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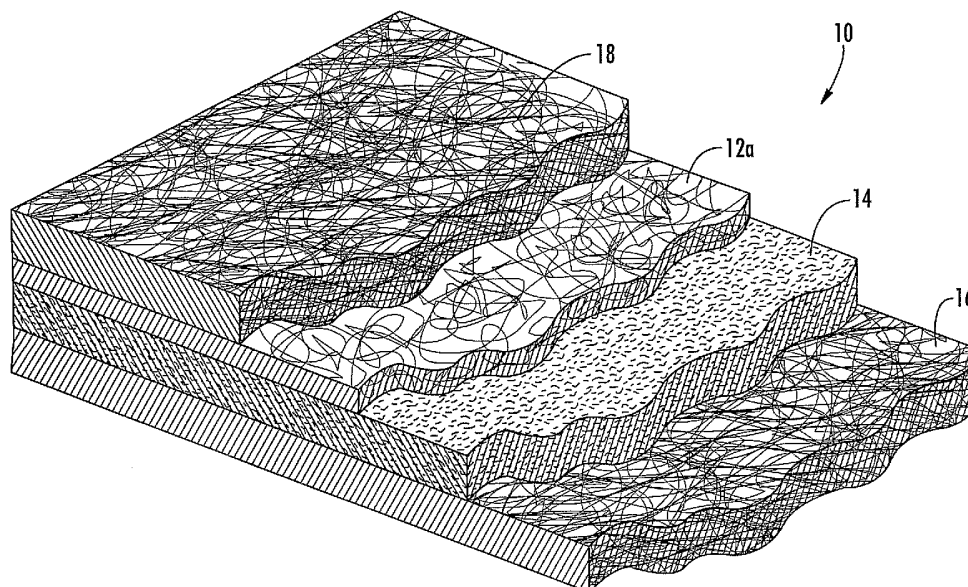
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(54) Title: NONWOVEN PROTECTIVE FABRICS WITH CONDUCTIVE FIBER LAYER



(57) Abstract: Nonwoven barrier laminates are provided having a desirable balance of properties, including barrier properties, strength, static dissipation, fluid repellency, aesthetics and tactile properties. The nonwoven barrier laminates of the invention generally include outer spunbonded layers, at least one hydrophobic microporous layer between the outer spunbonded layers, and at least one discrete layer of electrically conductive strands. A multiplicity of discrete bond sites bond the various layers of the nonwoven barrier laminate into a coherent fabric.

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For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

NONWOVEN PROTECTIVE FABRICS WITH CONDUCTIVE FIBER LAYER

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to nonwoven fabrics and to processes for
5 producing nonwoven fabrics. More specifically, the invention relates to nonwoven
barrier fabrics having a balance of liquid repellent and antistatic properties that are
particularly suited for medical applications.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Barrier fabrics have been developed which impede the passage of bacteria and
10 other contaminants and which are used for disposable medical fabrics, such as
surgical drapes, disposable gowns, sterile wrap and the like. Barrier fabrics can be
formed by sandwiching an inner fibrous web of thermoplastic meltblown microfibers
between two outer nonwoven webs of substantially continuous thermoplastic
spunbonded filaments. The fibrous meltblown web provides a barrier impervious to
15 bacteria or other contaminants in the composite nonwoven fabric. The outer
spunbonded webs are selected to provide abrasion resistance and strength to the
composite fabric. Examples of such trilaminate nonwoven barrier fabrics are
described in U.S. Pat. No. 4,041,203 and U.S. Pat. No. 4,863,785.

However, in addition to barrier properties and strength, medical barrier fabrics
20 must also advantageously provide a number of other beneficial properties. For
example, barrier fabrics used in medical applications must dissipate static charge
because they are often used in the presence of sensitive electronic equipment and
potentially volatile gases such as ether. Medical barrier fabrics must also exhibit
superior fluid repellency, so that contact by water, alcohol or other organic solvents
25 does not impair the barrier properties of the fabric.

Both static dissipation and fluid repellency have generally been imparted to
medical barrier fabrics to date by applying a series of topical treatments. More
specifically, antistatic performance has been imparted to medical fabrics by the
application of hydrophilic coatings. Fluid repellency has been achieved in medical
30 fabrics by the application of hydrophobic coatings. Unfortunately, the hydrophilic
and hydrophobic natures of the various topical treatments are incompatible, hence the
balance of properties provided to the barrier fabric is generally compromised. For

example, acceptable antistatic performance may be achieved at the sacrifice of water resistance.

Fabrics rendered antistatic by means other than topical treatments are known. For example, United States Patent 5,368,913 to Ortega discloses spunbonded fabrics for use in carpeting and the like that include conductive filaments, such as carbon or metallic filaments, distributed throughout the fabric thickness. Such fabrics can be problematic in garment applications because the electrically conductive fiber is not isolated visually or tactilely from the wearer. Conductive filaments, such as carbon or metallic filaments, are not readily dyeable and are thus generally considered to be less aesthetically pleasing than more traditional textile fibers. Carbon and metallic filaments further lack the flexibility and softness provided by traditional textile fibers. Further, fabric constructions including conductive filaments throughout their thickness generally require a significant amount of conductive filament, resulting in increased costs. The presence of conductive filaments during web manufacture can further disable the electrostatic charges frequently applied to filaments to enhance the uniformity of nonwoven webs.

Thus there remains a need in the art for improved antistatic, fluid repellent barrier fabrics.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention provides nonwoven barrier laminates having a desirable balance of properties, including barrier properties, strength, static dissipation, fluid repellency, aesthetics and tactile properties. The nonwoven barrier laminates of the invention generally include outer spunbonded layers, at least one hydrophobic microporous layer between the outer spunbonded layers, and at least one discrete layer of electrically conductive strands. A multiplicity of discrete bond sites bond the various layers of the nonwoven barrier laminate into a coherent fabric.

The nonwoven barrier fabrics of the invention have excellent barrier properties, provide alcohol and water repellency, antistatic performance, are readily dyeable, are flexible and comparatively soft. The nonwoven barrier laminates of the invention can be used as components in a variety of nonwoven products, and are particularly useful in medical fabrics, such as sterile wraps, surgical gowns, surgical drapes, and the like. The spunbonded layers provide good abrasion resistance, strength and aesthetic properties to the laminate fabrics of the invention. The inner

hydrophilic microporous layer provides good barrier properties. The layer of electrically conductive strands provides superior static dissipation characteristics for negative charges.

