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PORTABLE ROBOTIC WELDER FOR NUCLEAR WASTE HANDLING

Abstract

An automated welding system for sealing high level radioactive waste containers in the field at the nuclear plant site. The system includes a programmable portable robotic welder comprising a multi-jointed articulating robotic arm. A welding head operable to form a weld is mounted to the arm. Operation of the robotic welder and ancillary components is controlled by a programmable controller which implements a welding plan. In one embodiment, a circumferentially-extending lid-to-shell hermetic seal weld may be formed by the robotic welder. The weld is completed in multiple welding passes through the weld joint between the lid and shell guided by an automated joint tracking sensor linked to the controller. The highly portable robotic welder is detachably mountable on the lid to perform the welding. An automated pivotable cable-conduit management apparatus keeps electrically conductive wiring and flow tubing out of the path of the rotating robotic arm during welding.

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Background/Summary

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS [0001] This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 16/995,247 filed Aug. 17, 2020, which claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/887,984 filed Aug. 16, 2019. The foregoing applications are all incorporated herein by reference in their entireties.

BACKGROUND

[0002] The present invention relates generally to canisters used to transport and store high level radioactive waste such as spent nuclear fuel (SNF) created by nuclear generating plants or other facilities, and more particular to a robotic welder for sealing such canisters.

[0003] In the operation of nuclear reactors at nuclear plant site, the nuclear energy source is in the form of hollow Zircaloy tubes filled with enriched uranium (aka fuel rods), collectively arranged in assemblages referred to as fuel assemblies. Each fuel assembly contains a multitude of the packaged fuel rods. When the energy in the fuel assembly has been depleted to a certain predetermined level, the fuel assembly is removed from the nuclear reactor. The standard structure used to package used or spent nuclear fuel assemblies discharged from light water reactors for off-site shipment or on-site dry storage is known as the fuel basket. The fuel basket is essentially an assemblage of prismatic storage cells, each of which is sized to store one fuel assembly that comprises a plurality of individual spent nuclear fuel rods. The fuel basket is arranged inside a radiation unshielded metallic storage canister (typically stainless steel). The multi-purpose canister (MPC) available from Holtec International of Camden, New Jersey is one example of such a fuel storage canister. The canister may be placed in turn inside a radiation shielded outer storage or transport overpack or cask for safe transport and storage of the multiple spent fuel assemblies contained within the inner canister's fuel basket.

[0004] The spent nuclear fuel ("SNF") in the fuel assemblies within the transport/storage cask is still highly radioactive and produces considerable heat which must be dissipated, in addition to concomitantly emitting dangerous ionizing neutron and gamma photons (i.e. neutron and gamma radiation) requiring protective shielding. Thus, caution must be exercised when the fuel assemblies are handled, transported, packaged and stored. Neutron radiation may be effectively attenuated with outer casks having metallic and polymeric shielding materials typically containing boron. These boron-containing materials however are not effective at attenuating and shielding gamma radiation emitted from the fuel baskets. Effective gamma radiation shielding requires very dense materials, such as lead, steel, concrete, copper, and combinations thereof to also be incorporated into the cask construction. The outer casks which house the spent nuclear fuel canister are thus very heavy and large structures with thick walls, typically weighing about 150 tons and about 15 feet or more high/long, and about 6 feet in internal diameter for housing the unshielded canister.

[0005] Transfer of the SNF from wet storage in the water impounded spent fuel pool of the nuclear

facility to dry storage involves several operations to change the environment around the fuel from complete immersion in water to an inert gas such as helium. For example, the current practice in the United States is to package the SNF in the stainless-steel canister below water within the spent fuel pool which provides radiation shielding. The unshielded canister is placed inside the outer transfer cask which has been lowered into the fuel pool. The transfer cask along with the canister loaded with fuel assemblies and full of water is lifted out of the pool and set on the area often referred to as the “Decontamination and Assembly Station” (DAS) where the cask is pressure washed to remove surface contaminants. Hermetic seal welding of the closure lid to the top of the canister shell is then carried out. This process is typically completely by manually welding the lid to the canister, which exposes the workers to a dosage of radiation.

[0006] Attaching the lid to the canister via a lid-weld is a classic case of manual welding in a high radiation field. The lid-to-shell weld, by necessity, is made on the storage vessel with high level nuclear waste (nuclear fuel) inside. By necessity, this creates the radiological confinement in an all-welded container. There is a constant stream of various gamma, neutron and other radiation energies at the lid weld. With current fabrication practices, there is much human operator interaction with the component at this location of lid closure. During welding, this interaction is for extended periods of time. Presently, the closure lid to the shell weld is a circumferential deep groove-type weld joint weld that is completed using a multi-pass welding process by a qualified welder. The USNRC (United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission) typically requires the weld deposits to be progressively examined by the liquid penetrant process, which ensures the deposited weld is sound and does not have any structurally deleterious defects. Quality of the weld is therefore of paramount importance to the long-term function of the vessel and public safety. Completion of the lid-to-shell weld by manual means, however, is unfortunately a high dose accretive operation.

[0007] Improvements in making the nuclear waste canister lid-to-shell closure weld in the field at the nuclear plant site is desired which can decrease radiation exposure of the human weld operators without sacrificing weld quality.

BRIEF SUMMARY

[0008] The present application discloses an automated welding system and process which utilizes a portable robotic welder (PRW) under control of a microcontroller to make the foregoing nuclear waste canister lid-to-shell closure weld in the field at the nuclear plant site. The welding process may be monitored by a remote human operator who can operably interact with the welding control system formed by the microcontroller and various type sensors operably coupled thereto which can obtain and provide real-time actual data for use in controlling the PRW. Using the PRW, higher weld deposition rates than manual welding can be achieved. Advantageously, the PRW eliminates directly exposing human welders to the radiation emitted by the nuclear waste canister for an extended period of time which occurs in conventional manual welding operations to hermitically seal the lid to the canister.

[0009] It is considered especially desirable and valuable in such welding operations that must occur in high radiation environments to minimize radiation exposure to humans. In the nuclear industry, ALARA is an acronym used in radiation safety for “As Low as Reasonably Achievable.” The ALARA radiation safety principle is based on the minimization of radiation doses and limiting the release of radioactive materials into the environment by employing all “reasonable methods.” ALARA is not only a sound radiation safety principle, but it is a regulatory requirement for all “radiation protection programs.” The ALARA concept is an integral part of all activities that involve the use of radiation or radioactive materials and can help prevent unnecessary human exposure as well as overexposure to working environment radiation. The three major principles to assist with maintaining doses “As Low as Reasonably Achievable” are time, distance and shielding. More than merely best practice, ALARA is predicated on legal dose limits for regulatory compliance and is a requirement for all radiation safety programs. The basis for ALARA is a

radiation safety philosophy based on the conservative assumption that radiation dose and its biological effects on living tissues are modeled by a relationship known as the linear hypothesis. Simply put, every radiation dose of any magnitude can produce some level of potential detrimental health effects.

[0010] The present portable robotic welder (PRW) and associated automated welding system and process disclosed herein for making the canister lid-to-shell seal weld significantly contributes to meeting ALARA objectives.

