

[54] HIGH POWER METALLIC HALIDE LASER

[76] Inventor: Robert A. Frosch, Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, with respect to an invention of Thomas J. Pivrotto, La Canada, Calif.

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[52] U.S. Cl. 330/4.3; 372/56; 372/58; 372/82

[58] Field of Search 330/4.3; 331/94.5 G, 331/94.5 PE

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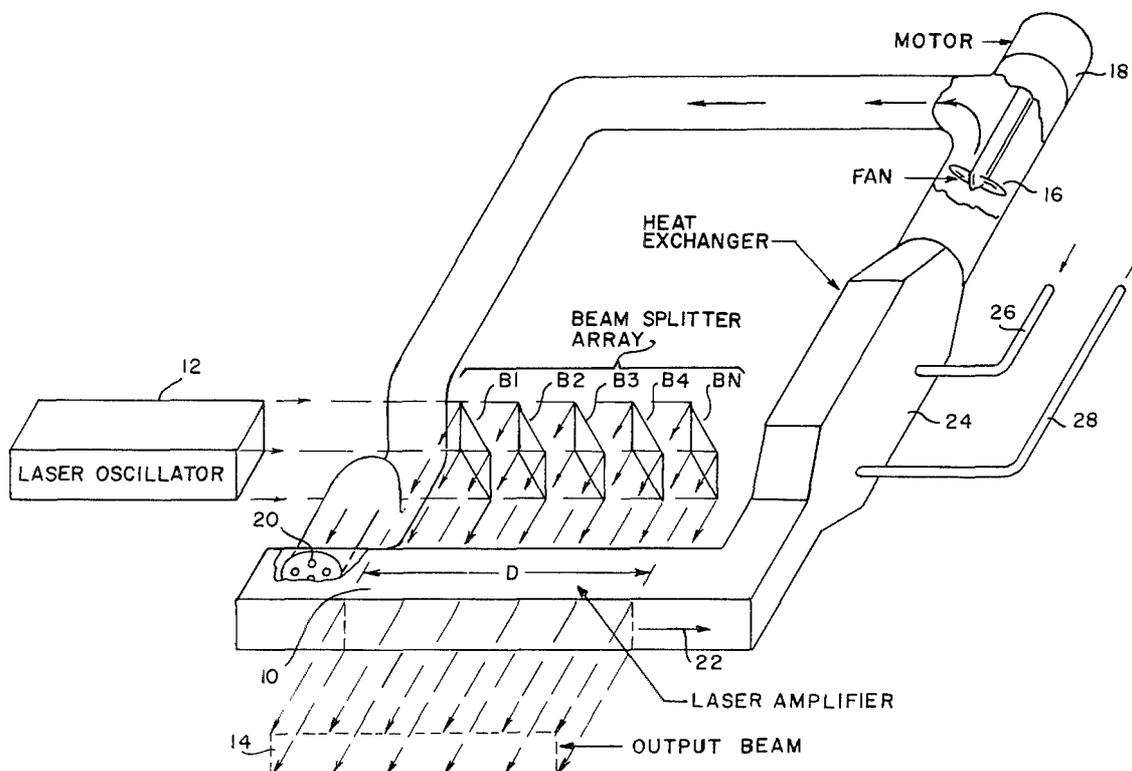
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Primary Examiner—Nelson Moskowitz
 Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Paul F. McCaul; John R. Manning

[57] ABSTRACT

A high power metallic halide laser capable of providing 300 watts of output power. More specifically, a laser amplification system is disclosed whereby a metallic halide vapor such as copper chloride (Cu_2Cl_2) is caused to flow through a laser amplifier (10) and a heat exchanger means (24) in a closed loop system whereby the flow rate is altered to control the temperature rise across the length of the laser amplifier. In the copper chloride laser described in an exemplary embodiment, the copper atoms within the laser amplifier should not exceed a temperature of 3000° K. so that the number of copper atoms in the metastable state will not be high enough to prevent amplification in the amplifier. In addition, a molecular dissociation apparatus (20) is provided at the input to the laser amplifier for dissociating the copper chloride into copper atoms and ions and chlorine atoms and ions. The dissociation apparatus includes a hollow cathode tube (56) and an annular ring (60) spaced apart from the tube end (62). A voltage differential is applied between the annular ring and the hollow cathode tube so that as the copper chloride flows therethrough, it is dissociated into copper and chlorine ions and atoms.

