



## Review Article

# Hydrogen is essential for sustainability

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Sustainable energy conversion requires zero emissions of greenhouse gases and criteria pollutants using primary energy sources that the earth naturally replenishes quickly, like renewable resources. Solar and wind power conversion technologies have become cost effective recently, but challenges remain to manage electrical grid dynamics and to meet end-use requirements for energy dense fuels and chemicals. Renewable hydrogen provides the best opportunity for a zero emissions fuel and is the best feedstock for production of zero emission liquid fuels and some chemical and heat end-uses. Renewable hydrogen can be made at very high efficiency using electrolysis systems that are dynamically operated to complement renewable wind and solar power dynamics. Hydrogen can be stored within the existing natural gas system to provide low cost massive storage capacity that (1) could be sufficient to enable a 100% zero emissions grid; (2) has sufficient energy density for end-uses including heavy duty transport; (3) is a building block for zero emissions fertilizer and chemicals; and (4) enables sustainable primary energy in all sectors of the economy.

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electricity generation, and industrial applications, will increase substantially over this century [7–14].

Since the Industrial Revolution, the vast majority of energy converted in society has been obtained from fossil fuels – coal, natural gas, and petroleum – which require tremendously long times for earth and the power of the sun to produce. This trend is widely expected to continue in coming decades [15–18]. Although the available global quantity of these fuels is extremely large, they are nevertheless finite and so will inevitably ‘run out’ at some near future time as we consume them much faster than the earth produces them [19]. A primary reason for their continued use is economics – energy from fossil fuels has been more cost effective than most other sustainable forms of energy, including renewable resources.

In addition, the continued use of fossil fuels is associated with increased criteria pollutant and greenhouse gas emissions [20]. Emissions from fossil fuel combustion degrade air quality, pose human health risks, and drive global climate change. In 2017, global energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions reached an historic high of 32.5 Gt as a result of global economic growth, reduced fossil-fuel prices and weaker energy efficiency efforts [21]. Additionally, the uneven geographic distribution of energy resources is associated with conflicts between nations. Given these issues, it is clear that eventually societies across the world must accomplish all energy conversion from renewable resources [22–43,44\*,45–51].

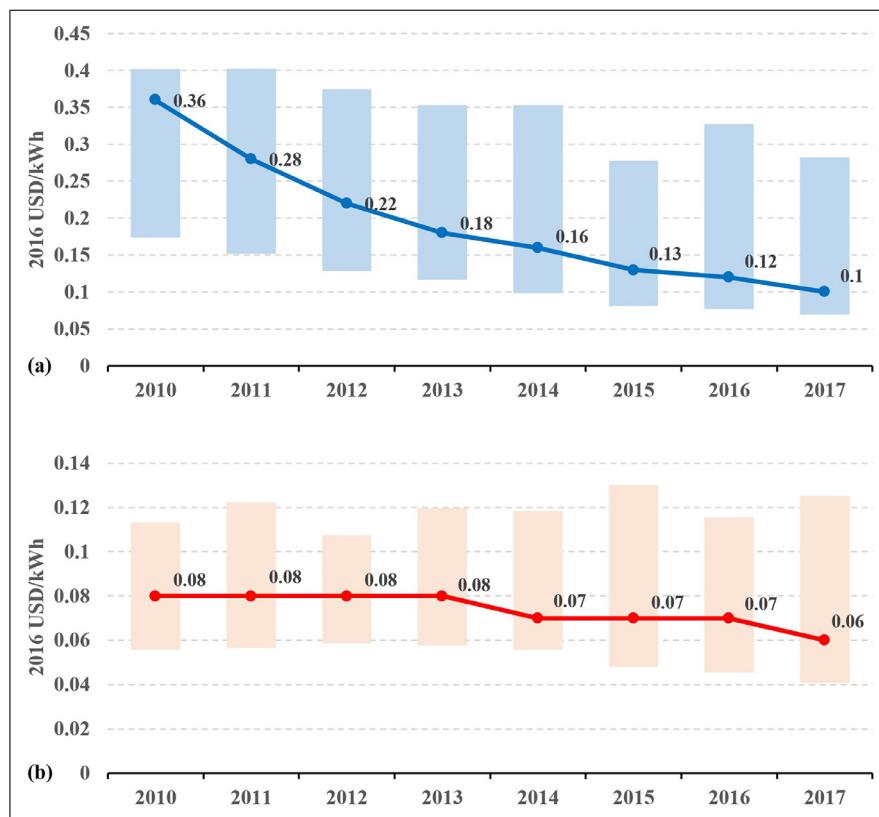
This review article provides an overview of renewable energy resources, challenges associated with integrating and managing renewable power and demand dynamics in the electric grid, and electrification of end-uses, and suggests that renewable hydrogen (via Power to Gas (P2G) technology) is the only zero emissions means for massive and seasonal energy storage and widespread distribution and use in difficult to electrify end-uses.

