Copper(II) adsorption by activated carbons from pecan shells: Effect of oxygen level during activation

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Abstract

Agricultural by-products represent a considerable quantity of harvested commodity crops. The use of by-products as precursors for the production of widely used adsorbents, such as activated carbons, may impart a value-added component of the overall biomass harvested. Our objective in this paper is to show how the partial oxidation of phosphoric acid-impregnated pecan shells resulted in activated carbons with different affinities for a typical metal ion, copper(II), in aqueous sorption studies. The oxygen level was varied during activation by altering the sweep gas (air) flow rate in the furnace. Surface area and micropore volume of the produced carbon did not vary significantly with degree of oxidation, while the surface charge and the adsorption capacity were strongly dependent on the oxidative conditions. Surface area functional groups of C=O, aromatics, and phosphorus were confirmed by infrared spectroscopy.

The results show that the yield of activated carbon product was higher in the more oxygen-deprived atmosphere but that the product had a lower affinity for adsorbing copper from an aqueous solution. The carbon with the highest adsorptive capacity was produced by activation in approximately 14% oxygen atmosphere, yielding adsorption values of 0.97 and 1.3 mmol of copper(II) per gram of carbon when the carbon had been in contact with a copper(II) solution with initial concentration of 10 and 20 mM of copper, respectively.

1. Introduction

A variety of resources may be considered for activated carbon generation: coal, wood char, and agricultural by-products. Unlike coal, wood and agricultural by-products are abundant, low cost and renewable. In a recent report, it was estimated that 129 and 176 million dry metric tons are available for bioenergy and bio-products from forestry and agriculture, respectively; and this could be increased substantially with different agricultural management practices (USDOE, 2005).

The quantity of tree nut shells as raw material for activated carbons production, or other uses, is significant. Tree nut production in 2006 was 1.6 million tons in the U.S. and had a value of $3.45 billion, with almond, walnut, pistachio, and pecan representing the most popular nuts (NASS, 2007). Pecans are grown in 15 states in the U.S. and, even though they may be marketed and sold with shells, the majority of pecans are sold without shell. In 2006, 84,000 tons of pecans were shelled, resulting in an estimated 46,000 tons of shells as a by-product.

Activated carbons are not commonly marketed for their ability to adsorb metal cations from solutions; more often they are sold for their ability to remove organics, dyes, and chlorine. The method of activation is often steam, resulting in a porous activated carbon with high surface area. While steam activation is the most common, acid activation with hydrochloric acid was investigated as early as 1938 (Whitehead and Warshaw, 1938) to produce carbon for dye removal. Chemical activation with phosphoric acid, zinc chloride, or carbonate salts was used for activation of almond shells (Bevia et al., 1984) under a nitrogen atmosphere and the resulting carbons were characterized for adsorption of organics. Acid activation of carbons made from wood and coal under a nitrogen atmosphere was investigated by Jagtoyen et al. (1992) and Jagtoyen and Derbyshire (1993) but no attempt was made to investigate cationic metal uptake. Jagtoyen et al. (1992) and Jagtoyen and Derbyshire (1993) concluded that the phosphoric acid, when applied at low temperatures (450°C), promotes dehydrogenation, cross-linking, sulfur removal, and increased aromatization in the resulting activated carbon product. Introduction of air during phosphoric acid activation was proposed by Molina-Sabio et al. (1995a) as a process simplification effort. That work determined that air was not detrimental to yield or micropore volume, when sufficient phosphoric acid was used for impregnation. The authors also found that the bulk density of these carbons tended to be higher than...
those produced under a nitrogen atmosphere, and it was speculated that additional oxygen was chemisorbed onto the carbons, generating a denser activated carbon. Cation adsorption was not part of the study. A patent was granted to Toles et al. (2000a), who demonstrated that phosphoric acid activation in an air atmosphere produced activated carbons from a variety of nut shells that had superior adsorptive capacity for metal cations. Various combinations of air, nitrogen, and rapid cooling, and activation temperatures during phosphoric acid activation was also studied by Toles et al. (1998, 2000b). It was found that pecan and almond shells pyrolyzed and activated at 450 °C for 1 h with an air atmosphere produced activated carbons with high surface area (1138–1458 m²/g) and significant adsorptive capacity for copper(II) ions. A slightly more complex method of activation at 170 °C and 450 °C, with an air atmosphere produced activated carbons with less surface area but with better copper ion adsorptive capacity. It was determined that the oxidation of the carbon surface was important as it produced a negative surface charge, which contributed to its ability to adsorb cations, and a linear relationship between surface charge and metal adsorptive capacity has already been demonstrated by Toles et al. (1998) and Lima et al. (2004). The process was further evaluated and the predicted cost of producing phosphoric acid activated carbons from pecan shells was estimated at $2.89/kg (Ng et al., 2003).

