

STIMULUS RESPONSIVE POLYMER FILMS AND FORMULATIONS

INCORPORATION BY REFERENCE

[0001] A PCT Request Form is filed concurrently with this specification as part of the present application. Each application that the present application claims benefit of or priority to as identified in the concurrently filed PCT Request Form is incorporated by reference herein in its entirety and for all purposes.

BACKGROUND

[0002] During semiconductor fabrication, many surfaces are sensitive to airborne molecular contaminants (AMCs) in the surrounding environment. Queue time can lead to exposure to the AMCs and unwanted interactions such as oxidation, corrosion, and halogenation. Solutions include storing partially fabricated semiconductor substrates in nitrogen (N₂)-filled storage cassettes or rooms and using integrated tools that support multiple processes without breaking the vacuum on the substrates. These solutions are difficult and expensive to implement and pose safety and reliability concerns.

[0003] Furthermore, as semiconductor devices continue to scale down to smaller sizes, higher aspect ratio structures are used to achieve the desired device performance. The fabrication of semiconductor devices involves multiple iterations of processes such as material deposition, planarization, feature patterning, feature etching, and feature cleaning. The drive towards higher aspect ratio structures creates processing challenges for many of these traditional fabrication steps. Wet processes such as etch and clean, which may make up greater than 25% of the overall process flow, are particularly challenging on high aspect ratio (HAR) features due to the capillary forces that are generated during drying. The strength of these capillary forces depends on the surface tension and contact angle of the etch, clean, or rinse fluids that are being dried, as well as the feature spacing and aspect ratio. If the forces generated during drying are too high, then the high aspect ratio features will collapse onto each other and stiction may occur. Feature collapse and stiction will severely degrade the device yield.

[0004] The background description provided herein is for the purposes of generally presenting the context of the disclosure. Work of the presently named inventors, to the extent it is described in this background section, as well as aspects of the description that may not otherwise qualify as prior art at the time of filing, are neither expressly nor impliedly admitted as prior art against the present disclosure.

SUMMARY

[0005] Formulations for forming stimulus responsive polymers (SRPs) on semiconductor substrates including organic weak acids are described. SRP layers formed from the formulations exhibit accelerated degradation characteristics compared to neat SRP. Also described are methods of protecting sensitive substrates including forming an SRP layer on sensitive substrates and forming one or more cap layers on the SRP layer.

[0006] Aspects of the disclosure relate to methods of protecting a surface. In some embodiments, a method includes forming an SRP layer, wherein the SRP layer is a layer including a stimulus responsive polymer (SRP), the SRP characterized by a ceiling temperature (T_c) at which the SRP is in thermal equilibrium with its monomers, the T_c being between -80°C and 400°C , on a sensitive surface of a substrate; and forming one or more cap layers on the SRP layer.

[0007] In some embodiments, the method further includes exposing the substrate including the SRP layer and one or more cap layers to ambient conditions for a predetermined period.

[0008] In some such embodiments, the method further includes removing the one or more cap layers and the SRP layer. In some embodiments, the one or more cap layers are removed prior to completing removal of the SRP layer. In some embodiments, the one or more cap layers are removed by peeling. In some embodiments, the one or more cap layers are removed by exposure to a solvent or plasma. In some such embodiments, the solvent is removed or the plasma is extinguished while the SRP layer is covering the sensitive surface. In some embodiments, removing the one or more cap layers includes depolymerizing the SRP and lifting off the one or more cap layers from the substrate.

[0009] In some embodiments, forming the one or more cap layers includes maintaining the substrate temperature at no more than the ceiling temperature of the SRP. In some embodiments, the one or more cap layers are inorganic layers. In some embodiments, the one or more cap layers include one or more of: SiO_x , SnO_x , AlO_x , TiO_x , ZrO_x , HfO_x , and ZnO_x , and nitride films such as SiN_x wherein x is a number greater than 0.

[0010] In some embodiments, the one or more cap layers include one or more polymer layers. In some embodiments, the SRP includes a poly(phthalaldehyde), a poly(aldehyde), a poly(benzyl carbamate), a poly(benzyl ether), a poly(alpha-methyl styrene), a poly(carbonate), a poly(norbornene), a poly(olefin sulfone), a poly(glyoxylate), a poly(ester), or a poly(methyl methacrylate), as well as derivatives thereof, as a homopolymer or a constituent polymer of a copolymer. In some embodiments, one of the one or more cap layers is polytetrafluoroethylene, polyethylene polyacrylates, polystyrene, polyimides, polyamides, polyesters, polyurea, polyaldehydes, and polyurethanes. In some embodiments, the SRP and the one or more cap layers are deposited by vapor deposition.

[0011] Another aspect of the disclosure relates to a formulation including: a stimulus responsive polymer (SRP) characterized by a ceiling temperature (T_c) at which the SRP is in thermal equilibrium with its monomers, the T_c being between -80°C and 400°C ; and an organic acid having a $\text{pK}_a \geq 1$, wherein the SRP:organic acid wt% is at least 1:1.

5 [0012] In some embodiments, the SRP includes a poly(phthalaldehyde), a poly(aldehyde), a poly(benzyl carbamate), a poly(benzyl ether), a poly(alpha-methyl styrene), a poly(carbonate), a poly(norbornene), a poly(olefin sulfone), a poly(glyoxylate), a poly(ester), or a poly(methyl methacrylate), as well as derivatives thereof, as a homopolymer or a constituent polymer of a co-polymer. In some embodiments, the T_c is less than 200°C . In some embodiments, the T_c is greater
10 than 150°C .

