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STONE METERING SYSTEM FOR RAILROAD TRACK MAINTENANCE VEHICLE
- [75]

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- [58]

Field of Search 414/326, 325, 414/295, 296, 294, 526, 528, 501, 502, 518, 293; 198/661, 612, 676, 657, 467.1; 104/5, 6, 2, 1 R; 222/412, 413; 171/16; 37/104

- [56]

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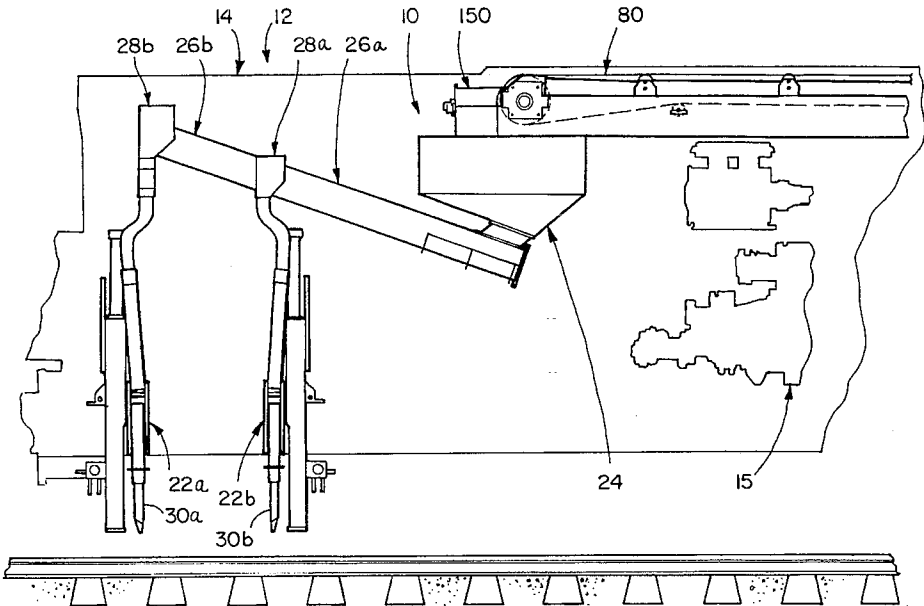
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ABSTRACT

A stone metering system for a railroad track maintenance vehicle providing improved accuracy in stone delivery. The system includes a surge hopper, a number of metering augers, and a corresponding number of splitters. The metering augers convey ballast stones from the surge hopper to the corresponding splitters, which divide the stones evenly between a number of blow tubes. The pitch of the auger screw flights is increased from the inlet end of the screw to “expand” the stone and reduce the production of fines. In addition, the diameter of the final screw flight is reduced at the outlet end of the auger to provide a consistent and even flow of stone into the splitters. The splitters are dynamically adjustable to provide even distribution between the blow tubes regardless of the cant to the rails. The desired amount of stone is delivered to the tubes by rotating the auger screw the number of full or partial revolutions associated with the amount. In an alternative embodiment, each of the metering augers is replaced by a conveyor having a belt divided into a series of uniformly sized compartments each conveying the same quantity of stone. The desired amount of stone is delivered to the tubes by driving the belt so that a desired number of compartments are emptied into the splitter.

