



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
Research Online

---

Faculty of Engineering - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences

---

2008

# Reliability Assessment of Railway Prestressed Concrete Sleepers

Sakdirat Kaewunruen

*Austrak Pty Ltd, sakdirat@hotmail.com*

Alexander Remennikov

*University of Wollongong, alexrem@uow.edu.au*

<http://ro.uow.edu.au/engpapers/470>

---

## Publication Details

This peer-reviewed paper was originally published as Kaewunruen, S and Remennikov, AM, Reliability Assessment of Railway Prestressed Concrete Sleepers, Proceedings of the 2008 Australasian Structural Engineering Conference, Melbourne, Australia, June 26-27, 2008. Copyright Engineers Australia 2008.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

*Paper No. 050*

## **Reliability Assessment of Railway Prestressed Concrete Sleepers**

**S. Kaewunruen<sup>1</sup>, A.M. Remennikov<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Austrak Pty Ltd. Brisbane, QLD, Australia (Formerly PhD Candidate at the University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia)

<sup>2</sup> University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia

### **Abstract**

This paper carries out the assessment of reliability indices of railway prestressed concrete sleepers designed in accordance with Australian Standard: AS1085.19. The current design approach of the prestressed concrete sleeper relies on the permissible stresses over cross-sectional area. Loading condition acting on railway sleepers is considered from axle burden and dynamic amplification factor. On the basis of Australian design of railway prestressed concrete sleepers, only service limit states are considered; however, the design challenge is to provide adequate resistance of certain cross sections to both positive and negative bending moments. In this paper, the service limit states functions are formulated taking into account the permissible compressive and tensile stresses at both initial and final stages, and applied positive and negative bending moments at railseat and middle sections. Random variables in the reliability analysis include railway track design parameters, axle load, material and geometrical properties, prestressing force and its losses, and model uncertainties regarded to the structural resistance and load effects. Statistical properties of related parameters are adopted from previous studies. Two analysis methods are used: first-order moment reliability method (FORM) and second-order moment reliability method (SORM). Sensitivity analyses of the reliability indices for flexural capacity according to the requirements of the limit states functions are also investigated, in order to evaluate the major influences of dynamic load factors, strengths of materials, track parameters, and model uncertainties.

## **Reliability assessment of railway prestressed concrete sleepers**

**S. Kaewunruen<sup>1</sup>, A.M. Remennikov<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Austrak Pty Ltd, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

<sup>2</sup> University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia

### **1. Introduction**

Railway tracks are built to transport either passengers or merchandises across areas. The track structures are anticipated to guide and facilitate the safe, cost-effective, and smooth rides of any operation. Figure 1 shows the main components constituting typical railway tracks. Its components can be subdivided into the two main groups: superstructure and substructure. The most obvious components of the track such as the rails, rail pads, concrete sleepers, and fastening systems form a group that is referred to as the superstructure. The substructure is associated with a geotechnical system consisting of ballast, sub-ballast and subgrade (formation). Both superstructure and substructure are equally important in ensuring the safety and comfort of passengers and the quality ride of the passenger and freight trains. Note that in Australia, UK, and Europe, the common nomenclature for the structural element, which is a major component of ballasted railway tracks used to distribute the axle load on tracks from rails to foundation system is referred to 'railway sleeper', while the term 'railroad tie' is often called in the US and Canada (Esveld, 2001). This paper will adopt the former term to denote this component thereafter.

Railway sleepers are the cross-tie beams resting on ballast and support. Back to the past, wooden sleepers had been used because the timber could be easily found in the local area as the construction materials. Then, due to the higher durability and longer service life of concrete and steel materials, prestressed concrete (PC) sleepers and to a limited extent steel sleepers have been employed worldwide in modern railway tracks. Their main functions are to: (1) uniformly transfer and distribute loads from the rail foot to underlying ballast bed; (2) sustain and retain the rails at the proper gauge by keeping anchorage for the rail fastening system; (3) preserve rail inclination; and (4) provide support for rail by restraining longitudinal, lateral and vertical rail movements (Remennikov and Kaewunruen, 2007). Defined as concrete with a specified compressive strength greater than 50MPa, high strength concrete (HSC) is mostly used in Australian PC sleepers to facilitate and optimize the challenging design of their continuum sections (Standards Australia, 2003).

