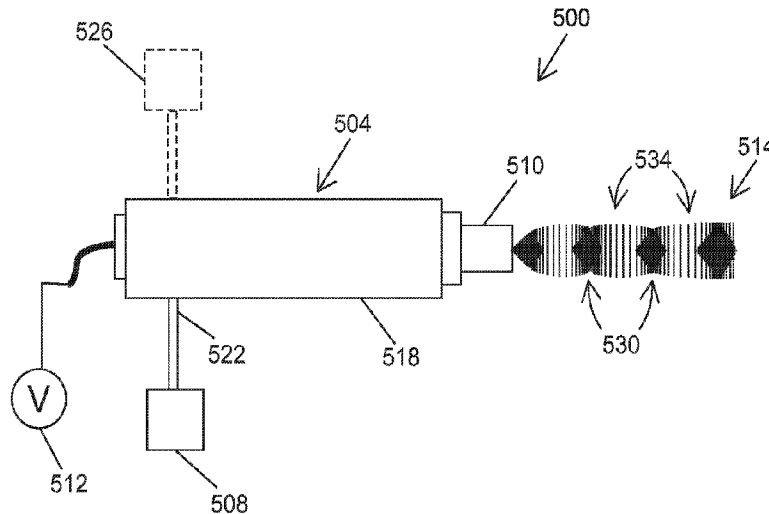




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 (54) Title: PLASMA SOURCE AND METHOD FOR REMOVING MATERIALS FROM SUBSTRATES UTILIZING PRESSURE WAVES



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

In a method is provided for removing a material from a substrate, a plasma is generated at atmospheric pressure. The plasma includes an energetic species reactive with one or more components of the material. The plasma is flowed from an outlet as a plasma plume that includes periodic regions of high plasma density and low plasma density. The material is exposed to the plasma plume. At least one component of the material reacts with the energetic species, and at least one other component of the material is physically impacted and moved by one or more of the regions of high plasma density.

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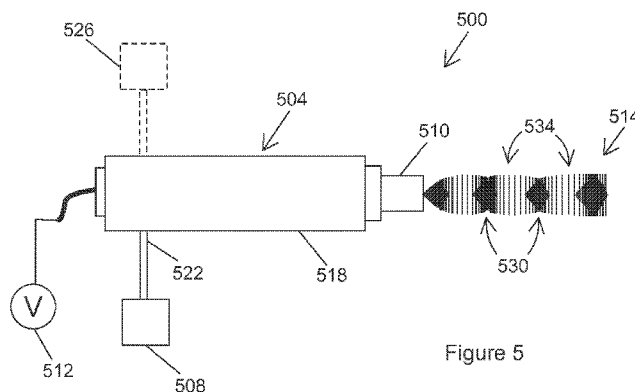


Figure 5

(57) Abstract: In a method is provided for removing a material from a substrate, a plasma is generated at atmospheric pressure. The plasma includes an energetic species reactive with one or more components of the material. The plasma is flowed from an outlet as a plasma plume that includes periodic regions of high plasma density and low plasma density. The material is exposed to the plasma plume. At least one component of the material reacts with the energetic species, and at least one other component of the material is physically impacted and moved by one or more of the regions of high plasma density.



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**PLASMA SOURCE AND METHOD FOR REMOVING MATERIALS FROM
SUBSTRATES UTILIZING PRESSURE WAVES**

RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 61/150,795, filed February 8, 2009, titled "COATING REMOVAL DEVICE AND METHODS".

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present invention generally relates to the removal of materials from substrates utilizing atmospheric pressure plasma.

BACKGROUND

[0003] Atmospheric pressure (AP) plasma may be utilized to remove a coating of material (e.g., a layer, film, paint, etc.) from the surface of a substrate. The source of the AP plasma may be device configured to discharge an AP plasma plume from a nozzle. The device may positioned at some specified distance between the nozzle and the surface of the coating, and oriented so as to direct the AP plasma plume toward the coating. While the AP plasma plume is active, the device may be moved across the coating along an appropriate path to effect removal of the coating or a desired portion thereof.

[0004] The coating may include a combination of components, some of which are readily removable by a conventional AP plasma (reactive or plasma-responsive components) and some of which are not (non-reactive or non-responsive components). An example is a coating or paint that includes organic or polymeric components that are reactive to one or more energetic species of the

AP plasma, but also includes inorganic pigments and fillers that are generally not responsive to the AP plasma. As a conventional AP plasma is applied to such a coating, loosely bonded inorganic components begin to build up and serve as an etch-resistant layer or diffusion barrier to the activated chemical species of the AP plasma plume. Consequently, the material removal rate and hence the effectiveness of the conventional AP plasma device rapidly become diminished (e.g., within milliseconds). Conventionally, the solution has been to cease application of the AP plasma plume, brush the surface with a brush or rough cloth in an attempt to sweep away the build-up, and then resume application of the AP plasma plume to reach additional layers of coating requiring removal, and often make additional passes over areas previously obstructed by the build-up. Depending on the thickness and composition of the material being removed from the underlying substrate, these iterations need to be repeated a number of times until the material is completely removed from the substrate.

[0005] In view of the foregoing, there is a need for AP plasma sources and methods for efficiently removing various types of materials from substrates without being impaired by certain components of such materials that typically are not reactive with energetic species of the AP plasma.

SUMMARY

[0006] To address the foregoing problems, in whole or in part, and/or other problems that may have been observed by persons skilled in the art, the present disclosure provides methods, processes, systems, apparatus, instruments, and/or devices, as described by way of example in implementations set forth below.

[0007] According to one implementation, a method is provided for removing a material from a substrate. A plasma is generated at atmospheric pressure. The plasma includes an energetic species reactive with one or more components of the material. The plasma is flowed from a nozzle exit, or from a slot-shaped plasma outlet, as a plasma plume that includes periodic regions of high plasma density and low plasma density. The material is exposed to the plasma plume. At least one component of the material reacts with the energetic species, and at least one other component of the material is physically impacted and moved by one or more of the regions of high plasma density.

[0008] According to another implementation, an atmospheric pressure plasma source is provided. The plasma source is configured for generating a plasma plume that includes periodic regions of high plasma density and low plasma density.

[0009] According to another implementation, an atmospheric pressure plasma source is provided. The plasma source includes a plasma-generating chamber, an electrode extending into the plasma-generating chamber, a plasma outlet communicating with the plasma-generating chamber, and a component configured for flowing from the plasma outlet a plasma plume comprising energetic plasma species and periodic regions of high plasma density and low plasma density.

[0010] Other devices, apparatus, systems, methods, features and advantages of the invention will be or will become apparent to one with skill in the art upon examination of the following figures and detailed description. It is intended that all such additional systems, methods, features and advantages be included within this description, be within the scope of the invention, and be protected by the accompanying claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] The invention can be better understood by referring to the following figures. The components in the figures are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles of the invention. In the figures, like reference numerals designate corresponding parts throughout the different views.

[0012] Figure 1 illustrates an example of utilizing a conventional AP plasma source.

[0013] Figure 2 is a cross-sectional elevation view of a portion of a typical coated structure to which AP plasma may be applied.

[0014] Figure 3 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the coated structure illustrated in Figure 2 while initially subjected to a conventional plasma.

[0015] Figure 4 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the coated structure illustrated in Figure 2 while undergoing the conventional plasma treatment after a very brief period of time.

[0016] Figure 5 is a diagram of an example of an AP plasma application system according to implementations disclosed herein.

[0017] Figure 6 illustrates an example of utilizing the AP plasma source illustrated in Figure 5.

[0018] Figure 7 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the coated structure while being subjected to a shock- wave or pressure-wave assisted plasma plume at a given instance of time.

[0019] Figure 8 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the coated structure illustrated in Figure 7 at a later instance of time.

[0020] Figure 9 is a lengthwise cross-sectional view of an example of an AP plasma source that may be configured for producing shock waves or pressure waves in the plasma plume.

[0021] Figure 10 is a cross-sectional view of another example of an AP plasma source, in transverse plane passing through gas inlets.

[0022] Figure 11 is a cross-sectional view of an example of a nozzle that may be configured for producing shock waves or pressure waves in the plasma plume.

[0023] Figure 12 is a set of shadowgrams of output flows from an AP plasma source at various air pressures and flow rates.

