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Passivation of a Metal Contact with a Tunneling Layer

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Abstract

The potential of contact passivation for increasing cell performance is indicated by several results reported in the literature. However, scant characterization of the tunneling layers used for that purpose has been reported. In this paper, contact passivation is investigated by insertion of an ultra-thin AlOₓ layer between an n-type emitter and a Ti/Pd/Ag contact. By using a 1.5 nm thick layer, an increase of the minority carrier lifetime by a factor of 2.7 is achieved. Since current-voltage measurements indicate that an ohmic behavior is conserved for AlOₓ layers as thick as 1.5 nm, a 1.5 nm AlOₓ layer is found to be a candidate of choice for contact passivation.

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1. Introduction

Surface passivation is one of the main driving factors for the improvement of the efficiency of silicon solar cells. Most attention throughout the history of photovoltaics has been paid to the passivation of base material and highly-doped silicon areas, but almost no research has been published on the passivation of the metalized areas of silicon solar cells. However, the potential of contact passivation for increasing cell performance is indicated by several results reported in the literature.

By 1984, the highest silicon solar cell efficiency was achieved by using a tunneling SiO$_2$ layer to passivate the front contacts of a full Aluminum Back Surface Field (BSF) cell [1]. This tunneling layer is approximately 2 nm thick and consists of a thermal oxide grown at 500ºC. Unfortunately, no comparison with a cell without contact passivation was made, and investigation of contact passivation has apparently not been pursued by this group.

Later, starting in 1995, the use of an ultra-thin thermal SiO$_2$ layer (~1.5 nm) under Al contacts is reported by Metz and Hezel [2, 3]. This allows the replacement of the costly front Ti/Pd/Ag contacts by evaporated Al contacts by preventing Al spiking through the POCl$_3$-diffused emitter. Such a tunneling SiO$_2$ layer is regularly integrated in high efficiency Passivated Emitter and Rear Cell (PERC) results published by this group, see e.g. ref. [4]. Recently, an extremely thin (0.24 nm) AlO$_x$ layer was implemented for the same purpose in PERCs, enabling open-circuit voltage ($V_{oc}$) to reach 673 mV on 0.5 Ωcm p-type Si wafers, i.e. a $V_{oc}$ gain of 12 mV compared to cells without AlO$_x$ tunneling layer [5, 6]. Cousins et al also reported a $V_{oc}$ gain of about 32 mV in Interdigitated Back Contact (IBC) cells, enabling the reach of voltages over 720 mV [7]. This gain is said to result mainly from the use of “passivated contacts”. Unfortunately, scant details on the nature of the passivation scheme have been provided, with no mention of a tunnel layer.

All these achievements indicate a real potential of tunneling layers to improve cell performance. Despite this, no in-depth characterization of the passivation process has been published, and it is not clear how much these layers actually reduce interface recombination under metal contacts. In the present work, passivation of metal contacts with tunneling AlO$_x$ layers is investigated through photoluminescence (PL) and current-voltage (I-V) measurements.

This paper is structured as follows: in section 2, some requirements of a contact passivation layer are discussed, and AlO$_x$ is proposed as a good candidate for such an application. In section 3, the structure used for minority carrier lifetime investigations is presented, and the impact of AlO$_x$ as a contact passivating layer is shown through PL measurements. Contact properties of tunnel AlO$_x$ layers are studied in section 4, and finally, results are discussed in section 5.

2. AlO$_x$ layers as candidate for contact passivation

2.1. Passivation of Si by ultra-thin AlO$_x$ layers

Aluminum oxide has received considerable research attention in the past few years as it was shown to provide excellent surface passivation of bulk n- and p-type Si [8-10] as well as highly doped p-type Si [11].
The AlOx layers used for that purpose have a thickness generally comprised between 5 and 30 nm, and will be referred to as thick layers. However, for contact passivation, the passivating layer should be thin enough so that the voltage drop caused by the passage of a few A/cm² (metalized area in the range of the percent of the total area) should not exceed the millivolt range, as otherwise the resistive losses due to the tunneling layer would balance out the gain in Voc it allows for. Hence, contact passivating layers should be ultra-thin, of the order of the nanometer.