Current Australian and international design standards of PC sleepers (e.g. AREMA-US) are based on the permissible stress concept where various limited values or reduction factors are used in material strengths and load effects (AREMA, 2006; Leong, 2007). Recent findings among track engineers within Australian railway community show that railway tracks, especially railway PC sleepers, have untapped strength that could be the potential and economic advantages for track owners. Unfortunately, the allowable stress principle does not consider the ultimate strength of materials, probabilities of actual loads, and risks associated with failure, all of which could lead to the conclusion of cost-ineffective and over design of current PC sleepers. An effort to ascertain the actual reserved capacity has consequently initiated under a collaborative research project in the Australian Cooperative Research Centre for Railway Engineering and Technologies (Rail-CRC), including University of Wollongong (UoW), Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Queensland Rails, and RailCorp New South Wales.

---

<sup>1</sup> Formerly PhD Candidate at the University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia

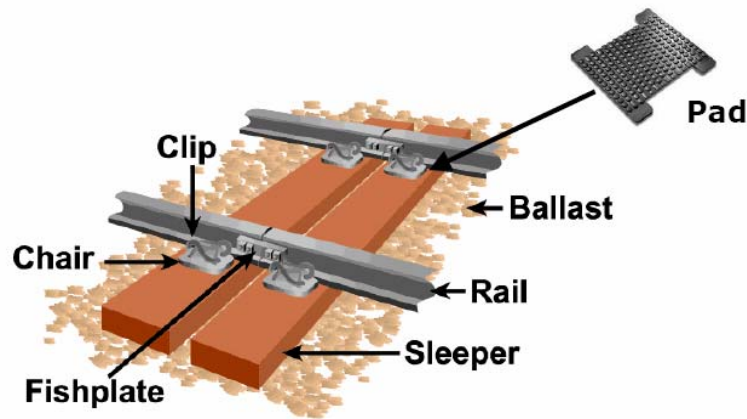


Figure 1 Typical rail track

This paper reports the assessment of reliability indices of railway prestressed concrete sleepers designed in accordance with current Australian Standard: AS1085.14-2003. Although the standard is presently under revision, the permissible stress, wheel load formula, and empirical method still remain almost the same (Standards Australia, 2006). The current design approach of the prestressed concrete sleeper controls the allowable stresses over cross-sectional area. Loading condition acting on railway sleepers is considered from axle burden and dynamic amplification factor. On the basis of Australian standard design of railway prestressed concrete sleepers, only service limit states are considered; however, the design challenge is to provide adequate resistance of certain cross sections to both positive and negative bending moments. In this paper, the service limit states functions are formulated taking into account the permissible compressive and tensile stresses at both initial and final stages, and applied positive and negative bending moments at railseat and middle sections. Random variables in the reliability analysis include railway track design parameters, axle load, material and geometrical properties, prestressing force and its losses, and model uncertainties regarded to the structural resistance and load effects. Statistical properties of related parameters are adopted from previous studies. Two analysis methods are used: first-order moment reliability method (FORM) and second-order moment reliability method (SORM). Sensitivity analyses of the reliability indices for flexural capacity according to the requirements of the limit states functions are also investigated, in order to evaluate the major influences of dynamic load factors, strengths of materials, track parameters, and model uncertainties.

## 2. Performance Levels

Lu and Gu (2004) described the context of performance-based design, which consists of five performance levels: fully operational, operational, life safety, near collapse, and collapse. In relation to Australian Standard AS1085.14-2003, the fully operational and operational stress level is the indicator for the sleeper performance-based design. Adopted for this study, the 2700mm long Austrak broad gauge sleeper was originally designed for both metropolitan and country tracks with the following parameters:

Track gauge	1600 mm
Rail size	53/60 kg
Maximum axle load	25 tonne
Maximum train speed	115 kph
Sleeper spacing	685 mm
Design rail seat load	187 kN