6 Claims, 5 Drawing Figures



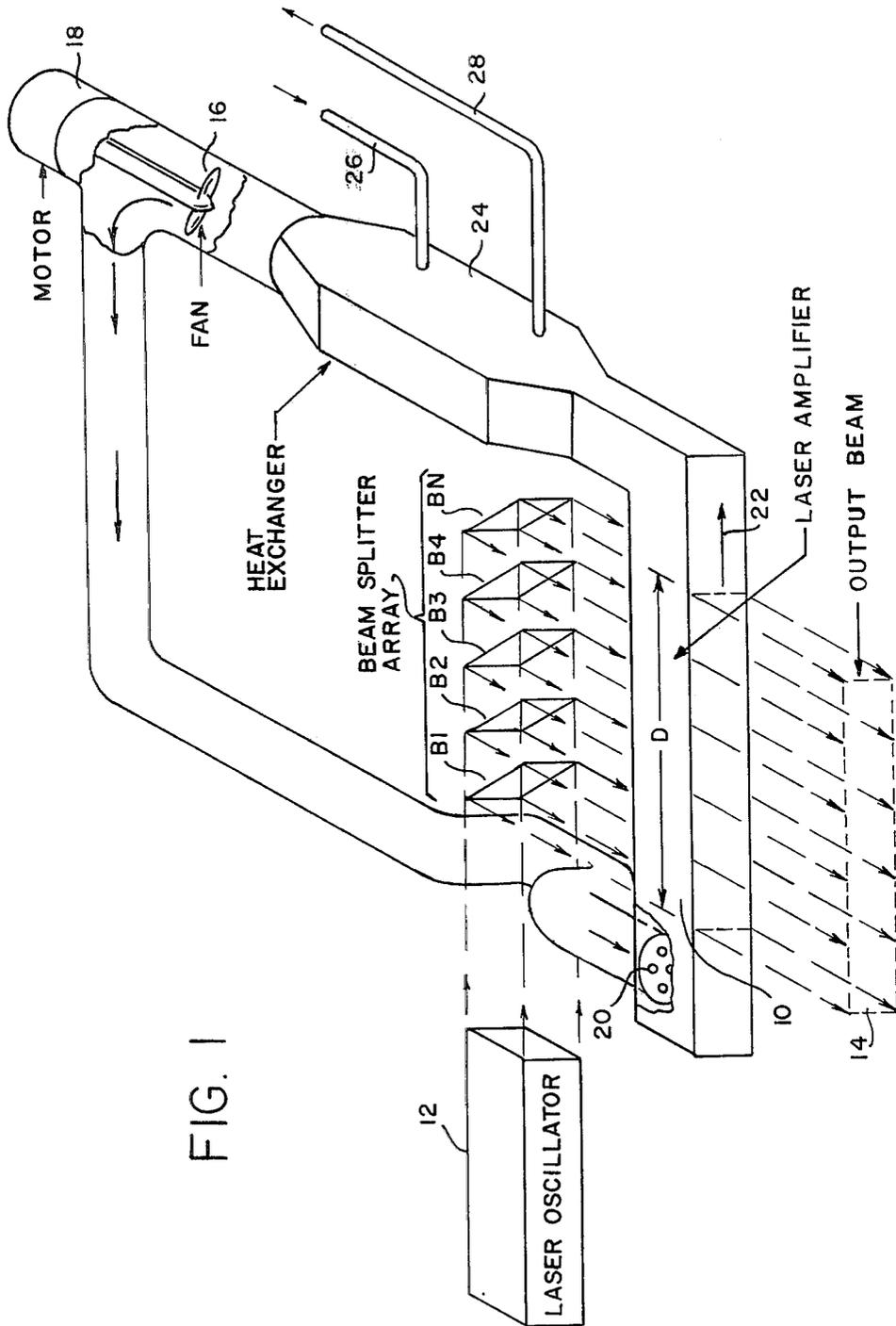


FIG. 1

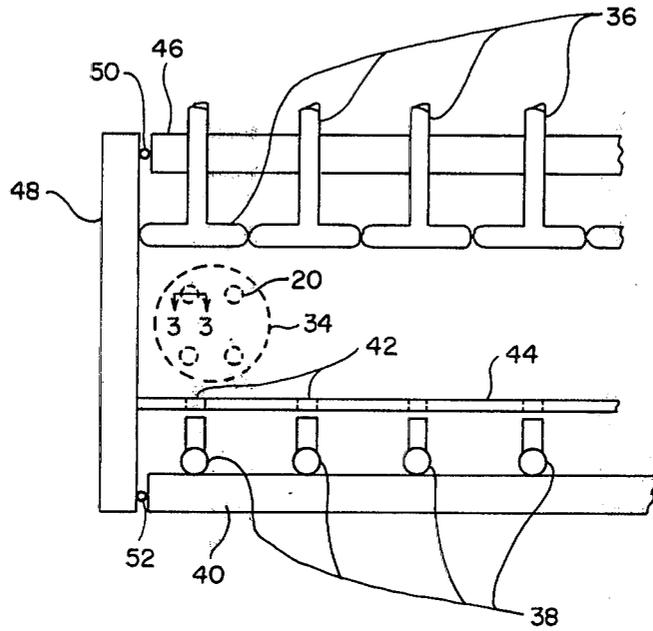


FIG. 2

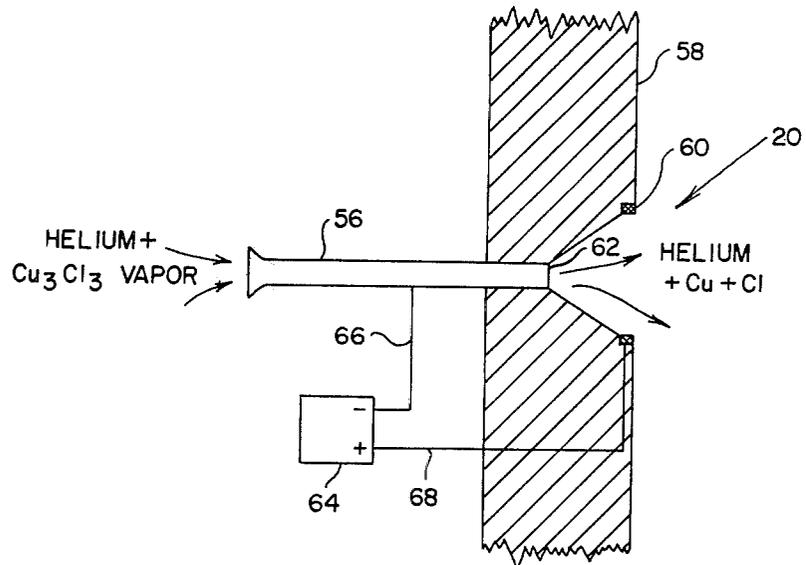


FIG. 3

