

# Heat Insulation Performance of Straw Bales and Straw Bale Walls

**GrAT**

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## Aim

Straw bale houses will play an important role in sustainable building all over the world. The fundamental technical basis and the necessary building certificates like thermal conductance tests, provided by this project, will prepare and facilitate the introduction to the market of this highly functional, economical and environmental friendly building material. The insulation parameters thus have to meet the criteria of passive solar houses.

## Conductance tests

The specific thermal conductance is described by the material dependent numeric  $\lambda$ -value. More common is the thermal transmittance (U-value) for a building component (wall, roof, etc.).

Recently made thermal insulation tests of upright standing straw bales (as they are used for wooden frame constructions) have shown  $\lambda$ -values of 0,045 W/mK (McCabe,1993).

The above described testing results were done according to US norms and do not correspond with European norms and therefore can not be used in Europe. Hence within the project "Wall Systems made of Renewable Resources" wheat straw bales with a different density were tested. The thermal insulation tests were accomplished by the Municipal Department 39 (Vienna) according to ISO 8301 and ÖNORM B6015 part 1.

The measurement according ISO 8301 showed the following result:  $\lambda_{10} = 0,0369$  respectively 0,0337 W/mK (at 10 °C and dry material)

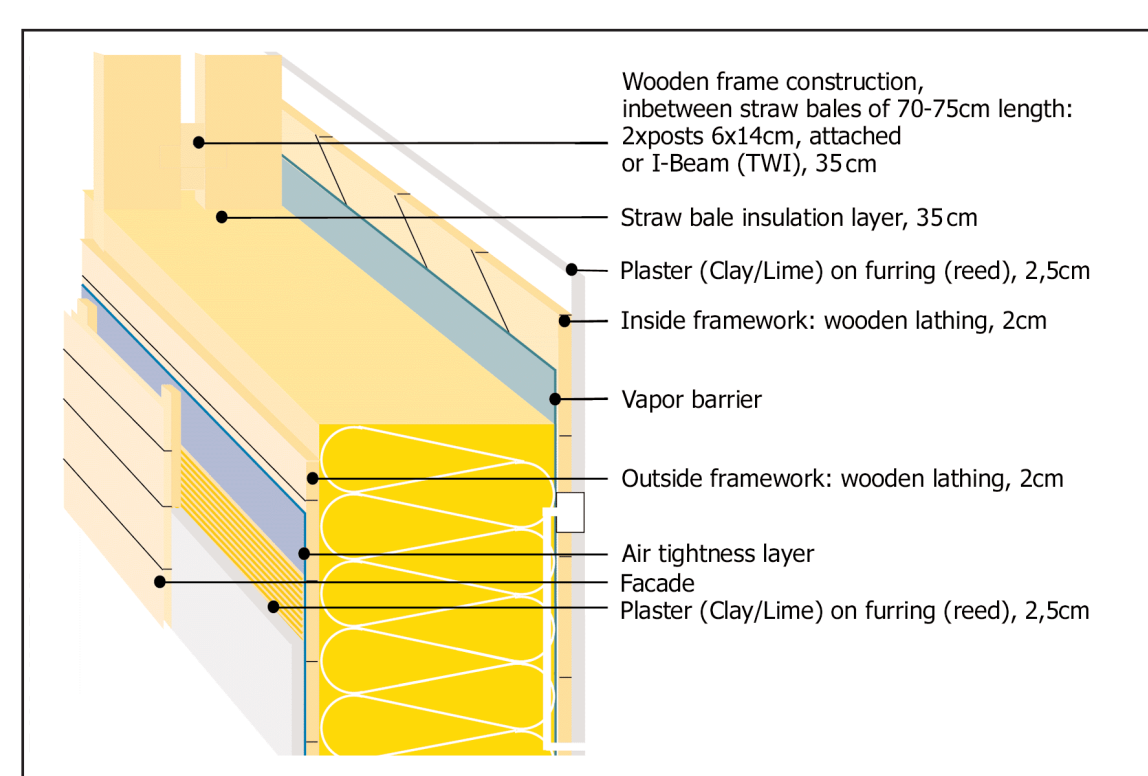
The measurement according ÖNORM B6015 resulted in the following value:  $\lambda_{10} = 0,0380$  W/mK

