

Life cycle greenhouse gas emissions and costs of production of diesel and jet fuel from municipal solid waste

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20 KEYWORDS

21 Biofuels; Aviation; Waste management; LCA; TEA; Uncertainty analysis

22 ABSTRACT

23 This paper quantifies and compares the life cycle GHG emissions and costs of production of diesel
24 and jet fuel derived from municipal solid waste (MSW) in the United States via three
25 thermochemical conversion pathways: conventional gasification and Fischer-Tropsch (FT middle
26 distillate, MD), plasma gasification and Fischer-Tropsch (Plasma FT MD) and, conventional
27 gasification, catalytic alcohol synthesis and alcohol-to-jet upgrading (ATJ MD). We use expanded
28 system boundaries to capture the change in existing MSW use and disposal, and account for
29 parameter uncertainty with Monte Carlo simulations. We estimate median life cycle GHG
30 emissions of 32.9, 62.3 and 52.7 gCO₂e/MJ for FT, Plasma FT and ATJ MD fuels, respectively,
31 compared to a baseline of 90 gCO₂e/MJ for conventional MD fuels. Median minimum selling
32 prices are estimated at 0.99, 1.78 and 1.20 \$ per litre with the probability of achieving a positive
33 net present value of fuel production at market prices of 14%, 0.1% and 7% for FT, Plasma FT and
34 ATJ MD fuels, respectively. If the societal perspective rather than an investor's perspective is
35 evaluated the probability of positive net present value of fuel production increases to 93%, 67%
36 and 92.5% for the FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ MD fuels, respectively

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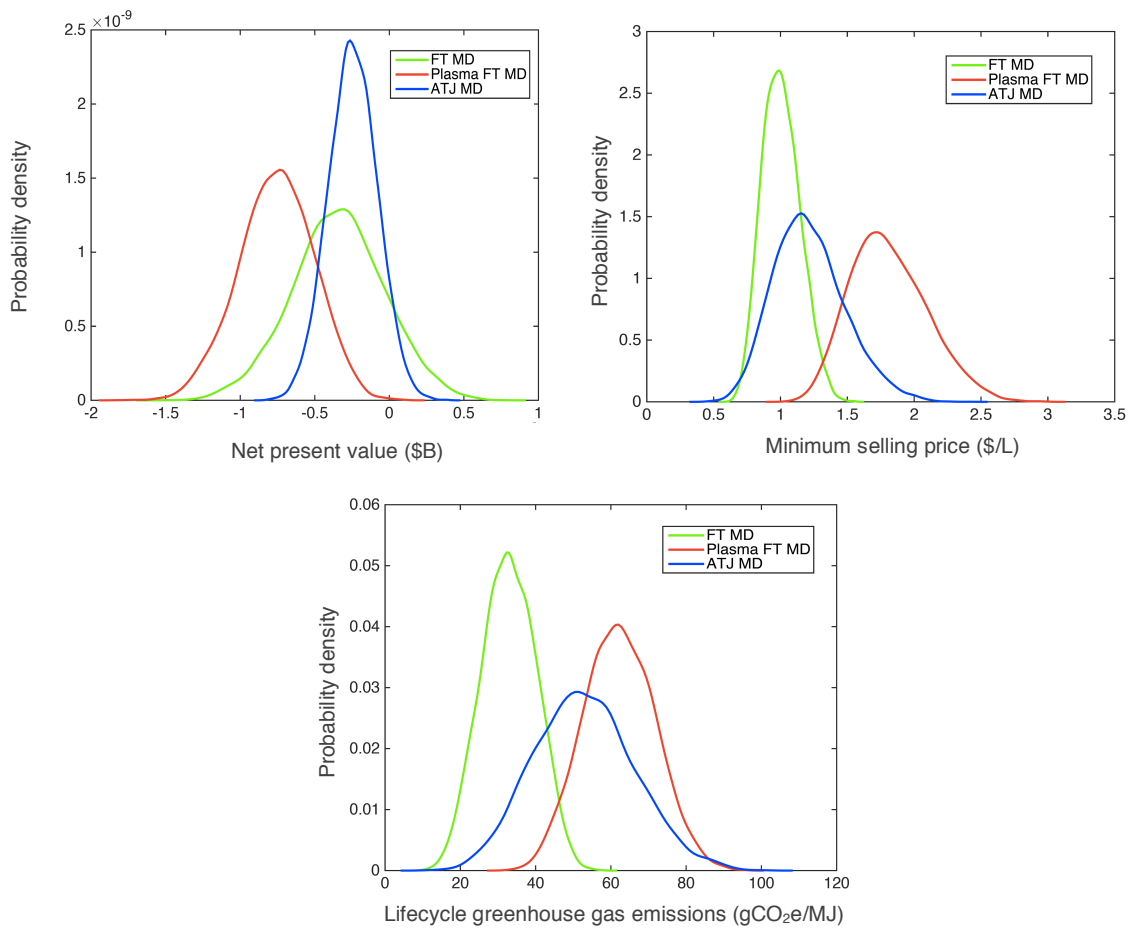
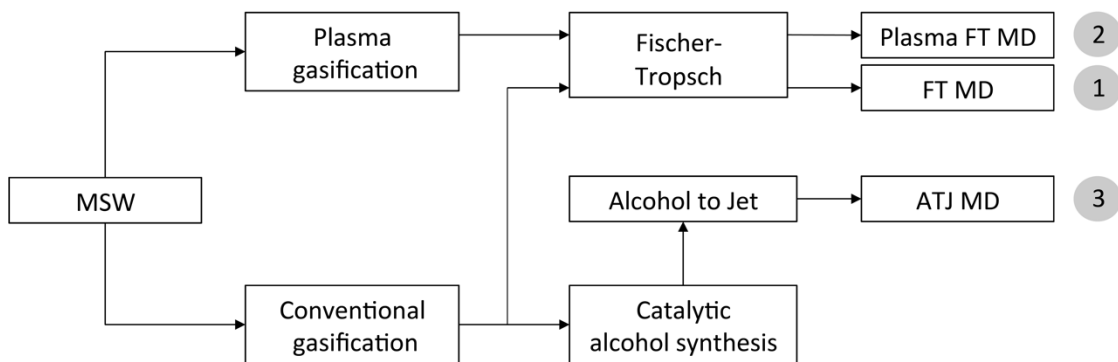
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44 1 Introduction

45 Transportation accounted for approximately 27% of total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in
46 the United States (US) in 2015,¹ with fossil fuels constituting over 95% of the sector's primary
47 energy consumption.² Alternative fuels offer the potential to reduce GHG emissions from
48 transportation compared to petroleum-derived fuels. Diesel and jet fuel make up approximately
49 35% of US transportation energy consumption, which is projected to increase to 44% in 2040,³ and
50 federal agencies in the US have put in place mandates and goals specific to alternative diesel and
51 jet fuel (e.g. ^{4,5}).

