https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-1423
Preprint. Discussion started: 19 March 2026

Reaction kinetics and multi-sulfur products formation of sulfur-containing volatile organic compounds with OH radicals

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Abstract. Atmospheric sulfur-containing volatile organic compounds (sulfur-VOCs) have been recognized as crucial precursors for gaseous sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4), particulate sulfate and secondary organic aerosol (SOA) formation. However, their reaction kinetics and multi-sulfur product formation remain poorly understood. This study presents a systematic kinetic investigation into •OH-initiated oxidation of a series of sulfur-VOCs including thiols and sulfides, and the reaction rates of dithiols and cyclic sulfides are generally higher than that of monothiols and acyclic sulfides. It was further demonstrated that under low NO_x, sulfur-containing RO_2 radicals can undergo bimolecular reactions forming low-volatility multi-sulfur products that enhance their SOA formation potential. Additionally, many sulfur-VOCs investigated in our chamber experiments are also identified from the emissions of algae samples collected from a major freshwater lake in China, and similar multi-sulfur oxidation products were observed. These findings advance the kinetic and mechanistic understanding of atmospheric sulfur-VOCs oxidation and suggest that the formation of low-volatility multi-sulfur products and inorganic sulfur-containing species may contribute to SOA production and new particle formation in marine and freshwater environments influenced by algal emissions.

Keywords: sulfur-VOCs, reaction rates, multi-sulfur products, freshwater algae emissions, secondary organic aerosol

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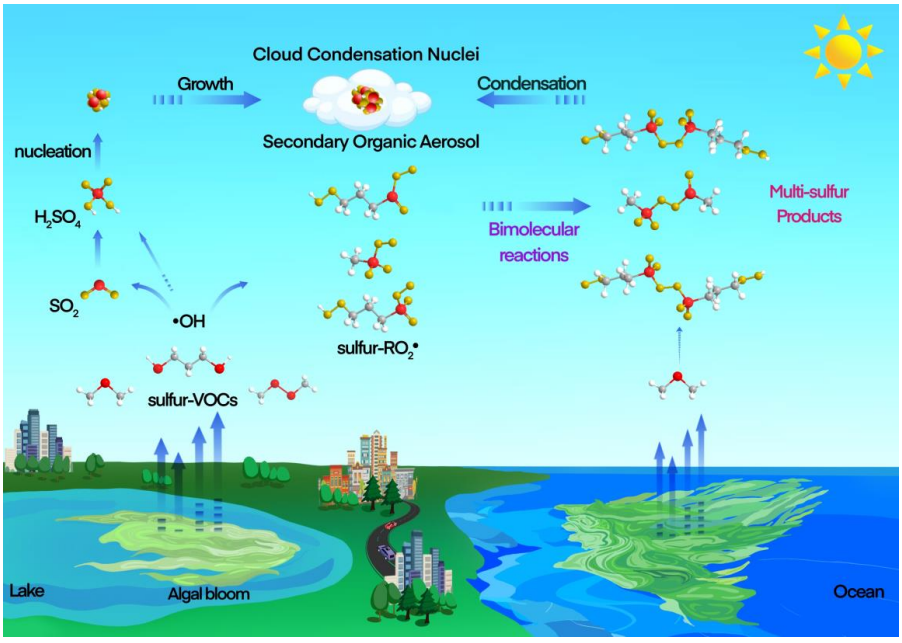

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1 Introduction

Atmospheric sulfur-containing volatile organic compounds (sulfur-VOCs) (e.g., dimethyl sulfide (CH_3SCH_3, DMS), methanthiol (CH_3SH), dimethyl disulfide ($CH_3S_2CH_3$, DMDS), and carbonyl sulfide (OCS)) are important biogenic VOCs and mainly produced by degradation of sulfur-containing amino acids and methylation of sulfides (Kietäväinen et al., 2025; Kilgour et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023b). These compounds play a key role in the global atmospheric sulfur cycle, and their atmospheric oxidation products such as sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4) and methanesulfonic acid (CH_3SO_3H) are able to combine with basic species (e.g., NH_3 and amines) to form new particles and particulate sulfate , which can contribute to the formation of cloud condensation nuclei (CCN) and then have an effect on regional and global climate (Fiddes et al., 2021; Jokinen et al., 2022; Revell et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023a).

At present, it is widely recognized that marine ecosystems (e.g., phytoplankton) are the dominant natural sources of atmospheric sulfur-VOCs, among which DMS is the dominate one and mainly produced via the dimethylsulfoniopropionate (DMSP) metabolic pathway of phytoplankton (Novak et al., 2022; Rocco et al., 2025). The importance of this source is further underscored by recent satellite-based observations showing that, between 2003 and 2020, the global spatial extent of coastal phytoplankton blooms expanded by 13.2% (+ 3.97 million km^2) and their frequency increased by 59.2%, indicating an overall intensification of marine algae activity (Dai et al., 2023). The measurements in marine boundary layer reported DMS mixing ratios ranging from tens to a few hundred pptv with pronounced seasonal maxima in biologically productive waters (Zhao et al., 2021). Co-emitted methanthiol is also detected and generally ranged from ~10 to 250 pptv (Mynard et al., 2025; Novak et al., 2022; Rocco et al., 2025).

In addition to marine phytoplankton, freshwater algae are also recognized as important sources of atmospheric sulfur-VOCs, including DMS, DMDS, and dimethyl trisulfide ($CH_3S_3CH_3$, DMTS), which are released through amino acid degradation and methylation processes (Bao et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2018; Li et al., 2022). This source is becoming particularly relevant in eutrophic freshwater lakes experiencing frequent algal blooms. In China, around 85.4% of the 138 major freshwater lakes with their areas larger than 10 km^2 suffer from varying degrees of eutrophication (Wang et al., 2022). In such systems, concentrations of DMS, DMDS, and DMTS in the water column commonly reach the microgram per liter level (Bao et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2019a). Supporting the potential for atmospheric release, previous laboratory and field studies have quantified sulfur-VOCs emission fluxes from freshwater lakes, showing that DMS can be emitted at rates of several μmol m^{-2} d^{-1}, with emission intensity strongly modulated by seasonality and trophic status of lakes (Li et al., 2022; Steinke et al., 2018). Many sulfur-VOCs have been directly observed in the atmosphere near an inland freshwater lake (Dianshan Lake, Shanghai)

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during winter-spring campaigns, with mixing ratios of DMS, methanthiol and DMDS can be up to 331.4 pptv, 183.8 pptv, and 153.6 pptv, respectively (Deng et al., 2025).