### Renewable energy resources

While the earth rapidly and naturally replenishes many forms of primary energy (solar, wind, geothermal, hydropower, biomass, biogas, and wave and tidal energy), this paper will focus upon photovoltaic (PV) and wind power as they have become increasingly competitive in the power generation market [52–67]. The global weighted average Levelized Cost of Electricity (LCOE) from both solar PV and an onshore wind turbines in 2017

## Introduction

The world population is steadily increasing, expected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050 [1]. Additionally, modern societal living standards, the industrialization and urbanization of developing nations, long-distance travel, shipping, and freight transport are experiencing rapid growth [2–6]. Hence, global demands for energy services, including transportation, residential and commercial buildings,

**Figure 1**

(a) Solar PV global weighted average LCOE 2010–2017 and (b) onshore wind global weighted average LCOE 2010–2017.  
Source: Data gathered from Ref. [68].

were in the middle of fossil fuel cost ranges, and will be close to the lower end of this range by 2022 (Figure 1) [68••]. Reductions in LCOE are making renewable energy from solar PV panels and wind turbines more desirable than other renewable resources, and even preferred over fossil resources [69,70]. As a result, renewable electricity capacity growth has largely been associated with solar PV and wind (Figure 2) [71•].

### Electrification of end-uses

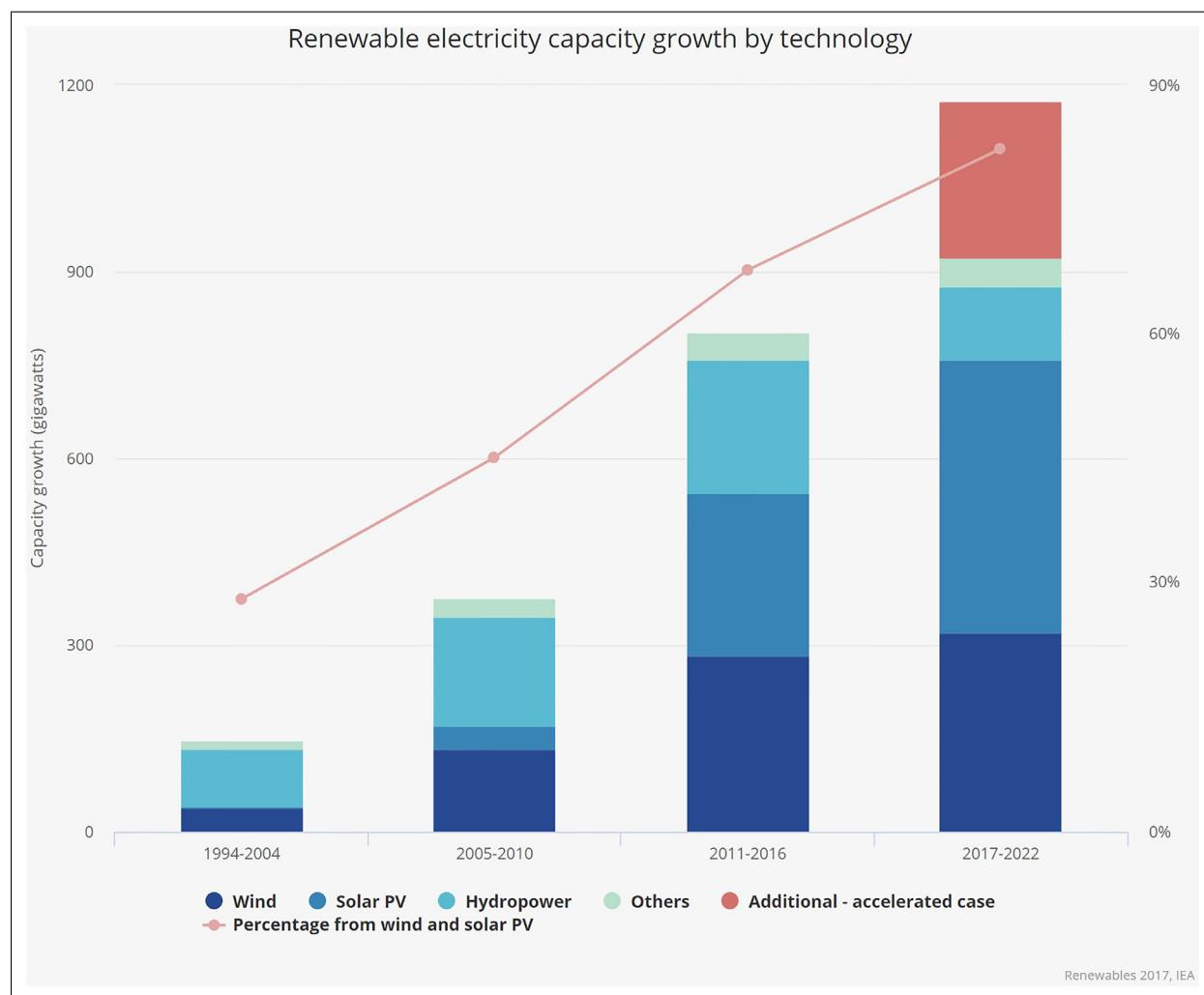
