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Perspective

Developments in Forward Osmosis Membranes: Opportunities for Low-Energy Desalination

Calvin Michaels*

Monash Centre for Membrane Innovation, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Forward Osmosis (FO) is an emerging membrane-based technology that promises a low-energy approach to desalination. As global demand for freshwater rises, finding efficient and sustainable desalination methods has become essential, especially in water-scarce regions. FO membranes, using natural osmotic pressure instead of applied hydraulic pressure, offer the potential to desalinate seawater with significantly lower energy requirements than traditional Reverse Osmosis (RO) systems. This article discusses the developments in FO membrane technology, highlights its advantages and challenges, and explores opportunities for its adoption in low-energy desalination.

DESCRIPTION

Understanding Forward Osmosis (FO) in desalination

Forward osmosis relies on osmotic pressure differences across a semi-permeable membrane to draw water from a lower concentration solution (feed solution) to a higher concentration solution (draw solution). Unlike RO, which requires high pressure to force water through a membrane, FO operates without the need for externally applied pressure, reducing energy consumption. After water permeates the membrane, a secondary separation step is often needed to recover fresh water from the diluted draw solution, which is critical in desalination applications.

FO's potential for energy savings and lower fouling propensity makes it a promising desalination technology. However, challenges remain in optimizing membrane materials, improving flux performance, and developing efficient draw solution regeneration processes to achieve cost-effective FO desalination.

Advances in forward osmosis membranes

The effectiveness of FO in desalination largely depends on membrane materials and structural design. Recent research has focused on optimizing these aspects to enhance water flux, reduce salt leakage, and improve durability:

High-performance Thin-Film Composite (TFC) membranes: TFC membranes are the most widely used membranes in FO due to their thin active layer and support structure, which together enable high water flux. Innovations in TFC membrane materials, such as polyamide and polybenzimidazole, have improved permeability and selectivity, making them suitable for demanding desalination processes.

Biomimetic and aquaporin-embedded membranes: Inspired by natural water channels in biological cells, aquaporin-embedded membranes incorporate aquaporins as selective water channels. These membranes show promise in achieving high water flux with minimal salt passage, mimicking efficient, selective water transport found in nature. Biomimetic membranes are being developed to replicate these properties, offering selective, low-energy desalination.

Graphene-based membranes: Graphene Oxide (GO) membranes are highly permeable and exhibit excellent fouling resistance, enhancing FO efficiency. Researchers are developing multilayered GO membranes with tunable nanopores to achieve high water transport rates and selective salt rejection, making them attractive for desalination applications.

Hollow fiber membranes: Unlike flat-sheet membranes, hollow fiber membranes offer high packing density and a greater surface area for water transport, improving efficiency in desalination applications. Hollow fibers are easier to clean and maintain, providing a low-fouling alternative with the potential for long-term use.

Correspondence to: Calvin Michaels, Monash Centre for Membrane Innovation, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia; E-mail: calvin@gmail.com

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Benefits of forward osmosis for low-energy desalination

FO offers several advantages over conventional desalination methods, particularly in reducing energy consumption:

Lower energy requirements: Since FO relies on osmotic pressure rather than applied hydraulic pressure, it consumes less energy than RO, especially when the draw solution is easily separated from water. This makes FO more energy-efficient, reducing operational costs and greenhouse gas emissions.

Reduced fouling and longer membrane lifespan: FO's lower operating pressures reduce the risk of fouling, which commonly affects high-pressure membranes in RO systems. Less fouling results in fewer chemical cleaning cycles, lower maintenance costs, and extended membrane lifespan, particularly in treating challenging feed waters like seawater.

CONCLUSION

Forward osmosis membranes represent a promising solution for low-energy desalination, combining efficient water transport with reduced fouling propensity. Advances in membrane materials, draw solution chemistry, and hybrid system design have brought FO closer to practical applications, particularly in sustainable desalination for water-scarce regions. Despite challenges related to draw solution regeneration and salt rejection, ongoing research is addressing these limitations, paving the way for FO's role in future desalination processes. With its potential to produce freshwater at a lower energy cost and reduced environmental impact, FO desalination offers a sustainable pathway to meet the growing global demand for clean water.