[0011] Although the PRW and associated automated welding system and process is described herein for convenience without limitation with respect to forming the circumferential lid-to-shell seal weld for a nuclear waste canister (which is a term of art), its application is not limited to canisters alone. The PRW and associated system and process may be used for forming the circumferential lid-to-shell seal weld in numerous other types of cylindrical containers holding radioactive nuclear waste which may be used in the nuclear industry. Some examples without limitation include radiation shielded overpacks or casks such as a Holtec International (Camden, NJ) Vertically Ventilated Overpack (VVO) for above-ground storage, underground Vertical Ventilated Module (VVM), and HI-TRAC transfer casks; each of which holds the canister (which may be a Holtec MPC) which in turn contains the high level nuclear waste material. Such casks may be configured to hold more than a single canister. Accordingly, the term “container” may optionally be used and should be broadly interpreted and understood to include any of the foregoing types of nuclear waste storage vessels, and others not specifically enumerated herein.

[0012] In addition, the PRW and associated automated welding system and process may further be used to make circumferential welds other than the lid-to-shell seal welds which may be encountered with any of the foregoing nuclear waste storage containers. This may include the welds used to attach annular cover plates which may be welded to the lid to cover the lid-to-shell seal welds for added protection. In yet other embodiments, the PRW and associated automated welding system and process may be used for making non-circumferential welds which may be encountered on the top of the nuclear waste container. In essence, any type welds formed on top of the container which might be performed and reached by the robotic welder centrally positioned on the lid of the container are amenable to welding according to the present disclosure.

[0013] According to one aspect, a robotic welding system for containment of radioactive nuclear waste comprises: a container defining a cavity configured to hold the nuclear waste; a lid disposed on the container and defining an open weld joint therebetween; and a programmable robotic welder positioned over the lid, the robotic welder programmable and operable to automatically form a weld in the weld joint.

[0014] According to another aspect, a robotic welding system for containment of radioactive nuclear waste comprises: a container defining a cavity configured to hold the nuclear waste; a lid disposed on the container and defining an open circumferential weld joint therebetween; a robotic welder comprising an articulating arm assembly rotatably supported by a base detachably mounted on the lid, articulating arm assembly movable in circumferential and radial directions relative to the lid; the robotic welder further comprising a welding head disposed at a distal end of the articulating arm assembly and operable to form a hermetic seal weld in the circumferential weld joint; and a programmable main controller operably coupled to the articulating arm assembly, the main controller programmable configured to control movement and operation the articulating arm assembly and welding head to form the hermetic seal weld in accordance with a preprogrammed welding plan.

[0015] According to another aspect, a method for hermetically sealing nuclear waste in a container comprises: (a) providing a robotic welder comprising an articulating arm assembly rotatably mounted on a base, and a welding head mounted on a distal end of the articulating arm assembly and operable to form a hermetic seal weld; (b) communicably linking a programmable main controller to the robotic welder, the main controller configured to control operation and movement

of the robotic welder; (c) positioning a lid on top of the container to define a circumferential weld joint between the lid and the container; (d) detachably mounting the base of the robotic welder on the lid; and (e) automatically forming a hermetic seal weld in the weld joint via the robotic welder under control of the main controller. In certain embodiments, step (e) comprises steps of: (e1) positioning the welding head at a first starting point at the circumferential weld joint; (e2) rotating the welding head a first full revolution from the first starting point back thereto while depositing weld material to form a first contiguous weld bead in the weld joint, the welding head completing a first welding pass; (e3) positioning the welding head at a second starting point at the circumferential weld joint; and (e4) rotating the welding head a second full revolution from the second starting point back thereto while depositing weld material to form a second contiguous weld bead in the weld joint, the welding head completing a second welding pass.

[0016] Further areas of applicability of the present invention will become apparent from the detailed description provided hereinafter. It should be understood that the detailed description and specific examples, while indicating the preferred embodiment of the invention, are intended for purposes of illustration only and are not intended to limit the scope of the invention.

Description

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0017] The present invention will become more fully understood from the detailed description and the accompanying drawings, wherein like elements are labeled similarly and in which:

[0018] FIG. 1 is a side cross-sectional view of a nuclear waste container with automated portable robotic welder perched on top, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

[0019] FIG. 2A is a detailed view therefrom of the container lid-to-shell circumferential weld;

[0020] FIG. 2B is a detailed view therefrom showing the composite construction of the lid;

[0021] FIG. 3 is a first perspective view of the container and robotic welder of FIG. 1;

[0022] FIG. 4 is a second perspective view of the container and robotic welder of FIG. 1;

[0023] FIG. 5A is a detailed view taken from FIG. 4;

[0024] FIG. 5B is a detailed view taken from FIG. 3;

[0025] FIG. 6 is a top view of the container and robotic welder of FIG. 1;

[0026] FIG. 7 is a first close-up side view of the container and robotic welder of FIG. 1;

[0027] FIG. 8 is a second close-up side view of the container and robotic welder of FIG. 1;

[0028] FIG. 9 is a third close-up side view of the container and robotic welder of FIG. 1;

[0029] FIG. 10 is a fourth close-up side view of the container and robotic welder of FIG. 1;

[0030] FIG. 11 is a first close-up perspective view thereof;

[0031] FIG. 12 is a second close-up perspective view thereof;

[0032] FIG. 13 is a first top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0033] FIG. 14 is a second top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0034] FIG. 15 is a third top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0035] FIG. 16 is a fourth top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0036] FIGS. 17A-C are sequential views of a welding wire cutter station of the robotic welder showing the process of trimming the welding wire;

[0037] FIG. 18 is a fifth top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0038] FIGS. 19A-C are sequential views of a welding head reaming station showing the process

of reaming the welding head;

[0039] FIG. **20** is a sixth top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0040] FIGS. **21A-B** are sequential views of an anti-spatter liquid misting station of the robotic welder showing the process of spraying the welding head with anti-spatter liquid;

[0041] FIG. **22** is a seventh top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0042] FIG. **23** is an eighth top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0043] FIG. **24** is a ninth top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container;

[0044] FIG. **25** is a tenth top view in a welding process sequence for making a lid-to-shell weld of the container; and

[0045] FIG. **26** is a schematic control diagram showing the control system **10** of the robotic welding system.

[0046] All drawings are schematic and not necessarily to scale. Features shown numbered in certain figures are the same features as they may appear un-numbered in other figures unless noted otherwise herein. A reference to a figure by whole number which comprises multiple figures with the same whole number but different alphabetical suffixes should be construed as a reference to all those figures unless noted otherwise herein.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0047] The features and benefits of the invention are illustrated and described herein by reference to exemplary (i.e. “example”) embodiments. This description of exemplary embodiments is intended to be read in connection with the accompanying drawings, which are to be considered part of the entire written description. Accordingly, the disclosure expressly should not be limited to such exemplary embodiments illustrating some possible non-limiting combination of features that may exist alone or in other combinations of features.

[0048] In the description of embodiments disclosed herein, any reference to direction or orientation is merely intended for convenience of description and is not intended in any way to limit the scope of the present invention. Relative terms such as “lower,” “upper,” “horizontal,” “vertical,” “above,” “below,” “up,” “down,” “top” and “bottom” as well as derivatives thereof (e.g., “horizontally,” “downwardly,” “upwardly,” etc.) should be construed to refer to the orientation as then described or as shown in the drawing under discussion. These relative terms are for convenience of description only and do not require that the apparatus be constructed or operated in a particular orientation. Terms such as “attached,” “affixed,” “connected,” “coupled,” “interconnected,” and similar refer to a relationship wherein structures are secured or attached to one another either directly or indirectly through intervening structures, as well as both movable or rigid attachments or relationships, unless expressly described otherwise.

