

**Abstract**  
**Process Economics Program Report 59C**  
**BIO-BASED ANIONIC SURFACTANTS**  
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Sustainability, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” is a growing issue with consumers in the United States. Western European and Japanese consumers, who seem to be better informed about environmental concerns surrounding surfactant use, are adopting non-petroleum based products the quickest. The large increases in the price of crude oil during 2007–2008 further drove the interest of consumer product formulators as well as consumers to oleochemical-based surfactants.

Anionic surfactants command the largest share of the commodity surfactant market, which includes laundry and dishwashing applications. The three largest volume anionic surfactants, linear alkylbenzene sulfonates (LAS), alpha olefin sulfonates (AOS) and alcohol ether sulfates (AES), are all totally or largely ethylene based.

The two potentially largest volume, sustainable anionic surfactants, methyl ester sulfonate (MES) and alcohol ether sulfate (AES) are produced from palm oils or coconut oil. MES is biodegradable and can substitute for LAS. AES, besides replacing petroleum-based AES, can substitute for some other ethylene-based surfactants. Both MES and AES contribute desirable surfactant properties to detergent and personal care products.

This PEP Report first provides a brief overview of the sustainability issue and market trends for the raw material supply chain from natural oils through intermediate methyl esters and fatty alcohols to the final MES and AES surfactants. Reaction chemistry and MES and AES production processes are reviewed next. We then develop the process economics of integrated plants for the production of two bio-based anionic surfactants:

- Solid MES (86.3% active matter) from C<sub>16</sub> palm oil methyl ester feedstock by sulfonation with gaseous SO<sub>3</sub>, bleaching and neutralization, followed by drying into a product suitable for dry blending into detergent formulations, and
- Liquid AES (70% active matter) from C<sub>12</sub> lauryl alcohol derived from coconut oil by ethoxylation with gaseous ethylene oxide, sulfation with gaseous SO<sub>3</sub> and neutralization.



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**BIO-BASED ANIONIC SURFACTANTS**

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## CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1-1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>2-1</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>3-1</b>
	COMMERCIAL ASPECTS .....	3-1
	TECHNICAL ASPECTS .....	3-3
	ECONOMIC ASPECTS .....	3-6
<b>4</b>	<b>INDUSTRY STATUS</b> .....	<b>4-1</b>
	APPLICATIONS.....	4-1
	INDUSTRY OUTLOOK.....	4-3
	SUSTAINABILITY.....	4-5
	SURFACTANTS .....	4-8
	Methyl Ester Sulfonates.....	4-8
	Alcohol Sulfates .....	4-10
	Alcohol Ether Sulfates .....	4-11
	Sulfonated Fatty Acids.....	4-12
	Ether Carboxylates .....	4-13
	Monoalkyl Phosphate .....	4-13
	Soaps.....	4-13
	SURFACTANT CONSUMPTION .....	4-14
	ANIONIC SURFACTANT DEMAND.....	4-16
	North America.....	4-16
	Western Europe.....	4-18
	Central and South America .....	4-19
	Asia-Pacific .....	4-19
	Japan .....	4-20
	China .....	4-21

## CONTENTS (Continued)

India .....	4-22
SUPPLY/DEMAND OF NATURAL OILS AND FATS.....	4-22
SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF FATTY ALCOHOLS .....	4-26
PRICES .....	4-28
Natural Oils .....	4-28
Methyl Esters .....	4-29
Fatty Alcohols .....	4-29
Sulfur .....	4-32
Ethylene Oxide .....	4-33
Surfactants.....	4-34
PRODUCERS.....	4-36
Fatty Acids.....	4-37
Fatty Alcohols .....	4-37
Anionic Surfactants.....	4-38
Ethylene Oxide .....	4-49
REGULATION .....	4-50
U.S. Regulation.....	4-50
European Regulation.....	4-51
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT .....	4-54
Biodegradation .....	4-56
MES .....	4-60
Toxicity in Water .....	4-61
AES.....	4-62
MES .....	4-64
<b>5 GENERAL PROCESS REVIEW .....</b>	<b>5-1</b>
RAW MATERIALS.....	5-3
Oils and Fats.....	5-5

