

HARNESSING DRONE TECHNOLOGY FOR ASSESSMENT AND MONITORING OF ON-FARM SOIL FERTILITY FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD GRAIN PRODUCTION

Rajagopal Vadivel*, K. Sammi Reddy

ICAR-National Institute of Abiotic Stress Management, Malegaon Khurd, Maharashtra, India

*Corresponding author email: rgpssac@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

The assessment of soil fertility is vital for sustainable food production. Traditional soil testing methods are laborious and limited in spatial accuracy. Drone technology offers a transformative solution by enabling high-resolution, real-time monitoring through multispectral, hyperspectral, LiDAR, thermal, and RGB sensors. This paper discusses how drones assess nutrient distribution, moisture, organic matter, and pH variability. The integration of GIS, AI models, and machine learning enhances soil mapping and nutrient prediction. Despite challenges like high costs and regulatory hurdles, drones hold great promise for advancing precision agriculture and sustainable soil management.

KEYWORDS: Drone-based soil assessment, Precision agriculture, Site-specific nutrient management, Sustainable food production

INTRODUCTION

Soil fertility is a fundamental determinant of sustainable food grain production, as it governs the soil's capacity to supply essential nutrients for optimal crop growth and yield. It is influenced by a complex interplay of physical, chemical, and biological properties, including nutrient availability, organic matter content, microbial activity, and moisture retention. Conventional soil fertility assessment methods—based on manual sampling and laboratory analysis—are time-consuming, labour-intensive, and often incapable of capturing spatial heterogeneity within fields. This limitation hinders timely and precise nutrient management, particularly for smallholder farmers with limited access to technical resources. The inability of traditional methods to reflect intra-field variability leads to inefficient fertilizer application, which can result in nutrient imbalances, reduced crop productivity, and environmental degradation through leaching and runoff.

The advent of drone technology offers a transformative alternative, enabling rapid, high-resolution, and non-invasive soil assessments. Drones equipped with advanced sensors such as multispectral,

hyperspectral, LiDAR, and thermal cameras can accurately detect spatial variations in nutrient content, moisture levels, organic matter, and soil texture. These insights facilitate the development of real-time soil fertility maps, supporting site-specific nutrient management (SSNM) and the application of variable rate technology (VRT). The integration of drone-generated data with Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and artificial intelligence (AI) analytics enhances decision-making and predictive modelling. This results in more efficient resource use, reduced input costs, and minimized environmental impact. Ultimately, drone-based soil monitoring strengthens the resilience and sustainability of agricultural systems by promoting biodiversity, conserving soil health, and improving long-term productivity.

DATA PROCESSING AND INTERPRETATION

The vast amount of data collected by drones requires advanced processing and interpretation using specialized software and analytical tools. Geographic Information Systems (GIS), AI-based soil fertility models, and machine learning algorithms play a pivotal role in analyzing drone-generated data. GIS facilitates the visualization of spatial variability in soil fertility, while AI and machine learning enable predictive modelling of nutrient availability, soil degradation trends, and optimal fertilizer application strategies. A key application of this processed data is the creation of high-resolution soil fertility maps that capture variations in nutrient distribution, organic matter, pH levels, and soil moisture across agricultural fields. By integrating drone imagery with historical soil records, farmers can apply fertilizers more precisely based on specific field conditions, thereby improving nutrient use efficiency and minimizing environmental impact.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, drone-based soil assessments must be validated against ground-based data collected through conventional sampling and laboratory testing. This calibration, often referred to as ground truthing, enhances the precision of drone sensor readings and strengthens the predictive capability of AI models. Despite these advancements, drone-based assessments face certain limitations. Environmental factors such as cloud cover, sensor sensitivity, and differences in soil reflectance can affect data quality. Moreover, the effectiveness of these technologies depends on continuous improvements in sensor calibration, machine learning algorithms, and real-time data analytics. Addressing these challenges is essential to fully harness the potential of drone technology in soil fertility assessment and precision agriculture.

