

Copper as Cost-Effective Alternative to Silver for Si Solar Cell Metallization – Status and Outlook

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Fraunhofer ISE, Freiburg

PV CellTech, Frankfurt
March 12th, 2025

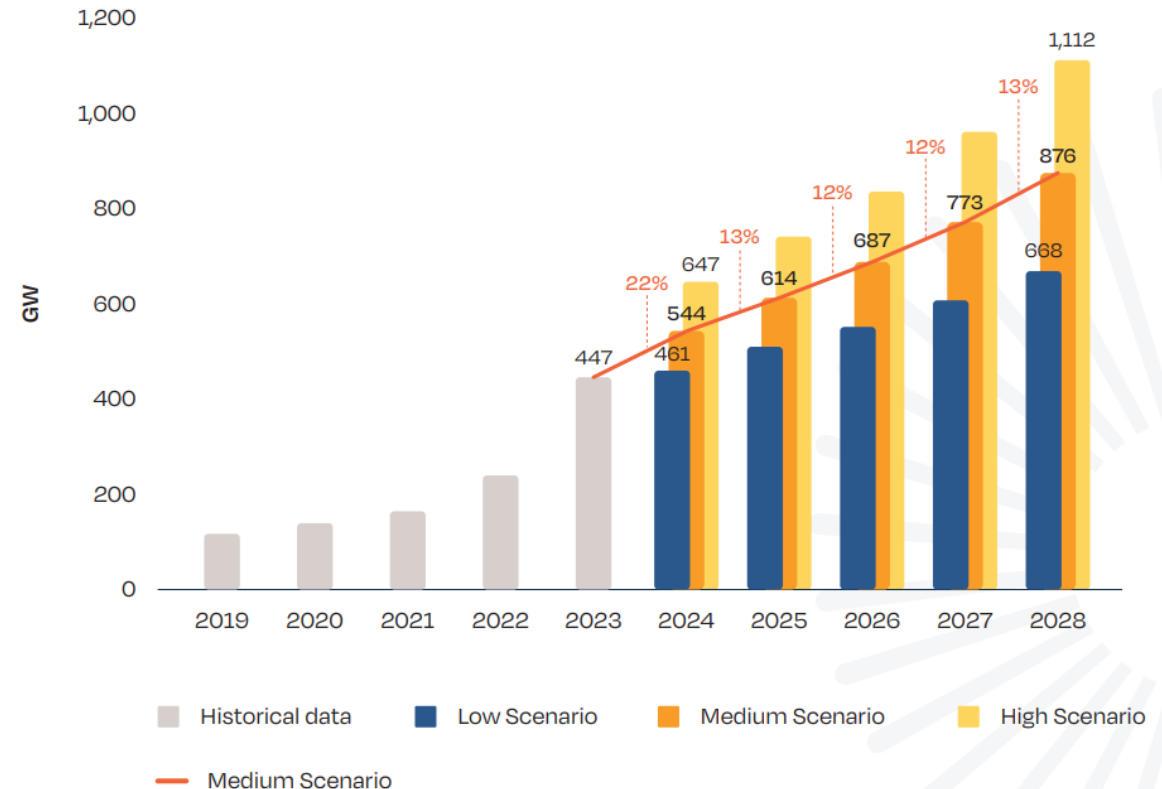
Background and Motivation

Rapid growth of the PV Industry – Risk and Challenges

Rapid growth of PV:

- Installed capacity 2024: **599 GW_p** ^[1]
(2025 forecast: 650-700 GW_p)

FIGURE 4 WORLD ANNUAL SOLAR PV MARKET SCENARIOS 2024-2028



Forecast of the globally installed PV capacity until 2028. Source: [2]

Background and Motivation

Rapid growth of the PV Industry – Risk and Challenges

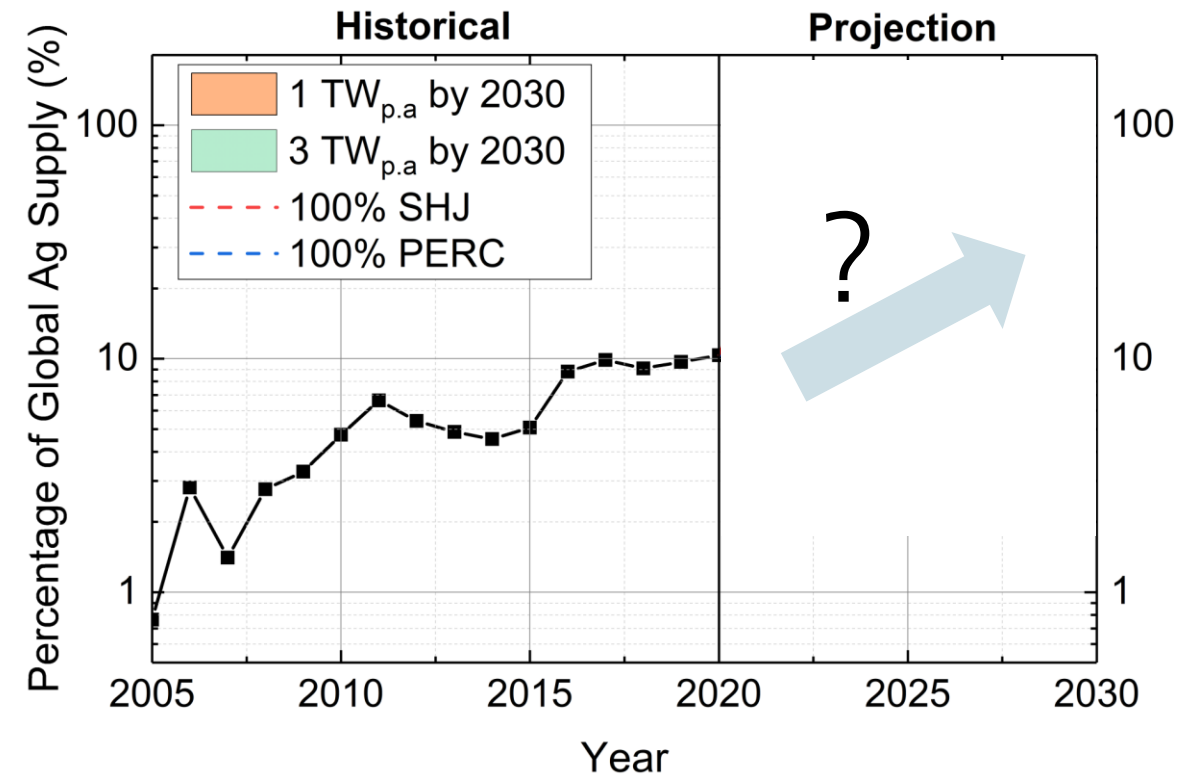
2025 (ITRPV): Around 30% of global Ag supply is used by PV

Rapid growth of PV:

- Installed capacity 2024: **599 GW_p** [1]

Risk and Challenge:

- Rising demand for scarce material (**Ag**, Bi, In...)
 - 2020: PV needs ~10% of global Ag supply



Development of global silver consumption until 2030 with a projected yearly increase of 1 or 3 TW/year. Source: [6]

Background and Motivation

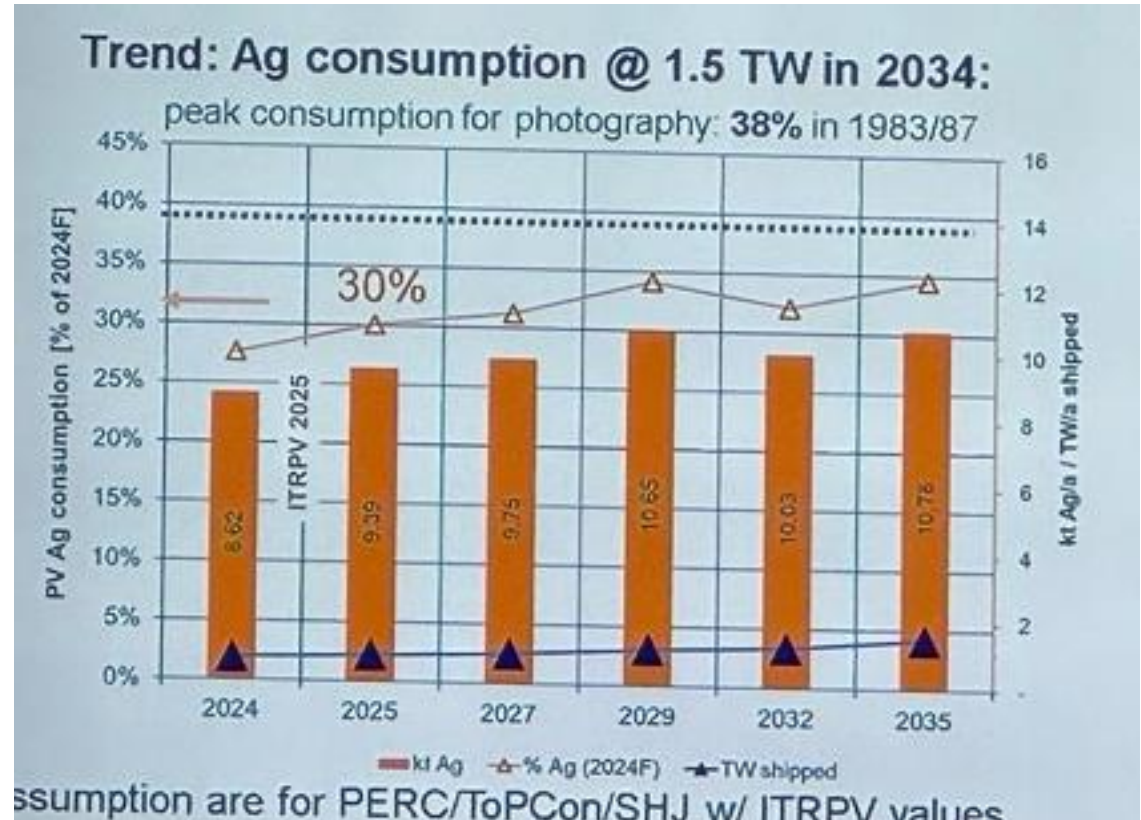
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Risk and Challenge:

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- **Update 2025:** PV needs ~30% of global Ag supply



Development of global silver consumption until 2035

Source: ITRPV, talk by M Fischer PV Celltech 2025 March 11th

Background and Motivation

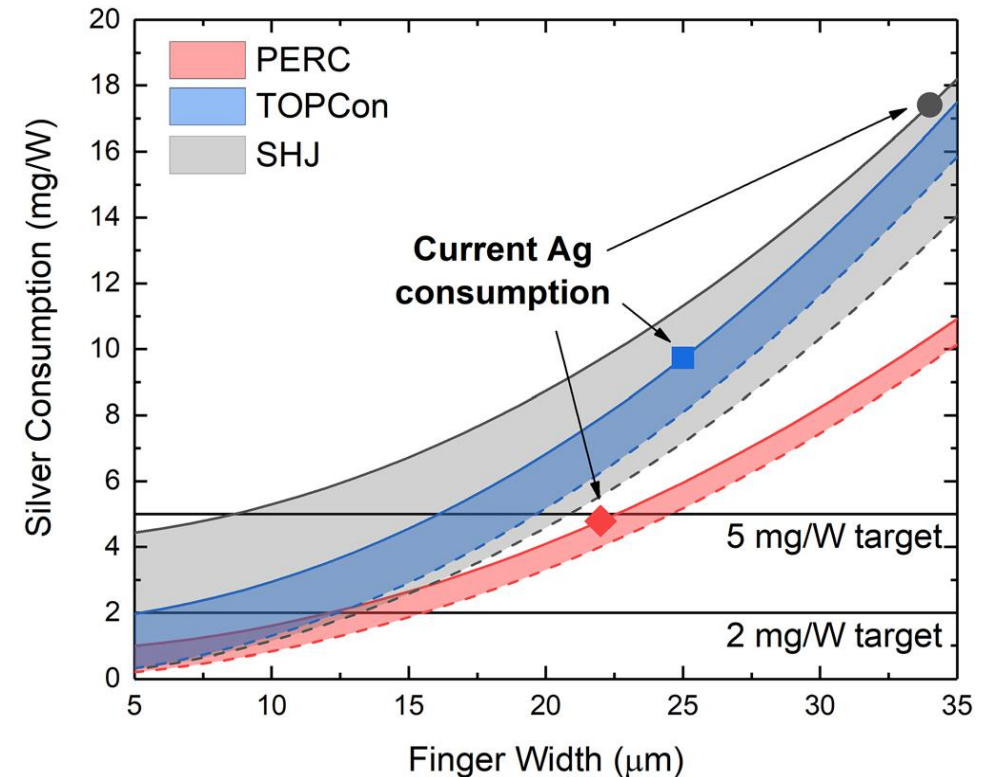
Rapid growth of the PV Industry – Risk and Challenges

Rapid growth of PV:

- Installed capacity 2024: **599 GW_p** [1]

Risk and Challenge:

- Rising demand for scarce material (**Ag**, Bi, In...)
- Most critical resource: Silver usage in metallization
- 2023/24: 5 mg/W (PERC) – 17 mg/W (SHJ) Ag is used



Calculated silver consumption as a function of printed width of ag fingers in industrial screen-printed PERC, TOPCon and SHJ solar cells. Solid lines show the total silver consumption in the finger, busbar and soldering tab regions, and dash lines show finger silver consumption only; Source: [5]

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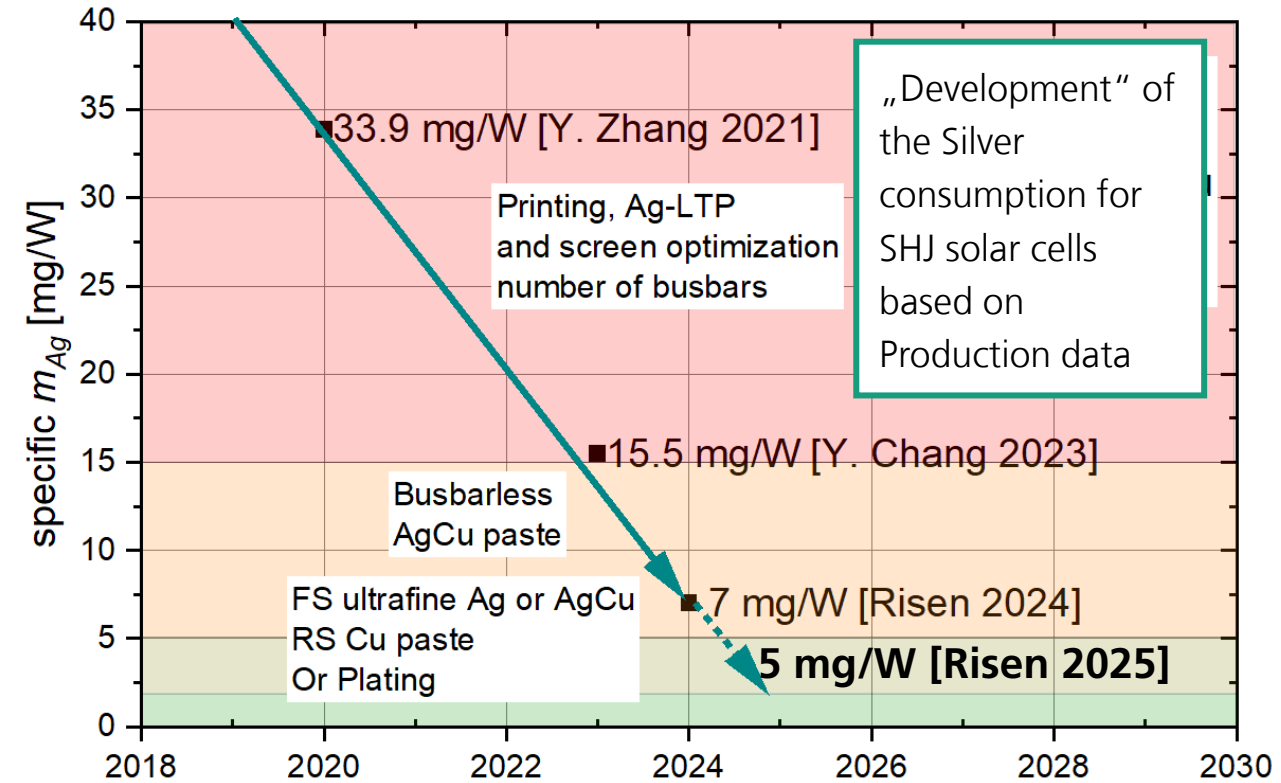
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- 2023/24: 5 mg/W (PERC) – 17 mg/W (SHJ) Ag is used
 - **Update SHJ 2025: ~5 mg/W with AgCu pastes**



Silver consumption “development” for SHJ solar cells in the last years;
Source: [5a]

Background and Motivation

Rapid growth of the PV Industry – Risk and Challenges

Rapid growth of PV:

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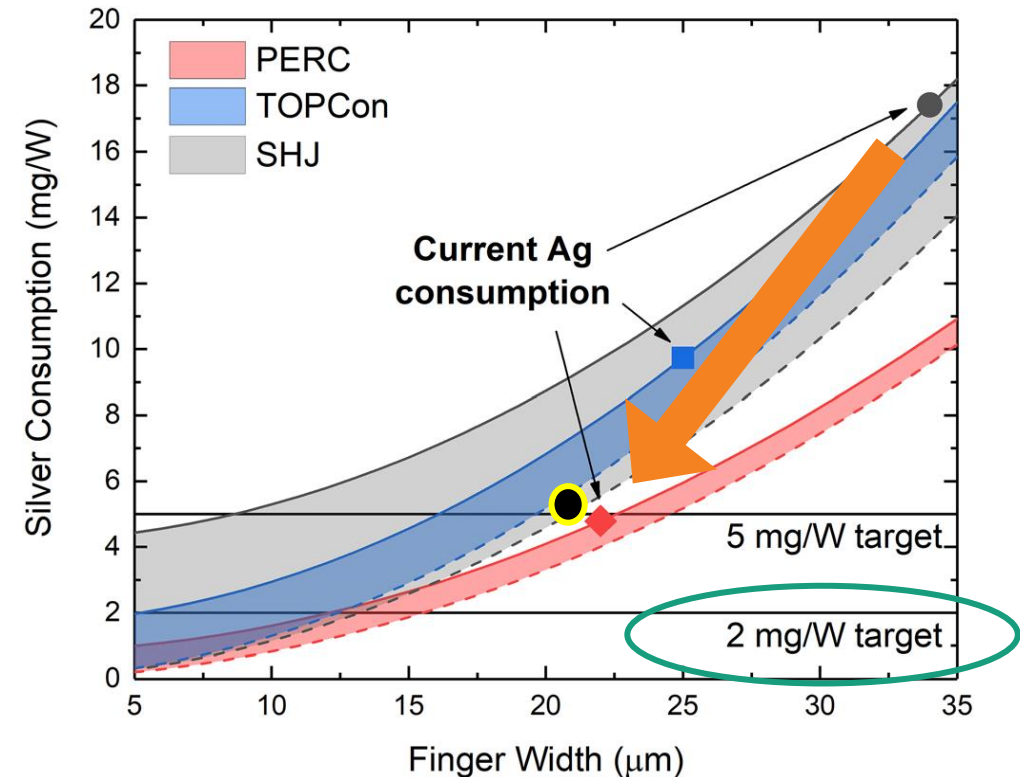
Risk and Challenge:

- Rising demand for scarce material (**Ag**, Bi, In...)
- Most critical resource: Silver usage in metallization
- 2025: 5 mg/W – 10 mg/W Ag is used***
- Sustainable TW production:
reducing Ag usage to **2 mg/W or below** [3-5]

→ Silver has to be reduced (!) or replaced (?)

→ This talk: Copper as alternative

*CPIA: same level, ITRPV: ~50% higher values



Calculated silver consumption as a function of printed width of ag fingers in industrial screen-printed PERC, TOPCon and SHJ solar cells. Solid lines show the total silver consumption in the finger, busbar and soldering tab regions, and dash lines show finger silver consumption only; Source: [5]

Technology Roadmap

How can we reduce / replace Silver?



foto from www.tradestation.com

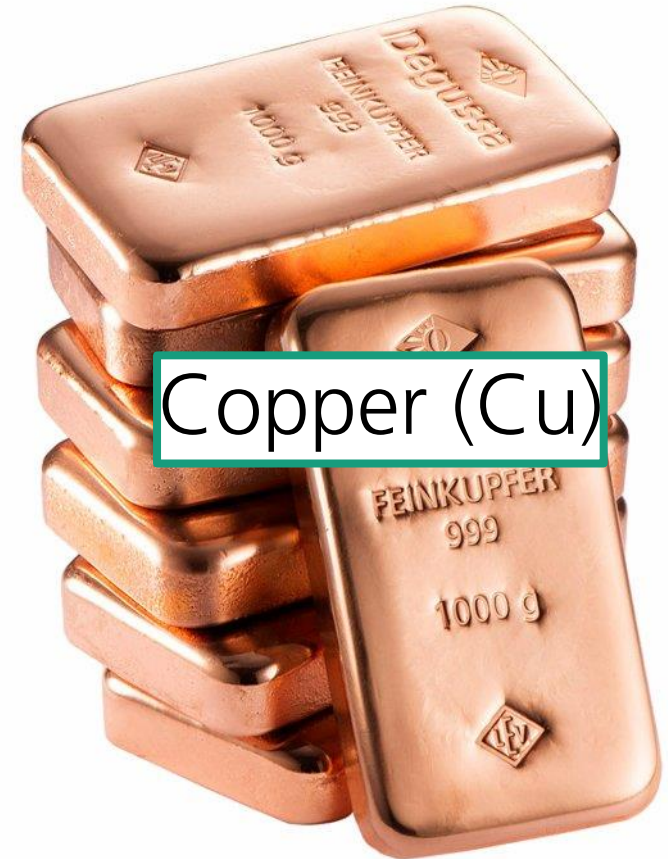
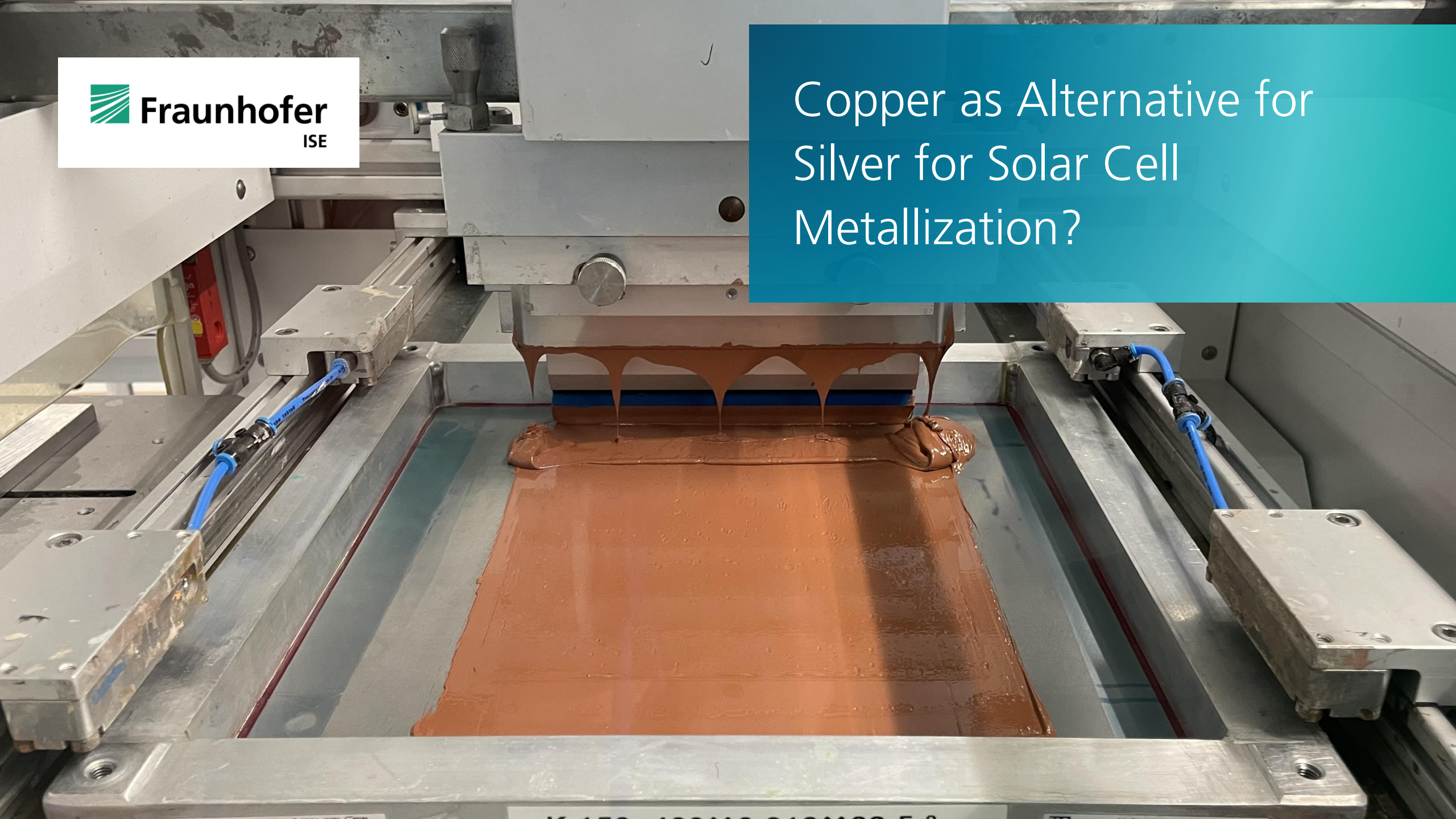


foto from www.degussa-goldhandel.de

Copper as Alternative for Silver for Solar Cell Metallization?



Perspectives for Solar Cell Metallization with Copper

Advantages and Challenges of Copper Metallization

Benefits:

- Resistivity comparable to Ag
- Substantial cost reduction
- More sustainable production
- Reduction of economic risks and material dependency

	Copper	Silver
Resistivity	0.018 $\mu\Omega\text{m}$	0.016 $\mu\Omega\text{m}$
Price [\$/Kg] ^[7]	10.49	1151.09
Carbon footprint [Kg CO ₂ Equivalents per Kg] ^[8]	1.71	98.1
Abundance in earth's crust [%] ^[9]	0.0055	7 x 10 ⁻⁶

[7] <https://www.dailymetalprice.com> [Mar 07, 2025]

[8] [LCA data MFD & Printers \(epa.gov\)](https://www.epa.gov) [accessed June 1st, 2024]

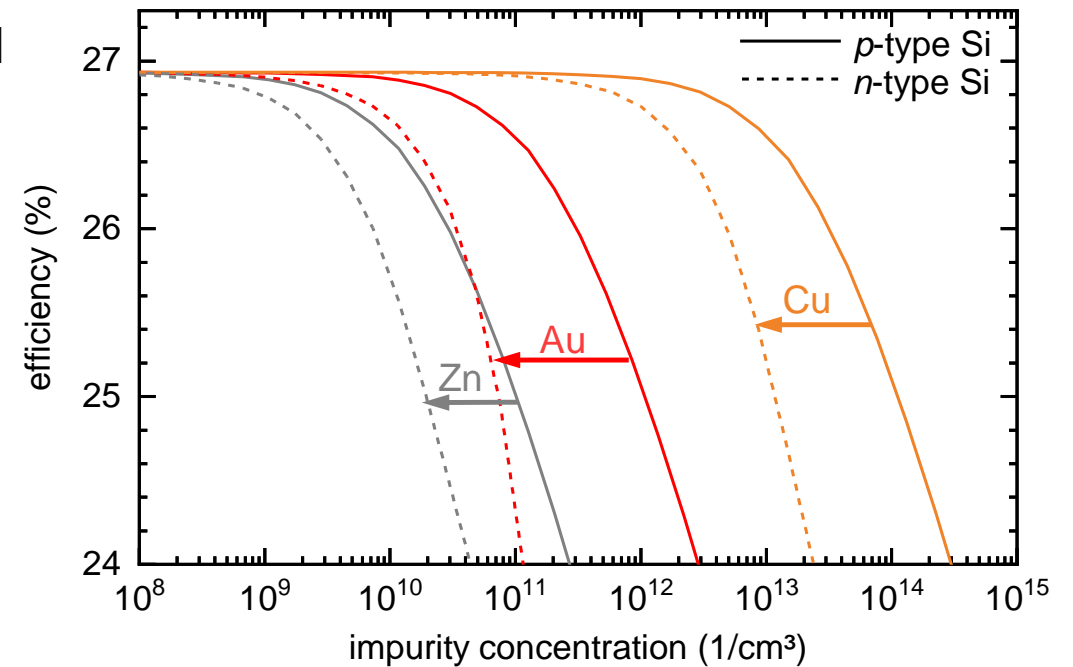
[9] Pandey, B. State-of-the-Art Report on Technology for Producing Rare Metals in India (2012).

Perspectives for Solar Cell Metallization with Copper

Advantages and Challenges of Copper Metallization

Risk and Challenge:

- Cu particularly critical for high-temperature n-type solar cell concepts (e.g. TOPCon)
 - Diffusion of Cu into Silicon, i.e. n-type Si, and formation of recombination-active precipitates (deep-level traps)



Simulated cell eff. depending on Impurities that are more detrimental for n-type Si [10]

Perspectives for Solar Cell Metallization with Copper

Advantages and Challenges of Copper Metallization

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- Cu particularly critical for high-temperature n-type solar cell concepts (e.g. TOPCon)
 - Diffusion of Cu into Silicon and formation of recombination-active precipitates (deep-level traps)
 - Oxidation of contacts (loss of conductivity)
- Long-term stability of copper contacts
 - ➔ effects on module reliability

Natural corrosion: patina and verdigris due to reactions with air or vinegar.

Bild: <https://www.11880-gebaeudereinigung.com/>



Perspectives for Solar Cell Metallization with Copper

Advantages and Challenges of Copper Metallization

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- Cu particularly critical for high-temperature n-type solar cell concepts (e.g. TOPCon)
 - Diffusion of Cu into Silicon and formation of recombination-active precipitates (deep-level traps) ^[1]
 - Oxidation of contacts (loss of conductivity)
 - Long-term stability of copper contacts
 - ➔ effects on module reliability
- **How can we replace silver with copper without performance losses?**

Natural corrosion: patina and verdigris due to reactions with air or vinegar.

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Technology Roadmap

How can we reduce / replace Silver?



foto from www.tradestation.com

Ag reduction / replacement

- **Fine line printing**
- Screen printing
 - Ag(/Cu) pastes
 - 100% Cu pastes
- Cu plating

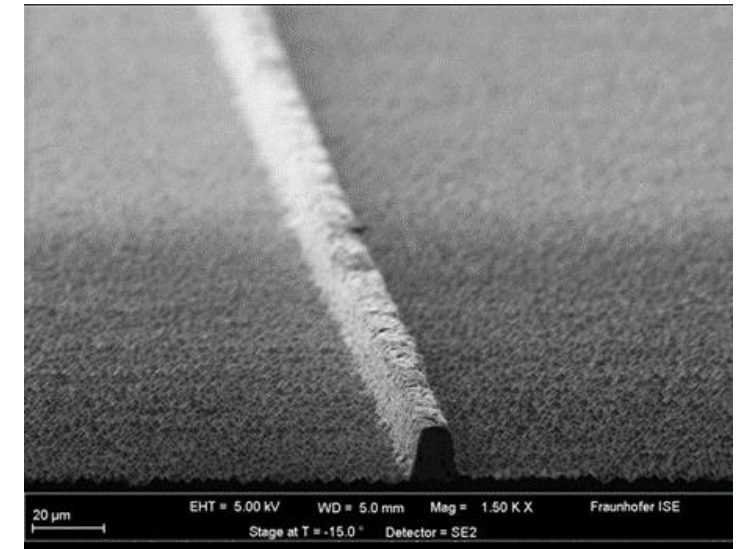


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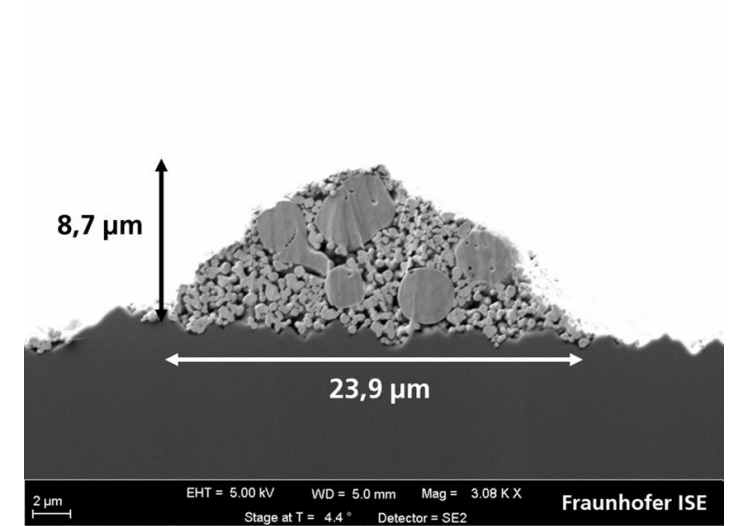


