V International Scientific and Technical Conference Actual Issues of Power Supply Systems

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AIPCP25-CF-ICAIPSS2025-00444 | Article

Microstructural Degradation Mechanisms in High-Voltage Transmission Conductors: A Review of Crystal Structure, Diffusion Processes, and Long-Term Aging

Gulhayot Xolyigitova [a)], Munojat Abduqaxxorova, Nodirbek Madaminov

Andijan state technical university, Andijan, Uzbekistan

[a)] *Corresponding author:* gulhayot2012@gmail.com

Abstract. High-voltage overhead transmission conductors operate under complex combinations of electrical, thermal, mechanical, and environmental loads, leading to gradual microstructural degradation and performance loss. This review systematically analyzes degradation mechanisms in copper (Cu), aluminum (Al), and Cu–Al alloy conductors, with emphasis on crystal structure effects, dislocation dynamics, grain boundary diffusion, oxidation, creep, and vibration-induced fatigue. Drawing on recent Scopus-indexed literature, the paper synthesizes experimental and theoretical findings to explain how microstructural evolution governs electrical resistance, mechanical stability, and service lifetime. Particular attention is given to diffusion-controlled aging, void formation, and creep-driven sagging under elevated temperatures. Finally, current material design strategies and advanced conductor concepts aimed at mitigating degradation are discussed. This review provides a unified materials-science framework for understanding conductor aging and supports informed material selection for reliable power transmission systems.

INTRODUCTION

The long-term reliability of high-voltage overhead transmission lines is fundamentally controlled by the stability of conductor materials under combined electrical, thermal, mechanical, and environmental loading conditions. Copper (Cu), aluminum (Al), and Cu–Al alloy systems remain the most widely used materials due to their favorable balance of electrical conductivity, mechanical strength, and manufacturability [1].

However, extensive field observations and failure analyses demonstrate that prolonged exposure to thermal cycling, sustained tensile stress, wind-induced vibration, and atmospheric oxidation leads to progressive microstructural degradation, increased electrical resistance, creep-induced sagging, and fatigue-driven fracture [2]. Recent Scopus-indexed studies emphasize that conductor aging is governed by interacting physical mechanisms rather than isolated damage processes [3].

TABLE 1. Service Temperature Capability and Material Concepts of Overhead Transmission Conductors

Conductor / Material Concept	Core / Matrix Material	Typical Long-Term Operating Temperature	Key Microstructural Implications
Conventional ACSR	Strain-hardened Al + steel core	~70–80 °C	Recovery and partial recrystallization of Al at elevated temperature; accelerated creep and sag
ACSS	Fully annealed Al + steel core	200 °C (design up to ~250 °C)	Load transfer to steel core; reduced Al creep sensitivity
HTLS / Composite-core conductors	Al strands + composite core	≥150–200 °C	Suppressed sag; reduced creep due to thermally stable core

1. Crystal Structure and Its Role in Conductor Performance. Copper and aluminum both crystallize in the face-centered cubic (FCC) lattice, which provides twelve independent slip systems and enables high ductility under

tensile loading [4]. This crystallographic feature allows conductors to accommodate plastic deformation without catastrophic fracture during installation and service.

In Cu–Al alloy systems, solid-solution strengthening alters lattice spacing and elastic properties, thereby modifying dislocation mobility [5]. While alloying improves short-term mechanical strength, it also enhances recovery and recrystallization kinetics at elevated temperatures, which may reduce long-term mechanical stability during service [6].

2. Dislocation Dynamics under Thermal and Mechanical Loading. Dislocation motion is the dominant mechanism controlling plastic deformation, creep, and fatigue behavior in metallic conductors [7]. Increasing temperature reduces the activation energy for dislocation glide and climb, resulting in time-dependent deformation. Aluminum conductors exhibit pronounced creep deformation at temperatures exceeding 100–120 °C, whereas copper demonstrates superior resistance due to its higher melting temperature and lower self-diffusion coefficient. Thermal cycling caused by fluctuating current loads induces repeated dislocation rearrangement and subgrain formation. Concurrently, wind-induced vibration generates cyclic mechanical strain, promoting persistent slip band formation and accelerating fatigue damage accumulation [8-10].

3. Grain Boundary Diffusion and Long-Term Aging. Grain boundary diffusion becomes the dominant mass-transport mechanism when the operating temperature approaches approximately 0.4–0.5 of the melting temperature [11]. In aluminum conductors, significant grain boundary diffusion is activated above 150 °C, leading to void nucleation, grain growth, and intergranular embrittlement [12].

TABLE 2. Diffusion and Grain Boundary Transport Parameters Relevant to Conductor Aging

Diffusion Process	Typical Expression	Activation Energy (Representative)	Aging Consequence
Lattice self-diffusion (Cu)	$D = D_0 \exp(-Q/RT)$	~2.0 eV	Slower creep and void formation than Al
Grain boundary diffusion (Al, Cu)	Arrhenius-type	~0.5–0.6 eV	Void nucleation and intergranular weakening at $T > 0.4–0.5 \, T_m$
Vacancy-assisted diffusion	Thermally activated	Material-dependent	Accelerated aging under sustained stress

In Cu–Al alloys, interdiffusion between constituent elements and precipitate coarsening further degrade mechanical integrity over time. The accumulation of vacancies and impurities at grain boundaries reduces the effective load-bearing cross-sectional area and facilitates crack initiation.

4. Oxidation and Surface-Related Degradation

Overhead conductors continuously operate in oxidizing atmospheric environments. Aluminum rapidly forms a thin and adherent Al_2O_3 layer that provides partial corrosion protection but influences heat dissipation and surface diffusion behavior. Copper forms Cu_2O and CuO layers that increase surface resistivity and contribute to electrical losses. Recent investigations show that oxide layers can act as diffusion pathways and stress concentrators, promoting microcrack initiation at the metal–oxide interface. These localized defects often evolve into thermally unstable regions, accelerating degradation and shortening conductor lifetime.

TABLE 3. Oxidation- and Surface-Related Degradation Mechanisms in Cu and Al Conductors.

Degradation Mechanism	Observed Feature	Quantitative Trend / Constant	Effect on Performance
Aluminum oxidation	Al_2O_3 surface film	Growth accelerates with temperature	Alters heat dissipation; promotes surface diffusion
Copper oxidation	Cu_2O / CuO layers	Increased surface resistivity	Electrical losses and local heating
Oxide-assisted cracking	Microcracks at metal–oxide interface	Stress-concentration driven	Early crack initiation
Oxidation + aging synergy	Thickened oxide + defects	Property degradation over decades	Reduced lifetime and reliability

5. Creep and Stress Relaxation in Overhead Conductors. Creep deformation under sustained mechanical tension is a critical factor governing conductor sagging during long-term operation. Elevated temperatures resulting from solar radiation and Joule heating significantly intensify creep strain, particularly in aluminum-based conductors.

TABLE 4. Creep Behavior and Diffusion-Controlled Parameters of Aluminum-Based Conductor Alloys.

Material / Condition	Temperature (°C)	Stress Exponent / Activation Energy	Dominant Creep Mechanism
8xxx Al conductor alloy	100	$n \approx 3.1$	Dislocation glide with solute drag
8xxx Al conductor alloy	150	$n \approx 3.8$	Dislocation climb assisted by diffusion
8xxx Al conductor alloy	200	$n \approx 4.5$	Diffusion-controlled dislocation creep
Elevated-temperature Al alloys	150–250	$Q \approx 145\text{--}155 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$	Steady-state creep (power-law)

Copper exhibits superior creep resistance but suffers from higher density, while aluminum offers weight advantages at the expense of dimensional stability. Cu–Al alloy systems provide an intermediate solution by balancing density reduction and improved creep performance.

6. Fatigue and Vibration-Induced Damage. Wind-induced vibration subjects overhead conductors to millions of low-amplitude loading cycles annually. These cyclic stresses promote dislocation accumulation and persistent slip band formation, followed by microcrack nucleation.

Crack propagation often occurs along grain boundaries weakened by diffusion and oxidation, ultimately leading to strand fracture and mechanical failure [25]. Fatigue-driven damage is widely recognized as one of the primary causes of premature conductor replacement in power transmission systems.

TABLE 5. Long-Term Mechanical and Structural Degradation of Aluminum Overhead Conductors after ~30 Years of Service.

