

Electron-Beam Powder-Bed Fusion of Metals: Vacuum Processing, Preheating, Alloy Windows, Surface State and Qualification

Charging, Powder-Cake Control, Thermal-Field Management and Part-Linked Evidence

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Statement of Significance

Electron-beam powder-bed fusion can combine tool-less metal geometry, rapid electromagnetic beam positioning, a low-pressure process environment and an elevated build temperature. Those features do not make the route universally cleaner, stress-free, support-free or suitable for every alloy. The electron beam interacts with a powder bed whose electrical, thermal and surface states evolve during preheating and melting. Partial sintering helps stabilise the bed and limit powder ejection, but it also creates a powder cake that must be broken, recovered and verified. Vacuum changes electron transport and chemical driving forces while volatile species, residual gases, hot surfaces and handling history still matter. This review defines PBF-EB/M as a complete controlled chain from released powder and qualified equipment to an accepted component. It distinguishes conditional process advantages from powder-cake, surface, composition, monitoring and factory burdens, and provides an evidence architecture that prevents a machine label or high build temperature from substituting for qualification.

Abstract

Electron-beam powder-bed fusion of metals, designated PBF-EB/M by ISO/ASTM and widely known as EBM or selective electron beam melting, selectively melts successive metal-powder layers using an electronically generated, focused and deflected beam in a low-pressure chamber. Its potential industrial value includes complex near-net metal geometry, rapid beam repositioning, elevated-temperature processing and a process atmosphere distinct from laser powder-bed fusion. Each benefit has a boundary. Electrons can charge electrically isolated powder particles and trigger the rapid particle-ejection instability called smoke. Bed preheating and partial sintering change electrical conduction, thermal conductivity and mechanical stability, but also create a cake whose strength affects depowdering, internal-feature access and powder recovery. High build temperature can reduce some thermal gradients and stresses while altering solidification, phase evolution, texture, surface state and powder history. Vacuum reduces gas scattering but does not eliminate residual species, preferential evaporation, condensation, contamination or composition change. This qualitative engineering review maps the route from powder release and equipment qualification through evacuation, preheat, melting, cooldown, cake recovery, post-processing, inspection and disposition. It explains why beam jump speed, nominal chamber pressure, preheat temperature, relative density or one backscattered-electron image cannot qualify a component. The resulting selection and qualification gates accept PBF-EB/M only when alloy chemistry, powder electrical state, vacuum and beam performance, thermal-field strategy, geometry, powder recovery, delivered surface, complete-cell productivity, safety and part-linked evidence are jointly compatible with the intended use.

Keywords: PBF-EB/M; electron-beam powder-bed fusion; EBM; metal powder; vacuum; preheating; smoke; powder cake; surface roughness; evaporation; texture; qualification

1. Purpose and scope

ISO/ASTM 52900 places electron-beam melting of metal powder within powder-bed fusion, while ISO/ASTM 52911-3 uses the designation PBF-EB/M for the process-specific design route [1,3]. ‘PBF-EB’ is used here as the readable abbreviation. ‘Electron beam melting,’ ‘EBM’ and ‘selective electron beam melting’ remain established legacy or commercial terms; they do not define separate base categories. ER-146 applies the state-resolved selection and decision-gate architecture owned by ER-139 to this process family, and inherits from ER-049 the direct-versus-indirect distinction for advanced metals and ceramics [35,36]. The process must also be distinguished from electron-beam directed-energy deposition, in which feedstock is delivered directly to a melt zone rather than spread as a powder bed.

The scope is direct consolidation of metal powder in a bed by a focused electron beam. It includes powder receipt and lifecycle, machine and electron-column qualification, evacuation and pressure control, plate and bed heating, powder spreading, preheating/partial sintering, contour or bulk melting, thermal-field management, cooldown, cake break-out, powder recovery, support and plate separation, heat treatment, machining or finishing, cleaning, inspection and production qualification. ISO/ASTM TS 52949 supplies PBF-EB equipment IQ/OQ/PQ architecture; ISO/ASTM 52920 and 52904 make clear that site, process and production control are broader than a successful equipment cycle [2,4,8].

Laser powder-bed fusion is assigned to ER-145. Metal binder jetting, bound-metal material extrusion and lithography-based metal manufacturing are assigned to ER-147, ER-148 and ER-149 respectively; those routes deliberately create binder-containing green intermediates. Directed-energy deposition and wire-arc additive manufacturing are assigned to ER-150. A metal powder supplied for any of those processes is not automatically released for PBF-EB. ER-146 inherits from ER-141 the generic spreading, layer-coverage and powder-lifecycle argument [37]; it owns here the electrically coupled and partly sintered bed, staged preheat, smoke and cake-recovery consequences. Ceramic vat photopolymerisation belongs to ER-151, ceramic direct ink writing and robocasting to ER-152, ceramic and sand binder jetting to ER-153, and bound-ceramic extrusion to ER-154. ER-155 covers

polymer-binder powder-bed shaping of metals, ceramics and unusual powders, including a metal route: its bed is polymer-bound and the binder is subsequently removed so that the delivered metal is created in a furnace, whereas ER-146 fuses the metal in the machine. Construction-scale, cementitious, geopolymer, regolith and macroscopic high-volume applications are excluded.

