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(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US): **TICONA LLC** [US/US]; 8040 Dixie Highway, Florence, Kentucky 41042 (US).

(72) Inventors; and

(75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): **NELSON, Sherri, M.** [US/US]; 22274 East Burns Valley Road, Winona, Minnesota 55987 (US). **EASTEP, David, W.** [US/US]; 8300 East 10th Street, Winona, Minnesota 55987 (US). **REGAN, Timothy, A.** [US/US]; 5545 West 9th Street, Townhouse 2, Winona, Minnesota 48360 (US). **WESLEY, Michael, L.** [US/US]; 1120 County Road 142 SE, Dover, Minnesota 55929 (US).

(74) Agents: **HUYCKE, Thomas, D.** et al.; Dority & Manning, P.A., PO Box 1449, Greenville, South Carolina 29602-1449 (US).

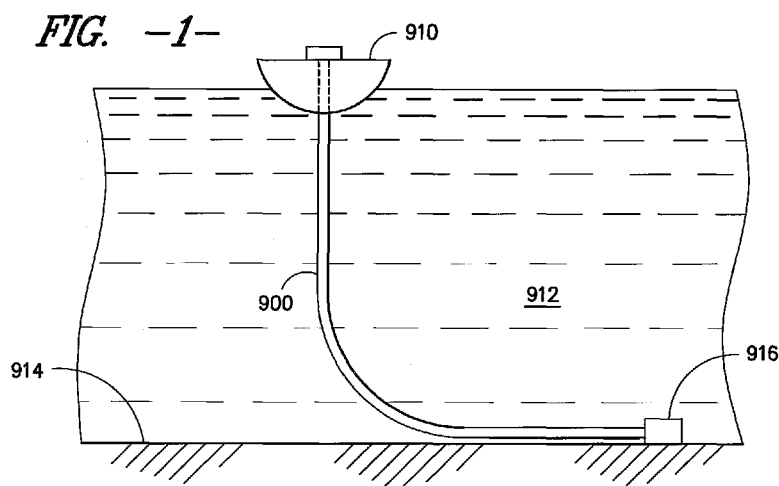
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(57) Abstract: An umbilical for the transfer of fluids and/or electric current/signals, particularly between the sea surface and equipment deployed on the sea bed (e.g., in deep waters), is provided. The umbilical contains a plurality of elongated umbilical elements (e.g., two or more), such as a channel element, fluid pipe, electric conductor/wire (e.g., optic fiber cable), armoring wire, etc., enclosed within an outer sheath (e.g., plastic sheath). The umbilical also contains at least one reinforcing rod formed from a plurality of unidirectionally aligned fiber rovings embedded within a thermoplastic polymer matrix. The present inventors have discovered that the degree to which the rovings are impregnated with the thermoplastic polymer matrix can be significantly improved through selective control over the impregnation process, and also through control over the degree of compression imparted to the rovings during formation and shaping of the rod, as well as the calibration of the final rod geometry. Such a well impregnated rod has a very small void fraction, which leads to excellent strength properties for reinforcing the umbilical elements.



UMBILICAL FOR USE IN SUBSEA APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application relates to U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 61/474,467, filed April 12, 2011, titled: "UMBILICAL FOR USE IN SUBSEA APPLICATIONS", which is hereby incorporated by reference.

Background of the Invention

[0002] Umbilicals are often used in the transmission of fluids and/or electric signals between the sea surface and equipment located on the sea bed. Such umbilicals generally include one or more pipes and electric conductors/wires collected in a bundle, a filler material arranged at least partly around and between the pipes and conductors/wires, and a protective sheath enclosing the pipes, conductors/wires, and filler material. To help strengthen such umbilicals, attempts have been made to use pultruded carbon fiber rods as separate load carrying elements. Exemplary umbilical designs are described in more detail, for instance, in U.S. Patent No. 7,798,234 to Ju, et al. and 7,754,966 to Figenschou, which are incorporated herein in their entirety by reference thereto for all purposes. A significant problem with such rods however, it is that they rely upon thermoset resins (e.g., vinyl esters) to help achieve the desired strength properties. Thermoset resins are difficult to use during manufacturing and do not possess good bonding characteristics for forming layers with other materials.

[0003] As such, a need currently exists for an umbilical that contains pultruded fiber rods formed from a thermoplastic material, which are still capable of achieving the desired strength and durability.

Summary of the Invention

[0004] In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, an umbilical for use in subsea applications is disclosed. The umbilical comprises a plurality of umbilical elements extending in a longitudinal direction, at least one reinforcing rod, and an outer sheath enclosing the umbilical elements and the reinforcing rod. The rod has a core that contains a plurality of thermoplastic impregnated rovings comprising continuous fibers oriented in the longitudinal direction and a thermoplastic matrix that embeds the fibers. The continuous fibers

constitute from about 25 wt.% to about 80 wt.% of the core and the thermoplastic matrix constitutes from about 20 wt.% to about 75 wt.% of the core.

[0005] Other features and aspects of the present invention are set forth in greater detail below.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0006] A full and enabling disclosure of the present invention, including the best mode thereof to one skilled in the art, is set forth more particularly in the remainder of the specification, including reference to the accompanying figures, in which:

[0007] Fig. 1 is a system that may be used in conjunction with one embodiment of the umbilical of the present invention;

[0008] Fig. 2 is a cross-sectional view of one embodiment of the umbilical of the present invention;

[0009] Fig. 3 is a cross-sectional view of another embodiment of the umbilical of the present invention;

[0010] Fig. 4 is a cross-sectional view of yet another embodiment of the umbilical of the present invention;

[0011] Fig. 5 is a perspective view of one embodiment of a consolidated ribbon for use in the present invention;

[0012] Fig. 6 is a cross-sectional view of another embodiment of a consolidated ribbon for use in the present invention;

[0013] Fig. 7 is a schematic illustration of one embodiment of an impregnation system for use in the present invention;

[0014] Fig. 8 is a cross-sectional view of the impregnation die shown in Fig. 7;

[0015] Fig. 9 is an exploded view of one embodiment of a manifold assembly and gate passage for an impregnation die that may be employed in the present invention;

[0016] Fig. 10 is a perspective view of one embodiment of a plate at least partially defining an impregnation zone that may be employed in the present invention;

[0017] Fig. 11 is a schematic illustration of one embodiment of a pultrusion system that may be employed in the present invention;

[0018] Fig. 12 is a perspective view of one embodiment of a continuous fiber reinforced thermoplastic rod that may be formed in accordance with the present invention;

[0019] Fig. 13 is a top cross-sectional view of one embodiment of various calibration dies that may be employed in accordance with the present invention;

[0020] Fig. 14 is a side cross-sectional view of one embodiment of a calibration die that may be employed in accordance with the present invention;

[0021] Fig. 15 is a front view of a portion of one embodiment of a calibration die that may be employed in accordance with the present invention; and

[0022] Fig. 16 is a front view of one embodiment of forming rollers that may be employed in accordance with the present invention.

[0023] Repeat use of reference characters in the present specification and drawings is intended to represent the same or analogous features or elements of the present invention.

Detailed Description of Representative Embodiments

[0024] It is to be understood by one of ordinary skill in the art that the present discussion is a description of exemplary embodiments only, and is not intended as limiting the broader aspects of the present invention.

[0025] Generally speaking, the present invention is directed to an umbilical for the transfer of fluids and/or electric current/signals, particularly between the sea surface and equipment deployed on the sea bed (e.g., in deep waters). The umbilical contains a plurality of elongated umbilical elements (e.g., two or more), such as a channel element, fluid pipe, electric conductor/wire (e.g., optic fiber cable), armoring wire, etc., enclosed within an outer sheath (e.g., plastic sheath). The umbilical also contains at least one reinforcing rod formed from a plurality of unidirectionally aligned fiber rovings embedded within a thermoplastic polymer matrix. The present inventors have discovered that the degree to which the rovings are impregnated with the thermoplastic polymer matrix can be significantly improved through selective control over the impregnation process, and also through control over the degree of compression imparted to the rovings during formation and shaping of the rod, as well as the calibration of the final rod geometry. Such a well impregnated rod has a very small void fraction, which leads to excellent strength properties for reinforcing the umbilical elements.

[0026] The particular configuration, arrangement, and number of umbilical elements are not critical and may vary as is known in the art. Referring to Fig. 2, for example, one particular embodiment of an umbilical 600 is shown that contains a central portion 609, which may be formed from a steel pipe, rubber sheath, metallic strand, metallic strand over-sheathed with a thermoplastic material, etc. One or more inner channel elements 603 (e.g., polyvinylchloride), electric conductors/wires 606 (e.g., optic fiber cables), and/or fluid pipes 604 (e.g., steel) may be concentrically disposed about the central portion 609. For example, such umbilical elements may be wound helically around the central portion 609 using a helix machine as is known in the art. The umbilical 600 may also contain conventional strength elements 608, such as those made from steel rope or armoring wires. A filler 610 (e.g., foam or thermoplastic material) may be arranged at least partly around and between two or more of the umbilical elements. An outer sheath 601 (e.g., polyethylene) also typically encloses the umbilical elements.

[0027] The reinforcing rod of the present invention may be incorporated into the umbilical in any desired manner, such as individually or in the form of bundles. In the embodiment illustrated in Fig. 2, a bundle of reinforcing rods 607 is disposed within the central portion 609 to provide enhanced strength to the umbilical 600. At least one, but preferably all of the rods 607 are formed from a continuous fiber-reinforced thermoplastic polymer matrix in accordance with the present invention. Of course, the rods need not be contained within the central portion of the umbilical. Referring to Fig. 3, for example, another embodiment of an umbilical 700 is shown that contains a bundle of rods 707 located about a periphery of the umbilical. The umbilical 700 may also contain a central portion 709, which is either free of rods as shown or contains a plurality of rods as illustrated in Fig. 2. The umbilical 700 may also contain one or more inner channel elements 703, electric conductors/wires 706, fluid pipes 704, filler 710, and/or outer sheath 701. In the embodiments referenced above, the reinforcing rods are generally provided in the form of a bundle. However, individual rods may also be employed. Referring to Fig. 4, for example, one embodiment of an umbilical 800 is shown that contains one or more channel elements 803, pipes 804, and/or electrical conductors/wires

806. The umbilical 800 also contains individual rods 807 distributed about the periphery and/or in the interior of the umbilical 800.

[0028] Regardless of the particular manner in which they are incorporated into the umbilical, the reinforcing rods of the present invention are formed from a plurality of unidirectionally aligned fiber rovings embedded within a thermoplastic polymer matrix. As used herein, the term "roving" generally refers to a bundle or tow of individual fibers. The fibers contained within the roving can be twisted or can be straight. Although different fibers can be used in individual or different rovings, it is generally desired that each of the rovings contain a single fiber type to minimize any adverse impact of using material with a different thermal coefficient of expansion. The continuous fibers employed in the rovings possess a high degree of tensile strength relative to their mass. For example, the ultimate tensile strength of the fibers is typically from about 1,000 to about 15,000 Megapascals ("MPa"), in some embodiments from about 2,000 MPa to about 10,000 MPa, and in some embodiments, from about 3,000 MPa to about 6,000 MPa. Such tensile strengths may be achieved even though the fibers are of a relatively light weight, such as a mass per unit length of from about 0.1 to about 2 grams per meter, in some embodiments from about 0.4 to about 1.5 grams per meter. The ratio of tensile strength to mass per unit length may thus be about 1,000 Megapascals per gram per meter ("MPa/g/m") or greater, in some embodiments about 4,000 MPa/g/m or greater, and in some embodiments, from about 5,500 to about 20,000 MPa/g/m. Such high strength fibers may, for instance, be metal fibers, glass fibers (e.g., E-glass, A-glass, C-glass, D-glass, AR-glass, R-glass, S1-glass, S2-glass, etc.), carbon fibers (e.g., amorphous carbon, graphitic carbon, or metal-coated carbon, etc.), boron fibers, ceramic fibers (e.g., alumina or silica), aramid fibers (e.g., Kevlar® marketed by E. I. duPont de Nemours, Wilmington, Del.), synthetic organic fibers (e.g., polyamide, polyethylene, paraphenylene, terephthalamide, polyethylene terephthalate and polyphenylene sulfide), and various other natural or synthetic inorganic or organic fibrous materials known for reinforcing thermoplastic compositions. Carbon fibers are particularly suitable for use as the continuous fibers, which typically have a tensile strength to mass ratio in the range of from about 5,000 to about 7,000 MPa/g/m. The continuous fibers often have a nominal diameter of about 4 to about 35 micrometers, and in some embodiments, from

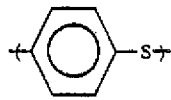
about 5 to about 35 micrometers. The number of fibers contained in each roving can be constant or vary from roving to roving. Typically, a roving contains from about 1,000 fibers to about 100,000 individual fibers, and in some embodiments, from about 5,000 to about 50,000 fibers.

[0029] Any of a variety of thermoplastic polymers may be employed to form the thermoplastic matrix in which the continuous fibers are embedded. Suitable thermoplastic polymers for use in the present invention may include, for instance, polyolefins (e.g., polypropylene, propylene-ethylene copolymers, etc.), polyesters (e.g., polybutylene terephthalate ("PBT")), polycarbonates, polyamides (e.g., Nylon™), polyether ketones (e.g., polyetherether ketone ("PEEK")), polyetherimides, polyarylene ketones (e.g., polyphenylene diketone ("PPDK")), liquid crystal polymers, polyarylene sulfides (e.g., polyphenylene sulfide ("PPS"), poly(biphenylene sulfide ketone), poly(phenylene sulfide diketone), poly(biphenylene sulfide), etc.), fluoropolymers (e.g., polytetrafluoroethylene-perfluoromethylvinylether polymer, perfluoro-alkoxyalkane polymer, perfluoroethylene polymer, ethylene-tetrafluoroethylene polymer, etc.), polyacetals, polyurethanes, polycarbonates, styrenic polymers (e.g., acrylonitrile butadiene styrene ("ABS")), and so forth.

[0030] The properties of the thermoplastic matrix are generally selected to achieve the desired combination of processability and performance of the rod during use. For example, the melt viscosity of the thermoplastic matrix is generally low enough so that the polymer can adequately impregnate the fibers and become shaped into the rod configuration. In this regard, the melt viscosity typically ranges from about 25 to about 2,000 Pascal-seconds ("Pa-s"), in some embodiments from about 50 to about 500 Pa-s, and in some embodiments, from about 60 to about 200 Pa-s, determined at the operating conditions used for the thermoplastic polymer (e.g., about 360°C). Likewise, when the rod is intended for use at high temperatures, a thermoplastic polymer is employed that has a relatively high melting temperature. For example, the melting temperature of such high temperature polymers may range from about 200°C to about 500°C, in some embodiments from about 225°C to about 400°C, and in some embodiments, from about 250°C to about 350°C.

[0031] Polyarylene sulfides are particularly suitable for use in the present invention as a high temperature matrix with the desired melt viscosity.

