

PCT PATENT APPLICATION**STEPPED BALANCE RING FOR A SUBMERSIBLE WELL PUMP**

Inventors: David F. McManus and Brown Lyle Wilson

Cross Reference to Related Application:

This application claims priority to U.S. Non-Provisional Application 14/158,151, filed January 17, 2014, the full disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference herein for all purposes.

Field of the Disclosure:

This disclosure relates in general to electrical submersible pumps for wells and in particular to a centrifugal pump stage having an impeller balance ring that varies a flow area of a flow path between the balance ring and diffuser in response to whether the thrust is upward or downward directed.

Background:

Electrical submersible pumps (ESP) are widely used to pump oil production wells. A typical ESP has a rotary pump driven by an electrical motor. A seal section is located between the pump and the motor to reduce the differential between the well fluid pressure on the exterior of the motor and the lubricant pressure within the motor. A drive shaft, normally in several sections, extends from the motor through the seal section and into the pump for rotating the pump. The pump may be a centrifugal pump having a large number of stages, each stage having an impeller and diffuser.

During operation, the impellers create thrust, which can be downthrust, which acts in an upstream direction and upthrust, which acts in a downstream direction. The impellers transmit the upthrust and downthrust in various manners to the diffusers. If the thrust is severe, wear occurs between the thrust surfaces of the impellers and diffusers. The wear is exacerbated if the well fluid contains abrasive sand particles. Thrust surfaces formed of abrasion resistant material, such as tungsten carbide, may be employed in pumps for use in sand laden wells. Abrasion resistant material thrust surfaces add to the cost of the pump.

The impeller of each stage may have a downstream balance ring that extends into the next downstream diffuser. The downstream balance ring fits closely alongside a wall surface of the downstream diffuser. The close engagement of the downstream balance ring and the diffuser wall surface defines a downstream pressure cavity between the downstream diffuser and the impeller. The close engagement restricts communication of fluid being discharged from the impeller vane passages with fluid in the downstream pressure cavity. The clearance between the downstream balance ring and the diffuser wall surface remains constant whether the impeller is in downthrust or upthrust.

Balance holes may extend through a shroud or downstream side of the impeller, communicating fluid pressure in the vicinity of the intake of the impeller with the downstream pressure cavity. Also, each impeller may have an upstream skirt that is closely spaced from a guide surface of the next upstream diffuser.

Summary:

The submersible pump assembly of this disclosure includes a submersible motor. A centrifugal pump is operatively connected to the motor. The pump has a longitudinal axis and a

plurality of stages. Each of the stages comprises an impeller in cooperative engagement with a downstream diffuser, the impeller being axially movable relative to the downstream diffuser between a downthrust and an upthrust position. The downstream diffuser has an annular downstream wall surface, relative to the impeller, defining a downstream cavity. The impeller has a downstream balance ring that locates alongside the downstream diffuser wall surface. An annular clearance between the downstream balance ring and the downstream diffuser wall surface increases in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position.

In the preferred embodiment, the downstream wall surface has an annular downstream diffuser rib. The downstream balance ring has an annular impeller downstream rib that is juxtaposed with the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the downthrust position, defining a minimum dimension of the annular clearance. The impeller downstream rib moves downstream of the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the upthrust position, defining a maximum dimension of the annular clearance.

In the examples shown, the downstream wall surface faces inward toward the axis and the annular downstream diffuser rib protrudes inward. The impeller downstream rib protrudes outward and has an axial dimension that is substantially the same as the axial dimension of the downstream diffuser rib.

In one of the embodiments, a plurality of annular downstream diffuser ribs are axially spaced apart from each other by annular downstream diffuser grooves. A plurality of annular impeller downstream ribs are axially spaced apart from each other by annular impeller downstream grooves. The impeller downstream ribs axially align with the downstream diffuser

ribs, and the impeller downstream grooves axially align with the downstream diffuser grooves while the impeller is in the downthrust position. The impeller downstream ribs axially align with the downstream diffuser grooves, and the impeller downstream grooves axially align with the downstream diffuser ribs while the impeller is in the upthrust position.

