

Advancements in Fine Line Metallization: Latest Achievements at Fraunhofer ISE

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Special thanks to: Dr. Weiming Zhang¹, Dr. Ning Chen², Dr. Xinpeng Zhang³

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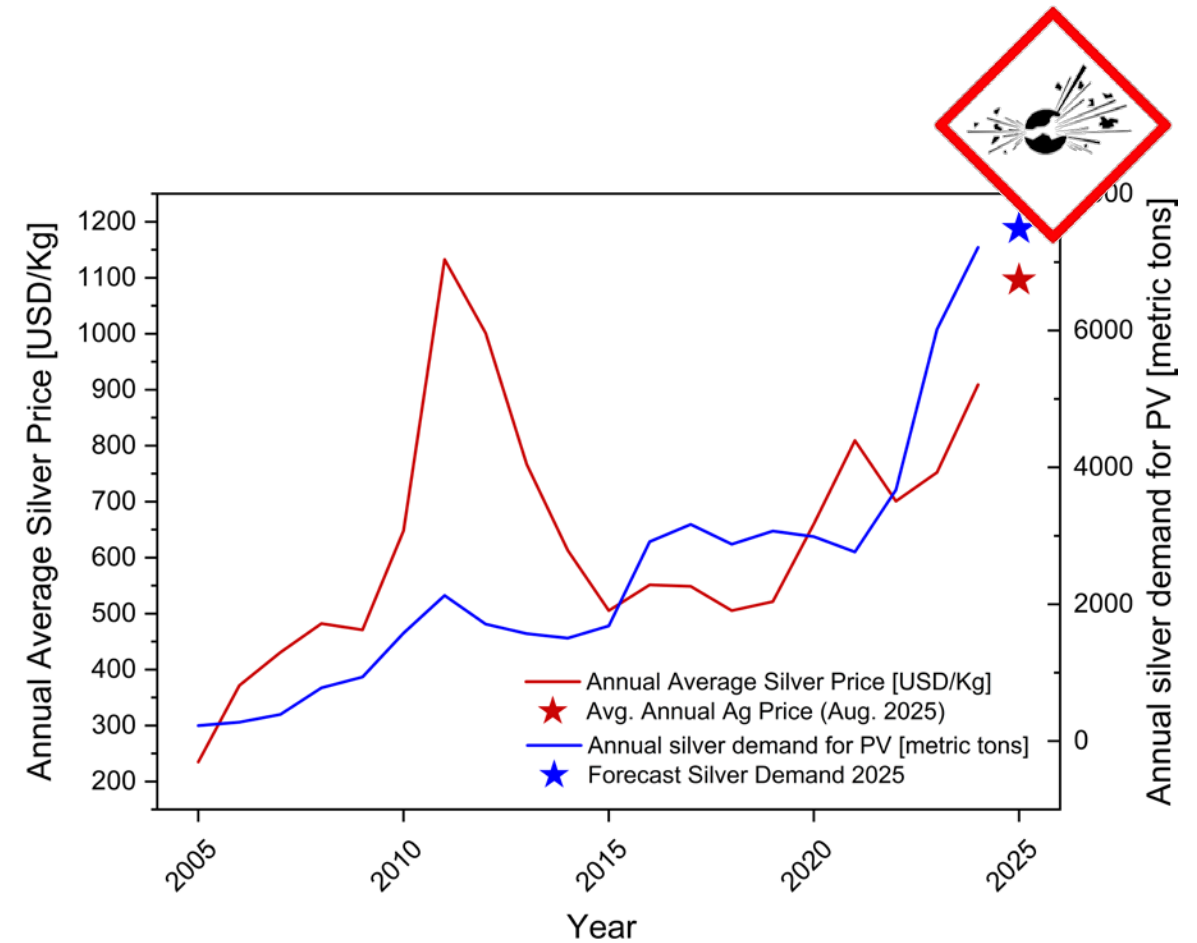
13th Metallization and Interconnection Workshop
October 21st 2025, Berlin

Motivation

There is no alternative to drastic silver reduction

Silver demand for the PV industry 2025:

- Silver price reaches new record highs (> 52 \$/Oz)
- PV silver demand of PV expected to reach > 7,5 kt ^[1]
- „Explosive mix“ for PV industry



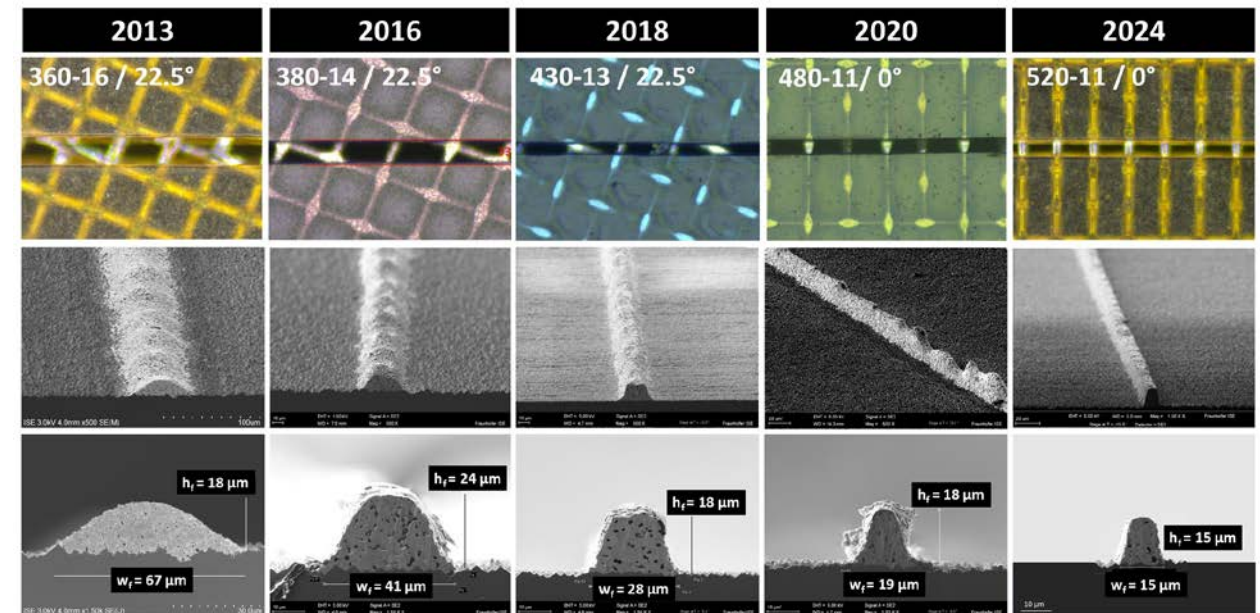
Evolution of silver price [\$/Kg] and yearly total silver demand [Tons] from 2005 to 2025 (forecast). Source: The Silver Institute [2]

Motivation

There is no alternative to drastic silver reduction

Impact on PV industry:

- Strong pressure to drastically reduce/replace Ag
- Possible solutions:
 - Silver reduction by fine line printing,
Rapid development of new screens & pastes ^[1]
→ Approaching 10 μm in industrial mass production ^[2,3]



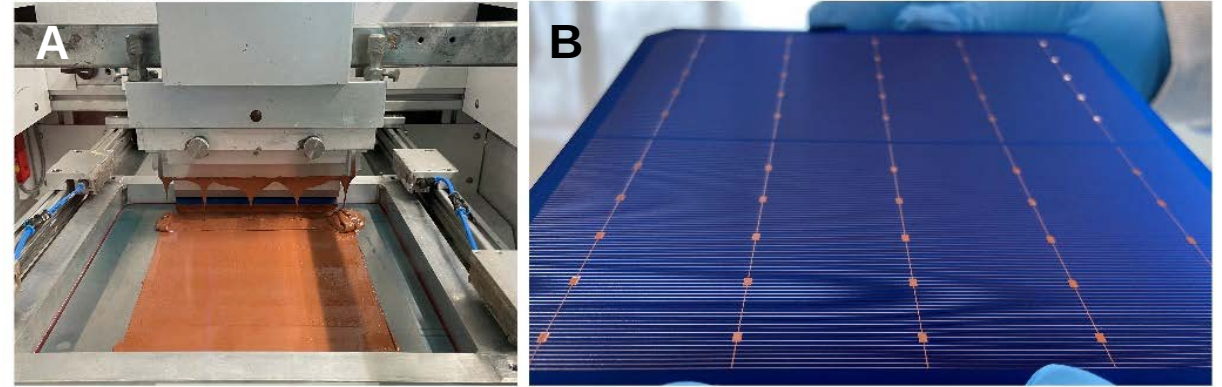
Evolution of fine line screen printing at Fraunhofer ISE: Microscopic images of different screen types and SEM images of selected front side contacts (Al BSF and PERC) from 2013 to 2024. Source: Fraunhofer ISE

Motivation

There is no alternative to drastic silver reduction

Impact on PV industry:

- Strong pressure to drastically reduce/replace Ag
- Possible solutions:
 - Silver reduction by fine line printing, Rapid development of new screens & pastes ^[1]
→ Approaching 10 μm in industrial mass production ^[2,3]
 - Replacement of silver (i.e. AgCu ^[1,2], Copper ^[2] or Nickel ^[3] paste),



A) Screen printing of copper paste B) SHJ solar cells with Cu front side metallization (Source: Fraunhofer ISE)

A brief historic excursion: Review of 25 years of screen printed solar cell metallization



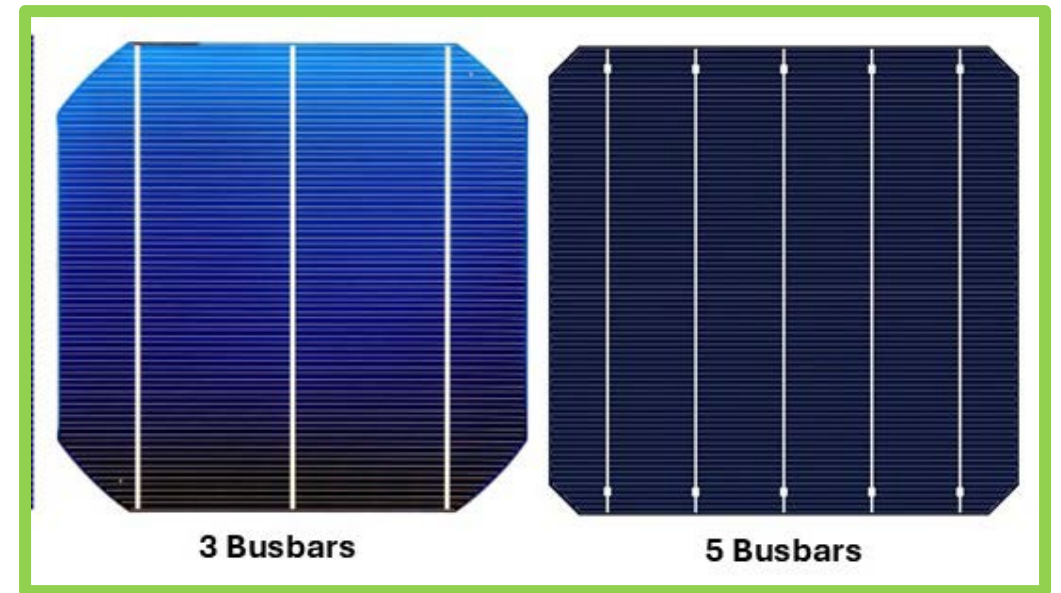
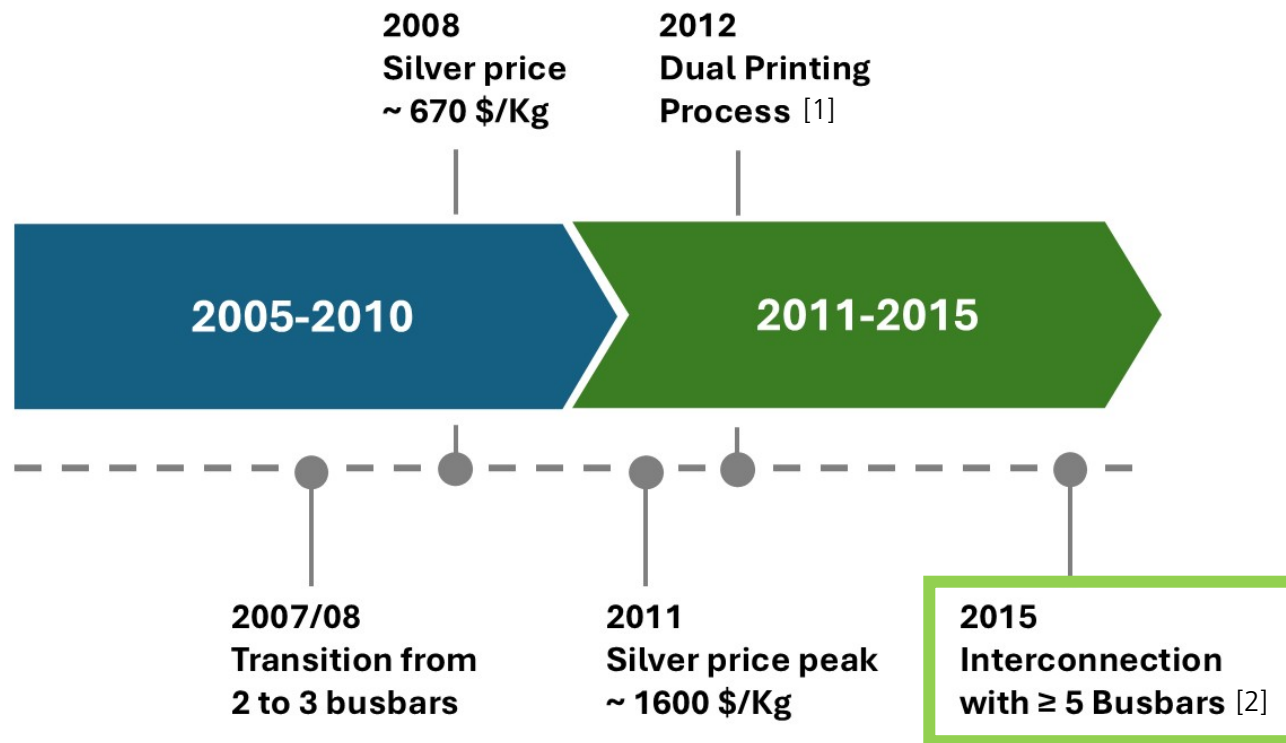
Evolution of Screen Printing for PV

