Detecting Airborne Mercury by Use of Polymer/Carbon Films

Films made of certain polymer/carbon composites have been found to be potentially useful as sensing films for detecting airborne elemental mercury at concentrations on the order of tens of parts per billion or more. That is to say, when the polymer/carbon composite films are exposed to air containing mercury vapor, their electrical resistances decrease by measurable amounts. Because airborne mercury is a health hazard, it is desirable to detect it with great sensitivity, especially in enclosed environments in which there is a risk of a mercury leak from lamps or other equipment.

The present effort to develop polymer-based mercury-vapor sensors complements the work reported in NASA Tech Briefs “Detecting Airborne Mercury by Use of Palladium Chloride” (NPO-44955), Vol. 33, No. 7 (July 2009), page 48 and “Detecting Airborne Mercury by Use of Gold Nanowires” (NPO-44787), Vol. 33, No. 7 (July 2009), page 49. Like those previously reported efforts, the present effort is motivated partly by a need to enable operation and/or regeneration of sensors under relatively mild conditions — more specifically, at temperatures of at least 60°C or more, which is feasible for polymer materials.

In extending C-SPE to a multiplexed format, a filter holder that incorporates discrete analysis channels and a jig that facilitates the concurrent operation of multiple sample syringes has been designed, enabling the simultaneous determination of multiple analytes. Separate, single analytic membranes, placed in a readout cartridge create unique, analyte-specific addresses at the exit of each channel. Following sample exposure, the diffuse reflectance spectrum of each address is collected serially and the Kubelka-Munk function is used to quantitify each water quality parameter via calibration curves. In a demonstration, MC-SPE was used to measure the pH of a sample and quantitate Ag(I) and Ni(II).

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In accordance with Public Law 96-517, the contractor has elected to retain title to this invention. Inquiries concerning rights for its commercial use should be addressed to: Iowa State University Research Foundation, Inc. 310 Lab of Mechanics Ames, IA 50011-2131 Phone No.: (515) 294-4740 Fax No.: (515) 294-0778 Refer to MSC-23850-1, volume and number of this NASA Tech Briefs issue, and the page number.

Figure 1. These Polymers were selected as components of mercury-detecting polymer/carbon sensor films based on quantum-mechanical computations of energies of binding between mercury atoms and polymer chemical functionalities, like these, containing amine functional group.