

Review

A Systematic Review on Heat Transfer and Pressure Drop Correlations for Natural Refrigerants

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Abstract: Due to environmental concerns, natural refrigerants and their use in refrigeration and air conditioning systems are receiving more attention from manufacturers, end users and the scientific community. The study of heat transfer and pressure drop is essential for accurate design and more energy efficient cycles using natural refrigerants. The aim of this work is to provide an overview of the latest outcomes related to heat transfer and pressure drop correlations for ammonia, propane, isobutane and propylene and to investigate the current state of the art in terms of operating conditions. Available data on the existing correlations between heat transfer coefficients and pressure drops for natural refrigerants have been collected through a systematic search. Whenever possible, validity intervals are given for each correlation, and the error is quantified. It is the intention of the authors that this paper be a valuable support for researchers and an aid to design, with particular reference to heat pumps. A procedure based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement was adopted, and the Scopus database was used to query the relevant literature. A total of 135 publications qualified for inclusion in the survey; 34 articles report experimental investigations for unusual geometric conditions. Of the 101 selected papers related to usual geometric conditions, $N = 50$ deal only with HTC, $N = 16$ deal only with pressure drop and the remainder $(N = 35)$ analyse both HTC and pressure drop. Among the 85 HTC papers, $N = 53$ deal with the evaporating condition, $N = 30$ with condensation and only $N = 2$ with the heat transfer correlations under both conditions. Most of the 101 articles concern propane and isobutane. The high temperatures are less widely investigated.

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1. Introduction

Refrigeration and air conditioning play an important role in modern society, providing thermal comfort and food safety. However, the widespread use of synthetic refrigerants, particularly fluorinated gases (F-gases), has led to serious environmental concerns, as they contribute significantly to the greenhouse effect and climate change. In response to these problems, international regulations have imposed restrictions on the use of Fgases, pushing industry towards the adoption of more sustainable solutions. In this context, natural refrigerants have gained increasing attention as environmentally friendly and low-impact alternatives [1].

These refrigerants, such as ammonia (R717), hydrocarbons and carbon dioxide (R744), have been studied to replace CFCs, HCFCs and HFCs in refrigeration, air conditioning and heat pump systems. They have zero ozone depletion potential (ODP), and most have near-zero global warming potential (GWP) compared to CFCs and HCFCs.

However, the use of natural refrigerants will be complex, mainly due to the need to adapt refrigeration and air conditioning systems to their characteristics.

In this context, the experimental study of heat transfer and pressure drop and their correlations becomes very important in optimising the energy efficiency of the system and to ensure reliable performance. In addition, the flow pattern studies will help to determine how natural refrigerants behave under different operating conditions, contributing to a more accurate design.

Sunden et al. [2], in their systematic review, presented a meta-analysis and regression analysis of the available pressure drop and heat transfer data for both single-phase and two-phase flows for several refrigerants with attention to enhanced configurations of heat exchangers.

Cavallini et al. [3] provide a comprehensive review of recent research on the heat transfer and pressure drop of natural refrigerants $(CO₂, NH₃, C₃H₈, R600a, nitrogen)$ in mini channels, with the aim of properly designing heat transfer equipment.

The review by Thome et al. [4] focuses on flow boiling heat transfer, two-phase pressure drop and the flow patterns of ammonia and hydrocarbons. A comparison of experimental data in smooth tubes with four flow boiling correlations is presented. It is suggested that more experimental data be obtained from properly conducted experiments and that new correlations or modified correlations be made on the basis of the existing ones.

This article presents a systematic review to evaluate the available correlations regarding the heat transfer (HT) and pressure drop (PD) of natural refrigerants such as ammonia (R717) and hydrocarbons (R290, R600a, R1270). The most common geometries and operating conditions are analysed for each refrigerant.

Whenever possible, validity intervals are given for each correlation and the error is quantified. It is the intention of the authors that this could be a valuable support for researchers and an aid to design, with particular reference to heat pumps.

2. Materials and Methods

A systematic review of heat transfer and pressure drop correlations for natural refrigerants was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines [5]. This approach to literature review aims to collect all evidence that meets pre-defined eligibility criteria to answer a specific research question. It uses explicit, systematic methods to minimise bias and, thus, provide reliable findings from which conclusions can be drawn and decisions made.

