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(71) **Applicant (for all designated States except US):** THE TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY SYSTEM [US/US]; 3369 Tamu, College Station, Texas 77843-3369 (US).

(72) **Inventors; and**

(75) **Inventors/Applicants (for US only):** CLARIDGE, David, E. [US/US]; The Texas A&M University System, 3369 TAMU, College Station, Texas 77843-3369 (US). CULP, Charles, H. [US/US]; The Texas A&M University System, 3369 TAMU, College Station, Texas 77843-3369 (US). HABERL, Jeffrey, S. [US/US]; The Texas A&M University System, 3369 TAMU, College Station, Texas 77843-3369 (US).

(74) **Agents:** SWANSON, Tait, R. et al.; P.O. Box 692289, Houston, Texas 77269-2289 (US).

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- as to applicant's entitlement to apply for and be granted a patent (Rule 4.17(ii))
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(54) **Title:** SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR EFFICIENT MULTI-STAGE AIR DEHUMIDIFICATION AND LIQUID RECOVERY

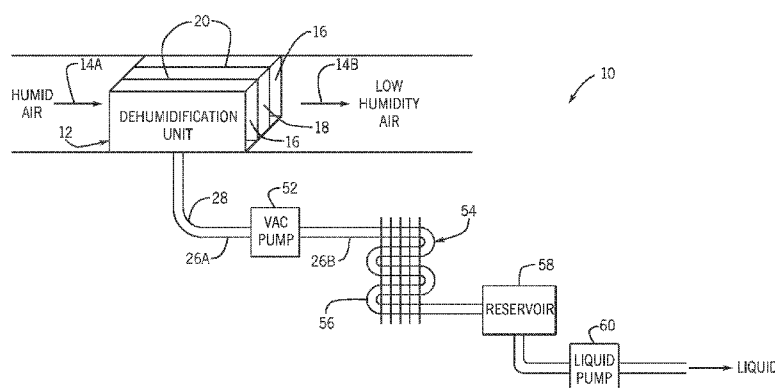


FIG. 1

(57) **Abstract:** The present invention relates to systems and methods for dehumidifying air by establishing humidity gradients in a plurality of dehumidification units, which are arranged in series and/or in parallel. Water vapor from air entering each stage of the plurality of dehumidification units is extracted by the dehumidification units without substantial condensation into low pressure water vapor chambers. For example, in one embodiment, the water vapor is extracted through water vapor permeable membranes of the dehumidification units into the low pressure water vapor chambers. As such, the air exiting each of the dehumidification units is less humid than the air entering the dehumidification units. The low pressure water vapor extracted from the air is subsequently compressed to a slightly higher pressure (i.e., just high enough to facilitate condensation), condensed, and removed from the system at ambient conditions.

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SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR EFFICIENT MULTI-STAGE AIR DEHUMIDIFICATION AND LIQUID RECOVERY

BACKGROUND

[0001] Heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems often have dehumidification systems integrated into the cooling apparatus for dehumidifying the air being conditioned by such systems. When cooling is required in warm to hot environments, the air being cooled and dehumidified will usually have a humidity ratio above approximately 0.009 (pounds of H₂O per pounds of dry air). In these environments, the HVAC systems traditionally use refrigerant compressors for sensible cooling of the air and removal of latent energy (i.e., humidity). The air is typically cooled to about 55°F, which condenses H₂O out of the air until the air is about 100% saturated (i.e., relative humidity at about 100%). The 55°F temperature lowers the humidity ratio to about 0.009 pounds of H₂O per pounds of dry air, which is the water vapor saturation point at 55°F, resulting in a relative humidity of almost 100%. When this air warms to about 75°F, the humidity ratio remains approximately the same, and the relative humidity drops to approximately 50%. This traditional method of dehumidification requires the air to be cooled to about 55°F, and can usually achieve a coefficient of performance (COP) of approximately 3-5.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

[0002] Certain embodiments commensurate in scope with the present disclosure are summarized in the following. These embodiments are not intended to limit the scope of the claimed invention, but rather these embodiments are intended only to provide a brief summary of possible forms of the invention. Indeed, the invention may encompass a variety of forms that may be similar to or different from the embodiments set forth in the following.

[0003] In a first embodiment, a dehumidification system for removing water vapor from an airstream is provided. The dehumidification system includes a plurality of dehumidification units. Each dehumidification unit includes a first and second channel separated by a membrane. The membrane is configured to facilitate removal

of water vapor from an airstream flowing through the first channel by facilitating passage of H_2O from the water vapor to the second channel through permeable volumes of the membrane while substantially blocking all other components of the airstream from passing through the membrane. The dehumidification system also includes at least one pressure increasing device configured to create a lower partial pressure of water vapor within the second channels than in the first channels, such that the H_2O moves through the membranes to the second channels. The at least one pressure increasing device is also configured to increase the pressure of water vapor at an outlet of the at least one pressure increasing device to a partial pressure of water vapor in a range suitable for subsequent condensing into liquid water. The dehumidification system further includes at least one condensation device configured to receive the water vapor from the at least one pressure increasing device and condense the water vapor into liquid water. The dehumidification system also includes at least one water transport device configured to transport the liquid water from the at least one condensation device.

[0004] In a second embodiment, a system includes a dehumidification system for removing H_2O vapor from an airstream. The dehumidification system includes a plurality of dehumidification units, each comprising an air channel configured to receive an inlet airstream and discharge an outlet airstream, and an H_2O permeable barrier adjacent to the air channel. The H_2O permeable barrier is configured to selectively enable H_2O from H_2O vapor in the inlet airstream to pass through the H_2O permeable barrier to a suction side of the H_2O permeable barrier and substantially block other components in the inlet airstream from passing through the H_2O permeable barrier to the suction side of the H_2O permeable barrier. The dehumidification system also includes at least one pressure increasing device configured to create a lower partial pressure of H_2O vapor on the suction sides of the H_2O permeable barriers than the partial pressure of the H_2O vapor in the inlet airstreams to drive passage of the H_2O from the H_2O vapor in the inlet airstream through the H_2O permeable barrier, and to increase the pressure at an outlet of the at least one pressure increasing device to a partial pressure of H_2O vapor suitable for condensing H_2O vapor into liquid H_2O . The dehumidification system further includes

at least one condensation device configured to receive the H₂O vapor from the outlet of the at least one pressure increasing device, and to condense the H₂O vapor into liquid H₂O.

[0005] In a third embodiment, a method includes receiving a plurality of airstreams including H₂O vapor into air channels of a plurality of dehumidification units. The airstreams have a first partial pressure of H₂O vapor. The method also includes suctioning H₂O into H₂O vapor channels of the plurality of dehumidification units through H₂O permeable materials of the plurality of dehumidification units using pressure differentials across the H₂O permeable materials. The H₂O vapor channels have a second partial pressure of H₂O vapor lower than the first partial pressure of H₂O vapor of the airstreams. The method further includes receiving H₂O vapor from the H₂O vapor channels into a pressure increasing device and increasing the pressure of the H₂O vapor from the pressure increasing device to a third partial pressure of H₂O vapor that is higher than the second partial pressure of H₂O vapor. The method also includes receiving the H₂O vapor from the pressure increasing device into a condensation device and condensing the H₂O vapor into liquid H₂O. The method further includes transporting the liquid H₂O from the condensation device to ambient conditions.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0006] These and other features, aspects, and advantages of embodiments of the present disclosure will become better understood when the following detailed description is read with reference to the accompanying drawings in which like characters represent like parts throughout the drawings, wherein:

[0007] FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system having a dehumidification unit in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0008] FIG. 2A is a perspective view of the dehumidification unit of FIG. 1 having multiple parallel air channels and water vapor channels in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0009] FIG. 2B is a perspective view of the dehumidification unit of FIG. 1 having a single air channel located inside a single water vapor channel in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0010] FIG. 3 is a plan view of an air channel and adjacent water vapor channels of the dehumidification unit of FIGS. 1, 2A, and 2B in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0011] FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a separation module formed using a membrane that may be used as a water vapor channel of the dehumidification unit of FIGS. 1-3 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0012] FIG. 5 is a psychrometric chart of the temperature and the humidity ratio of the moist air flowing through the dehumidification unit of FIGS. 1-3 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0013] FIG. 6 is a schematic diagram of the HVAC system and the dehumidification unit of FIG. 1 having a vacuum pump for removing noncondensable components from the water vapor in the water vapor extraction chamber of the dehumidification unit in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0014] FIG. 7 is a schematic diagram of the HVAC system and the dehumidification unit of FIG. 6 having a control system for controlling various operating conditions of the HVAC system and the dehumidification unit in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0015] FIG. 8 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system having a plurality of dehumidification units arranged in series in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0016] FIG. 9 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system having a plurality of dehumidification units arranged in parallel in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure; and

[0017] FIG. 10 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system having a first plurality of dehumidification units arranged in series, and a second plurality of dehumidification units also arranged in series, with the first and second plurality of dehumidification units arranged in parallel in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC EMBODIMENTS

[0018] Specific embodiments of the present disclosure will be described herein. In an effort to provide a concise description of these embodiments, all features of an actual implementation may not be described in the specification. It should be appreciated that in the development of any such actual implementation, as in any engineering or design project, numerous implementation-specific decisions must be made to achieve the developers' specific goals, such as compliance with system-related and business-related constraints, which may vary from one implementation to another. Moreover, it should be appreciated that such a development effort might be complex and time-consuming, but would nevertheless be a routine undertaking of design, fabrication, and manufacture for those of ordinary skill having the benefit of this disclosure.

[0019] When introducing elements of various embodiments of the present invention, the articles "a," "an," "the," and "said" are intended to mean that there are one or more of the elements. The terms "comprising," "including," and "having" are intended to be inclusive and mean that there may be additional elements other than the listed elements.

[0020] The subject matter disclosed herein relates to dehumidification systems and, more specifically, to systems and methods capable of dehumidifying air without initial condensation by establishing a humidity gradient in a dehumidification unit. In one embodiment, a water vapor permeable material (i.e., a water vapor permeable membrane) is used along at least one boundary separating an air channel from a secondary channel or chamber to facilitate the removal of water vapor from the air passing through the air channel. The secondary channel or chamber separated from

the air channel by the water vapor permeable material may receive water vapor extracted from the air channel via the water vapor permeable material.

[0021] In certain embodiments, multiple dehumidification units (i.e., multiple stages) may be used in combination with each other. For example, in certain embodiments, the dehumidification units may be arranged in series with each other, such that the air flows through each of the dehumidification units, with more and more water vapor removed from the air in each successive dehumidification unit. In other embodiments, the dehumidification units may be arranged in parallel with each other such that the air is split between the dehumidification units. In addition, in even more complex systems, multiple sets of one or more dehumidification units arranged in series may be further arranged in parallel. For example, a first set of dehumidification units arranged in series with each other may be arranged in parallel with a second set of dehumidification units arranged in series with each other.

[0022] In operation, the water vapor permeable material allows the flow of H₂O (which may refer to H₂O as water molecules, gaseous water vapor, liquid water, adsorbed/desorbed water molecules, absorbed/desorbed water molecules, or combinations thereof) through the water vapor permeable material from the air channel to the secondary channel or chamber, while substantially blocking the flow of other components of the air flowing through the air channel from passing through the water vapor permeable material. As such, the water vapor permeable material reduces the humidity of the air flowing through the air channel by removing primarily only water vapor from the air. Correspondingly, the secondary channel or chamber is filled with primarily water vapor. It should be noted that the passage of H₂O through the water vapor permeable material may be facilitated by a pressure differential. Indeed, a lower partial pressure of water vapor (i.e., a partial pressure less than the partial pressure of water vapor in the air channel) may be created in the secondary channel or chamber to further facilitate passage of the H₂O through the water vapor permeable material. Accordingly, the side of the water vapor permeable material opposite the air channel may be referred to as the suction side of the water vapor permeable material.