[0049] As used throughout, any ranges disclosed herein are used as shorthand for describing each and every value that is within the range. Any value within the range can be selected as the terminus of the range. In addition, all references cited herein are hereby incorporated by reference in their entireties. In the event of a conflict in a definition in the present disclosure and that of a cited reference, the present disclosure controls.

[0050] The novel automated robotic welding process and associated portable robotic welder (PRW) disclosed herein can effectively and safely distance personnel from the radiation hazards they would otherwise encounter while manually making the nuclear waste canister lid-to-shell weld. This advantageously brings factory automation technology into a field weld setting thereby replacing manual welding in an area of high radiation system. The welding process is implemented by the processor-based programmable main controller **100** which controls operation of the PRW via a sensor array. The automated welding system defined by the PRW and controller is designed in a

way to process and execute program instructions such as control logic (software) via an efficient and expedient highly automated digital control.

[0051] FIGS. **1** and **2** show a nuclear waste container in the non-limiting form of a canister **20** having a closure lid **30** which may be seal welded thereto by the portable robotic welder (PRW) **50** and the automated robotic welding process disclosed herein. Canister **20** may be a multi-purpose canister (MPC) available from Holtec International of Camden, New Jersey in one embodiment, however; other type canisters may be used with the present robotic welding system.

[0052] Canister **20** may have an elongated tubular body defining a longitudinal centerline axis LA. The canister body includes a top end **24**, bottom end **23**, and a cylindrical shell **21** extending longitudinal therebetween. The canister defines an internal cavity **22** extending for the full height of the canister which is configured to hold high level radioactive nuclear waste W in any form or shape, such as spent nuclear fuel (SNF) rods held in a fuel basket or other type support cell arrays, or other miscellaneous high level radioactive waste materials of any form. Such radioactive waste, represented schematically in FIG. **1**, may be created by a nuclear power generation facility or other facility employing a nuclear reactor. Bottom end **23** of canister **20** is closed by a circular baseplate **25** hermetically seal welded to bottom end of shell **21**. Baseplate **25** supports the nuclear waste W. An annular top peripheral edge portion **25** extends perimetrically and circumferentially around the top end of the shell **21**. Peripheral edge portion **25** may be rectilinear in configuration as shown, thereby defining a generally squared-off edge profile.

[0053] Closure lid **30** is hermetically seal welded to top peripheral edge portion **25** of shell **21** to form a fluid-tight (i.e. air, liquid, and gas) enclosure of the nuclear waste W. Lid **30** has a circular solid body including a top surface **35**, opposite bottom **36**, and a circumferentially-extending cylindrical side **32** defining an annular peripheral surface or edge **32a** of the lid which faces radially outwards. Top and bottom surfaces **35**, **36** are major surfaces which extend for the full diameter of lid **30** from edge to opposite edge. In one embodiment, the top surface **35** may be flat/planar and parallel to the bottom surface **36** which may be flat in one embodiment as shown; however, the bottom surface may have other non-planar profiles and thus at least portions may be non-parallel to the top surface in other constructions.

[0054] In one embodiment, lid **30** has a smaller outside diameter than the inside diameter of the shell **21** such that the lid may fit completely inside cavity **22** of canister **20**. The top surface **35** of the lid may sit substantially flush with the top surface **25a** of the top peripheral edge portion **25** of the shell when the lid is fully mounted to the canister **20**, in some embodiments as shown. The term “substantially” as used here connotes slight deviations from a perfectly flush mounting attributable to manufacturing and shop fabrication tolerances, and variations in fit-up and seal welding the lid to the canister.

[0055] A circumferentially-extending circumferential weld joint **37** filled by a hermetic seal weld **31** may be formed and laid by PRW **50** between the uppermost or top portion of the side **32** of lid **30** at its peripheral edge **32a**, and the inside surface **25b** of the top peripheral edge portion **25** of shell **21** inside canister cavity **22**. An annular angled chamfered surface **33** may be formed which extends between the top surface **35** and side **32** of lid **30** to define an upwardly open single bevel type circumferential butt joint in one embodiment, which is filled by the hermetic seal weld **31** having a complementary configured shape. The seal weld **31** preferably may be a butt weld for superior strength and deep penetration to create a good hermetic seal. Other types/shapes of butt joints and concomitantly butt welds may be used, such as for example without limitation a square butt joint/weld, single V butt joint/weld, single or double J butt joint weld, etc. Chamfered surface **33** extends circumferentially around the entire perimeter and peripheral edge of and at the top of the lid **30** and aids to support the innermost side of weld **31**. Any suitable angle to the horizontal plane defined by the top surface **35** of lid **30** may be used. In some embodiments, as shown, the finished seal weld **31** may be ground substantially flush after welding to the top surface **35** of lid **30** and top surface **25a** of peripheral edge portion **25** as shown.

[0056] Both the lid **30** and foregoing parts of the canister **20** may be formed of a suitable metal, preferably corrosion resistant, such as stainless steel. Other suitable metallic materials for this application may be used; however, the same material preferably should be used for the lid and canister when possible to avoid the necessity for forming dissimilar metal seal welds. The lid **30** may have any suitable thickness (measured between top and bottom surfaces **35**, **36**) to provide effective radiation shielding and minimize exposure of personnel to radiation dosage encountered by any limited duration tasks that might be performed to setup the robotic welding process for seal welding the canister lid. Lid **30** may be thicker than the baseplate **25** by comparison.

[0057] FIGS. **1-16** show the portable robotic welder (PRW) **50** of the automated robotic welding system detachably mounted and positioned on the closure lid **30** of nuclear waste canister **20** in preparation for forming the circumferential canister lid-to-shell hermetic seal weld **51**. In one embodiment, the rotatable and multi-directional articulating PRW **50** may be centrally positioned and mounted on the lid **30** with respect to its geometric center, which coincides with the vertical centerline V_c of canister **20**. The centrally-located PRW **50** includes a radiation-shielded base **51** mounted directly on the top surface **35** of lid **30** such as via a bolting **52** at plural locations spaced about the base to form a rigid and stationary, but readily detachable mount to the lid **30**. This stabilizes the base to lid interface of the PRW. Base **51** may be a disk-shaped and circular thick metal plate (e.g. carbon or stainless steel) as shown in the illustrated embodiment; however, other non-polygonal and polygonal shapes may be used. A plurality of lifting lugs **54** welded to or integrally formed with the base **51** as a unitary structural part thereof may be provided which are configured for connection rigging (e.g. rigging holes) to allow a crane or other lifting motorized device to maneuver and position the PRW **50** atop the lid **30**.

[0058] In one embodiment, the base **51** may be configured and constructed to shield and protect the PRW **50** and its associated ancillary components described herein from the gamma and neutron radiation emitted by the nuclear waste **W** contained inside canister **20**. Accordingly, base **51** may comprise a boron-containing material. In one construction, base **51** may have a sandwiched composite construction comprising a top metal layer **51a**, a bottom metal layer **51b**, and a neutron-absorbing intermediate layer **51c** formed of the boron-containing material effective to deflect and attenuate the neutron radiation. In one non-limiting preferred embodiment, the intermediate layer **51c** may be formed of Holtite™ (a proprietary product of Holtec International of Camden, NJ), which generally comprises hydrogen rich polymer impregnated with boron carbide particles. Other boron containing materials however may be used and the invention is not limited to use of the foregoing proprietary product. The intermediate layer **51c** thus protects the PRW **50** from direct neutron streaming, and in some embodiments may have a greater thickness than the top or bottom metal layers **51a**, **51b**.