In another aspect of the invention, medical fabrics that include the nonwoven barrier laminate described above are also provided. For example, the nonwoven barrier fabrics of the invention are useful as components in medical fabrics such as surgical drapes and gowns. When used to form a surgical gown, the discrete layer of conductive filaments dissipates negative static charges as they arise, thereby decreasing both static discharge and static cling. Accordingly, the surgical gowns of the invention are formed from fabrics having greater safety and comfort, as well as superior fluid resistance and antistatic properties.

Nonwoven barrier laminates according to the invention can be readily manufactured according to another aspect of the invention. The nonwoven barrier fabrics may be manufactured by forming a layered web including outer spunbonded layers sandwiching at least one hydrophobic microporous layer and a discrete layer of electrically conductive strands. Thereafter, the layers of the resultant composite laminates are subjected to a thermal bonding treatment sufficient to introduce a plurality of discrete thermal bonds that provide cohesion to the laminate.

The nonwoven barrier laminates of the invention provide several desirable and yet apparently opposing properties in one fabric. For example, the barrier laminates of the invention provide antistatic protection without sacrifice to fluid repellency.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the drawings which form a portion of the original disclosure of the invention:

FIG. 1a is cut-away schematic perspective view of a laminate nonwoven fabric in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 1b is cut-away schematic perspective view of a laminate nonwoven fabric in accordance with a second embodiment of the present invention; and

FIG. 2 schematically illustrates one method embodiment for forming a laminate nonwoven fabric of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention will now be described more thoroughly hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which illustrative embodiments of the invention are shown. This invention may, however, be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the embodiments set forth herein. Rather, this embodiment is provided so that the disclosure will be thorough and complete, and will convey fully the scope of the invention to those skilled in the art. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout. For purposes of clarity, the scale has been exaggerated.

FIGS. 1a and 1b are schematic perspective views of a barrier laminate in accordance with two embodiments of the present invention. The barrier laminate is designated generally as **10**. In the advantageous embodiments provided in FIGS. 1a and 1b, the barrier laminate **10** is a four ply composite comprising a conductive layer **12a** or **12b** and at least one hydrophobic microporous layer **14** sandwiched between outer plies **16** and **18**. In addition to beneficial antistatic and fluid repellent properties, the barrier laminate **10** has good strength, flexibility and drape and may be formed into various articles or garments such as sterile wraps, surgical gowns, surgical drapes and the like. The barrier properties of the laminate **10** make it particularly suitable for medical applications, but the laminate is also useful for any other applications wherein a barrier to contaminants and fluid repellency, as well as a cloth-like feel and drapeability, would be desirable, such as industrial garments, filtration media, and disposable wipes.

The outer plies **16** and **18** of the barrier laminate **10** may be formed from any construction capable of providing sufficient strength and cohesion to the resulting barrier laminate **10**. Advantageously, outer plies **16** and **18** of the barrier laminate **10** are nonwoven webs, such as spunbonded webs of substantially continuous nonelastomeric thermoplastic filaments. The thermoplastic filaments of outer plies **16** and **18** can be made of any of a number of known fiber forming polymers or polymer compositions. Exemplary polymers include those selected from the group consisting of polyolefins such as polypropylene and polyethylene, polyesters, polyamides, and copolymers and blends thereof. The terms "polypropylene" and "polyethylene" are used herein in a general sense, and are intended to include various homopolymers,

copolymers, and terpolymers thereof. The term "polyethylene" is also intended to include any polyethylene suitable for fiber formation including low density polyethylene, high density polyethylene, and linear low density polyethylene. The thermoplastic filaments of outer plies **16** and **18** may be made from either the same or
5 different polymers. Advantageously, the thermoplastic filaments of outer plies **16** and **18** are formed from polypropylene.

Outer plies **16** and **18** may be produced using well-known nonwoven processes, *e.g.* spunbonding processes, and may suitably have a basis weight in the range of about 10 gsm to 100 gsm. In advantageous embodiments, the outer plies **16**
10 and **18** have a basis weight ranging from about 10 to 25 gsm. The basis weights of outer plies **16** and **18** may be approximately the same, or may differ. Deniers for spunbonded substantially continuous thermoplastic filaments in accordance with the invention generally range from about 2.0 to 4.0.

The hydrophobic microporous layer **14** may be any layer known in the art to
15 provide barrier properties to laminate structures. In advantageous embodiments, the hydrophobic microporous layer **14** is a nonwoven fibrous web comprising a plurality of nonelastomeric thermoplastic meltblown microfibers. The microfibers can be made of any of a number of known fiber forming polymers or polymer compositions. Such polymers include those selected from the group consisting of polyolefins such as
20 polypropylene and polyethylene, polyesters, polyamides, and copolymers and blends thereof. Advantageously, the microfibers are polypropylene microfibers.

The microfibers preferably have an average fiber diameter of up to about 10 microns with very few, if any, other fibers exceeding 10 microns in diameter. Typically, the average diameter of the fibers will range from 2 to 6 microns. The
25 hydrophobic microporous layer **14** is preferably manufactured in accordance with the process described in Buntin et al., U.S. Pat. No. 3,978,185. Such meltblown fibers generally have a denier of about 1.0 or less. The hydrophobic microporous layer **14** can have a basis weight in the range of about 10 to about 80 grams per square meter (gsm), advantageously in the range of about 8 to 20 gsm.

30 The beneficial embodiment illustrated in FIGS. 1a and 1b, the barrier laminate **10** includes a single hydrophobic microporous layer **14**. In alternative embodiments, the barrier laminate **10** includes more than a single microporous layer **14**. For example, the barrier laminate **10** may include two hydrophobic microporous layers sandwiched between the outer layers **16** and **18**. For embodiments including at least

two hydrophobic microporous layers, the hydrophobic microporous plies may be the same or may differ. For example, the hydrophobic microporous layers may differ in composition, average denier, or basis weight. The multiple hydrophobic microporous layers may either be positioned immediately adjacent to each other or they may be arranged so as to sandwich the electrically conductive layer (**12a**, **12b**).

