Catalytic Autothermal Reforming
Of Hydrocarbon Fuels For Fuel Cells†

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Introduction

Fuel cell development has seen remarkable progress in the past decade because of
an increasing need to improve energy efficiency as well as to address concerns about the
environmental consequences of using fossil fuel for producing electricity and for
propulsion of vehicles [1]. The lack of an infrastructure for producing and distributing H₂
has led to a research effort to develop on-board fuel processing technology for reforming
hydrocarbon fuels to generate H₂ [2]. The primary focus is on reforming gasoline,
because a production and distribution infrastructure for gasoline already exists to supply
internal combustion engines [3]. Existing reforming technology for the production of H₂
from hydrocarbon feedstocks used in large-scale manufacturing processes, such as
ammonia synthesis, is cost prohibitive when scaled down to the size of the fuel processor
required for transportation applications (50-80 kWe) nor is it designed to meet the
varying power demands and frequent shutoffs and restarts that will be experienced during
normal drive cycles. To meet the performance targets required of a fuel processor for
transportation applications will require new reforming reactor technology developed to
meet the volume, weight, cost, and operational characteristics for transportation
applications and the development of new reforming catalysts that exhibit a higher activity
and better thermal and mechanical stability than reforming catalysts currently used in the
production of H₂ for large-scale manufacturing processes.

The conversion of hydrocarbon fuels to H₂ can be carried out by several reaction
processes, including steam reforming (SR), partial oxidation (PO), and autothermal
reforming (ATR). Steam reforming involves the reaction of steam with the fuel in the
presence of a catalyst to produce H₂ and CO. Since steam reforming is endothermic,
some of the fuel must be burned and the heat transferred to the reformer via heat
exchangers. Partial oxidation involves the reaction of oxygen with fuel to produce H₂
and CO when the oxygen-to-fuel ratio is less than that required for total combustion, i.e.,
complete conversion to \( \text{CO}_2 \) and \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \). Partial oxidation can be conducted with a catalyst (catalytic partial oxidation) or without a catalyst (non-catalytic partial oxidation). The reaction rates are much higher for partial oxidation than for steam reforming, but the \( \text{H}_2 \) yield per carbon in the fuel is lower. Non-catalytic partial oxidation requires reaction temperatures above 1000ºC to achieve rapid reaction rates. Although the reaction is exothermic, some of the fuel must be combusted because the amount of heat generated by the reaction is not sufficient to preheat the feed to achieve optimal rates [4]. Recently, there has been an interest in catalytic partial oxidation since it operates at lower temperatures than the non-catalytic route. The lower operating temperatures provide better control over the reaction, thus minimizing coke formation and allowing for a wider choice of materials of construction for the reactor. Autothermal reforming involves the reaction of oxygen, steam, and fuel to produce \( \text{H}_2 \) and \( \text{CO}_2 \), and can be viewed as a combination of partial oxidation and steam reforming.

The choice of the reaction process for on-board reforming depends on the operating characteristics (e.g., varying power demand, rapid startup, frequent shutdowns) for transportation applications. Steam reforming is heat transfer limited and as such does not respond rapidly to changes in the power demand (i.e., “load following”). When power demand rapidly decreases, the catalyst can overheat, causing sintering, which in turn results in loss of activity. Autothermal reforming can overcome the load following limitations of steam reforming since the heat required for the endothermic reactions is generated within the catalyst bed, a property that allows for more rapid response to changing power demands and faster startup [5]. The lower operating temperature of catalytic autothermal reforming has several advantages including less complicated reactor design, wider choice of materials of construction, and lower fuel requirements during startup over the higher operating temperature of partial oxidation or the endothermic steam reforming for transportation applications [6].

At Argonne National Laboratory, we are developing new catalysts for autothermal reforming [7]. Our catalysts are derived from solid oxide fuel cell technology, where a transition metal is supported on an oxide-ion-conducting substrate, such as ceria, zirconia, or lanthanum gallate that has been doped with a small amount of a non-reducible element, such as gadolinium, samarium, or zirconium. Ceria-based materials are being investigated as potential catalysts for \( \text{CO} \) and hydrocarbon oxidation reactions because of the redox and oxygen storage/release properties of ceria [8]. The catalytic activity of ceria can be further enhanced by the addition of dopants, such as \( \text{Gd}^{3+} \) or \( \text{Sm}^{3+} \), which have been shown to increase the number of oxygen vacancies, improve the oxygen mobility and oxygen ion conductivity, and enhance the redox and oxygen storage/release properties of ceria. The role of defect chemistry and the surface oxygen vacancies in determining the catalytic behavior of these metal/mixed oxide systems is well known [9].

