Simulation and economic analysis of a hydrometallurgical approach developed for the treatment of waste printed circuit boards

Bırloaga I.*, Veglıó F.

Department of Industrial and Information Engineering and Economics, University of L'Aquila, Via Giovanni Gronchi 18, 67100 L'Aquila, Italy

*corresponding author: Ionela Birloaga

e-mail: ionelapoenita.birloaga@graduate.univaq.it

Abstract

This paper presents the main achievements of a hydrometallurgical process to recover base and precious metals from waste printed circuit boards. The technology comprise a first leaching process performed in a two-step counter current way with sulfuric acid and hydrogen peroxide for base metals solubilization and a consecutive cross leaching process with thiourea, ferric sulfate and sulfuric acid to extract precious metals. Furthermore, the reach solutions are subjected to cementation procedure with zinc powder to recover the elements of interests in their metallic form. The enriched solution with zinc after base metals recovery is considered as a by-product of the process as this has the properties suitable for its using in agriculture industry as fertilizing agent. The spent solution achieved after cementation of precious metals is partially recycled within the process and the other part is treated by Fenton process and then neutralized with lime. Considering the achieved results at laboratory level, the entirely procedure was simulated using SuperPro Design software to determine the process economy for an industrial plant.

Keywords: Waste Printed Circuit Board, Hydrometallurgical Process, Process Analysis, Super Pro Design

1. Introduction

The waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE) represent about 5% from the total of solid waste generated each year (STEP 2010). According to Balde *et al* (Balde *et al*. 2014), in 2014 about 6.5 Mt of WEEEs have been formally treaded by national take-back systems at worldwide level, which means about 15.5 % of the total quantity of these kind of waste generated (41.8Mt) within the same year. This waste is considered as being both hazardous material due to its content of dangerous substances but also a valuable secondary resource of base, precious and rare element and not limited. According to literature data, over 57 elements are present in the WEEEs structure (Behrendt *et al*. 2007) (Fig.1). Therefore, in order to avoid the environmental contamination with these toxic substances, there have been implemented various regulations that had as main core firstly to collect and minimize and, thereafter, product reuse and materials recovery to avoid landfill and incineration (the most used technologies till a few years ago) (Khetriwal *et al*. 2009).

Most of all the electrical and electronic equipment present in their structure at least a printed circuit boards. This component has attracted the largest interest of processing due to its relatively high content of base and precious metals compared with their content within the primary ores. However, as the composition of waste printed circuit boards is very heterogeneous, their processing is very difficult. The literature data presents various technologies for the treatment of these wastes. Generally, they consist in a first step of physical-mechanical treatment flowed by a chemical process. Mostly, the chemical processes applied for WPCBs treatment are based either on thermal or aqueous methodologies or even a combination of thereof. As is specified in the literature data, the most easily applicable and environmental friendly procedure in the treatment of such as wastes in represented by the aqueous methods, more particularly, the hydrometallurgical procedures. Within this paper the main achievements of the research undertaken for WPCBs treatment by a hydrometallurgical technology are shown. In addition, the process simulation and economic analysis considering a certain capacity of an industrial plant are also exposed here.

2.1 WPCB hydrometallurgical process development

The waste printed circuit boards represent an important secondary resource of precious metals (Au, Ag, Pd) but also of base metals (Cu, Zn, Ni, Sn, Pb, Fe, Al). As was expressed in the paper of Wand and Gaustad (Wang & Gaustad 2012) the main economic drivers in the recycling of such waste, considering their concentrations and market price, are in the following order: Au, Pd, Cu, Ag, Pt, Sn, Ni. We have performed various experimental procedures for recovery of main economic drivers (Au, Cu and Ag) from waste printed circuit boards of exhausted personal computers. In a first study we have published the achieved results for the physical and chemical characterization of five different samples (Birloaga *et al*. 2012).

2. Developed technology, process simulation and economy

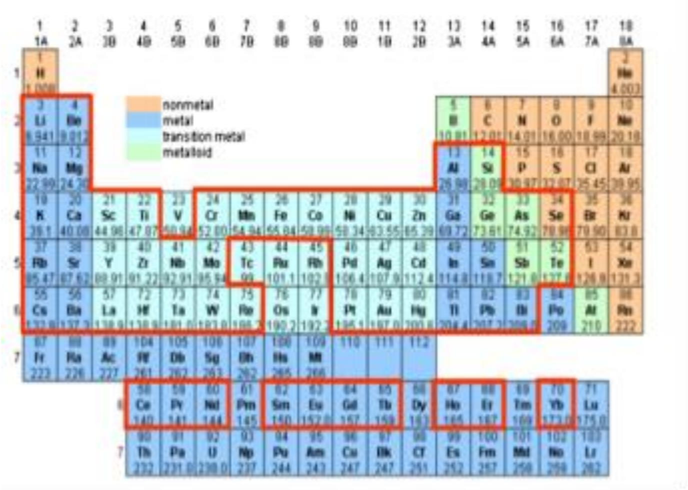

Figure 1. Elements present in the structure of WEEE structure (Behrendt *et al*. 2007)