This sleeper was designed according to AS 1085.14 to satisfy permissible stresses at transfer (operational performance level) and at service (fully operational performance level). The sleeper design can be assessed using the reliability-based approach to calculate the safety index  $\beta$ . The limit state function  $g(\mathbf{X})$  (see equation (1)) with respect to permissible stress criteria can be formulated as follows:

$$g(\mathbf{X}) = \text{permissible stress} - \text{fibre stress} \quad (1)$$

The rail seat section is designed such that the extreme top and bottom fibres satisfy stress constraints as prescribed by AS 1085.14:

*Concrete:*

At transfer:  $f'_{cp} = 30$  MPa;  $f_{ci} = 0.5 f'_{cp} = 15$  MPa;  $f_{ti} = 0.25 \sqrt{f'_{cp}} = 1.37$  MPa

At final:  $f'_c = 55$  MPa;  $f_c = 0.45 f'_c = 24.8$  MPa;  $f_t = 0.4 \sqrt{f'_c} = 2.97$  MPa

*Prestressing steel:*

At transfer:  $f_p = 1700$  MPa;  $f_{pe@t} = 0.7 f_p = 1190$  MPa

At final:  $f_p = 1700$  MPa;  $f_{pe@f} = 0.8 f_p = 1360$  MPa

In general, the stresses at the top and bottom fibres ( $\sigma_t$  and  $\sigma_b$ , respectively) are

$$\sigma_t = -\frac{P}{A_g} \pm \frac{P \cdot e \cdot y_t}{I_g} \mp \frac{M \cdot y_t}{I_g} \quad (2)$$

$$\sigma_b = -\frac{P}{A_g} \mp \frac{P \cdot e \cdot y_b}{I_g} \mp \frac{M \cdot y_b}{I_g} \quad (3)$$

where  $P$  is the prestressing force,  $e$  is the effective eccentricity,  $M$  is the bending moment at the rail seat,  $A_g$  is the gross sectional area,  $I_g$  is the gross moment of inertia of the cross section,  $y_t$  is the distance between top fibre and neutral axis of the cross section, and  $y_b$  is the distance between bottom fibre and neutral axis of the cross section.

The current design procedure in AS1085.14-2001 (calculated using the QR PSC Design spreadsheet) provides the designed railseat section as shown in Figure 2 with fibre stresses at each stage. The design data is adopted from QR drawings. The sleeper is designed for the axle load of 25 tonne, sleeper spacing of 685mm, and the dynamic amplification factor ( $j$ ) of 2.5. The length of sleeper  $L$  is 2.695m and the centre-centre gauge  $g$  is 1.680m.

The railseat load,  $R$  can be read:  $R = j \cdot Q (DF)/100$  where  $j$  is the design load factor (2.5),  $Q$  is static wheel load (125 kN), and  $DF$  is the axle load distribution factor (55% for 600mm spacing). For standard and broad gauge sleepers, at railseat, the positive moment  $M_R^+ = R(L-g)/8$  while the negative moment  $M_R^- = \max\{0.67 M_R^+, 14\text{MPa}\}$ . The wheel load is 125 kN and the designed railseat load is equal to 172 kN. Table 1 presents the sectional stresses of the Austrak broad gauge sleeper at the final stage. It should be noted that the stresses  $\sigma_t$  and  $\sigma_b$  are calculated using equations (2) and (3).

*Table 1 Design results for Austrak broad gauge sleeper using the QR PSC Design Spreadsheet*

Moment	Value of Moment, kNm	Location	Total Stress, MPa	Allowable Stress, MPa	Performance Criteria
MR+	21.8	Top fibre	19.61	24.75	functional
		Bottom fibre	-1.71	-2.97	functional
MR-	14.6	Top fibre	-2.09	-2.97	functional
		Bottom fibre	18.97	24.75	functional

### 3. Basic Random Variables

The reliability model for each performance criteria considered contains a specified group of basic variables. The group represents the physical quantities characterizing actions and environmental influences, material and ballast properties, and imperfections and geometrical quantities. For each variable, if the uncertainty becomes important, it should be represented as a random variable, which is described by the probability distribution. The primary basic variables are those whose values are of primary importance for the design resistance results prescribed in AS5400-2005 (Standards Australia, 2005). In terms of the standard design of prestressed concrete sleepers based on AS1085.14, the strengths of concrete and wires, ballast properties or track stiffness, prestressing force in tendons, as well as action forces (wheel load & impact force) are primary basic variables (Kaewunruen and Remennikov, 2006). With regard to fatigue limit state, crack growth, load cycles/histories, and fatigue resistance are the primary basic variables.