[0023] Once the H₂O has been passed through the water vapor permeable material, a vacuum pump is used to increase the partial pressure of the water vapor on the suction side of the water vapor permeable material to a minimal saturation pressure required to enable condensation of the water vapor by a condenser. That is, the vacuum pump compresses the water vapor to a pressure in a range suitable for condensing the water vapor into liquid water (e.g., a range of approximately 0.25-1.1 pounds per square inch absolute (psia), with the higher value applying to embodiments using multiple dehumidification units in series), depending on desired conditions for condensation. The condenser then condenses the water vapor into a liquid state, and the resulting liquid water is then pressurized to approximately atmospheric pressure, such that the liquid water may be rejected at ambient atmospheric conditions. By condensing the water vapor to a liquid state prior to expelling it, certain efficiencies are provided. For example, pressurizing liquid water to atmospheric pressure requires less energy than pressurizing water vapor to atmospheric pressure. It should also be noted that the dehumidification unit described herein in general uses significantly less energy than conventional systems.

[0024] While the embodiments described herein are primarily presented as enabling the removal of water vapor from air, other embodiments may enable the removal of other H₂O components from air. For example, in certain embodiments, instead of a water vapor permeable material, an H₂O permeable material may be used. As such, the H₂O permeable material may allow the flow of one, all, or any combination of H₂O components (i.e., water molecules, gaseous water vapor, liquid water, adsorbed/desorbed water molecules, absorbed/desorbed water molecules, and so forth) through the H₂O permeable material from the air channel to the secondary channel or chamber, while substantially blocking the flow of other components of the air flowing through the air channel from passing through the H₂O permeable material. In other words, the disclosed embodiments are not limited to the removal of water vapor from air, but rather to the removal of H₂O (i.e., in any of its states) from air. However, for conciseness, the embodiments described herein are primarily focused on the removal of water vapor from air.

[0025] FIG. 1 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system 10 having a dehumidification unit 12 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. As illustrated, the dehumidification unit 12 may receive inlet air 14A having a relatively high humidity and expel outlet air 14B having a relatively low humidity. In particular, the dehumidification unit 12 may include one or more air channels 16 through which the air 14 (i.e., the inlet air 14A and the outlet air 14B) flows. In addition, the dehumidification unit 12 may include one or more water vapor channels 18 adjacent to the one or more air channels 16. As illustrated in FIG. 1, the air 14 does not flow through the water vapor channels 18. Rather, the embodiments described herein enable the passage of water vapor from the air 14 in the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18, thus dehumidifying the air 14 and accumulating water vapor in the water vapor channels 18. In particular, water vapor from the air 14 in the air channels 16 may be allowed to flow through an interface 20 (i.e., a barrier or membrane) between adjacent air channels 16 and water vapor channels 18, while the other components (e.g., nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and so forth) of the air 14 are blocked from flowing through the interface 20. In general, the water vapor channels 18 are sealed to create the low pressure that pulls the water vapor from the air 14 in the air channels 16 through the interfaces 20 as H₂O (i.e., as water molecules, gaseous water vapor, liquid water, adsorbed/desorbed water molecules, absorbed/desorbed water molecules, and so forth, through the interfaces 20).

[0026] As such, a humidity gradient is established between the air channels 16 and adjacent water vapor channels 18. The humidity gradient is generated by a pressure gradient between the air channels 16 and adjacent water vapor channels 18. In particular, the partial pressure of water vapor in the water vapor channels 18 is maintained at a level lower than the partial pressure of water vapor in the air channels 16, such that the water vapor in the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16 tends toward the suction side (i.e., the water vapor channels 18 having a lower partial pressure of water vapor) of the interfaces 20.

[0027] Components of air other than H₂O may be substantially blocked from passing through the interfaces 20 in accordance with present embodiments. In other words, in certain embodiments, approximately 95% or more, approximately 96% or

more, approximately 97% or more, approximately 98% or more, or approximately 99% or more of components of the air 14 other than H₂O (e.g., nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and so forth) may be blocked from passing through the interfaces 20. When compared to an ideal interface 20 that blocks 100% of components other than H₂O, an interface 20 that blocks 99.5% of components other than H₂O will experience a reduction in efficiency of approximately 2-4%. As such, the components other than H₂O may be periodically purged to minimize these adverse effects on efficiency.

[0028] FIG. 2A is a perspective view of the dehumidification unit 12 of FIG. 1 having multiple parallel air channels 16 and water vapor channels 18 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 2A, the air channels 16 and the water vapor channels 18 are generally rectilinear channels, which provide a substantial amount of surface area of the interfaces 20 between adjacent air channels 16 and water vapor channels 18. Further, the generally rectilinear channels 16, 18 enable the water vapor 26A to be removed along the path of the air channels 16 before the air 14 exits the air channels 16. In other words, the relatively humid inlet air 14A (e.g., air with a dew point of 55°F or higher such that the air is appropriate for air conditioning) passes straight through the air channels 16 and exits as relatively dry outlet air 14B because moisture has been removed as the air 14 traverses along the atmospheric pressure side of the interfaces 20 (i.e., the side of the interfaces 20 in the air channels 16). In an embodiment where a single unit is dehumidifying to a 60°F saturation pressure or below, the suction side of the interfaces 20 (i.e., the side of the interfaces 20 in the water vapor channels 18) will generally be maintained at a partial pressure of water vapor that is lower than the partial pressure of water vapor on the atmospheric pressure side of the interfaces 20.

[0029] As illustrated in FIG. 2A, each of the water vapor channels 18 is connected with a water vapor channel outlet 22 through which the water vapor in the water vapor channels 18 is removed. As illustrated in FIG. 2A, in certain embodiments, the water vapor channel outlets 22 may be connected via a water vapor outlet manifold 24, wherein the water vapor 26A from all of the water vapor channels 18 is combined in a single water vapor vacuum volume 28, such as a tube or a chamber. Other configurations of the air channels 16 and the water vapor channels 18 may also be

implemented. As another example, FIG. 2B is a perspective view of the dehumidification unit 12 of FIG. 1 having a single air channel 16 located inside a single water vapor channel 18 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. As illustrated, the air channel 16 may be a cylindrical air channel located within a larger concentric cylindrical water vapor channel 18. The embodiments illustrated in FIGS. 2A and 2B are merely exemplary and are not intended to be limiting.

[0030] FIG. 3 is a plan view of an air channel 16 and adjacent water vapor channels 18 of the dehumidification unit 12 of FIGS. 1, 2A, and 2B in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. In FIG. 3, a depiction of the water vapor 26 is exaggerated for illustration purposes. In particular, the water vapor 26 from the air 14 is shown flowing through the interfaces 20 between the air channel 16 and the adjacent water vapor channels 18 as H₂O (i.e., as water molecules, gaseous water vapor, liquid water, adsorbed/desorbed water molecules, absorbed/desorbed water molecules, and so forth, through the interfaces 20). Conversely, other components 30 (e.g., nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and so forth) of the air 14 are illustrated as being blocked from flowing through the interfaces 20 between the air channel 16 and the adjacent water vapor channels 18.

[0031] In certain embodiments, the interfaces 20 may include membranes that are water vapor permeable and allow the flow of H₂O through permeable volumes of the membranes while blocking the flow of the other components 30. Again, it should be noted that when the H₂O passes through the interfaces 20, it may actually pass as one, all, or any combination of states of water (e.g., as water vapor, liquid water, adsorbed/desorbed water molecules, absorbed/desorbed water molecules, and so forth) through the interfaces 20. For example, in one embodiment, the interfaces 20 may adsorb/desorb water molecules. In another example, the interfaces 20 may adsorb/desorb water molecules and enable passage of water vapor. In other embodiments, the interfaces 20 may facilitate the passage of water in other combinations of states. The interfaces 20 extend along the flow path of the air 14. As such, the water vapor 26 is continuously removed from one side of the interface 20 as the relatively humid inlet air 14A flows through the air channel 16. Therefore,

dehumidification of the air 14 flowing through the air channel 16 is accomplished by separating the water vapor 26 from the other components 30 of the air 14 incrementally as it progresses along the flow path of the air channel 16 and continuously contacts the interfaces 20 adjacent to the air channel 16 from the inlet air 14A location to the outlet air 14B location.

[0032] In certain embodiments, the water vapor channels 18 are evacuated before use of the dehumidification unit 12, such that a lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26 (i.e., a partial pressure less than the partial pressure of water vapor in the air channels 16) is created in the water vapor channels 18. For example, the partial pressure of the water vapor 26 in the water vapor channels 18 may be in the range of approximately 0.10-0.25 psia during normal operation, which corresponds to dehumidifying to a 60°F saturation pressure or below. In this example, an initial condition in the 0.01 psia range may be used to remove noncondensables, whereas the partial pressure of water vapor in the air channels 16 may be in the range of approximately 0.2-1.0 psia. However, at certain times, the pressure differential between the partial pressure of the water vapor in the water vapor channels 18 and the air channels 16 may be as low as (or lower than) 0.01 psia. The lower partial pressure of water vapor in the water vapor channels 18 further facilitates the flow of water vapor 26 from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18 because the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16 is at local atmospheric pressure (i.e., approximately 14.7 psia at sea level). Since the partial pressure of water vapor in the air 14 in the air channels 16 is greater than the partial pressure of the water vapor 26 in the water vapor channels 18, a pressure gradient is created from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18. As described previously, the interfaces 20 between adjacent air channels 16 and water vapor channels 18 provide a barrier, and allow substantially only water vapor 26 to flow from the air 14 in the air channels 16 into the water vapor channels 18. As such, the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16 will generally decrease in humidity from the inlet air 14A to the outlet air 14B.

[0033] The use of water vapor permeable membranes as the interfaces 20 between the air channels 16 and the water vapor channels 18 has many advantages. In particular, in some embodiments, no additional energy is required to generate the

humidity gradient from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18. In addition, in some embodiments, no regeneration is involved and no environmental emissions (e.g., solids, liquids, or gases) are generated. Indeed, in accordance with one embodiment, separation of the water vapor 26 from the other components 30 of the air 14 via water permeable membranes (i.e., the interfaces 20) can be accomplished at energy efficiencies much greater than compressor technology used to condense water directly from the airstream.

[0034] Because water vapor permeable membranes are highly permeable to water vapor, the costs of operating the dehumidification unit 12 may be minimized because the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16 does not have to be significantly pressurized to facilitate the passage of H₂O through the interfaces 20. Water vapor permeable membranes are also highly selective to the permeation of the water vapor from the air 14. In other words, water vapor permeable membranes are very efficient at preventing components 30 of the air 14 other than water vapor from entering the water vapor channels 18. This is advantageous because the H₂O passes through the interfaces 20 due to a pressure gradient (i.e., due to the lower partial pressures of water vapor in the water vapor channels 18) and any permeation or leakage of air 14 into the water vapor channels 18 will increase the power consumption of the vacuum pump used to evacuate the water vapor channels 18. In addition, water vapor permeable membranes are rugged enough to be resistant to air contamination, biological degradation, and mechanical erosion of the air channels 16 and the water vapor channels 18. Water vapor permeable membranes may also be resistant to bacteria attachment and growth in hot, humid air environments in accordance with one embodiment.

[0035] One example of a material used for the water vapor permeable membranes (i.e., the interfaces 20) is zeolite supported on thin, porous metal sheets. In particular, in certain embodiments, an ultrathin (e.g., less than approximately 2 μ m), dense zeolite membrane film may be deposited on an approximately 50 μ m thick porous metal sheet. The resulting membrane sheets may be packaged into a membrane separation module to be used in the dehumidification unit 12. FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a separation module 32 formed using a membrane that may be used as a water

vapor channel 18 of the dehumidification unit 12 of FIGS. 1-3 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. Two membrane sheets 34, 36 may be folded and attached together into a generally rectangular shape with a channel for the water vapor having a width w_{msm} of approximately 5 mm. The separation module 32 may be positioned within the dehumidification unit 12 such that the membrane coating surface is exposed to the air 14. The thinness of the metal support sheet reduces the weight and cost of the raw metal material and also minimizes resistance to the H_2O diffusing through the water vapor permeable membrane film deposited on the membrane sheets 34, 36. The metallic nature of the sheets 34, 36 provides mechanical strength and flexibility for packaging such that the separation module 32 can withstand a pressure gradient of greater than approximately 60 psi (i.e., approximately 4 times atmospheric pressure).

