Grounding of conductors during the spark test

by Henry Clinton

Nearly all industry-wide specifications for insulated wire and cable pertaining to in-line spark testing require the grounding or earthing of the conductors under test. It is the purpose of this discussion to examine the reasons for this and to define the conditions which allow for a safe and effective spark test when conductors are not grounded. Although this testing mode cannot be used to satisfy most industry specifications, it can be useful when quality must be strictly monitored and conductor grounding is inconvenient or impossible.

D-C spark testing

If a direct potential is used for spark testing, it is absolutely necessary to ground the conductor or conductors under test. In Fig. 1, C_g represents the capacitance of the product to ground, which could be in the range of 100 to 2,000 picofarads, depending on the size and length of the conductor.

If the conductor is not grounded, the potential on the conductor with respect to ground will rise when the first insulation fault passes through the electrode. This is because C_g charges towards the D-C test potential applied to the electrode through the arc.

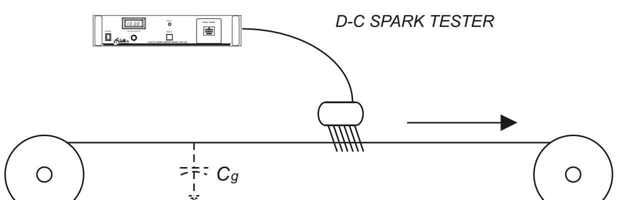


FIG. 1

If the conductor is not grounded but is initially at ground potential, when the first insulation defect passes through the electrode, an arc forms between the electrode and the conductor. The current flowing through this arc charges capacitance C_g, elevating the potential of the conductor by a value which is a function of arc time duration and the value of the current. After the defect or fault has completed its passage through the electrode, C_g retains this elevated potential, since C_g has no discharge path to ground. The effective test potential on the product insulation is now reduced by this retained conductor potential. If a second insulation flaw traverses the electrode, additional charging of C_g takes place, further reducing the effective test potential. Eventually the effective test potential falls below that required to cause an arc to occur on the passage of an insulation flaw, and all subsequent flaws will be undetected. Usually, current and traverse time are large enough to sully charge C_g on the passage of the first flaw, so it will be the only one detected.

Furthermore, the entire length of product is now charged to the test potential. If the operator accidentally comes into contact with the conductor or with a flawed insulation area anywhere along the wire line, C_g can discharge through his body to ground. If by coincidence a faulted insulation area is within the electrode, the maximum current output of the spark tester can also pass through his body. While this current , in the case of Clinton spark testers, is well below a dangerous level, the involuntary muscular reaction resulting from this event can itself cause a secondary accident.

It is thus apparent that from the dual standpoints of utility and safety the conductors of a product being spark tested with a D-C potential should be grounded.

A-C spark testing, general

If an A-C potential is used for the spark test, and the conductors are not grounded, the diagram in Fig. 2 applies.

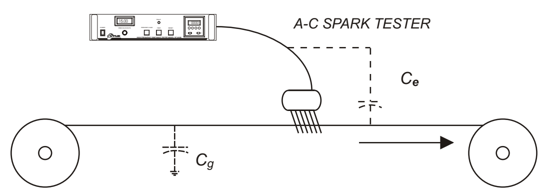
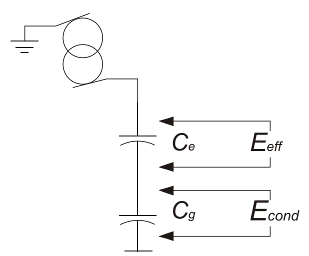


FIG. 2

Note that the electrode to product capacitance C_e is shown, and that C_e and C_g comprise a voltage divider which determines the A-C potential from conductors to ground, and also the effective test potential applied across the product insulation.



$$\frac{E_{eff}}{E_{cond}} = \frac{C_g}{C_e}$$

$$E_{cond} = E_{app} - E_{eff}$$

$$E_{eff} = \frac{C_g}{C_e\ C_g} E_{app}$$

If C_g is very large compared to C_e, Eeff is nearly equal to Eapp. For example, if C_e = 5pf and C_g - 1000pf, 99.5% of the applied test potential is impressed across the product insulation. If C_g is 100pf, however, the effective test voltage drops to 95% of the applied value.

Power mains frequency testing

When an insulation defect passes through the electrode, the arc which forms to the ungrounded conductor in effect connects the conductor to the electrode. If the spark tester operates at the

Reprinted from March 1986 Issue of Wire Journal

mains frequency, the ungrounded conductor will be elevated to nearly the full test potential. If an operator comes into contact with a bare spot in the insulation at this time, current can flow through his body to ground. The maximum value of this current will be the maximum output level of the spark tester. For Clinton mains frequency spark testers this level is less than the " let-go" threshold and is not dangerous in itself However, as in the D-C case, the event is unexpected and unpleasant, and can lead to a secondary accident. From the standpoint of flaw detection, the detector circuitry must differentiate between normal electrode current and the new level when the arc connects C_g to the electrode, which is a small increment. As in the D-C case, grounding of the conductors under test is a practical necessity.

High Frequency spark testing

When the A-C test frequency is increased to 3Khz, two dramatic changes occur. First, because a short electrode is used, the capacitance to the conductor C_e is kept small. For a 2 in. electrode C_e might be typically 2 to 20pf, increasing with the applied potential. The other change is the low reactance of Cg, which allows the current to be conducted readily to ground through a capacitive path rather than by direct connection.

The ratio of C_g /C_e is usually high, so that nearly all of the applied test potential appears across the product insulation. When an insulation flaw passes through the electrode, current drawn from the spark tester increases sharply in this same ratio, subject to the current limiting characteristics of the test equipment. This means that flaws can be detected reliably. If required, C_g can be increased by passing a considerable length of the product close to the grounded surface.

Although the maximum resistive current which can be delivered by a Clinton 3Khz spark tester is well below the "let-go" threshold, a mild shock could still be experienced if an operator contacts a bare spot on the product while a second defect is in the electrode. For this reason the entire line should be provided with protective guards to prevent this.

The ratio of C_g/C_e can be experimentally determined by measuring Econd, the conductor to ground potential, with a high impedance A-C volt-meter or an oscilloscope.

$$\frac{C_g}{C_e} = \frac{E_{app} - E_{cond}}{E_{cond}}$$

Summary

Spark testing of ungrounded conductors is usually not permitted by industry-wide specifications, and is unsatisfactory in any event if D-C or A-C power mains frequency test potentials are used. A satisfactory test for quality control purposes can be made on ungrounded conductors at 3Khz, however, if proper precautions are followed.

Henry Clinton is president of Clinton Instrument Co., Clinton, CT.