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Standard Practice for Selection of Water Vapor Retarders for Thermal Insulation¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation C755; 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 reappraisal. A superscript epsilon (ϵ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reappraisal.

1. Scope

1.1 This practice outlines factors to be considered, describes design principles and procedures for water vapor retarder selection, and defines water vapor transmission values appropriate for established criteria. It is intended for the guidance of design engineers in preparing vapor retarder application specifications for control of water vapor flow through thermal insulation. It covers commercial and residential building construction and industrial applications in the service temperature range from -40 to $+150^{\circ}\text{F}$ (-40 to $+66^{\circ}\text{C}$). Emphasis is placed on the control of moisture penetration by choice of the most suitable components of the system.

1.2 The values stated in inch-pound units are to be regarded as standard. The values given in parentheses are mathematical conversions to SI units that are provided for information only and are not considered standard.

1.3 *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.*

1.4 *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

[C168 Terminology Relating to Thermal Insulation](#)

[C647 Guide to Properties and Tests of Mastics and Coating Finishes for Thermal Insulation](#)

[C921 Practice for Determining the Properties of Jacketing Materials for Thermal Insulation](#)

[C1136 Specification for Flexible, Low Permeance Vapor Retarders for Thermal Insulation](#)

[E96/E96M Test Methods for Water Vapor Transmission of Materials](#)

3. Terminology

3.1 For definitions of terms used in this practice, refer to Terminology [C168](#).

4. Significance and Use

4.1 Experience has shown that uncontrolled water entry into thermal insulation is the most serious factor causing impaired performance. Several ways exist by which water enters into an insulation system, the primary ones being diffusion of water vapor, air leakage carrying water vapor, and leakage of surface water. Application specifications for insulation systems that operate below ambient dew-point temperatures necessarily include an adequate vapor retarder system. A vapor retarder system is separate and distinct from the insulation itself, or is provided by the insulation itself when it has adequate vapor resistant properties and all joints are properly sealed against water vapor intrusion, in which case a separate vapor retarder system is not necessary. For selection of adequate retarder systems to control vapor diffusion, it is necessary to establish acceptable practices and standards.

4.2 *Vapor Retarder Function*—The primary function of a vapor retarder is to control movement of diffusing water vapor into or through a permeable insulation system. The vapor retarder system in some cases is designed to prevent entry of surface water. When properly functioning as a vapor retarder, it will also serve as a barrier to air leakage.

¹ This practice is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee [C16](#) on Thermal Insulation and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee [C16.33](#) on Insulation Finishes and Moisture.

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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.

4.3 *Vapor Retarder Performance*—Design choice of retarders will be affected by thickness of retarder materials, substrate to which applied, the number of joints, available length and width of sheet materials, useful life of the system, and inspection procedures. Each of these factors will have an effect on the retarder system performance and each must be considered and evaluated by the designer.

4.3.1 Although this practice properly places major emphasis on selecting the best vapor retarders, it must be recognized that faulty installation is likely to impair vapor retarder performance. The effectiveness of installation or application techniques in obtaining design water vapor permeance (WVP) performance must be considered in the selection of retarder materials.

4.3.2 It is impractical to specify an “as installed” permeance value because, due to the nature of field application, attainment of system permeance equivalent to the vapor retarder materials themselves is assumed not possible. The best approach is to specify an appropriate vapor retarder and insure that proper installation and sealing procedures are followed.

5. Factors to Be Considered in Choosing Water Vapor Retarders

5.1 *Water Vapor Pressure Difference* is the difference in the pressure exerted on each side of an insulation system or insulated structure that is due to the temperature and moisture content of the air on each side of the insulated system or structure. This pressure difference determines the direction and magnitude of the driving force for the diffusion of the water vapor through the insulated system or structure. In general, for a given permeable structure, the greater the water vapor pressure difference, the greater the rate of diffusion. One is able to calculate water vapor pressure differences for specific conditions by numerical methods or from psychrometric tables showing thermodynamic properties of water at saturation.