[0036] Separation of water vapor from the other components 30 of the air 14 may create a water vapor permeation flux of approximately $1.0 \text{ kg/m}^2/\text{h}$ (e.g., in a range of approximately $0.5\text{-}2.0 \text{ kg/m}^2/\text{h}$), and a water vapor-to-air selectivity range of approximately 5-200+. As such, the efficiency of the dehumidification unit 12 is relatively high compared to other conventional dehumidification techniques with a relatively low cost of production. As an example, approximately $7\text{-}10 \text{ m}^2$ of membrane area of the interfaces 20 may be needed to dehumidify 1 ton of air cooling load under ambient conditions. In order to handle such an air cooling load, in certain embodiments, 17-20 separation modules 32 having a height h_{msm} of approximately 450 mm, a length l_{msm} of approximately 450 mm, and a width w_{msm} of approximately 5 mm may be used. These separation modules 32 may be assembled side-by-side in the dehumidification unit 12, leaving approximately 2 mm gaps between the separation modules 32. These gaps define the air channels 16 through which the air 14 flows. The measurements described in this example are merely exemplary and not intended to be limiting.

[0037] FIG. 5 is a psychrometric chart 38 of the temperature and the humidity ratio of the moist air 14 flowing through the dehumidification unit 12 of FIGS. 1-3 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. In particular, the x-axis 40 of the psychrometric chart 38 corresponds to the temperature of the air 14 flowing

through the air channels 16 of FIG. 1, the y-axis 42 of the psychrometric chart 38 corresponds to the humidity ratio of the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16, and the curve 44 represents the water vapor saturation curve of the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16. As illustrated by line 46, because water vapor is removed from the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16, the humidity ratio of the outlet air 14B (i.e., point 48) from the dehumidification unit 12 of FIGS. 1-3 is lower than the humidity ratio of the inlet air 14A (i.e., point 50) into the dehumidification unit 12 of FIGS. 1-3, while the temperature of the outlet air 14B and the inlet air 14A are substantially the same.

[0038] Returning now to FIG. 1, as described previously, a lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26 (i.e., a partial pressure less than the partial pressure of water vapor in the air channels 16) is created in the water vapor channels 18 of the dehumidification unit 12 to further facilitate the passage of H_2O through the interfaces 20 from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18. In certain embodiments, the water vapor channels 18 may initially be evacuated using a vacuum pump 52. In particular, the vacuum pump 52 may evacuate the water vapor channels 18 and the water vapor vacuum volume 28, as well as the water vapor outlets 22 and the water vapor manifold 24 of FIG. 2A. However, in other embodiments, a pump separate from the vacuum pump 52 may be used to evacuate the water vapor channels 18, water vapor vacuum volume 28, water vapor outlets 22, and water vapor manifold 24. As illustrated in FIG. 1, the water vapor 26 removed from the air 14 in the dehumidification unit 12 may be distinguished between the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 (i.e., the suction side of the vacuum pump 52) and the water vapor 26B expelled from an exhaust side (i.e., an outlet) of the vacuum pump 52 (i.e., the water vapor 26B delivered to a condensation unit). In general, the water vapor 26B expelled from the vacuum pump 52 will have a slightly higher pressure and a higher temperature than the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28. The vacuum pump 52 may be a compressor or any other suitable pressure increasing device capable of maintaining a lower pressure on the suction side of the vacuum pump 52 than the partial pressure of water vapor in the humid air 14.

[0039] For example, the lower partial pressure of water vapor 26A maintained in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 may be in the range of approximately 0.15-0.25 psia, which corresponds to saturation temperatures of approximately 45°F to 60°F, with the water vapor 26A typically be in the range of approximately 65-75°F. However, in other embodiments, the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 may be maintained at a partial pressure of water vapor in the range of approximately 0.01-0.25 psia and a temperature in the range of approximately 55°F up to the highest ambient air temperature. A specific embodiment may be designed to lower the partial pressure in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 to the range of 0.01 psia to increase the capacity for removing water vapor from the air 14 to enable an evaporative cooler to process the entire air conditioning load when atmospheric conditions permit this mode of operation.

[0040] In certain embodiments, the vacuum pump 52 is a low-pressure pump configured to decrease the pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 to a lower partial pressure than the partial pressure of water vapor on the atmospheric side of the interfaces 20 (i.e., the partial pressure of the air 14 in the air channels 16). On the exhaust side of the vacuum pump 52, the partial pressure of the water vapor 26B has been increased just high enough to facilitate condensation of the water vapor (i.e., in a condensation unit 54). Indeed, the vacuum pump 52 is configured to increase the pressure such that the water vapor 26B in the condensation unit 54 is at a pressure proximate to a minimal saturation pressure in the condensation unit 54.

[0041] As an example, when in operation, the air 14 may enter the system at a partial pressure of water vapor of 0.32 psia, which corresponds to a humidity ratio of 0.014 pounds of H₂O per pounds of dry air. The system may be set to remove 0.005 pounds of H₂O per pounds of dry air from the air 14. Pressure differentials across the interfaces 20 may be used to create a flow of H₂O through the interfaces 20. For example, the partial pressure of water vapor in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 may be set to approximately 0.1 psia. The pressure of the water vapor 26B is increased by the vacuum pump 52 in a primarily adiabatic process, and as the pressure of the water vapor 26B increases, the temperature increases as well (in contrast to the

relatively negligible temperature differential across the interfaces 20). As such, if for example the pressure of the water vapor 26B is increased in the vacuum pump 52 by 0.3 psi (i.e., to approximately 0.4 psia), the condensation unit 54 is then capable of condensing the water vapor 26B at a temperature of approximately 72-73°F, and the temperature of the water vapor 26B will increase to a temperature substantially higher than the condenser temperature. The system may continually monitor the pressure and temperature conditions of both the upstream water vapor 26A and the downstream water vapor 26B to ensure that the water vapor 26B expelled from the vacuum pump 52 has a partial pressure of water vapor just high enough to facilitate condensation in the condensation unit 54. It should be noted that the pressure and temperature values presented in this scenario are merely exemplary and are not intended to be limiting.

[0042] Note that as the pressure difference from the water vapor 26A entering the vacuum pump 52 to the water vapor 26B exiting the vacuum pump 52 increases, the efficiency of the dehumidification unit 12 decreases. For example, in a preferred embodiment, the vacuum pump 52 will be set to adjust the pressure of the water vapor 26B in the condensation unit 54 slightly above the saturation pressure at the lowest ambient temperature of the cooling media (i.e., air or water) used by the condensation unit 54 to condense the water vapor 26B. In another embodiment, the temperature of the water vapor 26B may be used to control the pressure in the condensation unit 54.. The temperature of the water vapor 26B expelled from the vacuum pump 52 may be substantially warmer than the humid air 14A (e.g., this temperature could reach 200°F or above depending on a variety of factors). Because the vacuum pump 52 only increases the pressure of the water vapor 26B to a point where condensation of the water vapor 26B is facilitated (i.e., approximately the saturation pressure), the power requirements of the vacuum pump 52 are relatively small, thereby obtaining a high efficiency from the dehumidification unit 12.

[0043] Once the water vapor 26B has been slightly pressurized (i.e., compressed) by the vacuum pump 52, the water vapor 26B is directed into the condensation unit 54, wherein the water vapor 26B is condensed into a liquid state. In certain embodiments, the condensation unit 54 may include a condensation coil 56, a

pipe/tube condenser, a flat plate condenser, or any other suitable system for causing a temperature below the condensation point of the water vapor 26B. The condensation unit 54 may either be air cooled or water cooled. For example, in certain embodiments, the condensation unit 54 may be cooled by ambient air or water from a cooling tower. As such, the costs of operating the condensation unit 54 may be relatively low, inasmuch as both ambient air and cooling tower water are in relatively limitless supply.

[0044] Once the water vapor 26B has been condensed into a liquid state, in certain embodiments, the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 may be directed into a reservoir 58 for temporary storage of saturated vapor and liquid water. However, in other embodiments, no reservoir 58 may be used. In either case, the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 may be directed into a liquid pump 60 (i.e., a water transport device), within which the pressure of the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 is increased to approximately atmospheric pressure (i.e., approximately 14.7 psia) so that the liquid water may be rejected at ambient conditions. As such, the liquid pump 60 may be sized just large enough to increase the pressure of the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 to approximately atmospheric pressure. Therefore, the costs of operating the liquid pump 60 may be relatively low. In addition, the liquid water from the liquid pump 60 may be at a slightly elevated temperature due to the increase in the pressure of the liquid water. As such, in certain embodiments, the heated liquid water may be transported for use as domestic hot water, further increasing the efficiency of the system by recapturing the heat transferred into the liquid water.

[0045] Although the interfaces 20 between the air channels 16 and the water vapor channels 18 as described previously generally allow only H₂O to pass from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18, in certain embodiments, very minimal amounts (e.g., less than 1% of the oxygen (O₂), nitrogen (N₂), or other noncondensable components) of the other components 30 of the air 14 may be allowed to pass through the interfaces 20 from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18. Over time, the amount of the other components 30 may build up in the water vapor channels 18 (as well as in the water vapor vacuum volume 28, the water vapor outlets 22, and the water vapor manifold 24 of FIG. 2A). In general, these other

components 30 are noncondensable at the condenser temperature ranges used in the condensation unit 54. As such, the components 30 may adversely affect the performance of the vacuum pump 52 and all other equipment downstream of the vacuum pump 52 (in particular, the condensation unit 54).

[0046] Accordingly, in certain embodiments, a second vacuum pump may be used to periodically purge the other components 30 from the water vapor vacuum volume 28. FIG. 6 is a schematic diagram of the HVAC system 10 and the dehumidification unit 12 of FIG. 1 having a vacuum pump 62 for removing noncondensable components 30 from the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 of the dehumidification unit 12 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. The vacuum pump 62 may, in certain embodiments, be the same pump used to evacuate the water vapor vacuum volume 28 (as well as the water vapor channels 18, the water vapor outlets 22, and the water vapor manifold 24) to create the lower partial pressure of water vapor described previously that facilitates the passage of the H₂O through the interfaces 20 from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18. However, in other embodiments, the vacuum pump 62 may be different from the pump used to evacuate the water vapor vacuum volume 28 to create the lower partial pressure of water vapor.

[0047] The dehumidification unit 12 described herein may also be controlled between various operating states, and modulated based on operating conditions of the dehumidification unit 12. For example, FIG. 7 is a schematic diagram of the HVAC system 10 and the dehumidification unit 12 of FIG. 6 having a control system 64 for controlling various operating conditions of the HVAC system 10 and the dehumidification unit 12 in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. The control system 64 may include one or more processors 66, for example, one or more “general-purpose” microprocessors, one or more special-purpose microprocessors and/or ASICS (application-specific integrated circuits), or some combination of such processing components. The processors 66 may use input/output (I/O) devices 68 to, for example, receive signals from and issue control signals to the components of the dehumidification unit 12 (i.e., the vacuum pumps 52, 62, the condensation unit 54, the reservoir 58, the liquid pump 60, other equipment such as a

fan blowing the inlet air 14A through the dehumidification unit 12, sensors configured to generate signals related to characteristics of the inlet and outlet air 14A, 14B, and so forth). The processors 66 may take these signals as inputs and calculate how to control the functionality of these components of the dehumidification unit 12 to most efficiently remove the water vapor 26 from the air 14 flowing through the dehumidification unit 12. The control system 64 may also include a nontransitory computer-readable medium (i.e., a memory 70) which, for example, may store instructions or data to be processed by the one or more processors 66 of the control system 64.

