Why Humidification is Important

Glossary

Relative Humidity(RH):
The ratio of the vapor pressure (or mole fraction) of water vapor in the air to the vapor pressure (or mole fraction) of saturated air at the same dry-bulb temperature and pressure.

Sensible Heat:
Heat that when added to or taken away from a substance causes a change in temperature or, in other words, is “sensed” by a thermometer. Measured in Btu.

Latent Heat:
Heat that when added to or taken away from a substance causes or accompanies a phase change for that substance. This heat does not register on a thermometer, hence its name “latent” or hidden. Measured in Btu.

Dew Point:
The temperature at which condensation occurs (100%RH) when air is cooled at a constant pressure without adding or taking away water vapor.

Evaporative Cooling:
A process in which liquid water is evaporated into air. The liquid absorbs the heat necessary for the evaporation process from the air, thus, there is a reduction in air temperature and an increase in the actual water vapor content of the air.

Enthalpy:
Also called heat content, this is the sum of the internal energy and the product of the volume times the pressure. Measured in Btu/lb.

Hygroscopic Materials:
Materials capable of absorbing or giving up moisture.

Phase:
The states of existence for a substance, solid, liquid, or gas (vapor).

Humidification is simply the addition of water to air. However, humidity exerts a powerful influence on environmental and physiological factors. Improper humidity levels (either too high or too low) can cause discomfort for people, and can damage many kinds of equipment and materials. Conversely, the proper type of humidification equipment and controls can help you achieve effective, economical, and trouble-free control of humidity.

As we consider the importance of humidity among other environmental factors—temperature, cleanliness, air movement, and thermal radiation—it is important to remember that humidity is perhaps the least evident to human perception. Most of us will recognize and react more quickly to temperature changes, odors or heavy dust in the air, drafts, or radiant heat. Since relative humidity interrelates with these variables, it becomes a vital ingredient in total environmental control.

Humidity and Temperature

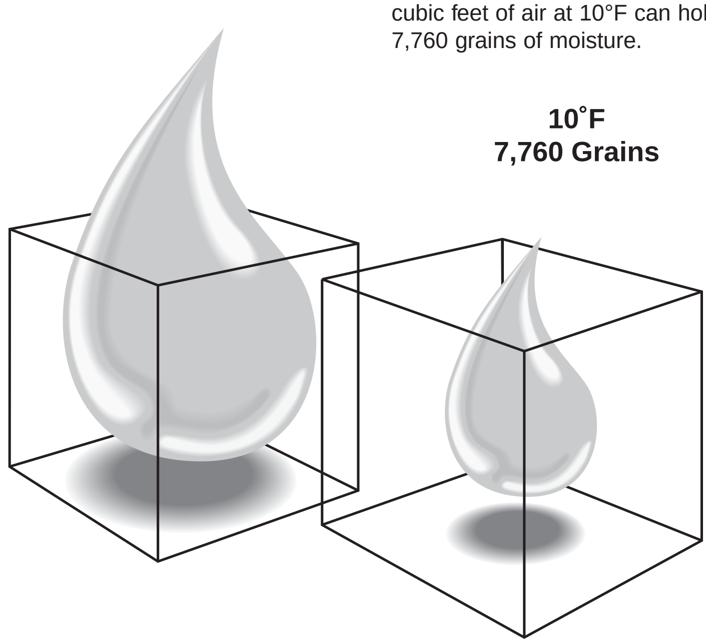
Humidity is water vapor or moisture content always present in the air. Humidity is definable as an absolute measure: the amount of water vapor in a unit of air. But this measure of humidity does not indicate how dry or damp the air is. This can only be done by computing the ratio of the actual partial vapor pressure to the saturated partial vapor pressure at the same temperature. This is relative humidity, expressed by the formula:

$$RH = \left.\frac{vp_a}{vp_s}\right|_t$$

vp_a = actual vapor pressure
vp_s = vapor pressure at saturation
t = dry-bulb temperature

For practical purposes, at temperatures and pressures normally encountered in building systems, relative humidity is considered as the amount of water vapor in the air compared to the amount the air can hold at a given temperature.

“At a given temperature” is the key to understanding relative humidity. Warm air has the capacity to hold more moisture than cold air. For example, 10,000 cubic feet of 70°F air can hold 80,550 grains of moisture. The same 10,000 cubic feet of air at 10°F can hold only 7,760 grains of moisture.



If the 10,000 cubic feet of 10°F air held 5,820 grains of moisture, its relative humidity would be 75%. If your heating system raises the temperature of this air to 70°F with no moisture added, it will still contain 5,820 grains of moisture. However, at 70°F, 10,000 cubic feet of air can hold 80,550 grains of moisture. So the 5,820 grains it actually holds give it a relative humidity of slightly more than 7%. That’s very dry...drier than the Sahara Desert.

