



US 20120184788A1

(19) **United States**

(12) **Patent Application Publication**  
**Loop et al.**

(10) **Pub. No.: US 2012/0184788 A1**

(43) **Pub. Date: Jul. 19, 2012**

(54) **BIOMASS AND WASTE PLASTICS  
DEPOLYMERIZATION MACHINE AND  
METHODS VIA SUPERCRITICAL WATER**

**Publication Classification**

(51) **Int. Cl.**  
**C10G 1/10** (2006.01)

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(52) **U.S. Cl. .... 585/241**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

(21) Appl. No.: **13/297,217**

(22) Filed: **Nov. 15, 2011**

A method for transforming a selected polymeric material into a plurality of reaction products via supercritical water is disclosed. The method comprises: conveying the selected polymeric material through an extruder, wherein the extruder is configured to continuously convey the selected polymeric material to a supercritical fluid reaction zone; injecting hot compressed water into the supercritical fluid reaction zone, while the extruder is conveying the selected polymeric material into the supercritical fluid reaction zone so as to yield a mixture; retaining the mixture within the reaction zone for a period of time sufficient to yield the plurality of reaction products. The reaction zone may be characterized by a tubular reactor having an adjustably positionable inner tubular spear, wherein the tubular reactor and the inner tubular spear further define an annular space within the reaction zone, and wherein the mixture flows through the annular space and into a reaction products chamber.

**Related U.S. Application Data**

(63) Continuation-in-part of application No. 12/828,102, filed on Jun. 30, 2010, now Pat. No. 8,057,666, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 12/402,489, filed on Mar. 11, 2009, now Pat. No. 7,955,508.

(60) Provisional application No. 61/035,380, filed on Mar. 11, 2008, provisional application No. 61/110,505, filed on Oct. 31, 2008.

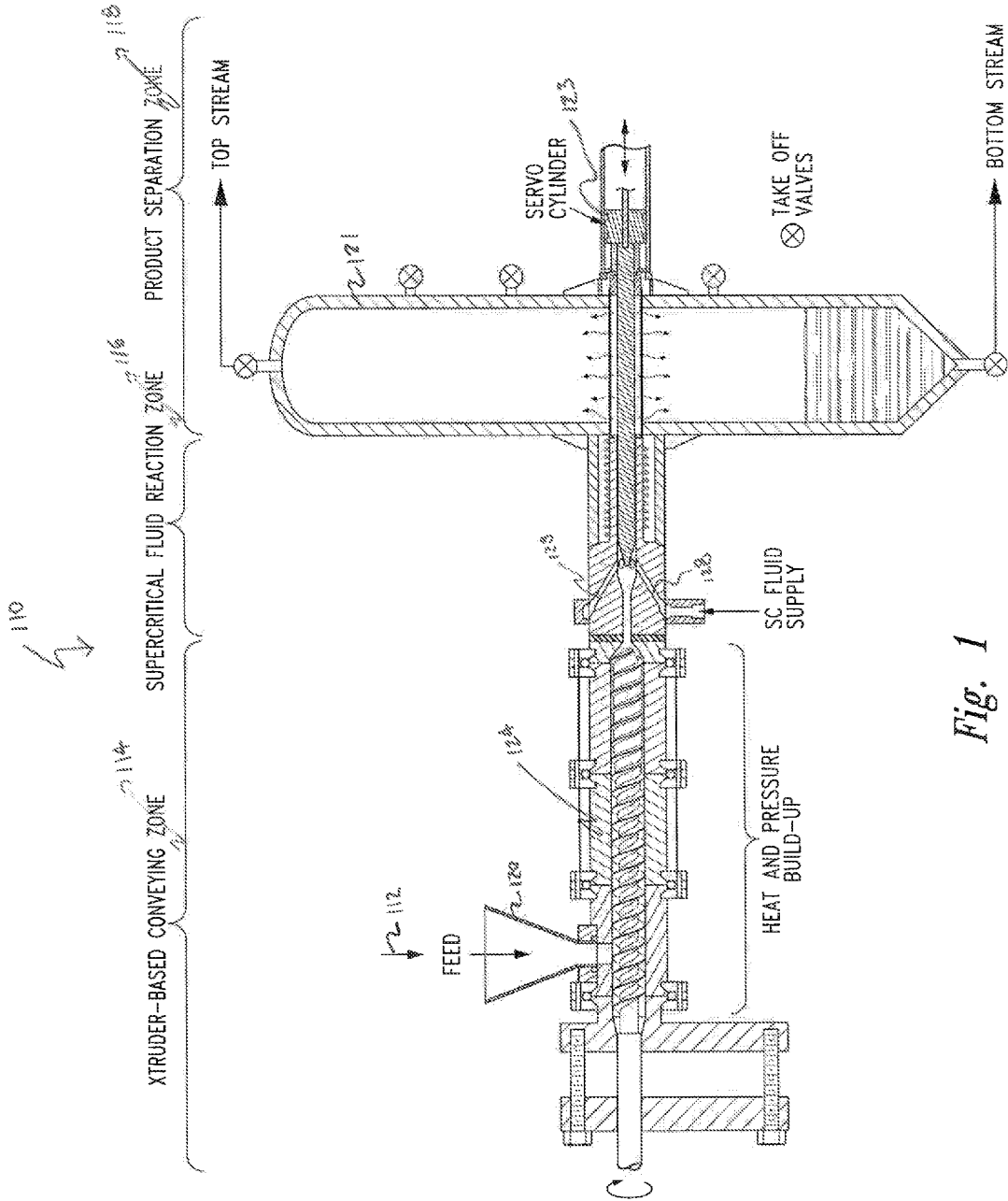


Fig. 1

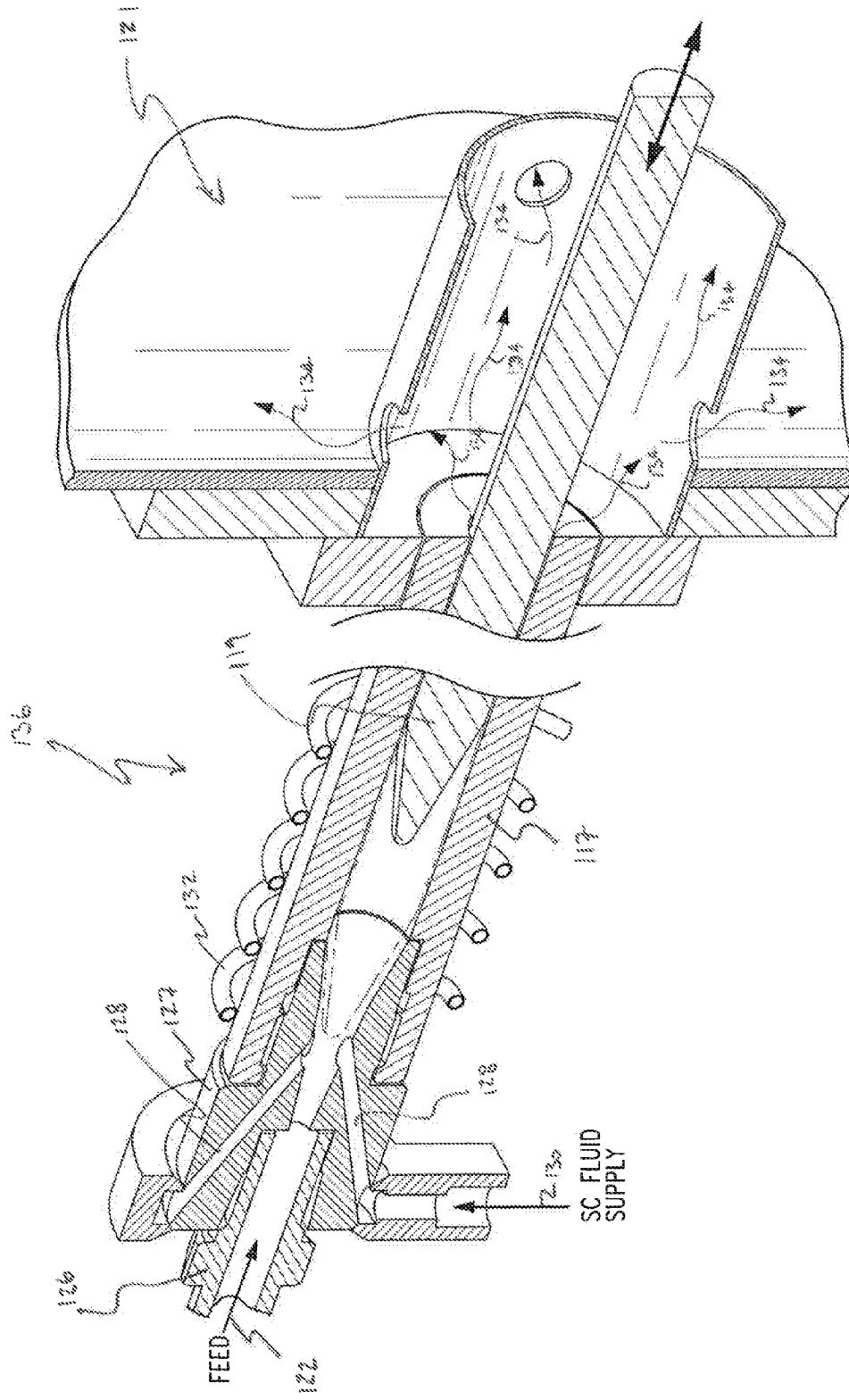


Fig. 2

**BIOMASS AND WASTE PLASTICS  
DEPOLYMERIZATION MACHINE AND  
METHODS VIA SUPERCRITICAL WATER**

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED  
APPLICATIONS

**[0001]** This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 12/828,102 filed on Jun. 30, 2010 and U.S. application Ser. No. 12/402,489 filed on Mar. 11, 2009, which application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 61/035,380 filed on Mar. 11, 2008, and U.S. Provisional Application No. 61/110,505 filed on Oct. 31, 2008, which applications are all incorporated herein by reference in their entireties for all purposes.

TECHNICAL FIELD

**[0002]** The present invention relates generally to biomass and waste plastic conversion systems and, more specifically, to machines and methods of depolymerising naturally occurring and synthetic polymers (namely, biomass and waste plastics) into smaller molecules by reaction with a hot compressed and/or supercritical water.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

**[0003]** Everyday the Sun pours down onto the Earth a vast quantity of radiant energy many many times greater than the total now used by Man. Some of this energy, together with carbon dioxide and water, Nature traps in trees and other plants by conversion into giant chemical molecules, collectively called biomass. The major components (about 60% to 80%) of this mixture are polysaccharides. Polysaccharides are long and substantially linear chains, the individual links of which are simple sugars. The remaining component (about 15% to 25%) is called lignin and is a complex network of joined aromatic rings of the type present in liquid diesel engine fuel. The energy trapped within plants can be recovered, in part, by breaking down the long chains into their constituent sugar links for subsequent standard fermentation into bioethanol. In contrast, the breakdown of the lignin network can yield simple aromatic compounds for possible direct incorporation into diesel fuel. The problem facing chemical engineers has been how to achieve these demonstrated chemical breakdowns on a large-scale, commercially practical, and energy efficient way.

