

NASA/TM—2008–215577



# **Long-Term Effects of Soldering By-Products on Nickel-Coated Copper Wire**

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**October 2008**

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Space Administration

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

|      |                                |
|------|--------------------------------|
| EDS  | energy dispersive spectroscopy |
| FTIR | Fourier Transform Infrared     |



## NOMENCLATURE

|                |                      |
|----------------|----------------------|
| C-H            | carbon-hydrogen bond |
| C-O            | carbon-oxygen bond   |
| O-H            | oxygen-hydrogen bond |
| R              | generic organic      |
| R-COO-Cu-OOC-R | copper abietate      |
| R-COOH         | carboxylic acid      |



## TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM

### LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF SOLDERING BY-PRODUCTS ON NICKEL-COATED COPPER WIRE

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Rosin, a material obtained from conifer trees, is a flux material typically incorporated into the cores of solder wire. This material has been used for years to aid in the solder wetting process by removing surface oxides from the materials to be soldered. The primary constituent of commercial rosin is a carboxylic acid known as abietic acid.<sup>1</sup> The removal of surface oxides occurs when this carboxylic acid is converted to a metal ester called abietate. The reaction that leads to the abietate form is illustrated in figure 1.<sup>2</sup> Although soldering requirements usually state that the rosin residue should be removed from soldered areas, usually cleaned using isopropyl alcohol, it is possible that the material can be wicked under the insulation of wires by capillary action. The alcohol itself can assist with the wicking and subsequent deposition of flux residue under the insulation. Excessive wicking is prohibited by soldering requirements, but many times the wicked material is not detected due to the opaqueness of the insulation. When copper wire is part of the soldering process the reaction product is copper abietate, which is green in color. However, copper (II) chloride is also green in color and is an unwanted, corrosive contaminate. The purpose of this study is to determine the composition of the green material found on thirty-year-old, down graded flight cables and to establish the long-term corrosive effects of this material on nickel-plated copper wire.

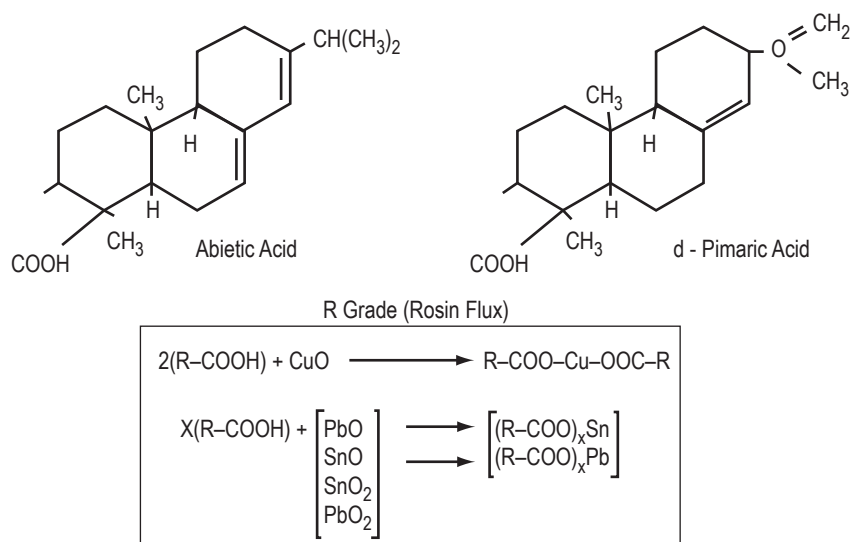


Figure 1. Reaction of copper oxide with abietic acid produces a water-insoluble copper soap called copper abietate.

