



Designation: **D5879 – 95 (Reapproved 2010) D5879/D5879M – 18**

Standard Practice for Surface Site Characterization for On-Site Septic Systems¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation **D5879/D5879M**; 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 practice covers procedures for the Site characterization of surface conditions at a site for evaluating suitability for an on-site septic system for disposal and treatment of wastewater. This practice provides a method for identifying potentially suitable areas for soil absorption of septic tank wastewater.~~ systems requires both simple and complex techniques that may be accomplished by many different procedures and may be variously interpreted. These studies are frequently site specific and are influenced by geological and geographical settings, by the purpose of the site characterization, by design requirements for the project proposed, and by the background, training, and experience of the staff involved.

1.2 This standard is a guide for using the surface site characterization for on-site septic systems method for projects that require on-site sewage disposal. It is intended to improve consistency of practice and to encourage the use of this method as part of a site characterization program. Since the subsurface conditions at a particular site are usually the result of a combination of natural, geologic, topographic, and climatic factors, and of historical modifications both natural and manmade, an adequate and internally consistent use of a method as part of the exploration program will allow evaluation of the results of these influences.

1.3 This practice can be used at any site where on-site treatment of residential and nonhazardous commercial wastewaters using septic tanks and natural soils or constructed filter beds is required or an option under consideration. This practice may also be useful when constructed wetlands are used as an alternative wastewater treatment method.

1.4 This practice should be used in conjunction with Practices **D5921** and **D5925**.

1.5 Units—The values stated in either SI units or inch-pound units given in brackets 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 nonconformance with the standard. Reporting of results in units other than SI shall not be regarded as nonconformance with this standard.

1.6 *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.*

1.7 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:*²

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

[D5921 Practice for Subsurface Site Characterization of Test Pits for On-Site Septic Systems](#)

¹ This practice is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee **D18** on Soil and Rock and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee **D18.01** on Surface and Subsurface Characterization.

Current edition approved ~~May 1, 2010~~ May 15, 2018. Published ~~September 2010~~ June 2018. Originally approved in 1995. Last previous edition approved in ~~2003~~ 2010 as **D5879 – 95 (2003)**, (2010). DOI: ~~10.1520/D5879-95R10~~ 10.1520/D5879_D5879M-18.

² For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

3. Terminology

3.1 *clinometer, n*—Definitions: an instrument for measuring inclination, as in topographic slope.

3.1.1 For definitions of common technical terms used in this standard, refer to Terminology D653.

3.2 *constructed filter bed, n*—a material, usually of a sandy texture, placed above or in an excavated portion of the natural soil for filtration and purification of wastewater from an on-site septic system.

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *constructed filter bed, n*—a material, usually of a sandy texture, placed above or in an excavated portion of the natural soil for filtration and purification of wastewater from an on-site septic system.

3.2.2 *on-site septic system, n*—any wastewater treatment and disposal system that uses a septic tank or functionally equivalent device for collecting waste solids and treats wastewater using natural soils, or constructed filter beds with disposal of the treated wastewater into the natural soil.

3.2.3 *potentially suitable field area, n*—the portions of a site that remain after observable limiting surface features, such as excessive slope, unsuitable landscape position, proximity to water supplies, and applicable setbacks, have been excluded.

3.2.4 *recommended field area, n*—the portion of the potentially suitable field area at a site that has been determined to be most suitable for an on-site septic system soil absorption field or filter bed based on surface and subsurface observations.

3.2.5 *soil absorption area, n*—an area of natural soil used for filtration and purification of wastewater from an on-site septic system.

3.2.6 *soil absorption field area, n*—an area that includes soil absorption trenches and any soil barriers between the trenches. Also called a leachfield.

3.2.7 *soil absorption trench, n*—an excavated trench, usually 0.5 to 1 m [1.5 to 3 ft] wide that receives wastewater for treatment. Also called a lateral or leachline.

3.2.8 *wastewater load rate, n*—the rate with which wastewater enters the soil.

3.3 *on-site septic system, n*—any wastewater treatment and disposal system that uses a septic tank or functionally equivalent device for collecting waste solids and treats wastewater using natural soils, or constructed filter beds with disposal of the treated wastewater into the natural soil.

3.4 *potentially suitable field area, n*—the portions of a site that remain after observable limiting surface features, such as excessive slope, unsuitable landscape position, proximity to water supplies, and applicable setbacks, have been excluded.

3.5 *recommended field area, n*—the portion of the potentially suitable field area at a site that has been determined to be most suitable for an on-site septic system soil absorption field or filter bed based on surface and subsurface observations.

3.6 *soil absorption area, n*—an area of natural soil used for filtration and purification of wastewater from an on-site septic system.

3.7 *soil absorption field area, n*—an area that includes soil absorption trenches and any soil barriers between the trenches. Also called a leachfield.

3.8 *soil absorption trench, n*—an excavated trench, usually 1.5 to 3 ft wide that receives wastewater for treatment. Also called a lateral or leachline.

