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Fundamental mechanistic studies in formic acid decomposition on transition metal surfaces[1]

MANOS MAVRIKAKIS, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Formic acid (HCOOH) is a simple molecule that is an abundant product of biomass processing and can serve as an internal source of hydrogen for oxygen removal and upgrading of biomass to chemicals and fuels. In addition, HCOOH can be used as a fuel for low temperature direct fuel cells. We present a systematic study of the HCOOH decomposition reaction mechanism starting from first-principles and including reactivity experiments and microkinetic modeling. In particular, periodic self-consistent Density Functional Theory (DFT) calculations are performed to determine the stability of reactive intermediates and activation energy barriers of elementary steps. Pre-exponential factors are determined from vibrational frequency calculations. Mean-field microkinetic models are developed and calculated reaction rates and reaction orders are then compared with experimentally measured ones. These comparisons provide useful insights on the nature of the active site, most-abundant surface intermediates as a function of reaction conditions and feed composition. Trends across metals on the fundamental atomic-scale level up to selectivity trends will be discussed. Finally, we identify from first-principles alloy surfaces, which may possess better catalytic properties for selective dehydrogenation of HCOOH than monometallic surfaces, thereby guiding synthesis towards promising novel catalytic materials.

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