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SOIL CARBON FRACTIONS AS INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABILITY OF COTTON CROPPING SYSTEMS

By

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DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



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ABSTRACT

The cracking clay soils on which cotton is typically grown are prone to compaction, which can lead to a reduction in soil aeration, infiltration of water, and a condition where roots are unable to penetrate the dense layer of the soil. This in turn reduces yields and farm income, and in the longer term, will result in a reduction in soil quality and land value. Increasing public and grower concern about soil and environmental quality in relation to long-term sustainable cotton production has emphasised the need to develop and implement management strategies that maintain and protect soil resources.

The development of sustainable cotton cropping systems requires the identification, monitoring and management of those soil properties whose variability significantly influence the stability and resilience of the soil resource. Since sustainability is a systems issue, the sustainability of a cropping system can be appropriately assessed through the use of indicators, which are partial indices that estimate some aspect of the broader concept. The selection of such indicators can be achieved through a step-wise approach; by identifying a set of attributes that constitute components of a sustainable cropping system, and then develop techniques for monitoring these attributes. The organic matter content of a soil is a key indicator of a sustainable cropping system because of its influence on the physical, chemical and biological health of a soil. Because organic matter in soil exists in a wide diversity of forms with considerable variability in decomposition rates, the success of any organic matter management strategy will depend to a large extent on methods that can detect and monitor short-term changes in soil organic matter quantity and quality.

The primary concern of the work described in this thesis was to examine the potential value of a simple measurement of labile and non-labile carbon fractions to provide a sensitive monitoring indicator of organic matter changes under cotton cropping systems. The labile carbon is obtained by oxidation with a 333 mM KMnO_4 solution and the non-labile carbon obtained as the difference between the total and labile carbon. Based on the relative contents of labile and non-labile carbon in a cropped soil and a reference soil, a carbon management index is calculated. The study commenced with a general survey of the fertility status of soils used for cotton production. The specific objectives of the survey were to examine the soil test values in the main soils used for cotton production and compare these values between cropped and reference sites. Changes in soil organic matter due to cotton production were examined using the carbon fractionation procedure based on ease of oxidation. The relationships between the carbon fractions obtained by ease of oxidation and other common measurements of soil organic matter were also examined. The carbon fractionation procedure was then used to follow soil organic matter changes under different cotton stubble management systems and cotton rotation sequences.

The results from the soil survey showed that most of the soils used for cotton production in Australia are alkaline in reaction, with a considerable variability in soil test values. The ranges observed for most soil tests indicated adequate chemical fertility in these soils, but no significant relationships were found between soil test levels and nutrient responses under glasshouse conditions. The large number of significant responses to P and S under glasshouse conditions, in spite of the adequate soil test levels, suggests the need for future field studies to examine the role of these nutrients in cotton cropping systems.

The 333 mM KMnO_4 carbon fractionation procedure showed that cultivation of soils has led to a decrease in the organic carbon status of the cracking clay soils used in cotton production. The effect of cultivation was more pronounced in the labile carbon (C_L) and the carbon management index (CMI) than in the total carbon (C_T) and non-labile carbon (C_{NL}). The effect of cultivation on the ratio of C_L to C_{NL} (LI) was not as clear, since both increases and decreases were observed as a result of cultivation. The role of aggregates in the protection of soil organic matter from rapid decomposition was also demonstrated. It was shown that there was a higher concentration of both C_T and C_L in the microaggregates ($< 250 \mu\text{m}$) than in the macroaggregates ($> 250 \mu\text{m}$) indicating that the rates of decomposition of both C_T and C_L were higher in the macroaggregates than in the microaggregates. However, in all the aggregate sizes, the relative losses of C_L were higher than the relative losses of C_T . These observations also support the hypothesis that the KMnO_4 -oxidisable carbon (C_L) is a measure of labile carbon in soil and can be used for monitoring short-term changes in organic matter under different cropping systems. The CMI generally declined during cultivation, with the exception of a few soils, and since the CMI incorporates the changes taking place in C_T , C_L and C_{NL} , the use of this index can provide very useful results in the monitoring of organic matter status of soils.

