Journal of Ceramics and Concrete Technology
Volume 11, Issue 1, January-April 2026
ISSN: 2457-0826 (Online)

# *Green and Low Carbon Concrete Technologies: A Review*

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## *ABSTRACT*

*Concrete is one of the most widely used construction materials in the world. However, its production, especially Portland cement, is responsible for significant carbon dioxide ($CO_2$) emissions, contributing to climate change. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in developing* **green and low carbon concrete technologies** *that reduce environmental impact while maintaining structural performance. This paper reviews the latest advancements in eco-friendly concrete, including the use of supplementary cementitious materials (SCMs), recycled aggregates, industrial by-products, and innovative curing techniques. Additionally, it discusses emerging trends such as geopolymer concrete, carbon capture integration, and performance-based optimization strategies. Challenges in implementation, economic feasibility, and life-cycle assessment are also explored. This review aims to provide researchers and practitioners with a comprehensive understanding of sustainable concrete technologies for future construction.*

***KEYWORDS:*** *Green concrete, Low carbon concrete, Supplementary cementitious materials, Recycled aggregates, Geopolymer concrete, Carbon footprint, Sustainable construction*

## INTRODUCTION

Concrete is indispensable to modern infrastructure due to its versatility, durability, and relatively low cost. However, the environmental cost of conventional concrete production is high, primarily due to the production of **Portland cement**, which accounts for approximately

8% of global $CO_2$ emissions. Increasing urbanization and infrastructure development are likely to escalate cement demand, worsening the environmental impact.

**Green and low carbon concrete technologies** focus on reducing the carbon footprint of concrete while maintaining or enhancing mechanical and durability properties. This review examines sustainable materials, production techniques, and innovations aimed at reducing $CO_2$ emissions associated with concrete.

## NEED FOR GREEN AND LOW CARBON CONCRETE

The construction sector is one of the largest consumers of natural resources and a significant contributor to environmental degradation. Among construction materials, concrete dominates due to its widespread use in buildings, bridges, roads, and infrastructure. However, conventional concrete production is highly energy-intensive, with the **manufacturing of Portland cement** being the primary source of environmental concern. Cement production requires heating limestone to around 1450°C during calcination, releasing approximately **0.9 tonnes of $CO_2$ per tonne of cement**. This alone accounts for nearly **8% of global anthropogenic $CO_2$ emissions**. In addition to greenhouse gas emissions, conventional concrete contributes to **resource depletion**, particularly through the extraction of sand, gravel, and water.

Given these environmental pressures, the adoption of **green and low carbon concrete technologies** is increasingly necessary. These technologies aim to reduce the ecological footprint of concrete while maintaining structural performance, durability, and workability. The need for such technologies is driven by several critical factors:

### 1. Environmental Sustainability

The primary motivation behind green concrete is the mitigation of climate change. By reducing cement content, using **supplementary cementitious materials (SCMs)** like fly ash, slag, or silica fume, and incorporating recycled aggregates, the $CO_2$ emissions associated with concrete production can be significantly lowered. For example, replacing 30% of cement with **ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBS)** can reduce carbon emissions by 20–30%. Moreover, green concrete reduces **landfill waste** by utilizing industrial by-products and recycled materials, thereby conserving natural resources such as limestone, clay, and aggregates. These measures contribute to more sustainable construction practices that align with global climate targets, including the **Paris Agreement**.

### 2. Economic Benefits

Green concrete technologies often leverage **locally available industrial by-products** such as fly ash from thermal power plants or slag from steel manufacturing. Utilizing these waste materials reduces disposal costs for industries and decreases the demand for expensive Portland cement. Over the long term, green concrete can reduce **life-cycle costs** due to improved durability and reduced maintenance requirements. For instance, concretes incorporating fly ash or slag are known to exhibit lower permeability, which minimizes repair frequency caused by corrosion or chemical attack. Additionally, the use of recycled aggregates reduces dependency on quarried stone, which can be costly in regions where natural resources are scarce.

