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SLIDE MEASURING SYSTEM FOR FILLING POUCHES AND ASSOCIATED METHOD

Abstract

Systems and methods for metering a granular material for packaging in pouches are disclosed. A system includes a hopper structured and arranged to hold a granular material in a hopper cavity. The system also includes a measuring system including a measuring cavity and a tube that is slidable in the hopper cavity between a first position unaligned with the measuring cavity and a second position over and aligned with the measuring cavity. The measuring system is structured and arranged to move a portion of the granular material from the hopper cavity to the measuring cavity when the tube is in the first position. The measuring system is structured and arranged to move the portion of the granular material from the measuring cavity to a pouch making machine using pressurized gas when the tube is in the second position.

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Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS [0001] This is a continuation application of U.S. application Ser. No. 17/940,551, filed Sep. 8, 2022, which is a continuation application of U.S. application Ser. No. 16/526,451, filed Jul. 30, 2019, which is a continuation application of U.S. application Ser. No. 14/584,668, filed Dec. 29, 2014; which claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application No. 61/920,972, filed Dec. 26, 2013, the entire contents of each of which are incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD
[0002] This disclosure relates generally to systems and methods for filling pouches with granular material and, more particularly, to providing measured portions of smokeless tobacco to a pouch making machine in a continuous operation.
SUMMARY
[0003] Smokeless tobacco, such as dipping tobacco, snus, etc., is commonly packaged in pouches that are provided to the consumer in a lidded cylindrical container (e.g., a can). Each pouch may include an amount of tobacco contained in a paper case.
[0004] In accordance with aspects disclosed herein, there is a system and method for measuring (metering) tobacco for packaging in pouches. A system includes a hopper structured and arranged to hold a granular (shredded, ground) material in a hopper cavity. The system also includes a measuring system including a measuring cavity and a tube that is slidable in the hopper cavity between a first position unaligned with the measuring cavity and a second position over and aligned with the measuring cavity. The measuring system is structured and arranged to move a portion of the granular material from the hopper cavity to the measuring cavity when the tube is in the first position. The measuring system is structured and arranged to move the portion of the granular material from the measuring cavity to a pouch making machine using pressurized gas when the tube is in the second position.
[0005] According to another aspect, there is a system for measuring tobacco for packaging in pouches. The system includes a hopper structured and arranged to hold a granular material in a hopper cavity. The system also includes a measuring system including: a plurality of measuring cavities; a plurality of tubes slidable in the hopper cavity; a vacuum source; and a pressure source. The measuring system is structured and arranged to move the plurality of tubes to a first position that uncovers the plurality of measuring cavities. The measuring system is also structured and arranged to fill the plurality of measuring cavities with respective portions of the granular material using the vacuum source while the plurality of tubes are in the first position. The measuring system

is additionally structured and arranged to move the plurality of tubes to a second position over and aligned with the plurality of measuring cavities. The measuring system is further structured and arranged to move the respective portions of the granular material from the plurality of measuring cavities to a pouch making machine using the pressure source while the plurality of tubes are in the second position.

[0006] According to another aspect, there is a method for measuring tobacco for packaging in pouches. The method includes: providing granular material to a sifter using a feeder; sifting the granular material into a hopper; measuring a portion of the granular material in a measuring cavity; moving the portion of the granular material from the measuring cavity to a pouch making machine; and making a pouch encapsulating the portion of granular material. The measuring includes: moving a tube to a first position unaligned with the measuring cavity; moving the portion of the granular material into the measuring cavity using gravity and/or vacuum; and moving the tube to a second position over and aligned with the measuring cavity. The moving the portion of the granular material from the measuring cavity to the pouch making machine includes applying compressed gas to the measuring cavity to move the portion of the granular material through a flowpath extending between the measuring cavity and the pouch making machine.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0007] Various aspects are further described in the detailed description which follows, in reference to the noted plurality of drawings by way of non-limiting examples of embodiments, in which like reference numerals represent similar parts throughout the several views of the drawings.

[0008] FIG. **1** shows an exemplary pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0009] FIG. **2** shows various aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0010] FIG. **3** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0011] FIG. **4** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0012] FIG. **5** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0013] FIG. **6** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0014] FIG. **7** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0015] FIG. **8** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0016] FIG. **9** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0017] FIG. **10** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0018] FIG. **11** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0019] FIG. **12** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0020] FIG. **13** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0021] FIG. **14** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith;

[0022] FIG. **15** shows additional aspects of the pouch making system, in accordance herewith; and

[0023] FIG. **16** shows a flow diagram of a method in accordance herewith.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0024] Various aspects will now be described with reference to specific forms selected for purposes of illustration. It will be appreciated that the spirit and scope of the apparatus, system and methods disclosed herein are not limited to the selected forms. Moreover, it is to be noted that the figures provided herein are not drawn to any particular proportion or scale, and that many variations can be made to the illustrated forms. Reference is now made to FIGS. **1-15**, wherein like numerals are used to designate like elements throughout.