5.1.1 Fig. 1 shows the variation of dew-point temperature with water vapor pressure.

5.1.2 Fig. 2 illustrates the magnitude of water vapor pressure differences for four ambient air conditions and cold-side operating temperatures between +40 and -40°F (+4.4 and -40°C).

5.1.3 At a stated temperature the water vapor pressure is proportional to relative humidity but at a stated relative humidity the vapor pressure is not proportional to temperature.

5.1.4 Outdoor design conditions vary greatly depending upon geographic location and season with the potential to have a substantial impact on system design requirements. It is therefore necessary to calculate the actual conditions rather than rely on estimates. As an example, consider the cold-storage application shown in Table 1. The water vapor pressure difference for the

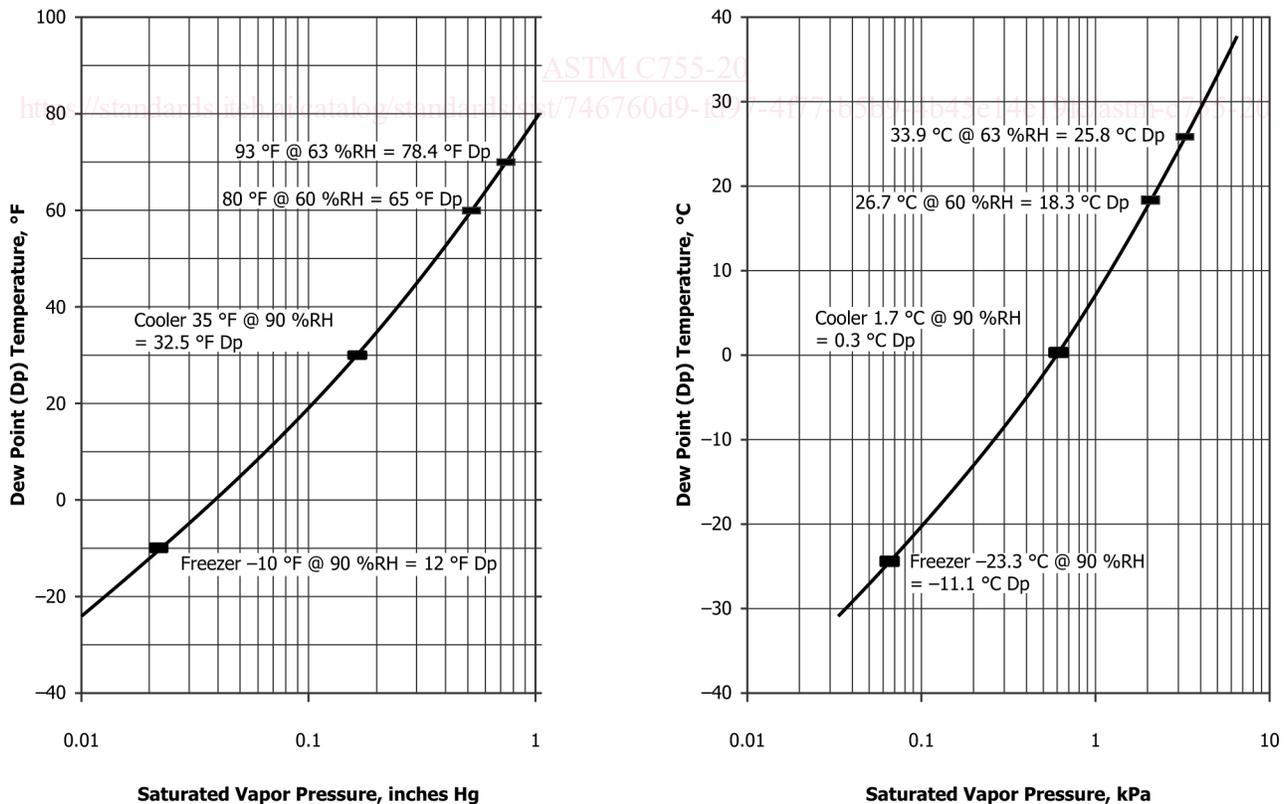


FIG. 1 Dew Point (Dp) Relation to Water Vapor Pressure

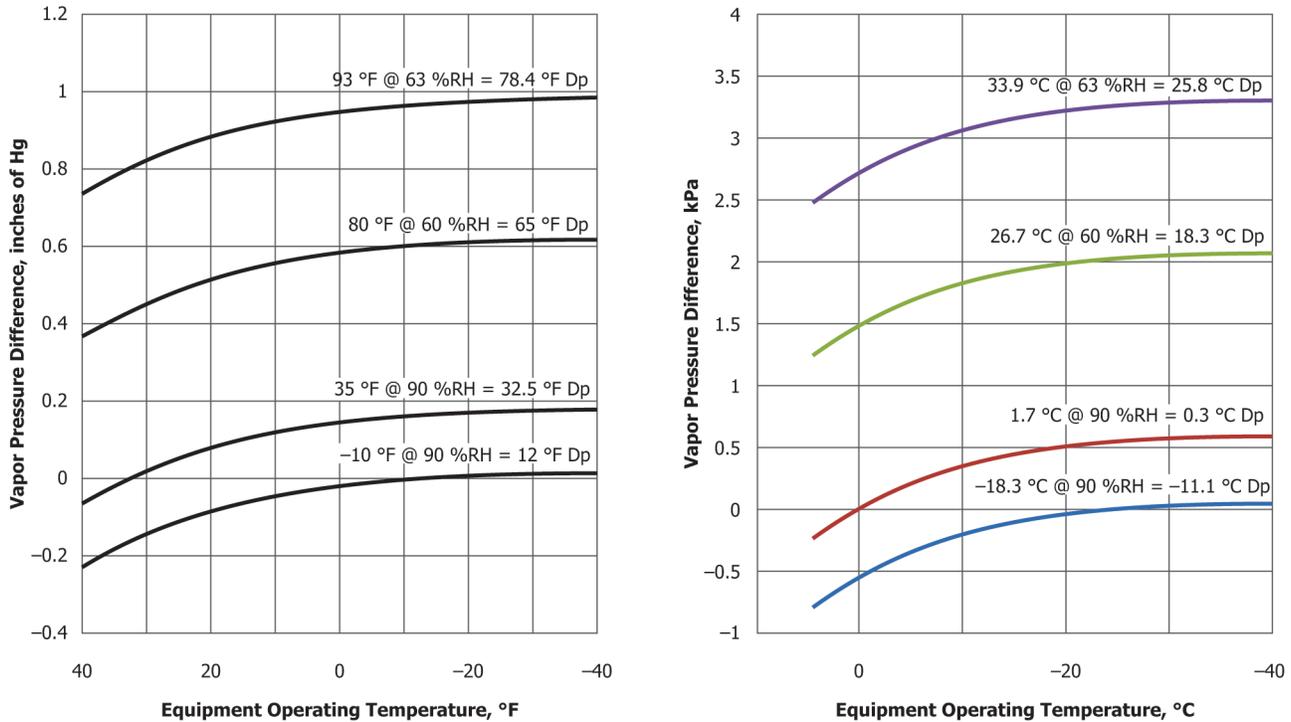


FIG. 2 Magnitude of Water Vapor Pressure Difference for Selected Conditions (Derived from Fig. 1)

TABLE 1 Cold Storage Example

Location	Biloxi, MS	International Falls, MN
Season	Summer	Winter
<i>Outside Design Conditions</i>		
Temperature, °F (°C)	93 (34)	-35 (-37)
Relative Humidity, %	63	67
Dew Point Temperature, °F (°C)	78.4 (26)	-42 (-41)
Water Vapor Pressure in. Hg (kPa)	.9795 (3.32)	.003 (0.01)
<i>Inside Design Conditions</i>		
Temperature, °F (°C)	-10	-10
Relative Humidity, %	90	90
Water Vapor Pressure in. Hg (kPa)	.02	.02
<i>System Design Conditions</i>		
Water Vapor Pressure Difference in. Hg (kPa)	0.9795	0.001 (0.067)
Direction of Diffusion	From outside	From inside

facility located in Biloxi, MS is 0.98 in. Hg (3.25 kPa) as compared to a 0.001 in. Hg (3 Pa) pressure difference if the facility was located in International Falls, MN. In the United States the design dew point temperature seldom exceeds 75°F (24°C) (1).³

5.1.5 The expected vapor pressure difference is a very important factor that must be based on realistic design data (not estimated) to determine vapor retarder requirements.

5.2 *Service Conditions*—The direction and magnitude of water vapor flow are established by the range of ambient atmospheric and design service conditions. These conditions normally will cause vapor flow to be variable in magnitude, and either unidirectional or reversible.

5.2.1 Unidirectional flow exists where the water vapor pressure is constantly higher on one side of the system. With buildings operated for cold storage or frozen food storage, the summer outdoor air conditions will usually determine vapor retarder requirements, with retarder placement on the outdoor (warmer) side of the insulation. In heating only buildings for human occupancy, the winter outdoor air conditions would require retarder placement on the indoor (warmer) side of the insulation. In

³ The boldface numbers in parentheses refer to the list of references at the end of this practice.

cooling only buildings for human occupancy (that is, tropic and subtropic locations), the summer outside air conditions would require retarder placement on the outdoor (warmer) side.

5.2.2 It is possible that reversible flow will occur where the higher vapor pressure alternates between sides of the system, changing because of seasonal variations, for example. It is possible that the inside temperature and vapor pressure of a refrigerated structure will be below the outside temperature and vapor pressure at times, and above them at other times. Cooler rooms with operating temperatures in the range from 35 to 45°F (2 to 7°C) at 90 % relative humidity and located in northern latitudes will experience an outward vapor flow in winter and an inward flow in summer. This reversing vapor flow requires special design consideration.

5.3 *Properties of Insulating Materials with Respect to Moisture*—Insulating materials permeable to water vapor will allow moisture to diffuse through at a rate defined by its permeance and exposure. The rate of movement is inversely proportional to the vapor flow resistance in the vapor path. Insulation having low permeance and vapor-tight joints will act as a vapor retarder to varying degrees, depending on type of insulation and sealing materials.

5.3.1 When condensed water vapor becomes entrained in the insulation, the insulation's thermal properties will be affected to varying degrees where wetted. The overall effect is less impactful when the condensation does not become trapped in the insulation itself, or is dissipated from the system in some manner. Liquid water resulting from condensation has a thermal conductivity some fifteen times greater than that of a typical low-temperature insulation. Ice conductivity is nearly four times that of water. Condensation reduces the thermal effectiveness of the insulation in the zone where it occurs, but when the zone is thin and perpendicular to the heat flow path, the reduction is not extreme. Water or ice in insulation joints that are parallel to the heat flow path provide higher conductance paths with consequent increased heat flow. Generally, hygroscopic moisture in insulation is disregarded.

5.3.2 Thermal insulation materials range in permeability from essentially 0 (zero) perm-in. (0 g/Pa-s-m) to greater than 100 perm-in. (1.45×10^{-7} g/Pa-s-m). Because insulation is supplied in pieces of various size and thickness, vapor diffusion through joints must be considered in the permeance of the materials as applied. The effect of temperature changes on dimensions and other physical characteristics of all materials of the assembly must be considered as it relates to vapor flow into the joints and into the insulation.

5.4 *Properties of Boundary or Finish Materials at the Cold Side of Insulation*—When a vapor pressure gradient exists the lower vapor pressure value usually will be on the lower temperature side of the system, but not always. (There are some exceptions, but these must be considered as special cases.) The finish on the cold side of the insulation-enclosing refrigerated spaces needs to have high permeance relative to that of the warm side construction, so that water vapor penetrating the system is able to flow through the insulation system without condensing. This moisture must be able to move freely to the refrigerating surfaces where it is removed as condensate. When the cold side permeance is zero, as with insulated cold piping, water vapor that enters the insulation system usually will condense within the assembly and remain as an accumulation of water, frost, or ice.

5.5 *Effect of Air Leakage*—Where leakage exists, water vapor will in most cases be transported as a component of air movement into and out of an air-permeable insulation system. This fact must be taken into account in the design and construction of any system in which moisture control is a requirement. It is possible for the quantity of water vapor transported by air leakage through cracks or air-permeable construction to be several times greater than that which occurs by vapor diffusion alone.

5.5.1 Air movement occurs as a result of air pressure differences. In insulated structures, various factors cause these air pressure differences, including wind action, buoyancy forces due to temperature difference between interconnected spaces, volume changes due to fluctuations in temperature and barometric pressure, and the operation of mechanical air supply or exhaust systems. Air leakage occurs through openings or through air-permeable construction across which the air pressure differences occur. Water vapor in air flowing from a warm humidified region to a colder zone in an insulation system will condense in the same way as water vapor moving only by diffusion.

5.5.2 If there is no opportunity for dilution with air at lower vapor pressure along the flow path, there will be no vapor pressure gradient. It is possible that condensation will occur when the air stream passes through a region in the insulation system where the temperature is equal to or lower than the dew point of the warm region of origin. Possible scenarios are airflow from a warm region on one side of the system through to a cold region on the other side, or recirculation between interconnected air spaces at different temperatures forming only a part of the system. Sufficient airflow rate could virtually eliminate the temperature gradient through the insulation.

5.5.3 When air flows from a cold region of low vapor pressure through the system to the warm side there will be a drying effect along the flow path; the accompanying lowering of temperatures along the flow path, if significant, is undesirable.

5.5.4 In any insulation system where there is a possibility of condensation due to air leakage, the designer needs to ensure that a continuous unbroken air barrier is present. Often this is provided by the vapor retarder system, but sometimes it is best provided by a separate element. Particular attention is to be given to providing airtightness at discontinuities in the system, such as at intersections of walls, roofs and floors, at the boundaries of structural elements forming part of an enclosure, and around window and service openings. The insulation system needs to be designed so that it is practical to obtain a continuous air barrier under the conditions that will prevail on the job site, keeping in mind the problem of ensuring good workmanship.

5.5.5 It is possible to use recirculation of air between spaces on the cold side of the insulation and a region of low vapor pressure (usually on the cold side of the insulation system) advantageously to maintain continuity of vapor flow, whether due to diffusion

or air leakage, and thus to avoid condensation. This will often be the only practical approach to the control of condensation and maintenance of dry conditions within the system. In thus venting the insulation system, whether by natural or mechanical means, care must be taken to avoid adverse thermal effects.

5.6 *Other Factors*—In some cases, physical properties of retarder material, insulations, and structures that are not within the scope of this practice will affect choice of barrier. These include such properties as combustibility, compatibility of system components, damage resistance, and surface roughness.

6. Fundamental Design Principles of Vapor Control

6.1 *Moisture Blocking Design*—The moisture blocking principle is applied in a design wherein the passage of water vapor into the insulation is eliminated or minimized to an insignificant level. In such a design, unless it is possible to provide a totally impermeable vapor retarding system, condensation will occur in the system eventually, probably limiting service life. It is applicable in cases of predominantly or exclusively unidirectional vapor flow. The design must incorporate the following:

6.1.1 A vapor retarder with suitably low permeance.

6.1.2 A joint and seam sealing system which maintains vapor retarding system integrity.

6.1.3 Accommodation for future damage repair, joint and seam resealing, and reclosing after maintenance.

6.2 *Flow-Through Design*—The flow-through principle is limited to essentially unidirectional vapor flow in installations where any water vapor that diffuses into the insulation system is permitted to pass through without significant accumulation. This concept is acceptable only:

6.2.1 Where vapor is able to escape beyond the cold side of the system, or

6.2.2 Where vapor cannot so escape, it is possible for it to be continuously purged out, or

6.2.3 Where provision is made to collect it as condensation and to remove it periodically.

6.3 *Moisture-Storage Design:*

6.3.1 Thus far the discussion has dealt with methods of avoiding any condensation. In many cases, however, some condensation is tolerable, the amount depending on the water-holding capacity or water tolerance of a particular construction under particular conditions of use. The moisture-storage principle permits accumulation of water vapor in the insulation system but at a rate designed to prevent harmful effects. This concept is acceptable when:

6.3.1.1 Unidirectional vapor flow occurs, but during severe seasonal conditions, accumulations build up, which, in less severe (compensating seasonal) conditions are adequately expelled to the low vapor-pressure side.

