



# Next-Generation Si Microwire Array Devices for Unassisted Photoelectrosynthesis

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## Background and Introduction

**Motivation:** A priority of the DOE–EERE H<sub>2</sub> Production subprogram is to demonstrate efficient and economically sustainable fuel-forming photoelectrosynthesis (PES), storing 0.6 – 0.8 V of potential as H<sub>2</sub> fuel.

**Proposal:** To realize unassisted H<sub>2</sub> evolution from hydrohalic acids using next-generation tandem Si-microwire-array-based, membrane-embedded PES devices incorporating earth-abundant nanoparticle electrocatalysts.

**Background and State of the Art:** In the 1980s, the Texas Instruments Corporation achieved ~9% solar-to-H<sub>2</sub> efficiency through HBr splitting using a tandem Si || Si device containing Pt–Ir alloy electrocatalysts. In 2007, the Lewis and Atwater laboratories at Caltech pioneered ordered arrays of crystalline Si microwires, fabricated by a chemical-vapor-deposition (CVD) process, for sunlight-to-electrical power conversion. Last year p-type Si microwire arrays, employing a thin n<sup>+</sup>-doped emitter layer (n<sup>+</sup>p-Si), achieved > 5% efficiency toward H<sub>2</sub> evolution from aqueous electrolytes when functionalized with nanoparticle Pt electrocatalysts (Fig. 1). In addition, less expensive alternatives to Pt, like Ni–Mo alloy, efficiently catalyze the H<sub>2</sub> evolution reaction on Si microwire arrays; and a Nafion<sup>®</sup> proton-exchange membrane supports free-standing Si microwire arrays.

The microwire-array geometry is advantageous for the proposed PES device:

### Device is scalable

- Tolerates less pure Si
- Mechanical removal of polymer-infilled array results in a free-standing device

### Rapid rate of fuel-formation

- Significant sunlight absorption occurs along microwire long dimension
- Microwire short, radial dimension affords rapid minority-carrier charge separation
- Nanoparticle electrocatalysts catalyze the two-charge-transfer reactions
- Ionomer membranes attenuate product crossover

### Large potentials stored in fuels (i.e. 0.4 – 0.8 V)

- Microwires support a space-charge region
- Micron-scale ionic drift results in negligible resistive potential losses

### Obstacles (Fig. 2)

- Efficient n-type Si and p<sup>+</sup>n-Si microwire arrays
- Efficient molecular-halogen evolution through halide oxidation
- Protection of n-type Si from surface corrosion and passivation
- Interfaces with appropriate junction characteristics