52 Contrary to traditional crop-based feedstocks, waste-based feedstocks for alternative fuel
53 production do not require additional land and do not directly compete with food production.
54 Municipal solid waste (MSW), in particular, could offer a significant environmental advantage
55 because the conversion of MSW to fuels would not only displace petroleum-derived fuels, but also
56 avoid the GHG emissions associated with existing waste management strategies. In 2013, 34% of
57 the total generated MSW in the US was recycled and composted, while the remaining 150 million
58 tonnes (metric tons) of MSW, comprising food waste, residential rubbish and commercial waste,
59 were discarded.⁶ 80% of the discards were transferred to landfills,⁶ where waste of biogenic origin
60 releases anthropogenic methane, thereby making landfills the third-largest anthropogenic source of
61 methane emissions in the US.⁷

62 Finally, in contrast to fuels from other waste streams such as waste fats and greases,⁸ MSW
63 derived fuels could replace relatively large shares of petroleum-derived MD fuel supply, as the
64 energy content of the US national MSW discards in 2013 was equivalent to approximately 70% of
65 same year US jet fuel consumption and 20% of the same year US transportation demand for all
66 middle distillate fuels.^{2,6,9}

67 This analysis evaluates three thermochemical pathways that convert MSW to middle distillate
68 (MD), i.e. diesel and jet, fuel: conventional gasification and Fischer-Tropsch (FT MD), plasma
69 gasification and Fischer-Tropsch (Plasma FT MD) and, conventional gasification, catalytic alcohol
70 (ethanol) synthesis and alcohol-to-jet upgrading (ATJ MD). Figure S1 in the Supplemental
71 Information (SI) illustrates the major technologies in each of the conversion pathways. These
72 technologies are suited to the heterogeneity of MSW and have attracted commercial interest in
73 recent years. They not only produce MD fuels but also other products that include naphtha/gasoline,
74 higher alcohols (propanol and butanol), as well as electricity. The product slates vary based on the
75 technology and the data source, as indicated in the SI.

76 Despite the potential advantages and commercial interest in MSW MD fuels, only two peer-
77 reviewed studies have assessed components of environmental and/or economic feasibility for a
78 limited number of pathways.¹⁰⁻¹¹ This is the first peer-reviewed analysis to quantify life cycle GHG
79 emissions and costs of production for the MSW to Plasma FT MD and the MSW to ATJ MD
80 pathways. Life cycle GHG emissions are reported in $\text{gCO}_2\text{e}/\text{MJ}_{\text{MD}}$, minimum selling price in $\$/\text{L}_{\text{MD}}$,
81 and net present value in billion US dollars (\$B) are the three impact assessment metrics utilized
82 throughout this paper. Furthermore, in contrast to previous studies, this study expands the system
83 boundary to capture the change in the overall MSW life cycle that results from using MSW to
84 produce MD fuels rather than its existing use. Therefore, we account for changes in GHG emissions
85 and costs associated with the replacement of existing waste management strategies, additional
86 recycling, end-of-life combustion and co-products. Additionally, we quantify the uncertainty
87 associated with the environmental and economic evaluation of these pathways through Monte
88 Carlo Simulations and present results as probability distributions.

89 2 Methods

90 2.1 System boundary and functional unit

91 The analysis quantifies the change in GHG emissions and costs resulting from diverting MSW
92 away from the prevailing waste management strategy to alternative MD fuel production.^{12,13} In this
93 respect, it differs from other biomass-to-fuel LCA studies. MSW has a pre-existing life cycle that
94 is altered when it is used as fuel feedstock, whereas in the case of crop-based biomass, additional
95 feedstock is cultivated for the purpose of fuel production. Therefore, this analysis excludes
96 processes that occur irrespective of the waste management such as collection and existing sorting
97 for recycling and composting. The system boundary does include the effects of eliminating waste
98 management processes such as landfill, and accounts for the impacts of MSW conversion to MD
99 fuels and their end-use.

100 The system boundary is shown in Figure 1. The system boundary is set where the MSW discards
101 exit the sorting facility. Approximately 66% of the MSW generated in the US is discarded after the
102 recycling and compost streams are separated out,⁶ and only these discards are included in this
103 analysis. The composition of the discarded MSW is described in the SI under 3.1. The system
104 boundary also includes the impact of displacing the existing management strategy for discards,
105 which is a combination of landfill (approximately 80% of the discards) and incineration (the
106 remainder) in the US.⁶ The model accounts for transport of the feedstock to the fuel production
107 plant. At the plant, further classification is required to adjust the feedstock composition in order to
108 prevent contamination of equipment.¹¹ Non-combustibles such as metals, glass and other
109 inorganics are sorted out, resulting in a higher heating value feedstock, which is then sized to meet
110 the requirements of the gasifier. The pre-processing system is based on the Refuse Derived Fuel

111 (RDF) facility model presented by Jones *et al.*¹⁴ Assuming an average sorting efficiency of 90%,¹⁰
112 approximately 15% of the MSW feed is separated out during the pre-processing.

113 The recyclable scrap metals and glass removed from the feedstock are sold for recycling, and the
114 rejects are sent to landfill. The GHG emissions impacts, revenues and costs associated with material
115 recovery and disposal of rejects are included within the system boundary. The pre-processed
116 feedstock is then directed to the fuel production process. The material, energy and carbon balances
117 for the conversion technologies are incorporated into the model to account for inputs such as
118 utilities and catalysts, as well as the output fuels and co-products such as excess electricity, higher
119 alcohols, sulfur and slag. The electricity generated by the plant is used to satisfy its own utility
120 requirements, and any excess electricity is considered a co-product that can be sold to the grid. Slag
121 is sold as construction aggregates.¹⁵ Waste streams generated by the fuel production process, such
122 as spent catalysts and ash, are disposed in landfills, which are included in the system boundary.
123 Transportation and distribution, and combustion, of the finished MD product make up the last
124 stages of the fuel life cycle.

125 The functional units of this analysis are one megajoule (based on lower heating value) of middle
126 distillate fuel for the GHG emissions lifecycle analysis, and one liter of middle distillate fuel for
127 the economic analysis. Functional units were chosen in order to allow for comparison of results
128 between pathways analyzed in this manuscript, and with existing studies on other middle distillate
129 fuels. The lifecycle GHG emission analysis, techno-economic analysis and uncertainty assessment
130 were performed using MATLAB.

131

132 2.2 Conversion technology

133 We analyze three thermochemical pathways to convert MSW to MD fuels: FT MD, plasma
134 Plasma FT MD and ATJ MD. Of the technologies across the three pathways, conventional
135 gasification and FT in the FT MD fuel pathway are more mature, thereby typically achieving higher
136 fuel yields than the other technologies. Gasification refers to partial oxidation of the pre-processed
137 feedstock at elevated temperatures to produce syngas, which is then synthesized to fuels and wax
138 using a FT catalyst, and the products are refined to yield naphtha, jet and diesel. In the case of
139 plasma gasification, plasma torches are used to create the high temperatures necessary for
140 decomposing and oxidizing the feedstock. Plasma gasification is a less mature technology but
141 because it renders toxic substances non-hazardous and provides cleaner syngas with no tars, it has
142 received considerable interest in waste management. Relative to the first two pathways, the ATJ
143 MD pathway involves more conversion steps, with the syngas converted to ethanol followed by a
144 series of chemical upgrading steps to produce jet fuel, diesel and naphtha. Due to low ethanol yields
145 and losses in the additional conversion steps, the fuel yield is lower but catalytic synthesis of
146 alcohols is less capital-intensive than FT.

