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WHITE PAPER: NOVEL LOW-CARBON MATERIAL ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

Version 1.0

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Executive Summary

Goals to decarbonize construction of data centers are being hampered by the absence of a standardized process for evaluating novel, low-carbon materials. This gap forces reliance on inconsistent assessments, which can result in the slowing of adoption of sustainable innovations and introduce risks related to material performance, scalability, and true environmental impact. A key material in data center construction is concrete, and its production has a notable contribution to GHG emissions. Hence, to support construction decarbonization, there is an urgent need to have a systematic framework to identify, evaluate, and deploy innovative and low-carbon alternatives to conventional concrete.

This white paper presents the “Framework for the Evaluation of the Adoptability of Novel Low-Carbon Cement and Concrete Technologies,” a systematic methodology to resolve this challenge. The full framework is presented in a [technical report](#) published by University California Davis and is summarized in this white paper. It provides a consistent and transparent system for evaluating materials across three essential criteria: (i) environmental impact; (ii) material performance; and (iii) feasibility.

By applying this holistic approach, stakeholders can de-risk new technologies and make confident, data-driven decisions, enabling the widespread adoption of sustainable materials for the next generation of data centers.



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1. Introduction

The increasing demand for data centers, fueled by advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and growing computing needs, presents a significant challenge for owners, operators, and general contractors aiming to meet sustainability goals. Current practice results in a major component of impacts coming from Scope 3 emissions. These indirect emissions from a company's value chain include the embodied carbon of construction materials, with concrete being a key contributor. While the industry is seeing many new low-carbon cement and concrete technologies, a standardized, efficient method for their evaluation is needed to accelerate assessment and adoption.

This framework offers a practical solution to this challenge. The full technical report, "[Framework for the Evaluation of the Adoptability of Novel Low-Carbon Cement and Concrete Technologies](#)," [1] summarized in this white paper was developed as a collaboration between Google and the University of California Davis (UC Davis) to provide a systematic methodology for assessing new materials. By sharing this framework, our goal is to empower industry stakeholders to make data-driven decisions. This will enable the confident, responsible, and efficient scaling of low-carbon innovations, which is essential to significantly reduce Scope 3 emissions and accelerate the industry's transition to a more sustainable future.

The Open Compute Project (OCP) is a natural and ideal forum for this contribution. The OCP community's foundation is built on the principles of collaboration, transparency, and a shared pursuit of efficiency and sustainability. By providing this framework to the OCP community, we are aligning with this core philosophy, enabling members to share a common tool and language for evaluating sustainable construction materials. This effort also aligns with the OCP's mission to design and enable scalable, efficient infrastructure, and we believe that this open-source approach is the most effective way to foster rapid innovation and adoption of low-carbon technologies across the entire data center industry.



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2. Compliance with Open Compute Project Tenets

The “Framework for the Evaluation of the Adoptability of Novel Low-Carbon Cement and Concrete Technologies” embodies the core tenets of the Open Compute Project (OCP) by promoting a transparent, collaborative, and forward-thinking approach to sustainable construction. The methodology and findings of this technical report align directly with the philosophy of sharing to drive industry-wide change.

2.1. Openness

This white paper demonstrates a commitment to openness by providing a comprehensive, structured, evaluation framework that is intended for widespread use and adoption. The methodology is clearly defined, and the criteria for assessing novel technologies are transparently outlined. This promotes the ability for any third party, from material manufacturers to data center operators, to adopt, modify, and personalize the framework to their specific needs. By sharing this detailed evaluation process, co-created by UC Davis and Google, the report actively removes barriers to innovation, enabling a common language for assessing material readiness and fostering collaboration within the broader ecosystem of low-carbon materials development.

2.2. Efficiency

The primary goal of the framework is to drive efficiency and standardization in the selection and deployment of novel construction materials. The white paper establishes a systematic approach for evaluating new cements and concrete based on a variety of metrics, including material performance, environmental impact, and feasibility. In doing so, it enables a more efficient decision-making process, reducing the time and resources traditionally spent on vetting new technologies. Additionally, prioritizing materials with lower embodied carbon, the framework directly addresses the efficiency of resource use and contributes to a smaller environmental footprint per unit of construction.