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Technology Roadmap

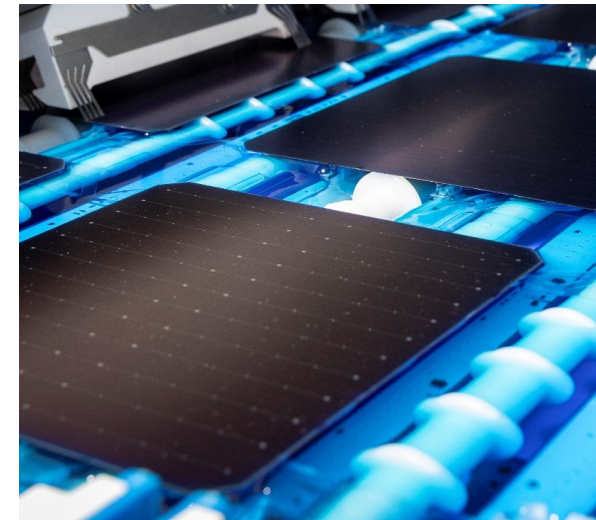
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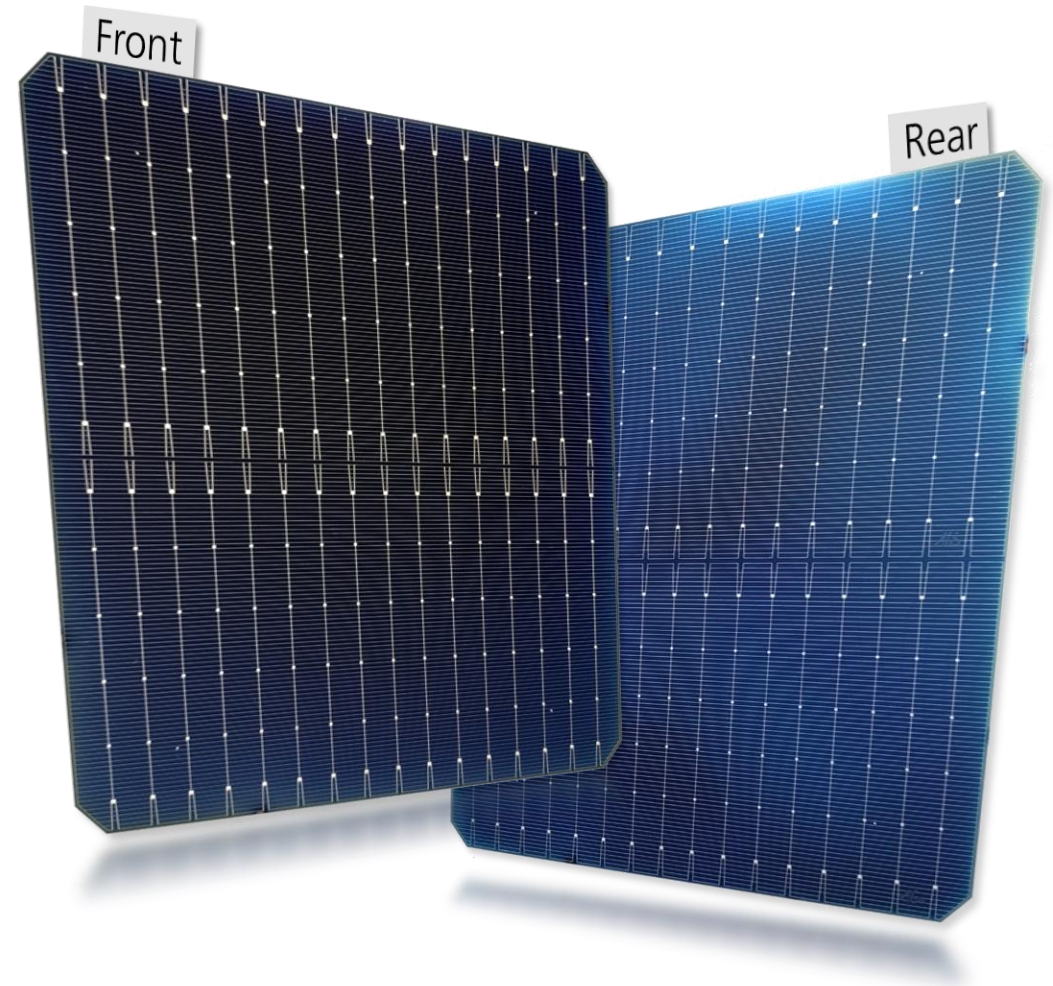
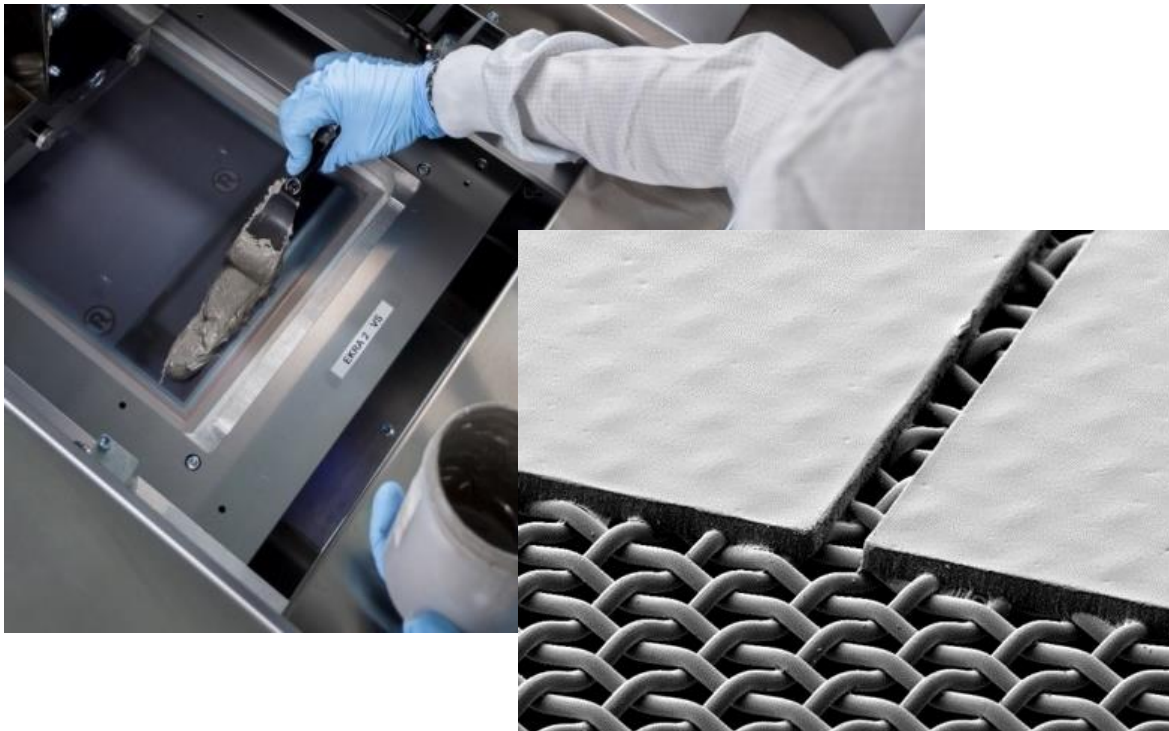


The „Old Bull“: Silver Based Screen Printing – Status and Outlook

Screen Printed Metallization for Si Solar Cells

Towards Minimizing Silver Dependence

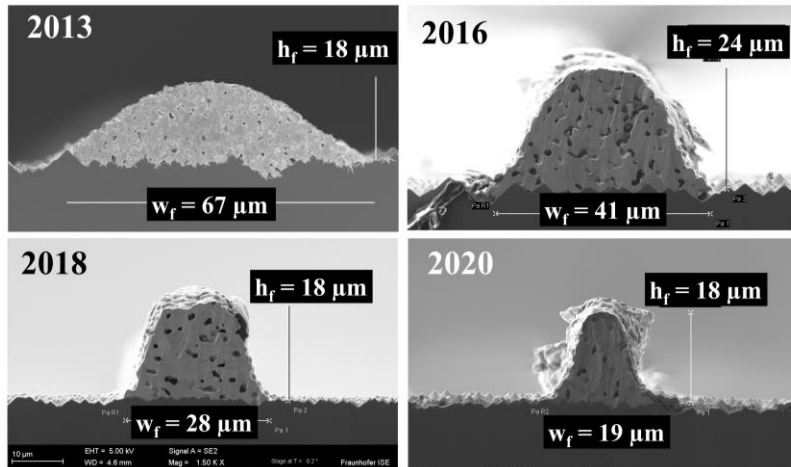
- State-of-the-art: flatbed screen printing



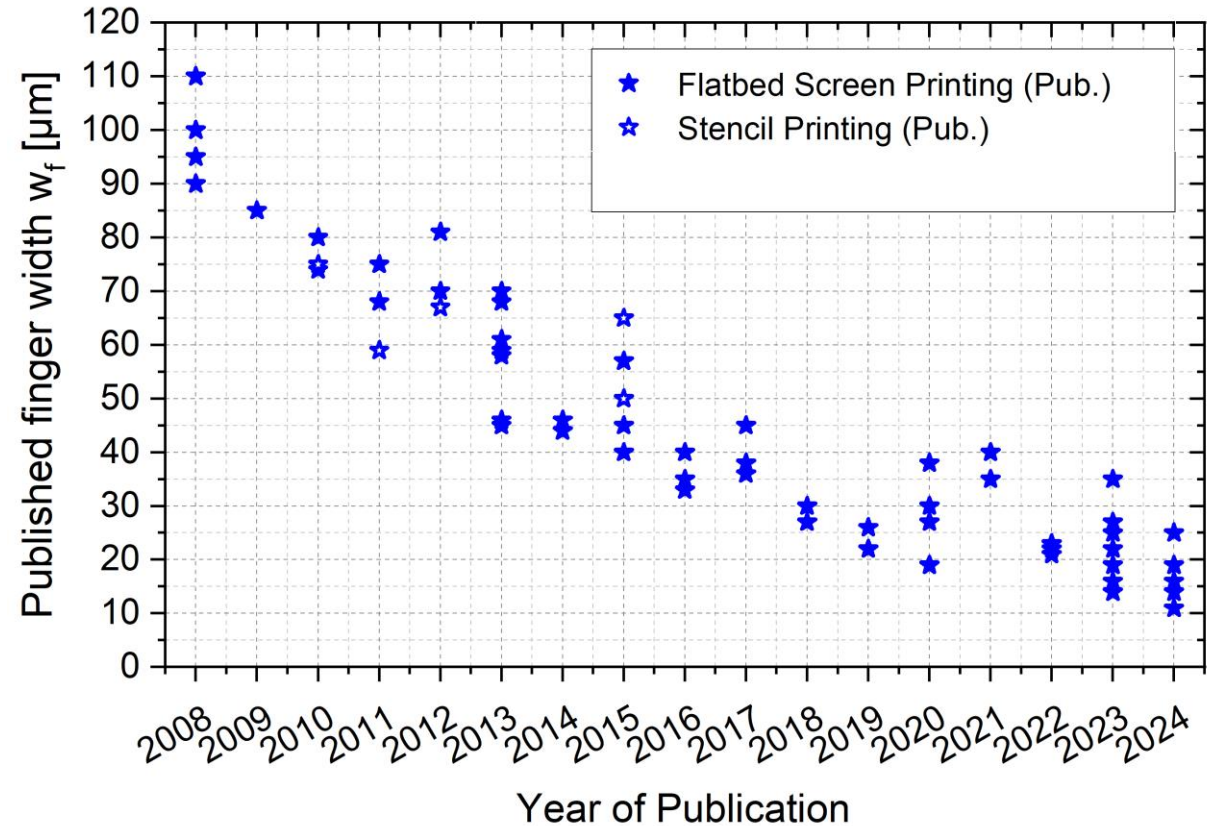
Screen Printed Metallization for Si Solar Cells

Towards Minimizing Silver Dependence

- State-of-the-art: flatbed screen printing
- Finger width reduction by factor 8 since 2010 [11]



Evolution of screen-printed finger width illustrated by selected SEM images of screen printed contacts. Source: Fraunhofer ISE

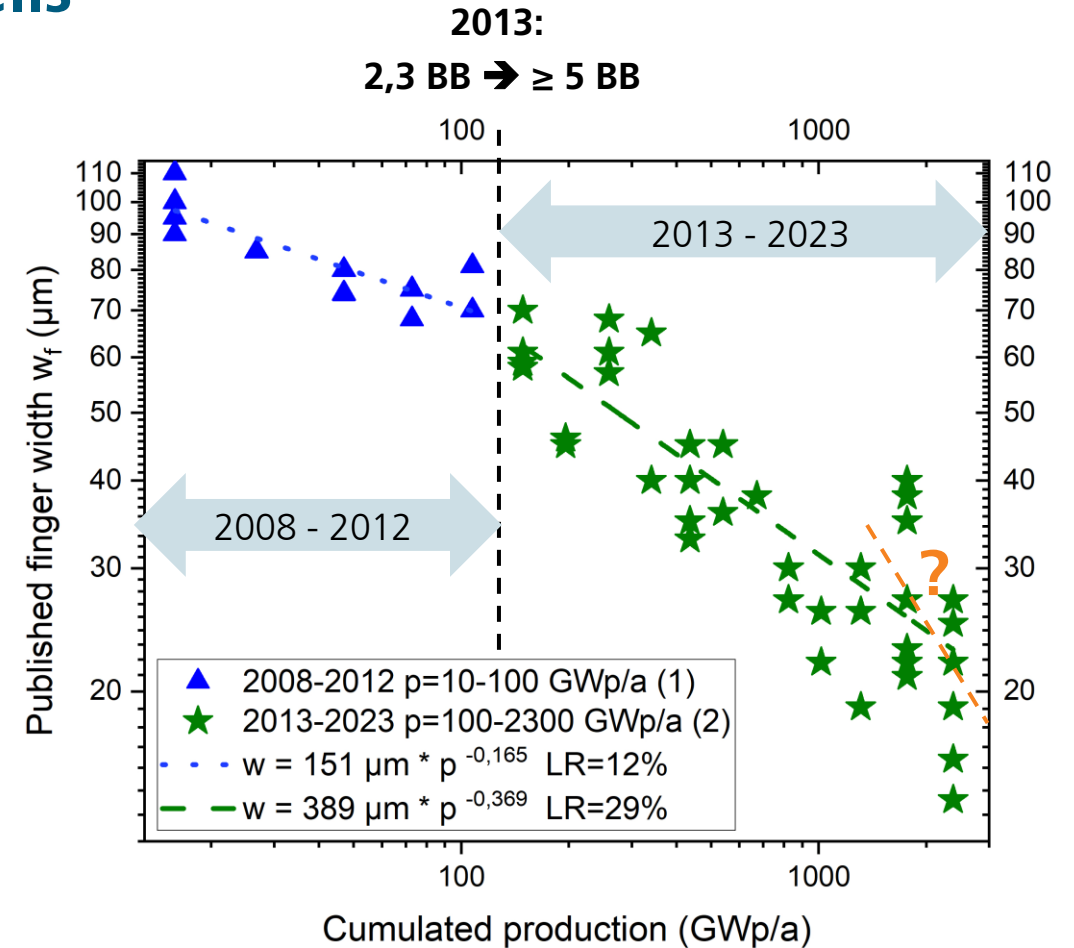


Evolution of screen-printed finger width based on published results from 2008 to 2024. Updated version, based on [11]

Screen Printed Metallization for Si Solar Cells

Towards Minimizing Silver Dependence

- State-of-the-art: flatbed screen printing
- Finger width reduction by factor 8 since 2010 [2]
 - “Learning rate” increases in 2013 due to technological leap from 2 or 3 to 5 or more busbars
 - Further Increase with current technological leap to half cells and multi-busbar technology?

