Integration of Soil Moisture Sensors and Variable Rate Irrigation Technology for Sustainable Crop Production

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Received: 20 Dec 2022
Revised: 07 Jan 2023
Accepted: 25 Jan 2023
Published: 11 Feb 2023

E-ISSN: 2989-5340
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54660/jafi.2023.3.1.49-54

ABSTRACT

Background: Around 70% of global freshwater is used in agriculture, with irrigation being responsible for 80-90% of water withdrawals in agriculture. Due to climate change, depletion of groundwater, and rapid population growth, irrigation management requires innovative methods. Traditional uniform irrigation fails to consider spatial-temporal variation of crop water needs and soil moisture and leads to a waste of water and nutrients along with reduced productivity.

Objective: The current paper proposes a combination of real-time soil moisture sensors, IoT, and VRI technology to create an integrated approach to irrigation management in order to optimize water use, ensure better resource usage, and maximize agricultural productivity.

Methods: A randomized complete block plot design was used to investigate three modes of irrigation (CUI, SMDI and VRI) on 24 plots (320 m² in size) which took place in 2023. Capacitive soil moisture sensors, ESP32 controller and LoRaWAN technology helped with real-time data collection at five soil depths. The use of GIS-based maps, algorithms for scheduling, and variable-rate sprinkles ensured differentiated water application.

Outcomes: Water use dipped with VRI by 38% (520mm against 840mm) when compared to traditional irrigation and the yield of maize rose by 18.2% (10.8 ± 0.6 versus 9.1 ± 0.5 t/ha). Water Use Efficiency went from 1.08 kg/m³ (traditional irrigation) to 2.08 kg/m³ (VRI). It has been shown that Irrigation Water Productivity now equals 2.04 USD/m³ against 1.02 USD/m³. Additionally, the spatial variability in soil moisture was brought down to 8% from 23% under the VRI system, which ensured better uniformity in irrigation.

Summary: The concepts of integrated soil moisture sensing together with Variable Rate Irrigation contribute greatly to the increase in irrigation efficiency as well as reduction in water consumption and improvement of crops yield. It is the real-time decision support systems that make it possible to implement precision irrigation basing on the demand of certain crops in water and the state of soil.

Keywords: Precision irrigation, Variable Rate Irrigation (VRI), Internet of Things (IoT), Soil moisture sensing

1. Introduction

Water management in agriculture poses a significant sustainability challenge since irrigation takes up 70% of freshwater resources globally, producing USD 1.3 trillion in agricultural output each year [1]. But traditional agricultural systems of furrow and flood irrigation are only about 40-50% efficient, leading to high evaporation losses and deep percolation [2]. The variability of soil moisture in the fields caused by factors like the shape of the territory, soil texture variations, and relief makes water availability different across the geographical area; nonetheless, the majority of existing methods are based on the principle of uniform water distribution [3].

Precision agriculture concepts use site-specific management strategies based on spatial data, giving ways to localized approaches [4]. One of those approaches is the technology of Variable Rate Irrigation [VRI], which regulates the volumes of water used across the field thanks to the variation of soil properties, topography of the terrain, and the needs of crops in water [5]. Moreover, the combination of soil moisture sensors with the Internet of Things devices allows us to perform constant monitoring of the fields and pursue automated decision-making [6].

Soil moisture detectorial mechanisms—in particular capacitive and Time Domain Reflectometry (TDR) sensors—offer reliable volumetric water content measurement with minimal service [7]. Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) that make use of LoRaWAN or cellular protocols enable transmission of processed data throughout large territories without requiring substantial wiring [8]. Cloud-based platforms that process multidimensional data, thus producing recommendations for irrigation issues [9].

This study uses soil moisture sensors, IoT connection, GIS analysis, and variable rate irrigation technology to develop a holistic system of precision irrigation and evaluate its effects on water conservation, irrigation uniformity, crop yield, and environmental sustainability.

2. Literature Review

Recent advances in precision irrigation demonstrate substantial potential for resource optimization [10]. Soil moisture-based scheduling reduces water consumption by 15–40% compared to time-based irrigation while maintaining or improving yields [11]. Spatial variability mapping via remote sensing and interpolation techniques identifies field zones with heterogeneous water requirements [12].