[0025] Each of the following terms written in singular grammatical form: “a,” “an,” and “the,” as used herein, may also refer to, and encompass, a plurality of the stated entity or object, unless otherwise specifically defined or stated herein, or, unless the context clearly dictates otherwise. For example, the phrases “a device,” “an assembly,” “a mechanism,” “a component,” and “an element,” as used herein, may also refer to, and encompass, a plurality of devices, a plurality of assemblies, a plurality of mechanisms, a plurality of components, and a plurality of elements, respectively.

[0026] Each of the following terms: “includes,” “including,” “has,” “having,” “comprises,” and “comprising,” and, their linguistic or grammatical variants, derivatives, and/or conjugates, as used herein, means “including, but not limited to.”

[0027] Throughout the illustrative description, the examples, and the appended claims, a numerical value of a parameter, feature, object, or dimension, may be stated or described in terms of a numerical range format. It is to be fully understood that the stated numerical range format is provided for illustrating implementation of the forms disclosed herein, and is not to be understood or construed as inflexibly limiting the scope of the forms disclosed herein.

[0028] Moreover, for stating or describing a numerical range, the phrase “in a range of between about a first numerical value and about a second numerical value,” is considered equivalent to, and means the same as, the phrase “in a range of from about a first numerical value to about a second numerical value,” and, thus, the two equivalently meaning phrases may be used interchangeably.

[0029] It is to be understood that the various forms disclosed herein are not limited in their application to the details of the order or sequence, and number, of steps or procedures, and sub-steps or sub-procedures, of operation or implementation of forms of the method or to the details of type, composition, construction, arrangement, order and number of the system, system sub-units, devices, assemblies, sub-assemblies, mechanisms, structures, components, elements, and configurations, and, peripheral equipment, utilities, accessories, and materials of forms of the system, set forth in the following illustrative description, accompanying drawings, and examples, unless otherwise specifically stated herein. The apparatus, systems and methods disclosed herein can be practiced or implemented according to various other alternative forms and in various other alternative ways.

[0030] It is also to be understood that all technical and scientific words, terms, and/or phrases, used herein throughout the present disclosure have either the identical or similar meaning as commonly understood by one of ordinary skill in the art, unless otherwise specifically defined or stated herein. Phraseology, terminology, and, notation, employed herein throughout the present disclosure are for the purpose of description and should not be regarded as limiting.

[0031] This disclosure relates generally to systems and methods for filling pouches with granular material and, more particularly, to providing measured portions of smokeless tobacco to a pouch making machine in a continuous operation. According to aspects disclosed herein, a system includes a measuring system that accurately and consistently measures a volumetric amount of granular material for insertion into a pouch. In embodiments, the measuring system includes a plurality of lanes that measure a plurality of portions of the granular material simultaneously. In aspects described herein, the measuring system is arranged upstream of a pouch making machine and provides the measured portions of granular material to the pouch making machine, which creates respective pouches each containing a measured portion of granular material.

[0032] As used herein the terms “adapted” and “configured” or “structured” and “arranged” mean that the element, component, or other subject matter is designed and/or intended to perform a given function. Thus, the use of the terms “adapted” and “configured” or “structured” and “arranged” should not be construed to mean that a given element, component, or other subject matter is simply “capable of” performing a given function but that the element, component, and/or other subject matter is specifically selected, created, implemented, utilized, programmed, and/or designed for the purpose of performing the function. It is also within the scope of the present disclosure that elements, components, and/or other recited subject matter that is recited as being adapted to perform a particular function may additionally or alternatively be described as being configured to perform that function, and vice versa.

[0033] Granular material as used herein may refer to smokeless tobacco, including but not limited to dipping tobacco, snus, etc. However, the invention is not limited to use with tobacco, and other non-tobacco granular material(s) may be used within the scope of the invention.

[0034] FIG. **1** shows an exemplary system **10** in accordance herewith. In embodiments, system **10** includes a feeder **20**, sifter **30**, hopper **40**, measuring system **50**, and pouch making machine **60**. The system **10** may also include a conveyor **70** that moves empty containers (e.g., cans) **80** into position to receive pouches from pouch making machine **60** and that moves containers filled with pouches away from pouch making machine **60**. The details of the pouch making machine **60** are not shown. Pouch making machine **60** may include a conventional machine such as, for example, the pouching apparatus manufactured and sold by, for example, Ropak Manufacturing Company, Inc. of Decatur, Ala. and Merz Verpackungsmaschinen GmbH, Lich, Germany.

[0035] In an exemplary operation of the system **10**, the feeder **20** selectively provides bulk granular material to the sifter **30**, which de-clumps the bulk granular material with a sifting operation and provides the sifted granular material to the hopper **40**. The hopper **40** collects and holds the sifted granular material adjacent the measuring system **50**. The measuring system **50** draws a portion of the granular material from the hopper **40** into a measuring volume, and subsequently moves the measured portion of granular material from the measuring volume to the pouch making machine **60** where the measured portion of granular material is encapsulated in a pouch. The pouch containing the measured portion of granular material may be placed in a container **80**. The various aspects of system **10** are described in greater detail herein.

