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Umicore to boost production of thin film materials

Materials technology group Umicore intends to invest € 30 million over a period of three years to expand its worldwide production capacity and capabilities of key materials for thin film deposition to meet demand in the booming photovoltaic and display markets.

The investment will boost production capacity of rotary sputtering targets[1] for large area thin film deposition at Umicore's existing operations in Providence (North America), Balzers (Europe) and Hsinchu (Asia). The investment also involves establishing a newly-developed rotary target bonding technology at all three locations.

"Demand for large area sputtering targets is surging in the photovoltaic and display markets. We are successfully introducing new rotary target technology as a replacement of earlier, less efficient target designs. The investments will cement Umicore's position as a key materials producer for thin film deposition in photovoltaic and display applications and are demonstrating our commitment towards our customers in the photovoltaic and display sectors," Umicore Chief Executive Officer Marc Grynberg said.

The technology development capabilities and application know-how will also be supported by new test and development facilities in Balzers and Providence. This will further enhance Umicore's capabilities to enter into technological and strategic partnerships with selected equipment makers and producers, as well as support its customers in production line optimization and product development and testing.

Thin Film Products is part of Umicore's Energy Materials business group.

[1] Sputtering is a method of depositing thin film coatings onto a substrate (for example an LCD screen). Electrons are targeted at a solid target material, resulting in the release of atoms from that material which are subsequently deposited onto the substrate to be coated. Target materials such as aluminium-zinc-oxide or indium-tin-oxide for example are both transparent and able to direct the flow of energy, hence their use in LCD screens or thin film solar cells. Rotary targets offer higher yields than earlier, flat / planar designs and therefore result in less wasted material during the sputtering process and lower costs.

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Umicore profile

Umicore is a materials technology group. It focuses on application areas where it knows its expertise in materials science, chemistry and metallurgy can make a real difference. Umicore generates approximately 50% of its revenues and spends approximately 80% of its R&D budget in the area of clean technology, such as emission control catalysts, materials for rechargeable batteries and photovoltaics, fuel cells, and precious metals recycling. Umicore's overriding goal of sustainable value creation is based on this ambition to develop, produce and recycle materials in a way that fulfils its mission: materials for a better life.

The Umicore Group has industrial operations on all continents and serves a global customer base; it generated a turnover of € 6.9 billion (€ 1.7 billion excluding metal) in 2009 and currently employs some 14,300 people.