

WIRELESS SUBSEA SEISMIC SENSOR AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to seismic sensors and their method of operation and, in particular, to subsea seismic sensors for subsea deployment in arrays on the sea bed and
5 their operation using wireless communications.

BACKGROUND TO THE INVENTION

Seismic surveys are carried out to search for and manage reserves of oil and gas in underground rock formations. Such surveys utilize the reflection or refraction of seismic waves by geologic layers and rock/soil in order to characterize the subsurface
10 geological conditions and structures that may contain hydrocarbons. When rock formations to be surveyed are under the sea, arrays of sensors may be typically deployed on the sea surface, for example, by being towed behind a survey vessel. However, a floating array of sensors can only detect longitudinal or pressure waves (p-waves), because transverse, or shear waves (s-waves) produced from a controlled
15 seismic source of energy do not travel through water. More information can be gained, and seismic surveys can be more effective, when seismic sensors are located on the seabed. By locating the seismic sensors, such as geophones and hydrophones, and the seismic energy source on the solid seabed, both pressure and shear waves may be introduced directly into the solid seabed and both s-waves and p-waves may be
20 received at the seismic sensors. More detailed Interpretation of the seismic record can then be undertaken to reveal possible hydrocarbon-bearing formations.

Conventionally, seismic sensors are strung into arrays, with sensors wired at fixed intervals. Accurately placing strings of seismic sensors in an array on the seabed is difficult and time consuming. The seabed is not always level and so corrections have
25 to be made when sensors cannot be evenly spaced. The cabling, carrying power and communications between the sensors, constitutes a large capital cost. Electrical wiring also degrades in a subsea environment.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed at providing improved subsea seismic sensors, which may be conveniently deployed individually into an array; which may be individually powered; and which each include a communications module, or transceiver, for wirelessly communicating the seismic data and a location signal from each sensor. Adopting wireless communications and using a local battery or power source for each sensor or group of sensors, removes the need for cables to connect the sensors in a fixed array. This substantially reduces the cost of communication with the seismic sensors by elimination of the costly wiring between the sensors. Furthermore, the invention allows flexibility of location of the seismic sensors, yet still provides for accurate determination of their position.

The relative positions of individual sensors may be conveniently, and accurately, determined after deployment, using the triangulation of wireless location signals between three or more sensors. It is not necessary to fix the sensors in predetermined relationships to each other as with a wired array. Individual sensors may be more quickly and conveniently placed (and replaced) on the seabed without worrying about their precise positions. Ease of replacement of individual sensors without the necessity for precise initial relocation is also helpful in situations where an array is left in place for an extended period, such as for 4D or time-lapse seismic monitoring of reservoirs in production. The sensors may also include a transducer for determining the depth below the sea level at which the sensor is located on the seabed when in use.

The seismic sensors may comprise 3 or 4 component (3C or 4C) sensors comprising 3 orthogonal geophones with a hydrophone, which are powered either by battery, per sensor, or as a group of sensors connected to a local battery, or alternative subsea power source.

In a first aspect, the invention provides a subsea seismic sensor comprising at least one transducer responsive to physical changes following a seismic event; means for recording data from the or each transducer; and a transceiver for wirelessly transmitting the recorded data from the sensor to a remote data collection device in response to a control signal received from an external source.

Preferably, the sensor is adapted to communicate selectively and wirelessly with one or more adjacent similar sensors. Conveniently, the sensor is adapted to determine its position relative to one or more adjacent similar sensors, or the position of another similar sensor relative to it, using wireless communication between the sensors. The
5 sensor can be further adapted to receive and accumulate data from one or more other similar sensors with its own data and to retransmit said accumulated data on to another similar sensor or remote data collection device.

Using wireless communications and independently operable sensors also facilitates alternative methods of data collection from arrays of such sensors.

10 The invention further provides a method of collecting data from an array of subsea seismic sensors according to the invention, using a remote data collection device, the method comprising wirelessly sending a control signal to each one of a selected plurality of the sensors in the array in turn to initiate wireless transmission of the data
15 data collection device the transmitted data from each one of said selected plurality of sensors in turn. Additionally, the method may conveniently include the steps of storing all the received data in the remote data collection device, and subsequently communicating the stored data from the remote data collection device for further processing. The remote data collection device may be a mobile unit installed in a
20 remotely operated vehicle (ROV) or in an autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV), which can be deployed to retrieve data from an array (or several arrays) when necessary, thereby saving on costs of installing a fixed data collection device for every array.

Where the subsea seismic sensors are adapted to communicate with each other, an
25 alternative data collection method according to the invention comprises the steps of wirelessly sending a polling signal from the remote data collection device; receiving one or more responses from adjacent sensors in the array; selectively designating a one of the responsive sensors as a first sensor in a communication chain of sensors, said one designated responsive sensor then sending a polling signal and receiving responses
30 from one or more previously undesignated sensors, and selectively designating a one of

the previously undesignated responsive sensors as the next sensor in the communication chain and the next sensor repeating the polling and selective designation for a subsequent next sensor in the communication chain and the process repeating until the communication chain has a desired number of sensors or until no
5 sensors remain undesignated; sending a data collection signal from the data collection device to the first designated sensor to commence data collection; propagating the data collection signal along the communication chain from the first to the last designated sensor in the chain; and commencing data transmission from the last designated sensor back up the chain of sensors, each next last designated sensor in the chain successively
10 adding its data to the data received from each previous sensor in the chain, the first designated sensor in the chain finally transmitting the accumulated data from itself and all the previous sensors in the chain on to the data collection device.