## CONTENTS (Continued)

Composition .....	5-7
Properties .....	5-10
Specifications .....	5-12
Fatty Acids .....	5-15
Properties .....	5-16
Specifications .....	5-19
Methyl Esters .....	5-21
Properties .....	5-21
Specifications .....	5-24
Fatty Alcohols .....	5-26
Properties .....	5-26
Specifications .....	5-27
Alcohol Ethoxylates .....	5-28
Properties .....	5-28
Specifications .....	5-29
Sulfur .....	5-30
Properties .....	5-30
Specifications .....	5-31
Sulfonating Agents .....	5-32
Ethylene Oxide .....	5-33
Properties .....	5-34
Specifications .....	5-36
SURFACTANT PROPERTIES .....	5-37
Critical Micelle Concentration .....	5-38
Krafft Temperature .....	5-40
Cloud Point .....	5-41
Aggregation Number .....	5-41
Klett Color .....	5-41
Lovibond Color .....	5-42

## CONTENTS (Continued)

Iodine Value.....	5-42
Acid Value/Percent Free Fatty Acid .....	5-42
Saponification Value.....	5-42
Unsaponifiable Matter.....	5-42
Peroxide Value .....	5-42
Stability Test .....	5-42
Mildness.....	5-42
SURFACTANT PRODUCTS.....	5-43
Methyl Ester Sulfonate .....	5-43
Physical Properties.....	5-43
Surfactant Properties.....	5-48
Effect of Methyl Ester Feedstock.....	5-49
Specifications .....	5-51
Sulfoxidation ( $\Phi$ -MES).....	5-52
Alcohol Sulfates .....	5-53
Alcohol Ether Sulfates .....	5-53
Properties .....	5-54
Specifications .....	5-59
REACTION CHEMISTRY.....	5-60
Fatty Acids by Hydrolysis (Fat Splitting).....	5-60
Methyl Ester Production .....	5-61
Esterification .....	5-62
Transesterification .....	5-63
Methyl Ester Sulfonate .....	5-65
MES Impurities .....	5-68
Mechanisms.....	5-68
MES Bleaching .....	5-72
Aging Kinetics.....	5-72
Fatty Alcohols .....	5-73

## CONTENTS (Continued)

Alcohol Sulfates .....	5-75
Alcohol Ether Sulfates .....	5-75
Ethoxylation .....	5-76
Ethoxylation By-Products .....	5-77
Sulfation .....	5-78
Ethylene Oxide .....	5-79
Green Propylene Oxide .....	5-80
<b>6 MES AND AES PROCESS TECHNOLOGY .....</b>	<b>6-1</b>
METHYL ESTER SULFONATES .....	6-4
MES Process Comparison .....	6-6
SO <sub>3</sub> Sources .....	6-7
Chemithon MES Process .....	6-8
SO <sub>3</sub> Generation .....	6-9
SO <sub>3</sub> Absorber .....	6-10
SO <sub>2</sub> Absorber .....	6-10
Reactor System .....	6-10
MESA Digestion .....	6-11
MES Bleaching .....	6-11
Neutralizer .....	6-12
MES Dryer .....	6-13
MES Product Cooler .....	6-15
Methanol Recovery .....	6-15
Desmet Ballestra Process .....	6-15
AES PROCESS .....	6-18
Ethoxylation .....	6-19
Sulfation .....	6-23
1,4-Dioxane .....	6-23
PEG .....	6-23



## CONTENTS (Continued)

Venturi Reactor.....	6-23
<b>7 MES ECONOMICS.....</b>	<b>7-1</b>
DESCRIPTION .....	7-1
SO <sub>3</sub> Generation Section (100).....	7-17
Sulfonation Section (200).....	7-17
Finishing Section (300).....	7-18
Methanol Recovery Section (400).....	7-19
DISCUSSION .....	7-19
Feedstock .....	7-20
SO <sub>3</sub> Generation .....	7-20
Air Supply .....	7-22
SO <sub>3</sub> Absorber.....	7-22
Sulfonation Reactor .....	7-23
Acid Bleaching.....	7-23
Neutralizer .....	7-24
MES Dryer System .....	7-24
MES Product Flaker .....	7-24
Methanol Recovery.....	7-24
Materials of Construction.....	7-25
COST ESTIMATES .....	7-25
Capital Cost .....	7-25
Production Costs .....	7-30
<b>8 AES ECONOMICS .....</b>	<b>8-1</b>
DESCRIPTION .....	8-1
Ethoxylation (Section 100).....	8-15
SO <sub>3</sub> Generation (Section 200).....	8-15
Sulfation and Neutralization (Section 300).....	8-16

