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(54) **WATER DESALINATION PLANT AND SYSTEM FOR THE PRODUCTION OF PURE WATER AND SALT**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

The present invention discloses a desalination plant that operates with a sea water or brackish water feed and produces a concentrated and selectively improved salt reject stream and a pure water permeate stream from a first treatment section that is arranged to produce primarily water at high recovery using membrane desalination processes. The reject stream from the first treatment line has a component distribution that is substantially reduced in native di- and polyvalent scaling ions, essentially depleted of sulfate, has substantially higher total dissolved solids than a traditional sea water reverse osmosis reject, yet is suitable for thermal treatment processes. The system may be enhanced by monovalent salt components. The unit may be integrated with a second treatment section, in which the first reject stream is further concentrated, purified, and processed to produce a high purity salt product.

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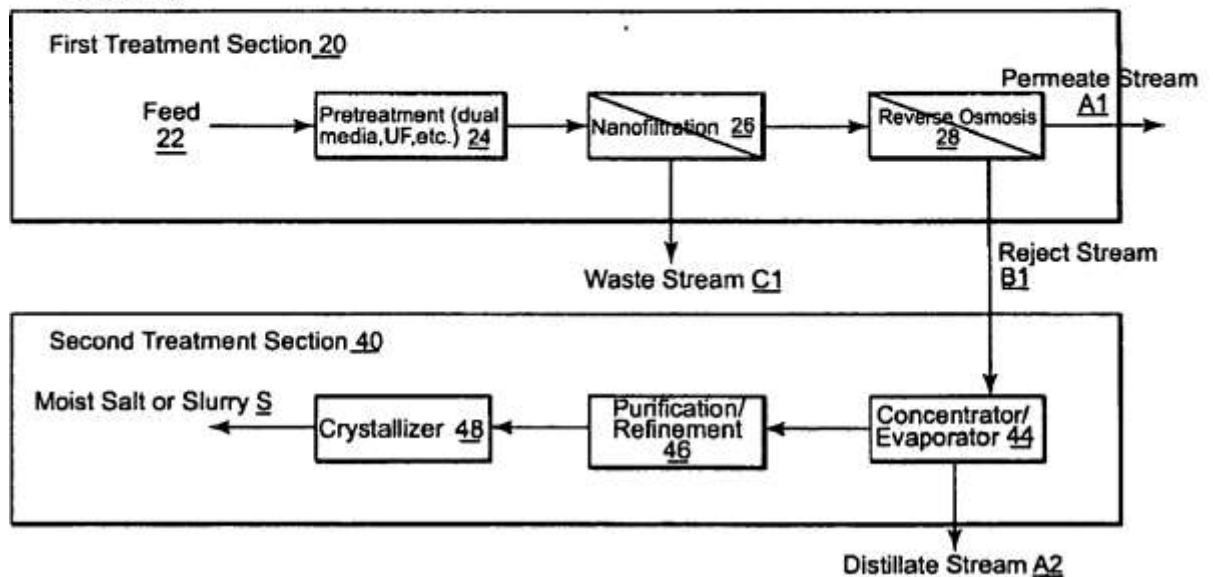
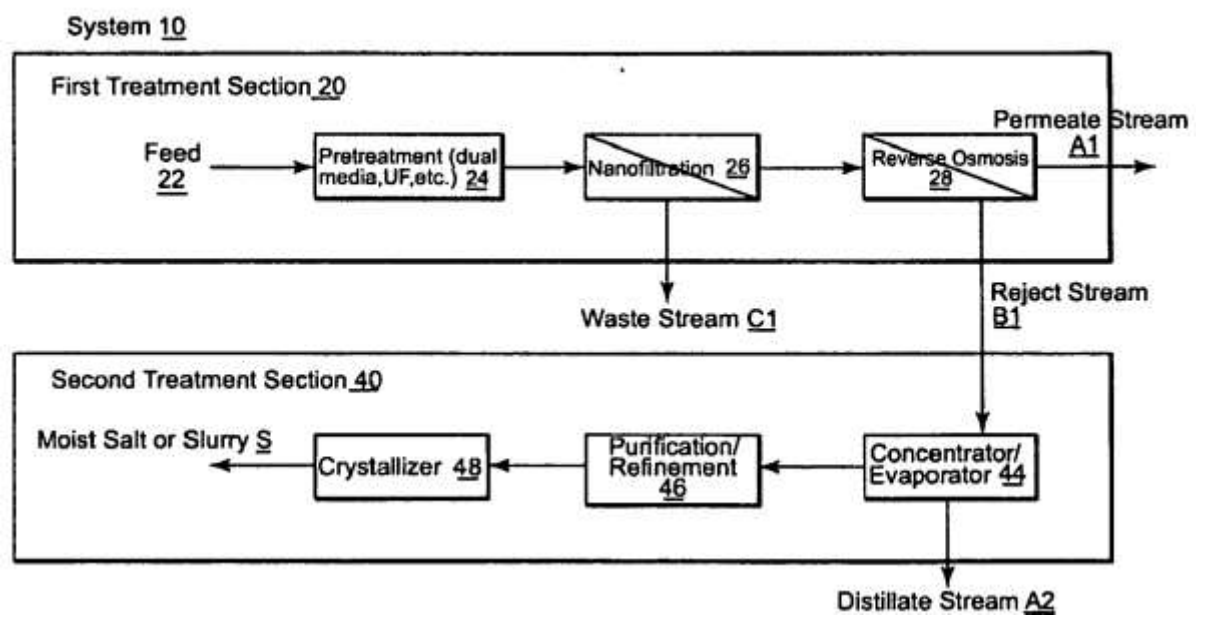


Fig. 1



Water Quality

	Seawater	NF Reject	NF Permeate	SWRO Permeate	Reject
Ca	400	1,320	93	0	387
Mg	1,229	4,461	151	1	629
Na	10,287	14,960	8,729	157	35,874
K	368	536	313	6	1,283
Cl	18,478	30,920	14,331	<249	59,016
HCO ₃	172	566	41	0.8	7
SO ₄	2,604	10,335	27	0.2	110
Br	64	107	50	0.9	204
Boron	4.2	4.2	4.2	1.8	12
SiO ₄	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.8
pH	8	8	7	5	5
CO ₂	2	2	2	10	92
NaCl	26,165	38,051	22,202	399	91,246
TDS	33,615	63,234	23,743	418	97,537

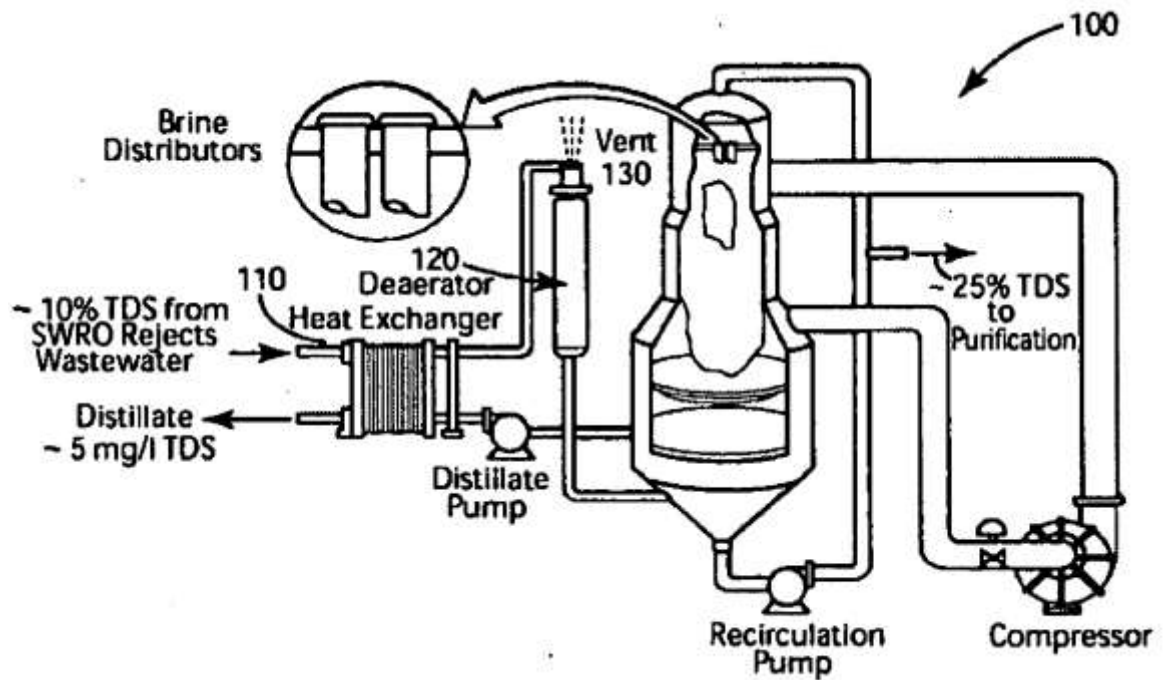
Fig. 1A

Quality Improvement with NF

Constituent	Seawater (% TDS)	NF Permeate (% TDS)	% Change (% TDS)
Ca	1.19%	0.39%	-67.0%
Mg	3.66%	0.64%	-82.5%
Na	30.60%	36.77%	20.1%
K	1.10%	1.32%	20.1%
Cl	54.97%	60.36%	9.8%
HCO ₃	0.51%	0.17%	-66.3%
SO ₄	7.75%	0.11%	-98.6%
Br	0.19%	0.21%	9.8%
Organic Carbon	0.01%	0.00%	-71.7%
NaCl	77.84%	93.51%	-20.1%