147 Although classification to remove inorganics, sizing, and drying of feedstock is necessary for
148 thermochemical pathways, these pre-processing steps can be less energy- and cost-intensive than
149 the pretreatment required for biochemical pathways, wherein the biodegradable and non-
150 biodegradable content of MSW must be separated.¹⁶ The data to calculate the material and energy
151 balances (MEB) for each pathway are obtained from literature for a facility size of approximately
152 3000 tonnes per day (tpd) of raw MSW feed (2000 tpd of dry, processed MSW), based on the size
153 of large landfills in the US that receive more than 30% of the nation's MSW.⁹ A brief explanation
154 on each pathway and the references used to calculate their respective MEB can be found in the SI

155 under 3.2. We use probability distributions to capture parameter uncertainty, as defined in Table
156 S1.

157 **2.3 Life cycle GHG emission analysis**

158 GHG emissions are calculated as mass of GHG per unit of energy (lower heating value). We
159 include carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄) and nitrous oxide (N₂O) emissions. CH₄ and N₂O
160 emissions are converted into CO₂ equivalents (CO₂e) using the 100-year global warming potentials
161 of the three gases.¹⁷ Climate impacts of non-CO₂ MD fuel combustion emissions are not included
162 in the analysis and this may underestimate climate benefits particularly in aviation, since paraffinic
163 alternative jet fuels (such as those produced from FT synthesis) have been found to significantly
164 reduce black carbon emissions.¹⁸ We allocate GHG emissions amongst energy products on the basis
165 of their relative energy contents⁵⁹ for the baseline analysis. System expansion is assessed for
166 sensitivity analyses with regard to energy products. For non-energy products, i.e. elemental sulfur
167 and construction aggregates, we use system expansion. Market-based allocation is an alternative
168 method for allocating emissions between products that are used for different purposes (such as
169 energy- and non-energy products)^{58,8} We assessed the effect of using market-based allocation to
170 allocate emissions between energy and non-energy products instead of system expansion, and
171 found the difference to be negligible. Details are presented in the SI in Table S11 and in Section
172 3.2.

173 The calculated mass and energy balances are integrated with life cycle inventories and databases
174 to compute the GHG emissions. Fuel transportation and distribution emissions are obtained from
175 Argonne National Laboratory's Greenhouse Gases, Regulated Emissions, and Energy Use in
176 Transportation model (GREET .NET 2015).¹⁹ We use jet and diesel fuel combustion CO₂ emission
177 factors from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).²⁰ The MSW-related emission

178 factors for feedstock transportation, landfill, incineration and recycling, as well as the life cycle
179 GHG emissions for production of construction aggregates are obtained from the US EPA's Waste
180 Reduction Model (WARM) model.²¹ We use the default feedstock transport distance of 20 miles
181 from the WARM model for the baseline analysis, and assess the sensitivity of the results to
182 variations in the parameter. In order to capture the uncertainty associated with LCA parameters,
183 the probability distributions shown in Table S1 are employed.

184

185 **2.3.1 MSW feedstock characteristics**

186 When using the method presented by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), the lower
187 heating value (LHV) of the US average MSW discards is found to be approximately 13 MJ/kg.²²
188 The LHV of the pre-processed and dried MSW is approximately 20 MJ/kg. This value and the
189 LHV values calculated using other references are used to build the probability distribution for
190 LHV.²³⁻²⁶ Similarly, we calculate carbon, ash (inorganic), moisture and sulfur content.²⁵⁻²⁹ One
191 distinction between MSW and biomass as feedstocks for alternative MD fuel is that a portion of
192 the carbon in MSW is not biogenic by origin, attributable to plastics and rubber.²² Therefore, the
193 non-biogenic proportion of carbon in the feedstock is calculated to determine the non-biogenic
194 share of process and combustion emissions that have to be counted in the analysis. We do not vary
195 the MSW composition for the stochastic analysis because we are considering the composition of
196 the total discards in the US as an average representation. Due to lack of uncertainty estimates, we
197 did not assign arbitrary bounds and instead, assess sensitivity of results to MSW composition in
198 different cases.

199

200 **2.3.2 Replaced waste management strategy**

201 Converting MSW to MD fuels avoids the GHG emissions that would have otherwise resulted
202 from landfilling and incinerating the MSW for energy recovery, but also eliminates existing GHG
203 emission benefits that currently occur if landfill gas is recovered and displaces fossil energy use.
204 Emission factors that account for all of the above effects are obtained from the WARM model for
205 each material type.²¹ The combustion emission factors for each material type take into account non-
206 biogenic combustion CO₂ and N₂O emissions, transportation GHG emissions, avoided electric
207 utility GHG emissions, and avoided emissions due to steel recycling, if applicable.²³ For landfill
208 gas recovery we use the emission factors reported for US average landfill gas recovery rates, based
209 on the average landfill type mix. Even after accounting for GHG benefits from landfill gas recovery
210 and carbon sequestration, the net avoided landfill GHG emissions amount to 162 gCO₂e per tonne
211 of raw MSW and the net avoided combustion GHG emissions amount to 5 gCO₂e per tonne of raw
212 MSW.²¹ The sum of these is used as the GHG credit from the replaced waste management strategy
213 in this analysis. Lower and upper bounds for the GHG credit are applied for the stochastic analysis
214 based on IPCC guidance.³⁰

215

216 **2.3.3 Classification and recycling**

217 The energy requirements for classification and sizing of the MSW feedstock are derived from
218 simulation models of refuse-derived fuel facilities by Pressley *et al.* and Caputo *et al.*^{10, 31-32} The
219 inorganics stream that is separated from the MSW feed comprises approximately 55% metals and
220 30% glass. The composition breakdown by material (ferrous, aluminum etc.) and product type
221 (cans, packaging, durable goods etc.) is used in conjunction with the appropriate GHG emission
222 benefit factors from recycling in the WARM model.^{6, 21} For product types that have not been

223 modeled in WARM we rely on similar products as proxies.³³ In order to capture the associated
224 uncertainties we use a range of recycling rates. The rates vary from recycling only aluminum cans,
225 steel cans and glass bottles at the lower bound (approximately 30% of total scrap by weight), to
226 recycling approximately 80% of the total metals and glass by weight. The most likely estimate is
227 assumed to correspond to recycling aluminum cans, aluminum in durable goods (as aluminum
228 ingot), steel cans and glass bottles (approximately 40% of total scrap by weight).

