Building Hydrogen Economy Based on Sand and Water

Prof. Dr. Firouz Shahrokhi[1*], **Prof. Dr. Ahad S. Nasab**[2] **and Dr. Rocco Guarnaccia**[1]

[1]PowerAvenue Corp. 4215 Harding Rd, Suite 1202, Nashville, TN 37205, USA

[2]Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN 37132, USA

*www.poweravenuecorp.com and e-mail: poweravenue@aol.com

Abstract

Over the last several years there have been increasing indications that a "hydrogen-based economy" might be where the world is headed. One prevalent approach to generating hydrogen has been electrolysis of water which requires immense input energy (286 kJ/mole compared to 37.5 kJ/mole for natural gas). In this study, we show that sand and water can be used to generate hydrogen more efficiently and safely. Through the use of a solar reactor, the silicon-rich sand would be refined to produce silicon powder with a purity of up to 98%. While some of the silicon would be converted to hydrogen, the balance would be transported before being converted to hydrogen. The process of obtaining hydrogen from silicon occurs when the purified silicon comes into contact with water. The silicon oxidizes and combines with oxygen from the water, releasing its hydrogen. The resulting hydrogen would then be introduced into PEM fuel cells to produce the electricity that would power individual homes and businesses. With a PEM fuel cell, approximately 0.4 kg of sand converted to silicon will yield enough hydrogen to produce 1 kWh (one kilowatt hour) of electricity.

Keywords: *Hydrogen, Fuel cells, Silicon, Hydrogen Economy, PowerAvenue, PEM, Sand*

1. Introduction

Global reserves of coal, oil, and natural gas are decreasing drastically; global energy requirements, however, are dramatically increasing. Energy generation using nuclear technology could possibly become abandoned, and regenerative energy sources are not able to meet energy consumption in major urban areas. The future lies with hydrogen. However, this gas is essentially totally manufactured from fossil fuels and hence is of limited abundance—not to mention the dangers involved in its utilization. A new approach to solving the energy problem is being sought. Silicon instead of coal and oil: could this be the answer?

2. The Current Situation

Our present energy generation concepts are essentially based on carbon (crude oil, natural gas) as a source of raw material[1], Fig. 1. The resulting energy supply process consequently produces the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, CO_2. Scientific studies prove that the natural carbon-based resources are becoming dramatically exhausted: "Mankind consumes more carbon- based energy per day than was formed in thousand years of the earth's history." Furthermore, it is expected that energy consumption will double in the next 40 years from improvement in quality of life and increase in population from current 6.5 billions to nearly 10 billions[2]. Projected hydrocarbon energy reserves are; raw oil - 42 yrs, natural gas – 60 yrs, and coal 250 – yrs[1,2,3]. See Figure 2.

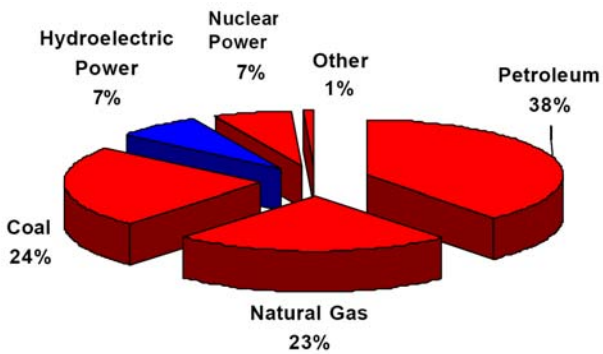


Figure 1: Various sources of global energy production as of 2000.