The impeller has an impeller shroud on a downstream side of the impeller. A plurality of vane passages extend outward from a central intake to an impeller periphery. A plurality of balance holes extend through the impeller shroud from the vane passages and are in fluid communication with the downstream cavity. Fluid within the downstream cavity is in fluid communication via the annular clearance with fluid discharged from the vane passages. The increase in the annular clearance that occurs while the impeller moves from the downthrust position toward the upthrust position increases a fluid pressure in the downstream cavity, which acts on the shroud tending to return the impeller to the downthrust position. The decrease in the annular clearance that occurs while the impeller moves from the upthrust position toward the downthrust position reduces a fluid pressure in the downstream cavity, tending to return the impeller toward the upthrust position.

In another embodiment, each stage includes an upstream diffuser having an annular upstream cavity, relative to the impeller, with an annular wall surface. An annular upstream balance ring is located on the impeller. An annular clearance between the upstream balance ring and the wall surface of the upstream cavity decreases in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position.

The impeller also has an annular upstream skirt on the impeller that has a cylindrical wall surface spaced with a guide surface clearance from a guide surface of the upstream diffuser. The

guide surface clearance remains constant while the impeller moves between the downthrust and upthrust positions.

Brief Description of the Drawings:

Figure 1 is a side view of an electrical submersible pump assembly in accordance with this disclosure.

Figure 2 is a sectional view of two stages of the pump of the pump assembly of Figure 1, illustrating a first embodiment of an impeller balance ring, with the left side showing the impellers undergoing upthrust and the right side showing downthrust.

Figure 3 is a sectional view of one of the pump stages of the pump assembly of Figure 1, illustrating a second embodiment of an impeller balance ring, with the left side showing the impeller undergoing upthrust and the right side showing downthrust.

Figure 4 is a sectional view of one of the pump stages of the pump assembly of Figure 1, illustrating a third embodiment of an impeller with balance rings, with the left side showing the impeller undergoing upthrust and the right side showing downthrust.

Detailed Description of the Disclosure:

Referring to Figure 1, electrical submersible pump assembly (ESP) 11 is illustrated as being supported on production tubing 13 extending into a well. Alternately, ESP 11 could be supported by other structure, such as coiled tubing. ESP 11 includes several modules, one of which is a rotary pump 15 that is illustrated as being a centrifugal pump. Pump 15 has an intake 16 for drawing in well fluid. Another module is an electrical motor 17, which drives pump 15

and is normally a three-phase AC motor. A third module comprises a protective member or seal section 19 coupled between pump 15 and motor 17. Seal section 19 has components to reduce a pressure differential between dielectric lubricant contained in motor 17 and the pressure of the well fluid on the exterior of ESP 11. Intake 16 may be located in an upper portion of seal section 19 or on a lower end of pump 15. A thrust bearing unit 21 for motor 17 may be in a separate module or located in seal section 19 or motor 17.

ESP 11 may also include other modules, such as a gas separator for separating gas from the well fluid prior to the well fluid flowing into pump 15. If so, intake 16 would be in the gas separator. The various modules may be shipped to a well site apart from each other, then assembled with bolts or other types of fasteners.

Referring to Figure 2, pump 15 includes a housing 23 that is cylindrical, has a longitudinal axis 25, and is much longer than its diameter. A drive shaft 27 extends along longitudinal axis 25 through housing 23 and is rotated by motor 17. Shaft 25 is normally made up of several sections, one for each of the modules, and connected together with splined ends. A large number of stages are normally within housing 23, each stage including a nonrotating diffuser 29. Diffusers 29 are stacked on one another and secured against rotation in housing 23. Diffusers 29 have central hubs 33, each having a bore through which shaft 27 passes. Hub 33 has an upthrust surface 37 facing in an upstream direction. In the examples shown, diffuser 29 is a mixed flow type, having diffuser flow passages 39 that incline downstream and inward toward axis 25. In radial flow types, which are not shown, diffuser flow passages 39 lead primarily in radial directions rather than inclining.

Diffuser 29 has in its interior an inward-facing wall surface 41 that may be generally cylindrical and is located radially inward from diffuser flow passages 39. Diffuser hub 33 has an outward-facing wall surface 43 that is illustrated as being conical, but could be other shapes. The downstream ends of wall surfaces 41, 43 are joined, defining an annular pressure cavity 45 that is open on the upstream side.

