

Highway Traffic Noise Analysis and Abatement Policy and Guidance

Noise Fundamentals

As we all know, sound is created when an object moves; the rustling of leaves as the wind blows, the air passing through our vocal chords, the almost invisible movement of the speakers on a stereo. The movements cause vibrations of the molecules in air to move in waves like ripples on water. When the vibrations reach our ears, we hear what we call sound.

Noise is defined as unwanted sound. Sound is produced by the vibration of sound pressure waves in the air. Sound pressure levels are used to measure the intensity of sound and are described in terms of decibels. The decibel (dB) is a logarithmic unit which expresses the ratio of the sound pressure level being measured to a standard reference level. Sound is composed of various frequencies, but the human ear does not respond to all frequencies. Frequencies to which the human ear does not respond must be filtered out when measuring highway noise levels. Sound-level meters are usually equipped with weighting circuits which filter out selected frequencies. It has been found that the A-scale on a sound-level meter best approximates the frequency response of the human ear. Sound pressure levels measured on the A-scale of a sound meter are abbreviated dBA.

In addition to noise varying in frequency, noise intensity fluctuates with time. In the past few years, there has been a definite trend toward the use of the equivalent (energy-average) sound level as the descriptor of environmental noise in the U.S. The equivalent sound level is the steady- state, A-weighted sound level which contains the same amount of acoustic energy as the actual time-varying, A-weighted sound level over a specified period of time. If the time period is 1 hour, the descriptor is the hourly equivalent sound level, Leq(h), which is widely used by SHAs as a descriptor of traffic noise. An additional descriptor, which is sometimes used, is the L10. This is simply the A-weighted sound level that is exceeded 10 percent of the time.

A few general relationships may be helpful at this time in understanding sound generation and propagation. First, as already mentioned above, decibels are logarithmic units. Consequently, sound levels cannot be added by ordinary arithmetic means. A chart for decibel addition is shown in Table 1. From this table it can be seen that the sound pressure level from two equal sources is 3 dB greater than the sound pressure level of just one source. Therefore, two trucks producing 90 dB each will combine to produce 93 dB, not 180 dB. In other words, a doubling of the noise source produces only a 3 dB increase in the sound pressure level. Studies have shown that this increase is barely detectable by the human ear.

Table 3: Decibel Changes, Loudness, and Energy Loss

Sound Level Change	Relative Loudness	Acoustic Energy Loss
0 dBA	Reference	0
-3 dBA	Barely Perceptible Change	50%
-5 dBA	Readily Perceptible Change	67%
-10 dBA	Half as Loud	90%
-20 dBA	1/4 as Loud	99%
-30 dBA	1/8 as Loud	99.9%

Table 4: Rules for Combining Sound Levels by "Decibel Addition"

When two decibel values differ by	Add the following amount to the higher value
0 or 1 dB	3 dB
2 or 3 dB	2 dB
4 to 9 dB	1 dB
10 dB or more	0 dB

For noise levels known or desired to an accuracy of ± 1 decibel (acceptable for traffic noise analyses):

Secondly, an increase or decrease of 10 dB in the sound pressure level will be perceived by an observer to be a doubling or halving of the sound. For example, a sound at 70 dB will sound twice as loud as a sound at 60 dB.

Finally, sound intensity decreases in proportion with the square of the distance from the source. Generally, sound levels for a point source will decrease by 6 dBA for each doubling of distance. Sound levels for a highway line source vary differently with distance, because sound pressure waves are propagated all along the line and overlap at the point of measurement. A long, closely spaced continuous line of vehicles along a roadway becomes a line source and produces a 3 dBA decrease in sound level for each doubling of distance. However, experimental evidence has shown that where sound from a highway propagates close to "soft" ground (e.g., plowed farmland, grass, crops, etc.), the most suitable dropoff rate to use is not 3 dBA but rather 4.5 dBA per distance doubling. This 4.5 dBA dropoff rate is usually used in traffic noise analyses.

For the purpose of highway traffic noise analyses, motor vehicles fall into one of three categories: (1) automobiles - vehicles with two axles and four wheels, (2) medium trucks - vehicles with two axles and six wheels, and (3) heavy trucks - vehicles with three or more axles. The emission levels of all three vehicle types increase as a function of the logarithm of their speed.

The level of highway traffic noise depends on three things: (1) the volume of the traffic, (2) the speed of the traffic, and (3) the number of trucks in the flow of the traffic. Generally, the loudness of traffic noise is increased by heavier traffic volumes, higher speeds, and greater numbers of trucks. Vehicle noise is a combination of the noises produced by the engine, exhaust, and tires. The loudness of traffic noise can also be increased by defective mufflers or other faulty equipment on vehicles. Any condition (such as a steep incline) that causes heavy laboring of motor vehicle engines will also increase traffic noise levels. In addition, there are other, more complicated factors that affect the loudness of traffic noise. For example, as a person moves away from a highway, traffic noise levels are reduced by distance, terrain, vegetation, and natural and manmade obstacles. Traffic noise is not usually a serious problem for people who live more than 150 meters from heavily traveled freeways or more than 30 to 60 meters from lightly traveled roads.