[0024] Figure 13 is a side elevation view of another example of an AP plasma source according to another implementation.

[0025] Figure 14 is a front perspective view of the front portion of the AP plasma source illustrated in Figure 13.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0026] As used herein, the term “plasma” generally refers to a (partially) ionized gas-like mass comprising a mixture of ions, electrons and neutral species. The term “atmospheric pressure,” in the context of “atmospheric pressure plasma,” is not limited to a precise value of pressure corresponding exactly to sea-level conditions. For instance, the value of “atmospheric pressure” is not limited to exactly 1 atm. Instead, “atmospheric pressure” generally encompasses ambient pressure at any geographic location and thus may encompass a range of values less than and/or greater than 1 atm as measured at sea level. Generally, an “atmospheric pressure plasma” is one that may be generated in an open or ambient environment, i.e., without needing to reside in a pressure-controlled chamber or evacuated chamber.

[0027] As used herein, a “non-thermal plasma” generally refers to a plasma exhibiting low temperature ions (relative to a “thermal” plasma) and high electron temperatures relative to the temperature of the surrounding gas. A non-thermal plasma is distinguished from a thermal plasma

in that a thermal plasma exhibits a higher overall energy density and both high electron temperatures and high ion and neutral temperatures.

[0028] As used herein, the term “coating” generically refers to any material desired to be removed from an underlying substrate. The term “coating” is used interchangeably with like terms such as layer, film, paint, etc.

[0029] As used herein, the term “substrate” generically refers to any structure that includes a surface on which a coating has been applied. The substrate may present a surface having a simple planar or curved geometry or may have a complex or multi-featured topography. Typically, the substrate is of the type for which it is desired not be adversely affected by the coating removal operations contemplated in the present disclosure.

[0030] For purposes of the present disclosure, it will be understood that when a layer (or coating, film, region, substrate, component, device, or the like) is referred to as being “on” or “over” another layer, that layer may be directly or actually on (or over) the other layer or, alternatively, intervening layers (e.g., buffer layers, transition layers, interlayers, sacrificial layers, etch-stop layers, masks, electrodes, interconnects, contacts, or the like) may also be present. A layer that is “directly on” another layer means that no intervening layer is present, unless otherwise indicated. It will also be understood that when a layer is referred to as being “on” (or “over”) another layer, that layer may cover the entire surface of the other layer or only a portion of the other layer. It will be further understood that terms such as “formed on” or “disposed on” are not intended to introduce any limitations relating to particular methods of material transport, deposition, fabrication, surface treatment, or physical, chemical, or ionic bonding or interaction. The term “interposed” is interpreted in a similar manner.

[0031] According to some implementations disclosed herein, an AP plasma source is configured for material removing operations, including for example the removal of polymeric coatings, paints, or the like from substrates or structures of any type. The AP plasma source is configured to exhibit exceptionally high etching rates with minimal transfer of heat to the underlying substrate. The AP plasma source generates one or more plasma plumes or jets that include one or more energetic, chemically reactive species of a type effective for removing a coating composition of interest. Unlike conventional AP plasmas, the plasma plume taught in the present disclosure additionally exhibits areas of periodically increasing (high) and decreasing (low) plasma density. Without wishing to be bound by any one particular theory, it is postulated herein that this periodic plasma density contributes to enhanced removal rates observed, and that the plasma plume may be characterized as exhibiting pressure waves or pressure fronts, which in some implementations may be further characterized as shock waves or shock fronts that may be observed as supersonic shock diamonds or Mach disks. When the AP plasma source is operated to apply the plasma plume to a material to be removed, the shock waves (or other type of pressure waves) generated in the plasma plume physically disrupt the loosely adhered build-up on the material. As the plasma plume is rastered across the surface of the material (or, equivalently, when the material is moved relative to the plasma plume), the as-generated shock wave or pressure wave interacts with the loosely adhered residue and the residue is consequently ejected from or blown off the surface. Accordingly, the AP plasma source effects material removal by way of a dual modality, one being the chemical (e.g., oxidizing) interaction of the activated plasma species of the plasma plume with the coating and the other being the physical interaction of the shock wave or pressure wave structures of the plasma plume with the coating. The AP plasma source and associated methods overcome the limitations of conventional techniques by enabling inorganic or other typically unresponsive components to be

rapidly broken up or peeled away, thereby continuously revealing fresh new surfaces of the coating for treatment by the activated species of the plasma.

[0032] Figure 1 illustrates an example of utilizing a conventional AP plasma source. Specifically, Figure 1 illustrates a nozzle **110** of the conventional AP plasma source (not shown) applying a conventional plasma plume **114** to a typical coated structure **118**. The coated structure **118** generally includes a substrate **122** and a coating or layer **124** of material desired to be removed cleanly from the substrate **122** without damaging the substrate **122**. The conventional plasma plume **114** is shown interacting with a top surface **126** of the coating **124** but is not effective for removing all components of the coating **124**. The conventional plasma plume **114** produces no shock wave (or other type of useful pressure wave) and thus applies no appreciable force to the surface **126** effective to disrupt bound inorganic particles or other components unresponsive to the conventional plasma treatment.

[0033] The conventional technique is further illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4. Figure 2 is a cross-sectional elevation view of a portion of the coated structure **118** to which AP plasma may be applied. In this example, the coating **124** includes a matrix of organic binder material **232** and inorganic pigment and/or filler particles **234** adhered to the substrate **122**. Figure 3 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the coated structure **118** illustrated in Figure 2 while initially subjected to the conventional AP plasma **114**. The conventional plasma **114** is able to effectively remove some organic material **232**, and possibly some material surrounding the inorganic particles **234**, but only in the uppermost region of the coating **124** nearest to the plasma source. Figure 4 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the coated structure **118** illustrated in Figure 2 while undergoing the conventional plasma treatment after a very brief period of time. In a time period typically less than 1 second (and often only a few milliseconds), the conventional plasma **114** will cease to remove

organic binder **232** due to the blocking effect of the inorganic particles **234**. The plasma **114** and low-velocity air stream feeding the **114** plasma do not provide sufficient physical force to disrupt the loosely bound inorganic particles **234**. As depicted by arrows **438**, the plasma **114** and associated ionized species are reflected from the uppermost surface and can do no further work.

[0034] Figure 5 is a diagram of an example of an AP plasma application system **500** according to implementations disclosed herein. The system **500** generally includes an AP plasma source **504** (or device, applicator, apparatus, instrument, pen, gun, etc.), a plasma-generating gas supply source **508**, and a power source **512**. The AP plasma source **504** generally includes a main body **518** (or support structure, housing, etc.) which may be configured for manual use (i.e., handheld) or automated use (e.g., attached to a multi-axis robotics system, not shown). For manual operation, a portion of the main body **518** may be utilized as a handle. The AP plasma source **504** further includes a plasma outlet at its distal end from which a plume or jet **514** of AP plasma is generated according to various implementations disclosed herein. In the implementation illustrated in Figure 5, the plasma outlet is the exit of a nozzle **510**. The plasma-generating gas supply source **508** is in fluid communication with a gas inlet **522** of the AP plasma source **504** by any suitable conduit and fittings for supplying a suitable plasma-generating gas to the AP plasma source **504**. In one example, the plasma-generating gas is air, in which case the plasma-generating gas supply source **508** may be a source of low-pressure compressed air. The power source **512** is in electrical communication with the AP plasma source **504** by any suitable wiring and connectors for supplying electrical power according to operating parameters suitable for generating and maintaining the type of AP plasma described herein. In Figure 5, the power source **512** represents the electronics and user controls needed for this purpose. As appreciated by persons skilled in the art, the user controls may be configured as necessary to enable the setting and adjustment of various operating

parameters of the voltage or current signal fed to the AP plasma source such as, for example, power level, drive voltage amplitude, drive frequency, waveform shape, etc. Electrical signals of AC (e.g., RF), DC, pulsed DC, or arbitrary periodic waveforms with or without an applied DC offset may be utilized to drive the AP plasma as appropriate for a particular application. For simplicity, internal components of the main body **518** of the AP plasma source **504** utilized for receiving the electrical and gas inputs and generating the AP plasma therefrom (e.g., electrodes, gas conduits, etc.) are omitted in Figure 5 but readily understood by persons skilled in the art. In the case of an air plasma, the plasma-generating gas supply source **508** may also serve as the source of active species of the AP plasma (e.g., oxygen- and nitrogen-based species). Alternatively, one or more reactive gas supply sources **526** may also be placed in communication with the AP plasma source **504** for such purposes as enhancing the supply of O₂ or N₂ or for supplying other types of reactive species (e.g., He, Ar, other noble gases, halogens, NH₃, CO₂, various hydrocarbons, etc.) to specifically tailor the chemical species for a given coating type. Alternatively, specific mixtures of either noble or non-noble gases may be combined in order to enhance the ionization of secondary, tertiary, or quaternary, species or reactions by a process such as Penning ionization..