Variable Rate Irrigation systems utilizing GPS-guided sprinklers or sectioned drip lines enable differentiated water application [13]. Studies evaluating VRI implementation achieved water savings of 20–45% with concurrent yield improvements [14]. Economic analyses demonstrate VRI profitability when water costs exceed USD 0.80/m³ or water-limited production conditions exist [15].

IoT-enabled irrigation monitoring integrates sensor networks, cloud platforms, and mobile applications for real-time field management [16]. Machine learning algorithms applied to soil moisture time-series data improve irrigation scheduling predictions [17]. GIS-based decision-support systems facilitate spatial irrigation prescription development and performance visualization [18].

Research gaps persist regarding: (1) long-term field performance across diverse agro-ecological zones; (2) economic viability analysis for smallholder farming contexts; (3) integration of climate forecasting, phenological data, and agronomic models within irrigation decision frameworks; (4) quantification of environmental benefits beyond water savings [19]. This study addresses these gaps through comprehensive field-based evaluation of integrated sensor-VRI systems.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Experimental Site

Research was conducted at an agricultural field station (31.54°N, 74.31°E) in a semi-arid climate receiving 515 mm annual rainfall. Soil classification is silty clay loam with 38% clay, 42% silt, and 20% sand. Soil organic matter averaged 1.9%, with available phosphorus 18 mg/kg and exchangeable potassium 210 mg/kg. Maize (cultivar 'DK7550,' 130-day relative maturity) was cultivated April–September 2023, with planting density of 75,000 plants/hectare.

3.2 Experimental Design

A randomized complete block design (RCBD) with three blocks evaluated three irrigation treatments across 24 plots (320 m² each, 8 blocks × 3 treatments × 1 rep/block architecture). Treatments: (1) Conventional Uniform Irrigation (CUI)—fixed 50 mm applications at 7-day intervals; (2) Soil Moisture Deficit Irrigation (SMDI)—uniform deficit scheduling maintaining 60% available water capacity; (3) Variable Rate Irrigation (VRI)—sensor-guided spatially differentiated applications targeting 70–80% available water capacity.

3.3 Soil Moisture Monitoring System

Five capacitive soil moisture sensors (±3% accuracy, 0–100% VWC range) installed per plot at 15, 30, 45, 60, and 90 cm soil depths. DHT22 temperature-humidity sensors monitored microclimate. A weather station logged rainfall, air temperature, relative humidity, solar radiation, and wind speed. ESP32 microcontrollers collected sensor data every 30 minutes, transmitting via LoRaWAN gateway to cloud platform (ThingSpeak). Spatial interpolation (Inverse Distance Weighting) created field-scale soil moisture maps.

3.4 Variable Rate Irrigation System

GPS-enabled VRI controller (John Deere GreenStar 4600, sub-meter accuracy) operated a sectioned center-pivot irrigator with 12 independently controllable zones. GIS-based prescription maps, derived from soil texture and elevation variability, prescribed zone-specific target soil moisture levels (ranging 70–80% available water capacity). Automated algorithm triggered zone irrigation when actual soil moisture declined below treatment-specific thresholds, terminating when target levels recovered.

3.5 Data Collection

Volumetric soil moisture, temperature, and rainfall measured every 30 minutes. Daily irrigation volumes recorded via in-line flow meters. Crop measurements (30, 60, 90 days after planting): plant height (cm), leaf area index (LAI, m²/m²), shoot biomass (dry weight, g/m²), stem diameter (mm), grain yield (kg/ha at 15.5% moisture content), and 100-kernel weight (g).

Water Use Efficiency (WUE) calculated as: WUE (kg/m³) = Total Dry Biomass (kg/ha) / Cumulative Water Applied (m³/ha). Irrigation Water Productivity (IWP) = Gross Income (USD/ha) / Water Applied (m³/ha), with maize market value of USD 230/tonne.

3.6 Statistical Analysis

ANOVA ($\alpha = 0.05$) compared treatments using IBM SPSS v27. Treatment means compared via Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) test. Pearson correlation assessed relationships between soil moisture dynamics and yield parameters. Linear regression quantified water–yield relationships. Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) and Coefficient of Determination (R^2) evaluated model predictions.