The procedure consisted of characterization consisted of comminution experiments which have shown that the precious metals cannot be separated in a single fraction, these being present in all the chemically analysed fractions. Therefore, this physical process cannot be considered as suitable for WPCBs treatment.Then, the research activity was continued with a study on various factors influence during the leaching using a first leaching system for Cu composed of hydrogen peroxide as oxidant and sulfuric acid as reagent followed by a second leaching system for Au and Ag with thiourea as reagent and ferric sulfate as oxidant using an acid solution of diluted sulfuric acid as medium (Birloaga *et al*. 2013). Has been shown that the process temperature, hydrogen peroxide concentration, agitation rate and time had an important influence on copper extraction. Decrease of particle size correlated with increase of oxidant concentration had a favourable effect on the degree of Cu dissolution. Was shown that copper complete dissolution cannot be achieved within a single step of leaching as this is entrapped between the layers of the printed circuit boards. In addition, within the same paper, was shown that copper presence has a detrimental effect on Au and Ag leaching with thiourea and triferric ion. At 75% of Cu recovery, only 45 % f Au recovery have been achieved. Therefore, the two step cross leaching using fresh leaching solution each time for the same solid has increased the recovery degree of Cu to over 90%. The subsequent leaching system has revealed an increment of Au recovery of over 69%. Into another paper, in order to achieve the total extraction of all three elements and also for a better procedure sustainability, the cross current method for both leaching systems has been applied(Birloaga *et al*. 2014). The cross current leaching with sulfuric acid and hydrogen peroxide with fresh solution each time for the same solid resulted in complete dissolution of Cu. For the second leaching system the cross current method consisted of solution reuse for three different solids already treated with the cross current H2SO4 and H2O2 leaching process. This technology has provided both Au and Ag almost complete recovery and also the achievement of a rich final solution of Au and Ag. The experimental work continued to reduce also the high chemicals consumption during the Cu leaching process (Birloaga & Vegliò 2016). For this, the counter current procedure has been performed, and according to the achieved results, this allowed to recover more than 95% of Cu using a two-step method. The cross leaching process for Au and Ag had as result over 90% of Au recovery and 75% for Ag. In addition, the elements recovery from solution has been also tested and successfully achieved using the cementation procedure with zinc metal powder. The copper precipitate had a purity of about 88%, with Zn, Sn, Ni and Fe as impurities. The gold and silver solid product had over 20% of purity, with Zn and S as impurities. In order to achieve better purity level for Cu product, the work was continued with various tests which have involved various flocculation/precipitation agents for Sn recovery from solution prior to cementation process with Zn. Over 90% of Sn recovery has been achieved using polyamine C-15 as coagulation agent. Then, by the cementation process, the achieved Cu purity was higher than 93%. In addition, the final solution, with high $ZnSO_4$ content, can be subjected to crystallization process. In addition, tests for waste water treatment of the residual solution achieved after Au and Ag cementation, have been performed using Fenton process for degradation of its organic complex and then a precipitation of the impurities with calcium hydroxide. At the end of both procedures, over 98% of COD and impurities removal has been achieved. In addition, the treated water has been recirculated within the procedure and this had as result the same recovery degrees of elements as in case of fresh water use.

2.2. Super Pro Design Software brief description

The Super Pro Design software (version 9.0 was used for the simulation presented within this article), by Intelligen Inc. USA, is a computer simulator tool package that tracks the behaviour of chemicals in individual and combinations of unit operations. Within this software database, various chemical are provided, and also it has the allowance to insert new ones. As it has a variety of procedure operations with different kind of equipment, can be easily used for the design and simulation of a working plant in either batch or continuous operation mode. Based on the all the chemical reactions involved within a process, this software allows the mass and energy balance estimation for all streams of the process, estimates purchase costs, and reports stream and equipment data, as well as capital and manufacturing costs. A compressive description of the software and also its way of operating for various processes are fond in the user's guide of each version of this tool (Intelligen 2017).

