Career Point International Journal of Research (CPIJR)
©2022 CPIJR | Volume 1 | Issue 4 | ISSN : 2583-1895
March-2025 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15136936

Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Agricultural Practices: A Review

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Abstract:

Agriculture is a significant contributor to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, accounting for approximately 25-30% of total emissions. This review explores the link between agricultural practices and GHG emissions, focusing on how conventional and sustainable practices influence environmental sustainability. Key sources of emissions include livestock production, synthetic fertilizer use, and land-use changes, which emit methane (CH_4), nitrous oxide (N_2O), and carbon dioxide (CO_2). Sustainable agricultural techniques, such as precision farming, agroforestry, and conservation tillage, have shown promise in mitigating these emissions. This paper provides a comprehensive synthesis of literature on GHG emissions from agriculture, highlighting challenges and potential strategies for mitigation.

1. Introduction:

The agricultural sector plays a dual role in the global climate system: it is both a major source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and a potential avenue for mitigation. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), agriculture contributes 25-30% of global GHG emissions, primarily through activities such as crop cultivation, livestock management, and land-use changes (IPCC, 2019). The growing demand for food, feed, and bioenergy has intensified the environmental pressures exerted by agriculture, necessitating a deeper understanding of how farming practices affect GHG emissions. This review examines the contribution of agricultural activities to GHG emissions and evaluates the potential of sustainable practices to reduce emissions while maintaining productivity.

2. Major Sources of GHG Emissions in Agriculture:

2.1 Methane Emissions from Livestock:

Livestock farming is the largest source of methane (CH_4) emissions in agriculture, contributing approximately 44% of the sector's total emissions (FAO, 2020). Methane is

primarily released through enteric fermentation in ruminants such as cattle, sheep, and goats. Additionally, manure storage and management further contribute to methane emissions. Studies have shown that improving feed efficiency and adopting dietary supplements can reduce methane emissions significantly (Hristov et al., 2013).

2.2 Nitrous Oxide Emissions from Fertilizers:

The use of nitrogen-based fertilizers is a significant driver of nitrous oxide (N_2O) emissions, a GHG with a global warming potential 298 times that of carbon dioxide over 100 years (IPCC, 2006). Emissions occur due to nitrification and denitrification processes in soils. Precision farming techniques, including the application of controlled-release fertilizers and adoption of organic inputs, have been effective in reducing N_2O emissions (Snyder et al., 2009).

2.3 Carbon Dioxide Emissions from Land-Use Changes:

Deforestation and conversion of carbon-rich ecosystems to agricultural lands contribute to CO_2 emissions. Agriculture-induced deforestation accounts for approximately 13% of global CO_2 emissions (FAO, 2019). Sustainable land management practices, such as agroforestry and reforestation, have the potential to offset these emissions by enhancing carbon sequestration in soils and vegetation.

3. Sustainable Agricultural Practices for Mitigating GHG Emissions:

3.1 Conservation Tillage:

Conservation tillage reduces soil disturbance and enhances carbon storage in agricultural soils. Studies indicate that no-till practices can sequester up to 1.2 metric tons of CO_2 per hectare annually (Lal, 2015).

3.2 Cover Cropping:

Cover crops, such as legumes and grasses, improve soil organic matter and reduce nitrogen leaching, thereby lowering N_2O emissions. Research by Basche et al. (2016) highlights the effectiveness of cover cropping in enhancing soil health and reducing GHG emissions.

3.3 Agroforestry:

Agroforestry integrates trees and shrubs into agricultural landscapes, enhancing carbon sequestration and biodiversity. Studies estimate that agroforestry systems can sequester 0.29–15.21 metric tons of CO_2 per hectare annually, depending on the system and region (Zomer et al., 2016).

3.4 Improved Livestock Management:

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Efficient livestock systems focus on optimizing feed quality, improving breeding practices, and managing manure through anaerobic digestion. Such measures can reduce methane emissions by up to 30% (Gerber et al., 2013).

3.5 Precision Agriculture:

Precision agriculture employs technologies like GPS and sensors to optimize input use, minimizing excess fertilizer application and water usage. This approach not only reduces GHG emissions but also enhances resource efficiency (Mondal & Basu, 2009).

4. Quantifying and Modeling GHG Emissions:

Quantifying agricultural emissions is essential for identifying hotspots and prioritizing mitigation strategies. Tools such as the Cool Farm Tool and COMET-Farm allow farmers and policymakers to estimate emissions from agricultural activities. Advanced models like DNDC (DeNitrification-DeComposition) and DayCent simulate the impact of management practices on soil carbon dynamics and GHG emissions (Giltrap et al., 2010).

5. Challenges in Mitigating Agricultural GHG Emissions:

5.1 Socioeconomic Barriers:

Adopting sustainable practices often requires significant investments in technology and training, which may not be feasible for smallholder farmers. Financial incentives and subsidies can help bridge this gap.

5.2 Knowledge Gaps:

Limited understanding of the long-term impacts of certain practices, such as biochar application or regenerative agriculture, hampers widespread adoption. More research is needed to quantify their effectiveness.

5.3 Policy Constraints:

Inconsistent policies and lack of enforcement mechanisms undermine efforts to promote sustainable agriculture. International collaboration and alignment of agricultural policies with climate goals are critical.

6. Policy Recommendations: Policymakers should prioritize the integration of climate-smart agricultural practices into national development plans. Key recommendations include:

- Providing subsidies for adopting sustainable technologies.
- Enhancing research and development on low-emission farming techniques.
- Promoting education and outreach programs to raise awareness among farmers.
- Establishing carbon markets to incentivize emission reductions in agriculture.

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7. Conclusion:

Agriculture's contribution to GHG emissions presents both challenges and opportunities for climate change mitigation. While conventional farming practices exacerbate emissions, sustainable techniques offer viable pathways to reduce agriculture's carbon footprint. A concerted effort involving farmers, researchers, and policymakers is essential to achieve global climate goals while ensuring food security. Continued investment in research, education, and technology adoption will be pivotal in transforming the agricultural sector into a driver of environmental sustainability.

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