**[0004]** There exists immense amounts of biomass materials in forests and crops, and cellulose, the main component, is one of the most abundant natural resources available on the Earth. In this regard, natural cellulosic feedstocks are now commonly referred to as "biomass," and biomass materials are known to generally consist primarily of cellulose (~40% to ~50%), hemicellulose (~20% to ~30%), and lignin (~15% to ~25%) bound together in a complex structure together with smaller amounts of pectins, proteins, and ash. Many types of biomass, including, for example, wood, paper, agricultural residues such as bagasse, switchgrass, wheat or sorghum straw, corn husks, and the like have long been considered as possible feedstocks for the manufacture of certain organic chemicals, but thus far existing biomass conversion technologies have achieved only limited success. It is believed by many that due to the complex chemical structure of most biomass materials, microorganisms and enzymes cannot effectively attack the cellulose component without prior treatment. Indeed, conventional methods for converting cellulose

to glucose by way of acid hydrolysis and enzymatic saccharification are known to be inefficient and, consequently, are not yet commercially viable.

**[0005]** More recently, however, the chemical conversion of cellulose with supercritical water to obtain various sugars has been studied. (see, e.g., M. Sasaki, B. Kabyemela, R. Malaluan, S. Hirose, N. Takeda, T. Adschiri & K. Arai, *Cellulose hydrolysis in subcritical and supercritical water*, *J. Supercritical Fluids*, 13, 261-268 (1998); S. Saki & T. Ueno, Chemical conversion of various celluloses to glucose and its derivatives in supercritical water, *Cellulose*, 6, 177-191 (1999).) These more recent studies are among the first to demonstrate that cellulose may be rapidly hydrolyzed in supercritical water to yield glucose (in high yield) in either flow or batch type micro-reactors. The use of flow or batch type micro-reactors, however, is not a realistic option for the commercial-scale production of cellulosic based motor fuels.

