

HYDRATION OF GCLs ADJACENT TO SOIL LAYERS

An extensive laboratory testing program was undertaken to investigate the potential for hydration of a GCL when placed against a compacted soil layer. Three different GCLs were used to evaluate the effects of hydration time, initial GCL water content, thickness of soil layer and overburden pressure.

Tests were conducted using a low plasticity clay, commonly found in the Cincinnati, Ohio area. Specimens of GCL with a known moisture content, were placed in a specially designed test apparatus, where a soil with a known moisture content was compacted into the base and the GCL was placed on top. The specimen was then loaded with a load platen and allowed to hydrate for a specific amount of time. At the end of the hydration period, the GCL was tested for moisture content. The GCL was left in contact with the soil for periods of 5, 25 and 75 days to define the effect of test duration on the hydration of the GCL.

Test results show that significant increases in the moisture content of a GCL may occur in the first few days of a GCL's contact with a soil stratum. Overburden pressures within the range tested (i.e. 5 to 390 kPa) did not deter the hydration process, but a larger soil thickness resulted in a larger increase in GCL moisture content.



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Overview of Testing Program

The authors conducted an extensive laboratory testing program to evaluate the potential for hydration of GCLs placed against a compacted subgrade soil layer. Hydration tests were performed on three different GCL products to evaluate the effects of: (i) test duration (i.e., hydration time); (ii) soil initial water content; (iii) thickness of soil layer; and (iv) overburden pressure. Three commercially-available GCL products, namely, Claymax®, Bentomat®, and Bentofix® were used in the testing program. The soil used in the testing program was obtained from the USEPA GCL Field Test Site at the ELDA-RDF facility in Cincinnati, Ohio. This material is classified as low plasticity clay (CL) based on the Unified Soil Classification System (USCS). Tests were performed on two different soil samples and consistent results were obtained between samples. The results reported herein were obtained from tests on a sample with 99 percent of the soil passing the U.S. No. 200 standard sieve and 33 percent smaller than 2 μm (clay fraction). The liquid limit of the soil is 41 and the plasticity index is 19. The soil has an optimum moisture content (OMC) of 20 percent and a maximum dry unit weight of 16.7 kN/m^3 based on the standard Proctor compaction method (ASTM D 698).

Testing Apparatus and Procedure

Figure 11 shows the apparatus specially designed to conduct the GCL hydration tests. The apparatus consists of a polypropylene mold 75 mm in diameter and 150 mm in height. A geomembrane/GCL/soil composite specimen is placed in the mold and covered with two layers of a thin vapor barrier. A loading platen is placed on the specimen for application of overburden pressure.

To process the soil, it was first passed through a U.S. No. 4 standard sieve. The soil was then moisture conditioned to achieve the desired moisture content. The moist soil was placed in the mold in a loose condition and statically compressed to 50-mm thick lifts. The soil was compacted to a dry unit weight equal to approximately 90 percent of the maximum dry unit weight based on the standard Proctor method (ASTM D 698). Two soil lifts were used giving a total thickness of 100 mm. The GCL and geomembrane specimens were carefully trimmed from the same sheets. The initial moisture content of the GCL was measured by taking a small sample from the same GCL sheet and measuring its weight before and after oven drying. The initial moisture content of the GCLs varied between 15 and 20 percent.

