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OPTIMIZATION OF ALGAE-BASED BIODIESEL BLENDS: A SUSTAINABLE SOLUTION FOR FOSSIL FUEL ALTERNATIVES

[1,a] **Ms. Princy,** [2,b]**Dr. Monika Chahar,**[3,c] **Dr. Jaibir Singh Yadav**
[1]Research Scholar, [2]Supervisor, [3] Co-supervisor,
[1-2] Department of Chemistry, Baba Mast Nath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.
[3]Department of Chemistry, A. I. Jat H. M. College, Rohtak, Haryana, India
[a] ruhalprincy@gmail.com, [b] chaharmonika507@gmail.com, [c] jaichem01@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the optimization of multicomponent blends composed of biodiesel derived from algal biomass, with the objective of advancing sustainable and renewable alternatives to traditional fossil fuels. With the global energy demand rising and the environmental impacts of fossil fuel reliance becoming increasingly evident, algal biofuels offer a promising solution due to their high productivity, land-use efficiency, and carbon sequestration capabilities. The paper examines the thermodynamic behavior of algae-based biodiesel blends, their impact on engine performance, and the technical challenges involved in large-scale adoption. It highlights the biochemical diversity of algal feedstocks, the benefits of multicomponent fuel blends, and advanced conversion methods such as transesterification and enzymatic hydrolysis. The review also addresses the environmental and economic feasibility of algal biofuels, emphasizing the need for process optimization, cost reduction, and market integration to achieve long-term sustainability. Furthermore, it discusses future research directions including genetic strain improvement, process intensification, and the scaling of integrated systems for fuel production and environmental remediation.

Keywords: Algal biodiesel, multicomponent blends, sustainable energy, thermodynamic optimization.

Introduction

The contemporary global energy paradigm is characterized by a precarious reliance on finite fossil fuel reserves, an arrangement that has fostered unprecedented industrial growth but at a profound environmental and geopolitical cost. As of the mid-2020s, global energy demand continues to rise at an accelerated pace, driven by rapid population expansion, urbanization, and the digitalization of economies. Data from the 2024 Global Energy Review indicates a record 4.3% increase in global electricity demand, reflecting the broadening access to appliances and the electrification of transportation sectors. Despite the rapid deployment of solar and wind technologies, fossil fuels—coal, oil, and natural gas—still provide approximately 60–80% of the world's primary energy supply (Qubeissi et al., 2021). The structural challenge remains that renewable capacity expansion often supplements rather than replaces fossil fuel use, leading to a persistent rise in total greenhouse gas emissions.

The combustion of fossil fuels stands as the primary source of anthropogenic carbon dioxide and methane , with atmospheric levels now exceeding pre-industrial benchmarks by more than 50%. This concentration has exacerbated the greenhouse effect, resulting in melting ice sheets, rising sea levels, and more frequent extreme weather events. Furthermore, the uneven geographical distribution of fossil reserves exposes energy-importing nations to significant supply instabilities and price volatility, highlighting a desperate need for energy security through domestic, renewable alternatives. In this context, biofuels derived from algal biomass represent a critical technological frontier. Algal-based biodiesel offer a third-generation energy solution that does not compete with food crops for arable land and provides a superior carbon sequestration profile. This report examines the optimization of multicomponent blends of these fuels, investigating their thermodynamic behavior, engine performance, and the techno-economic barriers to their large-scale adoption.

Global energy dynamics and the imperative for bioenergy

The transition toward sustainable energy is no longer a matter of environmental preference but a systemic necessity for long-term economic resilience. Global electricity and transport needs are shifting toward low-carbon solutions, yet the high energy density and established infrastructure of liquid fuels mean they will remain essential for the foreseeable future, particularly in heavy-duty transport, aviation, and shipping. Sustainable energy alternatives are defined by their capacity to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs—a concept central to the development of bioenergy systems (Algunaibet et al., 2016).

Bioenergy is unique among renewables for its versatility; it can be converted into heat, electricity, and liquid fuels, making it compatible with existing internal combustion engines and distribution networks with minimal modification. The integration of bioenergy into global energy strategies serves several key objectives: the reduction of dependence on fossil fuel imports, the utilization of waste and non-food biomass, and the enhancement of rural economies (Cherwoo et al., 2023a). Algal biomass, as a third-generation feedstock, addresses the most significant criticisms of first-generation biofuels (e.g., corn ethanol or soybean biodiesel), such as land-use change and food security conflicts. Algae grow rapidly, double their biomass in hours, and can be harvested daily, providing oil yields up to 200 times greater unit area than traditional oleaginous crops.

