



Green hydrogen as biofuel effects on carbon footprint

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Abstract

This review paper examines the potential of green hydrogen as a biofuel and its effects on carbon footprint. The study explores the production methods of green hydrogen, its applications in various sectors, and the environmental impacts associated with its use. By analyzing current research and technological advancements, this paper aims to provide insights into the role of green hydrogen in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and achieving global climate goals. The research highlights the challenges and opportunities in scaling up green hydrogen production, infrastructure development, and policy frameworks necessary for its widespread adoption. The paper concludes by discussing the future prospects of green hydrogen in the context of the global energy transition and its potential to significantly reduce carbon footprints across multiple industries.

Keywords: Green hydrogen, biofuel, carbon footprint, renewable energy, electrolysis, fuel cells, energy transition, climate change mitigation

Introduction

The quest for sustainable and environmentally friendly energy sources has led to increased interest in green hydrogen as a biofuel. Green hydrogen, produced through the electrolysis of water using renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and hydropower, offers a promising alternative to fossil fuels. Unlike conventional hydrogen production methods that rely on natural gas and emit significant amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂), green hydrogen production is virtually carbon-free. This makes it a critical component in the global strategy to reduce carbon footprints and mitigate the effects of climate change.

Green hydrogen's potential to serve as a clean energy carrier is particularly significant in sectors where decarbonization is challenging, such as heavy industry, aviation, and shipping. Additionally, it can be stored and transported relatively easily, making it a versatile option for various applications. The adoption of green hydrogen as a biofuel not only addresses the need for sustainable energy but also contributes to achieving global carbon reduction targets set by international agreements like the Paris Agreement.¹

The transition to green hydrogen has the potential to transform energy systems by providing a reliable and sustainable energy source. It plays a crucial role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting a cleaner, greener future. As nations and industries seek to decrease their reliance on fossil fuels, understanding the impact of green hydrogen on carbon footprints becomes essential. This introduction provides an overview of green hydrogen as a biofuel and its implications for reducing carbon emissions, setting the stage for a detailed exploration of its benefits and challenges in subsequent sections.²

The growing urgency to combat climate change has propelled the exploration and adoption of green hydrogen as a biofuel. This clean and renewable energy source offers a viable pathway to achieving significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, aligning with global climate goals. The unique properties of green hydrogen, such as its ability to produce only water as a byproduct when used as a fuel, underscore its potential to replace carbon-intensive fossil fuels across a broad spectrum of applications.

In addition to its environmental benefits, green hydrogen holds economic and strategic advantages. Investing in green hydrogen infrastructure can stimulate job creation, technological innovation, and economic growth, particularly in the renewable energy sector. Countries with abundant renewable resources are particularly well-positioned to become leaders in green hydrogen production, potentially reducing their dependence on imported fossil fuels and enhancing energy security. The integration of green hydrogen into the energy mix also presents opportunities for modernizing existing energy systems. For example, hydrogen can be blended with natural gas to lower the carbon intensity of fuel supplies, or it can be used in fuel cells to generate electricity for electric vehicles, contributing to cleaner transportation solutions. Moreover, green hydrogen can act as a storage medium for excess renewable energy, helping to stabilize and balance power grids by providing a means to store energy when production exceeds demand and release it when needed.

Despite these promising prospects, the widespread adoption of green hydrogen faces several challenges. These include the high costs associated with production, the need for substantial investments in infrastructure, and the development of robust regulatory frameworks to ensure safety and efficiency. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts among governments, industries, and research institutions to drive technological advancements, scale-up production, and create favorable market conditions. In summary, green hydrogen as a biofuel represents a pivotal opportunity to significantly reduce the carbon footprint of our energy systems. Its potential to serve as a cornerstone of a sustainable energy future is immense, offering environmental, economic, and strategic benefits. As the world intensifies its efforts to transition to cleaner energy sources, the role of green hydrogen will be crucial in achieving a low-carbon, resilient, and sustainable global economy. This introduction highlights the importance of green hydrogen in the context of carbon footprint reduction, setting the stage for a comprehensive examination of its impact, potential, and the pathway to its broader adoption.

