
PV Module Frame Grounding

New Study Report

Greg Ball, BEW Engineering

October 15, 2010



Study Overview

- Address gap in requirements and methods for reliable grounding of PV module frame and mounting components
- Define grounding and bonding requirements
- Survey stakeholders and labs to address needs
- Develop test objectives and methods
- Ultimately incorporate in appropriate codes/standards



Study Outline

1. Preliminary “lay-of-the-land” Report (BEW)
 - Summary of existing conditions, problem statement
 - Survey of existing issues and experiences from stakeholders
2. UL interim test development (UL)
 - Preliminary testing on corrosion, degradation using methods that go beyond those in existing UL1703 standard.
3. Final report (BEW/UL)
 - Recommendations for a set of tests/methods to incorporate into existing/new standards.



Preliminary Report

Existing State of Affairs

- Two Key Issues
 - Existing standards do not adequately ensure long term, reliable, and safe grounding of PV modules.
 - Standards lack guidance for evaluating alternative equipment or methods of PV module grounding
- Specific Issues/Consequences:
 - Field experience demonstrates listed module grounding methods can fail... tests not rigorous enough.
 - Onus of defining acceptable methods and components fall on module manufactures via UL 1703.
 - Grounding equipment suppliers must have their components/methods included in *module* installation manual



Preliminary Report

Existing State of Affairs

- *UL 467 Grounding and Bonding Equipment*
 - Has been used to list PV grounding equipment
 - Provides some useful tests but was not written to address unique aspects of PV system applications.
- Integrators and installers find *listed* methods to be limiting, unreliable, and costly – innovation is thwarted
- In practice, integrators, product developers, AHJs demonstrate widely different interpretations of acceptable means
- Various NRTLs interpret and impose requirements differently
- 2007 UL1703 CRD (Certification Requirements Decision) issued to clarify UL requirements – thwart NRTL evaluation of parts/methods not specified/tested by module manufacturer



Preliminary Report

Existing State of Affairs

- UL efforts to address problems
 - New more rigorous testing -- exploratory
 - Development of Std 2703 to address PV mounting systems
 - Scheduling of new series of STP (standards technical panel) meetings beginning in December --- key to affecting change
- Industry efforts to address problems
 - Work development through Solar ABCs
 - Proposal for standard language in UL 61730-1: PV Module Safety Qualification - Part 1
 - Proposal developed by group (Wiley, Bill Brooks, others) this week for review at STP meeting



Preliminary Report - Survey

- Most common failure modes
- Things that do work
- Installation issues (sensitivity to errors)
- Permitting issues
- Cost issues
- Needs and wishes
- Applicability of different codes and standards



Preliminary Report - Survey

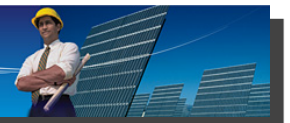
- Most common failure modes
 - Loosening or failure of connections, corrosion
- Things that do work
 - Properly installed wire grounds, gas-tight mechanical module-module or support structure connections.
- Installation issues (sensitivity to errors)
 - Under or over-torqueing of wire/lug
 - Use of wrong parts or material
 - Insufficient penetration of coating on frames
- Permitting issues
 - Inconsistency of code/standard interpretation.
- Cost issues
 - Predominant wire-based methods very costly for large systems, e.g.



Preliminary Report - Survey

Installation issues (sensitivity to errors)

- Under or over-torqueing wire connections to frame ground holes
 - Under or over-torqueing lug connections to frame ground holes
 - Use of wrong material or lacking material (i.e. not per design)
 - Insufficient penetration of coating on frames, where that connection
- Permitting issues
 - Inconsistency of code/standard interpretation.
- Cost issues
- Predominant wire-based methods very costly for large systems, e.g.



Preliminary Report - Survey

Needs and wishes

- More approved methods utilizing abundant existing metal racking or support systems
- Standards uniformly applied (as opposed to module specific as defined in module installation manuals)
- More explicit use of mechanical mounting hardware. Criteria is that if a screw is used as ground current path, it can't be the (sole) mechanical connection.

Applicability of different codes and standards [NEC, UL 1703, UL 467, UL 1741, IEC 61730, etc..].

- Gap between 1703 and grounding and bonding. Lack of guidance for physical connections of frames and structures.
- UL 467 has good aspects, but some misses PV specific issues.
- Etc.



UL Interim Testing

Ongoing Corrosion Testing - Preliminary Report to be released soon:

- Involved numerous types of ground connectors
- Continuous damp heat and salt mist environmental exposure
- Periodic electrical current cycling.
- Measure change in resistance in connections.

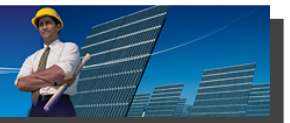
Preliminary Results

- Salt mist condition, most samples corroded severely, failed in weeks
- Identical samples in damp heat chamber were still in good condition.
- Assembly force and anti-oxidant coating also have effects on integrity.
- Failure mechanisms from galvanic, pitting, and crevice corrosion
- Insulating metal oxide formed during the corrosion broke the electrical connections and failed the grounding system.



Tests Methods to Develop

- Resistance, component level
- Resistance, interconnected component level
- Current magnitude and duration (DC, AC)
 - Impulse current tests
 - Steady state current tests
 - Current cycling
- Accelerated lifetime tests
 - Temperature cycling with current cycling
 - Humidity with current cycling
 - Corrosive atmosphere exposure
- Mechanical Cycling
 - Vibration test



Other Work Planned

System Level Grounding

- AC modules and micro-inverters
- DC to DC converters
- Ground requirements to accommodate arc suppression
- GEC and/or equipment grounding conductors in the vicinity of the array
- Prescriptive mechanical interface requirements at system level to limit obviate need for listing all combinations of racking, framing, equipment, and bonding device



Contact

- Greg Ball, BEW Engineering
- greg.ball@bewengineering.com
- 510-418-2745

