



LV, MC, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, RS, SE, SI, SK, **Published:**

SM, TR), OAPI (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GQ, — *with international search report (Art. 21(3))*
GW, KM, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

METHOD OF MANUFACTURING UNBONDED, ABSORBENT FIBROUS STRUCTURES

5

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a method of manufacturing unbonded, absorbent, fibrous structures, such as absorbent pads.

10

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The use of fibrous structures in absorbent articles such as diapers or feminine hygienic articles is well known in the art. Fibrous structures may be either consolidated, bonded webs, such as nonwoven webs, but can also be unbonded structures, often made of natural fibers such as cellulose fibers or chemically modified cellulose fibers.

Unbonded fibrous structures can for example be used as absorbent cores, wherein the fibers are typically mixed with superabsorbent gelling materials, such as superabsorbent polymer particles. Moreover, such unbonded fibrous structures can be used in so-called liquid acquisition systems overlaying the absorbent core.

With the processes used today for high speed manufacture of fibrous webs for absorbent articles, it is difficult to make unbonded fibrous webs having a relatively low basis weight, such as basis weights below 120 g/m² as such fibrous webs typically suffer from poor homogeneity, resulting in holes in the web and low web integrity. When used in absorbent articles, holes lead to reduced integrity of the fibrous structure, which can reduce the liquid handling performance of absorbent articles.

EP-A-0 252 650, published on January 13th 1988, discloses processes for making individualized, stiffened fibers. The fibers may be directly deposited on a foraminous forming wire in a manner similar to conventional pulp sheeting processes and formed into pulp sheets. Pulp sheets may be undensified or compacted. In one embodiment the individualized, stiffened fibres are combined with conventional fibres to be made into a densified pulp sheet for subsequent defibration and formation into absorbent pads. The incorporation of the conventional fibers eases dry compression of the pulp sheet into a densified form.

Whereas mixtures of fibres, such as mixtures of individualized, stiffened fibers combined with conventional fibers, can be processed into absorbent pads using the methods of the prior art, it would be desirable to provide more flexible processes in which pulp sheets can be transformed into various absorbent pads, the pads having different compositions, different profiles, different densities etc.

Thus the present invention provides a method wherein roughly graded material of first fibrous sheets having certain composition can be mixed with second material(s) after defiberising and directly prior to forming the fibrous structure or pad.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a method of manufacturing an unbonded, absorbent, fibrous structure, the method comprising the steps of:

- a) providing of a first fibrous material in the form of a fibrous sheet;
- b) defiberising the sheet of first fibrous material to form a roughly graded material;
- c) mixing the roughly graded material with a second material to form a mixture; and
- d) air-laying the mixture on a foraminous surface to form the unbonded, absorbent, fibrous structure.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a schematic drawing of an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 2 a schematic drawing of another embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 3 is a schematic drawing of an embodiment of the present invention, including the laydown section.

Figure 4 is a schematic drawing of another embodiment of the present invention, including the lay-down section.

Figure 5 is a plan view of an unbonded fibrous structure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Definitions

"Absorbent article" refers to devices that absorb and contain body exudates, and, more specifically, refers to devices that are placed against or in proximity to the body of the wearer to absorb and contain the various exudates discharged from the body. Absorbent articles may include diapers, pants, training pants, adult incontinence undergarments, feminine hygiene products, and the like. As used herein, the term "body fluids" or "body exudates" includes, but is not limited to, urine, blood, vaginal discharges, breast milk, sweat and fecal matter. Preferred absorbent articles of the present invention are diapers, pants, training pants and feminine hygiene products such as sanitary napkins and/or sanitary pads

"Absorbent core" means a structure typically disposed between a topsheet and a backsheet of an absorbent article for absorbing and containing liquid received by the absorbent article. The absorbent core typically comprises absorbent material such as airfelt (comprising cellulose fibers), superabsorbent particles, or absorbent foams. In one embodiment, the absorbent core may be substantially cellulose free (i.e. less than 1% cellulose) and may comprise one or more substrates, absorbent polymer material disposed on the one or more substrates, and a thermoplastic composition on the absorbent particulate polymer material and at least a portion of the one or more substrates for immobilizing the absorbent particulate polymer material on the one or more substrates. In a multilayer absorbent core, the absorbent core may also include a cover layer. The one or more substrates and the cover layer may comprise a nonwoven. For the present invention, the absorbent core does not include an acquisition system, a topsheet, or a backsheet of the absorbent article.