The electrically conductive layer (**12a**, **12b**) is a discrete ply that includes electrically conductive strands. As used herein, the term "strand" includes any configuration of fibrous or filamentary material including continuous filaments, staple fibers, tow or any other fibrous configuration. The electrically conductive strands within the conductive layer may be distributed within the discrete ply either anisotropically, i.e. substantially randomly throughout the fabric, as indicated in FIG. 1a by the conductive layer **12a**, or the conductive strands may be arranged in a spaced apart relation from one another in zones extending generally longitudinally of the laminate as indicated in FIG. 1b by the conductive layer **12b**. Although the strands of the layer **12b** extend predominantly longitudinally in the machine direction, their location in the cross-machine direction may vary or fluctuate as the strands loop or double upon themselves to form generally longitudinally extending bands or zones where the strands are deposited. Typically, the conductive layer **12a** or **12b** is a non-cohesive ply prior to bonding the barrier laminate **10**.

Suitable electrically conductive strands for use in the conductive layer include any of the electrically conductive strands known in the art, such as carbon fibers or filaments, metallic fibers or filaments, fibers or filaments made from a polymer that has electrically conductive or static-discharging properties, and the like. As used herein the term "carbon fibers or filaments" generally refers to fibers or filaments made by heating (or "carbonizing") precursor organic fibers or filaments, such as rayon or polyacrylonitrile fibers or petroleum residues, to appropriate temperatures to convert them to primarily carbon.

The term "carbon fibers or filaments" also includes fibers or filaments made conductive by incorporating carbon into a polymeric fiber or filament structure, for example, by incorporating a core of carbon into a hollow polymer fiber or filament or by coating a fiber or filament with a sheath made of a composite containing carbon or by otherwise filling thermoplastic polymer with carbon, and the like.

The term "metallic filaments" refers to fibers made conductive by incorporating a metal into a polymeric fiber or filament structure, and includes, for

example, metal plated filaments, metal-deposited filaments, metallic strands, and the like.

In advantageous embodiments of the invention, the electrically conductive strands are multicomponent filaments having at least one nonconductive polymer component and at least one conductive component. The nonconductive polymer component can be made of any of a number of known fiber forming nonelastomeric polymer or polymer composition. Such polymers include those selected from the group consisting of polyolefins such as polypropylene and polyethylene, polyesters, polyamides, and copolymers and blends thereof. The conductive component may be any material providing sufficient static dissipative properties to the conductive layer. For example, the conductive component can be derived from carbon or metal or other conductive additive. It is also possible to produce conductive monocomponent filaments by incorporating a suitable conductive melt-additive into the polymer melt during manufacture of the filaments.

In advantageous embodiments, the electrically conductive strands are multicomponent fibers that include at least one nylon component and at least one carbon component. In beneficial aspects of such embodiments, the electrically conductive strand comprises a nylon filament having one or more carbon sub-filaments attached to its perimeter, such as a nylon filament having three carbon filaments attached to its perimeter. Exemplary electrically conductive strands include filaments available from Solutia Chemical Company under the trade names NO-SHOCK™ conductive nylon; from Kanebo Ltd. under the trade name BELLTRON™; and the like. One particularly advantageous electrically conductive strand is NO-SHOCK™ conductive nylon grade 18-2-E3N. Exemplary deniers for the electrically conductive strand range from about 3 to 36 denier, such as from about 3 to 18 denier. In one advantageous embodiment, the electrically conductive strand is an 18 denier multifilament fiber having two 9 denier filaments.

Advantageously, the conductive layer is formed solely of electrically conductive strands. In alternative aspects of the invention, the conductive layer includes nonconductive strands. In such beneficial embodiments, the nonconductive strands can be made of any of a number of known fiber forming polymers and polymer compositions. Exemplary polymers include those selected from the group consisting of polyolefins such as polypropylene and polyethylene, polyesters, polyamides, and copolymers and blends thereof. The nonconductive strands are

included within the conductive layer in amounts that do not interfere with the conductive nature of the layer. For example, the nonconductive strands may be included within the conductive layer in amounts of up to 10 weight percent, based on the weight of the conductive layer.

5 The conductive layer (**12a, 12b**) may be formed by any means capable of depositing a non-cohesive assembly of strands onto a moving surface. In beneficial embodiments, the conductive layer is formed by pneumatically assisted means, such as an air gun or air laying headbox.

10 The basis weight of the conductive layer can vary according to the degree of antistatic properties desired for the barrier laminate **10**. The conductive layer generally has a basis weight ranging from about 0.01 to about 1.0 grams per square meter (gsm). In beneficial embodiments, the conductive layer has a basis weight ranging from about 0.05 to about 0.5 gsm, particularly from about 0.1 to 0.3 gsm. In one advantageous aspect of the invention, the conductive layer has a basis weight of
15 about 0.23.

 Surprisingly, barrier laminates **10** containing relatively small amounts of conductive layer can provide acceptable antistatic properties. Considered on a relative weight basis, the conductive layer generally constitutes from about 0.1 to 0.5 weight percent of the barrier laminate **10**. In advantageous embodiments, the
20 conductive layer forms from about 0.2 to 0.4 weight percent of the barrier laminate **10**. In one beneficial embodiment, a conductive layer constituting about 0.37 weight percent of the barrier laminate **10** provides acceptable antistatic properties.

 Layers **12a or b, 14, 16 and 18** of the barrier laminate **10** can be bonded together to form a coherent fabric using techniques and apparatus known in the art.
25 For example, layers can be bonded together by thermal bonding, mechanical interlocking, adhesive bonding, and the like. Preferably, laminate fabric **10** includes a multiplicity of discrete thermal bonds distributed throughout the fabric, bonding layers together to form a coherent fabric.

 In addition, as will be appreciated by the skilled artisan, barrier laminate **10**
30 can include one or more additional layers to provide improved barriers to transmission of liquids, airborne contaminants and/or additional supporting layers.

 Barrier laminates **10** of the invention exhibit a variety of desirable characteristics that make them particularly useful as a barrier fabrics in medical applications. The outer plies **16 and 18** are designed to provide good strength and

abrasion resistance to the barrier laminate **10**. The hydrophobic microporous layer **14** imparts barrier properties. The conductive layer provides acceptable static dissipation times for negative charges at no sacrifice to fluid repellency, particularly at no sacrifice to hydrostatic head. The barrier laminates of the invention can be further be
5 treated with topical fluid repellents to provide constructions exhibiting a balance of beneficial properties, including acceptable antistatic performance at no sacrifice to water and/or alcohol repellancy.