This review does not publish machine pressure limits, preheat temperatures, beam voltage/current, scan functions, powder-size ranges, cake-strength targets, support rules, cooling schedules, alloy compositions or inspection acceptance limits. Such values belong to a specified machine–powder–alloy–geometry–thermal-history–post-process–intended-use state. The purpose is to define which causal variables and evidence close that state.

2. Process identity and the state-resolved production chain

A simplified PBF-EB cycle spreads a powder layer, preheats it, selectively melts the part cross-section and repeats. The industrial chain contains more states. The beam cannot be treated as an abstract heat source: electron generation, acceleration, focus, deflection, column pressure, calibration and backscatter response affect delivery. The bed cannot be treated as unchanged feedstock: spreading, preheat and repeated thermal exposure change particle contact, necking, conductivity, flow and recoverability. The object leaving the chamber is not yet necessarily a delivered component: it can remain hot, embedded in a cake, attached to a plate/supports and inaccessible to complete inspection.

Table 1. State-resolved PBF-EB/M production chain

Stage	Controlled state	Principal evidence	Invalid shortcut
Powder release	Alloy/lot, chemistry, particle and surface/oxide state, history and storage	Certificate plus verified sampling and specified tests	“Correct alloy name”
Equipment release	Electron gun/column, focus/deflection, vacuum system, sensors, interlocks and plate system	IQ/OQ/PQ and calibration/maintenance status	“Machine is qualified”
Loading and evacuation	Plate, powder, chamber cleanliness, pressure trajectory and residual/regulating gas state	Load record, leak/pressure evidence and hold point	“Target pressure reached”
Spreading	Layer coverage, packing, disturbance, recoater and local powder state	Layer/recoater evidence and deviation record	“Nominal layer loaded”
Preheat and stabilisation	Electrical/thermal contact, particle necking, temperature field and bed stability	Qualified staged-preheat record and monitoring	“Bed is hot”
Selective melting	Beam delivery, contour/bulk strategy, local thermal accumulation and fusion state	Released build definition plus validated process evidence	“Beam completed the path”
Cooldown and recovery	Thermal trajectory, cake condition, part/plate state, powder segregation and exposure	Controlled cooldown, break-out and genealogy record	“Build finished”
Transformation and finishing	Heat treatment, HIP if specified, separation, machining, surface treatment and cleaning	Operation-specific route and material-state verification	“Near-net shape is final”
Acceptance	Geometry, surface, imperfections, composition, microstructure, properties and traceability	Part-linked measurements, uncertainty and disposition	“Coupon passed”

ISO/ASTM 52904 applies production control to both laser- and electron-beam metal PBF, while ISO/ASTM 52949 addresses PBF-EB equipment qualification [4,8]. They are complementary. Equipment performance does not release a powder lot or a component. Conversely, one conforming test piece does not establish that an uncontrolled vacuum, powder, preheat, beam or recovery change is equivalent.

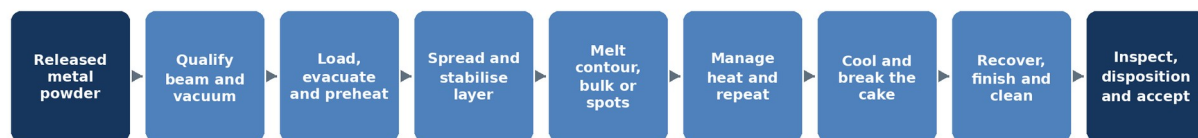


Figure 1. State-resolved PBF-EB/M route.

The chain exposes two common category errors. First, the partially sintered cake is neither unused virgin powder nor the final solid part. Second, a hot, plate-bound part inside a vacuum chamber is not the delivered material state. Each transition changes the evidence needed for safe handling, dimensional control and acceptance.

3. Vacuum, electron-beam delivery and machine state

An electron beam requires a sufficiently controlled low-pressure path so electrons reach the work region with acceptable scattering and stability. That physical requirement does not reduce the chamber to one pressure number. Pump-down trajectory, column and build-chamber pressure, leaks, seals, hot-surface outgassing, residual species, deliberate regulating gas, condensate on shields, beam-source state and pressure-sensor calibration can influence the process. A qualification record therefore identifies where pressure is measured, sensor range and uncertainty, the relevant time/state, regulating-gas identity, pressure and admission schedule, pump configuration, maintenance and the response to deviations.