Once released into the atmosphere, sulfur-VOCs can rapidly react with hydroxyl radicals (•OH). The reaction rates between a few sulfur-VOCs (e.g., methanethiol, DMS, and DMDS (Abbatt et al., 1992; Barnes et al., 1986; Cruz-Torres and Galano, 2007; Hashemi et al., 2019)) and •OH have been well-established, with k_{OH} values of ~3.3×10^{-11} cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1} for methanthiol, ~7.0×10^{-12} cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1} for DMS, and ~2.3×10^{-10} cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1} for DMDS, respectively (Atkinson et al., 2004). These reactions play a critical role in determining the atmospheric lifetimes and transformation pathways of these sulfur VOCs. There are significant differences in the reactivity of sulfur-VOCs with different functional groups towards •OH, with thiols and disulfides generally exhibiting higher reactivity than that of mono-sulfides (Abbatt et al., 1992; Cruz-Torres and Galano, 2007; Hashemi et al., 2019; Tahan and Shiroudi, 2020). However, systematic understanding of reaction kinetics of sulfur-VOCs with different functional groups towards •OH remains limited, particularly for sulfur-VOCs with complex molecular structures which are increasingly detected in field measurements. For instance, 1-propanethiol ($CH_3(CH_2)_2SH$), 2-propanethiol ($(CH_3)_2CHSH$), methyl propyl disulfide ($CH_3S_2(CH_2)_2CH_3$), diethyl disulfide ($CH_3CH_2S_2CH_2CH_3$), and isopropyl disulfide ($(CH_3)_2CHS_2CH(CH_3)_2$) have been detected from freshwater algae emissions, yet data on their reaction kinetics with •OH remain scarce (Liu et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2019b; Zhou et al., 2024). Therefore, it hinders accurate assessments of the chemical behavior and environmental impact of these biogenic sulfur-VOCs in the atmosphere, particularly in aquatic environments (e.g., huge freshwater lakes) where algae blooms frequently occur.

Previous studies on the reaction mechanisms between some sulfur-VOCs and •OH have established a relatively comprehensive framework (Berndt et al., 2024; Goss and Kroll, 2023; Shen et al., 2022; Ye et al., 2022). The initial steps typically involve the formation of sulfur-containing radicals (sulfur-R•) via H-extraction or •OH-addition, which then combine with O_2 to generate various sulfur-containing RO_2 radicals (sulfur-RO_2•) (Berndt et al., 2023; Goss and Kroll, 2023; Shen et al., 2022). Among these, sulfides primarily form α-carbon peroxy radicals (e.g., CH_3SCH_2OO•), while thiols and disulfides tend to generate sulfur-centered peroxy radicals (e.g., RSOO•) (Berndt et al., 2023; Goss and Kroll, 2023; Lily et al., 2023). Although the unimolecular reactions (e.g., H-migration) and bimolecular reaction pathways involving NO_x and HO_2• of these sulfur-RO_2• species have been investigated, the bimolecular reactions between sulfur-RO_2• and sulfur-R'O_2• remain poorly characterized (Berndt et al., 2023; Jernigan et al., 2022; Shen et al., 2022).

This study systematically investigated the reaction kinetics and multi-sulfur products formation of 11 sulfur-VOCs with •OH using a Teflon chamber together with a Vocus proton transfer reaction

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long-time-of-flight mass spectrometry (Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS, Tofwerk AG) and a nitrate-based chemical ionization long-time-of-flight mass spectrometry (nitrate-CI-LToF-MS, Aerodyne Research). To investigate the relationship between the reaction rates and their molecular structures, these 11 sulfur-VOCs were divided into 5 classes, which are monothiols (i.e., ethanethiol (C_2H_6S), 1-propanethiol (C_3H_8S), and 2-propanethiol (C_3H_8S)), dithiols (i.e., 1,2-ethanedithiol ($C_2H_6S_2$), and 1,3-propanedithiol ($C_3H_8S_2$)), acyclic sulfides (i.e., dimethyl sulfide (C_2H_6S), methyl ethyl sulfide (C_3H_8S), and bis(methylthio)methane ($C_3H_8S_2$)), cyclic sulfides (i.e., trimethylene sulfide (C_3H_6S), and 1,3-dithiolane ($C_3H_6S_2$)) and disulfides (dimethyl disulfide ($C_2H_6S_2$)) (Table 1). Moreover, the emitted VOCs from freshwater algae samples taken from a huge freshwater lake (i.e., Taihu lake, China) and their oxidation products by •OH were also investigated. Similar sulfur-VOCs and multi-sulfur products were also observed from VOCs emitted from freshwater algae samples and their oxidation products, which demonstrates the atmospheric relevance of our selected sulfur-VOCs and their atmospheric transformation mechanisms in our study.

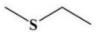
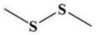
2 Materials and methods

2.1 Chamber experiments of 11 sulfur-VOCs with •OH

The selected 11 high-purity (≥ 96%) sulfur-VOCs liquid standards (Sigma-Aldrich and Macklin) were listed in Table S1. These liquid standards were then used to generate individual sulfur-VOC standard gases with our laboratory partial-pressure gas mixing system (Li et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2020). The experimental setup is shown in Figure S1. A 0.53 m^3 polytetrafluoroethylene (FEP) chamber was employed to conduct atmospheric oxidation experiments of sulfur-VOCs with •OH. The experimental conditions including the initial mixing ratios of sulfur-VOCs, O_3 concentration, and relative humidity (RH), are summarized in Table 1. The OH radicals were generated by photolysis of O_3 under humid condition using a 253 nm ultraviolet lamp (Philips TUV 16W).

During these experiments, the evolution of 11 sulfur-VOCs was monitored by a Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS, and their oxidation intermediates and products (e.g., sulfur-containing peroxy radicals, gaseous H_2SO_4 and multi-sulfur products) were detected using a nitrate-CI-LToF-MS. The estimation of wall and dilution loss of sulfur-VOCs in our chamber was described in Text S3. The procedure used to quantify sulfur-containing oxygenated organic molecules (sulfur-OOMs) was described in Text S5. In addition, an ozone monitor (Thermo, 49i) and a temperature and humidity sensor (Vaisala HMP110) were used to record O_3 concentration and monitor environmental conditions in the chamber. Due to the chamber is not collapsible, a make-up flow of 15 L/min high-purity zero air generated from zero air generator (AADCO 737 series) was continuously introduced to the chamber and a RH of 20~25% was maintained.

143 **Table 1.** Experimental conditions of 11 sulfur-VOCs with •OH under temperature 291±1 K and 1 atm.

Exp.	Species	sulfur-VOCs	Formulae	Molecular structure	Precursor conc. (ppbv)	$[O_3]$ (ppbv)	Relative humidity (%)
1	Monothiols	ethanethiol	C_2H_6S		0.90	33.5	25.1
2					1.50	31.7	24.3
3		1-propanethiol	C_3H_8S		45.39	32.4	17.4
4		2-propanethiol	C_3H_8S		1.10	31.8	24.0
5					1.77	31.5	24.0
6	Dithiols	1,2-ethanedithiol	$C_2H_6S_2$		0.65	30.0	23.9
7					1.67	30.5	24.3
8		1,3-propanedithiol	$C_3H_8S_2$		2.84	30.0	22.8
9					2.33	31.1	24.0
10	Acyclic sulfides	dimethyl sulfide	C_2H_6S		0.83	30.9	24.0
11					0.94	31.7	22.0
12		methyl ethyl sulfide	C_3H_8S		0.28	29.5	24.2
13					0.29	31.7	24.3
14		bis(methylthio)methane	$C_3H_8S_2$		10.61	30.4	20.9
15	Cyclic sulfides	trimethylene sulfide	C_3H_6S		0.79	28.6	24.3
16					0.62	29.7	25.3
17		1,3-dithiolane	$C_3H_6S_2$		1.40	35.0	22.8
18					1.23	31.7	24.3
19	Disulfides	dimethyl disulfide	$C_2H_6S_2$		0.74	33.0	25.5
20					0.75	29.0	24.7

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2.2 Characteristic of VOC emission from freshwater algae

Fresh water samples with algae were collected from Taihu Lake (~2338.1 km^2), China, which is the third largest freshwater lake in China (Qin et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023c), at the Taihu Lake Ecosystem Research Station (Figure S2 a). In the past years, frequent large-scale algal blooms often occurred in Taihu Lake due to anthropogenic nutrient inputs and endogenous pollutant releases in summer(Wang et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021). Therefore, the water samples with algae taken from Taihu Lake were treated as representative samples of freshwater algae.