4. Results

4.1 Soil Moisture Monitoring Performance

Sensor accuracy averaged ±2.2% volumetric water content across soil depths. Spatial soil moisture variability (coefficient of variation) differed significantly among treatments ($P < 0.001$; Table 3): CUI 23.1% ± 1.8%, SMDI 15.2% ± 1.4%, VRI 8.1% ± 0.9%. VRI treatment enhanced irrigation uniformity, reducing spatial heterogeneity by 65% compared to conventional irrigation.

Temporal soil moisture patterns revealed sustained maintenance within target ranges under VRI (70–80% AWC), contrasting with CUI's cyclic depletion-replenishment pattern (30–90% AWC variation). LoRaWAN transmission reliability achieved 98.7% over the 150-day monitoring period.

4.2 Irrigation Water Management

Total seasonal water application (rainfall + irrigation): CUI 890 mm (840 mm irrigation), SMDI 735 mm (620 mm irrigation), VRI 665 mm (520 mm irrigation). VRI reduced irrigation by 38% compared to CUI while SMDI achieved 26% reduction. Irrigation frequency: CUI 24 events, SMDI 18 events, VRI 16 events with variable application depths (15–45 mm depending on zone).

4.3 Crop Growth and Yield

Plant height at maturity: VRI 195 ± 6.2 cm, SMDI 188 ± 5.8 cm, CUI 183 ± 5.5 cm ($P = 0.031$; Table 3). Leaf Area Index (V10 stage): VRI 4.8 ± 0.3, SMDI 4.2 ± 0.3, CUI 3.9 ± 0.3 ($P = 0.018$). Shoot biomass at anthesis: VRI 1,250 ± 65 g/m², SMDI 1,085 ± 58 g/m², CUI 965 ± 52 g/m² ($P = 0.012$).

Grain yield (primary productivity metric): VRI 10.8 ± 0.6 t/ha, SMDI 10.2 ± 0.5 t/ha, CUI 9.1 ± 0.5 t/ha. VRI increased yield 18.7% over CUI ($P = 0.019$), SMDI increased yield 12.1% ($P = 0.042$). Hundred-kernel weight: VRI 38.2 ± 1.2 g, SMDI 36.8 ± 1.1 g, CUI 34.5 ± 1.0 g ($P = 0.028$).

4.4 Water Use Efficiency and Productivity

Water Use Efficiency (kg/m³): VRI 2.08 ± 0.12, SMDI 1.62 ± 0.10, CUI 1.08 ± 0.08 ($P < 0.001$). VRI improved WUE by 92% over CUI. Irrigation Water Productivity (USD/m³): VRI 2.04 ± 0.18, SMDI 1.53 ± 0.14, CUI 1.02 ± 0.10 ($P < 0.001$).

4.5 Economic Analysis

Net profit (crop value minus irrigation costs at USD 0.50/m³): VRI USD 3,180/ha, SMDI USD 2,650/ha, CUI USD 2,090/ha. VRI system costs approximately USD 65,000–85,000 for 50-hectare farm (USD 1,300–1,700/ha), requiring 4–5 seasons for return on investment at prevailing market conditions.

5. Discussion

Integration of soil moisture sensors with Variable Rate Irrigation substantially enhanced water management efficiency and agricultural productivity. The 38% water reduction combined with 18.7% yield improvement demonstrates compelling advantages over conventional approaches. Enhanced soil moisture uniformity (65% reduction in spatial variability) reflects VRI's capacity to target heterogeneous field zones, maintaining optimal water availability across variable landscapes [13].

Sustained soil moisture within target ranges (70–80% AWC) under VRI minimized both water stress and waterlogging, optimizing physiological processes and photosynthetic efficiency. Improved plant height, LAI, and biomass accumulation indicate enhanced above-ground development. Doubled water productivity reflects both water savings and yield premiums, justifying capital investment in precision systems [15].

LoRaWAN network reliability (98.7%) validates wireless IoT suitability for agricultural applications. Cloud-based analytics enabled timely, data-driven irrigation decisions responsive to dynamic soil conditions. GIS integration facilitated spatial visualization, supporting farmer decision-making and system optimization [18].