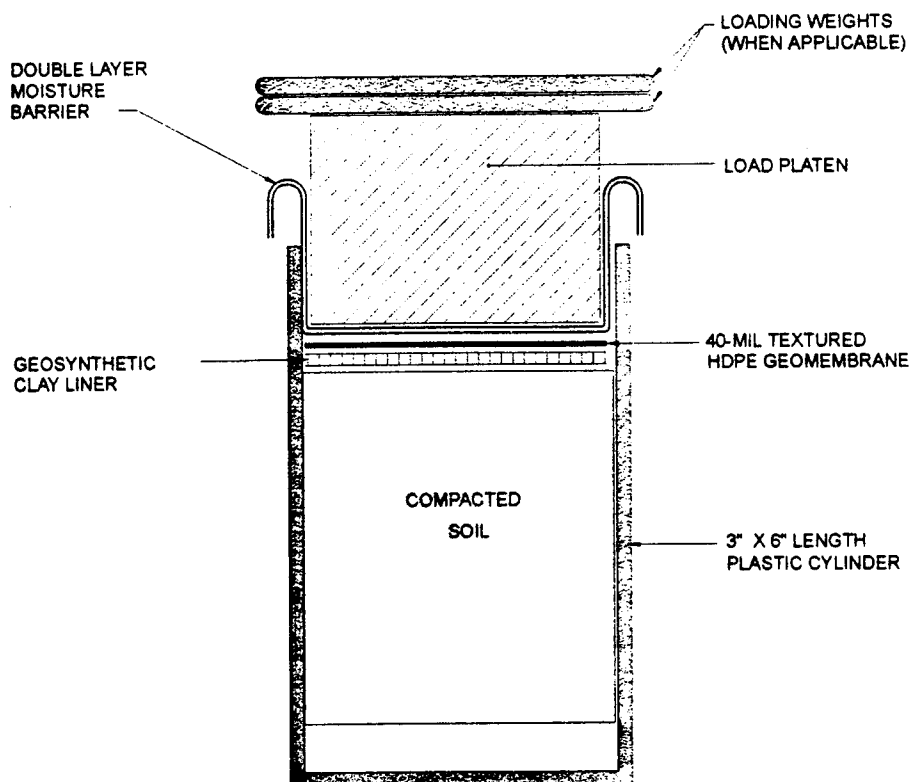


Figure 11. Simplified diagram of GCL hydration test set-up.

The GCL and geomembrane were placed on the soil and covered with the vapor barrier. The side of the GCL placed against the soil was woven in the case of Claymax® and nonwoven for Bentomat® and Bentofix®. Overburden pressure of 10 kPa was applied on the composite specimen utilizing standard weights which were placed on the loading platen. The entire apparatus was then placed in a temperature and humidity controlled room for the desired hydration time period. At the end of the hydration period, the test specimen was removed and the water content of the GCL and soil were measured. The final moisture content of the GCL was measured by weighing the entire GCL specimen before and after oven drying. The final moisture content of the soil was measured as the average water content of three samples obtained from the top, middle, and bottom of the soil specimen.

Testing Conditions and Results

As previously described, test conditions were varied to evaluate the effects of several factors on the hydration of GCLs. To evaluate the effect of test duration, tests were performed where the GCL was in contact with the soil for 5, 25, and 75 days. Soil specimens were compacted to initial moisture contents equal to OMC, 4 percentage points dry of OMC, and 4 percentage points wet of OMC to evaluate the effect of soil initial moisture content on GCL hydration.

Figures 12, 13, and 14 present the results of the hydration tests for the GCL products Claymax®, Bentomat®, and Bentofix®, respectively. These figures show that the moisture content of all three GCLs increased significantly as a result of contact with compacted subgrade soil. The increase in GCL water content was significant after only five days of hydration. With increasing time, GCL water content continued to increase at a decreasing rate. For most tests, GCL water content reached a maximum value after about 25 days of soil contact and for some of the tests water content continued to increase even after 75 days of hydration. It is interesting to note that all three GCL products showed relatively similar behavior. Increases in water content were comparable for the three GCL products despite differences in GCL fabric (i.e., woven vs. nonwoven) and types of bentonite clay used to manufacture the GCLs.

