IJAET International Journal of Application of Engineering and Technology ISSN: 2395-3594

Vol-2 No.-5

Prospects for coal Gasification Systems and Challenges occurred in Underground Way (UCG

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ABSTRACT

It is widely used in most parts of the world. Underground Coal Gasification gives the promise of turning many poor quality coal resources into exploitable reserves by delivering energy in the form of synthesis gas, potentially at very low cost. The synthesis gas can be used for generation of electricity and the production of fuels and chemicals by commercially proven technology. Furthermore, any carbon present in the synthesis gas not used for downstream products could be easily separated and geo-sequestrated. This could extend the Fossil Fuel Age by providing low cost energy for developing and developed countries alike. Underground Coal Gasification also comes with technical and environmental challenges that are still not fully resolved. The paper outlines key developments in Underground Coal Gasification and issues raised by Australian experience, particularly in regard to the contamination of acquifers. The paper discusses the quality of Underground Coal Gasification synthesis gas and its potential use in downstream applications. The clean-up steps required for various downstream applications are described. A key hurdle to up-take of Underground Coal Gasification is the overall cost of clean-up which has to be added to the cost of Underground Coal Gasification production. This cost is discussed and the potential of Underground Coal Gasification as a major new feedstock described.

Keywords: ***coal gasification, fossil fuels, clean-up, potential.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Coal Gasification as a source of synthesis gas (syn-gas) for power generation, liquid fuels production and/or chemicals and fertilizer manufacture has been made to look beguilingly simple and straightforward by many of it proponents. Simple figures, such as Figure 1 below, are produced to introduce the concept to the public, potential investors and the greater scientific and engineering community.

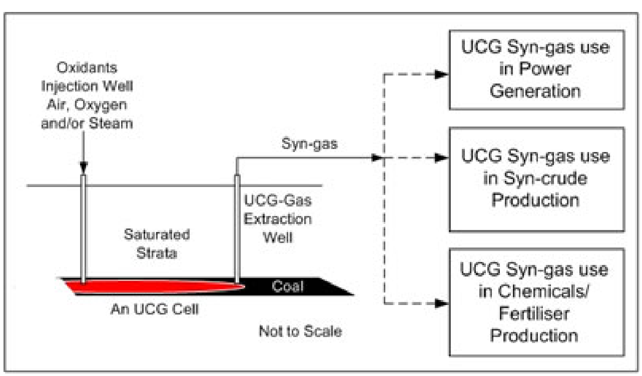

Figure 1 Concept to the public, potential investors and the greater scientific and engineering community.

The use of Underground Coal Gasification technology has been promoted as being the answer to the monetisation of 'unminable' coal. Also it is promoted as being a technology that provides the following:

- A means of reducing the mining costs of coal winning, since it can be described a non-entry and thus low labour mining system,
- A means of reducing the inherent dangers of traditional coal extraction,
- A system of gasification where wastes are safely locked-away in underground caverns formed during Underground Coal Gasification production,
- A system for utilising a significantly higher percentage of contained coal than other underground mining methods,
- An opportunity to utilise 'not-so-good' coal measures, and
- A method of reducing the environmental challenges associated with coal utilisation.

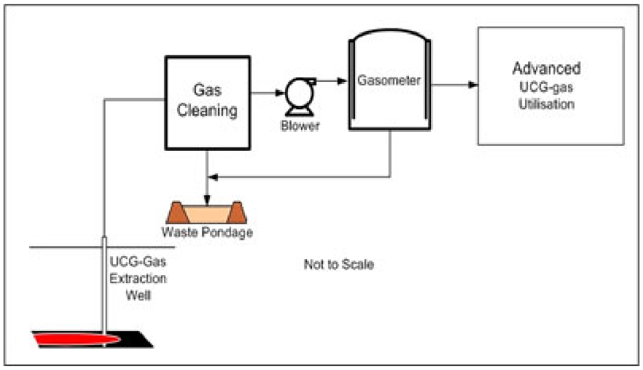

Figure 2 Gasometer (gasholder)

Intended Use	Cost	Process Risk
Co-firing Coal Fired Power Stations	Low to Moderate	Low to Moderate
Firing Dedicated Gas Turbine Power Stations	Moderate to High	Moderate to High
Chemicals and Fertiliser requiring Catalysts	High to Very High	High to Very High

Table 1 Cost of fuel used

In Figure 2 a gasometer (gasholder) is shown. This is very mature technology that is likely to be a very necessary component of a Underground Coal Gasification -gas utilisation train. The gasometer will have four functions:

1. A storage function, where gas can be held for a designed amount of production,
2. A gas averaging function, where gas SE and gas make-up averaging from multiple cells will occur,
3. A secondary cleaning (settling/precipitation) function, and
4. A sampling point function.

Downstream processes which use syn-gas fall into two groups. In the first group are methods which utilise the heat content of the syn-gas. This group comprised combustion processes which burn the syn-gas to form carbon dioxide and water. In the second group are chemical processes which utilise either or both of the components of syn-gas for a chemical reaction. These chemical processes use catalysts which are very sensitive to foreign material.

