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Hilt et al.

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- (54) **SEMICONDUCTOR LAYER STRUCTURE**
- (71) Applicant: **Forschungsverbund Berlin E.V.**, Berlin (DE)
- (72) Inventors: **Oliver Hilt**, Schöneiche (DE); **Rimma Zhytnytska**, Berlin (DE); **Hans-Joachim Würfl**, Zeuthen (DE)
- (73) Assignee: **Forschungsverbund Berlin E.V.**, Berlin (DE)
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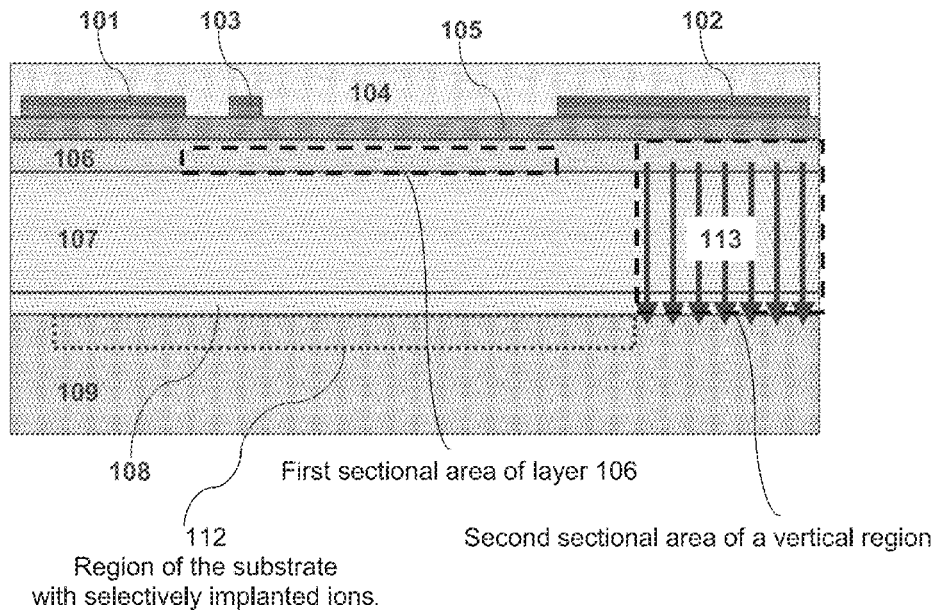
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USPC **257/402**; 257/487; 257/E21.483;
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USPC 257/402, 487, E21.403, E21.407
See application file for complete search history.

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Primary Examiner — Timor Karimy

- (57) **ABSTRACT**
- This invention relates to a semiconductor layer structure. The semiconductor layer structure described includes a substrate and a buffer layer deposited onto the substrate. The semiconductor layer structure is characterized in that a drain voltage threshold lower than the breakdown voltage threshold is determined by isolating ions that are selectively implanted in just one region of the substrate into the substrate, wherein charge can dissipate from the one contact through the buffer layer towards a substrate region without isolating ions, if the one potential deviates from the other at least by the drain voltage threshold, and wherein the substrate region without isolating ions is located underneath the one contact. The semiconductor layer structure described allows dissipation of currents induced by induction in blocking active structures without damaging the active structures.