Polyphenylene sulfide, for example, is a semi-crystalline resin that generally includes repeating monomeric units represented by the following general formula:



[0032] These monomeric units typically constitute at least 80 mole%, and in some embodiments, at least 90 mole%, of the recurring units, in the polymer. It should be understood, however, the polyphenylene sulfide may contain additional recurring units, such as described in U.S. Patent No. 5,075,381 to Gotoh, et al., which is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference thereto for all purposes. When employed, such additional recurring units typically constitute no more than about 20 mole% of the polymer. Commercially available high melt viscosity polyphenylene sulfides may include those available from Ticona LLC (Florence, Kentucky) under the trade designation FORTRON®. Such polymers may have a melting temperature of about 285°C (determined according to ISO 11357-1,2,3) and a melt viscosity of from about 260 to about 320 Pascal-seconds at 310°C.

[0033] According to the present invention, an extrusion device is generally employed to impregnate the rovings with the thermoplastic matrix. Among other things, the extrusion device facilitates the ability of the thermoplastic polymer to be applied to the entire surface of the fibers. The impregnated rovings also have a very low void fraction, which helps enhance its strength. For instance, the void fraction may be about 6% or less, in some embodiments about 4% or less, in some embodiments about 3% or less, in some embodiments about 2% or less, in some embodiments about 1% or less, and in some embodiments, about 0.5% or less. The void fraction may be measured using techniques well known to those skilled in the art. For example, the void fraction may be measured using a “resin burn off” test in which samples are placed in an oven (e.g., at 600° C for 3 hours) to burn out the resin. The mass of the remaining fibers may then be measured to calculate the weight and volume fractions. Such “burn off” testing may be performed in accordance with ASTM D 2584-08 to determine the weights of the fibers and the thermoplastic matrix, which may then be used to calculate the “void fraction” based on the following equations:

$$V_f = 100 * (\rho_t - \rho_c) / \rho_t$$

where,

V_f is the void fraction as a percentage;

ρ_c is the density of the composite as measured using known techniques, such as with a liquid or gas pycnometer (e.g., helium pycnometer);

ρ_t is the theoretical density of the composite as is determined by the following equation:

$$\rho_t = 1 / [W_f / \rho_f + W_m / \rho_m]$$

ρ_m is the density of the thermoplastic matrix (e.g., at the appropriate crystallinity);

ρ_f is the density of the fibers;

W_f is the weight fraction of the fibers; and

W_m is the weight fraction of the thermoplastic matrix.

[0034] Alternatively, the void fraction may be determined by chemically dissolving the resin in accordance with ASTM D 3171-09. The “burn off” and “dissolution” methods are particularly suitable for glass fibers, which are generally resistant to melting and chemical dissolution. In other cases, however, the void fraction may be indirectly calculated based on the densities of the thermoplastic polymer, fibers, and ribbon (or tape) in accordance with ASTM D 2734-09 (Method A), where the densities may be determined ASTM D792-08 Method A. Of course, the void fraction can also be estimated using conventional microscopy equipment, or through the use of computed tomography (CT) scan equipment, such as a Metrotom 1500 (2k x 2k) high resolution detector.

[0035] Referring to Fig. 7, one embodiment of such an extrusion device is shown. More particularly, the apparatus includes an extruder 120 containing a screw shaft 124 mounted inside a barrel 122. A heater 130 (e.g., electrical resistance heater) is mounted outside the barrel 122. During use, a thermoplastic polymer feedstock 127 is supplied to the extruder 120 through a hopper 126. The thermoplastic feedstock 127 is conveyed inside the barrel 122 by the screw shaft 124 and heated by frictional forces inside the barrel 122 and by the heater 130. Upon being heated, the feedstock 127 exits the barrel 122 through a barrel flange 128 and enters a die flange 132 of an impregnation die 150.

[0036] A continuous fiber roving 142 or a plurality of continuous fiber rovings 142 are supplied from a reel or reels 144 to die 150. The rovings 142 are

generally kept apart a certain distance before impregnation, such as at least about 4 millimeters, and in some embodiments, at least about 5 millimeters. The feedstock 127 may further be heated inside the die by heaters 133 mounted in or around the die 150. The die is generally operated at temperatures that are sufficient to cause melting and impregnation of the thermoplastic polymer. Typically, the operation temperatures of the die is higher than the melt temperature of the thermoplastic polymer, such as at temperatures from about 200°C to about 450°C. When processed in this manner, the continuous fiber rovings 142 become embedded in the polymer matrix, which may be a resin 214 (Fig. 8) processed from the feedstock 127. The mixture is then extruded from the impregnation die 150 to create an extrudate 152.

[0037] A pressure sensor 137 (Fig. 8) senses the pressure near the impregnation die 150 to allow control to be exerted over the rate of extrusion by controlling the rotational speed of the screw shaft 124, or the feedrate of the feeder. That is, the pressure sensor 137 is positioned near the impregnation die 150 so that the extruder 120 can be operated to deliver a correct amount of resin 214 for interaction with the fiber rovings 142. After leaving the impregnation die 150, the extrudate 152, or impregnated fiber rovings 142, may enter an optional pre-shaping, or guiding section (not shown) before entering a nip formed between two adjacent rollers 190. Although optional, the rollers 190 can help to consolidate the extrudate 152 into the form of a ribbon, as well as enhance fiber impregnation and squeeze out any excess voids. In addition to the rollers 190, other shaping devices may also be employed, such as a die system. The resulting consolidated ribbon 156 is pulled by tracks 162 and 164 mounted on rollers. The tracks 162 and 164 also pull the extrudate 152 from the impregnation die 150 and through the rollers 190. If desired, the consolidated ribbon 156 may be wound up at a section 171. Generally speaking, the ribbons are relatively thin and typically have a thickness of from about 0.05 to about 1 millimeter, in some embodiments from about 0.1 to about 0.8 millimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 0.2 to about 0.4 millimeters.

[0038] Within the impregnation die, it is generally desired that the rovings 142 are traversed through an impregnation zone 250 to impregnate the rovings with the polymer resin 214. In the impregnation zone 250, the polymer resin may

be forced generally transversely through the rovings by shear and pressure created in the impregnation zone 250, which significantly enhances the degree of impregnation. This is particularly useful when forming a composite from ribbons of a high fiber content, such as about 35% weight fraction ("Wf") or more, and in some embodiments, from about 40% Wf or more. Typically, the die 150 will include a plurality of contact surfaces 252, such as for example at least 2, at least 3, from 4 to 7, from 2 to 20, from 2 to 30, from 2 to 40, from 2 to 50, or more contact surfaces 252, to create a sufficient degree of penetration and pressure on the rovings 142. Although their particular form may vary, the contact surfaces 252 typically possess a curvilinear surface, such as a curved lobe, rod, etc. The contact surfaces 252 are also typically made of a metal material.

[0039] Fig. 8 shows a cross-sectional view of an impregnation die 150. As shown, the impregnation die 150 includes a manifold assembly 220, a gate passage 270, and an impregnation zone 250. The manifold assembly 220 is provided for flowing the polymer resin 214 therethrough. For example, the manifold assembly 220 may include a channel 222 or a plurality of channels 222. The resin 214 provided to the impregnation die 150 may flow through the channels 222.

[0040] As shown in Fig. 9, some portions of the channels 222 may be curvilinear, and in exemplary embodiments, the channels 222 have a symmetrical orientation along a central axis 224. Further, in some embodiments, the channels may be a plurality of branched runners 222, which may include first branched runner group 232, second group 234, third group 236, and, if desired, more branched runner groups. Each group may include 2, 3, 4 or more runners 222 branching off from runners 222 in the preceding group, or from an initial channel 222.

[0041] The branched runners 222 and the symmetrical orientation thereof generally evenly distribute the resin 214, such that the flow of resin 214 exiting the manifold assembly 220 and coating the rovings 142 is substantially uniformly distributed on the rovings 142. This desirably allows for generally uniform impregnation of the rovings 142.

[0042] Further, the manifold assembly 220 may in some embodiments define an outlet region 242, which generally encompasses at least a downstream

portion of the channels or runners 222 from which the resin 214 exits. In some embodiments, at least a portion of the channels or runners 222 disposed in the outlet region 242 have an increasing area in a flow direction 244 of the resin 214. The increasing area allows for diffusion and further distribution of the resin 214 as the resin 214 flows through the manifold assembly 220, which further allows for substantially uniform distribution of the resin 214 on the rovings 142.

[0043] As further illustrated in Figs. 8 and 9, after flowing through the manifold assembly 220, the resin 214 may flow through gate passage 270. Gate passage 270 is positioned between the manifold assembly 220 and the impregnation zone 250, and is provided for flowing the resin 214 from the manifold assembly 220 such that the resin 214 coats the rovings 142. Thus, resin 214 exiting the manifold assembly 220, such as through outlet region 242, may enter gate passage 270 and flow therethrough, as shown.

[0044] Upon exiting the manifold assembly 220 and the gate passage 270 of the die 150 as shown in Fig. 8, the resin 214 contacts the rovings 142 being traversed through the die 150. As discussed above, the resin 214 may substantially uniformly coat the rovings 142, due to distribution of the resin 214 in the manifold assembly 220 and the gate passage 270. Further, in some embodiments, the resin 214 may impinge on an upper surface of each of the rovings 142, or on a lower surface of each of the rovings 142, or on both an upper and lower surface of each of the rovings 142. Initial impingement on the rovings 142 provides for further impregnation of the rovings 142 with the resin 214.

[0045] As shown in Fig. 8, the coated rovings 142 are traversed in run direction 282 through impregnation zone 250, which is configured to impregnate the rovings 142 with the resin 214. For example, as shown in Figs. 8 and 10, the rovings 142 are traversed over contact surfaces 252 in the impregnation zone. Impingement of the rovings 142 on the contact surface 252 creates shear and pressure sufficient to impregnate the rovings 142 with the resin 214 coating the rovings 142.

[0046] In some embodiments, as shown in Fig. 8, the impregnation zone 250 is defined between two spaced apart opposing plates 256 and 258. First plate 256 defines a first inner surface 257, while second plate 258 defines a second inner surface 259. The contact surfaces 252 may be defined on or extend from

both the first and second inner surfaces 257 and 259, or only one of the first and second inner surfaces 257 and 259. Fig. 10 illustrates the second plate 258 and the various contact surfaces thereon that form at least a portion of the impregnation zone 250 according to these embodiments. In exemplary embodiments, as shown in Fig. 8, the contact surfaces 252 may be defined alternately on the first and second surfaces 257 and 259 such that the rovings alternately impinge on contact surfaces 252 on the first and second surfaces 257 and 259. Thus, the rovings 142 may pass contact surfaces 252 in a waveform, tortuous or sinusoidal-type pathway, which enhances shear.

[0047] Angle 254 at which the rovings 142 traverse the contact surfaces 252 may be generally high enough to enhance shear, but not so high to cause excessive forces that will break the fibers. Thus, for example, the angle 254 may be in the range between approximately 1° and approximately 30°, and in some embodiments, between approximately 5° and approximately 25°.

[0048] In alternative embodiments, the impregnation zone 250 may include a plurality of pins (not shown), each pin having a contact surface 252. The pins may be static, freely rotational, or rotationally driven. In further alternative embodiments, the contact surfaces 252 and impregnation zone 250 may comprise any suitable shapes and/or structures for impregnating the rovings 142 with the resin 214 as desired or required.

[0049] To further facilitate impregnation of the rovings 142, they may also be kept under tension while present within the impregnation die. The tension may, for example, range from about 5 to about 300 Newtons, in some embodiments from about 50 to about 250 Newtons, and in some embodiments, from about 100 to about 200 Newtons per roving 142 or tow of fibers.

[0050] As shown in Fig. 8, in some embodiments, a land zone 280 may be positioned downstream of the impregnation zone 250 in run direction 282 of the rovings 142. The rovings 142 may traverse through the land zone 280 before exiting the die 150. As further shown in Fig. 8, in some embodiments, a faceplate 290 may adjoin the impregnation zone 250. Faceplate 290 is generally configured to meter excess resin 214 from the rovings 142. Thus, apertures in the faceplate 290, through which the rovings 142 traverse, may be sized such that when the

rovings 142 are traversed therethrough, the size of the apertures causes excess resin 214 to be removed from the rovings 142.

[0051] The impregnation die shown and described above is but one of various possible configurations that may be employed in the present invention. In alternative embodiments, for example, the rovings may be introduced into a crosshead die that is positioned at an angle relative to the direction of flow of the polymer melt. As the rovings move through the crosshead die and reach the point where the polymer exits from an extruder barrel, the polymer is forced into contact with the rovings. Examples of such a crosshead die extruder are described, for instance, in U.S. Patent Nos. 3,993,726 to Moyer; 4,588,538 to Chung, et al.; 5,277,566 to Augustin, et al.; and 5,658,513 to Amaike, et al., which are incorporated herein in their entirety by reference thereto for all purposes. It should also be understood that any other extruder design may also be employed, such as a twin screw extruder. Still further, other components may also be optionally employed to assist in the impregnation of the fibers. For example, a "gas jet" assembly may be employed in certain embodiments to help uniformly spread a roving of individual fibers, which may each contain up to as many as 24,000 fibers, across the entire width of the merged tow. This helps achieve uniform distribution of strength properties. Such an assembly may include a supply of compressed air or another gas that impinges in a generally perpendicular fashion on the moving rovings that pass across the exit ports. The spread rovings may then be introduced into a die for impregnation, such as described above.

[0052] Regardless of the technique employed, the continuous fibers are oriented in the longitudinal direction (the machine direction "A" of the system of Fig. 7) to enhance tensile strength. Besides fiber orientation, other aspects of the pultrusion process are also controlled to achieve the desired strength. For example, a relatively high percentage of continuous fibers are employed in the consolidated ribbon to provide enhanced strength properties. For instance, continuous fibers typically constitute from about 25 wt.% to about 80 wt.%, in some embodiments from about 30 wt.% to about 75 wt.%, and in some embodiments, from about 35 wt.% to about 60 wt.% of the ribbon. Likewise, thermoplastic polymer(s) typically constitute from about 20 wt.% to about 75 wt.%, in some embodiments from about 25 wt.% to about 70 wt.%, and in some

embodiments, from about 40 wt.% to about 65 wt.% of the ribbon. The percentage of the fibers and thermoplastic matrix in the final rod may also be within the ranges noted above.