Many research efforts have suggested that the bulk of future energy conversion could be generated by renewables (largely wind and solar power) in combination with energy storage (including large-scale battery energy storage) and the electrification of end-use sectors, for example, transportation, residential and commercial buildings, and industry [72–74]. Indeed, a significant body of research exists regarding technologies, costs and performance analysis of electrification options, with technology projections in the various sectors [75–78,79•,80–85].

Figure 3 presents the U.S. subsector primary energy conversion shares in 2015 [86••]. While in the transportation

sector, initial electrification of light duty vehicles is occurring now, complete electrification of the light duty fleet and electrification of heavy duty transportation face challenges including upfront costs, range limitations, payload requirements, and infrastructure development [87–89]. The residential and commercial building sectors are widely amenable to electrification and should be electrified as much as possible using various, potentially cost effective technologies [90–94]. For the industrial sector, studies examining the potential electrification of its sub-sectors, including cost and performance analysis, are limited due to the complexity and challenges associated with the industrial sector [94–98].

It must be considered that electrification of all end-use sectors will be potentially more expensive and less resilient than transforming both electricity and fuel production to zero emissions technologies [80,99]. In addition, some end-uses (Figure 3) such as aviation, long-haul trucking, shipping, heavy industry (e.g., cement, steel production) and the fertilizer industry, which account for roughly 30% of global carbon emissions, are difficult to electrify [100–103]. Furthermore, demands for these

