

# Modeling and Design of an Adaptive Stiffness Wave Energy Converter

Carson McGuire, Olivia Mabe, and Dr. Matthew Bryant

Aug. 14, 2025

UMERC+OREC 2025

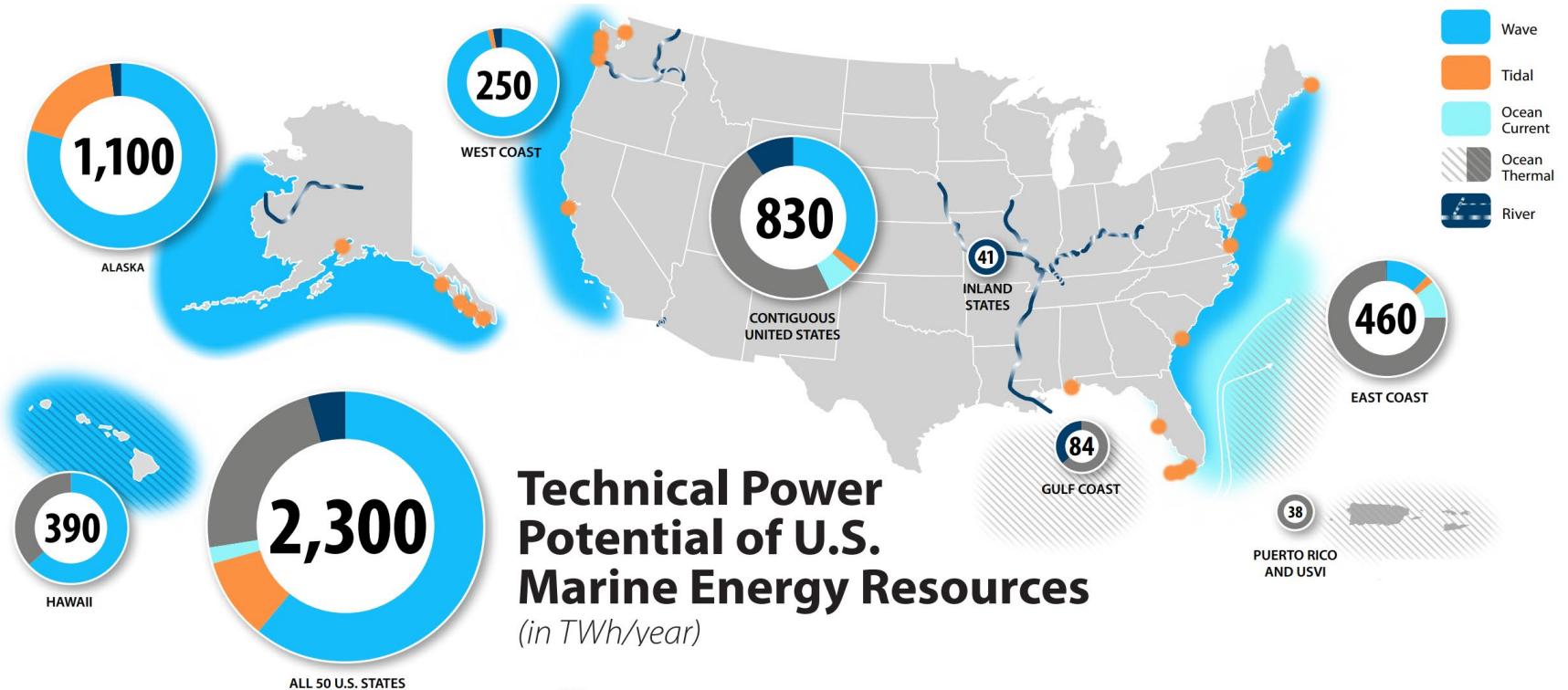


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# Ocean waves offer a substantial source of renewable energy

- 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

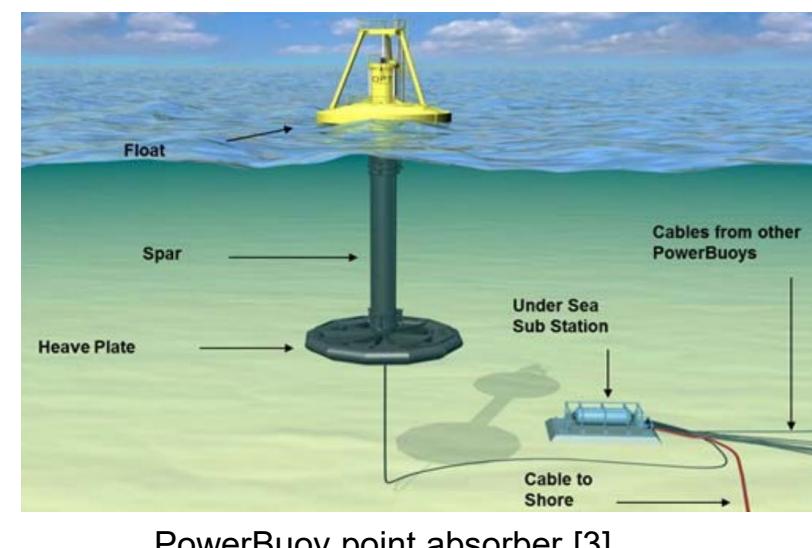
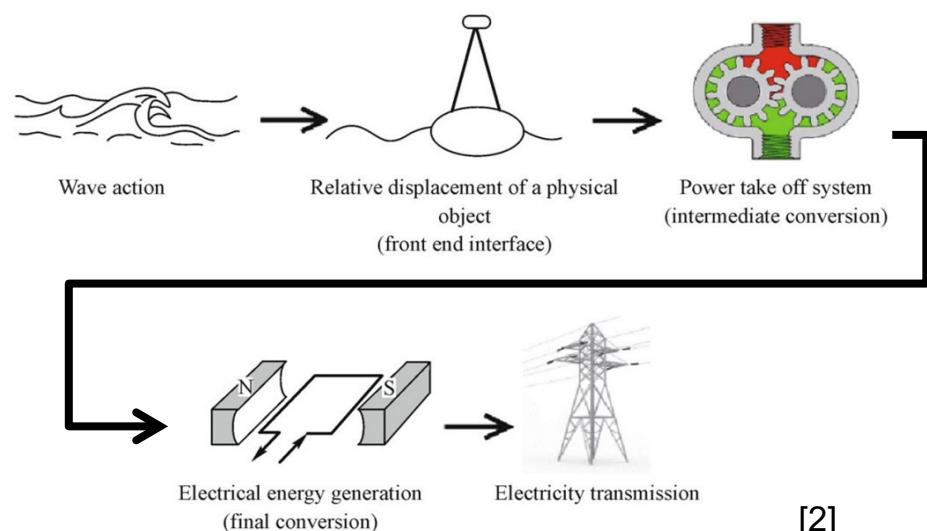


National Renewable Energy Laboratory overview of U.S. marine energy resource [1]

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- Wave power availability in the US: 1400 TWh/yr [1]
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- Underutilized source of renewable energy

- **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] 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.

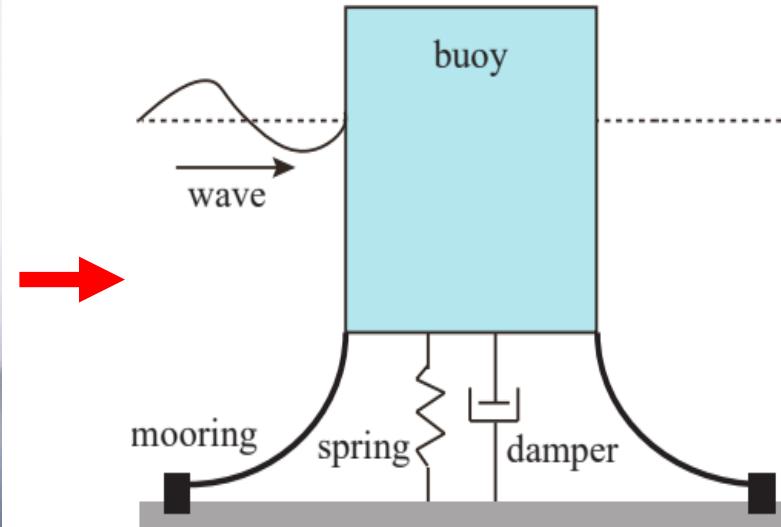
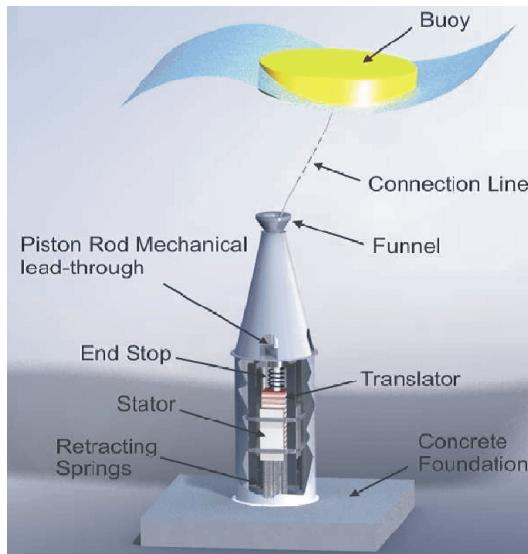
[3] M. Mekhiche and K. Edwards, "Ocean Power Technologies PowerBuoy: System-Level Design, Development and Validation Methodology," in Proc. 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Energy Tech. Symposium, Seattle, WA, USA, Apr. 15-18, 2014. [Online].

Available: <http://hdl.handle.net/10919/49232>

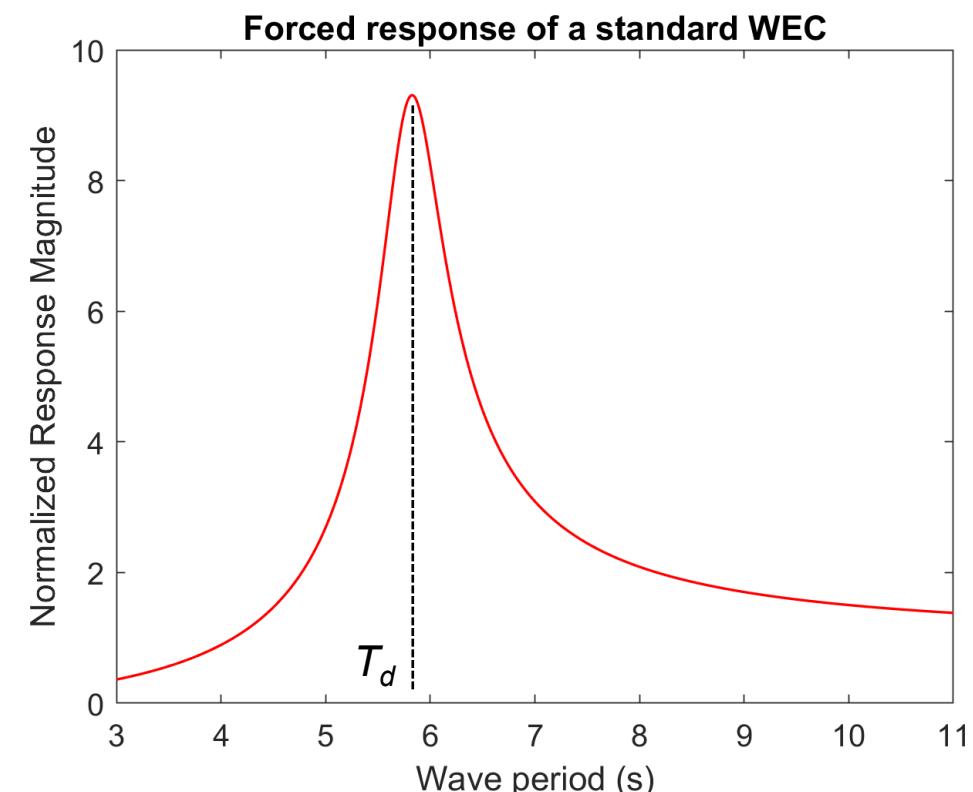
# A fundamental limitation of point absorbers: narrowband response

- 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

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

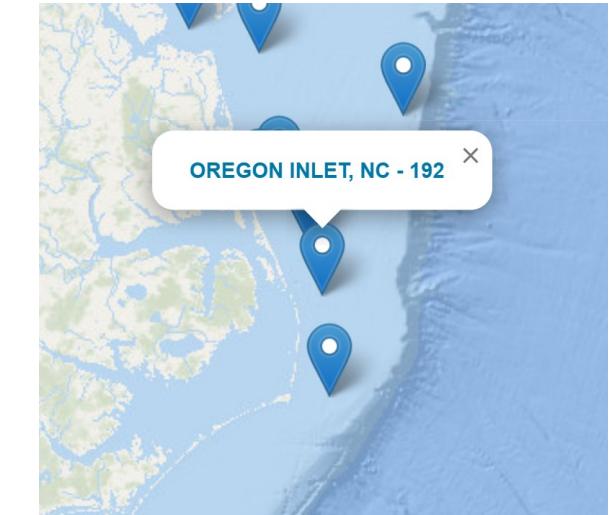
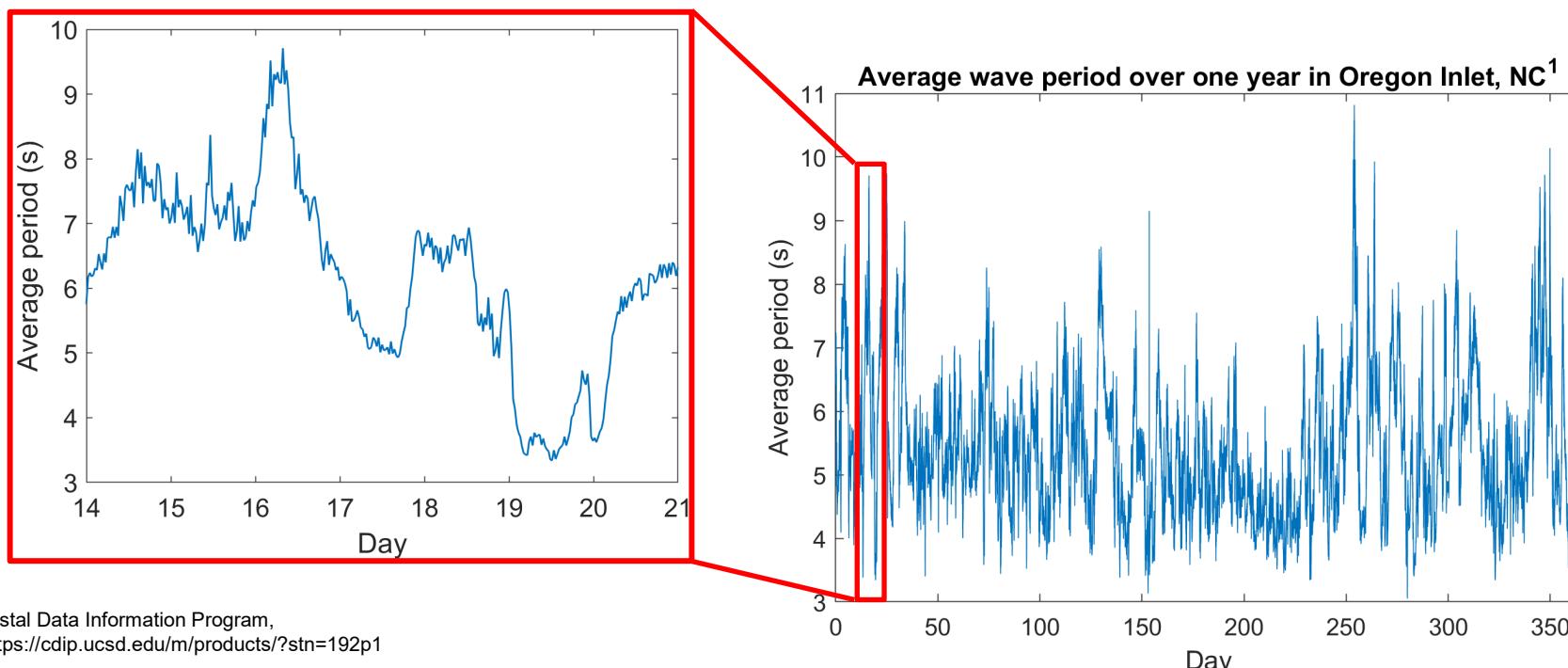


Mass-spring-damper representation of a point absorber [4]



# Motivation for developing an adaptive-stiffness point absorber

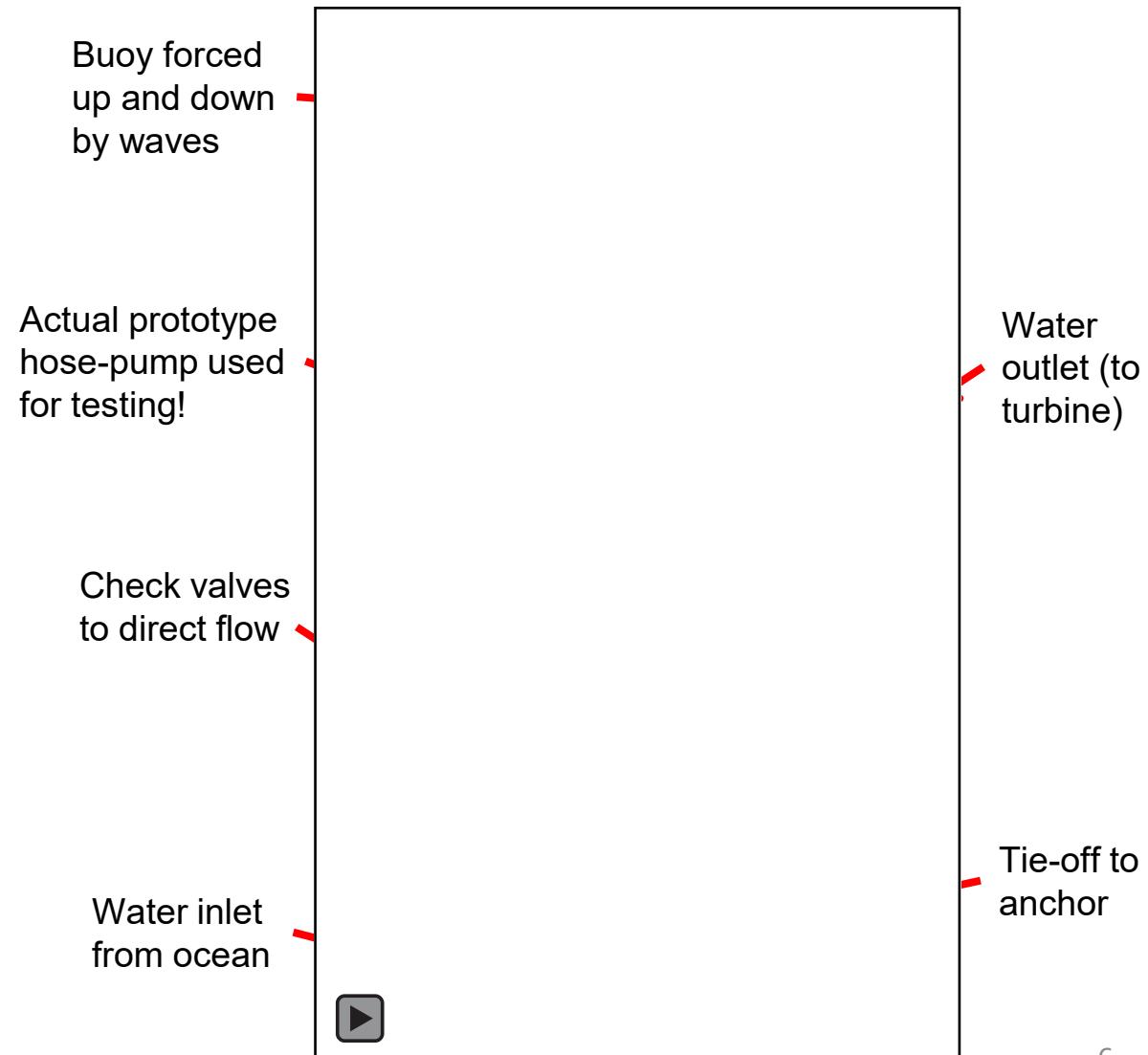
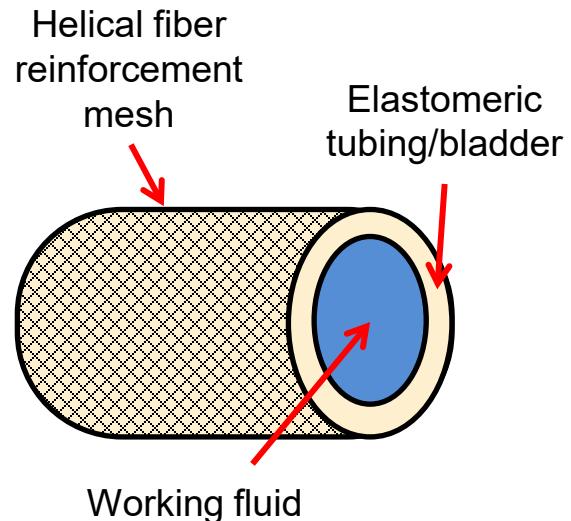
- Ocean wave periods vary significantly with time
  - Example: Wave periods off Oregon Inlet vary from 3 – 10 seconds (Mean = 5.54 s,  $\sigma$  = 1.22 s)
- WECs cannot perform optimally much of the time
  - Capacity factor = 
$$\frac{\text{Actual energy output over time}}{\text{Theoretical maximum energy output over time}}$$
- 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]