[0053] As noted above, the rovings may be consolidated into the form of one or more ribbons before being shaped into the desired rod configuration. When such a ribbon is subsequently compressed, the rovings can become distributed in a generally symmetrical manner about a longitudinal center of the rod. Such symmetrical distribution enhances the consistency of the strength properties (e.g., flexural modulus, ultimate tensile strength, etc.) over the entire length of the rod. When employed, the number of consolidated ribbons used to form the rod will vary based on the desired thickness and /or cross-sectional area and strength of the rod, as well as the nature of the ribbons themselves. In most cases, however, the number of ribbons is from 1 to 15, and in some embodiments, from 2 to 5. The number of rovings employed in each ribbon may likewise vary. Typically, however, a ribbon will contain from 2 to 10 rovings, and in some embodiments, from 3 to 5 rovings. To help achieve the symmetric distribution of the rovings in the final rod, it is generally desired that they are spaced apart approximately the same distance from each other within the ribbon. Referring to Fig. 5, for example, one embodiment of a consolidated ribbon 4 is shown that contains three (3) rovings 5 spaced equidistant from each other in the -x direction. In other embodiments, however, it may be desired that the rovings are combined, such that the fibers of the rovings are generally evenly distributed throughout the ribbon 4. In these embodiments, the rovings may be generally indistinguishable from each other. Referring to Fig. 6, for example, one embodiment of a consolidated ribbon 4 is shown that contains rovings that are combined such that the fibers are generally evenly distributed.

[0054] The specific manner in which the rovings are shaped is also carefully controlled to ensure that rod can be formed with an adequate degree of compression and strength properties. Referring to Fig. 11, for example, one particular embodiment of a system and method for forming a rod are shown. In this embodiment, two ribbons 12 are initially provided in a wound package on a creel 20. The creel 20 may be an unreeling creel that includes a frame provided with horizontal rotating spindles 22, each supporting a package. A pay-out creel

may also be employed, particularly if desired to induce a twist into the fibers, such as when using raw fibers in a one-step configuration. It should also be understood that the ribbons may also be formed in-line with the formation of the rod. In one embodiment, for example, the extrudate 152 exiting the impregnation die 150 from Fig. 7 may be directly supplied to the system used to form a rod. A tension-regulating device 40 may also be employed to help control the degree of tension in the ribbons 12. The device 40 may include inlet plate 30 that lies in a vertical plane parallel to the rotating spindles 22 of the creel 20 and/or perpendicular to the incoming ribbons. The tension-regulating device 40 may contain cylindrical bars 41 arranged in a staggered configuration so that the ribbons 12 passes over and under these bars to define a wave pattern. The height of the bars can be adjusted to modify the amplitude of the wave pattern and control tension.

[0055] The ribbons 12 may be heated in an oven 45 before entering the consolidation die. Heating may be conducted using any known type of oven, as in an infrared oven, convection oven, etc. During heating, the fibers in the ribbon are unidirectionally oriented to optimize the exposure to the heat and maintain even heat across the entire ribbon. The temperature to which the ribbons 12 are heated is generally high enough to soften the thermoplastic polymer to an extent that the ribbons can bond together. However, the temperature is not so high as to destroy the integrity of the material. The temperature may, for example, range from about 100°C to about 500°C, in some embodiments from about 200°C to about 400°C, and in some embodiments, from about 250°C to about 350°C. In one particular embodiment, for example, polyphenylene sulfide ("PPS") is used as the polymer, and the ribbons are heated to or above the melting point of PPS, which is about 285°C.

[0056] Upon being heated, the ribbons 12 are provided to a consolidation die 50 that compresses them together into a preform 14, as well as aligns and forms the initial shape of the rod. As shown generally in Fig. 11, for example, the ribbons 12 are guided through a flow passage 51 of the die 50 in a direction "A" from an inlet 53 to an outlet 55. The passage 51 may have any of a variety of shapes and/or sizes to achieve the rod configuration. For example, the channel and rod configuration may be circular, elliptical, parabolic, etc. Within the die 50,

the ribbons are generally maintained at a temperature at or above the melting point of the thermoplastic matrix used in the ribbon to ensure adequate consolidation.

[0057] The desired heating, compression, and shaping of the ribbons 12 may be accomplished through the use of a die 50 having one or multiple sections. For instance, although not shown in detail herein, the consolidation die 50 may possess multiple sections that function together to compress and shape the ribbons 12 into the desired configuration. For instance, a first section of the passage 51 may be a tapered zone that initially shapes the material as it flows from into the die 50. The tapered zone generally possesses a cross-sectional area that is larger at its inlet than at its outlet. For example, the cross-sectional area of the passage 51 at the inlet of the tapered zone may be about 2% or more, in some embodiments about 5% or more, and in some embodiments, from about 10% to about 20% greater than the cross-sectional area at the outlet of the tapered zone. Regardless, the cross-sectional of the flow passage typically changes gradually and smoothly within the tapered zone so that a balanced flow of the composite material through the die can be maintained. A shaping zone may also follow the tapered zone that compresses the material and provides a generally homogeneous flow therethrough. The shaping zone may also pre-shape the material into an intermediate shape that is similar to that of the rod, but typically of a larger cross-sectional area to allow for expansion of the thermoplastic polymer while heated to minimize the risk of backup within the die 50. The shaping zone could also include one or more surface features that impart a directional change to the preform. The directional change forces the material to be redistributed resulting in a more even distribution of the fiber/resin in the final shape. This also reduces the risk of dead spots in the die that can cause burning of the resin. For example, the cross-sectional area of the passage 51 at the shaping zone may be about 2% or more, in some embodiments about 5% or more, and in some embodiments, from about 10% to about 20% greater than the width of the preform 14. A die land may also follow the shaping zone to serve as an outlet for the passage 51. The shaping zone, tapered zone, and/or die land may be heated to a temperature at or above that of the glass transition temperature or melting point of the thermoplastic matrix.

[0058] If desired, a second die 60 (e.g., calibration die) may also be employed that compresses the preform 14 into the final shape of the rod. When employed, it is sometimes desired that the preform 14 is allowed to cool briefly after exiting the consolidation die 50 and before entering the optional second die 60. This allows the consolidated preform 14 to retain its initial shape before progressing further through the system. Typically, cooling reduces the temperature of the exterior of the rod below the melting point temperature of the thermoplastic matrix to minimize and substantially prevent the occurrence of melt fracture on the exterior surface of the rod. The internal section of the rod, however, may remain molten to ensure compression when the rod enters the calibration die body. Such cooling may be accomplished by simply exposing the preform 14 to the ambient atmosphere (e.g., room temperature) or through the use of active cooling techniques (e.g., water bath or air cooling) as is known in the art. In one embodiment, for example, air is blown onto the preform 14 (e.g., with an air ring). The cooling between these stages, however, generally occurs over a small period of time to ensure that the preform 14 is still soft enough to be further shaped. For example, after exiting the consolidation die 50, the preform 14 may be exposed to the ambient environment for only from about 1 to about 20 seconds, and in some embodiments, from about 2 to about 10 seconds, before entering the second die 60. Within the die 60, the preform is generally kept at a temperature below the melting point of the thermoplastic matrix used in the ribbon so that the shape of the rod can be maintained. Although referred to above as single dies, it should be understood that the dies 50 and 60 may in fact be formed from multiple individual dies (e.g., face plate dies).

[0059] Thus, in some embodiments, multiple individual dies 60 may be utilized to gradually shape the material into the desired configuration. The dies 60 are placed in series, and provide for gradual decreases in the dimensions of the material. Such gradual decreases allow for shrinkage during and between the various steps.

[0060] For example, as shown in Figs. 13 through 15, a first die 60 may include one or more inlet 62 and corresponding outlets 64, as shown. Any number of inlets 62 and corresponding outlets 64 may be included in a die 60, such as four as shown, one, two, three, five, six, or more. An inlet 62 in some embodiments

may be generally oval or circle shaped. In other embodiments, the inlet 62 may have a curved rectangular shape, i.e. a rectangular shape with curved corners or a rectangular shape with straight longer sidewalls and curved shorter sidewalls. Further, an outlet 64 may be generally oval or circle shaped, or may have a curved rectangular shape. In some embodiments wherein an oval shaped inlet is utilized, the inlet 62 may have a major axis length 66 to minor axis length 68 ratio in a range between approximately 3 to 1 and approximately 5 to 1. In some embodiments wherein an oval or circular shaped inlet is utilized, the outlet 64 may have a major axis length 66 to minor axis length 68 ratio in a range between approximately 1 to 1 and approximately 3 to 1. In embodiments wherein a curved rectangular shape is utilized, the inlet and outlet may have major axis length 66 to minor axis length 66 ratios (aspect ratios) between approximately 2 to 1 and approximately 7 to 1, with the outlet 64 ratio being less than the inlet 62 ratio.

[0061] In further embodiments, the cross-sectional area of an inlet 62 and the cross-sectional area of a corresponding outlet 64 of the first die 60 may have a ratio in a range between approximately 1.5 to 1 and 6 to 1.

[0062] The first die 60 thus provides a generally smooth transformation of polymer impregnated fiber material to a shape that is relatively similar to a final shape of the resulting rod, which in exemplary embodiments has a circular or oval shaped cross-section. Subsequent dies, such as a second die 60 and third die 60 as shown in Fig. 13, may provide for further gradual decreases and/or changes in the dimensions of the material, such that the shape of the material is converted to a final cross-sectional shape of the rod. These subsequent dies 60 may both shape and cool the material. For example, in some embodiments, each subsequent die 60 may be maintained at a lower temperature than the previous dies. In exemplary embodiments, all dies 60 are maintained at temperatures that are higher than a softening point temperature for the material.

[0063] In further exemplary embodiments, dies 60 having relatively long land lengths 69 may be desired, due to for example desires for proper cooling and solidification, which are critical in achieving a desired rod shape and size. Relatively long land lengths 69 reduce stresses and provide smooth transformations to desired shapes and sizes, and with minimal void fraction and bow characteristics. In some embodiments, for example, a ratio of land length 69

at an outlet 64 to major axis length 66 at the outlet 64 for a die 60 may be in the range between approximately 0 and approximately 20, such as between approximately 2 and approximately 6.

[0064] The use of calibration dies 60 according to the present disclosure provides for gradual changes in material cross-section, as discussed. These gradual changes may in exemplary embodiments ensure that the resulting product, such as a rod or other suitable product, has a generally uniform fiber distribution with relatively minimal void fraction.

[0065] It should be understood that any suitable number of dies 60 may be utilized to gradually form the material into a profile having any suitable cross-sectional shape, as desired or required by various applications.

[0066] In addition to the use of one or more dies, other mechanisms may also be employed to help compress the preform 14 into the shape of a rod. For example, forming rollers 90, as shown in Fig. 16, may be employed between the consolidation die 50 and the calibration die 60, between the various calibration dies 60, and/or after the calibration dies 60 to further compress the preform 14 before it is converted into its final shape. The rollers may have any configuration, such as pinch rollers, overlapping rollers, etc., and may be vertical as shown or horizontal rollers. Depending on the roller 90 configuration, the surfaces of the rollers 90 may be machined to impart the dimensions of the final product, such as the rod, profile, or other suitable product, to the preform 14. In exemplary embodiment, the pressure of the rollers 90 should be adjustable to optimize the quality of the final product.

[0067] The rollers 90 in exemplary embodiments, such as at least the portions contacting the material, may have generally smooth surfaces. For example, relatively hard, polished surfaces are desired in many embodiments. For example, the surface of the rollers may be formed from a relatively smooth chrome or other suitable material. This allows the rollers 90 to manipulate the preform 14 without damaging or undesirably altering the preform 14. For example, such surfaces may prevent the material from sticking to the rollers, and the rollers may impart smooth surfaces onto the materials.

[0068] In some embodiments, the temperature of the rollers 90 is controlled. This may be accomplished by heating of the rollers 90 themselves, or by placing the rollers 90 in a temperature controlled environment.

[0069] Further, in some embodiments, surface features 92 may be provided on the rollers 90. The surface features 92 may guide and/or control the preform 14 in one or more directions as it is passed through the rollers. For example, surface features 92 may be provided to prevent the preform 14 from folding over on itself as it is passed through the rollers 90. Thus, the surface features 92 may guide and control deformation of the preform 14 in the cross-machine direction relative to the machine direction A as well as in the vertical direction relative to the machine direction A. The preform 14 may thus be pushed together in the cross-machine direction, rather than folded over on itself, as it is passed through the rollers 90 in the machine direction A.

[0070] In some embodiments, tension regulation devices may be provided in communication with the rollers. These devices may be utilized with the rollers to apply tension to the preform 14 in the machine direction, cross-machine direction, and/or vertical direction to further guide and/or control the preform.

[0071] If desired, the resulting rod may optionally be applied with a capping layer to protect it from environmental conditions or to improve wear resistance. Referring again to Fig. 11, for example, such a capping layer may be applied via an extruder oriented at any desired angle to introduce a thermoplastic resin into a capping die 72. Suitable thermoplastic polymers for this purpose may include, for instance, polyolefins (e.g., polypropylene, propylene-ethylene copolymers, etc.), polyesters (e.g., polybutylene terephthalate ("PBT")), polycarbonates, polyamides (e.g., Nylon™), polyether ketones (e.g., polyetherether ketone ("PEEK")), polyetherimides, polyarylene ketones (e.g., polyphenylene diketone ("PPDK")), liquid crystal polymers, polyarylene sulfides (e.g., polyphenylene sulfide ("PPS"), poly(biphenylene sulfide ketone), poly(phenylene sulfide diketone), poly(biphenylene sulfide), etc.), fluoropolymers (e.g., polytetrafluoroethylene-perfluoromethylvinylether polymer, perfluoro-alkoxyalkane polymer, perfluoroethylene polymer, ethylene-tetrafluoroethylene polymer, etc.), polyacetals, polyurethanes, polycarbonates, styrenic polymers (e.g., acrylonitrile butadiene styrene ("ABS")), acrylic polymers, polyvinyl chloride (PVC), etc.

Particularly suitable capping layer materials may include polyketone (e.g., polyetherether ketone ("PEEK")), polysulfide (e.g., polyarylene sulfide), or a mixture thereof.

[0072] Although not required, the capping layer may be generally free of continuous fibers. That is, the capping layer contains less than about 10 wt.% of continuous fibers, in some embodiments about 5 wt.% or less of continuous fibers, and in some embodiments, about 1 wt.% or less of continuous fibers (e.g., 0 wt.%). Nevertheless, the capping layer may contain other additives for improving the final properties of the rod. Additive materials employed at this stage may include those that are not suitable for incorporating into the continuous fiber material. For instance, it may be desirable to add pigments to reduce finishing labor, or it may be desirable to add flame retardant agents to enhance the flame retarding features of the rod. Because many additive materials are heat sensitive, an excessive amount of heat may cause them to decompose and produce volatile gases. Therefore, if a heat sensitive additive material is extruded with an impregnation resin under high heating conditions, the result may be a complete degradation of the additive material. Additive materials may include, for instance, mineral reinforcing agents, lubricants, flame retardants, blowing agents, foaming agents, ultraviolet light resistant agents, thermal stabilizers, pigments, and combinations thereof. Suitable mineral reinforcing agents may include, for instance, calcium carbonate, silica, mica, clays, talc, calcium silicate, graphite, calcium silicate, alumina trihydrate, barium ferrite, and combinations thereof.