Comparison of biomass productivity and energy potential

The following table summarizes the comparative advantages of microalgal feedstocks against traditional terrestrial oil crops, emphasizing the efficiency of third-generation bioresources.

Feedstock Category	Primary Examples	Oil Yield (L/acre/year)	Land Use Efficiency	Mitigation Potential
First Generation	Soybean, Rapeseed	46 – 122	Low	Moderate
Second Generation	Jatropha, Waste Oil	150 – 250	Moderate	High (Waste utilization)
Third Generation	Microalgae (various)	5,000 – 15,000	Very High	Superior (kg /kg biomass)
Fourth Generation	GM Algae/Cyanobacteria	>20,000	Extreme	Enhanced Metabolic Fixing

Biochemical diversity and algal feedstock selection

The suitability of algae for biofuel production is determined by its biochemical composition, which varies significantly between species and is highly sensitive to environmental stressors. Algae are broadly classified into microalgae (unicellular) and macroalgae (multicellular seaweeds) (Mishra & Goswami, 2017). Microalgae, such as *Chlorella*, *Nannochloropsis*, and *Spirulina*, are preferred for biodiesel production due to their high lipid content, often ranging from 20% to 50% of dry weight. Macroalgae, including brown algae (*Laminaria*) and red algae (*Halymenia*), are typically richer in carbohydrates (polysaccharides like alginate, agar, and cellulose), making them more suitable for production via fermentation (Elgharbawy et al., 2021).

Microalgal lipids primarily consist of neutral lipids (triacylglycerols or TAGs), which are the essential precursors for biodiesel synthesis. Under optimal conditions, microalgae focus on protein synthesis and rapid division; however, when subjected to environmental stress—most notably nitrogen or phosphorus starvation—metabolic pathways shift toward the storage of energy-dense lipids or carbohydrates. For instance, *Dunaliella salina* can accumulate up to 60% lipid content under high light and nitrogen-deficient conditions (Henderson, 2019).

Biochemical profiles of prominent algal species (2024 data)

Algal Species	Lipid Content (% dw)	Carbohydrate (% dw)	Protein (% dw)	Growth Rate (divisions/day)
Chlorella vulgaris	19.25 – 30.0	12.0 – 25.0	45.0 – 55.0	0.4 – 0.6
Nannochloropsis oculata	23.07 – 45.0	10.0 – 18.0	35.0 – 42.0	0.3 – 0.5
Spirulina platensis	7.0 – 12.0	15.0 – 25.0	50.0 – 65.0	0.2 – 0.4
Dunaliella salina	40.0 – 60.0	20.0 – 30.0	10.0 – 18.0	0.2 – 0.35
Halymenia durvillei	0.27	35.09	0.7	0.1 – 0.2
Scenedesmus sp.	20.0 – 47.0	25.0 – 64.0	10.0 – 20.0	0.4 – 0.7

The variation in these profiles suggests that a single-species approach may not be as effective as a multicomponent strategy. *Chlorella vulgaris* and *Nannochloropsis oculata* are identified as prime candidates for biodiesel due to their high yields and favorable fatty acid profiles (high in palmitic and oleic acids), which ensure fuel stability and ignition quality. Conversely, species like *Scenedesmus sp.* provide a robust source of carbohydrates, particularly when grown in wastewater, which simultaneously facilitates nutrient removal and water purification (Barabás & Todoruţ, 2009).

Advanced conversion mechanisms for algal biofuels

The chemical and biochemical transformation of algal biomass into useable liquid fuels requires optimized conversion pathways to ensure high yields and energy-positive outputs. The two primary fuels derived—biodiesel—utilize distinct fractions of the biomass: the lipid portion for the former and the carbohydrate portion for the latter (Panahi et al., 2021).

Biodiesel synthesis via transesterification

Biodiesel is chemically defined as the mono-alkyl esters of long-chain fatty acids. The standard production route is transesterification, where triglycerides react with an alcohol (typically methanol or ethanol) in the presence of a catalyst (Owusu & Asumadu-Sarkodie, 2016). The reaction replaces the glycerol backbone of the triglyceride with the alkyl group of the alcohol, significantly reducing the molecular weight and viscosity of the resulting esters.

