

Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to airlaying fibrous webs having discrete particles dispersed through at least a portion of the web. More particularly, it relates to depositing a dusting layer of fibers onto the foraminous forming element of an airlaying apparatus prior to depositing a layer of fibers mixed with discrete particles of a material such as an absorbent gelling material on the foraminous forming element so as to minimize the loss of such particles through the foraminous forming element.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Absorbent gelling materials (AGM's) are polymeric materials which are capable of absorbing large quantities of fluids such as body fluids and wastes and which are further capable of retaining such absorbed fluids under moderate pressures. These absorption characteristics of absorbent gelling materials make such materials especially useful for incorporation into absorbent articles such as disposable diapers, incontinent pads and catamenial napkins. For example, Procter & Gamble; European Patent Application EP-A-122,042; published October 17, 1984 discloses absorbent structures wherein discrete particles of absorbent gelling materials (hydrogel particles) are dispersed in a web of hydrophilic fibers. Additionally, U.S. Patent No. 4673402 issued June 16 1987 to Paul T. Weisman, Dawn I. Houghton and Dale A. Gellert discloses an absorbent article having a dual-layer absorbent core wherein a shaped core component consists essentially of hydrophilic fiber material and an insert core component consists essentially of a substantially uniform combination of hydrophilic fiber material and discrete particles of absorbent gelling material.

GB-A-2124264 discloses an apparatus and method for forming air-laid fibrous webs in which two sheets of fibrous material, which may be of the same or different types are fed to spaced points on the periphery of a rotary disintegrator and formed into separate air-entrained fiber streams. The streams are then air-laid on a moving endless foraminous belt, at locations spaced from each other in the direction of movement, to form a layered batt. Removal of air from the air-entrained fiber streams takes place via a vacuum chamber disposed beneath the foraminous belt and in communication therewith over the areas of both deposition locations.

However, several difficulties have been encountered in airlaying absorbent cores having a multiplicity of layers and/or layers containing a

mixture of fibers and particular amounts of discrete particles of materials such as absorbent gelling materials. Airlaying apparatus and methods require the removal of the gas or air which transports the fiber/particle admixture from beneath the foraminous forming element of the airlaying apparatus. During this removal, small particles which are mixed with the fibers can generally be drawn along with the air through the voids in the foraminous forming element, resulting in a loss of expensive absorbent gelling materials through the airlaying apparatus, the resultant absorbent article also having a reduced quantity of absorbent gelling material dispersed throughout its absorbent core resulting in a loss of absorbent capacity in the articles. Additionally, relatively large particles tend to plug or block the flow of air through the foraminous forming element resulting in a loss of uniformity of basis weight across or along the fibrous web or absorbent core as well as machinery down time necessitated in order to unplug the foraminous forming element. Thus, it would be advantageous to provide apparatus for and methods of airlaying fibrous webs having discrete particles of material, such as absorbent gelling materials, dispersed through at least a portion of the web wherein the apparatus and methods minimize plugging problems as well as the loss of materials through the foraminous forming element. It would also be advantageous to provide apparatus for and methods of forming airlaid fibrous webs having a multiplicity of layers.

The present invention provides a solution in which a dusting layer of hydrophilic fibers is deposited on the foraminous forming element prior to depositing the admixture of hydrophilic fibers and discrete particles of absorbent gelling material. This solution requires the use of two deposition chutes and hoods disposed around the periphery of the laydown drum. It has been discovered that as the laydown drum rotates from the dusting layer deposition chute to the first deposition chute, the chute configurations, the fiber/air velocities, the pressure differential along the edge of the dusting layer and the impingement of the fiber/particle admixture on the dusting layer are contributing factors in causing the dusting layer to shear or disperse resulting in an increase in plugging and loss of the particles of absorbent gelling material. Thus, it is also desired to provide an airlaying apparatus in which a dusting layer can be airlaid onto the foraminous forming element and have a primary layer airlaid over the dusting layer without damaging or destroying the dusting layer.

Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to provide an apparatus for and method of airlaying fibrous webs having discrete particles dispersed through at least a portion of the web.

It is another object of the present invention to provide an apparatus for and method of airlaying fibrous webs having a multiplicity of layers.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide apparatus and methods which minimize equipment plugging problems as well as the loss of particles through the apparatus.

It is also an object of the present invention to provide an apparatus wherein a dusting layer is not damaged or destroyed when additional fibers or fiber/particle admixtures are air-laid over the dusting layer.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to one aspect of the present invention there is provided an apparatus for forming air-laid fibrous webs having a multiplicity of layers or discrete particles dispersed through at least a portion of the web, said apparatus comprising: air-laying means having a foraminous forming element for forming an air-laid fibrous web; dusting layer deposition means positioned adjacent a first portion of the periphery of the air-laying means for directing a dusting layer stream of air-entrained fibers to said foraminous forming element of said air-laying means and for depositing the fibers on said foraminous forming element so as to form a dusting layer ; primary layer deposition means positioned adjacent a second portion of the periphery of said air-laying means for directing a primary stream of air-entrained fibers to said foraminous forming element of said air-laying means and for depositing the fibers onto said foraminous forming element over the dusting layer so as to form a primary layer over the dusting layer; said apparatus comprising: dusting layer deposition means comprising a first sector and a second sector; dusting layer vacuum means for drawing fiber-depleted air through said foraminous forming element, said dusting layer vacuum means being positioned subjacent said first sector of said dusting layer deposition means; and primary vacuum means for drawing fiber-depleted air through said foraminous forming element, said primary vacuum means being positioned subjacent both said primary deposition means and said second sector of said dusting layer deposition means, so as to prevent the dusting layer formed on said foraminous forming element from being damaged or destroyed.

According to another aspect of the present invention there is provided a method for forming an air-laid fibrous web having a multiplicity of layers or discrete particles dispersed through at least a portion of the web, said method comprising the steps of:

- a. providing multiple streams of air-entrained fibers, including a dusting layer stream and a primary layer stream;
- b. directing said dusting layer stream of air-entrained fibers toward a dusting layer sector of a moving foraminous forming element;
- c. depositing said dusting layer stream of air-entrained fibers on to the foraminous forming element;
- d. drawing the dusting layer stream entrainment air through the foraminous forming element by a pressure differential maintained by a source of vacuum positioned subjacent the foraminous forming element;
- e. collecting the fibers on the foraminous forming element to form a dusting layer;
- f. transferring said dusting layer to a primary layer sector of the foraminous forming element;
- g. directing said primary layer stream of air-entrained fibers toward the primary layer sector of the foraminous forming element;
- h. depositing said primary layer stream of air-entrained fibers on the foraminous forming element to form a primary layer over said dusting layer;
- i. drawing the primary layer stream entrainment air through the foraminous forming element by the pressure differential maintained by the source of vacuum positioned subjacent the foraminous forming element; and
- j. collecting the deposited fibers as an air-laid fibrous web having a primary layer over a dusting layer;

wherein:

- step (d) also comprises maintaining the pressure differential for drawing the dusting layer fiber stream entrainment air through said foraminous forming element by means of a source of dusting layer vacuum disposed subjacent said foraminous element in a first portion of said dusting layer sector;
- step (i) also comprises maintaining the pressure differential for drawing the primary layer fiber stream entrainment air through said foraminous forming element by means of a source of primary layer vacuum disposed subjacent said foraminous element in the primary layer sector thereof, said source of primary layer vacuum being disposed so as also to be subjacent a second portion of said dusting layer sector, downstream of said first dusting layer sector; and
- step (f) also comprises transferring said dusting layer to the influence of the pressure differential maintained by the primary layer source of vacuum in said second portion while said dusting layer is still positioned in the dusting layer sector of the foraminous forming element.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the drawings:

Figure 1 is a partially out-away side view of a preferred apparatus of the present invention;
 Figure 2 is a perspective view of the splitter chute apparatus of the present invention;
 Figure 3 is a bottom view of the splitter chute apparatus of the present invention;
 Figure 4 is a cross-sectional view taken along section line 4-4 of Figure 2;
 Figure 5 is a cross-sectional view taken along section line 5-5 of Figure 2;
 Figure 6 is a cross-sectional view taken along section line 6-6 of Figure 2;
 Figure 7 is an enlarged cross-sectional illustration of a transition zone of a splitter chute apparatus;
 Figure 8 is a schematic illustration of the first deposition chute of the present invention;
 Figure 9 is an enlarged cross-sectional view of the first airlaying means of the present invention.
 Figure 10 is a cut-away view of a preferred disposable absorbent article such as a diaper having a dual-layer absorbent core formed by the apparatus and methods of the present invention.
 Figure 11 is an enlarged cross-sectional view of the insert core component of the absorbent core of the diaper shown in Figure 10.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

While the present invention will be described in detail in the context of providing airlaid fibrous webs for use as absorbent cores in absorbent articles such as disposable diapers, the present invention is in no way limited to such an application. The present invention may be employed with equal facility to provide airlaid fibrous webs for later incorporation into a number of articles, including incontinent briefs, sanitary napkins, bandages and the like.

Figure 10 shows a particularly preferred embodiment of a disposable diaper having an absorbent core formed by the apparatus and methods of the present invention. The disposable diaper 1000 comprises a topsheet 1002, a liquid impervious backsheet 1004, and an absorbent core 1006 disposed between the topsheet 1002 and the backsheet 1004. A preferred construction of such a disposable diaper is described in U.S. Patent 3,860,003, issued January 14, 1975 to Kenneth B. Buell.

The absorbent core 1006 preferably comprises two or more distinct core components. The absorbent core comprises an insert core component 1008 (first web component) and a shaped core

component 1010 (second web component). This preferred absorbent core is described in more detail in U.S. Patent No. 4673402 issued June 16 1987 to Dale T. Weisman, Dawn I. Houghton, and Paul E. Gellert.

The shaped core component 1010 serves to quickly collect and temporarily hold and distribute discharged body fluid. Thus, the wicking properties of the materials or fibers in the shaped core component 1010 are of primary importance. Therefore, the shaped core component 1010 consists essentially of an hourglass shaped web of hydrophilic fiber material. While many types of fibers are suitable for use in the shaped core component 1010, preferred types of fibers are cellulose fibers, in particular, wood pulp fibers. While the shaped core component 1010 is preferably free of particles of an absorbent gelling material, the shaped core component 1010 may alternatively contain small amounts of particles of an absorbent gelling material so as to enhance its fluid acquisition properties. Other materials in combination with the fibers may also be incorporated into the core component such as synthetic fibers.

