

Apparatus and method for isolating a section of a pipe riser bore in the course of riser
renewal

Field of the Invention

5 The invention relates to a mechanical assembly or "isolation tool" for use in controlling fluid movement through a pipe bore during the course of replacing a section of the pipe. For example, the tool may be used in connection with the process of replacing the worn or damaged upper section of a vertical "riser" associated with an off-shore oil or gas production platform. The invention further relates to a method associated
10 with the pipe section replacement procedure.

Background of the Invention

 The invention was developed in connection with providing an isolation tool which could be used 'downhole' in connection with the process of replacing the upper section of
15 an upwardly oriented riser associated with an off-shore oil or gas production platform. Such platforms are prevalent in the Gulf coast region of the U.S. It will be described herein in that connection. However, it is contemplated that the tool and method may find application in other fields of use as well and is not limited to downhole applications in upwardly oriented pipes.

20 The word "riser" is commonly used to identify a steel pipe extending up from the sea floor to a production platform. Oil or natural gas is produced through the bore of the riser from one or more wells connected to it.

 Many of these risers have been in use for decades in the Gulf coast region. As a consequence, in many cases their upper sections have become weakened and worn by
25 wave action, corrosion and other damaging actions. The well operators pay close attention to this deterioration and will initiate replacement of the upper section of the riser when appropriate.

 Typically the prior art replacement operation has involved:

- closing the valves of the sea floor wellhead(s) to terminate production into the
30 base of the riser;

- setting a packer at depth in the riser bore (for example, this might take place at a depth of up to 40' below the platform), so as to provide a barrier sealing off or isolating the upper section of the riser bore from its lower section;
- severing the riser wall at a point above the packer with a mechanical cutting tool;
- 5 • removing the severed upper section of the riser and lowering a replacement pipe section into its place; and
- welding the new riser section end to end to the old section.

It follows that one needs to isolate the pipe wall area, where welding is to occur, from the flammable gas which may still be present in the bore of the riser.

10 Heretofore there have been various downhole tools employed to so control the riser bore. In one case, a pig-type device or packer is displaced to the appropriate depth in the bore and then actuated from ground surface by means of an electronic signal. Upon actuation, the packer mechanically expands its seal element radially into sealing engagement with the pipe wall and anchors itself to the wall, thereby providing a barrier
15 to gas movement along the inner surface of the upper pipe segment.

These prior art tools are closely held and are not publically disclosed in detail in the literature, to our knowledge. However, we understand that they are characterized by several shortcomings, including that:

- the tools are complex and their use entails lengthy set-up times;
- 20 • the tools are not adapted to monitor and provide a real time indication of the on-going competence or possible leakage of the packer seal element; and
- rental of the known tools is expensive.

It is therefore one object of the present invention to provide an isolation tool for use downhole that can be comparatively quickly installed and deployed at the desired
25 depth in a riser bore.

It is another object to provide a tool adapted to provide a real time indication of seal competency or leakage.

And it is another object to provide a tool which, due to the simplicity of its structure and operation, can be supplied at less cost than has been common in the past.

If the tool is to be used at an off-shore platform, it is desirable that it be adapted to be insertable into the riser inlet within the space available. While these platforms are huge structures, the space available to feed an isolation tool into the open upper end of the riser bore is commonly very limited. Typically there might be only about 2 ½ - 6' of "head room" available at the riser inlet. It therefore is a preferred object of the invention to provide a tool which is adapted to be fed into the pipe bore in spite of the usual space limitations at the inlet.

If the tool is to be used in the context of an off-shore platform riser, it is desirable that it remain cohesive in use. Dropping a steel part down the riser bore is unacceptable to the well operator. It therefore is a preferred object to provide a tool whose components are well tied together to maintain its cohesiveness while still allowing tool components to move to a limited extent in the course of 'setting' the tool.

If the tool is to be used in close proximity to a welding operation, it is desirable to avoid heat damage of the elastomer seals. It therefore is another preferred object to provide a tool adapted to protect the seals against deterioration from heat.

Summary of the Invention

In one aspect, the present invention provides a primarily mechanical isolation tool adapted for use downhole. The tool is designed to work at depth within the bore of a pipe, such as an upwardly oriented riser associated with an off-shore production platform.

The tool provides a sealed pressurized barrier internally dividing the pipe bore into upper and lower sections. The barrier functions to block fluid movement along the inner surface of the pipe. But the tool also provides a conduit extending upwardly to the pipe's open end, for venting rising bore fluid at ground surface. The barrier is actuated or 'set' from ground surface by mechanical means extending down through the upper section of the bore.

In addition, the tool incorporates a system for monitoring, at ground surface, whether the downhole seal elements are leaking and it further preferably incorporates means for tying tool components together so as to ensure cohesiveness.

One embodiment of the downhole isolation tool comprises, in combination:

- support means, at ground surface, for engaging the upper end of the pipe and supporting and anchoring downwardly extending segments of the tool;
- an isolation assembly for positioning lengthwise in the pipe bore at depth, said assembly comprising a linear assemblage of components including a front plate, a front seal element, a central body, a back seal element and a back plate, said seal elements being axially spaced apart, resilient, deformable and annular, each said seal element being positioned between one end of the body and a plate, whereby, when the plates and body are compressed together, the seal elements may be squeezed and deformed outwardly into sealing engagement with the pipe and may thereby combine with the outer surface of the body and the inner surface of the pipe to form a sealed annular space;
- a housing assembly, preferably a string of tubular joints connectable end to end, for lowering the isolation assembly into the pipe bore and positioning it at the desired operational depth, said housing assembly being operative to be anchored at its upper end to the support means and connectable at its lower end with the isolation assembly, whereby the front plate may be held stationary and fixed in place by said housing assembly;
- a tubular vent rod means, preferably a string of tubular rods connectable end to end, for connection with the back plate and extending upwardly from the back plate through the isolation assembly to ground surface, said vent rod means being operative to communicate with the lower section of the pipe bore;
- means, supportable by the support means, for tensioning the vent rod means to thereby compress the plates and body together and deform the seal elements so that they sealably engage the pipe;
- monitoring means, extendable through the upper section of the pipe bore and connectable with the isolation assembly, for circulating pressurized liquid through the sealed space and back to ground surface;
- whereby the isolation assembly may provide a sealing barrier having a pair of annular seal elements sealing against the pipe's inner surface at axially spaced apart intervals, the vent rod means may simultaneously provide a passageway for

segregated venting of pipe bore fluid from the pipe bore's lower section through the barrier to ground surface, said rod means may additionally function to actuate the isolation assembly, the housing assembly may provide a means for lowering, holding and recovering the isolation assembly and the monitoring means may
5 function to provide an indication as to whether the seal elements are leaking.

In a preferred optional feature, the back plate is connected by floating locking pins with the back end of the body, said pins being positioned internally of the body in bores which permit limited axial movement of the pins and back plate but the body has shoulders which prevent separation of the back plate and body. In addition, the front
10 plate is connected with the body by locking pins which permit limited axial movement of the body toward the front plate. As a consequence of this arrangement the vent rod means can pull the back plate and body toward the front plate and thereby squeeze the seal elements to actuate the isolation assembly, while the locking pins still ensure cohesiveness of the isolation assembly.

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Brief Description of the Drawings

These and other features of the invention will become more apparent in the following detailed description in which reference is made to the appended drawings wherein:

20 Figure 1 is a cross-sectional view of the invention according to embodiments herein;

Figure 2 is a partial cut-away side view of the isolation assembly;

Figure 3 is an exploded perspective view of the components of the isolation assembly of Figure 1;

25 Figure 4 is a perspective view of the back plate of the isolation assembly;

Figure 5 is a partial cut-away side view of the back plate shown in Figure 4;

Figure 6 is a perspective view of the vent rod of the isolation assembly;

Figure 7 is a perspective view of the body of the isolation assembly;