17 Claims, 7 Drawing Sheets



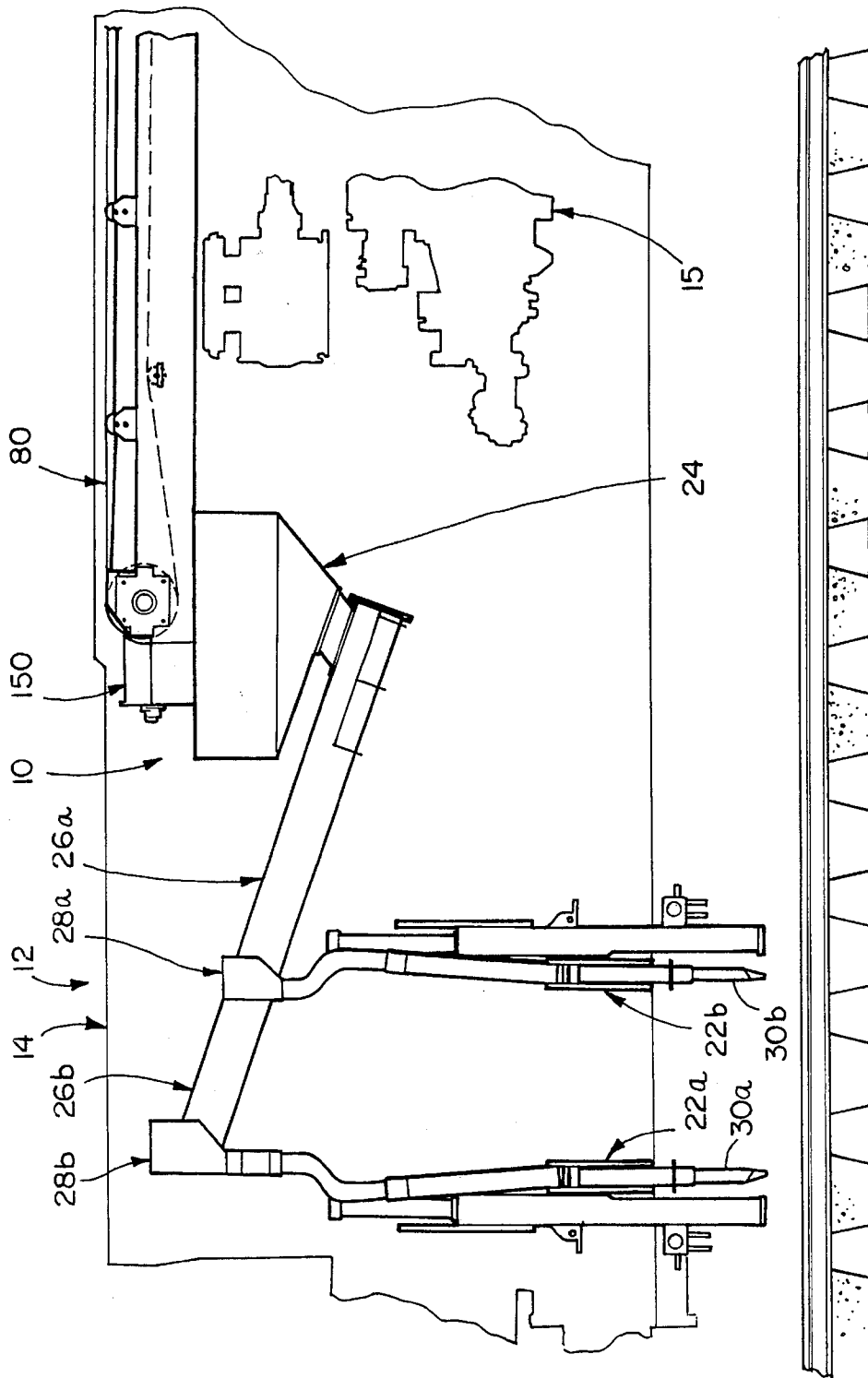


FIG. 1a

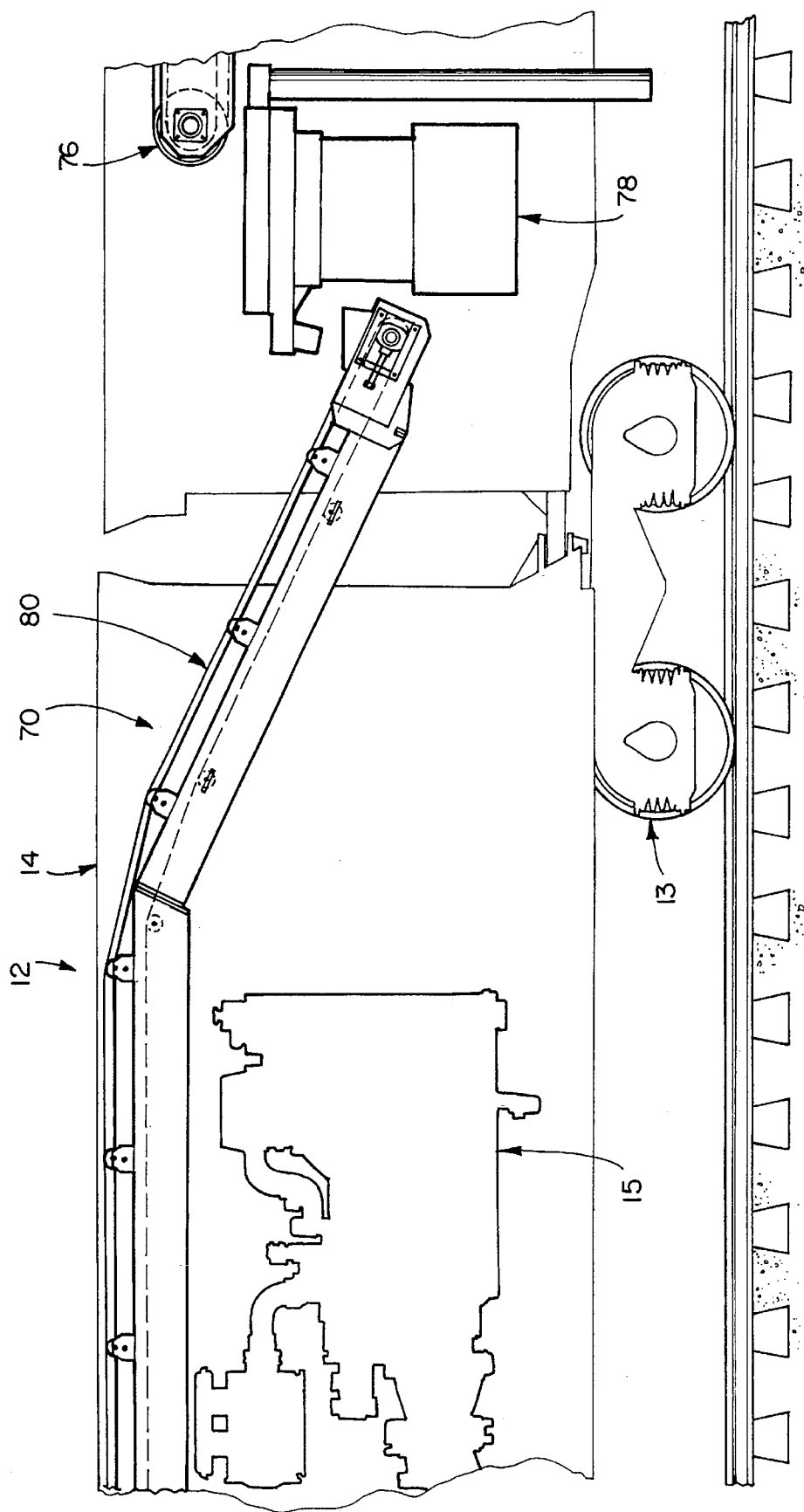


