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The influence of agricultural runoff on river water quality

AO Sulaiman
Department of Fisheries, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract
This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the influence of agricultural runoff on river water quality, focusing on nutrient load, pesticide contamination, and sediment deposition. Data were collated from diverse studies across multiple river basins, which consistently demonstrate that runoff from agricultural fields substantially alters the chemical makeup of river waters, predominantly through the enhanced concentrations of nitrates, phosphates, and chemical residues. These alterations affect not only the physicochemical properties of the water but also the health of aquatic ecosystems. By synthesizing findings from empirical research, this paper highlights the extent of agricultural impacts on water quality and evaluates the effectiveness of various mitigation strategies employed to date.

Keywords: Agricultural, harmful, dissolved, oxygen

Introduction
Rivers are vital freshwater resources that support a wide range of biological diversity and provide water for domestic, agricultural, and industrial use. The quality of river water is, therefore, of paramount importance for ecological health and human well-being. However, agricultural activities-predominantly those involving the extensive use of fertilizers and pesticides-pose significant threats to this quality. Agricultural runoff, laden with high nutrient loads and chemical residues, enters river systems predominantly through surface runoff and, to a lesser extent, through infiltration into groundwater systems. Such inputs can lead to eutrophication, harmful algal blooms, and the degradation of aquatic habitats.

Scope of this paper
The scope of this paper encompasses a detailed review of the pollutants associated with agricultural runoff - namely, nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus compounds), pesticides, and sediments. It examines their impacts on the physico-chemical environment of rivers and the subsequent effects on aquatic life. The analysis extends to assessing the temporal and spatial variations in water quality degradation as influenced by different farming practices, land use patterns, and mitigation measures across various geographical settings.

Objective
The objective of this paper is to analyse the Influence of Agricultural Runoff on River Water Quality.

Methods and Materials
Study Area
The study was conducted on two major rivers in Oregon, USA: the Siuslaw River and the Willamette River. These rivers were chosen due to their distinct characteristics and relevance to agricultural runoff. The Siuslaw River, with its smaller agricultural impact but significant forestry activities, contrasts with the Willamette River, which is heavily influenced by agricultural and urban runoff.

Sampling Strategy: Water samples were collected monthly over a one-year period at multiple sites along each river. Sites were selected based on their proximity to agricultural lands, urban areas, and upstream reference points presumed to be less affected by human activities.

Water Quality Analysis
Collected samples were analyzed for the following parameters:
- Dissolved Oxygen, Nitrate and Phosphorus Levels, pH, Turbidity, Algal Biomass.
- Standard methods for the examination of water and wastewater were employed for these analyses. All chemical assays were performed using spectrophotometry, following EPA-approved protocols.

Biological Assessment
Benthic macroinvertebrates were sampled using a D-frame net during the same period as water sampling. The diversity index was calculated to assess ecological health relative to a baseline established from less impacted upstream sites.

Data Analysis
Data were analyzed using statistical software to compare water quality and ecological conditions between the study sites and control sites. Differences were assessed using t-tests and ANOVA, with a significance level set at $p<0.05$.

Results

Table 1: Effects of agricultural runoff on river water quality

Parameter	Siuslaw River (Control Site)	Willamette River (Affected Site)	Percentage Change	Notes
Dissolved Oxygen (mg/L)	8.5	5.2	-38.8%	Reduction due to eutrophication
Nitrate Levels (mg/L)	1.2	7.4	+516.7%	Increase due to fertilizer runoff
Phosphorus Levels (mg/L)	0.03	0.29	+866.7%	Increase leading to algal blooms

pH Level	7.4	6.8	-8.1%	Acidification from nitrification processes
Turbidity (NTU)	10	80	+700%	Increase due to sediment runoff
Algal Biomass (mg/L)	50	300	+500%	Algal bloom due to high nutrients
Benthic Invertebrates Diversity Index	0.75	0.30	-60%	Decrease in diversity due to habitat degradation

Significance level: $p<0.05$

Notes

Dissolved Oxygen (mg/L): The amount of oxygen available in the water, crucial for aquatic life.

Nitrate and Phosphorus Levels (mg/L): Indicators of nutrient pollution which can lead to eutrophication.

pH Level: Reflects the acidity of the water, with potential impacts on species composition and metal solubility.

Turbidity (NTU): Measures the clarity of water, with higher values indicating more particulate matter.

Algal Biomass (mg/L): Represents the amount of algal growth, which can block sunlight and deplete oxygen.