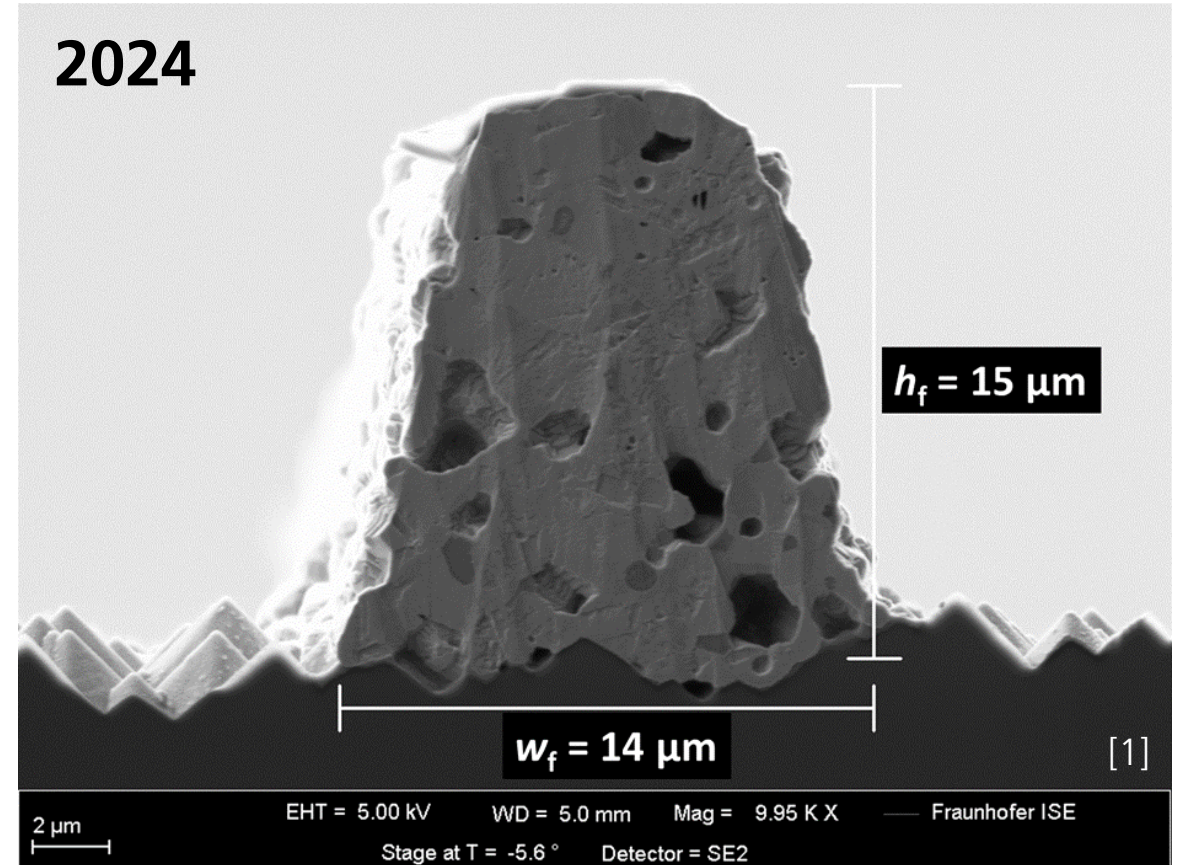


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Screen Printed Metallization for Si Solar Cells

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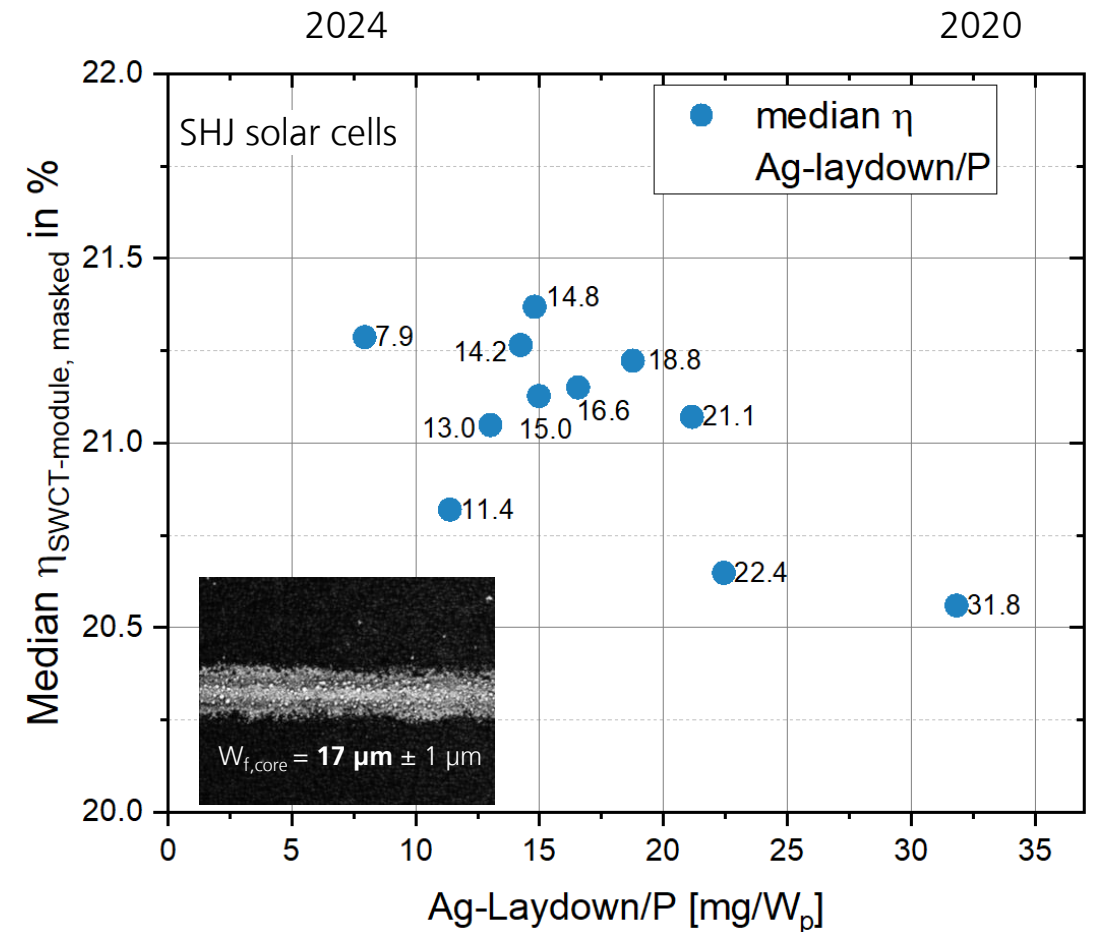
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- Recent result:
 - PERC front side metallization $w_f = 14 \mu\text{m}$ [12,13]



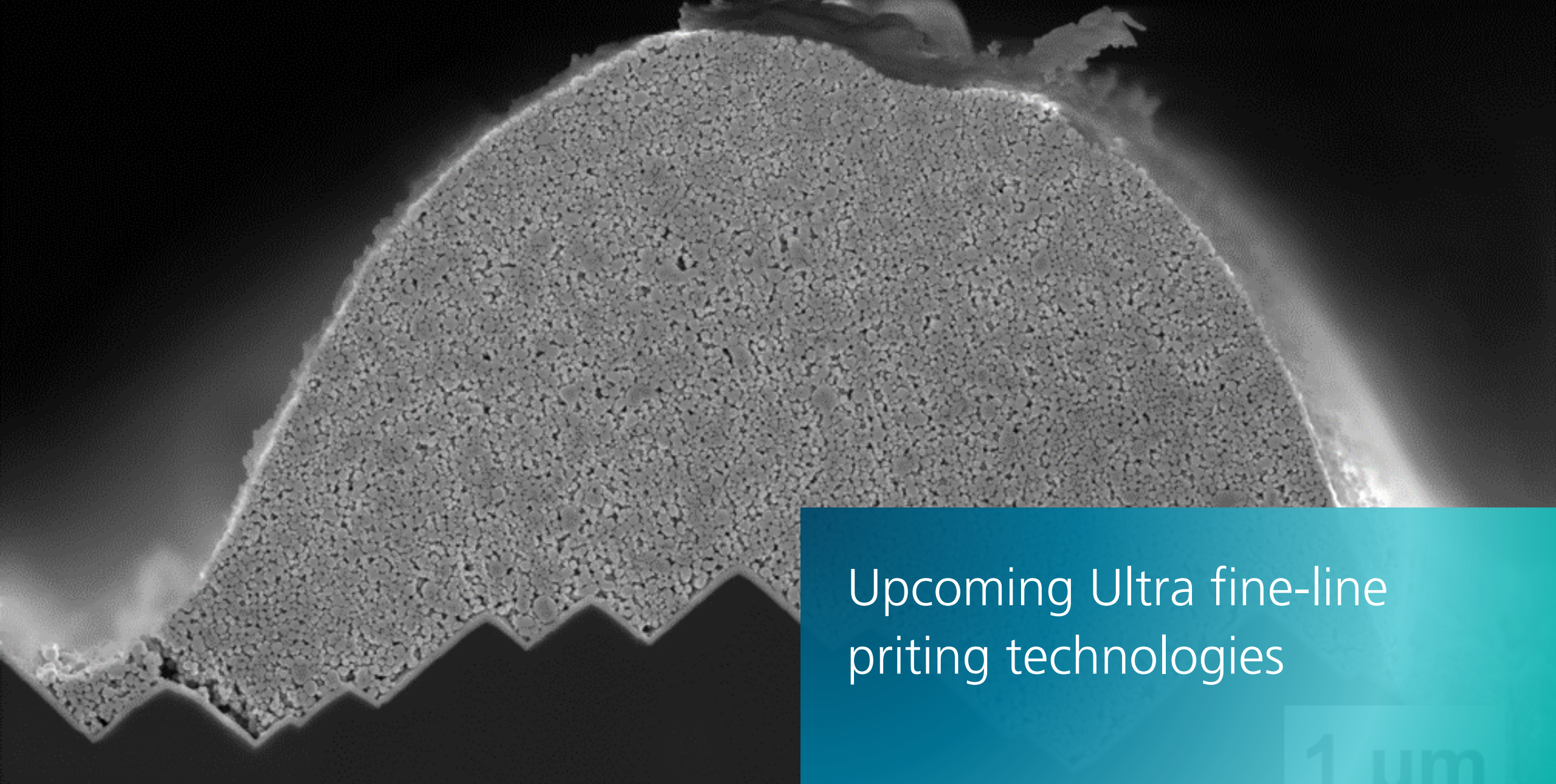
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 - SHJ front side metallization $w_f = 17 \mu\text{m}$ [14]



Reduction of silver consumption @Fraunhofer ISE of SHJ solar cells without busbars / pads for smart wire (SWCT) module integration



Upcoming Ultra fine-line printing technologies

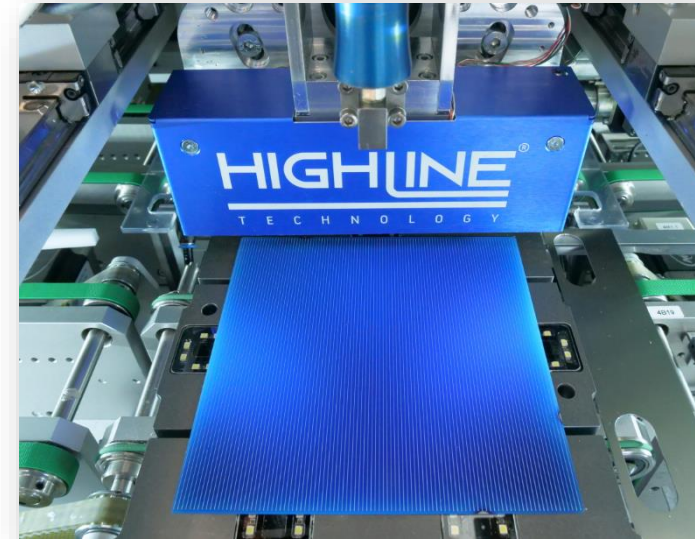
Ultra Fine-Line Printing

Upcoming Technologies

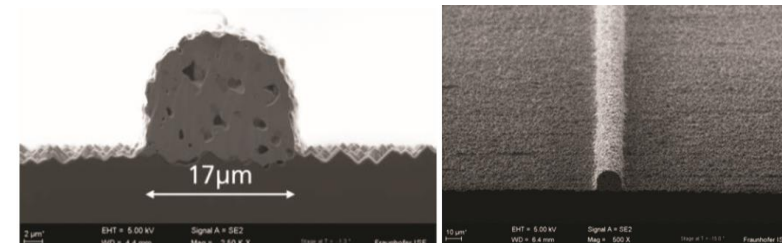
■ Parallel Dispensing Technology

- allows more homogenous finger geometry
 - ➔ about 20% less silver consumption demonstrated
- Industrial printheads available
 - ➔ HighLine Technology (Fraunhofer ISE Spin-off)

➔ More Details: See the next talk by Francesca



In-line Intermittent Parallel Dispensing printhead [16]

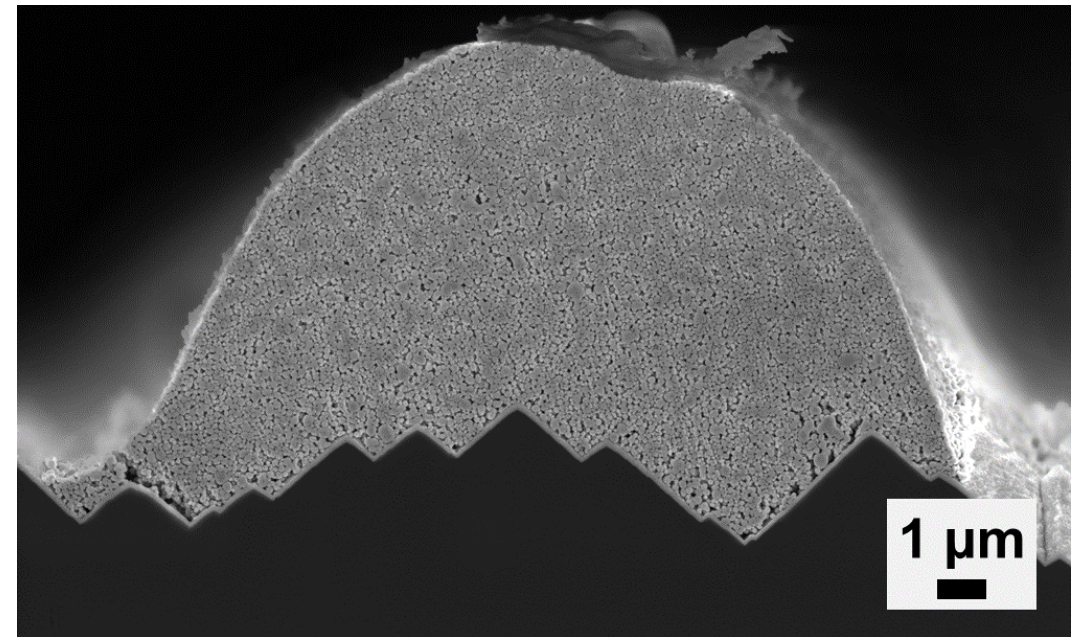
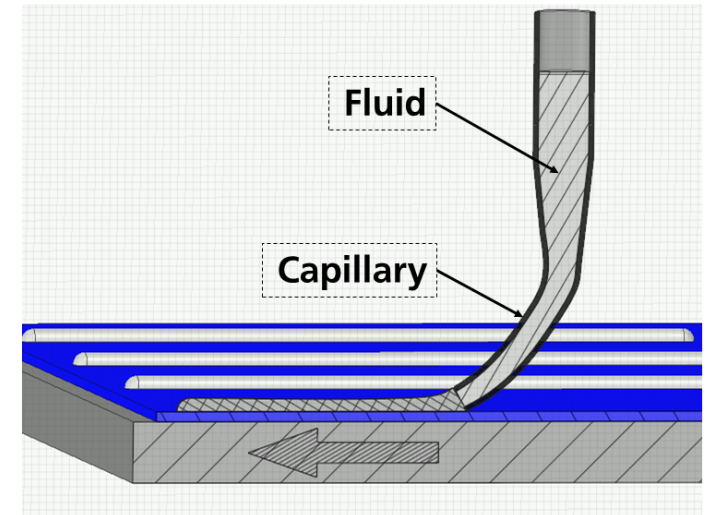


SEM image of a dispensed contact finger [15]

