

PLATE 32. PERMAFROST

Introduction
Permafrost is a term used to describe the thermal condition of earth materials, such as soil and rock, when their temperature remains below 0°C continuously for more than 1 year. The negative annual heat imbalance at the ground surface due to the cold climate in polar and alpine regions has been responsible for the formation and maintenance of permafrost conditions in the ground. Ice may be present in the form of particle coatings, layers, wedges, crack fillings, or irregularly shaped masses. Above the permafrost is a surface layer of soil or rock, called the active layer, which thaws in summer and freezes in winter.

Hydrologic methodology developed for more southern latitudes has often been utilized for permafrost regions, simply because intensive studies have not been carried out in these northern regions to determine whether hydrologic processes are greatly affected by the presence of permafrost. The effect of permafrost on the hydrologic cycle in the hydrologic cycle have been studied in Canada only to a limited extent. Current Canadian knowledge of permafrost hydrology is documented in the proceedings of recent workshops [1,2]. For this reason, the present text and accompanying map deal only with the occurrence and distribution of permafrost, taken from references 3-7, which contain extensive bibliographies.

Zonation of Permafrost

One-half of Canada's land surface is underlain by permafrost. The permafrost region is divided into two zones: continuous in the north and discontinuous in the south. In the continuous zone, permafrost exists everywhere beneath the land surface and varies in thickness from about 100 metres at the southern limit to 1000 metres in the Far North. The active layer usually extends down to the permafrost. In the discontinuous zone, some areas have permafrost beneath the land surface and other areas are free of permafrost. The distribution ranges from widespread in the north, where permafrost areas predominate, to scattered, where permafrost occurs in islands in generally unfrozen terrain. It varies in thickness from a few metres or less at the southern limit to about 100 metres at the boundary with the continuous zone. The active layer does not extend down to the permafrost in all places. South of the discontinuous zone, a few patches of permafrost exist in peatlands owing to unusual microclimatic and terrain conditions.

Permafrost in the Cordillera comprises a continuous zone at higher elevations, and below that, a discontinuous zone extending down to the lower altitudinal limit of permafrost. At the northern limit of the Cordilleran alpine permafrost, as shown on the map, permafrost occurs in valley bottoms. Southward to about latitude 54°30' N, the lowest probable elevation of permafrost is about 1200 metres above sea level, with only scattered occurrences in peatlands at lower elevations. South of latitude 54°30' N, the lowest probable elevation has been estimated to rise steadily to about 2000 metres at the 49th parallel.

Thickness of Permafrost

The thickness of permafrost is influenced by such factors as soil and rock type, snow cover, and proximity to bodies of water. The values shown on the map were obtained by different methods such as direct observation in boreholes, mine shafts, and wells; ground-temperature measurements using thermocouple and thermistor cables; and geophysical methods, including seismic and resistivity.

Temperature of Permafrost

The temperature of the permafrost in the continuous zone at the depth where annual variations are only a few tenths of a degree—

measured the depth of zero annual amplitude—ranges from about -15°C in the Far North to about -5°C at the southern boundary of the zone. In the discontinuous zone, the temperature of the permafrost at the depth of zero annual amplitude generally ranges from about -5°C in the north to just below 0°C at the southern limit of the zone. The six ground-temperature envelopes (Figure 1 on the map) are typical for stations in the continuous and discontinuous zones. The annual temperature fluctuations decrease with depth. The depth of zero annual amplitude in the permafrost region generally varies from about 10 to 20 metres depending on the same conditions affecting the thickness of permafrost. Temperature data are obtained by several methods. Multi-point thermocouple and thermistor cables installed permanently in boreholes are read regularly at weekly or monthly intervals to construct envelopes like those in Figure 1. Another method is to observe the temperature at regular depth intervals by lowering a single thermistor on a cable in abandoned petroleum exploration boreholes, which are cased and oil filled.

Climate Relationships of Permafrost

The mean annual air temperature isotherms on the map are derived from a 30-year average for the period 1941-1970 inclusive. A broad relationship appears to exist between air temperature and permafrost temperature based on presently available permafrost thickness and temperature observations obtained at specific locations. In general, the temperature of the permafrost is from one to 5.5 Celsius degrees (average, about 3.3 degrees) warmer than the average annual air temperature at a given locality. It is apparent that the distribution of permafrost is related to air temperature. The boundary between the continuous and discontinuous permafrost zones corresponds roughly to a mean annual air temperature of about -8.3°C, and the southern limit of permafrost to about -1°C. The lower altitudinal limit of Cordilleran permafrost, shown on the map, coincides approximately with the -1°C average annual air isotherm.