[0059] Top and bottom metal layers **51a**, **51b** of composite PRW base **51** may be formed of a dense metallic material like steel (e.g. carbon or stainless steel) effective to block gamma radiation emitted by the nuclear waste **W** and to protect the intermediate layer **51c** from physical damage when maneuvering lid **30** into position on canister lid **30**. In other embodiments, however, the PRW base **51** may be formed of entirely steel, or have a composite construction including additional or different materials such as lead or copper for gamma blocking, or other boron-containing materials for neutron attenuation. Accordingly, numerous approaches may be used in the construction a radiation shielded base **51**.

[0060] With general reference to FIGS. **1-24**, PRW **50** further includes robotic arm comprising a multi-jointed articulating arm assembly **60**. Arm assembly **60** may be rotatably coupled to an electrically-motorized and geared rotary drive unit or mechanism **53**. Drive mechanism **53** may be a commercially-available product which may be provided with the robotic arm and generally includes a gear box **53a** comprising a gear or gear train inside movably coupled to an electric servo drive motor **66**. Servo drive motors include an encoder which provides closed-loop control which incorporates positional feedback information to the present welding process main controller **100**.

This allows the main controller to know the position and orientation of the articulating arm **60** segments at all times, thereby allowing the controller to control and control the movement of the various segments as necessary to achieve the desired motion and positioning of the robotic arm. Such servo drives and their closed loop feedback control are well known in the art without further elaboration necessary.

[0061] The robotic arm rotary drive mechanism **53** may be mounted directly to the radiation shielded base **51** plate or optionally to a raised support platform **55** extending upwards from the generally flat base plate in one embodiment as shown to elevate the drive mechanism and articulating arm assembly **60**. Rotary drive mechanism **53** is operable to rotate the arm assembly in a full 360 degree circumferential path around the lid **30** via a horizontally-oriented rotary joint **56**. The rotary mechanism rotates articulating arm assembly **60** in a horizontal plane up to 360 degrees in either rotational direction about a vertical rotational axis Ra defined by the geometric center of the base **51** which may be aligned with the vertical centerline Vc of canister **20**. The rotary mechanism gear box **53a** and base **51** thus movably supports the entire weight of PRW **50** in a stable manner to allow a precision hermetic seal weld **31** to be deposited in circumference weld joint **37**.

[0062] The robotic articulating arm assembly **60** includes a plurality of movable jointed arms rotatably coupled together by multiple rotary joints to provide a robotic welder with six axis/six degrees of freedom of movement of the arm assembly in a three dimensional space. The arm assembly **60** generally includes a proximal arm **61** closest to the base **51** and coupled to rotary mechanism **53** and a distal arm **62** farthest from the base (when arm **42** is fully extended outward and straightened). The terms proximate/proximal and distal, and variants thereof, refer to relationships with respect to the base **51** for convenience of reference. In one embodiment, a commercially-available FANUC ARC Mate 120iC from Fanuc Corporation, Japan may be used. Other model or types of robotic arm assemblies from other manufacturers however may be used and does not limit the invention to a particular brand or model. The PRW may include all the usual accessories and appurtenances known in the art necessary to provide a fully functional and programmable robotic welder.

[0063] The proximate end of proximal arm **61** may be coupled to rotatable platter **56** of the rotary mechanism **53** which can rotate a full 360 degrees in either direction at the horizontally-oriented rotary joint **64**. A structural coupling bracket **67** rigidly mounted to platter **56** may couple a vertically-oriented first main rotatory joint **63a** of proximal arm **61** to the platter. Proximal arm **61** is vertically rotatable in a vertical plane with respect to the PRW base **51** and lid **30**.

[0064] The proximate end of distal arm **62** may be rotatably coupled in turn to the distal end of proximal arm **61** by a vertically-oriented second main rotary joint **63b** arranged between the arms. Distal arm **62** is vertically rotatable in a vertical plane with respect to the proximal arm **62** of the articulating arm assembly **60** and base **51**/lid **30**. A third rotary joint **65** allows the distal arm **62** to rotate a full 360 degrees in either direction coaxial with respect to the longitudinal centerline axis Lc of the distal arm. Other arrangements of platters and rotary joints may be used.

[0065] Welding head **80** is mounted to the distal end of distal arm **62** via an enlarged mounting bracket **82**. Welding head **80** is essentially an elongated nozzle including central passage **80a** for feeding out welding wire **81** from the tip **85** of the nozzle, and an annular shielding gas outlet passage **80b** surrounding the wire for forming the gas shield when welding (see, e.g. FIGS. **19A-C**). The gas shield or envelope prevents outside elements or contaminants in the welding environment from creating impurities in the formed weld which can comprise its structural integrity.

[0066] The welding wire **81**, which protrudes outwards from welding head **80** by a preselected distance, provides the filler metal for forming the weld beads in the weld joint and is considered a consumable. A continuous supply of welding wire **81** is fed to the welding head **81** during the welding process from a bulk wire supply spool or barrel. The welding wire also acts as the

electrode for the welding process.

[0067] Welding head **80** can be rotationally articulated via servo drive mechanism **68** mounted to the proximal end of distal arm **62**. Distal arm **62** is rotatable coaxially about its longitudinal centerline Lc in either direction a full 360 degrees via the drive mechanism **68**. This allows the welding head to be concomitantly rotated a full 360 degrees as desired. An articulated joint or wrist bracket **69** affixed to head mounting bracket **82** further allows the welding head to be pivotably and angularly adjusted via drive mechanism **68** with respect to distal arm **62**. This allows the head to be pivoted or tilted as need to the proper orientation for making the circumferential hermetic seal weld **31** in weld joint **37**.

[0068] The robotic welder **50** further includes an automatic welding wire feeder **70** which may be mounted articulating arm assembly **60**. Wire feeder **70** is coaxially aligned with distal arm **62** to feed welding wire **81** along longitudinal centerline axis Lc of distal arm **62** to the welding nozzle or head **80** (also coaxial with axis Lc). Wire feeder **70** may be fixedly mounted to the proximal end of distal arm **62** as shown (see, e.g. FIGS. 5A-B). (e.g. at servo drive mechanism **68** in one embodiment). The wire feeder is operable to continuously feed welding wire **81** to a welding head **80** as the wire is consumed during the welding process. Complete automatic wire feeders for mounting on articulating arm assembly **60** are commercially available from numerous companies, such as for example Lincoln Electric of Cleveland Ohio (Autodrive® models) or other feeder manufacturers.

