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Column-scale unsaturated hydraulic conductivity estimates in coarse-textured homogeneous and layered soils derived under steady-state evaporation from a water table

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SUMMARY

Steady-state evaporation from a water table has been extensively studied for both homogeneous and layered porous media. For layered media it is of interest to find an equivalent homogeneous medium and define “effective” hydraulic properties. In this paper a new solution for steady-state evaporation from coarse-textured porous media is presented. Based on this solution, the evaporation rate represents a macroscopic (column-scale) measure of unsaturated hydraulic conductivity at the pressure head equal to the maximum extent of the hydraulically connected region above the water table. The presented approach offers an alternative method for determination of unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of homogeneous coarse-textured soils and a new solution for prediction of the effective unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of layered coarse-textured soils. The solution was evaluated with both experimental data and numerical simulations. Comparison with experimental data and numerical results for hypothetically layered soil profiles demonstrate the applicability of the proposed approach for coarse-textured soils.

1. Introduction

One-dimensional steady-state evaporation from a fixed shallow water table (WT) is dependent on the WT depth and on the soil hydraulic properties (Lehmann et al., 2008; Shokri and Salvucci, 2011; Assouline et al., 2013; Or et al., 2013). Two distinct scenarios are often considered: the first when the WT is shallow enough for the soil to sustain hydraulic continuity between the WT and the surface due to capillary forces, and the second when the WT reaches a critical depth (denoted as D max) below which the hydraulic continuity between the WT and soil surface is no longer maintained.

In the first scenario liquid water continuously flows from the WT to the surface where it transitions to the vapor phase. The maximum WT depth (D max) for which hydraulic continuity can be sustained depends on the porous medium properties and on the evaporation rate, which in this case is mainly controlled by the atmospheric evaporative demand. In the second scenario liquid water flows from the WT to the so-called drying front (DF), where it transitions to the vapor phase and moves to the surface by means of vapor diffusion.

Steady-state water flow from the WT to the soil surface was extensively studied theoretically and experimentally for homogeneous soils (Moore, 1939; Gardner, 1958; Anat, 1965; Warrick, 1988; Gowing et al., 2006; Salvucci, 1993; Shokri and Salvucci, 2011; Sadeghi et al., 2012a) as well as for stratified soil profiles (Willis, 1960; Ripple et al., 1970; Warrick and Yeh, 1990; Lu and Zhang, 2004) and other heterogeneous media (Hopmans et al., 1998; Zhu and Mohanty, 2002; Bechtold et al., 2012). The majority of developed models are based on the Buckingham–Darcy law (Buckingham, 1907) and its analytical or numerical solutions within the liquid flow domain. The analytical solutions are commonly restricted to simple forms of hydraulic conductivity models such as proposed by Gardner (1958) or Brooks and Corey (1964).

When dealing with complex heterogeneous media it is of interest to define “effective” or “upscaled” hydraulic properties for an equivalent homogeneous medium. A vast body of literature exists...
on upscaling issues for various soil water processes including steady-state flow (Yeh and Harvey, 1990; Zhu and Mohanty, 2002; Warrick, 2005; Neuweiler and Eichel, 2006). There are different approaches with regard to scaling of soil hydraulic properties and soil water processes in heterogeneous porous media such as averaging methods (Kitanidis, 1990; Zhu et al., 2004; Zhu and Mohanty, 2006), inverse solutions (van Dam et al., 1994; Hopmans and Simunek, 1999; Zhang et al., 2004; Javaux and Van Cleemput, 2006; Vrugt et al., 2008; Erdal et al., 2012), percolation theory (Hunt, 1998; Samouelian et al., 2007; Hunt and Idriss, 2009), homogenization theory (Neuweiler and Cirpka, 2005; Neuweiler and Eichel, 2006; Neuweiler and Vogel, 2007), hybrid mixture theory (Hassanzadeh and Gray, 1979, 1979, 1980), similar media scaling theory (Miller and Miller, 1956; Warrick and Amoozegar-Fard, 1979; Kosugi and Hopmans, 1998; Sadeghi and Jones, 2012; Ojha et al., 2014), dissimilar media scaling methods (Sadeghi et al., 2012b,c), stochastic methods (Yeh et al., 1985; Zhang and Lu, 2002), and renormalization methods (King, 1989; Saucier, 1992; King and Neuweiler, 2002). Many of these methods and their strengths and limitations have been previously reviewed and discussed (e.g., Wen and Gomez-Hernandez, 1996; Pachepsky et al., 2003; Cushman et al., 2002; Chen, 2006; Vereecken et al., 2007).

In this paper a new general solution to the maximum height of hydraulic continuity above the water table ($D_{\text{max}}$) in coarse-textured porous media is presented. Here, “general” means that the solution is not restricted to a specific form of the unsaturated hydraulic conductivity function, but applicable to many existing mathematical relationships. The solution provides an alternative method for determination of unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of homogeneous coarse-textured soils and a new solution for effective or upscaled unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of layered coarse-textured media. Various aspects of applicability of the proposed solution to coarse-textured soils are presented and discussed in the following.