Figure 2



Renewable electricity capacity growth by technology 1994–2022.  
 Source: Reproduced with permission from Ref. [71], ©OECD/IEA 2017 Renewables, IEA Publishing. License: [www.iea.org/t&c](http://www.iea.org/t&c)  
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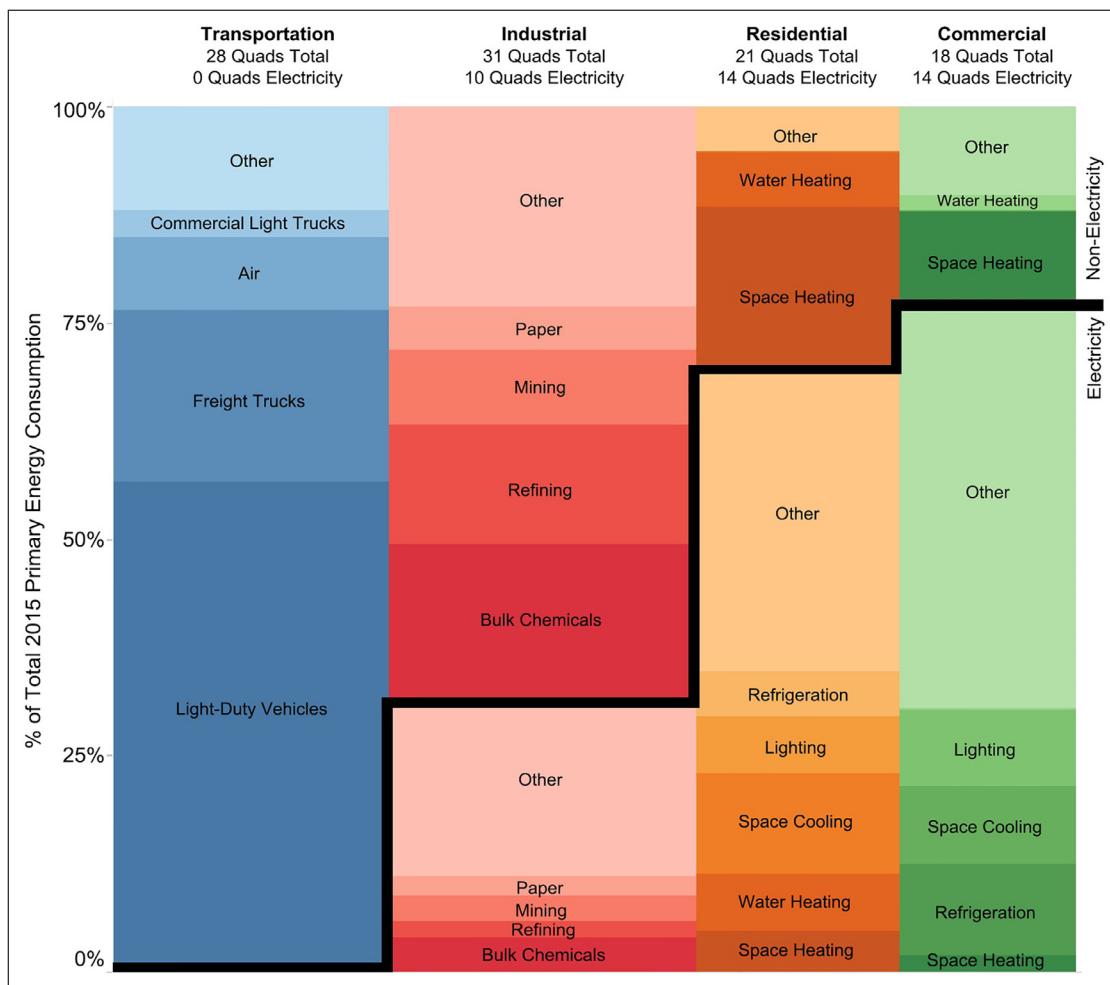
sectors are expected to grow substantially in the coming decades. Hence, it is essential to find a solution for these difficult-to-electrify energy services [5,104<sup>\*\*</sup>,105,106].

