Alternatives to SF$_6$ for Magnesium Melt Protection
The environmental benefits provided by lightweight and recyclable magnesium have the potential to grow significantly in the future as consumers, businesses, and national governments seek to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The global magnesium industry is working together with governments to demonstrate its environmental stewardship and eliminate SF₆ emissions. New melt protection technologies are cleaner and cost effective, and will help further improve the industry’s environmental performance.

Photo courtesy of Mark St. Johnson Photography, www.msjphotography.com
Alternative (non-SF$_6$) melt protection can provide:

- Excellent performance
- Potential cost savings
- Worker safety and environmental benefits

**Why Does Molten Magnesium (Mg) Need Protection?**

Today's automobiles, aerospace technologies, and portable electronics all use magnesium (Mg) for its advantageous light weight and structural properties. While being produced and when used in manufacturing other products, molten Mg will oxidize (burn) on contact with ambient air. Therefore Mg producers and parts manufacturers use melt protection on the metal's surface to prevent burning. In the past, salt fluxes or concentrated sulfur dioxide (SO$_2$) gas were used for this purpose. While these chemicals provided adequate melt protection, they also reduced the quality of the metal, corroded equipment, and presented workplace and environmental hazards. Since the 1970s, the international magnesium industry has largely used SF$_6$ for melt protection for its nontoxic, nonflammable, and non-corrosive characteristics. China's rapidly growing Mg industry employs sulfur powder for melt protection but is transitioning to SF$_6$ cover gas systems to improve product quality.
Why Eliminate SF$_6$?

Although it is an effective Mg cover gas, SF$_6$ is a very potent and persistent greenhouse gas, which means its release to the atmosphere contributes to global warming for thousands of years. Many national governments and companies around the world are seeking to reduce or eliminate SF$_6$ use in molten Mg processes. For example in the United States, members of the SF$_6$ Emission Reduction Partnership for the Magnesium Industry have committed to voluntarily eliminate SF$_6$ emissions by 2010. Also, the European Union will prohibit the use of SF$_6$ in Mg die-casting beginning in 2008, except when used in quantities less than 850 kg per year.

Many end users of Mg worldwide will continue to demand consistently high-quality Mg products and will seek improved environmental conditions that alternative flux-less melt protection other than SF$_6$ can provide.

One standard 52 kg (115 lb) cylinder of SF$_6$ is equivalent to 1,243 tonnes of CO$_2$. Therefore, the climate benefit of eliminating emissions of one standard cylinder is similar to eliminating CO$_2$ emissions from 240 U.S. passenger cars for one year or planting roughly 210 acres of forest land.$^2$

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$^2$ EPA ENERGY STAR conversion factor (11,560 lbs CO$_2$ / U.S. car), http://www.energystar.gov
**2004 Estimated Worldwide Mg Primary Production/Capacity**

- **China**: 400,000
- **Canada**: 60,000
- **Russia**: 55,000
- **United States**: 43,000
- **Israel**: 24,000
- **Kazakhstan**: 16,000
- **Brazil**: 11,000
- **Serbia & Montenegro**: 2,000

*a* Reported in metric tons.

Source: U.S. Geological Survey and Hydro Magnesium estimates.


China’s magnesium industry presents a unique opportunity for climate protection in the world’s fastest growing production center. The magnesium industry in China is opening new plants and beginning to transition from flux-based melt protection to cover gas technologies. Instead of using the potent global warming gas SF₆ for melt protection, these firms can “leapfrog” beyond SF₆ and choose the more environmentally friendly options discussed in this brochure. By adopting alternative melt protection technologies, China has an opportunity to avoid releasing annual greenhouse gas emissions equal to roughly 9.6 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (MMTCO₂)—more than three times the total emissions released by the entire U.S. Mg industry, production and casting combined, in 2004.³

What Alternatives to SF\textsubscript{6} are Available for Mg Melt Protection?

Several alternative melt protection technologies are commercially available that provide comparable performance to SF\textsubscript{6}. The most technically proven alternatives to date include:

- **AM-cover™**—Patented fluorine-based blended gas technology consisting of an active gas (such as HFC-134a) and a carrier gas such as nitrogen or carbon-dioxide.

- **Novec™ 612 Magnesium Protection Fluid**—Patented blended liquid-to-gas system using a fluorinated ketone as the active ingredient and a carrier gas such as carbon dioxide or nitrogen and dry air.

