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A Conceptual Model for Drilling Time and Cost Forecasting in Directional Wells: Integration of Geomechanics and Historical Field Data

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Abstract
Accurate forecasting of drilling time and cost remains a persistent challenge in complex directional well operations, particularly in heterogeneous geological settings. Traditional estimation approaches often lack the fidelity required to account for subsurface variability and historical field performance, resulting in budgetary overruns and operational inefficiencies. This paper presents a comprehensive conceptual model designed to integrate geomechanical parameters and historical drilling data to enhance predictive accuracy for time and cost planning in directional drilling. The model incorporates inputs such as formation pressure, rock strength, well trajectory, and lithological profiles alongside time-depth records and cost logs from prior wells. By mapping functional relationships—such as rate of penetration versus unconfined compressive strength—and embedding them within a logical structure, the framework enables dual-layer output forecasting with risk-adjusted confidence intervals. The model promotes cross-functional collaboration by aligning geological, engineering, and financial perspectives into a unified forecasting tool. It offers a data-driven basis for proactive decision-making, enabling improved planning, resource allocation, and operational reliability. Future development may include real-time data integration and machine learning-based calibration to refine predictive performance further.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

The ability to accurately forecast drilling time and associated costs plays a critical role in optimizing well delivery and budget control [1]. This is particularly crucial in directional wells, where planned deviations from vertical introduce additional layers of complexity such as trajectory friction, borehole instability, and changing lithological interfaces. These factors affect the rate of penetration, tool wear, and the incidence of non-productive time, all of which directly influence overall project timelines and expenditure [2].

Directional wells present unique challenges that are not as prevalent in vertical drilling. The complexity of steering the wellbore through targeted zones while maintaining operational stability requires an advanced understanding of both geomechanics and surface parameters [3, 4]. Formation variability, such as the presence of interbedded shale and sand or fluctuating pore pressures, complicates real-time decision-making and historical benchmarking. As drilling complexity increases, so does the need for robust predictive tools that can account for these multidimensional variables [5].

Historical data and geomechanical insights are increasingly recognized as essential inputs in refining predictive accuracy.

Past drilling records offer empirical benchmarks for time and cost expectations, while geomechanical parameters help explain deviations due to subsurface behavior [6]. When integrated systematically, these datasets can inform models that predict drilling performance under comparable conditions. This dual input approach—leveraging both what has been done and what is expected in the rock—provides a powerful foundation for building reliable forecasting models tailored for directional drilling environments [7].

1.2 Problem Statement

Traditional methods of estimating drilling time and cost often rely heavily on empirical formulas or expert judgment. While these methods offer simplicity, they frequently fail to capture the nuanced challenges associated with complex directional wells. Variability in formation properties, operational practices, and well design can lead to wide discrepancies between estimated and actual drilling performance. As a result, stakeholders are exposed to financial and scheduling uncertainties that undermine confidence in project planning.

One of the central issues lies in the disjointed integration of subsurface data and historical drilling performance. Geological models, geomechanical analyses, and time-depth records often reside in different data silos, managed by separate teams. This fragmentation limits the ability to synthesize a coherent understanding of how subsurface conditions affect time and cost outcomes. Consequently, planners and engineers are unable to harness the full potential of available data in making accurate projections.

Moreover, existing frameworks for time and cost forecasting are generally not tailored to the specific demands of directional wells. They may not adequately consider the nonlinear interactions between variables such as wellbore inclination, lithological transitions, or bit performance across formations of varying strength. The absence of a unified conceptual structure that integrates both geomechanical factors and historical field data impedes the development of precise, repeatable, and scalable forecasting models. This gap presents a compelling rationale for the research and development of a more integrative predictive approach.

1.3 Objectives and Contributions

The primary objective of this work is to propose a conceptual model for forecasting drilling time and cost in directional wells by integrating geomechanical parameters and historical field data. The model is designed to bridge the divide between subsurface behavior and drilling performance, enabling more accurate and data-informed planning. By harmonizing physical rock properties with empirical performance trends, the model aims to provide a realistic and repeatable method for projecting operational timelines and budgets.

