Development and Evaluation of a New Advanced Solid Bio-Fuel and Related Production Process

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Abstract- An advanced solid bio-fuel along with a suitable process for its production at industrial scale was developed and analyzed. This new product, similar in the shape to woody pellet, can be obtained not only by wood or woody material but also by uncontaminated agro-industrial vegetable wastes. It is characterized by high density, low mixture content, and good calorific value. All these desirable properties were obtained by compressing and heating the raw materials, previously chopped and mixed, at temperature significantly higher than that used for drying but smaller than that used for the pyrolysis of woody material. The compression and heating condition of biomass were set within the range that partial decomposition of a portion of the biomass and thermal hardening of hemicelluloses is induced, 115-230 °C and 8-25 MPa. The measured lower heating value of the new solid bio-fuel is in the range between 18 and 20 MJ/kg and its specific net renewable energy content is significantly higher than that of traditional woody pellet. This last result along with a number of environmental impacts of the new solid bio-fuel was quantified using an LCA methodology.

Keywords- Solid Bio-Fuels, Renewable Energy, Biomass.

1. Introduction

The total world energy consumption (TWEC) on 2008 amounted to $474\times10^{18}$ J [1], obtained for more than 80% from combustion of fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas) [2,3]. In 2009, for the first time in 30 years, there was a reduction of 1.1% of TWEC in comparison with the previous year, as a consequence of the economic crisis in the USA, EU and other developed countries [4].

The solar radiation arriving yearly on the earth is almost 4 orders of magnitude larger than the TWEC [5] and significantly higher with reference to the residual energy resources derived from fossil fuels [6]. Currently, renewable energy, consisting of energy produced and/or derived from sources infinitely renovated (hydro, solar, wind) or generated by combustible renewables (sustainably produced biomass) [7], contributes to the TWEC for less than 20% [6]. Starting with this scenario it appears reasonable to expect that renewable energy, which is strictly related to the solar radiation, will contribute more and more in satisfying the growing TWEC, provided that new advanced technologies will be developed and applied in order to meet all the requirements of the modern way of living as consolidated in developed countries. In future energy scenarios an important role has been addressed to bioenergy considering that biomass, under certain conditions [8], can be considered carbon neutral and less contaminant in comparison to fossil fuels; consequently, GHG emissions and other pollutants can be significantly reduced [9]. In this contest, the potential contribution of solid biofuels to the TWEC has been estimated to about 11% [10] and, in particular areas, this value can arrive to 25% [11,12] or more. There are already a variety of consolidated modern solid biofuels made using chopped or densified milled wood and sawdust as raw material, used for both electrical and heat production for industrial and heating purposes. Among these, the most popular and marketed solid biofuel is the woody pellet [13]. It has been pointed out that biofuel pellets can also be produced using mixtures of waste materials from the agricultural-food industry: pruning residues, straw and bran of rice and cereals, grape pomace, biomasses herbaceous and fibrous generated in the processes of producing juices of
fruits and/or horticultural products, and many others [14-18]. The total yearly availability of these materials is very big [19-21]. In this case, only the grinding, the natural drying and the densification are not sufficient, while more sophisticated upstream and downstream processing of raw materials are required to obtain biofuel pellets with satisfactory physical, chemical and mechanical properties [22]. Among these, torrefaction (a kind of mild pyrolysis) between 200 °C and 300 °C is the most diffused and promising technology [21,23-25]. However, the joint effect of pressure and temperature on processed agro-industrial wastes (MAW) for producing high quality biofuel pellets is interesting [26-28]. The main purpose of this work is the development of a mixed biomass derived biofuel pellet (MBDP) having better physicochemical and environmental impact in comparison to traditional woody pellets (WP). To this purpose, the minimally processed (MP) raw materials were treated into a pressurized and heated reactor in order to study the combined effect of pressure, temperature, residence time and ratio between wood and biomass herbaceous and fibrous. An additional purpose of the research is the development of a process and the identification of a set of optimal operating parameters for the industrial production of MBDP.

2. Materials and Methods

Both the wood waste (WW) that biomass herbaceous and fibrous (BHF) were taken from local farmers and stored in open flat containers, one for each kind of biomass. The WW was naturally dried and grounded, when necessary, and then intimately mixed with different amounts, from 0 to 60% by weight, of BHF taken from the vessel where were stored for about one week. The resulting mixture was charged in the heated reactor shown in Figure 1, which can be manually pressurized to a predetermined desired value.

![Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of the laboratory scale heated and pressurizing reactor used for developing the new solid biofuel.](image)

As can be seen there is a vessel (4) where the biomass can be charged, heated electrically, 10, and pressurized using a manual pump, land 2, to the desired values. For proper operation of this device, an additional piston was inserted between the pressuring fluid and the biomass. The reactor 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10, can be easily opened and closed by using the cover 5. The residence time can be changed as necessary and temperature and pressure inside the reactor are continuously monitored; in addition, the temperature is fixed at some predetermined value and automatically controlled. As a consequence of heating and pressurization the biomass is dried and densified; at the same time small amounts of organic compounds and of water are released and collected, for the most, and quantified in the refrigerated vessel 7, equipped with a diffuser 8. The uncondensed portion of this stream is adsorbed from the activated granular carbon inside the ampoule 9 and subsequently analysed together with the solution into the vessel 7, in order to identify the composition and quantify the whole stream leaving the reactor during the whole time of duration of an experimental test.

Both the reactor vessel (0.1 L) and the pump were made of stainless steel 316 L, while the refrigerated vessel (0.6 L) used to collect water and the condensable vapours coming from the reactor, was made of glass. The glass bulb containing the activated carbon is connected to the glass vessel 7, and to the vacuum system 13, by two small pieces of silicon tube that were sealed at the end of each experiment. The glass bulb containing the activated carbon is connected to the glass vessel 7 and to the vacuum system 13 by two small pieces of silicon tube that are sealed at the end of each experiment. Then, the adsorbed organic compounds are recovered by breaking the bulb and by washing the activated carbon with an organic solvent. The resulting liquid solution, along with the liquid solution in the vessel 7, were in turn analyzed using standard procedure and a GC equipped with FID and thermal conductivity detectors, while the amount of steam collected in the vessel 8 was determined by weighing the solution before and after each experiment. Finally, the reactor was cooled and opened in order to take the solid bio-fuel from the inside and to measure its residual moisture content using the Karl Fischer METTLER TOLEDO method, its LHV using a standard Mahler bomb, and its density. Several experimental tests were made in order to find the influence and the applicable ranges of the process parameters on the characteristics of the final product. In particular, accounting for literature results [15,26] and after few preliminary tests, the following ranges for the experimental parameters were selected:

- Temperature, from 115 °C to 230 °C;
- Pressure, from 8 MPA to 25 MPa;
- BHF /WW ratio, from 0% to 60%;
- Reaction time from 0.5 h to 6 h.

It is worth to emphasize that this range of temperature covers three typical different intervals: a) the nonreactive drying, where there isn’t any changes in chemical composition, other than the mixture content; b) the reactive drying where initiates changes in chemical composition and colour; c) the destructive drying usually called torrefaction where alterations in chemical composition and colour is significant [15]. Furthermore, the above selected range of pressure is all above the operating pressure of the wet torrefaction [27] to obtain higher value of density.

2.1. Energetic Balance and Environmental Impact

An unavoidable verification in the production of solid biofuels is to quantify the sustainability, namely the amount of the net renewable energy, and the main environmental implications to be compared with the use of coal. In fact, to
make a solid modern biofuel with a modern technology, one must consider the fossil energy “invested” in the building of plants, machineries, roads, and others required durable goods, and the fossil energy consumed for the collection, the transportation, and the operation of the plant.

Using all these information, the energetic balance allows to quantify a variety of indicators such as EROEI (energy returned on energy invested), EPBT (energetic pay-back time), NREV (specific net renewable energy value), and others related to additional aspects of environmental impacts. In this study this was done using the LCA (life cycle assessment) methodology [8,28,29]. In particular, the commercial LCA software package SimaPro7.0 [29] was used to make a comparison between MBDP and WP assuming that: a) the non-renewable energy “invested” is practically the same in both cases; b) the whole processes used for the industrial production of MBDP and WP are quite similar. The only significant difference is in the extrusion section because when producing MBDP, temperature, pressure and residence time are quite higher and, consequently, the fossil energy required for a unit amount of MBDP is about 15% higher than that required for the same quantity of WP.

2.2. Industrial Process

Figure 2 shows the block diagram of the process developed for the industrial production of the solid biofuel obtained at laboratory scale.

![Block diagram of the process proposed for the industrial production of MBDP.](image)

Fig. 2. Block diagram of the process proposed for the industrial production of MBDP.

As can be seen this process proposed for the industrial is made of several sections, including extrusion and cooling of MBDP, heat recovery, and purification of flue gas deriving from the combustion of a portion of lingo-cellulosic biomass. However, since only virgin wood is burned, the flue gas purification section is actually a treatment finalized to remove small amount of solid particulate. It can also be observed that a portion of the lingo-cellulosic biomass is fed directly to the mixer, as in the case of sawdust. Similarly, the BHF waste are fed directly to the mixer, considering that this kind of material is usually friable.

