Fuel Cells and Electrolyzers for Space Applications

Advanced primary fuel cell and regenerative fuel cell energy storage systems are enabling for various aspects of future Exploration missions. Proton Exchange Membrane (PEM) and Solid Oxide Based systems are of particular interest.

Proton Exchange Membrane (PEM) Fuel Cells and Electrolyzers

Proposals that address technology advances related to the following issues for PEM fuel cell, electrolysis, and regenerative fuel cell systems are desired.

Oxidation resistant gas diffusion layers (GDLs) for PEM fuel cell membrane-electrode-assemblies (MEAs) GDLs are integral to PEM fuel cell MEAs. Traditional carbon or graphite based GDLs are very susceptible to oxidation under certain operating conditions in the pure oxygen environment of space fuel cell systems. This results in MEA degradation and shortened life. Proposals addressing the development of oxidation resistant GDLs that remain stable to oxidation in a pure oxygen environment, and provide improved performance and longer life are desired.

Passive liquid-feed high-pressure PEM electrolysis technology - Water electrolysis technology is critical for water utilization and hydrogen/oxygen generation. Standard liquid-feed PEM electrolysis technology requires numerous mechanical ancillary components for reactant management functions, including pumps and two-phase water/gas separators. These components present life and reliability issues in addition to their inherent mass and volume penalties, and also require parasitic power for operation. Vapor-feed PEM electrolysis technology avoids the necessity of these ancillary components, but suffers from reduced electrochemical performance and operational constraints. Development of passive liquid-feed PEM electrolysis technology could offer the benefits of both aforementioned systems without the drawbacks. This would yield an electrolysis system with strong electrochemical performance and a minimum of ancillary components with their inherent system penalties.

Oxidation resistant, electrically conductive, hydrophilic coatings for internal cell components within PEM fuel cells
and electrolyzers. Liquid water is produced within the reactant cavities of PEM fuel cells and consumed within the reactant cavities of PEM electrolyzers. In the case of a non-flow-through PEM fuel cell, the liquid product water moves across an open but supported gas cavity and through a water/gas separation barrier into a liquid cavity. If the supporting cell components within the gas cavity are hydrophobic, the water will be transported as droplets, which could impede gas flow and subsequently reduce electrochemical performance. If these supporting components are hydrophilic, the water is more likely to be transported as a film along the support structure and not impede gas flow. In the case of a PEM electrolyzer, water is moving in the opposite direction and therefore into the reactant cavity. A hydrophilic support structure would allow a flowing film of liquid water to reach the cell MEA while still maintaining an open reactant cavity relative to gas flow. In essence, an electrolysis cell assembly designed for vapor-feed operation could operate in a liquid-feed mode. This would yield a system with strong electrochemical performance and a minimum of ancillary components with their inherent system penalties.

Stable, highly efficient, long-life MEAs and catalysts for PEM fuel cells and electrolyzers - PEM fuel cells and electrolyzers are key technologies for space systems utilizing hydrogen, oxygen, or water as reactants. In order to improve the life and reliability of the electrochemical stacks within these systems, as well as to reduce overall system mass/volume and cost, development of MEAs and catalysts that are stable and highly efficient is critical. Techniques to accomplish this goal include, but are not limited to, alternative noble metal and mixed oxide catalysts with increased surface areas, advanced binders and catalyst layer application techniques, alternative ionomer formulations, and high-temperature membrane compatibility.

Research should be conducted to demonstrate technical feasibility during Phase I and show a path toward a Phase II hardware demonstration, and when possible, deliver a demonstration unit for functional and environmental testing at the completion of the Phase II contract.

Solid Oxide Fuel Cells and Electrolyzers

Advanced primary Solid Oxide Fuel Cells (SOFC) and Electrolyzers offer notable advantages in certain space applications when integrated with, respectively, CH₄/O₂ propulsion systems and systems for producing oxygen from planetary resources. Technology advances that reduce the weight and volume, improve the efficiency, life, safety, system simplicity and reliability of Solid Oxide Fuel Cells and Electrolyzers are desired. Proposals are sought which address the following areas:

Advanced Primary SOFC Systems: Their high temperature heat rejection and high efficiency power generation from methane and oxygen make primary SOFC’s attractive for application to spacecraft with CH₄/O₂ propulsion systems. Research directed towards improving the durability, efficiency, and reliability of SOFC systems fed by propellant-grade methane and oxygen is desired.

Primary SOFC components and systems of interest:

- Have power outputs in the 1 to 3 kW range.
- Offer thermodynamic efficiencies of at least 70% (fuel source-to-DC output) when operating at the current draw corresponding to optimized specific power.
- Operate as specified after at least 300 start-up cycles (from cold to operating temperature within 5 minutes)
Advanced Solid Oxide Electrolyzers: Their high temperature heat rejection and operation, along with high efficiency, make solid oxide electrolyzers attractive as the final step of producing oxygen from Lunar regolith by way of hydrogen or carbothermal reduction. They are also attractive components for Sabatier reactors producing methane from the Martian atmosphere. Research directed towards improving the durability, efficiency, and reliability of solid oxide electrolyzers is desired.

Solid oxide electrolysis systems of interest:

- Require power inputs in the 1 to 3 kW range.
- Operate as specified after 10,000 hours of operation fed by water with mild contamination.
- Operate as specified after 100 start-up cycles (from cold to operating temperature within 5 minutes) and 100 shut-down cycles (from operating temperature to cold within 5 minutes).
- Offer thermodynamic efficiencies of at least 70% (DC-input to Lower Heating Value H₂ output) when operating at the current feed corresponding to rated power.

Research should be conducted to demonstrate technical feasibility during Phase I and show a path toward a Phase II hardware demonstration, and when possible, deliver a demonstration unit for functional and environmental testing at the completion of the Phase II contract.