A key contribution of the proposed framework lies in its identification and structuring of critical parameters that influence time and cost in directional drilling. These include, but are not limited to, pore pressure, formation strength, trajectory design, bottomhole assembly configurations, and historical drilling efficiency indices. The model also accounts for the relationships between these variables, providing a dynamic mechanism for estimating performance outcomes based on real-world field conditions.

In addition to improving forecasting accuracy, this research offers a theoretical foundation for future enhancements and applications. The model serves as a foundational blueprint for digital implementation, calibration with new field data, and integration into planning software environments. Ultimately, this work aims to support more confident and efficient decision-making in directional well projects by providing a conceptually sound, data-driven approach to time and cost prediction.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Drilling Operations and Time Modeling Basics

Drilling time in any well—directional or otherwise—is typically segmented into operational phases such as spudding, drilling, casing, and tripping [8]. Each of these phases contributes discrete time components that, when aggregated, define the total well duration [9]. In directional wells, these phases become more variable due to trajectory complexity, which affects factors like bit performance, steering time, and stabilization requirements. Time modeling must therefore consider each stage as a function of depth, inclination, and drilling system configuration [3, 10].

The well trajectory has a marked influence on the operational duration, particularly in terms of increased drag, mechanical loading, and time spent on directional corrections. Longer horizontal or high-angle sections often demand additional drilling hours compared to vertical equivalents due to greater resistance and the need for more precise control [11]. Moreover, deeper wells typically face compounding time delays associated with bottomhole assembly retrieval, drillstring management, and pressure-related considerations. Thus, any time forecasting model must normalize such geometric and depth-related variables [12, 13].

Time-loss mechanisms are also critical to model accuracy. Non-productive time (NPT) events—such as stuck pipe, wellbore collapse, and tool failure—represent significant deviations from ideal drilling curves [14]. These events are often stochastic in nature but can be correlated with formation types, poor planning, or equipment mismatch. In time modeling, historical frequencies and durations of such events are typically analyzed to introduce probabilistic adjustments or contingency buffers into forecasts. Incorporating these loss mechanisms is essential for realism in model outputs [15].

2.2 Geomechanical Parameters and Well Performance

Geomechanical parameters—such as pore pressure, fracture gradient, and unconfined compressive strength—play a decisive role in shaping drilling performance. Pore pressure affects the selection of mud weight and contributes to pressure differentials that impact wellbore stability [16, 17]. An accurate understanding of this parameter is critical to preventing fluid influx or formation fracturing. The fracture gradient further defines the pressure window within which the well must be drilled, influencing casing programs and drilling fluid design [18, 19].

These geomechanical factors directly affect drilling performance metrics. For instance, harder formations with high compressive strength typically reduce the rate of penetration and accelerate bit wear, thereby increasing drilling time and cost [20, 21]. Instability-prone zones with variable stress conditions may also necessitate more frequent wiper trips or remedial measures, which prolong operational phases. A conceptual forecasting model that integrates these parameters can better predict performance degradation points and help avoid unexpected slowdowns [22-24].

Data for geomechanical interpretation are often obtained from seismic surveys, logging-while-drilling tools, offset well records, and laboratory analysis of core samples. These datasets, while diverse, can be synthesized into models that represent stress regimes, mechanical stratigraphy, and pressure profiles [25, 26]. Interpretation methods such as 1D mechanical earth models and wellbore stability analysis are used to derive operational guidelines. Embedding these geomechanical outputs into a drilling time and cost model enables predictive analytics to reflect physical realities downhole, rather than just surface-level planning assumptions [27, 28].

2.3 Historical Field Data in Cost Forecasting

Historical drilling data offer an empirical basis for estimating time and cost in similar geological and operational settings. Time-depth logs, bit records, and daily cost summaries from offset wells are particularly valuable in identifying baseline performance trends [29, 30]. These records enable engineers to determine average progress rates, tool change frequencies, and the relative impact of known formation features. In directional wells, such comparisons can be refined based on analogous trajectories, geologies, and rig capabilities [31-33].

One challenge with historical datasets is their heterogeneity. Data must often be normalized to account for differences in rig specifications, mud systems, and directional profiles. Normalization can involve unit standardization, outlier filtering, and segmentation by depth or lithology [34, 35]. This ensures that derived insights are reflective of actual geological or mechanical effects, rather than operational anomalies. Properly processed data can then be used to inform models with context-aware baselines for drilling speed and cost per foot [36, 37].

