Powering Complex FPGA-Based Systems Using Highly Integrated DC/DC µModule Regulator Systems

In a recent discussion with a system designer, the requirement for his power supply was to regulate 1.5V and deliver up to 40A of current to a load that consisted of four FPGAs. This is up to 60W of power that must be delivered in a small area with the lowest height profile possible to allow a steady flow of air for cooling. The power supply had to be surface mountable and operate at high enough efficiency to minimize heat dissipation. He also demanded the simplest possible solution so his time could be dedicated to the more complex tasks. Aside from precise electrical performance, this solution had to remove the heat generated during DC to DC conversion quickly so that the circuit and the ICs in the vicinity do not overheat. Such a solution requires an innovative design to meet these criteria:

1. Very low profile to allow efficient air flow and to prevent thermal shadow on surrounding ICs
2. High efficiency to minimize heat dissipation
3. Current sharing capability to spread the heat evenly to eliminate hot spots and minimize or eliminate the need for heat sinks
4. Complete DC/DC circuit in a surface mount package that includes the DC/DC controller, MOSFETs, inductor, capacitors and compensation circuitry for a quick and easy solution

Innovation in DC/DC Design

The innovation is a modular but surface mount approach that uses efficient DC/DC conversion, precise current sharing and low thermal impedance packaging to deliver the output power while requiring minimal cooling. Because of the low profile and power sharing among four devices, a system using this solution depends on fewer fans or a slower fan speed as well as few or no heat sinks. (These contribute to lower system cost, consuming less power to remove heat). Figure 1 shows a test board for such a circuit. The design regulates 1.5V output while delivering 40A (up to 48A) of load current. Each “black square” is a complete DC/DC circuit and is housed in a 15mm × 15mm × 2.8mm surface mount package. With a few input and output capacitors and resistors, the design using these DC/DC µModule® regulator systems is as simple as it’s shown in the photo.

Figure 1. Four DC/DC µModule Regulator Systems Current Share to Regulate 1.5V at 48A with Only 2.8mm Profile and 15mm × 15mm of Board Area. Each µModule Regulator Weighs Only 1.7g and Has an IC Form-Factor That Can Easily Be Used with Any Pick-and-Place Machine During Board Assembly
Figure 2. Simply Parallel Multiple DC/DC µModule Regulator Systems to Achieve Higher Output Current. Board Layout Is as Easy as Copying and Pasting Each µModule Regulator’s Layout With Very Few External Components Required
supply can produce 12A (more, if paralleled) from a wide input range of 4.5V to 20V, making it extremely versatile. The pin-compatible LTM4601HV extends the input range to 28V.

Another significant advantage of the LTM4601 over power-module- or IC-based systems is its ability to easily scale up as loads increase. If load requirements are greater than one µModule regulator can produce, simply add more modules in parallel. The design of a parallel system involves little more than copying and pasting the layout of each 15mm × 15mm µModule regulator. Electrical layout issues are taken care of within the µModule package—there are no external inductors, switches or other components to worry about.

Output features include output voltage tracking and margining. The high switching frequency, typically 850kHz at full load, constant on-time, zero latency controller delivers fast transient response to line and load changes while maintaining stability. Should frequency harmonics be a concern, an external clock can control synchronization via an on-chip phase-locked loop.

**48A from Four Parallel DC/DC µModule Regulators**

Figure 2 shows a regulator comprising four parallel LTM4601s, which can produce a 48A (4 × 12A) output. The regulators are synchronized but operate 90° out-of-phase with respect to each other, thereby reducing the amplitude of input and output ripple currents through cancellation (Figure 3).

Synchronization and phase shifting is implemented via the LTC6902 oscillator, which provides four clock outputs, each 90° phase shifted (for 2- or 3-phase relationships, the LTC6902 can be adjusted via a resistor). By operating the µModule regulators out-of-phase, peak input and output current is reduced by approximately 20% depending on the duty cycle (see the LTM4601 data sheet). The attenuated ripple, in turn, decreases the external capacitor RMS current rating and size requirements, further reducing solution cost and board space.

The clock signals serve as input to the PLLIN (phase-locked loop in) pins of the four LTM4601s. The phase-locked loop of the LTM4601 is comprised of a phase detector and a voltage controlled oscillator, which combine to lock onto the rising edge of an external clock with a frequency range of 850kHz. The phase-locked loop is turned on when a pulse of at least 400ns and 2V amplitude at the PLLIN pin is detected, though it is disabled during start-up. Figure 3 shows the switching waveforms of four LTM4601 µModule regulators in parallel.

![Figure 3. By Operating Each DC/DC µModule Regulator 90° Out-of-Phase, the Input and Output Ripples Are Reduced, Which Also Reduces the Requirement for Input and Output Capacitors. Photo Shows Individual µModule Regulator Switching Waveforms for Figure 2](image)

Only one resistor is required to set the output voltage. In a parallel set-up, the value of the resistor depends on the number of LTM4601s used. This is because the effective value of the top (internal) feedback resistor changes as you parallel LTM4601s. The LTM4601’s reference voltage is 0.6V and its internal top feedback resistor value is 60.4kΩ, so the relationship between $V_{OUT}$, the output voltage setting resistor ($R_{FB}$), and the number of modules (n) placed in parallel is:

$$V_{OUT} = 0.6V \frac{60.4k}{n} + R_{FB}$$
Figure 4 illustrates the system’s high efficiency over the vast output current range up to 48A. The system performs impressively with no dipping in the efficiency curve for a broad range of output voltages.

**Start-Up, Soft-Start and Current Sharing**

The soft-start feature of the LTM4601 prevents large inrush currents at start-up by slowly ramping the output voltage to its nominal value. The relation of start-up time to $V_{OUT}$ and the soft-start capacitor ($C_{SS}$) is:

$$t_{SOFTSTART} = 0.8 \times (0.6V - V_{OUT(MARGIN)}) \times \frac{C_{SS}}{1.5\mu A}$$

where

$$V_{OUT(MARGIN)} = \frac{\%V_{OUT}}{100} \times V_{OUT}$$

For example, a 0.1µF soft-start capacitor yields a nominal 8ms ramp (see Figure 5) with no margining.

Current sharing among parallel regulators is well balanced through start-up to full load. Figure 6 shows an evenly distributed output current curve for a 2-parallel LTM4601 system, as each rises to a nominal 10A each, 20A total.

**Conclusion**

The DC/DC µModule regulators are self-contained and complete systems in an IC form factor. The low profile, high efficiency and current sharing capability allow practical high power solutions for the new generation of digital systems. Thermal performance is impressive at 48A of output current with balanced current sharing and smooth uniform start-up. The ease and simplicity of this design minimizes development time while saving board space. In part two of this discussion, the focus will be on thermal performance and layout of this circuit.