"Absorbent polymer material," "absorbent gelling material," "AGM," "superabsorbent," and "superabsorbent material" are used herein interchangeably and refer to cross linked polymeric materials that can absorb at least 5 times their weight of an aqueous 0.9% saline solution as measured using the Centrifuge Retention Capacity test (Edana 441.2-01).

"Absorbent particulate polymer material" is used herein to refer to an absorbent polymer material which is in particulate form so as to be flowable in the dry state.

"Diaper" refers to an absorbent article generally worn by infants and incontinent persons about the lower torso so as to encircle the waist and legs of the wearer and that is specifically adapted to receive and contain urinary and fecal waste. As used herein, term "diaper" also includes "pants" which is defined below.

5 "Pant" or "training pant", as used herein, refer to disposable garments having a waist opening and leg openings designed for infant or adult wearers. A pant may be placed in position on the wearer by inserting the wearer's legs into the leg openings and sliding the pant into position about a wearer's lower torso. A pant may be preformed by any suitable technique including, but not limited to, joining together portions of the article using
10 refastenable and/or non-refastenable bonds (e.g., seam, weld, adhesive, cohesive bond, fastener, etc.). A pant may be preformed anywhere along the circumference of the article (e.g., side fastened, front waist fastened). While the terms "pant" or "pants" are used herein, pants are also commonly referred to as "closed diapers," "prefastened diapers," "pull-on diapers," "training pants," and "diaper-pants".

15 A "nonwoven web" is a manufactured sheet, web or batt of directionally or randomly orientated fibers, bonded by friction, and/or cohesion and/or adhesion, excluding paper and products which are woven, knitted, tufted, stitch-bonded incorporating binding yarns or filaments, or felted by wet-milling, whether or not additionally needled. The fibers may be of natural or man-made origin and may be staple or continuous filaments or be formed in situ.
20 Commercially available fibers have diameters ranging from less than about 0.001 mm to more than about 0.2 mm and they come in several different forms such as short fibers (known as staple, or chopped), continuous single fibers (filaments or monofilaments), untwisted bundles of continuous filaments (tow), and twisted bundles of continuous filaments (yarn). Nonwoven fabrics can be formed by many processes such as meltblowing, spunbonding, solvent
25 spinning, electrospinning, carding and airlaying. The basis weight of nonwoven fabrics is usually expressed in grams per square meter (gsm).

"Roughly graded material" as used herein refers to fibrous material, wherein the majority of the fibers are not individualized. Thus, the majority of the fibers are present as clusters in the roughly graded material. A fiber cluster as used herein is an aggregation of
30 several fibers (several hundreds up to several thousand fibers). The fiber clusters may have a diameter of only a few millimeters or have a diameter of up to several centimeters, e.g. up to 5

cm, depending how well the fiber clusters have been isolated and taken out from the raw material, which is typically provided in densely packed bales.

The method of the present invention is illustrated in Figure 1. A toothed cutter **100** is passed across the surface, preferably the end surface, of a fibrous sheet **10** comprising first fibrous material. Preferably the fibrous sheet **10** has a bulk density in the range from 0.1 to 0.85 g/cm³. The sheet **10** is advanced into the first cutting zone **12** by a first feeding device **14**, at a first feed rate. The cutter **100** breaks the sheet into roughly graded material **16** and transports the roughly graded material **16** away from the cutting zone **12**.

A second material **26** is fed into a second cutting zone **22** by a second feeding device **24**, at a second feed rate. Preferably the second material **26** has a bulk density in the range from 0.1 to 0.85 g/cm³. The first feed rate and the second feed rate need not be the same. Indeed it is an advantage of the present invention that the ratio between first feed rate and the second feed rate can be preselected in order to provide different absorbent pads containing different proportions of the first fibrous material and the second material.

In Figure 1 the second material **26** is shown as a material in sheet form **20**. However for the purpose of the invention the second material **26** may be fed to the cutter **100** in any suitable physical form, not limited to a sheet.

In Figure 2 the second material **36** is fed to the cutter **100** by means of a rotating drum **34** which meters the feed rate of the second material **36**. Such an arrangement is particularly suitable for the addition of material in particulate form, such as absorbent particulate polymer material. Suitable rotating drum metering systems are disclosed in EP-A-1 621 165, published on February 1st 2006, entitled "Indirect Printing of AGM".

The embodiments of Figures 1 and 2 may be combined in order to provide mixtures of the roughly graded first fibrous material **16** with more than one second material **26**, **36**, in which case the added materials will be referred to as the second, third, fourth, etc. materials.