The reaction kinetics and yield are heavily influenced by the catalyst type and the alcohol-to-oil molar ratio. While homogeneous base catalysts like or are standard for high-purity oils, they are prone to soap formation if the free fatty acid (FFA) content exceeds 1%. Algal oils often contain higher FFA levels, necessitating acid-catalyzed pretreatment or the use of heterogeneous solid catalysts, which are more resilient and easier to separate from the product stream. Research on *Chlorella vulgaris* using ultrasound-assisted extraction and transesterification has demonstrated oil yields of 19.25%, while *Nannochloropsis oculata* reached 23.07% with optimal extraction occurring within 180 minutes (Clark & Deswarte, 2014).

Integrated Biorefinery and Hydrothermal Liquefaction

To maximize the economic viability of algal biofuels, the integrated biorefinery model extracts multiple high-value products from the same biomass batch. This approach mitigates the high costs associated with cultivation and harvesting by diversifying revenue streams (Tabatabaei et al., 2015).

Biorefinery Stream	End Product	Application
Lipid Fraction	Biodiesel, Aviation Fuel	Transportation
Carbohydrate Fraction	Butanol	Fuel additive, Chemical precursor
Protein Fraction	Animal Feed, Nutraceuticals	Agriculture, Human health
Pigment/Bioactive	Carotenoids, Chlorophyll	Cosmetics, Pharmaceuticals
Solid Residue	Bio-fertilizer, Bioplastics	Sustainable agriculture

A significant advancement in this field is Hydrothermal Liquefaction (HTL), a thermochemical process that mimics natural petroleum formation over millions of years but in a matter of minutes. HTL operates at high temperatures (C) and pressures (10–25 MPa), converting the whole wet biomass into "biocrude." This technology is particularly advantageous because it bypasses the energy-intensive drying process, which can account for up to 30% of total production costs in conventional biofuel pathways (Mangoyana, 2008).

Multicomponent fuel blending: Synergy and optimization

The independent use of pure biodiesel (B100) in conventional engines is restricted by several technical limitations, including high viscosity, poor cold flow, and low energy density. Multicomponent liquid fuel blends—mixtures of biodiesel, and conventional diesel (diesohol)—are designed to combine the favorable properties of each constituent while mitigating their individual weaknesses.

Concept and classification of liquid fuel blends

Fuel blending is a strategy to tailor critical parameters such as cetane number, viscosity, and lubricity to meet stringent environmental regulations and engine performance standards.

1. **Binary Blends:** The simplest form, such as B20 (20% biodiesel, 80% diesel) or E10 (10% ethanol, 90% gasoline). These are the most common commercial formulations.

2. **Ternary and Higher-Order Blends:** Mixtures such as diesel-biodiesel-ethanol. In these systems, biodiesel acts as a "bridge" or co-solvent that enhances the miscibility of ethanol in diesel, preventing phase separation, especially at low temperatures.

3. **Emulsified Blends:** Systems that incorporate water or other immiscible liquids through surfactants to improve combustion efficiency and reduce NOx emissions.

Physicochemical properties and blend quality

The ratio of components in a multicomponent blend significantly shifts its thermophysical profile. Biodiesel increases the lubricity of the fuel, which reduces wear on fuel injectors and pumps, but its higher viscosity can impair atomization. The addition of ethanol, which has a much lower viscosity (Acién et al., 2012), helps restore the flow characteristics of the blend to levels comparable to conventional diesel.

Fuel Formulation	Density	Viscosity	Calorific Value	Cetane Number
Pure Diesel (D100)	830 – 850	2.5 – 3.5	42.5	45 – 55
Algal Biodiesel (B100)	860 – 895	3.5 – 5.0	37.0 – 40.0	50 – 65
B20 Blend (D80B20)	845 – 855	2.8 – 3.8	41.5	46 – 56
Diesohol (D70B20E10)	835 – 845	2.2 – 3.2	39.5	40 – 45

A critical observation from experimental investigations is the reduction in flash point when ethanol is added. While pure biodiesel has a safe flash point exceeding C, the addition of even 5–10% ethanol drops this value significantly, requiring specialized handling and storage protocols. However, the high oxygen content of these blends (10–35% by weight) ensures a more complete combustion cycle, which is fundamental to reducing soot and particulate emissions (Pang et al., 2024).