### 3. Regulatory Compliance

Governments worldwide are increasingly imposing **carbon emission regulations** in the construction sector. Standards such as the European Union’s **Carbon Reduction Targets** and India’s **Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC)** emphasize the use of low-carbon materials and energy-efficient practices. Compliance with these regulations is not only a legal requirement but also provides **market advantages**, as developers and contractors adopting sustainable practices are often favored in public infrastructure projects. Green concrete technologies enable companies to meet these regulatory demands while demonstrating environmental responsibility.

### 4. Enhanced Durability and Performance

Beyond environmental and economic considerations, green concrete can offer **enhanced structural performance**. Concrete incorporating SCMs or recycled materials often exhibits improved **durability** due to reduced permeability, lower susceptibility to chemical attack, and resistance to cracking. For example, fly ash and silica fume can refine the pore structure of concrete, reducing chloride penetration and enhancing resistance to sulfate attack. Geopolymer concretes, which are entirely cement-free, also provide superior fire resistance and chemical stability. These performance benefits not only extend the service life of structures but also reduce long-term maintenance costs, contributing indirectly to sustainability.

### 5. Addressing Resource Scarcity

Rapid urbanization and infrastructure development have put enormous pressure on **natural aggregates** such as sand and gravel. Many regions face depletion of high-quality aggregate sources, leading to higher extraction costs and environmental degradation. Green concrete, through the use of **recycled aggregates and industrial by-products**, provides a viable solution to address this scarcity. By substituting conventional raw materials with sustainable alternatives, the construction industry can maintain growth without overexploiting finite natural resources.

### 6. Climate Change Mitigation

Finally, adopting low-carbon concrete technologies is essential for **mitigating climate change**. The construction sector is under increasing scrutiny for its carbon emissions, and green concrete offers a practical pathway to **carbon neutrality** in infrastructure projects. Techniques such as **carbon-cured concrete**, **geopolymer concrete**, and optimized cement replacement strategies are capable of sequestering $CO_2$ during production or service life. In the long term, widespread adoption of these technologies can contribute substantially to national and global carbon reduction targets.

The need for green and low carbon concrete is multi-faceted: it addresses environmental sustainability, reduces costs, ensures regulatory compliance, improves durability, mitigates resource scarcity, and helps combat climate change. These compelling drivers make the development and adoption of sustainable concrete technologies a priority for the modern construction industry.

## TYPES OF LOW CARBON CONCRETE

Low carbon concrete encompasses a range of technologies and material innovations designed to reduce the environmental impact of conventional concrete while maintaining or enhancing its structural performance. These technologies primarily focus on **reducing the cement content**, incorporating **industrial by-products**, and developing **alternative binder systems**. Key types of low carbon concrete are discussed below.

### 1. Supplementary Cementitious Materials (SCMs)

**Supplementary Cementitious Materials (SCMs)** are materials that possess **pozzolanic or**

**latent hydraulic properties**, allowing them to partially replace Portland cement in concrete. SCMs contribute to strength development by reacting with calcium hydroxide in the cement matrix to form additional **calcium silicate hydrate (C-S-H)** gel, which enhances the concrete microstructure. By replacing a portion of cement with SCMs, the carbon footprint of concrete can be significantly reduced, as less energy-intensive cement is required.

Some commonly used SCMs include:

1. **Fly Ash**

- **Source:** By-product of coal-fired power plants.
- **Replacement Level:** 15–40% by weight of cement.

**Benefits:**

- Reduces $CO_2$ emissions proportionally to cement replacement.
- Improves workability due to spherical particle shape (“ball-bearing effect”).
- Enhances long-term durability by refining pore structure, reducing permeability, and improving resistance to sulfate and chloride attack.

**Limitations:** Early-age strength may be lower, especially with high-volume replacement (>30%).

2. **Silica Fume (Microsilica)**

- **Source:** By-product of silicon or ferrosilicon alloy production.
- **Replacement Level:** 5–10% by weight of cement.

**Benefits:**

- Significantly improves compressive and tensile strength due to ultra-fine particle size (~100 times smaller than cement particles).
- Reduces permeability, enhancing resistance to chemical attacks and carbonation.