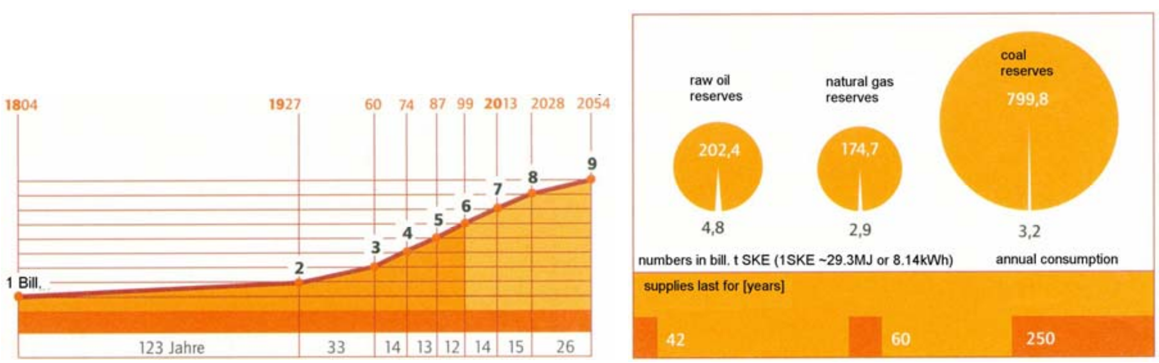


Figure 2: World Population in Billions and Carbon-Based Energy Resources

Taking into consideration the reprehending discussions aimed at effecting a reduction in CO_2 emission, it is apparent that the search for and development of alternative energy sources are of eminent importance. This raises the logical question of finding an efficient secondary energy-carrying vehicle enabling permanent energy storage and safe energy transportation, since direct transport of primary electrical energy via long-distance high-voltage power lines is prone to considerable energy losses. According to numerous experts, this future energy-carrying vehicle will be hydrogen, which produces water as the result of the highly efficient energy-delivering combustion process[2,4]. In spite of huge investments, however, the hydrogen-based energy concept is still controversial due to following factors;

■ Hydrogen is currently manufactured using crude oil or natural gas.

■ Water can be used as an alternative hydrogen source—possibly involving expensive and hazardous handling during the transport and storage of the hydrogen.

■ Energy input necessary to generate hydrogen from water is immense (286 kJ/mol compared to 37.5 kJ/mol for natural gas [methane])[5,6].

■ Generation, storage, and transport of liquid or gaseous hydrogen involves an enormous expenditure of energy.

The technical feasibility of large-scale activities involving hydrogen thus requires the use of an intermediate storage medium for regenerative energy.

In other words, we are seeking a medium that is capable of producing hydrogen without the involvement of carbon or carbon dioxide.

These pre-requirements can be met using three materials: silicon, water, and air, where silicon is the energy carrier.

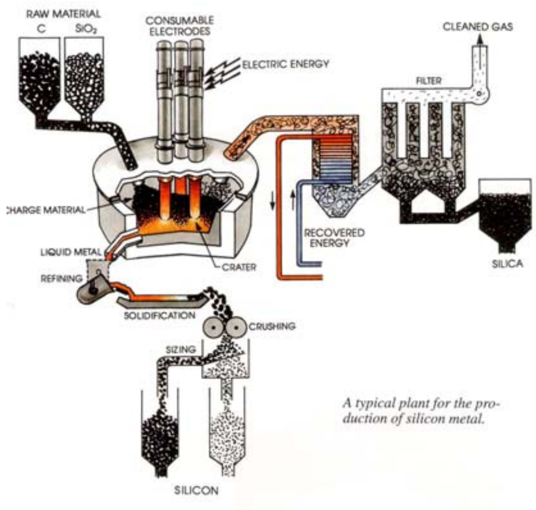
3. Silicon: Description, Availability, and Reactivity

Approximately 75 percent of the accessible earth's crust consists of silicon dioxide, SiO_2 (Si: 26.3 percent; O_2:48.9 percent)[5].

A chemical process that enables a completely carbon-independent production of silicon makes use of the resources "sand" and inexpensive excess energy—ideally renewable forms such as solar energy—to manufacture silicon and thus act as an energy storage medium. Beginning with conventional desert or sea sand, which contains approximately 80–90 percent α-quartz, silicon is obtained using technologically well-established, large-scale processes as a high purity powder[7].

This process is not in competition with current silicon production via electric arc ovens shown in Figure 2. However, it could certainly develop into an attractive alternative as an option to permit the manufacture of silicon in a future with depleted carbon reserves. The process remains completely free of C/CO_2, and no byproducts are generated. The sole starting material is sand, which, in contrast to the present-day technology, can even be used in low-quality grades. The complementary result of our basic research activities is a second technical process that effectively converts silicon tetra-halide to silicon in a gas-phase reaction[8]. This simplifies the manufacture of silicon to an analog of the so-called Siemens process that is currently employed to produce electronic-grade silicon from chlorinated silicon compounds.