Thermodynamic modeling and molecular interaction theories

To predict the behavior of multicomponent fuel blends under various operational conditions, researchers employ sophisticated thermodynamic models. These models analyze molecular-level interactions to explain macroscopic deviations from ideal mixing behavior, such as volume contraction or changes in compressibility.

Kirkwood-Buff (KB) Theory of Solutions

KB theory is a rigorous statistical mechanical framework that relates integrals of radial distribution functions to thermodynamic properties (Knothe, 2007). It is particularly effective for multicomponent systems where components have vastly different polarities and sizes, such as ethanol-diesel-biodiesel mixtures.

The Kirkwood-Buff integral (KBI), , represents the average excess or deficit of molecules of species in the vicinity of species . The relationship to macroscopic properties like partial molar volumes and isothermal compressibility is given by (Powar et al., 2022):

In ternary mixtures, KB theory allows for the calculation of preferential binding parameters, which indicate whether a solute (e.g., ethanol) is "preferentially solvated" by the biodiesel or the diesel fraction. This is crucial for maintaining phase stability; for instance, clusters dominated by propanol or ethanol tend to disappear at specific mole fractions, leading to a more homogeneous and stable fuel blend. (Vong & Wong, 2009)

Statistical Associating Fluid Theory (SAFT)

SAFT and its modern variants, such as PC-SAFT (Perturbed-Chain SAFT) and SAFT-VR (Variable Range), are essential tools for modeling the thermodynamic properties of large, complex molecules like the fatty acid methyl esters (FAME) found in biodiesel.

The Helmholtz free energy in PC-SAFT is modeled by treating molecules as chains of segments. The residual Helmholtz energy is the sum of various interaction terms:

For biodiesel blends containing alcohols, the term is vital, as it accounts for the hydrogen bonding between ethanol molecules and the oxygenated headgroups of the esters. PC-SAFT parameters—such as segment number , segment diameter , and segment energy —are regressed from experimental density and vapor pressure data. This allows for the prediction of high-pressure densities and phase equilibria (VLE and LLE) for fuel blends up to 70 MPa, reflecting the conditions inside a modern diesel engine's common rail system.

Molecular Dynamics (MD) and spectroscopic insights

MD simulations provide a dynamic, time-resolved view of how molecules arrange themselves within a blend. Simulations have revealed that diesel molecules (hydrocarbons) tend to accumulate around the non-polar tails of FAME molecules at a distance of approximately Å, while ethanol molecules interact primarily with the polar ester headgroups through hydrogen bonds at Å (Azapagic et al., 2006).

This molecular arrangement explains why biodiesel acts as a stabilizing agent in diesel-ethanol blends. The FAME molecules act as a "bridge," with their long hydrocarbon tails soluble in diesel and their polar heads soluble in ethanol, thus inhibiting the macro-phase separation that typically occurs in binary ethanol-diesel mixtures. This insight is further confirmed by ATR-FTIR (Attenuated Total Reflectance Fourier Transform Infrared) spectroscopy, which shows a shift in the characteristic absorption band of biodiesel (the ester group vibration) from to when blended, indicating the formation of these molecular associations.

Engine performance and emission characteristics

The ultimate test for any fuel optimization study is its performance in internal combustion engines. Compression Ignition (CI) engines, particularly those utilizing Direct Injection (DI) and Common Rail Direct Injection (CRDI), are highly sensitive to the fuel's atomization, ignition delay, and combustion duration (Wakil et al., 2015).

Combustion dynamics and thermal efficiency

Experimental investigations into ternary blends of *Chlorella vulgaris* biodiesel, ethanol, and diesel have shown promising results. Increasing the content from 5% to 25% in a biodiesel-diesel base fuel has been recorded to improve Brake Thermal Efficiency (BTE) by up to 6.2%. This improvement is driven by several factors:

1. **Enhanced Atomization:** The lower viscosity and density of ethanol-containing blends result in smaller fuel droplets during injection, leading to a broader spray cone angle (SCA) and improved air-fuel mixing (Sánchez et al., 2005).

