

# Modeling and Design of an Adaptive Stiffness Wave Energy Converter

Carson McGuire, Olivia Mabe, and Dr. Matthew Bryant

Aug. 14, 2025

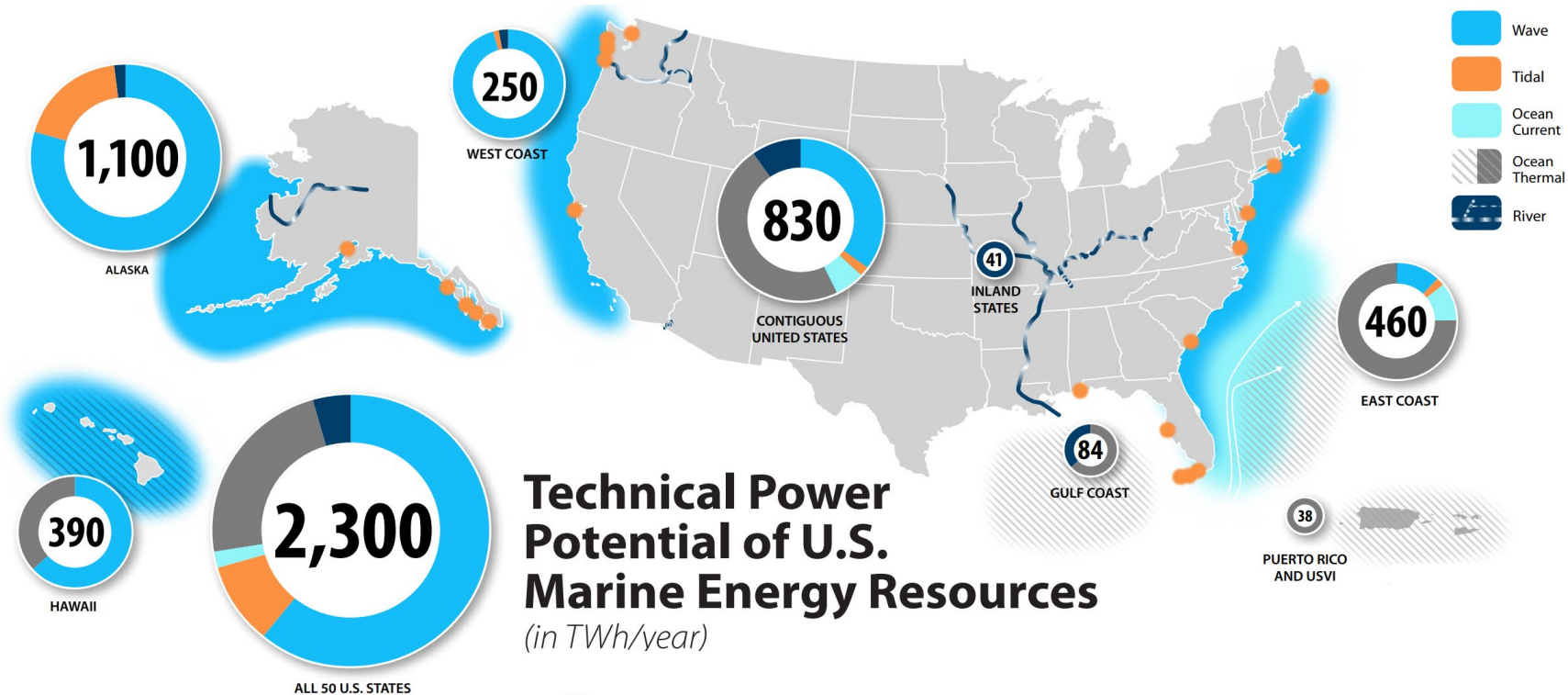
UMERC+OREC 2025

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Mechanical and Aerospace  
Engineering

# Ocean waves offer a substantial source of renewable energy

- Wave power availability in the US: 1400 TWh/yr [1]
  - Sufficient for 130 million homes
- 55 TWh/yr on East Coast alone
- Underutilized source of renewable energy

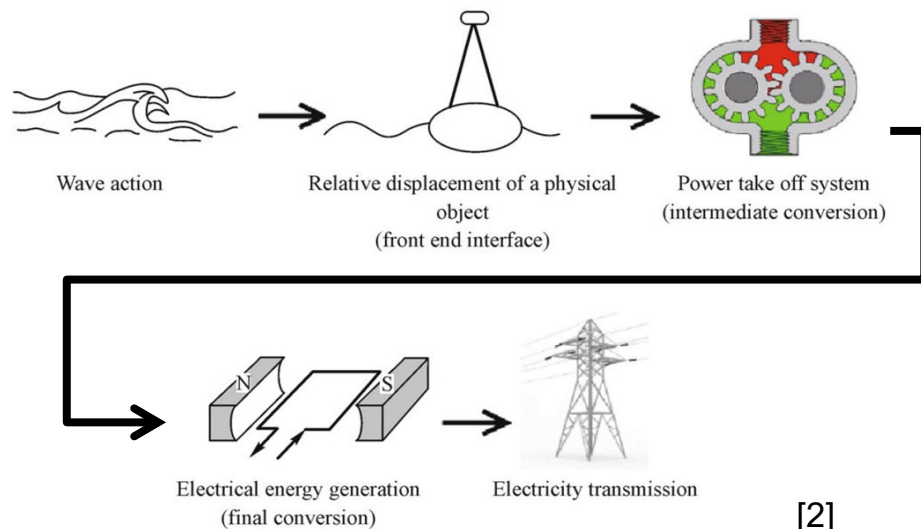


National Renewable Energy Laboratory overview of U.S. marine energy resource [1]

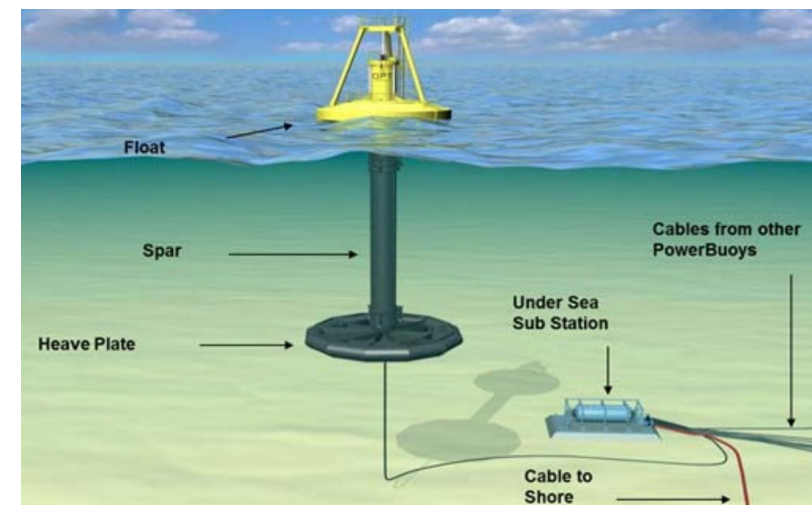
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- **Wave energy converters (WECs):** Generate usable work from wave energy
- **Point absorbers:** Buoy heaves up and down due to ocean wave motion to drive a power take-off element



[2]



PowerBuoy point absorber [3]

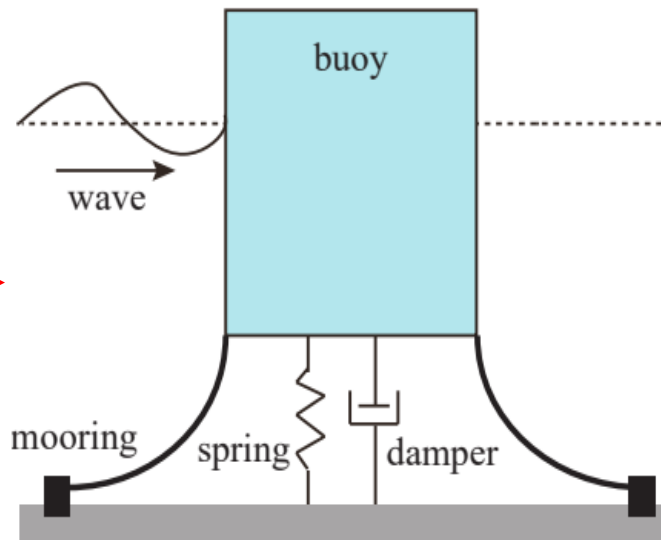
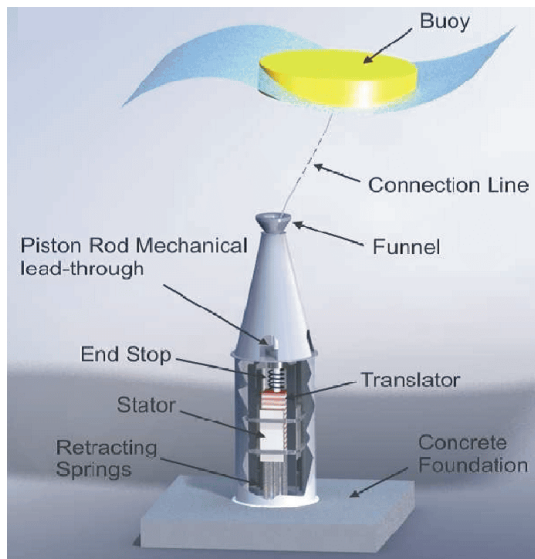
[2] N. Santhosh, V. Baskaran, A. Amarkarthik, "A review on front end conversion in ocean wave energy converters," Front. Energy, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 297-310, Oct. 2015, doi: 10.1007/s11708-015-0370-x.

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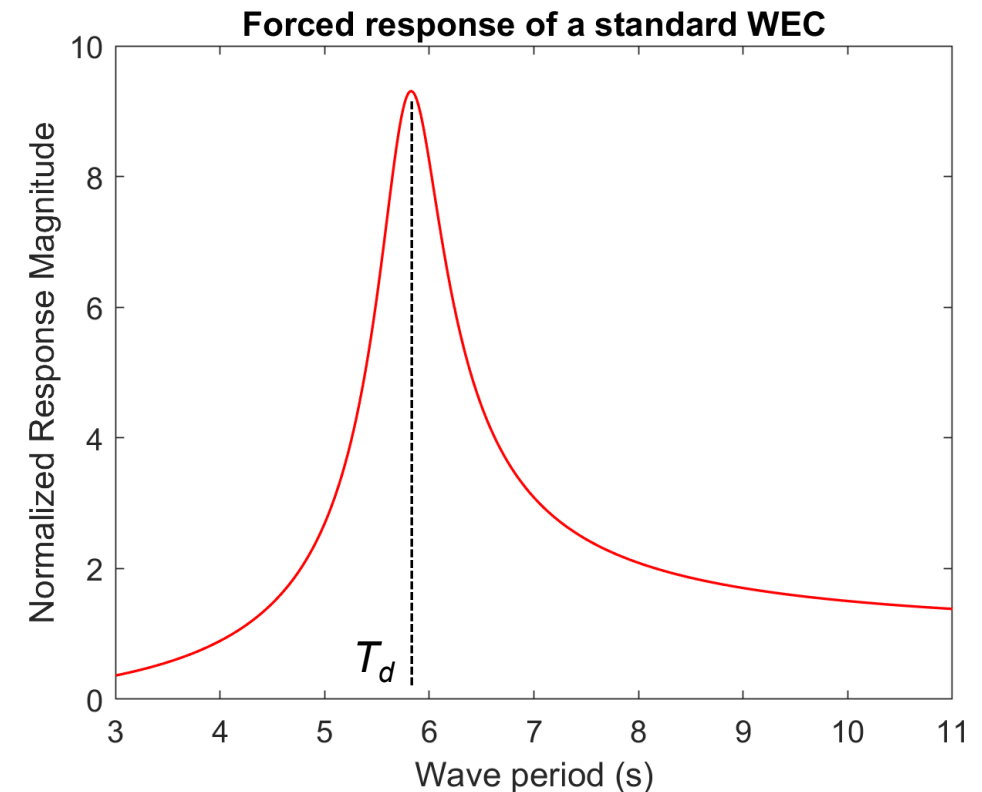
# A fundamental limitation of point absorbers: narrowband response

- Point absorber dynamics are analogous to mass-spring-damper systems
  - Resonant period:** Best performance at one particular driving period
  - Narrowband response:** Displacement falls off away from the resonant period
  - Most are tuned to one driving period

$$T_d = \frac{2\pi}{\sqrt{\frac{k}{m} - \frac{c^2}{4m^2}}}$$



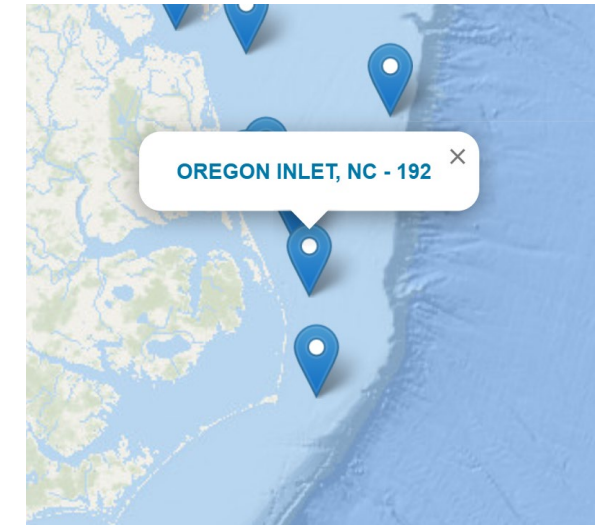
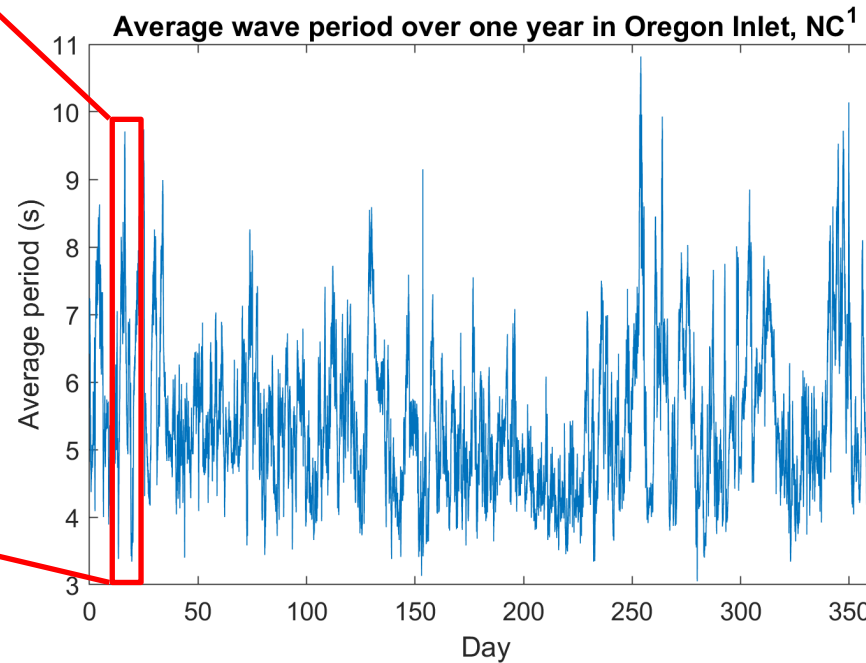
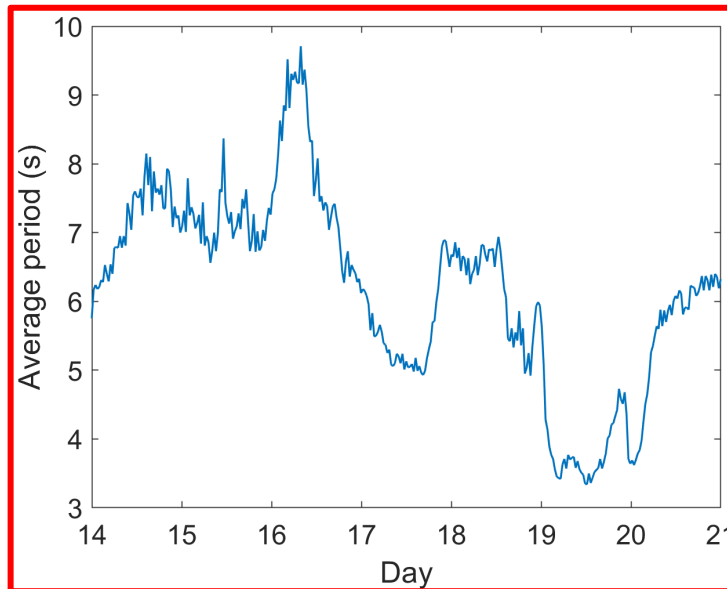
Mass-spring-damper representation of a point absorber [4]





## Motivation for developing an adaptive-stiffness point absorber

- Ocean wave periods vary significantly with time
  - Example: Wave periods off Oregon Inlet vary from 3 – 10 seconds (Mean = 5.54 s,  $\sigma = 1.22$  s)
- WECs cannot perform optimally much of the time
  - Capacity factor =  $\frac{\text{Actual energy output over time}}{\text{Theoretical maximum energy output over time}}$
- Performance would improve by adjusting resonant period dynamically to match driving waves
  - Focus of this work: **Control mooring stiffness to improve WEC performance with a “hose-pump”**

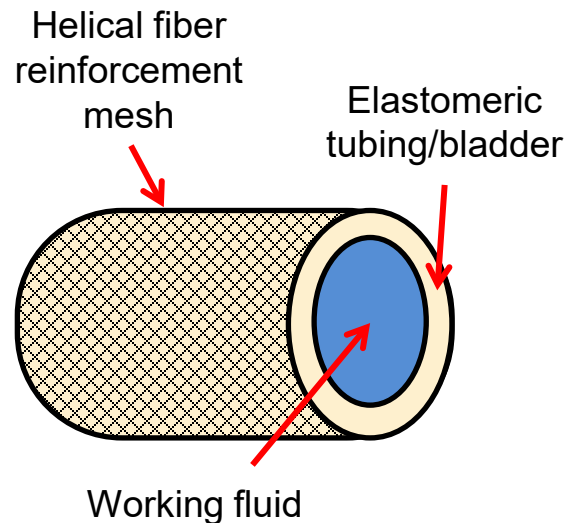


Data collection location: CDIP  
Station 192 [5]

[5] Coastal Data Information Program,  
<https://cdip.ucsd.edu/m/products/?stn=192p1>

## Hose-pump material: Fluidic flexible matrix composite (F2MC)

- F2MC pump:
  - Helically braided fiber mesh tube embedded in a rubber elastomer matrix
  - Fiber kinematics produce volume change when stretched/relaxed



Buoy forced  
up and down  
by waves

Actual prototype  
hose-pump used  
for testing!

Check valves  
to direct flow

Water inlet  
from ocean

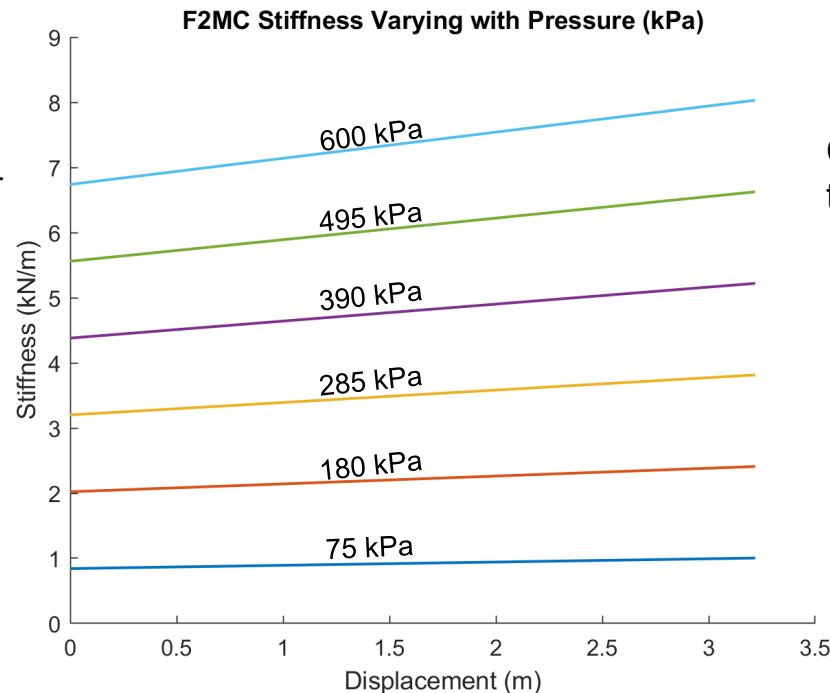
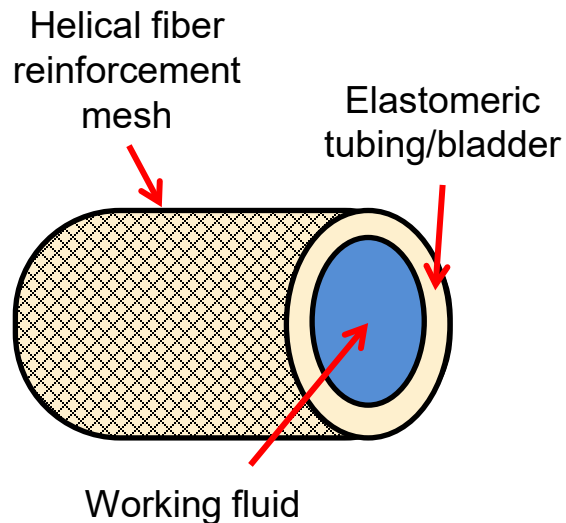
Water  
outlet (to  
turbine)

Tie-off to  
anchor



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- F2MC pump:
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  - Fiber kinematics produce volume change when stretched/relaxed
- Useful property:** F2MC axial stiffness is strongly dependent on internal fluid pressure



Buoy forced up and down by waves

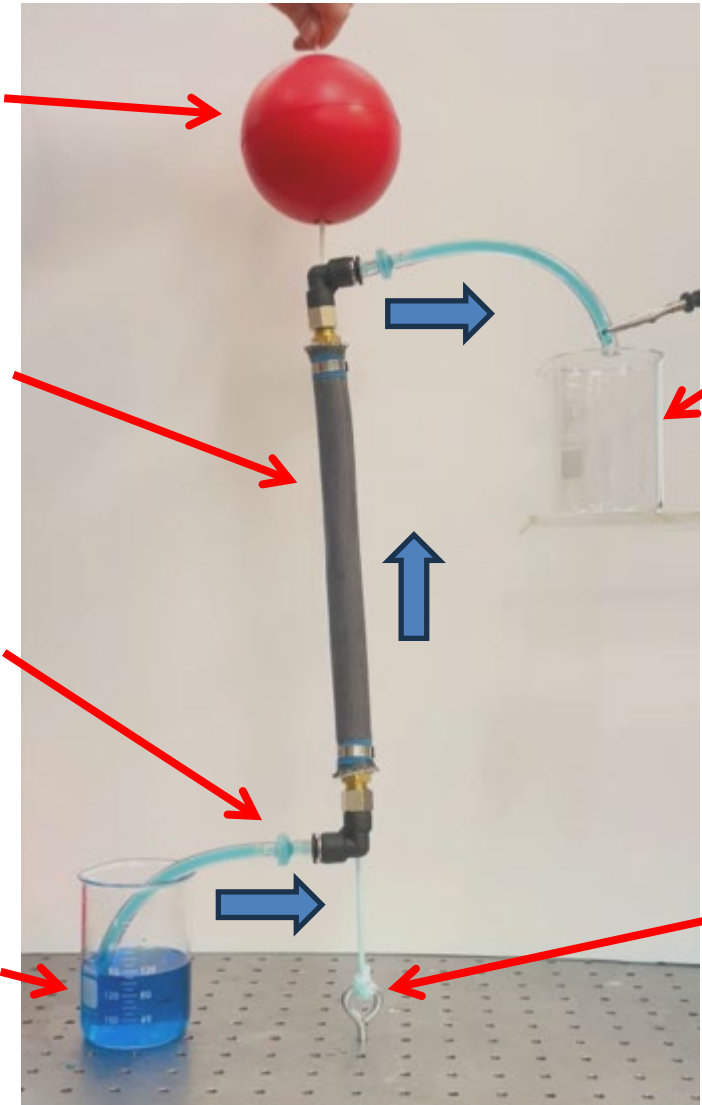
Actual prototype hose-pump used for testing!