6 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets



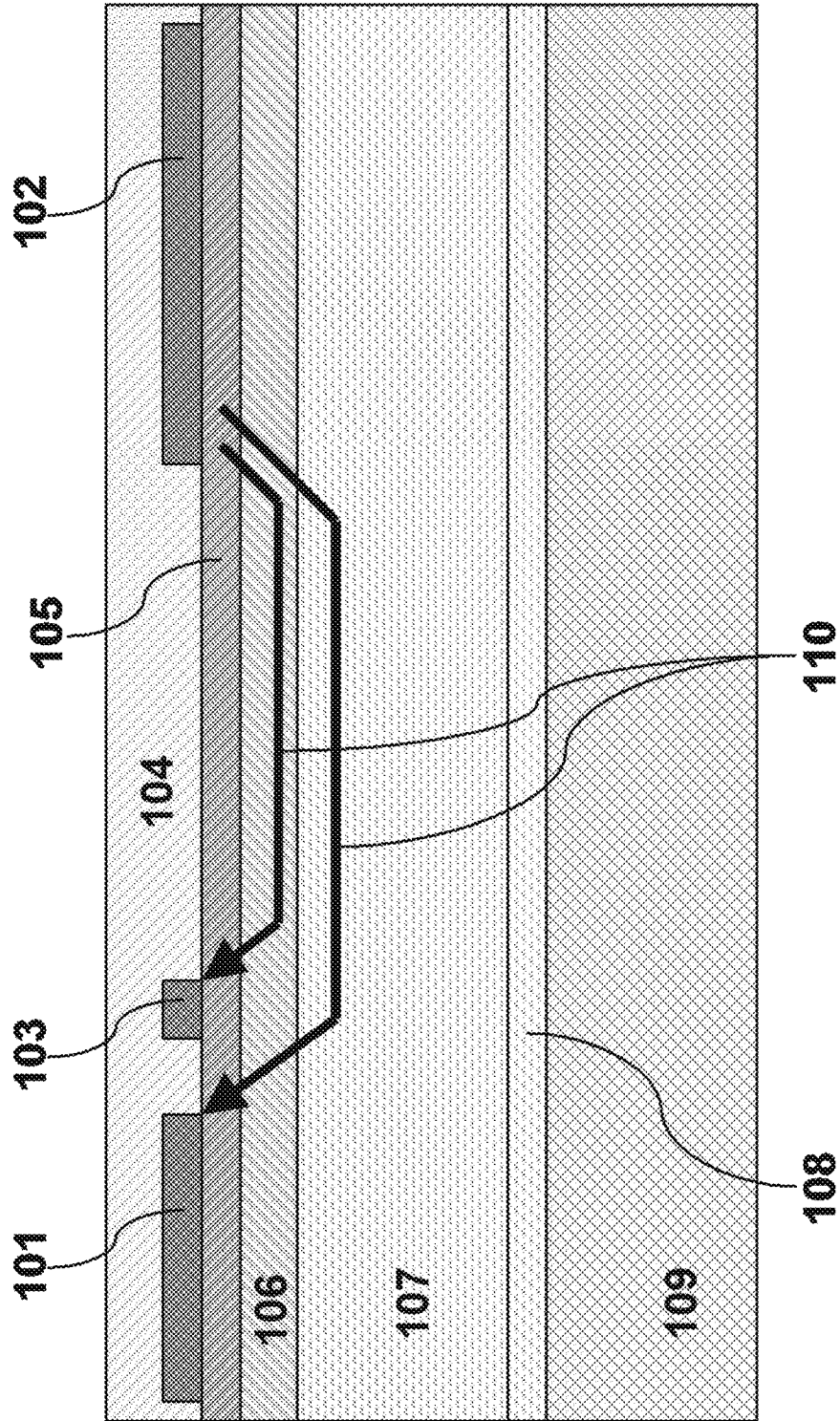


Figure 1 -- Prior art

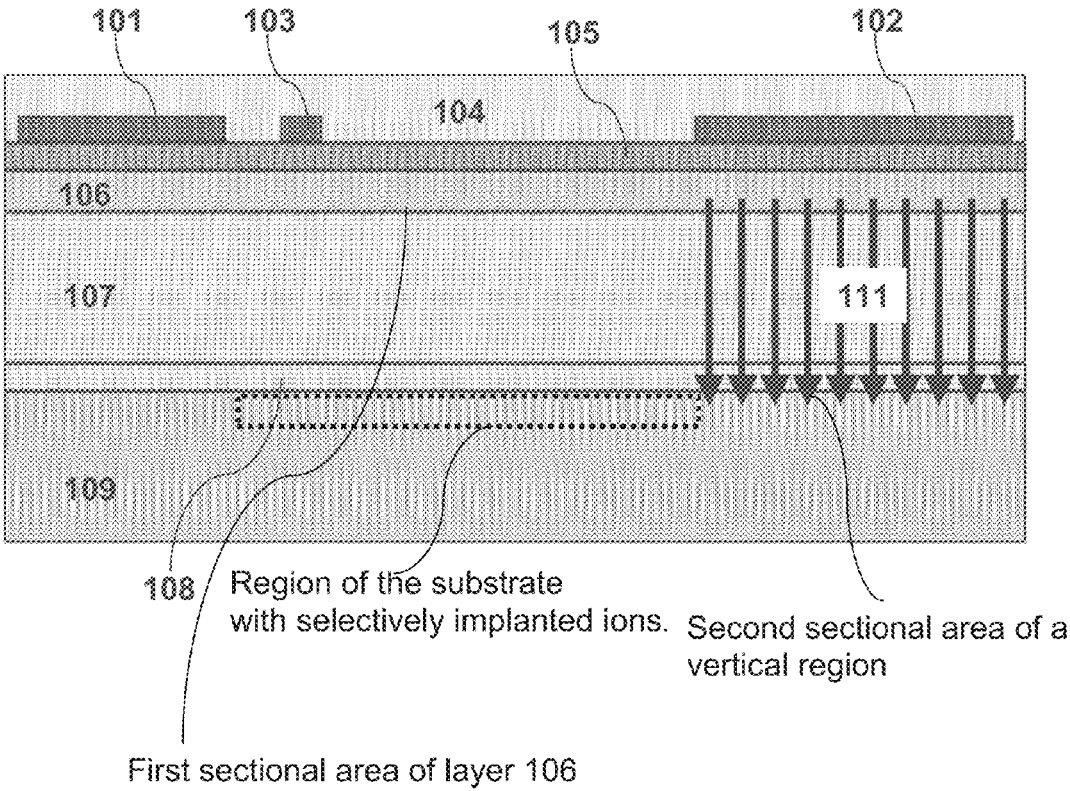


Figure 2

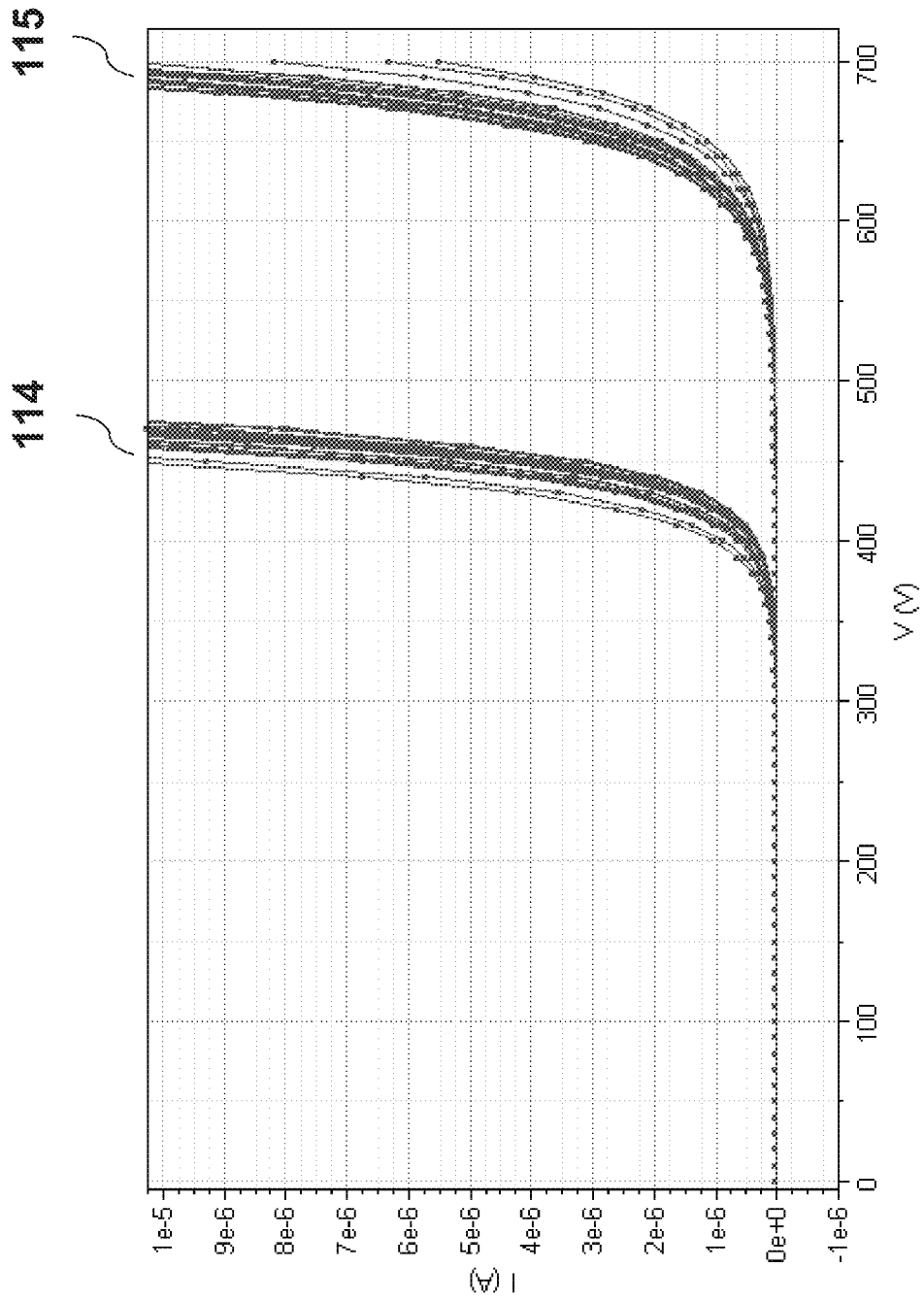


