



Designation: E1643 – 11 (Reapproved 2017)

# Standard Practice for Selection, Design, Installation, and Inspection of Water Vapor Retarders Used in Contact with Earth or Granular Fill Under Concrete Slabs<sup>1</sup>

This standard is issued under the fixed designation E1643; 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 practice covers procedures for selecting, designing, installing, and inspecting flexible, prefabricated sheet membranes in contact with earth or granular fill used as vapor retarders under concrete slabs.

1.2 Conditions subject to frost and either heave or hydrostatic pressure, or both, are beyond the scope of this practice. Vapor retarders are not intended to provide a waterproofing function.

1.3 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.

1.4 *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:<sup>2</sup>

[E1745 Specification for Plastic Water Vapor Retarders Used in Contact with Soil or Granular Fill under Concrete Slabs](#)

[E1993/E1993M Specification for Bituminous Water Vapor Retarders Used in Contact with Soil or Granular Fill Under Concrete Slabs](#)

[F710 Practice for Preparing Concrete Floors to Receive Resilient Flooring](#)

### 2.2 Other Standard:<sup>3</sup>

[ACI 302.2R–06 Guide for Concrete Slabs that Receive Moisture-Sensitive Flooring Materials](#)

## 3. Significance and Use

3.1 Vapor retarders provide a method of limiting water vapor transmission and capillary transport of water upward through concrete slabs on grade, which can adversely affect floor finishes and interior humidity levels.

3.2 Adverse impacts include adhesion loss, warping, peeling, and unacceptable appearance of resilient flooring; deterioration of adhesives, ripping or separation of seams, and air bubbles or efflorescence beneath seamed, continuous flooring; damage to flat electrical cable systems, buckling of carpet and carpet tiles, offensive odors, growth of fungi, and undesired increases to interior humidity levels.

## 4. Manufacturer's Recommendations

4.1 Where inconsistencies occur between this practice and the manufacturer's instructions, conform to the manufacturer's instructions for installation of vapor retarder.

## 5. Material, Design, and Construction

5.1 See ACI 302.2R–06 for material, design, and construction recommendations.

5.2 See Specifications [E1745](#) and [E1993/E1993M](#) for vapor retarder specifications.

5.3 *Vapor Retarder Material Selection*—The following criteria should be considered when selecting a vapor retarder material.

5.3.1 Local building code and regulatory requirements.

5.3.1.1 Comply with local building code and regulatory requirements as a minimum consideration.

5.3.2 The water-vapor permeance of the vapor retarder material.

5.3.2.1 The water vapor permeance of the vapor retarder material shall be at such a rate so that adverse impacts to floor finishes and coatings do not occur

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<sup>2</sup> For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org), or contact ASTM Customer Service at [service@astm.org](mailto:service@astm.org). For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

<sup>3</sup> Available from American Concrete Institute (ACI), 38800 Country Club Dr., Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3439, <http://www.concrete.org>.

5.3.2.2 Refer to **X1.6** for discussion on water vapor transmission rate of vapor retarder.

5.3.2.3 The perm rating determined under these criteria shall supersede that in references **5.2** should this value be less than required under references in **5.2**.

5.3.3 The types and amounts of deleterious compounds in the soil on the building site.

5.3.3.1 Review building site soil analyses for deleterious materials and compounds and select a vapor retarder material that will withstand exposure to such deleterious materials or compounds.

5.3.4 The tensile strength and puncture resistance of the vapor retarder material.

5.3.4.1 Select a vapor retarder material capable of withstanding potential construction site damage.

5.3.5 The type of base material on which the vapor retarder is to be installed.

5.3.5.1 Select vapor retarder material capable of withstanding tear or puncture damage due to the type, gradation, and texture of the base material to be installed below the material. Prepare base material to minimize risk of puncture, for example, by rolling or compacting.

5.3.6 The expected exposure of the vapor retarder to ultraviolet rays.

5.3.6.1 Assess expected exposure of the vapor retarder material to ultra violet rays and select a material capable of withstanding such exposure and maintain its capability to perform its intended function.

## **6. Placement**

6.1 Level and compact base material.

6.2 Install vapor retarder material with the longest dimension parallel with the direction of concrete pour.

6.3 Face laps away from the expected direction of the concrete pour whenever possible.

6.4 Extend vapor retarder over footings and seal to foundation wall, grade beam, or slab at an elevation consistent with the top of the slab or terminate at impediments such as water stops or dowels. Seal around penetrations such as utilities and columns in order to create a monolithic membrane between the surface of the slab and moisture sources below the slab as well as at the slab perimeter.

6.5 Lap joints minimum 6 in. (150 mm), or as instructed by the manufacturer, and seal laps in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations.

6.6 Extend vapor retarder over the tops of pile caps and grade beams to a distance acceptable to the structural engineer and terminate as recommended by the manufacturer.

## **7. Protection**

7.1 Take precautions to protect vapor retarder from damage during installation of reinforcing steel, utilities and concrete.

7.2 Use reinforcing bar supports with base sections that minimize the potential for puncture of the vapor retarder.

7.3 Avoid use of stakes driven through the vapor retarder.

7.4 Refer to ACI 302.2R-06 for discussion of aggregate for protection of vapor retarder, including the risks of installing aggregate fill above a vapor retarder that can act as a reservoir for water.

## **8. Inspection and Repair**

8.1 Inspect and mark all areas of damage and insufficient installation of the vapor retarder sufficiently in advance of concrete placement such that deficiencies may be corrected before concrete is placed.

8.2 Repair vapor retarder damaged during placement of reinforcing or concrete with vapor barrier material or as instructed by manufacturer.