[0013] In some embodiments, the SRP and organic acid are in a solution, the solution including a solvent, the SRP, and the organic acid, wherein the wt% of the SRP in the solution is between 1% and 20%.

[0014] In some such embodiments, the solvent is selected from diglyme, tetrahydrofuran, N-methyl-pyrrolidone, dimethylformamide, propylene carbonate, cyclopentanone, anisole, dichlorobenzene, propylene glycol methyl ether acetate, and 2-ethoxyethyl acetate.
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[0015] In some embodiments, the organic acid is a linear alkyl carboxylic acid CXH_2XO_2 , where X is an integer, a corresponding dicarboxylic acid variant, or a derivative thereof.

[0016] In some embodiments, the organic acid is one of methanoic acid, acetic acid, oxalic acid, tartaric acid, ethanedioic acid, propanedioic acid, oxoethanoic acid, 2-hydroxyethanoic acid, prop-2-enoic acid, 2-propynoic acid, 2-hydroxypropanedioic acid, oxopropanedioic acid, 2,2-dihydroxypropanedioic acid, 2-oxopropanoic acid, 2-hydroxypropanoic acid, 3-hydroxypropanoic acid, and 2,3-dihydroxypropanoic acid.
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25 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0017] Figure 1A is a flow diagram showing an example of a method of bracing high aspect ratio (HAR) structure using a stimulus responsive polymer (SRP).

[0018] Figure 1B is a flow diagram showing an example of a method of protecting a sensitive surface during semiconductor process using an SRP.

30 [0019] Figure 2 shows a schematic example of a substrate including a surface protect with a multi-layer protection stack including an SRP layer and a cap layer.

[0020] Figure 3 is a flow diagram showing an example of a method of protecting a sensitive surface using a multi-layer protection stack.

[0021] Figure 4 shows an example of an apparatus that may be used to performed methods described herein.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0022] Stimuli responsive polymers (SRPs) may be used in semiconductor fabrication processes for sacrificial bracing of high aspect ratio (HAR) structures and queue-time extension.

[0023] Referring to Figure 1A, an example of a method for bracing HAR structures using an SRP is shown. First at an operation 101, a substrate including HAR structures with a solvent is provided. HAR structures are structures having high aspect ratios (ARs), e.g., at least 8, 10, 20, 30, 40, or 80. The substrate may be provided, for example, after a wet etch or cleaning operation and have solvent associated with the prior operation. In some embodiments, the solvent in operation 101 may be a transitional solvent if the prior solvent is not chemically compatible with the SRP solution.

[0024] Next in an operation 103, the solvent is displaced with a solution that includes a stimuli responsive polymer (SRP). The substrate is then dried in an operation 105. The SRP precipitates out of solution and fills the HAR structures. A mechanical brace forms in the HAR structures to prevent collapse of the structures due to capillary forces that are generated during solvent drying.

[0025] The substrate is then exposed to a stimulus, such as light, heat, or chemistry that degrades the SRP in an operation 107. In some embodiments, operation 107 involves controlled exposure to a compound or to two reactants that react to form a compound that degrades the SRP. The stimulus is any compound that scissions bonds of the SRP to degrade it. In some embodiments, the compound is a relatively strong acid or base. Monomers or fragments from the degraded polymer remaining on the substrate can then be further removed from the structure in an operation 109. In some embodiments, exposure to metastable species from a noble gas plasma is performed during operations 107 and/or 109.

[0026] SRPs may also be used in the semiconductor fabrication processes for transient protection of a sensitive surface of substrate. This in turn can extend available queue time. Figure 1B shows an example of a method for protection of a sensitive surface of a substrate. At operation 121, a substrate including an environmentally sensitive surface is provided. The surface may be a planar surface or include one or more pillars, holes, and trenches, including HAR structures. Examples of substrate surfaces that can be sensitive to environmental queue time effects include silicon, silicon germanium, and germanium structures such as fins and nanowires, metal surfaces including but not limited to copper, titanium, titanium nitride, cobalt, tungsten or molybdenum, and/or other structures and materials.

[0027] The surface is then coated with a solution including an SRP in an operation 123. The substrate is then dried in an operation 125, forming a protective coating including SRP on the sensitive substrate.

The substrate can then be stored in ambient conditions in an operation 127. When ready for further processing, the substrate is exposed to a stimulus, such as light, heat, or a chemistry that degrades the SRP in an operation 129. Volatile monomers or fragments from the degraded polymer can then be removed from the structure in an operation 131.

- 5 [0028] Figures 1A and 1B are flow diagrams showing certain operations in example semiconductor fabrication processes that use SRPs, though the methods described herein are not limited to particular applications but may be used with any application in which SRPs are removed from any surface.

SRPs

- 10 [0029] The SRPs as described herein are polymers that are in thermal equilibrium with their constituent monomers at a ceiling temperature (T_c). On exposure to an appropriate stimulus, an SRP is de-polymerized with the monomer products easily removed from the surface of the substrate. The ceiling temperature is an intrinsic property of the polymer. According to various embodiments, the SRPs have ceiling temperatures between -80°C and 400°C .

- 15 [0030] In many embodiments, the SRPs are low ceiling temperature (T_c) polymers. As used herein, the term low T_c refers to T_c values below a removal temperature. In some embodiments, the T_c is below room temperature, such that the polymers are thermodynamically unstable at room temperature. Instead, the low T_c polymer is kinetically trapped to allow prolonged storage at room temperature. In some examples, the stable storage period is on the order of months or years. Low T_c polymers will rapidly de-polymerize to its monomer constituents if an end-group or main chain
- 20 bond is broken. Thus, the polymer de-polymerizes in response to stimuli such as ultraviolet (UV) light, heat, thermal catalyst, photocatalyst, or an acidic/basic catalyst. The monomer products are volatile and leave or can be easily removed from the surface and chamber.