FIG. 1b

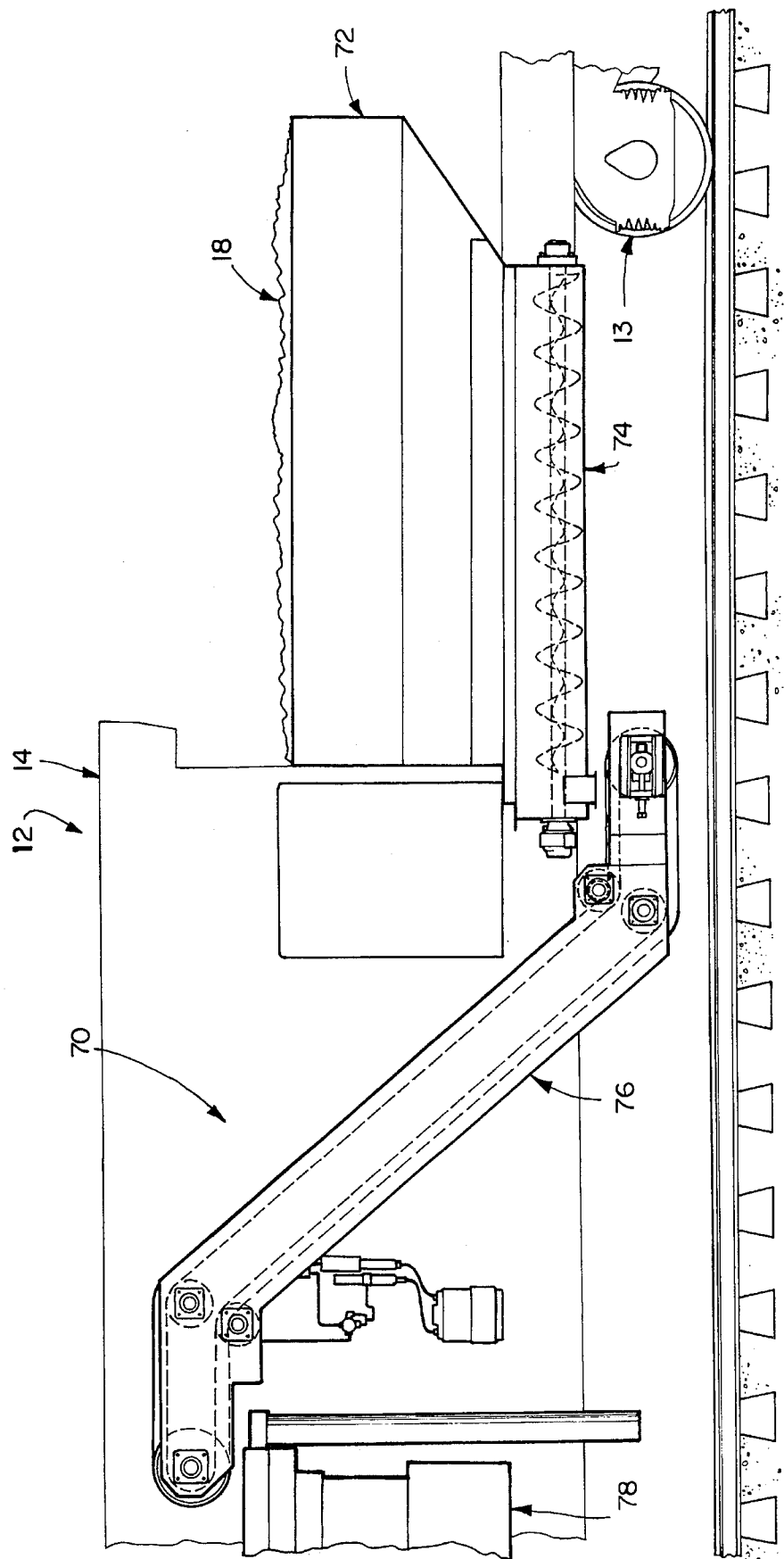
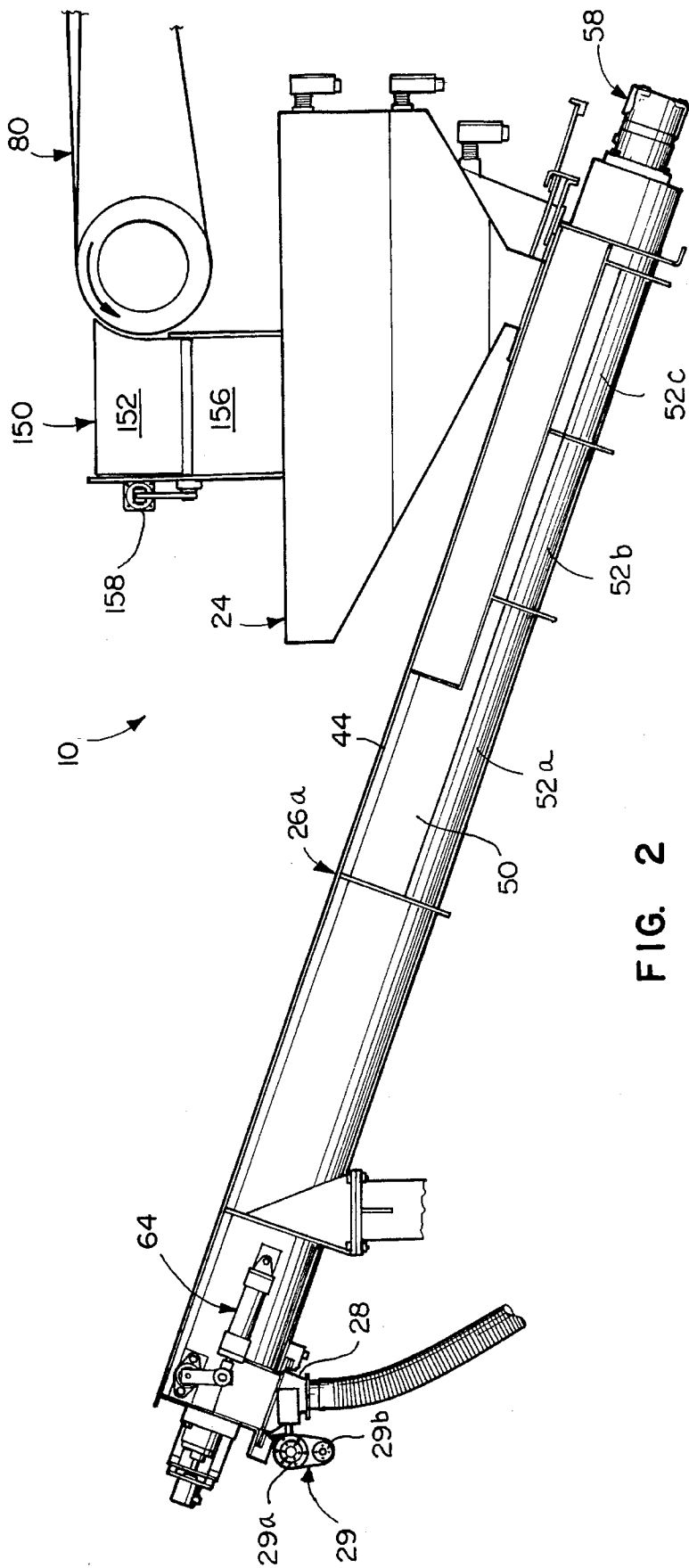


