



Insight — Technical Overview 2.05

Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring of Wind Turbine Blades and Large Structures

Introduction

Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring (D-DEA) is a new concept for the application of Dielectric Analysis (DEA) in manufacturing. Instead of a single expensive base instrument and many long extension cables, D-DEA uses multiple inexpensive instruments connected along a single RS-485 communications line, as shown in Figure 1.

Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring for the first time allows the use of DEA to monitor many locations in very large structures like wind turbine blades and composite beams. Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring also avoids the tangle of extension cables used for monitoring parts requiring multiple sensors, such as aircraft and spacecraft components.

Compared to conventional DEA instruments, Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring:

- Is less expensive
- Avoids long sensor cables which degrade signals to base instrument
- Uses short sensor cables which preserve signals to D-DEA units
- Integrates DEA into a standard RS-485 process control network
- Allows up to 256 DEA channels operating simultaneously
- Extends the distance of DEA channels to 4000 feet (1890 meters), the RS-485 distance limit
- Enables DEA monitoring and process control of very large structures

Dielectric cure monitoring uses the same sensors and measurements for research, quality control and manufacturing applications. Dielectric Analysis correlates with laboratory tests such as differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) or dynamic mechanical analysis (DMA). As a result, DEA can act as the “go between” that brings information from the research lab to the manufacturing floor, and from the manufacturing floor to the manager responsible for product quality.