Examples of second, third, fourth, etc. materials are absorbent materials, for example absorbent particulate polymer material; cellulose fibers, for example air felt, or individualized, stiffened fibers; and other staple fibers, preferably from 0.5 mm to 10 mm long. In one embodiment of the present invention these materials comprise a mixture of individualized, stiffened fibers, such as those described in EP-A-0 252 650, with eucalyptus fibers, for

example at a ratio of 90:10. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention the first fibrous material comprises individualized, stiffened fibers, such as those described in EP-A-0 252 650.

5 Defiberising

The cutter **100** breaks up the first fibrous sheet in a roughly graded material **16**. This step is referred to herein as a defibration step, or defiberising. Preferably the cutter is a toothed cutter, more preferably a rotary, toothed cutter. Such a cutter may take the form of a drum with teeth positioned around the circumferential surface of the drum.

- 10 The roughly graded first material is combined at the teeth of the cutter **100** with the second, third, fourth etc., materials and subsequently transported by the cutter **100** to a transfer zone. At the transfer zone the combined materials are air laid on a foraminous carrier **50**.

Transfer

- 15 Figures 3 and 4 show different embodiments of the transfer of the combined materials from the cutter **100** to the foraminous carrier **50** via a transfer duct **60**.

- Preferably the combined materials on the cutter **100** are blown off from between the teeth of the cutter by blow-off air supplied under pressure from within the cutter **100**, and/or the combined materials may be sucked off from between the teeth of the cutter by providing a
20 region of lower pressure of air within the transfer duct **60**. The air pressure within the transfer duct **60** may be reduced, for example, by means of baffles, or by aerodynamic surfaces which reduce the pressure by a Bernoulli effect.

- A foraminous carrier **50** may be of any suitable design enabling fibers to be deposited on its upper surface, and then capable of delivering the fibrous structure thus formed to a subsequent
25 station. In one embodiment the foraminous carrier **50** is configured as an endless belt. In another embodiment, the foraminous carrier **50** is configured in form of a drum. In the latter embodiments it is desirable that the drum-shaped foraminous carrier **50** has a diameter of from 400 mm to 800 mm, or from 500 mm to 600 mm. The drum **50** is placed such that the axis of the foraminous carrier drum **50** is positioned essentially horizontally. A drum-shaped
30 foraminous carrier **50** is illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. In these embodiments, the pressure

differential is applied for example by applying low-pressure or vacuum within the drum-shaped foraminous carrier. The fibers are deposited on the part of the outer surface of the foraminous carrier **50**, which is adjacent the cutter **100**. Due to the rotation of the drum-shaped foraminous carrier **50** the fibrous structure is moved downward while still held on the surface of the foraminous carrier **50** by the low-pressure or vacuum applied inside the drum-shaped foraminous carrier **50**. Once the fibrous structure has reached a more downward position, it passes a zero pressure (i.e. no pressure differential between the inside and the outside of the drum) or overpressure zone (i.e. a higher pressure inside the drum compared to outside of the drum), which enables the fibrous structure to be transferred from the drum-shaped foraminous carrier **50** onto another carrier **80** which is located below the drum-shaped foraminous carrier **50**, such as an endless belt. On this carrier **80** the fibrous structure will again be held by applying a pressure differential, for example with a suction box underneath.

In one embodiment, the fibrous structure is placed on top of another structure, such as a nonwoven web, a film or a multiplicity of webs and/or films. In these embodiments, the all layers will be held on the carrier due to an applied pressure differential. The fibrous structure can also be placed on top of a not yet finally assembled absorbent article. The term “not yet finally assembled” as used herein means that one or more layers or components (e.g. the fastening system or parts thereof; the topsheet, the backsheet, the absorbent core, the side panels or combinations thereof) of the absorbent article are still missing and will only be joined and/or attached to the absorbent article at a subsequent, downstream stage after the fibrous structure of the present invention has been placed on the not yet finally assembled absorbent article.

If the fibrous web forms part of a multi-layer acquisition system in an absorbent article, the fibrous web may be placed on top of the one or more other layers of the acquisition system, such as a nonwoven web. For example, if the fibrous structure is used as the lower layer of an acquisition system of an absorbent article, the fibrous structure is applied on top of the upper layer of the acquisition system. The thus assembled acquisition system will subsequently be delivered to and assembled with the remaining layers and components of the absorbent core or absorbent article.

In all these embodiments, the assembled layers and/or components will be held on the foraminous carrier **50** due to an applied pressure differential.

However, in another embodiment, the fibrous structure is formed directly on the surface of the foraminous carrier **50** with no additional layers underneath.

