

Preliminary Performance Comparisons of Hydrogen Production by Auto- Thermal Reforming and Steam Methane Reforming of Natural Gas with Low CO₂ Emissions – Preliminary Estimates of Cost of H₂ from Auto-Thermal Reforming

**Memorandum from Hensley Energy Consulting
to Clean Air Task Force**

July, 2021





Introduction

At the request of CATE, Hensley reviewed selected published studies production of merchant hydrogen for use in industrial, power, transportation, and domestic markets. Throughout the industrialized world natural gas (NG) is used now to manufacture hydrogen primarily for use in the petroleum refining and petrochemical industry to produce transport fuels, ammonia, methanol, and other petrochemicals. These technologies can be easily adapted and applied to “fit for purpose” merchant hydrogen production.

Until recently, these NG based hydrogen plants reject the carbon contained in the NG to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide (CO₂) produced by burning process “tail gas” and additional NG. With growing demands to reduce global warming, there is significant new efforts by industry and government to produce hydrogen fuels without releasing CO₂ to the atmosphere. If such plants are to be constructed to support a new “hydrogen economy”, then the captured CO₂ must be sequestered or converted to beneficial uses that do not release CO₂ to the atmosphere. Geologic sequestration and beneficial use of CO₂ in enhanced oil recovery is being practiced today. Recycling of waste CO₂ to synfuels or chemicals is possible but not yet commercially practiced. This memo does not address the sequestration and beneficial uses of captured CO₂.

This memo focuses on NG based technologies that are demonstrated at commercial scale either as individual unit operations or fully integrated systems. Those technologies include non-catalytic partial oxidation (POX), catalytic steam methane reforming (SMR), and catalytic autothermal reforming (ATR). SMR is widely practiced in the refining industry worldwide and is most studied of the 3 options. SMR reacts methane and other light hydrocarbons with steam to produce carbon monoxide (CO) and hydrogen (H₂). The reaction is accelerated using solid catalyst. This process is “endothermic” and substantial heat is required to carry out the chemical transformation of methane (CH₄) to H₂. Hydrogen atoms in the water (as steam) used for reforming also provides a significant amount of the H₂ that is produced as product. Today’s reformers supply heat by combusting NG and unconverted “tail gas”. The steam required for reforming is supplied internally from waste heat recovery inside the reformer furnace. The reformer furnace is the primary source of CO₂ emissions.

SMR Process

The SMR process uses a fixed bed catalytic reactor inside a “furnace” radiantly heated by burning NG and byproduct “tail gas”. The catalyst forces the reaction to chemical equilibrium. High temperatures (800-900 deg C) favor conversion of methane to H₂. However, the temperatures are limited to avoid damaging the catalyst. At these conditions, methane is unavoidably left unreacted in a stream of hot “syngas” (CO and H₂). More steam is used to catalytically “shift” the CO and steam to CO₂ and additional H₂. This “water gas shift” reaction is exothermic and heat is removed by generating additional steam. This process is limited by chemical equilibrium and some CO is left in the “tail gas” with unconverted methane. The shifted syngas is separated into 99.9% pure H₂ using “pressure swing adsorption” (PSA) and the carbon gases are rejected as “tail gas”. The rejected “tail gas” burned along with fresh NG to fire the reformer furnace. This is the primary source of CO₂ emissions in a SMR plant.