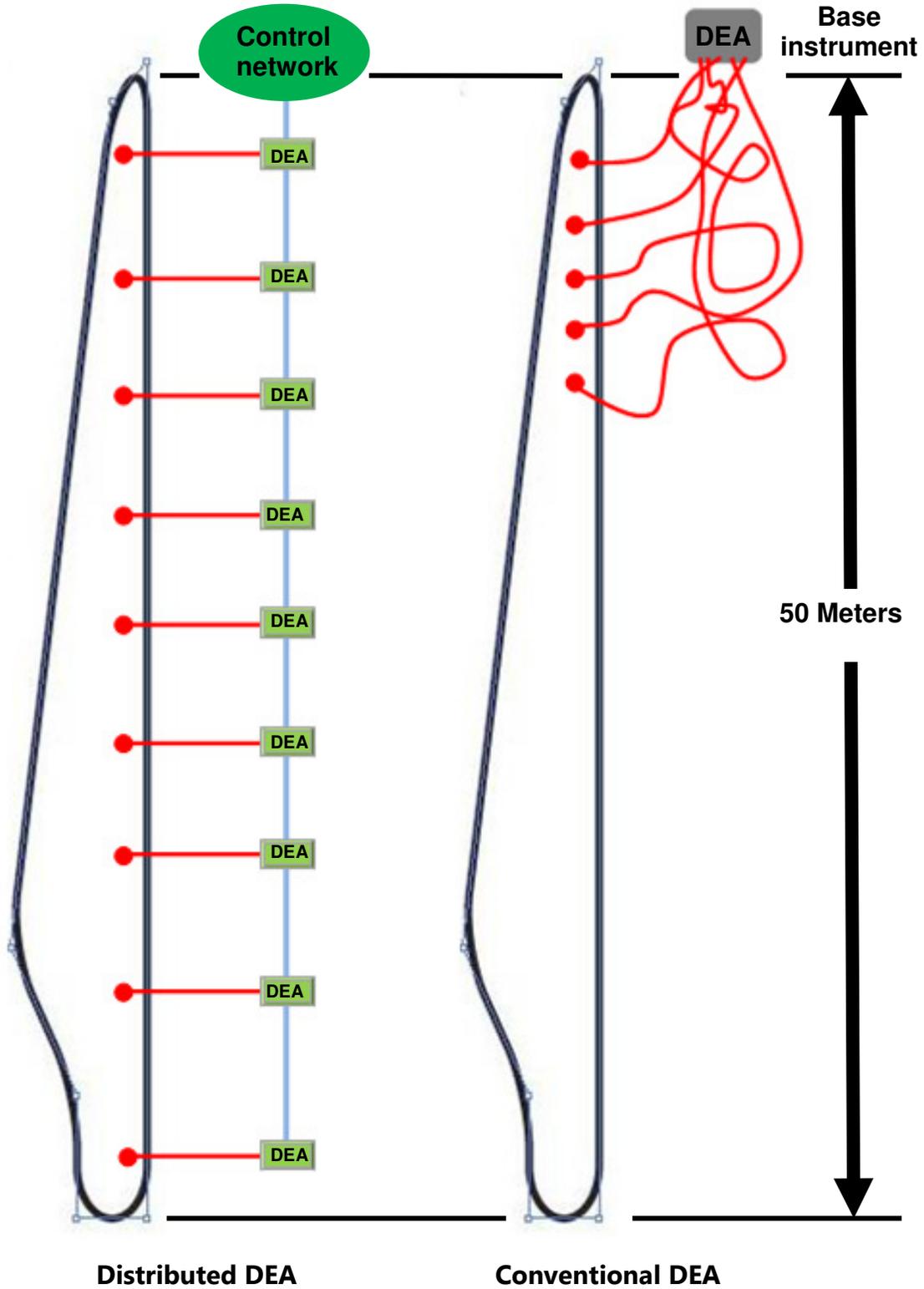


Figure 1
Distributed DEA compared to conventional DEA
(Wind turbine blade manufacture)

Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring with the LT-439

The LT-439 Dielectric Channel of Figure 2 is a cost effective, compact instrument designed for thermoset cure monitoring in R&D, Quality Control/Quality Assurance and manufacturing. When used with either disposable or reusable dielectric/conductivity sensors, like those shown in Figure 3, the LT-439 Dielectric Channel enables Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring in all processing environments.



Figure 2
LT-439 Dielectric Channel for Distributed DEA

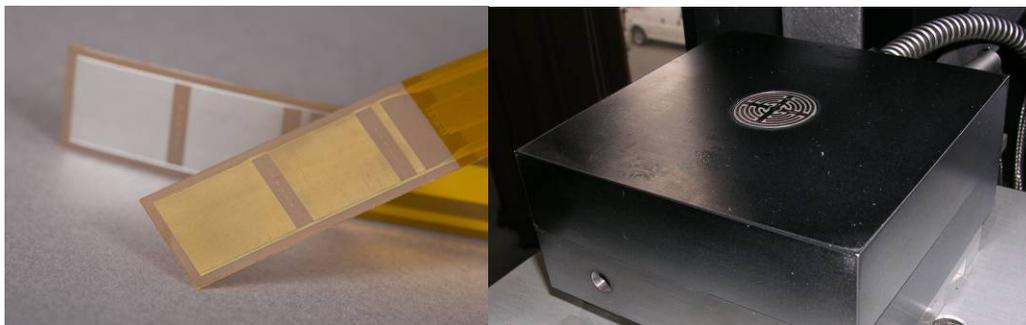


Figure 3
Disposable (left) and reusable (right) dielectric sensors

Measurements from the LT-439 may be interfaced to a control network through its standard RS-232 serial port or optional RS-485 serial port. Each LT-439 supports one dielectric sensor and one thermocouple. Up to 256 individual Dielectric Channels may be connected to a single RS-485 line. This low-cost flexibility eliminates complex cabling and allows simultaneous, multi-channel monitoring of cure state at any point in a large part.

The standard LT-439 Dielectric Channel has 10 Hz, 100 Hz, 1 kHz and 10 kHz excitation frequencies. An extended frequency option expands the range to 1 Hz – 10 kHz with additional frequencies within each decade.

DEA in manufacturing

Dielectric cure monitoring can immediately improve productivity for high value items like wind turbine blades. These blades, often more than 50 meters long, are fabricated in a mold. The thickness of the blade and the exotherm during processing vary along its length. Consequently, the rate of cure also varies along its length, and manufacturers must use experience and guesswork to determine the optimum demold time. Removing a blade too soon can cause cracks because it is not stiff enough, and removing a blade later than necessary reduces throughput.

Dielectric sensors installed in the mold at strategic locations, or perhaps every five meters along its length, for example, can determine when cure along the entire part has reached a desired point. Only at that time would the wind turbine blade be removed from its mold. As a benefit, if a factory ships even as little as one or two more blades a week, profitability increases.

During the manufacture of composite materials, parts are typically cured with a fixed schedule for time and temperature. Currently, DEA is most often used to confirm the consistency of parts. The nominal cure of a sheet molding compound (SMC) automobile body panel might look like Figure 4. Ion viscosity is the frequency independent electrical resistivity, and is a sensitive probe of cure state.