[0048] For example, the control system 64 may be configured to control the rate of removal of the noncondensable components 30 of the water vapor 26A from the water vapor vacuum volume 28 of the dehumidification unit 12 by turning the vacuum pump 62 on or off, or by modulating the rate at which the vacuum pump 62 removes the noncondensable components 30 of the water vapor 26A. More specifically, in certain embodiments, the control system 64 may receive signals from a sensor in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 that detects when too many noncondensable components 30 are present in the water vapor 26A contained in the water vapor vacuum volume 28. This process of noncondensable component removal will operate in a cyclical manner. In “normal” operation of removing the water vapor 26 from the air 14, the vacuum pump 62 will not be in operation. As the noncondensable components 30 build up in the water vapor vacuum volume 28, the internal pressure in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 will eventually reach a setpoint. At this point in time, the vacuum pump 62 will turn on and remove all components (i.e., both the noncondensable components 30 as well as H₂O, including the water vapor) until the internal pressure in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 reaches another setpoint (e.g., lower than the starting vacuum pressure). Then, the vacuum pump 62 shuts off and the dehumidification unit 12 returns to the normal operational mode. Setpoints may either be preset or dynamically determined. A preferred method will be to have the vacuum pump 62 only operating in the purge mode intermittently.

[0049] Another example of the type of control that may be accomplished by the control system 64 is modulating the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in

the water vapor vacuum volume 28 (as well as the water vapor channels 18, the water vapor outlets 22, and the water vapor manifold 24) to modify the water vapor removal capacity and efficiency ratio of the dehumidification unit 12. For example, the control system 64 may receive signals from pressure sensors in the water vapor vacuum volume 28, the water vapor channels 18, the water vapor outlets 22, and/or the water vapor manifold 24, as well as signals generated by sensors relating to characteristics (e.g., temperature, pressure, flow rate, relative humidity, and so forth) of the inlet and outlet air 14A, 14B, among other things. The control system 64 may use this information to determine how to modulate the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A (e.g., with respect to the partial pressure of water vapor in the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16) to increase or decrease the rate of removal of water vapor 26 from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18 through the interfaces 20.

[0050] For example, if more water vapor removal is desired, the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 may be reduced and, conversely, if less water vapor removal is desired, the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 may be increased. Furthermore, in certain embodiments, the amount of dehumidification (i.e., water vapor removal) may be cycled to improve the efficiency of the dehumidification unit 12. More specifically, under certain operating conditions, the dehumidification unit 12 may function more efficiently at higher rates of water vapor removal. As such, in certain embodiments, the dehumidification unit 12 may be cycled to remove a maximum amount of water vapor from the air 14 for a while, then to remove relatively no water vapor from the air 14 for a while, then to remove a maximum amount of water vapor from the air 14 for a while, and so forth. In other words, the dehumidification unit 12 may be operated at full water vapor removal capacity for periods of time alternating with other periods of time where no water vapor is removed. In addition, the control system 64 may be configured to control start-up and shutdown sequencing of the dehumidification unit 12.

[0051] The dehumidification unit 12 may be designed and operated in many various modes, and at varying operating conditions. In general, the dehumidification

unit 12 will be operated with the water vapor vacuum volume 28 (as well as the water vapor channels 18, the water vapor outlets 22, and the water vapor manifold 24) at a water vapor partial pressure below the water vapor partial pressure of the air 14 flowing through the air channels 16. In certain embodiments, the dehumidification unit 12 may be optimized for dedicated outside air system (DOAS) use, wherein the air 14 may have a temperature in the range of approximately 55-100°F, and a relative humidity in the range of approximately 55-100%. In other embodiments, the dehumidification unit 12 may be optimized for residential use for recirculated air having a temperature in the range of approximately 70-85°F, and a relative humidity in the range of approximately 55-65%. Similarly, in certain embodiments, the dehumidification unit 12 may be optimized for dehumidifying outside air in commercial building recirculated air systems, which dehumidifies the inlet air 14A having a temperature in the range of approximately 55-110°F, and a relative humidity in the range of approximately 55-100%. The outlet air 14B has less humidity and about the same temperature as the inlet air 14A, unless cooling is performed on the outlet air 14B.

[0052] The dehumidification unit 12 described herein requires less operating power than conventional dehumidification systems because of the relatively low pressures that are required to dehumidify the air 14A. This is due at least in part to the ability of the interfaces 20 (i.e., water vapor permeable membranes) to remove the water vapor 26 from the air 14 efficiently without requiring excessive pressures to force the water vapor 26 through the interfaces 20. For example, in one embodiment, the minimal power needed to operate the dehumidification unit 12 includes only the fan power required to move the air 14 through the dehumidification unit 12, the compressive power of the vacuum pump 52 to compress the water vapor 26 to approximately the saturation pressure (for example, to approximately 1.0 psia, or to a saturation pressure that corresponds to a given condensation temperature, for example, approximately 100°F), the pumping and/or fan power of the condensation unit 54 (e.g., depending on whether cooling tower water or ambient air is used as the cooling medium), the pumping power of the liquid pump 60 to reject the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 at ambient conditions, and the power of the vacuum

pump 62 to purge noncondensable components 30 that leak into the water vapor vacuum volume 28 of the dehumidification unit 12. As such, the only relatively major power component required to operate the dehumidification unit 12 is the compressive power of the vacuum pump 52 to compress the water vapor 26 to approximately the saturation pressure (for example, only to approximately 1.0 psia, or to a saturation pressure that corresponds to a given condensation temperature, for example, approximately 100°F). As mentioned previously, this power is relatively low and, therefore, operating the dehumidification unit 12 is relatively inexpensive as opposed to conventional refrigeration compression dehumidification systems. Moreover, calculations for an embodiment indicate that the dehumidification unit 12 has a coefficient of performance (COP) at least twice as high (or even up to five times as high, depending on operating conditions) as these conventional dehumidification systems. In addition, the dehumidification unit 12 enables the dehumidification of air without reducing the temperature of the air below the temperature at which the air is needed, as is often done in conventional dehumidification systems.

[0053] In certain embodiments, multiple instances of the dehumidification unit 12 described previously with respect to FIGS. 1 through 7 may be used in a single HVAC system. For example, FIG. 8 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system 72 having a plurality of dehumidification units 12 (i.e., a first dehumidification unit 74, a second dehumidification unit 76, and a third dehumidification unit 78) arranged in series in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. Although illustrated as having three dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 in series, any number of dehumidification units 12 may indeed be used in series in the HVAC system 72. For example, in other embodiments, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, or even more dehumidification units 12 may be used in series in the HVAC system 72.

[0054] The HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8 generally functions the same as the HVAC system 10 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7. More specifically, as illustrated in FIG. 8, the HVAC system 72 receives the inlet air 14A having a relatively high humidity. However, the relatively dry air 14B from the first dehumidification unit 74 is not expelled into the atmosphere. Rather, as illustrated in FIG. 8, the air 14B expelled from the first dehumidification unit 74 is directed into the second dehumidification unit 76 via a

first duct 80. Similarly, air 14C expelled from the second dehumidification unit 76 is directed into the third dehumidification unit 78 via a second duct 82. Outlet air 14D from the third dehumidification unit 78 is then expelled into the conditioned space. Because the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 of the HVAC system 72 are arranged in series, each successive airstream will be relatively dryer than the upstream airstreams. For example, outlet air 14D is dryer than air 14C, which is dryer than air 14B, which is dryer than inlet air 14A.

[0055] As illustrated, many of the components of the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8 may be considered identical to the components of the HVAC system 10 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7. For example, as described previously, the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 of the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8 may be considered identical to the dehumidification units 12 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7. In addition, the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8 also includes the condensation unit 54 that receives water vapor 26B having a partial pressure just high enough to facilitate condensation, as described previously. In certain embodiments, the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8 may also include the reservoir 58 for temporary storage of saturated vapor and liquid water. However, as described previously, in other embodiments, no reservoir may be used. In either case, the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 may be directed into the liquid pump 60, within which the pressure of the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 is increased to approximately atmospheric pressure (i.e., approximately 14.7 psia) so that the liquid water may be rejected at ambient conditions.

[0056] As illustrated in FIG. 8, in certain embodiments, each dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78 may be associated with a respective vacuum pump 84, 86, 88, each of which is similar in functionality to the vacuum pump 52 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7. However, because water vapor is removed from each successive dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78, the partial pressure of water vapor in the air 14 will be gradually reduced at each successive dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78. For example, as described previously, the partial pressure of water vapor in the inlet air 14A may be in the range of approximately 0.2-1.0 psia; the partial pressure of water vapor in the air 14B from the first dehumidification unit 74 may be in the range of approximately 0.17-0.75 psia (accomplishing approximately 1/3 of the drop); the partial pressure of

water vapor in the air 14C from the second dehumidification unit 76 may be in the range of approximately 0.14-0.54 psia (accomplishing approximately the next 1/3 of the drop); and the partial pressure of water vapor in the outlet air 14D from the third dehumidification unit 78 may be in the range of approximately 0.10-0.25 psia, which is consistent with a 60°F saturation temperature or lower. The very low values may be used to increase capacity for occasional use.

[0057] In certain embodiments, the partial pressure of water vapor in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94 (e.g., that are similar in functionality to the water vapor vacuum volume 28 described previously) associated with each respective vacuum pump 84, 86, 88 may be modulated to ensure an optimal flow of water vapor 26 from each respective dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78. For example, the partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volume 28 described previously may be maintained in a range of approximately 0.15-0.25 psia. However, in the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8, the partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the first water vapor vacuum volume 90 may be maintained in a range of approximately 0.15-0.7 psia, the partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the second water vapor vacuum volume 92 may be maintained in a range of approximately 0.12-0.49 psia, and the partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the third water vapor vacuum volume 94 may be maintained in a range of approximately 0.09-0.24 psia. Regardless, it may be expected that less water vapor 26 will be removed in each successive dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78, and will generally be optimized to minimize energy required to operate the system.

[0058] As illustrated in FIG. 8, in certain embodiments, each of the vacuum pumps 84, 86, 88 may compress the water vapor 26 and direct it into a common manifold 96 having a substantially constant partial pressure of water vapor (i.e., just high enough to facilitate condensation in the condensation unit 54) such that the water vapor 26 flows in a direction opposite to the flow of the air 14. In other embodiments, the water vapor 26 extracted from each successive dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78 may be compressed by its respective vacuum pump 84, 86, 88 and then combined with the water vapor 26 extracted from the next upstream dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78. For example, in other embodiments, the water vapor 26 from the third

dehumidification unit 78 may be compressed by the third vacuum pump 88 and then combined with the water vapor 26 from the second dehumidification unit 76 in the second water vapor vacuum volume 92. Similarly, the water vapor 26 compressed by the second vacuum pump 86 may be combined with the water vapor 26 from the first dehumidification unit 74 in the first water vapor vacuum volume 90. In this embodiment, the exhaust side of each successive vacuum pump 84, 86, 88 increases the partial pressure of the water vapor 26 only to the operating pressure of the next upstream vacuum pump 84, 86, 88. For example, the third vacuum pump 88 may only increase the pressure of the water vapor 26 to approximately 0.2 psia if the partial pressure of water vapor in the second water vapor vacuum volume 92 is approximately 0.2 psia. Similarly, the second vacuum pump 86 may only increase the pressure of the water vapor 26 to approximately 0.35 psia if the partial pressure of water vapor in the first water vapor vacuum volume 90 is approximately 0.35 psia. In this embodiment, the water vapor 26 compressed by the first vacuum pump 84 will be directed into the condensation unit 54 at a partial pressure of water vapor just high enough to facilitate condensation.

[0059] It should be noted that the specific embodiment illustrated in FIG. 8 having a plurality of dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 arranged in series may be configured in various ways not illustrated in FIG. 8. For example, although illustrated as using a respective vacuum pump 84, 86, 88 with each dehumidification unit 74, 76, 78, in certain embodiments, a single vacuum pump 52 may be used with multiple inlet ports connected to the first, second, and third water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94. In addition, although illustrated as using a single condensation unit 54, reservoir 58, and liquid pump 60 to condense the water vapor 26B into a liquid state, and store and/or transport the liquid water from the HVAC system 72, in other embodiments, each set of dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 and vacuum pumps 84, 86, 88 may be operated independently and be associated with their own respective condensation units 54, reservoirs 58, and liquid pumps 60.

