Novel technology: magnets that separate plastics

Bruno van Wayenburg begins a 2-part feature in which he outlines a new patent-pending approach to magnetic fluids, which uses permanent magnets, and can be applied to applications such as the recycling of plastics and metals, and refining diamonds…

Fundamental research into magnetic fluids spans more than thirty years, in the course of which a number of practical applications have emerged. Magnetic fluids become heavier when exposed to a magnetic field and can thus be used to separate materials of different densities, with lighter materials floating to the surface. However, since practical fluids took a long time to appear on the scene, development was faltering. A patent has been applied for.

Raw materials technologist Dr Peter Rem discovered a new approach, in which separation becomes a viable option for applications like the recycling of plastics and metals, and for refining diamonds. Instead of bulky, energy-hungry electromagnets, the system uses permanent magnets.

Recycling materials like plastics, glass and metal has really taken off in the past few decades. Even so, many of the recycled materials, like plastics for instance, cannot be used for their original purpose, because they are not pure enough. They are contaminated with wood chips (car shredding), textile, domestic waste, metals (shredded electronics) and other types of plastics. The 15,000 tons of pet bottles collected every year in the Netherlands alone are mostly for the manufacture of plastic straps and synthetic fleece material. Reusing the plastic to make new pet bottles is difficult because the maximum level of impurity arising from non-pet material must not exceed 50 parts per million. Even minor impurities could result in weak spots, and a bottle manufacturer cannot afford to supply leaking or exploding bottles.

Bollards

The current separating techniques, based on the difference in flotation properties in water, can be used to separate lighter types of plastic such as polypropylene (pp) and polyethylene (pe) from the heavier types such as pet and pvc. Even so, pp and pe together are both difficult to separate and chemically incompatible, making low-quality objects such as traffic bollards the most common recycling application. The combination of pvc and pet, which used to be common when pet bottles were fitted with pvc screw caps, is even worse. The components cannot be separated, and pvc burns at pet processing temperatures.

"Fortunately the pet recycling market has managed to persuade the manufacturers to stop using that particular combination of materials," says Dr Peter Rem, associate professor of raw materials technology, at the sub faculty of Applied Earth Sciences (Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands), "but even so, we're still not very good at separating different types of plastics."

Rem and his doctoral student, Erwin Bakker are working on a separation technology that should be able to produce the required levels of purity. In addition their technology, density separation by means of magnetic fluids, is capable of separating several other types of materials in a single process. Such fluids change their density when subjected to a magnetic field.

Pink liquid

If Archimedes had ever got round to publishing his bathtub eureka moment in a scientific journal, Rem and Bakker would now be including a reference to his work. As part of an assignment by a king who suspected fraud, the famous Greek scientist measured the exact difference in density between silver and gold by means of weighing and immersion in water to determine volume. The Delft team uses a related method.

In the laboratory of the research group in the former Mining Institute of TU Delft, Rem drops a lump of metal into a cup containing a transparent pink liquid, a solution of manganese chloride. The metal sinks straight to the bottom of the cup, but when Rem places the cup on a specially prepared surface over a powerful magnet, the metal rises from the bottom to remain suspended halfway to the surface.

The manganese chloride solution is paramagnetic, which means that the magnet attracts the liquid. As a result, the liquid immediately above the magnet increases in density and so effectively becomes heavier. The lump of metal, which is not paramagnetic and so remains unaffected, suddenly becomes lighter in weight than the liquid, and so rises. As the effect of the magnetic field diminishes away from the magnet, the effective density of the liquid decreases with it. At the point where the density corresponds with that of the metal, the lump remains suspended. The net effect of this phenomenon is to produce a strict horizontal separation of particles of different densities, which is ideal for separating a mixed flow into its weight components in a single process.

Ditch water

Even so, manganese chloride will not be the solution used in separation plants. Its only purpose here is to serve as a demonstration liquid, because it is so nice and clear. To make a solution like this, about 400 kilograms of salt have to be added to a cubic metre of water, Rem explains. Therefore, the density of the solution is 1400 kilograms per cubic metre. “The effect of the magnetic field we’re using is to add another 300 kilograms per cubic metre to the density,” Rem says. Nice, but not nearly enough for full-range separation, and in addition the solution contains a lot of salt, all of which would have to be processed in a regeneration plant after use.