By comparing cure profiles, every panel can be judged against this nominal curve. Results for each panel can be recorded for statistical quality control (SQC), and deviations beyond defined limits indicate the process has drifted.

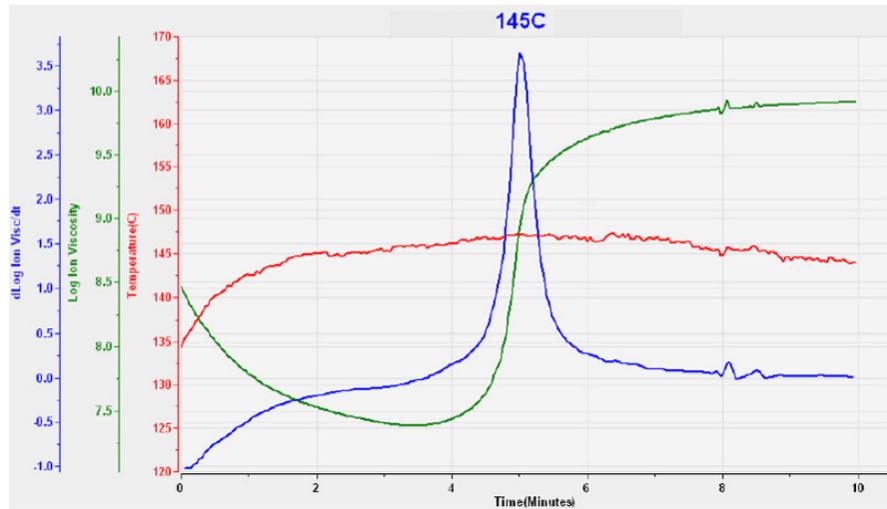


Figure 4
Typical sheet molding compound (SMC) cure

For highly critical parts such as composite aircraft or spacecraft components, every step in manufacturing is documented, both to record that the part is made according to specification and for analysis in the event of failure. Many manufacturers measure temperature as a very indirect and inaccurate way to infer the progress of cure. DEA, however, is a direct indicator of cure state. Dielectric cure monitoring is valuable for documentation because no other technique can observe cure state in manufacturing and in real-time.

Closed loop process control

Related to productivity is the possibility of closed loop process control. Figure 5 shows how Critical Points, which identify key events during cure, vary with temperature for the sheet molding compound of Figure 4. Because the reaction is thermally driven, the time to end of cure decreases with higher processing temperatures.

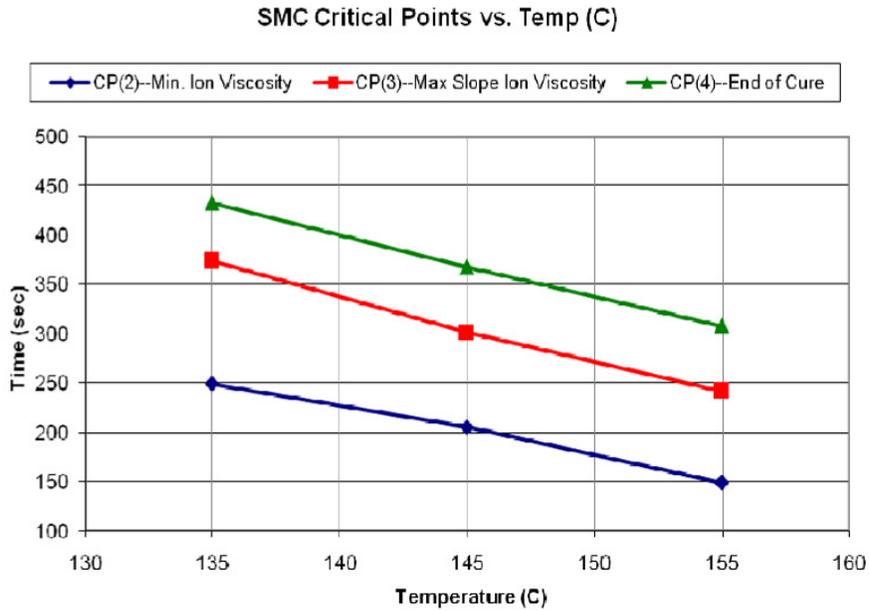


Figure 5
Variation of time to end of cure with temperature

Manufacturers of molded thermosets use timers to determine when products are cured and may be removed from a press. This standard practice must allow for normal variation in process temperature and other factors that affect cure. To be conservative, demold time is chosen to guarantee that all parts are good, with the result that some parts may be cured longer than necessary. Over many thousands of parts, the use of timers wastes considerable time, effort and productivity.

