

Simulation of soil organic carbon dynamics under different land use and crop management practices

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Prologue

The main layout of the thesis follows the Style Guide of the University of New England <http://www.une.edu.au/research-services/forms/thesis-submission-instructions.php>.

Each experimental chapter is written in as individual journal article format, targeting different specific journals. Parts of the literature review, material and method, study site description and references might be repeated in the subsequent chapters. Formatting of each experimental chapter follows the editorial style of the relevant journal. For other chapters, the format follows that of *Soil Research*. Figures and tables are located throughout the text.

Thesis structure

Chapter 1:

“Introduction, scope and objectives” – this chapter contains a general introduction, and states the scope and objectives of the present study.

Chapter 2:

“Review of Literature” – this chapter contains a general review of literature.

Chapter 3:

“Measuring turnover times of Soil Organic Carbon fractions in contrasting land use systems as revealed by radiocarbon signature” – this chapter reports on soil organic carbon (SOC), fractionated by a combination of physical and chemical methods, to study whether the combined method could partition SOC in accordance with the hierarchy of SOC stabilization mechanisms, and with distinct ages and turnover times as proposed in SOC turnover models.

Chapter 4:

“Effect of land use change on soil organic carbon dynamics: Evaluation of RothC using paired-site data sets” – here, in the absence of long-term experimental data, the performance of the Rothamsted carbon model (RothC) was evaluated using paired-site data. The partitioning method of SOC as proposed by Zimmermann et al. (2007) was examined to evaluate its potential to quantify different SOC pools, as required by RothC. The initialization method of RothC was assessed to determine whether initialization with measured SOC pools rather than using default model equilibrium pools improves the model predictability.

Chapter 5:

“Modelling soil organic carbon dynamics using the Rothamsted carbon model in a cotton based cropping system on irrigated Vertosol” – in this chapter, RothC performance was evaluated using a long-term field experiment data set in simulation of SOC dynamics under cotton based cropping system in irrigated Vertosols. Different scenarios of SOC dynamics under different proposed cotton based cropping systems were also explored.

Chapter 6:

“Projections of changes in grassland soil organic carbon under climate change are relatively insensitive to methods of model initialization” – here, the sensitivity of RothC to the model initialisation method in projection of changes in SOC under climate change was examined by using data from 12 native grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of New South

Wales (NSW), Australia. The global climate model CSIRO Mk3.5 was used for climate projection for the period 2008-2100. Three different methods of model initialization were used viz. model initialization with (i) spin-up of model pools with Inert Organic Matter (IOM) pool size calculated from a regression equation (Falloon et al., 1998), ii) spin-up of model pools with measured IOM, and (iii) all pools estimated from measured SOC fraction.

Chapter 7:

“Projected changes in grassland SOC under climate change in the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia, 2008-2100” – in this chapter, climate change impacts on grassland SOC was projected with three different global climate models forced with four different climate scenarios for the time period 2008-2100, using RothC in the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia. Sensitivity of projected SOC to soil C inputs, and the increase in C inputs necessary to offset the climate impacts on grassland SOC for the period 2008-2100 were also determined.

Chapter 8:

“General conclusion and future research” – this chapter contains general conclusions and outlines scope for future research.

References

References are presented for each chapter rather than in a final cumulative bibliography. This is made necessary by the differing bibliographical styles required by the publishing journals.

Publication arising from the Thesis

Journal articles

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- Senapati N, Hulugalle NR, Smith P, Wilson B, Yeluripati JB, Daniel H, Ghosh S, Lockwood P (2013) Modelling soil organic carbon dynamics using the Rothamsted carbon model in a cotton based cropping system on irrigated Vertosol. *Soil Research (under review)*.
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- Senapati N, Yeluripati JB, Daniel H, Wilson B, Smith P, Lockwood P, Ghosh S (2013) Effect of land use change on soil organic carbon dynamics: Evaluation of RothC using paired-site data sets. Manuscript to be submitted to *Soil Research*.