The real separator fluid Rem plans to use is a suspension of iron oxide particles in water, a brownish black liquid reminiscent of very dirty ditch water. Due to the small size of 20 nano-metres of the particles, their thermal motion at room temperature is sufficient to keep them suspended. A special coating prevents them from locking together magnetically.

The particles, and with them the fluid, are ferromagnetic, i.e. each of the particles is a minute magnet, which greatly enhances the attraction effect. As a result, the quantity of iron oxide particles mixed with the water can be far less while achieving the same effect: only about 10 kilograms per cubic metre, i.e. 1 per cent. “On top of that, iron oxide is cheap and harmless,” Rem says, “look in any sewer and you’re bound to find it.”

A number of plastic balls in four different colours can just be made out in the glass beaker of murky liquid which he places on the magnetic plate. Each ball remains suspended at its own level determined by the type of plastic it is made of, and consequently its density. “This is the separating principle in a nutshell,” Rem says.

Copper, gold, and other metals

Over thirty years of research into density separation by means of magnetic fluids, with particular emphasis on separating metals and metal ores, seems like a long time to have come up with such a simple solution.

Rem: “The thing is that research has always focused on finding a magnetic field in which the liquid would have a constant effective density, just like any normal fluid.” This would make the extractable material float on the surface, like wood on water. Since no normal fluids exist that have the high densities of copper, gold, and many other metals, magnetic fluids would be just the thing for the job, or so it was thought.

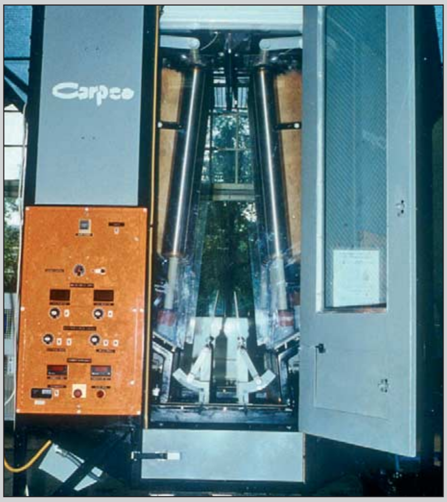
If only more physicists had been involved in the research, it might have emerged earlier on that the idea in itself is literally a physical impossibility, Rem thinks. To obtain a uniform effective density, you need a magnetic field with a linear strength gradient (i.e. the plot of the magnetic field strength is a straight line). However, according to Maxwell’s equations, which describe the behaviour of electrical and magnetic fields, a linear magnetic field cannot be created inside a volume.

In the Netherlands alone, 15,000 tonnes of PET waste gets recycled every year. The total quantity of waste plastics is far greater, which is where part of the problem lies, since separating different types of plastics remains a commercially unattractive proposition. Also, if the separated plastic cannot be made pure enough, the product's value plummets.

In order to process recycled PET bottles, they are shredded and any dirt and other unwanted materials such as bottle caps, labels, and whatever consumers have left behind, are removed.

Contaminants that currently get left behind in the cleaned PET:

Aluminium, stainless steel, and other non-magnetic metals (left); Iron (middle); Stone and glass (right.)



Electrostatic separator for removing PVC particles from shredded PET waste. Intensive stirring of the mixture imparts different electrostatic charges to the PET and PVC particles. The mixture is then dropped between the two vertical electrodes, across which a 60,000 volts electrostatic field is maintained. As they drop past the electrodes, the PET and PVC flows become separated.

The closest approach, a linear gradient field in a single plane, is the field that exists between the poles of an annular magnet with a specially formed cavity. Rem: “To create a magnetic field of any reasonable dimensions with such an instrument would require a set of electromagnets several metres in size.”

Rem himself was actually working with just such a device some eight years ago, when he realised that there was no need for a continuous density, in fact it created an obstacle for an effective separation technique. The only reason for the preference had been that a homogeneous density came closest to classical fluids such as the water Archimedes had in his bath.”