Trend-based methods and statistical techniques, including regression analysis and machine learning algorithms, are increasingly used to convert historical data into predictive baselines. These methods allow for dynamic forecasting that adjusts based on formation type, trajectory changes, or equipment variables. By grounding predictions in actual performance data and linking them to geomechanical conditions, the model improves its applicability to real-world directional drilling scenarios. The resulting insights support risk-aware planning and facilitate more accurate budgeting [38, 39].

3. Conceptual Model Design

3.1 Model Components and Data Inputs

The model's foundation rests on a comprehensive set of input parameters categorized into four primary domains: trajectory geometry, lithological characteristics, mechanical rock properties, and historical drilling performance metrics. Trajectory inputs include measured depth, inclination, azimuth, and curvature, all of which directly influence tool behavior and downhole friction [40, 41]. Lithology data—sourced from formation tops and cuttings analysis—allow for the classification of zones with differing drillability. Mechanical inputs such as unconfined compressive strength (UCS), Young's modulus, and fracture toughness form the geomechanical layer that dictates penetration rates and bit wear [42, 43].

To construct an effective predictive engine, these inputs are drawn from multiple validated sources. Drilling logs, such as time-depth records, torque and drag measurements, and bit performance logs, provide empirical context to field behavior [44, 45]. Geomechanical profiles derived from offset wells or seismic interpretations supplement this by offering formation-specific stress models and rock strength data. Integrating these with real-time data sources such as daily drilling reports ensures that the model is informed by both past trends and present conditions. This hybrid data strategy enriches the model's contextual sensitivity [46-48].

Parameter weighting and classification are central to organizing input data by relevance and influence. For instance, lithological transitions are weighted by their drilling difficulty, while trajectory sections are segmented and classified based on inclination angle and curvature severity [49, 50]. A decision matrix is used to rank each parameter's expected impact on time and cost outcomes, allowing the model to prioritize high-sensitivity variables. This weighting mechanism supports interpretability while enhancing the model's ability to generate realistic and field-relevant forecasts. The result is a cohesive input structure primed for robust computation [51, 52].

3.2 Relationship Mapping and Logical Structure

The conceptual model establishes defined relationships between input parameters and target outcomes, namely drilling time and cost. These relationships are modeled as both linear and non-linear functions, depending on the interaction type [53, 54]. For example, an increase in UCS typically leads to a non-linear decline in the rate of penetration, whereas increasing inclination may linearly escalate torque and drag, thereby extending drilling duration. The model maps such interdependencies to accurately represent how multiple forces compound to influence real-time drilling behavior in directional wells [55, 56].

At the heart of the model lies a logical engine that transforms raw inputs into forecastable metrics through a sequential algorithm. The process begins by translating well trajectory into mechanical loading zones, which are then evaluated against geomechanical thresholds [57, 58]. Formation strength and stress regimes are matched with drilling speeds from historical data to establish reference performance bands. Each zone is assigned a drilling efficiency index based on these inputs, which cascades into cumulative time and cost calculations. The logic also accounts for transition zones—such as interbedded sands and shales—where performance may vary abruptly [59-61].

To ensure computational transparency and functional robustness, the model uses a flowchart-based logic framework. Each parameter feeds into its respective processing module, which evaluates it in conjunction with other factors using predefined equations and empirical correlations [62-64]. For example, torque prediction uses input from trajectory and friction coefficients, while bit wear modeling incorporates UCS and rotational speed. This modular architecture ensures that each output—be it time, cost, or a derived risk factor—is traceable back to specific inputs and assumptions. This enhances not only the model's diagnostic utility but also its acceptance by field engineers and planners [65, 66].

3.3 Forecasting Mechanism and Output Interpretation

The model is designed to deliver dual-layer outputs: drilling time and cost estimates across specified well sections. These outputs are not static figures but distributions that reflect variability in input parameters. For example, a forecast may return a drilling duration of 22–28 days with a 90% confidence level, acknowledging uncertainties in rock strength and trajectory control. Similarly, cost projections are segmented into direct (bit, fluid, rig time) and indirect (waiting on materials, tool damage) components, each traceable to their respective contributors in the input model [67, 68].

To enhance decision-making under uncertainty, the model integrates confidence intervals and risk bands around its forecasts. These are generated using statistical sampling techniques such as Monte Carlo simulations or historical error margins. For example, zones with poor data resolution may carry wider forecast bands, alerting engineers to possible cost overruns or delays. This probabilistic output format helps operational teams plan contingencies and prioritize sections for enhanced pre-drill evaluation or real-time monitoring during execution n [69-71].

The interpretive value of the model's outputs is especially significant in project planning, budgeting, and procurement. Time estimates feed directly into rig scheduling and contract structuring, while cost forecasts inform material orders and inventory management [72, 73]. Furthermore, outputs are formatted for easy integration into planning dashboards or ERP systems, enabling cross-functional use. By offering granular insights—such as section-specific drilling risks or material requirements—the model becomes more than just a forecasting tool; it evolves into a strategic planning asset aligned with the broader goals of drilling optimization and financial control [74, 75].

4. Implementation Strategy

4.1 Data Acquisition and Validation

Implementing the model begins with sourcing the appropriate data types required for accurate time and cost forecasting. These data fall into structured categories such as wellbore surveys, lithological logs, bit run records, rig activity logs, and geomechanical parameters like pore pressure and rock strength [76, 77]. Mechanical specifications of tools and bottom hole assemblies, along with real-time drilling data, add operational granularity. The data must span both historical wells and upcoming projects to ensure representativeness and statistical relevance [78, 79].

However, data quality directly affects forecast reliability. Inconsistent or incomplete field logs can introduce error margins that undermine the credibility of output metrics. Therefore, a rigorous pre-processing workflow must be established, incorporating validation checks such as range enforcement, anomaly detection, and time-depth normalization [80, 81]. Data outliers must be flagged and either corrected through cross-referencing or excluded via established rules. Automation tools may assist in repeatable validation processes, while metadata tagging ensures transparency in tracking source origins and pre-processing steps [82-84].

To ensure confidence in model output, all input datasets must be auditable and traceable. This is particularly important when the model is applied in regulatory contexts or high-stakes planning scenarios. Version control of datasets, documentation of preprocessing actions, and timestamping of data imports help build an audit trail. Additionally, inputs should be mapped to specific components of the model (e.g., UCS to ROP calibration) to enhance interpretability. These traceability protocols are essential for organizational accountability and for refining model accuracy over time [85-87].

4.2 Integration into Drilling Planning Workflow

The model is best embedded within the pre-drill planning phase, where time and cost forecasts can directly influence well design decisions, budgeting, and scheduling. During well planning, the model acts as a predictive advisor, providing drilling engineers with time estimates by section and associated cost projections. These forecasts enable more accurate planning of rig moves, crew shifts, and material procurement. The model can be revisited during daily operations to validate progress or adjust expectations in response to real-time data [88, 89].

Cross-functional coordination is key to implementation success. Geoscientists contribute formation models and geomechanical interpretations, while drilling engineers provide tool specs and operational histories. Financial analysts, in turn, require cost breakdowns and sensitivity ranges for budgeting. The model serves as a collaborative interface, allowing inputs and validations from multiple departments. This not only improves the accuracy of forecasts but also promotes organizational alignment by unifying assumptions and decision criteria across teams [90, 91].

Scenario evaluation and contingency planning are vital applications of the model within the workflow. For example, the model can simulate alternative trajectories, mud weights, or tool configurations to determine optimal combinations under budget constraints. Contingency plans—such as increased bit wear in abrasive zones or delays from unstable formations—can be pre-assessed by inputting variant geomechanical scenarios. This proactive use of the model enhances preparedness and reduces the likelihood of unplanned costs or delays, ultimately increasing project robustness [92, 93].

4.3 Uncertainty and Model Limitations

Despite its structured framework, the model must contend with uncertainties inherent in subsurface data and drilling operations. Geomechanical parameters such as pore pressure or UCS are often derived from indirect methods, introducing ranges rather than fixed values. Similarly, operational factors such as crew efficiency, tool reliability, and weather conditions can impact time and cost unpredictably. The model must therefore generate outputs with confidence intervals and highlight zones of high forecast uncertainty for risk mitigation [94, 95].

