FOAMtastic: Polystyrene Repurposing to Reduce Landfill Waste

Group 14: Thomas Lee, Heidi Jiang, Vivian Su, Calvin Huang

Supervisor: Xianshe Feng

University of Waterloo Chemical Engineering Capstone 2025

References:

[1] J. Davis, “Styrofoam Facts — Why You May Want To Bring Your Own Cup,” *SEJ*, Apr. 10, 2019. https://www.sej.org/publications/backgrounders/styrofoam-facts-why-you-may-want-bring-your-own-cup

[2] Baleen Group, “CIF 291 Town of Markham Polystyrene Densifier,” May 2012.

[3] M. R. Reed, E. R. Belden, N. K. Kazantzis, M. T. Timko, and B. Castro-Dominguez, “Thermodynamic and economic analysis of a deployable and scalable process to recover Monomer-Grade styrene from waste polystyrene,” *Chemical engineering journal*, pp. 152079–152079, May 2024, doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cej.2024.152079.

[4] NIST, “ThermoData Engine (TDE),” *trc.nist.gov*, 2009. https://trc.nist.gov/tde.html (accessed Feb. 28, 2025).

[5] aspentech, “Aspen Plus | Leading Process Simulation Software | AspenTech,” *www.aspentech.com*. https://www.aspentech.com/en/products/engineering/aspen-plus

FOAMtastic
Polystyrene Repurposing to Reduce Landfill Waste

Group 14: Calvin Huang, Heidi Jiang, Thomas Lee, Vivian Wan Ping Su
Department of Chemical Engineering
UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Introduction

Problem Statement

Polystyrene (PS) is a durable and versatile plastic that can take over 500 years to degrade, which presents environmental risks due to its limited recyclability and potential to release harmful toxins [1]. With less than 10% being recycled, the majority accumulates in landfills. This project addresses these challenges by developing a pyrolysis process to convert PS waste into feedstock.

Context

PS is classified as #6 on the plastic resin identification scale, making it one of the most difficult plastics to recycle despite its common use in takeout containers and packaging.

Using pyrolysis, a method that thermally degrades plastic anaerobically, this recycling process will:

1. Divert municipal PS waste from entering landfills

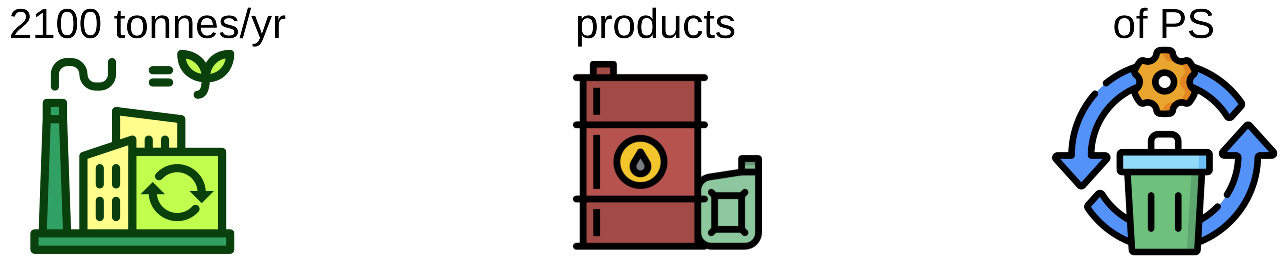
Table 1: 2013 City of Markham PS Densifier project [2]

Polystyrene Collected	Revenue ($)	Profit/Loss ($)
2100 tonnes/year	3,029.61	(53,036)

2. Develop a novel solution that can operationally repurpose PS waste into valuable products

Constraints

Process capacity of 2100 tonnes/yr | Yield 98% purity of all products | Improve circularity of PS



Sustainable Development Goals

SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
- Reducing virgin material use
- Addresses single use nature and low recyclability
- Improve waste management

SDG 13: Climate Action
- Diversion of waste from landfills and incineration
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- Minimize energy use and emissions