6.3.1.2 Reverse-flow conditions regularly occur on a seasonal cycle and sometimes occur on a diurnal cycle. Possible design solutions include:

(1) Prevention of reverse flow by flushing the usually colder side with low dew point air. This procedure requires a supply of conditioned air and means for its adequate distribution in passages.

(2) Limitation of the magnitude of one reversed flow cycle to a level of accumulation that system materials are able to absorb safely without insulation deficiency or damage. System design must enable the substantial removal of the vapor accumulation during the opposite cycle.

(3) Use of an insulation system of such low permeability that an accumulation of vapor during periods of flow reversal is of little importance. Such a design must ensure that the expulsion of the accumulation during the opposite cycle is adequate.

(4) Supplementation of design (3) by the use of selected vapor retarders at the boundaries of the insulation.

6.3.2 The moisture storage design practice is in widespread use throughout industry. However, a thorough understanding of a given system is necessary. The effect of moisture accumulation on thermal conductivity, frost action on wet materials, dimensional changes produced by changes in moisture content, and many other factors must be considered before this solution is adopted. References (1, 2, 3) and (4) contain information on results taken from in-use systems and studies on moisture accumulation in insulation products and systems under varied environmental conditions. A realistic design approach normally assumes there will be some moisture accumulation but desirably within controllable limits to do the job intended.

7. Vapor Retarder Materials

7.1 Vapor retarder materials need to be water resistant, puncture resistant, abrasion resistant, tear resistant, fire resistant, noncorrosive, rot and mildew resistant, and of strong tensile strength, in addition to having low permeance.

7.2 *Types:*

7.2.1 *Membrane retarders* are non-structural laminated sheets, plastic films, or metal foils of low permeance. See Specification C1136 or Practice C921 for required physical properties. The vapor retarders are applied with adhesives or mechanical fasteners. All joints, penetrations, holes and cuts, or any other discontinuities in the vapor retarder must be sealed to maintain system integrity. Proper sealants, methods, and workmanship must be employed to insure overall design vapor resistance of the installed system.

7.2.2 *Mastics and Coatings:*

7.2.2.1 *Mastics and coating vapor retarders* (“mastic” hereafter for simplification) are field-applied semiliquid compositions of low permeance after curing. They are intended for application by spraying, brushing, or troweling. The specified thickness must

be applied, in one or more continuous coats, and suitable membrane reinforcement shall also be required when recommended by the manufacturer. The system must resist cracking caused by substrate movement. Good workmanship during application is essential to attain design vapor diffusion resistance. See Guide C647 for properties of mastics and coatings. On systems operating at below-ambient temperatures, mastic is often used solely to seal the seams, punctures, penetrations and terminations of vapor retarder membranes, and when used in this manner, the mastic must be a vapor retarding type as opposed to non-vapor retarding types.

7.2.2.2 The permeance of mastics and coatings varies with varying dry thickness, and data showing this relationship for specific products are available from manufacturers. Comparison of permeance values for various mastics and coatings is not to be based on wet thickness, but rather on dry thickness (after curing and evaporation of all volatile ingredients).

7.2.2.3 Because of environmental regulations and sustainability initiatives, mastics used for sealing below-ambient systems are now most commonly water-borne. These water-borne mastics are not available with a permeance as low as the sheet vapor retarders used in below-ambient applications. When mastic is used solely to seal the seams, punctures, penetrations and terminations of vapor retarder membranes, concern about the higher permeance of mastic is mitigated by the fact that a relatively small area of the vapor retarder system will consist of, or be sealed with, mastic.

7.2.2.4 The mastic itself, when used solely to seal the seams, punctures, penetrations and terminations of vapor retarder membranes and applied per manufacturer’s instructions, must have a permeance of 0.15 perm or less for applications operating at 33°F to ambient, or 0.05 perm or less for applications operating below 33°F when tested according to Test Methods E96/E96M desiccant method at 73°F and 50 % RH. When reinforcing mesh is recommended by the manufacturer’s application instructions, permeance values shall be based upon reinforced films. The applied mastic shall not exceed 10 % of the total vapor retarder area, unless the mastic itself meets the requirements of Table 2, in which case the coverage is not restricted. The mastic and vapor retarder membrane combination shall be as agreed upon by specifier and installer.

7.2.2.5 The use of mastics meeting the above permeance values with vapor retarder membranes meeting the requirements of Table 2 will in some cases increase the weighted average permeance of the mastic and vapor retarder combination to slightly above the Table 2 requirements. Such increase is considered insignificant when mastic is 10 % or less of the total vapor retarder area.

NOTE 1—Solvent-borne mastics that provide lower permeance are available if their use is permitted.

7.2.3 Structural retarders are typically formed from rigid or semirigid materials of low permeability, which form a part of the structure. They include some insulation materials, as well as prefabricated composite units comprising insulation and finish, and metal curtain walls. They require careful sealing of joints and seams.

7.2.4 Caulks and mastics are the typical sealants used in conjunction with vapor retarder materials. Pressure sensitive tapes are also employed as a sealing method. Consideration must be given in the selection of the product most appropriate to the specific application, including installation, ambient, and system operating conditions. Manufacturers’ recommendations for proper application must be followed.

7.3 Test Method and Values:

7.3.1 Test Methods E96/E96M is acceptable for determining water vapor transmission of materials.

7.3.1.1 This test method provides isothermal conditions for testing materials by the cup method. In the “dry cup” method, Procedure A (desiccant method), relative humidity inside is approximately 0 % and approximately 50 % on the outside. In the “wet cup” method or water method, the relative humidity inside is approximately 100 % and usually 50 % on the outside. When evaluating WVT data it is preferable to use data obtained by the procedure in which the test conditions approximate the service conditions.

7.3.1.2 This test method does not permit measurement of WVT values under all conditions of temperature and moisture found in service. It does provide values that permit the selection of suitable barrier materials.

TABLE 2 Recommended Maximum Permeance of Water Vapor Retarders for Blocking Design^A

Insulation Application	Insulation Permeability Less than 4.0 perm-in. ^B (5.8 × 10 ⁻⁹ g/Pa-s-m)	Insulation Permeability, 4.0 or greater perm-in. ^B (5.8 × 10 ⁻⁹ g/Pa-s-m)
	Vapor Retarder Permeance, perms ^A	Vapor Retarder Permeance, perms ^A
Wall (residential)	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸)	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸)
Underslab (residential and commercial)	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸)	0.4 (2.29 × 10 ⁻⁸)
Roof deck	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸)	0.4 (2.29 × 10 ⁻⁸) ^C
Pipe and vessels (33 to Ambient (1°C to Ambient))	0.05 (2.86 × 10 ⁻⁹)	0.05 (2.86 × 10 ⁻⁹)
Pipe and vessels (-40 to 32°F (-40 to 0°C))	0.02 (1.14 × 10 ⁻⁹)	0.02 (1.14 × 10 ⁻⁹)
Ducts (40°F to Ambient (4°C to Ambient))	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸)	0.03 (1.72 × 10 ⁻⁹) ^C
Ducts (39°F and below (4°C and below))	0.02 (1.14 × 10 ⁻⁹)	0.02 (1.14 × 10 ⁻⁹)
Metal buildings	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸)	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸) ^C
Cold storage	1.0 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁸)	0.1 (5.72 × 10 ⁻⁹)

^A Water vapor permeance of the vapor retarder in perms when tested in accordance with Test Methods E96/E96M.

^B Water vapor permeability of the insulation material when tested in accordance with Test Methods E96/E96M, Desiccant Method at 73.4°F (23°C) at 50 % RH.

^C Subject to climatic and service conditions.