It has been possible to directly generate the secondary energy-carrier silicon from desert sand on a laboratory scale in a two-stage process using solar energy. Of course, studies to transfer this to a large-scale operation are necessary. See Figure 4 for summary chemical reaction.



$$SiO_2 + 2C \longrightarrow Si + 2CO$$

Figure 3: Traditional Method of Silicon Production

The reduction process sand → silicon generates a permanent energy carrier with an energy density and energy content comparable with that of carbon. Energy content of silicon is 32.6 kJ/g as compared to 32.8 kJ/g for carbon. Energy density of silicon is 75.9 kJ/cm^3 while carbon's energy density is 74.2 kJ/cm^3.

Step 1: $$Sand(SiO_2) \xrightarrow{HCl/C} SiCl_4 + H_2 + CO/CO_2 \quad (1)$$

Step 2: $$SiCl_4 \xrightarrow{H_2} Si + HCl \quad (2)$$

Step 1: $$Sand(SiO_2) \longrightarrow SiF_4 + H_2O \quad (3)$$

Step 2: $$SiF_4 \longrightarrow Si + HF \quad (4)$$

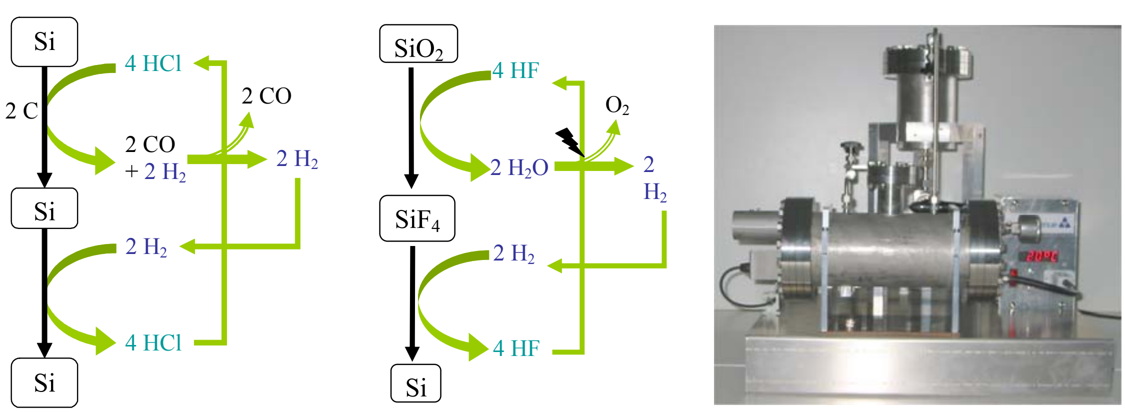


Figure 4: Summary Chemical reactions for Production of Silicon from Sand. Prototype reactor for 1 kg H2 is also shown

4. Silicon: As an Energy Carrier

The theoretical energy densities of metals and metal hydrides that release hydrogen in aqueous solution is shown in Table 1. The values indicate the heating value of the evolved hydrogen at complete material conversion. It is clearly shown that despite high energy densities in some cases, alkali metals and/or their hydrides are not utilized to generate hydrogen since they must be stored and transported under exclusion of air. Furthermore, the metals are often rarely occurring.

Material	Reaction mechanism leading to hydrogen formation	Energy density relative to: Starting product [MJ/kg]	Final product [MJ/kg]	Average [MJ/kg]
Li	$Li + 1/2\ H_2O \rightarrow LiOH + 1/2\ H_2$	17.1	5.0	11.0
Na	$Na + 1/2\ H_2O \rightarrow NaOH + 1/2\ H_2$	5.2	3.0	4.1
Be	$Be + 2\ H_2O \rightarrow Be(OH)_2 + H_2$	26.7	5.6	16.1
Mg	$Mg + 2\ H_2O \rightarrow Mg(OH)_2 + H_2$	9.9	4.1	7.0
Ca	$Ca + 2\ H_2O \rightarrow Ca(OH)_2 + H_2$	6.0	3.2	4.6
Al	$Al + 3\ H_2O \rightarrow Al(OH)_3 + 3/2\ H_2$	13.3	4.6	9.0
Si	$Si + 2\ H_2O \rightarrow SiO_2 + 2\ H_2$	**17.1**	**8.0**	**12.6**
Fe	$Fe + 4/3\ H_2O \rightarrow 1/3\ Fe_3O_4 + 4/3\ H_2$	5.7	4.2	4.9
Zn	$Zn + 4\ H_2O \rightarrow Zn(OH)_4 + 2\ H_2$	7.3	3.6	5.5
LiH	$LiH + H_2O \rightarrow LiOH + H_2$	30.4	10.0	20.0
NaH	$NaH + H_2O \rightarrow NaOH + H_2$	10.0	6.0	8.0
CaH_2	$CaH_2 + 2\ H_2O \rightarrow Ca(OH)_2 + 2\ H_2$	11.4	6.5	9.0
$NaBH_4$	$NaBH_4$ + 2 H2O → 4 H2 + $NaBO_2$	25.4	14.6	20.0

