United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resource Conservation Service
Program Aid Number 1619

Estimating Soil Moisture by Feel and Appearance

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Irrigation Water Management (IWM) is applying water according to crop needs in an amount that can be stored in the plant root zone of the soil.

The “feel and appearance method” is one of several irrigation scheduling methods used in IWM. It is a way of monitoring soil moisture to determine when to irrigate and how much water to apply. Applying too much water causes excessive runoff and/or deep percolation. As a result, valuable water is lost along with nutrients and chemicals, which may leach into the ground water.

The feel and appearance of soil vary with texture and moisture content. Soil moisture conditions can be estimated, with experience, to an accuracy of about 5 percent. Soil moisture is typically sampled in 1-foot increments to the root depth of the crop at three or more sites per field. It is best to vary the number of sample sites and depths according to crop, field size, soil texture, and soil stratification. For each sample the “feel and appearance method” involves:

1. Obtaining a soil sample at the selected depth using a probe, auger, or shovel.
2. Squeezing the soil sample firmly in your hand several times to form an irregularly shaped “ball”.
3. Squeezing the soil sample out of your hand between thumb and forefinger to form a ribbon.
4. Observing soil texture, ability to ribbon, firmness and surface roughness of ball, water glistening, loose soil particles, soil/water staining on fingers, and soil color. [Note: A very weak ball will disintegrate with one bounce of the hand. A weak ball disintegrates with two to three bounces.]
5. Comparing observations with photographs and/or charts to estimate percent water available and the inches depleted below field capacity.

### Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Depth</th>
<th>USDA Texture</th>
<th>AWC* for Zone</th>
<th>Soil Moisture Depletion**</th>
<th>Percent Depletion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6” 0-12”</td>
<td>sandy loam</td>
<td>1.4”</td>
<td>1.0”</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18” 12-24”</td>
<td>sandy loam</td>
<td>1.4”</td>
<td>.8”</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30” 24-36”</td>
<td>loam</td>
<td>2.0”</td>
<td>.8”</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42” 36-48”</td>
<td>loam</td>
<td>2.0”</td>
<td>5”</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Result: A 3.1” net irrigation will refill the root zone.

*Available Water Capacity

**Determined by “feel and appearance method”

Available Water Capacity (AWC) is the portion of water in a soil that can be readily absorbed by plant roots of most crops.

Soil Moisture Deficit (SMD) or Depletion is the amount of water required to raise the soil-water content of the crop root zone to field capacity.
**Appearance of fine sand and loamy fine sand soils at various soil moisture conditions.**

**Available Water Capacity**  
*0.6-1.2 inches/foot*

**Percent Available:** Currently available soil moisture as a percent of available water capacity.

**In./ft. Depleted:** Inches of water currently needed to refill a foot of soil to field capacity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Available Level</th>
<th>Depletion Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-25 percent available</td>
<td>1.2-0.5 in./ft.</td>
<td>Dry, loose, will hold together if not disturbed, loose sand grains on fingers with applied pressure. (Not pictured)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-50 percent available</td>
<td>0.9-0.3 in./ft.</td>
<td>Slightly moist, forms a very weak ball with well-defined finger marks, light coating of loose and aggregated sand grains remains on fingers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-75 percent available</td>
<td>0.6-0.2 in./ft.</td>
<td>Moist, forms a weak ball with loose and aggregated sand grains on fingers, darkened color, moderate water staining on fingers, will not ribbon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-100 percent available</td>
<td>0.3-0.0 in./ft.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a weak ball, loose and aggregated sand grains remain on fingers, darkened color, heavy water staining on fingers, will not ribbon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 percent available</td>
<td>0.0 in./ft.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a weak ball, moderate to heavy soil/water coating on fingers, wet outline of soft ball remains on hand. (Not pictured)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appearance of sandy loam and fine sandy loam soils at various soil moisture conditions.

Available Water Capacity
1.3-1.7 inches/foot

Percent Available: Currently available soil moisture as a percent of available water capacity.