[0060] In addition, the control system 64 of FIG. 7 may also be used in the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8 to control the operation of the HVAC system 72 in a similar manner as described previously with respect to FIG. 7. For example, as described

previously, the control system 64 may be configured to control the rate of removal of the noncondensable components 30 of the water vapor 26 in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94 by turning the vacuum pumps 84, 86, 88 (or separate vacuum pumps 62, as described previously with respect to FIGS. 6 and 7) on or off, or by modulating the rate at which the vacuum pumps 84, 86, 88 (or separate vacuum pumps 62, as described previously with respect to FIGS. 6 and 7) remove the noncondensable components 30. More specifically, in certain embodiments, the control system 64 may receive signals from sensors in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94 that detect when too many noncondensable components 30 are present in the water vapor 26A contained in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94.

[0061] In addition, the control system 64 may modulate the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94 to modify the water vapor removal capacity and efficiency ratio of the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78. For example, the control system 64 may receive signals from pressure sensors in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94, the water vapor channels 18, as well as signals generated by sensors relating to characteristics (e.g., temperature, pressure, flow rate, relative humidity, and so forth) of the air 14, among other things. The control system 64 may use this information to determine how to modulate the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94 to increase or decrease the rate of removal of water vapor 26 from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18 through the interfaces 20 of the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 as H₂O (i.e., as water molecules, gaseous water vapor, liquid water, adsorbed/desorbed water molecules, absorbed/desorbed water molecules, and so forth, through the interfaces 20).

[0062] For example, if more water vapor removal is desired, the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94 may be reduced and, conversely, if less water vapor removal is desired, the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 90, 92, 94 may be increased. Furthermore, as described above, the amount of dehumidification (i.e., water vapor removal) may be cycled to improve the efficiency of the dehumidification

units 74, 76, 78. More specifically, under certain operating conditions, the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 may function more efficiently at higher rates of water vapor removal. As such, in certain embodiments, the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 may be cycled to remove a maximum amount of water vapor from the air 14 for a while, then to remove relatively no water vapor from the air 14 for a while, then to remove a maximum amount of water vapor from the air 14 for a while, and so forth. In other words, the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 may be operated at full water vapor removal capacity for periods of time alternating with other periods of time where no water vapor is removed. In addition, the control system 64 may be configured to control start-up and shutdown sequencing of the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78.

[0063] While FIG. 8 includes a serial arrangement of multiple dehumidification units 12, present embodiments include other ways in which multiple dehumidification units 12 may be arranged in a single HVAC system. For example, FIG. 9 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system 98 having a plurality of dehumidification units 12 (i.e., a first dehumidification unit 100, a second dehumidification unit 102, and a third dehumidification unit 104) arranged in parallel in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. Although illustrated as having three dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 in parallel, any number of dehumidification units 12 may indeed be used in parallel in the HVAC system 98. For example, in other embodiments, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, or even more dehumidification units 12 may be used in parallel in the HVAC system 98.

[0064] The HVAC system 98 of FIG. 9 generally functions the same as the HVAC system 10 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7 and the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8. More specifically, as illustrated in FIG. 9, each dehumidification unit 100, 102, 104 of the HVAC system 98 receives the inlet air 14A having a relatively high humidity and expels the outlet air 14B having a relatively low humidity. As illustrated, many of the components of the HVAC system 98 of FIG. 9 may be considered identical to the components of the HVAC system 10 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7 and the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8. For example, the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 of the HVAC system 98 of FIG. 9 may be considered identical to the dehumidification units 12 of FIGS. 1,

6, and 7 and the dehumidification units 74, 76, 78 of FIG. 8. In addition, the HVAC system 98 of FIG. 9 also includes the condensation unit 54 that receives water vapor 26B having a partial pressure just high enough to facilitate condensation, as described previously. In certain embodiments, the HVAC system 98 of FIG. 9 may also include the reservoir 58 for temporary storage of saturated vapor and liquid water. However, as described previously, in other embodiments, no reservoir may be used. In either case, the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 may be directed into the liquid pump 60, within which the pressure of the liquid water from the condensation unit 54 is increased to approximately atmospheric pressure (i.e., approximately 14.7 psia) so that the liquid water may be rejected at ambient conditions.

[0065] As illustrated in FIG. 9, in certain embodiments, each dehumidification unit 100, 102, 104 may be associated with a respective vacuum pump 106, 108, 110, each of which is similar in functionality to the vacuum pump 52 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7 and the vacuum pumps 84, 86, 88 of FIG. 8. However, as opposed to the HVAC system 72 of FIG. 8, because the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 and associated vacuum pumps 106, 108, 110 are arranged in parallel, the partial pressure of water vapor in the air 14 will be approximately the same in each dehumidification unit 100, 102, 104. As such, in general, the partial pressure of water vapor in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 associated with each respective vacuum pump 106, 108, 110 will also be approximately the same. For example, as described previously with respect to the HVAC system 10 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7, the partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 may be maintained in a range of approximately 0.10-0.25 psia.

[0066] As illustrated in FIG. 9, in certain embodiments, each of the vacuum pumps 106, 108, 110 may compress the water vapor 26 and direct it into a common manifold 118 having a substantially constant partial pressure of water vapor (i.e., just high enough to facilitate condensation in the condensation unit 54). In other embodiments, the water vapor 26 extracted from each successive dehumidification unit 100, 102, 104 (i.e., from top to bottom) may be compressed by its respective vacuum pump 106, 108, 110 and then combined with the water vapor 26 extracted from the next downstream (i.e., with respect to the common manifold) dehumidification unit 100,

102, 104. For example, in other embodiments, the water vapor 26 from the first dehumidification unit 100 may be compressed by the first vacuum pump 106 and then combined with the water vapor 26 from the second dehumidification unit 102 in the second water vapor vacuum volume 114. Similarly, the water vapor 26 compressed by the second vacuum pump 108 may be combined with the water vapor 26 from the third dehumidification unit 104 in the third water vapor vacuum volume 116. In this embodiment, the exhaust side of each successive vacuum pump 106, 108, 110 increases the partial pressure of the water vapor 26 only to the operating pressure of the next downstream vacuum pump 106, 108, 110. For example, the first vacuum pump 106 may only increase the pressure of the water vapor 26 to approximately 0.2 psia if the partial pressure of water vapor in the second water vapor vacuum volume 114 is approximately 0.2 psia. Similarly, the second vacuum pump 108 may only increase the pressure of the water vapor 26 to approximately 0.35 psia if the partial pressure of water vapor in the third water vapor vacuum volume 116 is approximately 0.35 psia. In this embodiment, the water vapor 26 compressed by the third vacuum pump 110 will be directed into the condensation unit 54 at a partial pressure of water vapor just high enough to facilitate condensation.

[0067] It should be noted that the specific embodiment illustrated in FIG. 9 having a plurality of dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 arranged in parallel may be configured in various ways not illustrated in FIG. 9. For example, although illustrated as using a respective vacuum pump 106, 108, 110 with each dehumidification unit 100, 102, 104, in certain embodiments, a single vacuum pump 52 may be used with multiple inlet ports connected to the first, second, and third water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116. In addition, although illustrated as using a single condensation unit 54, reservoir 58, and liquid pump 60 to condense the water vapor 26B into a liquid state, and store and/or transport the liquid water from the HVAC system 98, in other embodiments, each set of dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 and vacuum pumps 106, 108, 110 may be operated independently and be associated with their own respective condensation units 54, reservoirs 58, and liquid pumps 60.

[0068] In addition, the control system 64 of FIG. 7 may also be used in the HVAC system 98 of FIG. 9 to control the operation of the HVAC system 98 in a similar

manner as described previously with respect to FIG. 7. For example, as described previously, the control system 64 may be configured to control the rate of removal of the noncondensable components 30 of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 by turning the vacuum pumps 106, 108, 110 (or separate vacuum pumps 62, as described previously with respect to FIGS. 6 and 7) on or off, or by modulating the rate at which the vacuum pumps 106, 108, 110 (or separate vacuum pumps 62, as described previously with respect to FIGS. 6 and 7) remove the noncondensable components 30. More specifically, in certain embodiments, the control system 64 may receive signals from sensors in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 that detect when too many noncondensable components 30 are present in the water vapor 26A contained in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116.

[0069] In addition, the control system 64 may modulate the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 to modify the water vapor removal capacity and efficiency ratio of the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104. For example, the control system 64 may receive signals from pressure sensors in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116, the water vapor channels 18, as well as signals generated by sensors relating to characteristics (e.g., temperature, pressure, flow rate, relative humidity, and so forth) of the air 14, among other things. The control system 64 may use this information to determine how to modulate the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 to increase or decrease the rate of removal of water vapor 26 from the air channels 16 to the water vapor channels 18 through the interfaces 20 of the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 as H₂O (i.e., as water molecules, gaseous water vapor, liquid water, adsorbed/desorbed water molecules, absorbed/desorbed water molecules, and so forth, through the interfaces 20).

[0070] For example, if more water vapor removal is desired, the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 may be reduced and, conversely, if less water vapor removal is desired, the lower partial pressure of the water vapor 26A in the water vapor vacuum volumes 112, 114, 116 may be increased. Furthermore, as described above, the amount of

dehumidification (i.e., water vapor removal) may be cycled to improve the efficiency of the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104. More specifically, under certain operating conditions, the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 may function more efficiently at higher rates of water vapor removal. As such, in certain embodiments, the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 may be cycled to remove a maximum amount of water vapor from the air 14 for a while, then to remove relatively no water vapor from the air 14 for a while, then to remove a maximum amount of water vapor from the air 14 for a while, and so forth. In other words, the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104 may be operated at full water vapor removal capacity for periods of time alternating with other periods of time where no water vapor is removed. In addition, the control system 64 may be configured to control start-up and shutdown sequencing of the dehumidification units 100, 102, 104.

[0071] In addition to the serial arrangement of dehumidification units 12 illustrated in FIG. 8 and the parallel arrangement of dehumidification units 12 illustrated in FIG. 9, multiple dehumidification units 12 may be used in other ways. Indeed, much more complex and expansive arrangements may also be used. For example, FIG. 10 is a schematic diagram of an HVAC system 120 having a first set 122 of dehumidification units 12 (i.e., a first dehumidification unit 124 and a second dehumidification unit 126) arranged in series, and a second set 128 of dehumidification units 12 (i.e., a third dehumidification unit 130 and a fourth dehumidification unit 132) also arranged in series, with the first and second sets 122, 128 of dehumidification units 12 arranged in parallel in accordance with an embodiment of the present disclosure. In other words, the first set 122 of serial first and second dehumidification units 124, 126 are arranged in parallel with the second set 128 of serial third and fourth dehumidification units 130, 132.

[0072] Although illustrated as having two sets 122, 128 of serial dehumidification units 12 arranged in parallel, any number of parallel pluralities of dehumidification units 12 may indeed be used in the HVAC system 120. For example, in other embodiments, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, or even more parallel sets of dehumidification units 12 may be used in the HVAC system 120. Similarly, although illustrated as having two dehumidification units 12 arranged in series within each set 122, 128 of

dehumidification units 12, any number of dehumidification units 12 may indeed be used in series within each set 122, 128 of dehumidification units 12 in the HVAC system 120. For example, in other embodiments, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, or even more dehumidification units 12 may be used in series within each set 122, 128 of dehumidification units 12 in the HVAC system 120.

[0073] All of the operating characteristics of the HVAC system 120 of FIG. 10 are similar to those described previously with respect to the HVAC systems 72, 98 of FIGS. 8 and 9 (as well as the HVAC system 10 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7). For example, as illustrated, each of the dehumidification units 124, 126, 130, 132 may be associated with its own respective vacuum pump 134, 136, 138, 140 (e.g., similar to the vacuum pump 52 of FIGS. 1, 6, and 7). However, in other embodiments, one vacuum pump 52 may be used for each set 122, 128 of dehumidification units 12 with multiple inlet ports connected to the respective water vapor vacuum volumes 142, 144, 146, 148. Indeed, in other embodiments, all of the dehumidification units 124, 126, 130, 132 may be associated with a single vacuum pump 52 with multiple inlet ports connected to all of the water vapor vacuum volumes 142, 144, 146, 148.