[0069] In addition to feeding welding wire, the commercially-available wire feeder **70** is further fully equipped to supply cooling water and electric power to the water-cooled welding head **80** via a plurality of input connections on the rear of the unit's housing. These connections may include, for example without limitation, a welding wire conduit connection **72a** for routing wire from an wire external spool or barrel into the unit, an electric power connection **72b** for powering the feeder and welding head **80**, a shielding gas fluid connection **72d** for fluid coupling to a gas hose from a source of weld shielding gas, and a pair of cooling fluid connections including cooling water inlet and outlet fluid connections **72c** for fluid coupling to an external cooling water source such as a cooling water heat exchanger **73** thereby forming a closed cooling loop with the feeder unit. The cooling water lines, electric power line, and welding wire **81** from the wire feeder **70** may be routed to the welding head **80** via an outer cable conduit **74** mounted to the distal arm **62** of articulating arm assembly **60** (see, e.g. FIG. 5A).

[0070] The automatic wire feeder **70** further standardly includes a programmable sub-controller **71** represented schematically in FIG. 5A by the box shown on the rear of the feeder unit. Sub-controller **71** includes software and/or firmware which digitally controls the wire feed rate necessary to maintain a preselected protrusion length of weld wire **81** from the weld nozzle or head **80** to produce a quality weld. The sub-controller also includes an associated communication interface for wired or wireless linkage via communication links **101** to the welding system main controller **100** (see, e.g. welding system schematic control diagram FIG. 26). This establishes two-way communications and coordinated control between the main controller and sub-controller of the feeder unit. Via one or more temperature sensors **86** mounted to the welding head **80**, the sub-controller **71** may further be programmed to automatically control the cooling water flow to the weld head and electric power supply thereto provided through the wire feeder **70**.

[0071] In some embodiments, welding head **80** further includes a weld seam or joint vision tracking system which includes a touchless joint tracking sensor **83** and a high-resolution digital weld monitoring camera **84**. These devices may both be mounted to the welding head **80** via bracket **82**. Both the touchless joint tracking sensor and camera are operably coupled to and controlled at least in part by main controller **100** via communication links **101**. The camera **84** provides real-time images during the welding process to the controller **100**, which in turn displays the images on a visual display **102** operably linked to the controller. Camera **84** is configured and constructed especially for use in harsh welding environments to monitor arc welding processes.

The camera unit may include lighting (e.g. LED's) for illuminating the weld joint **37** as the welding head **80** circumnavigates the canister **20**, and integrated air cooling provisions for fluid connection to the cooling air pressure reduction unit **90**. The camera **84** may also include an auto-iris feature that automatically dims during welding based on a light sensor, so the welding operations can be remotely and safely monitored by an operator without human presence necessary in the immediate area of welding at the nuclear waste container **20**. This advantageously eliminates exposure to both radiation emitted from the canister **20** and welding arc flash. Suitable complete weld monitoring cameras packages which may include camera control image display software that be used include Models XVC-1000e/XVC-1100e available from Xiris Automation Inc. of Ontario, Canada and other suppliers.

[0072] The touchless joint tracking sensor **83** optically locates the weld seam or joint **37** in real-time and measures the geometry and contours of the joint. In certain embodiments, the joint tracking sensor may be a laser sensor. Suitable laser joint tracking sensor devices and associated tracking systems (i.e. software) are available from Servo-Robot Inc. of Quebec, Canada (e.g. Auto-Trac/LW™) and other suppliers. The joint tracking sensor unit may include integrated air cooling provisions for fluid connection to the cooling air pressure reduction unit **90** describe herein. The touchless joint tracking sensor system allows the main controller **100** to develop a welding plan based on the actual measured geometry of the weld joint (e.g. dimensions and contours) via a communication link with the joint tracking sensor unit's sub-controller which locally controls operation of the sensor. The welding plan essentially includes the welding sequence in which the hermetic seal weld **31** will be completed in multiple passes around the joint to an amount deposit weld material (i.e. weld bead) with each pass, and the precise welding path followed by the articulating arm assembly **60** and particularly the welding head **80** itself.

[0073] Obtaining and using the geometric information about the actual weld joint measured via the touchless joint tracking sensor **83** and process by the main controller **100** may be approached in two ways. In a first “advanced mapping” approach, the PRW **50** rotates the articulating arm assembly **60** such that the touchless joint tracking sensor **83** circumnavigates the circumferential weld joint **37** one complete time or pass (without performing any welding). The sensor **83** scans and maps the geometric profile of entire weld joint as it travels along the joint, and then transmits the weld joint mapping information back to the main controller **100**. The main controller is programmed (via software/control instructions) to develop and then implement the welding plan based on the joint mapping information. The welding plan when executed by controller **100** instructs the PRW **50** how many welding passes are to be made around the weld joint **37**, and the size/dimensions and placement of the continuously formed weld beads associated with each pass until the weld joint is progressively filled by the weld material deposited by the welding wire **81** in each pass to complete the weld. The welding plan is also relayed and coordinated with the sub-controller **71** associated with the welding wire feeder **70** which adjusts the wire feed rate to match the welding plan rate of weld material deposition required.

[0074] In a second “real-time mapping” approach, the weld joint **37** is mapped in real-time simultaneously with depositing weld material and forming hermetic seal weld **31** in order to develop a welding plan “on-the-fly.” The touchless joint tracking sensor **83** maps the weld joint as described above by looking ahead of the welding tip of the weld head **80** as the weld is forming, and transmitting the mapping information back to the main controller **100**. The welding process and multiple-passes of the welding head along the joint progresses to eventually form the completed weld, as previously described above in the first approach.

[0075] In conjunction with implementing the second real-time mapping approach, the main controller **100** and/or sub-controller of the joint tracking sensor **83** executes a preprogrammed adaptive control software provided with the vision system. This adaptive control software/program allows the controller **100** to monitor the geometry of the weld joint in real-time and seamlessly adapts the deposited weld material placement and dimensions with each pass to uniformly and

progressively fill the joint with the weld **31** regardless of variations encountered in the joint's topography with no or negligible remote human interaction with the controller.

[0076] The PRW **50** further includes an air cooling system for cooling and protecting the touchless joint tracking sensor **83** and camera **84** from the heat generated at the welding head **80** during the welding process. In one embodiment, the air cooling system generally comprises an air pressure reduction unit **90** which includes an air flow manifold and air pressure regulating valve. The unit **90** is fluidly coupled to an available supply of compressed cooling air at the nuclear site/facility. The house air line pressure is reduced by the pressure reduction unit to a preselected maximum air pressure setpoint associated with the pressure regulating valve. Operation of the unit **90** and air pressure setpoint may be controlled by microcontroller **100**. In instances where a source of nuclear plant air is not readily available, a portable air compressor may be used as the source of cooling air. The cooling air is dispensed to the joint tracking sensor **83** and camera **84** via air conduits or tubing **91** which may be routed along the articulating arm assembly **60**. Suitable air pressure reduction units **90** are commercially-available from sources such as Servo-Robot Inc. or others.

[0077] According to another aspect of the present disclosure, a cable organizer or management apparatus is provided. Since the PRW **50** must complete a full 360 degree circumferential canister lid-to-shell weld in multiple weld passes, routing of the electrical and control cables (e.g. wires) and flow conduits (e.g. water and air tubing) with respect to the articulating arm assembly **60** and canister **20** becomes problematic and may interfere with full rotation of the robotic welder. This creates unique challenges particularly for this onsite "field" welding operation. Rather than requiring an operator to be present at the high radiation dosage area of canister **20** during welding to manually move the cables/conduits out of the way with each rotational pass of the robotic articulating arm assembly **60**, a cable-conduit management apparatus **95** is provided which is automatically pivotable and under control of the main controller **100**. Thereby requiring no manual intervention at the canister welding location.

