward salt migration, which contributes to increased cavern closure rates can explain these observations (Bérest et al., 2013). The clustered microearthquakes align with mapped shear zones from drilled wells (Figure 4c; 5b), where salt creep reactivates preexisting

fractures in anomalous salt bodies (Davison, 2009) (Figure 1d). Salt creep along a shear zone is capable of overstretching well casing, causing the casing and liner ruptures observed in the LPG-4, LPG-5, W-1 and W-5 wells (Figure 5 and 6). Salt creep and shear zone deformation within salt domes have been linked to gas outbursts, increased shearing, slickensides occurrence, and halite recrystallization at other Gulf Coast domes (Bérest et al., 2019; Davison, 2009; Neal et al., 1993). At Sorrento, drilled wells within the vicinity of the shear zones were reported to have methane outbursts, anomalous salt properties, and ruptured well casings (Looff, 2017). This suggests that internal shearing of salt is the dominant source of microearthquake activity at the Sorrento dome.

5.2 Effect of Salt Creep on Shear Zones

While the concept of salt creep is well understood and even accounted for in geomechanical models (Sandia, 2017), shear zone identification and its potential hazards are poorly understood and often overlooked. During normal storage operations, wellhead pressure steadily increases in caverns due to salt creep, and this pressure is usually bled off when it exceeds the operating pressure range as part of a pressure cycle (Bettin et al., 2017). During workovers, the caverns are completely depressurized, which can result in accelerated salt creep along the shear zones (Bérest et al., 2013). Salt creep along the shear zones can trigger microearthquakes, increasing the risk of casing breach and gas release during well workovers like a mechanical integrity test. Based on the proximity of the LPG-5 cavern to the west BSZ (Figure 4c and 5b) and the low cavern pressures during the workover process, we conclude that accelerated shear movement weakened the well casing to the point of failure following which impulsive energy from the MIT events exacerbated the damage (Figure 3c), resulting in the gas release observed at the surface, and associated wellhead damage.

5.3 Geological Context of Salt Dome Seismic Hazards

When assessing seismic hazard, we need to evaluate all the avalaible subsurface data. Well logs, sonar measurements and hanging string failure events are useful for monitoring cavern integrity at specific points in time. However, due to data sparsity (acquisition timeframe and limited sample points), it is difficult to use them to independently assess unstable regions within the salt dome unless an obvious failure occurs (Ehgartner & Sobolik, 2009). In contrast seismicity is useful for mapping the 3D extent of shear zones, identifying weak zones that are actively undergoing seismic deformation (seismogenic regions), and improving near real-time hazard mapping in salt dome cavern facilities (Mercerat et al., 2009). Independently both data types provide distinct advantages. However, together they can be integrated to robustly assess seismic hazards. For instance, when the microearthquakes are integrated with well data, the dip of the east BSZ microearthquakes explains how the LPG-1 and LPG-2 wells encountered anomalous salt deposits considering they were drilled east of the shear zone (Figure 5b). The gaps in seismicity between the two BSZs suggest 3 potential spines migrating upwards at different rates. The central salt spine is migrating the fastest, as evidenced by the high cavern closure rates within the K-4 and K-6 caverns (Figure 6c-d), and the relatively thinner overburden thickness above the spine. To the east and west, the other salt spines are much smaller and relegated to the flanks of the central spine. Considering salt spines discussed in literature are circular in shape (Warren, 2016), we could have E-W trending shear zones that were not imaged in our current catalog. Additional months of seismic monitoring can be combined with downhole

sensors to improve the number of intra-salt event detections, and accuracy of events locations for further shear zone imaging.

For operators, temporal seismicity trends can provide insights into salt instability during workover or drilling operations. However, interpreters have to be careful when analyzing such trends. While a departure from background seismicity trends can be indicative of impending damage, time to failure models cannot be derived from seismicity alone (Ford & Dreger, 2020; Petersen et al., 2006). The number of recorded events depends on noise levels, salt creep, and station distribution as evidenced by the higher number of daily recorded microearthquakes during the facility shut-down in comparison to the LPG-5 well failure event (Figure 3a). In this study, our integration of seismic and well data allows us to associate event spikes with well incidents and improve our understanding of hazard at the Sorrento salt dome.