Table 1: Energy densities of metal hydrides that evolve hydrogen in aqueous solution (100% material conversion)

Silicon proves to be optimal with respect to handling and energy density relative to hydrogen storage and generation. Furthermore, the price of electricity in the sequence SiO_2 → Si → H2 → Electricity decreases proportionally with the costs for the production of silicon. It is expected that for a solar thermally produced carrier manufactured from conventional sand permit us to predict an unbeatable cost profile for silicon in the future.

It is technically possible to generate hydrogen directly from silicon at any location of choice avoiding the transport and storage difficulties encountered with conventional power stations and stationary/mobile fuel cells. Thus, silicon acts as a tailor-made intermediate linking decentralized energy generation with equally decentralized hydrogen-based infrastructure at any location of choice.

Additionally, the hydrogen generated via the sequence Sand → Silicon → Hydrogen directly from silicon and water is “pure.” In strong contrast to oil and in particular hydrogen, the transport and storage of silicon are free from potential hazards and require a simple infrastructure similar to that needed for coal. Whereas the latter material is converted to carbon dioxide, sand is produced from the silicon, which in turn can be used to prepare the silicon carrier material.

When hydrogen is oxidized, there is a reaction between the oxygen and hydrogen which results in water, while energy is released in the form of heat. In a fuel cell, the process is split in two.

The two processes take place on each respective side of the electrolyte which keeps the gasses separated, but which transports ions.

The negatively charged electrons move in an outer electrical circuit. With this apparatus a portion of the chemical energy is converted directly to electric energy. Theoretically, 83% of the energy can be generated into electricity. In reality, the efficiency is lower, but compared to traditional technology, the fuel cell is very efficient – 50% compared to 30% in a typical hydrocarbon-based combustion engines.

There are several types of fuel cells. Desirable type is Proton Exchange Membrane (PEM) fuel cell that operates by putting a hydrogen molecule in contact with the platinum catalyst, splitting it into two hydrogen ions (protons) and two electrons. The electrons are conducted by the electrode to the external circuit where they can power for instance an electrical motor. They are then fed onward to the cathode where oxygen from the air splits into two oxygen atoms when it comes in contact with the catalyst. Two hydrogen ions combine with one oxygen atom and two electrons from the conductor, to create a water molecule. The reaction in a fuel cell produces only about 0.7 volts, so several fuel cells are connected in a series to attain a functional level of output. Fuel cells connected together are called a fuel cell stack.

Fuel cells can be manufactured from a few watts to several hundred watts by cascading them in various configurations. One kilogram of hydrogen produces nearly 33 kWh of power in a typical PEM fuel cell, while same amount of gasoline generates only 13 kWh.

When using sand to generate hydrogen via silicon, these fuel cells consume approximately 0.4 kg of sand to produce 1 kWh of electric power.

An additional byproduct of the hydrogen production method proposed here is the production of pure drinking water from sea water. As shown in Figure 5, 163 kg of sand reacted with 100 liters of sea water could potentially produce 100 liters of pure drinking water plus 180 kWh of electricity.