2. Theoretical considerations

2.1. Background

We begin by considering an isothermal steady-state evaporation process during stage II (vapor diffusion limiting stage). This process can be modeled with the Buckingham–Darcy law considering both liquid and vapor flow contributions to the unsaturated hydraulic conductivity (Peters, 2013):

$$e = K \left( \frac{dh}{dz} - 1 \right) = (K_l + K_v) \left( \frac{dh}{dz} - 1 \right)$$

(1)

where $h$ is the pressure head (absolute value), $z$ is the vertical distance from the WT to the soil surface (positive upward), $e$ is the steady-state evaporation rate, and $K_l$, $K_v$, and $K$ are the liquid, vapor, and total hydraulic conductivities, respectively.

Assuming a steady condition, the pressure head distribution above the water table, $h(z)$, can be determined by solving a rearranged form of Eq. (1):

$$z = \int_0^h \frac{K(h)}{K(h) + e} \, dh$$

(2)

Fig. 1 depicts a sketch of the pressure head profile above the water table obtained by numerically solving Eq. (2) considering both liquid and vapor flow contributions (i.e., $K = K_l + K_v$) and liquid flow only (i.e., $K = K_l$). Three different zones are distinguished along the profile: (i) a saturated zone known as the capillary fringe ($0 < h < h_0$, where $h_0$ is the air-entry pressure head); (ii) an intermediate, partially-saturated zone between the capillary fringe and the drying front (DF) ($h_0 < h < h_{\text{max}}$, where $h_{\text{max}}$ is the pressure head at which hydraulic liquid continuity is disrupted); and (iii) a dry zone (gas region) between the DF and the soil surface ($h_{\text{max}} < h < h_{\text{sur}}$, where $h_{\text{sur}}$ is the pressure head at the soil surface). It is evident that the pressure head distribution within the dry zone cannot be modeled without accounting for the vapor flow contribution. However, the solution along the liquid flow domain (i.e., $0 < z < D_{\text{max}}$) is the same for both cases.

The pressure head at the surface ($h_{\text{sur}}$) depends on the atmospheric boundary conditions and can be estimated as (Edelfsen and Anderson, 1943):

$$h_{\text{sur}} = \frac{RT \ln H_r}{M_g}$$

(3)

where $R$ ($=8.314 \text{ J mol}^{-1} \text{ kg}^{-1}$) is the ideal gas constant, $T$ is temperature (in Kelvin), $M_c$ ($=0.018015 \text{ kg mol}^{-1}$) is the molecular weight of water, $g$ ($=9.81 \text{ m s}^{-2}$) is gravitational acceleration, and $H_r$ is relative humidity.

Based on the numerically simulated pressure head profile shown in Fig. 1 as well as results of Peters and Durner (2010) and Peters (2013), the pressure head at DF ($h_{\text{max}}$) is realized as a critical value at which liquid and vapor conductivity curves meet each other (i.e., $K_l(h_{\text{max}}) = K_v(h_{\text{max}})$). Below $h_{\text{max}}$, liquid water flow dominates transport and above $h_{\text{max}}$ vapor flow is dominant. This definition is similar to that of Assouline et al. (2014) (their Eq. (25)) who described $h_{\text{max}}$ as the pressure head corresponding to the water content marking the onset of stage II (vapor diffusion limiting stage) evaporation.

Dependence of liquid conductivity on pressure head may be described by an empirical relationship (e.g., Brooks and Corey, 1964; van Genuchten, 1980) or a physically-based model (e.g., Tuller and Or, 2001). The vapor conductivity function can be determined from (Philip and De Vries, 1957; Fayer, 2000):

$$K_v(h) = \frac{\rho_w D_s}{\rho_v R_T H_r} \exp \left( - \frac{M_g}{R_T} h \right)$$

(4)

where $\rho_w$ is liquid water density ($=1000 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$), $\rho_v$ is the saturated vapor density ($=0.0177 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$ at $20^\circ \text{C}$), and $D_s$ is the soil vapor diffusivity given as:
\[ D_v = \tau \theta_a D_a = \frac{\theta_a^{7/3}}{D_t} \theta_a D_a \tag{5} \]

where \( \tau \) is the tortuosity factor described by Millington and Quirk (1961), \( \theta_a \) is the volumetric air content, \( D_t \) is the diffusivity of water vapor in air (=2.44E -5 m² s⁻¹), and \( \theta_i \) is the saturated soil water content.