FIG. 1c



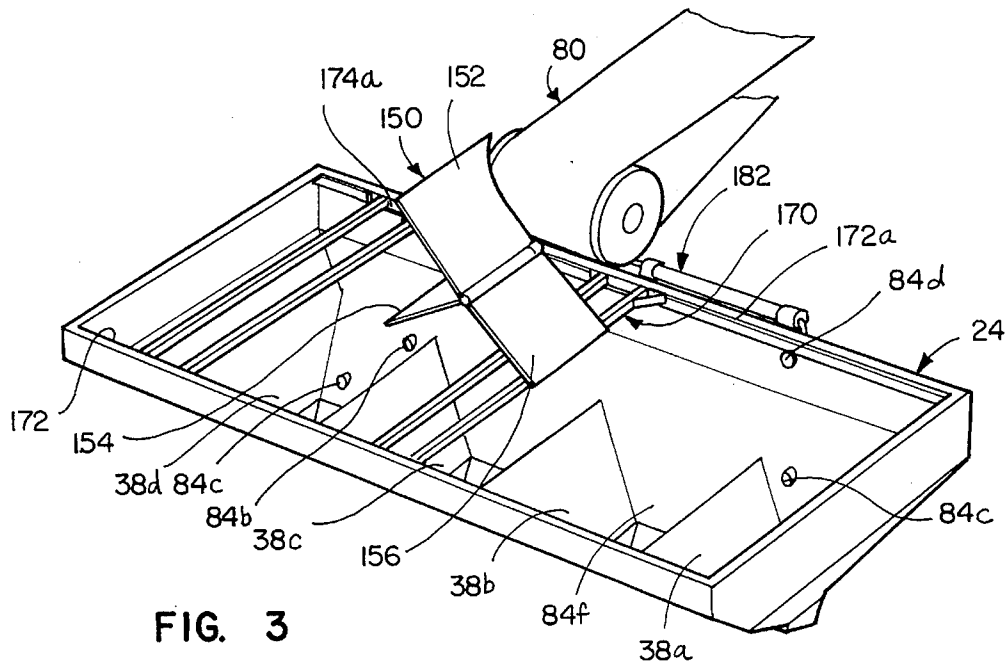


FIG. 3

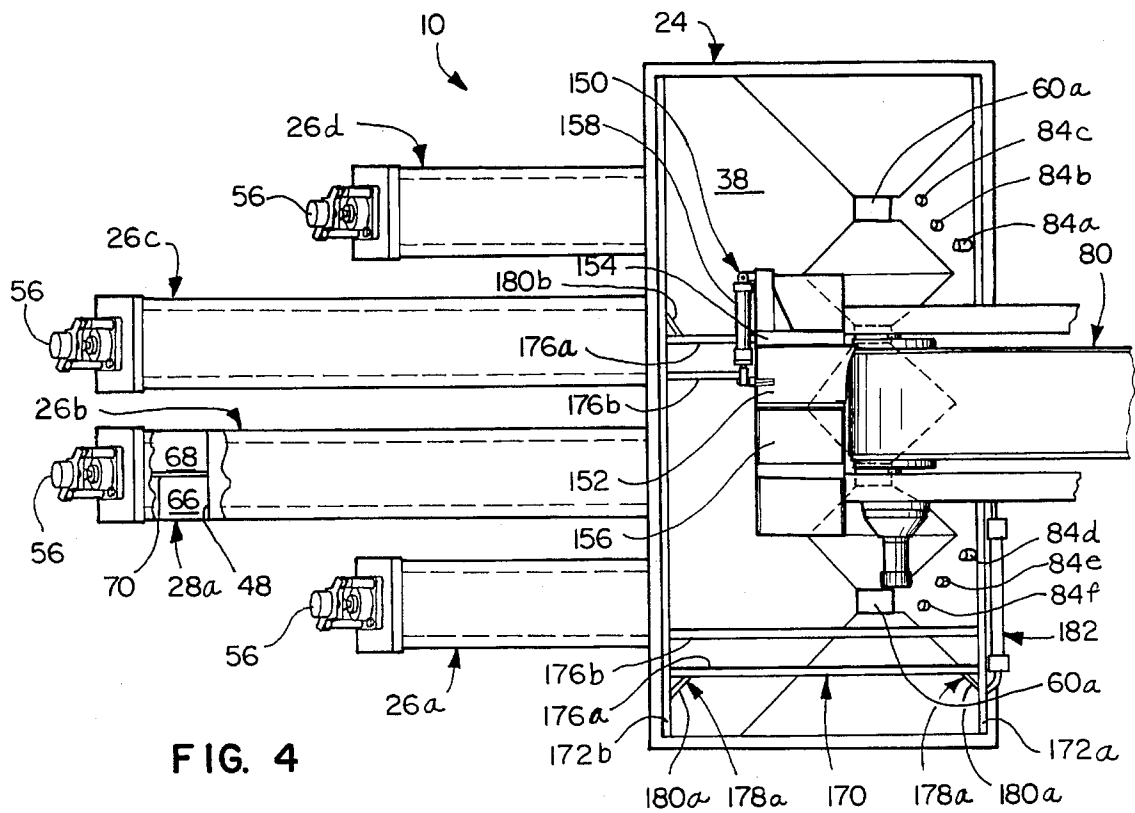


FIG. 4

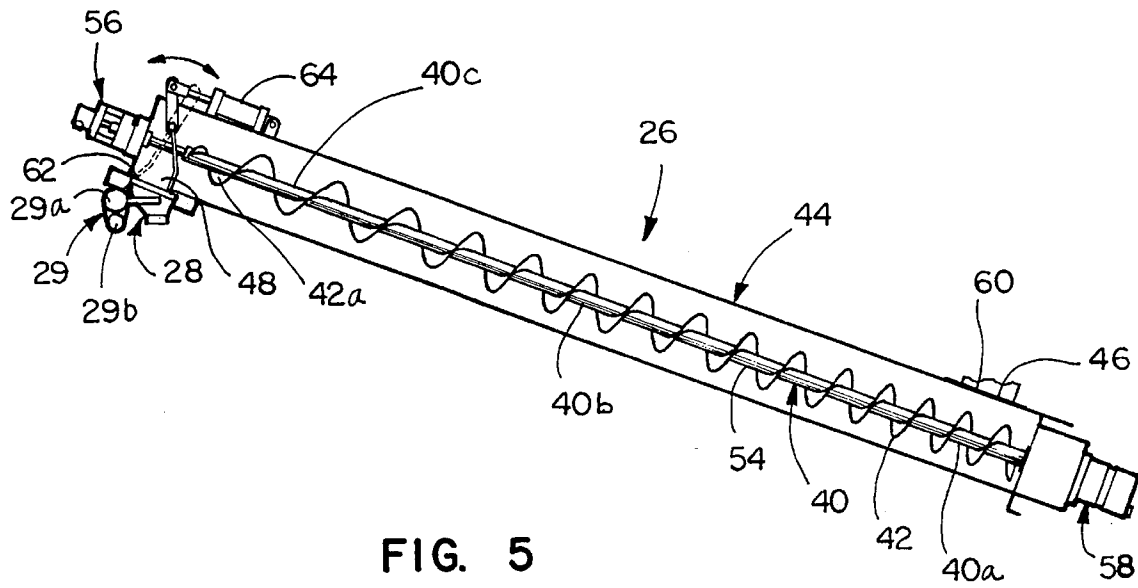


FIG. 5

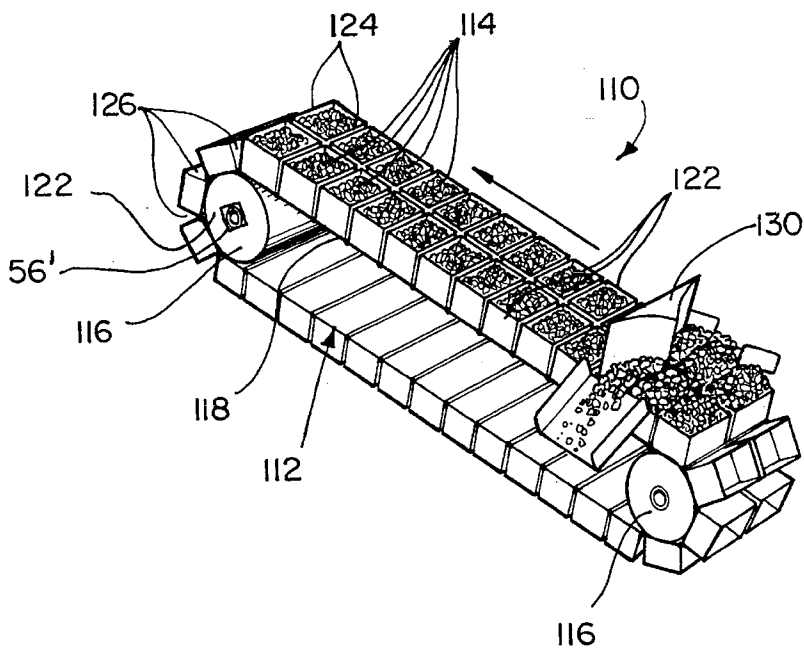


FIG. 6

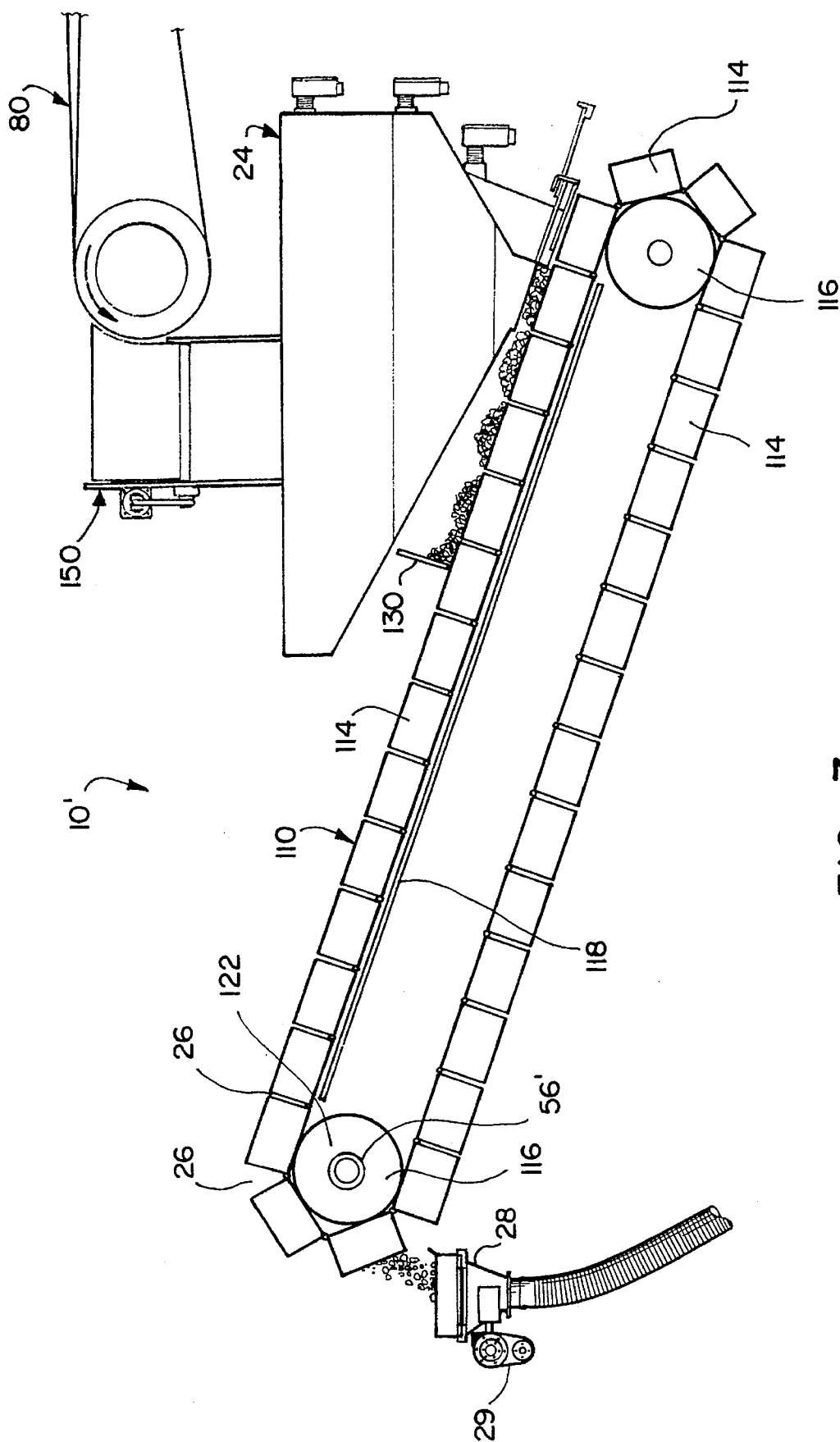


FIG. 7

STONE METERING SYSTEM FOR RAILROAD TRACK MAINTENANCE VEHICLE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a stone or ballast metering system for a railroad track maintenance vehicle.

The tremendous forces exerted on railroad track as trains and other rail vehicles move over the track results in displacement of the rails and ties within the stones or "ballast." In particular, the vertical position of the ties within the track ballast changes, usually with the ties settling deeper into the ballast, changing the height of the track. Accordingly, periodic realignment of the railroad track within the bed is necessary to restore the track to its desired configuration. Realignment is performed by either a tamper or a stone blower.

A tamper includes a jacking mechanism which grasps and lifts the rails and ties attached thereto. The tamper also includes blades which penetrate the ballast and are vibrated to force the ballast back under the lifted ties to return the track to a desired vertical position.