Property / Feature	As-Manufactured Condition	Aged Condition (~30 years in service)	Quantified Change	Dominant Degradation Mechanism	Performance Implication
Tensile strength	Nominal design strength	Noticeably reduced	≈ **10% decrease**	Cross-section loss, microstructural damage	Reduced load-bearing capacity
Elongation to fracture	High ductility (uniform plastic deformation)	Significantly reduced ductility	≈ **30% decrease**	Oxidation-assisted embrittlement, defect accumulation	Increased brittleness, higher fracture risk
Surface morphology	Smooth, defect-free surface	Severe pitting corrosion and oxide layers	Qualitative but extensive	Atmospheric oxidation, environmental exposure	Stress concentration sites
Cross-sectional integrity	Full nominal cross-section	Local material loss and thinning	Localized reduction	Corrosion and localized overheating	Increased local stress
Strand continuity	Continuous metallic strands	Local melting zones and discontinuities	Observed in service-aged samples	Electrical arcing and thermal overload	Premature strand failure
Failure initiation mode	Ductile deformation-controlled	Surface-initiated damage	Shift in failure mechanism	Oxidation + thermal effects	Reduced service reliability

7. Material Design Strategies and Future Directions. To mitigate degradation, recent research focuses on advanced conductor materials such as aluminum–zirconium alloys, thermally stabilized aluminum systems, and composite-core conductors. These materials suppress diffusion, delay recrystallization, and improve creep resistance under elevated temperatures.

Digital twin frameworks that couple electrical loading conditions with microstructural evolution models are emerging as effective tools for lifetime prediction and predictive maintenance planning.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis presented in Tables 1–5 demonstrates that the long-term reliability of high-voltage transmission conductors is governed not by a single degradation mechanism, but by a synergistic interaction between crystal structure, diffusion-controlled processes, oxidation kinetics, and time-dependent mechanical damage.

Importantly, the reviewed Scopus data reveal several non-trivial trade-offs and unresolved contradictions that are often overlooked in conventional conductor design strategies.

1. Temperature Capability vs. Microstructural Stability

Table 1 clearly shows that increasing the allowable operating temperature-from conventional ACSR (~75–80 °C) to ACSS and HTLS-class conductors (≥200 °C)-does not inherently eliminate degradation but rather shifts the dominant damage mechanism.

While ACSS designs successfully mitigate sag by transferring mechanical load to the steel core, the aluminum strands remain susceptible to accelerated diffusion and recovery phenomena. This creates a paradox: higher ampacity improves grid capacity, yet simultaneously pushes aluminum into a thermodynamically unstable regime, where grain boundary diffusion and creep become dominant.

Thus, high-temperature conductor concepts should not be evaluated solely by ampacity ratings; microstructural stability thresholds must be treated as design-limiting criteria.

2. Creep Is Not a Single Mechanism: Stress Exponent Evolution

The creep data summarized in Table 2 reveal a critical insight: the stress exponent (n) increases systematically with temperature, transitioning aluminum conductors from glide-dominated deformation ($n \approx 3$) to diffusion-assisted dislocation climb ($n > 4$).

This transition implies that creep resistance enhancements achieved through alloying (e.g., Fe-rich dispersoids in 8xxx alloys) are temperature-dependent and transient. At elevated temperatures (>150 °C), solute drag and particle pinning effects progressively lose effectiveness as diffusion accelerates.

Consequently, conductor lifetime predictions based on low-temperature creep data significantly underestimate long-term deformation under real service conditions.

3. Grain Boundary Diffusion as the Aging Rate-Controller

Table 3 highlights grain boundary diffusion as the **rate-controlling process** for long-term aging once the operating temperature exceeds ~0.4–0.5 T_m. Notably, the much lower activation energy for grain boundary diffusion (~0.5–0.6 eV) compared to lattice diffusion explains why **aging accelerates abruptly rather than gradually**.

This behavior challenges simplified Arrhenius lifetime extrapolations commonly used in conductor design. Even modest temperature excursions-caused by overloads, solar heating, or poor heat dissipation-can activate grain boundary transport, leading to **void nucleation, intergranular weakening, and premature mechanical failure**.

