

## 2. Coating Processes and Surface Treatments

GalvInfoNote

# Imparting Resistance to Storage Stain

2.10

REV 2.0 JAN 2019

### Introduction

The surface of zinc and zinc alloy-coated steel sheet can be treated using one or more of many methods. **This GalvInfoNote deals with surface treatments used to impart resistance to storage staining.** Other treatments are used for different reasons, namely:

- Improving uniformity of appearance (see GalvInfoNote 2.8)
- Treatments for enhancing formability (see GalvInfoNote 2.9)
- Preparing galvanize for field painting (see GalvInfoNote 2.11)
- Pretreatments for metallic-coated sheet (see GalvInfoNote 2.12)
- Treatments for resistance to handling and fingerprint marks (see GalvInfoNote 2.13)

While anti storage stain treatments are always applied directly on the hot-dip line after the metallic coating has been applied, some of the others listed above can also be carried out on separate process lines/facilities, or in the field.

There are a number of surface treatments available to improve resistance to storage stain. First, the reason for the formation is storage stain is explained.

### Storage Stain

Storage stain is a corrosion product that is typically white, but which can also take the form of a grey or black deposit on the surface. Since the most common form of discoloration is white, storage stain is often called **white rust**. It can occur when sheets of galvanized steel that are in close contact (in a coil or stacked in lifts/bundles) get wet, either by water intrusion, or by condensation from moist air trapped between the sheets. The discoloration is due to the corrosion products that form after zinc reacts with moisture in the absence of free air circulation. Refer to GalvInfoNote 3.2 for more information on storage stain.

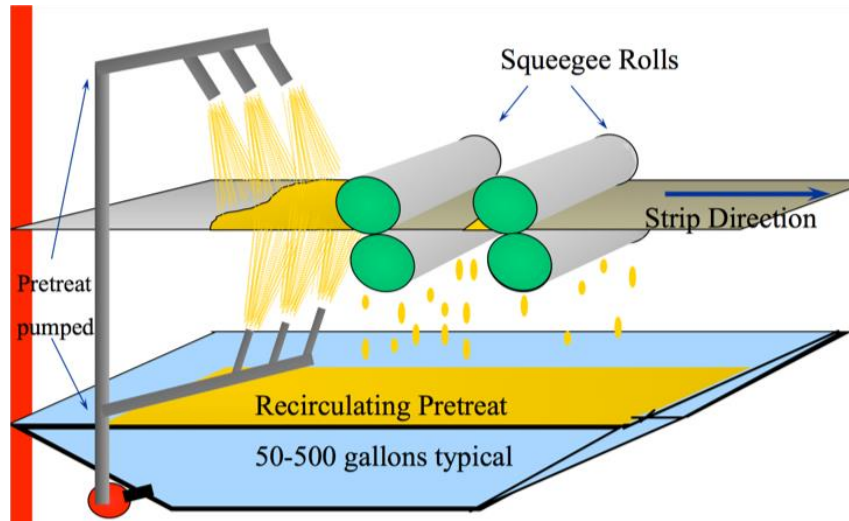
White rust on storage stain-damaged galvanize is initially zinc hydroxide, and turns to zinc oxide when left to dry in the open air. The white rust inside a wet stack or coil will eventually turn black if left unchecked. When storage stain on galvanize turns black it usually means that iron has become part of the corrosion product. When iron becomes involved, enough zinc has been consumed to expose the steel substrate and the remaining zinc is of little, if any, protective value.

The stain that forms on water-damaged galvalume is grey to black in color due to the iron in the coating. See GalvInfoNote 3.3 for more information on stained galvalume, and Note 3.2 for a light black stain that can form on some galvanize products. The corrosion products that form on water damaged zinc-aluminum coatings often have a black to grey appearance – the result of hydrated aluminum hydroxide formation.