A whirlwind journey through history



Evolution of Screen Printing for PV

A whirlwind journey through history



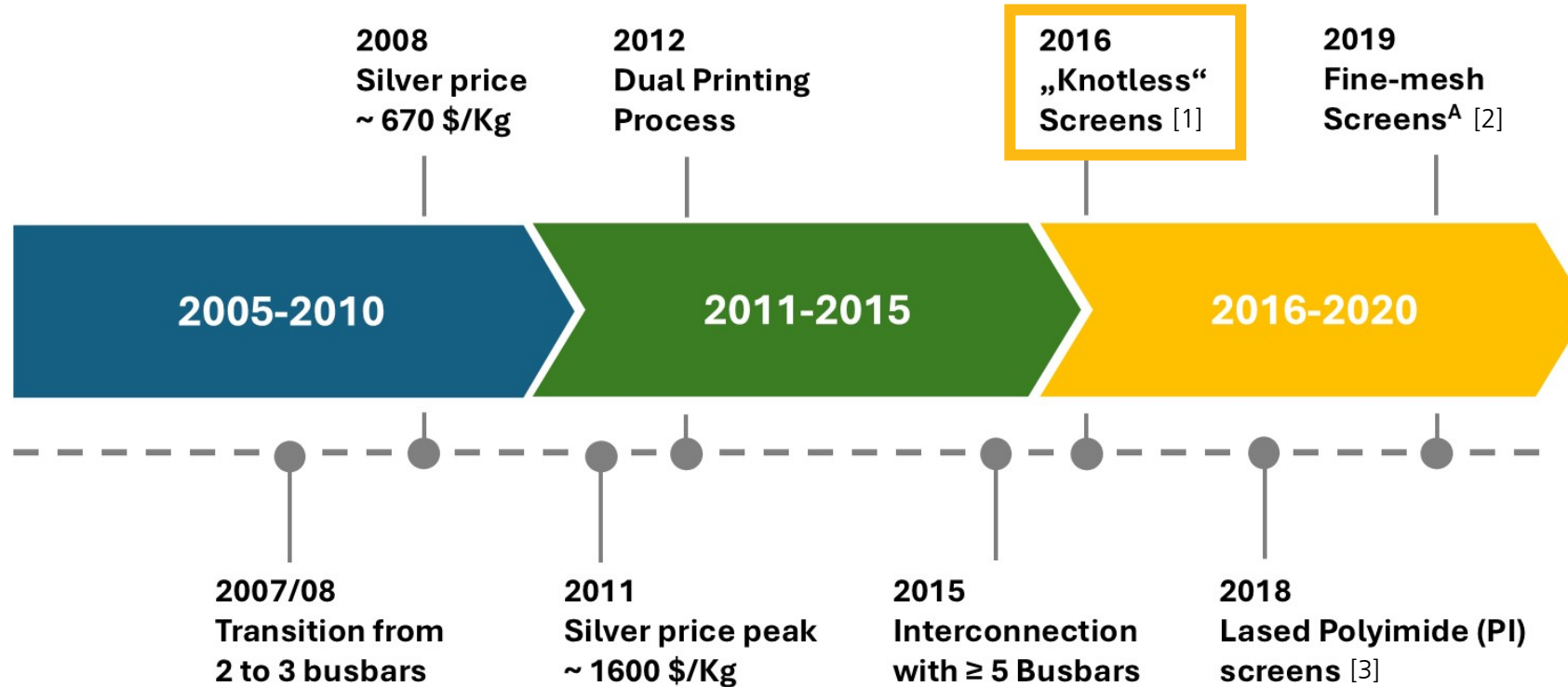
Silicon solar cells with 3 and 5 busbars for interconnection

[1] M. König et al., Energy Procedia 27 (2012)

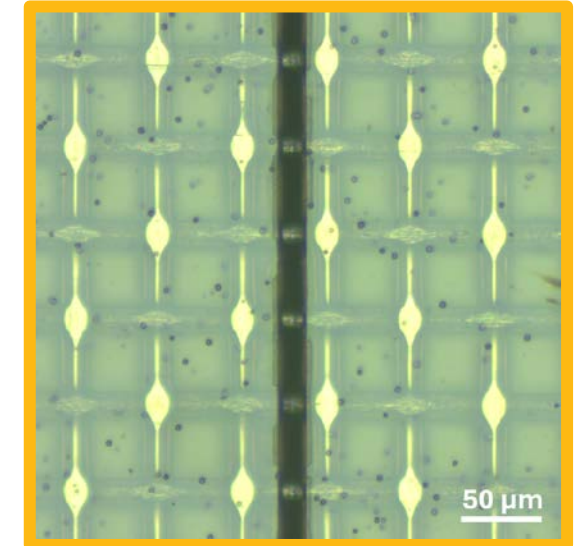
[2] <https://www.solarserver.de/2015/05/04/photovoltaik-technologie-solarworld-ag-setzt-auf-5-busbars-und-meldet-perc-solarzellen-rekordwirkungsgrad-von-2151/>, 2015 (accessed 28 May 2025).

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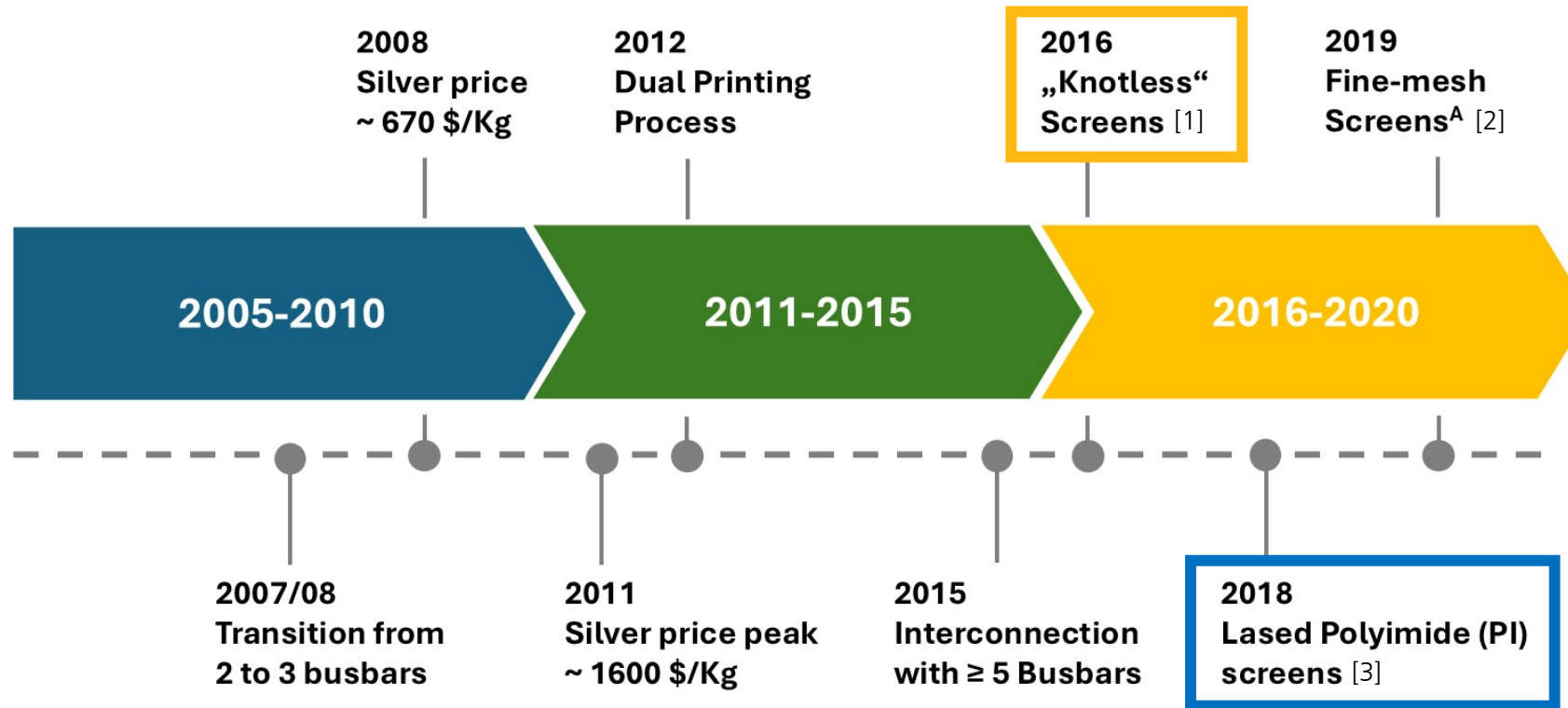
^A Fine mesh screens ≥ 480 wires/mesh



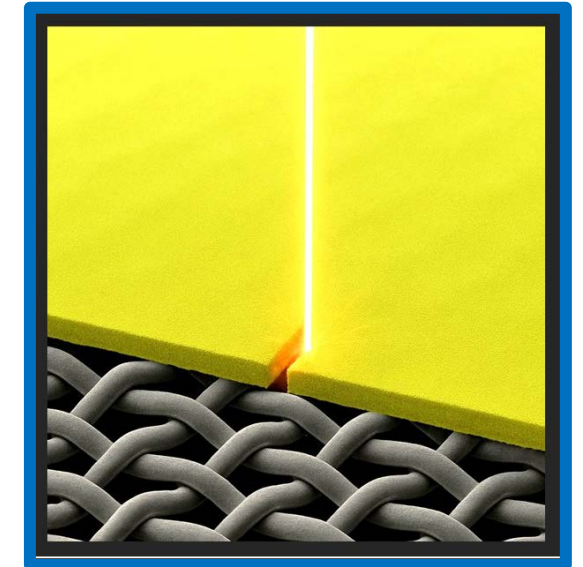
Microscopic image of knotless screen (500-05 / 0° mesh)