Check valves to direct flow

Water inlet from ocean

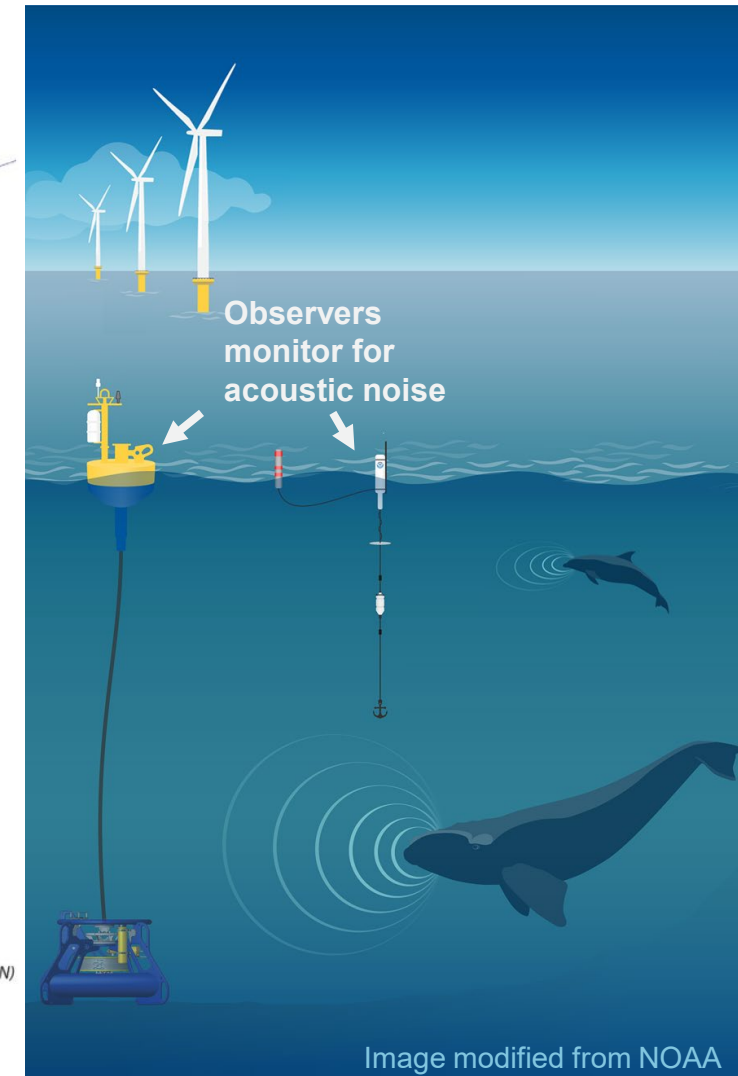
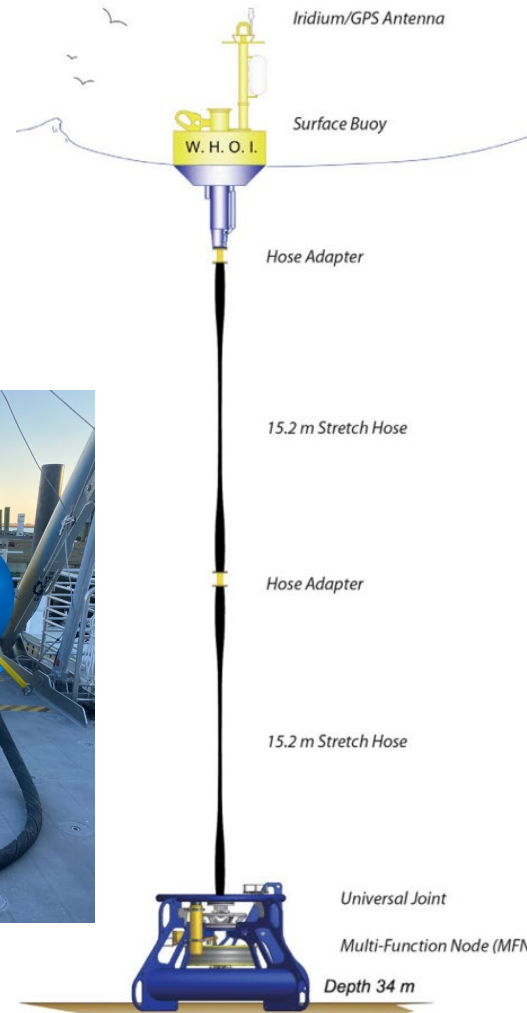
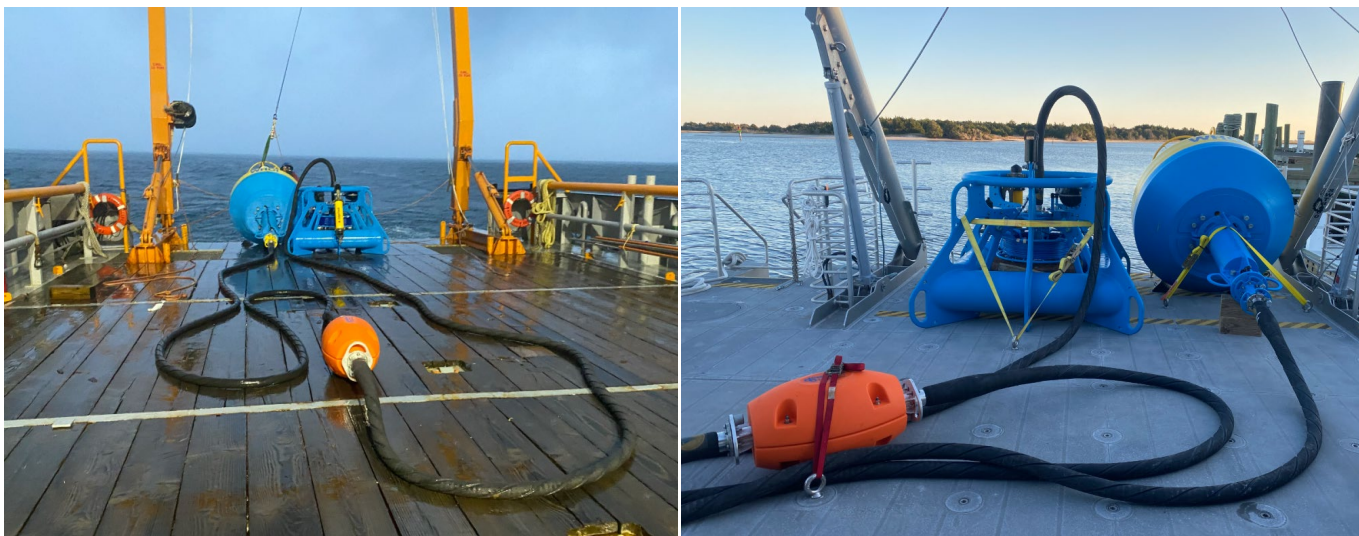
Water outlet (to turbine)

Tie-off to anchor



# Reinforced hoses have been proven reliable for mooring use

- Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute (WHOI) has developed high-compliance reinforced rubber hoses as moorings
- Acoustically quiet
- Active deployments include:
  - OOI Coastal Pioneer Array
  - Robots4Whales whale monitoring buoys



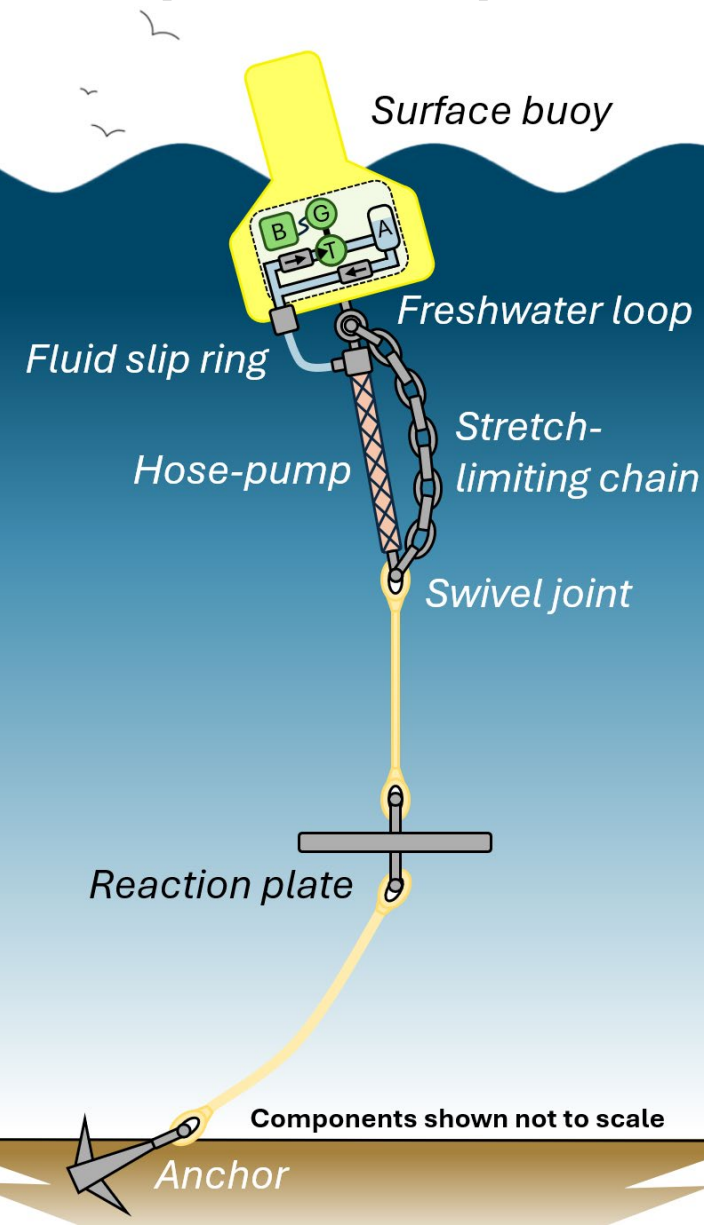
- Paul, Walter HG. "Hose elements for buoy moorings: Design, fabrication and mechanical properties." (2004).

- Baumgartner, Mark F., et al. "Persistent near real-time passive acoustic monitoring for baleen whales from a moored buoy: System description and evaluation." *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 10.9 (2019): 1476-1489.

- <https://www2.whoi.edu/site/moorings/projects/>



# Proposed adaptive-stiffness hydraulic PTO system architecture

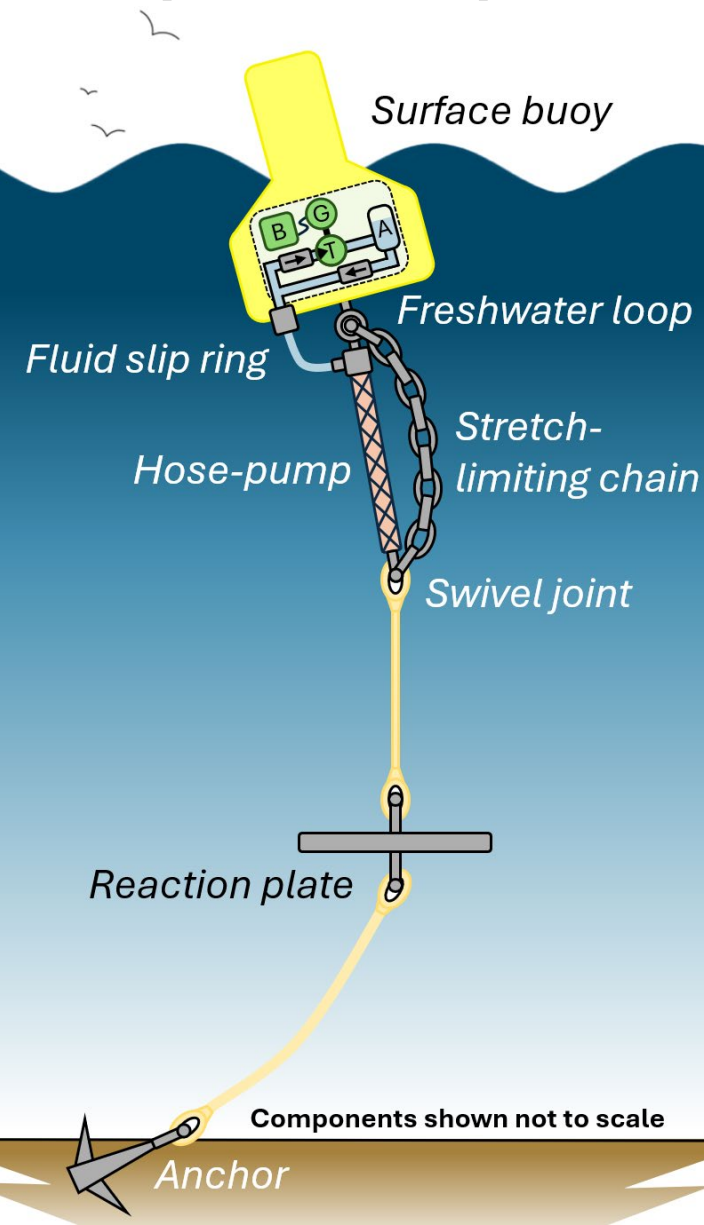


- Coupling hose-pump output to a hydraulic turbine and generator can create electrical output

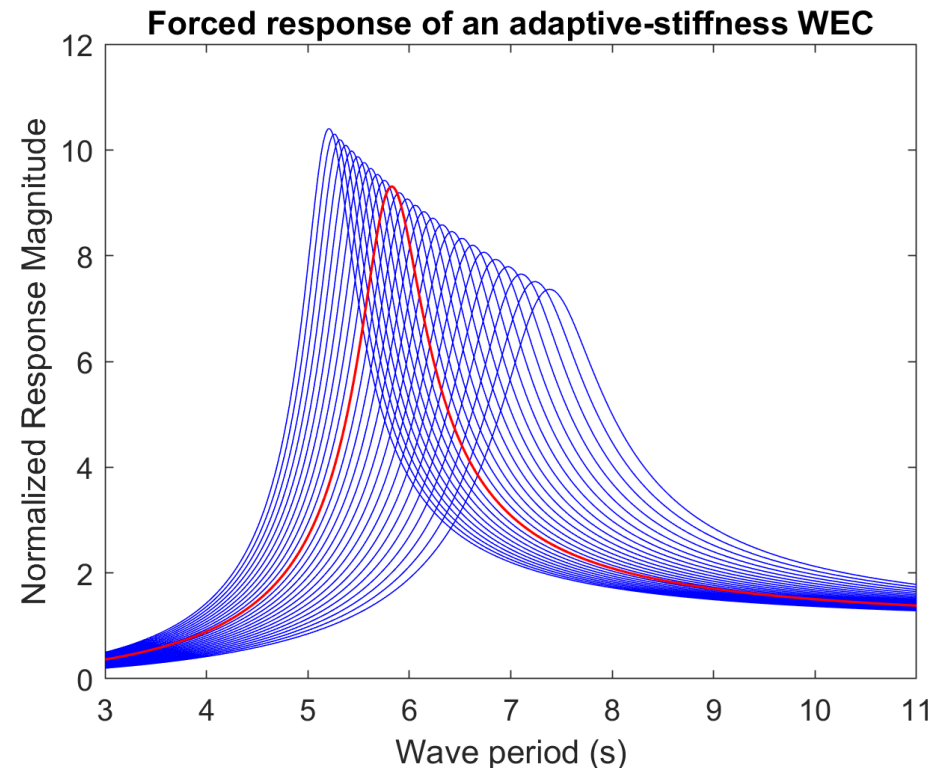
- Additional potential benefits:
  - In rough seas, stiffness can be reduced to mitigate shock loads
  - Unlike piston pumps, there are no high precision sliding seals
  - Hose pump is corrosion resistant and can be fully coated to inhibit biofouling
  - Easy to transport and deploy
    - Hose pump can be coiled on a spool
  - Low environmental risk
    - Working fluid can captive freshwater
  - Reduced risk of entanglement for marine mammals



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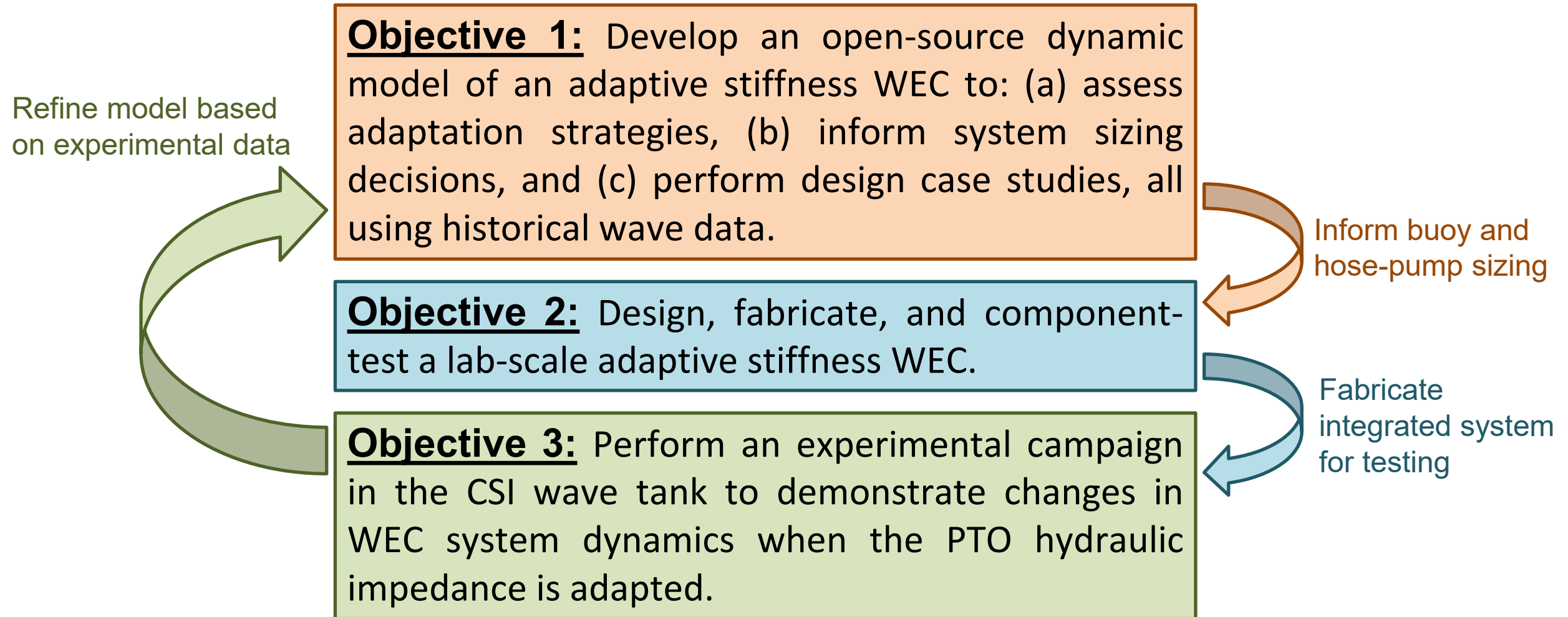


- Coupling hose-pump output to a hydraulic turbine and generator can create electrical output
- Pressure (and thus, stiffness) control: Add multi-speed gearing (such as a CVT) between the turbine and generator
  - Changing gear ratio alters torque-speed relationship, internal pressure-output flow rate relationship



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## Project objectives for 2024-25



