



TECHNICAL REPORT

INFORMATION AND IMAGE MANAGEMENT SILVER RECOVERY TECHNIQUES

May 1, 2005

Technical Report for Information and Image Management

Silver Recovery Techniques

Prepared by
AIIM International

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Abstract:

This technical report covers the economics and techniques of recovering silver from used photographic processing solutions. Included are vendors of equipment and supplies, refiners of recovered silver, and a suggested reading list of other sources of information.

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	References	2
3	Acronyms and Definitions.....	2
4	Sources of Silver	2
5	Some General Considerations	3
5.1	General	3
5.2	Selling Seasoned Fixer	3
5.3	In-house Silver Recovery	3
6	In-house Silver Recovery Methods	4
6.1	General	4
6.2	Metallic Replacement.....	4
6.3	Electrolytic Silver Recovery.....	6
6.3.1	Terminal Recovery	8
6.3.2	Optimum pH for Silver Recovery	9
6.4	Alternate Silver Recovery Methods.....	10
6.4.1	Silver Recovery by Precipitation.....	10
6.4.2	Silver Recovery by Evaporation	10
7	Processor Types	11
7.1	General	11
7.2	Tabletop Processors	11
7.2.1	Tabletop Processor Modifications	11
7.3	Deep Tank Processors	11
8	The Use of Silver Test Paper	12
9	Selling Recovered Silver	12
9.1	General	12
9.2	Selling Silver Flake	13
9.3	Selling Seasoned Fixer Solution	13
9.4	Selling Silver Sludge	13
9.5	Selling Scrap Film and Paper	14
9.6	Secure Destruction of Film.....	14
10	Hazardous Waste Manifesting Considerations	14
10.1	General	14
10.2	Washing Instructions for Recovered Silver	14
10.2.1	Steel Wool Cartridges	14
10.2.2	Flake Silver.....	15
10.3	Photographic Films and Papers.....	15
11	Summary	15
	Annex A (informative) Conversion Factors	16
	Annex B (informative) Sources of Recovery Equipment.....	17

Annex C (informative) Evaporation Equipment Vendors	19
Annex D (informative) Secure Destruction of Film	20
Annex E (informative) Suggested Reading	22

Figures

Figure 1: Cross section of an MRC	5
Figure 2: Cross section of an electrolytic recovery unit	6
Figure 3: Continuous recovery setup	8
Figure 4: Batch recovery system	9

Tables

Table 1: Typical Silver Concentrations	12
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Foreword

Silver recovery technology has been available for more than 50 years and has been the subject of many articles and publications. This report is a revision of ANSI/AIIM TR 4-1982 published by the National Micrographics Association, now AIIM International. This updated version is a current and comprehensive publication specifically written for the micrographics community.

Suggestions for improvement of this technical report should be sent to Chairman, AIIM Standards Board, 1100 Wayne Ave., Suite 1100, Silver Spring, MD, 20910.

This document was developed under the auspices of the AIIM Standards Board, which approved it as an AIIM technical report. The Standards Board had the following members at the time it processed and approved this technical report:

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Technical Report for Information and Image Management—Silver Recovery Techniques

1 Introduction

Poets have spoken of silver and its beauty for thousands of years. Men have betrayed and killed for it. Financiers hoard it. Modern technology depends on it for applications in medicine, electronics, chemical processes, and photography. Front-page stories of wild fluctuations in the price of silver have dramatized the importance of conserving this valuable natural resource. For whatever happens to the price of silver, there is only so much of it on the planet and every year more silver is consumed than mined. The recovery of silver from scrap film and from spent photographic processing solutions is vital in redressing the balance. At least one third of all the silver consumed each year goes into photographic products. As the largest single user of silver, the photographic industry is in the best position of all to participate in the recycling process and thereby ensure an adequate supply.

Another reason to recover silver is to meet environmental regulations. Silver is still classified as a "priority pollutant" and toxic metal by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Until recently most federal and state environmental agencies had assumed that all chemical species of silver are toxic despite a growing body of scientific evidence to the contrary¹. The most recent findings, from several years of concentrated study by many independent scientists in several countries, show that the species of silver found in photo processing does not harm a waste treatment plant, and reverts to an even more innocuous form upon discharge to the environment². Nevertheless, until the EPA changes the standards, a number of the older sewer codes remain in place. Many municipalities have established sewer codes restricting the concentration of total silver in waste water discharges to a few parts per million or less. If the sewer code is exceeded, one must consider silver recovery from fixers, bleaches (reversal processing only), or wash water. (This is considered good practice in any event, for economic as well as environmental reasons.) The type of silver recovery technology employed is often dependent upon the silver limitation that must be met. Off-site disposal of processing solutions may have to be considered in some extreme cases.

Technology for recovering silver from used fixer has been around for decades and is widely available. Silver recovery from reversal bleaches and wash water is more difficult and requires special handling. Still another compelling reason to recover silver is economics. Silver recovery was profitable even when the metal was selling for less than \$3 per troy ounce. We are not likely to see such low prices again, and properly sized recovery equipment is able to pay for itself in a short time.