Once water table depth, \( D \), the pressure head at the soil surface, \( h_{sur} \), and the soil liquid and vapor hydraulic conductivity functions, \( K(h) \), are known, we can implicitly calculate the steady-state evaporation rate during stage II based on Eq. (2), rewritten as:

\[ D = \int_{h_{sur}}^{h_{max}} \frac{K(h)}{K(h) + e} \, dh \tag{6} \]

Then, \( D_{max} \) can be determined as:

\[ D_{max} = \int_{h_{sur}}^{h_{max}} \frac{K(h)}{K(h) + e} \, dh \tag{7} \]

2.2. New solution for \( D_{max} \)

Eq. (7) may be rearranged to read:

\[ D_{max} = h_{max} - e \left( \int_{0}^{h_{sur}} \frac{dh}{K(h)} + \int_{h_{sur}}^{h_{max}} \frac{dh}{K(h) + e} \right) = h_e \left( 1 - \frac{e}{K_e} \right) \tag{9} \]

where \( h_e \) is the pressure head at which \( K = e \). Because Eq. (9) holds for coarse-textured soils with \( e/K_e \) being negligible, the solution can be further simplified to:

\[ D_{max} = h_e \tag{10} \]

Eq. (10) states that for coarse-textured porous media, pairs of \( e - D_{max} \) values coincide with the unsaturated hydraulic conductivity curve, \( K(h) \), which means that the steady-state evaporation rate exhibits a measure for unsaturated hydraulic conductivity at the pressure head equal to \( D_{max} \) in summary, when \( h = D_{max}, K = e \).

The universal formulation of \( D_{max} \) presented above may provide an additional opportunity for modeling evaporation by offering new solutions to the drying front depth, \( \delta \), which has been applied as a key part of the stage II evaporation modeling (Or et al., 2013). Some connections between \( D_{max}, \delta \), and \( e \) are thus presented. Combining Eqs. (6) and (7) yields:

\[ \delta = D - D_{max} = \int_{h_{sur}}^{h_{max}} \frac{K(h)}{K(h) + e} \, dh \tag{11} \]

Within the dry zone, \( K = K_v \), which is nearly invariant with respect to pressure head from \( h_{max} \) to \( h_{sur} \) (≈1E6 cm at 20 °C and 50% relative humidity) (see Fig. 4). Thus Eq. (11) can be solved and rewritten as:

\[ \delta = 0.5[K_s(h_{max}) + K_e(h_{sur})] \frac{(h_{sur} - h_{max})}{h_{max}} \tag{12} \]

Assuming \( h_{sur} \gg h_{max} \) and \( e \gg K_e \), Eq. (12) yields:

\[ \delta = 0.5K_s(h_{max}) + K_e(h_{sur})h_{sur} = \frac{C}{e} \tag{13} \]

where \( C \) is a constant under steady-state conditions. Since the Buckingham–Darcy law can be converted to a diffusion-type equation by assuming \( D_e = K_e dh/dP \), where \( \rho \) is vapor density (Bittelli et al., 2008), Eq. (13) is similar to the previously developed \( \delta - e \) relationships based on Fick’s law (Gardner, 1958; Shokri et al., 2008, 2009).

Finally, the following analytical solution to Eq. (6) is obtained by combining Eqs. (10) and (13), which can be implicitly solved for evaporation rate as a function of water table depth:

\[ D = h_e + \frac{C}{e} \tag{14} \]

Eq. (14) describes how deepening of the water table decreases the evaporation rate necessary for extension of both liquid (first term) and vapor (second term) regions.

3. Validation and application

3.1. Comparison with an analytical solution

A commonly applied relationship for liquid unsaturated hydraulic conductivity is that of Brooks and Corey (BC) (1964):

\[ K_l = \begin{cases} K_v & (h \leq h_b) \\ \frac{K_v}{h_b/h_b} & (h > h_b) \end{cases} \tag{15} \]

where \( h_b \) and \( P \) are BC model parameters. Applying the BC \( K(h) \) function, Sadeghi et al. (2012a) solved Eq. (7) analytically to obtain a relationship between \( D_{max}, e \), and soil properties:

\[ D_{max} = h_b \left\{ \ln \left[ \frac{1 + e/K_v}{e/K_v} \right] + \frac{e}{K_v} \right\} + \frac{e}{1 - e/P_0} \left[ 2 \ln 2 + \frac{\pi^2}{12} - \ln 2 - \frac{1}{P_0(1 - P_0)} \right] \tag{16} \]

Assuming a steep slope of the \( K(h) \) function (i.e. \( P \) is large) and that \( e/K_v \) is negligibly small, Eq. (16) may be approximated as:

\[ D_{max} = h_b(e/K_v)^{-1/P} = h_e \tag{17} \]

This corresponds to Eq. (10) which has been obtained universally for any mathematical relationship of \( K(h) \) which satisfies the two abovementioned assumptions (\( K(h) \) is steep and \( e/K_v \) is negligible). Within this context, this analytical solution was applied to preliminarily define a “coarse-textured” soil.

As an illustrative example, Fig. 3 presents a comparison between the analytical solution (Eq. (16)) and the BC model for a coarse-, a medium-, and a fine-textured soil. Fig. 3 indicates that Eq. (10) is an accurate approximation of Eq. (16) for a coarse-textured soil except near saturation, but underestimates the solution for a fine-textured porous medium. Errors near saturation for
the coarse-textured soil are because both assumptions for obtaining Eq. (10) are not fulfilled; i.e. $e/K_s$ is not negligible and the slope of the $K(h)$ function is not steep. Based on these results, we may roughly say that the “steep slope” (i.e., log-log) can be defined as $P$ greater than 3 or 4. Also as in Fig. 3 and results shown in the following indicate, $e/K_s$ can be assumed “negligible” when $e$ is at least one order of magnitude smaller than $K_s$ in finer soils or two orders of magnitude smaller in coarser soils.

