

COVER GASESFIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to compositions useful
5 as cover gases for protecting molten magnesium/magnesium
alloys. The present invention also relates to a method for
protecting molten magnesium/magnesium alloys.

BACKGROUND ART

10 Magnesium is a highly reactive and thermodynamically
unstable element. Molten magnesium is readily and
violently oxidised in ambient air, burning with a flame
temperature of approximately 2820°C. Three approaches have
been used to inhibit the severe oxidation process. Salt
15 cover fluxes may be sprinkled over the molten metal; oxygen
may be excluded from contacting the molten metal by
blanketing the molten metal with an inert gas such as
helium, nitrogen or argon; or a protective cover gas
composition may be used to blanket the molten metal.
20 Protective cover gas compositions typically comprise air
and/or carbon dioxide and a small amount of an inhibiting
agent which reacts/interacts with the molten metal to form
a film/layer on the molten metal surface which protects it
from oxidation. To this day, the mechanism by which
25 inhibiting agents protect molten reactive metals is not
well understood.

US patent no. 1,972,317 relates to methods for
inhibiting the oxidation of readily oxidisable metals,
including magnesium and its alloys. The patent notes that
30 at the time of its filing in 1932, numerous solutions had
been proposed to the oxidation problem including displacing
the atmosphere in contact with the metal with a gas such as
nitrogen, carbon dioxide or sulphur dioxide. US 1,972,317

teaches inhibition of oxidation by maintaining in the atmosphere in contact with molten metal an inhibiting gas containing fluorine, either in elemental or combined form. Reference is made to many fluorine containing compounds
5 with the solids ammonium borofluoride, ammonium silicofluoride, ammonium bi-fluoride and ammonium fluophosphate or the gases evolved therefrom upon heating being said to be preferred. Notwithstanding the issue of US 1,972,317 in 1934, it was not until about the mid-1970's
10 that a fluorine containing compound found commercial acceptance as an inhibiting agent in a cover gas.

Prior to about the mid-1970's, sulphur dioxide (SO_2) was widely used as an inhibiting agent in a magnesium cover gas composition but was replaced by sulphurhexafluoride
15 (SF_6) which has become the industry standard. Typically, SF_6 based cover gas compositions contain 0.2-1% by volume SF_6 and a carrier gas such as air, carbon dioxide, argon or nitrogen. SF_6 has the advantages that it is a colourless, odourless, non-toxic gas which can be used for protecting
20 molten magnesium/magnesium alloy and in the production of bright and shiny ingots with relatively low dross formation. However, SF_6 suffers from several disadvantages. Its sulphur based decomposition products at high temperature are very toxic. It is expensive, has
25 limited sources of supply, and is one of the worst known greenhouse gases having a Global Warming Potential (GWP) at a time horizon of 100 years of 23,900 relative to 1 for carbon dioxide.

It is also noted that once magnesium has ignited, the
30 resulting fire cannot be extinguished even with high concentrations of SF_6 . SO_2 is even worse in this respect as it can accelerate a magnesium fire. The only known cover gas for extinguishing a magnesium fire is boron trifluoride

(BF₃) which is very expensive and very toxic.

Alternative cover gas compositions are desirable.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In a first aspect, the present invention provides a
5 cover gas composition for protecting molten
magnesium/magnesium alloy, the composition comprising a
fluorine containing inhibiting agent and a carrier gas,
wherein each component of the composition has a Global
Warming Potential (GWP) (referenced to the absolute GWP for
10 carbon dioxide at a time horizon of 100 years) of less than
5000.

Preferably, the inhibiting agent has minimal ozone
depletion potential, more preferably the inhibiting agent
has no ozone depletion potential.

15 Preferably, the inhibiting agent is non-toxic. In
this regard, compounds having a Threshold Limit Value -
Time Weighted Average (TLV-TWA) (the time weighted average
concentration for a normal 8 hour workday and a 40 hour
workweek, to which nearly all workers may be repeatedly
20 exposed, day after day, without adverse effect) as issued
by the American Conference of Governmental Industrial
Hygienists of less than 100ppm are considered to be toxic.
By way of example, BF₃, silicon tetrafluoride (SiF₄),
nitrogen trifluoride (NF₃) and sulfuryl fluoride (SO₂F₂)
25 disclosed in US 1972317 are toxic.