2.3. Impact

This contribution has a transformative impact on the industry by introducing a standardized and repeatable method for evaluating technologies that are critical to achieving decarbonization goals. The framework addresses a significant industry-wide challenge: the rapid and responsible adoption of low-carbon materials in high-volume applications like data center construction. By providing a clear pathway for assessing technologies from "incubation" to "piloting" and "deployment," the white paper creates a pathway to accelerate time-to-market for promising innovations. This enables the scaling of new technologies that can help meet ambitious emissions reduction targets globally, creating a meaningful positive impact on the OCP ecosystem and the construction sector at large.

2.4. Scale

The framework is designed for easy implementation and application at any scale, from a single material assessment to a broad portfolio analysis. It provides the necessary tools and systematic scoring to inform decisions, ensuring that solutions can be incrementally scaled to address the entire problem of decarbonizing cement and concrete. The report's emphasis on feasibility—including supply chain resilience, available infrastructure, and manufacturability—ensures that the technologies identified are viable for deployment. The framework itself can be easily adopted by any organization, providing a common tool for evaluation that can grow with the user's needs and the industry's evolving landscape.

2.5. Sustainability

The framework's core purpose is to provide a transparent and evidence-based method for evaluating novel materials based on their environmental impacts. It mandates a focus on the responsible use of natural resources and minimizing environmental harm, with a specific emphasis on quantifying greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and other life cycle burdens. By providing a structured approach for assessing sustainability, the document fosters continuous



improvement and encourages the adoption of materials that promote a circular economy and responsible resource management.

3. Navigating the Low Embodied Carbon Material Landscape

The drive to decarbonize the construction sector has spurred a wave of innovative, low-embodied carbon materials. While promising, this expanding market creates a complex evaluation landscape for data center stakeholders. Many novel materials have compelling environmental claims, but lack comprehensive performance data or a clear path to scalable production.

The primary challenge lies in balancing three, often competing, criteria: (i) environmental impact; (ii) material performance; and (iii) feasibility. As examples, a material with a low-carbon footprint may not meet durability standards, a high-performing alternative might be too expensive or rely on a fragile supply chain. This difficulty is compounded by a lack of standardized assessment methods, making direct comparisons between materials difficult and forcing organizations to conduct costly, bespoke evaluations.

A standardized, systematic framework is therefore essential. It would enable consistent and efficient assessment of novel materials, ensuring that decisions are based on a holistic understanding of both risks and readiness, thereby accelerating the adoption of effective and applicable sustainable solutions.

4. A Systematic Approach to Risk & Readiness

The purpose of the evaluation framework is to provide a systematic, transparent, and evidence-based approach to determining whether a novel product or technology should be incubated for further research and development, piloted at a larger scale, or is ready for deployment. It is intended for technologies at early to mid-stage development to help identify research gaps, risks, and technology readiness. Figure 1 presents a suggested workflow for application of the evaluation framework. Prior to the framework application, an initial screening



process (Step 1) is suggested to collect information and identify materials viable for in-depth evaluation. It is up to the user to formulate initial screening criteria based on their individual organization's needs.

The detailed evaluation (Step 2) is formulated as in-depth series of questions categorized by three focus areas: (i) environmental impacts; (ii) material performance; and (iii) feasibility. Questions under **environmental impacts** are aimed at evaluating the methodology used to quantify the GHG emissions and other environmental burdens associated with the product. **Material performance** questions cover critical engineering characteristics, performance criteria, and conformance with material standards to ensure reliability and a path to industry acceptance. The evaluation of **feasibility** focuses on crucial considerations related to scalability, safety, supply chain resilience, and compliance with regulations. More details are provided in the full [technical report](#) [1]. The questions will help the user identify risks and sources of uncertainty associated with the material and its market readiness. Uncertainty, in this case, is based on questions unanswered due to limited information, and in the context of this framework, it is used to highlight information gaps that need to be filled in subsequent steps (incubation, piloting, or deployment). Hence, the results from the detailed evaluation will guide what areas need further testing, modeling, or analysis to improve the readiness. For suggested actions for Step 3-5, see the full [technical report](#) [1].