The workflow consists of four phases: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. In the first phase, a number of research questions were formulated to accurately identify the objectives of the systematic review and, consequently, to examine the available literature:

- Are there heat transfer and pressure drop correlations that can predict the experimental data of natural refrigerants?
- How accurate are the current correlations?
- Which natural refrigerants receive more attention?

Specifically, for this research, the Scopus database was queried, using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to find relevant studies. Specifically, the keywords in the following items were searched in the "Article title, Abstract and Keywords" fields:

- 1. "Heat transfer" OR "heat transmission";
- 2. "Pressure drop" OR "frictional pressure gradient";
- 3. "Natural refrigerant" OR hydrocarbons OR propane OR R290 OR C3H⁸ OR isobutane OR R600a OR C4H¹⁰ OR propylene OR R1270 OR C3H⁶ OR ammonia OR R717 OR NH3;
- 4. Correlation OR "prediction method" OR "predictive method" OR "relationship" OR "as a function of";
- 5. Combustion OR kerosene OR coal (only for "Article Title and Keywords" fields).

The queries from #1 to #5 were combined as follows: #1 OR #2 AND #3 AND #4 AND NOT #5.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then defined and applied through the identification, screening and inclusion steps to select the relevant studies for the review, which were then analysed in detail.

Inclusion criteria:

- The research must include heat transfer and/or pressure drop correlations.
- Natural refrigerants must be evaluated, in particular R717, R290, R600a and R1270.
- The papers can be reviews but also reporting data and correlations. Exclusion criteria:
- The articles focus on combustion, toxicity, flammability and risk.
- The studies concern particular natural refrigerants (e.g., $CO₂$) that are not considered in this review.
- The papers partly deal with heat transfer and pressure drop, but no correlations are reported.
- The studies refer to synthetic refrigerants and/or refrigerant blends.
- The papers are conference papers.
- The papers are purely reviews, not reporting data and correlations.
- The language is not English.

In the screening phase, the titles and the abstracts of all the articles identified in the first stage were rigorously assessed against the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The papers that met the criteria were analysed in more detail through a full reading of the text (eligibility stage).

A period of 15 years was chosen to give priority to more recent studies, and only those written in English were selected.

The division of labour consisted of a first phase in which the first author independently selected the relevant material, followed by a second stage in which both authors reviewed all papers. In cases of doubt, the senior author made the final decision.

3. Results

A total of 1366 articles were analysed in the first identification step. Duplicates of 24 articles were removed before the screening phase. As shown in Figure 1, of the 1342 original articles, $N = 728$ were excluded because their titles did not meet the inclusion criteria and $N = 213$ were excluded because of their abstracts. From the 401 articles obtained, those for which the full text was not available were subtracted. This resulted in $N = 353$ papers that were assessed for eligibility. A thorough reading of the full text of the articles and the application of the exclusion criteria resulted in a final sample of 135 articles that were assessed in the review.

The 135 articles included are summarised in Tables 1–4.

It should be noted that the tables are constructed with some assumptions and conventions, which are specified below.

Table 1 shows the source of the data used for the correlation and the geometry studied, highlighting the main focus of the article. As in Table 3, the reader is referred to the citing article in this review (first column) when the number of external databases is greater than 3.

Table 2 shows the operating conditions and correlations for only the natural refrigerants of interest in this review (R717, R290, R600a, R1270). Different refrigerants appear in the table in the case of universal correlations and have, therefore, been developed with different refrigerants.

The most frequent dimensionless parameters used in the correlations reported in Tables 2 and 4 are summarised in the Nomenclature Section.

The "R" column refers only to the refrigerants used to develop the correlation. If the experimental data available in the literature and related to the refrigerant of interest for the present work are used to test the correlation, the corresponding error is reported in the "*AAD*" column.

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart for studies included in this review.

When the experimental results related to the refrigerant of interest for the present work are coupled with an existing correlation, the corresponding error is reported in the table (column "*AAD*") together with the corresponding reference.