According to EU-norm the reference value has to be a calculated  $\lambda$ -value, which includes 20% of moisture-supplement. Hence the thermal insulation reference value for wheat straw bales with a density of 100 kg/m<sup>3</sup> is  $\lambda = 0,0456$  W/mK.

Therewith the thermal conductance is in the range of other insulation materials which are made of renewable resources (flax, hemp, wool, cork, cellulose).

## Thermal transmittance

Due to the low conductance value of straw, straw bale walls with a total thickness of 42 cm (35 cm straw layer) show a U-value of 0,12 W/m<sup>2</sup>K. Including the wooden frame the U-value is around 0,14 W/m<sup>2</sup>K. This means that a straw bale construction with wooden frames or post and beam structures has a U-value below 0,15 W/m<sup>2</sup>K and hence meets the criteria for passive solar houses.



Section of a straw bale wall

## Cost reduction potential

A rough estimation of the costs of different insulation materials shows the huge cost reduction potential of straw bale insulation.

In the table below  $\lambda$  refers to a calculated value. The thickness that is required to reach  $U = 0,15$  W/m<sup>2</sup>K is given in the third column and the specific price of the different materials stands in the fourth column. The last column shows the insulation material costs for an average 150 m<sup>2</sup> house. (prices incl. 20% VAT)

Material	$\lambda$ W/mK	Thickness cm	Spec. pr. Euro/m <sup>2</sup>	Price Euro
Straw Bale	0,045	30	3,63	1453
Cellulose	0,045	30	18,31	7325
EPS	0,038	24	20,35	8139
Rockwool	0,038	24	23,55	9418