Figures 12, 13, and 14 illustrate the influence of soil subgrade initial moisture content on the hydration of GCLs. From these figures, it is evident that the moisture content of the GCL for any particular hydration time increases as the initial moisture content of the soil increases. These figures also show that a small increase in soil initial moisture content can have a significant impact on GCL moisture content. For example, after 75 days of hydration, the moisture content of Claymax® was approximately 16 percent higher when the initial moisture content of the soil was equal to OMC than when it was 4 percentage points drier than OMC. This behavior is expected because more water is available in the soil for the GCL to hydrate.

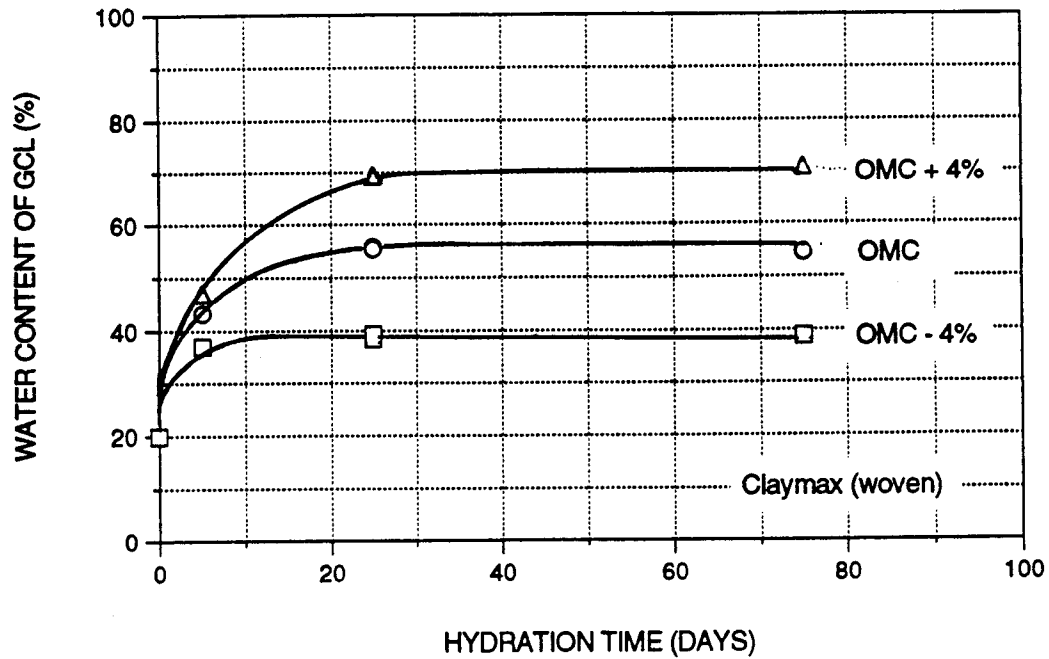


Figure 12. Increase in GCL moisture content due to contact with compacted subgrade soil: Claymax® with woven geotextile against soil.

