

Potential of Conservation Tillage to Reduce Carbon Dioxide Emission in Australian Soils

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ABSTRACT

Organic matter content is one of the major determinants of soil quality, and degradation of soil organic matter is well recognized as an adverse effect of cultivation. However, the consequent release of CO₂ and resultant contribution to the global greenhouse gas problem has received less attention. In the context of the need to reduce CO₂ emission, to reduce the global greenhouse gas problem, and to maintain soil quality to sustain food production, the role and relevance of current soil cultivation practices and their impact on soil organic matter need re-examination.

Approximately 47 Mha of land is cultivated in Australia each year. On the basis of the limited data available, it is conservatively estimated that a single cultivation of this area will release 9.4 Mt of CO₂ into the atmosphere. In many situations, adoption of conservation tillage, or farming systems, can reduce CO₂ emission from the soil and effectively retain C in the soil. The current use of conservation tillage on approximately 50% of Australia's cultivated land is estimated to reduce CO₂ emission by 4.3 Mt y⁻¹, relative to the release that would occur under conventional tillage. Adoption of conservation tillage on each additional 5% of cultivated land a year would provide an additional reduction of 0.43 Mt

INTRODUCTION

In traditional agriculture, the aims of tillage can be summarized as to (1) create a suitable seedbed, (2) kill weeds, reducing competition and conserving water and (3) remove restrictions to infiltration, drainage and root growth within the root zone. Tillage loosens the soil, increasing the exposure of soil organic matter and hence speeding oxidization. This results in a reduced soil organic matter content with a consequent release of CO₂ into the atmosphere (Chan et al, 1998; Dalal and So, 1998). The associated decline in soil quality is a major concern, not only in the context of maintaining food production, but also with regard to the quality of the environment as part of the global greenhouse gas problem. The magnitude of CO₂ emission resulting from tillage operation, and the opportunities for managing soils to maintain soil productivity but minimize greenhouse gas emissions are not adequately understood.

The Australian Greenhouse Gas Problem

The 1995 National Greenhouse Gas Inventory reported that the net annual emission of greenhouse gases in Australia was 402.4 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent, of which Agricultural activities contributed 18 % and Land Use Change and Forestry 12 % (Fig. 1) (NGGIC, 1997). The reported agricultural activities emitted mostly CH₄ and N₂O, primarily from livestock (12%), flooded rice cultivation (0.1%), application of fertilizers (1.9%) and burning of savannahs and agricultural waste (2%). Emissions reported under Land Use Change and Forestry are primarily CO₂ from activities such as forest clearance and grassland conversions (17.9%), while CO₂ sinks are associated with growth of trees in managed forest, regrowth after land clearing and pasture improvements (-4.3%). Although the methodology for estimation conforms to the IPCC guidelines, there is a high degree of uncertainty associated with emissions from agricultural activities and very high degree of uncertainty for Land Use Changes and Forestry. This uncertainty reflects the scarcity of data available and the constraints in the methodology used. Emissions from tillage operations were not included in the 1995 Inventory, and the figures should be viewed as current best estimates.

Estimated CO₂ emissions steadily increased from 1988 to 1995 (excluding Forest and Grassland clearing) (Fig. 2) and the projected growth in emissions by the year 2010, under a 'business as usual' scenario, will be 28 % over the 1990 emissions. Constraining the increase in emissions to 8 % above the 1990 levels by the year 2010, as agreed under the Kyoto protocol, is going to require serious changes in management (Jackson, 1998) as this is an equivalent reduction of ~20 % over the current rate of emission growth, or an equivalent annual reduction of ~ 80 Mt of CO₂. We ask "Can Australia's 47 million ha of cultivated land be managed to make a significant contribution to the reduction in CO₂ emission? Can a change from conventional cultivation to conservation tillage contribute to this reduction?" In its National Greenhouse Response Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992), the Australian government is seeking to encourage agricultural practices that reduce greenhouse gas emission and conserve or enhanced greenhouse gas sinks. Recommended actions include reduced soil disturbance and soil erosion through improved soil tillage, thus maintaining the effectiveness of the soil as a sink for greenhouse gases.

