

APPARATUS FOR MANUFACTURE OF PV SOLAR CELLS OR THIN FILM SOLAR MODULES

CROSS REFERENCE TO PRIOR APPLICATION

[0001] This application claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application No. 61/155,944 filed February 27, 2009 and U.S. non-Provisional Application No. 12/711,595 filed February 24, 2010, which are herein incorporated by reference in their entirety.

FIELD OF INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates generally to the field of equipment used in the manufacture of photovoltaic (PV) solar cells or thin film (TF) modules. In one embodiment, the present invention relates to the support of solar cell or TF module substrates as they are transported through an in-line processing apparatus.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Solar energy is widely accepted as being an excellent source of renewable energy. Photovoltaic (PV) cells which can convert sunlight into electricity have been studied for the past ~70 years. The adoption and wide spread use of PV cells has been slow because they have exhibited poor conversion efficiency and have been expensive to manufacture. Therefore, the economics (\$/Watt) of using PV cells to generate electricity have not been competitive with traditional sources such as coal, oil, natural gas, etc. The \$/Watt metric represents the total system cost to generate a Watt of energy. Lower PV solar cell efficiencies and higher PV solar cell system costs increase this metric and lowers the competitiveness of the PV solar cell system relative to traditional energy generation systems.

[0004] Recent advances in the design and manufacture have improved the efficiency of the PV solar cells and lowered the manufacturing cost such that PV based solar energy systems have improved economics. It is a goal that PV based solar energy systems will be

able to generate electricity at costs that are competitive with traditional electricity generation methods in the near future. For this goal to be realized, advances must be made to continue to improve the conversion efficiency of the PV solar cells and to lower the manufacturing costs.

[0005] In the manufacture of PV solar cells or TF modules, substrates are often processed in equipment configured in an “in-line” structure. That is, the substrates move through the equipment in a continuous manner or in small steps. The input portion of the equipment is positioned at one end of the system and the output portion is positioned at the opposite end. This type of equipment is to be distinguished from “batch” systems wherein the substrates are generally processed in large batches and the input and output portions of the equipment are generally found at the same end of the system. In the in-line equipment, an automation system is used to translate the substrates from the input end to the output end. The automation system may comprise a conveyor, a belt, discrete pallets, rollers, a “walking beam” system, chains, strings, or cables, among others.

[0006] Current in-line equipment for the manufacture of PV based solar cells or TF modules suffer from a number of problems. Examples of these problems may be high equipment cost, low throughput, large footprint, poor performance, contamination of the substrate by the automation system, shadowing of the backside of the substrate by the automation system, movement of the substrate during processing, and others. These problems may act individually or in combination to lower the efficiency of the PV solar cells or TF modules or increase the cost of manufacturing the PV solar cells or TF modules. This will increase the \$/Watt economic metric used to evaluate energy system performance and slow the adoption of PV solar energy systems. Therefore, there is a need for automation systems to be used in in-line equipment used to manufacture PV solar cells or TF modules that address these problems.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] Accordingly and advantageously, some embodiments of the present invention provide a support system for solar cell or TF module substrates as they are transported through an in-line processing apparatus. The support system captures the substrate and supports the substrate around the edge. The support system allows exposure of the

backside of the substrate so that there is no shadowing effect. Furthermore, the support system is manufactured from materials chosen so that the PV cell or TF module substrate is not contaminated during processing. The support system is suitable for use with equipment configured in an in-line structure used to manufacture PV cells or TF modules.

[0008] These and other advantages are achieved in accordance with the present invention as described in detail below.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] To facilitate understanding, identical reference numerals have been used, where possible, to designate identical elements that are common to the figures. The drawings are not to scale and the relative dimensions of various elements in the drawings are depicted schematically and not to scale.

[0010] The techniques of the present invention can readily be understood by considering the following detailed description in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

[0011] FIG. 1 is a schematic illustration of one link of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention.

[0012] FIG. 2 is a schematic illustration of one of the sub-components of one link of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention.