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Abstract

Soils are the largest reservoir of terrestrial carbon (C) (~1500 Pg organic C in top one meter) and any change in this large soil organic carbon (SOC) stock due to change in land use, management practice or climate change may have significant and long-lived effects on the global C cycle. The SOC turnover models can project the change in SOC storage and turnover rate under future scenarios of land use, management practice, technological improvement and climate change, and investigate hypotheses that are beyond the feasibility of experimental work. In Australia, there is a greater need for modelling such scenarios across a wider range of agro-ecological regions and land uses.

In this thesis, SOC dynamics under different land uses and crop management practices in the northern plains and slopes of New South Wales (NSW) was explored using the Rothamsted carbon model (RothC). The specific objectives were (i) to determine turnover times of SOC fractions, separated by a combination of physical and chemical methods, in contrasting land use systems by natural ^{14}C abundance, (ii) to examine whether a combination of physical and chemical laboratory methods of SOC fractionation has the potential to quantify different SOC pools, as required by RothC, (iii) to evaluate the performance of RothC in simulating the effect of land use change (LUC) on SOC dynamics, particularly following a proposed land use change from native vegetation to cropping, using paired-site data sets, (iv) to examine whether initializing RothC with measured SOC pools, rather than using default model equilibrium pools, improves RothC performance in prediction of LUC effects on SOC dynamics, (v) to evaluate RothC performance in simulation of SOC dynamics under a cotton based cropping system on an irrigated Vertosol using long-term field experiment data, (vi) to explore different scenarios of SOC dynamics under different cotton based cropping systems in irrigated Vertosol, (vii) to test whether RothC projections of grassland SOC under climate change were sensitive to the model initialisation method, and (viii) to projected climate change impacts on grassland SOC with three different global climate models (GCMs) forced with four different climate scenarios for the time period 2008-2100, using RothC in the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia.

Results showed that a combination of physical size separation and chemical oxidation methods are able to partition SOC into a short to medium (~10-360 yr) turnover time fraction (particulate organic carbon), medium (~230 - 3100 yr) turnover time fraction (silt and clay

associated C) and a stable old (radio C age ~ modern – 2000 BC) inert organic C fraction in accordance with different SOC stabilization mechanisms. The combined physical and chemical SOC fractionation methods resulted in meaningful fractions which could be related to conceptualized pools of SOC turnover models. Assessment of a similar type of combined physical and chemical fractionation methods showed a good potential of the laboratory fraction method in determining model conceptual pools as required by RothC across different land use systems.

For evaluation of RothC performance in simulation of the LUC effect on SOC dynamics, data from 16 paired-sites across the northern slope and plains of NSW was used. RothC was initialized with both measured and default equilibrium SOC pool structure of native vegetation, and then run to simulate total SOC stock after LUC from native vegetation to cropping, given the known climate, land clearing and management history. RothC performed satisfactorily with both the initialization methods. However, model performance was not improved significantly when RothC was initialized with measured SOC pools ($r = 0.98$, $EF = 0.96$, $RMSE = 5.89$, $E = -1.82$) as compared with initialization with model default equilibrium pools ($r = 0.97$, $EF = 0.93$, $RMSE = 7.82$, $E = 2.64$). RothC could be used to predict total SOC stock at any point in time after LUC from native vegetation to cropping in the region, as long as total SOC in adjacent remnant native vegetation and crop management history at the site are known. The paired-site SOC dataset was shown to be useful in evaluating the ability of RothC to predict LUC effects on SOC dynamics. The analytical effort of SOC laboratory fractionation may not be required to initialize the model to simulate total SOC in such a case.

Performance of RothC in simulating SOC dynamics under cotton based cropping systems in irrigated Vertosols was evaluated using data from a long-term cropping experiment, located at the Australian Cotton Research Institute, near Narrabri, in north-western NSW, Australia. The experimental treatments were three cropping/tillage combinations *viz.* continuous cotton/conventional tillage (CC/CT), continuous cotton/minimum tillage (CC/MT) and cotton-wheat/minimum tillage (CW/MT). Measured values showed a loss in SOC of 22%, 17% and 21% of the initial SOC stocks within 15 years (1994-2008) under CC/CT, CC/MT, and CW/MT, respectively. RothC satisfactorily simulated SOC dynamics under CC/MT ($LOFIT = 44-46$, $RMSE = 3.1$, $E = -2.2$ and $r = 0.90$)

