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Agricultural Production Systems Simulator (APSIM): Enhancements and Applications in Rice-Based Cropping Systems

(*Kishore S. M[1] and S Prasanth[2])
[1]Ph.D. Scholar, Keladi Shivappa Nayaka University of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences, Shivamogga, India
[2]M.Sc. Scholar (Agronomy), Centurion University of Technology and Management, Odisha-761211, India
*Corresponding Author's email: kp464751@gmail.com

The Agricultural Production Systems Simulator (APSIM) has emerged as a critical tool for agricultural research, particularly in modelling the complex dynamics of cropping systems under varying management practices and climate conditions. Initially developed by the Agricultural Production Systems Research Unit (APSRU) in Australia, APSIM employs a modular framework that allows for the integration of various biophysical processes related to crops, soil and climate. This article outlines the development history of APSIM, its current capabilities and the significant enhancements made to model rice-based cropping systems. With a focus on integrating nitrogen and carbon dynamics in both flooded and non-flooded conditions, the enhanced APSIM provides a robust platform for addressing the challenges posed by diminishing irrigation water availability. The ongoing validation efforts, particularly within the context of the SAARC-Australia project, aim to ensure the model's applicability across diverse geographical and management scenarios.

Introduction

The challenges facing modern agriculture are multifaceted, including climate change, resource limitations, and the need for sustainable practices. The Agricultural Production Systems Simulator (APSIM) is a powerful tool developed to address these challenges by simulating biophysical processes in cropping systems. As a modular and flexible framework, APSIM enables researchers and practitioners to explore various scenarios, optimizing crop production while managing ecological impacts. This article discusses the evolution of APSIM, its recent enhancements and its applications in rice-based cropping systems, particularly in light of diminishing irrigation water resources.

Development History of APSIM

APSIM was first developed in 1990 by the Agricultural Production Systems Research Unit (APSRU) in Toowoomba, Queensland, through a collaborative effort involving the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the University of Queensland and the Queensland State Government. The primary objective was to enhance agricultural production management through advanced computer simulation, leading to the creation of a robust modelling platform. In 2009, APSRU transitioned to the APSIM Unincorporated Joint Venture (APSIM UJV), which aimed to expand collaboration among various agricultural systems modelling groups globally. This new structure was designed to streamline model development and ensure that advancements could be integrated efficiently, promoting high-quality research and facilitating scientific collaboration.

Current Capabilities and Extensions

APSIM has diversified its applications across numerous domains, including farming systems research, ecological studies, and commercial applications. It is used for production management in cereal-based systems, rotations, legume systems, and agroforestry. Additionally, it addresses climate change impacts and environmental issues such as nutrient dynamics and pest populations. Recent extensions, such as the FLUSH framework for catchment modelling and the APSFarm tool for whole-farm simulations, have further enhanced APSIM's applicability. The commercial tool Yield Prophet® exemplifies how real-time data can support growers in making informed management decisions. APSIM's influence extends beyond Australia, impacting regions across Africa and Asia, especially in participatory farming systems research projects funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR).

Simulating Rice-Based Cropping Systems

Rice production is particularly sensitive to water availability, making it essential to explore adaptive farming practices. APSIM's capabilities to model interactions among soil water, nutrient dynamics, crop growth, and management practices position it well to evaluate these adaptation strategies. However, traditional models have struggled to account for the complexities of soil dynamics in rice-growing systems, especially the transitions between aerobic and anaerobic conditions. Recent advancements have sought to fill these gaps. The integration of the ORYZA2000 rice crop model into the APSIM framework represents a significant milestone. This enhancement involved replacing ORYZA2000's soil water routines with APSIM's comprehensive soil water balance modules, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of nitrogen (N) dynamics in rice-based cropping systems.

Key Enhancements to APSIM for Rice-Based Systems

1. Ponded Environment Simulation: New mechanisms for carbon (C) and nitrogen (N) loss in ponded soils were introduced, including processes such as ammonia volatilization and the growth of nitrogen-fixing aquatic biomass.

2. Fertilizer Application Dynamics: The model now accounts for fertilizers applied directly to standing water, considering hydrolysis, volatilization, and plant uptake, rather than limiting itself to soil application.

3. Organic Matter Decomposition: Enhancements have been made to model organic matter decomposition rates, which can be significantly slower in waterlogged conditions.

4. Reduced Organic Matter Cycling: The model reflects the diminished rates of organic matter decomposition in saturated anaerobic environments, providing a more accurate representation of system behaviour.

Transitional Dynamics

One of APSIM's most critical advancements is its ability to simulate transitions between flooded and non-flooded soil environments. This capability is vital for understanding nutrient dynamics in rice systems. In flooded conditions, significant nitrogen loss via ammonia volatilization occurs, while nitrification processes become dominant once the soil is drained. APSIM effectively captures these cyclical processes, addressing the complexities of nitrogen dynamics in systems incorporating both flooded rice phases and dryland crops.

Validation and Testing

Validation efforts have included testing the enhanced APSIM model against 121 replicated datasets primarily from experiments conducted by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). Statistical analyses indicate a strong correlation (R^2 = 0.81) between observed and simulated grain yields for rice crops, with a low bias. The root mean square error (RMSE) of 1061 kg/ha is notably less than the standard deviation of measured data (2160 kg/ha), signifying acceptable model performance. Moreover, statistical tests confirmed no significant differences between the measured and simulated data, with a modelling efficiency (EF) of 0.79 indicating robust performance. Despite these successes, the datasets used for validation represent a limited segment of the global rice-growing context. Ongoing validation in diverse environments, particularly in South Asia, is crucial for further refinement of the model. The SAARC-Australia project aims to expand this validation effort, ensuring that APSIM remains relevant in a broader range of rice-based farming systems.

Conclusion

For a simulation model to be effective in rice-based cropping systems research, it must be rigorously tested across various conditions, including geography, soil types, crop sequences, management practices, and climatic variations. This paper highlights APSIM's development and its recent enhancements aimed at improving simulations for rice systems. With robust validation efforts in place, particularly through collaborations within the SAARC-Australia project, APSIM is poised to contribute significantly to our understanding of agricultural systems and the development of sustainable practices. By adapting to the evolving challenges faced by farmers, APSIM not only enhances productivity but also supports ecological balance, underscoring its value as a vital tool in modern agricultural research.