Two wire assemblies were analyzed during this study. Photographs of both wires were taken and the images are shown in figure 2. The shrink-wrap tubing that protects the soldered area was removed along with the wire insulation to ascertain the location and length of green discoloration. The shrink-wrap tubing and insulation were removed from the wire and a high magnification image of clean and contaminated wire is shown in figure 3. The location of the contamination shows that a significant amount of wicking had occurred. The shorter wire has serial number 009 and was designated with two other identifiers: 5104123-5 and P48-55. The nickel-coated copper overall shield portion of this assembly was approximately 2.5 inches long and each of the wire lead-outs was approximately 2.5 inches long making a total length of 5 inches. The contamination on this wire was found to extend from the soldered end to 0.75 inches down the length of the wire. The other wire has a designator of BTB6 and is much longer. The designation identifies the location where the cable is terminated in the box and was used to differentiate the two wires. The total length of the shielded portion of BTB6 is approximately 24 inches and each of the wire lead-outs was approximately 3.5 inches long making the total length 27.5 inches long. The contamination on this wire was found to extend from the soldered end to approximately 1 inch down the length of the wire. Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) spectra were acquired from the insulation and from the metal itself, both of which were coated with a green material. An FTIR spectrum of uncontaminated insulation was also taken for comparison. The bare wire was also placed in a scanning electron microscope to conduct an energy dispersive spectroscopic (EDS) analysis.

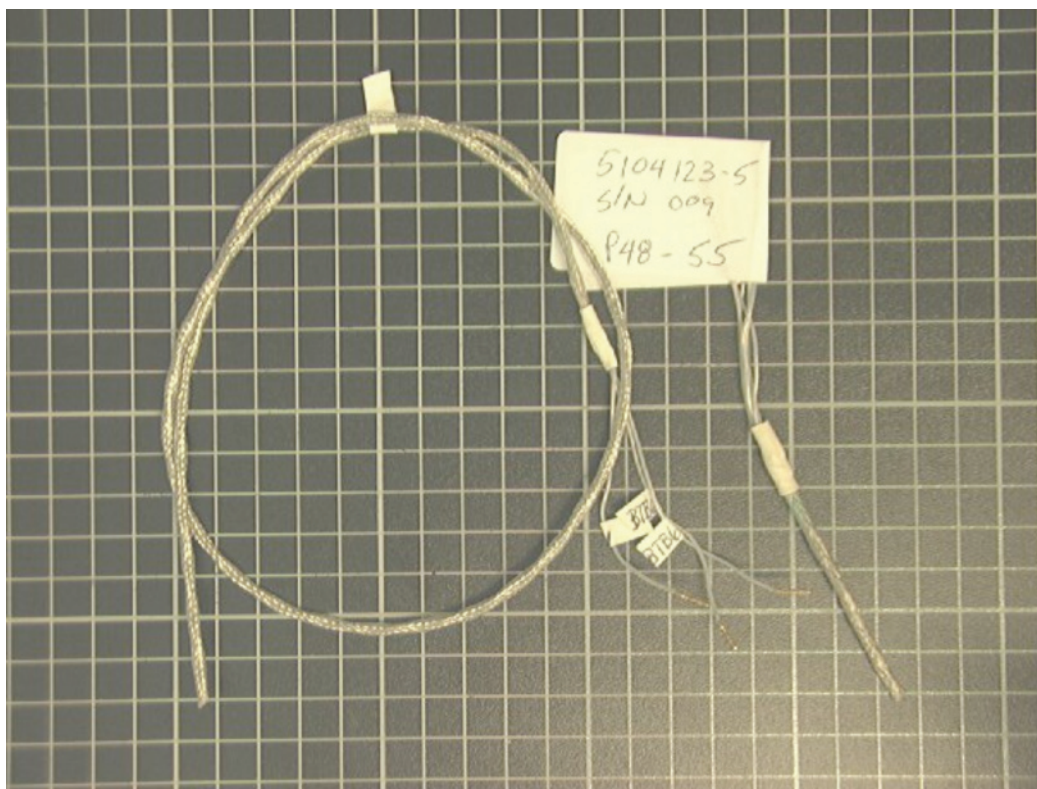


Figure 2. Photograph of wires provided for analysis of corrosion. The smallest boxes that make up the grid in this photo measure  $1 \times 1$  cm.

