

# A Real-Time Decision-Making Framework for Post-Flood Road Closure in Moisture-Sensitive Unbound Granular Pavements

Ayesh Dushmantha, Chaminda Gallage

School of Civil and Environmental Engineering, QUT, Brisbane, Australia, [ayesh.gamaralalage@hdr.qut.edu.au](mailto:ayesh.gamaralalage@hdr.qut.edu.au)

Jinjiang Zhong

Logan City Council, Logan, Queensland, Australia

**ABSTRACT:** Unbound Granular Materials (UGMs) are a cost-effective and widely used component of road pavements in Australia, particularly in low-traffic regions. However, their performance is highly sensitive to moisture ingress resulting from rainfall and flooding, especially in areas exposed to extreme climatic conditions. This study investigates the critical thresholds at which UGMs begin to lose structural integrity as saturation increases. Repeated Load Triaxial (RLT) tests were conducted to evaluate two key performance indicators, resilient modulus ( $M_r$ ) and plastic strain ( $\epsilon_p$ ), under varying Degrees of Saturation (DoS) and stress levels. The results reveal that  $M_r$  increases with DoS up to a critical threshold (DoS = 0.83), beyond which it declines sharply. Simultaneously,  $\epsilon_p$  exhibits exponential growth under high saturation. These trends were modelled using newly developed empirical equations, enabling the identification of a "DoS range of vulnerability to damage". The developed models achieved high accuracy ( $R^2 = 0.98$  for  $M_r$  and  $R^2 = 0.86$  for  $\epsilon_p$ ) and were validated using literature-based data ( $R^2 > 0.95$  for both  $M_r$  and  $\epsilon_p$ ). By integrating these models with real-time sensor data, critical periods of moisture exceedance were identified under both normal and extreme climatic conditions. This facilitates improved real-time pavement management during critical situations such as flooding, as guided by the proposed procedure.

**KEYWORDS:** Unbound Granular Pavements, Moisture Dependent Resilient Modulus, Flood, Road resilience, Real time pavement Monitoring

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Australia's extensive road network spans over 900,000 km and is vital for maintaining connectivity, particularly in rural and regional areas (Clark & Gallage, 2020, Clark et al., 2018, Klompmaker et al., 2024, Gedara & Udukumburage, 2024, Cheah et al., 2016). A large portion of this network comprises low-volume roads, commonly constructed using UGMs due to their affordability, availability, and satisfactory performance under standard traffic loads (Jayalath et al., 2024, Dushmantha et al., 2024, Jayalath et al., 2021, Austroads, 2017, Weerasinghe et al., 2019). These materials, such as gravel, crushed rock, and lateritic soils, derive strength from interparticle friction and matric suction when unsaturated (Dutta & Kodikara, 2022, Sangsefidi et al., 2021). However, their performance deteriorates significantly under saturated conditions, leading to a loss of suction-induced cohesion and mechanical stability (Jayakody Arachchige et al., 2012, Gallage et al., 2012, Gallage et al., 2013a, Gallage et al., 2017, Gui et al., 2022).

Given Australia's climatic diversity, from arid zones to tropical regions, UGMs are particularly vulnerable to moisture variation, which is exacerbated by projected increases in extreme rainfall due to climate change. For instance, the 2022 Queensland floods caused over AUD 500 million in road damage (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022), and rainfall intensity is projected to increase by 15–30% by 2050 (Takhellambam et al., 2024, Wang et al., 2014). Understanding how moisture affects UGM behaviour under repeated traffic loading is therefore essential to ensuring long-term pavement resilience.

Two key parameters commonly used to evaluate UGM performance are the resilient modulus ( $M_r$ ) and accumulated plastic strain ( $\epsilon_p$ ).  $M_r$  quantifies elastic recovery under cyclic loading and is a cornerstone of mechanistic-empirical design (Dushmantha et al., 2025a, Li et al., 2019, Chowdhury et al., 2021), while  $\epsilon_p$  captures irreversible deformation linked to rutting (Gu et al., 2016, Gu et al., 2017, Luan et al., 2023, Dareeju et al., 2017, Jayakody et al., 2019, Ishikawa et al., 2021). Excessive  $\epsilon_p$  can accelerate surface degradation by promoting water ponding and undermining structural capacity

(Dushmantha et al., 2025b, Dushmantha & Gallage, 2025, Dutta et al., 2024, Xiao et al., 2018, Askarinejad et al., 2018, Cheah et al., 2017).