The insert core component 1008 absorbs discharged body fluids from the shaped core component 1010 and retains such fluids. As shown in Figures 10 and 11, the insert core component 1008 consists essentially of a thin dusting layer 1012 of hydrophilic fiber material overlaid by a primary layer 1014 of a uniform combination of hydrophilic fiber material and particular amounts of discrete particles 1016 of substantially water-insoluble, fluid absorbing, absorbent gelling materials. The hydrophilic fibers in the insert core component 1008 are preferably of the same type as those herein described for use in the shaped core component 1010. There are several suitable absorbent gelling materials which can be used in the insert core component, such as silica gels or organic compounds such as crosslinked polymers. Particularly preferred absorbent gelling materials are hydrolyzed acrylonitrile grafted starch, acrylic acid grafted starch, polyacrylates and isobutylene maleic anhydride copolymers, or mixtures thereof.

While the dusting layer 1012 of the absorbent core 1006 is preferably a relatively thin layer of hydrophilic fiber materials, it should be understood that the term "dusting layer", used herein to denote a certain layer of the fibrous web or as a prefix to identify certain elements which form or are used to form the dusting layer, should not be limited to such a thin layer, but includes embodiments wherein such a layer may be any thickness. For example, the dusting layer is preferably 25 mm to 38 mm (1.0 - 1.5 inch) thick with 31.75 mm (1.25 inches) being especially preferred, although thicker or thinner layers are contemplated.

Figure 1 discloses a particularly preferred embodiment of the apparatus for forming airlaid fibrous webs having multiplicity of components such as the absorbent core 1006 of the disposable diaper 1000 that is shown in Figures 10 and 11. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 1, the apparatus 20 is shown to comprise a pair of counter-rotating metering infeed rolls 22 for directing a roll 24 of drylap material into engagement with a disintegrator 26, the disintegrator 26 having a rotary disintegrating element 28 partially enclosed by a housing 30; a splitting means or apparatus such as a splitter chute 32 for providing multiplicity of streams of air-entrained fibers; a first airlaying means such as a drum-type airlaying apparatus 34 for forming a first web component; a first deposition means such as a first deposition chute 36 and hood 38 for directing a first stream of air-entrained fibers to the first airlaying means and for depositing the fibers on the first airlaying means; an absorbent gelling material injection apparatus 40 or means for mixing discrete particles of an absorbent gelling material with the stream of air-entrained fibers that is directed through the first deposition chute 36; a dusting layer deposition means such as a dusting layer deposition chute 42 and hood 44 for directing a dusting layer stream of air-entrained fibers to the first airlaying means and depositing the fibers on the first airlaying means; a second airlaying means such as a second drum-type airlaying apparatus 46 for forming a second web component; a second deposition means such as a second deposition chute 48 and hood 50 for directing a second stream of air-entrained fibers to the second airlaying means and for depositing the fibers onto the second airlaying means; and a uniting means such as a uniting roll apparatus 52 for uniting the first and second web components. In order to simplify the disclosure, several elements or means which can readily be supplied by those skilled in the art have been omitted from the drawings. Such elements include structural members, bearings, power transmission units, controlling units and the like. Additionally, a first stream 54 of air-entrained fibers is shown in Figure 1 to be moving through the first deposition chute 36; a dusting layer stream 56 of air-entrained fibers is shown to be moving through the dusting layer deposition chute 42; a second stream 58 of air-entrained fibers is shown to be moving through the second deposition chute 48; an endless stream of insert core components 1008 (first web components) is shown moving on the belt 60 of a first take-away conveyor 62; and an endless stream of shaped core components 1010 (second web components) is shown moving on the belt 64 of a second take-away conveyor 66.

A preferred embodiment of a disintegrator 26 is shown in Figure 1 to comprise a rotary disintegrat-

ing element 28 partially enclosed in a housing 30. A similar-type disintegrator is shown in U.S. Patent 3,863,296, issued on February 4, 1975 to Kenneth B. Buell.

However, as used herein, the term "disintegrator" is not intended to limit the present invention to apparatus of the type illustrated in the above patent, but includes apparatus such as hammermills, fiberizers, picker rolls, lickerin rolls or any other apparatus which separates a roll or mat of fibrous material into its individual fibers.

As used herein, a fibrous or drylap material or sheet describes any type of fibrous sheet material capable of disintegration into individual fibers. For example, the fibrous material can include fibers of rayon, polyester, cotton or the like, with cellulosic fibers being especially preferred.

The disintegrator 26 preferably comprises a rotary disintegrating element 28 comprising a plurality of rotors 68 and a housing 30 having a generally cylindrical bore 70. A shaft 72 is journaled in the closed ends of the housing 30 such that one end of the shaft 72 extends outside the housing 30 to permit coupling the shaft in a conventional manner to a motive power source such as an electric motor (not shown). The motor continuously drives the shaft 72 in the direction as shown. The rotors 68 are keyed to the shaft 72 in juxtaposed relation, each being provided with a plurality of teeth 74 extending outwardly such that their tips are adapted to serve as impacting elements. As used herein, "rotor" refers to thin rotored discs. With the above arrangement, successive teeth 74 impact the end of the infeeding sheet 24 as the rotors are turned. The rotors 68, when keyed into place and molded together, form an axial rotary cylindrical disintegrating element 28 rotatable about its cylindrical axis. This configuration is preferred since it permits the favorable internal distribution of stresses set up during operation of the disintegrator 26.

The housing 30 partially encloses the disintegrating element 28 and defines a flow channel 78 for a column of fibers between the disintegrating element and the housing. The flow channel 78 is sized to give from one thirty-second to about one-fourth inch (0.79 mm to 6.35 mm) clearance between the blade tips of the disintegrating element 28 and the housing 30 so as to direct the column of fibers from the inner end of the housing toward the splitter chute 32. The housing 30 has a cylindrical bore 70 to partially enclose the disintegrating element 28 and an inlet portion 80 which is slotted to provide an inlet opening having an inner end. (While the housing 30 may alternatively be comprised of additional elements, such are not preferred in the present invention). The inlet opening 80 is disposed so as to receive the fibrous

sheet 24 and guide it to the inner end, which defines a sheet support element, whereat an edge of the fibrous sheet 24 is disintegrated.

With the above arrangement, successive teeth 74 impact the end of the infeeding drylap sheet 24 as the rotors 68 are turned to separate the fibers of the fibrous sheet 24 into individual fibers. After separation of the fibers of the fibrous sheet into the individual fibers, a column of fibers is formed across the axial width of the housing 30. As used herein, "a column of fibers" denotes a pattern or system of fibers disposed across the axial width of the housing. The rotation of the disintegrating element 28 imparts an inherent velocity to the fibers across the axial width of the housing 30, whereupon a continuous column of fibers is directed around the flow channel 78 toward the splitter chute 32.

As shown in Figure 1, the splitter chute 32 is preferably joined to the housing 30 of the disintegrator 26. The term "joined" includes embodiments wherein the splitter chute 32 is a separate element directly or indirectly connected to or within the housing 30 (i.e. integral) or embodiments wherein the splitter chute 32 is the same element as the housing 30 so that the splitter chute 32 is a continuous and undivided element of the housing 30 (i.e., unitary). While the splitter chute 32 may be an independent apparatus from the disintegrator 26, or the splitter chute 32 may be unitary with the housing 30 of the disintegrator 26, such embodiments are not preferred. The splitter chute 32 is preferably an integral member that is joined into the housing 30 of the disintegrator 26.

Figure 2 shows a particularly preferred embodiment of an apparatus (splitting means or splitter chute 32) for forming a multiplicity of streams of air-entrained fibers by splitting a column of fibers into a multiplicity of fiber streams and independently entraining each of the fiber streams in air. As shown in Figure 2, the apparatus comprises a splitting member 200 having a number of ports disposed in and along its surface. As shown, the ports are designated a first port 202, a second port 204, a third port 206, and a dusting layer port 208. The apparatus also comprises multiple independent conduit means, such as conduit ducts, for directing high velocity columns of air past the ports disposed along the stripping member 200. The conduit ducts are designated in Figure 2 according to which port with which the conduit duct is in communication, so as to define a first conduit duct 210, a second conduit duct 212, a third conduit duct 214 and a dusting layer conduit duct 216.

The splitter chute 32 shown in Figure 2 is a preferred embodiment of the apparatus of the present invention. The splitter chute is shown in Figure 2 to additionally comprise a base 218, four

side walls 220, 222, 224 and 226, respectively, and a top wall 228 which defines the splitting member 200. The base 218 preferably extends beyond the lateral side walls 222 and 226 to define flanges 230 having bores 232 so that the splitter chute 32 may be bolted or otherwise secured in any conventional manner to the housing 30 of the disintegrator 26. Figure 3 shows a preferred embodiment of the base 218, the base 218 being shown to accommodate the discharge outlets of each of the conduit ducts. As shown in Figure 3, the discharge outlets are designated a first discharge outlet 234, a second discharge outlet 236, a third discharge outlet 238 and a dusting layer discharge outlet 240.

The splitting member 200 provides a means for splitting the column of fibers into multiple fiber streams. The splitting member 200 directs the column of fibers to the ports where portions of the column of fibers are split-off into individual fiber streams. The term "splitting member" is used herein to describe a number of different structures having varying configurations and shapes such as ducts, pipes, sheets or combinations of sheets of material, a number of plates in combination, or a number of different elements in combination. The splitting member 200 is shown in Figure 2 as a curvilinear surface defined by the top wall 228 of the splitter chute 32. However, alternative preferred splitting members include a duct having ports disposed therein or, for example, if the splitter chute 32 is unitary with the housing 30 of the disintegrator 26, the splitting member 200 may comprise a combination of a portion of the disintegrating element 28, the housing 30, and the surface of the top wall 228 of the splitter chute 32, together defining a flow channel 78 through which the column of fibers may be directed.

While the splitting member 200 may have a number of configurations, the surface in which the ports are located or disposed preferably has a curvilinear profile. A curvilinear profile provides angular displacement and velocity components to the fibers to assist in separating and in drawing off the fibers into the individual conduit ducts without the presence of fiber catching mechanical edges or walls such that fiber clumping is minimized. While flat or rectilinear splitting members are contemplated by the present invention, they do not provide this angular displacement advantage as will be described later. In addition, when the splitter chute 32 is joined to the housing 30, a curvilinear splitting member accommodates the shape of the disintegrating element 28. While the curvilinear profile of the splitting member is preferably circular in nature, a number of different curvilinear profiles would be equally preferred such as hyperbolic, parabolic or ellipsoid profiles.