During the emission characterization process, water samples were divided into 12 petri dishes (with a total exposed liquid surface area of 0.213 m^2) and placed in the chamber for 18 hours at the temperature of ~21°C to allow the release of VOCs (Figure S2 b). After that, ~90 ppb of O_3 was injected into the chamber and two 253 nm UV lamps were turned on to generate •OH by photolysis of O_3 under humid conditions (Figure S3). A Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS, which was calibrated using selected sulfur-VOC standards (Text S4), was employed to measure and identify sulfur-VOCs and other VOC species released from freshwater algae, as well as their low-oxygenated oxidation products, while a nitrate-CI-LToF-MS was used to identify the mono-sulfur and multi-sulfur products derived from the reactions of sulfur-VOCs from algal source with •OH.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Rate constants of sulfur-VOCs with •OH

The reaction rates were derived based on Eq. (1) in Text S2. By monitoring the change in concentrations of sulfur-VOCs over time, a linear relationship was established. To estimate the •OH concentration in the chamber, DMS was employed as a reference compound, based on its well-established temperature-dependent reaction rate with •OH (Text S2). The estimated •OH concentration was ~$4.42 \pm 0.08 \times 10^7$ molecules cm^{-3}. Using the estimated •OH concentration, the reaction rate constants of 10 other sulfur-VOCs with •OH were subsequently determined (Table 2).

The order of magnitude of reaction rates ranged from 10^{-11} to 10^{-10} cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1} (Table 2), with pronounced differences among different classes of sulfur-VOCs, including thiols, dithiols, acyclic sulfides, cyclic sulfides, and disulfide. Besides the reference compound DMS which was used to estimate •OH concentration in the chamber, Figure 1 presents the linear fitting results for 5 sulfur-VOCs, whose reaction rates remain scarce in previous studies. These 5 sulfur-VOCs and their reaction rates are 1,2-ethanedithiol ($2.99 \pm 0.10 \times 10^{-10}$ cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1}), 1,3-propanedithiol ($8.46 \pm 0.53 \times 10^{-11}$ cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1}), bis(methylthio)methane ($1.49 \pm 0.11 \times 10^{-11}$ cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1}), trimethylene sulfide ($1.15 \pm 0.02 \times 10^{-10}$ cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1}), and 1,3-dithiolane ($6.11 \pm 0.13 \times 10^{-11}$ cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1}), respectively (Table 2).

The corresponding fittings for the remaining 5 sulfur-VOCs, which have been studied previously,

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are also provided in Figure S4. The obtained reaction rates of these 4 sulfur-VOCs (i.e., ethanethiol, 1-propanethiol, 2-propanethiol and methyl ethyl sulfide) from our experiments are consistent with that reported by previous studies, ensuring our experimental results (Table 2) (Barnes et al., 1986; Wang et al., 2011; Wine et al., 1984). However, a notable discrepancy was observed for DMDS, with the current value ($1.03 \pm 0.02\times10^{-10}$ cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1}) being lower than previously reported ones (1.98 ± 0.18 to $2.39 \pm 0.30 \times10^{-10}$ cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1}), which may be related to the lower temperature in our study and measurement uncertainty due to its rapid rate.

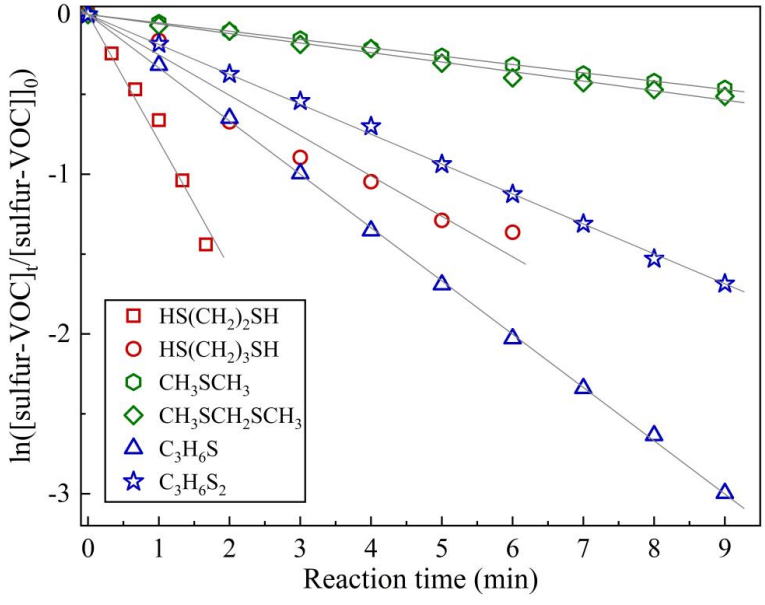

Figure 1. Plots of *ln*([sulfur-VOC]$_t$/[sulfur-VOC]$_0$) versus reaction time for •OH-initiated decay of 1,2-ethanedithiol ($HS(CH)_2SH$), 1,3-propanedithiol ($HS(CH)_3SH$), dimethyl sulfide (CH_3SCH_3), bis(methylthio)methane ($CH_3SCH_2SCH_3$), trimethylene sulfide (C_3H_6S), and 1,3-dithiolane ($C_3H_6S_2$).

Table 2. Inter-comparison of our results with other measurements of reaction rates for 10 sulfur-VOCs with •OH.

Species	sulfur-VOCs	Formulae	$k \times 10^{11}$ (cm^3 $molecule^{-1}$ s^{-1})	T (K)	p (Pa)	Buffer gas	Technique [a]	Reference
Monothiol	ethanethiol	CH_3CH_2SH	3.89 ± 0.57	298	1.01×10^5	air	CP-GC	Ref. (Wang et al., 2008)
			4.50 ± 0.50	300	1.01×10^5	N_2	CP-GC	Ref. (Barnes et al., 1986)
			4.21 ± 0.32	298	1.0×10^4	Ar	FP-RF	Ref. (Wine et al., 1984)
			4.44 ± 0.10	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
	1-propanethiol	$CH_3CH_2CH_2SH$	5.30 ± 0.60	300	1.01×10^5	N_2	CP-GC	Ref. (Barnes et al., 1986)
			4.59	298	1.0×10^4	Ar	FP-RF	Ref. (Wine et al., 1984)
			4.51 ± 0.14	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
	2-propanethiol	$(CH_3)_2CHSH$	3.90 ± 0.40	300	1.01×10^5	N_2	CP-GC	Ref. (Barnes et al., 1986)
			4.24	298	1.0×10^4	Ar	FP-RF	Ref. (Wine et al., 1984)
			4.68 ± 0.11	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
Dithiol	1,2-ethanedithiol	$HS(CH_2)_2SH$	29.88 ± 1.02	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
	1,3-propanedithiol	$HS(CH_2)_3SH$	8.46 ± 0.53	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
Acyclic sulfide	methyl ethyl sulfide	$CH_3SCH_2CH_3$	1.50 ± 0.29	297	1.01×10^5	air	GC-FID	Ref. (Wang et al., 2011)
			1.16 ± 0.42	298	1.01×10^5	air	RK-FTIR	Ref. (Oksdath-Mansilla et al.,
			1.46 ± 0.36	298	1.01×10^5	air	CP-GC	Ref. (Wang et al., 2008)
			1.54 ± 0.04	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
	bis(methylthio)methane	$CH_3SCH_2SCH_3$	1.49 ± 0.11	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
Cyclic sulfide	trimethylene sulfide	C_3H_6S	11.53 ± 0.21	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
	1,3-dithiolane	$C_3H_6S_2$	6.11 ± 0.13	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work
Disulfide	dimethyl disulfide	$CH_3S_2CH_3$	23.90 ± 3.00	297	1466	N_2	HPF-LIF	Ref. (Abbatt et al., 1992)
			19.80 ± 1.80	298	6666-26664	Ar	FP-RF	Ref. (Wine et al., 1981)
			22.30 ± 8.00	298	1.01×10^5	air	CP-GC	Ref. (Cox and Sheppard, 1980)
			10.26 ± 0.20	291±1	1.01×10^5	air	Vocus-PTR	this work

