

A Lightweight Material for Heat Exchange Applications

Introduction

Thermal conductivity is an important consideration in choosing materials for different manufacturing applications. For example, materials used in heat exchangers require high thermal conductivity because heat must be transferred between substances located at a distance from one another. Historically, heat exchangers have been manufactured from metal because metals are effective in conducting thermal energy. Plastics, although cheaper, lighter, and less energy intensive to make than metals, are much less efficient in conducting heat than metals. This project will combine the valuable performance characteristics of both metals and plastics by developing a continuous production process for ultra-high molecular weight polyethylene (UHMWPE) fiber and sheet production that will result in a thermally conductive plastic material.

A number of lab-scale studies have shown that thermal conductivity is improved when polymer fibers are stretched mechanically. This increase is believed to be a direct result of the higher molecular chain alignment achieved by stretching. The aim of this work is to transform these early laboratory results into a scalable production process.

The proposed production process will involve using an extrusion chamber designed for sheet formation to extrude an UHMWPE gel at a set temperature and shear rate. The resultant gel then will be exposed to a controlled temperature environment to partially evaporate the solvent and solidify the gel sheet.

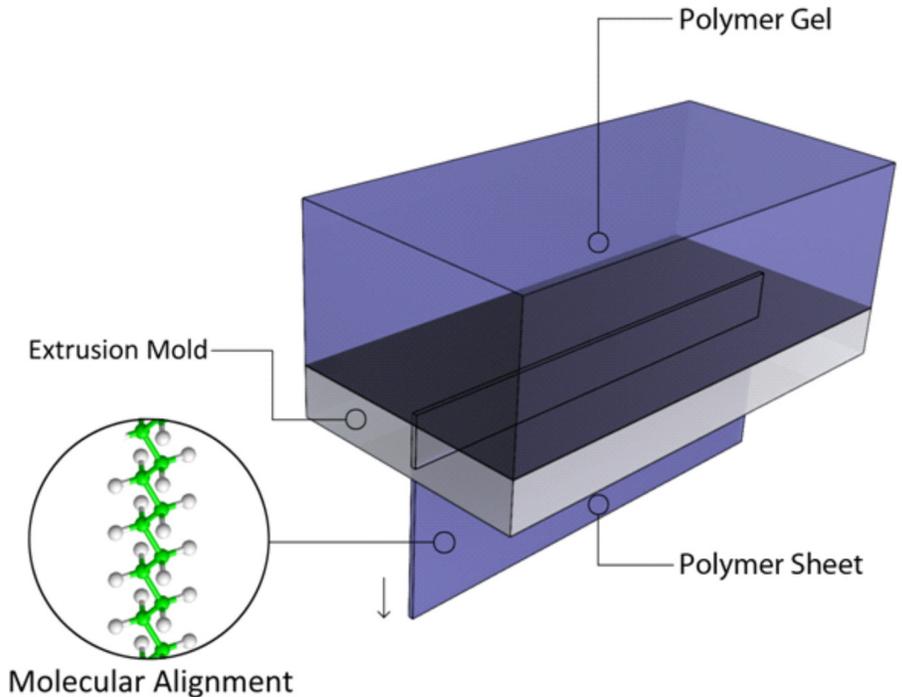


Illustration of continuous processing of UHMW-PE sheets (or fibers) with highly aligned molecule chains. UHMW-PE nanofibers are extruded through a template to form a continuous sheet (or fiber) and are stretched (not shown) further to align the molecules. *Graphic courtesy of MIT.*

The sheet will then be reheated and stretched to enhance the molecular chain orientation and create high thermal conductivity. A combination of process modeling and experimental trials will be used to identify conditions that yield plastic sheets with high thermal conductivity.

The thermal conductivity of the fibers and sheets is expected to be about two orders of magnitude higher than bulk polymers and at least twice that of currently available fibers.

Benefits for Our Industry and Our Nation

Benefits are expected to be realized in both fabrication and end use. Energy intensity will be significantly lowered during material synthesis and processing because lower process heating

temperatures will be used. The result will be that production plants for these materials will generate less pollution compared to metal processing plants. These polymers could be a game changer for many heat exchangers, especially in fins that require directionally high thermal conductivity values. They also could be used in thermal management systems in microelectronics, where an electrical insulating material is preferred. High thermal conductivity sheets could significantly expand the potential application for plastics and could help the U.S. plastics industry to expand its competitive position internationally. From an end use perspective, polyethylene is 35% less dense than aluminum, making the material lighter per unit volume. For example, using these polyethylene sheets in automotive applications would reduce vehicle weight and improve fuel economy.

Applications in Our Nation's Industry

This process could provide the plastics industry with a low-energy, cost-effective method of producing high thermal conductivity polyethylene material for further use as a lightweight and inexpensive alternative to metals in various heat transfer applications. Process integration is simplified by existing knowledgebase and widespread use of the primary source material (polyethylene).

Project Description

Project tasks focus on manufacturing platform design and fabrication, process modeling and optimization, materials characterization, and property characterization and modeling. The project objective is to develop and validate a continuous manufacturing process for polyethylene fibers and sheets yielding a thermal conductivity value greater than 60 Watts per meter-Kelvin ($\text{W m}^{-1}\text{K}^{-1}$).

Barriers

- Lack of scalable processes for manufacturing high thermal conductivity polyethylene sheets.
- Uncertainties associated with molecular-scale chain manipulation and modeling.
- Understanding of the optimum conditions for proper polymer flow through the extrusion chamber to limit or eliminate clogging.

Pathways

The primary task involves manufacturing platform design and fabrication. The concept is based on a gel-extrusion process and subsequent hot drawing. Research efforts will focus on fabricating and assembling the processing apparatus. Process modeling and optimization will be conducted to guide the manufacturing process considering four key variables: mechanical strength of the extrusion chamber, flow of the polymer through the chamber, polymer drying, and the optimal stretch ratio.

Researchers will characterize the molecular orientation of the polymer chains within the finished product using techniques such as X-ray diffraction, polarized microscopy, scanning electron microscopy, and transmission electron microscopy.

Researchers will also undertake property modeling to determine the thermal conductivity of the polymer sheets, specifically focusing on discovering the heat transfer characteristics between the polyethylene chains. These models will also provide guidance for structure and process optimization.

Milestones

This project began in 2012.

- Achieve capability to fabricate greater than 1×5 square centimeter (cm^2) polymer sheets by means of the proposed gel-extrusion and hot drawing process (Completed).
- Reach a thermal conductivity greater than $30 \text{ W m}^{-1}\text{K}^{-1}$ in $1 \times 5 \text{ cm}^2$ sheets (Completed).
- Reach a thermal conductivity greater than $60 \text{ W m}^{-1}\text{K}^{-1}$ in $1 \times 10 \text{ cm}^2$ sheets (2015).

Commercialization

There is strong interest from major chemical and polymer producers regarding this high thermal conductivity polyethylene material. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) intends to secure intellectual property for this technology, then determine whether to license it directly to other companies or pursue another commercialization option. As a first step in this process, the research team has engaged students in the MIT Sloan School of Management. As has been the case for numerous MIT technology developments, there is a strong possibility that a start-up company could be formed by project participants to further advance the technology.

Project Partners

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA

Principal Investigator: Gang Chen

Email: gchen2@mit.edu

For additional information, please contact

Bob Gemmer

Technology Manager

U.S. Department of Energy

Advanced Manufacturing Office

Phone: (202) 586-5885

Email: Bob.Gemmer@ee.doe.gov ■