**Applications:** Often used in **high-performance concrete (HPC)**, **bridge decks**, and **industrial floors**.

3. **Ground Granulated Blast Furnace Slag (GGBS)**

- **Source:** By-product of iron manufacturing in blast furnaces.
- **Replacement Level:** 30–50% by weight of cement.

**Benefits:**

- Reduces $CO_2$ emissions substantially.
- Increases durability against sulfate attack, chloride penetration, and alkali-silica reaction.
- Improves long-term strength development.

**Considerations:** Slower early-age strength gain; curing conditions may need optimization.

4. **Rice Husk Ash (RHA)**

- **Source:** Agricultural waste from rice milling.
- **Replacement Level:** 10–20% by weight of cement.

**Benefits:**

- Rich in amorphous silica, providing pozzolanic activity.
- Enhances compressive strength and reduces permeability.
- Environmentally sustainable due to utilization of agricultural waste.

**Limitations:** High variability in quality; requires controlled burning to produce reactive ash.

***Table 1: Common SCMs and Their Characteristics***

| SCM Type | Source | Typical Replacement (%) | Key Benefits |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fly Ash | Thermal power plants | 15–40 | Reduces $CO_2$, enhances workability |
| Silica Fume | Silicon/ferrosilicon industry | 5–10 | Improves strength and durability |
| GGBS | Steel industry | 30–50 | Reduces permeability, increases longevity |

| SCM Type | Source | Typical Replacement (%) | Key Benefits |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rice Husk Ash | Agricultural waste | 10–20 | Improves pozzolanic activity |

### 2. Recycled Aggregate Concrete (RAC)

Concrete production consumes **millions of tons of natural aggregates** every year, including sand, gravel, and crushed stone. With increasing urbanization, the demand for aggregates is rising, leading to environmental degradation such as **riverbed depletion, habitat destruction, and energy-intensive mining processes**. One sustainable solution is **Recycled Aggregate Concrete (RAC)**, which uses aggregates derived from **demolished concrete structures**, construction debris, and industrial by-products.

**Key Features and Mechanisms:**

- Recycled aggregates contain **residual cement paste**, which may slightly increase water absorption and reduce the density of RAC compared to natural aggregate concrete.
- Pre-treatment techniques, such as **washing, sieving, and removing loose old cement paste**, are used to improve quality.
- Using RAC reduces **landfill waste**, conserves natural aggregates, and lowers overall energy consumption.

**Performance:**

- Research indicates that **RAC with up to 30% recycled aggregates** can achieve compressive strength comparable to conventional concrete, especially when combined with SCMs like fly ash or slag.
- Long-term durability can be enhanced by **admixtures** that reduce porosity and improve bond strength between recycled aggregates and the new cement matrix.

**Benefits:**

1. **Environmental:** Decreases natural resource extraction and landfill disposal.
2. **Economic:** Reduces costs by utilizing locally available demolished concrete.
3. **Sustainability:** Promotes circular economy practices by reusing construction waste.

**Challenges:**

- Variability in recycled aggregate quality depending on source material.
- Slightly higher water demand due to absorption of old cement paste.
- Potential reduction in early-age strength, requiring mix optimization.

**Practical Applications:**

- Pavements, curbs, non-structural walls, and low-rise building elements.
- Secondary structural members in multi-story buildings.

**Case Study:** A residential project in Europe replaced 50% of natural coarse aggregates with recycled aggregates, resulting in **10–15% reduction in $CO_2$ emissions** while achieving comparable 28-day compressive strength.

### 3. High-Performance and Ultra-High-Performance Concrete (HPC/UHPC)

**High-Performance Concrete (HPC)** and **Ultra-High-Performance Concrete (UHPC)** are advanced concretes designed to deliver **exceptional mechanical properties, durability, and longevity**, while simultaneously reducing cement content, which lowers carbon emissions.

**Characteristics:**

- **Optimized mix design:** Fine aggregates, SCMs, and chemical admixtures are used to enhance packing density and reduce voids.
- **High compressive strength:** HPC typically achieves 50–80 MPa, whereas UHPC can exceed 150 MPa.
- **Dense microstructure:** Minimizes permeability, improving resistance to **chloride penetration, freeze-thaw cycles, and chemical attacks**.