[0035] The plasma generated by the AP plasma source **504** may be a cold, or non-thermal, plasma containing one or more reactive species suitable for chemically interacting with a coating in a manner sufficient for causing the coating to be removed from its underlying substrate. Generally, the reactive species may include photons, metastable species, atomic species, free radicals, molecular fragments, monomers, electrons, and ions. The reactive species desired to be produced will generally depend on the type of coating to be removed. In the case of various polymeric coatings and paints, a highly oxidizing plasma has been found to be effective, in which case the predominant reactive species may include O, O₂^{*} (the asterisk designating the metastable form of

diatomic oxygen), and/or O₃. In various implementations, air supplied by the plasma-generating gas supply source **508** may be sufficient for generating an effective amount of oxygen-based energetic species for removing various types of polymeric coatings or paints. Additional non-limiting examples of active species that may be formed in the plasma and utilized for material removal include fluorine, chlorine, bromine, iodine, nitrogen, or sulphur. One or more of these species may be utilized, for example, to selectively etch (or enhance the etching selectivity of) a primer layer or adhesion layer if a specialized chemistry or primer formulation has been employed in the coated structure. For example, in the case of a primer that exhibits preferential etching by oxygen, oxygen species could be used so that the primer layer is preferentially etched relative to a topcoating layer. The oxidizer may also be mixed with an inert gas or relatively inert gas such as nitrogen or natural air mixtures. It is also possible to use reducing plasma species such as hydrogen or ammonia. It is also possible to use neutral or inert gases to energetically bombard the interface layer and promote decohesion at the bond line. The type of oxidizing species in the plasma plume may be adjusted for specific coating chemistries to maximize the etch rate of the coating. For instance, certain coating chemistries may be quite resistant to an oxygen-containing oxidizer but could be quite easily etched by a fluorinated oxidizer.

[0036] As further illustrated in Figure 5, the plasma plume **514** generated by the AP plasma source **504** may be configured as a periodic or alternating series of high plasma density regions **530** and low plasma density regions **534**. The high plasma density regions **530** may be considered as including shock fronts (or other types of pressure waves) that propagate in the general direction of the plasma plume **514**, i.e., toward a target coating to be removed. Under appropriate operating conditions, the shock fronts may be visually manifested as shock diamonds or Mach disks.

[0037] Certain pressure regimes, geometrical configurations, and other operational parameters will give rise to suitable plasma and shock wave generation and control. In one implementation, the nozzle 510 is configured to cause rapid expansion of the gas emanating therefrom. As an example, the nozzle 510 may have a converging or converging-diverging configuration of appropriate dimensions. In this case, the AP plasma generated within the AP plasma source 504 flows from the nozzle exit at supersonic velocity and at a pressure different from (less than or greater than) the ambient pressure outside the nozzle exit. Another example of a nozzle that may be suitable is a non-axially symmetric nozzle such as an aerospike nozzle. In another implementation, the drive frequency and/or power level applied by the power source 512 to the electrical field generating the plasma are controlled so as to modulate the pressure waves (e.g., compression waves) generated in the AP plasma source 504. Pressure waves generated in such manner may be, or be similar to, acoustic shock waves or pressure waves. Similarly, this may be accomplished inductively by generating a time-varying magnetic field to modulate the plasma. In another implementation, the geometry of the AP plasma source 504 (e.g., the volume and the length-to-width ratios of the nozzle 510 and/or upstream plasma-generating chamber) may be selected or adjusted so as to selectively filter or enhance certain frequency modes in the pressure waves of the plasma. This may be analogous to causing acoustic gain or resonance to occur to further enhance the coherency of the shock waves. In another implementation, a piezoelectric material, such as for example various known ceramics or polymers (e.g., barium titanate, lead zirconium titanate, polyvinylidene fluoride, etc.) may be driven by the power source 512 to produce vibrations or oscillations transferred to the as-generated plasma plume. In another implementation, the supply gas pressure to the plasma plume may be modulated in order to create the necessary pressure waves or shockwaves by rapidly actuating a high speed gas valve. For example, a pneumatically actuated valve, electrically actuated

valve or piezoelectric valve actuator may be used to modulate the pressure being fed into the AP plasma device.

[0038] Generally, operating parameters associated with the AP plasma source **504** are selected so as to produce a stable plasma discharge, with the pressure/shock waves as desired. The operating parameters will depend on the particular application, which may range, for example, from nanoscale etching of micro-fabricated structures or devices (e.g., MEMS devices) to removing large areas of paint from aircraft carriers. Examples of operating parameters will now be provided with the understanding that the broad teachings herein are not limited by such examples. In the case of generating an air plasma, the rate at which the air is fed to the AP plasma source **504** may range from 1×10^{-6} SCCM to 1×10^6 SCCM. The feed pressure into the AP plasma source **504** may range from 1 Pa to 1×10^7 Pa. The power level of the electrical field driving the plasma may range from 1×10^{-6} W to 1×10^6 W. The drive frequency of the electrical field may range from DC (0 GHz) to 100 GHz. The separation distance, i.e. the distance from the nozzle exit to the exposed surface of the material to be removed, may range from 1×10^{-6} m to 1 m. The scan speed, i.e. the speed at which the AP plasma source **504** is rastered across (over) the surface of the material, may range from 1×10^{-4} m/s to 10 m/s. Related to the scan speed and power is the time averaged power density. Also related to the scan speed is the dwell time, i.e., the period of time during which a particular area of the material is exposed to the plasma plume, which may range from 1×10^{-9} s to 43×10^3 s (1 month). It will be noted that scan speed (or dwell time) effectively characterizes two different techniques for exposing the material to the plasma plume **514**, the first being moving the AP plasma source **504** relative to the material (i.e., the material remains in a fixed position) and the second being holding the AP plasma source **504** stationary while moving the coated structure relative to the

AP plasma source **504**. The foregoing parameters may depend on the composition and thickness of the material to be removed.

[0039] Figure 6 illustrates an example of utilizing the AP plasma source **504** illustrated in Figure 5. Specifically, Figure 6 shows the nozzle **510** applying the shock wave-inclusive plasma plume **514** to the same or similar coated structure **118** described above in conjunction with Figures 1-4. Reactive components of the coating material **124** are removed by the active species of the AP plasma. For example, organic compounds may be converted to CO₂ and/or water vapor. In addition, the shock waves (or pressure waves, as indicated by high plasma density regions **530**) generated in the AP plasma propagate toward the coated structure **118** and impinge on the uppermost surface **126** of the coating **124**. The shock waves disrupt inorganic particles or any other particles which a plasma unassisted by shock waves would fail to remove by sole reliance on active plasma species or incident gas flow pressure. The loosened particles may then be swept away in the gas (e.g., air) stream emanating from the AP plasma source **504** (as part of the plume **514**) and may be disposed of by any suitable means (e.g., a vacuum device). Due to the bimodal activity of the shock-assisted plasma plume **514**—i.e., a combination of reactive species and shock waves in the plasma—the AP plasma source **504** may be operated on a continuous basis to rapidly penetrate the coated structure **118** of any thickness down to the substrate **122**. Unlike conventional plasmas, the plasma plume **514** disclosed herein is not impaired by any accumulation of non-reactive or unresponsive components of the coating **124** and thus its optimized material removal rate may be preserved throughout the removal operation.