[0036] Still referring to FIG. **1**, the feeder **20** includes an inlet **100** adapted to receive bulk material and an outlet **105** adapted to pass the bulk material to the sifter **30**. The outlet **105** may include a number of pans **110**_a-c_ equal to a number of chambers included in the sifter **30**. Bulk material may be provided to the inlet **100** in any suitable manner, including manually (e.g., hand scooped, poured from a bag, etc.) and/or automatically (e.g., delivered on a conveyor, etc.). A number of chutes **115**_a-c_ equal to the number of pans **110**_a-c_ may be used to convey the bulk material from the inlet to the pans **110**_a-c_. The invention is not limited to the three pans and chutes shown, and any number of may be used, including one, two, more than three, etc.

[0037] In aspects described herein, the bulk material collects in the pans **110**_a-c_ and is selectively moved from the pans **110**_a-c_ to the sifter **30** by controllably agitating (e.g., shaking) the feeder **20**. For example, the pans **110**_a-c_ may be slightly inclined relative to horizontal such that agitating the feeder causes the bulk material to move toward an open end of the pans **110**_a-c_ and fall from the pans **110**_a-c_ into the sifter **30** by gravity. The agitating is controlled, e.g., selectively turned on and off, to provide a desired amount of bulk material to the sifter **30**. The control may be provided by a sensor and/or by a computer-based control program, or the like. The agitating may be provided in any suitable manner, such as with an electric or pneumatic actuator.

[0038] FIGS. **2-4** show views of an exemplary implementation of sifter **30** in accordance herewith. With specific reference to FIG. **2**, sifter **30** may include a number of chambers **130**_a-c_ corresponding to the number of pans **110**_a-c_ of feeder **20**. During operation, chambers **130**_a-c_ receive bulk material from feeder **20**. Partitions **135**_a-b_ may be used to divide the chambers **130**_a-c_. The sifter **30** is described with three chambers **130**_a-c_ for illustration purposes but is not limited to this or any other number of chambers. Moreover, the invention is not limited to sifter **30** including a number of chambers equal to the number of pans, and implementations may be used in which sifter **30** has a number of chambers that is different than the number of pans.

[0039] According to aspects described herein, and as shown in FIGS. **3** and **4**, each chamber **130**_a-c_ includes a screen **140** in a bottom surface of the chamber and a wiper (e.g., agitator) **145** connected to a shaft **150**. In embodiments, the shaft **150** extends through all chambers **130**_a-c_ and is connected to the respective wiper **145** in each respective chamber, such that the shaft **150** moves all wipers **145** at the same time. The shaft **150** may be driven (e.g., rotated in a reciprocating manner) by any suitable actuator, such as an electric motor **155** as shown in FIG. **1**.

[0040] As is understood from FIGS. **2-4**, sifter **30** operates to sift bulk material that is held in chambers **130***a-c* through screens **140**, with wipers **145** assisting in breaking up the bulk material and/or pushing the bulk material through the screens **140**. Tobacco pouch making equipment is sensitive to the composition/characteristics of the tobacco (e.g., bulk material) that is used in pouch production. The ability to control pouch weight consistently at the pouch making equipment is affected by the consistency of the tobacco used. The more consistent the tobacco characteristics are, the better the pouch maker will operate. When sticky/clumpy tobacco is used in the production, pouch weight can be difficult to control. Moreover, when the tobacco is fed from bulk storage containers into the pouch making machinery, it can be difficult to provide consistent material characteristics. Many times, tobacco coming from bulk storage containers is stuck together in clumps.

[0041] As described herein, sifter **30** is arranged downstream of bulk material feeder **20** and upstream of pouch making machine **60**, and is used to de-clump the granular material in order to provide consistent granular material. In embodiments, sifter **30** forces the granular material to flow through the one or more screens **140**, which have a predefined opening dimension. In some aspects, when the granular material does not easily flow through screen **140** by gravity alone, wiper **145** pushes the granular material through the screen **140**. The wiper **145** also breaks up clumps of the bulk material, which helps the material pass through screen **140**.

[0042] FIGS. **5-7** show views of an exemplary implementation of hopper **40** in accordance herewith. With specific reference to FIG. **5**, hopper **40** is arranged below sifter **30** and receives sifted granular material that has passed through screens **140**. A diverter **160**, shown in FIGS. **1** and **5**, may be used to guide the granular material as it travels by gravity from sifter **30** to hopper **40**.

