



Designation: D 2850 – 03a

Standard Test Method for Unconsolidated-Undrained Triaxial Compression Test on Cohesive Soils¹

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1. Scope*

1.1 This test method covers determination of the strength and stress-strain relationships of a cylindrical specimen of either undisturbed or remolded cohesive soil. Specimens are subjected to a confining fluid pressure in a triaxial chamber. No drainage of the specimen is permitted during the test. The specimen is sheared in compression without drainage at a constant rate of axial deformation (strain controlled).

1.2 This test method provides data for determining undrained strength properties and stress-strain relations for soils. This test method provides for the measurement of the total stresses applied to the specimen, that is, the stresses are not corrected for pore-water pressure.

NOTE 1—The determination of the unconfined compressive strength of cohesive soils is covered by Test Method D 2166.

NOTE 2—The determination of the consolidated, undrained strength of cohesive soils with pore pressure measurement is covered by Test Method D 4767.

1.3 All observed and calculated values shall conform to the guidelines for significant digits and rounding established in Practice D 6026.

1.3.1 The method used to specify how data are collected, calculated, or recorded in this standard is not directly related to the accuracy to which the data can be applied in design or other uses, or both. How one applies the results obtained using this standard is beyond its scope.

1.4 The values stated in SI units are to be regarded as the standard. The values stated in inch-pound units and given in parentheses are approximate.

1.5 *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.*

¹ This test method is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee D18 on Soil and Rock and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee D18.05 on Structural Properties of Soils.

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2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*²

- D 422 Method for Particle-Size Analysis of Soils
- D 653 Terminology Relating to Soil, Rock, and Contained Fluids
- D 854 Test Method for Specific Gravity of Soils
- D 1587 Method for Thin-Walled Tube Sampling of Soils
- D 2166 Test Methods for Unconfined Compressive Strength of Cohesive Soil
- D 2216 Test Method for Laboratory Determination of Water (Moisture) Content of Soil and Rock
- D 2487 Classification of Soils for Engineering Purposes
- D 2488 Practice for Description and Identification of Soils (Visual-Manual Procedure)
- D 3740 Practice for Evaluation of Agencies Engaged in the Testing and/or Inspection of Soil and Rock as Used in Engineering Design and Construction
- D 4220 Practices for Preserving and Transporting Soil Samples
- D 4318 Test Method for Liquid Limit, Plastic Limit, and Plasticity Index of Soils
- D 4753 Specification for Evaluating, Selecting, and Specifying Balances and Scales for Use in Testing Soil and Rock, and Related Construction Materials
- D 4767 Test Method for Consolidated-Undrained Triaxial Compression Test on Cohesive Soils²
- D 6026 Practice for Using Significant Digits in Geotechnical Data

3. Terminology

3.1 Definitions—The definitions of terms used in this test method shall be in accordance with Terminology D 653.

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *failure*—the stress condition at failure for a test specimen. Failure is often taken to correspond to the maximum principal stress difference (deviator stress) attained or the

² For referenced ASTM Standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact 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.

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

principal stress difference (deviator stress) at 15 % axial strain, whichever is obtained first during the performance of a test.

3.2.2 *unconsolidated-undrained compressive strength*—the value of the principal stress difference (deviator stress) at failure.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 In this test method, the compressive strength of a soil is determined in terms of the total stress, therefore, the resulting strength depends on the pressure developed in the pore fluid during loading. In this test method, fluid flow is not permitted from or into the soil specimen as the load is applied, therefore the resulting pore pressure, and hence strength, differs from that developed in the case where drainage can occur.

4.2 If the test specimens are 100 % saturated, consolidation cannot occur when the confining pressure is applied nor during the shear portion of the test since drainage is not permitted. Therefore, if several specimens of the same material are tested, and if they are all at approximately the same water content and void ratio when they are tested, they will have approximately the same undrained shear strength. The Mohr failure envelope will usually be a horizontal straight line over the entire range of confining stresses applied to the specimens if the specimens are fully saturated.

4.3 If the test specimens are partially saturated or compacted specimens, where the degree of saturation is less than 100 %, consolidation may occur when the confining pressure is applied and during shear, even though drainage is not permitted. Therefore, if several partially saturated specimens of the same material are tested at different confining stresses, they will not have the same undrained shear strength. Thus, the Mohr failure envelope for unconsolidated undrained triaxial tests on partially saturated soils is usually curved.

4.4 The unconsolidated undrained triaxial strength is applicable to situations where the loads are assumed to take place so rapidly that there is insufficient time for the induced pore-water pressure to dissipate and for consolidation to occur during the loading period (that is, drainage does not occur).

4.5 Compressive strengths determined using this procedure may not apply in cases where the loading conditions in the field differ significantly from those used in this test method.

NOTE 3—Notwithstanding the statements on precision and bias contained in this test method: 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 which meet the criteria of Practice D 3740 are generally considered capable of competent testing. Users of this test method are cautioned that compliance with Practice D 3740 does not ensure reliable testing. Reliable testing depends on several factors; Practice D 3740 provides a means of evaluating some of those factors.

5. Apparatus

5.1 *Axial Loading Device*—The axial loading device shall be screw jack driven by an electric motor through a geared transmission, a hydraulic loading device, or any other compression device with sufficient capacity and control to provide the rate of loading prescribed in 7.5. The rate of advance of the loading device shall not deviate by more than ± 5 % from the selected value. Vibrations due to the operation of the loading

device shall be sufficiently small to not cause dimensional changes in the specimen.

NOTE 4—A loading device may be said to provide sufficiently small vibrations if there are no visible ripples in a glass of water placed on the loading platen when the device is operating at the speed at which the test is performed.

5.2 *Axial Load-Measuring Device*—The axial load-measuring device shall be a load ring, electronic load cell, hydraulic load cell, or any other load-measuring device capable of measuring the axial load to an accuracy of 1 % of the axial load at failure and may be a part of the axial loading device.

5.3 *Triaxial Compression Chamber*—The triaxial chamber shall consist of a top plate and a baseplate separated by a cylinder. The cylinder shall be constructed of any material capable of withstanding the applied pressure. It is desirable to use a transparent material or have a cylinder provided with viewing ports so the behavior of the specimen may be observed. The top plate shall have a vent valve such that air can be forced out of the chamber as it is filled. The base plate shall have an inlet through which the pressure liquid is supplied to the chamber.

5.4 *Axial Load Piston*—The piston passing through the top of the chamber and its seal must be designed so the variation in axial load due to friction does not exceed 0.1 % of the axial load at failure as measured in 8.4.1.3 and so there is negligible lateral bending of the piston during loading.

NOTE 5—The use of two linear ball bushings to guide the piston is recommended to minimize friction and maintain alignment.

NOTE 6—A minimum piston diameter of one sixth the specimen diameter has been used successfully in many laboratories to minimize lateral bending.

5.5 *Pressure Control Device*—The chamber pressure control device shall be capable of applying and controlling the chamber pressure to within ± 2 kPa (0.25 psi) for pressures less than 200 kPa (28 psi) and to within ± 1 % for pressures greater than 200 kPa (28 psi). This device may consist of a reservoir connected to the triaxial chamber and partially filled with the chamber fluid (usually water), with the upper part of the reservoir connected to a compressed gas supply; the gas pressure being controlled by a pressure regulator and measured by a pressure gage, electronic pressure transducer, or any other device capable of measuring to the prescribed tolerance. However, a hydraulic system pressurized by deadweight acting on a piston or any other pressure-maintaining and measurement device capable of applying and controlling the chamber pressure to the tolerance prescribed in this section may be used.

5.6 *Specimen Cap and Base*—An impermeable rigid cap and base shall be used to prevent drainage of the specimen. The specimen cap and base shall be constructed of a noncorrosive impermeable material, and each shall have a circular plane surface of contact with the specimen and a circular cross section. The weight of the specimen cap shall produce an axial stress on the specimen of less than 1 kN/m². The diameter of the cap and base shall be equal to the initial diameter of the specimen. The specimen base shall be connected to the triaxial compression chamber to prevent lateral motion or tilting and the specimen cap shall be designed such that eccentricity of the piston to cap contact relative to the vertical axis of the

specimen does not exceed 1.3 mm (0.05 in.). The end of the piston and specimen cap contact area shall be designed so that tilting of the specimen cap during the test is minimal. The cylindrical surface of the specimen base and cap that contacts the membrane to form a seal shall be smooth and free of scratches.

5.7 Deformation Indicator—The vertical deformation of the specimen shall be measured with an accuracy of at least 0.03 % of the specimen height. The deformation indicator shall have a range of at least 20 % of the height of the specimen, and may be a dial indicator, linear variable differential transformer (LVDT), extensometer or other measuring device meeting the requirements for accuracy and range.

