

**ACID SOILS AND SOIL ACIDIFICATION
ON THE NORTHERN TABLELANDS
OF NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA**

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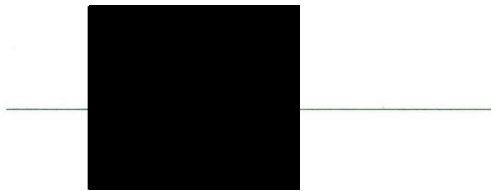
*A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of The University of New England.*

June, 2006

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.



Data files have been supplied as appendixes on a compact disc at the end of this thesis.
This thesis differs from the original submitted as corrections have been made.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to two mates, Tim Dalby and Paddy O'Sullivan, who were there at the start at USP and who were there at UNE. Bula vinaka Tim and Paddy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the course of this project many people have provided assistance and support, and I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge this help and express my appreciation.

Tim Dalby deserves special thanks for his support, equanimity, and for just being there.

Support from the sponsors is acknowledged, for without their assistance, the project would not have eventuated. They are the former Acid Soil Action (ASA), NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI), NSW Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and The University of New England (UNE).

I would like to thank my principal supervisor, Dr Peter Lockwood, Senior Lecturer, Agronomy and Soil Science (UNE), for his guidance, advice, support and immense patience. I want to thank my other supervisors, Dr Brian Wilson, Senior Research Scientist, DNR, and Dr Heiko Daniel, Associate Professor, Agronomy and Soil Science (UNE) for their great support and encouragement throughout the project. The advice from all three supervisors has been sound, and they have always been ready to listen to, and foster, my ideas.

I am indebted to Terry Koen, Senior Biometrician, DNR, Cowra for all his direction, help, and immense patience with the intricacies of the experiments and subsequent statistical analyses. Terry's interest in the project was ongoing and included a visit to some field sites on the Northern Tablelands. Any omissions or errors in interpreting the analyses are mine.

I would like to thank all the farmers who were involved with the paired-sites study. Without their permission to sample their soil and provide information about their land-management practices, the project could not have gone ahead.

From Agronomy and Soil Science (UNE) I would like to acknowledge the help provided by Greg (Tractor) Chamberlain, Dan Alter, David Edmonds, Leanne Lisle, Mick Faint, George Henderson, and Elizabeth Davies. Tractor, Dan and David were a great help with all the field work. Tractor deserves special thanks for fine-tuning the sampling protocol of the paired-sites study. Leanne's help with the ammonium-N and nitrate-N analyses was great.

Acknowledgment and thanks must be given to DPI staff (former and current) at Wagga Wagga Research Station, in particular Greg Fenton (ASA), Mark Conyers and Brendan Scott for their advice and support. Graeme Poile's advice on laboratory equipment and procedures was invaluable.

Mick Duncan (formerly ASA, DPI), now Agronomist, Northern Agriculture assisted from the outset of the project. Dacre King, DNR, Armidale was invaluable with his help in classifying all the soils from the project. Neil McKenzie and David Jacquier, Australian Soil Resource Information System (ASRIS), CSIRO, Canberra together with staff from Geoscience Australia, are thanked for providing data and help during the preparation of the acidity map.

For his advice on pH buffer capacity equations, Richard Merry, CSIRO, Adelaide, is thanked. Paul Kennelly, IncitecPivot, Werribee is thanked for editing the chemical procedures listed in this thesis.

Support from former and present fellow postgraduate students in Agronomy and Soil Science was terrific. Here, I would like to mention Dr Anne Hoult, Dr Jen Smith, Dr Matt Tighe, Libuseng Shakhane, and Mark and Tienneke Trotter. Research Associates, Kath King and Keith Hutchinson are thanked for their help and encouragement through the project. Associate Professor Robin Jessop is also acknowledged for his ongoing encouragement.

Staff from other areas of UNE also deserve thanks for their help with the administration side of the project. They include Shirley Fraser and Chris Cooper (The Faculty of the Sciences), Thea Harris and Maree Hourigan (Research Services), Mark Lawlor and Dianne Oldham (Motor Pool) and Michael Patricks and Greg Wood (Printery).