Beam power is often described as the product of acceleration voltage and beam current. That scalar does not define the spatial or temporal energy deposited in the powder. Focus, astigmatism, deflection calibration, beam position, dwell, jump order, backscatter, penetration, local surface angle, powder packing and the evolving electric field remain absent. ISO/ASTM 52949 appropriately separates installation, operation and performance qualification because a functioning electron gun is not equivalent to calibrated delivery over the usable build region [4].

Vacuum also changes the chemistry and heat-transfer boundary. It limits convective gas heat transfer and reduces some gas-phase reactions, yet radiative transfer, conduction through the plate/cake, residual gas, powder-surface oxides and volatile metal species remain. O'Donnell et al. observed composition banding associated with preferential aluminium loss in a specific rastered Ti-6Al-4V build, and Antunes et al. examined the chemical composition of vapor during a specific Ti-6Al-4V PBF-EB process [21,27]. These results prohibit the shortcut “vacuum preserves composition.” They do not provide a universal loss factor.

Evaporated species can leave the melt pool, transport through the chamber and condense on colder surfaces. Deposits can affect viewing paths, shielding, sensors or maintenance exposure, depending on the machine and alloy. The process plan must state how chamber shields, windows, sensors and vacuum components are inspected, cleaned and dispositioned. A clean chamber at installation does not establish a clean optical/electrical state after repeated high-temperature builds.

The beam and vacuum system also form a change-controlled asset. Cathode replacement, column service, focus/deflection recalibration, sensor replacement, pump work, shielding changes, software revision or build-platform modification can affect relevant performance. The response is risk-based requalification, not an administrative note. ISO/ASTM 52920 supplies the site/process framework, and ISO/ASTM 52949 supplies the PBF-EB equipment layer [2,4].

4. Powder electrical state, preheating, bed stabilisation and smoke

Metal powder is not electrically equivalent to a continuous metal plate. Particles touch at discrete contacts and can carry insulating or semiconducting surface films. Packing, morphology, oxide thickness/chemistry, adsorbed species, temperature, prior thermal exposure and partial necking change the path by which charge and heat move through the bed. ISO/ASTM 52907 provides metal-powder characterisation methods, while ISO/ASTM 52928 requires lifecycle control; neither supplies one PBF-EB acceptance number for all alloys and equipment [6,7].

Preheating is a controlled transformation of that bed. It establishes a thermal field before selective melting, changes effective thermal conductivity and can create necks between neighbouring particles. Landau et al. modelled staged preheating and powder-conductivity change in a 316L system and corroborated the large-scale temperature field with machine IR observations [15]. Their study demonstrates why preheat stages and irreversible conductivity changes must be represented. It does not authorise transfer of the studied temperatures or timing to a commercial alloy/process route.

Partial sintering also gives the bed mechanical cohesion. That can resist recoater disturbance and powder ejection. The same cohesion creates a cake that must later be broken without damaging the part, mixing segregated fractions or leaving inaccessible powder. Preheat therefore has at least four coupled outputs: temperature field, electrical contact, mechanical stability and recovery burden. Optimising only one can make another unacceptable.

In PBF-EB, “smoke” describes rapid powder displacement or ejection, not combustion smoke. Cordero et al. characterised an insulating oxide layer on Ti-6Al-4V powder and modelled charge accumulation and electrostatic forces in the bed [16]. Ye et al. directly observed particle-scale smoke evolution using high-speed synchrotron radiography: disturbances created electrically isolated particles, direct or backscattered electrons charged them, and repulsion propagated an avalanche in the tested conditions [17]. These studies support an electrical-state and stability model; they do not define one universal onset voltage, temperature, oxide thickness or return time.

Smoke prevention is consequently not one setting. The qualification plan must consider powder surface/electrical state, layer packing, grounding/current paths, preheat sequence, beam footprint and return pattern, local disturbance, regulating gas if used, geometry and machine detection/interlock behaviour. A deliberately admitted low-pressure regulating gas provides a charge-dissipation path through the bed and also modifies heat transfer; it acts directly on the electrostatic mechanism rather than by increasing bed cohesion [17]. Its presence, identity, pressure and admission schedule are calibrated process variables under change control, not merely chamber conditions. Machine generations differ in whether and how they use such gas, so smoke behaviour, thermal conduction and cooling cannot be transferred between generations of a nominally common machine family without matched evidence. A countermeasure that increases cake strength may complicate depowdering. A countermeasure that changes powder morphology or surface chemistry changes the feedstock and requires its own evidence.

