Ernest Solvay Encyclopedia Article

Ernest Solvay

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Ernest Solvay

1839-1922

Belgian industrial chemist who invented an efficient low cost process to manufacture sodium carbonate (washing soda). Sodium carbonate is used in making ceramics, paper, as a cleaner, to soften water, and to make other sodium containing compounds. In the Solvay process ammonia and carbon dioxide are pumped through a saturated solution of sodium chloride (brine). A reaction occurs that produces sodium hydrogen carbonate, which precipitates out. Heating the sodium hydrogen carbonate converts it to sodium carbonate. The Solvay process displaced the LeBlanc process, which was energy intensive and produced massive amounts of pollution from the byproducts. All the products of the Solvay process are used or can be recycled.