### Challenges for integrating renewable electricity into the electric grid

While integrating wind and solar power into electric grids at low levels has been accomplished throughout the world, integrating increasing amounts is challenging. First, the intermittent and uncontrollable nature of some renewable resources (particularly solar and wind) increases the dynamics of electrical grid operation, which can have major impacts on the performance of the system [107–110]. Moreover, the integration of renewable energy sources into existing electric power systems increases

the interdependence between natural gas and electricity transmission networks, and as a result the required dynamic operation of the gas grid increases [111,112]. Integrating high levels of solar and wind power into electric grids requires various types of technologies that can provide instantaneous, hourly, daily, weekly and seasonal storage, power generation, and ancillary services to ensure the stability of the grid [113<sup>\*\*</sup>]. Moreover, characterizing resource variability and implementing different balancing strategies in different regions with different resources requires detailed planning by utility providers and other stakeholders [114]. The potential use of and interactions between firm low-carbon resources (e.g., natural gas with carbon capture and sequestration), variable renewable resources, and highly dynamic electric resources

Figure 3



Depiction of U.S. primary energy consumption and electricity penetration shares for different energy subsectors in 2015.  
Source: Reproduced from Ref. [86], with permission from National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

(short-duration battery energy storage and demand-side flexibility) must likely all contribute to a highly renewable electric grid [115]. Even in 2017, current renewable resources are creating significant amounts of excess generation that is curtailed in many regions [116,117<sup>•,118</sup>]. Finding a promising solution to store the otherwise curtailed, large-scale excess renewable energy produced during peak generation times and seasons, followed by use in later demand periods is an increasingly important issue.

### Storage of otherwise curtailed renewable electricity

Different forms of energy storage can be used in various levels and for various purposes in the electric grid to ensure that the supply of power generation matches power demand at every instant. Energy storage technologies

include thermal storage, compressed air, pumped hydroelectric storage, flywheels, batteries, flow batteries, capacitors and hydrogen [119–134].

Battery energy storage is a good candidate for small isolated power systems to store small amounts of excess renewable electricity for short durations (hours to days) [135–137]. However, for large-scale and long duration storage, it must be considered that lithium-ion battery systems will be limited due to immutable features of: (1) insufficient global reserves of lithium and cobalt to produce enough batteries to meet all of the storage required [138<sup>•</sup>,139,140<sup>•</sup>,141], (2) challenges with self-discharge that preclude seasonal storage [142<sup>•</sup>,143–149], (3) challenges with recycling and waste [147,150], and (4) lithium-ion battery energy density may not become sufficient to meet some end-uses [151–153].

## Renewable hydrogen as storage medium and clean future fuel

P2G technology, which involves the conversion of electrical power into a gaseous energy carrier, is a promising prospect for future energy systems seeking sustainability, as it can address many of the challenges associated with 100% renewable systems [154,155]. Integrating high levels of solar and wind requires a large storage capacity which can be provided by hydrogen production via a P2G approach [156,157,158<sup>•</sup>, 159–161]. Hydrogen can be supplied completely from excess renewable energy using P2G, which benefits both balancing the electrical grid with high use of variable, unpredictable renewable power, and providing high capacity, long-term energy storage for seasonal shifting [162,163,164<sup>•</sup>, 165–169,170<sup>•</sup>]. Hydrogen production via P2G has also been shown to be the most cost-effective approach for long-term energy storage [171]. Newly developed smart energy systems provide more efficient, more cost-effective, and more sustainable solutions by combining both renewable energy sources and hydrogen energy systems [172]. Energy management strategies, as well as predictive controllers, are important components of combined renewable energy sources and hydrogen energy systems because they allow hydrogen production using surplus renewable energy and power production from hydrogen when renewable energy is insufficient [173–176].

P2G has shown considerable potential in transitions to 100% renewable energy systems in different countries [177,178<sup>•</sup>,179<sup>•</sup>,180–182,183<sup>•</sup>,184,185,186<sup>•</sup>]. While the emergence of hydrogen over other low-carbon technologies will require reductions in cost [187], these reductions can be facilitated with appropriate policies that support development of infrastructure to transition to a hydrogen economy.

