

**FOREST PRODUCTIVITY AS A FUNCTION OF ROOT GROWTH
OPPORTUNITY**

by

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

IN

FORESTRY

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October, 2002
Blacksburg, Virginia

Key words: Forest Soils, Compaction, Bulk Density, Soil Strength, Soil Water, Least Limiting Water Range, Root Growth

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(ABSTRACT)

Compaction caused by certain intensive forest management practices can reduce tree growth, but the causes of growth reduction are usually complex interactions between soil properties and tree species. We used a 7 by 7 factorial greenhouse experiment to create a matrix of bulk density (ρ_b) and volumetric water content (θ_v) to determine soil compaction effects on seedling growth of: (i) ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa* Dougl. ex Laws) grown on Dome and Cohasset soils from California; (ii) shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*) on a Clarksville soil from Missouri; and (iii) loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) on an Argent soil from South Carolina. We also characterized soil physical properties and determined compaction effects on soil strength, air/water balance and least limiting water range (LLWR) for each of the soils. Optimum water content for compaction varied from 19% (Argent) to 34% (Cohasset). Compactive effort curves varied for the four soils; maximum ρ_b were 1.33, 1.52, 1.58 and 1.65 Mg m⁻³ for the Cohasset, Dome, Clarksville, and Argent soils, respectively. Compression indices ranged from 0.33 to 0.38. In general, soil strength increased linearly with a θ_v decrease at the higher ρ_b levels, but the effect varied with each soil type. Cohasset, with the lowest ρ_b , had the highest soil strength (3.5 MPa), while strengths exceeding 2.0 MPa were not found for the Argent soil. Compaction affected the soil water retention curves and associated air/water balance parameters for all soils, particularly the Cohasset and Dome soils. Aeration porosity became limiting at ρ_b of 1.13, 1.42, 1.44 and 1.55 for the Cohasset, Dome, Clarksville and Argent soils respectively. The LLWR was lowest for the Dome and Argent soils (0.13 cm³ cm⁻³) and in some cases increased with compaction. Models of root growth opportunity were developed using multiple regression. The general model of root length

density (RLD) = $b_0 + b_1 \theta_v + b_2 \rho_b + b_3 \theta_v^2$ described rooting response for the Clarksville-shortleaf and Argent-loblolly soil-species combinations ($p = 0.005$). However, the root response of ponderosa pine on Cohasset was linear and pine roots in the Dome soil responded to an interaction between θ_v and ρ_b . No model adequately described oak seedling growth as a function of ρ_b and θ_v . High soil strength at low water contents and low aeration porosity at high water contents limited root growth. Shoot mass of seedlings growing within the least limiting water range (LLWR) was greater than those growing outside the range for all soil-species combinations except the Argent-loblolly pine ($p = 0.05$). The loblolly pines had greater shoot mass at volumetric water contents above the upper LLWR limits (aeration limiting). The LLWR is a promising method for integrating compaction's influence on soil properties and thus root growth potential since single factors did not appear to adequately explain each soil's compressibility. Furthermore, response surface models of RLD as a function of θ_v and ρ_b in conjunction with the LLWR and seasonal site water data have potential for determining compaction-induced soil limitations for tree growth, but need to be calibrated for both soil and species.

Acknowledgements

This research was sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service, Long-Term Soil Productivity Study cooperators and Virginia Tech State University. I would like to thank Dr. Jim Burger, Dr. John Seiler, Dr. Ray Reneau, and Dr. Bob Powers for providing their advice, wisdom and patience over the many years I spent working on my thesis. I would also like to thank Richard Kreh and Jack Bird at the Reynolds Research Center who were invaluable in keeping my seedlings alive and measured.

During my graduate work, I took a leave of absence to spend time with my beautiful young son who was born in 1999. I will forever be grateful for the support I received when I returned to finish my graduate program. It has been a long, tortuous path, but thanks to those around me I finally made it.

Jim Burger has been an inspiration and a mentor, both on a professional and personal level. Thank you, Jim. I still marvel at the amazing patience and absolute support I've received while trying to balance my family life and pursue my love of soils, trees and science. His vision as a scientist has inspired me and his steadfast patience and understanding amaze me. I was not the easiest grad student to work with, yet he supported my return and helped me to achieve a life goal while inspiring me to go on. Are you ready for another four years, Jim?

I learned so much from other students along the way and also made great friends. Thanks Masato, Dan K., Tonya and Andy. Finally, I have to thank my husband Rob, who has endured my long-term masters program, supported me throughout the process, and shared my pain and joys along the way. Thank you Rob.

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