The splitting member 200 may be positioned

anywhere relative to where the column of fibers is discharged by the disintegrating element 28. For example, the splitting member 200 of the splitter chute 32 may be positioned relatively far downstream from the disintegrator 26. However, this configuration is not preferred because the column of fibers tends to lose its momentum and is subject to width biasing into fiber wads the farther from the disintegrating element 28 the splitting member 200 is positioned. Thus it has been found that in order to have as clean and accurate a split as possible (a split which provides consistent basis weight fiber streams and minimizes fiber clumping), the splitting member 200 should be positioned as closely as possible to the disintegrating element 28, preferably adjacent to it so that the column of fibers is drawn away from and off of the disintegrating element as it is split into the fiber streams.

As shown in Figure 2, the splitting member 200 is provided with a number of ports. The ports put the columns of air that are directed through the conduit ducts in communication with the portion of the column of fibers that is directed along the splitting member 200 so that portions of the fiber column may be split-off and drawn into the conduit duct to form a distinct fiber stream. Thus the ports provide an opening for the intake of a stream of fibers into the conduit ducts. While the ports may take a number of shapes and configurations, a preferred configuration of each of the ports is a rectangular-shaped opening having an upstream edge and a downstream or doctor's edge. (These edges are shown and described more particularly in Figure 4, 5 and 6).

In order to effectively and efficiently split-off the fibers, at least two ports must be at least partially laterally spaced from each other. As used herein, the term "laterally spaced" is used to denote that a portion of a port is offset to one side of and out of alignment with at least a portion of another port such that a line that is perpendicular to the lateral dimension would not intersect both of the ports. (Lateral being defined as the dimension across the width of the splitting member.) Thus, a partially laterally spaced port denotes that a portion of the first port is disposed to one side of and out of alignment with a portion of the second port. The ports may alternatively and preferably be completely axially offset. In addition, each of the ports may be either longitudinally aligned or spaced downstream or upstream from the other. The term "longitudinally spaced" used herein to denote that a port is disposed upstream or downstream from another. (Longitudinal being defined as the dimension along the length of the splitting member.) A preferred configuration provides that each successive port be laterally spaced and longitudinally spaced from each successive port. This configura-

tion providing the most efficient split of the fiber column.

As shown in Figure 2, the first port 202 preferably is disposed adjacent a lateral side wall 222 of the splitter chute 32, an outermost portion of the column of fibers thereby being split-off by the first port 202. The second port 204 is preferably longitudinally spaced downstream and laterally spaced from the first port 202 so as to split-off a second or central width of the column of fibers. The third port 206 is preferably longitudinally aligned with the first port 202 but is laterally spaced from both the first and second ports so as to strip off a third width of fibers from the column of fibers. The dusting layer port 208 which is provided to create a stream of fibers that is used to form the dusting layer, is longitudinally aligned with but laterally spaced from both the first and third ports 202 and 206, but is laterally aligned with but longitudinally spaced from a portion of the second port 204. While the ports may be longitudinally and laterally arranged in a number of different configurations, the configuration shown in Figure 2 is especially preferred to provide a fibrous web having two core components, one of the components having discrete particles of absorbent gelling material dispersed through one of its layers.

The first and third ports 202 and 206 are preferably centered relative to the second port 204 on the outer edges of the splitting member 200 so as to accommodate variations in the width of the drylap sheet that is fed into the disintegrator 26. Because the fiber streams that are formed from the first and third ports 202 and 206 are merged in the first deposition chute 36 downstream of the splitter chute 32, if there are any major variations in the width of the drylap sheet 24, this variation will not cause a significant change in the basis weight of the web component (insert layer) formed by the first and third fiber streams because they are merged into a combined or primary fiber stream. Thus, the first and third ports 202 and 206 should have equal widths and be positioned symmetrically about the centerline of the splitter chute 32 or splitting member 200.

While the dusting layer port 208 is preferably laterally spaced and longitudinally spaced from all of the ports so that the column of fibers is more efficiently split into four fiber streams, space and size constraints require that the preferred embodiment of the splitter chute 32 have the dusting layer port 208 laterally aligned with a portion of the second port 204 and longitudinally aligned with the first and third ports 202 and 206. The dusting layer port 208 is laterally aligned with a portion of the second port 204 because the second port 204 is preferably much wider than the first and third ports 202 and 206 such that the loss of such a small

stream of fibers will have a minimal effect on the ultimate basis weight of the core component formed by the second fiber stream. As shown in Figure 2, the dusting layer port 208 is preferably laterally spaced from the centerline of the splitter chute 32 toward an edge of the second port 204 so that any effect that the removal of the dusting layer fiber stream has on the basis weight of the hour-glass shaped core component is centered along the ears of the shaped core component rather than in the primary absorbent area of the shaped core component.

The conduit ducts provide a means through which a column of high velocity air well as streams of air-entrained fibers are directed or conveyed. The conduit ducts may be separate elements such as pipes, channels or ducts which are secured to the splitting member 200 adjacent the ports, or an integral element formed by the positioning of plates as is shown in Figure 4, 5 and 6. The conduit ducts should be configured for flow rates of preferably greater than or equal to $13.93 \text{ dm}^3/\text{sec}/\text{cm}$ of disintegrating element 28 width and for velocities of preferably greater than or equal to $3048 \text{ cm}/\text{sec}$ more preferably $5080 \text{ cm}/\text{sec}$. Thus it is preferable to make the conduit ducts 25mm (1. inch) thick and as wide as required to be in complete communication with the full width of the particular port with which the duct is in communication. While the conduit ducts may have any particular cross-sectional shape, rectilinear ducts or curvilinear ducts having a radius of curvature greater than about 6 inches are especially preferred. While rectilinear conduit chutes minimize air and fiber turbulence within the ducts, especially when such ducts are disposed tangentially to the curvilinear surface of the splitting member 200 adjacent that particular port, curvilinear ducts are especially preferred due to size and shape constraints and equipment arrangement.

The inlets of the conduit ducts provide a means to inject or draw ambient air into the conduit ducts at relatively high velocities. While the inlet ports may take on a number of different configurations, a configuration having an aerodynamic shape is believed to function to minimize air turbulence as the air is drawn into the conduit duct.

A preferred configuration of the discharge outlets along the base 218 of the splitter chute 32 is shown in Figure 3. The first and third discharge outlets 234 and 238 are preferably aligned across the width of the base so that the first deposition chute 210 which merges the fiber streams downstream may conveniently be secured to both discharge outlets. The dusting layer discharge outlet 240 is slightly offset from the first and third discharge outlets 234 and 238 to more easily accommodate the dusting layer deposition chute. The

second discharge outlet 236 is set apart from all of the other discharge outlets due to the configuration of the second conduit duct and to facilitate equipment arrangements of two laydown drums.

The percentage of the total airfelt weight per absorbent core that will form each of the specific core components will vary according to the size of the absorbent article that is being manufactured. Thus a large diaper may require a greater percentage of the total airfelt weight in the shaped core component than a medium diaper. Because the axial width of the ports determine the percentage of airfelt dedicated to each core component, it is preferable that the axial width of each port across the total axial width of the splitting member 200 be able to be changed according to the core component airfelt weights. Accordingly, the splitter chute 32 is preferably manufactured from a series of plates that are bolted or otherwise secured together in any conventional manner to form varying size chambers so that the width of each port, and correspondingly the width of each conduit duct, may be varied to accommodate the particular basis weight required in the final core component.

Figure 4 shows a cross-sectional view of a preferred embodiment of the splitter chute 32 taken along sectional line 4-4 of Figure 2. The cross-sectional view illustrates the configuration of the splitting member 200, the third port 206, and the third conduit duct 214 having an inlet 237 and a discharge outlet 238 in the third chamber or splitting region of the splitter chute 32. (While the present invention will be described with reference to the third chamber or splitting region, it should be understood that the description is equally applicable to the first chamber or splitting region.) The above elements are preferably formed and defined by three plates comprising a top plate 400, a downstream plate 402, and a base plate 404.

The top plate 400 defines a portion of the top wall 228 or splitting member 200 of the present invention as well as a top wall of the third conduit duct 214, a portion of the inlet 237, and the upstream edge 406 of the third port 206. The portion of the top plate 400 that defines the upstream edge 406 of the third port 206 is shown to be tapered away from the circular profile of the splitting member 200. This configuration is preferred so that the portion of the column of fibers directed in the third chamber will begin to depart from the disintegrating element 28 due to the lack of constraint provided by the tapered upstream edge 406 as well as the fact that each fiber has an angular velocity component directed tangentially to its angular path which tends to direct or release the fibers away from the disintegrating element 28.

The downstream plate 402 defines the portion of the splitting member 200 that is downstream of

the third port 206, a portion of a wall of the third conduit duct 214, and a portion of the base 218 of the splitter chute 32. Additionally, the downstream plate 402 defines the downstream edge or doctor's edge 408 of the third port 206. In conventional disintegrating apparatus, this doctor's edge is a point where a significant amount of the fibers are removed from the teeth of the disintegrating element and directed into a conduit duct. The result of this removal at the doctor's edge causes a significant amount of fiber clumping along the doctor's edge. However, the term "doctor's edge" is used herein for descriptive purposes. Very little, if any, fibers are removed from the teeth 74 of the disintegrating element 28 by this edge. Most of the fibers are removed by the effects of the pressure differential established adjacent the port and the angular velocity and momentum of the fibers as the fibers are drawn or pulled away from the disintegrating element. Thus, there is reduced fiber clumping along this doctor's edge 408.

The base plate 404 defines a wall of the third conduit duct 214, as well as a portion of the base 218 and side wall 224 of the splitter chute 32.

Figure 5 shows a cross-sectional view of a preferred embodiment of the splitter chute taken along sectional line 5-5 of Figure 2. The cross-sectional view illustrates the configuration of the splitting member 200, the second port 204, and the second conduit duct 212 having an inlet 235 and a discharge outlet 236 in the second chamber or splitting region of the splitter chute 32. (This portion of the second chamber is where no dusting layer fiber stream is formed.) The above elements are preferably formed and defined by three plates comprising a top plate 500, a downstream plate 502 and a base plate 504. These plates are arranged in a similar manner and define similar portions of the splitter chute as the plates shown in Figure 4 except that the second port 204 and the second conduit ducts 212 are arranged downstream along the splitting member 200 from where the first and third ports 202 and 206 are disposed. The upstream edge 506 and the doctor's edge 508 of the second port are also shown in Figure 5.

Figure 6 shows a cross-sectional view of a preferred embodiment of the splitter chute 32 taken along sectional line 6-6 of Figure 2. The cross-sectional view illustrates the configuration of the splitting member 200, the dusting layer port 208, the second port 204, the dusting layer conduit duct 216 having an inlet 239 and a discharge outlet 240 and the second conduit duct 212 having an inlet 235 and a discharge outlet 236, in the dusting layer chamber or splitting region of the splitter chute. While the dusting layer chamber may be configured in a number of different ways, including the configuration shown in Figure 4 wherein the second

port and duct would not be formed in the dusting layer chamber, such embodiments are not preferred. The above elements are preferably formed and defined by six plates comprising a top plate 600, an intermediate plate 602, a downstream plate 604, a side plate 606, a base plate 608, and a wedge plate 610.

