



Ministry of
Environment and
Climate Change Strategy

PROTOCOL 22

FOR CONTAMINATED SITES

Application of Vapour Attenuation Factors to
Characterize Vapour Contamination

Version 3.0

Prepared pursuant to Section 64 of the
Environmental Management Act

Approved:

Sonya Sundberg

Director of Waste Management

August 12, 2024

Date

Effective Date: August 12, 2024

1.0 Definitions

Terms defined in the Environmental Management Act (EMA) and the Contaminated Sites Regulation (CSR) shall apply to this protocol, with the addition of the following:

“biodegradation” refers to the process by which organic substances are biotransformed by organisms.

“biodegradation attenuation adjustment divisor” [BAAD] is a unitless divisor that can be applied to a ministry vertical vapour attenuation factor for a select list of substances that have been demonstrated to biodegrade efficiently under aerobic conditions.

“breathing zone” means any place where humans could come into direct contact with contaminated vapour, including indoor and outdoor environments that exist at the time of site investigation or have a reasonable potential to exist after a site investigation is complete.

“contaminated sites legal instrument” [CSLI] includes an Approval in Principle, Certificate of Compliance, Determination of Contaminated Site, Transfer Agreement or Voluntary Remediation Agreement.

“lateral attenuation adjustment divisor” [LAAD] is a unitless divisor that can be used to modify a ministry vertical vapour attenuation factor in circumstances where the target breathing zone is offset laterally from the point at which vapours have been characterized.

“ministry” [ENV] means the Ministry of Environment & Climate Change Strategy.

“nonaqueous phase liquid” [NAPL] means a liquid that exists as a separate, immiscible phase when in contact with water.

“parkade attenuation adjustment divisor” [PAAD] is a unitless divisor that can be used to modify a ministry vertical vapour attenuation factor in circumstances where reliance is dependent on default conservative assumptions regarding increased air exchange within the parkade due to mechanical ventilation.

“preferential flow pathway” means a pathway that is significantly (greater than 1 order of magnitude) more water or gas permeable than the soil media that surrounds it and may be anthropogenic (including pathways such as underground utilities for

sewers, water and gas lines) or natural (including pathways such as fractured bedrock, surface depressions, streambeds and ditches that intersect and drain shallow aquifers).

“Regulation” means the Contaminated Sites Regulation.

“risk-based standards” means the standards prescribed in CSR sections 18 and 18.1.

“vapour attenuation factor” means the ratio of the breathing zone concentration of a volatile substance to the subsurface concentration of that substance.

2.0 Introduction

This protocol describes the requirements for determining the presence and extent of vapour contamination at contaminated sites in BC using default vertical vapour attenuation factors (VAFs) for indoor air (α_I) and outdoor air (α_O) listed in Table 1. Vapour contamination exists if the concentration of any substance that is associated with a soil, sediment, or water source exceeds its Contaminated Sites Regulation (the Regulation) Schedule 3.3 numerical vapour standard in the breathing zone.

Guidance for site investigation, characterization, and remediation with respect to vapours is provided in [Technical Guidance 4, “Vapour Investigation and Remediation”](#). In Technical Guidance 4, there are three methods for characterizing vapour contamination in the breathing zone:

- Approach A - Estimation based on subsurface and/or sub-slab vapour measurements;
- Approach B - Direct vapour measurement;
- Approach C - Estimation based on soil and/or groundwater measurements.

Approaches A and C may include application of VAFs to measured or estimated subsurface or sub-slab concentrations. If, after characterizing vapour contamination, the concentrations of substances in the breathing zone are less than or equal to applicable Schedule 3.3 standards, the site would not be considered contaminated for vapours. However, if the concentrations of substances in the breathing zone exceed the Schedule 3.3 standards, then the site would be considered contaminated for vapours.

3.0 Vertical vapour attenuation factors

Selection of a vertical VAF must be based on the current and/or reasonable potential future use or configuration of the site (e.g., location and foundation depth of buildings), as per Section 12 (5) of the Regulation.

For the purpose of determining the presence and extent of vapour contamination, the vertical VAFs shown in Table 1 must be used. The Table 1 vertical VAFs may only be applied in the vertical direction, i.e. for a breathing zone (actual or hypothetical) located vertically above the point at which subsurface vapour concentrations have been determined; they do not apply laterally.

The use of a site-specific vapour attenuation scenario is only permitted under detailed risk assessment.