Inward-facing wall surface 41 has an annular downstream diffuser rib 47 on its upstream end that protrudes toward outward-facing wall surface 43. In this embodiment, diffuser rib 47 has cylindrical portion 47a; a conical portion 47b joins and extends downstream from cylindrical portion 47a. Conical portion 47b inclines downstream and outward from cylindrical portion 47a. The inner diameter of inward-facing wall surface 41 immediately downstream from conical portion 47b is greater in diameter than cylindrical portion 47a.

An impeller 51 locates between a downstream and an upstream one of the diffusers 29. The terms “upper”, “lower” and the like may be used herein but only for convenience, since pump 15 could be operated horizontally. The term “downstream diffuser” refers to the diffuser 29 located immediately downstream of a particular one of the impellers 51. The term “upstream diffuser” refers to the diffuser 29 located immediately upstream a particular one of the impellers 51. Thus as used herein, the term “upstream” refers to structure located upstream from impeller 51, and the term “downstream” refers to structure located immediately downstream from impeller 51.

Impeller 51 has an impeller hub 53 with a bore 55 through which shaft 27 passes. Impeller hub 53 is fixed to shaft 27 for rotation in unison, such as by a key (not shown). However, impeller 51 is free to move axially or float on shaft 27 limited distances between the

upthrust position shown in the left side of Figure 2 and the downthrust position shown on the right side of Figure 2. Hub 53 extends downstream into diffuser bore 35 of the next downstream diffuser 29. Tubular spacers 56 may be employed to extend into diffuser bores 35 and link each impeller hub 53 with impellers 51 upstream and downstream from it. Impellers 53 generally move axially on shaft 27 in unison with each other. The spacer located above the downstream impeller 51 of Figure 2 is not shown.

Impeller 51 has impeller or vane passages 57 that incline downstream and outward. The downstream side of impeller 51, referred to herein as an impeller shroud 59, closes the downstream sides of vane passage 57. The upstream sides of vane passages 57 are also closed in this example. A balance hole 61 extends from each vane passage 57 through impeller shroud 59. Balance holes 61 may be parallel with axis 25 and are located at a point radially closer to an impeller central intake 62 than a periphery 64 of impeller 51, which is where vane passages 57 discharge.

Impeller 51 has a downstream balance ring 63 extending downstream from impeller shroud 59. Downstream balance ring 63 is concentric with axis 25 and located radially outward from balance holes 61. In this example, downstream balance ring 63 is located about half the distance from hub 53 to impeller periphery 64. Downstream balance ring 63 has an annular impeller downstream rib 65 on its outer diameter at its downstream end. Downstream impeller rib 65 has a cylindrical surface 65a. A conical surface 65b may join cylindrical surface 65a and incline upstream to a cylindrical outer diameter portion of downstream balance ring 63. The cylindrical surface 65a of impeller downstream rib 65 is only slightly less in outer diameter than the inner diameter of downstream diffuser rib cylindrical surface 47a. As an example, the difference in diameter may only be about 0.004 to .008 inches measured radially on a side. The

axial dimension or height of impeller rib cylindrical surface 65a may be the same as diffuser rib cylindrical surface 47a. The inclination angle of impeller rib conical surface 47b may be the same as the inclination angle of diffuser rib conical surface 65b. Downstream balance ring 63 and a downstream side of impeller shroud 59 define remaining portions of downstream pressure cavity 45.

Impeller 51 has a skirt 69 that extends upstream from an upstream side of impeller 51. Skirt 69 is a cylindrical member concentric with axis 25. In this embodiment, skirt 69 has an inner diameter that engages a cylindrical guide surface 71 formed on the next upstream diffuser 29. The inner diameter of skirt 69 is only slightly greater than the outer diameter of diffuser guide surface 71, creating a small clearance. The clearance does not change while impeller 51 moves from the maximum downthrust position on the right side of Figure 2 to the maximum upthrust position of the left side. Although skirt 69 is shown located on the outer diameter of guide surface 71, that arrangement could be reversed, with an outer diameter of skirt 69 engaging an inner diameter of guide surface 71. The outer diameter of skirt 69, as shown, is approximately the same as the outer diameter of downstream balance ring rib 65, but that could be changed.