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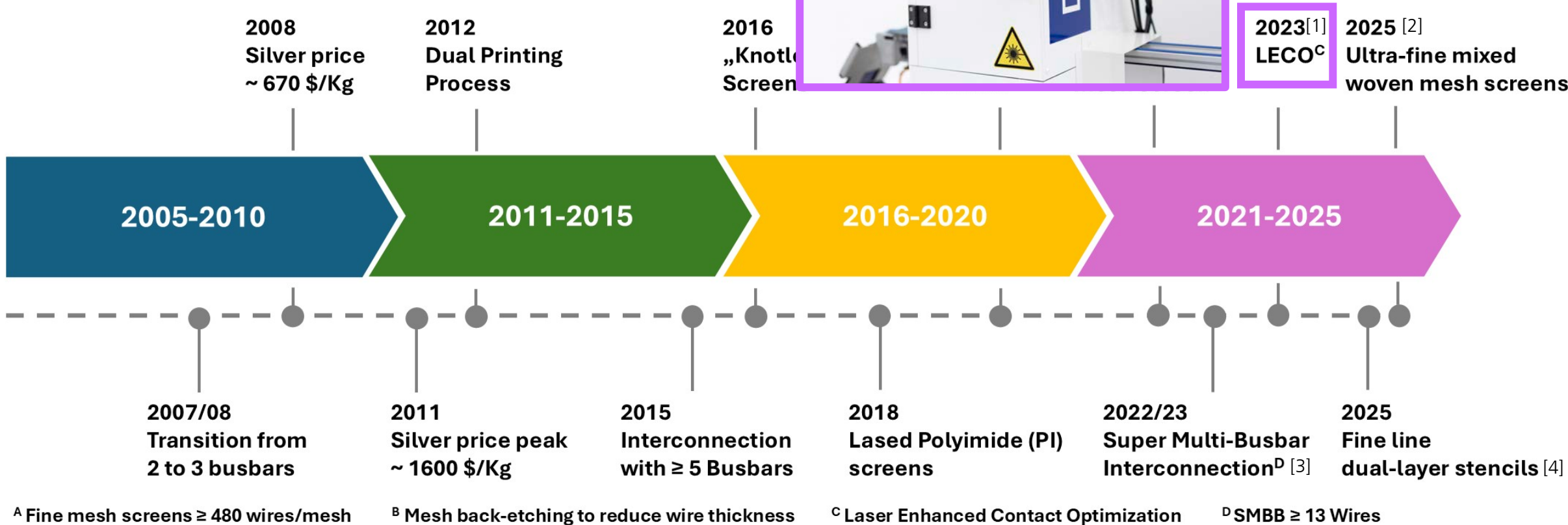
^A Fine mesh screens ≥ 480 wires/mesh



*AI-created visualization of lasing process for Polyimide screens
(Source: A. Lorenz, ISE)*

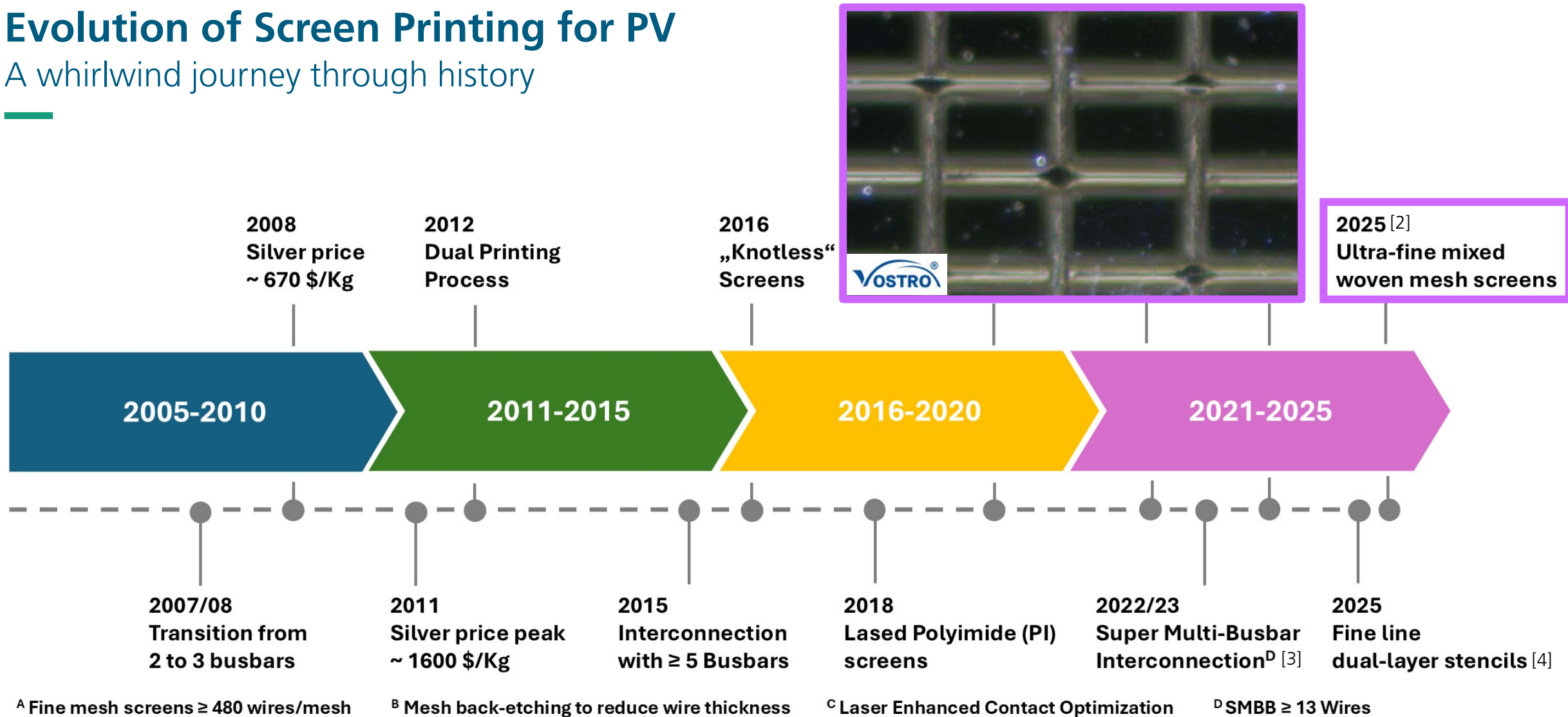
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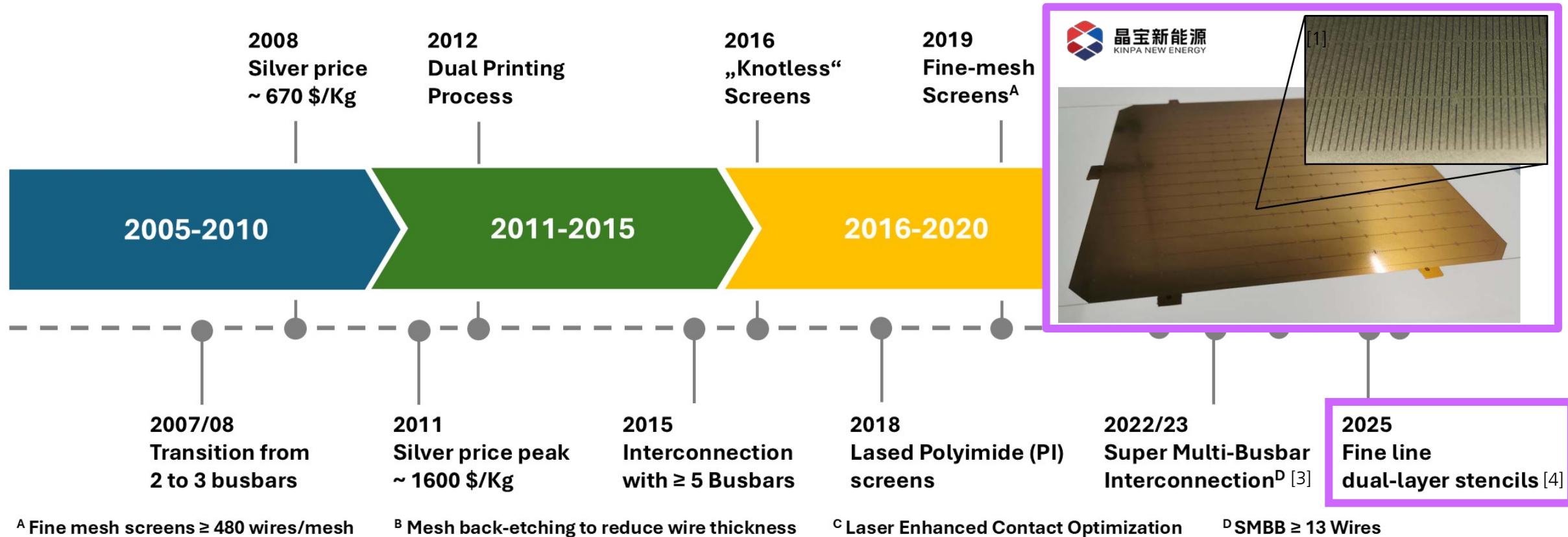
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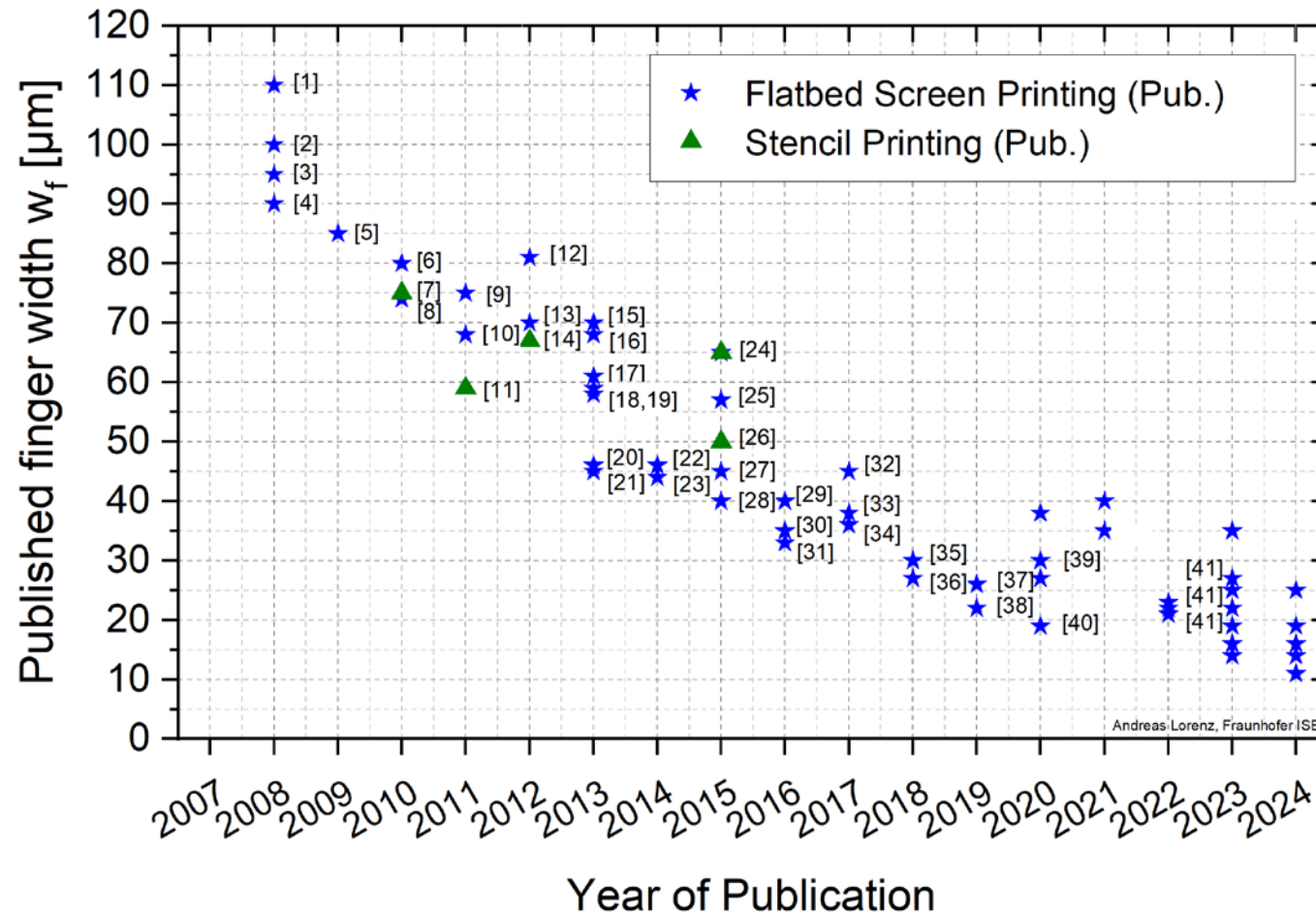
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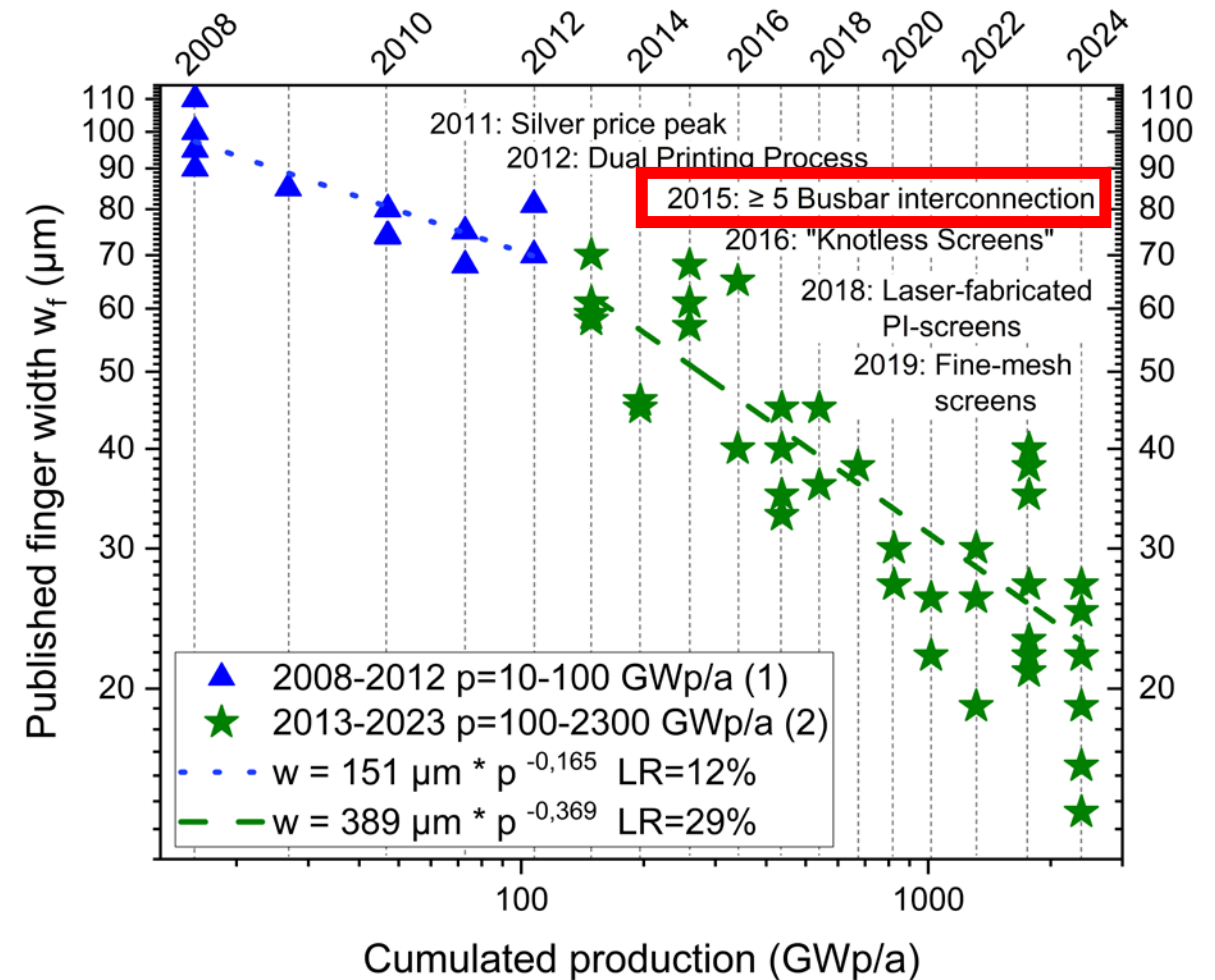
Linear learning curve of screen printed finger width evolution from 2008 to 2025. Updated version based on [1,2], References see [2],

