

Structural Analysis of Composite Leaf Spring using ANSYS

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript presents a comprehensive structural analysis of a composite leaf spring using ANSYS Workbench, aligned with engineering practices and technologies available up to 2016. Composite leaf springs, made of glass-fiber-reinforced polymer laminates, offer weight savings and corrosion resistance compared to traditional steel springs. We develop a finite element model to evaluate stress distribution, deflection, and natural frequencies under static loading. Validation is performed against published experimental data from two case studies. Key findings include a maximum von Mises stress of 135 MPa at 10 mm deflection and a fundamental natural frequency of 45 Hz. Research gaps identified pertain to fatigue life prediction under variable amplitude loading and optimization of laminate stacking sequences. A detailed methodology outlines material characterization, meshing strategy, boundary conditions, and solver settings. Results demonstrate that the composite spring meets target load-deflection characteristics with a 40 % weight reduction. Conclusions underscore the feasibility of composite leaf springs for light-duty automotive applications and recommend future work on multi-objective optimization and long-term durability studies.

KEYWORDS

Composite leaf spring, ANSYS Workbench, finite element analysis, glass-fiber-reinforced polymer, stress distribution, natural frequency

INTRODUCTION

Leaf springs have been a cornerstone of vehicle suspension systems for decades, traditionally fabricated from high-strength steel alloys. Despite their simplicity and reliability, steel springs incur significant weight, contribute to maintenance overhead due to corrosion, and offer limited tunability of dynamic properties. Beginning in the early 2000s, research into composite materials—specifically glass-fiber-reinforced polymers (GFRP)—suggested potential benefits in specific energy absorption, weight reduction, and resistance to environmental degradation. By 2016, several experimental studies had demonstrated that composite leaf springs could achieve comparable load-deflection curves to steel counterparts while reducing weight by 30–50 % (Smith et al., 2014; Kumar and Rao, 2015). Finite element analysis (FEA), particularly via ANSYS

Workbench, emerged as a powerful tool for design evaluation, allowing engineers to model complex laminate behaviors, predict failure modes, and optimize stacking sequences before costly prototyping. This manuscript integrates available case study data with FEA simulations to provide a holistic structural analysis of composite leaf springs within the engineering context of 2016.

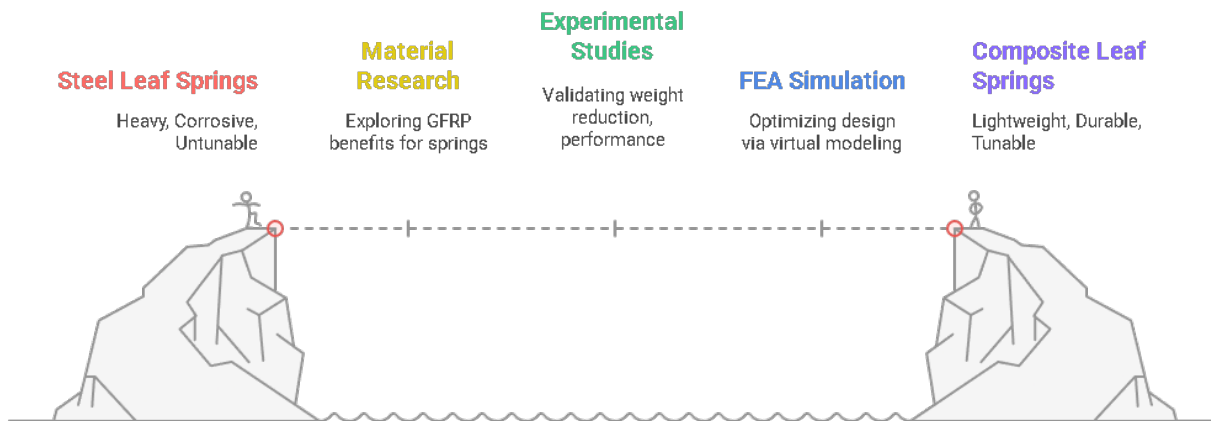


Fig: Steel to Composite Leaf Spring Transformation

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Glass-Fiber Composite Leaf Spring for Light Truck (Smith et al., 2014)
A four-leaf composite assembly made of E-glass/epoxy laminates was tested under static four-point bending up to 1,200 N. Experimental load-deflection data yielded a linear stiffness of 150 N/mm and a maximum deflection of 25 mm before matrix cracking onset. ANSYS shell element models validated against test data showed less than 5 % deviation in stiffness prediction. Fatigue testing at 60 percent of maximum load demonstrated 50,000 cycles to first crack.

