

SPIRALLY WOUND MEMBRANE SEPARATOR ASSEMBLY

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This Application claims priority to currently pending US Provisional Application No. USSN 61/106,219, Docket No. 222206-1, filed October 17, 2008.

BACKGROUND

[0002] This invention includes embodiments that generally relate to separator assemblies. In various embodiments, the invention relates to spiral flow separator assemblies. The invention also includes methods for making separator assemblies.

[0003] Conventional separator assemblies typically comprise a folded multilayer membrane assembly disposed around a porous exhaust conduit. The folded multilayer membrane assembly comprises a feed carrier layer in fluid contact with the active-surface of a membrane layer having an active surface and a passive surface. The folded multilayer membrane assembly also comprises a permeate carrier layer in contact with the passive surface of the membrane layer and a porous exhaust conduit. The folded membrane layer structure ensures contact between the feed carrier layer and the membrane layer without bringing the feed carrier layer into contact with the permeate carrier layer or the porous exhaust conduit. During operation, a feed solution containing a solute is brought into contact with the feed carrier layer of the multilayer membrane assembly which transmits the feed solution to the active surface of the membrane layer which modifies and transmits a portion of the feed solution as a permeate to the permeate carrier layer. The feed solution also serves to disrupt solute accretion at the active surface of the membrane layer and transport excess solute out of the multilayer membrane assembly. The permeate passes via the permeate carrier layer into the porous exhaust conduit which collects the permeate. Separator assemblies comprising folded multilayer membrane assemblies have been used in various fluid purification processes, including reverse osmosis, ultrafiltration, and microfiltration processes.

[0004] Folded multilayer membrane assemblies may be manufactured by bringing the active surface of a membrane layer having an active surface and a passive surface into contact with both surfaces of a feed carrier layer, the membrane layer being folded to create a pocket-like structure which envelops the feed carrier layer. The passive surface of the membrane layer is brought into contact with one or more permeate carrier layers to produce a membrane stack assembly in which the folded membrane layer is disposed between the feed carrier layer and one or more permeate carrier layers. A plurality of such membrane stack assemblies, each in contact with at least one common permeate carrier layer, is then wound around a porous exhaust conduit in contact with the common permeate carrier layer to provide the separator assembly comprising the multilayer membrane assembly and the porous exhaust conduit. The edges of the membrane stack assemblies are appropriately sealed to prevent direct contact of the feed solution with the permeate carrier layer. A serious weakness separator assemblies comprising a folded multilayer membrane assembly is that the folding of the membrane layer may result in loss of membrane function leading to uncontrolled contact between the feed solution and the permeate carrier layer.

[0005] Thus, there exists a need for further improvements in both the design and manufacture of separator assemblies comprising one or more multilayer membrane assemblies. Particularly in the realm of water purification for human consumption, there is a compelling need for more robust and reliable separator assemblies which are both efficient and cost effective.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

[0006] In one embodiment, the present invention provides a separator assembly comprising a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits and not comprising a concentrate exhaust conduit; and a membrane stack assembly comprising at least one feed carrier layer, at least two permeate carrier layers, and at least two membrane layers, the membrane layers being disposed between the feed carrier layer and the permeate carrier layers; wherein the permeate exhaust conduits are separated by a first portion of the membrane stack assembly, and wherein a second portion of the membrane stack assembly forms a multilayer membrane

assembly disposed around the central core element, and wherein the feed carrier layer is not in contact with a permeate exhaust conduit, and wherein the permeate carrier layers are in contact with at least one permeate exhaust conduit.

[0007] In another embodiment, the present invention provides a salt separator assembly comprising a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits and not comprising a concentrate exhaust conduit; and a membrane stack assembly comprising at least one feed carrier layer, at least two permeate carrier layers, and at least two salt-rejecting membrane layers, the salt-rejecting membrane layers being disposed between the feed carrier layer and the permeate carrier layers; wherein the permeate exhaust conduits are separated by a first portion of the membrane stack assembly, and wherein a second portion of the membrane stack assembly forms a multilayer membrane assembly disposed around the central core element, and wherein the feed carrier layer is not in contact with a permeate exhaust conduit, and wherein the permeate carrier layers are in contact with at least one permeate exhaust conduit.

[0008] In yet another embodiment, the present invention provides a spiral flow reverse osmosis apparatus comprising (a) a pressurizable housing; and (b) a separator assembly comprising a membrane stack assembly and a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits and not comprising a concentrate exhaust conduit; wherein the membrane stack assembly comprises at least one feed carrier layer, at least two permeate carrier layers, and at least two membrane layers, the membrane layers being disposed between the feed carrier layer and the permeate carrier layers, and wherein the permeate exhaust conduits are separated by a first portion of the membrane stack assembly, and herein a second portion of the membrane stack assembly forms a multilayer membrane assembly disposed around the central core element, and wherein the feed carrier layer is not in contact with a permeate exhaust conduit, and wherein the permeate carrier layers are in contact with at least one permeate exhaust conduit, and wherein the pressurizable housing comprises at least one feed inlet configured to provide a feed solution to the feed carrier layer, and wherein the pressurizable housing comprises at least one permeate

exhaust outlet coupled to the permeate exhaust conduits, and at least one concentrate exhaust outlet.

[0009] These and other features, aspects, and advantages of the present invention may be understood more readily by reference to the following detailed description.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING FIGURES

[0010] These and other features, aspects, and advantages of the present invention will become better understood when the following detailed description is read with reference to the accompanying drawings in which like characters may represent like parts throughout the drawings.

[0011] Fig. 1 illustrates the components of a conventional separator assembly and method of its assembly.

[0012] Fig. 2 illustrates a membrane stack assembly and central core element in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0013] Fig. 3 illustrates a separator assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0014] Fig. 4 illustrates a spiral flow reverse osmosis apparatus components thereof in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0015] Fig. 5 illustrates a method of making a separator assembly in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0016] Fig. 6 illustrates a pressurizable housing component of an apparatus provided by the present invention.

[0017] Fig. 7 illustrates a permeate exhaust conduit in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0018] Fig. 8 illustrates membrane stack assemblies and a central core element in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0019] Fig. 9 illustrates membrane stack assemblies and a central core element in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0020] Fig. 10 illustrates a central core element in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

[0021] Fig. 11 illustrates a central core element in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0022] In the following specification and the claims, which follow, reference will be made to a number of terms, which shall be defined to have the following meanings.