[0078] Referring to FIGS. **1-16**, cable-conduit management apparatus **95** in one embodiment includes a fully closed or partially open tubular body defining a hollow support tube **97** and an organizing channel **96** extending therethrough from one proximal end **95a** where the cables/conduits CC enter to another distal end **95b** at the robotic articulating arm assembly **60** where the cables/conduits exit the tube. The tube **97** may have an elongated rigid body formed by of either welded or brazed metal section or optionally strong monolithic plastic body. The tube body may have any suitable polygonal or non-polygonal cross-sectional shape (e.g. square, rectangular, circular, etc.) and overall configuration. In top view, the support tube **97** may be linearly straight. A tube centerline CL is defined which extends along the center of tube from end to end in each section (see, e.g. FIGS. **6** and **9**). Although the walls of the cable-conduit management apparatus tube are shown as solid, the walls may be partially open (e.g. cage-like) or include openings in other embodiments. In certain embodiments, the support tube **97** may be upwardly open including only a pair of side walls and a bottom wall. Accordingly, numerous variation in the shape and construction of the support tube **97** are possible and does not limit the invention

[0079] In one embodiment, support tube **97** may have a multi-angled configuration in which proximal end **95a** defined by proximal end section **97a** is higher than the distal end **95b** defined by distal end section **97b**. An intermediate section **97c** is defined between the proximal and distal end sections **97a**, **97c**. Each section may be straight as shown in the illustrated embodiment and joined by miter joint if metal is used for the tube body. Elevating the proximal end allows the cables/conduits to avoid becoming snagged on the canister **20** during pivotable movement of the cable-conduit management apparatus **95**, while the lower distal end **95b** locates the emerging cables close to the base **51** from which they can be routed internally and/or externally along the robotic arms. Channel **96** is configured for routing and retaining a plurality of cables and conduits CC therethrough as shown to the articulating arm assembly **60**.

[0080] It bears noting at this point that not all cables-conduits are shown on the PRW articulating

arm assembly **60** in the figures for purposes of illustration to avoid visually obscuring details of the robotic welder. Any suitable routing of the cables-conduits internally or externally on the PRW **50** may be used. It is well within the ambit of those skilled in the art to select proper cable-conduit routing and means of securement compatible with the rotary and/or liner motions of the robotic arms.

[0081] The distal end **95b** of support tube **97** is mounted to a rotary actuator **98** (e.g. electric or pneumatic) which provides pivotable motion to the cable-conduit management apparatus **95**. Rotary actuator **98** is fixedly attached to base **51**. Accordingly, the cable-conduit management apparatus is liftable and moveable for deployment with the base and robotic articulating arm assembly **60** as a single unit.

[0082] In one embodiment, cable-conduit management apparatus is pivotably movable through an angle $A1$ of about and including at least 10 degrees in either rotational direction with respect the centerline CL of tube **97** and a radial reference line Rc extending from the geometric center of the articulating arm assembly **60** defined by the arms' main rotational axis defined rotary drive mechanism through the pivot axis of the cable-conduit management apparatus **53** defined by rotary actuator **98** (see, e.g. FIG. 6). Accordingly, the support tube **97** of cable-conduit management apparatus **95** is movable through a total arcuate path of about and including at least about 20 degrees but less than 360 degrees. In a certain embodiment, the cable-conduit management apparatus **95** may be moveable in a total arcuate of about 90 degrees (i.e. $A1=45$ degrees). The pivotable action of the cable-conduit management apparatus **95** allows the main controller **100** to pivot the apparatus from a first angular position to a second angular position to avoid interference with the robotic articulating arm assembly **60** when forming the hermetic seal weld **31**. Operation of the cable-conduit management apparatus **95** is fully described below in conjunction with description of the welding process or method for sealing nuclear waste in a container using PRW **50**.

[0083] According to another aspect of the present disclosure, the PRW **50** further includes a plurality of weld preparation stations **120** arranged around and on the base **51** of the robotic welder. After completion of each welding pass around the circumferential weld joint **37**, main controller **100** is programmed to move the articulating arm assembly such that welding head **80** is transported to and visits each weld preparation station as part of the preprogrammed welding plan. This allows the weld head to be prepared and cleaned for the next welding pass. Heretofore when seal welding the lid to the nuclear waste canister shell, these weld preparations had to be performed manually in the field thereby exposing workers to radiation.

[0084] With primary reference to FIGS. 1-12, in certain embodiments the weld preparation stations **120** may include without limitation a welding wire cutter station **121**, a welding head reaming station **122**, and an anti-spatter liquid misting station **123**. The weld preparation equipment for each station is commercially-available. The stations may be located in one or more quadrants of the PRW base **51** (best shown in FIG. 6) and spaced angularly apart far enough to provide clearance for the welding head **80** assembly and appurtenances (e.g. joint tracking sensor **83**, camera **84**, bracket **82**, etc.) to visit each station. Referring specifically to FIGS. 17A-C which are sequential operating views, wire cutter station **121** includes a movable wire cutter or knife blade(s) **121a** which trims the welding wire **81** to a predetermine length optimized for welding the lid **30** to canister **20**. Referring specifically to FIGS. 19A-C which are sequential operating views, welding head reaming station **122** cleans and burnishes the tip **85** of the weld head nozzle to remove weld splatter and other deposits thereon. Station **122** includes a rotatably reamer tool head **122a** configured especially for cleaning the nozzle with rotary action. A rotary drive **122b** (represented schematically by the dashed box) rotates the tool head **122a** at preselected speed (RPM). The tool head is configured to avoid damaging the welding wire **81** trimmed at the first cutting station **121**. In the final station with particular reference to FIGS. 21A-B, the anti-spatter misting station **123** sprays the cleaned welding head **80** with a mist of anti-spatter liquid from a pressurized container or pump of the

liquid fluidly to spray nozzle **123a** supported by a support stand **123b** affixed to PRW base **51**. The liquid coating or film deposited on the head **80** helps resist adhesion of weld splatter. After visiting this last station, the second welding pass and welding is ready to resume. The foregoing weld preparation sequence is preferably followed after each welding pass by the PRW **50**.

[0085] In addition to the servo drive motor **66** of the main rotary drive mechanism **53** of PRW **50** and distal arm servo drive mechanism **68** previously described herein, a plurality of additional servo drive motors **64** may be incorporated into the articulating arm assembly **60** of the robotic welder where needed at appropriate joint locations to produce the desired 6 degrees of freedom rotational and linear movements of the various arm assembly segments. The servo drive motors and mechanisms are standardly provided with the articulating arm assembly **60** package by the robot manufacturer.

[0086] PRW **50** is flexible to employ any of the conventional semi-automatic welding processes used in the art. The welding processes may include for example, without limitation, Gas Metal Arc Welding (GMAW), Gas Tungsten Arc Welding (GTAW), Flux-Cored Arc Welding (FCAW), Submerged Arc Welding (SAW), and the variations thereof.