[0073] While not shown in detail herein, the capping die 72 may include various features known in the art to help achieve the desired application of the capping layer. For instance, the capping die 72 may include an entrance guide that aligns the incoming rod. The capping die may also include a heating mechanism (e.g., heated plate) that pre-heats the rod before application of the capping layer to help ensure adequate bonding. Following capping, the shaped part 15 is then finally cooled using a cooling system 80 as is known in the art. The cooling system 80 may, for instance, be a sizing system that includes one or more blocks (e.g., aluminum blocks) that completely encapsulate the rod while a vacuum pulls the hot shape out against its walls as it cools. A cooling medium may be supplied to the sizer, such as air or water, to solidify the rod in the correct shape.

[0074] Even if a sizing system is not employed, it is generally desired to cool the rod after it exits the capping die (or the consolidation or calibration die if capping is not applied). Cooling may occur using any technique known in the art, such a water tank, cool air stream or air jet, cooling jacket, an internal cooling channel, cooling fluid circulation channels, etc. Regardless, the temperature at which the material is cooled is usually controlled to achieve optimal mechanical properties, part dimensional tolerances, good processing, and an aesthetically pleasing composite. For instance, if the temperature of the cooling station is too high, the material might swell in the tool and interrupt the process. For semi-crystalline materials, too low of a temperature can likewise cause the material to cool down too rapidly and not allow complete crystallization, thereby jeopardizing the mechanical and chemical resistance properties of the composite. Multiple cooling die sections with independent temperature control can be utilized to impart the optimal balance of processing and performance attributes. In one particular embodiment, for example, a water tank is employed that is kept at a temperature of from about 0°C to about 30°C, in some embodiments from about 1°C to about 20°C, and in some embodiments, from about 2°C to about 15°C.

[0075] If desired, one or more sizing blocks (not shown) may also be employed, such as after capping. Such blocks contain openings that are cut to the exact rod shape, graduated from oversized at first to the final rod shape. As the rod passes therethrough, any tendency for it to move or sag is counteracted, and it is pushed back (repeatedly) to its correct shape. Once sized, the rod may be cut to the desired length at a cutting station (not shown), such as with a cut-off saw capable of performing cross-sectional cuts or the rod can be wound on a reel in a continuous process. The length of rod will then be limited to the length of the fiber tow.

[0076] As will be appreciated, the temperature of the rod as it advances through any section of the system of the present invention may be controlled to yield optimal manufacturing and desired final composite properties. Any or all of the assembly sections may be temperature controlled utilizing electrical cartridge heaters, circulated fluid cooling, etc., or any other temperature controlling device known to those skilled in the art.

[0077] Referring again to Fig. 11, a pulling device 82 is positioned downstream from the cooling system 80 that pulls the finished rod 16 through the system for final sizing of the composite. The pulling device 82 may be any device capable of pulling the rod through the process system at a desired rate. Typical pulling devices include, for example, caterpillar pullers and reciprocating pullers.

[0078] One embodiment of the rod formed from the method described above is shown in more detail in Fig. 12 as element 516. As illustrated, the rod 516 has a generally circular shape and includes a core 514 formed from one or more consolidated ribbons. By "generally circular", it is generally meant that the aspect ratio of the rod (height divided by the width) is typically from about 1.0 to about 1.5, and in some embodiments, about 1.0. Due to the selective control over the process used to impregnate the rovings and form a consolidated ribbon, as well the process for compressing and shaping the ribbon, the rod is able to possess a relatively even distribution of the thermoplastic matrix across along its entire length. This also means that the continuous fibers are distributed in a generally uniform manner about a longitudinal central axis "L" of the rod 516. As shown in Fig. 12, for example, the core 514 includes continuous fibers 526 embedded within a thermoplastic matrix 528. The fibers 526 are distributed generally uniformly about the longitudinal axis "L." It should be understood that only a few fibers are shown in Fig. 12, and that the rod will typically contain a substantially greater number of uniformly distributed fibers.

[0079] A capping layer 519 also extends around the perimeter of the core 514 and defines an external surface of the rod 516. The cross-sectional thickness ("T") of the rod 514 may be strategically selected to help achieve a particular strength. For example, the rod 514 may have a thickness (e.g., diameter) of from about 0.1 to about 40 millimeters, in some embodiments from about 0.5 to about 30 millimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 1 to about 10 millimeters. The thickness of the capping layer 519 depends on the intended function of the part, but is typically from about 0.01 to about 10 millimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 0.02 to about 5 millimeters. Regardless, the total cross-sectional thickness or height of the rod typically ranges from about of from about 0.1 to about 50 millimeters, in some embodiments from about 0.5 to about 40 millimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 1 to

about 20 millimeters. While the rod may be substantially continuous in length, the length of the rod is often practically limited by the spool onto which it will be wound and stored or the length of the continuous fibers. For example, the length often ranges from about 1000 to about 5000 meters, although even greater lengths are certainly possible.

[0080] A capping layer 519 also extends around the perimeter of the core 514 and defines an external surface of the rod 516. The cross-sectional thickness ("T") of the core 514 may be strategically selected to help achieve a particular strength for the rod. For example, the core 514 may have a thickness (e.g., diameter) of from about 0.1 to about 40 millimeters, in some embodiments from about 0.5 to about 30 millimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 1 to about 10 millimeters. The thickness of the capping layer 519 depends on the intended function of the part, but is typically from about 0.01 to about 10 millimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 0.02 to about 5 millimeters. The total cross-sectional thickness or height of the rod 516 may also range from about of from about 0.1 to about 50 millimeters, in some embodiments from about 0.5 to about 40 millimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 1 to about 20 millimeters. While the rod may be substantially continuous in length, the length of the rod is often practically limited by the spool onto which it will be wound and stored. For example, the length often ranges from about 1000 to about 5000 meters, although even greater lengths are certainly possible.

[0081] Through control over the various parameters mentioned above, rods having a very high strength may be formed. For example, the rods may exhibit a relatively high flexural modulus. The term "flexural modulus" generally refers to the ratio of stress to strain in flexural deformation (units of force per area), or the tendency for a material to bend. It is determined from the slope of a stress-strain curve produced by a "three point flexural" test (such as ASTM D790-10, Procedure A), typically at room temperature. For example, the rod of the present invention may exhibit a flexural modulus of from about 10 Gigapascals ("GPa") or more, in some embodiments from about 12 to about 400 GPa, in some embodiments from about 15 to about 200 GPa, and in some embodiments, from about 20 to about 150 GPa. Furthermore, the ultimate tensile strength may be about 300 Megapascals ("MPa") or more, in some embodiments from about 400 MPa to

about 5,000 MPa, and in some embodiments, from about 500 MPa to about 3,500 MPa. The term "ultimate tensile strength" generally refers to the maximum stress that a material can withstand while being stretched or pulled before necking and is the maximum stress reached on a stress-strain curve produced by a tensile test (such as ASTM D3916-08) at room temperature. The tensile modulus of elasticity may also be about 50 GPa or more, in some embodiments from about 70 GPa to about 500 GPa, and in some embodiments, from about 100 GPa to about 300 GPa. The term "tensile modulus of elasticity" generally refers to the ratio of tensile stress over tensile strain and is the slope of a stress-strain curve produced by a tensile test (such as ASTM 3916-08) at room temperature. Notably, the strength properties of the composite rod referenced above may also be maintained over a relatively wide temperature range, such as from about -40°C to about 300°C, and particularly from about 180°C to 200°C.

[0082] Rods made according to the present disclosure may further have relatively flexural fatigue life, and may exhibit relatively high residual strength. Flexural fatigue life and residual flexural strength may be determined based on a "three point flexural fatigue" test (such as ASTM D790, typically at room temperature. For example, the rods of the present invention may exhibit residual flexural strength after one million cycles at 160 Newtons ("N") or 180 N loads of from about 60 kilograms per square inch ("ksi") to about 115 ksi, in some embodiments about 70 ksi to about 115 ksi, and in some embodiments about 95 ksi to about 115 ksi. Further, the rods may exhibit relatively minimal reductions in flexural strength. For example, rods having void fractions of about 4% or less, in some embodiments about 3% or less, may exhibit reductions in flexural strength after three point flexural fatigue testing of about 1% (for example, from a maximum pristine flexural strength of about 106 ksi to a maximum residual flexural strength of about 105 ksi). Flexural strength may be tested before and after fatigue testing using, for example, a three point flexural test as discussed above.

[0083] The linear thermal expansion coefficient of the composite rod may be, on a ppm basis per °C, less than about 5, less than about 4, less than about 3, or less than about 2. For instance, the coefficient (ppm/°C) may be in a range from about -0.25 to about 5; alternatively, from about -0.17 to about 4; alternatively,

from about -0.17 to about 3; alternatively, from about -0.17 to about 2; or alternatively, from about 0.29 to about 1.18. The temperature range contemplated for this linear thermal expansion coefficient may be generally in the -50 °C to 200 °C range, the 0 °C to 200 °C range, the 0 °C to 175 °C range, or the 25 °C to 150 °C range. The linear thermal expansion coefficient is measured in the longitudinal direction, i.e., along the length of the fibers.

[0084] The composite rod may also exhibit a relatively small "bend radius", which is the minimum radius that the rod can be bent without breaking and is measured to the inside curvature of the rod. A smaller bend radius means that the rod is more flexible and can be spooled onto a smaller diameter bobbin. This property also makes the rod easier to implement in processes that currently use metal rods. Due to the improved process and resulting rod of the present invention, bend radiuses may be achieved that are less than about 40 times the outer diameter of the rod, in some embodiments from about 1 to about 30 times the outer diameter of the rod, and in some embodiments, from about 2 to about 25 times the outer diameter of the rod, determined at a temperature of about 25°C. For instance, the bend radius may be less than about 15 centimeters, in some embodiments from about 0.5 to about 10 centimeters, and in some embodiments, from about 1 to about 6 centimeters, determined at a temperature of about 25°C.

[0085] The composite rod also has a very low void fraction, such as about about 6% or less, in some embodiments 3% or less, in some embodiments about 2% or less, in some embodiments about 1% or less, and in some embodiments, about 0.5% or less. The void fraction may be determined in the manner described above, such as using a "resin burn off" test in accordance with ASTM D 2584-08 or through the use of computed tomography (CT) scan equipment, such as a Metrotom 1500 (2k x 2k) high resolution detector..

[0086] As will be appreciated, the particular embodiment described above is merely exemplary of the numerous designs that are made possible by the present invention. Among the various possible rod designs, it should be understood that additional layers of material may be employed in addition to those described above. In certain embodiments, for example, it may be desirable to form a multi-component rod in which one component is formed from a higher strength material

and another component is formed from a lower strength material. Such multi-component rods may be particularly useful in increasing overall strength without requiring the need for more expensive high strength materials for the entire rod. The lower and/or higher strength components may be formed from ribbon(s) that contain continuous fibers embedded within a thermoplastic matrix.

[0087] It should be understood that the present invention is by no means limited to the embodiments described above. For example, the rods may contain various other components depending on the desired application. The additional components may be formed from a continuous fiber ribbon, such as described herein, as well as other types of materials. In one embodiment, for example, the rod may contain a layer of discontinuous fibers (e.g., short fibers, long fibers, etc.) to improve its transverse strength. The discontinuous fibers may be oriented so that at least a portion of the fibers are positioned at an angle relative to the direction in which the continuous fibers extend.

[0088] The rod of the present invention provides various advantages and benefits especially when used to construct umbilicals. For example, due to its construction, the rod may be strong, lightweight, and may be easily processible and compatible with other materials used in the umbilical. The umbilical of the present invention may be employed in a wide variety of applications, such as in subsea environments. Fig. 1, for instance, shows one embodiment of an umbilical 900 in a body of water 912, which is a connecting vessel 910 with subsea facility 916 adjacent the bottom 914 of body of water 912. The vessel 910 and/or subsea facility 916 may be permanently installed or movable within the body of water 912. In certain embodiments, the umbilical 900 may be employed in water having a depth of about 2,500 meters or more, in some embodiments about 4,000 meters or more, and in some embodiments, from about 5,000 to about 15,000 meters.

[0089] The present disclosure may be better understood with reference to the following examples.

EXAMPLE 1

[0090] Two (2) continuous fiber ribbons were initially formed using an extrusion system as substantially described above. Carbon fiber rovings (Toray T700SC, which contained 12,000 carbon filaments having a tensile strength of 4,900 MPa and a mass per unit length of 0.8 grams per meter) were employed for

the continuous fibers with each individual ribbon containing 4 rovings. The thermoplastic polymer used to impregnate the fibers was polyphenylene sulfide ("PPS") (FORTRON® PPS 205, available from Ticona LLC), which has a melting point of about 280°C. Each ribbon contained 50 wt.% carbon fibers and 50 wt.% PPS. The ribbons had a thickness of about 0.18 millimeters and a void fraction of less than 1.0%. Once formed, the ribbons were then fed to a pultrusion line operating at a speed of 20 feet per minute. Before shaping, the ribbons were heated within an infrared oven (power setting of 305). The heated ribbons were then supplied to a consolidation die having a circular-shaped channel that received the ribbons and compressed them together while forming the initial shape of the rod. Within the die, the ribbons remained at a temperature of about 177°C. Upon consolidation, the resulting preform was then briefly cooled with an air ring/tunnel device that supplied ambient air at a pressure of 1 psi. The preform was then passed through a nip formed between two rollers, and then to a calibration die for final shaping. Within the calibration die, the preform remained at a temperature of about 140°C. After exiting this die the profile was capped with a polyether ether ketone ("PEEK"), which had a melting point of 350°C. The capping layer had a thickness of about 0.1 millimeters. The resulting part was then cooled with an air stream. The resulting rod had a diameter of about 3.5 millimeters, and contained 45 wt.% carbon fibers, 50 wt.% PPS, and 5 wt.% capping material.

[0091] To determine the strength properties of the rod, three-point flexural testing was performed in accordance with ASTM D790-10, Procedure A. The support and nose radius was 0.250 inch, the support span was 30 millimeter, the specimen length was 2 inches, and the test speed was 2 millimeters per minute. The resulting flexural modulus was about 31 Gigapascals and the flexural strength was about 410 MPa. The density of the part was 1.48 g/cm³ and the void content was less than about 3%. Likewise, the bend radius was 3.27 centimeters.

EXAMPLE 2

[0092] A rod was formed as described in Example 1, except that no capping material was employed. The rod thus contained 50 wt.% carbon fibers and 50 wt.% PPS. The void content was less than about 1.5% and the bend radius was 3.86 centimeters.