A flat, annular downthrust surface 73 is formed on upstream diffuser 29 immediately inward of guide surface 71. A downthrust washer 75 is located between downthrust surface 73 and a downthrust surface of impeller 51 immediately inward from skirt 69. An upthrust washer 76 is located between an upthrust portion of impeller 51 and upthrust surface 37 of the next downstream diffuser 29. Downthrust washer 75 and upthrust washer 76 need not be bonded to either impeller 51 or either diffuser 29, thus are free to either rotate with impeller 51 or remain non rotating.

In operation, as impeller 51 rotates with shaft 27, well fluid from the next upstream diffuser 29 flows into impeller intake 62. Impeller 51 discharges the well fluid at a higher velocity and pressure from vane discharges at its periphery 64. The discharged well fluid flows into diffuser passages 39 of the next downstream diffuser 29. Balance holes 61 communicate pressure of vane passages 57 near intake 62 with downstream pressure cavity 45.

Downthrust on impeller 51 occurs during operation. In the maximum downthrust position shown on the right, the upstream side of impeller 51 exerts an upstream directed force on downthrust washer 75 and diffuser downthrust surface 73. At full downthrust, impeller downstream balance ring rib 63 is in registry with and at the same axial position as downstream diffuser rib 47. The close clearance between impeller rib cylindrical surface 65a and diffuser rib cylindrical surface 47a essentially forms a seal for downstream pressure cavity 45. Fluid in pressure cavity 45 will be restricted from flowing past ribs 47, 63 to the vicinity of impeller periphery 64 area and vice versa. Balance holes 61 will communicate the lower pressure of fluid in vane passages 57 near intake 62 with pressure cavity 45. The lower pressure near impeller intake 62, which is less than at impeller periphery 64, causes bleeding of pressure from pressure cavity 45 through balance holes 61 to the lower pressure region in vane passages 57. This bleeding of fluid lowers the pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45 and reduces the upstream directed force that the pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45 applies to impeller 51. The reduction in upstream directed force lessens the downthrust imposed through downthrust washer 73 to upstream diffuser downthrust surface 75. The reduced upstream directed force reduces wear on the downthrust surface of impeller 51, on diffuser downthrust washer 73, and on diffuser downthrust surface 75, particularly if the well fluid contains abrasive sand particles.

For various reasons, upthrust also occurs during operation, particularly at higher flow rates. As shown on the left side of Figure 2, during upthrust, impellers 51 move downstream relative to diffusers 29. When impeller 51 reaches the full upthrust position, upthrust washer 76 will transmit a downstream directed force imposed by impeller 51 to upthrust surface 37. Approximately at this full upthrust position, impeller rib 65 will have moved to a point where its cylindrical surface 65a is downstream from diffuser rib cylindrical surface 47a, as shown on the left side of Figure 2. A clearance or flow path between conical surfaces 47b and 65b opens. Fluid in downstream pressure cavity 45 is now in fluid communication with the higher pressure fluid at impeller periphery 64, increasing the fluid pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45. The increased fluid pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45 increases an upstream directed force on impeller 51, which reduces the upthrust force imposed on upthrust washer 76. The increased upstream directed force also tends to push impeller 51 upstream toward the downthrust position shown on the right side of Figure 2. The reduction in upthrust force reduces wear on upthrust washer 76, diffuser upthrust surface 37 and the upthrust surface of impeller 51. Varying conditions will cause impellers 51 to modulate back and forth between maximum downthrust and maximum upthrust positions.

Figure 3 shows a first alternate embodiment, with the shaft and housing not illustrated, and only a single impeller shown. Components that are essentially the same as in Figure 2 will use the same reference numerals, but with a prime symbol. In this embodiment, a plurality of downstream diffuser ribs 77 are employed, rather than a single diffuser rib 47 as in Figure 2. Each downstream diffuser rib 77 is an annular protrusion on the diffuser inward-facing wall surface 41' concentric with axis 25. Downstream diffuser ribs 77 are axially spaced apart from each other, defining a diffuser groove 79 between each. This embodiment shows three

downstream diffuser ribs 77 and two diffuser grooves 79, but the number can vary. Diffuser grooves 79 have the same axial dimension as each downstream diffuser rib 77. The base of each diffuser groove 79 is approximately the same diameter as the inward-facing wall surface 41' directly downstream from diffuser ribs 77.