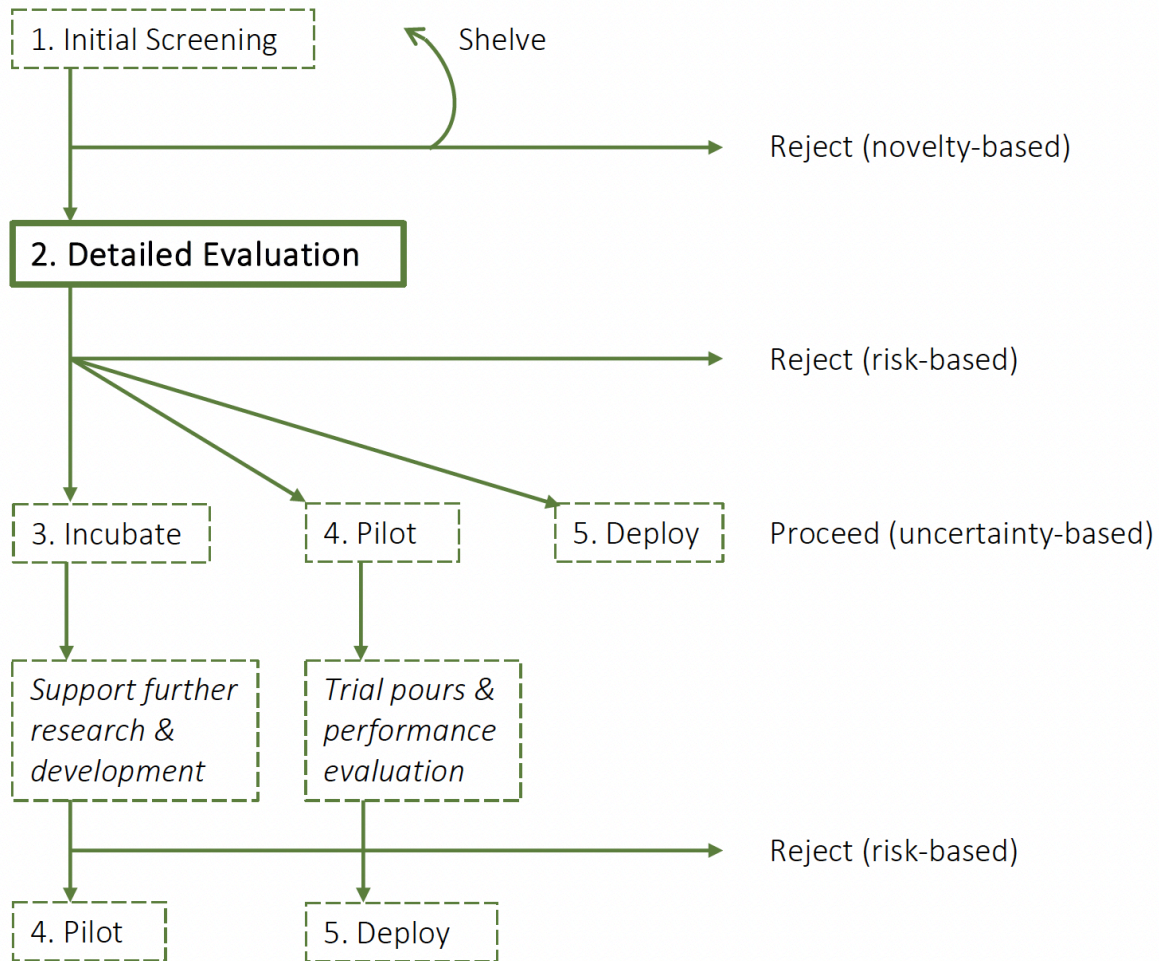


Figure 1: Flow chart illustrating the suggested workflow. The evaluation framework is applied in Step 2.