Assumptions based on historical data must also be managed carefully. Offset well data, while valuable, may not perfectly correlate with new wells due to stratigraphic differences, tool evolution, or changes in operating procedures [96]. The model should include flags for data obsolescence and support metadata tagging to denote the recency and relevance of each input. Calibration modules may be required to re-tune the model as new wells are drilled and new data becomes available, maintaining model relevance over time [97, 98].

To improve resilience and adaptability, the model should include update protocols for periodic refinement. This includes incorporating new drilling data, refining input relationships based on back-analysis, and retraining any embedded statistical or machine learning components. Change logs and performance tracking metrics—such as prediction error vs. actual drilling performance—can support iterative improvement. This continuous feedback loop ensures that the model evolves with the field and remains a reliable tool for planning and optimization [99, 100].

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Contributions

The primary contribution of this study is the development of a unified conceptual model that integrates geomechanics and historical drilling data to predict time and cost in directional well planning. By embedding subsurface mechanics—such as pore pressure, rock strength, and formation gradients—into the estimation framework, the model establishes a geotechnically informed basis for forecasting. This represents a marked improvement over conventional approaches that rely heavily on empirical averages or generic offset analogs without contextualizing subsurface behavior.

The model further provides a structured path for estimating drilling duration and expenditure in complex trajectories, taking into account both mechanical design and formation challenges. It aligns wellbore trajectory data, operational records, and lithological features within a logical framework that maps their interdependencies. The result is a more systematic and transparent process for transforming raw field data into actionable forecasting metrics, aiding engineers and planners in their pre-drill assessments.

By placing emphasis on data-driven forecasting, the model reframes time and cost estimation as a proactive planning enabler rather than a post-drill reconciliation task. This transformation supports a culture of anticipatory project management, where drilling performance is no longer seen as subject to unpredictable conditions but instead as something that can be simulated, risk-assessed, and optimized using robust inputs. The conceptual clarity and input modularity ensure that the model remains accessible and adaptable across diverse field applications.

5.2 Industry Implications

For industry practitioners, the model offers considerable promise in enhancing the precision of budget planning and improving execution timelines. By more accurately forecasting operational duration and expenditure, project managers can align rig schedules, procurement timelines, and financial allocations with expected performance profiles. This minimizes the likelihood of cost overruns and schedule slippages—persistent challenges in complex directional drilling programs, particularly in high-risk or data-scarce environments.

Cross-functional collaboration is another key benefit. The model provides a common interface for geoscience, drilling engineering, and financial planning teams to align their interpretations and expectations. By standardizing how parameters such as formation hardness or historical rig performance are translated into cost and time forecasts, the model improves communication, reduces planning ambiguities, and fosters a shared understanding of project risks and opportunities. This cross-discipline integration is especially important in mature fields where resources are constrained and coordination is critical.

Enhanced visibility into operational risks is a final but vital implication. By modeling confidence intervals and defining ranges of uncertainty, the tool empowers teams to identify, quantify, and mitigate risks associated with well design or unexpected subsurface behavior. This capability enables earlier interventions, such as contingency planning or alternative tool deployment strategies, which in turn supports safer and more efficient drilling. These enhancements contribute not only to performance outcomes but also to the safety and sustainability of field operations.

5.3 Future Development Opportunities

Looking ahead, the model presents fertile ground for expansion into more advanced digital domains. One key area for growth is the integration of real-time drilling data streams into the forecasting engine. By embedding live inputs such as surface torque, ROP, and downhole sensor data, the model could evolve into a dynamic advisor, continuously refining its predictions during execution. This would allow for just-in-time decisions and rapid adaptation to changing downhole conditions.

Another promising direction lies in the adoption of machine learning techniques for model calibration and optimization. As more wells are drilled and the volume of performance data grows, supervised learning algorithms could identify hidden patterns, automate parameter weighting, and improve the model's predictive power. This would reduce the manual labor involved in calibration and allow for model performance to improve over time with minimal human intervention.

Finally, the conceptual framework could be extended beyond single-well planning to multi-well programs and even completion operations. By incorporating metrics such as stage counts, stimulation time, and flowback rates, the model can support holistic forecasting across the full well lifecycle. This would enable integrated field development strategies where drilling, completion, and production teams collaborate around shared, data-driven forecasts. Such a unified planning tool represents a significant step toward fully digital, optimization-driven oilfield operations.

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