

## SAM

### 4 - 20 mA Soil Moisture Sensor



# **User Manual**

Version 4

Automatikprodukter



## **Table of contents**

1.	Introduction	 •	• •	 •		 •	•	• •	 •	•	•	• •	•	•	 •	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	 •	•	•	• •	 •	2
2.	Specifications	 			•									•				•				•	•		•		•		•	 •	2
3.	About the SAM 1	 																				•							• (	 •	2
4.	Integrating the SAM	 	•															•				•							•	 •	2
4.1	Wiring		• •															•			 	•							• •	 •	3
5.	Testing the Sensor	 	•															•				•							•	 •	3
6.	Installing the SAM	 	•															•				•							•	 •	3
6.1	Procedure	 	•															•				•							•	 •	4
6.2	Orientation	 	•															•				•							•	 •	4
6.3	Removing the Sensor.	 	• •															•				•							• •	 •	4
7.	Calibration	 	•															•				•							•	 •	4
7.1	Mineral Soils	 	•															•				•							•	 •	4
7.2	Potting Soil/Peat	 	•															•				•							•	 •	4
7.3	Rock Wool	 	•															•				•							•	 •	5
8.	Troubleshooting	 																				•							• (	 •	5

#### 1. Introduction

Thank you for choosing the SAM 4-20 mA Soil Moisture Sensor. These innovative sensors will enable you to monitor soil moisture accurately and affordably with a standard 2-wire, 4-20 mA analog interface for use with many data acquisition and control systems.

2. Specifications	
Electrical	
Interface:	Standard 4-20 mA, 2-wire analog transmitter
Supply voltage:	12-32 VDC continuous
Output current:	4-20 mA
Overvoltage protection:	Yes
Reverse polarity protection:	Yes
Settling time:	4 seconds
Wiring:	Red wire: (+) supply
	Black wire: (-) output
Shield:	Not connected
Measurement	
Туре:	Volumetric water content (VWC)
Range:	0-100% VWC typical
Resolution:	Depends on current measurement (data acquisition) device
Accuracy:	± 6 % VWC with generic calibration for supported growing media up to 65% VWC, above which accuracylessens. Increased accuracy can be achieved with a mediumspecific calibration.
Output:	4-20 mA current proportional to VWC
Sensor measurement interval:	1 second
Operating Environment	
Temperature:	-40 to 50 °C
Physical Properties	
Dimensions:	8.9 cm x 1.8 cm x 0.7 cm
Cable:	2 m or 5 m (standard), 3 wire (22 AWG tinned Redand Black wires, 24 AWG tinned bare wire); (Custom cable length available upon request)

#### 3. About the SAM

The SAM measures the dielectric constant of the soil in order to find its volumetric water content. Since the dielectric constant of water is much higher than that of air or soil minerals, the dielectric constant of the soil is a sensitive measure of water content. The SAM supplies a 70 MHz oscillating wave to the sensor prongs that induces an electromagnetic field in the medium (soil) surrounding the sensor. The charging and discharging of the sensor is controlled by the dielectric of the surrounding soil. A microprocessor on the SAM measures the charging of the sensor, and therefore the dielectric constant of the soil which is related to the water content of the soil. The micro-processor makes a dielectric measurement and updates the transmitted current once per second. The transmitted 4-20mA current can be converted to the water content of the soil using a simple calibration function. The SAM was designed to be used with standard 4-20 mA controllers and monitoring systems. It cannot be used with AP logging systems. For more information about using AP logging systems please contact AP's customer support representatives.



#### 4. Integrating the SAM

Integrating the SAM A 4-20mA system generally consists of a sensor, a transmitter, a power supply, and a device to read the current being transmitted through the current loop. The SAM is an integrated sensor and 4-20mA transmitter. When the SAM is powered by the Power Supply, it transmits a current though the loop that is proportional to the soil dielectric permittivity and therefore the soil volumetric water content. In Figure 1, the current loop is shown by the dotted line labeled I=4-20mA. The arrows indicate the direction of the current.