EXAMPLE 3

[0093] Two (2) continuous fiber ribbons were initially formed using an extrusion system as substantially described above. Carbon fiber rovings (Toray T700SC) were employed for the continuous fibers with each individual ribbon containing 4 rovings. The thermoplastic polymer used to impregnate the fibers was FORTRON® PPS 205. Each ribbon contained 50 wt.% carbon fibers and 50 wt.% PPS. The ribbons had a thickness of about 0.18 millimeters and a void fraction of less than 1.0%. Once formed, the ribbons were then fed to a pultrusion line operating at a speed of 20 feet per minute. Before shaping, the ribbons were heated within an infrared oven (power setting of 305). The heated ribbons were then supplied to a consolidation die having a circular-shaped channel that received the ribbons and compressed them together while forming the initial shape of the rod. Within the die, the ribbons remained at a temperature of about 343°C. Upon consolidation, the resulting preform was then briefly cooled with an air ring/tunnel device that supplied ambient air at a pressure of 1 psi. The preform was then passed through a nip formed between two rollers, and then to a calibration die for final shaping. Within the calibration die, the preform remained at a temperature of about 140°C. After exiting this die the profile was capped with FORTRON® PPS 320, which had a melting point of 280°C. The capping layer had a thickness of about 0.1 millimeters. The resulting part was then cooled with an air stream. The resulting rod had a diameter of about 3.5 millimeters, and contained 45 wt.% carbon fibers, 50 wt.% PPS, and 5 wt.% capping material.

[0094] To determine the strength properties of the rod, three-point flexural testing was performed in accordance with ASTM D790-10, Procedure A. The support and nose radius was 0.250 inch, the support span was 30 millimeter, the specimen length was 2 inches, and the test speed was 2 millimeters per minute. The resulting flexural modulus was 20.3 Gigapascals and the flexural strength was about 410 MPa. The density of the part was 1.48 g/cm³ and the void content was less than about 3%. Likewise, the bend radius was 4.37 centimeters.

EXAMPLE 4

[0095] Two (2) continuous fiber ribbons were initially formed using an extrusion system as substantially described above. Glass fiber rovings (TUFROV® 4588 from PPG, which contained E-glass filaments having a tensile strength of 2599 MPa and a mass per unit length of 2.2 grams per meter) were employed for

the continuous fibers with each individual ribbon containing 2 rovings. The thermoplastic polymer used to impregnate the fibers was polyphenylene sulfide ("PPS") (FORTRON® 205, available from Ticona LLC), which has a melting point of about 280°C. Each ribbon contained 56 wt.% glass fibers and 44 wt.% PPS. The ribbons had a thickness of about 0.18 millimeters and a void fraction of less than 1.0%. Once formed, the ribbons were then fed to a pultrusion line operating at a speed of 20 feet per minute. Before shaping, the ribbons were heated within an infrared oven (power setting of 330). The heated ribbons were then supplied to a consolidation die having a circular-shaped channel that received the ribbons and compressed them together while forming the initial shape of the rod. Upon consolidation, the resulting preform was then briefly cooled with ambient air. The preform was then passed through a nip formed between two rollers, and then to a calibration die for final shaping. Within the calibration die, the preform remained at a temperature of about 275°C. After exiting this die, the profile was capped with FORTRON® 205. The capping layer had a thickness of about 0.1 millimeters. The resulting part was then cooled with an air stream. The resulting rod had a diameter of about 3.5 millimeters, and contained 50 wt.% glass fibers and 50 wt.% PPS.

[0096] To determine the strength properties of the rod, three-point flexural testing was performed in accordance with ASTM D790-10, Procedure A. The support and nose radius was 0.250 inch, the support span was 30 millimeter, the specimen length was 2 inches, and the test speed was 2 millimeters per minute. The resulting flexural modulus was about 18 Gigapascals and the flexural strength was about 590 MPa. The void content was less than about 0% and the bend radius was 1.87 centimeters.

EXAMPLE 5

[0097] Two (2) continuous fiber ribbons were initially formed using an extrusion system as substantially described above. Glass fiber rovings (TUFROV® 4588) were employed for the continuous fibers with each individual ribbon containing 2 rovings. The thermoplastic polymer used to impregnate the fibers was Nylon 66 (PA66), which has a melting point of about 250°C. Each ribbon contained 60 wt.% glass fibers and 40 wt.% Nylon 66. The ribbons had a thickness of about 0.18 millimeters and a void fraction of less than 1.0%. Once

formed, the ribbons were then fed to a pultrusion line operating at a speed of 10 feet per minute. Before shaping, the ribbons were heated within an infrared oven (power setting of 320). The heated ribbons were then supplied to a consolidation die having a circular-shaped channel that received the ribbons and compressed them together while forming the initial shape of the rod. Upon consolidation, the resulting preform was then briefly cooled with ambient air. The preform was then passed through a nip formed between two rollers, and then to a calibration die for final shaping. Within the calibration die, the preform remained at a temperature of about 170°C. After exiting this die, the profile was capped with Nylon 66. The capping layer had a thickness of about 0.1 millimeters. The resulting part was then cooled with an air stream. The resulting rod had a diameter of about 3.5 millimeters, and contained 53 wt.% glass fibers, 40 wt.% Nylon 66, and 7 wt.% capping material.

[0098] To determine the strength properties of the rod, three-point flexural testing was performed in accordance with ASTM D790-10, Procedure A. The support and nose radius was 0.250 inch, the support span was 30 millimeter, the specimen length was 2 inches, and the test speed was 2 millimeters per minute. The resulting flexural modulus was about 19 Gigapascals and the flexural strength was about 549 MPa. The void content was less than about 0% and the bend radius was 2.34 centimeters.

EXAMPLE 6

[0099] Three (3) batches of eight (8) rods were formed having different void fraction levels. For each rod, two (2) continuous fiber ribbons were initially formed using an extrusion system as substantially described above. Carbon fiber rovings (Toray T700SC, which contained 12,000 carbon filaments having a tensile strength of 4,900 MPa and a mass per unit length of 0.8 grams per meter) were employed for the continuous fibers with each individual ribbon containing 4 rovings. The thermoplastic polymer used to impregnate the fibers was polyphenylene sulfide ("PPS") (FORTRON® PPS 205, available from Ticona, LLC), which has a melting point of about 280°C. Each ribbon contained 50 wt.% carbon fibers and 50 wt.% PPS. The ribbons had a thickness of about 0.18 millimeters and a void fraction of less than 1.0%. Once formed, the ribbons were then fed to a pultrusion line operating at a speed of 20 feet per minute. Before shaping, the ribbons were

heated within an infrared oven (power setting of 305). The heated ribbons were then supplied to a consolidation die having a circular-shaped channel that received the ribbons and compressed them together while forming the initial shape of the rod. Within the die, the ribbons remained at a temperature of about 177°C. Upon consolidation, the resulting preform was then briefly cooled with an air ring/tunnel device that supplied ambient air at a pressure of 1 psi. The preform was then passed through a nip formed between two rollers, and then to a calibration die for final shaping. Within the calibration die, the preform remained at a temperature of about 140°C. After exiting this die the profile was capped with a polyether ether ketone ("PEEK"), which had a melting point of 350°C. The capping layer had a thickness of about 0.1 millimeters. The resulting part was then cooled with an air stream. The resulting rod had a diameter of about 3.5 millimeters, and contained 45 wt.% carbon fibers, 50 wt.% PPS, and 5 wt.% capping material.

[00100] A first batch of rods had a mean void fraction of 2.78%. A second batch of rods had a mean void fraction of 4.06%. A third batch of rods had a mean void fraction of 8.74%. Void fraction measurement was performed using CT scanning. A Metrotom 1500 (2k x 2k) high resolution detector was used to scan the rod specimens. Detection was done using an enhanced analysis mode with a low probability threshold. Once the specimens were scanned for void fraction, Volume Graphics software was used to interpret the data from the 3D scans, and calculate the void levels in each specimen.

[00101] To determine the flexural fatigue life and residual flexural strength of the rods, three-point flexural fatigue testing was performed in accordance with ASTM D790. The support span was 2.2 inches and the specimen length was 3 inches. Four (4) rods from each batch were tested at a loading level of 160 Newtons ("N") and four (4) rods from each batch were tested at a loading level of 180 N, respectively representing about 50% and 55% of the pristine (static) flexural strength of the rods. Each specimen was tested to one million cycles at a frequency of 10 Hertz (Hz).

[00102] Before and after fatigue testing, to determine the respective pristine and residual flexural strength properties of the rods, three-point flexural testing was performed in accordance with ASTM D790-10, Procedure A. The average pristine and residual flexural strengths of each batch at each loading level were recorded.

The resulting pristine flexural strength for the third batch was 107 ksi, and the resulting residual flexural strength for the third batch was 75 ksi, thus resulting in a reduction of about 29%. The resulting pristine flexural strength for the second batch was 108 ksi, and the resulting residual flexural strength for the second batch was 72 ksi, thus resulting in a reduction of about 33%. The resulting pristine flexural strength for the first batch was 106 ksi, and the resulting residual flexural strength for the first batch was 105 ksi, thus resulting in a reduction of about 1%.

[00103] These and other modifications and variations of the present invention may be practiced by those of ordinary skill in the art, without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. In addition, it should be understood that aspects of the various embodiments may be interchanged both in whole or in part. Furthermore, those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that the foregoing description is by way of example only, and is not intended to limit the invention so further described in such appended claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An umbilical for use in subsea applications, the umbilical comprising:
a plurality of umbilical elements extending in a longitudinal direction;
at least one reinforcing rod having a core that contains a plurality of thermoplastic impregnated rovings, the rovings comprising continuous fibers oriented in the longitudinal direction and a thermoplastic matrix embedding the fibers, wherein the continuous fibers constitute from about 25 wt.% to about 80 wt.% of the core and the thermoplastic matrix constitutes from about 20 wt.% to about 75 wt.% of the core; and

an outer sheath that encloses the umbilical elements and the reinforcing rod.

2. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the umbilical elements include a pipe, electrical conductor/wire, channel element, armoring wire, or a combination thereof.

3. The umbilical of claim 1, further comprising a filler that is arranged at least partly around and between the umbilical elements.

4. The umbilical of claim 1, further comprising a central portion within which the reinforcing rod is located.

5. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the reinforcing rod is disposed about the periphery of the umbilical.

6. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the umbilical contains a bundle of reinforcing rods, each of which has a core that contains a plurality of thermoplastic impregnated rovings comprising continuous fibers oriented in the longitudinal direction and a thermoplastic matrix embedding the fibers, wherein the continuous fibers constitute from about 25 wt.% to about 80 wt.% of the core and the thermoplastic matrix constitutes from about 20 wt.% to about 75 wt.% of the core.

7. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the continuous fibers have a ratio of ultimate tensile strength to mass per unit length of greater than about 1,000 Megapascals per gram per meter.

8. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the continuous fibers have a ratio of ultimate tensile strength to mass per unit length of from about 5,500 to about 20,000 Megapascals per gram per meter.

9. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the continuous fibers are carbon fibers.
10. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the thermoplastic matrix includes a polyarylene sulfide.
11. The umbilical of claim 10, wherein the polyarylene sulfide is polyphenylene sulfide.
12. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the continuous fibers constitute from about 30 wt.% to about 75 wt.% of the core.
13. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the rod has a void fraction of about 3% or less.
14. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the rod has a minimum flexural modulus of about 10 Gigapascals.
15. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the rod has a minimum ultimate tensile strength of about 300 Megapascals.
16. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the rod has a minimum tensile modulus of elasticity of about 50 Gigapascals.
17. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the minimum bend radius of the rod is from about 1 to about 30 times the outer diameter of the rod, determined at a temperature of about 25°C.
18. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the minimum bend radius of the rod is from about 0.5 to about 10 centimeters, determined at a temperature of about 25°C.
19. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the core contains from 4 to 20 rovings.
20. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the rovings are distributed generally symmetrically about a longitudinal center of the core.
21. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein each roving contains from about 1,000 to about 50,000 individual continuous fibers.
22. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the rod has a diameter of from about 0.1 to about 50 millimeters.
23. The umbilical of claim 1, further comprising a capping layer that surrounds the core.
24. The umbilical of claim 1, wherein the rod has a substantially circular cross-sectional shape.

25. An umbilical for use in subsea applications, the umbilical comprising:
- a plurality of umbilical elements extending in a longitudinal direction, wherein the umbilical elements include a pipe, electrical conductor/wire, channel element, armoring wire, or a combination thereof;
 - a filler that is arranged at least partly around and between the umbilical elements;
 - at least one reinforcing rod having a core that contains a plurality of thermoplastic impregnated rovings, the rovings comprising continuous carbon fibers oriented in the longitudinal direction and a thermoplastic matrix embedding the fibers, wherein the continuous carbon fibers constitute from about 30 wt.% to about 75 wt.% of the core and the polyphenylene sulfide matrix constitutes from about 25 wt.% to about 70 wt.% of the core; and
 - an outer sheath that encloses the umbilical elements, the filler, the reinforcing rod.