## CONTENTS (Concluded)

DISCUSSION .....	8-17
Feedstock .....	8-17
Ethoxylation .....	8-17
SO <sub>3</sub> Generation .....	8-18
Air Supply .....	8-18
SO <sub>3</sub> Absorber.....	8-19
Sulfation Reactor .....	8-19
Neutralizer .....	8-19
Safety.....	8-19
COST ESTIMATES .....	8-20
Capital Cost .....	8-20
Production Costs .....	8-24
<b>APPENDIX A PATENT SUMMARY TABLES .....</b>	<b>A-1</b>
<b>APPENDIX B DESIGN AND COST BASES .....</b>	<b>B-1</b>
<b>APPENDIX C CITED REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>C-1</b>
<b>APPENDIX D PATENT REFERENCES BY COMPANY .....</b>	<b>D-1</b>
<b>APPENDIX E PROCESS FLOW DIAGRAMS.....</b>	<b>E-1</b>

## FIGURES

1.1	Surfactants Derived from Fatty Methyl Esters.....	1-3
1.2	Surfactants Derived from Fatty Alcohols.....	1-4
4.1	Total Energy Usage of Various Surfactant Types.....	4-7
4.2	World Palm Oil Production.....	4-23
4.3	World Palm Kernel Oil and Coconut Oil Production.....	4-23
4.4	Distribution of 2009 World Palm Oil Production.....	4-24
4.5	2009 World Palm Kernel Oil Production Distribution.....	4-24
4.6	Price History of Palm Oil and Coconut Oil.....	4-28
4.7	Sulfur Price Trends.....	4-33
4.8	Ethylene Oxide Price Trends.....	4-34
4.9	Evolution of the Management of Chemicals and Products in the European Union.....	4-52
4.10	Pathways of Surfactants Entering the Environment.....	4-55
4.11	MES Biodegradation.....	4-61
4.12	Concept of Environmental Risk Assessment.....	4-63
5.1	Oleochemical Raw Materials and Their Derivatives.....	5-4
5.2	Structures of Common C <sub>18</sub> Fatty Acids.....	5-5
5.3	Physical Properties of Aqueous Solution as a Function of Surfactant Concentration.....	5-39
5.4	Henkel Process for Methyl Esters from Fatty Acids.....	5-62
5.5	Henkel Transesterification Process.....	5-64
5.6	Reaction Mechanism of ME Sulfonation to MES.....	5-66
5.7	MES Synthesis Reactions.....	5-67
5.8	Disproportionation Reactions of Mixed Anhydride in MES By-Product Formation.....	5-69
5.9	Main MES Aging Reaction Mechanism and Proposed Color Formation Mechanism.....	5-71
5.10	Manufacturing Routes of Fatty Alcohols from Natural Oils and Fats.....	5-74
5.11	Ethoxylation Mechanism for Basic Catalyst.....	5-76

## FIGURES (Concluded)

5.12	1,4-dioxane Formation.....	5-78
5.13	AES Sulfonation Mechanism.....	5-79
6.1	Chemithon Annular Falling Film Reactor .....	6-3
6.2	MES Plant Block Diagram .....	6-5
6.3	Chemithon ASME Esterification and Bleaching System .....	6-12
6.4	Chemithon MES Turbo® Dryer System .....	6-14
6.5	Ballestra Falling Film Reactor .....	6-17
6.6	Venturi Loop Reactor and Spray Loop Reactor .....	6-20
6.7	Batch Ethoxylation Unit .....	6-21
6.8	Batch/Continuous Ethoxylation Unit Schematic .....	6-21
7.1	Methyl Ester Sulfonate Process Flow Diagram .....	E-3
7.2	SO <sub>2</sub> Conversion to SO <sub>3</sub> Equilibrium Temperature Diagram.....	7-21
8.1	Alcohol Ether Sulfates Process Flow Diagram .....	E-11

## TABLES

1.1	Surfactant Types and Examples .....	1-2
3.1	Summary of Cost Estimates for Two Anionic Biosurfactants .....	3-7
4.1	Common Uses of Different Types of Surfactants .....	4-2
4.2	Main Environmental Issues of Powdered Laundry Detergent .....	4-6
4.3	Consumption of Surfactants by Region .....	4-14
4.4	Consumption of Surfactants by Type in 2009 .....	4-15
4.5	Consumption of Surfactants for Household Detergents in Developed Regions ...	4-16
4.6	Total U.S. and Canadian Consumption of Major Anionic Surfactants .....	4-17
4.7	U.S. and Canadian Consumption of Anionic Surfactants by End Use in 2009 .....	4-17
4.8	U.S. Consumption of Surfactants for Home Laundry Detergents .....	4-18
4.9	Western European 2009 Surfactant Consumption for Household Detergents .....	4-19
4.10	Western European Consumption of AES in Household Detergents .....	4-19
4.11	Japanese Production of Synthetic Detergents .....	4-20
4.12	Japanese Consumption of AES .....	4-21
4.13	Chinese Production of Synthetic Detergents .....	4-21
4.14	Indian Consumption of Detergents .....	4-22
4.15	North American Supply/Demand for Naturally Derived Fatty Acids .....	4-25
4.16	North American Consumption of Fatty Acids by Market (2008) .....	4-26
4.17	World Consumption of Fatty Alcohols by Derivative (2008) .....	4-27
4.18	World Supply/Demand for Fatty Alcohols (2009) .....	4-27
4.19	U.S. Market Prices for Detergent Alcohols .....	4-29
4.20	Western European Prices of Natural Fatty Alcohols .....	4-30
4.21	Japanese Unit Import Values for Natural Detergent Alcohols .....	4-31
4.22	Chinese Market Prices for Detergent Alcohols .....	4-31
4.23	Prices of Detergent Alcohols in Other Asian Countries .....	4-32
4.24	U.S. List Prices of Anionic Surfactants .....	4-35
4.25	U.S. and Canadian Unit Trade Values for Surfactants .....	4-35
4.26	Regional Anionic Surfactant Trade Values .....	4-35