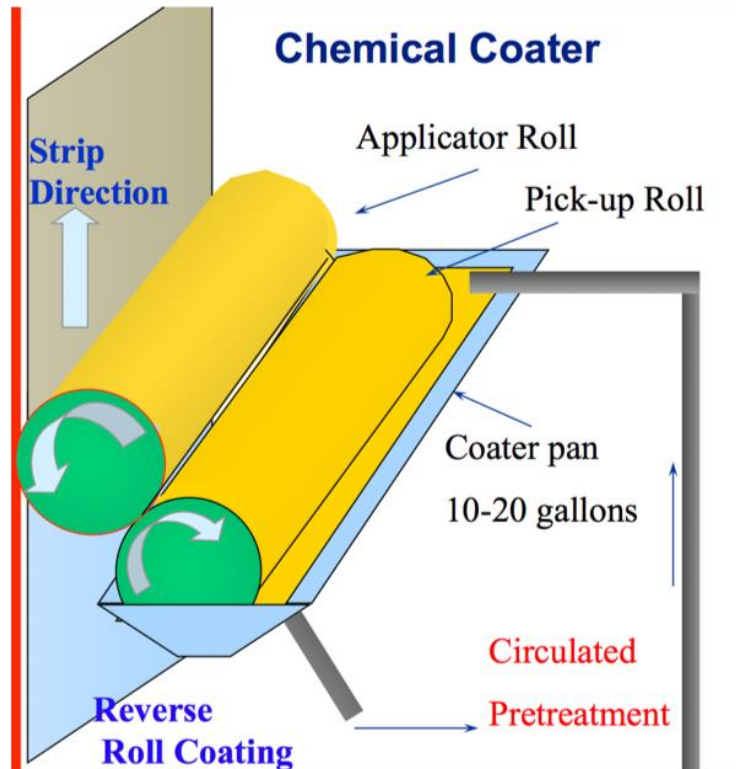
### Application of Chemical Treatments

If freshly galvanized steel becomes wet with moisture trapped between contacting surfaces, and access to free-flowing air is restricted, zinc oxide breaks down and zinc hydroxide forms. Zinc hydroxide can form from even a single incident of wetting by rain or condensation. If the affected areas are immediately exposed and allowed to dry, it generally has little harmful effect on the long-term performance of galvanized steel, but if the damp, restrictive conditions continue, zinc corrosion may proceed rapidly down to the base steel. Chemical treatments are designed to lower the chemical activity of the zinc surface (passivate it) to slow down the formation of oxidation products. This is the primary purpose of passivation but it also can have other benefits such as maintaining the brightness of exposed galvanized sheet longer, marginally improving service life, and sometimes (with special formulations) even acting as a lubricant during forming.

Chemical treatment is applied at the final process section of a galvanizing line, using one of the two methods shown in the following figures.



**Flood & Squeegee**



**Reverse Roll Coating**

The reverse roll coating process has been found to be a more precise and better controlled method of applying chemical treatments and the industry is migrating to this method.

## Chemical Treatments – Chromate Based

To reduce the susceptibility of metallic coated steel sheet to storage stain, the practice for many decades has been to treat it with an aqueous solution of chromic acid, chromium salts and mineral acids to produce a thin-film coating on the surface. This inorganic chemical or “passivation” treatment is applied near the end of the coating line. The solution dissolves a very small amount of the coating metal and forms a protective film containing complex chromium and metal compounds<sup>1</sup>. Traditional chromium based treatments contain chrome in two valence states, trivalent ( $\text{Cr}^{+3}$ ), and hexavalent ( $\text{Cr}^{+6}$ ). The presence of  $\text{Cr}^{+6}$  designates these as “chromate” passivates. The formation mechanism of a chromate coating is a dissolution and precipitation process similar to what occurs during phosphating. The thickness and color of chromate coatings depends mainly on the chromate concentration, pH, and dipping time. They are usually applied so thin ( $\sim 0.4 \mu\text{m}$ ) that they are essentially invisible. Thicker chromate coatings may have a yellowish or greenish appearance and could be up to  $0.6 \mu\text{m}$  thick. The total chromium content of a normal, invisible coating is usually 1-2 mg/ft<sup>2</sup>, with less than half as hexavalent chromium in a complex mixture of metal salts and oxides.

Protection of the zinc is afforded through barrier and passivation effects. The complex chromium oxide acts a barrier while the hexavalent chromium contained in the film serves to re-passivate exposed metal. Water that comes in contact with the film dissolves the hexavalent chromium, forming a chromate solution, which then forms a fresh passivation film on the surface. This is the reason for the “self healing” ability of chromate passivation films. This self-healing attribute is limited under wet conditions. The result is that chromate passivate films do not prevent the eventual formation of storage stain if the water is allowed to remain between contacting surfaces. In any case however, even when the sheet is kept dry,  $\text{Cr}^{+6}$  eventually oxidizes to  $\text{Cr}^{+3}$ .

Chromate passivation films are generally not considered paintable without the use of extreme removal procedures. Also, they cannot be effectively phosphate treated.

Any type of chromium passivation interferes negatively with the spot weldability of galvanized sheet. Chrome “poisons” the copper electrodes, softening them, and reducing tip life. For this reason, almost all galvanized sheet intended to be fabricated using automated spot welding equipment, is ordered and produced as non-chemically treated (unpassivated).