[0013] FIG. 3 is a schematic illustration of one of the sub-components of one link of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention.

[0014] FIG. 4 is a schematic illustration of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention illustrating the capture/release of the substrate.

[0015] FIG. 5 is a schematic illustration of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention illustrating the capture/release of the sub-components.

[0016] FIG. 6 is a schematic illustration of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention illustrating the capture/release of the sub-components.

[0017] FIG. 7 is a schematic illustration of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention illustrating the details of the capture slot.

[0018] FIGs. 8A-8C are schematic illustrations of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention illustrating the fundamental building blocks.

[0019] FIGs. 9A-9D are schematic illustrations of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention illustrating one method of assembly.

[0020] FIGs. 10A-10B are schematic illustrations of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention illustrating the support of the substrate.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0021] After considering the following description, those skilled in the art will clearly realize that the teachings of the invention can be readily utilized in the manufacture of PV solar cells or TF modules.

[0022] One configuration of PV solar energy systems comprises PV solar modules. One version of PV solar modules may be constructed of a plurality of PV solar cells connected in series or parallel. The PV solar cells may be based on single crystal semiconductor substrates or on polycrystalline semiconductor substrates. Examples of suitable semiconductor substrates comprise Si, poly-Si, and GaAs, among others. For economy of language within the current disclosure, the phrase "PV solar cell" will be understood to mean the semiconductor substrates used in the manufacture of a PV solar module.

[0023] A second version of PV solar modules may be constructed by applying thin films of semiconductor materials on rigid substrates. Examples of semiconductor thin films comprise a-Si, CdTe, CIGS (Cu-In-Ga-S; or Cu-In-Ga-Se), and organic semiconductor materials, among others. An example of a typical rigid substrate is a glass sheet. For economy of language within the current disclosure, the phrase "TF module" will be understood to mean the formation of the PV solar module by the application of thin films of semiconductor materials onto a rigid substrate.

[0024] In-line equipment is often used for the manufacture of PV solar cells or TF modules. In the case of PV solar cells, the in-line equipment may be used to process a

plurality of PV solar cells by making the equipment wide enough to transport the PV solar cells through the equipment in one or more lanes through the equipment. Typical substrates used in the manufacture of PV solar cells comprise pseudo-square single crystal Si wafers, square poly-Si slices, rectangular poly-Si slices, and GaAs wafers; among others. Typical sizes of the substrates include 125mm x 125mm, 156mm x 156mm, 210mm x 210mm and larger substrates are proposed for the future.

[0025] In the case of PV solar TF modules, the in-line equipment may be used to process a plurality of PV solar TF modules by making the equipment wide enough to transport the PV solar TF modules through the equipment in one or more lanes through the equipment. Typical substrates used in the manufacture of PV solar TF modules comprise square rigid substrates (such as glass), and rectangular rigid substrates (such as glass), among others.

[0026] Figure 1 is a schematic illustration of one link 101 of the substrate support system according to one embodiment of the present invention. The link 101 is comprised of sub-components 103, and 105 which are assembled to form the link and to give the link flexibility. The substrate (not shown) would be held on the ledge 107. Each sub-component 103, 105 incorporates a ledge 107 that combine when assembled into a link to capture the substrate. Traditional in-line equipment may use a wire mesh belt as an automation system for conveying the substrates through the system. Since the wire mesh belt does not actively capture the substrate, the substrates may move from their initial configuration during the processing sequence due to mechanical vibration and the influence of gas movements within the system. This is particularly prevalent for very thin substrates.

[0027] Figure 2 is a schematic illustration of one of the sub-components 103 that combine to form link 101. Sub-component 103 has a top surface 201. Ledge 107 is formed within the top surface 201 to form a support for the substrate (not shown) within the interior of sub-component 103. Ledge 107 may be flat or may comprise raised areas (not shown) to elevate the substrate slightly above the ledge. Typical examples of raised areas comprise bumps, tabs, mesas, and pyramids, among others. The raised areas serve to thermally isolate the substrate from ledge 107 so that the substrate may be uniformly heated without conduction losses from the substrate into ledge 107.

