



Designation: D6747 – 15

# Standard Guide for Selection of Techniques for Electrical Leak Location of Leaks in Geomembranes<sup>1</sup>

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D6747; 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 is intended to assist individuals or groups in assessing different options available for locating leaks in installed geomembranes using electrical methods. For clarity, this guide uses the term “leak” to mean holes, punctures, tears, knife cuts, seam defects, cracks, and similar breaches in an installed geomembrane (as defined in 3.2.3).

1.2 This guide does not cover systems that are restricted to seam testing only, nor does it cover systems that may detect leaks non-electrically. It does not cover systems that only detect the presence, but not the location of leaks.

1.3 (**Warning**—The electrical methods used for geomembrane leak location could use high voltages, resulting in the potential for electrical shock or electrocution. This hazard might be increased because operations might be conducted in or near water. In particular, a high voltage could exist between the water or earth material and earth ground, or any grounded conductor. These procedures are potentially very dangerous, and can result in personal injury or death. The electrical methods used for geomembrane leak location should be attempted only by qualified and experienced personnel. Appropriate safety measures must be taken to protect the leak location operators as well as other people at the site.)

1.4 The values stated in SI units are to be regarded as standard. No other units of measurement are included in this 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 requirements prior to use.*

<sup>1</sup> This guide is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee D35 on Geosynthetics and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee D35.10 on Geomembranes.

Current edition approved Jan. 1, 2015. Published January 2015. Originally approved in 2002. Last previous edition approved in 2012 as D6747–12. DOI: 10.1520/D6747-15.

## 2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards*:<sup>2</sup>

- D4439 Terminology for Geosynthetics
- D7002 Practice for Electrical Leak Location on Exposed Geomembranes Using the Water Puddle Method
- D7007 Practices for Electrical Methods for Locating Leaks in Geomembranes Covered with Water or Earthen Materials
- D7240 Practice for Leak Location using Geomembranes with an Insulating Layer in Intimate Contact with a Conductive Layer via Electrical Capacitance Technique (Conductive Geomembrane Spark Test)
- D7703 Practice for Electrical Leak Location on Exposed Geomembranes Using the Water Lance Method
- D7953 Practice for Electrical Leak Location on Exposed Geomembranes Using the Arc Testing Method

## 3. Terminology

3.1 For general definitions used in this guide, refer to Terminology D4439.

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *conductive-backed geomembrane, n*—a specialty geomembrane manufactured using the coextrusion process with an insulating layer in intimate contact with a conductive layer.

3.2.2 *electrical leak location, n*—a method which uses electrical current or electrical potential to locate leaks in a geomembrane.

3.2.3 *leak, n*—for the purposes of this guide, a leak is any unintended opening, perforation, breach, slit, tear, puncture, crack, or seam breach. Significant amounts of liquids or solids may or may not flow through a leak. Scratches, gouges, dents, or other aberrations that do not completely penetrate the geomembrane are not considered to be leaks. Types of leaks

<sup>2</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.

detected during surveys include, but are not limited to: burns, circular holes, linear cuts, seam defects, tears, punctures, and material defects.

3.2.4 *leak detection sensitivity, n*—the smallest leak that the leak location equipment and survey methodology are capable of detecting under a given set of conditions. The leak detection sensitivity specification is usually stated as a diameter of the smallest leak that can be likely detected.

3.2.5 *poor contact condition, n*—for the purposes of this guide, a poor contact condition means that a leak is not in intimate contact with the sufficiently conductive layer above or underneath the geomembrane to be tested. This occurs on a wrinkle or wave, under the overlap flap of a fusion weld, in an area of liner bridging and in an area where there is a subgrade depression or rut.

#### 4. Significance and Use

4.1 Geomembranes are used as barriers to prevent liquids from leaking from landfills, ponds, and other containments. For this purpose, it is desirable that the geomembrane have as little leakage as practical.

4.2 The liquids may contain contaminants that, if released, can cause damage to the environment. Leaking liquids can erode the subgrade, causing further damage. Leakage can result in product loss or otherwise prevent the installation from performing its intended containment purpose.

4.3 Geomembranes are often assembled in the field, either by unrolling and welding panels of the geomembrane material together in the field, unfolding flexible geomembranes in the field, or a combination of both.

4.4 Geomembrane leaks can be caused by poor quality of the subgrade, poor quality of the material placed on the geomembrane, accidents, poor workmanship, manufacturing defects and carelessness.

4.5 Experience demonstrates that geomembranes can have leaks caused during their installation and placement of material(s) on the geomembrane.

4.6 Electrical leak location methods are an effective and proven quality assurance measure to locate leaks. Such methods have been used successfully to locate leaks in electrically-insulating geomembranes such as polyethylene, polypropylene, polyvinyl chloride, chlorosulfonated polyethylene and bituminous geomembranes installed in basins, ponds, tanks, ore and waste pads, and landfill cells.

4.7 The principle behind these techniques is to place a voltage across an electrically insulating geomembrane and then locate areas where electrical current flows through leaks in the geomembrane (as shown schematically in Fig. 1). Other electrical leak paths such as pipe penetrations, flange bolts, steel drains, and batten strips on concrete and other extraneous electrical paths should be electrically isolated or insulated to prevent masking of leak signals caused by electrical short-circuiting through those preferential electrical paths. The only electrical paths should be through leaks in the geomembrane. These electrical detection methods for locating leaks in geomembranes can be performed on exposed geomembranes, on geomembranes covered with water, or on geomembranes covered with an earthen material layer.

#### 5. Developed Methods

5.1 Electrical leak detection methods were developed in the early 1980's and commercial surveys have been available since 1985.

5.2 The principal conditions for the successful application of the methods are as follows:

5.2.1 There must be sufficiently conductive material above the geomembrane or the geomembrane should be clean and dry (extent depends on method),

5.2.2 There must be sufficiently conductive material underneath the geomembrane,

5.2.3 There must be good contact of the material above and below the geomembrane through the leak, and

5.2.4 The sufficiently conductive material above and below the geomembrane are to be in contact only through the leak locations.

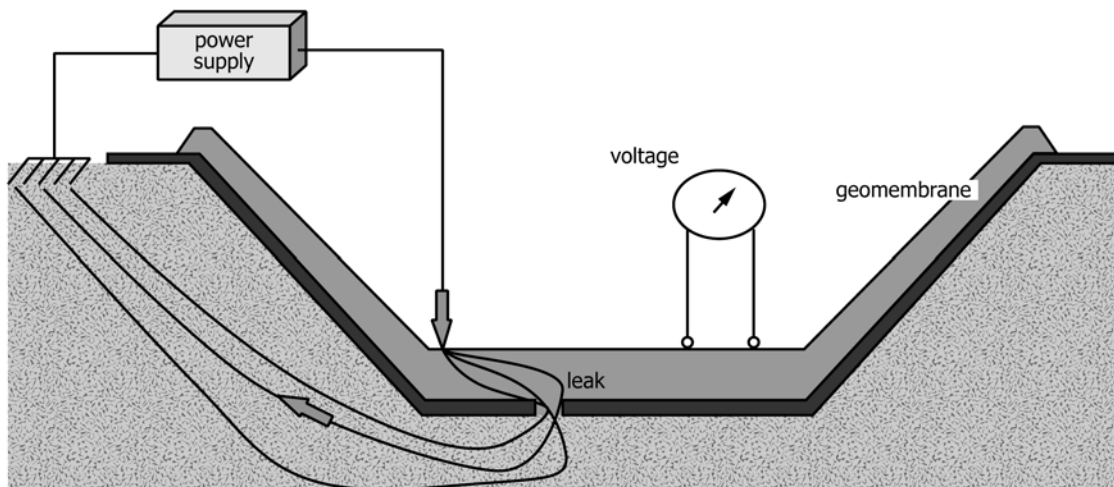


FIG. 1 Schematic of the Electrical Leak Location Method (Earthen Material-Covered Geomembrane System is Shown)

5.3 The methods can be organized into two categories depending on whether the geomembrane is bare or covered with a sufficiently conductive material. A short description of each of the methods that can be applied to these geomembrane conditions is presented in Sections 6 and 7.

5.4 Choosing which method is appropriate for a particular application will depend foremost on whether the geomembrane is bare or covered with water or earth. If the geomembrane is bare, multiple methods are effective. Each method has different features and limitations and typical leak detection sensitivities, as described in Section 6. If the geomembrane is covered, the method selection will depend on whether the material is covered with water or earth, and whether the method is to be performed as part of construction or as part of a permanent leak monitoring system, as described in Section 7.

5.5 For geomembranes that are to be covered with earthen materials, for enhanced leak detection, a bare geomembrane leak survey method should be performed before cover material is placed. The survey on the bare geomembrane will detect the smaller leaks caused during the geomembrane installation. Then after the earth material is placed, the dipole method (Practices D7007) can be used to locate any damage incurred during material placement. If only the dipole method is used, the smallest leaks caused during liner installation will likely not be detected due to the variable and generally lower sensitivity of the dipole method.

5.6 Conductive-backed geomembrane is manufactured using a coextrusion process with an insulating layer in intimate contact with a sufficiently conductive layer and can be used to overcome the subgrade conductivity and hole contact limitations of the water puddle, water lance, arc testing, and soil-covered dipole leak location methods. If it is used, the geomembrane should be installed with the manufacturer's recommended specific installation procedures and equipment to enable electrical leak location methods. If the manufacturer's specific recommendations are not followed, in most cases false positive signals will be measured along the seams. In some cases, some of the methods may not work at all. For example, the false positive signals along the seams can draw too much current away from the survey area for the dipole method to be effective, and if the water puddle method is used, false signals from the seams can mask the signal of a hole near the seam.

## 6. Exposed Geomembrane Methods

### 6.1 Comparison of Methodologies:

6.1.1 Currently available methods include the water puddle method (Practice D7002), the water lance method (Practice D7703), the spark testing method (Practice D7240), and the arc testing method (Practice D7953).

6.1.2 All of the methods listed in 6.1.1 are effective at locating leaks in exposed geomembranes. Each method has specific site and labor requirements, survey speeds, advantages, limitations, and cost factors. A professional specializing in the electrical leak location methods can provide advice on the advantages and disadvantages of each method for a specific project. Alternatives to a project's specified method

should be accepted when warranted by site conditions, logistics, schedule, or economic reasons.

6.2 A summary of the comparisons of the exposed geomembrane electrical leak location methods is presented in Table 1.

6.3 *The Water Puddle Method*—This technique is appropriate to survey a dry uncovered geomembrane placed directly on a sufficiently conductive layer below the electrically insulating geomembrane. Practice D7002 is a standard practice describing the water puddle method. The lower sufficiently conductive material is usually the subgrade soil and the upper sufficiently conductive layer is the water in an applied puddle. One electrode of a low voltage power supply is placed in contact with the lower sufficiently conductive material and another electrode is placed in a water puddle maintained by a squeegee or roller bar (as shown schematically in Fig. 2). Water is usually supplied from a tank or other pressurized water source. For this technique to be effective in locating leaks, the water in the puddle or stream must come into contact through the leak with the electrical conducting material below the geomembrane. This completes an electrical circuit and electrical current will flow. Detector electronics are used to monitor the electrical current. The detector electronics convert a change in the current into a change in an audio tone. This method can typically locate leaks as small as 1 mm in diameter and smaller.

6.3.1 *Features*—The main advantage of this method is the detection of leaks in geomembrane seams and sheets while the geomembrane installation work progresses during construction. The method does not require covering the geomembrane with water other than the small puddle of water. Procedures can be used to differentiate smaller leaks from larger leaks in their vicinity. The electrical survey rate of approximately 1000 m<sup>2</sup>/h per operator does not affect the installation work schedule and permits a rapid construction quality control of the geomembrane installers' finished work. The approximate setup time varies from 1 to 3 h. The method requires a minimal amount of training to be proficient.

6.3.2 *Limitations*—Unless a geomembrane manufactured with a conductive layer in intimate contact with the insulating geomembrane is being tested, leaks may not be detected in poor contact situations such as at the peak of a wrinkle and in any area where the subgrade is not in intimate contact with the geomembrane, unless measures are taken to make the contact. This technique cannot be used during rainy weather or when the membrane is installed on an electrically non-conductive material, typically a desiccated subgrade, and in the near vicinity of conductive structures that cannot be fully insulated or isolated. The detection of leaks in seams of repair patches is difficult and time consuming since it requires a potential lengthy water infiltration time. A constant water source is required for the application of the water puddle. The water applied to the geomembrane must not be allowed to flow off to the surrounding soil. The geomembrane must be reasonably clean and mostly dry at the commencement of the survey. Conductive objects such as concrete sumps, batten strips, or metal pipes connected to the conductive layer under the geomembrane must be electrically isolated from the water applied to the survey area and cannot be leak tested.

**TABLE 1 Summary of Comparisons of Exposed Geomembrane Leak Location Methods (typical)**

Geomembrane Type	Water Puddle	Any non-conducting or conductive-backed geomembrane <sup>A</sup>
	Water Lance	Any non-conducting or conductive-backed geomembrane <sup>A</sup>
	Spark Tester	Conductive-backed geomembrane
	Arc Tester	Any non-conducting or conductive-backed geomembrane <sup>A</sup>
Subgrade Conductivity	Water Puddle	Must be sufficiently conductive
	Water Lance	Must be sufficiently conductive
	Spark Tester	Not relevant; Spark testing used exclusively on conductive-backed geomembrane
	Arc Tester	Must be sufficiently conductive
Water Source Requirement	Water Puddle	Required – low volume
	Water Lance	Required – high volume
	Spark Tester	Not required
	Arc Tester	Not required
Additional Labor Requirement for Movement of Water Supply Hoses	Water Puddle	May be required
	Water Lance	May be required
	Spark Tester	Not required
	Arc Tester	Not required
Power Supply	Water Puddle	12 to 36 volts DC or AC
	Water Lance	12 to 36 volts DC or AC
	Spark Tester	6000 to 35 000 volts DC, AC, or pulsed
	Arc Tester	6000 to 35 000 volts DC, AC, or pulsed
Effectiveness on Side Slopes and Vertical Walls	Water Puddle	Effective: slightly less effective on vertical walls
	Water Lance	Can be effective: less effective on vertical walls
	Spark Tester	Effective: not dependent on contact between geomembrane and subgrade
	Arc Tester	Can be effective: project specific
Setup and Calibration Time	Water Puddle	1 hour
	Water Lance	1 hour
	Spark Tester	30 min
	Arc Tester	30 min
Measurement Time	Water Puddle	A second or two
	Water Lance	A second or two
	Spark Tester	Instantaneous
	Arc Tester	Instantaneous
Operator Training Time Requirement	Water Puddle	1 day
	Water Lance	1 day
	Spark Tester	1 hour
	Arc Tester	1 hour
Typical Survey Speed (varies depending on equipment used)	Water Puddle	1000 m <sup>2</sup> per hour per operator
	Water Lance	900 m <sup>2</sup> per hour per operator
	Spark Tester	500 m <sup>2</sup> per hour per operator
	Arc Tester	900 m <sup>2</sup> per hour per operator
Tolerance to Wet and Dirty Geomembrane	Water Puddle	Tolerant to slightly wet and dirty sites
	Water Lance	Tolerant to slightly wet and dirty sites
	Spark Tester	Tolerant to slightly dirty but dry sites
	Arc Tester	Tolerant to slightly dirty but dry sites
Effectiveness in Locating Leaks in Poor Contact Conditions <sup>B</sup>	Water Puddle	Somewhat effective: depends on if water can get through leak and make contact with subgrade <sup>B</sup>
	Water Lance	Somewhat effective: depends on if water can get through leak and make contact with subgrade <sup>B</sup>
	Spark Tester	Effective
	Arc Tester	Somewhat effective: depends on arc length <sup>B</sup>
Leak Detection Sensitivity	Water Puddle	Smaller than 1 mm diameter
	Water Lance	Smaller than 1 mm diameter
	Spark Tester	Smaller than 1 mm diameter
	Arc Tester	Smaller than 1 mm diameter

<sup>A</sup> If used, conductive-backed geomembrane must be installed per the manufacturer's recommendations in order to allow it to be tested using all of the available electrical leak location methods. In particular, there must be some means to break the conductive path through the fusion welds along the entire lengths of the welds, the undersides of adjacent panels (and patches) should be electrically connected together, and a means of preventing unwanted grounding at the anchor trenches or other unwanted earth grounds should be provided.

<sup>B</sup> If conductive-backed geomembrane is being tested and it has been installed using specific installation guidelines with the intent of enabling electrical leak location surveys, then all methods become effective at locating leaks in poor contact conditions.

6.4 *The Water Lance Method*—This technique is appropriate to survey a dry uncovered geomembrane placed directly on a sufficiently conductive layer below the electrically insulating geomembrane. Practice **D7703** is a standard practice describing the water lance method. The lower sufficiently conductive material is usually the subgrade soil and the upper sufficiently conductive layer is the water in a stream of water. There are

two ways to implement the water lance method set up, as detailed in Practice **D7703**. Fig. 3 shows one way to connect the power supply and sensor. The meter measures the voltage drop in a continuous stream of water. Another implementation is the same electrical set up as that used for the water puddle method previously shown in Fig. 2 except a continuous stream of water is used instead of a squeegee. Water is usually



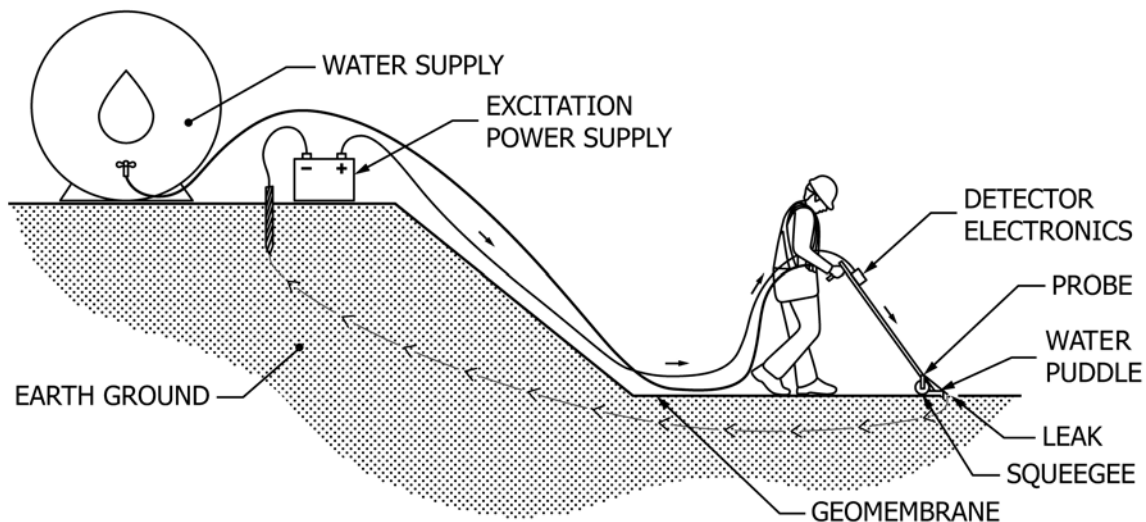


FIG. 2 Schematic of Water Puddle Method

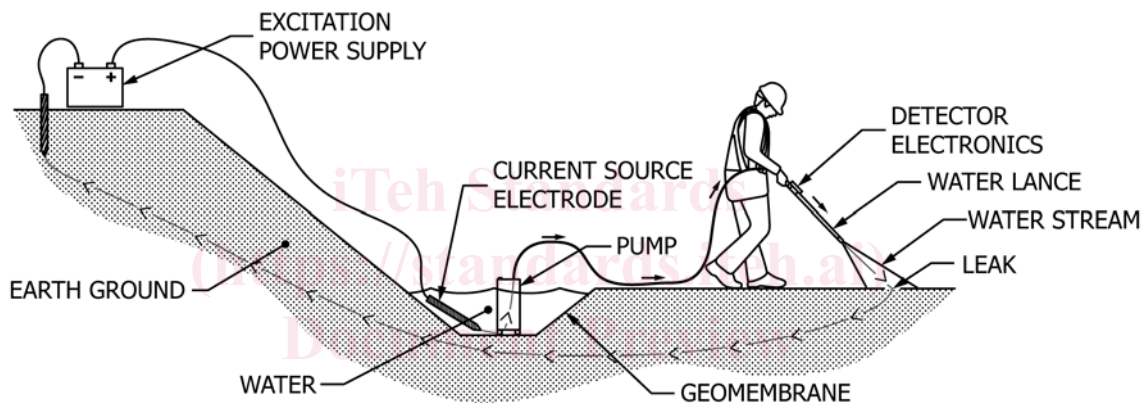


FIG. 3 Schematic of Water Lance Method

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supplied from a tank, the sump or low spot of a survey area, or other pressurized water source. For this technique to be effective in locating leaks, the water in the stream must come into contact through the leak with the electrical conducting material below the geomembrane. This completes an electrical circuit and electrical current will flow. Detector electronics are used to monitor either the electrical current or the voltage between two points along the column of the water lance. The detector electronics converts a change in the current or voltage into a change in an audio tone. This method can typically locate leaks as small as 1 mm in diameter and smaller.

6.4.1 *Features*—The main advantage of this method is the detection of leaks in geomembrane seams and sheets while the geomembrane installation work progresses during construction. The method does not require covering the geomembrane with water other than the water stream. Procedures can be used to differentiate smaller leaks from larger leaks in their vicinity. The electrical survey rate of approximately 900 m<sup>2</sup>/h per operator does not affect the installation work schedule and permits a rapid construction quality control of the geomembrane installers' finished work. The approximate setup time varies from 1 to 3 h. When the water lance is set up to measure voltage potential along the water column in the water lance, it

can be less susceptible to current short-circuiting, but the overall survey sensitivity would be less than when the lance is set up to measure current. The method requires a minimal amount of training to be proficient.

6.4.2 *Limitations*—Unless a geomembrane manufactured with a conductive layer in intimate contact with the insulating geomembrane is being tested, leaks may not be detected in poor contact situations such as at the peak of a wrinkle and in any area where the subgrade is not in intimate contact with the geomembrane, unless measures are taken to make the contact. This technique cannot be used during rainy weather or when the membrane is installed on an electrically non-conductive material, typically a desiccated subgrade, and in the near vicinity of conductive structures that cannot be fully insulated or isolated. The detection of leaks in seams of repair patches is difficult and time consuming since it requires a potential lengthy water infiltration time. A constant water source is required for the application of the water stream. The water stream must be continuous to detect a leak. The water applied to the geomembrane must not be allowed to flow off to the surrounding soil. The geomembrane must be reasonably clean and mostly dry at the commencement of the survey. Conductive objects such as concrete sumps, batten strips or metal pipes

connected to the conductive layer under the geomembrane must be electrically isolated from the water applied to the survey area and cannot be leak tested.

**6.5 The Arc Testing Method**—This technique is appropriate to survey a clean (or slightly dirty), dry uncovered geomembrane placed directly on a sufficiently conductive layer below the electrically insulating geomembrane. Practice D7953 is a standard practice describing the arc testing method. The lower sufficiently conductive material is usually the subgrade soil. One electrode is placed in contact with the lower sufficiently conductive material or subgrade. Another electrode is introduced above the geomembrane as an electrically conductive probe with a very high voltage power supply (as shown schematically in Fig. 4). The test probe is swept over the upper surface to inspect for the presence of leaks. Where a leak occurs, a closed circuit is created and an electrical arc is produced. In addition to a visual arc, the equipment has an audible and visual alarm. Different types of test probes can be utilized with the equipment depending on the area to be tested. For example, small probes are used in confined areas and large probes can be used on large, open areas. This method can typically locate leaks as small as 1 mm in diameter and smaller.

**6.5.1 Features**—The main advantage of this technique is that the technique is not dependant on the use of water. All slopes and vertical walls can be tested. The method can detect pinhole leaks. The electrical survey rate of approximately 900 m<sup>2</sup>/h per operator does not affect the installation work schedule and permits a rapid construction quality control of the geomembrane installers' finished work. Repairs can be performed immediately upon location of a leak. The setup time required is approximately 30 min. The method requires very little training to be proficient.

**6.5.2 Limitations**—The maximum arc length for leak detection depends on the site conditions and equipment voltage. Unless a geomembrane manufactured with a conductive layer in intimate contact with the insulating geomembrane is being tested, leaks will not be detected in poor contact situations such as at the peak of a wrinkle, under a seam overlap flap, and in any area where the subgrade is not within the maximum arc length of the geomembrane, unless effort is made to improve the contact. This technique cannot be used during rain events. The geomembrane must be dry and clean (or slightly dirty).

Conductive objects such as concrete sumps, batten strips, or metal pipes connected to the conductive layer under the geomembrane cannot be leak tested.

**6.6 The Spark Testing Method**—Coextrusion technology made it possible to manufacture a polyethylene geomembrane that can be spark tested. Practice D7240 is a standard practice for this method. The material has a thin layer of electrically conductive material on one surface as an integral part of the geomembrane. This provides a way to spark test the installed geomembrane. The conductive-backed geomembrane is installed such that the non-conductive surface is on top. The testing utilizes a very high voltage power supply to charge an element such as an electrically conductive neoprene pad. The geomembrane acts as a dielectric of a capacitor that provides a low impedance through the geomembrane. Another conductive element is then swept over the upper surface to inspect for the presence of leaks. When the probe is scanned over a leak, the high voltage causes a spark through the leak to the co-extruded lower layer as shown in Fig. 5. To facilitate leak location, equipment must include an audible alarm. Different types of equipment are utilized depending on the area to be tested. For example, small, hand-held detectors are used in confined areas and large detectors can be used on large, open areas. This method can typically locate leaks as small as 1 mm in diameter and smaller.

**6.6.1 Features**—One advantage of this technique is that the technique is not dependant on the use of water. All slopes and vertical walls can be tested. The method can detect pinhole leaks. Since the geomembrane tested is manufactured with a conductive layer in intimate contact with the insulating geomembrane, the problems of insufficiently conductive subgrade and poor hole contact are eliminated. This means that the technique can locate holes on wrinkles and waves and when the subgrade is not sufficiently conductive. It can be performed while construction is ongoing. All slopes and vertical walls can be tested. The rate of testing depends on the type of equipment used. Using a 2-m wide brush, travelling at 3 to 5 km/h, the rate can be up to 500 to 1500 m<sup>2</sup>/h. Repairs can be performed immediately upon location of a leak. The setup time required is approximately 30 min. The method requires very little training to be proficient.

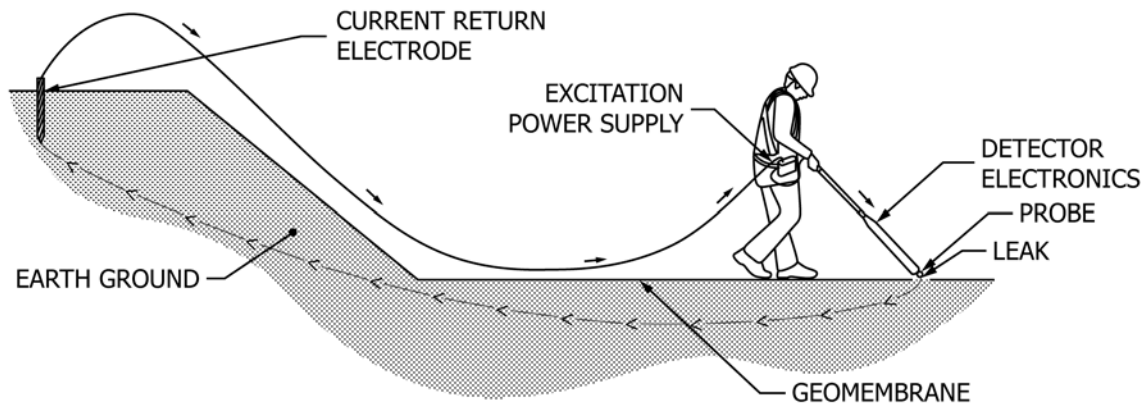


FIG. 4 Schematic of Arc Testing Method