



Designation: D6780 – 05

Standard Test Method for Water Content and Density of Soil in Place by Time Domain Reflectometry (TDR)¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D6780; the number immediately following the designation indicates the year of original adoption or, in the case of revision, the year of last revision. A number in parentheses indicates the year of last reapproval. A superscript epsilon (ϵ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reapproval.

1. Scope*

1.1 This test method may be used to determine the water content of soils and the in-place density of soils using a TDR apparatus.

1.2 This test method applies to soils that have 30 % or less by weight of their particles retained on the 19.0-mm ($\frac{3}{4}$ -in.) sieve.

1.3 This test method is suitable for use as a means of acceptance for compacted fill or embankments.

1.4 This test method may not be suitable for organic and highly plastic soils.

1.5 All observed and calculated values shall conform to the guidelines for significant digits and rounding established in Practice [D6026](#).

1.5.1 The method used to specify how data are collected, calculated, or recorded in this standard is not directly related to the accuracy to which the data can be applied in design or other uses, or both. How one applies the results obtained using this standard is beyond its scope.

1.6 Two alternative procedures are provided.

1.6.1 *Procedure A* involves two tests in the field, an in-place test and a test in a mold containing material excavated from the in-place test location. The apparent dielectric constant is determined in both tests.

1.6.2 *Procedure B* involves only an in-place test by incorporating a bulk electrical conductivity in addition to the apparent dielectric constant.

1.7 The values stated in either SI units or inch-pound units are to be regarded separately as standard. The values stated in each system may not be exact equivalents; therefore, each system shall be used independently of the other. Combining values from the two systems may result in non-conformance with the standard. For additional information consult [SI10](#).

¹ This test method is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee [D18](#) on Soil and Rock and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee [D18.08](#) on Special and Construction Control Tests.

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1.8 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*²

[D653](#) Terminology Relating to Soil, Rock, and Contained Fluids

[D698](#) Test Methods for Laboratory Compaction Characteristics of Soil Using Standard Effort (12 400 ft-lbf/ft³ (600 kN-m/m³))

[D2216](#) Test Methods for Laboratory Determination of Water (Moisture) Content of Soil and Rock by Mass

[D3740](#) Practice for Minimum Requirements for Agencies Engaged in Testing and/or Inspection of Soil and Rock as Used in Engineering Design and Construction

[D4753](#) Guide for Evaluating, Selecting, and Specifying Balances and Standard Masses for Use in Soil, Rock, and Construction Materials Testing

[D6026](#) Practice for Using Significant Digits in Geotechnical Data

[D6565](#) Test Method for Determination of Water (Moisture) Content of Soil by the Time-Domain Reflectometry (TDR) Method

[E1](#) Specification for ASTM Liquid-in-Glass Thermometers

[SI10](#) Standard for Use of the International System of Units (SI): The Modern Metric System

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions*—Refer to Terminology [D653](#) for standard definitions of terms.

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *apparent dielectric constant, K_{insitu} , K_{mold}* —the squared ratio of the velocity of light in air to the apparent

*A Summary of Changes section appears at the end of this standard

velocity of electromagnetic wave propagation in the soil measured by a TDR apparatus in place and in the cylindrical mold, respectively.

3.2.2 *apparent length, L_a* —on a plot of electromagnetic wave signal versus scaled distance measured by a TDR apparatus as shown in Fig. 1, it is the horizontal distance between the point on the waveform due to the reflection from the surface of the soil where the probe is inserted into the soil to the point on the waveform due to the reflection from the end of the probe.

3.2.3 *bulk electrical conductivity, EC_b* —electrical conductivity is a measure of how well a material accommodates the transport of electric charge. Its SI derived unit is Siemens per meter (S/m). As an electromagnetic wave propagates along TDR probed buried in soil, the signal energy is attenuated in proportion to the electrical conductivity along the travel path. Determination of bulk electrical conductivity is illustrated in Fig. 1.

3.2.4 *coaxial head, CH^3* —a device that forms a transition from the coaxial cable connected to the TDR apparatus to the Multiple Rod Probe or to a Cylindrical Mold Probe.

3.2.5 *cylindrical mold probe, CMP^3* —a probe formed by a cylindrical metal mold as the outer conductor having a non-metallic end plate, filled with compacted soil, and with an inner conductor consisting of a rod driven into the soil along the axis of the mold.

3.2.6 *multiple rod probe, MRP^3* —a probe formed by driving four rods of equal length into the soil in a pattern where three of the rods define the outer conductor of a “coaxial cable” and one of the rods is the inner conductor.

³ The apparatus is covered by patents. Interested parties are invited to submit information regarding the identification of alternative(s) to this patented item to the ASTM Headquarters. Your comments will receive careful consideration at a meeting of the responsible technical committee, which you may attend.

3.2.7 *probe length, L* —the length of the TDR probe that is below the surface of the soil.

3.2.8 *scaled distance, l* —the product of the velocity of light in air and electromagnetic wave travel time in the soil divided by two.

3.2.9 *TDR internal resistance, R_s* —the internal resistance of the TDR’s pulse generator (generally 50 ohms).

3.2.10 *voltage source, V_s* —the source voltage and equal to twice the step voltage generated by the TDR.

3.2.11 *voltage, long term, V_f* —the long term voltage as illustrated in Fig. 1.

4. Summary of Test Method

4.1 *Procedure A*—The dielectric constant of the soil in-place is determined using a multiple rod probe (MRP), a coaxial head (CH), and TDR apparatus. The soil at the location of the insitu measurement is then excavated and compacted in a mold. By measurement of the mass of the mold and soil and with the mass and volume of the mold known, the wet density of the soil in the mold is determined. A rod driven into the soil along the axis of the mold creates a cylindrical mold probe (CMP). Using the same coaxial head (CH), an adapter ring, and the TDR apparatus the dielectric constant of the soil in the mold is measured. The water content of the soil in the mold is determined using a correlation between the dielectric constant, moisture content and soil density. The correlation requires two constants that are somewhat soil specific. It is assumed that the water content of the soil in place is the same as the water content in the mold. The density of the soil in place is determined from the density of the soil in the mold and the dielectric constants measured in the mold and in place.

4.2 *Procedure B*—The apparent dielectric constant and the bulk electrical conductivity of the soil in-place is determined

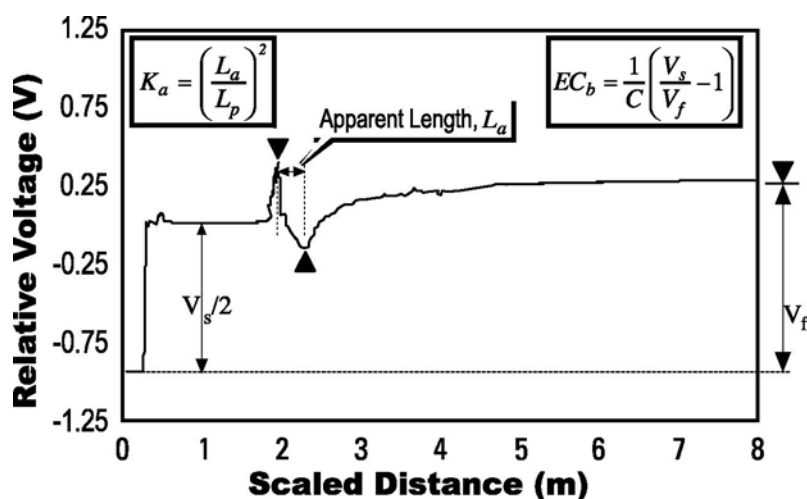


Figure 1: Typical TDR Waveform for Soil Showing Measurements to Obtain Apparent Dielectric Constant, K_a , and Bulk D.C. Electrical Conductivity, EC_b

FIG. 1 Typical TDR Waveform for Soil Showing Measurements to Obtain Apparent Dielectric Constant, K_a , and Bulk D.C. Electrical Conductivity, EC_b

using a multiple rod probe (MRP), a coaxial head (CH), and TDR apparatus. The water content and density of the soil in-place are determined from the measured apparent dielectric constant, the bulk electrical conductivity and six constants. The six soil constants are soil and in-place pore fluid dependent. The six soil constants are determined in conjunction with laboratory compaction procedures using specified compaction procedures, for example, Test Method [D698](#), and by taking measurements of the apparent dielectric constant and the bulk electrical conductivity for each compaction point.

5. Significance and Use

5.1 This test method can be used to determine the density and water content of naturally occurring soils and of soils placed during the construction of earth embankments, road fills, and structural backfills.

5.2 Time domain reflectometry (TDR) measures the apparent dielectric constant (Procedure A) and both the apparent dielectric constant and the bulk electrical conductivity (Procedure B) of soil. The apparent dielectric constant is affected significantly by the water content and density of soil, and to a lesser extent by the chemical composition of soil and pore water, and by temperature. The bulk electrical conductivity is affected significantly by the water content, density, and the chemical composition of the in-place pore water, and to a lesser extent the chemical composition of the soil solids. This test method measures the gravimetric water content and makes use of a different relationship between the electrical properties and water content from Test Method [D6565](#) which measures the volumetric water content.