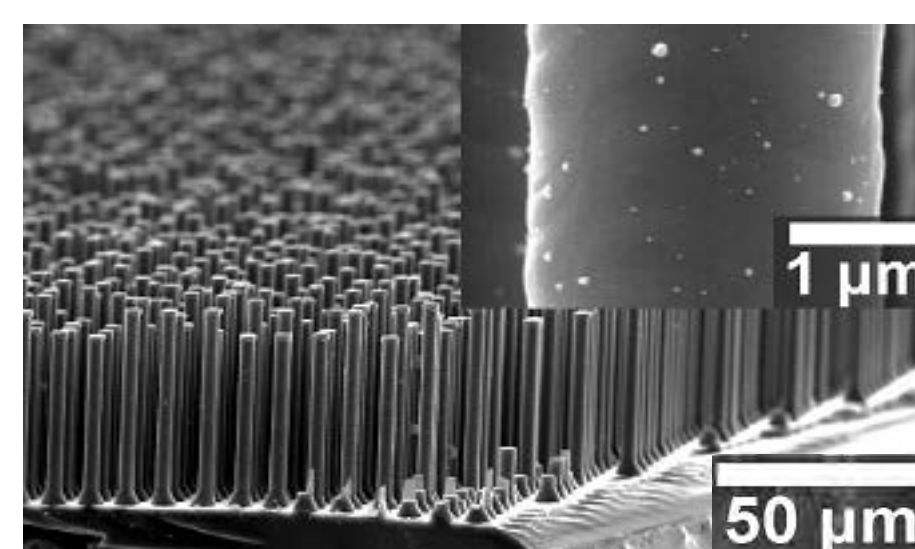


Figure 1. SEM of a Si microwire array with Pt catalysts

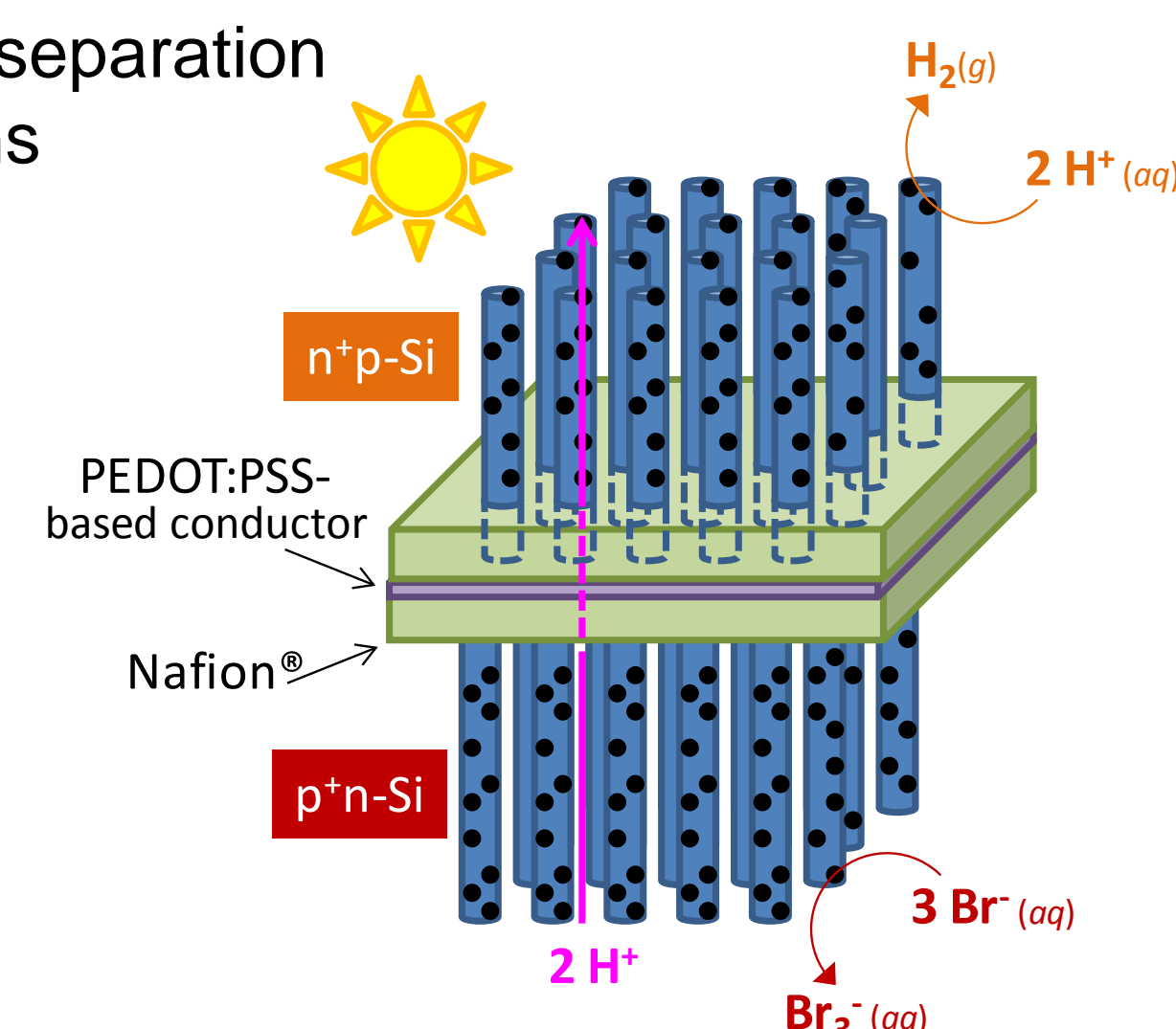


Figure 2. Proposed tandem Si || Si HBr splitting device

## Approach

### Efficient n-type Si and p<sup>+</sup>n-Si microwire arrays

- (1) Introduce PH<sub>3</sub> dopant gas in the SiCl<sub>4</sub>/H<sub>2</sub> stream during CVD growth (Lewis laboratories)
- (2) Fabricate p<sup>+</sup>-doped emitters using a boron–nitride solid dopant-diffusion source (Atwater laboratories)
- (3) Evaluate photoelectrode performance in a three-electrode, non-aqueous photoelectrochemical cell via *j*–*E* measurements (Lewis laboratories) (Fig. 3)