[0028] Sub-component **103** further comprises notches **203a** and **203b**. The notches are formed at the end of sub-component **103** that will be at the center of link **101**. The notches are formed on the exterior of the sub-component. The notches further comprise pins **205a** and **205b**. Pins **205a** and **205b** are elliptical in shape and comprise a major axis and a minor axis. The width of the elliptical shape along the major axis is greater than the width of the elliptical shape along the minor axis. The pins face toward the exterior of the sub-component. The major axis of the elliptical shape is aligned within the plane of sub-component **103**.

[0029] Sub-component **103** further comprises tabs **207a** and **207b**. The tabs are formed at the end of sub-component **103** that will be away from the center of link **101** and toward the neighboring link (not shown). The tabs are formed on the exterior of the sub-component. The tabs further comprise pins **209a** and **209b**. The pins face toward the exterior of the sub-component. Pins **209a** and **209b** are elliptical in shape and comprise a major axis and a minor axis. The width of the elliptical shape along the major axis is greater than the width of the elliptical shape along the minor axis. The pins face toward the exterior of the sub-component. The major axis of the elliptical shape is aligned within the plane of sub-component **103**.

[0030] Figure **3** is a schematic illustration of one of the sub-components **105** that combine to form link **101**. Sub-component **105** has a top surface **301**. Ledge **107** is formed within the top surface **301** to form a support for the substrate (not shown) within the interior of sub-component **105**. Ledge **107** may be flat or may comprise raised areas (not shown) to elevate the substrate slightly above the ledge. Typical examples of raised areas comprise bumps, tabs, mesas, and pyramids, among others. The raised areas serve to thermally isolate the substrate from ledge **107** so that the substrate may be uniformly heated without conduction losses from the substrate into ledge **107**.

[0031] Sub-component **105** further comprises notches **305a** and **305b**. The notches are formed at the end of sub-component **105** that will be at the center of link **101**. The notches are formed on the interior of the sub-component. The notches further comprise slots **303a** and **303b**. The slots face toward the interior of the sub-component.

[0032] Sub-component **105** further comprises tabs **307a** and **307b**. The tabs are formed at the end of sub-component **105** that will be away from the center of link **101** and toward the neighboring link (not shown). The tabs are formed on the exterior of the sub-

component. The tabs further comprise slots **309a** and **309b**. The slots face toward the interior of the sub-component. The tabs further comprise holes **311a** and **311b**. The holes are used to interface with the drive system to be described later.

[0033] Sub-components **103** and **105** may be composed of materials that do not contaminate the substrate during processing. In some process sequences, the substrate may be protected by previously deposited materials and may undergo a simple thermal treatment. In this case, the sub-components **103** and **105** may be composed of metals or metal alloys. Typical metal materials may comprise nichrome doped with vanadium, steel alloys, and high temperature refractory metal alloys among others. In some process sequences, the substrate may not be protected by previously deposited materials or may be undergoing processing with a reactive species. In this case, it is important that the material used to form sub-components **103** and **105** not contaminate the substrate. Various ceramic materials such as AlN, BN, SiC, Al₂O₃, ZrO₂, and others are typical examples. These ceramics have high temperature stability and are relatively inert to much reactive chemistry.

[0034] Sub-components **103** and **105** may be formed by any well known manufacturing method. Typical examples include machining, stamping from metal sheet stock and bending, and casting, among others. Sub-components **103** and **105** are advantageously formed by a low cost manufacturing method such as casting.

[0035] Link **101** may be formed through the combination of sub-components **103** and **105**. Sub-components **103** and **105** are aligned so that their top surfaces **201** and **301** are oriented in the same direction. Pins **203a** and **203b** of sub-component **103** engage with slots **303a** and **303b** of sub-component **105**. The assembly forms a completed link **101** as illustrated in FIG. 1. The substrate (not shown) is held by ledge **107** as previously described. Multiple links may be combined to form a transport system.

