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METHOD FOR DISSOLUTION AND STABILIZATION OF SILICA-RICH FIBERS

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METHOD FOR DISSOLUTION AND STABILIZATION  
OF SILICA-RICH FIBERS

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METHOD FOR DISSOLUTION AND STABILIZATION  
OF SILICA-RICH FIBERS

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention:

The present invention relates to the dissolution of silica-rich  
10 fibers such as borosilicate glass, fiberglass and asbestos. More  
particularly, the present invention relates to preparation of  
contaminated and hazardous silica-rich fibers for stabilization and  
disposal. The United States Government has rights in this invention  
pursuant to Contract No. DE-AC09-89SR18035 between the U.S.  
15 Department of Energy and Westinghouse Savannah River Company.

2. Discussion of Background:

Silica-rich fibers include glass fibers, borosilicate glass fibers  
such as fiberglass and asbestos. These types of fibers are found in  
insulation and filter material. In particular, so-called HEME (High  
20 Energy Mist Eliminator) and HEPA (High Energy Particulate  
Absorber) filters are made of borosilicate glass fibers, the latter with a  
binder such as polyurethane foam, the former without a binder. These  
filters are usually encased in steel frames.

HEME and HEPA filters, because they are highly efficient, are  
25 often used when contaminants are present since it is then so much  
more important to cleanse the air of the contaminants before venting it

to the atmosphere. Periodically, however, the filters themselves must be replaced and the used filters properly disposed of. Proper disposal is frequently made more complicated by the nature of the contaminants adsorbed by the filter material.

5           For example, in a radioactive environment such as in a facility for processing radioactive waste or spent nuclear fuel, HEPA and HEMA filters can become contaminated by radioisotopes such as cesium-137 and strontium-90, both having relatively longer decay half-lives and being known carcinogens. If the concentrations of these  
10 and other radioisotopes present on the filters are sufficiently great, the filters cannot be disposed of as "low-level radioactive waste" but must meet requirements for disposal as "high-level radioactive wastes". Currently, high level radioactive waste is prepared for disposal by encapsulating it in glass to stabilize it for long term storage until  
15 radioactive decay reduces the primary hazard of the waste -- radioactivity -- to innocuous levels. If the contaminant-bearing filter material can be dissolved, it could be incorporated into the predominantly silica matrix of the bulk glass. A filter frame, if present, can then be decontaminated and disposed of as low-level  
20 radioactive waste or perhaps reused. Dissolution of the glass fibers of the filters would decrease the volume of material requiring disposal and simplify disposal because no additional techniques would be needed to stabilize and encapsulate the fibers for disposal.

          However, bulk glass is not easily dissolved. It is this very  
25 characteristic of glass that recommends it as a matrix for the long term encapsulation of radionuclides.

In U.S. 4,995,916 issued February 1991 to Meikrantz et al., there is disclosed a process for decontaminating radioactively contaminated filters made of phenolic resins, rather than borosilicate glass, and recovery of hazardous material attached thereto. This process begins with dissolution of the filter material in a strong acid (8-12 M nitric acid) at elevated temperature to solubilize the filter material, followed by recovery of the contaminant of interest using standard chemical techniques.

However, there remains a need for a process for solubilizing contaminated, hazardous silica-rich fibers, especially for use in preparation of HEME and HEPA fiberglass filter materials for disposal.

### SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to its major aspects and broadly stated, the present invention is a method for dissolving silica-rich fibers, such as borosilicate fibers, fiberglass and asbestos. The method comprises the steps of (1) making a first mixture of sodium hydroxide and water; (2) immersing the fibers in the first mixture; (3) maintaining the fibers in this first mixture until the concentration of silica approaches equilibrium and only a gelatinous residue of the fibers remains; (4) removing the residue from the first mixture; (5) making a second mixture of nitric acid and water; (6) immersing the residue in this second mixture; and (7) maintaining the residue in the second mixture until it dissolves.

The first mixture is at least two percent by weight sodium hydroxide, but preferably not more than 30 weight percent, most preferably approximately five weight percent. The second mixture comprises at least one weight percent but preferably approximately 5 five percent by weight nitric acid. Both mixtures are heated to approximately at least their respective boiling temperatures and held at those temperatures for approximately 48 hours and 96 hours, respectively. When dissolution is complete, the pH of the solution may be adjusted with hot, five-weight-percent sodium hydroxide to be 10 caustic so that it is compatible with vitrification process input streams.