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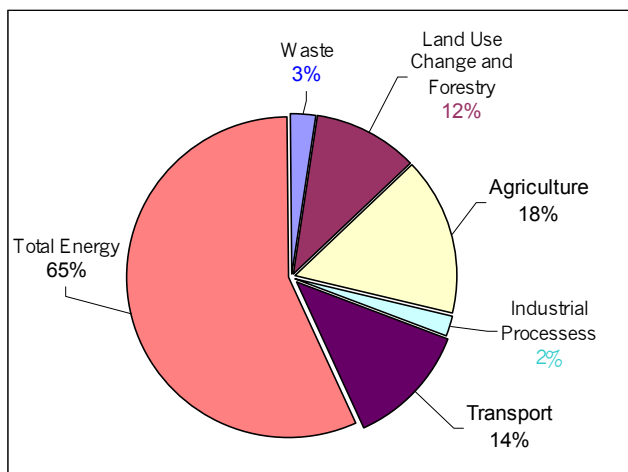


Figure 1. Contribution to total CO₂-equivalent emissions by sector 1995 (NGGIC, 1997).

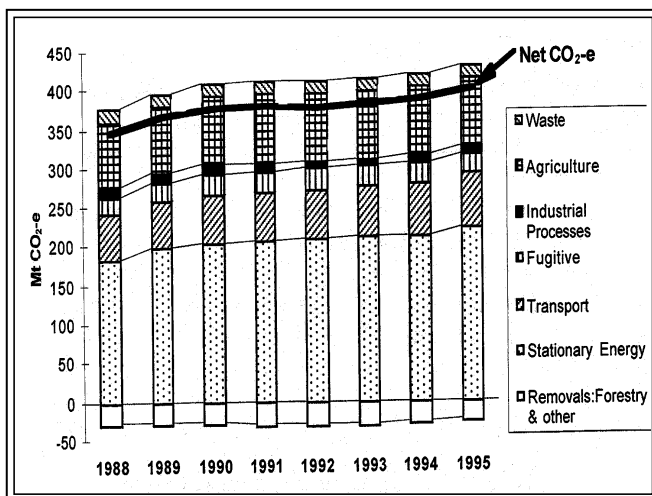


Figure 2. CO₂-equivalent emissions 1988 to 1995 by Sector, excluding Forest and Grassland Clearance (NGGIC, 1997).

In formulating its response strategy, the government has emphasized so-called 'no regrets' actions, those, which provide industry net benefits in addition to addressing the greenhouse gas effect, or at least those that have no net cost (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). It seems logical that a similar no-regrets policy will also be essential to convince farmers to adopt new practices, and the linking of emission reduction through conservation tillage with improvement of soil quality will be essential. Using the model SOCRATES, the potential of changes in tillage practices towards reducing CO₂ emissions has been estimated at 5.94 million tons of CO₂ per annum from an estimated existing 9 million ha of wheat under conservation tillage, and 1.3 Mt y⁻¹ from an estimated 2 Mha of new fields expected to be brought under conservation tillage (Carter et al., 1997, Grace et al, 1997; Jackson, 1998). Reductions of this magnitude would have a significant effect on Australia's greenhouse gas emissions (Greenfield, 1998). This paper will review the current information available and provide an independent estimate

of potential reduction of CO₂ emission from conservation tillage in Australia based on consideration of known soil processes.

Tillage in Australia

The objectives of tillage necessitate the use of multiple cultivations, the frequencies of this cultivation being dictated by the prevailing climatic conditions and experience of the farmers. Although the traditional tillage practices in Australia were originally imported from European agriculture, they have evolved into a range of locally adapted practices (Pratley and Rowell, 1987). The number of cultivations adopted has been greatly reduced from its European origins, and today, conventional cultivation under dryland farming typically consist of 1 to 2 primary cultivation (75-150 mm deep depending on the perceived need) followed by 2 to 4 light cultivation (50 to 100 mm deep) and sowing (Poole, 1987). This reduction in the frequency of cultivation represents an adaptation to, and recognition of, the fragile nature of Australian soils and the value of stored water in an arid environment.