Since organic carbon in soils has been determined by a wide range of procedures, the carbon fractions obtained by ease of oxidation were compared with other common measurements of soil organic carbon. It was shown that C_L determined by ease of oxidation was significantly related to fulvic acid, soil polysaccharides and soil microbial biomass carbon. From ^{13}C NMR studies, it appears that the KMnO_4 oxidisable carbon mostly comprised of soil carbohydrates and some unidentified aromatic compounds. The association between C_L and fulvic acid, carbohydrates and microbial biomass carbon indicates that the term labile is appropriate for KMnO_4 oxidisable carbon, and that the un-oxidisable C_{NL} is related to soil humin and non-labile polysaccharides. Therefore, the partitioning of soil carbon into C_L and C_{NL} as shown in this study will allow the separation of active and less active soil carbon to be used for monitoring carbon dynamics of agricultural systems.

The carbon fractions obtained by ease of oxidation were then used to monitor organic matter changes under different stubble management systems and cotton rotation sequences in the field.

The results showed that management of cotton stubble significantly affects the organic matter status of Vertisols. Incorporation of stubble increased both the total carbon concentration and the Carbon Management Index while burning reduced the Carbon Management Index. Most of the increases in soil organic matter observed in a 3-year period were due to increases in the amount of light fraction. With regards to crop rotation options, it appeared that rotating cotton with wheat is a more sustainable option with regards to long-term improvement of soil quality than continuous cotton or legumes alone. The inclusion of legumes in the rotation sequence appeared to produce mainly short-term benefits, probably as a result of their rapid decomposition rates. However, since observations were only made for a relatively short time, subsequent monitoring of the organic carbon changes was recommended for a conclusive evaluation of the role of different rotation sequences on soil organic carbon status. In general, it can be concluded that for sustainable management of soil organic matter in Vertisols under cotton production, as much of the stubble produced in the system be returned to the soil rather than removed.

Since the continuity of supply of carbon in soil depends on both the total pool size and the decomposability, the carbon management index (CMI) can be considered to be a useful indicator of sustainable cropping systems.

Publications

The following papers, arising from this research project, have been published.

Conteh, A., Blair, G. J., MacLeod, D. A., and Lefroy, R. D. B. (1997). Soil organic carbon changes in cracking clay soils under cotton production as studied by carbon fractionation. *Australian Journal of Agricultural Research* **48**, 1049 - 1058.

Conteh, A., and Blair, G. J. (1998). The distribution and relative losses of soil organic carbon fractions in aggregate size fractions from cracking clay soils (Vertisols) under cotton production. *Australian Journal of Soil Research* **36**, 257 - 271.

Conteh, A., Blair, G. J., and Rochester, I. J. (1998). Soil organic carbon fractions in a vertisol under irrigated cotton production as affected by burning and incorporating cotton stubble. *Australian Journal of Soil Research* **36**, 655 - 667

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
PUBLICATIONS	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
2.1. INTRODUCTION.....	6
2.2. THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY.....	6
2.2.1. General Overview of Sustainability	6
2.2.2. Indicators of Sustainability.....	9
2.3. SOIL ORGANIC MATTER AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF SUSTAINABLE CROPPING SYSTEMS..	11
2.3.1. Role of Organic Matter in Soils.....	11
2.3.2. Constituents of Soil Organic Matter	12
2.3.3. Dynamics of Soil Organic Matter.....	16
2.3.4. Modelling Soil Organic Matter Dynamics.....	19
2.4. SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF SOIL ORGANIC MATTER	21
2.4.1. Crop Residue Management.....	21
2.4.2. Crop Rotations and Sustainable Organic Matter Management.....	25
2.5. METHODS USED IN ASSESSING THE DYNAMICS OF ORGANIC MATTER IN SOILS.....	28
2.5.1. Loss-on-ignition.....	28
2.5.2. Dry Combustion Techniques	29
2.5.3. Wet Oxidation Techniques	30