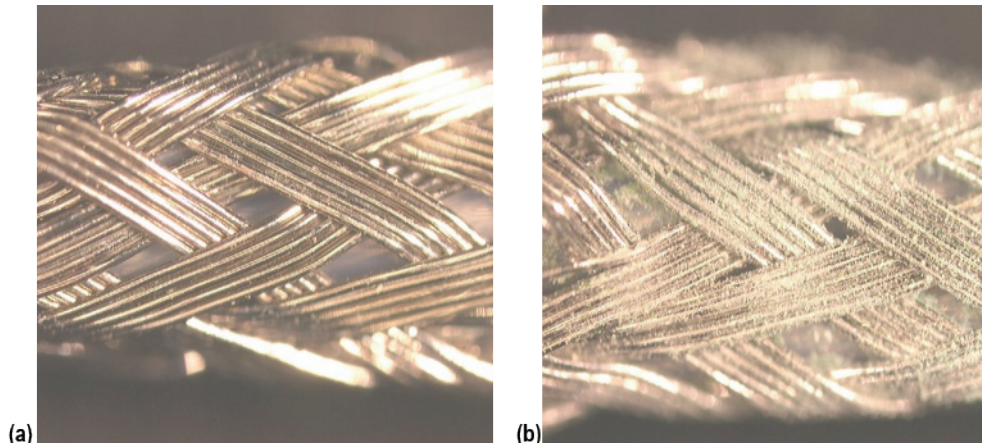


Figure 3. Optical photographs of (a) Clean wire and (b) Wire covered in green material.

A cross section of each section of contaminated wire was performed along with an uncontaminated portion of the same wire. The wires were mounted such that the axial surface was exposed for metallographic preparation. This position was necessary in order to determine if any corrosion was present by measuring the nickel coating thickness in areas exposed to the green material. The wires were potted in a two-part epoxy (Epo-Resin® and Epo-Hardener®, both by Buehler) and allowed to cure overnight without heat or pressure. A standard grit regimen was used to grind the potted samples, namely 240-grit, 400-grit, 800-grit, and 1,200-grit. Grinding was followed by polishing with 6-micron diamond and 0.05-micron alumina.

## 2. ANALYSIS

Fourier Transform Infrared spectra of the wire insulation and the underlying green material are shown in figure 4. The top spectrum is from an area of insulation where the green material was sandwiched between the insulation and the nickel-coated copper wire. The spectrum reveals distinct polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), which is the insulation, fingerprints at 1,147 and 1,201  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . The bottom spectrum is representative of green material from both the insulation and the nickel-coated wire. The green material exhibited characteristic peaks at 1,398  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  and 1,606  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  that point to an ionized carboxylate stretching mode.<sup>3, 4</sup> The small peak at 1,249  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  results from a C–O stretch that is also associated with the carboxylate structure.<sup>4</sup> These peak positions are clear evidence that the bulk of the green material is the abietate form. The peak at 1,703  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  indicates that unreacted abietic acid may also be present because this position is typical for the carbonyl stretch of a free carboxylic acid.<sup>5</sup> The typical O–H stretch band for free carboxylic acids is in the 2,700–3,300  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  area, but the size and shape of the signature from the green material is not indicative of a strong O–H stretch mode in this band. The O–H stretch peak of free carboxylic acid is generally very strong and broad and in most cases overshadows the C–H stretching peaks, which in this case is at 2,867 and 2,925  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ .<sup>3, 4</sup> The lack of a strong O–H stretch peak is compelling evidence that only small amounts of carboxylic acid are present. In addition, the weaker O–H stretch appears to be shifted upward to between 3,100 and 3,600  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ , which is associated with changing hydrogen bonding owing to a decrease of free carboxylic acid moieties in the green material.<sup>5</sup>

Scanning electron microscope images of the material are shown in figures 5 and 6. The material is clearly insulating due to the amount of charging. Energy dispersive spectroscopy was used to analyze the elemental makeup of the green material, as shown in figure 7. The energy dispersive spectrum clearly shows that no chlorides exist. This evidence coupled with the FTIR data strongly indicates that the green material is copper abietate with some small, unreacted abietic acid and not copper (II) chloride.

Cross sections of the wires were obtained so that nickel thicknesses could be measured, as demonstrated in figures 8–10. Typical nickel thickness measurements, acquired using a National Institute of Standards and Technology traceable calibrated optical system, are shown in figure 10. The minimum nickel thickness of 50 microinches (1.27 microns) as called out by the drawings to which these assemblies were built (40M39526, Sheet 5, Section 3.3.2.1) and American Society for Testing and Materials Specification B355 is clearly met. Areas where the contamination was prevalent showed no signs of gross degradation or corrosion even after almost 30 years of residing on the wire surface.