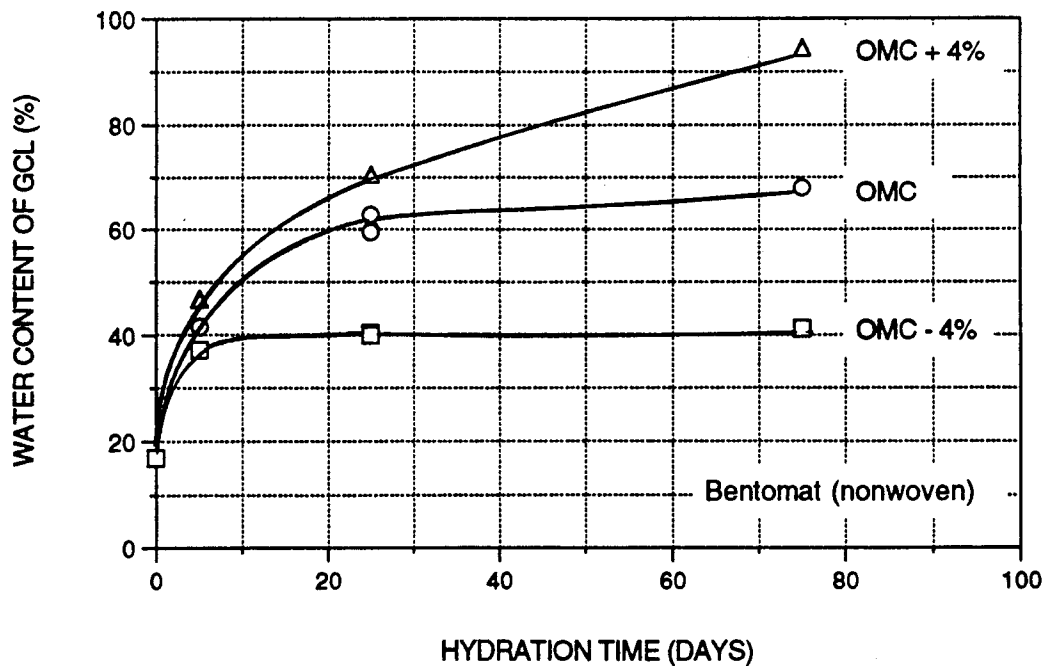


Figure 13. Increase in GCL moisture content due to contact with compacted subgrade soil: Bentomat® with nonwoven geotextile against soil.

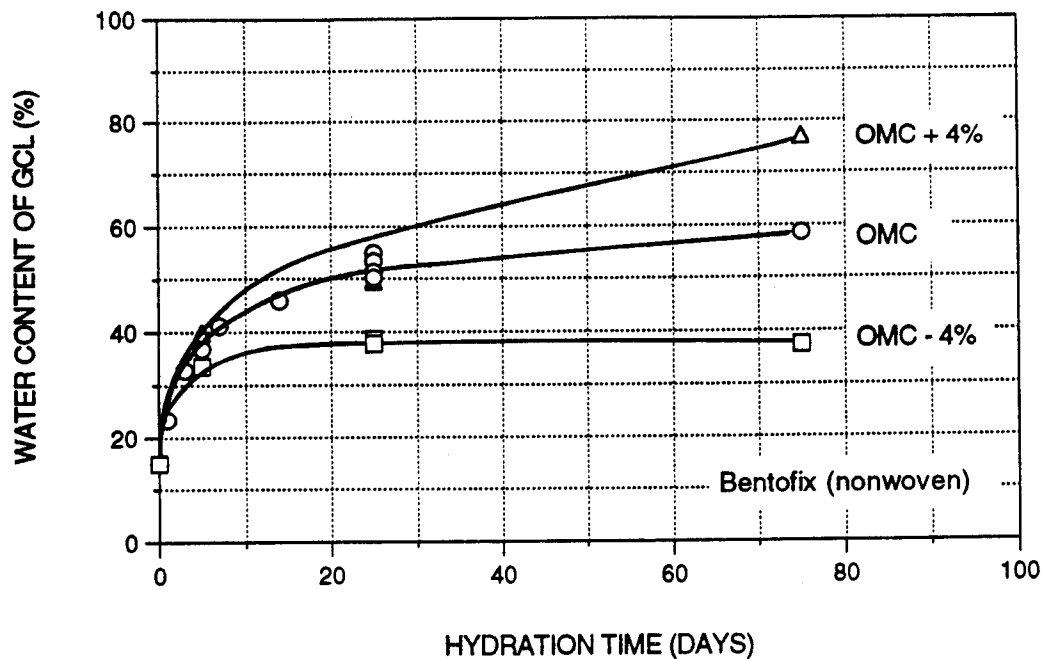


Figure 14. Increase in GCL moisture content due to contact with compacted subgrade soil: Bentofix® with nonwoven geotextile against soil.