Referring now to FIG. 2, an illustrative process for forming an advantageous embodiment of the barrier laminate **10** is illustrated. A conventional spunbonding
10 apparatus **20** forms a first spunbonded layer **22** of substantially continuous nonconductive polymer filaments. Advantageously, the nonconductive polymer filaments are polypropylene filaments. The first spunbonded layer **22** is deposited onto a forming wire or screen **24** which is driven in a longitudinal direction by rolls
26.

The spunbonding process **20** involves extruding a polymer through a generally
15 linear die head or spinneret **30** for melt spinning substantially continuous filaments **32**. The spinneret preferably produces the filaments in substantially equally spaced arrays and the die orifices are preferably from about 0.002 to about 0.040 inches in diameter.

The substantially continuous filaments **32** are extruded from the spinneret **30**
20 and subsequently quenched by a supply of cooling air. The filaments are directed to an attenuator **36** after they are quenched, and a supply of attenuation air is admitted therein. Although separate quench and attenuation zones may be employed, it will be apparent to the skilled artisan that the filaments can exit the spinneret **30** directly into
25 an attenuator **36** where the filaments can be quenched, either by the supply of attenuation air or by a separate supply of quench air.

The attenuation air may be directed into the attenuator **36** by an air supply
above the entrance end, by a vacuum located below the forming wire or by the use of
eductors integrally formed in the attenuator. The air proceeds down the attenuator **36**,
30 which narrows in width in the direction away from the spinneret **30**, creating a venturi effect and providing filament attenuation. The air and filaments exit the attenuator **36**, and the filaments are collected on the collection screen **24**. The attenuator **36** used in the spunbonding process may be of any suitable type known in the art, such as a slot draw apparatus or a tube type (Lurgi) apparatus.

After the spunbonded layer **22** is deposited onto screen **24**, the web moves longitudinally beneath a conventional meltblowing apparatus **40**. Meltblowing apparatus **40** forms a meltblown fibers stream **42** of nonconductive polymer which is deposited on the surface of the spunbonded web **22** to form a spunbonded
5 web/meltblown web structure **44**. Advantageously, the meltblown fibers stream **42** is formed from polypropylene. Meltblowing processes and apparatus are known to the skilled artisan and are disclosed, for example, in U.S. Pat. No. 3,849,241 to Buntin et al. and U.S. Pat. No. 4,048,364 to Harding et al.

In meltblowing, thermoplastic resin is fed into an extruder where it is melted
10 and heated to the appropriate temperature required for fiber formation. The extruder feeds the molten resin to a special meltblowing die. The die arrangement is generally a plurality of linearly arranged small diameter capillaries. The resin emerges from the die orifices as molten threads or streams into high velocity converging streams of heated gas, usually air. The air attenuates the polymer streams and breaks the
15 attenuated stream into a blast of fine fibers which are collected on a moving screen placed in front of the blast. As the fibers land on the screen, they entangle to form a cohesive web.

After the meltblown fibers stream **42** is deposited on the surface of the spunbonded web **22**, the spunbonded web/meltblown web structure **44** moves
20 longitudinally beneath an array of air guns **46** which stretches across the width of the web. For example, one or more rows of air guns **46** may extend across the width of the web. In advantageous embodiments, the air guns within the array are spaced from about 6 to 12 inches apart.

Each air gun **46** in the array deposits a discrete layer of preformed conductive
25 strands **48**, in the form of continuous filaments, provided on a package **54** onto the surface of the spunbonded web/meltblown web structure **44**. The air gun **46** may advantageously be a Lurgi apparatus, commonly employed in spunbonding. However, in contrast to their use in attenuating spunbonded fibers issuing from a die, the air gun **46** would not be expected to attenuate the preformed conductive filament,
30 but merely transport it. The transport air may be directed into the air gun **46** by an air supply above its entrance end, by a vacuum located below the forming wire or by the use of eductors integrally formed in the air gun. The volume of air required to deposit the conductive filament may vary depending upon the air gun configuration. Typically, a volume of air sufficient to achieve a filament velocity of about 1000 to

3000 mpm is employed. Each air gun 46 generally deposits conductive strand onto the spunbonded web/meltblown web structure 44 at a rate ranging from about 1 to 3 grams/minute.

Figure 2 illustrates the use of an air gun 46 to transport a single end of
5 conductive strand 52. In alternative embodiments, a single air gun 46 may be used to simultaneously deposit multiple ends of conductive strand 52 onto the surface of the spunbonded web/meltblown web structure 44. In such embodiments, the multiple ends may be fed from packages hung on a creel or the like. In alternative aspects of the invention, the conductive filament may be deposited using a slot die. In further
10 alternative aspects of the invention, the conductive filament may be formed in-line by means such as spunbonding or meltblowing.

Spunbonded web/meltblown web/conductive layer structure 50 is next conveyed by forming screen 24 in the longitudinal direction beneath a second conventional spunbonding apparatus 56. The spunbonding apparatus 56 deposits a
15 second spunbonded nonconductive polymer layer onto the structure 50 to thereby form a laminate structure 58 comprising a spunbonded web/meltblown web/conductive filament ply/spunbonded web structure 58. Advantageously, the second spunbonded layer is formed from polypropylene.

The four-layer laminate 58 is conveyed longitudinally as shown in FIG. 2 to a
20 conventional thermal fusion station 60 to provide a bonded barrier laminate 10. The fusion station 60 is constructed in a conventional manner as known to the skilled artisan, and advantageously includes cooperating embossing rolls 62 and 64, which may include at least one point roll, helical roll, and the like. Preferably, the layers are bonded together to provide a multiplicity of thermal bonds distributed throughout the
25 laminate fabric. Bonding conditions, including the temperature and pressure of the bonding rolls, are known in the art for differing polymers. For composites comprising a polypropylene spunbonded web/polypropylene meltblown web/conductive strand ply/polypropylene spunbonded web, the embossing rolls are preferably heated to a temperature between about 120°C and about 130°C. The laminate is fed through the
30 embossing rolls at a speed of about 3 to 300 meters per minute, such as a speed between about 5 and 150 meters per minute.

Although a thermal fusion station in the form of bonding rolls is illustrated in FIG. 2, other thermal treating stations such a ultrasonic, microwave or other RF treatment zones which are capable of bonding the fabric can be substituted for the

bonding rolls of FIG. 2. Such conventional heating stations are known to those skilled in the art and are capable of effecting substantial thermal fusion of the nonwoven webs. In addition, other bonding techniques known in the art can be used, such as hydroentanglement of the fibers, needling, and the like. It is also possible to achieve bonding through the use of an appropriate bonding agent as is known in the art, singly or in combination with thermal fusion.