Renewable hydrogen provides the best opportunity for a zero carbon and zero criteria pollutant emissions fuel across its life cycle, from production to end-use [188,189<sup>•</sup>,190–195]. P2G enables the production of a clean feedstock that can be used in difficult to electrify applications [196<sup>•</sup>,197]. P2G can also support the utilization of intermittent renewables in decarbonizing the industrial sector [198–200].

P2G is also a means of coupling renewable electricity and the transportation sector by producing a renewable fuel that can be used in state-of-art fuel cell vehicles with considerable environmental benefits [201,202,203<sup>•</sup>,204,205,206<sup>•</sup>]. Also, renewable hydrogen can be methanated with CO<sub>2</sub> to produce synthetic fuels like methane and methanol as alternative fuels for heavy duty transport [207–209,210<sup>•</sup>,211<sup>•</sup>]. In addition, P2G provides a path to store large-scale excess renewable electricity in the form of methane by using CO<sub>2</sub> capture process, which can be used in different applications

for example, combine cycle gas turbine power plants [212–215,216<sup>•</sup>,217,218].

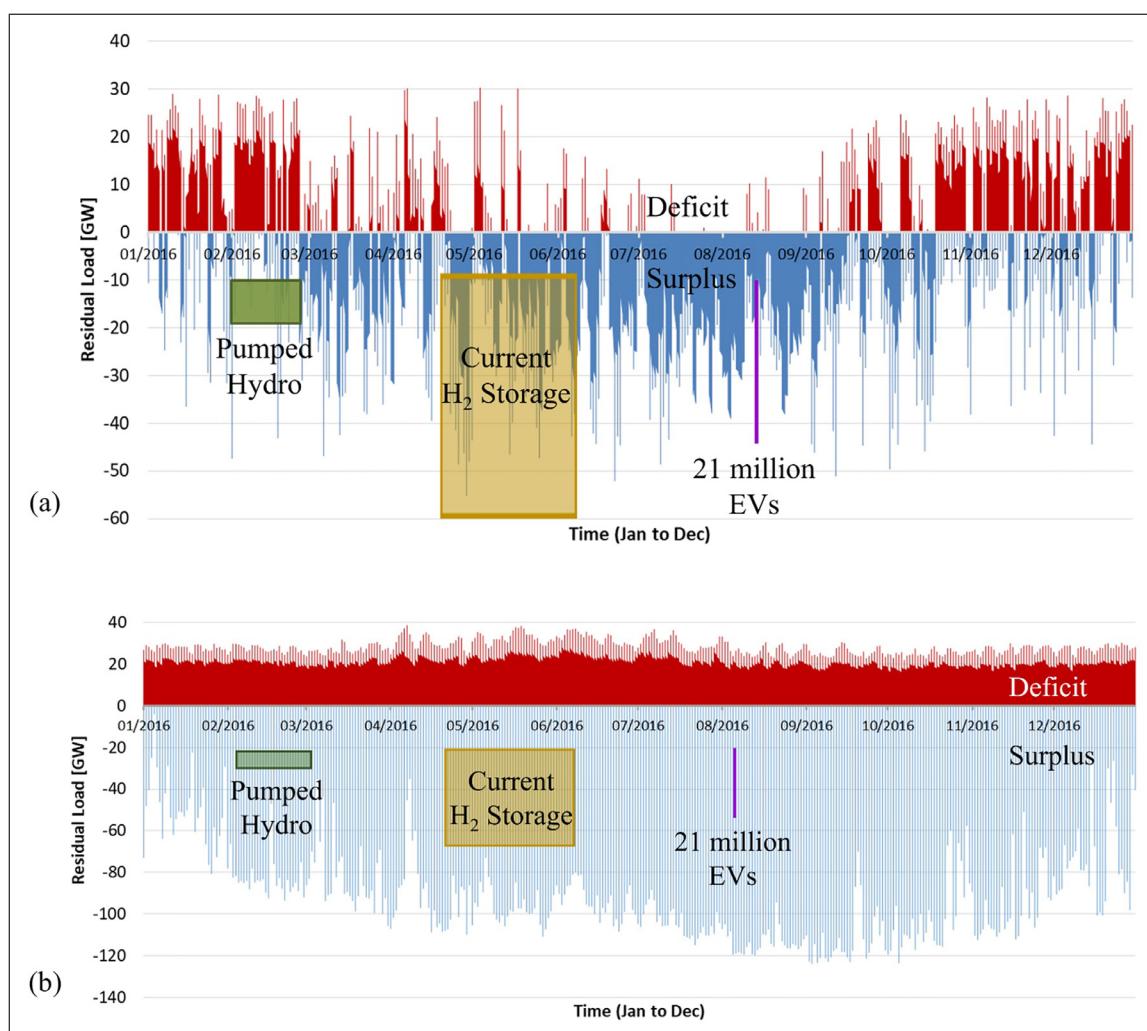
Although electrification is a good option for residential and commercial sectors, hydrogen as an energy carrier appears to be feasible in residential and commercial applications, as well as in microgrids and for cases when long duration or large magnitude storage is required [219,220<sup>•</sup>,221–223]. Hydrogen can be used in different residential and commercial applications for example, as an environmentally sustainable cooking fuel relative to conventional cooking fuels typically used in developing countries, such as liquefied petroleum gas, charcoal, and firewood. The use of produced renewable hydrogen via P2G can reduce carbon emissions between 2.5 and 14 times (0.04 kg CO<sub>2</sub>eq/MJ) compared to firewood (0.1 kg CO<sub>2</sub>eq/MJ) and liquefied petroleum gas (0.57 kg CO<sub>2</sub>eq/MJ) [224].