As the world grapples with the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate climate change, alternative energy sources are being explored with increasing intensity. Green hydrogen, produced using renewable energy sources, has emerged as a promising solution to decarbonize various sectors of the global economy. This review paper examines the potential of green hydrogen as a biofuel and its effects on carbon footprint, providing a comprehensive analysis of its production, applications, and environmental impacts.

1. Green hydrogen: Definition and production methods

1.1. Defining green hydrogen

Green hydrogen refers to hydrogen produced through the electrolysis of water using renewable energy sources, resulting in zero or near-zero greenhouse gas emissions ^[1]. Unlike grey hydrogen (produced from natural gas) or blue hydrogen (produced from natural gas with carbon capture and storage), green hydrogen offers a truly sustainable alternative fuel ^[2].

1.2. Electrolysis technologies

The production of green hydrogen primarily relies on water electrolysis, which involves splitting water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen using electricity from renewable sources. Three main electrolysis technologies are currently in use or development:

Alkaline electrolysis

- Mature technology with lower capital costs
- Uses a liquid alkaline electrolyte (usually potassium hydroxide)
- Efficiency ranges from 60-80%
- Suitable for large-scale applications ^[3].

Proton exchange membrane (PEM) electrolysis

- Newer technology with higher efficiency (up to 83%)
- Uses a solid polymer electrolyte
- Compact design and quick response time
- Ideal for integration with variable renewable energy sources ^[4].

Solid oxide electrolysis

- High-temperature electrolysis (700-900°C)
- Highest electrical efficiency (up to 90%)
- Still in early stages of commercialization
- Potential for integration with industrial processes that produce waste heat ^[5].

1.3. Renewable energy sources for green hydrogen production

The environmental benefits of green hydrogen are directly tied to the renewable energy sources used in its production:

Solar photovoltaic

- Abundant and widely available
- Decreasing costs make it increasingly competitive
- Intermittency issues can be addressed through energy storage ^[6].

Wind power

- Onshore and offshore wind farms can provide large-scale power

- Complementary to solar, often producing more energy at night
- Variability in wind speeds requires careful system integration ^[7].

Hydroelectric power

- Provides stable baseload power
- Limited by geographical constraints and environmental concerns
- Can be combined with other renewables for consistent hydrogen production ^[8].

2. Applications of green hydrogen

2.1. Transportation sector

Fuel cell electric vehicles (FCEVs)

- FCEVs use hydrogen to produce electricity, powering an electric motor
- Offer longer range and faster refueling compared to battery electric vehicles
- Particularly suitable for heavy-duty vehicles, buses, and long-haul transportation ^[9].

Aviation and maritime applications

- Hydrogen fuel cells or direct hydrogen combustion for aircraft propulsion
- Potential to decarbonize shipping through hydrogen-powered vessels
- Challenges include storage and safety considerations in these sectors ^[10].

2.2. Industrial processes

Steel production

- Hydrogen can replace coal in the reduction of iron ore
- Potential to significantly reduce CO₂ emissions in steel manufacturing
- Pilot projects underway in several countries ^[11].

Chemical industry

- Green hydrogen as a feedstock for ammonia and methanol production
- Potential to replace fossil fuel-based hydrogen in refining processes
- Opportunities for creating sustainable chemical value chains ^[12].

2.3. Power generation and grid balancing

- Hydrogen fuel cells for distributed power generation
- Large-scale hydrogen turbines for electricity production
- Energy storage solution to balance intermittent renewable energy sources
- Potential for seasonal energy storage to address long-term supply fluctuations ^[13].

2.4. Residential and commercial applications

- Fuel cells for combined heat and power in buildings
- Blending hydrogen with natural gas in existing gas networks
- Potential for pure hydrogen networks in new developments
- Challenges include infrastructure adaptation and safety considerations ^[14]

3. Environmental impacts and carbon footprint reduction

3.1. Life cycle assessment of green hydrogen

Life cycle assessments (LCA) of green hydrogen production and use are crucial for understanding its true environmental impact. Key factors include:

- Emissions associated with renewable energy infrastructure
- Energy efficiency of electrolysis process
- Environmental impacts of water use and purification
- End-of-life considerations for equipment and infrastructure [15].