The methods according to the invention may also conveniently include the step of determining the position of said at least one sensor relative to two or more other sensors
15 in the array by triangulation using wireless signal transmission between the sensors; and transmitting the determined positional data to the remote data collection device.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a block diagram of a seismic sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention;

20 Fig. 2 illustrates an array of seismic sensors adapted to communicate individually with a mobile data collection device;

Fig. 3 illustrates a similar array of seismic sensors adapted to communicate individually with a fixed remote data collection device comprising a separate seabed transceiver unit, for onward transmission to a mobile data collection device; and

25 Fig. 4 illustrates a further array of seismic sensors adapted to communicate sensor by sensor to accumulate data from the array for ultimate onward transmission of the accumulated data via a seabed transceiver unit.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Fig. 1 is a block diagram of a seismic sensor 1 according to an embodiment of the present invention. The sensor 1 comprises a waterproof and pressure-resistant housing 2 enclosing the sensor's electronic modules. A power supply unit (PSU) 3 is provided with rechargeable batteries to supply power to the modules. The PSU may be connected to an external power supply, which can also be used to recharge the internal batteries, via a connector 4. The sensor includes a 3-component geophone 5 to respond to 3-dimensional physical displacement of the sensor and a hydrophone 6 to respond to water pressure variations. In operation, signals from the geophone 5 and hydrophone 6 are passed to the data acquisition module 7. A control unit 8 manages the data acquisition and storage of the data in a memory module 9. The control unit 8 also manages the receipt and transmission of control signals and data to and from external sources via a transceiver module 10 and an antenna 11. The sensor is provided with its own individual electronic identifier (ID) so that signals can be selectively sent to and from each sensor. The sensor 1 is also provided with a handle 12 for mechanical recovery and an automated retrieval mechanism 13 incorporating an electronically operable compressed air cartridge adapted to inflate a balloon to lift the sensor to the sea surface.

Fig. 2 shows an array of sixteen sensors 1 deployed on the seabed and illustrates a method of data collection, which may be employed using these sensors. Four of the sensors 1(a), (b), (c) and (d) are shown connected to an auxiliary power supply 14. The remaining sensors are all powered individually by their internal PSUs.

In this example, data is collected from the sensors individually by a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) 15, which is controlled, and communicates with the surface, via an umbilical cable 17. The ROV 5 sends control signals via its antenna 16 to interrogate the sensors. In this embodiment, each sensor 1 is individually interrogated and each transmits its data sequentially to the ROV 15. In an alternative embodiment, each sensor may be adjusted to transmit on a slightly different frequency so that the data from different sensors can be collected simultaneously on different frequencies.

Fig. 3 shows a similar array of sensors 1 set up to use an alternative method of data collection via a local data hub unit 18. In this case, the hub unit 18 is centrally located to collect data from all the sensors 1 in the array. In the illustrated embodiment, data is received from each sensor 1 via its antenna 19(a). The accumulated data is then stored
5 until an autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) 20 is deployed to collect the data. The AUV 20 is pre-programmed to pass over the array and communicates wirelessly with the hub unit 18, which is instructed to transmit the accumulated data via an antenna 19(b) on the hub unit 18 to an antenna 21 on the AUV 20. As the AUV 20 is not directly connected to the surface via any umbilical connections, the AUV 20 then itself
10 stores the data collected from the hub unit 18 (and can do likewise for multiple arrays and associated other hub units) before returning to the surface when the accumulated data can be downloaded for processing in the normal way.

Fig. 4 shows another similar array of sensors 1 set up to use a yet further alternative method of data collection via a subsea base unit 22 which, in this example, is itself
15 connected to, and controlled from, the surface via an umbilical cable 24.

In this embodiment, the base unit 22 is programmed to poll and communicate wirelessly via an antenna 23 with one or more of the sensors in the array. Each sensor 1 is similarly adapted to poll and communicate with one or more adjacent sensors in order to set up a “daisy chain” communication channel using all active sensors in the
20 array (i.e. 1(p) to 1(a) and back).

To set up a suitable channel, the base unit 22 first polls nearby sensors and, on the basis of acquired signal strength, or other appropriate parameter, selects and designates one sensor (typically the nearest – 1(p) in the example shown) to start the chain. The first designated sensor then itself polls adjacent sensors and designates a next nearest 1(o).
25 The process continues, with each successively designated sensor further designating the next previously undesignated sensor until all active sensors in the array are designated in turn and the chain is completed. In cases where an array comprises spurs or multiple diverging lines of sensors, then one or more of the sensors may act as an interim node, communicating to and from multiple chains of sensors in order to complete the
30 communication channels to and from the base unit to all the active sensors. Similarly,

if a sensor in the chain fails, the adjacent sensors can be programmed to re-route the chain automatically. In this embodiment, when the base unit 22 wishes to initiate data collection from the array, it sends an appropriate trigger command, which is relayed down the chain to the most remote sensor (i.e. to 1(a) in the example). This sensor
5 then responds by transmitting its data to the next sensor 1(b) in the chain, which adds on its data and then transmits the combined data on to the next sensor, and so on until the final sensor 1(p) in the chain transmits the accumulated data for all the active sensors in the array on to the base unit 22.