Figure 8 is a front view of the body shown in Figure 7;

30 Figure 9 is a cross-sectional view of the body taken at line I-I in Figure 8;

Figure 10 is a cross-sectional view of the body taken at section II-II in Figure 8;

Figure 11 is a cross-sectional view of the body taken at section III-III in Figure 8;

Figure 12 is a perspective view of the front plate assembly of the isolation assembly;

5 Figure 13 is a partial cut-away side view of the front plate assembly shown in Figure 12;

Figure 14 is a cross-sectional partial cut-away view of the back plate, body, vent rod and a seal element in an assembled state, wherein a first set of locking pins are shown as fastening the body with the back plate;

10 Figure 15 is a cross-sectional partial cut-away view of part of the isolation assembly, incorporating a pair of axially spaced apart seal elements, in an assembled state, wherein a second set of locking pins are shown fastening the front plate to the body;

Figure 16 is an enlarged partial cut-away side view of part of the isolation assembly positioned within a pipe in an actuated state, wherein a sealed space, defined by the body, pipe and seal elements, is shown;

Figure 17 is a side view of a vent rod extension;

Figure 18 is a side view of a modular housing string;

Figure 19 is a partial cut-away side view of a coupling connecting a vent rod extension to the vent rod;

Figure 20 is a side view of the coupling and the vent pipe extension attached to the isolation assembly;

Figure 21 is a partial cut-away perspective view showing an embodiment of the fully assembled downhole isolation tool;

25 Figure 22 is a partial cut-away side view of the tool shown in Figure 21;

Figure 23 is a perspective view of the tool, showing a venting tube being connected to the vent rod extension, including an enlarged perspective view of the venting tube connected to the vent rod extension;

Figure 24 is a partial cut-away side view of the isolation assembly;

Figure 25 is a partial cut-away side view of another embodiment of the isolation assembly;

Figure 26 is a partial cut-away side view of the tool in the process of being lowered into a pipe;

5 Figure 27 is a partial cut-away side view of the tool positioned within the pipe for isolating a section of the pipe, wherein a cut line has been formed through the pipe side wall;

Figure 28 is a partial cut-away side view of the tool positioned within the pipe for isolating a section of the pipe, wherein a weld has been formed at the cut line;

10 Figure 29 is a partial cut-away side view of the tool positioned within the welded pipe for pressure testing the weld;

Figure 30 is a perspective view of a blow out plate; and

Figure 31 is a front view of the blow out plate shown in Figure 30

Figure 32 is a perspective view of the tool.

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Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment

Throughout the description the following terms will be assumed to have the following meanings:

20 "Axial" – this term is used to indicate a direction along the longitudinal axis of the pipe and tool. Thus, the term "axially extending" will be understood to mean extending in a direction parallel to the longitudinal axis of the pipe.

 "Front" and "back" and "upper" and "lower" – these terms are used interchangeably to describe the positions of various components of the tool. The terms "front" and "upper" indicate a position closer to the open end of the pipe. The terms
25 "back" and "lower" indicate a position away from the open end of the pipe.

"Ground surface" is intended to mean the off-shore platform (not shown) or an alternative surface structure adjacent the upper end of the pipe.

 The isolation tool 1 is shown assembled and ready to operate in Figure 1. It is illustrated as inserted in an upwardly oriented pipe 2, such as an off-shore platform riser
30 whose upper end is to be replaced. The isolation tool 1 will be described herein below in

that context, although it is contemplated that it could be applied in a horizontal pipe as well.

The isolation tool 1 comprises a combination of assemblies which can be deployed into and can work together in the bore 3 of the pipe 2 at depth (usually the
5 depth is less than 40 feet).

The purpose of the tool 1 is to provide a sealed barrier which prevents flammable downhole fluid from migrating up along the inner surface 4 of the pipe 2 to the point where cutting and welding operations are to take place. Instead the fluid is to be vented through the tool to ground surface in a segregated way.

