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Testing of a Catalytic Partial Oxidation Diesel Reformer with a Solid Oxide Fuel Cell System

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Introduction

Rural Alaska currently uses diesel generator sets to produce much of its power. The high energy content of diesel (i.e. ~140,000 BTU per gallon) makes it the fuel of choice because this reduces the volume of fuel that must be transported, stored, and consumed in generating the power. There is an existing investment in infrastructure for the distribution and use of diesel fuel. Problems do exist, however, in that diesel generators are not very efficient in their use of diesel, maintenance levels can be rather high as systems age, and the environmental issues related to present diesel generators are of concern.

The Arctic Energy Technology Development Laboratory at the University of Alaska – Fairbanks is sponsoring a project to address the issues mentioned above. The project takes two successful systems, a diesel reformer and a tubular solid oxide fuel cell unit, and jointly tests those systems with the objective of producing a for-purpose diesel fueled solid oxide fuel cell system that can be deployed in rural Alaska. The reformer will convert the diesel to a mixture of carbon monoxide and hydrogen that can be used as a fuel by the fuel cell. The high temperature nature of the solid oxide fuel cell (SOFC) is capable of using this mixture to generate electricity and provide usable heat with higher efficiency and lower emissions. The high temperature nature of the SOFC is more compatible with the arctic climate than are low temperature technologies such as the proton exchange membrane fuel cells.

This paper will look at the interaction of a SOFC system that is designed to internally reform methane and a catalytic partial oxidation (CPOX) diesel reformer. The diesel reformer produces a reformat that is approximately 140 BTU per scf (after removal of much of the reformat water) as compared to a methane based reformat that is over twice that value in BTU content. The project also considers the effect of altitude since the test location will be at 4800 feet with the consequential drop in oxygen content and necessary increases in flow rates.

Importance to Alaska

Electric generation in Alaska is characterized by small utilities which service non-urban areas where the average village population is about 450 people. Many villages are only accessible by aircraft and the transportation costs

of fuel for power generation can become significant. Over 90% of the diesel fuel used in Alaska is used for power generation. The efficiencies of the plants typically range from about 17% to 30+ % dependent on the size, speed (*note: slower speed diesel systems are generally more expensive but are more efficient*), and age of the diesel generation unit. As the diesel generation sets become older, the amount of maintenance increases. Fuel cells become an attractive alternative when the overall costs are considered (i.e. cost per kWh exceeds \$.40 in some remote locations). Fuel cells have the potential to cut the amount of diesel used by at least 50% and thus significantly reduce the amount of fuel that must be transported. The high temperature nature of the SOFC system also generates high quality heat that can be used to further improve fuel utilization.

An example of the impact of going to a higher efficiency fuel cell system could be seen by considering a village with three (3) thirty-five kW generators running for power. Even using a newer conventional system with an efficiency of 25%, the units would require about 1800 pounds of fuel per day if run at full capacity. A 50% efficient SOFC system would use half that amount of fuel cutting transportation, cost of fuel, storage cost, and environmental impacts. Taking a typical fuel cost in a remote village (i.e. \$4/gallon delivered – *Arctic Rural Energy Conference, 2004*), a typical load profile, and the using 100 kWe as the peak load it is possible to generate Table 1.

Table 1
Comparison of Operating Cost
Diesel Generator versus SOFC
Comparison for One Year

System Type	Efficiency	Fuel Used	Cost per Year
Diesel	25%	~49,000 gal	\$194,000
SOFC	50%	~24,000 gal	\$97,000

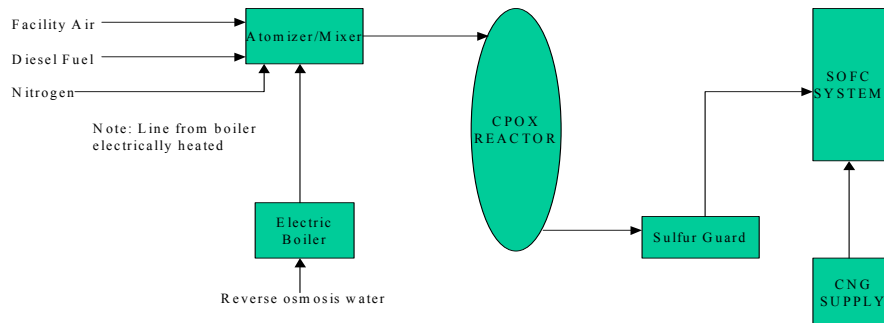
Note: No cost included for transportation, storage, maintenance, et al

It can be seen that even for small power generation systems, the savings can be substantial over the period of a year. When reductions in transportation, storage, and maintenance are considered, the savings are even larger. Storage of the fuel must consider the likely scenario that access will not be possible during certain periods of the year. Storage must also consider the harsh climate and potential environmental impact. Any method that can improve fuel utilization (i.e. reduce transportation requirements), reduce the storage requirements, reduce the required maintenance, and improve the environmental aspects of the emissions is of great interest. Of course, the relatively hostile operating environment requires that any system must be proven reliable, simple to operate and repair, and robust.