229

230 **2.3.4 Fuel production process**

231 The MEB calculated for each conversion pathway are used to estimate the process-related GHG
232 emissions, the GHG emissions associated with production of inputs, and the allocation of emissions
233 amongst co-products. Process CO₂ emissions are calculated based on carbon balances. The carbon
234 converted to fuels, alcohols, tars and dissolved hydrocarbons is accounted for and any remaining
235 carbon from the input feedstock and catalysts is assumed to be converted to CO₂.³⁴ GHG emissions
236 associated with production of inputs are determined from the GREET model.¹⁹ The energy product
237 slate used for allocation of emissions by share of energy for each pathway is given in Table S2 in
238 the SI. Excess electricity generation is calculated from the literature, and correlated to fuel yield.
239 The result is an inversely proportional relationship since lower fuel yield implies that more
240 unconverted syngas can be combusted for electricity.³⁵

241 If the simulation models used to calculate the energy balances for the conversion technologies
242 are missing data on some of the material inputs and outputs, we estimate these with uncertainty
243 ranges from other studies, referenced in Table S1 in the SI. Emissions associated with disposal of
244 rejects, ash and spent catalysts in landfills are accounted for using the WARM model, and since
245 these materials are inorganic they do not contribute to anthropogenic methane emissions.³⁶ The

246 mass of rejects, ash, slag and sulfur are calculated from the feedstock composition based on sorting
247 efficiency (90%), the calculated inorganic content and sulfur content in pre-processed MSW, as
248 well as elemental sulfur recovery rates are from the literature.³⁷

249

250 **2.4 Techno-economic analysis**

251 The TEA calculates production costs and NPV from the plant perspective, and changes to the
252 MSW life cycle are accounted for if they lead to a change in the costs of inputs or to a change in
253 revenues. The replaced waste management strategy affects the feedstock cost because replacing
254 existing or new landfills may allow the plant to charge similar tipping fees for the MSW feedstock.
255 At the same time this could lead to the commodification of MSW and, in the long run, result in a
256 positive feedstock cost. MSW-to-fuel technologies have not entered large-scale commercial
257 production in the US yet. However, existing empirical evidence shows the emergence of long-term,
258 zero-cost MSW feedstock contracts.³⁸ We, therefore, follow Jones et al.¹⁴ and assume zero
259 feedstock cost for the baseline analysis but quantify the sensitivity of results to positive and
260 negative feedstock costs. To quantify the costs of production of MD fuels produced from MSW,
261 we calculate minimum selling prices (MSP) and net present value (NPV) of plant operation by
262 adopting the discounted cash flow rate of return (DCFROR) model from Pearlson et al for a 20-
263 year plan.³⁹ All prices are expressed in 2014 USD. Further financial assumptions are listed in
264 Table S3. Facility capital cost estimates are obtained from the literature referenced for material and
265 energy balances for each pathway.^{11,14,57} In some cases, the estimates are supplemented with
266 additional capital costs of the processes that are not modeled in the particular studies, such as MSW
267 pre-processing, naphtha reforming to gasoline, and alcohol-to-jet conversion. The material and
268 energy balances calculated for the LCA are carried over to the TEA in order to calculate operating

269 costs and sales revenues. More detail on the cost and revenue calculations and underlying data are
270 provided in Section 3.3 of the SI.

271

272 **2.5 Uncertainty assessment**

273 We implement stochastic analysis using Monte Carlo simulations, wherein parameters are
274 randomly sampled from their probability distributions for 10,000 iterations. This translates the
275 uncertainty in the input parameters to uncertainty in the results. Parameter uncertainty in this
276 analysis stems primarily from data limitations. We assign uniform distributions when available
277 data are considered equally likely. For example, in the cases of LHV, carbon, ash, moisture and
278 sulfur content of the MSW feedstock, we calculate values using different methods from literature²².
279 ^{23-26, 25-29} (see 2.3.1). Since there is no data suggesting that one value is more likely than the other,
280 we assume that all the values are equally likely and assign uniform distributions. When data is
281 available to estimate minimum and maximum bounds, as well as a most likely value, we assign
282 triangular or pert distributions. A second type of parameter uncertainty in this analysis is statistical
283 uncertainty associated with availability of a large number of data samples, for example, availability
284 of historical data for commodity prices. In this case, the uncertainty distributions are dictated by
285 the samples, based on best fit using the Anderson-Darling test.⁴⁰ A detailed explanation of the
286 methods we use to quantify the uncertainties associated with the conversion efficiency of the
287 pathway, capital cost, and fuel and energy prices is provided in section 3.4 of the SI.

288 3 Results

289 3.1 Life cycle GHG emissions

290 The results for net life cycle GHG emissions for the three MSW to MD fuels pathways are
291 summarized in Table 1. The median results of 32.86, 62.34 and 52.74 gCO₂e/MJ for FT, Plasma
292 FT, and ATJ MD fuels, respectively indicate that they have the potential to reduce life cycle GHG
293 emissions compared to the conventional MD baseline of 90 gCO₂e/MJ.⁴¹ However, parameter
294 uncertainty translates into ranges that 95% of the Monte Carlo simulation results lie within: 18.45
295 – 47.33, 43.55 – 81.47, and 26.44 – 79.32 gCO₂e/MJ, for FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ MD fuels,
296 respectively. The probability density functions of the life cycle GHG emissions are provided in the
297 upper part of Figure S2 in the SI. Cumulative probability curves of Figure S3 indicate that the
298 probability of MSW-derived FT, Plasma FT and ATJ MD fuels satisfying the minimum 60%
299 emissions reduction requirement (compared to conventional MD) under the US Renewable Fuel
300 Standard (RFS2) is 65.7, 0.1 and 10.2%, respectively. Note that the 60% threshold under RFS2 is
301 for cellulosic biomass. Based on the cellulosic content of the MSW, the produced fuels could be
302 categorized as cellulosic or advanced. In the case of the latter, a less stringent threshold of 50%
303 applies. Figure S4 compares the 95% confidence interval results with the life cycle GHG emissions
304 of other biofuels.

305 The conventional gasification and FT pathway has the highest fuel yield of the three pathways;
306 approximately 50-57% of the input MSW energy (LHV) is converted to fuels (with 54% as the
307 mode of the fuel yield probability distribution). The other two pathways have lower fuel yields,
308 implying that more of the non-biogenic carbon in the MSW feedstock is converted to CO₂ during
309 the process. Higher emissions during fuel production, which are then allocated over lower fuel and
310 energy co-product yields, results in higher net life cycle GHG emissions for the other two pathways.

311 Table S4 shows the results for each pathway broken out by life cycle step. The credits from the
312 replaced waste management strategy and recycling are major contributors to the overall GHG
313 emissions. These credits, as well as the emissions associated with feedstock transport, are the same
314 for each of the three pathways on the basis of per tonne of input MSW, but vary when they are
315 allocated over the fuel and energy co-product yield.

316 The fuel production and combustion steps are major sources of GHG emissions in all three
317 pathways. The Plasma FT MD pathway has the highest fuel production emissions per tonne of
318 input MSW. The mode of the fuel yield probability distribution for this pathway is approximately
319 38%. At this fuel yield, the pathway generates more excess electricity than the other pathways
320 (almost 9% of the input MSW LHV) but at the upper bound of fuel yield of 46%, the plant has to
321 import electricity to meet plasma power requirements. This results in increased net GHG emissions
322 due to the high carbon intensity of the US average grid mix (160.1 gCO₂e/MJ).¹⁹ The grid makeup
323 is described in Table S5. Fossil fuel inputs such as petroleum coke and natural gas further increase
324 the GHG emissions associated with fuel production in this pathway.