The non-primary basic variables of railway prestressed concrete sleepers include the moduli of elasticity of concrete and wires, rail gauge length, sleeper geometry, sleeper spacing, vehicle profiles and characteristics, vehicle speeds, wheel/rail imperfections, type of rail pads and their properties, fastening systems, type of rails, subgrade condition, pressure distribution underneath a sleeper, track importance levels, maintenance levels (track & vehicle), and even the vehicle driver behavior (Murray and Leong, 2005; 2006; Leong, 2007). In addition, the non-primary basic variables for fatigue limit state are design working life, initial and critical crack sizes, uncertainties in materials and prestressing force levels, design decompression moments, loading paths, and inspected intervals and probability of crack detection.

In a particular concern of this study, the random variables associated with the uncertainties of basic resistance variables are concrete strength variations, losses in prestressing wires, changes in pressure distribution underneath a sleeper, different sleeper geometries, different track stiffness, various rail pads used, visual detection of initial crack size, and unpredictable major cracks and mode of failures. The random variables in terms of basic action variables include a variety of impact forces, different vehicle speeds, a variety of imperfections: sizes and types, return periods, and different static axle forces (passenger, coal, etc.). However, the random variables in the current reliability analysis are limited. Available data include railway track design parameters, axle load, material and geometrical properties, prestressing force and its losses, and model uncertainties regarded to the structural resistance and load effects. Statistical properties of related parameters are adopted from previous studies as given in Table 2. It is assumed that these data produce a governing limit state over the service life of the sleepers. The time-dependent properties could also be found elsewhere (Darmawan and Stewart, 2007).

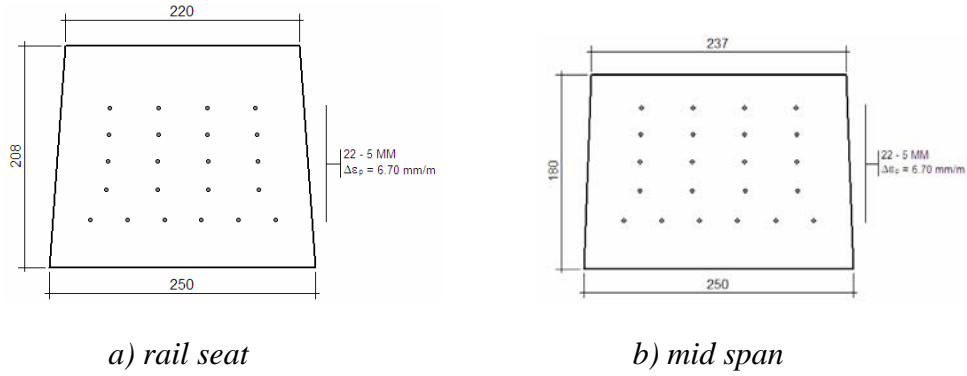


Figure 2 Rail seat and mid span cross sections of a PC sleeper

#### 4. Limit State Functions and Reliability Analysis

Limit state functions for bending strength can be defined from Equations (1), (2), and (3) as

At the top fibre: 
$$g_t(X) = \alpha_1 \bar{\sigma}_t - \alpha_2 \sigma_t$$

At the bottom fibre: 
$$g_b(X) = \alpha_1 \bar{\sigma}_b - \alpha_2 \sigma_b$$

where  $\bar{\sigma}_t$  and  $\bar{\sigma}_b$  are the permissible stresses at the top and bottom fibres, respectively, at any stage (transfer/initial and final stages -  $f_{ci}, f_{ti}, f_c, f_t, f_{pe@t}$ , and  $f_{pe@f}$ ), and  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_2$  are the model variation coefficients with respect to the resistance and the action, respectively (Melchers, 1987). The rail seat and mid span sections are illustrated in Figure 2. Using the structural reliability analysis program COMREL (RCP GmbH, 2004), the reliability indices can be calculated for railseat and mid-span sections as provided in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. It should be noted that these safety indices are based on the design positive moment at railseat and the design negative moment at mid span for a specific sleeper only. Sensitivity of load and strength is illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. More information is required for further comprehensive study in the future.