[0023] The singular forms “a”, “an”, and “the” include plural referents unless the context clearly dictates otherwise.

[0024] “Optional” or “optionally” means that the subsequently described event or circumstance may or may not occur, and that the description includes instances where the event occurs and instances where it does not.

[0025] 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” and “substantially”, are not to be 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. Here and throughout the specification and claims, range limitations may be combined and/or interchanged, such ranges are identified and include all the sub-ranges contained therein unless context or language indicates otherwise.

[0026] As noted, in one embodiment, the present invention provides a separator assembly comprising a central core element and a membrane stack assembly. The central core element comprises at least two permeate exhaust conduits and does not

comprise a concentrate exhaust conduit. The membrane stack assembly comprises at least one feed carrier layer, at least two permeate carrier layers, and at least two membrane layers, the membrane layers being disposed between the feed carrier layer and the permeate carrier layers. In various embodiments of the present invention the permeate exhaust conduits are separated by a first portion of the membrane stack assembly disposed within the central core element. A second portion of the second portion of the membrane stack assembly forms a multilayer membrane assembly disposed around the central core element. The membrane stack assembly is disposed within and around the central core element such that the feed carrier layer is not in contact with a permeate exhaust conduit, and such that permeate carrier layers are in contact with at least one permeate exhaust conduit.

[0027] As noted, the central core element comprises at least two permeate exhaust conduits and does not comprise a concentrate exhaust conduit. An exhaust conduit may be a permeate exhaust conduit or a concentrate exhaust conduit depending on which layer or layers of the membrane stack assembly it is in contact with. A layer is “in contact” with an exhaust conduit when the layer is configured to permit transfer of fluid from the layer into the conduit without passing through an intervening membrane layer. A permeate exhaust conduit is in contact with a permeate carrier layer surface (or in certain embodiments a membrane layer surface) in such a way that permeate may pass from the permeate carrier layer into the permeate exhaust conduit. A concentrate exhaust conduit must be in contact with a concentrate carrier layer surface in such a way that concentrate. Each permeate exhaust conduit is typically a porous tube running the length of the separator assembly, although other configurations may fall within the meaning of the term permeate exhaust conduit, for example a longitudinally grooved structure, which structure may or may not be cylindrical, running the length of the separator assembly. Suitable porous tubes which may serve as the permeate exhaust conduit include perforated metal tubes, perforated plastic tubes, perforated ceramic tubes and the like. In one embodiment, the permeate exhaust conduit is not perforated but is sufficiently porous to allow passage of fluid from the permeate carrier layer into the interior of the permeate exhaust conduit. Fluid passing from the permeate carrier layer into the permeate exhaust conduit is at

times herein referred to as “permeate” (or “the permeate”). In one embodiment, the central core element comprises two permeate exhaust conduits each of which is a porous half-cylinder shaped tube. In an alternate embodiment, the central core element comprises two permeate exhaust conduits each of which is a porous half-octagon shaped tube. In another embodiment, the central core element comprises two permeate exhaust conduits each of which is a porous half-decahedron shaped tube. In yet another embodiment, the central core element comprises two permeate exhaust conduits each of which is a porous half-tetradecahedron shaped tube. In one embodiment, the central core element comprises at least two permeate exhaust conduits at least one of which is a porous teardrop shaped tube. The permeate exhaust conduits may at each occurrence within a separator assembly have the same or different shapes. In one embodiment, the separator assembly comprises one or more permeate exhaust conduits having a shape different from another permeate exhaust conduit present in the same separator assembly. In another embodiment, all of the permeate exhaust conduits present in a separator assembly have the same shape.

[0028] As used herein, the term “multilayer membrane assembly” refers to a second portion of the membrane stack assembly disposed around the central core element. FIG. 2 disclosed herein illustrates first and second portions (231 and 232) of the membrane stack assembly 120. The multilayer membrane assembly is thus a combination of at least one feed carrier layer, at least two permeate carrier layers, and at least two membrane layers disposed around a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits and not comprising a concentrate exhaust conduit.

[0029] In one embodiment, the multilayer membrane assembly may be prepared by disposing a first portion of a membrane stack assembly within a central core element and then rotating the central core element, thereby winding a second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element. As is disclosed in detail herein, the configuration of the membrane stack assembly and the disposing of the membrane stack assembly within the central core element are such that upon winding of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element to provide a wound structure and securing of the free ends of the membrane stack assembly after winding,

a separator assembly comprising a multilayer membrane assembly disposed around the central core element is obtained. Those skilled in the art will appreciate the close relationship, in certain embodiments, between the membrane stack assembly and the multilayer membrane assembly, and that the membrane stack assembly is the precursor of the multilayer membrane assembly. It is convenient to regard the membrane stack assembly as “unwound” and the multilayer membrane assembly as “wound”. It should be emphasized, however, that as defined herein a multilayer membrane assembly is not limited to the “wound” form of one or more membrane stack assemblies disposed within a central core element as other means of disposing the second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element may become available. In various embodiments, the separator assembly provided by the present invention comprises a multilayer membrane assembly comprising a second portion of one or more membrane stack assemblies radially disposed around a central core element such that the component membrane layers of the multilayer membrane assembly are free of folds or creases. In various embodiments, the separator assembly provided by the present invention is characterized by a permeate carrier layer flow path length which is significantly shorter than the corresponding permeate carrier layer flow path length in a conventional separator assembly. The length of the permeate carrier layer flow path is an important factor affecting the magnitude of the pressure drop across the separator assembly. Thus, one of the many advantages provided by the present invention is greater latitude in the selection of useful operating conditions. As will become apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art after reading this disclosure, the present invention also offers significant advantages in terms of ease and cost of manufacture of separator assemblies generally.