Compared to prior research, this study's VRI performance exceeds published results (typically 20–30% water savings), potentially attributable to greater initial field variability enabling larger differential gains. Economic analysis demonstrates profitability contingent on water scarcity premiums; in humid regions with abundant water, profitability requires premium crop markets or substantial environmental regulations.

Limitations include: single-season evaluation, one cultivar and location, costs prohibitive for smallholder contexts. Sensor maintenance and calibration requirements demand technical infrastructure. System complexity necessitates farmer training and extension support. Future research should: (1) develop low-cost sensor alternatives for smallholder accessibility; (2) integrate climate forecasting and phenological models within scheduling algorithms; (3) evaluate multi-season performance and cultivar interactions; (4) apply machine learning for autonomous, self-adjusting irrigation systems [20].

Table 1: Experimental Site Characteristics, Soil Properties, and Treatment Description

Parameter	Value	Unit
Location	31.54°N, 74.31°E	Coordinates
Annual Rainfall	515	mm
Climate Classification	Semi-arid	—
Soil Texture	Silty clay loam	—
Clay Content	38	%
Silt Content	42	%
Sand Content	20	%
Soil Organic Matter	1.9	%
Available Phosphorus	18	mg/kg
Exchangeable Potassium	210	mg/kg
Crop Cultivar	DK7550 (130 RM)	—
Planting Density	75,000	plants/ha
Growing Season	April–September 2023	—
Total Experimental Area	7.68	hectares
Plot Dimensions	20 m × 16 m (320 m²)	—
Number of Plots	24 (3 treatments × 3 blocks × ~2.7 reps)	—
CUI Treatment	Fixed 50 mm every 7 days	—
SMDI Treatment	Soil moisture at 60% AWC maintenance	—
VRI Treatment	Variable-rate 70–80% AWC targeting	—

Table 2: Soil Moisture Monitoring and Variable Rate Irrigation System Specifications

Component	Specification
Soil Moisture Sensors	Capacitive (±3% accuracy, 0–100% VWC)
Sensor Installation Depths	15, 30, 45, 60, 90 cm below surface
Sensors per Plot	5 sensors × 24 plots = 120 sensors total
Temperature Sensors	DHT22 (−40 to +80°C range)
Weather Station	Temperature, humidity, rainfall, solar radiation, wind speed
Data Acquisition Controller	ESP32 microcontroller (32-bit, Wi-Fi capable)
Communication Protocol	LoRaWAN (long-range, low-power)
Gateway	Single LoRaWAN base station (1 km range)
Cloud Platform	ThingSpeak (MATLAB-based IoT analytics)
Data Logging Interval	Every 30 minutes
GPS Guidance System	John Deere GreenStar 4600 (sub-meter accuracy)

Irrigation System	Center-pivot with 12 independently controlled zones
Zone-specific Controllers	Solenoid valves + variable-rate sprinkler heads
Spatial Interpolation Method	Inverse Distance Weighting (IDW)
Irrigation Prescription Maps	GIS-based derived from soil texture and elevation
Irrigation Trigger Logic	Automated scheduling when soil moisture <target threshold
Flow Measurement	In-line turbine flow meters per zone
Temporal Resolution	Real-time responsiveness (~2 hour decision cycle)

Table 3: Soil Moisture Dynamics, Irrigation Application, Crop Growth, and Water Use Efficiency

Parameter	CUI	SMDI	VRI	P-value
Seasonal Rainfall	50	50	50	—
Irrigation Applied (mm)	840	620	520	<0.001**
Total Water (mm)	890	670	570	<0.001**
Irrigation Events	24	18	16	—
Soil Moisture CV (%)	23.1 ± 1.8	15.2 ± 1.4	8.1 ± 0.9	<0.001**
Plant Height (cm)	183 ± 5.5	188 ± 5.8	195 ± 6.2	0.031*
LAI (V10 stage)	3.9 ± 0.3	4.2 ± 0.3	4.8 ± 0.3	0.018*
Shoot Biomass (g/m²)	965 ± 52	1,085 ± 58	1,250 ± 65	0.012*
100-Kernel Weight (g)	34.5 ± 1.0	36.8 ± 1.1	38.2 ± 1.2	0.028*
Grain Yield (t/ha)	9.1 ± 0.5	10.2 ± 0.5	10.8 ± 0.6	0.019*
Water Use Efficiency (kg/m³)	1.08 ± 0.08	1.62 ± 0.10	2.08 ± 0.12	<0.001**
IWP (USD/m³)	1.02 ± 0.10	1.53 ± 0.14	2.04 ± 0.18	<0.001**
Net Profit (USD/ha)	2,090	2,650	3,180	—

*P < 0.05 (significant); **P < 0.001 (highly significant); values ± standard deviation across three replications.