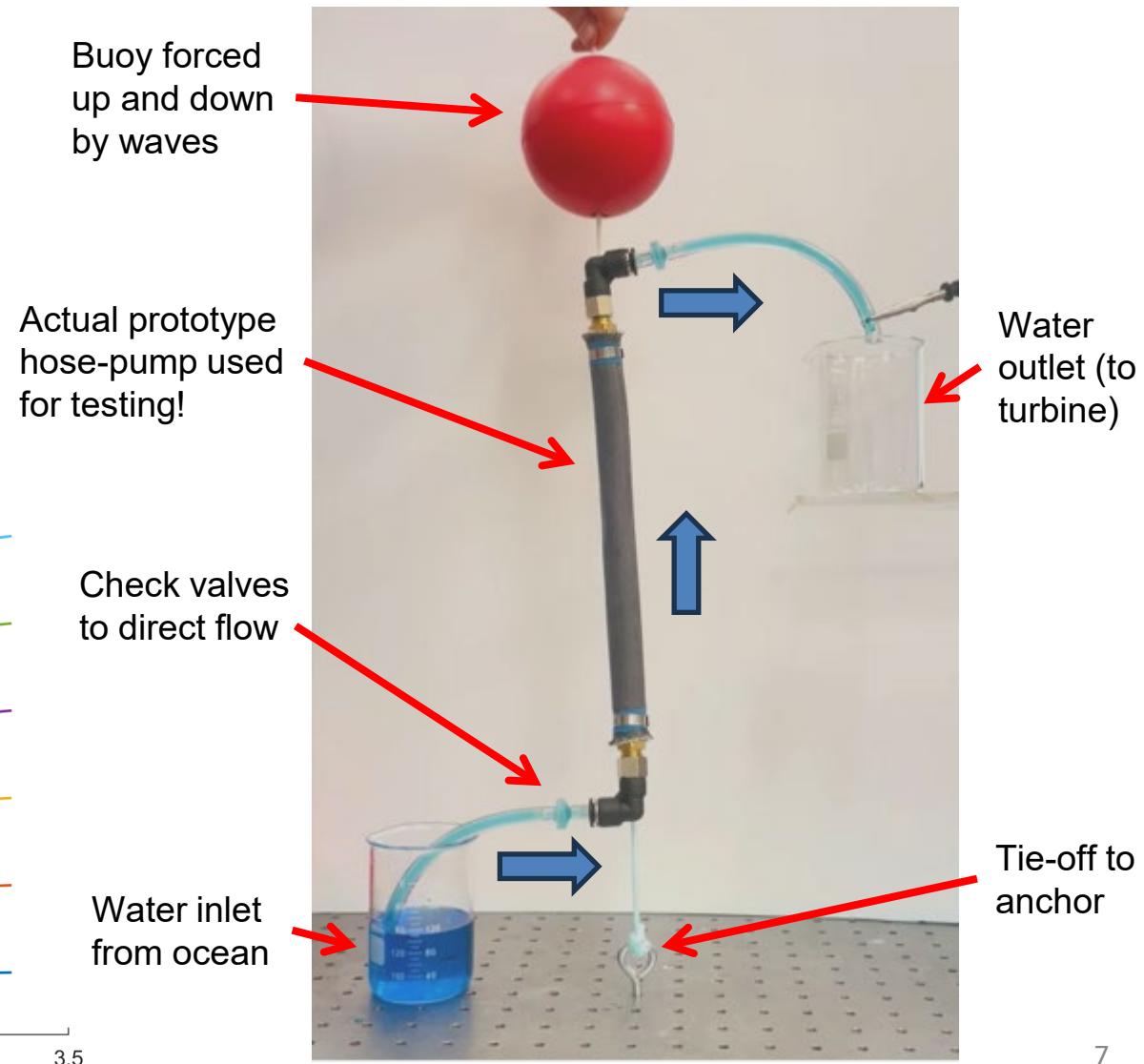
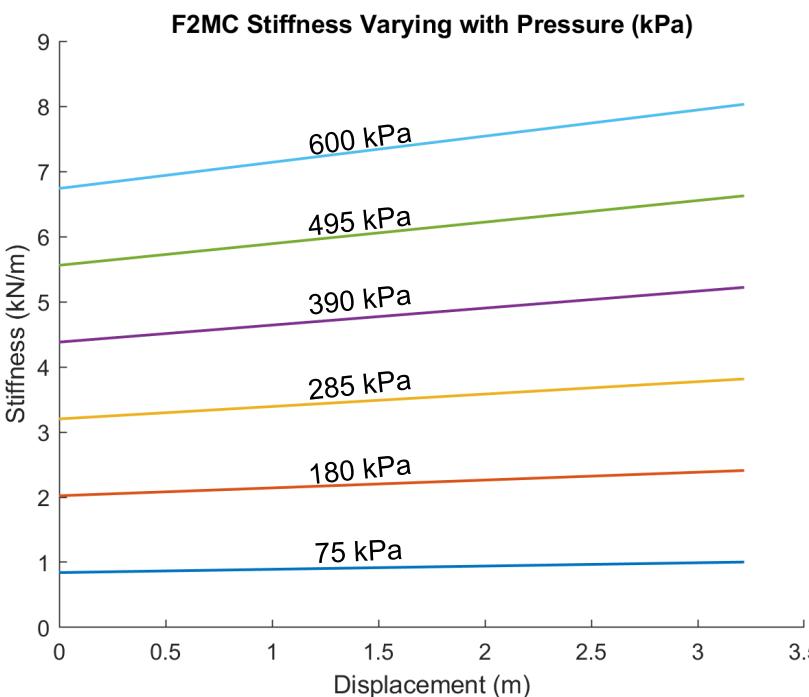
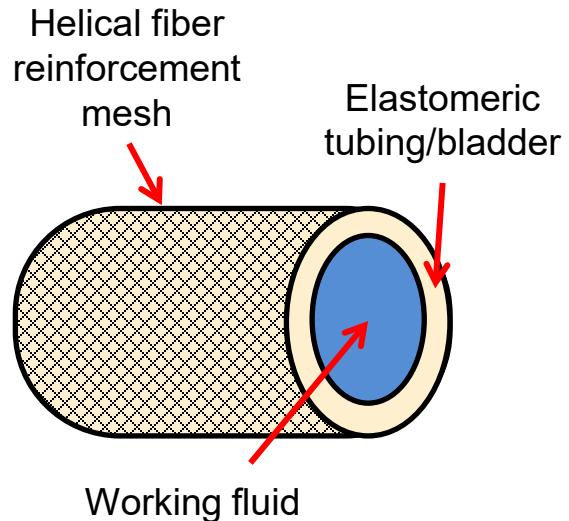
# Hose-pump material: Fluidic flexible matrix composite (F2MC)

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



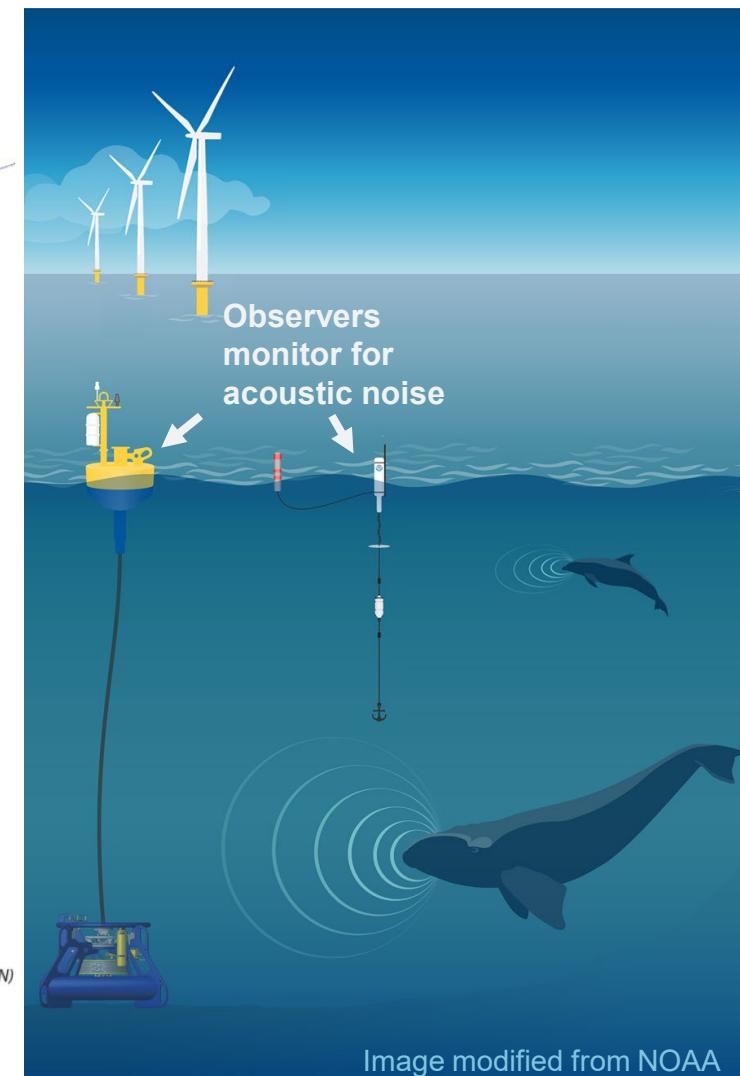
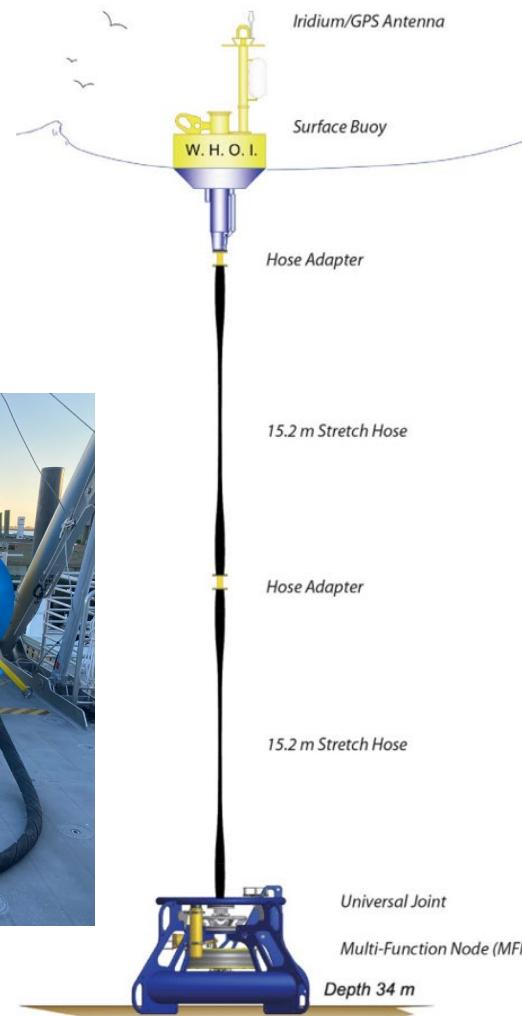
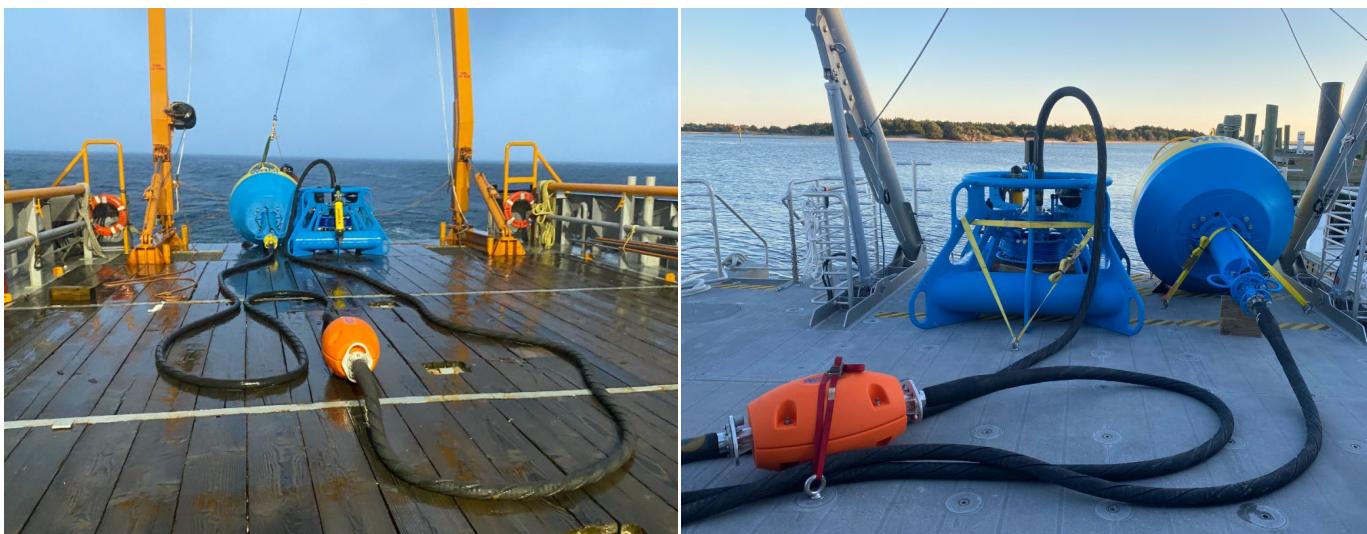
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  - Fiber kinematics produce volume change when stretched/relaxed
- **Useful property:** F2MC axial stiffness is strongly dependent on internal fluid pressure



# 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

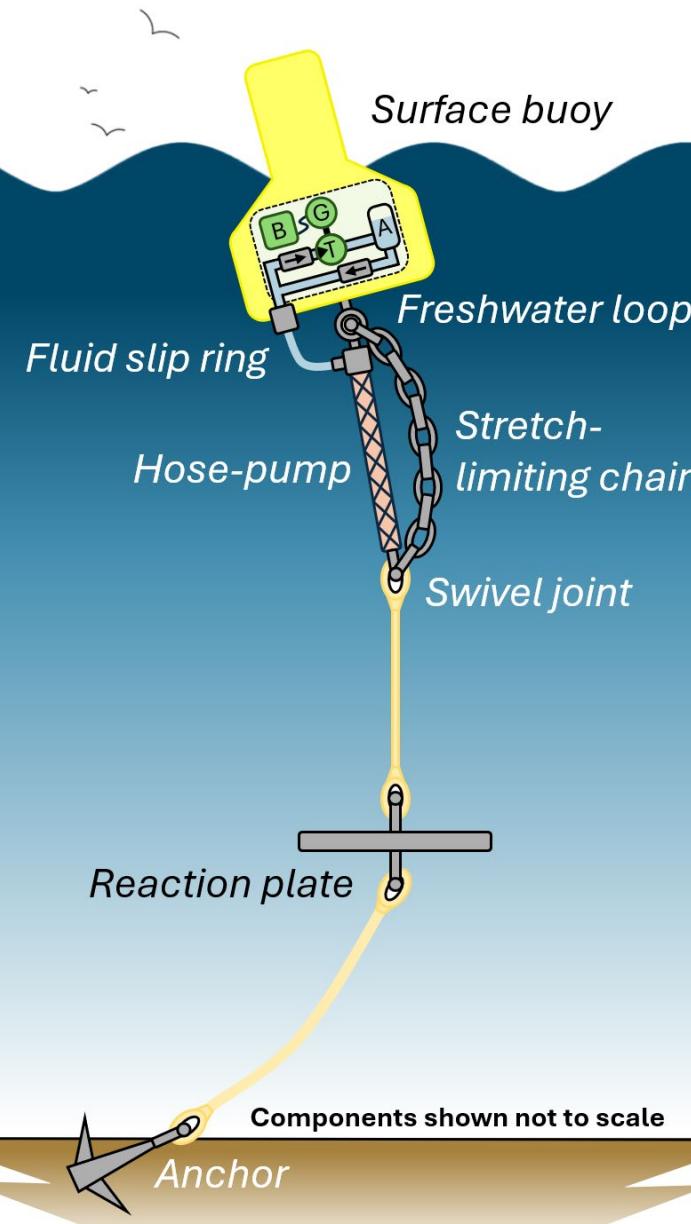


- Paul, Walter HG. "Hose elements for buoy moorings: Design, fabrication and mechanical properties." (2004).

- 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/mooringops/projects/>

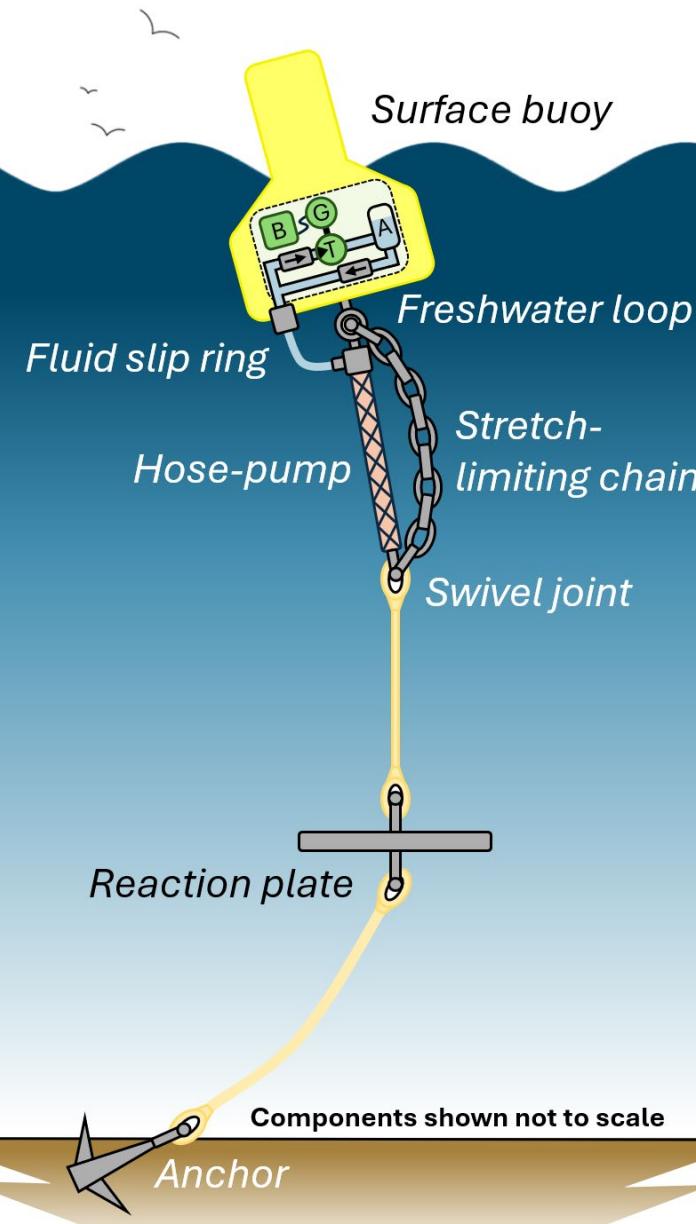
# Proposed adaptive-stiffness hydraulic PTO system architecture



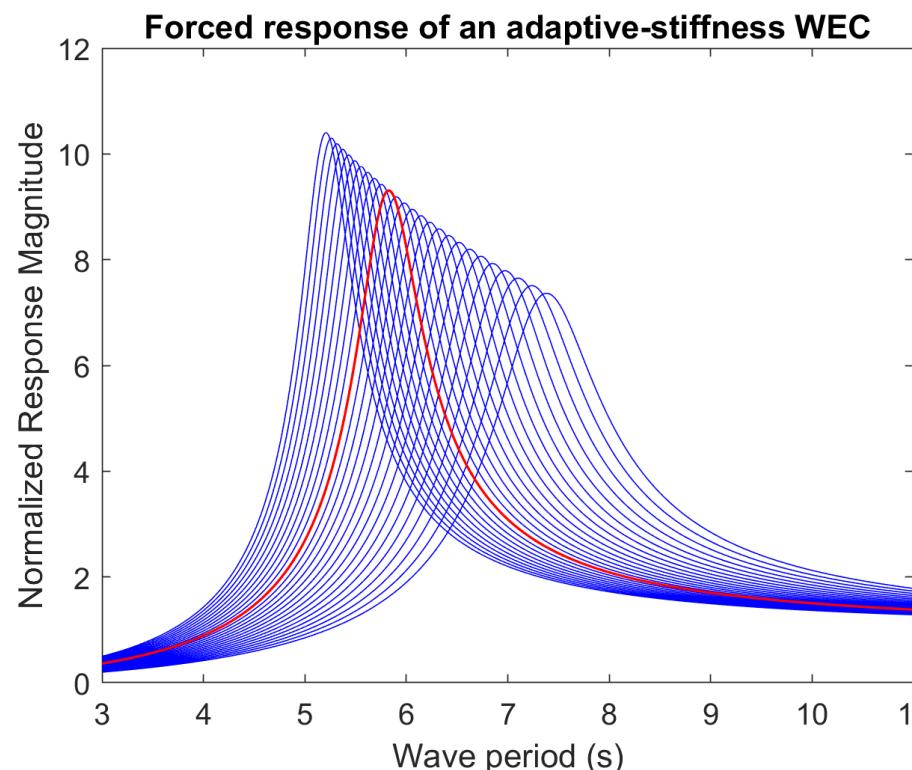
- Coupling hose-pump output to a hydraulic turbine and generator can create electrical output

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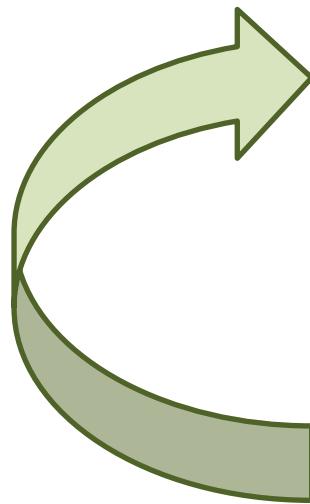
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- Pressure (and thus, stiffness) control: Add multi-speed gearing (such as a CVT) between the turbine and generator
  - Changing gear ratio alters torque-speed relationship, internal pressure-output flow rate relationship