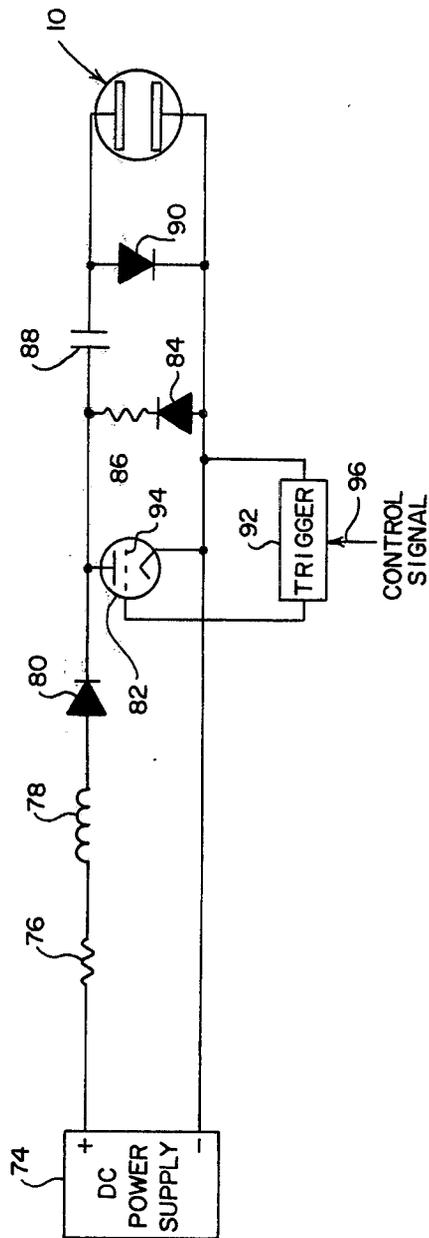


FIG. 4

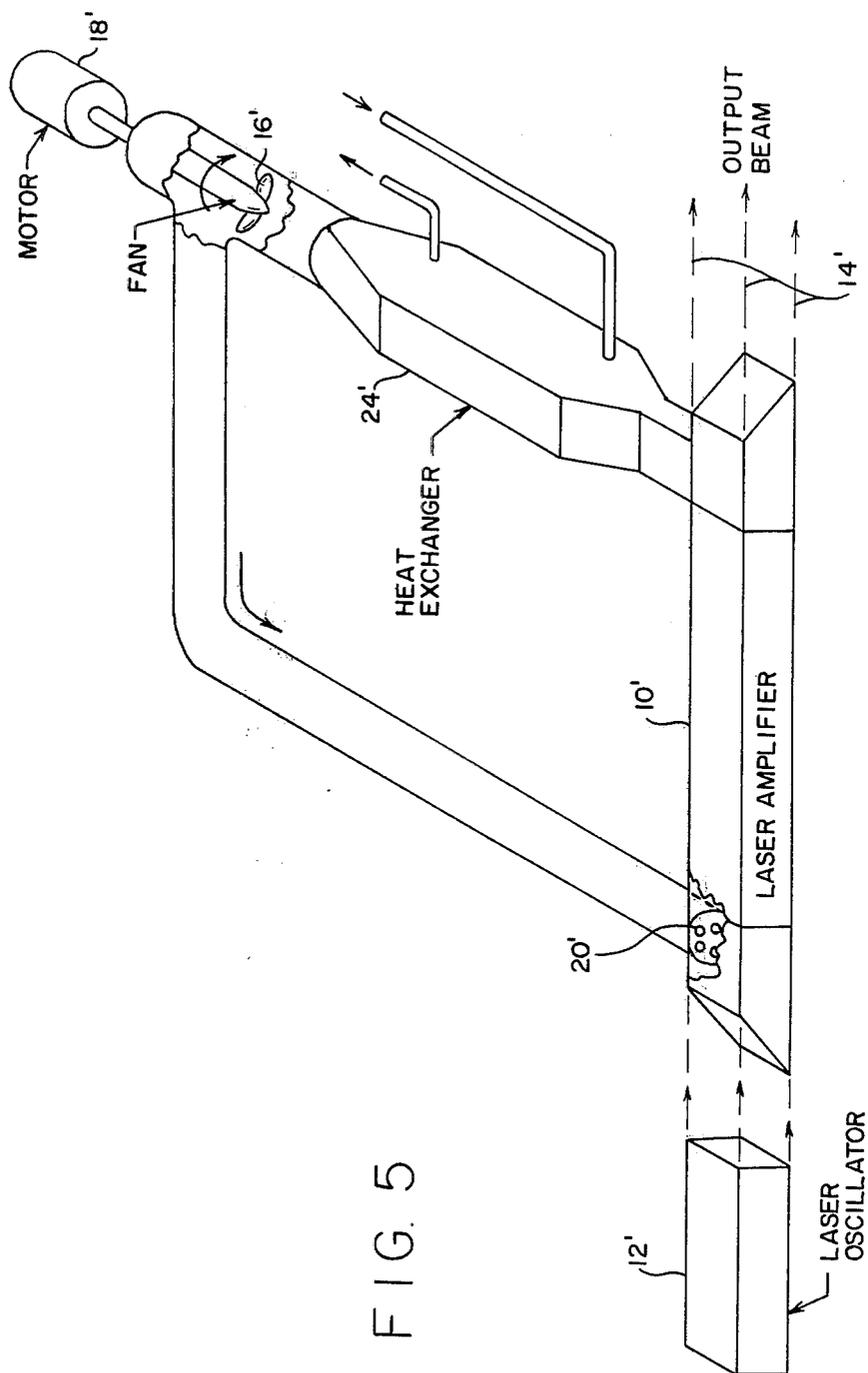


FIG. 5

HIGH POWER METALLIC HALIDE LASER

ORIGIN OF THE INVENTION

The invention described herein was made in the performance of work under a NASA contract and is subject to the provisions of Section 305 of the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958, Public Law 85-568 (72 Stat. 435, 42 USC 2457).