Existing frameworks such as the Technology Readiness Level by National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) [2] and the Adoption Readiness Level (ARL) by the United States Department of Energy (DOE) [3] are commonly utilized to evaluate the maturity of a novel technology. The maturity for deployment is a critical consideration, hence, the detailed



evaluation presented in this framework is based on the same concept, and it takes a similar approach to identify risks and challenges related to market implementability and viability. Risks and challenges specific to the cement and concrete are outlined in the full [technical report](#) [1].

The evaluation questions related to environmental impacts, material performance, and feasibility are answered with one of three predefined risk scenarios that best aligns with the available information. Figure 2 shows an example of an evaluation question and its associated risk scenarios. Questions marked red indicate ‘red flags’, i.e., if ‘high’ risk is selected, the product should be rejected. If the information needed to confidently answer an evaluation question is unavailable or not provided by the vendor, the evaluator may select "IM/uncertain" (IM: Information Missing), see Figure 3. As such, questions marked IM/uncertain highlight information gaps to be filled through incubation or piloting, unless more information can be provided by the vendor.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT					
Adoption Criteria	Explanation of Risks	Risk Level			
		Low	Medium	High	
2	Unintended Life Cycle Burdens	<i>Risks associated with the potential for unforeseen unintended side effects even with lower GHG emissions than reference product (e.g., generation of hazardous waste); or unintended consequences from production, transport, or use of the product in the absence of sufficient controls.</i> The product demonstrates lower or similar non-GHG emissions environmental impacts than the representative reference (the conventional product on the market that would otherwise be used). The product or the production technology has minimal inherent environmental burdens or hazardous risk.	The product demonstrates lower GHG emissions than a representative reference, but has potential for environmental degradation and/or can generate hazardous waste or cause other burdens, but the risks can be managed through current processes and/or anticipated future processes or solutions.	The product has potential to create significant environmental degradation or increase other emissions or is associated with other environmental burdens over currently fielded solutions.	

Figure 2: Example of evaluation question with explanation of the risks and definitions of the three risk scenarios.

Select the box that best corresponds with the provided information about the product			
Risk Level Assessment			
Low	Medium	High	IM/uncertain

Figure 3: Risk level assessment. The evaluator assigns a level that best applies to the product being evaluated. IM = Information Missing.

Based on the overall score obtained for each of the three categories (environmental impacts, material performance, and feasibility) in the risk assessment, the material is assigned a level of uncertainty (i.e., the number of evaluation questions that could not be answered due to lack of data or information). Figure 4 shows suggested categorization based on the overall results. These ranges can be adjusted as needed by the user to meet specific needs. More explanation about the scoring procedure can be found in the full [technical report](#) [1].

Risk	Uncertainty	Readiness	Action
Moderate-to-high	High	<4	Shelve or reject
Low-to-moderate	High-to-moderate	5-6	Incubate
Low	Low-to-moderate	7-8	Pilot
Low	Low	9	Deploy

Figure 4: Suggested uncertainty and risk categorization of a novel material.

5. Case Study: De-Risking a Novel Material

To demonstrate the applicability of the evaluation framework, a case study on a non-conventional low-carbon cement is conducted. Limestone calcined clay cement (LC3) is an emerging blended cement which has demonstrated great potential to reduce GHG emissions