[0040] The technique taught herein is further illustrated in Figures 7 and 8. Figure 7 is a cross-sectional elevation view of the coated structure **118** while being subjected to the shock-assisted plasma plume **514** at a given instance of time, and Figure 8 is a similar view of the coated structure

118 at a later instance of time. The coated structure 118 in this example is the same or similar to that illustrated in Figures 2-4. Figure 8 illustrates the physical disruption of particles 234 as a result of the intense physical impingement of shock waves (as indicated by high plasma density regions 530) on the surface 126 of the coating 124. The pressure gradients associated with these shock waves may thus be quite significant. The physical disruption helps to expose new organic layers of the coating 124, which are now free to be subsequently removed by the energetic species of the AP plasma. As shown in Figure 8, eventually all of the binder 232 (Figure 7) is ablated and successive shock waves release all inorganic particles 234 down the surface of the substrate 122.

[0041] The substrate 122 underlying the material 124 to be removed may have any composition, e.g., metallic, polymeric, ceramic, composite, etc. Moreover, generally no limitation is placed on the type or composition of the material 124 to be removed. As noted above, the material 124 will generally be one in which at least some of the components are responsive to active species of the AP plasma while other components may not be responsive and thus are removed primarily or exclusively by the pressure waves (as indicated by high plasma density regions 530) generated in the AP plasma as taught herein. Such materials 124 include, for example, various types of polymeric coatings and paints. Generally, no limitation is placed on the thickness of either the substrate 122 or the material 124 to be removed from the substrate 122. Moreover, the substrate 122 and associated material 124 to be removed are not required to have a simple planar or curvilinear geometry. Instead, the AP plasma source 504 is effective for treating three-dimensional topographies, irregular profiles, and complex geometries. The AP plasma source 504 may be utilized to apply the plasma plume 514 around structural features such as, for example, rivets, or inside narrow channels, or in corners or cracks, etc.

[0042] It will also be understood that a “material,” “coating,” “layer,” “film” or the like as used herein encompasses multi-layered, single-layer, or composite materials. For instance, a given polymeric material may include a protective overcoat, an adhesion-promoting layer, or the like. A paint may include a primer layer, a topcoat, etc. The AP plasma source **504** is effective for all such layers or strata of a multi-layered material down to the underlying substrate. The AP plasma source **504** may also be utilized to precisely remove one or more selected layers of a multi-layered material, leaving underlying layers intact on the substrate.

[0043] Figure 9 is a lengthwise cross-sectional view of an example of an AP plasma source **904** that may be configured for producing shock waves in the plasma plume. The AP plasma source **904** includes an axially elongated plasma-generating chamber **942** or other structure that serves as a ground electrode for generating plasma and as a conduit for flowing gases and plasma. The plasma-generating chamber **942** may be enclosed in an electrically- and thermally-insulating housing (not shown). A “hot” or powered electrode **946** is located in the plasma-generating chamber **942**. Electrical connections to the hot electrode **946** may be made through a dielectric structure **950** located at the proximal end of or in the plasma-generating chamber **942**. One or more gas inlets **958** may be formed through the dielectric structure **950** in fluid communication with the plasma-generating chamber **942**. The gas inlets **958** may be placed in fluid communication with the gas supply source **508** (Figure 5). Accordingly, the gas inlets **958** provide a flow path for plasma-generating gas fed to a region **962** within the plasma-generating chamber **942** proximate to the hot electrode **946**. In operation, the plasma is generated in this region **962** and subsequently flows with the gas flow toward a nozzle **910** positioned at a distal end of the plasma-generating chamber **942**.

[0044] According to another implementation, a piezoelectric material such as a suitable ceramic or polymer is positioned in the AP plasma source so as to enable the electrical output from the

power supply to induce the piezoelectric effect. For example, the structure **950** shown in Figure 9 may serve as the piezoelectric element. In this case, the electrical field impressed between the hot electrode **946** and the plasma-generating chamber **942** drives the structure to vibrate. The vibrations are transferred to the plasma and yield pressure waves in the plasma plume, which are utilized to impact a coated structure as described above. The piezoelectric material may be selected so as to match up with the drive frequency as closely as possible for optimizing the piezoelectric effect. Ideally, the drive frequency utilized creates a resonance condition (or other condition that promotes the piezoelectric effect) in the structure **950**, although it will be appreciated that various off-resonant frequencies may be sufficient for producing pressure waves effective for the coating removal applications contemplated herein.

[0045] Figure 10 is a cross-sectional view of another example of an AP plasma source **1004**, in a transverse plane perpendicular to the flow of gases through an axially elongated plasma-generating chamber **1042**. In this example, gas inlets **1058** are oriented at an acute angle (e.g., 45 degrees) relative to the central, longitudinal axis of the plasma-generating chamber **1042**. By this configuration, gas is introduced into the AP plasma source **1004** with a significant tangential vector and consequently flows in the axial direction in a vortex flow pattern or path. The tangential gas inlets **1058** may be utilized in any of the implementations disclosed herein.

[0046] Figure 11 is a cross-sectional view of an example of a nozzle **1110** that may be utilized in any of the implementations disclosed herein. In this example, the nozzle **1110** has a converging-diverging design. Specifically, the nozzle **1110** includes a first, converging section **1166** having an inside diameter that tapers down to a second, reduced-diameter section or throat **1170**. The throat **1170** transitions to a third, diverging section **1174** having an inside diameter that increases to a larger-diameter nozzle exit **1178**. The nozzle **1110** may be dimensioned appropriately as a means

for producing pressure waves or shock waves as described above. Alternatively, the nozzle **1110** has only a converging design, i.e., lacks the diverging section **1174**. Converging nozzles as well as converging-diverging nozzles have been found by the inventors to be effective for producing pressure waves under appropriate operating conditions.

[0047] In another implementation, an AP plasma source having a configuration similar to that shown in Figures 5 and 9, with a converging nozzle (i.e., a straight conical cross-sectional flow area without being followed by a diverging section), has been fabricated and evaluated. The AP plasma source repeatably and reliably produces a plasma plume characterized by shock waves, as evidenced by a clearly visible pattern of shock diamonds in the plasma plume, and achieved superior etch rates on coated samples as compared to conventional AP plasma sources unassisted by shock waves. The AP plasma source generated an air plasma using air at about room temperature as the feed gas. The air may be fed to an AP plasma source of this type at a pressure ranging from 30-110 psi and at a flow rate ranging from 1-7.5 CFM. In another example, the pressure range is 65-95 psi. In another example, the flow rate range is 1-4 CFM. Pressures higher than 110 psi may also be implemented to produce shock waves. In a more general example, the pressure may be 30 psi or greater and the flow rate may be 1 CFM or greater.

[0048] Figure 12 is a set of shadowgrams (Schlieren images) of output flows from an AP plasma source at various air pressures and flow rates. In order, starting from the upper left image and ending with the lower right image, the conditions were: 98 psi and 7.5 CFM; 90 psi and 7.4 CFM; 80 psi and 6.5 CFM; 70 psi and 5.7 CFM; 60 psi and 5.0 CFM; 50 psi and 4.3 CFM; 40 psi and 3.5 CFM; 30 psi and 2.8 CFM; 20 psi and 2.2 CFM; and 0 psi and 0 CFM. In these examples, it can be seen that the shock waves are more visible or pronounced at the higher pressures and flow rates as compared to the lower pressures and flow rates.

[0049] Figure 13 is a side elevation view of another example of an AP plasma source **1304** according to another implementation. Figure 14 is a front perspective view of the front portion of the AP plasma source **1304** illustrated in Figure 13. The AP plasma source **1304** includes one or more plasma-generating units **1346** in a main body **1318** communicating with one or more nozzles (or a manifold) **1310**. The nozzle(s) or manifold **1310** are set back in the main body **1318** and communicate with a slot-shaped plasma outlet **1322** that opens at a distal end **1326** of the main body **1318**. By this configuration, the AP plasma source **1304** produces a wide, predominantly linear or horizontally-oriented plasma plume or “plasma line” **1314** with wide, predominantly linear or horizontally-oriented shock waves or pressure waves **1330**.

[0050] While the foregoing description of implementations of the AP plasma source has focused primarily on material removal techniques, it will be understood that various implementations of the AP plasma source may be utilized for other operations such as, for example, surface treatment or functionalization.

[0051] Another potential application for the AP plasma source is in dentistry. With the correct etching chemistry of the plasma plume, the shock waves may be utilized to perform micro-etching of the hydroxyapatite within cavities or the surface of the teeth. A secondary effect would be the sterilization of the cavity or hole. This could possibly replace employing hard drills.

