

Opinion





Need to estimate the net global warming potential of nitrogenous fertilizers

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In several developing countries, including India, the production of food grain is mainly dependent on the use of fertilizers, particularly nitrogenous fertilizers which increases by many folds after industrialization and its use will further increase in future to meet the demand of increase food production. Use of fertilizer alters the global nitrogen (N) cycle resulting to decline in total factor productivity and decreased nitrogen use efficiency (NUE). The N cycle is the conversion or transformation of molecular nitrogen (N2) to other reactive forms and back to its original state. The N cycle is completed in five different steps namely, nitrogen fixation, nitrification, assimilation, ammonification and denitrification.¹ During the nitrogen cycle many oxidised compounds i.e. nitrous oxide (N,O), oxides of nitrogen (NO_x), and nitrate (NO₃-) and reduced compound i.e. ammonia (NH₃) are emitted into the atmosphere affecting the overall climate system.² Being a potent green house gas N₂O is directly contributed to global warming and its concern is greater than the NH₂, NO₂ and NO₃- nitrate due to its higher global warming potential (GWP) i.e., 310 times of CO₂, high global temperature change potential (GTP) i.e. 290 on 100year time scale⁴ and longer atmospheric life time i.e. about 116 years. In India agriculture is the major contributor with 70% of total $N_{\nu}O$ emission and N fertilizer, contribute 77% of the total nitrous oxide emission from Indian agricultural soils.⁵

Besides N_2O emission, other oxidized and reduced N compounds (NH₃, NO_x, NO₃-) are also emitted from soils as result of use of N fertilizers which have short- and long-term, direct and indirect impacts on climate system. The emissions from agricultural soils is mainly dominated by NH₃ (about 95%) and NO_x (about 5%) which results in formation of sulphur (S) containing aerosols having short term cooling impacts. These aerosols also regulate the oxidation capacity of the atmosphere by increasing the concentration hydroxyl radical (OH), which acts as sink for methane (CH₄). Therefore, the emissions of NH₃ and NO_x have cooling effect on climate system through the process of aerosols formation and alteration of stratospheric ozone (O₃) and methane (CH₄) concentration.

Nitrogen application to agricultural soils affects not only the emission of nitrogenous compounds but it also affects the emission and uptake of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄) from soils. Application of fertilizers in nitrogen limited agriculture system, usually increases productivity of agricultural crops, by increasing the CO₂ fixation, and it enhanced carbon (C) sequestration in agricultural soils due to increased crop residue production which have cooling impacts on climate system. Soils, particularly aerobic soils are the major sink for atmospheric CH₄ and oxidation of CH₄ by methane oxidizing bacteria (MOB) is the important methane removal process. However, use of fertilizers have inhibitory effects on MOB through ammonium ions (NH₄+) and nitrate ions (NO₃-), thereby decreasing the total CH₄ uptake. In the sum of th

There are many studies in which the warming impacts of N_2O emission alone as results of nitrogenous fertilizers use in agriculture is reported. If we consider only N_2O emission there will be over

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Fagodiya RK,¹ Pathak H,² Meena BL,¹ Meena RK,³ Nagdev R⁴

¹Project Coordinating Unit, ICAR-Central Soil Salinity Research Institute. India

²ICAR-National Rice Research Institute, India

³Agronomy Section, ICAR-National Dairy Research Institute, India

⁴ICAR-National Bureau of Soil Survey and Land Use Planning, RCD. India

Correspondence: Fagodiya RK, Project Coordinating Unit, ICAR-Central Soil Salinity Research Institute, Karnal-132 001, India, Tel 0184-2209348, Email ram.iari4874@gmail.com

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estimation of the warming. To estimate the actual net warming caused by nitrogenous fertilizers use in agriculture the other impacts i.e. indirect $\rm N_2O$ emission from $\rm NO_3$ - leaching (warming), aerosols formation as results of $\rm NH_3$ and $\rm NO_x$ emission (cooling), alteration of atmospheric $\rm O_3$ and $\rm CH_4$ (cooling), nitrogen induced carbon sequestration (cooling) and nitrogen induced $\rm CH_4$ uptake (warming) should we considered which will provide the new dimensions to the climate studies and helps in better management of nitrogenous fertilizers use in agricultural system.

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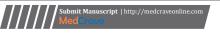
None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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