



Soil Carbon Sequestration: A Nature-Based Solution for Climate-Smart Agriculture

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Soil carbon sequestration has emerged as one of the most promising nature-based solutions to address the twin challenges of climate change mitigation and sustainable agricultural production. Agricultural soils have immense potential to act as carbon sinks by capturing atmospheric carbon dioxide through plant growth and storing it in stable soil organic matter pools. Enhancing soil carbon stocks not only reduces greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere but also improves soil fertility, structure, water-holding capacity, and overall ecosystem resilience. This popular article discusses the concept, mechanisms, benefits, management practices, challenges, and future prospects of soil carbon sequestration with a special focus on its role in climate-smart agriculture.

Keywords: Soil organic carbon, soil carbon sequestration, climate-smart agriculture, climate change mitigation, sustainable agriculture, soil health, conservation agriculture, carbon cycle, agroforestry, organic amendments.

Introduction

Climate change has become one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, significantly affecting agricultural productivity, food security, and environmental sustainability. Rising concentrations of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), and nitrous oxide (N₂O), have led to global warming, erratic rainfall patterns, frequent droughts, floods, and soil degradation. Agriculture is both a victim and a contributor to climate change. While it suffers from climatic extremes, conventional agricultural practices such as intensive tillage, excessive use of chemical fertilizers, residue burning, and land-use change contribute substantially to greenhouse gas emissions.

In this context, soil carbon sequestration has gained global attention as a climate-smart and sustainable solution. Soils are one of the largest carbon reservoirs on Earth, storing more carbon than the atmosphere and vegetation combined. Even a small increase in soil organic carbon stocks can have a significant impact on reducing atmospheric CO₂ levels. At the same time, carbon-rich soils are healthier, more productive, and more resilient to climatic stresses. Therefore, promoting soil carbon sequestration offers a unique opportunity to mitigate climate change while strengthening agricultural sustainability.

Understanding Soil Carbon and the Carbon Cycle. Carbon continuously cycles through the atmosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere in what is known as the global carbon cycle. Plants absorb atmospheric CO₂ through photosynthesis and convert it into organic compounds. A portion of this carbon is transferred to the soil through plant residues, root exudates, and dead roots. Soil microorganisms decompose these organic inputs, releasing some carbon back into the atmosphere through respiration while stabilizing the remaining carbon in soil organic matter.

Soil carbon exists mainly in two forms: soil organic carbon (SOC) and soil inorganic carbon (SIC). SOC includes plant residues, microbial biomass, and humus, whereas SIC mainly consists of carbonates. Among these, SOC plays a crucial role in soil fertility, biological activity, and climate change mitigation. The balance between carbon inputs and outputs determines whether soil acts as a carbon sink or a carbon source.

What is Soil Carbon Sequestration?

Soil carbon sequestration refers to the process of transferring atmospheric CO₂ into the soil and storing it as stable organic carbon for long periods. This process occurs naturally but can be significantly enhanced through improved land management and agricultural practices. When carbon inputs exceed carbon losses, soil organic carbon stocks increase, leading to carbon sequestration. The stability of sequestered carbon depends on several factors such as soil texture, mineralogy, climate, vegetation type, and management practices. Carbon can be protected within soil aggregates, chemically bound to minerals, or transformed into resistant organic compounds, allowing it to remain in the soil for decades or even centuries.

Mechanisms of Soil Carbon Sequestration

Soil carbon sequestration involves multiple physical, chemical, and biological mechanisms. Plant residues and roots provide organic inputs, which are decomposed by soil microorganisms. During decomposition, some carbon is released as CO₂, while the remaining carbon is transformed into humus and microbial by-products. These compounds can become physically protected within soil aggregates or chemically stabilized by clay minerals and oxides. Root-derived carbon is considered more stable than above-ground residues because it is deposited deeper in the soil and closely associated with soil minerals. Soil aggregation plays a key role by physically protecting organic matter from microbial decomposition. Additionally, interactions between organic matter and minerals enhance long-term carbon stabilization.