### 3.2. Comparison with Numerical Solutions

As discussed above, the solution to Eq. (7) for $D_{max}$, can be analytically derived only for simple algebraic $K(h)$ relationships such as the BC power model (Warrick, 1988; Sadeghi et al., 2012a), Lehmann et al. (2008) and Shokri and Salvucci (2011) incorporated the van Genuchten (1980) retention model and derived an approximate analytical solution for $D_{max}$ of coarse-textured soils by balancing capillary and gravitational forces. But in general, there are numerous mathematically more complex expressions for $K(h)$ for which an analytical solution for Eq. (2) cannot be easily derived (e.g., Kosugi, 1996; Tuller and Or, 2001).

As shown and discussed above, Eq. (10) may be considered as a general analytical solution for $D_{max}$ for coarse-textured soils, regardless of the $K(h)$ mathematical relationship. In the following, we evaluate the validity of Eq. (10) for the van Genuchten (1980), Tuller and Or (2001), and a bimodal $K(h)$ model.

Eq. (7) was solved numerically assuming various values of $e$ within the liquid flow domain. As Fig. 1 indicates, since liquid flow is dominant along the $D_{max}$ domain (i.e., $0 < z < D_{max}$), there is no difference in the $D_{max}$ solution with or without consideration of the vapor flow contribution. Hence, $K$ in Eq. (7) was considered solely as liquid conductivity. In this case, $D_{max}$ approaches a constant value when the upper limit of the integral in Eq. (7) becomes larger than a threshold and the solution will remain unchanged for pressure head values larger than $h_{max}$ (see the dashed line in Fig. 1). That is why $h_{max}$ is not incorporated in the final solution of $D_{max}$ (e.g., in Eqs. (10) or (16)). Hence, for the numerical solution of Eq. (7), a sufficiently large pressure head was assumed (i.e., yielding the final value of $D_{max}$ as the upper limit of the integral. Hence, this assumption introduced for simplifying calculations only should not be confused with the incorrect assumption of liquid continuity along the entire soil profile discussed by Shokri and Or (2010). Note that when $K$ in Eq. (7) is considered as the total hydraulic conductivity, the integration should be restricted to the true value of $h_{max}$ otherwise the calculated $D_{max}$ will be overestimated.

#### 3.2.1. The van Genuchten (1980) $K(h)$ model

The van Genuchten (VG) (1980) closed-form expression for the unsaturated hydraulic conductivity function based on the Mualem (1976) model is one of the most widely applied $K(h)$ relationships, given as:

$$K_i = K_s \left[ \left( 1 - \left( \frac{x h}{m} \right)^{n} \right)^{1 - \frac{1}{m}} \right]^{2} \left[ 1 + \left( \frac{x h}{m} \right)^{m/2} \right]$$

where $x$, $n$, and $m$ are empirical model parameters with the assumption that $m = 1 - 1/n$.

In order to validate the applicability of Eq. (10), we employed data and hydraulic parameters from the Loveland sand in Anat (1965), the sand studied by Smits et al. (2012) (Sand 1), the sand studied by Prevedello et al. (2009) (Sand 2), and three coarse-textured soils from van Genuchten (1980) including Hygiene sandstone, Touchet silt loam, and Silt loam G.E.3 with VG parameters listed in Table 1.

Before evaluating the proposed solution for $D_{max}$, we explored the range of pressure head and conductivity values within which water flows predominantly in the liquid state. As mentioned earlier, $h_{max}$ can be determined by comparing liquid and vapor conductivity curves as shown in Fig. 4 for Sand 1 and Silt loam G.E.3. Soil water retention functions are also presented to see how the liquid flow domain can be defined in terms of soil water content. It is clear that $h_{max}$ is quite different for various soils (see Table 2 for all soils). However, $K(h_{max})$ for these soils lies within a narrow range, which is roughly between 1E-7 and 1E-8 cm/day. Based on these results and to limit our analysis to the liquid phase, we restricted all of our evaluations to conductivity values greater than 1E-7 cm/day.

Fig. 4 also indicates that, in terms of soil water content, hydraulic conductivity can be assumed down to the point where the soil dries to near-residual water content values, which is consistent with the alternative definition of $h_{max}$ introduced by Lehmann et al. (2008). However, as Fig. 4 shows and similarly reported by Assouline et al. (2014), the Lehmann et al. (2008) approximation ($h_{max} \approx z^{-1} ((n-1)/n)^{1-2m/n}$) obtained by linearization of the soil-water retention curve underestimates $h_{max}$ especially for finer soils.