Importantly, in such a system, the fibrous structure does not need to be wound up on a roll for intermediate storage but is immediately further processed and incorporated into the final absorbent article. Therefore, it is not necessary to consolidate and reinforce the fibrous structure for storage (for example by having an additional bonding step by thermal bonding, pressure bonding, resin bonding, adhesive bonding, needle punching, hydroentangeling, or combinations thereof). Instead, the unbonded fibrous structure, having relatively low integrity due to the absence of any consolidation step, can be directly introduced onto the absorbent core or absorbent article.

The fibrous structure can be adhesively attached to the layer or layers onto which it is deposited. Adhesive attachment can be done by gluing the complete surface of the fibrous structure to the underlying layer or layers or by only gluing selected portions of the surface. Gluing can for example be done by applying the glue in a stripe, spiral, dot or any other pattern. However, it will be sufficient to use relatively low amounts of glue, since it should be avoided that the adhesive penetrates into the fibrous structure or the underlying layer or layers as such penetration will have an adverse effect on the absorption properties.

Also, the fibrous structure is preferably only cut transversely (i.e. in cross machine direction), once the fibrous structure has been placed on one or more other layers, either on the foraminous carrier **50** or at a later stage, e.g. on carrier **80**. Thereby, the fibrous structure is stabilized to certain degree, reducing the risk of damaging the fragile fibrous structure upon cutting. To enable in-line production of the fibrous structure with the manufacture of the absorbent article, in which it is used, it is desirable that the manufacture of the fibrous structure takes place at the same speed or about the same speed as the manufacture of the absorbent article as a whole. As modern absorbent article production lines often produce 1200 absorbent articles per minute or even more, this requires manufacturing speeds of the fibrous structure ranging from 200 to 350 m/min.

To enable fast and easy transfer of the fibrous structure to the absorbent article, the fibrous structure needs to have its final width already upon formation of the fibrous structure. This eliminates the need for any subsequent cutting steps along the longitudinal direction of the fibrous structure (i.e. in machine direction). Especially as the fibrous structure alone has low

integrity due to the absence of any consolidation steps, cutting in the longitudinal direction bears the risk of damaging the fibrous structure. According to the present invention, the fibrous structure therefore does not undergo any longitudinal cutting (i.e. in the machine direction). The width of the fibrous structure of the present invention is from 4 cm to 25 cm,
5 or from 5 cm to 15 cm, or from 5 cm to 12 cm.

Compared to traditional production lines for fibrous structures, which only need to accommodate the equipment for the manufacture of the fibrous structure, production lines of absorbent articles need to accommodate numerous other equipment required to manufacture or supply, and assemble all the different components of the absorbent article. Thus, absorbent
10 article manufacturing lines have considerable higher space constraints compared to traditional production lines for fibrous structures. Therefore, it is advantageous to have a foraminous carrier **50** in form of a drum as such a carrier is less space consuming compared to a horizontal carrier.

In Figure 3 the configuration is shown in which the end surface of a fibrous sheet **10** comprising first fibrous material is advanced into the first cutting zone **12** by a first feeding device **14**, at a first feed rate. The cutter **100** breaks the sheet into roughly graded material **16** and transports the roughly graded material **16** away from the cutting zone **12**. A second material **26** is fed into a second cutting zone **22** by a second feeding device **24**, at a second feed rate. The first and second materials are combined at the cutter **100** and transferred via a
20 transfer duct **60** to the foraminous carrier **50**. Air is blown **70** into the transfer duct **60** to assist transfer.

In Figure 4 the configuration is shown in which the first **16** and second **26** materials are supplemented by a third material **36**. In this embodiment the third material is an absorbent gelling material in the form of particles.

In Figures 3 and 4 the process may be further modified to enable a variation in the unbonded fibrous structure **54**. In particular the variation may correspond in the machine direction to the pitch of the unbonded fibrous structure **54** so that the first, second (optionally third, fourth etc.) materials are distributed in a desired predetermined manner. For example the first feeding device **14** and/or the second feeding device **24** (optionally third, fourth feeding
30 devices etc.) may be driven at variable speed, for example with sinusoidal speed profile in which one speed cycle corresponds to the pitch of the unbonded fibrous structure **54**. The

variable drive mechanism may be, for example, servomotor or cam driven (drive mechanism not shown in Figures 3, 4).

The fibrous web can also be deposited on the foraminous carrier **50** in a shaped form, i.e. the longitudinal side edges of the fibrous structure do not form a straight line but take a certain shape, typically a curved shape. This can be facilitated e.g. by not having the complete surface of the carrier **50** being foraminous but by masking certain areas along the side edges of the carrier surface. Thereby, the fibers leaving the apertured, cylindrical drums are only directed towards those areas of the carrier surface which is foraminous due to the low-pressure applied below the foraminous carrier **50**.