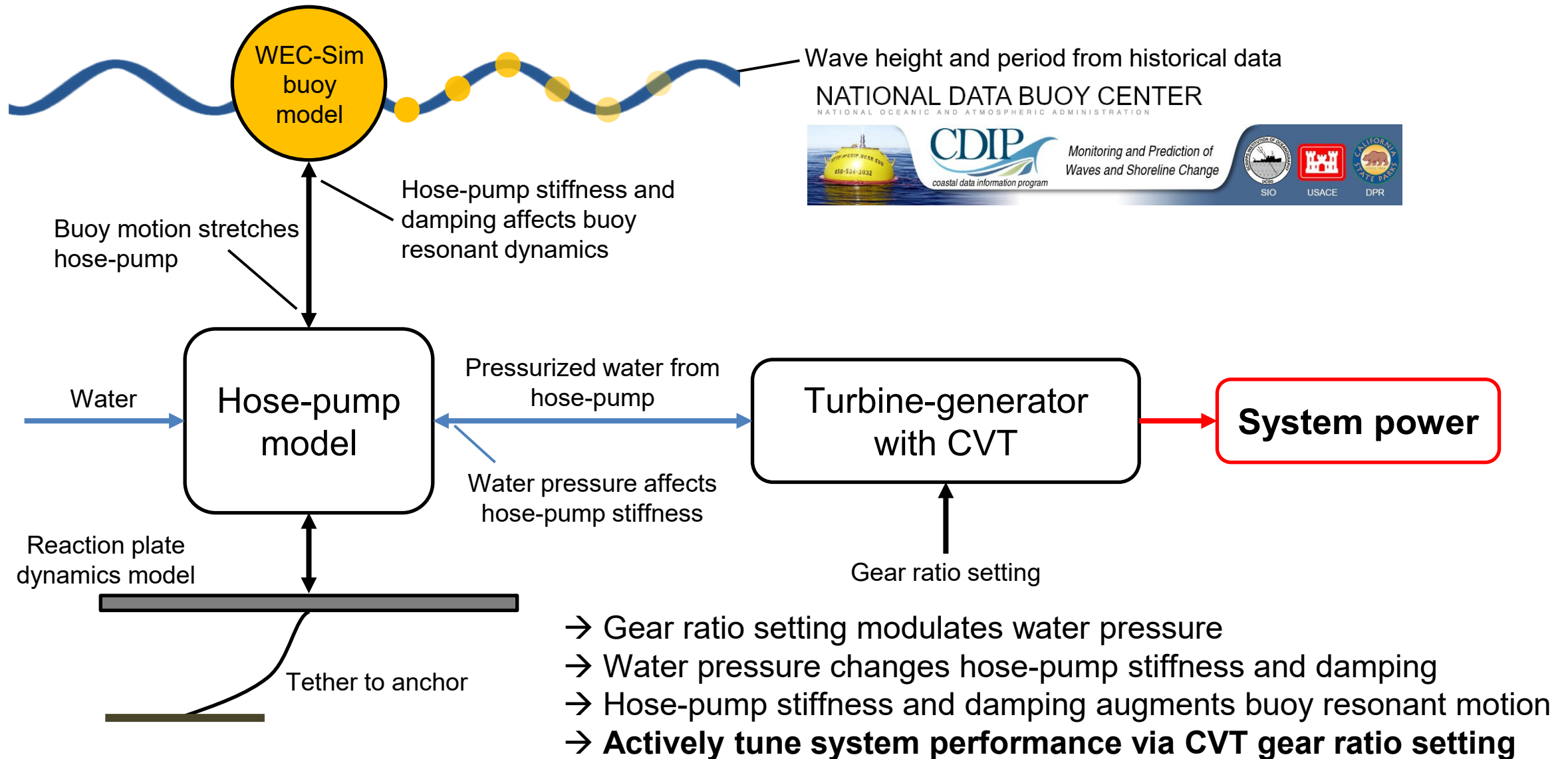
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**Objective 1:** Develop an open-source dynamic model of an adaptive stiffness WEC to: (a) assess adaptation strategies, (b) inform system sizing decisions, and (c) perform design case studies, all using historical wave data.

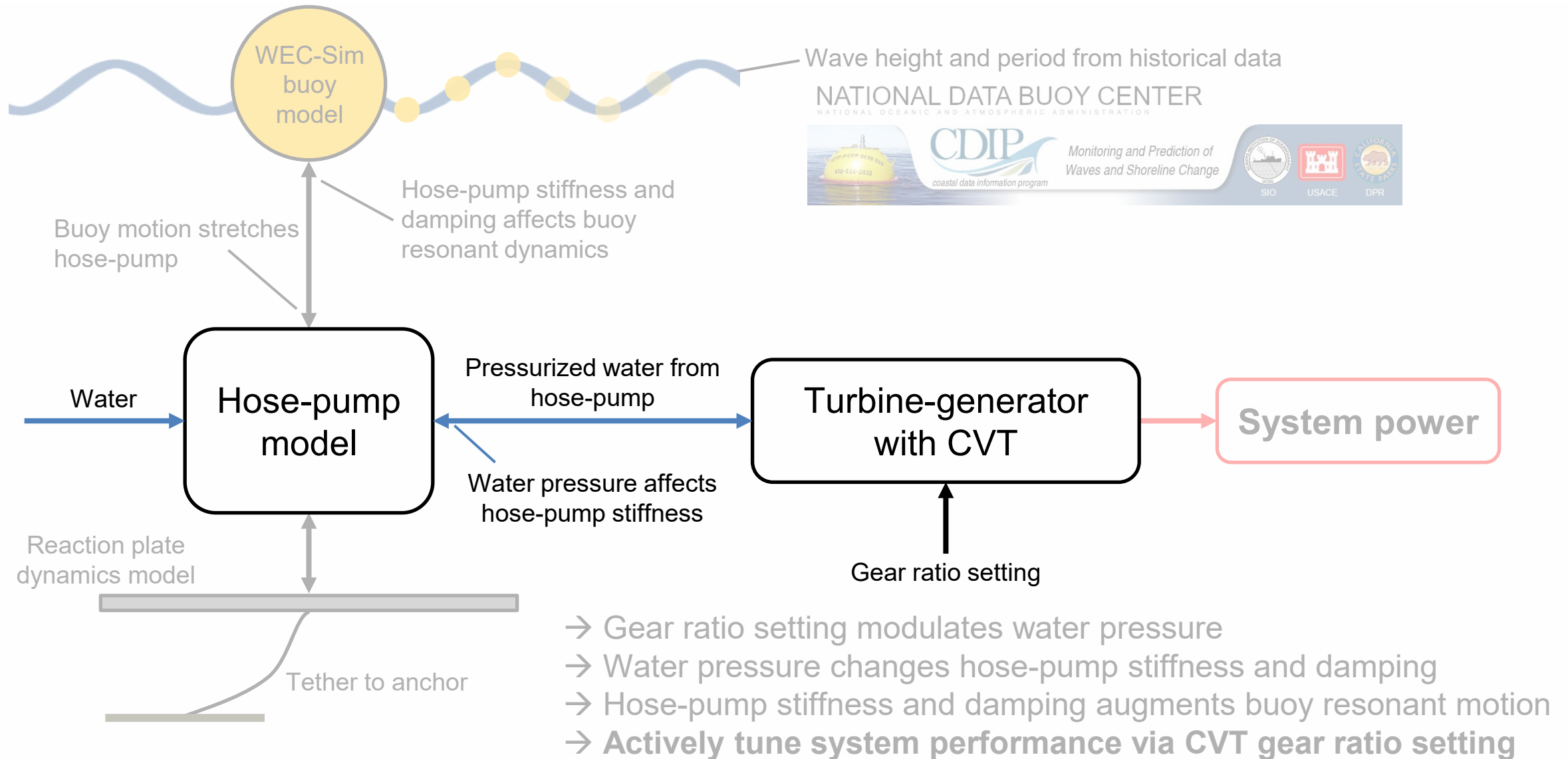
**Objective 2:** Design, fabricate, and component-test a lab-scale adaptive stiffness WEC.

**Objective 3:** Perform an experimental campaign in the CSI wave tank to demonstrate changes in WEC system dynamics when the PTO hydraulic impedance is adapted.

# Objective 1: Dynamic modeling framework for the F2MC WEC



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# Objective 1: Quasistatic fluid flow modeling of hose-pump system

Flow rate of an ideal hose-pump [6]:

$$V_{pump} = \pi r_u^2 l_u \left( \frac{-\left(1 + \frac{x}{l_u}\right)^3}{\tan^2(a_u)} + \frac{1 + \frac{x}{l_u}}{\sin^2(a_u)} \right)$$

$$Q_{out} = \frac{-dV_{pump}}{dt}$$

Force and stiffness due to internal pressure of an ideal hose-pump [1]:

$$F_{axial} = \pi r_u^2 P \left( \frac{3\left(1 + \frac{x}{l_u}\right)^2}{\tan^2(a_u)} - \frac{1}{\sin^2(a_u)} \right)$$

$$k_{overall} = \frac{dF_{axial}}{dx}$$

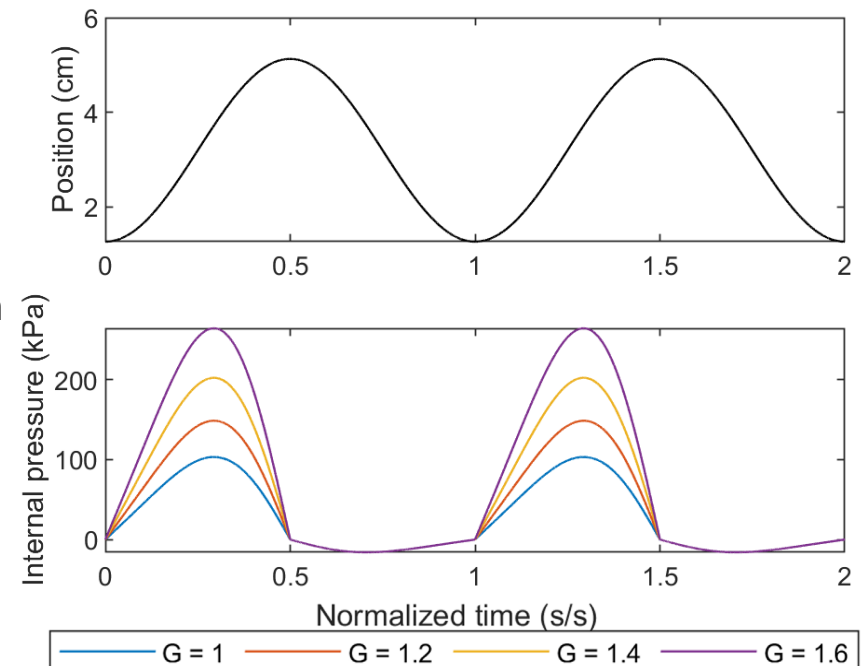
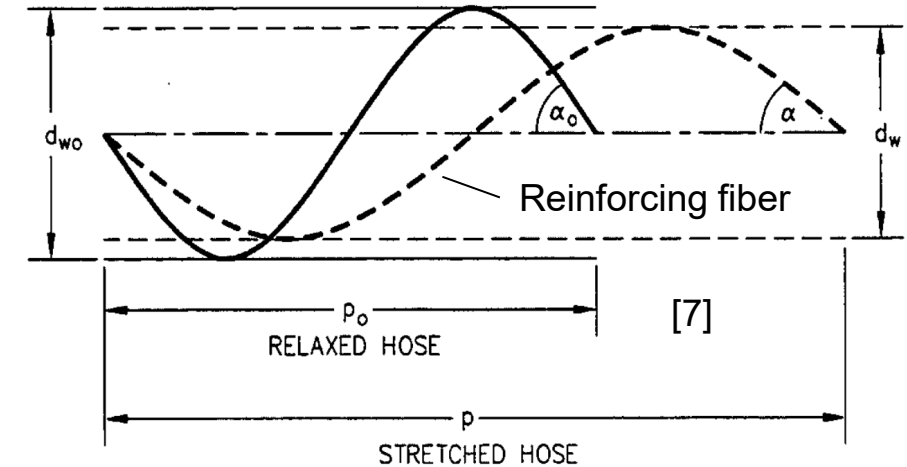
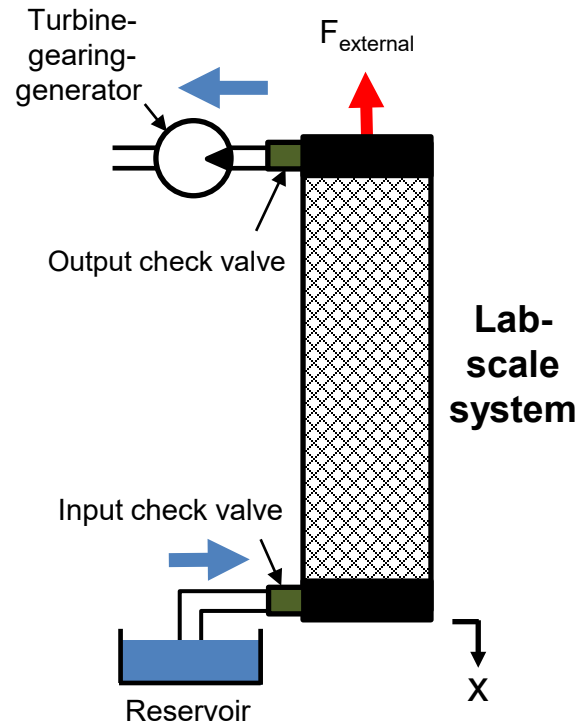
Simple hydraulic turbine with gearing:

$$Q_{out} = \frac{D\omega_1}{2\pi} \quad \tau_1\omega_1 = \tau_2\omega_2$$

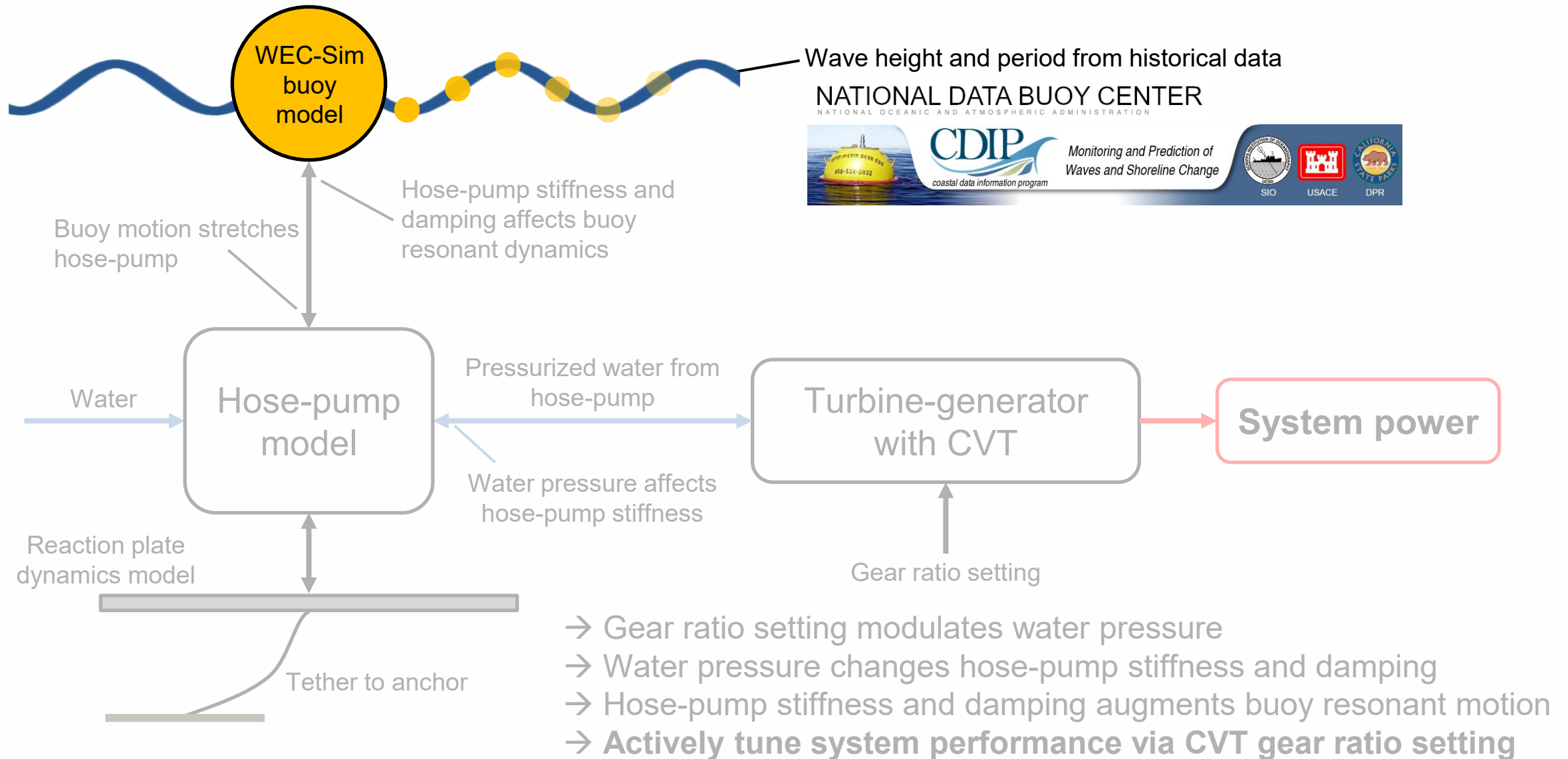
$$P = \frac{2\pi}{D}\tau_1 \quad G = \frac{\omega_2}{\omega_1}$$

Assumptions:

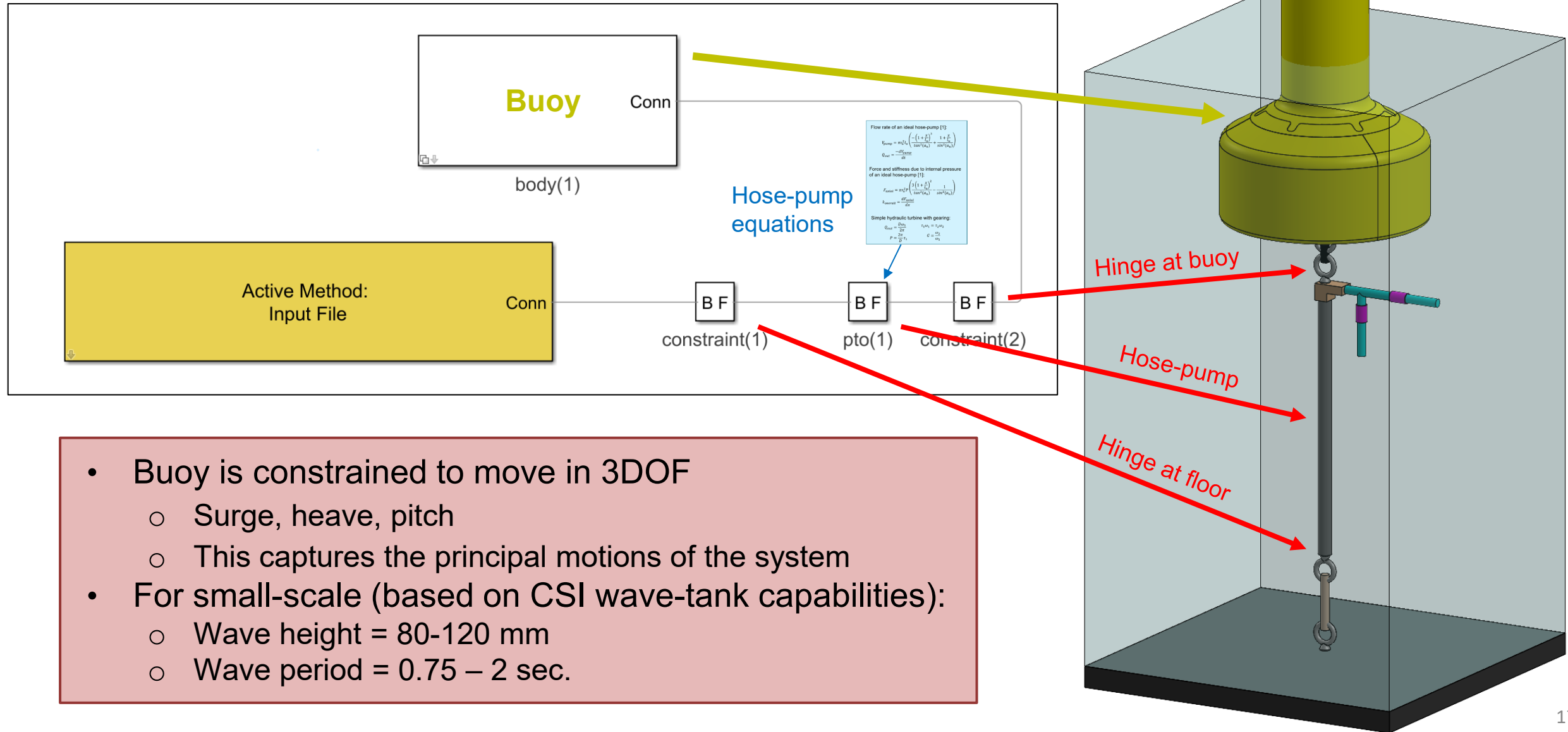
- Ideal pantograph network
- Negligible mass
- No flow effects from check valves



# Objective 1: Dynamic modeling framework for the F2MC WEC



## Objective 1: WEC-Sim Simulink model of integrated system



- Buoy is constrained to move in 3DOF
  - Surge, heave, pitch
  - This captures the principal motions of the system
- For small-scale (based on CSI wave-tank capabilities):
  - Wave height = 80-120 mm
  - Wave period = 0.75 – 2 sec.