**$CO_2$ Reduction Mechanism:**

- By using **SCMs and minimizing cement content**, HPC and UHPC can reduce the carbon footprint by 20–40% compared to conventional concrete, depending on the replacement materials used.
- Enhanced durability increases **service life**, further reducing life-cycle carbon emissions.

**Applications:**

- Bridges, high-rise buildings, marine structures, and pre-stressed elements.
- UHPC is ideal for **slender structural elements**, where superior strength allows for material reduction and lighter structures.

**Example:** A bridge deck in Japan used UHPC with 30% GGBS replacement. The concrete exhibited **high early-age strength, excellent durability, and reduced $CO_2$ emissions** compared to traditional concrete decks.

### 4. Geopolymer Concrete

**Geopolymer concrete (GPC)** is an innovative low-carbon alternative that **replaces Portland cement entirely** with **aluminosilicate materials** such as fly ash, metakaolin, or slag, activated using alkaline solutions (e.g., NaOH, KOH, or sodium silicate). This technology leverages **geopolymerization reactions** to form a **three-dimensional alumino-silicate network**, which serves as the binder instead of calcium silicate hydrate (C-S-H) in traditional concrete.

**Key Features:**

- **$CO_2$ reduction:** Can achieve up to 80% lower $CO_2$ emissions than conventional concrete, mainly by eliminating cement production.
- **Durability:** Excellent chemical resistance, low permeability, and high fire resistance.
- **Early and long-term strength:** Depending on activator type and curing conditions, compressive strength can exceed 50 MPa within 7–28 days.

**Advantages:**

1. **Sustainability:** Uses industrial by-products like fly ash and slag, reducing waste disposal.
2. **Thermal and chemical resistance:** Ideal for aggressive environments such as chemical plants and marine structures.
3. **Carbon sequestration potential:** Some formulations can absorb $CO_2$ during curing.

**Challenges:**

- Cost and availability of alkaline activators.
- Need for controlled curing conditions (e.g., elevated temperature or humidity) in some formulations.

- Limited adoption due to lack of international standards and design codes.

**Applications:**

- Infrastructure in harsh environments (chemical plants, seawater-exposed structures).
- Precast elements, pavements, and non-structural applications in urban construction.

**Case Study:** A pilot project in Australia used fly-ash-based geopolymer concrete for a footbridge. The result showed **comparable strength and durability to conventional concrete**, with a **70% reduction in $CO_2$ emissions**.