Among all influencing factors, moisture content is particularly dynamic and externally driven, governed by climatic elements such as rainfall, temperature, humidity, wind, and solar radiation (Maha Madakalapuge et al., 2022, Maha Madakalapuge et al., 2024, Dushmantha & Jayakody). Increases in moisture, especially beyond optimum compaction levels, reduce suction (Udukumburage et al., 2019, Abeykoon et al., 2017, Abeykoon et al., 2018) and interparticle resistance, leading to lower  $M_r$  and higher  $\epsilon_p$  (Rahman & Erlingsson, 2016a, Rahman & Erlingsson, 2016b, Kodikara et al., 2014). Laboratory evidence confirms that a rising DoS correlates with reduced stiffness and increased deformation (Dutta & Kodikara, 2022, Gallage et al., 2013b), and these effects are amplified under traffic-induced cyclic loading (Alnedawi et al., 2018, Gallage et al., 2015).

Despite substantial experimental research, two critical knowledge gaps remain. First, there is no consensus on the critical DoS threshold at which UGMs shift from stable to degrading behaviour. For example, Dutta & Kodikara (2022) reported a peak  $M_r$  at DoS = 0.4 using a Constant Radial Stiffness Test (CRST), whereas Tatsuoka & Correia (2018) noted performance degradation at DoS = 0.7 based on CBR tests. Other studies using Geogauge data (Pu, 2002) and further laboratory trials (Dutta et al., 2024) showed considerable variability, with stiffness loss occurring below the optimum DoS. These inconsistencies likely stem from material differences, test setups, and moisture regimes, making it difficult to generalise findings for design applications.

Second, real-time moisture monitoring remains underutilised in current asset management practices. While embedded sensors have proven effective in capturing in-situ moisture dynamics (Ahmed et al., 2018, Hedayati & Hossain, 2015), their integration into predictive or preventive maintenance frameworks is limited. As a result, most agencies rely on reactive strategies, which can incur up to 60% higher lifecycle costs compared to timely, moisture-informed interventions (Mia et al., 2015).

This study addresses these gaps through a combined laboratory–field methodology, linking RLT test results with continuous field monitoring of DoS using embedded sensors. The goal is to identify the critical DoS threshold where UGM behaviour transitions from favorable to unfavourable, and to define the associated vulnerability window in field conditions. Empirical models will be developed to relate  $M_r$  and  $\varepsilon_p$  to DoS and Stress Ratio (SR), tailored to local materials, and validated against external datasets to ensure transferability.

Beyond technical advancements, this work supports broader resilience goals, aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goal 9 on resilient infrastructure (Brodny & Tutak, 2023, Monaco, 2024). By identifying moisture-related risk periods, the models aid targeted interventions such as drainage upgrades and optimised maintenance, while also informing climate-adaptive pavement design using real-time and projected moisture data.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Real-time moisture monitoring and materials

To monitor temporal moisture variations within pavement layers, nine sensors were installed, three each in the base (100 mm), subbase (200 mm), and subgrade (400 mm), to capture vertical moisture gradients (Figure 1). These sensors were connected to cellular-enabled dataloggers for hourly data collection and were calibrated in-house for each pavement materials.

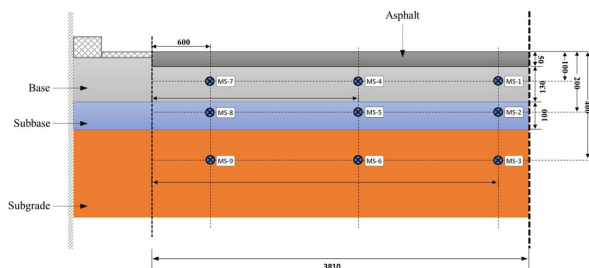


Figure 1. Sensors Installation Plan.