Figure 3

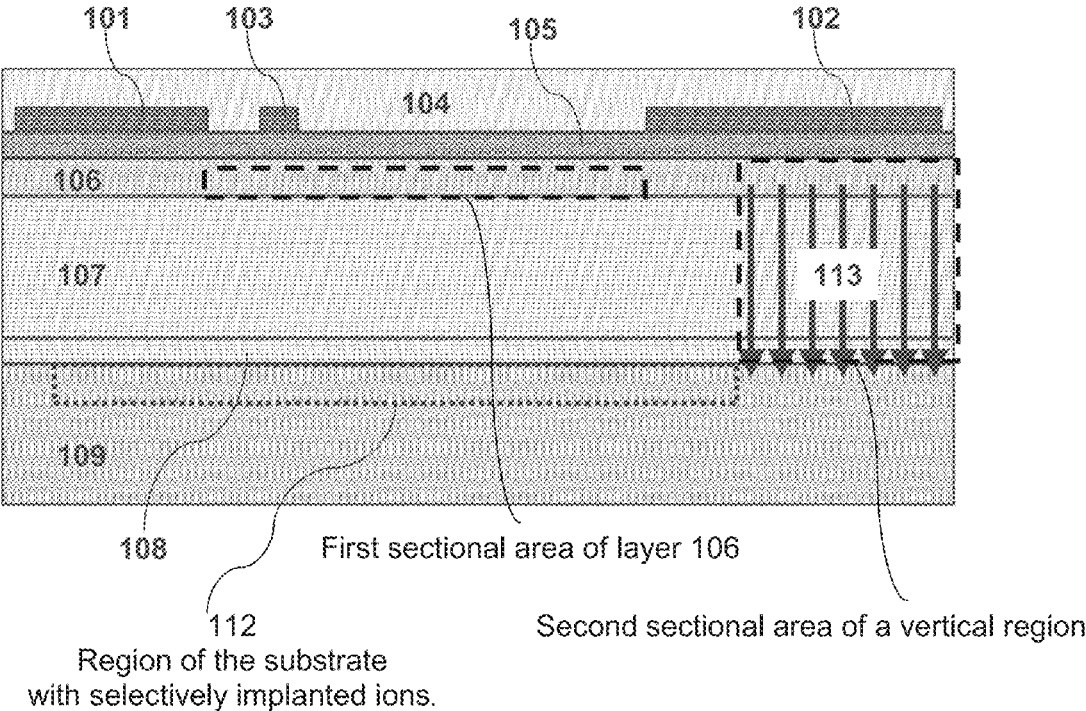
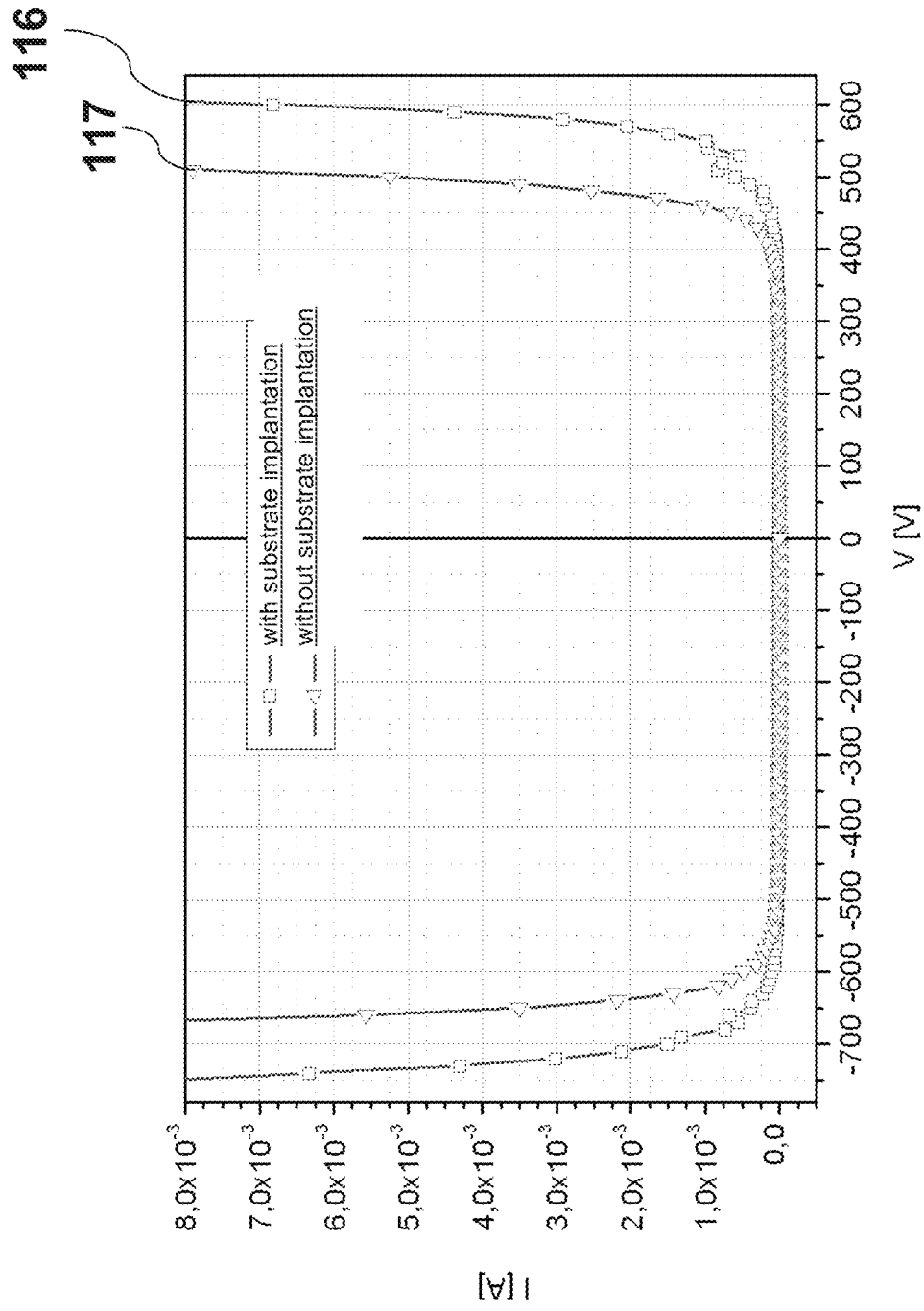


Figure 4

Figure 5



SEMICONDUCTOR LAYER STRUCTURE

RELATED APPLICATION

This application claims the benefit of priority of German Patent Application No. 10 2012 207 501.1 filed May 7, 2012, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

FIELD AND BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to a semiconductor layer structure. In particular, this invention relates to a semiconductor layer structure that allows dissipation of voltage pulses induced by induction in active blocking structures of the semiconductor layer structure without damaging the active structures.