- [0031] While in some embodiments, the T_c is below room temperature, in the context of semiconductor processing, low T_c may also refer to ceiling temperatures that are higher than room
- 25 temperature. For example, removal temperatures of up to 400°C may be used, meaning that the ceiling temperature is below 400°C . In some embodiments, the SRP is characterized by having a T_c below 200°C . In some embodiments, the SRP is characterized by having a T_c between -80°C and 200°C , between -80°C and 150°C , or between -80°C and 100°C . In some embodiments, having a ceiling temperature of no more than about 100°C is advantageous such that de-polymerization into
- 30 constituent monomers can occur without burning or charring the SRP.

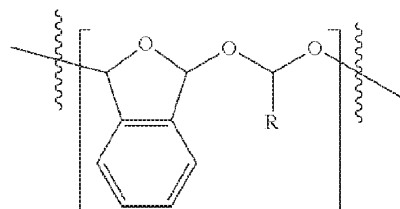
[0032] Example of SRPs are provided below. However, the methods described herein may be used with any SRPs. In some embodiments, the SRPs are co-polymers or homopolymers including poly(aldehydes). Non-limiting examples of homopolymer or constituent polymers of a copolymer in SRPs include a poly(phthalaldehyde), a poly(aldehyde), a poly(benzyl carbamate), a poly(benzyl ether),

a poly(alpha-methyl styrene), a poly(carbonate), a poly(norbornene), a poly(olefin sulfone), a poly(glyoxylate), a poly(ester), or a poly(methyl methacrylate), as well as derivatives thereof. Such derivatives can include replacement of oxy (-O-) with an optionally substituted heteroalkylene, as defined herein, as well as substitutions with one or more substitution groups, as described herein for alkyl.

[0033] In some embodiments, the SRP is a homopolymer. Such a polymer can have any useful number n of monomers, such as n is from about 2 to about 100,000 (e.g., about 2 to 50, 2 to 100, 2 to 200, 2 to 300, 2 to 400, 2 to 500, 2 to 1,000, 2 to 2,000, 2 to 5,000, 2 to 10,000, 2 to 20,000, 2 to 50,000, 2 to 100,000, 3 to 50, 3 to 100, 3 to 200, 3 to 300, 3 to 400, 3 to 500, 3 to 1,000, 3 to 2,000, 3 to 5,000, 3 to 10,000, 3 to 20,000, 3 to 50,000, 3 to 100,000, 4 to 50, 4 to 100, 4 to 200, 4 to 300, 4 to 400, 4 to 500, 4 to 1,000, 4 to 2,000, 4 to 5,000, 4 to 10,000, 4 to 20,000, 4 to 50,000, 4 to 100,000, 5 to 50, 5 to 100, 5 to 200, 5 to 300, 5 to 400, 5 to 500, 5 to 1,000, 5 to 2,000, 5 to 5,000, 5 to 10,000, 5 to 20,000, 5 to 50,000, 5 to 100,000, 10 to 50, 10 to 100, 10 to 200, 10 to 300, 10 to 400, 10 to 500, 10 to 1,000, 10 to 2,000, 10 to 5,000, 10 to 10,000, 10 to 20,000, 10 to 50,000, 10 to 100,000, 50 to 100, 50 to 200, 50 to 300, 50 to 400, 50 to 500, 50 to 1,000, 50 to 2,000, 50 to 5,000, 50 to 10,000, 50 to 20,000, 50 to 50,000, 50 to 100,000, 100 to 200, 100 to 300, 100 to 400, 100 to 500, 100 to 1,000, 100 to 2,000, 100 to 5,000, 100 to 10,000, 100 to 20,000, 100 to 50,000, and 100 to 100,000). In other embodiments, the polymer is cyclic, in which n is from about 3 to about 100. In other embodiments, the cyclic polymer includes any useful number $n1+2$ of monomers, such as $n1$ from about 1 to about 100.

[0034] In particular embodiments, the SRPs may also be any appropriate linear or cyclic copolymer including the pure phthalaldehyde homopolymer, a homopolymer of poly(phthalaldehyde) derivatives such as poly(4,5-dichlorophthalaldehyde), or a homopolymer of poly(aldehyde) derivatives.

[0035] In some embodiments, the SRPs are copolymers including poly(aldehydes). In particular embodiments, they may be self-immolative polymers as described in U.S. Patent Publication No. 2018/0155483, which was published on June 7, 2018 and which is hereby incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. Examples of copolymers reference include those of Formula (I):

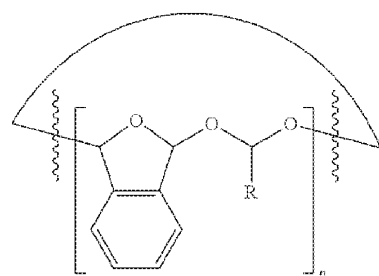


[0036] (I), wherein:

[0037] R is substituted or unsubstituted C1-20 alkyl, C1-20 alkoxy, C2-20 alkenyl, C2-20 alkynyl, C6-10 heteroaryl, C3-10 cycloalkyl, C3-10 cycloalkenyl, C3-10 heterocycloalkyl, or C3-10

heterocycloalkenyl; and, when substituted, R is substituted with C1-20 alkyl, C1-20 alkoxy, C2-20 alkenyl, C2-20 alkynyl, C6-10 aryl, C6-10 heteroaryl, carboxyaldehyde, amino, sulfonic acid, sulfinic acid, fluoroacid, phosphonic acid, ether, halo, hydroxyl, ketone, nitro, cyano, azido, silyl, sulfonyl, sulfinyl, or thiol.