APPLICATION OF DRONE-BASED SOIL MONITORING IN SUSTAINABLE FOOD GRAIN PRODUCTION

The integration of drone technology in soil monitoring has several practical applications in ensuring sustainable food grain production. One of the primary benefits is the optimization of fertilizer application through site-specific nutrient management, reducing excessive use of chemical fertilizers and ensuring balanced soil nutrition. By enabling real-time monitoring of soil health, drones help prevent nutrient depletion and soil degradation, contributing to long-term soil sustainability. Additionally, drones can monitor erosion trends and soil degradation in croplands, allowing for timely intervention through conservation practices. Another crucial application is in water use efficiency, where drones assess soil moisture variability, enabling farmers to implement more precise irrigation schedules and reduce water wastage. Furthermore, drones help detect nutrient deficiencies at different crop growth stages, allowing farmers to adjust nutrient inputs and improve overall crop productivity.

ROLE OF DRONE TECHNOLOGY IN SOIL FERTILITY MANAGEMENT

Drone technology plays a pivotal role in modern soil fertility management by delivering high-resolution, real-time data that supports precise nutrient application and improved soil health. One of its primary advantages is the rapid assessment of soil nutrient status, enabling early detection of deficiencies in essential elements such as nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). Using multispectral and hyperspectral imagery, drones generate detailed soil fertility maps, facilitating targeted nutrient management and reducing input costs and environmental impact. Additionally, drones enhance precision agriculture by enabling variable rate technology (VRT), which ensures fertilizers are applied only where needed, optimizing crop yields and preventing soil degradation.

Beyond nutrient management, drones significantly improve irrigation efficiency and soil conservation practices. Equipped with thermal and multispectral sensors, they monitor soil moisture variations, allowing farmers to optimize irrigation schedules—especially critical in drought-prone areas. Integration with smart irrigation systems ensures precise water delivery, reducing both overwatering and drought stress. LiDAR-equipped drones detect early signs of soil erosion and compaction by capturing high-resolution topographic data, guiding the implementation of conservation techniques like contour farming and no-till methods. Furthermore, drones with near-infrared (NIR) sensors can assess soil organic carbon, supporting the evaluation of organic amendments such as compost and biochar. This enables farmers to track changes in soil organic matter and microbial activity over time, helping develop long-term, sustainable soil fertility strategies.

ASSESSING SOIL FERTILITY USING DRONES

Drone technology enables precise assessment of various soil parameters critical for maintaining soil fertility and productivity. Organic carbon and soil organic matter (SOM) can be effectively analyzed using Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and Near-Infrared (NIR) reflectance sensors, providing insights into soil health and biological activity. Essential macronutrients such as nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) are mapped using spectral indices, allowing farmers to identify nutrient deficiencies and optimize fertilizer application. Additionally, drones equipped with remote sensing algorithms can assess soil pH, electrical conductivity (EC), and salinity levels, which are crucial for preventing soil degradation and ensuring optimal crop growth. Soil moisture content, another key factor in soil fertility, is effectively monitored using thermal and multispectral sensors, helping farmers manage irrigation more efficiently. To ensure accuracy, drone-based assessments are often integrated with traditional soil sampling methods for validation, improving the reliability of nutrient management strategies.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF DRONE APPLICATION IN SOIL FERTILITY ASSESSMENT

Despite its advantages, drone technology in soil fertility assessment faces several challenges. High initial costs of drones and specialized sensors remain a significant barrier, especially for smallholder farmers. Moreover, operating drones, processing data, and interpreting results require technical expertise, limiting adoption in regions with low technological infrastructure. Regulatory restrictions, including airspace regulations and licensing, also pose hurdles. Furthermore, weather conditions such as wind and cloud cover can affect drone performance and data accuracy.

Looking ahead, the prospects for drone-based soil fertility assessment are highly promising. Integration with AI, IoT, and cloud computing can improve data precision and predictive modelling. Advances in sensor technology, such as real-time nutrient detection and enhanced hyperspectral imaging, will further refine soil analysis. Additionally, promoting cooperative farming models and providing government subsidies can increase scalability and affordability. These innovations are expected to make drone-based assessments more accessible and effective for farmers worldwide, supporting sustainable agricultural practices.

CONCLUSION

Drone technology represents a transformative advancement in soil fertility assessment, offering rapid, high-resolution, and real-time data essential for precision agriculture. By integrating advanced sensors with AI, GIS, and IoT, drones enable accurate monitoring of soil nutrients, moisture, pH, and organic matter, supporting site-specific nutrient management and sustainable farming. Despite challenges such as



high costs and regulatory constraints, continued innovation and supportive policies can enhance accessibility and scalability. Ultimately, drone-based soil monitoring promotes efficient resource use, improved crop yields, and long-term soil health, playing a crucial role in ensuring food security and environmental sustainability in modern agriculture.

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