



Ballast Degradation Characterized through Triaxial Testing

SUMMARY

Transportation Technology Center, Inc. (TTCI) has supported the development of a large-scale triaxial test device (Figure 1) for testing ballast size aggregate materials at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). This new test equipment uses monotonic compression and repeated load testing to characterize shear strength, resilient modulus, and permanent deformation behavior of railroad ballast materials. The investigation was performed as part of the heavy-axle-load (HAL) Track Substructure research initiative co-sponsored by the Association of American Railroads (AAR) and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

Preliminary test results from the triaxial test device indicated that ballast characteristics could be captured adequately at different levels of degradation. To simulate ballast degradation due to breakage and abrasion, Los Angeles (LA) abrasion tests were used to generate degraded limestone ballast samples.

The laboratory sieve analysis and triaxial tests produced the following results:

- Ballast degradation can cause significant changes in ballast grain size distributions as well as particle shape properties: LA Abrasion Tests produced particles that exhibited considerable breakdown.
- In permanent deformation testing, the heavily degraded ballast specimen with a Selig's Fouling Index (FI) of 40 had the highest

permanent deformation compared to the other specimens of new clean ballast and degraded ballast (coarse aggregate fraction) specimen. The specimen with coarse aggregate fraction (particles larger than 3/8 inch) from the degraded ballast yielded higher permanent deformation than the new clean ballast specimen.

- Ballast degradation did not lead to a significant strength loss in the monotonic shear strength tests. On the contrary, under dry sample conditions, the degraded ballast specimens with or without materials finer than 3/8 inch yielded higher strength than the new clean ballast specimen.

The triaxial test setup should provide a better understanding of the factors that affect ballast life-cycle and field performance.

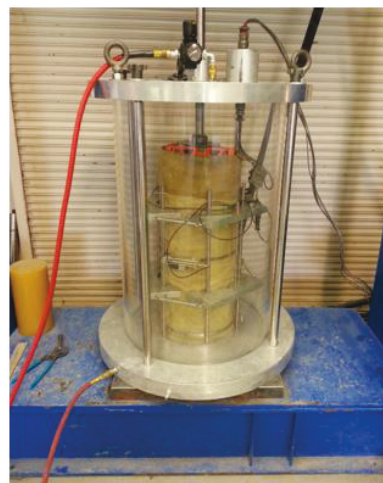


Figure 1. UIUC TX-24 Ballast Triaxial Tester

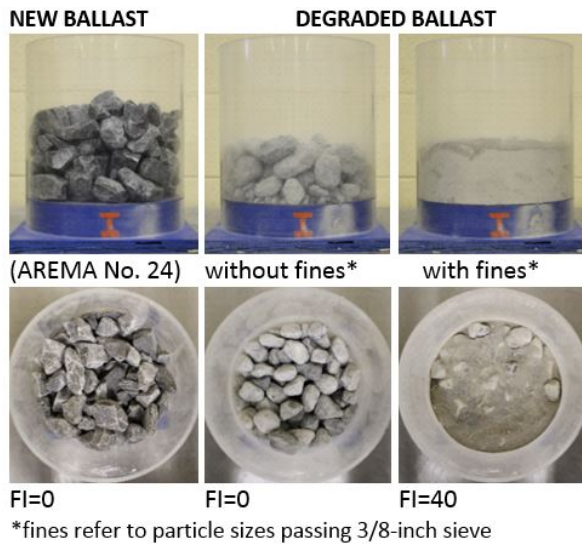


Figure 3. Side and top views of ballast aggregate packing

Triaxial Testing

A realistic dynamic pulse (similar to field train loading) with 0.4-second load duration and 0.6-second rest period was selected to evaluate permanent deformation characteristics of the ballast materials obtained before and after LA abrasion tests. The peak deviator stress repeatedly applied on the specimen was 24 psi (166 kPa) and the confining pressure was 8 psi (55 kPa).

A typical loading strain rate of 1 percent per minute was used, which corresponded to 0.1016 mm per second. All test specimens were monotonically loaded up to 10 percent axial strain at a confining pressure of 10 psi (69 kPa).