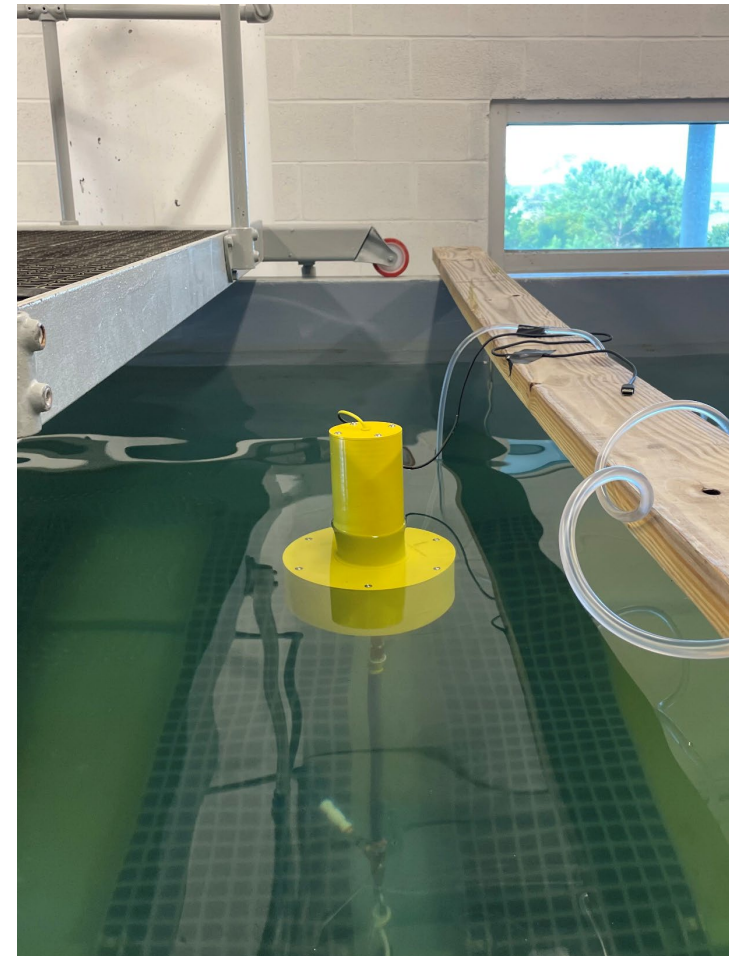
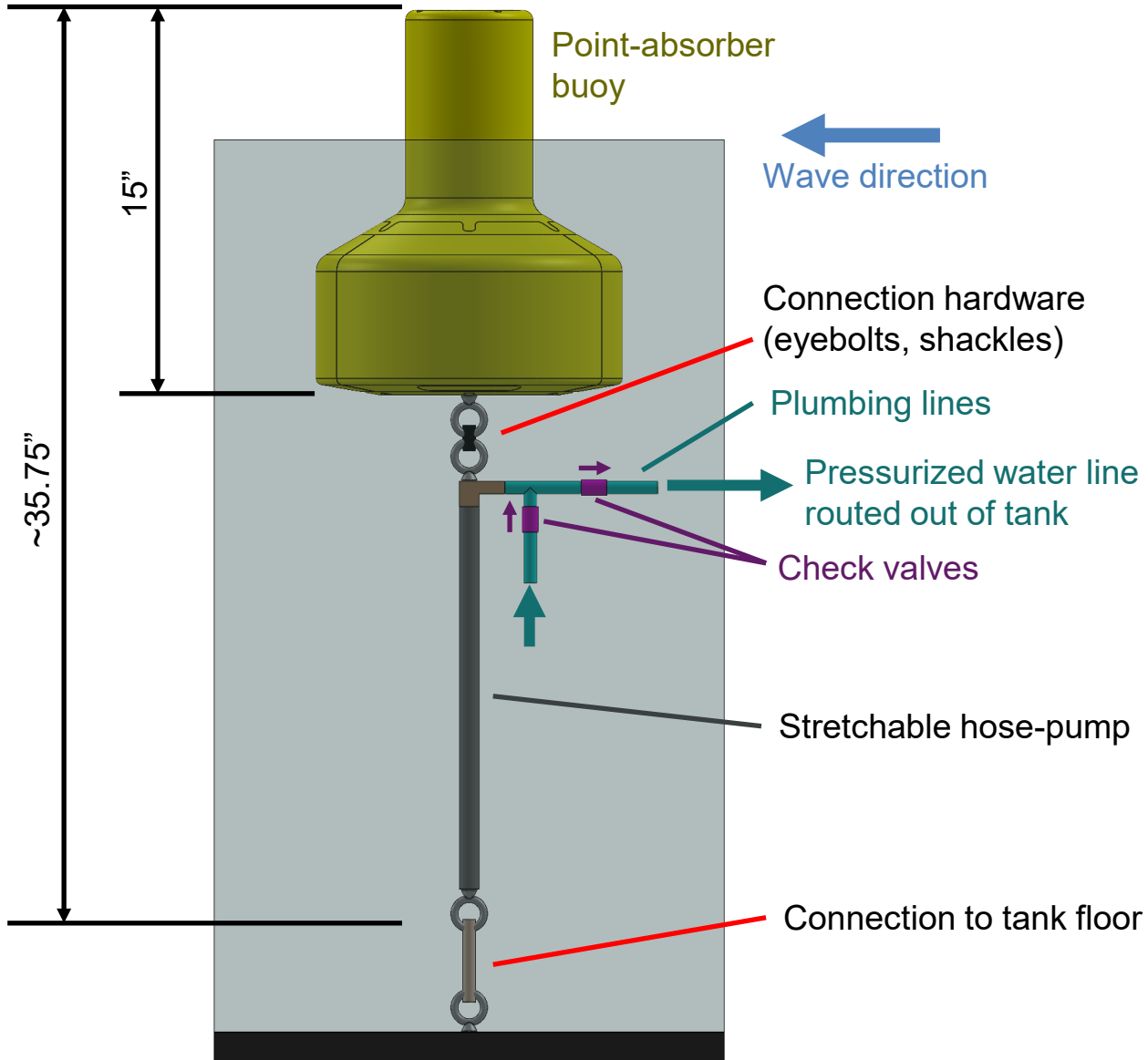
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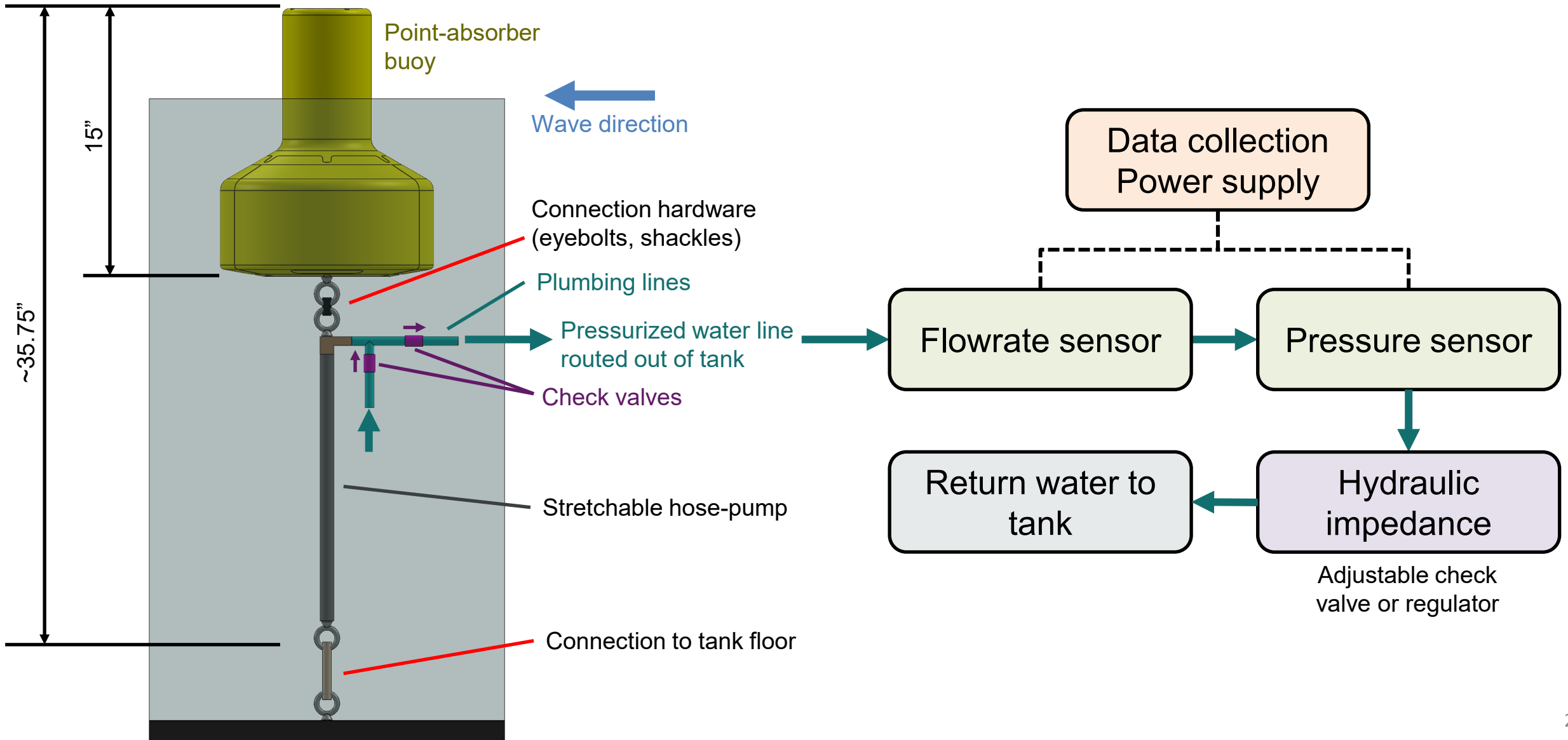
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## Objective 2: Lab-scale buoy/hose-pump integrated system in water





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## Objective 3: First point absorber buoys (July, Oct. 2024)

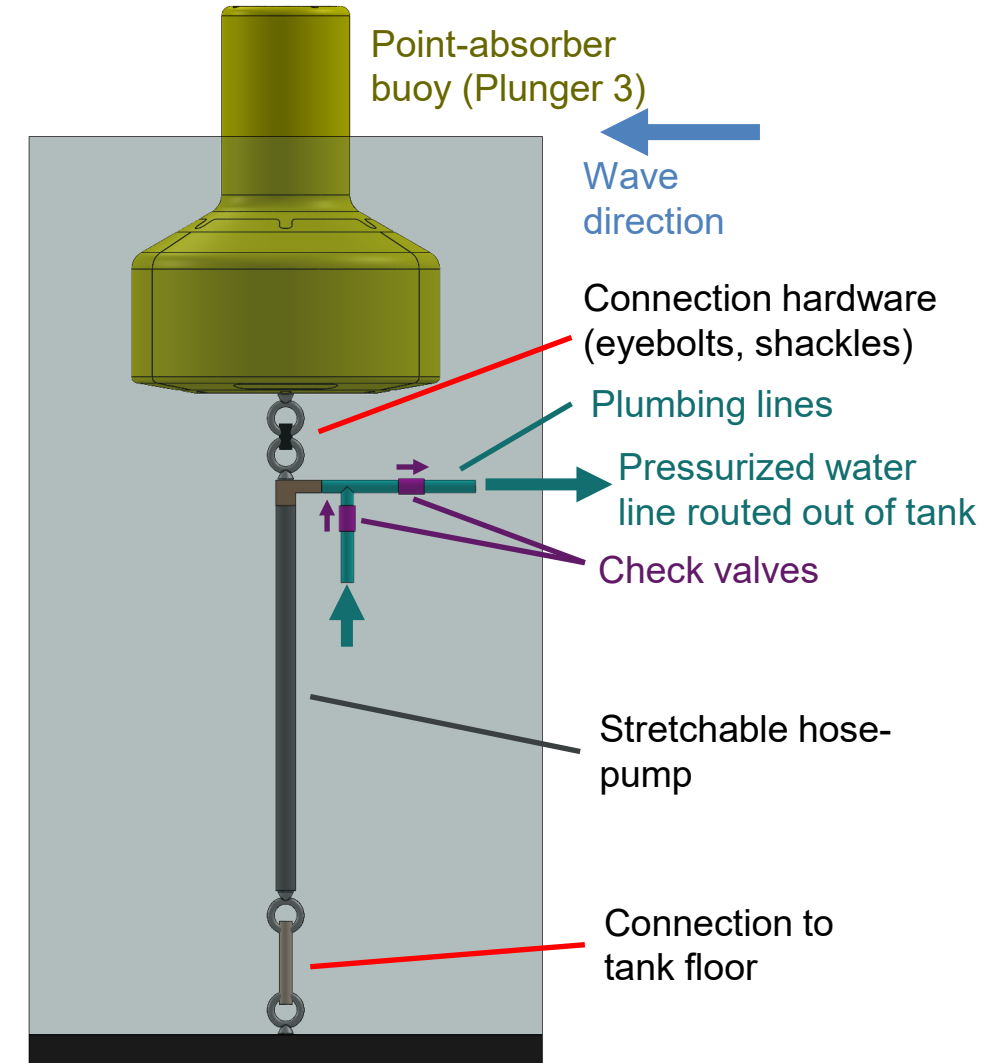
- Captured side-view videos of wave-tank testing in addition to flow rate and pressure data
- Captured data and videos were used to fine-tune WEC-Sim model parameters



## Objective 3: Streamlined point absorber buoy (Feb. 2025)

Feb. 18-21, 2025

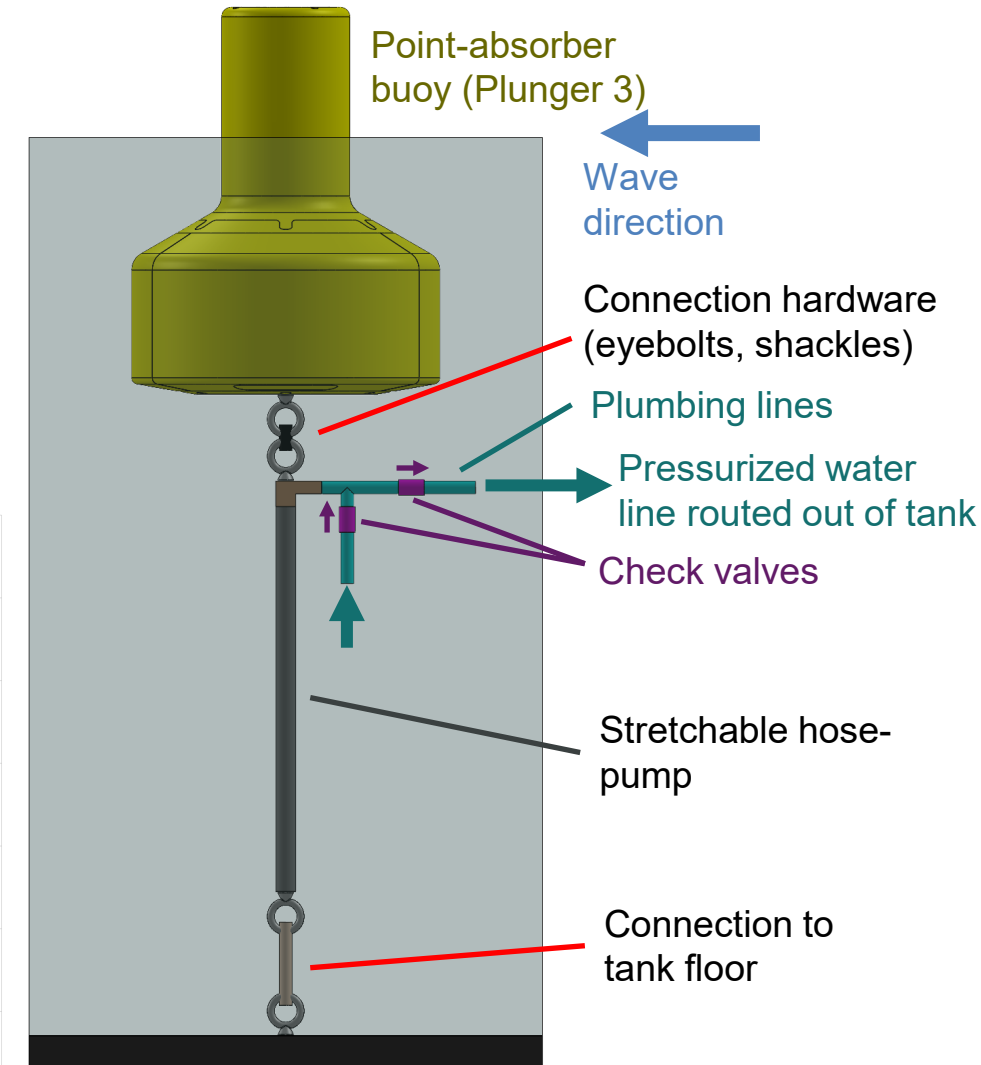
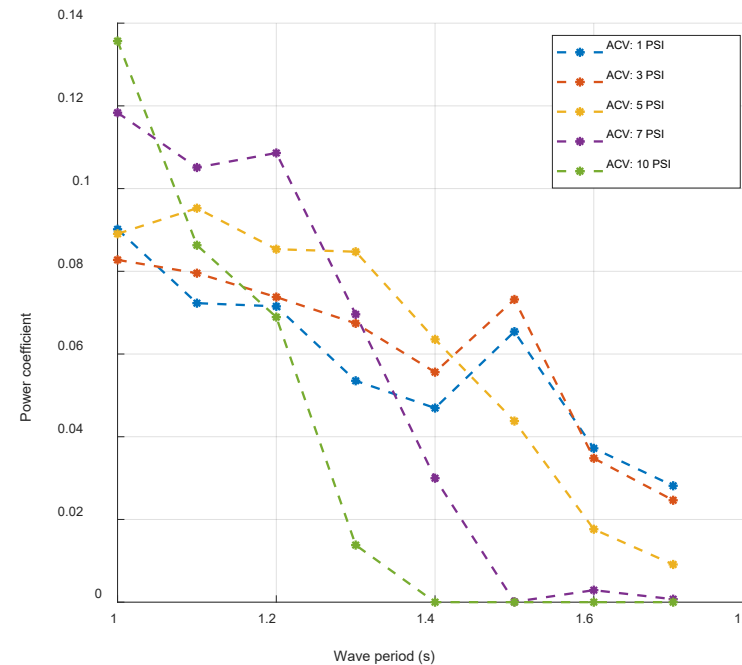
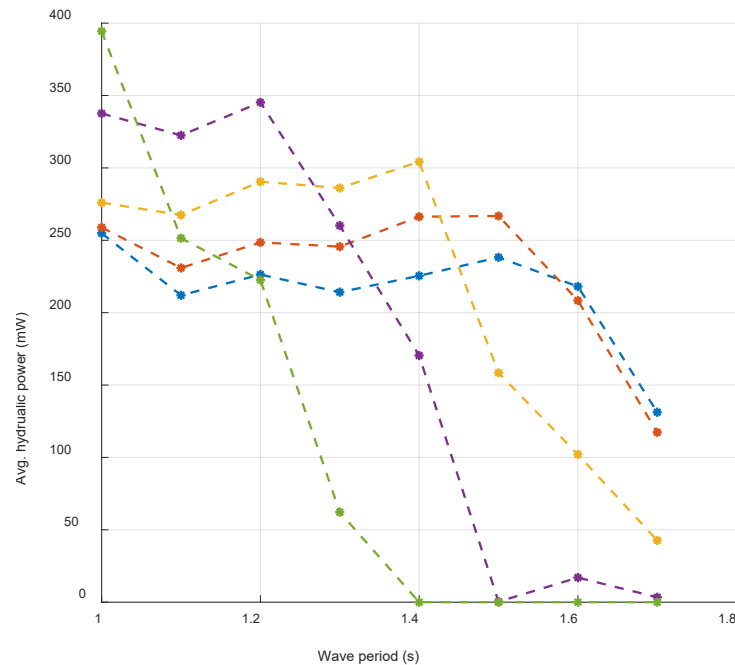
- Streamlined point-absorber buoy (Plunger 3)
- Adjustable check valve (ACV) to set hydraulic impedance
- Measured outflow rate and pressure  
→ Calculate hydraulic power