Evolution of Screen Printing for PV

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New learning curve model:

- Two-phase logarithmic learning curve based on published finger widths ^[1]
- Linked to the annual growth of the cumulated PV production volume
- Key Findings:
 - Fine line screen printing accelerated drastically from around 2014/2015 on
 - Game changer: Transition from 3 to ≥ 5 busbars for interconnection



Progress in fine line screen printing for TOPCon at Fraunhofer ISE



TOPCon – Latest results with high-end screens and stencils

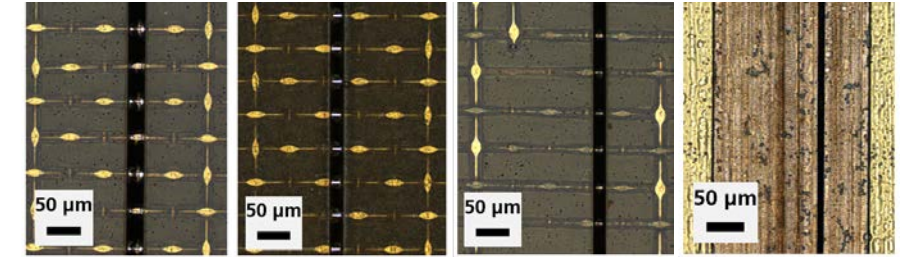
Aim and experimental setup

Aim and motivation:

- Reduction of silver by fine line printing
- Evaluation of new screen & stencil technology

Experimental setup:

- Screen/paste variation:
 - Fraunhofer ISE TOPCon precursors (M10)
 - 3 different fine mesh screen configurations
 - Varying nominal finger width / # fingers
 - High-end dual layer stencil
 - 2 high-performance Ag pastes (partly diluted)



	Screen 1 (Ref)	Screen 2	Screen 3	Stencil
Mesh/Stencil configuration	520-11 (0°)	520-09 (0°)	500-05 (0°)	Dual layer
Nom. Finger width w_n [µm]	24	20	17/15/13	9
Paste	A/B	A/B	A/B	A/B

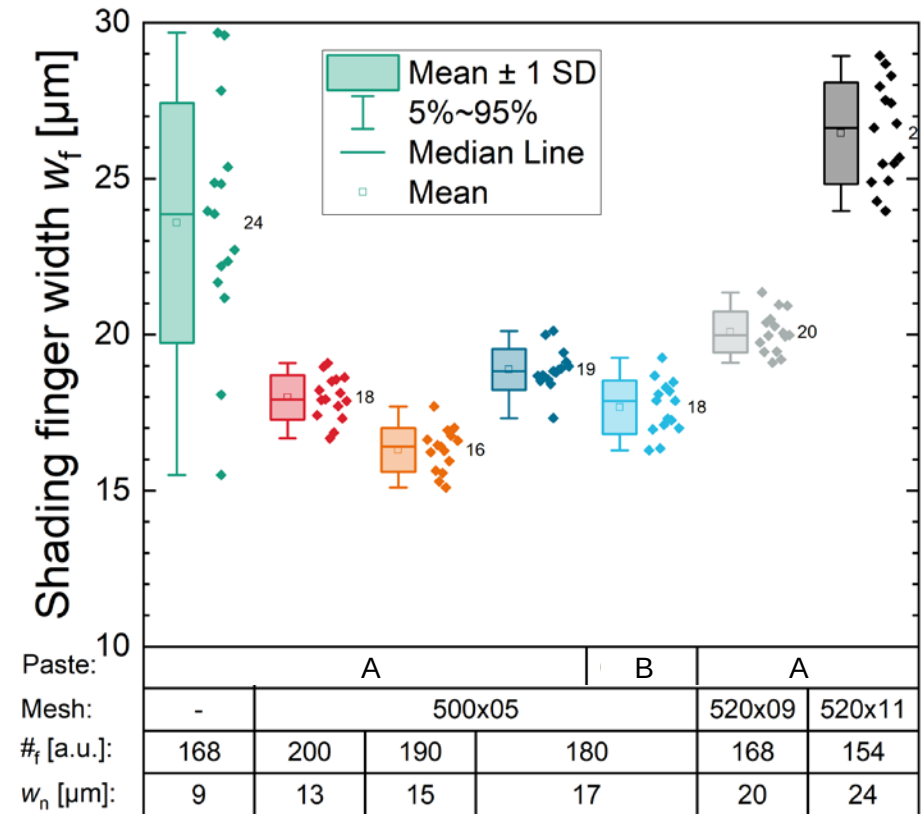
Experimental setup – Overview of screen/stencil variations for the conducted TOPCon fine line test batch.

TOPCon – Latest results with high-end screens and stencils

Screen / stencil printing results

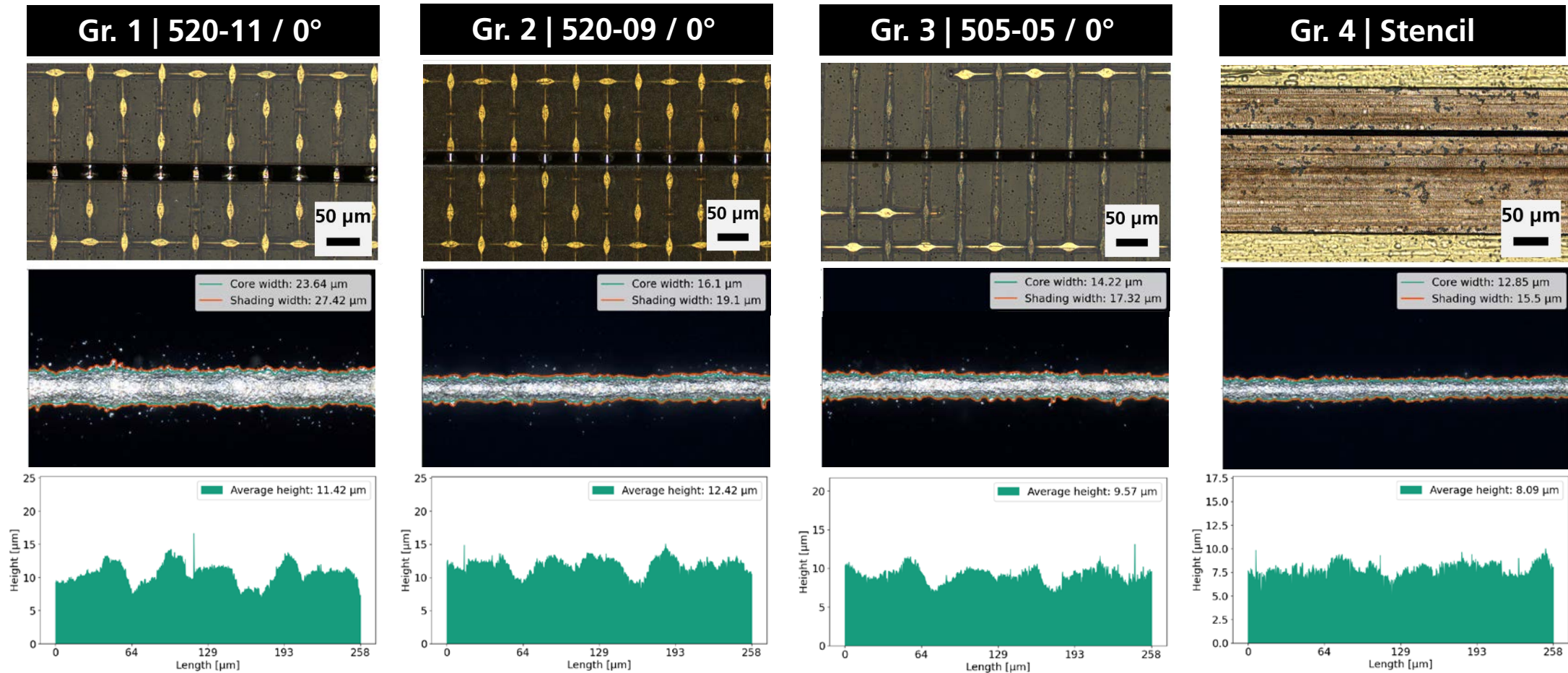
Printing results:

- Substantial finger width reduction possible with screens 500-09 and 500-05
- Best results for 500-05 (0°) mesh with $w_n = 17 \mu\text{m}$: $\varnothing$ finger width $w_f \sim 18 \mu\text{m}$, uniform printing quality
- Stencil: improved finger uniformity, yet strong variation of finger width



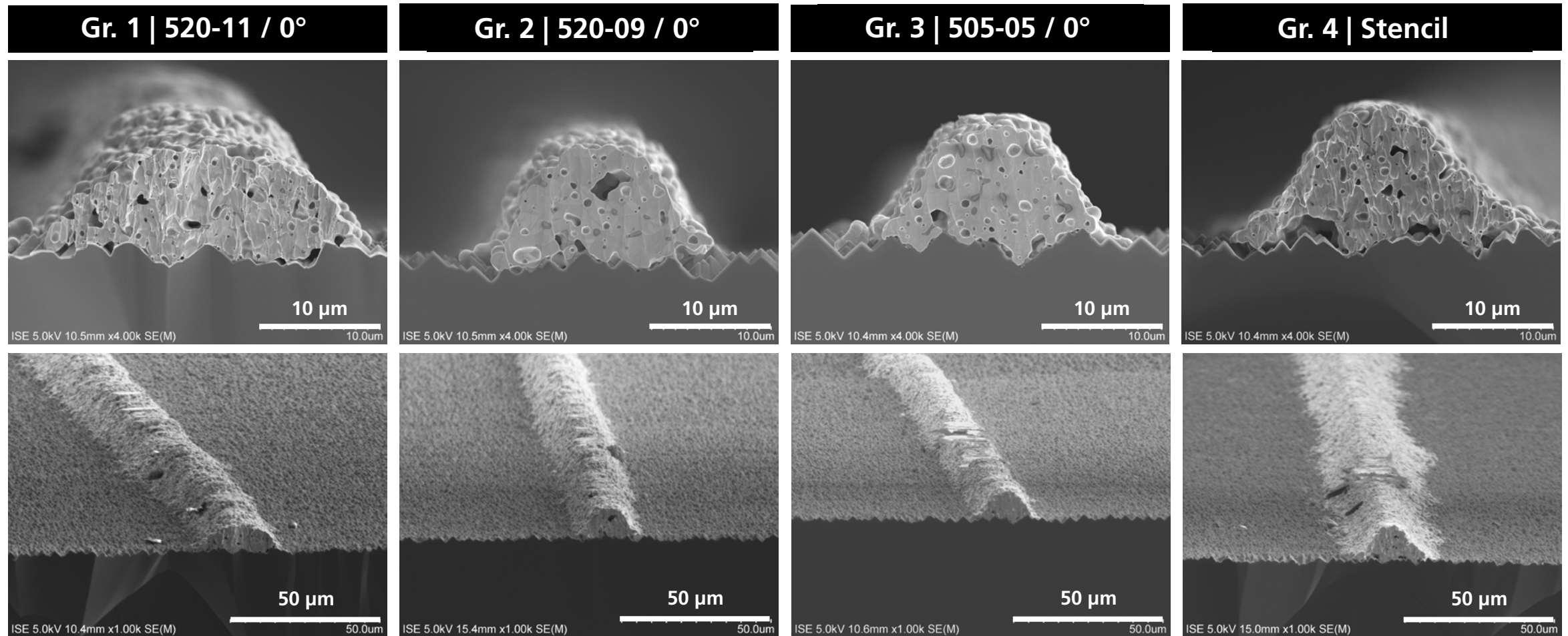
TOPCon – Latest results with high-end screens and stencils

Screen / stencil printing results



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Screen / stencil printing results

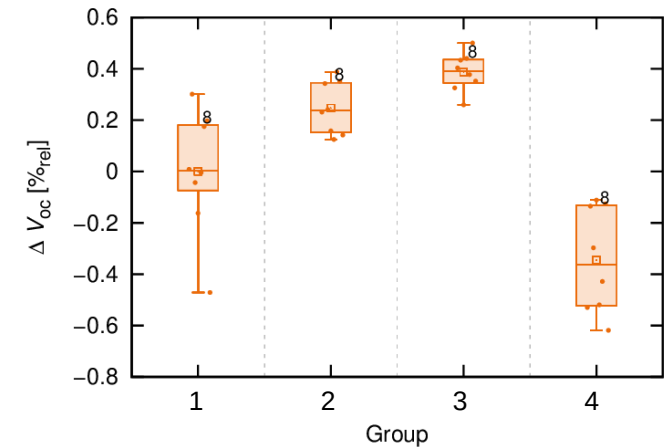
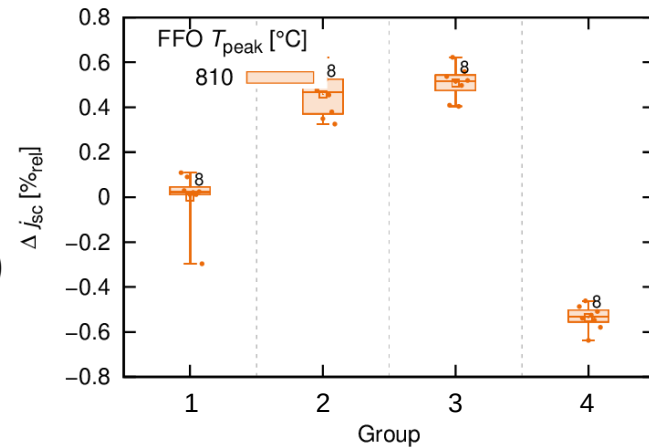
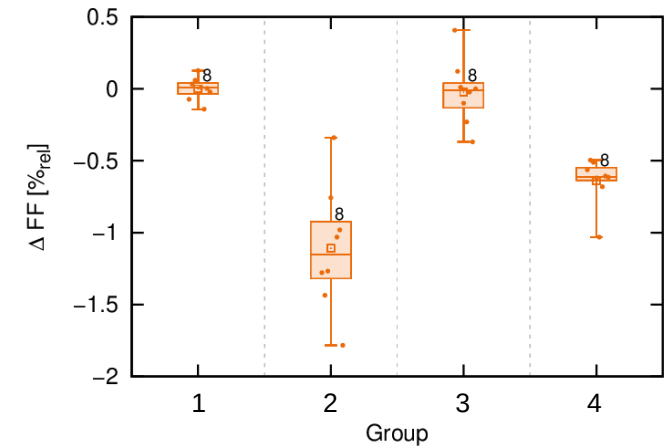
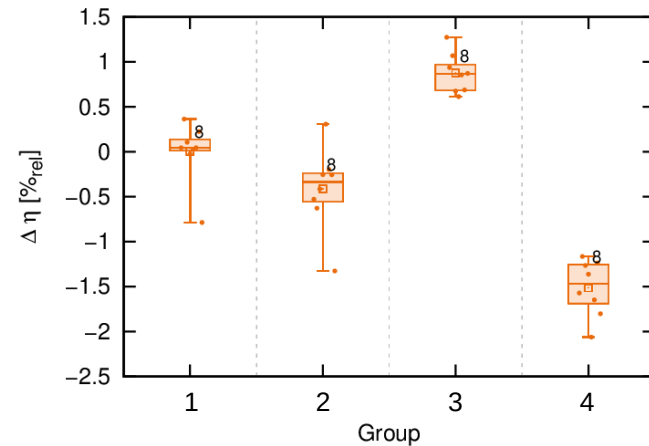
Results on cell level:

- J_{sc} gain up to ~ **0.55 %rel.** (group 3)
→ smaller fingers, reduced shading
- V_{oc} gain of up to ~ **0.4 %rel.** (group 3)
→ smaller fingers, reduced metal-related recombination
- FF roughly on same level as reference (gr. 3)
- Total efficiency gain: ~ **0.9 %rel.** (group 3)

Silver consumption:

- Group 3: Silver reduction $\Delta m_{Ag} = 19 \text{ mg}$ (- 34%) compared to reference group 1

Group	Screen/Stencil
1	520/11 0° - $w_n = 24 \mu\text{m}$
2	520-09 0° - $w_n = 20 \mu\text{m}$
3	500-05 0° - $w_n = 17 \mu\text{m}$
4	Stencil - $w_n = 9 \mu\text{m}$

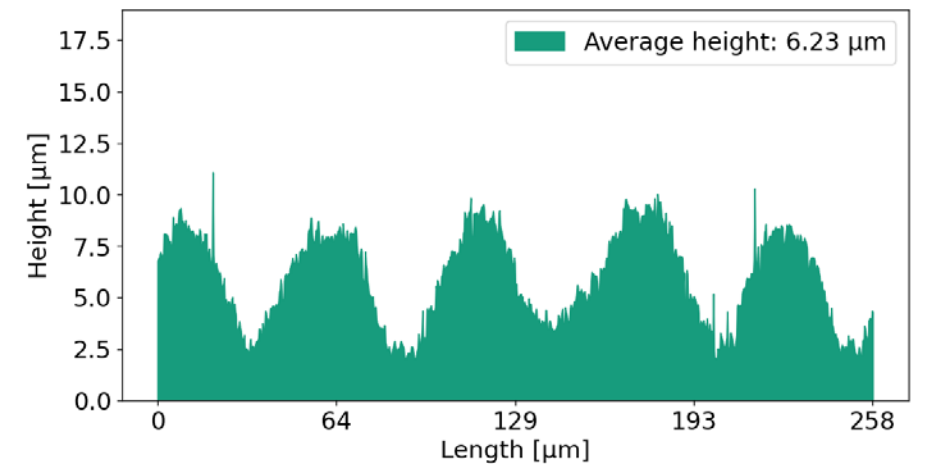
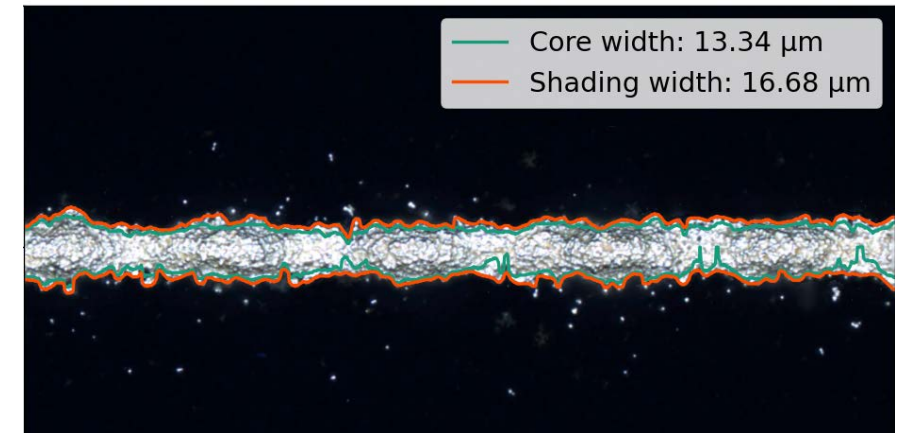


