



Designation: D7475 – 11

## Standard Test Method for Determining the Aerobic Degradation and Anaerobic Biodegradation of Plastic Materials under Accelerated Bioreactor Landfill Conditions<sup>1</sup>

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D7475; 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 modification of Test Method [D5526](#), which only considered anaerobic degradation, is used to determine the degree and rate of aerobic degradation (as indicated by loss of tensile strength, molecular weight, possibly resulting in disintegration and fragmentation) and anaerobic biodegradation of plastic materials in an accelerated bioreactor landfill test environment. It simulates the change from aerobic to anaerobic environments over time as landfill depth increases. Plastic materials found in landfills include discarded plastic products such as bags and wrappers and also deliberately applied plastic covers as inter-layer sealers between daily refuse fills to prevent windblown scatter of garbage overnight or at other down times. This modification is a two-tiered test method in which the two tiers, which address aerobic degradation and anaerobic biodegradation, are most preferably run sequentially to more closely resemble the real world condition of a biologically active landfill, or a bioreactor landfill, but are functional independently and separately depending on the plastic under evaluation and the information sought: either aerobic degradation or anaerobic biodegradation or both. The tiered system approach is shown schematically in [Fig. 1](#). In Tier 1, the test plastic material is mixed with household waste, then pretreated and stabilized aerobically in the presence of air, in a sealed vessel in a temperature range that is consistent with the average temperature range of those recorded for landfills for a time period of four weeks. The tier is an accelerated simulation of degradation with concomitant oxygen consumption and depletion with time as if oxidative degradation proceeds. In Tier 2 samples of the plastic materials pretreated aerobically as described in Tier 1, are exposed to a methanogenic inoculum derived from anaerobic digesters operating only on pretreated household waste. The anaerobic decomposition and biodegradation occur under dry (more than 30 % total solids) and static non-mixed conditions. If it is desired to

only assess anaerobic biodegradation of a plastic material, Tier 2 is run using preconditioned household waste, as described in Tier 1 but without the added plastic. The mixtures obtained from Tier 1 and Tier 2 in this test method are sampled and used to assess the environmental and health risks of plastic materials that are degraded in a landfill under aerobic and anaerobic conditions.

1.2 This test method generates comparative data for several materials and must not be used to make claims regarding benefits of placing degradable or biodegradable plastics in landfills. Claims must be limited to and dependent on the results obtained from each tier.

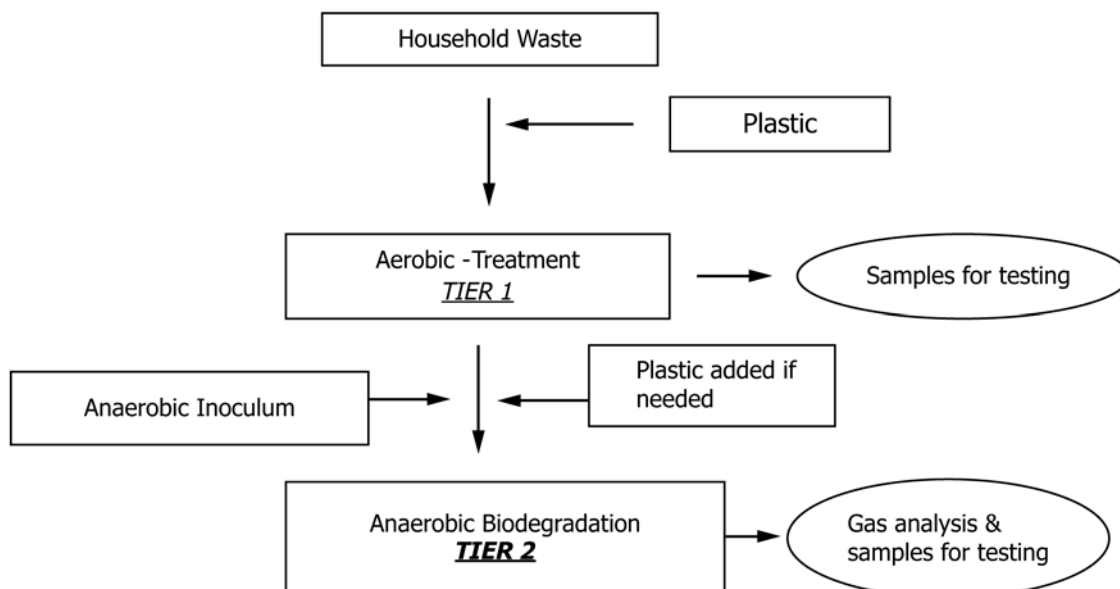
1.2.1 If only Tier 1 is run, then the claims must state: Will modify the performance/physical properties (for example, mechanical properties will degrade), up to a measured percent, X%, in a given time period, Y days using Test Methods [D3593](#) (Molecular weight change) and Test Method [D3826](#) (tensile strength change) in a biologically active “bioreactor” landfill. Report measured percent property changes and standards used to measure the test results which are, for example, changes in tensile strength, mass and molecular weight, as well as residual particle size ranges in [Section 14](#) to support the extent of such claims.