For AlOx to be a promising candidate for contact passivation, it should passivate Si when deposited in ultra-thin layers. This has been checked by evaluating the effective surface recombination velocity, $S_{eff}$, provided by AlOx layers of various thicknesses in the nanometer range on Si wafers with base doping in the range of 2.5-7.10$^{15}$ cm$^{-3}$. First, n- and p-type polished Float Zone (FZ) Si wafers with resistivity of 2 and 2.4 $\mu$F/cm² respectively were cleaned with the following sequence: H$_2$O$_2$:H$_2$SO$_4$ 1:4 (referred to as SPM clean); HF dip; NH$_4$OH:H$_2$O$_2$:H$_2$O 1:1:5 at 70°C (SC1); HF dip. Then, they were coated on both sides by AlOx layers deposited by thermal Atomic Layer Deposition (ALD) in a Cambridge NanoTech Savannah tool. Finally, they were submitted to a forming gas anneal (FGA) at 350°C for 30 min and their effective minority carrier lifetime $\tau_{eff}$ was measured by Quasi-Steady State Photoconductance. Figure 1 shows the obtained $S_{eff}$ as a function of the AlOx thickness, where $S_{eff}$ was evaluated assuming infinite bulk lifetime, i.e. $S_{eff} = 2W/\tau_{eff}$ with $W$ being the substrate thickness. Already with 20 ALD cycles, which correspond to approximately 2 nm AlOx, $S_{eff}$ values of 8 and 20 cm/s are achieved on n- and p-Si respectively. Hence, effective passivation of both types of Si with base doping can be reached with ultra-thin layers.

However, to obtain a lowly-resistive ohmic contact, metal contacts are generally deposited on highly-doped surfaces. AlOx has been shown to provide excellent passivation of highly-doped p-type Si [11]. As the target here is passivation of the front contacts in p-type i-PERC cells, passivation of highly-doped n-type regions is investigated in section 2.2.

Fig. 1. $S_{eff}$ as a function of AlOx thickness on p- and n-Si, measured at an excess carrier density of 10$^{15}$ cm$^{-3}$. The AlOx thickness is expressed in amount of ALD cycles, where 1 ALD cycle corresponds to approximately 1 Å, without taking into account the interfacial SiOx possibly present.
2.2. Passivation of highly doped Si by AlOₓ

After receiving an SPM clean followed by an HF dip, lowly doped 280 µm thick polished FZ Si wafers were submitted to POCl₃ diffusion on both sides. Some of the wafers were subsequently annealed at 1000ºC in oxygen between 40 and 120 min in order to create deep emitters. After removal of the thermal oxide formed, all wafers were coated on both sides by 30 nm thermal ALD AlOₓ, and submitted to an FGA at 350ºC for 30 min. Lifetimes measured on these wafers by QSSPC are plotted as a function of the sheet resistivity \( R_{\text{sheet}} \) in fig. 2. It can be seen that for moderate doping, namely \( R_{\text{sheet}} \) lower or equal to 115 \( \Omega/\square \), achieved lifetimes are much lower, of the order of 100 to 200 µs. This strong dependence of surface passivation on \( R_{\text{sheet}} \) can be interpreted by means of the passivation mechanism of AlOₓ, which relies on field effect [9]. On n-type Si with base doping, the high density of negative charges contained in the AlOₓ layer and at its interfaces, of the order of \( 10^{12} - 10^{13} \text{ cm}^{-2} \) [9, 12, 13], is large enough to create a region of strong inversion close to the Si surface. This region of strong inversion results in good surface passivation of lowly doped n-Si, as shown by several authors [9, 10]. For Si with moderate n-type doping, the negatively charged AlOₓ can still generate a region of weak inversion near the Si surface. This results in some passivation, though less effective than on lowly doped n-Si, as seen in fig. 2 for \( R_{\text{sheet}} \sim 170 \Omega/\square \). On highly doped n-Si, no or only very weak inversion is achieved, such that passivation is relatively poor, as it is the case for \( R_{\text{sheet}} < 115 \Omega/\square \) in fig. 2.

It has been demonstrated in subsection 2.1 that ultra-thin AlOₓ layers can offer excellent passivation of lowly doped Si. As contacted surfaces are generally highly doped, the impact of n-type doping level on passivation by thick AlOₓ was studied in subsection 2.2, and was shown to be strong. In the next section, the passivation achieved with ultra-thin AlOₓ on 100Ω/\square emitters, contacted or not with metal, is
investigated. This doping value is chosen as it is low enough to target high efficiency in PERC-type cells, and high enough to maintain adequate lateral conductivity. For a 100Ω□ emitter, fig. 2 tells us that lifetime will be limited to around 100 µs. Although 100 µs is a relatively poor value for surface passivation, it is likely much higher than what can be obtained under the contact area of a 100 Ω□ emitter without contact passivation. Besides what is mentioned above, deposition of AlOₓ by ALD allows for a very precise control, repeatability and reproducibility of the thickness. Consequently, AlOₓ is a good candidate for contact passivation.

