



Application Note:

Damage Threshold of kW Thermopile Power Sensors

Introduction

A thermopile detector, commonly used for commercial laser power sensors, absorbs incident laser power and heats up, resulting in a temperature rise. This generates an electrical signal through the thermocouple arrays arranged around the detector.

There are several failure modes that can cause thermal fracture of the detector's absorptive coating and melting of the substrate material. In many cases this will result in changes of the sensor's sensitivity. This can occur because the power density is too high, the water flow rate is too low, the total input power is above the maximum power rating, or a combination of these.

Definition of Damage Threshold

The damage threshold for a power sensor is defined as the maximum applied laser power density below which no permanent change to the performance of the sensor is observed. Usually damage threshold is specified as an irradiation power per unit area for CW lasers: kilowatts per square centimeter or kW/cm^2 . An incident power density higher than the damage threshold will overheat the sensor, thereby permanently damaging the laser absorbing surface and changing the sensitivity of the sensor. Therefore, it is crucial to choose a power sensor whose damage threshold is above the maximum power density created by the laser beam.

Damage Mechanism

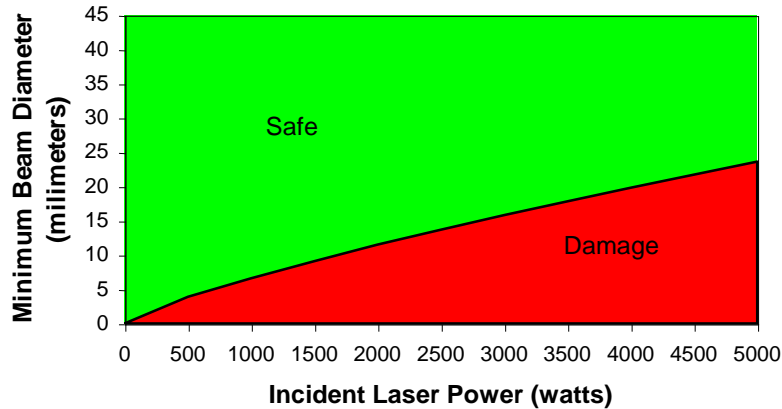
When struck by a laser beam with a power density below, but close to, the damage threshold, the sensor may appear bleached or slightly discolored on the exposed surface. This generally is not an indication of damage, and a sensor in this condition can function accurately for a long time.

As the power density is increased, the irradiated surface begins emitting visible light -- first weak red and then bright white light. The visible light emission is usually initiated on some weak spots where thermal conduction is relatively low, optical absorption is relatively high, and micro-cracks are present. Normally the white light emission indicates that permanent damage is occurring, which in many cases will lead to a thermal runaway, a phenomenon of spreading the damage quickly to the entire beam area.

Non-Gaussian Beams

The PM-model and LM-model kW sensors are able to measure smaller beams if the laser is not Gaussian because the peak power densities are not intense. The following chart outlines the safe beam sizes for typical CO₂ and Nd:YAG kW lasers.

Application Note: *Damage Threshold of a kW Thermopile Sensor*



Beam Diameter and Flow Rate for non-Gaussian Beams

Power	1/e ² Beam Diameter	Flow Rate*
1 kW	> 7 mm	4 LPM (1 GPM)
2 kW	>12 mm	7.5 LPM (2 GPM)
3 kW	>15 mm	7.5 LPM (2 GPM)
4 kW	>15 mm	15 LPM (4 GPM)
5 kW	>18 mm	15 LPM (4 GPM)
>5 kW	Contact factory for assistance	

*Abbreviations: LPM = liters per minute, GPM = gallons per minute

Laser Beams with near-Gaussian Profiles

The sensor is most susceptible to damage from laser beams that approach a Gaussian profile. Coherent has performed finite element analysis (FEA) thermal modeling on the PM-model kW sensors, followed by live testing of a fiber laser that is nearly Gaussian, to confirm the safe operating conditions listed below with these types of lasers. It is extremely important to monitor the beam diameter and water flow rates list below when measuring lasers of this type.

The PM5K is recommended for measurement of any Gaussian beams greater than 3 kW. The PM5K has been shown to withstand Gaussian beams under these conditions:

Beam Diameter and Flow Rate for Gaussian Beams

Power	1/e ² Beam Diameter	Flow Rate*
1-2 kW	>15 mm	15 LPM (4 GPM)
3 kW	>15 mm	15 LPM (4 GPM)
4 kW	>20 mm	15 LPM (4 GPM)
5 kW	>26 mm	15 LPM (4 GPM)
>5.5 kW	Will damage with Gaussian beam	

*Abbreviations: LPM = liters per minute, GPM = gallons per minute

If your laser is on the borderline of the damage threshold limits mentioned above, the follow-up tips can help prevent damaging the sensor.

Ramp kW Power in Steps

During operation it is recommended the power be slowly ramped up in 1 kW increments, instead of instantly exposing the absorber to 5 kW. The absorber can be damaged if it is instantly exposed to a beam near its damage threshold limit. Hold each 1 kW increment for approximately 5 seconds to allow time for the temperature to stabilize.

Cosmetic Marking

You may notice some slight change in your coating over time. In fact, In the process of calibrating your kW thermopile sensor we use a kW laser. This can leave a slight cosmetic bleached or darkened area where the beam was being absorbed. This cosmetic marking has been determined to not cause any discernable change in the sensor's uniformity or its calibration.

Watch for Signs of Damage

As the power is ramped up it is possible to watch for signs of damage. If there is any non-uniform orange glowing points (the peaks of high spots on the coating), the damage point is nearly reached.

Once the glow becomes a uniform round glow the damage point has been reached. The glow will become a more intense red as damage occurs. **The laser must always be turned off immediately if any uniform round glowing is observed.** If a very bright white light is observed, the coating has been ablated from the surface and the metallic disk itself is melting. After this point, the thermopile coating will be compromised and no longer will have the same thermal properties as before. The result will be inaccuracies in laser measurement. The thermopile will need to be sent in to Coherent for repair and calibration.

Contact Coherent

For additional information, contact Coherent Technical Support as follows:

- Contact your local Coherent Service Representative (or visit www.Coherent.com to view a list of contacts worldwide)
- Send an e-mail to: LSMservice@Coherent.com
- Call the Coherent Technical Support Hotline
 - Within the USA: 1-(800)-343-4912
 - Outside of the USA: 1-(408)-764-4042

For additional information about **sensor products**, go to:

<https://www.coherent.com/measurement-control>

To download the **current software** for sensor products, go to this link and scroll down to the Software, Drivers & Manuals section:

<https://www.coherent.com/measurement-control/measurement/laser-measurement-and-control-help-center>