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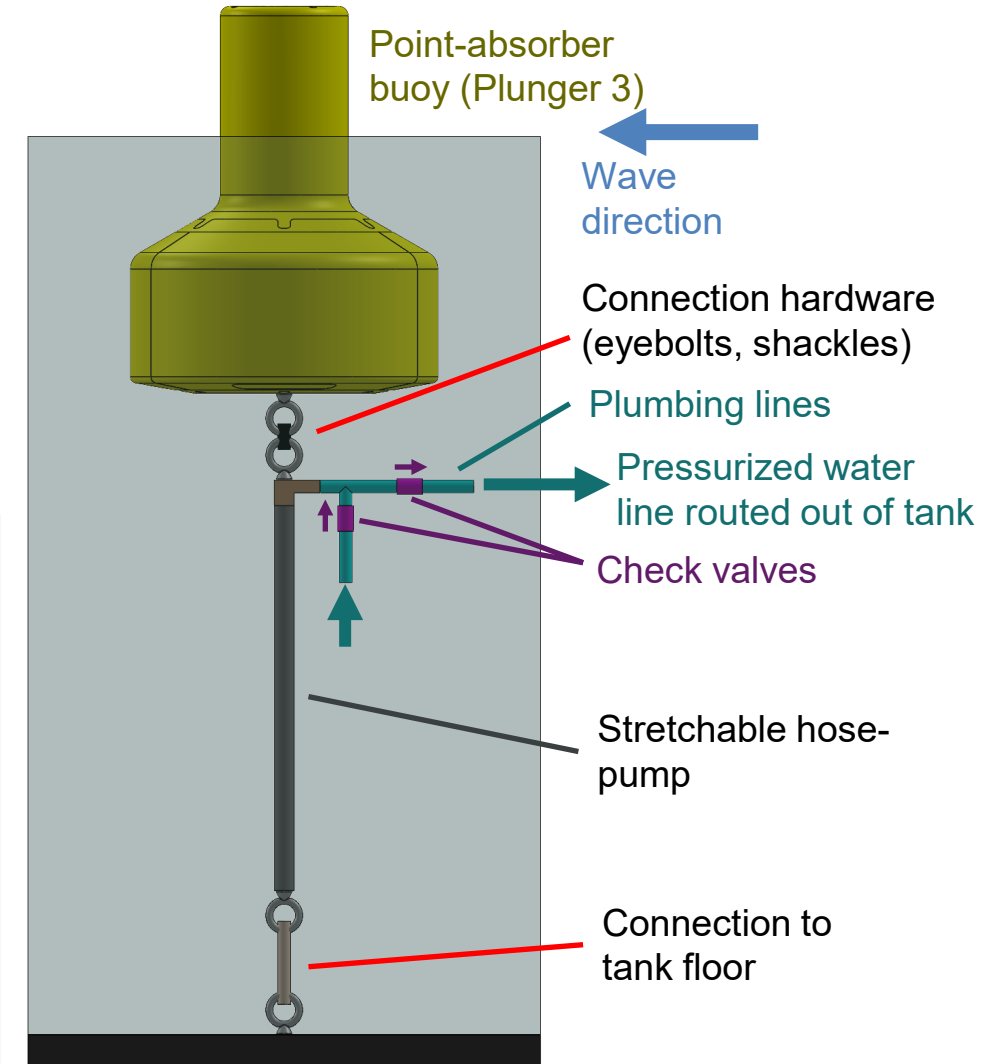
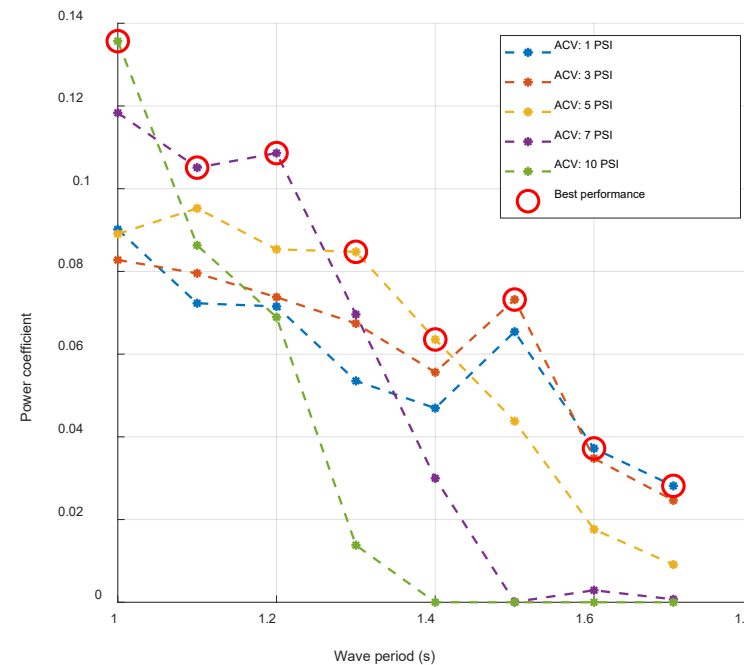
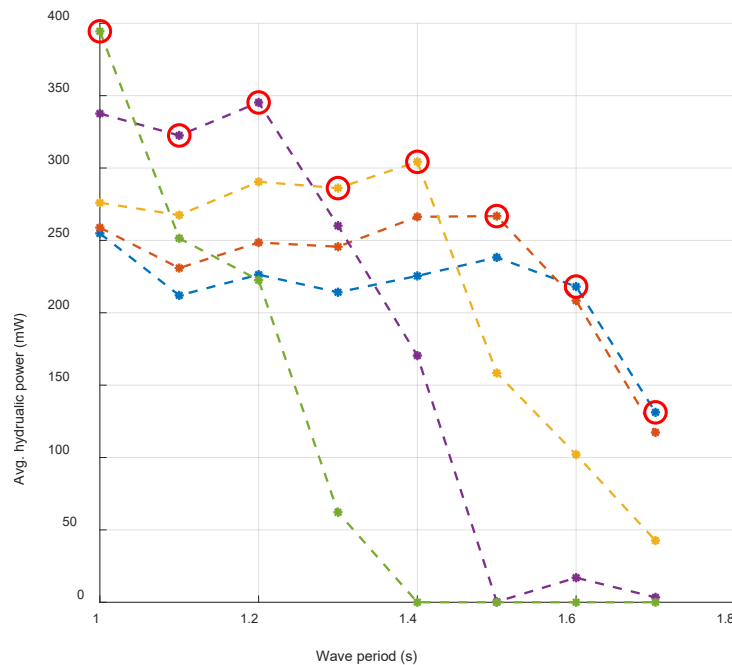


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→ Calculate hydraulic power

Each wave period has a best-choice for outflow hydraulic impedance setting to maximize hydraulic power



## Acknowledgements

- This research was supported by the North Carolina Renewable Ocean Energy Program.
- The authors would like to thank the Coastal Studies Institute for their generous technical support and the use of their facilities.
- We would also like to thank UMERc for providing travel support to attend UMERc+OREC 2025.



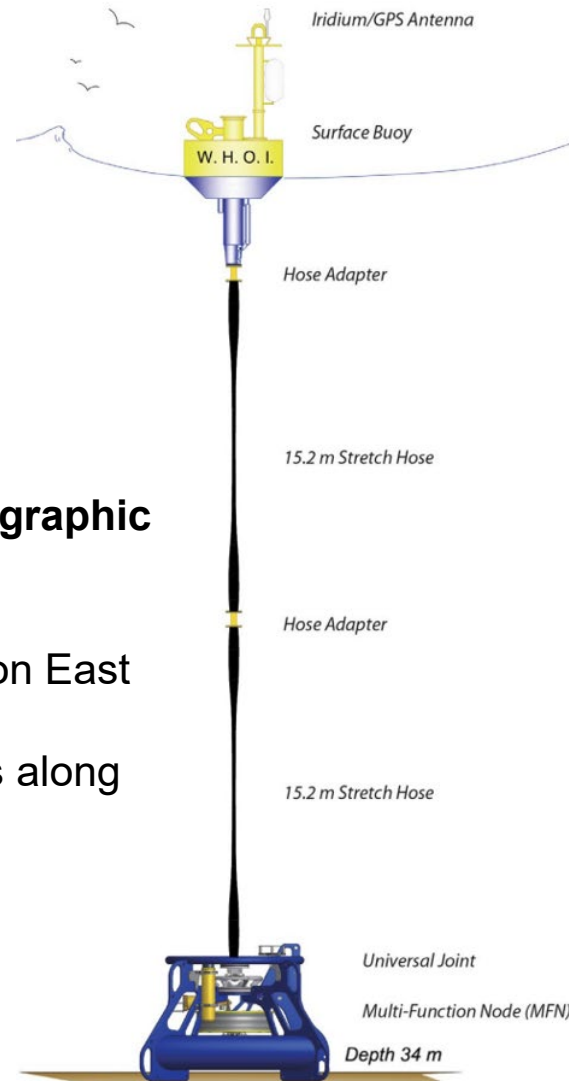
Thank you for your  
attention!

Questions?



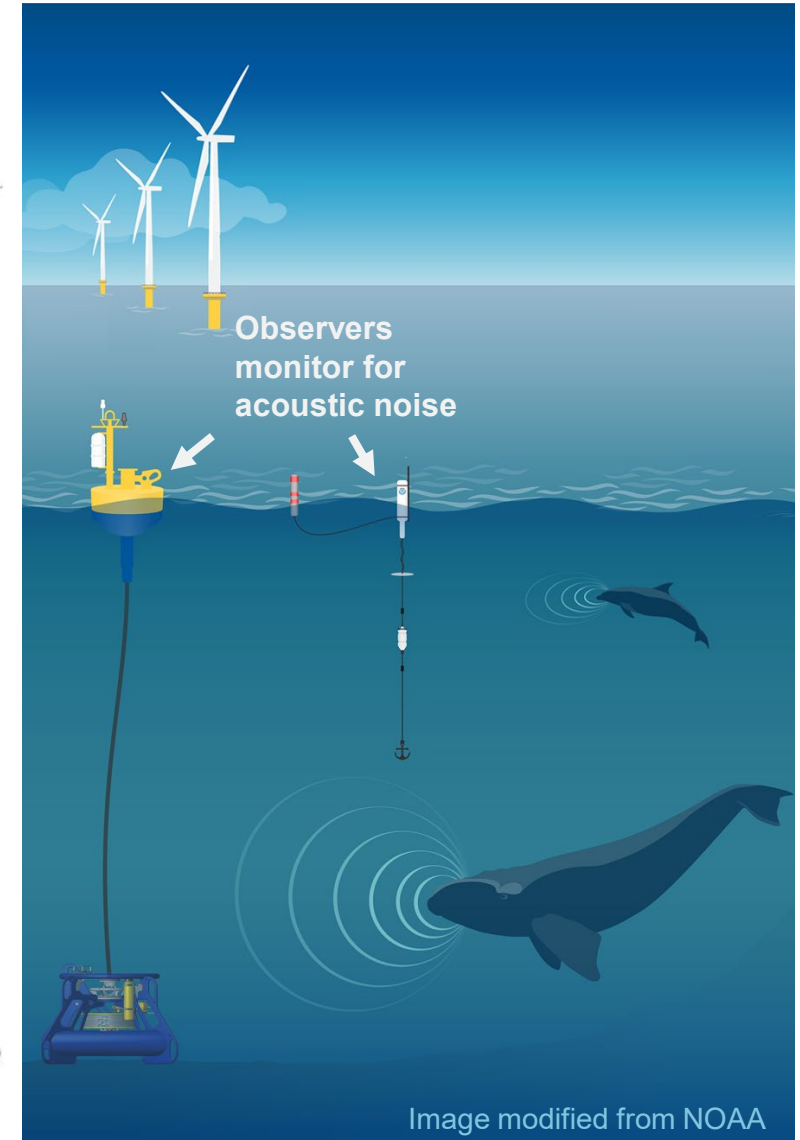
# Application case study: Passive acoustic monitoring of marine mammals

Stretch hoses on existing moorings can be adapted for powering ocean monitoring sensors



## Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute:

- Robots4Whales
- 10 moored buoys on East Coast
- 2 mobile observers along East Coast



# Application case study: Passive acoustic monitoring of marine mammals

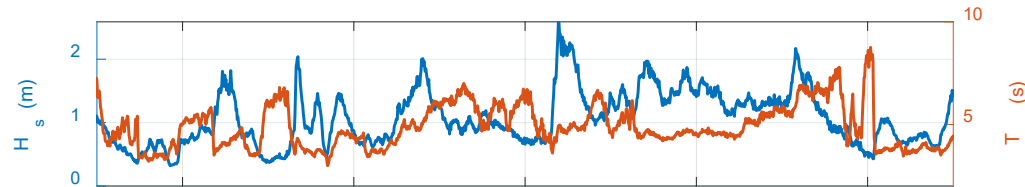
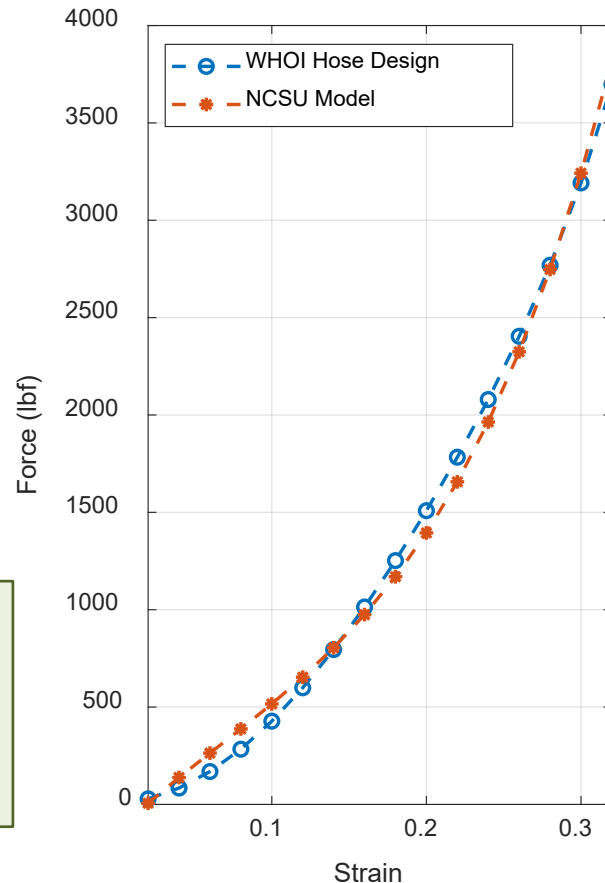
Stretch hoses on existing moorings can be adapted for powering ocean monitoring sensors

- Simulations of PAM buoy stretch hose WEC
  - Actual buoy system offshore of Norfolk, VA
  - Driven by historical sea-state data
  - **Capacity factor increases by 1.55x with adaptive stiffness**



Donald Peters  
WHOI  
Principal  
Engineer

Hose-pump and WHOI stretch hose reaction force vs. strain

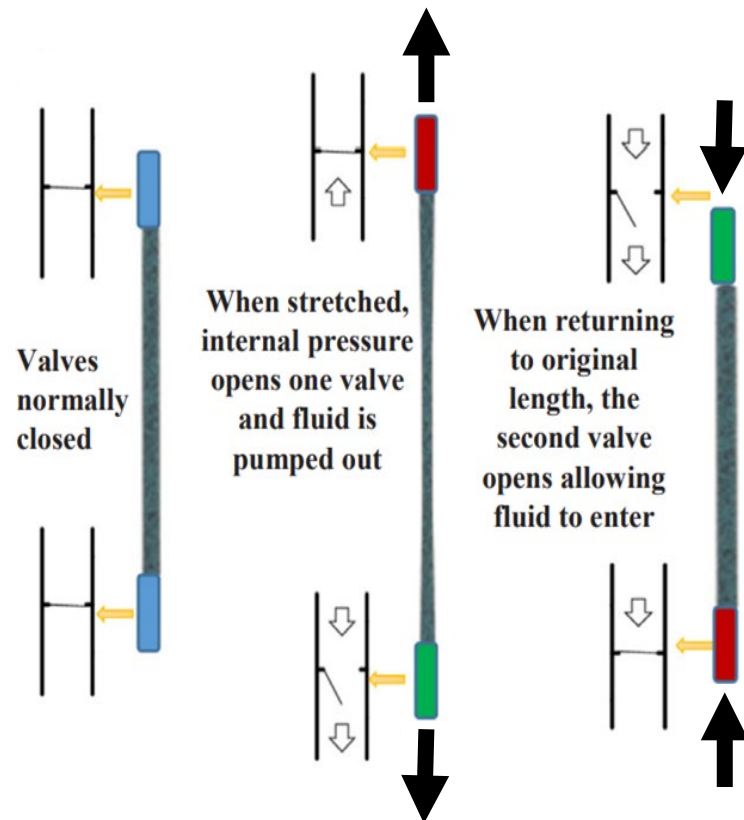


Result	Non-adaptive	Adaptive
Capacity factor	39.0%	<b>60.4%</b>
Avg. net annual production	332 kW-hr	<b>515 kW-hr</b>
Annual power requirement	16.2 kW-hr	

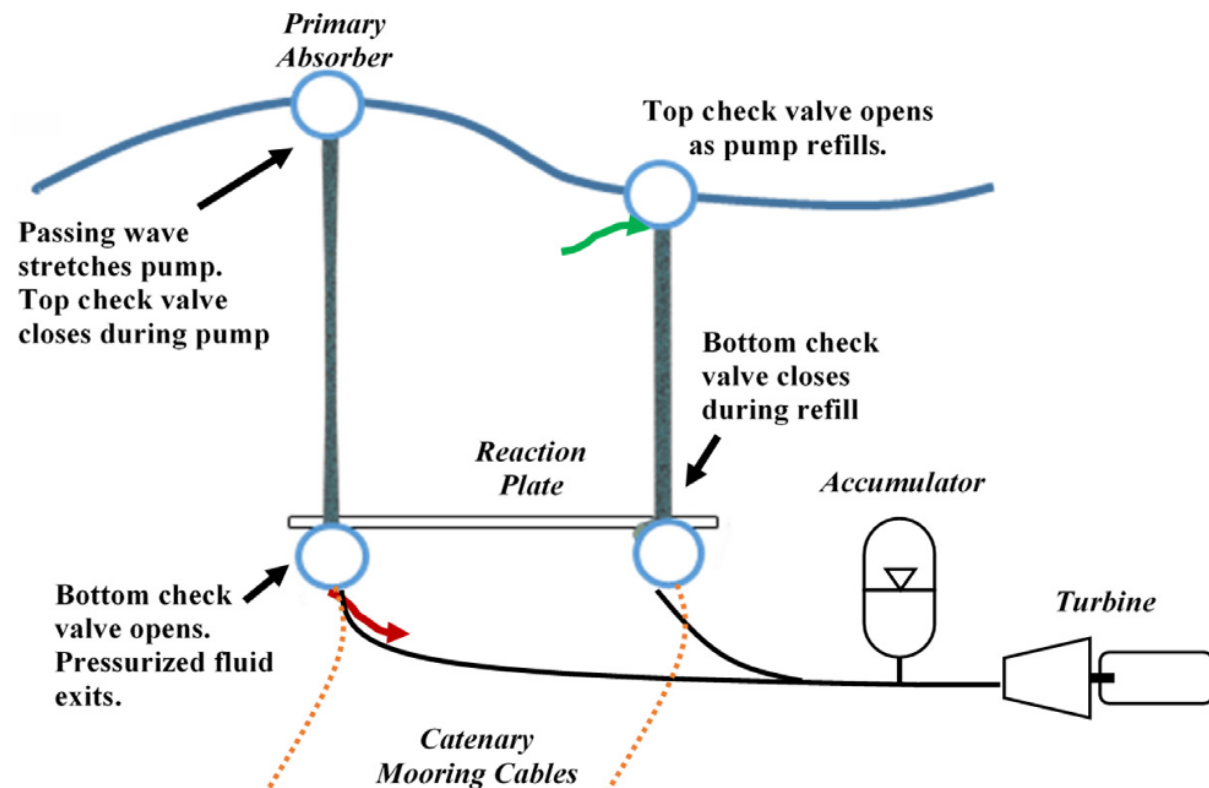
Simulation results for the WEC across 15.6 years of historical data from CDIP Station 147.

## Hydro turbine hose-pump system architecture

- Philen et al. 2018: Coupling an F2MC hose-pump output to a hydraulic turbine and generator can create electrical output
- Axial stretch from heaving buoy  $\rightarrow$  Internal volume decreases, pressurized water jets through turbine



Functionality of an F2MC pump [1]

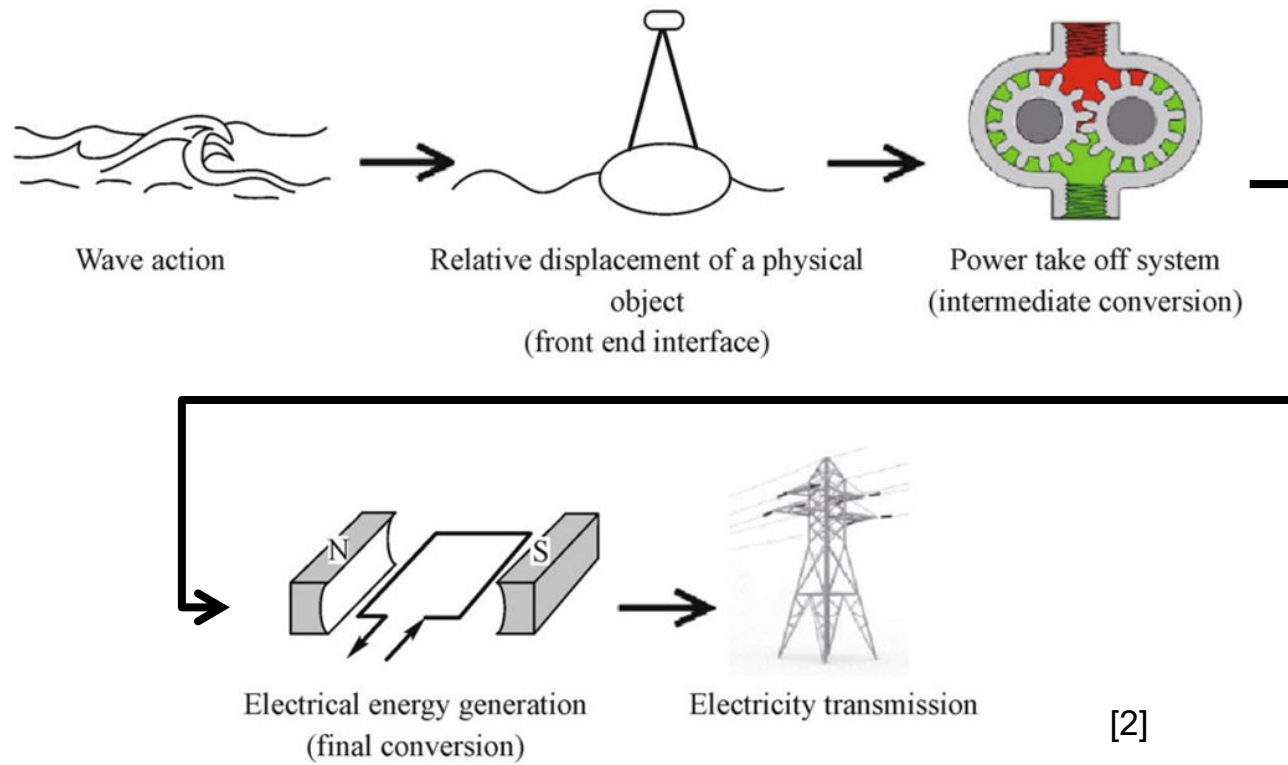


F2MC pumping WEC system [1]