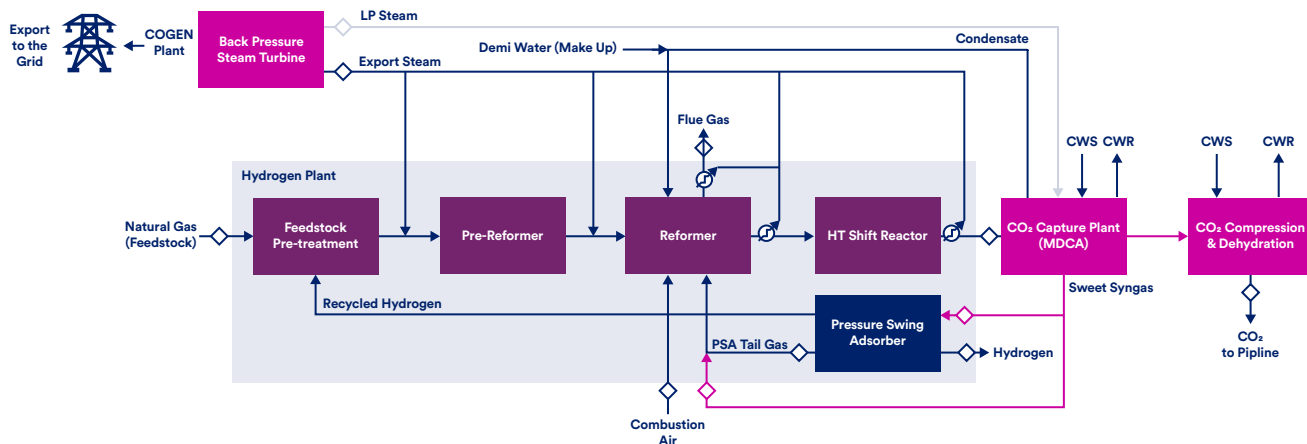
Existing SMR plants are optimized for economics, not carbon capture. High temperature shift is used

to convert CO and steam to CO₂ and H₂. Only a partial shift is needed to produce high purity H₂ and CO is used for fuel gas. The emissions of CO₂ can be reduced by adding an “acid gas” recovery unit upstream of the PSA to remove “process” CO₂. Residual CH₄, CO₂, CO and H₂ not captured ends up in the tail gas as “combustion” CO₂ in the flue gas. There has been at least one existing SMR retrofitted to recover “process” CO₂ for sequestration. Typically, this amounts to 50-60% of the CO₂ that would otherwise end up in the reformer flue gas.

One of the more detailed studies of SMR carbon capture options is the IEA Technical Report 2017-02. The two highest carbon capture options are Case 1B and Case 3. Case 1B BFD I shown as Figure 1. It achieves about 66% capture of the carbon contained in the NG feed. This is achieved by removing the “process CO₂” down stream of the “shift unit” using widely proven amine absorption system. To further reduce CO₂ emissions shifted H₂ rich gas is burned in the reformer furnace to replace the NG fuel. Current reformer technology limits the amount of H₂ burned in the furnace.

Figure 1: SMR with Syngas CO₂ Capture

Source: IEAGHG Technical Report 2017-02 2/2017



Based on commercially proven technology, our review of the literature and independent analysis indicates that new SMR based hydrogen plants can be designed today to capture up to about 50 to 60% of the carbon fed to the plant by treating the high-pressure syngas stream using proven amine scrubbing technology. If a H₂ rich syngas stream is used for part of reformer fuel, higher carbon capture rates may be possible with some modifications

to the furnace design. 90% or more CO₂ can be captured if the reformer flue gas is treated with post combustion amine scrubbing technology. Independent analyses such as the IEA Study indicate that “post-combustion capture” pathway may be less economical overall.

Some of the published studies on this topic are listed in the reference list attached to this memo.

ATR Process

Autothermal Reforming (ATR) was developed by the industrial gas industry to improve on the performance and economics of SMR technology. The focus has been on larger scale reactors applied to the manufacture of ammonia and methanol. Large “mega” ammonia and methanol plants have been constructed outside the US where low-cost NG is available.

Instead of using an externally fired furnace, the ATR reactor generates heat internally by injecting air or oxygen into the reactor containing catalyst. For ammonia production, air is used to provide the required heat and nitrogen to synthesize ammonia. For methanol, pure oxygen from an air separation plant (ASU) is injected to the reformer reactor to produce syngas in the right mix to synthesize methanol. ATR also operates at higher temperatures. This drives the chemical equilibrium to higher CH₄ conversion, higher yields of product chemicals and reduces the residual CH₄ in the tail gas. This results in less carbon in the tail gas and less CO₂ emitted to the atmosphere.

Because of the high temperature operations, recovering heat is important to achieving high overall thermal efficiency and product yields. That high-level heat is recovered from the hot reformer syngas in the form of steam that is needed to drive the reforming reactions and feed the CO shifting reactions.

