Alternatives to Nuclear Gauges for HMA Density Measurement

In the 1990s Wisconsin DOT shifted from the use of core samples to measure asphalt pavement density to the use of nuclear density gauges. Capable of producing fast results without damaging the pavement, nuclear gauges are used during asphalt construction for quality control to assure proper density (a characteristic of durable asphalt pavement), and again later for quality assurance.

What’s the Problem?

Though effective and nondestructive, nuclear density gauges involve a variety of challenges. Using these gauges requires WisDOT to annually renew its radioactive materials license, as well as annually certify each gauge at additional cost. Calibrating the gauges for each project site adds yet another cost. In addition, due to their use of radioactive materials, nuclear gauges require special handling and present potential health risks to operators, paving project crews, and the public.

Furthermore, nuclear gauges provide data of variable accuracy when used to evaluate WisDOT standard Superpave mix designs. These mixes typically use coarser aggregates than traditional hot-mix asphalt mixes.

The accuracy of non-nuclear gauges has improved over time, and these devices offer an alternative nondestructive density measurement process without the disadvantages of radioactive materials. Non-nuclear gauges can collect more data than nuclear gauges in the same time period, potentially offering more effective quality assurance and control while eliminating the licensing and handling requirements associated with nuclear gauges. However, non-nuclear gauges have not been tested extensively in Wisconsin.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The investigators sought to evaluate non-nuclear density gauges in the field for WisDOT use. Specific objectives included:

- Through a literature search, identify promising non-nuclear gauge models and technical challenges associated with their use.
- Evaluate selected gauges in the field on coarse, Superpave HMA pavements for effectiveness and practicality in quality control and assurance.
- Evaluate the nuclear gauge testing process for effectiveness and as a baseline for non-nuclear gauge evaluation.
- Recommend test protocols and systems for non-nuclear density measurement.

To achieve these objectives, the researchers performed a literature review and selected three non-nuclear density gauges for field evaluation: the TransTech Pavement Quality Indicator (PQI) 300, the TransTech PQI 301, and the Troxler PaveTracker 2701b. They evaluated these gauges on 16 HMA pavement projects against density measurements from 6-inch-diameter cores, and compared their readings with those from a CPN MC-3 nuclear density gauge. Ten of the projects involved multiple testing days and mix types. Investigators also reviewed and analyzed WisDOT nuclear density testing specifications and procedures for effectiveness in determining in-place density.

Results

The researchers found that all three non-nuclear density gauges provided data quickly and effectively. Specific findings included:

- The literature review of previous field studies found consistent differences between the density readings from non-nuclear gauges and measurements from cores or nuclear gauges. These differ-
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Researchers recommend that technicians using non-nuclear gauges take at least 30 readings within each lot to ensure acceptable confidence levels, which requires about 55 minutes to complete. In addition, the researchers presented a statistically based procedure for determining and correcting statistical differences between two non-nuclear density gauge devices.

Further Research and Implementation

The researchers identified several implementation issues, including the continued need for nuclear density gauge use and the need to train operators on the new devices. Other issues include a need to adjust to the more frequent battery charging required by non-nuclear gauges, and the greater effort required to lay out test sites for 30 samples rather than seven (or 15).

Implementation of the study findings would require WisDOT to adjust its current specifications, which are based on the use of nuclear density gauges. New specifications for non-nuclear density gauges would have to be developed and field-tested. As non-nuclear gauge technologies improve, future research may succeed in eliminating the use of nuclear instruments in density measurements altogether.

This Troxler PaveTracker, shown here testing asphalt specimens produced by a Superpave Gyratory Compactor, will be easier and safer to use in quality control of HMA density than nuclear density gauges (Fig. A.4 of the final report).