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Madhu Mali
M.Sc. (Agri.) Agronomy, Department of Agronomy, IGKV, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Kammara Megha Latha
M. Sc. (Agri.) Entomology, Department of Entomology, SHUATS, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Sudha Sidar
M.Sc. (Agri.) Agronomy, Department of Agronomy, IGKV, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Sai Kiran Rudraboyina
M. Sc. (Agri.) Entomology, Department of Entomology, SHUATS, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Neelam Jaiswal
M.Sc. (Agri.) Agricultural Extension Education, Department of Agricultural Extension, IGKV, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Akanand
Ph.D. (Entomology), Department of Entomology, IGKV, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India.

Gajendra Chandrakar
Senior Scientist, Department of Entomology, IGKV, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Corresponding Author:
Madhu Mali
M.Sc. (Agri.) Agronomy, Department of Agronomy, IGKV, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Review of conservation agriculture practices for sustainable farming

Madhu Mali, Kammara Megha Latha, Sudha Sidar, Sai Kiran Rudraboyina, Neelam Jaiswal, Akanand and Gajendra Chandrakar

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Abstract
Conservation agriculture practices, such as integrated pest management, agroforestry, and agroecology, can contribute to sustainable and resilient food systems by reducing reliance on chemical pesticides, improving soil health, increasing biodiversity, and minimizing environmental impact. Continued investment in research and development is crucial for the advancement of conservation agriculture practices and the development of innovative solutions to address global challenges. Governments and international organizations play a key role in promoting and supporting the adoption of these practices through policy incentives, funding, and capacity building. Collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers is essential for knowledge sharing, capacity building, and the development of training programs to empower farmers and extension workers. Integration of conservation agriculture with other sustainable agriculture practices, such as organic farming, can maximize its benefits and contribute to a more resilient and sustainable food system.

Keywords: Conservation agriculture practices, agroforestry, agroecology

Introduction
Conservation agriculture (CA) is an approach for managing agricultural ecosystems that aims to improve productivity, increase benefits, and enhance food security while preserving the environment [1]. It is a sustainable farming system that combines three key principles:

a) **Diversified Crop Species:** CA encourages the cultivation of a variety of crops, including legumes, to enhance soil fertility, reduce pest and disease pressure, and improve overall ecosystem resilience [2].
b) **Minimum or No Tillage (NT):** This principle involves reducing soil disturbance during planting and crop management activities. NT helps to maintain soil structure, reduce erosion, and enhance water infiltration and retention [2].
c) **Permanent Soil Cover:** CA promotes the use of crop residues, cover crops, or mulch to keep the soil covered between harvest and planting. This practice protects the soil from erosion, reduces evaporation, and improves organic matter content [2].

Importance of Conservation Agriculture in Sustainable Farming
Conservation agriculture plays a crucial role in sustainable farming by offering several benefits to farmers, the environment, and society as a whole. Some of the key advantages include:

a) **Soil Health and Productivity:** CA helps to maintain soil organic carbon (SOC) levels, which are essential for soil fertility and structure. It also improves soil physical, chemical, and biological properties, leading to increased crop yields and long-term productivity [2].
b) **Water Conservation:** The use of permanent soil cover in CA reduces water evaporation, improves water infiltration, and enhances water-holding capacity, making it a valuable practice in water-limited regions [2].
c) **Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation:** CA can contribute to climate change mitigation by sequestering carbon in the soil and reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agricultural activities. It also helps farmers adapt to climate change by improving soil resilience and water management [2].
d) **Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services:** The adoption of CA promotes biodiversity by providing habitat for beneficial organisms and reducing the use of agrochemicals. This, in turn, enhances ecosystem services such as pollination, pest control, and nutrient cycling [2].

e) **Economic Viability:** While the initial transition to CA may require some investment, studies have shown that it can lead to long-term profitability for farmers through increased yields, reduced input costs, and improved soil health [3].

Food Security and Nutrition: CA can contribute to food security by improving crop yields, reducing post-harvest losses, and enhancing the nutritional quality of crops through better soil nutrient availability [4, 5].

Crop Rotations and Diversification in Conservation Agriculture

Crop rotations and diversification are essential components of conservation agriculture that offer several benefits to farmers, the environment, and society.