Shaped fibrous structures may be desirable in absorbent articles to facilitate a narrow crotch portion of the absorbent article. Thus, if the fibrous structure is used in an acquisition system, as absorbent core or as part of an absorbent core, the part of the fibrous structure having a narrower width will be placed in the crotch region while the parts having a wider width are placed in the front and back waist region.

Figure 5 shows an example of an unbonded fibrous structure **54** which may generally follow the contour and construction of the absorbent core over which it is disposed, although it may also be in general shorter in longitudinal and/or transversal direction. In general, the same features disclosed previously for the central portion, side portions and folding guides of the core can apply to the liquid management layer. The layer **54** may thus comprise a central portion **60'** generally longitudinally extending, but which may be shorter than the central portion of the core, and two folding guides **261'**, **262'**. These folding guides may comprise areas substantially free of the liquid management material, in this case substantially free of unbound or loosely bound hydrophilic fibers such as cross-linked cellulosic fibers. The liquid management side portions **61'**, **62'** may further comprise winglets **610'-617'**, **620'-627'**, which as shown may correspond in shape and configuration to the winglets **610-617**, **620-627** of the absorbent core, although this is not required.

The dimensions and values disclosed herein are not to be understood as being strictly limited to the exact numerical values recited. Instead, unless otherwise specified, each such dimension is intended to mean both the recited value and a functionally equivalent range surrounding that value. For example, a dimension disclosed as "40 mm" is intended to mean "about 40 mm".

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method of manufacturing an unbonded, absorbent, fibrous structure, the method
5 comprising the steps of:
 - a) providing of a first fibrous material in the form of a fibrous sheet (10);
 - b) defiberising the sheet (10) of first fibrous material to form a roughly graded material (16);
 - c) mixing the roughly graded material (16) with a second material (26) to form a
10 mixture; and
 - d) air-laying the mixture on a foraminous carrier (50) to form the unbonded, absorbent, fibrous structure.
2. The method according to claim 1 wherein the sheet (10) of first fibrous material is
15 formed into the roughly graded material (16) by passing a surface of the sheet (10) passed a rotary toothed cutter.
3. The method according to claim 1 wherein the sheet (10) of first fibrous material is
advanced into the first cutting zone (12) by a first feeding device (14) at a first feed rate.
20
4. The method according to claim 3 wherein the second material (26) is fed into a second cutting zone by a second feeding device (24) at a second feed rate.
5. The method according to claim 4 wherein the first feed rate is not equal to the second
25 feed rate.
6. The method according to either of claims 3 or 4 wherein at least one of the first and second feed rates is a variable feed rate.
- 30 7. The method according to claim 6 wherein at least one of the first and second feed rates varies sinusoidally with respect to time.

8. The method according to any of the previous claims wherein the fibrous sheet (10) has a bulk density in the range from 0.1 to 0.85 g/cm³.

9. The method according to any of the previous claims wherein the second material (26)
5 has a bulk density in the range from 0.1 to 0.85 g/cm³.

10. The method according to claim 1 wherein the second material (26) is a particulate material, preferably an absorbent particulate polymer material.