[0052] In general, terms such as “communicate” and “in . . . communication with” (for example, a first component “communicates with” or “is in communication with” a second component) are used herein to indicate a structural, functional, mechanical, electrical, signal, optical, magnetic, electromagnetic, ionic or fluidic relationship between two or more components or elements. As such, the fact that one component is said to communicate with a second component is not intended

to exclude the possibility that additional components may be present between, and/or operatively associated or engaged with, the first and second components.

[0053] It will be understood that various aspects or details of the invention may be changed without departing from the scope of the invention. Furthermore, the foregoing description is for the purpose of illustration only, and not for the purpose of limitation—the invention being defined by the claims.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. An atmospheric pressure plasma source, comprising:

a plasma-generating chamber configured for generating atmospheric pressure, non-thermal plasma, having a connector for a gas supply configured for feeding a gas to the plasma-generating chamber, and having within a plasma-generating region;

a dielectric structure located against a grounded interior wall of the plasma-generating chamber, the dielectric structure spanning laterally across the plasma-generating chamber from one side of the plasma-generating chamber to another side of the plasma-generating chamber, and the dielectric structure having a passage formed therein which extends through an entire body of the dielectric structure and through which the gas passes;

a powered electrode made through the body of the dielectric structure and extending outside the body of the dielectric structure partially into the plasma-generating region of the plasma-generating chamber, the plasma-generating region is beside the dielectric structure through which the gas passes, and the electrode is coupled to a power source configured to provide power to the atmospheric pressure, non-thermal plasma;

a plasma outlet comprising a nozzle downstream from the electrode, communicating with the plasma-generating chamber, and out-letting the plasma to outside the chamber, wherein the nozzle is configured to cause rapid expansion of the gas; and

the atmospheric pressure, non-thermal plasma out-letted from the plasma outlet comprising an atmospheric pressure, non-thermal plasma plume comprising energetic plasma species emitted from the plasma outlet at a supersonic velocity into an ambient environment outside the atmospheric pressure plasma source, wherein, with the power source powering the

atmospheric pressure, non-thermal plasma, the plasma plume outside the atmospheric pressure plasma source comprises periodic regions of high plasma density and low plasma density extending from the plasma outlet to a substrate having material thereon for removal, and wherein the regions of high plasma density outside the atmospheric pressure plasma source comprise shockwaves effective for enhancing removal of the material from the substrate with which the plasma plume having the periodic regions of high plasma density and low plasma density interacts.

2. The atmospheric pressure plasma source of claim 1, wherein the power source is configured for enabling adjustment of a drive frequency and a power level applied to the electrode to produce the shockwaves in the plasma plume.

3. The atmospheric pressure plasma source of claim 1, wherein the dielectric structure comprises a piezoelectric element operatively connected to the power source and configured for transferring vibrations to the plasma generated in the chamber and to the plasma plume outside the atmospheric pressure plasma source.

4. The atmospheric pressure plasma source of claim 1, wherein the gas supply comprises an air supply source configured for supplying air to the chamber at a pressure and at flow rate effective to produce supersonic flow at an exit of the nozzle.

5. The atmospheric pressure plasma source of claim 1, wherein the power source is in communication with the electrode and is configured for adjustment of a drive frequency and a power level applied to the electrode to modulate the shockwaves produced in the atmospheric

pressure, non-thermal plasma plume flowing from the nozzle.

6. The atmospheric pressure plasma source of claim 1, wherein the shockwaves of the high plasma density regions comprise Mach disks.

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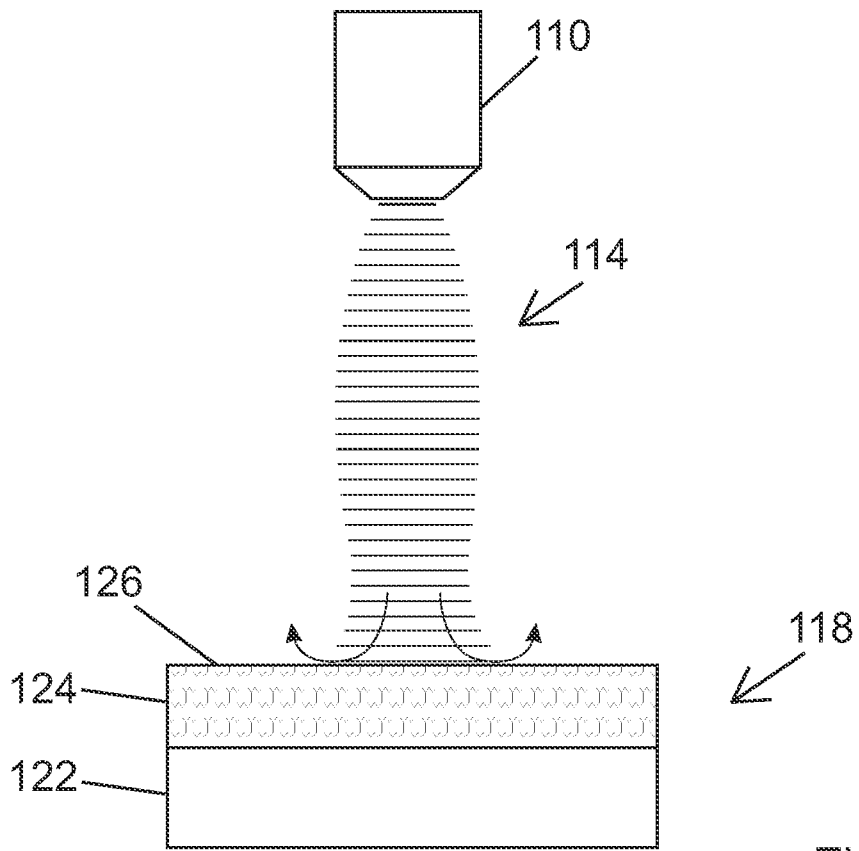