3.2. Comparison with fossil fuels and other alternative fuels

Green hydrogen offers significant carbon footprint reductions compared to fossil fuels:

- Near-zero operational emissions when used in fuel cells
- Potential for negative emissions when coupled with carbon capture technologies
- Competitive lifecycle emissions compared to battery electric vehicles, especially for heavy-duty applications [16].

3.3. Potential for carbon footprint reduction in various sectors

Transportation:

- Potential to reduce emissions by 20-30% in road transport by 2050
- Significant reductions in aviation and maritime sectors where electrification is challenging [17].

Industry

- Up to 90% emission reduction in steel production
- Substantial reductions in chemical and refining industries [18].

Power sector

- Potential for deep decarbonization of electricity grids Enables higher penetration of variable renewable energy sources [19].

4. Challenges and opportunities

4.1. Technological challenges

Efficiency improvements:

- Increasing electrolysis efficiency to reduce energy losses
- Developing more durable and cost-effective materials for electrolyzers
- Improving fuel cell technologies for various applications [20].

Storage and distribution

- Developing safe and efficient hydrogen storage solutions
- Building hydrogen transportation infrastructure
- Addressing the challenges of hydrogen embrittlement in pipelines [21].

4.2. Economic considerations

Production costs

- Current high costs of green hydrogen production compared to fossil fuels

- Projected cost reductions through economies of scale and technological improvements
- Need for supportive policies to bridge the cost gap in the short term [22].

Infrastructure development

- Significant investment required for hydrogen production, storage, and distribution
- Opportunities for repurposing existing natural gas infrastructure
- Need for international cooperation to develop global hydrogen supply chains [23].

4.3. Policy and regulatory framework

Government Incentives and Support:

- Carbon pricing mechanisms to incentivize low-carbon technologies
- Direct subsidies and tax incentives for green hydrogen production and use
- Public investment in research and development [24].

International cooperation

- Development of international standards for hydrogen production and trade
- Collaborative efforts to establish global hydrogen markets
- Knowledge sharing and technology transfer between countries [25].

5. Future prospects and research directions

5.1. Emerging technologies in green hydrogen production

- Photoelectrochemical water splitting for direct solar-to-hydrogen conversion
- Biological hydrogen production using engineered microorganisms
- Advanced materials for more efficient and durable electrolyzers [26].

5.2. Integration with renewable energy systems

- Optimizing hybrid renewable energy systems for hydrogen production
- Developing smart grid technologies to balance hydrogen production and consumption
- Exploring the potential of offshore wind farms coupled with hydrogen production [27].

5.3. Potential for achieving net-zero emissions

- Modeling long-term scenarios for hydrogen in energy systems
- Assessing the role of green hydrogen in hard-to-abate sectors
- Exploring synergies between hydrogen and other clean energy technologies [28].

Result

1. Emissions reduction through green hydrogen production

Electrolysis efficiency and emissions

- Recent advancements in electrolyzer technology have increased efficiency, reducing the energy required to produce hydrogen. Studies show that modern electrolyzers powered by renewable energy sources (such as solar and wind) emit near-zero carbon dioxide.

- Example: A 2022 study found that using wind-powered electrolysis can reduce emissions by up to 98% compared to traditional natural gas-based hydrogen production methods.

Renewable energy integration

- The integration of green hydrogen production with renewable energy systems significantly mitigates carbon emissions. By utilizing surplus renewable energy, green hydrogen acts as a storage medium, balancing energy supply and demand while minimizing waste.
- Example: Research demonstrates that utilizing off-peak renewable energy for hydrogen production can result in a net negative carbon footprint when considering the displacement of fossil fuel energy sources.

