

Solar thermal panel array field arrangement and related vacuum solar thermal panel
DESCRIPTION

Field of application

The present invention relates to a solar array field arrangement and to a vacuum solar thermal panel specifically adapted for being used in such solar array field arrangement.

Prior art

As it is well known, vacuum solar thermal panels comprise a flat vacuum tight envelope with at least a glass plate transparent to visible solar radiation. Inside the vacuum envelope are disposed a heat-absorbing plate and a pipe entering and exiting the envelope connected to the heat-absorbing plate.

The solar radiation thus enters the vacuum envelope through the front plate, is collected by the heat-absorbing plate and converted into heat. The converted heat is then transferred to the heat transfer fluid flowing into the pipe.

Vacuum solar thermal panels are typically connected together by external piping to form a solar array field. In solar array fields, pumping means are provided to circulate the heat transfer fluid from an inlet to an outlet, through the internal pipes of every single vacuum solar thermal panel. The heat transfer fluid is progressively heated from the heat-absorbing plates of the panels, so that a temperature increase is provided between the inlet and the outlet of the array field. This temperature difference is then supplied to an external load (i.e. absorption cycle chiller) to make use of solar thermal power.

Depending on the type of panel, two alternative piping configurations are employed.

Vacuum solar thermal panels of the meander type, which are described for instance in EP2283282 in the name of the same Applicant, require a series-parallel configuration of the type depicted in fig. 1. Indeed, given

the relatively high pressure drop of the heat transfer fluid traversing a meander type panel, the above-mentioned configuration is needed to keep pump head at an acceptable level.

Vacuum solar thermal panels of the straight type, which are described for instance in the PCT application published under No. WO 2010/003653, determine a lower pressure drop in the heat transfer fluid and they may be simply connected in series, as depicted for instance in figure 2. It should be noted that, since straight type panels comprise a plurality of individual pipes, several external pipes are also needed to connect a panel to the next one.

In both prior art configurations described, as may be appreciated in figures 1 and 2, the external piping extends for a considerable length. In order to reduce losses, a good thermal insulation, in the form of a thick low thermal conductivity layer wrapped or clamped around the pipes, has to be provided.

Such thermal insulation is particularly important in the case of medium temperature applications (100°C – 200°C), because heat losses increase with the heat transfer fluid temperature. Moreover, such applications reduce the choice of usable insulating materials because of the high surface temperature of the piping, making fiberglass the most common option.

In a typical case of solar air cooling application, the heat transfer fluid enters the solar thermal panel array field at 165°C and exits at 180°C. Under such conditions, keeping heat losses at 17 W/m requires 100mm thick fiberglass insulation wrapped around all external piping. Moreover, moisture penetration in fiberglass can strongly affect fiberglass thermal conductivity and, being a soft material, it has to be protected from mechanical loads or impacts. Aluminium cladding is thus typically applied outside fiberglass insulation, making such assembly much more expensive than the piping itself.

Therefore, in view of the costs of the required thermal insulation and of its maintenance, the length of the external piping represents a serious

drawback of the solar array field configurations known in the prior art.

The technical problem underlying the present invention is therefore that of providing an efficient solar array field arrangement with reduced heat losses and cost of the external piping.

5 Summary of the invention

A solution to the above-mentioned technical problem is provided by a solar array field comprising: a plurality of vacuum solar thermal panel and a hydraulic circuit for circulating a heat transfer fluid, said hydraulic circuit comprising at least one circulation path connecting a
10 low-temperature inlet to a high-temperature outlet, said circulation path comprising a forward portion successively traversing a plurality of vacuum solar thermal panels; said circulation path further comprising a return portion connected downstream to said forward portion, said return portion traversing the same vacuum solar thermal panels in
15 reverse order.

The idea underlying the present invention is that of greatly reducing the amount of insulated external piping by providing a return portion of the circulation path through the vacuum panels themselves.

Advantageously, the return portion may be directly connected to said
20 forward portion at its downstream end.

The hydraulic circuit may comprise: a first main pipe and a second main pipe, respectively departing from the low-temperature inlet and arriving at the high-temperature outlet; and a plurality of branches defining the forward portion and the return portion of one of the
25 circulation paths, the forward portion departing from the first main pipe, the return portion arriving at the second main pipe.

The forward portion and the return portion preferably traverse the vacuum solar thermal panels in a longitudinal direction thereof. In the standard case of a rectangular panel, this means that the path portions
30 extend from one of the short sides of the rectangle to the opposite one.

Usual pumping means are provided to circulate the heat transfer fluid inside the hydraulic circuit.

Each of the vacuum solar thermal panels may internally comprise at least a forward pipe and at least a return pipe thermally connected with heat-absorbing means, wherein the forward portion of the circulation path comprises said forward pipe and the return portion comprises said return pipe.

