Beyond the Launchpad: Overcoming the Polymer Limit

Troy Calloway

Research Advisor

Dept. of In-Space Servicing, Assembly, and Manufacturing

International Space Education and Research Guild (ISERG)

Beyond the Launchpad

Since the launch of V-2 rockets circa 1940, polymer seals and one-time use metal crush gaskets have been used to contain the pressure and volatility of rocket propellants. Modern manufacturers have utilized slightly more advanced polymers - perfluoroelastomers, for example, to push the boundaries of what is possible with elastomers. However, the limit has been reached at the extreme temperatures, pressures, and radiological environments encountered beyond the launchpad. After roughly 75 years of rockets capable of reaching outer space, modern launch providers have yet to even master launching, where terrestrial conditions are much more favourable than those in space. Recent launch scrubs of the NASA Artemis program or the mishaps of commercial providers reveal that one of the biggest challenges on the launchpad and beyond is containment and management of propellants.

As we move beyond the launchpad and into the realm of low Earth orbit (LEO) refueling, lunar propellant depots, and on to Mars, it is crucial that we move beyond the limits of polymer sealing technology.

The Polymer Limit in Space

To understand why polymers fail off-world, one must examine their chemical constraints. Elastomers rely on the flexibility of polymer chains to maintain their compliance. When exposed to the harsh realities of space, those molecular chains degrade in three distinct ways.

1. At the extreme temperatures required for storing and transferring cryogenic fuels such as hydrogen (20 K), oxygen (90 K), or methane (112 K), elastomeric materials cross their glass transition temperatures. The once flexible and compliant material turns brittle, losing its ability to recover from compression, vibration, and temperature changes, resulting in micro-fractures, seal separation, and catastrophic blow outs.

2. Deep space propulsion systems frequently utilize hypergolic propellants such as nitrogen tetroxide and monometylhydrazine for reaction control and orbital maneuvering. These fluids are highly corrosive, destroying polymer matrices over time and compromising seal integrity.

3. Exposure to hard vacuum and cosmic radiation causes plasticiser outgassing and polymer chain scission which breaks the very backbone of legacy seals. After the structure becomes compromised, it inevitably results in leakage and catastrophic failure.

The High Cost of Material Compromise

The space industry has long recognized the limitations of legacy polymers, but rather than abandoning them, have designed complex workarounds - imposing an unfair tax on vehicle performance and mission economics in the forms of parasitic mass and thermal architecture complexity, penalties on payload and delta-v, and limitations on reusability.

Every kilogram of heat mitigation to cool polymer seals reduces the vehicle's net payload capacity. For an orbital propellant depot, for example, this parasitic mass directly erodes its delta-v (velocity change potential) and, consequently, its efficiency in transferring cryogens or payload to the lunar surface.

Where aerospace designs have eliminated polymers in the past, they have typically defaulted to single-use metallic crush gaskets, pyrotechnic isolation valves, or swaged tube connections. While these have been somewhat effective, we are now in the age of reusable rockets and spacecraft where single-use solutions are unacceptable. For instance, In-space Servicing and Maintenance (ISAM) requires reusable and autonomous fluid couplers that can mate hundreds of times without losing sealing capability; propellant depots inherently require multi-use seals; and robotic arms and astronauts working in suits will require low-torque, resilient, reusable connections.

The Path Forward: Dynamic Metallurgical Seals

Overcoming the polymer limit does not require waiting for new exotic chemistry or ever more elaborate workarounds. It requires a paradigm shift in how we engineer fluid seals for humanity's journey to the stars and beyond - beyond chemical compliance (elastomers) and toward engineered metallic compliance (advanced superalloys and precision metallurgical seals).

By leveraging modern manufacturing, high precision machining, and advanced metallurgical science, the space industry can transition to the dynamic, elastomer-free sealing architectures necessary for traversing the severe environments of deep space. Advanced metal-on-metal designs will utilize micro-compliant metallic interfaces and pair hard substrates of superalloys with ductile noble metals that can outperform and outlast the best of polymer designs.

Because superalloys retain their structural integrity across large temperature ranges, dynamic metal seals can effortlessly bridge thermal environments that destroy polymers and match more closely the thermal expansion and contraction of surrounding metallic parts. In fact, superalloys paired with noble metal sealing systems can reach ranges from deep cryogenic (20 K) to hypersonic kinetic heat (922 K) - a temperature delta no other material can match.

A Material Foundation for Humanity's Shared Future

As humanity prepares to establish a permanent presence on the Moon and lay the logistical foundation for human missions to Mars, the space sector stands at a critical inflection point. The age of single-use launch vehicles is behind us. The era of ISAM, orbital propellant depots, and autonomous cis-lunar transport has arrived.

Yet, our ambitions remain bound by 19th century legacy materials. We simply cannot build a multi-planetary, reusable space economy while maintaining dependence on fragile o-rings that freeze, outgas, or degrade when exposed to the unforgiving realities of space. The "polymer limit" is not an insurmountable law of physics - it is a material choice whose time has passed.

Solving the immediate concerns of launch reliability and deep-space logistics requires an industry-wide commitment to metallurgical innovation. By adopting metal-on-metal sealing systems, aerospace engineers can eliminate thousands of kilograms of parasitic mass, unlock true high-cycle autonomous refueling, and build fluid management systems that outlast the missions they support.

To build a sustainable off-world economy, we must stop engineering complex workarounds for fragile materials that weren't meant for the rigors of space and start building fluid infrastructure that matches our ambitions.

Author Bio

Troy Calloway is an aerospace technologist and research advisor at the International Space Education and Research Guild (ISERG), where he focuses on extreme-environment fluid systems and next-generation space infrastructure. He is also the Chief Executive Officer of Calloway Advanced Technologies in Walton, KY.