The reliability index  $\beta$  can be obtained by using the stress limit functions:

- $\beta_{ti}$  = reliability index with respect to top fibre stress at initial stage;
- $\beta_{bi}$  = reliability index with respect to bottom fibre stress at initial stage;
- $\beta_{tf}$  = reliability index with respect to top fibre stress at final stage;
- $\beta_{bf}$  = reliability index with respect to bottom fibre stress at final stage;
- $\beta_{wi}$  = reliability index with respect to wire stress at initial stage;
- $\beta_{wf}$  = reliability index with respect to wire stress at final stage; and
- $\beta_{cf}$  = reliability index with respect to cross-sectional stress at final stage.

Where  $\beta = \min \{ \beta_{ti}, \beta_{bi}, \beta_{tf}, \beta_{bf}, \beta_{wi}, \beta_{wf}, \beta_{cf} \}$

Table 2 Statistical model of the selected PC sleeper.

Basic variables	Symbol	Distribution type	Units	Mean value	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation
<u>Loads</u>						
Static wheel load	Q <sub>st</sub>	Log-normal	kN	125	31.25	0.25
Dynamic load factor	<i>j</i>	Log-normal		2.5	0.625	0.25
Axle load distribution factor	<i>DF</i>	Constant		0.55		
<u>Resistances</u>						
Permissible tension at transfer ( $f_{cp} = 30$ MPa)	$f_{ti}$	Normal	MPa	1.37	0.2466	0.18
Permissible compression at transfer ( $f_{cp} = 30$ MPa)	$f_{ci}$	Normal	MPa	15.0	2.25	0.15
Permissible tension at service ( $f_c = 55$ MPa)	$f_t$	Normal	MPa	2.97	0.5346	0.18
Permissible compression at service ( $f_c = 55$ MPa)	$f_c$	Normal	MPa	24.8	3.72	0.15
Concrete compressive strength	$f'_c$	Normal	MPa	66.0	9.9	0.15
Prestressing steel yield stress	$f_p$	Normal	MPa	1768	44.2	0.025
Area of prestressing steel	$A_{ps}$	Normal	m <sup>2</sup>	432	5.4	0.0125
Prestressing nominal force	<i>P</i>	Normal	kN	550.0	33	0.06
<u>Sleeper dimensions</u>						
Length	<i>L</i>	Constant	m	2.7		
Depth (rail seat)	<i>h</i>	Constant	m	0.208		
<u>Track parameters</u>						
Track gauge	<i>g</i>	Constant	m	1.6		
Sleeper spacing	<i>S</i>	Constant	m	0.685		
Track stiffness	$k_T$	Constant	MN/m <sup>2</sup>	100		
Railpad stiffness	$k_P$	Constant	MN/m <sup>2</sup>	400		
<u>Model uncertainties</u>						
Uncertainty of resistance	$\Theta_R$	Normal		0.99		0.06
Uncertainty of load effect	$\Theta_S$	Normal		1.0		0.2

\*Distribution patterns and coefficients of variation adopted from Al-Harthy (1992)



Table 3 Reliability indices of railseat section of AUS BG sleepers under design positive moment

Reliability Index	FORM <sup>a</sup>	SORM <sup>b</sup>
$\beta_{ti}$ (top fibre stress at initial stage)	3.101	3.105
$\beta_{bi}$ (bottom fibre stress at initial stage)	1.524	1.403
$\beta_{tf}$ (top fibre stress at final stage)	3.242	3.246
$\beta_{bf}$ (bottom fibre stress at final stage)	2.750	2.730
$\beta_{wi}$ (wire stress at initial stage)	0.221	0.221
$\beta_{wf}$ (wire stress at final stage)	3.379	3.379
$\beta_{cf}$ (cross-sectional stress at final stage)	2.825	2.818

<sup>a</sup>first-order reliability method; <sup>b</sup>second-order reliability method

Table 4 Reliability indices of middle section of AUS BG sleepers under design negative moment