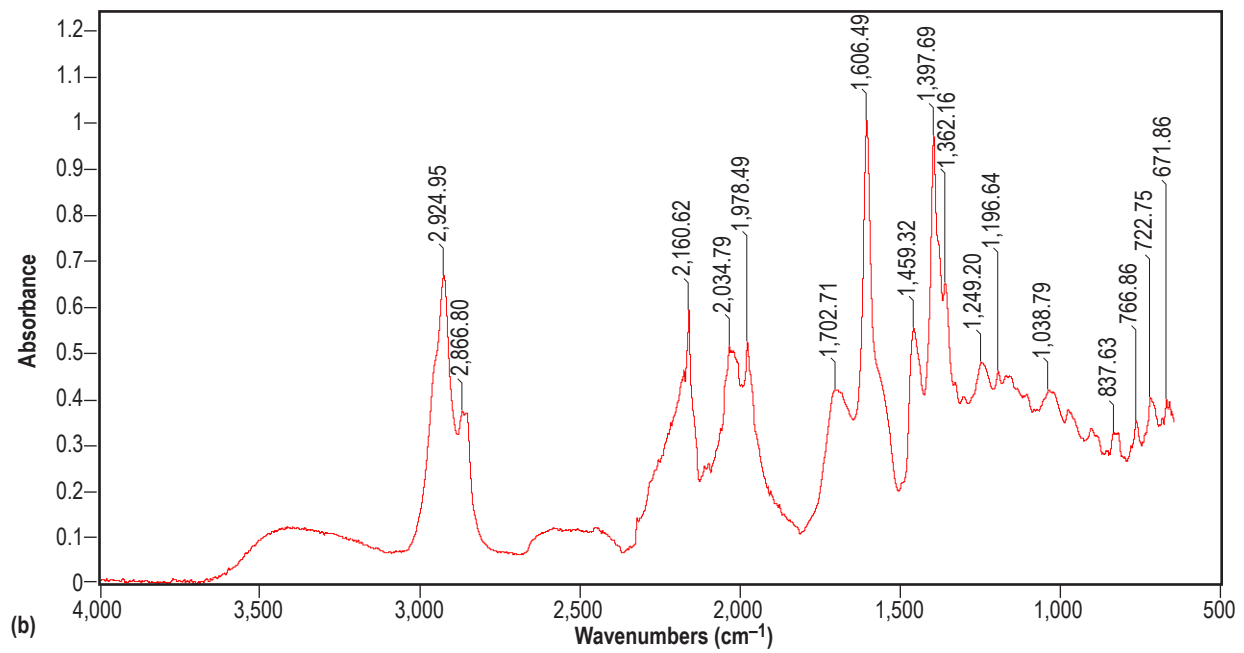
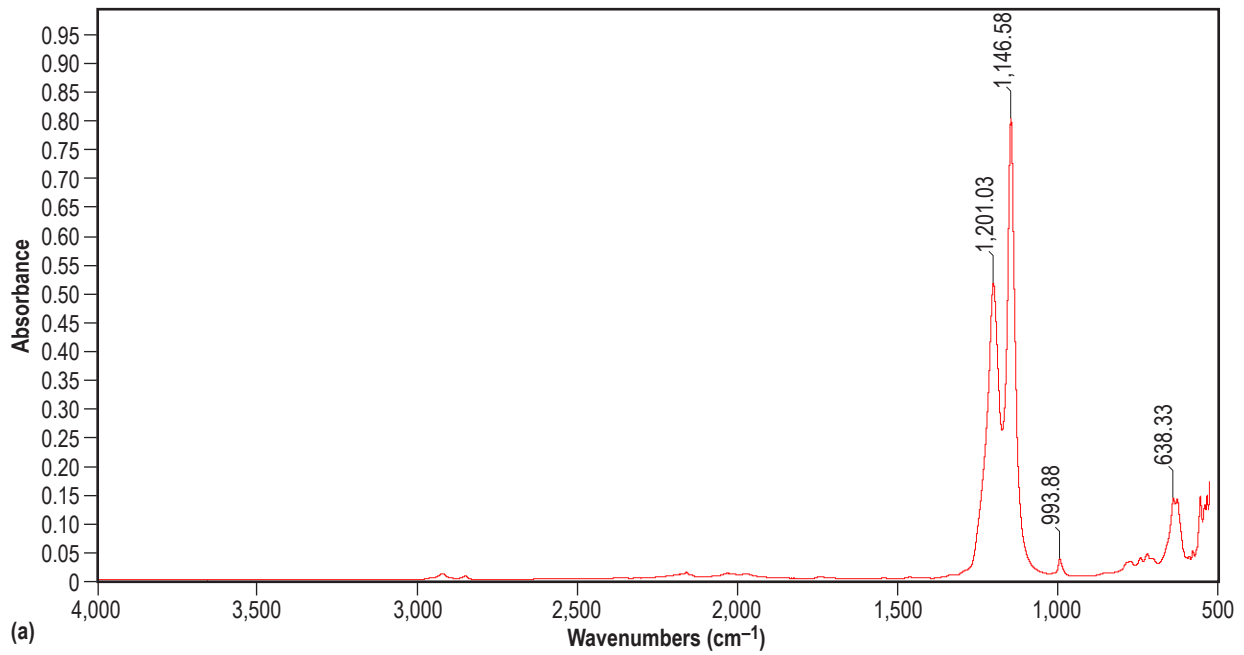