The examination of the curves shown in Figures 12, 13, and 14 shows that the time required for the GCL to reach its final moisture content is less in the case of a dry soil than in the case of a wet soil. At the lowest soil initial moisture content tested, GCL moisture content ceased to increase after about 5 to 25 days. At the highest initial moisture content tested, the Bentomat® and Bentofix® GCLs continued to increase in moisture content after 75 days of hydration.

To evaluate the effect of soil layer thickness, specimens were prepared using 50, 100, 150, and 200 mm of soil thickness. Soil initial moisture content was 20 percent and dry unit weight was 14.9 kN/m^3 for all specimens. Figure 15 shows the results of hydration tests for the Bentofix® GCL after 25 days of hydration. The GCL moisture content increased with the increase of the soil layer thickness. However, it appears that only a small change in moisture content increase occurs for thicknesses greater than 100 mm.

The effect of overburden pressure on GCL hydration is illustrated in Figure 16 for the Bentofix® GCL. As shown in this figure, overburden pressure in the range of 5 to 390 kPa did not significantly affect the rate of GCL hydration during the 25-day test duration.

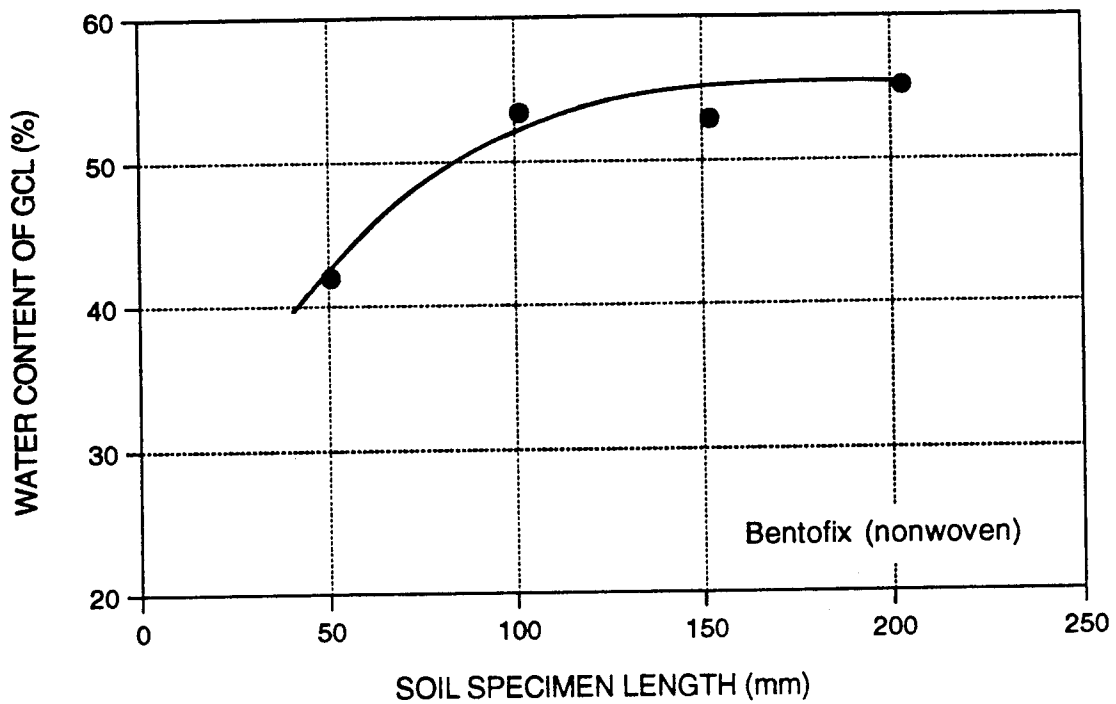


Figure 15. Influence of subgrade soil layer thickness on GCL moisture content.