Ultra Fine-Line Printing

Upcoming Technologies

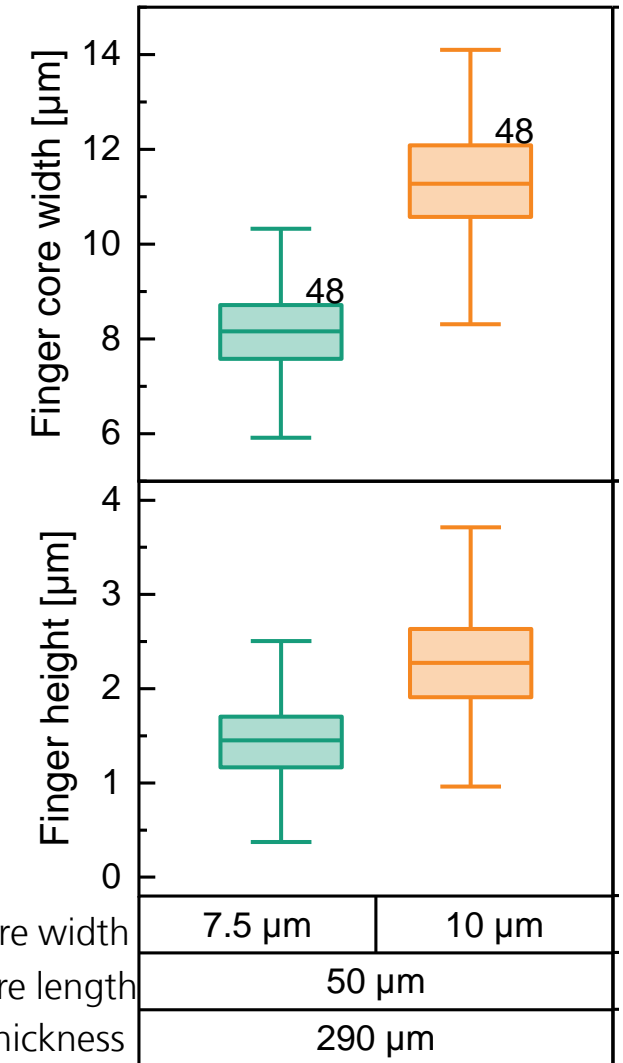
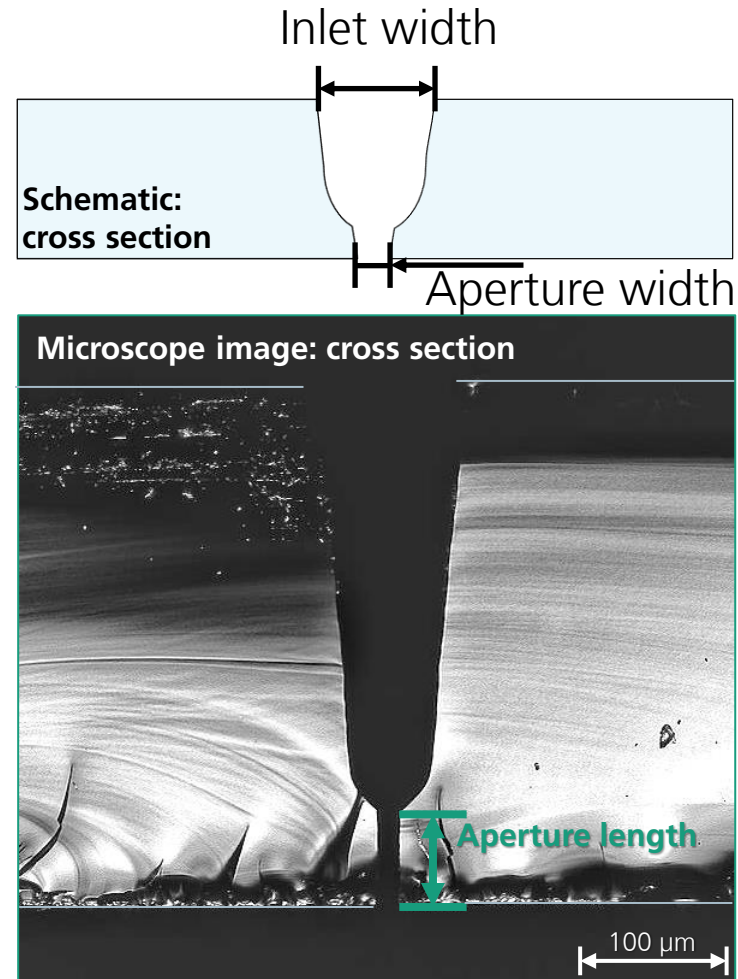
- Parallel Dispensing Technology
- **FlexTrail Printing Technology**^[17,18]
 - Finger width down to 10 μm
 - Significant silver saving potential
 - Technology upscaling is ongoing



Ultra Fine-Line Printing

Upcoming Technologies

- Parallel dispensing technology
- Flextrail printing technology
- Further high potential ultra fine-line printing technologies:
 - Glass stencil printing ^[19]

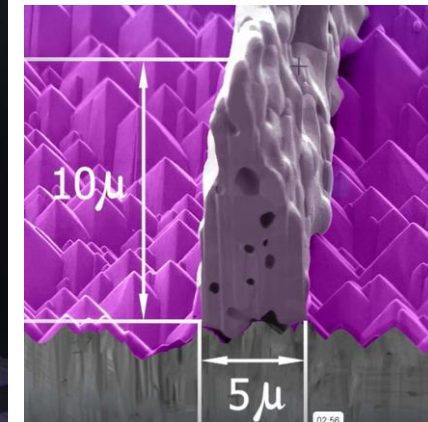
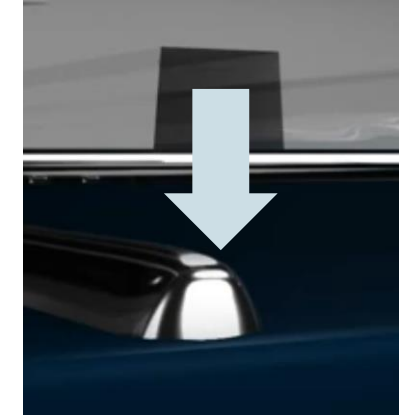
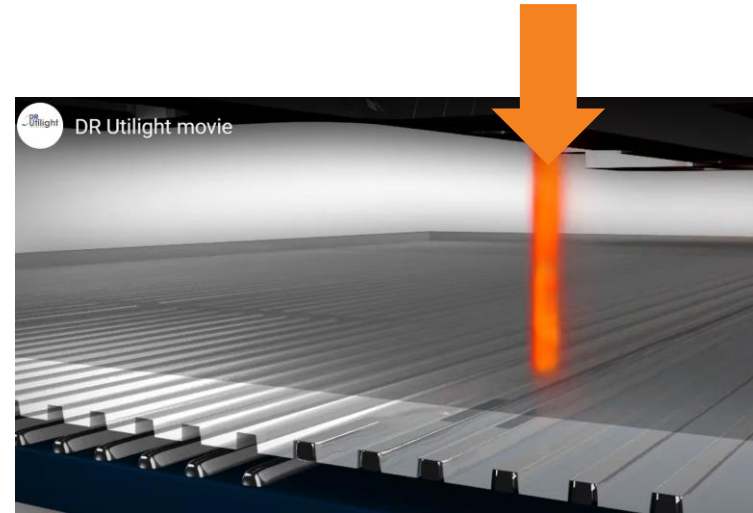


Ultra Fine-Line Printing

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 - Pattern transfer printing (PTP) [21]
 - „Lumet Metallization Technology“ [20]
 -

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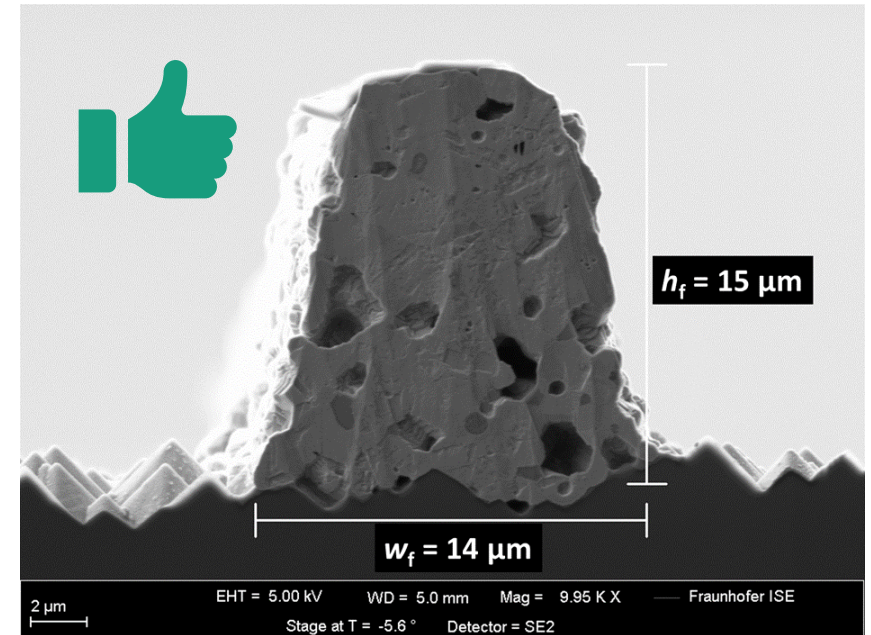
Technology Roadmap

How can we reduce / replace Silver?



foto from www.tradestation.com

Ag reduction / replacement
(First step):
Fine line printing allows ultra-fine finger geometries (below 15 μm)




Technology Roadmap

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Ag reduction / replacement (first step): 
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Ag reduction / replacement (second step):

- Ag/Cu and Cu pastes
- Cu plating

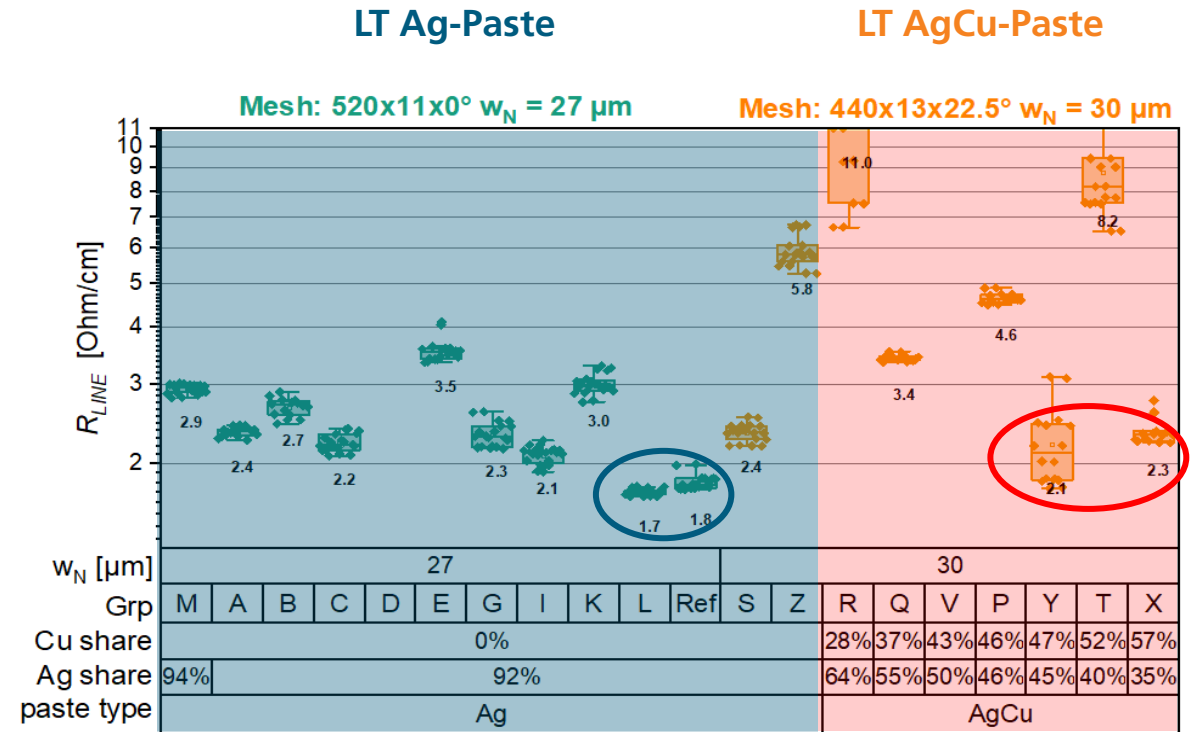
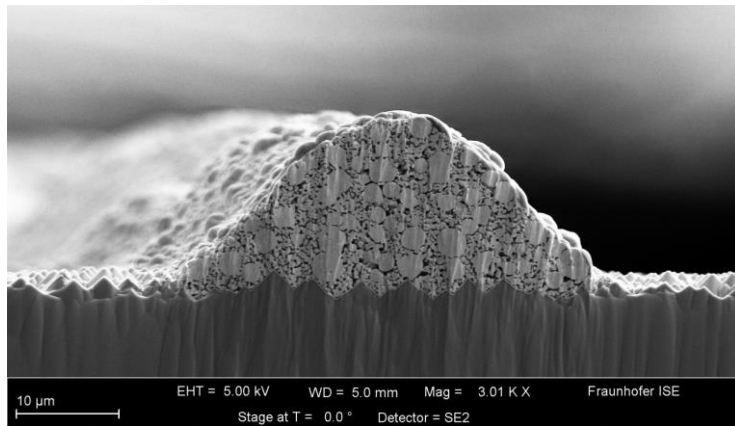


Screen Printed Copper Metallization for Solar Cells

Screen Printing of Copper Contacts

SHJ solar cells with screen printed silver-copper (AgCu) metallization

- Low temperature approach with silver-copper pastes
- Latest versions of AgCu pastes can compete with the best Ag pastes
- **AgCu fingers allow to reduce Ag consumption by at least 50% for SHJ cell**

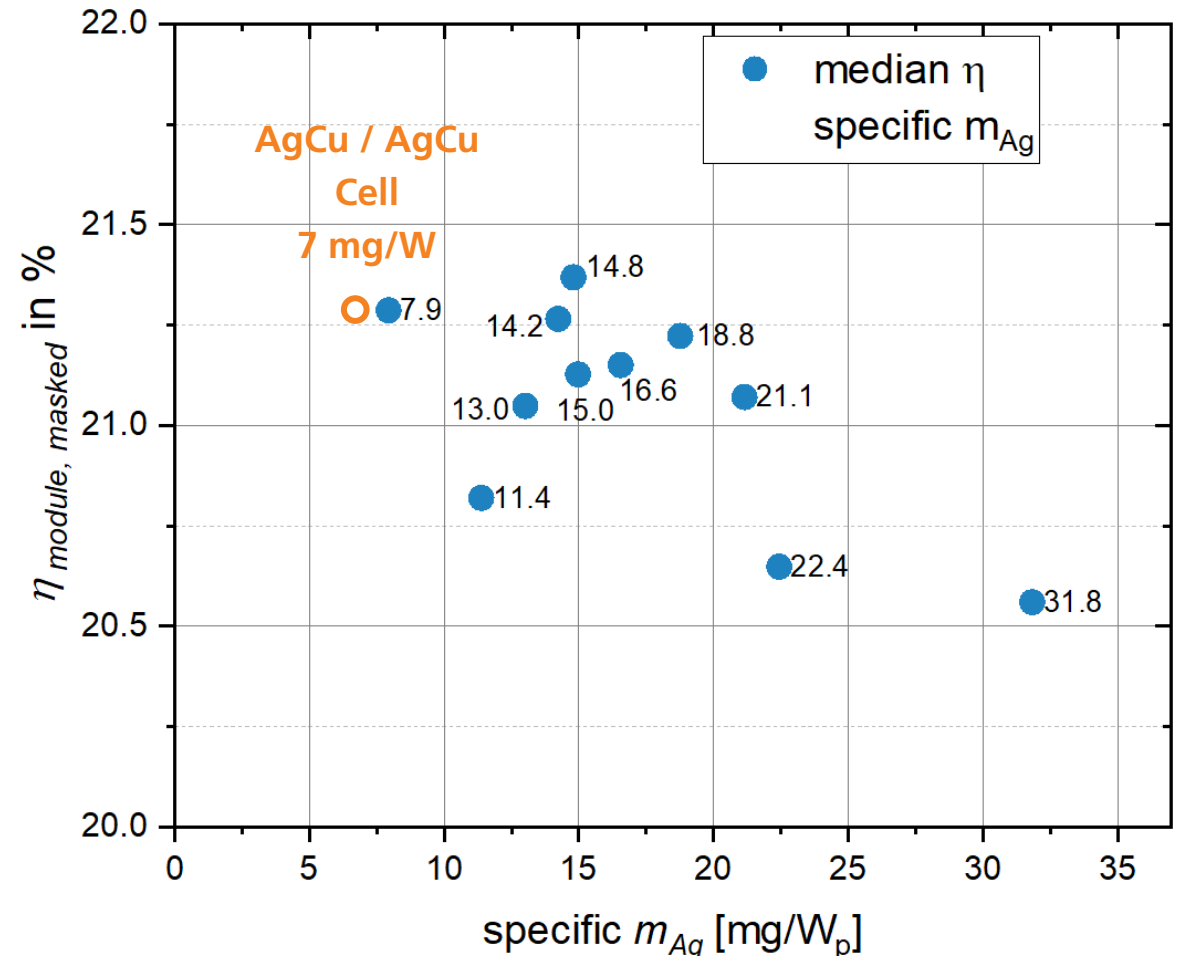


R_{LINE} data for Ag and AgCu pastes printed with varied w_N (27 μm and 30 μm are shown).