One study of closed loop process control used the hardware of Figure 6 at a company that manufactures commercial SMC products. A reusable dielectric sensor was embedded in the lower mold. The sensor was coated with mold release before each charge of SMC was loaded. Then the 2000-ton press was closed. Upon detecting end of cure, the dielectric cure monitor automatically issued a signal to open the press.

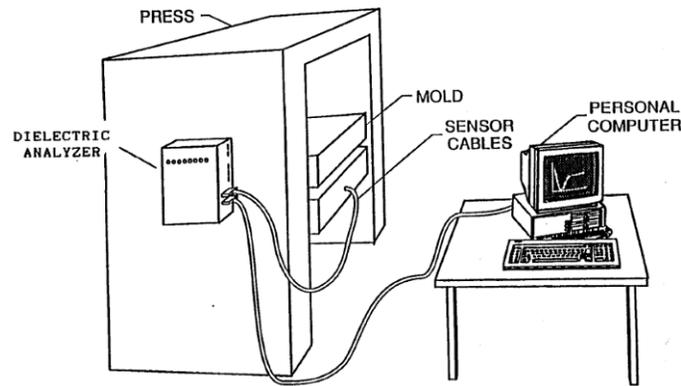


Figure 6
Closed-loop process control with dielectric cure monitoring (ref. 1)

Figure 7 shows the distribution of cure time during the production of about 1000 parts. A fixed timer setting would have been 60 seconds to ensure 100% good parts. In comparison, closed loop control with dielectric cure monitoring reduced average press cycle time to 50 seconds.¹ This 10 second reduction would have saved \$70,000/year/press in labor costs alone.

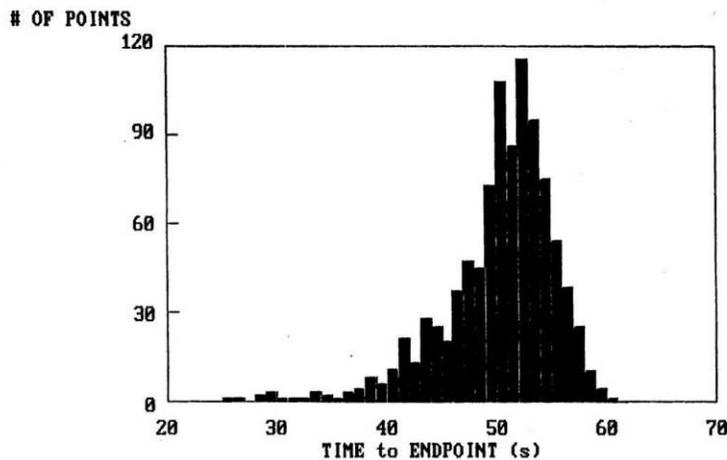


Figure 7
Distribution of SMC cure time for 1000 parts (ref. 1)

In large composite structures, such as a wind turbine blade, bridge beam or an aircraft fuselage, different locations cure at various rates because of differences in thickness and thermal environment. If sections of a large part have independent heaters, as shown in Figure 8, then dielectric measurements can provide feedback for a control system. This system can adjust temperatures so all sections cure at a uniform rate for optimum throughput.