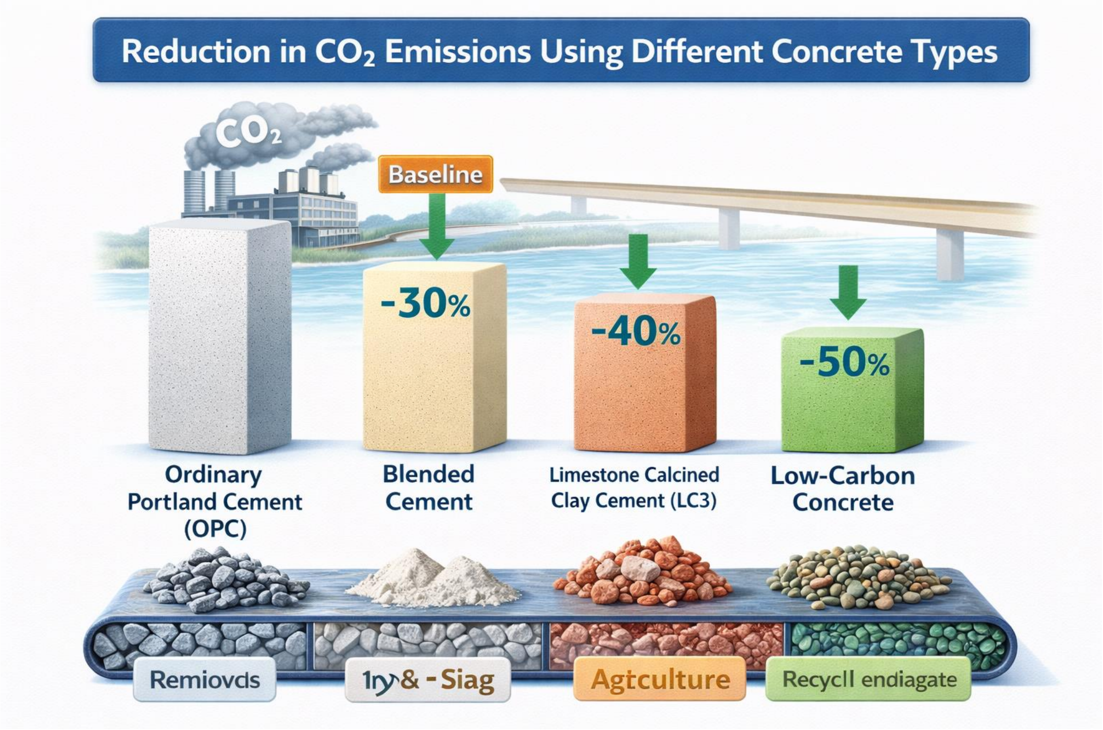

*Figure 1: Reduction in $CO_2$ Emissions Using Different Concrete Types*

## TECHNIQUES TO REDUCE CARBON FOOTPRINT

Reducing the carbon footprint of concrete requires a **multi-faceted approach**, targeting the main sources of $CO_2$ emissions in concrete production. These sources include cement manufacturing, aggregate extraction, and energy-intensive production processes. Modern research and practical applications have focused on strategies that **minimize cement usage, recycle $CO_2$, and optimize energy consumption** while maintaining structural performance and durability. The key techniques are discussed below.

## 1. Optimized Mix Design

**Optimized mix design** is one of the simplest and most effective ways to reduce the carbon footprint of concrete. Traditional concrete mixes often use higher-than-necessary cement content, leading to unnecessary $CO_2$ emissions. By carefully **balancing cement, aggregates, water, and admixtures**, it is possible to maintain strength and workability while lowering cement usage.

**Strategies for optimized mix design include:**

1. **Cement Reduction:**

- Partial replacement of cement with **Supplementary Cementitious Materials (SCMs)** such as fly ash, silica fume, GGBS, or rice husk ash can reduce $CO_2$ emissions by up to **30–40%**, depending on replacement level.
- For example, replacing 30% of cement with fly ash in a standard concrete mix can reduce carbon emissions from **400 kg $CO_2/m^3$ to approximately 280 kg $CO_2/m^3$**.

2. **Use of Mineral Fillers:**

- Materials like **limestone powder** or **natural pozzolans** improve packing density and reduce cement demand.
- Fillers also enhance workability, allowing for **lower water content** and reduced use of chemical admixtures.

3. **Optimized Aggregate Grading:**

- Proper aggregate proportioning ensures **maximum packing density**, reducing voids and minimizing cement paste requirements.
- Use of **recycled aggregates** where possible further reduces environmental impact.

4. **Performance-Based Design:**

- Instead of specifying concrete solely by cement content, modern codes emphasize **strength, durability, and service life**.
- This allows for lower cement usage without compromising safety.

**Benefits:**

- Reduced $CO_2$ emissions directly proportional to cement reduction.
- Cost savings due to lower cement consumption.
- Improved durability and reduced shrinkage when SCMs are included.

### 2. Carbon Capture and Utilization (CCU)

**Carbon Capture and Utilization (CCU)** in concrete production is an emerging technology aimed at **sequestering $CO_2$ from industrial emissions** into concrete during curing. This process is often referred to as **carbon curing**.

**Mechanism:**

- $CO_2$ from flue gases is injected into **fresh or precast concrete**.
- $CO_2$ reacts with calcium hydroxide and other alkaline components to form **stable calcium carbonate ($CaCO_3$)** within the cement matrix.
- This process accelerates **early-age strength development** and densifies the concrete microstructure.

**Advantages:**

1. **Carbon Sequestration:** Permanently traps $CO_2$ within the concrete, reducing net emissions.
2. **Strength Improvement:** Some studies report a **10–20% increase in compressive strength** compared to conventionally cured concrete.
3. **Durability Enhancement:** Carbonation reduces porosity, lowering permeability and enhancing resistance to chloride penetration.