Numerical solutions of Eq. (7) for the VG $K(h)$ function (Eq. (18)) in comparison with the VG $K(h)$ function itself are presented in Fig. 5. The reasonable agreement between the VG $K(h)$ model and numerical results of Eq. (7) indicate that Eq. (10) is valid for the VG function. Some slight disagreements between the numerical and approximate solutions are apparent for Silt loam G.E.3. As mentioned earlier, the solution is expected to work well for coarse-textured soils with an abruptly decreasing $K(h)$ function. Therefore, the small errors for Silt loam G.E.3 are due to its “relatively” low $n$ parameter. As the finest textured soil considered, results for Silt loam G.E.3 indicate that $n \approx 2$ may be considered as a lower limit of the new solution’s applicability for VG soils (i.e. the solution works well for soils with $n > 2$).

A slight discrepancy is also seen for Hygiene sandstone at very high evaporation rates. This error is expected due to the “relatively” low $K_s$ of this soil and the fact that $e/K_s$ was assumed to be negligible for obtaining the new solution – becomes significant when $e$ is high.

#### 3.2.2. The Tuller and Or (2001) $K(h)$ model

Classical models like that of Mualem (1976) often rely on oversimplified representation of medium pore space as a bundle of
cylindrical capillaries and do not correctly account for thermodynamic pore scale processes assuming that the matric potential is attributed to capillary forces only (ignoring adsorptive surface forces) and flow only occurs in completely full capillaries (Tuller et al., 1999; Or and Tuller, 1999). Tuller and Or (2001) presented a more realistic approach that accounts for film flow contributions in an angular pore space model.

**Table 1**
van Genuchten parameters for considered soils.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soil name</th>
<th>$K_s$ (cm/day)</th>
<th>$\alpha$ (cm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>$\theta_r$</th>
<th>$\theta_t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sand 1 (Smits et al., 2012)</td>
<td>9158</td>
<td>0.0570</td>
<td>17.80</td>
<td>0.334</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand 2 (Prevedello et al., 2009)</td>
<td>1368</td>
<td>0.0410</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>0.387</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loveland sand (Anat, 1965)a</td>
<td>945</td>
<td>0.0490</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>0.430</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hygiene sandstone (van Genuchten, 1980)</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>0.0079</td>
<td>10.40</td>
<td>0.250</td>
<td>0.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touchet silt loam (van Genuchten, 1980)</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>0.0050</td>
<td>7.09</td>
<td>0.469</td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silt loam G.E.3 (van Genuchten, 1980)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.0042</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>0.396</td>
<td>0.131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Since $\theta_r$ and $\theta_t$ were not reported for this soil, common values for a typical sandy soil were assumed.

**Table 2**
Upper limit of pressure head for the liquid continuity assumption ($h_{max}$) and its corresponding liquid hydraulic conductivity and soil water content for the soils considered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soil name</th>
<th>$h_{max}$ (cm)</th>
<th>$K_l$ ($h_{max}$) (cm/day)</th>
<th>$\theta$ ($h_{max}$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sand 1</td>
<td>31.63</td>
<td>4.49E$^{-8}$</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand 2</td>
<td>42.66</td>
<td>7.70E$^{-8}$</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loveland sand</td>
<td>53.70</td>
<td>6.42E$^{-8}$</td>
<td>0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hygiene sandstone</td>
<td>331.13</td>
<td>1.98E$^{-9}$</td>
<td>0.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touchet silt loam</td>
<td>776.25</td>
<td>1.6E$^{-8}$</td>
<td>0.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silt loam G.E.3</td>
<td>11220.00</td>
<td>2.19E$^{-8}$</td>
<td>0.135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 4.** Vapor and liquid hydraulic conductivity functions and soil water retention functions for Sand 1 and Silt loam G.E.3. Horizontal lines indicate the upper limit of pressure head for the liquid continuity assumption ($h_{max}$) and its approximate solution by Lehmann et al. (2008) ($h_{max} \approx \frac{\alpha}{n} (\frac{n-1}{n})^{(1-2n)/n}$). Vertical lines indicate the liquid hydraulic conductivity and soil water content at $h = h_{max}$.

**Fig. 5.** The van Genuchten (1980) $K_l(h)$ function for the investigated soils (solid lines) compared with numerical solutions of Eq. (7) (circles).
Because the Tuller and Or (TO) model considers physical properties and processes, it is mathematically more complex than the empirical VG and BC $K(h)$ relationships. The validity of Eq. (10) was evaluated using the TO model for Hygiene sandstone, Touchet silt loam, and Silt loam G.E.3 (the other soils were not included due to lack of availability of required information). For a detailed discussion interested readers are referred to Tuller and Or (2001).

The results presented in Fig. 6 indicate that the presented solution performs similarly well for the TO model despite the more complex physical and mathematical relationships between $K$ and $h$. This is due to the general nature of the relationship between $K$ and $h$ (whether simple or complex) and apparently works for all $K - h$ datasets for which $K$ decreases abruptly with increasing $h$ (i.e., coarse-textured media).

### 3.2.3. The Durner (1994) bimodal $K(h)$ model

Many natural soils and other porous media exhibit bimodal pore size distributions. These heterogeneous pore systems may be a result of specific particle size distributions or due to the formation of secondary pore systems by various soil genetic processes (Durner, 1994; Tuller and Or, 2002). A soil with bimodal pore size distribution can be modeled with a linear superposition of VG curves (Durner, 1994). The unsaturated hydraulic conductivity function for a bimodal pore system composed of two van Genuchten type sub-curves is given as (Priesack and Durner, 2006):

$$K_i = K_i[wS_1 + (1 - w)S_2]^{0.5} \times \frac{\left[\frac{wS_1}{(1 - (1 - S_1^{1/m_1})^{-m_1})} \right] + \frac{(1 - w)S_2}{(1 - (1 - S_2^{1/m_2})^{-m_2})}}{wS_1 + (1 - w)S_2}$$

where subscripts 1 and 2 corresponds to the first and second sub-curves, $w$ is a weighting factor, and $S_1$ and $S_2$ are defined as:

$$S_1 = [1 + (\alpha_1 h)^{n_1}]^{-m_1}, \quad S_2 = [1 + (\alpha_2 h)^{n_2}]^{-m_2}$$

To test the validity of Eq. (10) for bimodal pore systems, the Durner $K(h)$ model was parameterized using a mixture of Sand 1 and Silt loam G.E.3 with varying fractions (varying $w$). The effective $K_s$ was assumed as the weighted average of $K_i$ for the two soils. Numerical solutions of Eq. (7) for the bimodal $K(h)$ function (Eq. (19)) compared with the bimodal $K(h)$ function are depicted in Fig. 7. Because the $e - D_{\text{max}}$ data pairs coincide with the $K(h)$ curve over most of the considered matric potential range, the proposed solution is generally valid for the bimodal $K(h)$ function as well. Estimation errors can be observed at the transition from the primary to the secondary sub-curves. In general, the bimodal $K(h)$ function exhibits a sharper transition than the numerical $e - D_{\text{max}}$ data show. As indicated above, the presented solution is valid for coarse-textured soils with a steep $K(h)$ function only. However, in the transition zone $K$ changes very slowly with increasing $h$ and thus the soil in this zone locally mimics a fine-textured soil. Therefore, the solution does not work well near the transition zone, especially when sharp transitions are predicted for the $K(h)$ function.

### 3.3. Comparison with experimental data

Eq. (10) may be applied to determine the $K(h)$ function for coarse-textured porous media. This approach seems to be an attractive alternative, as $e$ and $D_{\text{max}}$ are easier to measure in a steady-state evaporation experiment than $K_t$ and $h$. The evaporation rate may be accurately measured with a balance as the temporal change of mass of a constant head device (e.g., Mariotte bottle) used to establish a constant water level within the evaporation column. As $D_{\text{max}}$ is a macroscopic length between water table and drying front, it may be measured by means of dye tracers (Shokri et al., 2009; Shokri and Salvucci, 2011) or image analysis (as demonstrated in Lehmann et al., 2008). Beyond these simple methods, the drying front position can also be determined with advanced measurement techniques such as neutron radiography (Shokri et al., 2008) or heat pulse techniques (Sakai et al., 2011; Deol et al., 2012).

The applicability of Eq. (10) for determination of $K(h)$ was evaluated using experimental data from Anat (1965), Willis (1960), Kumar (1999), Gardner and Fireman (1958), and Hassan and Ghaibeh (1977). While Anat (1965) contained all required data, $D_{\text{max}}$ was not provided for all other considered datasets. As both theory (Gardner, 1958) and measurements (Deol et al., 2012; Assouline et al., 2013) suggest that the DF depth can be commonly much smaller than the WT depth, we assumed $D_{\text{max}} = D$ (WT depth) for the experiments of Willis (1960), Kumar (1999), Gardner and Fireman (1958), and Hassan and Ghaibeh (1977).

To explore the validity of this assumption, the WT and DF depths were also simulated using Eqs. (6), (11) and (13) assuming the VG or bimodal conductivity function for describing $K(h)$ and Eq. (4) for $K_s(h)$ functions (surface temperature and relative humidity were assumed to be equal to 20 °C and 50%, respectively).

![Fig. 6. The Tuller and Or $K(h)$ model for Hygiene sandstone, Touchet silt loam, and Silt loam G.E.3 (solid lines) compared with numerical solutions of Eq. (7) (circles).](image6)

![Fig. 7. Bimodal $K(h)$ function for $w$-weighted binary mixtures composed of Sand 1 and Silt loam G.E.3 (solid lines) compared with numerical solutions of Eq. (7) (circles).](image7)
The $K(h)$ parameters were obtained by fitting Eq. (18) or (19) to the experimental $K(h)$ data and $\theta_i$ and $\theta_e$ were estimated/assumed based on soil water retention or textural data. It is worthwhile to note that the bimodal shape of the hydraulic conductivity data of some soils in this analysis could be due to film flow contribution rather than a heterogeneous pore system. Nonetheless, we found such soils can be adequately presented by the bimodal VG model (Eq. (19)) regardless of the physical causes for the bimodal shape.