**[0006]** Nowadays, everyone is aware of the desirability of having new domestic sources of liquid fuels for diesel as well as gasoline engines. Likewise, it is generally recognized that the USA has been living in the Age of Plastics for the past 75 years. This has become a throwaway age and multi-ton quantities of plastics are discarded daily all around the world.

**[0007]** In the major cities of the USA, it is now standard to have special bins everywhere in which recyclable material can be dumped. Originally, this recyclable designation was restricted to paper and cardboard but now plastics in general are accepted. Strangely enough, in Seattle polystyrene foam and packaging material is excluded, and must be dumped in the regular garbage cans. The contents of the recycle bins are collected in a special truck and are transported to a municipal recycling center. There the various components are separated.

**[0008]** Now the discarded plastics, separated at the recycle center, consist of long chains of thousands of atoms called polymers. Of the commercially most important polymers, polystyrene (PS), polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP), have chains that contain only carbon and hydrogen atoms in amounts similar to the hydrocarbons in diesel and gasoline fuels. Thus, the molecules in diesel and gasoline are chemically similar to the polymers but are much smaller in size. It has therefore been appreciated for some time that if the long chains of the plastics could be broken down into smaller pieces these moieties could find use as chemical feedstocks.

**[0009]** One of the most intriguing and environmentally sound approaches to breaking down plastics is simply to use water alone, heated to its supercritical state. About a decade ago this chemical-free technology was comprehensively discussed in an English language review by P. E. Savage (*Chem. Rev.* 1999, 99, 609). Since then few modern reviews have appeared. However, numerous articles, mostly from Japan and China, have appeared each year dealing with the treatment of plastics with supercritical water. All of these publications emphasize that when water is heated to 374.4 C or above, the pressure concomitantly generated is 217.7 atm and the water then becomes a powerful new reactive solvent. Temperatures above 400 C seem to make the water even more effective in its new role. For example, it now dissolves PS and breaks it down in 100% yield into a mixture of styrene, methylstyrene, styrene dimers and trimers, toluene, ethylbenzene, isopropylbenzene, 1,3-diphenylpropane and 1,3-diphenylbutane. (H. Kwak, H.-Y. Shin, S.-Y. Bae and H. Kumazawa, *J. Appl. Poly. Sci.* 2006, 101, 675). All of these substances are immiscible with water at room temperature and could be components of a diesel fuel.

**[0010]** These and numerous other similar reactions (J. A. Onwudili & P. T. Williams, *Chemosphere* 2009, 74(6), 787) demonstrate clearly that plastics can be broken down by treatment with supercritical water. Apparently the water and plastic undergoes the water gas reaction and hydrogen is released to combine with the chain fragments from the plastics. This has actually been demonstrated by the use of deuterium oxide in place of water and the consequent finding of deuterium in the fragments. However, since nearly all water-plastic reactions have been run in a batch mode on a very small scale, the chemistry so elegantly elucidated does not provide answers to the questions necessary for the future development of a commercially-sized, practical, continuous, supercritical water-based process.

**[0011]** As is commonly understood by those with backgrounds in chemical engineering, petroleum-based diesel fuels are produced from the fractional distillation of crude oil between 200 C (392° F.) and 350° C. (662° F.) at atmospheric pressure, resulting in a mixture of carbon chains that typically contain between 8 and 21 carbon atoms per molecule. Diesel fuels are approximately similar to fuel oils used for heating (fuel oils no. 1, no. 2, and no. 4). All fuel oils consist of complex mixtures of aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons. The aliphatic alkanes (paraffins) and cycloalkanes (naphthenes) are hydrogen saturated and compose approximately 80-90% of the fuel oils. Aromatics (e.g., benzene) and olefins (e.g., styrene and indene) compose 10-20% and 1%, respectively, of the fuel oils. Fuel oil no. 1 (straight-run kerosene) is a light distillate which consists primarily of hydrocarbons in the C9-C16 range; fuel oil no. 2 is a heavier, usually blended, distillate with hydrocarbons in the C11-C20 range. Straight-run distillates may also be used to produce fuel oil no. 1 and diesel fuel oil no. 1. Diesel fuel no. 1 and no. 2 are similar in chemical composition to fuel oil no. 1 and fuel oil no. 2, respectively, with the exception of the additives. Diesel fuels predominantly contain a mixture of C 10 through C19 hydrocarbons, which include approximately 64% aliphatic hydrocarbons, 1-2% olefinic hydrocarbons, and 35% aromatic hydrocarbons.