Traditional ATR plants have a “pre-reformer” which partially converts methane to syngas. The pre-reformer

is typically a fired furnace to partially reform methane before feeding to the primary reformer. A fired pre-reformer generates flue gas and works against the goal of high carbon capture.

Most recently, some ATR licensors have developed an ATR process that uses the high temperature syngas product from the ATR reactor to “pre-reform” the feed stream without using a fired pre-reformer. This eliminates the need to burn carbon fuels in the reformer furnace. Johnson Matthey has been a leader in the concept of “heat exchange reforming”. Other process developers have similar technology available for license. The unfired pre-reformer is referred to as a “reformer heat exchanger” or a “gas heat reactor”. When modified for carbon capture, the capture of most of the high-pressure CO₂ is feasible using existing technology. This substantially increases the overall carbon capture rate and reduces the carbon in the tail gas. The concept has been commercially proven in one ammonia plant and one methanol plant. Two other ATR chemical plants are under development in the US but are not yet sanctioned for construction.

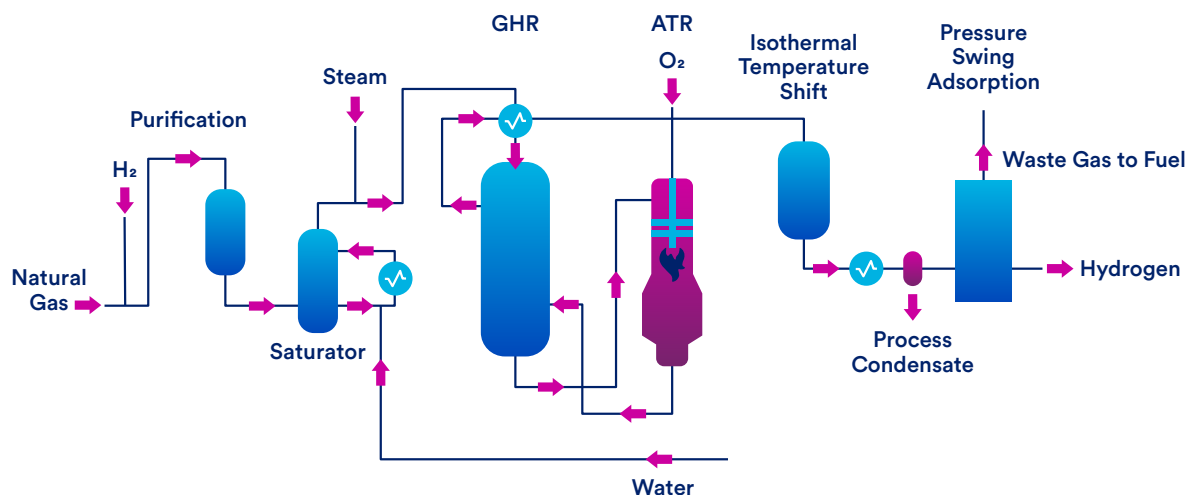
A disadvantage of ATR is the higher power requirements to produce oxygen in an air separation plant (ASU). If this power comes from a carbon intensive source, then the higher carbon capture rate of an ATR H₂ plant is partially offset by the CO₂ associated with the higher power requirement. If that power is from a low-carbon power source then this is not an issue.

At this time, a high carbon capture ATR merchant hydrogen plant has not been constructed. The most advanced ATR CCS merchant H₂ plant under development appears to be the “HyNet” project in the UK. Figure 3 is a conceptual process flow diagram for the proposed HyNet Project. Note that the only source of CO₂ emissions is the tail gas which is used to generate steam for internal use.

Progressive Energy is developing this project and a UK government funded “pre-FEED” feasibility study has been completed. Progressive Energy has received funding for the detailed FEED which is underway. Some details of the pre-FEED study have been published. The reference list to this memo lists the HyNet project and many other published studies on ATR and comparative studies to SMR.

Figure 3: ATR GHR CCS Hydrogen Plant Flow Diagram

Source: Phase 1 Report for BEIS Progressive Energy Ltd



Preliminary Performance Estimates for ATR CCS Merchant Hydrogen Production

Currently, the HyNet project appears to be the best example of a high carbon capture merchant hydrogen plant using proven commercial technology. The detailed process stream data has not been published. The published reports provide sufficient information to construct overall performance data.