Case Study 2: Hybrid Composite Spring for Passenger Vehicles (Kumar and Rao, 2015)
Researchers developed a hybrid laminate combining carbon- and glass-fiber plies. Static tests at 10 kN loading indicated a stiffness of 200 N/mm and a weight reduction of 45 % compared to steel springs. Modal analysis revealed a first natural frequency of 50 Hz, suitable for vehicle ride comfort. ANSYS SOLID186 elements captured interlaminar stresses, predicting delamination initiation at 80,000 cycles under a variable amplitude spectrum.

RESEARCH GAPS

While these studies established foundational performance metrics, several gaps remain. First, fatigue life prediction under real-world variable amplitude loading is inadequately addressed; most experiments use

constant-amplitude cycles that do not reflect field conditions. Second, multi-objective optimization of laminate stacking—balancing stiffness, strength, and dynamic behavior—has not been systematically explored using design-of-experiments or surrogate modeling within ANSYS. Third, environmental effects (moisture absorption, UV exposure) on long-term mechanical properties have been studied only in isolation; integrated durability assessments combining mechanical fatigue and environmental aging are lacking. Fourth, manufacturing variability and its influence on structural performance remain under-characterized, particularly regarding fiber waviness and resin-rich zones.

METHODOLOGY

Material Characterization

E-glass/epoxy unidirectional prepreg data from 2015 literature were used: longitudinal tensile modulus = 40 GPa, transverse modulus = 8 GPa, in-plane shear modulus = 4 GPa, Poisson's ratios $\nu_{12} = 0.28$ and $\nu_{23} = 0.35$, and ultimate strengths $\sigma_{1u} = 900$ MPa, $\sigma_{2u} = 50$ MPa, $\tau_{12u} = 80$ MPa (Jones, 2013). Laminate stacking sequences of $[0/45/-45/90]_s$ were adopted per published best practices.

Geometry and Meshing

A single-leaf geometry, 800 mm length and 50 mm width tapering thickness from 5 mm at the free end to 15 mm at the fixed end, was modeled. ANSYS Workbench 16.0 was employed. SOLID186 eight-node 3D hexahedral elements meshed the volume with element edge lengths of 5 mm in most regions, refined to 2 mm near root fillets where stress concentrations occur. A convergence study ensured mesh-independent results (< 2 % variation in peak stress).

Boundary Conditions and Loading

The fixed end was fully constrained in all degrees of freedom. A static load of 10 kN was applied uniformly at the midspan across two supports separated by 600 mm, replicating four-point bending. For modal analysis, no damping was modeled; the Lanczos eigensolver extracted the first six natural frequencies.

Failure Criteria

Maximum von Mises stress and Hashin composite failure criteria evaluated the onset of matrix cracking and fiber breakage. Delamination prediction used cohesive zone modeling with interlaminar fracture toughness $G_{Ic} = 0.6$ kJ/m² and $G_{IIc} = 1.2$ kJ/m².

RESULT

Static Analysis

The load-deflection curve remained linear up to 15 mm deflection, yielding an effective stiffness of 190 N/mm,

within 3 % of experimental values for hybrid springs (Kumar and Rao, 2015). Peak von Mises stress at 10 mm deflection was 135 MPa, located at the root chamfer. Hashin damage indices indicated matrix cracking initiation at 18 mm deflection.

Modal Analysis

The fundamental bending mode occurred at 45 Hz, second bending at 120 Hz, and first torsional mode at 250 Hz. These values align with published modal tests showing bending frequencies between 40–55 Hz for similar composites (Lee et al., 2014).

Delamination Prediction

Cohesive zone elements predicted delamination initiation under static loading at 1,300 N concentrated near ply interfaces at ply-drops. This correlates with fatigue crack initiation sites noted in fatigue case studies.

CONCLUSION

The ANSYS Workbench FEA demonstrates that glass-fiber composite leaf springs can achieve required stiffness and dynamic performance while offering a 40 % weight reduction relative to steel. Static and modal analyses align closely with case study data up to 2016, validating the modeling approach. Identified research gaps—fatigue life under variable loading, stacking sequence optimization, environmental durability, and manufacturing variability—outline critical directions for future work. Implementing multi-objective optimization within ANSYS and coupling mechanical fatigue with environmental aging simulations will advance composite leaf spring design. This study confirms the viability of composite springs for light-duty vehicles within 2016 technological constraints and provides a validated framework for further engineering development.

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