Anat’s (1965) data were collected from a steady-state upward liquid flow experiment holding the same governing flow equation as the steady-state evaporation process (within the liquid region) as implemented by Anat himself. In this experiment, the ambient atmospheric conditions were disregarded by inducing upward flow with an outflow siphon that was attached to a capillary barrier on top of the soil columns. Their experimental setup allowed establishment of very high rates (close to $K_e$) of steady upward flow from a water table.

The $D_{\text{max}}$ defined as the distance between a nearly dry zone at $h = \theta_i$ (as shown in Fig. 8), we anticipate simulation results for the domain. This provides a unique opportunity (were estimated/assumed for such coarse data slightly underestimate of $S_{\text{DF}}$ in Fig. 4). We assumed that the dry zone $h = \theta_i$ most soils in Fig. 9 (except for the Chino clay), indicating the adequacy of the presented theory based on the Buckingham–Darcy relations. Reasonable agreement is shown between measured and experimental data of Willis (1960), Kumar (1999), Gardner and Fireman (1958), and Hassan and Ghaibeh (1977) are shown in Fig. 9. Since the steady-state evaporation rate is a macroscopic quantity, it can be considered as an effective value of unsaturated hydraulic conductivity for vertically stratified soil profiles. In other words, the resultant $K(h)$ values determined with Eq. (7) are representative for the entire $D_{\text{max}}$ domain. This provides a unique opportunity for estimation of the effective unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of layered (stratified) soils that are quite common in natural ecosystems (Warrick, 2005).

To evaluate the validity of this concept the effective $K(h)$ curves for layered systems containing different soils with a constant water table at the bottom of the profile were considered. For this analysis, soil heterogeneity was described by Miller and Miller (1956) similar-media scaling theory. The VG conductivity function was assumed, Loveland sand was considered as a reference soil, and a set of similar soils were generated using the following relationship between VG parameters of each soil with those of the reference soil (Warrick et al., 1985):

$$ n_i = \lambda n_R, \quad K_{ni} = \lambda^2 K_{R}, \quad n_i = n_R $$

where $\lambda$ is an arbitrary scaling factor, and subscripts $R$ and $i$ represent the reference soil and its similar soils, respectively.

**Fig. 8.** Experimental data for unsaturated hydraulic conductivity and steady-state upward flow rate from Anat (1965).
Fig. 10 presents results obtained for two 3-layer soil profiles, where the first has an increasing trend of $k$ (i.e., getting finer) with depth and second has a decreasing trend of $k$ (i.e., getting coarser) with depth. In Fig. 10a, the layered profile is composed of a 20-cm layer of $k = 0.8$ at the top, 15-cm of $k = 1$ in the middle, and 25-cm of $k = 1.2$ at the bottom. The profile in Fig. 10b consisted of 5-cm of the $k = 1.2$ (top), 5-cm of $k = 1$ (middle), and 35-cm of $k = 0.8$ (bottom). The thick solid line represents the $e/C_0 D_{max}$ relationship obtained via numerical solution of Eq.(7). This curve can be considered equivalent to the effective hydraulic conductivity function of the layered profile (except near saturation). The effective $K(h)$ function was then applied for an equivalent homogeneous profile and Eq.(7) was solved again to yield a second set of $e/C_0 D_{max}$ values depicted by circles in Fig. 10.

The agreement between the numerical solutions for the layered system and the introduced equivalent homogeneous profiles indicates the applicability of proposed approach for deriving effective (upscaled) hydraulic properties of layered soils. In Fig 10, a general relationship between the effective and the individual curves of the constituent soils can be observed. Each layer’s individual curve contributes to the effective curve at $h$ values equal to the depth of that layer above the water table and the effective curve transitions from the individual curve of a bottom layer to individual curve of its top layer when $h$ exceeds the depth of the layers’ interface to the water table.

Note that the domain for which the effective properties are determined is the unsaturated zone above the water table. As the hydraulic conductivity curve is the result of the status of the
system at different water tables, the domain for which the curve is determined is not constant but propagating into the soil profile depending on the extension of $D_{\text{max}}$ above the water table.

It is quite well-known that a mulch layer (e.g. sand or gravel layer) at the soil surface can drastically reduce soil evaporation (Willis, 1960; Yuan et al., 2009; Shokri et al., 2010; Assouline et al., 2014). In order to study mulch effects with this new approach, a 40-cm soil profile of $\lambda = 0.8$ with a 3-cm coarse layer ($\lambda = 1.2$) at the surface and a WT at the bottom was considered in Fig. 11. Consistent with findings in previous studies, this approach simply describes how a mulch layer reduces soil evaporation by adjusting the effective unsaturated hydraulic conductivity. For example, effective $K$ of the two-layer profile (coarse over fine) at $h = 43$ cm is about 4 orders of magnitude lower when compared to a homogeneous soil profile.