Figure 4. FTIR spectra of (a) Wire insulation and (b) Green material.



Figure 5. High-magnification image of wire showing the presence of contamination that is low molecular weight and insulating as indicated by the large amount of charging.

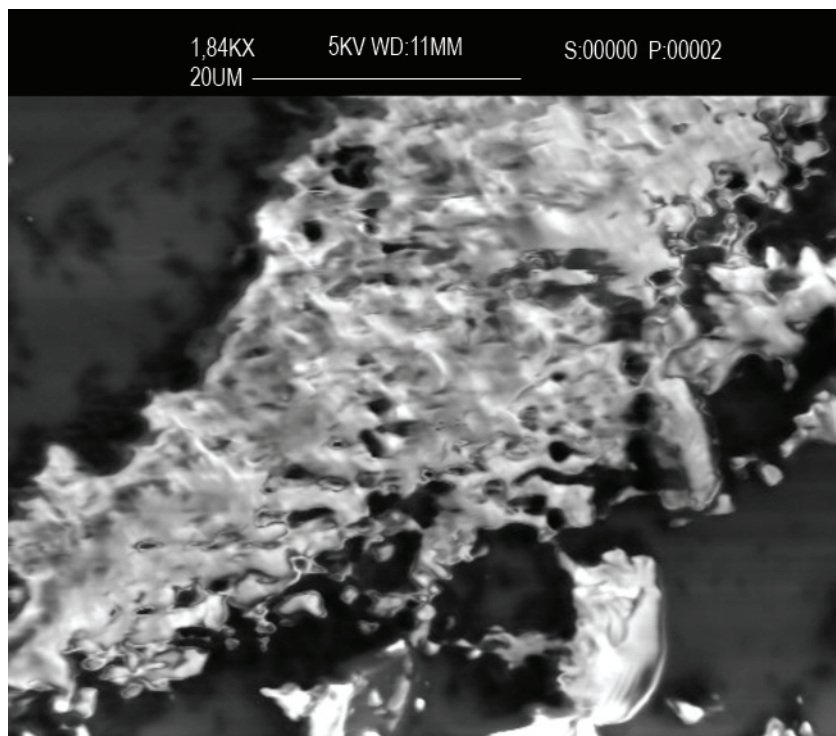


Figure 6. High-magnification image of the contamination from which an EDAX spectrum was taken.