and CW/MT ($LOFIT = 48-172$, $RMSE = 3.2-5.9$, $E = -1.9$ to -4.8 and $r = 0.88-0.92$), whereas the model performance was poor under CC/CT ($LOFIT = 220-223$, $RMSE = 7.5-7.6$, $E = -6.6$ and $r = 0.80-0.81$). However, a minimum of 69% reduction in soil C input could significantly simulate the SOC dynamics under CC/CT ($LOFIT = 58$, $RMSE = 3.9$, $E = -0.6$ and $r = 0.88$). In an irrigated Vertosol, these present cropping systems were predicted to lose soil C continuously from 2009 onwards until they reached equilibrium. At equilibrium, a loss in SOC of 62%, 2% and 16% of their 2008 levels were predicted under CC/CT, CC/MT and CW/MT, respectively and the losses were 70%, 18% and 34%, respectively of their initial (1994) levels. Inclusion of vetch (*Vicia spp.*) with cotton monoculture and cotton–wheat system could potentially reduce the loss in SOC stocks from their initial levels to 2 - 17% and 7%, respectively within 15 years. Similarly, inclusion of a summer forage legume with the CW/MT system had the potential to reduce the loss in SOC stocks to 11%, whereas inclusion of summer grain cereals could improve SOC stock by 1 - 10% compared to initial SOC level within the same time period. These proposed cotton based cropping/tillage systems could potentially elevate equilibrium SOC levels by 0.5 - 2.0 times compared to the equilibrium levels under the current cropping systems and thus could reduce the loss of soil C under cotton based cropping systems in an irrigated Vertosol.

Sensitivity of RothC to the initialization methods in projection of SOC under climate change was assessed by running the model under climate change for the period 2008-2100 using 12 native grassland sites and three different initialization methods *viz.* model initialization with (i) spin-up of model pools with the Inert Organic Matter (IOM) pool size calculated from a regression equation, (ii) spin-up of model pools with measured IOM, and (iii) all pools estimated from measured fractions. Averaged over the sites and initialization methods, maximum absolute variations as well as averaged absolute variations throughout the projection period were very small (2.2 and 1.6%, respectively). There were no significant differences in projected grassland SOC stocks under climate change after 93 years (2008-2100) of simulation with model initialization by different methods and averaged over the sites, mean absolute variation in the projected SOC stocks was only 1.6% across the initialisation methods. The findings suggested that in a relatively undisturbed land use system such as native grassland, SOC projections under climate change are relatively insensitive to the model initialisation methods.

Potential climate change impacts on grassland soil organic carbon (SOC) was studied by running RothC from 2008-2100 at 12 native grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia, using three different GCMs (CSIRO Mk3.0, CSIRO Mk3.5 and Max Planck) forced with four Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emission scenarios. Averaged over the GCMs, SOC stocks were projected to fall by 6-12% compared to 2008 levels over the period 2008-2100, with the range determined by the climate scenario. Use of different GCMs did not cause any significant differences in projection. An average increase in annual soil C input by 15-27% is required to offset the climate change impact on grassland SOC in the region, depending on the climate scenario. Unless increased annual soil C inputs at these rates are realised, *e.g.* through improvements in management/technology or other mechanisms, a loss in grassland SOC can be expected under climate change in this region of northern NSW.

Table of Contents

Declaration	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Prologue	iv
Thesis structure	v
Publication arising from the Thesis.....	vii
Abstract	viii
Table of Contents	xii
List of Tables.....	xvii
List of Figures	xx
Chapter 1: Introduction, Scope and Objectives.....	1
1.1. Project overview.....	1
1.2. Objectives of this study	3
1.3. References	4
Chapter 2: Review of Literature	10
2.1. Soil organic carbon – the global context.....	10
2.2. Factor Affecting change in soil organic carbon	10
2.2.1. Land use change	10
2.2.2. Change in management practices and technology.....	12
2.2.3. Climate change	12
2.3. Soil organic carbon fractionation	13
2.4. Measurement of turnover rate of soil organic carbon	21
2.5. Modelling soil organic carbon.....	23
2.5.1. Classification of soil organic carbon models.....	24
2.5.2. Factors affecting turnover of soil organic carbon in models	26
2.5.3. Rothamsted carbon model	26
2.5.4. Application of soil organic carbon models.....	29
2.5.5. Measured and modelled pools	29
2.5.6. Initialization of SOC models	33
2.5.7. Evaluation of SOC models	35
2.5.8. Evaluation of SOC models under land use change.....	35

