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High-efficiency III-V solar cells: From drawing board to real devices

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The record solar cell conversion efficiency of 46% at concentrated sunlight has been demonstrated by direct bonding technique [1]. Regardless of the high efficiencies obtained using the direct wafer bonding technique, the conventional monolithic approach used in commercial solar cell production has several benefits, including production technology and cost-related factors. And yet, there is a high unused potential, particularly in new materials that can be grown lattice-matched onto GaAs or Ge substrates. For example, by utilizing dilute nitride materials in multijunction solar cell structures with more than three junctions and by carefully optimizing structural elements and manufacturing technology, efficiencies exceeding 50% is a realistic target [2].

Here we review our theoretical and experimental work carried out on development of various parts of high-efficiency multijunction solar cells based on GaInNAsSb-based materials, i.e., dilute nitrides. First of all, we have developed a molecular beam epitaxy process for GaInNAsSb sub-junction with very high external quantum efficiency exceeding 90%. This building block is essential for achieving high conversion efficiency for GaInP/GaAs/GaInNAsSb triple-junction solar cells. Secondly, the use of a variety of electro-optical simulation tools such as Crosslight APSYS, Silvaco TCAD, PC1D, Essential MacLeod and semi-empirical analytical models combined with experimental work on numerous test samples have helped in fabricating ultra-low specific resistivity tunnel junctions and high-quality sub-junctions based on conventional III-V materials such as GaInP and GaAs to be integrated with the dilute nitride sub-junction. Thirdly, we have also extracted important material specific physical parameters such as carrier lifetimes, mobilities and concentrations for dilute nitrides by matching the simulations to experimental solar cell device characteristics [3]. The extracted parameters are used for refining the simulation models which provide deeper understanding of the device physics. The work done so far has led to a rapid increase in conversion efficiency of our GaInP/GaAs/GaInNAsSb triple-junction solar cells – at a pace of ~5 %-points/year since 2012. High-efficiency solar cells with efficiencies of 29% and 31% at one sun (AM0 and AM1.5G, respectively) and 36–39% under concentrated sunlight (at ~70 suns) have already been demonstrated [4,5].

Additionally, the effects of various optical and structural design elements related to fabrication of real III-V multijunction solar cells will be critically reviewed. Especially, we will concentrate on the pros and cons of backside reflector structure architectures – including various planar reflector types and Lambertian scatterers – and nanostructured antireflection coatings [6] which are currently widely employed for solar cell photon management. The consequences of adding such elements to the fabrication process and impact on improving the conversion efficiency towards >50% efficiency are assessed.

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