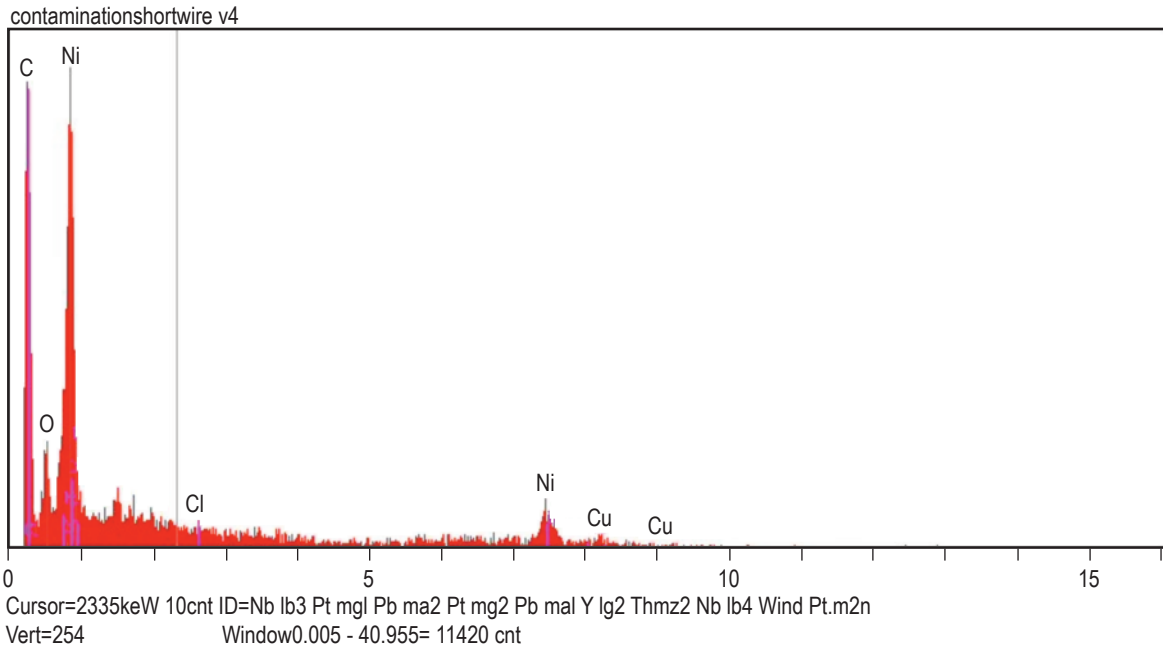


Figure 7. EDS spectrum indicating an organic material and no chlorine contamination. The location of chlorine, had there been a peak, is marked with its symbol, Cl.

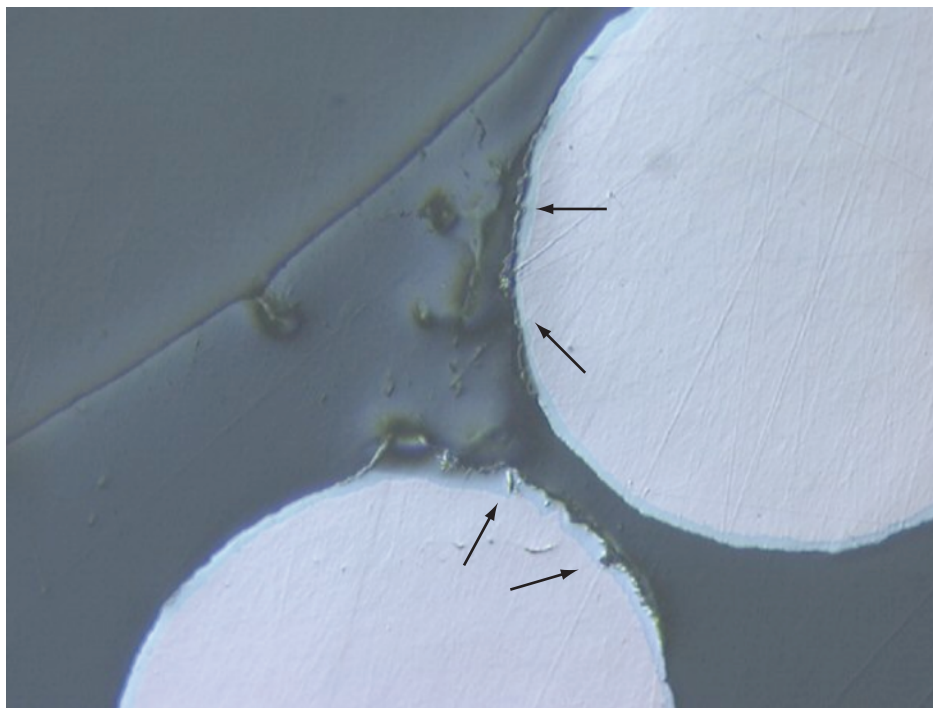


Figure 8. Polarized microscopic image of contaminated area showing an intact nickel coating (black arrows) and no copper degradation ( $\times 500$  magnification).