**[0012]** Accordingly, and although some progress has been made with respect to the development of biomass and/or waste plastic conversion systems, there is still a need in the art for new and improved machines, systems, and methods for converting biomass and/or waste plastics into simple sugars, hydrocarbons, and/or aromatic chemicals as the case may be which, in turn, can be readily converted into liquid transportation fuels. The present invention fulfills these needs and provides for further related advantages.

#### SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

**[0013]** The present invention in one embodiment is directed to a method for transforming a selected polymeric material into a plurality of reaction products. The innovative method of the present invention comprises at least the following steps: conveying the selected polymeric material (e.g., biomass, a waste plastic, or a combination thereof) through an extruder (single or twin screw) so as to define a selected polymeric material flowstream, wherein the extruder is configured to continuously convey the selected polymeric material from an upstream inlet to a supercritical fluid reaction zone; injecting hot compressed water into the supercritical fluid reaction zone while the extruder is conveying the selected polymeric material flowstream into the supercritical fluid reaction zone so as to yield a mixture; retaining the mixture within the

reaction zone for a period of time (e.g., from about 0.4 to about 10 seconds) sufficient to yield the plurality of reaction products, wherein the reaction zone is defined by a tubular reactor shell having an inner tubular spear, wherein the tubular reactor and the inner tubular spear further define an annular space within the reaction zone, and wherein the mixture flows through the annular space (and wherein the inner tubular spear is adjustably movable in back and forth directions within the tubular reactor so as to selectable increase or decrease the volume of the reaction zone); and expelling the plurality of reaction products out of the supercritical fluid reaction zone and into a reaction products chamber. The method may further comprise a step of separating the plurality of reaction products into an aqueous phase and a non-aqueous phase.

**[0014]** In another embodiment, the present invention is directed to an innovative tube and spear reactor as herein shown and described, as well as to related extruder-based machinery and fluid expansion chambers.

**[0015]** These and other aspects of the present invention will become more evident upon reference to the following detailed description and accompanying drawings. It is to be understood, however, that various changes, alterations, and substitutions may be made to the specific embodiments disclosed herein without departing from their essential spirit and scope.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

**[0016]** The drawings are intended to be illustrative and symbolic representations of certain exemplary embodiments of the present invention and as such they are not necessarily drawn to scale. In addition, it is to be expressly understood that the relative dimensions and distances depicted in the drawings are exemplary and may be varied in numerous ways. Finally, like reference numerals have been used to designate like features throughout the views of the drawings.

**[0017]** FIG. 1 shows a side elevational cross-sectional view of an extruder-fed induction-heated supercritical fluid polymer depolymerization machine in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

**[0018]** FIG. 2 shows a partial cross-sectional view of a supercritical fluid reaction zone defined by a spear-and-tube reactor in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF INVENTION

**[0019]** Referring now to the drawings where like numerals have been used to designate like features throughout the views, and more specifically to FIGS. 1 and 2, the present invention in one embodiment is directed to a supercritical fluid polymer depolymerization conversion machine/system 110 capable of converting a selected biomass and/or waste plastic material 112 into a plurality of reaction products (not shown). In the context of the present invention, the term “biomass” means any plant derived organic matter, including dedicated energy crops and trees, agricultural food and feed crops, agricultural crop wastes and residues, wood wastes and residues, aquatic plants, algae, animal wastes, municipal wastes, and other like organic materials—whereas the term “waste plastic” means a synthetic polymer. As shown, the polymer conversion machine/system 110 of the present invention comprises, in fluidic series, three discreet zones:

namely, (1) an extruder-based conveying zone **114**; (2) a supercritical fluid reaction zone **116**; and (3) a reaction products separation zone **118**.