Reliability Index	FORM <sup>a</sup>	SORM <sup>b</sup>
$\beta_{ti}$ (top fibre stress at initial stage)	1.122	1.104
$\beta_{bi}$ (bottom fibre stress at initial stage)	4.760	4.763
$\beta_{tf}$ (top fibre stress at final stage)	2.309	2.302
$\beta_{bf}$ (bottom fibre stress at final stage)	4.886	4.892
$\beta_{wi}$ (wire stress at initial stage)*	0.221	0.221
$\beta_{wf}$ (wire stress at final stage)*	3.379	3.379
$\beta_{cf}$ (cross-sectional stress at final stage)	4.501	4.494

<sup>a</sup>first-order reliability method; <sup>b</sup>second-order reliability method

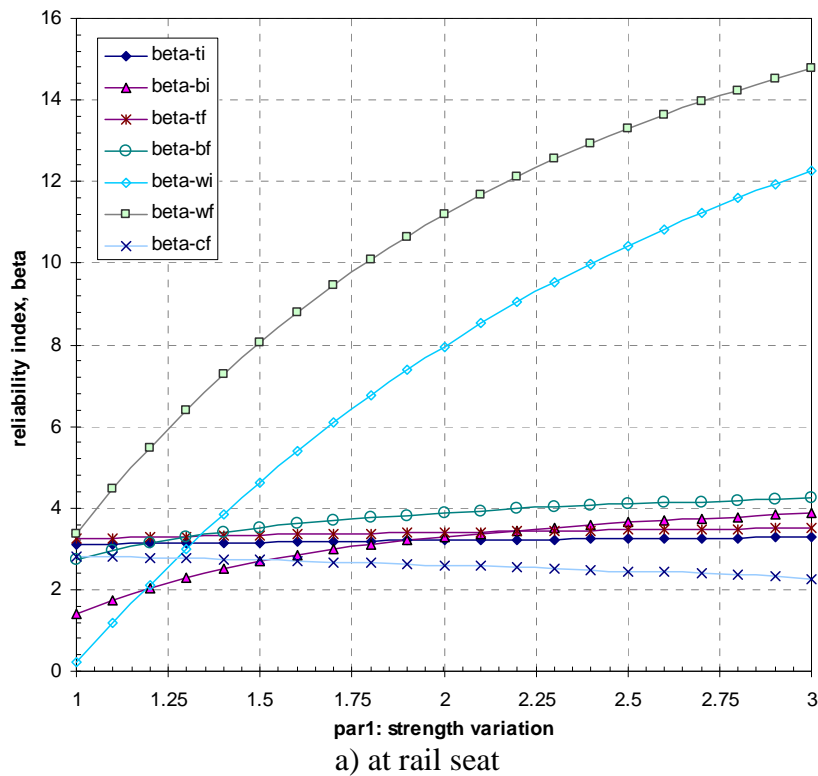


Figure 3 Effect of strength variation on reliability indices of PC sleepers

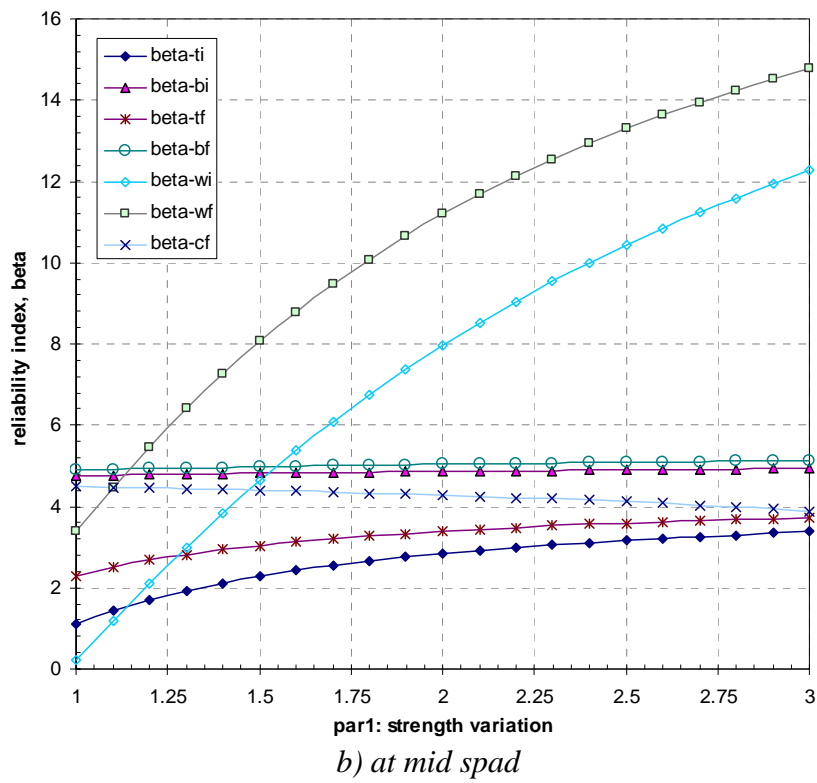


Figure 4 Effect of strength variation on reliability indices of PC sleepers

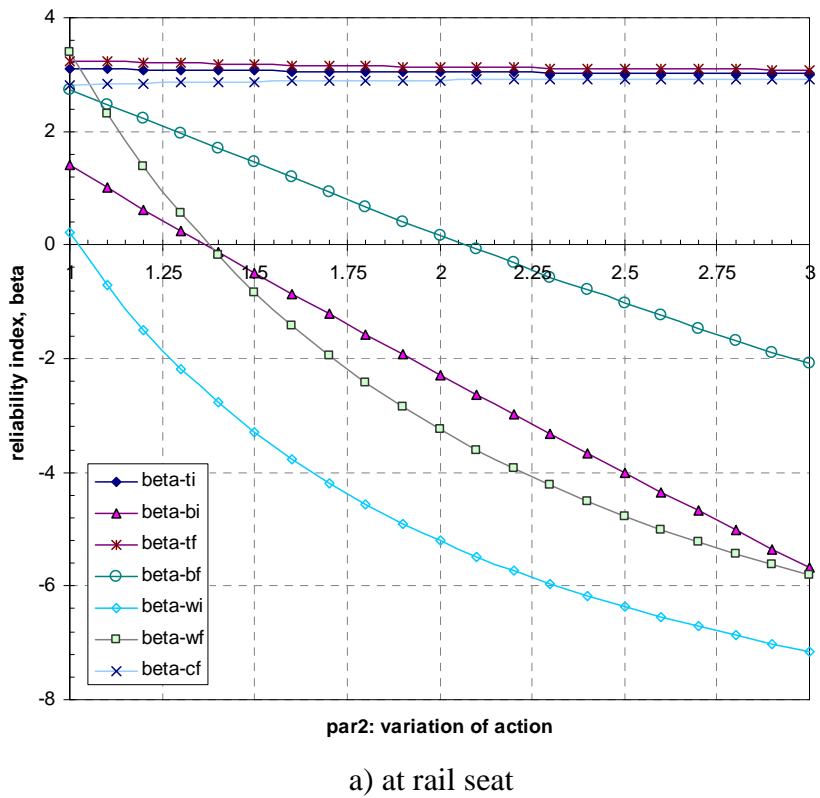
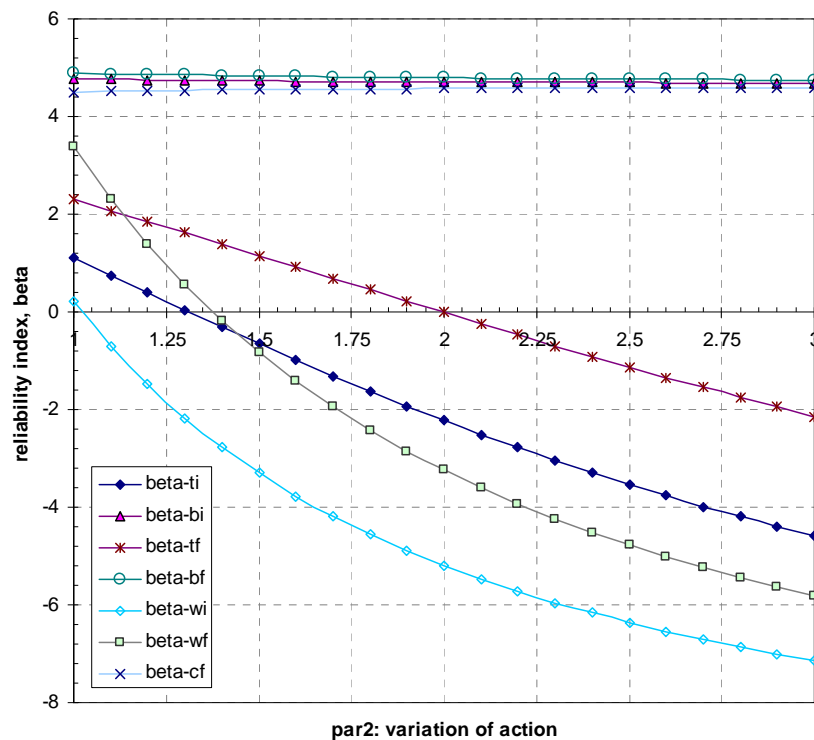