RESULTS

Figure 4 presents the results of the permanent deformation tests on the new clean ballast and degraded limestone ballast after 10,000 load cycles. The fully degraded ballast specimen (with fines), for which the FI was 40, clearly resulted in the highest permanent axial strain value of 1.32 percent. The degraded ballast specimen with coarse aggregates (without fines) had a

permanent axial strain value of 0.92 percent, whereas the new clean ballast specimen had a permanent axial strain value of 0.62 percent.

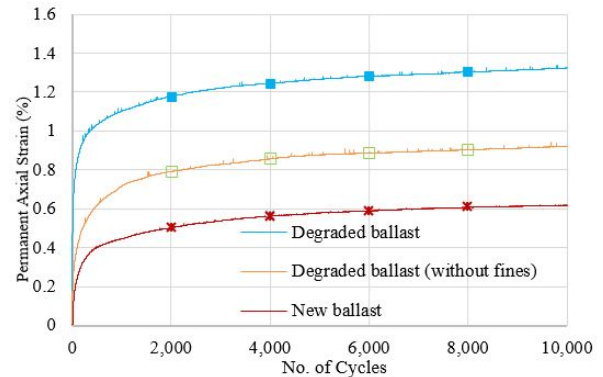


Figure 4. Side and top views of ballast aggregate packing

Figure 5 shows the results of the monotonic shear strength tests on the new clean ballast and cylindrical specimens of degraded limestone ballast for up to 10 percent axial strain. Interestingly, when dry fouled ballast specimens were compared to the new clean ballast material, particle degradation did not lead to significant strength loss in the dry-fouled ballast. On the contrary, both the fully degraded ballast with fines and the degraded ballast without fines (coarse aggregate) yielded higher strength than the new clean ballast specimen under dry sample testing conditions.

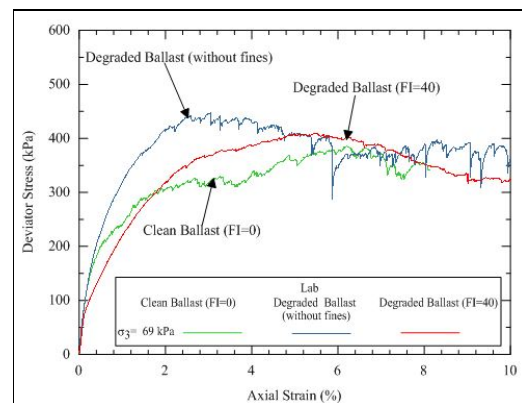


Figure 5. Deviator Stress and Axial Strain for New, Dry, Clean Ballast and Degraded Ballast



Comparing the gradations of the three ballast materials, the degraded ballast without fines was more “well” graded than the new clean ballast material. The smaller particles in the fully degraded ballast matrix helped to achieve higher density and better packing.

CONCLUSIONS

The ballast degradation tests produced the following results:

- As LA abrasion tests caused degradation in ballast, the particles tended to become smaller in size and significant amounts of fines (particles smaller than 3/8 inch) were generated. Particles that did not break became more rounded and smoother in texture.
- When the FI approached 40 (fully degraded ballast with fines), nearly all the voids were filled with fines, which resulted in loss of contact between large particles in the degraded ballast aggregate skeleton.
- Fully degraded ballast with fines (FI=40) yielded the highest permanent deformation, followed by the degraded ballast with no fines, and the new clean ballast resulted in the lowest deformation. On the contrary, the degraded ballast with or without fines yielded higher strength than the new clean ballast specimens when tested under dry conditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TTCI participated in this research under joint funding from the AAR and FRA as part of the HAL revenue service program. TTCI participants are Colin Basye and Dr. Dingqing Li. Dr. Erol Tutumluer and Yu Qian of the University of Illinois, Champaign (UIUC) provided LA Abrasion Tests, imaging analysis, and triaxial load tests.

CONTACT

Luis Maal
On-Site Resident Engineer Program Manager
Federal Railroad Administration
Office of Research and Development
55500 DOT Road
Pueblo, CO 81001
(719) 584-0551
luis.maal@dot.gov

Second Contact

Gary Carr
Chief – Track Division
Federal Railroad Administration
Office of Research and Development
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590
(202) 493-6354 gary.carr@dot.gov

KEYWORDS

Ballast degradation, triaxial testing, LA abrasion test

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