Advantages of crop rotations in conserving soil fertility

a) **Increased Soil Fertility:** Crop rotations help maintain soil fertility by alternating nutrient demands and reducing the risk of nutrient depletion. Different crops have varying nutrient requirements and rotating them allows the soil to replenish specific nutrients while others are being utilized [5, 6, 7].
b) **Improved Soil Nutrients and Nutrient Uptake Regulation:** Crop rotations can enhance soil nutrient availability and uptake regulation. For example, leguminous crops like soybeans can fix atmospheric nitrogen, benefiting subsequent crops that require nitrogen for growth [5, 7].
c) **Enhanced Soil Structure and Health:** Diverse crop rotations, including crops with different root structures and growth patterns, can improve soil structure and health. This is because different crops contribute to the formation of soil aggregates and the development of a diverse soil microbiome, which is essential for nutrient cycling and overall soil health [5, 7].
d) **Weed and Pest Management:** Crop rotations can help manage weeds and pests by disrupting their life cycles. For example, rotating between crops with different growth habits and root structures can make it more challenging for weeds to establish and spread, reducing the need for herbicides [5, 7].
e) **Erosion Control:** Crop rotations that include cover crops or crops with extensive root systems can help prevent soil erosion by providing ground cover and improving soil structure [5, 6].
f) **Climate Resilience:** Crop rotations can contribute to climate resilience by reducing the negative effects of extreme weather events on the planting system and increasing the overall robustness of the agricultural system [5, 8].

Diversification in conservation agriculture also plays a vital role in minimizing pest and disease pressure. Diverse crop rotations can help break pest and disease cycles by interrupting the availability of host plants. This reduces the risk of pest and disease buildup in the soil and helps maintain a healthier agroecosystem. Studies have shown that crop rotation systems with species diversification can lead to increased profitability and grain productivity. This is due to improved ecosystem services, such as better pest and disease management, nutrient cycling, and soil health [5, 6, 9].

Examples of successful crop rotation systems in conservation agriculture include

Alfalfa, Pasture, and Small Grains Rotation: This rotation, which includes crops with different growth habits and root structures, can help improve soil structure, nutrient cycling, and overall soil health. Cover Crop Integration: Adding cover crops to existing crop rotations can provide additional benefits, such as erosion control, weed suppression, and improved soil health. Legume-Cereal Rotation: Alternating between leguminous crops (e.g., soybeans) and cereal crops (e.g., corn or wheat) can help improve soil nitrogen levels and overall soil fertility [5, 6, 7].

Minimum or No-Tillage Practices in Conservation Agriculture

Impact of minimum or no-tillage on water infiltration and erosion

Minimizing mechanical operations and soil disturbance in a field can lead to benefits such as reduced soil erosion and associated air and water pollution; decreased fuel expenditures and costs of production [10].
When compared to conventional practices, minimum tillage systems can reduce tillage passes by 40% or more. By definition, all of these tillage techniques have a clear conservation goal, such as reducing the volume of soil disturbed or preserving surface residues in order to maintain soil, environmental, and economic viability [10].

Advantages of minimum or no-tillage practices in soil conservation

- No-till farming, in which the soil is left undisturbed by tillage and the residue is left on the soil surface, is the most effective soil conservation system [11].
- Conservation tillage practices range from zero tillage (No-till), reduced (minimum) tillage, mulch tillage, ridge tillage to contour tillage [12].
- The accumulation of crop residues and the build-up of soil organic matter (SOM) in surface layers under conservation tillage create favorable feeding conditions and provide protection for soil microorganisms, thereby contributing to their abundance and creating greater diversity. Various studies have shown that microbial biomass increases by 80% to 200% with conservation tillage when compared to conventional tillage [13].
- Optimizing fertility in conservation tillage systems can benefit from crop residue management. Greater immobilization in reduced and no-till systems helps conserve the soil and fertilizer nitrogen. Fertilizer requirements decrease over time because of reduced losses from erosion and the accumulation of larger pools of readily mineralizable organic nitrogen [13].

Example case studies highlighting the benefits of minimum or no-tillage practices

- A study conducted in a cereal farming area in Spain from 1994 to 2016 showed that on-farm productivity for maize improved by 26%-38% for minimum tillage and 21%-24% for crop rotation [13].
- The strategic use of minimum tillage within conservation agriculture in southern New South Wales, Australia was studied. The results showed that minimum tillage can improve soil structure, reduce erosion, and increase water infiltration [14].