Table 1 (on page 7) summarizes the performance of the first phase HyNet “LCH” plant using the ATR technology with Reformer Heat Exchanger, based on published data and our analysis. The overall CO₂ capture rate for the HyNet project is 97%. The CO₂ is compressed to dense phase pressure for pipeline transport to sequestration.

Excluding purchased power, the plant converts NG to high purity hydrogen at 84.7% thermal efficiency.

At 89.3 MMSCFD H₂ (100 KnM³/Hr), this plant is about half the size of the largest single train conventional SMR plant without carbon capture. A single train ATR H₂ much larger than the HyNet first of a kind plant could be designed in the future. ATR plants typically are most economic at scales larger than the largest single train SMR H₂ plants. The HyNet report states that this is their long-term goal.

The steam and power balances were estimated using data from HyNet reports. It is not clear if the steam from the tail gas steam generator is used for power generation or process use. However, the net imported power matches the reported data.

Table 1: Analysis of Merchant Hydrogen ATR CCS Plant Performance Data

| Description | Units, Features | Reported or Calculated Data |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Location | | Gulf Coast USA |
| Reformer Fuel Basis: UK Hynet Project | Feed/Fuel | None ATR with PreReformer HX Natural Gas (Typical USA) |
| | Steam Generator Fuel Process Configuration Reformer Oxygen Scale | Tail Gas Only Johnson Matthey ATR/RHX O ₂ from ASU One Train – Hynet UK |
| NG Feed | Mmbtu, hhv / hr | 1,429.8 |
| NG Heating Value | Btu HHV/scf | 1,013.7 |
| NG Feed | MMSCFD | 33.8 |
| NG Fuel to Reformer burners | Mmbtu, hhv / hr | none |
| Total NG feed + fuel: | Mmbtu, hhv / hr | 1,429.8 |
| H₂ Product stream: | MMSCFD | 89.63 |
| H ₂ prod stream Total HHV | MMBTU/hr | 1,211.4 |
| H ₂ Product mass rate | lbs/hr | 19,680.9 |
| H ₂ Product mass rate | kg/hr | 8,929.6 |
| H ₂ Product Volume rate | KnM3/hr | 100.0 |
| Thermal Efficiency | H ₂ /NG HHV | 84.7% |
| Thermal Efficiency | H ₂ /NG+Power | 80.3% |
| Hydrogen Composition | mol% H ₂ | 99.999% |
| Pressure (w/o compress.) | psig | 676 |
| Temperature | deg. F | 59 |
| H ₂ product Heating Value | BTU/SCF HHV | 323.8 |
| CO₂ Product Stream | sT/hr | 82.97 |
| | vol % CO ₂ | 99.7% |
| Pressure | psig | dense phase |
| Temperature | deg. F | 32-67 |
| Utilities | | |
| Raw Water, gpm (BFW/CT) | gpm | 416 |
| Power: | | |
| Air Separation Unit | KW | 5,500 |
| H ₂ Plant | KW | 6,500 |
| Offsites, BOP | KW | 4,900 |
| CO ₂ compressor | KW | 6,000 |
| Total kW (net purchased) | KW | 22,900 |

Preliminary Carbon Balances for ATR CCS Merchant Hydrogen Production

Table 2 summarized key carbon balance data for the ATR H₂ CCS plant described in Table 1. As reported, the overall carbon capture ratio is 97%. This is substantially higher than the 55-67% capture rate for SMR plants with capture only of the “process CO₂”. (See EIA Foster Wheeler Study reference). If the reformer furnace flue gas is treated using amine solvent technology designed for oxidizing conditions, 90% capture can be achieved in a traditional SMR H₂ plant.