The composition may include a mixture of inhibiting
agents (each having a GWP less than 5000) and preferably
comprises a minor amount of inhibiting agent and a major
amount of a carrier gas. Preferably, the composition
30 consists of less than 1% by volume inhibiting agent and the
balance carrier gas. More preferably, the composition
contains less than 0.5% by volume (most preferably less
than 0.1% by volume) inhibiting agent.

Preferably, each component of the composition has a GWP of less than 3000, more preferably, less than 1500.

Suitable carrier gases include air, carbon dioxide, argon, nitrogen and mixtures thereof.

- 5 The inhibiting agent may be selected from the group consisting of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), hydrofluoroethers (HFEs) and mixtures thereof. Preferably, the inhibiting agent has a boiling point of less than 100°C, more preferably less than 80°C. Where the inhibiting agent is
- 10 gaseous at ambient temperature, it may be diffused in the carrier gas at the desired concentration. Where the inhibiting agent is liquid at ambient temperature, it may be entrained in the carrier gas to a desired concentration by passing a flow of carrier gas over the inhibiting agent.
- 15 Suitable hydrofluorocarbons and hydrofluoroethers are listed in Table 1 below which includes their boiling points (BP) and their GWP's (referenced to the absolute GWP for carbon dioxide at a time horizon of 100 years) which have been sourced from IPCC 1996.

TABLE 1

Chemical Name	Industry Name	Formula	GWP	BP
difluoromethane	HFC-32	CH_2F_2	580	-52°C
pentafluoroethane	HFC-125	C_2HF_5	3,200	-49°C
1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane	HFC-134a, R134a	$\text{C}_2\text{H}_2\text{F}_4$	1,300	-26°C
difluoroethane	HFC-152a, R152a	$\text{C}_2\text{H}_4\text{F}_2$	140	-27°C
heptafluoropropane	HFC-227ea	C_3HF_7	2,900	-17°C
methoxy-nonafluorobutane	HFE-7100	$\text{C}_4\text{F}_9\text{OCH}_3$	480	61°C
ethoxy- nonafluorobutane	HFE-7200	$\text{C}_4\text{F}_9\text{OC}_2\text{H}_5$	90	78°C
dihydrodecafluoropentane	HFC-43-10-mee	$\text{C}_5\text{H}_2\text{F}_{10}$	1,300	54°C

A preferred cover gas composition consists of 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane and dry air. Experimental work has demonstrated that such a cover gas composition provides protection at least the equal of SF_6 based compositions and
5 can be utilised at lower concentrations of inhibiting agent. SF_6 has a GWP in excess of 18 times that of 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane and is presently more than 2½ times the cost of 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane.

In a second aspect, the present invention provides a
10 method of protecting molten magnesium/magnesium alloy, the method including blanketing the molten magnesium/magnesium alloy with a cover gas composition according to the first aspect of the present invention.

The method according to the second aspect of the
15 present invention is applicable to protecting molten magnesium/magnesium alloy in a foundry vessel such as a furnace and during casting.

In a third aspect, the present invention provides use of an inhibiting agent as defined with respect to the first
20 aspect of the present invention for preventing or minimising oxidation of molten magnesium/magnesium alloy. By way of example, an inhibiting agent of the present invention may be used to prevent or minimise oxidation of molten magnesium/magnesium alloy during sand casting.
25 Where the inhibiting agent is gaseous at ambient temperature, the sand mould may be purged with inhibiting agent prior to pouring of the molten metal. Where the inhibiting agent is liquid at ambient temperature, the sand mould may be sprayed with inhibiting agent from a squeeze
30 bottle or the like prior to pouring of the molten metal. Other suitable methods of using inhibiting agents of the present invention to prevent or minimise oxidation of

molten magnesium/magnesium alloy will be readily apparent to those of skill in the art of foundry practice.