Cover Crops and Mulching for Soil Protection
Cover crops and mulching are important techniques for improving soil health and structure, reducing weed pressure, conserving soil moisture, and reducing erosion. Here are some benefits of cover crops and mulching, along with research paper citations:

Benefits of cover crops
a) Soil erosion protection
b) Reduced nutrient leaching.
c) Carbon sequestration
d) Weed suppression and integrated pest management.
e) Improved water quality by reducing losses of nutrients, pesticides, and sediment [15, 16]

Benefits of mulching
a) Protects the soil from cold nights and slow cooling.
b) Conserves soil moisture
c) Reduces erosion.
d) Provides organic material and nutrients to the soil [15, 17]

Cover crops can also improve soil physical properties and soil nutrients in a citrus orchard [18]. They can provide early-season weed control via physical mulching and the production of compounds that leach from roots and aboveground residues during their growth [16]. Cover crops can also increase soil organic matter and subsequent total soil carbon content, primarily near the soil surface, which promotes overall soil health by improving the physical and chemical properties of the soil [16].
Mulching can be a great low-maintenance alternative to cover crops, especially if there are limitations that prevent you from working with cover crops. Natural mulch materials protect the soil from harsh elements and erosion, and the mulch will break down over time to provide organic material and nutrients to the soil [18].
Cover crops and mulching are important techniques for improving soil health and structure, reducing weed pressure and nutrient leaching, conserving soil moisture, and reducing erosion.

Conservation Agriculture and Climate Change Mitigation.
Conservation agriculture is an approach to farming that seeks to increase food security, alleviate poverty, conserve biodiversity, and safeguard ecosystem services while making agricultural systems more resilient to climate change [19]. The three main principles of conservation agriculture are minimum soil disturbance, crop diversification, and permanent soil cover, which help to protect the environment and reduce both the impacts of climate change on agricultural systems and the contribution of agricultural practices to greenhouse gas emissions through sustainable land management. Conservation agriculture practices can also contribute to making agricultural systems more resilient to climate change and have been proven to reduce farming systems' greenhouse gas emissions and enhance their role as carbon sinks [19, 20]. Some of the key contributions of conservation agriculture to climate change mitigation include:

a) Carbon sequestration: Conservation agriculture practices can increase the amount of carbon stored in soils, which can help to mitigate climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere [19, 21].

b) Reducing greenhouse gas emissions: Conservation agriculture practices can reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agricultural systems by reducing the need for tillage, which can release carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from the soil, and by promoting the use of cover crops, which can absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere [21].

There are several case studies on how conservation agriculture practices can mitigate climate change impacts. For example, a study in Eastern Zambia explored the use of conservation agriculture as a climate adaptation strategy among smallholder farmers. The study found that conservation agriculture practices helped farmers to cope with the effects of climate change, such as drought and soil erosion, and also helped to reduce greenhouse gas emissions [22]. Another case study in Illinois found that placing a farm under an agricultural conservation easement can avoid an estimated 19,541 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents and 8 tonnes of non-greenhouse gas air pollutant emissions in the first 30 years [23].

Adoption and Challenges of Conservation Agriculture
Factors influencing farmers' adoption of conservation agriculture include technical, social, and economic challenges. Some of the challenges faced in implementing conservation agriculture practices include:

a) Technical challenges: Conservation agriculture practices require specialized knowledge and skills, which may be lacking among farmers. Additionally, the adoption of conservation agriculture practices may require significant changes to existing farming systems, which can be difficult to implement [24].

b) Social challenges: The adoption of conservation agriculture practices may require changes to social norms and cultural practices, which can be difficult to overcome. Additionally, the adoption of conservation agriculture practices may require collective action among farmers, which can be difficult to coordinate [25].

c) Economic challenges: The adoption of conservation agriculture practices may require significant investments in new equipment, inputs, and training, which can be difficult for farmers to afford. Additionally, the adoption of conservation agriculture practices may require changes to existing markets and supply chains, which can be difficult to navigate [24].