Powder reuse closes the loop. Returned cake powder has experienced vacuum, heat, partial sintering, nearby vapor/condensate and mechanical break-out. Borrelli et al. documented reuse-dependent powder and part observations for one Ti-6Al-4V PBF-EB route [28]. The correct control is lot/fraction genealogy, representative sampling, specified tests and disposition—not “reused N times” or “still flows.”

5. Melt strategy, energy deposition and the cumulative thermal field

Once the bed is stabilised, selective melting may use contour passes, rastered hatching, spot sequences or combinations. Electromagnetic deflection allows the beam to reposition rapidly, but one beam is still a finite energy source. Describing a strategy as “multibeam” or “multispot” can refer to rapid time-sharing among locations rather than multiple independent beam columns. The engineering record must state the actual scheduling, dwell, revisit time, focus, overlap, contour/bulk distinction and control logic.

An areal, line or volumetric energy descriptor can label a parameter set inside a controlled study. It cannot establish equivalent melt physics. Beam penetration and backscatter, focus, dwell, scan order, local powder/cake temperature, section width, contour interaction and heat-sink geometry are not collapsed into one scalar. At insufficient local energy or overlap, incomplete fusion can remain. At excessive or poorly timed input, overheating, evaporation, swelling, surface disruption or composition change can occur. The valid window is local, alloy-specific and connected to the thermal history.

PBF-EB is especially sensitive to cumulative heating because each layer can include broad preheat scans plus selective melting. A small cross-section after a massive region, two adjacent parts, a thin wall next to bulk or a contour adjacent to rastered fill can experience different prior temperatures and heat paths. The same nominal beam command can therefore create different melt-pool and cooling states. Landau et al. show why layer-by-layer preheat must be represented as a cyclic thermal process [15]; O'Donnell et al. show how contour/raster and energy-history interactions can leave spatial defect and composition records [21].

Surface optimisation can conflict with dimensional and thermal control. Wang et al. found different contour parameters dominated surface response for continuous and multispot strategies in one Ti-6Al-4V system, with trade-offs between roughness and geometric accuracy [18]. The allowed inference is that contour architecture matters and requires matched surface/dimension evidence. The numerical optimum is not portable.

The beam strategy can also be used to influence microstructure, but that makes microstructure an intentional controlled output rather than a free benefit. A scan revision that changes thermal gradient, solidification direction or revisit time is a material-state change even if density remains high. Production change control must therefore link the build-file/strategy version to the qualified microstructure and properties.

6. Alloy windows, evaporation, phase stability and conditional advantages

PBF-EB alloy feasibility is not determined by melting point or laser reflectivity alone. Electron energy deposition, backscatter, powder electrical state, surface oxide, vapor pressure of each constituent, thermal conductivity, solidification interval, phase transformations, hot cracking, preheat feasibility and powder-cake behaviour interact. A composition may melt while failing smoke stability, chemistry retention, surface, cracking, phase, recovery or final-property requirements.

Table 2. Conditional PBF-EB/M opportunities and controlling liabilities

Material/process condition	Conditional opportunity	Controlling liability	Required evidence
Reactive metal alloy	Low-pressure route can reduce some gas-phase contamination pathways	Powder handling, residual species, surface oxides and hot-powder exposure remain	Powder/chamber chemistry, handling and final interstitials
Crack-sensitive alloy	Elevated bed/build temperature can reduce some thermal gradients	Long high-temperature exposure, phase change, segregation and cake strengthening	Thermal history, crack detection, composition and final heat-treatment state
Volatile alloying constituent	Controlled strategy may retain acceptable composition in a qualified window	Preferential evaporation, banding, condensation and build-position dependence	Feedstock-to-part chemistry map and chamber-deposit control
Rapidly deflected beam	Flexible contour, raster or spot scheduling	Cumulative heat, revisit timing, calibration and strategy/version dependence	Spatial delivery and part-specific thermal/process evidence
Complex lattice/internal channel	Tool-less geometry and surrounding bed support	Sintered-cake entrapment, incomplete cleaning and inaccessible rough surface	Demonstrated recovery, cleanliness and inspection coverage
High-temperature as-built route	Some stress relaxation may occur during the build	Texture, grain coarsening, distortion and location-dependent properties remain	Representative material-state and location/orientation testing

Helmer et al. established a processing window and microstructure for alloy 718 in one selective electron-beam system, and Nandwana et al. demonstrated processing/post-processing dependence for alloy 718 [25,26]. Those studies establish that a non-titanium alloy can have a controlled PBF-EB route. They do not show that all nickel alloys, all machines or all heat-treatment states are equivalent.