The following equations are used to estimate vapour substance concentrations in the breathing zone vertically above vapour concentrations determined in subsurface or sub-slab vapour:

$$C_{V-I} = C_{V-SS} * \alpha_I$$
$$C_{V-O} = C_{V-SS} * \alpha_O$$

Where C_{V-I} and C_{V-O} ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) are the estimated substance concentrations in indoor and outdoor vapour, respectively; C_{V-SS} ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) is the measured or estimated substance concentration in subsurface or sub-slab vapour; and α_I and α_O (unitless) are the default indoor and outdoor Table 1 vertical VAFs.

Subsurface or sub-slab vapour concentrations may be measured directly or estimated from soil or groundwater data using appropriate partitioning relationships. See Technical Guidance 4 for more detail.

3.1 Precluding conditions

Use of the Table 1 vertical VAFs for vapour characterization is not permitted if the footnotes of Table 1 preclude the use or if any of the following conditions applies:

- a. Groundwater is in contact with the foundation slab at any time of the year, or there is active pumping or drawdown of groundwater at the site, with the exception of parkades built to the equivalent or better: 2012 or later [BC Building Codes](#).

b. Subsurface or sub-slab vapour is under pressure (e.g., as at a landfill).

Regardless of the vapour sampling and analysis approach taken, characterization of vapour contamination must capture worst-case vapour substance concentrations expected in the breathing zone. Furthermore, to support contaminated sites legal instrument applications under the Regulation, vapour contamination must be stable or shrinking.

Table 1. Vertical VAFs

Sample Location	Sample Depth ^{2,3,4}	Vertical VAF (α_1, α_0) ¹			
		Outdoor Exposure (α_0)	Indoor Exposure (α_1)		
			Agricultural, Urban Park, Residential Use	Commercial, Industrial Use	Parkade Use
Below unlined crawlspace, earthen basement, or wooden ⁵ basement	0.45 to 5 m	-	1.0 x 10 ⁻¹		-
Sub-slab ⁶	-	-	2.0 x 10 ⁻²		
In preferential flow pathway ⁷	-	1.0 x 10 ⁻⁴	2.0 x 10 ⁻²		
Subsurface	< 1.0 m ⁸	1.0 x 10 ⁻⁴	2.0 x 10 ⁻²		
	1.0 m	1.5 x 10 ⁻⁶	2.8 x 10 ⁻³	3.7 x 10 ⁻⁴	2.8 x 10 ⁻³
	1.5 m	1.2 x 10 ⁻⁶	2.3 x 10 ⁻³	3.4 x 10 ⁻⁴	2.3 x 10 ⁻³
	2.0 m	9.2 x 10 ⁻⁷	2.0 x 10 ⁻³	3.1 x 10 ⁻⁴	2.0 x 10 ⁻³
	3.0 m	6.1 x 10 ⁻⁷	1.6 x 10 ⁻³	2.7 x 10 ⁻⁴	1.6 x 10 ⁻³
	5.0 m	3.7 x 10 ⁻⁷	1.1 x 10 ⁻³	2.1 x 10 ⁻⁴	1.1 x 10 ⁻³
	7.0 m	2.6 x 10 ⁻⁷	8.3 x 10 ⁻⁴	1.7 x 10 ⁻⁴	8.3 x 10 ⁻⁴
	10.0 m	1.8 x 10 ⁻⁷	6.2 x 10 ⁻⁴	1.3 x 10 ⁻⁴	6.2 x 10 ⁻⁴
	15.0 m	1.2 x 10 ⁻⁷	4.3 x 10 ⁻⁴	9.9 x 10 ⁻⁵	4.3 x 10 ⁻⁴
	20.0 m	9.2 x 10 ⁻⁸	3.3 x 10 ⁻⁴	7.8 x 10 ⁻⁵	3.3 x 10 ⁻⁴
30.0 m	6.1 x 10 ⁻⁸	2.3 x 10 ⁻⁴	5.5 x 10 ⁻⁵	2.3 x 10 ⁻⁴	

¹ Use of these attenuation factors for vapour characterization is not permitted where precluding conditions apply, see Section 3.1.

² For subsurface vapour samples taken from probes installed in boreholes (e.g., vapour or groundwater monitoring wells), the sample depth is based on the vertical distance from the bottom of the

bentonite seal to the bottom of the existing or proposed building foundation (indoor exposure) or ground surface (outdoor exposure). For subsurface vapour samples taken from driven probes, the sample depth is based on the vertical distance from the top of the sampling screen to the bottom of the existing or proposed building foundation (indoor exposure) or ground surface (outdoor exposure).