**Figure 4** shows residual load resulting from simulations of a 100% renewable California electric grid, hourly matching demand with available solar and wind resources. Two cases are considered: (1) wind dominant, and (2) solar dominant. While the amount of electric energy produced is slightly greater than the demand, it is clear that massive and seasonal energy storage is required. Options for storage technologies are also presented in **Figure 4** showing that both the power and energy capacity of hydrogen energy storage in current gas infrastructure (pipelines and storage facilities) is the only option that can technically balance renewable power and energy with load on an annual basis. The magnitude of hydrogen energy storage compared to existing pumped hydro and to lithium-ion batteries (from complete electrification of the light and medium duty fleet of 21 million vehicles) is the only one sufficient to hourly and seasonally balance load and generation. This fact, together with the lack of self-discharge or evaporation, and separate power and energy scaling that enables cost effective seasonal storage, make hydrogen essential for achieving our zero-emission goals. While seasonal storage appears more clearly required for the wind dominant case (**Figure 4(a)**), similar amounts of seasonal storage and more daily storage are required for the solar dominant case (**Figure 4(b)**).

## Hydrogen generation via solid oxide electrolysis

Solid Oxide Electrolysis (SOE) system has attracted considerable attention as an efficient large-scale hydrogen production system that can create a sustainable pathway to hydrogen production [225<sup>•</sup>]. A vast body of research has been aimed at developing electrochemical, thermodynamic and fluid mechanics models to investigate the effects of operating conditions, component materials, as well as cell geometry on the performance of SOE cells. They showed inherently high energetic and exergetic efficiencies for using SOE systems for both hydrogen and

Figure 4



1-year hourly simulation of the load and power generation dynamics of a 100% renewable grid in California, and the capacity of different storage technologies for (a) wind dominant case (37 GW solar capacity and 80 GW wind capacity installed) and (b) solar dominant case (162 GW solar capacity, 5.6 GW wind capacity installed).

other synthetic gases (e.g., methane synthesized from renewable hydrogen and captured CO<sub>2</sub>) via electrolysis and co-electrolysis processes [226–228,229\*]. The high operating temperature of SOE cells, that is, 800–1300 K, eliminates the need for expensive catalysts and increases conversion efficiency and system integration opportunities. The high operating temperature also allows use of thermal inputs to reduce the electrical power demand of the SOE system and enhance the hydrogen production by using thermal energy for water to steam conversion [230,231]. These electrolysis systems can be operated dynamically to well complement renewable wind and solar power dynamics [232,233]. One of the main challenges associated with operating at high-temperature is degradation of materials, but, recent studies have shown that

the mixed conductor and proton conductor SOE cells are more stable and showing lower degradation rate [234,235].