325 For the ATJ MD pathway, the fuel yields vary between 24 – 40% of the input MSW LHV with
326 31% as the mode, the lowest of the three pathways. Therefore, on a per MJ of MD fuel basis it has
327 higher fuel production emissions, which are offset by higher credits per MJ from waste
328 management strategy and additional recycling, resulting in a 15% lower median GHG emissions
329 than the Plasma FT MD pathway. Fuel combustion emissions attributable to the non-biogenic
330 portion of the MSW feedstock are similar for the three pathways and vary only because of the
331 different proportions of diesel and jet fuel produced by each pathway.

332 In addition to the standard deviation measures listed in Table 1, we also quantify the contributions
333 of the parameters that are sampled for the stochastic analysis to the overall variance of the results

334 through a first-order sensitivity index analysis. Uncertainty associated with the non-biogenic
335 proportion of carbon in the feedstock contributes approximately 47%, 41% and 41% of the total
336 variance of life cycle GHG emissions for FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ MD fuels, respectively. This
337 translates to larger standard deviations for the fuel production and combustion steps where the non-
338 biogenic share of emissions is counted. Other major contributions to variance are 39%, 34% and
339 38% from the recycling credit for FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ MD fuels, respectively. Detailed results
340 are presented in Figure S5.

341 We also conduct sensitivity analyses to quantify variability within the pathways. Figure 2 shows
342 the five drivers that are assessed by varying each one in isolation. The parameter that produces the
343 largest change in results for all three pathways is the MSW composition, characterized by the non-
344 biogenic proportion of carbon in the feedstock and the LHV of the feedstock. The 0% non-biogenic
345 case assumes absence of all plastics and rubber. This reduces the energy content of the feedstock
346 to approximately 8 MJ/kg, and is accompanied by a reduction of almost 40% in the quantity of fuel
347 produced per tonne of raw MSW, relative to the baseline. The absence of non-biogenic carbon
348 emissions during fuel production and combustion reduces the median life cycle GHG emissions by
349 180-320% overall, depending on the pathway. This is because the contribution to the life cycle
350 GHG emissions from the fuel combustion step is zero, and only emissions associated with input
351 utilities and chemicals are counted from the fuel production step. The primary remaining
352 contributors are the replaced waste management and further recycling credits.

353 The 65% non-biogenic case assumes the absence of food wastes, yard wastes and wood, and this
354 reduces the replaced waste management credit since the landfill emissions due to these biogenic
355 wastes are not avoided. Additionally, the non-biogenic CO₂ emissions from both fuel production
356 and combustion are higher, resulting in a net increase of 60-100% in the median life cycle GHG

357 emissions. These results reflect the sensitivity of life cycle GHG emissions of the MSW MD fuels
358 to variability in the composition of MSW that may occur in different geographic regions.

359 In the baseline case, US national average landfill gas recovery rates have been assumed in order
360 to calculate the replaced waste management credit in the baseline stochastic analysis. Figure 2
361 shows two other potential cases: one with no landfill gas recovery (replaced waste management
362 credit of 603 kgCO₂e per tonne of MSW) and the other with all replaced landfills assumed to have
363 landfill gas recovery for energy with aggressive gas collection. In the latter case, replacing the
364 waste management strategy results in GHG emissions of 23 kgCO₂e/tonne.²¹

365 For the conventional gasification and FT pathway, MEB are estimated for a larger facility scale
366 from Larson *et al.*¹¹ and a different fuel yield case at the same 3000 tpd scale from Vliet *et al.*⁴² At
367 the larger 7000 tpd feed capacity scale, a lower fuel yield of 34% (23% excess electricity) leads to
368 higher life cycle GHG emissions by approximately 11 gCO₂e/MJ compared to the baseline median.
369 On the other hand, generating additional excess electricity while maintaining high fuel yield (52%
370 fuels and 8% excess electricity) at the 3000 tpd scale, results in lower net GHG emissions (31.5
371 gCO₂e/MJ).

372 In the case of the plasma gasification and FT pathway, the 1000 tpd facility with a fuel yield
373 similar to the baseline generates additional excess electricity, and therefore has lower life cycle
374 GHG emissions (by 8%).⁴³⁻⁴⁴ We assess the effect of increased fuel yield at the 3000 tpd scale that
375 requires additional electricity to be imported from the grid,⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ and find that this would result in
376 56% higher life cycle GHG emissions. Due to data limitations, we assess only the effect of different
377 conversion efficiencies for the ATJ MD fuel pathway. The higher fuel yield is based on future
378 projections by Mu *et al.*³⁴ and the lower fuel yield is based on a conservative estimate by Jones *et*

379 *al.*,¹⁴ which also forms the lower bound in the uncertainty assessment. These cases and other
380 conversion efficiency scenarios are detailed in Tables S6-S8 in the SI.

381 Using system expansion instead of energy allocation generates a carbon credit for the excess
382 electricity exported to the grid, and the produced higher alcohols, making the Plasma FT and ATJ
383 MD pathways more sensitive than the FT MD pathway to the emissions allocation method.
384 Changing the feedstock transport distance based on literature estimates to 10 and 70 miles (16 and
385 113 km), respectively, reduces the associated emissions by 4-8%, respectively increases emissions
386 by 21-37%.⁴⁶

387 **3.2 MSP and NPV**

388 The MSP and NPV results for the three MSW to MD fuels pathways are summarized in Table 1.
389 The median MSP results are 0.99, 1.78 and 1.20 \$ per liter for FT, Plasma FT and ATJ MD fuels,
390 respectively. Parameter uncertainty results in ranges of values that 95% of the Monte Carlo
391 simulation results lie within: 0.72 – 1.28, 1.24 – 2.39 and 0.68 – 1.75 \$ per liter for FT, Plasma FT,
392 and ATJ MD fuels, respectively. These results, even at the lower bound, are above the approximate
393 average US price of conventional middle distillate fuel in January 2016 of 0.27 \$ per liter (refiner
394 price).⁴⁷ However, there is volatility associated with fuel prices in the short and long term, and we
395 account for this volatility in the NPV calculations. We fit a normal distribution to the year-to-year
396 price variations of the past 20 years from 1996 to 2015. The short-term price volatility is predicted
397 by sampling from a normal distribution fitted to the year-to-year price variations of the past 20
398 years from 1996 to 2015. The probability of achieving positive NPV for the project is calculated
399 from the NPV results to be 14%, 0.1% and 7% for FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ MD fuels, respectively.
400 The probability density functions are given in the middle and lower part of Figure S2.