[a] CP: Continuous Photolysis. GC: Gas Chromatography. FP: Flash Photolysis. RF: Resonance Fluorescence. FID: Flame Ionization Detection. RK: Rapid Kinetic. FTIR: Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy. HPF: High Pressure Fast. LIF: Laser Induced Fluorescence

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Based on these measured rate constants, molecular structure-reactivity relationships can be observed among the investigated sulfur-VOCs, as illustrated in Figure 2. Sulfur-VOCs containing S-H functional groups, such as thiols and dithiols, generally react more rapidly with •OH than acyclic sulfides, reflecting the high reactivity of the S-H bond toward H-abstraction by •OH. For dithiols, the presence of two S-H groups provides multiple accessible H-abstraction sites for •OH and thus can enhance the overall reactivity. The higher rate observed for 1,2-ethanedithiol ($HS(CH_2)_2SH$) relative to 1,3-propanedithiol ($HS(CH_2)_3SH$) may further hint the importance of vicinal configuration of the two S-H groups.

Acyclic sulfides, which lack S-H functional groups, typically exhibit lower reaction rates because their oxidation by •OH proceeds mainly through abstraction from α-C-H bonds, which are less reactive than S-H bonds. Notably, disulfides react faster than acyclic sulfides despite also lacking S-H groups, highlighting the activating role of the S-S bond in facilitating radical formation during the initial •OH attack. Bis(methylthio)methane ($CH_3SCH_2SCH_3$), although containing two sulfur atoms, behaves kinetically more like an acyclic sulfide, indicating that the presence of an S-S bond is a key structural factor enhancing reactivity.

Cyclic sulfides display intermediate reactivity, with reaction rates that are higher than those of acyclic sulfides. This behavior is likely influenced by ring strain, owing to stronger ring strain, such as that in trimethylene sulfide (C_3H_6S), can enhance reactivity by lowering the barrier for H-abstraction. Overall, the reaction rates of sulfur-VOCs with •OH increase when molecules containing more reactive S-H, S-S bond and cyclic structure, whereas compounds are limited primarily to H-abstraction from α-C-H bonds generally react more slowly.

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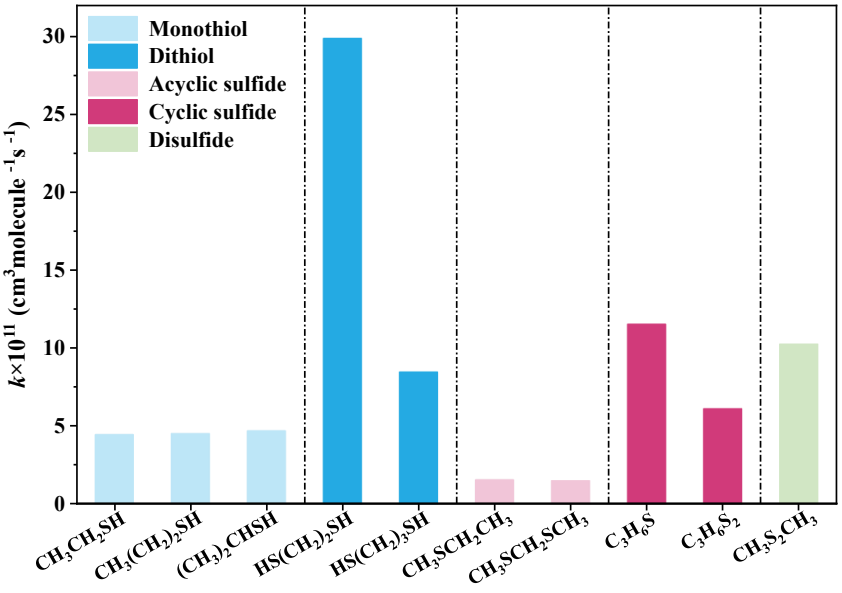

Figure 2. Reaction rates of 10 sulfur-VOCs with •OH, divided by their functional groups.

3.2 Formation of multi-sulfur products

During our chamber experiments, many multi-sulfur products which contain 2 sulfur atoms in their chemical formulas were detected by nitrate-CI-LToF-MS (Table S3). The formation pathways of multi-sulfur products from •OH-initiated oxidation of 11 selected sulfur-VOCs under NO_x-free conditions were investigated. The 11 sulfur-VOCs examined here comprise 5 thiols (CH_3CH_2SH, $CH_3(CH_2)_2SH$, $(CH_3)_2CHSH$, $HS(CH_2)_2SH$, $HS(CH_2)_3SH$), 3 acyclic sulfides (CH_3SCH_3, $CH_3CH_2SCH_3$, $CH_3SCH_2SCH_3$), 2 cyclic sulfides (C_3H_6S, $C_3H_6S_2$) and 1 disulfide ($CH_3S_2CH_3$). Among them, to exhibit the formation pathways of multi-sulfur products, DMS and $HS(CH_2)_3SH$ are adopted as representative compounds for acyclic sulfides and thiols, respectively, whereas DMDS is treated as a representative compound for disulfide.