10 It is intended to provide an isolation tool 1 that is primarily mechanical in nature. The tool can be actuated from ground surface and the competence of its seals can be monitored in real time.

Having reference to Figures 1 and 2, the isolation tool 1 comprises in general:

- 15 • an isolation assembly 100a incorporating a linear assemblage of components including: a front plate 112, a front seal element 31, a central body 61, a back seal element 35 and a back plate 11. When the components are compressed together, the axially spaced apart annular seal elements 31, 35 are deformed radially outward and seal against the inner surface 4 of the pipe 2, thereby combining with the outer surface 62 of the body 61 and the pipe inner surface 4 to define an
20 annular sealed space 63;
- a housing assembly 7 incorporating a string 8 of tubular pipe joints 9 for lowering the isolation assembly 100a into position, holding it stationary during operation and recovering it upon completion of the work;
- 25 • a vent rod means, comprising a string of tubular vent rods 17, which is connected with the back plate 11, communicates with the pipe lower bore 12, slidably extends through the balance of the isolation assembly 100a and up through the housing assembly 7 to ground surface. The vent rod string 17 can be pulled upwardly and tensioned at ground surface to actuate the isolation assembly 100a by compressing its components together. It also functions to vent downhole fluid
30 through the isolation assembly 100a to ground surface;

- actuating means, such as a long nut or hydraulic tensioner, provided at ground surface for pulling and maintaining the vent rod string 17 in a tensioned state so that the seal elements 31, 35 engage and continue to seal against the pipe 2;
- a support means 21 positioned at ground surface for supporting and anchoring the
5 downwardly extending components; and
- a monitoring means 24, comprising conduits 161, 163 extending down through the bore of the pipe 2 from ground surface and connecting with the isolation assembly's sealed annular space 63. The monitoring means 24 circulates pressurized water down through the annular sealed space 63 and back up to
10 ground surface. The water pressure is monitored and provides an indication in real time of seal leakage.

Now in greater detail and having reference to Figures 3-5, the back plate 11 is a circular disk having front and back faces 14, 16. At its front end, the plate 11 forms a plurality of threaded recesses 67 for receiving the threaded ends of a first set of "floating"
15 locking pins 181. Each of the plurality of recesses 67 extend only part way into the plate 11.

The back plate 11 serves as a barrier extending transversely of the pipe bore 3. It also plays a role in the action of compressing the body 61 and plates 11, 112 together to deform the seal elements 31, 35 outwardly into sealing engagement with the pipe's inner
20 surface 4.

Referring to Figures 4 and 5, the back plate 11 is shown as also having a central threaded aperture 19 extending therethrough, for connection with the vent rod string 17 (shown in Figure 6).

The front face 14 of the back plate 11 is beveled along its perimeter to form an
25 annular bevel 22. The bevel 22 is rearwardly angled, preferably at about 15°.

As previously indicated, the vent rod string 17 is connected with the back plate 11 and extends through it. Having regard to Figure 6, the string's open lower end communicates with the downhole pipe bore 12. An axial bore 47 vents downhole fluid through the isolation assembly 100a and up to ground surface. As previously indicated,
30 string 17 further functions, when pulled upwardly from ground surface, to bias the back

plate 11 and body 61 toward the front plate 112 and thereby compress the seal elements 31, 35. In summary, the vent rod string 17 performs two functions – it provides a means for venting downhole fluid to ground surface and it contributes to compressing the plates 11, 112 and body 61 together, to thereby deform the seal elements 31, 35.

5 The vent rod string 17 can be formed by adding one or more modular extensions to the isolation assembly's vent rod 17. In the case where the available head room between the deck of the off-shore platform and the riser inlet is only about 3', extension rods may be only 2' in length.

10 The body 61 is generally cylindrical in configuration and is shown in Figures 7-11. It has a front face 77, a back face 78 and an outer side surface 62. The outer side surface 62 has an outer diameter that is slightly less than the inner diameter of the pipe 2 being worked in, so that an annular clearance or space 63 is defined therebetween.