The splitting member 200 is formed from the top surfaces of the top plate 600, the intermediate plate 602 and the downstream plate 604. The intermediate plate 602 acts as a separator to define the ports. The dusting layer port 208 is defined by the top plate 600 and the intermediate plate 602; the top plate 600 defining the upstream edge 612 of the dusting layer port 208 and the intermediate plate 602 defining the doctor's edge 614 of the dusting layer port 208. The second port 204 is defined by the intermediate plate 602 and the downstream plate 604; the intermediate plate 604 defining the upstream edge 508, and the downstream plate 604 defining the doctor's edge 510 of the second port 204. The dusting layer conduit duct 216 is formed by the top plate 600, the side plate 606, the intermediate plate 602, and the base plate 608. The second conduit duct 212 is defined by the intermediate plate 602, the downstream plate 604 and the base plate 608. It should be noted that the second conduit duct 212 is blocked by the wedge plate 610. The wedge plate 610 is a plate having tapered ends and a square hole cut vertically through the plate so as to block the flow of air through the portion of the second conduit duct 212 which is in communication with the dusting layer conduit duct 216 while permitting the flow of air through the dusting layer conduit duct 216.

A particularly exemplary splitter chute 32 is configured of twenty-seven sets of plates across its width, each of the plates having a width of five-eighths inch (15.8 mm). Thus, the cumulative width of the splitter chute 32 is seventeen inches (432 mm). The first and third chambers are configured of from four to eight plates each such that the first and third ports 202 and 206 each have a width of 2.5 to 5.0 inches (63.5 to 127 mm). The second chamber is configured of from thirteen to twenty plates such that the width of the second port 204 is 8.12 to 12.5 inches (206 to 317.5 mm). Of these thirteen to twenty plates, two to four plates are configured to provide the dusting layer chamber such that the dusting layer port 208 has a width of 1.25 to 2.5 inches (31.75 to 63.5 mm). The dusting layer chamber being laterally spaced from the first chamber by at least two plates or 1.25 inches (31.75 mm).

The splitter chute 32 is preferably operated such that each column of air that is drawn through the conduit ducts has a velocity of six-thousand to fifteen-thousand feet per minute (1.83 to 4.57 km

per minute), preferably about ten-thousand feet per minute (3.05 km per minute) and a flow rate of from 7.43 to 18.57 dm³/sec/cm preferably 13.93 dm³/sec/cm.

Figure 7 shows an expanded cross-sectional view of a preferred embodiment of the splitter chute 32 adjacent any of the ports of the present invention. The disintegrating element 28 is shown to be rotating in a counter-clockwise direction. The splitting member 200 having a port 700 is shown to be a curvilinear surface formed by a top plate 702 and a downstream plate 704. The conduit duct 706 is formed from the surfaces of the top plate 702, the downstream plate 704 and the base plate 708; the inlet of the conduit duct 706 being designated 710 and the discharge outlet being designated 712. Also as shown in Figure 7, the disintegrating element 28, the splitting member 200, and the housing (not shown) define a narrow flow channel 714 through which the column of fibers 716 is directed. The upstream edge 718 of the port 700 (the edge of the top plate 702 adjacent the port 700) is shown in Figure 7 to be tapered away from the disintegrating element 28. (As previously discussed, this configuration is preferred so that the fibers may begin to release from the disintegrating element.) The doctor's edge 720 or downstream edge of the port 700 (the edge of the downstream plate 704 adjacent the port 700) is shown to have an included angle "A" as defined by the tangents to the surfaces of the plate. A tangent release point, designated by the "X" in Figure 7, is the point defined wherein the tangential component of angular velocity of the fiber is such that the fiber tends to release from its angular path away from the disintegrating element 28. While the tangent release point may be positioned either upstream or adjacent the port 700, it is preferable that the tangent release point be configured slightly upstream of the port 700 to provide the maximum stripping effect while minimizing clumping.

It has been found that the geometry of the members may have an important determination upon whether fiber clumping can be minimized. The angle "B" formed between the upstream edge 718 and the doctor's edge 720 defines the actual opening of the port 700. The actual opening is preferably not greater than 60°, more preferably 15 to 45° and most preferably 30°. The angle "C" defined by the angle between the tangent release point, X, and the doctor's edge 720 defines an effective opening of the port 700. The effective opening is preferably not greater than 75°, more preferably 30 to 60°, and most preferably 40 to 45°. Thus the tangent release point should not be disposed upstream of the port 700 by more than fifteen degrees (15°). It has also been found that the included angle, angle "A", is preferably 15 to

60°, most preferably 45°. It should also be noted that the angle between the ports from center-to-center should preferably be not greater than 90°, more preferably 30 to 60°, and most preferably 45° to achieve a sufficient separation between the ports to minimize interaction between the ports.

Referring to Figure 7, the operation of the apparatus of this invention will be described. The column of fibers 716 is directed around the flow channel 714 along the splitting member 200 of the splitter chute 32 by the pumping action of the disintegrating element 28. The column of fibers 716 is directed along the curvilinear surface of the splitting member such that angular motion and thus angular velocity and momentum is imparted to each of the fibers in the column. A high velocity column of air is simultaneously directed through the conduit duct 706 and past the port 700. This column of air may be provided by any conventional means (not shown) such as a blower positioned to inject air through the inlet 710 of the conduit duct 706 or a vacuum means positioned downstream of the discharge outlet 712, preferably below the foraminous forming element of the drum-type air-laying apparatus so as to draw ambient air through the inlet 710 of the conduit duct 706.

While not wishing to be bound by theory, by maintaining a column of high velocity air (at least 3048 cm/sec and more preferably 5080 cm/sec flowing through the conduit ducts, it is believed that a pressure differential or low pressure zone is created between the pressure in the flow channel and the pressure in the conduit duct adjacent to or below the ports. Because of the pressure differential created by the movement of the column of air and the angular velocity and mass-derived momentum of the fibers, the fibers tend to pull away from the disintegrating element and be directed along the pathway created by the tapered edge of the upstream edge of the port while they are being drawn into the first conduit duct as a result of the pressure differential. Thus the fibers need not be split-off by the mechanical action of a doctor's edge, but are split-off as a result of air and fiber momentum, thereby minimizing clumping due to the absence of mechanical edges or walls.

The stream of fibers which is drawn into the conduit duct subsequently becomes entrained in the column of air, the resultant stream of air-entrained fibers being directed downstream and out of the discharge outlet into the corresponding deposition chute. This process is repeated along each of the ports so as to create multiple, independent streams of air-entrained fibers.

The deposition chutes provide a means for directing streams of air-entrained fibers from the splitter chute 32 to one of the air-laying means and for depositing the fibers onto the air-laying means.

The deposition chutes also preferably decelerate the air-entrained fiber streams and orient the fiber streams from the discharge outlets to be compatible with the width and location of the airlaying means.

The deposition chutes may comprise any members that are known in the art that are capable of performing the above functions. Preferably, the deposition chutes comprise ducts that are designed so as to decelerate the fiber streams and minimize clumping of the fibers during their reorientation from the splitter chute to the airlaying means. The deposition chutes should be designed to provide a reduction in air speed with a minimum of chute contraction and expansion angles. Preferably the chutes provide about a two-thirds reduction in air speed and more preferably reduce the air speeds by a factor of 3 so that the fibers do not impact the laydown drum at a high velocity. Thus, the walls of the deposition chutes should have various curves and tapers to provide a gradually increasing cross-sectional area to reduce the velocity of the fiber streams. The deposition chutes preferably have a rectangular cross-sectional area.

As shown in Figure 8, the first deposition chute 36 preferably comprises a "Y-shaped" configuration so as to merge the first and third fiber streams into a primary or combined fiber stream. Preferably, the first deposition chute 36 is designed to minimize the turbulence encountered with the merging of the two fiber streams. Thus, this chute preferably uses a fifth order polynomial curve profile or other profiles having their first and second derivative equal to zero so as to blend the fiber streams into a single stream.

As shown in Figure 1, the apparatus 20 and more particularly the first deposition chute 36, is preferably provided with a means for providing discrete particles of absorbent gelling material. The absorbent gelling material injection apparatus 40 or means mixes discrete particles of absorbent gelling material with the combined or primary stream of air-entrained fibers prior to the deposition of the stream onto the first airlaying means. An exemplary type of injection means is shown in U.S. Patent 4,551,191 issued to Ronald W. Kock and John A. Esposito on November 5, 1985.

The injection means preferably comprises a hopper (not shown) for storing a quantity of absorbent gelling material, a feed device (not shown) for metering the release of absorbent gelling material through an inlet duct 172 into an eductor 174 which entrains the absorbent gelling material in air, and a spreading duct 176 which provides air-entrained absorbent gelling material particles to the fiber streams. The absorbent gelling material is then entrained in and mixed with the fiber streams before the admixture is deposited on the laydown

drum. Any other suitable injection means as are known in the art may also be used for the invention. In addition, any of the other deposition chutes may be provided with absorbent gelling material injection means as are required.

The uniting means or apparatus provide a means for uniting the web components. "Uniting" is used herein to denote that the webs are brought together in a direct or indirect relationships to form an airlaid fibrous web. While many uniting apparatus are known in the art, a preferred uniting apparatus comprises a pair of uniting rolls upon which a continuous stream of enwrapped insert core components are directed to be positioned adjacent the shaped core components.

Any other uniting means, including embodiments wherein the insert core components are blown-off of the first airlaying means directly onto the shaped core components, are also contemplated by the present invention.

The first and second airlaying means or apparatus, for forming fibrous webs are shown in Figure 1 to preferably comprise drum-type airlaying apparatus. While the airlaying apparatus of the present invention may alternatively comprise a number of different configurations such as a moving foraminous screen, a drum-type airlaying apparatus is especially preferred. Typical drum-type airlaying apparatus useful in the present invention are shown in U.S. Patent 4,388,056, issued to F. B. Lee and O. Jobes, Jr., on June 14, 1983, and U.S. Patent No. 4592708 issued June 3 1986 to B. R. Feist, J. E. Carstens and D. A. Peterson. While the present invention can be practiced using a drum-type airlaying apparatus either which forms an endless or continuous web or which forms discrete webs or articles, the following description will be related to a drum-type airlaying apparatus for making discrete fibrous webs.