### Hydrogen distribution and storage

Hydrogen storage, transmission and distribution (T&D) are regarded as critical issues that must be solved before a technically and economically viable hydrogen economy can be established. Various hydrogen storage-delivery scenarios have been evaluated in terms of cost, performance and environmental impacts for both large-scale and small-scale hydrogen production [236\*\*,237–239,240\*\*]. Blending increasing amounts of hydrogen into the existing natural gas pipeline network has been proposed as a low cost means of handling renewable hydrogen, which makes large-scale hydrogen

storage and distribution possible [241,242]. The analyses of Figure 4 are corroborated by others who have determined that natural gas infrastructure can accommodate large-scale gaseous fuel injection whenever there is a huge imbalance between renewable supply and grid demand [243\*\*]. Hydrogen also enables T&D of energy over long distances, which is simpler to manage and less costly than electric grid T&D.

P2G is the only energy storage concept that addresses massive energy storage in a range of more than 100 GWh [244\*\*] in addition to T&D by using the existing natural gas system, which should provide the lowest cost solution for massive storage capacity. Using the gas network in this manner avoids unwanted installation of electric T&D infrastructure to manage the electric grid [245]. This strategy of storing and delivering renewable energy to markets appears to be viable without significantly increasing risks associated with gas end-uses (such as household appliances), overall public safety, or the durability and integrity of the existing natural gas pipeline network [246–249].

Over time, as hydrogen concentrations increase there may be some required alterations to current natural gas pipelines, including replacement of some pipelines, and adding new compressor stations and pressure management equipment to assure safety [250\*]. This should be followed by piecewise conversion of some pipelines to 100% hydrogen over time, until the entire gas network is converted to a zero emissions hydrogen storage and delivery system. The dynamics for transferring hydrogen through a long natural gas transmission pipeline appear to be viable without significantly increasing risks in the gas system [251\*\*].

More studies and long-term measurements and demonstrations are required to further understand and address the impacts of increased hydrogen injection on existing natural gas infrastructure and to evaluate the required changes for metering systems and other components [252\*\*]. However, it is clear from historical use of town gas (containing primarily hydrogen and carbon monoxide) [253], from the safe operation of existing hydrogen storage and T&D infrastructure throughout Europe, the south-eastern US (from Texas to Florida), and in California [254], and from the current standards for hydrogen injection into the natural gas system that have already been set in Germany, Japan, Canada, England and other jurisdictions [168,255,256], that this evolution of the gas system is possible.

## Summary and conclusions

While we must electrify as many end-uses as possible and must power end-uses with zero emissions sources (e.g., solar, wind) complemented by battery energy storage, this strategy alone cannot achieve the sustainable and zero emissions future that we need. This electrification plus

battery strategy using lithium-ion batteries, as we are today, is limited due to immutable features of insufficient global reserves of lithium and cobalt to produce enough batteries for all the storage required, challenges with self-discharge that preclude seasonal storage, challenges with recycling and waste, insufficient energy density for heavy duty transport, and inability to produce chemicals or fertilizer. Hydrogen has unique features as a zero emissions fuel, energy storage medium, and industrial and chemical feedstock that can enable the massive and seasonal energy storage that is required for a zero emissions electric grid and introduce zero emissions energy conversion into most sectors of the economy.

## Declarations of interest

None.

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- Paper of special interest.
- Paper of outstanding interest.

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