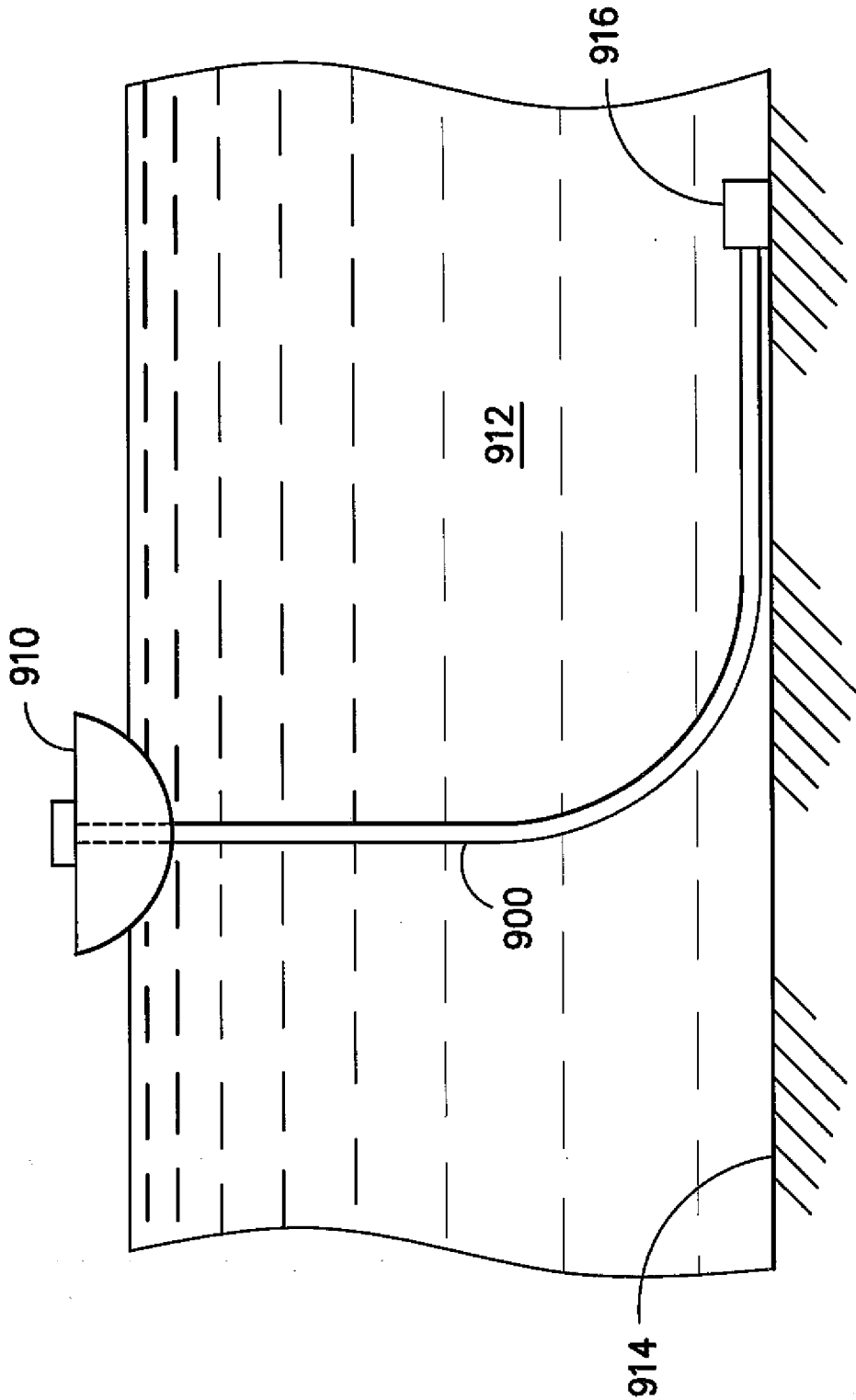
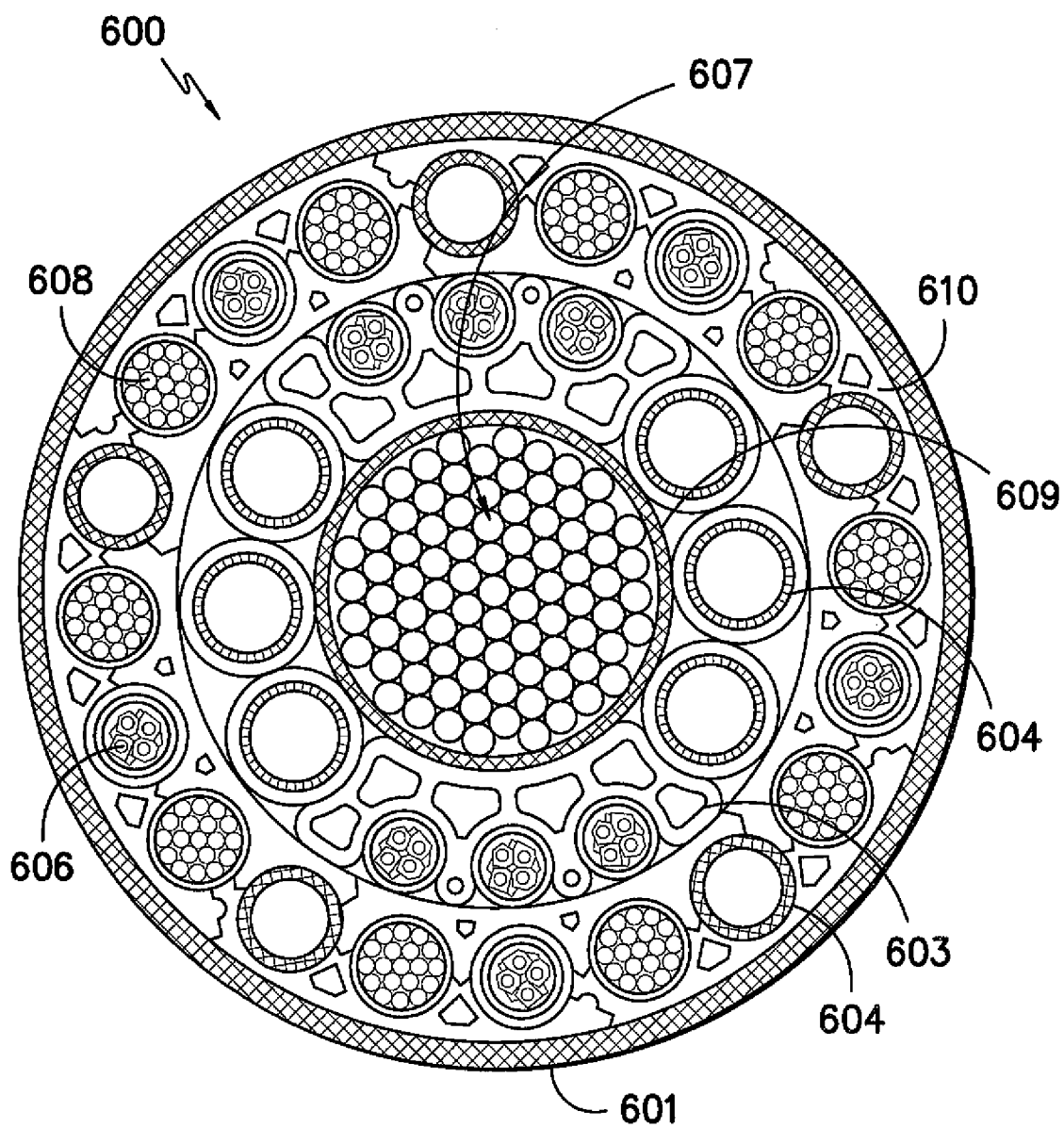
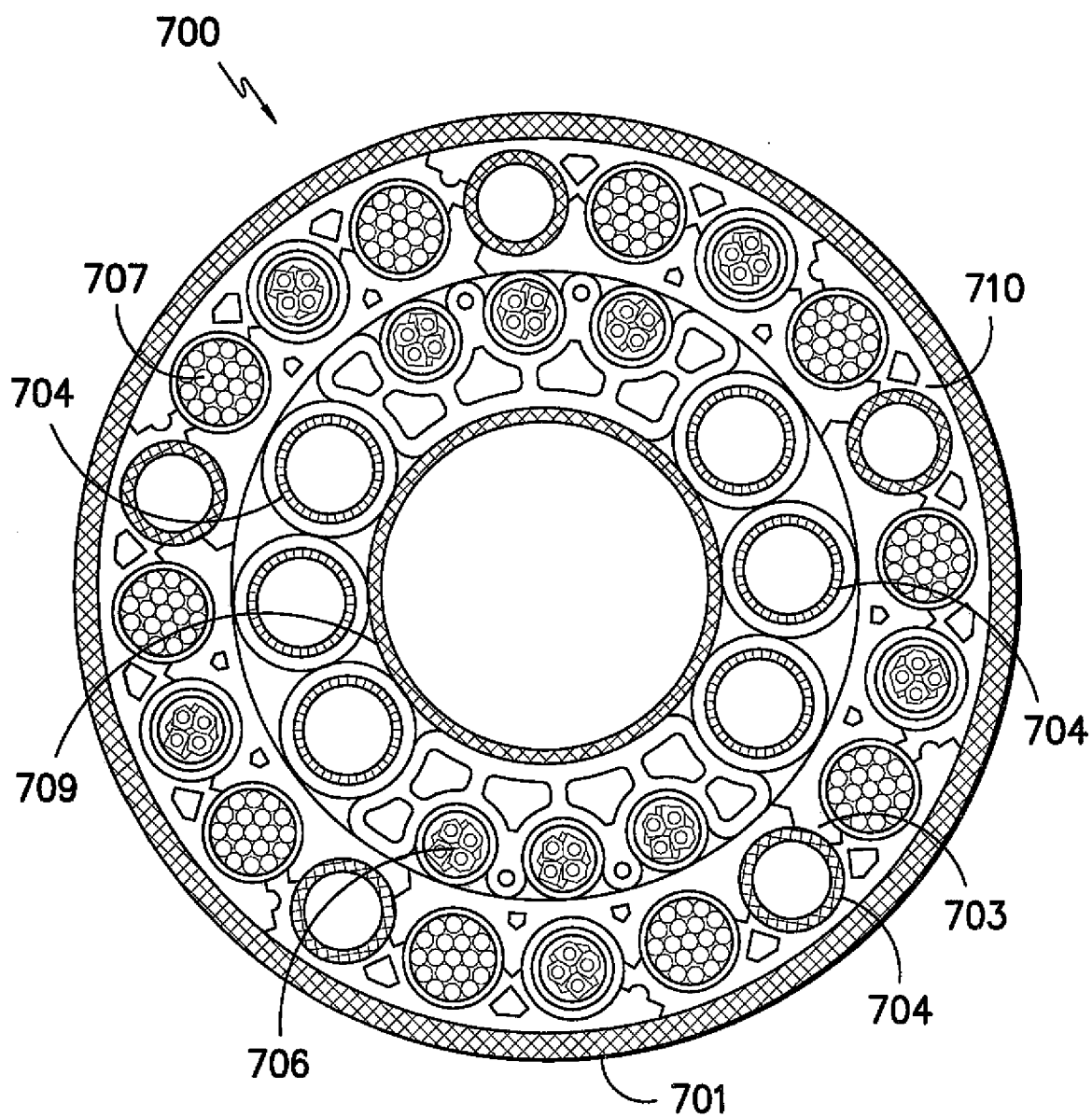