A stone blower also includes a jacking mechanism which grasps and lifts the rails and ties. However, rather than blades, the stoneblower includes tubes which penetrate the ballast and force new or additional stones beneath the ties. More particularly, a stoneblower is a vehicle that travels upon the track rails and carries a track lifting device, a number of workheads, a source of compressed air, a supply of ballast stones, and a stone metering system. The workheads each include one or more blow tubes through which ballast stone is blown by compressed air. In operation, the track lifting device raises the track rails and the ties to which the rails are secured, which creates a void beneath the ties. The blow tubes are forced into the track bed adjacent the raised ties to direct a measured quantity of ballast stone under the ties. The amount of stone is determined by the desired amount of lift.

The amount of ballast stone blown beneath each tie is crucial to the proper level of the tracks. The ballast stone must be delivered to the workheads in the proper quantity. It is the function of the stone metering system to ensure that the proper quantity of stone is delivered from the supply of ballast stones to the workheads.

In the past, vibratory chute style stone metering systems have been employed. This type of system utilizes a feeder pan to receive the desired amount of stone by weight. The measured stone is passed in bulk to a vibratory chute type feeder. The vibratory chute feeds the measured stone to the blow tubes at a fairly constant rate. This type of stone metering system is difficult to incorporate into the configuration and profile of the stoneblower. In addition, the precision of this design is adversely affected by a variety of elements, such as track cant, stone moisture content, track grade, and cycle time.

Another known type of stone metering system includes a number of auger conveyors which convey and meter stone to the workheads. Each auger conveyor includes an auger screw housed within a casing. As the auger screw is rotated, stone is conveyed along the flights of the screw. The amount of stone supplied to the blow tubes is measured by calculating the flow rate of the auger conveyor and monitoring the revolutions of the auger screw. Auger systems include an auger conveyor for each blow tube. Auger type stone metering systems have a variety of shortcomings. First, degrada-

tion (i.e. pulverization) of the stone during the conveying process produces "fines" (i.e. powdered stone) which reduces the accuracy of the metering system. Second, pulsed output of stone from the metering auger can lead to uneven distribution of stone. Third, the required multiplicity of augers is relatively expensive, bulky, and difficult to incorporate into the profile of a stoneblower.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The aforementioned problems are overcome by the present invention wherein an auger-type stone metering system includes augers that each feed multiple blow tubes. More particularly, the stone metering system includes a number of metering augers and a splitter for each auger. The metering augers convey the ballast stones upward along the flights of a rotating auger screw housed within a cylindrical casing. At the upper end, the stone is expelled onto the corresponding splitter. Each splitter includes two adjacent feed compartments which divide the stone supplied by the metering auger between two adjacent blow tubes. The splitters are moveable to provide the desired distribution between the blow tubes even when the stoneblower is tilted due to significant cant to the rails.

In a second aspect of the invention, the screw within the auger has a unique configuration to expel stone at a more uniform rate than previously has been possible. The pitch of the auger screw flights is increased between the inlet end and the outlet end to "expand" the stone reducing the production of fines through grinding and shearing. In addition, the diameter of the auger screw is tapered down or reduced toward the outlet end of the auger to improve consistent and even flow of stone onto the splitters.

A second embodiment of the invention incorporates a different metering conveyor. Specifically, each metering conveyor is a belt having a series of uniform, adjacent compartments along its length-somewhat like an ice-cube tray. Each compartment holds a known quantity of stone. Therefore, the stone can be metered by operating the conveyor to dump a desired number of compartment of stone onto the associated splitter. Preferably, a distribution plate is positioned over each conveyor to ensure that each compartment is evenly filled.

The present invention provides an accurate and reliable stone metering system for use in track maintenance vehicles. The variable-pitch and variable-diameter auger screw reduces pulverization of stone during the conveying process and makes the flow of stone out of the auger more consistent. In addition, the adjustable splitters compensate for a wide variety of flow factors, such as track cant, material characteristics, stone moisture content, track grade, and cycle time. Further, the splitters enable the number of metering augers to be cut in half thereby reducing the cost and profile of the system.

These and other objects, advantages, and features of the invention will be more fully understood and appreciated by reference to the detailed description of the preferred embodiment and the drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1a is a fragmentary side elevational view of a portion of a stoneblower showing the surge hopper, the work head, and the stone conveying/metering system of the present invention;

FIG. 1b is a fragmentary side elevational view of a second portion of the stoneblower to the right of FIG. 1a showing a portion of the conveyor system for moving stone from the main hopper to the surge hopper;

FIG. 1c is a fragmentary side elevational view of a third portion of the stoneblower to the right of FIG. 1c showing the main hopper and a portion of the conveyor system for moving stone from the main hopper to the surge hopper;

FIG. 2 is a side elevational view of the surge hopper and one stone auger;

FIG. 3 is a perspective view of the surge hopper;

FIG. 4 is a top plan view of the surge hopper and stone augers;

FIG. 5 is a sectional view of a stone metering auger showing the screw;

FIG. 6 is a perspective view of a metering conveyor according to an alternative embodiment; and

FIG. 7 is a side elevational view of the surge hopper and alternative metering conveyor.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The stone metering system of the present invention is illustrated in the drawings and generally designated 10. By way of example, and not by way of limitation, the stone metering system will be described in connection with a stoneblower 12. The stoneblower 12 (FIGS. 1a-c) includes a superstructure 14 carrying a supply of ballast stones 18, a plurality of workheads 22a-d, a stone replenishing system 70, and a stone metering system 10. Each workhead 22a-d includes a pair of blowing tubes 30a-b. The stoneblower 12 also includes wheels 13 for supporting the superstructure 14 upon the rails and an engine 15 for moving the stoneblower 12 along the track.

The stoneblower 12 travels along track to be realigned. A conventional track lifting device (not shown) carried on the superstructure 14 raises both the track rails and the ties to which the rails are secured, thereby creating a void beneath the raised ties. The workhead 22a-d forces the pair of blowing tubes 30a-b into the track bed adjacent to and straddling the raised track ties. Stone is then blown through the blowing tubes 30a-b into the voids beneath the raised ties. The stone is propelled through the blowing tubes 30a-b by compressed air that is supplied by any conventional means, such as an air compressor. Upon completion, the workhead 22a-d withdraws the blowing tubes 30a-b; and the stoneblower 12 indexes to the next tie.

I. Stone Replenishing System

A stone replenishing system 70 is provided to move stone from the main hopper 18 to the stone metering system 10 when the level of stone in the surge hopper 24 becomes low. While the surge hopper 24 will be described in greater detail below in conjunction with the stone metering system 10, a basic knowledge of its general structure and function are necessary for a clear understanding of the stone replenishing system 70. In general, the surge hopper 24 is an intermediate storage compartment that receives stone from the main hopper 72 and feeds that stone to the stone metering system 10. The surge hopper 24 has a wide but rather shallow construction which allows it to fit within the profile of the maintenance vehicle (See FIGS. 2-4). As a result of the relatively shallow nature of the surge hopper 24, the supply

of stone carried therein must be periodically replenished by the stone replenishing system 70.

Referring again to FIGS. 1a-c, the stone replenishing system 70 generally includes a main hopper 72, a main auger 74, a cleat conveyor 76, a stone scalper 78, a horizontal conveyor 80, a diverter assembly 150, and a plurality of stone level sensors 84a-f (See FIGS. 3 and 4). The main hopper 72 is supported upon the superstructure and carries the supply of ballast stones 18. The stone replenishing system 70 is controlled by the control system of the maintenance vehicle which monitors the stone level sensors 84a-d to periodically activate the system 70.

The stone level sensors 84a-f are mounted within the surge hopper 24 to monitor the level of stone therein (See FIGS. 3 and 4). Because of the wide and shallow construction of the surge hopper 24, stone level may vary at opposite sides of surge hopper 24. Accordingly, the stone level sensors 84a-f are aligned in two rows located on opposite sides of the surge hopper 24. Each row of sensors includes a high 84a and 84d, low 84b and 84e, and empty 84c sensor. In a preferred embodiment, the stone level sensors 84a-f are photoelectric sensors. However, a variety of other types of sensors may be employed and the incorporation thereof will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art.