[0074] In addition, although illustrated as using a single condensation unit 54, reservoir 58, and liquid pump 60 to condense the water vapor 26B into a liquid state, and store and/or transport the liquid water from the HVAC system 120, in other embodiments, each set of dehumidification units 124, 126, 130, 132 and vacuum pumps 134, 136, 138, 140 may be operated independently and be associated with their own respective condensation units 54, reservoirs 58, and liquid pumps 60. In addition, the control system 64 described previously may also be used in the HVAC system 120 of FIG. 10 to control operation of the HVAC system 120 in a similar manner as described previously.

[0075] The embodiments described previously with respect to FIGS. 8 through 10 are slightly more complex than the embodiments described previously with respect to FIGS. 1 through 7 inasmuch as multiple dehumidification units 12 are used in series, parallel, or some combination thereof. As such, the control of pressures and temperatures of the HVAC systems 72, 98, 120 of FIGS. 8 through 10 are slightly

more complicated than the control of a single dehumidification unit 12. For example, the partial pressures in the water vapor vacuum volumes may need to be closely monitored and modulated by the control system 64 to take into account variations in temperature and partial pressure of water vapor in the air 14 within the respective dehumidification units 12, operating pressures of adjacent water vapor vacuum volumes and vacuum pumps (which may be cross-piped together as described previously to facilitate control of pressures, flows, and so forth), among other things. In certain embodiments, variable or fixed orifices may be used to control pressures and changes in pressures in and between the dehumidification units 12. In addition, as described previously, each of the respective vacuum pumps may be controlled to adjust the partial pressures of water vapor in the water vapor vacuum volumes to account for variations between dehumidification units 12.

[0076] While the present disclosure may be susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments have been shown by way of example in the drawings and tables and have been described in detail herein. However, it should be understood that the embodiments are not intended to be limited to the particular forms disclosed. Rather, the disclosure is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the disclosure as defined by the following appended claims. Further, although individual embodiments are discussed herein, the disclosure is intended to cover all combinations of these embodiments.

CLAIMS:

1. A dehumidification system for removing water vapor from an airstream, comprising:

a plurality of dehumidification units, each dehumidification unit comprising a first and second channel separated by a membrane, wherein the membrane is configured to facilitate removal of water vapor from an airstream flowing through the first channel by facilitating passage of H₂O from the water vapor to the second channel through permeable volumes of the membrane while substantially blocking all other components of the airstream from passing through the membrane;

at least one pressure increasing device configured to create a lower partial pressure of water vapor within the second channels than in the first channels, such that the H₂O moves through the membranes to the second channels, wherein the at least one pressure increasing device is also configured to increase the pressure of water vapor at an outlet of the at least one pressure increasing device to a partial pressure of water vapor in a range suitable for subsequent condensing into liquid water;

at least one condensation device configured to receive the water vapor from the at least one pressure increasing device and condense the water vapor into liquid water; and

at least one water transport device configured to transport the liquid water from the at least one condensation device.

2. The system of claim 1, wherein the plurality of dehumidification units are arranged in series with each other such that the airstream flows through the first channel of each dehumidification unit in series.

3. The system of claim 1, wherein the plurality of dehumidification units are arranged in parallel with each other such that the airstream flows through the first channel of only one dehumidification unit in parallel.

4. The system of claim 1, wherein a first set of the plurality of dehumidification units is arranged in series with each other, a second set of the plurality of dehumidification units is arranged in series with each other, and the first and second set of the plurality of dehumidification units are arranged in parallel with each other.

5. The system of claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of dehumidification units delivers water vapor from the second channel to the same pressure increasing device.

6. The system of claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of dehumidification units delivers water vapor from the second channel to a respective pressure increasing device associated therewith.

7. A system, comprising:

a dehumidification system for removing H₂O vapor from an airstream, comprising:

a plurality of dehumidification units, each comprising an air channel configured to receive an inlet airstream and discharge an outlet airstream, and an H₂O permeable barrier adjacent to the air channel, wherein the H₂O permeable barrier is configured to selectively enable H₂O from H₂O vapor in the inlet airstream to pass through the H₂O permeable barrier to a suction side of the H₂O permeable barrier and substantially block other components in the inlet airstream from passing through the H₂O permeable barrier to the suction side of the H₂O permeable barrier;

at least one pressure increasing device configured to create a lower partial pressure of H₂O vapor on the suction sides of the H₂O permeable barriers than the partial pressure of the H₂O vapor in the inlet airstreams to drive passage of the H₂O from the H₂O vapor in the inlet airstream through the H₂O permeable barrier, and to increase the pressure at an outlet of the at least one pressure increasing device to a partial pressure of H₂O vapor suitable for condensing H₂O vapor into liquid H₂O; and

at least one condensation device configured to receive the H₂O vapor from the outlet of the at least one pressure increasing device, and to condense the H₂O vapor into liquid H₂O.

8. The system of claim 7, wherein the plurality of dehumidification units are arranged in series with each other such that the airstream flows through the air channel of each dehumidification unit in series.

9. The system of claim 7, wherein the plurality of dehumidification units are arranged in parallel with each other such that the airstream flows through the air channel of only one dehumidification unit in parallel.

10. The system of claim 7, wherein a first set of the plurality of dehumidification units is arranged in series with each other, a second set of the plurality of dehumidification units is arranged in series with each other, and the first and second set of the plurality of dehumidification units are arranged in parallel with each other.

11. The system of claim 7, wherein each of the plurality of dehumidification units delivers H₂O vapor from the suction side of the H₂O permeable barrier to a shared pressure increasing device.

12. The system of claim 7, wherein each of the plurality of dehumidification units delivers H₂O vapor from the suction side of the H₂O permeable barrier to a respective pressure increasing device associated therewith.

13. The system of claim 7, comprising a liquid pump configured to transport the liquid H₂O from the at least one condensation device.

14. The system of claim 7, wherein the H₂O permeable barriers comprise H₂O permeable membranes.

15. The system of claim 7, wherein the H₂O permeable barriers comprise zeolite.

16. A method, comprising:

receiving a plurality of airstreams including H₂O vapor into air channels of a plurality of dehumidification units, wherein the airstreams have a first partial pressure of H₂O vapor;

suctioning H₂O into H₂O vapor channels of the plurality of dehumidification units through H₂O permeable materials of the plurality of dehumidification units using pressure differentials across the H₂O permeable materials, wherein the H₂O vapor channels have a second partial pressure of H₂O vapor lower than the first partial pressure of H₂O vapor of the airstreams;

receiving H₂O vapor from the H₂O vapor channels into a pressure increasing device and increasing the pressure of the H₂O vapor from the pressure increasing device to a third partial pressure of H₂O vapor that is higher than the second partial pressure of H₂O vapor;

receiving the H₂O vapor from the pressure increasing device into a condensation device and condensing the H₂O vapor into liquid H₂O; and

transporting the liquid H₂O from the condensation device to ambient conditions.

17. The method of claim 16, comprising receiving the plurality of airstreams including H₂O vapor into air channels of the plurality of dehumidification units arranged in series with each other such that the airstreams flow through the air channels of each dehumidification unit in series.

18. The method of claim 16, comprising receiving the plurality of airstreams including H₂O vapor into air channels of the plurality of dehumidification units arranged in parallel with each other such that each of the airstreams flow through the air channel of only one dehumidification unit in parallel.

19. The method of claim 16, comprising receiving the plurality of airstreams including H₂O vapor into air channels of a first set of the plurality of dehumidification units arranged in series with each other, and a second set of the plurality of dehumidification units arranged in series with each other, wherein the first and second set of the plurality of dehumidification units are arranged in parallel with each other.

20. The method of claim 16, wherein the airstreams have a first partial pressure of H₂O vapor in a range of approximately 0.2-1.0 psia, the second partial pressure of H₂O vapor is in a range of approximately 0.1-1.0 psia, and the third partial pressure of H₂O vapor is in a range of approximately 0.25-1.1 psia.