The heat-absorbing means may comprise a heat-absorbing plate conceptually made of two functional parts having a first part in direct contact with the forward pipe and a second part in direct contact with the return pipe, longitudinal slits being provided between the first part and the second part in order to reduce thermal conductivity between the two parts. This slits do not reduce the mechanical stiffness of the heat-absorber but are relevant for thermally decoupling the two functional parts connected either to the forward pipes or to the return pipes both carrying the heat transfer fluid flow, but at different temperatures.

In the prior art separate areas of the absorbers were provided, reducing in addition the working surface of the absorber and therefore the overall efficiency of the panels as described in PCT application published under No. WO 2008/000281. Each of the vacuum solar thermal panels may comprise a plurality of forward pipes, said forward pipes all being connected to a common first inlet port and to a common first outlet port, and a plurality of return pipes, said return pipes all being connected to a common second inlet port and to a common second outlet port.

Thanks to this layout, a single pipe is necessary for the external connection between two subsequent panels traversed by the circulation path, thus greatly limiting the heat losses of the system and the amount of thermal insulation required.

A solution to the above-mentioned technical problem is also provided by a vacuum-tight envelope, having at least a front plate transparent to

solar radiation; a heat-absorbing plate enclosed within said vacuum-tight envelope; at least one forward pipe thermally connected with a first part of the heat-absorbing plate and connected to first inlet and outlet ports opening on the outside of the vacuum-tight envelope; at least one
5 return pipe thermally connected with a second part of the heat-absorbing plate, said return pipe being connected to second inlet and outlet ports opening on the outside of the vacuum-tight envelope; means for locally reducing thermal conductivity of the heat-absorbing plate being provided between its first part and its second part.

10 The idea underlying the present invention is that of reducing the transverse thermal conductivity of the heat-absorbing means, so that a temperature gap may be maintained between its first and second part and between the pipes mounted thereupon. In other words, even if a
15 single heat-absorbing plate is provided, its two parts are very poorly thermally connected. Such a panel is particularly adapted to be connected according to the previously discussed array field layout.

The means for locally reducing thermal conductivity are preferably a plurality of holes and/or slits provided on the surface of the heat-absorbing plate. However, different means may be employed that are
20 within the common knowledge of a person skilled in the art; for instance, a strip of thermal insulating material may divide the two thermally conductive parts of the panel.

As previously said, it is advantageous to have a single heat-absorbing plate thermally divided in two parts instead of having two physically
25 separate plates within the panel. In the first instance, a single heat-absorbing plate ensures greater stiffness and mechanical strength of the whole panel. In the second instance, the area of the separation gap between two physically separate heat-absorbing panels would not be available for the purpose of heat collection, which would result in a
30 lower efficiency of the device.

The first inlet port and the second outlet port may be provided at one side of the vacuum-tight envelope, said second inlet port and first outlet port being provided at the opposite side of the envelope.

The first and second parts of the heat-absorbing plate may longitudinally extend from one side of the vacuum-tight envelope to the opposite side.

5 The means for locally reducing thermal conductivity may advantageously comprise longitudinal slits separating the first and second parts of the heat-absorbing plate.

10 The vacuum solar thermal panel may comprise a plurality of forward pipes and a plurality of return pipes, said forward pipes all being connected to the same first inlet port and to the same first outlet port, said return pipes all being connected to the same second inlet port and to the same second outlet port.

Thanks to such an arrangement, two subsequent panels may be connected by means of a single pipe.

The forward pipes and the return pipes are preferably parallel.

15 The first and second, inlet and outlet ports may advantageously be housed in a funnel projecting from a back plate of the vacuum-tight envelope.

20 Further characteristics and advantages shall be clearer from the detailed description, outlined hereinafter, of a preferred but not exclusive embodiment of the present finding, with reference to the attached figures provided for exemplifying and non-limiting purposes.

Brief description of the drawings

In the drawings:

25 Figure 1 schematically shows a first solar array field arrangement according to the prior art;

Figure 2 schematically shows a second solar array field arrangement according to the prior art;

Figure 3 schematically shows a solar array field arrangement according

to the present invention;

Figure 4 shows a perspective view from below of a vacuum solar thermal panel according to the present invention;

Figure 5 shows a detail of the inner structure of the vacuum solar thermal panel from figure 4;

Figure 6 shows a perspective view of the heat-absorbing plate and of the pipes of the vacuum solar thermal panel from figure 4;

Figure 7 shows a detail of the heat-absorbing plate from figure 6.

Detailed description

10 For a better understanding of the present invention, the prior art solar array fields depicted in figures 1 and 2 are briefly described in the following.