Other Factors Affecting Permafrost

Other factors that affect permafrost conditions include relief, vegetation, hydrology, snow cover, fire, glacier ice, and soil and rock type. Relief influences the amount of solar radiation received by the ground surface and the accumulation of snow. The influence of orientation and degree of slope is particularly evident in mountainous regions. In the discontinuous zone, this may result in permafrost occurring on north-facing slopes but not on adjacent slopes facing south. In the continuous zone, permafrost is thicker and the active layer thinner on north-facing slopes.

Vegetation affects permafrost in various ways and is one of the more obvious indicators of subsurface conditions. The greatest influence of vegetation is its role of shielding the permafrost from atmospheric heat and in impeding heat transfer. This protection is provided mainly by insulating properties of moss, lichen, and other ground cover. Removal or disturbance of this surface cover causes degradation of the underlying permafrost.

Water greatly influences the distribution and thermal regime of permafrost. In the discontinuous zone, the existence of permafrost is inhibited in poorly drained areas. Under water bodies, there is almost always an unfrozen layer of ground that never completely freezes. The extent of this thawed zone varies with a large number of factors—area and depth of the water body, water temperature, thickness of winter ice and snow cover, general hydrology, and composition and history of accumulation of bottom sediments.

Snow cover influences the heat transfer between the air and the ground and hence affects the distribution of permafrost. The snowfall regime and the length of time that snow lies on the ground are critical factors. A heavy fall of snow in the autumn and early winter inhibits winter frost penetration. On the other hand, a thick snow cover that persists on the ground in the spring delays thawing of the ground underneath. The heavier snowfall east of the Hudson Bay appears to be an important factor in the northward displacement of the permafrost zones in Quebec.

Fire is a transient factor which is not normally recognized as affecting the permafrost. Although the time of actual burning at any given point is usually of short duration, a forest or tundra fire can change the underlying permafrost conditions. Charring of the ground surface will change the heat absorption capabilities of the ground. The removal of the vegetative cover by burning can cause thawing of the permafrost, and unstable soil conditions result.

The growth and regime of glaciers and ice caps has had a marked effect on the permafrost through geological time. The temperature at the bottom of the ice determined the temperature of the underlying permafrost. The variety of postglacial conditions produced fluctuations in the extent of permafrost.

The types of soil and rock, as well as their water content, have considerable influence on the permafrost because of variations in their thermal properties such as conductivity, diffusivity, and specific heat. They affect the rate of permafrost accumulation and the thickness of the active layer.

Acknowledgments

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Selected References

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disçines de degré, la température du pergélisol varie entre environ 15 °C dans le Grand-Nord, et environ -5 °C, dans la partie méridionale de la zone. Dans la zone discontinue, la température à amplitude annuelle nulle, elle se situe de façon générale à -5 °C dans le nord et la zone, à juste au-dessus de 0 °C, dans la partie méridionale. Les six enveloppes de températures du sol sont caractéristiques des stations des zones continues et discontinues (figure 1). Les variations annuelles de température diminuent en fonction de la profondeur. La profondeur à amplitude annuelle nulle, dépendant des mêmes facteurs qui sont responsables de l'épaisseur du pergélisol, varie généralement entre environ 10 mètres et 20 mètres. Les données de température sont obtenues à l'aide de câbles à thermocouples et à thermistors, installés en permanence dans les trous de sonde. Les lectures hebdomadaires ou mensuelles sont mises en graphique comme sur la figure 1. Une autre méthode consiste à mesurer la température à des intervalles de profondeur réguliers et descendant un câble à thermistor unique dans un forage d'exploration de pétrole abandonné, tubé et rempli de pétrole.