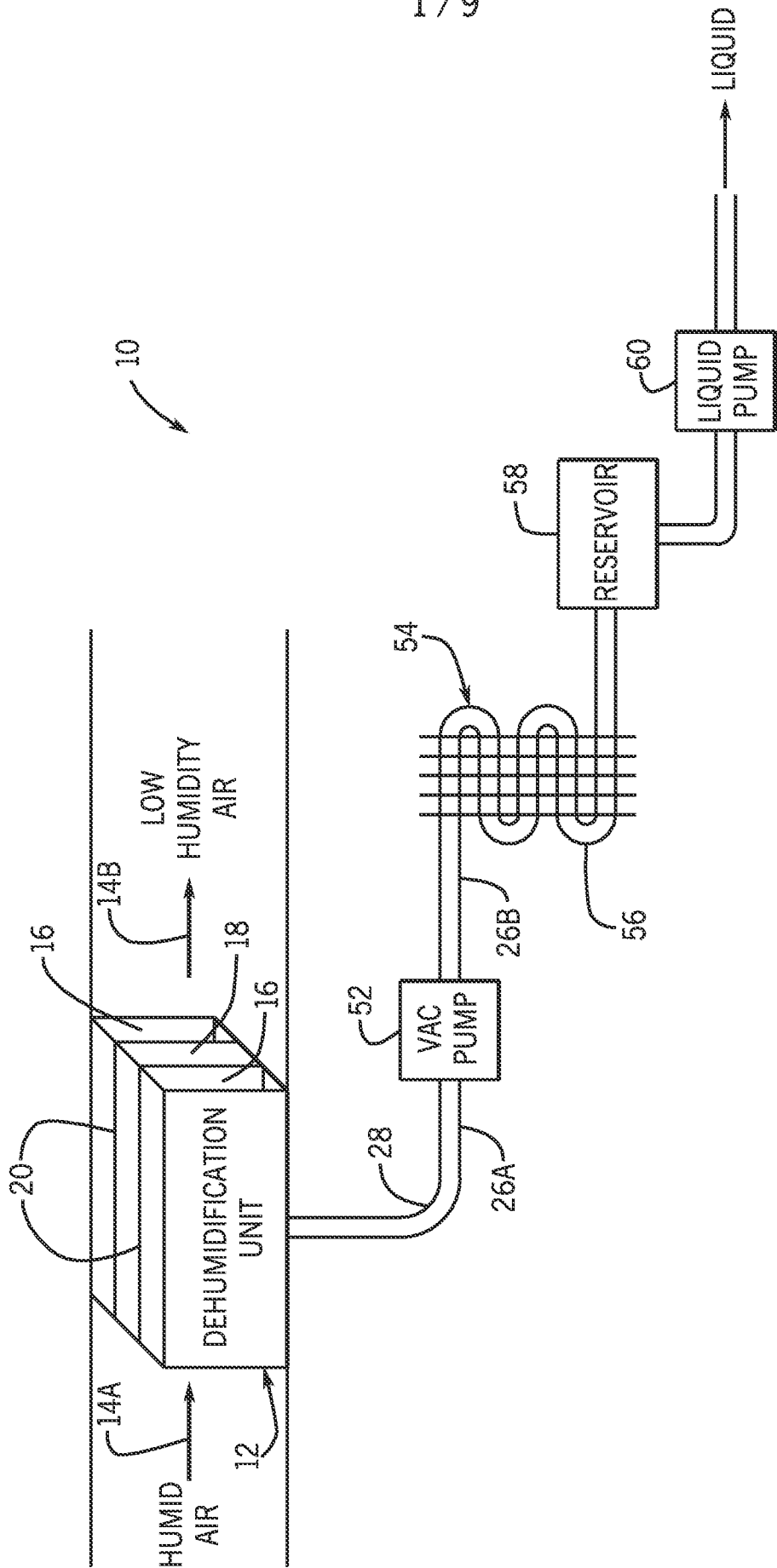


FIG. 1

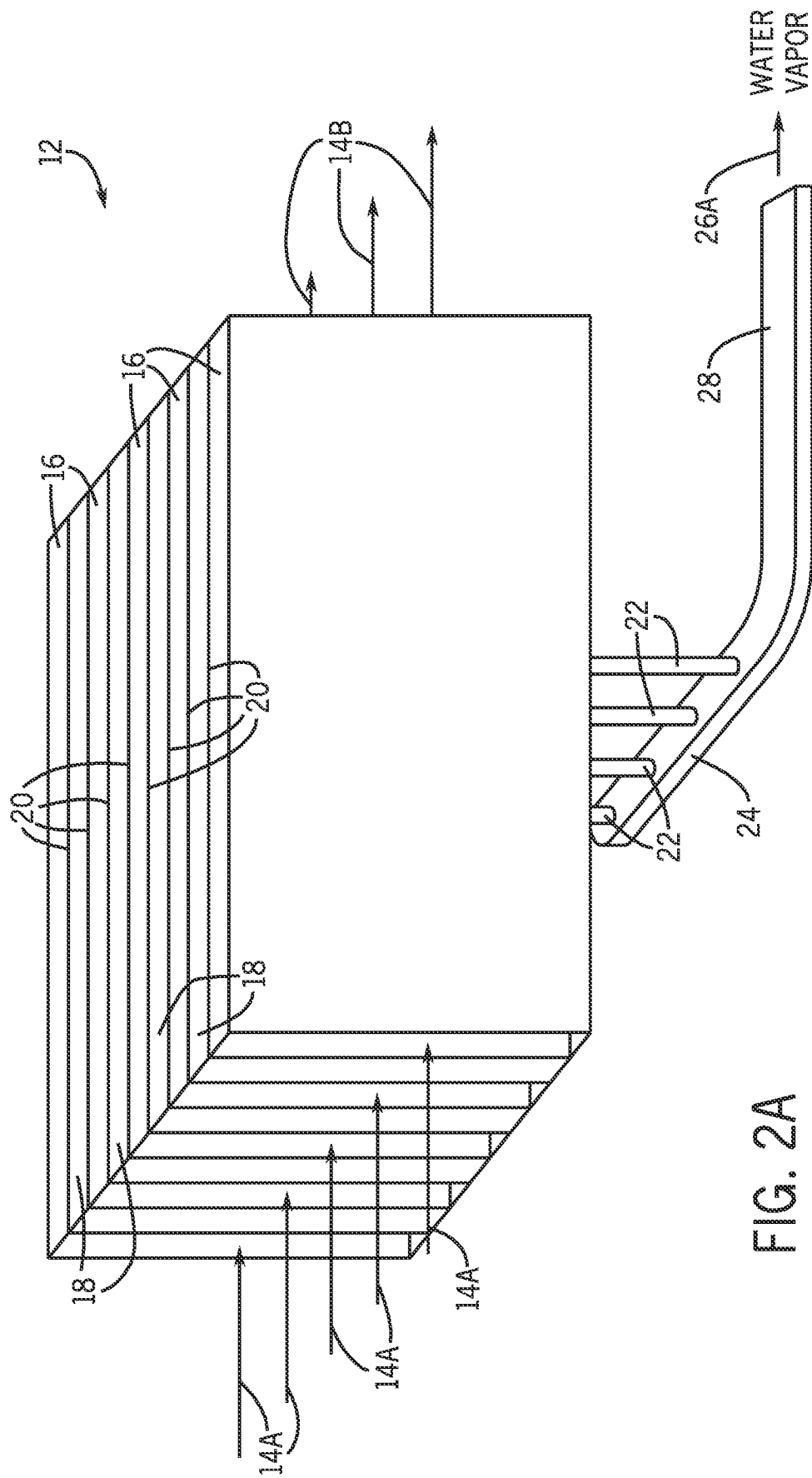


FIG. 2A

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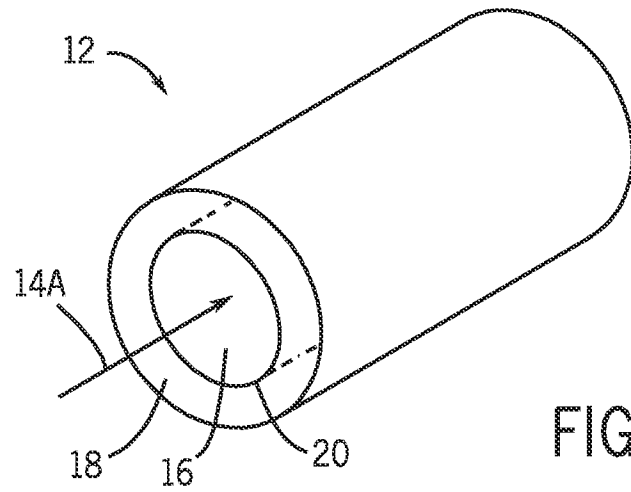


FIG. 2B

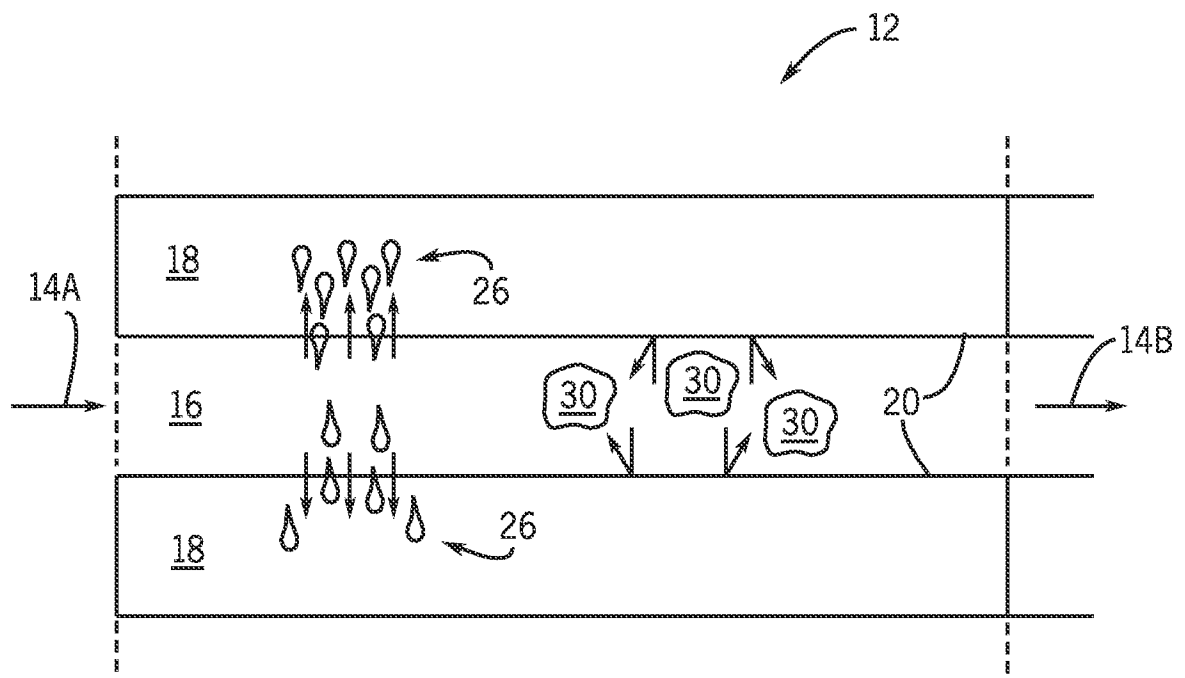


FIG. 3

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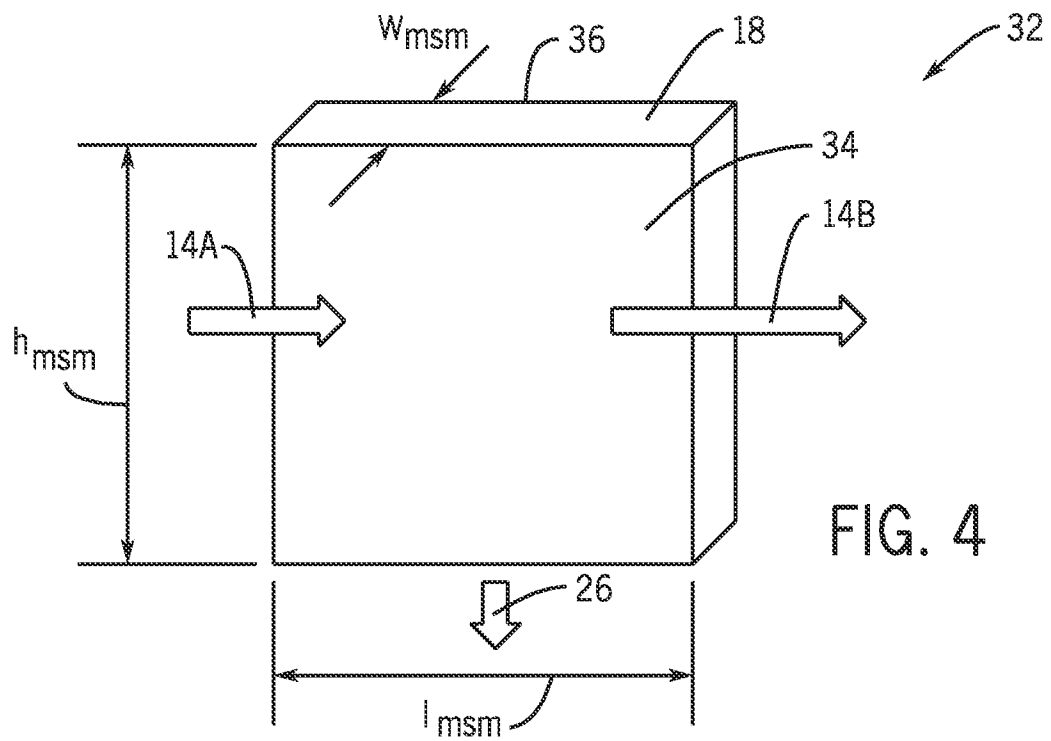