The necessity to conserve and accumulate adequate amounts of water in the root zone resulted in the introduction of clean fallow periods prior to cropping. The requirement to cultivate and kill weeds during the fallow periods has resulted in widespread degradation from erosion, particularly in the summer dominant rainfall areas with the intense summer storms (Freebairn and Wockner, 1986; Holland et al, 1987). In many areas adoption of minimum and no-till systems has been driven by the need to maintain stubble as surface protection. However, the adoption rates remained low for a long time due to the unknown impact on farm profitability (Ward et al, 1987).

In more recent times, there is increasing awareness that the soil is not only an important component of our production system, but that it plays an important role in the maintenance of local, regional and global environmental quality. At the farm level, conservation tillage as an integral component of conservation farming has become increasingly accepted, and it is estimated that some form of this system is practiced on ~ 50 % of land across all states (Burgiss and Willshire, 1998). In Queensland, the 1996 data shows that stubble was incorporated on ~ 53% of cropping land, stubble mulching employed on 20 % while 9 % was left with stubble intact (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996). Knowledge of the potential effect that tillage may have on the emission of CO₂ by the soil, and hence the quality of the global environment, may increase the push towards greater adoption of conservation tillage in Australian agriculture.

The Effect of Tillage on CO₂ Emission

Recent measurements showed that 221 g m⁻² of CO₂ was released over a 4 day period following one summer tillage operation on a moist Sodosol (sandy loam soil), compared to 27 g m⁻² from an untilled soil (Watling, 1998). Similar measurements on a Vertosol showed CO₂ release rates of 34.5 g m⁻² after tillage and 20 g m⁻² with no tillage (Thornton, 1998). These figures equate to equivalent losses over untilled soil of 928 kg ha⁻¹ of soil organic matter in the Sodosol and 69.6 kg ha⁻¹ in the Vertosol as a result of one

cultivation of moist soil to approximately 100mm depth. These results indicate that the effect of tillage on soil organic matter degradation is potentially much greater in the sandy than in clayey soils. Reicosky (1998) reported cumulative CO₂ losses of 244 g m⁻² from silty loams over 80 hours following fall moldboard plowing to a depth of 250 mm. In the spring the reduced release rates of 95 g m⁻² was attributed to the colder soil temperatures. While soil organic matter losses associated with single tillage operations are high, it appears that when measurements are made over longer periods, the net loss over other potential organic matter additions may not be so great (Reicosky, 1998; Loch and Coughlan, 1984).

Since the 1980's, ~10 % of Australia's agricultural lands, or approximately 47 Mha, is cultivated each year (McLennan, 1998). Most of Australia's arable regions are dominated by coarse textured soils characteristic of the dryland environments (Carter et al, 1997), and have low organic matter contents. Hence, we adopt a conservative stance by assuming a low average CO₂ emission of 20 g m⁻² (69.6 kg ha⁻¹ soil organic matter loss) and that most cultivation are done on moist soil. On the basis of these figures, we estimate that a single tillage operation of Australia's arable land can potentially release 9.4 Mt of CO₂ into the atmosphere.

Losses from soil cultivation need to be balanced against organic matter additions, from residues, roots and litter, to arrive at a net loss or gain in soil organic matter over a cropping season. However, as difference in biomass production between conventional and reduced tillage is relatively small (Chan et al, 1998), the number of cultivation undertaken during a season will largely determine the rate of soil organic matter losses. Heenan et al (1995) reported net average annual rates of soil organic C losses of 50 to 400 kg ha⁻¹ from a long-term rotation experiment in Wagga-Wagga, NSW (Figure 3). It is clear

that the lower frequency and intensity of cultivation with direct drilling (no-till) reduced the rate of soil org C loss relative to conventional tillage. Organic matter additions are influenced by the crop rotation employed, with pasture/wheat providing the highest input, and a wheat/wheat rotation provides the lowest input, and hence results in the highest rate of org C loss. Dalal and So (1998) reported mean annual soil organic C losses ranging from 0.2 to 1.4 t ha⁻¹ y⁻¹ in vertisols of Southern Queensland.

