Wide-Band Radar for Measuring Thickness of Sea Ice

This instrument could contribute to understanding of climate change.

NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, California

A wide-band penetrating radar system for measuring the thickness of sea ice is under development. The need for this or a similar system arises as follows: Spatial and temporal variations in the thickness of sea ice are important indicators of heat fluxes between the ocean and atmosphere and, hence, are important indicators of climate change in polar regions. A remote-sensing system that could directly measure the thickness of sea ice over a wide thickness range from aboard an aircraft or satellite would be of great scientific value. Obtaining thickness measurements over a wide region at weekly or monthly time intervals would contribute significantly to understanding of changes in the spatial distribution and of the mass balance of sea ice.

A prototype of the system was designed on the basis of computational simulations directed toward understanding what signal frequencies are needed to satisfy partly competing requirements to detect both bottom and top ice surfaces, obtain adequate penetration despite high attenuation in the lossy sea-ice medium, and obtain adequate resolution, all over a wide thickness range. The prototype of the system is of the frequency-modulation, continuous-wave (FM-CW) type. At a given time, the prototype functions in either of two frequency-band/operational-mode combinations that correspond to two thickness ranges: a lower-frequency (50 to 250 MHz) mode for measuring thickness greater than about 1 m, and a higher-frequency (300 to 1,300 MHz) mode for measuring thickness less than about 1 m. The bandwidth in the higher-frequency (lesser-thickness) mode is adequate for a thickness resolution of 15 cm; the bandwidth in the lower-frequency (greater-thickness) mode is adequate for a thickness resolution of 75 cm. Although a thickness resolution of no more than 25 cm is desired for scientific purposes, the 75-cm resolution was deemed acceptable for the purpose of demonstrating feasibility.

The prototype was constructed as a modified version of a 500-to-2,000-MHz FM-CW radar system developed previously for mapping near-surface internal layers of the Greenland ice sheet. The prototype included two sets of antennas, one for each frequency-band/mode. For Arctic and Antarctic field tests, the prototype was mounted on a sled that was towed across the ice. The Arctic field test was performed in the lower-frequency mode on ice ranging in thickness from 1 to 4 m. In the analysis of the results of the Arctic field test, a comparison of the radar-determined ice thicknesses with actual ice thicknesses yielded an overall mean difference of 14 cm and standard deviation of 30 cm. The Antarctic field test was performed in the higher-frequency mode and achieved thickness resolutions of 30 cm with mean differences of 15 cm and standard deviations of 30 cm. Although the system was deemed acceptable for the purpose of demonstrating feasibility, it is not clear whether or not it will be used for such purposes.

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Vertical Isolation for Photodiodes in CMOS Imagers

Diffusion cross-talk would be reduced substantially.

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In a proposed improvement in complementary metal oxide/semiconductor (CMOS) image detectors, two additional implants in each pixel would effect vertical isolation between the metal oxide/semiconductor field-effect transistors (MOSFETs) and the photodiode of the pixel. This improvement is expected to enable separate optimization of the designs of the photodiode and the MOSFETs so as to optimize their performances independently of each other. The purpose to be served by enabling this separate optimization is to eliminate or vastly reduce diffusion cross-talk, thereby increasing sensitivity, effective spatial resolution, and color fidelity while reducing noise.

Ideally, the spatial resolution of an imager should be limited by the geometric pixel size. However, in most practical image detectors, resolutions are limited, not by geometric pixel sizes, but by cross-talk. (As used here, “cross-talk” denotes the response of a pixel to light focused on an adjacent pixel.) Cross-talk degrades spatial resolution of an imager, reduces overall sensitivity, compromises color fidelity, and leads to additional noise in the image after color correction. Diffusion cross-talk occurs where photogenerated charge carriers can move to neighboring charge-accumulation sites — in particular, where junction diodes in adjacent pixels have insufficient depletion widths.

The left side of the figure presents a schematic cross section of a typical conventional CMOS imager pixel containing a junction diode connected to the source of a reset MOSFET. The junction diode is formed between the n well and the p epitaxial layer (or p substrate). The n well is connected to the source of the reset MOSFET through an n+ implant. The reset MOSFET and an associate source-follower MOSFET are n-type and are placed inside a p well. For reasons too complex to present in this article, the depletion width is too small to prevent lateral diffusion of photo-induced charge carriers in the undepleted (field-free) epitaxial region. In the absence of a guiding electric field, photoelectrons generated in the epitaxial layer substrate diffuse omnidirectionally between pixels, thereby causing cross-talk.

The maximum supply potential in a CMOS process is between 3 and 5 V. When potential drops are taken into account, the reverse bias across the diode is between 2 and 3 V. At these reverse biases, the p-n junction depletion width is too small to prevent diffusion cross-talk, especially for longer wavelength light. In principle, the depletion width could be increased significantly by applying a large reverse bias (e.g., 50 V) to the p epitaxial layer or substrate. However, because of (1) the electrical connection between the p well and the p epitaxial layer or substrate and (2) a requirement to keep at the most between 3 and 5 V across the CMOS devices, it is not possible to apply such a large reverse bias in this device structure. This prompts the proposed improvement in device structure.

A CMOS imager pixel as proposed, depicted on the right side of the figure, would include a deep n well and a deep p well in addition to the conventional n and p wells. The photodiode would be formed by the deep n well and the p epitaxial layer or substrate. The anode end (n end) of the diode would be connected to the n+ source and the p end (p end) of the diode would be connected to the p+ source.