Due to health, safety, and environmental concerns, the use of hexavalent chrome is being discontinued. This move began with the European Union RoHS Directive to eliminate hexavalent chromium and other substances from essentially all new electrical and electronic equipment as of July 1, 2006. This regulation is being used as a model in many other countries. It is significant that these regulations do not prohibit the use of chromium; rather they prohibit the use of chrome in the hexavalent state<sup>2</sup>. The use of chrome in other valence states, e.g.,  $\text{Cr}^{+3}$ , is acceptable. As a result, the development of passivates to replace chromate is evolving in two directions: products containing trivalent chromium ( $\text{Cr}^{+3}$ ), or products entirely free of chromium.

## Trivalent Chromium Passivation Treatments

The use of trivalent chromium products allows the retention of some of the advantages of chromium-based systems yet avoids the use of hexavalent chromium treatments<sup>2</sup>. These products have been in use for several decades and are less costly than non-Cr based passivates. Obtaining all the benefits of chromate is difficult to achieve with trivalent Cr, so the latter must be applied at heavier coating weights to obtain the same corrosion protection as the former. Trivalent treatments can be applied successfully on both flood/squeegee and chemcoater application systems. Many of these treatments are paintable.

## Chromium-Free Passivation Treatments

Chrome-free coatings are manufactured from both organic and inorganic materials that can contain many different ionic species, including molybdates, tungstates, vanadates, titanates, and fluorides. While they can be applied using flood/squeegee and chemcoater units, the application parameters have been found

to be more critical compared to those for Cr<sup>+6</sup> systems and coating weights need to be as high as 30 mg/ft<sup>2</sup>. Corrosion performance tests compare favorably with hexavalent systems with excellent formability. Paintability, however, is similar to chromate passivation.

Other non-chromium products have been developed to replace Cr<sup>+6</sup> containing acrylic coatings. Thick acrylic coatings are used on zinc and aluminum-zinc coated sheet, not only as passivates, but as clear protector films to avoid handling marks and to keep the sheet brighter for a longer period. The thickness is as high as 250 mg/ft<sup>2</sup> and is applied using a roll coater at ambient temperatures. The paintability is improved over hexavalent-based treatments.

### Is it Passivated?

To find out if coated sheet has been passivated, here are some methods for detecting its presence.

- Passivation can be quickly evaluated with 5% hydrochloric acid. A drop will “fizz” on unpassivated zinc surfaces but show little to no reaction on passivated zinc.
- The amount of chromium on the surface can always be tested by using chemical stripping and laboratory analysis but the standard of the industry is to use x-ray fluorescence.
- Analysis for the presence of chromate can also be performed by placing a drop of a diphenylcarbohydrazide solution on the surface of the sheet and observing if there is a color change or not. If the drop remains clear, no hexavalent chromium is present. This test is described in ASTM D6492 – Detection of Hexavalent Chromium on Zinc and Zinc/Aluminum Alloy Coated Steel, available at [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org).
- Another quick method of finding out if galvanized sheet has been passivated, with chrome or non-chrome treatments, is to use a simple condensing humidity test. Place a ~4 in [100 mm] square of the galvanize sheet as a lid on a beaker containing 140°F [60°C] water and leave for 15 minutes. Remove the sample and let it dry in open air. If the underside remains shiny it is passivated. If it is stained to any degree it is not passivated.

### Oils

An alternative to using passivation treatments is to apply oil. Specially formulated oils are used that contain rust inhibitors. These are usually polar products designed to strongly adsorb onto metal surfaces. They are effective in delaying the onset of staining from humidity rust due to their ability to prevent moisture from condensing between the laps of a coil or sheets in a bundle. They are not effective, however, in preventing damage due to the penetration of bulk water, e.g., rain, between laps.

Oil also has the benefit of being easily cleaned off at a paint line, so some temporary protection can be given to metallic-coated sheet without the risk of contaminating the cleaning and pretreatment chemicals with chrome. To assist lubrication during forming, passivated sheets can be oiled.

A source of additional information on mill-applied surface treatments can be found in Appendix X2 of ASTM A 924/A 924M General Requirements for Steel Sheet, Metallic-Coated by the Hot-Dip Process, available at [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Zhang, Xiaoge Gregory: Corrosion and Electrochemistry of Zinc, Plenum Press, New York, 1996, pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Cape, Tom, et al: Non-Hexavalent Chromium Coating Technologies for Galvanized Steel, Galvanizers Association Conference, Montreal, QC, 2007