2.5.9. Projection of soil organic carbon under climate change.....	36
2.6. Soil carbon modelling efforts in Australia	37
2.7. Summary and research gap	38
2.8. References	40
Chapter 3: Measuring turnover times of Soil Organic Carbon fractions in contrasting land use systems as revealed by radiocarbon signature	59
3.1. INTRODUCTION.....	60
3.2. MATERIAL AND METHODS	62
3.2.1. Study sites.....	62
3.2.2. Soil sampling	63
3.2.3. Soil analysis.....	64
3.2.4. Measurement of ¹⁴ C content in SOC fractions:	65
3.2.5. Determination of MRT:	66
3.3. RESULTS.....	67
3.4. DISCUSSION	71
3.5. CONCLUSIONS	74
REFERENCES.....	76
Chapter 4: Effect of land use change on soil organic carbon dynamics: Evaluation of RothC using paired-site data sets	89
4.1. Introduction	90
4.2. Materials and methods	92
4.2.1. Study area	92
4.2.2. Site selection.....	93
4.2.3. Soil sampling	95
4.2.4. Soil analysis.....	95
4.2.5. Deriving “measured pools” from measured fractions	96
4.2.6. Soil carbon stocks adjustment for bulk density	98
4.2.7. Calculation of organic carbon input under cropping	98
4.2.8. Climate data.....	98
4.2.9. Application of RothC-26.3	99
4.2.10. Statistical analysis	99
4.3. Results	100
4.3.1. Measured and model default equilibrium SOC pools	100

4.3.2. Measured and modelled total SOC stocks after LUC from native vegetation to cropping	102
4.3.3. Measured and modelled SOC pools after LUC from native vegetation to cropping	107
4.4. Discussion	111
4.4.1. Measured and the model default equilibrium SOC pools.....	112
4.4.2. Measured and modelled total SOC stocks following land use change.....	112
4.4.3. Measured and modelled SOC pools following land use change	113
4.5. References	115

Chapter 5: Modelling soil organic carbon dynamics using the Rothamsted carbon model in a cotton based cropping system on irrigated Vertosol 126

5.1. Introduction	127
5.2. Materials and Methods	128
5.2.1. Experimental site	129
5.2.2. Treatments and crop management.....	129
5.2.3. Soil data	130
5.2.4. Climate data.....	130
5.2.5. Land management data.....	130
5.2.6. Running RothC	132
5.2.7. Statistical analysis	132
5.3. Results and discussion.....	137
5.3.1. Change in soil organic carbon, 1994-2008.....	137
5.3.2. Model evaluation	137
5.3.3. Scenario exploration.....	141
5.4. Conclusion.....	149
5.5. References	149

Chapter 6: Projections of changes in grassland soil organic carbon under climate change are relatively insensitive to methods of model initialization 157

6.1. Introduction	158
6.2. Materials and methods	160
6.2.1. Soil data	160
6.2.2. Climate data.....	163
6.2.3. Model initialization	164
6.2.4. Model run	165

6.2.5. Statistical analysis	166
6.3. Results	166
6.3.1. SOC pools during model initialization using three different initialization methods	166
6.3.2. Influence of methods of initializing RothC on projected grassland soil carbon..	170
6.4. Discussion	174
6.5. References	176
Chapter 7: Projected changes in grassland SOC under climate change in the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia, 2008-2100	183
7.1. INTRODUCTION.....	184
7.2. MATERIALS AND METHODS	186
7.2.1. Study Region	186
7.2.2. Soil Data	188
7.2.3. Climate Data	188
7.2.4. Running the RothC Model.....	189
7.2.5. Sensitivity Analysis	190
7.2.6. Statistical Analysis	190
7.3. RESULTS.....	191
7.3.1. Projected Climate Change, 2008-2100.....	191
7.3.2. Direct Climate Change Impact on Grassland Soil Carbon	191
7.3.3. Change in Carbon Input and Projected Grassland Soil Carbon.....	196
7.4. DISCUSSION	200
7.4.1. Direct Climate Change Impact and Projection of Grassland Soil Carbon	200
7.4.2. Change in Soil Carbon Input and Projected Grassland Soil Carbon under Climate Change	200
7.5. REFERENCES.....	203
Chapter 8: General conclusion and future research	210
8.1. Key findings	210
8.2. General conclusions and implication of the results.....	212
8.2.1. Combined physical and chemical SOC fraction methods and meaningful SOC fractions	212
8.2.2. SOC fractionation method of Zimmermann et al. (2007) and conceptual pools of RothC.....	213