8.3 Lap beyond damaged areas a minimum of 6 in. (50 mm) and seal as prescribed for sheet joints.

8.4 Avoid the use of non-permanent stakes driven through vapor retarder.

8.5 If non-permanent stakes are driven through vapor retarder, repair as recommended by vapor retarder manufacturer.

8.6 Seal permanent penetrations as recommended by vapor retarder manufacturer.

## **9. Slab Moisture Content**

9.1 *Moisture Conditions of Slab*—Following placement of the concrete and acclimatization of the building, comply with Practice **F710** and floor covering manufacturer's recommendations for any specified tests for moisture emissions from or moisture content of the slab on grade. Review written report(s) on test results prior to the installation of the floor covering or coating installation. Obtain written approval of acceptable slab conditions from the floor covering manufacturer and project design professional.

9.2 See ACI 302.2R-06.

## **10. Keywords**

10.1 concrete slabs; vapor; vapor retarder

## APPENDIX

## (Nonmandatory Information)

## X1. PRE-DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

X1.1 *Planning and Organization of Construction*—To avoid ambiguities, redundancies, conflicts, and omissions, plan the organization and coordination of drawings and specifications so that graphic, dimensional, and descriptive information on subgrade, granular base, vapor retarder, and protection course, if any, appears in only one place. Since the relationship of the subgrade (pad) elevation (usually shown on grading plans) to the rest of the building finish floor elevations and finished site grades is a function of the depth of the granular base and protection course, these dimensions should be shown in only one place. For graphic depictions and dimensions of the granular base and the protection course, the architectural drawings are preferred, but structural drawings are sometimes used. Specifications for sub-base conditions should be in the grading section. Specifications for base, vapor retarder, and protection course should be in the section on concrete, but there are advocates of a separate section in Division 7 for the vapor retarder system. Examination and testing of surface conditions should be in appropriate finish sections.

X1.2 *Scheduling*—Determine if slab drying will be on the critical path for schedule occupancy. If so, plan measures to reduce drying times, mitigate moisture, or select floor finish materials not subject to damage by moisture.

X1.3 *Geotechnical*—Ensure that the geotechnical survey includes comprehensive and reliable information on subsurface water table levels and the hydrology of geological strata as well as historical data on surface flooding and hydrology. The survey should also include a list of compounds and concentration levels that are deleterious to plastic materials. The geotechnical study should consider not only the past but also the projected change from ongoing or anticipated development patterns. Soils with comparably higher clay contents are particularly troublesome because the relatively high capillary action within the clay allows moisture to rise under the slab.

X1.4 *Civil*—Ensure that site topographic surveys and grading plans accurately and comprehensively establish surface drainage characteristics for the site and surrounding areas.


X1.5 *Landscape and Irrigation*—Most traditional geotechnical studies do not take into account the post-construction change in ground moisture conditions due to introduced planting and irrigation which is a major problem. For example, in California coastal areas, the average annual rainfall is about 18 in. (457 mm). Turf irrigation amounting to 1.3 in. (33 mm) of water per week over the normal seven-month dry season will increase this to nearly 60 in. (1524 mm) with almost no runoff. It is not enough to assume that irrigation will simply duplicate natural conditions encountered during the wet season. The landscape architect, geotechnical engineer, and civil engineer should closely coordinate design recommendations to avoid moisture problems introduced or exacerbated by landscape

planting and irrigation. Once a project is completed, effective irrigation management is instrumental not only in water conservation but also in avoiding potential building-related moisture problems.

X1.6 *Water Vapor Permeance of Vapor Retarder*—In order to prevent moisture damage to the slab on grade, floor covering systems and floor coating systems the water vapor permeance of the vapor retarder material shall be such that accumulation of moisture in the slab through the vapor retarder material does not occur. The vapor pressures of the below grade environment and the interior environment shall be calculated and analyzed. For humidity sensitive interior environments, calculate the effect of vapor diffusion through the vapor retarder, slab on grade and, if applicable, the floor covering or coating on the interior humidity levels. Select a vapor retarder material with a water vapor permeance rating that will maintain interior humidity levels within specified tolerances. The water vapor permeance of flooring material or coating shall be obtained, if available. Calculate the amount of moisture entering the slab through the vapor retarder material. Calculate the amount of moisture that can diffuse through the flooring material. Insure that the water vapor permeance of the vapor retarder material does not allow accumulation of moisture within the slab due to water vapor permeance of the flooring material. Analyze soil temperatures with regard to heat flux through the slab on grade as well as interior temperature and RH levels. Determine if conditions exist for a dew point within the slab. If such conditions can potentially exist, analyze the amount of moisture accumulation within the slab versus the drying potential of the slab through its top surface, and if applicable, through the floor covering system to determine if prolonged and detrimental wetting of the slab will occur. If so, incorporate measures to eliminate conditions for a dew point to occur. One such measure is installing an insulation layer directly below the slab and vapor retarder.

X1.7 *Moisture Entrapment Due to Rainfall or Ground Water Intrusion*—Moisture entrapment can occur beneath slabs when the vapor retarder is placed below a fill course or vapor retarder protection layer, and the fill material takes on water from rainfall, saw-cutting, curing, cleaning or other sources. If a fill course or vapor retarder protection layer is used, the extent of moisture entrapment can be reduced by scheduling concrete placements before rainfall and by sealing any entry points for water in the completed slab. If a fill course or vapor retarder protection layer is used, the vapor retarder must be turned up at the perimeter of the slab to protect the fill course from lateral entrance of moisture.

X1.8 Ensure there is no water accumulation on top of the vapor retarder prior to placing of concrete.

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