- ³ If the sample is collected between two depth increments (e.g., between 2 and 3 m), select the attenuation factor associated with the shallower depth increment (i.e., in this example, 2 m).
- ⁴ If fractured bedrock, karst, cobbles, or other highly-permeable medium lie between the vapour source in soil or groundwater and the building foundation or ground surface, base your choice of attenuation factor on the shorter of (a) the vertical distance between the bottom of the foundation or ground surface and the highest point of the highly-permeable medium, or (b) the vertical distance between the bottom of the foundation slab or ground surface and the bottom of the bentonite seal.
- ⁵ The vapour attenuation factor for samples collected below an unlined crawlspace, earthen basement, or wooden basement applies to data collected from depths more than 1 m below an earthen basement (i.e., more than 1 m below the exposed soil surface) and more than 0.45 m below a surface seal installed on the exposed soil surface
- ⁶ The sub-slab vapour attenuation factor (2.0×10^{-2}) applies to vapour data collected from a sub-slab installation at the foundation of a building.
- ⁷ If there is a preferential flow pathway through the foundation slab or other direct connection between a utility backfill and indoor breathing zone (such as an unlined inspection or clean-out box), then use of the preferential flow pathway vapour attenuation factor (i.e., 2.0×10^{-2}) is not permitted. Apply the crawlspace vapour attenuation factor (i.e., 1.0×10^{-1}) and sampling restrictions instead.
- ⁸ Use of this attenuation factor must be consistent with best practices for measurement of shallow soil vapours.

4.0 Vapour attenuation adjustment divisors

The Table 1 vertical VAFs may be adjusted to account for additional attenuation using:

1. a biodegradation attenuation adjustment divisor (BAAD);
2. a parkade attenuation adjustment divisor (PAAD); or
3. lateral attenuation adjustment divisors (LAADs).

The application of one or more attenuation adjustment divisors (AAD) can occur as long as the circumstances at the site meet the described conditions for use of that AAD and no precluding conditions for use of a Table 1 VAF apply (see Section 3.1).

Use the following equations to modify the Table 1 vertical VAFs with an AAD, as applicable to the site:

$$C_{V-I} = C_{V-SS} * \alpha_I / AAD$$
$$C_{V-O} = C_{V-SS} * \alpha_O / AAD$$

Where C_{V-I} and C_{V-O} ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) are the estimated substance concentrations in indoor and outdoor vapour, respectively; C_{V-SS} ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) is the measured or estimated substance concentration in subsurface or sub-slab vapour; α_I or α_O (unitless) are the indoor and outdoor Table 1 vertical VAFs, respectively; and AAD is an attenuation adjustment divisor (unitless).

4.1 Biodegradation attenuation adjustment divisor

Since a number of hydrocarbons are readily biodegraded in aerobic environments, the ministry permits a 10-fold adjustment of the Table 1 vertical VAFs to account for biodegradation. This 10-fold adjustment divisor is described as the BAAD.

$$\text{BAAD} = 10$$

Use the BAAD as the AAD term in the equation in Section 4.0.

4.1.1 Conditions for using the BAAD

The BAAD may only be used when “biologically active soil” underlies the entire extent of the breathing zone(s) under evaluation.

Biologically active soil is soil that has the capability to support the growth and survival of aerobic microorganisms such that aerobic biodegradation of contaminants can occur.

Biologically active soil must not contain detectable concentrations of substances listed in CSR Schedule 3.3. Furthermore, the following geologic materials do not qualify as biologically active:

1. coarse sand and gravel with low (< 10%) silt, clay and organic matter content, and a moisture content that is less than two percent;
2. fractured, faulted, or jointed consolidated rock; or consolidated rock with solution channels (i.e., karst).

Soil samples must be collected and analyzed for soil moisture, which must be greater than two percent to indicate a biologically active soil.

Use of the BAAD is restricted to the following conditions:

- If nonaqueous phase liquids are not present in soil or ground water, and VH_{w6-10} is < 15,000 $\mu\text{g}/\text{L}$ and EPH_{w10-19} is < 5,000 $\mu\text{g}/\text{L}$, then the BAAD can be applied if the building foundation (indoor exposure) or ground surface (outdoor exposure) and the vapour source (i.e., all detectable vapour substance concentrations in soil and groundwater) are separated vertically by 2 m of biologically active soil.

- If nonaqueous phase liquids are present in soil or ground water, or VH_{w6-10} is $> 15,000 \mu\text{g/L}$ and EPH_{w10-19} is $> 5,000 \mu\text{g/L}$, then the BAAD can be applied if the building foundation (indoor exposure) or ground surface (outdoor exposure) and the vapour source (i.e., all detectable vapour substance concentrations in soil and groundwater) are separated vertically by 5 m of biologically active soil.
- If the BAAD is applied to measured soil vapour data, the vapour data must have been collected within 1 m of the vapour source.
- There must be no substantive surface cap at the site. Specifically, paved or other low permeability surfaces cannot represent more than 80% of the area surrounding the building.
- The BAAD can be used only for the aerobically biodegradable substances listed in Table 2 in conjunction with a Table 1 vertical VAF.