4. Real-Service Evidence: Mechanical Property Degradation

The long-term field data summarized in Table 4 (≈30 years of service) provide critical validation of the microstructural mechanisms discussed earlier. The observed **~10% reduction in tensile strength and ~30% loss of ductility** cannot be attributed to a single factor such as corrosion or fatigue alone.

Instead, the data confirm a **cumulative degradation model**, where:

- oxidation-induced cross-section loss,
- diffusion-assisted recovery,
- and localized thermal damage (e.g., electrical arcing)

act concurrently. Importantly, the disproportionate loss of elongation relative to strength indicates a **ductile-to-quasi-brittle transition**, which significantly increases the risk of sudden fracture under transient loads.

5. Oxidation as an Active Degradation Driver, Not a Passive Surface Effect

Table 5 underscores that oxidation in aluminum and copper conductors is not merely a protective or superficial phenomenon. Oxide layers act as:

- **stress concentrators**,
- **enhanced diffusion pathways**, and
- **thermal barriers**, promoting localized overheating.

The coupling between oxidation and diffusion explains why surface degradation often precedes internal damage. In long-term service, oxide-assisted cracking at the metal–oxide interface becomes a critical crack initiation site, particularly under vibration-induced fatigue.

This finding contradicts the common assumption that aluminum's native Al_2O_3 layer guarantees long-term stability under elevated temperatures.

6. Unresolved Challenges and Research Gaps

Despite extensive Scopus-indexed literature, several critical gaps remain:

1. **Lack of coupled models** integrating oxidation kinetics, diffusion, and creep into unified lifetime predictions.
2. Insufficient **in-situ microstructural data** under combined electrical, thermal, and mechanical loading.

3. Over-reliance on short-term laboratory creep tests that fail to capture **decades-long diffusion-controlled aging**.

Addressing these gaps will require combining advanced characterization (in-situ SEM/TEM, synchrotron diffraction) with **physically informed digital twin frameworks**.

Overall Implication

The comparative evidence demonstrates that improving conductor performance is not a matter of maximizing ampacity alone. Instead, **microstructural stability under long-term service conditions must be elevated to a primary design criterion**. Without this shift, next-generation high-temperature conductors risk trading short-term performance gains for accelerated long-term degradation.

CONCLUSIONS

This review demonstrates that the long-term performance and reliability of high-voltage transmission conductors are governed by a **coupled set of microstructural degradation mechanisms**, rather than by isolated effects such as creep, oxidation, or fatigue alone. Crystal structure, diffusion-controlled processes, oxidation kinetics, and time-dependent mechanical damage interact synergistically, progressively reducing both mechanical integrity and electrical performance during service.

Comparative analysis of conductor concepts shows that increasing allowable operating temperature-through ACSS and HTLS-type designs-does not eliminate degradation, but instead **shifts the dominant damage mechanisms toward diffusion- and oxidation-controlled regimes**. While higher ampacity improves short-term transmission capacity, it simultaneously drives aluminum-based conductors closer to thermodynamic and kinetic instability thresholds, where grain boundary diffusion, recovery, and creep accelerate sharply.

Creep behavior is shown to be strongly temperature-dependent, with stress exponent evolution indicating a transition from glide-dominated to diffusion-assisted dislocation creep at elevated temperatures. This transition undermines the long-term effectiveness of alloying and particle pinning strategies, which are often optimized using short-duration laboratory tests that fail to capture decades-long aging.

Field evidence from long-service conductors confirms that mechanical degradation is cumulative and non-linear. The disproportionate reduction in ductility relative to tensile strength highlights a critical **loss of damage tolerance**, increasing the likelihood of sudden failure under transient loading conditions. Oxidation further amplifies degradation by acting as an active driver of diffusion, stress concentration, and localized overheating rather than a passive surface phenomenon.

Overall, the findings indicate that **ampacity-centered design paradigms are insufficient** for ensuring long-term conductor reliability. Future conductor development must prioritize **microstructural stability under sustained thermal and mechanical loading** as a primary design criterion. Integrating diffusion kinetics, oxidation behavior, and creep mechanics into unified lifetime prediction frameworks-supported by in-situ characterization and digital twin approaches-represents a necessary direction for next-generation power transmission materials.

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