

Claims

1. A method of converting particulate lignocellulosic material to produce volatile organic compounds and char, comprising the steps of:

forming a mixture of the particulate lignocellulosic material with a catalyst composition containing a polar organic liquid and an acid,

heating the mixture to convert a major portion of the remaining solid phase of the mixture to char, wherein the heating occurs in a reactor under a pressure less than 900 millibar and a temperature in the range of 190°C to 500°C while the mixture is subjected to shearing and compression, and wherein the heating vaporizes the catalyst composition during the conversion of the solid phase to char, and

separating the volatile organic compounds and the catalyst composition as a gaseous phase from the solid phase, wherein the gaseous phase is separated during the shearing and compression,

wherein the polar organic liquid is a room temperature ionic liquid having the general formula A_xM_y , where A is an organic cation, M is an anion drawn from halide, sulfate, or organic anions, and x and y are integers,

or wherein the polar organic liquid is a dipolar aprotic liquid.

2. The method according to claim 1 wherein the mixture is subjected to shearing and compression by a screw reactor while steam is injected into the mixture.

3. The method according to claim 1 or 2 wherein A is a dialkyl imidazolium or alkyl pyridinium, and M is halide, sulfate, formate, acetate, trifluoromethanesulfonate, or bis (trifluoromethane) sulformide.

4. The method according to claim 3 wherein the dipolar aprotic liquid comprises a dialkyl formamide, N-alkyl morpholine oxide, dialkyl sulfoxide or dialkyl sulfone having the general chemical formula $R_1-SO_2-R_2$ where R_1 and R_2 are alkyl groups containing between one and ten carbon atoms, including cyclic sulfones in which R_1 and R_2 form part of a cyclic polymethylene ring.

5. The method according to any one of claims 1 to 4 wherein the polar organic liquid comprises tetramethylene sulfone.
6. The method according to any one of claims 1 to 5 wherein the acid is chosen from the group consisting of orthophosphoric acid, sulfuric acid, methanesulfonic acid, trifluoromethanesulfonic acid, hydrohalic acids, nitric acid and formic acid.
7. The method according to any one of claims 1 to 6 wherein the acid comprises 0.1% to 10% by weight of the catalyst composition.
8. The method according to claim 1 wherein the weight of the catalyst composition in the mixture is one to ten times the weight of the particulate lignocellulosic material.
9. The method according to any one of claims 1 to 8 wherein the mixture is subjected to shearing and compression by any one or more of single of twin-screw presses, rolling mills, crushing mills, shredding mills and hammer mills.
10. The method according to claim 9 wherein the volatile organic compounds comprise levoglucosenone.
11. The method according to claim 10 wherein the heating of the mixture occurs in a rotating screw reactor having an inlet for the mixture and an outlet for char, and the pressure in the reactor is maintained within the range 50 to 150 millibar, with the temperature in the reactor being controlled along the reactor's length such that temperature of the reactor increases from a lower temperature closer to the inlet to a higher temperature closer to the outlet.
12. An apparatus for converting lignocellulosic materials into volatile organic liquids and char comprising,

a mixing and comminution station for mixing the lignocellulosic material with a catalyst composition and comminuting the lignocellulosic material,

a screw feeder reactor configured to receive a mixture from the mixing and comminution station through an inlet and to discharge char from an outlet located downstream of the inlet,

an evacuation pump configured to reduce pressure in the reactor to less than 900 millibar,

a feed assembly configured to move the mixture from the inlet to the outlet in order to discharge char from the outlet whilst subjecting the mixture to shearing and compression,

a heating assembly for heating the mixture in the reactor to a temperature between 190°C and 500°C as the mixture travels through the reactor,

a steam assembly configured to inject steam into the reactor in at least one location downstream of the inlet, and

a volatiles condensation assembly for recovering catalyst and separating volatile chemical products from the reactor.

13. The apparatus according to claim 12 also comprising a gas-solid separation system and a fractional distillation system

CLAIMS

1. A method of converting particulate lignocellulosic material to produce volatile organic compounds and char, comprising the steps of:

forming a mixture of the particulate lignocellulosic material with a catalyst composition containing a polar organic liquid and an acid,

heating the mixture to convert a major portion of any remaining solid phase of the mixture to char and to vaporize the volatile fraction of the catalyst composition during the conversion of the solid phase to char,

carrying out the heating in a screw reactor under a pressure less than 900 millibar and a temperature in the range of 190°C to 500°C while the mixture is subjected to shearing and compression by the screw reactor,

injecting steam into the screw reactor during the shearing and compression, and

separating the volatile organic compounds and the volatile fraction of the catalyst composition as a gaseous phase from the solid phase during the shearing and compression.

2. The method according to claim 1 wherein the polar organic liquid is chosen from room temperature ionic liquids having the general formula A_xM_y , where A is an organic cation, M is an anion drawn from halide, sulfate, or organic anions, and x and y are integers, or, a dipolar aprotic liquid.

3. The method according to claim 2 wherein A is dialkyl imidazolium, or alkyl pyridinium and M is halide, sulfate, formate, acetate, trifluoromethanesulfonate or bis (trifluoromethane) sulfonimide.

4. The method according to claim 3 wherein the dipolar aprotic liquid comprises a dialkyl formamide, N-alkyl morpholine oxide, dialkyl sulfoxide or dialkyl sulfone having the general chemical formula $R_1-SO_2-R_2$ where R_1 and R_2 are alkyl groups containing

between one and ten carbon atoms, including cyclic sulfones in which R_1 and R_2 form part of a cyclic polymethylene ring.

5. The method according to claim 1 wherein the polar organic liquid comprises tetramethylene sulfone.

6. The method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the acid is chosen from orthophosphoric acid, sulfuric acid, methanesulfonic acid, trifluoromethanesulfonic acid, hydrohalic acids, nitric acid and formic acid.

7. The method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the acid comprises, 0.1% to 10% by weight of the catalyst composition.

8. The method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the weight of the catalyst composition in the mixture is one to ten times the weight of the particulate lignocellulosic material.

9. The method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the heating of the mixture is carried out in a rotating screw reactor having an inlet for the mixture and an outlet for char in which the pressure is maintained within the range 50 to 150 millibar with temperature in the reactor being controlled along the reactor's length such that the temperature of the reactor increases from a lower temperature closer to the inlet to a higher temperature closer to the outlet.

10. The method according to any one of the preceding claims wherein the volatile organic compounds comprise levoglucosenone.

11. Levoglucosenone when produced by the method of any one of the preceding claims.

12. Apparatus for converting lignocellulosic materials into volatile organic liquids and char comprising,

a mixing and comminution station for mixing the lignocellulosic material with a catalyst composition and comminuting the lignocellulosic material,

an elongate tubular reactor arranged to receive mixture from the mixing and comminution station through an inlet and to discharge char from an outlet located downstream of the inlet,

an evacuation pump arranged to reduce pressure in the reactor to below 900 millibar,

a screw feeder arranged to subject the mixture to shearing and compression and to move the mixture from the inlet to the outlet so as to discharge char from the outlet,

a heating assembly for heating the mixture in the reactor to a temperature in the range 190°C to 500°C as it travels through the reactor,

a steam assembly arranged to inject steam into the reactor at at least one location downstream of the inlet, and

a volatiles condensation assembly arranged to recover catalyst and separate volatile chemical products from the reactor.

13. The apparatus according to claim 12 comprising a gas-solid separation system and a fractional distillation system.