Harvesting Carbon and Valuable Substances

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In the production of biodiesel, fats—such as vegetable oils, animal fats, or recycled cooking oil—are converted into fuel via a method known as transesterification. Using a catalyst, an alcohol (usually methanol) cleaves the bonds in fat molecules to produce glycerol and long-chain molecules known as fatty acid esters.

The fatty acid esters, similar to the molecular structure of petroleum diesel, convert into biodiesel, while glycerol is produced as a byproduct that enters the wastewater. If not addressed, glycerol may contaminate natural water sources by reducing oxygen levels, asphyxiating fish and other aquatic life.

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Scientists have shifted toward a less expensive, more energy-efficient option to the OER known as the electrochemical glycerol redox reaction or GOR. The method instead utilizes glycerol's extremely low redox potential—or high eagerness to transfer electrons—reducing energy requirements by 23% to 53% based on the catalyst used.

The type of catalyst also influences the chemicals that GOR is capable of producing. Nickel has garnered attention lately due to its affordability, simple manufacturing process, and capacity to generate valuable co-products such as formate—a chemical utilized in food production and preservation valued at $146 per liter.

"Integrating GOR with CO2 electrolysis for capturing CO2 from atmospheric sources combines sustainable wastewater management, CO2 utilization, and green chemical synthesis into one unified process," stated Kyungho Kim, a postdoctoral research fellow in civil and environmental engineering at U-M and the primary author of the research.

Although recent studies have concentrated on enhancing catalytic activity for GOR, there has been reduced attention on the durability of catalysts over extended durations. In order to enhance the process, the researchers concentrated on the consistency of a nickel catalyst during 24 hours of operation.

The research team initially created a synthetic biodiesel wastewater that included glycerol, methanol, soap, and water. Experiments utilized an electric potential on the wastewater simulation housed in a flow cell, which features a nickel positive electrode (anode) and a platinum negative electrode (cathode).

The results outline various previously unrecognized methods by which the nickel catalyst diminished in effectiveness over time. The current dropped by 99.7% in just 24 hours of operation, primarily due to particles obstructing the nickel electrode.

Establishing a consistent cleaning and maintenance routine will be essential for the prolonged utilization of the energy-efficient nickel catalysts prior to their implementation in real-world applications.

"The analytical framework applied in this research can provide a novel pathway for assessing catalyst stability, and the experimental findings may enhance catalyst design and performance across various environmental processes," stated Jack.

This research represents an initial step in developing stronger electrocatalysts capable of functioning effectively in wastewater.