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Standard Guide for
Conducting a Sensitivity Analysis for a Ground-Water Flow Model Application[1]

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D 5611; 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.

ϵ^1 NOTE—Paragraph 1.9 was added editorially October 1998.

1. Scope

1.1 This guide covers techniques that should be used to conduct a sensitivity analysis for a ground-water flow model. The sensitivity analysis results in quantitative relationships between model results and the input hydraulic properties or boundary conditions of the aquifers.

1.2 After a ground-water flow model has been calibrated, a sensitivity analysis may be performed. Examination of the sensitivity of calibration residuals and model conclusions to model inputs is a method for assessing the adequacy of the model with respect to its intended function.

1.3 After a model has been calibrated, a modeler may vary the value of some aspect of the conditions applying solely to the prediction simulations in order to satisfy some design criteria. For example, the number and locations of proposed pumping wells may be varied in order to minimize the required discharge. Insofar as these aspects are controllable, variation of these parameters is part of an optimization procedure, and, for the purposes of this guide, would not be considered to be a sensitivity analysis. On the other hand, estimates of future conditions that are not controllable, such as the recharge during a postulated drought of unknown duration and severity, would be considered as candidates for a sensitivity analysis.

1.4 This guide presents the simplest acceptable techniques for conducting a sensitivity analysis. Other techniques have been developed by researchers and could be used in lieu of the techniques in this guide.

1.5 This guide is written for performing sensitivity analyses for ground-water flow models. However, these techniques could be applied to other types of ground-water related models, such as analytical models, multi-phase flow models, non-continuum (karst or fracture flow) models, or mass transport models.

1.6 This guide is one of a series on ground-water modeling codes (software) and their applications, such as Guide D 5447 and Guide D 5490. Other standards have been prepared on environmental modeling, such as Practice E 978.

1.7 The values stated in inch-pound units are to be regarded as the standard. The SI units given in parentheses are for information only.

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

1.9 *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.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*

D 653 Terminology Relating to Soil, Rock, and Contained Fluids[2]

D 5447 Guide for Application of a Ground-Water Flow Model to a Site-Specific Problem[3]

D 5490 Guide for Comparing Ground-Water Flow Model Simulations to Site-Specific Information[3]

E 978 Practice for Evaluating Environmental Fate Models of Chemicals[4]

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions:*

3.1.1 *boundary condition*—a mathematical expression of a

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[2] *Annual Book of ASTM Standards*, Vol 04.08.

[3] *Annual Book of ASTM Standards*, Vol 04.09.

[4] *Annual Book of ASTM Standards*, Vol 11.04.

state of the physical system that constrains the equations of the mathematical model.

3.1.2 *calibration*—the process of refining the model representation of the hydrogeologic framework, hydraulic properties, and boundary conditions to achieve a desired degree of correspondence between the model simulations and observations of the ground-water flow system.

3.1.2.1 *Discussion*—During calibration, a modeler may vary the value of a model input to determine the value which produces the best degree of correspondence between the simulation and the physical hydrogeologic system. This process is sometimes called sensitivity analysis but for the purposes of this guide, sensitivity analysis begins only after calibration is complete.

3.1.3 *calibration targets*—measured, observed, calculated, or estimated hydraulic heads or ground-water flow rates that a model must reproduce, at least approximately, to be considered calibrated.

3.1.4 *ground-water flow model*—an application of a mathematical model to represent a ground-water flow system.

3.1.4.1 *Discussion*—This term refers specifically to modeling of ground-water hydraulics, and not to contaminant transport or other ground-water processes.

3.1.5 *hydraulic properties*—intensive properties of soil and rock that govern the transmission (that is, hydraulic conductivity, transmissivity, and leakance) and storage (that is, specific storage, storativity, and specific yield) of water.

3.1.6 *residual*—the difference between the computed and observed values of a variable at a specific time and location.

3.1.7 *sensitivity*—the variation in the value of one or more output variables (such as hydraulic heads) or quantities calculated from the output variables (such as ground-water flow rates) due to variability or uncertainty in one or more inputs to a ground-water flow model (such as hydraulic properties or boundary conditions).

3.1.8 *sensitivity analysis*—a quantitative evaluation of the impact of variability or uncertainty in model inputs on the degree of calibration of a model and on its results or conclusions.[5]

3.1.8.1 *Discussion*—Anderson and Woessner[5] use "calibration sensitivity analysis" for assessing the effect of uncertainty on the calibrated model and ′′prediction sensitivity analysis" for assessing the effect of uncertainty on the prediction. The definition of sensitivity analysis for the purposes of this guide combines these concepts, because only by simultaneously evaluating the effects on the model's calibration and predictions can any particular level of sensitivity be considered significant or insignificant.

3.1.9 *simulation*—one complete execution of a ground-water modeling computer program, including input and output.

3.2 For definitions of other terms used in this guide, see Terminology D 653.

4. Significance and Use

4.1 After a model has been calibrated and used to draw conclusions about a physical hydrogeologic system (for example, estimating the capture zone of a proposed extraction well), a sensitivity analysis can be performed to identify which model inputs have the most impact on the degree of calibration and on the conclusions of the modeling analysis.

4.2 If variations in some model inputs result in insignificant changes in the degree of calibration but cause significantly different conclusions, then the mere fact of having used a calibrated model does not mean that the conclusions of the modeling study are valid.

4.3 This guide is not meant to be an inflexible description of techniques of performing a sensitivity analysis; other techniques may be applied as appropriate and, after due consideration, some of the techniques herein may be omitted, altered, or enhanced.

5. Sensitivity Analysis

5.1 The first step for performing a sensitivity analysis is to identify which model inputs should be varied. Then, for each input: execute calibration and prediction simulations with the value of the input varied over a specified range; graph calibration residuals and model predictions as functions of the value of the input; and determine the type of sensitivity that the model has with respect to the input.

5.2 *Identification of Inputs to be Varied*:

5.2.1 Identify model inputs that are likely to affect computed hydraulic heads and ground-water flow rates at the times and locations where similar measured quantities exist, and thereby affect calibration residuals. Also, identify model inputs that are likely to affect the computed hydraulic heads upon which the model's conclusions are based in the predictive simulations.

5.2.2 Usually, changing the value of an input at a single node or element of a model will not significantly affect any results. Therefore, it is important to assemble model inputs into meaningful groups for variation. For example, consider an unconfined aquifer that discharges into a river. If the river is represented in a finite-difference model by 14 nodes, then varying the conductance of the river-bottom sediments in only one of the nodes will not significantly affect computed flow into the river or computed hydraulic heads. Unless there are compelling reasons otherwise, the conductance in all river nodes should be varied as a unit.

5.2.3 Coordinated changes in model inputs are changes made to more than one type of input at a time. In ground-water flow models, some coordinated changes in input values (for example, hydraulic conductivity and recharge) can have little effect on calibration but large effects on prediction. If the model was not calibrated to multiple hydrologic conditions, sensitivity analysis of coordinated changes can identify potential non-uniqueness of the calibrated input data sets.

5.3 *Execution of Simulations*:

5.3.1 For each input (or group of inputs) to be varied, decide upon the range over which to vary the values. Some input values should be varied geometrically while others should be varied arithmetically. The type of variation for each input and the range over which it is varied are based on the modeler's judgment, with the goal of finding a Type IV sensitivity (see 5.5.1.4) if it exists.

[5] Anderson, Mary P., and Woessner, William W., *Applied Groundwater Modeling—Simulation of Flow and Advective Transport*, Academic Press, Inc., San Diego, 1992.