Preferential evaporation deserves explicit control. Antunes et al. investigated vapor chemistry in a Ti-6Al-4V PBF-EB process, while O'Donnell et al. linked observed aluminium-depleted banding to the thermal/melt history of a specific rastered build [21,27]. Feedstock chemistry can therefore conform while local delivered chemistry or phase state varies. Chemistry sampling must represent the geometry, build position and thermal route rather than only a bulk coupon.

High temperature can help an alloy remain above a brittle or high-stress processing state, but it may simultaneously promote phase transformation or coarsening. The correct question is not whether PBF-EB is “better for crack-prone alloys.” It is whether a qualified preheat–melt–hold–cool–post-process chain can produce the specified chemistry, imperfection population, microstructure and properties without an unacceptable cake or factory burden.

7. Geometry, powder cake, support functions and recovery access

ISO/ASTM 52911-3 supplies PBF-EB/M-specific design recommendations and requires process-specific treatment of features [3]. The surrounding partially sintered powder can support or stabilise some geometries differently from loose LPBF powder. It does not remove every need for anchoring, thermal conduction, restraint, start structures or support interfaces. A part must still survive spreading, local heating, thermal contraction, cake break-out, plate separation and finishing.

The cake changes the meaning of “self-supporting.” A downward-facing surface may build without a conventional support yet be rough, dimensionally displaced or strongly bonded to surrounding particles. A lattice may remain intact yet be impossible to clear. A channel may be geometrically open in CAD but blocked by sintered powder or inaccessible to verification. Hasib et al.

experimentally studied powder removal from Ti-6Al-4V cellular structures and showed that recovery depends on the tested geometry and process state [29]. Their result supports design-for-recovery; it does not provide a universal minimum opening.

Supports and anchors have several possible functions: establish electrical/thermal contact, attach the part to the start plate, resist motion or distortion, conduct heat and create sacrificial machining allowance. They also add scan time, trapped regions, removal work and damaged-surface risk. The support decision must therefore specify function by region. “High preheat means no supports” is not a valid design rule.

Part placement and nesting couple recovery. Dense packing can improve nominal build occupancy while limiting tool/nozzle access during cake break-out, increasing correlated damage, mixing recovered fractions or complicating identity. A tall build can extend hot residence and cooldown even when beam melting is rapid. Internal channels and porous implants require a documented sequence for break-out, blasting or other removal, capture, cleanliness verification and powder disposition.

Powder recovery must preserve genealogy. Cake from near parts, overflow, feed hoppers, blasting/recovery equipment and filters may have different histories. Combining them creates a new blend whose representativeness and release need definition under ISO/ASTM 52928 [7]. Powder that can be made free-flowing again is not automatically chemically, electrically or morphologically equivalent to its incoming state.

8. As-built surface, dimensional state and accessible finishing

PBF-EB surface condition emerges from particle size/state, layer thickness, contour strategy, local temperature, orientation, stair-stepping, melt wetting, evaporation, adhered or partially fused particles and cake break-out. Roughness is therefore not one inherent machine number. Wang et al. showed parameter- and strategy-dependent surface response in Ti-6Al-4V; Kotzem et al. found build-position dependence of surface and related properties in another Ti-6Al-4V investigation [18,24]. These studies support location- and strategy-aware qualification.

Surface roughness, dimensional deviation and volumetric imperfection are different characteristics. A smoother contour can change melt geometry or dimensional allowance. Removing surface material can improve accessible roughness and eliminate some surface-connected features while altering dimensions and not touching internal pores, cracks or inaccessible channels. ISO/ASTM 52908 and TR 52905 organise post-processing, inspection and NDT choices; neither makes one method universal [9,11].

The delivered drawing must identify which surfaces are as-built, machined, chemically treated, blasted, polished or otherwise conditioned. It must also identify datum creation, stock allowance, inaccessible zones, critical surface direction and the material state when measured. A coupon machined on every face cannot represent a thin lattice strut delivered as-built.

Dimensional inspection needs a thermal reference state. Parts can contract during controlled cooldown and change during plate/support separation or heat treatment. Measurement before complete thermal equilibration or before the specified post-process can be useful process evidence but is not necessarily final conformance. The route should record the sequence of measurement, transformation and datum establishment.

Surface and cleanliness can dominate functional acceptance even when bulk density is high. Fatigue-critical, sealing, fluidic, tribological, implant or heat-transfer surfaces have different response variables. The qualification plan should connect actual surface state and orientation to the intended failure modes, not substitute one average roughness value.

9. Microstructure, texture, residual stress and location dependence

Elevated-temperature PBF-EB can permit stress relaxation during the build, but “low residual stress” is a comparison that needs a reference route, material state and measurement method. Abdullah et al. combined thermomechanical modelling with experimental validation for Ti-6Al-4V and showed the relevance of coupled temperature, distortion and geometry [19]. Maimaitiyili et al. used X-ray and neutron diffraction to study lattice strain and phase distribution, highlighting representative-volume and texture effects in stress interpretation [20]. Neither supports a zero-stress claim.