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 - Ag consumption below 8 mg/W achievable
 - Significant step towards the 5 mg/W mid-term goal for sustainable SHJ production
 - ➔ **Risen already presented 5 mg/W**

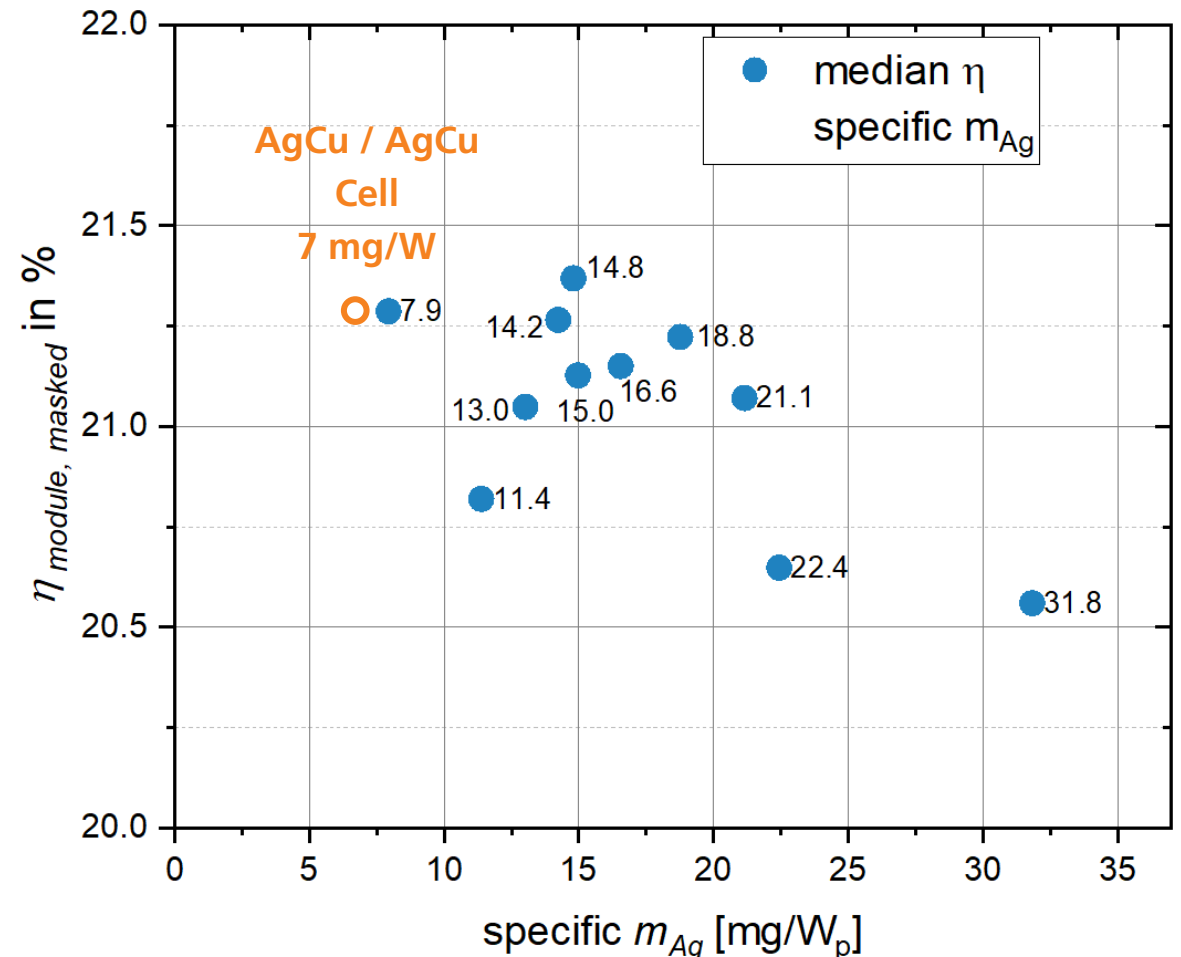


Reduction of silver consumption @Fraunhofer ISE of SHJ solar cells without busbars / pads for smart wire (SWCT) module integration

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 - ➔ **Risen already presented 5 mg/W**
- **Will 100% Cu pastes be the next step?**

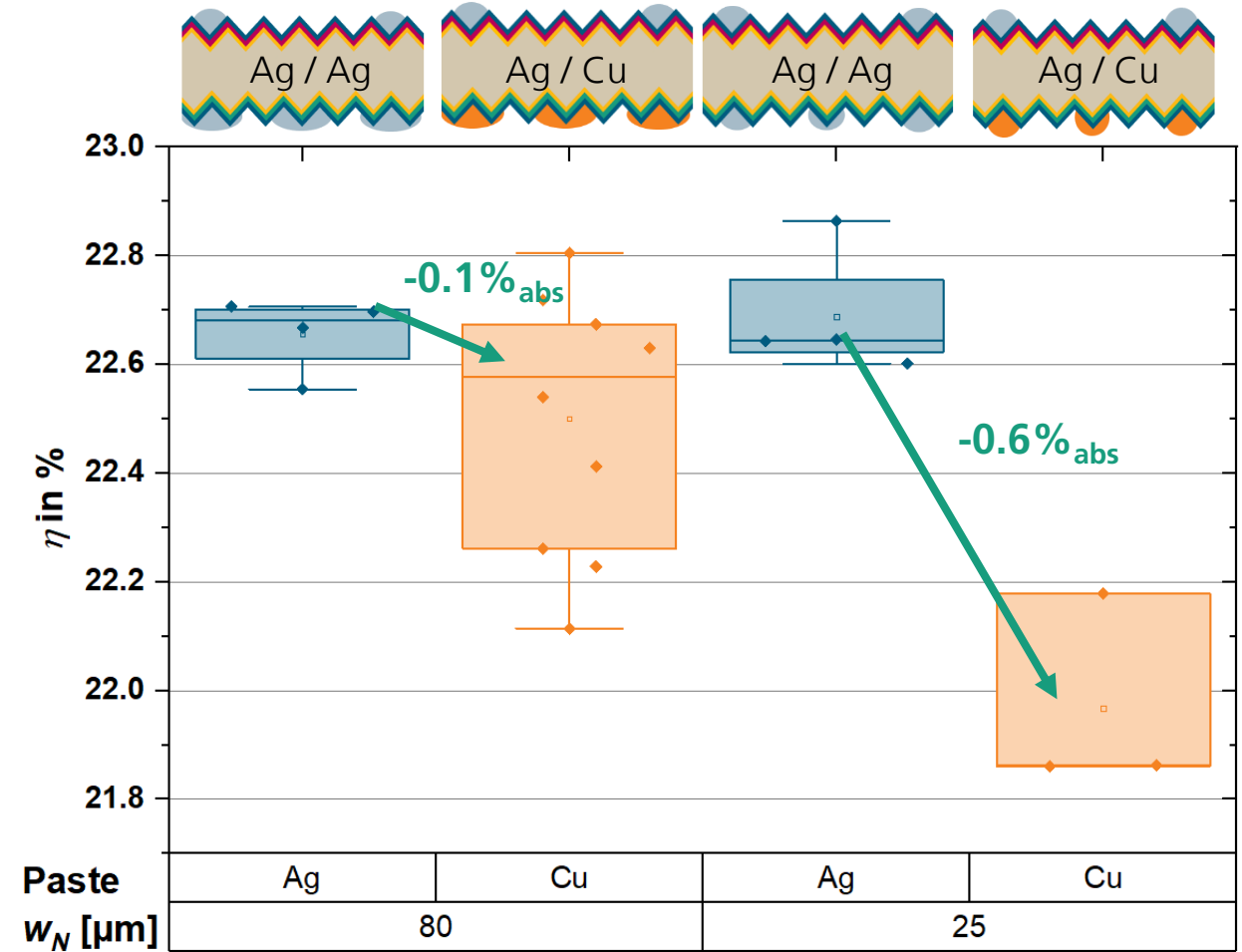
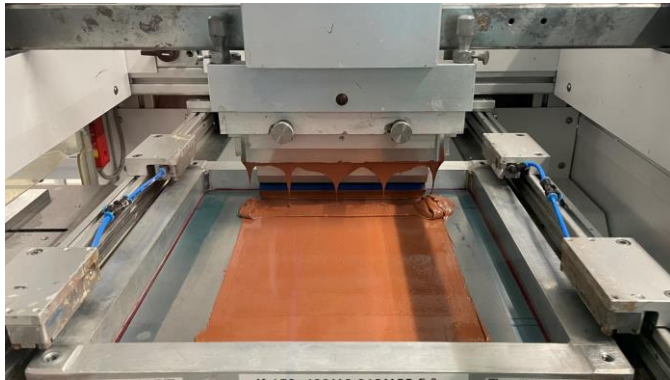


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Screen Printing of Copper Contacts

SHJ solar cells with screen printed copper metallization

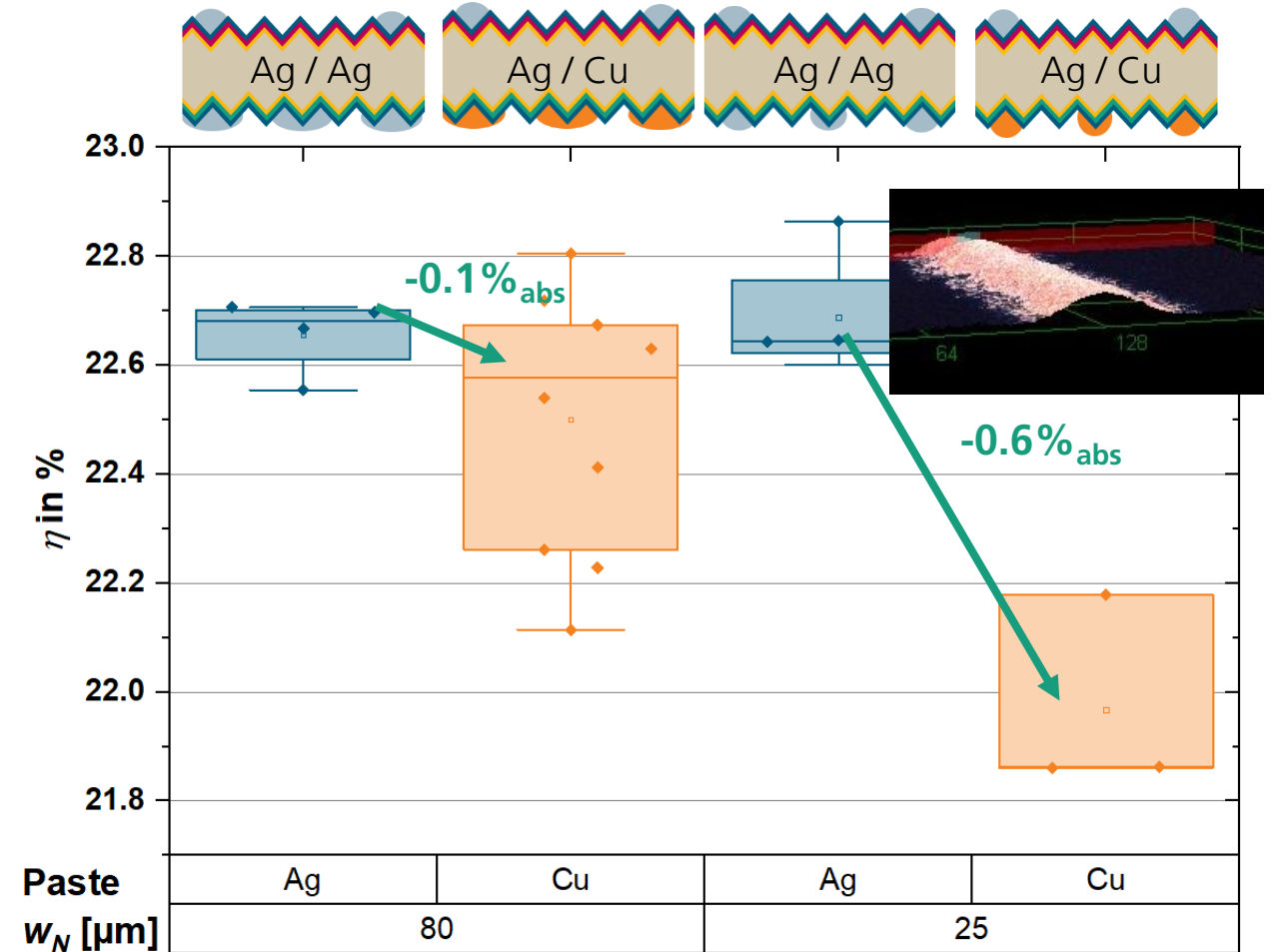
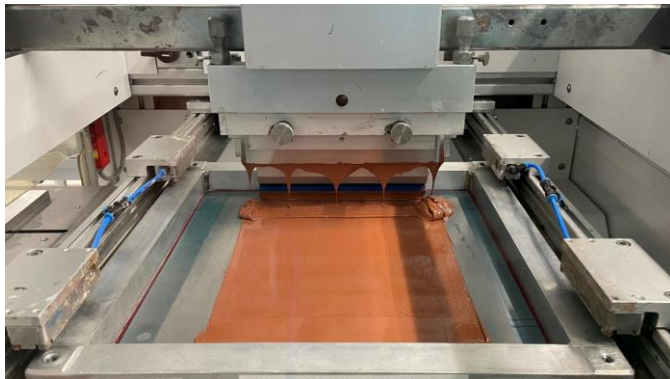
- SHJ Solar cell results show....
 - Cu pastes allow **almost same efficiency level with 80 μ m screen opening**
 - Cu pastes show **promising results with 25 μ m screen opening, but still need some improvement**



Screen Printing of Copper Contacts

SHJ solar cells with screen printed copper metallization

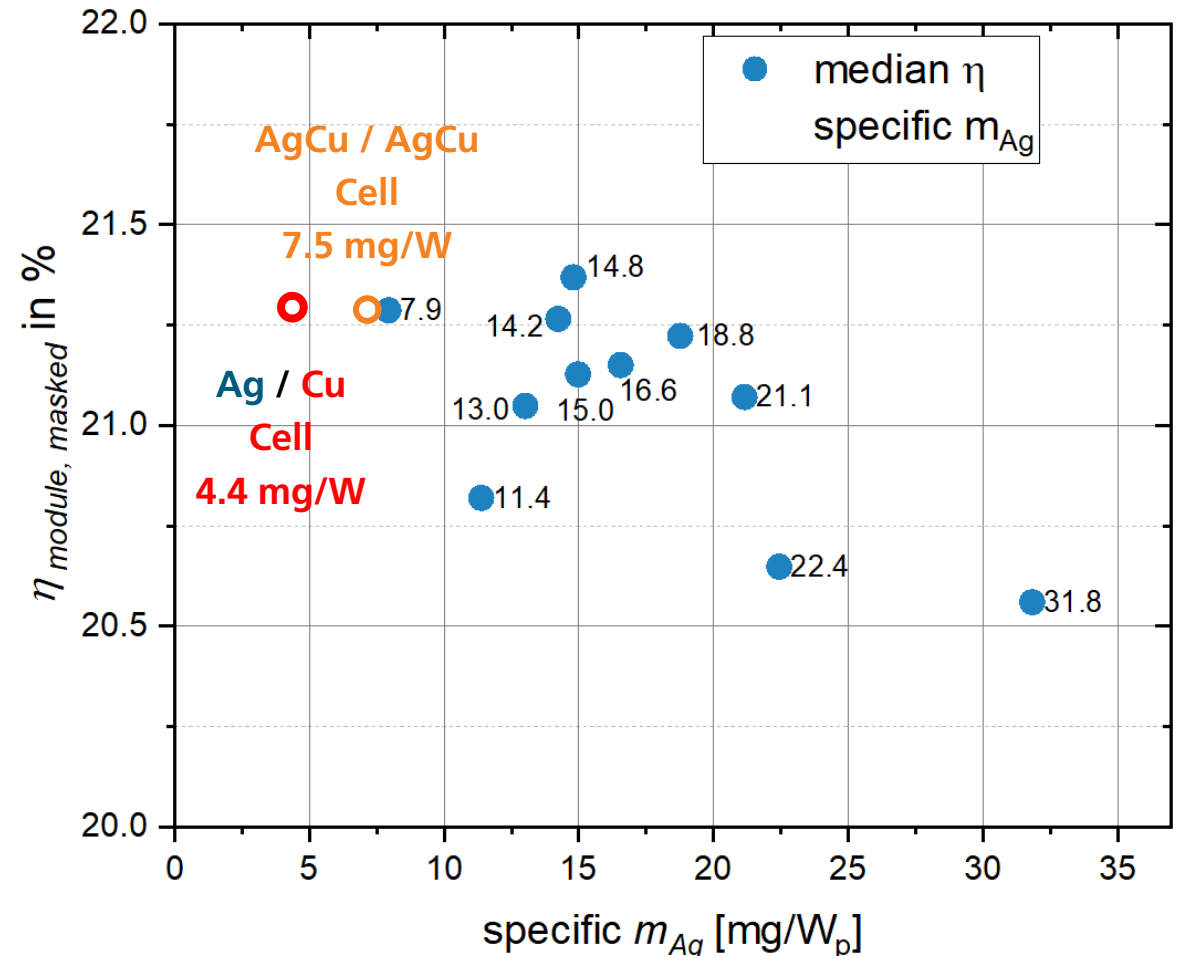
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- >> **printing geometry** >> **line resistance**