2. **Increased Premixed Combustion:** Biofuels, especially those with ethanol, tend to have a longer ignition delay due to ethanol's high autoignition temperature. This allows more fuel to be prepared during the delay period, resulting in a higher peak heat release rate (HRR) and higher in-cylinder pressure (DemiRbaş, 2005).

3. **Oxygen Availability:** The inherent oxygen content in both biodiesel (11%) and ethanol (35%) ensures that even in fuel-rich regions of the combustion chamber, there is sufficient oxygen to facilitate complete combustion (Dincer, 2000).

However, there is a limit to this benefit. Excessive ethanol blending (>30%) can lead to a reduction in the cetane number below the required engine threshold, causing combustion instability, knocking, and potential misfire.

Impact of piston bowl geometry on combustion

The interaction between fuel properties and engine hardware is a significant area of research. Studies on Chlorella-based blends have evaluated different piston combustion chambers (PCC) to identify the optimal geometry for these fuels.

Chamber Type	Swirl/Tumble Ratio	Peak Temperature	Combustion Quality

SCC (Standard)	0.61	970	High BTE, low emissions
BTCC	0.42 (Tumble)	945	Good HRR, manageable NOx
DSCC	0.63	968	Efficient mixing, low soot
DTRCC	0.38 (Tumble)	748 – 815	Poor HRR, high knocking risk

Research indicates that the SCC and DSCC (Deep Swirl Combustion Chamber) designs are best suited for multicomponent algal blends, as their high swirl ratios ensure that the turbulent motions avoid combustion in crevice regions, thereby reducing unburned hydrocarbon emissions.

Exhaust emissions and environmental compliance

The primary advantage of transitioning to algal biofuel blends is the drastic reduction in regulated tailpipe emissions, which directly impacts public health and urban air quality.

- **Carbon Monoxide (CO) and Hydrocarbons (HC):** These are products of incomplete combustion. The ternary blend BDE25 (*Chlorella* biodiesel, ethanol, and diesel) has shown a 13.10% decrease in HC and a 7.69% decrease in CO compared to pure diesel. Other studies on B20 blends have reported even higher reductions, up to 15.86% for CO and 18.5% for HC (Bandara et al., 2023).

- **Particulate Matter (PM) and Smoke:** PM is a major concern for respiratory health. Both biodiesel and ethanol significantly reduce exhaust opacity. The oxygenation effect helps oxidize soot precursors during the diffusion combustion phase, resulting in smoke reductions of up to 40% for optimized diesohol blends (D70B20E10) (Brown & Jeffrey, 1992).

- **Nitrogen Oxides (NOx):** This remains the most significant challenge for biofuels. NOx formation is highly temperature-dependent. Some studies report a 15–26% increase in NOx for biodiesel blends due to higher combustion temperatures.

  The use of Exhaust Gas Recirculation (EGR) is highly effective at further mitigating NOx in these high-oxygen fuel systems (Wang et al., 2021).

Techno-economic and environmental feasibility

While the technical performance of algal fuel blends is well-established, their commercial success depends on achieving a competitive Minimum Fuel Selling Price (MFSP) and demonstrating a favorable Life Cycle Assessment (LCA).

Economic analysis and cost drivers

The primary barrier to algal biofuels is the high cost of biomass cultivation and harvesting, which can make algal oil 3–4 times more expensive than traditional vegetable oils. Harvesting alone—comprising flocculation, filtration, and centrifugation—can account for 20–30% of total production energy and cost. Recent techno-economic analysis (TEA) by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) for 2024 emphasizes the importance of biomass composition. The "High-Lipid" (HL) scenario, focusing on lipid-rich algae for aviation fuel and bioplastics, projects an MFSP of $3.68 per gasoline gallon equivalent (GGE). With current policy incentives, such as renewable fuel credits and carbon taxes, this MFSP can drop to as low as $0.45/GGE, making it highly competitive with fossil fuels. Conversely, "High-Protein" (HP) scenarios are less economically viable as fuel-primary operations, requiring extensive revenue from co-products like bioplastics to offset the lower fuel yields.

Life cycle assessment (LCA) and sustainability

LCA measures the environmental impact from "well-to-wheel." Algal biofuels are more environmentally friendly than lignocellulosic-derived biofuels on a pilot scale, primarily due to their superior assimilation rates (C. Wu et al., 2004).

