

Critical Issues Forum

Hydrogen — Tomorrow's Fuel

DR. ROBERT HIRSCH

Is H₂ the fuel of choice for the future? It certainly has its benefits, but, it also has some serious shortcomings. Although no one can deny that the H₂ supply on earth is essentially infinite, the fact of the matter is that energy is still required to liberate it for practical use. In internal combustion engines, H₂ burns without emissions of CO₂, particulates and SO_x. In fuel cells, H₂ fuel can be converted to electric power at attractive efficiencies with negligible emissions. Of course, H₂ is an energy carrier, and not a fuel that occurs in nature. And, like electricity, primary energy from an external source must be invested to produce H₂.

When measured against petroleum-based fuel systems in

the near-term, it is well established that H₂-fueled systems have large economic barriers to overcome. In addition, issues of safety and public acceptance are considerable.

But, we should remain open minded regarding what basic and exploratory research might yield in the way of solutions to H₂-economy barriers. Just because we cannot now map a clear, specific path to an acceptable H₂ economy does not mean that innovative people and advancing technology will not provide the means to overcome the barriers that we now face. Readers are well aware of the history of technological development. Did any credentialed professional foresee supersonic flight when the Wright brothers demonstrated powered flight?



Dr. Robert L. Hirsch is a senior energy program advisor at SAIC. He has held senior positions in industry, government and the non-profit sectors. He has served on numerous advisory committees and is immediate past chairman of the Board on Energy and Environmental Systems of the National Research Council.

Peaking oil production

We should also be mindful that H₂'s current barriers are a strong function of today's values. In the not-too-distant future, world oil production will peak and begin to decline. The problem of oil peaking will be like none other encountered by modern society, because it will represent the first non-evolutionary energy transition. Higher efficiency vehicles and substitute fuel production from heavy oil, coal liquids and oil shale will be required to fuel the then existing enormous worldwide fleet of automobiles, light duty trucks, trains,

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airplanes, ships, etc. The costs of liquid fuels will almost certainly escalate dramatically, and the barriers to H₂ acceptance will surely change.

No one knows with certainty when the peaking of world oil production will occur. Some think it may happen this decade, others in the next decade or so. Without massive mitigation well before the onset of world oil peaking, national economies will likely be significantly damaged for a decade or more. The future of transportation after world oil peaking will look very different than it does today. Fuel efficiency will become a much higher priority, and consumer preferences must change.


There may not be a single substitute for petroleum-based transportation fuels. Besides synthetic liquid fuels, options are likely to be electricity and H₂. Natural gas is an unlikely choice in the very long term unless methane hydrates become practical and affordable — a low, but not zero probability option.

Commercialization of electric automobiles was attempted in the 1990s, and the effort failed in the consumer environment that existed at the time. The primary limitation to electric vehicles was on-board electric storage. In recent years, there have been significant advances in batteries, and it is not difficult to imagine that future research will yield the improvements needed for at least partial market acceptance.

H₂ is one of the few options that we can now conceive for the period after world oil peaking and for the very long-term future. Accordingly, H₂ research

deserves a high priority. A stepped up effort is now underway by the DOE, industry, and foreign governments. The focus of the U.S. effort is the

development of H₂ for use in automobiles and light duty trucks. As recently observed in an Academies study, the related challenges of economics, safety and public acceptance are formidable. One of the major recommendations of the NRC report was major support for basic and exploratory research on fundamental barriers. To its great credit, DOE has embraced the NRC recommendation and initiated a wide-ranging basic and exploratory research program.

It is not now knowable when H₂ might be utilized as a transportation fuel. We do know that H₂ will not become a serious contender without considerable additional research and development. Critics have argued that since H₂'s problems are so large, a major research program is not now justified. Some use the synthetic fuels program of the late 1970's and early 1980s as an example of wasted effort. Clearly, we did not understand the likely timing of synthetic fuels 25 years ago, but it is now becoming clear that synthetic fuels will be needed to mitigate world oil peaking. The same can be said for research on H₂. The costs of being late in solving the problems of H₂ as a transportation fuel are almost certainly lower than premature success. 