[0036] Link **101** may be connected to a neighboring link through the interaction of the tabs **207a** and **207b** on sub-component **103** with the tabs **307a** and **307b** of a neighboring sub-component **105**. The pins **209a** and **209b** of sub-component **103** engage with slots **309a** and **309b** of the neighboring sub-component **105**. In this way, a transport system of any length may be formed by repeating this process. Therefore, the transport system is formed from combinations of only two pieces, specifically sub-components **103** and **105**.

[0037] Figure 4 is a schematic illustration of multiple lane (i.e. three) substrate transport system illustrating a plurality of links. Three neighboring links **101a**, **101b**, and **101c** are shown with the corresponding sub-components **103a**, **103b**, **103c**, and **105a**, **105b**, **105c**. The links engage with drive member **405** where pins **407a**, **407b** on the drive member engage with the holes **311a**, **311b** within sub-component **105**. Drive member **405** rotates around drive shaft **403**. Drive member **405** advantageously has a polygonal cross-section with 30 degree angles such that in operation the links will bend to conform to the polygonal shape.

[0038] Figure 4 has been drawn to illustrate the movement of substrates from right to left and illustrates the input portion of the system. As indicated by the arrow, if drive shaft **403** is rotating counterclockwise, then substrates **401** are being loaded into the links **101**. Substrate **401b** is placed into the pocket formed by ledge **107** of sub-component **103b** by an automation system (not shown). As the drive member **405** continues to rotate, sub-component **105b** rotates up to complete the pocket and capture substrate **401b** within link **101b**.

[0039] At the output portion of the system, (not shown) the wafer transfer sequence would be reversed. Sub-component **103a** would flex downward to follow the contours of the output drive member. This would expose the leading edge of substrate **401a** to the output automation system and the substrate would be extracted from ledge **107**.

[0040] The transport system used for in-line tools is typically a closed loop belt. With the commonly used metal mesh belt assemblies, if the belt is damaged the entire belt must be replaced. This occurs at significant cost and most importantly significant lost production time for the manufacturer of the PV cells or TF modules. In some embodiments of the present invention, individual damaged links can be easily replaced. This is accomplished by reducing the tension or separation of the input and output drive members sufficiently to allow the upward bend of a link or sub-component of a link to 90 degrees. When the upward angle reaches 90 degrees the damaged link or sub-component may be removed and replaced with a new link or sub-component.

[0041] Figure 5 is a schematic illustration of the substrate support system illustrating the capture/release of the sub-components during the repair and replacement of a damaged link or sub-component.

[0042] Figure 6 is a schematic illustration of the substrate support system illustrating the capture/release of the sub-components during the repair and replacement of a damaged link or sub-component showing a close-up of the pin 209 of sub-component 103 and the slot 303 of sub-component 105. When sub-component 103 is positioned at a 90 degree angle relative to sub-component 105, the major axis of the elliptically-shaped pin 209 is aligned with the slot 303 of sub-component 105. This allows pin 209 to enter slot 303.

[0043] The details of slot 303 are illustrated in Figure 7. Slot 303 comprises a narrow entrance 701 and a wider lower portion 703. The width of slot entrance 701 is slightly larger than the width of the minor axis of elliptical pin 209 but less than the width of the major axis of elliptical pin 209. When sub-component 103 is rotated to be co-planar with sub-component 105, pin 209 is captured within slot 303. Similar engagement mechanisms are used to connect neighboring links by the interaction of pins 209 and slots 309.

[0044] In some embodiments of the present invention, the substrates are held between parallel "chains" that form the substrate support system. The chains are comprised of fundamental building blocks (i.e. links) that are assembled to create chains of the desired length.