Just as it is important to independently monitor the level of stone at opposite sides of the hopper 24, it is also important to independently feed stone to opposite sides of the hopper 24. As perhaps best illustrated in FIGS. 3 and 4, the diverter assembly 150 is mounted adjacent the end of the horizontal conveyor 80 to control the proportional flow of stone to opposite sides of the surge hopper 24. In a preferred embodiment, the diverter assembly 150 is mounted above the surge hopper 24 in alignment with the horizontal conveyor 80 and includes three diverter plates 152, 154 and 156 that extend radially from a common axis. Plates 154 and 156 are inclined to direct stone to opposite sides of the surge hopper 24. Plate 152 extends upward from and is pivotally secured to plates 154 and 156 at a common axis. Plate 152 divides and directs the stone flowing from the horizontal conveyor 80 toward plates 154 and 156. Changing the angular position of plate 152 alters the proportional flow of stone to plates 154 and 156, and consequently to opposite sides of the surge hopper 24. A double acting air cylinder 158 driven by the control system in response to data received from the stone level sensors 84a-f may be secured to plate 152 to provide automated control over its angular position. If the sensors 84a-f indicate that one side of the surge hopper 24 is lower than the other, then diverter plate 152 is positioned to increase the proportional flow of stone to the lower side.

II. Stone Metering System

The stone metering system 10 meters and conveys metered quantities of ballast stone to the workheads 22a-d. Referring to FIGS. 1 and 2, the stone metering system 10 is mounted upon the stoneblower 12 and includes a surge hopper 24, a plurality of metering augers 26a-d, and a plurality of splitters 28a-d.

As discussed above, the surge hopper 24 is fed by the stone replenishing system 70 and provides a constant supply of stone to the stone metering system 10. As perhaps best illustrated in FIG. 4, the surge hopper 24 has an open top and includes four feed compartments 38a-d. Each compartment 38a-d is tapered to feed one of the metering augers 26a-d through openings 60a-d in the bottom of each compartment 38a-d.

To provide even distribution of stone throughout compartments 38a-d, a rack 170 is mounted for reciprocating motion atop the surge hopper 24 (See FIG. 3). The rack 170 is slidably received within a pair of C-shaped guideways 172a-b. The rack 170 is secured to a reciprocating rack cylinder 182 and is synchronized to start and stop in correspondence with the stone replenishing system 70. In a preferred embodiment, the rack 170 includes two longitudinally extending beams 174a-b that are received within guideways 172a-b. Two pairs of cross tubes 176a-b extend between opposite longitudinal end portions of beams 174a-b. When the stone piled in the surge hopper 24 extends above the plane defined by the rack 170, the reciprocating cross tubes 176a-b engage and distribute the stone throughout the hopper 24.

In addition, opposite longitudinal ends of each beam 174a-b include conventional wear pads (not shown) and a sweep 178a-d. The wear pads are removably secured to each beam 174a-b to engage the guideways 172a-b and prevent premature wear of the beams 174a-b and guideways 172a-b. The wear pads may be replaced as necessary to extend the life of the rack assembly. The sweeps 178a-d are comprised of a plate 180a-d that extends angularly into the guideways 172a-b from the end of each beam 174a-b. The reciprocating motion of the rack 170 causes the plates 180a-d to "sweep" out any stone that may have accumulated within the guideways 172a-b.

One metering auger 26a-d is positioned below each of the surge hopper compartments 38a-d. As perhaps best illustrated in FIG. 5, each metering auger 26a-d generally includes a casing 44 and an auger screw 40 with variable pitch and variable diameter flights 42. The casing of the metering auger 44 includes a "U" shaped trough 50 that cooperates with a plurality of cover sections 52a-c to define a cylindrical chamber within which the auger screw 40 is rotatably supported (See FIG. 2). The cover sections 52a-c are removable to allow inspection, servicing, and cleaning of the auger 26a-d. In the preferred embodiment, the internal diameter of the casing 44 is approximately 9.00 inches (228.6 mm), and, as discussed below in more detail, the external diameter of the auger screw flights 42 is approximately 6.0 inches (15.24 cm). This provides a 1.5 inch (38.1 mm) screw-to-casing clearance which allows significant stone movement with reduced torque requirements and lower potential for jamming.

Inlet and outlet openings 46 and 48 extend through the side walls of the casing 44 adjacent longitudinally opposite ends of the metering augers 26a-d. The inlet opening 46 is located in the upper surface of the casing 44 where it may be aligned with one of the openings 60a-d in the surge hopper 24 to allow stone to feed into the casing 44 by gravity. The outlet opening 48 is disposed in the lower surface of casing 44 so that stone will flow from the metering auger. In a preferred embodiment, the auger screw 40 is supported within the casing 44 at the outlet end by an end plate bearing (not shown) and at the inlet end by a drive motor bearing (not shown).

The auger screw 40 (see FIG. 5) is constructed of sectional flights 42 welded to center shaft 54. In the preferred embodiment, the center shaft is two-inch schedule 80 pipe and the screw flights 42 have a maximum diameter of 6.0 inches (15.24 cm). In order to reduce wear, the screw flights 42 are preferably constructed of an abrasion resistant steel. The pitch of the auger screw flights 42 is approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ at the inlet end 40a of the screw near the inlet end of the casing 44. The pitch is 1 or full along the remaining portion 40b of the screw 40. The increase in pitch expands the stone

during the conveying process to decrease the production of fines by reducing cross abrasion between the stones. In the presently preferred embodiment, the pitch of the inlet end 40a is 4.0 inches; and the pitch of the remaining portion 40b is 6.0 inches.

In addition, the last flight 42a adjacent the outlet end 40c of the screw tapers from the full diameter to the diameter of the center shaft 54. The stone naturally rides in the "bottom" of each flight as it travels up the screw. Without the described tapering, the stone would be discharged in these bunches as each screw flight emptied. By reducing the screw diameter at the discharge end, the stone becomes a more continuous or uniform flow. This enables the stone to flow from the metering augers 26a-d in a smooth manner.

An encoder 56 is mounted to the outlet end of the casing 44 to allow the control system to monitor the revolutions or rotational movement of the auger screw 40. The preferred dimensions of the auger screw 40 and casing 44 described above yield an average stone flow rate of 1.32 kilograms per revolution. Based on the average flow rate and rotational movement of the auger screw 40, the control system determines the amount of stone supplied to the blow tubes and adjusts the speed of the drive motor 58 accordingly. A variety of encoders capable of converting rotational movement into electrical signals are well known to those of ordinary skill in the art.

A drive motor 58 is mounted to the inlet end of the casing 44 for engaging and rotatably driving the auger screw 40. In the preferred embodiment, each blowing tube requires anywhere from 0.25 to 1.0 kg/second of stone. Because each metering auger 26 supplies stone to two blowing tubes, each auger 26 must have a delivery range of 0.5-2.0 kg/sec, or twice the single tube stone requirements. Based on the above-noted average flow rate of 1.32 kg/revolution, the auger screw 40 must have a speed range of approximately 23 to 91 rotations per minute to meet the stone delivery requirements. The hydraulic motor 58 is controlled by a standard double-solenoid-operated three-position valve allowing reversal of the screw when required to clean or unjam the auger. As is well known to those skilled in the art, pressure-compensated flow controls may be used to maintain smooth rotation of the auger screw 40 under varied torque requirements.

The profile constraints of the maintenance vehicle require that the openings 60a-d in the surge hopper 24 lie horizontally below the splitters 28a-d. Accordingly, the metering augers 26a-d are inclined upward from the inlet end of the casing to lift the stone to the splitters 28a-d. In a preferred embodiment, the metering augers 26a-d are inclined upward approximately 20 degrees to accommodate the size of the surge hopper 24 and the profile of the maintenance vehicle. The inclination of the auger can be decreased to reduce the development of fines and also to reduce the torque requirements on the drive motor. However, in order to do so, the height of the workheads 22a-d or the depth of the surge hopper 24 must be sacrificed.