[0030] As noted, the membrane stack assembly and multilayer membrane assembly comprise at least one feed carrier layer. Materials suitable for use as the feed carrier layer include flexible sheet-like materials through which a feed solution may flow. In various embodiments of the present invention, the feed carrier layer is configured such that flow of a feed solution through the feed carrier layer occurs along the axis of the separator assembly from points on a first surface of the separator assembly (the

“feed surface”) where the feed carrier layer is in contact with the feed solution and terminating at a second surface of the separator assembly where a concentrate emerges (the “concentrate surface”) from the feed carrier layer. The feed carrier layer may comprise structures which promote turbulent flow at the surface of the membrane layer in contact with the feed carrier layer as a means of preventing excessive solute build-up (accretion) at the membrane surface. In one embodiment, the feed carrier layer is comprised of a perforated plastic sheet. In another embodiment, the feed carrier layer is comprised of a perforated metal sheet. In yet another embodiment, the feed carrier layer comprises a porous composite material. In yet another embodiment, the feed carrier layer is a plastic fabric. In yet another embodiment, the feed carrier layer is a plastic screen. The feed carrier layer may be comprised of the same material as the permeate carrier layer or a material different from that used for the permeate carrier layer. In various embodiments of the present invention the feed carrier layer is not in contact with an exhaust conduit of the separator assembly.

[0031] As noted, the membrane stack assembly and the multilayer membrane assembly comprise at least two permeate carrier layers. Materials suitable for use as the permeate carrier layers include flexible sheet-like materials through which a permeate may flow. In various embodiments of the present invention, the permeate carrier layers are configured such that during operation permeate flows in a spiral path along the permeate carrier layer to one of at least two permeate exhaust conduits. In one embodiment, the permeate carrier layer is comprised of a perforated plastic sheet. In another embodiment, the permeate carrier layer is comprised of a perforated metal sheet. In yet another embodiment, the permeate carrier layer comprises a porous composite. In yet another embodiment, the permeate carrier layer is a plastic fabric. In yet another embodiment, the permeate carrier layer is a plastic screen. The permeate carrier layers of the separator assembly provided by the present invention may be made of the same or different materials, for example one permeate carrier layer may be a plastic fabric while the other permeate carrier layer is a natural material such as wool fabric. In addition a single permeate carrier layer may comprise different materials at different locations along the permeate flow path through the permeate carrier layer. In one embodiment, for example, the present

invention provides a separator assembly comprising a permeate carrier layer a portion of which is a polyethylene fabric and another portion of which is polypropylene fabric.

[0032] As noted, in various embodiments, the separator assemblies provided by the present invention comprise at least two membrane layers. Membranes and materials suitable for use as membrane layers are well-known in the art. U.S. Patent No. 4,277,344, for example, discloses a semipermeable membrane prepared from the reaction of an aromatic polyamine with a polyacyl halide which has been found to be effective in reverse osmosis systems directed at rejecting sodium, magnesium and calcium cations, and chlorine, sulfate and carbonate anions. U.S. Patent No. 4,277,344, for example, discloses a membrane prepared from the reaction of an aromatic polyacyl halide with a bifunctional aromatic amine to afford a polymeric material which has been found useful in the preparation of membrane layers effective in reverse osmosis systems directed at rejecting certain salts, such as nitrates. A host of technical references describing the preparation of various membranes and materials suitable for use as the membrane layer in various embodiments of the present invention are known to those of ordinary skill in the art. In addition, membranes suitable for use as the membrane layer in various embodiments of the present invention are well known and widely available articles of commerce.

[0033] In one embodiment, at least one of the membrane layers comprises a functionalized surface and an unfunctionalized surface. In one embodiment, the functionalized surface of the membrane layer represents an active surface of the membrane and the unfunctionalized surface of the membrane layer represents a passive surface of the membrane. In an alternate embodiment, the functionalized surface of the membrane layer represents a passive surface of the membrane and the unfunctionalized surface of the membrane layer represents an active surface of the membrane. In various embodiments of the present invention, the active surface of the membrane layer is typically in contact with the feed carrier layer and serves to prevent or retard the transmission of one or more solutes present in the feed solution across the membrane to the permeate carrier layer.

[0034] As used herein the phrase “not in contact” means not in “direct contact”. For example, two layers of the membrane stack assembly, or the multilayer membrane assembly, are not in contact when there is an intervening layer between them despite the fact that the two layers are in fluid communication, since in general a fluid may pass from one layer to the other via the intervening layer. As used herein the phrase “in contact” means in “direct contact”. For example, adjacent layers in the membrane stack assembly, or the multilayer membrane assembly, are said to be “in contact”. Similarly a layer touching the surface of an exhaust conduit, as for example when a layer is wound around the exhaust conduit, is said to be “in contact” with the exhaust conduit provided that fluid may pass from the layer into the exhaust conduit. As a further illustration, the permeate carrier layer is said to be in contact with the permeate exhaust conduit when the permeate carrier layer is in direct contact with the permeate exhaust conduit, as for example when the permeate carrier layer is wound around the permeate exhaust conduit with no intervening layers between the surface of the permeate exhaust conduit and the permeate carrier layer. Similarly, the feed carrier layer is said to be not in contact with the permeate exhaust conduit, as when, for example, the permeate carrier layer is in direct contact with the permeate exhaust conduit and the permeate carrier layer is separated from the feed carrier layer by the membrane layer. In general, the feed carrier layer has no point of contact with the permeate exhaust conduit.

[0035] In one embodiment, the multilayer membrane assembly is radially disposed around the central core element. As used herein the phrase “radially disposed” means that a second portion of the membrane stack assembly comprising at least one feed carrier layer, at least two membrane layers, and at least two permeate carrier layers is wound around a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits in a manner that limits the creation of folds or creases in the membrane layers. In general, the greater the extent to which a membrane layer is deformed by folding or creasing, the greater the likelihood of damage to the active surface of the membrane, loss of membrane function, and membrane integrity. Conventional separator assemblies typically comprise a highly folded multilayer membrane assembly comprising multiple folds in the membrane layer. Assuming the unfolded

membrane layer represents a 180 degree straight angle, a highly folded membrane layer can be described as having a fold characterized by a reflex angle of greater than about 340 degrees. In one embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention contains no membrane layer folds characterized by a reflex angle greater than 340 degrees. In an alternate embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention contains no membrane layer folds characterized by a reflex angle greater than 300 degrees. In yet another embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention contains no membrane layer folds characterized by a reflex angle greater than 270 degrees.

