Electronic Clocks for Timing Irrigation Advance

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Introduction

One of the basic parameters affecting surface irrigation performance is the rate of water advance in a furrow, basin or border. Rate-of-advance varies with the soil infiltration rate which, in turn, varies both within a given field and with time throughout the irrigation season. Mathematical models can predict rate-of-advance; however, they depend upon a knowledge of the actual field soil infiltration rate which is difficult to accurately measure or predict. Thus, rate-of-advance field data are needed to supplement model predictions and to calibrate the models. Recently, many rate-of-advance studies have been conducted to determine the effect of surge flow on the soil's intake rate and the water advance rate. Water applied intermittently advances to the end of the furrow in less application time for most soils than when applied in continuous streams.

Monitoring rate-of-advance in a number of furrows requires consid-

Footnotes 1, 2, and 3:
Location should be Kimberly, ID
erable man-hours and several people, particularly if a number of repli-
cations are made with intermittent flow. The number of people required
to monitor rate-of-advance can be greatly reduced by using water sen-
sors and time recorders spaced down the length of the furrow to record the
time that the advancing water front reaches a given point. Low-cost,
electronic "stick-on" clocks, modified for this purpose, along with their
associated sensor, are described in this paper.

**Electronic Clocks**

Stick-on electronic digital clocks are available in many drug and variety
stores and can be obtained in quantity for about $2 each. These clocks
were modified by attaching a sensor to serve as a switch between the
clock’s battery and the clock circuit. One side of the battery is isolated
from the clock circuit with a small piece of electrical insulating tape in-
serted between the battery and its cover plate as shown in Figs. 1 and
2. The battery cover plate serves as the electrical contact for one battery
terminal. The stripped ends of wire leads from the sensor are placed on
each side of the insulating tape so that one lead makes electrical contact
with the battery, and the other makes electrical contact with the battery
cover plate. The wire leads are held in place by the clamping action of
the cover plate when it is replaced. A knot is tied in each wire lead
before it goes through a small hole in the rear clock cover to keep the
wires from being pulled loose. As shown in Fig. 1, there is usually space
within the clock enclosure where the knots can be tucked out of the way.
However, the clocks are made by different manufacturers and some have
more room to place the knots than others. Small diameter wire (Alpha
1853-26 Ga or equivalent with thin insulation) was used to minimize the
space required. When two single wires were used, they were covered
with a small diameter plastic hose to avoid tangling. Two-conductor cab-
le with an insulating jacket, if available, would be more convenient to
use. The clocks can be waterproofed by covering them with a liquid latex
or plastic dip coating.

**Sensor**

Water sensors were constructed as shown in Fig. 2. The two sensor
electrodes were made from 2.4 mm (3/32 in.) diam brass welding rod.
They were pressed through 2.2 mm (0.086 in.) diam holes drilled in a
30 mm (1-1/8 in.) × 30 mm (1-1/8 in.) × 10 mm (3/8 in.) PVC block.
The depression in the center of the sensor block was made with a modi-
fied 16 mm (5/8 in.) speedbor drill bit. The centering point on the bit
was made smaller and shortened to about 3 mm (1/8 in.) length so that
the point would not cut through the block. The 38 cm (15 in.) long wire
leads from the clock were soldered to the ends of the electrodes with
the terminal connections covered with a protective coating such as epoxy
or similar material. One sensor electrode extends through the block to
provide mechanical support when placed in the furrow. A spot of solder
or epoxy was placed on this electrode on the bottom side of the block
to prevent its movement in the block when inserted into hard soil.

Once a technician becomes familiar with the technique, the clock-sen-
sors can be assembled quite rapidly. One person can assemble approxi-
ately 40 units/day.

**Field Use**

The sensors can be rapidly installed in a test furrow or downfield in
a border or basin by one person while measuring the distance from the
inlet. The sensor is placed in the furrow or on the ground with the top
of the block level with the ground surface at the point where the ad-
ancing water front is to be monitored (Fig. 3). A rack can be used to

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**FIG. 1.—Water Sensor and Inside Rear View of Modified Electronic Clock Showing Wire Connections for Sensor**

**FIG. 2.—Diagram of Water Sensor and Its Electrical Connections to Electronic Clock**
time to be lost. The clock time, \( T_c \), is recorded as the display time minus
the one hour turn-on time, \( (t_d - 1) \), (also in 24-hr format if \( t_d - 1 \)
exceeds 12). Thus, the advance time, \( T_x \), to any point downfield is de-
termined from

\[
T_x = T_2 - (T_1 + T_c) \]  \hspace{1cm} (1)

in which the hours and minutes are added algebraically, individually.
The clocks can be picked up and re-installed to monitor advance further
downfield by cleaning and drying the block depression to interrupt the
electrical current path.

These clock sensors were used in surface irrigation water advance
studies during the summer of 1984. They were reliable and greatly fa-
cilitated obtaining field data with a limited number of personnel. They
were also useful in reducing the amount of walking necessary when there
was full crop cover in the field which made it difficult to both walk through
the crop and visually observe the advancing water front.

FIG. 3.—Clock Sensor In Furrow: (a) Before Irrigation; (b) During Irrigation

facilitate carrying and handling of the sensors, if desired.
The amount of electrical current required to operate a clock is minutely
small. Therefore, the depression in the sensor block must be dry so as
not to provide an electrical conducting path when the sensor is installed.
Since the soil can dry considerably and still conduct enough current to
operate the clock, considerable time can usually elapse after irrigation is
completed before the clock-sensors are picked up when the block
depression fills with water and soil. However, when trash is present,
they should be picked up as soon as practical, since the sensors tend to
catch trash which can block the furrow and may cause erosion around
the block.

When used in furrows, the clocks are laid on the ridges to keep them
dry. In basins or borders, the clocks could be supported by a stake or
mounted directly on an enlarged version of the sensor to keep them
above the water. Since the clocks are not waterproof, they should be
protected from rainfall should it occur. When the advancing water front
reaches the water-sensor, the water completes the electrical circuit be-
tween the electrodes, and the clock is immediately turned on, as shown
in Fig. 3. The clocks are designed to turn on at 1:00 a.m. Only about
1% of those we have obtained started at another time.

To determine the advance time, the time of day at the beginning of
irrigation, \( T_1 \), is recorded in 24-hr format, as well as the time of day,
\( T_2 \), at which the clock-sensor is picked up. The time displayed by the
sensor clock, \( t_d \), must be noted before the clock is picked up, or the
electrical circuit may be broken, causing the display to go blank and the