- **Dilute SO\textsubscript{2}**—An approximately 1.5% SO\textsubscript{2} mixture that uses nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and/or dry air as a carrier gas.

Other alternatives have been developed but are not currently commercialized or readily available. One technique known as “COOLCOM” generates solid CO\textsubscript{2} (i.e., dry ice) for melt protection. Another technique is a boron trifluoride (BF\textsubscript{3}) system that uses solid fluoroborate as a feedstock to generate a small amount of BF\textsubscript{3} gas in-line when needed for melt protection. A third technique under investigation uses SO\textsubscript{2}F\textsubscript{2} for melt protection.

What are the Benefits of Mg Melt Protection Alternatives to SF\textsubscript{6}?

By using fluxless melt protection other than SF\textsubscript{6}, the global Mg industry can benefit from improved metal quality, potential cost savings, and increased workplace safety while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Potential Cost Savings

Companies can potentially reduce their costs using Mg melt protection other than SF\textsubscript{6}. Using alternative fluorine-based blended melt protection in place of an SF\textsubscript{6}-based cover gas process can reduce metal loss (% dross) due to oxidation and provide associated cost savings, as shown in the hypothetical example in the graph on page 5. This example also shows that as the incoming Mg raw material price increases, the resulting cost savings also increase.

When considering dilute SO\textsubscript{2} systems, the cost of SO\textsubscript{2} per kg is usually less than the cost of SF\textsubscript{6}; however, equipment and process upgrades often must be made to safely use sulfur-based systems, and associated worker safety and environmental risks

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4 Bach et al, 2005. See URL: www.tms.org/Meetings/Annual-05/AM05-TechProg.pdf
5 Revankar et al, no date. See URL: http://www.hatch.ca/Light_Metals/Articles/
are necessary considerations. Dilute SO$_2$ systems also do not reduce metal loss, and thus may not offer the additional cost savings possible with fluorine-based systems shown in the graph below.

Mg producers or casters should note that the potential for the cost savings shown in the graph depends on the use of appropriate gas distribution systems, furnace lid designs and maintenance, and other production factors. Also, magnesium melt protection costs depend on many factors, including the price of Mg raw materials, the cost of a specific melt protection, the ratio of blended gas used, and the flow rate needed.

Potential Cost Savings from Reducing Metal Losses: Alternative fluorine-based melt protection vs. SF$_6$ cover

% Metal Loss Reduction Vs. Die Cast Ingot Price
(Die Cast Process Only)
Workplace Safety and Environmental Benefits

Alternative non-SF₆ Mg melt protection can provide important workplace safety and environmental benefits. These systems:

◆ Produce less smoke and fumes—making the workplace safer for workers’ health
◆ Are non-flammable
◆ Reduce or eliminate greenhouse gas emissions—A typical diecasting facility that processes 2,000 tonnes of Mg per year using alternative melt protection other than SF₆ may reduce greenhouse gas emissions by over 60,000 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent emissions per year compared to an SF₆-based system.
◆ Do not deplete stratospheric ozone

The alternative melt protection technologies can potentially produce toxic or corrosive byproducts, as does SF₆ (see Table 1). However, if these technologies are managed and operated correctly, the byproducts can be maintained at acceptable levels.

Mg casting operation using SF₆; alternative fluorine-based melt protection may substantially reduce the workplace fume and smoke emissions shown above.
Table 1. Summary of Magnesium Melt Protection Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>Atmospheric Lifetime* (yrs)</th>
<th>Global Warming Potential (GWP)* (100 yrs)</th>
<th>Potential Climate Benefit (% reduction in overall global warming vs. SF6)*</th>
<th>Selected Potential Byproduct Emissions of Concern*</th>
<th>Equipment and Process Upgrades (from SF6 system)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SF6</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>23,900</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>SO2, HF</td>
<td>Moderate (e.g., same as &quot;minimal&quot; plus liquid processing equipment &amp; monitoring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FK (Novec™ 612)</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>1--1'</td>
<td>95-99%</td>
<td>HF, PFIB, PFCs</td>
<td>Minimal (e.g., recalculate mixing units; possibly add entry point to improve distribution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFC-134a (AM-cover)</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>95-99%</td>
<td>HF, PFCs</td>
<td>Significant (e.g., replace all mixing equipment &amp; distribution system piping with stainless steel/corrosion-resistant materials; monitoring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilute SO2</td>
<td>Several days</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>SO2</td>
<td>Significant (e.g., dilution mixing equipment &amp; distribution; monitoring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BF3</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Not measured</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>BF3</td>
<td>Moderate (see above)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO2F2</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>SO2, HF</td>
<td>Significant (see above)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Global Warming Potential (GWP) reflects the potential for contributing to the heating of the earth’s atmosphere over a specified time frame. CO2 has a GWP of 1. The GWP figures listed above are from: *Climate Change 1995: The Science of Climate Change*. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.