Finally I would like to acknowledge the support of friends and family. The O'Sullivan family, friends from The University of the South Pacific (USP), had moved to Armidale and welcomed me here. Lots of lalomas Paddy, Mary and Siobhan. Former lecturers from USP, Sunhee and Joe Ha kept sending their encouragement from Melbourne. Then family members, my Mum-in-Law Edna Dalby, my brother Col Walpole, and my late father Ernie Walpole, were especially supportive. Thanks Col for the flying cows!

ABSTRACT

Soil acidification is a serious, world wide, land-degradation problem that can be accelerated by pasture management. In Australia, the true extent of soil acidification and distribution of acid soils is not fully known. Agriculturally-induced soil acidification is widespread in southern New South Wales (NSW), Australia, and active research has been undertaken in that area. Soil acidification is not well understood on the NSW Northern Tablelands and more research was needed to understand better soil acidification in NSW. The extent and severity of acid soils under pasture, and pasture management impacts on soil acidification in the Northern Tablelands region were assessed in this project.

To estimate the extent of acid soils across the region, a regional-scale soil pH map was produced. Approximately 72% of the mapped soils were acidic with a soil pH of a 1:5 soil:0.01 M CaCl₂ suspension (pH_{Ca}) of 5.5 or less and, of these, 27% were strongly acid. Soils tended to be more acidic to the southeast of the region. Only 6% of soils were in the optimal range for plant growth (5.1-6.0 pH_{Ca}).

The impact of pasture management on soil acidification was investigated in a paired-sites study. Soil samples from forty-one sites, comprising a grazed, fertilized, improved pasture (paddock) and adjacent native pasture (reserve) were tested for a range of chemical properties. Soil acidification, measured by pH_{Ca}, as a result of pasture management was not significant and suggested that accelerated soil acidification due to pasture and grazing management is not a problem in the soils of the Northern Tablelands. The more robust measurement was soil pH_{Ca}; soil pH_w was affected by a salt effect caused by fertilizer application to the paddock. Soils in the paddocks had higher concentrations of available phosphorus, available sulfur, total N and nitrate-N compared with those of the reserve areas. Nitrate leaching, a major acidifying process, was not evident but this might have been the result of drought and a single sampling time was insufficient to assess this.

A repeated-measures analysis determined the influence of rainfall and temperature on soil pH, electrical conductivity, nitrate-N and ammonium-N over the seasons of a year. Drought affected this study with a lower rainfall than the long-term average in spring and summer, and higher than average falls during autumn. Nitrate concentrations increased with an increase in rainfall in three of five paddocks studied and uptake of nitrate by pasture plants was

apparent in the warmer months. Some nitrate movement down the profile was detected following rain at a time when pasture plants were dormant.

Controlled incubation experiments investigated nitrification of Northern Tablelands' pasture soils. Soil samples from adjacent reserve and paddock areas were amended with ammonium sulfate at different moisture levels, incubated at different temperatures and tested for nitrate-N and ammonium-N. Incubation conditions imposed moisture levels to simulate dry (15 kPa), moist (130 kPa) and wet (1 500 kPa) conditions and cold (7°C), warm (13°C), hot (19°C) and very hot (25°C) temperatures. Nitrification was limited by low moisture, a cold temperature, and management. A pronounced management effect showed increased nitrification in soils from the paddock. Nitrification of soil from a fertilized, pastured paddock occurred under all temperatures and moisture levels but proceeded at a faster rate with warmer temperatures. Nitrification was negligible in most reserve soils even under optimum, hot and wet, incubation conditions.

On the NSW Northern Tablelands, nitrification is influenced by management and seasonal factors, but even though nitrate is readily produced under sown, fertilized pastures, this does not accelerate soil acidification. Higher nitrification in the paddock probably results from increased microbial activity with higher fertility in this area from fertilizer amendments and pasture management using legumes. Indirect evidence of pasture uptake was found and if nitrate leaching was a frequent occurrence under wet conditions, a fall in soil pH_{Ca} would have been evident. The sequence of nitrogen cycling differs between the Northern Tablelands and southern NSW. On the Northern Tablelands, rainfall during spring and summer coincides with the growth of pasture plants, which take up nitrate before it can be leached. In southern NSW, autumn and winter rainfall can leach accumulated nitrate before it can be utilized by pasture plants in winter and spring.

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