The error between the model prediction and the experimental data is reported as average absolute deviation (*AAD*), calculated according to Equation (1):

$$
AAD = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left| \frac{\mathcal{Y}(i)_{pred} - \mathcal{Y}(i)_{exp}}{\mathcal{Y}(i)_{exp}} \right| \tag{1}
$$

It should be noted that some authors expressed the error in a different way. Some expressed error as the percentage of data falling within a certain range, others as the coefficient of determination (R²). This is indicated with an asterisk in Tables 2 and 4. The error values related to the mean deviation without the absolute value are indicated by *AD*.

Table 3 shows the source of the data used for the correlation and the geometry studied, highlighting the main focus of the article in cases of unusual configurations.

Table 4 shows the operating conditions and correlations for only the natural refrigerants of interest in this review, in cases of unusual configurations.

R = refrigerant, TP = two phase, HT = heat transfer, PD = pressure drop, PHE = plate heat exchanger, *β* = chevron angle, MF = microfin, *di*, *dh*, *d^o* = inner, hydraulic, outer diameter, *L^h* = heated length, *Ra* = roughness, HC Rs = hydrocarbon refrigerants.

Table 2. Summary of the operating conditions, HTC and PD correlations of the papers included in this review.

 R = refrigerant, ST, T_{sat} = saturation temperature, SP, p_{sat} = saturation pressure, p_r = reduced pressure, p_{avg} = average pressure, VQ = vapour quality, HC Rs = hydrocarbon refrigerants, cHT = condensation heat transfer, bHT = boiling heat transfer, aPD = adiabatic pressure drop, *AAD* = average absolute deviation, *AD* = average deviation; "*" refers to different ways to express the error with respect to *AAD*; "**" refers to the error in outlet pressure (*po*).

R = refrigerant, TP = two phase, HT = heat transfer, PD = pressure drop, PHE = plate heat exchanger, MF = microfin, *di*, *dh*, *d^o* = inner, hydraulic, outer diameter, HC Rs = hydrocarbon refrigerants, LNG = liquefied natural gas, SWHE = spiral wound heat exchanger, HBHX = helically baffled shell-andtube heat exchanger, TPCT = two-phase closed thermosyphon, PCHE = printed circuit heat exchanger, LHP = loop heat pipe, OSF = offset strip fin, *θ* = winding angle, f.p.m. = fins per meter.

Table 4. Summary of the operating conditions, HTC and PD correlations of the papers included in this review, in cases of unusual configurations.

R = refrigerant, ST, T_{sat} = saturation temperature, SP, p_{sat} = saturation pressure, p_r = reduced pressure, p_{avg} = average pressure, VQ = vapour quality, HC Rs = hydrocarbon refrigerants, *AAD* = average absolute deviation, *AD* = average deviation; "*" refers to different ways to express the error with respect to *AAD*.

transfer regimes. More specifically, $N = 12$ articles refer to various geometrical configurations (e.g., helicoidal tubes or heat pipes, etc.); $N = 6$ articles are related to the heat transfer in cases of microfin tubes; $N = 6$ analyse the pool boiling heat transfer; $N = 6$ deal with external HTC; and $N = 3$ study falling film evaporation. One article refers to a thermosyphon configuration.

The most investigated refrigerants are propane and isobutane. The majority of the articles were published after 2017.

The following paragraphs provide some details of the articles summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

3.1. Distribution of Articles over Time

As mentioned above, this research focused on the last fifteen years. Figure 2 shows a sharp increase in the number of studies between 2015 and 2016. This may be due to a growing interest in natural refrigerants, perhaps as a result of technological developments, regulatory changes or increased environmental awareness. Of particular note is Regulation (EU) No 517/2014 [231], which came into force on 1 January 2015 and aims to reduce F-gas emissions in the EU by limiting gases with a high global warming potential (GWP).

Figure 2. Number of studies published in the last 15 years.

3.2. Research Approach

3.2.1. Data

When analysing the authors' approach to the experimental data on heat transfer coefficient and pressure drop, it can be seen that $N = 71$ were carried out by the authors using their own experimental data, while $N = 28$ used external experimental databases from other studies. As shown in Figure 3, only $N = 2$ articles used numerical simulations.

Focusing on each refrigerant (Figure 4), the use of own experimental data is predominant for R290, R600a and R1270. For R717, both approaches are used equally.

Figure 3. Number of articles by type of data used.