The reactions between DMS and •OH primarily proceed via two competing pathways (Scheme 1). One is that •OH adds to sulfur atom to form $CH_3S•(OH)CH_3$. Another is that •OH abstracts H-atom from the methyl group to generate the $CH_3SCH_2•$. These primary radicals subsequently react with O_2 to form a series of sulfur-containing $RO_2•$ (i.e., $CH_3SOO•$, $CH_3S(O)OO•$, and $CH_3S(O)_3OO•$) (Berndt et al., 2023; Goss and Kroll, 2023; Shen et al., 2022). Notably, under NO_x-free conditions, these sulfur-containing $RO_2•$ tend to undergo bimolecular reactions with another $R'O_2•$ and $HO_2•$, instead of termination by NO_x. Under NO_x-free conditions, the fate of sulfur-$RO_2•$ is primarily determined by the competition between $RO_2•$ + $HO_2•$ and $RO_2•$ + $R'O_2•$ reactions. Box-model simulation shows that $RO_2•$ + $R'O_2•$ reactions initially dominate the reaction system, but their relative contribution gradually decreases to approximately 50% as the reaction proceeds (Text S6;

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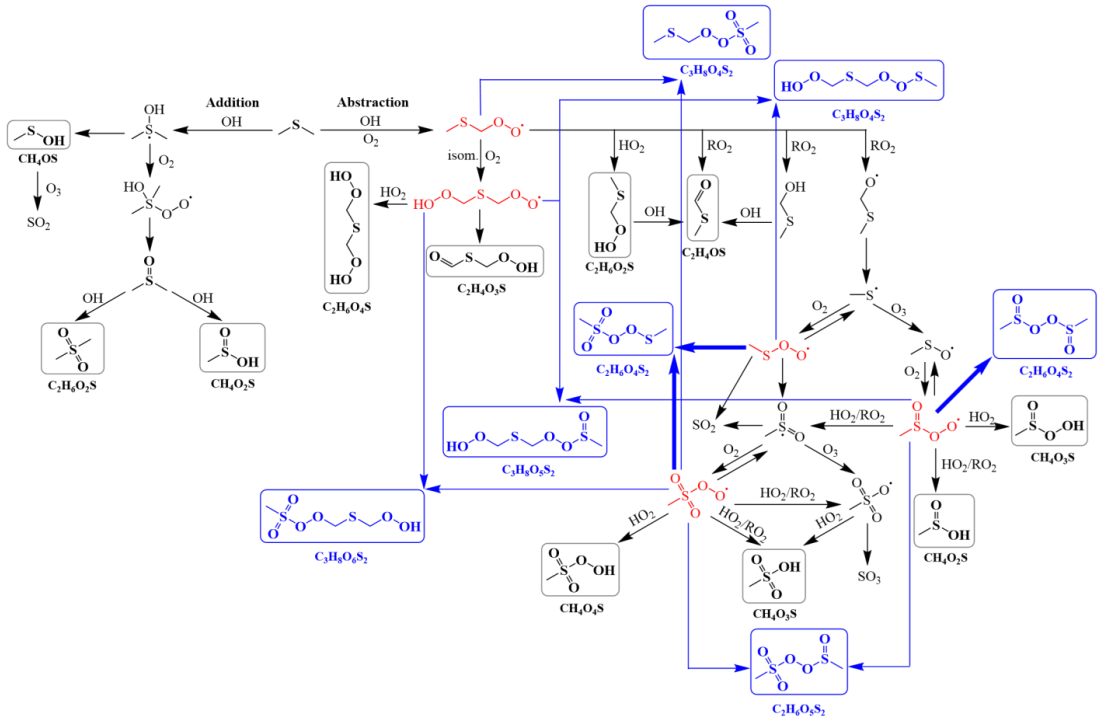
Figure S7 and S8). This sustained and substantial participation of RO_2• + $R'O_2$• underscores its critical role in generating the observed multi-sulfur products. Based on the detection by nitrate-CI-LToF-MS, various multi-sulfur bimolecular products (e.g., $C_2H_6O_4S_2$ and $C_2H_6O_5S_2$) resulting from RO_2•-$R'O_2$• reactions were identified (Figure S6). Among these, $C_2H_6O_4S_2$ may originate from the bimolecular reaction of CH_3SOO• with $CH_3S(O)_2OO$• or the self-polymerization of $CH_3S(O)OO$•, while $C_2H_6O_5S_2$ may be formed by the bimolecular reaction between $CH_3S(O)_2OO$• and $CH_3S(O)OO$• (Scheme 1).

Previous studies on the •OH-initiated oxidation of DMS have extensively investigated the formation and fate of sulfur-RO_2•, and have highlighted the potential importance of RO_2•-$R'O_2$• reactions, particularly under low-NO_x or NO_x-free conditions (Barnes et al., 2006; Ye et al., 2022). However, direct molecular-level identification of multi-sulfur products has been very limited in earlier studies. Most previous investigations mainly focused on major oxidation products such as C_2H_6OS (dimethyl sulfoxide), $C_2H_6O_2S$ (dimethyl sulfone), CH_4SO_3, and SO_2, rather than explicit characterization of individual bimolecular products from RO_2•-$R'O_2$• chemistry (Chen et al., 2023; Hatakeyama et al., 1982). Self- and cross-reactions of RO_2• are known to produce organic peroxides (ROOR') and multimeric products, and such pathways have been experimentally confirmed for a variety of alkyl peroxy radicals (Cho et al., 2023; Nozière, 2025; Orlando and Tyndall, 2012). In addition, studies on highly oxygenated organic molecules (HOMs) formation from biogenic VOC oxidation have demonstrated that RO_2•-$R'O_2$• reactions can lead to complex, multifunctional products that are efficiently detected using nitrate-CIMS (Bianchi et al., 2019; Ehn et al., 2014; Gao et al., 2023). Nevertheless, there have been no previous reports explicitly identifying molecular formulas such as $C_2H_6O_4S_2$ and $C_2H_6O_5S_2$ as products of RO_2•-$R'O_2$• reactions in the atmospheric oxidation of sulfur-VOCs. The formation of these multi-sulfur products can likely be favored by low-NO_x and NO_x-free experimental conditions, which can prolong the lifetime of sulfur-containing RO_2• and favor their bimolecular reactions.

As shown in Scheme S1, the •OH-initiated oxidation of DMDS follows a reaction framework similar to that of sulfides. Cleavage of the S-S bond leads to the formation of sulfur-centered radical intermediates which are analogous to those generated from acyclic sulfides. Among the multi-sulfur products detected from the •OH-initiated oxidation of DMDS, $C_2H_6O_4S_2$ was identified under the present experimental conditions, and its formation is also derived from RO_2•-$R'O_2$• bimolecular reactions inferred for the DMS oxidation system.



Scheme 1. Scheme of the reaction pathways of DMS (CH_3SCH_3) with •OH. Gray boxes denote mono-sulfur oxygenated organic products detected by Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS and nitrate-CI-LToF-MS. Blue boxes indicate multi-sulfur products detected by nitrate-CI-LToF-MS and these multi-sulfur products are presumably generated by the red-labeled sulfur-containing RO_2 radicals via bimolecular reactions. The bold blue arrows highlight the potential dominant pathways leading to the abundant multi-sulfur products.