[0020] In accordance with the novel approach of the present invention, a specialized extruder conveys the selected biomass and/or waste plastic materials **112** from an upstream hopper **120** to the downstream supercritical fluid reaction zone **116**, while increasing the pressure from about atmospheric to greater than about 3,200 psi. The extruder-based approach is important because it enables the conveyance of near-solid materials (as opposed to conventional slurry pumping technologies used in the prior art). The heated and pressurized near-solid materials (biomass and/or waste plastic) **122** exits the extruder **124** through a specialized die **126** connected to a manifold **127** that includes a plurality of circumferentially positioned supercritical fluid injection channels **128** configured to inject hot compressed water **130** (or other fluid) into the supercritical fluid reaction zone **116**.

[0021] In a preferred embodiment, hot compressed water **130** is injected into the supercritical fluid reaction zone **116** by way of the injection channels **128** while the extruder **124** is conveying the selected polymeric materials **112** into the supercritical fluid reaction zone **116** so as to yield a mixture (not shown). The supercritical fluid reaction zone **116** further heats the flowing and pressurized polymeric materials **122** and hot compressed water **130** mixture to conditions at or above supercritical by means of a circumferentially positioned, high efficiency alternating current induction coil **132** (which, in turn, is connected to an induction heater (not shown)) to thereby yield the plurality of reaction products **134**. The resulting liquefied and/or gaseous reaction products **134** are then conveyed through a highly innovative spear-and-tube reactor **136**.

[0022] As best shown in FIG. 2, the spear-and-tube reactor **136** of the present invention allows a controlled and/or minimal amount of supercritical water to enter into the system (i.e., preferably less than about 100% to about 20% by weight basis). More specifically, the reaction zone **116** is defined by a tubular reactor shell **117** having an inner tubular spear **119**, wherein the tubular reactor shell **117** and the inner tubular spear **119** further define an annular space within the reaction zone. As shown, the polymeric materials **122** and hot compressed water **130** mixture yield the plurality of reactions products **134** that flow through the annular space and are expelled into an innovative expansion/separation chamber **121**. The expansion/separation chamber **121** preferably contains liquid water and a hydrocarbon solvent to facilitate liquid-liquid extraction and phase separation of the resulting neodiesel and water. As further shown, the inner tubular spear **119** is adjustably movable in back and forth directions within the tubular reactor shell **117** by means of a servo cylinder **123** so as to selectable increase or decrease the volume of the reaction zone.

[0023] Without necessarily prescribing to any particular scientific theory, it is believed that at supercritical conditions the water component is at a supercritical state, thereby enabling (in the context of a selected biomass material) the rapid hydrolysis and depolymerization of the surrounding biomass's main polysaccharide components (cellulose and hemicellulose) into one or more fermentable sugars, and the main polyphenolic components into one or more simple aromatic compounds. In the context of one or more waste plastics, supercritical water (SCW) breaks down, for example, polyethylene (PE) by cleaving the carbons at various loca-

tions along the backbone and simultaneously capturing hydrogen atoms from the water. As a consequence a whole range of linear hydrocarbons of various lengths are formed. Most of these have been found to be soluble in regular gasoline and may be most readily utilized in the automobile fuel market. In the case of polypropylene (PP) the breakdown fragments will not be linear, but branched, because of the side chain methyl groups on every other carbon atom in the polymer backbone. These branched structures have been found to be even more soluble in gasoline than their counterparts from polyethylene. Again, the specific fuel market will likely be for trucks and automobiles at some percentage addition value. When the starting renewable plastic is polystyrene (PS), the breakdown fragments are somewhat different because supercritical water does not readily cleave aromatic rings. The aliphatic backbone chain of polystyrene is of course cut by the supercritical water as with polyethylene and polypropylene backbones, but the polystyrene-derived fragments contain aromatic rings that originate from the phenyl rings. Thus, the supercritical water product has been found to be more like the aromatic components of kerosene with its alkylbenzenes currently usable in diesel. These aromatic higher boiling substances have been found to be more compatible with diesel fuel usage rather than gasoline.