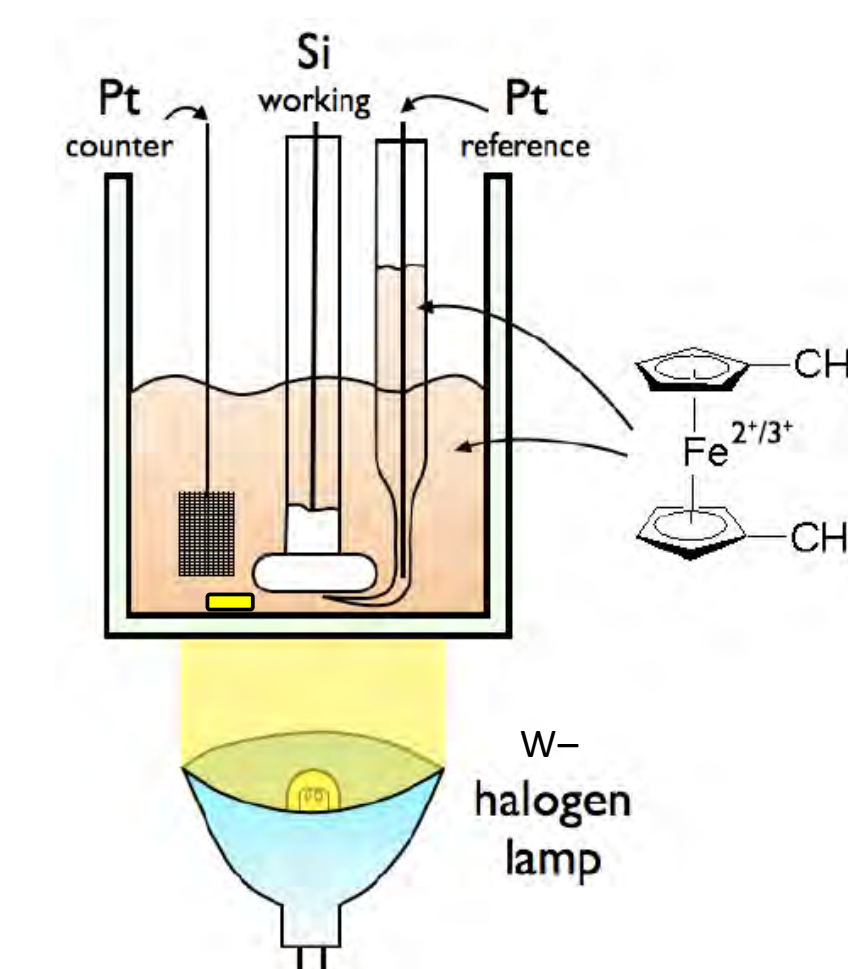


Figure 3. Three-electrode, non-aqueous photoelectrochemical cell

### Efficient molecular-halogen evolution through halide oxidation

- (1) Electrodeposit Pt or Ni–Mo alloy, and synthesize and drop-cast Mo/W(S,Se)<sub>2</sub> nanoparticle electrocatalysts on planar Si and Si microwire arrays (Lewis laboratories & JCAP)
- (2) Evaluate the nanoparticles for catalysis, long-term stability, and parasitic light absorption in a three-electrode aqueous photoelectrochemical cell via *j*–*E* measurements and spectral response (Lewis laboratories)