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# Project objectives for 2024-25

Refine model based  
on experimental data



**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.



Inform buoy and  
hose-pump sizing

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



Fabricate  
integrated system  
for testing

**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.



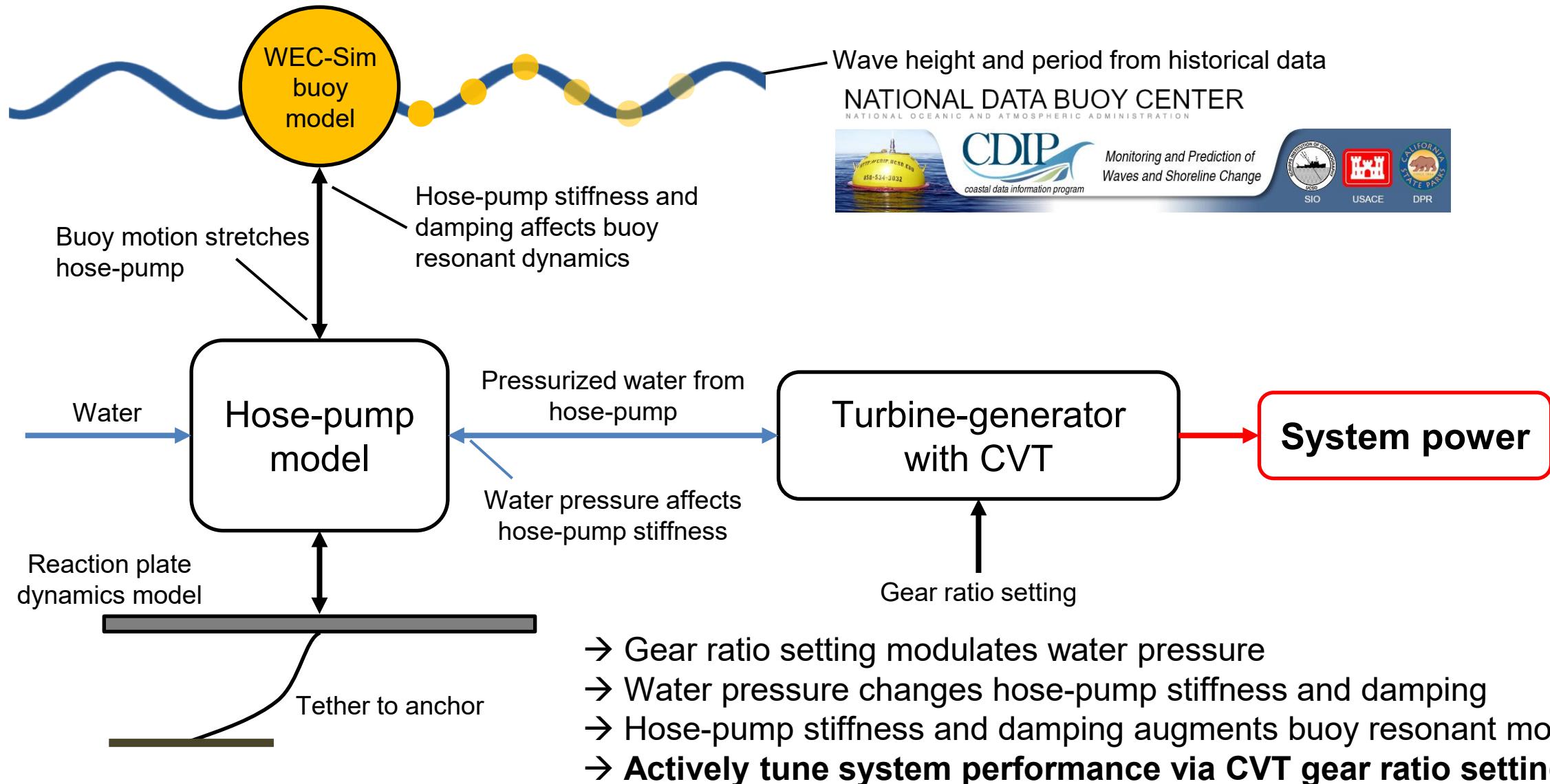
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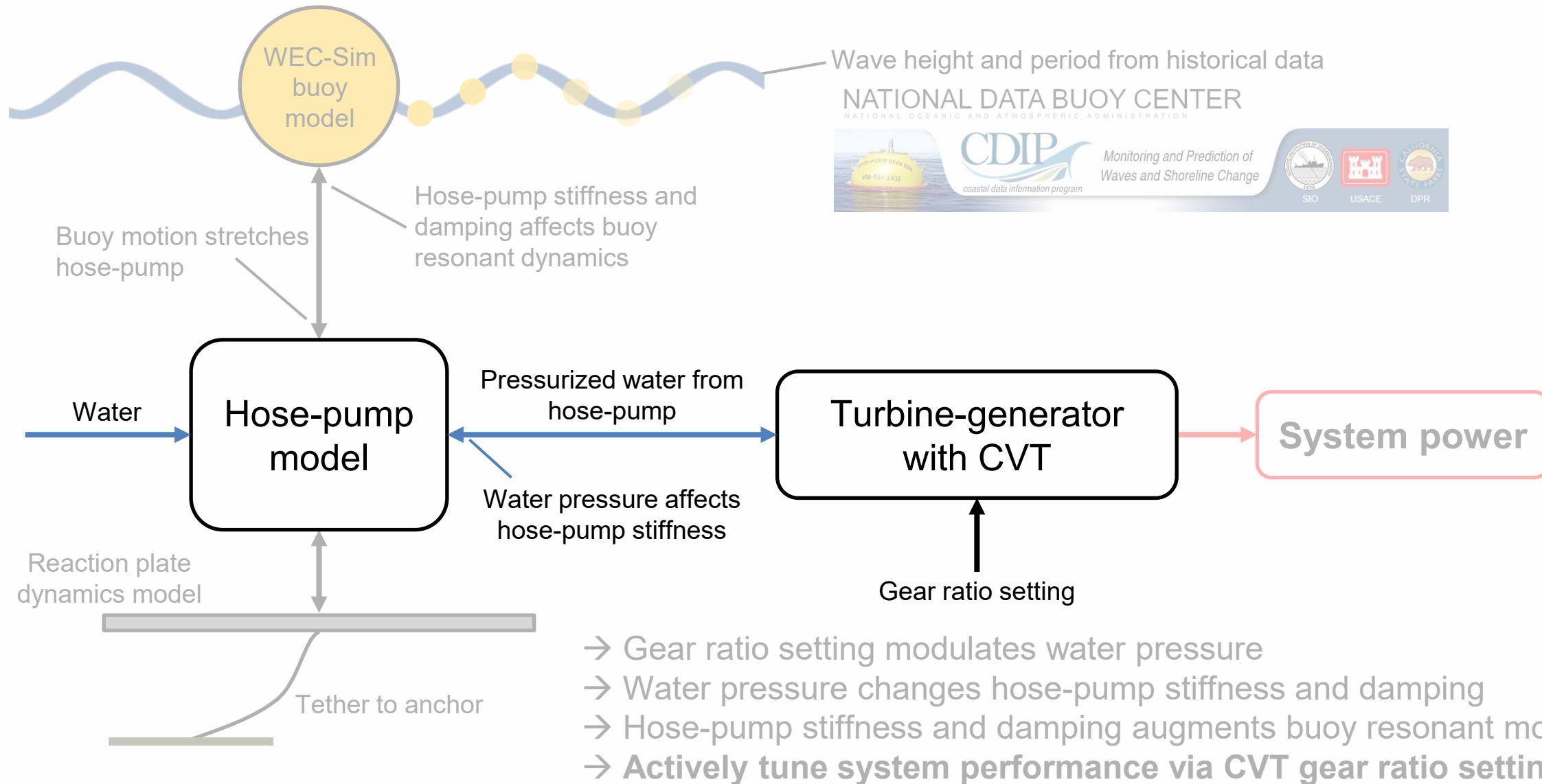
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# Objective 1: Dynamic modeling framework for the F2MC WEC



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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:

$$Q_{out} = \frac{D\omega_1}{2\pi}$$

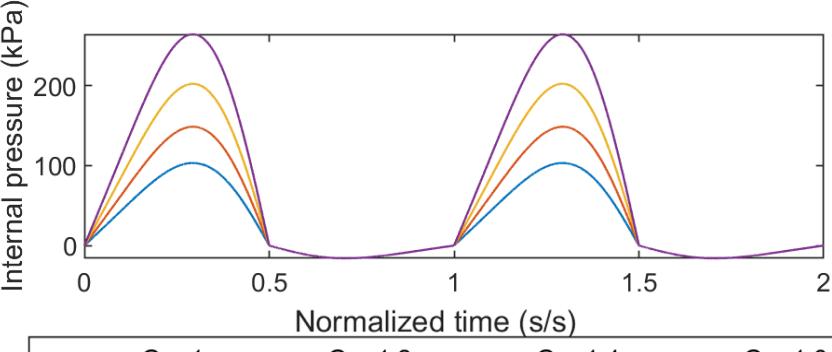
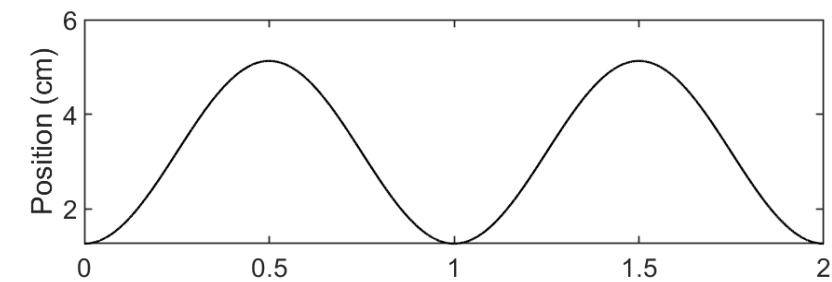
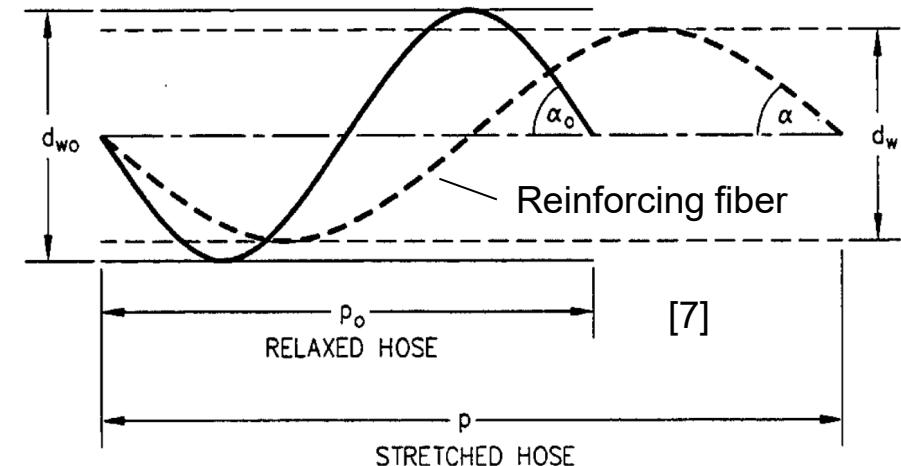
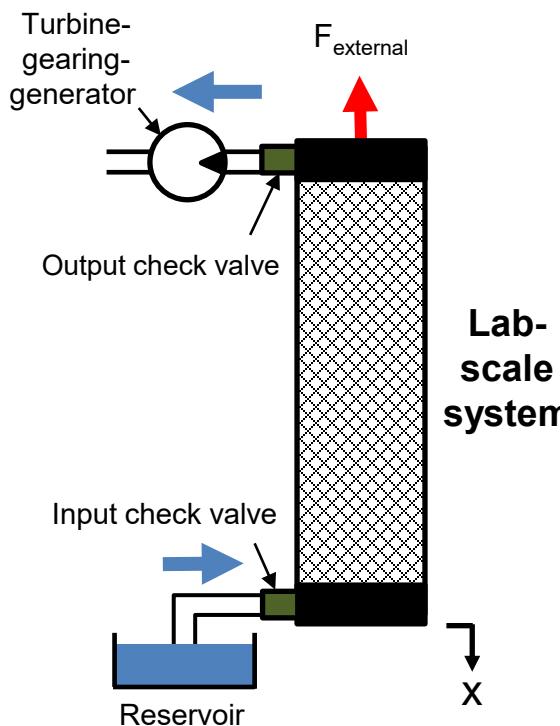
$$\tau_1\omega_1 = \tau_2\omega_2$$

$$P = \frac{2\pi}{D}\tau_1$$

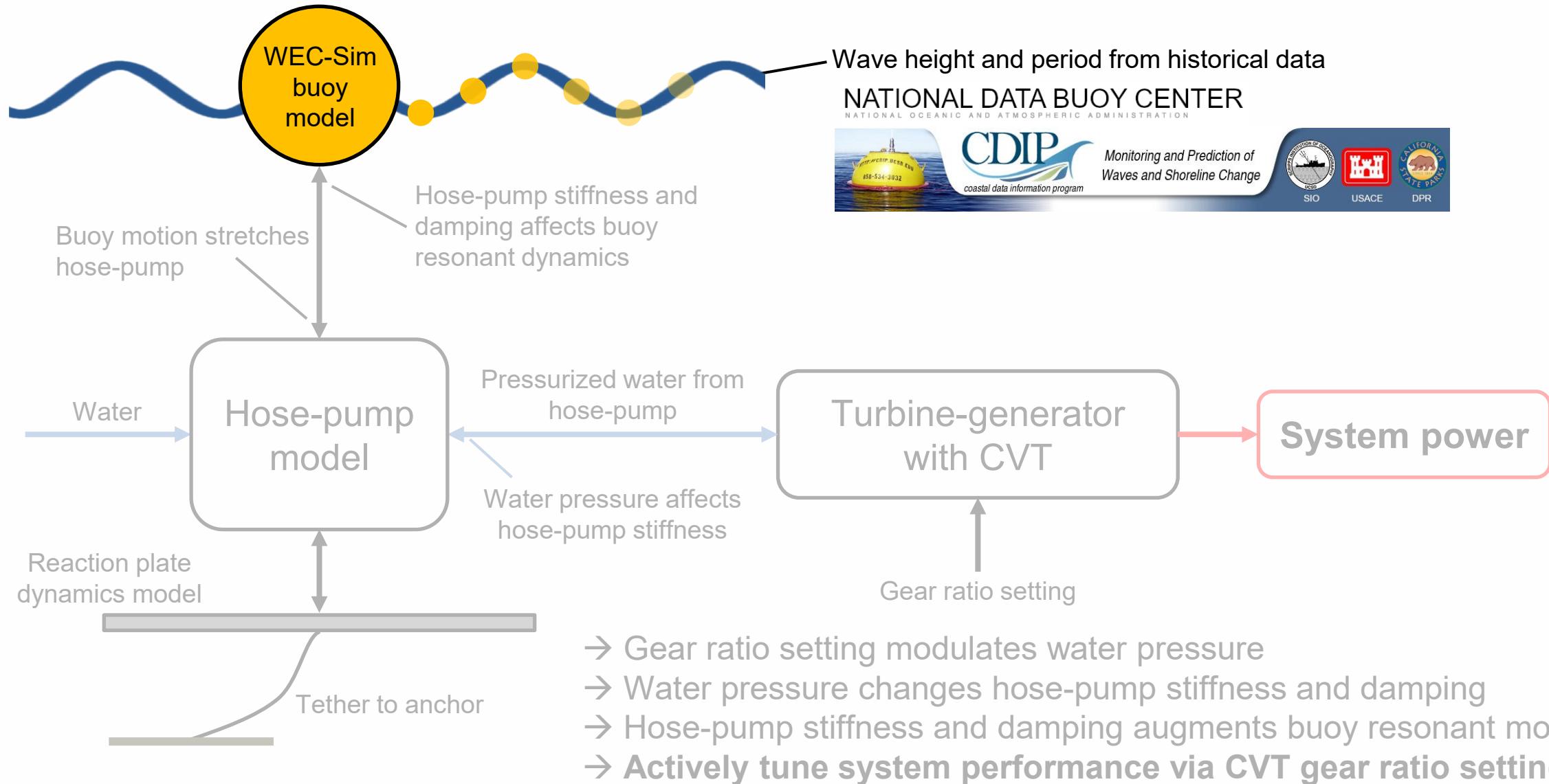
$$G = \frac{\omega_2}{\omega_1}$$

Assumptions:

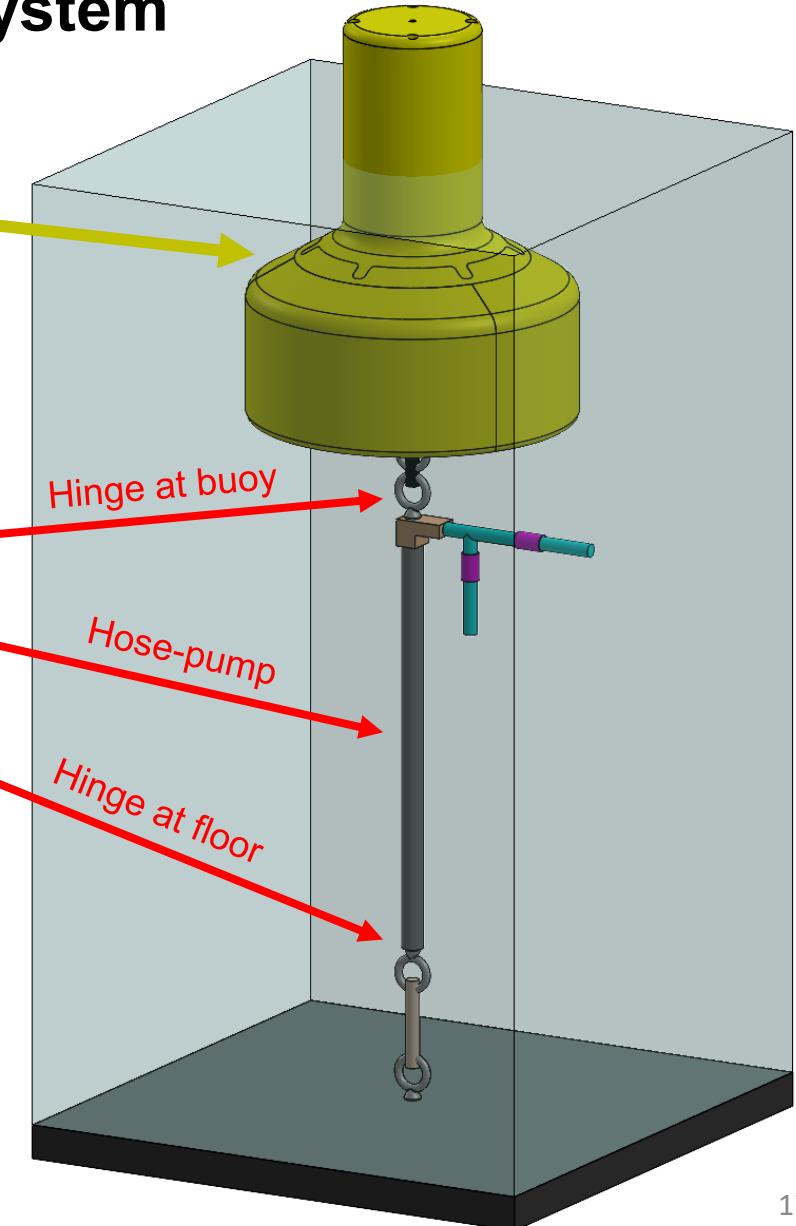
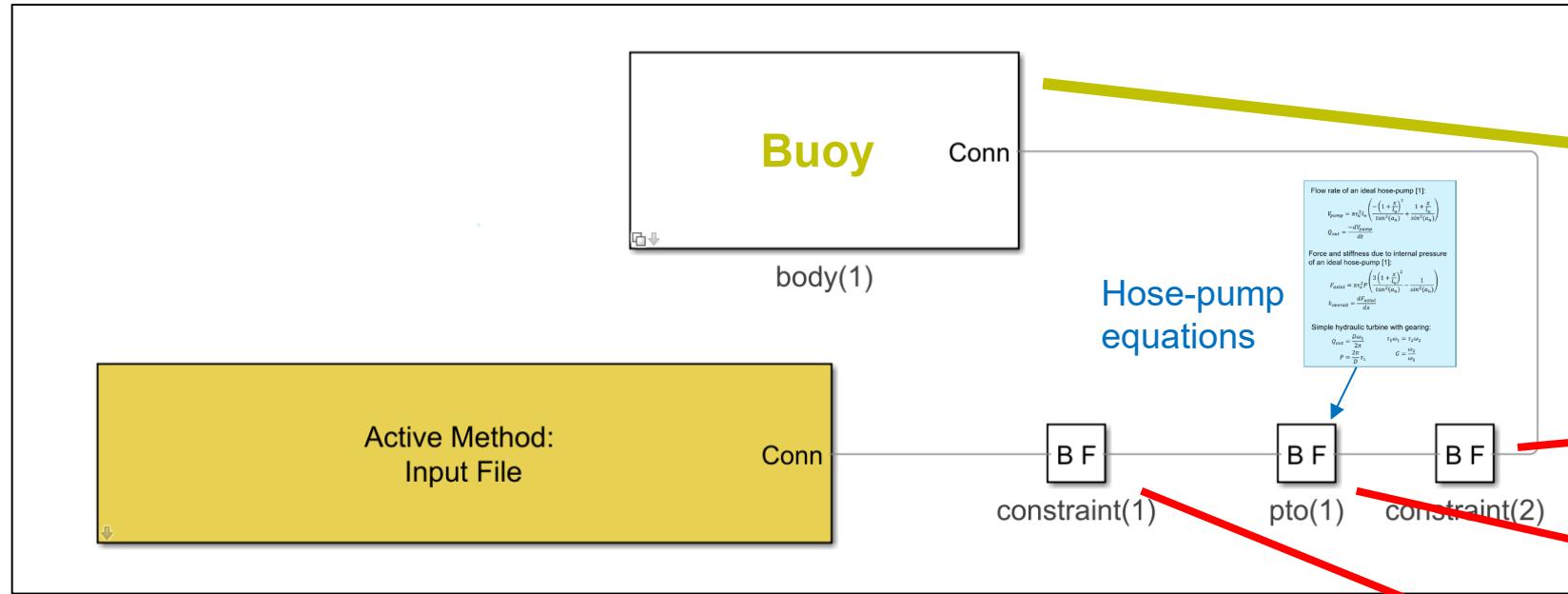
- Ideal pantograph network
- Negligible mass
- No flow effects from check valves