- 5 [0038] In particular embodiments, the SRPs are cyclic copolymers of the phthalaldehyde monomer with a second aldehyde such as ethanal, propanal, or butanal. Examples of such copolymers are given in U.S. Patent Publication No. 2018/0155483 as Formula (II):



[0039] wherein n is an integer from 1 to 100,000 and R can be any described herein (e.g., such as for Formula (I)).

- 10 [0040] Specific examples in U.S. Patent Publication No. 2018/0155483 include copolymers of phthalaldehyde and one or more of acetaldehyde, propanal, butanal, pentanal, hexanal, heptanal, octanal, nonanal, decanal, undecanal, propenal, butenal, pentenal, hexenal, heptenal, octenal, nonenal, decenal, undecenal, and any combination thereof.
- [0041] The SRPs may also be any appropriate linear or cyclic copolymer including the pure
15 phthalaldehyde homopolymer. It also may be a homopolymer of poly(phthalaldehyde) derivatives such as poly(4,5-dichlorophthalaldehyde).

- [0042] In particular embodiments, the SRP is formed with no unwanted side products. In this way, residue-free vaporization of the polymer can be achieved because side products need not be removed. For removal, scission of one (or few) chemical bonds within the SRP propagates full, rapid
20 depolymerization of the polymer. Since all the bonds are the same (no inadvertent impurities), little or no residue is expected.

[0043] The SRP, or a formulation thereof, can be deposited in any useful manner. For instance, the SRP can be spin-coated or vapor deposited.

SRP formulations

- 25 [0044] In some embodiments, the SRP is formulated with an organic weak acid. Organic weak acids are organic acids having a $pK_a \geq 1$, with examples including tartaric acid and oxalic acid. Examples include linear alkyl carboxylic acids, CXH_2XO_2 , where X is an integer, and the corresponding dicarboxylic acid variants. Particular examples include including methanoic acid (X=1) and acetic acid (X=2). Particular examples of dicarboxylic acids include ethanedioic acid and propanedioic acid. The

organic weak acid may also be variants of any of these with additional alcohol substitutions and/or unsaturated bonds. For example, oxoethanoic acid, 2-hydroxyethanoic acid, prop-2-enoic acid, 2-propynoic acid, 2-hydroxypropanedioic acid, oxopropanedioic acid, 2,2-dihydroxypropanedioic acid, 2-oxopropanoic acid, 2-hydroxypropanoic acid, 3-hydroxypropanoic acid, 2,3-dihydroxypropanoic acid, etc. may be used.

[0045] According to various embodiments, an SRP formulation may include a solvent, the SRP, and the organic weak acid. In some embodiments, the solution is provided as 1–20 or 5–20 wt% SRP and < 1 wt% organic weak acid, with the balance being the solvent. In some embodiments, the organic weak acid loading is as low as one part per thousand of the loading of the SRP, and still provides benefit. The formulation may include one or more additional components. Such additional components may include stabilizers, surfactants, and/or plasticizers. And as described further below, the formulation may include one or more acid generators. In some embodiments, the solution is provided as 1–20 wt% or 5–20 wt % SRP and < 1 wt% organic weak acid, additional components, and solvent. The additional components, if present, may total less than 5 wt% of the formulation in some embodiments.

[0046] While the formulations with less than 1 wt % organic weak acid can be used, the formulations with substantially more organic weak acid may be stable for certain applications. In some embodiments, up to 20 wt % weak organic acid may be used. The upper limit of the organic weak acid is the level at which a formulation is shelf stable. This can depend on the particular acid, its pKa, and how many protons it generates, as well as the application. For high throughput applications that may only be on the shelf for a day or two, it can be at the higher end of the range. For applications in which shelf stability of weeks is desired, the organic weak acid may be closer to or below 1 wt %.

[0047] Example solvents include diglyme, tetrahydrofuran, N-methyl-pyrrolidone, dimethylformamide, propylene carbonate, cyclopentanone, anisole, dichlorobenzene, propylene glycol methyl ether acetate, and 2-ethoxyethyl acetate. In some embodiments, the SRP and the organic weak acid may be formulated and stored as separate solutions but mixed together at point of deposition onto the wafer, or at some point relatively shortly beforehand. In some embodiments, the SRP and organic weak acid may be provided as a powder to be mixed in the solvent before spin coating. The SRP and organic weak acid may be provided with a relative wt% of at least 5:1 SRP:organic weak acid, or at least 10:1, or 20:1. If there is too much acid, the film stability may be compromised. As indicated above, in some embodiments, it may be acceptable to use a higher amount of organic weak acid, such as 1:1 SRP:organic weak acid.

[0048] SRP films that include an organic weak acid as described above are stable at room temperature but exhibit accelerated degradation characteristics compared to the neat SRP formulated without the organic weak acid.

[0049] The formulation, and thus the resultant film, can include a photoacid generator (PAG), in which exposure of the SRP to electromagnetic radiation produces acid. In this way, energetic light (e.g., UV light, IR lights, or x-rays) exposure generates acid to promote in situ degradation of the film. Non-limiting photoacid generators include onium salts, such as iodonium and sulfonium salts having perfluorinated anions (e.g., diaryliodonium and triarylsulfonium salts), bissulfonyldiazomethane compounds, N-sulfonyloxydicarboximide compounds, and O-arylsulfonyloxime compounds. The photoacid generator may optionally include a photosensitizer (e.g., having modified polyaromatic hydrocarbons or fused aromatic rings).