Thermal history also creates texture and geometry dependence. Antonysamy et al. found distinct contour/skin and bulk grain structures and geometry-dependent texture in Ti-6Al-4V [22]. Bruno et al. reported build-orientation effects on microstructure and mechanical response, while Kotzem et al. measured build-platform-position dependence of surface, defects and cyclic behaviour [23,24]. Qualification must therefore freeze orientation, location or a justified equivalence strategy.

The as-built state can be intentionally close to a desired heat-treated state for one alloy or application, yet that does not eliminate post-processing by default. Stress relief, solution treatment, ageing, HIP and machining address different outputs. HIP may close some internal pores under suitable conditions; it does not remove composition banding, every lack-of-fusion plane, contamination, an inaccessible rough surface or a dimensional error. A heat treatment can change phase and strength while leaving a trapped-powder problem untouched.

Material data must declare the exact state. ISO/ASTM 52929 specifies content for PBF material-property data sheets but expressly does not itself establish qualification [14]. A comparison between PBF-EB and wrought, cast or PBF-LB material is meaningful only when composition, orientation, location, heat treatment, surface condition, specimen geometry, test method and uncertainty are aligned.

Microstructure can be a controlled design output, but then the evidence burden increases. Scan order, section size, preheat, build position and cooldown become material-definition variables. A software update or strategy change can be a metallurgical change even if geometry and apparent density remain acceptable.

10. Imperfections, monitoring, inspection and evidence fusion

PBF-EB imperfections can include lack of fusion, gas or vapor-related porosity, cracks, inclusions/contamination, composition banding, surface-connected features and geometric nonconformance. ISO/ASTM 52948 supplies a current classification framework; it does not provide universal acceptance thresholds [12]. O'Donnell et al. used microscopy, CT, composition mapping and serial sectioning to interpret lack-of-fusion, spherical porosity and banding in a specific Ti-6Al-4V build [21]. Their work demonstrates why shape, location, composition and process history matter beyond total porosity.

Monitoring inside a hot, low-pressure, radiation-producing chamber is technically constrained. Backscattered electrons are attractive because they are generated by the same beam-material interaction. Arnold et al. demonstrated in-operando mapping of backscattered-electron intensity and correlation with the as-built surface [30]. Upadhyay et al. later showed that beam point-spread affects reconstructed fine features and that improved surface maps had only bounded correlation with post-build porosity in their studied system [31]. A useful signal is therefore not automatically a volumetric defect detector.

Thermography can track relative or calibrated temperature patterns, preheat evolution and anomalies, but emissivity, view angle, powder/solid state, detector range, window/deposit condition, spatial resolution and registration remain. Landau et al. used IR observations to corroborate a preheat model in a controlled study [15]. The correct production use defines which measurand the signal represents and how it is calibrated; it does not label every bright/dark pixel a defect.

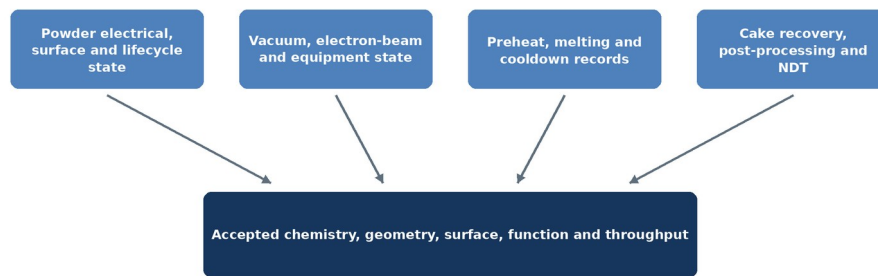


Figure 2. Part-linked PBF-EB/M evidence architecture.

Evidence fusion must preserve independence. If an algorithm selects suspicious regions and the same signal is used to declare them conforming, the validation must address that dependence. If CT labels train a backscatter model, CT detection capability and registration uncertainty limit the labels. If witness coupons substitute for inaccessible component zones, thermal, geometry, orientation and surface equivalence must be demonstrated.

The evidence hierarchy begins with raw or appropriately controlled source data, calibration and time/position registration. Transformations, thresholds, software/model version and operator actions remain traceable. ISO/ASTM 52927 helps organise characteristics and methods, while TR 52905 supports NDT method-selection thinking [11,13]. The output is not maximum data volume; it is adequate coverage of the declared failure modes with known uncertainty and disposition logic.