The splitters 28a-d include an open top and two adjacent compartments 66 and 68 each separated from the other by a splitter wall 70 generally aligned with the outlet 48 of the corresponding metering auger 26a-d. On level track, the splitter 28a-d is preferably offset from the center of the outlet 48 by 0.19 inches. The offset compensates for the stone being propelled slightly off center by the auger screw 40. On railroad track with significant cant, the offset of the splitter 28a-d may be adjusted to compensate for the angle of the vehicle and provide for accurate distribution of the

stone between the two blow tubes. For example, the stone is accurately split with an offset of 0.62 inches for track cant of 4 degrees and an offset of 1.06 inches for track cant of 8 degrees. The offset of the common wall **70** is controlled by an automated linear actuator **29** incorporated into the control system (See FIGS. 2-3). In the preferred embodiment, the automated actuator **29** also includes a position feedback mechanism **29b**, such as a potentiometer, to measure the offset of the common wall **70**. In operation, the position feedback mechanism **29b** measures the offset of the common wall **70**. Based on this measurement, the actuator **29** is either extended or retracted to obtain the desired offset for the existing cant.

III. Operation of Auger Embodiment

In operation, the control system (not shown) continually monitors the stone level sensors **84a-f** to determine when the supply of stone in the surge hopper **24** requires replenishing. When the stone level sensors **84a-b** indicate that the level of stone on either side of the surge hopper **24** is low, the stone replenishing system **70** is activated. The control system starts the main auger **74**, the cleat conveyor **76**, the stone scalper **78** and the horizontal conveyor **80**. The main auger **74** moves stone out of the main hopper **72** to the cleat conveyor **76**. The cleat conveyor **76** carries stone from the main hopper **72** to the stone scalper **78**.

The stone scalper **78** is of conventional design and filters the stone by a screen that prevents any stones larger than the openings of the screen from passing through to the horizontal conveyor **80**.

The horizontal conveyor **80** receives the scalped stone and delivers it to the surge hopper **24**. As the stone is expelled from the horizontal conveyor **80**, the diverter assembly **150** directs it in proper proportion to opposite sides of the surge hopper **24** as described above. The stone replenishing system does not stop delivering stone to the surge hopper **24** until both high sensors **84a** and **84d** are activated. In addition, if either empty sensor **84c** or **84f** is activated then the maintenance function is halted while the surge hopper **24** is replenished.

Rack **170**, mounted in the opening of the surge hopper **24**, reciprocates to distribute the ballast stone delivered by the horizontal conveyor evenly **24** throughout compartments **38a-d**. The ballast stone flows by gravity through openings **60a-d** into auger inlets **46a-d** to provide a constant supply of stone to the metering augers **26a-d**. The auger screws **40a-d** are rotatably driven by drive motors **58a-d** to carry the stone upward from the inlets **46a-d** through the metering augers **44a-d** along the flights **42a-d** of the screws **40a-d**. The outlet gates **62a-d** are opened as rotation of the auger screws **40a-d** begins.

The stone expands along auger screws **40a-d** as it is driven upward along the variable pitch flights **42a-d**. Upon reaching the upward extreme of the casing **44a-d**, the stone is expelled from the metering augers **26a-d** through outlets **48a-d**. The stone flows by gravity into the splitters **28a-d** where it is evenly divided and fed to the two blow tubes. When stone flow is no longer desired, the drive motors **58a-d** are stopped and the outlet gates **62a-d** are closed to prevent stone from spilling into the splitters. As discussed above, encoder **56** provides the control system (not shown) with an accurate measure of the number of revolutions of the auger screw **40**. The amount of stone delivered by the metering augers **26a-d** is determined by multiplying the revolutions of the auger screws **40a-d** by the average flow rate (i.e. 1.32 kg/revolution).

In addition, fluid pressure build-up in the feed line causes the hydraulic motor **58** to overshoot or continue to rotate for a short period after the motor has been shut off (e.g. the hydraulic valve is shut off). The amount of overshoot is proportional to the speed of the motor prior to shut off. Overshoot adversely affects the accuracy of the system by causing additional stone to fall into the splitter. Accordingly, the control system preferably considers an overshoot parameter which dictates how far in advance the motor **58** must be shut off to compensate for the overshoot.

IV. Alternative Ice-Cube Tray Embodiment

In an alternative embodiment of the present invention, the metering augers **26a-d** are replaced by unique belt-like conveyors **110**. With the exception of the stone conveying/metering units, the stoneblower and stone metering system are identical to those described in conjunction with the auger embodiment.

A metering conveyor constructed in accordance with the alternative embodiment is illustrated in FIGS. 6 and 7. The metering conveyor **110** includes a conveyor belt **112**, a plurality of support rollers **116**, a steel slider bed **118** for supporting the conveyor belt, and a conventional drive system, such as a hydraulic motor (not shown).

The conveyor belt **112** is unique and separated into a number of compartments **114** by a plurality of intersecting longitudinally and laterally extending walls **122** and **124**. Each of the compartments **114** are precisely and uniformly sized to hold a specific quantity of stone. Preferably, the belt **112** is approximately 5 inches wide and the individual compartments **114** are approximately 2 inches wide by 2 inches long by 1 inch high. A plurality of cuts **126** are made through the longitudinally extending walls to allow the belt **112** to move around the support rollers **118**.

A stone distribution plate **130** is positioned above the conveyor **110** immediately upstream from the location where the surge hopper **24** feeds the conveyor belt **112**. The exact longitudinal location of the distribution plate **130** is not critical, and it may alternatively be located adjacent the upper support roller **122** to level the stone immediately prior to dumping.

V. Operation of Alternative Embodiment

The surge hopper **24** feeds stone directly into the compartments **114** of the conveyor belt **112**. The conveyor belt **112** in turn conveys the stone upward and expels it into the splitter **28**. As the conveyor belt **112** carries stone upward, it passes beneath the distribution plate **130** which levels and distributes the stone carried in the compartments **114** (See FIG. 7) to improve the uniformity of stone within each compartment. As the conveyor belt **112** rounds the upper support roller **122**, the stone is dumped from the compartments **114** into the corresponding splitter **28**.

As in the preferred embodiment, the amount of stone delivered by the conveyors **110** is determined in part by an encoder **56'**. In this embodiment, the encoder **56'** monitors the rotational movement of the upper support roller **122** to determine the number of compartments **114** dumped into the splitter **28**. The control system (not shown) multiplies the number of compartments **114** dumped into the splitter by the amount of stone carried by each compartment to determine the total amount of stone delivered. Alternatively, a sensor (not shown) may be mounted adjacent the belt **112** to determine the number of compartments **114** passing thereby.

Preferably, the sensor is photoelectric. However, a variety of conventional sensors will suffice.

The above descriptions are those of preferred embodiments of the invention. Various alterations and changes can be made without departing from the spirit and broader aspects of the invention set forth in the appended claims, which are to be interpreted in accordance with the principles of patent law, including the Doctrine of Equivalents.

The embodiments of the invention in which an exclusive property or privilege is claimed are defined as follows:

1. A railroad track maintenance vehicle comprising:

- a superstructure adapted to travel along a railroad track;
- at least one workhead carded on said superstructure;
- a plurality of blow tubes carded on said workhead;
- a main hopper carded on said superstructure;
- a supply of ballast stones carded in said main hopper; and
- a means for moving the ballast stones from the main hopper to the blow tubes including a stone replenishing system, a stone metering apparatus, and a splitter means for dividing and distributing stone exiting said stone metering apparatus to said blow tubes;

said stone metering apparatus including:

- a casing defining an inlet and an outlet through which said ballast stone is received and discharged, respectively, said casing having a uniform diameter between said inlet and said outlet inclusive; and
- a screw rotatably supported within said casing for conveying said ballast stone from said inlet to said outlet, said screw having an inlet end proximate said inlet, said screw having a remainder other than said inlet end, said screw including a plurality of flights each having a pitch, said pitch of said flights at said inlet end being less than said pitch of said flights at said remainder of said screw, whereby flight volume is greater away from said inlet end to expand said ballast stone and reduce the production of fines within said stone metering apparatus.

