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A Study of the Importance of Secondary Reactions in Char Formation and Pyrolysis

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Process Engineering

at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand.

Georg Dietrich Ripberger

2016
Abstract
Abstract

Anthropogenic climate change, caused primarily by excessive emissions of carbon dioxide, has led to a renewed interest in char, the solid product of pyrolysis. When applied to soil as biochar it can both sequester carbon and improve soil function. To make its manufacture environmentally friendly and economically viable it is important to maximise char yield, which can be done by promoting secondary reactions.

This research shows that secondary reactions, which are enhanced by prolonged vapour-phase residence time and concentration, not only increase the char yield but are the source of the majority of the char formed. All four biomass constituents (extractives, cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin) undergo secondary reactions concurrent with primary reactions over the entire pyrolysis range ≈140 to 500 °C, which makes it practically impossible to separate them. Secondary char formation was confirmed to be exothermic which affects the overall heat of pyrolysis. Impregnating the feedstock with the elements K, Mg and P, which are plant macro-nutrients naturally present in biomass, resulted in the catalysis of secondary char formation. The results reveal that a first order reaction model does not describe pyrolysis accurately when char formation is enhanced by catalysis and secondary reactions.

Secondary char can be enhanced by increasing the particle size but there is a limit due to increased cracking and fracturing of the pyrolysing solid. This limitation is overcome by pyrolysis in an enclosed vessel, termed autogenous pressure pyrolysis, which was discovered to cause significant changes in the volatile pyrolysis products; indicating the co-production of a high quality liquid. This process, however, negatively affects the char properties relevant for biochar like the surface area, similar to self-charring and co-carbonisation of condensed volatile pyrolysis products. To increase research capabilities a unique high temperature/ high pressure reactor (600 °C at 20 MPa) was designed to allow the detailed characterisation of all three pyrolysis product classes under extreme pyrolysis conditions. This was demonstrated to be invaluable for understanding the underlying pyrolysis mechanism and physical processes at play.
Acknowledgements

Doing research is a bit like a quest into the unknown. Over the past few years I embarked on my own journey to discover the unknown, and shed some light onto it. There are a few people who helped me along the way, who I would sincerely like to thank:

My principal supervisor Professor Jim Jones and co-supervisor Professor Tony Paterson whose guidance and mentorship throughout this journey has been invaluable. They helped me to conquer the seemingly ever-increasing mountain of research questions and provided me with many opportunities to further my knowledge and gain experience for the tasks ahead. I am grateful for their continuous support, ideas, and encouragement.

The fourth year students Fatima Bashir, Uchena Evanson, Craig Kirwan, Hani Mohd-Hanif, Saleh Alyami and Nadeem Caco who contributed with their final year research projects to the outcome of this quest.

John McDonald-Wharry from the University of Waikato, who I would like to thank for taking SEM images, doing Raman analysis, and the helpful discussions and comments about char chemistry and the nanostructural development.

Associate Professor Marta Camps, Roberto Calvelo Pereira, Tao Wang, Laura Munoz and everyone from the New Zealand Biochar Research Centre for assisting me with experiments, and helping me to understand the complexities of biochar and its intricate interplay with soil.

Professor Peter Buurman, Barry Scott and Bruce Fraser for their help with Py/GC-MS, and the team from DKSH New Zealand for their support with elemental analysis.

Rhonda Bridges for her help with experiments during her Masters, and for being a friend and running partner; keeping me physically fit for the challenges of this journey.

Clive Bardell, Bruce Collins, Ian Thomas, Anthony Wade, and all the workshop team from the School of Engineering and Advanced Technology that provided the specialised equipment needed for my PhD endeavour. Special thanks goes also to the
team from Worley Parsons New Zealand and Fitzroy Engineering Ltd for their expertise in designing the high temperature/ high pressure reactor.

The academic staff, in particular Professor John Bronlund, Professor Robert McLachlan, and Colin Brown for their assistance with modelling; Mike Bretherton, Ian Ferkert, John Sykes, and all the technical staff that helped with the analytical equipment and its maintenance. A special thank you goes to John Edwards for always making time, organising all the bits-and-pieces, and for giving me ideas on how to tackle the problems encountered; Ann-Marie Jackson, the Lab Manager; Nick Look and Michael Lusby for IT support; Glenda Rosoman, Gayle Leader and all the administrative staff that were part of making this project possible.

I would also like to acknowledge my fellow explorers Eli, Grace, Ian, Julawit, Sadia, Shakti, Sureewan, Tawan, Tiyaporn and all the others in the postgraduate office not named here, who offered their friendship and company while embarking on their own journey.

Last but not least, many special thanks go to my family back in Germany and my New Zealand family. Their support and backing seems to have no boundaries, and they are the best cheerleaders one could ever ask for. Especially, I would like to thank my wife Amber Rose for being so understanding about the commitment such a task takes and sacrificing her personal time with me so I could immerse myself into the world of research.

Like an expedition into the wild, this journey was not a single person’s effort. One can only be as good as the team that supports them; imparting their knowledge, wisdom, and insight along the way. Thus, journeys are not defined by reaching the finish line, but rather by the experiences we gain, the people we meet, and the friendships we develop. I have been privileged to be part of a great team that made this journey possible to whom I am greatly indebted.
Statement of Contribution to Doctoral Thesis Containing Publications

List of Publications

Report:


[PhD Confirmation Report]

Conference presentations:


[Conference Oral Presentation & Peer Reviewed Paper; Speaker: Georg Ripberger]


[Conference Oral Presentation & Peer Reviewed Paper; Speaker: Georg Ripberger]


[Conference Oral Presentation; Speaker: Georg Ripberger]

[Conference Oral Presentation; Speaker: Georg Ripberger]


[Conference Oral Presentation; Speaker: Georg Ripberger]


[Conference Oral Presentation; Speaker: J. McDonald-Wharry]


[Conference Oral Presentation; Speaker: Georg Ripberger]


[Conference Oral Presentation; Speaker: Georg Ripberger]

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**Conference posters:**


[Conference Poster; Presented by Georg Ripberger]


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**Seminars:**


[Oral Presentation; Speaker Georg Ripberger]


[Oral Presentation; Speaker Georg Ripberger]


[Oral Presentation; Speaker Georg Ripberger]

[Oral Presentation; Speaker Georg Ripberger]
Statement of Contribution

These outputs were distributed over the time of Georg Ripberger’s PhD study. They represent the state of knowledge at the time. The final opinions are contained in the thesis which, in some cases, are different to those expressed in the publications and presentations. In other words, the work has evolved over time. Georg had ownership of his PhD project and the work contained is entirely his. The role of the supervisors, Jim Jones and Tony Paterson, was to mentor him. A number of honours research projects were conducted alongside the PhD; these were supervised by Georg Ripberger and Jim Jones. We discussed many of the ideas presented in the publications, but emphasise that they are the work of Georg. Percentages are hard to ascribe, but as supervisors, we can only attribute ourselves a small percentage commensurate with mentoring.

Signed

Jim Jones, Principal Supervisor
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