Among the three monitored layers, the base exhibited the greatest moisture variability, with DoS ranging from 0.56 to 1.00, due to its direct exposure to climatic influences. This layer was therefore selected for detailed laboratory characterisation. Material samples retrieved during sensor installation were tested following relevant Australian Standards, including particle size distribution (AS 1289.3.6.1), liquid limit (AS 1289.3.9.1 – 2009), plasticity index (AS 1289.3.9.1 – 2015), and specific gravity (AS 1289.3.5.1 – 2006). Maximum Dry Density (MDD) and Optimum Moisture Content (OMC) were assessed under three regimes: reduced effort (357 kJ/m<sup>3</sup>), standard Proctor (569 kJ/m<sup>3</sup>; AS 1289.5.1.1 – 2007), and modified Proctor (2,677.5 kJ/m<sup>3</sup>; AS 1289.5.2.1 – 2017). The Line of Optimum (LOO), representing the DoS at peak dry density, was found to be 0.90. According to the Unified Soil Classification System (USCS), the material was classified as well-graded gravel with significant sand content (GW). Key geotechnical properties are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Soil parameters

Parameter	Value
D10 (mm)	0.42
D50 (mm)	3.10
D60 (mm)	4.80
Liquid Limit (LL) (%)	22

Plasticity Index (PI)	NP
Specific Gravity ( $G_s$ )	2.77
Reduced Proctor – OMC (%)	8.6
Reduced Proctor – MDD (g/cm <sup>3</sup> )	2.19
Standard Proctor – OMC (%)	6.4
Standard Proctor – MDD (g/cm <sup>3</sup> )	2.32
Modified Proctor – OMC (%)	4.7
Modified Proctor – MDD (g/cm <sup>3</sup> )	2.42
Average Field Dry Density (g/cm <sup>3</sup> )	2.31

### 2.2 Repeated Load Triaxial testing

To evaluate the mechanical response of UGMs under cyclic loading and varying moisture conditions, RLT tests were conducted. This method assesses two key performance indicators,  $M_r$ , reflecting elastic stiffness, and permanent strain ( $\varepsilon_p$ ), representing cumulative deformation. A schematic of the typical stress–strain response observed during testing is shown in Figure 2.

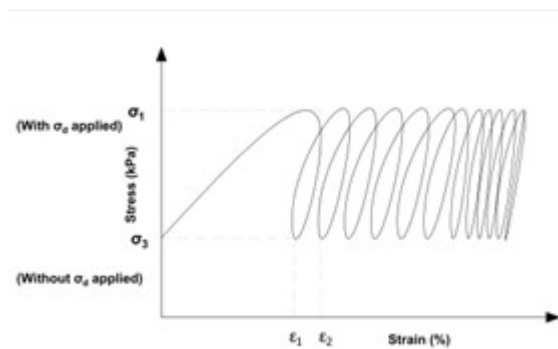


Figure 2. Typical stress-strain diagram during RLT test.

The  $M_r$  was computed as the ratio of deviator stress ( $\sigma_d = \sigma_1 - \sigma_3$ ) to the recoverable axial strain ( $\varepsilon_r$ ), while permanent strain ( $\varepsilon_p$ ) was determined from the incremental change in axial strain between load cycles. Specimens (100 mm × 200 mm) were compacted to the MDD derived from the standard Proctor test and subjected to deviator stresses of 250, 375, 500, and 625 kPa, yielding stress ratios ( $SR = \frac{\sigma_d}{\sigma_3}$ ) from 2 to 5. Moisture conditions were controlled at DoS levels of 0.65, 0.75, 0.85, and 0.95, reflecting observed in-field moisture variations. Sixteen tests were performed following standard Q137 and, to ensure repeatability, three replicates were conducted under a representative test case, confirming the consistency and reliability of results.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Initial Observation of Moisture Dynamics from Real-Time Measured Data

A long-term field monitoring program was carried out from September 2020 to July 2023 at a pavement site in Queensland, Australia, to investigate moisture behaviour across pavement layers. Three moisture sensors were embedded in each layer, with averaged readings used to generate representative DoS trends. The resulting time series enabled evaluation of both long-term moisture variation and short-term responses to flood events. Figure 3 and Figure 4 illustrate DoS changes over two half-year periods and during a selected flood event, respectively.