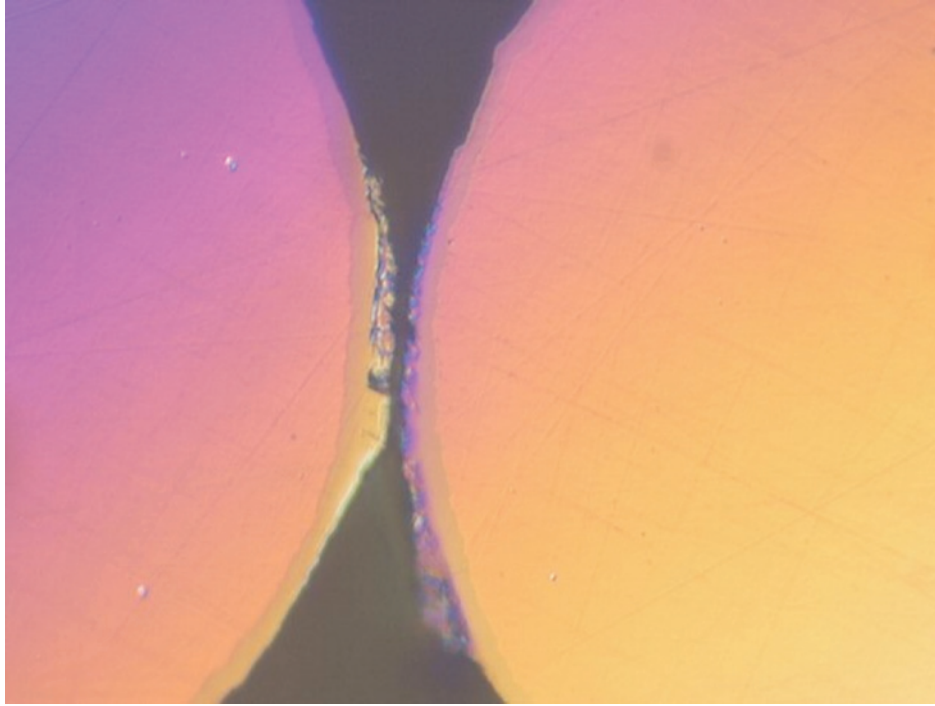


Figure 9. Polarized microscopic image of contaminated area showing an intact nickel coating and no copper degradation ( $\times 1000$  magnification).