The Potential of Conservation Tillage to Reduce CO₂ Emissions From Australian soils

In the Australian context, conservation tillage is increasingly and appropriately practiced as part of conservation farming, which may include crop rotations, particularly with legumes or pastures. The net gain or loss in soil organic C from the balance between organic matter inputs and losses through oxidation associated with tillage is dependent on the prevailing temperature and rainfall combinations. The ratio of C storage between conventional and conservation tillage systems is significantly correlated with annual rainfall (Chan et al, 1998). The ratio may remain constant at 1.00 in areas with less than 500 mm annual rainfall and in those cases the prospects of C sequestration through conservation tillage alone may be very limited. Approximately half of Australia's cropping lands (23.5 Mha) receive annual rainfall of less than 500 mm. Cropping under these climatic conditions tends to reduce the soil organic C contents irrespective of the tillage practices adopted (White, 1990); though conservation tillage may be of benefit by reducing the rate of degradation. Approximately half of these low rainfall areas are already under conservation tillage, and will continue to provide the benefit of a reduced rate of degradation of soil organic C. In contrast to the ineffectiveness of conservation tillage, the use of rotations with legumes or pastures can significantly increase soil organic C (Fettell and Gill, 1995) (Table 1). A legume/wheat rotation increased soil organic carbon from 0.96 % under continuous wheat to 1.46 % after 15 years, a mean annual increase of 0.033% or 330 kg ha⁻¹. Carbon sequestration under low rainfall conditions appears to be more assured if a combination of conservation tillage and legume pasture/crop rotations is practiced.

The annual rate of soil organic C increase, when conventional cultivation is replaced by direct drilling or no-till, ranges from 0.011 to 0.157 % or 110 to 1570 kg ha⁻¹ (Table 1). It would be reasonable to assume a low value for the mean rate of increase in organic C of 50 kg ha⁻¹ for all cropping soils in Australia (47 Mha), if conservation tillage or farming is adopted. This rate of increase will probably continue for a period of 20 to 25 years when an equilibrium maximum organic C content in the soil will be reached. Therefore, the potential annual increase in soil organic C can be approximated as 47 Mha x 0.05 t ha⁻¹ organic C or 2.35 Mt org C, equivalent to a reduction in CO₂ emission of 8.61 Mt CO₂ year⁻¹. Currently, approximately half the cropping areas are already practicing some form of conservation tillage and these practices should be preserving carbon at a rate equivalent to a CO₂ reduction of 4.3 Mt annually. If new

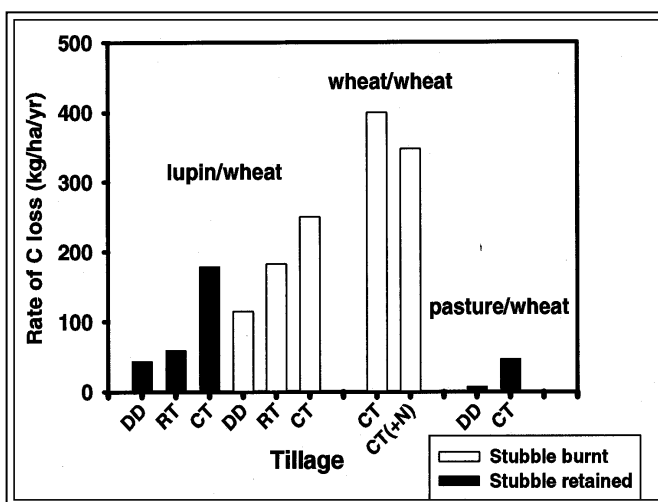


Figure 3. The rate of carbon loss under different tillage, stubble management and rotation in a long term rotation experiment in Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia (Chan et. al 1998). DD= direct drill; RT = reduced tillage; CT = conventional tillage; CT (+N) = Conventional tillage with N fertilizer application.

Table 1: The rate of Soil Organic Carbon increase when conventional cultivation is changed to direct drilling or no-till practices.