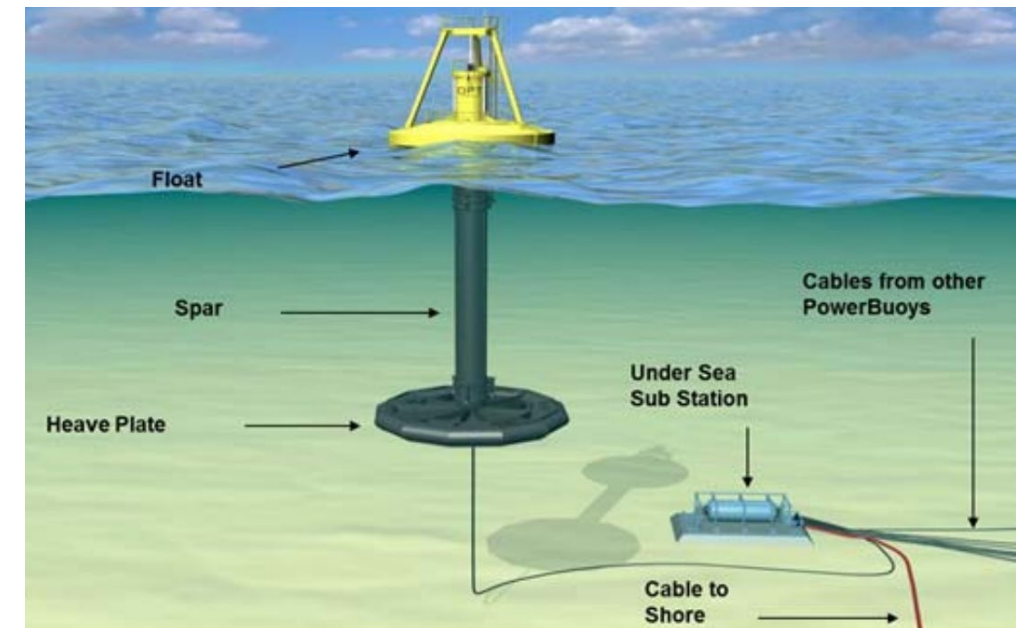


# Wave energy converter (WEC) design: Point absorbers

- **Wave energy converters (WECs):** Generate usable work from wave energy
- **Point absorbers:** Buoy heaves up and down due to ocean wave motion to drive a power take-off element (omnidirectional)



[2]

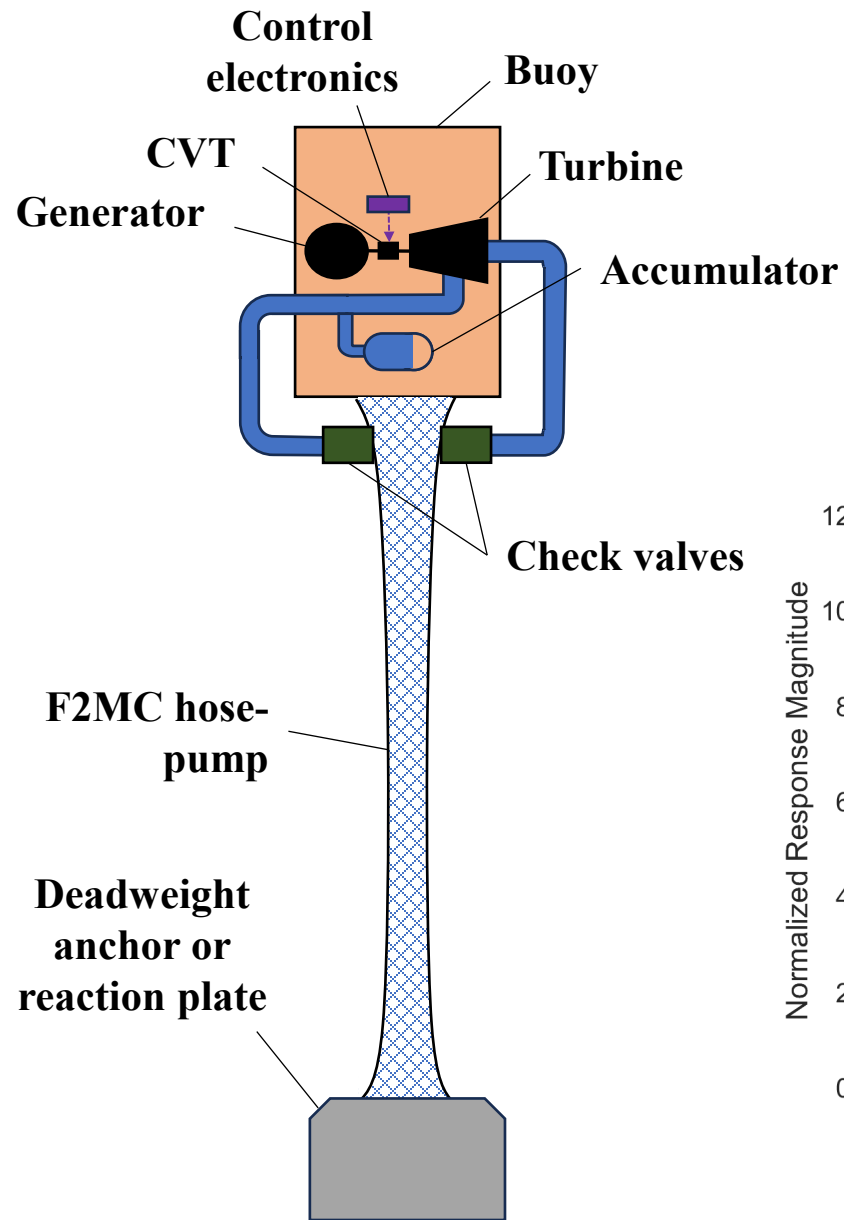


PowerBuoy point absorber [3]

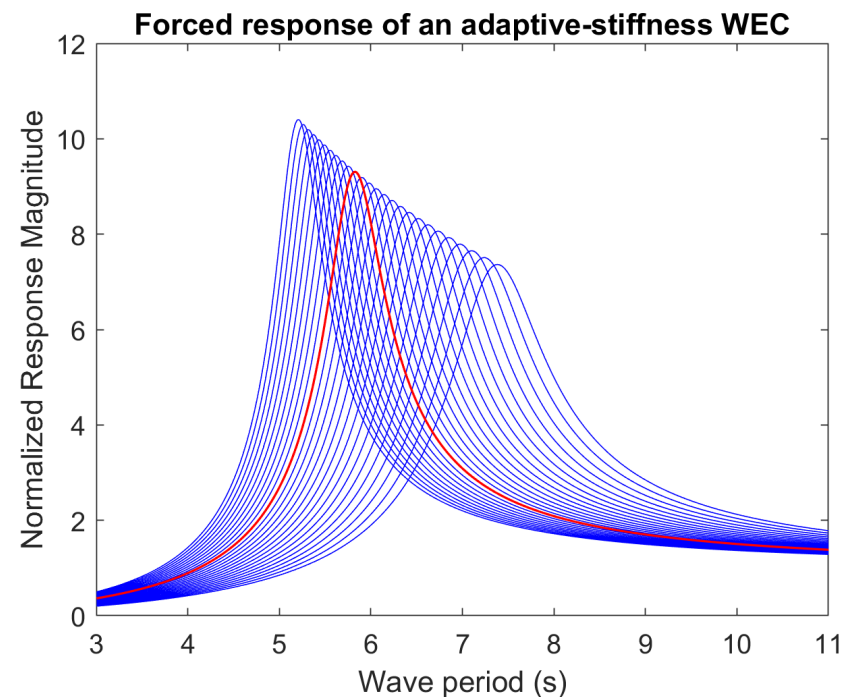
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# Proposed adaptive-stiffness hydraulic PTO system architecture



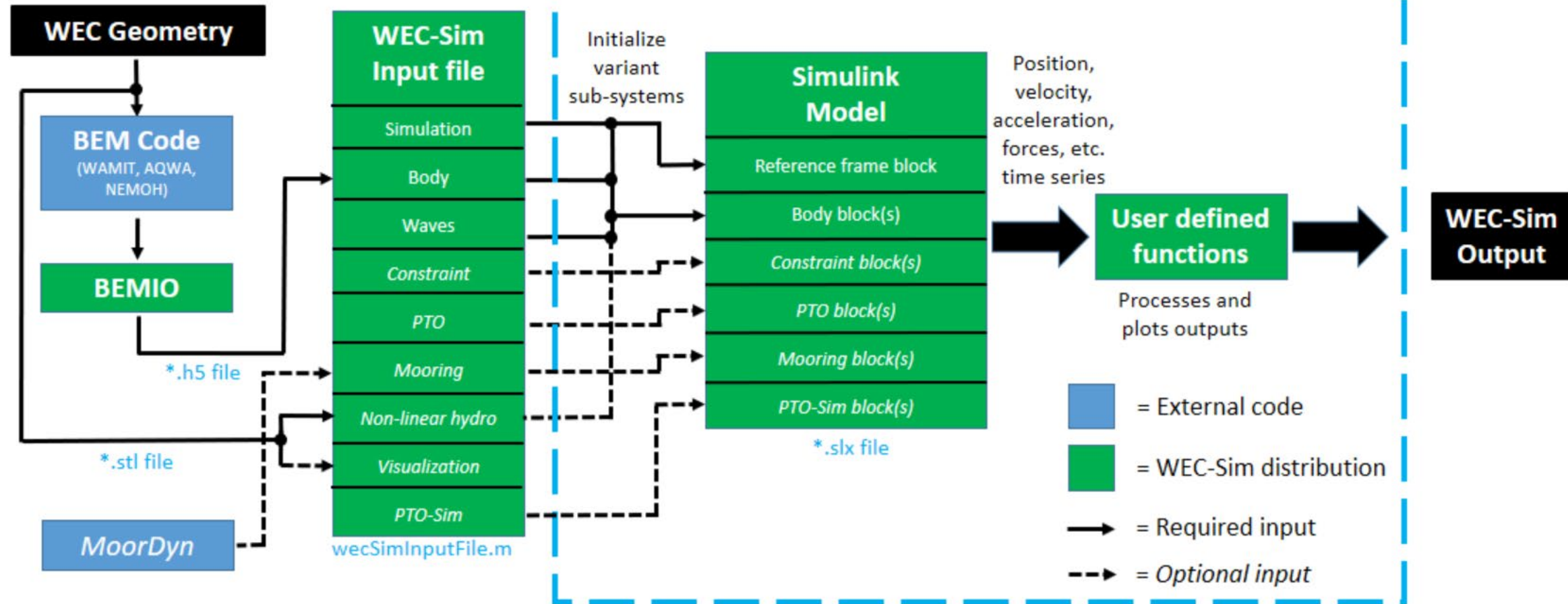
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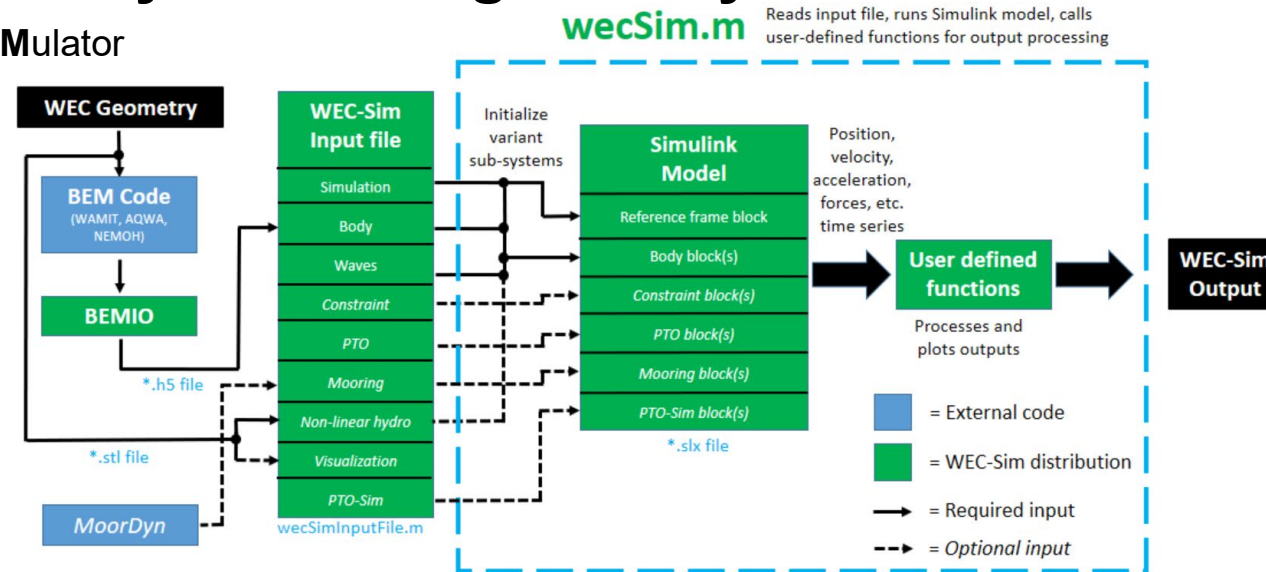
# Objective 1: WEC-Sim analysis of integrated system

Wave Energy Converter **SIM**ulator  
(NREL/Sandia)

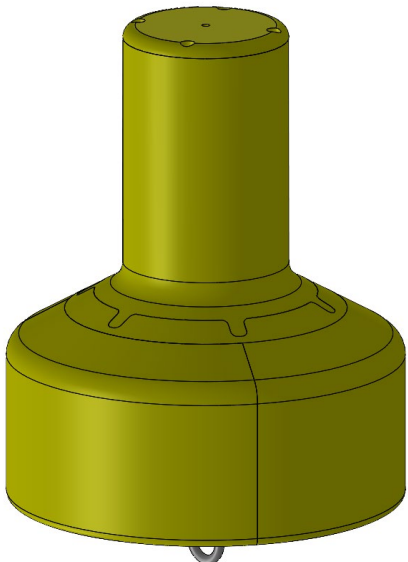


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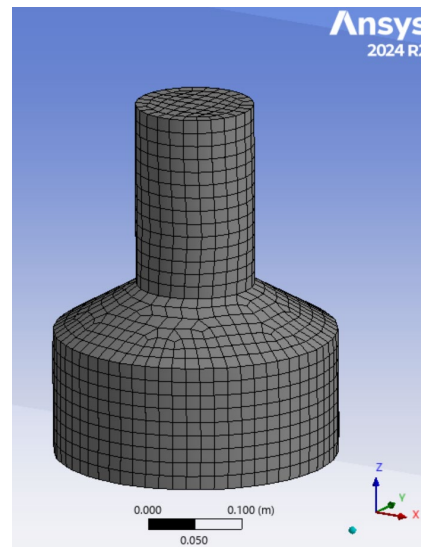
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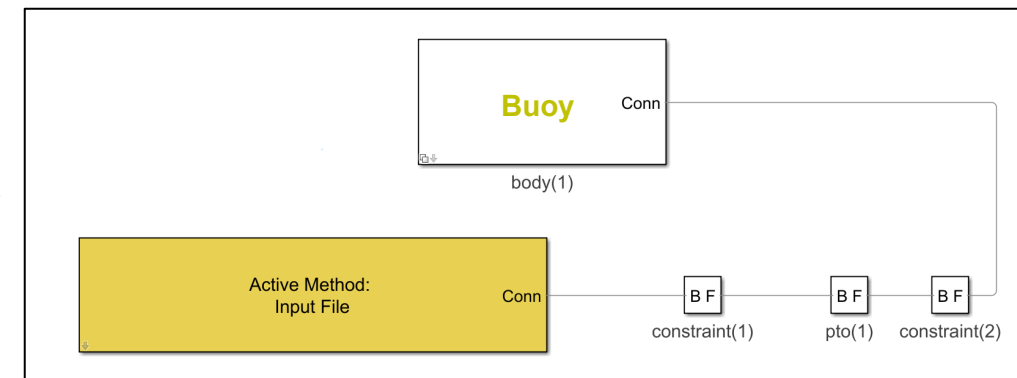
SolidWorks geometry:



Ansys Aqwa (BEM):



Simulink Model:

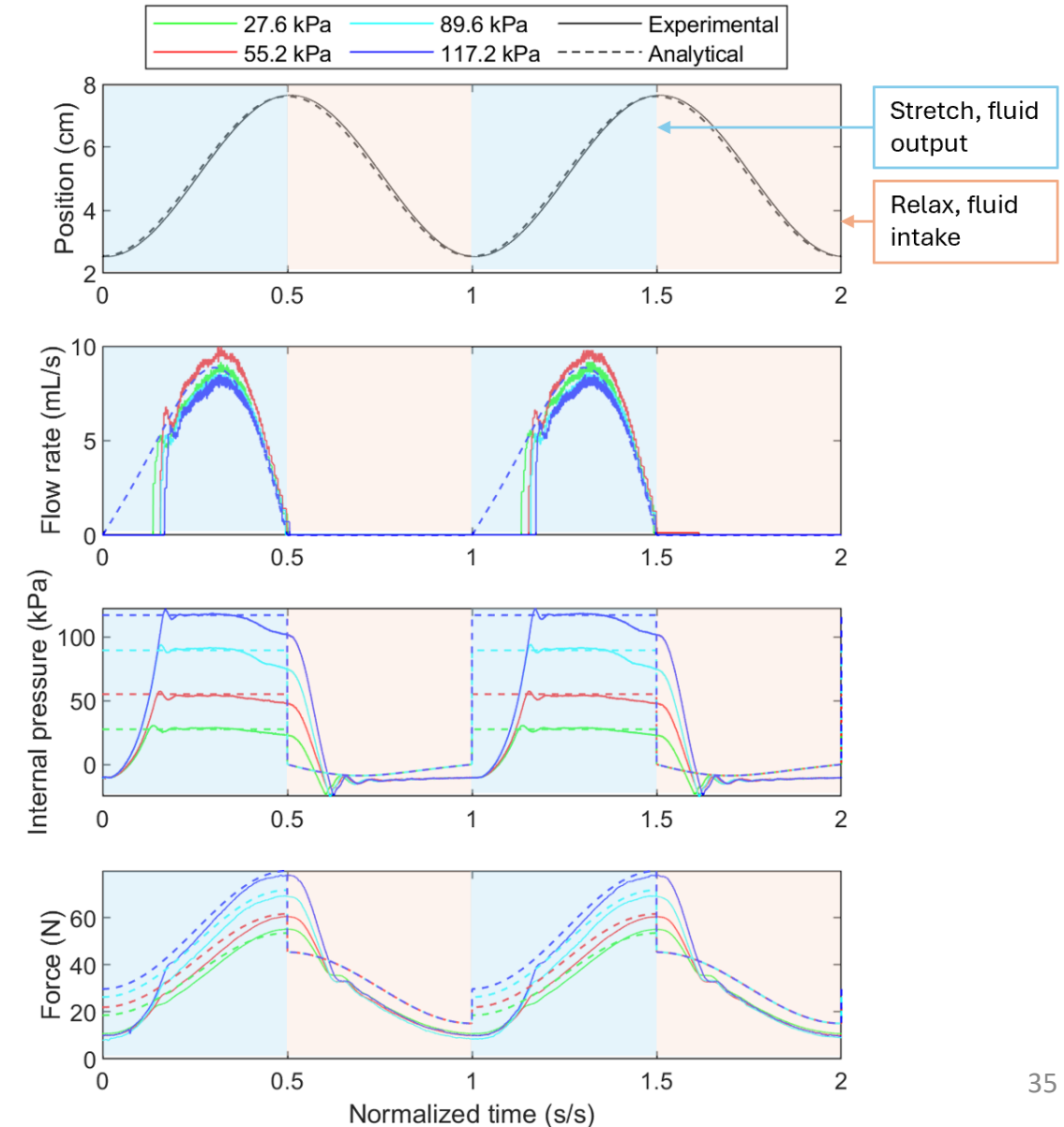
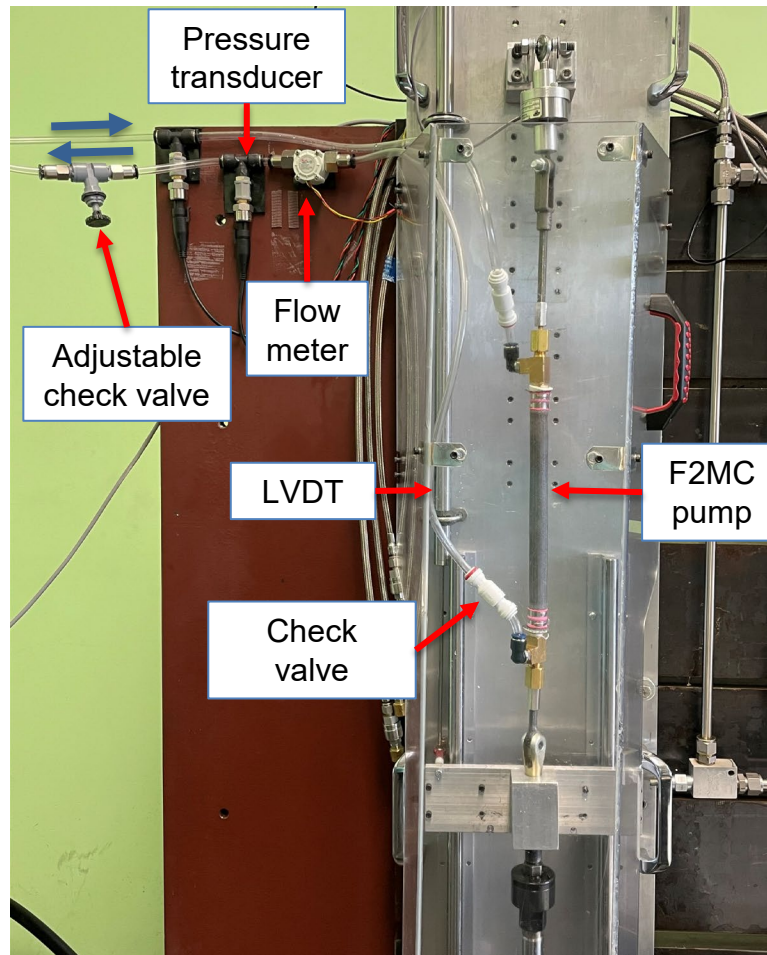