401 Table S9 and S10 give the results for each pathway, disaggregated by type of cost and type of
402 revenue. Capital costs and fixed operating expenses, which are a function of the capital costs, are
403 the major cost contributors for all three pathways, making up 70-75% of total expenses. The net
404 capital costs are highest for the Plasma FT MD pathway and the lowest for the ATJ MD pathway,
405 but when normalized to the MD fuel yield, the FT MD pathway has the lowest median capital cost
406 per liter of \$0.89/L.

407 The variable operating expenses attributable to water, catalysts, cleaning chemicals and disposal
408 of wastes are only 2-3% of MSP for all three pathways. Comparison of the results indicates that
409 revenues from the sale of gasoline, and of scrap metals and glass, vary among the three pathways
410 due to technology-specific differences in conversion process product slates and plant feed
411 capacities. The Plasma FT and ATJ MD pathways have higher co-product revenues from higher
412 export of excess electricity and sale of higher alcohols, respectively (see Table S10).

413 We also quantify first order contributions to variance for the MSP and NPV results. The major
414 contributions to variance of MSP are 73%, 70% and 54% from capital costs; 11%, 10% and 10%
415 from fixed operating costs; and 3%, 12% and 24% from fuel yield for FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ
416 MD fuels, respectively. The primary contributions to variance of NPV are 51%, 35% and 35%
417 from year-to-year fuel price variations; 21%, 14% and 15% from the analysis start year (2017) fuel
418 prices; 20%, 40% and 30% from capital costs; and 3%, 6% and 5% from fixed operating costs for
419 FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ MD fuels, respectively. Detailed results are presented Figures S6 and S7.
420 Figure S8 shows the probability of two of these technologies or all three of them to result in
421 identical values when individual contributions of these parameters are considered on the overall
422 variance. These joint probabilities range from 0 to 7.1%.

423 The majority of variance in the NPV results arises from uncertainty associated with fuel prices.
424 Since the fuel yields are higher for the FT MD pathway, the total variance and standard deviation
425 are also greater than that of the other two pathways. On the other hand, the MSP of the FT MD
426 pathway has the lowest standard deviation (0.14 \$/L) of the three pathways because calculation of
427 the MSP divides the net costs over the fuel yield, thereby resulting in an inverse relationship.
428 Following from the fuel yields and the capital costs (shown in Table S1 and explained in Section
429 3.1), the FT MD fuel has the lowest median MSP and the Plasma FT MD fuel has the highest
430 median MSP of the three pathways. The ATJ MD pathway has the least negative median NPV
431 because the relative reduction of net capital costs outweighs other costs compared to the other two
432 pathways. However, to achieve a positive NPV, the ATJ MD pathway requires a higher selling
433 price for the fuel than the FT MD pathway, because the lower fuel yield implies that each unit of
434 fuel needs to be sold at a higher price.

435 Figure 3 presents the results of the sensitivity analysis for the MSP and NPV results in terms of
436 discount rate, income tax rate, feedstock cost, plant scale and associated technology parameters,
437 and carbon pricing as an example of a policy driver. The discount rate, which is dictated by the rate
438 of required return for equity and loan interest rate for debt, has the greatest impact on the results.
439 From an investor's perspective, Blazy *et al.* suggest that the discount rate could be up to
440 approximately 22% for novel alternative fuel technologies with significant associated risks.⁴⁸ This
441 reduces the probability of positive NPV to 0-0.4% and increases the MSP by 40-60% depending
442 on the conversion pathway. To assess sensitivity in the opposite direction, we use the social
443 opportunity cost of capital based on long-term treasury bond rates from the US Office of
444 Management and Budget as the discount rate (3.2% nominal).⁴⁹ This decreases the MSP by 50-
445 70%, and increases the probability of positive NPV above 80% for the FT and ATJ MD pathways.

446 The plant scale and conversion yield cases assessed for NPV and MSP are the same as for the
447 LCA sensitivity analysis, except for the FT MD pathway, wherein the 3000 tpd case (other than
448 the baseline) evaluated for the economic sensitivity analysis is based on data from Zhu *et al.*⁵⁰ At
449 larger feed input capacities, economies of scale are achieved for the conversion technologies. At
450 the same feed capacity and level of capital investment, improvements in fuel yield increase the
451 probability of positive NPV to greater than 50%. In the case of the FT MD pathway, at the same
452 feed capacity, lower fuel yield (39%) and 8% higher capital costs than the baseline results in a
453 decrease of the probability of positive NPV to 0.4%.

454 In order to quantify the impact of feedstock cost, we use the 2013 US average landfill tipping
455 fees,⁶ first as a source of revenue that lowers the median MSP by 20-46% and raises the probability
456 of positive NPV to 2.5-55% and second, as a positive cost associated with the feedstock as it gains
457 value due to end-use as fuels, yielding the opposite effect. The latter increases the median MSP by
458 25-50% and lowers the probability of positive NPV to 0-2%. Income tax expenses have a similar
459 effect, raising the median MSP by 24-32% when the tax rate is raised to match the 2015 US
460 combined corporate income tax rate of 39%, as reported by the Organization for Economic Co-
461 operation and Development (OECD).⁵¹ In the discount rate and feedstock cost cases, the ATJ MD
462 pathway demonstrates the lowest median MSPs (\$0.34/L, \$0.64/L) and highest probability of
463 positive NPV (87%, 55%) compared to the other two pathways.

464 We also present the result of implementing a carbon price of \$48.56/tonne (2014 dollars) based
465 on the revised social cost of carbon guidance provided by the US Interagency Working Group on
466 Social Cost of Carbon.⁵² This ties together the results of the LCA and TEA analyses. The carbon
467 price improves the median MSP of the FT MD pathway by 11% compared to 3-4% for the other

468 two pathways because of its greater life cycle GHG savings potential of 63% compared to 30-40%
469 (median estimates).

470 **4 Discussion**

471 The results from the LCA show that drawing a larger system boundary allows for analysis of the
472 change in GHG emissions that occurs due to conversion of MSW to fuels, relative to the existing
473 waste management strategy. Therefore, the total life cycle GHG emissions of the MSW MD fuels
474 are dependent on the waste management being replaced, credits from additional recycling, and
475 combustion emissions attributable to the non-biogenic content of the feedstock. We note that the
476 results in this paper represent the current US average characteristics of MSW feedstock; the MSW
477 composition and credit from replaced waste management strategies may vary significantly at
478 different spatial and temporal scopes.^{9,53} Furthermore, this work only quantifies life cycle GHG
479 emissions, whereas additional analyses could include criteria such as air quality and non-GHG
480 climate impacts.⁵⁴ We also note that we compare the GHG benefits of MSW MD fuels only to
481 conventional petroleum-derived fuels, and not to MSW-to-electricity or MSW-to-ethanol or other
482 alternative MD fuel pathways. The GHG benefits of different waste management strategies depend
483 on a number of factors, such as MSW composition, carbon intensity of the grid electricity,
484 conversion efficiencies and feedstock pretreatment requirements.⁵⁵⁻⁵⁶ The mature conventional
485 gasification and FT technologies demonstrate higher conversion efficiencies in the literature,
486 leading to the lowest median lifecycle GHG emissions of the three pathways. Improving fuel yields
487 while maintaining sufficient electricity generation to meet the plant's utility needs could reduce the
488 lifecycle GHG emissions of all three pathways.