Demystifying the Hydrogen Myth

DR. REUEL SHINNAR

In the 1970s, the first H₂ mirage collapsed after costing \$7 billion dollars to the U.S. and another \$6 billion to Europe and Japan. So why the continued fervent interest? And why do we take this mirage so seriously that we expend valuable resources?

The term "H₂ economy" is a misnomer. Our present economy is based on fossil fuels with a small contribution from nuclear energy. H₂ is an inefficient energy carrier, not an energy source. For the next foreseeable 20–30 years, we will still depend on fossil fuels, so what use would H₂ achieve?

Conversion of fossil fuels to H₂ inherently involves a large irreversible energy loss. The best lower heating value (LHV) efficiency of a H₂ plant from natural gas is 65%, and of a coal plant is 55%. There is no available energy conversion device based on H₂ that has a sufficiently large advantage to compensate for this loss, and conversion of nuclear or solar electricity to H₂ makes no sense. The electricity

alone to produce one million BTU would be about \$50, while its market value as hydrogen would be only \$16.

It is also claimed that the hydrogen economy would allow carbon to be sequestered. Almost all coal is burned in power plants. We have the technology to build gasifier power plants where the CO can be shifted to hydrogen and the CO₂ removed. If we go down this road, the carbon can be sequestered, if we can find a place to put it, but it has no relevance to the hydrogen economy. The hydrogen doesn't go anywhere outside the power plant.

Electricity is a much more efficient energy source than fuel. In a hybrid car, the gasoline creates the electricity with an efficiency of 35%. In general, we need, on a BTU basis, only a half to one third as much electricity as fossil fuel. So, converting nuclear or solar electricity on a mass basis to H₂ is a thermodynamic crime and technical

insanity. Any use of H₂ as a substitute for a fossil fuel will increase our dependence on imported oil and gas, as well as increase global emissions. And, no research can change the second law of thermodynamics.

The ill effects of H₂ can be seen from two examples. One is the General Motors (GM) hydrogen car — the so-called clean car. If H₂ is generated by electrolysis of water, which means to a large extent from coal, its overall efficiency is 10% in H₂ cars vs. 35% in conventional vehicles.

H₂-powered cars would increase both greenhouse and smog-forming emissions by a factor of five — a strange definition of clean energy. It violates all safety instructions presently used in the industry, and H₂ is the most dangerous fuel. By fitting a H₂ car with a properly designed release valve and a delayed detonator, it becomes an undetectable suicide bomb, at least four times as large as a suicide bomber can carry.

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There are only two ways to address the problems of global emissions and energy independence — reduce fuel consumption and build thermal solar and nuclear plants. Eliminating gas-guzzling SUVs and forcing everybody to buy a hybrid car would reduce gasoline consumption by a factor of three. The only purpose of the H₂ car that I can see is to divert the attention from this solution.

The second and the only long-term option is to switch to solar and nuclear energy. The U.S. in the southwest has enough sun for all its present energy needs. We have the technology (thermal solar energy with storage) ready to do so in a way that fits the needs of the grid, and we could gradually start today. Most of our energy needs can be met with much higher efficiency by di-

rect use of electricity. Even for private cars, a hybrid car with a plug-in battery good for 50 miles would reduce gasoline consumption by 80%, and more than 90% compared to present cars. In an electric economy, this 10% could be supplied by bio-based gasoline.

The crisis in our society

Why is the H₂ myth so persistent? I believe it fulfills a deep psychological need. We are a society that has for the last 10 years discussed and computed the potential reduction of global warming by switching from coal to natural gas. But, in the last 6 years, when gas prices increased, we closed several gigawatts of combined-cycle power plants, and replaced them with coal-fired power plants. Now, we are faced with global warming.

The U.S. is capable of solving these problems for the next 100 years at an affordable cost. We have the technology, but lack the will to face the costs. Elected officials from both

political parties are not willing to allocate funds for tax incentives or subsidies that would make these solutions possible. Instead, we have created a fantasy,

that, through research, the costs will become so low that the free market will adopt solutions that require no subsidies or government intervention. Regrettably, this is not realistic. Furthermore, when energy prices increase sufficiently, we will no longer have the 20-yr lead time required to make solar and nuclear energy our major sources of power.

