Gains and Threats from Smouldering Combustion to Biochar Production and Storage

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1. INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, smouldering combustion can provide energy-efficient conversion of biomass into biochar. On the other hand, smouldering fires are a major menace to biochar storage fields and can reduce them to ashes.

Like biochar, most organic solid materials can sustain a smouldering combustion, including forest biomass, duff, peat, wood, coal, cotton, and most charring polymers.

2. SMOULDERING

Smouldering is the flameless form of combustion of a solid. The oxidation reaction occurs on the surface of the solid (Fig. 1) rather than on the gas phase as in flaming. The characteristic temperature (500-700°C), spread rate (~50mm/h) and heat release rate (~8 kJ/g) are significantly lower than in flaming combustion.

3. GAINS to BIOCHAR

Biochar is produced by the pyrolysis conversion of biomass (Fig. 2). Pyrolysis is an endothermic process that requires an energy external input. This external supply increases the energetic cost of biochar production. One process that promotes biochar conversion with the advantage of minimal or zero energy costs is a smouldering process where the energy supply is released from the slow oxidation of a part of the biomass itself.

Small, easy to operate and maintain reactors can be designed to be run by local small communities.

Natural smouldering consumes most of the fuel (Fig. 2), specially the char. Thus, controlling the two governing variables, oxygen supply and heat losses, is required to reach optimum biochar yields at low energy costs.

4. THREATS to BIOCHAR

When a layer of organic soil ignites on the surface, it smoulders steadily and slowly without flame (Fig. 3) and propagates slowly into the soil, reaching deeper locations (Fig. 3). In case of occurring in a biochar field, a smouldering fire could propagate through the surface and subsurface layers destroying the biochar and releasing its carbon as gas emissions [2]. This is about the only hazard that can lead to an accidental release of the stored carbon to the atmosphere. Smouldering fires occur regularly at a global scale and can linger for very long periods of time, weeks, up to years and centuries depending on the amount of fuel available. Once ignited (Fig. 4), they are particularly difficult to extinguish despite extensive rains or fire-fighting attempts.

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