[0045] Figures 8A-8C are schematic illustrations of one of the links 800 that combine to form the chains. Link 800 comprises a central cavity 808. Central cavity 808 is generally formed in the shape of a rectangular box having sides denoted "top", "bottom", "front", "rear" and "side" (there are 2 "sides"). FIG. 8A illustrates link 800 as viewed from the bottom, that is, the surface of the link opposite from the substrate. Central cavity 808 comprises openings 809 that engage with teeth on a drive sprocket (not shown) to advance and align the chain. Stub 801 projects from the center of the front face of central cavity 808. Stub 801 further comprises two posts 802 at the distal end of stub 801 that project outward on opposite sides of stub 801. Posts 802 project from stub 801 in a direction aligned with the sides of central cavity 808. Capture slots 804 (there are two of them) project from the rear face of central cavity 808. Capture slots 804 have an elliptical shape wherein the major axis is aligned with the direction of travel of the chain and the minor axis is aligned parallel to the two sides of the central cavity. Capture slots 804 are aligned toward the side edges of central cavity 808 and are separated by a distance large enough to allow stub 801 to pass between them. Capture slots 804 further comprise insertion slots 805 on their surface which is aligned with the bottom surface of central

cavity **808**. Insertion slots **805** are sized so as to allow posts **802** to engage capture slots **804**. Central cavity **808** and capture slots **804** further comprise support guides **803** on the bottom surface. Support guides **803** serve to align the chain to support rods (not shown).

[0046] FIG. **8B** illustrates link **800** as viewed from the top, that is, the surface of the link supporting the substrate. Central cavity **808** and capture slots **804** further comprise substrate support surfaces **806**. Substrate support surfaces **806** may be beveled, curved, angled, or contain small bumps to minimize the contact to the substrate. Typically, support surfaces **806** contact the substrate at the substrate edge. FIG. **8B** illustrates one embodiment of the present invention wherein link **800** comprises a consistent support surface **806** along its length. Chains made of this style of link would require only one type of length. Substrates could be loaded at any position along the length of the chain. Chains made of this style of link would not prevent the substrates from changing their position along the length of travel while being carried through the in-line system. However, chains made of this style of link would prevent the substrates from changing their position perpendicular to the length of travel (i.e. side-to-side) while being carried through the in-line system.

[0047] FIG. **8C** illustrates link **800** as viewed from the top, that is, the surface of the link supporting the substrate. Central cavity **808** and capture slots **804** further comprise substrate support surfaces **807**. Substrate support surfaces **807** may be beveled, curved, angled, or contain small bumps to minimize the contact to the substrate. Typically, substrate support surfaces **807** contact the substrate at the substrate edge. The substrate support surfaces **807** as shown in FIG. **8C** serves to capture the leading or trailing edge of the substrate (not shown). Chains made of this style of link would prevent the substrates from changing their position along the length of travel while being carried through the in-line system as well as prevent the substrates from changing their position perpendicular to the length of travel (i.e. side-to-side) while being carried through the in-line system.

Chains using links having the substrate support surfaces **807** as illustrated in FIG. **8C** would require a combination of links as illustrated in FIG. **8B** and FIG. **8C**. The chains would require links having substrate support surfaces **807** separated by links having support surfaces **806**. The links would have to be manufactured such that they form pockets that correspond to the size of the substrates. The in-line system would have to be loaded precisely so that the substrates were properly loaded into the pockets.

[0048] FIGs. 9A-9D illustrate the method of assembling links 800-A and 800-B to form part of a chain. The links are viewed from the bottom surface as described earlier. Link 800-B is positioned such that stub 801 is aligned perpendicular to the bottom surface of central cavity 808. Stub 801 of link 800-B is moved in the direction of the arrow and travels between the two capture slots 804 of link 800-A. The resulting configuration after this sequence of moves is illustrated in FIG. 9B.

[0049] Link 800-B is then moved in a direction toward the top surface of link 800-A as illustrated in the arrow in FIG. 9B. This movement causes posts 802 of link 800-B to engage with the insertion slots 805 of link 800-A. The resulting configuration after this sequence of moves is illustrated in FIG. 9C.

[0050] Link 800-B is then rotated in an arc toward the rear of link 800-A as illustrated in the arrow in FIG. 9B. This movement causes posts 802 of link 800-B to further engage with the insertion slots 805 of link 800-A and become captured by the two capture slots 804 of link 800-A. The resulting configuration after this sequence of moves is illustrated in FIG. 9D. Links 800-A and 800-B are now firmly attached and coplanar. This sequence may be repeated to build a chain of the desired length.