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 compares the yields for the primary reaction products (\( \text{H}_2 \), \( \text{CO} \), \( \text{CO}_2 \), and \( \text{CH}_4 \)) produced from reforming isooctane (2,2,4-trimethylpentane), which is used as a
surrogate for gasoline, using Pt supported on doped ceria and Rh supported on doped ceria at 500 and 700°C. The experiments were conducted in a microreactor system using ~1 g of powder catalyst. The product gas was analyzed by gas chromatography. The space velocity for these experiments was ~20,000 h⁻¹. The experiments were conducted using an O₂:C₈ ratio of 4 and a H₂O:C₈ ratio of 9. At 700°C, the yields of 11.4 moles H₂ per mole of isooctane in the feed for the Pt catalyst and 10.9 moles of H₂ per mole of isooctane in the feed for the Rh catalyst are close to the 12.2 moles of H₂ per mole of isooctane in the feed predicted by thermodynamic equilibrium. The isooctane conversion was 94% for the Pt catalyst and 100% for the Rh catalyst. At 500°C, the H₂ yield for the Rh catalyst is greater that of the Pt catalyst (10.7 moles of H₂ vs. 4.5 moles of H₂ per mole of isooctane, respectively). The isooctane conversion was 73% for the Pt catalyst and 99% for the Rh catalyst. At 500°C, various C₃-C₅ hydrocarbons and isooctane were detected in the product gas for the Pt catalyst, whereas only methane and isooctane were the only hydrocarbons detected in the product gas for the Rh catalyst. There was no evidence of coke formation for either catalyst. The higher H₂ yield for the Rh catalyst compared to the Pt catalyst at 500°C can be attributed to Rh catalyst being more active for steam reforming. No O₂ was detected in the product gas suggesting that the reactions involving O₂ are extremely rapid for both catalysts.

Figure 2 compares the H₂ yield as a function of gas-hourly space velocity (GHSV) for the Pt and Rh catalysts. H₂ is produced by the Pt and Rh catalysts at 600°C at GHSV as high as 150,000 h⁻¹. Of particular note is that at a GHSV of 190,000 h⁻¹, the Rh catalyst produces 9.9 moles of H₂ per mole of isooctane in the feed, evidence of the high steam reforming activity of this catalyst.
Because of concerns over the cost of a noble metal reforming catalyst, there is considerable interest to develop a non-noble metal reforming catalyst. Figure 3 shows the product yields of \( \text{H}_2 \), CO, \( \text{CO}_2 \), and \( \text{CH}_4 \) produced from reforming isooctane over the temperature range of 500-800ºC using a Ni supported on a doped ceria catalyst. Similar to the Rh catalyst, the Ni catalyst exhibits good steam reforming activity at 500ºC based on the production of 9 moles of \( \text{H}_2 \) per mole of isooctane in the feed. The conversion of isooctane ranged from 75% at 500ºC to >99% at 800ºC. At 500ºC, \( \text{C}_3-\text{C}_5 \) hydrocarbons, methane, and isooctane are present in the product gas. As the reforming temperature is increased to 800ºC, the concentration of \( \text{C}_3-\text{C}_5 \) hydrocarbons in the product gas decreases; however, the concentration of \( \text{CH}_4 \) increases. There was no evidence of coking under these reaction conditions.

Sulfur tolerance is an important issue for reforming catalysts being developed for on-board reforming of gasoline. Despite new EPA regulations that will lower the average sulfur content in gasoline to 30 ppm with a maximum of 80 ppm, many reforming catalysts will still be poisoned by sulfur at these levels. As shown in Figure 4, the presence of 300 ppm sulfur added as benzothiophene to isooctane does not degrade the performance of the Pt catalyst over a period of 48 h. In long-term testing, the vol.% of \( \text{H}_2 \) in the product gas generated from reforming a benchmark fuel mixture consisting of isooctane, pentene, methylcyclohexane, and xylenes, which contains 50 ppm S added as benzothiophene decreased by only 5% over a 1700 h period for the Pt catalyst. Experiments are in progress to determine the sulfur tolerance of the Rh supported on doped ceria catalyst. For comparison, commercial nickel steam reforming catalysts for show evidence of sulfur poisoning when the sulfur content of the gas is 50 ppm [4].
Conclusions

Platinum, Rh, and Ni supported on doped ceria catalyze the autothermal reforming of isooctane to produce a H$_2$-rich product gas at temperatures ranging from 500-800°C. At 500°C, the H$_2$ yield for the Rh and Ni catalysts, 10.7 and 9 moles of H$_2$ per mole of isooctane, respectively, is higher than the H$_2$ yield for the Pt catalyst (4.5 moles of H$_2$ per mole of isooctane) which is attributed to the higher steam reforming activity of the Rh and Ni catalysts. At 700°C and a GHSV of ~20,000 h$^{-1}$, the Pt catalyst exhibited the
highest H₂ yield, 11.4 moles of H₂ per mole of isooctane. There was no evidence of coke formation for any of the catalysts in these reactor studies. The Pt catalyst exhibits excellent sulfur tolerance with minimal loss in activity over 1700 h when reforming a benchmark fuel containing 50 ppm S as benzothiophene.

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