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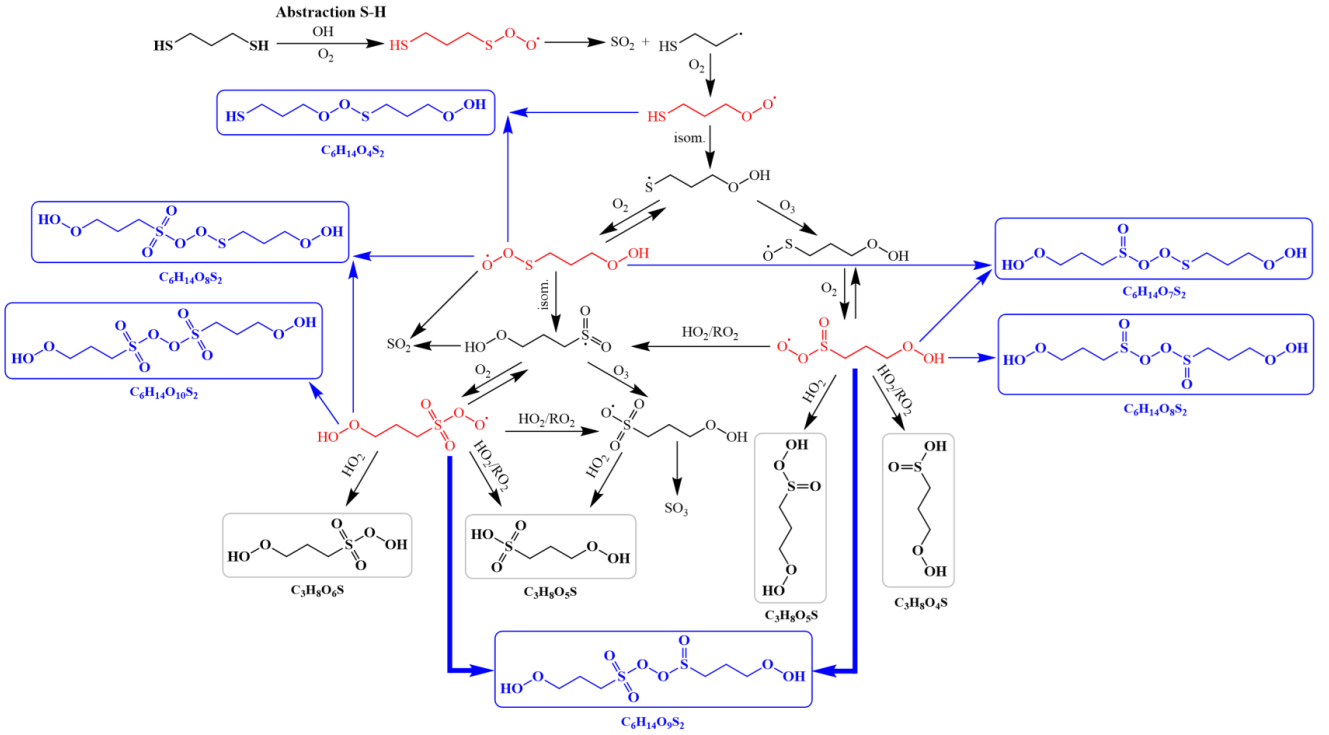
For thiols, the reactions between $HS(CH_2)_3SH$ and •OH are initiated predominantly by H-abstraction from the S-H group (Scheme 2), forming the sulfur-centered radical ($HS(CH_2)_3S$•) (Berndt et al., 2023; Douroudgari et al., 2020; Mai et al., 2020). Subsequent reactions lead to the formation of a few sulfur-containing RO_2• intermediates, including $HS(CH_2)_3OO$•, $HOO(CH_2)_3SOO$•, and $HOO(CH_2)_3S(O)_2OO$•. Compared to RO_2• derived from acyclic sulfides and disulfides, thiol-derived RO_2• exhibit more structurally diverse, enabling more bimolecular reaction pathways. As a result, more multi-sulfur products were identified (Figure S10), including $C_6H_{14}O_8S_2$, $C_6H_{14}O_9S_2$, $C_6H_{14}O_{10}S_2$, etc. Plausible formation pathways for these multi-sulfur products are illustrated in Scheme 2. Specifically, $C_6H_{14}O_9S_2$ can originate from the bimolecular reaction of $HOO(CH_2)_3S(O)_2OO$• with $HOO(CH_2)_3S(O)OO$•. The formation pathways of $C_6H_{14}O_8S_2$ and $C_6H_{14}O_{10}S_2$ are similar with $C_6H_{14}O_9S_2$. In addition, multi-sulfur products were also detected for other investigated sulfur-VOCs (Figures S9 and S11-S13). Although acyclic sulfides and disulfides are structurally distinct, the reaction pathways presented above indicates that their •OH-initiated oxidation proceeds through similar sulfur-centered radical intermediates and subsequent reactions of sulfur-RO_2•.



Scheme 2. Scheme of the reaction pathways of $HS(CH_2)_3SH$ with •OH. Gray boxes denote mono-sulfur oxygenated organic products detected by Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS and nitrate-CI-LToF-MS. Blue boxes indicate multi-sulfur products detected by nitrate-CI-LToF-MS and these multi-sulfur products are presumably generated by the red-labeled sulfur-containing RO_2 radicals via bimolecular reactions. The bold blue arrows highlight the potential dominant pathways leading to the abundant multi-sulfur products

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To evaluate the yields and volatility distributions of these multi-sulfur products, Figure 3 summarizes the estimated volatility distributions and formation yields from the •OH-initiated oxidation of 10 sulfur-VOCs except for ethanethiol. No multi-sulfur products were detected for ethanethiol, suggesting that their formation was either negligible or that the resulting concentrations were below the detection limit of the nitrate-CI-LToF-MS. The volatilities were estimated using the parameterization proposed by Li et al., 2016. Overall, the total yields of multi-sulfur products varied substantially among the 10 sulfur-VOCs, ranging from 0.001% to 11.73% (Table S3), indicating a strong dependence on precursor structure and sulfur functionality.

Among all investigated compounds, trimethylene sulfide (C_3H_6S) exhibited the highest total yield (11.73%), suggesting its highly efficient formation of multi-sulfur products. In contrast, several thiol systems and certain acyclic sulfides produced only trace amounts of multi-sulfur products, with total yields below 0.1%. Acyclic sulfides and disulfide systems (e.g., DMS) predominantly generated semi-volatile organic compounds (SVOCs), with total multi-sulfur yields generally below ~4%. In comparison, cyclic sulfides displayed more diverse volatility distributions. For C_3H_6S, multi-sulfur products extended into the low-volatility organic compounds (LVOCs) and extremely low-volatility organic compounds (ELVOCs) regimes, with a significant fraction of the total yield residing in these low-volatility classes. By contrast, 1,3-dithiolane ($C_3H_6S_2$) mainly produced SVOCs-range multi-sulfur products, and individual species yields remained below ~0.4%, despite a moderate summed yield. Thiols (e.g., $HS(CH_2)_3SH$) exhibited a distinct pattern: although their oxidation generated products extending into the LVOCs and ELVOCs regimes, the overall formation efficiency was low, with total yields ranging from 0.001% to 0.40%. This suggests that structural factors, such as the position and number of -SH groups, may influence both RO_2• reactivity and multi-sulfur product formation efficiency. The presence of LVOCs and ELVOCs multi-sulfur products, particularly for cyclic sulfides, implies a potential role in secondary organic aerosol formation and particle growth.

It should be noted that the semi-quantification of these multi-sulfur products is based on the calibration factor of gaseous sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4) (Text S2). It was assumed that the ionization efficiency of H_2SO_4 towards the reagent ions ($(HNO_3)_nNO_3^-$, n=0, 1 and 2) is the same as that of multi-sulfur products. As a result, the reported yields may have an additional uncertainty because of ionization efficiency difference between H_2SO_4 and multi-sulfur products towards the reagent ions.

