

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Since its discovery in 1933, PE has grown to become one of the world's most widely used and recognized thermoplastic materials.⁽¹⁾ The versatility of this unique plastic material is demonstrated by the diversity of its use and applications. The original application for PE was as a substitute for rubber in electrical insulation during World War II. PE has since become one of the world's most widely utilized thermoplastics. Today's modern PE resins are highly engineered for much more rigorous applications such as pressure-rated gas and water pipe, landfill membranes, automotive fuel tanks and other demanding applications.



Figure I Joining Large Diameter PE Pipe with Butt Fusion

PE's use as a piping material first occurred in the mid 1950's. In North America, its original use was in industrial applications, followed by rural water and then oil field production where a flexible, tough and lightweight piping product was needed to fulfill the needs of a rapidly developing oil and gas production industry. The success of PE's pipe in these installations quickly led to its use in natural gas distribution where a coilable, corrosion-free piping material could be fused in the field to assure a "leak-free" method of transporting natural gas to homes and businesses. PE's success in this critical application has not gone without notice and today it is the material of choice for the natural gas distribution industry. Sources now estimate that nearly 95% of all new gas distribution pipe installations in North America that are 12" in diameter or smaller are PE piping.⁽²⁾

The performance benefits of polyethylene pipe in these original oil and gas related applications have led to its use in equally demanding piping installations such as potable water distribution, industrial and mining pipe, force mains and other critical applications where a tough, ductile material is needed to assure long-term performance. It is these applications, representative of the expanding use of polyethylene pipe that are the principle subject of this handbook. In the chapters that follow, we shall examine all aspects of design and use of polyethylene pipe in a broad array of applications. From engineering properties and material science to fluid flow and burial design; from material handling and safety considerations to modern installation practices such as horizontal directional drilling and/or pipe bursting; from potable water lines to industrial slurries we will examine those qualities, properties and design considerations which have led to the growing use of polyethylene pipe in North America.

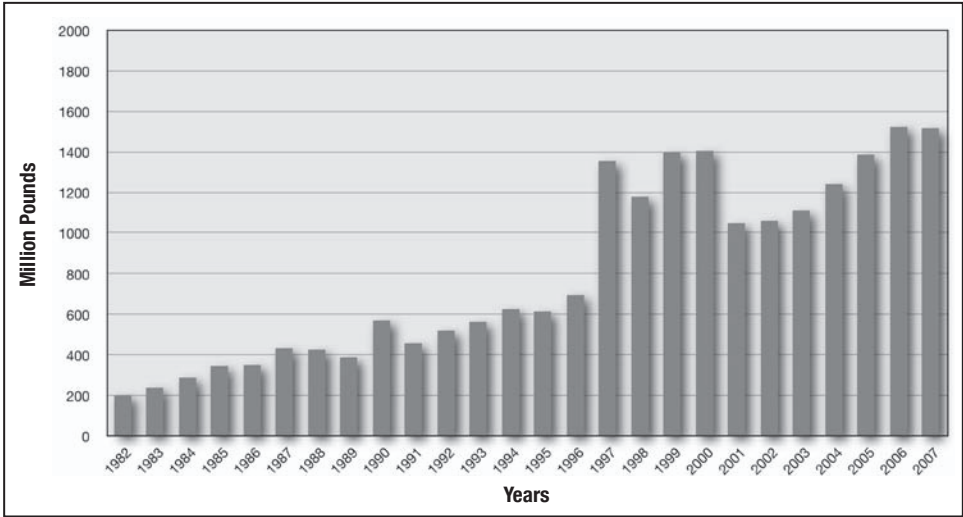


Figure 2 Historical Growth in North American HDPE Pipe Shipments⁽³⁾

Features and Benefits of PE Pipe

When selecting pipe materials, designers, owners and contractors specify materials that provide reliable, long-term service durability, and cost-effectiveness.

Solid wall PE pipes provide a cost-effective solution for a wide range of piping applications including natural gas distribution, municipal water and sewer, industrial, marine, mining, landfill, and electrical and communications duct applications. PE pipe is also effective for above ground, buried, trenchless, floating and marine installations. According to David A. Willoughby, P.O.E., "... one major

reason for the growth in the use of the plastic pipe is the cost savings in installation, labor and equipment as compared to traditional piping materials. Add to this the potential for lower maintenance costs and increased service life and plastic pipe is a very competitive product.”⁽⁴⁾

Natural gas distribution was among the first applications for medium-density PE (MDPE) pipe. In fact, many of the systems currently in use have been in continuous service since 1960 with great success. Today, PE pipe represents over 95% of the pipe installed for natural gas distribution in diameters up to 12” in the U.S. and Canada. PE is the material of choice not only in North America, but also worldwide. PE pipe has been used in potable water applications for almost 50 years, and has been continuously gaining approval and growth in municipalities. PE pipe is specified and/or approved in accordance with AWWA, NSF, and ASTM standards.

Some of the specific benefits of PE pipe are discussed in the paragraphs which follow.

- **Life Cycle Cost Savings** – For municipal applications, the life cycle cost of PE pipe can be significantly less than other pipe materials. The extremely smooth inside surface of PE pipe maintains its exceptional flow characteristics, and heat fusion joining eliminates leakage. This has proven to be a successful combination for reducing total system operating costs.
- **Leak Free, Fully Restrained Joints** – PE heat fusion joining forms leak-free joints that are as strong as, or stronger than, the pipe itself. For municipal applications, fused joints eliminate the potential leak points that exist every 10 to 20 feet when using the bell and spigot type joints associated with other piping products such as PVC or ductile iron. All these bell and spigot type joints employ elastomeric gasket materials that age over time and thus have the potential for leaks. As a result of this, the “allowable water leakage” for PE pipe is zero as compared to the water leakage rates of 10% or greater typically associated with these other piping products. PE pipe’s fused joints are also self-restraining, eliminating the need for costly thrust restraints or thrust blocks while still insuring the integrity of the joint. Notwithstanding the advantages of the butt fusion method of joining, the engineer also has other available means for joining PE pipe and fittings such as electrofusion and mechanical fittings. Electrofusion fittings join the pipe and/or fittings together using embedded electric heating elements. In some situations, mechanical fittings may be required to facilitate joining to other piping products, valves or other system appurtenances. Specialized fittings for these purposes have been developed and are readily available to meet the needs of most demanding applications.
- **Corrosion & Chemical Resistance** – PE pipe will not rust, rot, pit, corrode, tuberculate or support biological growth. It has superb chemical resistance and is the material of choice for many harsh chemical environments. Although unaffected