Since past research has shown that the gas composition during activation of phosphoric acid impregnated material is important, we initiated a set of experiments to produce activated carbons via phosphoric acid activation of pecan shells under different oxidative conditions. This was accomplished by altering the flow of gas (to achieve different oxygen levels) during pyrolysis and activation. The carbons were then characterized and evaluated for their ability to adsorb cations.

2. Methods

2.1. Materials

Pecan shells were obtained from H.J. Bergeron Pecan Shelling (Boyce, LA). Extraneous matter was removed, and the shells were ground in a cutting mill (Type SM2000; Retsch Gmbh, Haan, Germany) and sieved to retain the 0.84–2 mm (nos. 10–20 sieve) fraction for conversion to activated carbon. The size fraction was selected based on previous experiments (Toles et al., 1998; Lima et al., 2004; Marshall et al., 2007).

A commercial carbon, Norit C, from Norit Americas, Inc. (Marshall, TX) was used for comparison purposes. This carbon was chosen because it is made via a similar activation strategy as the one used here. Based on manufacturer’s information, Norit C is a phosphoric acid-activated carbon used for adsorbing high molecular organics.

2.2. Experimental methods

The phosphoric acid activation of the pecan shells was performed using the same method previously done with flax shive (Marshall et al., 2007). To summarize: 100 g shells and 100 g phosphoric acid (30% by weight) were mixed in a porcelain evaporating dish and the material was allowed to absorb the phosphoric acid solution overnight. Activation was then performed by placing the dish in a furnace with retort (Lindberg, Type 51662-HR, Watertown, WI) for 4 h at 450 °C with either 100, 400, 600, 1200, 1600, or 2000 mL/min of air flow. The void volume of the furnace was approximately 22 L and the heating rate was approximately 12 °C/min (independent of air flow rate.) The off-gas composition from the furnace was monitored during the heating and activation process. After activation, the furnace (and carbon) was allowed to cool overnight with constant air flow. The air flow during heating, activation, and cooling was kept constant during runs. The resulting carbon was washed five times in hot water (90 °C) at a ratio of approximately 100:1 (w/w, water:carbon) and only the fraction above no. 60 sieve screen (i.e., >0.25 mm) was retained. While the commercial carbon (Norit C) was not activated, it was found to contain residual phosphoric acid and was washed in the same manner as the experimental carbons. The carbons were oven-dried at 80 °C overnight.

The carbons were physically and chemically characterized for nitrogen gas adsorption, surface charge, and possible chemically active surface groups using a variety of methods described in Section 2.3.

Two-point adsorption studies were carried out in covered 50-mL glass beakers using 0.25 g of activated carbon and 25 mL of aqueous solution. This solution contained 10 or 20 mM of copper(II) chloride and was buffered at pH 4.8 with 20 mM acetic acid and 30 mM sodium acetate. The solution and activated carbon were stirred (using a magnetic stirrer bar) at approximately 300 rpm for 24 h. After contact, the solution was diluted before metals analysis. The concentration after adsorption was compared to that of a control solution containing no activated carbon but which had undergone all the other experimental procedures. The adsorption experiments were run in duplicate. Similar adsorption studies have previously been reported (Toles et al., 1998; Lima et al., 2004; Marshall et al., 2007), which allowed for easy comparison of results.

2.3. Analytical methods

The composition of the off-gas from the furnace during heat-up and activation was analyzed with an Enerac 500 Emissions Analyzer (Enerac, Westbury, NY) attached to a computer. This analyzer pulls gas through a particle filter and into a chamber equipped with a set of electro-chemical sensors for oxygen, combustibles, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide. Carbon dioxide is determined through calculations from oxygen and carbon monoxide levels.

Surface areas for the activated carbons were determined from nitrogen gas adsorption isotherms at −196 °C using a Nova 2000 Surface analyzer (Quantochrome Instruments, Boynton Beach, FL) that reports Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) surface area and micropore volume measurements. The carbons were conditioned under vacuum at 200 °C before nitrogen adsorption.