Relations climat-pergélisol

Les isothermes des températures moyennes annuelles de l'air, qui figurent sur la carte, sont tirées des moyennes annuelles obtenues au cours de la période de trente ans allant de 1941 à 1970 inclusivement. Il semble, compte tenu des données actuellement disponibles sur les mesures de température et d'épaisseur du pergélisol qui ont été effectuées en des endroits spécifiques, qu'il existe une relation simple entre la température de l'air et celle du pergélisol. De façon générale, cette dernière est supérieure de 1 à 5,5 degrés Celsius (moyenne de 3,3 degrés) à la température moyenne annuelle de l'air mesurée en un endroit donné. Il semble donc que la répartition du pergélisol est fonction de la température de l'air. La limite entre la zone continue et discontinue correspond approximativement à la température moyenne annuelle de l'air de -8,3 °C et à quelque -1 °C à la limite sud du pergélisol. L'altitude limite minimale du pergélisol de la Cordillère coïncide approximativement avec l'isotherme de -1 °C, tel qu'on le voit sur la carte.

Autres facteurs pouvant influer sur le pergélisol

Le relief, la végétation, l'hydrologie, la couverture nivale, le feu, les glaciers et la nature de la roche et du sol sont tous des facteurs qui influent sur le pergélisol. Le relief exerce une influence sur la quantité d'ensoleillement reçue par le sol et sur la quantité de neige qui s'y accumule. L'effet de l'orientation et de la déclivité des versants se fait sentir surtout dans les régions montagneuses. Dans la zone discontinue, ces facteurs peuvent donner naissance à la formation de pergélisol sur les versants nord mais non sur les versants sud avoisinants. Dans la zone continue, le pergélisol est plus épais sur les versants nord et la zone active plus mince. La végétation agit de diverses façons sur le pergélisol; elle est considérée comme l'indicateur le plus évident de l'état du sous-sol. Son rôle le plus connu, c'est celui de mettre le pergélisol à l'abri de la chaleur atmosphérique et d'empêcher l'échange de chaleur. Cette protection est assurée principalement par les propriétés isolantes du vaste tapis de mousse et de tourbe. Le fait d'enlever ou même de perturber cette couverture protectrice provoque la dégradation du pergélisol sous-jacent.

L'eau influe considérablement sur la répartition et le régime thermique du pergélisol. Dans la zone discontinue, les régions mal drainées empêchent la formation de pergélisol. Il existe presque toujours, sous les nappes d'eau, une couche de terre non gelée qui ne réussit jamais à geler complètement. L'étendue de cette partie non gelée dépend d'un grand nombre de facteurs tels : la superficie et la profondeur de la nappe d'eau, la température de l'eau, l'épaisseur de la couche de glace et de

neige pendant l'hiver, les caractéristiques hydrologiques générales, la composition des dépôts de sédiments ainsi que la manière dont ils se sont accumulés.

La couverture nivale crée un effet sur l'échange de chaleur entre l'air et le sol et affecte en conséquence la répartition du pergélisol. Le régime des chutes de neige et la durée de l'enneigement sur le sol sont des facteurs extrêmement importants. Ainsi, une chute de neige abondante en automne ou au début de l'hiver empêche la pénétration de la glace d'hiver. D'autre part, une couverture nivale épaisse qui demeure sur le sol au printemps en retarde le dégel. Les chutes de neige abondantes à l'est de la baie d'Hudson apparaissent comme un facteur important dans le déplacement, en direction du nord, des zones de pergélisol au Québec.

Le feu constitue un facteur passager que l'on ne considère pas normalement comme pouvant influer sur le pergélisol. Bien qu'un incendie en un endroit donné soit habituellement de courte durée, il n'en demeure pas moins qu'un incendie de forêt ou de toundra peut altérer l'état du pergélisol qui se trouve dans le sous-sol. La carbonisation de la surface du sol changera ses capacités d'absorption de la chaleur. La disparition de la couche végétale, suite à un incendie, peut entraîner le dégel du pergélisol et rendre le sol moins stable.

Au cours des temps géologiques, la formation et le régime des glaciers et des calottes glaciaires ont profondément influencé le pergélisol. La température de la partie inférieure de la glace a déterminé celle du pergélisol sous-jacent. Les conditions post-glaciaires varient ont amené des fluctuations dans l'étendue du pergélisol.

La nature et la teneur en eau du sol et du roc exercent, en raison des variations de leurs propriétés thermiques telles que la conductivité, la diffusivité et la chaleur spécifique, une influence considérable sur le pergélisol. Elles modifient le taux d'accumulation du pergélisol ainsi que l'épaisseur de la zone active.

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Références

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