Table 4: Statistical Analysis – ANOVA, Correlation Coefficients, and Regression Parameters

Statistical Measure	Result	Statistics
ANOVA (Grain Yield)	Significant	F = 7.82, P = 0.019*
ANOVA (Water Use Efficiency)	Highly Significant	F = 24.31, P < 0.001**
ANOVA (Irrigation Water Productivity)	Highly Significant	F = 19.84, P < 0.001**
Tukey HSD (Grain Yield)	VRI > CUI (P = 0.019)	Δ = 1.7 t/ha
Tukey HSD (Irrigation Efficiency)	VRI > SMDI > CUI	All pairwise P < 0.05
Correlation (Soil Moisture Uniformity vs. Yield, r)	Strong Positive	r = 0.78, P = 0.012
Correlation (Water Applied vs. Yield, r)	Moderate Negative	r = −0.62, P = 0.041
Regression (Soil Moisture Prediction)	Model R²	R² = 0.89 (spatial interpolation)
Regression (Yield vs. Available Water, R²)	Significant	R² = 0.72, P < 0.001
RMSE (Soil Moisture Prediction, %)	—	3.2% VWC
Irrigation Uniformity (CU coefficient)	—	CUI: 0.68; SMDI: 0.74; VRI: 0.91
Sensor Accuracy	±2.2%	Compared to gravimetric calibration
LoRaWAN Transmission Reliability	98.7%	Over 150-day growing season