[0050] Other acid generators can be used, such as a thermal acid generator that releases acidic moieties upon exposure to heat. In this way, depolymerization of the SRP can include both thermal and acidic processes. Non-limiting examples of thermal acid generators include ammonium salts, sulfonyl esters, and acid amplifiers. In some embodiments, the formulation may include a plasticizer. Non-limiting examples include phthalate-based plasticizers such as bis(2-ethylhexyl)phthalate, bis(2-propylheptyl)phthalate, diisononyl phthalate, butyl benzyl phthalate, di-n-butyl phthalate, diisodecyl phthalate, diisooctyl phthalate, diethyl phthalate, diisobutyl phthalate, and dihexylphthalate; trimellitates such as trimethyl trimellitate, tri(2-ethylhexyl)trimellitate, tri(octyl,decyl)trimellitate, and tri(heptyl,nonyl)trimellitate, octyltrimellitate; adipate-based plasticizers such as bis(2-ethylhexyl)adipate, dimethyl adipate, monomethyl adipate, and dioctyl adipate; sebacate-based plasticizers; maleate-plasticizers such as dibutyl maleate; glycols and polyethers; and surfactants.

[0051] According to various embodiments, an SRP may be pre-formulated with the appropriate acid at some point prior to use and then spin-coated onto the substrates for sacrificial bracing or surface protection applications. Alternatively, the SRP may be mixed with the acid at point of use, right before spin-coating. This latter approach may be used to prolong the shelf-life of the SRP in some embodiments, since although it is stable in film form (solid state), it may not be stable in solution once contacted with the acid.

Examples

[0052] Three formulations of SRP with 0, 0.5, and 20 parts per hundred per resin (pph resin) of D,L tartaric acid were made and spin-coated onto bare Si wafers to produce films between 90 and 150 nm. Upon baking the films at 135°C, the films containing the acid visibly degraded within seconds, while the film without acid did not change.

[0053] Additional films of these solutions were created and stored in air in a cleanroom. 10 days later, film thicknesses were measured, and found to be within 1 nm of the initial readings, confirming film stability. The bake test at 135°C was repeated. The 20 pph resin loaded sample again degraded while the other two films did not degrade at this temperature.

[0054] Acid Concentration [0055] (pph resin)	[0056] Depolymerization at 135°C		[0057] Depolymerization at Room Temperature
	[0058] Day 0	[0059] Day 10	[0060] Film loss at Day 10
[0061] 0	[0062] No apparent	[0063] No apparent	[0064] < 1%
[0065] 0.5	[0066] Yes	[0067] No apparent	[0068] < 1%
[0069] 20	[0070] Yes	[0071] Yes	[0072] < 1%

- 5 [0073] Degradation at day 10 for a 20 pph resin loaded sample was slower than at day 0 for the same loading. This is possibly due to poisoning of the film with base present in the ambient. Poisoning of the film also likely explains why the 0.5 pph resin sample degrades at 135C on day 0 but does not appreciably degrade on day 10. Even with this, there was clearly a different response from the film containing the highest acid loading. The film would be expected to degrade quickly in high-volume manufacturing settings where queue-time is approximately four hours.

10 [0074] Also provided herein are multi-layer transient protective films that include at least one SRP layer. Figure 2 shows an example of a substrate 201 including a surface to be protected. A multi-layer film including SRP layer 203 and layer 205 is on the substrate surface and serves as a transient protective layer. For example, the multi-layer film may be implemented to protect surfaces as described above with respect to Figure 1B.

15 [0075] In addition to the SRP layer, the multi-layer film includes one or more cap layers that provide protection from unwanted oxidation, corrosion, or halogenation due to exposure to ambient conditions. In the example of Figure 1B, the cap layer may be formed after operation 125 and removed after operation 127 and prior to operation 129 in some embodiments.

20 [0076] In the example of Figure 2, there is one cap layer 205, however additional cap layers of the same or different composition may be used. Examples of thicknesses may range from 2–1000 nm for an SRP layer, and from a few nm's to several microns for the one or more cap layers. Thicknesses may depend on storage ambient and length of time, for example.

25 [0077] The SRP layer 203 may include an SRP as described above. However, the SRP layer in a multi-layer transient protective film is not limited to those; any SRP that is responsive to stimuli (e.g., low temperature bake, UV radiation, chemical compounds, noble gas plasma) that are benign to the

surface may be used. The SRP layer 203 may be spin-coated onto the surface or vapor deposited in a manner that does not damage the underlying surface.

[0078] The cap layer 205 may be a high-density material with little-to-no porosity or defects. The cap layer may be characterized as having greater moisture or oxygen barrier properties than the SRP. It is deposited in a manner that does not degrade the SRP material. In some embodiments, this involves thermal (non-plasma) deposition at temperatures less than 150°C (or other temperature at which the SRP degrades). In some embodiments, there is no direct exposure of the SRP layer to a plasma. Example deposition processes can include electron-beam evaporation, various sputtering processes, atomic layer deposition, and chemical vapor deposition. Example cap layers can include oxide films such as SiO_x, SnO_x, AlO_x, TiO_x, ZrO_x, HfO_x, and ZnO_x, and nitride films such as SiN_x wherein x is a number greater than 0.

[0079] In some embodiments, the cap layer may be a polymer film. Such films can be vapor deposited (by chemical vapor deposition or physical vapor deposition). Other cap layers that may be vapor deposited include polymer-like films, resin films, and organic molecules. In some embodiments, polymers can be grown in situ from precursors delivered in the vapor phase.

[0080] Examples of cap layers that can be deposited by vapor deposition or solution-based deposition include polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), polyethylene (PE), polyacrylates (including derivatives, substituted forms, and copolymers thereof), polystyrene (including derivatives, substituted forms, and copolymers thereof), polyimides, polyamides, polyesters, polyurea, polyaldehydes, and polyurethanes.