[0043] According to aspects described herein, and as shown in FIGS. **6** and **7**, hopper **40** includes a front wall **170**, back wall **175**, bottom plate **180**, and end blocks **185** that define a hopper cavity **190** that receives and holds sifted granular material adjacent the measuring system. In embodiments, the front wall **170**, back wall **175**, and bottom plate **180** are stationary, and the end blocks **185** are moveable relative to the stationary elements. In one example, end blocks **185** are fixedly connected to a slide **200** that moves transversely, e.g., along arrow **205**, and in a reciprocating fashion relative to stationary front wall **170**, back wall **175**, bottom plate **180**. Slide **200** may be moved using any suitable actuator, such as an electric actuator, pneumatic actuator, or the like. The movement of blocks **185** causes movement of the granular material within the hopper cavity **190**, which prevents accumulation of the granular material at the ends of the hopper cavity **190** adjacent the blocks **185**. The movement of the granular material within hopper cavity **190** that is caused by moving the blocks **185** also assists in moving the granular material over the measuring holes **210** in the bottom plate **180**, as described in greater detail below.

[0044] FIG. **8** shows aspects of an exemplary measuring system **50** as described herein. In embodiments, bottom plate **180** of hopper **40** includes holes **210** that are structured and arranged to be filled with a volume of granular material from hopper cavity **190**. After one of the holes **210** is filled with granular material, a tube **215** is moved over and in precise alignment with the filled hole **210**. The tube **215** may be moved by a tube carrier **220** that is connected to slide **200** as described herein. A conduit **225** may be connected to one end of tube **215** between tube **215** and pouch making machine **60**. In embodiments, when tube **215** is aligned over hole **210**, the measured portion of granular material in hole **210** is moved out of hole **210**, through tube **215**, and through conduit **225** to pouch making machine **60**. In aspects, the pouch making machine **60** encapsulates (encloses) the measured portion of granular material in a pouch “P” (e.g., a paper pouch) and drops pouch “P” into a container **80** (e.g., a cylindrical can). The filling of hole **210** with granular material may be accomplished using gravity and/or vacuum, and moving the granular material out of the hole **210** may be accomplished using pressurized gas, as described in greater detail herein. As depicted in FIG. **8**, there may be plural holes **210**, tubes **215**, and conduits **225** associated with a single hopper **40** and/or a single pouch making machine **60**.

[0045] FIG. **9** shows an exemplary arrangement of tubes **215**, tube carrier **220**, and conduits **225** as described herein. In embodiments, a tube carrier **220** holds two tubes **215** and includes hardware **230** (e.g., clamps, etc.) for connecting to slide **200** (as shown in FIG. **8**), such that tube carrier **220** moves with slide **200**. The tube carrier **200** is not limited to the configuration shown in FIG. **9**, and other configurations may be used within the scope of the invention.

[0046] FIGS. **10-12** show an exemplary operation of measuring a portion of granular material using measuring system **50** as described herein. As shown in FIG. **10**, in embodiments a pin **235** is arranged within hole **210** in bottom plate **180**. An uppermost portion of pin **235** is situated within hole **210** (e.g., recessed from a surface of bottom plate **180**), such that a cavity **240** is defined in hole **210** by bottom plate **180** and pin **235**. Cavity **240** may also be referred to herein as a measuring cavity. The volume of cavity **240** may be selectively adjusted (e.g., increased or decreased) by moving pin **235** up or down within hole **210**, as described in greater detail herein.

[0047] Still referring to FIG. **10**, tube **215** is atop bottom plate **180** and is moveable (e.g., slidable) back and forth along the top of plate in the directions indicated by arrow **205**. The tube **215** has a hollow interior that, in embodiments, is substantially a same diameter as hole **210**. Although not shown in FIG. **10**, an upper end of tube **215** is connected to conduit **225**, such that the hollow interiors of tube **215** and conduit **225** combine to form a flow path extending from measuring system **50** to pouch making machine **60**. The movement of tube **215** in the direction of arrow **205** may be effectuated via slide **200** as described with respect to FIG. **8**, e.g., by connecting tube **215** to tube carrier **220** that is connected to slide **200**. In the position shown in FIG. **10**, tube **215** is beside (e.g., not covering) hole **210**, which permits granular material **245** in hopper cavity **190** to move into cavity **240** by gravity and/or vacuum.

[0048] In embodiments, pin **235** has a hollow axial bore **250**. The hollow axial bore **250** may include a first portion **251** that is cylindrical and a second portion **252** that is frustoconical, as shown in FIG. **10**. A screen **247** may be provided at a first end of bore **250** (e.g., adjacent cavity **240**) to prevent granular material **245** from entering bore **250**. In aspects, a three-way valve **255** is connected to a second end of bore **250**, a vacuum source **260**, and a pressure source **265**. A controller **270**, such as a programmable computer device or the like, may be operatively connected to valve **255** to cause valve **255** to place one of vacuum source **260** and pressure source **265** in fluid communication with bore **250**. In this manner, valve **255** and controller **270** may be used to selectively apply vacuum or pressurized gas (e.g., compressed air) to bore **250**.

[0049] With continued reference to FIG. **10**, cavity **240** is filled with granular material **245** when tube **215** is moved to a position to the side of hole **210** (e.g., not covering hole **210**). In this position, some of the granular material **245** in hopper cavity **190** falls into cavity **240** by gravity. In embodiments, controller **270** causes valve **255** to connect vacuum source **260** to bore, which applies a vacuum to bore **250** (e.g., negative pressure indicated by downward arrow shown in bore **250**), which aids in moving granular material **245** from hopper cavity **190** into cavity **240**.