Screen Printing of Copper Contacts

SHJ solar cells with screen printed copper metallization

- Low temperature approach with silver-copper pastes
 - Latest versions of AgCu pastes can compete with the best Ag pastes
 - AgCu fingers allow to reduce Ag consumption by at least 50% for SHJ cell
- **100% Cu paste on rear side allow Ag consumption below 5 mg/W**
- Significant step towards the 2 mg/W long-term goal for sustainable SHJ production



Reduction of silver consumption @Fraunhofer ISE of SHJ solar cells without busbars / pads for smart wire (SWCT) module integration

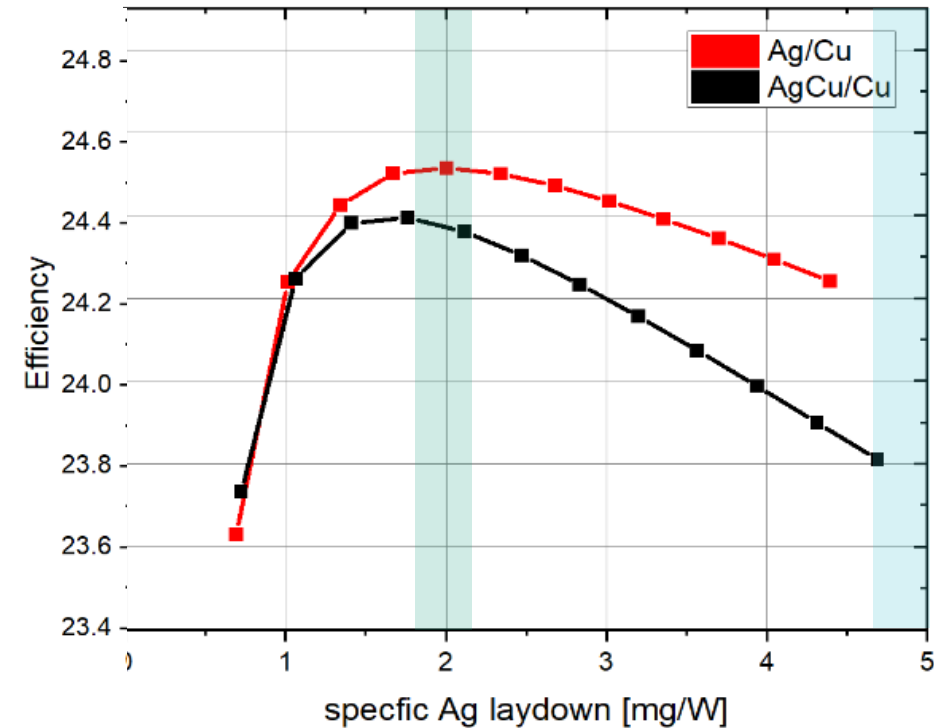
Screen Printing of Copper Contacts

SHJ solar cells with screen printed metallization > Outlook

GRIDMASTER calculation with 100% Cu paste as rear side metallization

➤ **Cu pastes (on rear side) allow Ag consumption below 2 mg/W especially in combination with AgCu front side**

➤ More details: see talk by Sebastian Pingel at Silicon PV 2025



GRIDMASTER calculation based on experimental results: more details see talk of Sebastian Pingel at Silicon PV 2025

Screen Printing of Copper Contacts

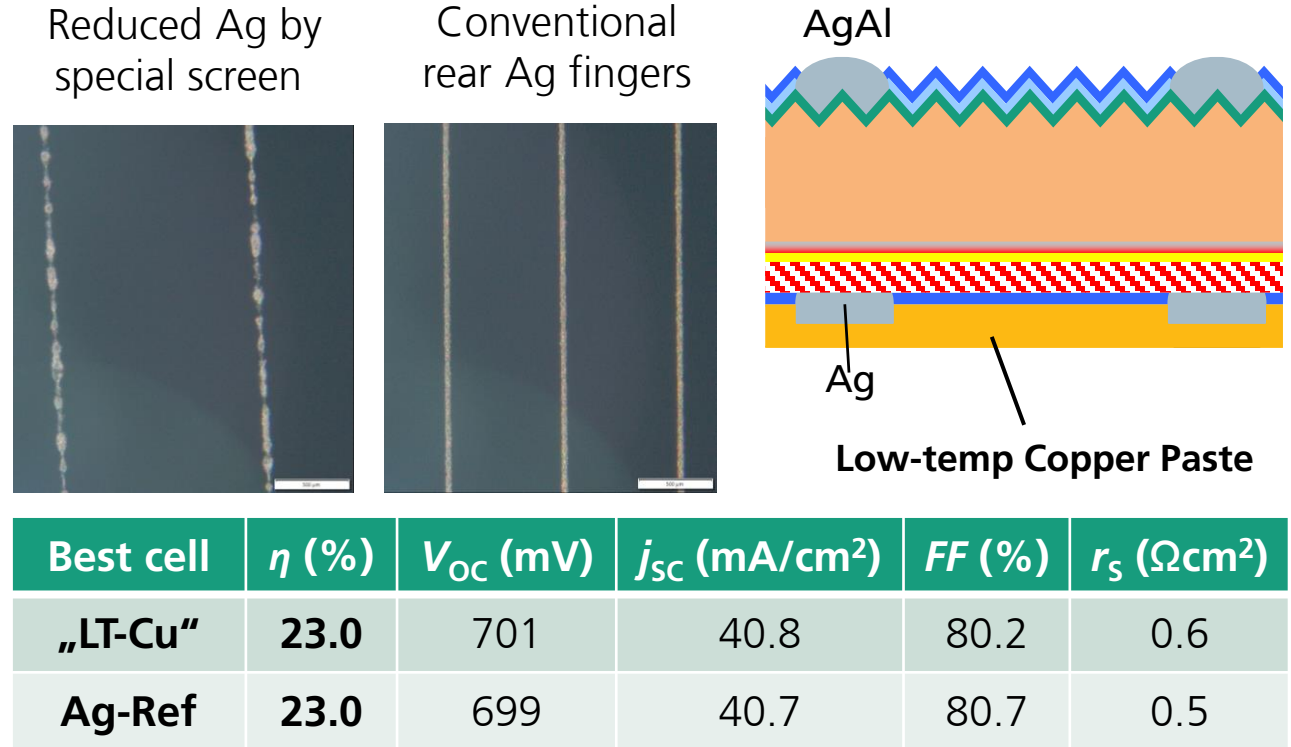
TOPCon solar cells with screen printed low temperature copper metallization

Previous Work:

- Print on Print Ag+Cu metallization successfully demonstrated by ISC Konstanz on IBC and TOPCon solar cells [22]

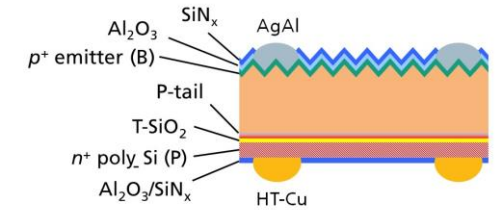
Previous Study at ISE:

- TOPCon solar cells with rear side **Ag contacts** + **full area low-temp copper** conduction layer
- Similar conversion efficiency as reference group
- 75 % silver reduction on the rear side**
- No detectable Cu oxidation (r_s) or Cu diffusion into Si (V_{OC})
- Results published by D. Ourinson [23]

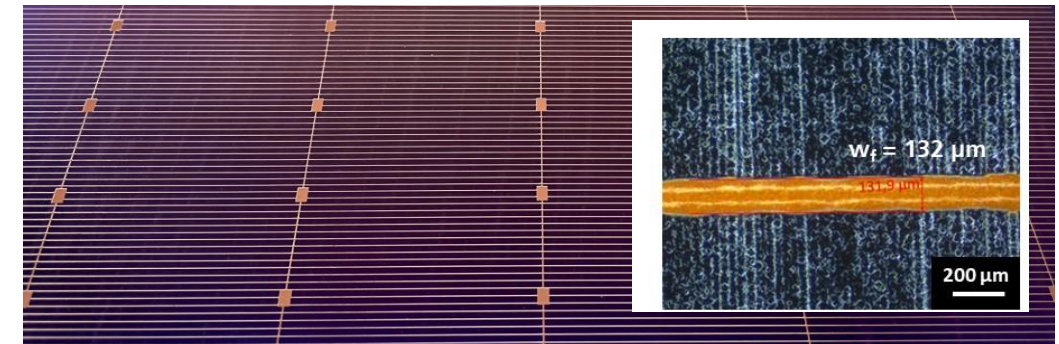


Screen Printing of Copper Contacts

TOPCon solar cells with screen printed copper rear side metallization [24]



- High temperature approach with copper paste
 - Fully functional TOPCon solar cells with screen printed & fired copper metallization on the rear
 - Screen printed Cu contacts: $w_f \sim 130\mu\text{m}$
→ Process Optimization for fine line contacts ongoing
 - Silver reduction in total: ~ 60% less silver**
→ **2-5 mg/W silver consumption reasonable**
- **Feasibility confirmed, further optimization of Cu paste and firing process is ongoing**



Group	η (%)	V_{OC} (mV)	J_{SC} (mA/cm ²)	FF (%)
1 (Cu-RS)	21.6	679	40.2	79.3
2 (Ag-Ref)	23.5	712	40.9	80.5

Group	Ag Front [mg]	Ag Rear [mg]	Total Ag [mg]
1 (Cu-RS)	39	-	39
2 (Ag-Ref)	39	65	104

Technology Roadmap

Screen Printing: How can we reduce / replace Silver?



foto from www.tradestation.com

Low Temperature
Metallization (SHJ)

High Temperature
Metallization (TOPCon)

Technology Roadmap

Screen Printing: How can we reduce / replace Silver?



Silver (Ag)

foto from www.tradestation.com

Low Temperature
Metallization (SHJ)

High Temperature
Metallization (TOPCon)

- Metallization with Ag/Cu pastes ready for mass production
→ at least 50% less Ag
- Approaches with 100% Cu pastes show high potential



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- Print (Ag paste) on Print (Cu pastes) approach promising
- Approaches with 100% Cu pastes still challenging



→ Plating as alternative ?





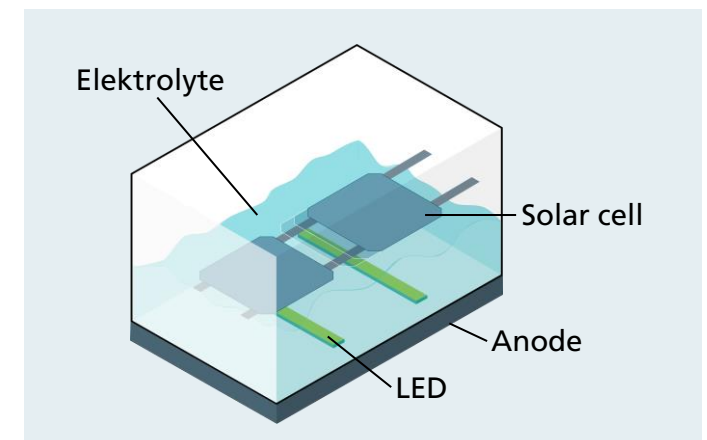
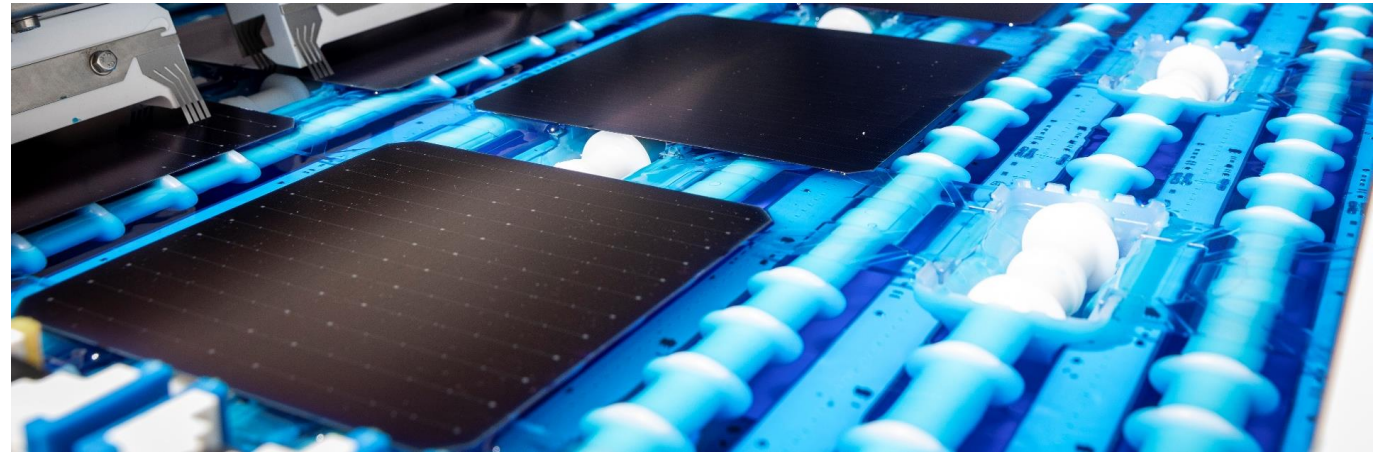
Copper Plating of High-Efficiency Solar Cells

Electroplating of Copper Contacts

TOPCon Solar Cells with Plated Copper Metallization

Objective:

- TOPCon solar cells with plated Ni/Cu metallization
- First pilot fabrication of TOPCon solar cells with format M10 (182 mm x 182 mm) at Fraunhofer ISE



Electroplating of Copper Contacts

TOPCon Solar Cells with Plated Copper Metallization

Experimental:

- TOPCon precursors fabricated at Fraunhofer ISE, format M10 (182 mm x 182 mm)
- Industrial Cz-Si (n-type) Silicon wafers, base resistivity $\rho_{Si} = 0.3-2.1 \Omega\text{cm}$
- Two experimental groups:
 - Group 1: Laser contact opening (LCO) + Electroplating (Ni/Cu/Ag) on front and rear side (RENA InCell Plating Device)
 - Group 2 (Reference): Screen printing (commercial AgAl and Ag paste)

Group 1 – Plating Ni/Cu

Group 2 – Screen Printing (Reference)

n-type Cz-Si TOPCon Precursors (M10 format)

Laser Contact Opening

Fast Firing

Electroplating (Ni/Cu/Ag)

Screen Printing (AgAl)

Fast Firing

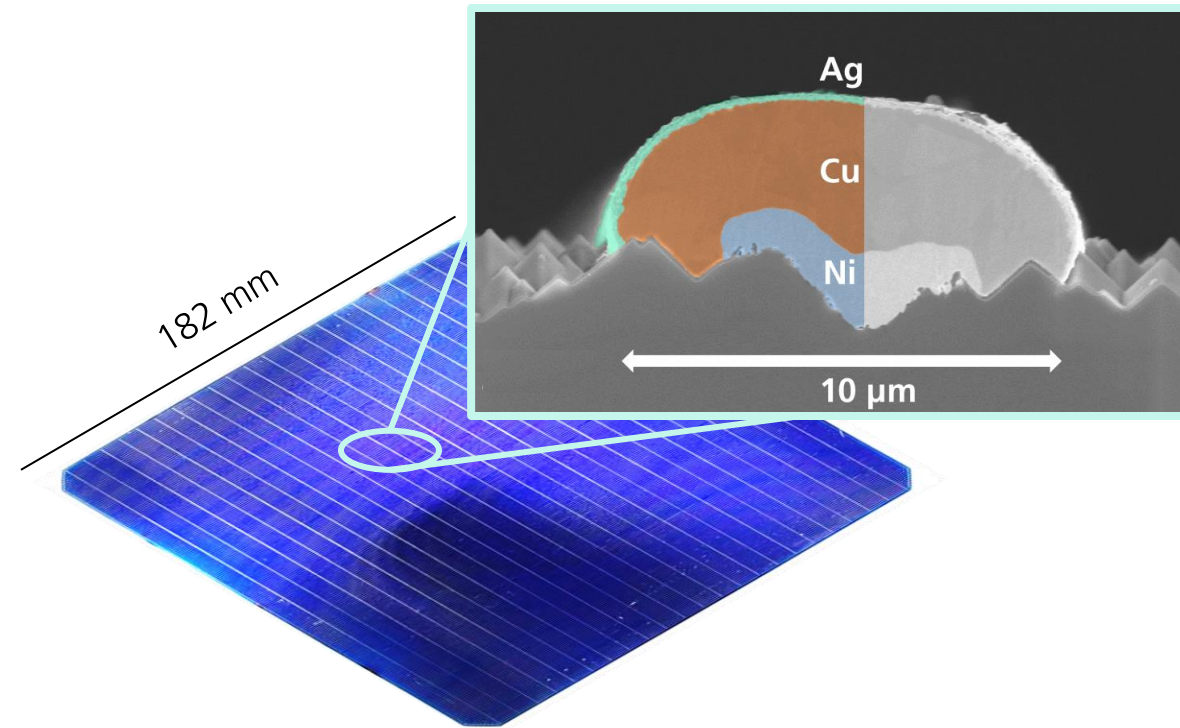
I-V-Measurement

Electroplating of Copper Contacts

TOPCon Solar Cells with Plated Copper Metallization

Results:

- First TOPCon solar cells with format M10 completely fabricated at Fraunhofer ISE [25]
- Champion cell efficiencies:
 - Screen printing: $\eta_{\max} = 24.0 \%$
 - Electroplating: $\eta_{\max} = 24.0 \%$
- Silver capping: **~ 9 mg / cell (1 mg/W)**
Ag reduction by **~93 %** to SP reference
- Perspective: Silver can be completely avoided by using Sn as capping layer



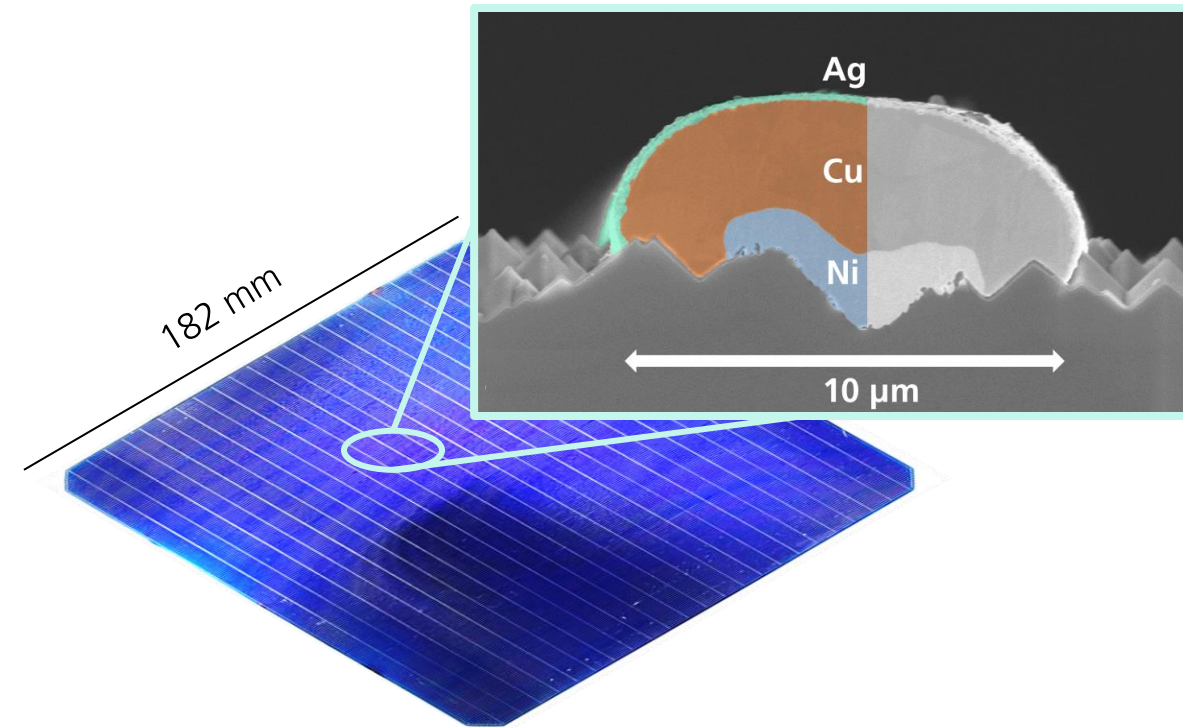
Group	η (%)	V_{OC} (mV)	j_{sc} (mA/cm ²)	FF (%)
1 (PL)	24.0	708	41.0	82.7
2 (SP)	24.0	713	41.0	82.0

Electroplating of Copper Contacts

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- **Reliable module integration demonstrated in industry** [25]



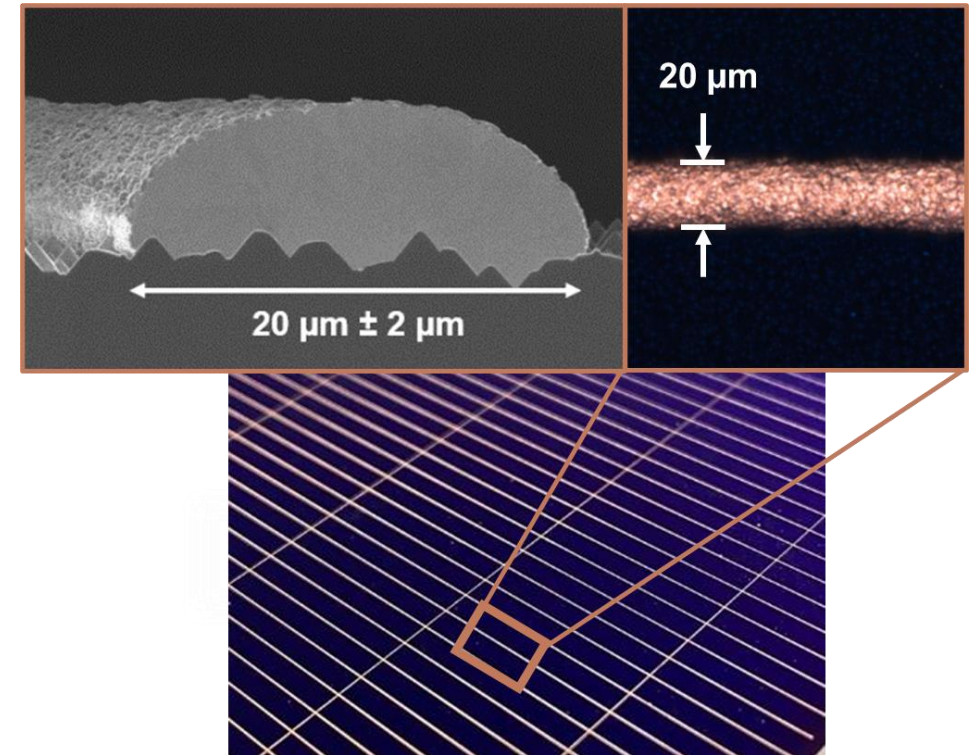
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Electroplating of Copper Contacts

SHJ Solar Cells with Plated Copper Metallization

Results:

- Patented process for plated Cu contacts on SHJ
 - PVD metal masking → organic free
 - Laser patterning → narrow width, fast
 - Bifacial plating Cu/Sn → **Silver free**
- Successful piloting on industrial SHJ solar cells M2-G12 format
- Cost of ownership benefits compared to screen printing for SHJ
- Market Introduction:
 - ➔ Fraunhofer ISE Spin-off: PV²⁺ GmbH



Mask and Plate Copper Contacts

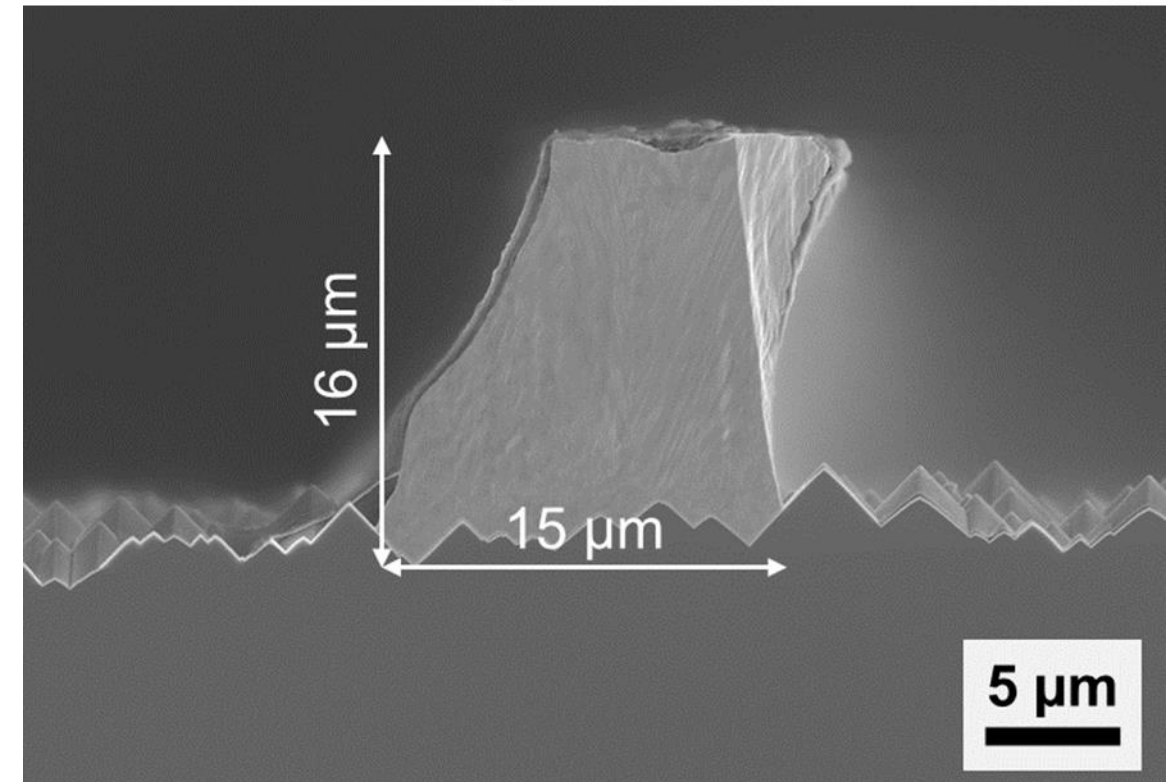
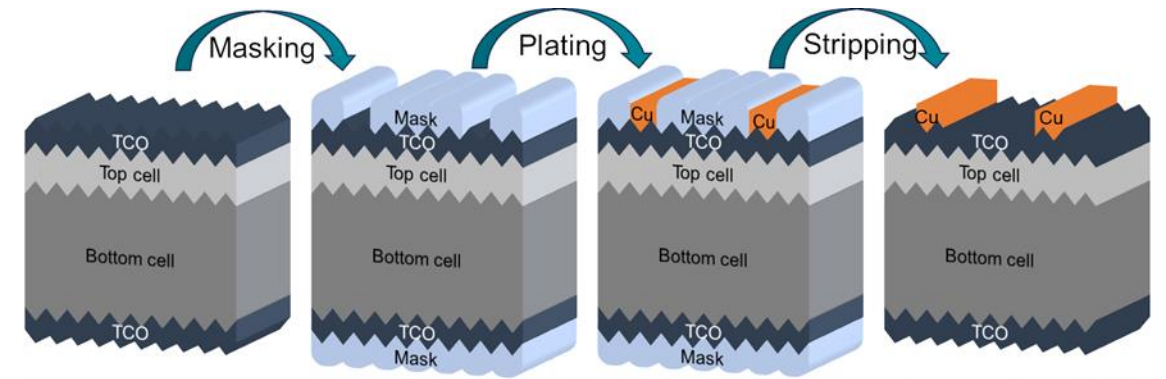
Ultra-Low-Temperature Metallization Approach

Approach

- Masking using hotmelt inkjet printing [26]
- Cu electroplating directly on ITO (no seed layer)
- Mechanical adhesion improved by pre-treatment
- Process temperature well below 100 °C

Process integration

- III-V//Si tandem solar cells with $\eta = 31.6\%$ [27,28]
- Electrical performance on ITO and texture
 - $(2.5 \pm 0.1) \mu\Omega \text{ cm}$ finger resistivity
 - $(0.4 \pm 0.2) \text{ m}\Omega \text{ cm}^2$ contact resistivity
- Transfer to SHJ and Pero-Si tandem (tbp.)

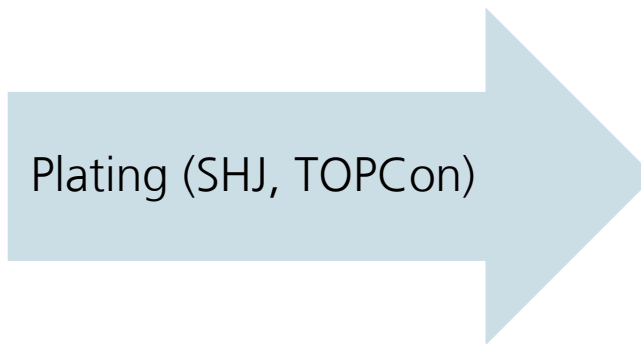


Technology Roadmap

Plating: How can we reduce / replace Silver?



foto from www.tradestation.com

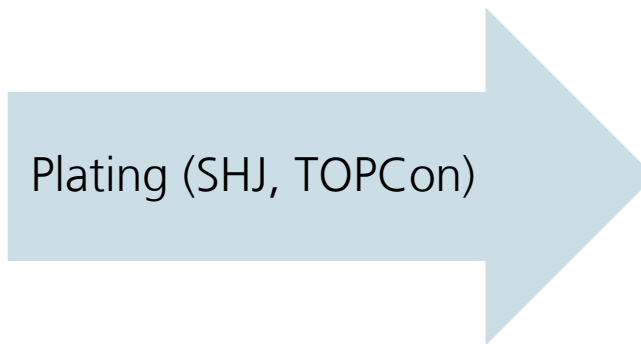


Technology Roadmap

Plating: How can we reduce / replace Silver?



foto from www.tradestation.com



- Ni/Cu(/Ag) Plating for TOPCon:
 - almost Ag free
 - and ready for mass production
- Cu plating for SHJ / Tandem:
 - high potential demonstrated
 - process upscaling is ongoing

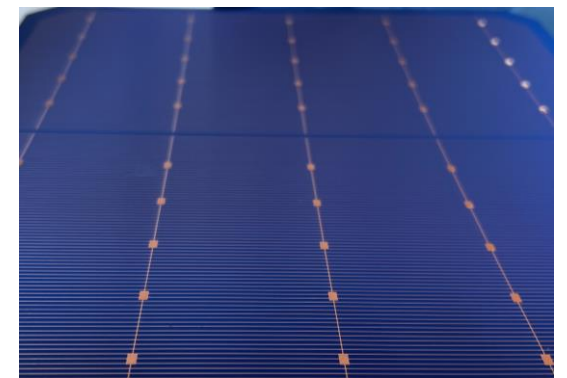
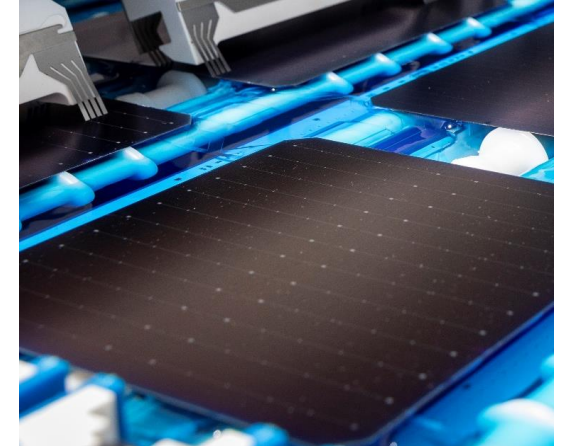
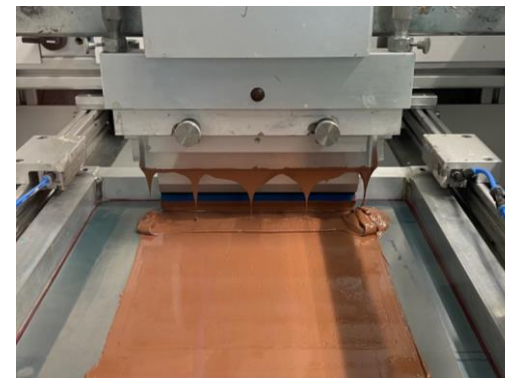
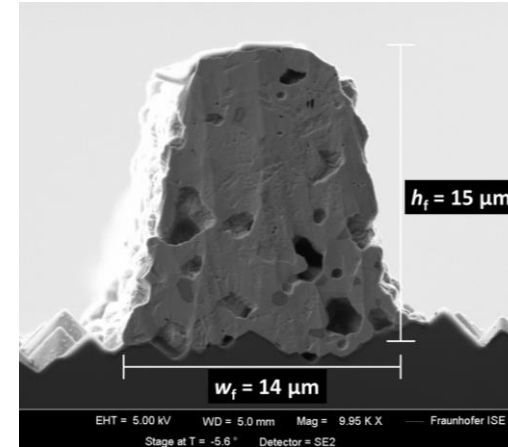


Copper as Cost-Effective Alternative to Silver

Summary and outlook

Summary & Outlook:

- There is a strong need to reduce / replace silver
- Different printing technologies allow ultra fine line contacts with less silver consumption
- Ag/Cu pastes replace Ag pastes for low temperature metallization step by step
- Cu pastes are a promising alternative to Ag pastes for low and high temperature metallization
- Cu plating is ready for production especially for TOPCon solar cells
- **Cu will replace Ag step by step in the future**
- **Other metals (e.g. Al) will also play a role**





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Thank you for your
attention!

—
Dr. Florian Clement

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