Basic research can create new ideas, and DOE has an excellent record on basic research. However, its mandate is not basic research, but rather technology development that the free market can adopt, which is not a realistic goal. So, since its mandate is not feasible, DOE has created a fantasyland in which learning curves can achieve the impossible and the ideas that are most unlikely to succeed become the most

attractive. Even a \$3 billion/yr research program is inexpensive when compared with the expense of meaningful work. Money for research faces much less opposition and gets strong vocal support from the grant-seeking professional community.

Fantasy fuel cells

Take, for instance, fuel cells. The number of "creative" new uses for fuel cells is impressive and still growing. One example is to use them in combined cycle power plants to increase efficiency to 80%. Since conversion to H₂ has an efficiency of 65%, this idea is clearly a nonstarter. If one wants to design efficient combined cycle power plant, the only problem is the cost, with no penalties for emissions, and both global and conventional pollution.

Another myth is the use of fuel cells for distributed energy to private homes and apartment houses, with backup from the power grid. This is an illusion; the cost of providing a connection for a customer to the grid is a function only of location and capacity, and is independent of consumption. Therefore, the charge to the customer should be separated from the connection fee. The only reason this has not become universal is that the small user is subsidized under

the present system. Obviously, the total subsidy must remain small, otherwise the system would collapse. Thus, the whole concept that distributed energy can become a large electricity source is a fraud used to promote non-competitive technologies.

But why should the public be subsidizing an obsolete technology whose low efficiency increases the shortage of gas and triples greenhouse gas emissions? We have no system studies on how much uncontrolled distributed energy the grid can accept before it collapses, and how much an uncontrollable input would reduce the efficiency of the other power sources on the grid.

DOE also spends \$90 million/yr on solar cell research that, in the absence of a storage mechanism, can make only a negligible contribution to our energy supply. Only \$5 million was spent on thermal solar energy, which is cheaper than solar cells by a factor of two to three and, when properly designed, can meet the requirements of the grid and can complement nuclear energy. Nuclear energy is preferable for base power, while thermal solar plants can be designed to be better for intermediate and peak power. But their design can be improved and the cost reduced only by building larger proto-

types, which is really doable technology, but not a candidate for long-range research. Apparently, such technologies are not popular in today's climate.

The only way to solve the problem is to add to the mandate of DOE a major program that is similar to NASA's mission to the moon, or now Mars. The mission should be to achieve 50% of our energy from large-scale solar and nuclear energy plants and reduce global emissions by 50% within 20 years. All the basic technology needed is already available. As with NASA, the project director would have to define the specifications and select the best options by choosing among competitive proposals from companies experienced in the design of large plants that meet the requirements of the grid. No project director with a clear mission and a limited budget could afford to waste billions of dollars over a 40-yr period on such nonsense as H₂ fuel cells.

H₂ and fuel cells may have many applications, but they will not solve large-scale energy or pollution problems. To avoid exposing our children to the potential catastrophic effects of global warming or the sudden collapse of our economy, we should abandon the myth of H₂ and other fantasies, and start to solve real problems. **CEP**



Professor Shinnar is a distinguished Professor of Chemical Engineering at City College, where he has taught for 40 years. Previously, he worked 20 years in industry, and has been consulting since then in the oil and chemical industry. He is a member of the National Academy and has published over 100 papers in many areas of chemical engineering. His research has changed the design methodology of chemical processes, as well as their control. He also has introduced powerful methods for economic evaluation and development potential for new technologies and has written many papers on technical policy issues.

We Want to Hear From You

What's your opinion about the hydrogen economy — reality or myth? As can be seen above, the ongoing debate regarding the hydrogen economy is highly polarized. As engineers, analyzing the science behind the hydrogen economy is in our nature. Please send your comments to *CEP* and *AICHE*'s Government Relations Committee by one of three ways:

E-mail: cepedit@aiche.org

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Critical Issues Forum Editor

3 Park Ave, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10016

Select letters will be published in a future issue of *CEP*. We look forward to hearing from you.