Fuel Cell Handbook
(Sixth Edition)

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DISCLAIMER

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FORWARD

Fuel cells are an important technology for a potentially wide variety of applications including micropower, auxiliary power, transportation power, stationary power for buildings and other distributed generation applications, and central power. These applications will be in a large number of industries worldwide.

In this Sixth Edition of the Fuel Cell Handbook, we have included over 5,000 fuel cell patent abstracts and their claims. In addition, the handbook features a new fuel cell power conditioning section, and overviews on the hydrogen industry and rare earth minerals market. Finally, an updated list of fuel cell URLs is included in the Appendix and an updated index assists the reader in locating specific information quickly.

It is an important task that NETL undertakes to provide you with this handbook. We realize it is an important educational and informational tool for a wide audience. We welcome suggestions to improve the handbook.

Mark C. Williams

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PREFACE

The last edition of the Fuel Cell Handbook was published in November, 2000. Since that time, polymer electrolyte fuel cells, molten carbonate fuel cells, and solid oxide fuel cells have been demonstrated at commercial size. The previously-demonstrated phosphoric acid fuel cells have entered the marketplace with over 250 fuel cells in 19 countries around the world. Highlighting this commercial entry, the phosphoric acid power plant fleet has demonstrated 95+% availability, and one plant has completed over 50,000 hours of operation. Fourteen additional plants have operated over 35,000 hours; several of those have passed 40,000 hours of operation.

Early expectations of very low emissions and relatively high efficiencies have been met in power plants with each type of fuel cell. Fuel flexibility has been demonstrated using natural gas, propane, landfill gas, anaerobic digester gas, military logistic fuels, and coal gas, greatly expanding market opportunities. Transportation markets worldwide have shown remarkable interest in fuel cells; nearly every major vehicle manufacturer in the U.S., Europe, and the Far East is supporting development.

Still in its infancy, fuel cell technology development offers further opportunities for significant performance and cost improvements. To achieve 100% successful commercial-scale demonstration, more aggressive pre-testing may be needed to ensure more robust cell technologies. Deficiencies in funding for research and development and for commercial demonstration place tremendous pressure on fuel cell developers.

This Handbook provides a foundation in fuel cells for persons wanting a better understanding of the technology, its benefits, and the systems issues that influence its application. Trends in technology are discussed, including next-generation concepts that promise ultra-high efficiency and low cost, while providing exceptionally clean power plant systems. Section 1 summarizes fuel cell progress since the last edition, and includes existing power plant nameplate data. Section 2 addresses the thermodynamics of fuel cells to provide an understanding of fuel cell operation. Sections 3 through 7 describe the five major fuel cell types and their performance. Polymer electrolyte, alkaline, phosphoric acid, molten carbonate, and solid oxide fuel cell technology descriptions have been updated from the previous edition. Manufacturers are focusing on reducing fuel cell life cycle costs. In this edition, we have included over 5,000 fuel cell patent abstracts and their claims. In addition, the handbook features a new fuel cell power conditioning section, and overviews on the hydrogen industry and rare earth minerals market.

An updated list of fuel cell URLs is included in the Appendix.

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1. TECHNOLOGY OVERVIEW

1.1 Fuel Cell Description

Fuel cells are electrochemical devices that convert the chemical energy of a reaction directly into electrical energy. The basic physical structure, or building block, of a fuel cell consists of an electrolyte layer in contact with a porous anode and cathode on either side. A schematic representation of a fuel cell with the reactant/product gases and the ion conduction flow directions through the cell is shown in Figure 1-1.

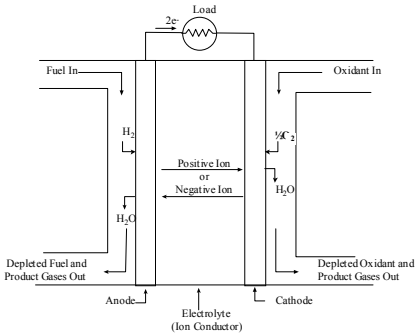

Figure 1-1 Schematic of an Individual Fuel Cell

In a typical fuel cell, gaseous fuels are fed continuously to the anode (negative electrode) and an oxidant (i.e., oxygen from air) is fed continuously to the cathode (positive electrode); the electrochemical reactions take place at the electrodes to produce an electric current. A fuel cell, although having components and characteristics similar to those of a typical battery, differs in several respects. The battery is an energy storage device. The maximum energy available is determined by the amount of chemical reactant stored within the battery itself. The battery will cease to produce electrical energy when the chemical reactants are consumed (i.e., discharged). In a secondary battery, the reactants are regenerated by recharging, which involves putting energy into the battery from an external source. The fuel cell, on the other hand, is an energy conversion device that theoretically has the capability of producing electrical energy for as long as fuel and oxidant are supplied to the electrodes. Figure 1-2 is a simplified diagram that demonstrates how the fuel cell works. In reality, degradation, primarily corrosion, or malfunction of components limits the practical operating life of fuel cells.

