



Designation: D2487 – 17

# Standard Practice for Classification of Soils for Engineering Purposes (Unified Soil Classification System)<sup>1</sup>

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D2487; 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.

*This standard has been approved for use by agencies of the U.S. Department of Defense.*

## 1. Scope\*

1.1 This practice describes a system for classifying mineral and organo-mineral soils for engineering purposes based on laboratory determination of particle-size characteristics, liquid limit, and plasticity index and shall be used when precise classification is required.

NOTE 1—Use of this standard will result in a single classification group symbol and group name except when a soil contains 5 to 12 % fines or when the plot of the liquid limit and plasticity index values falls into the crosshatched area of the plasticity chart. In these two cases, a dual symbol is used, for example, GP-GM, CL-ML. When the laboratory test results indicate that the soil is close to another soil classification group, the borderline condition can be indicated with two symbols separated by a slash. The first symbol should be the one based on this standard, for example, CL/CH, GM/SM, SC/CL. Borderline symbols are particularly useful when the liquid limit value of clayey soils is close to 50. These soils can have expansive characteristics and the use of a borderline symbol (CL/CH, CH/CL) will alert the user of the assigned classifications of expansive potential.

1.2 The group symbol portion of this system is based on laboratory tests performed on the portion of a soil sample passing the 3-in. (75-mm) sieve (see Specification E11).

1.3 As a classification system, this standard is limited to naturally occurring soils.

NOTE 2—The group names and symbols used in this test method may be used as a descriptive system applied to such materials as shale, claystone, shells, crushed rock, etc. See Appendix X2.

1.4 This standard is for qualitative application only.

NOTE 3—When quantitative information is required for detailed designs of important structures, this test method must be supplemented by laboratory tests or other quantitative data to determine performance characteristics under expected field conditions.

1.5 This standard is the ASTM version of the Unified Soil Classification System. The basis for the classification scheme is the Airfield Classification System developed by A. Casa-

<sup>1</sup> This practice is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee D18 on Soil and Rock and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee D18.07 on Identification and Classification of Soils.

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grande in the early 1940s.<sup>2</sup> It became known as the Unified Soil Classification System when several U.S. Government Agencies adopted a modified version of the Airfield System in 1952.

1.6 *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, health, and environmental practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

1.7 *This practice offers a set of instructions for performing one or more specific operations. This document cannot replace education or experience and should be used in conjunction with professional judgment. Not all aspects of this practice may be applicable in all circumstances. This ASTM standard is not intended to represent or replace the standard of care by which the adequacy of a given professional service must be judged, nor should this document be applied without consideration of a project's many unique aspects. The word "Standard" in the title of this document means only that the document has been approved through the ASTM consensus process.*

1.8 *This international standard was developed in accordance with internationally recognized principles on standardization established in the Decision on Principles for the Development of International Standards, Guides and Recommendations issued by the World Trade Organization Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Committee.*

## 2. Referenced Documents

### 2.1 ASTM Standards:<sup>3</sup>

C117 Test Method for Materials Finer than 75- $\mu$ m (No. 200) Sieve in Mineral Aggregates by Washing

C136 Test Method for Sieve Analysis of Fine and Coarse Aggregates

C702 Practice for Reducing Samples of Aggregate to Testing Size

<sup>2</sup> Casagrande, A., "Classification and Identification of Soils," *Transactions*, ASCE, 1948, p. 901.

<sup>3</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

- D653** Terminology Relating to Soil, Rock, and Contained Fluids
- D1140** Test Methods for Determining the Amount of Material Finer than 75- $\mu\text{m}$  (No. 200) Sieve in Soils by Washing
- D2216** Test Methods for Laboratory Determination of Water (Moisture) Content of Soil and Rock by Mass
- D2488** Practice for Description and Identification of Soils (Visual-Manual Procedures)
- D3740** Practice for Minimum Requirements for Agencies Engaged in Testing and/or Inspection of Soil and Rock as Used in Engineering Design and Construction
- D4083** Practice for Description of Frozen Soils (Visual-Manual Procedure)
- D4318** Test Methods for Liquid Limit, Plastic Limit, and Plasticity Index of Soils
- D4427** Classification of Peat Samples by Laboratory Testing
- D6913** Test Methods for Particle-Size Distribution (Gradation) of Soils Using Sieve Analysis
- E11** Specification for Woven Wire Test Sieve Cloth and Test Sieves

### 3. Terminology

#### 3.1 Definitions:

3.1.1 Except as listed below, all definitions are in accordance with Terminology **D653**.

NOTE 4—For particles retained on a 3-in. (75-mm) U.S. standard sieve, the following definitions are suggested:

*Cobbles*—particles of rock that will pass a 12-in. (300-mm) square opening and be retained on a 3-in. (75-mm) U.S. standard sieve, and

*Boulders*—particles of rock that will not pass a 12-in. (300-mm) square opening.

3.1.2 *clay*—soil passing a No. 200 (75- $\mu\text{m}$ ) U.S. standard sieve that can be made to exhibit plasticity (putty-like properties) within a range of water contents and that exhibits considerable strength when air dry. For classification, a clay is a fine-grained soil, or the fine-grained portion of a soil, with a plasticity index equal to or greater than 4, and the plot of plasticity index versus liquid limit falls on or above the “A” line.

3.1.3 *gravel*—particles of rock that will pass a 3-in. (75-mm) sieve and be retained on a No. 4 (4.75-mm) U.S. standard sieve with the following subdivisions:

*Coarse*—passes 3-in. (75-mm) sieve and retained on  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. (19-mm) sieve, and

*Fine*—passes  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. (19-mm) sieve and retained on No. 4 (4.75-mm) sieve.

3.1.4 *organic clay*—a clay with sufficient organic content to influence the soil properties. For classification, an organic clay is a soil that would be classified as a clay except that its liquid limit value after oven drying is less than 75 % of its liquid limit value before oven drying.

3.1.5 *organic silt*—a silt with sufficient organic content to influence the soil properties. For classification, an organic silt is a soil that would be classified as a silt except that its liquid limit value after oven drying is less than 75 % of its liquid limit value before oven drying.

3.1.6 *peat*—a soil composed of vegetable tissue in various stages of decomposition usually with an organic odor, a

dark-brown to black color, a spongy consistency, and a texture ranging from fibrous to amorphous.

3.1.7 *sand*—particles of rock that will pass a No. 4 (4.75-mm) sieve and be retained on a No. 200 (75- $\mu\text{m}$ ) U.S. standard sieve with the following subdivisions:

*Coarse*—passes No. 4 (4.75-mm) sieve and retained on No. 10 (2.00-mm) sieve,

*Medium*—passes No. 10 (2.00-mm) sieve and retained on No. 40 (425- $\mu\text{m}$ ) sieve, and

*Fine*—passes No. 40 (425- $\mu\text{m}$ ) sieve and retained on No. 200 (75- $\mu\text{m}$ ) sieve.

3.1.8 *silt*—soil passing a No. 200 (75- $\mu\text{m}$ ) U.S. standard sieve that is nonplastic or very slightly plastic and that exhibits little or no strength when air dry. For classification, a silt is a fine-grained soil, or the fine-grained portion of a soil, with a plasticity index less than 4 or if the plot of plasticity index versus liquid limit falls below the “A” line.

#### 3.2 Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:

3.2.1 *coefficient of curvature,  $C_c$* —the ratio  $(D_{30})^2 / (D_{10} \times D_{60})$ , where  $D_{60}$ ,  $D_{30}$ , and  $D_{10}$  are the particle sizes corresponding to 60, 30, and 10 % finer on the cumulative particle-size distribution curve, respectively.

3.2.2 *coefficient of uniformity,  $C_u$* —the ratio  $D_{60}/D_{10}$ , where  $D_{60}$  and  $D_{10}$  are the particle diameters corresponding to 60 and 10 % finer on the cumulative particle-size distribution curve, respectively.

### 4. Summary

4.1 As illustrated in **Table 1**, this classification system identifies three major soil divisions: coarse-grained soils, fine-grained soils, and highly organic soils. These three divisions are further subdivided into a total of 15 basic soil groups.

4.2 Based on the results of visual observations and prescribed laboratory tests, a soil is catalogued according to the basic soil groups, assigned a group symbol(s) and name, and thereby classified. The flow charts, **Figs. 1 and 2** for fine-grained soils, and **Fig. 3** for coarse-grained soils, can be used to assign the appropriate group symbol(s) and name.

### 5. Significance and Use

5.1 This standard classifies soils from any geographic location into categories representing the results of prescribed laboratory tests to determine the particle-size characteristics, the liquid limit, and the plasticity index.

5.2 The assigning of a group name and symbol(s) along with the descriptive information required in Practice **D2488** can be used to describe a soil to aid in the evaluation of its significant properties for engineering use.

5.3 The various groupings of this classification system have been devised to correlate in a general way with the engineering behavior of soils. This standard provides a useful first step in any field or laboratory investigation for geotechnical engineering purposes.