The resultant barrier laminate **10** exits the thermal fusion station and is wound up by conventional means on a roll.

The method illustrated in FIG. 2 is susceptible to numerous variations. For example, the conductive strand **52** may be deposited directly onto the spunbonded layer **22**. In such embodiments, the meltblown fibers stream **42** is subsequently directed onto the conductive layer and a second spunbonded layer applied.

Further, although the schematic illustration of FIG. 2 has been described as forming a spunbonded web directly during an in-line continuous process, it will be apparent that the spunbonded webs can be preformed and supplied as rolls of preformed webs. Similarly, although the meltblown web is shown as being formed directly on the spunbonded web, and the spunbonded web thereon, meltblown webs and spunbonded webs can both be preformed and such preformed webs can be combined with a conductive filament layer to form the laminate fabric. Alternatively, preformed spunbonded and meltblown webs can be passed through heating rolls for further consolidation, a layer of conductive filaments deposited thereon and thereafter a spunbonded layer may be extruded onto the surface of the conductive filament layer. Similarly, the four-layer laminate can be formed and stored prior to bonding.

One or more topical treatments is typically applied to the bonded barrier laminate **10**. Such topical treatments and their methods of application are known in the art and include, for example, alcohol and water repellency treatments and the like, applied by spraying, dipping, etc. Fluorocarbon chemicals to enhance alcohol and water repellency are known. One example of such a topical alcohol/water repellency treatment is the application of Spinrite 150 by Fiber Sciences of Fountain Inc. SC, a proprietary chemical treatment. It is important that any treatments applied to the material be low in formaldehyde or other volatile materials since they will be in close contact with people during most applications.

Additionally, the polymers used in the present invention may be specifically engineered to provide or improve a desired property in the laminate. For example,

any one of a variety of adhesive-promoting, or "tackifying" agents, such as ethylene vinyl acetate copolymers, may be added to the polymers used in the production of any of the webs or plies of the laminate structure to improve inter-ply adhesion. Further, at least one of the webs or plies may be treated with a treatment agent to render any
5 one of a number of desired properties to the fabric, such as flame retardancy, hydrophilic properties, and the like.

Surprisingly, the barrier laminates of the invention can provide superior antistatic performance in comparison to conventional antistatic barrier fabrics. The typical maximum static decay time specified by medical gown converters is 0.5
10 seconds or less. The static decay time of conventional topically treated antistatic barrier laminates ranges from about 0.2 to 0.4 seconds. In contrast, the barrier laminates of the invention are capable of static decay times of about 0.1 seconds, particularly for negative charges. The advantageous antistatic properties of the invention are further provided at no sacrifice to the remaining laminate properties. In
15 particular, the present invention imparts antistatic properties to barrier laminates without detrimentally affecting the fluid repellent properties of the fabric, especially the water resistance.

The present invention will be further illustrated by the following non-limiting examples.

20 COMPARATIVE EXAMPLES 1 THROUGH 5

The antistatic and fluid repellent properties of several polypropylene spunbond/meltblown/spunbond ("SMS") webs commercially available from BBA Nonwovens were determined before and after the application of various antistatic and/or fabric repellent topical treatments. The topical treatments were applied to the
25 commercially available SMS by conventional means, such as dip coating. The results set forth in Table 1 attached demonstrate the detrimental effect of antistatic topical treatments on the water resistance, i.e., the hydrostatic head, of conventional SMS webs.

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LAMINATES OF THE INVENTION

EXAMPLES 1 AND 2

Barrier laminates according to the invention were prepared as described below. A first spunbonded web was formed of polypropylene available from Amoco under the trade designation 7956. The filaments in the first spunbond layer had a denier per filament of about 2 to 3, and the spunbonded web of substantially continuous polypropylene filaments had a basis weight of about 25 gsm. A meltblown web was prepared by meltblowing polypropylene available from Exxon under the trade designation 3746G to give a fibrous web having a basis weight of about 12 gsm onto the surface of the first spunbonded web. A conductive layer was formed by directing 18 denier Grade 18-2-E3N conductive multicomponent nylon/carbon filament from Solutia Chemical Company to form a ply having a basis weight of about 0.23 gsm onto the surface of the meltblown web. A second spunbonded web formed of polypropylene available from Amoco under the trade designation of 7956 was formed on the surface of the conductive layer. The filaments in the second spunbond layer had a denier per filament of about 2 to 3 denier, and the spunbonded web of substantially continuous polypropylene filaments had a basis weight of about 25 gsm.

The webs were bonded together to form a barrier laminate by passing the sample through the nip of a cooperating pair of textured and smooth embossing rolls.

The antistatic and fluid repellent properties of a web formed in accordance with the invention was determined before and after the application of topical fluid repellent. The results set forth in Table 2 attached demonstrate the beneficial balance of antistatic and fluid repellent properties provided by the barrier laminates of the invention.

As indicated in Table 2, the barrier laminates of the invention exhibit a beneficial balance of antistatic performance, alcohol resistance and hydrohead.

HANDSHEET EXAMPLES

Comparative Example 6 was prepared by bonding outer layers of 7657 Polypropylene Spunbond Filaments (2 to 3 denier) ("SB") from Amoco Corp. of Chicago, Illinois to an inner layer of 3746 G Meltblown Polypropylene ("MB") by Exxon Corp. of Houston, Texas. The laminate layers were point bonded by passing

the layers through a heated patterned calender. A topical fluid repellent was applied to the sample by immersing it into an aqueous solution containing Bayguard™ LTC, commercially available from Bayer Chemical Corp. of Wellford, SC, and isopropanol. The Bayguard™ was present in the aqueous solution in an amount of about 2 weight percent, based on the weight of the solution (“bos”). The isopropanol was present in the aqueous solution in an amount of about 4 weight percent, bos. The sample was immersed in the topical fluid repellent for about 2 to 3 seconds until it became saturated. The saturated sample was then calendered to reduce the wet pick up of topical fluid repellent to between 60 to 80% of dry web weight. The calendered web was then dried and cured at 265 to 270°F for 3 minutes.