In./ft. Depleted: Inches of water currently needed to refill a foot of soil to field capacity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0-25 percent available</th>
<th>1.7-1.0 in./ft. depleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dry, forms a very weak ball, aggregated soil grains break away easily from ball. (Not pictured)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>25-50 percent available</th>
<th>1.3-0.7 in./ft. depleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slightly moist, forms a weak ball with defined finger marks, darkened color, no water staining on fingers, grains break away.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>50-75 percent available</th>
<th>0.9-0.3 in./ft. depleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moist, forms a ball with defined finger marks, very light soil/water staining on fingers, darkened color, will not slick.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>75-100 percent available</th>
<th>0.4-0.0 in./ft. depleted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wet, forms a ball with wet outline left on hand, light to medium staining on fingers, makes a weak ribbon between the thumb and forefinger.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>100 percent available</th>
<th>0.0 in./ft. depleted (field capacity)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wet, forms a soft ball, free water appears briefly on soil surface after squeezing or shaking, medium to heavy soil/water coating on fingers. (Not pictured)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appearance of sandy clay loam, loam, and silt loam soils at various soil moisture conditions.

**Available Water Capacity**

1.5-2.1 inches/foot

**Percent Available:** Currently available soil moisture as a percent of available water capacity.

**In./ft. Depleted:** Inches of water needed to refill a foot of soil to field capacity.

- **0-25 percent available**
  2.1-1.1 in./ft. depleted

Dry, soil aggregations break away easily, no staining on fingers, clods crumble with applied pressure. (Not pictured)

- **25-50 percent available**
  1.6-0.8 in./ft. depleted

Slightly moist, forms a weak ball with rough surfaces, no water staining on fingers, few aggregated soil grains break away.

- **50-75 percent available**
  1.1-0.4 in./ft. depleted

Moist, forms a ball, very light staining on fingers, darkened color, pliable, forms a weak ribbon between the thumb and forefinger.

- **75-100 percent available**
  0.5-0.0 in./ft. depleted

Wet, forms a ball with well-defined finger marks, light to heavy soil/water coating on fingers, ribbons between thumb and forefinger.

- **100 percent available**
  0.0 in./ft. depleted (field capacity)

Wet, forms a soft ball, free water appears briefly on soil surface after squeezing or shaking, medium to heavy soil/water coating on fingers. (Not pictured)
Appearance of clay, clay loam, and silty clay loam soils at various soil moisture conditions.

Available Water Capacity
1.6-2.4 inches/foot

Percent Available: Currently available soil moisture as a percent of available water capacity.

In./ft. Depleted: Inches of water needed to refill a foot of soil to field capacity.

- 0-25 percent available
  2.4-1.2 in./ft. depleted
  Dry, soil aggregations separate easily, clods are hard to crumble with applied pressure. (Not pictured)

- 25-50 percent available
  1.8-0.8 in./ft. depleted
  Slightly moist, forms a weak ball, very few soil aggregations break away, no water stains, clods flatten with applied pressure.

- 50-75 percent available
  1.2-0.4 in./ft. depleted
  Moist, forms a smooth ball with defined finger marks, light soil/water staining on fingers, ribbons between thumb and forefinger.

- 75-100 percent available
  0.6-0.0 in./ft. depleted
  Wet, forms a ball, uneven medium to heavy soil/water coating on fingers, ribbons easily between thumb and forefinger.