[0081] The layer in contact with the sensitive surface generally contains the SRP, which can be removed in a benign way (e.g., UV or bake at 150°C-300°C) with little residue left behind. To construct the film, the SRP is first spin-coated or vapor deposited. Then one or more cap layers are subsequently deposited onto the SRP. Vapor-phase, low temperature, non-plasma CVD techniques may be used to avoid SRP degradation. For example, CVD deposition at a temperature of no more than or less than 150°C may be used without radiation. Additionally, the cap layer may be spun cast on top of the SRP using a solvent that does not dissolve the SRP. Multiple different types of films may be deposited multiple times in a repeated stack to optimize protection of the surface.

[0082] In some embodiments, a first cap layer may be deposited by a mild CVD process to protect the SRP film followed by deposition by a harsher technique such as PECVD to grow faster, more robust films. The temperature of the substrate should generally below 150°C (or other degradation temperature) of the SRP film throughout the entire process or exceed it for no more than a few seconds.

[0083] Figure 3 shows an example of a process that may be used in accordance with embodiments herein. First, in an operation 321, a substrate including an environmentally sensitive surface is provided. The surface may be a planar surface or include one or more pillars, holes, and trenches, including HAR structures. Examples of substrate surfaces that can be sensitive to environmental queue time effects include silicon, silicon germanium, and germanium structures such as fins and nanowires, metal surfaces including but not limited to copper, titanium, titanium nitride, cobalt, tungsten or molybdenum, and/or other structures and materials. Then, in an operation 323, an SRP is formed on the surface. In some embodiments, this can involve a solution-based method as described above. In other embodiments, the SRP may be vapor deposited. In an example of chemical vapor deposition, monomer precursors are delivered to the surface through the vapor phase and then polymerize to form the film. In some embodiments, an initiating species (e.g., tert-butyl peroxide) and monomer are simultaneously introduced through the vapor phase. The initiating species may be exposed to a heat, light, or other energy source to generate reactive radical or ionic species to conduct the polymerization of the monomer. In an example of physical vapor deposition, a relatively low molecular weight (< 10 kDa) sample of a polymer with low intermolecular forces (e.g., polyethylene or polytetrafluoroethylene) are heated in vacuum in proximity to the substrate, and the polymers desorb and reabsorb onto the substrate, creating a polymer film. In an operation 325, a cap layer is formed on the SRP. This also may be done by vapor deposition. Solution-based methods may be performed depending on the cap material. The substrate is then stored in ambient conditions in an operation 327. When ready for further processing of the substrate, the cap layer and the SRP are removed in an operation 329. Operation 329 can be a single operation or multiple operations. Further, the one or more cap layers and the SRP can be removed in the same or different operations. [0084] Removing the one or more cap layers can involve using a plasma or solvent to degrade these layers, turning off the plasma or removing the solvent before the SRP itself is fully removed. The surface can then be baked under vacuum or at ambient to drive off the SRP, leaving behind the clean surface of interest, which is protected from the harsh chemistries or conditions used to remove the cap layers. [0085] In some embodiments, the one or more cap layers may be peeled-off by attaching them with an adhesive to another substrate, while the first substrate remains chucked or affixed to some kind of holder. The whole assembly is then heated while being pulled apart. Since the heating serves to degrade the SRP material, this spot is where the two halves separate, leaving behind a clean substrate free of the protecting film, while the bulk of the protecting film remains attached by the adhesive to the second substrate. Similarly, in some embodiments, the SRP film can be degraded to make it easy to remove, with gravity or other force used to separate the SRP and the overlying cap layer(s).

Apparatus

[0086] The processes described above may be implemented in a chamber which may be part of a substrate processing system. The substrate processing system may further include one or more additional substrate processing tools used to process substrates including deposition of SRPs and upstream and downstream processing. Referring now to Figure 4, a substrate processing system 400 includes one or more substrate processing tools 402 (substrate processing tools 402a and 402b are shown for illustration purposes) and substrate buffer 430 or other substrate storage. Each of the substrate processing tools 402a and 402b includes a plurality of processing chambers 404a, 404b, 404c, etc. (collectively processing chambers 404). For example only, each of the processing chambers 404 may be configured to perform a substrate treatment. In some examples, the substrates may be loaded into one of the processing chambers 404, processed, and then moved to one or more other ones of the processing chambers 404 and/or removed from the substrate processing tool 400 (e.g., if all perform the same treatment).

[0087] Substrates to be processed are loaded into the substrate processing tools 402a and 402b via ports of a loading station of an atmosphere-to-vacuum (ATV) transfer module 808. In some examples, the ATV transfer module 408 includes an equipment front end module (EFEM). The substrates are then transferred into one or more of the processing chambers 404. For example, a transfer robot 412 is arranged to transfer substrates from loading stations 416 to load locks 420. A vacuum transfer robot 424 of a vacuum transfer module 428 is arranged to transfer substrates from the load locks 420 to the various processing chambers 404.

[0088] After processing in one or more of the substrate processing tools 402a and 402b, the substrates may be transported outside of a vacuum environment. For example, the substrates may be moved to a location for storage (such as the substrate buffer 430). In other examples, the substrates may be moved directly from the substrate processing tool to another substrate processing tool for further processing or from the storage buffer 430 to another substrate processing tool for further processing.

[0089] Exposure of the substrate to ambient conditions may cause defects or otherwise adversely impact downstream processing. A sacrificial protective layer including an SRP can be added to the substrate prior to exposure to ambient conditions. In some examples, the sacrificial protective layer is applied in the substrate processing tool prior to transferring the substrate to the substrate buffer for storage or to another substrate processing tool. In other examples, the sacrificial protective layer is applied in another processing chamber (not associated with the substrate processing tool). For example, an SRP and one or more cap layers may be added in a substrate processing tool 402b.

