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► To cite this version:

J.-C. Brachet, I. Idarraga, M. Le Flem, Matthieu Le Saux, F. Schuster, et al.. Out-of-pile RandD on chromium coated nuclear fuel zirconium based claddings for enhanced accident tolerance in LWRs. 18th International Symposium on Zirconium in the Nuclear Industry, May 2016, Hilton Head, United States. cea-02500847

HAL Id: cea-02500847

<https://cea.hal.science/cea-02500847>

Submitted on 6 Mar 2020

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Title: “Out-of-pile R&D on coated nuclear fuel zirconium based claddings for enhanced accident tolerance in LWRs”

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In the framework of the CEA/AREVA/EDF French nuclear institute, coatings (with thicknesses of a few microns up to ~20µm) on zirconium alloy cladding have been studied with the objective to provide a significant reduction in the embrittlement of the cladding in accidental conditions, such as the loss-of-coolant accident (LOCA). Early studies performed at CEA on several types of coatings obtained by a physical vapor deposition (PVD) process, including ceramic nitride and metallic multi-layered coatings, are discussed in a first part of this paper. The results of this screening analysis showed that chromium coatings have exhibited the best compromise between oxidation resistance and adhesion of the coating. In a second part, the present paper gives an overview of out-of-pile results obtained so far on Cr-coated Zircaloy 4 cladding in both nominal and accidental (LOCA) conditions:

- As-received properties and behavior in nominal conditions: The Cr-coating forms a dense layer with no porosity at the interface leading to very good adherence to the underlying Zircaloy substrate, which is not affected by the PVD coating process. Additionally, the Cr-coated Zircaloy-4 samples exhibit significantly reduced corrosion kinetics during autoclave tests in representative 360°C PWR water chemistry conditions by forming a very thin oxide layer on the order of a few hundred nanometers.

- Accidental conditions: The behavior of chromium coated claddings during high temperature (HT) oxidation has been studied and shows significant reduction of oxidation kinetics in HT steam conditions. The Cr-coating serves as a barrier for the diffusion of oxygen in the underlying zirconium substrate, and this delays significantly the formation of the brittle ZrO₂ and Zr-Alpha(O) layers and decrease the overall oxygen quantity diffusing into the remaining prior-β. Consequently, Cr-coated Zircaloy-4 cladding retains higher post-quench ductility and helps extend the margins to fuel rod (brittle) failure in accidental conditions. A model describing the HT oxidation kinetics of the Cr-coated cladding up to 1200°C and for typical Design Base Accident (DBA) cumulated time will be presented in this paper. The consequences of the oxidation at HT on the resulting post-quench mechanical properties (hardness, tensile properties...) will also be discussed.

Further investigations are ongoing and the next steps of coated Zr cladding evaluation as well as CEA/AREVA/EDF perspectives are also briefly presented in the paper. For example, the same deposition process was used to successfully deposit a Cr-coating on other zirconium alloys, such as M5® and some material irradiations have been performed or are planned to test this solution in more representative conditions. Additionally, high temperature creep and ramp tests are ongoing to obtain a full understanding of the LOCA behavior. To conclude, the current results on Cr-coated cladding suggest that it could provide significant benefits in accidental conditions, while allowing for a relative short term implementation time. Consequently, it appears as a very promising solution to enhance the accident tolerance of the fuel rod.