2.5.4. Physical Fractionation	31
2.5.5. Fractionation of humic substances	32
2.5.6. Isotopic Techniques	33
2.5.7. Spectroscopic Techniques.....	35
2.5.8. Oxidation by potassium permanganate (KMnO ₄)	37
2.6. SUMMARY.....	39
CHAPTER 3: A SURVEY OF THE FERTILITY STATUS OF SOILS USED FOR COTTON PRODUCTION IN AUSTRALIA.....	40
3.1. INTRODUCTION.....	40
3.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS	41
3.2.1. Soil Sampling.....	41
3.2.2. Soil Nutrient Analyses	41
3.2.3. Double-pot Experiment.....	43
3.2.4. Data analysis.....	45
3.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	46
3.3.1. Soil nutrient status.....	46
3.3.2. Effects of cropping	49
3.3.3. Correlations between soil variables	49
3.3.4. Nutrient responses	52
3.4. CONCLUSIONS.....	55
CHAPTER 4: CHANGES IN SOIL ORGANIC CARBON UNDER COTTON AS STUDIED BY ORGANIC CARBON FRACTIONATION	56
4.1. INTRODUCTION.....	56
4.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS	57
4.2.1. Soil sampling	57
4.2.2. Determination of total carbon (C _T)	57
4.2.3. Determination of labile carbon (C _L).....	58
4.2.4. Aggregate-size separation	61
4.2.5. Isolation of the light fraction	61
4.2.6. Chemical analysis of aggregate fractions	62

4.3. RESULTS	64
4.3.1. Changes in carbon fractions in soils from the Gwydir Valley	64
4.3.2. Changes in carbon fractions in soils from the Namoi Valley.....	65
4.3.3. Changes in carbon fractions in soils from the Macquarie Valley.....	65
4.3.4. Changes in carbon fractions in soils from Bourke	65
4.3.5. Changes in carbon fractions in soils from the MacIntyre Valley	66
4.3.6. Changes in carbon fractions in soils from the Darling Downs.....	67
4.3.7. Changes in carbon fractions in soils from Emerald.....	67
4.3.8. Distribution of aggregate size fractions in selected soils	68
4.3.9. Distribution and losses of total and labile carbon in different aggregate sizes	70
4.3.10. Distribution and losses of light fraction (LF) and light fraction carbon (LF-C) in different aggregate size fractions.	71
4.3.11. Variations in the soil and light fraction $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values between aggregate fractions.....	73
4.4. DISCUSSION	74
4.4.1. Changes in carbon fractions in the whole soil from different cotton growing regions	74
4.4.2. Distribution and losses of carbon fractions in different aggregates sizes.....	78
4.5. CONCLUSIONS	81
CHAPTER 5: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LABILE CARBON DETERMINED BY KMNO_4 OXIDATION AND OTHER COMMON MEASUREMENTS OF SOIL ORGANIC CARBON	83
5.1. INTRODUCTION	83
5.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS	84
5.2.1. Selection of soil samples.....	84
5.2.2. Fractionation of humic substances	85
5.2.3. Determination of total and labile polysaccharides.....	87
5.2.4. Determination of water-soluble phenolics	88
5.2.5. Determination of light fraction carbon (LF-C).....	89
5.2.6. Determination of soil microbial biomass carbon.....	89
5.2.7. Near Infrared Reflectance and solid-state ^{13}C CPMAS NMR Analyses	90
5.2.8. Data analysis.....	91
5.3. RESULTS	91