TOPCon – Latest results with high-end screens and stencils

Screen / stencil printing results

Printing results:

- 500-05 Screens with finger openings (wn = 13 and 15 μm) were printable
- Finger geometry was inconsistent (interruptions and strong height variation), result did not match „ISE quality standard“

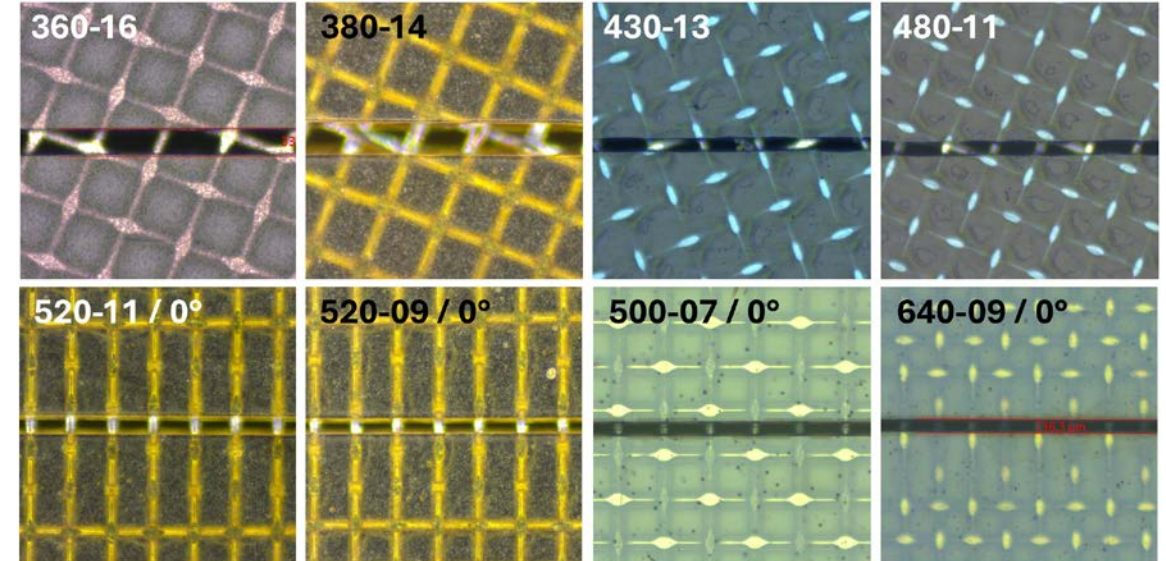


Fine line screen printing for TOPCon and SHJ

Challenges for ultra fine line printing ($\leq 10\text{ }\mu\text{m}$)

Important influencing factors:

- Screen / Stencil properties ^[1-6]:
 - Mesh count, wire thickness, PI-layer (EOM), channel width, knotless/angled...



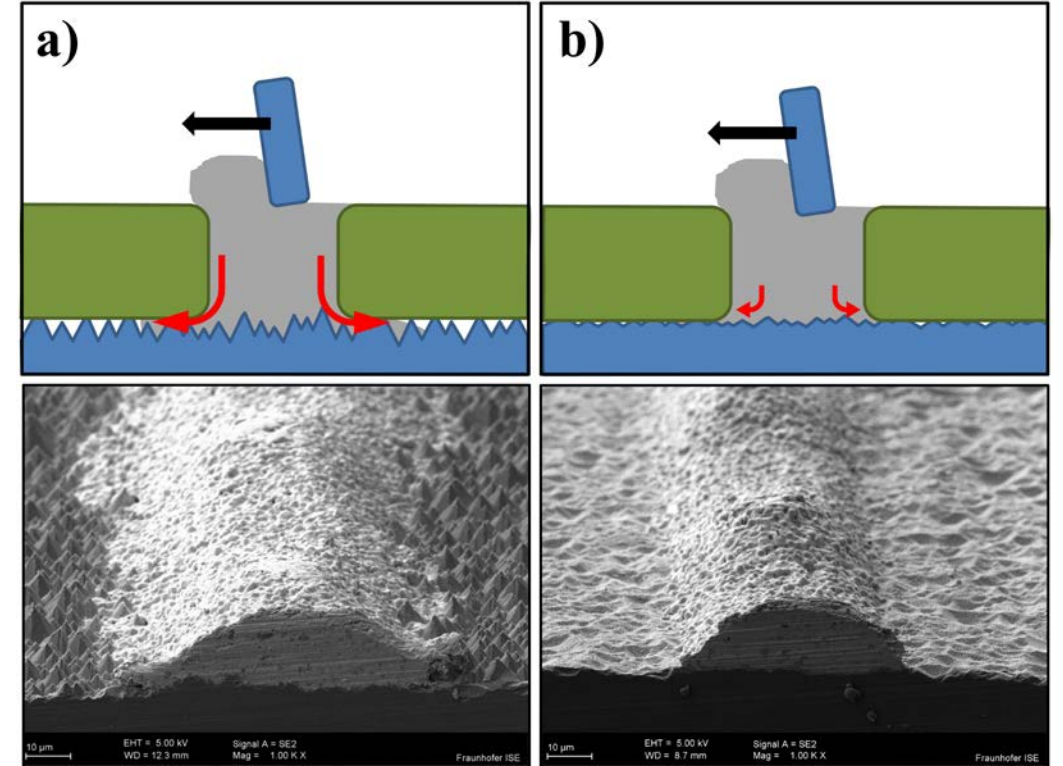
Variants of fine line screens with varying mesh count, wire thickness and mesh angle [Source: ISE]

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 - Critical for spreading: Edge sealing between texture and PI-barrier layer ^[1]
 - Influenced by texture size and PI properties ^[2,3]



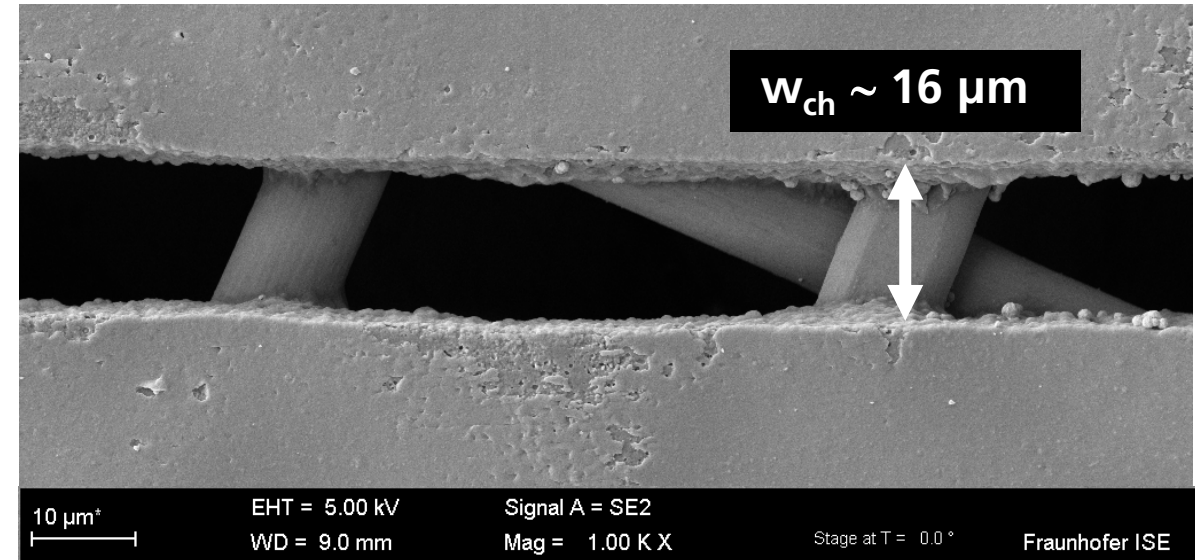
Impact of wafer surface texture and PI barrier layer properties on uniformity and spreading of printed contacts [Source: ISE [3]]

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- Paste properties & Printing conditions:
 - Rheology (i.e. dilution) ^[4] and particle size ^[5]



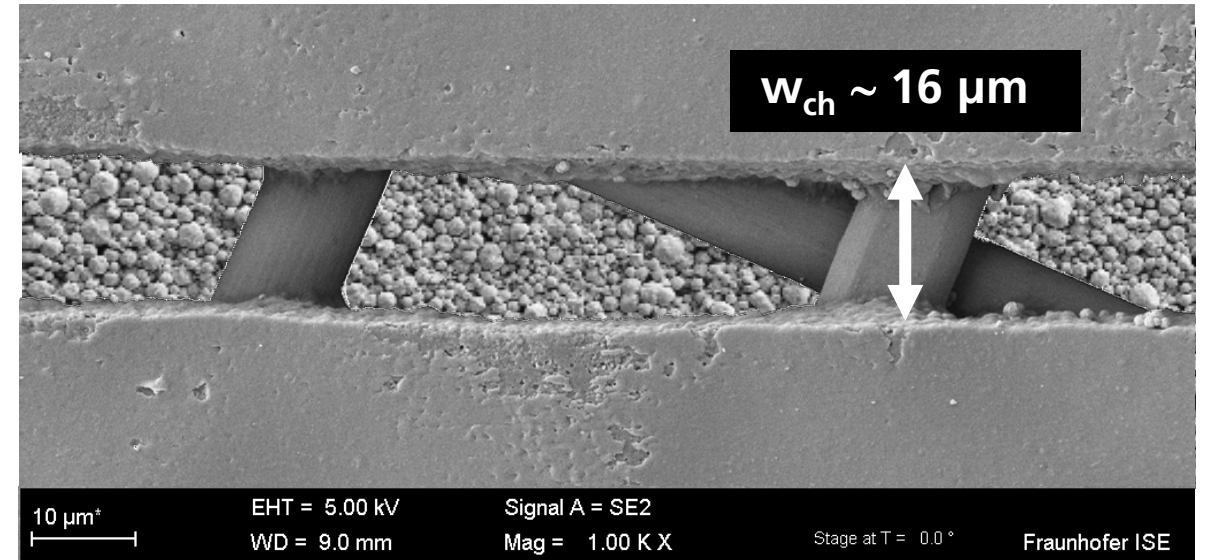
True-to-scale SEM image overlay of a fine-line channel in a fine mesh screen (480-11/22.5°)

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True-to-scale SEM image overlay of a fine-line channel in a fine mesh screen (480-11/22.5°) with SEM image of a PERC Paste (particle size $\sim 2\text{-}5 \mu\text{m}$)

[1] Aoki, M. et al., 40th IEEE Photovoltaic Specialists Conference (PVSC) (2014)

[2] Lorenz, A. et al., IEEE J. Photovoltaics 5 (4) (2015)

[4] Tepner, S. et al., Adv. Mater. Technol. 5 (10), (2020)

[3] Tepner & Lorenz, Progr. Photovolt Res Appl 31 (6), (2023)