Process Development & Tools

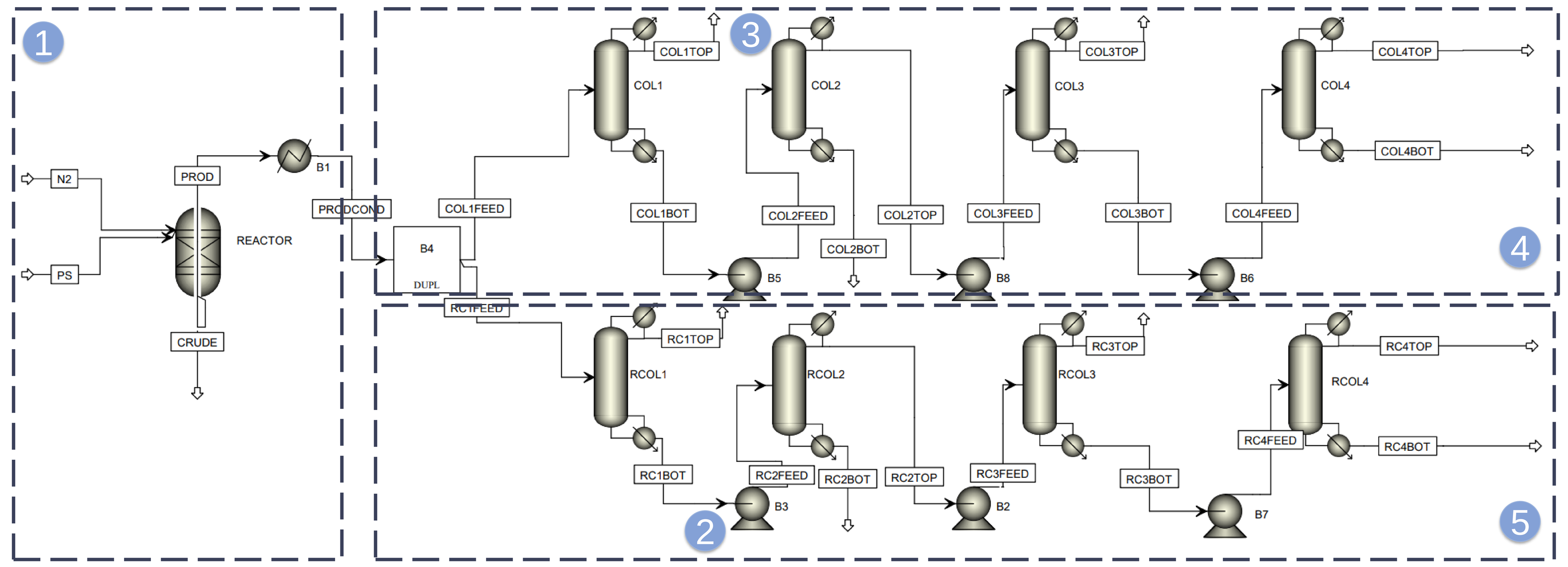
Process Development

Literature review on PS/plastic pyrolysis → Develop process flow diagram → Preliminary calc. & Analysis → Simulate in Aspen Plus → Validate model with literature

Engineering Tools

- Aspen Plus v14 for process simulation of shortcut and rigorous design of the process
- Microsoft Excel for cost analysis and general calculation
- Python for model validation using Matplotlib, NumPy, SciPy, and pandas

Process Flow Diagram & Analysis



Feed:
- 100 kg/hr N2
- 257 kg/hr PS

Assumptions:
- Feed contamination is negligible
- Fixed conversion reactor
- NRTL thermodynamic model
- Steady-state

1 Reactor
N2 and PS are the feed of the reactor for the pyrolysis process. B1 (heat exchanger) cools the reactor output and ensures the input of the distillation columns are at the set temperature.

2 Pumps

3 Distillation Columns
Sieve tray columns used to separate the products of the process. Separations in each column:
1. Toluene
2. Alpha Methylstyrene
3. Ethylbenzene
4. Cumene and Styrene

4 Shortcut Method
Uses a simplified distillation model (DSTWU) for quick estimates of the process using minimal information. Model provides estimates of key parameters such as reflux ratios and feed tray location.