Surface charge was determined (in duplicates) at pH 5 by a procedure previously described (Lima et al., 2004). The approach involves contacting a sample of activated carbon (H⁺-saturated at pH 5) with a known volume of 0.1 M NaOH. The base solution is then titrated using an HCl solution, yielding a value for the amount of base neutralized by the protonated carbons surface (in mmol H⁺/g).

The raw material and the activated carbons were subjected to Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra analysis using a Bruker Optics Tensor 27 FTIR spectrometer (Bruker Optics, Billerica, MA) with a Zn-Se attenuated total reflectance (ATR) crystal. Sixty-four (64) scans were made of each sample at 4 cm⁻¹ resolution from 4000 cm⁻¹ to 600 cm⁻¹.

After completion of copper(II) ion adsorption experiments, liquid samples were removed and filtered using a disposable syringe with a 0.22-μm-pore-size Millipore filter (Millipore Corp., Bedford, MA). The filtered sample was diluted a 100-fold with 4 vol.% nitric acid (Ultrapure, ICP grade) and analyzed using an Inductively Coupled Plasma Optical Emissions Spectrometer (Profile Plus, Teledyne/Leeman Labs, Hudson, NH).
3. Results and discussion

3.1. Off-gas composition during pyrolysis and activation

The composition of the off-gases from the furnace is shown in Fig. 1(a)–(d) for the different activation air flow rates. As is noted in Fig. 1(a), the oxygen content in the off-gas (and thus in the furnace) was dependent on the activation air flow rate. There was an initial dip in the oxygen level, followed by a gradual increase over time. The nominal oxygen concentration for the latter part of the treatment is listed in Table 1. It can be concluded that there is a net consumption of oxygen during the pyrolysis/activation cycle. In the present studies conducted in an oxygen-rich atmosphere, it was not surprising that sulfur dioxide was present in the off-gas (Fig. 1(b)). Sulfur loss during acid activation was noted by Jagtoyen et al. (1992) when coal was activated in a nitrogen atmosphere; in this case hydrogen sulfide was released, while other sulfur gases were absent. Here we show that the oxidized form of sulfur is released in an oxidizing atmosphere. The evolution of combustible gases was noted and, as shown in Fig. 1(c), their sharp rise corresponded to the noted decrease in oxygen (Fig. 1(a)); however, it is clear that the decrease in oxygen cannot be explained by simply the dilution of the gas with the gases volatilized from the pecans. Oxygen possibly reacts with the carbon contained in the shells and the volatile (combustible) gases generated from the heating of the materials. The reaction of a combustible gas (as methane equivalents) with oxygen to create carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide is shown in Eqs. (1) and (2):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{CH}_4 \text{ (equivalents)} + 1.5O_2 & \rightarrow \text{CO} + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (1) \\
\text{CH}_4 \text{ (equivalents)} + 2O_2 & \rightarrow \text{CO}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad (2)
\end{align*}
\]

While oxygen also reacts with sulfur to produce sulfur dioxide (see Fig. 1(b)), the amount of oxygen used for this reaction is small. The instrument-calculated concentration of carbon dioxide is shown in Fig. 1(d). Carbon monoxide was also recorded by the instrument; however, the level in the exhaust exceeded the maximum limit of 1900 ppmv for the duration of the activation cycle.

3.2. Surface analysis and oxidation of activated carbon surface

The surface charge correlated well with the nominal oxygen level in the furnace indicating that a higher oxygen level resulted in more groups on the carbons surface capable of adsorbing positive ions (H⁺ equivalents) (see Fig. 2). The ability for the activated carbons to adsorb copper(II) was strongly dependent on the surface charge, which was in agreement with studies using other activation strategies (Toles et al., 1998, 1999; Wartelle and Marshall, 2001; Lima et al., 2004).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carbon</th>
<th>Activation air flow rate (mL/min)</th>
<th>Nominal oxygen levela (%)</th>
<th>Surface area (m²/g)</th>
<th>Micropore volume (mL/g)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>904</td>
<td>0.329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>0.326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>864</td>
<td>0.316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>0.325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>0.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>0.344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norit C</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1237</td>
<td>0.530</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aThe nominal oxygen level was calculated as an average oxygen concentration in the furnace off-gas between 60 and 270 min (see Fig. 1(a)).
phosphorous-containing groups being formed during heat treatment, as noted prominently by the absorption peaks formed with activation at 1206, 1141, 1070, and 880 cm$^{-1}$. In addition, appearance of bands from 900 to 650 cm$^{-1}$ can indicate an increase in aromatic nature for the activated compounds. The presence of large quantities of phosphorous on the surface of phosphoric acid activated carbons has been confirmed with energy-dispersive X-ray spectrometry (Dastgheib and Rockstraw, 2001). While the type of phosphorous groups present on the surface was not determined in our studies, Benaddi et al. (2000) postulated, based on measured surface acidity constants, that phosphonic acids, phosphonous acids, and phosphines were likely functional groups in phosphoric acid-activated carbons made from wood.