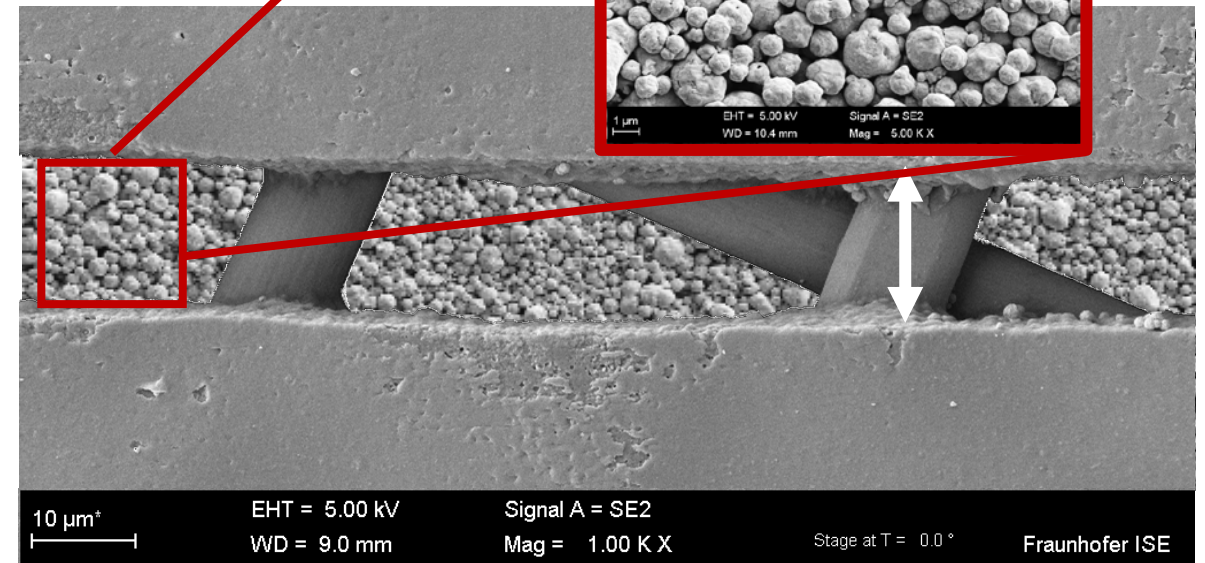
[5] Tsai, J.T. Et al. Journal of Alloys and Compounds 548 (2013)

Fine line screen printing for TOPCon and SHJ

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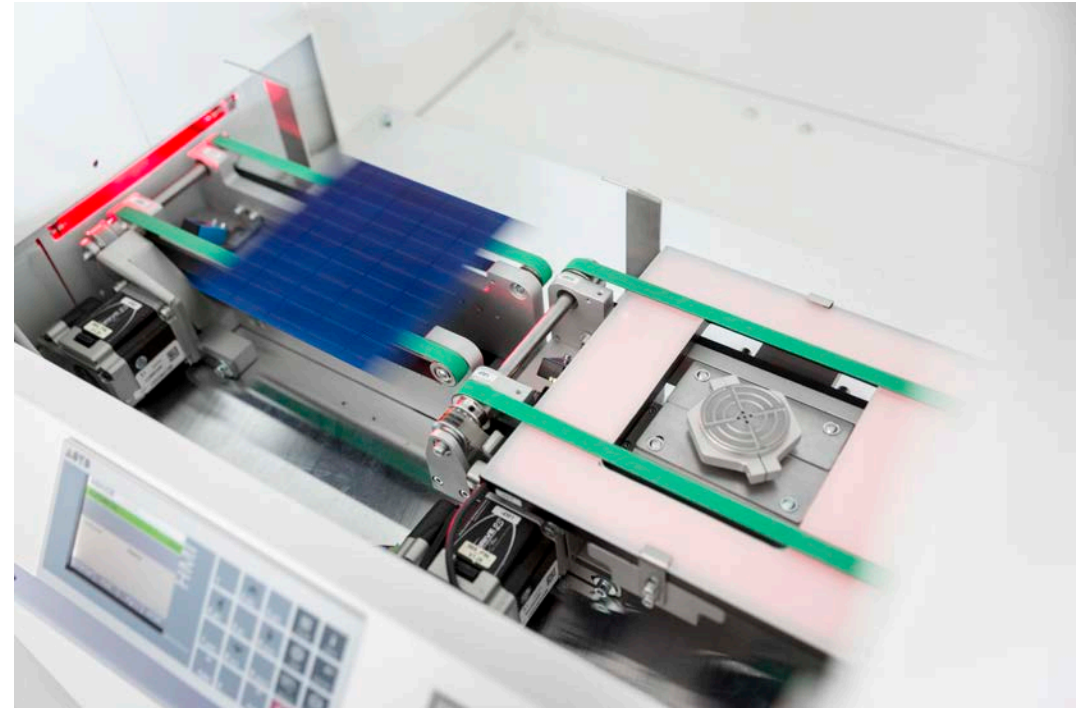
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- Paste properties & Printing conditions:
 - Rheology (i.e. dilution) ^[4] and particle size ^[5]
 - Printing/flooding speed, cycle time of machine



Screen printing line at Fraunhofer ISE

Copper paste metallization

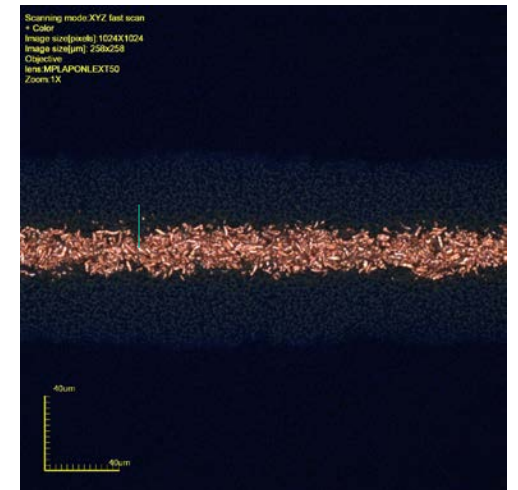
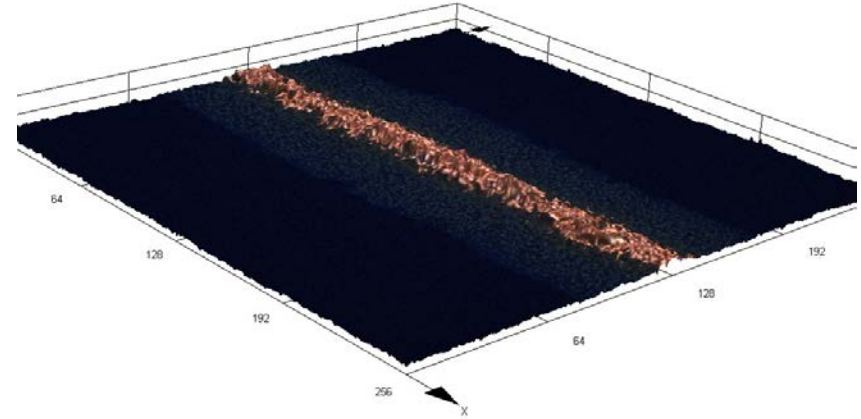
Update: Fine line screen printing of copper pastes

Aim and motivation:

- Evaluation of pure copper pastes (LT and HT) for SHJ and TOPCon

Screen printing results:

- Strong progress regarding development of copper paste printability
- LT copper pastes can be printed down to **~20-25 μm width** with **5-7 μm height**
- Rear side metallization on SHJ ^[1,2] and TOPCon ^[3,4] successfully demonstrated with good cell results



Outlook – Can screen printing challenge photolithography?



Screen Printing beyond PV

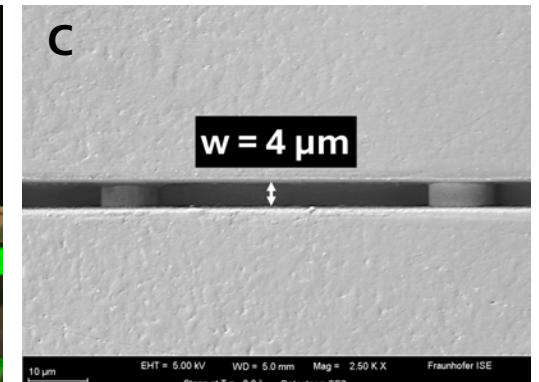
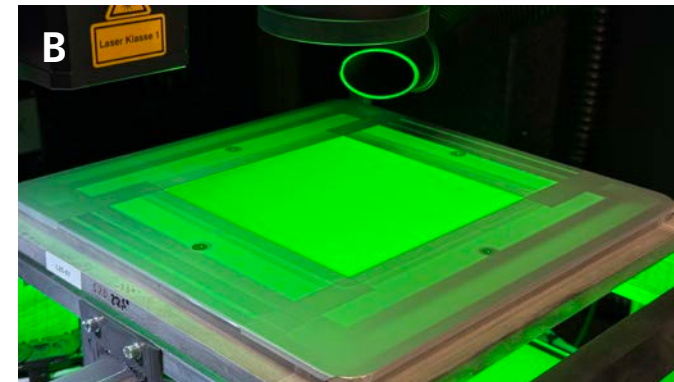
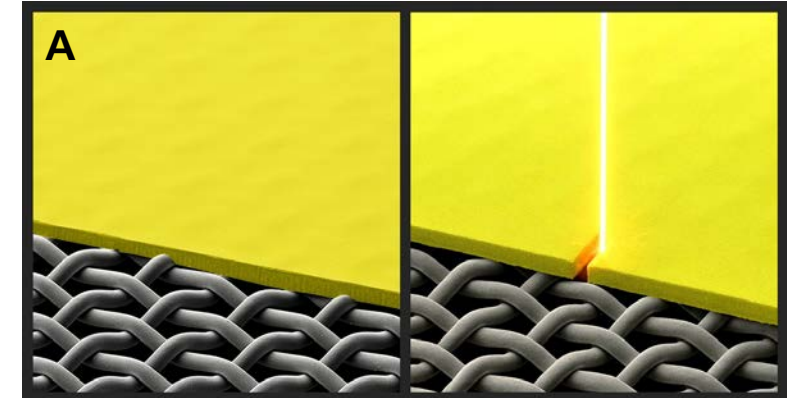
How fine can we print with screen and stencil printing?

Motivation and Background:

- „Laser2Screen“ device at Fraunhofer ISE enables laser opening of very fine lines on PI screens and stencils ^[1,2]

Hypothesis:

- Can screen printing challenge **simple photolithography applications?**



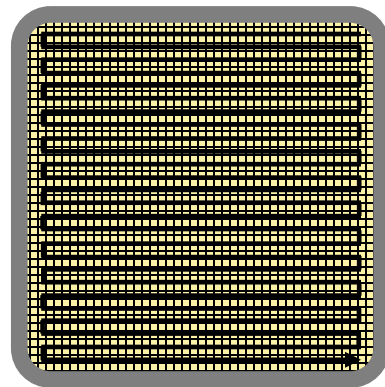
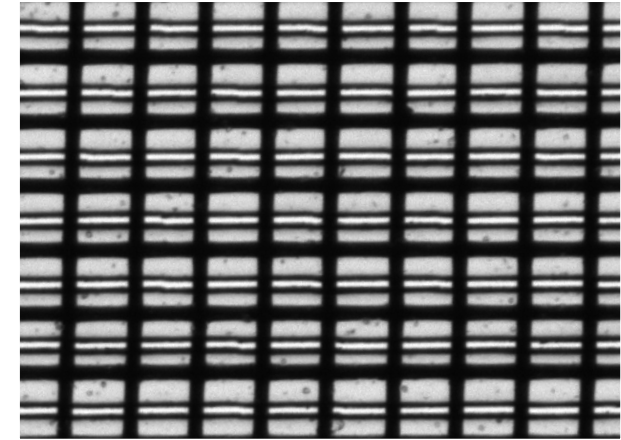
A) AI-created visualization of laser structuring process for PI-screens;
B) „Laser2Screen“ lasing machine at Fraunhofer ISE; C) $4 \mu\text{m}$ channel on PI-screen realized at Fraunhofer ISE (Source: ISE)

Screen Printing beyond PV

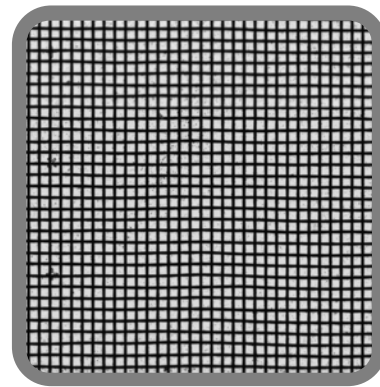
Lasing of knotless screens at Fraunhofer ISE

Lasing of 0° screens at ISE:

- Development of a processing pipeline for lasing of 0°-Screens (Knotless) at Fraunhofer ISE
- Screen mesh analysis using OSIF full screen inspector
- Digital clone („digital mesh“) → laser coordinate extraction