EXAMPLES

5 The ensuing non-comparative Examples are illustrative of preferred embodiments of the present invention and are not to be construed as limiting the scope of the present invention in any way.

10 **Example 1**

A crucible furnace containing 100 grams of molten pure magnesium at 680°C was blanketed with a gaseous composition consisting of 0.02% by volume 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane and the balance dry air. Good molten magnesium protection was
15 observed, with the formation of a thin protective surface film. Deliberate rupturing of the surface film did not induce burning of the molten magnesium sample.

Comparative Example 1

20 Comparative Example 1 was identical to Example 1 with the exception that 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane was replaced by SF₆. Good molten magnesium protection was not observed, and the magnesium sample burned rapidly. Adequate protection of the molten magnesium sample was only achieved
25 when the gaseous composition consisted of 0.05% by volume SF₆ and the balance dry air. At this concentration of SF₆ deliberate rupturing of the surface film resulted in localised burning of the molten magnesium sample.

30 Example 1 and Comparative Example 1 demonstrate that the inventive cover gas composition provides good protection of molten magnesium at a lower concentration than an SF₆ based composition.

Example 2

A series of single ingots of both pure magnesium and magnesium-aluminium alloy AZ91 were cast in an 8kg ingot mould within a controllable atmosphere chamber. The molten metal was sucked under vacuum into the chamber to fill the ingot mould. When the ingot mould was full, the vacuum was turned off, the chamber was filled with a cover gas composition, and the molten metal was allowed to solidify. In the case of AZ91 alloy the cover gas composition consisted of 0.04% by volume 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane and the balance dry air. The cover gas composition for the pure magnesium casting consisted of 0.1% by volume 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane and the balance dry air.

Single ingots of both pure magnesium and AZ91 alloy were produced free of burning, with bright shiny surface finishes, with very low levels of dross, and with no reaction with boron nitride mould coatings.

Comparative Example 2

Comparative Example 2 was identical to Example 2 with the exception that 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane was replaced by SF_6 which was used at the same concentrations, ie. 0.04% by volume in dry air for AZ91 alloy and 0.1% by volume in dry air for pure magnesium.

The ingots produced in Example 2 had lower levels of dross and had a more attractive surface finish than those produced in Comparative Example 2.

Example 3

A small flow of 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane was continuously metered into a container that is used to collect molten magnesium dross. During transport of the dross from the furnace to the container, the dross

contacted the air and ignited. Upon placing the dross into the container, the burning quickly stopped.

Comparative Example 3

5 Comparative Example 3 was identical to Example 3 with the exception that 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane was replaced by SF₆. In this case, the dross continued to burn after being placed into the container.

10 Example 3 and Comparative Example 3 demonstrate that an inhibiting agent of the present invention is able to suppress the burning of magnesium metal/dross. This enables minimisation of magnesium fume in a working environment and prevention of oxidation of the magnesium metal content in the dross. This would enable dross
15 processing operations to recover valuable magnesium metal content.

Example 4

20 Ingots of pure magnesium were cast in 8kg ingot moulds on an industrial-sized ingot casting machine having a controllable atmosphere chamber. The casting machine was operated at a casting rate of 3 tonnes of cast metal per hour with 330 litres per minute dry air and 3.3 litres per minute 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane introduced into the
25 chamber. Ingots were produced free of burning, with bright shiny surface finishes, with very low levels of dross and with no reaction with boron nitride mould coatings.

Comparative Example 4

30 Comparative Example 4 was identical to Example 4 with the exception that 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane was replaced by SF₆ which was used at the same flow rate and at the same concentration in dry air. Ingots produced in Comparative

Example 4 exhibited similar properties to those produced in Example 4.

Example 4 and Comparative Example 4 demonstrate that the inventive gas can successfully replace SF_6 for industrial scale continuous production of magnesium ingot.