Figure 1 - 4-20mA current loop diagram

The SAM uses a microcontroller to regulate the interval at which it takes measurements. It takes one second from the time it is powered up to take its first measurement and transmit current though the loop. The transmitted current will reach a stable value within four seconds of power up. After the initial four second startup, measurements are taken every one second, while the current in the loop is continuously maintained. Since the measurement intervals are controlled by the SAM itself, there is no need to pulse the excitation voltage. A constant supply voltage should be applied in order for the SAM to function as it is designed.

#### 4.1 Wiring

#### Conventional (PLC)

A Programmable Logic Controller (PLC) is typically used to read the current transmitted through the SAM. The red wire (see Figure 2) of the SAM is connected to a voltage output terminal that is able to supply 12-32 VDC. The blackwire is connected to an input terminal that is capable of accepting a current input ranging from 4 mA to 20 mA. For the SAM to function properly, the voltage drop from the red to the black lead must be 12 V or greater.

### **12** 4 - 20 mA Soil Moisture Sensor

SAM

Dec. 13



Figure 2 - Typical wiring connection

Non-Conventional

When using a device, such as a data logger, that does not have an input capable of measuring current, a pickoff resistor can be used as shown in Figure 3. Assuming that the Single Ended Input has an input impedance, or resistance, much larger that of  $R_{volt}$ , then all of the current in the 4-20 mA loop passes through  $R_{volt}$ . If the data logger can measure the voltage drop over the  $R_{volt}$ , then the current can be calculated as

 $I = V_{measured} / R_{volt}$  (1)

where I (mA) is the 4-20 mA current,  $R_{volt}$  (ohms) is the resistance of the pickoff resistor, and  $V_{measured}$  (mV) is thevoltage drop over  $R_{volt}$ .



Figure 3 - Wiring connection for devices without current inputs

The optional 100 $\mu$ F capacitor shown in parallel with the R<sub>volt</sub> reduces measurement noise. It should have a voltage rating higher than the largest supply voltage. Be sure to observe correct polarity.

The SAM requires a voltage of at least 12 V. This limits the value of R<sub>volt</sub> since part of the total voltage drop will



SAM

Dec. 13

be across the resistor. Equation (2) can be used to determine the maximum value for R<sub>volt</sub>. Table 1 shows some resistance values.

 $V_{supply} - 12 = 0.02 R_{Volt Max}$  (2)

Supply Voltage	Load
13 V	50 Ω
24 V	50 Ω
32 V	50 Ω

Table 1 – Maximum resistance values for R<sub>volt</sub> at specified voltages

The SAM sensor has several advantages over voltage-output sensors, even for voltage-input data loggers.

The SAM supply voltage doesn't need to be regulated for the sensor to work properly; it can be any value between 12 and 32 volts, without affecting sensor output.

When using a current-based sensor like the SAM, the signal is not affected by electrical resistance in the cable, so the sensor output is not affected by cable length or wire gauge.

The SAM requires only two conductors, so long lines are both lower in noise and less expensive.

With the SAMsensor the source impedance is small, and a current loop is highly immune to noise on the line. Measured voltage can be tailored to a particular data acquisition system simply by adjusting the value of  $R_{volt}$ . A typical application might be to use a SAM with a 12 volt supply and a  $R_{volt}$  value of 1 ohm. The output voltage range is the product of the current and the resistance (Equation (1), so for 4-20 mA it would be 4 to 20 mV.

#### 5. Testing the Sensor

After integrating the SAM into your PLC or other data acquisition system, it is always a good idea to test the sensor output to verify that it is functioning correctly with your system. Two convenient test conditions are having the sensor surrounded by air and water. To test in air, suspend the sensor from the cable, making sure that it is at least 6 inches from any object. To test in water, place the sensor in a bucket of tap water (do not use de-ionized or distilled water). The entire sensor (prongs + black plastic electronics portion) should be immersed in water, and should be at least 2 inches from any container surface. Under these conditions, the sensor should transmit in the following ranges(approximately):

Air: 3.4 to 4.7 mA Tap water: 18.1 to 22.4 mA

Note that the sensor output can go above 20 mA and below4 mA.