5.3 Soil and pore water characteristics are accounted for in Procedure A with two calibration constants and for Procedure B with six calibration constants. The soil constants for Procedure A are determined for a given soil by performing compaction tests in a special mold as described in [Annex A2](#). The six soil constants for Procedure B are determined in conjunction with compaction testing in accordance with specified compaction procedures, for example, Test Method [D698](#) as described in [Annex A3](#). Both Procedures A and B use Test Method [D2216](#) to determine the water contents.

5.4 When following Procedure A, the water content is the average value over the length of the cylindrical mold and the density is the average value over the length of the multiple-rod probe embedded in the soil. When following Procedure B, the water content and density is the average values over the length of the multiple-rod embedded in the soil.

NOTE 1—The quality of the result produced by this standard is dependent on the competence of the personnel performing it, and the suitability of the equipment and facilities used. Agencies that meet the criteria of Practice [D3740](#) are generally considered capable of competent and objective testing/sampling/inspection/etc. Users of this standard are cautioned that compliance with Practice [D3740](#) does not in itself assure reliable results. Reliable results depend on many factors; Practice [D3740](#) provides a means of evaluating some of those factors.

6. Interferences

6.1 Quality and accuracy of the test results significantly depend on soil having contact with the inner conductor of the probes. To assist this, when installing the rods of the MRP, the

rod that forms the inner conductor must be the last rod installed. If in the installation process, the rod hits upon a large particle that causes it to drift from vertical alignment, all rods should be removed and the test conducted in a new location at least 0.2-m (8-in.) from the previous test location.

6.2 The quality of the signal read by the TDR apparatus depends on having clean contacts between the CH and the MRP and the CMP. The contacting surfaces should be wiped with a clean cloth prior to placing the CH on the MRP and the CMP. Once placed, observe the signal on the TDR apparatus. If the characteristic signal is not present, the CH may have to be slightly rotated about its axis to make better contact.

6.3 This test method only applies to non-frozen soil. The apparent dielectric constant is slightly temperature dependent for soils and depends on soil type. For soil temperatures between 15°C and 25°C (59°F and 77°F), no temperature corrections are needed for most soils. A simple temperature adjustment for water content determination is part of the test method.

7. Apparatus

7.1 *TDR Apparatus*, a Metallic Time Domain Reflectometer with a scaled length resolution of at least 2.4-mm (0.10-in.) (this corresponds approximately to a time between data points less than or equal to sixteen picoseconds (16×10^{-12} s)). A portable computer with a communication port to the TDR is suggested for controlling the apparatus, acquiring and saving the data, and for making the calculations as the test proceeds.

7.2 Multiple Rod Probe (MRP)³ with Coaxial Head (CH)³

7.2.1 The MRP consists of four common steel spikes, typically 250-mm (10-in.) in length and uniform diameters of 9.5-mm ($\frac{3}{8}$ -in.). (Other length spikes, but with the same diameter, may be used but in no case should they have lengths less than 150-mm (6-in.). For lengths longer than 250-mm (10-in.), drift in the alignment of the spikes and loss of reflected signal from the end of the MRP may occur.)

