Technical Noise Supplement to the Traffic Noise Analysis Protocol

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than the background or ambient, it usually becomes objectionable. One example is an aircraft flying over a residential area.

- **Nature of Work or Living Activity Exposed to Noise Source:** Highway traffic noise might not be disturbing to workers in a factory or office, but it might be annoying or objectionable to people sleeping at home or studying in a library. An automobile horn at 2:00 a.m. is more disturbing than the same noise in traffic at 5:00 p.m.

2.2.1.1 Human Response to Changes in Noise Levels

Under controlled conditions in an acoustics laboratory, the trained healthy human ear is able to discern changes in sound levels of 1 dBA when exposed to steady single-frequency (pure tone) signals in the mid-frequency range. Outside such controlled conditions, the trained ear can detect changes of 2 dBA in normal environmental noise. It is generally accepted that the average healthy ear, however, can barely perceive a noise level change of 3 dBA. If changes to the character (i.e., frequency content) of a sound occur, level changes less than 3 dBA may be noticeable. Individuals who are exposed to continuous traffic noise may also be able to notice small changes in noise levels (i.e., less than 3 dBA).

Earlier, the concept of A-weighting and the reasons for describing noise in terms of dBA were discussed. The human response curve of frequencies in the audible range is simply not linear (i.e., humans do not hear all frequencies equally well).

It appears that the human perception of loudness is also not linear, either in terms of decibels or in terms of acoustical energy. As discussed, there is a mathematical relationship between decibels and relative energy. For example, if one source produces a noise level of 70 dBA, two of the same sources produce 73 dBA, three will produce about 75 dBA, and 10 will produce 80 dBA.

Human perception is complicated by the fact that it has no simple correlation with acoustical energy. Two noise sources do not sound twice as loud as one noise source. Based on studies conducted over the years some approximate relationships between changes in acoustical energy and corresponding human reaction have been charted. Table 2-10 shows the relationship between changes in acoustical energy, dBA, and human perception. The table shows the relationship between changes in dBA (ΔdBA), relative energy with respect to a reference of a ΔdBA of 0 (no change), and average human perception. The factor change in relative energy relates to the change in acoustic energy.

Table 2-10. Relationship between Noise Level Change, Factor Change in Relative Energy, and Perceived Change

Noise Level Change, (dBA)	Change in Relative Energy ($10^{\pm\Delta dBA/10}$)	Perceived Change	
		Perceived Change in Percentage ($[2^{\pm\Delta dBA/10}-1] * 100\%$)	Descriptive Change in Perception
+40	10,000		16 times as loud
+30	1,000		Eight times as loud
+20	100	+300%	Four times as loud
+15	31.6	+183%	
+10	10	+100%	Two times as loud
+9	7.9	+87%	
+8	6.3	+74%	
+7	5.0	+62%	
+6	4.0	+52%	
+5	3.16	+41%	Readily perceptible increase
+4	2.5	+32%	
+3	2.0	+23%	Barely perceptible increase
0	1	0%	Reference (no change)
-3	0.5	-19%	Barely perceptible reduction
-4	0.4	-24%	
-5	0.316	-29%	Readily perceptible reduction
-6	0.25	-34%	
-7	0.20	-38%	
-8	0.16	-43%	
-9	0.13	-46%	
-10	0.10	-50%	One-half as loud
-15	0.0316	-65%	
-20	0.01	-75%	One-quarter as loud
-30	0.001		One-eighth as loud
-40	0.0001		One-sixteenth as loud

Section 2.1.3.3 discusses that the rms value of the sound pressure ratio squared (P_1/P_2) is proportional to the energy content of sound waves (acoustic energy). Human perception is displayed in two columns: percentage and descriptive. The percentage of perceived change is based on the mathematical approximation that the factor change of human perception relates to ΔdBA as follows:

$$\text{Factor Change in Perceived Noise Levels} = 2^{\pm\Delta dBA/10} \qquad \textbf{(2-18)}$$

Table 2-11. Common Noise Descriptors

Noise Descriptor	Definition
Maximum noise level (L_{max})	The highest instantaneous noise level during a specified time period. This descriptor is sometimes referred to as "peak (noise) level." The use of term "peak level" should be discouraged because it may be interpreted as a non-rms noise signal (see Section 2.1.3.3 for difference between peak and rms).
Statistical descriptor (L_x)	The noise level exceeded *X* % of a specified time period. The value of *X* is commonly 10 (e.g., L_{10}). Other values such as 50 and 90 are used also.
Equivalent noise level (L_{eq}). Routinely used by Caltrans and FHWA to address the worst noise hour (L_{eq}[h]).	The equivalent steady-state noise level in a stated period of time that would contain the same acoustic energy as the time-varying noise level during the same period
Day-night noise level (L_{dn}). Used commonly for describing community noise levels.	A 24-hour L_{eq} with a "penalty" of 10 dBA added during the night hours (10 p.m. to 7 a.m.) because this time is normally used for sleep
Community noise equivalent level (CNEL). A common community noise descriptor, also used for airport noise.	Same as L_{dn} with an additional penalty of 4.77 dBA (or 10log3), for the hours 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., which are usually reserved for relaxation, television, reading, and conversation
Sound exposure level. Used mainly for aircraft noise, it enables comparing noise created by a loud but fast overflight with that of a quieter but slow overflight.	The acoustical energy during a single noise event, such as an aircraft overflight, compressed into a period of 1 second, expressed in decibels

2.2.2.3 Calculating Noise Descriptors

The following formulae and examples may be used to calculate various noise descriptors from instantaneous noise vs. time data.

Statistical Descriptor

L_x, a statistical descriptor, signifies the noise level that is exceeded *X* % of the time. This descriptor was formerly used in highway noise, before L_{eq}. The most common value of *X* was 10, denoting the level that is exceeded 10% of the time. Therefore, the L_{10} descriptor is used as an example to represent the L_x family of calculations. The following instantaneous noise samples (Table 2-12) shown as a frequency distribution (dBA vs. number of occurrences) serve to illustrate the L_{10} calculation.