Role of Soil Carbon Sequestration in Climate Change Mitigation Increasing soil carbon stocks helps reduce the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere, thereby mitigating climate change. Agricultural soils alone have the potential to sequester a substantial amount of carbon annually if managed properly. Soil carbon sequestration is recognized as a cost-effective and environmentally friendly climate mitigation strategy compared to technological carbon capture methods. Moreover, carbon-rich soils are more resilient to climate extremes. Higher organic matter content improves water infiltration and retention, reducing the impact of droughts and floods. Improved soil structure also minimizes erosion and nutrient losses, further contributing to ecosystem stability.

Agricultural Practices Enhancing Soil Carbon Sequestration

Several agricultural practices can enhance soil carbon sequestration by increasing organic inputs and reducing carbon losses.

Conservation Tillage: Reduced tillage or no-tillage systems minimize soil disturbance, thereby reducing the oxidation of organic matter. Conservation tillage helps maintain soil structure, increase residue retention, and enhance microbial activity, leading to higher soil carbon storage over time.

Cover Cropping: Cover crops such as legumes, grasses, and oilseeds provide continuous soil cover and additional biomass inputs. They improve soil structure, reduce erosion, enhance microbial activity, and increase carbon inputs through roots and residues.

Crop Rotation and Diversification: Diverse crop rotations improve carbon sequestration by increasing biomass production and root diversity. Including legumes and deep-rooted crops enhances below-ground carbon inputs and nutrient cycling.

Organic Amendments: Application of organic manures, compost, crop residues, and biochar significantly increases soil organic carbon content. Biochar, in particular, is highly stable and can remain in soil for long periods, contributing to long-term carbon sequestration.

Agroforestry Systems: Agroforestry integrates trees with crops and/or livestock, increasing biomass production and carbon storage both above and below ground. Tree roots contribute stable carbon to deeper soil layers, enhancing long-term sequestration.

Benefits of Soil Carbon Sequestration for Soil Health

Soil organic carbon is the foundation of soil health. It improves soil structure, aggregate stability, porosity, and water-holding capacity. Carbon-rich soils support diverse microbial communities that play a crucial role in nutrient cycling and disease suppression. Improved soil fertility reduces dependence on chemical fertilizers, lowering production costs and environmental pollution. Enhanced water retention helps crops withstand dry spells, while improved drainage reduces waterlogging during heavy rainfall.

Economic and Social Benefits

Soil carbon sequestration offers economic benefits to farmers through improved crop yields, reduced input costs, and increased resilience to climate risks. Emerging carbon markets and incentive schemes provide opportunities for farmers to earn additional income by adopting carbon-sequestering practices. At the societal level, soil carbon sequestration contributes to food security, environmental sustainability, and rural livelihoods. It also supports national and global climate commitments by reducing agricultural greenhouse gas emissions.

Challenges in Soil Carbon Sequestration

Despite its potential, soil carbon sequestration faces several challenges. Measuring and monitoring changes in soil carbon stocks is complex, time-consuming, and costly. Carbon sequestration rates vary widely across regions due to differences in soil type, climate, and management practices. There is also a risk of carbon reversal if sustainable practices are discontinued. Land-use change, intensive tillage, and residue removal can rapidly release stored carbon back into the atmosphere. Therefore, long-term commitment and appropriate policies are essential to ensure permanence.

Future Prospects and Policy Support

Advances in soil carbon monitoring technologies, modeling tools, and remote sensing can improve measurement accuracy and reduce costs. Integrating soil carbon sequestration into climate-smart agriculture policies, incentive programs, and extension services can enhance adoption at the farm level. Awareness creation, capacity building, and farmer-friendly technologies are crucial for scaling up soil carbon sequestration. Research and innovation should focus on region-specific practices that maximize carbon storage while ensuring productivity and profitability.

Conclusion

Soil carbon sequestration represents a powerful and practical solution to mitigate climate change while improving soil health and agricultural sustainability. By adopting appropriate land management practices, agriculture can shift from being a major carbon source to a significant carbon sink. Investing in soil carbon sequestration is not only an environmental necessity but also an opportunity to build resilient farming systems, enhance food security, and ensure a sustainable future for coming generations.

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