Also, impeller 51 has a plurality of impeller downstream ribs 81 rather than a single impeller downstream rib 65 as shown in Figure 2. Each impeller downstream rib 81 is an annular external protrusion on downstream balance ring 63'. Impeller downstream ribs 81 are axially spaced apart from each other by impeller grooves 83. This embodiment shows three impeller downstream ribs 81 and two impeller grooves 83, but the number may vary. The axial dimensions of impeller downstream ribs 81 and grooves 83 are the same as downstream diffuser ribs 77 and grooves 79.

During the maximum downthrust position shown in the right side of Figure 3, impeller downstream ribs 81 are in axial alignment with downstream diffuser ribs 77. The close proximity of the cylindrical surfaces of impeller downstream ribs 81 and downstream diffuser ribs 77 restricts and substantially seals any fluid from flowing past impeller ribs 81 and diffuser ribs 77. Fluid pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45' will not be in communication with the higher pressure at impeller periphery 64'. Fluid pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45' will decrease due to communication via balance holes 61' with lower pressure at the impeller intake area 62'. The reduction in fluid pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45' lowers the downthrust force imposed on impeller 51', making it easier for impeller 51' to move upstream from the maximum downthrust position.

The left side of Figure 3 shows impeller 51' in the full upthrust position. Impeller downstream ribs 81 are located radially inward from downstream diffuser grooves 79. A sinuous clearance exists between impeller downstream ribs 81 and downstream diffuser grooves 79 and between downstream diffuser ribs 77 and impeller downstream grooves 83. The sinuous clearance creates a flow path communicating the higher pressure around impeller periphery 64' with downstream pressure cavity 45'. The higher pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45' increases an upstream directed force on impeller 51', tending to cause impeller 51' to move toward the downthrust position.

Figure 4 shows a second alternate embodiment, with the shaft and housing not illustrated, and only a single impeller shown. Components that are essentially the same as in Figure 2 will use the same reference numerals, but with a double prime symbol. In this embodiment, diffuser rib 47'' and impeller rib 65'' are the same as in Figure 2, but alternately, they could be configured as in Figure 3. In this embodiment, each diffuser 29 has another rib 85 in addition to diffuser rib 47''. The second rib 85 is actually downstream of the first diffuser rib 47'' of each diffuser 29. However, to be consistent, the second rib 85 will be referred to herein as upstream diffuser rib 85 because it is upstream of and on an upstream diffuser 29 relative to a particular impeller 51. On the other hand, the first rib 47'' is downstream relative to the same impeller 51 and is on a downstream diffuser 29''. Upstream diffuser rib 85 is an annular protuberance on an inward-facing upper wall surface 87.

Impeller 51'' has an upstream balance ring 89 that is concentric with impeller skirt 69'' and preferably has a greater diameter. Upstream balance ring 89 has an external, annular impeller upstream rib 91 that has a cylindrical outer surface only slightly less in diameter than a cylindrical inner surface of upstream diffuser rib 85. In this embodiment, upstream balance ring

rib 91 has a greater outer diameter than the outer diameter of downstream balance ring rib 65", but that could be changed. A diffuser upstream pressure cavity 93 is defined on an inner side by the close clearance between impeller skirt 69" and diffuser guide surface 71". An outer side of upstream pressure cavity 93 is defined by the interaction of upstream balance ring rib 91 and upstream diffuser rib 85. Although pressure cavity 93 is actually downstream from pressure cavity 45" of the same diffuser 29", it will be referred to herein as upstream pressure cavity 93 because it is located on upstream diffuser 29" and is upstream from impeller 51". The downstream and upstream sides of upstream pressure cavity 93 are defined by an upstream-facing portion of impeller 51" between skirt 69" and upstream balance ring 89, and by a downstream-facing portion of the next upstream diffuser 29" between guide surface 71" and inward-facing wall surface 85.

The upstream pressure cavity 93 of the next upstream diffuser 29" undergoes higher pressure while downstream pressure cavity 45" of the next downstream diffuser 29" undergoes lower pressure and vice versa. . While in the maximum downthrust position, as shown on the right side of Figure 4, upstream balance ring rib 91 is axially spaced upstream relative to upstream diffuser rib 85, opening the flow path between them. The open flow path communicates high pressure from impeller periphery 64" to upstream pressure cavity 93. The higher pressure in upstream pressure cavity 93 exerts a greater downstream-directed force on impeller 51", tending to move impeller downstream from the maximum downthrust position.