489 The results of the TEA show that MSW MD fuels have higher costs of production than
490 conventional MD fuels. The probability of positive NPV is less than 15% for all three pathways.

491 Based on capital costs and conversion yields, the conventional gasification and FT pathway has the
492 greatest probability of positive NPV (14%) and lowest median MSP (\$0.99/L). MSP can be
493 reduced, and NPV increased, by improving conversion efficiencies and the sale of recyclables for
494 all three pathways. The ATJ MD pathway has the lowest net capital costs for the scale considered,
495 and therefore, the least negative median NPV of -247 million USD. The sensitivity analysis shows
496 the significant impact of the perceived risk of the investment on NPV and MSP results. Several
497 policies and corporate agreements exist that can reduce investment risk and, therefore, increase the
498 economic performance of the different pathways.⁶⁰ These include, but are not limited to loan
499 guarantees, capital subsidies and offtake agreements.

500 Finally, the economic analysis in this study is conducted from the perspective of an investor.
501 Therefore, only actual financial streams were accounted for. We can complement this analysis with
502 a societal perspective which values resource streams instead of financial streams. This is done by
503 assuming the social opportunity cost of capital instead of an investor-driven discount rate, by
504 eliminating tax payments from the analysis as they do not constitute a resource stream, and by
505 valuing GHG emissions savings by means of carbon pricing as outlined in the sensitivity analysis.
506 If this societal perspective is taken, the probability of positive NPV increases to 93%, 67% and
507 92.5% for the FT, Plasma FT, and ATJ MD pathways, respectively.

508

509 **Associated content**

510 In the Supporting Information (SI) the reader can find 11 supporting tables, 5 supporting figures,
511 and 9 supporting text excerpts. The SI is available as a PDF file.

512

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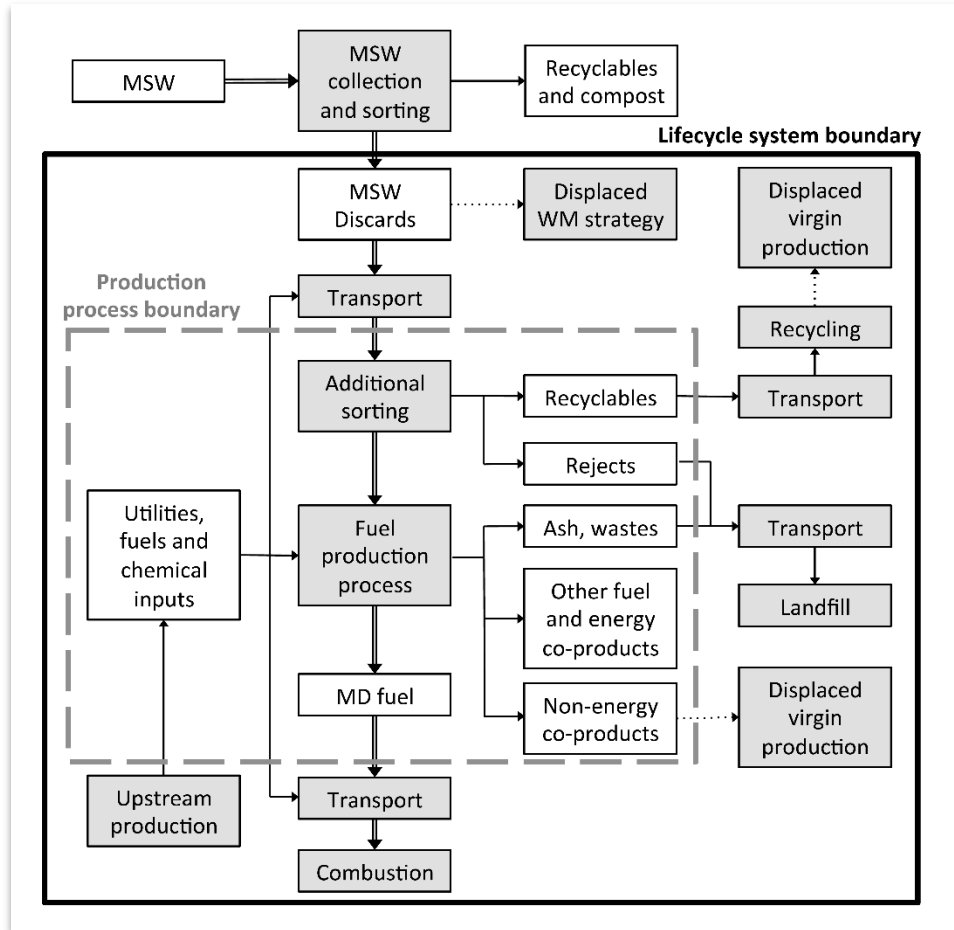
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688 **Figures**

