

HYDROGEN SULFIDE REMOVAL FROM BIOGAS

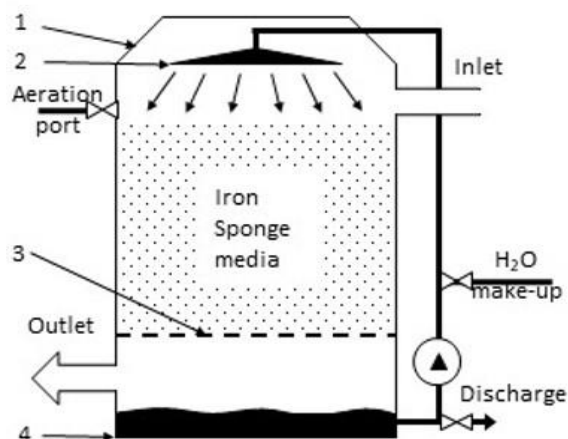
Part 3A: Iron Sponge Basics

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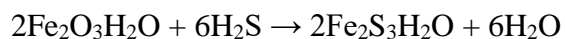
One of the oldest technologies for the removal of hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) from gas is the use of “Iron Sponge”. A chemical-physical process, originally developed to remove H₂S from natural and coal gas streams, iron sponge has been in use for over 140 years and more recently to remove H₂S from biogas.

SYSTEM DESCRIPTION

An iron sponge system consists of: 1) a reaction vessel containing bark impregnated with ferric oxide (Fe₂O₃), 2) a misting system to maintain moisture levels, 3) support for the impregnated bark, and 4) a reservoir of surplus recirculated water.



Biogas is typically introduced at the top of the vessel (down-flow) and as it makes its way down the column, H₂S reacts with the Fe₂O₃ to form ferric sulfide (Fe₂S₃) in the following reaction:



Water is produced during this reaction, and typically biogas is saturated with water vapor, which reduces the need to add additional water to maintain moisture in the

media. Water is trickled from the top as needed to keep the wood chips damp.

The pH of the trickle water is typically maintained at approximately 8, with a requirement to add sodium bicarbonate or other base if the pH drops below 7.

Temperatures are usually kept between 50 and 130°F, as above 130°F the water of crystallization (the water in complex with the ferric oxide) can be driven off, reducing the ability of the iron sponge to react with H₂S until temperature is dropped.

REQUIREMENTS

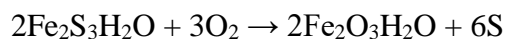
Reactor vessels are relatively simple designs that seek to maximize the contact time between the biogas and media, while preventing short-circuiting. Typically at the bottom of the vessel there is a gas collection system to improve the uniformity of gas collection, and a sump to collect condensed biogas moisture and possible excess trickled water. Typically reactor vessels are a minimum of 5 feet tall with the media evenly packed throughout. (See **Hydrogen Sulfide Removal from Biogas Part 3B: Iron Sponge Design Considerations** for more information on sizing reactor vessels.)

If the biogas flow rate and concentration of inlet H₂S remain constant, the time between media change-outs will also be consistent. However, this is rarely the case with manure-derived biogas and so both the H₂S concentration at the outlet, and the pressure increase across the media bed need to be monitored. Increasing outlet concentration indicates that there is less ferric oxide available to react. Pressure increases signal that the media may be becoming fouled with solid ferric sulfide.

SPENT MEDIA

It is necessary to change the iron sponge as the ferric oxide becomes replaced with ferric sulfide. It is possible to “regenerate” or “revivify” the media by aerating the vessel; however, regeneration is not complete and typically 30% of the reaction capacity is lost each time. Alternatively, oxygen can be added to the biogas stream (2 to 3% air injection) to continuously regenerate the media. This process is not 100% efficient either, but can lengthen the lifespan of the media by 2 to 3 times.

The regeneration reaction:



is an exothermic reaction, meaning it gives off heat. Sufficient heat can be produced to cause spontaneous combustion thus the need to keep the media moist.

To maintain biogas flows during media change-out or regeneration, reactors are often installed in parallel, so that when one reactor is shut down for maintenance, the other(s) can be used.

Once the media can no longer be regenerated, it must be removed and disposed of. Depending on the vessel design this can be a labor intensive process that may require manual breaking up of the spent media and removal from the vessel by shoveling; CAUTION: VESSELS ARE CONSIDERED CONFINED SPACES AND SHOULD NOT BE ENTERED WITHOUT PROPER TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT¹. Other options are to fill the vessel with water and use vacuum trucks to remove media.

¹Nellie Brown 1997. Health Hazard Manual: Wastewater Treatment Plant and Sewer Workers. <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=manuals>

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Care must be taken to ensure that material removed from the vessel is kept wet, to prevent auto-ignition. Spent media can be disposed of in a landfill, composted, or field applied.

COST

Iron sponge media retails for approximately \$12 per bushel (plus shipping), and is usually sold based on the amount of ferric oxide per bushel of media (e.g. 15 lbs. Fe₂O₃ per bushel).

The annual cost of media will depend on the flowrate of biogas as well as the incoming H₂S concentration. Each pound of Fe₂O₃ will react with 0.56 pounds of H₂S. The media cost for the biogas from a 1,000 cow dairy would be ~\$11,000 per year with an inlet concentration of 3,000 ppm H₂S. With regeneration this could be reduced to ~\$5,500.

The required media replacement frequency and cost have led most operators of large-scale anaerobic digesters to select other technologies for primary treatment, though it remains a good option for a secondary or polishing treatment.

Iron Sponge Pros:

- Simple maintenance requirements
- No start up time required (as with biological trickling filters)
- No expensive/sensitive controls required
- Not affected by other contaminants in the gas stream (water vapor)

Iron Sponge Cons:

- Media replacement
- Labor intensive to replace media