2. The vehicle as defined in claim 1 wherein said screw includes an outlet end proximate said outlet and having a diameter smaller than the diameter of said remainder of said screw to enable a relatively even flow of the ballast stone through said casing outlet.

3. A railroad track maintenance vehicle comprising:

- a superstructure adapted to travel along a railroad track;
- at least one workhead carried on said superstructure;
- a plurality of blow tubes carried on said workhead;
- a main hopper carried on said superstructure;
- a supply of ballast stones carried in said main hopper; and
- a means for moving the ballast stones from the main hopper to the blow tubes including a stone replenishing system, a stone metering apparatus, and a splitter means for dividing and distributing stone exiting said stone metering apparatus to said blow tubes;

said stone metering apparatus including:

- a casing defining an inlet and an outlet through which said ballast stone is received and discharged, respectively, said casing having a uniform diameter between said inlet and said outlet; and
- a screw rotatably supported within said casing for conveying said ballast stone from said inlet to said outlet, said screw having an outlet end proximate said outlet, said screw having a remainder other than said outlet end, said screw having a non-uniform diameter along its length, said diameter of said outlet

end of said screw being less than said diameter of said remainder of said screw, whereby said ballast stones flow together at said outlet end to reduce bunching and provide relatively even flow from said casing outlet.

4. The vehicle as defined in claim 3 wherein said splitter means includes variable positioning means for offsetting said splitter means in relation to said outlet.

5. An improved track maintenance vehicle having a superstructure adapted to travel along a railroad track, at least one workhead carried on said superstructure, a plurality of blow tubes carried on said workhead, a supply of ballast stones carried on said superstructure, a means for moving the ballast stones from the supply of ballast stones to the workhead, wherein the improvement comprises:

said means for moving said ballast stone from said supply of ballast stone to said workheads includes a stone metering apparatus supported upon said track maintenance vehicle and a splitter means for dividing and distributing stone exiting said stone metering apparatus to said plurality of blow tubes carried on said workhead, said stone metering apparatus comprising a stone metering auger including a casing having inlet and outlet openings and an auger screw having longitudinally opposite inlet and outlet ends rotatably housed within said casing, said casing having a uniform diameter, said auger screw including flights that increase in pitch as they extend longitudinally along the screw away from said inlet end, said auger screw further including flights that decrease in diameter at said outlet end, whereby said increasing pitch reduces production of fines within said stone metering apparatus by expanding said stone, and further whereby said decreasing diameter reduces bunching of stone by causing said stone to flow together toward said outlet end of said stone metering apparatus.

6. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 5, said splitter means for dividing and distributing the stone delivered by said metering auger simultaneously to said plurality of blow tubes, and a splitter mounting means for mounting said splitter means in proximity to said casing outlet opening whereby stone expelled from said metering auger passes into said splitter means.

7. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 6, further comprising a surge hopper mounted upon said superstructure and having an outlet opening in communication with said casing inlet opening whereby stone delivered to said surge hopper flows into said metering auger.

8. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 7, wherein said splitter mounting means further includes variable positioning means for offsetting said splitter means in relation to said casing outlet opening.

9. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 8, further comprising an outlet gate mounted over said casing outlet opening and a gate control means for actuating said outlet gate between a first open position in which stone may be expelled from said metering auger through said casing outlet opening and a second closed position in which stone is prevented from being expelled from said metering auger through said casing outlet opening.

10. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 9, wherein said maintenance vehicle further includes a main hopper for storing the supply of ballast stones; and

wherein said means for moving the ballast stones from the supply of ballast stones to the workhead further includes a stone replenishing system mounted on said superstructure for moving stone from said main hopper

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to said surge hopper, said stone replenishing system including a main auger mounted within said main hopper for moving stone out of said main hopper, a cleat conveyor in proximity to said main hopper for receiving and conveying stone moved out of said main hopper, a stone scalper in proximity to said cleat conveyor for receiving stone conveyed by said cleat conveyor and screening out excessively large stones, a horizontal conveyor having a first end in proximity to said stone scalper and a second end in proximity to said surge hopper for receiving scalped stone from said stone scalper and conveying the scalped stone to said surge hopper, a control means for activating and deactivating said stone replenishing system and a plurality of stone level sensors mounted within said surge hopper.

11. A railroad track maintenance vehicle, comprising: a superstructure adapted to travel along a railroad track; at least one workhead carded on said superstructure; a plurality of blow tubes carded on said workhead; a main hopper carded on said superstructure; a supply of ballast stones carded in said main hopper; and a means for moving the ballast stones from the main hopper to the blow tubes including a stone replenishing system, a stone metering apparatus, and a splitter means for dividing and distributing stone exiting said stone metering apparatus to said blow tubes;

said stone metering apparatus including a stone metering auger supported upon said superstructure, said stone metering auger having a casing with inlet and outlet openings and an auger screw with longitudinally opposite inlet and outlet ends rotatably housed within said casing, said casing having a uniform diameter, said auger screw including flights that decrease in diameter at said outlet end of said auger screw and increase in pitch as they extend along the length of said screw away from said inlet end toward said outlet end, whereby said increasing pitch reduces production of fines within said stone metering apparatus by expanding said stone, and further whereby said decreasing diameter reduces bunching of stone exiting said stone metering apparatus by causing said stone to flow together toward said outlet end.

12. The track maintenance vehicle of claim 11, said splitter means for dividing and distributing the stone deliv-

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ered by said metering auger simultaneously to said plurality of blow tubes, and a splitter mounting means for mounting said splitter means in proximity to said casing outlet opening whereby stone expelled from said metering auger passes into said splitter means.

13. The track maintenance vehicle of claim 12, further comprising a surge hopper mounted upon said superstructure, said surge hopper being in communication with said stone replenishing system to receive said ballast stone from said main hopper, said surge hopper having an outlet opening in communication with said casing inlet opening whereby stone delivered to said surge hopper by said stone replenishing system flows into said metering auger.

14. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 13, wherein said splitter mounting means further includes variable positioning means for offsetting said splitter means in relation to said casing outlet opening.

15. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 14, further comprising a rack capable of reciprocating motion mounted within said surge hopper to distribute stone delivered by said stone replenishing system evenly throughout said surge hopper.

16. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 15, further comprising an outlet gate mounted over said casing outlet opening and a gate control means for actuating said outlet gate between a first open position in which stone may be expelled from said metering auger through said casing outlet opening and a second closed position in which stone is prevented from being expelled from said metering auger through said casing outlet opening.

17. The improved track maintenance vehicle of claim 16, wherein said stone replenishing system includes a main auger mounted within said main hopper for moving stone out of said main hopper, a cleat conveyor in proximity to said main hopper for receiving and conveying stone moved out of said main hopper, a stone scalper in proximity to said cleat conveyor for receiving stone conveyed by said cleat conveyor and screening out excessively large stones, a horizontal conveyor having a first end in proximity to said stone scalper and a second end in proximity to said surge hopper for receiving scalped stone from said stone scalper and conveying the scalped stone to said surge hopper, a control means for activating and deactivating said stone replenishing system and a plurality of stone level sensors mounted within said surge hopper.

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UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
CERTIFICATE OF CORRECTION

PATENT NO. : 5,584,641
DATED : December 17, 1996
INVENTOR(S) : Kevin A. Hansen

It is certified that error appears in the above-identified patent and that said Letters Patent is hereby corrected as shown below:

Column 9, Claim 1, Line 13:
"carded" should be --carried--

Column 9, Claim 1, Line 14:
"carded" should be --carried--

Column 9, Claim 1, Line 15:
"carded" should be --carried--

Column 9, Claim 1, Line 16:
"carded" should be --carried--

Column 11, Claim 11, Lines 19, 20, 21, & 22:
delete all occurrences of "carded" and insert --carried--

Signed and Sealed this
Twenty-fifth Day of March, 1997

Attest:



BRUCE LEHMAN

Attesting Officer

Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks