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Standard Guide for Developing Conceptual Site Models for Contaminated Sites¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This guide is intended to assist in the development of conceptual site models to be used for the following: (1) integration of technical information from various sources, (2) support the selection of sample locations for establishing background concentrations of substances, (3) identify data needs and guide data collection activities, and (4) evaluate the risk to human health and the environment posed by a contaminated site. This guide generally describes the major components of conceptual site models, provides an outline for developing models, and presents an example of the parts of a model. This guide does not provide a detailed description of a site-specific conceptual site model because conditions at contaminated sites can vary greatly from one site to another.

1.2 The values stated in either inch-pound or SI units are to be regarded as the standard. The values given in parentheses are for information only.

1.3 This guide is intended to apply to any contaminated site.

1.4 *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:

D 2216 Test Method for Laboratory Determination of Water (Moisture) Content of Soil and Rock²

2.2 EPA Documents:³

Guidance for Data Useability in Risk Assessment (Part A) Final, Publication 9285.7-09A, PB 92-963356, April 1992

Guidance for Data Useability in Risk Assessment (Part B), OSWER Directive 9285.7-09B, May 1992

Guidance for Conducting Remedial Investigations and Feasibility Studies Under CERCLA, OSWER Directive 9355.3-01, October 1988

3. Terminology

3.1 Definitions:

3.1.1 *background concentration, n*—the concentration of a substance in ground water, surface water, air, sediment, or soil at a source(s) or nearby reference location, and not attributable to the source(s) under consideration. Background samples may be contaminated, either by naturally occurring or manmade sources, but not by the source(s) in question.

3.1.2 *conceptual site model, n*—for the purpose of this guide, a written or pictorial representation of an environmental system and the biological, physical, and chemical processes that determine the transport of contaminants from sources through environmental media to environmental receptors within the system.

3.1.3 *contaminant, n*—any substance, including any radiological material, that is potentially hazardous to human health or the environment and is present in the environment at concentrations above its background concentration.

3.1.4 *contaminant release, n*—movement of a substance from a source into an environmental medium, for example, a leak, spill, volatilization, runoff, fugitive dust emission, or leaching.

3.1.5 *environmental receptor, n*—humans and other living organisms potentially exposed to and adversely affected by contaminants because they are present at the source(s) or along contaminant migration pathways.

3.1.6 *environmental transport, n*—movement of a chemical or physical agent in the environment after it has been released from a source to an environmental medium, for example, movement through the air, surface water, ground water, soil, sediment, or food chain.

3.1.7 *exposure route, n*—the process by which a contaminant or physical agent in the environment comes into direct contact with the body, tissues, or exchange boundaries of an environmental receptor organism, for example, ingestion, inhalation, dermal absorption, root uptake, and gill uptake.

3.1.8 *migration pathway, n*—the course through which contaminants in the environment may move away from the source(s) to potential environmental receptors.

3.1.9 *source, n*—the location from which a contaminant(s) has entered or may enter a physical system. A primary source, such as a location at which drums have leaked onto surface soils, may produce a secondary source, such as contaminated soils; sources may hence be primary or secondary.

¹ This guide is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee E47 on Biological Effects and Environmental Fate and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee E47.05 on Risk Assessment, Communication, and Management.

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² *Annual Book of ASTM Standards*, Vol 04.08.

³ Available from Standardization Documents Order Desk, Bldg 4 Section D, 700 Robbins Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19111-5094, Attn: NPODS.



4. Summary of Guide

4.1 The six basic activities associated with developing a conceptual site model (not necessarily listed in the order in which they should be addressed) are as follows: (1) identification of potential contaminants; (2) identification and characterization of the source(s) of contaminants; (3) delineation of potential migration pathways through environmental media, such as ground water, surface water, soils, sediment, biota, and air; (4) establishment of background areas of contaminants for each contaminated medium; (5) identification and characterization of potential environmental receptors (human and ecological); and (6) determination of the limits of the study area or system boundaries.

4.2 The complexity of a conceptual site model should be consistent with the complexity of the site and available data. The development of a conceptual site model will usually be iterative. Model development should start as early in the site investigation process as possible. The model should be refined and revised throughout the site investigation process to incorporate additional site data. The final model should contain sufficient information to support the development of current and future exposure scenarios.