Reforming system

The first portion of the system that is being jointly tested is a catalytic partial oxidation (CPOX) diesel reformer that has been designed, constructed, and assembled by SOFCo-EFS. SOFCO is a subsidiary of BWX Technologies that is located in Alliance, Ohio. SOFCO has been producing heavy hydrocarbon reformers since the mid-1990's. Most recently they worked with the Idaho National Laboratory (INL) to design, construct, assemble, and test a 500 kWe high sulfur diesel (fuel specification NATO F-76) for Office of Naval Research. SOFCO is providing the basic CPOX equipment to INL. The INL is responsible for providing the fuel to be tested, a nitrogen purge system, an electric boiler that provides steam, reverse osmosis water for the boiler, compressed air, a water removal system, compressed natural gas for initial startup of the SOFC, a sulfur guard bed, and valves to connect the foregoing items. The system is in the configuration noted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Block Diagram of CPOX System



The CPOX reactor is attractive because of its relatively compact size compared to other alternatives and its reduced demands for water (as compared to steam reforming or autothermal reformers). The high activity of the CPOX unit results in space velocities that are an order of magnitude higher than those with autothermal reforming. The potential exists to conduct anode recycle from the SOFC system and reduce the water demands to a very low amount. Information from SOFCO's diesel and methane reforming experiments is shown in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF DIESEL AND METHANE REFORMING

	Methane	Low Sulfur	Synthetic
Hydrogen %	31%	30%	33%
Carbon Monoxide %	14.6%	12.4%	12%
Fuel type	Natural gas	Phillips	Syntroleum
Hours tested	2000+	4	4
Hydrocarbon Conversion	93%	99%	99%
Reformer efficiency	77%	82%	80%

Note: H₂ and CO shown in Table 2 are mole percentages on a dry basis. Data reported from SOFCO-EFS tests.

The CPOX reactor is designed to operate on low sulfur diesel and provide a reformat stream suitable for a solid oxide fuel cell system. Preliminary tests indicate that the reformer will provide 150 SLPM at 800^o C on a dry basis, 2-4 psig. Prior to water removal, the reformat has about 20% water content and the above percentages would need to be modified if measured on a wet basis.

Water coming to the system is prepared by running normal city water through a reverse osmosis system to remove impurities. The boiler will provide steam to a mass flow controller that can provide steam of up to 5.8 pounds per hour at 500^o C at 10% accuracy. The line between the flow control valve and the atomizer is heat traced with electric heat tape that maintains temperature. Facility air is put through a pressure regulator, an air filter, a mass flow controller, and then an air heater prior to entering the atomizer. The diesel is pumped through a pressure regulator, a fuel filter, and a mass flowmeter to the atomizer.

Exiting the CPOX reactor the reformat is cooled to approximately 600^o F prior to entering the sulfur guard bed. The reformat is then cooled in a heat exchanger and enters a water removal device. A flowmeter controls the amount of reformat entering the SOFC. The delivery conditions of the reformat are .25 - .5 psig and 120^o F maximum temperature.