The FTIR results strongly support significant spectral and chemical changes occurring with the activation of the pecan shells with phosphoric acid and heat treatment. As noted earlier, these changes are observed even at the low oxygen levels (e.g., 4% O$_2$ at 100 mL/min of air). There are only minor spectral differences in the 100 mL/min (4.0% O$_2$) and 400 mL/min (7.6% O$_2$) spectra from 1650 cm$^{-1}$ to 700 cm$^{-1}$, but the spectral changes attributed to the formation of phosphorus containing groups increased steadily and significantly thereafter, as shown in Fig. 4. This would suggest that, oxygen level during activation is important if the formation of phosphorous-containing groups on the activated carbon’s surface is desired.

### 3.3. Activated carbon surface area and yields

The specific surface areas of the laboratory-manufactured activated carbons ranged from 864 to 915 m$^2$/g (Table 1). While the greatest surface area was noted for activated carbon obtained with the highest levels of oxygen, there was no observable trend which was dependent on the oxidative conditions. Likewise, the micropore volume was not influenced by the oxidative conditions. These findings correspond well with those presented by Molina-Sabio et al. (1995a), who found that the atmosphere (nitrogen or air) did not affect the pore structure when sufficient phosphoric acid was used in the impregnation. Other studies have shown that concentration of phosphoric acid, activation temperature, and impregnation conditions are mainly responsible for creating the physical pore structure (Jagtoyen and Derbyshire, 1993; Molina-Sabio et al., 1995b). Thus we conclude that the various atmospheres used in our studies were mainly responsible for surface chemistry changes but not for pore structure. The specific surface area and micropore volume were lower than that of the commercial phosphoric acid activated carbon, but the values obtained by the
The ability of the activated carbons to adsorb copper ions was dependent on the oxygen level in the furnace, and the resulting adsorptive capacity of the activated carbons made with the highest oxygen levels was almost double that of the carbon activated with the lowest oxygen levels (Fig. 6). In both studies (with 10 and 20 mM of Cu$^{2+}$), the relationship between oxygen level during activation and adsorptive capacity appeared almost linear in the range of oxygen levels studied. In the best case, the adsorption of copper(II) was 0.97 and 1.3 mmol/g of carbon after contact with 10 mM and 20 mM of Cu$^{2+}$, respectively (Fig. 6). This compared favorably with the results obtained by Toles et al. (1998), who found that capacities ranged from 0.23 to 0.86 mmol/g for phosporic acid (50%) activated pecan shells, when using a variety of different activation strategies (other than the one studied here). The adsorption capacity was about 10–13% lower than determined by Lima et al. (2004) and Marshall et al. (2007) when using the same activation method for hardwood and flax shive, but it was significantly higher than Norit C (Fig. 6) and several other commercial carbon products when tested under the same conditions (Lima et al., 2004; Marshall et al., 2007). While the current studies only involved copper cation adsorption, previous studies have shown that the phosphoric acid activation is also suitable for adsorption of other metals such as lead, nickel, and zinc (Bansode et al., 2003; Marshall et al., 2007).

4. Conclusions

The results have shown that the oxygen level present during activation of phosporic acid-impregnated pecan shells is an important factor when activated carbon is tailor-made for aqueous copper(II) cation adsorption. More active surface groups, of the type responsible for attracting positive, ions were found in carbons prepared in a more oxidizing atmosphere. These groups contributed to the high levels of Cu$^{2+}$ adsorption. In addition, the results showed that more phosphorous was incorporated into the surface in an oxidizing atmosphere. The level of oxidation correlated well surface charge and was a strong indicator of copper uptake ability. The surface area of the activated carbon was much less dependent on the oxidizing atmosphere and only varied with 3% around the mean, which was in agreement with previous studies.

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References