The use of an interactive, intelligent daisy-chaining of the sensors in the array can
10 overcome problems of communication distance limitations under water, where signals can be subject to rapid attenuation over relatively short distances. This also means sensor transmitters can operate at lower power and for longer periods without needing to recharge batteries, for example.

It will be apparent that various aspects of the methods of data collection illustrated in
15 the examples of Figs. 2, 3 and 4 may be interchanged or combined in large scale arrays, for example.

In each of the options above, the wireless communication can be through either electromagnetic radio frequency, acoustic or optical means, and the sensors and transmitters may be powered by alternative local sources of electricity such as water
20 current turbines, temperature differential thermocouples, nuclear isotope electrical generators, etc.

Each sensor can be strategically placed relative to other sensors for an effective array. Alternatively, a first sensor or base unit could be placed accurately and the remaining sensors distributed with less accurate initial positioning. Triangulation of signals
25 between sensors (not co-linear) can then be used to locate the sensors relative to each other. The distance to any particular sensor may be determined by measuring the relative time delays in the signal from the sensor to three different sensors close to it. Using individually selectable, wireless seismic sensors according to the invention, a decision can be made as to which of the many sensors in an array is to take part in any
30 particular survey, and to define which of the seismic data sources is selected to produce

a particular seismic image. Using data from a subset of the total array can effectively allow an analyst to 'view' a reservoir from one particular perspective. Similar views can be constructed using different subsets of the total array to get seismic profiles from different angles. These separate 'views' may then be combined to improve the resolution of the overall reservoir image.

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CLAIMS

1. A method of collecting data from an array of subsea seismic sensors (1), each subsea seismic sensor comprising:

at least one transducer (5 or 6) responsive to physical changes following a seismic event;

means (9) for recording data from the or each transducer; and

a transceiver (10) for wirelessly transmitting the recorded data from the sensor to a remote data collection device (15) in response to a control signal received from an external source, each sensor being adapted to communicate selectively and wirelessly with one or more adjacent similar sensors, and adapted to determine its position relative to one or more adjacent similar sensors, or the position of another similar sensor relative to it, using wireless communication between the said sensors,

characterised in that the method comprises:

wirelessly sending a polling signal from the remote data collection device;

receiving one or more responses from adjacent sensors in the array;

selectively designating a one of the responsive sensors as a first sensor in a communication chain of sensors, said one responsive sensor then sending a polling signal and receiving responses from one or more previously undesignated sensors and selectively designating a one of the previously undesignated responsive sensors as the next sensor in the communication chain and the next sensor repeating the polling and selective designation for a subsequent next sensor in the communication chain and the process repeating until the communication chain has a desired number of sensors or until no sensors remain undesignated;

sending a data collection signal from the data collection device to the first designated sensor to commence data collection;

propagating the data collection signal along the communication chain from the first to the last designated sensor in the chain; and

commencing data transmission from the last designated sensor back up the chain of sensors, each next last designated sensor in the chain successively adding its data to the data received from each previous sensor in the chain, the first

designated sensor in the chain finally transmitting the accumulated data from all the sensors in the chain on to the data collection device.

2. A method of collecting data according to claim1, wherein each sensor is adapted to receive and accumulate data from one or more other similar sensors with its own data and to retransmit said accumulated data on to another similar sensor or remote data collection device.
3. A method of collecting data according to claim 1 or 2, wherein each sensor is adapted to adjust the operating frequency of the transceiver transmissions according to need.
4. A method of collecting data according to any preceding claim, wherein the at least one transducer comprises a geophone (5).
5. A method of collecting data according to any preceding claim, wherein the at least one or a further transducer comprises a hydrophone (6).
6. A method of collecting data according to any preceding claim, wherein each sensor includes a self-contained power supply (3).
7. A method of collecting data according to claim 6, wherein the self-contained power supply incorporates a rechargeable battery and means for recharging the battery in situ.
8. A method of collecting data according to any preceding claim, wherein the transceiver communicates wirelessly using at least one of radio frequency, optical frequency and acoustic signals.
9. A method of collecting data according to any preceding claim, wherein the remote data collection device is mobilised in an ROV or AUV.
10. A method of collecting data according to any preceding claim including, for at least one sensors in the array, the steps of determining the position of said at least one sensor relative to two or more other sensors in the array by triangulation using wireless signal

transmission between the sensors; and transmitting the determined positional data to the remote data collection device.

11. A method of collecting data according to any preceding claim including the steps of selectively collecting the data relating to a particular seismic event from a subset of the total number of sensors in the array.