At the same time, impeller downstream balance ring rib 65" will be in axial registry with the downstream diffuser rib 47". The sealing or restricted engagement of ribs 47", 65' creates a lower pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45", reducing the upstream-directed force imposed on impeller 51" due to the higher pressure. In this downthrust position, upstream pressure

cavity 45'' is blocked from communication with the higher pressure at impeller periphery 64'', thus bleeds through balance holes 61'' into the intake portion of vane passages 57''.

Consequently, while in the maximum downthrust position, upstream pressure chamber 93 simultaneously increases a downstream-directed force and downstream pressure chamber 45'' decreases an upstream-directed force on impeller 51''. The two changing forces combine to urge impeller 51'' downstream from the maximum downthrust position.

When in the maximum upthrust position shown on the left side of Figure 4, upstream balance ring rib 91 and upstream diffuser rib 85 are in axial registry with each other, sealing or restricting communication of upstream pressure cavity 93 with impeller periphery 64''. Some pressure in upstream pressure cavity 93 can bleed through the interface between skirt 69'' and guide surface 71'' into impeller intake area 62''. Optionally, a port (not shown) could extend downward from upstream pressure cavity 93 into each upstream diffuser passages 39'' to allow bleeding off of pressure in upstream pressure cavity 93. The lower pressure in upstream pressure cavity 93 reduces the downstream-directed force imposed on impeller 51. At the same time, the flow path between downstream diffuser rib 47'' and downstream balance ring rib 65'' opens, which increases the pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45''. The increased pressure in downstream pressure cavity 45'' urges impeller 51'' toward the downthrust position, cooperating with the decreased pressure in upstream pressure cavity 93 to lessen the downstream-directed force on impeller 51''. As in the other embodiments, the small clearance between impeller skirt 69'' and diffuser guide surface 71'' remains constant between the downthrust and upthrust positions.

While the disclosure has been shown in only a few of its forms, it should be apparent to those skilled in the art that it is not so limited but is susceptible to various changes without

departing from the scope of the disclosure. For example, although the impeller ribs are shown on an outward-facing surface and the diffuser ribs on an inward-facing surface, that arrangement could be reversed.

Claims:

1. A submersible pump assembly, comprising:

a submersible motor;

a centrifugal pump operatively connected to the motor, the pump having a longitudinal axis and a plurality of stages, each of the stages comprising:

an impeller in cooperative engagement with a downstream diffuser, the impeller being axially movable relative to the downstream diffuser between a downthrust and an upthrust position;

the downstream diffuser having an annular downstream wall surface, relative to the impeller, defining a downstream cavity;

the impeller having a downstream balance ring that locates alongside the downstream wall surface; and

an annular clearance between the downstream balance ring and the downstream wall surface that increases in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position.

2. The pump assembly according to claim 1, wherein:

the downstream wall surface comprises an annular downstream diffuser rib; and

the downstream balance ring has an annular impeller downstream rib that is juxtaposed with the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the downthrust position, defining a minimum dimension of the annular clearance, and wherein the impeller downstream rib moves

downstream of the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the upthrust position, defining a maximum dimension of the annular clearance.

3. The pump assembly according to claim 1, wherein:

the downstream wall surface comprises an annular downstream diffuser rib;

the downstream balance ring has an annular impeller downstream rib;

wherein the impeller downstream rib is axially aligned with the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the downthrust position; and

the impeller downstream rib is axially misaligned with the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the upthrust position.

4. The pump assembly according to claim 1, wherein:

the downstream wall surface faces inward toward the axis and comprises an annular downstream diffuser rib having an axial dimension and protruding inward;

the downstream balance ring has an outward facing wall surface and an annular impeller downstream rib protruding outward and having an axial dimension that is substantially the same as the axial dimension of the downstream diffuser rib; and

the impeller downstream rib is axially aligned with the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the downthrust position, and downstream of the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the upthrust position.