TECHNICAL FIELD

The invention relates to high power laser amplifiers and more particularly to high power metallic halide laser amplifiers.

BACKGROUND ART

In a copper vapor laser ground state ($^2S_{1/2}$) copper atoms are pumped by direct electron impact into first resonant states ($^2P_{3/2}$ and $^2P_{1/2}$). Stimulated emission can then occur between these resonant states and the two lower metastable states ($^2D_{3/2}$ and $^2D_{5/2}$). The resulting emission is at two visible wave lengths, 5106 Å ($^2P_{3/2} \rightarrow ^2D_{5/2}$) and 5782 Å ($^2P_{1/2} \rightarrow ^2D_{3/2}$). In order to achieve a population inversion between the resonant and metastable states, laser amplifier pumping must be fast, because of short resonant life times, and the metastable population density must be low. Fast pumping is achieved with low induction pulsed discharge circuits. Typical discharge characteristics are, (a) initial rates of current rise of the order of 10^{10} amperes per second, and (b) current pulse widths of the order of 100 nanoseconds.

The metastable population density increases during each current pulse and decays between current pulses. It is this decay rate that determines the minimum allowed time between pulses and hence the maximum allowed pulse repetition rate of the laser. The level to which the metastable population density decays can be no lower than the equilibrium value determined by the copper vapor temperature. It is theorized that if the copper vapor temperature is allowed to exceed 3000° K., the equilibrium metastable population density will be too high and the population inversion will not occur.

The copper vapor laser has a demonstrated efficiency of about 1%. Hence about 100 times the extracted optical energy is deposited in a lasant-buffer gas mixture with each pulse and this energy or waste heat must be removed while assuring that the lasant temperature does not exceed about 3000° K.

Experiments to date on copper halide lasers have been conducted in relatively small bore tubes where the tube wall plays a dominant role in removing waste heat. The small volume of these tubes has limited the average power to the order of 10 watts. By using an oscillator and several amplifiers, this power could probably be increased by a factor of 10. In order to make large increases in average output power, however, amplifiers with large cross-sectional areas would be required. Extracting the waste heat, while maintaining the lasant at or below about 3000° K., and providing fast uniform discharges has become a major challenge.

The present invention provides a means for solving the above problem by flowing a copper vapor and buffer gas through a laser amplifier at a rate just high enough to prevent overheating of the copper atoms. Heat is removed from the laser amplifier by convection, as the lasant-buffer gas mixture absorbs waste heat. Within the amplifier, the temperature will increase lin-

early from about 700° K. at the amplifier entrance port to about 3000° K. at the exit port. The 700° K. entrance port temperature is determined by the required vapor pressure when copper chloride is the source of copper atoms.

STATEMENT OF INVENTION

The invention provides a laser amplification system which includes a laser amplifier having input means for receiving energy from a laser oscillator. A heat exchanger in fluid communication with the laser amplifier is provided. A means for flowing a metallic halide and a buffer gas in a closed loop manner through the laser amplifier and the heat exchanger is also provided whereby the temperature of the metallic halide and the buffer gas within the laser amplifier is maintained between predetermined temperature limits. In accordance with a further feature of the invention, a molecular dissociation means located at the input of, and in fluid communication with, the laser amplifier is provided. The molecular dissociation means converts the metallic halide molecules into metallic atoms and ions and halide atoms and ions, thereby providing metallic atoms for the laser amplifier.

In a specific embodiment of the invention, the metallic halide is copper chloride and the buffer gas is helium. Utilizing a laser amplifier having a cross-section of 8 × 8 centimeters and a length of 50 centimeters, it is theorized that a laser amplifier provided by the invention having a closed loop pressure of 100 torr and a flow velocity of 4×10^3 centimeters per second inside the laser amplifier, a specific optical energy per pulse of 5 $\mu\text{J}/\text{cm}^3$, a pulse repetition of 2×10^4 Hz, and a peak voltage drop across a transverse discharge means within the laser amplifier between 8 and 10 kilovolts, that a 300 watt output beam can be obtained.

Also provided is a molecular dissociation apparatus for dissociating the metallic halide into copper and halide ions and atoms and a pulse power supply capable of providing 8–10 kilovolts at a 2×10^4 Hz pulse repetition rate. The pulse power supply utilizes a hydrogen thyratron in conjunction with an energy storage capacitor.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a diagrammatic representation of a laser amplification system provided by the invention;

FIG. 2 is a cross-sectional view showing the transverse discharge apparatus incorporated in the laser amplifier;

FIG. 3 is cross-sectional view showing the hollow cathode dissociation apparatus;

FIG. 4 shows the transverse discharge pulse power supply; and

FIG. 5 is a diagrammatic representation of a further embodiment of the laser amplification system.

BEST MODE FOR CARRYING OUT THE INVENTION

Detailed illustrative embodiments of the invention disclosed herein exemplify the invention and are currently considered to be the best embodiments for such purposes. They are provided by way of illustration and not limitation of the invention. Various modifications thereof will occur to those skilled in the art, and such modifications are within the scope of the claims which define the present invention.

As previously explained, the disclosure describes a laser amplification system which includes a laser amplifier having an input means for receiving energy from a laser oscillator. The laser amplifier is chosen to be of the transverse discharge type. A molecular dissociation means is provided for dissociating a metallic halide such as copper chloride into metallic atoms and ions and halide atoms and ions. The metallic halide is mixed with a buffer gas such as helium. The dissociated metallic halide and buffer gas is flowed into the laser amplifier wherein the copper ground state atoms are pumped by direct electron impact into first resonant states ($^2P_{3/2}$ and 2P_1). Stimulated emissions can then occur between these resonance states and the two lower metastable states ($^2D_{3/2}$ and $^2D_{5/2}$). The resulting emissions are at two visible wave lengths, 5106 Å and 5782 Å. The flow rate of the metallic halide and buffer gas through the laser amplifier is chosen so that the temperature exiting the amplifier is not greater than 3000° K. Heat from the laser amplifier is removed by convection due to the flow of the heated metallic halide and buffer gas, and passes through a heat exchanger where it is cooled to a predetermined lower level. The gas is then flowed from the heat exchanger and back through the molecular dissociation apparatus and into the laser amplifier where the process is then repeated. The flow rate can be controlled so that the temperature within the laser amplifier does not exceed 3000° K., thereby allowing an output from the laser amplifier to be at least 300 watts.

Referring now to FIG. 1, a laser amplification system provided by the invention is shown. A laser amplifier 10 is irradiated by energy to be amplified from a laser oscillator 12. The output energy from the laser oscillator is passed through a plurality of beam splitters B1-BN which are chosen so that the energy output from the laser oscillator 12 is substantially evenly distributed along the length D of the laser amplifier 10. An output beam 14 is provided by the laser amplifier 10. A metallic halide and a buffer gas is flowed by the action of a fan 16 and associated motor 18 through a molecular dissociation apparatus 20 in fluid communication with the laser amplifier which converts the metallic halide into metallic atoms and ions and halide atoms and ions. A plurality of molecular dissociation apparatus 20 are formed in an array at the input to the laser amplifier 10. Rotation of the fan 16 is chosen so that the dissociated metallic halide and buffer gas will leave the laser amplifier as indicated by the arrow at 22 at a temperature not significantly over 3000° K. This heat is convected by flow of the gas to a heat exchanger 24 where it is conducted through conduction tubes 26 and 28 to an appropriate heat sink (not shown). As the dissociated metallic halide is cooled, it again forms metallic halide molecules.

In a specific embodiment of the invention, the metallic halide is chosen to be copper chloride (Cu_2Cl_2) and the buffer gas is chosen to be helium. However, other metallic halides such as manganese chloride, iron chloride, lead chloride, copper bromide, copper iodide, or the like could also be utilized. Also, although helium is used as the buffer gas, any of the other noble gases such as neon or argon could also have been selected. Thus as can be appreciated, the temperature within the laser amplifier is controlled both by the rate of flow of the dissociated metallic halide and buffer gas through the laser amplifier, and the cooling efficiency of the heat exchanger 24. As previously explained, a sufficiently high flow rate allows the dissociated metallic halide and