## TABLES (Continued)

4.27	Average 2009 Japanese Prices for Commodity Anionic Surfactants .....	4-36
4.28	Chinese Unit Trade Values for Anionic Surfactants .....	4-36
4.29	Distribution of Major Producers of Fatty Acids .....	4-37
4.30	World Producers of Fatty Alcohols (2009) .....	4-38
4.31	U.S. and Canadian Producers of Sulfonated/Sulfated Anionic Surfactants.....	4-39
4.32	Major Western European Anionic Surfactant Producers .....	4-40
4.33	Selected Central and Eastern European Anionic Surfactant Producers.....	4-43
4.34	Selected South and Central American Anionic Surfactant Producers .....	4-44
4.35	Selected Middle Eastern Surfactant Producers .....	4-45
4.36	Selected African Surfactant Producers .....	4-46
4.37	Major Japanese Anionic Surfactant Producers .....	4-46
4.38	Major Chinese Anionic Surfactant Producers .....	4-47
4.39	Major Indian Producers of Anionic Surfactants .....	4-48
4.40	Major Republic of Korea Producers of Anionic Surfactants .....	4-48
4.41	Major Taiwanese Anionic Surfactant Producers .....	4-49
4.42	Global Leading Ethylene Oxide Producers and Capacity .....	4-50
4.43	Reach Implementation Timetable.....	4-53
4.44	Biodegradability of Surfactants in the Environment .....	4-56
4.45	Aerobic Biodegradation of LAS and Alcohol-Based Surfactants .....	4-57
4.46	Concentrations of Surfactants in Treated Sludges.....	4-58
4.47	Anaerobic Biodegradation of LAS And Alcohol-Based Surfactants .....	4-59
4.48	Concentrations of Selected Surfactants in Sewage Influent and Effluents .....	4-59
4.49	Average Measured Concentrations of Alcohol-Based Surfactants in Surface Waters.....	4-60
4.50	Average Measured Toxicity of Las and Alcohol-Based Surfactants .....	4-62
4.51	Long-Term Effect (LTE) Values of Las and Alcohol-Based Surfactants .....	4-63
4.52	Aquatic Risk Assessment Conclusions for LAS, Ae and Aes in the Netherlands .....	4-64

## TABLES (Continued)

4.53	Aquatic Toxicity of Commercial MES/Sulfonated Fatty Acid Blends.....	4-64
4.54	Change in Acute Toxicity of Mixed C <sub>14</sub> /C <sub>16</sub> MES to Fish during Biodegradation .....	4-65
5.1	Typical Surfactant Hydrophilic and Hydrophobic Groups .....	5-2
5.2	More Surfactant Hydrophilic and Hydrophobic Groups.....	5-2
5.3	Impurities in Crude Palm Oil.....	5-7
5.4	Typical Fatty Acid Composition of Common Oils and Fats .....	5-8
5.5	Minor Constituents of Crude Oils and Fats .....	5-10
5.6	Density of Selected Oils and Fats .....	5-10
5.7	Viscosity of Selected Oils and Fats .....	5-11
5.8	Melting Point Range and Iodine Number of Coconut and Palm Oils .....	5-11
5.9	Heat Capacity of Selected Liquid Oils.....	5-12
5.10	Selected Properties of Coconut and Palm Oils .....	5-12
5.11	PROAM Standard Specifications for Processed Palm Oil .....	5-13
5.12	Coconut Oil Specifications .....	5-15
5.13	Major Sources of Natural Fatty Acids.....	5-16
5.14	Characteristics of Common Naturally Occurring Fatty Acids .....	5-17
5.15	Selected Fatty Acid Specifications .....	5-19
5.16	Methyl Ester Properties .....	5-22
5.17	Properties of Selected Malaysian Fatty Esters .....	5-23
5.18	Benchmark Methyl Ester Specifications for Sulfonation.....	5-25
5.19	Effect of Raw Material Specifications on MES Product.....	5-25
5.20	Carbon Distribution of a C <sub>12</sub> -C <sub>14</sub> Natural Fatty Alcohol.....	5-26
5.21	Physical Properties of C <sub>10</sub> to C <sub>20</sub> Saturated Natural Fatty Alcohols .....	5-26
5.22	Properties of Selected Malaysian Fatty Alcohols .....	5-27
5.23	Main Specifications of Natural Fatty Alcohols for Sulfation.....	5-28
5.24	Selected Properties of Essentially Linear Ethoxylated Alcohols .....	5-29
5.25	Main Specifications for Ethoxylated Fatty Alcohols for Sulfation .....	5-30