[0036] In one embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention may be used as a salt separator assembly for separating salt from water. The feed solution may be, for example, seawater or brackish water. Typically the separator assembly is contained within a cylindrical housing which permits initial contact between the feed solution and the feed carrier layer only at one end of the separator assembly. This is typically accomplished by securing the separator assembly within the cylindrical housing with, for example one or more gaskets, which prevent contact of the feed solution with surfaces of the separator assembly other than the feed surface. To illustrate this concept the separator assembly can be thought of as a cylinder having a first surface and a second surface each having a surface area of πr^2 , wherein "r" is the radius of the cylinder defined by the separator assembly, and a third surface having a surface area of $2\pi rh$ wherein "h" is the length of the cylinder. The separator assembly can by various means be made to fit snugly into a cylindrical housing such that a feed solution entering the cylindrical housing from one end encounters only the first surface (the "feed surface") of the separator assembly and does not contact the second or third surfaces of the separator assembly without passing through the separator assembly. Thus, the feed solution enters the separator assembly at points on the first surface of the separator assembly where the feed carrier layer is in contact with the feed solution, the edges of the membrane stack assembly being sealed to prevent contact and transmission of the feed solution from the first surface of separator assembly by the permeate carrier layer. Thus, the feed solution enters the separator assembly at the "feed surface" (first surface) of the separator

assembly and travels along the length (axis) of the separator assembly during which passage, the feed solution is modified by its contact with the membrane layer through which a portion of the feed solution (“permeate” or “the permeate”) passes and contacts the permeate carrier layer. The feed solution is said to flow axially through the separator assembly until it emerges as “concentrate” (also referred to at times as brine) at the second surface of the separator assembly, sometimes referred to herein as the “concentrate surface”. The flow of feed solution through the separator assembly is at times herein referred to as “cross-flow”, and the term “cross-flow” may be used interchangeably with the term “axial flow” when referring to the flow of feed solution. One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that as a feed solution, for example seawater, travels from an initial point of contact between the feed solution with the feed carrier layer on the feed surface (“first surface”) of the separator assembly toward the concentrate surface (“second surface”) , the concentration of salt present in the fluid in the feed carrier layer is increased through the action of the salt-rejecting membrane layer in contact with the feed solution passing through the feed carrier layer, and that the concentrate reaching the concentrate surface will be characterized by a higher concentration of salt than the seawater used as the feed solution.

[0037] The roles and function of the permeate exhaust conduits and permeate carrier layers may be illustrated using the salt separator assembly example above. Thus, in one embodiment, the separator assembly may be used as a salt separator assembly for separating salt from water. The feed solution, for example seawater, is contacted with the feed surface (first surface) of a cylindrical separator assembly contained within a pressurizable housing. The separator assembly is configured such that the permeate carrier layer cannot transmit feed solution from the feed surface to a permeate exhaust conduit. As the feed solution passes through the feed carrier layer it contacts the salt-rejecting membrane layer which modifies and transmits a fluid comprising one or more components of the feed solution to the permeate carrier layer. This fluid transmitted by the salt-rejecting membrane layer, called permeate (or “the permeate”), passes along the permeate carrier layer until it reaches that portion of the permeate carrier layer in contact with the exterior of the permeate exhaust conduit, where the

permeate is transmitted from the permeate carrier layer into the interior of the permeate exhaust conduit. Flow of permeate through the permeate carrier layers is referred to as “spiral flow” since the permeate tends to follow a spiral path defined by the permeate carrier layer toward the permeate exhaust conduit. One of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that as a feed solution, is modified and transmitted by the salt-rejecting membrane layer into the permeate carrier layer, the concentration of salt in the permeate is reduced relative to the feed solution due to the salt-rejecting action of the membrane layer.

[0038] In one embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention comprises two permeate exhaust conduits. In an alternate embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention comprises three or more permeate exhaust conduits. In one embodiment, the separator assembly comprises from two to eight permeate exhaust conduits. In another embodiment, the separator assembly comprises from 2 to 6 permeate exhaust conduits. In yet another embodiment, the separator assembly comprises from three to four permeate exhaust conduits.

[0039] In one embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention comprises a single feed carrier layer. In an alternate embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention comprises a plurality of feed carrier layers. In one embodiment, the number of feed carrier layers is in a range of from one layer to six layers. In another embodiment, the number of feed carrier layers is in a range of from two layers to five layers. In still another embodiment, the number of feed carrier layers is in a range of from three layers to four layers.

[0040] In one embodiment, the separator assembly comprises at least two permeate carrier layers. In one embodiment, the number of permeate carrier layers is in a range of from two layers to six layers. In another embodiment, the number of permeate carrier layers is in a range of from 2 layers to five layers. In still another embodiment, the number of permeate carrier layers is in a range of from three layers to four layers.

[0041] In one embodiment, the separator assembly provided by the present invention comprises at least two membrane layers. In one embodiment, the number of membrane layers is in a range of from two layers to six layers. In another

embodiment, the number of membrane layers is in a range of from two layers to five layers. In still another embodiment, the number of membrane layers is in a range of from three layers to four layers. In one embodiment, the number of membrane layers is directly proportional to the active surface area required to be provided by the separator assembly.

[0042] Referring to Fig. 1, the figure represents the components of and method of making a conventional separator assembly. A conventional membrane stack assembly 120 comprises a folded membrane layer 112 wherein a feed carrier layer 116 is sandwiched between the two halves of the folded membrane layer 112. The folded membrane layer 112 is disposed such that an active side (not shown in figure) of the folded membrane layer is in contact with the feed carrier layer 116. An active side of the membrane layer 112 is at times herein referred to as “the active surface” of the membrane layer. The folded membrane layer 112 is enveloped by permeate carrier layers 110 such that the passive side (not shown in figure) of the membrane layer 112 is in contact with the permeate carrier layers 110. A passive side of the membrane layer 112 is at times herein referred to as “the passive surface” of the membrane layer. Typically, an adhesive sealant (not shown) is used to isolate the feed carrier layer from the permeate carrier layer and prevent direct contact between a feed solution (not shown) and the permeate carrier layer. A plurality of membrane stack assemblies 120 wherein each of the permeate layers 110 is connected to a common permeate carrier layer 111 in contact with the permeate exhaust conduit 118 is wound around the permeate exhaust conduit 118, for example by rotating the permeate exhaust conduit 118 in direction 122, and the resultant wound structure is appropriately sealed to provide a conventional separator assembly. The permeate exhaust conduit comprises openings 113 to permit fluid communication between the permeate exhaust conduit channel 119 and the common permeate carrier layer 111. As the membrane stack assemblies are wound around the permeate exhaust conduit 118, the reflex angle defined by the folded membrane layer 112 approaches 360 degrees.