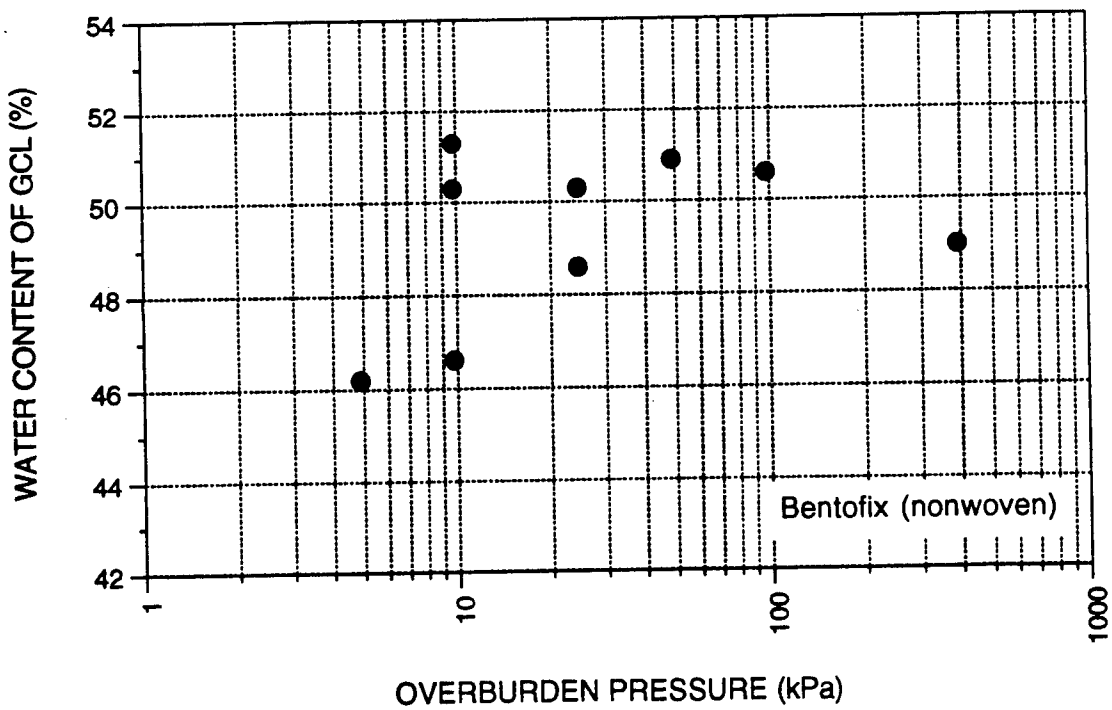


Figure 16. Influence of overburden pressure on the increase in GCL moisture content.

Summary

From the testing program results described above, the following can be concluded:

- GCLs will hydrate when placed in contact with subgrade soils compacted within the range of moisture contents typically found in earthwork construction specifications; this conclusion is consistent with data provided by Daniel et al. [1993]; even for the driest soil (compacted 4 percentage points dry of OMC), GCL moisture contents consistently increased from an initial value in the range of 15 to 20 percent up to about 40 percent within a 100-day period; it should thus be anticipated that GCLs placed even against relatively dry compacted subgrades will undergo substantial hydration;
- given that Daniel et al. [1993] have shown that long-term GCL shear strengths are insensitive to water content for water contents above about 50 percent, stability analyses involving GCLs placed in contact with compacted subgrade soils should be based on hydrated GCL shear strengths;
- significant increases in GCL moisture contents may occur within a few days of GCL contact with a moist soil; the rate of GCL hydration is initially highest and then decreases with increasing time;
- within the range of conditions tested a higher soil moisture content results in a higher GCL moisture content;
- larger soil layer thickness results in a larger increase in GCL moisture content, however, for soil layer thicknesses greater than 100 mm only insignificant increases were observed with increasing soil layer thickness;
- overburden pressure within the range tested (i.e., 5 to 390 kPa) did not influence the hydration process; and
- differences between GCL products tested (i.e., type of bentonite clay and fabric) did not seem to significantly affect the test results.