8.2.3. Paired site data set and evaluation of RothC	215
8.2.4. Model initialization with measured pools vs. model equilibrium pools and performance of RothC in prediction of land use change effects on SOC dynamics	215
8.2.5. Evaluation of RothC under cotton based cropping system in irrigated Vertosols	216
8.2.6. Exploration of different scenario of SOC dynamics under cotton based cropping system	216
8.2.7. Projection of change in grassland SOC under climate change by RothC and sensitivity RothC to the method of model initialization.....	217
8.2.8. Projection of change in grassland SOC under climate change in the northern slope and plane of NSW, Australia, 2008-2100.....	218
8.3. Scope for future research.....	219

List of Tables

Table 3.1 Site characteristics of different land use and soil types	63
Table 3.2 Specific ^{14}C activities, radio C ages and MRTs of different SOC fractions under different land use system and soil types	69
Table 4.1 Site characteristics, and clearing and management history of 16 paired-sites across the northern cropping region of NSW, Australia.....	94
Table 4.2 Spearman's rank order correlation, R, and statistical parameter of Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis of measured and model default equilibrium SOC pools across 16 paired-sites	102
Table 4.3 Measured and modelled total SOC stocks (t C ha^{-1}) before and after land use change from native vegetation to cropping.....	106
Table 4.4 Statistics describing the performance of RothC in predicting total SOC stocks after land use change from native vegetation to cropping across 16 paired sites	107
Table 4.5 Measured and modelled SOC pools before and after LUC from native vegetation to cropping	109
Table 4.6 Statistics describing the performance of RothC in predicting SOC pools after LUC from native vegetation to cropping across 16 paired-sites.....	111
Table 5.1 Lint yield and C input calculation from crop under continuous cotton/conventional tillage throughout the simulation period (1994-2008).....	133
Table 5.2. Lint yield and C input calculation from crop under continuous cotton/minimum tillage throughout the simulation period (1994-2008)	134
Table 5.3. Lint yield (cotton), grain yield (wheat) and C input calculation from crop under cotton-wheat/minimum tillage throughout the simulation period (1994-2008)	135
Table 5.4. The proportions of carbon assumed to be added to the soil as plant carbon input in each month under different crops in the northern New South Wales, Australia (note that the study region is in the southern hemisphere)	136
Table 5.5. Initial soil organic carbon pools and total soil organic carbon stocks under three cropping/tillage system	138
Table 5.6. Statistics for evaluation of model performance under different cropping/tillage system	139
Table 5.7. Exploration of different scenarios of soil organic carbon under cotton based cropping systems.....	144