### Protection of n-type Si from surface corrosion and passivation

- (1) Methylate Si microwire atop sites via a two-step chlorination–alkylation procedure (Lewis laboratories) (Fig. 4)
- (2) Deposit heterojunctions (Co<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>, NiO, Cu<sub>2</sub>O) or tunnel barriers (MgO, TiO<sub>2</sub>, Mn<sub>x</sub>O<sub>y</sub>) on planar Si and Si microwire arrays via the following techniques:
  - Atomic layer deposition (Lewis laboratories)
  - Sputter deposition (Lewis laboratories)
  - Plasma-enhanced CVD (Kavli Nanoscience Institute at Caltech)
- (3) Evaluate electrode long-term stability in hydrohalic acids during the halide oxidation reaction via SEM, XPS, and AFM (Lewis laboratories, JCAP, and Molecular Materials Research Center at Caltech)

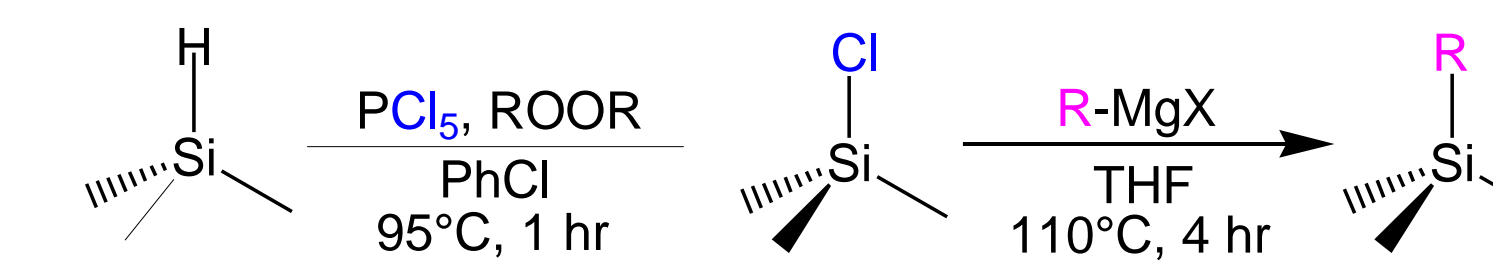


Figure 4. Two-step chlorination–alkylation procedure

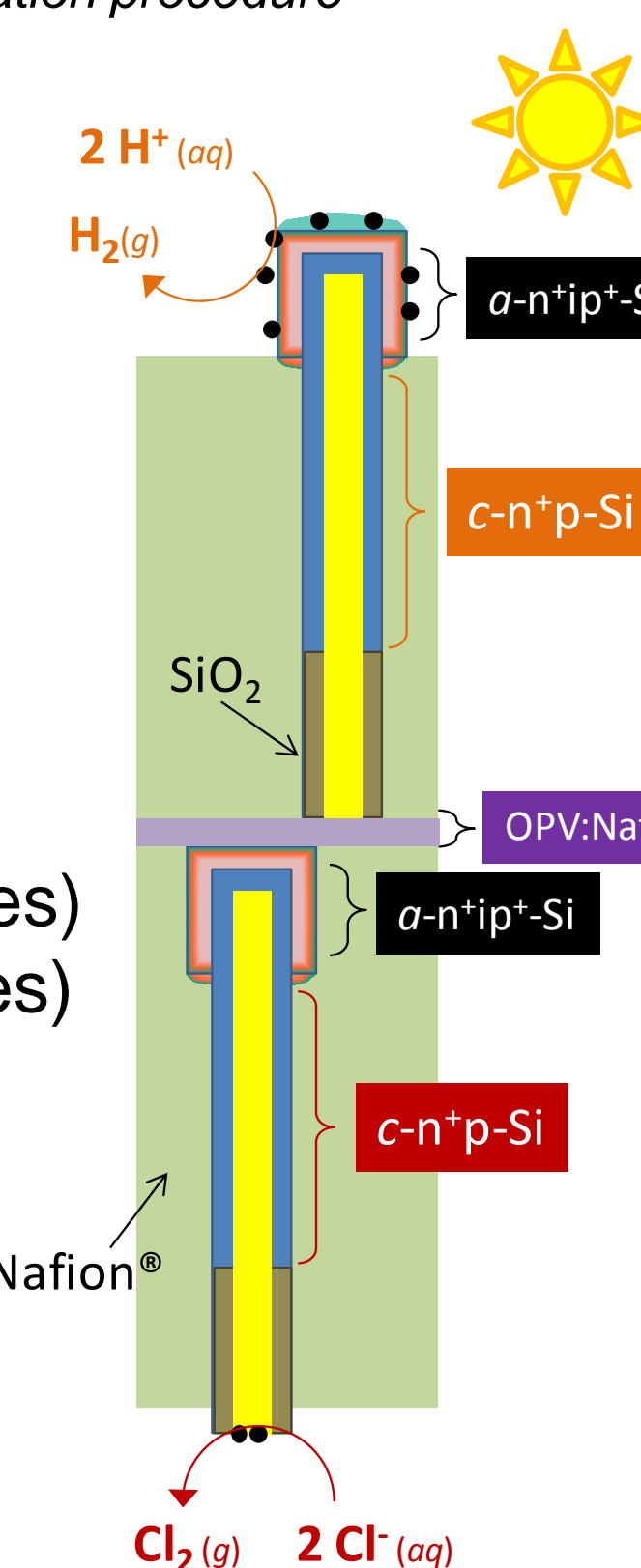


Figure 5. Quintuple-junction innovation project device

### Interfaces with appropriate junction characteristics

- (1) Deposit catalysts electrochemically or by drop-casting (Lewis laboratories)
- (2) Generate back-surface fields in Si via dopant drive-in from the highly doped growth wafers (Lewis laboratories)
- (3) Deposit Al electrolessly on the backsides of Nafion<sup>®</sup>-embedded n-type Si microwire arrays (Lewis laboratories)

### Innovation Projects (Fig. 5)

- (1) Synthesize organic photovoltaics that also conduct protons to serve as a middle layer in a tandem device (Lewis laboratories & Walter group at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte)