PRIOR ART

When using power transistors and diodes as switches or amplifiers with inductive loads, inductively driven currents must be dissipated after a switch-off process via the (blocking) transistor or diode structure without damaging the same. Since the inductively driven currents cannot pass through the active blocking structure, high voltages build up at it to enforce the current flow. While Si-based power transistors, for example, can tolerate such a voltage or current pulse up to a specific energy level or can dissipate the pulse energy (avalanche resistance), even very small pulse energies may lead to component damage in other active structures, e.g. GaN-based lateral transistors (HFETs).

FIG. 1 shows a schematic cross section of such a GaN-based HFET according to prior art. In non-blocking operation, a flow of current is needed only in the transistor channel **106**, which typically has a thickness of less than 100 nm. The buffer layer **107** located underneath the transistor channel **106** is typically much thicker than the channel **106**, >1 μm layer thickness. When the gate **103** is blocking and a high voltage exists at the drain contact **102**, leakage currents **110** flow between the drain contact and the gate contact **103** or between the drain contact and source contact **101**, respectively. If the voltage at the drain contact **102** increases due to an inductively driven current, the leakage current along the current paths **110** rises considerably to dissipate the pulse energy inside or underneath the transistor channel **106**, that is, to distribute or spread it. Since the thickness of the transistor channel **106** of a GaN HFET is only a few nm, this results in a high power density that can lead to component damage. In addition the field distribution in the channel **106** is highly inhomogeneous with significant maximums at the gate and drain. This further increases power density at these positions.

The voltage endurance of a blocked GaN HFET on a conductive substrate **109** is limited first by the lateral leakage current from the drain contact **102** to the source contact **101** or gate contact **103** within the transistor channel **106**, and second by the vertical leakage current from the drain contact **102** through semiconductor layers **105**, **106**, **107**, and **108** to the substrate **109**.

DE 10 2009 018 054 A1 discloses laterally delimited p-type doped GaN or Si semiconductor regions to protect lateral components at various locations in the semiconductor stack. The p-n junctions created in this way are to absorb the energy of the current/voltage peaks. The energy is dissipated laterally underneath the transistor channel or within a p-n diode structure in the Si substrate.

DE 11 2007 001 762 T5 discloses a separate protective structure for protecting a component with a wide bandgap from transient voltages, wherein the separate protective structure absorbs the voltage peaks.

U.S. Pat. No. 7,250,641 B2 describes a p-type GaN layer that forms a PIN diode with the Si substrate, so that holes created in an avalanche breakdown can discharge between the drain electrode and the Si substrate and the (lateral component) is not destroyed.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The invention proposes to use a buffer layer as an element limiting electric strength where, according to prior art, a space-charge region is created between a p-type layer and the Si substrate as a result of a p-n junction.

In particular, the invention proposes a semiconductor layer structure according to claim **1** comprising a substrate and a buffer layer deposited onto the substrate.

According to the invention, the semiconductor layer structure is characterized in that the thickness of the buffer layer and/or an ion implantation into the substrate determine(s) a drain voltage threshold that a voltage between a charge separated from the substrate by the buffer layer and a potential of the substrate must exceed for the charge to flow off through the buffer layer towards the substrate.

This structure is particularly suitable for carrying an active semiconductor structure and its protection from damage by inductively driven currents. The approach according to the invention is to use the comparatively thick buffer layer to vertically dissipate overvoltage pulses to the substrate. Due to its large volume, the power density in the buffer is low, allowing such a structure to dissipate considerably more energy without causing damage than in the transistor channel. Since the semiconductor volume of the buffer already exists in GaN HFETs, no additional chip area has to be used for integrating the vertically conductive protective structure.