FIG. -1-

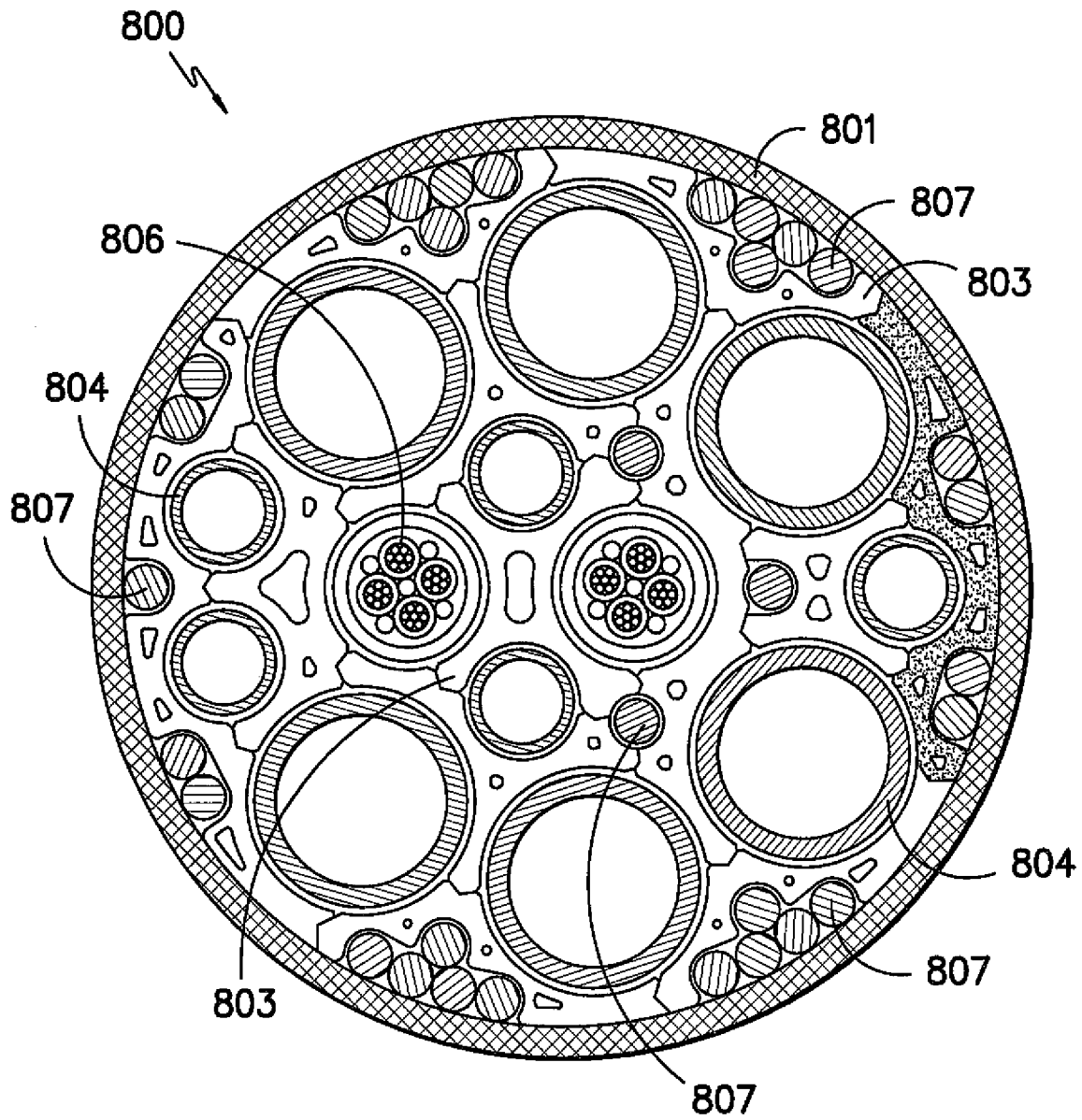
2/13

*FIG. -2-*

3/13

*FIG. -3-*

4/13

*FIG. -4-*

5/13

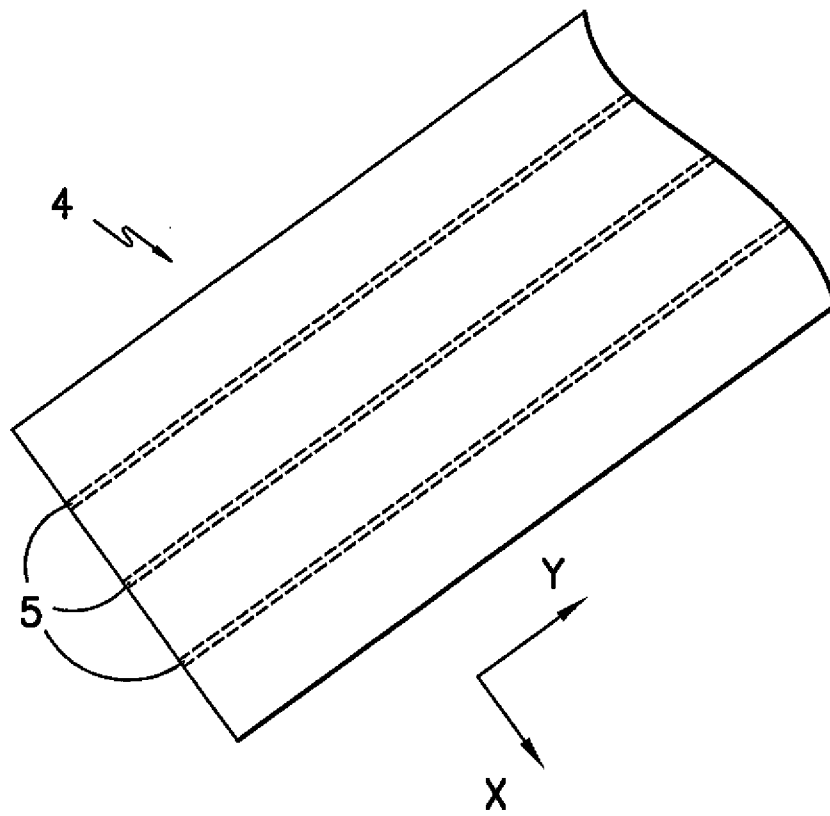


FIG. -5-

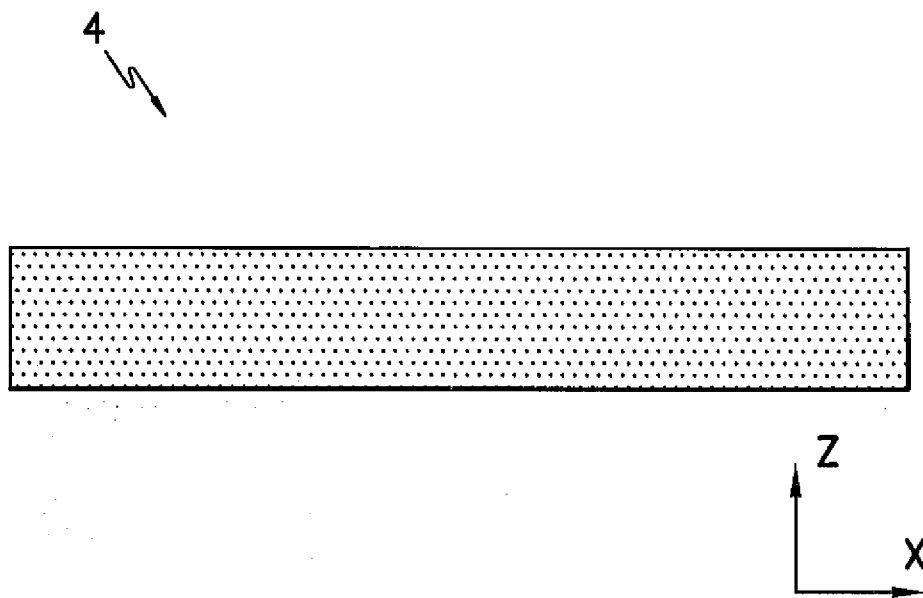


FIG. -6-

6/13

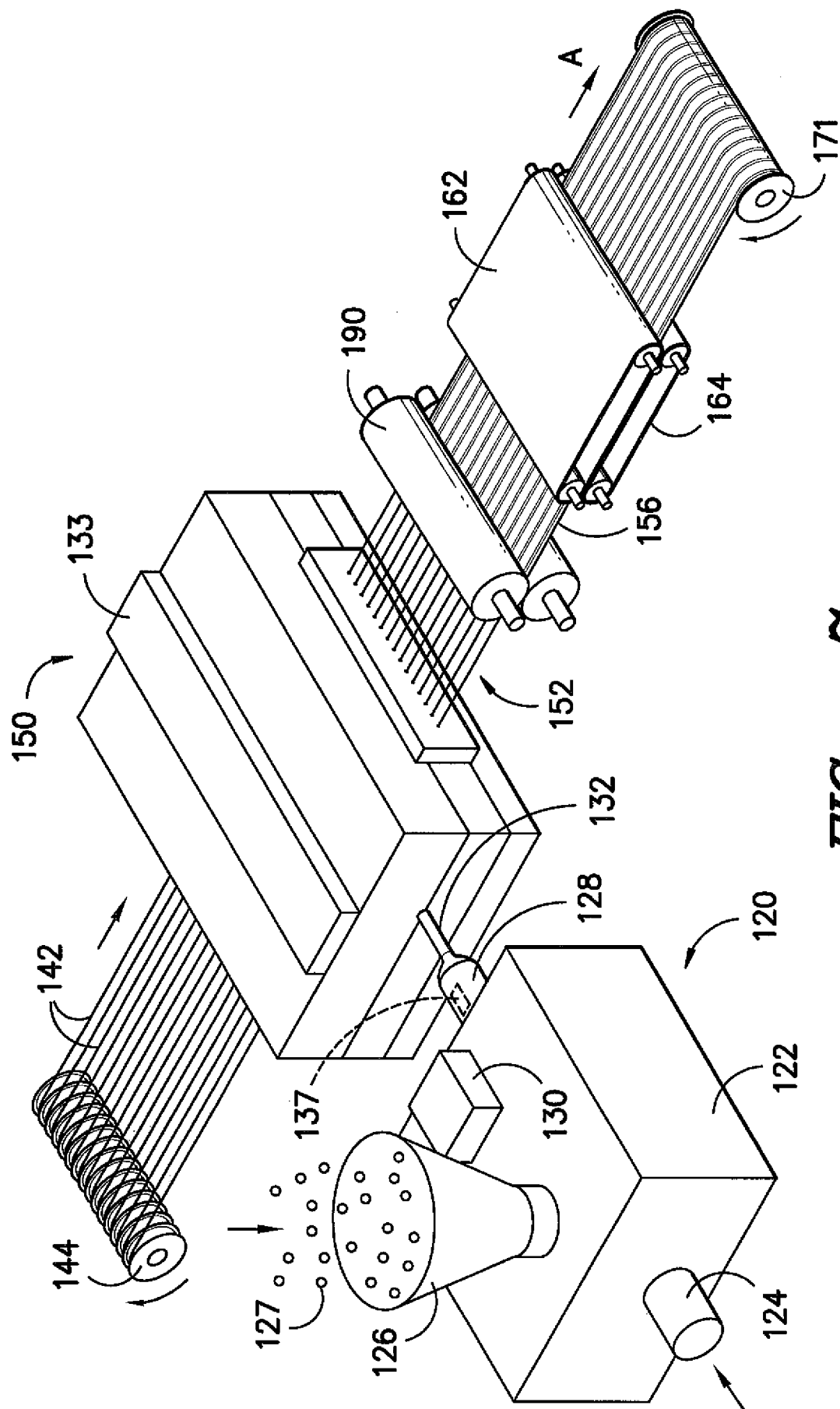


FIG. 7—

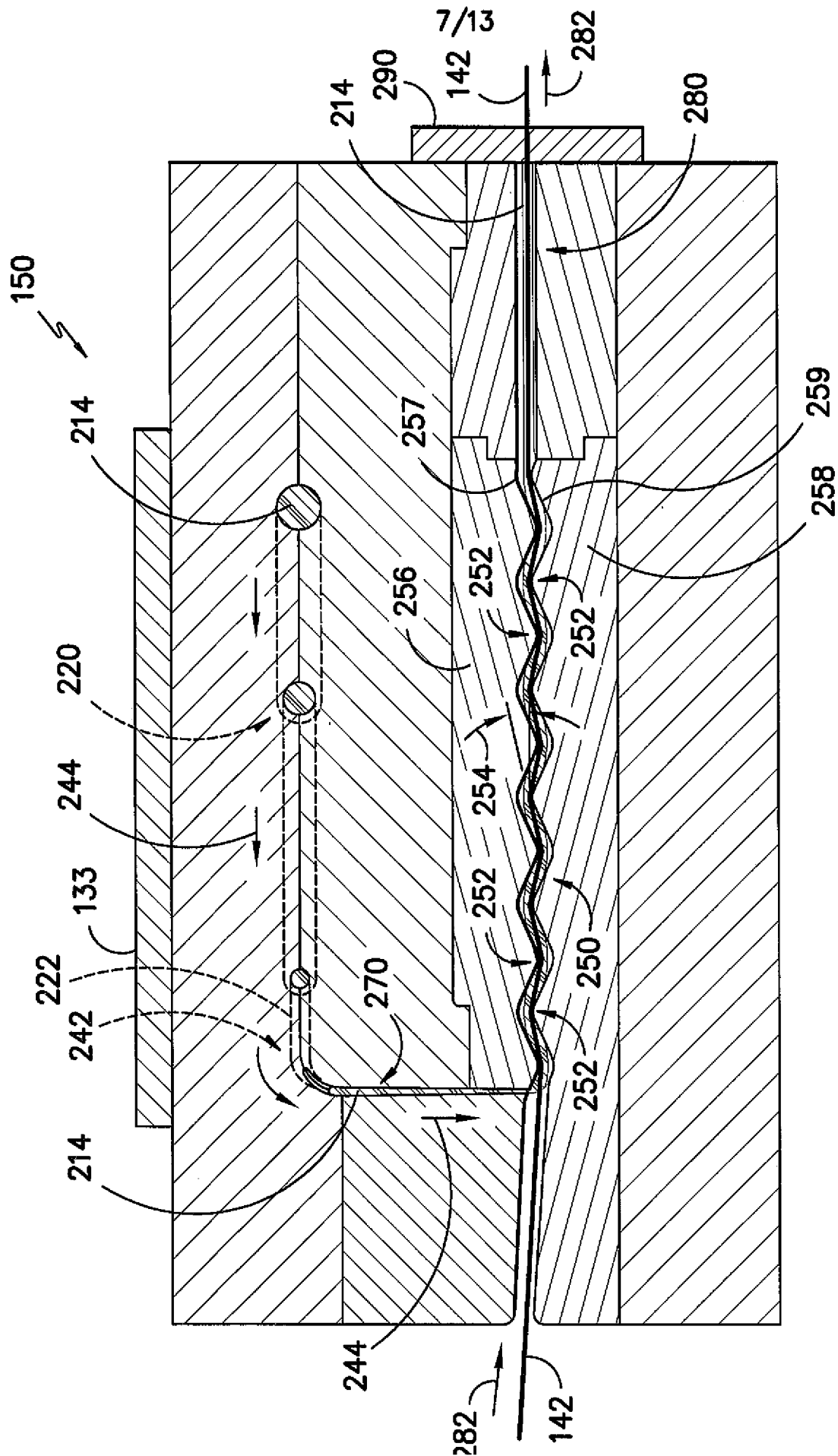
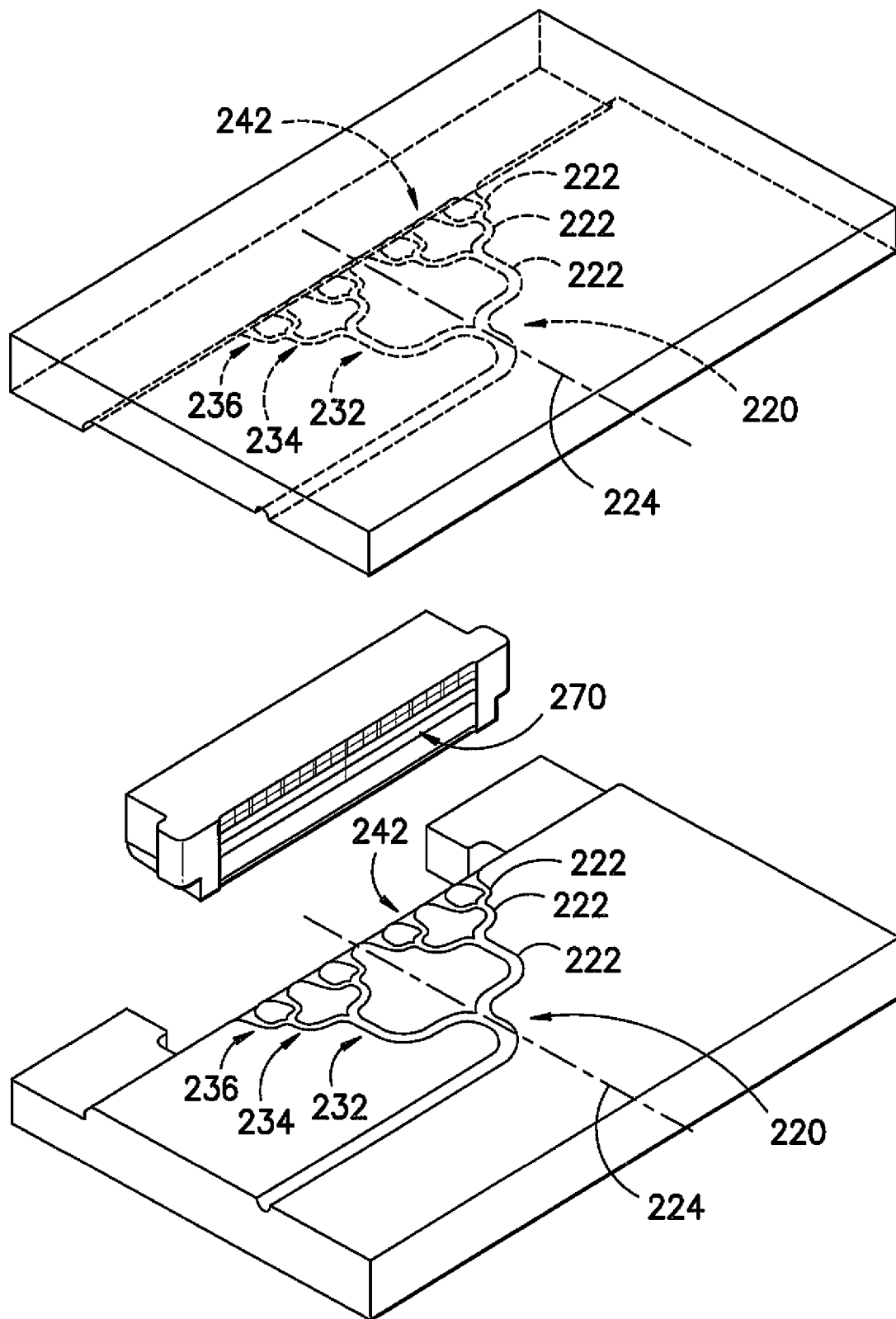