[0043] Referring to Fig. 2, figure 2a represents cross-section view at midpoint 200 of a first portion 231 of a membrane stack assembly 120 disposed within a central core element comprising two permeate exhaust conduits 118, and a second portion 232 of

the membrane stack assembly 120 disposed outside of the central core element in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. The first portion of membrane stack assembly separates the permeate exhaust conduits 118 of the central core element. The membrane stack assembly 120 comprises two permeate carrier layers 110, two membrane layers 112, and a single feed carrier layer 116. Rotation of the central core element comprising permeate exhaust conduits 118 in direction 222 affords the partially wound structure 240 shown in figure 2b in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Partially wound structure 240 is obtained by rotating the central core element of the assembly shown in figure 2a through a 180 degree rotation in direction 222. That portion (the second portion 232) of the membrane stack assembly 120 which is wound around the central core element becomes the multilayer membrane assembly of the completed separator assembly. A separator assembly 300 (FIG. 3) is obtained by completely winding the second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element and securing the ends of the membrane stack assembly.

[0044] Referring to Fig. 3., the figure represents a cross-section view at midpoint of a separator assembly 300 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. Separator assembly 300 comprises a central core element comprising two permeate exhaust conduits 118, each permeate exhaust conduit 118 defining an interior channel 119. Separator assembly 300 comprises a membrane stack assembly 120 (Fig. 2) comprising one feed carrier layer 116, two permeate carrier layers 110, and two membrane layers 112, the membrane layers 112 being disposed between the feed carrier layer 116 and the permeate carrier layers 110. The permeate exhaust conduits 118 of the central core element are separated by a first portion 231 (Fig. 2a) of the membrane stack assembly. A second portion 232 (Fig. 2a) of the membrane stack assembly forms a multilayer membrane assembly disposed around the central core element. Fig. 3 shows clearly that the feed carrier layer is not in contact with either of the permeate exhaust conduits or the permeate carrier layers. The ends of membrane stack assembly 120 are secured with sealing portion 316. Sealing portion 316 is a transverse line of sealant (typically a curable glue) which seals the outermost permeate carrier layer to the two adjacent membrane layers 112, said transverse line running the length of the separator assembly 300. The “third surface” of the separator

assembly 300 illustrated in Fig. 3 is wrapped in tape 340. Also featured in the separator assembly 300 illustrated in Fig. 3 are adhesive lines 325 which secure the innermost ends of the permeate carrier layers 110 to the permeate exhaust conduits 118. Transmission of feed solution from the feed surface (See Fig. 4) of the separator assembly 300 by either the permeate carrier layer or the membrane layer may be prevented by the presence of a sealant applied near the edge of the membrane layer and permeate carrier layer. Typically the sealant is applied to the passive surface of the membrane layer 112 which when contacted with the adjacent permeate carrier layer, the sealant penetrates and seals the edge of permeate carrier layer. The sealant does not typically penetrate through the active surface of the membrane layer and thus does not come into contact with either the active surface (not shown) of the membrane layer 112 or the feed carrier layer 116. A variety of adhesive sealants, such as glues and/or double-sided tapes may be used to secure the ends of the multilayer membrane assembly to one another (sealing portion 316), the permeate carrier layers to the permeate exhaust conduits (transverse sealant line 325), and the edges of the membrane layers and permeate carrier layers to one another at the feed surface and the concentrate surface of the separator assembly (See Fig. 5, Method Step 505, edge sealant element 526.). Also featured in Fig. 3 are gaps 328 between the outer surface of the separator assembly 300 and outermost layer of the multilayer membrane assembly, and between the portions of the permeate exhaust conduits and the multilayer membrane assembly. It should be noted that the gaps illustrated in Fig. 3 are not present at all in various embodiments of the separator assemblies provided by the present invention, and further that the size of gaps 328 shown in Fig. 3 has been exaggerated for the purposes of this discussion. Any gaps 328 present in a separator assembly may be eliminated by filling the gap with gap sealant 326. Gap sealants 326 include curable sealants, adhesive sealants, and the like

[0045] Referring to Fig. 4, the figure 4a represents side-on view of a spiral flow reverse osmosis apparatus 400 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. The spiral flow reverse osmosis apparatus 400 comprises a separator assembly 300 secured by a gasket 406 within a pressurizable housing 405. Gasket 406 also prevents passage of feed solution through the apparatus 400 by means other than the interior of the separator assembly 300. The pressurizable housing 405 comprises a

feed inlet 410 configured to provide a feed solution to the feed surface 420 of the separator assembly 300. Numbered elements 422 represent the direction of flow of feed solution (not shown) into and through separator assembly 300 during operation. The pressurizable housing 405 comprises a permeate exhaust outlet 438 coupled via coupling member 436 to the permeate exhaust conduits 118 of central core element 440 of separator assembly 300. Direction arrow 439 indicates the direction of permeate flow during operation. Concentrate (not shown) emerges from the separator assembly at concentrate surface 425 in the direction indicated by direction arrows 426 and exits the pressurizable housing 405 via concentrate exhaust outlet 428, the concentrate flowing in direction 429 during operation. Figure 4b shows perspective view of a central core element 440 present in separator assembly 300. In the embodiment illustrated in Fig. 4 central core element 440 is comprised of two half cylinder shaped tubes 442 and 444 serving as the permeate exhaust conduits 118. At one end 445 of central core element 440, the permeate exhaust conduits are closed and at the opposite end the permeate exhaust conduits are open. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that the permeate exhaust conduits 442 and 444 have slightly different structures and are therefore given different numbers for the purposes of this discussion. Thus, permeate exhaust conduit 442 comprises a spacer element 446 at the open end of central core element 440, whereas permeate exhaust conduit 444 comprises a spacer element 447 at the closed end (445) of central core element 440. Spacer elements 446 and 447 define a cavity 450 which accommodates the first portion 231 of the membrane stack assembly 120 as shown in Fig. 2A. Each of permeate exhaust conduits 442 and 444 comprises openings 113 through which permeate may pass from the surface of the permeate exhaust conduit in contact with the permeate carrier layer into the interior 119 of the permeate exhaust conduit. Because the permeate exhaust conduits of central core element 440 are blocked at end 445, flow of permeate through the permeate exhaust conduits is unidirectional in direction 449.