Compared costs of different insulation materials

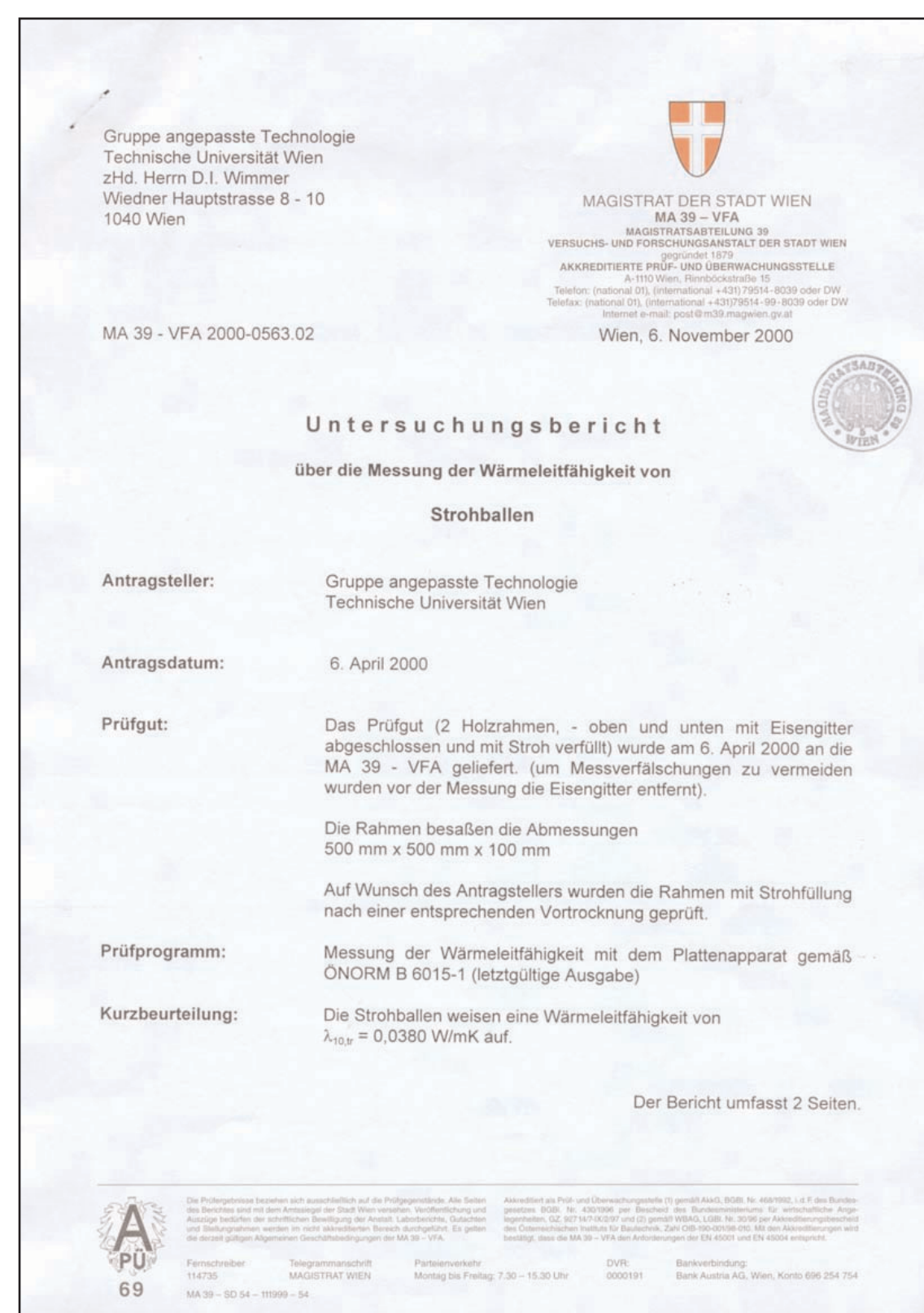
## Conclusions

The heat insulation value of straw bales depends not so much on the density as expected initially. On the basis of experiences and tests, which were confirmed by the tests made within the project, the heat insulation value rises with increased density. Surprising was the fact, that small bales with a low density of 80-110 kg/m<sup>3</sup> show rather high insulation values. There is of course a significant difference between one insulation and another regarding the whole construction, because powerfully pressed bales (90-110 kg/m<sup>3</sup>) have a more exact shape and therefore generate less heat leakage. Nevertheless the test results show, that not only Jumbo Bales with high densities of more than 130 kg/m<sup>3</sup> but also small bales with densities between 80 and 110 kg/m<sup>3</sup> meet the technical requirements for highly heat insulated straw bale constructions.