1 / 4

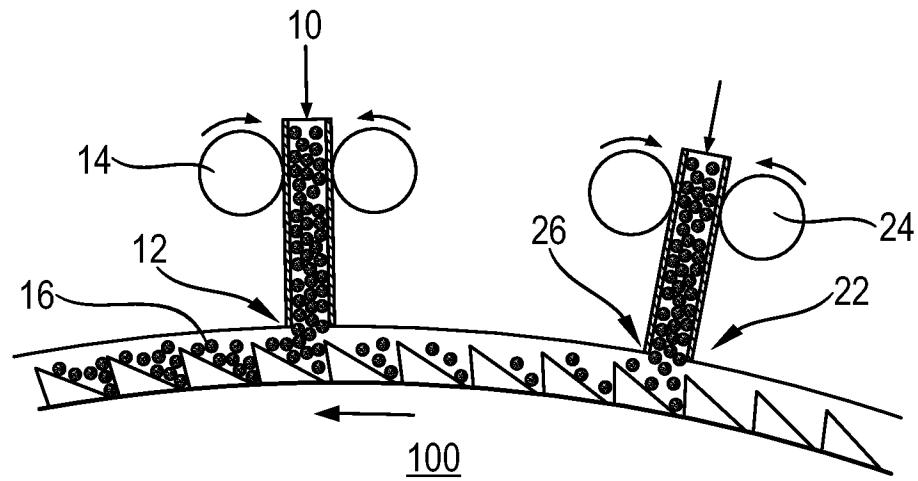


Fig. 1

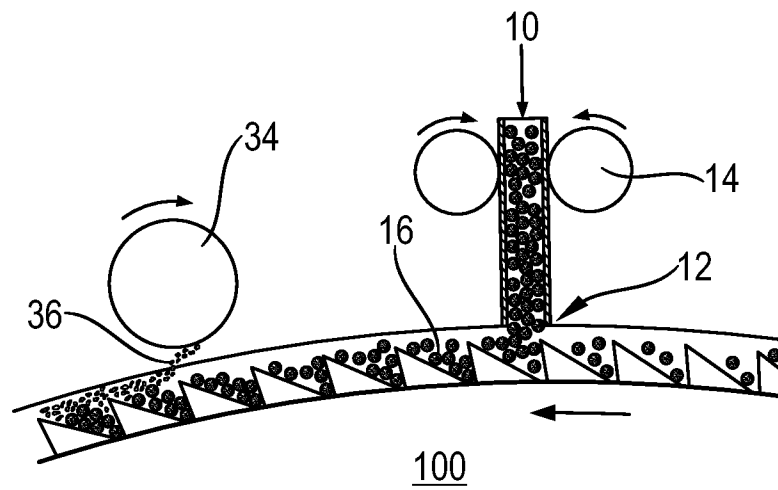


Fig. 2

2 / 4