689

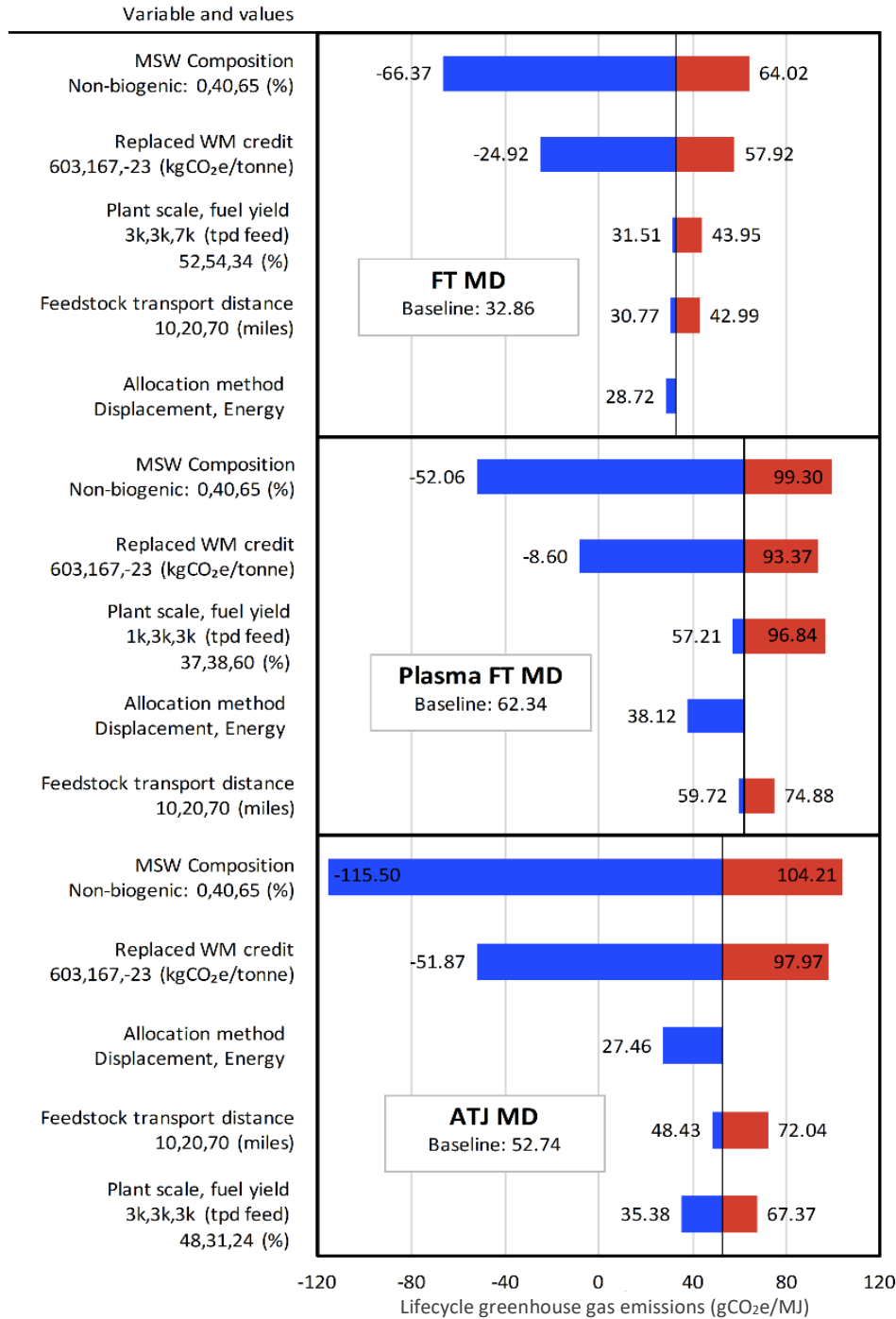


690
691

692 **Figure 1.** Expanded system boundary of the MSW to MD fuels life cycle (solid line boundary) and
693 fuel production process boundary (dashed line boundary).^a

694 ^aDouble lined arrows indicate the primary material flow path. Single line arrows indicate secondary
695 input and co-product material flows. Dotted line arrows connect to displaced processes. Processes
696 are indicated with grey background.

697

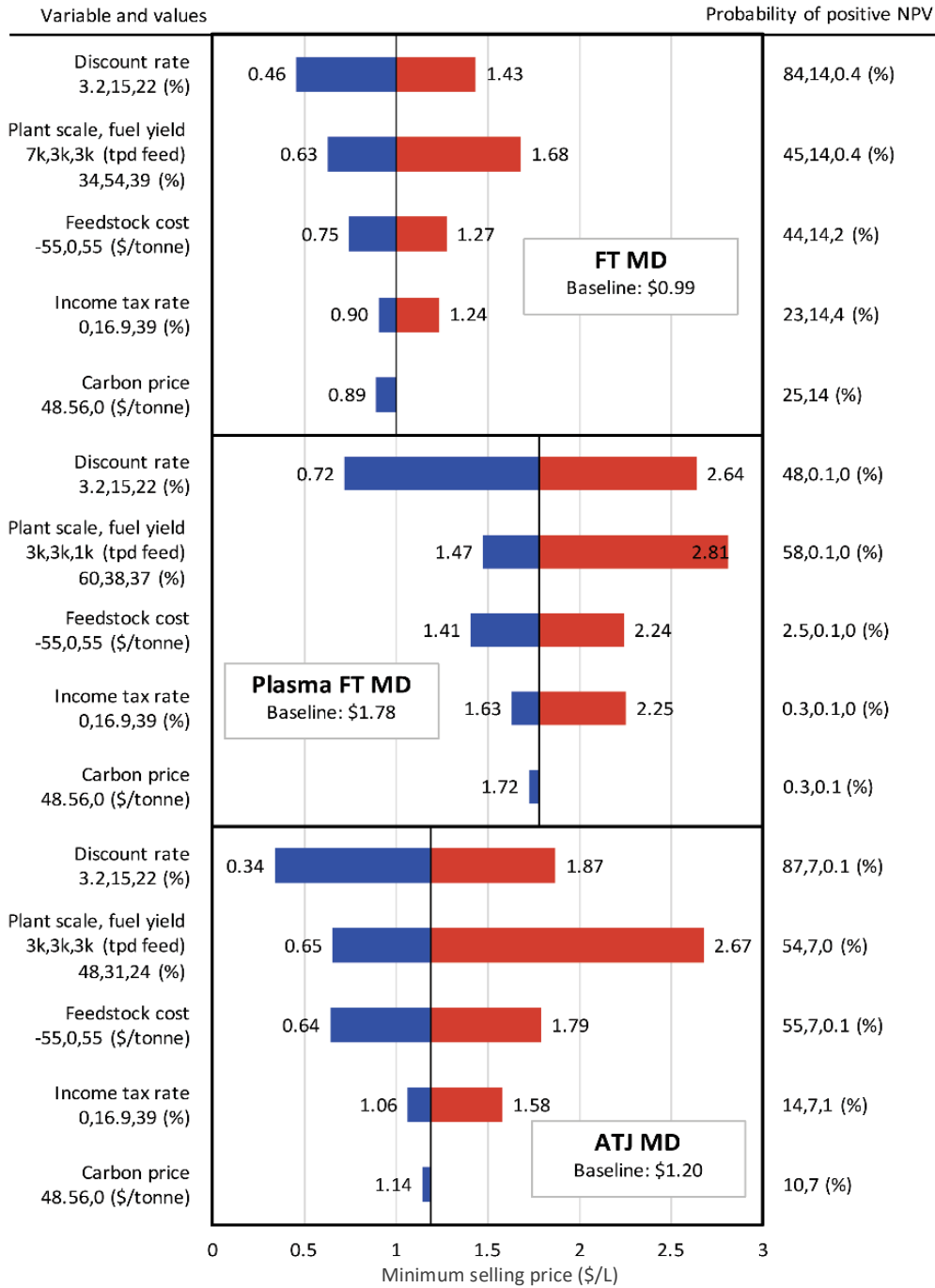


698

699 **Figure 2.** Life cycle GHG emissions sensitivity analysis showing the resultant median values.^b

700 ^bThe variables and assumptions are listed on the left axis (low, baseline, high).

701



702

703 **Figure 3.** MSP sensitivity analysis showing the resultant median values.^c

704 ^cThe variables and assumptions are listed on the left axis (low, baseline, high). On the right axis,
 705 the probability of positive NPV associated with each case (low, baseline, high) is listed.

706 **Tables**

707

Table 1. Life cycle GHG emissions, MSP and NPV results

		Conversion Pathway	Median	Mean	Std. Dev.
Life cycle emissions (gCO ₂ e/MJ)	GHG	FT MD	32.86	32.89	7.22
		Plasma FT MD	62.34	62.51	9.48
		ATJ MD	52.74	52.88	13.22
Minimum price (\$/L)	selling	FT MD	0.99	1.00	0.14
		Plasma FT MD	1.78	1.81	0.29
		ATJ MD	1.20	1.22	0.27
Net present value (\$B)	value	FT MD	-0.339	-0.344	0.312
		Plasma FT MD	-0.753	-0.761	0.252
		ATJ MD	-0.247	-0.247	0.163