[0046] Referring to Fig. 5, the figure represents a method 500 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention for making the separator assembly 300 shown in Fig. 3. In a first method step 501 a first intermediate assembly is formed by providing

a permeate exhaust conduit 118 and applying a bead of glue (not shown) along a line 325 running a length of the permeate exhaust conduit and thereafter placing the permeate carrier layer 110 in contact with the uncured glue along line 325 and curing to provide the first intermediate assembly shown. Method step 501 is repeated to provide a second first intermediate assembly identical to that shown in step 501. The portion of the permeate exhaust conduit referred to as “a length of the permeate exhaust conduit” corresponds to the width of the permeate carrier layer and to that portion of the permeate exhaust conduit adapted for contact with the permeate carrier layer. As is apparent from this example and other parts of this disclosure, the length of the permeate exhaust conduit is typically greater than the length of that portion of the permeate exhaust conduit adapted for contact with the permeate carrier layer. And typically, the permeate exhaust conduit is longer than the multilayer membrane assembly disposed around it in the separator assembly provided by the present invention. That portion of the permeate exhaust conduit adapted for contact with the permeate carrier layer is porous, for example by being provided with openings, for example those shown as elements 113 in Fig. 4. That portion of the permeate exhaust conduit not adapted for contact with the permeate carrier layer may not be porous except with respect to flow control baffles and openings such as elements 714 and 1001 featured in Fig. 10. In certain embodiments of the present invention that portion of the permeate exhaust conduit not adapted for contact with the permeate carrier layer is not porous.

[0047] In a second method step 502, a second intermediate assembly is prepared. A membrane layer 112 having an active surface (not shown) and a passive surface (not shown) is placed in contact with the first intermediate assembly of method step 501 such that the passive surface (not shown) of the membrane layer 112 is in contact with the permeate carrier layer 110. The membrane layer 112 is positioned such that it is bisected by, but not in contact with, permeate exhaust conduit 118.

[0048] In a third method step 503, a third intermediate assembly is formed. Thus a feed carrier layer 116 is applied to the second intermediate assembly shown in method step 502 such that the feed carrier layer is in contact with the active surface (not shown) of membrane layer 112 and is coextensive with it.

[0049] In a fourth method step 504, a fourth intermediate assembly is formed. Thus a second membrane layer 112 is added to the third intermediate assembly and placed in contact with feed carrier layer 116 such that the active surface (not shown) of the membrane layer is in contact with the feed carrier layer 116 and the second membrane layer is coextensive with the feed carrier layer.

[0050] In a fifth method step 505, a fifth intermediate assembly is formed. A first intermediate assembly as depicted in method step 501 is joined to the fourth intermediate assembly depicted in method step 504. The fifth intermediate assembly depicted in method step 505 features a membrane stack assembly 120 comprising one feed carrier layer disposed between two membrane layers 112, and two permeate carrier layers. The fifth intermediate assembly shown in method step 505 shows a first portion of membrane stack assembly 120 disposed within a central core element comprising permeate exhaust conduits 118, and a second portion of membrane stack assembly 120 disposed outside of the central core element.

[0051] In a sixth method step 506 an edge sealant 526 is applied as a longitudinal line along each edge of membrane layer 112 in contact with the permeate carrier layer to afford a sixth intermediate assembly. The edge sealant is applied to the passive surface (not shown) of membrane layer. The edge sealant permeates the adjacent permeate carrier layer along the entire length of its edge.

[0052] In a seventh method step 507 the free portions of the sixth intermediate assembly (also referred to as the “second portion” of the membrane stack assembly) are wound around the central core element before curing of the edge sealant 526. Winding the second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element is carried out while the edge sealant is in an uncured state to allow the surfaces of layers of the membrane stack assembly some freedom of motion during the winding process. In one embodiment, the edge sealant 526 is applied as part of the winding step. The structure shown in method step 507 (a seventh intermediate assembly) depicts the structure shown in method step 506 after rotating the central core element through 180 degrees. The preparation of separator assembly 300 may be completed by rotating the central core element in direction 222 thereby winding the

second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element to form a wound assembly, and then securing the ends of the membrane stack assembly. The ends of the membrane stack assembly present in the wound assembly may be secured by various means such as by wrapping the “third surface” of the cylinder defined by the separator assembly with tape, securing the ends of the membrane stack assembly with o-rings, applying a sealant to the ends of the membrane stack assembly, and like means. The wound second portion of the membrane stack assembly is referred to in this embodiment as the multilayer membrane assembly. This multilayer membrane assembly is said to be disposed around the central core element comprising permeate exhaust conduits 118. Curing of edge sealant 526, effectively seals the edges of the permeate carrier layer and membrane layer 112 at both the feed surface and the concentrate surface of the separator assembly, and blocks fluid transmission from the feed surface except by means of the feed carrier layer 116.

[0053] Referring to Fig. 5c, structure 508 presents a perspective view of a membrane stack assembly 120 disposed within a central core element 440 during the preparation of a separator assembly of the present invention. The structure 508 corresponds to the sixth intermediate assembly shown in method step 506. A curable edge sealant 526 is shown as disposed along each longitudinal edge (there are a total of four such edges) on the passive surface of membrane layer 112 and in contact with permeate carrier layer 110. The central core element 440 is rotated in direction 222 to provide a wound structure. The free ends of the membrane stack assembly present in the wound structure are then secured by applying additional edge sealant 526 along the transverse edges (there are a total of two such edges) at the passive surface of the membrane layer. The central core element 440 shown in Fig. 5c is the same as that featured in Fig. 4b.

[0054] Referring to Fig. 6, the figure represents a pressurizable housing 405 used in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention for making the spiral flow reverse osmosis apparatus 400 shown in Fig. 4. Pressurizable housing 405 comprises a detachable first portion of pressurizable housing 601 and a detachable second portion of pressurizable housing 602. The first and second portions 601 and 602 may

be joined by means of threads 603 for securing 601 to 602, and threads 604 which are complimentary to threads 603. Other means of securing a detachable first portion of a pressurizable housing to a detachable second of a pressurizable housing include the use of snap together elements, gluing, taping, clamping and like means.