FIG. -8-

8/13

*FIG. -9-*

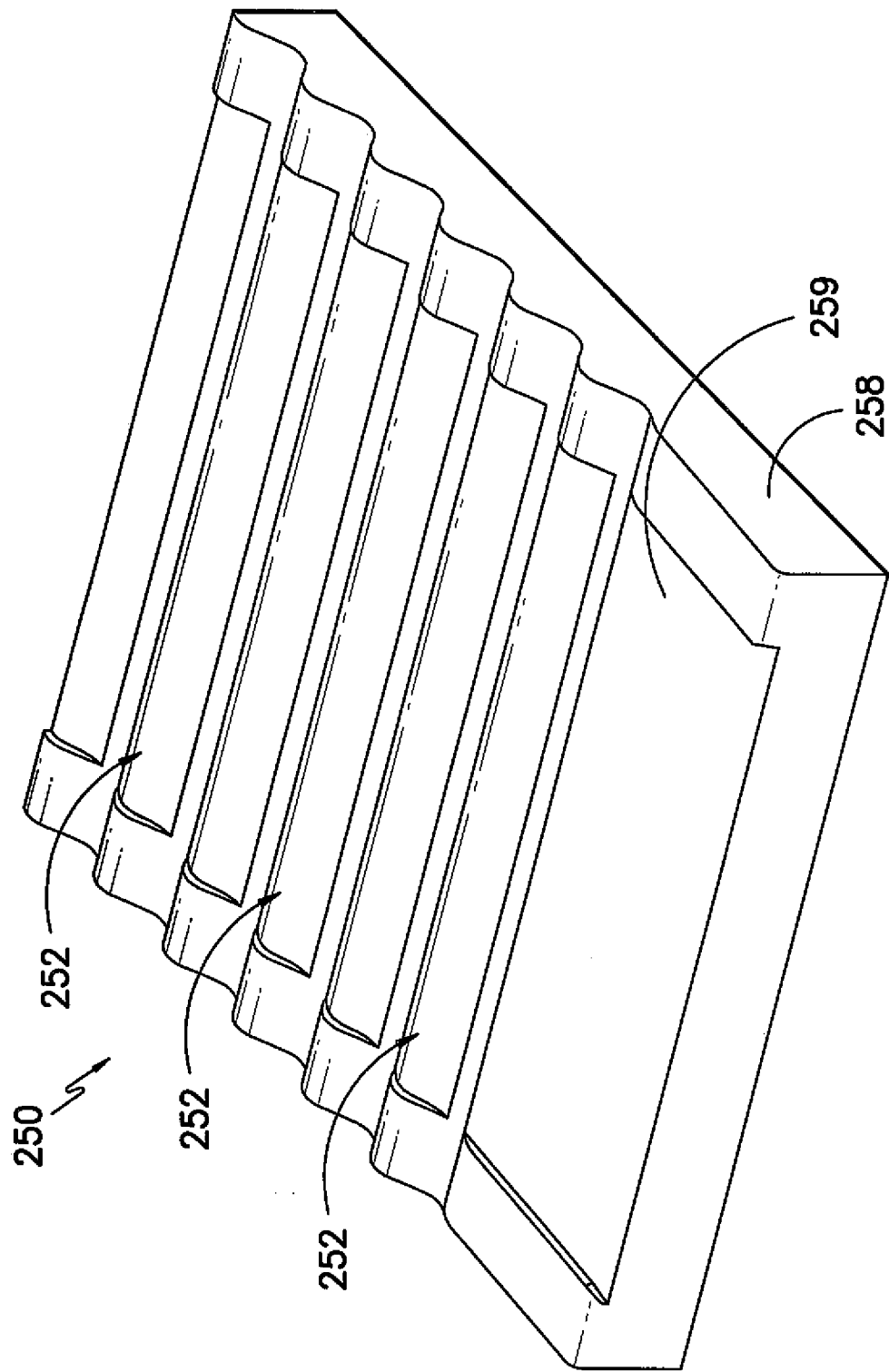


FIG. -10-

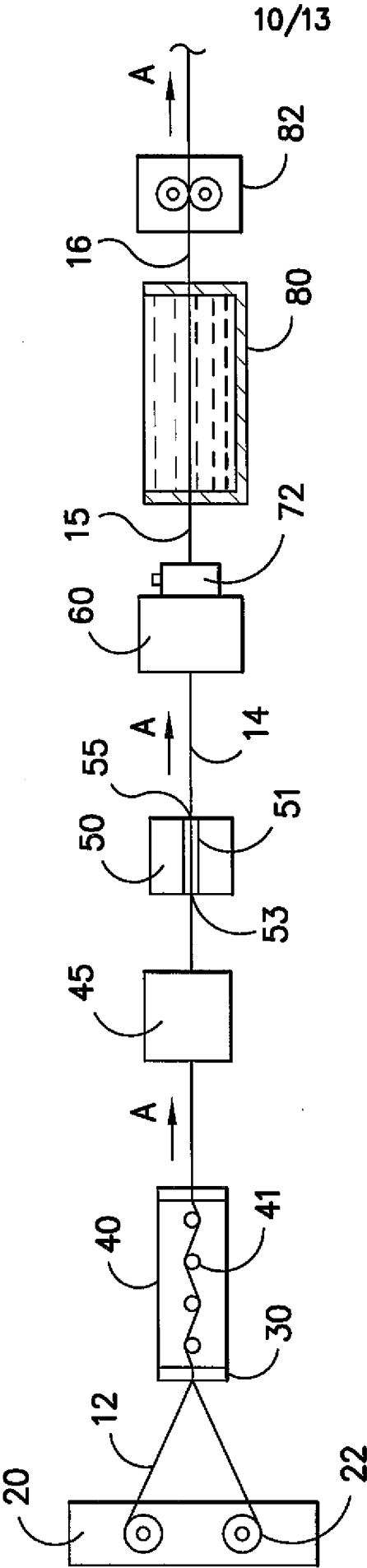
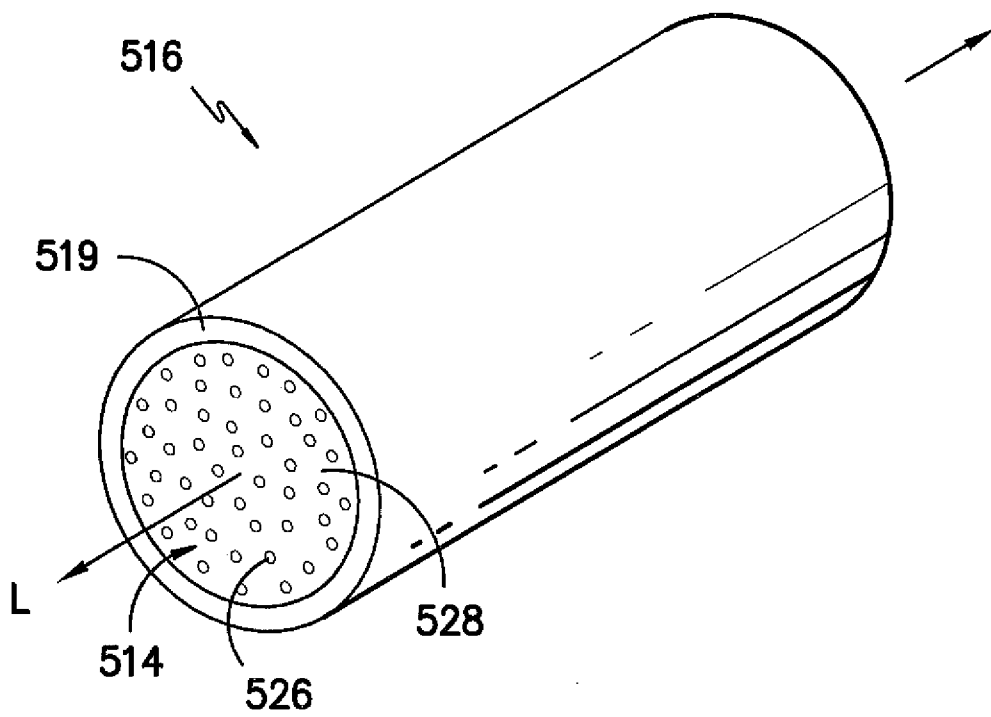


FIG. -11-

11/13

*FIG. -12-*

12/13

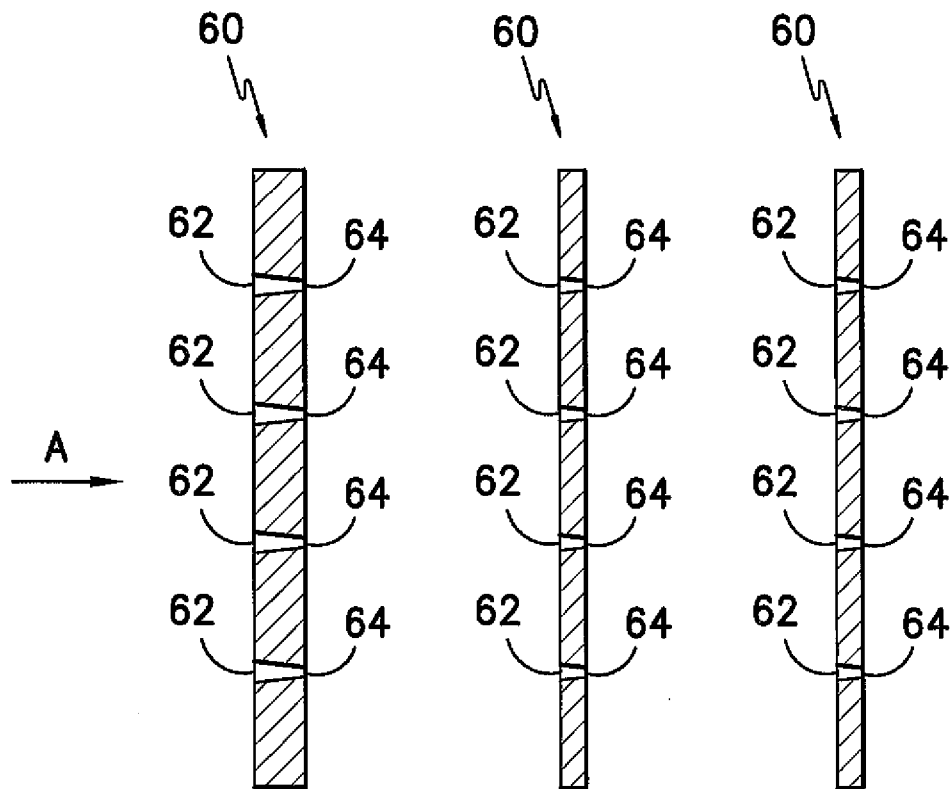


FIG. -13-

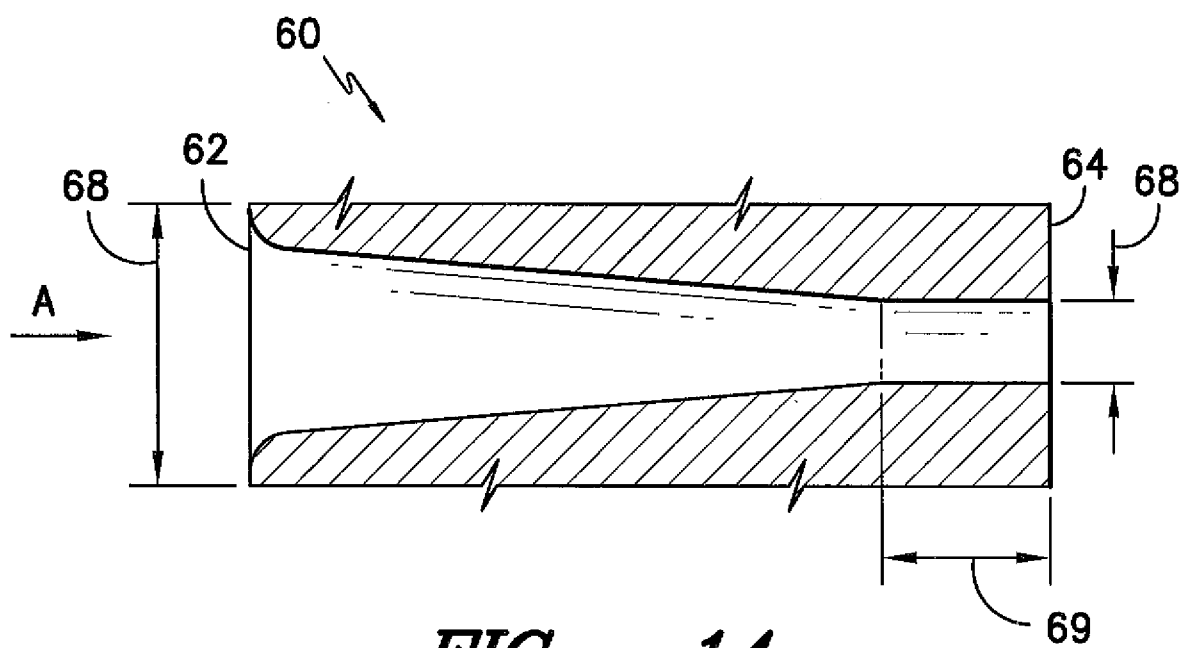


FIG. -14-

13/13

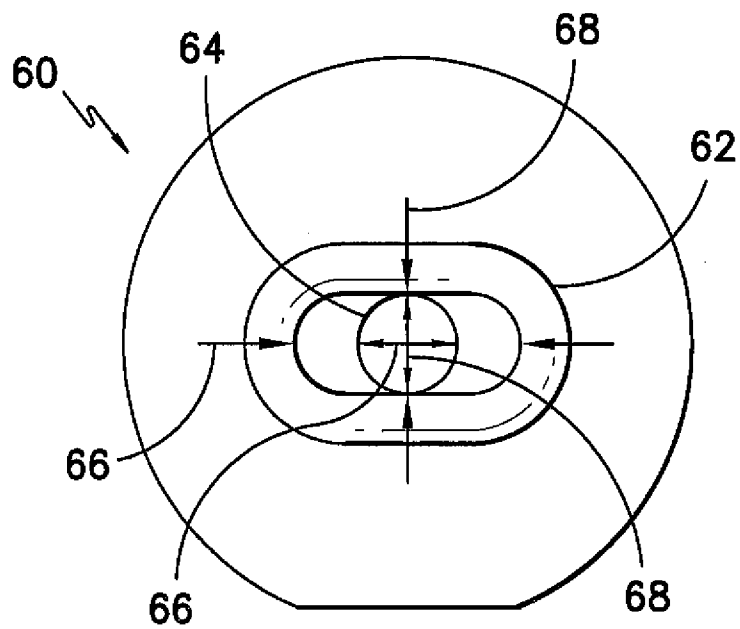


FIG. -15-

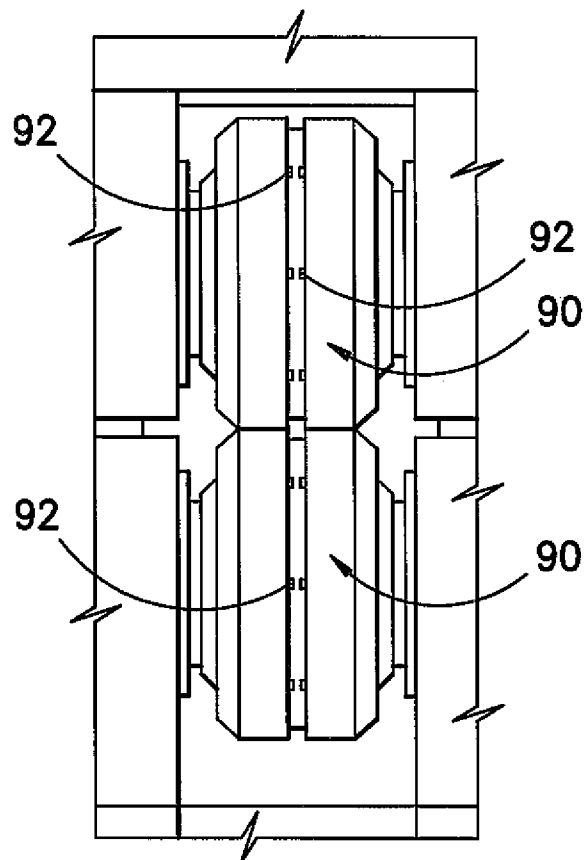


FIG. -16-