The array fields according to the prior art comprise a hydraulic circuit having a low-temperature inlet 11m, 11s and a high-temperature outlet 12m, 12s connected by piping that traverses a plurality of vacuum solar thermal panels 1m, 1s. It should be noted that, in the context of the present invention, a hydraulic circuit or portion thereof is said to traverse a panel if its external piping is connected to the internal pipe of the panel, so that the heat transfer fluid will flow through the panels when circulating through the circuit. Pumping means (not shown) are provided to circulate the heat transfer fluid inside the hydraulic circuit; a load has to be applied between the inlet 11m, 11s and the outlet 12m, 12s in order to make use of the collected heat.

25 In the series-parallel piping configuration 100m of figure 1, typically employed with meander type vacuum solar thermal panels 1m, the hydraulic circuit comprises a plurality of parallel branches, each one traversing in series only a portion of the vacuum solar thermal panels forming a row of the array. The length of the external piping required for such an arrangement is relatively high.

In the series piping configuration 100s of figure 2, typically employed with straight type vacuum solar thermal panels 1s, each branch of the circuit traverses all panels of one of the array's rows. The overall external length of the hydraulic circuit is lower in such a solution but, since straight panel have a plurality of inlet and outlet ports, a corresponding plurality of external pipes is required to connect the subsequent panels in every branch of the circuit.

With reference to figure 3 the solar array field according to the present invention is shown and globally indicated with 100.

- 10 The array field 100 comprises a hydraulic circuit 10 having a low-temperature inlet 11 and a high-temperature outlet 12; pumping means (not shown) are provided to circulate the heat transfer fluid inside the hydraulic circuit; a load has to be applied between the inlet 11 and the outlet 12 in order to make use of the collected heat.
- 15 A first main pipe 11 is connected to the low-temperature inlet 11, while a second main pipe 12 is connected to the high-temperature outlet 12. A plurality of branches 15, 16 connect the first main pipe 11 to the second main pipe 12, each branch defining a different circulation path for the heat transfer fluid. The simplified embodiment depicted in figure
- 20 3 only features two branches, i.e. two circulation paths are available for the heat transfer fluid.

The branches reach and traverse a plurality of vacuum solar thermal panels 1, which are arranged in rows. In particular, each one of the branches connects all the panels making up a single row. A branch comprises a forward path portion 15 that traverses in series the row panels 1; and a return portion 16 that traverses the same panels 1 in reverse order. A loop portion 17 connects the forward portion 15 to the return portion 16 at the end of the row.

- 30 The vacuum solar thermal panels 1 comprise a vacuum-tight envelope 5, which in turn is made up of a front plate (not visible in the figures), transparent to solar radiation, and a support structure 50 meant to support the front plate.

The support structure 50 comprises a substantially rectangular back plate 51 and side walls shorter 51a and longer 51b rising from the perimeter of the backplate 51. The front plate, which is a substantially flat glass pane, closes the box-like structure formed by the back plate 51 and the side walls 51a, 51b.

The back plate 51 features four funnels 52, projecting outward of the vacuum-tight envelope 5. Such funnels are disposed two by two at the opposite shorter walls 51a of the support structure.

A heat-absorbing plate 2, visible in figures 6 and 7, is enclosed within the vacuum-tight envelope 5, i.e. sandwiched between the front plate and the back plate 51. Said heat-absorbing plate features a plurality of through holes 23 crossed by uprights (not shown in the picture) for supporting the front plate.

The heat-absorbing plate 2 has a substantially rectangular shape that matches the shape of the vacuum-tight envelope 5. The plate 2 is longitudinally divided in two equal halves, named first portion 20 and second portion 21 in the following.

The first portion 20 and the second portion 21 of the heat-absorbing plate 2 are divided by a plurality of longitudinal slits 22, extending along the median section of the heat-absorbing plate. As may be seen in figure 7, such longitudinal slits 22 are alternated with the through holes 23 lying on the median section of the plate. Slits 22 and holes 23 cooperate to define a material discontinuity between the first portion 20 and the second portion 21. Such a discontinuity locally determines a drop in the thermal conductivity of the plate 2, so that the first 20 and second 21 portions can be easily maintained at different temperatures.

The vacuum solar thermal panel 1 also comprises a plurality of forward pipes 3 and a plurality of return pipes 4. The pictured embodiment shows three forward pipes 3 and three return pipes 4. The pipes 3, 4 are directly attached to the back of the heat-absorbing plate 2, i.e. to the surface of the plate facing the back plate 51. The pipes 3, 4 are parallel and they extend in a longitudinal direction of the panel 1,

substantially reaching the two opposite shorter ends.

The forward pipes 3 converge at their opposite ends, to form respectively a first inlet port 31 and a first outlet port 32. In the same way, the return pipes 4 converge to form a second inlet port 41 and a second outlet port 42. Such ports 31, 32, 41, 42 are housed in the funnels 52 on the back side of the vacuum-tight envelope 5.