Table 2: Analysis of Merchant Hydrogen ATR CCS Plant Carbon Balance Data

| Carbon Metric | Units | Amount |
|--|---|---------------|
| Carbon Balance | | |
| Carbon in Feed (CO ₂ basis) | sT/hr | 85.56 |
| Carbon in tailgas to steam gen | sT/hr | 2.59 |
| CO ₂ captured | sT/hr | 82.97 |
| % CO ₂ captured | % | 97.0% |
| Carbon Intensity | | |
| CO ₂ equiv NG/Btu NG Feed | lb/mmbtu hhv NG | 114.98 |
| CO ₂ emissions/Btu H ₂ product | lb/mmbtu hhv H ₂ | 4.27 |
| CO₂ adjusted for Power Req'ts | | |
| Grid Power Carbon, lbs/mwhr | | |
| 1000 (Texas Grid 2019) | lb/mmbtu hhv H ₂ lb CO ₂ / lb H ₂ product | 23.17 1.43 |
| 446 (CA Grid 2019) | lb/mmbtu hhv H ₂ lb CO ₂ / lb H ₂ product | 12.70 0.78 |
| Zero Emitting Power | lb/mmbtu hhv H ₂ lb CO ₂ / lb H ₂ product | 4.27 0.26 |

Preliminary Comparison of Carbon Intensities for ATR CCS SMR Merchant Hydrogen Plants

ATR has a disadvantage of higher power requirements due to the ASU load. For this reason, carbon intensities should be adjusted to include the CO₂ emissions from the purchased power. Table 2 above uses two metrics: lbs of CO₂ emitted per MMBtu of H₂ fuel product and lbs of CO₂ emitted per lb of H₂ product. If the plant is powered by 100% carbon free energy, the carbon intensity is low at 4.27 lb/mmbtu of H₂ product. If the grid carbon intensity is high at 1000 lb CO₂/mwhr (the 2019 average in Texas), the effective carbon intensity including the power grid emissions, is 22.17 lb

CO₂/mmbtu. Methane combustion generates about 115 lb CO₂/mmbtu. The typical NG used in this plant design contains about 2-3% higher hydrocarbon gases, so the actual CO₂ emissions would be slightly higher. In 2019, the California grid had fallen to 446 lb CO₂/mwhr. At this rate, the effective carbon intensity of the ATR CCS plant would be 12.7 lb CO₂/mmbtu or about 90% lower than the CO₂ emissions from burning NG. Table 2 also shows the same information using the lb CO₂/lb H₂ metric. To achieve 90% CC, an SMR plant would need to use post combustion carbon capture. The IEA Foster

Wheeler study (see references) of the same size SMR plant with CCS, shows that the plant is approximately balanced in power requirements due to surplus steam used to generate on-site power. Thus, SMR CCS plant CO₂ emissions are not sensitive to grid carbon intensity.

Today, there is growing interest in producing “zero carbon” hydrogen by splitting water in an electrolysis cell. This process is proven on a small scale and several projects have been announced that would demonstrate electrolysis H₂ on a larger scale. At low temperatures, thermodynamic laws limit the thermal efficiency of electrolytic cells to about 66% where the feed is electricity. This compares to about 74 to 80% for SMR CCS or 80-85% for ATR CCS where the feed is lower cost NG.

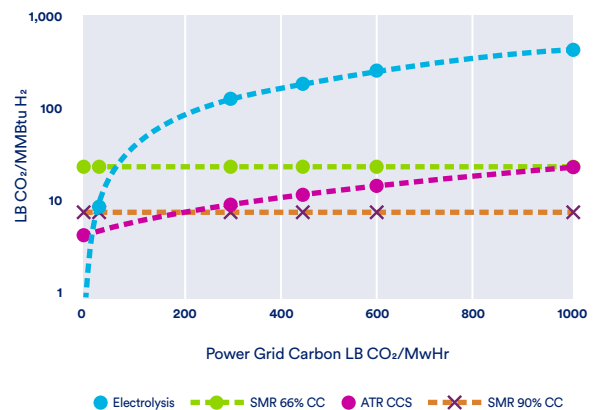
Figures 4 and 5, illustrate the relative carbon intensity of ATR, SMR and electrolytic production of H₂.

