

Title: Method for drying a product using a regenerative adsorbent

The invention relates to a method for drying a product using a regenerative adsorbent, more in particular to such a method which can be carried out in an energy-saving manner. The invention also relates to an apparatus suitable for carrying out such a method.

5 A method for drying water-containing products using an adsorbent is, for instance, described in WO-A-00/02822. According to this known method, an adsorbent in the form of zeolite A is brought into contact with the watery substance to be dried, which may or may not first be dewatered and/or preheated. In this method, the zeolite adsorbs water from the substance,
10 while adsorption heat is produced, so that more water evaporates. Subsequently, the thus obtained dried substance is separated from the zeolite, and the zeolite is regenerated by heating in an oven.

A drawback of this known method is that in the regeneration step a substantial amount of heat must be supplied to regenerate the zeolite.

15 The present invention contemplates providing a method for drying a product which can be carried out in an energy-saving manner.

It has been found that if the regeneration step is carried out using superheated steam, a number of advantages is obtained. Therefore, the present invention relates to a method for drying a product, comprising the
20 steps of:

- bringing the wet product into contact with an adsorbent, water being taken up from the product by the adsorbent;
- regenerating the mentioned adsorbent with superheated steam, steam being obtained, which steam comprises at least a part of the
25 mentioned water.

The wet product may be either a final product to be dried, such as foods, for instance starch or carrots, or chemical products, for instance pigments or cellulose derivatives and sludges, which are mixed with the adsorbent (direct drying); or a wet gas stream originating from a previous
5 drying step (indirect drying).

With the method of the invention, inter alia a product stream of steam is obtained, which stream comprises the water removed from the dried product by means of the adsorbent in the form of steam. An important advantage is that this steam stream can be employed for the purposes
10 conventional in the (agro-)process industry, for instance for heating. If, for instance for the regeneration step, the starting steam stream is a steam stream of 5 bara/160°C (slightly superheated), this stream may first be superheated to the desired temperature, for instance 300°C. Subsequently, with this superheated steam, the regeneration step is carried out, while the
15 temperature of the steam falls to, for instance, 160°C. Because the water is released from the adsorbent in the form of steam, the amount of steam obtained with this released part increases. In this manner, therefore, a steam stream of 150°C/5 bara is obtained, which is, for instance, 105 wt.% of the original ingoing steam stream. This steam has sufficient energy content
20 to be employed elsewhere for process-technological purposes.

With special advantage, the invention can be used for drying a gas stream originating from a drying step, preferably from a low temperature drying step. This embodiment is particularly suitable if temperature-sensitive products, such as specific foods, must be dried. According to this
25 embodiment, the food or other product to be dried is brought into contact with a suitable gas, such as nitrogen, or if the product allows it, air, at a suitable temperature. The temperature must be selected such that, on the one hand, effective drying is obtained and, on the other hand, the food or other product to be dried does not undergo appreciable thermic degradation.
30 This product temperature is typically 30-90°C, for instance 60°C, for drying

starch. Of course, this temperature differs per case. Thus, the method according to the invention is also very suitable for freeze drying products, the product temperature typically ranging between -40°C and -10°C .

The low temperature drying step can be carried out in known per se apparatuses suitable to that end, for instance in a column. According to the invention, the wet gas is then brought into contact with the adsorbent, water being taken up from the wet gas by the adsorbent and a dry gas stream being obtained again, which dry gas stream can be applied again in the low temperature drying step. The water-loaded adsorbent is regenerated again with superheated steam, in the above-described manner.

An advantage of this embodiment, in which a wet product is first dried with a gas stream, after which this gas stream is dried with a regenerative adsorbent, compared to bringing the food or other product to be dried directly into contact with the adsorbent, is that the adsorbent need not be separated from the food (or other product).

It is particularly advantageous if the embodiment is applied when freeze drying products.

It is particularly advantageous if in this embodiment the step of bringing the wet gas stream into contact with the adsorbent is carried out under such conditions that in this step a dry gas is obtained with a temperature suitable to be directly applied in the low temperature drying step, that is to say without first needing to cool or heat this gas stream. To obtain a dry gas of a desired temperature, process factors, such as temperature of the adsorbent, ratio of adsorbent to wet gas and contact time, can be varied. It is noted that through the released adsorption heat the gas heats up.