[0090] Prior to performing another treatment on the substrate, the sacrificial protective layer is removed as described herein. For example, the substrate may be transferred to the substrate processing tool 402b after a period of storage in the storage buffer 430 or after processing in the substrate processing tool 402a. The sacrificial protective layer may be removed in one of the processing chambers in the substrate processing tool 402b, or another processing chamber (not associated with the substrate processing tool 802b). In some embodiments, the sacrificial protective layer is removed in a load lock 420.

[0091] In some examples, the sacrificial protective layer is applied by a processing chamber in the same substrate processing tool (that performed substrate treatment) prior to exposure to ambient conditions. Since the substrate processing tool operates at vacuum, exposure of the substrate to ambient conditions is prevented. In some examples, the sacrificial layer is deposited after a wet clean process. In this case, oxides and residues may be removed by the wet clean process and the sacrificial layer is deposited in sequence prior to drying the wafer or immediately after drying the wafer. In some examples, this process is not done under vacuum and is done without any exposure of the dry pristine surface to the ambient. In other examples, the substrate is transported from the substrate processing tool to another processing chamber located outside of the substrate processing tool that adds the sacrificial protective layer. Using this approach limits or reduces the period of exposure of the substrate to ambient conditions. Exposure is limited to a brief period of transport from the substrate processing tool to the processing chamber where the sacrificial protective layer is applied. Storage of the substrate may be performed for longer periods without additional exposure to ambient conditions. Subsequently, the sacrificial protective layer may be removed prior to further processing. In some examples, the sacrificial protective layer is removed in another substrate processing tool under vacuum conditions prior to substrate treatment in processing chambers of the same substrate processing tool. In other examples, the substrate is transported to a processing chamber that removes the sacrificial protective layer and then to the substrate processing tool for further processing. This approach also limits exposure to ambient conditions between the processing chamber and the substrate processing tool or other environment. In one example, the sacrificial protective layer is formed immediately after etch, deposition, or other process by exposing the substrate to a small molecule vapor that condenses on the surface to form a film. This can be performed directly inside the tool in which the etch or deposition occurred (e.g., substrate processing tool 402a) and may occur in the same processing chamber in which the etch or deposition occurred. The substrate is then taken to the next tool for processing (e.g., substrate processing tool 402b). Once the substrate is again no longer exposed to ambient conditions (for example by bringing the substrate under vacuum or an atmosphere purged with an inert gas), vacuum and compounds, and in some cases, other stimuli, as

described above are applied to induce the film to degrade and be removed from the substrate. This may take place inside of a processing chamber as described above (e.g., process chamber 404a of substrate processing chamber 402b).

[0092] In various embodiments, a system controller is employed to control process conditions during processing including during the SRP removal. The controller will typically include one or more memory devices and one or more processors. A processor may include a CPU or computer, analog and/or digital input/output connections, stepper motor controller boards, etc.

[0093] The controller may control all the activities of a removal apparatus. The system controller executes system control software, including sets of instructions for controlling the timing, mixture of gases, chamber pressure, chamber temperature, wafer temperature, wafer chuck or pedestal position, plasma power, and other parameters of a particular process. Other computer programs stored on memory devices associated with the controller may be employed in some embodiments.

[0094] Typically, there will be a user interface associated with the controller. The user interface may include a display screen, graphical software displays of the apparatus and/or process conditions, and user input devices such as pointing devices, keyboards, touch screens, microphones, etc.

[0095] System control logic may be configured in any suitable way. In general, the logic can be designed or configured in hardware and/or software. The instructions for controlling the drive circuitry may be hard coded or provided as software. The instructions may be provided by "programming." Such programming is understood to include logic of any form, including hard coded logic in digital signal processors, application-specific integrated circuits, and other devices which have specific algorithms implemented as hardware. Programming is also understood to include software or firmware instructions that may be executed on a general purpose processor. System control software may be coded in any suitable computer readable programming language.

[0096] The computer program code for controlling the reactant pulses and purge gas flows and other processes in a process sequence can be written in any conventional computer readable programming language: for example, assembly language, C, C++, Pascal, Fortran, or others. Compiled object code or script is executed by the processor to perform the tasks identified in the program. Also as indicated, the program code may be hard coded.

[0097] The controller parameters relate to process conditions, such as, for example, process gas composition and flow rates, temperature, pressure, substrate temperature, and plasma power. These parameters are provided to the user in the form of a recipe and may be entered utilizing the user interface.

[0098] Signals for monitoring the process may be provided by analog and/or digital input connections of the system controller. The signals for controlling the process are output on the analog and digital output connections of the system.

[0099] The system software may be designed or configured in many ways.

5 [00100] For example, various chamber component subroutines or control objects may be written to control operation of the chamber components necessary to carry out the deposition processes in accordance with the disclosed embodiments. Examples of programs or sections of programs for this purpose include substrate positioning code, process gas control code, pressure control code, and heater control code.

10 [00101] In some implementations, a controller is part of a system, which may be part of the above-described examples. Such systems can include semiconductor processing equipment, including a processing tool or tools, chamber or chambers, a platform or platforms for processing, and/or specific processing components (a wafer pedestal, a gas flow system, etc.). These systems may be integrated with electronics for controlling their operation before, during, and after processing of a
15 semiconductor wafer or substrate. The electronics may be referred to as the "controller," which may control various components or subparts of the system or systems. The controller, depending on the processing requirements and/or the type of system, may be programmed to control any of the processes disclosed herein, including the delivery of processing gases, temperature settings (e.g., heating and/or cooling), pressure settings, vacuum settings, power settings, flow rate settings, fluid
20 delivery settings, positional and operation settings, wafer transfers into and out of a tool and other transfer tools and/or load locks connected to or interfaced with a specific system.