5 Rigorous Method
Uses a more complex distillation model (RadFrac), and the results of key parameters from the shortcut method as starting values to fine-tune column operating conditions for a more accurate process.

Table 2: Key Analysis Results based on shortcut method design

Product	Toluene	Alpha Methylstyrene	Ethylbenzene	Cumene	Styrene
Production Location	COL 1	COL 2	COL 3	COL 4	COL 4
Mass (tonnes/year)	158	281	387	82	1343
Product Purity	99.71%	99.97%	99.61%	98.02%	99.97%
Uses	Paint solvent, rubber	Paint, resins, coatings, synthetic rubbers	Inks, dyes, perfume, new PS	Phenol, acetone	New PS, rubbers

Thermodynamic Model Validation

NRTL (Non-Random Two-Liquid)

Thermodynamic model chosen for modelling vapor-liquid equilibrium (VLE) of the process:
- Effective at modelling non-ideal interactions between hydrocarbons like styrene/toluene [3]
- VLE data obtained from NIST ThermoData Engine [4] and NRTL Aspen Plus Simulation [5]
- Simulated temperatures very closely reflect literature values

0.13% Max. error across vapor/liquid composition for both datasets

R^2 >= .995 Fitted coefficients of VLE data used in temperature simulation

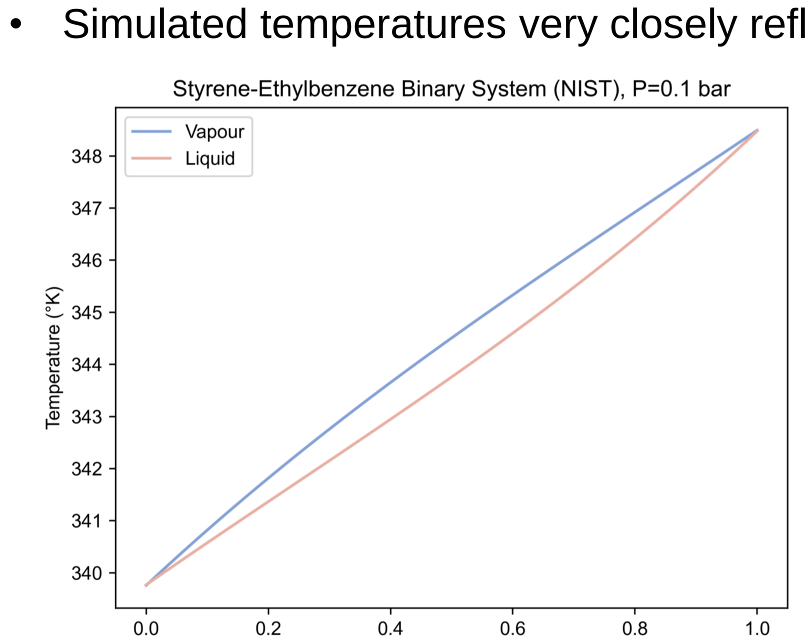


Figure 1: NIST ThermoData Engine Dataset

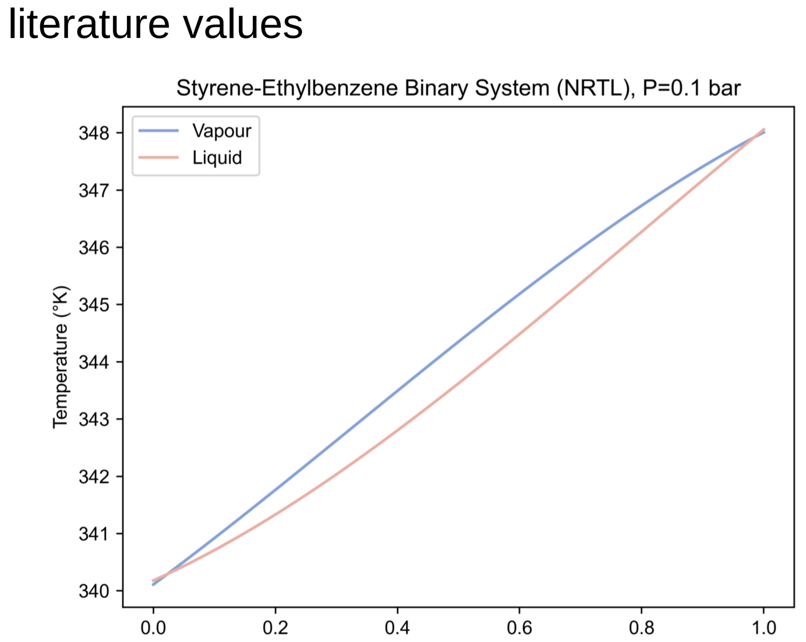


Figure 2: NRTL Thermodynamic Model Dataset

Cost Analysis

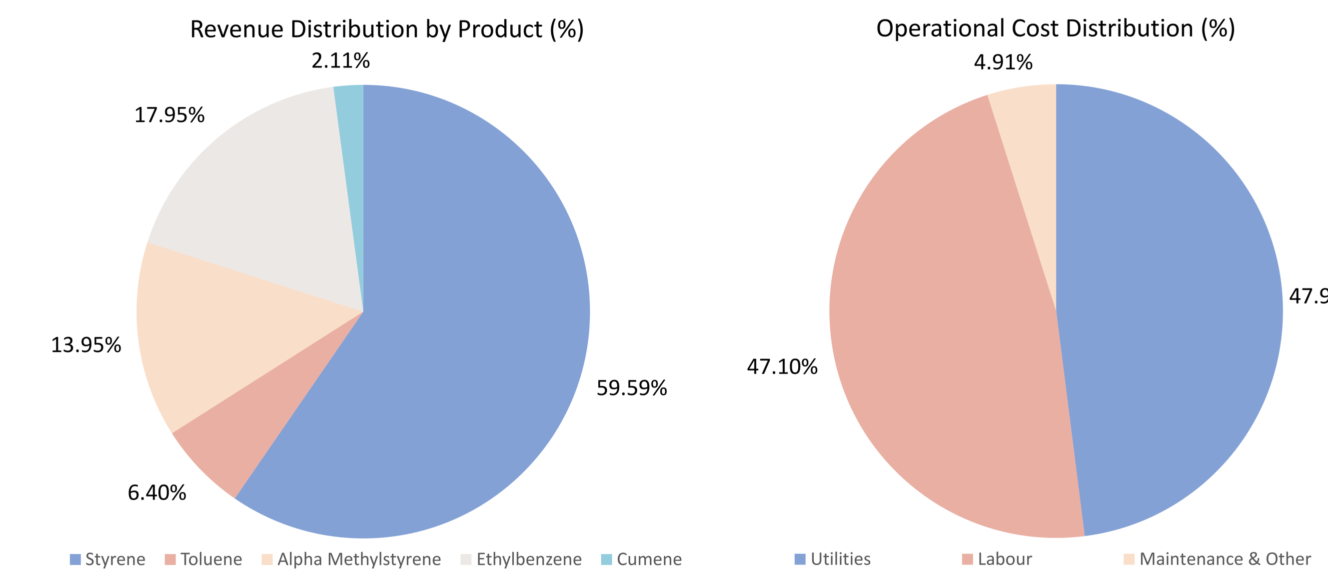


Table 3: Cost Analysis Summary

Cost Analysis ($/year)			
Total Equipment Cost ($)	7,390,000	Revenue	8,533,000
Total Operational Cost	6,420,000	**Profit**	**2,113,000**
Payback Period: 4.1 years			