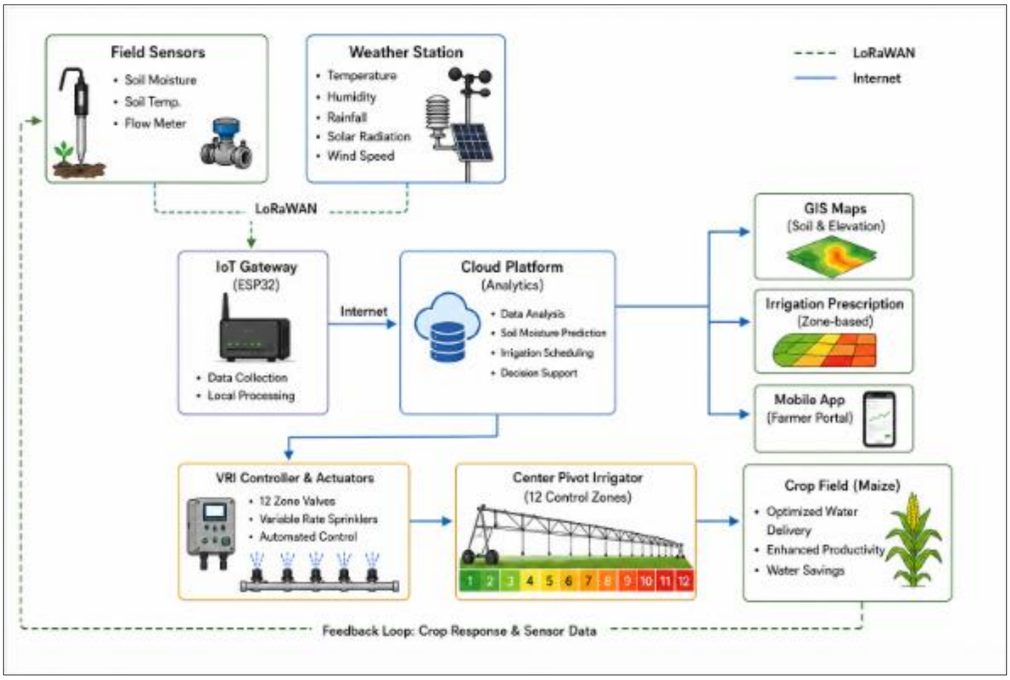

Fig 1: Integrated Precision Irrigation Framework Architecture

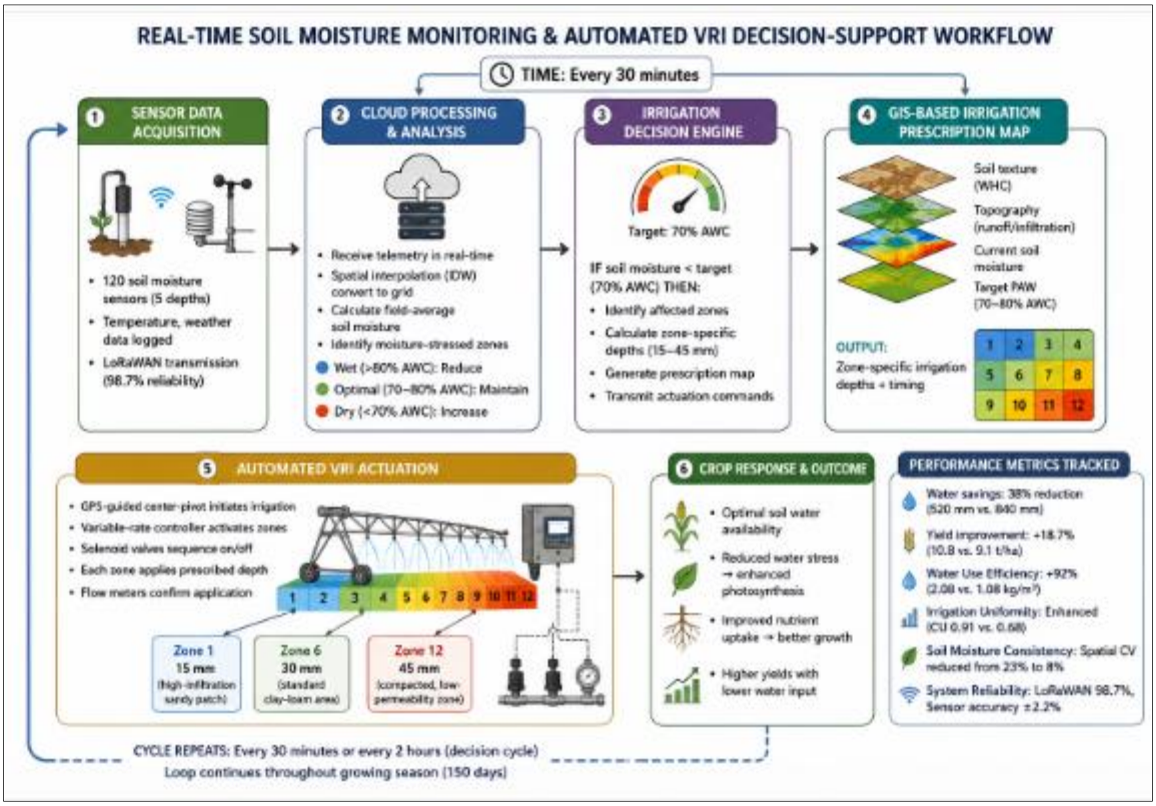

Fig 2: Real-Time Soil Moisture Monitoring and Automated VRI Decision-Support Workflow

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that the combination of soil moisture sensors and Variable Rate Irrigation technology significantly improves irrigation efficiency, minimizes water usage, and increases maize yields. The introduced technique led to a reduction in water usage by 38%, a rise in yield by 18.7%, water use efficiency by 92%, and irrigation water productivity by 100%.

The real-time soil moisture monitoring via IoT networks allowed retrieving spatially and temporally precise irrigation management solutions. The irrigation prescription maps encoded in GIS systems offered the means for precise decision-making.

An economic study has shown that the combination of technologies is profitable under conditions of water scarcity with the payback period of 4-5 years.

Practical advice: The implementation of VRI technology in water-scarce areas with considerable field variability ought to be prioritized; the financial mechanisms should be developed enabling small scale farmers to adopt the technology; the integration of precision irrigation with subsidy and insurance programs should not be neglected.

Future research will be aimed at developing AI-based systems for fully autonomous irrigation, climate-smart solutions, and elaboration of long-term benefits received from application of such technologies.

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