Ultra-thin oxide breakdown for OTP development in power technologies

O. Gasparri, M. Bernardoni, P. Del Croce, A. Baschirotto

OTP (One Time Programmable) memory in power technology enables electrical performance optimization together with area occupation reduction. In this paper, the aspects relative to the oxide breakdown (which is the key mechanism for memory programmability) are studied and applied to the development of an antifuse OTP cell in a 350 nm-CMOS power technology. The physical analysis of the degradation phases of an oxide layer is presented together with the physical models, exploited to foresee the device time-to-breakdown depending on applied voltage, oxide thickness etc. The achieved results are used in the development and reliable implementation of OTP cells in the target 350 nm-CMOS node.

Keywords: 1/E model; E model; oxide breakdown; OTP; power law; tunneling; time-to-breakdown

1. Introduction

Recently aggressive optimization of power devices is exploiting digital programmability, which is possible for the availability of on-chip low-cost memory as OTP (One Time Programmable) cells. Digital programmability is exploited in power devices to configure the circuit and optimize it for any operation condition. On the other hand, in the design of analog blocks, where the power devices are not specifically developed for, digital programmability is exploited to adjust and tune performance to achieve accuracy otherwise critical in such technology. This key need of on-chip memory in power technology is satisfied by the development of low-cost OTP cells, which have to guarantee efficient and reliable programmability mechanism.

In an OTP cell, the oxide is the antifuse element to be programmed by inducing its Breakdown reliability and within a certain time, defined Time-To-Breakdown ($T_{BD}$).

In this paper, the mechanisms producing the Breakdown events are presented and their effects are studied for the development of an OTP cell in 350 nm technology with 7.7 nm oxide thickness ($t_{ox}$).

2. Oxide degradation processes

The main classes of processes producing oxide degradation, resulting in damages and, then, in Breakdown are the Wearout currents and the Defect Generation Mechanisms, as described in the following.

2.1 Wearout currents

If a voltage is applied to an oxide layer, a leakage current flows, called tunneling or wearout current. There are two main mechanisms causing such current:

- **Fowler-Nordheim tunneling (FN):** the band diagram deforms such that the electron crosses a triangular potential barrier. Such FN current is due to electrons reaching the anode passing through the oxide conduction band, as in Fig. 1 (left), and is:

$$J_{FN} = A \cdot F_{ox}^2 \cdot \exp \left( - \frac{B}{F_{ox}} \right)$$

(1)

where $q$ is the elementary charge, and $A, B$ parameters are:

$$A = \frac{q^3}{8 \pi \hbar^2} \frac{m_{ox}^*}{m_{ox}} \quad \text{and} \quad B = \frac{8 \pi \sqrt{2m_{ox}^* \phi_B}}{3 \hbar q}$$

(2)

with $m_{ox}^*$ the electron rest mass, $m_{ox}$ the electron effective mass within the dielectric and $\phi_B$ the injecting electrode barrier height.

FN mechanism dominates for high electric fields;

- **Direct Tunneling (DT):** the current is due to cathode injected electrons crossing a trapezoidal potential barrier (between metal/oxide/$\text{Si}$ in CMOS) reaching the anode without flowing into...
Defects in an oxide layer are due to fabrication imperfections and/or expected to dominate. While for thin oxide, nailing, considering a single trap, electrons tunnel from the cathode to trigger other defect creation mechanisms. In a trap-assisted tun-

eral and bonds rupture, shown in Fig. 2 (right), leading to irreversible oxide damages.

### 3. Breakdown physical models

The OTP programmability efficiency and reliability depends on the accuracy of the evaluation of $T_{BD}$, whose value depends on the dominating defect creation mechanisms. There are three main mechanisms producing Breakdown, each of which leading to a different $T_{BD}$.

- **E Model (also Thermo-Chemical model):** the Breakdown results from the covalent SiO$_2$ bonds rupture due to the electric field [7]. In this case:

$$T_{BD,E} = (C \cdot e^{\frac{V_G}{E}}) \cdot e^{-G E_{ox}}$$

- **1/E Model (also AHI model):** the Breakdown is due to the hot holes injected from the anode. The hole tunneling current can be expressed as the product between the electron FN tunneling current and a term expressing the probability of the hole generation and tunneling through the anode barrier [3, 4]. The amount of injected holes determines the $T_{BD}$, expressed as:

$$T_{BD,1/E} = (D \cdot e^{\frac{V_G}{E_{ox}}}) \cdot e^{-G E_{ox}}$$

- **Power Law:** linked to the hydrogen release phenomena. Hot tunneling electrons may break the Si-H bonds, leading to releasing of hydrogen atoms at the cathode interface. These can subsequently diffuse through the oxide and combine with oxygen vacancies [5]. In such a way, defects are generated till the Breakdown happens and $T_{BD}$ is given by:

$$T_{BD,Power} = K \cdot V_G^{-\beta}$$

where $\beta$ is the voltage acceleration factor [6], related to the disruption energy of Si-H bonds.