- (2) Deposit an amorphous n<sup>+</sup>ip<sup>+</sup>-Si (a-Si) coating on the crystalline Si (c-Si) microwires as additional junctions (Deng group at the University of Toledo & Xunlight Corporation in Toledo, OH)

## Impact

Success of this project will result in an economically feasible technology for conversion of sunlight to H<sub>2</sub>. This technology is not only relevant to centralized solar fuel power plants but the chloralkali industry. The chloralkali process is extremely energy intensive, requiring > 1% of the world's electricity, yet is indispensable as it produces two of the top-ten worldwide commodity chemicals: NaOH and Cl<sub>2</sub>. Driving this electrochemical reaction with sunlight would alleviate the large electricity input and, because a byproduct of the reaction is H<sub>2</sub>, would also generate a large-potential, carbon-free fuel as H<sub>2</sub>/Cl<sub>2</sub>. Fuel cells based on H<sub>2</sub>/Cl<sub>2</sub> are more efficient than those based on H<sub>2</sub>/O<sub>2</sub>, thus further motivating hydrohalic acids as fuel precursors for H<sub>2</sub> fuel.

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported in part by the Department of Energy (DOE) Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE) Postdoctoral Research Awards under the EERE Fuel Cell Technologies Program administered by the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) for the DOE. ORISE is managed by Oak Ridge Associated Universities (ORAU) under DOE contract number DEAC05-06OR23100.

**A recyclable fuel generated from the energy in sunlight using a single, economical assembly**