Table 2. Substances that are considered to be readily biodegraded in aerobic environments.

Substance	Chemical Abstract Service #
benzene	71-43-2
decane, n-	124-18-5
ethylbenzene	100-41-4
hexane, n-	110-54-3
isopropylbenzene	98-82-8
methylcyclohexane	108-87-2
naphthalene	91-20-3
toluene	108-88-3
xylenes, total	1330-20-7
trimethylbenzene, 1,3,5-	108-88-3
trimethylbenzene, 1,2,4-	95-63-6
VPHv	-

4.2 Parkade attenuation adjustment divisor

For buildings with a parkade below the entire footprint¹ of the building, the ministry permits a 50-fold adjustment of the Table 1 vertical VAF. This 50-fold adjustment divisor is described as the PAAD.

$$\text{PAAD} = 50$$

Use the PAAD as the AAD term in the equation in Section 4.0.

4.2.1 Conditions for using the PAAD

A PAAD may only be used when the parkade underlies the entire extent of the footprint of the building above it.

The PAAD may only be applied in conjunction with the sub-slab VAF listed in Table 1 (2.0×10^{-2}).

Use of the PAAD constitutes reliance on an engineered system to increase air exchange within the parkade. Therefore, use of the PAAD constitutes risk management for vapours and only a risk-based contaminated sites legal instrument can be obtained. Refer to [Technical Guidance 4](#) for more information regarding risk management of vapour contamination.

¹ "footprint" is defined as the entire area of the foundation of the structure, not including stairs, patios or decks.

4.3 Lateral attenuation adjustment divisors

In certain circumstances where the target breathing zone (e.g. current or future building, outdoor receptor location) is offset laterally from the point at which vapours have been characterized, the ministry Table 1 vertical VAFs may be adjusted to account for additional attenuation in the lateral direction.

Lateral offset distances are measured horizontally at ground surface from the location of the sampling point to the target breathing zone.

Use the LAADs specified in Table 3 as the AAD term in the equation in Section 4.0.

4.3.1 Conditions for using LAADs

LAADs can only be applied if the following conditions are met:

- Site conditions do not preclude the use of the Table 1 vertical VAFs, including requirements described in Section 3.1;
- The measured or predicted vapour concentration in indoor or outdoor air at the point of measurement is less than or equal to 10 times the vapour standard of the Regulation;
- The point of application of the LAADs (i.e. the point at which subsurface or sub-slab vapours have been characterized) must in all cases be beyond the vapour source in soil or groundwater (i.e., at the boundary of detectable concentrations in soil and groundwater); and
- The contaminant plume must be stable or decreasing in concentration and extent.

C. Indoor exposure – Commercial/industrial uses

	Indoor Exposure – CL/IL LAAD ^{1,2}									
Sample depth ³ (m)	Lateral offset distance ^{4,5} (m)									
	1.0	1.5	2.0	3.0	5.0	7.0	10.0	15.0	20.0	30.0
≤ 1.0	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	4	5	7
1.5		1	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	6
2.0			1	1	1	2	2	3	4	6
3.0				1	1	2	2	3	3	5
5.0					1	1	2	2	3	4
7.0						1	1	2	2	3
10.0							1	1	2	2
15.0								1	1	2
20.0									1	1
30.0										1

¹ LAADs are to be used in conjunction with Table 1 vertical VAFs, if no precluding conditions exist.

² For blank cells, LAAD = 1, and for distance and depth combinations outside the range of the above table, no adjustment for lateral attenuation may be applied.

³ The sample depth for selection of the LAAD should be the same as that used to select the Table 1 vertical VAF.

⁴ The lateral offset distance is the horizontal distance from the vertical point at which subsurface or sub-slab vapours have been characterized to the breathing zone under investigation (nearest edge of a current or future building or the nearest point of an outdoor exposure area).

⁵ If the lateral distance is between two lateral offset increments (e.g., between 10 and 15 m), select the attenuation factor associated with the smaller lateral offset increment (i.e., in this example, 10 m).

For more information, please direct inquiries to site@gov.bc.ca.

Revision history

Approved Date	Effective Date	Document Version	Notes
	November 1, 2017	1.0	Created for CSR Stage 10 amendment
March 20, 2023	March 1, 2023	2.0	Updated for CSR Stage 14 amendment
August 12, 2024	August 12, 2024	3.0	Updated for Protocol 19 amendment