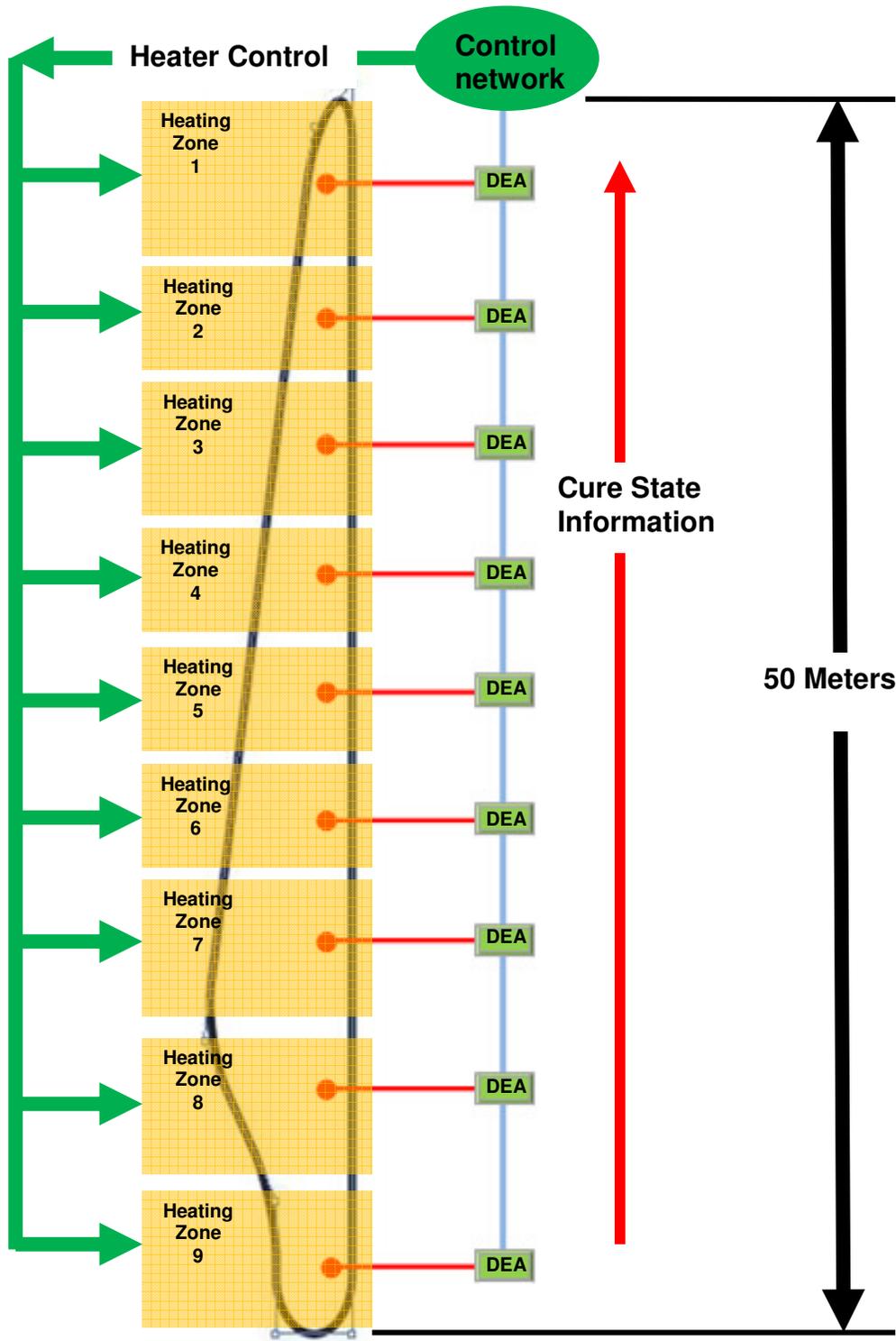


Figure 8
Distributed DEA for closed loop process control
(Wind turbine blade manufacture)

Conclusion

Distributed Dielectric Cure Monitoring (D-DEA) with the LT-439 Dielectric Channel is a new method of implementing dielectric cure monitoring for wind turbine blades and other large composite structures. By placing inexpensive, individual DEA instruments at desired points, D-DEA avoids long extension cables which can degrade the sensor signal. A process control network can communicate with up to 256 LT-439 Dielectric Channel Units, enabling cure monitoring of as many points as needed as far as 4000 feet (1890 meters) away from the base station.

Dielectric cure monitoring (DEA) is a simple electrical measurement that uses the same sensors and methods in research, quality control and manufacturing applications. Dielectric analysis correlates with measurements from purely laboratory tests, such as differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) or dynamic mechanical analysis (DMA). As a result, DEA can act as the “go between” that brings information from the research lab to the manufacturing floor, and from the manufacturing floor to the manager responsible for product quality.

References

1. Day, D.R. and Lee, H.L., “Analysis and Control of SMC Part to Part Variations,” Session 13-C of *Proceedings of the 17th Annual Conference, Composites Institute, the Society of the Plastics Industry, Inc., Feb 3-6, 1992.*



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