15 The body 61 forms a plurality of through holes 65, a plurality of threaded recesses 67, a first port 69 for coupling a first monitoring conduit 161 to the body and a second port 71 for coupling a second monitoring conduit 163 to the body. It further forms a central bore 73 extending therethrough.

 The central bore 73 is provided through the body 61 to allow the vent rod 17 to extend therethrough. The diameter of the body bore 73 is slightly greater than the outer diameter of the vent rod 17. As a result the body 61 is slidable on the vent rod 17.

20 As shown in Figure 9, the body's first port 69 connects with a first channel 91 extending radially out to the body's circumferential surface 62, at the front end of the body 61. The second port 71 connects with a second channel 92 that also extends radially out to the body's surface 62, at the back end of the body 61.

25 As shown in Figure 10, each of the through holes 65 includes a larger diameter portion 96 on the front end thereof, and a smaller diameter portion 97 on the back end thereof. A ledge 75 is therefore formed at the interface between the portions 96, 97.

 As shown in Figure 11, the circumferential edges of both end faces 77, 78 of the body 61 are beveled to form surfaces 85, 87, respectively. The outwardly flared surfaces 85, 87 are adapted to cooperate with the annular seal elements 31, 35 to facilitate their

outward radial deformation when the plates 112, 11 and body 61 are compressed together.

Figures 12 and 13 show the front plate assembly 111, which includes a front plate 112, a flange plate 143 and a sleeve 131 extending therebetween.

5 The front plate 112 is a circular disk having a front face 113 and a back face 114. The front plate forms a central aperture 125, a plurality of through holes 121, a first opening 115 for the first monitoring conduit 161 to extend through and a second opening 117 for the second monitoring conduit 163 to extend through. The front plate 112 further has an outwardly flared surface or bevel 123 formed at the perimeter of its back face 114
10 and a circumferential groove 119 formed by its side surface. The bevel 123 is adapted to squeeze the front seal element 31 to radially deform it into sealing engagement with the inner surface of the pipe 2.

The sleeve 131 is a tubular member having a back end, a front end and a central bore 133 extending axially therethrough.

15 The flange plate 143 forms a threaded central aperture 153 for engaging the sleeve 131, a plurality of bolt holes 151 and openings 145, 147 for enabling the monitoring conduits 161, 163 to extend therethrough.

As shown in Figure 14, the vent rod 17 extends through the back plate 11, central bore 73 of the body 61. Otherwise stated, the vent rod 17 is connected to the back plate
20 11 and extends slidably through the isolation assembly 100a.

The annular back seal element 35 is positioned between the back face 78 of the body 61 and the front face 14 of the back plate 11.

A first set of "floating" locking cap screws or pins 181 is inserted into holes 65. Each locking pin 181 may be threaded into the back plate holes 67 and extend through
25 the smaller diameter portions 97 of the body holes 65. Pins 181 are positioned in the larger diameter portions 96 of the holes 65, such that the pin 181 can travel within the hole portions 96 but their downward travel is limited by the ledges 75. Thus, in the event that the vent rod 17 breaks during operation, separation of the back plate 11 from the body 61 is prevented when the pins 181 contact the ledges 75.

The front end of the larger diameter portion 96 of the through hole 65 may be plugged by a cap 190 as shown in Figure 2 to protect the locking pin 181 and to prevent foreign objects from accumulating within the through hole 65.

5 Having reference to Figure 15, a second set of "floating" locking pins 191 is shown. Each pin 191 extends through the holes 121 formed through the front plate 112 and are threaded into the threaded recesses 67. The pin 191 are of sufficient length so that, when threaded into the body recesses 67, the pins 191 are still spaced from the body front face 113. This enables the slidable body 61 to be axially displaced toward the front plate 112. However the locking pins 191 prevent the body 61 and front plate assembly
10 from separating, as the diameter of the plate holes 121 is smaller than the diameter of the heads of the pins 191.

In summary, the two sets of locking pins 181, 191 limit the maximum separation distance between the front plate 112 and the body 61, and between the body 61 and the back plate 11, while enabling the back plate 111 and body 61 to move a short distance
15 toward or away from the stationary front plate 112.

As previously indicated, the seal elements 31, 35 are annular and formed of deformable, resilient material, such as buna rubber. Preferably they have a D-ring configuration with a rounded inner surface profile and a flat outer surface.

To complete the isolation assembly 100a, a lock nut 251 may be screwed onto the
20 front end of the vent rod 17 to abut the flange 143. The monitoring conduits 161, 163 are connected to the body ports 69, 71.

The isolation assembly 100a may be operated and monitored from ground surface to a depth of up to about 40 feet.

Operation of the isolation assembly 100a involves: pulling the vent rod string 17
25 upwardly at ground surface with means such as a hydraulic tensioner (not shown) or a long nut 5 and thereby drawing the back plate 11 and body 61 upwardly so that they press against the stationary fixed front plate 112 and squeeze the annular seal elements 31, 35 between the beveled surfaces 22, 87, 85, 123, whereby the seal elements 31, 35 deform and extend outwardly to seal effectively against the circular inner surface 4 of the pipe 2,
30 thereby combining with the body 61 and pipe 2 to define the sealed annular space 63;

then locking the vent rod string 17 in a tensioned condition so as to maintain the seal; circulating water or the like under pressure from ground surface and back through the conduits 161, 163 and sealed space 63, to provide an indication as to whether seal leakage is occurring; and eventually releasing the vent rod string 17 so as relax it and the seal elements whereby the assembly may be withdrawn.

Having regard to Figures 17-20, the vent rod 17 is extended by adding tubular extension rods 311 to form the string using threaded couplings 341, as shown in Figures 17, 19. Each coupling contains an O-ring to minimize the escape of flammable fluid passing through the bore 47 of the vent rod string 17. Similarly, the tubular flanged housing extensions 431 are added and bolted end to end to front plate assembly 111 to form the housing string 8, as shown in Figure 18. Finally, conduit extensions 471, 473 are added and connected with the first and second conduits 161, 163, as shown in Figure 20.

In summary, the isolation assembly 100a is progressively lowered into the riser bore 3 by adding short modular extensions to the vent rod 17, front plate assembly and conduits 161, 163, thereby forming the vent rod string 17, housing string 8 and conduit string. Spacer plates 451 may be supplied to centralize the strings 17, 8 and minimize twisting of the strings.

As shown in Figures 26-28, a support means 21 is positioned at ground surface, for supporting and anchoring the downwardly extending components. Commonly the pipe 2 will have a flange 25 at its upper end. The support means 21 shown comprises an H-shaped lifting bridle 26 adapted to seat on the pipe flange 25. A flange 401, forming part of the uppermost housing extension, seats on the bridle 26. The housing string 8 therefore is suspended from the flange 401 and bridle 26.

A long nut 651 is threaded onto the upper end of the vent rod string 17, which protrudes out of the upper end of the housing string 8. The nut 651 can be turned to tension the vent rod string 17 to actuate and then lock the isolation assembly 100a. Alternatively a hydraulic tensioner can be used for the same purpose.

As shown in Figure 27, the isolation assembly 100a will be positioned close to (usually about 1' below) the cut point 571.

As shown in Figure 1, the monitoring means 24 comprises a pump 26 at ground surface, for supplying water under pressure into the supply conduit 161, for conveyance through the sealed spaced 63. A pressure gauge 27 shows the pressure of the water returning from the sealed space 63 through the return conduit 163. Observation of the gauge reading will inform if there is a reduction in pressure, thereby indicating seal leakage.

The isolation tool described is characterized by several advantages, including:

- it can be relatively quickly deployed – commonly this can be accomplished within a day;
- the provision of two axially separated seal elements provides a safety factor – if the primary lower seal begins to leak, there may still be an opportunity to terminate welding;
- the spaced double seals and conduit system provide a way to monitor for seal leakage;
- the modular design allows the tool to be inserted into the riser bore despite limited head room; and
- tying together of components with the floating locking pins is beneficial in reducing the possibility of losing parts down the riser bore.