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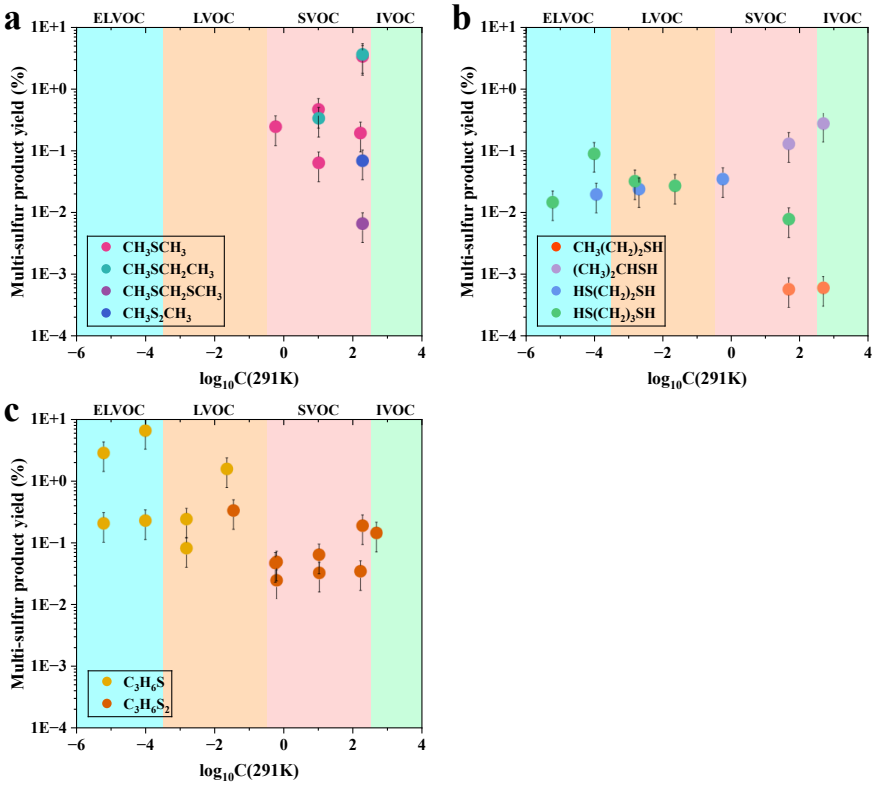

Figure 3. Volatility ($log_{10}C^*$, at 291 K) versus the yield (%) of multi-sulfur products formed from the •OH-initiated oxidation of sulfur-VOCs. (a) acyclic sulfides and disulfide: CH_3SCH_3, $CH_3SCH_2CH_3$, $CH_3SCH_2SCH_3$ and $CH_3S_2CH_3$; (b) thiols: $CH_3(CH_2)_2SH$, $(CH_3)_2CHSH$, $HS(CH_2)_2SH$, and $HS(CH_2)_3SH$; (c) cyclic sulfides: C_3H_6S, $C_3H_6S_2$. The volatility ranges were divided into ELVOCs, LVOCs, SVOCs and IVOCs (intermediate volatile organic compounds). Error bars represent an estimated uncertainty of approximately ±50%, primarily arising from the use of calibration factor of gaseous H_2SO_4.

3.3 Identification and atmospheric oxidation of sulfur-VOCs and other VOCs emitted from freshwater algae

As shown in Figure 4a, the emitted VOCs from freshwater algae were measured by Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS and 240 compounds in total were identified, including 143 CHO species, 43 CH species, 20 sulfur-VOCs, and 34 other VOCs. High-resolution peak fittings for the assigned sulfur-VOCs were shown in Figure S15. The molecular formulas and mixing ratios of 20 sulfur-VOCs are summarized in Table S4 and Figure 4b.

Under the specific treatment conditions (see Section 2.2), absolute mixing ratios of emitted VOCs spanned over three orders of magnitude, ranging from 0.01 to 11.77 ppbv. Among the 20 identified sulfur-VOCs, 6 monosulfur species were detected and they are dominated ones. Specifically, CH_4S

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reached the highest level (11.77 ppbv), followed by C_2H_6S (8.60 ppbv), CH_2S (4.09 ppbv), and C_2H_4S (3.57 ppbv), while the remaining monosulfur species were present at sub-ppbv levels. 9 disulfur species were identified with generally lower abundances, spanning from 0.04 to 0.78 ppbv, with $C_6H_{14}S_2$ (0.78 ppbv) and $C_3H_6S_2$ (0.69 ppbv) representing the most abundant disulfur species. 3 trisulfur species were detected at similarly low levels, ranging from 0.06 to 0.50 ppbv, with $C_4H_{10}S_3$ showing the highest mixing ratio within this group. In contrast, 2 tetrasulfur species were the least abundant, with mixing ratios decreasing to ~0.01 ppbv for $C_2H_6S_4$ and $C_3H_6S_4$. Overall, a clear and systematic decrease in mixing ratios was observed with increasing sulfur number.

In addition, removal of most algae by filtration led to a remarkable decrease in sulfur-VOC signals (Figure S16), supporting that these sulfur-VOCs were primarily associated with freshwater algae. Although only molecular formulas rather than structures could be assigned, the results still provide a comprehensive inventory of freshwater algae-emitted sulfur-VOCs. Notably, the molecular formulas of sulfur-VOCs targeted in our chamber study were also present in the list of sulfur-VOCs emitted from freshwater algae. Although Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS measurements constrain molecular formulas rather than isomer-specific structures, the co-occurrence of these formula families in algal emissions supports the atmospheric relevance of the structure-resolved kinetics and oxidation mechanisms derived from our chamber experiments.

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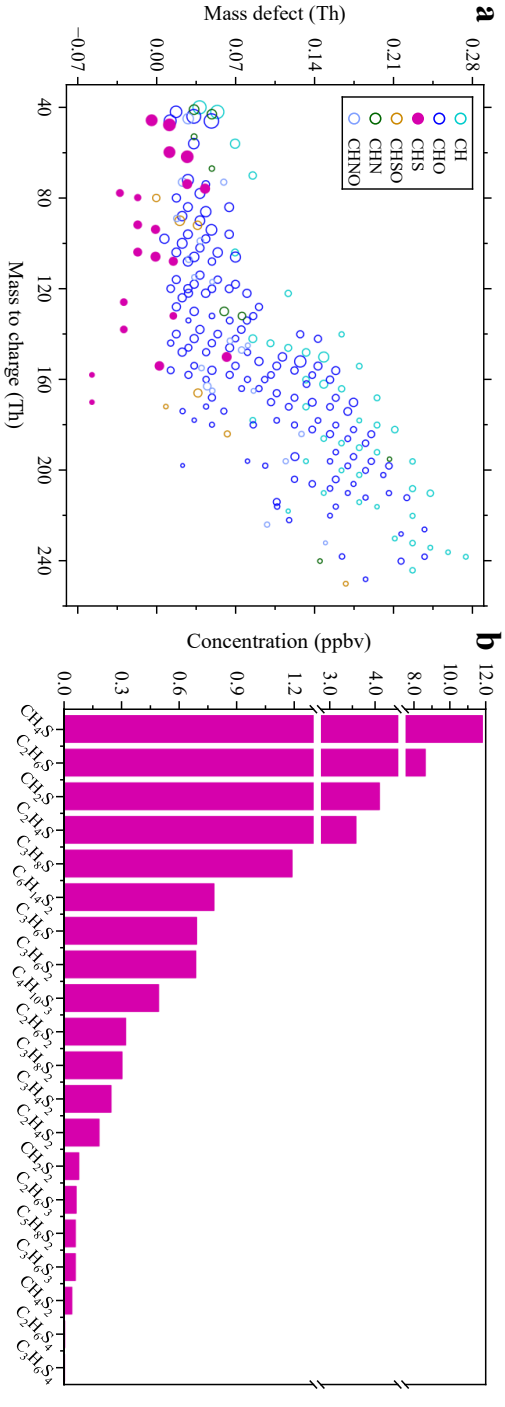