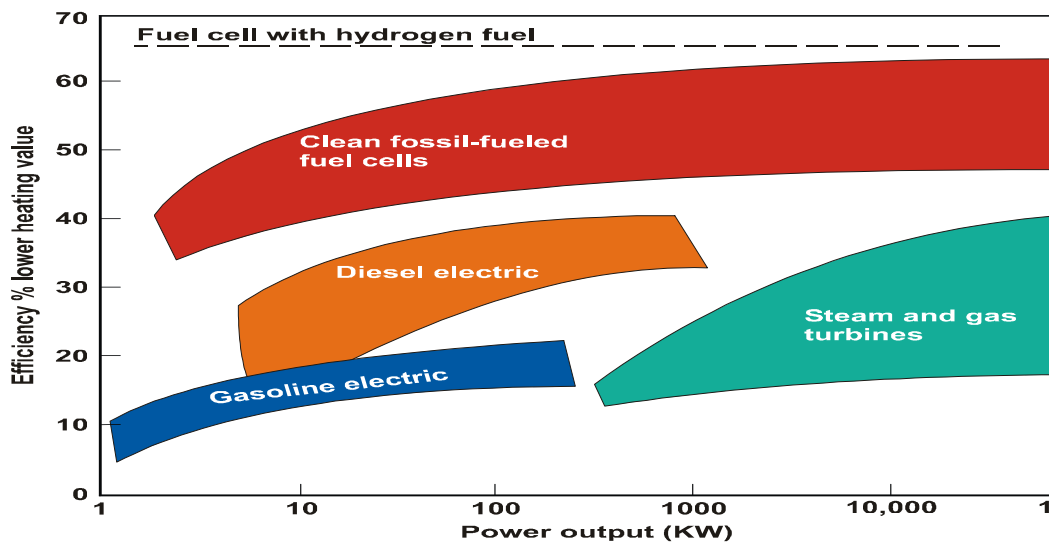
Solid Oxide Fuel Cell System

The other main portion of the system test is the SOFC system. It is rated at 5 kWe operating on reformed natural gas at sea level. The SOFC system was designed and assembled by Acumentrics. The system is based on Acumentrics proprietary high temperature tubular SOFC technology that operates at approximately 750^o F. The unit is designed to internally reform natural gas or other low chain hydrocarbons. The unit is approximately 68" long, 36" wide, and 60" high and weighs about 1200 pounds. The SOFC system is in a NEMA 3R enclosure with removable locking doors and can withstand temperatures from 20^o F to 120^o F.

The SOFC is brought on line with a purge gas of hydrogen and argon. No fuel reformer is needed when operating on natural gas because the temperature and materials of the system act to internally reform the fuel. The reformat generated by natural gas has a higher BTU content per cubic foot than that generated from diesel fuel. This is because of the higher weight percentage of hydrogen in methane as compared to diesel. The reaction of the system to the lower reformat BTU content and the effect of the heat management required when the endothermic reforming reaction is external to the fuel cells is of critical interest.

As previously mentioned the SOFC system is of particular interest to Alaska because of the high temperature nature of its operation (i.e. greater compatibility with the Alaskan environment than low temperature cells). The efficiency of fuel cells as compared to other methods of power generation is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2
Comparison of Power System Efficiency



Note: Figure 2 is from DOE presentation on fuel cells, 1997

The unit was tested at the Acumentrics facility in Massachusetts on pipeline natural gas. The unit was then shipped to INL and initially tested on compressed natural gas (CNG). Since INL is at 4800' altitude, this initial test characterized the variation in performance that was generated by the change in altitude. The variations in the partial pressure of oxygen, atmospheric pressure, and other environmental conditions were observed while operating on CNG as a fuel.

After the initial tests on natural gas, the unit was switched to operation on diesel reformat. The operation of the unit was closely monitored and data recorded regarding the response of the unit to the lower BTU content of the diesel reformat. The data recorded will be used to design a for-purpose integrated system that is to be deployed in rural Alaska. Testing commenced March 15, 2005. Preliminary results on the testing of the linked system are shown in Table 3 below.

**TABLE 3
PRELIMINARY SYSTEM RESULTS**

<i>Fuel Type</i>	<i>Hydrogen</i>	<i>Carbon Monoxide</i>	<i>CH₄ - C₃H₈ ppmv</i>	<i>Load</i>
Synthetic Diesel	20%	18%	987	2.5 kW
Low Sulfur Diesel	16%	15%	657	2.5 kW

- Notes: 1. Amounts shown are on a dry basis
 2. Samples were drawn and had oxygen contamination, amounts are corrected.
 3. Some drift on steam flow between samples may have affected the numbers.
 4. Carbon dioxide was in the expected range but the hydrogen numbers appear low.
 5. System efficiency was about what was expected for a non-optimized system.

Summary

A SOFC system manufactured by Acumentrics is being tested with a CPOX diesel reformer provided by SOFCO-EFS under a project sponsored by UAF-AETDL. Each system was previously tested independently with acceptable results. The SOFC was initially benchmarked at INL on natural gas to test the effect of the altitude change and then the unit was tested on the output of the CPOX reformer. The data from the test at INL will be used to design a for-purpose SOFC system that will be deployed into Alaska. The objective is to provide fuel cell based power generation for remote locations while taking advantage of existing fuel distribution infrastructure.

Preliminary results indicate that the CPOX reformer can successfully operate on either low sulfur diesel or synthetic diesel. The operation of the reformer appeared to be more stable on the synthetic diesel. The SOFC system needed adjustments in cooling air when operated on the reformat. It appeared that the cooling effect of the endothermic reaction of reforming natural gas was greater than the cooling provided by the increased volume of the reformat. With the cooling air adjustments, the SOFC operated in a stable manner.