11. Productivity, material utilisation and factory economics

PBF-EB productivity is often reduced to beam power, jump speed, melt rate or the number of nested parts. The factory denominator is longer:

Effective cell throughput = accepted components / elapsed time from released powder and equipment to final acceptance

Elapsed time includes powder release, machine preparation, loading, evacuation, staged preheat, spreading and melting, interruptions, controlled cooldown, chamber opening, hot-cake handling, break-out, powder segregation/reconditioning/sampling, plate/support separation, heat treatment, machining, finishing, cleaning, inspection, nonconformance, rework and maintenance. A faster scan strategy can shift the bottleneck to preheat, cooldown, recovery, machining or CT.

Nominal material utilisation must distinguish powder purchased, powder loaded, powder incorporated into accepted components, supports/start structures, witness specimens, retained hot inventory, cake/recovery loss, sampling, filter/cleaning residues, contamination loss and retired powder. Recovered powder is not zero-cost: it occupies capital, controlled storage, break-out equipment, labour and testing capacity. Borrelli et al. show why reuse affects powder/part evidence and cannot be priced as a simple cycle count [28].

The sintered cake produces a process-specific labour and yield term. Aggressive recovery can damage thin features or change recovered powder; gentle recovery can be slow and incomplete. Complex internal geometry can create value by reducing assembly or machining while adding cleaning and verification cost. Nesting can distribute fixed vacuum/preheat/cooldown time across more components while coupling their schedule and correlated rejection risk.

A cost comparison must freeze annual volume, part mix, alloy/powder policy, machine utilisation, build height, preheat/cool schedule, cake/recovery route, accepted yield, finishing and inspection. PBF-EB can be rational for complex or high-value parts when the complete route closes. It is not automatically economic because the beam moves quickly or because unused powder can sometimes be recovered.

12. Occupational safety, high voltage, radiation, vacuum and hot-powder control

PBF-EB combines metal-powder tasks with high voltage, an electron beam, ionising-radiation potential, vacuum equipment, hot build/cake/powder, mechanical movement, electrical energy and post-processing. Risk depends on alloy composition and physical form, machine enclosure/interlocks, pressure system, task, maintenance state, local law and facility controls. One generic PPE list or machine marketing statement is not an adequate assessment.

ISO/ASTM 52926-3 defines PBF-EB/M operator capability and responsibility boundaries [5]. Operator qualification does not replace authorised maintenance competence, radiation protection, electrical safe-work, pressure/vacuum inspection, powder hazard assessment or emergency planning. Conversely, a guarded production cycle does not establish safety during chamber cleaning, shield replacement, filter handling, powder recovery or service with protections defeated under controlled procedures.

High-energy electrons decelerating in matter can generate bremsstrahlung and other ionising radiation. OSHA's hazard-recognition material establishes the need to recognise and control ionising-radiation hazards under applicable requirements [33]. ER-146 does not prescribe shielding thickness, dose limits or survey frequency. Those are machine-, jurisdiction- and facility-specific controls that require competent assessment, interlock verification, monitoring and records.

Vacuum introduces stored-energy, structural, hot-surface and maintenance states. The chamber must not be opened or serviced based only on elapsed time; pressure, temperature, electrical isolation and machine state must be verified under the controlled procedure. Regulating gas, pumps and exhausted species add their own chemical/asphyxiation or maintenance considerations where applicable.

NIOSH's facility-specific metal-AM evaluation demonstrates that powder tasks and control effectiveness depend on actual work practices and locations [32]. It does not provide a PBF-EB exposure limit or prove another facility compliant. The factory assessment must map receipt, loading, cake break-out, blasting, sieving, sampling, cleaning, filter/deposit handling, spill response, waste and maintenance for the actual alloy and equipment. For reactive systems, mechanically fracturing sintered necks during break-out generates fresh surfaces that were not present in the passivated incoming lot; the facility hazard analysis must therefore treat powder immediately after break-out as a distinct handling and storage state from received powder.

13. Qualification architecture and selection gate

PBF-EB/M qualification is a linked evidence system. ISO/ASTM 52920 defines site/process principles; ISO/ASTM 52949 addresses equipment IQ/OQ/PQ; ISO/ASTM 52926-3 addresses operators; ISO/ASTM 52904 covers critical metal-PBF production control; and ISO/ASTM 52908, 52909, 52927 and 52929 organise post-processing, location/orientation, characteristics and property reporting [2,4,5,8–10,13,14]. None replaces the others.