buffer gas to be maintained at a relatively cool temperature, such as 3000° K., in order to maintain the equilibrium metastable population density, which is determined by the copper vapor temperature, at a low level such that a population inversion can be attained. It is estimated that if the copper vapor temperature is allowed to exceed 3000° K., the equilibrium metastable population density will be too high and the population inversion as previously described will not occur. The heat exchanger 24 is configured to be of the type that the exit temperature of the dissociated metallic halide and buffer gas is chosen to be approximately 700° K., thus providing a 2300° K. temperature differential along the distance D of the laser amplifier 10. In the specific embodiment described, it is theorized that with the distance D being 50 centimeters and the cross-sectional area of the laser amplifier 10 being 64 cm², that the output beam 14 will contain in the order of 300 watts of energy. As previously explained, it is the temperature of the metallic atoms that is critical to the maintenance of an efficient amplifier. Thus the apparatus provided by the invention allows a critical upper-limit temperature not to be exceeded by controlling the flow rate of the metallic atoms through the laser amplifier, and by conducting heat away from the laser amplifier through convection currents formed by the flowing dissociated metallic halide and buffer gases.

A transverse discharge type laser amplifier 10 has been chosen which is capable of maintaining pulse repetition rates between 10⁴ and 2×10⁴ Hz, and peak voltage drops between electrodes between 8–10 kilovolts. Referring to the cross-sectional view of a portion of the laser amplifier 10 shown in FIG. 2, four molecular dissociation apparatus 20 are formed into an array defined by the dotted lines 34. Although four molecular dissociation apparatus 20 are shown, any number could be selected, the only significant factor being that a sufficient number be chosen to maintain the required flow rate. The laser amplifier 10 contains a plurality of Rogowsky profile anodes 36 and a plurality of hollow cathode tubes 38 located on a bottom portion 40 of the laser amplifier 10. The hollow cathode tubes 38 are chosen so that their electron discharge is directed upwardly through holes 42 in a longitudinally extending inner partition 44. The bottom portion of the amplifier 40 and an upper portion 46 are placed in sealing contact with an end plate 48 through appropriate seals 50 and 52. A pulse voltage source to be described below is placed across the hollow cathode tubes 38 and Rogowsky profile anodes 36 so as to provide 8000 volt pulses at a rate of 10,000 per second.

As previously explained, the method disclosed by the invention for removing waste heat from a large laser amplifier requires flowing the metallic vapor and buffer gas through the amplifier at a rate just high enough to prevent overheating of the metallic atoms. The laser buffer gas mixture will absorb the waste heat, and its temperature will increase linearly between the amplifier entrance port and the amplifier exit port. The required temperature of the copper atoms entering the amplifier is determined by the required vapor pressure of the metallic atoms when a metallic halide is used as the metallic atom source. To maximize the overall efficiency of a large, multiple pulsed amplification system being described, the metallic halide vapor must be dissociated efficiently as it enters the laser amplifier. Referring now to FIG. 3, a molecular dissociation apparatus 20 for breaking the metallic halide into metallic atoms

thereby pulsing said transverse discharge apparatus.

6. A laser amplification system comprising:
 an elongated metallic halide laser amplifier; 5
 a laser oscillator for providing a laser beam to be amplified by said laser amplifier, said beam being parallel to the longitudinal axis of said amplifying means;
 input means for receiving said laser beam in a direction parallel to the longitudinal axis of said laser amplifier, said laser amplifier input means comprising a plurality of beam splitters aligned parallel with the axis of said laser beam, each irradiated by a portion of said beam and each reflecting a portion of said beam through a different segment of said laser amplifier, whereby said plurality of beam splitters oriented along the length of said laser amplifier reflect portions of said beam into said

laser amplifier in a direction normal to the longitudinal axis of said laser amplifier;
 dissociation means for dissociating a metallic halide into metallic atoms and ions and halide atoms and ions, said dissociation means comprising
 a hollow cathode tube array in fluid communication with said laser amplifier and
 a conductive material shaped as an annular ring defining an aperture spaced apart from, and centrally located about the end of said hollow cathode tube,
 said dissociation means being in fluid communication with said laser amplifier;
 cooling means for removing heat from said metallic atoms and ions and halide atoms and ions after having passed through said laser amplifier; and
 closed cycle flowing means for flowing a mixture of said metallic halide and a buffer gas through said dissociation means, said laser amplifier, said cooling means, and back to said dissociation means.

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