[0050] As shown in FIG. **11**, after cavity **240** is filled with granular material **245**, tube **215** is moved laterally within hopper cavity **190** (e.g., slid along plate **180**) to a position over and aligned with cavity **240**. In particular, the hollow interior of tube **215** is vertically aligned with hole **210** and cavity **240**. Movement of tube **215** in the direction of arrow **275** pushes excess granular material **245** away from the space immediately over cavity **240**, which provides a trimming action similar to dragging a knife across the top of a measuring cup that is overfilled with material. In this manner, implementations of the invention precisely measure a portion of granular material **245** in cavity **240**. In embodiments, valve **255** keeps vacuum source **260** connected to bore **250** while tube **215** moves from the position shown in FIG. **10** to the position shown in FIG. **11**.

[0051] As shown in FIG. **12**, while tube **215** is in the aligned position over cavity **240**, controller **270** causes valve **255** to disconnect vacuum source **260** from bore **250** and then connect pressure source **265** to bore **250**. This applies pressurized gas (e.g., compressed air) to bore **250** (e.g., as indicated by upward arrow shown in bore **250**), which pushes the measured portion of granular material **245** out of cavity **240**, through tube **215** and conduit **225** (as shown in FIG. **8**), and into pouch making machine **60** (as shown in FIG. **8**). In embodiments, controller **270** causes valve **255** to keep pressure source **265** connected to bore **250** for a predetermined amount of time that is sufficient to move the measured portion of granular material **245** from cavity **240** to the pouch making machine. After the predetermined amount of time, controller **270** causes valve **255** to disconnect pressure source **265** from bore **250** and then connect vacuum source **260** to bore **250**, and tube **215** moves back to the position shown in FIG. **10** to repeat the cycle.

[0052] In additional embodiments, a fluid (e.g., water) may be injected into bore **250** while pressure source **265** is connected to bore **250** as described in FIG. **12**. The fluid may be injected into plumbing downstream of pressure source **265**, or alternatively may be injected at a separate port of pin **235**. For example, an atomized water source **273** may be provided to inject atomized water into bore **250**.

[0053] The timing of the fluid injection may be optimized based on parameters including, but not limited to: duration of applying pressurized gas to bore **250** (e.g., the predetermined amount of time described with respect to FIG. **12**); pressure of pressurized gas; and volume of cavity **240**. In a non-limiting example, the pressure source **265** provides compressed air at a pressure of about 20 to 30 psi, the predetermined amount of time of applying pressurized gas to bore **250** is in a range of about 50 to about 160 milliseconds, and the amount of time of fluid injection is about 30 to about 40 milliseconds, with the fluid injection occurring nearer the beginning of the duration of applying pressurized gas than the end. The invention is not limited to the values in this example, however, and other suitable pressures and/or durations may be used within the scope of the invention.

[0054] With continued reference to FIGS. **10-12**, the volume of cavity **240** may be adjusted by moving pin **235** up or down within hole **210**. For example, moving pin **235** upward in hole **210** makes cavity **240** smaller, and moving pin downward in hole **210** makes cavity **240** larger. The pin **235** may be moved up or down in hole **210** using any suitable actuator, such as a manual and/or automated screw actuator or the like.

[0055] In accordance with aspects described herein, the volume of cavity **240** is adjusted based on a determined weight of a number of pouches that are produced by the pouch making machine **60**. For example, a number of pouches may be made by pouch making machine **60**, with each pouch including a portion of granular material that is measured using cavity **240**. The number of pouches may be weighed, the weight of the number of pouches may be compared to an upper threshold and a lower threshold, and the volume of cavity **240** may be adjusted based on comparing the determined weight to the upper and lower thresholds. For example, when the determined weight is less than the lower threshold, then pin **235** is moved downward in hole **245**, thereby making cavity **240** larger and increasing the mass of granular material per pouch. When the determined weight is more than the upper threshold, then pin **235** is moved upward in hole **245**, thereby making cavity **240** smaller and decreasing the mass of granular material per pouch. When the determined weight is between the lower threshold and upper threshold, the pin **235** is kept at its current position in hole **210**, as this indicates the pouches are meeting a target weight. In this manner, implementations of the invention provide a feedback loop for adjusting the volume of cavity **240**, which adjusts the mass of granular material in each pouch that is produced using cavity **240**.