#### 6. Installing the SAM

When selecting a site for installation, it is important to understand that the soil adjacent to the sensor surface has the strongest influence on the sensor reading and that the sensor measures the volumetric water content. Therefore any airgaps or excessive soil compaction around the sensor can profoundly influence the readings.



Also, do not install the sensors adjacent to large metal objects such as metal poles or stakes. This can attenuate the sensor's electromagnetic field and adversely affect sensor readings. Because the SAM has gaps between its prongs, it is also important to consider the size of the media you are inserting the sensor into. It is possible to get sticks, bark, roots or other material stuck between the sensor prongs, which will adversely affect readings. Finally, be careful when inserting the sensors into dense soil, as the prongs will break if excessive sideways force is used when pushing them in.

#### 6.1 Procedure

The SAM sensor was designed for easy installation into the soil. After digging a hole to the desired depth, push the prongs on the sensor into undisturbed soil at the bottom of the hole or into the sidewall of the hole. Make sure that the prongs are buried completely up to the black overmolding. The sensor may be difficult to insert into extremely compact or dry soil. If you have difficulty inserting the sensor, try loosening the soil somewhat or wetting the soil. Never pound it in!

Carefully backfill the hole to match the bulk density of the surrounding soil. Be careful to not overstress the cable or overmold by bending when installing the sensor.



#### 6.2 Orientation

The sensor can be oriented in any direction. However, orienting the flat side perpendicular to the surface of the soil will minimize effects on downward water movement.

#### 6.3 Removing the Sensor

When removing the sensor from the soil, do not pull it out of the soil by the cable! Doing so may break internal connections and make the sensor unusable.

#### 7. Calibration

The current transmitted by the SAM is proportional to the dielectric permittivity of the medium surrounding the sensor, and therefore its volumetric water content (VWC) of the medium. The VWC is calculated by applying a calibration equation to the current transmitted by the SAM. The following are generic calibration equations for common growth media. Applying these equations will generally result inaccuracy of  $\pm$  6% VWC as long as the electrical conductivity of the medium is less than 8 dS/m. If you wish to use the SAM in a medium that isn't listed below, if you need better than  $\pm$  6% accuracy, or if you are working in a high salinity material, then you should develop a custom calibration for your particular medium. AP can also develop a custom calibration for

7



SAM

Dec. 13

your medium; contact AP for more details on the calibration service.

#### 7.1 Mineral Soils

A single calibration equation will generally result in good accuracy for all mineral soil types with electrical conductivity < 8 dS/m. VWC is given by:

VWC = 0.00328 \* mA<sup>2</sup> - 0.0244 \* mA - 0.00565

If your data acquisition system isn't capable of higher order mathematical operations, the mineral soil calibration can be approximated by the following linear model. This will result in slightly worse accuracy at low VWC, with errors becoming large above 35% VWC.

VWC= 0.0479 \* mA - 0.391

#### 7.2 Potting Soil/Peat

The following equation can be used to convert SAM transmitted current into VWC in potting soil and peat potting mixes. Please note that different potting soil types are quite variable, so this calibration equation may not result in good accuracy in your particular mix (although precision should still be good). We recommend a custom calibration for best accuracy when using the SAM in potting soils.

VWC = 0.00531 \*e<sup>(0.29\*mA)</sup>

#### 7.3 Rock Wool

The SAM was calibrated in Groden Expert<sup>™</sup> rockwool at several electrical conductivities. VWC can be calculated as:

VWC = 0.00446 \* mA<sup>2</sup> - 0.0359 \* mA + 0.0741

#### 8. Troubleshooting

If you encounter problems with the SAM, they will usually be caused by one of two situations

- If the SAM readings in air and/or water are outside the ranges given in the Testing the Sensor section, the there is likely a problem with the connection to the PLCor other data acquisition system. Check the wiring and check to make sure that the supply voltage is in the specified range.
- If the SAM is reading a negative value for VWC while it is inserted into the soil, make sure that you have good sensor-to-soil contact. When inserted, the SAM should be completely covered up past the black over-molding. Removing and re-installing the full length of the sensor with good sensor-to-soil contact should remedy this problem.

If problems persists, please contact AP for assistance.