**Applications:**

- **Precast concrete elements** such as blocks, pipes, and panels.
- Industrial-scale carbon curing plants can treat **tons of concrete per day**, integrating captured $CO_2$ into construction materials.

**Example:**

A precast plant in Europe implemented carbon curing using captured $CO_2$ from a cement plant. The process resulted in **over 200 kg $CO_2$ sequestered per cubic meter of concrete** and a 15%

increase in compressive strength.

### 3. Energy-Efficient Production

Cement production accounts for a large portion of energy consumption in concrete manufacture. Reducing energy usage directly translates into **lower $CO_2$ emissions**, as fossil fuels are often used to heat cement kilns to ~1450°C. Several strategies have been developed to improve energy efficiency:

**a) Alternative Fuels:**

- Use of **biomass, waste plastics, or industrial residues** as partial substitutes for coal in kilns.
- Reduces fossil fuel consumption and associated $CO_2$ emissions.

**b) Waste Heat Recovery:**

- Modern cement plants can **capture and reuse waste heat** from clinker production for electricity generation or preheating raw materials.
- This can reduce plant energy consumption by **10–20%**.

**c) Low-Temperature Clinkering Processes:**

- Innovations in clinker production allow for **reduced calcination temperatures**, lowering fuel consumption.
- Techniques include **modular kiln designs**, alternative raw mixes, or chemically enhanced clinkers.

**d) Electrification and Renewable Energy Integration:**

- Use of **electric kilns powered by renewable energy** further reduces emissions associated with cement manufacturing.

**Impact:**

- Combined, these strategies can reduce **$CO_2$ emissions from cement production by 20–50%**, depending on technology adoption and plant efficiency.

- Life-cycle assessments show that energy-efficient production combined with SCMs and recycled aggregates produces **the lowest carbon concrete** over the service life of structures.

## PERFORMANCE AND DURABILITY

While reducing carbon emissions is crucial, concrete must also meet performance criteria:

- **Compressive Strength:** SCMs and recycled aggregates may affect early-age strength but improve long-term strength.
- **Durability:** Reduced permeability, improved chemical resistance, and lower shrinkage are key advantages of green concrete.
- **Workability:** Proper mix design ensures comparable workability to conventional concrete.

*Table 2: Comparative Properties of Green and Conventional Concrete*

| Property | Conventional Concrete | SCM Concrete | RAC Concrete | Geopolymer Concrete |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Compressive Strength (MPa) | 40 | 42 | 38 | 45 |
| Durability | Moderate | High | Moderate | High |
| Workability | Good | Good | Moderate | Good |
| $CO_2$ Reduction (%) | 0 | 25–40 | 20–30 | 60–80 |

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the advantages, green concrete technologies face certain challenges:

1. **Availability of SCMs:** Industrial by-products like fly ash are limited in some regions.
2. **Variability of recycled aggregates:** Quality depends on source and treatment processes.
3. **Standardization issues:** Lack of widespread codes and standards for geopolymer and other innovative concretes.
4. **Cost and technical expertise:** Some technologies require specialized equipment or chemicals.

## EMERGING TRENDS

### 1. Nanotechnology

Incorporating nano-silica and other nanoparticles improves microstructure and durability, further reducing cement content and $CO_2$ emissions.

### 2. Smart Concrete

Self-healing and sensor-integrated concrete enhance longevity and reduce maintenance, indirectly contributing to sustainability.

### 3. Circular Economy Approaches

Maximizing the use of waste materials, reusing demolished concrete, and integrating lifecycle assessment in project planning supports a circular economy in construction.

## CONCLUSION

Green and low carbon concrete technologies present a promising pathway to sustainable construction. The use of SCMs, recycled aggregates, geopolymer concrete, and carbon capture methods can significantly reduce the environmental footprint of concrete. While challenges exist, continued research, standardization, and industry adoption can enable large-scale implementation. Policymakers and engineers must collaborate to balance performance, cost, and sustainability to achieve a low-carbon future in construction.

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