



Designation: **D6429—20** D6429 – 23

## Standard Guide for Selecting Surface Geophysical Methods<sup>1</sup>

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D6429; 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 guide covers the selection of surface geophysical methods, as commonly applied to geologic, geotechnical, hydrologic, and environmental site investigations and subsequent site characterization, as well as forensic and archaeological applications. These geophysical methods are rarely the sole method used in the site investigation and are often used for pre-screening to guide how and where drilling, sampling or other targeted ~~in-situ~~ in situ testing are conducted. This guide does not describe the specific procedures for conducting geophysical surveys. Individual guides have been developed for many surface geophysical methods.

1.2 Surface geophysical methods yield direct and indirect measurements of the physical properties of soil and rock and pore fluids, as well as buried objects.

1.3 This guide provides an overview of applications for which surface geophysical methods are appropriate. It does not address the details of the theory underlying specific methods, field procedures, or interpretation of the data. Numerous references are included for that purpose and are considered an essential part of this guide. It is recommended that the user of this guide be familiar with the references cited **(1-27)**<sup>2</sup> and with Guides **D420**, **D5730**, **D5753**, **D5777**, **D6285**, **D6430**, **D6431**, **D6432**, **D6820**, **D7046**, and **D7128**, as well as Practices **D5088**, **D5608**, **D6235**, and Test Methods **D4428/D4428M**, **D7400/D7400M**, and **G57**.

1.4 To obtain detailed information on specific geophysical methods, ASTM standards, other publications, and references cited in this guide, should be consulted.

1.5 The success of a geophysical survey is dependent upon many factors. One of the most important factors is the competence of the person(s) responsible for planning, carrying out the survey, and interpreting the data. An understanding of the method's theory, field procedures, and interpretation along with an understanding of the site geology, is necessary to successfully complete a survey. Personnel not having specialized training or experience should be cautious about using geophysical methods and should solicit assistance from qualified ~~practitioners~~ professionals. All references in this standard to the "qualified professional" refers to individuals (such as engineers, soil scientists, geophysicists, engineering geologists or geologists), who have the appropriate experience and, if required by local regulations, applicable certification, licensure or registration. The term "engineering" must be understood to be associated with the practices or activities of that qualified professional.

1.6 *Units*—The values stated in SI units are to be regarded as standard. The values given in parentheses are for information only and are not considered standard. Reporting of test results in units other than SI shall not be regarded as nonconformance with this standard.

<sup>1</sup> This guide 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/Investigation.

Current edition approved ~~Aug. 1, 2020~~ Feb. 15, 2023. Published ~~September 2020~~ March 2023. Originally approved in 1999. Last previous edition approved in ~~2011~~ 2020 as **D6429 – 99 (2011)**<sup>20</sup>, ~~which was withdrawn in March 2020 and reinstated in August 2020~~. DOI: 10.1520/D6429-20. DOI: 10.1520/D6429-23.

<sup>2</sup> The boldface numbers given in parentheses refer to a list of references at the end of this standard.

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

1.7 This guide offers an organized collection of information or a series of options and does not recommend a specific course of action. This document cannot replace education or experience and should be used in conjunction with professional judgment. Not all aspects of this guide 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 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.

1.9 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>

- D420 Guide for Site Characterization for Engineering Design and Construction Purposes
- D653 Terminology Relating to Soil, Rock, and Contained Fluids
- D3740 Practice for Minimum Requirements for Agencies Engaged in Testing and/or Inspection of Soil and Rock as Used in Engineering Design and Construction
- D4428/D4428M Test Methods for Crosshole Seismic Testing (Withdrawn 2023)<sup>4</sup>
- D5088 Practice for Decontamination of Field Equipment Used at Waste Sites
- D5608 Practices for Decontamination of Sampling and Non Sample Contacting Equipment Used at Low Level Radioactive Waste Sites
- D5730 Guide for Site Characterization for Environmental Purposes With Emphasis on Soil, Rock, the Vadose Zone and Groundwater (Withdrawn 2013)<sup>4</sup>
- D5753 Guide for Planning and Conducting Geotechnical Borehole Geophysical Logging
- D5777 Guide for Using the Seismic Refraction Method for Subsurface Investigation
- D6235 Practice for Expedited Site Characterization of Vadose Zone and Groundwater Contamination at Hazardous Waste Contaminated Sites
- D6285 Guide for Locating Abandoned Wells
- D6430 Guide for Using the Gravity Method for Subsurface Site Characterization
- D6431 Guide for Using the Direct Current Resistivity Method for Subsurface Site Characterization
- D6432 Guide for Using the Surface Ground Penetrating Radar Method for Subsurface Investigation
- D6639 Guide for Using the Frequency Domain Electromagnetic Method for Subsurface Site Characterizations
- D6820 Guide for Use of the Time Domain Electromagnetic Method for Geophysical Subsurface Site Investigation
- D7046 Guide for Use of the Metal Detection Method for Subsurface Exploration (Withdrawn 2020)<sup>4</sup>
- D7128 Guide for Using the Seismic-Reflection Method for Shallow Subsurface Investigation
- D7400/D7400M Test Methods for Downhole Seismic Testing
- G57 Test Method for Measurement of Soil Resistivity Using the Wenner Four-Electrode Method

## 3. Terminology

### 3.1 Definitions:

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

3.1.2 *site investigation, n—in geologic, geotechnical, hydrologic, and environmental evaluations*, the effort(s) to plan a scope of work and collect data to support the assessment of the acquired data, such as engineering, chemical and index properties, of rock, soil and/or groundwater, and possibly their spatial variability, at the area of interest.

#### 3.1.2.1 Discussion—

One or more parties may have responsibility for various elements of the site investigation.

<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.

<sup>4</sup> The last approved version of this historical standard is referenced on [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org).

3.1.3 *site characterization, n—in geologic, geotechnical, hydrologic, and environmental evaluations*, to analyze the data collected during the site investigation; then prepare various presentations/reports covering the purpose/intent of the site investigation(s).

3.1.3.1 *Discussion*—

The site characterization findings and conclusions may be based on a combination of engineering judgment, risk management considerations and standard of care appropriate at the time of the investigation(s).

3.1 Definitions:

3.1.1 For definitions of common technical terms used in this standard, refer to Terminology [D653](#).

## 4. Summary of Guide

4.1 This guide applies to surface geophysical techniques that are commonly used in site investigations, as well as forensic and archaeological applications.

4.2 The selection of preferred geophysical methods for a number of common applications is summarized in [Table 1](#). The table is followed by brief descriptions of each application.

4.3 A brief description of each geophysical method along with some of the field considerations and limitations also are provided.

4.4 It is recommended that personnel consult appropriate references on each of the methods, applications, and their interpretations. All geophysical measurements should be carried out by knowledgeable professionals who have experience and training in theory and application of the method, and the interpretation of the data resulting from the use of the specific method.

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, and the like. Users of this standard are cautioned that compliance with Practice [D3740](#) does not in itself assure reliable results. Reliable results depend on many factors; Practice [D3740](#) provides a means of evaluating some of those factors.

## 5. Significance and Use

5.1 This guide applies to commonly used surface geophysical methods for those applications listed in [Table 1](#). The rating system used in [Table 1](#) is based upon the ability of each method to produce results under average field conditions when compared to other methods applied to the same application. An “A” rating implies a preferred method and a “B” rating implies an alternate method. There may be a single method or multiple methods that can be successfully applied. There may also be a method or methods that will be successful technically at a lower cost. Selection of the most appropriate method(s) must be made based on the scale and setting of the target. The final selection must be made considering site specific conditions and project objectives; therefore, it is critical to have an experienced a qualified professional make the final decision as to the method(s) selected.

5.1.1 Benson [et al \(1\)](#) provides one of the earlier guides to the application of geophysics to environmental problems.

5.1.2 Ward [\(2\)](#) is a three-volume compendium that deals with geophysical methods applied to geotechnical and environmental problems.

5.1.3 Butler [\(3\)](#) provides detailed technical explanations of near-surface geophysical methods and includes several detailed case histories histories.

5.1.4 The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manual [\(4\)](#) provides introductory chapters for the methods of Geophysical Exploration for Engineering and Environmental Investigations. This manual can be downloaded for no charge from the Corps of Engineers website.

5.1.5 Olhoeft [\(5\)](#) provides an expert system for helping select geophysical methods to be used at hazardous waste sites.

5.1.6 The U.S. EPA [\(6\)](#) provides an excellent literature review of the theory and use of geophysical methods for use at contaminated sites.

TABLE 1 Selection of Geophysical Methods for Common Applications<sup>A,B</sup>

Applications	Geophysical Methods (Section 6)											
	Seismic		Electrical		Electromagnetic			Pipe/Cable Locator (6.9)	Metal Detectors (6.10)	Ground Penetrating Radar (6.11) <sup>C</sup>	Magnetics (6.12)	Gravity (6.13)
	Refraction (6.1)	Reflection (6.2)	MASW (6.3)	DC Resistivity (6.4)	SP (6.5)	Frequency Domain (6.6)	Time Domain (6.7)	VLF (6.8)				
Natural Geologic and Hydrologic Conditions												
Soil/unconsolidated layers	A	B	A	A		B	A	B				A
Soil/unconsolidated layers	A	B	B	A		B	A	B				A
Rock layers	B	A	A	B			B					B
Rock layers	B	A	B	B			B					B
Depth to bedrock	A	A	A	B		B	B	B				A
Depth to bedrock	A	A	B	B		B	B	B				A
Depth to water table	A	A	B	B		B	B	B			A	
Depth to water table	A	B	B	B		B	B	B				
Fractures and fault zones	B	A	B	B		A	B	A				B
Voids and sinkholes	B	B	A	B		B	B	B			B	
Voids and sinkholes	B	B	A	A		B	B	B				A
Soil and rock properties	A		B	A		B	B					A
Soil and rock properties	A		A	A		B	B					A
Dam and lagoon leakage			A	B	A	B	B					B
Dam and lagoon leakage			B	B	A	B	B					B
Inorganic Contaminants												
Landfill leachate				A		A	A	B				B
Saltwater intrusion				A		A	A	B				B
Soil salinity				A		A	A					B
Organic Contaminants												
Light, nonaqueous phase liquids				B		B	B					B
Dissolved phase <sup>D</sup>												
Dense, nonaqueous phase liquids <sup>D</sup>												
Manmade Buried Objects												
Utilities						B			A	B		A
Drums and USTs						A			A	A		A
UXO						B	B	B				A
Abandoned wells						B		B				A
Landfill and trench boundaries	B		B	B		A	B		B	B		A
Forensics				B		A			B	B		A
Archaeological features	B	B	B	B		A						A

<sup>A</sup>"A" implies primary choice of method/method for a given set of site-specific conditions.

<sup>B</sup>"B" implies secondary choice or alternate method.

<sup>C</sup>Selection implication is applicable where mineralogic clays or conductive pore fluids are not present/predominant.

<sup>D</sup>Also see natural geologic and hydrologic conditions to characterize contaminant pathways.

## 5.2 *An Introduction to Geophysical Measurements:*

5.2.1 Geophysical measurements provide a means of mapping lateral and vertical variations of one or more physical properties or monitoring temporal changes in conditions, or both. In the absence of prior information about the site, reconnaissance-level geophysical investigations may be appropriate as a precursor to refined surveys. A primary factor affecting the accuracy of site investigation results is the number of test locations. Insufficient spatial sampling to adequately characterize the conditions at a site can result if the number of samples is too small. Interpolation between these sample points may be difficult and may lead to an inaccurate site characterization.

5.2.2 Geophysical measurements generally can be made relatively quickly, are minimally intrusive, and enable interpolation between known points of control. Continuous data acquisition can be obtained with certain geophysical methods at speeds up to several km/h (mph). In some cases, total site coverage is economically possible. Because of the greater sample density, geophysical methods can be used to define background (ambient) conditions and detect anomalous conditions resulting in a more accurate site characterization than using borings or soundings alone. Geophysical survey design considerations vary according to the intended distribution of measurements. Data may be collected along individual transects to investigate linear features (dams, levees, roadways), while multiple transects or 3D survey geometries are required to identify areal trends over larger sites and non-linear targets. These geophysical methods are especially important to pre-screen large sites prior other drilling, sampling and testing methods, and additionally are relevant and important for use on levees and other linear structures to detailed planning of further site investigation such as other drilling, sampling and testing methods.

~~5.2.3 Geophysical measurements provide a means of mapping lateral and vertical variations of one or more physical properties or monitoring temporal changes in conditions, or both.~~

5.3 A contrast in material properties must be present for geophysical measurements to be successful.

5.3.1 Geophysical methods measure the physical, electrical, or chemical properties of soil, rock, and pore fluids. To detect an anomaly, a soil to rock contact, the presence of inorganic contaminants, or a buried drum, there must be a contrast in the property being measured, ~~for measured.~~ For example, the target to be detected or geologic feature to be defined must have properties significantly different from “background” conditions.

5.3.2 For example, the interface between fresh water and saltwater in an aquifer can be detected by the differences in electrical properties of the pore fluids. The contact between soil and unweathered bedrock can be detected by the differences in acoustic velocity of the materials. In some cases, the differences in measured physical properties may be too small for anomaly detection by geophysical methods.

5.3.3 Because physical properties of soil and rock vary widely, some by many orders of magnitude, one or more of these properties usually will correspond to a geologic discontinuity; therefore, boundaries determined by the geophysical methods will usually coincide with geological boundaries, and a cross-section produced from the geophysical data may resemble a geological cross-section, although the two are not necessarily identical.

5.4 Geophysical methods should be used in the following instances:

5.4.1 Surface geophysical methods can and should be used early in a site investigation program to aid in identifying background conditions, as well as anomalous conditions so that borings, soundings, and sampling points can be located to be representative of site conditions and to investigate anomalies. Geophysical methods also can be used later in the site investigation program after an initial study is completed to confirm and improve the site investigation findings and provide fill-in data between other measurements. General site knowledge (for example, depth to bedrock, site use history) is a useful precursor for designing a geophysical survey.

5.4.2 The level of success of a geophysical survey is improved if the survey objectives are well defined. In some cases, the objective may be refined as the survey uncovers new or unknown data about the site conditions. The flexibility to change or add to the technical approach should be built into the program to account for changes in interpretation of site conditions as a site investigation progresses.

## 5.5 *Profiling and Sounding Measurements:*

5.5.1 Profiling by stations or by continuous measurements provides a means of assessing lateral changes in subsurface conditions.

5.5.2 Soundings provide a means of assessing depth and thickness of geologic layers or other targets. Most surface geophysical sounding measurements can resolve three and possibly four layers.

#### 5.6 *Ease of Use and Interpretation of Data:*

5.6.1 The theory of applied geophysics is quantitative, however, in application, geophysical methods often yield interpretations that are qualitative.

5.6.2 Some geophysical methods provide data from which a preliminary interpretation can be made in the field, for example, ground penetrating radar (GPR), frequency domain electromagnetic profiling, direct current (DC) resistivity profiling, magnetic profiling, and metal detector profiling. A map of GPR anomalies or a contour map of the EM (electromagnetic), resistivity, magnetic or metal detector data often can be created in the field.

5.6.3 Some methods, (for example, time domain electromagnetics and DC resistivity soundings, seismic refraction, seismic reflection, and gravity), require that the data be processed before any quantitative interpretation can be done.

5.6.4 Any preliminary interpretation of field data should be treated with caution. Such preliminary analysis should be confirmed by correlation with other information from known points of control, such as borings or outcrops. Such preliminary analysis is subject to change after data processing and is performed mostly as a means of quality control (QC).

5.6.5 It is the interpretation and integration of all site data that results in useful information for site characterization. The conversion of raw data to useful information is a value-added process that experienced professionals achieve by careful analysis. Such analysis must be conducted by a competent professional to ensure that the interpretation is consistent with geologic and hydrologic conditions.

5.7 *Discussion of Applications*—Applications listed in **Table 1** are discussed below.

#### 5.7.1 *Natural Geologic and Hydrologic Conditions:*

5.7.1.1 *Soil/Unconsolidated Layers*—This application includes determining the depth to, thickness of, and areal extent of unconsolidated layers. These layers may be discontinuous or include lenses of various materials. These layers can be detected because of differences in their physical properties as compared to adjacent materials.

5.7.1.2 *Rock Layers*—This application includes determining the contact between different rock layers, for example, limestone over granite or sandstone over shale, discontinuous bedding planes, and unconformities and the thicknesses of these layers. Several geophysical methods can be used to delineate rock layers depending on the physical properties and the depths and thicknesses of the layers.

5.7.1.3 *Depth to Bedrock*—This application includes determining depth to the top of competent rock covered by unconsolidated overburden. The choice of geophysical method depends on whether there is a physical property contrast between the rock and the overlying material. In areas where the top of rock is weathered or highly fractured, top of rock may be difficult to determine. Highly irregular rock surfaces may present additional problems.

5.7.1.4 *Depth to Water Table*—This application includes determining the depth at which a subsurface unit is fully saturated. The water table (top of the saturated zone) can be detected because of the changes in physical properties that are caused by saturated conditions. The ability to detect the water table may depend on the geologic unit in which it occurs. Seismic methods can be used to detect the water table in most unconsolidated materials; electrical, electromagnetic, or GPR methods may be used to detect the water table in either consolidated or unconsolidated materials.

5.7.1.5 *Fractures and Fault Zones*—This application includes the location and characterization of joints, fractures, and faults. These features range from individual joints and fracture zones to larger regional structural features. Joints, fractures and fault zones may be dry, fluid-filled or filled with clays or weathered rock. The detectability of these features increases with the size of the feature and with the presence of distinctive pore fluids or conductive fill material.

5.7.1.6 *Voids and Sinkholes*—This application includes karst features, such as weathered depressions in rock, open, water-filled,



or sediment-filled sinkholes, and cavities or larger cave systems. In many cases, the target of concern may be beyond the effective resolution or depth range of some or all of the surface geophysical methods; however, deep cavities often show signs of their presence in the near surface and may be interpreted using shallow geophysical data. The ability to detect a given size cavity decreases with increasing depth for all surface geophysical methods.

**5.7.1.7 Soil and Rock Properties**—This application refers to the measurement of the physical properties of soil and rock, for example, elastic, plastic, and electrical. The geophysical method selected will be determined by the specific property to be measured. ASTM standards pertinent to those properties should be consulted. For example, rippability and acoustic velocities of rock are discussed in Guide **D5777**, the wave velocities measured down a single borehole in Test Method **D7400/D7400M** and between boreholes in Test Methods **D4428/D4428M**. Soil resistivity measurements are discussed in Test Method **G57**. Density, porosity measurements and seismic velocity measurements in boreholes are discussed in Guide **D5753**.

**5.7.1.8 Dam and Lagoon Leakage**—This application refers to the detection and mapping of fluids leaking along preferential flow pathways from a dam or lagoon. The application of surface geophysical methods to detect leakage is contingent upon the presence of localized flow or difference in conductivity.

### 5.7.2 Inorganic Contaminants:

**5.7.2.1 Landfill Leachate**—This application includes all types of waste disposal sites in which the primary leachate is likely to be inorganic and electrically conductive. This includes municipal landfill sites, hazardous waste sites, and mine tailings. Inorganic contaminants can be detected using electrical or electromagnetic geophysical methods.

**5.7.2.2 Saltwater Intrusion**—Saltwater intrusion refers to movement of saline water into fresh water aquifers, and although this is primarily a coastal problem, it can occur naturally in inland aquifers or by man-made contamination, for example, brine ponds. Saline water is highly conductive and can be detected by DC resistivity and electromagnetic methods. The lateral boundary of the saltwater/fresh water interface can be mapped and the depth of the saline water estimated.

**5.7.2.3 Soil Salinity**—Soil salinity is a condition in which salt concentrations within soils have reached levels affecting the growth and yields of crops. DC resistivity and electromagnetic conductivity measurements provide means for measuring the soil salinity over a large area and at various depths.

### 5.7.3 Organic Contaminants:

[ASTM D6429-23](https://standards.iteh.ai/catalog/standards/sist/8e682e04-6341-4eea-95fd-0811d476740c/astm-d6429-23)

<https://standards.iteh.ai/catalog/standards/sist/8e682e04-6341-4eea-95fd-0811d476740c/astm-d6429-23>

**5.7.3.1 Light, Nonaqueous Phase Liquids (LNAPL)**—This application includes petroleum products present as discrete, measurable contaminants with concentrations greater than their solubility in water. The contaminants are lighter than water and “float” on the surface of an unconfined aquifer in porous media. The geometry of their occurrence in fractured soil or rock is more complex and less well defined. LNAPL dissolves into water and acts as a source of dissolved contaminant plumes (see dissolved organic contaminants). LNAPL can be detected in some cases because its electrical properties are different from those of ground water; it depresses the ground water surface if present in sufficient quantities; and, it can alter the capillary properties of soil.

#### 5.7.3.2 Dense, Nonaqueous Phase Liquids (DNAPL):

(1) This application includes chlorinated organic solvents and other contaminants that are present as a discrete, measurable contaminant phase with concentrations greater than their solubility in water. The contaminants are denser than water and “sink” below the water table. The distribution of DNAPL in the subsurface is complex and is controlled by gravity and the capillary properties of subsurface materials, rather than by ground water flow direction. DNAPL dissolves into water and acts as a source of dissolved contaminant plumes (see dissolved organic contaminants). Moreover, “residual” DNAPL (immobile contaminant left behind during migration) also can act as a source of dissolved organic contamination. Residual concentrations of DNAPL do not significantly alter the properties measured by most geophysical methods.

(2) Some DNAPLs have dielectric properties that may allow their detection using GPR if temporal measurements are made before the DNAPL is introduced to compare with properties that exist after the DNAPL is present; thus, GPR may be useful to monitor the movement of DNAPL during remediation.

(3) The geophysical methods listed in **Table 1** under natural geologic and hydrologic conditions are appropriate to characterize the hydrogeology of a site; therefore, an attempt can be made to predict DNAPL occurrence and distribution based upon an understanding of site geology.

#### 5.7.3.3 Dissolved Phase: