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UICC's damaged fab has second fire

By Mark LaPedus

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HSINCHU, Taiwan -- Taiwan's ill-fated United Integrated Circuits Corp. (UICC) here today was hit by another bizarre fire--just four months after the company's new 8-inch wafer fab was destroyed by a major blaze.

The event renews concerns about the safety of Taiwan's semiconductor industry. It is the fourth semiconductor plant fire in Taiwan in just the last 15 months.

Today's UICC fire was minor in comparison to the one that occurred on Oct. 3. UICC officials estimated that the blaze caused \$416 million in damage to the foundry's new 8-inch fab, shifting it down for one year (see Oct. 8 new coverage). UICC is a joint-venture between Taiwan's United Microelectronics Corp. (UMC) and seven North American fabless chip companies.

Today, construction workers were removing damaged pipes and unusable semiconductor processing equipment from the already-destroyed UICC fab, when another fire broke out at the plant sometime around 11:25 a.m.

Apparently, some sparks ignited a sizable fire in a pipeline under the UICC fab, but the Hsinchu-based Fire Department was able to extinguish the blaze by about 1:30 p.m., the spokesman said.

There were no injuries, nor was there any damage at the wafer-fab facilities surrounding UICC, namely those of its major investor, Hsinchu-based UMC, the spokesman insisted.

Surprisingly, though, UMC has ordered the construction concern that was working at the UICC plant off the project, because that company did not have any experience in tearing down fabs in the first place,

according to sources.

Instead, the construction company, whose identity was not given, was more experienced in the tearing down old and unusable ships, the sources said. The construction company could not be reached for comment. The Hsinchu-based Fire Department declined to comment.


It was unclear why UMC hired the construction company in the first place, but today's event gives Taiwan's IC industry another black eye, according to some observers in the region.

In October 1996, Hsinchu-based Winbond Electronic Corp.'s new and initial 8-inch fab was destroyed by a major fire, causing it to shift some of its chip production over to two IC-wafer foundry concerns--Singapore's Chartered Semiconductor Manufacturing Pte. Ltd. and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. Ltd.

And last November, Hsinchu-based Advanced Microelectronic Products Inc. reported a fire that damaged the company's 4-inch wafer fab.



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