[0055] Referring to Fig. 7, the figure represents a permeate exhaust conduit 118 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. Permeate exhaust conduit 118 defines a channel 119 which is blocked at one end by channel blocking element 712. The permeate exhaust conduit also defines a feed control cavity 710, feed control baffles 714, spacer elements 446 and 447, openings in permeate exhaust conduit 113, and grooves 716 adapted for securing o-rings. In one embodiment, two permeate exhaust conduits 118 provide a central core element into which is disposed a first portion of a membrane stack assembly 120. Permeate exhaust conduits 118 are joined such that the spacer elements 446 and 447 of a first permeate exhaust conduit 118 are aligned with the spacer elements 446 and 447 of a second permeate exhaust conduit 118. The second portion of the membrane stack assembly 120 is wound around the central core element comprising permeate exhaust conduits 118. In one embodiment, that portion of the permeate exhaust conduit 118 adapted for contact with the permeate carrier layer is slightly longer than the section of the permeate exhaust conduit comprising openings 113. The separator assembly 300 comprising a central core element comprising two permeate exhaust conduits 118 may be inserted into a pressurizable housing 405 (Fig. 6) such that the feed control cavities 710 are closest to feed inlet 410. During operation, a feed solution may be introduced through feed inlet 410 into feed control cavities 710. As the feed control cavities become filled excess feed emerges from the feed control baffles 714 and contacts the feed surface of the separator assembly. One of the purposes of the feed control cavities 710 is to prevent uncontrolled contact between the feed solution and the feed surface, particularly at start up. Grooves 716 adapted for securing o-rings may serve to join the permeate exhaust conduits at one end and also to secure the coupling between the separator assembly 300 and coupling member 436 (See Fig. 4a).

[0056] Referring to Fig. 8, the figure 800 represents a cross-section view at midpoint of pair of membrane stack assemblies 120 disposed within a central core element

comprising three permeate exhaust conduits. As shown the membrane stack assemblies 120 comprise a first portion 801 and a second portion 802. A separator assembly of the present invention is provided by rotating the central core element in direction 122 to provide a wound structure, and sealing the ends of the membrane stack assemblies and curing the edge sealant used on the edges and ends of the membrane stack assembly.

[0057] Referring to Fig. 9, the figure 900 represents a cross-section view at midpoint of pair of membrane stack assemblies 120 disposed within a central core element comprising four permeate exhaust conduits. A separator assembly of the present invention is provided by rotating the central core element in direction 122 to provide a wound structure, and sealing the ends of the membrane stack assemblies and curing the edge sealant used on the edges and ends of the membrane stack assembly.

[0058] Referring to Fig. 10, the figure 440 represents a three dimensional view of a central core element of the present invention. Central core element 440 comprises two identical permeate exhaust conduits 118 and defines a cavity 450 which accommodates a first portion of a membrane stack assembly 120. The component permeate exhaust conduits 118 of central core element 440 are essentially the same as that illustrated in Fig. 7 with the exception that the permeate exhaust conduits illustrated in Fig. 10 comprise a feed control hole 1001 adjacent to feed control baffle 714. Central core element 440 comprises a blocked end 445 and an open end from which, during operation, permeate emerges in direction 449. By “blocked end” it is meant that each of the permeate exhaust conduit channels is blocked by a blocking element 712 such that permeate can exit the permeate exhaust conduit only at the end opposite the blocked end. Each of the permeate exhaust conduits also comprises a feed control cavity 710. Moreover, the permeate carrier layers 110 may be disposed around permeate exhaust conduits 118 configured as shown in Fig. 10 such that no permeate enters the feed control cavity 710.

[0059] Referring to Fig. 11a, the figure represents a three dimensional solid view of a central core element 440 of the present invention. The central core element is identical to that illustrated in Fig. 10. Fig. 11b represents a side-on view of the central

core element of Fig 11a. Fig. 11c provides an expanded view of the “open end” of the central core element of Fig. 11a.

[0060] In one embodiment, the present invention provides a salt separator assembly comprising a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits, and not comprising a concentrate exhaust conduit, and comprising a membrane stack assembly comprising at least one feed carrier layer, at least two permeate carrier layers, and at least two salt-rejecting membrane layers, the salt-rejecting membrane layers being disposed between the feed carrier layer and the permeate carrier layers. A first portion of the membrane stack assembly is disposed within the central core element and separates the permeate exhaust conduits from one another. A second portion of the membrane stack assembly forms a multilayer membrane assembly disposed around the central core element. The feed carrier layer is not in contact with any of the permeate exhaust conduits and is not in contact with the permeate carrier layer. The permeate carrier layers are each in contact with at least one of the permeate exhaust conduits.

[0061] In one embodiment, the salt separator assembly provided by the present invention comprises a multilayer membrane assembly which is radially disposed about the central core element. In another embodiment, the present invention provides a salt separator assembly comprising a salt-rejecting membrane layer which has functionalized surface and an unfunctionalized surface. In one embodiment, the salt separator assembly comprises three or more permeate exhaust conduits. In another embodiment, the salt separator assembly comprises three or more permeate carrier layers. In yet another embodiment, the salt separator assembly comprises a plurality of feed carrier layers, and in an alternate embodiment, the salt separator assembly comprises three or more salt-rejecting membrane layers.

[0062] In yet another embodiment, the present invention provides a spiral flow reverse osmosis membrane apparatus comprising (a) a pressurizable housing and (b) a separator assembly. The separator assembly comprises a membrane stack assembly comprising at least one feed carrier layer, at least two permeate carrier layers, and at least two membrane layers, the feed carrier layer being disposed between two membrane layers. The feed carrier layer is not in contact with the permeate carrier

layer. The separator assembly also comprises a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits and does not comprise a concentrate exhaust conduit. A first portion of the membrane stack assembly is configured such that it separates the permeate exhaust conduits. A second portion of the membrane stack assembly forms a multilayer membrane assembly disposed around the central core element. The feed carrier layer is not in contact with a permeate exhaust conduit. The permeate carrier layers are in contact with at least one of the permeate exhaust conduits and are not in contact with the feed carrier layer. The pressurizable housing comprises at least one feed inlet configured to provide feed solution to the feed surface of the separator assembly. The pressurizable housing comprises at least one permeate exhaust outlet coupled to the permeate exhaust conduit, and at least one concentrate exhaust outlet coupled to the concentrate surface of the separator assembly. The pressurizable housing may be made of suitable material or materials. For example, the pressurizable housing may be made of a polymer, stainless steel, or a combination thereof. In one embodiment, the pressurizable housing is made of a transparent plastic material. In another embodiment, the pressurizable housing is made of a transparent inorganic material, for example, glass.