## TABLES (Continued)

5.26	Density of Liquid Sulfur.....	5-31
5.27	Sulfur Properties.....	5-31
5.28	Sulfur Specifications.....	5-32
5.29	SO <sub>3</sub> Properties.....	5-33
5.30	Selected Ethylene Oxide Physical Properties.....	5-35
5.31	Physical Properties of Liquid Ethylene Oxide.....	5-36
5.32	Physical Properties of Gaseous Ethylene Oxide.....	5-36
5.33	Typical Ethylene Oxide Specifications.....	5-37
5.34	Surfactant Properties.....	5-37
5.35	Parameters of Anionic Surfactants and Test Methods Types.....	5-38
5.36	Comparative Irritation Study via 14-Day Cumulative Irritation Test.....	5-43
5.37	Critical Micelle Concentrations of MES and Corresponding Acid.....	5-44
5.38	CMC of Sodium Ester Sulfonates.....	5-45
5.39	Surface Tension of MES Components in Deionized Water.....	5-47
5.40	Properties of Sulfonate Products of Various Methyl Esters.....	5-50
5.41	Properties of Selected Sodium AESs.....	5-55
5.42	Efficiency and Effectiveness of Selected Sodium AESs at 25°C (77°F) and Surface Tension.....	5-57
5.43	Wetting Properties of AESs.....	5-58
5.44	Detergent Properties of Several AESs and ASs—Terg-O-Tometer.....	5-58
5.45	Main Specifications Achievable for Alcohol Ether Sulfate.....	5-59
6.1	Sulfonation Reactor Types.....	6-2
6.2	Comparison of MES Processes Feedstock Specifications.....	6-6
6.3	Comparison of MES Processes Product Quality.....	6-7
6.4	Ethoxylation Batch Reactor Typical Operating Conditions.....	6-22
6.5	AES Venturi Reactor Operating Conditions.....	6-24
7.1	MES Design Basis and Assumptions.....	7-2
7.2	MES Feedstocks and Chemicals Characterization.....	7-5



## TABLES (Concluded)

7.3	Sulfonation Reactor Yields .....	7-6
7.4	MES by SO <sub>3</sub> -Air Sulfonation Stream Flows.....	7-7
7.5	Methyl Ester Sulfonate Major Equipment .....	7-13
7.6	Methyl Ester Sulfonate Utilities Summary.....	7-16
7.7	Methyl Ester Sulfonate Total Capital Investment.....	7-26
7.8	Methyl Ester Sulfonate Capital Investment by Section .....	7-28
7.9	Methyl Ester Sulfonate Production Costs .....	7-31
7.10	Sensitivity of MES Product Value to Feedstock Costs.....	7-33
8.1	AES Design Basis and Assumptions.....	8-2
8.2	AES Feedstocks and Chemicals .....	8-4
8.3	AES by SO <sub>3</sub> -Air Sulfonation Stream Flows.....	8-6
8.4	Alcohol Ether Sulfates by SO <sub>3</sub> -Air Sulfation Major Equipment .....	8-12
8.5	Alcohol Ether Sulfates by SO <sub>3</sub> -Air Sulfation Utilities Summary.....	8-14
8.6	Alcohol Ether Sulfates by SO <sub>3</sub> -Air Sulfation Total Capital Investment.....	8-21
8.7	Alcohol Ether Sulfates by SO <sub>3</sub> -Air Sulfation Capital Investment by Section .....	8-23
8.8	Alcohol Ether Sulfates by SO <sub>3</sub> -Air Sulfation Production Costs .....	8-25
8.9	C <sub>12</sub> -C <sub>14</sub> Alcohol Splitter Production Costs .....	8-27
8.10	Sensitivity of AES Product Value to Feedstock Costs .....	8-29