Air Movement and Humidity

Another variable, air movement in the form of infiltration and exfiltration from the building, influences the relationship between temperature and relative humidity. Typically, one to three times every hour (and many more times with forced air make-up or exhaust) cold outdoor air replaces your indoor air. Your heating system heats this cold, moist outdoor air, producing warm, dry indoor air.

Evaporative Cooling

We've discussed the effects of changing temperature on relative humidity. Altering RH can also cause temperature to change. For every pound of moisture evaporated by the air, the heat of vaporization reduces the sensible heat in the air by about 1,000 Btu. This can be moisture absorbed from people or from wood, paper, textiles, and other hygroscopic material in the building. Conversely, if hygroscopic materials absorb moisture from humid air, the heat of vaporization can be released to the air, raising the sensible heat.

Dew Point

Condensation will form on windows whenever the temperature of the glass surface is below the dew point of the air. Table 7-2, from data presented in the ASHRAE Systems and Equipment Handbook, indicates combinations of indoor relative humidity and outside temperature at which condensation will form. Induction units, commonly used below windows in modern buildings to blow heated air across the glass, permit carrying higher relative humidities without visible condensation.

Table 7-2. Relative Humidities at Which Condensation Will Appear on Windows at 74°F When Glass Surface Is Unheated

Outdoor Temperature	Single Glazing	Double Glazing
40	39%	59%
30	29%	50%
20	21%	43%
10	15%	36%
0	10%	30%
-10	7%	26%
-20	5%	21%
-30	3%	17%

Table 7-1. Grains of Water per Cubic Foot of Saturated Air and per Pound of Dry Air at Various Temperatures.
(Abstracted from ASHRAE Handbook)

°F	Per cu ft	Per lb Dry Air	°F	Per cu ft	Per lb Dry Air	°F	Per cu ft	Per lb Dry Air	°F	Per cu ft	Per lb Dry Air
-10	0.28466	3.2186	50	4.106	53.38	78	10.38	145.3	106	23.60	364.0
-5	0.36917	4.2210	51	4.255	55.45	79	10.71	150.3	107	24.26	375.8
0	0.47500	5.5000	52	4.407	57.58	80	11.04	155.5	108	24.93	387.9
5	0.609	7.12	53	4.561	59.74	81	11.39	160.9	109	25.62	400.3
10	0.776	9.18	54	4.722	61.99	82	11.75	166.4	110	26.34	413.3
15	0.984	11.77	55	4.889	64.34	83	12.11	172.1	111	27.07	426.4
20	1.242	15.01	56	5.060	66.75	84	12.49	178.0	112	27.81	440.4
25	1.558	19.05	57	5.234	69.23	85	12.87	184.0	113	28.57	454.5
30	1.946	24.07	58	5.415	71.82	86	13.27	190.3	114	29.34	469.0
31	2.033	25.21	59	5.602	74.48	87	13.67	196.7	115	30.13	483.9
32	2.124	26.40	60	5.795	77.21	88	14.08	203.3	120	34.38	566.5
33	2.203	27.52	61	5.993	80.08	89	14.51	210.1	125	39.13	662.6
34	2.288	28.66	62	6.196	83.02	90	14.94	217.1	130	44.41	774.9
35	2.376	29.83	63	6.407	86.03	91	15.39	224.4	135	50.30	907.9
36	2.469	31.07	64	6.622	89.18	92	15.84	231.8	140	56.81	1064.7
37	2.563	32.33	65	6.845	92.40	93	16.31	239.5	145	64.04	1250.9
38	2.660	33.62	66	7.074	95.76	94	16.79	247.5	150	71.99	1473.5
39	2.760	34.97	67	7.308	99.19	95	17.28	255.6	155	80.77	1743.0
40	2.863	36.36	68	7.571	102.8	96	17.80	264.0	160	90.43	2072.7
41	2.970	37.80	69	7.798	106.4	97	18.31	272.7	165	101.0	2480.8
42	3.081	39.31	70	8.055	110.2	98	18.85	281.7	170	112.6	2996.0
43	3.196	40.88	71	8.319	114.2	99	19.39	290.9	175	125.4	3664.5
44	3.315	42.48	72	8.588	118.2	100	19.95	300.5	180	139.2	4550.7
45	3.436	44.14	73	8.867	122.4	101	20.52	310.3	185	154.3	5780.6
46	3.562	45.87	74	9.153	126.6	102	21.11	320.4	190	170.7	7581.0
47	3.692	47.66	75	9.448	131.1	103	21.71	330.8	195	188.6	10493.0
48	3.826	49.50	76	9.749	135.7	104	22.32	341.5	200	207.9	15827.0
49	3.964	51.42	77	10.06	140.4	105	22.95	352.6			