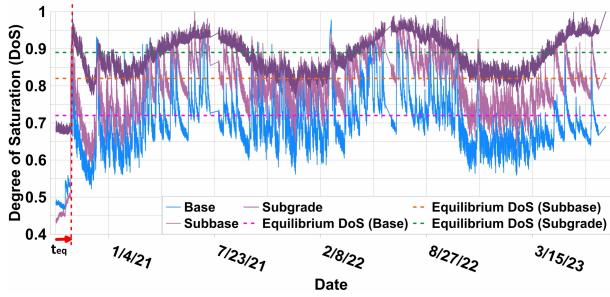


Figure 3. DoS variation of pavement layers.

Key moisture-related parameters were extracted, including the equilibrium DoS ( $DoS_{eq}$ ), variation range, and environmental sensitivity across pavement layers. The base layer, closest to the surface, showed the lowest  $DoS_{eq}$  (0.72) and highest variability (0.56–1.00), reflecting strong responsiveness to surface climate conditions. The subbase exhibited moderate values ( $DoS_{eq} = 0.82$ ; range = 0.63–1.00), while the subgrade showed the highest  $DoS_{eq}$  (0.89) with minimal variation (0.77–1.00), likely less influenced by land climate interactions. These results confirm a clear depth-dependent attenuation of moisture dynamics, underscoring the importance of layer-specific analysis.

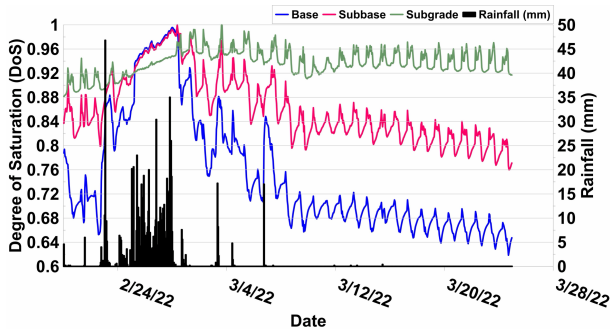


Figure 4. DoS variation during a flood event

Initial post-installation data indicated that the pavement system required approximately 24 days to reach moisture equilibrium following sensor embedding, as shown in Figure 3. This period, characterised by repeated wetting and drying cycles, reflects the natural adjustment process of pavement layers under climatic exposure and moisture redistribution (Dushmantha & Gallage, 2025, Madakalapuge et al., 2022).

During the extreme flood event illustrated in Figure 4 the base layer demonstrated the fastest drop in DoS post-rainfall, confirming its high drainage capacity and exposure to drying. In contrast, the subbase exhibited slower moisture loss, while the subgrade remained nearly saturated for nearly four weeks, likely due to low permeability and proximity to the water table. These findings confirm that the base layer is the most responsive to moisture changes and structurally critical, justifying its selection for RLT testing. This allowed a detailed investigation into its resilient and plastic performance under varying DoS, directly linked to field-monitored moisture conditions.

### 3.2 Repeated Load Triaxial (RLT) test

The mechanical behaviour of the base layer under varying stress and moisture conditions was assessed using an extensive RLT testing program. The evaluation focused on two key parameters,  $M_r$  and  $\epsilon_p$  across a range of DoS values. Two key behavioral trends have emerged. Firstly,  $M_r$  consistently increased with rising SR across all moisture levels, reflecting

stress-induced stiffness gain typical of granular materials. However, when stress was held constant,  $M_r$  displayed a non-linear trend, initially increasing with DoS before dropping sharply near full saturation, due to the loss of matric suction and particle interlock that maintain stiffness in unsaturated conditions.

Secondly,  $\epsilon_p$  was influenced by both SR and DoS, but moisture had the dominant effect. While  $\epsilon_p$  rose modestly with SR at fixed saturation, it increased exponentially with the rising DoS under constant stress. This trend highlights the role of moisture in promoting shear deformation and particle rearrangement in unbound materials. Together, these findings underscore the critical vulnerability of UGMs at high saturation, where reduced stiffness and rapid deformation co-occur.

#### 3.2.1 Resilient Modulus ( $M_r$ )

From the RLT tests, Figure 5 illustrates the resilient response of the tested UGM under combined variations in SR and DoS. The results reveal a nonlinear response, highlighting the complex interaction between mechanical loading and moisture conditions.