Before entering a silver recovery program, first answer a few questions. Many microfilmmers can legitimately ask whether they use enough fixer to justify their involvement with silver recovery methods. If companies do venture into such activities, should they recover silver themselves or is it better to have someone else do it?

Initially, the most important thing is to become acquainted with the basics of silver recovery to determine the approach best suited to a particular situation. If there are unanswered questions, help is available from a number of sources. These include silver service companies, firms supplying film and chemicals, silver recovery equipment manufacturers, and their dealers. (See Annexes B through D for further information.)

¹ An Eastman Kodak Company technical report, *Silver and the Environment*, reviews the environmental chemistry and environmental toxicology of silver.

² *Transport, Fate and Effects of Silver in the Environment: Research Findings of the Argentum International Conference Series, 1993-2000*. Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, Boca Raton, FL, 2001

2 References

AIIM TR20-1989, *Environmental and Right-to-Know Regulations Affecting Microfilm Processors*

Chemical Controls Handbook, Publication Z-98, Rochester, NY: Eastman Kodak.

3 Acronyms and Definitions

3.1

EP

Extraction Procedure
toxic category in RCRA

3.2

MRC

metallic replacement cartridge

3.3

RCRA

Resource Conservation and Recovery Act

3.4

SWC

steel wool cartridge

3.5

TMT

trimercapto-s-triazine

4 Sources of Silver

In the micrographics industry, silver may be recovered from two main sources: exhausted processing solutions and processed films or papers. When film is wet-processed, as much as 70 percent of the silver in the emulsion layer is removed and remains in the processing solutions. The rest of the silver stays on the film to form the image. When film or paper is no longer required for records purposes, it may have substantial value. Variables that influence the value of the scrap film include the type of product, the size of the image area, polarity, the quantity available, and the market price of silver at the time of refining. The only way to determine the true value of the film is to assay a representative sample. The other source of silver is the spent processing solutions. In conventional microfilm processing, the greatest percentage of recoverable silver is in the fixing bath. Photographic fixers convert unexposed, undeveloped silver halide to soluble silver compounds, which diffuse out of the emulsion layers.

In black-and-white reversal processing, most of the silver usually remains on the film. Silver that is removed is found in the bleach and fixer. However, the concentration may be too low, and the extraction technique too time consuming, to be economical for most microfilm installations. Silver also is found in wash water, but usually in concentrations too low for profitable recovery. However, silver recovery from these solutions may be necessary to meet municipal regulatory requirements.

Micrographic films and papers that do not contain silver include diazo, vesicular, and most electrostatic materials.

5 Some General Considerations

5.1 General

If silver recovery is not required to meet local municipal sewer code regulations, it should be recovered to meet federal guidelines and also to conserve a valuable resource. In addition, the economics of silver recovery should be addressed. To find out how much silver is potentially available from the fixer that is being consumed, you must identify the usage rate of the fixer and the silver concentration, and then perform this equation:

$$\text{silver concentration in troy oz/gallon} \times \text{gallon/week} = \text{troy oz of silver/week}$$

The concentration can be estimated in-house with silver test paper (see Section 8) or by a service company, equipment vendor, or commercial analytical laboratory that can do a chemical analysis. Care should be taken to ensure that the sample of used fixer is representative of the process.

The next step is to find out the current market price for silver. This is given in the commodities listings in the *Wall Street Journal* and in the *New York Times* under the heading "Cash Prices."

Silver recovery may be profitable even if the potential return is less than \$20 to \$25 per week. This takes into account the fact that the quoted market price is for bullion grade silver and that, for reasons to be discussed later, a sale of small amounts of impure silver seldom realizes more than 50 percent of the market price. If silver recovery is economically feasible, two options are available:

1. Sell the seasoned fixer; or
2. Recover the silver in-house, either with a metallic replacement cartridge or an electrolytic unit. Both techniques can be employed with equipment purchased directly by the microfilmer or with the equipment installed and serviced by a service company.

5.2 Selling Seasoned Fixer

The small user will have to save the spent fixer until enough is accumulated to be of interest to a potential buyer. This is discussed in Section 9.

5.3 In-house Silver Recovery

If the fixer volume is large enough, no money at all needs to be invested in equipment. Many operations such as small as dentists' offices sell fixer. There are silver service companies that will come to the plant, install a system on the processor, monitor it, then take away the recovered silver and use it to pay for the system. The silver service company bears the cost of the equipment and the people needed to monitor the program, so it will charge a percentage of the recovered silver to cover its costs and obtain profits. This results in some mutual incentive for both the processing organization and the silver service company to operate an efficient recovery program. However, typically only 50 percent of the market price for the recovered silver may be received.

On the other hand, a properly managed silver recovery system will yield a higher dollar return when the silver is sold and, in the long run, it might provide a higher return on investment. This is a question answered after comparing silver service company proposals with the estimated cost of purchasing and operating equipment in-house. Shipping, assaying, and refining charges are always involved in the selling of recovered silver. This subject is discussed in more detail in Section 9.

If the decision is made to buy equipment, the choice then must be made among silver recovery techniques and equipment. The most common techniques are metallic replacement and electrolytic plating. These techniques, with their advantages and disadvantages, are described in Section 6.