# 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.

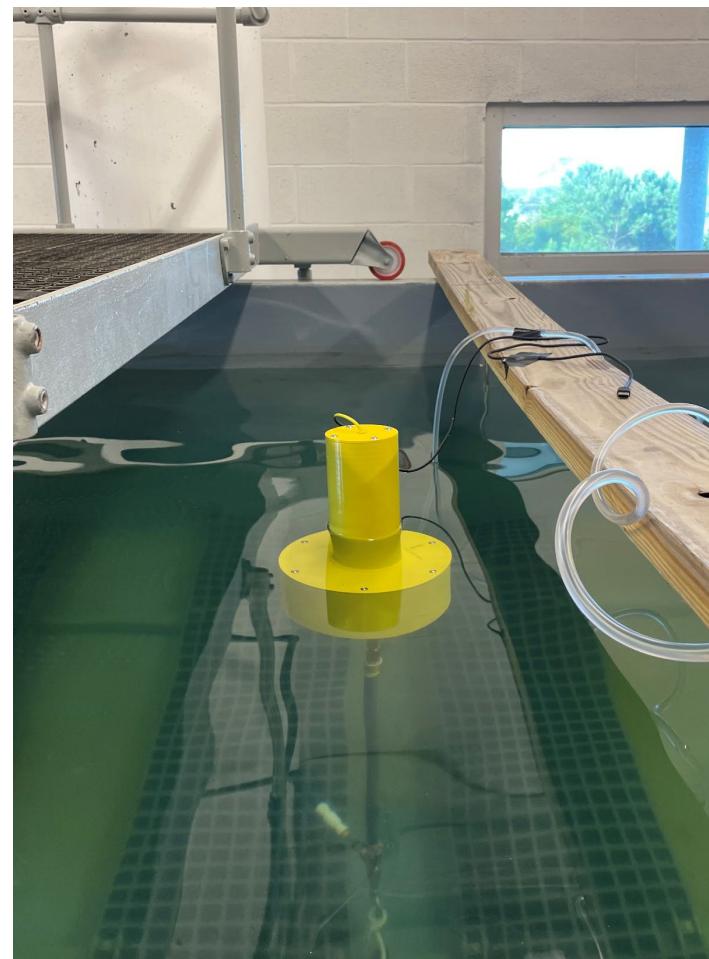
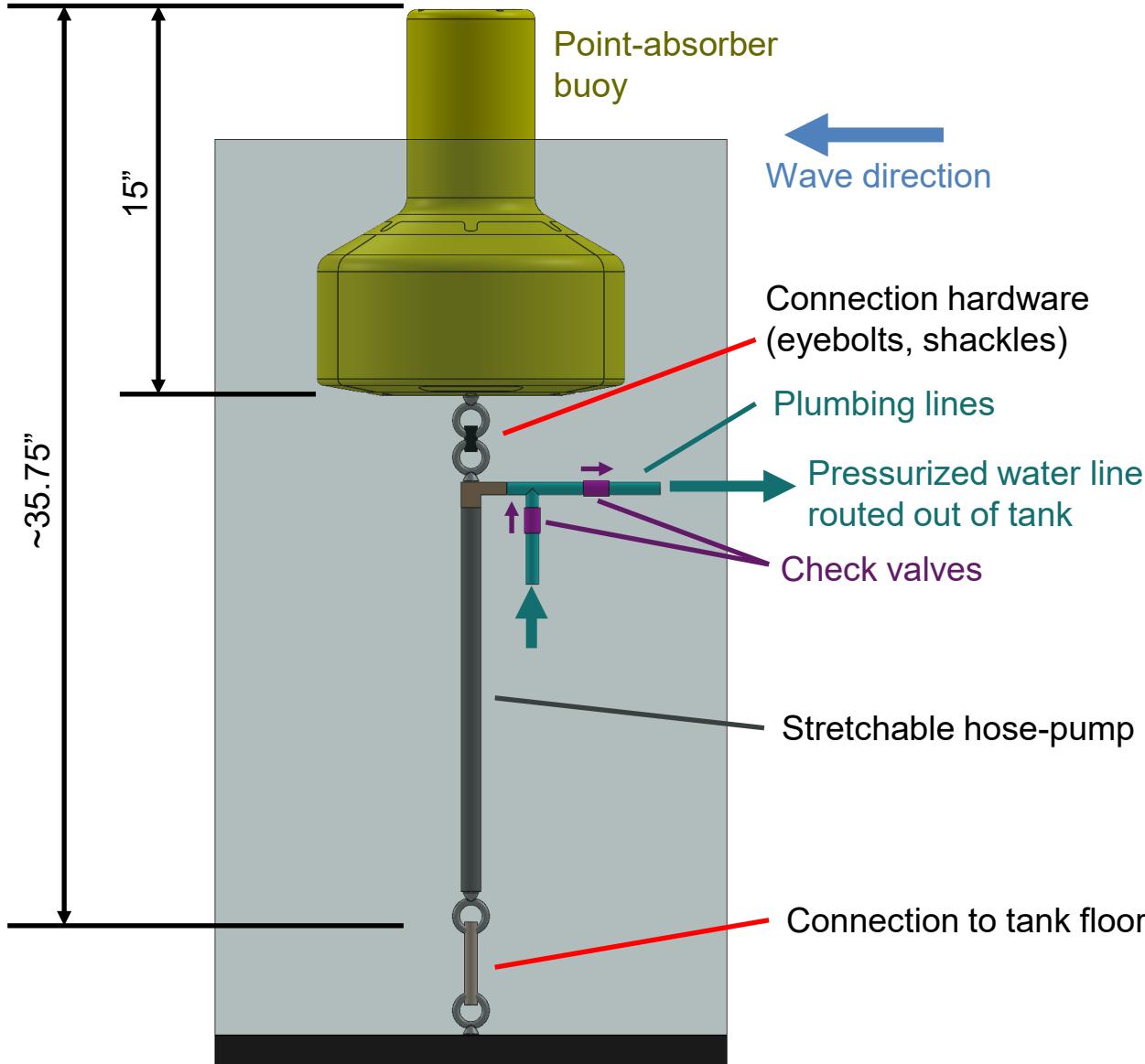
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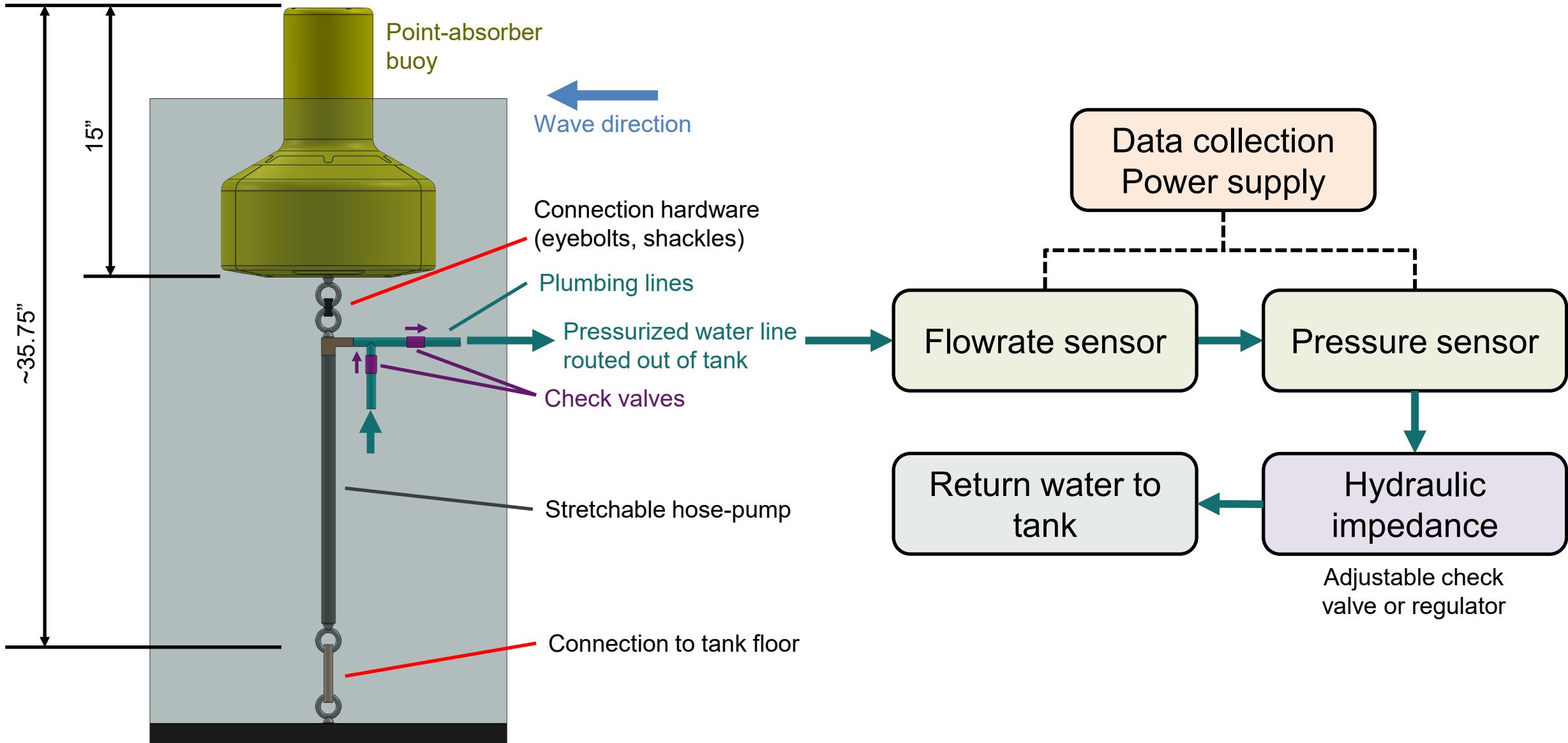
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## Objective 2: Lab-scale buoy/hose-pump integrated system in water



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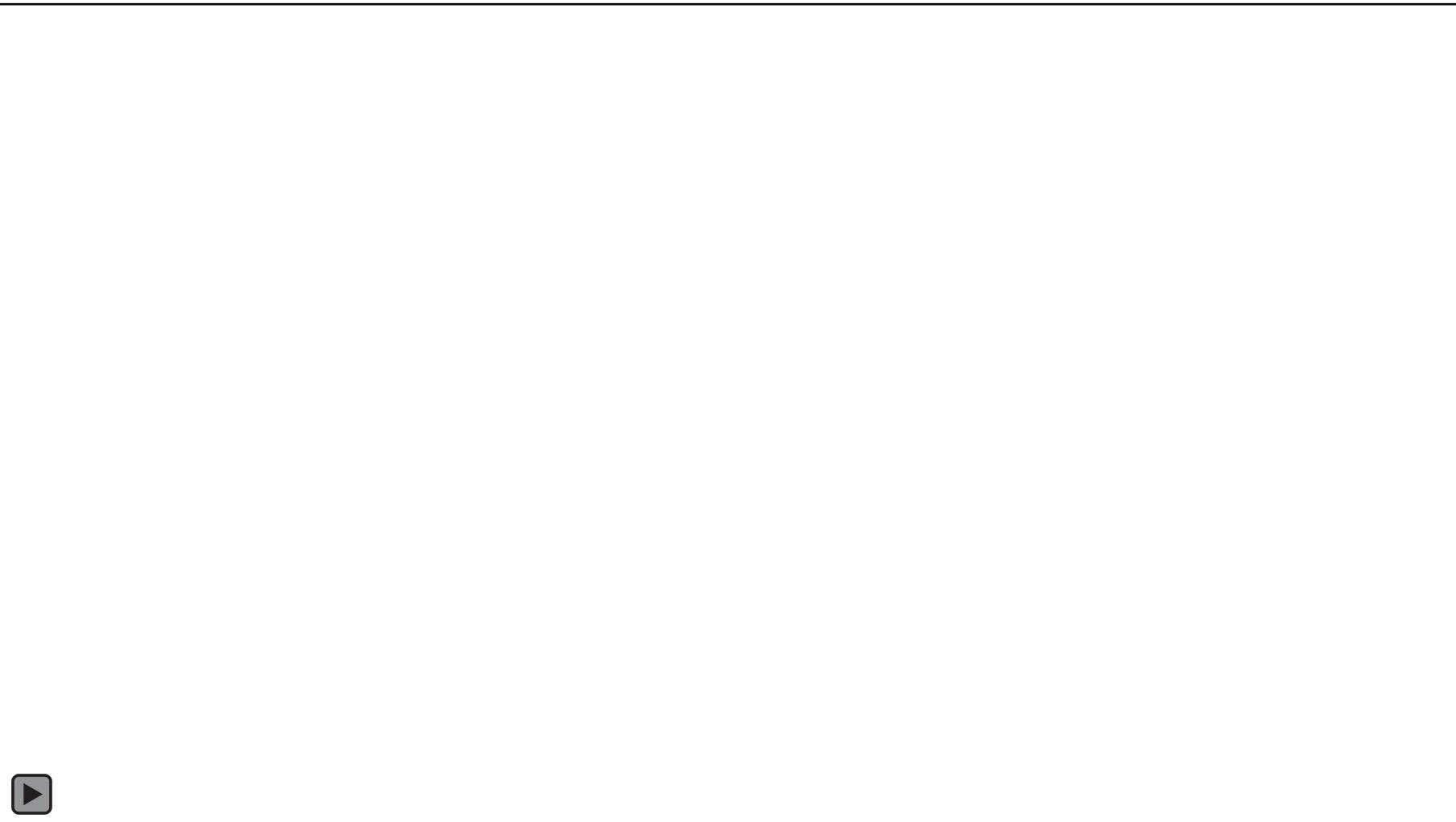
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## Objective 3: First point absorber buoys (July, Oct. 2024)

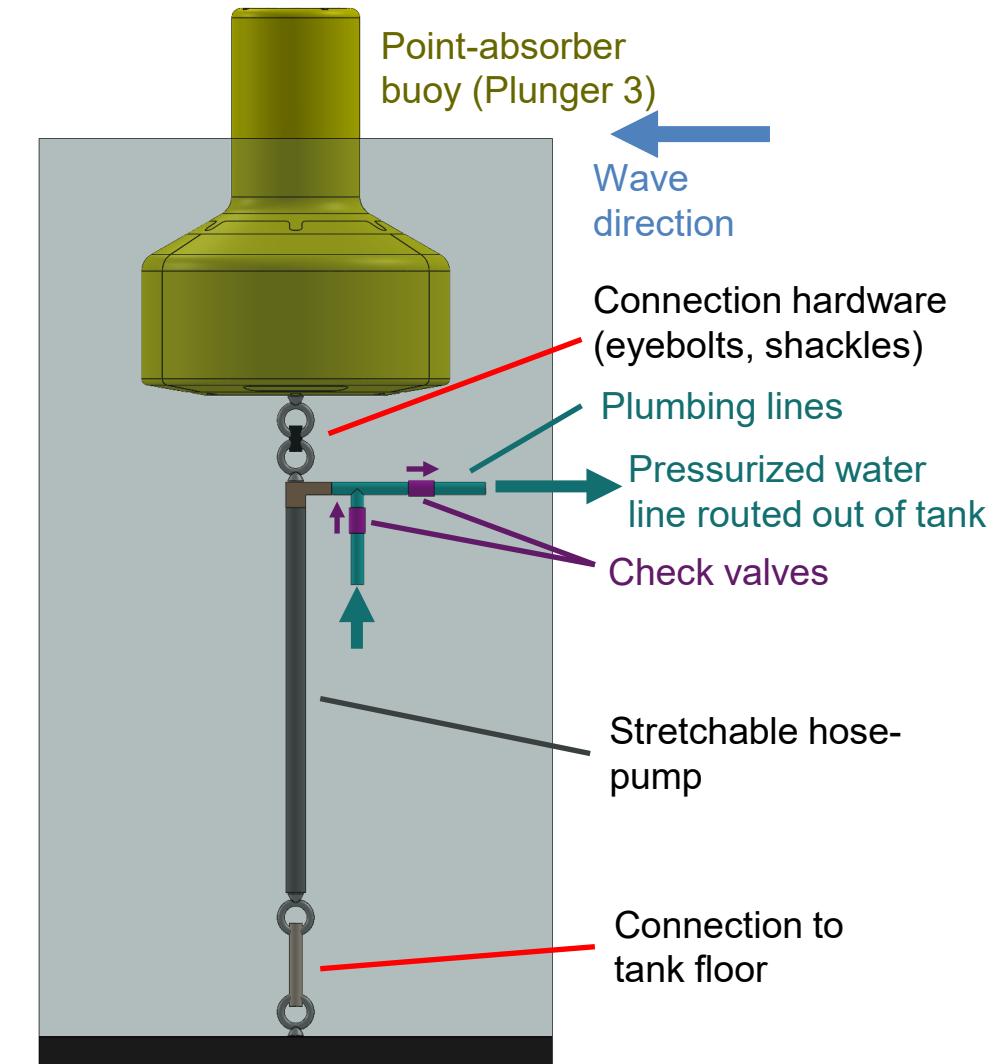
- Captured side-view videos of wave-tank testing in addition to flow rate and pressure data
- Captured data and videos were used to fine-tune WEC-Sim model parameters



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

Feb. 18-21, 2025

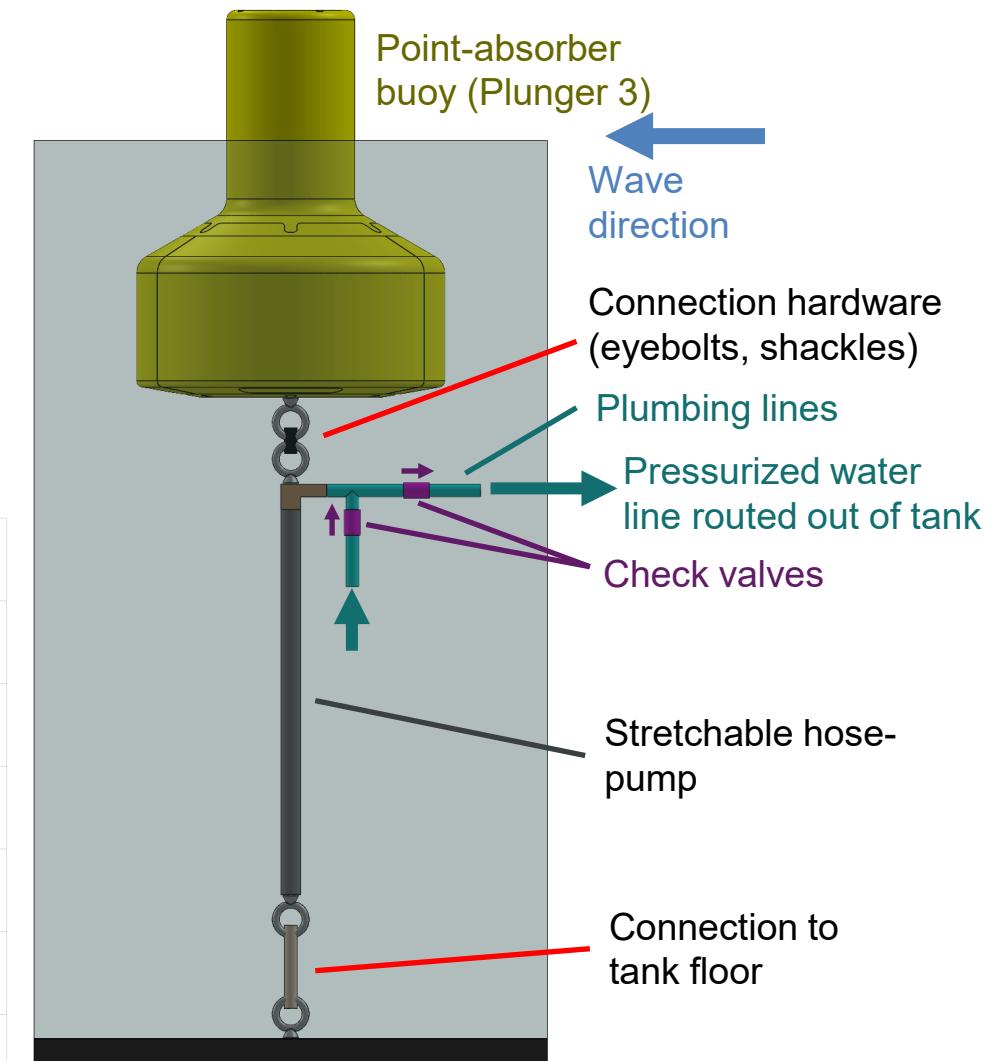
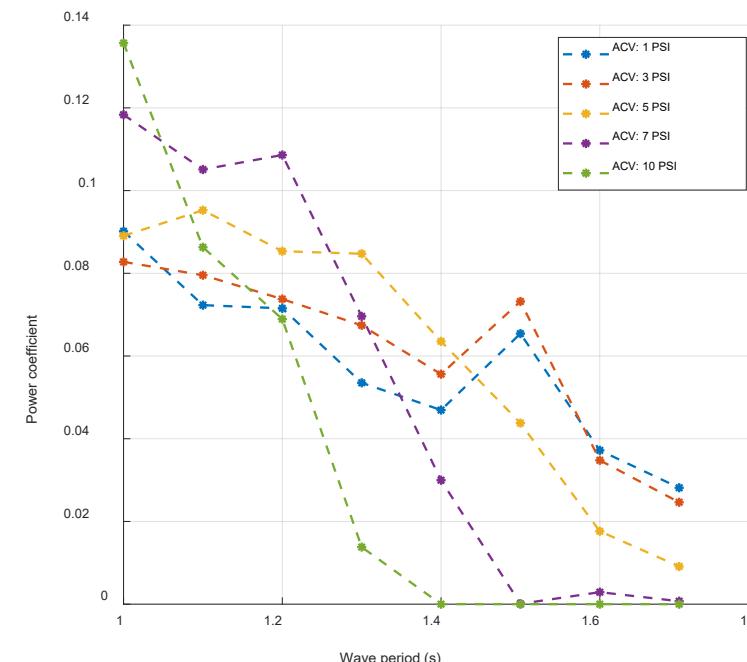
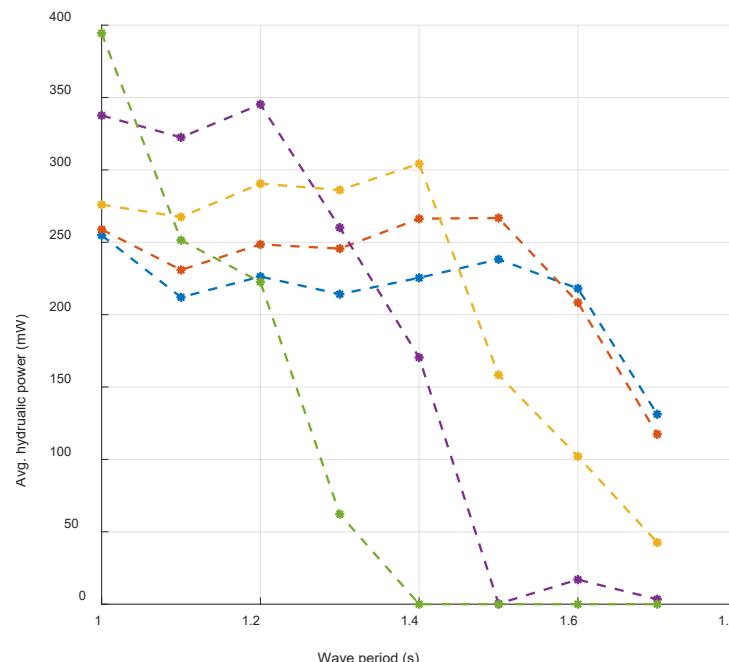
- Streamlined point-absorber buoy (Plunger 3)
- Adjustable check valve (ACV) to set hydraulic impedance
- Measured outflow rate and pressure  
→ Calculate hydraulic power