compared to conventional cement. While there can be variations, a commonly proposed LC3 is composed of 15% limestone, 30% calcined clay, 5% gypsum, and 50% clinker. LC3 uses a clinker produced in the same manner as clinker for conventional cement, and the production of calcined clay has a lower energy requirement as well as negligible direct process-related CO₂ emissions. As a result, LC3 has a notable potential for reducing emissions relative to a conventional cement. The development of LC3 gained a strong foothold at the Swiss Federal Technology Institute of Lausanne (EPFL), where its technical feasibility was demonstrated over a three-year initial phase, followed by a phase focusing on market preparation and implementation, and policy outreach. The product has been adopted in India, Cuba, and in the European market. This case study focuses on the feasibility for adoption into a United States market. The detailed evaluation assessment is based on documents from the LC3-project [4], as well as from published experimental studies and life cycle assessments from the literature.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Case studies on LC3 produced in California have demonstrated a 36-40% reduction in GHG emissions compared to conventional cement. The embodied carbon emissions have been quantified in a life cycle assessment of LC3 by Martinez et al. [5], which is used for the detailed evaluation of the environmental impacts in this case study. Table 1 summarizes the risk levels for each evaluation question.

With a readiness level of 7 (Figure 5, below) and low uncertainty, LC3 demonstrates high potential to be produced in the United States with reduced GHG emissions compared to conventional cement. Information gaps and suggested further research needs are presented in the full [technical report](#) [1].



Table 1. Risk levels for the environmental impacts associated with LC3, based on [5], [6].

Environmental impacts	Risk level	Motivation
Environmental Product Declaration (EPD)	Medium	No EPD, but a California-based LCA study has demonstrated reduced impact compared to conventional cement.
Unintended Life Cycle Burdens	Low	Other emissions (NOx, SOx, PM2.5, PM10, VOC, CO, Pb), water consumption, and energy demand have been demonstrated lower than for conventional cement.
Assessment Scope and Representativeness	Low	The life cycle assessment scope is similar to conventional cement production, and differences are clearly considered.
Life Cycle Inventory Data	Medium	A data quality analysis has been performed, demonstrating medium data quality.
Environmental Impact Variability and Sensitivity	Low	Sensitivity analysis has been performed and shows low variability.
Life Cycle Completeness	High	Cradle-to-gate assessment is performed, excluding environmental impacts from the production, use, and end-of-life stages.
End-of-Life Management	IM	
Alternative Cements Produced Similarly to PC (clinkered)	Low	It is known that the energy demand is lower and can be achieved by minor modification to existing kilns.

Figure 5: Environmental impacts risk score and readiness level. With two medium and one high risk counts, the environmental impacts category demonstrates low risk and a readiness level of 7.

Environmental impacts										
Readiness Level	High risk counts									
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Medium risk counts	0	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
	1	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	1
	2	8	7	6	4	4	2	1	1	1
	3	7	6	5	4	3	1	1	1	1
	4	7	6	4	3	2	1	1	1	1
	5	6	5	4	2	1	1	1	1	1
	6	6	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
	7	5	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	8	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1



MATERIAL PERFORMANCE

LC3 is a well studied material in the scientific literature, and its engineering properties and performance have been demonstrated as satisfactory through extensive research and piloting projects. The uncertainty of the material performance is low due to the amount of information and testing data available. Table 2 summarizes the risk levels for each evaluation question.

LC3 demonstrates low uncertainty and a readiness level of 8 (Figure 6, below). Based on this evaluation, long-term performance needs to be verified through pilot testing and material standards need to be updated to cover LC3, to which will support and accelerate broader industry adoption.

Table 2. Risk levels for the material performance of LC3, see full [technical report](#) [1] for list of references.

Material Performance	Risk Level	Motivation
Functional Performance	Low	LC3 has been demonstrated to obtain comparable performance to conventional cement.
Testing and Performance Verification	Low	Extensive testing in various conditions and over long durations have demonstrated satisfactory performance.
Code and Standards Compliance	Medium	Complies with ASTM C595 (blended hydraulic cements) and the calcined clay can be classified as Class N (natural pozzolan) per ASTM C618, but there is no standard for LC3.
Mixture Design and Proportions	Low	It is well known how LC3 influences concrete properties, and how to obtain desired performance.
Fresh and Transitional Properties	Low	Minor need for additional measures to obtain properties.
Mechanical Properties	Low	Overall, equal or better performance than concrete with conventional cement.
Long-term and Durability Properties	Medium	LC3 has been tested long-term in the field, but some durability properties are yet to be verified.