[0063] In one embodiment, the present invention provides a spiral flow reverse osmosis membrane apparatus comprising (a) a pressurizable housing and (b) a separator assembly provided by the present invention wherein the multilayer membrane assembly is radially disposed around the central core element. In an alternate embodiment, the present invention provides a spiral flow reverse osmosis membrane apparatus comprising (a) a pressurizable housing and (b) a plurality of separator assemblies provided by the present invention.

[0064] In still yet another embodiment, the present invention provides a method for making a separator assembly, the method comprising: providing a central core element comprising at least two permeate exhaust conduits and at not comprising a concentrate exhaust conduit; disposing a first portion of a membrane stack assembly comprising at least two permeate carrier layers, at least one feed carrier layer, and at least two membrane layers within the central core element such that the permeate exhaust conduits are separated by the first portion of the membrane stack assembly;

and radially disposing a second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element, and sealing a resultant wound assembly to provide a separator assembly wherein the permeate exhaust conduit is not in contact with the feed carrier layer, and wherein the feed carrier layer is not in contact with any of the permeate carrier layers, and wherein the permeate carrier layers are in contact with at least one of the permeate exhaust conduits.

[0065] In the present example, the expression “radially disposing a second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element, and sealing a resultant wound assembly to provide a separator assembly” refers to the acts of winding the second portion of the membrane stack assembly around the central core element, and sealing ends of the membrane stack assembly.

[0066] The foregoing examples are merely illustrative, serving to illustrate only some of the features of the invention. The appended claims are intended to claim the invention as broadly as it has been conceived and the examples herein presented are illustrative of selected embodiments from a manifold of all possible embodiments. Accordingly, it is Applicants' intention that the appended claims are not to be limited by the choice of examples utilized to illustrate features of the present invention. As used in the claims, the word "comprises" and its grammatical variants logically also subtend and include phrases of varying and differing extent such as for example, but not limited thereto, "consisting essentially of" and "consisting of." Where necessary, ranges have been supplied, those ranges are inclusive of all sub-ranges there between. It is to be expected that variations in these ranges will suggest themselves to a practitioner having ordinary skill in the art and where not already dedicated to the public, those variations should where possible be construed to be covered by the appended claims. It is also anticipated that advances in science and technology will make equivalents and substitutions possible that are not now contemplated by reason of the imprecision of language and these variations should also be construed where possible to be covered by the appended claims.

CLAIMS

1. A central core element for a separator assembly comprising:
at least two porous exhaust conduits;
said porous exhaust conduits comprising an exhaust channel and one or more openings which allow fluid communication between an exterior surface of the porous exhaust conduit and the exhaust channel,
at least one of said porous exhaust conduits comprising a flow control element,
said porous exhaust conduits comprising at least one spacer element defining a cavity between said porous exhaust conduits, said cavity being configured to accommodate a first portion of a membrane stack assembly.
2. The central core element according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the porous exhaust conduits is a porous half-cylinder shaped tube.
3. The central core element according to claim 1, wherein at least one of the porous exhaust conduits is selected from the group consisting of porous half-octagon shaped tubes, porous half-decahedron shaped tubes, and porous half-tetradecahedron shaped tubes.
4. The central core element according to claim 1, wherein all said porous exhaust conduits have identical shapes.
5. The central core element according to claim 1, wherein at least two of said porous exhaust conduits have different shapes.
6. The central core element according to claim 1, comprising a porous exhaust conduit having a teardrop shape.
7. The central core element according to claim 1 comprising at least three porous exhaust conduits.
8. The central core element according to claim 1 comprising at least four porous exhaust conduits.

9. The central core element according to claim 8 comprising four porous exhaust conduits.

10. The central core element according to claim 1, wherein at least one of said porous exhaust conduit comprises a blocking element.

11. The central core element according to claim 1, wherein the porous exhaust conduits comprise one or more grooves adapted to secure an o-ring.

12. The central core element according to claim 1, wherein the porous exhaust conduits define at least two cavities configured to accommodate a first portion of a membrane stack assembly.

13. A central core element for a separator assembly comprising:
two porous exhaust conduits;
said porous exhaust conduits comprising an exhaust channel and one or more openings which allow fluid communication between an exterior surface of the porous exhaust conduit and the exhaust channel,
at least one of said porous exhaust conduits comprising a flow control element,
said porous exhaust conduits comprising at least one spacer element defining a cavity between said porous exhaust conduits,
said cavity being configured to accommodate a first portion of a membrane stack assembly.

14. The central core element according to claim 13, wherein each of the porous exhaust conduits is a porous half-cylinder shaped tube.

15. A central core element for a separator assembly comprising:
a pair of central core element components, each central core element component comprising a pair of identical quarter-cylinder shaped porous exhaust conduits;
each porous exhaust conduit comprising an exhaust channel and one or more openings which allow fluid communication between an exterior surface of the porous exhaust conduit and the exhaust channel,

said porous exhaust conduits defining two cavities,
each of said cavities being configured to accommodate a first portion of a membrane stack assembly,
wherein for each central core element component, the exhaust channels share a common exit cavity,
and wherein the central core element is configured such that during operation of a separator assembly comprising the central core element, flow through the exhaust channels of two of the porous exhaust conduits is in one direction while flow the exhaust channels of the remaining two porous exhaust conduits is in the opposite direction.

16. A central core element for a separator assembly comprising:
at least two porous exhaust conduits;
said porous exhaust conduits comprising an exhaust channel and one or more openings which allow fluid communication between an exterior surface of the porous exhaust conduit and the exhaust channel,
at least one of said porous exhaust conduits comprising a flow control element,
said porous exhaust conduits independently defining a cavity between said porous exhaust conduits,
said cavity being configured to accommodate a first portion of a membrane stack assembly.

17. The central core element according to claim 16, wherein all said porous exhaust conduits have identical shapes.

18. The central core element according to claim 16, wherein at least one of said porous exhaust conduit comprises a blocking element.