Figure 4. (a) Mass defect plot of emitted VOCs from freshwater algae measured by Vocus-PTR-LToF-MS, with data points color-coded by elemental composition (CH, CHO, CHS, CHSO, CHN, and CHNO) and marker size scaled to signal intensity. (b) Mixing ratios of the 20 sulfur-VOCs detected from the algal emissions

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In subsequent atmospheric oxidation experiments of these emitted VOCs including sulfur-VOCs, our chamber was maintained under NO_x-free conditions, hence the termination of RO_2• by NO_x was suppressed and bimolecular reactions of RO_2• were favored. Approximately 110 oxidation products were identified using nitrate-CI-LToF-MS, including dozens of mono-sulfur organic compounds, a few inorganic sulfur-containing species (e.g., H_2SO_4 and its clusters), and 11 multi-sulfur products (Figure 5 and Table S5). Among 11 multi-sulfur products, 7 of them could be inferred from our selected sulfur-VOCs chamber simulation experiments and their high-resolution peak fitting plots were also shown in Figure S17. Additionally, 4 multi-sulfur products could not be reproduced from our chamber simulation experiments (Figure S18). These experimental results not only confirm that multi-sulfur products can be formed from bimolecular reactions of sulfur-RO_2•, but also promote the understanding of atmospheric chemical processes of sulfur-VOCs in ambient air (especially in low NO_x environments). Notably, the detection of H_2SO_4 and its clusters known as precursors for new particle formation suggests that the oxidation of algae-emitted sulfur-VOCs can contribute to secondary particle formation. However, due to the complex composition of algae-derived sulfur-VOCs, specific formation pathways of these multi-sulfur products need to be further elucidated.

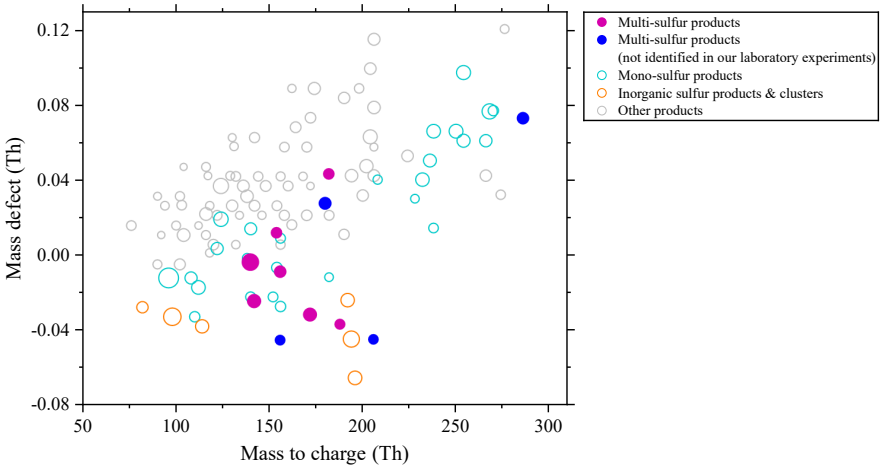

Figure 5. Mass defect plot of oxidation products formed from the •OH-initiated oxidation of algae-emitted VOCs. Multi-sulfur products shown in deep purple represent species whose molecular formulas were also identified in our chamber simulation experiments of the selected sulfur-VOCs, whereas those shown in dark blue represent multi-sulfur products whose corresponding molecular formulas were not identified in our chamber experiments. Marker size is proportional to the corresponding signal intensity.

Although the oxidation experiments were conducted under NO_x-free conditions, such chemical regimes are still representative of atmospherically relevant environments characterized by low NO_x

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levels and strong biogenic emissions (e.g., inland eutrophic lakes, remote marine boundary layer and polar regions). In these environments, NO_x concentrations are typically very low and RO_2• termination by NO_x is strongly suppressed (Berresheim et al., 1998; Novak et al., 2022; Read et al., 2008; Steinke et al., 2018). Field observations in these environments have reported sulfur-VOCs such as DMS and methanthiol at dozens to hundreds of pptv levels (Berresheim et al., 1998; Novak et al., 2022; Read et al., 2008). Therefore, multi-sulfur products derived from RO_2•-$R'O_2$• bimolecular reactions during atmospheric oxidation of sulfur-VOCs may contribute SOA formation in these environments. While the quantitative contribution of sulfur-VOCs-derived multi-sulfur products to SOA formation remains uncertain, the present results only highlight the detection and formation pathways of multi-sulfur products from atmospheric oxidation of sulfur-VOCs.

4 Conclusions

This study provides an integrated understanding of kinetics and formation pathways of multi-sulfur products of •OH-initiated oxidation of a series of selected sulfur-VOCs with different functional groups. Reaction rate constants determined for these sulfur-VOCs reveal clear structure–reactivity relationships and sulfur-RO_2• can undergo bimolecular reactions under low NOx, leading to the formation of multi-sulfur products with distinct volatility characteristics. Acyclic sulfides and disulfides mainly produce semi-volatile multi-sulfur products with relatively higher yields, whereas thiols (particularly dithiols) favor the formation of more highly oxygenated, low-volatility products that may promote SOA formation. Furthermore, the selected sulfur-VOCs were also observed from the emission of freshwater algae and some of multi-sulfur products derived from our chamber simulation experiments of selected sulfur-VOCs were also identified from •OH-initiated oxidation of VOCs emitted from freshwater algae. These results together further confirm the atmospheric relevance of these selected sulfur-VOCs and the sulfur-RO_2• chemistry leading to the formation of multi-sulfur products.

Biogenic sulfur-VOCs could have increased significance in the context of ongoing changes in the atmospheric sulfur budget. Anthropogenic SO_2 emissions have been declining worldwide, reducing the dominance of the traditional gaseous H_2SO_4 formation pathway from anthropogenic SO_2 in atmospheric sulfur cycling. Instead, the oxidation of biogenic sulfur-VOCs is likely to become an increasingly important source for gaseous H_2SO_4 and particulate sulfate, particularly in low-NO_x environments. The formation of low-volatility multi-sulfur products via sulfur-RO_2• bimolecular reactions highlight an additional pathway by which sulfur-VOCs can contribute to SOA formation. Overall, this study underscores the growing role of biogenic sulfur-VOCs in atmospheric sulfur budget and highlights the necessity of explicitly considering the atmospheric chemistry of sulfur-VOCs in atmospheric models.

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Data availability. The data used to support the conclusions in this study are available at a public data repository of Zenodo via https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18923240. Additional data related to this paper can be requested from the authors (lei_yao@fudan.edu.cn).

Author contributions. L.Y. conceived and designed this study and revised the manuscript. X.R. conducted the experiments, performed data analysis, and prepared the manuscript with contributions from all co-authors. C.L. assisted in designing the experiments. C.A. and G.Y. assisted with data collection. J.L.S, R.L.C., D. R. Worsnop, and L.W. interpreted the results and revised the manuscript.

Competing interests. The contact author has declared that none of the authors has any competing interests.

Acknowledgements. This research was supported by the National Key Research and Development Program of China (2022YFC3704100) and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (22376031).

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