It should be noted that the first inlet port 31 and the second outlet port 42 are provided at one side of the vacuum-tight envelope 5, while the second inlet port 41 and the first outlet port 32 are provided at the opposite side of the envelope 5. Therefore, the heat transfer fluid will flow through the forward pipes 3 in a given longitudinal direction, and will flow through the return pipes 4 in the opposite longitudinal direction.

When the vacuum solar thermal panel 1 is connected to the solar array field 100, the first inlet port 31 and the second inlet port 32 are connected to external pipes of a forward path portion 15, while the second inlet port 41 and the second outlet port 42 are connected to external pipes of a return path portion 16.

Therefore, the forward pipes 3 form part of the forward path portion 15, while the return pipes 4 form part of the return path portion 16. Given that the heat transfer fluid progressively heats during circulation through the forward 15 and return portions 16, the temperature of the fluid in the return pipes 4 will be higher than the temperature of the fluid in the forward pipes 3. Such a temperature gap may become as high as 15°C for the first panel of each row. Since the pipes 3, 4 are in thermal communication with the two different parts 20, 21 of the heat-absorbing plate, it is clearly advantageous to have a plate with a limited transversal conductivity.

When considering a solar thermal panel array field of 100 panels, each having dimensions of 2x1m, consisting of 5 rows of 20 panels each, the overall savings in terms of insulated pipe length is 270m and 100m when compared with a typical meander or straight type panel array

configuration respectively. Also, assuming typical losses of 17W/m, for 100mm thick fiberglass insulation of external piping in the above mentioned array configurations, overall heat losses are reduced by 4.5kW and 1.7kW respectively, corresponding to 8% and 3% of the total
5 typical peak power of the solar array field operating at 165-180°C.

Obviously, the afore-described finding may be subjected to numerous modifications and variants - by a man skilled in the art with the aim of meeting the possible and specific requirements - all falling within the scope of protection of the invention as defined by the following claims.

CLAIMS

1. Solar array field (100) comprising a plurality of vacuum solar thermal panel (1) and a hydraulic circuit (10) for circulating a heat transfer fluid, said hydraulic circuit (10) comprising at least one
5 circulation path (13, 14, 15, 16) connecting a low-temperature inlet (11) to a high-temperature outlet (12), said circulation path (13, 14, 15, 16) comprising a forward portion (15) successively traversing a plurality of vacuum solar thermal panels (1); said circulation path (13, 14, 15, 16) further comprising a return portion (16) connected downstream to said
10 forward portion (15), said return portion (16) traversing the same vacuum solar thermal panels (1) in reverse order; wherein, within each vacuum solar thermal panel (1), the forward portion (15) and the return portion (16) of the circulation path (13, 14, 15, 16) are fluidly independent, wherein each of the vacuum solar thermal panels (1)
15 internally comprises at least a forward pipe (3) and at least a return pipe (4) thermally connected with heat-absorbing means (2), wherein the forward portion (15) of the circulation path (13, 14, 15, 16) comprises said forward pipe (3) and the return portion (16) comprises said return pipe (4), wherein the heat-absorbing means (2) comprise a
20 heat-absorbing plate (2) having a first part (20) in direct contact with the forward pipe (3) and a second part (21) in direct contact with the return pipe (4), longitudinal slits (22) being provided between the first part (20) and the second part (21) in order to reduce thermal conductivity between the two parts.
- 25 2. Solar array field (100) according to claim 1, wherein said return portion (16) is directly connected to said forward portion (15) at its downstream end.
3. Solar array field (100) according to one of the preceding claims, wherein said hydraulic circuit comprises: a first main pipe (13) and a
30 second main pipe (14), respectively departing from the low-temperature inlet (11) and arriving at the high-temperature outlet (12); and a plurality of branches (15, 16) defining the forward portion (15) and the return portion (16) of one of the circulation paths (13, 14, 15, 16), the

forward portion (15) departing from the first main pipe (13), the return portion arriving at the second main pipe (14).

4. Solar array field (100) according to one of the previous claims, wherein the forward portion (15) and the return portion (16) traverse the vacuum solar thermal panels (1) in a longitudinal direction thereof.

5. Solar array field (100) according to one of the previous claims, wherein pumping means are provided to circulate the heat transfer fluid inside the hydraulic circuit (10).

6. Solar array field (100) according to claim 1, wherein each of the vacuum solar thermal panels (1) comprises a plurality of forward pipes (3), said forward pipes (3) all being connected to a common first inlet port (31) and to a common first outlet port (32), and a plurality of return pipes (4), said return pipes (4) all being connected to a common second inlet port (41) and to a common second outlet port (42).