[00102] Broadly speaking, the controller may be defined as electronics having various integrated circuits, logic, memory, and/or software that receive instructions, issue instructions, control operation, enable cleaning operations, enable endpoint measurements, and the like. The
25 integrated circuits may include chips in the form of firmware that store program instructions, digital signal processors (DSPs), chips defined as application specific integrated circuits (ASICs), and/or one or more microprocessors, or microcontrollers that execute program instructions (e.g., software). Program instructions may be instructions communicated to the controller in the form of various individual settings (or program files), defining operational parameters for carrying out a particular
30 process on or for a semiconductor wafer or to a system. The operational parameters may, in some embodiments, be part of a recipe defined by process engineers to accomplish one or more processing steps during the fabrication of one or more layers, materials, metals, oxides, silicon, silicon dioxide, surfaces, circuits, and/or dies of a wafer.

[00103] The controller, in some implementations, may be a part of or coupled to a computer that is integrated with, coupled to the system, otherwise networked to the system, or a combination thereof. For example, the controller may be in the “cloud” or all or a part of a fab host computer system, which can allow for remote access of the wafer processing. The computer may enable remote access to the system to monitor current progress of fabrication operations, examine a history of past fabrication operations, examine trends or performance metrics from a plurality of fabrication operations, to change parameters of current processing, to set processing steps to follow a current processing, or to start a new process. In some examples, a remote computer (e.g. a server) can provide process recipes to a system over a network, which may include a local network or the Internet. The remote computer may include a user interface that enables entry or programming of parameters and/or settings, which are then communicated to the system from the remote computer. In some examples, the controller receives instructions in the form of data, which specify parameters for each of the processing steps to be performed during one or more operations. The parameters may be specific to the type of process to be performed and the type of tool that the controller is configured to interface with or control. Thus, as described above, the controller may be distributed, such as by comprising one or more discrete controllers that are networked together and working towards a common purpose, such as the processes and controls described herein. An example of a distributed controller for such purposes would be one or more integrated circuits on a chamber in communication with one or more integrated circuits located remotely (such as at the platform level or as part of a remote computer) that combine to control a process on the chamber.

[00104] Without limitation, example systems may include a plasma etch chamber or module, a deposition chamber or module, a spin-rinse chamber or module, a metal plating chamber or module, a clean chamber or module, a bevel edge etch chamber or module, a PVD chamber or module, a CVD chamber or module, an ALD chamber or module, an atomic layer etch (ALE) chamber or module, an ion implantation chamber or module, a track chamber or module, and any other semiconductor processing systems that may be associated or used in the fabrication and/or manufacturing of semiconductor wafers.

[00105] As noted above, depending on the process step or steps to be performed by the tool, the controller might communicate with one or more of other tool circuits or modules, other tool components, cluster tools, other tool interfaces, adjacent tools, neighboring tools, tools located throughout a factory, a main computer, another controller, or tools used in material transport that bring containers of wafers to and from tool locations and/or load ports in a semiconductor manufacturing factory.

[00106] The controller may include various programs. A substrate positioning program may include program code for controlling chamber components that are used to load the substrate onto a pedestal or chuck and to control the spacing between the substrate and other parts of the chamber such as a gas inlet and/or target. A process gas control program may include code for controlling gas composition, flow rates, pulse times, and optionally for flowing gas into the chamber. A pressure control program may include code for controlling the pressure in the chamber by regulating, e.g., a throttle valve in the exhaust system of the chamber. A heater control program may include code for controlling the current to a heating unit that is used to heat the substrate. Alternatively, the heater control program may control delivery of a heat transfer gas such as helium to the wafer chuck. A plasma power program may control plasma power.

[00107] Examples of chamber sensors that may be monitored during removal include mass flow controllers, pressure sensors such as manometers, and thermocouples located in the pedestal or chuck. Appropriately programmed feedback and control algorithms may be used with data from these sensors to maintain desired process conditions.

[00108] The foregoing describes implementation of disclosed embodiments in a single or multi-chamber semiconductor processing tool. The apparatus and process described herein may be used in conjunction with lithographic patterning tools or processes, for example, for the fabrication or manufacture of semiconductor devices, displays, LEDs, photovoltaic panels, and the like. Typically, though not necessarily, such tools/processes will be used or conducted together in a common fabrication facility. Lithographic patterning of a film typically comprises some or all of the following steps, each step provided with a number of possible tools: (1) application of photoresist on a workpiece, i.e., substrate, using a spin-on or spray-on tool; (2) curing of photoresist using a hot plate or furnace or UV curing tool; (3) exposing the photoresist to visible or UV or x-ray light with a tool such as a wafer stepper; (4) developing the resist so as to selectively remove resist and thereby pattern it using a tool such as a wet bench; (5) transferring the resist pattern into an underlying film or workpiece by using a dry or plasma-assisted etching tool; and (6) removing the resist using a tool such as an RF or microwave plasma resist stripper.

[00109] Although the foregoing embodiments have been described in some detail for purposes of clarity of understanding, it will be apparent that certain changes and modifications may be practiced within the scope of the appended claims. It should be noted that there are many alternative ways of implementing the processes, systems, and apparatus of the present embodiments. Accordingly, the present embodiments are to be considered as illustrative and not restrictive, and the embodiments are not to be limited to the details given herein.