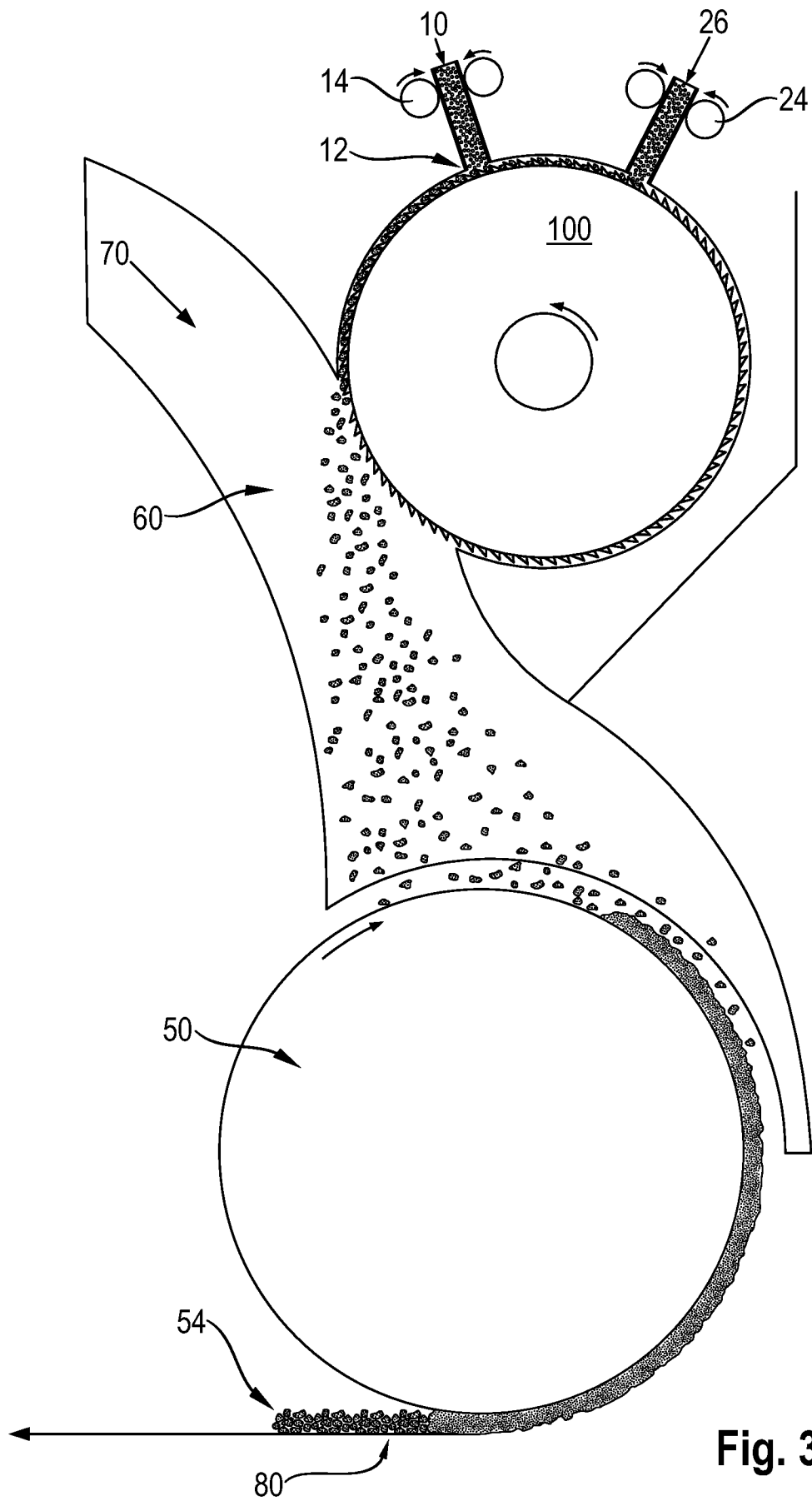


Fig. 3

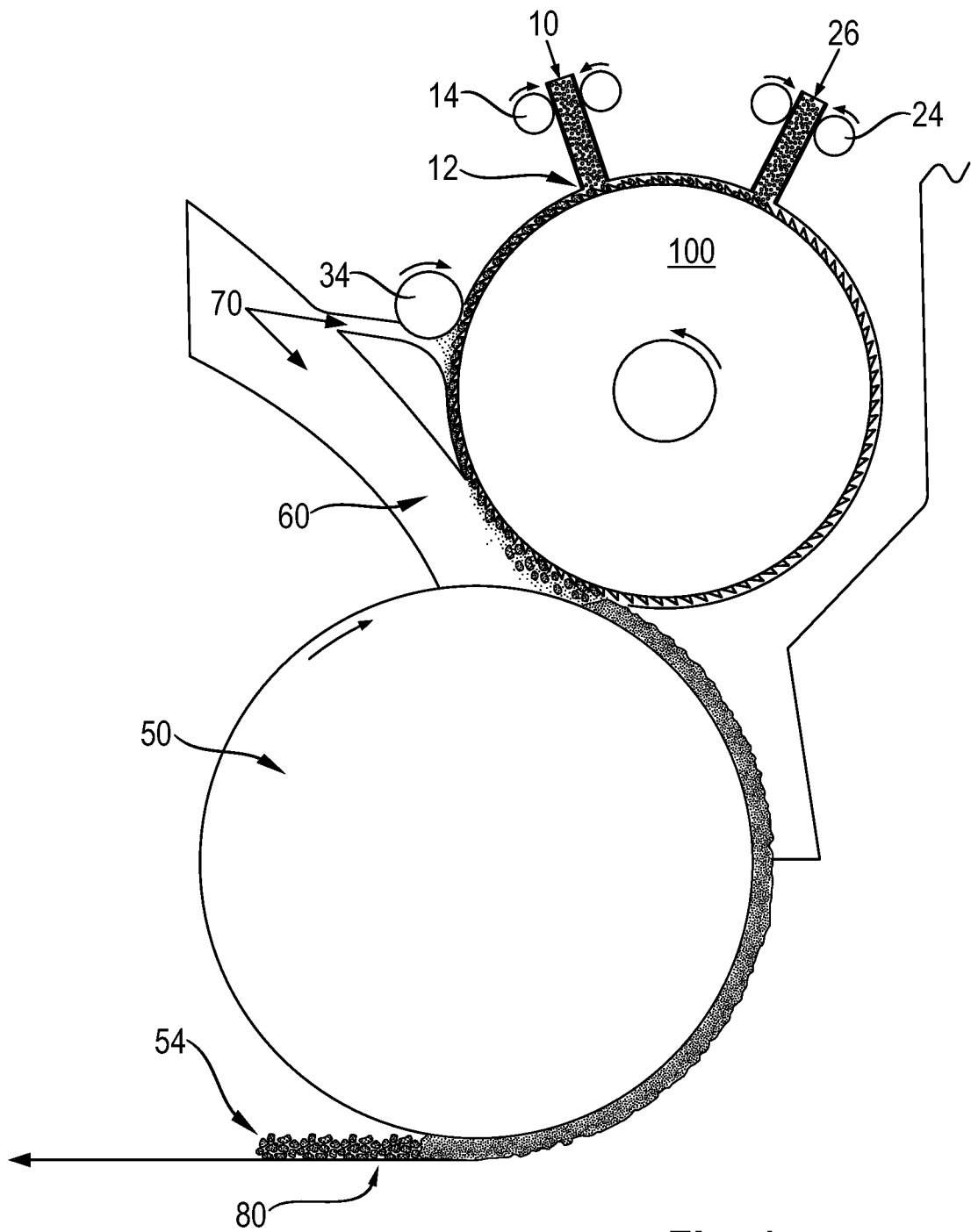
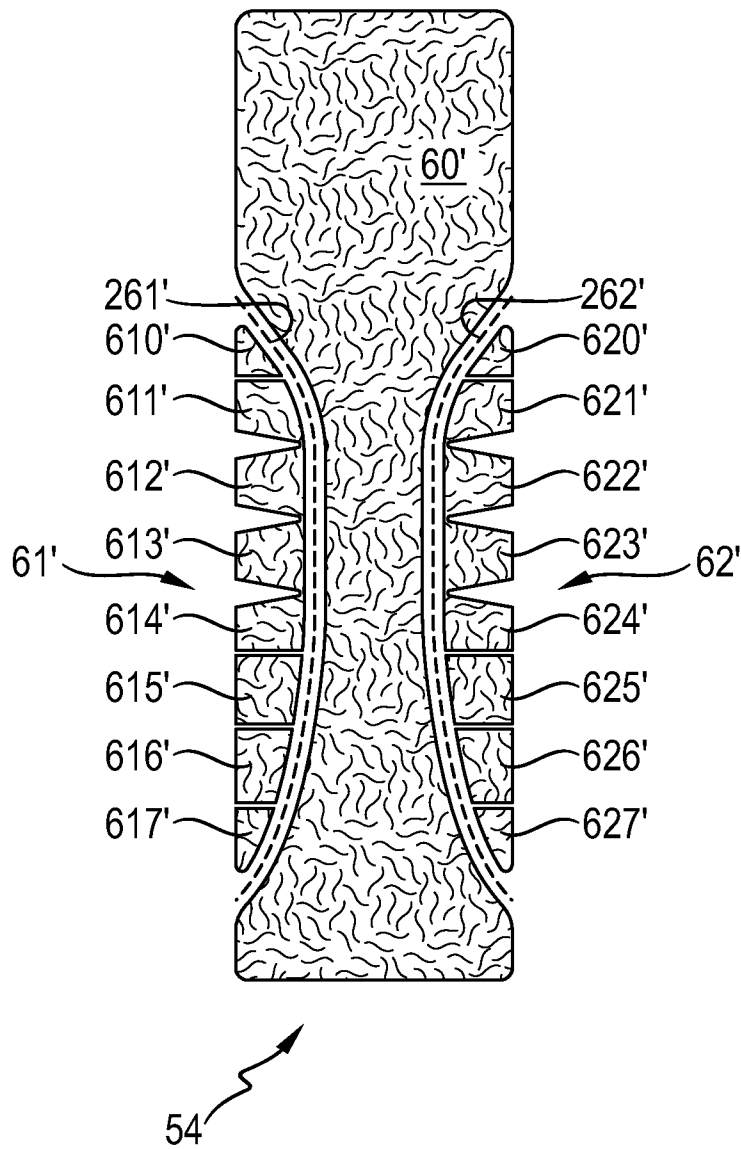