Considering the distance to the salt edge and microseismicity distribution, we propose that the safest region for cavern operations is above the central spine, between the two identified BSZs at depths <1.3 km (Figure 4b). Caverns located on the flanks away from the central spine are closer to the salt edge which increases the risk of additional complications during operations. One draw-back for leaching the central spine is the high surface subsidence near the shear zones, and fast closure rate observed in the K-4 and K-6 caverns (Figure 5b; 6c-d). Additional cavern wells will need to avoid those regions to minimize associated subsurface hazards. By avoiding the salt around the shear zones, the risk of casing breach due to seismicity is relatively lower.

As more salt domes are enlisted for energy storage as part of the energy transition, the environmental safety of cavern operations becomes increasingly crucial. Integrating microseismic monitoring into site evaluation criteria for new sites and deploying a combination of borehole and surface nodal arrays for passive monitoring of existing underground storage facilities are key strategies. These approaches enable operators to proactively identify ground movement on seismic instruments and take steps to minimize the risk of blowouts or sinkhole formation.

6 Conclusion

Similar to other machine learning earthquake detection models (Mousavi et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2018; Zhu & Beroza, 2019), we detect microearthquakes using 3-component waveforms however, our model is more efficient at detecting salt dome microearthquakes because it was trained and finetuned with small microearthquakes ($M_w < 3$) from both tectonic and salt dome environments.We successfully apply our Hybrid U-Net machine learning model for microearthquake detection at the Sorrento salt dome, and combined our event catalog with existing well data and published literature to generate a holistic assessment of seismic hazard. The detected events with magnitudes ranging between M_L -3 to 2 were correlated with salt creep and fracture reactivation along two internal boundary shear zones where seismicity triggers cavern deformation. Our geological interpretation accurately explains past and recent incidents, and we propose recommendations to improve the safety of cavern operations.

Our pre-trained machine learning model is easy to use and can be finetuned to monitor other sites with limited seismicity catalogs such as nuclear plants, dams, bridges. It is also useful for detecting seismicity from other hazards such as landslides and mine collapses, and identifying BSZs at other sites used for underground storage. BSZ identification is of central importance if salt domes are to be utilized for hydrogen storage during the energy transition

because hydrogen has lower molecular weight than natural gas and can escape into even smaller cracks. In this study, we have demonstrated that salt dome characterization can be optimized with microearthquake monitoring to identify seismogenic BSZs prior to leaching salt caverns, allowing preferential location of caverns within stable salt which extends their lifecycles when used for natural gas and hydrogen storage.

Acknowledgments

We thank the operators at the Sorrento salt dome in Ascension Parish, Louisiana for providing access to the sites occupied by our seismic array. We are grateful to Justin Kain and Jeff Nunn for their help installing instruments, and Jeff Hanor for discussions on the salt domes. We thank the USGS Lower Mississippi-Gulf Water Science Center for releasing the preliminary data from the Bayou Conway station. Most computations were carried out on the LSU HPC SuperMike II cluster. Some of the seismic instruments were provided by the United States Geological Survey and Earthscope through the Earthscope Primary Instrument Center (EPIC, formerly the PASSCAL Instrument Center) at New Mexico Tech. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. (2045983). The facilities of the Earthscope Consortium are supported by the National Science Foundation's Seismological Facilities for the Advancement of Geoscience (SAGE) Award under Cooperative Support Agreement EAR-1851048.

Open Research

All data needed to evaluate the conclusions in the paper are present in the paper and/or Supporting Information. The waveform data from the Sorrento array are publicly available at the SAGE Facility Web Services (https://service.iris.edu/irisws/) under the ZE network (Persaud, 2020). The trained model used for event detection, catalogs of the detected events, and scripts to reproduce the images are available at the Zenodo repository https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10799264. For review purposes, the repository can be accessed with a unique token link.
Data analysis was carried out using different python packages. ObsPy was used for processing the seismic data (Krischer et al., 2017). All plots were created with Matplotlib and PyGMT 6.0.0 (Hunter & Dale, 2007; Uieda et al., 2021). The hybrid autoencoder model was built with TensorFlow 2.5, and shapefiles were processed using Geopandas (Abadi et al., 2015; Jordahl et al., 2020).

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