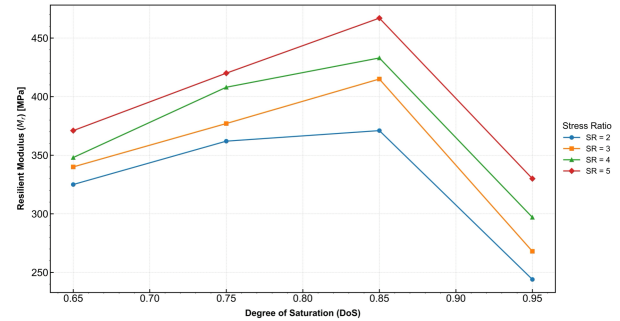


Figure 5. Variation of Resilient Modulus with SR and DoS.

The interaction between SR and moisture conditions significantly influences the  $M_r$  of UGMs. Three distinct behavioral trends were observed in the experimental results. First, under constant moisture content,  $M_r$  increased with SR, reflecting stress-induced stiffening due to enhanced bulk stress and internal particle rearrangement. For example, at DoS = 0.85,  $M_r$  rose from 371 MPa (SR = 2) to 467 MPa (SR = 5), an increase of approximately 26 %, consistent with known densification mechanisms in granular materials.

Second, when stress was held constant,  $M_r$  declined with increasing DoS, particularly beyond the critical threshold (DoS > 0.83), where matric suction and interparticle friction diminish. At SR = 4,  $M_r$  dropped from 433 MPa at DoS = 0.85 to 297 MPa at DoS = 0.95, a 31% reduction, demonstrating moisture-induced softening, as similarly reported by Rahman and Erlingsson (2015). Third, at near-saturation (DoS = 0.95), all specimens showed early failure, indicating reduced effective stress and potential onset of liquefaction. This underscores the instability of UGMs under extreme moisture conditions. To quantify these interactions, a predictive model was developed for  $M_r$  as a function of SR and DoS (Equation (1) and Equation (2))

$$M_r = A (1 + SR)^B \cdot f(DoS) \quad (1)$$

$$f(DoS) = p + q DoS + r DoS^2 + s DoS^3 + t DoS^4 \quad (2)$$

Where, A, B, p, q, r, s and t are model parameters and f is a function that depends on the DoS. The proposed model demonstrated excellent performance, achieving a high level of accuracy with an  $R^2$  value of 0.98 when fitted to the test results. The determined parameters for the model are as follows: A =

45.4213,  $B = 0.2801$ ,  $p = 69.5867$ ,  $q = -197.4417$ ,  $r = 63.5522$ ,  $s = 262.0396$ , and  $t = -196.2986$ , specifically for the tested UGM.

This model was validated using existing data from Sun et al. (2021), achieving a high accuracy with an  $R^2$  value of 0.98, demonstrating its robustness across different materials.

### 3.2.2 Plastic Strain ( $\epsilon_p$ )

Accumulated plastic strain ( $\epsilon_p$ ) is the second critical indicator of long-term deformation in UGMs, capturing permanent changes under cyclic loading, unlike the resilient modulus, which reflects elastic recovery. Results from the RLT testing program demonstrated that  $\epsilon_p$  is strongly influenced by both SR and DoS. As illustrated in

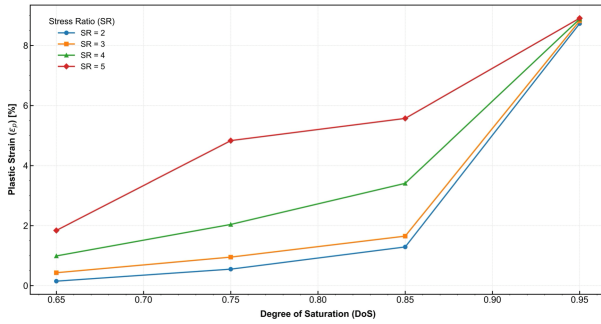


Figure 6,  $\epsilon_p$  consistently increased with rising SR and DoS, confirming a coupled hydro-mechanical interaction driving progressive deformation in pavement layers.

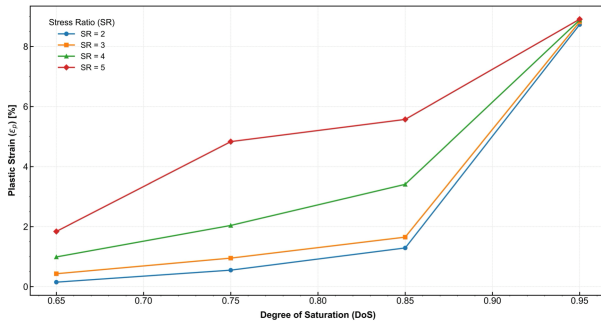


Figure 6. Variation of Plastic Strain with SR and DoS.