[0024] The present invention is also directed to a method for converting a selected biomass and/or waste plastic material into a plurality of reaction products. Accordingly, and in another embodiment, a method of the present invention comprises the steps of: providing an elongated conveying zone that contains two or more elongated rotatable shafts having a plurality of flighted screws positioned lengthwise within an elongated conveying section housing, wherein the plurality of flighted screws are positioned about each respective two or more elongated rotatable shafts, and wherein the two or more elongated rotatable shafts are configured to continuously convey the selected biomass and/or waste plastic material (optionally together with water or other liquid) from an upstream inlet to a supercritical fluid reaction zone while increasing the pressure of the selected biomass and/or waste plastic material from about atmospheric at the inlet to greater than about 22.1 MPa at the supercritical fluid reaction zone; conveying a mixture of the selected biomass and/or waste plastic material through the elongated conveying zone and into the supercritical fluid reaction zone; heating and further pressurizing the mixture within the supercritical fluid reaction zone, while injecting hot compressed and/or supercritical water into the supercritical fluid reaction zone, to yield a plurality of reaction products, wherein heat energy is supplied by means of an induction heating coil positioned circumferentially about the supercritical fluid reaction zone; retaining the mixture within the supercritical fluid reaction zone for a period of time sufficient to yield the plurality of reaction products; expelling the plurality of reaction products out of the supercritical fluid reaction zone and into a separation zone; and separating the plurality of reaction products into at least a water soluble fraction and an organic solvent soluble fraction.

[0025] In this method, the period of time that the mixture is retained within the supercritical fluid reaction zone generally ranges from about 0.4 to about 10 seconds (but may include much greater periods of time up to an hour and above). This method may also comprise the further steps of adding a phenolic compound to the plurality of reaction products to thereby retard the formation of certain degradation reaction products, as well as a step of adding a plurality of electrically

conductive particles to the mixture of the selected biomass and/or waste material and water such the plurality of electrically conductive particles are heated while passing through the induction coil.

**[0026]** Finally, and for purposes of efficient heat transfer across the flowing biomass and/or waste plastic material fluid stream, it is contemplated that a suitable heat transfer agent such as, for example, a heavy petroleum oil or oil shale, or a recyclable low melting metal (tin, mp 232° C. or lead, mp 327° C.) or metal alloy, preferably Wood's metal (an alloy of Bismuth 50%, Cadmium 12.5%, Lead 25% and Tin 12.5%, mp 73-77° C.) may be added to biomass and/or waste plastic material feedstock prior to its introduction into the co-rotating twin screw extruder.

**[0027]** While the present invention has been described in the context of the embodiments illustrated and described herein, the invention may be embodied in other specific ways or in other specific forms without departing from its spirit or essential characteristics. Therefore, the described embodiments are to be considered in all respects as illustrative and not restrictive. The scope of the invention is, therefore, indicated by the appended claims rather than by the foregoing description, and all changes that come within the meaning and range of equivalency of the claims are to be embraced within their scope.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for transforming a selected polymeric material into a plurality of reaction products, the method comprising the steps of:

conveying the selected polymeric material through an extruder so as to define a selected polymeric material flowstream, wherein the extruder is configured to continuously convey the selected polymeric material from an upstream inlet to a supercritical fluid reaction zone;

injecting hot compressed water into the supercritical fluid reaction zone while the extruder is conveying the selected polymeric material flowstream into the supercritical fluid reaction zone so as to yield a mixture;

retaining the mixture within the reaction zone for a period of time sufficient to yield the plurality of reaction products, wherein the reaction zone is defined by a tubular reactor having an inner tubular spear, wherein the tubular reactor and the inner tubular spear further define an annular space within the reaction zone, and wherein the mixture flows through the annular space; and

expelling the plurality of reaction products out of the supercritical fluid reaction zone and into a reaction products chamber.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the selected polymeric material is biomass, a waste plastic, or a combination thereof.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the extruder is a twin screw extruder.

4. The method of claim 2 wherein the hot compressed water is supercritical water.

5. The method of claim 4 wherein the hot compressed water is in amount that is less than the amount of the selected polymeric material on a weight percent basis.

6. The method of claim 2 wherein the period of time ranges from about 0.4 to about 10 seconds.

7. The method of claim 2 wherein the inner tubular spear is adjustably movable in back and forth directions within the tubular reactor so as to selectable increase or decrease the volume of the reaction zone.

8. The method of claim 7, further comprising the step of separating the plurality of reaction products into an aqueous phase and a non-aqueous phase.

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