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Standard Guide for Operation of a Gauging Station¹

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1. Scope

1.1 The guide covers procedures used commonly for the systematic collection of streamflow information. Continuous streamflow information is necessary for understanding the amount and variability of water for many uses, including water supply, waste dilution, irrigation, hydropower, and reservoir design.

1.2 The procedures described in this guide are used widely by those responsible for the collection of streamflow data, for example, the U.S. Geological Survey, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Water Survey Canada, and many state and provincial agencies. The procedures are generally from internal documents of the preceding agencies, which have become the defacto standards used in North America.

1.3 It is the responsibility of the user of the guide to determine the acceptability of a specific device or procedure to meet operational requirements. Compatibility between sensors, recorders, retrieval equipment, and operational systems is necessary, and data requirements and environmental operating conditions must be considered in equipment selection.

1.4 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.

1.5 *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.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 ASTM Standards:²

D1129 Terminology Relating to Water

¹ This guide is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee D19 on Water and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee D19.07 on Sediments, Geomorphology, and Open-Channel Flow.

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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.

- D1941 Test Method for Open Channel Flow Measurement of Water with the Parshall Flume
- D3858 Test Method for Open-Channel Flow Measurement of Water by Velocity-Area Method
- D5129 Test Method for Open Channel Flow Measurement of Water Indirectly by Using Width Contractions
- D5130 Test Method for Open-Channel Flow Measurement of Water Indirectly by Slope-Area Method
- D5242 Test Method for Open-Channel Flow Measurement of Water with Thin-Plate Weirs
- D5243 Test Method for Open-Channel Flow Measurement of Water Indirectly at Culverts
- D5388 Test Method for Indirect Measurements of Discharge by Step-Backwater Method
- D5389 Test Method for Open-Channel Flow Measurement by Acoustic Velocity Meter Systems
- D5390 Test Method for Open-Channel Flow Measurement of Water with Palmer-Bowlus Flumes
- D5413 Test Methods for Measurement of Water Levels in Open-Water Bodies
- D5541 Practice for Developing a Stage-Discharge Relation for Open Channel Flow

2.2 ISO Standards:³

- ISO 1100 Liquid Flow Measurement in Open Channels—Part I: Establishment and Operation of a Gauging Station
- ISO 6416 Measurement of Discharge by Ultrasonic (Acoustic) Method

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions*—For definitions of terms used in this guide, refer to Terminology **D1129**.

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *control*—the physical properties of a channel, which determine the relationship between the stage and discharge of a location in the channel.

3.2.2 *datum*—a level plane that represents zero elevation.

3.2.3 *discharge*—the volume of water flowing through a cross-section in a unit of time, including sediment or other

³ *Measurement of Liquid Flow in Open Channels*, ISO Standards Handbook 16, 1983. Available from American National Standards Institute (ANSI), 25 W. 43rd St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10036.

solids that may be dissolved in or mixed with the water; usually cubic feet per second (ft³/s) or metres per second (m/s).

3.2.4 *elevation*—the vertical distance from a datum to a point; also termed stage or gage height.

3.2.5 *gage*—a generic term that includes water level measuring devices.

3.2.6 *gage datum*—a datum whose surface is at the zero elevation of all of the gages at a gaging station. This datum is often at a known elevation referenced to the national geodetic vertical datum (NGVD) of 1929.

3.2.7 *gage height*—the height of a water surface above an established or arbitrary datum at a particular gaging station; also termed stage.

3.2.8 *gaging station*—a particular site on a stream, canal, lake, or reservoir at which systematic observations of hydrologic data are obtained.

3.2.9 *national geodetic vertical datum (NGVD) of 1929*—prior to 1973 known as mean sea level datum, a spheroidal datum in the conterminous United States and Canada that approximates mean sea level but does not necessarily agree with sea level at a specific location.

3.2.10 *stilling well*—a well connected to the stream with intake pipes in such a manner that it permits the measurement of stage in relatively still water.

4. Summary of Guide

4.1 A gaging station is usually installed where a continuous record of stage or discharge is required. A unique relationship exists between water surface elevation and discharge (flow rate) in most freely flowing streams. Water-level recording instruments continuously record the water surface elevation, usually termed stage or gage height. Discharge measurements are taken of the stream discharge to develop a stage-discharge curve. The discharge data are computed from recorded stage data by a stage-discharge rating curve.

5. Significance and Use

5.1 This guide is useful when a systematic record of water surface elevation or discharge is required at a specific location. Some gaging stations may be operated for only a few months; however, many have been operated for a century.

5.2 Gaging station records are used for many purposes:

5.2.1 Resource appraisal of long-term records to determine the maximum, minimum, and variability of flows of a particular stream. These data can be used for the planning and design of a variety of surface water-related projects such as water supply, flood control, hydroelectric developments, irrigation, recreation, and waste assimilation.

5.2.2 Management, where flow data are required for the operation of a surface-water structure or other management decision.

6. Site Location

6.1 The general location of the station will be dependent on the purpose for which the station is established. Location constraints for a resource appraisal-type station may be quite

broad, for example, between major tributaries. Constraints for a management-type station may require a location just below a dam, contaminant discharge point, or other point at which discharge information is required specifically.

6.2 *Site Requirements*—Certain hydraulic characteristics of the stream channel are desirable for collecting high-accuracy data of minimal cost. Hydraulically difficult sites can still be gaged; however, accuracy and cost are affected adversely. Desirable conditions include the following:

6.2.1 The general course of the river should be straight for approximately 300 ft (100 m) above and below the gage.

6.2.2 The flow is confined to one channel at all stages.

6.2.3 The stream bed is stable, not subject to frequent scour and fill, and is free of aquatic growth.

6.2.4 The banks are sufficiently high to contain flow at all stages.

6.2.5 A natural feature such as ledge rock outcrop or stable gravel riffle, known as a “control,” is present in the stream. It is necessary and practical in some cases to install a low-head dam or artificial control to provide this feature. Additional information on man-made structures is given in Test Methods **D1941**, **D5242**, and **D5390**.

6.2.6 A pool is present behind the control where water-level instruments or stilling well intakes can be installed at a location below the lowest stream stage. The velocity of water passing sensors in a deep pool also eliminates or minimizes draw-down effects on stage sensors during high flow conditions.

6.2.7 The site is not affected by the hydraulic effects of a bridge, tributary stream entering the gaged channel, downstream impoundment, or tidal conditions.

6.2.8 A suitable site for making discharge measurements at all stages is available near the gage site.

6.2.9 There is accessibility for construction and operation of the gage.

6.3 *Site Selection*—An ideal site is rarely available, and judgement must be exercised when choosing between possible sites to determine that meeting the best combination of features.

6.3.1 *Office Reconnaissance*—The search for a gaging station begins with defining the limits along the stream at which the gage must be located on topographic maps of the area. The topographic information will indicate approximate bank heights or overflow areas, general channel width, constrictions, slope, roads, land use, locations of buildings, and other useful information so that promising locations can be checked out in the field.

6.3.2 *Field Reconnaissance*—If the range of possible gage locations is large, flying over the stream at a low altitude in a small aircraft is an efficient way of checking for promising sites. The view from the air on a clear day is much more helpful than peering off of a few highway bridges. Traversing the channel in a canoe or small boat is an alternative method. Field reconnaissance is best performed during low flow conditions; however, additional reconnaissance at high flow conditions and under ice-covered conditions for northern streams adds data that result in improved site selection.

6.3.3 *Logistical Reconnaissance*—Once a site has been selected that meets hydraulic considerations, and before design or construction begins, the following should occur:

6.3.3.1 Property ownership must be ascertained and legal permission secured to install and maintain the gage. This may include multiple landowners, especially if a cableway is required from which to make discharge measurements.

6.3.3.2 Necessary permits must be obtained from applicable governing agencies for, but not limited to, building and excavation, stream bank permits, and FAA notification for cableways or other local requirements.

6.3.3.3 Where electrical or phone service is required for operation, the availability of this service should be verified.

6.3.3.4 Most gaging stations are intended to record over the range of stream stages. It is therefore important to obtain any local information available on historical flood levels and to make estimates of stage for a 100-year event using locally used flood-frequency equations. A cross-section survey of the channel should be obtained during field reconnaissance to aid in estimating high flow stage.

6.4 More detailed information is available in Refs (1-3)⁴ and ISO-1100.

7. Types of Gaging Stations

7.1 Non-recording stations can be as simple as a permanent staff gage attached to a bridge, pier, or other structure, which is

⁴ The boldface numbers in parentheses refer to the list of references at the end of this standard.

read and recorded manually in an appropriate notebook once or more each day. For details on non-recording gages, see Test Methods D5413, ISO 1100, and Refs (1-4).

7.2 Recording gages are usually nonattended installations that require a sensor in direct contact with the water that is connected mechanically or electrically to a recording device.

7.2.1 Stilling well-type gages use a vertical well installed in the stream bank with small-diameter intake pipes connecting the river to the well. In this type of installation, a float on the water surface in the well drives a recorder housed in a shelter over the well by mechanical means (Fig. 1). Stilling well gages tend to provide more reliable data because water-level sensing as well as recording components of the system are protected from direct installation in the stream. Disadvantages are locations with unstable stream channels that may move away from the intakes and higher initial cost. For details on stilling well gages, see Test Methods D5413, ISO 1100, and Refs (1-3, 5).

7.2.2 Bubbler-type gages consist of a gas supply, usually nitrogen, which is fed through a controller and tube to an orifice attached near the bed of a stream. The gas pressure is equal to the liquid head in the stream. A pressure transducer, mercury, or balance-beam manometer senses this pressure and passes this information either mechanically or electronically to a compatible recorder (Fig. 2). The advantage to this system is less expensive construction costs, which is especially desirable for short-term gages or in locations in which stilling well installations are difficult. Disadvantages are maintaining the orifice in a stable mounting on the river bed. Keeping the

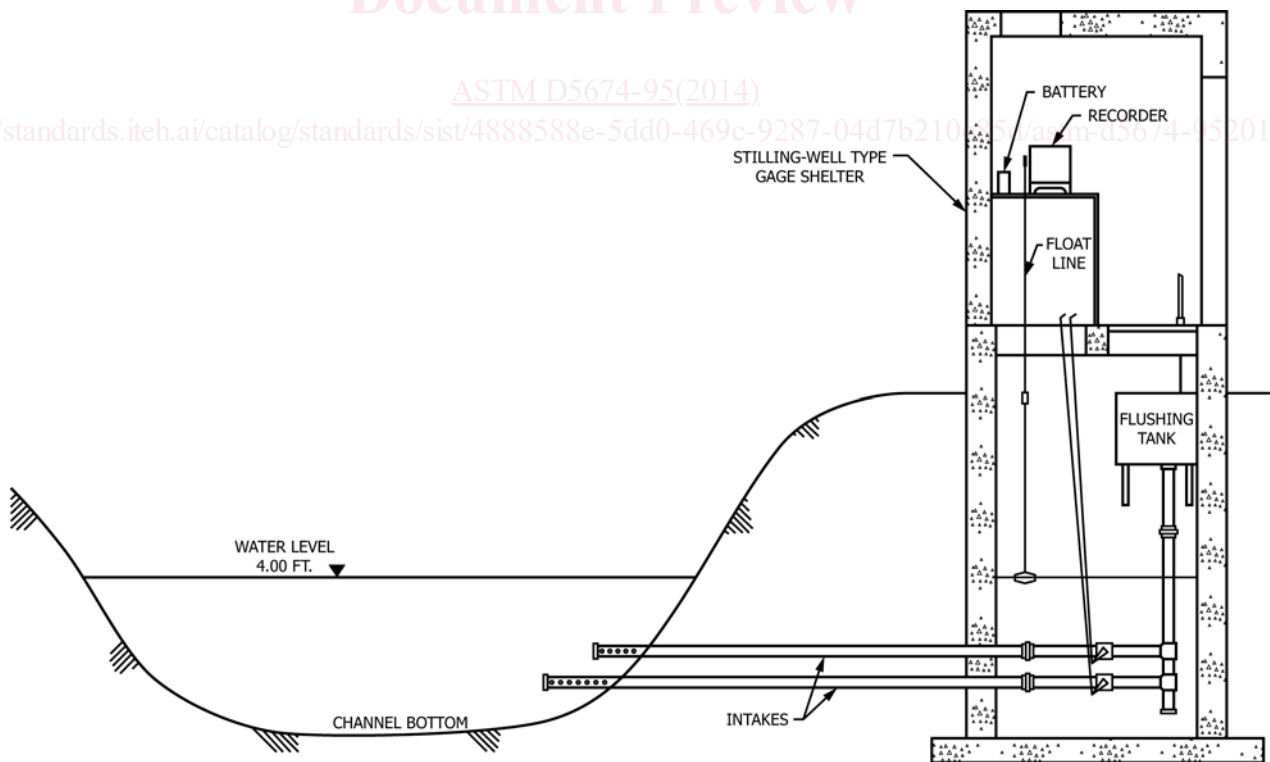


FIG. 1 Stilling Well Gage

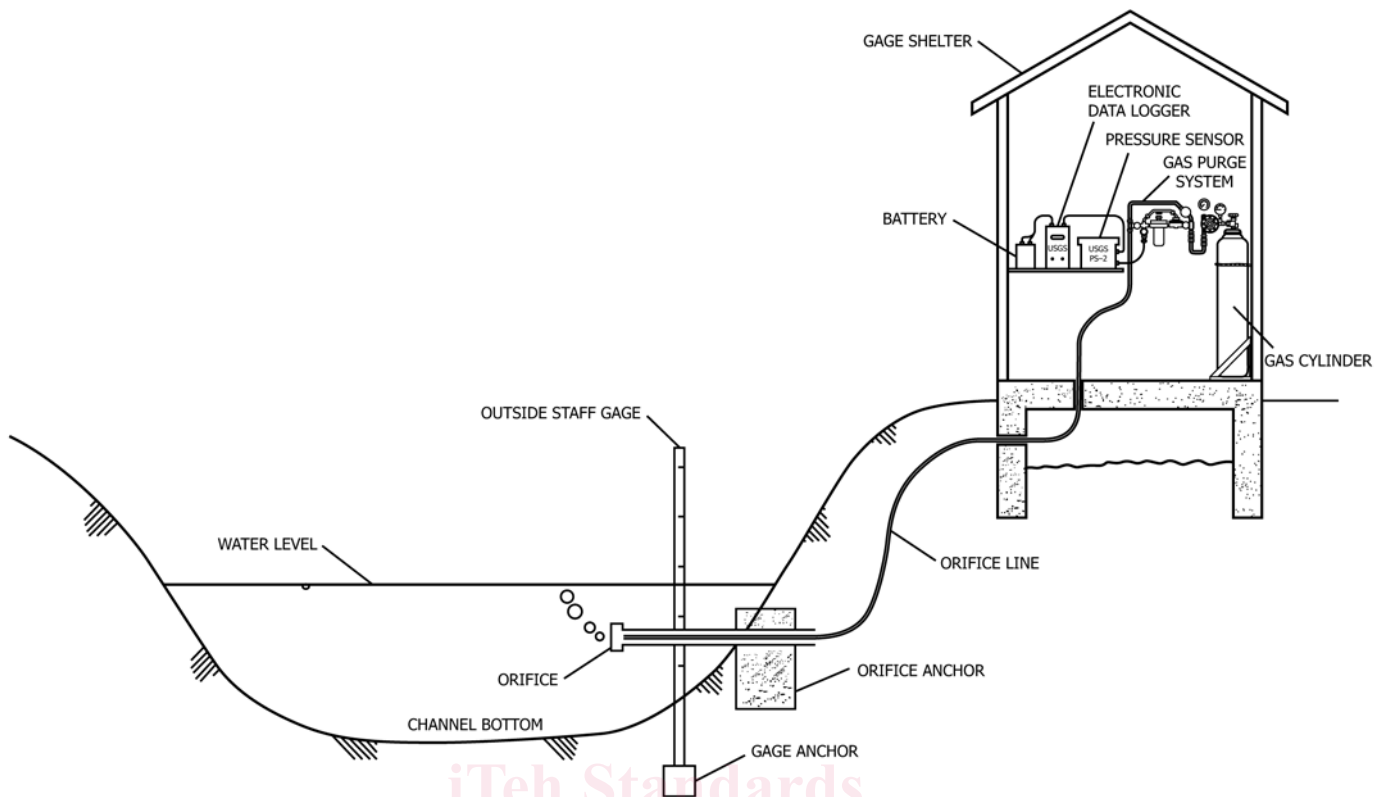


FIG. 2 Bubble Gage

orifice from being buried in silty streams is also a problem. For details on bubble-gages, see Test Methods D5413, ISO 1100, and Refs (1-3, 5, 6).

7.2.3 Acoustic Velocity Meter (AVM) stations directly sense and record the velocity observed between two transducers at fixed elevations in the channel cross section. The AVM gages are used in locations in which stage-discharge relations are unreliable, usually in deep, slow-moving channels or where tidal or bidirectional flow occurs. Additional information is given in Test Method D5389.

8. Gaging Station Structures

8.1 *Stilling Well Functional Requirements*—A stilling well must provide a water surface at the same elevation as that of the stream at any point in time, dampen out the effect of surface waves, and provide a sensor, usually a float and recording system.

8.1.1 The stilling well must be sufficiently long to cover the entire range of stages that might occur reasonably.

8.1.2 The stilling well can be any shape in plan view; however, most are either round or square. Permanent long-term gages should have a large enough area to allow personnel to work inside them for servicing; the most common size is approximately 4 by 4 ft (1.2 by 1.2 m). Some semipermanent stilling wells may be as small as 1 ft (0.3 m).

8.1.3 Stilling wells may be fabricated from poured concrete, concrete blocks, galvanized steel, concrete culvert pipe, or other suitable material. The well must have a sealed bottom to preclude the interchange of water from the stream and groundwater.

8.1.4 Stilling wells are usually installed in a stream bank for protection and to minimize freezing in northern climates. They may be attached to bridge piers or wing walls in some applications but must be protected from damage by floating debris and must not interfere with flow patterns in the channel.

8.1.5 Intake pipes are required to connect the stilling well to the stream when the well is buried in the stream bank. Holes in the well usually suffice when installed on a bridge pier or wing wall.

8.1.5.1 Intake pipes must be sized to allow the water surface in the well to be at the same level as that in the stream, but they limit the effect of wind- or boat-generated waves or other transitory or artificial fluctuations of stream water levels. Intake pipes are typically 2 to 4 in. (50 to 100 mm) in diameter. Long or small-diameter intakes may cause a lag in response in the stilling well. The following relation can be used to predict the intake pipe lag for a given rate of change of stage (1).

$$\Delta h = \frac{0.01}{g} \frac{L}{D} \left(\frac{A_w}{A_p} \right)^2 \left(\frac{dh}{dt} \right)^2$$