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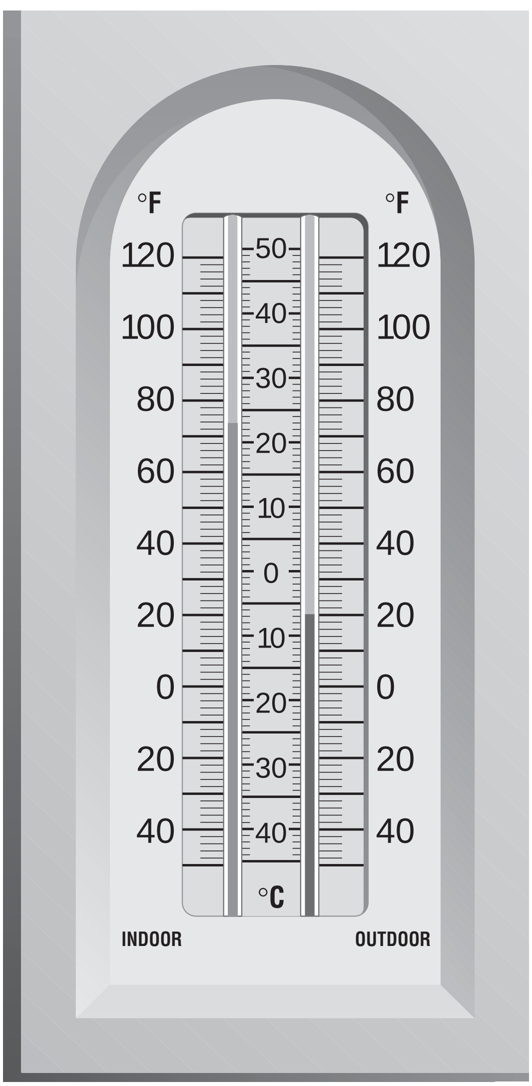
Why Humidification is Important, continued…

Energy Conservation With Controlled RH

Indoor relative humidity as we have computed it is called Theoretical Indoor Relative Humidity (TIRH). It virtually never exists. RH observed on a measuring device known as a hygrometer will almost always exceed the TIRH. Why? Dry air is thirsty air. It seeks to draw moisture from any source it can. Thus it will soak up moisture from any hygroscopic materials (such as wood, paper, foodstuffs, leather, etc.) and dry out the nasal passages and skin of human beings in the building.

But is this free "humidification"? No, it is the most expensive kind there is when translated into terms of human comfort, material deterioration, and production difficulties. Moreover, it requires the same amount of energy whether the moisture is absorbed from people and materials or added to the air by an efficient humidification system.

The true energy required for a humidification system is calculated from what the actual humidity level will be in the building, NOT from the theoretical level. In virtually all cases, the cost of controlling RH at the desired level will be nominal in terms of additional energy load, and in some cases may result in reduced energy consumption.



A major convention center in the Central United States reported that it experienced a decrease in overall steam consumption when it added steam humidification. From one heating season with no humidification to the next with humidifiers operating, the steam consumption for humidification was 1,803,000 lbs, while the steam for heating decreased by 2,486,000 lbs in the same period. The decreased (metered) consumption occurred despite 7.2% colder weather from the previous year. The records from this installation indicate that it is possible to reduce the total amount of steam required for environmental control by maintaining a higher, controlled relative humidity.

Let's examine a theoretical system using enthalpy (heat content) as our base.

- Assume a winter day with outside temperature of 0°F at 75% RH.
- The enthalpy of the air is .6 Btu/lb dry air (DA).
- If the air is heated to 72°F without adding moisture, the enthalpy becomes 18 Btu/lb DA.
- Theoretical relative humidity becomes 3.75%, but actual RH will be about 25%.
- At 72°F and 25% RH the enthalpy is 22 Btu/lb DA.
- The additional moisture is derived from hygroscopic materials and people in the area.

But what about the additional energy — the difference between the 18 Btu/lb DA and 22 Btu/lb DA? This 22% increase must come from the heating system to compensate for the evaporative cooling effect. If a humidification system is used and moisture added to achieve a comfortable 35% RH, the enthalpy is 23.6 Btu/lb DA.

This is only a 7% increase over the "inevitable" energy load of 22 Btu/lb DA—substantially less than the theoretical increase of 31% from 3.75% RH (18 Btu/lb DA) to 35% RH (23.6 Btu/lb DA) at 72°F. If the temperature was only 68°F at 35% RH (because people can be comfortable at a lower temperature with higher humidity levels), the enthalpy is 21.8 Btu/lb DA, or a slight decrease in energy.

Problems With Dry Air

Dry air can cause a variety of costly, troublesome, and sometimes dangerous problems. If you are not familiar with the effects of dry air, the cause of these problems may not be obvious. You should be concerned if you are processing or handling hygroscopic materials such as wood, paper, textile fibers, leather, or chemicals. Dry air and/or fluctuating humidity can cause serious production problems and/or material deterioration.