Example 5

A series of single ingots of pure magnesium were cast in an 8kg ingot mould within a controllable atmosphere chamber. The molten metal was sucked under vacuum into the chamber to fill the ingot mould. When the ingot mould was full, the vacuum was turned off, the chamber was filled with cover gas composition, and the molten metal was allowed to solidify. The cover gas composition was produced by passing 0.5 litres per minute of dry air over 50ml of the HFE liquid methoxy-nonafluorobutane. The resulting gas phase mixture flowed to the single ingot casting apparatus. Single ingots were produced free of burning, with bright shiny surface finishes, with very low levels of dross and with no reaction with boron nitride mould coatings.

Example 6

A series of single ingots of pure magnesium were cast in an 8kg ingot mould within a controllable atmosphere chamber. The molten metal was sucked under vacuum into the chamber to fill the ingot mould. When the ingot mould was full, the vacuum was turned off, the chamber was filled with a cover gas composition, and the molten metal was allowed to solidify. The cover gas composition was produced by passing 0.5 litres per minute of dry air over 50ml of the HFC liquid dihydrodecafluoropentane. The resulting gas phase mixture flowed to the single ingot

casting apparatus. Single ingots were produced free of burning, with bright shiny surface finishes, with very low levels of dross and with no reaction with boron nitride mould coatings.

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Example 7

A furnace containing 20kg of molten magnesium at 700°C was blanketed with a cover gas composition. The cover gas composition was produced by passing 0.6 litres per minute
10 of dry air over 50ml of the HFE liquid methoxy-nonafluorobutane. The resulting gas phase mixture flowed to the furnace. Good molten magnesium protection was observed, with the formation of a thin protective surface film. Deliberate rupturing of the surface film did not
15 induce burning of the molten magnesium sample.

Example 8

A furnace containing 20kg of molten magnesium at 700°C was blanketed with a cover gas composition. The cover gas
20 composition was produced by passing 0.9 litres per minute of dry air over 50ml of the HFE liquid ethoxy-nonafluorobutane. The resulting gas phase mixture flowed to the furnace. Good molten magnesium protection was observed, with the formation of a thin protective surface
25 film. Deliberate rupturing of the surface film did not induce burning of the molten magnesium sample.

Example 9

A furnace containing 20kg of molten magnesium at 700°C
30 was blanketed with a cover gas composition. The cover gas composition was produced by passing 0.9 litres per minute of dry air over 50ml of the HFC liquid

dihydrodecafluoropentane. The resulting gas phase mixture flowed to the furnace. Good molten magnesium protection was observed, with the formation of a thin protective surface film. Deliberate rupturing of the surface film did not induce burning of the molten magnesium sample.

Example 10

A furnace containing 20kg of molten magnesium at 700°C was blanketed with a gaseous composition consisting of 0.4% by volume difluoroethane and the balance dry air. Good molten magnesium protection was observed, with the formation of a thin protective surface film. Deliberate rupturing of the surface film did not induce burning of the molten magnesium sample.

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Comparative Example 10

Comparative Example 10 was identical to Example 10 with the exception that difluoroethane was replaced by SF₆ which was used at the same concentration. Good molten magnesium protection was observed.

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Example 10 and Comparative Example 10 demonstrate that an inhibiting agent of the present invention provides equivalent protection of molten magnesium metal compared to SF₆.

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Example 11

Magnesium squeeze-castings were produced by hand-pouring molten magnesium into the shot sleeve of a vertical injection squeeze casting machine. Prior to pouring the molten magnesium into the shot sleeve, a small volume of pure 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane was introduced into the shot sleeve. This protected the molten magnesium in the shot

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sleeve and prevented the molten magnesium from burning during the filling of the mould.

Example 12

5 Various magnesium components were produced using the investment casting technique. Prior to filling the investment casting shell with molten magnesium, the shell was purged with pure 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane. This prevented the magnesium from burning while solidifying
10 inside the shell. Upon cooling, the shell mould was removed. The magnesium casting exhibited a good surface finish.

