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The demand for SOI (Silicon on Insulator) wafers is continuing to build momentum, according to a new report from Semico. The SOI market grew by over 100 percent in 2006 compared to 2005. Although the pace of growth is set to slow, Semico says that demand is such that the market research firm expects sales to increase by 40 percent in 2007.

"As 45nm technology enters mainstream manufacturing and 32nm is introduced in the 2010 timeframe, we expect even greater SOI wafer demand for high performance applications," said Joanne Itow, Managing Director of Manufacturing at Semico Research Corporation. "This will drive SOI to even higher levels beyond 2011. However, the availability of quality SOI wafers and the alternative solutions that may be discovered for processing products at 45nm and below will play a critical cost/volume point which triggers economic feasibility of technologies."

The growth has been fuelled in part due to the latest generation of gaming consoles. All three main systems from Microsoft, Nintendo and Sony use microprocessors that are designed for harnessing the benefits of SOI technology. AMD, IBM and Freescale use SOI wafers for mainstream and niche microprocessor markets, adding to the growth seen in SOI use in recent years.

Soitec, the leading SOI wafer manufacturer, posted sales of €372.0 million for its 2006 financial year, which represents growth of 41.5% over the previous year. Wafer sales grew by 48.9%, according to the company.

However, Soitec reiterated that it was seeing a softening in demand due to inventory issues but was also affected by lower demand from the gaming market. Last year Microsoft reduced wafer loadings at foundry partner Chartered Semiconductor.

Soitec noted that demand in the second half of the year is expected to be very strong, also noting that this would be due to new product introductions. It is well known that AMD is launching native quad-core microprocessors in the second half of the year. Soitec is the main SOI wafer supplier to AMD.

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