* This category does not reflect a comprehensive list of potential byproduct emissions, but rather those most commonly identified; other byproduct emissions may also be produced.

* SO2 must be used with care. It is toxic to humans at 2 parts per million (ppm) (based on American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists Threshold Limit Values) and can corrode steel equipment. At levels produced in the magnesium industry, it contributes minimally to acid rain.

* HF (hydrogen fluoride) is toxic at low levels and can accelerate corrosion of equipment. HF levels may be minimized to acceptable levels by using good operating practices.


* PFIB (perfluorisobutylene) is toxic; good operating practices can eliminate PFIB byproduct emissions.

* PFCs (perfluorocarbons) are potent greenhouse gases and have long atmospheric lifetimes ranging from 1,000 to 50,000 years (see www.ipcc.ch/press/SPM.pdf). Adding oxygen to the cover gas mixture can minimize PFC production to non-detectable levels (see www.epa.gov/highgwp/liquidpower-sf6/pdf/milbrath.pdf).

* BF3 (boron trifluoride) gas is highly reactive, toxic (1 ppm workplace exposure limit, U.S. DOL/OSHA), and corrosive; good operating practices may maintain BF3 at acceptable levels.

* SO2F2 is toxic and thus poses potential workplace hazards; these hazards must be addressed with the use of alarms or odorization, equipment upgrades, and establishment of a safe supply chain.
Retrofitting for Alternative Melt Protection Technologies

In most cases, conversion from an SF₆-based or (older) SO₂-based system to a non-SF₆ alternative melt protection system is relatively easy. It is important that melt protection users carefully follow the manufacturer’s recommended best practices to achieve good performance, maintain product quality, and achieve workplace and environmental improvements. Table 1 (previous page) briefly summarizes the environmental and operational concerns. When installing a new melt protection technology, companies should use careful advance planning and good operating practices, such as:

- **Proper choice and grade of carrier gases**—Pay attention to the final blended product (active ingredient plus carrier gas) and how efficiently it is applied to the molten Mg surface. For example, some alternatives perform better in carrier gas mixtures of nitrogen or carbon dioxide rather than dry air alone.

- **Correct concentrations and flow rates**—Know exactly how much of the final product has been delivered; consider the need for improving current gas blending equipment. With some alternatives, Mg is best protected at lower concentrations and higher flow rates than those used with SF₆.

- **Good distribution systems and practices**—Available melt protection alternatives are more reactive and thus less thermally stable than SF₆, making good gas distribution essential.

- **Appropriate operating conditions**—Monitor process parameters such as molten metal level, and variations in temperature and alloy chemistry.

The detailed information needed to convert a facility to use an alternative melt protection technology is available from the respective technology providers – please see the list of suppliers’ contact information on the back cover.
Globally, the magnesium industry can avoid annual greenhouse gas emissions equal to more than 15 million metric tons of CO₂ by eliminating SF₆ emissions. The environmental benefit from choosing climate-friendly Mg melt protection technologies is equivalent to the CO₂ absorbed by planting 2.5 million acres (10,117 km²) of forest, an area larger than the United States Yellowstone National Park.

Assumes 1 kg SF₆/mt of Mg (global primary production only) and an average of 6 mt CO₂ per acre of forest per year. Source: R. Birdsey, 1996, USDA Forest Service.

Contact Information:
U.S. EPA: www.epa.gov/magnesium-sf6
IMA: www.intlmag.org
CMA: www.chinamagnesium.org
www.chinamagnesium.org/english.htm
JMA: www.kt.rim.or.jp/~ho01-mag

Product Information:
Novec™ 612: www.3M.com; dsmilbrath@mmm.com
mixing equipment:
christian.domanyi@rauch-ft.com (outside N. America)
kurt.brising@rauch-ft.com (N. America)
www tn-sanso.co.jp/en/index.html (Japan)

Dilute SO₂ (Europe): www.aski-gasotechnik.de
Dilute SO₂ (N. America): www.polycontrols.com
COOLCOM: www.linde-gas.com
SO₂F₂: www.halidegroup.com