Fig.1B

Fig. 3



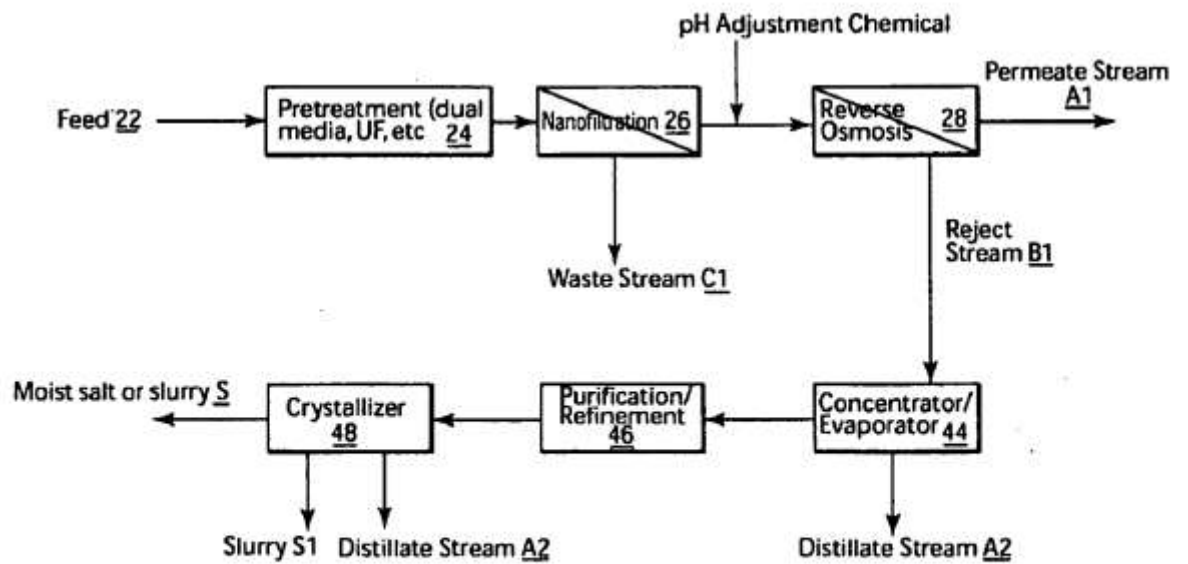


Fig. 4

Water Quality

	Seawater Feed mg/l	NF Reject mg/l	NF Permeate mg/l	pH Adjusted		
				SWRO Feed mg/l	SWRO Permeate mg/l	SWRO Reject mg/l
Ca	400	1320	93	93	0	387
Mg	1229	4461	151	151	1	628
Na	10287	19460	8729	8730	157	35976
K	368	536	313	313	6	1287
Cl	18478	30920	14331	14331	249	59083
HCO ₃	172	566	41	42	0.8	173
SO ₄	2604	10335	27	27	0.2	114
Br	64	107	50	50	0.9	206
Boron	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.3	0.3	17.0
SiO ₂	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0	0.9
pH	8	8	7	9.2	8.5	9.9
CO ₂	2	2	2	0	0	0
NaCl	26156	38051	22202	22205	399	91505
TDS	33615	63234	23743	23745	417	97862

Fig. 4A

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WATER DESALINATION PLANT AND SYSTEM FOR THE PRODUCTION OF PURE WATER AND SALT

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] 1. Field of the Invention
[0002] This invention relates generally to desalination, salt production, and water production. In particular, it relates to a process for converting seawater to potable water.
[0003] 2. Description of Related Art
[0004] For centuries, common salt has been produced by evaporative concentration of seawater or of another naturally occurring brine, typically by using open-air evaporation lagoons or thermal concentration equipment and processes. A number of modern industrial processes require salt of substantially high purity, such as a sodium chloride salt substantially free of undesirable chemical or taste components. Such high purity salt may be mined from some natural geological formations, and may also be obtained from other saline waters by concentration and treatment steps that remove the principal unwanted impurities present in a starting solution.
[0005] Potable, high-quality or pure water has also historically been produced, when fresh water is not available, from natural saline or brackish waters, originally by thermal processes such as freezing or distillation, and more recently by membrane processes such as reverse osmosis or membrane vapor permeation, and/or by hybrid membrane/thermal processes. When starting with a saline feed, all of these water production processes recover or purify only a fraction of the water present in the feed, and generally produce waste brine that is substantially more concentrated than the original feed stream.
[0006] Two processes, production of salt and production of pure water, may each start with a seawater or brackish water feed, and some proposals have been made for a unified co-production of the two commodities, particularly in circumstances when an additional economic benefit can be readily derived from the second product, or where environmental considerations regarding water reclamation or solids management dominate. However, water is perhaps the least valuable commodity, and when sitting a water plant where there is a need for water and a supply of feed water is available, much engineering skill goes into arranging the water treatment to minimize capital and operating cost, i.e., to maximize water production for the total project or to minimize capital and/or operating treatment costs per unit of water produced.
[0007] Processes for producing water treat, remove, or concentrate different solids with varied effect. Salt plants, by contrast, produce a more valuable commodity, typically in a lower quantity, often by removing a vast quantity of the original solute. Salt manufacturers may employ different separation or refining processes that may be antagonistic toward or poorly compatible with the mechanisms or production goals of water treatment. There have been proposals to combine and optimize water and salt co-production, although a number of these proposals have been driven by a specific environmental task (such as mine drainage cleanup), have taken advantage of a natural opportunity (such as presence of a fairly pure saline ground water), or have been driven by a high-level conceptual goal, (such as complete elimination of a liquid effluent (ZLD), extraction of a subsidiary value, or achieving better control of a specific waste output). While such specific or top-down system proposals may in concept answer certain needs, they fall short of providing a general seawater water

and salt process. A better approach would employ rigorously reasoned analysis to integrate a system in light of competing considerations of costs, efficiency, energy consumption, water recovery, or other factors. However, there are great variations in local conditions, as well as a variety of treatment equipment and materials available for effecting treatment, and the range of equipment spans different areas of expertise. A limited amount of theoretical or modeling tools exist for predicting the operation or effectiveness of non-standard systems, such as selective filtration at high mixed solids loading, and modeling of such systems is a time-consuming and complex undertaking. Applicant is not aware of existing commercial-scale plants capable of efficiently producing both a high quality salt output and a pure water output from a common sea water or substantially impure brackish feed.

[0008] Several factors contribute to this state of affairs. Water is a cheap commodity, yet the equipment used in the production of pure water from a brackish or saline feed requires a large capital investment and operation of the plant requires large inputs of energy. The design of a plant to operate in a stable, economical, and physically predictable manner under a particular set of conditions is a complex engineering problem. Production of salt involves at least one brine stream of high concentration, but high concentrations generally introduce scaling and corrosion problems, particularly in high flux, high temperature, or multi-conduit treatment equipment, and are thus generally considered outside the conservative range of input parameters employed in modeling high production water systems. To design a water production system and also purify the process waste streams to produce salt may be desirable from grand perspective, e.g., as a zero-liquid discharge (ZLD) process, but the engineering implementation requires a conceptual shift from the water-based on the permeate to the necessarily-produced but not optimized brine streams, possibly requiring extensive piloting of new purification approaches applied to concentrated saline intermediate streams.

[0009] One problem is that sea water and other natural saline waters contain many solutes and impurities, so the salt-enriched side streams of a pure water production process—the concentrated reject of a reverse osmosis water treatment, or the residue of a distillation process—include other solids that both limit flux or treatment rate and/or recovery of the water side and must be removed on the brine side if a high quality salt is desired. These dissolved solids can be corrosive and scale forming, the underlying de-watering processes consume great amounts of energy, and the concentrated salt mixtures require purification. Moreover, the intended scale of production strongly governs capital cost and the size of waste streams. Seawater reverse osmosis (RO) plants operating at 40-50% recovery generate 1 to 1½ units of concentrated brine waste for each unit of permeate, so the intake pumps, clear wells and pretreatment must be oversized. Seawater salt production plants must remove water that constitutes over 90-95% of the input mass, for which evaporation lagoons appear to offer the least expensive, albeit slow, treatment approach, while energetic processes become quite costly.

[0010] A number of related and possibly suggestive first steps have been taken toward membrane-based integrated water and salt production. Some systems are identified in the articles by Marian Turek entitled *Seawater Desalination and Salt Production in Hybrid Membrane-Thermal Process* (Desalination 153 (2002) 173-177) and Marian Turek and Maciej



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Gonet entitled *Nanofiltration in the Utilization of Coal Mine Brines* (Desalination 108 (1996) 171-177). The earlier of these papers deals with remediation of a coal mine water with a high quality sodium chloride brine, the water desalted by thermal crystallization processes. The later paper built on the earlier experience to explore the economics of combined systems employing nanofiltration pretreatment to increase the achievable water recovery of combined systems of less pure brackish waters. The economics of such systems depend strongly on the local cost of energy. Optimization of such approaches, as applied to more concentrated natural brines, such as sea water, require development of appropriate techniques for economically and dependably refining the concentrated but mixed brine streams produced in the water production lines, and also development of appropriate modeling and solution of optimization and prediction algorithms for the system as a whole to operate effectively. On the water production side, it is known in the art that seawater is treated by a one- or two-stage nanofiltration process during the production of water for potable or agricultural use. Certain nanofiltration or desulfation membranes, with or without later reverse osmosis, have been used for decades to condition sea water so that it may be used for sulfate-free non-scaling down hole injection water in oilfield production applications or with more complete demineralization treatment for applications such as boiler, cooler or thermal distillation feed.

[0011] In addition, there have been studies aimed at modeling water systems incorporated in cogeneration plants to assess cost and efficiency of water production with hybrid approaches, such as multistage flash/reverse osmosis. One such study accounts for energy costs, carbon credits and other inputs. Thus, a number of parameters relevant to evaluating water production systems have been explored, sometimes with a view to increase the perceived value of the system (e.g., carbon credits) to justify the greater cost of addressing a dual water/salt production problem. In addition, with the invention of effective nanofiltration membranes, it has been proposed to purify concentrated salt solutions by nanofiltration as one stage in a salt extraction process. UK Patent GB2395946 has proposed in general terms a hybrid membrane/thermal plant for co-production of water and salt. To applicant's knowledge, this proposal does not appear to have resulted in a working plant.

[0012] Although a salt or a water production plant is historically most likely to be specially engineered for a specific owner, such as a municipality (for water) or a hydrocarbon-, polymer- or food processor (for salt or chlorite), larger industrial platforms are being designed from the ground up around the world, making it worthwhile to deeply explore possible efficiencies of integration.

[0013] A real and substantial need exists to produce pure water suitable for municipal supplies, for power, boiler, or other industrial uses, or for agricultural use, and these needs may exist in the same region, or the same site, where a high purity brine or salt product is needed for food or chemical production.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0014] The present invention discloses an integrated plant for the production of both pure water and a salt or slurry product, operable at a large industrial capacity to effectively provide water at high recovery and salt of high purity with enhanced efficiency. The present invention provides a novel and improved system for co-production of both a high purity

salt, and one or more grades of a high quality water, such as a potable, boiler-quality, agricultural or other purified water or blend of such waters. It also provides a simplified and cost effective process for converting seawater to potable water.