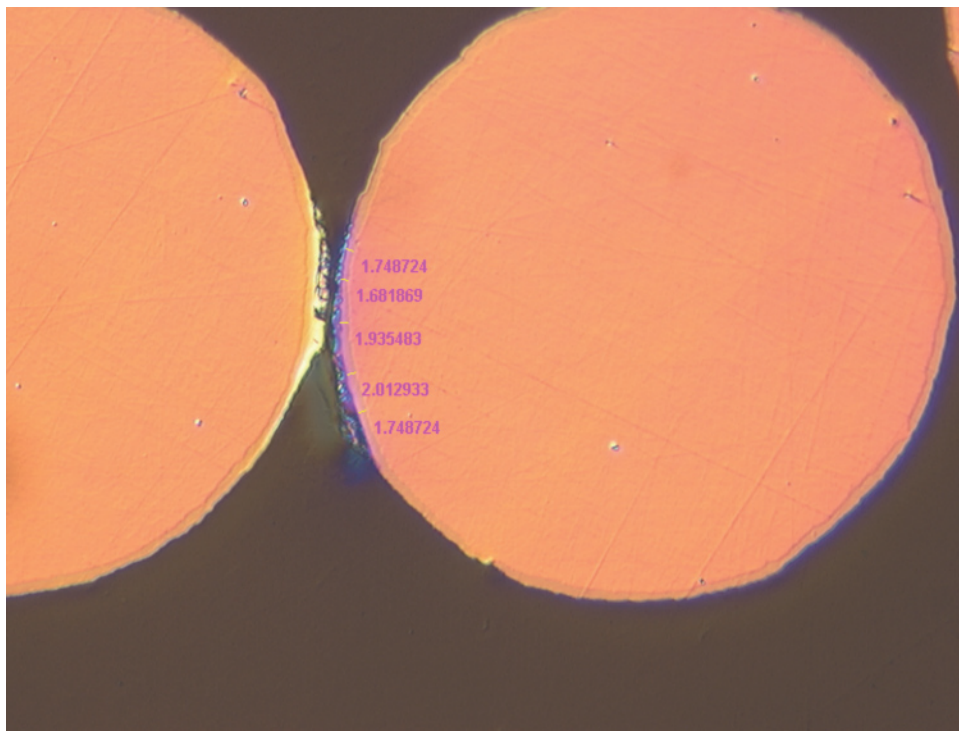


Figure 10. Polarized microscope image of contaminated wire showing minimum nickel thickness is met by calibrated measurement (numbers reported in microns).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The green material on the surface of the nickel-coated copper wire has been confirmed with EDS and FTIR to be copper abietate. Further analysis using scanning electron microscopy and high magnification optical microscopy confirm that no gross degradation or corrosion of the nickel-coated copper wire has occurred. The thickness of the nickel plating under areas of copper abietate still meets the minimum thickness requirements even after decades of exposure to the copper abietate and small amounts of abietic acid. It should be noted, however, that these particular wires have been under controlled environments. During flight, their time is spent in a sealed box that is back-filled with dry nitrogen and is exposed to ambient conditions during lid removal in a clean room. These test results and observations reflect copper abietate behaviour in those environments.



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## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
*OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operation and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188), Washington, DC 20503

|   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>1. AGENCY USE ONLY</b> <i>(Leave Blank)</i>  | <b>2. REPORT DATE</b><br>October 2008                           | <b>3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED</b><br>Technical Memorandum |  |
| <b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b><br>Long-Term Effects of Soldering By-Products on Nickel-Coated Copper Wire   |   |   | <b>5. FUNDING NUMBERS</b>  |
| <b>6. AUTHORS</b><br>R.E. Hodge and T.D. Rolin  |   |   |  |
| <b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b><br>George C. Marshall Space Flight Center<br>Marshall Space Flight Center, AL 35812   |   |   | <b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b><br><br>M-1242                |
| <b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b><br>National Aeronautics and Space Administration<br>Washington, DC 20546-0001  |   |   | <b>10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b><br>NASA/TM-2008-215577 |
| <b>11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b><br>Prepared by ES43 EEE Parts Engineering and Analysis Team, ES43 Parts, Packaging, and Fabrication Branch, and ES 40 Electrical Integration and Fabrication Division, Space Systems Department  |   |   |  |
| <b>12a. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b><br>Unclassified-Unlimited<br>Subject Category 12<br>Availability: NASA CASI 301-621-0390  |   |   | <b>12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE</b>  |
| <b>13. ABSTRACT</b> <i>(Maximum 200 words)</i><br>An analysis of thirty-year-old, down graded flight cables was conducted to determine the makeup of a green material on the surface of the shielded wire near soldered areas and to ascertain if the green material had corroded the nickel-coated copper wire. Two likely candidates were possible due to the handling and environments to which these cables were exposed. The flux used to solder the cables is known to contain abietic acid, a carboxylic acid found in many pine rosins used for the soldering process. The resulting material, copper abietate, is green in color and is formed during the application of heat during soldering operations. Copper (II) chloride, which is also green in color, is known to contaminate flight parts and is corrosive. Data is presented that shows the material is copper abietate, not copper (II) chloride, and more importantly that the abietate does not aggressively attack nickel-plated copper wire. |   |   |  |
| <b>14. SUBJECT TERMS</b><br>soldering, flux, rosin, nickel plated copper wire, corrosion  |   |   | <b>15. NUMBER OF PAGES</b><br>20   |
|   |   |   | <b>16. PRICE CODE</b>  |
| <b>17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT</b><br>Unclassified  | <b>18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE</b><br>Unclassified | <b>19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT</b><br>Unclassified  | <b>20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b><br>Unlimited                               |



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