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A service of Semiconductor Business News, CMP Media Inc.
Story updated at 10 a.m./7 a.m. PDT, 10/6/97

Fire damages UICC's fab in Taiwan

By Mark LaPedus

HSINCHU, Taiwan -- United Integrated Circuits Corp.'s new 8-inch wafer fab here apparently sustained heavy damage from a fire that started in the plant late Friday afternoon. UICC's wafer fab had begun volume production this summer, processing wafers with 0.35-micron technology.

Today, officials involved in the joint-venture silicon foundry refused to return telephone calls to discuss the extent of damage. However, industry sources in Taiwan said the fire caused millions of dollar in damage, possibly knocking UICC's fab out of commission indefinitely.

UICC is a joint-venture foundry between Taiwan's United Microelectronics Corp. (UMC) and seven North American chip companies--ATI Technologies, ESS Technology, Integrated Silicon Solution, Lattice Semiconductor, Oak Technology, Opti, and Trident Microsystems. In June, UICC officials said the fab's capacity would reach 25,000 wafers a month when fully equipped (see June 9 story).

The cause of the fire is still apparently unknown. UMC plans to hold a press conference in Hsinchu on Wednesday to comment on the damage of UICC fab. On Friday, Lattice Semiconductor Corp. in Hillsboro, Ore., said when it first learned of the fire, the extent of damage was unknown. Lattice said its products were not yet being made in the UICC fab, and it expected the fire to have no impact on its business.

UMC officials refused to return phone calls, but in an interview with a local television station today, UMC president John Hsuan said his company plans to move production from the damaged UICC fab to other 8-inch wafer plants in Hsinchu.

However, this may be easier said than done: UMC's entire 6- and 8-inch fab capacity is fully-booked for the remainder of this year, according to analysts.

One UICC investor downplayed the incident. "The problem won't be too big for us," said Michael Chao, general manager of ESS Technology Inc.'s Taiwan subsidiary, in Taipei. "We don't have our products in mass production at UICC yet."

For its foundry services, ESS Technology also uses other UMC fabs, as well as those from Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. Ltd., also in Hsinchu.



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