An important feature of the present invention is the use of a strong, hot, basic mixture followed by a strong, hot acidic mixture. The strong base breaks down the silica fiber matrix to a gel; the strong acid dissolves the gel. The result is complete dissolution of the fibers, 15 as well as the typical binders that are used in the making of some filters. Completely or substantially completely dissolved fibers allows feeding the solution along with the input stream to a vitrification process input stream where the silica fiber material can be formed into non-respirable bulk glass. Especially in the case of fiberglass, the 20 disposal of which is subject to stringent regulatory control, having an effective dissolution method that leads directly to a long term stabilization process is a distinct advantage of the present method.

Other features and advantages of the present invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from a careful reading of the 25 Detailed Description of a Preferred Embodiment presented below and accompanied by the drawings.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the drawings,

5 Fig. 1 is a graph showing silica concentration versus dissolution time in the basic mixture; and

Fig. 2 is a graph showing calcium and magnesium concentration versus dissolution time in the acidic mixture, indicating the rate at which the calcium and magnesium of the silica gel break down.

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## DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The present invention is a method for dissolving silica-rich fibers. Silica-rich fibers include two types that are especially  
15 important to be able to dispose of properly and their dissolution greatly facilitates disposal because the dissolved glass fibers can be vitrified in a non-respirable bulk glass matrix made at least in part of the chemical constituents in the fibers themselves. These fibers are borosilicate glass, as is used in HEPA and HEME filters that may have  
20 been used to filter radioactive or chemical contaminants from the exhaust of a laboratory or other facility where such contaminants are encountered, fiberglass and asbestos, formerly, widely-used insulating material.

According to the dissolution process, the fibers are immersed in  
25 a first mixture of water and hot sodium hydroxide solution. Preferably, the sodium hydroxide solution contains at least two



percent by weight sodium hydroxide in water, more preferably between two and thirty weight percent and most preferably approximately 5 weight percent sodium hydroxide. Also preferably, the solution is heated to approximately at least the boiling temperature of the solution (approximately 104° C).

The fibers should remain immersed in the hot sodium hydroxide solution until the concentration of dissolved silica reaches equilibrium at which time the fibers have become gelatinous, typically about 48 hours. Fig. 1 is a graph depicting the concentration of silica in sodium hydroxide solution versus time. About 50% of the fibers are dissolved in this first part of the method.

After immersion in sodium hydroxide, the residue of the fibers is immersed in a solution of hot nitric acid, preferably at least one percent nitric acid by weight and most preferably approximately five percent. This second solution is also preferably heated to its boiling temperature (approximately 103° C) and maintained in the hot nitric acid solution until dissolution is complete, usually after the calcium and magnesium concentrations in the solution reach equilibrium (approximately 96 hours). Fig. 2 is a graph of calcium and magnesium concentrations in the nitric acid solution versus time.

Optionally, for feeding the dissolved fibers into a vitrification system, it may be necessary to adjust the pH to be caustic so that it is compatible with the balance of the input feed.

Adding a five weight percent sodium hydroxide solution and soaking for four hours raises the pH to the desired levels. The sodium hydroxide solution should also be at or near boiling.

If the fibers were part of HEME or HEPA filters, the steel frames can be removed from the solution and rinsed with water. The cesium-137, strontium 90 and any transuranic wastes follow the dissolved silica fibers to the vitrification system melter.

- 5        It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that many changes and substitutions can be made to the preferred embodiment herein described without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention as defined by the appended claims.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

A method for dissolving silica-rich fibers such as borosilicate fibers, fiberglass and asbestos to stabilize them for disposal. The method comprises (1) immersing the fibers in hot, five-weight-percent sodium hydroxide solution until the concentration of dissolved silica reaches equilibrium and a only a residue is left (about 48 hours), then immersing the residue in hot, five-weight-percent nitric acid until the residue dissolves (about 96 hours). After adjusting the pH of the dissolved fibers to be caustic, the solution can then be added to a waste vitrification stream for safe disposal. The method is useful in disposing contaminated HEME and HEPA filters.

FIG. 1.