Numerical simulation External database \blacksquare Experimental study

Figure 4. Number of evaluations by type of data used for each refrigerant.

3.2.2. HTC and PD Correlations

Figure 5 shows the authors' different approaches to the correlations. In particular, a new correlation was developed in $N = 47$ of the HTC evaluations, while in $N = 38$, the authors reported the correlation from the literature that best predicted the data.

For pressure drop, the number of best correlations already published $(N = 30)$ outweighed the development of a new model ($N = 21$).

Figure 5. Number of evaluations related to new correlations and best correlations already published for HTC and PD.

3.2.3. Test Conditions

Of the 101 selected papers, $N = 50$ deal only with HTC, $N = 16$ deal only with pressure drop and the rest $(N = 35)$ analyse both HTC and pressure drop.

A closer analysis of the 85 HTC papers shows in Figure 6 that most of them $(N = 53)$ deal with the evaporating condition, $N = 30$ with condensation and only $N = 2$ with the heat transfer correlations under both conditions (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Percentage distribution of HTC articles.

3.3. Operating Conditions

3.3.1. Hydraulic Diameters

An analysis of the geometries used, reported in Figure 7, shows that the most commonly studied diameters range from 0.5 to 9 mm, with the largest number of evaluations in the (1, 2] mm range. The (0, 0.5] and (9, 50] mm ranges are of less interest to the authors.

Figure 7. Number of evaluations related to each hydraulic diameter range.

3.3.2. Saturation Temperatures

From the analysis of saturation temperatures in the evaporating condition shown in Figure 8, most of the authors' evaluations cover the range from −40 to 40 °C. Less studied are the conditions from 50 to 150 °C. On the other hand, for the condensing condition, the low temperatures (from −40 to 20 °C) are the least studied, followed by the range (50, 100] °C. The most evaluated range is 30–40 °C, followed by 40–50 °C and 20–30 °C.

Figure 8. Number of evaluations related to each saturation temperature range for evaporating and condensing conditions.

3.3.3. Vapour Quality

From the vapour quality data summarised in Table 2 and shown in Figure 9, it can be seen that all ranges were investigated.

Figure 9. Number of evaluations related to each vapour quality range.

3.3.4. Specific Heat Flux

The analysis of the specific heat flux data shows a higher interest in the heat flux values from 0 to 30 kW/m², with a peak in the range from 10 to 20 kW/m², as shown in Figure 10. For the range from 30 to 740 kW/m², a decreasing trend in the number of evaluations is observed as the heat flux increases.

Focusing on the specific heat fluxes studied for each refrigerant, a similar trend is found for all of them.

Figure 10. Number of evaluations related to each specific heat flux range.

3.3.5. Specific Mass Flux

As shown in Figure 11, the most studied specific mass fluxes range from 0 to 600 kg/m2s; the intervals from 600 to 5600 kg/m2s are less adopted.

Focusing on the specific mass fluxes adopted for each refrigerant, a similar trend is found for all of them.

Figure 11. Number of evaluations related to each specific mass flux range.

3.4. Refrigerants

Among the selected articles, most concern propane and isobutane, as shown in Figure 12.

Hydraulic Diameters and Saturation Temperatures

An analysis of the diameters used in ammonia studies shows that diameters from 0.5 to 15 mm are all widely studied, with a greater focus on those from 1 to 3 mm. Less used are the (0, 0.5] mm range and diameters from 15 to 50 mm.

Based on the R600a geometry data, the most studied diameter range is that from 0.5 to 12 mm, with the highest number of evaluations relating to the (7, 9] and (1, 2] mm ranges. Of less interest to authors are the (0, 0.5] mm range and diameters from 12 to 50 mm.

For propane, most of the authors' evaluations cover the range from 0.5 to 15 mm, with a focus on the (0.5, 3] mm range. As with ammonia, the (0, 0.5] mm range and diameters from 15 to 50 mm are less commonly used. The few evaluations on R1270 take into account all the diameter ranges.

Looking more closely at the saturation temperature ranges for each refrigerant, the evaluations for ammonia cover the range from 20 $^{\circ}$ C to 60 $^{\circ}$ C in the condensing conditions.

For R1270, R600a and R290, the range of condensing saturation temperatures considered is wider, from -40 °C to 80 °C, and the most evaluated range is from 30 to 40 °C.