The process can be operated in a continuous mode provided that the extruder is made with pressure resistant but porous walls in order to allow water and other volatile organic compounds to be separated from the solid MBDP.

3. Results and discussion

All the raw experimental results obtained at laboratory scale using the apparatus and the procedure described above are reported in Table 1. In addition, Figures 3 and 4 show the behaviour of LHV, yield, and density of MBDP as function of temperature, pressure and BHF/WW ratio. The forth independent variable—the reaction time—is strongly related to geometry and volume of the reactor other than to operating procedure and heating system. For the laboratory apparatus used in this work it was found that a residence time in the range between 0.5 h and 1 h can be considered satisfactory and, consequently it was fixed to 1 h for all the tests reported in Figure 3 and in Figure 4. As can be seen from Figure 3 LHV is almost independent from P, while the influence of T is about 3% and that of BHF/WW ratio is about 10%; furthermore, the yield is almost independent from P and BHF/WW ratio, while the influence of T is stronger, in particular with T higher than 200 °C. As can be seen from Figure 4 the density is almost independent from the BHF/WW ratio, while is strongly influenced from T and P.

As result of all the above considerations and of the additional experimental tests reported in Table 1, the following set of operating parameters was selected:

- T = 200 °C;
- P = 20 MPa;
- BHF/WW = 0;
- Reaction time = 1 h.

Table 2 shows the physical and chemical properties of MBDP obtained under these condition, for comparison with those of a traditional WP. Furthermore, under these conditions, the residual moisture content in the solid biofuel was about 2%, and the sample had the shape of the reactor, was not friable and brown in the colour. Using a material balance made after the measurements of the quantity and the composition of the adsorbate on the activated carbon taken from the glass bulb, along with the quantity and the composition of the organic matter condensed in the glass vessel, it was found that the whole organic matter lost was lower than 3.5%.

**Table 2.** Comparison between the average value of some physical and chemical properties of MBDP (obtained under optimal operating conditions) and those of traditional WP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>MBDP</th>
<th>WP</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Density (kg/m³)</td>
<td>1276</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual moisture content (%w)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LHV (MJ/ton)</td>
<td>20000</td>
<td>17000</td>
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</table>

It is of some interest to point out that the above mentioned result was obtained using always the same WW material (olive oil pruning, naturally dried in the laboratory for at least 6 months, and milled just before starting the experimental run, with the same laboratory mill), and the same BHF, naturally dried in the laboratory for a week (waste of mixed horticultural products taken from a minimally processed food (MPF) and carrot juice local production plant). It is reasonable to expect that changing the nature of the raw materials the results can also change a little.
Table 1. Raw experimental results obtained with the laboratory reactor, varying T, P, BHF/WW ratio, and reaction time inside the range indicated above for each independent variable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>BHF/WW (kg/kg)</th>
<th>T (°C)</th>
<th>P (MPa)</th>
<th>θ (h)</th>
<th>LHV (MJ/kg)</th>
<th>Yield (%)</th>
<th>Moisture content (% w)</th>
<th>Density (kg/m³)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>115</td>
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<td>87.6</td>
<td>4 ±0.5</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>4 ±0.5</td>
<td>993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>115</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
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Fig. 3. Behaviour of LHV and yield of MBDP as function of temperature, pressure and BHF/WW ratio.

Fig. 4. Behaviour of density of MBDP as function of temperature, pressure and BHF/WW ratio.
Fig. 5. Environmental impact of MBDP (red) in comparison to WP (green).

4. Conclusion

A new solid bio-fuel named MBDP, which can be produced using woody material mixed with other waste biomass from agricultural and agrifood activities was developed as alternative to traditional woody pellet. Its technical feasibility was proved experimentally at laboratory scale using a small device built for this purpose. The main advantages of MBDP in comparison to traditional WP is that the first is characterized by a residual moisture content less than 2% and its density is about 1280 (kg/m$^3$). Consequently its LHV for the same volume is significantly higher.

A continuous process for the industrial production of MBDP was developed and described as block diagram, and a set of optimal operating conditions was identified: T= 200°C; P = 20 MPa; 0% of the BHF to WW ratio, and 1 h of reaction time.

Finally, the results show that the MBDP is significantly better (5%) than traditional WP in terms of net renewable energy value, NREV, while it is comparable to WP in terms of the environmental impact.

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References