Figure 6: Material performance risk score and readiness level. With two medium risk counts, the material performance demonstrates low risk and a readiness level of 8.

Material performance										
Readiness Level	High risk counts									
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Medium risk counts	0	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
	1	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	1
	2	8	7	6	4	4	2	1	1	1
	3	7	6	5	4	3	1	1	1	1
	4	7	6	4	3	2	1	1	1	1
	5	6	5	4	2	1	1	1	1	1
	6	6	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
	7	5	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	8	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

FEASIBILITY

The economic and technical feasibility of LC3 compared to conventional cement has been demonstrated through multiple studies and pilot projects in India, Cuba, and in Europe. It has been shown that LC3 can be produced with minor adjustments to current construction practice and production (LC3 can be produced using the same production technology as conventional cement). The raw materials for calcined clay (e.g., kaolin-rich clay) are available in large quantities in some areas of the United States (southeast and parts of the Pacific northwest). Table 3 summarizes the risk levels for each evaluation question.

LC3 is associated with medium risk and a readiness level of 5 (Figure 7, below). The barriers to overcome for practical implementation of LC3 in the United States mainly stem from the need to establish required permitting for use of low-kaolin clays, infrastructure and supply chains and initial investment to make adjustments to existing kilns and train the workforce, as well as creating incentives such as through policy mechanisms.



Table 3. Risk levels for the LC3 feasibility , see full [technical report](#) [1] for list of references.

Feasibility	Risk Level	Motivation
Delivered Cost	Low	No risk associated with market swings has been identified.
Ease of Use/Complexity	Low	Works with current equipment and on-site infrastructure.
Market Size	Low	At scale, LC3 has the potential to compete strongly and broadly on the market.
Infrastructure	Medium	The United States currently lacks the infrastructure to produce LC3 at scale, and kaolin clay is not available uniformly all over the US.
Manufacturing and Supply Chain	Medium	Minor adjustments are required to produce LC3 using existing technology. Clinker, limestone and gypsum are already available at cement plants, but supply chains for calcined clay (and the clay precursor) are yet to be established.
Materials Sourcing	Medium	Raw materials needed for LC3 production do not compete with other industries and can be sourced from some existing mines. Processing is needed to make the clays viable for use in concrete.
Workforce	Medium	Minor adjustment needed, some training required for mixing and production, as well as educating engineers.
Policy Environment	Medium	Currently not enough incentives in terms of carbon credits/taxes at national level to invest in LC3 production.
Permitting and Siting	High	The permitting process for opening new mines is complicated and heavily regulated. However, there is potential for clay to be obtained from some existing mines.
Safety	Low	No safety risks or concerns have been highlighted.

Figure 7: Feasibility risk score and readiness level. With 5 medium risk counts and one high risk count, the material performance demonstrates medium risk and a readiness level of 5.

		Feasibility								
Readiness Level		High risk counts								
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Medium risk counts	0	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
	1	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	1
	2	8	7	6	4	4	2	1	1	1
	3	7	6	5	4	3	1	1	1	1
	4	7	6	4	3	2	1	1	1	1
	5	6	5	4	2	1	1	1	1	1
	6	6	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
	7	5	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	8	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1



RESULTS

The overall score for LC3 adoption in the United States is presented in Figure 8. Based on this evaluation, LC3 can proceed to piloting. Next steps should focus on addressing challenges related to the feasibility for broad industry implementation, such as scaling up production. Additionally, piloting LC3 should include efforts to improve environmental impact data and verify long-term performance considering data center applications. Information collected during piloting can inform standardization of LC3, and demonstrate its viability for broader industry adoption to drive decarbonization.