Figure 5 Effect of load action variation on reliability indices of PC sleepers



b) at mid span

Figure 6 Effect of load action variation on reliability indices of PC sleepers

## 5. Conclusion

This paper investigated the reliability indices of a railway prestressed concrete sleeper designed and manufactured in Australia. The reliability assessment to attain the target reliability or safety indices of the PC sleeper was shown as well as the sensitivity analysis to study the effect of load action and strength variations on the target reliability indices. The target reliability will be used as the benchmark safety index for the reliability based approach for conversion of the permissible stress principle to limit state design concept for prestressed concrete sleepers. It is found that the shape of sleepers is optimized so that the sleepers tend to provide low to moderate safety indices at service performance level.

## 6. Acknowledgement

This research project is financially supported by the Australian Cooperative Research Centre for Railway Engineering and Technologies (RailCRC) as part of Project 5/23, with the collaboration with Queensland Rails, RailCorp NSW, Austrak, Rocla, PANDROL (Australia), and Queensland University of Technology. In addition, the authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for providing very constructive comments.

## 7. References

Al-Harthy, AS. Reliability analysis and reliability-based design of prestressed concrete structures, *PhD Thesis*, Department of Civil Engineering, University of Colorado at Boulder, USA, 1992

- AREMA- American Railway Engineering and Maintenance-of-Way Association, *Manual for Railway Engineering Chapter 30 Ties*, USA, 2006
- Darmawan, M.S. and Stewart, M.G. “Spatial time-dependent reliability analysis of corroding pretensioned prestressed concrete bridge girders,” *Structural Safety*, 29(1): 16-31, 2007.
- Esveld, C. *Modern railway track*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, MRT-Productions, The Netherlands, 2001.
- Kaewunruen, S. and Remennikov, A. Discussion paper on the use of reliability-based approach in the conversion of the existing code AS1085.14 to limit states design, *Research Report*, CRC for Railway Engineering and Technologies, November 2006.
- Leong, J. Development of a limit state design methodology for railway track, *Masters of Engineering Thesis*, School of Urban Development, Queensland University of Technology, Australia, 2007.
- Melchers, R.E. *Structural Reliability: Analysis and Prediction*, Ellis Horwood, Chichester, England, 1987.
- Murray, M. and Leong, J. Discussion paper on the development of limit state factors: State 1, *Research Report*, CRC for Railway Engineering and Technologies, October 2005.
- Murray, M. and Leong, J. Discussion paper on the development of limit state factors: State 2, *Research Report*, CRC for Railway Engineering and Technologies, September 2006.
- Remennikov AM, Kaewunruen S, “A review on loading conditions for railway track structures due to train and track vertical interaction,” *Progress in Structural Engineering and Materials*, incorporated in Structural Control and Health Monitoring, in press, 2007 (invited).
- RCP GmbH, *COMREL User Manual – Demo Version*, Germany, 2004
- Standards Australia, *Australian Standard AS1085.14 Railway Track Materials, Part 14: Railway Prestressed Concrete Sleepers*, Australia, 2003
- Standards Australia, *Australian Standard AS5104 General Principles on Reliability for Structures*, Australia, 2005.
- Standards Australia, *Draft of Australian Standard AS1085.14 Railway Track Materials, Part 14: Railway Prestressed Concrete Sleepers*, Australia, 2006.