[0015] Also disclosed is a desalination plant that operates with a sea water or brackish water feed and produces a concentrated and selectively improved salt reject stream and a pure water permeate stream from a first treatment section that is arranged to produce primarily water at high recovery using membrane desalination processes. The reject stream from the first treatment section has a component distribution that is substantially reduced in native di- and polyvalent scaling ions, essentially depleted of sulfate, has substantially higher total dissolved solids (TDS) than a traditional sea water reverse osmosis (SWRO) reject, yet is suitable for thermal treatment processes. The system may be enhanced by monovalent salt components. The first treatment section may be built as a stand-alone unit which, for a given output capacity, advantageously requires relatively undersize intake and pretreatment components and produces high quality permeate at high recovery.

[0016] In another embodiment, the first treatment section may be integrated with a second treatment section, in which the reject stream is further concentrated, purified, and processed to produce a high purity salt product. A second treatment line or conventional concentration process may recover high purity salt from the salt-enriched reject stream without increasing the intake/pretreatment footprint of the overall water and salt plant and may produce salt with great energy efficiency while generating minimal waste effluent and producing additional quantities and grades of pure water to achieve 60-85% water recovery in the overall system. This permits use of much smaller intake pumps, pretreatment chemicals and equipment, clearwells and other treatment or pressurization equipment for a given water production volume, and the degree of concentration and partial refinement of the reject stream in the initial water production line reduces the cost of salt production below existing benchmarks, giving a highly purified NaCl product while generating very little waste.

[0017] The various features of novelty which characterize the invention are pointed out with particularity in the claims annexed to and forming a part of this disclosure. For a better understanding of the invention, its operating advantages and benefits obtained by its uses, reference is made to the accompanying drawings and descriptive matter. The accompanying drawings are intended to show examples of the many forms of the invention. The drawings are not intended as showing the limits of all of the ways the invention can be made and used. Changes to and substitutions of the various components of the invention can of course be made. The invention resides as well in sub-combinations and sub-systems of the elements described, and in methods of using them.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0018] These and other aspects of the invention will be understood from the description and claims herein, taken together with the drawings showing details of construction and illustrative embodiments, wherein:

[0019] FIG. 1 schematically illustrates a system for the integrated production of salt and water outputs in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;



[0020] FIG. 1A is a water quality table showing representative concentrations of components in a seawater feed and the corresponding reject and permeate streams calculated for one representative plant;

[0021] FIG. 1B shows percentage quality improvements for relevant species in nanofiltration permeate;

[0022] FIG. 2 shows a process flow diagram with multi-stage nanofiltration and reverse osmosis sections, indicating representative water qualities and recoveries or the different sections;

[0023] FIG. 3 illustrates details of a preferred brine concentrator for the salt production section;

[0024] FIG. 4 schematically illustrates another system for the integrated production of salt and water outputs in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention; and

[0025] FIG. 4a is a water quality table showing representative concentrations of components in seawater feed and the corresponding reject and permeate streams calculated for one representative plant.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0026] Approximating language, as used herein throughout the specification and claims, may be applied to modify any quantitative representation that could permissibly vary without resulting in a change in the basic function to which it is related. Accordingly, a value modified by a term or terms, such as “about”, is not limited to the precise value specified. In at least some instances, the approximating language may correspond to the precision of an instrument for measuring the value. Range limitations may be combined and/or interchanged, and such ranges are identified and include all the sub-ranges included herein unless context or language indicates otherwise. Other than in the operating examples or where otherwise indicated, all numbers or expressions referring to quantities of ingredients, reaction conditions and the like, used in the specification and the claims, are to be understood as modified in all instances by the term “about”.

[0027] “Optional” or “optionally” means that the subsequently described event or circumstance may or may not occur, or that the subsequently identified material may or may not be present, and that the description includes instances where the event or circumstance occurs or where the material is present, and instances where the event or circumstance does not occur or the material is not present.

[0028] As used herein, the terms “comprises,” “comprising,” “includes,” “including,” “has,” “having” or any other variation thereof, are intended to cover a non-exclusive inclusion. For example, a process, method, article or apparatus that comprises a list of elements is not necessarily limited to only those elements, but may include other elements not expressly listed or inherent to such process, method article or apparatus.

[0029] The singular forms “a,” “an” and “the” include plural referents unless the context clearly dictates otherwise.

[0030] The present invention discloses an integrated plant for the production of both pure water and a salt or slurry product, operable at a large industrial capacity to effectively provide water at high recovery and salt of high purity with greatly enhanced efficiency.

[0031] Disclosed in FIG. 1 is a desalination plant that operates with a sea water or brackish water feed 22 and produces a concentrated and selectively improved salt reject stream B1 and a pure water permeate stream A1 from a first treatment section 20 that is arranged to produce primarily water at high

treatment section 20 may also be referred to as a first processing section or first treatment line. The reject stream B1 from the first treatment section 20 has a component distribution that is substantially reduced in native di- and polyvalent scaling ions, essentially depleted of sulfate, has substantially higher total dissolved solids (TDS) than a traditional sea water reverse osmosis (SWRO) reject, yet is suitable for thermal treatment processes. The system may be enhanced by monovalent salt components. The first treatment section 20 may be built as a stand-alone unit which, for a given output capacity, advantageously requires relatively undersize intake and pretreatment components and produces high quality permeate at high recovery. Preferably the first treatment section 20 may be integrated with a second treatment section 40, in which the reject stream B1 is further concentrated, purified, and processed to produce a high purity salt product.

[0032] In one embodiment, a desalination plant for treating a sea water or brackish water feed 22 is disclosed wherein the desalination plant is comprised of a first treatment section 20 to effectively remove scaling species and a reverse osmosis 28 section that operates at high recovery to produce a purified permeate stream A1 and a selectively NaCl salt-enriched reject stream B1 as a saline output for processing into bulk salt. In an alternate embodiment, the reject stream may be concentrated to above about 85,000 ppm total dissolved solids (TDS).

[0033] The second treatment section 40 further concentrates the reject stream B1, and chemically precipitates unwanted impurities from the reject stream and forms a refined concentrate stream, such that salt may be continuously recovered by crystallization at purity above about 99% as a high purity salt product. While the second treatment section 40 may include or consist of one or more conventional salt production stages such as evaporation lagoons and precipitation ponds, preferably the second treatment section 40 employs a thermal or hybrid process to concentrate the reject stream B1 from the first section while also producing one or more additional pure water or distillate streams A2, thereby further raising overall water recovery. Such additional pure water stream or streams may be of a different grade than the primary bulk water recovery of the first treatment section 20, and when two such streams are produced, each may be of a different quality, so that depending on local industrial, domestic or agricultural needs, the purified water streams may be blended or supplied separately to different classes of industrial and domestic users. In either case, the salt production and additional distillation quality water are produced from the same original stream, e.g., the reject stream B1 from the first treatment section 20, and thus any augmentation of the front end pretreatment capital equipment is not required.

[0034] In one embodiment, the second treatment section 40 is configured to concentrate and refine the reject stream B1, wherein the second treatment section 40 concentrates the reject stream B1 by a thermal or hybrid section and produces pure water and a purified salt product while operating above about 62% water recovery. In an alternate embodiment, the overall recovery may be above from about 65% to about 70%.

[0035] The concentrated salt stream produced in the thermal treatment line section 40 is then purified, e.g., by softening, such as with sodium hydroxide, to remove remaining magnesium and polyvalent metals such as iron, with sodium carbonate to precipitate calcium, and/or other chemical combinations to precipitate the residual metal and impurity ions so that the resultant salt product meets an intended purity



standard (e.g., NaCl purity level and absence of critical contaminants) for chlor-alkali or other user applications. The concentrated and further purified stream passes to a crystallizer 48 stage and a pure salt product is crystallized. The high purity salt may be extracted as a moist solid or as a salt slurry from an evaporator/centrifuge loop in which the stream temperature may be easily controlled, e.g. with mechanical vapor recompression, to provide supersaturated salt solution and optimize sodium chloride crystallization.

[0036] The treatment section may produce a purified permeate stream via membrane pressure filtration processes at recovery above about 55% and removes a preponderance of species that contaminate salt production. The pressure membrane filtration processes may include nanofiltration 26 softening which effectively removes substantially all sulfates. Alternatively, the first treatment section 20 is comprised of a multistage nanofiltration 26 unit such that bivalent ions are substantially removed from nanofiltration permeate, while operating at a recovery level above about 65% to form an monovalent salt enhanced permeate stream for concentration.

[0037] In one embodiment, the second treatment section 40 removes residual impurities by chemical precipitation to produce a refined salt concentrate, and pure salt is separated at a temperature or further concentration effective to crystallize salt from a saturated solution. Crystallization 48 may be driven by crystal seeding, allowing efficient and continuous take-off of the salt output from a precipitation and centrifugation loop, and both the crystallization and the purity of the product may be enhanced by allowing a small periodic blow-down from the loop to keep remaining unwanted species, such as potassium, below saturation in the crystallizer 48, and below a level that might impair crystallization or product quality. For this, a purge under about 1% of the initial brine feed volume or 3% of the crystallizer volume suffices, resulting in a near (zero-liquid discharge (ZLD)) process for producing a highly purified NaCl product. In one embodiment, the second treatment section 40 purifies and then crystallizes salt, maintaining low impurities in the crystallizer by periodic purge to remove interfering contaminants not removed by nanofiltration 26. In another embodiment, the refined salt concentrate forms a moist salt or slurry that is centrifugally extracted from a crystallizer seed loop and a crystal seed stream is returned from a centrifuge to a crystallizer liquor to drive crystallization for continuous take-off of the concentrated salt product. Advantageously, the thermal concentration and mechanical vapor recompression evaporators 44 may each produce additional output streams of pure water, increasing overall water recovery such that 100% of the reverse osmosis output (e.g., the permeate and the brine) of the first treatment section 20 is utilized. In one embodiment, periodic or continuous blowdown from a crystallizer 48 may be used to limit the specific impurities from the crystallized product.