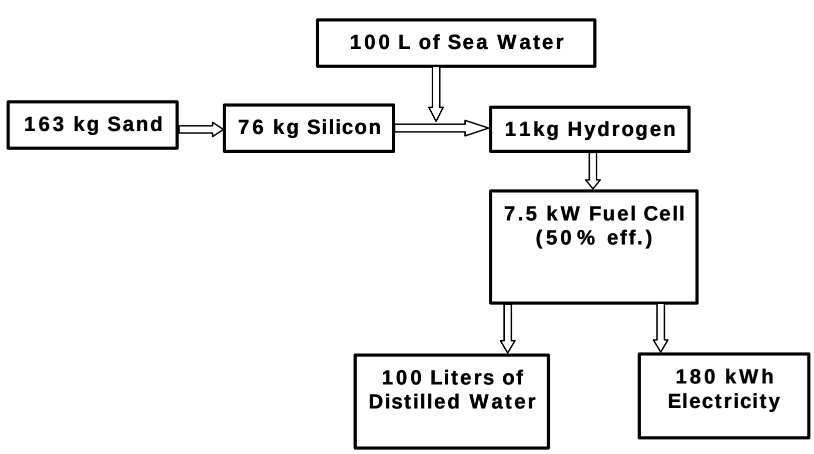


Figure 5: Production of drinking water as a byproduct of power generation using sand

5. Summary

As carbon-based primary energy carriers become increasingly exhausted, it is obvious that the existing reserves should be better used for the production of valuable products as opposed to carbon dioxide. The concept outlined here describes a practical solution to secure the future supply of hydrogen via a "non-carbon" route for a range of applications.

Figure 6 illustrates the overall infrastructure and transportation means for a silicon based 560 MW power station which could potentially feed vehicles and residential/commercial buildings without the environmental disadvantages of fossil fuel based energy sources. Moreover, figure 6 indicates the reduction in the amount of CO2 emission on a yearly basis for both a silicon fuel based hydrogen hub station as well as a solar energy based hydrogen hub station.

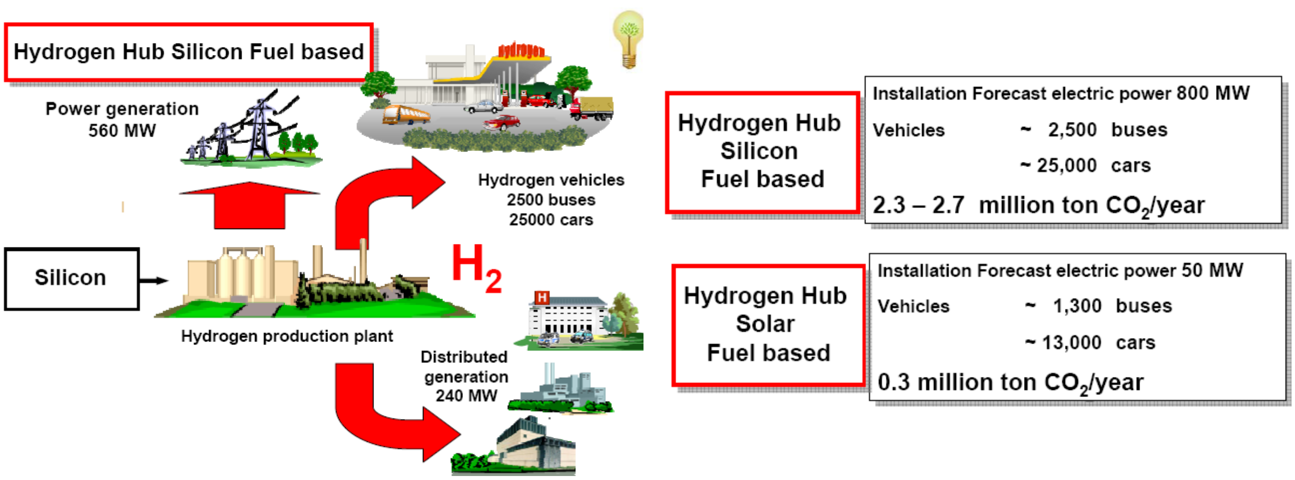


Figure 6: Infrastructure of hydrogen production and distribution as well as the annual reduction in CO2 emissions due to silicon based energy production.

This concept of future energy supply based on hydrogen in effect represents the realization of PowerAvenue's vision described in the introduction: the three- stage solar thermal generation of hydrogen from sand. The use of the element silicon represents an attractive solution to the problems resulting from efficiency losses during the conversion of thermal energy into electrical power as well as the transport and storage difficulties associated with hydrogen.

Utilization of this technique will enable nations with abundant sun/sand resources to redirect and modify their energy production schemes to take advantage this non-carbon based alternative. It is noted that the proposed technique of producing hydrogen from sand is not meant to fully replace current or future fossil-fuel based techniques; however, it is possible that as fossil fuels reserves become more limited, the proposed technique offers an attractive alternative to the carbon-based energy production.

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