4.3 The concerns of ecological risk assessment are different from those of human-health risk assessment, for example, important migration pathways, exposure routes, and environmental receptors. These differences are usually sufficient to warrant separate descriptions and representations of the conceptual site model in the human health and ecological risk assessment reports. There will be elements of the conceptual site model that are common to both representations, however, and the risk assessors should develop these together to ensure consistency.

5. Significance and Use

5.1 The information gained through the site investigation is used to characterize the physical, biological, and chemical systems existing at a site. The processes that determine contaminant releases, contaminant migration, and environmental receptor exposure to contaminants are described and integrated in a conceptual site model.

5.2 Development of this model is critical for determining potential exposure routes (for example, ingestion and inhalation) and for suggesting possible effects of the contaminants on human health and the environment. Uncertainties associated with the conceptual site model need to be identified clearly so that efforts can be taken to reduce these uncertainties to acceptable levels. Early versions of the model, which are usually based on limited or incomplete information, will identify and emphasize the uncertainties that should be addressed.

5.3 The conceptual site model is used to integrate all site information and to determine whether information including data are missing (data gaps) and whether additional information needs to be collected at the site. The model is used furthermore to facilitate the selection of remedial alternatives and to evaluate the effectiveness of remedial actions in reducing the exposure of environmental receptors to contaminants.

5.4 This guide is not meant to replace regulatory require-

ments for conducting environmental site characterizations at contaminated (including radiologically contaminated) sites. It should supplement existing guidance and promote a uniform approach to developing conceptual site models.

5.5 This guide is meant to be used by all those involved in developing conceptual site models. This should ideally include representatives from all phases of the investigative and remedial process, for example, preliminary assessment, remedial investigation, baseline human health and ecological risk assessments, and feasibility study. The conceptual site model should be used to enable experts from all disciplines to communicate effectively with one another, resolve issues concerning the site, and facilitate the decision-making process.

5.6 The steps in the procedure for developing conceptual site models include elements sometimes referred to collectively as site characterization. Although not within the scope of this guide, the conceptual site model can be used during site remediation.

6. Procedure

6.1 *Assembling Information*—Assemble historical and current site-related information from maps, aerial images, cross sections, environmental data, records, reports, studies, and other information sources. A visit(s) to the site by those preparing the conceptual site model is recommended highly. The quality of the information being assembled should be evaluated, preferably including quantitative methods, and the decision to use the information should be based on the data's meeting objective qualitative and quantitative criteria. For more information on assessing the quality and accuracy of data, see *Guidance for Data Useability in Risk Assessment (Part A)* and *Guidance for Data Useability in Risk Assessment (Part B)*. Methods used for obtaining analytical data should be described, and sources of information should be referenced. A conceptual site model should be developed for every site unless there are multiple sites in proximity to one another such that it is not possible to determine the individual source or sources of contamination. Sites may be aggregated in that case. A conceptual model should then be developed for the aggregate.

6.2 *Identifying Contaminants*—Identify contaminants in the ground water, surface water, soils, sediments, biota, and air. If no contaminants are found, the conceptual site model should be used to help document this finding.

6.3 *Establishing Background Concentrations of Contaminants*—Background samples serve three major functions: (1) to establish the range of concentrations of an analyte attributable to natural occurrence at the site; (2) to establish the range of concentrations of an analyte attributable to source(s) other than the source(s) under consideration; and (3) to help establish the extent to which contamination exceeds background levels.

6.3.1 The conceptual site model should include the naturally occurring concentrations of all contaminants found at the site. The number and location of samples needed to establish background concentrations in each medium will vary with specific site conditions and requirements. The model should include sufficient background samples to distinguish contamination attributable to the source(s) under consideration from naturally occurring or nearby anthropogenic contamination.



The procedures mentioned in 6.2 and 6.3 are sometimes grouped under the general heading of contaminant assessment and may be performed as a separate activity prior to the development of a conceptual site model.

6.4 Characterizing Sources—At a minimum, the following source characteristics should be measured or estimated for a site:

6.4.1 Source location(s), boundaries, and volume(s). Sources should be located accurately on site maps. Maps should include a scale and direction indicator (for example, north arrow). They should furthermore show where the source(s) is located in relationship to the property boundaries.

6.4.2 The potentially hazardous constituents and their concentrations in media at the source.

6.4.3 The time of initiation, duration, and rate of contaminant release from the source.

6.5 Identifying Migration Pathways—Potential migration pathways through ground water, surface water, air, soils, sediments, and biota should be identified for each source. Complete exposure pathways should be identified and distinguished from incomplete pathways. An exposure pathway is incomplete if any of the following elements are missing: (1) a mechanism of contaminant release from primary or secondary sources, (2) a transport medium if potential environmental receptors are not located at the source, and (3) a point of potential contact of environmental receptors with the contaminated medium. The potential for both current and future releases and migration of the contaminants along the complete pathways to the environmental receptors should be determined. A diagram (similar to that in Fig. X1.4) of exposure pathways for all source types at a site should be constructed. This information should be consistent with the narrative portion and tables in the exposure assessment section of an exposure or risk assessment. Tracking contaminant migration from sources to environmental receptors is one of the most important uses of the conceptual site model.

6.5.1 Ground Water Pathway—This pathway should be considered when hazardous solids or liquids have or may have come into contact with the surface or subsurface soil or rock. The following should be considered further in that case: vertical distance to the saturated zone; subsurface flow rates; presence and proximity of downgradient seeps, springs, or caves; fractures or other preferred flow paths; artesian conditions; presence of wells, especially those for irrigation or drinking water; and, in general, the underlying geology and hydrology of the site. Other fate and transport phenomena that should be considered include hydrodynamic dispersion, inter-phase transfers of contaminants, and retardation. Movement through the vadose zone should be considered.

6.5.2 Surface Water and Sediment Pathway—This pathway should always be investigated in the following situations: (1) a perennial body of water (river, lake, continuous stream, drainage ditch, etc.) is in direct contact with, or is potentially contaminated by a source or contaminated area, (2) an uninterrupted pathway exists from a source or contaminated area to the surface water, (3) sampling and analysis of the surface water body or sediments indicate contaminant concentrations substantially above background, (4) contaminated ground wa-

ter or surface water runoff is known or suspected to discharge to a surface water body, and (5) under arid conditions in which ephemeral drainage may convey contaminants to downstream points of exposure.

6.5.3 Air Pathway—Contaminant transport through the air pathway should be evaluated for contaminants in the surface soil, subsurface soil, surface water, or other media capable of releasing gasses or particulate matter to the air. The migration of contaminants from air to other environmental compartments should be considered, for example, deposition of particulates resulting from incineration onto surface waters and soil.

6.5.4 Soil Contact Pathway—Contaminated soils that may come into direct contact with human or ecological receptors should be investigated. This includes direct contact with chemicals through dermal absorption and direct exposure to gamma radiation from radioactively contaminated soil. There is a potential for human and ecological receptors to be exposed to contaminants at different soil depths (for example, humans may be exposed to only surface and subsurface soils, whereas plants and animals may encounter contaminants that are buried more deeply). This should be considered when contaminated soils are being evaluated.

6.5.5 Biotic Pathway—Bioconcentration and bioaccumulation in organisms and the resulting potential for transfer and biomagnification along food chains and environmental transport by animal movements should be considered. For example, many organic, lipophilic contaminants found in soils or sediments can bioaccumulate and bioconcentrate in organisms such as plankton, worms, or herbivores and biomagnify in organisms such as carnivorous fish and mammals or birds. The movement of contaminated biota can transport contaminants.

6.6 Identifying Environmental Receptors—Identify environmental receptors currently or potentially exposed to site contaminants. This includes humans and other organisms that are in direct contact with the source of contamination, potentially present along the migration pathways, or located in the vicinity of the site. It is advisable to compile a list of taxa representative of the major groups of species present at the site. It will rarely be possible or desirable to identify all species present at a site. It is recommended that the conceptual site model include species or guilds representative of major trophic levels. The complexity and iterative nature of the conceptual site model has already been mentioned in 4.2.

6.6.1 Human Receptors—The conceptual site model should include a map or maps indicating the physical boundaries of areas within which environmental receptors are potentially or currently exposed to the source(s) or migration pathways; separate maps may be prepared to illustrate specific contaminants or groups of contaminants. In addition, the human receptors should be represented in a figure similar to Fig. X1.4, which is based on *Guidance for Conducting Remedial Investigations and Feasibility Studies Under CERCLA*. Fig. X1.4 shows the potentially exposed populations, sources, and exposure routes. It represents a clear and concise method of displaying exposure information.

6.6.2 Ecological Receptors—The conceptual site model should include a map or maps identifying and locating terrestrial and aquatic habitats for plants and animals.