Sustainability Linearity Analysis

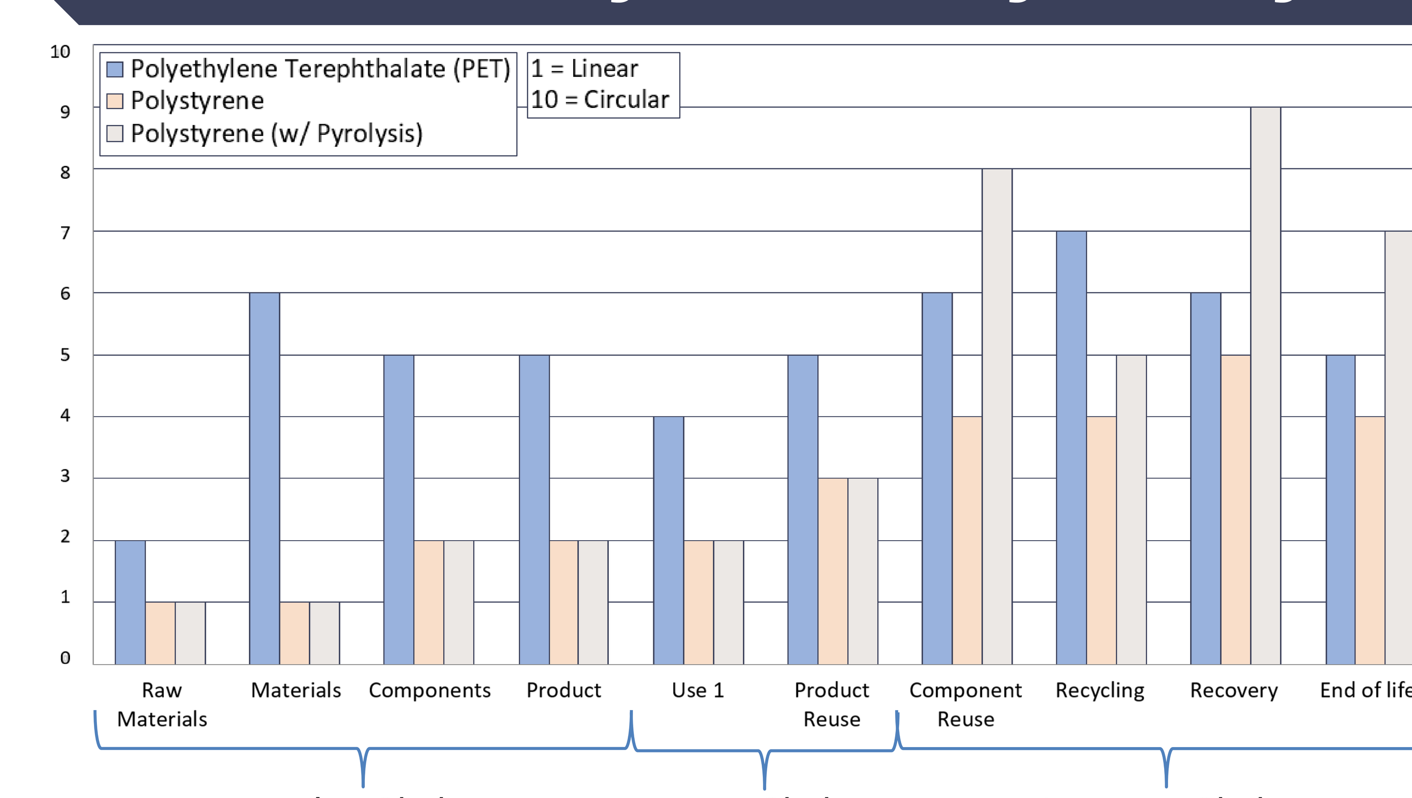


Figure 3: Sustainability Linearity Analysis

A linearity analysis was performed to evaluate a product's lifecycle from raw material to end of life. The developed pyrolysis process, improved all aspects of the recovery chain

Conclusion

- The process effectively processes 100% of annual polystyrene waste collected by the City of Markham
- The process improves the material circularity by improving its recyclability while yielding 98% purity of all products
- The process has a payback period of 4.1 years with a yearly profit of $2,113,000

Future Direction

- Analysis on impact of CaO catalysts to reduce energy expenditure
- Operational cost reduction through distillation column parameter optimization

Acknowledgments & References

We want to thank our supervisor, Dr. Xianshe Feng, for technical guidance and the Continuous Improvement Fund for providing polystyrene recycling data on the City of Markham.