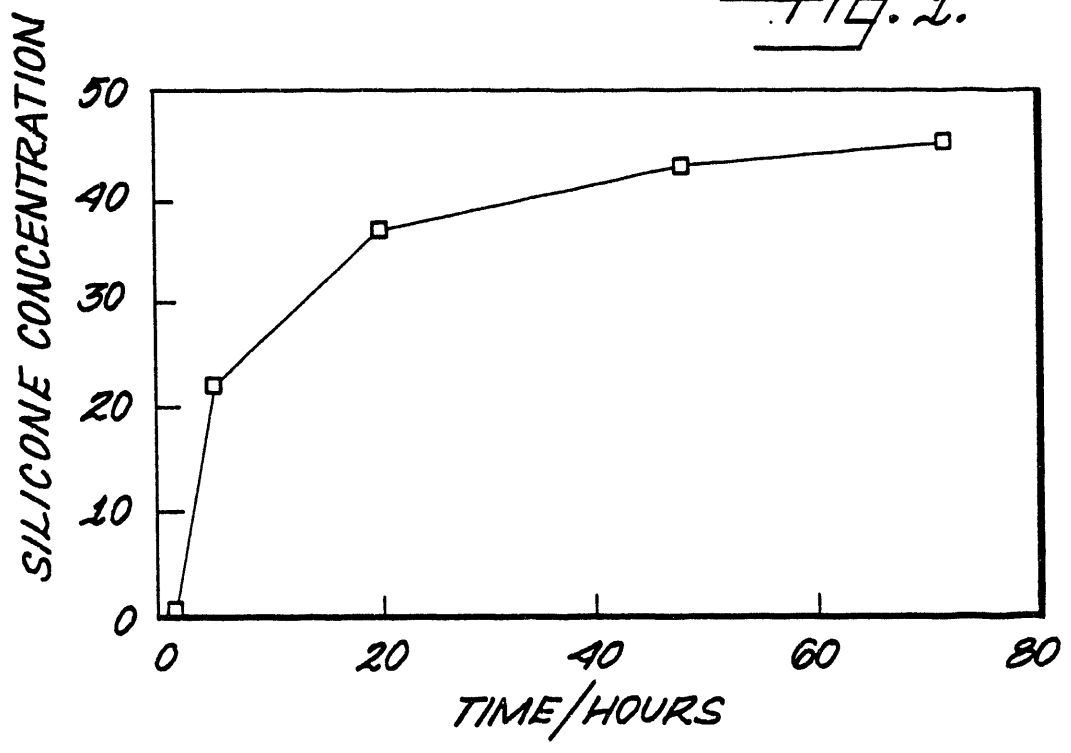
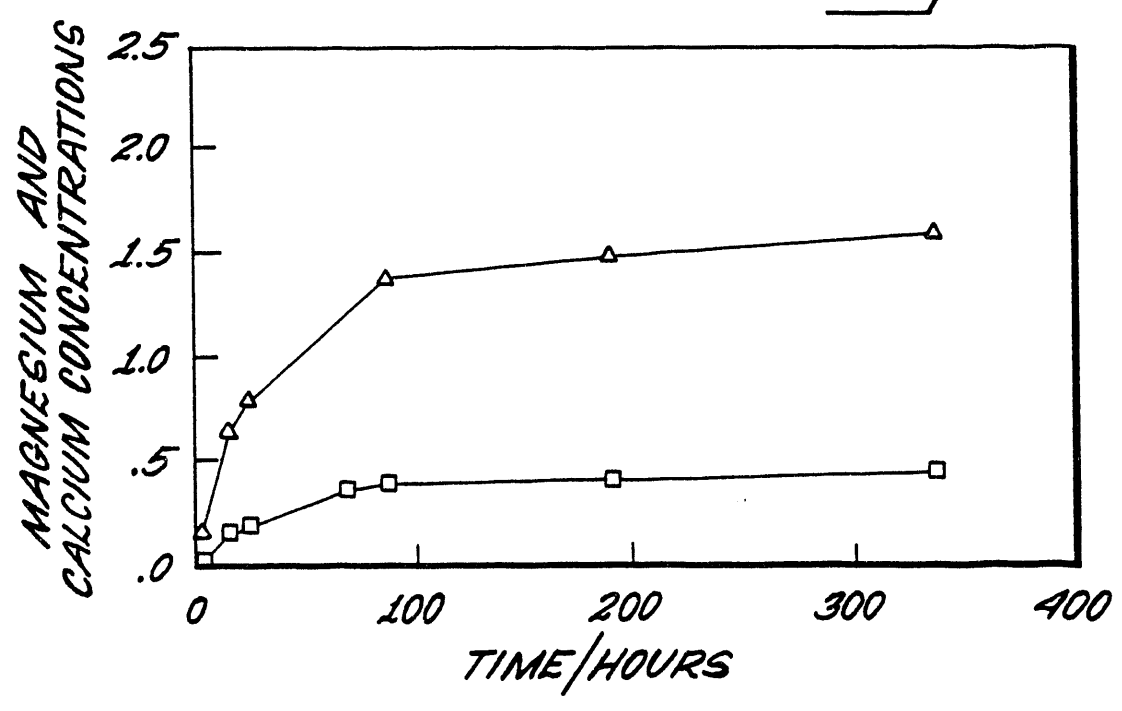


FIG. 2.



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