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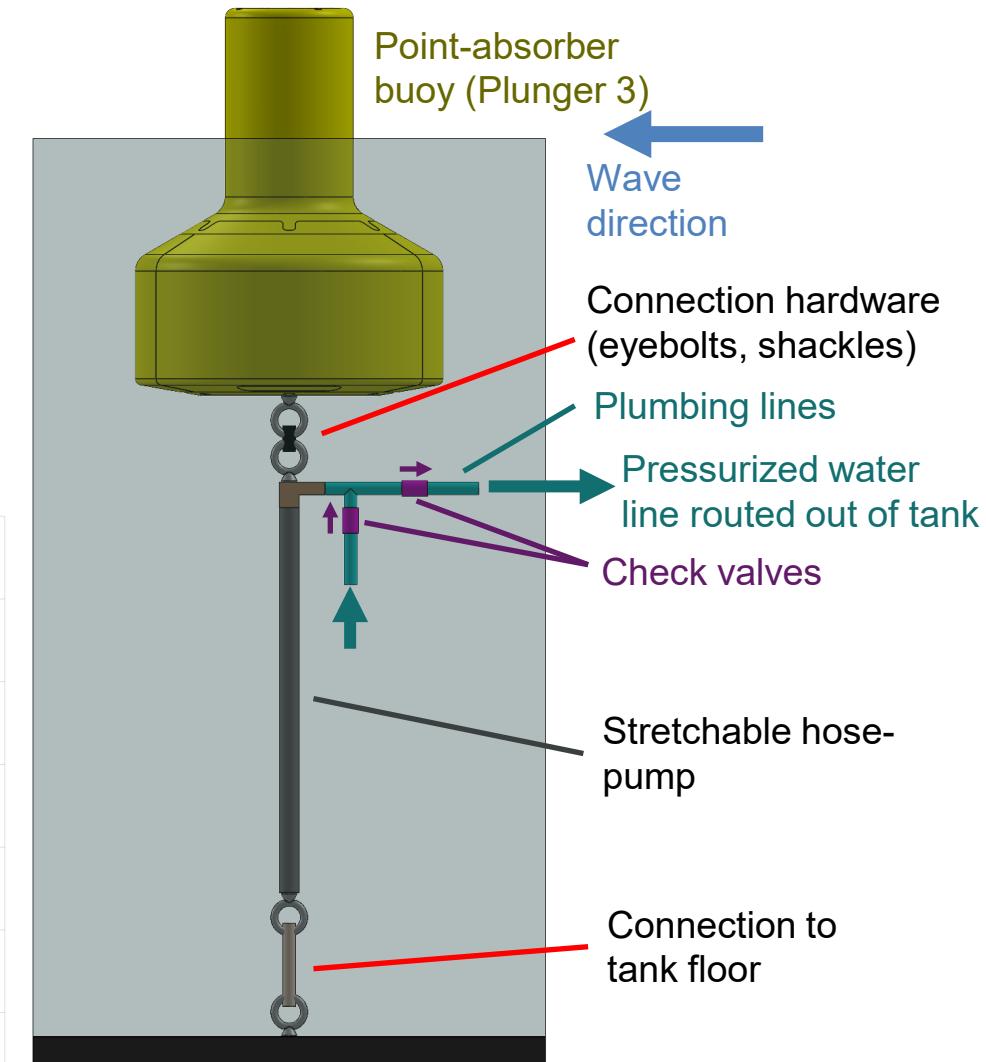
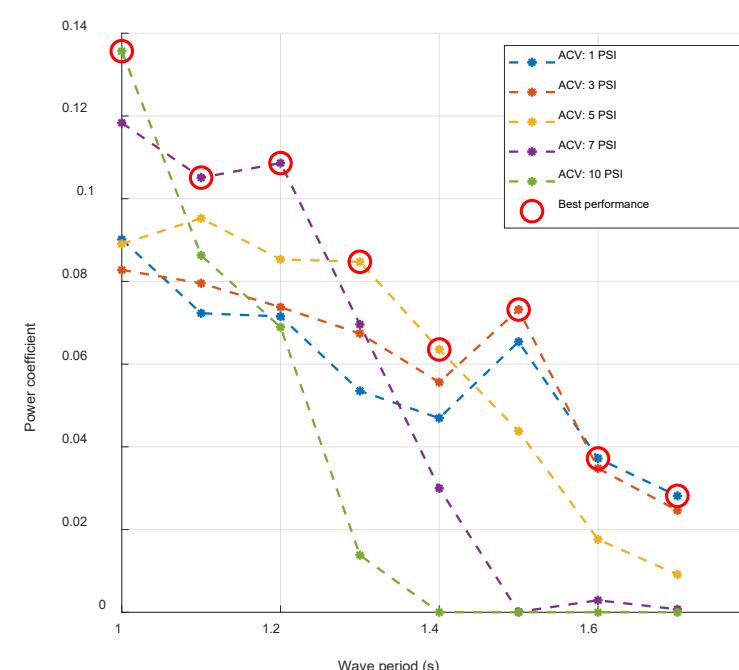
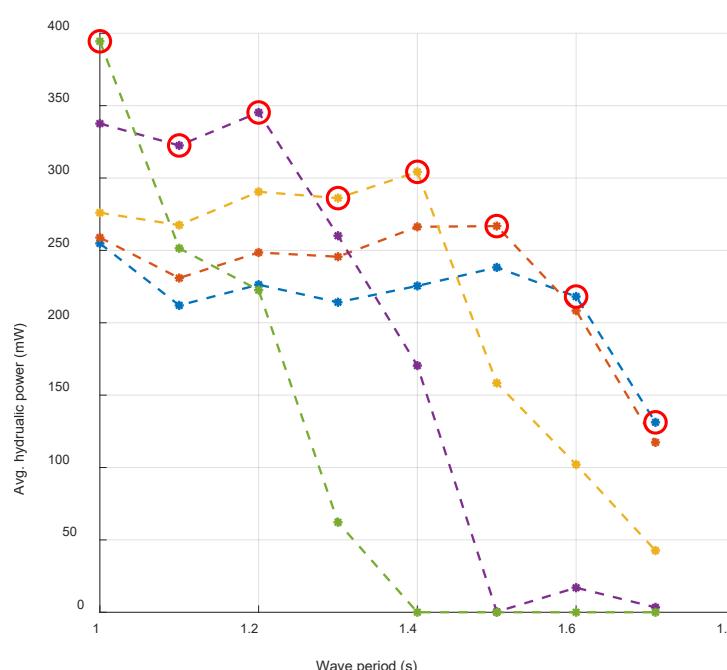


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→ Calculate hydraulic power

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.



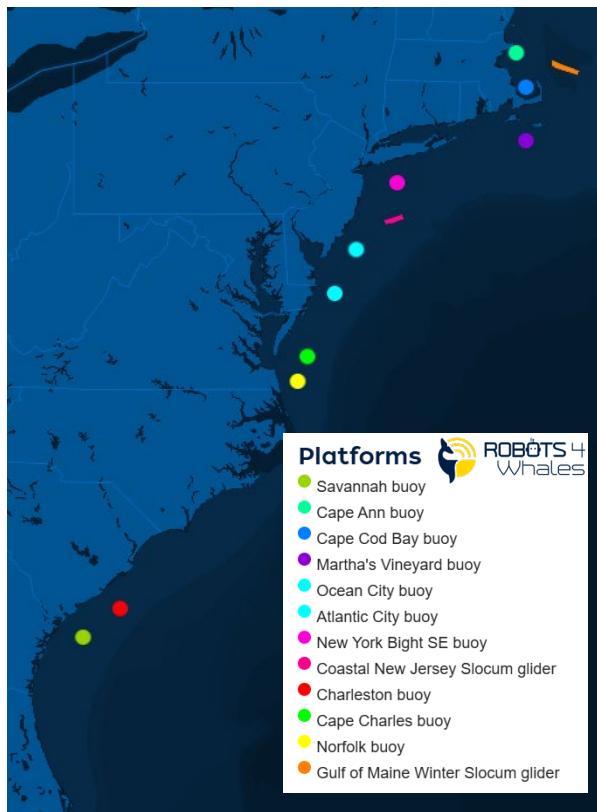
Thank you for your  
attention!

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

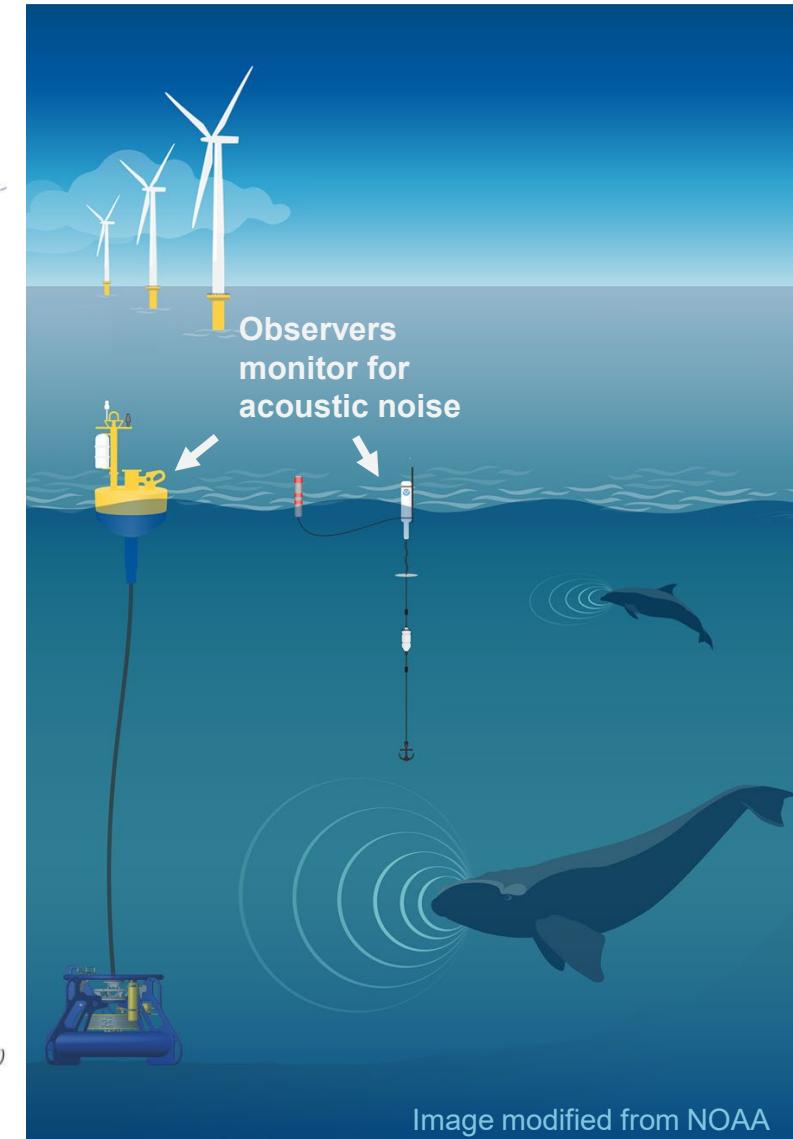
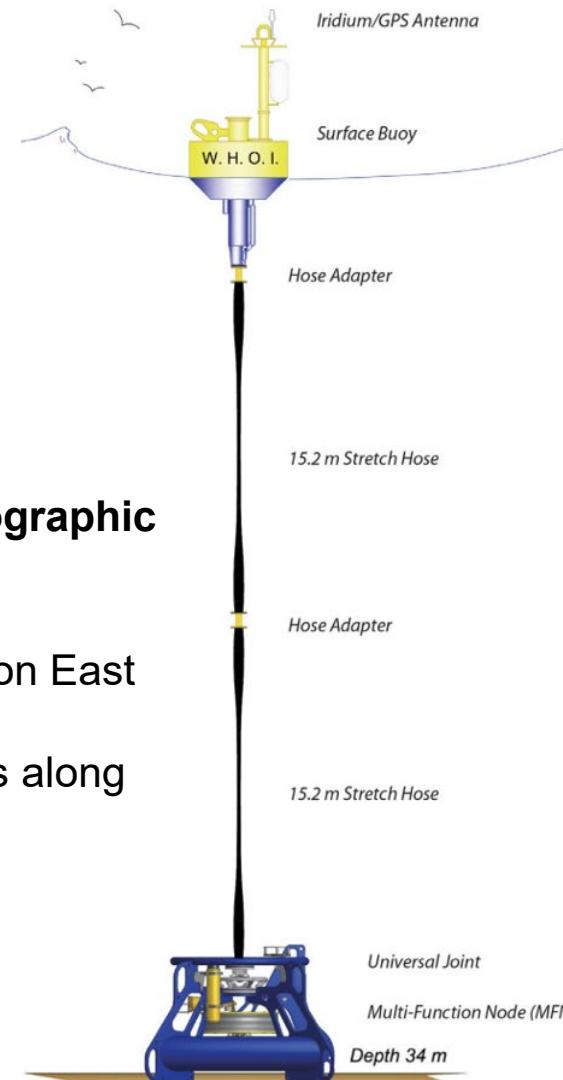


Image modified from NOAA

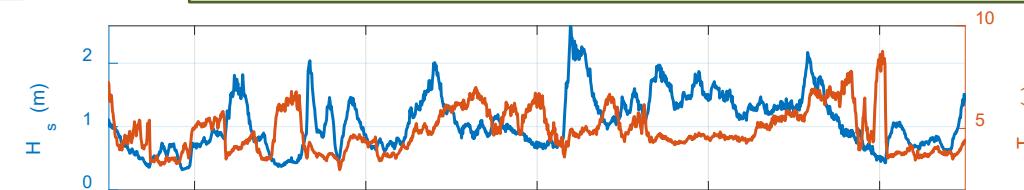
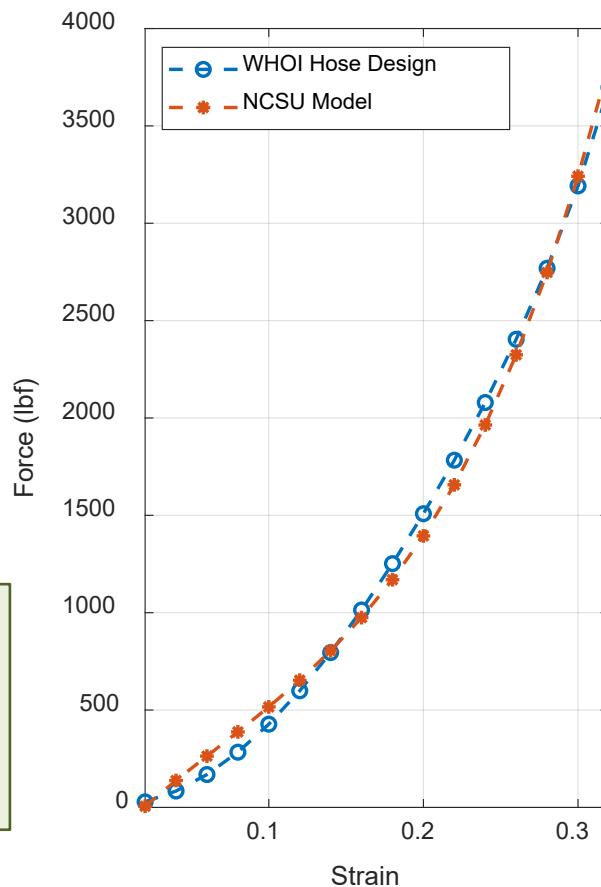
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Donald Peters  
WHOI  
Principal  
Engineer

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



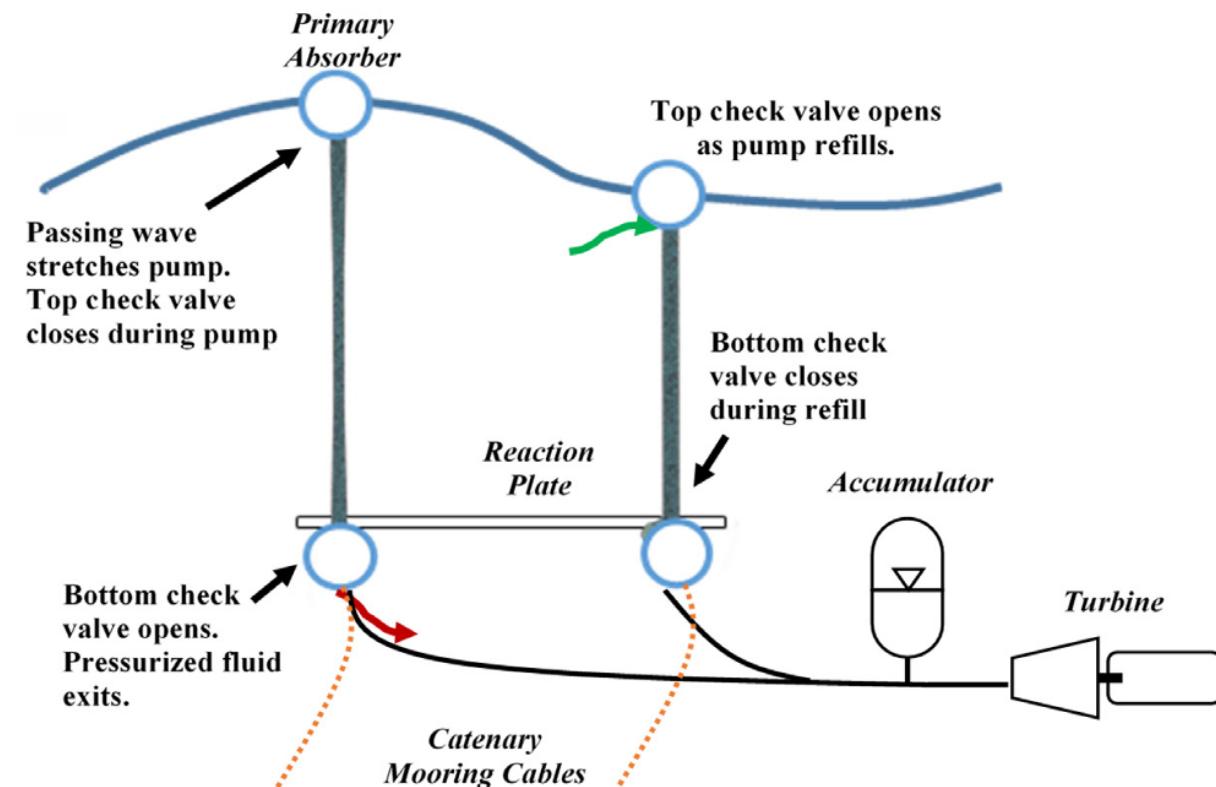
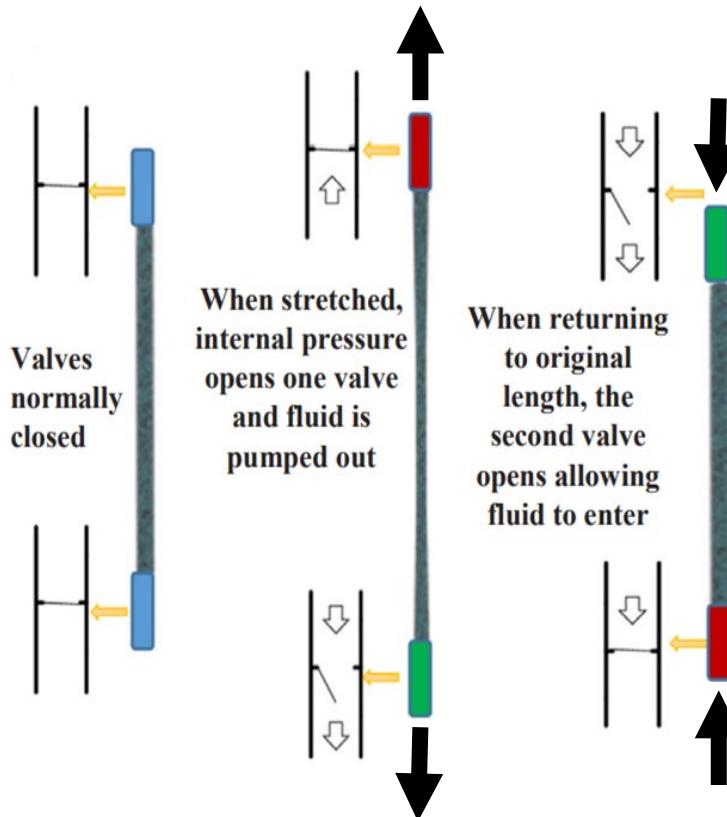
- Simulations of PAM buoy stretch hose WEC
  - Actual buoy system offshore of Norfolk, VA
  - Driven by historical sea-state data
  - **Capacity factor increases by 1.55x with adaptive stiffness**

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.

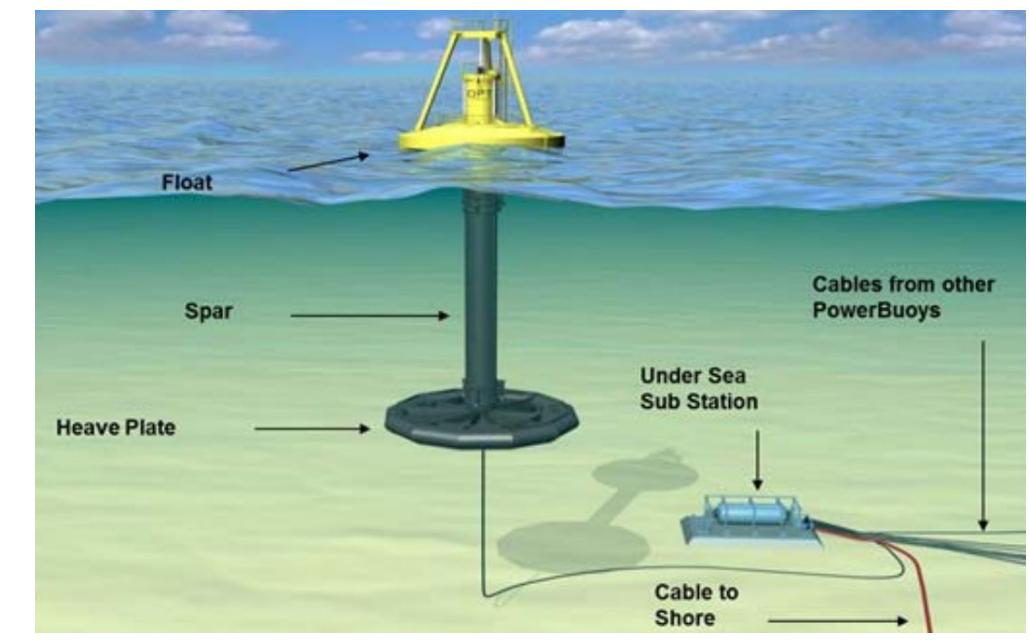
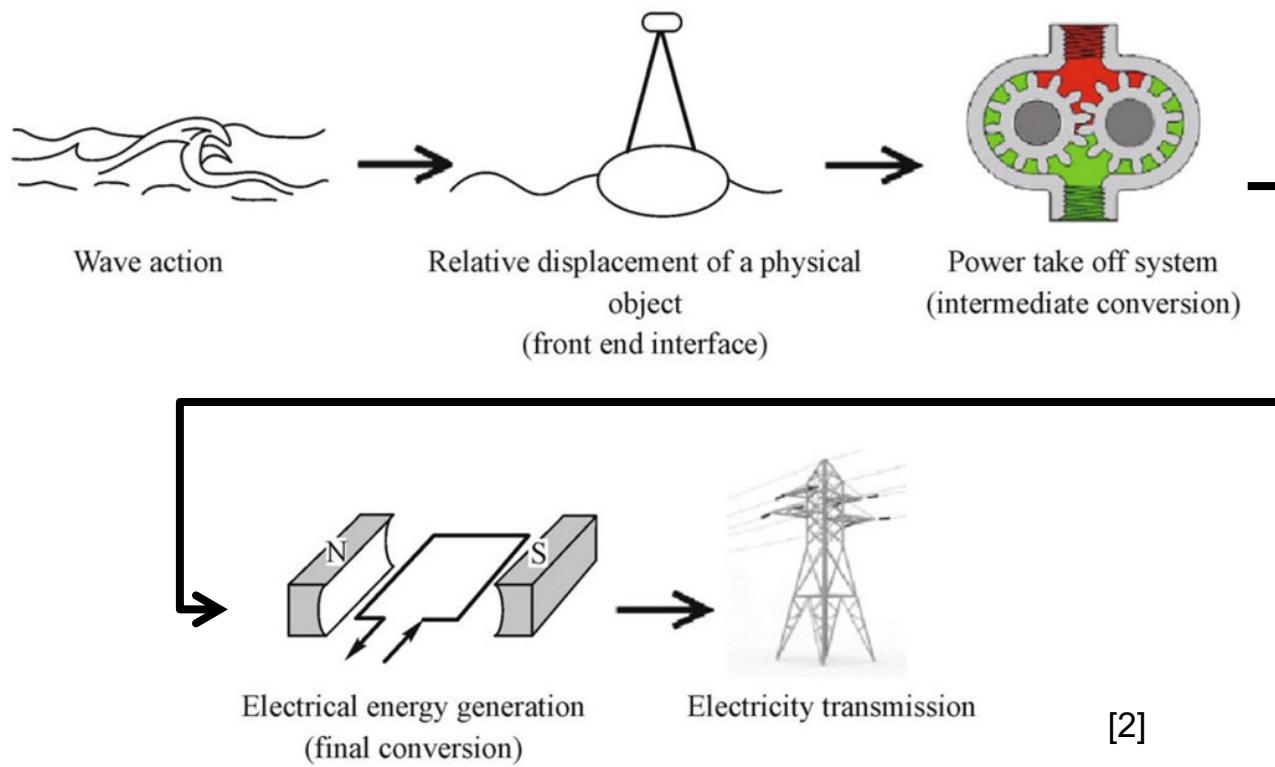
# Hydro turbine hose-pump system architecture

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



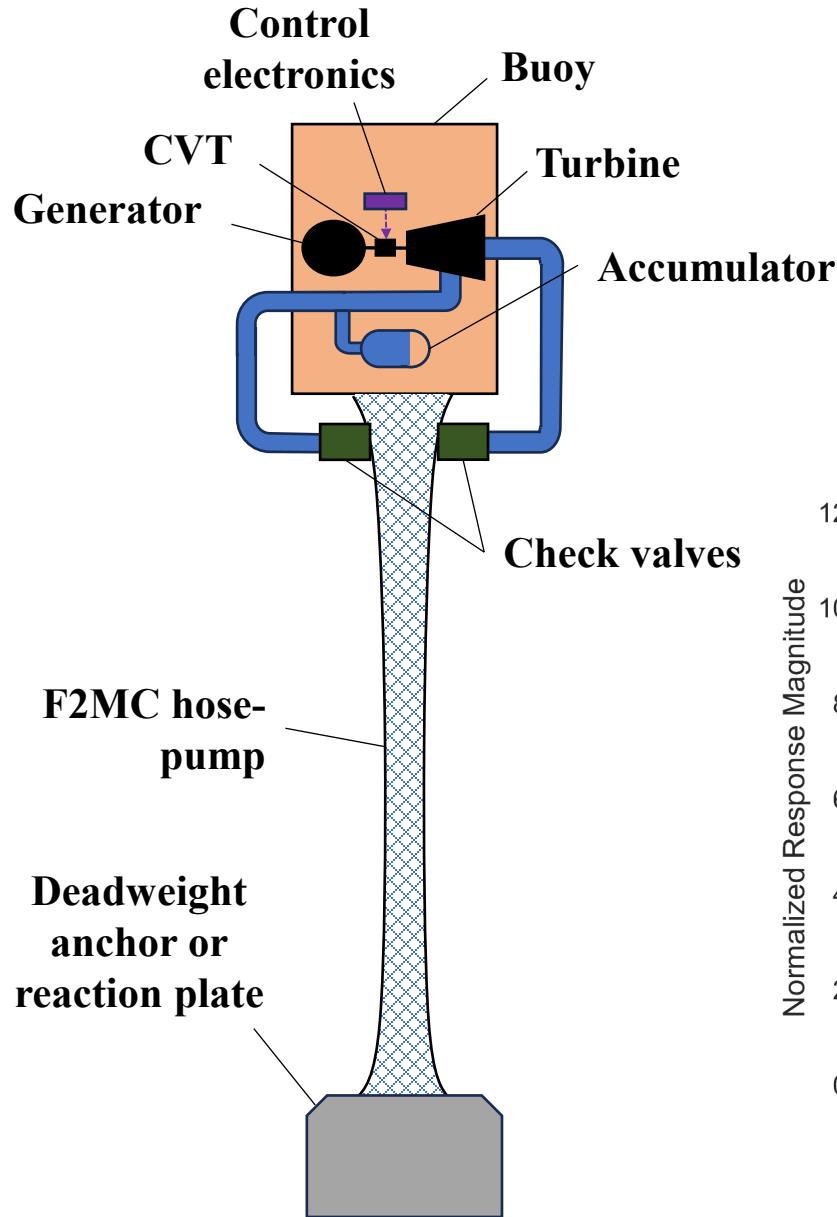
# Wave energy converter (WEC) design: Point absorbers

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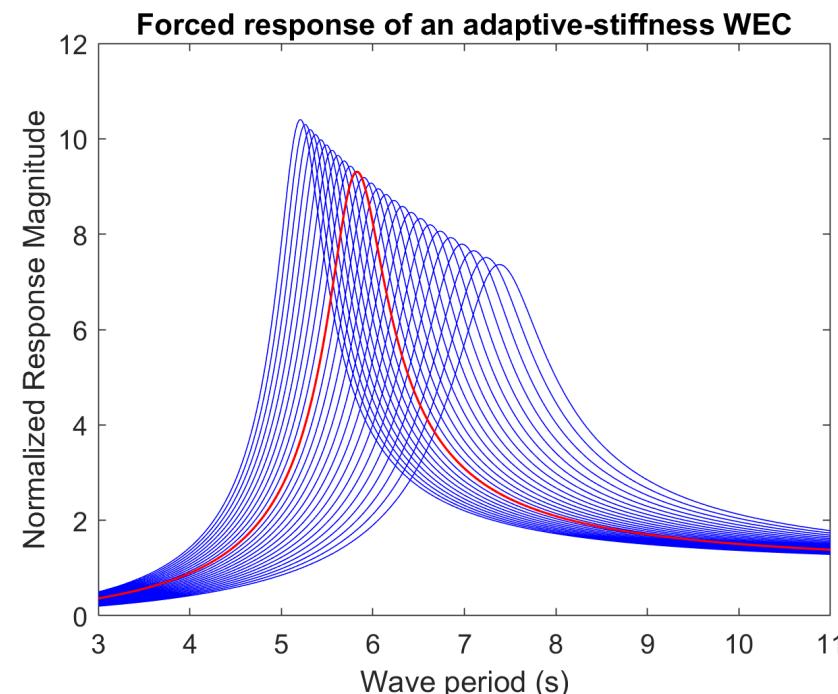


PowerBuoy point absorber [3]

# Proposed adaptive-stiffness hydraulic PTO system architecture



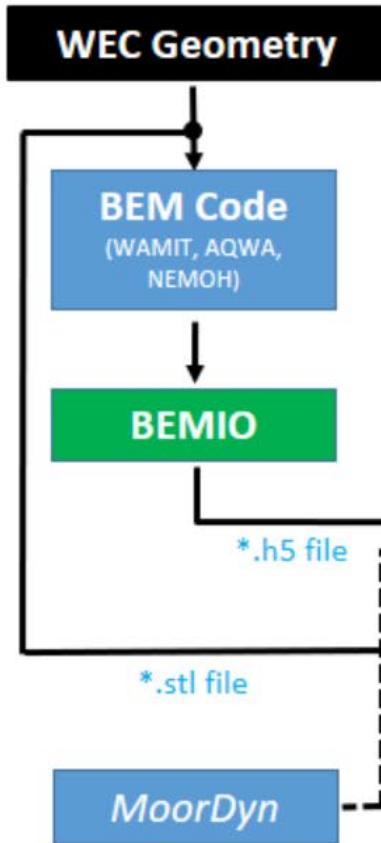
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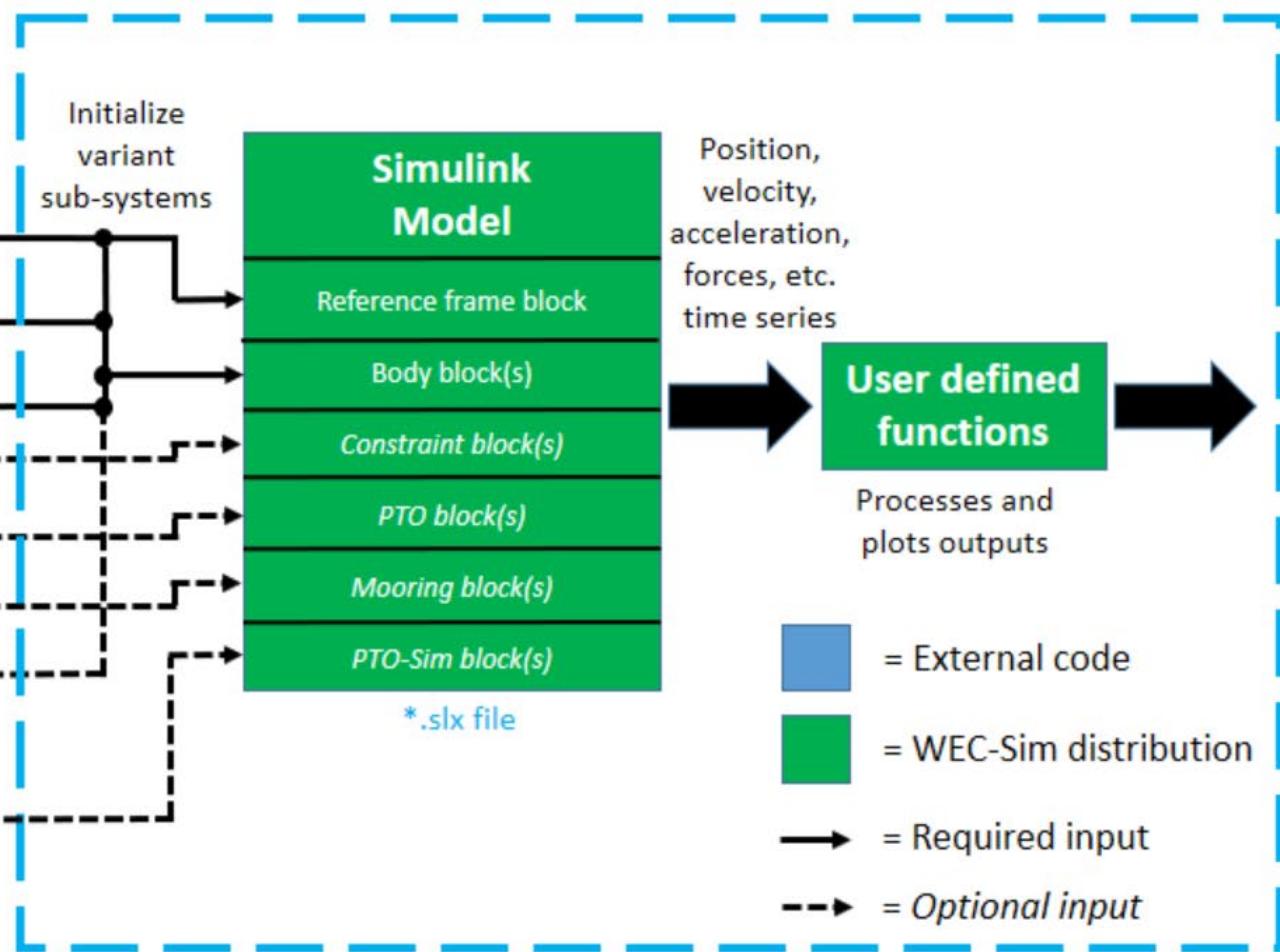
# Objective 1: WEC-Sim analysis of integrated system

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



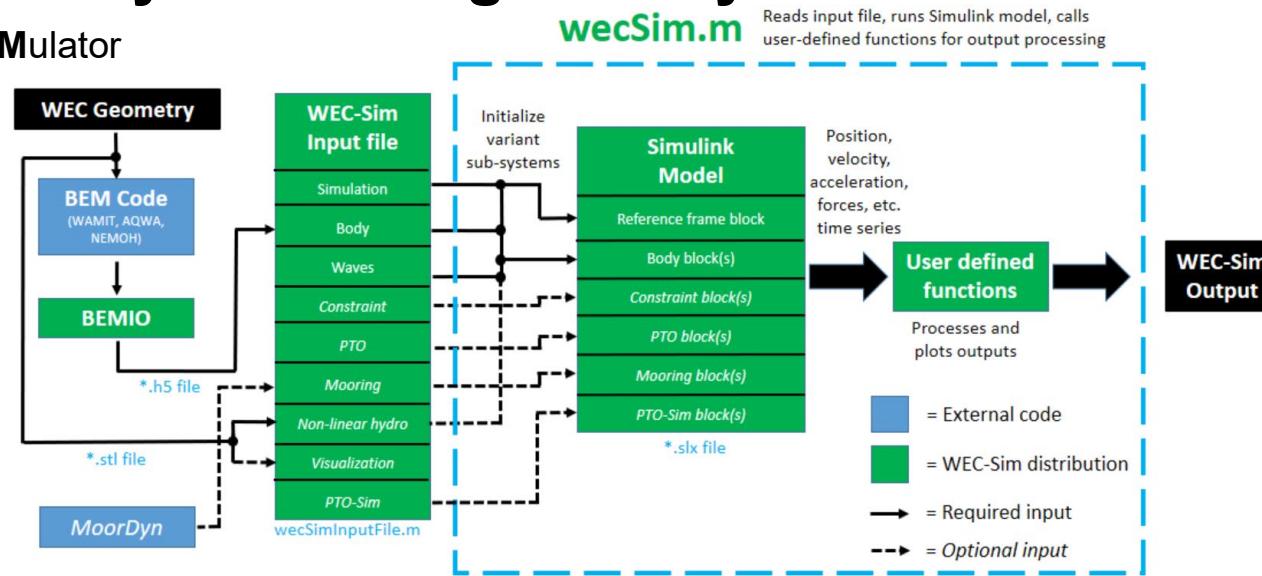
**wecSim.m**

Reads input file, runs Simulink model, calls user-defined functions for output processing

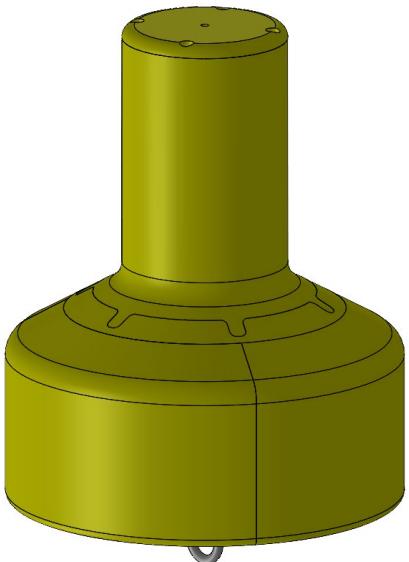


# Objective 1: WEC-Sim analysis of integrated system

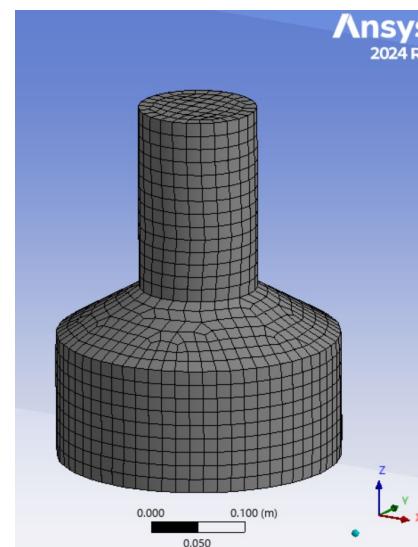
Wave Energy Converter SIMulator  
(NREL/Sandia)



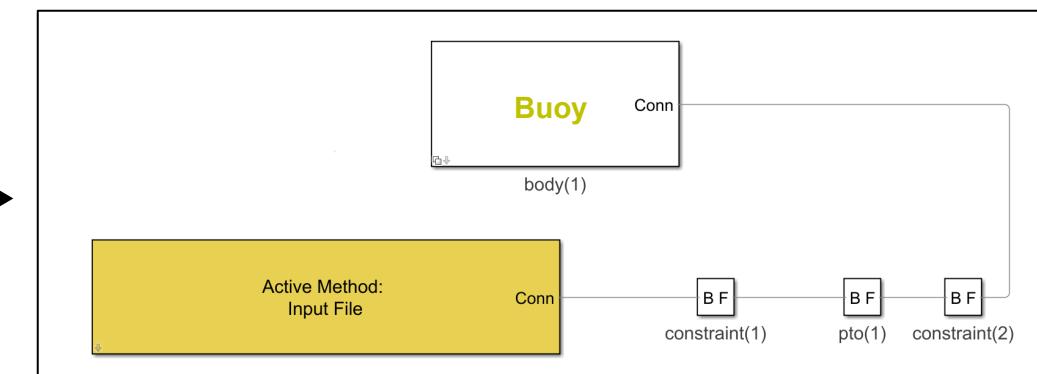
SolidWorks geometry:



Ansys Aqwa (BEM):



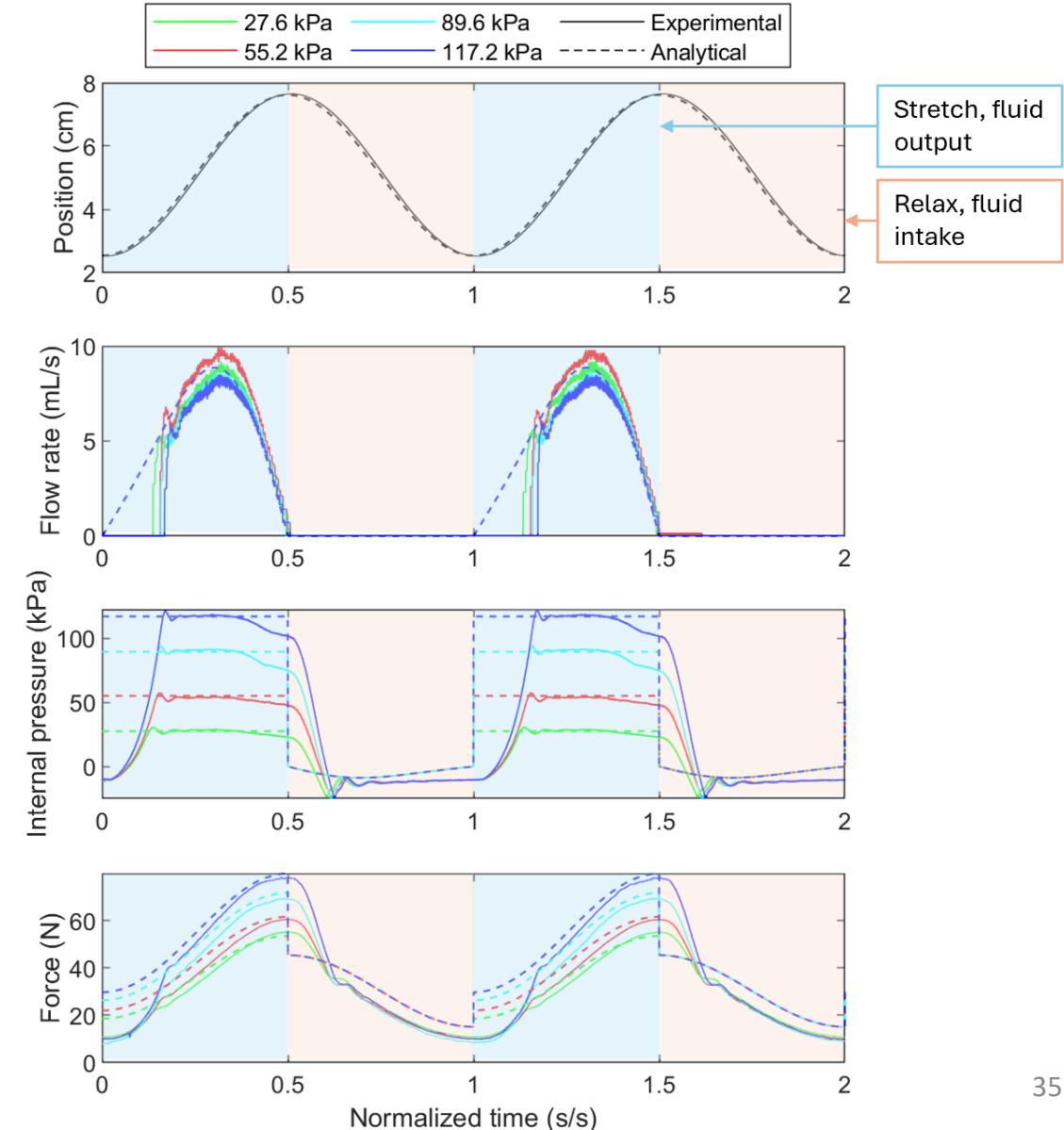
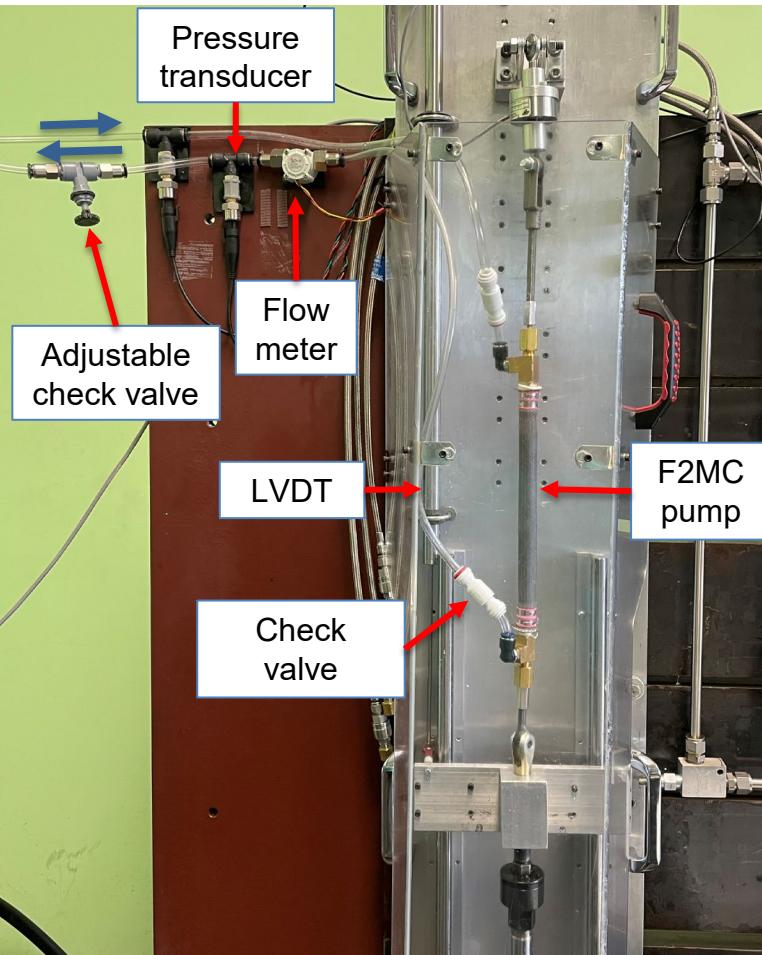
Simulink Model:



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



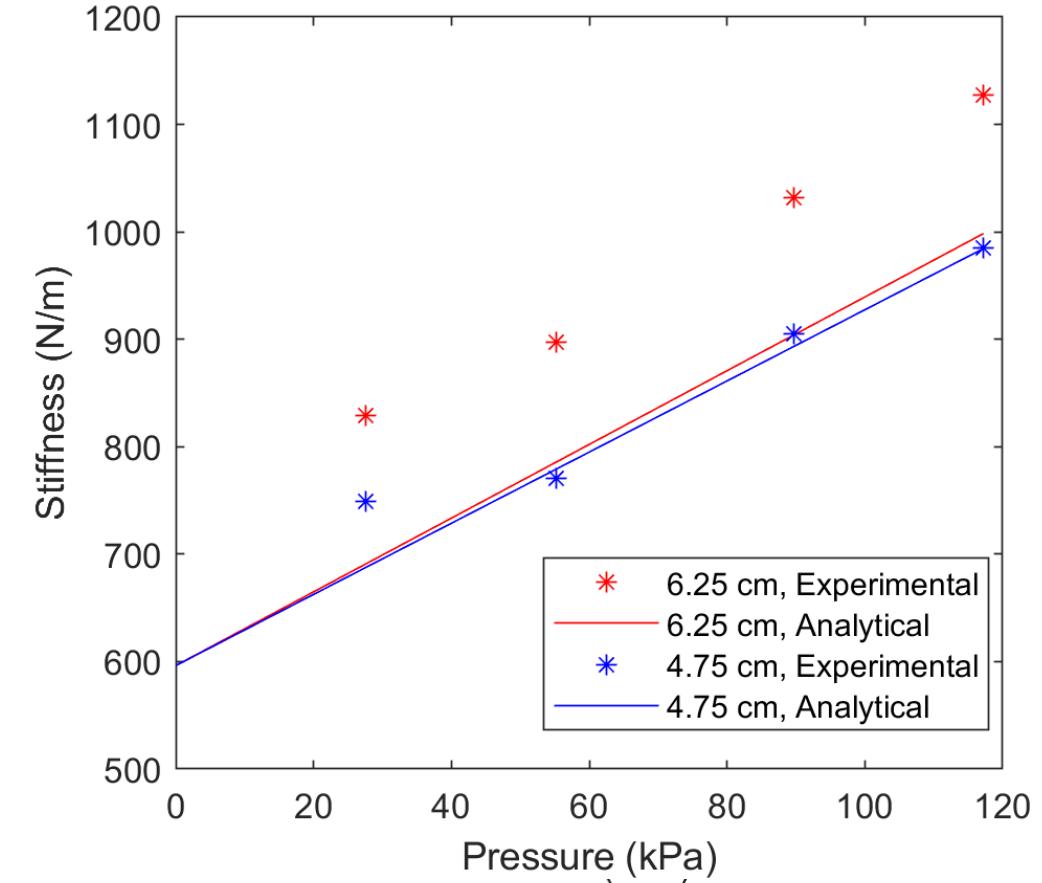
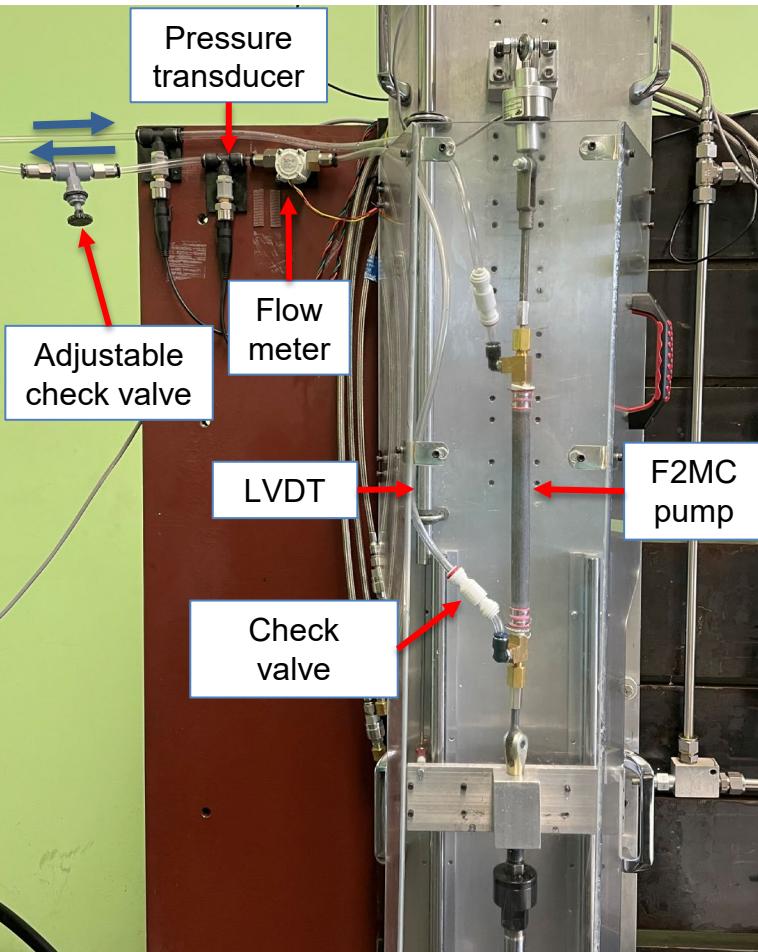
- Adjustable check valve on outlet
  - Direct control of internal pressure during stretch



## 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

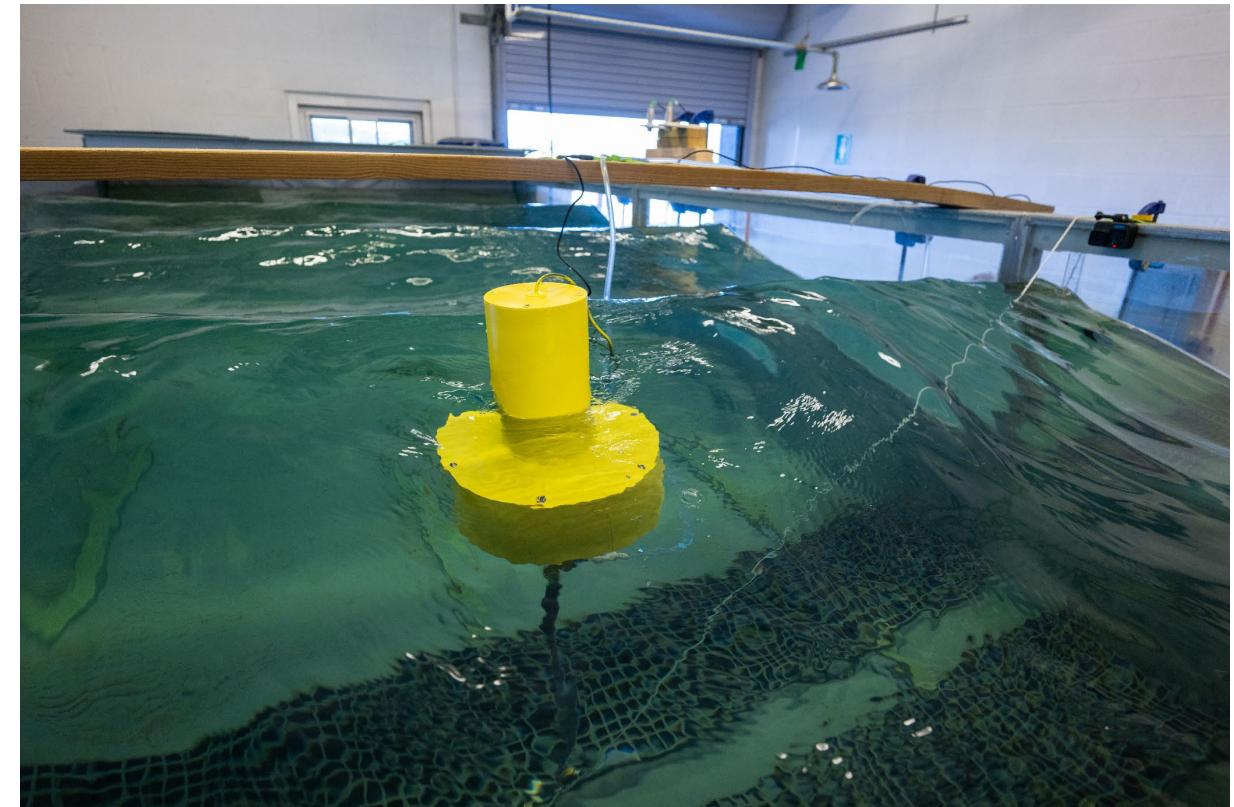
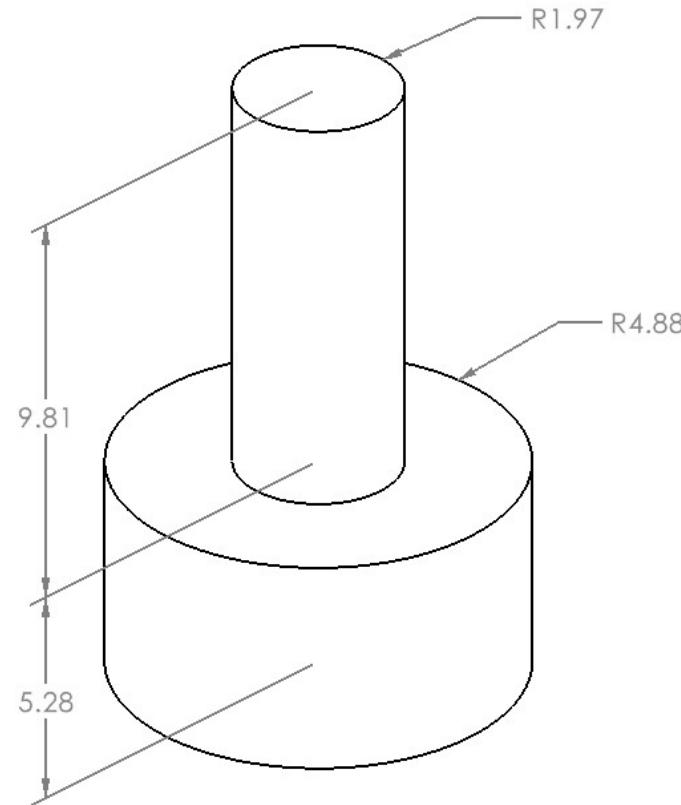


Photo credit: John McCord (CSI)

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

Jul. 16-17, 2024

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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

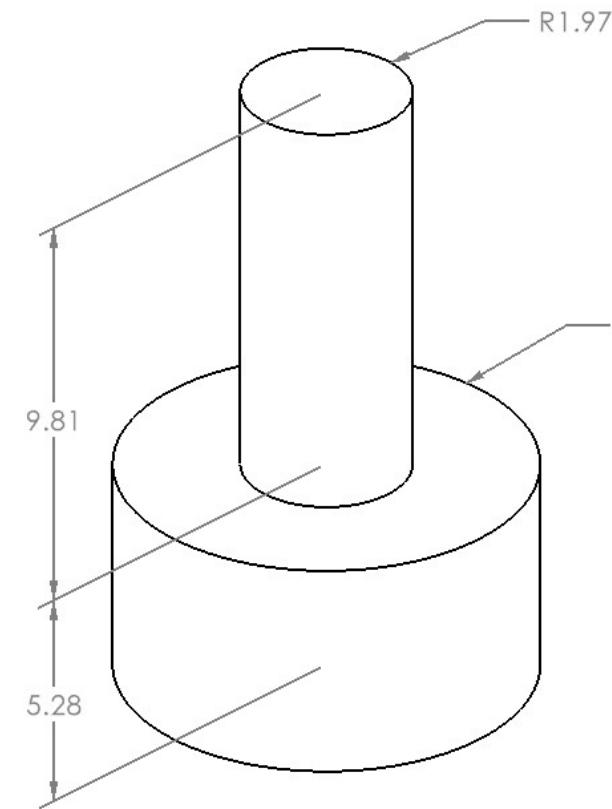
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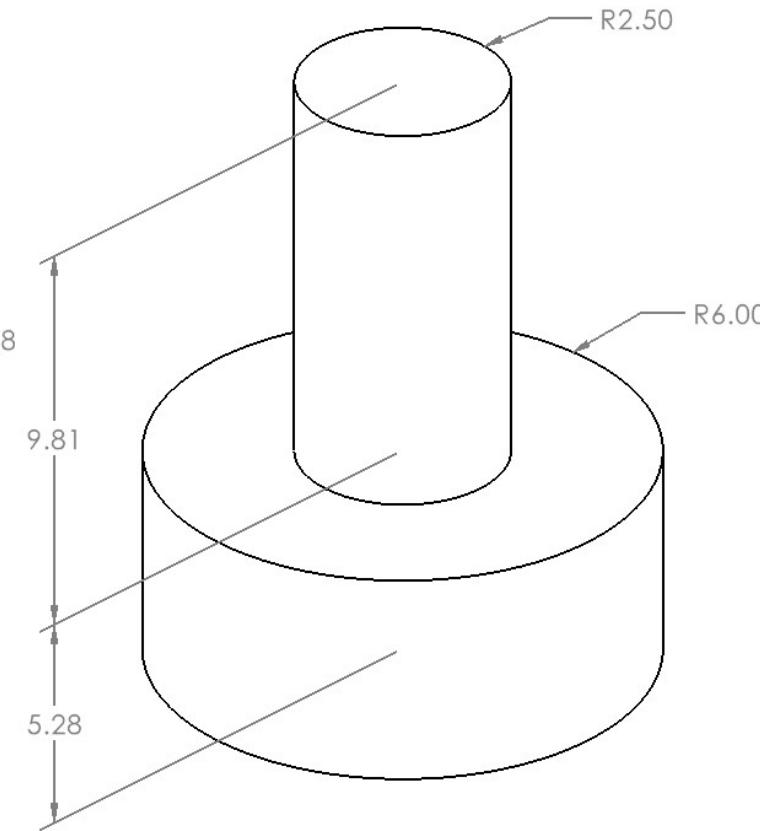
Oct. 9-11, 2024

- 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.

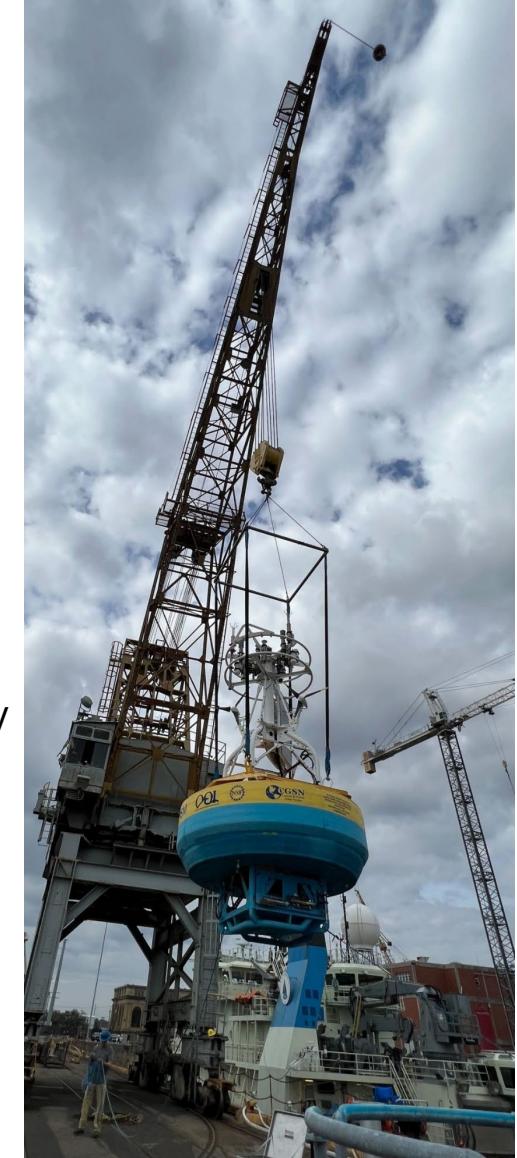
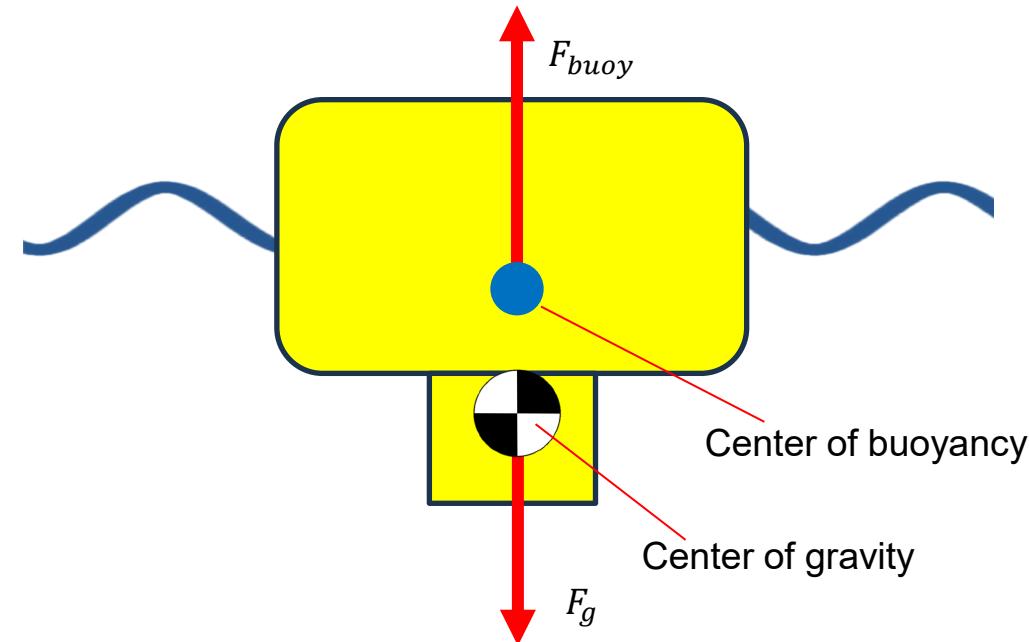
<https://www.whoi.edu/press-room/news-release/ocean-observatories-initiatives-pioneer-array-relocating-to-southern-mid-atlantic-bight/>

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

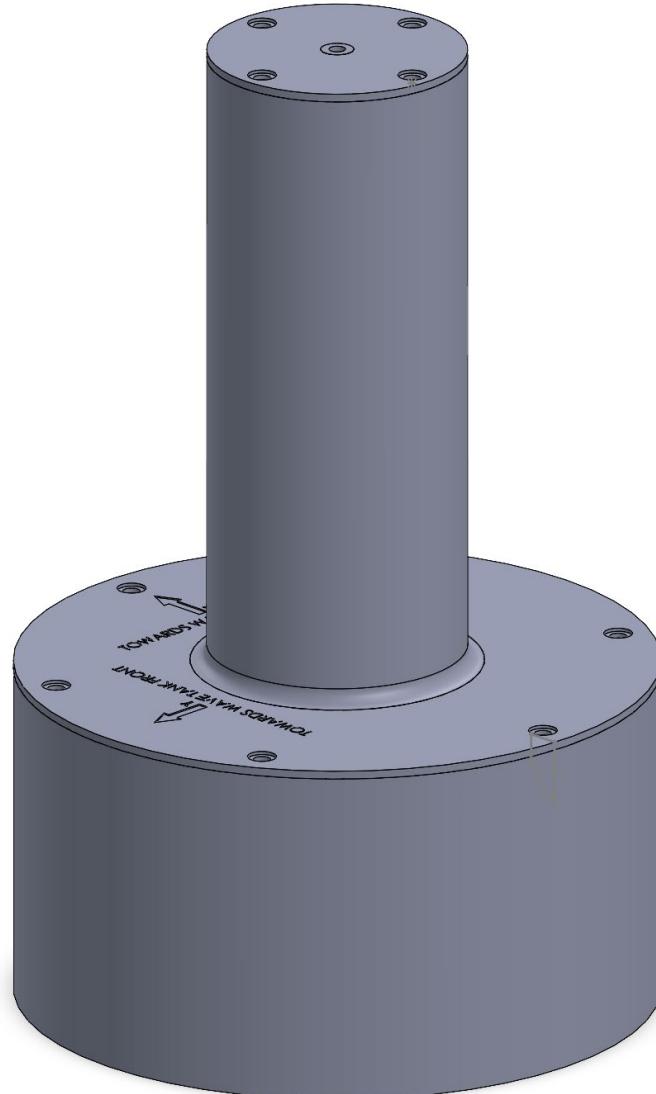
Typical buoys have:

- 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



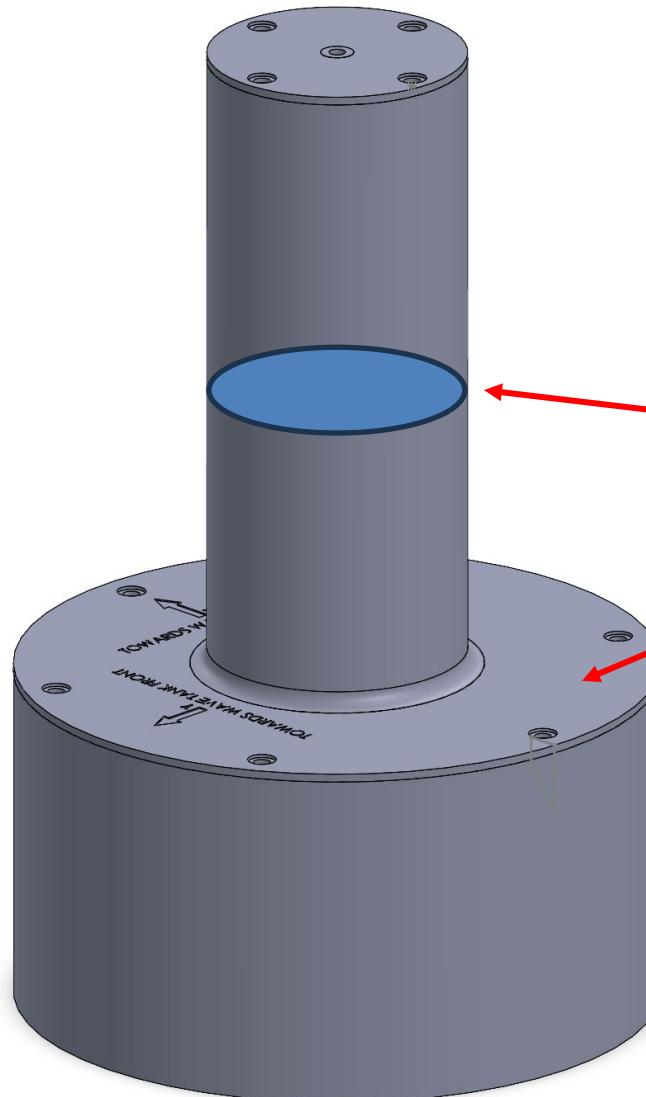
## Sidebar: What's the deal with the shape of that buoy?



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

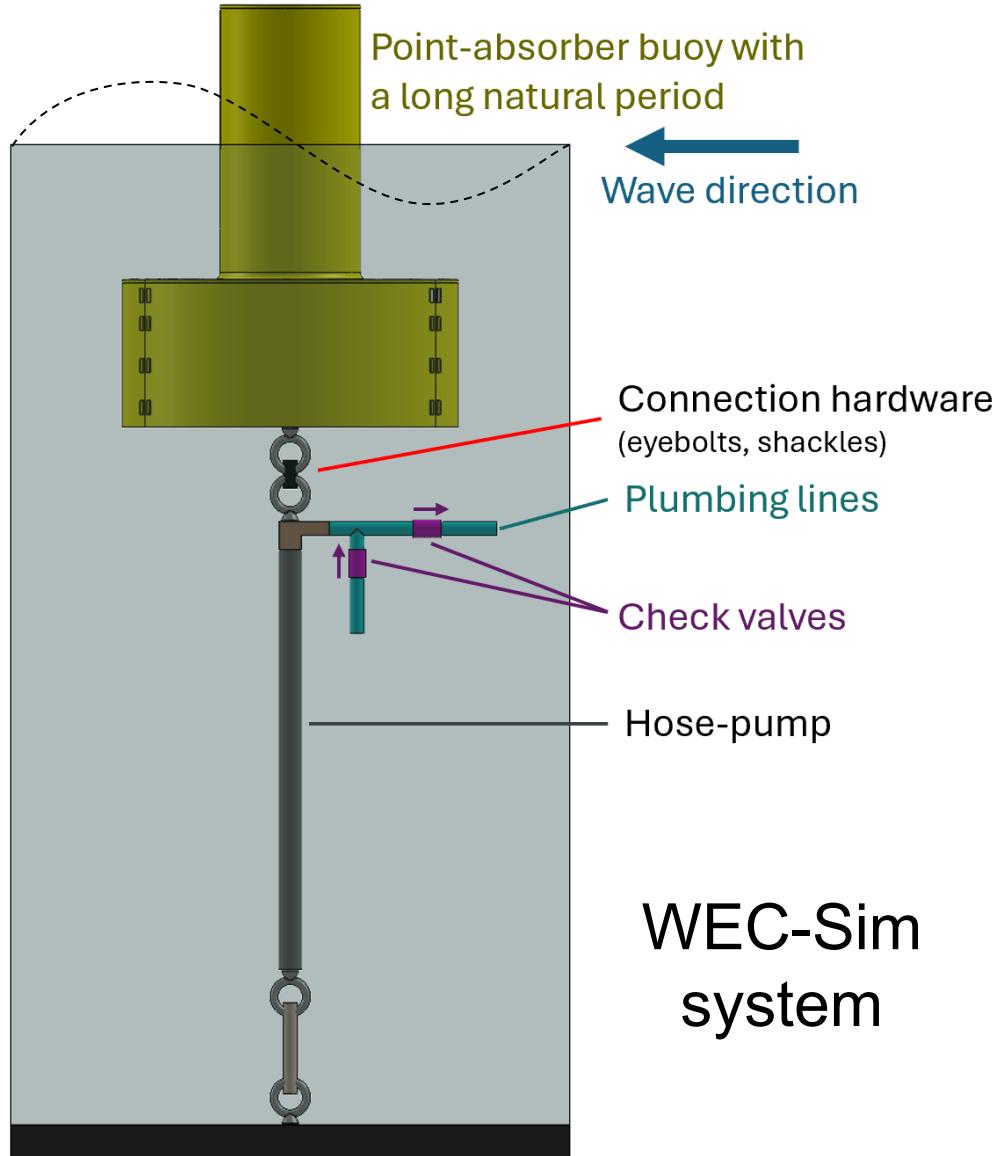
## Sidebar: What's the deal with the shape of that buoy?



### 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

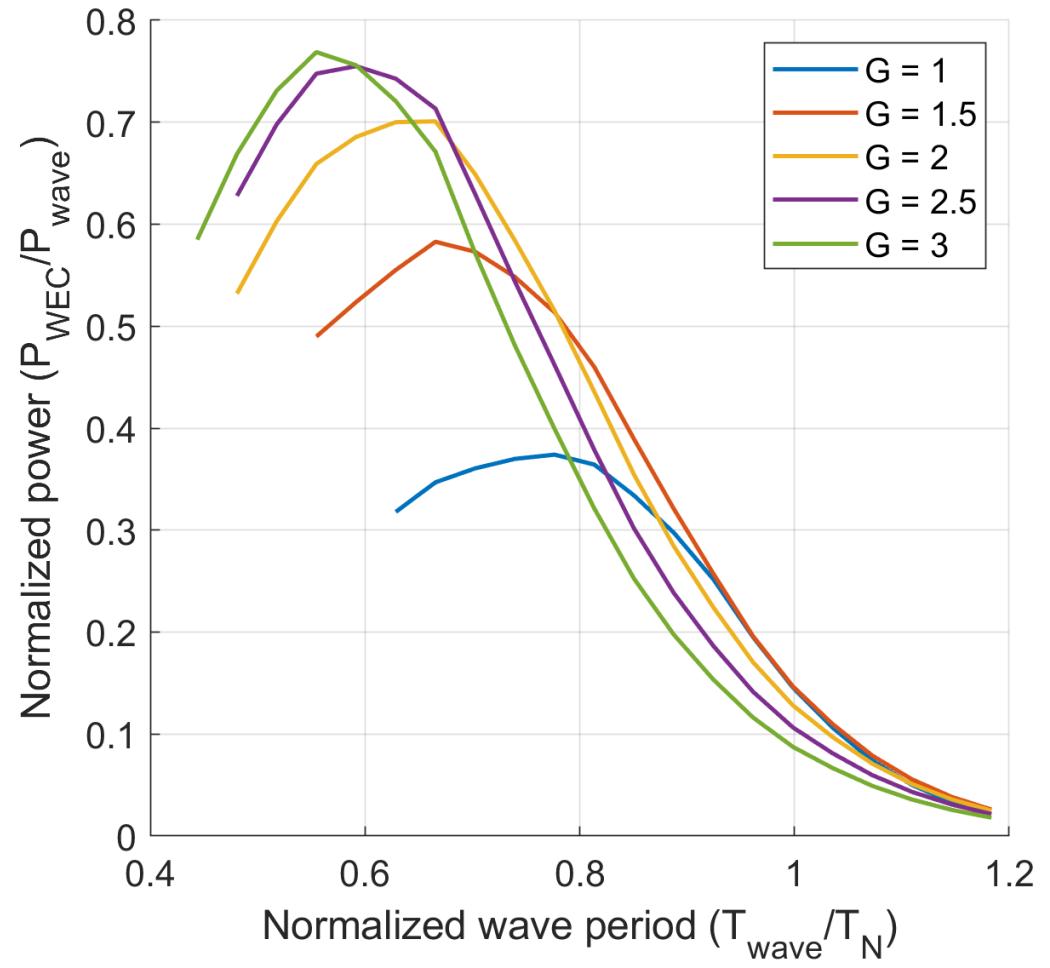
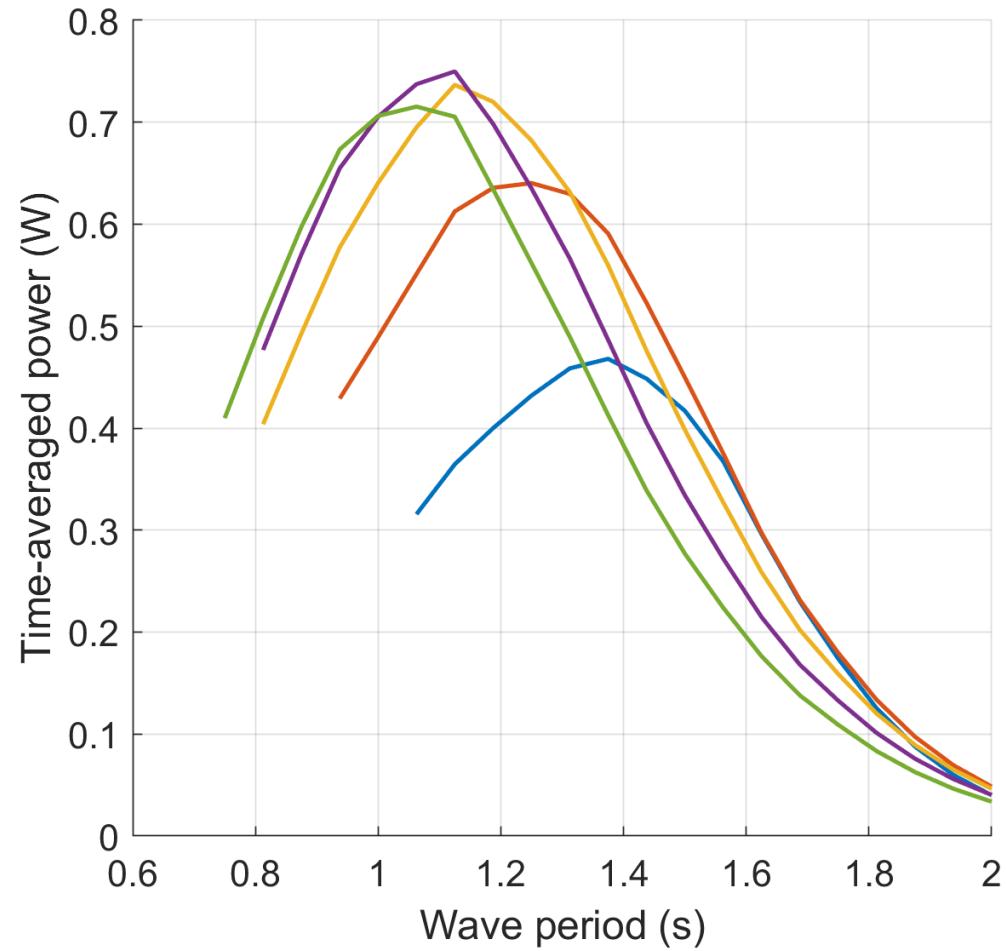


$$k = C_{p1} \frac{k_t k_e}{D^2 R} G^2 \left( \frac{3 \left( 1 + \frac{x}{l_u} \right)^2}{\tan^2(a_u)} - \frac{1}{\sin^2(a_u)} \right) \dot{x} + k_{tube}$$

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

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

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



BEM Code  
(WAMIT, AQWA,  
NEMOH)

BEMIO

\*.h5 file

\*.stl file

MoorDyn

- Buoy geometry modeled in Solidworks

WEC  
Input

Simul

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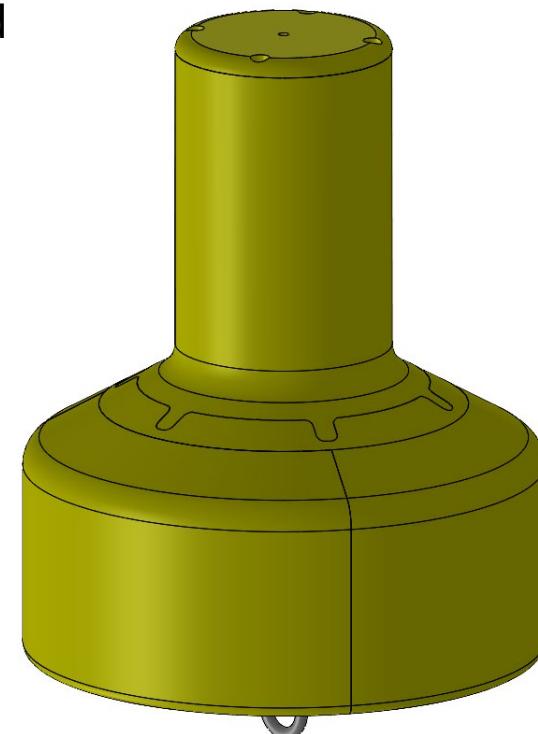
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PTO-Sim

wecSimInputFile.m



model, calls  
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WEC-Sim  
Output

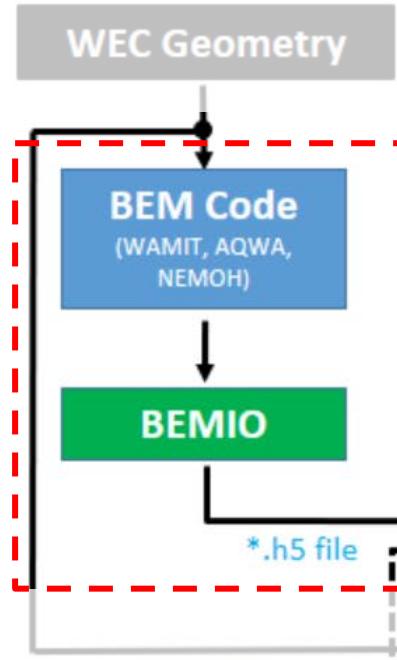
= WEC-Sim distribution

= Required input

= Optional input

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

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



- Buoy geometry modeled in Solidworks
- Hydrodynamic coefficients pre-calculated using Ansys Aqwa
- Hydro data converted for use by WEC-Sim through BEMIO function