[0056] As described herein, system **10** may include plural lanes simultaneously making pouches filled with granular material. For example, as shown in FIGS. **1** and **8**, there may be ten lanes L**1**-L**10**, although the invention is not limited to this number and any desired number of lanes may be used. Each lane may include: at least one hole **210** with an associated cavity **240** and pin **235**; a tube **215**; and a conduit **225**. When plural lanes are used, the volume of each respective cavity **240** may be individually adjusted based on determined weight of the pouches produced in that particular lane as already described herein. For example, with reference to FIG. **1**, a conveyor system **70** may be structured and arranged to simultaneously move plural empty containers **80** into alignment with the plural lanes at the output of pouch making machine **60**, such that the respective containers **80** are simultaneously filled with pouches from respective ones of the lanes. The position of each container **80** may be tracked throughout the entire system, and each container **80** may be associated with the particular one of the lanes from which it was filled. Each container **80** may be weighed after being filled, and the volume of cavity **240** in the lane associated with the weighed container **80** may be adjusted based on the weight of the container **80** independent of the cavities **240** of the other lanes.

[0057] FIGS. **13** and **14** show an exemplary operation of measuring system **50′** in which each lane includes one tube **215**, two holes **210***a* and **210***b*, two pins **235***a* and **235***b*, and two cavities **240***a* and **240***b*. As shown in FIGS. **13** and **14**, tube **215** moves back and forth to positions aligned over the respective holes **210***a* and **210***b*. When tube **215** is aligned over hole **210***a*, as shown in FIG. **13**, the measured portion of granular material in cavity **240***a* is expelled from cavity **240***a* through tube **215** by applying pressurized gas (e.g., compressed air) to bore **250***a* of pin **235***a*, e.g., in a manner similar to that described with respect to FIG. **12**. Also when tube **215** is aligned over hole **210***a*, as shown in FIG. **13**, hole **210***b* is uncovered and cavity **240***b* fills with granular material from hopper cavity **190**, e.g., in a manner similar to that described with respect to FIG. **10**.

[0058] FIG. **14** depicts tube **215** moved to a position over and aligned with hole **210***b*, e.g., after the operation shown in FIG. **13**. As shown in FIG. **14**, when tube is over hole **210***b*, the measured portion of granular material in cavity **240***b* is expelled from cavity **240***b* through tube **215** by applying pressurized gas (e.g., compressed air) to bore **250***b* of pin **235***b*, and cavity **240***a* fills with granular material from hopper cavity **190**. After the operation shown in FIG. **14**, tube **215** moves back to the position shown in FIG. **13** and the cycle repeats.

[0059] In embodiments, vacuum source **260** may be used to assist filling cavities **240***a* and **240***b* in a manner similar to that described with respect to FIG. **10**. For example, in the position shown in FIG. **13**, pressure source **265** is applied to bore **250***a* for a predetermined amount of time, while vacuum source **260** is applied to bore **250***b*. The vacuum remains on bore **235***b* while tube moves from the position shown in FIG. **13** to the position shown in FIG. **14**. When tube **215** is aligned over hole **210***b*, vacuum source **260** is disconnected from bore **250***b* and pressure source **265** is connected to bore **250***b* for a predetermined amount of time. Concurrently, vacuum source **260** is connected to bore **250***a* to assist in filling cavity **240***a* with granular material. Vacuum source **260** remains connected to bore **250***a* until tube **215** moves back to the position shown in FIG. **13**. The amount of vacuum may be within a range of 0 to 10 inches of mercury, although any suitable amount of vacuum may be used within the scope of the invention. Each pin **235***a* and **235***b* may be connected to a respective valve **255***a* and **255***b*, which may be controlled by a controller (e.g., controller **270** as described herein).

[0060] FIG. **15** shows portions of an exemplary measuring system **50** including twenty pins **235***a-t*, which may be used in a ten lane system such as that shown in FIGS. **1**, **6**, and **8**. In embodiments, the respective valve associated with each respective pin is connected to a vacuum manifold **300** and a pressure manifold **305**. For example, pin **235***a* is connected to valve **255***a* (e.g., in a manner similar to that described with respect to FIG. **10**), with valve **255***a* being connected to vacuum manifold **300** and a pressure manifold **305**. The vacuum manifold **300** is connected to vacuum source **260**, and pressure manifold **305** is connected to pressure source **265**. Structure **310** may house all the valves associated with all the respective pins **235***a-t*. Structure **310** may additionally or alternatively house manual and/or automated mechanisms for adjusting the height of pins **235***a-t* to adjust cavity volumes as described herein, either individually or as a group.

[0061] The system as described herein may thus include ten lanes, with each lane including one tube **215**, one conduit **225**, two holes **210***a* and **210***b*, two cavities **240***a* and **240***b*, and two pins **235***a* and **235***b*. All ten tubes and conduits may be moved as a group in a reciprocating fashion, e.g., as shown in FIG. **8**, between a first position over a first ten holes and a second position over a second ten holes. When the ten tubes are in the first position over the first ten holes, a first ten measured portions of granular material are moved from a first ten cavities to the pouch making machine, while a second ten cavities are simultaneously filled with granular material from the hopper cavity. When the ten tubes are in the second position over the second ten holes, a second ten measured portions of granular material are moved from a second ten cavities to the pouch making machine, while the first ten cavities are simultaneously filled with granular material from the hopper cavity.