Source (author & year)	Location Rainfall, Soil Type & Percent Clay	Duration (years) & Crop Rotation	Treatments	Soil organic carbon (% at 0-10cm)	Rate of SOC increase ^c (% yr ⁻¹)	
Chan et al., 1992	Wagga Wagga, NSW 550 mm Red Earth (Chromic luvisol) 27 % clay	10, wheat-lupin	Stubble burnt			
			CT(3 cult)	1.68	0.055	
			RT(1 cult)	1.74		
			DD(0 cult)	2.23		
			Stubble retained			
			CT(3 cult)	2.06	0.036	
RT(1 cult)	2.06					
DD(0 cult)	2.42					
Packer & Hamilton, 1993	Cowra, NSW 564 mm, Red duplex (Xeralfic alfisol) 8 % clay	7	TT (1-3 cult)	0.57	0.041	
			RT (1 cult)	0.83		
			DD (0 cult)	0.86		
Packer et al., 1984	Ginnendera, ACT 664 mm Red Podzolic	6, wheat-pasture	CT (>3cult)	1.7	0.133	
			RT (2 cult)	2.0		
			DD (0 cult)	2.5		
	Wagga Wagga, NSW 550 mm Red Brown Earth	6, wheat	CT (>3cult)	1.9	0.05	
			RT (2 cult)	2.1		
			DD (0 cult)	2.2		
Thialingam et al., 1996	Katherine, NT 996 mm Red Earth, < 30 % clay	8, sorghum	CT	0.63 ^a	0.0525	
			NT	1.05 ^a		
	Pinnarendi, N Qld Red Earth (Typic Eutrostox) 13-24 % clay	4, mixed rotation	CT	0.84	0.102	
			NT	1.25		
Fettell & Gill, 1995	Condobolin, NSW 430 mm Red Brown Earth	14, wheat	Stubble burnt ^b	0.95		
			Stubble retain ^b	0.97		
			legume/crop rot	1.46		
			verano pasture	1.8		
			natural woodland	2.38		
White, 1990	Avondale, WA ^a 389 mm, Brown Earth (Xeralfic alfisol)	3	CT	1.37	0.083	
			DD	1.62		
		6	CT	1.35		0.033
			DD	1.55		
			CT	1.30		
	Wongan Hills, WA 345 mm, Yellow Earthy Sand	3	CT	0.84	0	
			DD	0.84		
		6	CT	0.70		0.016
			DD	0.80		
			CT	0.51		
	Merridin, WA 307 mm, Red Brown Earth	3	CT	0.94	0.026	
			DD	1.02		
		6	CT	0.92		0.018
			DD	1.03		
			CT	0.85		
DD	0.92	0.007				
Grabski et al., 1997	Grafton, NSW 1057 mm, Brown Earth (Kurasol ultisol)	14 wheat - soybean	CT	1.8	0.157	
			NT	4.0		
Cavanagh et al., 1991	Forbes, NSW 527 mm Red Brown Earth	3	DD	1.52	0.166	
			CC	1.02		
Loch & Coughlan, 1984	Warwick, Qld 527 mm, Vertisol (Ustic Pellustert)	-	Stubble burnt ^b	1.6	0.0	
			Stubble retain ^b	1.7		

^a% org C in 0-5 cm

^bAverage of CT, RT and DD where no differences were measured

^cCalculated as (DD-CT/duration)

adoption of conservation farming of 5% can be achieved annually, additional CO₂ reduction of 0.43 Mt y⁻¹ can be obtained in the first year rising to 4.3 Mt y⁻¹ within 10 years. Additionally, fossil fuel consumption in cropping can be reduced through reduced tillage and controlled traffic systems (Tullberg and Wylie, 1994; Freebairn et al, 1998).

The figure for mean annual increase of soil organic C used in this calculation is low compared to data shown in Table 1 and the estimation of 180 kg ha⁻¹ arrived at by Carter et al (1997). The real potential for CO₂ reduction from conservation tillage will depend on a number of factors such as soil types, cropping systems, current status of soil carbon pool, areas under cultivation (conventional vs. conservation tillage) and the actual rate of CO₂ emission as affected by temperature and water content. As climate varies greatly across Australia's agricultural areas, these estimates need to be validated against actual measured data.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have shown that the potential reduction for CO₂ emission from the adoption of conservation tillage under Australian conditions can be substantial. Further investigations should be undertaken to validate these estimates. The estimates in this paper have a high degree of uncertainty associated with the scarcity of relevant data available that can be used for this exercise.

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