



# Standard Test Method for Field Determination of Water (Moisture) Content of Soil by the Calcium Carbide Gas Pressure Tester <sup>1</sup>

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D4944; 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 ( $\epsilon$ ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reapproval.

## 1. Scope\*

1.1 This test method outlines procedures for determining the water (moisture) content of soil by chemical reaction using calcium carbide as a reagent to react with the available water in the soil producing a gas. A measurement is made of the gas pressure produced when a specified mass of wet or moist soil is placed in a testing device with an appropriate volume of reagent and mixed.

1.2 This test method is not intended as a replacement for Test Method [D2216](#); but as a supplement when rapid results are required, when testing is done in field locations, or where an oven is not practical for use. Test Method [D2216](#) is to be used as the test method to compare for accuracy checks and correction.

1.3 This test method is applicable for most soils. Calcium carbide, used as a reagent, reacts with water as it is mixed with the soil by shaking and agitating with the aid of steel balls in the apparatus. To produce accurate results, the reagent must react with all the water which is not chemically hydrated with soil minerals or compounds in the soil. Some highly plastic clay soils or other soils not friable enough to break up may not produce representative results because some of the water may be trapped inside soil clods or clumps which cannot come in contact with the reagent. There may be some soils containing certain compounds or chemicals that will react unpredictably with the reagent and give erroneous results. Any such problem will become evident as calibration or check tests with Test Method [D2216](#) are made. Some soils containing compounds or minerals that dehydrate with heat (such as gypsum) which are to have special temperature control with Test Method [D2216](#) may not be affected (dehydrated) in this test method.

1.4 This test method is limited to using calcium carbide moisture test equipment made for 20 g, or larger, soil specimens and to testing soil which contains particles no larger than the No. 4 Standard sieve size.

<sup>1</sup> 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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1.5 The values stated in SI units are to be regarded as standard. No other units of measurement are included in this standard.

1.5.1 Cited sieve sizes are the standard sieve sizes given in Table 1 of Specification [E11](#).

1.6 All observed and calculated values shall conform to the guidelines for significant digits and rounding established in Practice [D6026](#) unless superseded by this standard.

1.6.1 The procedures used to specify how data are collected, recorded or calculated in this standard are regarded as the industry standard. In addition they are representative of the significant digits that generally should be retained. The procedures used do not consider material variation, purpose for obtaining the data, special purpose studies, or any considerations for the user's objectives; it is common practice to increase or reduce significant digits of reported data to be commensurate with these considerations. It is beyond the scope of this standard to consider significant digits used in analytical methods for engineering design.

1.7 *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. For specific hazards statements, see Section 7.*

## 2. Referenced Documents

### 2.1 ASTM Standards:<sup>2</sup>

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

[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](#)

<sup>2</sup> For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org), or contact ASTM Customer Service at [service@astm.org](mailto:service@astm.org). For Annual Book of ASTM Standards volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

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

- Construction Materials Testing
- D6026 Practice for Using Significant Digits in Geotechnical Data
- E11 Specification for Woven Wire Test Sieve Cloth and Test Sieves
- E177 Practice for Use of the Terms Precision and Bias in ASTM Test Methods
- E691 Practice for Conducting an Interlaboratory Study to Determine the Precision of a Test Method

**3. Terminology**

3.1 *Definitions*—Definitions of terms used in this test method can be found in Terminology D653.

**4. Summary of Test Method**

4.1 A measured volume of calcium carbide, in excess of that needed to react with the water, is placed in the testing apparatus along with two steel balls and a representative specimen of soil having all particles smaller than the No. 4 sieve size and having a mass equal to that specified by the manufacturer of the instrument or equipment. The apparatus is shaken vigorously in a rotating motion so the calcium carbide reagent can contact all the available water in the soil. Acetylene gas is produced proportionally to the amount of available water present. The apparent water content is read from a pressure gauge on the apparatus calibrated to read in percent water content for the mass of soil specified.

4.2 A calibration curve is developed for each instrument and each soil type by plotting the pressure gauge reading and the water content determined from Test Method D2216 using representative specimens of the soil. The calibration curve is used to determine a corrected water content value for subsequent tests on the same type of soil.

**5. Significance and Use**

5.1 The water content of soil is used throughout geotechnical engineering practice, both in the laboratory and in the field. Results are sometimes needed within a short time period and in

locations where it is not practical to install an oven or to transport samples to an oven. This test method is used for these occasions.

5.2 The results of this test have been used for field control of compacted embankments or other earth structures such as in the determination of water content for control of soil moisture and dry density within a specified range.

5.3 This test method requires specimens consisting of soil having all particles smaller than the No. 4 sieve size.

5.4 This test method may not be as accurate as other accepted methods such as Test Method D2216. Inaccuracies may result because specimens are too small to properly represent the total soil, from clumps of soil not breaking up to expose all the available water to the reagent and from other inherent procedural, equipment or process inaccuracies. Therefore, other methods may be more appropriate when highly accurate results are required, or when the use of test results is sensitive to minor variations in the values obtained.

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. Users of this standard are cautioned that compliance with Practice D3740 does not in itself ensure reliable results. Reliable results depend on many factors; Practice D3740 provides a means of evaluating some of those factors.

**6. Apparatus**

6.1 *Calcium Carbide Pressure Tester Set Including:*

- 6.1.1 Testing chamber with attached pressure gauge.
- 6.1.2 A set of tared manual balances or portable electronic balance meeting the requirements of a GP2 of Specification D4753.

NOTE 2—Testers that use a smaller mass are available, but are considered too inaccurate for this standard. The testing chamber with pressure gauge and the balances are calibrated as a set (see Section 8). A typical apparatus is shown in Fig. 1.

6.1.3 Carrying case.

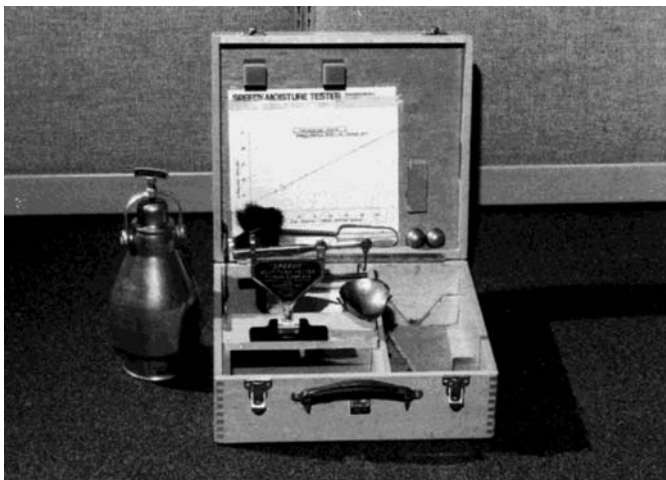


FIG. 1 Typical Calcium Carbide Gas Pressure Test Apparatus for Water Content of Soil Set with Manual Tared Balance

FIG. 1a (left) Apparatus Set with Manual Tared Balance  
FIG. 1b (right) Apparatus Set with Portable Electronic Balance