5. The pump assembly according to claim 1, wherein:

the upstream wall surface comprises a plurality of annular downstream diffuser ribs axially spaced apart from each other by annular downstream diffuser grooves;

the downstream balance ring has a plurality of annular impeller downstream ribs axially spaced apart from each other by annular impeller downstream grooves;

wherein the impeller downstream ribs axially align with the downstream diffuser ribs and the impeller downstream grooves axially align with the downstream diffuser grooves while the impeller is in the downthrust position; and

the impeller downstream ribs axially align with the downstream diffuser grooves, and the impeller downstream grooves axially align with the downstream diffuser ribs while the impeller is in the upthrust position.

6. The pump assembly according to claim 1, wherein the impeller further comprises:

an impeller shroud on a downstream side of the impeller;

a plurality of vane passages extending outward from a central intake to an impeller periphery, the vane passages being defined on a downstream side by the impeller shroud;

a plurality of balance holes, each extending through the impeller shroud from one of the vane passages in fluid communication with the downstream cavity; wherein

fluid within the downstream cavity is in fluid communication with fluid discharged from the vane passages via the annular clearance; and

the increase in the annular clearance that occurs while the impeller moves from the downthrust position toward the upthrust position increases a fluid pressure in the downstream cavity, which acts on the shroud tending to return the impeller to the downthrust position.

7. The pump assembly according to claim 1, wherein the impeller further comprises:

an impeller shroud on a downstream side of the impeller;

a plurality of vane passages extending outward from a central intake to an impeller periphery, the vane passages being defined on a downstream side by the impeller shroud;

a plurality of balance holes, each extending through the impeller shroud from one of the vane passages; wherein

a portion of fluid flowing through the vane passages is in fluid communication with the downstream cavity via the balance holes;

fluid within the downstream cavity is in fluid communication with fluid discharged from the vane passages via the annular clearance; and

a decrease in the annular clearance that occurs while the impeller moves from the upthrust position toward the downthrust position reduces a fluid pressure in the downstream cavity, tending to return the impeller toward the upthrust position.

8. The pump assembly according to claim 1, further comprising:

an upstream diffuser having an annular upstream cavity, relative to the impeller, with an annular wall surface;

an annular upstream balance ring on the impeller; and

an annular clearance between the upstream balance ring and the wall surface of the upstream cavity that decreases in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position.

9. The pump assembly according to claim 1, further comprising:

an upstream diffuser having an annular upstream cavity, relative to the impeller, with an annular upstream diffuser rib spaced radially outward from a cylindrical guide surface;

an annular upstream skirt on the impeller that has a cylindrical wall surface spaced with a guide surface clearance from the guide surface of the upstream diffuser, the guide surface clearance remaining constant while the impeller moves between the downthrust and upthrust positions;

an annular upstream balance ring on the impeller concentric and radially outward from the skirt; and

an annular impeller upstream rib on the upstream balance ring that is juxtaposed with the upstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the upthrust position, and which moves upstream of the upstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the downthrust position.

10. A submersible pump assembly, comprising:

a submersible motor;

a centrifugal pump operatively connected to the motor, the pump having a longitudinal axis and a plurality of stages through which a rotatable drive shaft extends, each of the stages comprising:

an impeller in mating engagement with a downstream diffuser, the impeller having a plurality of vane passages closed on downstream end by an impeller shroud, the impeller having a plurality of balance holes extending from the vane passages through the shroud, the impeller being axially movable relative to the downstream diffuser between a downthrust and an upthrust position;

the downstream diffuser having a downstream diffuser hub with a bore that receives the drive shaft, the downstream diffuser having an inward-facing wall surface radially outward from an outward-facing surface of the downstream diffuser hub, the downstream diffuser having a plurality of diffuser passages located outward from the inward-facing wall surface;

at least one annular downstream diffuser rib protruding inward from the inward-facing wall surface;

the impeller having a downstream balance ring extending downstream from the impeller shroud, the downstream balance ring being located between the inward-facing wall surface and the outward-facing wall surface of the downstream diffuser, the inward-facing and outward facing walls surfaces combining with the downstream balance ring and the impeller shroud to define a downstream fluid pressure cavity in fluid communication with the vane passages via the balance holes;

at least one annular impeller downstream rib on an outer diameter of the downstream balance ring; wherein

the impeller downstream rib is axially aligned with and closely spaced from the downstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the downthrust position, restricting communicating of the downstream fluid pressure cavity with a periphery of the impeller to lower a fluid pressure in the downstream fluid pressure cavity, tending to move the impeller toward the upthrust position; and

the impeller downstream rib moves downstream relative to the downstream diffuser rib in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position, increasing communication of the downstream fluid pressure cavity with fluid at the periphery of the impeller, to increase the fluid pressure in the downstream fluid pressure cavity, tending to move the impeller toward the downthrust position.