In one embodiment, an active semiconductor structure is deposited onto the buffer layer, wherein the active semiconductor structure includes a channel layer formed by depositing a barrier layer and contacts deposited onto the barrier layer. The semiconductor structure is designed to permanently or temporarily prevent or limit the flow of current from one of the contacts to another one of the contacts, at least in the first direction, if a potential of the one of the contacts deviates from the potential of the other of the contacts by less than a breakdown voltage threshold. The semiconductor structure is characterized in that the potential of the substrate corresponds to the other potential of the other of the contacts and the drain voltage threshold is lower than the breakdown voltage threshold. This allows voltages induced by induction to be dissipated vertically through the buffer layer to the substrate.

Other embodiments are described in the dependent claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Embodiments of the invention are explained in greater detail with reference to the drawings and the description below.

In the drawings:

FIG. 1 shows a schematic cross section through a GaN-based HFET according to prior art and potential destructive current paths;

FIG. 2 shows a schematic cross section through a first embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 3 shows a dependence of a substrate leakage current on the layer thickness of a buffer layer using the example of a carbon-doped GaN buffer layer;

FIG. 4 shows a schematic cross section through a second embodiment of the invention; and

FIG. 5 shows the dependence of the vertical leakage current towards the substrate for the ion-implanted and the non-ion-implanted substrate area using the example of a carbon-doped GaN buffer grown on an n-conductive SiC substrate.

DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION

FIG. 2 shows a schematic cross section through a first embodiment of the semiconductor layer structure according to the invention. An optional nucleation layer **108** and a buffer **107** located on top of it are both deposited on a conductive substrate **109**. The buffer **107** is thick compared to a layer **106** that was deposited onto the buffer **107** for forming an active structure. The active structure can at least be designed as a diode or a transistor.

In the example shown, the layer **106** constitutes a transistor channel of a GaN HFET that, in addition to the layer **106**, includes a barrier layer **105** located on top of the layer **106**. The layer **106** of the exemplary GaN HFET is not conductive per se. The two-dimensional electron gas (2DEG) required for suitability as transistor channel is only formed in the layer **106** at the border with the barrier **105** if the barrier layer **105** has grown out of the layer **106**, for a GaN HFET, for example, from AlGaIn. Active structures designed as GaN diodes or GaN HFETs further comprise source contacts **101** and drain contacts **102** located on the barrier layer **105**. In a transistor design, a gate contact **103** is provided between the source contact **101** and the drain contact **102**. The active structures in the example from FIG. 2 are covered and protected by a passivation **104**.

The thickness of the buffer layer **107** is selected based on its vertical conductivity behavior. Thickness is selected such that it opens an alternative current path **111** for energy dissipation above a drain voltage within the semiconductor structure of the exemplary GaN transistor. The current path in the example shown is located between an ohmic (drain) contact **102** on the semiconductor surface and the conductive substrate **109** at source potential on which the semiconductor layers **108**, **107**, **106**, and **105** have grown. Most of the voltage drop between the drain contact **102** and the substrate **109** is to drop from the GaN-based semiconductor buffer **107**. The pulse energy within the buffer can dissipate at a low power density due to the large volume of the buffer. This volume is marked by arrows **11** in FIG. 2. This means that the current path **110** from FIG. 1 with its high power density does no longer have to be used for dissipating the energy of inductively driven current pulses at the drain **102** of a closed GaN HFET.

Alternatively, the substrate can be at the level of the drain potential, and the current path **111** can be present between a source contact **101** and the substrate **109**.

Setting the layer thickness of the buffer **107** and/or selective ion implantation into the substrate can be used to determine that the alternative vertical current path **111** becomes available at voltages below the breakdown voltage of the transistor, which is determined by lateral transistor dimensions such as the gate-drain distance. Alternatively, or in addition, it can be determined that the alternative vertical current path **111** becomes available above an operating volt-

age threshold only, wherein the operating voltage threshold is not permanently exceeded in blocking operation of the active structure.

Above the operating voltage threshold, the substrate leakage current through the semiconductor structures **106** . . . **108** of the invention in FIG. 2 typically shows an exponential (at any rate a super-linear or sudden) increase as the voltage increases.

