

# User's Guide for Polyethylene-Based Passive Diffusion Bag Samplers to Obtain Volatile Organic Compound Concentrations in Wells

## Part 1: Deployment, Recovery, Data Interpretation, and Quality Control and Assurance

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Water-filled passive diffusion bag (PDB) samplers described in this report are suitable for obtaining concentrations of a variety of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in ground water at monitoring wells. The suggested application of the method is for long-term monitoring of VOCs in ground-water wells at well-characterized sites.

The effectiveness of the use of a single PDB sampler in a well is dependent on the assumption that there is horizontal flow through the well screen and that the quality of the water is representative of the ground water in the aquifer directly adjacent to the screen. If there are vertical components of intra-bore-hole flow, multiple intervals of the formation contributing to flow, or varying concentrations of VOCs vertically within the screened or open interval, then a multiple deployment of PDB samplers within a well may be more appropriate for sampling the well.

A typical PDB sampler consists of a low-density polyethylene (LDPE) lay-flat tube closed at both ends and containing deionized water. The sampler is positioned at the target horizon of the well by attachment to a weighted line or fixed pipe.

The amount of time that the sampler should be left in the well prior to recovery depends on the time required by the PDB sampler to equilibrate with ambient water and the time required for the environmental disturbance caused by sampler deployment to return to ambient conditions. The rate that the water within the PDB sampler equilibrates with ambient water depends on multiple factors, including the type of compound being sampled and the water temperature. The concentrations of benzene, *cis*-1,2-dichloroethene,

tetrachlorethene, trichloroethene, toluene, naphthalene, 1,2-dibromoethane, and total xylenes within the PDB samplers equilibrated with the concentrations in an aqueous mixture of those compounds surrounding the samplers under laboratory conditions within approximately 48 hours at 21 degrees Celsius (°C). A subsequent laboratory study of mixed VOCs at 10 °C showed that tetrachloroethene and trichloroethene were equilibrated by about 52 hours, but other compounds required longer equilibration times. Chloroethane, *cis*-1,2-dichloroethene, *trans*-1,2-dichloroethene, and 1,1-dichloroethene were not equilibrated at 52 hours, but appeared to be equilibrated by the next sampling point at 93 hours. Vinyl chloride, 1,1,1-trichloroethane, 1,2-dichloroethane, and 1,1-dichloroethane were not equilibrated at 93 hours, but were equilibrated by the next sampling point at 166 hours. Different equilibration times may exist for other compounds. Differences in equilibration times, if any, between single-solute or mixed VOC solutions have not yet been thoroughly examined.

The samplers should be left in place long enough for the well water, contaminant distribution, and flow dynamics to restabilize following sampler deployment. Laboratory and field data suggest that 2 weeks of equilibration probably is adequate for many applications; therefore, a minimum equilibration time of 2 weeks is suggested. In less permeable formations, longer equilibration times may be required. When applying PDB samplers in waters colder than previously tested (10 °C) or for compounds without sufficient corroborating data, a side-by-side comparison with conventional methodology is advisable to justify the field equilibration time.

Following the initial equilibration period, the samplers maintain equilibrium concentrations with the ambient water until recovery. Thus, there is no specified time for sampler recovery after initial equilibration. PDB samplers routinely have been left in ground waters having concentrations of greater than 500 parts per million (ppm) of trichloroethene for 3 months at a time with no loss of bag integrity, and at one site, the PDB samplers have been left in place in VOC-contaminated ground water for 1 year with no reported loss of sampler integrity. The effects of long-term (greater than 1 month) PDB-sampler deployment on sampler and sample integrity have not yet been thoroughly tested for a broad range of compounds and concentrations, however. Moreover, in some environments, development of a biofilm on the polyethylene may be a consequence of long-term deployment. Investigations of semipermeable membrane devices (SPMDs) have shown that the transfer of some compounds across a heavily biofouled polyethylene membrane may be reduced, but not stopped. If a heavy organic coating is observed on a PDB sampler, it is advisable to determine the integrity of the sample by comparison to a conventional sampling method before continuing to use PDB samplers for long-term deployment in that well.

Recovery consists of removing the samplers from the well and immediately transferring the enclosed water to 40-milliliter sampling vials for analysis. The resulting concentrations represent an integration of chemical changes over the most recent portion of the equilibration period (approximately 48 to 166 hours, depending on the water temperature and the type of compound).

The method has both advantages and limitations when compared to other sampling methods. Advantages include the potential for PDB samplers to eliminate or substantially reduce the amount of purge water associated with sampling. The samplers are relatively inexpensive and easy to deploy and recover. Because PDB samplers are disposable, there is no downhole equipment to be decontaminated between wells, and there is a minimum amount of field equipment required. The samplers also have the potential to delineate contaminant stratification in the formation across the open or screened intervals of monitoring wells where vertical hydraulic gradients are not present. In addition, the samplers integrate concentrations over time, which may range between about 48 to 166 hours depending on the compound of interest. Because the pore size of LDPE is only about

10 angstroms or less, sediment does not pass through the membrane into the bag. Thus, PDB samplers are not subject to interferences from turbidity. In addition, none of the data collected suggest that VOCs leach from the LDPE material, or that there is a detrimental effect on the VOC sample from the PDB material.

Water-filled polyethylene PDB samplers are not appropriate for all compounds. The samplers are not suitable for inorganic ions and have a limited applicability for non-VOCs and for some VOCs. For example, although methyl-*tert*-butyl ether and acetone and most semivolatile compounds are transmitted through the polyethylene bag, laboratory tests have shown that the resulting concentrations were lower than in ambient water. A variety of factors influence the ability of compounds to diffuse through the polyethylene. These factors include the molecular size and shape and the hydrophobic nature of the compound. Unpublished laboratory test data of semivolatile compounds in contact with PDB samplers showed a higher concentration of phthalates inside the PDB sampler than outside the PDB sampler, suggesting that the polyethylene may contribute phthalates to the enclosed water. Thus, the samplers should not be used to sample for phthalates.

VOC concentrations in PDB samplers represent concentrations in the vicinity of the sampler within the well screen or open interval. This may be a limitation for PDB samplers and some other types of sampling, such as low-flow sampling, if the ground-water contamination is above or below the screen or not in the sample intervals providing water movement to the PDB samplers. If there is a vertical hydraulic gradient in the well, then the concentrations in the sampler may represent the concentrations in the water flowing vertically past the sampler rather than in the formation directly adjacent to the sampler. Vertically spaced multiple PDB samplers may be needed in chemically stratified wells or where flow patterns through the screen change as a result of ground-water pumping or seasonal water-level fluctuations.

The purposes of this document are to present methods for PDB sampler deployment, and recovery; to discuss approaches to determine the applicability of passive diffusion samplers; and to discuss various factors influencing interpretation of the data. The intended audience for the methodology sections of this report is managers and field personnel involved in using PDB samplers. The discussion of passive diffusion sampler applicability and interpretation of the data is

suited for project managers, technical personnel, and the regulatory community. Part 2 of this report presents case studies of PDB sampler field applications.