

Calibrating ECH₂O Soil Moisture Sensors

Douglas R. Cobos and Chris Chambers

Revised 11/17/10

Introduction

Decagon's ECH₂O sensors measure the volumetric water content of the soil by measuring the dielectric constant of the soil, which is a strong function of water content. However, not all soils have identical electrical properties. Due to variations in soil bulk density, mineralogy, texture and salinity, the generic mineral calibration for current ECH₂O sensors (EC-5, 10HS, 5TE, 5TM) results in approximately $\pm 3-4\%$ accuracy for most mineral soils and approximately $\pm 5\%$ for soilless growth substrates (potting soil, rock wool, cocus, etc.). However, accuracy increases to $\pm 1-2\%$ for all soils and soilless substrates with soil-specific calibration. Decagon recommends that ECH₂O sensor users conduct a soil-specific calibration for best possible accuracy in volumetric water content measurements. Studies performed by independent researchers (Czarnomski et al., 2005) indicate that soil-specific calibration of ECH₂O sensors achieves performance results similar to that of TDR instruments - at a fraction of the price. Note that the resolution, precision, repeatability, and sensor to sensor agreement of the ECH₂O sensors are excellent, so the soil specific calibration of one sensor can be applied to all other sensors of that type in that particular soil. The purpose of this application note is to provide a step-by-step guide for performing a soil specific calibration on ECH₂O sensors.

Calibration Method

ECH₂O calibration generally follows the general procedure for calibrating capacitance sensors outlined by Starr and Paltineanu (2002). The following is a step-by-step instruction guide for performing a soil specific calibration.

1. Equipment needed

- 1.1. Shovel and bulk soil container (1 shovel, 1 container for each soil type) – for field soil collection and air drying soil.
- 1.2. Calibration container (1). The calibration container should allow you to pack the soil back to the field bulk density while maintaining enough soil depth to accommodate the full length of the ECH₂O sensor (including the electronics portion) plus a few cm beyond the end of the prongs and a few cm of cable. It is best if the container is relatively rigid, and allows clear access to the soil surface.
- 1.3. ECH₂O sensor and data acquisition system (1 each)
 - 1.3.1. ECH₂O sensor output is very similar among sensors of the same type. So, you can calibrate with a single sensor and apply that calibration to other sensors of that type in your soil and maintain excellent accuracy.
 - 1.3.2. Use whatever data acquisition system that you are planning to use in the field (ProCheck, Em50, Em5b, Campbell Scientific datalogger, etc.).
- 1.4. Volumetric soil sampler (1)
 - 1.4.1. To perform an ECH₂O sensor calibration you must have a volumetric soil sampler, which is used to sample known volumes of soil from the calibration container in order to determine volumetric water content. This can either be a commercial soil sampler (such as the ESS Core N' One available from Environmental Sampling Supply) or a homemade sampler. The only requirement for the sampler is that you can collect a soil sample of known volume without changing the soil bulk density.

1.4.2. If you don't have a sampler, we recommend cutting a 3 - 5 cm long section of metal conduit or other small diameter (1.5 - 2.5 cm) metal or thin walled, rigid plastic tubing. Deburr both ends of the tubing, and sharpen one end for easy insertion into the soil.

1.4.3. Precisely measure the length and inner diameter of the sampler, and calculate the volume ($\pi r^2 h$).

1.5. Soil drying containers (5-7 per soil type)

1.5.1. The drying container can be any container that is suitable for oven drying and has a sealable lid (soil sampling tin, baby food jar).

1.5.2. Measure the mass of each of the clean, dry soil drying containers before adding soil to them. Write down the tare mass in Table 1.

1.6. Scale or mass balance (1) – The scale should have resolution of 0.01 g or better for best possible soil specific calibration.