5.8 Rubber Membrane—The rubber membrane used to encase the specimen shall provide reliable protection against leakage. Membranes shall be carefully inspected prior to use, and if any flaws or pinholes are evident, the membrane shall be discarded. To offer minimum restraint to the specimen, the unstretched membrane diameter shall be between 90 and 95 % of that of the specimen. The membrane thickness shall not exceed 1 % of the diameter of the specimen. The membrane shall be sealed to the specimen base and cap with rubber O-rings for which the unstressed inside diameter is between 75 and 85 % of the diameter of the cap and base or by any method that will produce a positive seal. An equation for correcting the principal stress difference (deviator stress) for the effect of the stiffness of the membrane is given in 8.7.

5.9 Sample Extruder—The sample extruder shall be capable of extruding the soil core from the sampling tube in the same direction of travel in which the sample entered the tube and with minimum disturbance of the sample. If the soil core is not extruded vertically, care should be taken to avoid bending stresses on the core due to gravity. Conditions at the time of sample removal may dictate the direction of removal, but the principal concern is to keep the degree of disturbance minimal.

5.10 Specimen Size Measurement Devices—Devices used to measure the height and diameter of the specimen shall be capable of measuring the desired dimension to within 0.1 % of its actual length and shall be constructed such that their use will not disturb the specimen.

NOTE 7—Circumferential measuring tapes are recommended over calipers for measuring the diameter.

5.11 Timer—A timing device indicating the elapsed testing time to the nearest 1 s shall be used for establishing the rate of strain application prescribed in 7.5.

5.12 Balances—A balance or scale conforming to the requirements of Specification D 4753 readable (with no estimation) to 0.1 % of the test mass, or better.

5.13 Miscellaneous Apparatus—Specimen trimming and carving tools including a wire saw, steel straightedge, miter box and vertical trimming lathe, apparatus for preparing compacted specimens, remolding apparatus, water content cans, and data sheets shall be provided as required.

6. Test Specimens

6.1 Specimen Size—Specimens shall be cylindrical and have a minimum diameter of 3.3 cm (1.3 in.). The height-to-diameter ratio shall be between 2 and 2.5. The largest particle

size shall be smaller than one sixth the specimen diameter. If, after completion of a test, it is found based on visual observation that oversize particles are present, indicate this information in the report of test data (see 9.2.12).

NOTE 8—If oversize particles are found in the specimen after testing, a particle-size analysis may be performed in accordance with Test Method D 422 to confirm the visual observation and the results provided with the test report (see 9.2.4).

6.2 Undisturbed Specimens—Prepare undisturbed specimens from large undisturbed samples or from samples secured in accordance with Practice D 1587 or other acceptable undisturbed tube sampling procedures. Samples shall be preserved and transported in accordance with the practices for Group C samples in Practices D 4220. Specimens obtained by tube sampling may be tested without trimming except for cutting the end surfaces plane and perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the specimen, provided soil characteristics are such that no significant disturbance results from sampling. Handle specimens carefully to minimize disturbance, changes in cross section, or change in water content. If compression or any type of noticeable disturbance would be caused by the extrusion device, split the sample tube lengthwise or cut the tube in suitable sections to facilitate removal of the specimen with minimum disturbance. Prepare trimmed specimens, in an environment such as a controlled high-humidity room where soil water content change is minimized. Where removal of pebbles or crumbling resulting from trimming causes voids on the surface of the specimen, carefully fill the voids with remolded soil obtained from the trimmings. When the sample condition permits, a vertical trimming lathe may be used to reduce the specimen to the required diameter. After obtaining the required diameter, place the specimen in a miter box and cut the specimen to the final height with a wire saw or other suitable device. Trim the surfaces with the steel straightedge. Perform one or more water content determinations on material trimmed from the specimen in accordance with Test Method D 2216. Determine the mass and dimensions of the specimen using the devices described in 5.11 and 5.9. A minimum of three height measurements (120° apart) and at least three diameter measurements at the quarter points of the height shall be made to determine the average height and diameter of the specimen.

6.3 Compacted Specimens—Soil required for compacted specimens shall be thoroughly mixed with sufficient water to produce the desired water content. If water is added to the soil, store the material in a covered container for at least 16 h prior to compaction. Compacted specimens may be prepared by compacting material in at least six layers using a split mold of circular cross section having dimensions meeting the requirements enumerated in 6.1. Specimens may be compacted to the desired density by either: (1) kneading or tamping each layer until the accumulative mass of the soil placed in the mold is compacted to a known volume; or (2) by adjusting the number of layers, the number of tamps per layer, and the force per tamp. The top of each layer shall be sacrificed prior to the addition of material for the next layer. The tamper used to compact the material shall have diameter equal to or less than one half the diameter of the mold. After a specimen is formed,