The first drum-type airlaying apparatus 34 is shown in Figure 1 to comprise a first deposition or laydown drum 100 having a foraminous forming element (not shown) disposed about the drum's periphery; a first scarfing roll 102; a first blow-off means or nozzle 104; a first take-away conveyor 62 disposed about mounting rolls 106; and a first transfer vacuum box 108 positioned beneath the upper run of the take-away conveyor 62. The second drum-type airlaying apparatus 46 preferably comprises a second deposition or laydown drum 110 having a foraminous forming element (not shown); a second scarfing roll 112; a second blow-off means or nozzle 114; a second take-away conveyor 66 disposed about mounting rolls 116; and a second transfer vacuum box 118 positioned beneath the upper run of the second take-away conveyor 66. Means not shown in Figure 1 include means for driving the drums, differential pressure

means including a vacuum plenum duct, fan and a fan drive to draw fiber-depleted air through either the foraminous forming elements and to exhaust the air out of the drum through a duct.

Thus, the apparatus 20 provides a means for converting an endless length or roll of drylap material into a succession of fibrous webs for use as absorbent cores in disposable diapers, catamenial napkins and the like. As shown in Figure 1, a roll of drylap material 24 is unrolled into a sheet which is advanced to the disintegrator 26. The sheet is fed radially into the disintegrator 26 by the pair of counter-rotating metering infeed rolls 22. An inlet opening 80 in the housing 30 of the disintegrator 26 receives the fibrous sheet and guides it to the inner end of the housing 30 where the edge of the fibrous sheet is disintegrated into a column of fibers disposed across the axial width of the housing 30. The column of fibers is directed around the flow channel 78 by the pumping action of the disintegrating element 28 to the splitter chute 32. The column of fibers is split into multiple fiber streams that are entrained in air by the splitter chute 32, the air-entrained fiber streams being directed out of the splitter chute 32 into the deposition chutes.

A dusting layer fiber stream 56 is directed through the dusting layer deposition chute 42 to the first laydown drum 100 where the fibers are deposited on the foraminous forming element of the first laydown drum 100. Preferably, a first fiber stream 54 and a third fiber stream (not shown) are merged in and directed through the first deposition chute 36 where the combined or primary fiber stream is mixed with discrete particles of absorbent gelling material that are injected into the first deposition chute 36 by the absorbent gelling material injection apparatus 40. The resultant admixture is directed to the first laydown drum 100, whereupon the fiber/absorbent gelling material admixture is deposited and collected on the foraminous forming element over the dusting layer, downstream of the position where the dusting layer was formed. The fiber-depleted entrainment air is drawn through the foraminous forming element by the vacuum maintained behind the foraminous forming element. The resultant first web component is then transferred to the first take-away conveyor 62 by the blow-off nozzle 104 and the transfer vacuum box 108 located under the conveyor belt. The second web component is preferably formed in a similar manner as the first web component by directing a second fiber stream 58 through the second deposition chute 48, by depositing and collecting the second fiber stream 58 on the foraminous forming element of the second laydown drum 100; and by transferring the resultant second web component onto a second take-away conveyor 66.

Before uniting the web components, the web components may be finished by different operations such as calendering, enwrapping or reinforcing the webs as are known in the art. As shown in Figure 1, the first web component is enwrapped in tissue by means of a folding board, whereupon the continuous stream of enwrapped first core components is directed to the uniting rolls. The web components are then united by directing the continuous stream of enwrapped first web components over the uniting means or rolls 52 whereupon they are brought into contact with the second web component. Other converting operations as desired may then be effected upon the resultant fibrous web downstream from the uniting means or rolls 52 to produce a finished disposable absorbent article such as a disposable diaper.

Figure 9 shows an enlarged sectional view of a preferred embodiment of the first drum-type air-laying apparatus 34 of the present invention. As shown in Figure 9, the apparatus for forming fibrous webs having discrete particles dispersed therein or having a multiplicity of layers preferably comprises a laydown drum 100 having a foraminous forming element consisting of a plurality of formation cavities 120 circumferentially spaced about the periphery of the drum 100. The number of cavities 120 can be varied depending upon the size of the drum 100 or the size of the webs to be formed. In the embodiment shown, the drum 100 contains six cavities. A plurality of ribs 122 are mounted within the interior of the drum 100 to define a dusting layer vacuum chamber 124, a first or primary vacuum chamber 126, a hold-down vacuum chamber 128, and a blow-off chamber 130 having a blow-off means or nozzle 104. Each of the vacuum chambers is connected to a suitable source of vacuum (not shown) by vacuum ducts (not shown). The apparatus also preferably comprises a dusting layer deposition means such as a dusting layer deposition chute 42 and hood 44 for directing a dusting layer stream of air-entrained fibers to a dusting layer sector 132 of the laydown drum 100. The dusting layer hood 38 has a first sector 134 that circumferentially spans the entire dusting layer vacuum chamber 124 and a second sector 135 that circumferentially spans a portion of the first vacuum chamber 126. A first or primary deposition means such as a first deposition chute 36 and hood 38 for directing a first stream of air-entrained fibers to a first sector 136 of the laydown drum 100 is also shown in Figure 9, the first hood 38 having sufficient circumferential span to enclose the remaining portion of the first vacuum chamber 126. The apparatus further comprises a scarfing roll 102; a sealing roll 137; and a take-away conveyor 62 having an endless stream of discrete fibrous webs 138 or insert core components mov-

ing on the conveyor 62.

A critical feature of this invention is that the first vacuum chamber 126 is disposed not only subjacent the entire first hood 38 but also under the downstream or second sector 136 of the dusting layer hood 44 so that approximately equal pressures are established adjacent the intersection point 140 of the hoods. Since each of the hoods preferably has a circumferential span of one complete cavity 120 (measured from the edge of a first cavity to the same edge of a second cavity) or approximately 60 degrees for a six cavity drum, the first vacuum chamber 126 must have a circumferential span of greater than one chamber or about 75 degrees for the embodiment shown in Figure 9. Although the circumferential span of that portion of the first vacuum chamber 126 under the dusting layer hood 44 (i.e. the circumferential span of the second sector 135 of the dusting layer hood 44) has not been found to be particularly critical, there should be sufficient circumferential span as to allow a minimal transition zone between the dusting layer hood 44 and the first hood 38. This minimal circumferential span decreases as the number of cavities 120 increases and increases as the number of cavities 100 decreases.

Another critical feature is that a small gap 142 must exist between the outer surface of the laydown drum 100 and the point of intersection 140 of the hoods to allow for equalization of pressure in the portions of each hood adjacent the intersection point. If no gap existed, then there could be differential pressures in each hood so that as the drum brought the edge of the dusting layer into the first hood 38, this pressure differential could cause the dusting layer to lift off of the screen or shear. If the gap is too large, the two deposition chutes essentially merge into one and the independent dusting layer concept is not achieved. Thus a gap 142 of not more than 13 mm is desirable with a 3 mm gap being preferable so that the pressure may equalize in each portion of each hood that is adjacent to the intersection point 140.

Another important design criterion is that each of the hoods should have a relatively wide circular taper near the intersection point 140 so that the fibers that are directed toward the laydown drum in this area do not impinge on the dusting layer at an acute angle. When fibers impinge upon the dusting layer at an acute angle, the fibers have a component of velocity which is parallel to the surface of the drum, thus the fibers tend to cause the fibers constituting the dusting layer to lift or shear. The critical shear velocity has been determined to be 2032 cm/sec the chute geometry being designed with this as a limiting factor. Thus it is desirable that the fibers impinge upon the fibers of the dusting layer at an angle as close to perpendicular as

possible because the shear component would not exist. Thus, each of the hoods should have a relatively wide circular taper so that the fibers do not impinge upon the dusting layer at an acute angle or exceed the critical shear velocity. As shown in Figure 9, each of the hoods has about a 75 mm radius of curvature adjacent the intersection point.

The operation of the apparatus is as follows. The dusting layer stream of fibers is directed toward a circumferential span or dusting layer sector 132 of the periphery of the laydown drum 100 through the dusting layer deposition chute 42 and the dusting layer hood 44. The circumferential span preferably being equal to the span of one cavity 120 or 60° degrees if six cavities 120 are used. The fibers are deposited onto the foraminous forming element of one of the cavities 120 on the drum 100 while the entrainment air is being drawn through the foraminous forming element by the vacuum maintained in the dusting layer vacuum chamber 124 as well as by the vacuum maintained in the primary or first vacuum chamber 126. Thus the dusting layer is formed by the collected fibers on the foraminous forming element.

As the drum rotates, the dusting layer passes from the influence of the dusting hood 44 to the influence of the first hood 38 where a first stream of air-entrained fibers are being directed generally radially toward the periphery of the drum. However, it should be noted that the dusting layer has already been transferred to the influence of the first vacuum chamber 126 prior to passing between the hoods such that the pressure differential and velocity of the first stream do not have a tendency to shear the dusting layer apart. The fibers of the first fiber stream are thus deposited over the dusting layer while the entrainment air is drawn through the foraminous forming element by the vacuum maintained in the primary or first vacuum chamber 126. The first or primary layer is formed by the collected fiber/AGM admixture over the dusting layer. Since the dusting layer is substantially left intact, discrete particles of absorbent gelling material do not tend to be drawn through the foraminous forming element nor plug it due to the blocking effect of having a layer of fibers already covering the void spaces in the foraminous forming element.

The resultant fibrous web then passes under the scarfing roll 102 where the web is leveled. The fibrous web 138 or insert core component is then transferred to the take-away conveyor 62 by the joint action of the blow-off nozzle 104 and the vacuum maintained underneath the conveyor belt. The fibrous web 138 is then conveyed downstream to subsequent converting operations to produce a finished disposable absorbent article such as a disposable diaper.



Claims

1. An apparatus for forming air-laid fibrous webs having a multiplicity of layers or discrete particles dispersed through at least a portion of the web, said apparatus comprising:
 air-laying means (34) having a foraminous forming element for forming an air-laid fibrous web;
 dusting layer deposition means (42, 44) positioned adjacent a first portion (132) of the periphery of the air-laying means (34) for directing a dusting layer stream (56) of air-entrained fibers to said foraminous forming element of said air-laying means (34) and for depositing the fibers on said foraminous forming element so as to form a dusting layer (1012);
 primary layer deposition means (36, 38) positioned adjacent a second portion (136) of the periphery of said air-laying means (34) for directing a primary stream (54) of air-entrained fibers to said foraminous forming element of said air-laying means and for depositing the fibers onto said foraminous forming element over the dusting layer (1012) so as to form a primary layer (1014) over the dusting layer; said apparatus being characterised by:
 dusting layer deposition means comprising a first sector (134) and a second sector (135);
 dusting layer vacuum means (124) for drawing fiber-depleted air through said foraminous forming element, said dusting layer vacuum means being positioned subjacent said first sector (134) of said dusting layer deposition means (42, 44); and
 primary vacuum means (126) for drawing fiber-depleted air through said foraminous forming element, said primary vacuum means being positioned subjacent both said primary deposition means (36, 38) and said second sector (135) of said dusting layer deposition means (42, 44), so as to prevent the dusting layer (1012) formed on said foraminous forming element from being damaged or destroyed.
2. An apparatus according to Claim 1 wherein said air-laying means (34) comprises a laydown drum-type air-laying apparatus.
3. An apparatus according to Claim 2 wherein said drum is formed with a primary vacuum chamber (126) and a dusting layer vacuum chamber (124).
4. An apparatus according to Claim 3 wherein said dusting deposition means comprises a dusting layer hood (44) having a first sector (134) and a second sector (135) positioned downstream of said first sector, said dusting layer hood (44) being positioned adjacent a dusting layer portion of the periphery of said laydown drum; and said primary deposition means comprises a primary hood (38) positioned adjacent a primary portion of the periphery of said laydown drum and adjacent to and downstream of said dusting layer hood (44).
5. An apparatus according to Claim 4 wherein said primary hood (38) and said dusting layer hood (44) intersect at at least a point of intersection to allow for the equalization of pressures in the portions of said dusting layer hood and said primary hood adjacent said point of intersection.
6. An apparatus according to Claim 5 wherein said point of intersection is positioned so that a gap (142) between said primary hood (38) and said dusting layer hood (44) and the outer surface of said laydown drum is formed adjacent said point of intersection, said gap being not greater than 13mm.
7. An apparatus according to either one of Claims 5 and 6 wherein each of said dusting layer hood and said primary hood has a relatively wide circular taper adjacent said point of intersection so that the shear velocity of each of the primary fiber stream (54) and the dusting layer fiber stream (56) adjacent said point of intersection is less than 2032cm/sec.
8. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 5-7 wherein each of said dusting layer hood and said primary hood has a radius of curvature of approximately 75mm adjacent said point of intersection.
9. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 4-8 wherein said first sector (134) of said dusting layer hood (44) circumferentially spans the entire dusting layer vacuum chamber (174).
10. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 4-9 wherein said second sector (135) of said dusting layer hood (44) circumferentially spans a sufficient portion of said primary vacuum chamber (126) to form a transition zone and wherein said primary hood (38) has sufficient circumferential span to enclose the remaining portion of said primary vacuum chamber (126).
11. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 4-10 additionally comprising a scarfing roll (102) positioned adjacent said primary hood



(38) along the periphery of said laydown drum.

12. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 4-11 additionally comprising a sealing roll (137) positioned adjacent the downstream end of said primary hood (38). 5
13. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 4-12 wherein said laydown drum additionally comprises a hold-down vacuum chamber (126) and a blow-off chamber (130) positioned downstream of said hold-down vacuum chamber (128). 10
14. An apparatus according to Claim 13 wherein said blow-off chamber (130) has a blow-off nozzle (104). 15
15. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 1-14 additionally comprising absorbent gelling material injection means (40, 172, 174, 176) connected to said primary deposition means (36, 38) for mixing discrete particles of an absorbent gelling material with said primary stream (54) of air-entrained fibers. 20 25
16. An apparatus according to any one of Claims 1-15 additionally comprising a splitting means (32) for splitting a column of fibers into a multiplicity of fiber streams (54, 56) and for entraining each of the fiber streams in air so as to provide a multiplicity of streams of air-entrained fibers. 30
17. A method for forming an air-laid fibrous web having a multiplicity of layers or discrete particles dispersed through at least a portion of the web, said method comprising the steps of: 35
 - a. providing multiple streams of air-entrained fibers, including a dusting layer stream and a primary layer stream; 40
 - b. directing said dusting layer stream of air-entrained fibers toward a dusting layer sector of a moving foraminous forming element;
 - c. depositing said dusting layer stream of air-entrained fibers on to the foraminous forming element;
 - d. drawing the dusting layer stream entrainment air through the foraminous forming element by a pressure differential maintained by a source of vacuum positioned subjacent the foraminous forming element;
 - e. collecting the fibers on the foraminous forming element to form a dusting layer;
 - f. transferring said dusting layer to a primary layer sector of the foraminous forming element; 50
 - g. directing said primary layer stream of air-

entrained fibers toward the primary layer sector of the foraminous forming element;
h. depositing said primary layer stream of air-entrained fibers on the foraminous forming element to form a primary layer over said dusting layer;

i. drawing the primary layer stream entrainment air through the foraminous forming element by the pressure differential maintained by the source of vacuum positioned subjacent the foraminous forming element; and

j. collecting the deposited fibers as an air-laid fibrous web having a primary layer over a dusting layer;

characterised in that:

step (d) also comprises maintaining the pressure differential for drawing the dusting layer fiber stream entrainment air through said foraminous forming element by means of a source of dusting layer vacuum disposed subjacent said foraminous element in a first portion of said dusting layer sector ;

step (i) also comprises maintaining the pressure differential for drawing the primary layer fiber stream entrainment air through said foraminous forming element by means of a source of primary layer vacuum disposed subjacent said foraminous element in the primary layer sector thereof, said source of primary layer vacuum being disposed so as also to be subjacent a second portion of said dusting layer sector, downstream of said first dusting layer sector; and

step (f) also comprises transferring said dusting layer to the influence of the pressure differential maintained by the primary layer source of vacuum in said second portion while said dusting layer is still positioned in the dusting layer sector of the foraminous forming element.

18. A method according to Claim 17 wherein the step of providing multiple streams of air-entrained fibers comprises the steps of: 45
 - providing a column of fibers;
 - splitting the column of fibers into a multiplicity of fiber streams; and
 - separately entraining each of the fiber streams in air.
19. A method according to Claim 17 wherein a column of fibers is providing by a method comprising the steps of: 55
 - providing a fibrous sheet;
 - feeding a fibrous sheet into a disintegrator;
 - separating the fibers of the fibrous sheet via the disintegrator into individual fibers; and



forming a column of fibers across the width of the housing of the disintegrator.

20. A method according to either one of Claims 18 and 19 wherein said splitting step comprises the steps of:

directing the column of fibers along a splitting member having a first port and a second port; directing a column of air through a dusting layer conduit means and past the dusting layer port so as to cause a portion of the column of fibers to split-off and be drawn into the dusting layer fiber stream; and

directing a column of air through a first conduit means and past the first port so as to cause a portion of the column of fibers to split-off and be drawn into the first conduit means to form a first primary fiber stream.

21. A method according to any one of Claims 17-20 additionally comprising the step of:

k. mixing discrete particles of an absorbent gelling material with said primary stream of air-entrained fibers prior to depositing said primary stream of air-entrained fibers onto the foraminous forming element so that said primary layer comprises a mixture of discrete particles of absorbent gelling material and fibers.

22. A method according to any one of Claims 17-21 additionally comprising the step of:

l. leveling said air-laid fibrous web by passing said air-laid fibrous web under a scarfing roll.

Patentansprüche

1. Eine Vorrichtung zum Bilden im Luftstrom auf-
gebrachter faseriger Bahnen mit einer Mehr-
zahl von Schichten oder getrennten Partikeln,
welche über mindestens einen Abschnitt der
Bahn verteilt sind, wobei die genannte Vorrich-
tung umfaßt:
im Luftstrom aufbringende Einrichtung (34) mit
einem löchrigen formenden Element zum For-
men einer im Luftstrom aufgebrachten faseri-
gen Bahn;
Staubdämmschichte-Ablegemittel (42, 44), wel-
che nahe einem ersten Abschnitt (132) der
Peripherie der im Luftstrom aufbringenden Ein-
richtung (34) positioniert sind, zum Lenken ei-
nes Staubdämmschichte-Stromes (56) in Luft
mitgerissener Fasern zum genannten löchrigen
formenden Element der genannten im Luft-
strom aufbringenden Einrichtung (34) und zum
Ablegen der Fasern am genannten löchrigen
formenden Element, um so eine Staubdämm-

schichte (1012) zu bilden;

Hauptschichte-Ablegemittel (36, 38), welche
nahe einem zweiten Abschnitt (136) der Peri-
pherie der genannten im Luftstrom aufbringen-
den Einrichtung (34) positioniert sind, zum
Lenken eines Hauptstromes (54) in Luft mitge-
rissener Fasern zum genannten löchrigen for-
menden Element der genannten im Luftstrom
aufbringenden Einrichtung und zum Ablegen
der Fasern am genannten löchrigen formenden
Element über der Staubdämmschichte (1012),
um so eine Hauptschichte (1014) über der
Staubdämmschichte zu bilden; wobei die ge-
nannte Vorrichtung gekennzeichnet ist durch:
Staubdämmschichte-Ablegemittel, welche ei-
nen ersten Sektor (134) und einen zweiten
Sektor (135) aufweisen;

Staubdämmschichte-Vakuummittel (124) zum
Ziehen faserentzogener Luft durch das ge-
nannte löchrige formende Element, wobei das
genannte Staubdämmschichte-Vakuummittel
unter dem genannten ersten Sektor (134) der
genannten Staubdämmschichte-Ablegemittel
(42,44) liegend positioniert ist; und
Hauptvakuum-Mittel (126) zum Ziehen faser-
entzogener Luft durch das genannte löchrige
formende Element, wobei das genannte
Hauptvakuum-Mittel unter sowohl den genann-
ten Hauptschichte-Ablegemitteln (36,38) als
auch dem genannten zweiten Sektor (135) der
genannten Staubdämmschichte-Ablegemittel
(42,44) liegend positioniert ist, um so zu ver-
hindern, daß die auf dem genannten löchrigen
formenden Element gebildete Staubdämm-
schichte (1012) beschädigt oder zerstört wird.

2. Eine Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 1, bei welcher
die genannte im Luftstrom aufbringende Ein-
richtung (34) ein trommelartiges im Luftstrom
aufbringendes Ablegegerät umfaßt.
3. Eine Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 2, bei welcher
die genannte Trommel mit einer Hauptvakuum-
kammer (126) und einer Staubdämmschichte-
Vakuumkammer(124) ausgebildet ist.
4. Eine Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 3, bei welcher
das genannte Staubdämmschichte-Ablegemit-
tel eine Staubdämmschichte-Abdeckung (44)
mit einem ersten Sektor (134) und einem zwei-
ten Sektor (135), welcher stromabwärts vom
genannten ersten Sektor positioniert ist, um-
faßt, wobei die genannte Staubdämmschichte-
Abdeckung (44) nahe einem
Staubdämmschichte-Abschnitt der Peripherie
der genannten Ablegetrommel positioniert ist;
und das genannte Hauptschichte-Ablegemittel
eine Hauptschichte-Abdeckung (38), welche



nahe einem Hauptabschnitt der Peripherie der genannten Ablegetrommel und benachbart zu und stromabwärts von der genannten Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung (44) positioniert ist, umfaßt.

