



Slovak Society of Chemical Engineering
Institute of Chemical and Environmental Engineering
Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava

PROCEEDINGS

51st International Conference of the Slovak Society of Chemical Engineering SSCHE 2025

Hotel DRUŽBA
Jasná, Demänovská Dolina, Slovakia
May 27 - 30, 2025

Editors: Assoc. Prof. Mário Mihaľ

ISBN: 978-80-8208-158-2, EAN: 9788082081582

Published by the Faculty of Chemical and Food Technology Slovak Technical University in Bratislava in Slovak Chemistry Library for the Institute of Chemical and Environmental Engineering; Radlinského 9, 812 37 Bratislava, 2024

Horváth, D., Tomasek, S.: Comparison between Ni/ZSM-5 and NiMo/AlO Catalysts in the Hydrocracking of FischerTropsch Wax Reflected in the Properties of Middle Distillates, Editors: Mihaľ, M., In *51st International Conference of the Slovak Society of Chemical Engineering SSCHE 2025*, Jasná, Demänovská Dolina, Slovakia, 2025.

Comparison between Ni/ZSM-5 and NiMo/Al₂O₃ Catalysts in the Hydrocracking of Fischer–Tropsch Wax – Reflected in the Properties of Middle Distillates

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Key words: hydrocracking, Ni/ZSM-5, NiMo/Al₂O₃, Fischer-Tropsch wax, middle distillates

The harmful emissions caused by fossil fuels have long been recognized as a major issue. Various actions have been implemented worldwide to mitigate these negative effects. In the European Union, the ReFuel EU regulation and the RED III directive have been introduced. Both regulations promote the use of so-called e-fuels. This fuel category includes gasoline and middle distillates produced by Fischer-Tropsch synthesis from hydrogen generated using renewable electricity and carbon monoxide derived from renewable sources. In the low-temperature variant of the synthesis, which is more favorable from the perspective of middle distillate production, a large quantity of a low-value, high molecular weight paraffin fraction—known as Fischer-Tropsch wax—is formed. The conversion of this fraction has been considered crucial for the yield of hydrocarbons within the fuel boiling range and thus for the overall economic viability of the process. Fischer-Tropsch waxes have most commonly been subjected to some form of cracking. In terms of middle distillate quality, it has been found advantageous to perform hydrocracking, as the resulting fractions mainly consist of saturated hydrocarbons. In contrast, when thermo-catalytic cracking is carried out without a hydrogen atmosphere, the products have been found to contain a high proportion of olefins and aromatics. A high content of saturated hydrocarbons has been associated with improved stability, an increase in the smoke point for JET fuels, and an improvement in the cetane number for diesel gas oils. During our experiments, the hydrocracking of Fischer-Tropsch wax was carried out using two different commercially available nickel-containing catalysts in a continuous, single-pass, back-mixing-free microreactor system. The influence of the catalysts and changes in operating parameters on the yield and composition of the products was investigated. In addition, several key properties of the middle distillates were determined, including density, cold flow properties, and distillation characteristics. It was found that increasing the temperature and residence time improved the cold flow properties of the obtained middle distillates.

This work has been implemented by the TKP2021-NKTA-21 project with the support provided by the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the 2021 Thematic Excellence Programme funding scheme.