[0051] FIGs. 10A-10B illustrate the use of two parallel chains assembled from multiple links 800 to support a substrate 1000. FIG. 10A illustrates the use of two different style links. The link 800 that captures the leading or trailing edge of the substrate comprises substrate support surfaces 807. The link 800 that captures the middle of the substrate comprises substrate support surfaces 806. FIG. 10B illustrates the substrate support mechanism viewed in cross section along the length of travel. Substrate 1000 is supported on links 800 on their top surfaces. Links 800 are supported and guided by support guides 803 traveling along support rods 1001. Using this support system, the bottom surface of the substrate is advantageously exposed allowing the substrate to be processed in a uniform manner or allowing the substrate to be processed on the top and bottom surfaces simultaneously.

[0052] Links 800 may be composed of materials that do not contaminate the substrate during processing. In some process sequences, the substrate may be protected by previously deposited materials and may undergo a simple thermal treatment. In this case, the links 800 may be composed of metals or metal alloys. Typical metal materials may comprise nichrome doped with vanadium, steel alloys, and high temperature refractory

metal alloys among others. In some process sequences, the substrate may not be protected by previously deposited materials or may be undergoing processing with a reactive species. In this case, it is important that the material used to form links 800 not contaminate the substrate. Various ceramic materials such as AlN, BN, SiC, Al₂O₃, ZrO₂, and others are typical examples. These ceramics have high temperature stability and are relatively inert to much reactive chemistry.

[0053] Links 800 may be formed by any well known manufacturing method. Typical examples include machining, stamping from metal sheet stock and bending, and casting, among others. Links 800 are advantageously formed by a low cost manufacturing method such as casting.

[0054] Although various embodiments which incorporate the teachings of the present invention have been shown and described in detail herein, those skilled in the art can readily devise many other varied embodiments that still incorporate these teachings.

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus for the support of substrates comprising:
 - chains comprising a plurality of links;
 - the links comprising a central cavity;
 - the central cavity having a top, a bottom, a front, a rear, and two side surfaces;
 - the links further comprising a stub projecting from the center of the front surface of the central cavity;
 - the stub further comprising two posts projecting outward from the distal end of the stub in a direction aligned with the two sides of the central cavity;
 - the links further comprising two capture slots projecting from the rear surface of the central cavity;
 - the two capture slots having an elliptical shape wherein the major axis of the ellipse is aligned along the direction of travel of the chain and the minor axis of the ellipse is aligned parallel to the two sides of the central cavity;
 - the two capture slots being separated by a distance greater than the width of the stub;
 - the two capture slots further comprising insertion slots on their surface that is aligned with the bottom surface of the central cavity;
 - the central cavity and the two capture slots further comprising support guides on their bottom surfaces; and
 - the central cavity and the two capture slots further comprising substrate support guides on their top surfaces.
2. The apparatus of Claim 1 wherein the substrate support guides on their top surfaces capture the leading or trailing edge of a substrate.
3. The apparatus of Claim 1 wherein the links are a single configuration.

4. The apparatus of Claim 1 wherein the links are a mixture of different configurations.
5. A method of assembling a chain from links comprising:
 - a first and a second link, each link comprising a central cavity; a stub with two posts, and two capture slots separated by a distance greater than the width of the stub, the two capture slots having insertion slots on their bottom surfaces;
 - positioning the second link substantially perpendicular to the first link so that the stub of the second link is aligned with the space separating the two capture slots of the first link and the stub of the second link being aligned in a direction toward the top surface of the first link;
 - moving the second link toward the front surface of the first link so that the stub of the second link is positioned between the two capture slots of the first link;
 - moving the second link in a direction toward the top surface of the first link so that the two posts on the stub of the second link engage with the insertion slots on the two capture slots of the first link; and
 - rotating the second link in an arc toward the rear of the first link so that the links become coplanar.