5. Eine Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 4, bei welcher die genannte Hauptschichte-Abdeckung (38) und die genannte Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung (44) an mindestens einem Schnittpunkt einander schneiden, um in den dem genannten Schnittpunkt benachbarten Abschnitten der genannten Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung und der genannten Hauptschichte-Abdeckung den Ausgleich von Drücken zu erlauben.
6. Eine Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 5, bei welcher der genannte Schnittpunkt so positioniert ist, daß ein Spalt (142) zwischen der genannten Hauptschichte-Abdeckung (38) und der genannten Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung (44) und der äußeren Oberfläche der genannten Ablegetrommel nahe dem genannten Schnittpunkt gebildet ist, wobei der genannte Spalt nicht größer als 13 mm ist.
7. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 5 und 6, bei welcher eine jede der genannten Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung und der genannten Hauptschichte-Abdeckung nahe dem genannten Schnittpunkt eine relativ breite kreisförmige Verjüngung hat, sodaß nahe dem genannten Schnittpunkt die Schergeschwindigkeit eines jeden des Hauptschichte-Faserstroms (54) und des Staubbämschichte-Faserstroms (56) weniger als 2032 cm/sec ist.
8. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 5 bis 7, bei welcher eine jede der genannten Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung und der genannten Hauptschichte-Abdeckung nahe dem genannten Schnittpunkt einen Krümmungsradius von annähernd 75 mm aufweist.
9. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 4 bis 8, bei welcher der genannte erste Sektor (134) der genannten Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung (44) die gesamte Staubbämschichte-Vakuumkammer (124) am Umfang umspannt.
10. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 4 bis 9, bei welcher der genannte zweite Sektor (135) der genannten Staubbämschichte-Abdeckung (44) am Umfang einen ausreichenden Abschnitt der genannten Hauptvakuumkammer (126) umspannt, um eine Übergangszone zu bilden, und bei welcher die genannte

Hauptschichte-Abdeckung (38) eine ausreichende Umfangsumspannung aufweist, um den verbleibenden Abschnitt der genannten Hauptvakuumkammer (126) einzuschließen.

11. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 4 bis 10, welche zusätzlich eine Spleißrolle (102) umfaßt, welche nahe der genannten Hauptschichte-Abdeckung (38) an der Peripherie der genannten Ablegetrommel positioniert ist.
12. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 4 bis 11, welche zusätzlich eine Versiegelungsrolle (137) aufweist, welche nahe dem stromabwärtigen Ende der genannten Hauptschichte-Abdeckung (38) positioniert ist.
13. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 4 bis 12, bei welcher die genannte Ablegetrommel zusätzlich eine Niederhaltevakuumkammer (128) und eine Abblaskammer (130) umfaßt, welche stromabwärts von der genannten Niederhaltevakuumkammer (128) positioniert ist.
14. Eine Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 13, bei welcher die genannte Abblaskammer (130) eine Abreinigungsdüse (104) aufweist.
15. Eine Vorrichtung nach irgendeinem der Ansprüche 1 bis 14, welche zusätzlich Mittel zum Einspritzen absorbierenden gelierenden Materials (40, 172, 174, 176) aufweist, welche mit den genannten Hauptschichte-Ablegemitteln (36,38) verbunden sind, um getrennte Partikel eines absorbierenden gelierenden Materials mit dem genannten Hauptstrom (54) in Luft mitgerissener Fasern zu mischen.
16. Eine Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 1 bis 15, welche zusätzlich ein Aufspaltmittel (32) zum Aufspalten einer Fasersäule in eine Mehrzahl von Faserströmen (54,56) und zum Mitreißen eines jeden der Faserströme in Luft aufweist, um so eine Mehrzahl von Strömen in Luft mitgerissener Fasern zu ergeben.
17. Ein Verfahren zum Formen einer im Luftstrom aufgetragenen faserigen Bahn mit einer Vielzahl von Schichten oder getrennten Partikeln, welche über mindestens einen Abschnitt der Bahn verteilt sind, wobei das genannte Verfahren die Schritte umfaßt:
 - a. Beistellen mehrerer Ströme in Luft mitgerissener Fasern, einen Staubbämschichte-Strom und einen Hauptschichte-Strom umfassend;
 - b. Lenken des genannten



Staubdämmschichte-Stromes in Luft mitgerissener Fasern gegen einen Staubdämmschichte-Sektor eines sich bewegenden löchrigen formenden Elements;

c. Ablegen des genannten Staubdämmschichte-Stromes in Luft mitgerissener Fasern am löchrigen formenden Element;

d. Ziehen der Staubdämmschichte-Strom-Antriebsluft durch das löchrige formende Element durch eine Druckdifferenz, welche durch eine Vakuumquelle, welche unter dem löchrigen formenden Element liegend positioniert ist, aufrechterhalten wird;

e. Sammeln der Fasern am löchrigen formenden Element, um eine Staubdämmschichte zu bilden;

f. Transferieren der genannten Staubdämmschichte auf einen Hauptschichte-Sektor des löchrigen formenden Elements;

g. Lenken des genannten Hauptschichte-Stromes in Luft mitgerissener Fasern gegen den Hauptschichte-Sektor des löchrigen formenden Elements;

h. Ablegen des genannten Hauptschichte-Stromes in Luft mitgerissener Fasern am löchrigen formenden Element, um eine Hauptschichte über der genannten Staubdämmschichte zu bilden;

i. Ziehen der Hauptschichte-Strom-Antriebsluft durch das löchrige formende Element durch die Druckdifferenz, welche von der Vakuumquelle, welche unter dem löchrigen formenden Element liegend positioniert ist, aufrechterhalten wird;

j. Sammeln der abgelegten Fasern als eine im Luftstrom aufgebrachte faserige Bahn mit einer Hauptschichte über einer Staubdämmschichte;

dadurch gekennzeichnet:

daß Schritt (d) ebenso das Aufrechterhalten der Druckdifferenz zum Ziehen der Staubdämmschichte-Faserstrom-Antriebsluft durch das genannte löchrige formende Element mittels einer Staubdämmschichte-Vakuumquelle aufrechterhält, welche unter dem genannten löchrigen Element in einem ersten Abschnitt des genannten Staubdämmschichte-Sektors liegend angeordnet ist;

Schritt (i) ebenso das Aufrechterhalten der Druckdifferenz zum Ziehen der Hauptschichte-Faserstrom-Antriebsluft durch das genannte löchrige formende Element mittels einer Hauptschichte-Vakuumquelle umfaßt, welche unter dem genannten löchrigen Element in dessen Hauptschichte-Sektor liegend angeordnet ist, wobei die genannte Hauptschichte-Vakuumquelle so angeordnet ist, um auch unter

einem zweiten Abschnitt des genannten Staubdämmschichte-Sektors, stromabwärts vom genannten ersten Staubdämmschichte-Sektor, liegend angeordnet zu sein; und Schritt (f) ebenso das Transferieren der genannten Staubdämmschichte zum Einfluß der Druckdifferenz, welche durch die Hauptschichte-Vakuumquelle im genannten zweiten Abschnitt aufrechterhalten wird, umfaßt, während die genannte Staubdämmschichte noch im Staubdämmschichte-Sektor des löchrigen formenden Elements positioniert ist.

- 5
 - 10
 - 15
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 - 30
 - 35
 - 40
 - 45
 - 50
 - 55
18. Ein Verfahren nach Anspruch 17, bei welchem der Schritt vom Beistellen mehrerer Faserströme in Luft mitgerissener Fasern die Schritte umfaßt:
Beistellen einer Fasernsäule;
Aufspalten der Fasernsäule in eine Mehrzahl von Faserströmen; und
getrenntes Mitreßen eines jeden der Faserströme in Luft.
19. Ein Verfahren nach Anspruch 17, bei welchem eine Fasernsäule durch ein Verfahren beige stellt wird, welches die Schritte umfaßt:
Beistellen eines faserigen Blattes;
Speisen eines faserigen Blattes in einen Desintegrator;
Trennen der Fasern des faserigen Blattes über den Desintegrator in individuelle Fasern; und
Formen einer Fasernsäule über die Breite des Gehäuses des Desintegrators.
20. Ein Verfahren nach einem der Ansprüche 18 und 19, bei welchem der genannte Aufspalt schritt die Schritte umfaßt:
Lenken der Fasernsäule entlang einem Auf spaltbauteil mit einer ersten Öffnung und einer zweiten Öffnung;
Lenken einer Luftsäule durch eine Staubdämmschichte-Leitungseinrichtung und an der Staubdämmschichte-Öffnung vorbei, um so einen Abschnitt der Fasernsäule zu veranlassen, sich abzuspalten und in den Staubdämmschichte-Faserstrom gezogen zu werden; und
Lenken einer Luftsäule durch ein erstes Lei tungsmittel und an der ersten Öffnung vorbei, um so einen Abschnitt der Fasernsäule zu veranlassen, sich abzuspalten und in das erste Leitungsmittel gezogen zu werden, um einen ersten Hauptfaserstrom zu bilden.
21. Ein Verfahren nach einem der Ansprüche 17 bis 20, welches zusätzlich den Schritt umfaßt:
k. Mischen getrennter Partikel eines absor bierenden gelierenden Materials mit dem



genannten Hauptstrom in Luft mitgerissener Fasern vor Ablegen des genannten Hauptstroms in Luft mitgerissener Fasern auf dem löchrigen formenden Element, sodaß die genannte Hauptschichte eine Mischung getrennter Partikel absorbierenden gelierenden Materials und Fasern umfaßt.

22. Ein Verfahren nach einem der Ansprüche 17 bis 21, welches zusätzlich den Schritt umfaßt:

I. Abgleichen der genannten im Luftstrom aufgetragenen faserigen Bahn durch Führen der genannten im Luftstrom aufgetragenen faserigen Bahn unter einer Ausgleichsrolle.