FIG. 4

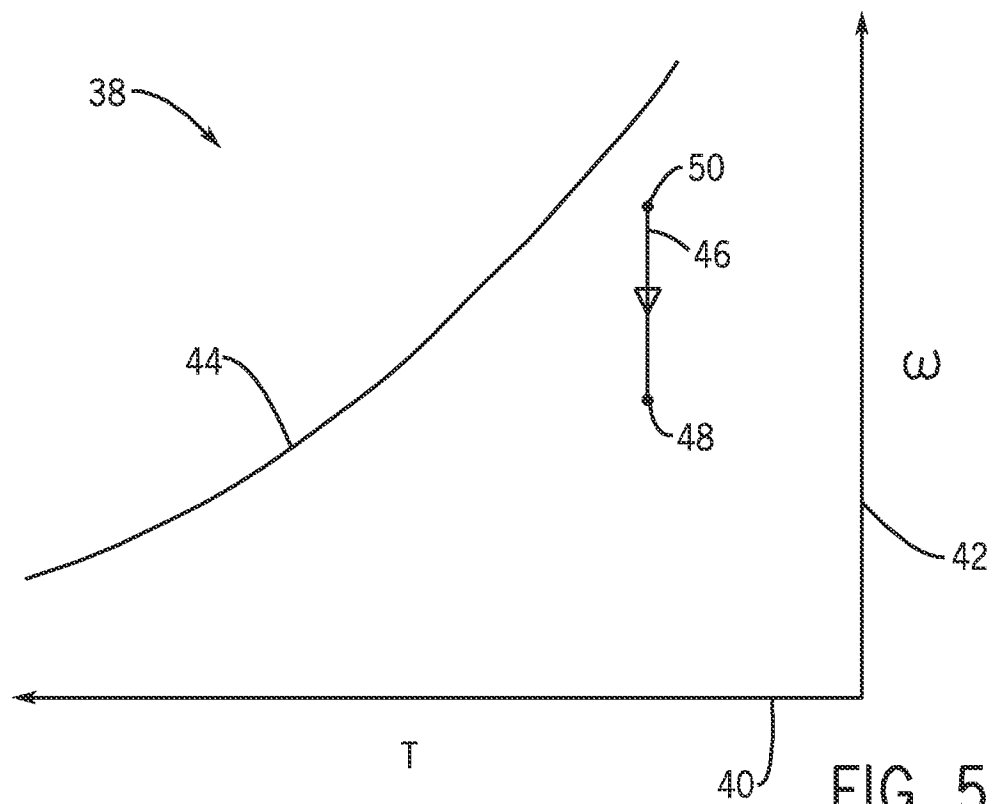


FIG. 5

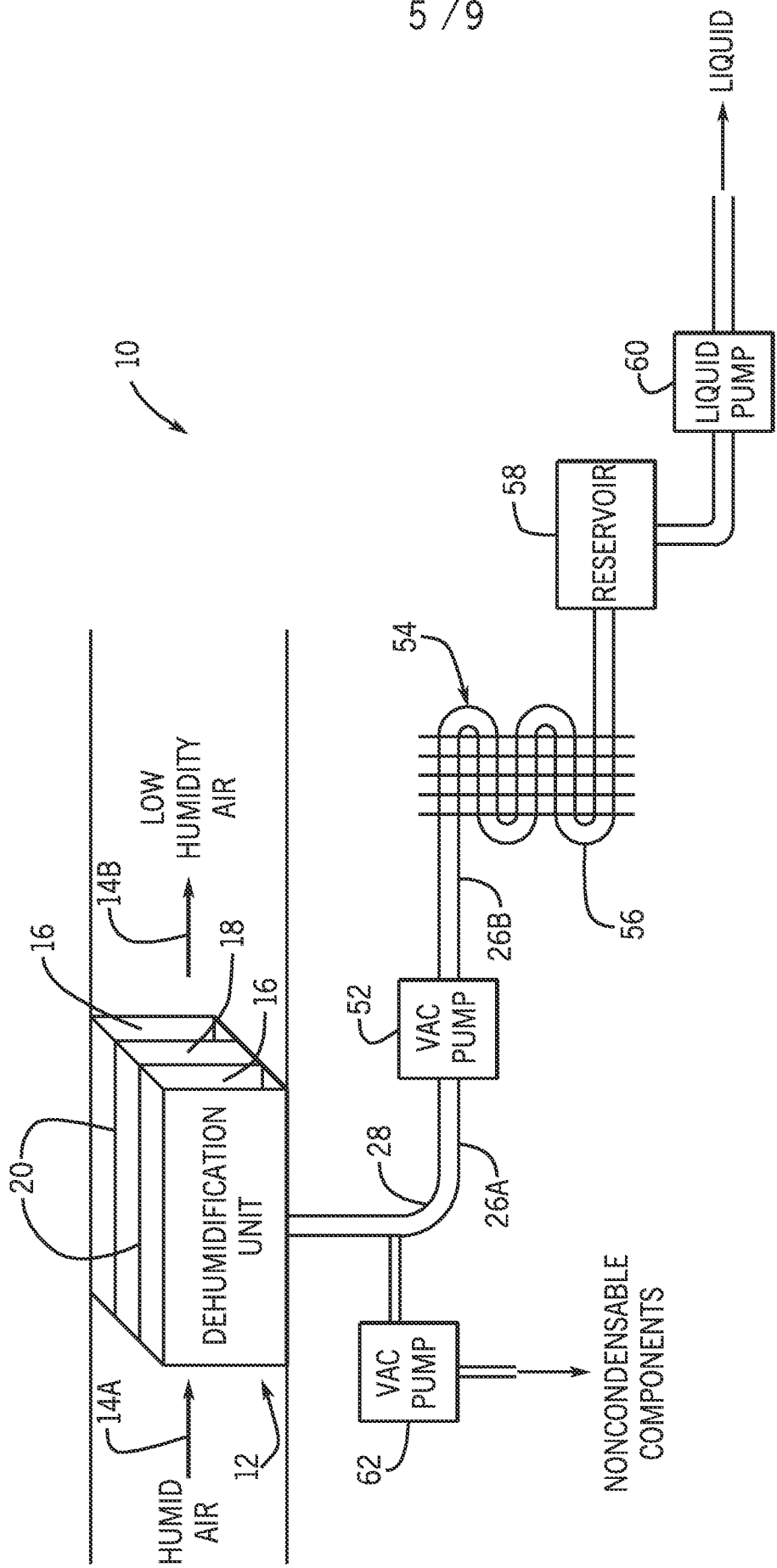


FIG. 6

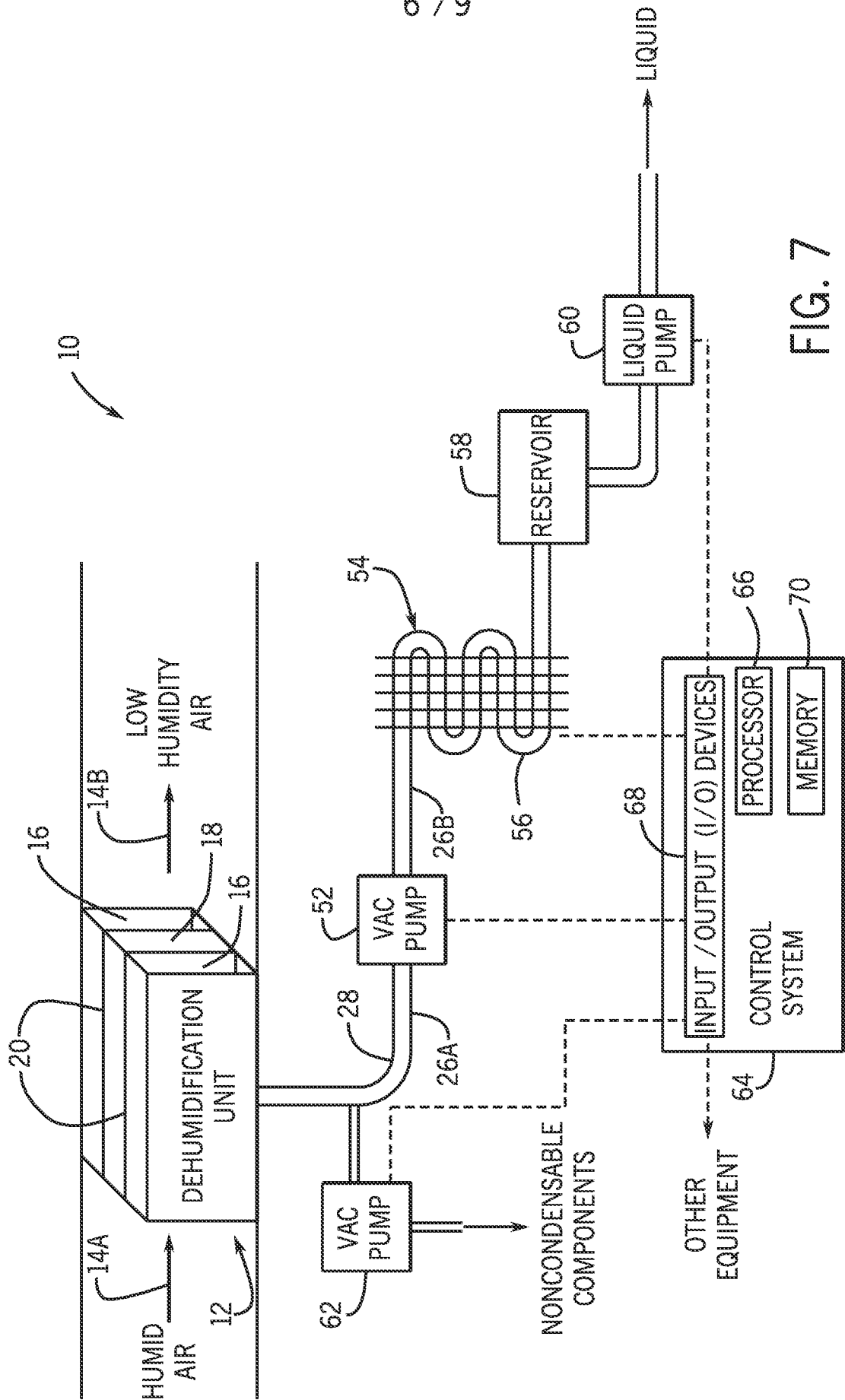


FIG. 7

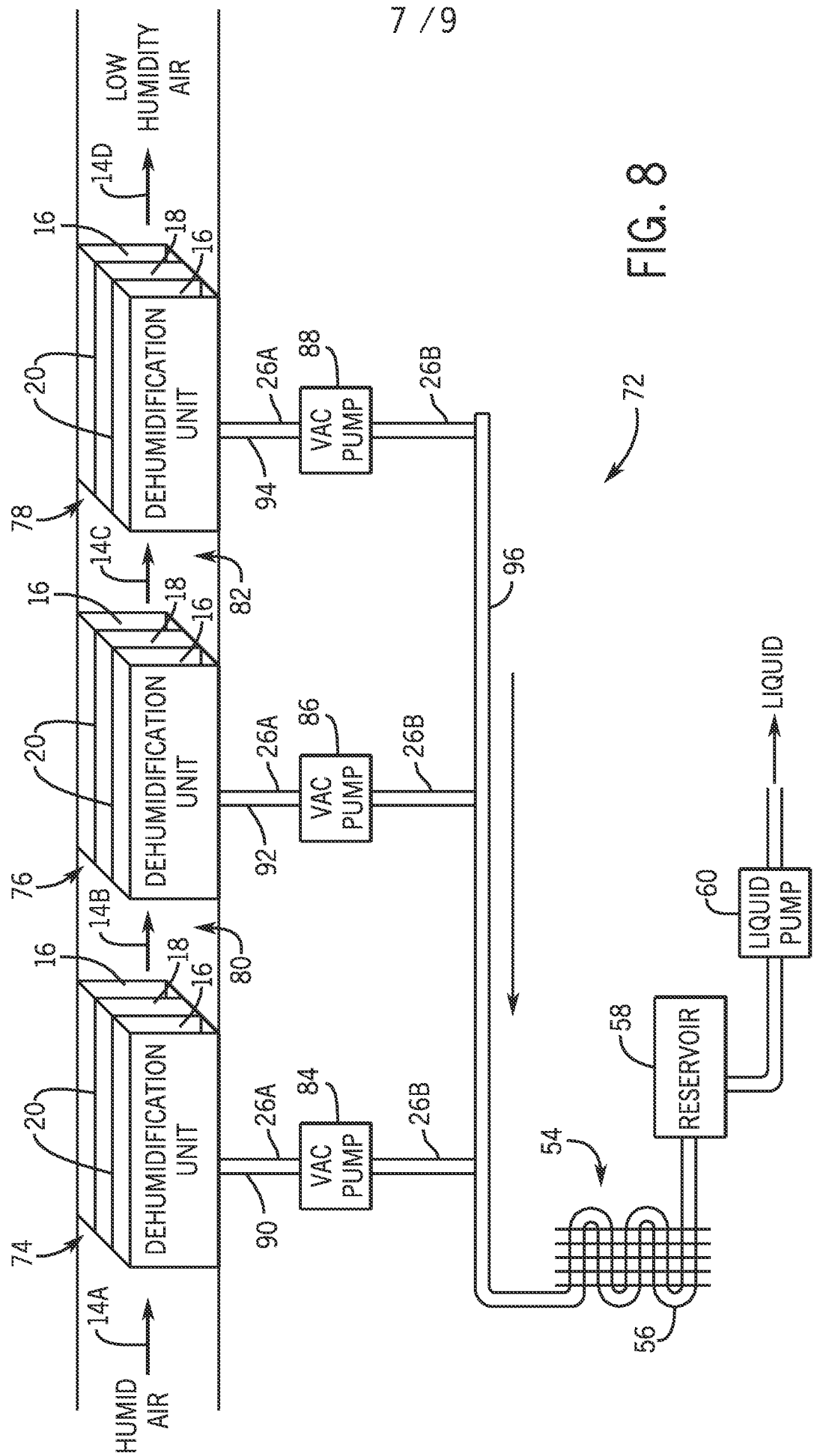


FIG. 8

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FIG. 9