At lower SRs ( $\leq 3$ ), the tested UGM exhibited signs of strain stabilisation, indicating a transition into a shakedown state, where further cyclic loading resulted in minimal additional plastic deformation. For instance, at  $\text{DoS} = 0.75$  and  $\text{SR} = 2$ ,  $\epsilon_p$  plateaued at 0.55 %, suggesting that internal particle rearrangement had achieved mechanical equilibrium. A similar trend was observed at  $\text{SR} = 3$ , where  $\epsilon_p$  stabilised at 0.95 % ( $\text{DoS} = 0.75$ ) and 1.65 % ( $\text{DoS} = 0.85$ ).

In contrast, under higher SRs ( $\geq 4$ ), the material displayed progressive accumulation of  $\epsilon_p$  throughout the entire loading sequence, with no indication of stabilisation. At  $\text{SR} = 4$  and  $\text{DoS} = 0.85$ ,  $\epsilon_p$  reached 3.41%, increasing to 5.57% at  $\text{SR} = 5$  under the same saturation. This rapid increase reflects the transition to a progressive failure regime, primarily driven by elevated moisture, which reduces interparticle friction and suction, facilitating enhanced deformation.

At near-saturation ( $\text{DoS} = 0.95$ ), the deformation response became predominantly governed by moisture, with  $\epsilon_p$  peaking at 8.91% ( $\text{SR} = 5$ ). Notably, under this condition, the influence of SR diminished, and high strain levels were observed consistently across all stress levels. This behaviour suggests a shift toward a lubrication-controlled regime, where excess pore water enables unrestricted particle movement and shear-induced displacement, consistent with findings by Ma et al.

(2020). To capture these trends quantitatively, an empirical model was developed to express  $\epsilon_p$  as a function of SR and DoS (Equation (3) and Equation (4)).

$$\epsilon_p = C (1 + SR)^D \cdot f(DoS) \quad (3)$$

$$f(DoS) = e^{E \cdot DoS} \quad (4)$$

Where,  $C$ ,  $D$ , and  $E$ , are model parameters and  $f$  is a function that depends on the DoS. The proposed model demonstrated strong performance, achieving a high level of accuracy with an  $R^2$  value of 0.86 when fitted to the test results. The determined parameters for the model are as follows:  $C = 0.0022$ ,  $D = 0.3112$ , and  $E = 8.3203$ , specifically for the tested UGM. Furthermore, the model was validated using data from Sun et al. (2021), achieving an  $R^2$  value of 0.96, confirming its reliability across different datasets.

### 3.3 Integration of Field DoS Variation and RLT Test Results

A major contribution of this study lies in linking laboratory-derived strength parameters,  $M_r$  and  $\epsilon_p$ , with real-time field moisture data, quantified as DoS (Figure 7). This integration allows for the identification of critical time windows during which the pavement base layer is most vulnerable to structural degradation. These periods typically coincide with elevated moisture levels and active loading, resulting in reduced stiffness and greater permanent deformation. To align with field conditions, a SR of 6 was adopted, corresponding to a vertical tyre pressure of 750 kPa and a confining pressure of 125 kPa.

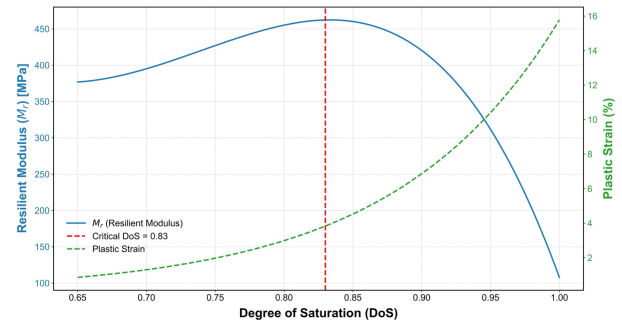


Figure 7. Variation of Resilient Parameters with DoS

Under these conditions,  $M_r$  peaked at  $\text{DoS} = 0.83$ , beyond which a sharp decline was observed, indicating a critical moisture threshold associated with accelerated stiffness loss. In parallel,  $\epsilon_p$  increased significantly beyond this point, reflecting reduced interparticle resistance and growing deformation potential. This critical threshold was subsequently applied to field-measured DoS data to identify periods of exceedance and associated pavement vulnerability (Figure 8 and Figure 9)