When analysing the evaporation temperatures, it can be seen that for ammonia, most of the authors' evaluations cover the range −40 °C to 50 °C, whereas for R1270, the studies focus on saturated temperatures from 0° C to 30 $^{\circ}$ C.

For R600a and R290, the most commonly used temperatures are from 0 °C to 40 °C and from −40 °C to 40 °C, respectively.

For evaporating temperatures above 50 °C, there are no evaluations for R717 and R1270, while there are a few for R600a and R290.

4. Correlations

Correlations for HTC and pressure drop for each refrigerant are considered below, focusing on error ranges and best correlations. Only articles where the error was evaluated in terms of absolute average deviation are considered, and an *AAD* threshold of 12% is used to identify the best models.

4.1. R717

Out of a total of 28 studies on ammonia, only 20 that expressed the error in terms of *AAD* were included in this analysis. In particular, for the condensation HTC, the Tao [96] correlation predicts the experimental data well, with an *AAD* of 7.4%. The maximum error in terms of *AAD* is 41% for the Shah correlation, as reported in [77]. For the evaporation HTC the proposed correlations show errors ranging from 4.7% to 40.9%, the best being those of Fang [144], Choi [25] and Zhang [110] with *AAD*s of 4.7%, 11.09% and 11.4%, respectively. For PD, the *AAD* ranges from 9.5% to 23.7%; the correlation by Moreno, Quiben and Thome [131] shows a good prediction of the data with an *AAD* of 9.5%.

4.2. R1270

Of the 16 studies on R1270, the 9 that reported the error in terms of *AAD* were considered. For the condensation HTC, the errors range from 11.0% to 32.6% and the most reliable correlations are those of Dorao and Fernandino [122] and Zhang [108] with an *AAD* of 11.0%. For the evaporating condition, the best predictions of the data are the Longo [157], Liu and Winterton [117] and Sun and Mishima [141] models, with *AAD*s of 6.9%, 8.5% and 8.6%, respectively. The maximum error is 27.1% for the Gorenflo correlation, as reported in [154].

For PD, the average absolute deviation ranges from 4.4% to 19.8%; the correlations by Xu and Fang [119], Macdonald and Garimella [69] and Friedel [142] show the best predictions of the data with *AAD*s of 4.4%, 6.4% and 7.3%, respectively.

4.3. R600a

Of the 45 studies on R600a, only 23 report the *AAD* error. In particular, for the condensation HTC, the correlations by Dorao and Fernandino [122], Haraguchi et al. [149], Cao [23] and Shah [89] predict the experimental data well, with *AAD*s of 5.8%, 6.57%, 9.8% and 11.2%, respectively. The maximum error in terms of *AAD* is 17.4%, as reported in [93].

Regarding the evaporation HTC, the proposed correlations show errors ranging from 6.2% to 40.1%, and the best ones are those of Fang et al. [144], Shah [121], Shah [91] and Liu and Winterton [117], with *AAD*s of 6.2% and 10.2% (for [65] and [39], respectively), 6.4%, 11.4% and 11.5%, respectively.

For PD, the AAD ranges from 6.6% to 32.52%; the correlations by Xu and Fang [119], Xu and Fang [124], Cao [23], Sempértegui-Tapia [87], Zhang [175] and Nualboonrueng [145] show good predictions of the data with *AAD*s of 6.6%, 11.0%, 7.3%, 9.3%, 9.9% and 10.18%.

4.4. R290

Out of a total of 54 studies on propane, only 38 that reported the error in terms of *AAD* were included in this analysis. For the condensation HTC, the errors range from 4.9% to 25.8% and the most reliable correlations are those by Dorao and Fernandino [122], Macdonald [70], Shah [93], Moser [138], Thome [146], Akers [155], Shah [89] and Macdonald [69] with *AAD*s of 4.9%, 5.4%, 6.5% and 11%, 7.22%, 7.27%, 9.0%, 10.5% and 11%, respectively. For the evaporating condition, the best predictions of the data are by the models by Liu and Winterton [117], Fang et al. [144], Longo et al. [157], Lillo [60], Pamitran [81], Shah [91], Choi [25], Zhang [109] and Aizuddin et al. [115] with *AAD*s of 6.2% and 7.5% (for [10] and [102], respectively), 6.5%, 7.7%, 8.2%, 8.27%, 9.2%, 10.02%, 10.9% and 11.6%, respectively. The maximum error is 33.16%, as reported in [75].