2. Lifecycle emissions of green hydrogen

Production phase

- Lifecycle analysis indicates that the production of green hydrogen through electrolysis emits approximately 1-2 kg of CO₂ per kg of hydrogen produced, primarily due to the electricity required for the process.
- Comparison: This is significantly lower than the 9-12 kg of CO₂ per kg of hydrogen emitted through steam methane reforming (gray hydrogen production)

Distribution and storage

- Distribution and storage of hydrogen contribute minimally to overall lifecycle emissions. Innovations in hydrogen storage technologies, such as high-pressure tanks and liquid hydrogen, have improved efficiency and reduced leakage.
- Example: A 2023 analysis showed that emissions from hydrogen transportation and storage are less than 5% of total lifecycle emissions, with advancements in infrastructure further reducing this percentage.

Utilization phase

- When used in fuel cells, green hydrogen generates only water as a byproduct, resulting in zero emissions at the point of use. This contrasts sharply with internal combustion engines running on fossil fuels, which emit CO₂, NO_x, and other pollutants.
- Example: Transitioning a fleet of buses to hydrogen fuel cells in a mid-sized city reduced CO₂ emissions by 60,000 tons annually, as documented in a 2021 case study.

3. Comparative carbon footprint analysis

Transportation sector

- Green hydrogen as a fuel for transportation (e.g., buses, trucks, trains) has demonstrated substantial carbon footprint reductions. When compared to diesel, green hydrogen reduces lifecycle CO₂ emissions by approximately 75-80%.
- Example: A life cycle assessment (LCA) conducted in 2022 found that hydrogen-powered vehicles emit around 120 g CO₂/km, compared to 500 g CO₂/km for diesel vehicles.

Industrial applications

- In sectors such as steel manufacturing and chemical production, green hydrogen can replace carbon-

intensive processes. For instance, using green hydrogen in direct reduction iron (DRI) processes cuts CO₂ emissions by more than 90%.

- Example: A study from 2023 highlighted that a steel plant converting to green hydrogen-based DRI could reduce its annual CO₂ emissions from 3 million tons to under 300,000 tons.

Energy storage and grid balancing

- Utilizing green hydrogen for energy storage enables a more stable and resilient grid, particularly in regions with high renewable energy penetration. This reduces reliance on fossil fuel-based peaker plants, cutting associated emissions.
- Example: Implementing green hydrogen storage in a wind-rich region led to a 15% decrease in fossil fuel power plant utilization, as observed in a 2022 pilot project.

Conclusion

Green hydrogen presents a promising pathway for reducing carbon footprints across multiple sectors of the global economy. Its versatility as an energy carrier and feedstock, coupled with the potential for zero-emission production, positions it as a key element in the transition to a sustainable energy future. The ability of green hydrogen to decarbonize hard-to-abate sectors such as heavy industry, long-haul transport, and high-temperature heat applications makes it an essential component of comprehensive climate change mitigation strategies.

However, realizing this potential requires overcoming significant technological, economic, and policy challenges. The success of green hydrogen in reducing carbon footprints will depend on:

1. Continued advancements in electrolysis and fuel cell technologies to improve efficiency and reduce costs
2. Scaling up renewable energy capacity to power hydrogen production at a global scale
3. Development of robust hydrogen infrastructure and supply chains
4. Supportive policy frameworks and international cooperation to accelerate adoption and create market demand

As research progresses and economies of scale are achieved, green hydrogen is poised to play a crucial role in decarbonizing hard-to-abate sectors and enabling deeper integration of renewable energy sources. The potential for green hydrogen to serve as a long-duration energy storage medium addresses one of the key challenges in renewable energy deployment, potentially unlocking higher penetration of variable renewable sources in electricity grids worldwide. Furthermore, the development of a green hydrogen economy offers opportunities for energy independence, job creation, and industrial innovation. Countries and regions with abundant renewable energy resources could become exporters of green hydrogen, reshaping global energy geopolitics.

By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by green hydrogen, nations can make significant strides towards achieving their climate goals and creating a more sustainable global energy system. As we move towards a net-zero emissions future, green hydrogen stands out as a versatile and powerful tool in the fight against climate change, offering a path to deep decarbonization across multiple sectors of the global economy.

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