[0062] In embodiments, a level sensor may be used to maintain a proper level of granular material in hopper cavity **190**. For example, a laser sensor, electronic eye, or the like, may be used to detect when the amount of granular material in hopper cavity **190** falls below a predefined threshold. Any desired number and/or type(s) of level sensors may be used. A controller may be connected to the level sensor. The controller connected to the level sensor may be the same as controller **270**, or may be a different controller. When the level sensor detects the amount of granular material in hopper cavity **190** falls below a predefined threshold, the controller may activate the sifter **30** for a predefined amount of sifting time (e.g., 2 seconds) to move granular material from the sifter **30** to the hopper **40**. Activating the sifter **30** may include, for example, the controller sending a signal to electric motor **155** to cause rotation of shaft **150** that moves wipers **145** for the predefined amount of sifting time.

[0063] After the predefined amount of sifting time, in the event the level sensor indicates the level of granular material in hopper **40** is above the predefined threshold, then the controller turns off sifter **30**. On the other hand, in the event the level sensor indicates the level of granular material in hopper **40** is still below the predefined threshold after the predefined amount of sifting time, then the controller causes the system to agitate feeder **20** for a predefined amount of feeder time to move granular material from feeder **20** to sifter **30**. Agitating feeder **20** may include, for example, the controller sending a signal to an actuator (e.g., an electric motor) that causes vibration of pans **110***a-c* of feeder **20** for the predefined amount of feeder time, which causes granular material to move from feeder **20** into sifter **30**. In aspects, the controller also activates sifter **30** while agitating feeder **20**.

[0064] After the predefined amount of feeder time, in the event the level sensor indicates the level of granular material in hopper **40** is above the predefined threshold, then the controller turns off feeder **20** and sifter **30**. On the other hand, in the event the level sensor indicates the level of granular material in hopper **40** is still below the predefined threshold after the predefined amount of sifting time, then the controller causes the system to agitate feeder **20** and activate sifter **30** again for the predefined amount of feeder time. In this manner, the system may keep feeder **20** and sifter **30** turned on until the level of granular material in hopper **40** reaches the desired level.

[0065] As described herein, various aspects of system **10** may be controlled using a controller, such as a programmable computer device or the like. For example, controller **270** may be operatively connected to elements of system **10** and adapted to control at least one of the following functions: detecting level of granular material in hopper **40**; agitating feeder **20**; moving wipers **145** in sifter **30**; moving slide **200**; controlling valve **255**; moving conveyor **70**; tracking positions of containers **80** on conveyor **70** and/or throughout the system; weighing pouches in containers and comparing the weight to thresholds; and adjusting height of pins **235** in holes **210** based on the comparing. For example, controller **270** may be configured to coordinate the timing of the movement of slide **200** with the control of valve **255**, such that vacuum or pressure is appropriately applied to bore **250** based on the position of tube **215** over cavity **240** (e.g., as described with respect to FIGS. **10-14**). The invention is not limited to a single controller performing these functions, and any desired number and/or type of controllers may be used. The controller(s) may be operatively connected to sensors and/or actuators, e.g., as described herein, in order to perform one or more of these functions.

[0066] FIG. **16** shows a flow diagram of a method in accordance herewith. Methods in accordance herewith may be performed using the systems described with respect to FIGS. **1-15** and in a manner similar to that described with respect to those figures. The steps of FIG. **16** are described in part by referring to reference numbers associated with elements shown in the previous drawings. At step **410** the system provides bulk granular material (e.g., tobacco), e.g., to sifter **30**. This may comprise, for example, providing bulk granular material to feeder **20** and/or agitating feeder **20** to cause the bulk granular material to fall out of feeder **20** into sifter **30**.

[0067] At step **420**, the system sifts the bulk granular material. In embodiments, this includes sifting the bulk granular material through screens **140** in sifter **145**. This may optionally include moving wipers **145** to assist in sifting the bulk granular material through screens **140**.

[0068] At step **430**, the system measures a portion of the sifted granular material. In embodiments, the measuring includes moving a portion of the granular material from the hopper cavity **190** to a measuring cavity **240**, e.g., as described with respect to FIGS. **10-14**. Step **430** may include uncovering a cavity **240** and moving granular material **245** into the cavity **240** by gravity and/or vacuum (e.g., as in FIG. **10**), and trimming excess granular material **245** away from over the cavity (e.g., as in FIG. **11**).

[0069] At step **440**, the system moves the measured portion of granular material to a pouch making machine. This may include ejecting the measured portion of granular material from the measuring cavity **240** using compressed air, which causes the measured portion of granular material to travel through tube **215** and conduit **225** to pouch making machine **60**.

[0070] At step **450**, the system makes a pouch encapsulating the measured portion of granular material. This may include, for example, pouch making machine **60** forming a pouch using conventional pouch making processes. At step **460**, the system places the pouch in a container, e.g., container **80**.

[0071] After step **440**, one branch of the process loops back to step **430**. In this manner, the system continues to measure new portions of the granular material concurrently while the pouch making machine is processing previous measured portions of granular material.