5.4 This standard may also be used as an aid in training personnel in the use of Practice **D2488**.

TABLE 1 Soil Classification Chart

Criteria for Assigning Group Symbols and Group Names Using Laboratory Tests <sup>A</sup>				Soil Classification		
				Group Symbol	Group Name <sup>B</sup>	
COARSE-GRAINED SOILS	Gravels (More than 50 % of coarse fraction retained on No. 4 sieve)	Clean Gravels (Less than 5 % fines <sup>C</sup> )	$Cu \geq 4.0$ and $1 \leq Cc \leq 3.0^D$	GW	Well-graded gravel <sup>E</sup>	
		Gravels with Fines (More than 12 % fines <sup>C</sup> )	$Cu < 4.0$ and/or $[Cc < 1 \text{ or } Cc > 3.0]^D$	GP	Poorly graded gravel <sup>E</sup>	
			Fines classify as ML or MH	GM	Silty gravel <sup>E,F,G</sup>	
	More than 50 % retained on No. 200 sieve	Sands (50 % or more of coarse fraction passes No. 4 sieve)	Clean Sands (Less than 5 % fines <sup>H</sup> )	$Cu \geq 6.0$ and $1.0 \leq Cc \leq 3.0^D$	SW	Well-graded sand <sup>I</sup>
			Sands with Fines (More than 12 % fines <sup>H</sup> )	$Cu < 6.0$ and/or $[Cc < 1.0 \text{ or } Cc > 3.0]^D$	SP	Poorly graded sand <sup>I</sup>
		Fines classify as ML or MH		SM	Silty sand <sup>F,G,I</sup>	
FINE-GRAINED SOILS	Silt and Clays	inorganic	$PI > 7$ and plots on or above "A" line <sup>J</sup>	CL	Lean clay <sup>K,L,M</sup>	
		organic	$PI < 4$ or plots below "A" line <sup>J</sup>	ML	Silt <sup>K,L,M</sup>	
	50 % or more passes the No. 200 sieve	Silt and Clays	inorganic	$\frac{\text{Liquid limit} - \text{oven dried}}{\text{Liquid limit} - \text{not dried}} < 0.75$	OL	Organic clay <sup>K,L,M,N</sup> Organic silt <sup>K,L,M,O</sup>
			organic	$PI \text{ plots on or above "A" line}$	CH	Fat clay <sup>K,L,M</sup>
		Liquid limit 50 or more	inorganic	$PI \text{ plots below "A" line}$	MH	Elastic silt <sup>K,L,M</sup>
			organic	$\frac{\text{Liquid limit} - \text{oven dried}}{\text{Liquid limit} - \text{not dried}} < 0.75$	OH	Organic clay <sup>K,L,M,P</sup> Organic silt <sup>K,L,M,Q</sup>
HIGHLY ORGANIC SOILS	Primarily organic matter, dark in color, and organic odor		PT	Peat		

<sup>A</sup> Based on the material passing the 3-in. (75-mm) sieve.  
<sup>B</sup> If field sample contained cobbles or boulders, or both, add "with cobbles or boulders, or both" to group name.  
<sup>C</sup> Gravels with 5 to 12 % fines require dual symbols:  
 GW-GM well-graded gravel with silt  
 GW-GC well-graded gravel with clay  
 GP-GM poorly graded gravel with silt  
 GP-GC poorly graded gravel with clay  
<sup>D</sup>  $Cu = D_{60}/D_{10}$      $Cc = \frac{(D_{30})^2}{D_{10} \times D_{60}}$   
<sup>E</sup> If soil contains  $\geq 15$  % sand, add "with sand" to group name.  
<sup>F</sup> If fines classify as CL-ML, use dual symbol GC-GM, or SC-SM.  
<sup>G</sup> If fines are organic, add "with organic fines" to group name.  
<sup>H</sup> Sands with 5 to 12 % fines require dual symbols:  
 SW-SM well-graded sand with silt  
 SW-SC well-graded sand with clay  
 SP-SM poorly graded sand with silt  
 SP-SC poorly graded sand with clay  
<sup>I</sup> If soil contains  $\geq 15$  % gravel, add "with gravel" to group name.  
<sup>J</sup> If Atterberg limits plot in hatched area, soil is a CL-ML, silty clay.  
<sup>K</sup> If soil contains 15 to <30 % plus No. 200, add "with sand" or "with gravel," whichever is predominant.  
<sup>L</sup> If soil contains  $\geq 30$  % plus No. 200, predominantly sand, add "sand" to group name.  
<sup>M</sup> If soil contains  $\geq 30$  % plus No. 200, predominantly gravel, add "gravelly" to group name.  
<sup>N</sup>  $PI \geq 4$  and plots on or above "A" line.  
<sup>O</sup>  $PI < 4$  or plots below "A" line.  
<sup>P</sup>  $PI \text{ plots on or above "A" line}$ .  
<sup>Q</sup>  $PI \text{ plots below "A" line}$ .

5.5 This standard may be used in combination with Practice D4083 when working with frozen soils.

NOTE 5—Notwithstanding the statements on precision and bias contained in this standard: The precision of this test method 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. Users of this test method are cautioned that compliance with Practice D3740 does not in itself assure reliable testing. Reliable testing depends on several factors; Practice D3740 provides a means for

evaluating some of those factors.

6. Apparatus

6.1 A plasticity chart, similar to Fig. 4, and a cumulative particle-size distribution curve, similar to Fig. 5, are required.

NOTE 6—The "U" line shown on Fig. 4 has been empirically determined to be the approximate "upper limit" for natural soils. It is a good check against erroneous data, and any test results that plot above or to the left of it should be verified.