Full-Format Screen-
Scan



Digital Clone

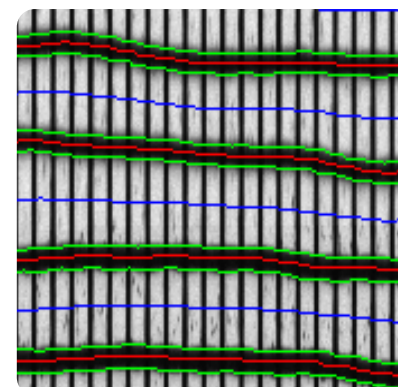
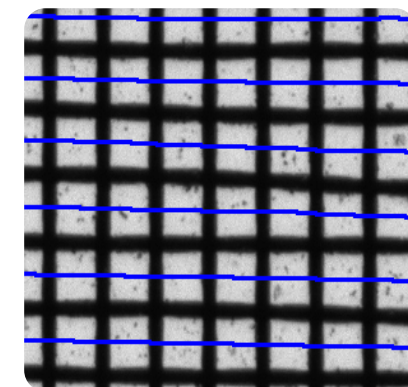


Image Processing



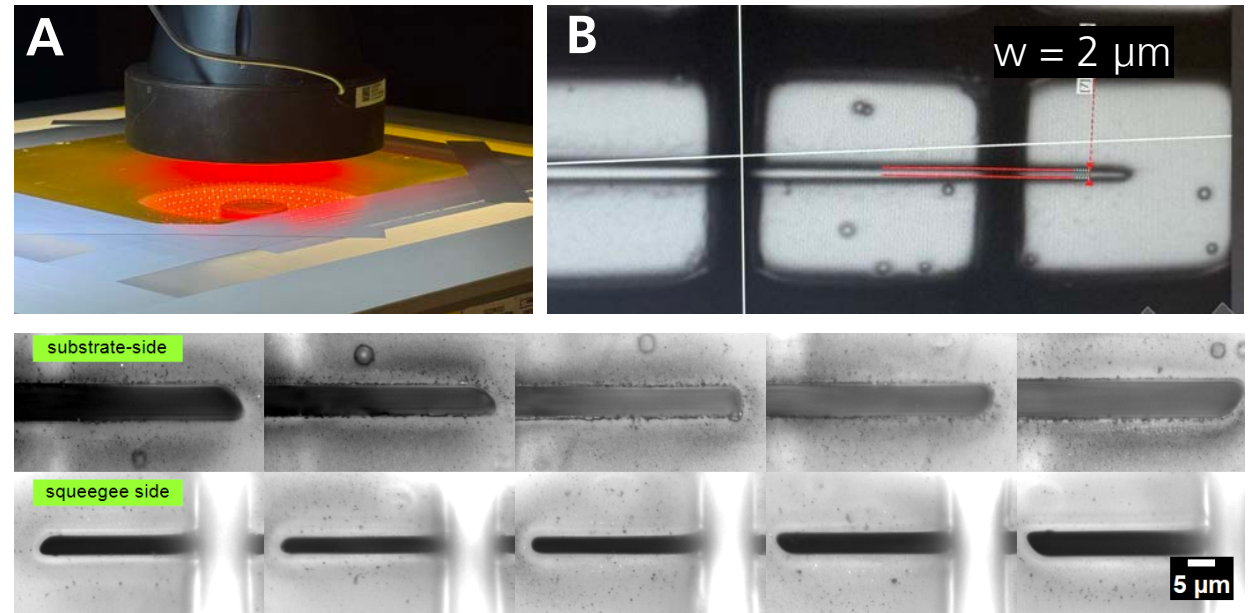
Coordinate
Extraction

Screen Printing beyond PV

How fine can we print with screen and stencil printing?

Experimental setup:

- Laser opening of ultra fine channels using „Laser2Screen“ device at Fraunhofer ISE ^[1,2]
- Screen type: 500-05 (0°) with PI layer
- Laser opening: Test patches with 1 – 10 μm tapered line-shaped channels
- Screen printing with Ag-Nano Paste on ISE TOPCon precursors (rear side)



A) Laser2Screen device for fine line structuring of screens and stencils
B) Ultra narrow tapered channel in between two wires (500-05 mesh)
C) Microscopic images of lasered fine line channels in PI layer (Source: ISE)

Screen Printing beyond PV

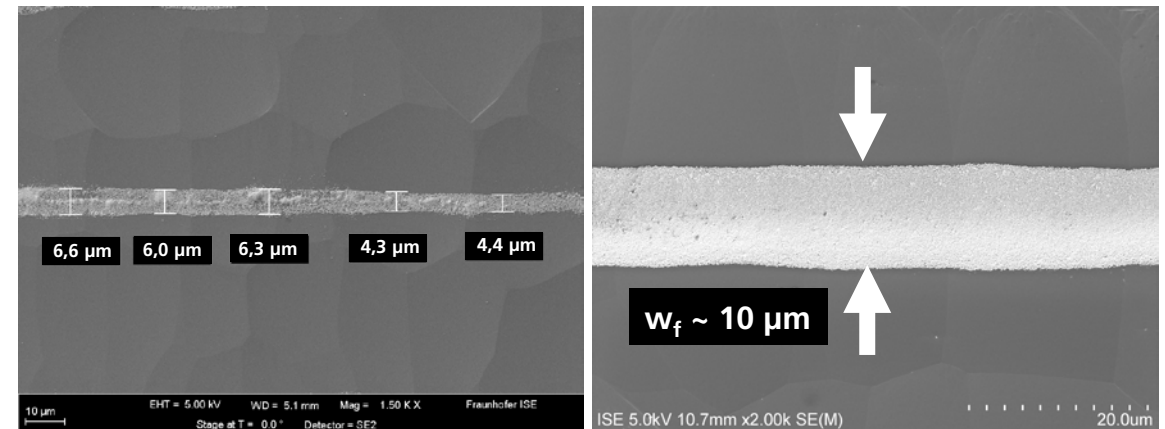
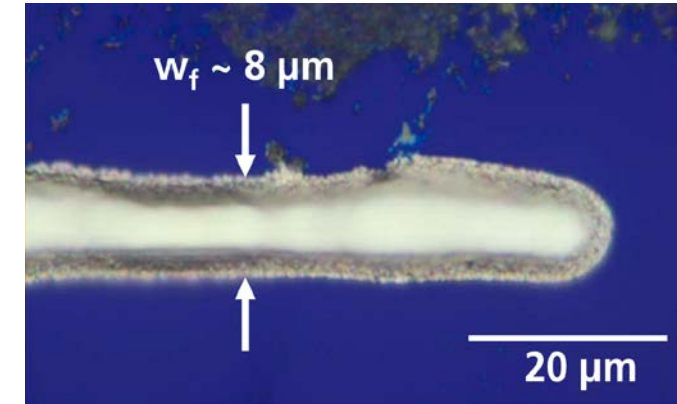
How fine can we print with screen and stencil printing?

Results::

- Ultra narrow channels down to $\sim 1 \mu\text{m}$ realized on PI screen
- Screen printed line width:
 $w_f \sim 8\text{-}10 \mu\text{m}$ (with measurable finger height)
 $w_f \sim 4\text{-}6 \mu\text{m}$ (Seed layer)

Conclusion:

- Screen printing is able to realize ultra fine lines below $10 \mu\text{m}$
- Ultra fine line printing require intense fine tuning of paste property, wafer surface and screen configuration



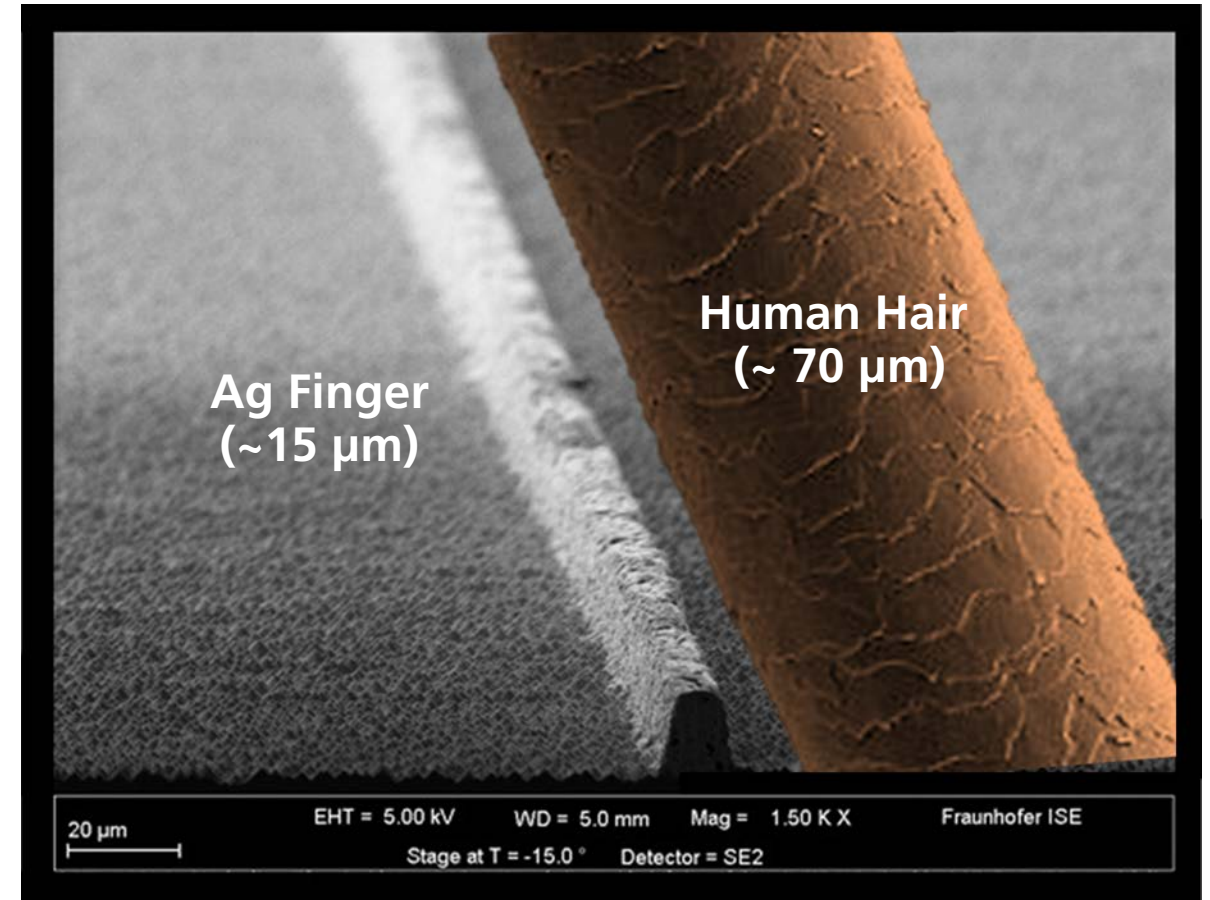
Screen printed ultra fine contacts using a fine line test layout lased at Fraunhofer ISE with Ag nano paste

Summary and Outlook

Screen printing – Achievements and Trends

Summary:

- New learning curve model illustrates impact of disruptive innovations on evolution of fine line screen printing
- Finger width down to **~18 μm** and **-34% silver reduction** on TOPCon obtained using high-end screens and stencils
- Printing of finer fingers possible, major challenge: printing conditions / cycle time
- Ultra fine fingers demonstrated:
 $w_f \sim 8\text{-}10 \mu\text{m}$ (width measurable height)
 $w_f \sim 4\text{-}6 \mu\text{m}$ (seed layer)



Summary and Outlook

Screen printing – Achievements and Trends

Trends for metallization:

- Screen printing has not reached the resolution limit
→ Finger width $< 10\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ in mass production will come
- High-end stencils will increasingly gain importance
- Screen printable AgCu, Cu and Ni pastes will likely replace silver pastes in the mid future
- Assumption: Sustainability target of $< 2\text{ mg/W}_p$ in mass production is possible with screen printing



Thank you for your attention!

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GONDA



VOSTRO



PULSAR
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and Climate Action

on the basis of a decision
by the German Bundestag