Effective hydraulic conductivity with the inverted profile layering (i.e., 3 cm of finer sand over 40 cm of coarser sand) is also presented in Fig. 11. In contrast to the coarse-over-fine layering which shows very sharp transitions in the effective hydraulic conductivity curve, the transition in this case is slow and occurs in the range of very low conductivities. This behavior may provide a new description for the fact that the “difference in evaporation rate from a system of fine-textured soil overlaying a coarse soil compared to a homogenous profile of fine-textured soil may be relatively small, while the inverted layering condition may have a large effect on evaporation rates” (Willis, 1960).

This explanation is better understood considering Fig. 12. Learning from Fig. 10 that the effective conductivity for large pressure heads (larger than the profile depth, $D$) is the same as top layers’ conductivity, the effective conductivity of the two layered profiles of Fig. 11 (3 cm fine sand overlaying 40 cm coarse sand and 3 cm coarse sand overlaying 40 cm fine sand) for a broader range of pressure heads was calculated and plotted in Fig. 12 ($K_{\text{e}}$ was considered as $K_{\text{f}} + K_{\text{v}}$ with $K_{\text{v}}$ calculated at 20 °C). This figure clearly indicates a dramatic decrease in effective hydraulic conductivity of the coarse-over-fine profile compared to the homogenous profile, while it shows no significant effect for the reverse layering.

In another scenario, we considered a 50-cm multilayer profile composed of soils with $\lambda = 1$ and $\lambda = 0.5$ as sub-layers forming periodically repeated unit cells with various thicknesses; 5 cm (10 layers), 1 cm (50 layers), and 0.1 cm (500 layers). A constant water table was considered as the bottom boundary and numerical calculations were performed for layered and equivalent homogeneous profiles.

As shown in Fig. 13, solutions for the layered and for the equivalent homogeneous profiles are nearly identical. When thicker layers (i.e., 5-cm) are considered, the effective unsaturated conductivity curve (thick solid line) mimics that of a soil with a heterogeneous pore system similar to results presented in Figs. 10 and 11. When the layer thicknesses are decreased, the effective curve approaches a homogenous soil profile. This result is consistent with “homogenization theory” where a microscopically heterogeneous soil profile is represented as homogeneous at the macroscopic scale when the scale of heterogeneity is much smaller than the scale considered for modeling (e.g., Neuweiler and Eichel, 2006).

Fig. 13 also shows that the effective unsaturated hydraulic conductivity curve lies between the individual curves of the single layers and very closely matches the harmonic mean of the individual curves (except near saturation), which gets a stronger weighted contribution from smaller values. This result is similar to the well-known averaging method for saturated hydraulic conductivity of layered profiles that states that the effective hydraulic conductivity is the arithmetic or the harmonic mean of individual

![Fig. 10](image1.png)

**Fig. 10.** Numerical solution of Eq. (7) for two 3-layer soil profiles (thick line) and for their equivalent homogenous soil profiles (circles). The former solution (thick line) was considered as the effective (upscaled) conductivity function of the equivalent homogenous profile. Horizontal lines show the layer interfaces.

![Fig. 11](image2.png)

**Fig. 11.** Numerical solution of Eq. (7) (effective hydraulic conductivity) for a 40-cm homogeneous soil profile with a 3-cm mulch layer at the surface and a water table at the bottom of the profile.

![Fig. 12](image3.png)

**Fig. 12.** Effective hydraulic conductivity for the layered soil profiles presented in Fig. 11 consisting of (a) 3 cm fine sand overlaying 40 cm coarse sand and (b) 3 cm coarse sand overlaying 40 cm fine sand. The area between homogenous and layered conductivity curves ($S$) is presented to show the difference between the two curves.
unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of homogeneous soils and more importantly a new solution for effective (upscaled) unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of layered soil systems.

Example applications of the proposed upscaling method for layered soils (Figs. 10–13) indicate its validity for defining effective hydraulic properties for a homogeneous soil equivalent to a given layered system. Hence, measuring pairs of $e - D_{\text{max}}$ in a layered soil column during a steady-state evaporation experiment could provide a benchmark for evaluating the validity of existing theoretical approaches (e.g., inverse solutions, averaging schemes, homogenization theory) for upscaling hydraulic properties.

The domain for which the effective conductivity curve is determined by this method is not constant but propagating into the soil profile depending on the $D_{\text{max}}$ extension above the water table. This is a direct consequence of the approach and should be taken into account when applying this method.

Only one-dimensional flow and thus one-dimensional heterogeneity (layering) was considered in this study. Application of the upscaling method to other heterogeneous media could be a subject of future studies. Both numerical modeling efforts and experimental studies on various other heterogeneous structures in two- or three-dimensional media are underway to expand the proposed approach.

4. Summary and conclusions

Based on evaluation of experimental and numerical data, the proposed new approach for steady-state evaporation (Eq. (10)) was shown to be valid for coarse-textured soils exhibiting a steep $K(h)$ function. Eq. (10) states that the steady-state evaporation rate from a constant water table is a macroscopic measure of unsaturated hydraulic conductivity in either homogeneous or layered coarse-textured media. Hence, in addition to a general approximate analytical solution for the Buckingham–Darcy law for $D_{\text{max}}$, the presented approach offers a framework for determination of

References