[0038] In one embodiment, the pure water production stage, and the selective salt or sodium chloride enrichment are performed by passing a seawater or brackish feed 22 stream through a seawater pretreatment 24 (coarse screen, media filter, flocculation and clarification, ultrafiltration and/or other pretreatment process), to remove suspended solids and a substantial portion of organic matter, followed by nanofiltration 26. The nanofiltration 26 effects a substantial reduction in sulfate (e.g., above about 95% and preferably above about 98%), removes bivalent ions while at least somewhat selectively passing monovalents. The initial nanofiltration 26

operates at a relatively low feed pressure, and preferably includes several stages so that the nanofiltration 26 permeate represents from about 70% to about 80% or more of the feed volume, achieving high water recovery. This nanofiltration permeate forms an intermediate permeate stream that is substantially free of scaling sulfate, relatively depleted of bivalent ions, and rich in monovalent salts, primarily NaCl, with a TDS that is about 2/3 that of the feed.

[0039] In accordance with another embodiment, this intermediate permeate may then be fed into a brackish water reverse osmosis (RO) 28, seawater reverse osmosis (SWRO), or other RO filtration system. Nanofiltration (NF) 26 allows the RO 28 system to operate on this permeate at high recovery without scaling and with very little need for antiscalant, to produce a pure water output and a substantially concentrated reject stream. By way of example, a two-stage NF 26 may operate at from about 70% to about 80% recovery and the RO section 28 may include a third stage high pressure brine recovery stage to operate at from about 70% to about 80% or more recovery on this NF permeate, giving an overall recovery of from about 50% to about 70% or more in the first treatment section 20. Higher recoveries are possible from certain brackish feeds 22. The reject stream B1 from the RO section 28 contains greatly concentrated and improved quality sodium chloride, substantially free of sulfate and greatly depleted in magnesium and calcium, with a manageable concentration of potassium and other minor components. Compared to the seawater feed 22, from about 75% to about 90% or more of the original water component has been removed, and the stream may be concentrated to above 85,000 ppm TDS, substantial over the level of a conventional SWRO brine and above the feed 22 to a conventional salt production process, so that relatively little energy is required to bring this reject stream to saturation and make the final salt output.

[0040] Further concentration of the RO reject stream B1 may be by a thermal process or other evaporative concentrator 44. A mechanical vapor compression unit may be used to enhance evaporative efficiency while recovering additional water in this stage. In one embodiment, the second treatment section 40 comprises a mechanical vapor compressor 44 that produces additional pure water or distillate A2 while further concentrating the selectively salt-enriched reject stream. By way of example, from about 70% to about 90% or more of the water present in the RO reject stream B1 that passes to the thermal concentration/salt production stage may be recovered as additional water, including distillate-quality water, in the course of making the purified salt product, increasing the overall water yield from the dual process line. Much of the liquid waste generated in both sections, such as the NF waste stream C1, the relatively small amounts of water from pretreatment backflushes, salt crystallizer blowdown, and other processes, may be passed into a municipal waste stream or digestion process, be diluted with clarified effluent, or otherwise be harmlessly treated or discharged. Alternatively, a thermal or steam driven evaporator 44 and crystallizer 48 may be used, such as in connection with cogeneration schemes, if low-cost or excess steam is available.

[0041] The selection of membranes for removal of multivalent ions up front, which may be accomplished using one or more stages of suitable nanofiltration membranes operating at a relatively low driving pressure, advantageously conditions the RO feed (e.g., the NF permeate) such that the RO may be driven at very high recovery with little or no anti-scalant, while the ensuring RO reject stream B1 composition has



reduced need for downstream chemicals for the thermal treatment equipment or subsequent precipitation of residual impurities in the salt production section. The increased RO recovery results in a substantially concentrated RO reject stream B₁, and thermal processes may be economically applied to a more concentrated salt feed with reduced scaling propensities and other advantages in the thermal salt purification processing. Nanofiltration 26 provides a monovalent-enhanced feed-water to the RO, more concentrated salt water to the salt concentration and purification section of the process, and reduces or eliminates requirements for membrane antiscalant treatment while allowing operation of the RO section 28 at high recovery. The RO section 28 in the first processing section may include an initial brackish water stage as well as one or more higher pressure SWRO stages, including, for example a brine recovery stage which operates at pressures of from about 80 atmospheres to about 100 atmospheres on an earlier stage RO brine to simultaneously maximize RO water production and elevate the TDS concentration of the reject without necessitating excessive pump energy or incurring a membrane scaling penalty.

[0042] In accordance with another embodiment, a potable water production line employing NF treatment may also be applied to reduce scaling components to such extent as to permit a moderate pH elevation of the RO feed to be applied such that boron species present in the RO feed, and enable single stage or two-stage RO to effectively remove remaining boron present in the feed to a level below about 0.5 ppm, and preferably below 0.3 ppm. In accordance with this embodiment, the permeate from a high recovery seawater NF line is treated to raise its pH above 8.3, and preferably to between from about 8.3 and about 10.5 ahead of an RO line, to ionize boron species, and thus substantially remove boron and provide potable water. Such a system construction represents a substantial simplification in and advance in seawater-to-drinking water technology. Moreover, the substantial reduction in bicarbonate and buffering ions by NF allows a pH elevation to from about 8.3 and about 10.5 to be achieved with little caustic, and the system may be operated at higher pressure and high recovery without scaling.

[0043] In one embodiment, a desalination plant for treating a seawater or brackish feed 22 comprised of a nanofiltration 26 unit and a reverse osmosis unit 28 is disclosed, the nanofiltration 26 unit arranged to form a nanofiltration permeate substantially diminished in scaling and fouling components, the permeate being fed to the reverse osmosis unit 28. The RO unit 28 may be operated at high recovery to form a purified water permeate stream A₁ and a non-scaling salt reject stream B₁ concentrated above about 85,000 ppm TDS. The NF permeate may be fed to the RO unit 28 at an elevated pH to form a purified water permeate stream A₁ having less than about 0.5 ppm boron. The pH of the nanofiltration permeate is raised ahead of the reverse osmosis unit 28 and operates at a recovery of about 70% while producing a high recovery purified water permeate stream A₁. In one embodiment, the pH elevation is from about 8.3 to about 10.5.

[0044] As schematically illustrated in FIG. 1, a system 10 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention includes a first processing section 20 and a second salt production section 40 or both salt and water production section 40. The first treatment section 20 may include, or may receive its feed 22 from, a pretreatment section 24 of known type, and includes a nanofiltration (NF) section 26 and a reverse osmosis (RO) section 28, producing three output streams, namely

a primary desalinated water RO permeate stream A₁, a primary RO reject concentrated salt production stream B₁ and a NF reject or waste stream C₁. The RO 28 section of the first treatment section 20 is preferably a multistage RO treatment unit that operates at high recovery (about 70% or above) on the NF permeate, producing the principal product streams A₁, B₁ (water and salt concentrate) of the first treatment section 20. Thus, the first treatment section 20 includes membrane filtration units that produce the streams A₁, B₁. The NF waste stream C₁ and other lesser waste streams such as pretreatment filter backwash and rinse waters may be passed to a municipal waste water treatment plant for utilization of its electrolytes and organics in waste digesters or for dilution with waste clarifier output streams before discharge.

[0045] As further shown in FIG. 1, the concentrated salt production stream B₁ produced by the RO section 28 passes to the salt production section 40, which includes a brine concentrator 44 section, a purification or refining section 46 and a crystallization/salt output section 48, 48a. The concentrator 44 raises the salinity of the brine feed close to saturation. Purification is then effected by adding sodium or other appropriate salts in section 46 to chemically precipitate the remaining bivalent metal ions still present in the concentrate, thus simultaneously removing these components and balancing the monovalent ion content of the thus-adjusted brine stream, and resulting in a pure brine B_{1a} concentrated almost to the saturation point. NaOH and Na₂CO₃ may be added, but other carbonates compatible with the purification may be used. The crystallizer 48 then effects a selective NaCl crystallization to provide a solid or slurry, or both, salt product S substantially free of potassium and suitable for industrial, food processing, or chlor-alkali applications.

[0046] The second section 40 may be implemented with traditional salt production techniques, such as evaporation lagoons and precipitation ponds, to further concentrate and refine the stream B₁. However, preferably the stream B₁ may be concentrated by thermal equipment in section 40. In one embodiment, the concentrator 44 may be an evaporative brine concentrator, preferably a unit such as a falling film evaporator, and may operate with a vapor recompressor unit for enhanced energy efficiency and augmented water recovery. The vapor recompressor unit 44 may compress steam that is recirculated in heat exchange contact with the entering brine stream B₁, enhancing energy efficiency of the process while producing a cooled compressed (liquid) distillate stream A₂ as one output stream of stage 40. A further concentrated salt stream or slurry S constitutes a second output. The distillate stream A₂ may amount to 50% or more of the water present in the high TDS brine feed B₁, and this may be added to or blended with the RO permeate stream A₁ from section 20. More generally, the distillate A₂ will be of higher purity than the stream A₁, so it may be maintained as a separate, distillate-quality output stream for processes such as chemical, pharmaceutical, semiconductor or other industrial applications that require ultra pure water (UPW) quality. One or more of the streams, A₁, A₂, etc. may have their hardness adjusted (e.g., with calcium hydroxide or other ions) to flavor or otherwise condition the stream and form a potable product.

[0047] Advantageously, the NF section 26 effectively removes sulfate and may greatly reduce the level calcium, magnesium, bicarbonate, or other components of the original feed 22. FIG. 1A shows the concentrations of principal dissolved species in the feed and permeate streams for a representative membrane configuration of section 20. Over about



98% of the sulfate, about 75% of the calcium, and about 85% of the magnesium are removed by NF, so that even when the NF permeate is next processed at high recovery by the RO section 28, and the level of TDS is concentrated by a corresponding factor in the RO stream, the concentration of these ions remains low in the reject stream. Further, the reject stream B1, although close to 100,000 ppm total solids, has a composition that may be thermally treated without incurring scaling problems in the second section 40, and following further concentration, NaCl salt may be purified by relatively direct and efficient precipitation and efficiently crystallized. The NF membrane may be a membrane such as, but not limited to, the ones commonly sold for sulfate removal by The Dow Chemical Company (Midland, Mich.), GE Osmonics (Minnetonka, Minn.), and other suppliers. GE Osmonics membranes may have a particularly high sulfate rejection that is relatively independent of feed concentration. This allows use of two or more stages of NF to achieve recovery above about 70%, and preferably above of from about 75% to about 80%, thus maximizing the feed available to the RO section 28 while still effectively removing over 98% of the sulfate. A two stage NF will provide nanofiltration recovery of about 75%.