Depending on the implementation aspects (oxide quality, technology processes, electric field etc.) the relative importance of the three mechanisms changes and one of these could become dominating. The case with a 350 nm technology is discussed in the following section.
Fig. 4. Wearout current fit with FN equation (left), $T_{BD}$ fit (right)

4. Models validation

Based on the above described physical mechanisms, the case of an OTP cell in the 350nm technology with oxide surface of 9.2 $\mu$m² and thickness of 7.7 nm is studied. The goal is to relate electric field, oxide properties and $T_{BD}$. For this purpose, high voltage (>13 V) pulses are applied to the gate (while source and drain were shorted) to induce Breakdown. From Fig. 3, for 13 V programming voltage, the Wearout current is about 50 $\mu$A and the pulses are applied to the gate (while source and drain were shorted) as proven in Fig. 4 (left) where the Eq. (1) correctly fits the data. The extrapolated $A$ and $B$ parameters of Eq. (1) are:

$$A = 3.5 \cdot 10^{-3} \text{AV}^2 \quad \text{and} \quad B = 3.8 \cdot 10^{10} \text{V/m}$$ (7)

The $T_{BD}$ behaviour as a function of the applied voltage is shown in Fig. 4 (right). The fitting equations are (4), (5) and (6) where $V_{g}/t_{ox} = E_{ox}$. The extrapolated parameters are:

$$E \text{ model: } (C \cdot e^{D/2T}) = 1.2e^{34}, \quad G_{t_{ox}} = 2.22$$

$$1/E \text{ model: } (D \cdot e^{G/2C}) = 2.4e^{17}, \quad F \cdot t_{ox} = 460$$ (8)

PowerLaw model: $K = 2.3e^{34}, \quad \beta = 32$

These results are validated also by the good agreement with literature. In fact, $B$ is consistent with [1] and $E$ model parameters are comparable with those obtained in [7].

The fitting to the experimental data proves the pertinence of the three models. However, the experiment is yet not enough to determine which of those defect generation mechanisms have more impact. Indeed, breakdown is generally a consequence of more mechanisms superimposed. Anyway, guesses of $T_{BD}$ can still be obtained by extrapolation. Must be pointed out that it is important to guarantee a maximum failure rate: the programmed oxide must be hardly broken, to avoid misunderstanding while reading the memory. The higher the electric field, the higher is the probability of having hard breakdowns in the programming time window. Nevertheless, producing a higher voltage would require more power and area consumption, affecting the overall chip cost. On the basis of these considerations, the specifications concerning the oxide properties, the target $T_{BD}$ and the applied field are drawn and the OTP circuit design follows.

5. Conclusion

The paper explains the oxide Breakdown process in a high-voltage technology required for the development of an OTP cell. The main models and formulas, useful to relate the oxide lifetime with the oxide dimension and the applied field are presented. From the conducted experiments in the adopted 350 nm technology and in the range 13 to 16 V, the three mechanism results in similar $T_{BD}$ and then $T_{BD}$ optimization requires to manage all three phenomena. This validates the presented research activity. The same methodology can also be adopted for predicting the devices lifetime for the surrounding 350 nm CMOS circuit.

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Authors

Osvaldo Gasparri
Born in 1994, he holds a master’s degree in solid state physics and electronics. His studies covered theoretical physics, semiconductor physics, computational physics, solid state physics, energetics, electronics and many laboratory experiences. He graduated magna cum laude in 2018 at the University of Milano-Bicocca. In the field of electronic physics he started a PhD in collaboration with the Analog Design Team of the Automotive Division of Infineon Technologies Villach (AT). He filed a patent on Power Converters and wrote several papers concerning concept, design and experimental activities with Integrated circuits. Joined and gave speeches in various seminars and conferences. Carried out academic tasks including exerciser, tutor and graduate supervisor. At present his research activities are: modeling and design of One Time Programmable memories using ultra-thin oxides.