FIG. 3 shows the dependence of the vertical leakage current on the thickness of the buffer and the voltage applied, using the example of a carbon-doped GaN buffer, wherein the leakage current flows through the buffer to the substrate. Measurements **114** at a buffer layer thickness of 3 μm show that the substrate leakage current is negligible up to a voltage of 300 volts and increases faster than a linear increase at voltages over 400 volts. Measurements **115** at a buffer layer thickness of 4 μm show that the substrate leakage current is negligible up to a voltage of 500 volts and increases faster than a linear increase at voltages over 600 volts only. It is apparent that the blocking capability of the 4 μm buffer is about 150-200 V higher than that of the 3 μm buffer.

FIG. 4 shows in an exemplary manner how a suitable selective ion implantation into substrate areas **112** in a region above which the drain contact **102** is to be, or is, deposited, how it can be shifted to areas **113** outside the active transistor structure, thus protecting the same even better. The position and volume of energy dissipation can be determined by suitable lateral dimensioning of the implanted areas **112** and the drain contact **102**, for example to control local heating-up of the transistor.

The substrate leakage current in the semiconductor structure can be reduced if the surface of the conductive substrate **109** (e.g. Si or doped SiC) is isolation-implanted at the lateral positions of the transistor structure before the semiconductor layers **107** and **108** grow. An implantation in the order of magnitude of several 100 keV produces an additional insulating layer **112** in the substrate **109**.

FIG. 5 uses the example of a carbon-doped GaN buffer with n-conductive SiC as the substrate to show the dependence of the vertical leakage current towards the substrate on an argon implantation into the substrate and the voltage applied. It can be seen that the substrate leakage current increases considerably above 400 volts with Ar implantation (measurements **116**) and without Ar implantation (measurements **117**), wherein the increase is clearly weaker with Ar implantation (measuring points shown as squares) than without Ar implantation (measuring points shown as triangles) so that a suitable Ar implantation can increase the blocking capability by at least 100 V. The blocking capability and drain voltage can be set precisely by selecting the implanted substance and the density and energies at which this substance is implanted.

What is claimed is:

1. A semiconductor layer structure comprising a substrate, a buffer layer deposited onto the substrate, and an active semiconductor layer stack deposited onto the buffer layer, wherein the active semiconductor layer stack includes a layer formed as a channel by depositing a barrier layer, and contacts deposited onto the barrier layer, wherein the semiconductor layer structure is designed to permanently or temporarily prevent or limit, at least in a first direction, a lateral flow of current from one of the contacts to one of the other contacts through the layer if a potential of the one of the contacts deviates from another potential of the other of the contacts by less than a breakdown voltage threshold, wherein; a potential of the substrate corresponds to the other potential, and in that a drain voltage threshold lower than the breakdown voltage

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threshold is determined by isolating argon ions that are selectively implanted into the substrate such that the isolating argon ions are in just one region of the substrate said just one region of the substrate with isolating argon ions implanted being laterally adjacent to a substrate region without isolating argon, wherein charge can dissipate from the one contact through the buffer layer towards said substrate region without isolating argon ions, if the one potential deviates from the other at least by the drain voltage threshold, and wherein the substrate region without isolating argon ions is located underneath the one contact.

2. The semiconductor layer structure according to claim 1, wherein in a cross section through the semiconductor structure, a first sectional area of the layer in the region between the one and the other contact is smaller than a second sectional area of a region between the one of the contacts and the substrate region without isolating ions.

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3. The semiconductor layer structure according to claim 1, wherein the drain voltage threshold is greater than a minimum voltage that may permanently exist between the one and the other contacts without the occurrence of a flow of current that damages the semiconductor structure.

4. The semiconductor layer structure according to claim 1, wherein the implanted isolating ions include a formation of a p-n junction in at least one region on a surface of the substrate onto which the buffer layer is deposited.

5. The semiconductor layer structure according to claim 1, wherein the active semiconductor structure forms a transistor and includes a gate contact deposited between the contacts on the barrier layer.

6. The semiconductor layer structure according to claim 1, wherein the active semiconductor structure forms a diode with the one contact and the other contact.

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