[0087] FIG. **26** is a welding system schematic control diagram showing control system **150** of the robotic welding system described herein. A configurable welding process electronic management unit in the form of a commercially-available processor-based main controller **100** may be used. Main controller **100** is configurable and operable to automatically coordinate, synchronize, and sequence operation of the PRW **50** and the ancillary equipment for unified control of the entire remotely-operated and fully automated welding process to form the complete canister lid-to-shell circumferential hermetic seal weld **31**. The controller **100**, configured with program instructions (e.g. control logic/software) stored therein and executed by its programmable processor, thus controls operation of the PRW **50** and its ancillary components via suitable wired and/or wireless communication links **101** as shown (represented by dot-dash-dot lines). It is well within the ambit of those skilled in the art to configure the program instructions to direct the robotic welder and operation of its related ancillary equipment in the manner described herein without further undue elaboration.

[0088] Programmable main controller **100** may include all the customary components and appurtenances necessary for a fully functional electronic control device, including generally, for example without limitation, a programmable processor, a bus, input/output devices, graphical user interfaces or displays **102** (e.g. touchscreen or non-touchscreen), wired and/or wireless communication interface devices (e.g., Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and/or LAN), volatile memory, non-volatile memory, non-removable and/or removable data storage (e.g. hard drive, USB, etc.), electric power supply, etc. The non-volatile memory may be any type of non-removable or removable semi-conductor non-transient computer readable memory or media. Both the volatile memory and the non-volatile memory may be used for saving data received by the controller **100** via various sensors or from other devices, for storing program instructions (e.g. control logic or software) implemented by the controller, and storing operating parameters (e.g. baseline parameters or set points) associated with operation of the welding system as some non-limiting examples. Main controller **100** described herein may be any central processing unit (CPU), processor, computational, or other programmable device configured for executing computer program instructions (e.g., code). The controller and various microcontrollers may be embodied in a computer and/or server hardware of any suitable type (e.g., desktop, laptop, notebook, tablets, cellular phones, etc.). Suitable controllers are commercially-available.

[0089] As shown in FIG. **26**, the programmable main controller **100** may further be communicably and operably coupled to an external processor-based personal electronic device **103** (e.g. personal desktop/laptop computer, tablet, smart phone, etc.) via a communication interface or module **104** configured for wired and/or wireless two-way communications using any suitable wireless protocol. The communication module **104** comprises a serial communication port thereby

providing an input/output interface which is configured to enable two-way communications between the external personal electronic device **103** and the microcontroller **100**. The personal electronic device **103** in some implementations may be used as an input device to program the controller **100**.

[0090] Advantageously, the main controller **100** provides remote control of the PRW welding system and process beyond the high radiation dosage area in the immediate vicinity of the nuclear waste canister **20** at the nuclear facility site.

[0091] A method or process for hermetically sealing nuclear waste in a container in an automated and remotely controlled manner using the portable robotic welder (PRW) **50** will now be briefly described. Notably, the entire process described below is performed onsite at end user's nuclear plant or facility site outside of the controlled shop conditions of the equipment manufacturer. General reference should be made to FIGS. **1-12** and **26** throughout the discussion to follow, with additional reference to specific figures where applicable as noted. Advantageously, this automated welding process minimizes exposure of personnel to the high level gamma and neutron radiation emitted by the nuclear waste W stored in the canister **20**.

[0092] To start the method or process, lid **30** is first placed on top of the nuclear waste canister **20**, thereby forming the open circumferential weld seam or joint **37** therebetween. PRW **50** is next lifted via a motorized crane or hoist and positioned on top of the lid **30**. Preferably, the base **51** of PRW **50** is positioned as close as possible to the geometric center of lid **30** which coincides with vertical centerline Vc of canister **20**. However, the PRW need not be perfectly positioned at the center of the lid since the main controller **100** can automatically compensate for off-center positioning and accordingly direct the articulating arm assembly **60** to position the welding head **80** at the weld joint **37** via the touchless joint tracking sensor **83**. In one embodiment, the PRW **50** may be bolted to lid **30** via the available bolting **54**.

[0093] If not already done so before the lid placement step above, the main controller **100** is activated to initiate the weld process software/program instructions and establish communication links to the PRW **50** which is energized. The welding head **80** air and water cooling system may begin operation at this time. The PRW **50** is ready to begin welding under remote operation directed by controller **100** without human presence in the high radiation dosage vicinity of the canister **20**. Unless specifically noted otherwise, the method/process steps which follow below are all implemented automatically by the main controller **100** via executing its programming.

[0094] The automated welding operation steps include the main controller **100** first locating the weld joint with the touchless joint tracking sensor **83** of the vision system on the welding head **80** by moving the articulating arm assembly **60** from an inward folded retracted positioned seen in FIGS. **5A-B** (used to transport and lift the PRW on top of the canister) to an outwardly extended position seen in FIGS. **11** and **13**. The welding head is positioned at a first starting point P1 at the circumferential weld joint **37** (FIG. **13**) via the main controller moving the articulating arm assembly. The cable-conduit management apparatus **95** is shown located in a first angular position AP1 on spaced apart on a first side (left in FIG. **13**) of first starting point P1.

[0095] If the welding plan to be automatically developed by the controller via the joint tracking sensor **83** scanning weld joint **37** is to be performed using the first “advanced mapping” approach previously described herein, the controller rotates robotic articulating arm assembly **60** a full 360 degrees around the weld while the sensor **83** maps and measures the weld geometry of the entire circumferential weld joint. Once the plan is formulated, the main controller **100** performs the welding operation in the manner described below.

[0096] If the welding plan is to be developed on-the-fly by controller **100** using the second “real-time mapping” approach previously described herein, the welding operation is ready to commence. Either approach to developing the welding plan may be used.

[0097] To commence welding, main controller **100** instructs the PRW **50** to rotate the articulating arm assembly **60** and welding head **80** in a first rotational direction (counter-clockwise in FIG. **13**)

of the circumferential welding path from the first starting point **P1** around the entire weld joint **37** back to first starting point **P1**, thereby completing a full 360 degree first revolution of the articulating arm assembly. This completes the first welding pass around the weld joint. As the weld head **80** rotates, weld material from welding wire **81** is simultaneously deposited and laid (i.e. first weld bead) in the circumferential weld joint **37** during the first revolution. The weld arc is protected by the gas shield emitted from the weld head **80**. The welding process is monitored remotely via camera **84** on the weld head to allow a human operator to oversee the operation for a radiation safe distance.

[0098] As shown in FIGS. **14-15**, during the foregoing first revolution of weld head **80** while the PRW **50** is welding, the controller automatically moves cable-conduit management apparatus **95** to a second angular position **AP2** spaced apart on an opposite second side (right in FIG. **15**) of first starting point **P1**. This ensures that the cable-conduit management apparatus will not block and prevent the robotic articulating arm assembly **60** from traveling back to the first starting point **P1** to complete the first full 360 welding pass and first weld bead. It bears noting that weld bead material in each welding pass is continuous and contiguous in structure from start to finish to progressively fully fill the weld joint with the hermetically sealed butt weld.

[0099] As shown in FIGS. **15-16**, PRW **50** retracts the articulating arm assembly **60** inwards to position welding head **80** at each of the welding preparation stations in sequence. The weld head visits (in order) the welding wire cutter station **121** (FIG. **16**), welding head reaming station **122** (FIG. **18**), and an anti-spatter liquid misting station **123** (FIG. **20**). The welding head **80** is now ready to start the second welding pass.