Also, it is possible to apply a combination of direct and indirect drying, as indicated in Fig. 1. In this figure, the product to be dried (1), for instance a slurry of lactose, is introduced into a spray tower (2) via a sprayer. The drying medium (for instance nitrogen) circulates

countercurrently with the sprayed slurry, so that a first drying step is effected. The wet drying medium is then dried via an adsorbent (4), as indicated. The thus obtained wet adsorbent is dried by steam, as described above, steam being obtained which comprises the water.

5 The product (6) at the bottom of the column may, if desired, be subjected to a second drying step according to the invention, in which it is, for instance, mixed with another adsorbent (7), as indicated in Fig. 1. The dried product is then separated from the adsorbent (7), for instance by means of sieving or other separation techniques for solid substances. In this
10 step, a wet stream of adsorbent is obtained, which, as described above, is dried by steam. Also, a dry product stream (9) is obtained, which product has therefore undergone two drying steps according to the invention.

 As adsorbent, the conventional adsorbents may be applied. Examples thereof are silica gel, activated alumina, activated carbon, carbon molecular
15 sieves and zeolites. Preferably applied is an adsorbent which comprises a zeolite. Surprisingly, it has been found that in contrast to what is generally assumed in the literature by Ruthven, D.M., 1984, Principles of Adsorption and Adsorption Processes, Chapter 1.5, John Wiley & Sons, New York, no degeneration of the zeolite structure occurs if this is brought into contact
20 with superheated steam of temperatures suitable according to the invention. At very high temperatures, degeneration of the zeolite can occur. For this reason, the temperature of the superheated steam preferably ranges between 100 and 450°C, with more preference between 150 and 400°C. With special preference, the adsorbent applied is one or more zeolites of the 3A,
25 4A and/or 5A type.

 Because according to the invention the removed water is obtained in the form of HP/HT steam, a substantial saving in the energy cost can be obtained, which can rise to as much as 70%.

 As stated, the obtained HP/HT steam stream can be employed for
30 different applications, such as heating purposes. Also, it is possible to return

a part of the obtained steam stream, after heating, again to the mentioned regeneration step for regenerating the adsorbent.

An apparatus for carrying out a method according to the invention comprises a space for bringing a product into contact with an adsorbent; and
5 a space for regenerating the mentioned adsorbent with superheated steam, steam being obtained, which steam comprises at least a part of the mentioned water.

The invention can be applied for drying different products. It can be very suitably applied for drying foods or starting materials in the food
10 industry, such as, for instance, starch, starch derivatives, proteins and fibers originating from starch-containing crops.

The invention can also be used for freeze drying products, in particular foods. With reference to Fig. 2, the freeze drying of a product such as, for instance, carrots, can be carried out as follows.

15 **1. Steam drying**

During the first phase, both the adsorbent (for instance zeolite) and the carrots are dried. This can be done in series or parallel. The carrots are dried so far that the texture of the product is retained. To retain the quality of the carrots, it is important that no air is present in the system at the end
20 of this phase. The pressure during steam drying is atmospheric or less.

2. Vacuumizing

By condensing the steam in the carrot vessel, a reduced pressure will be formed. As a result, water will evaporate from the product, so that the product dries further and cools to about 20°C. By cooling the zeolite vessel, a
25 reduced pressure will be formed here as well.

3. Freeze drying

By mixing the carrots with the zeolite, a deeper vacuum will be formed, so that the water in the product will freeze. The frozen product will still be dried, the sublimation heat is supplied through the adsorption heat
30 of the zeolite. The zeolite thereby remains at about 20°C, so that the high

adsorption capacity is retained. If required, external cooling or heating may be effected to maintain the temperature. The amount of needed zeolite can be calculated on the basis of the amount of moisture to be removed from the product.

CLAIMS

1. A method for drying a product, comprising the steps of:
 - bringing said product into contact with an adsorbent, water being taken up from the product by the adsorbent;
 - regenerating said adsorbent with superheated steam, steam being
- 5 obtained, which steam comprises at least a part of said water.
2. A method according to claim 1, wherein said product is a gas stream originating from a low temperature drying step.
3. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein said adsorbent comprises a zeolite.
- 10 4. A method according to claim 3, wherein the zeolite is of the 3A, 4A and/or 5A type.
5. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein said obtained steam has a temperature of at least 120°C.
6. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein said
- 15 obtained steam has a pressure of at least 3 bara.
7. A method according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the product is freeze dried.
8. An apparatus for carrying out a method according to any one of the preceding claims, comprising a space for bringing a product into contact
- 20 with an adsorbent; and a space for regenerating said adsorbent with superheated steam, steam being obtained, which steam comprises at least a part of said water.