Syn-gas gas produced from underground coal gasification contains contaminants which preclude it form being immediately used for downstream processes. In general these contaminants are:

- Particulate matter - mineral dust and soot from incomplete combustion which can cause fouling in downstream equipment,
- Heavy hydrocarbons and tars which can foul downstream equipment,
- Carbon dioxide which reduces the heat content of the gas and acts as poison to some catalytic processes,
- Nitrogen from air combustion, air ingress and from the coal. Nitrogen reduces the heat content of the synthesis gas and inhibits some catalysts,
- Oxygen from air ingress or poor combustion control. Oxygen can potentially result in explosive mixtures, is a poison to catalysts and causes unwanted side-reactions leading to catalyst fouling,
- Sulphur compounds which produce unacceptable sulphurous emissions on combustion and is generally poisonous to catalysts,
- Chlorine and chlorine compounds from coal and saline water. These corrode downstream equipment and are catalyst poisons, and

Trace heavy metals from the coal, such as mercury and arsenic, which act as a poison to catalysts and can result in unacceptable emissions from combustion processes.

Syn-gas Constituent	UCG	Surface Gasifier
Hydrogen	30•2	36•0
Carbon Monoxide	17•4	52•5
Carbon Dioxide	32•6	10•0
Methane	18•2	0•0
Nitrogen	0•1	1•1
Tar	0•1	0•0
Hydrogen sulphide and COS	0•2	0•4
C2+	0•9	0•0
Totals	99•7	100
[H2+CO]	47•6	88•5
BTU/scf	356	286
MJ/scm	13•3	10•7

Table 2 Syngas composition (vol.%) of underground and surface gasifier [1].

ISSN 2395-3594
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II. CLEAN-UP FOR COMBUSTION PROCESSES

The main concern is particulate matter including tars. The clean-up would include a water-wash scrubber system. This would have the duty to remove particulate mineral matter and condensed tar products. Coal tars and coal naphtha in the scrubber water may require removal by solvent extraction processes such as Pheno Solvan TM. Following the scrubber, cooling would remove excess water prior to compression and reticulation to the combustion operation. Depending on the local requirements it may be necessary for a combustion process to ensure minimum sulphur emissions which would require removal of all or at least a major part of the sulphur compounds.

III. CLEAN-UP FOR CHEMICAL PROCESSING

As well as particulate removal, chemical processing generally requires a unit operation to adjust the syn-gas stoichiometric ratio ([H2]/[CO]), usually by means of the water-gas-shift process, and the removal of excess carbon dioxide. Furthermore, it is usually required to remove all sulphur compounds to below 1ppm. This is accomplished along with the removal of carbon dioxide in an acid gas removal plant. It should be noted that the composition of UCG syn-gas may change with time-on-stream (over hours for instance). Such changes can be detrimental to downstream process operations and some sort of buffering would be required. This suggests a gas meter or similar buffer into the process flow to help smooth out changes in composition.

For ease of description, we consider the case for the production of highly purified syn-gas. The first step is the removal of particulate matter and heavy tars using a water scrubber system. This is followed by the water-gas-shift (WGS) section to adjust the gas stoichiometric ratio.

$CO + H_2O = CO_2 + H_2$

To reduce the size of the plant (and other units downstream), this unit operation is best conducted at pressure and so a compression stage is included prior to WGS. The high temperature WGS unit is robust to many poisons and contaminants but requires the process gas heated to about 350oC requiring the diversion of some of the produced gas to an appropriate heater. Following WGS, the shifted gas is cooled and passed to the COS converter with the duty to convert the traces of carbonyl sulphide present into hydrogen sulphide:

$COS + H_2O = CO_2 + H_2S$

Substantially all of the sulphur is now present as hydrogen sulphide and the gas is passed to an acid gas plant which removes the acid gases hydrogen sulphide and carbon dioxide either as separate or combined streams. There are many process operations for this. However, conventional wisdom is that for treating gases, which might contain hydrocarbons (coal tar naphtha) which have passed through the WGS operation, solvent processes such as RectisolTM are superior to amine based systems.Treating the hydrogen sulphide off-gas requires a Claus or similar unit to convert the hydrogen sulphide to sulphur for disposal. To-date carbon dioxide off-gas has been exhausted to atmosphere but in future carbon dioxide geo-sequestration may be required. At this stage the syn-gas is reasonably pure. Further purification may be required to remove the last vestiges of sulphur (zinc oxide absorber) and a polishing operation (carbon absorbers) to ensure that trace volatile poisons (such as mercury, arsine) are removed. A drier is included to remove any water that may be inimical to downstream processes. A typical process flow sheet is shown in the figure.