Revendications

1. Un dispositif pour former des nappes fibreuses étendues à partir d'un courant d'air ayant une multiplicité de couches ou de particules discrètes dispersées à travers au moins une partie de la nappe, ledit dispositif comprenant :
un moyen de dépôt à partir d'un courant d'air (34) ayant un élément de formage muni de trous pour former une nappe fibreuse étendue à partir d'un courant d'air ;
des moyens de dépôt d'une couche de poudrage (42, 44) disposés en position adjacente à une première partie (132) de la périphérie du moyen de dépôt à partir d'un courant d'air (34) pour diriger un courant de couche de poudrage (56) de fibres entraînées par un courant d'air vers ledit élément de formage muni de trous dudit moyen de dépôt à partir d'un courant d'air (34) et pour déposer les fibres sur ledit élément de formage muni de trous de manière à former une couche de poudrage (1012);
des moyens primaires de dépôt de couche (36, 38) disposés en position adjacente à une seconde partie (136) de la périphérie dudit moyen de dépôt à partir d'un courant d'air (34) pour diriger un courant primaire (54) de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air vers ledit élément de formage muni de trous dudit moyen de dépôt à partir d'un courant d'air et pour déposer les fibres sur ledit élément de formage muni de trous au-dessus de la couche de poudrage (1012) de manière à former une couche primaire (1014) sur la couche de poudrage ; ledit dispositif étant caractérisé en ce que :
lesdits moyens de dépôt de couches comportent un premier secteur (134) et un second secteur (135) ;
un moyen à vide de couches de poudrage (124) pour attirer l'air appauvri en fibres à travers ledit élément de formage muni de

trous, ledit moyen à vide de couches de poudrage étant disposé en position sous-jacente audit premier secteur (134) desdits premiers moyens de dépôt de la couche de poudrage (42, 44) ; et

un moyen à vide primaire (126) pour attirer l'air appauvri en fibres à travers ledit élément de formage muni de trous, ledit moyen à vide primaire étant disposé en position sous-jacente à la fois auxdits moyens primaires de dépôt (36, 38) et audit second secteur (135) desdits moyens de dépôt de couches de poudrage (42, 44), de manière à empêcher la couche de poudrage (1012) formée sur ledit élément de formage muni de trous d'être détériorée ou détruite.

2. Un dispositif selon la revendication 1, dans lequel ledit moyen de dépôt à partir d'un courant d'air (34) comprend un dispositif de dépôt à partir d'un courant d'air du type à tambour de dépôt.
3. Un dispositif selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit tambour est formé d'une chambre à vide primaire (126) et d'une chambre à vide de couches de poudrage (124).
4. Un dispositif selon la revendication 3, dans lequel lesdits moyens de dépôt de poudrage comportent une trémie de couches de poudrage (44) ayant un premier secteur (134) et un second secteur (135) disposé en aval dudit premier secteur, ladite trémie de couches de poudrage (44) étant disposée en position adjacente à une partie de couches de poudrage de la périphérie dudit tambour de dépôt ; et lesdits moyens de dépôt primaires comportent une première trémie (38) disposée en position adjacente à une première partie de la périphérie dudit tambour de dépôt et en position adjacente à et en aval de ladite trémie de couches de poudrage (44).
5. Un dispositif selon la revendication 4, dans lequel ladite première trémie (38) et ladite trémie de couches de poudrage (44) se coupent au moins en un point d'intersection pour permettre l'égalisation des pressions dans les parties de ladite trémie de couches de poudrage et ladite première trémie près dudit point d'intersection.
6. Un dispositif selon la revendication 5, dans lequel ledit point d'intersection est disposé de telle sorte qu'un intervalle (142) soit ménagé entre ladite première trémie (38) et ladite trémie de couches de poudrage (44) et la surface



extérieure dudit tambour de dépôt est formée près dudit point d'intersection, ledit intervalle n'étant pas plus grand que 13 mm.

7. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 5 et 6, dans lequel chacune des dites trémie de couches de poudrage et première trémie a une pointe circulaire relativement large près dudit point d'intersection de telle sorte que la vitesse de cisaillement de chacun du courant de fibres primaire (54) et du courant de fibres de couches de poudrage (56), près dudit point d'intersection, est inférieure à 2 032 cm/sec.
8. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 5-7, dans lequel chacune des dites trémies de couches de poudrage et première trémie a un rayon de courbure d'approximativement 75 mm près dudit point d'intersection.
9. Un procédé selon l'une quelconque des revendications 4-8, dans lequel ledit premier secteur (134) de ladite trémie de couches de poudrage (134) enjambe circonférentiellement la chambre à vide de couches de poudrage toute entière (174).
10. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 4-9, dans lequel ledit second secteur (135) de ladite trémie de couches de poudrage (44) enjambe circonférentiellement une partie suffisante de ladite chambre à vide primaire (126) pour former une zone de transition et dans lequel ladite première trémie (38) a un pont circonférentiel suffisant pour englober la partie restante de ladite chambre à vide primaire (126).
11. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 4-10, comportant en outre un rouleau de jointement (102) disposé près de ladite première trémie (38) le long de la périphérie dudit tambour de dépôt.
12. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 4-11, comportant en outre un rouleau de scellage (137) disposé près de l'extrémité aval de ladite première trémie (38).
13. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 4-12, dans lequel ledit tambour de dépôt comporte en outre une chambre à vide de fixation (126) et une chambre de soufflage (130) disposée en aval de ladite chambre à vide de fixation (128).
14. Un dispositif selon la revendication 13, dans

lequel ladite chambre de soufflage (130) a une tuyère de soufflage (104).

15. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 1-14, comportant en outre des moyens d'injection d'un matériau gélifiant absorbant (40, 172, 174, 176) reliés auxdits moyens de dépôt primaires (36, 38) pour mélanger les particules discrètes d'un matériau gélifiant absorbant avec ledit courant primaire (54) de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air.
16. Un dispositif selon l'une quelconque des revendications 1-15, comportant en outre un moyen de séparation (32) pour séparer une colonne de fibres en de multiples courants de fibres (54, 56) et pour entraîner chacun des courants de fibres dans le courant d'air de manière à former une multiplicité de courant de fibres entraînés à partir d'un courant d'air.
17. Un procédé pour former une nappe fibreuse étendue à partir d'un courant d'air ayant une multiplicité de couches ou de particules discrètes dispersées à travers au moins une partie de la nappe, ledit procédé comprenant les étapes suivantes :
 - a. on fournit de multiples courants de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air, y compris un courant de couches de poudrage et un courant de couches primaire ;
 - b. on dirige ledit courant de couches de poudrage de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air vers un secteur de couches de poudrage d'un élément de formage mobile, muni de trous ;
 - c. on dépose ledit courant de couches de poudrage de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air sur ledit élément de formage muni de trous ;
 - d. on attire l'air d'entraînement du courant de couches de poudrage à travers l'élément de formage muni de trous à l'aide d'une pression différentielle maintenue par une source de vide disposée en position sous-jacente à l'élément de formage muni de trous ;
 - e. on recueille les fibres sur l'élément de formage muni de trous pour former une couche de poudrage ;
 - f. on transfère ladite couche de poudrage vers un premier secteur de couche vers l'élément de formage muni de trous ;
 - g. on dirige ledit courant de couches primaire de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air vers le premier secteur de couches dudit élément de formage muni de trous ;

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- h. on dépose ledit courant de couches primaire de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air sur l'élément de formage muni de trous pour former une couche primaire sur ladite couche de poudrage ;
- i. on attire l'air d'entraînement du courant de couches primaire à travers l'élément de formage muni de trous à l'aide de la pression différentielle maintenue par la source de vide disposée en position sous-jacente à l'élément de formage muni de trous ; et
- j. on recueille les fibres déposées sous forme de nappes fibreuses étendues à partir d'un courant d'air ayant une couche primaire sur une couche de poudrage ;
- caractérisé en ce que :
- l'étape (d) consiste en outre à maintenir la pression différentielle pour attirer l'air d'entraînement du courant de fibres de couches de poudrage à travers ledit élément de formage muni de trous au moyen d'une source de vide de couche de poudrage disposée en position sous-jacente audit élément muni de trous dans une première partie dudit secteur de couches de poudrage ;
- l'étape (i) consiste également à maintenir la pression différentielle pour attirer l'air d'entraînement du courant de fibres de couches primaire à travers ledit élément de formage muni de trous au moyen d'une première source de vide de couche disposée en position sous-jacente audit élément muni de trous dans ledit premier secteur de couches de celui-ci, ladite première source de vide de couches étant disposée de manière à être également sous-jacente à une seconde partie dudit secteur de couches de poudrage, en aval dudit premier secteur de couches de poudrage ; et
- l'étape (f) consiste également à transférer ladite couche de poudrage vers l'influence d'une pression différentielle maintenue par la première source de vide de couches dans ladite seconde partie alors que ladite couche de poudrage est encore disposée dans le secteur de couches de poudrage de l'élément de formage muni de trous.
18. Un procédé selon la revendication 17, dans lequel l'étape qui consiste à fournir de multiples courants de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air comporte les étapes suivantes :
- on fournit une colonne de fibres ;
 - on sépare la colonne de fibres en de multiples courants de fibres ; et
 - on entraîne séparément chacun des courants de fibres dans un courant d'air.

19. Un procédé selon la revendication 17, dans

lequel une colonne de fibres est fournie par un procédé comprenant les étapes suivantes :

- on fournit une feuille fibreuse ;
- on amène une feuille fibreuse à l'intérieur d'un désintégrateur ;
- on sépare les fibres de la feuille fibreuse via le désintégrateur en fibres individuelles ; et
- on forme une colonne de fibres à travers la largeur de l'enceinte du désintégrateur.

20. Un procédé selon l'une quelconque des revendications 18 et 19, dans lequel ladite étape de séparation comporte les étapes suivantes :

on dirige la colonne de fibres le long d'un élément de séparation ayant un premier orifice et un second orifice ;

on dirige une colonne d'air à travers un moyen de conduite de couches de poudrage et au-delà de l'orifice de couches de poudrage de manière à faire en sorte qu'une partie de la colonne de fibres se sépare et soit attirée à l'intérieur du courant de fibres de couches de poudrage ; et

on dirige une colonne d'air à travers un premier moyen de conduite et au-delà du premier orifice de manière à faire en sorte qu'une partie de la colonne de fibres se sépare et soit attirée dans le premier moyen de conduite pour former un premier courant de fibres primaire.

21. Un procédé selon l'une quelconque des revendications 17-20, comportant en outre l'étape suivante :

k. on mélange des particules discrètes d'un matériau gélifiant absorbant avec ledit courant primaire de fibres entraînées à partir d'un courant d'air avant de déposer ledit courant primaire de fibres entraînées au moyen d'un courant d'air sur l'élément de formage muni de trous de telle sorte que ladite couche primaire comporte un mélange de particules discrètes de matériau gélifiant absorbant et de fibres.

22. Un procédé selon l'une quelconque des revendications 17-21 comportant en outre l'étape suivante :

l. on nivelle ladite nappe fibreuse étendue à partir d'un courant d'air en faisant passer ladite nappe fibreuse étendue à partir d'un courant d'air sous un rouleau de jointement.