## Objective 2: Hose-pump testing - Stiffness control from pressure control



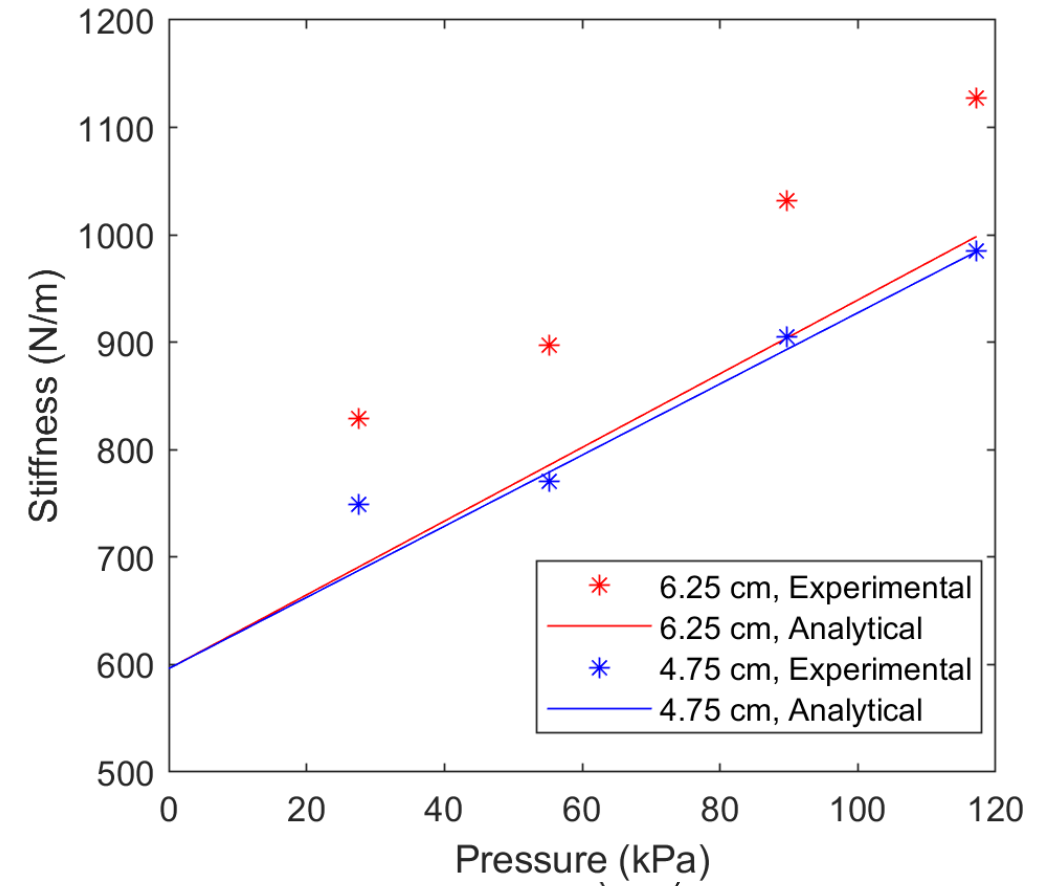
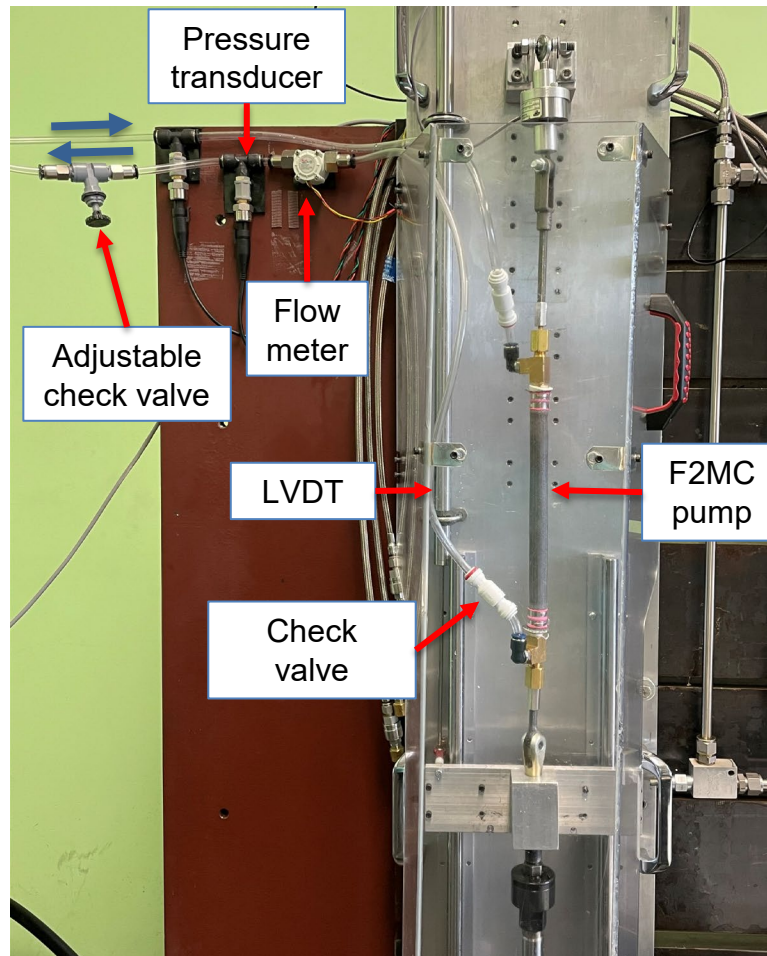
- Adjustable check valve on outlet
  - Direct control of internal pressure during stretch



## Objective 2: Hose-pump testing - Stiffness control from pressure control



- Adjustable check valve on outlet
  - Direct control of internal pressure during stretch





## Objective 3: First point absorber buoys (July, Oct. 2024)

Jul. 16-17, 2024

- First experiments with point-absorber buoy (Plunger 1)
- Issues with pressure regulator (used to apply hydraulic impedance)
- Buoy was undersized and could not adequately drive the hose-pump
- Failed to show benefits of adaptive stiffness

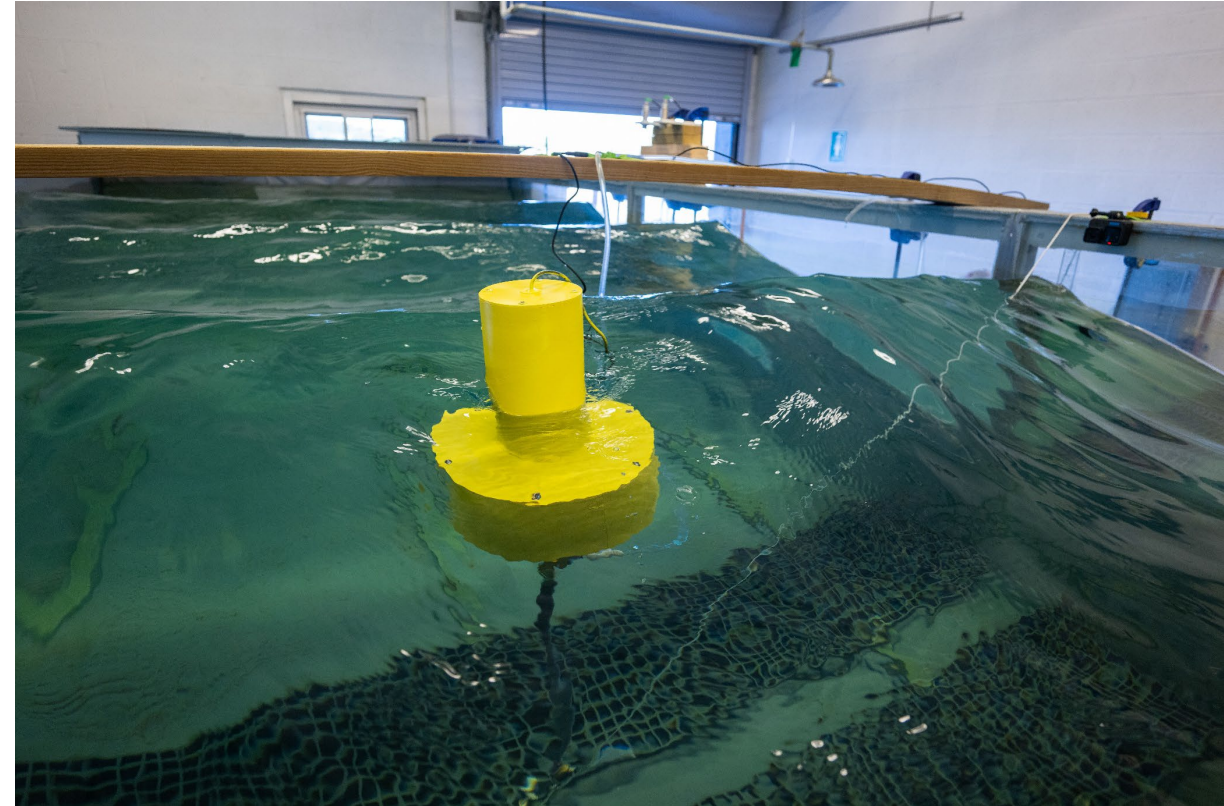
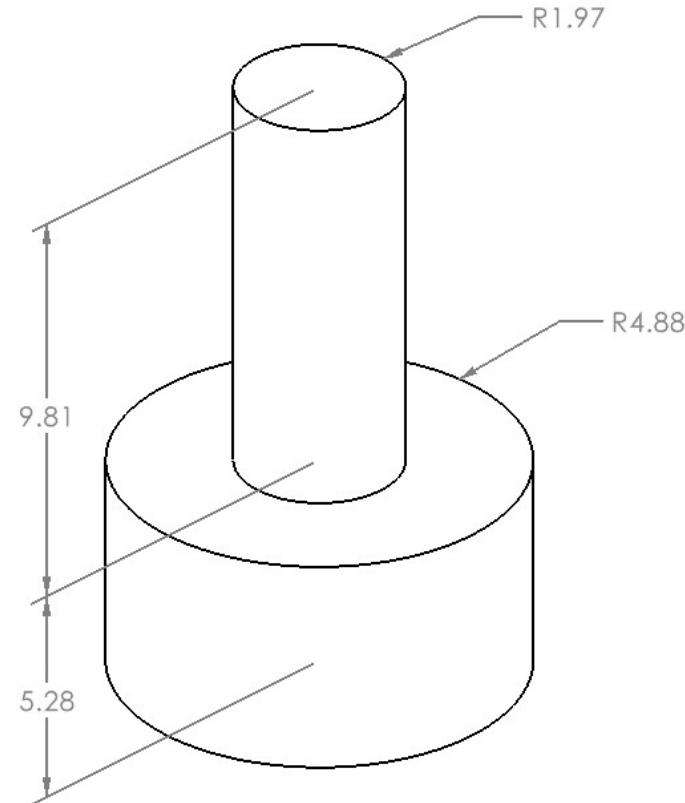


Photo credit: John McCord (CSI)

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Plunger 1:

- Mass: 7.5 kg (buoy + PTO)
- $K_{hydro} = 77.2 \text{ N/m}$
- $K_{PTO} = 112 \text{ N/m}$
- $T_n = 1.25 \text{ s}$
- Max. buoyancy force: 82.7 N

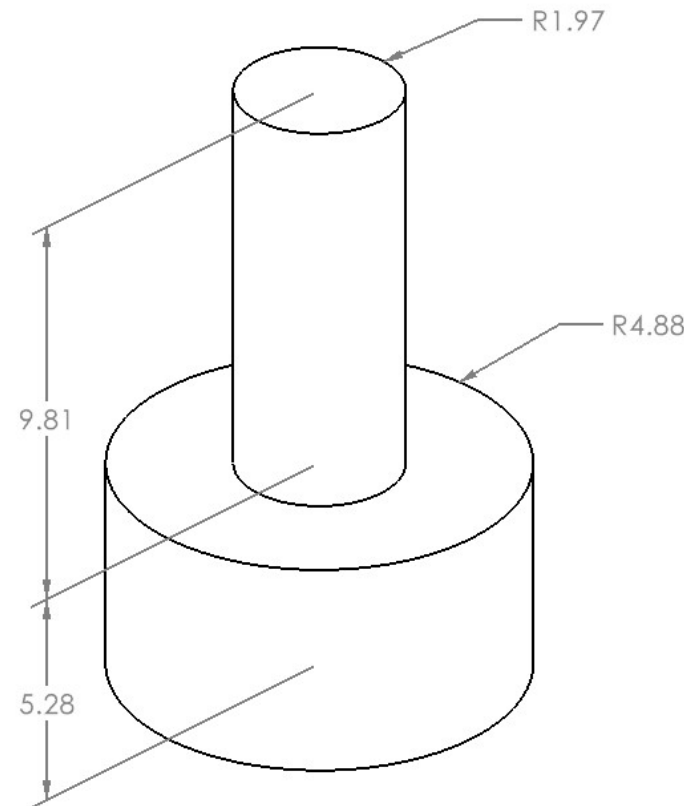
## Objective 3: First point absorber buoys (July, Oct. 2024)

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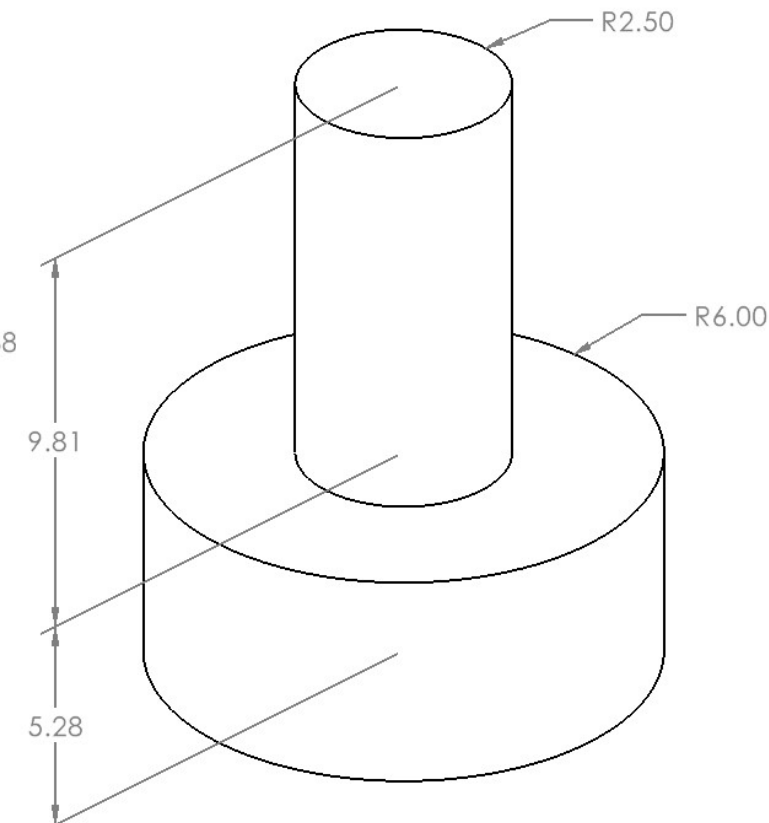
### Oct. 9-11, 2024

- Point-absorber buoy was scaled up (Plunger 2)
- Used an adjustable check valve (ACV)
- Chosen ACV was too small and over-throttled the flow
- Failed to show benefits of adaptive stiffness



#### Plunger 1:

- Mass: 7.5 kg (buoy + PTO)
- $K_{hydro} = 77.2 \text{ N/m}$
- $K_{PTO} = 112 \text{ N/m}$
- $T_n = 1.25 \text{ s}$
- Max. buoyancy force: 82.7 N



#### Plunger 2:

- Mass: 11.2 kg (buoy + PTO)
- $K_{hydro} = 124.6 \text{ N/m}$
- $K_{PTO} = 112 \text{ N/m}$
- $T_n = 1.36 \text{ s}$
- Max. buoyancy force: 126.9 N



## Sidebar: What's the deal with the shape of that buoy?

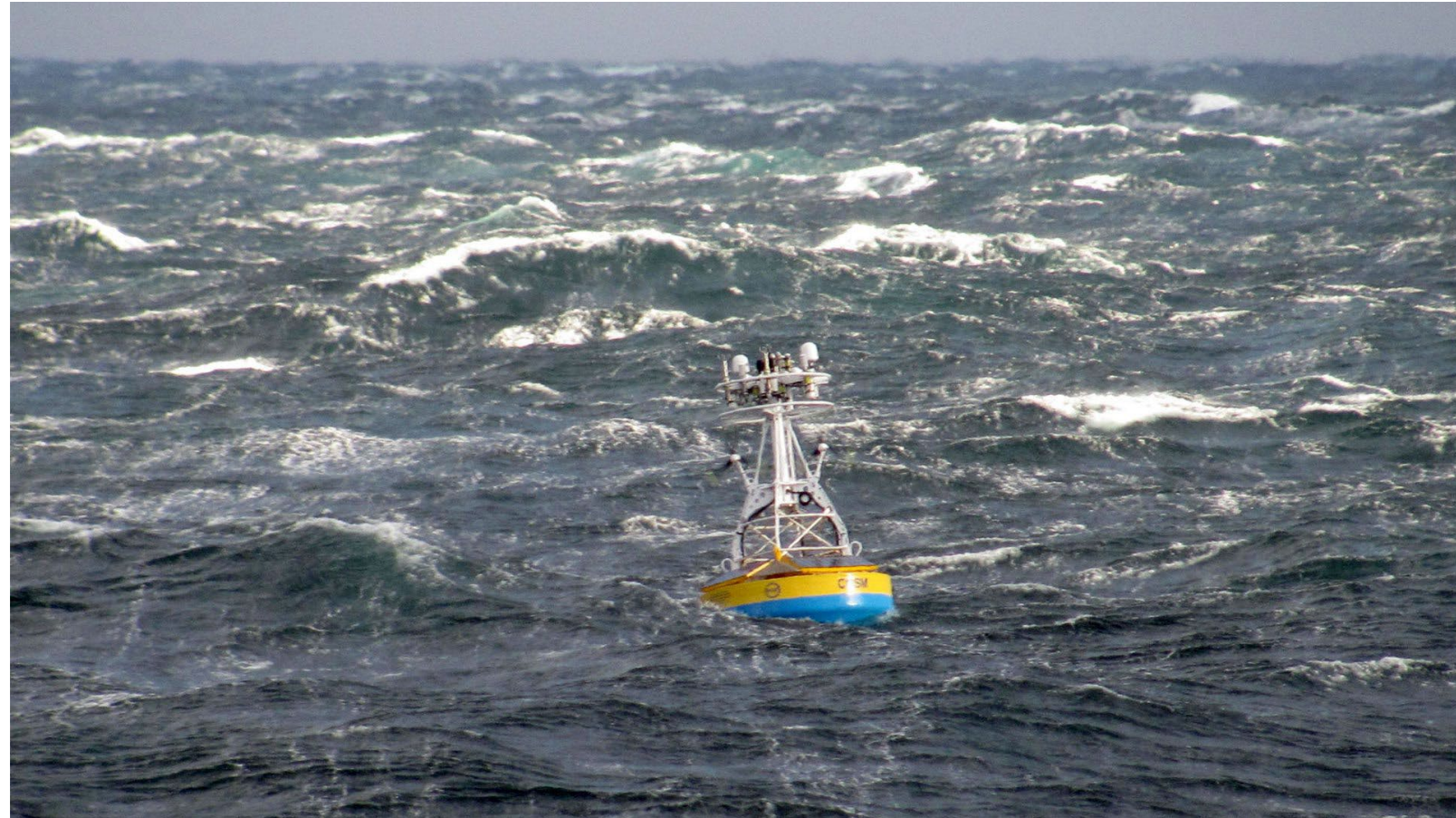
Typical buoys have:

- Large cross-sectional area at waterline
- Ballast mass low on body

Hydrostatic stiffness:

$$K_{hydro} = \rho g A$$

→ Larger CSA causes the buoy to move stiffer w.r.t the relative wave motion



In rough water, buoy more closely follows water surface → less likely to have waves crest over the buoy.