[0048] The reduction of scaling species in the NF permeate also allows the RO section 28 to also be operated at high recovery and with relatively low usage of anti-scalant despite the higher pressures generally needed in, and the higher TDS concentrations generally present in, higher recovery RO configurations having second or third stage units. For example, a three stage RO unit may be operated at a recovery of 75% on the permeate. As further shown in FIG. 1A, the levels of sodium and chloride are both somewhat reduced in the NF permeate, but these species may alternatively be somewhat augmented by appropriate selection of a seawater softening membrane having different permeation characteristics, for example wherein monovalent passage has been enhanced to decrease the overall operating pressure. Generally suitable NF membranes for use in systems of the present invention include, but are not limited to, SWNF membranes from The Dow Chemical Company's (Midland, Mich.) Filmtec line, DK series or SeaSoft membranes from GE Osmonics (Minnetonka, Minnesota), and seawater NF membranes from Toray (Poway, Calif.).

[0049] As the embodiment shows in FIG. 1, the salt production section 40 further concentrates the brine output of section 20 and also produces additional water. Section 40 includes an evaporator/concentrator section 44, a refinement or purification section 46, and a crystallization section 48, for which some representative flow volumes and operating conditions are indicated in FIG. 2. The brine concentrator or evaporator 44 receives the high concentration reject B1 from the RO 28 of the first treatment section 20 and further concentrates this stream close to the salt saturation point while recovering a substantial portion of the remaining water as distillate A2 in evaporator 44. The further-concentrated stream may be fed to a purification tank 46 where sodium salts such as sodium carbonate and sodium hydroxide are added to precipitate calcium, magnesium and other metals such as iron, thus simultaneously purifying the NaCl stream to meet high purity salt standards and balancing the monovalent ions. Thus, the purified and concentrated stream is then passed to a crystallizer 48, where the concentration may be increased above saturation and further distillate is recovered.

[0050] Advantageously, the removal of a substantial portion of the calcium and magnesium in the NF stage 26 greatly

reduces the quantity of chemicals required in the purification stage 46 of section 40. Calculations show that for a desalination plant producing 106,000 m³ of pure water per day or 854,000 tons per year of salt, the chemical savings are substantial. If the initial NF were not provided, then the amount of NaOH and Na₂CO₃ to remove bivalent ions to avoid scaling in crystallizers and operate with a minimal purge cycle in the crystallizer would be approximately 329,411 tons/yr NaOH consumption and 92,927 tons/yr Na₂CO₃ consumption. The corresponding figures calculated for a stream treated with NF as described above are 76,769 tons/yr NaOH consumption and 11,454 tons/yr of Na₂CO₃ consumption, so that the incremental chemical savings are 252,642 tons/yr of NaOH and 81,473 tons/yr of Na₂CO₃. At a price of 0.1 \$/kg for NaOH and 0.25 \$/kg for Na₂CO₃ this translates into annual savings of \$25.264 million for NaOH and \$20.368 million for Na₂CO₃. In addition to the direct chemical savings, by arranging the system such that the purification step treats a generally lower level of bivalent impurities, the stream that passes to the crystallizer can be dependably processed with greatly decreased scaling propensity, and operated with smaller volume, less frequent purges, while assuring that the remaining impurities do not reach a concentration that would interfere with crystallization or impair purity of the salt product.

[0051] In addition, by employing the initial NF stages or stages 26 to condition the feed 22 to an RO section 28 operating at recovery substantially above conventional SWRO recovery levels, and producing a correspondingly more concentrated reject stream B1, the energy costs of thermal processing to produce salt are substantially lowered. By way of comparison, for a raw seawater feed at 35,000 TDS, a conventional SWRO plant operating at a recovery of 50% (representing a recovery on the high end) would have a reject concentration of 70,000 TDS, requiring further concentration up to 250,000 TDS in a brine concentrator/evaporator 44. One calculates the energy consumption to produce 1 ton of salt (based upon the membrane desalination section at 3.25 KWH/m³ of permeate and the evaporator section at 26.31 kWh/m³ of feed to evaporator) to be:

$$\begin{aligned} &((100/3.5)-(100/7))*3.25+(100/7)*26.31=46.43+375. \\ &85=422.28 \text{ kWh.} \end{aligned}$$

The present invention by contrast would produce 40% more concentrated brine output (98,000 TDS) from the membrane desalination section at only slightly higher energy consumption due to the additional NF section (3.75 kWh/m³), and the energy consumption would be:

$$\begin{aligned} &((100/3.5)-(100/9.8))*3.75+(100/9.8)*26.31=68.87+ \\ &268.47=337.34 \text{ kWh.} \end{aligned}$$

This represents an incremental energy savings per ton of salt, of 84.94 kWh.

[0052] As illustrated in FIG. 3, the salt production section 40 preferably includes a mechanical vapor recompression apparatus 100, which collects and recompresses vapor given off as the brine is circulated through a falling film evaporator. The recompressed vapor may be placed in heat exchange contact with one or more evaporator stages, such as falling film evaporator stage as the entering SWRO reject stream (B₁ in FIG. 1) is concentrated to about 250,000 ppm concentration for the final purification steps, and may also be applied to a heat exchanger 110 which raises the incoming brine stream temperature ahead of a stripper or deaerator 120. The vent 130 losses from these heating and stripping units are small, under



one or two percent of the feed 22 volume, and up to about 60% of the brine feed may be recovered as recompressed vapor effectively constituting one additional high purity water output. This raises the overall water recovery by from about 18% to about 22% or more of the RO permeate volume above the salt purification step. Purification, as noted above, includes precipitating certain remaining hardness species and rebalancing the monovalents in tank(s) 46, preferably by applying sodium salts, thus avoid any increase in potassium. After purification, the salt stream passes to a crystallization/centrifugation unit 48 as previously discussed, wherein the temperature and/or pressure may be controlled to maintain a specific saturation point for pure NaCl crystallization. Periodic purges prevent build up of the potassium concentration, and maintain the levels of other impurities at sufficiently low levels to not impair either the rate of crystallization or the salt quality.

[0053] As FIGS. 1 and 3 illustrate, following purification 46, the high quality concentrated salt stream passes to a crystallizer 48, which may for example operate as a low-pressure evaporative concentrator 44, to further elevate the salt concentration and/or may also lower or otherwise control the concentrate temperature to a desired salt precipitation point so that salt may be continuously crystallized and taken off. The crystallizer 48 produces a further distillate stream, typically of lower volume than the first-mentioned distillate stream. In an overall integrated plant, one or more of the distillate streams may be processed to a higher quality by ion exchange, electrodeionization or other purification process when the site requires UPW water for sensitive applications such as semiconductor fabrication, pyrogen free water for pharmaceutical uses, high pressure steam turbine power, or other processes. Advantageously, these distillate side streams may be treated more efficiently, to a higher quality, than a typical fresh water or ground water feed containing native species, so the integrated plant offers even greater costs savings when an industrial platform has a need for such high purity water.

[0054] FIG. 4 illustrates another embodiment of the desalination process to achieve improved water quality by the adjustment of pH between from about 8.3 and about 10.5 after NF 26 to achieve high removal of species that are poorly dissociated at a neutral pH but well dissociated at a higher pH. This is especially true for boron, which is often regulated to product levels of less than about 0.5 mg/L. By raising the pH above the pKa of boric acid, which is too small to be removed by RO, the acid becomes ionized to borate and is well rejected, resulting in levels of less than about 0.5 ppm. NF 26 ahead of RO 28 reduces scaling components such as hardness and sulfate to levels low enough to prevent scaling in RO 28 run at moderate water recovery at the elevated pH's required. At higher water recovery, NF 26 allows scaling control with the addition of small dosages of scale inhibitors. FIG. 4A shows a typical performance of this embodiment, along with the enhanced boron removal. The resultant boron level in FIG. 4A is 0.3 mg/L as compared to 1.8 mg/L in FIG. 1A. The incorporation of adjusting the pH level has a substantial economic benefit since it removes the requirement for additional stages of treatment that are specifically for boron and other similar undissociated species removal.

[0055] In another embodiment of the present invention, a water desalination system 10 is disclosed, which comprises an intake section of a size to supply and pretreat a defined flow of a seawater or brackish feed 22 containing sulfate for a

system having a pure water output capacity, a nanofiltration 26 process that is configured to filter a defined flow to produce nanofiltration permeate at recovery above from about 70% to about 80% having sulfate concentration reduced at least about 90%, and a reverse osmosis process 28 which receives the nanofiltration permeate as a feed and operates to produce reverse osmosis permeate stream A1 at a recovery above from about 70% to about 80% and a concentrated reverse osmosis reject stream B1 suitable for enhanced commercial NaCl production. As a result, the reverse osmosis permeate A1 amounts to from about 49% to about 64% of the defined flow of the feed and the intake section may be sized less than twice the pure water output capacity. The reverse osmosis reject stream B1 may be provided to a thermal concentrator 44 to concentrate the stream to saturation and crystallization, and the thermal concentrator 44 may recover one or more additional streams of pure water such that between from about 75% to about 95% of the nanofiltration permeate is recovered as pure water. The nanofiltration 26 may remove a substantial portion of bivalent metal ions present in the feed such that the reverse osmosis reject is non-scaling in the concentrator 44 and salt is more economically purified by chemical precipitation of contaminants prior to crystallization. In another embodiment, the system is comprised of multiple nanofiltration stages to achieve recovery above about 70%, the permeate of the nanofiltration is fed to a multi-stage reverse osmosis to achieve high water recovery while producing a selectively salt-enriched reject having a TDS of about 100,000 and suitable for salt manufacture.

[0056] While the present invention has been described with references to preferred embodiments, various changes or substitutions may be made to these embodiments by those ordinarily skilled in the art pertinent to the present invention with out departing from the technical scope of the present invention. Therefore, the technical scope of the present invention encompasses not only those embodiments described above, but also all that fall within the scope of the appended claims.