Table 6.1 Site characteristics of 12 grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia.....	162
Table 6.2 The proportion of carbon assumed to be added to the soil as plant carbon input in each month under native grassland across the sites (note that the study region is in the southern hemisphere)	165
Table 6.3 Equilibrium soil carbon inputs in 2008 when measured inert organic matter was used in the model spin-up run in 12 grass land sites across the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia.....	168
Table 6.4 Initial soil organic carbon pools (2008) under three different methods of model initialization averaged across 12 grass land sites in the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia.....	169
Table 6.5 Measured SOC stock in 2008 and projected SOC stocks under climate change in 2100 averaged across 12 grass land sites in the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia under three different methods of model initialization.....	172
Table 7.1. Site characteristics of 12 grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia.....	187
Table 7.2. The proportion of carbon assumed to be added to the soil as plant carbon input in each month under native grassland across the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia (note that the study region is in the southern hemisphere).....	190
Table 7.3. Measured SOC stocks in the 0 – 0.3 m depth in 2008, projected soil organic carbon stocks in 2100 under four climate change scenarios as implemented by three global climate models, and Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis and Spearman’s rank order correlations, R, between projected soil organic carbon with different global climate models in 12 grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia.....	193
Table 7.4. Projected cumulative emissions of CO ₂ for the time period 2008-2100 under four climate change scenarios as implemented by three global climate models, and Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis and Spearman’s rank order correlations, R, between projected CO ₂ with different global climate models in 12 grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia.	195
Table 7.5. Annual soil C inputs, sensitivities of projected SOC stocks to soil C inputs, required increases in C inputs of the 2008 levels to offset the climate change impacts on grassland SOC for the period 2008-2100 under four climate scenarios as implemented by CSIRO Mk 3.5, projected soil C inputs under improved grassland/ due to technological and management improvements in native grassland, and Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis between the sensitivities of projected SOC stocks to soil C inputs under different scenarios in 12 grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia.....	197
Table 7.6. Sensitivities of projected cumulative emissions of CO ₂ from soil to soil C inputs and projected cumulative emissions of CO ₂ to offset the climate change impact on grassland	

SOC for the period 2008-2100 under four climate scenarios as implemented by CSIRO Mk 3.5 across the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia.....198

List of Figures

Fig 2.1. Physico-chemical SOC fractionation method after Skjemstead <i>et al.</i> (2004). POC: particulate organic carbon.....	19
Fig. 2.2. Physico-chemical SOC fractionation method after Zimmermann <i>et al.</i> (2007). POC: particulate organic carbon, DOC: dissolved soil organic carbon, S + A: soil organic carbon in sand and stable aggregate, s + c – rSOC: soil organic carbon in silt and clay fraction excluding inert organic carbon, rSOC: chemically resistant soil organic carbon/inert organic carbon.....	20
Fig. 2.3. Structure of the Rothamsted Carbon Model.....	27
Fig. 2.4. The concept of relating measured soil organic carbon fractions to conceptual pools of RothC after Skjemstead <i>et al.</i> (2007). POC: particulate soil organic carbon, Char-C: charcoal carbon, TOC: total soil organic carbon, TOC – (POC + Char-C): soil organic carbon excluding POC and Char-C, RPM: resistant plant material, IOM: inert organic matter and HUM: humified organic matter.	31
Fig. 2.5. The concept of relating measured soil organic carbon fractions to conceptual pools of RothC after Zimmermann <i>et al.</i> (2007). POC: particulate soil organic carbon, DOC: dissolved soil organic carbon, S + A: soil organic carbon in sand and stable aggregate, s + c – rSOC: soil organic carbon in silt and clay fraction excluding inert organic carbon, rSOC: chemically resistant soil organic carbon/inert organic carbon, DPM: decomposable plant material, RPM: resistant plant material, BIO: microbial biomass, HUM: humified organic matter and IOM: inert organic matter.	32
Fig. 3.1. Fractionation scheme of SOC a combination of physical and chemical method.....	65
Fig. 3.2. The relation between specific ¹⁴ C activity and MRT of SOC in 2008.....	67
Fig. 4.1. (a) Diagram of the SOC fractionation procedure (after Zimmermann <i>et al.</i> 2007): DOC = dissolved organic carbon, POM = particulate organic matter, S+A = sand and stable aggregates, s + c silt and clay, and rSOC = resistant soil organic carbon, and (b) concept of deriving “measured SOC pools” from measured fractions (after Zimmermann <i>et al.</i> 2007): s + c – rSOC = silt and clay fraction without resistant soil organic carbon.....	97
Fig. 4.2. (a) Box plots for the partitioning of the measured total SOC into fractions, and (b) pools across 16 paired-sites. Note the different scales	101
Fig. 4.3. Application of RothC in simulating the effect of land use change from native vegetation to cropping on total SOC, (a) taking paired-site 6 as an example (native grassland was cleared in 1970 followed by 38 years of cropping), (b) taking paired-site 7 as another example (native grassland was cleared in 1976 followed by 32 years of cropping): RothC grassland = equilibrium run under native grassland, RothC cropping (M) = RothC run under cropping after initialized with measured SOC pool structure of native vegetation, RothC cropping (D) = RothC run under cropping after initialized with model default equilibrium	

SOC pool structure of native vegetation, Measured total SOC = measured total SOC with SE after land use change followed by cropping. 104

Fig. 4.4. Scatter plots of the modelled *vs.* measured total SOC stocks across 16 paired-sites after LUC followed by cropping: RothC^M: when RothC was initialized with measured SOC pools, and RothC^D: when RothC was initialized with modelled default equilibrium SOC pools. The dotted line is the 1:1 line 105

Fig. 5.1. Measured and modelled soil organic carbon stocks under different cropping/tillage system with soil carbon input calculated by two different methods: (a) continuous cotton /conventional tillage, (b) continuous cotton /minimum tillage and (c) cotton-wheat/minimum tillage. Standard error bars of measured values from field replications (f_{SR} is the stubble retention factor, 2-69%D : carbon input as calculated by method 2 was reduced by a minimum of 69% throughout the simulation time to get at least significant model fit).....138

Fig. 5.2. Simulated SOC with at least significant and of best fit model simulation under continuous cotton/conventional tillage, continuous cotton/minimum tillage and cotton-wheat/minimum tillage (f_{SR} is the stubble retention factor, 2-69%D : carbon input as calculated by method 2 was reduced by a minimum of 69% throughout the simulation time to get at least significant model fit)..... 143

Fig. 5.3. Simulated SOC with significant and of best fit model (a) continuous cotton /conventional tillage, (b) continuous cotton/minimum tillage and (c) cotton-wheat/minimum tillage, and under proposed cropping system (a) summer cotton-winter vetch/conventional tillage, (b) summer cotton-winter vetch/minimum tillage, and (c) cotton-wheat-summer forage legume/minimum tillage (summer cotton-winter wheat-summer forage legume-winter fallow/minimum tillage), cotton-wheat-autumn and winter vetch/minimum tillage (summer cotton-winter wheat-summer fallow-autumn and winter vetch/minimum tillage), cotton-wheat-summer corn/minimum tillage (summer cotton-winter wheat-summer corn-winter fallow/minimum tillage), and cotton-wheat-summer sorghum/minimum tillage (summer cotton-winter wheat-summer sorghum-winter fallow/minimum tillage) 148

Figure 6.1 Box plots for the RothC model pools (DPM, BIO, RPM, HUM and IOM) as fraction (%) of total SOC at model initialization under three different methods of model initialization *viz.* (a) Method 1 (spin up of model pools using IOM calculated from the Falloon *et al.* equation), (b) Method 2 (spin up of model pools using measured IOM) and (c) Method 3 (All pools estimated from measured fractions). Note the different scales.....167

Figure 6.2 (a) Monthly air temperature and (b) precipitation in 2008 and corresponding projected values in 2100 as predicted by GCM CSIRO Mk3.5 forced with A2 emission scenario 171

Figure 6.3 Projected grassland SOC stocks (mean over site replication) under climate change throughout the projection period 2008-2100 under three different methods of model initialization in 12 grassland sites across the northern slopes and plains of NSW, Australia. 173

Fig. 7.1. Location map of study sites across the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia.....186

Fig. 7.2. Monthly precipitation (mm) (above) and mean monthly temperature (°C) (below) in 2008 and their respective 2100 projected values (regional means) as predicted by three global climate models forced with four climate scenarios in the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia..... 192

Fig. 7.3. Change in mean regional soil organic carbon stocks in grassland for the period 2008-2100 under four climate scenarios as implemented by three global climate models in the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia (standard error bars from site replications)..... 194

Fig. 7. 4. Mean regional changes in projected grassland SOC stocks under four climate change scenarios as implemented by CSIRO Mk3.5 for the period 2008-2100 due to changes in annual soil C inputs in the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia (standard error bars from site replications). 199

Fig. 7.5. Mean regional changes in projected cumulative emissions of CO₂ from grassland under four climate change scenarios as implemented by CSIRO Mk3.5 for the period 2008-2100 due to change in annual soil C inputs in the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales, Australia (standard error bars from site replications). 199