[0072] At optional step **470**, the system detects the weight of one or more pouches, compares the weight to upper and lower thresholds, and adjusts the measuring system based on the comparing, if necessary. Step **470** may include one of: moving pin **235** downward in hole **245**, thereby making cavity **240** larger and increasing the mass of granular material per pouch, when the determined weight is less than the lower threshold; moving pin **235** upward in hole **245**, thereby making cavity **240** smaller and decreasing the mass of granular material per pouch, when the determined weight is more than the upper threshold; and not moving pin **235** when the determined weight is between the lower threshold and upper threshold. After step **470**, the process returns to step **430** to continue measuring portions of the granular material.

[0073] Illustrative, non-exclusive examples of systems and methods according to the present disclosure have been presented. It is within the scope of the present disclosure that an individual step of a method recited herein, including in the following enumerated paragraphs, may additionally or alternatively be referred to as a “step for” performing the recited action.

INDUSTRIAL APPLICABILITY

[0074] The systems and methods disclosed herein are applicable to the packaging industry, in particular, to that portion directed to pouching, and to the tobacco industry, in particular that portion directed to smokeless tobacco products.

[0075] The particulars shown herein are by way of example and for purposes of illustrative discussion only and are presented in the cause of providing what is believed to be the most useful and readily understood description of the principles and conceptual aspects. In this regard, no attempt is made to show structural details in more detail than is necessary for fundamental understanding, the description taken with the drawings making apparent to those skilled in the art how the several forms disclosed herein may be embodied in practice.

[0076] It is noted that the foregoing examples have been provided merely for the purpose of explanation and are in no way to be construed as limiting. While aspects have been described with reference to an exemplary embodiment, it is understood that the words which have been used herein are words of description and illustration, rather than words of limitation. Changes may be made, within the purview of the appended claims, as presently stated and as amended, without departing from the scope and spirit of the present disclosure in its aspects. Although aspects have been described herein with reference to particular means, materials, and/or embodiments, the present disclosure is not intended to be limited to the particulars disclosed herein; rather, it extends to all functionally equivalent structures, methods and uses, such as are within the scope of the appended claims.

Claims

1. A metering system for loose material, the metering system comprising: a base at least partially defining a storage region, the storage region configured to hold a loose material, the base at least partially defining a cavity; a movable component defining a passage; and an actuator configured to move the movable component between a first position and a second position, when the movable component is in the first position, the cavity is in fluid communication with the storage region such that the cavity is configured to receive a portion of loose material from the storage region, and when the movable component is in the second position, the cavity is in fluid communication with the passage such that the passage is configured to receive the portion of the loose material from the cavity.
2. The metering system of claim 1, further comprising: a pressure source configured to be fluidly connected to the cavity, the pressure source configured to facilitate movement of the portion of the loose material from the cavity through the passage.
3. The metering system of claim 1, further comprising: a plurality of walls cooperating with the base to define the storage region.
4. The metering system of claim 3, wherein the plurality of walls includes a first wall, a second wall opposite the first wall, and a pair of end walls, each of the pair of end walls between the first wall and the second wall.
5. The metering system of claim 4, wherein positions of the first wall and the second wall are fixed with respect to the base.
6. The metering system of claim 4, wherein the pair of end walls is configured to move to cause motion of the loose material within the storage region.
7. The metering system of claim 6, wherein the actuator is connected to the pair of end walls.
8. The metering system of claim 7, further comprising: a slide configured to slide in the storage region, the slide connected to the movable component and the pair of end walls.
9. The metering system of claim 8, further comprising: a tube carrier connecting the slide to the movable component.
10. The metering system of claim 1, further comprising: a vacuum source configured to be fluidly connected to the cavity and facilitate movement of the portion of the loose material from the storage region to the cavity when the movable component is in the first position.
11. The metering system of claim 10, further comprising: a pressure source configured to be fluidly connected to the cavity; and a three-way valve fluidly connected to the cavity, the pressure source, and the vacuum source.
12. The metering system of claim 11, further comprising: a controller configured to selectively communicate pressurized gas from the pressure source or vacuum to the cavity.
13. The metering system of claim 1, wherein the actuator includes an electric motor or a pneumatic actuator.
14. The metering system of claim 13, wherein the base defines a first cavity and a second cavity, the first cavity including the cavity.
15. The metering system of claim 14, wherein in the first position, the passage of the movable component is in fluid communication with the second cavity.
16. The metering system of claim 1, wherein the base defines a through hole, the metering system

further comprises a pin at least partially in the through hole, and the pin cooperates with a wall of the through hole to define the cavity.

17. The metering system of claim 16, wherein the pin is configured to be moved to modify a volume of the cavity.

18. The metering system of claim 16, further comprising: a screen between the cavity and the pin.

19. The metering system of claim 1, wherein the movable component is configured to move excess of the loose material within the storage region during movement from the first position to the second position such that the portion of the loose material remains in the cavity.

20. The metering system of claim 1, further comprising: a source of atomized water configured to be fluidly connected to the cavity.