3. Lifetime investigation of a metalized area passivated with thin AlOₓ layers

3.1. Structure fabricated for photoluminescence measurements

In this section, the gain in passivation potentially obtained by inserting an ultra-thin AlOₓ layer under the front contacts of a PERC-type cell is studied. For this purpose, structures resembling PERCs have been fabricated. The starting material is 180 µm thick Czochralski (CZ) p-Si wafers with a resistivity around 1.5 Ωcm, the front side textured and the rear side flat. After an SPM clean and an HF dip, an oxide mask was deposited on the rear side by Chemical Vapor Deposition (CVD) using silane and oxygen as precursor gases. The wafers were cleaned again in an SPM solution and HF dipped and then submitted to POCl₃ diffusion at 845ºC. Subsequently, the phosphorous glass was removed in diluted HF, and the emitter was submitted to a drive-in at 860ºC for 60 min, to result in a 90-100 Ω□ emitter. After that, the diffusion mask was removed in concentrated HF, and wafers were cleaned once more in an SPM solution followed by an HF dip. The rear side was passivated by deposition of a 400 nm thick CVD oxide layer and a 160 nm thick CVD SiNₓ layer. Wafers were then shortly dipped in HF, and AlOₓ layers of different thicknesses were deposited by thermal ALD on their front side. To improve passivation offered by the AlOₓ layers, wafers were annealed in forming gas for 30 min at 350ºC. Immediately before metallization, the wafers were partly dipped in buffered HF for 20 s, in order to selectively remove AlOₓ from part of the front side of the wafers. Metallization was achieved by e-beam evaporation of a Ti/Pd/Ag stack (70 nm Ti, 50 nm Pd and 1.5 µm Ag) through a shadow mask. The obtained structure is sketched in fig. 3b and 4a: it consists of four different regions, as described in details in fig. 4a. Finally, the lifetime on the different regions of this structure is measured by photoluminescence (PL). The front, textured and metalized side is in contact with the chuck of the PL tool, while laser illumination is applied through the rear, flat and SiOₓ-SiNₓ passivated side.

A comparison of figs 3a and 3b shows the difference between a PERC and the fabricated structure. First, to allow for the PL laser light to illuminate the wafer and generate free carriers, rear side metallization is suppressed. Second, the front Anti-Reflective Coating (ARC) is omitted, and replaced by the contact passivating layer to be studied. Third, in order to perform comparisons between passivated/unpassivated and metalized/non-metalized areas, the regions coated by AlOₓ and metal respectively are re-organized. The exact repartition of the layers on the front side is shown in fig. 4a. Comparison between regions I and III shows the impact of the AlOₓ layer on passivation, i.e. what is actually sought in the experiment. Region IV is necessary for the calibration of the PL measurement by a QSSPC measurement. A comparison between regions III and IV is not straightforward, due to the presence of the metal layer on the front (in contact with the chuck): the quantity measured by PL is the flux of photons resulting from radiative recombination, and a larger fraction of these photons will be reflected on the metalized areas than in the case of the non-metalized ones. Therefore, lifetime of regions I and III might be over-estimated by a factor up to two. As this factor is the same for regions I and III, direct comparison between these two regions is valid. One should however keep in mind that the excess
carrier density at which $\tau_{\text{eff}}$ is measured is different in the different regions, and proportional to $\tau_{\text{eff}}$. Note that it was verified that patterning of the AlO$_x$ layer by buffered HF does not lead to any artifact in the PL images, like a change of reflectivity of the passivation layer on the flat side.

3.2. Interpretation of the photoluminescence measurements

Fig. 4b shows a photoluminescence image of a structure fabricated with 15 ALD cycles (~1.5 nm AlO$_x$), while fig. 5 shows $\tau_{\text{eff}}$ averaged over areas I, III and IV as a function of AlO$_x$ thickness. A comparison between regions II and IV in fig. 4b indicates that 1.5 nm AlO$_x$ does not offer higher passivation of a 100 $\Omega/\square$ P-emitter than native oxide, and the same is true for AlO$_x$ layers up to 16 nm, as seen in fig. 5. When AlO$_x$ is replaced by a 90 nm thick passivating SiN$_x$ ARC in the same structure which is then submitted to firing, $\tau_{\text{eff}}$ is around 160 $\mu$s in region IV. This difference was verified to be linked to the front side only, the firing of the rear side does not affect $\tau_{\text{eff}}$. AlO$_x$ is thus not an effective dielectric for the passivation of n-type emitters with $R_{\text{sheet}} \leq 100 \, \Omega/\square$, for the reason discussed in subsection 2.2, and this partly explains the overall relatively low lifetimes obtained in figs 4a and 5. Nevertheless, a clear improvement of the lifetime is observed on metalized areas passivated with AlO$_x$ layers of 1.5 to 3 nm ($\tau_{\text{eff}} \geq 15 \, \mu$s), as compared to unpassivated metalized areas ($\tau_{\text{eff}} \leq 7.5 \, \mu$s). In the 1.5-2 nm range, contact passivation by AlO$_x$ leads to an increase of lifetime by a factor of almost 3.