Benthic Invertebrates Diversity Index: A measure of the health and diversity of the bottom-dwelling organisms, affected by sediment and chemical pollutants.

Discussion

The data presented in Table 4 highlight significant differences in water quality parameters between the control site at the Siuslaw River and the affected site at the Willamette River. This section discusses the implications of these findings, examining the ecological impact of agricultural runoff on river water quality. The reduction in dissolved oxygen from 8.5 mg/L at the Siuslaw River to 5.2 mg/L at the Willamette River (a 38.8% decrease) is a clear indicator of eutrophication. This process, driven by excessive nutrient levels, leads to algal blooms which consume a large amount of oxygen during decomposition. The oxygen depletion can create hypoxic conditions that are unsuitable for most aquatic life, potentially leading to the death of fish and other aerobic organisms. The dramatic increases in nitrate and phosphorus levels at the Willamette River - 516.7% and 866.7% respectively - point to substantial nutrient loading from agricultural runoff. High levels of these nutrients are known to trigger eutrophication, further evidenced by the corresponding increase in algal biomass. This nutrient pollution not only disrupts local ecosystems but can also lead to downstream effects such as further eutrophication and hypoxic zones in larger water bodies. The decrease in pH levels by 8.1% at the Willamette River suggests a shift towards more acidic conditions, likely due to the accumulation of nitric and phosphoric acids from dissolved nitrates and phosphates. Acidic waters can lead to the mobilization of toxic metals and negatively affect aquatic fauna, altering species composition and potentially leading to the loss of biodiversity. An increase in turbidity by 700% at the Willamette River indicates a high level of suspended solids, primarily from soil erosion associated with agricultural practices. High turbidity reduces light penetration, which can inhibit photosynthesis in aquatic plants and disrupt the food web. Sediment deposition can also smother benthic habitats, as reflected by the significant decrease in the Benthic Invertebrates Diversity Index.

The 500% increase in algal biomass at the Willamette River is a direct result of nutrient over-enrichment. Such extensive algal growth can lead to algal blooms that, when they die off, consume vast amounts of oxygen, exacerbating the eutrophic conditions. This biomass also blocks sunlight, further disrupting the aquatic environment. A 60% decrease in the Benthic Invertebrates Diversity Index at the Willamette River highlights the severe impact of sediment and chemical pollutants on benthic communities. These organisms play critical roles in nutrient cycling and food web dynamics, and their decline can indicate broader ecosystem degradation.

Conclusion

The findings from this study on the Siuslaw and Willamette Rivers clearly demonstrate the significant and varied impacts of agricultural runoff on river water quality. These impacts include severe reductions in dissolved oxygen levels, drastic increases in nutrient concentrations, and widespread ecological degradation, underscoring the urgent need for effective management and mitigation strategies. The pronounced increase in nutrient levels, particularly nitrates and phosphates at the Willamette River, leads directly to eutrophication, causing algal blooms and subsequent oxygen depletion which can create dead zones incapable of supporting most aquatic life. The shift towards more acidic conditions, as indicated by the pH decrease, potentially mobilizes harmful metals and alters the survivability of sensitive aquatic species, thus diminishing biodiversity. Increased turbidity from soil erosion not only affects water clarity and photosynthesis but also smothers aquatic habitats, negatively impacting the benthic invertebrate populations and overall river health. The decline in the Benthic Invertebrates Diversity Index is particularly concerning as it reflects a loss of ecological integrity and function, affecting nutrient cycling and food web structures within the river ecosystems.

To address these challenges, several forward-looking strategies are recommended. Adoption of precision agriculture techniques that optimize fertilizer use and reduce runoff through technology and better management practices is critical. Establishing and maintaining vegetated buffer zones along riverbanks can significantly reduce sediment and nutrient runoff, enhancing habitat complexity and promoting biodiversity. Strengthening policy measures that regulate nutrient applications and manage agricultural runoff is essential, which could include stricter enforcement of existing regulations and the introduction of incentives for farmers to adopt best practices. Engaging local communities, farmers, and stakeholders in conservation efforts can foster more sustainable agricultural practices, with education and awareness programs playing a crucial role in changing local practices. Ongoing research into the impacts of agricultural runoff and the effectiveness of mitigation measures is vital, including advanced monitoring techniques to track changes in water quality and ecosystem health over time.

While the study presents a concerning picture of the impact of agricultural runoff on river water quality, it also highlights the potential for significant improvements through concerted effort and integrated management strategies. By addressing the root causes of runoff and implementing comprehensive mitigation measures, it is possible to restore and preserve the health of river ecosystems for future generations.

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