11. The pump assembly according to claim 10, wherein the downstream diffuser rib and the impeller downstream rib have a same axial dimension.

12. The pump assembly according to claim 10, wherein the downstream diffuser rib and the impeller downstream rib have cylindrical surfaces that are concentric with each other and juxtaposed while the impeller is in the downthrust position.

13. The pump assembly according to claim 10, wherein:

the downstream diffuser rib comprises a cylindrical surface joining a conical surface on a downstream side of the downstream diffuser rib; and

the impeller downstream rib comprises a cylindrical surface joining a conical surface on an upstream side of the impeller downstream rib.

14. The pump assembly according to claim 10, wherein:

the at least one impeller downstream rib comprises a plurality of impeller downstream ribs axially spaced apart from each other by internal grooves; and

the at least one downstream diffuser rib comprises a plurality of downstream diffuser ribs axially spaced apart from each other by internal grooves.

15. The pump assembly according to claim 10, further comprising:

an upstream diffuser having an annular upstream pressure cavity, relative to the impeller, with an annular wall surface;

an annular upstream balance ring on the impeller; and

an annular clearance between the upstream balance ring and the wall surface of the upstream pressure cavity that decreases in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position.

16. The pump assembly according to claim 10, further comprising:

an upstream diffuser upstream of and in cooperative engagement with the impeller, the upstream diffuser having an inward-facing wall surface;

an annular upstream diffuser rib on and protruding inward from the inward-facing wall surface of the upstream diffuser;

an upstream balance ring extending upstream from the impeller;

an annular upstream balance ring rib on and protruding outward from the upstream balance ring; and wherein

the upstream balance ring rib is axially aligned with and closely spaced to the upstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the upthrust position, and located upstream of the upstream diffuser rib while the impeller is in the downthrust position.

17. A method of pumping well fluid, comprising:

providing a centrifugal pump with a longitudinal axis and a plurality of stages, each of the stages comprising an impeller and a downstream diffuser, the impeller being axially movable relative to the downstream diffuser between a downthrust and an upthrust position;

providing the downstream diffuser with an annular downstream wall surface, relative to the impeller;

providing the impeller with a downstream balance ring that has an annular clearance between the downstream balance ring and the upstream wall surface;

coupling the pump to a motor and with the motor, rotating the impeller of each stage of the pump;

increasing the annular clearance in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position; and

decreasing the annular clearance in response to the impeller moving from the upthrust to the downthrust position.

18. The method according to claim 17, wherein:

increasing the annular clearance decreases a fluid pressure within a downstream pressure cavity of the downstream diffuser; and

decreasing the annular clearance increases the fluid pressure within each of the downstream pressure cavities.

19. The method according to claim 17, wherein:

the impeller of each of the stages has a plurality of vane passages defined on a downstream side by an impeller shroud;

balance holes extend from the vane passages through each of the impeller shrouds, communicating fluid pressure from within the vane passages to the downstream cavity of the downstream diffusers;

increasing the annular clearance communicates a fluid pressure of fluid being discharged from the vane passages to the downstream cavity via the annular clearance, thereby increasing fluid pressure within the downstream cavity; and

decreasing the annular clearance restricts communication of the fluid pressure within the downstream cavity to fluid being discharged from the vane passages, thereby reducing the fluid pressure within the downstream cavity.

20. The method according to claim 17, wherein each of the stages comprises an upstream diffuser, relative to the impeller, having an annular upstream pressure cavity, the upstream pressure cavity having an annular wall surface; and wherein the method further comprises:

providing an annular upstream balance ring on the impeller;

providing an annular clearance between the upstream balance ring and the wall surface of the upstream pressure cavity; and wherein

the annular clearance between the upstream balance ring and the wall surface of the upstream pressure cavity decreases in response to the impeller moving from the downthrust to the upthrust position.