1.7. Drying oven (1) – Any oven that will maintain a relatively stable temperature of 105 – 110 C will work.

2. Soil sample collection

2.1. Collect approximately 4 liters (1 gallon) of bulk soil.

2.2. Be sure that the soil is from the area/depth where you wish to measure with your ECH₂O sensors.

2.3. You may wish to measure the field bulk density of the soil when you collect your sample.

2.3.1. Use your volumetric soil sampler to collect several soil cores of undisturbed soil.

2.3.2. Since you've used a volumetric sampler, you know the volume of the soil sample (V_{soil}).

2.3.3. Oven-dry the soil cores and measure the mass of the dry soil (m_{dry}).

2.3.4. Use equation 4 below to calculate the bulk density of the soil.

3. Soil Preparation

3.1. Air dry the soil. Air drying is quickest if the soil is spread in a thin layer and air is moved over the soil.

3.2. Remove large objects from the soil.

3.2.1. The presence of large rocks or other objects can complicate the calibration process. We suggest breaking up large clods and running the soil through a 2-5 mm sieve before proceeding.

3.2.2. In some materials (e.g. compost, mulch, soilless growth substrates), it will not be possible to remove large particulates without significantly altering the nature of the material.

4. Calibration

4.1. Pack the soil into the calibration container at approximately the field bulk density.

4.1.1. If you start with dry soil, you can control the bulk density by packing a known mass of soil into a known container volume.

4.1.2. It is generally necessary to add the soil in layers, packing each layer before adding the next.

4.1.3. For the 10HS, only pack a little over half of the soil into the container before inserting the sensor.

4.1.4. For the EC-5, 5TE, and 5TM, pack the full soil volume into the container.

4.2. Insert the ECH₂O sensor (EC-5, 5TE, 5TM).

- 4.2.1. The EC-5, 5TE, and 5TM can be inserted vertically directly into the full soil container.
 - 4.2.2. **Important:** Be sure to insert the sensor tines in a straight line so as not to introduce any air gaps between the sensor tines and the soil.
 - 4.2.3. Insert the sensor fully into the soil. This includes the black plastic base of the sensor. If you cannot insert the black plastic portion fully into the soil, insert the sensor as far as possible, then take some additional soil and pack it around the remaining portion of the sensor base and a few cm of the cable if possible.
- 4.3. Insert the ECH₂O Sensor (10HS)
- 4.3.1. Insert the 10HS sensor as far as possible in the soil container. For some soil types and moisture levels it is possible to insert the entire length of the 10HS into the soil as with the other ECH₂O sensors
 - 4.3.2. For some soils it is not possible to insert the full length of the 10HS into the soil column.
 - 4.3.2.1. If you have an ECH₂O sensor insertion blade or other blade that is slightly thinner than the 10HS sensor, you can use it to make a pilot hole and insert the sensor fully.
 - 4.3.2.2. If no pilot tool is available, insert the 10HS as far as possible into the soil column. Then, pack soil around the exposed portion of the sensor being careful to prevent air gaps while maintaining the desired bulk density.
 - 4.3.3. Be sure to get the black plastic portion of the 10HS surrounded by soil. If you cannot insert the black plastic portion fully into the soil, insert the sensor as far as possible, then take some additional soil and pack it around the remaining portion of the sensor base and a few cm of the cable if possible.
- 4.4. **Important note:** The sensor should be surrounded by continuous soil for a radius of at least 5 cm from the flat sensing portion of the sensor, except in the case of the 10HS which should have a minimum of 10 cm.
- 4.5. Take a sensor reading.
- 4.5.1. If you are using non-Decagon data acquisition equipment, be sure that you are exciting the sensor with the same excitation voltage that you will use in the field for the EC5. All other Decagon sensors regulate their excitation voltage so refer to your manual for the appropriate voltage range.
 - 4.5.2. Collect the raw data from the sensor (no calibration applied).
 - 4.5.3. It is a good idea to repeat steps 4.2 - 4.5 once or twice to be sure that you are achieving repeatable insertion quality. There will generally be some small variability (a few raw counts or mV), so an average reading can be taken.
 - 4.5.4. Record the sensor readings in Table 1.
- 4.6. Collect a volumetric soil sample.
- 4.6.1. Without removing the ECH₂O sensor, insert the volumetric soil sampler fully into the undisturbed soil near the sensor.
 - 4.6.2. Remove the sampler, making sure that the soil core inside is intact. Shave excess soil from the end(s) with a flat edge, and re-fill any small voids that may have occurred.
 - 4.6.3. Place the entire soil core into a drying container and cap the container. Any water loss from the soil between sampling and the first weighing introduces error to the volumetric water content calculation.
 - 4.6.4. Repeat 4.6.1 - 4.6.3 at least once. This helps to reduce the effects of spatial variability in your sample.
- 4.7. Measure the mass of the wet soil + container (no lid) – record the mass in Table 1.
- 4.8. Wet the calibration soil.

- 4.8.1. Add about 1 mL of water for every 10 mL of soil volume (increases VWC by 10%). Add the water to the soil as evenly as possible
- 4.8.2. Thoroughly mix the soil with your hands or a trowel until the mixture is again homogenous.
- 4.9. Repeat 4.1 to 4.8 until the soil nears saturation. This generally yields 4-6 calibration points. Note that the bulk density of the sample can be maintained throughout the calibration process by packing the same soil sample to the same level on the calibration container at each water content.
- 4.10. Dry the volumetric soil samples
 - 4.10.1. Place all of the already-weighed, moist samples into the 105 C oven for 24 hours.
 - 4.10.2. Note that soils with high organic matter content may lose significant volatile organics if dried at 105 C, leading to error in the calibration. We recommend drying these soils at 60 – 70 C for at least 48 hours.
- 4.11. Weigh the dry soil.
 - 4.11.1. Remove the soil drying containers from the oven and replace covers while still hot
 - 4.11.2. Allow the soil and containers to cool
 - 4.11.3. Measure the mass of the dry soil + containers (without lids).
 - 4.11.4. Enter the values into Table 1.

Table 1. Example data collection table for soil specific ECH₂O sensor calibration.

Sample number	Avg. sensor reading (raw counts or mV)	Drying container tare mass (g)	Sample volume (cm ³)	mass of container + moist soil (g)	mass of container + dry soil (g)
1	664	70.605	15.31	94.836	94.215
2	764	72.245	15.31	96.433	95.194
3	902	71.713	15.31	96.923	94.785
4	1030	74.45	15.31	101.979	98.834
5	1318	70.997	15.31	100.402	95.873
6	1374	71.48	15.31	101.060	95.886

5. Calculations

The volumetric water content is defined as the volume of water per volume of bulk soil:

$$\theta = V_w/V_t \tag{1}$$

Where θ is volumetric water content (cm³/cm³), V_w is the volume of water (cm³) and V_t is the total volume of bulk soil sample (cm³). You already know V_t of your sample, because you used a volumetric sampler to collect your soils samples (see section 1.4). To find V_w , we calculate the volume of the water that is lost from the soil sample during oven drying:

$$m_w = m_{wet} - m_{dry} \tag{2}$$

$$V_w = m_w/\rho_w \tag{3}$$

Where m_w is the mass of water, m_{wet} is the mass of moist soil (g), m_{dry} is the mass of the dry soil, and ρ_w is the density of water (1 g/cm³). In addition to the volumetric water content, the bulk density of the soil sample can also be calculated. Bulk density (ρ_b) is defined as the density of dry soil (g/cm³):

$$\rho_b = m_{dry}/V_{soil} \quad (4)$$

The calculations above are most easily done in a spreadsheet program such as MS Excel. Table 2 shows an Excel spreadsheet with the data from Table 1, and the above calculations performed. The cell operations used to perform the calculations are shown in Row 3.

The output of the ECH₂O sensors is not very sensitive to small differences in soil bulk density. However, if the bulk density of the soil during calibration is radically different from that of your field soil, you will introduce error into your calibration. If you measured the field bulk density as described in section 2.3, you can control the bulk density of the soil in the calibration container to that level (see section 4.1.1). If you do not pack to a known bulk density and the bulk density in your calibration container is different from the field bulk density by more than about 20%, you should consider repeating the calibration while packing the soil to a more realistic bulk density.