What is claimed:

1. A downhole isolation tool for use in providing a sealing barrier extending transversely across the bore of a pipe for isolating an upper section of the bore from fluid originating from a connected lower section of the bore, said pipe having a bore inlet at ground surface, said tool, when used in the pipe, comprising, in combination:

support means, connectable with the pipe at the bore inlet, for supporting and anchoring a plurality of downwardly extending segments of the tool;

an isolation assembly for positioning lengthwise in the pipe bore at depth, said assembly comprising a linear assemblage of components including a front plate, a front seal element, a central body, a back seal element and a back plate, said seal elements being axially spaced apart, resilient, deformable and annular, each said seal element being positioned between one end of the body and a plate, whereby, when the plates and body are compressed together, the seal elements may be squeezed and deformed outwardly into sealing engagement with the pipe and may thereby combine with the outer surface of the body and the inner surface of the pipe to form a sealed annular space;

a housing assembly for lowering the isolation assembly into the pipe bore and positioning it at the desired operational depth, said housing assembly being operative to be anchored at its upper end to the support means and connected at its lower end with the front plate, whereby the front plate may be held stationary and fixed in place by said housing assembly;

a tubular vent rod means for connection with the back plate and extension through the isolation assembly and upper section of the pipe bore to ground surface;

means, supportable by the support means, for tensioning the rod means to compress the plates and body together and deform the seal elements so that they sealably engage the pipe;

monitoring means, extendable down through the upper pipe section bore and connectable with the isolation assembly, for circulating pressurized fluid from ground surface through the sealed space and back to ground surface, for providing an indication of seal leakage;

whereby the isolation assembly may provide a sealing barrier having a pair of annular seal elements sealing against the pipe's inner surface at axially spaced apart intervals, the rod means may simultaneously provide a passageway for segregated venting of pipebore fluid from the pipe's lower section through the barrier to ground surface, the housing assembly may provide a means for lowering, holding and recovering the isolation assembly and the monitoring means may function to provide an indication as to whether a seal element is leaking..

2. The isolation tool as set forth in claim 1 wherein:

the pipe is an upwardly extending riser.

3. The isolation tool as set forth in claim 1 comprising:

a first set of floating locking pins, connecting the back plate with the body, for limiting the maximum separation distance between them while enabling the back plate and the body to be displaced toward and away from each other; and

a second set of floating locking pins, connecting the front plate with the body, for limiting the maximum separation distance between them while enabling the front plate and the body to be displaced toward and away from each other.

4. The isolation tool as set forth in claim 1, 2 or 3 wherein:

the body and plates have opposed annular bevels arranged to squeeze and deform the annular seal elements into sealing engagement with the pipe.

5. The isolation tool as set forth in claim 1, 2 or 3 wherein:

the back plate and body are slideable along the rod means; and

the rod means is operative to pull the back plate, back seal element and body toward the front plate to thereby compress the plates, body and seal elements together.

6. The isolation tool as set forth in claim 1, 2 or 3 wherein:

the housing assembly comprises a string of tubular joints joined end to end; and

the rod means comprises a string of tubular rods joined end to end and extending through the string of tubular joints;

the back plate and body are slideable along the rod means; and

the rod means is operative to pull the back plate, back seal element and body toward the front plate to thereby compress the plates, body and seal elements together.

7. A method for isolating an open end section of the bore of a pipe from the remainder of the bore, said pipe extending upwardly to ground surface, comprising:

positioning a pair of axially spaced apart annular seal elements, mounted on a body, at depth in the bore of the pipe, using a string of joints joined to end;

5 deforming the seal elements from ground surface, using a string of tubular rods, so that they seal against the pipe and combine with the body and the pipe to define a sealed space; and

circulating pressurized liquid through the sealed space from ground surface and back through conduit means to provide an indication of seal competence.

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