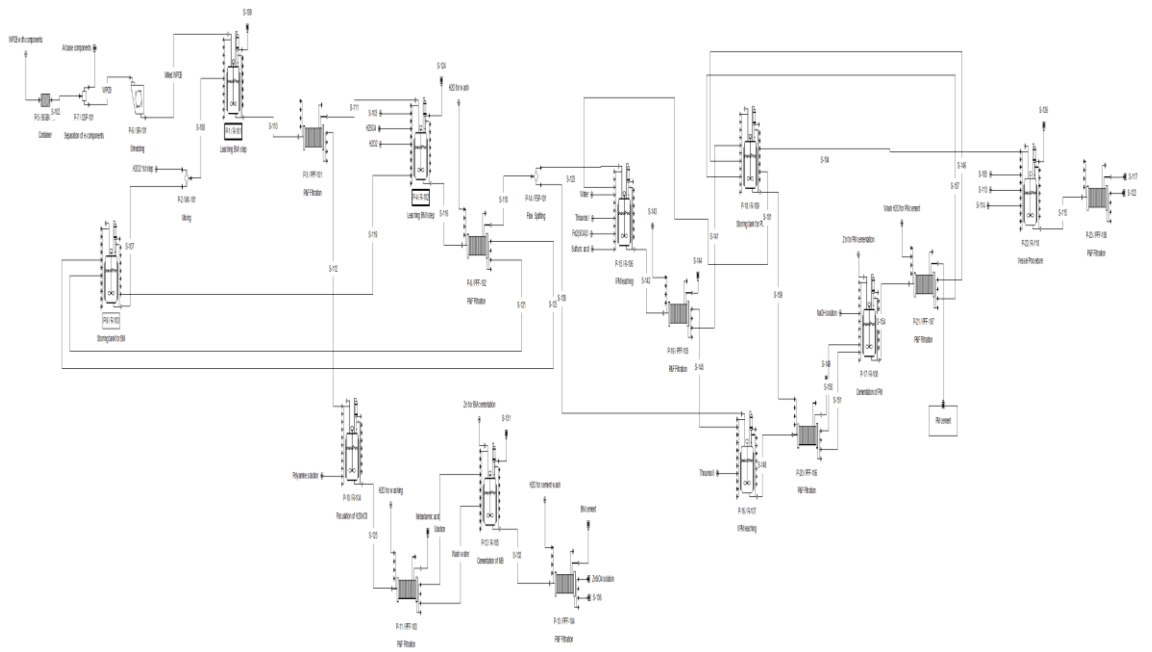

Figure 2 WPCB process flowsheet – simulation by SuperPro Design software

Table 1. Profitability analysis of the WPCBs hydrometallurgical process

A. Direct Fixed Capital	4,435,000 €
B. Working Capital	213,000 €
C. Startup Cost	222,000 €
D. Total Investment (A+B+C)	4,869,000 €
E. Investment Charged to This Project	4,869,000 €
F. Revenue Rates	
Metastannic acid (Revenue)	96,889 kg /yr
Base Metals cement (Revenue)	256,571 kg /yr
Precious Metals cement (Main Revenue)	7,201 kg /yr
Zinc sulfate (Revenue)	1,426,301 kg /yr
G. Revenue Price	

Metastannic acid (Revenue)	6.51 €/kg
Base Metals cement (Revenue)	3.44 €/kg
Precious Metals cement (Main Revenue)	549.65 €/kg
Zinc sulfate (Revenue)	0.15 €/kg
H. Revenues	
Metastannic acid (Revenue)	630,434 €/yr
Base Metals cement (Revenue)	882,373 €/yr
Precious Metals cement (Main Revenue)	3,957,767 €/yr
Zinc sulfate (Revenue)	216,805 €/yr
Total Revenues	5,687,379 €/yr
I. Annual Operating Cost (AOC)	
1 Actual AOC	2,125,000 €/yr
2 Net AOC (K1-J2)	2,125,000 €/yr
J. Unit Production Cost /Revenue	
Unit Production Cost	295.12 €/kg MP
Net Unit Production Cost	295.12 €/kg MP
Unit Production Revenue	789.85 €/kg MP
K. Gross Profit (J-K)	3,562,000 €/yr
L. Taxes (40%)	1,425,000 €/yr
M. Net Profit (K-L+ Depreciation)	**2,559,000 €/yr**
Gross Margin	62.64 %
Return On Investment	52.55 %
Payback Time	1.90 years

2.3. Process economic simulation

In Fig. 2 the developed procedure flow diagram using Super Pro Design process is shown. This plant was designed at a capacity of 1 MT per batch and to run 7200 h per year in a batch mode. As is shown in Figure 2, the plant was designed with a storage container for the WPCBs, then with a sorting system for e-components removal/sorting. Then the depopulated PCBs were send to a grinder to achieve a particle size lower than 2 mm. Furthermore, the hydrometallurgical procedures were carried out within batch reaction reactors using the already established laboratory scale optimal conditions. With the aid of Super Pro Design, the mass and energy balance calculation as well as the economic analysis were performed. Considering the optimal conditions of the developed procedure for waste printed circuit board with certain gold content, as is shown in Table 1, for an industrial plant, where the investment cost were considered to be of about 3 million of euro and a payback period of one year, at a plant capacity of 990 t/year, the total revenues were over 5 million of euro in one year. To calculate the net value of the profit, the other cost of plant maintenance, reagents, electricity, etc. has been considered and, according, over € 2 million/year can be achieved using the developed process at a depreciation established time of about 2 years. However, these numbers are considered for certain Au content in the treated material and also for the plant capacity. A decrease of both afore mentioned factors, will obviously diminish the process.

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