Soil Quality Resource Concerns: Compaction

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service **April 1996**

What is compaction?

Soil compaction occurs when soil particles are pressed together, reducing the pore space between them. This increases the weight of solids per unit volume of soil (bulk density). Soil compaction occurs in response to pressure (weight per unit area) exerted by field machinery or animals. The risk for compaction is greatest when soils are wet.

Why is compaction a problem?

Compaction restricts rooting depth, which reduces the uptake of water and nutrients by plants. It decreases pore size, increases the proportion of water-filled pore space at field moisture, and decreases soil temperature. This affects the activity of soil organisms by decreasing the rate of decomposition of soil organic matter and subsequent release of nutrients.

Compaction decreases infiltration and thus increases runoff and the hazard of water erosion.

How can compacted soils be identified?

- platy or weak structure, or a massive condition,

- greater penetration resistance,

- higher bulk density,

- restricted plant rooting,

- flattened, turned, or stubby plant roots.

The significance of bulk density depends on the soil texture. Rough guidelines for the minimum bulk density at which a root restricting condition will occur for various soil textures are (g/cc stands for grams per cubic centimeter):

Texture	Bulk Density (g/cc)
Coarse, medium, and fine sand and loamy sands other than loamy very fine sand	**1.80**
Very fine sand, loamy very fine sand	**1.77**
Sandy loams	**1.75**
Loam, sandy clay loam	**1.70**
Clay loam	**1.65**
Sandy clay	**1.60**
Silt, silt loam	**1.55**
Silty clay loam	**1.50**
Silty clay	**1.45**
Clay	**1.40**

What causes soil compaction?

Soil compaction is caused by tilling, harvesting, or grazing when the soils are wet.

Soil water content influences compaction. A dry soil is much more resistant to compaction than a moist or wet soil.

Other factors affecting compaction include the texture, pressure exerted, composition (texture, organic matter, plus clay content and type), and the number of passes by vehicle traffic and machinery. Sandy loam, loam, and sandy clay loam soils compact more easily than silt, silt loam, silty clay loam, silty clay, or clay soils.

Compaction may extend to 20 inches. Deep compaction affects smaller areas than shallow compaction, but it persists because shrinking and swelling and freezing and thawing affect it less. Machinery that has axle loads of more than 10 tons may cause compaction below 12 inches. Grazing by large animals can cause compaction because their hooves have a relatively small area and therefore exert a high pressure.

How long will compaction last?

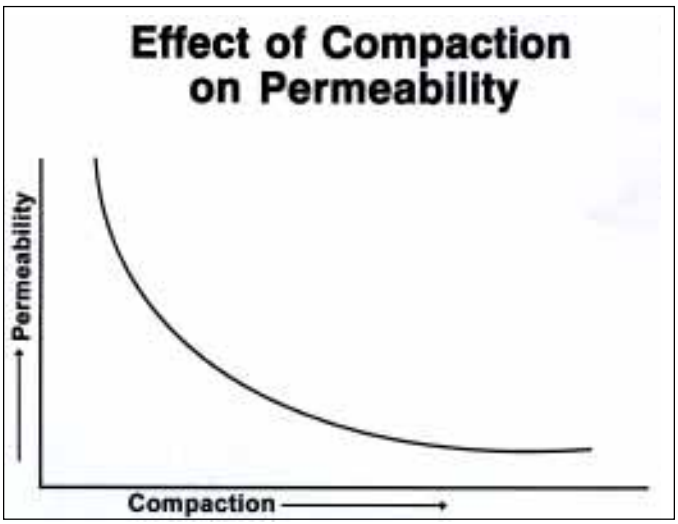
The persistence of soil compaction is determined by the depth at which it occurs, the shrink-swell potential of the soil, and the climate. As the depth increases, the more persistent the condition. The type and percentage of clay determine the shrink-swell potential. The greater the shrink-swell potential and number of wet/dry cycles, the lower is the duration of compaction at a particular depth. Freeze/thaw cycles also help decrease near-surface compaction.

How do organic matter and compaction interact?

Soil organic matter promotes aggregation of soil particles. This increases porosity and reduces bulk density (i.e., compaction). It also increases permeability and may increase plant available water.

Addition of manure, compost, or other organic materials including newspaper, woodchips, and municipal sludge can improve soil structure, helping to resist compaction.

Thick layers of forest litter reduce the impact of machinery, thus reducing compaction.



How can compaction be reduced?

- Reduce the number of trips across the area.

- Till or harvest when the soils are not wet.

- Reduce the pressure of equipment.

- Maintain or increase organic matter in the soil.

- Harvest timber on frozen soil or snow.

Literature Cited

Vorhees, W.B. 1992. Wheel-induced soil physical limitations to root growth. In i and B.O.. Stewart eds. Adv. Soil Sci 19:73-92.

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