Table 2. Excel spreadsheet with example calibration data. Note that Row 2 shows the variables names used in calculation section, and Row 3 shows the cell operations used to calculate VWC from the calibration data.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1	sample number	sensor output (Raw counts)	Jar mass (g)	sample volume (cm ³)	wet soil mass + container (g)	dry soil mass + container (g)	Mass & volume of water (cm ³)	Dry soil mass (g)	soil bulk density (g/cm ³)	VWC (cm ³ /cm ³)
2				V_t			(m_w, V_w)	m_{dry}	ρ_b	θ
3							=E3-F3	=F3-C3	=H3/D3	=G3/D3
4	1	664	70.605	15.31	94.836	94.215	0.621	23.610	1.54	0.0406
5	2	764	72.245	15.31	96.433	95.194	1.239	22.949	1.50	0.0809
6	3	902	71.713	15.31	96.923	94.785	2.138	23.072	1.51	0.1396
7	4	1030	74.45	15.31	101.979	98.834	3.145	24.384	1.59	0.2054
8	5	1318	70.997	15.31	100.402	95.873	4.529	24.876	1.62	0.2958
9	6	1374	71.48	15.31	101.060	95.886	5.174	24.406	1.59	0.3379

6. Finding and using the calibration function

If the above calculations are performed in a spreadsheet program, then finding the calibration function is quite easy. Simply make a scatter plot with the sensor output on the X-axis, and the calculated VWC on the Y-axis (Figure 1). Then use the trendline or curve fitting function to construct a mathematical model of the relationship. This relationship is often linear as shown below, but is sometimes best fit with a quadratic equation, especially in soils with high organic matter content.

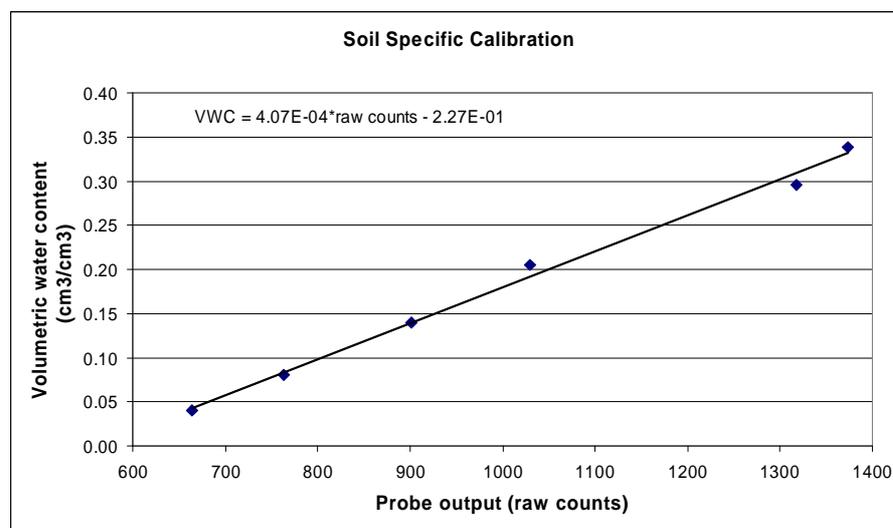


Figure 1. Plot of example calibration data. The soil specific calibration equation is shown in the upper left corner of the graph area.

Once you have constructed your calibration function, you need to apply it to the ECH₂O sensor data that you collect. When logging data with the EM 50 and EM 5b dataloggers, you should apply this equation to the raw data that you download from the logger. If you are using the DataTrac software package, you can apply the calibration function under the setup tab. If you are using Campbell Scientific dataloggers, you can apply the calibration in your datalogger program or during post processing.

References

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- Starr, J.L., and I.C.Paltineanu. 2002. Methods for Measurement of Soil Water Content: Capacitance Devices. p. 463-474. In J.H.Dane, and G.C.Topp (ed.) *Methods of Soil Analysis: Part 4 Physical Methods*. Soil Science Society of America, Inc., Soil Science Society of America, Inc.