

Improved Purification and Control of Molecular Weight of Lignin (2014-078)

Acetic Acid used as a Renewable Solvent, Purifies and Controls the Molecular Weight of Lignin

Market Overview

This renewable solvent system consisting of hot acetic acid-water mixtures can simultaneously purify, fractionate, and solvate lignins. This approach to purifying and controlling the molecular weight of lignin improves the pulping process and its output. Previous processes can be expensive and have poorly controlled molecular or chemical properties. Using traditional methods, less than 0.2 percent of the 50 million tons/yr of Kraft lignin is recovered for use in value-added products because of high ash content and poorly controlled molecular and chemical properties. Clemson University researchers have developed a hot acetic-water solvent system that can obtain ultra-pure lignin (UPL). This unique, multifunctional method for solvation will enable direct processing of lignin into microstructure-controlled, high performance carbon fibers and coatings. This form of ultra-pure lignin has potential to replace petroleum-derived polymers in a wide variety of applications.

Technical Summary

This approach uses a renewable solvent system that can simultaneously purify, fractionate and solvate lignins. The process operates at an elevated temperature in the presence of the hot acetic acid-water mixture, making the formation of a liquefied lignin phase. A key element of this process is tuning the compositions of the solvent system so as to split the lignin into two phases, a solvent-rich and a lignin-rich phase. This phase split is the key to the highly versatile purification, fractionation/molecular weight control, and solvation of the lignin. The ultra-pure lignins produced have broad potential use as carbon fiber.

Application

Carbon fibers, Industrial Food additives, Biofuels

Development Stage

Lab-scale Prototype

Advantages

- Applicable to multiple lignin recovery processes, resulting in a cost effective and easily commercialized product
- Allows adjustment of the solvent composition (i.e., the AcOH/H₂O ratio), enabling one to isolate lignin fractions from each of the liquid phases with the desired molecular weight, chemical functionality, and ash/metals purity

App Type	Country	Serial No.	Patent No.	CURF Ref. No.	Inventors
Utility	United States	14/945,846	10,053,482	2014-078	Mark Theis, Adam Klett, David Bruce

About the Inventors



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Dr. Mark Thies is the Dow Chemical Professor of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering at Clemson University. He earned his Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering from the University of Delaware. Prior to joining Clemson, he held appointments as a Humboldt Research Fellow at Technical University Hamburg-Harburg, and the Marie Curie Fellow at National Technical University of Athens (Greece). He is the author of over 70 refereed journal publications, holds three patents, and has directed over \$10 million in externally funded research. His research interest include separations, thermodynamics, and supercritical fluids.



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Dr. David Bruce is a professor and the Department Chair of Chemical Engineering at Clemson University. He earned his Ph.D. from Georgia Institute of Technology. His research interests include catalysis, kinetics, mass transfer, and molecular modeling.

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