Figure 1

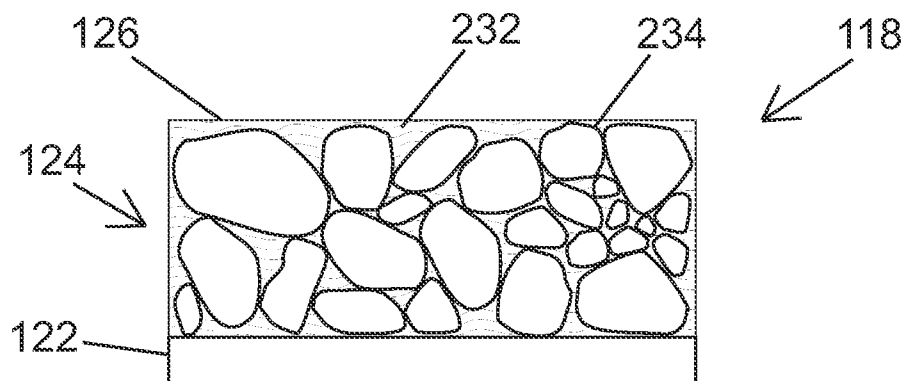


Figure 2

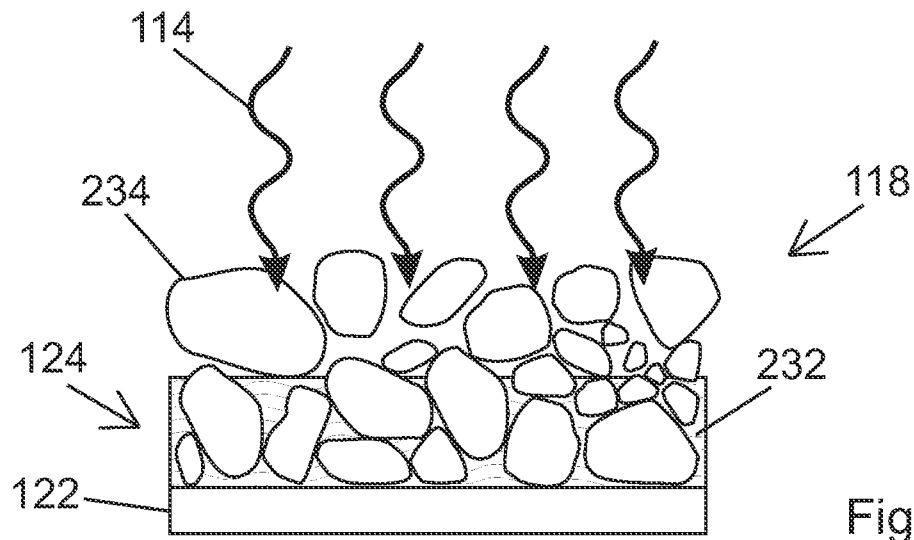


Figure 3

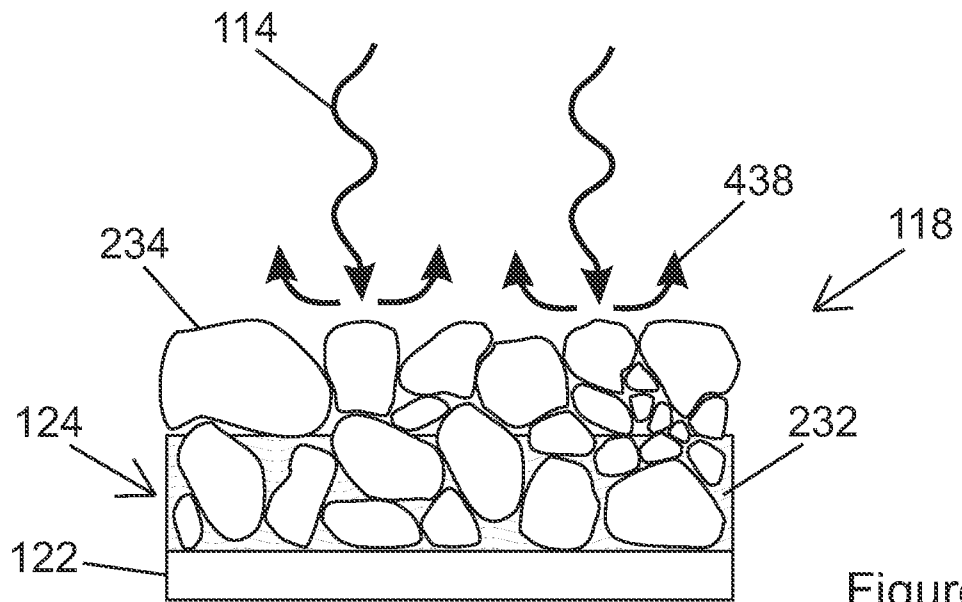


Figure 4

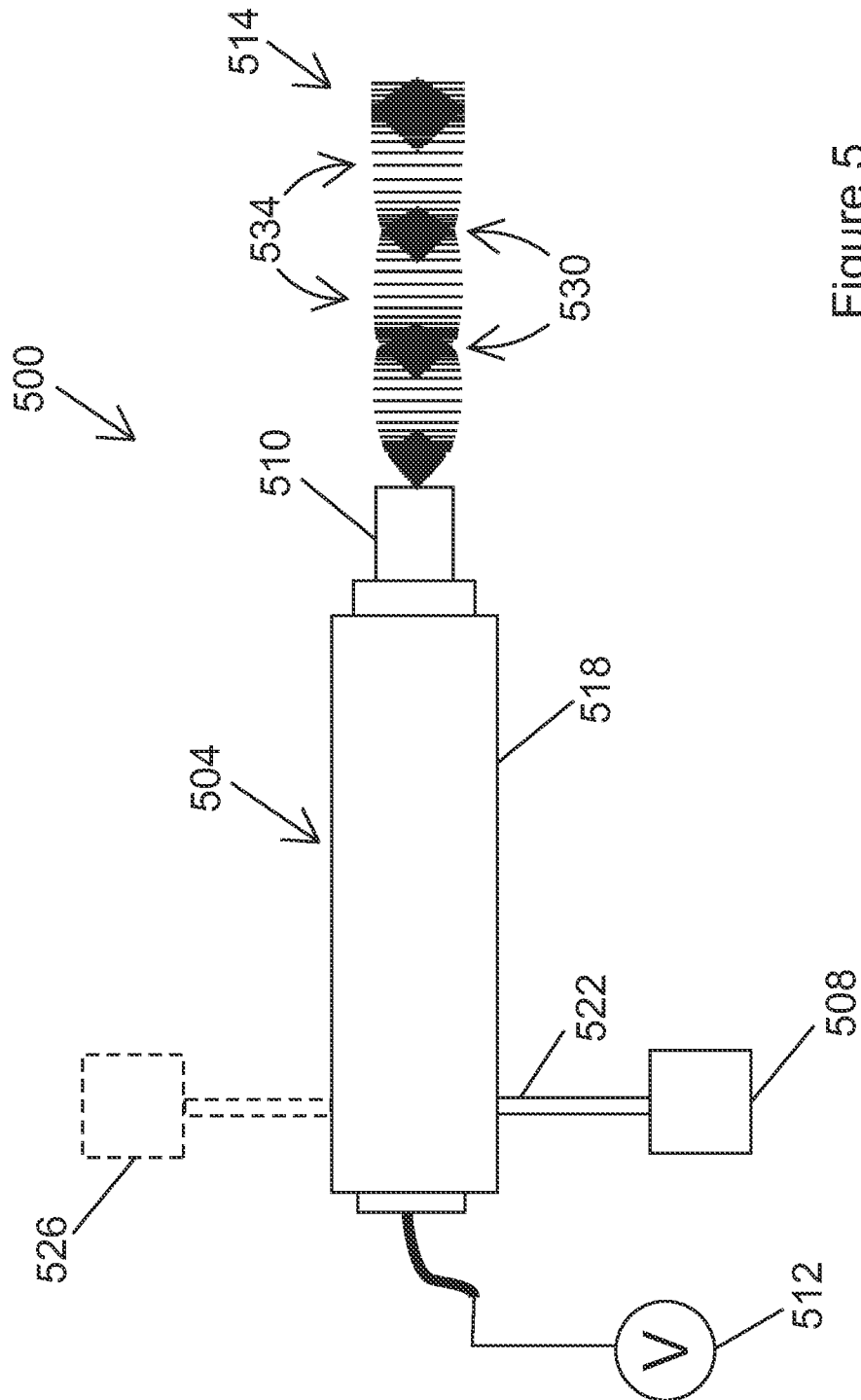


Figure 5

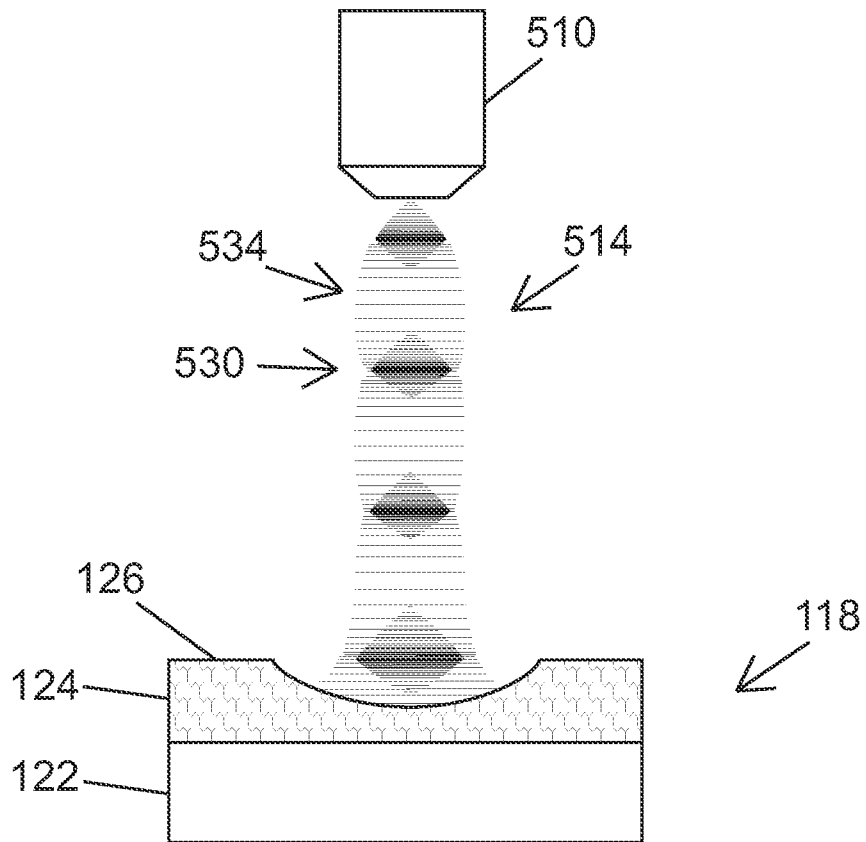