Static electricity can accumulate in dry atmospheric conditions and interfere with efficient operation of production machinery or electronic office machines. Where static-prone materials such as paper, films, computer disks, and other plastics are handled, dry air intensely aggravates the static problem. In potentially explosive atmospheres, dry air and its resultant static electricity accumulations can be extremely dangerous.

Humidity and Human Comfort

Studies indicate people are generally most comfortable when relative humidity is maintained between 35% and 55%. When air is dry, moisture evaporates more readily from the skin, producing a feeling of chilliness even with temperatures of 75°F or more. Because human perception of RH is often sensed as temperature differential, it's possible to achieve comfortable conditions with proper humidity control at lower temperatures. The savings in heating costs are typically very significant over the course of just a single heating season.

The Need for Humidity Control in Today's Electronic Workplace

Electronics are revolutionizing the way your office and plant floor operates, communicates, collects data, and maintains equipment. In the office, xerographic copies, phone systems, computers, and fax machines, even wall thermostats are electronically controlled. What's more, office decor has far more work stations incorporating wall panels and furniture with natural and synthetic fabric than ever before.

In manufacturing areas, more machines are electronically controlled. In fact, you see more control rooms (just to house electronic control systems) than in previous years.

All this means that the nature of today's business makes proper humidification a virtual necessity.

Why Improper Humidification Threatens Sensitive Electronic Equipment

Central to all electronic circuits today is the IC (integrated circuit) or "chip." The heart of the IC is a wafer-thin miniature circuit engraved in semiconductor material. Electronic components—and chips in particular—can be overstressed by electrical transients (voltage spikes). This may cause cratering and melting of minute areas of the semiconductor, leading to operational upsets, loss of memory, or permanent failure. The damage may be immediate or the component may fail sooner than an identical part not exposed to an electrical transient.

A major cause of voltage spikes is electrostatic discharge (ESD). Although of extremely short duration, transients can be lethal to the wafer-thin surfaces of semiconductors. ESD may deliver voltage as high as lightning and it strikes faster.

ESD is a particularly dangerous phenomenon because you are the source of these transients. It is the static electricity that builds up on your body. The jolt you get from touching a door-knob or shaking someone's hand is ESD. Table 9-1 below shows voltages which can be generated by everyday activities.

Voltage accumulates on surfaces (in this case, the human body), and when the surface approaches another at a lower voltage a discharge of electrical voltage occurs. Note the humidity levels at which these voltages may be generated. As the level of humidity rises, voltages are reduced because a film of moisture forms on surfaces, conducting the charges to the ground. Although the 65%-90% RH cited in Table 9-1 is impractical for office areas, any increase in humidity will yield a significant reduction in ESD events.

ESD Damage is Not Only Possible but Probable

A study of personnel ESD events in a poorly controlled room with a wool carpet was conducted for 16 months. The strength of the ESD event was measured in current (amps). Results indicate, for example, that a current discharge of 0.3 amps is 100 times more likely to occur at 10%-20% RH than at 45%-50% RH. In other words, the higher the relative humidity, the lower the occurrence and severity of ESD.

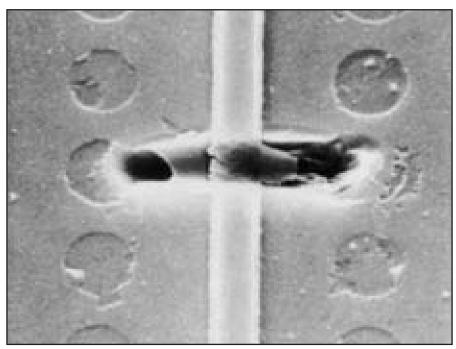
In addition to the risk of damage to electronic devices from static electricity charges, there are grave risks associated with sparks from static charges in many process applications. Static electricity is extremely dangerous in the presence of gases, volatile liquids, or explosive dusts such as is found in munitions plants, paint spray booths, printing plants, pharmaceutical plants, and other places.

While many static control products (special mats, carpeting, sprays, straps, etc.) are available, bear in mind that humidification is a passive static-control means. It is working to control static all the time—not just when someone remembers.

Table 9-1. Effect of Humidity on Electrostatic Voltages

Means of Static Generation	Electrostatic Voltages 10%-20% Relative Humidity	Electrostatic Voltages 65%-90% Relative Humidity
Walking across carpet	35,000	1,500
Walking over vinyl floor	12,000	250
Worker at bench	6,000	100
Vinyl envelopes for work instructions	7,000	600
Common poly bag picked up from bench	20,000	1,200
Work chair padded with polyurethane foam	18,000	1,500

Figure 9-1.
Effect of humidity on electrostatic voltages.



Integrated circuit damaged by ESD.
(Photo courtesy of Motorola Semiconductor, Inc.)