Example 3 was prepared using the methods and materials of Comparative Example 6, except that a conductive layer was formed between the bottom spunbond layer and the meltblown layer prior to bonding. The conductive layer was formed by depositing 1 end of 18 denier No-Shock Grade 18-2-E3N from Solutia of Gonzalez, Florida onto a first spunbond layer to form a 0.23 gsm layer. The conductive layer was then point bonded to the first spunbond layer by calendering. The meltblown layer was then applied to the conductive layer, and the three layer laminate was calendered. A second spunbond layer was superposed upon the bonded meltblown layer and the resulting four layer laminate was calendered to form a barrier laminate in accordance with the invention.

Table 3 indicates the superior static decay time provided by the barrier laminates of the invention without detriment to the fluid repellent properties, e.g. the hydrohead and alcohol repellency. As shown in Table 3, the conductive layer of the invention may actually increase the hydrohead value of the resulting barrier laminate. Applicants hypothesize that the conductive layer may provide reinforcement for the barrier laminate, resulting in an increased hydrohead value.

The foregoing examples are illustrative of the present invention and are not to be construed as limiting thereof. The invention is defined by the following claims, with equivalents of the claims to be included therein.

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TABLE 1
Antistatic and Fluid Repellency of Various Commercially Available Polypropylene SMS Barrier Laminates

Sample	SMS Id	Nominal Basis Weight (gsm)	Topical Antistat	Topical Fluid Repellent	Hydrohead ¹ (cm)	Alcohol Repellency ² (% Isopropanol)	Static Decay Time (sec) ³
Comp. Ex. 1	BBA T0831D	55	No	No	72	1-2	>60
Comp. Ex. 2	BBA T0832D ⁹	55	Yes ⁴	Yes ⁵	44	8-9	0.254
Comp. Ex. 3	BBA T0813D	50	No	No	62	1-2	>60
Comp. Ex. 4	BBA T0813D	50	No	Yes ⁶	65	8-9	>60
Comp. Ex. 5	BBA T0618D	50	Yes ⁷	Yes ⁸	N/A	8-9	0.49

¹Determined per International Nonwovens and Disposables Association ("INDA") Test Method IST 80.6 (98).

²Determined per INDA Test Method IST 80.8 (95).

³Determined per INDA Test Method IST 40.2 (92), indicating the average amount of time required for an initial negative static charge and subsequent positive static charge to dissipate from 5000V to 500V.

⁴The topical antistat was applied by Precision Fabric Group ("PFG") of Greensboro, NC. The composition of the treatment chemicals are proprietary to PFG.

⁵The alcohol repellent was applied by Precision Fabric Group of Greensboro, NC. The composition of the treatment chemicals are proprietary to PFG.

⁶The fluid repellent was Baygaurd LTC commercially available from Bayer Chemicals, Wellford, SC, present on the barrier laminate at 1.3 wt%, based on the weight of the laminate.

⁷The topical antistat was applied by Precision Fabric Group of Greensboro, NC. The composition of the treatment chemicals are proprietary to PFG

⁸The fluid repellent was Baygaurd LTC commercially available from Bayer Chemicals, Wellford, SC, present on the barrier laminate at 1.3 wt%, based on the weight of the laminate.

⁹BBA grade T0832D is a version of grade T0831D that has been topically treated by PFG for antistat and fluid repellency.

TABLE 2
Antistatic and Fluid Repellency of Barrier Laminates Formed in Accordance with the Present Invention

Sample	Basis Weight (gsm)	Topical Antistat	Topical Alcohol Repellent	Static Decay Time for Negative Charges (sec) ³
Example 1	72	No	No	0.01
Example 2	72	No	Yes ⁴	---

¹Determined per International Nonwovens and Disposables Association ("INDA") Test Method IST 80.6 (98).

²Determined per INDA Test Method IST 80.8 (95).

³Determined per INDA Test Method IST 40.2 (92), based on time to dissipate negative charges only.

⁴The fluid repellent was applied by Precision Fabric Group ("PFG") of Greensboro, NC. The composition of the treatment chemicals are proprietary to PFG.

TABLE 3
Beneficial Properties of Comparable Handsheet Samples

Sample	Basis Weight (gsm)				Hydrohead ¹ (cm)	Alcohol Repellency ² (% Isopropanol)	Static Decay Time ³	
	Top SB	MB	Conductive Layer	Bottom SB			-5kV to -0.5Kv	+5kV to +0.5Kv
Comp. Ex 6	25	12	0	25	64	80	>60 secs	>60 secs
Example 3	25	12	0.23	25	79	80	0.01	0.06

¹Determined per International Nonwovens and Disposables Association ("INDA") Test Method IST 80.6 (98).

²Determined per INDA Test Method IST 80.8 (95).

³Determined per INDA Test Method IST 40.2 (92), indicating the average amount of time required for a negative static charge and a positive static charge to dissipate from 5000V to 500V, respectively.

THAT WHICH IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A nonwoven barrier laminate comprising
 - (a) outer spunbonded layers;
 - 5 (b) at least one hydrophobic microporous layer between the outer spunbonded layers;
 - (c) at least one discrete conductive layer comprising electrically conductive strands; and
 - (d) a multiplicity of discrete bond sites bonding together said
10 layers to form a coherent fabric.
2. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 1 wherein said electrically conductive strands are selected from the group consisting of carbon filaments and metallic filaments.
3. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 1 wherein said
15 electrically conductive strands comprise multicomponent fibers or filaments having at least one nonconductive polymer component and at least one conductive component.
4. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 1 wherein said electrically conductive strands comprise monocomponent filaments formed from a polymer containing a conductive melt-additive.
- 20 5. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to any one of Claims 1 to 4 wherein said conductive layer comprises from about 0.1 to 0.5 weight percent of the barrier laminate..
6. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to any one of Claims 1 to 5 wherein said conductive layer has a basis weight ranging from about 0.01 to 0.5 gsm.
- 25 7. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 6, wherein said conductive layer has a basis weight of about 0.2 gsm.
8. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to any preceding claim wherein said laminate has a static decay time of about 0.10 seconds or less for a negative charge to dissipate from 5000V to 500V.

9. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 8, wherein said laminate has a hydrohead of at least about 35 cm and alcohol repellency of about 6.0 or more.

10. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to any one of Claims 1 to 9,
5 wherein said electrically conductive strands are arranged randomly within the conductive layer.

11. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to any one of Claims 1 to 10,
wherein said hydrophobic microporous layer comprises meltblown fiber.

12. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to any one of Claims 1 to 11,
10 wherein said spunbond layers and hydrophobic microporous layer comprise polypropylene filaments.

13. A nonwoven barrier laminate comprising

- (a) outer spunbonded layers comprising substantially continuous thermoplastic filaments;
- 15 (b) at least one hydrophobic microporous layer comprising meltblown microfibers between the outer spunbonded layers;
- (c) at least one discrete conductive layer comprising electrically conductive filaments located between one of said outer spunbond layers and said at least one hydrophobic microporous layer; and
- 20 (d) a multiplicity of discrete point bond sites bonding together said layers to form a coherent fabric.

14. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 13, wherein said outer spunbond layers and said meltblown microfibers are polypropylene.

15. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 13, wherein said
25 electrically conductive filaments comprise multicomponent filaments including at least one nonconductive polymer component and at least one electrically conductive component.

16. A nonwoven barrier laminate according to Claim 13, wherein said outer spunbond layers are treated with a topical fluid repellent composition.

17. A process for producing a nonwoven barrier laminate comprising:
- (a) directing a plurality of substantially continuous electrically nonconductive filaments onto an underlying longitudinally advancing collection surface to form a first outer spunbond web;
- 5 (b) directing a plurality of substantially discontinuous electrically nonconductive filaments onto the longitudinally advancing first spunbond web to form a meltblown web;
- (c) directing a plurality of electrically conductive strands onto either the meltblown web or onto the first spunbond web to form an electrically
- 10 conductive layer;
- (d) directing a plurality of substantially continuous electrically nonconductive filaments onto either said electrically conductive layer or said meltblown web to form a second outer spunbond layer; and
- (e) bonding said first outer spunbond web, said meltblown web,
- 15 said electrically conductive layer and said second outer spunbond web to form a cohesive barrier laminate.
18. A process according to Claim 17, wherein said step of directing electrically conductive strands further comprises transporting one or more electrically conductive strands through an air gun.
- 20 19. A process according to Claim 17, wherein said step of directing electrically conductive strands further comprises discharging electrically conductive strands from respective ones of a series spaced apart air guns arranged across the collection surface and depositing the strands anisotropically across the width of the underlying longitudinally advancing web.
- 25 20. A process according to Claim 17, wherein said step of directing electrically conductive strands further comprises discharging electrically conductive strands from respective ones of a series spaced apart air guns arranged across the collection surface and depositing the strands in distinct longitudinally extending zones across the width of the underlying longitudinally advancing web.

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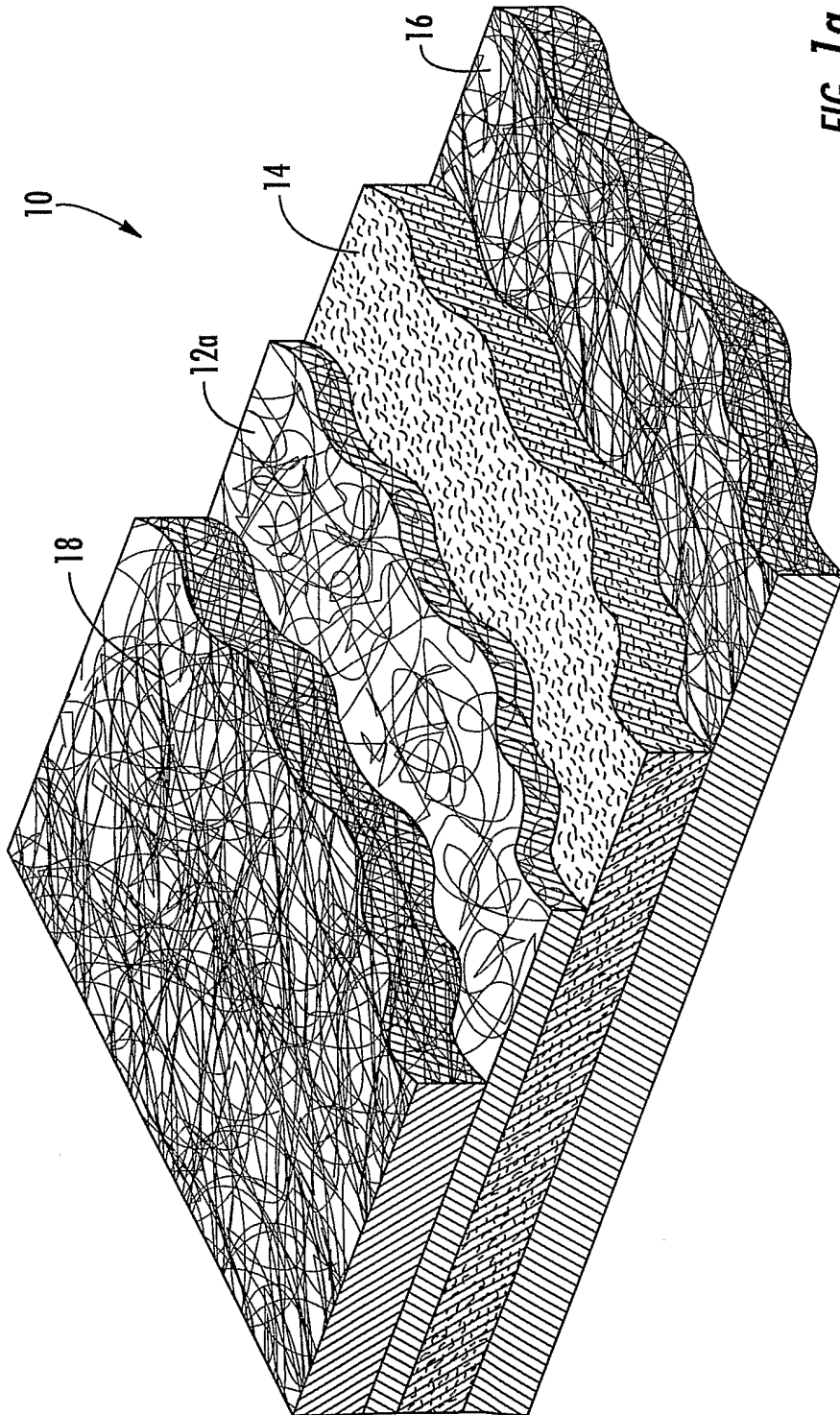