Frustrated

Unlike his Greek colleague, Rem never had his eureka moment, but in 2004 he realised there was another way. Rem calculated a magnetic field with a strength that decreases exponentially as the distance from the magnet increases. This results in an exponential decrease in the attractive force and consequently, a change in effective density, so that each type of material can find its own level of equilibrium in the magnetic liquid. This has the advantage that a large number of components of different densities can be accurately separated from each other in a single process.

Rem calculated a configuration of magnets that would produce such a field. Magnet manufacturers Bakker Magnetics, who specialise in the manufacture of complex magnet systems, then produced the configuration for the research group. Creating the experimental magnet plate was not a simple task. Its main ingredient is a set of extremely powerful permanent iron-neodymium-borium magnets.

“The field strength just above the magnets is 1 tesla, which is pretty strong for a permanent magnet,” Rem says. The magnets are mounted in a ‘frustrated’ configuration, which means that they are out of balance and subject to large forces acting between them. It is a good thing that the whole assembly is covered by a steel plate to protect researchers from being hit by any magnet fragments that may become detached from the main mass. In addition the plate screens the assembly from curious gazes, as the magnet configuration calculated by Rem is a secret.

“Our patent application mentions something like ‘any person trained in the art is capable of creating such a field’, but in practice it is not quite that simple,” Rem admits with a smile. ●

Part 2 can be read in next month’s issue of Filtration + Separation magazine.

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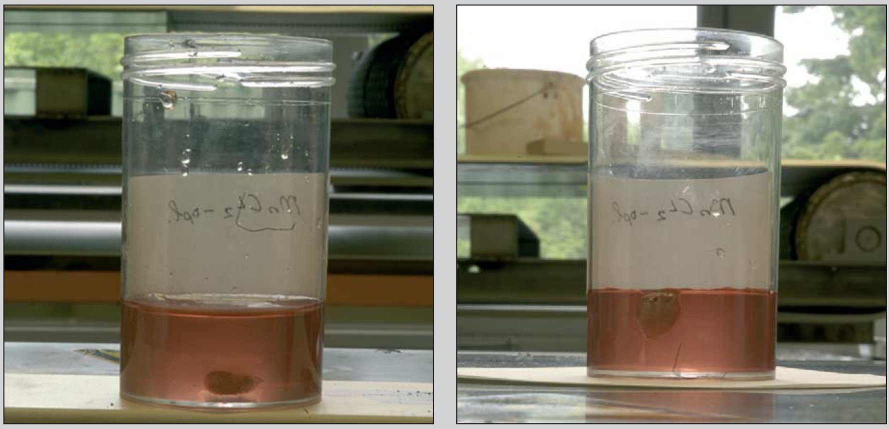
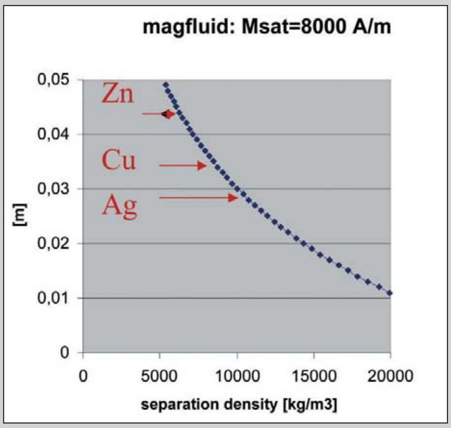
Eddy current separator used for separating aluminium from PET waste. It uses a rapidly changing magnetic field to eject the aluminium particles from the mixture.



If a lump of magnesium (density approximately 1700 kg/m³) is dropped into a manganese chloride solution (density approximately. 1400 kg/m³), it sinks to the bottom. If the container holding the solution and the metal is then placed on a magnet, the metal will rise in the solution (picture on the right) because of the increased density of the fluid.

By making use of the decreasing effect of the magnetic field at higher level in the liquid, balls made of different types of plastics will float at different levels according to their specific gravity, with the heavy balls sitting lowest in the liquid, and the lightest ones at the top.



Relation between the specific gravity of a material and the level at which a particle of the material will float in the magnetic liquid.