Fig. 3. Schematic drawings of a) a PERC-type cell with rear side facing up, and b) the structure fabricated for investigating contact passivation in PERC-type cells.

Fig. 4. a) schematic drawing of the structure fabricated for PL measurements, with the four regions with different coatings labeled I to IV. b) the same structure seen by PL, with a ~1.5 nm thick AlO$_x$ layer (deposited via 15 ALD cycles). Lifetime averaged over the white rectangular areas is indicated. The excess carrier density on the non-metalized areas is $5 \times 10^{14}$ cm$^{-3}$; the one under the metalized is lower, and proportional to the lifetime. The dashed line separates AlO$_x$ coated and non-coated areas.
Lifetime measurements by PL have shown that ultra-thin AlO\textsubscript{x} layers can provide a certain level of contact passivation. In order to find potential applications into solar cells, these passivating layers must not affect contact properties too strongly. Checking this is the subject of next section.

4. Contact properties of passivating AlO\textsubscript{x} tunnel layers

Contact properties of Ti/Pd/Ag stacks with an underlying AlO\textsubscript{x} layer were studied on flat and textured emitters. The structure used with flat emitters is shown in fig. 6a, and fabricated as follows: after an SPM clean and an HF dip, a 120 $\Omega$-square n-type emitter is obtained by POCl\textsubscript{3} diffusion on p-type wafers, with a process similar to the one described in subsection 3.1. The emitter is then coated with an ultra-thin AlO\textsubscript{x} layer, on which circular Ti/Pd/Ag contacts with a diameter of 500 µm are evaporated through a shadow mask. The ohmic nature of the Metal-Insulator-Silicon (MIS) contacts formed that way is verified by measuring the current-voltage (I-V) characteristics between adjacent dots. For AlO\textsubscript{x} layers with a thickness larger than or equal to 2 nm, weak to strong deviation from an ohmic behavior were observed, and an example is shown in fig. 6b for a 2 nm thick layer. Interestingly, for AlO\textsubscript{x} thicknesses less than or equal to 1.5 nm, ohmic behavior was observed. This is an important observation, since the highest lifetimes obtained in the previous section were achieved with 1.5 and 2 nm thick layers. Consequently, a 1.5 nm AlO\textsubscript{x} layer deposited between a POCl\textsubscript{3} emitter in the 100-120 $\Omega$-square range and a Ti/Pd/Ag contact provides a significant increase of lifetime without notably affecting the ohmic nature of this contact.

A similar experiment was repeated with textured 100 $\Omega$-square POCl\textsubscript{3} emitters. All structures with AlO\textsubscript{x} layers with a thickness ranging from 1 to 16 nm were found to have ohmic contacts. This is very surprising, as one would expect layers above 4 nm to be insulating. A possible explanation is that the electrical field is strongly increased at the pyramid tips by tip effect, leading to a local breakdown of the AlO\textsubscript{x} layer. In that case, the current would flow through the pyramid tips only. This hypothesis remains to be verified.

Fig. 5. Averaged value of $\tau_{eff}$ over regions I, III and IV of fig. 4a, as a function of AlO\textsubscript{x} thickness. One ALD cycle corresponds to about 1 Å.
5. Summary and conclusion

The potential of contact passivation for increasing cell performance is indicated by several results reported in the literature. However, scant characterization of the tunneling layers used for that purpose has been reported. In the present paper, tunneling AlO_x layers are characterized though lifetime and I-V measurements. It is first demonstrated that ultra-thin AlO_x layers can effectively passivate p- and n-Si with base doping. It is then shown that passivation by AlO_x is less efficient on highly-doped n-Si surfaces. This partly explains the overall low lifetimes obtained on the structures fabricated to compare lifetimes under passivated and non-passivated metalized areas. Also the quality of the bulk and of the surface passivation on the non-metalized side could be the origin of the low lifetimes, such that the achieved results should be confirmed by using higher quality substrates and excellent surface passivation on the rear side.

Nevertheless, an increase in minority carrier lifetime by a factor of two to three by insertion of an ultra-thin AlO_x layer under a Ti/Pd/Ag-metalized area has been achieved, with highest lifetime values seen for 1.5-2 nm thick layers. I-V measurements on flat emitters have shown that an ohmic behavior is conserved for AlO_x layers as thick as 1.5 nm.

As a consequence, a 1.5 nm AlO_x layer exhibits the requirements necessary for contact passivation on an n-type emitter: it leads to a significant improvement of lifetime under a metal contact without notably affecting the ohmic nature of this contact.
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