Fig. 4

Fig. 5



INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No

PCT/US2016/033980

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

INV. A61F13/15 D04H1/732
ADD.

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)

A61F D04H

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 practicable, search terms used)

EPO-Internal, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 3 973 291 A (KOLBACH CHARLES G) 10 August 1976 (1976-08-10) figure 9 column 14, line 51 - column 15, line 25 -----	1-10
X	US 4 908 175 A (ANGSTADT JOHN J [US]) 13 March 1990 (1990-03-13) figure 1 column 1, line 10 - column 2, line 61 column 4, line 54 - column 6, line 54 column 14, lines 45-66 -----	1-3,8-10
X	EP 0 168 957 A1 (SCAN WEB OF NORTH AMERICA INC [US]) 22 January 1986 (1986-01-22) page 16, line 1 - page 17, line 17 figure 1 -----	1,3-10



Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents :

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date

"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

22 July 2016

Date of mailing of the international search report

01/08/2016

Name and mailing address of the ISA/

European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2
NL - 2280 HV Rijswijk
Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040,
Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016

Authorized officer

Beins, Ulrika

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International application No

PCT/US2016/033980

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
US 3973291	A	10-08-1976	NONE
US 4908175	A	13-03-1990	NONE
EP 0168957	A1	22-01-1986	AU 582367 B2 23-03-1989
		AU 4433585 A	10-01-1986
		DE 3564971 D1	20-10-1988
		EP 0168957 A1	22-01-1986
		EP 0188454 A1	30-07-1986
		JP 2519204 B2	31-07-1996
		JP S61502689 A	20-11-1986
		US 4640810 A	03-02-1987
		WO 8600097 A1	03-01-1986