- **Water and Resource Usage:** High-rate raceway ponds that utilize recycled nutrients can reduce freshwater consumption by up to 60% compared to closed photobioreactor systems. Furthermore, integrating algal farms with wastewater treatment facilities allows the algae to absorb excess nitrogen and phosphorus, preventing eutrophication in natural water bodies while producing fuel feedstock.

- **Net Energy Ratio (NER):** The goal is to achieve an NER < 1 (energy in / energy out). Currently, many algal systems are at the break-even point (mean Energy Return on Energy Investment of 1.01). However, hydrothermal liquefaction and integrated co-product extraction are pushing this toward a more sustainable energy-positive regime.

Market outlook and technological roadmap (2024–2034)

The global algae biofuel market is projected to grow significantly, valued at USD 10.4 billion in 2024 and expected to reach USD 19.0 billion by 2034, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.4%. This growth is fueled by increasing demand for sustainable aviation fuels (SAF) and marine fuels, alongside stricter government regulations on carbon emissions.

Key market segments and trends

Market Segment	2024 Estimated Share	Growth Driver
Microalgae (Raw Material)	62.5%	High lipid content, adaptability
Spirulina (Fastest Growing)	High CAGR	Dual fuel/nutraceutical use
Open Pond (Technology)	57.5%	Scalability and low CAPEX
North America (Region)	38.0%	Strong governmental R&D incentives
Asia-Pacific (Region)	Rising	B40 mandates (Indonesia), Ethanol targets (India)

The 2024 biofuels landscape will likely be defined by a "cross-commodity scramble" for premium waste oils and bio-intermediates. As sustainable aviation mandates climb, the competition for feedstocks between SAF, renewable diesel, and e-fuels will intensify, placing an even greater premium on the rapid, scalable production capacity of algal systems (Behera et al., 2019).

Future research directions and technical barriers

Despite the substantial progress in multicomponent algal blends, several critical challenges must be addressed to facilitate global commercialization.

1. **Genetic Strain Improvement:** The use of omics technologies and CRISPR-Cas9 to develop "super-strains" that can maintain high growth rates even while accumulating lipids or carbohydrates is a primary research goal.

2. **Process Intensification:** Digital tools, machine learning, and artificial neural networks (ANN) are being deployed to optimize environmental conditions in real-time within photobioreactors. This includes predicting blend density and viscosity with high accuracy (Mean Absolute Percentage Error < 0.1%) to avoid operational harm to vehicle systems.

3. **Storage Stability and Additives:** Research into nanoparticle-enriched blends (e.g., using or) and novel antioxidants is essential to improve the shelf life of biodiesel and manage the hygroscopic nature of ethanol (Mironiuk & Chojnacka, 2018).

4. **Scaling and Harvesting:** Developing more cost-effective disruption methods, such as fungal-assisted bioflocculation or continuous-flow ultrasonic machines, remains the "Holy Grail" of algal biofuel economics.

Conclusion

The optimization of multicomponent liquid blends of biodiesel from algal biomass represents a multifaceted technological solution to the global energy crisis. By leveraging the rapid productivity and biochemical flexibility of algae, energy systems can move toward a circular bioeconomy that mitigates climate change without disrupting food supplies or demanding excessive land use.

The technical evidence confirms that ternary blends—incorporating diesel, algal biodiesel, can outperform traditional fossil fuels in terms of both combustion efficiency and emission profiles, provided the blend ratios are optimized (typically 10–20% renewable fraction). The synergistic interaction between these components, where biodiesel stabilizes the volatile ethanol and improves lubricity while ethanol reduces the heavy viscosity of biodiesel, creates a balanced fuel compatible with modern compression ignition engines.

Thermodynamic modeling, particularly through Kirkwood-Buff and SAFT frameworks, has provided the mathematical foundation necessary to design these fuels with precision, while MD simulations have elucidated the molecular "bridge" mechanism that ensures blend stability. Economically, while high production costs persist, the integration of biorefinery models and favorable carbon-credit policies in 2023 and 2024 are paving the way for market competitiveness. The future of this technology lies in continued genetic engineering, advanced harvesting innovation, and the scaling of integrated systems that combine fuel production with environmental remediation, ultimately securing a sustainable energy future independent of fossil resources.

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