[0100] Referring to FIG. **22**, the robotic articulating arm assembly **60** is returned to its extended position and welding head **80** relocates the weld joint **37** via joint tracking sensor **83**. The arm assembly rotates in the same first rotational direction (counter-clockwise in the figure) to a new second starting point **P2** (FIG. **23**). In one embodiment, **P2** is preferably offset from the first starting point **P1** to avoid igniting the weld arc at the same location for the second welding pass along the weld joint **37**. In other embodiments, **P2** may be the same as **P1** if desired. In either case, it should be observed that the cable-conduit management apparatus **95** remains in the second angular position **AP2** at the start of the second weld pass for efficiency.

[0101] It bears noting that the second weld pass will be implemented completed in accordance with the welding plan previously developed and stored in memory of the main controller **100**. If real-time mapping is used, the controller may readjust the welding plan as to compensate for the actual weld bead material previously laid in joint **37** during the first weld pass.

[0102] To commence welding in the second weld pass along the weld joint **37**, main controller **100** instructs the PRW **50** to rotate the articulating arm assembly **60** and welding head **80** in a second rotational direction, which may be the same as the first rotational direction (counter-clockwise in FIG. **24**) from the second starting point **P1** around the entire weld joint **37** back to second starting point **P2** thereby completing a full 360 degree second revolution of the articulating arm assembly. This completes the second welding pass around the weld joint. As the weld head **80** rotates, weld material from welding wire **81** is again simultaneously deposited and laid (i.e. second weld bead) in the circumferential weld joint **37** during the second revolution. The second weld bead may at least partially overlap the first weld bead in some instances, or not depending on where each weld bead is laid.

[0103] As shown in FIGS. **24-25-15**, during the foregoing second revolution of weld head **80** while the PRW **50** is welding, the controller automatically moves cable-conduit management apparatus **95** back to the first angular position **AP1** to allow the welding head to rotate fully back to the second starting point **P2** for completing the second contiguous weld bead from end to end.

[0104] The foregoing method/process is repeated multiple times to lay successive contiguous weld beads which progressively and fully fill the weld joint **37** with weld material, thereby forming the completed hermetic seal weld of the butt weld type. The joint may be overfilled in some

implementations of the process forming a rounded weld crown which may be ground flush with the top surfaces of the canister shell **21** and lid **30** (see, e.g. FIG. 2A).

[0105] Once the canister lid-to-shell butt weld is completed, the PRW **50** may be unbolted from the lid **30**, lifted, and transported to another canister **20** to complete the same process above. The PRW **50** is advantageously highly portable and easily maneuverable at the nuclear plant site.

[0106] While the foregoing description and drawings represent some example systems, it will be understood that various additions, modifications and substitutions may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope and range of equivalents of the accompanying claims. In particular, it will be clear to those skilled in the art that the present invention may be embodied in other forms, structures, arrangements, proportions, sizes, and with other elements, materials, and components, without departing from the spirit or essential characteristics thereof. In addition, numerous variations in the methods/processes described herein may be made. One skilled in the art will further appreciate that the invention may be used with many modifications of structure, arrangement, proportions, sizes, materials, and components and otherwise, used in the practice of the invention, which are particularly adapted to specific environments and operative requirements without departing from the principles of the present invention. The presently disclosed embodiments are therefore to be considered in all respects as illustrative and not restrictive, the scope of the invention being defined by the appended claims and equivalents thereof, and not limited to the foregoing description or embodiments. Rather, the appended claims should be construed broadly, to include other variants and embodiments of the invention, which may be made by those skilled in the art without departing from the scope and range of equivalents of the invention.

Claims

1-41. (canceled)

42. A method for hermetically sealing nuclear waste in a container, the method comprising: (a) providing a robotic welder comprising an articulating arm assembly rotatably mounted on a base, and a welding head mounted on a distal end of the articulating arm assembly and operable to form a hermetic seal weld; (b) communicably linking a programmable main controller to the robotic welder, the main controller configured to control operation and movement of the robotic welder; (c) positioning a lid on top of the container to define a circumferential weld joint between the lid and the container; (d) detachably mounting the base of the robotic welder on the lid; and (e) automatically forming a hermetic seal weld in the weld joint via the robotic welder under control of the main controller.

43. The method according to claim 42, wherein step (e) comprises steps of: (e1) positioning the welding head at a first starting point at the circumferential weld joint; (e2) rotating the welding head a first full revolution from the first starting point back thereto while depositing weld material to form a first contiguous weld bead in the weld joint, the welding head completing a first welding pass; (e3) positioning the welding head at a second starting point at the circumferential weld joint; (e4) rotating the welding head a second full revolution from the second starting point back thereto while depositing weld material to form a second contiguous weld bead in the weld joint, the welding head completing a second welding pass.

44. The method according to claim 43, wherein the weld material deposited by the second welding pass at least partially overlays the weld material deposited by the first welding pass.

45. The method according to claim 43, wherein the articulating arm assembly rotates in the same rotational direction while completing the first and second welding passes.

46. The method according to claim 43, wherein the first starting point and the second starting points are at a same location at the circumferential weld joint.

47. The method according to claim 43, wherein the first and second starting points are at different

locations at the circumferential weld joint.

48. The method according to claim 42, wherein the welding head comprises a welding wire and a gas nozzle fluidly coupled to a shielding gas source, the gas nozzle dispensing the shielding gas while depositing weld material in the circumferential weld joint.

49. The method according to claim 43, wherein between the first and second welding passes, further comprising the robotic welder moving the welding head through a plurality of weld preparation stations to clean and prepare the welding head for the second welding pass.

50. The method according to claim 49, wherein the weld preparation stations include at least two of a welding wire cutter station, a welding head reamer station, and an anti-spatter liquid misting station.

51. The method according to claim 43, wherein the robotic welder comprises a tubular cable-conduit management apparatus pivotably mounted to the base and configured for routing a plurality of cables-conduits therethrough to the articulating arm assembly.

52. The method according to claim 51, further comprising pivoting the cable-conduit management apparatus in an arcuate path from a first angular position to a second angular position between steps (e3) and (e4) to avoid interfering with rotation of the articulating arm assembly when completing the second welding pass.

53. The method according to claim 52, wherein the first angular position is on a first side of the first starting point, and the second angular position is on a second side of the first starting point.

54. The method according to claim 43, wherein step (e1) includes the robotic welder locating the circumferential weld joint via a laser joint tracking sensor affixed to the welding head of the robotic welder.

55. The method according to claim 43, further comprising repeating steps (e2) to (e4) until the circumferential weld joint is completely filled with weld beads to form a completed hermetic seal weld.

56. The method according to claim 55, wherein the hermetic seal weld is a butt weld.

57. The method according to claim 42, wherein the weld joint is a circumferentially-extending lid-to-shell joint formed between a cylindrical shell of the container and an annular peripheral edge of the lid, the lid having a smaller outside diameter than an inside diameter of the shell such that the lid is seated completely inside a top of the shell.

58. The method according to claim 58, wherein a top surface of the lid is flush with a top surface of a peripheral edge portion of the shell.

59. The method according to claim 58, wherein the weld joint is a circumferential butt joint.

60. The method according to claim 42, wherein the base is configured and constructed to shield the robotic welder from radiation emitted by the nuclear waste in the container.

61. The method according to claim 60, wherein the base has a composite construction comprising a top metal layer, a bottom metal layer, and an intermediate neutron absorbing layer formed of the boron-containing material.