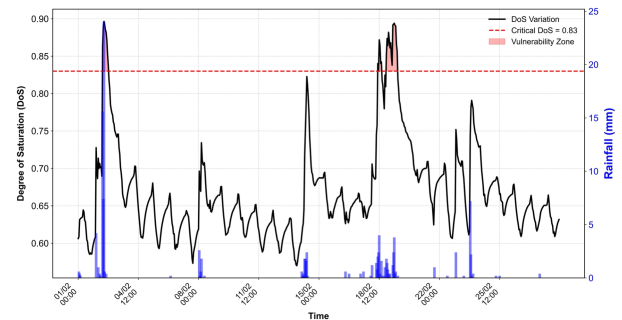


Figure 8. Vulnerability window for February 2021.

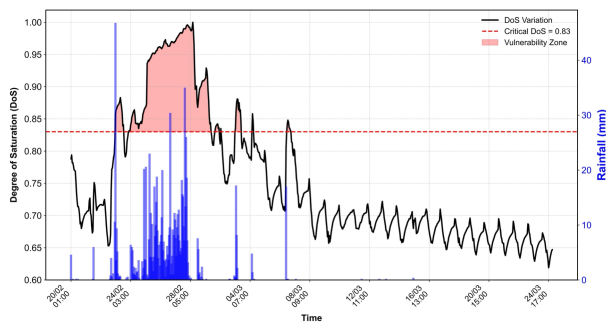


Figure 9. Vulnerability window for February 2022.

Analysis of field data revealed distinct differences in pavement moisture exposure under normal and extreme conditions. During a typical seasonal month (February 2021), the DoS exceeded the critical threshold (0.83) for only 30 hours out of 672 ( $\approx 4.5\%$ ), with short, isolated events suggesting minimal risk under standard traffic loads. However, in February 2022, during a major flood, the DoS remained above the threshold for 176 hours, representing over 22% of the 791-hour period. This prolonged saturation period indicated compromised structural conditions. Extended exposure to high DoS increases the risk of rutting, deformation, and early failure, particularly in the base layer. These findings highlight the value of coupling laboratory-defined moisture-performance thresholds with real-time field data to enable moisture-responsive pavement assessment.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

This study introduced an integrated methodology for assessing pavement performance by combining two years of real-time moisture data with laboratory-based strength parameters derived from Repeated Load Triaxial (RLT) testing. The focus was on the base layer constructed with unbound granular material (UGM), which exhibited the highest moisture variability (DoS range: 0.56 – 1.00) due to its proximity to the surface. In contrast, the subbase and subgrade showed progressively narrower variation ranges and higher equilibrium saturation values, confirming reduced moisture sensitivity with depth.

RLT results demonstrated that the  $M_r$  increased with both stress ratio and DoS up to a critical saturation point (DoS = 0.83), beyond which it declined sharply due to moisture-induced softening. Plastic strain ( $\epsilon_p$ ) increased exponentially with saturation, especially under higher stress levels, indicating a transition toward permanent deformation at elevated moisture states. Two predictive models were developed to describe  $M_r$  and  $\epsilon_p$  as functions of stress and saturation. These models showed high accuracy ( $R^2 = 0.98$  for  $M_r$ ,  $R^2 = 0.86$  for  $\epsilon_p$ ) and were successfully validated using literature data, confirming their reliability and applicability for pavement performance evaluation.

By applying the critical DoS threshold to field-monitored data, the study identified moisture-exceedance periods linked to pavement vulnerability. A typical dry month (Feb 2021) showed limited exceedance (30 hours or 4.5% of the time), whereas the 2022 flood event resulted in prolonged saturation (176 hours or 22%), revealing extended structural exposure to damaging conditions.

These findings underscore the value of integrating mechanical response models with real-time hydrological data to support moisture-responsive pavement management. The proposed framework enables timely identification of risk periods and facilitates adaptive maintenance planning,

particularly for climate-exposed and flood-prone road networks.

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