Mirko Bernardoni
Was born in Mantova (Italy) in 1984. He received his M.Sc. in Electronic Engineering in 2009 and his Ph.D. in Information Technologies in 2012, both from University of Parma, Italy. His research topics fall in the field of power electronics with particular focus on simulation and characterization of thermal and electro-thermal aspects in devices and systems, and the development of techniques to simulate such dynamics. From 2012 to 2013 he worked as post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Device Technology and Reliability (CDTR) at the university of Bristol, UK, in the field of contact-less thermal measurement techniques on GaN-based HEMTs with micrometer spatial resolution. From 2013 to 2018 he has been working as Modelling and Simulation Engineer for the Kompetenzzentrum für Automobil und Industrieelektronik (Competence Center for Automotive and Industrial Electronics) – an Infineon Austria subsidiary company in Villach. Since 2018 he is employed at Infineon Technologies Austria as Concept Engineer for Power Electronics, working in the product development for the Automotive branch division.

Paolo Del Croce
Born in 1971, holds a MS degree in electronic engineering (high frequency and microwave electronics). In the field of integrated circuit design worked first for the Low Power Static RAM Division of ST microelectronics (2000) as analog designer. In 2003 joined the Automotive Division of Infineon Technologies originally covering the role of analog/mix-signal designer, later taking over the role of technical project leader. In this context his main fields of activities have been: design of drivers, protections and load current sensing stages for monolithic Smart Power High Side Switches, thermal design of power stages, product EMC and ESD compliance, technology requirements definition, customer support. Filed several patents and wrote several papers in the field of Smart Power Switches. At present works as design group leader in the Automotive Body Power Department of Infineon, with focus on design methodology and steering of the product development from product idea to release for production.

Andrea Baschirotto
Received the Graduate (summa cum laude) and Ph.D. degrees in electronics engineering from the University of Pavia, Pavia, Italy, in 1989 and 1994, respectively. In 1994, he joined the Department of Electronics, University of Pavia, as a Researcher (Assistant Professor). In 1998, he joined the Department of Innovation Engineering, University of Lecce, Italy, as an Associate Professor. In 2007, he joined the Department of Physics, University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy, as an Associate Professor. He has a long-term experience in microelectronics for teaching, researching, and industrial designing. He has been teaching regular academic courses since 1997. He has been giving advanced courses in companies and research centers since 1996. He has been giving short courses and tutorials at the most important conferences, such as ISSCC, ICSAS, and PRIME. He has been responsible for some national and regional projects for the design of ASICs. Since 1989, he has also been personally collaborating with several companies on the design of mixed-signal ASICs, such as STMicroelectronics, Mikron, ACCO, Mindspeed, and Conexant. In 2010, he co-founded the start-up SparklingIC, where he serves as the Chief Technology Officer. He has authored or coauthored more than 190 articles in international journals and presentations at international conferences and six book chapters. In addition, he has coauthored more than 120 articles within research collaborations on high-energy physics experiments. He holds 40 USA patents. About his research activity, he founded and directs the Microelectronics Group, University of Milan-Bicocca, in collaboration with several companies and research institutions, such as Infineon, STMicroelectronics, Pirelli, IMEC, and the University of Pavia. He participated in several research collaborations, also funded by national and European projects. His main research interests include the design of CMOS mixed analog/digital-integrated circuits, in particular for low-power and/or high-speed signal processing. He has been a member of the Technical Program Committee of several international conferences, such as ISSCC, ESSCIRC, IAC, and DATE. He was the General Chair of IEEE-PRIME2006, AACD2008, AACD2013, IEEE-PRIME2013, and AACD2016. He has been serving the ESSCIRC TPC as the Data Converter Subcommittee Chairman. He has been the Technical Program Committee Chairman of the ESSCIRC 2002. He is the Founder and the Chairman of the IEEE Solid-State Circuit Society Italian Chapter. He was a Guest Editor of the IEEE Journal of Solid-State Circuits (JSSC) for ESSCIRC 2003 and ESSCIRC 2007. He has been an Associate Editor of the IEEE Transactions on Circuits and Systems—I and IEEE Transactions on Circuits and Systems—II. He has been an Associate Editor of the IEEE JSSC since 2014. He has been the Secretary of the European Committee of ISSCC Technical Program Committee. (Based on document published on 5 September 2019.)