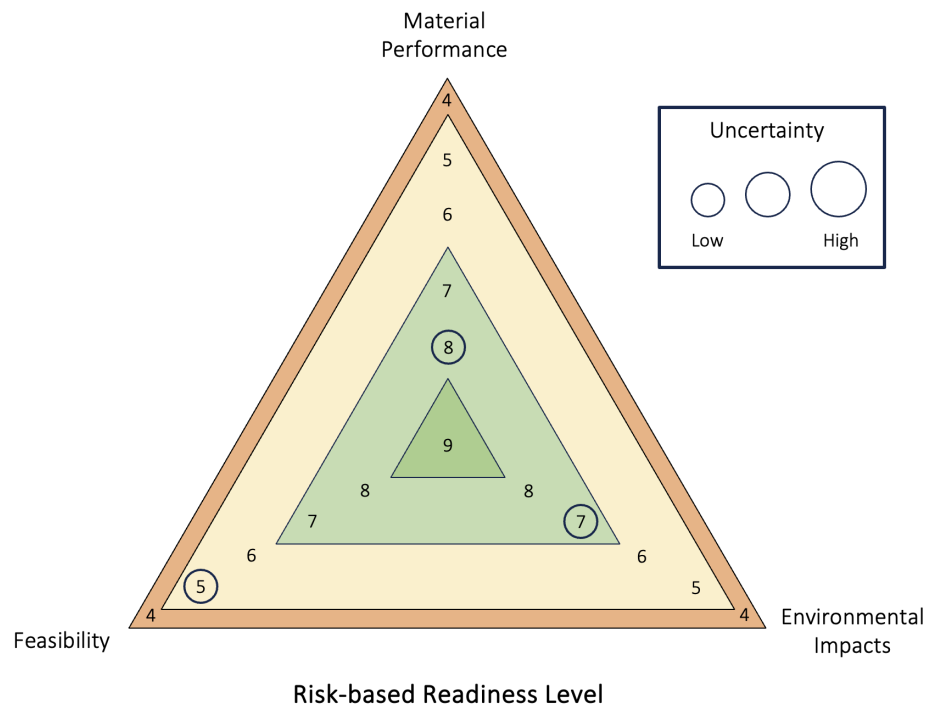


Figure 8: Risk-based readiness for each evaluation category, with uncertainty indicated by the size of the circles. Red indicates shelf or reject, yellow indicates incubation, and green indicates pilot or deploy the material.

6. Conclusion

The systematic approach developed for this evaluation framework covers critical considerations such as life cycle environmental impacts, material performance, and feasibility for successful adoption of novel materials to support decarbonization. The framework guides identification of risks (such as safety concerns, scalability, unintended environmental burdens) and information gaps that need to be filled through incubation or piloting, before the product can become ready for deployment. Robust evaluation of novel materials and technologies is essential for successful market implementation. Application of this framework can support the innovation and deployment of materials with the potential to significantly reduce GHG emissions from cement and concrete. Adoption of emerging low-carbon or net-zero materials in data center construction can have a significant impact on both the advancement and innovation of the construction industry, but also on the future environmental impact contribution from large scale digitalization.

7. References

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8. License

8.1. Creative Commons

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9. About Open Compute Foundation

The Open Compute Project (OCP) is a collaborative Community of hyperscale data center operators, telecom, colocation providers and enterprise IT users, working with the product and solution vendor ecosystem to develop open innovations deployable from the cloud to the edge. The OCP Foundation is responsible for fostering and serving the OCP Community to meet the market and shape the future, taking hyperscale-led innovations to everyone. Meeting the market is accomplished through addressing challenging market obstacles with open specifications, designs and emerging market programs that showcase OCP-recognized IT equipment and data center facility best practices. Shaping the future includes investing in strategic initiatives and programs that prepare the IT ecosystem for major technology changes, such as AI & ML, optics, advanced cooling techniques, composable memory and silicon. OCP Community-developed open innovations strive to benefit all, optimized through the lens of impact, efficiency, scale and sustainability. Learn more at www.opencompute.org.



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