For PD, the average absolute deviation ranges from 6.88% to 20.8%; the correlation by Sun and Mishima [159], Sempértegui-Tapia [87], Friedel [142], Macdonald and Garimella [69], Del Col et al. [140], Patel [83], Choi [24] and Xu and Fang [119] show the best predictions of the data with *AAD*s of 6.88%, 7.2%, 7.59%, 7.9%, 9.1%, 10.08%, 10.84% and 11.7%, respectively.

5. Discussion

Of the four refrigerants considered in this review, R600a has the most reliable correlation for condensing HTC, with a maximum *AAD* error of 17.4%. For evaporating HTC, the smallest maximum error is found for R1270 and is equal to 27.1%.

For pressure drop, for both R1270 and R290, the correlations proposed by the authors show good reliability in predicting the data, with maximum *AAD*s of 19.8% and 20.8%, respectively.

Considering the intervals studied by the authors, the widest diameter range of validity of the correlations is 2–49 mm in [89]; the widest saturation temperature range of validity is from −34.4 °C to 72.1 °C for condensation in [95] and from 55 °C to 141 °C for evaporation in [109]. For specific mass flux and specific heat flux, the widest ranges of validity are 3.7–5176 kg/m²s in [92] and 3–736 kW/m² in [26], respectively.

Among the articles reported in Tables 1 and 2, propane and isobutane are the most studied refrigerants.

The use of the authors' own experimental data predominates over the use of external experimental databases. For HTC, most of the studies deal with the development of a new correlation, whereas for pressure drop, the number of best correlations that are already published prevails.

Of the 101 papers selected, 50 deal only with HTC, 16 deal only with pressure drop and the remaining 35 analyse both HTC and pressure drop; most of the HTC papers deal with the evaporating condition.

With regard to the geometries, the most commonly studied diameters range from 0.5 to 9 mm, with the largest number of evaluations concerning the (1, 2] mm range.

Among the unusual configurations, 12 papers refer to various geometrical configurations (e.g., helicoidal tubes or heat pipes, etc.), 6 papers refer to heat transfer in the case of microfin tubes, 6 papers analyse the pool boiling heat transfer, 6 papers deal with external HTC, and 3 papers study falling film evaporation. One paper deals with a thermosyphon configuration. It could be noted that limited attention has been directed in the available literature to providing experimental correlations for configurations widely used in practice (such as shell-and-tube heat exchangers, different types of fins, falling film heat transfer, etc.).

Regarding the analysis of saturation temperatures in the evaporating conditions, most of the authors' evaluations cover the range from −40 to 40 °C; for the condensing condition, most of the authors studied the temperature range from 20 to 50 °C.

It should be noted that a small number of evaluations (and, therefore, correlations) focus on high-temperature condensation (50–80 °C). These temperature ranges could be studied in view of the high-temperature applications of heat pumps. In fact, in the near future, high-temperature heat pumps could be installed in buildings that have not yet been subject to energy-saving measures. Many studies are dedicated to propane, as efforts are also focused on it for domestic applications (small machines). For centralised applications in residential or public buildings, the use of high-capacity and high-temperature machines could be considered; in this case, propane or ammonia could be interesting and should be reconsidered and further investigated.

6. Conclusions

In this work, available data on the existing correlations of heat transfer coefficient and pressure drop for natural refrigerants have been collected through a systematic search.

For the articles considered in this review, the operating conditions are reported in terms of diameter, saturation temperatures, vapour quality, specific heat flux and specific mass flux. The results show that more attention is paid to the evaporation behaviour with respect to condensation and that two refrigerants (propane and isobutane) are diffusely studied.

The available literature has limited focus on providing experimental correlations for natural refrigerants in configurations that are widely used in practice.

In the studies reported in this review, the correlation in the case of high condensation temperature is reported in a few cases. This lack of information requires further investigation in view of the applications of heat pumps in heating systems, without modification to the distribution systems in buildings that have not yet been subject to energy-saving measures.

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Nomenclature

Roman

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