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Lignocellulosic biomass conversion to biofuels: Integrating green catalysis and process intensification.

Hiroshi Rangi*

Department of Environmental Sciences, Kyoto International Research Academy, Japan

***Correspondence to:** Hiroshi Rangi, Department of Environmental Sciences, Kyoto International Research Academy, Japan. E-mail: h.rangi@kira-ems.jp

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Introduction

The global transition toward sustainable energy has intensified interest in renewable, non-food-based sources of biofuels. Lignocellulosic biomass, derived from agricultural residues, forestry waste, and energy crops, represents the most abundant and underutilized feedstock for biofuel production. Unlike first-generation biofuels, lignocellulosic materials do not compete directly with food crops, making them an environmentally and ethically favorable alternative. However, the complex structure of lignocellulose poses significant technical challenges that demand innovative solutions. In recent years, the integration of green catalysis and process intensification has emerged as a transformative strategy for improving the efficiency and sustainability of biomass-to-biofuel conversion [1].

Lignocellulosic biomass is primarily composed of cellulose, hemicellulose, and lignin, arranged in a rigid, recalcitrant matrix. This complexity makes the biomass resistant to enzymatic hydrolysis and chemical processing. Traditional conversion methods require harsh pretreatment conditions—high temperatures, strong acids or bases, and long reaction times—which are energy-intensive and environmentally taxing. To overcome these barriers, researchers have turned to green chemistry principles and innovative reactor designs that reduce energy inputs and waste generation [2].

Green catalysis involves the use of environmentally benign catalysts that promote high selectivity, reusability, and minimal toxic byproducts. In lignocellulosic conversion, catalysts such as solid acids, ionic liquids, organocatalysts, and biocatalysts are being explored as alternatives to traditional corrosive agents. For example, heterogeneous acid catalysts like sulfonated carbon materials or metal-organic frameworks (MOFs) can hydrolyze hemicellulose and cellulose under mild conditions, enabling a more sustainable breakdown of the biomass matrix [3].

Ionic liquids (ILs) and deep eutectic solvents (DES) have shown great promise in dissolving lignocellulosic components and enhancing catalytic activity. These designer solvents can disrupt hydrogen bonding in cellulose, improving enzyme accessibility and facilitating fractionation of biomass into its constituents. Moreover, their tunable properties allow for task-specific optimization, improving yields of fermentable sugars or platform chemicals such as hydroxymethylfurfural (HMF) and levulinic acid [4].

Enzyme-based catalysis offers another green alternative. Engineered cellulases, hemicellulases, and ligninases can selectively break down biomass polymers into monomeric sugars with high specificity and minimal energy input. Advances in protein engineering and microbial fermentation have improved enzyme stability and reduced costs. When combined with mild pretreatment, enzymatic hydrolysis becomes a powerful step in converting biomass into bioethanol or other liquid fuels [5].

Conclusion

The conversion of lignocellulosic biomass into biofuels is no longer a distant vision but a rapidly advancing field driven by innovation in catalysis and process engineering. By integrating green catalysis and process intensification, researchers are overcoming the limitations of conventional methods and unlocking the full potential of plant-based feedstocks. Continued research, policy support, and industrial collaboration will be crucial

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to scaling up these technologies and realizing a sustainable, bio-based energy future.

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