[0057] This written description uses examples to disclose the invention, including the best mode, and also to enable any person skilled in the art to practice the invention, including making and using any devices or systems and performing any incorporated processes. The patentable scope of the invention is defined by the claims, and may include other examples that occur to those skilled in the art. These other examples are intended to be within the scope of the claims if they have structural elements that do not differ from the literal language of the claims, or if they include equivalent structural elements with insubstantial differences from the literal languages of the claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A desalination plant for treating a sea water or brackish water feed wherein the desalination plant comprises:
 - a. a first treatment section to effectively remove scaling species and
 - b. a reverse osmosis section that operates at high recovery to produce a purified permeate stream and a selectively NaCl salt-enriched reject stream as a saline output.
2. The desalination plant of claim 1 further comprising: a second treatment section configured to concentrate and refine the reject stream, wherein the second treatment section concentrates the reject stream by a thermal or hybrid section and produces pure water and a purified salt product.



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3. The desalination plant of claim 1 wherein the reject stream is concentrated to above about 85,000 ppm total dissolved solids.

4. The desalination plant of claim 1 wherein the desalination plant has an intake stream of saline feed that is less than two times the size of the permeate stream produced from the reverse osmosis section.

5. The desalination plant of claim 1 wherein the first treatment section produces the purified permeate stream via membrane pressure filtration processes at recovery above about 55% and removes a preponderance of species that contaminate salt production.

6. The desalination plant of claim 2 wherein the plant operates above about 62% water recovery.

7. The desalination plant of claim 2 wherein overall recovery is above from about 65% to about 70%.

8. The desalination plant of claim 2 wherein the second treatment section:

- a. further concentrates the reject stream, and
- b. chemically precipitates unwanted impurities from the reject stream and forms a refined concentrate stream, such that salt may be continuously recovered by crystallization at purity above about 99% as a high purity salt product.

9. The desalination plant of claim 2 wherein the second treatment section further comprises a crystallizer for forming a salt solid or slurry from said refined concentrated salt stream.

10. The desalination plant of claim 2 wherein the second treatment section removes residual impurities by chemical precipitation to produce a refined salt concentrate, and pure salt is separated at a temperature or further concentration effective to crystallize salt from a saturated solution.

11. The desalination plant of claim 9 wherein periodic or continuous blowdown from the crystallizer is used to limit the impurities from the crystallized product.

12. The desalination plant of claim 2 wherein the refined salt concentrate from the reject stream forms a moist salt or slurry that is centrifugally extracted from a crystallizer seed loop and a crystal seed stream is returned from a centrifuge to a crystallizer liquor to drive crystallization for continuous take-off of a concentrated salt product.

13. The desalination plant of claim 5 wherein the pressure membrane filtration processes include nanofiltration softening that effectively removes substantially all sulfates.

14. The desalination plant of claim 1 wherein the first treatment section comprises a multistage nanofiltration section where bivalent ions are substantially removed from nanofiltration permeate and operating a recovery level above about 65% to form an monovalent salt enhanced permeate stream for concentration.

15. The desalination plant of claim 2 wherein the second treatment section comprises a mechanical vapor compressor that produces additional pure water and further concentrates the selectively salt-enriched reject stream.

16. A desalination plant for treating a seawater or brackish feed comprised of a nanofiltration unit and a reverse osmosis unit, the nanofiltration unit arranged to form a nanofiltration permeate substantially diminished in scaling and fouling components and the permeate is fed to the reverse osmosis unit.

17. The desalination plant of claim 16 wherein the reverse osmosis unit is operated at high recovery to form a purified water permeate stream and a non-scaling salt reject stream concentrated above about 85,000 ppm TDS.

18. The desalination plant of claim 16 wherein the nanofiltration permeate is fed to the reverse osmosis unit at an elevated pH to form a purified water permeate stream having less than about 0.5 ppm boron.

19. The desalination plant of claim 18 wherein the pH of the nanofiltration permeate is raised before reverse osmosis and operates at a recovery of about 70% while producing a high recovery purified water permeate stream.

20. The desalination plant of claim 18, further wherein the nanofiltration allows scaling control when small dosages of scale inhibitors or anti-scalant is added.

21. The desalination plant of claim 18, wherein the pH elevation is from about 8.3 to about 10.5.

22. A water desalination system comprising:
- a. an intake section of a size to supply and pretreat a defined flow of a seawater or brackish feed containing sulfate for a system having a pure water output capacity,
 - b. a nanofiltration process configured to filter the defined flow to produce nanofiltration permeate at recovery above from about 70% to about 80% and sulfate concentration is reduced at least about 90%; and
 - c. a reverse osmosis process which receives the nanofiltration permeate as a feed and operates to produce a reverse osmosis permeate stream at a recovery above from about 70% to about 80% and a concentrated reverse osmosis reject stream suitable for enhanced commercial NaCl production, whereby the reverse osmosis permeate amounts to from about 49% to about 64% of the defined flow of the feed and the intake section is sized less than twice the pure water output capacity.

23. The water desalination system of claim 22 wherein the reverse osmosis reject stream is provided to a thermal concentrator to concentrate the stream to saturation and crystallization, and the thermal concentrator recovers one or more additional streams of pure water such that between from about 75% to about 95% of the nanofiltration permeate is recovered as pure water.

24. The water desalination system of claim 22 wherein the nanofiltration removes a substantial portion of bivalent metal ions present in the feed such that the reverse osmosis reject is non-scaling in the concentrator and salt is more economically purified by chemical precipitation of contaminants prior to crystallization.

25. The desalination system claim 22 wherein the system is comprised of multiple nanofiltration stages to achieve recovery above about 70%, the permeate of the nanofiltration being fed to a multi-stage reverse osmosis to achieve high water recovery while producing a selectively salt-enriched reject having a TDS of about 100,000 and suitable for salt manufacture.

26. The desalination system of claim 23 wherein a second treatment section purifies and then crystallizes salt, maintaining low impurities in the crystallizer by periodic purge to remove interfering contaminants not removed by nanofiltration.

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Kirchner et al.

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 7,621,968 B1**
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Nov. 24, 2009**

(54) **PROCESS FOR PRODUCING LOW SODIUM
SEA SALT FROM SEAWATER**

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U.S.C. 154(b) by 486 days.

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C01D 7/24 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **23/302 T; 23/304**

(58) **Field of Classification Search** **23/302 T,**
23/304; 423/499.4, 551, 554, 555
See application file for complete search history.

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

There is provided a low sodium sea salt and a method for producing the same. A first amount of natural seawater containing sodium, chloride, potassium, magnesium, sulfate and other trace minerals is introduced into a containment structure which is periodically exposed to the sun. Preferably, the containment structure is located outdoors in an arid climate with direct exposure to sunlight. An amount of water is evaporated forming a brine. An amount of sodium chloride is crystallized and an amount of the crystallized sodium chloride is removed so that the remaining brine includes substantial amounts of potassium, magnesium and sulfate. A second amount of natural seawater is combined with the remaining brine forming a diluted brine. An amount of water is evaporated from the diluted brine. Sodium chloride, potassium sulfate and magnesium sulfate is crystallized forming a low sodium sea salt whereby the sodium chloride is no more than 70 weight percent.

8 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets



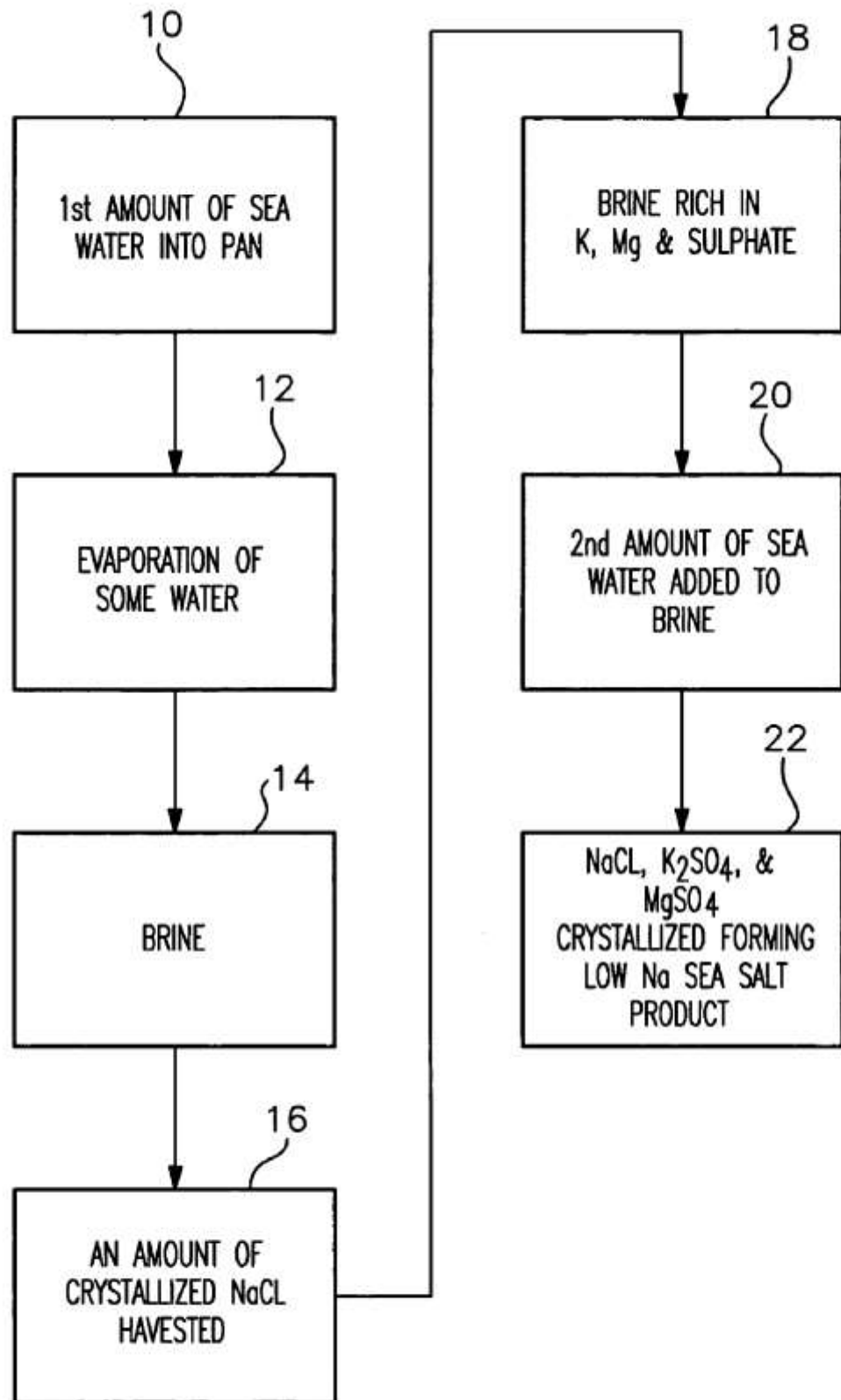


Fig. 1

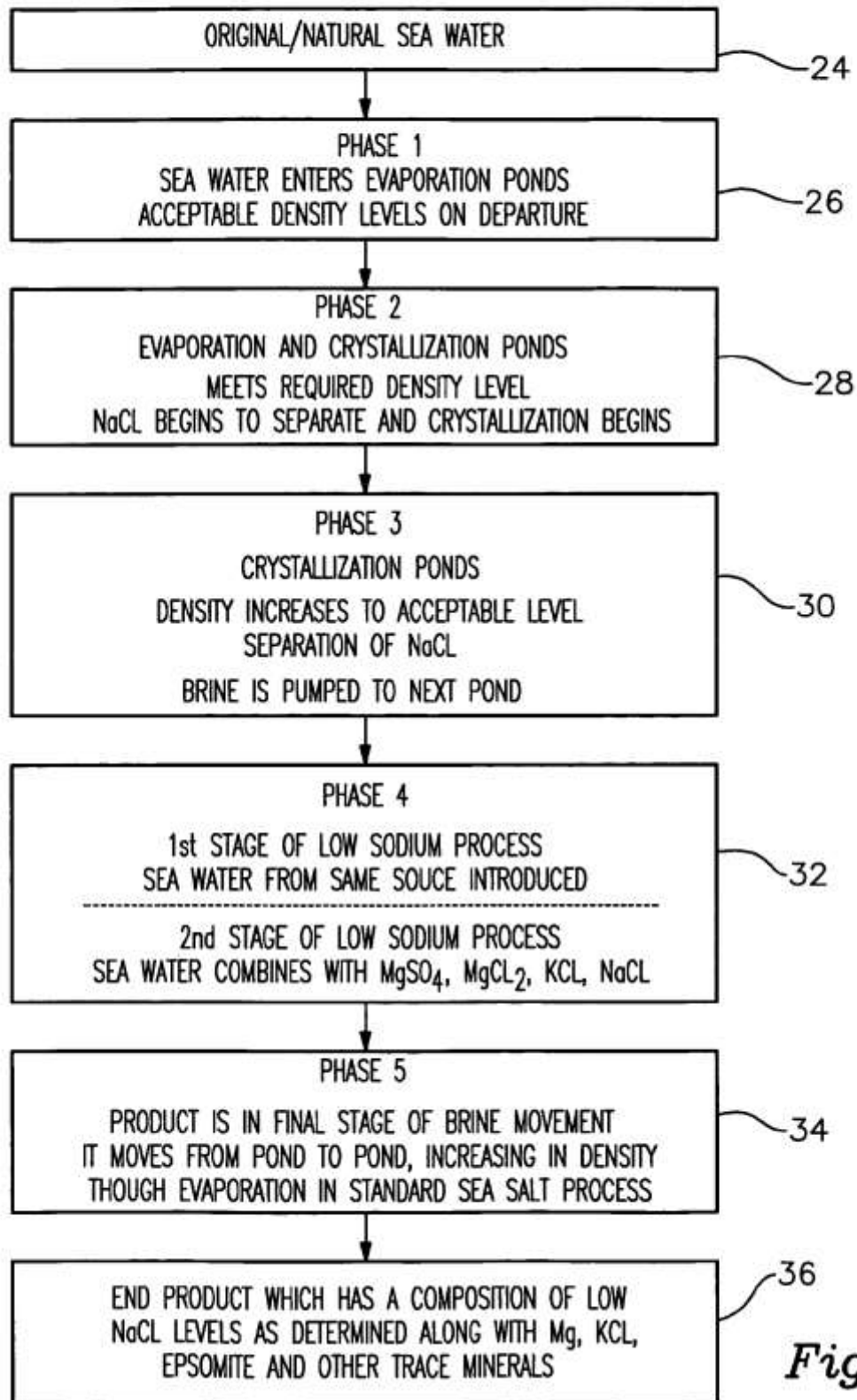


Fig. 2

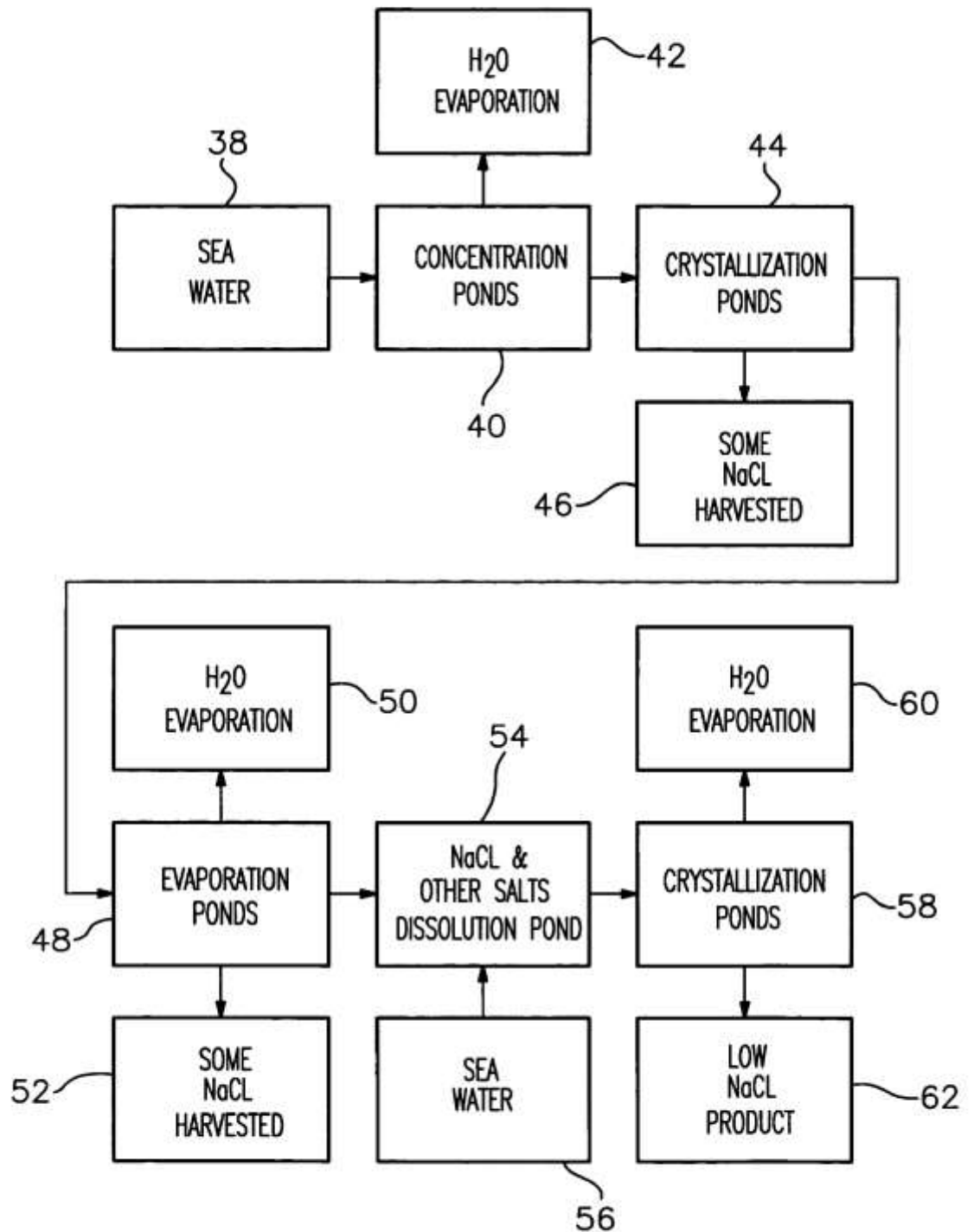


Fig. 3

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**PROCESS FOR PRODUCING LOW SODIUM
SEA SALT FROM SEAWATER**

RELATIONSHIP TO PRIOR APPLICATION

This is a U.S. non-provisional application relating to and claiming the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 60/723,807, filed Oct. 4, 2005.

BACKGROUND

Because sea salts include trace minerals which are known to promote good health, there is a substantial demand for sea salts to flavor foods. Sea salts have been produced for centuries using the traditional method of allowing natural seawater to evaporate from shallow ponds located in arid climates. As the natural seawater concentrates, crystals of salt begin to form as the solubility of them decreases. Although very complicated, this process occurs naturally and yields a coveted salt with unique chemistry and properties. The sodium chloride content of these sea salts is typically from 90 to 98%. This is due to the solubility and overwhelming concentration of sodium and chloride found in natural seawater as compared to other components such as magnesium, potassium, and sulfate.

Health concerns have prompted the introduction of low-sodium salts for food use. However, it is believed that existing products are all produced synthetically by blending purified potassium chloride with ordinary table salts to achieve the reduced sodium content. It is desirable to produce a natural sea salt with significantly reduced sodium chloride content, e.g., 30 to 70 weight percent, while maintaining the naturally occurring trace elements found in quality sea salts.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with one embodiment of this invention, there is provided a method for producing low sodium sea salt. A first amount of natural seawater containing sodium, chloride, potassium, magnesium, sulfates and other trace minerals is introduced into a containment structure. Preferably, the containment structure is located outdoors in an arid climate with direct exposure to sunlight. The containment structure is periodically exposed to the sun which evaporates some of the water and forms a brine and some of the sodium chloride is crystallized. Some of the sodium chloride is removed. The remaining brine includes substantial amounts of potassium, magnesium and sulfate. A second amount of natural seawater is combined with the remaining brine forming a diluted brine. An amount of water from the diluted brine is evaporated and sodium chloride, potassium sulfate and magnesium sulfate is crystallized forming a low sodium sea salt. The sodium chloride content is no more than 70 weight percent.

In accordance with another embodiment of this invention, there is provided a low sodium sea salt containing a plurality of grains. A substantial amount of the grains contains from 30 to 70 weight percent sodium chloride and substantial amounts of potassium and magnesium sulfates.

In accordance with yet another embodiment of this invention, there is provided a method for producing a low sodium chloride sea salt. A first amount of natural seawater containing natural amounts of sodium, potassium, magnesium and chloride is introduced into a containment structure. The containment structure is periodically exposed to the sun resulting in the evaporation of an amount of the water from the natural seawater, thus forming a brine. An amount of sodium chloride is crystallized from the brine. Some of the crystallized sodium

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chloride is removed from the remaining brine, leaving substantial amounts of potassium and magnesium in the remaining brine. A second amount of natural seawater is combined with the remaining brine forming a diluted brine. An amount of water is evaporated from the diluted brine. Sodium, potassium and magnesium salts are crystallized, forming a, preferably homogenous, low sodium sea salt whereby the sodium chloride content is no more than 70 weight percent.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The subject matter which is regarded as the invention is set forth in the independent claims. The invention, however, may be better understood in reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

FIG. 1 illustrates a flow chart in block diagram form showing one embodiment of the subject invention.

FIG. 2 illustrates a flow chart in block diagram form showing another embodiment of the subject invention.

FIG. 3 illustrates a flow chart in block diagram form showing another embodiment of the invention.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED
EMBODIMENTS**

The following describes embodiments of processes that result in an all natural sea salt with lower levels of sodium chloride (NaCl) than other sea salts. One process takes natural seawater through natural evaporation and crystallization stages and uses a unique natural method of introducing various elements that are common to natural seawater to form a finished product that has lower NaCl than regular salt formed by the natural process.

When one produces regular salt with NaCl levels in excess of ninety percent (90%) from natural seawater, there is a separation of various minerals, particularly potassium sulfate (K₂SO₄), potassium chloride (KCl), magnesium sulfate (MgSO₄), magnesium chloride (MgCl₂), and other trace minerals. A preferred process uses at least some of these elements in development of a final natural sea salt product produced from natural seawater from a single location.

Referring more particularly to FIG. 1, a first amount of natural seawater is introduced into a containment structure which is often referred to as a pond as illustrated in block 10. Some of the water in the pond evaporates due to exposure to the sun as illustrated in block 12 forming a brine as illustrated in block 14. An amount of the sodium chloride in the natural seawater crystallized and an amount of the crystallized sodium chloride is harvested as illustrated in block 16, resulting in a second brine which is rich in potassium (K), magnesium (Mg) and sulfate (SO₄) as illustrated in block 18. A second amount of natural seawater is added to this mineral rich brine as illustrated in block 20. Sodium chloride, potassium sulfate and magnesium sulfate are crystallized due to the exposure to the sun, thereby forming a low sodium sea salt product as illustrated in block 22. This second stage of crystallization yields a salt with dramatically lower sodium chloride levels because of the depletion of some of the sodium chloride which has occurred during the initial stage.

One preferred process begins with the pumping or draining of natural seawater into a series of evaporation ponds, where the natural process of wind and sun will remove water (H₂O) and increase the density of the salts and minerals in the solution.

The density of the salts in the natural seawater before entering the first pond could be about four percent (4%) depending on the location of the input channel in relation to the sea.



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Once natural seawater reaches the first evaporation pond, the density of the salt brine could range from twenty-five percent (25%) to thirty percent (30%) depending on the wind, rain, sun and general environmental conditions.

When the brine density increases, the concentration of potassium chloride (KCl), magnesium (Mg) and epsomite and other trace minerals becomes more evident and NaCl begins to separate.

The liquid containing high levels of NaCl is drained (pumped) to separate some of the NaCl from other salts and minerals and the remaining liquid is processed using the evaporation technique to determine the make up of the low NaCl end product. During this time, the degree of NaCl in relation to other elements is completed.

Use of the various elements that comprise natural seawater, which are preferably not blended but are formed by timely movement of the various brines between evaporation and crystallization ponds, a preferred composition is developed that provides the final low sodium product. The limits on the percentage of NaCl are generally governed by concentration and the process of developing the concentration of the various elements. Certain positioning of the ponds that can receive the brine for other ponds helps allow the low sodium product to naturally develop.

Once the product is completed to the point of crystallization with the proper moisture content and general structure of regular scale, the grinding and sizing process is the same as production of regular salt that comes directly from natural seawater.

FIG. 2 illustrates another preferred embodiment of the invention. As shown in blocks 24 and 26, natural seawater is first introduced into evaporation ponds. The sodium in the natural seawater flow is carefully monitored as it moves through the many ponds depending on the various minerals and density levels. As illustrated in block 28, the brine enters evaporation and crystallization ponds and is assessed so that one knows that it meets required density levels. Sodium chloride begins to separate and crystallization begins. As illustrated in block 30, the brine enters crystallization ponds. The density increases to acceptable levels. Sodium chloride begins to separate. The brine, less the separated sodium chloride, is then pumped into the next pond. As illustrated in block 32, which is a stage of the low sodium process, additional natural seawater from the same source is introduced and the natural seawater combines with the magnesium sulfate, magnesium chloride, potassium chloride and sodium chloride. As illustrated in block 34, the product is in the final stage of brine movement. It then moves from pond to pond increasing the density through evaporation in the standard sea salt process. As illustrated in block 36, the end product is a composition having low sodium chloride levels along with magnesium, potassium chloride, epsomite and other trace minerals.

The final product has a balance of the various elements to meet the required analysis for low sodium all natural sea salt.

The following is another embodiment of a process for producing low sodium salt from natural seawater. A first amount of natural seawater which contains various salts and other minerals is introduced into ponds. Some of the water is evaporated and portions of the various salts, which are mostly sodium chloride, are crystallized. Amounts of sodium chloride are removed after crystallization. The remaining liquid contains a higher concentration of non-sodium salts than that which is contained in natural seawater. The non-sodium salts are combined with a second amount of natural seawater to form a solution containing a higher concentration of non-sodium salts. The water is evaporated from the solution. The sodium salts and the non-sodium salts are crystallized form-

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ing grains containing both the sodium and non-sodium salts. The salt grains are harvested, yielding a product which is low in sodium chloride.

It is believed that the above described processes will produce a salt product having sodium chloride in the range of thirty weight percent to seventy weight percent and a preferred range of sodium chloride between forty weight percent and sixty weight percent.

The resulting low sodium sea salt includes a plurality of grains. The grains contain from 30 to 70 weight percent NaCl and substantial amounts of potassium and magnesium sulfates. Preferably, the amount of K_2SO_4 is between 14 and 31 weight percent and the amount of $MgSO_4$ is between 10 and 22 weight percent. A low sodium sea salt has been produced using methods described herein containing approximately 49 weight percent NaCl, 14.6 weight percent $MgSO_4$, and 21 weight percent K_2SO_4 .

Since the low sodium salt forms directly from the brine, the grains are uniform in composition unlike a synthetic blended product that contains a mixture of table salt or ordinary sea salt (high in NaCl) and purified potassium chloride. The low sodium salt has very similar chemistry, including the trace element profile, to traditionally produced sea salts but with dramatically less sodium chloride levels. Additionally, the potassium, magnesium and sulfate levels are substantially elevated to compensate for the reduced sodium chloride levels.

The unique, low sodium grains are very homogeneous and therefore exhibit dramatically different solubility properties than those of the synthetic low sodium salts. Specifically, they dissolve more slowly and have less of a cooling effect during solubilization in water, both of which positively effect mouth-feel and ultimately taste.

FIG. 3 shows a flow chart in block diagram form illustrating another preferred embodiment of the invention. As illustrated in blocks 38 and 40, natural seawater is introduced into concentration ponds. As illustrated in block 42, water evaporates from these ponds due to exposure to the sun. The concentrated liquid then flows to crystallization ponds as illustrated in block 44. Some of the sodium chloride is harvested from the crystallization ponds as illustrated in block 46. The reduced sodium chloride brine then enters evaporation ponds as illustrated in block 48. Additional water evaporates as illustrated in block 50. Additional crystallized sodium chloride is harvested as illustrated in block 52. The brine containing a lesser amount of sodium chloride but with other salts and minerals then proceeds to a dissolution pond as illustrated in block 54. Natural seawater is added to the dissolution pond as illustrated by block 56. The material then proceeds to crystallization ponds 58. More water is evaporated as illustrated in block 60. The material is harvested thereby yielding a low sodium chloride product as illustrated in block 62.

While the invention has been described in terms of the above embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that the invention can be practiced with modification within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method for producing low sodium sea salt comprising: introducing a first amount of natural seawater containing sodium, chloride, potassium, magnesium, sulfate and other trace minerals into a containment structure; the containment structure being exposed to the sun; evaporating an amount of water from the natural seawater forming a brine; crystallizing an amount of sodium chloride from the brine yielding a remaining brine which includes substantial amounts of potassium, magnesium, and sulfate;



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separating the remaining brine from an amount of the crystallized sodium chloride;
combining a second amount of natural seawater with the remaining brine forming a diluted brine;
evaporating an amount of water from the diluted brine; and
crystallizing sodium chloride, potassium and magnesium sulfates from the diluted brine forming a low sodium sea salt whereby the sodium chloride content is no more than 70 weight percent.

2. A method as set forth in claim 1 wherein the sodium chloride content of the low sodium sea salt is between 30 weight percent and 70 weight percent.

3. A method as set forth in claim 1 wherein the sodium chloride content of the low sodium sea salt is between 40 and 50 weight percent.

4. A method as set forth in claim 1 wherein said containment structure is located outdoors in an arid climate with direct exposure to sunlight.

5. A method for producing low sodium chloride sea salt comprising:

introducing a first amount of natural seawater containing natural amounts of sodium, potassium, magnesium and chloride into a containment structure;

the containment structure being exposed to the sun;

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evaporating an amount of the water from the natural seawater forming a brine;

crystallizing an amount of sodium chloride salt from the brine yielding a remaining brine which includes substantial amounts of potassium and magnesium;

separating the remaining brine from an amount crystallized sodium chloride salt;

combining a second amount of natural seawater with the remaining brine forming a diluted brine;

evaporating an amount of water from the diluted brine; and crystallizing sodium and potassium and magnesium salts from the diluted brine, forming a low sodium chloride sea salt whereby the sodium chloride is no more than 70 weight percent.

6. A method as set forth in claim 5 wherein the sodium chloride content of the low sodium chloride sea salt is between 30 weight percent and 70 weight percent.

7. A method as set forth in claim 5 wherein the sodium chloride content of the low sodium chloride sea salt is between 40 weight percent and 60 weight percent.

8. A method as set forth in claim 5 wherein said containment structure is located outdoors in an arid climate with direct exposure to sunlight.

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