FIG. 1a

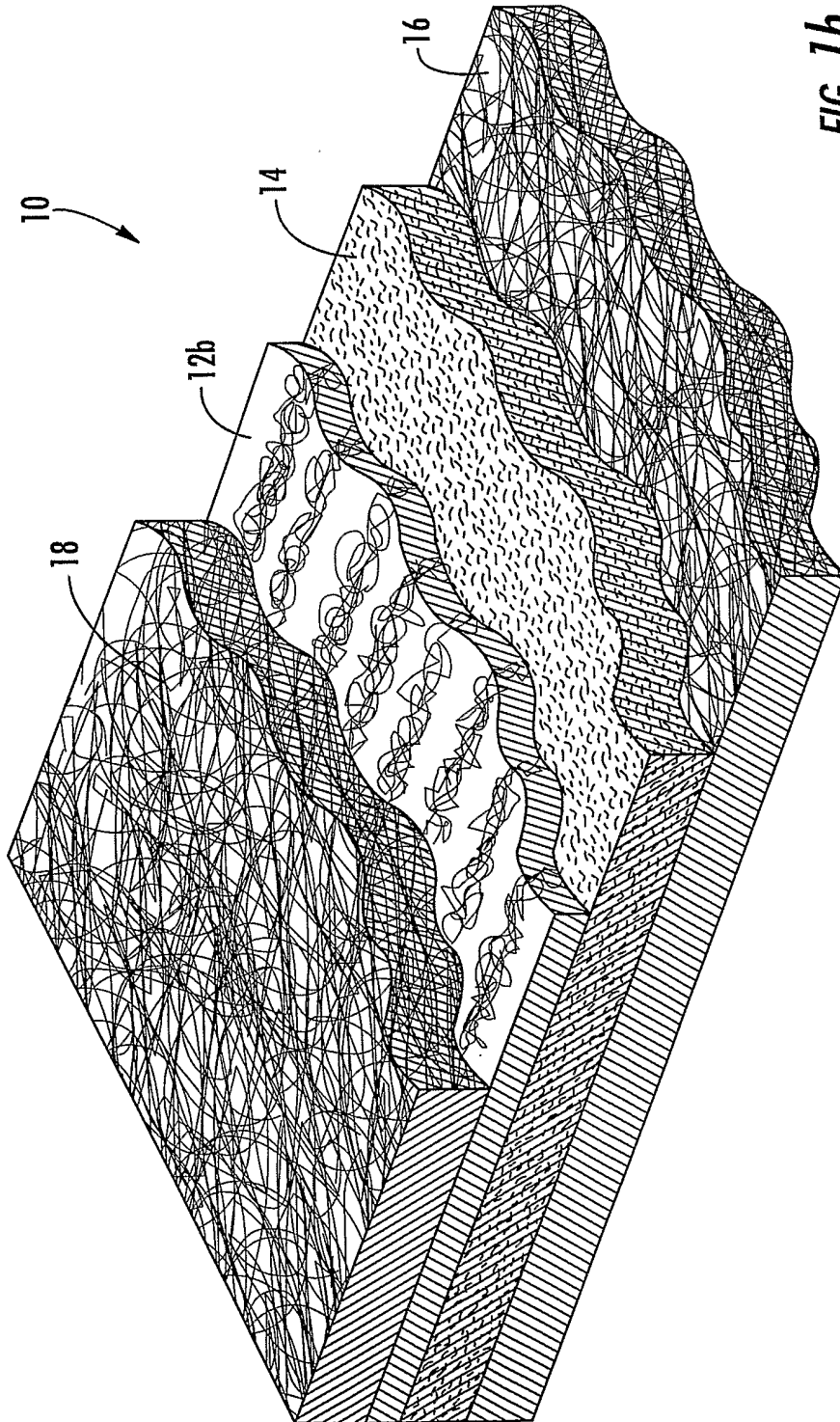


FIG. 1b

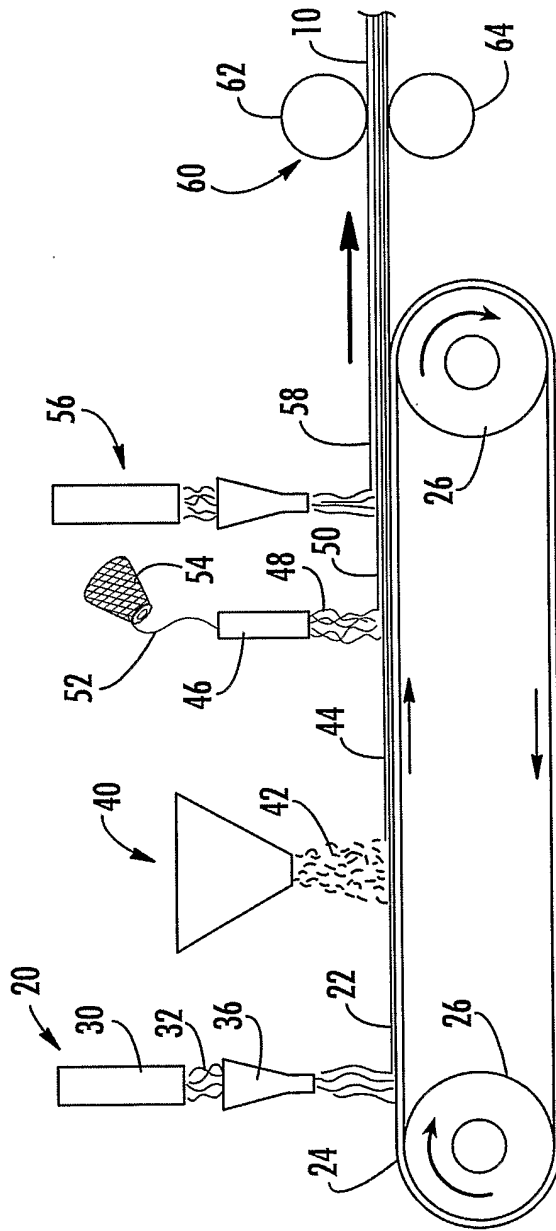


FIG. 2

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No

PCT/US 03/33453

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
 IPC 7 B32B27/12 D04H13/00 B32B5/26 D04H1/56 A61B19/08

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
 IPC 7 B32B D04H A61B

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)
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Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
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Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.

Patent family members are listed in annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:

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- *Z* document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No

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