These Figures illustrate the dramatic differences in carbon intensity of H₂ product from these 3 alternative sources depending on the energy source used to produce H₂. If the electrolysis plant is located where abundant zero carbon power is available (wind, solar, hydropower, nuclear), then the H₂ product is essentially carbon free. However, if the grid power feeding the electrolysis cells is over about 20 to 30 lb CO₂/Mwhr, then ATR will have a lower carbon footprint. If the grid power carbon intensity is at the recent California level or higher, electrolysis generates 10 times or more CO₂ emissions than ATR. Since SMR CCS plants are in power balance, the carbon intensity is not significantly affected by the power grid carbon intensity. Note that SMR CCS with 66% carbon capture is always higher than ATR CCS with 97% capture. However, if 90% CC SMR flue gas capture is used, then ATR produces less carbon intensity if grid intensity is below 600 lb CO₂/Mwhr (lb/lb) or 200 lb CO₂/Mwhr (lb/MMBtu). If the goal is to reduce US power grid carbon intensity, then ATR CCS will have a growing environmental advantage over these other alternatives.

Figure 4: Carbon Emissions – Electrolysis vs ATR CCS vs SMR CCS Carbon Intensity per Lb H₂



Figure 5: Carbon Emissions – Electrolysis vs ATR CCS vs SMR CCS Carbon Intensity per MMBtu H₂



Preliminary Economics for ATR CCS Merchant Hydrogen Production

Although the goal is to produce H₂ with the smallest possible carbon intensity, each alternative must also compete on economic grounds. This report does not include an economic comparison of the alternatives. However, a preliminary economic analysis of an ATR CCS H₂ plant located on the US Gulf Coast has been developed.

For this study, we used HyNet reports on capital costs as these were prepared by reputable engineering and construction companies. The HyNet design is based on specific site near an existing refinery in the UK. The breakdown includes a large component labeled “air and gas systems”. Based on the plant utility data, it appears that the ASU is included in this line item. We converted the capex estimate to US dollars using the current exchange rate. No effort was made to convert the estimate to a US Gulf Coast site. In general, construction in the Gulf Coast would be expected to cost less than in the UK. However, we have not made that adjustment. We added to the reported capex (assumed to be total installed costs) additional soft costs for owner’s expenses and a contingency of 10%.

We developed a simple “overnight” cost of producing H₂ using the performance data from Table 1 (on page 7). This estimate is intended to be illustrative only. The current FEED study will produce more accurate costs for construction in the UK. Local site conditions could substantially change the cost estimates. The HyNet report projects a plant operating factor of about 95%. For our estimate, we assume a more conservative 90% annual operating factor. Fixed and variable O&M costs were estimated using typical process industry factors. Detailed operating costs are not available. A “levelized” weighted average cost of capital of 8% was assumed. This rate is reasonable considering the very low long-term cost of debt in today’s credit markets.

Table 3 (on page 11) summarizes our findings. Assuming US Gulf Coast location, the DOE EIA reports that the industrial rate for purchased power may be about \$50/Mwhr and cost of natural gas at the Henry Hub is about \$3/MMBTU. The cost to sequester CO₂ in that region will vary significantly based on proximity to geologic reserves. A DOE 2017 study estimated the cost to transport and sequester at around \$10/ton. Recent reports from Shell on the Quest project in Canada reported long term costs at about \$25/ton. For this study we have used the higher cost of \$25/ton. With those assumptions we estimated today’s “overnight cost” of H₂ from ATR technology would be about \$10.18/MMBTU (HHV) or \$1.38/kg. This cost is substantial lower than most published cost estimates of hydrogen from electrolysis plants. However, those costs are forecasted to drop if large scale markets develop.

These economics for ATR CCS will vary with cost of power, natural gas, CO₂ sequestration costs and changes in capital costs and capital market conditions. The technology is available today for large scale applications. This study is not intended to favor one technology over another. However, it illustrates that current NG reforming technologies may be commercialized to produce merchant H₂ with low carbon emissions at an attractive price that appears to be substantially lower than those published for electrolysis renewable power resources. Given the uncertainty of future technology performance and costs, the promise of future technology improvements, and significant locational differences, we expect all these technologies will continue to attract capital for large scale demonstrations.