- 100 percent available
  0.0 in./ft. depleted (field capacity)
  Wet, forms a soft ball, free water appears on soil surface after squeezing or shaking, thick soil/water coating on fingers, slick and sticky. (Not pictured)
## GUIDE FOR ESTIMATING SOIL MOISTURE CONDITIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-25</td>
<td>0.6-1.2</td>
<td>1.3-1.7</td>
<td>1.5-2.1</td>
<td>1.6-2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available Soil Moisture Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-25</td>
<td>Dry, loose, will hold together if not disturbed, loose sand grains on fingers with applied pressure.</td>
<td>Dry, forms a very weak ball, aggregated soil grains break away easily from ball.</td>
<td>Dry, soil aggregations break away easily, no moisture staining on fingers, clods crumble with applied pressure.</td>
<td>Dry, soil aggregations easily separate, clods are hard to crumble with applied pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMD 1.2 - 0.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>SMD 1.7 - 1.0</td>
<td>SMD 2.1 - 1.1</td>
<td>SMD 2.4 - 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-50</td>
<td>Slightly moist, forms a very weak ball with well-defined finger marks, light coating of loose and aggregated sand grains remain on fingers.</td>
<td>Slightly moist, forms a weak ball with defined finger marks, darkened color, no water staining on fingers, grains break away.</td>
<td>Slightly moist, forms a ball with rough surfaces, no water staining on fingers, few aggregated soil grains break away.</td>
<td>Slightly moist, forms a weak ball, very few soil aggregations break away, no water stains, clods flatten with applied pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMD 0.9 - 0.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>SMD 1.3 - 0.7</td>
<td>SMD 1.6 - 0.8</td>
<td>SMD 1.8 - 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-75</td>
<td>Moist, forms a weak ball with loose and aggregated sand grains on fingers, darkened color, moderate water staining on fingers, will not ribbon.</td>
<td>Moist, forms a ball with defined finger marks, very light soil/water staining on fingers, darkened color, will not slick.</td>
<td>Moist, forms a ball, very light water staining on fingers, darkened color, pliable, forms a weak ribbon between thumb and forefinger.</td>
<td>Moist, forms a smooth ball with defined finger marks, light soil/water staining on fingers, ribbons between thumb and forefinger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMD 0.6 - 0.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>SMD 0.9 - 0.3</td>
<td>SMD 1.1 - 0.4</td>
<td>SMD 1.2 - 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-100</td>
<td>Wet, forms a weak ball, loose and aggregated sand grains remain on fingers, darkened color, heavy water staining on fingers, will not ribbon.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a ball with wet outline left on hand, light to medium water staining on fingers, makes a weak ribbon between thumb and forefinger.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a ball with well defined finger marks, light to heavy soil/water coating on fingers, ribbons between thumb and forefinger.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a ball, uneven medium to heavy soil/water coating on fingers, ribbons easily between thumb and forefinger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMD 0.3 - 0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>SMD 0.4 - 0.0</td>
<td>SMD 0.5 - 0.0</td>
<td>SMD 0.6 - 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Capacity (100 percent)</td>
<td>Wet, forms a weak ball, moderate to heavy soil/water coating on fingers, wet outline of soft ball remains on hand.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a soft ball, free water appears briefly on soil surface after squeezing or shaking, medium to heavy soil/water coating on fingers.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a soft ball, free water appears briefly on soil surface after squeezing or shaking, medium to heavy soil/water coating on fingers.</td>
<td>Wet, forms a soft ball, free water appears on soil surface after squeezing or shaking, thick soil/water coating on fingers, slick and sticky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMD 0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>SMD 0.0</td>
<td>SMD 0.0</td>
<td>SMD 0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Ball is formed by squeezing a hand full of soil very firmly with one hand.
2 Ribbon is formed when soil is squeezed out of hand between thumb and forefinger.
SOIL TEXTURE BY FEEL FLOW CHART

START

Place approximately two teaspoons of soil in your palm. Add a few drops of water and knead soil to break down all the aggregates. Soil is at proper consistency when it feels plastic and moldable, like moist putty.

Does the soil remain in a ball when squeezed?

NO

Is the soil too dry?

NO

Is the soil too wet?

0-10% NO

Place ball of soil between thumb and forefinger, gently pushing the soil with your thumb, squeezing it upward into a ribbon. Form a ribbon of uniform thickness and width. Allow the ribbon to emerge and extend over forefinger, breaking from its own weight.

Does the soil form a ribbon?

NO 0-15% Loamy sand

YES

Does soil make a weak ribbon < 1” long before it breaks?

NO

Excessively wet a small pinch of soil in your palm and rub it with your forefinger

YES

Does soil make a medium ribbon 1-2” long before it breaks?

NO

Does soil make a strong ribbon > 2” long before it breaks?

NO

YES

Does soil make a medium ribbon 1-2” long before it breaks?

YES

Excessively wet a small pinch of soil in your palm and rub it with your forefinger

YES

Excessively wet a small pinch of soil in your palm and rub it with your forefinger

YES

Texture Classification:
C = Coarse
MC = Moderately Coarse
M = Medium
F = Fine

1 Sand particle size should be estimated (very fine, fine, medium, coarse) for these textures. Individual grains of very fine sand are not visible without magnification and there is a gritty feeling to a very small sample ground between teeth. Some find sand particles may be just visible. Medium sand particles are easily visible. Examples of sand size descriptions where one size is predominate are: very fine sand, fine sandy loam, and loamy coarse sand.

2 Clay percentage range

3 Modified from: Thien, Steve J., Kansas State University, 1979 Jour. Agronomy Education.

Photo Credit: R. Weil, University of Maryland