1.2.2 If both Tier 1 and Tier 2 are run, then claims shall state: Will biodegrade in a biologically active “bioreactor” landfill to a degree, X%, in Y days established by the test results based on the extent to which the plastic sample is converted to gaseous carbon in the form of carbon dioxide and methane and this shall be made available according to [Section 14](#) to support the extent of such claims. It should be noted that biodegradation testing is very dependent on conditions chosen in this laboratory test and may well vary widely when the test is run with different inoculum, The results reported pertain only to the test conditions run and do not rule out potential biodegradation under other conditions and real world environments.

1.3 Tier 1 of this test method is designed to estimate the aerobic degradation of plastics, that is disintegration and fragmentation, only, by measuring the loss of physical and chemical properties of said plastics. The test environment is then changed to that of Tier 2, an anaerobic condition, and

<sup>1</sup> This test method is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee [D20](#) on Plastics and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee [D20.96](#) on Environmentally Degradable Plastics and Biobased Products.

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NOTE 1—The original D5526 schematic is represented by eliminating the household waste and plastic portion of that shown above.

FIG. 1 Schematic for testing Tiers 1 and 2 for Aerobic Degradation and Anaerobic Biodegradation

biodegradation is measured by a combination of evolved carbon dioxide and methane gases as a percentage of the conversion of carbon in the plastic sample to carbon in the gaseous form under conditions that resemble landfill conditions. This test method does not simulate all conditions found in landfills, especially those found in biologically inactive landfills. This test method more closely resembles those types of bioreactor landfills in which the gas generated is recovered or even actively promoted, or both, for example, by inoculation (co-deposition of anaerobic sewage sludge and anaerobic leachate recirculation), moisture control in the landfill (leachate recirculation), and temperature control (short-term injection of oxygen and heating of re-circulated leachate) (1-7).<sup>2</sup>

1.4 This test method produces partially degraded mixtures of municipal solid waste and plastics that, where required, are used to assess the ecotoxicological risks associated with the degradation of plastics after various stages of aerobic degradation and anaerobic biodegradation in a landfill.

1.5 The intended use of this method is for a comparison and ranking of aerobic degradation and anaerobic biodegradation of plastics after disposal in a bioreactor landfill. It is not designed or intended to be used to support claims recommending the value of plastic degradation in full-scale landfills. This simulation of an active landfill allows measurement of the percentage of aerobic degradation and anaerobic biodegradation (biogas evolution) in specified time periods, only.

1.6 Though the test method is in two tiers, they are meant to simulate a real world cycle of degradation in a landfill and are most preferably run consecutively and not independently or separately.

1.7 It is cautioned that the results of any laboratory landfill simulation cannot be directly extrapolated to actual disposal environments: confirmation to real world exposure is ultimately required as with all ASTM Standards. This confirmation is essential for landfill as the types of landfills vary widely, some are even heavily lined, tombs, and these will limit degradation severely.

1.8 The values stated in SI units are to be regarded as standard. No other units of measurement are included in this standard.

1.9 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.

NOTE 1—There is no known ISO equivalent to this standard.

## 2. Referenced Documents

### 2.1 ASTM Standards:<sup>3</sup>

- D618 Practice for Conditioning Plastics for Testing
- D883 Terminology Relating to Plastics
- D1293 Test Methods for pH of Water
- D1888 Methods Of Test for Particulate and Dissolved Matter in Water (Withdrawn 1989)<sup>4</sup>
- D2908 Practice for Measuring Volatile Organic Matter in Water by Aqueous-Injection Gas Chromatography
- D3590 Test Methods for Total Kjeldahl Nitrogen in Water

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> The last approved version of this historical standard is referenced on www.astm.org.

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

**D3593** Test Method for Molecular Weight Averages/ Distribution of Certain Polymers by Liquid Size-Exclusion Chromatography (Gel Permeation Chromatography GPC) Using Universal Calibration (Withdrawn 1993)<sup>4</sup>

**D3826** Practice for Determining Degradation End Point in Degradable Polyethylene and Polypropylene Using a Tensile Test

**D4129** Test Method for Total and Organic Carbon in Water by High Temperature Oxidation and by Coulometric Detection

**D5526** Test Method for Determining Anaerobic Biodegradation of Plastic Materials Under Accelerated Landfill Conditions

**D5951** Practice for Preparing Residual Solids Obtained After Biodegradability Standard Methods for Plastics in Solid Waste for Toxicity and Compost Quality Testing (Withdrawn 2011)<sup>4</sup>

**D6954** Guide for Exposing and Testing Plastics that Degrade in the Environment by a Combination of Oxidation and Biodegradation

**E260** Practice for Packed Column Gas Chromatography

**E355** Practice for Gas Chromatography Terms and Relationships

2.2 *APHA-AWWA-WPCF Standards*:<sup>5</sup>

**2540D** Total Suspended Solids Dried at 103°–105°C

**2540E** Fixed and Volatile Solids Ignited at 550°C

**212** Nitrogen Ammonia

### 3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions*—For definitions of terms used in this test method see Terminology **D883**.

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard*:

3.2.1 *methanogenic inoculum*—anaerobically digested organic waste containing a high concentration of anaerobic methane-producing microorganisms.

3.2.2 *aerobic degradation of a plastic*—degradation of properties promoted by oxidation and is synonymous with defined oxidative degradation of plastics.

### 4. Summary of Test Method

4.1 *Combination Aerobic Degradation and Anaerobic Biodegradation*—This two-tiered test method described herein consists of the following: Tier 1 (aerobic degradation): (1) selecting and analyzing material for testing; (2) exposing the test plastic material for degradation in a sealed aerobic environment together with municipal solid waste during pretreatment and stabilizing (3) measuring oxidative degradations occurring in the plastic material by property changes over time. Tier 2 (anaerobic biodegradation): (1) either utilizing the degraded stabilized pretreated mixture of municipal solid waste and the plastic aerobically degraded (products from Tier 1) or combining a previously pretreated and stabilized solid municipal waste (in the absence of test plastic material) and new added plastic material with a concentrated anaerobic inoculum

from an anaerobic digester; (2) exposing the mix to an anaerobic static batch fermentation at more than 30 % solids; (3) measuring total carbon in the gas (CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>) evolved as a function of time; (4) removing the specimens for cleaning (optional), conditioning, testing, and reporting; (5) assessing the degree of degradability and/or biodegradability under less than optimum conditions.

4.2 The rate of aerobic degradation in Tier 1 is obtained by determining chemical and physical property changes, such as tensile strength, friability, molecular weight, or other selected characteristic with time, relative to the initial material.

4.3 The rate of environment conversion from aerobic to anaerobic is followed by the head space gas sampling and analysis of the reactor over time. Any increase in carbon dioxide or methane production indicates some biodegradation is occurring.

NOTE 2—Test Methods **D3593** and **D3826** are key standards that must be used for molecular weight and tensile strength measurements, though additional measurements are acceptable where considered appropriate. In all cases results must be recorded.

4.4 The percent and rate of conversion of carbon from the test material introduced in Tier 2 to carbon in the gaseous phase (methane and carbon dioxide) indicates the degree of anaerobic biodegradation.

4.5 If anaerobic biodegradation is the major focus and degradation under aerobic conditions is not of interest, the plastic material for evaluation is introduced only into Tier 2 using the pretreated solid municipal waste as in Tier 1.

4.6 It is recognized that the two Tiers are laboratory contrivances to allow the degradation stages, aerobic and anaerobic, to be studied independently where normally in the real world these are concurrent and or consecutive processes.

### 5. Significance and Use

5.1 Decomposition of a plastic within a landfill involves processes in aerobic and anaerobic environmental conditions that can affect the decomposition of other materials enclosed by or in close proximity to the plastic. The rate of change from aerobic to anaerobic conditions is probably a characteristic of the particular landfill site, its garbage and the filling technique and is therefore difficult to assess with any degree of accuracy. Different sources indicate days to months (Refs (8) and (9)) for this change with the spread dependent on the perspective of what is aerobic or anaerobic and how fast the environment changes, 30 days is chosen in this method as a compromise time period. (Note, even very low levels of oxygen, far below normal atmospheric concentration can promote oxidative degradation). Obviously, there will be pockets of protected (in bags, cans, etc.) aerobic activity enclosed in any landfill. There is currently no evidence or data to support claims that rapid degradation of the plastic (when compared to conventional non-degradable plastic) can increase the economic feasibility of landfill-gas recovery, minimize the duration of after-care of the landfill, and make possible the recovery of the volume reduction of the waste due to degradation and biodegradation during the active life of the landfill. Additionally, it is possible that the rapid degradation and biodegradation of plastics can

<sup>5</sup> Standard Methods for the Examination of Water and Wastewater, 17th ed., 1989, available from American Public Health Association, 1740 Broadway, New York, NY 10018.

create hazardous conditions in landfills, such as the shifting of cells and overall stability. This standard method has been developed to permit determination of the aerobic degradation and anaerobic biodegradation of plastic products when placed in biologically active environments simulating some landfill conditions.

5.2 The decomposition of plastic materials in a landfill is of importance, as most landfills are biologically active and are an increasingly significant source of renewable energy. As degradation occurs in a landfill, it is of immediate concern that the plastic materials do not produce toxic metabolites or end products under the various conditions that occur in a landfill. The mixtures remaining after completion of the test method, containing fully or partially degraded plastic materials or extracts can be, when appropriate, submitted subsequently to ecotoxicity testing, see Practice D5951 and Guide D6954 for details, in order to assess the environmental hazards posed by the breakdown of plastics to varying degrees in landfills, especially if leaching occurs. This test method has been designed to assess aerobic degradation and anaerobic biodegradation under optimum and less-than-optimum conditions and toxicity.

5.3 *Limitations*—Because a wide variation exists in the construction and operation of landfills, and because regulatory requirements for landfills vary greatly, this procedure is not intended to simulate the environments of all landfills. However, it is expected to closely resemble the environment of a biologically active landfill. More specifically, the procedure is intended to create a standard laboratory environment that permits rapid and reproducible determination of the aerobic degradability and anaerobic biodegradability under accelerated landfill conditions, while at the same time producing reproducible mixtures of fully and partially decomposed household waste with plastic materials for ecotoxicological assessment.

## 6. Apparatus

6.1 *Pressure-Resistant Glass Vessels*—Twenty-seven, each with a volume of 4 to 6 L, which can be closed airtight and capable of withstanding an overpressure of two atmospheres. The lids of the reactors are equipped with an overpressure valve (to prevent the overpressure from becoming higher than two bars), a manometer that provides a rough indication of the overpressure, a septum that allows one to take gas samples and measure the exact overpressure, and, finally, a valve to release the overpressure (see Fig. 2).

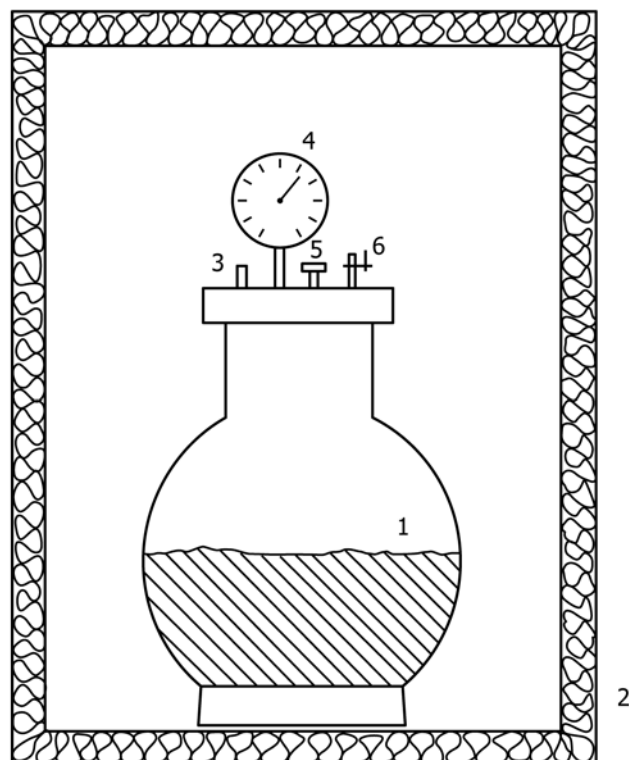
6.2 *Incubators*, sufficient to store the vessels in the dark at  $35 \pm 2^\circ\text{C}$  for the duration of the anaerobic testing in Tier 2.

6.3 *Pressure Transducer*, connected to a syringe needle to measure the headspace pressure in the test vessel.

6.4 *Gas Chromatograph*, or other apparatus, equipped with a suitable detector and column(s) for measuring methane and carbon dioxide concentrations in the evolved gases.

6.5 *pH Meter*, precision balance ( $\pm 0.1$  g), analytical balance ( $\pm 0.1$  mg), thermometer, and barometer.

6.6 *Suitable Devices*, for determining volatile fatty acids by aqueous-injection chromatography, total Kjeldahl nitrogen,



- 1 = Digester.
- 2 = Incubation chamber.
- 3 = Overpressure valve.
- 4 = Manometer.
- 5 = Septum.
- 6 = Valve.

FIG. 2 Setup of Accelerated Landfill

ammonia nitrogen, dry solids ( $105^\circ\text{C}$ ), moisture content and volatile solids ( $550^\circ\text{C}$ ) concentrations.

## 7. Reagents and Materials

7.1 *Household Waste*: Derived from mixed municipal solid waste or the organic fraction thereof, after homogenizing, screening over a screen with holes of a diameter of 40 to 80 mm.

7.2 *Pretreated Household Waste*: Household waste aerobically stabilized over a period of  $4 \pm 2$  weeks in an air flow and maintaining a dry-matter content of  $50 \pm 5\%$  and a temperature of  $35 \pm 2^\circ\text{C}$ . (Optional: the pretreated household waste can be replaced by a similarly pretreated simulated solid waste.)

7.3 *Anaerobic Inoculum*, derived from a properly operating anaerobic digester with pretreated household waste as a sole substrate or a digester that treats predominantly household waste.

7.4 *Cellulose*, analytical-grade, or other suitable standards such as Kraft paper, thin-layer chromatography paper, etc. as a positive control<sup>6</sup> in the anaerobic Tier 2 testing.

<sup>6</sup> Avicel, available from EM Chemicals, Inc., Hawthorne, NY, was used for development of this test method.