4. Summary of Practice

4.1 This practice describes a procedure using existing information about a site, simple field equipment, and visual observation for identifying and evaluating all significant conditions at the surface of a site, including climate, vegetation, topography, surface drainage, water sources, and human influences (structures, property lines), that may affect the suitability for design and construction of an on-site septic system.

4.2 This practice describes a procedure using existing information about a site, simple field equipment, and visual observation for identifying and evaluating all significant conditions at the surface of a site, including climate, vegetation, topography, surface drainage, water sources, and human influences (structures, property lines), that may affect the suitability for design and construction of an on-site septic system. The procedure involves exclusion of areas that are unsuitable for natural soil absorption or constructed filter beds as a result of topography, landscape position, and proximity to surface drainage, water sources, and other limiting surface characteristics (structures, utilities, property lines). If no areas at a site comply with applicable regulatory

³ The last approved version of this historical standard is referenced on www.astm.org.

requirements, no additional field investigations are required. This procedure also provides guidance on selection of the specific area or areas at a site for subsurface investigation as covered in Practice **D5921**.

5. Significance and Use

5.1 This practice should be used as the initial step for evaluating a site for its potential to support an on-site septic system and to determine the best location for subsurface observations as covered in Practice **D5921**.

5.2 This practice should be used by individuals involved with the evaluation of properties for the use of on-site septic systems. Such individuals may be required to be licensed, certified, or meet minimum educational requirements by the local or state regulatory authority. Generally, such individuals should be familiar with the appropriate regulatory requirements governing the design and placement of on-site septic systems for the area of the site being investigated, and at least some experience or training in geomorphology, soils, geology, and hydrology.

5.3 This practice is one step in the design of an on-site septic system that also includes subsurface characterization, see Practice **D5921**, staking and protection of the soil absorption or constructed filter bed area, see Practice **D5925**, selection of system type, and design of the system size and configuration. Typically, the same individual will perform the surface and subsurface characterization of a site. Local regulation and practice will determine whether the same individual is responsible for all steps in the process of locating and designing an on-site septic system. Effective surface and subsurface characterization of a site for on-site septic systems, however, requires some knowledge of the following for the county or state in which the site is located: (1) on-site septic system types typically used for different soil conditions, and (2) typical soil absorption/filter bed areas required for different wastewater flow rates and areal soil wastewater loading rates.

6. Field Equipment

6.1 In addition to equipment identified in Practice **D5925**, additional equipment useful for site surface investigations include the following:

6.1.1 *Clinometer or Hand Level*, and a *Surveyor's* or other rod for slope measurements;

6.1.2 *Hammer, Stakes and Flagging*, for marking probe or auger holes and the recommended field area. If an extendable surveyor's rod is used, a tripod for stabilizing the rod may also be useful. Accurate measurement of distances requires a tape measure (30 m or 100 ft), although for many investigations scasing pacing may be adequate for measuring approximate distances.

6.2 At some sites, surveying equipment may be required to determine more definitively suitability for an on-site septic system or to provide additional information at the design stages. Examples of such stages as described in **7.1.1** situations include marginal sites where accurate measurements of a recommended field area are required to determine if the suitable area is large enough and sites where accurate topographic contours are required for engineering design of constructed filter beds. This practice does not address the use of surveying equipment for such purposes.

7. Procedure

7.1 *Preliminary Documentation*—All readily available information about the site should be obtained and reviewed prior to visiting the site.

7.1.1 A survey showing the boundaries of the site is the preferred method for locating the site because it can also serve as a base map for field observations. A legal description of the property can also be used to plot the site on other available maps or for drawing a sketch map of the site. A topographic survey with contour intervals of ~~1 to 5 ft~~ **0.25 m to 1.5 m [1 to 5 ft]** will facilitate preliminary identification of potentially suitable field areas and final map preparation. Usually, such maps will not be available unless the site is part of a larger planned subdivision.

7.1.2 The following information concerning local or state regulatory on-site septic system siting requirements should be available for field reference, if required:

7.1.2.1 Minimum separation distance between soil absorption or constructed filter fields and water supply, property lines and other surface and subsurface features,

7.1.2.2 Wastewater hydraulic loading rates for different soil texture, structure and other field observable soil properties,

7.1.2.3 Selection criteria for alternative on-site septic system designs (that is, depth to seasonal high water table, depth to limiting soil layer, slope, and so forth), and

7.1.2.4 Other site-specific features that may affect design of on-site septic systems, such as perimeter drain clearances, and wastewater loading rates.

7.1.3 If the site is undeveloped, the following information should be obtained, prior to visiting the site:

7.1.3.1 Planned location and size of the house or commercial structure,

7.1.3.2 Planned location of water well, if applicable, water lines, and other buried utilities, and

7.1.3.3 Information required for determining wastewater load rates and strength for septic system design (that is, number of bedrooms, number of full-time employee equivalents and shifts per day, biological/chemical oxygen demand). Practice **D5925** addresses in more detail wastewater hydraulic loading and strength considerations in sizing on-site septic systems.

7.1.4 A published soil survey prepared by the U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) is the best single background reference on subsurface conditions for an on-site septic system field investigation. Plotting the site