Biogeosciences Discuss., 11, C698–C703, 2014
www.biogeosciences-discuss.net/11/C698/2014/

Biogeosciences
Discussions
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Interactive comment on "Determining the optimal nitrogen rate for summer maize in China by integrating agronomic, economic, and environmental aspects" *by* G. L. Wang et al.

G. L. Wang et al.

cuizl@cau.edu.cn

Received and published: 2 April 2014

Journal: BG

Title: Determining the optimal nitrogen rate for summer maize in China by integrating agronomic, economic, and environmental aspects

Author(s): G.L. wang et al.

MS No.: bg-2013-594

MS Type: Research Article

We deeply appreciate the reviewers' time and effort to help improve the manuscript. And we have considered the suggestions seriously. Below are our replies to the detailed and constructive comments/suggestions of referee #1.

This study estimates and compares the agronomical, economical and ecological optimum N application rates in maize cropping in the North China Plain. It concludes that the ecological optimum in N application rate yields also the highest financial net benefit. This finding is an argument for discouraging excessive N fertilisation and one may wonder why anyone is still using more fertiliser than is needed to achieve this ecologically and economically desirable goal. Does it have to do with putting a high value on food security?

Yes, in this study, we considered a high value on food security. According to the results, ecologically optimal N rate did not decrease maize yield significantly, though changed maize yield from 8.5 Mg ha-1 with agronomically optimal N rate to 8.2 Mg ha-1 (Table 2 in manuscript).

Is it, because the price of maize is volatile and in years when it is high, the economically optimum fertiliser application rate is also higher? Is too much of N during years with a low price for maize economically over-compensated during years when maize is expensive?

Yes, we added "table 3" in supporting material to describe Necl with different prices of maize, N fertilizer and N losses. The economically optimum fertilizer application rate increased slightly with increasing the price of maize. For example, When the price of maize increased from 360 $ t-1 in this study to 409 $ t-1 (the highest price in recent 10 years), the estimated Necl only increased by 4% from 196 to 206 kg N ha-1. And too much of N during years with a low price for maize is economically over-compensated during years when maize is expensive. For example, when N rate increased from 228 to 250 kg N ha-1, economical benefit changed from 337 to 334 $ ha-1 with 245 $ ha-1 price for maize, and changed from 337 to 678 $ ha-1 with 409 $ ha-1 price for maize

(Table 3 in supplementary of manuscript),

I find the study is comprehensive and potentially useful in re-evaluating N fertilizer rates not only in China, but also elsewhere, where similar data allows this kind of analyses. Still, I would recommend to go a little bit further in explaining why there is such a discrepancy between economically (ecologically) and actual rates in fertilizer application.

In this study, MN (median N rate) as 231 kg N ha-1 has been recommended based on experience and target economic yields (Table 1 in manuscript). Compared with MN, the ecologically optimal N rate significantly decreased to 171 kg N ha-1, with only a 0.2 Mg ha-1 decrease in maize yield. While, the economically optimal N rate was similar as 237 kg N ha-1, and maintained maize yield as 8.5 Mg ha-1 (Table 1 and 2 in manuscript).

In this context, a small sensitivity analysis for the estimated optima would be desirable. For example, the market price of a CO2 allowance (Pg) in Eq. 7 is set to 23.8 $/t. In the meanwhile, it has dropped considerably. How does this affect the estimated ecological optimum of N application? Estimate of the economical optimum for N application is based on a regional average maize price for 2008 and 2009 of 360 $/t. Over the years, the maize price can be very volatile, sometimes doubling or halving between years (e.g.: http://www.indexmundi.com/commodities/?commodity =corn&months=120). How do such changes affect the conclusions?

The ecologically optimal N rate was affected by the volatility of the market prices of maize, N fertilizer and environmental costs, however, there was no significant increase in ecological optimal N rate. For example, ecologically N rate increased only 2%, as 4 N ha-1, when the market price of CO2 decreased 25% from 23.8 to 17.9 $ t-1. When the price of maize increased from 360 $ t-1 in this study to 409 $ t-1 (the highest price in recent 10 years), the estimated Necl only increased by 4% from 196 to 206 kg N ha-1. Similarly, with the float of the prices of N fertilizer, environmental costs, there was

little difference in Necl (Supplementary Table 3). Other studies also indicated that the optimal N rate is relatively insensitive to shifts in prices (Scharf et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2011).

After all, the affects in estimating ecologically optimal N rate because of the volatilities of price of maize, N fertilizer, CO2, and so on, were discussed additionally. The following section was added as the second paragraph from bottom of the Discussion part based on the reviewed manuscript from “AC C559: ’Updated AC C247: ’Response to Referee #2”, zhenling cui, 26 Mar 2014”.

In addition, the volatile prices of maize yield, N fertilizer and various Nr losses also affected the net benefit, and the estimated Necl rate. When the price of maize increased from 360 $ t-1 in this study to 409 $ t-1 (the highest price in recent 10 years), the estimated Necl only increased by 4% from 196 to 206 kg N ha-1. Similarly, with the float of the prices of N fertilizer, environmental costs, there was little difference in Necl (Supplementary Table 3). Other studies also indicated that the optimal N rate is relatively insensitive to shifts in prices (Scharf et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2011).

Correspondingly, two references and supporting material of table 3 were added.

Chen, J., Huang, Y., Tang, Y.: Quantifying economically and ecologically optimum nitrogen rates for rice production in south-eastern China, Agri. Ecosys. Envir., 142, 195-204, 2011.

Scharf, P.C., Kitchen, N.R., Sudduth, K.A., Davis, J.G.: Spatially variable corn yield is a weak predictor of optimal nitrogen rate, Soil Sci. Soc. Am. J. 70, 2154-2160, 2006.

Discussion: page 2650, lines 14 to 21 are difficult to understand. I can guess what you mean, but try to rewritten these lines in a way that is less ambiguous.

Yes, we have rewritten these lines as followed: For intensive maize systems on the NCP, N fertilizer application rates of 223–240 kg N ha–1 have been recommended by government-supported extension services (Liu, 2009; Wang et al., 2012), which

are similar to the 237 kg N ha–1 found for Neco in the present study. With Neco management in this study, the grain yield averaged 8.5 Mg ha–1, and estimated N uptake was about 146 kg N ha–1 (Yue, 2013), which is significantly lower than 237 kg N ha–1 of the Neco (Table 2).

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Please also note the supplement to this comment:
http://www.biogeosciences-discuss.net/11/C698/2014/bgd-11-C698-2014-supplement.zip

Interactive comment on Biogeosciences Discuss., 11, 2639, 2014.