Figure 6

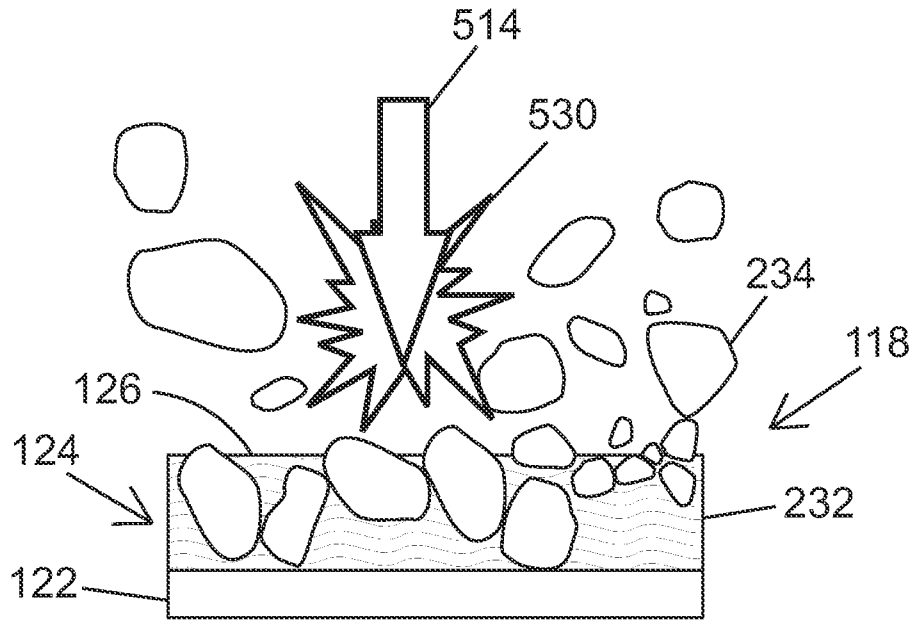


Figure 7

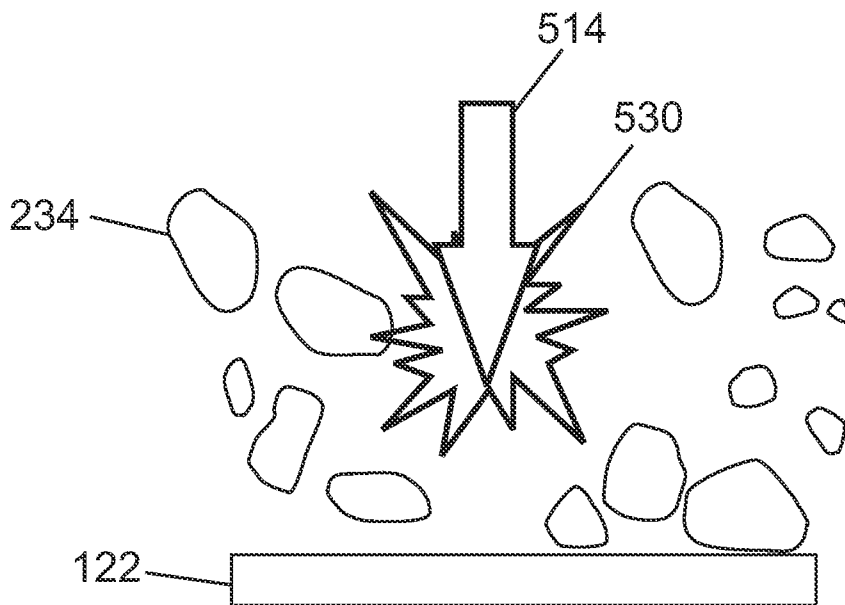


Figure 8

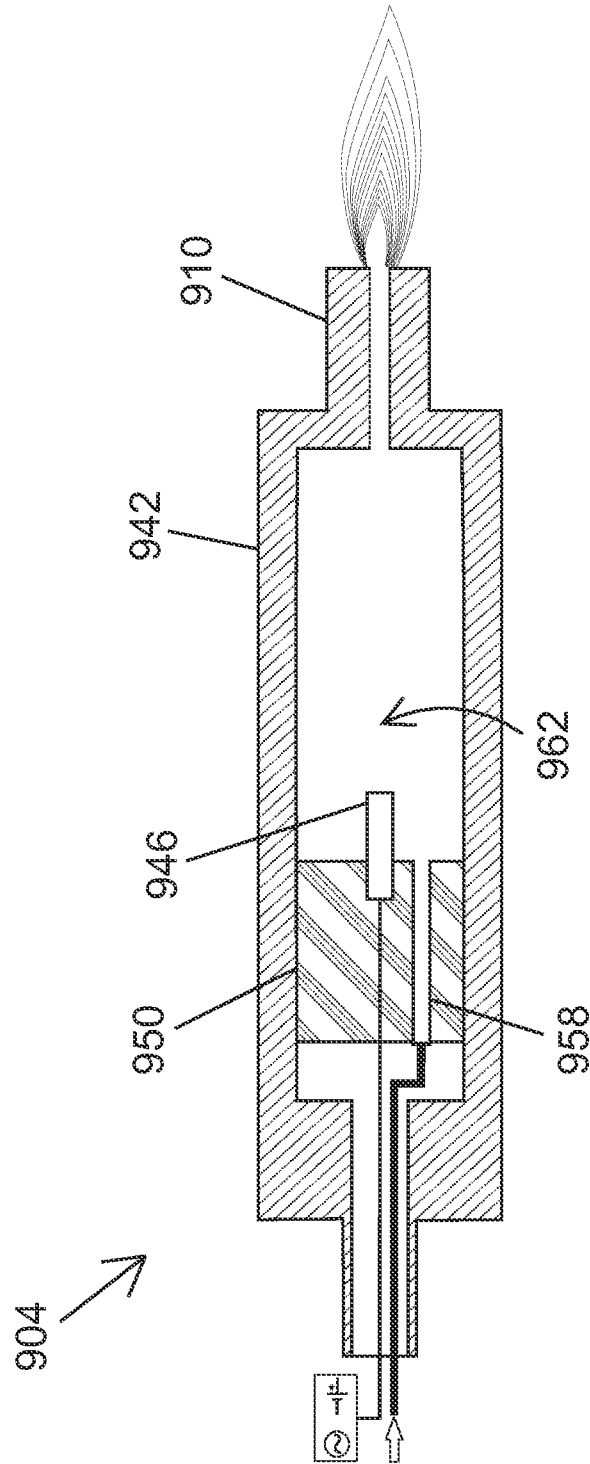


Figure 9

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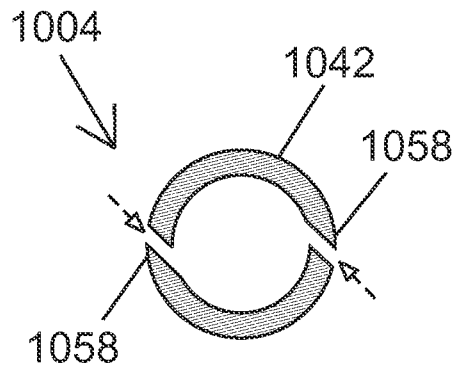