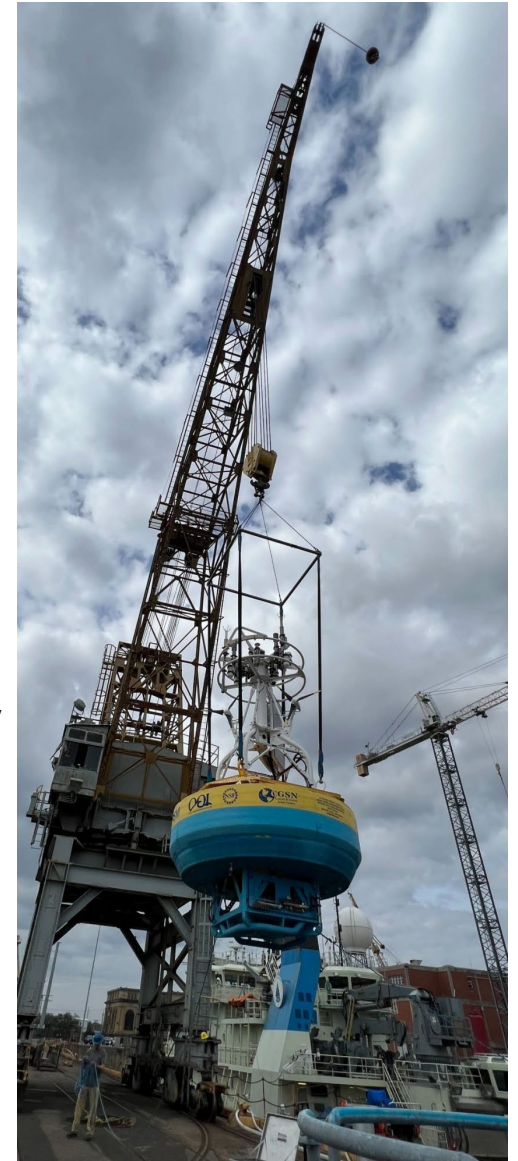
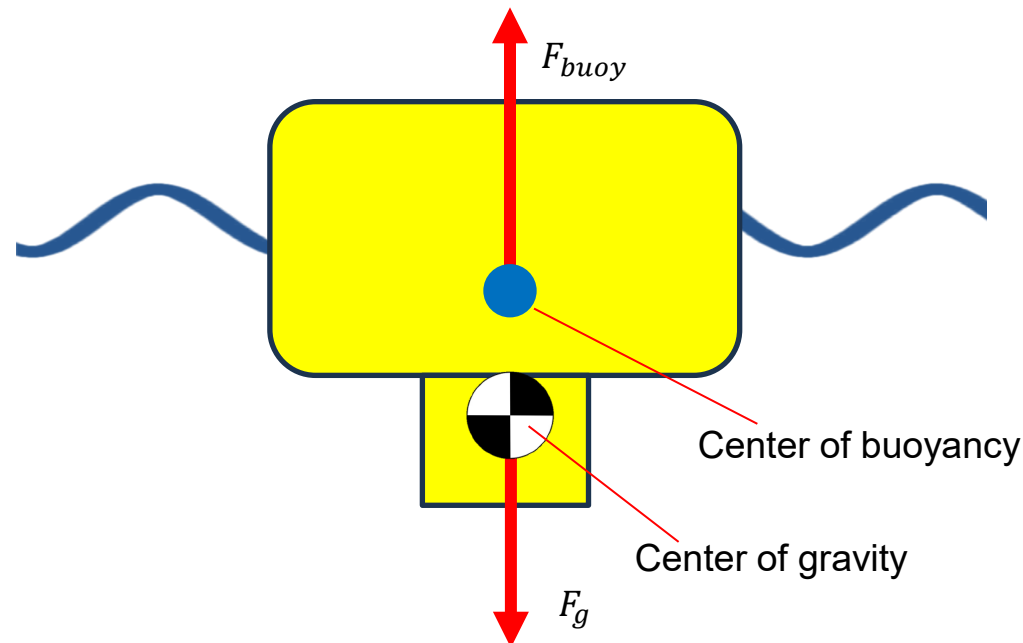
<https://www.whoi.edu/press-room/news-release/ocean-observatories-initiatives-pioneer-array-relocating-to-southern-mid-atlantic-bight/>

## Sidebar: What's the deal with the shape of that buoy?

Typical buoys have:

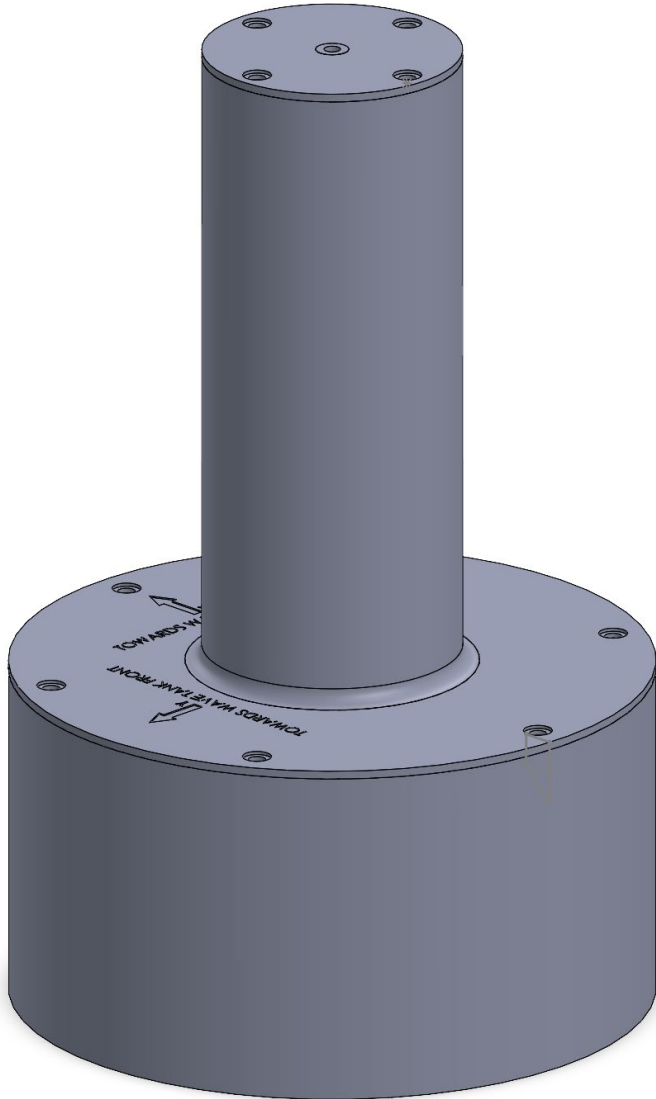
- Large cross-sectional area at waterline
- Ballast mass low on body

Low ballast mass moves CG far below buoyancy center  
→ Buoy stays upright, even in heavy storm conditions





## Sidebar: What's the deal with the shape of that buoy?

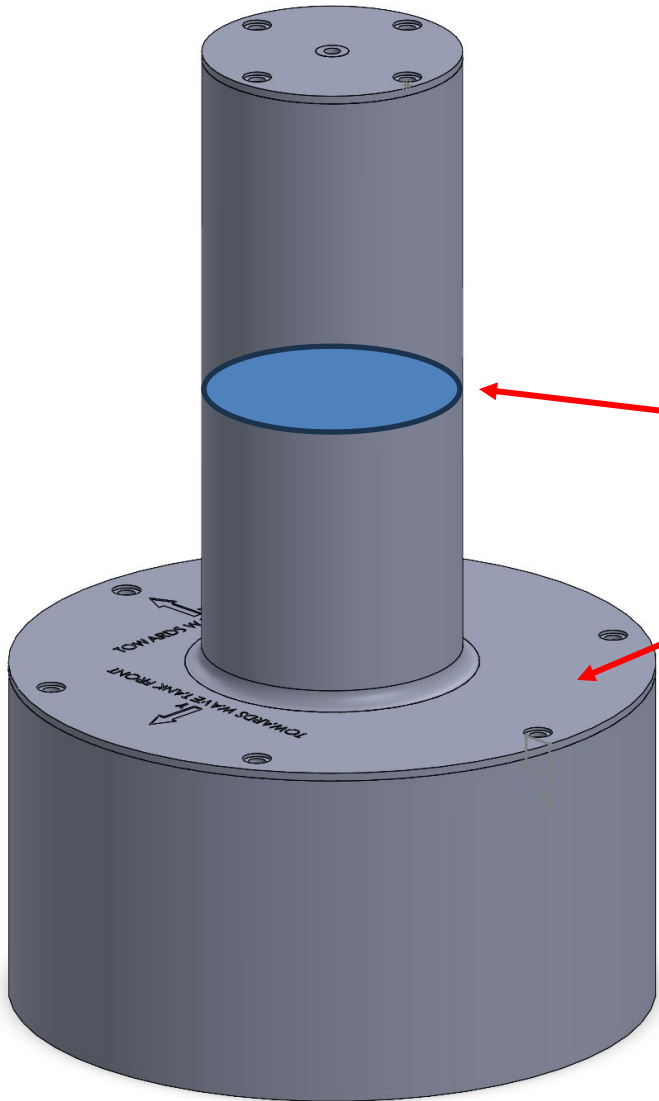


For our point-absorber WEC, we want:

- A buoy that stays upright  
→ Keep a low CG
  - A buoy that has a natural period longer than the maximum expected environmental wave period
    - The hose-pump PTO can only ever add stiffness
    - By adding stiffness, we shorten the overall WEC's natural period
    - Control the internal pressure of the PTO to add a certain amount of stiffness to target the instantaneous sea-state period
- We need a low buoyancy stiffness



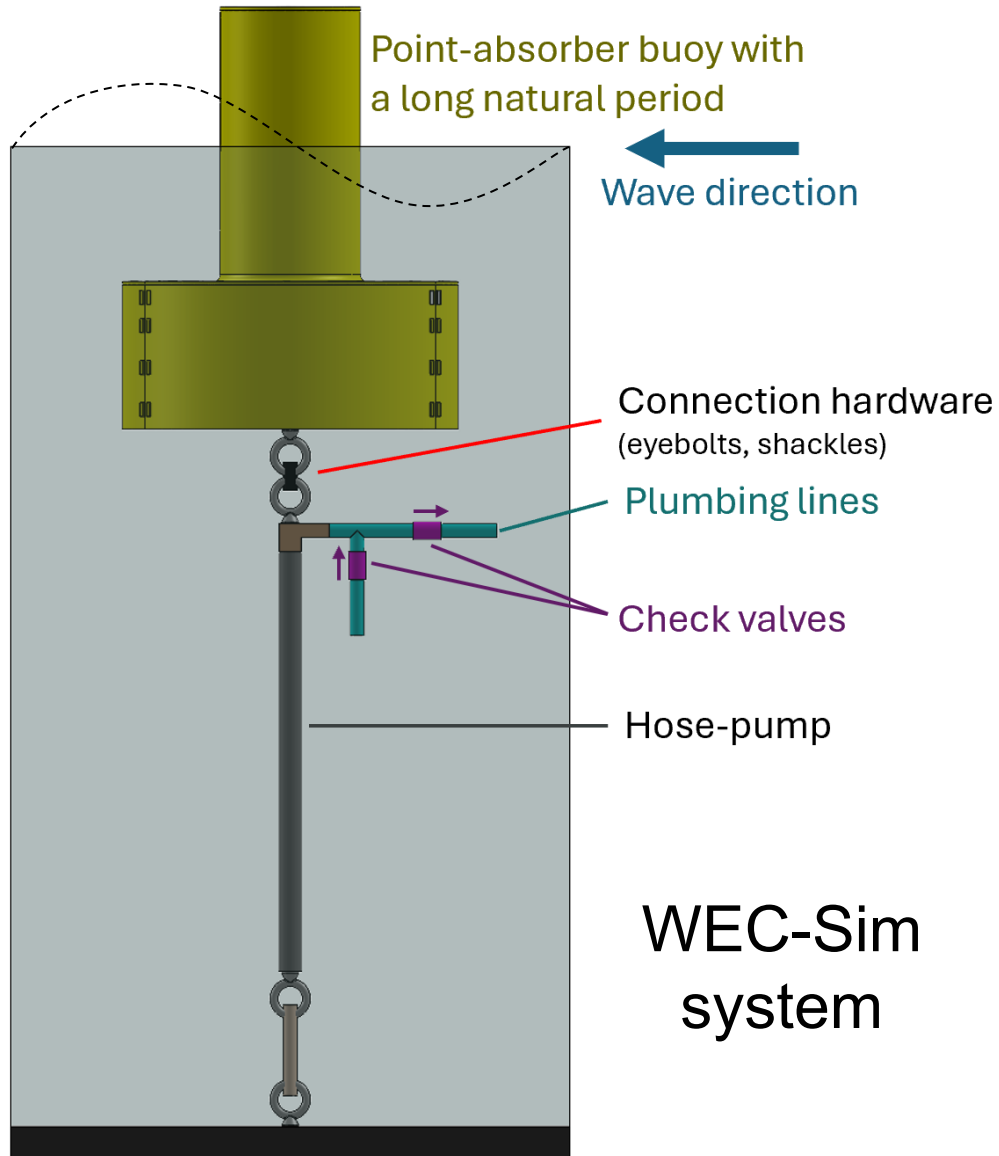
## Sidebar: What's the deal with the shape of that buoy?



Result:

- Low CSA at the waterline to minimize buoyancy stiffness
- A large sub-sea compartment for ballast weight

## Case study: Small-scale turbine-gearing-generator system driven by a buoy

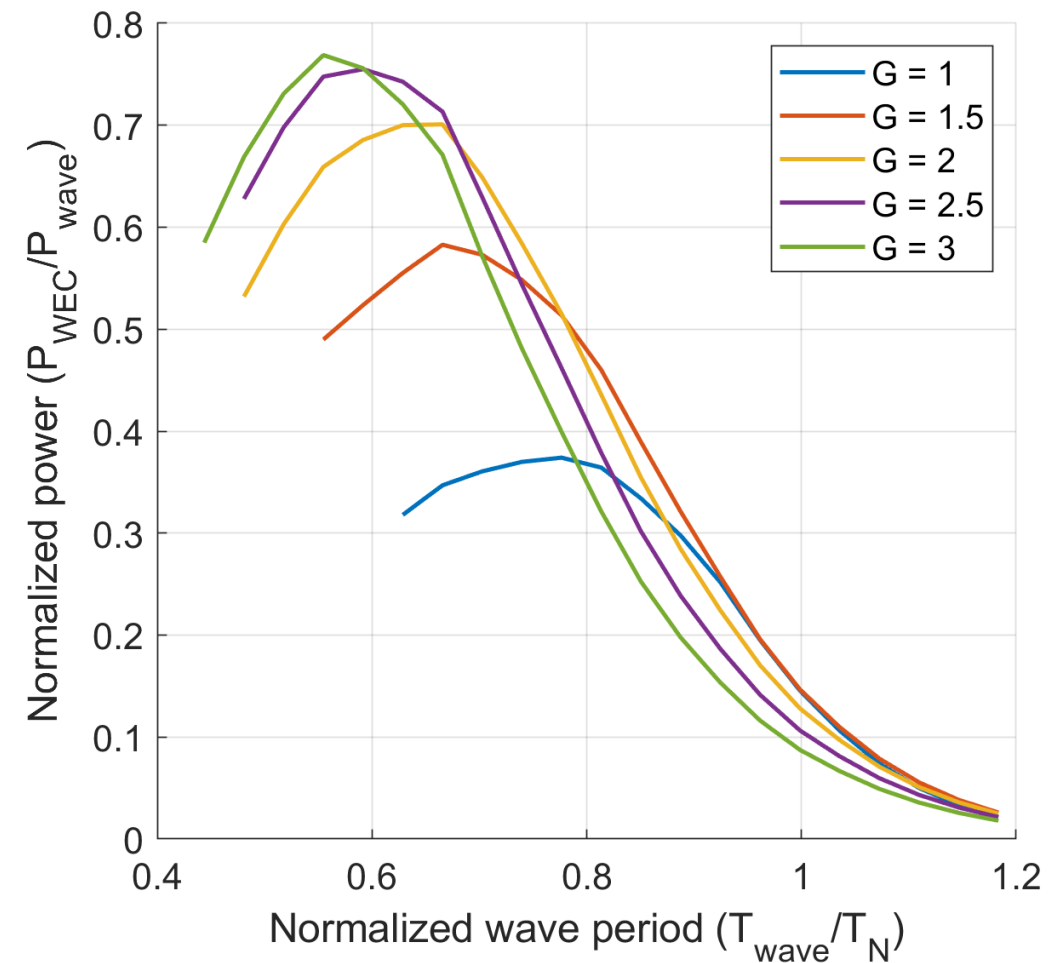
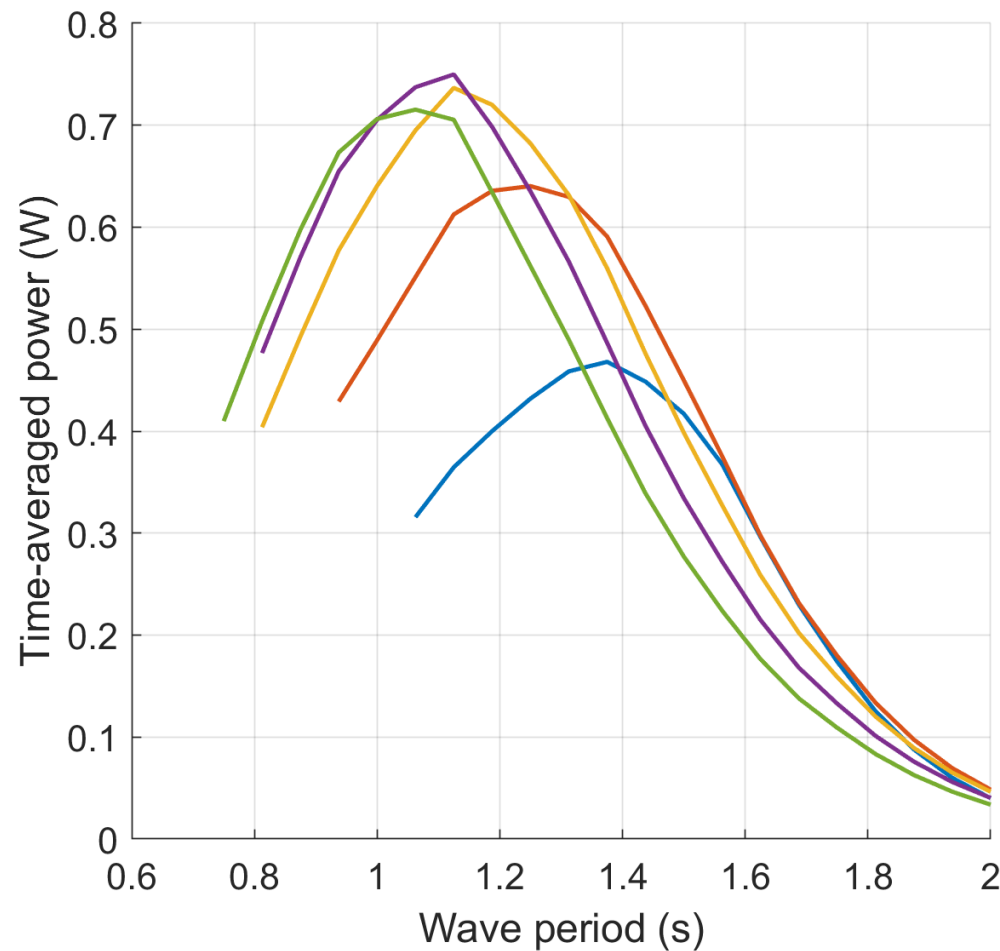


$$\mathbf{k} = C_{p1} \frac{k_t k_e}{D^2 R} \mathbf{G}^2 \left( \frac{3 \left( 1 + \frac{x}{l_u} \right)^2}{\tan^2(a_u)} - \frac{1}{\sin^2(a_u)} \right) \dot{x} + k_{tube}$$

Stiffness increases with gear ratio, natural period decreases

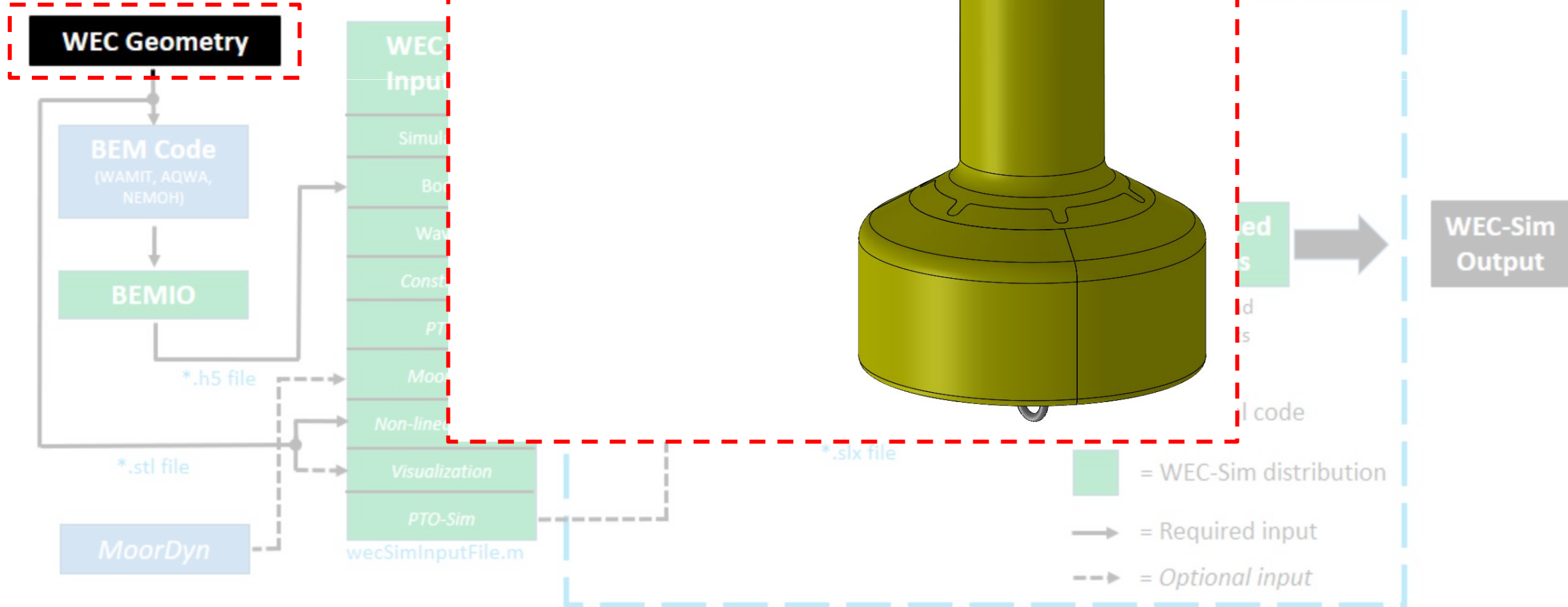
Parameter	Value
$k_t$	0.0108 Nm/A
$k_e$	890 rpm/V
$R$	2.292 ohm
$D$	1 cm <sup>3</sup> /rev

## Case study: Small-scale turbine-gearing-generator system driven by a buoy



- Resonant period controllable via gear ratio
- Output power from a particular driving wave depends on gear ratio

- Buoy geometry modeled in Solidworks



## Objective 1: WEC-Sim Simulink model of integrated system