**Table 3: Analysis of Merchant Hydrogen ATR CCS Plant
Estimated Required H₂ Selling Price (at Plant Gate)**

| Overnight \$2020 | UK location US\$ | \$1.23 per UK pound | |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Capex, \$MM 2018-20 (TIC) | \$MM US | | \$312.30 |
| Owner's cost | \$MM US | | \$17.70 |
| Contingency, 10% | \$MM US | | \$33.00 |
| Capex, with Owner's Cost | \$MM US | | \$363.00 |
| Capex per unit H₂ capacity | \$MM/MMSCFD | | \$4.05 |
| | \$/N3/hr | | \$3,630 |
| Capacity Factor | planned/forced | | 90.0% |
| Commodity Pricing | indicative pricing | | |
| Natural Gas | \$/MMBtu HHV | | \$3.00 |
| Power | \$/kwhr | | \$0.05 |
| CO₂ Transport, Sequestr. | \$/Ston | | \$25.00 |
| Annualized Rates | | | |
| Natural Gas | MMBtu | | 11,259,310 |
| Hydrogen | MMBtu | | 9,539,511 |
| Hydrogen | kg | | 70,401,286 |
| CO₂ captured | short tons | | 653,390 |
| Purchased Power | kwhr | | 180,543,600 |
| | % Capex | \$MM/yr | |
| Capital Charge | 8.00% | | \$29.04 |
| Fixed O&M, Labor, Materials | 1.50% | | \$5.44 |
| Prop Taxes, Insurance, G A | 1.50% | | \$5.44 |
| Variable Maint, Chems, Cat | 0.70% | | \$2.29 |
| Purchased Natural Gas | | | \$30.40 |
| Purchased Power | | | \$8.12 |
| CO ₂ Transport and Storage | | | \$16.33 |
| Total Revenue Requirements | | | \$97.08 |
| Required H₂ Price | \$/MMBtu | | \$10.18 |
| | \$/MSCF | | \$3.30 |
| | \$/lb | | \$0.63 |
| | \$/kg | | \$1.38 |

Key Findings

- Large scale merchant hydrogen plants can be constructed today using proven commercial technology based on natural gas reforming and gas purification technology.
- Merchant H₂ plants designed for minimum carbon intensity can be built today. SMR technology can achieve carbon emission reductions of 50 to 65% or 90% with post-combustion carbon reduction. ATR CCS technology can achieve 96-98% reduction in carbon emissions.
- ATR CCS H₂ plants have the disadvantage that oxygen is needed to achieve low carbon intensity goals. Additional power is needed to produce the oxygen. If this power comes from a power grid that has substantial renewable energy content, then ATR appears to retain a lower carbon intensity lead over SMR.
- When compared to water electrolysis technology, the ATR CCS technology has much lower carbon intensity unless the power supplied to the electrolysis cells has very low carbon intensity. If such grid power is available, then the same low carbon intensity power can benefit the ATR CCS option.
- Current research and development is underway for both ATR and SMR and associated gas purification technologies can be expected to further reduce the carbon intensity of NG to H₂ processes.
- Electrolysis technology is under development and expected to lead to lower capital costs. Lowering the power requirements may be possible but there are thermodynamic limitations set by the energy required to break the water chemical bonds.
- ATR single train plants can be constructed at 2 to 3 times the capacity of the HyNet project. Thus, economies of scale, design optimization, technology improvements are expected to bring down the cost of very low carbon hydrogen.
- The NG reforming and gas purification industry is highly competitive worldwide and actively competing to bring merchant hydrogen production into widespread use today. Some of the technology suppliers include Linde, Air Products, Air Liquide (Lurgi), Haldor Topsoe, Johnson Matthey, Thyssen Krupp Uhde, UOP, Axens, Fluor, KBR, Foster Wheeler, Wood Group, and many more.
- Similarly, numerous types of electrolysis cell technology are available, and there appears to be growing competition to serve this market.
- Markets for H₂ fuels, grid power carbon intensity, NG prices, construction costs, cost of capital, government incentives, and local conditions will all impact the selection of merchant H₂ technology.

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7. “Hydrogen production from natural gas and biomethane with carbon capture and storage – A techno-environmental analysis”
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