Figure 10

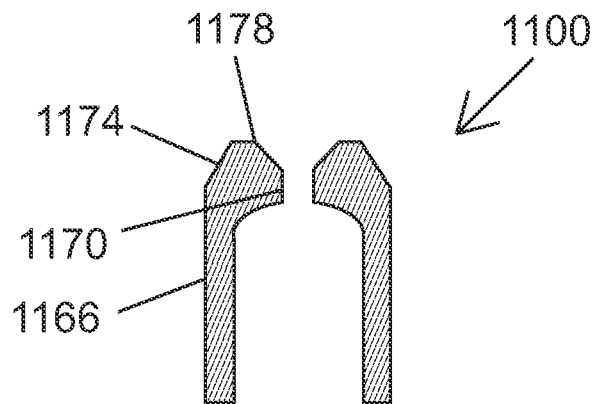


Figure 11

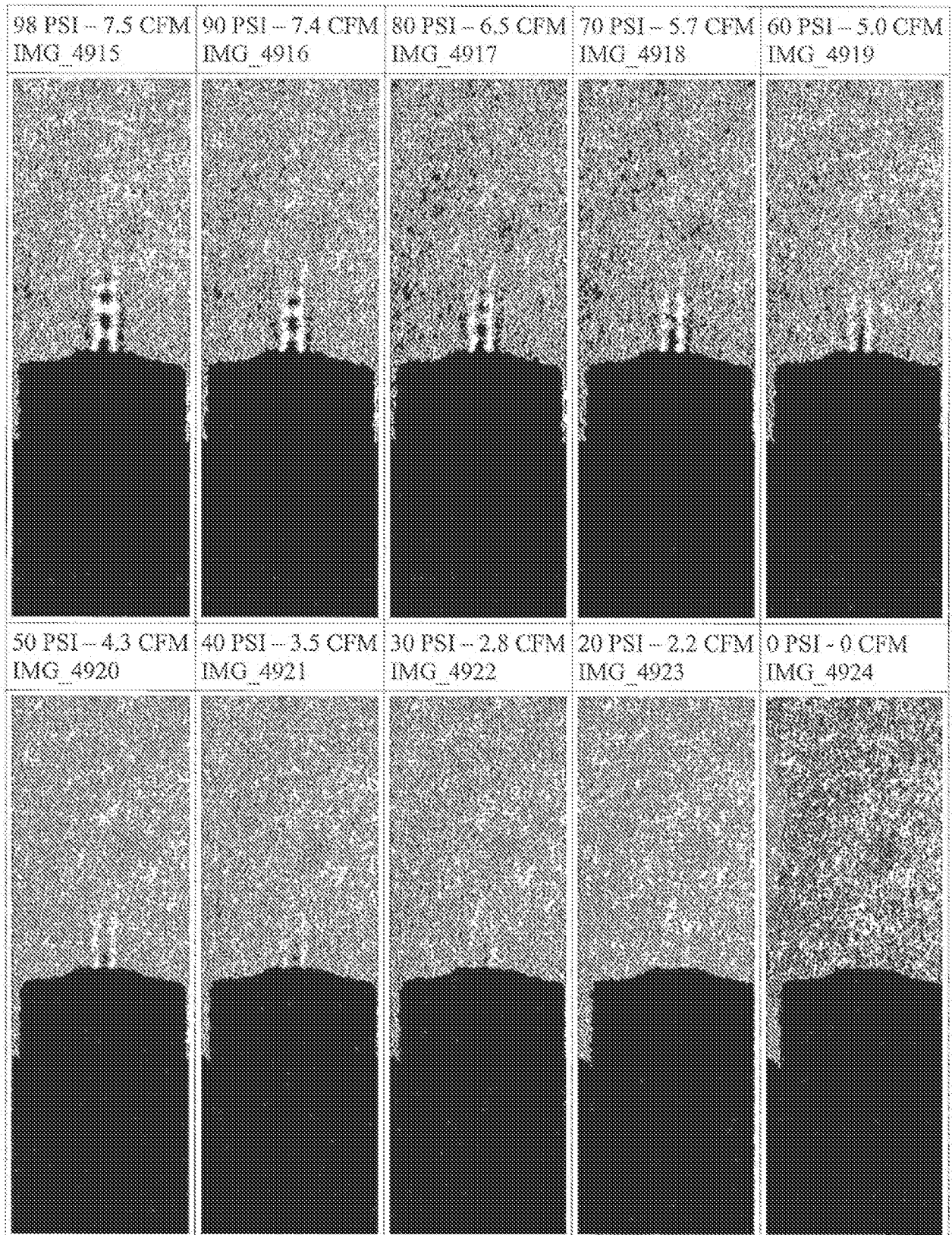


Figure 12

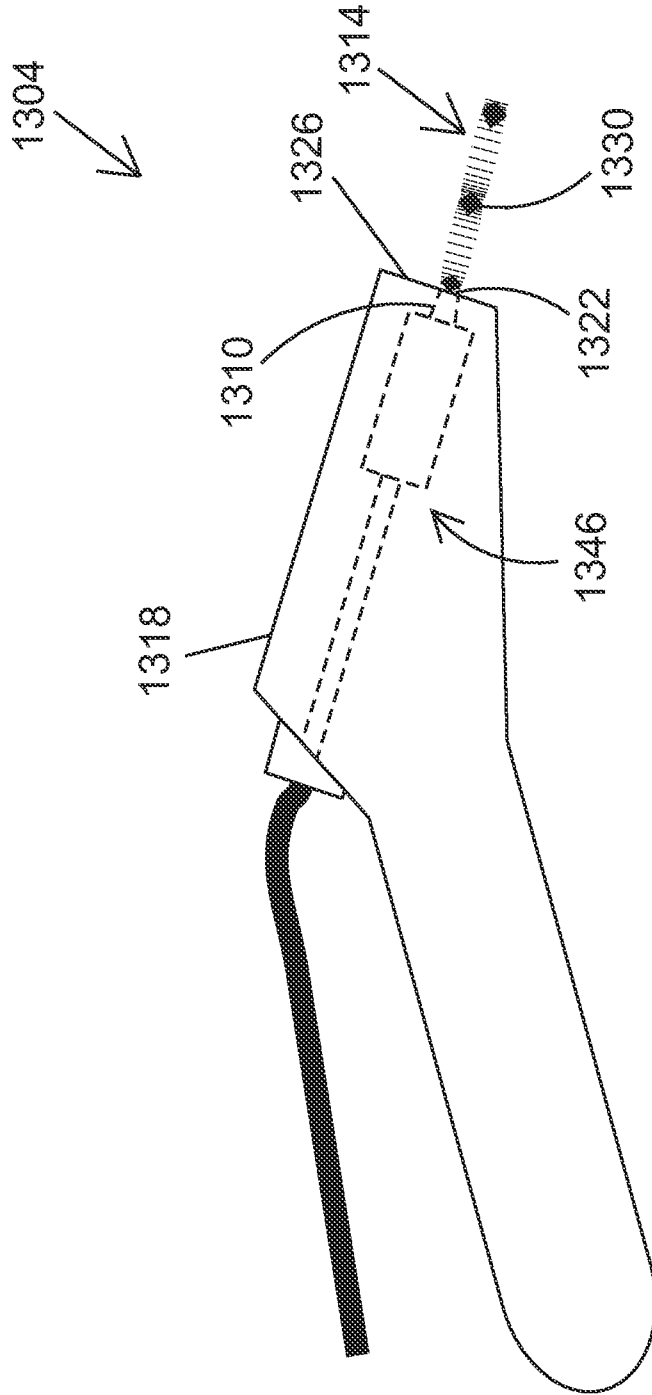


Figure 13

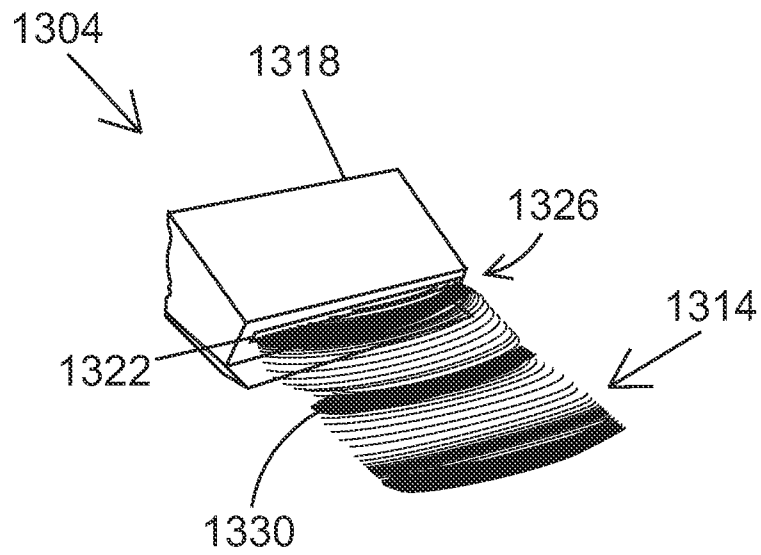


Figure 14