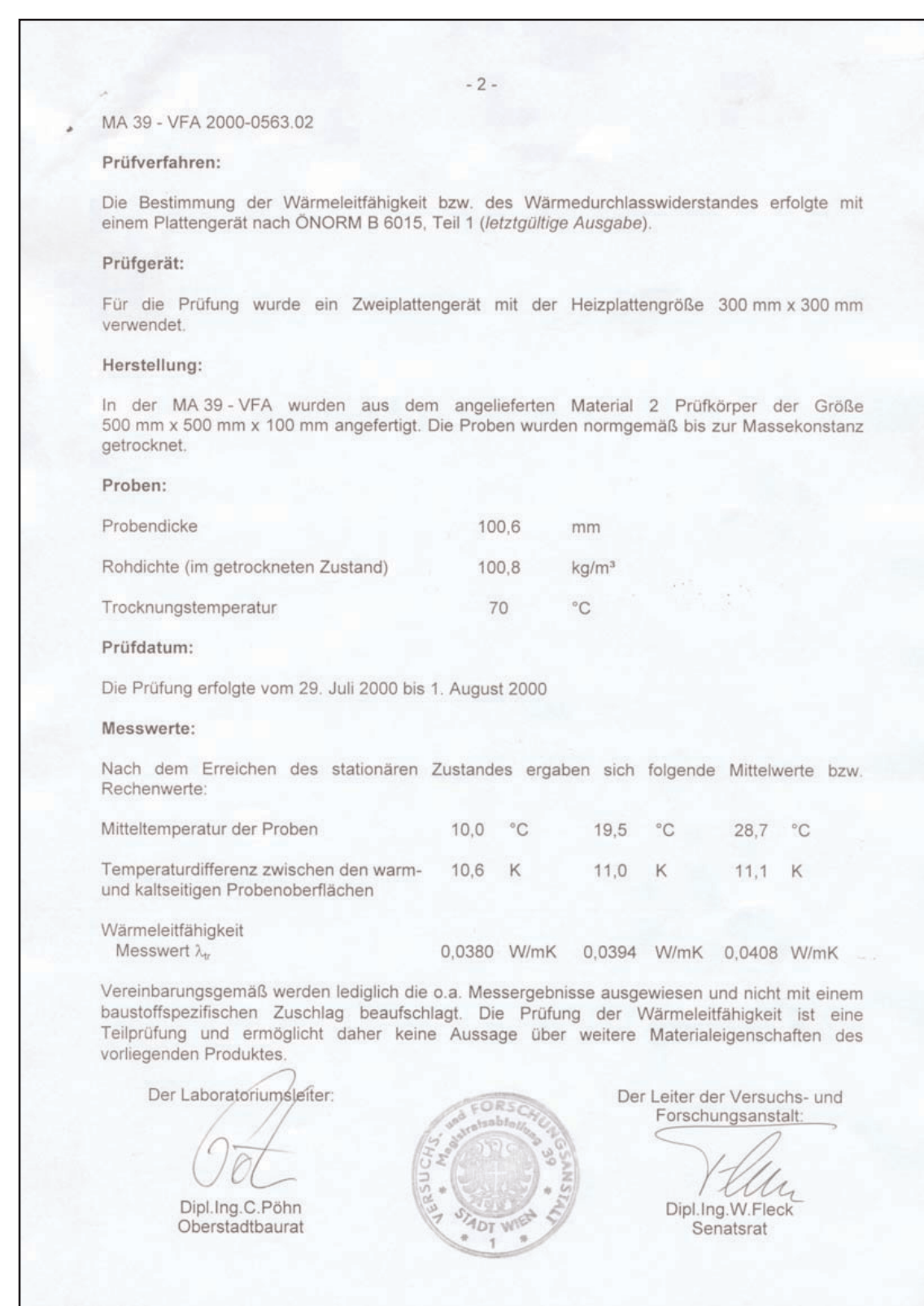
In the tests wheat straw was used. The tests in the US were carried out with rice straw. Both tests show similar results. Significant differences compared to other sorts of cereals can be excluded due to the similarity of the plants. It can be suggested that the heat insulation values of the much heavier straw from hemp and flax does not show significant differences. But to prove this assumption systematic tests still have to be made.

To guarantee a high heat insulation value the optimal moisture content of straw is between 8 and 14 %. A long-term-test has shown an average moisture content of 13 % in a plastered straw bale wall. This value is independent from out- and inside temperature, climate and season and remains to be almost constant. If the wall construction is diffusion-open (no vapour barriers except between the foundation and the wall) the moisture content of the wall levels off at 13 % within a few weeks. (Straube, 2000) To prove the long term behaviour, tests in a demonstration building (see [www.S-House.at](http://www.S-House.at)) are recommended.

The lower price of the straw bales can compensate the costs of the more complex housing technique and 3-layer glazing in passive solar houses.



Test certificate, page 1



Test certificate, page 2

## Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the Federal Ministry of Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT) for supporting the project. ([www.hausderzukunft.at](http://www.hausderzukunft.at))

## Key references

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