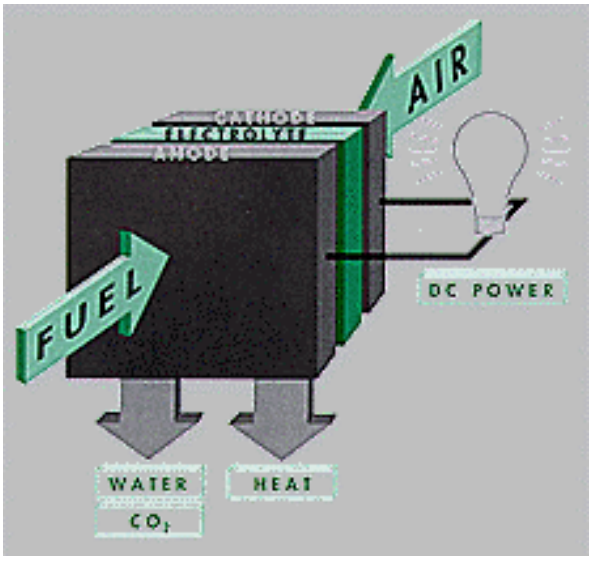

Figure 1-2 Simplified Fuel Cell Schematic

Note that an ion specie and its transport direction can differ, influencing the site of water production and removal. The ion can be either a positive or a negative ion, meaning that the ion carries either a positive or negative charge (surplus or deficit of electrons). The fuel or oxidant gases flow past the surface of the anode or cathode opposite the electrolyte and generate electrical energy by the electrochemical oxidation of fuel, usually hydrogen, and the electrochemical reduction of the oxidant, usually oxygen. Appleby and Foulkes (1) have noted that, in theory, any substance capable of chemical oxidation that can be supplied continuously (as a fluid) can be burned galvanically as fuel at the anode of a fuel cell. Similarly, the oxidant can be any fluid that can be reduced at a sufficient rate. Gaseous hydrogen has become the fuel of choice for most applications, because of its high reactivity when suitable catalysts are used, its ability to be produced from hydrocarbons for terrestrial applications, and its high energy density when stored cryogenically for closed environment applications, such as in space. Similarly, the most common oxidant is gaseous oxygen, which is readily and economically available from air for terrestrial applications, and again easily stored in a closed environment. A three-phase interface is established among the reactants, electrolyte, and catalyst in the region of the porous electrode. The nature of this interface plays a critical role in the electrochemical performance of a fuel cell, particularly in those fuel cells with liquid electrolytes. In such fuel cells, the reactant gases diffuse through a thin electrolyte film that wets portions of the porous electrode and react electrochemically on their respective electrode surface. If the porous electrode contains an excessive amount of electrolyte, the electrode may "flood" and restrict the transport of gaseous species in the electrolyte phase to the reaction sites. The consequence is a reduction in the electrochemical performance of the porous electrode. Thus, a delicate balance must be maintained among the electrode, electrolyte, and gaseous phases in the porous electrode structure. Much of the recent effort in development of fuel cell technology has been devoted to reducing the thickness of cell components while refining and improving the electrode structure and the electrolyte phase, with the aim of obtaining a higher and more stable electrochemical performance while lowering cost.

The electrolyte not only transports dissolved reactants to the electrode, but also conducts ionic charge between the electrodes and thereby completes the cell electric circuit, as illustrated in Figure 1-1. It also provides a physical barrier to prevent the fuel and oxidant gas streams from directly mixing.

The functions of porous electrodes in fuel cells are: 1) to provide a surface site where gas/liquid ionization or de-ionization reactions can take place, 2) to conduct ions away from or into the three-phase interface once they are formed (so an electrode must be made of materials that have good electrical conductance), and 3) to provide a physical barrier that separates the bulk gas phase and the electrolyte. A corollary of Item 1 is that, in order to increase the rates of reactions, the electrode material should be catalytic as well as conductive, porous rather than solid. The catalytic function of electrodes is more important in lower temperature fuel cells and less so in high-temperature fuel cells because ionization reaction rates increase with temperature. It is also a corollary that the porous electrodes must be permeable to both electrolyte and gases, but not such that the media can be easily "flooded" by the electrolyte or "dried" by the gases in a one-sided manner.

A variety of fuel cells are in different stages of development. They can be classified by use of diverse categories, depending on the combination of type of fuel and oxidant, whether the fuel is processed outside (external reforming) or inside (internal reforming) the fuel cell, the type of electrolyte, the temperature of operation, whether the reactants are fed to the cell by internal or external manifolds, etc. The most common classification of fuel cells is by the type of electrolyte used in the cells and includes 1) polymer electrolyte fuel cell (PEFC), 2) alkaline fuel cell (AFC), 3) phosphoric acid fuel cell (PAFC), 4) molten carbonate fuel cell (MCFC), and 5) solid oxide fuel cell (SOFC). These fuel cells are listed in the order of approximate operating temperature, ranging from ~80°C for PEFC, ~100°C for AFC, ~200°C for PAFC, ~650°C for MCFC, ~600-1000°C for SOFC. The operating temperature and useful life of a fuel cell dictate the physicochemical and thermomechanical properties of materials used in the cell components (i.e., electrodes, electrolyte, interconnect, current collector, etc.). Aqueous electrolytes are limited to temperatures of about 200°C or lower because of their high water vapor pressure and rapid degradation at higher temperatures. The operating temperature also plays an important role in dictating the type of fuel that can be used in a fuel cell. The low-temperature fuel cells with aqueous electrolytes are, in most practical applications, restricted to hydrogen as a fuel. In high-temperature fuel cells, CO and even CH_4 can be used because of the inherently rapid electrode kinetics and the lesser need for high catalytic activity at high temperature.

A brief description of various electrolyte cells of interest follows. A detailed description of these fuel cells may be found in Sections 3 through 7.

Polymer Electrolyte Fuel Cell (PEFC): The electrolyte in this fuel cell is an ion exchange membrane (fluorinated sulfonic acid polymer or other similar polymer) that is an excellent proton conductor. The only liquid in this fuel cell is water; thus, corrosion problems are minimal. Water management in the membrane is critical for efficient performance; the fuel cell must operate under conditions where the byproduct water does not evaporate faster than it is produced because the membrane must be hydrated. Because of the limitation on the operating temperature imposed by the polymer, usually less than 120°C, and because of problems with