5.3.1. Humic substances extracted from the selected soils.....	91
5.3.2. Polysaccharides and water-soluble phenolics in the selected soils.....	92
5.3.3. Light fraction (LF) isolated from the selected soils.....	94
5.3.4. Microbial biomass carbon of incubated and non-incubated soils.....	95
5.3.5. Linear relationships between KMnO ₄ carbon fractions and other organic carbon measurements.....	96
5.3.6. CPMAS ¹³ C NMR spectra of KMnO ₄ oxidised and non-oxidised samples.....	97
5.3.7. Near Infrared Reflectance (NIR) spectra of KMnO ₄ -oxidised and non-oxidised soil.....	101
5.4. DISCUSSION.....	105
5.4.1. Humic substances and their relationships to KMnO ₄ carbon fractions.....	105
5.4.2. Soil polysaccharides and their relationships to KMnO ₄ carbon fractions.....	106
5.4.3. Water-soluble phenolics and their relationships to KMnO ₄ carbon fractions.....	107
5.4.4. The light fraction (LF) and relationships to KMnO ₄ carbon fractions.....	108
5.4.5. Soil microbial biomass carbon and relationships to KMnO ₄ carbon fractions.....	109
5.4.6. ¹³ C nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) and near infrared reflectance (NIR) spectra of KMnO ₄ oxidised and non-oxidised soil.....	109
5.5. CONCLUSIONS.....	112
 CHAPTER 6: THE EFFECTS OF COTTON STUBBLE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND COTTON ROTATION SEQUENCES ON SOIL ORGANIC CARBON FRACTIONS.....	113
6.1. INTRODUCTION.....	113
6.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS.....	115
6.2.1. Stubble management experiment.....	115
6.2.2. Crop rotation experiment.....	116
6.3. RESULTS.....	120
6.3.1. Effects of cotton stubble management systems on soil carbon fractions.....	120
6.3.2. Crop rotation effects on soil carbon fractions.....	123
6.4. DISCUSSION.....	126
6.4.1. Effects of cotton stubble management systems on soil carbon fractions.....	126
6.4.2. Effects of different rotation sequences on soil carbon fractions.....	129
6.5. CONCLUSIONS.....	131

CHAPTER 7: GENERAL DISCUSSION	132
7.1. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS	135
BIBLIOGRAPHY	138
APPENDICES	160

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Map of Eastern Australia showing major cotton growing regions of New South Wales and Queensland.....	2
Figure 2.1: Schematic of an ANCA-MS system.....	30
Figure 3.1: Fluctuations in glasshouse temperature during six weeks of cotton growth.....	45
Figure 3.2: Relating soil test to relative yield of cotton seedlings using the modified Mitscherlich-Bray growth function.	54
Figure 4.1: Distribution of aggregate size fractions in cropped and reference soils from the various sites.....	69
Figure 4.2: Changes in carbon pool index and carbon management index in relation to years of cropping.....	78
Figure 5.1: The concentration of soil microbial biomass carbon in three pairs of reference/cropped soils under different incubation treatments.....	96
Figure 5.2: A comparison of CPMAS ¹³ C NMR spectra of non-oxidised and the KMnO ₄ -oxidised soil (Samples 1A and 1B).....	99
Figure 5.3: A comparison of CPMAS ¹³ C NMR spectra of the non-oxidised and the KMnO ₄ -oxidised soil (Samples 2A and 2B).....	100
Figure 5.4: Near Infrared Reflectance (NIR) spectra of two pairs of reference and cropped soils .	102
Figure 5.5: Near Infrared Reflectance (NIR) spectra of oxidised and unoxidised soil from reference and cropped sites (1A and 1B)	103
Figure 5.6: Near Infrared Reflectance (NIR) spectra of oxidised and unoxidised soil from reference and cropped sites (2A and 2B)	104

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1:	Some Definitions of Sustainability.....	7
Table 2.2:	Elements of a useful approach to characterising sustainability of agricultural systems ...	9
Table 2.3:	Analytical characteristics of humic and fulvic acids	13
Table 2.4:	S and P balance sheet in a maize cropping system over three years	22
Table 2.5:	Fate of nutrients (kg/ha) in 1.5 t/ha cotton crop	23
Table 2.6:	Nutrient ratios in returned cotton residues	23
Table 2.7:	Effects of tillage, crop residue and fertiliser N on organic carbon and total N of the surface soil (0 - 10 cm)	24
Table 3.1:	Distribution of samples by region and period under cultivation	42
Table 3.2:	Nutrient solutions used in the double-pot trial.....	43
Table 3.3:	Final Concentration of Macro- and Micronutrients in Nutrient Solutions.....	44
Table 3.4:	Variability in some chemical properties of samples from all regions.....	47
Table 3.5:	Number of samples from each region falling below, within and above the recommended critical ranges for cotton.....	48
Table 3.6:	Variability in soil chemical properties between reference and cropped soil	50
Table 3.7:	Linear correlation coefficients between selected soil chemical properties.....	51
Table 3.8:	Significant responses to P, S, K, Mg, and Trace nutrients by region.....	53
Table 4.1:	Standard solutions used for calibration curve	59
Table 4.2:	Description of samples selected for aggregate size fractionation.....	63
Table 4.3:	Carbon fractions in soils from the Gwydir Valley	64
Table 4.4:	Carbon fractions in soils from the Namoi Valley	65
Table 4.5:	Carbon fractions in soils of Macquarie Valley	66
Table 4.6:	Carbon fractions in soils from Bourke.....	66
Table 4.7:	Carbon fractions in soils from MacIntyre Valley.....	67
Table 4.8:	Carbon fractions in soils from the Darling Downs	68
Table 4.9:	Carbon fractions in soils from Emerald	68
Table 4.10:	Distribution and relative losses of total carbon (C_T mg/g) in aggregate fractions.....	70
Table 4.11:	Distribution and relative losses of labile carbon (C_L mg/g) in aggregate fractions	71

Table 4.12:	Distribution and relative losses of light fraction (mg/g) between aggregate fractions ...	72
Table 4.13:	Carbon concentration (%) of light fraction in aggregate fractions.....	72
Table 4.14:	Total soil carbon present as light fraction (LF-C) from different aggregate fractions (mg C/g soil). Values in parenthesis indicate percent of total soil carbon.....	73
Table 4.15:	Variations in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ (‰) between aggregate fractions of reference and cropped soil	74
Table 4.16:	Variations in $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ (‰) of the light fraction isolated from aggregate fractions of reference and cropped soil	74
Table 5.1:	Description of the seven pairs of samples used in this study	85
Table 5.2:	Concentration of humic substances in selected reference and cropped soils.....	92
Table 5.3:	Concentration of polysaccharides and water-soluble phenolics in the selected reference and cropped soils.....	93
Table 5.4:	Concentration of light fraction and light fraction carbon in the selected reference and cropped soils.....	94
Table 5.5:	Linear relationships between KMnO_4 carbon fractions and other organic carbon measurements.....	97
Table 5.6:	Relative proportion of carbon species in non-oxidised and KMnO_4 oxidised soil.....	101
Table 6.1:	Description of the cotton rotation sequences in “Auscott-Warren”.....	117
Table 6.2:	Effects of stubble incorporation and stubble burning on total nitrogen (N_T) and soil carbon fractions (mg/g).....	120
Table 6.3:	A comparison of Carbon Pool Index (CPI), Lability Index (LI), and Carbon Management Index (CMI) after 3 years of different stubble management systems	121
Table 6.4:	Effects of stubble management system on the light fraction (LF) and light fraction carbon (LF-C)	122
Table 6.5:	Effects of stubble incorporation, stubble burning and nitrogen levels on the $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ (‰) of the whole soil and the light fraction	123
Table 6.6:	Changes in total carbon (C_T) and labile carbon (C_L) following different rotation sequences (mg/g)	124
Table 6.7:	Changes in lability index (LI), carbon pool index (CPI) and carbon management index (CMI) following different rotation sequences	125