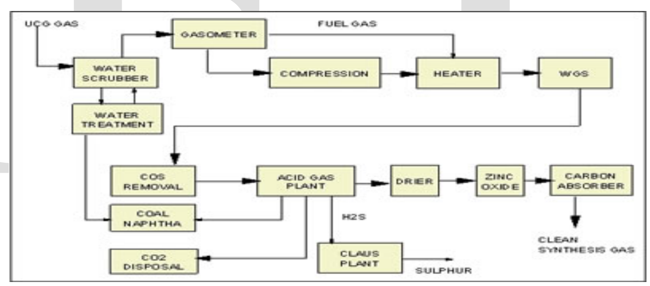

Figure3 process flow sheet

IV. MANAGING UCG-GAS TO ACHIEVE THE HIGHEST USE OF AVAILABLE RAW ENERGY

In table 2, it can be seen that the methane content of the UCG syn-gas is 18%, and represents around 50% of the syn-gas energy content. This methane cannot be directly utilized in the synthesis reactions, e.g. Fischer-Tropach or methanol that produce liquid fuels; it needs to be put through a reformer to produce additional hydrogen & carbon as shown in fig.

ISSN 2395-3594

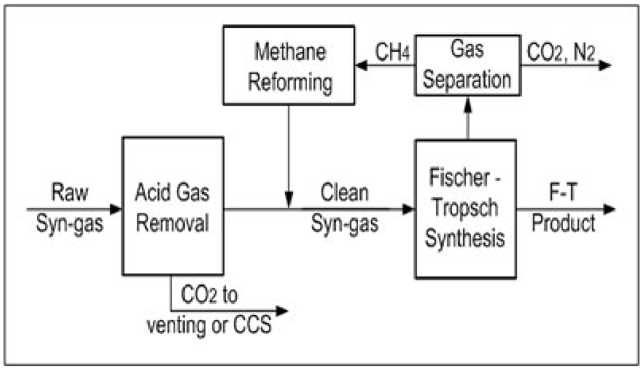

Figure 4 Reformer to produce additional hydrogen

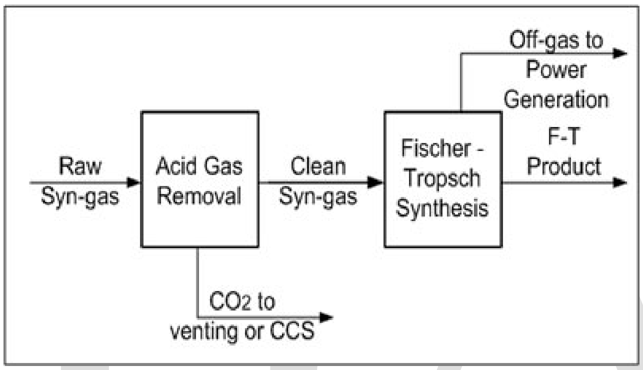

Figure 5 Reformer to produce additional carbon monoxide

Alternatively in a simplified process, there is no methane reforming (or gas recycling) and the syn-gas off-gas is used for power generation, Figure 4b. The choice of which route is best for maximising returns from syn-gas will be dependant on local circumstances, especially the need for and price of electricity. Figures 4a and 4b also suggest that a portion of the carbon dioxide generated in the UCG cells could be sent to Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS). The feasibility of CCS will depend on the availability of suitable carbon storage opportunities and on the economics of carbon, that being carbon taxes and imposts versus the cost of CCS. Note: CCS and UCG are a story to be told at another occasion.

V. THE SCALE AND COSTS OF UCG DEVELOPMENTS

Industry wisdom has settled on future major UCG developments having outputs of >50,000 bbl/day raw synthetic crude production. Some promoters are also looking at smaller units producing less than 10,000 bbl/day to service niche markets, such as the market for diesel in remote mining locations. We have estimated that for fuels production of about 70,000 to 150,000bbl/d the capital cost of using an above ground coal gasifier would be about $11.5 billion (US Gulf basis). Using UCG the capital cost would fall to about $8 billion with proportional savings in operating costs. Thus if the UCG costs are about the same as coal on an energy basis the UCG operation offers a significant advantage over traditional coal gasification routes.

VI. UCG IN A PERSPECTIVE

It has very extensive proven and recoverable (by accepted mining methods) coal reserves. It also has vast coal resources that are not presently classified as reserves since there are no accepted mining techniques that can give profitable coal extraction. UCG has the potential to allow for vast coal resources to be classified as reserves, if the technology can be proven. Many companies interested in promoting UCG technology for their presently un-monetisable coal resources. Some companies, such as Cougar Energy [3] have made mistakes in the management of their UCG trial blocks that have resulted in aquifer contamination. Others have found the regulatory and legislative hurdles too great to continue with specific projects. There are however a number of UCG energy companies who are spending money on researching how to overcome the challenges facing UCG.

VII. CONCLUSION

UCG technology holds out the promise of providing a means of converting numerous coal resources, equalling trillions of tonnes of coal that presently are economically unrecoverable into viable and verifiable coal resources. It is a technology that could be a major contributor to the continuation Fossil Fuel Age. Proponents of UCG technology have over simplified the UCG technology story in many instances. The technology has challenges, which relate to producing a consistent gas product in terms of energy content, constituent gases and continuity of production. The product syn-gas also requires very considerable cleaning for advanced uses, cleaning that will be costly in both CAPEX and OPEX. The technology also has significant environmental challenges, with the containment of wastes produced during the underground gasification process being the major concern., preventing the contamination of aquifers is a major consideration.

VIII. *REFERENCES*

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ISSN 2395-3594