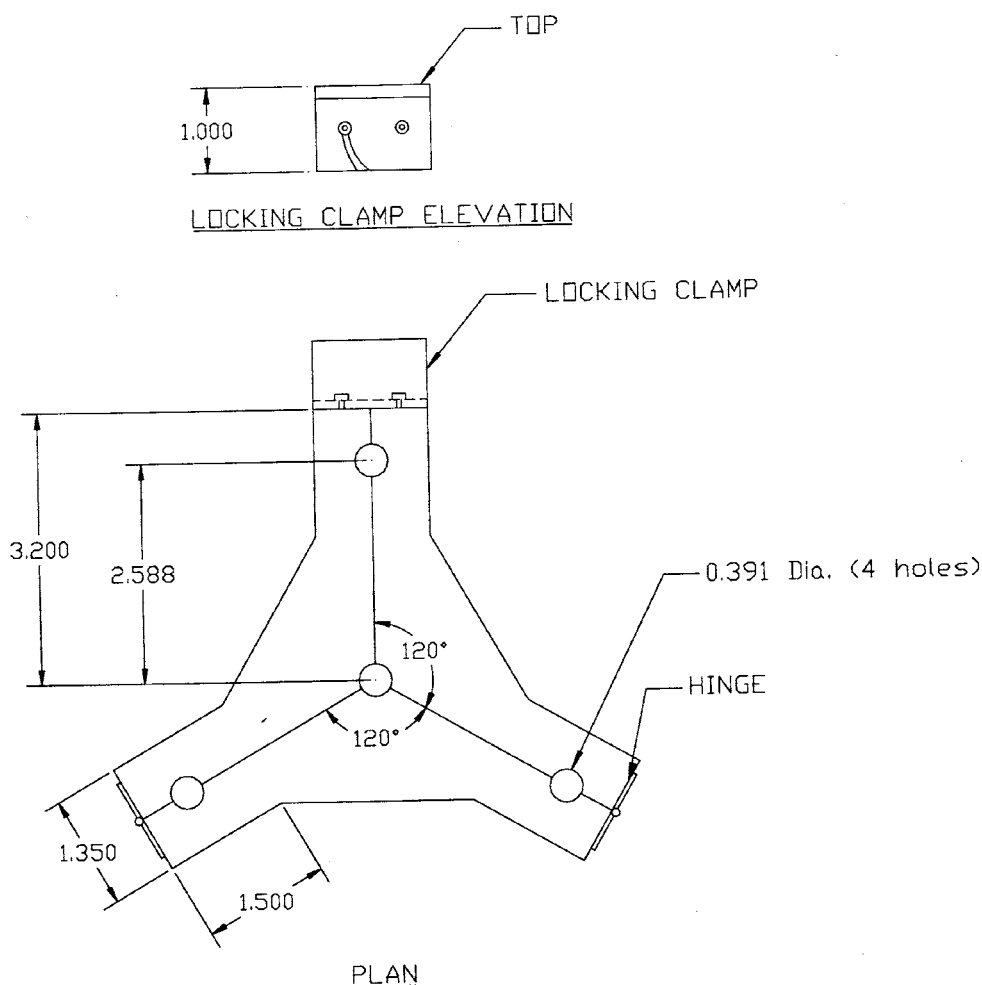
7.2.2 A MRP guide template (see [Fig. 2](#)) is used to guide the spikes as they are driven into the soil. The template must allow for its removal after the spikes are driven and before a TDR measurement is made. (The radius from the central spike to the outer spikes must be within the range of 5 to 7.5 times the diameter of the central spike.)

7.2.3 The Coaxial Head (CH)³ (see [Fig. 3](#)) forms a transition from the coaxial cable coming from the TDR apparatus to the MRP.

7.3 *Cylindrical Mold Probe (CMP)³*, the CMP consists of a cylindrical mold, a guide template, a central rod, and a ring collar. Details for these items are shown in [Fig. 4](#).

7.3.1 The central rod is a stainless steel rod with a diameter of 8.0-mm ($\frac{5}{16}$ -in.) and a length of 264-mm (10.4-in.) in length.

7.4 *Balances or Scales*, meeting Specification GP10 of Specification [D4753](#) to determine the mass of the soil and the cylindrical mold. A battery-operated balance or scale having a minimum capacity of 10 kg is suitable when an apparatus with the dimension given in [Fig. 3](#) is used.



Note: All dimensions are in inches.
See Table 1 for tolerances and metric equivalents.

FIG. 2 MRP Guide Template

TABLE 1 Metric Equivalents for Dimensions in Fig. 2

(in.)	Tol. (in.)	(mm)	Tol. (mm)
0.391	± 0.002	10.00	± 0.05
1.000	± 0.005	25.00	± 0.15
1.350	± 0.015	34.30	± 0.40
1.500	± 0.015	38.00	± 0.40
2.588	± 0.005	65.70	± 0.13
3.200	± 0.020	80.00	± 0.50

7.5 *Driving Tools*, a brass-headed hammer for driving spikes for the MRP and the central rod into the cylindrical mold. A resin-headed hammer also may be used for driving the central rod into the cylindrical mold. (Use of these hammers prevents peening of the driving end of the steel rods from repeated use.)

7.6 *Tamping Rod*, an aluminum rod with flat ends, a diameter of 37-mm (1.5-in.), and a length of 380-mm (15-in.). Other tamping devices which provide a relatively uniformly compacted specimen also may be used.

7.7 *Thermometer*, 0 to 50°C range, 0.5°C graduations, conforming to requirements of Specification E1.

7.8 *Vernier or Dial Caliper*, having a measuring range of at least 0 to 250-mm (0 to 10-in.) and readable to at least 0.02-mm (0.001-in.).

7.9 *Miscellaneous Tools*, a battery-powered hand drill with a spare battery and charger and with a 25-mm (1-in.) diameter auger bit (alternatively, a small pick will work), straight edge for smoothing the surface of the soil for the in-place test and for smoothing the surface of the soil in the cylindrical mold, pliers for removing the spikes and central rod, small scoop or spoon for removal of the loosened soil and for placement in the cylindrical mold, and a brush for removing excess soil from around the base of the cylindrical mold prior to determining its mass.

8. Preparation of Apparatus

8.1 Charge or replace, as appropriate batteries in the TDR apparatus, the hand drill, and the balance.