Example 13

15 Various magnesium components were produced using the sand casting technique. Prior to filling the sand mould with molten magnesium, the sand mould was purged with pure 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane. This prevented the magnesium from burning while solidifying inside the sand mould. Upon
20 cooling, the sand mould was removed. The magnesium casting exhibited a good surface finish.

Example 14

25 A melt furnace having a diameter of 1.6 metres and containing 4 tonnes of molten pure magnesium was blanketed with 60 litres per minute dry air and 0.6 litres per minute 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane. Good molten magnesium protection was observed, with the formation of a thin protective surface film.

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Comparative Example 14

Comparative Example 14 was identical to Example 14 with the exception that 1,1,1,2-tetrafluorethane was

replaced by SF_6 at differing flow rates. The flow rate of dry air was maintained at 60 litres per minute. Good molten magnesium protection was only achieved at an SF_6 flow rate of 2 litres per minute.

- 5 Example 14 and Comparative Example 14 demonstrate that the inventive cover gas composition provides good industrial scale protection of molten magnesium at a lower concentration than an SF_6 based composition.

- 10 In the claims which follow and in the preceding description of the invention, except where the context requires otherwise due to express language or necessary implication, the word "comprise" or variations such as "comprises" or "comprising" is used in an inclusive sense, i.e. to specify the presence of the stated features but
15 not to preclude the presence or addition of further features in various embodiments of the invention.

- 20 It is to be clearly understood that although prior art publication(s) are referred to herein, this reference does not constitute an admission that any of these documents forms part of the common general knowledge in the art in any country.

CLAIMS

1. A cover gas composition for protecting molten magnesium/magnesium alloy, the composition comprising a
5 fluorine containing inhibiting agent and a carrier gas, wherein each component of the composition has a Global Warming Potential (GWP) (referenced to the absolute GWP for carbon dioxide at a time horizon of 100 years) of less than 5000.
- 10 2. A composition as claimed in claim 1 wherein the inhibiting agent has no ozone depletion potential.
3. A composition as claimed in claim 1 or claim 2
15 wherein the carrier gas is selected from the group consisting of air, carbon dioxide, argon, nitrogen and mixtures thereof.
4. A composition as claimed in any one of the
20 preceding claims wherein each component of the composition has a GWP of less than 3000.
5. A composition as claimed in any one of the
preceding claims wherein the inhibiting agent is selected
25 from the group consisting of hydrofluorocarbons, hydrofluoroethers and mixtures thereof.
6. A composition as claimed in any one of the
preceding claims wherein the inhibiting agent has a boiling
30 point of less than 100°C.
7. A composition as claimed in any one of the
preceding claims wherein the inhibiting agent is selected

from the group consisting of difluoromethane,
pentafluoroethane, 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane,
difluoroethane, heptafluoropropane, methoxy-
nonafluorobutane, ethoxy-nonafluorobutane,
5 dihydrodecafluoropentane and mixtures thereof.

8. A composition as claimed in any one of the
preceding claims wherein each component of the composition
has a GWP of less than 1500.

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9. A composition as claimed in any one of the
preceding claims wherein the inhibiting agent is 1,1,1,2-
tetrafluoroethane and the carrier gas is dry air.

15 10. A composition as claimed in any one of claims 1 -
8 wherein the inhibiting agent is 1,1,1,2-tetrafluoroethane
and the carrier gas is either nitrogen or carbon dioxide.

11. A composition as claimed in any one of the
20 preceding claims containing less than 1% by volume
inhibiting agent.

12. A composition as claimed in claim 10 containing
less than 0.5% by volume inhibiting agent.

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13. A composition as claimed in claim 11 containing
less than 0.1% by volume inhibiting agent.

14. A cover gas composition substantially as herein
30 described in any non-comparative Example.

15. A method of protecting molten magnesium/magnesium
alloy, the method including blanketing the

magnesium/magnesium alloy with a cover gas composition as claimed in any one of the preceding claims.

16. Use of an inhibiting agent as defined in any one
5 of claims 1-13 for preventing or minimising oxidation of molten magnesium/magnesium alloy.