Table 3. PBF-EB/M factory qualification and selection gate

Gate	Minimum evidence	Fail/hold condition
Intended delivered state	Drawing/specification, alloy/chemistry, surface, properties, cleanliness and service boundary	Acceptance state or failure modes undefined
Powder release	Lot/fraction genealogy, surface/particle/electrical-relevant tests, storage and reuse disposition	Alloy label, PSD or reuse count used alone
Equipment and vacuum release	IQ/OQ/PQ, beam/focus/deflection, pressure sensors, regulating-gas identity/pressure/admission schedule and calibration, interlocks and maintenance status	Relevant service/change or gas state not qualified
Preheat and bed stability	Released staged strategy, temperature/electrical/bed evidence and smoke response	Stable bed or recovery window not demonstrated
Build definition	Geometry, orientation, supports/anchors, contour/bulk/spot strategy, location and software version	Uncontrolled strategy or non-equivalent placement change
Recovery and powder control	Cooldown; cake state by a declared repeatable surrogate—such as break-out force/energy under a fixed tool and procedure, recovered-fraction mass balance against dosed mass, or a defined position/geometry witness block—with procedure, uncertainty and explicit surrogate status; trapped-powder clearance, segregation, sampling and damage control	Cake state has no declared repeatable measure; surrogate not re-established after a preheat-strategy change; geometry cannot be cleared/verified; or fractions lose identity
Delivered material state	Chemistry, imperfections, microstructure/texture, residual-stress/distortion and post-process evidence	Coupon or data sheet substituted for component state
Inspection and monitoring	Calibrated/registered signals, NDT coverage, uncertainty and false-result handling	Monitoring treated as automatic acceptance
Factory and safety	Competent personnel, task controls, utilities, maintenance and legal requirements	Powder, radiation, electrical, vacuum or hot-work controls incomplete
Change and transfer	Equivalence/qualification plan for powder, machine, software, beam, vacuum/regulating gas, geometry, preheat/cake surrogate and post-process changes	“Same settings” or nominal machine model used as equivalence

Equivalence is tiered. A change that can introduce a new failure mode, alters an unrepresented powder/electrical state, regulating-gas regime, preheat/cake state, beam strategy, geometry class or delivered material state requires full requalification of the affected chain. A bounded change may use verification only when a documented causal assessment identifies the affected characteristics and a predeclared minimum set confirms powder genealogy, calibrated beam/vacuum/regulating-gas state, preheat and declared cake surrogate, representative geometry/location, actual execution, delivered-state material results, inspection capability and

acceptance against the existing limits. If that set is incomplete, its uncertainty overlaps a limit or the changed condition lies outside the validated domain, equivalence is not demonstrated and the route remains on hold.

The route genuinely wins when the required geometry, alloy and elevated-temperature process state survive cake recovery and finishing, and when complete-cell yield and evidence coverage are acceptable. Typical no-go conditions include an alloy whose chemistry/phase cannot be retained, a bed that cannot be stabilised without an unrecoverable cake, an internal geometry that cannot be cleared or inspected, a surface that cannot be delivered or finished, or a factory unable to control the high-voltage/radiation/vacuum/hot-powder tasks.

The current 3Dresyns nano/micron page lists metal, alloy and other raw-material families and distinguishes direct from indirect routes [34]. That page is a portfolio-scope source only. Availability of a composition or particle family does not establish powder morphology, oxide/electrical state, vacuum behaviour, smoke stability, processability, safe handling, recovery or final properties for PBF-EB/M. Any proposed 3Dresyns-related feedstock must pass the same independent powder/process/final-part gate.

14. Conclusions and research priorities

PBF-EB/M is not laser PBF with a substituted heat source. Vacuum, electron transport, powder charging, staged preheating, partial sintering and the hot cake create a distinct process architecture. Its most attractive features—elevated-temperature processing, rapid beam positioning, reduced gas scattering and powder-bed geometry—are inseparable from alloy, composition, surface, recovery, monitoring and factory constraints.

A defensible industrial decision therefore follows five rules:

1. qualify the electron-beam/vacuum system and the powder's evolving electrical/thermal state, not only nominal settings;
2. treat preheat as a multi-output transformation that balances bed stability, thermal field and recoverability;
3. qualify chemistry, microstructure, texture, surface and imperfections in the actual geometry/location/post-process state;
4. count vacuum, preheat, cooldown, cake break-out, powder control, finishing, inspection and yield in productivity; and
5. release a component only from registered, uncertainty-aware part-linked evidence.

Priority research should improve traceable bed-temperature/electrical-state measurement, smoke-onset and recovery models across powders, beam delivery calibration over the full build region, composition/vapor/deposit accounting, and metrology that can replace the declared cake-state surrogate with a traceable underlying property. Accessible reference artefacts for surface/internal geometry, monitoring-to-NDT registration and cross-machine transfer evidence remain additional needs. Until those links close, PBF-EB/M capability remains a qualified material-machine-thermal-geometry-factory route, not a general alloy or complexity claim.

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