To promote widespread adoption of conservation agriculture, it is essential to address the challenges and constraints faced by farmers and provide them with necessary information, resources, and support [24]. Some strategies to promote widespread adoption of conservation agriculture include:

a) Providing technical assistance: Providing farmers with technical assistance, such as training and education, can help to build their knowledge and skills in conservation agriculture practices [26].

b) Facilitating collective action: Facilitating collective action among farmers, such as through farmer groups or cooperatives, can help to coordinate the adoption of conservation agriculture practices and reduce the costs of implementation [27].

c) Providing financial incentives: Providing farmers with financial incentives, such as subsidies or payments for ecosystem services, can help to offset the costs of implementing conservation agriculture practices and provide a financial incentive for adoption [27].

d) **Promoting policy change**: Promoting policy change, such as through the development of supportive policies and regulations, can help to create an enabling environment for the adoption of conservation agriculture practices [27].

Economic and Environmental Benefits of Conservation Agriculture

Some of the economic and environmental benefits of conservation agriculture include:

a) **Cost-effectiveness:** Conservation agriculture practices have been found to improve production efficiency and reduce costs for farmers. This includes timesaving, reduced labor requirements, lower fuel and machinery operating costs, and higher efficiency in terms of more output for a lower input [29].

b) **Savings in water and energy usage:** Conservation agriculture practices, such as the use of cover crops and reduced tillage, can lead to significant water and energy savings. For example, maize, wheat, and legumes have been identified as the most water-saving crops under conservation agriculture practices [28]. Additionally, the reduction of tillage practices and the use of cover crops can help to improve water quality and increase the soil's capacity to retain water [30].

c) **Environmental benefits in terms of biodiversity and ecosystem services:** Conservation agriculture practices can help to protect the soil, improve soil structure, and reduce soil erosion and nutrient losses by maintaining a permanent soil cover and promoting biodiversity [31]. Cover crops, for example, can help suppress weeds, build and improve soil fertility, and promote biodiversity [31, 32]. Additionally, conservation agriculture practices have been found to contribute to carbon sequestration, leading to cleaner air and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions [33].

d) **Improved nutrient management:** Conservation agriculture practices, such as avoiding soil disturbance and using targeted applications of herbicides, can help to increase the soil's capacity to retain nutrients and reduce the quantities of fertilizers needed [34]. This can contribute to more sustainable nutrient management and help to achieve goals such as the European Commission's ambition to reduce fertilizer use by 20% by 2030 [35].

e) **Equity considerations:** Conservation agriculture is accessible to many small-scale farmers who need to obtain high yields with limited land area and inputs. This can help to improve food security and livelihoods for small-scale farmers [36].

Future Directions and Research Gaps in Conservation Agriculture

a) **Precision agriculture:** The use of advanced technologies such as GPS, remote sensing, and data analytics can help farmers optimize their inputs, reduce waste, and improve overall efficiency [37].

b) **Smart irrigation systems:** These systems use sensors and data analysis to deliver the right amount of water to crops, reducing water waste and improving water use efficiency [37].

c) **Robotics and automation**: Autonomous vehicles and robots can perform tasks such as planting, weeding, and harvesting, reducing the need for manual labor and improving efficiency [37].

d) **Biological pest control:** Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques, including the use of beneficial insects and biopesticides, can help reduce the reliance on chemical pesticides and minimize their environmental impact [37].

e) **Agroforestry:** Integrating trees and shrubs into agricultural landscapes can provide multiple benefits, such as improved soil health, increased biodiversity, and enhanced climate resilience [37].

f) **Agroecology:** This approach focuses on understanding and managing ecological processes in agricultural systems, promoting biodiversity, and reducing the use of external inputs [38].

Areas requiring further research and development

1. Understanding farmer decision-making: Improved understanding of the socio-economic and agro-ecological contexts that influence farmer decision-making is needed to develop effective conservation agriculture strategies [37].
2. Addressing knowledge gaps: The intersection of different disciplines, such as agro-ecology and socioeconomics, can help address the knowledge gaps in conservation agriculture research and provide a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness [37].
3. Access to compatible, comprehensive data sets: To overcome the challenges of interdisciplinary research, there is a need for access to compatible, comprehensive data sets that can be used to analyze and evaluate conservation agriculture practices [37].
4. Methodological approaches: Farmer participation and ethnography, as well as on-farm trial research, can serve as a middle ground between disciplinary approaches and help bridge the gap in conservation agriculture research [37].

Potential for scaling up conservation agriculture practices globally.

a) **Investment in research and development:** Continued investment in research and development is crucial for the advancement of conservation agriculture practices and the development of innovative solutions to address global challenges [5].

b) **Policy support:** Governments and international organizations can play a key role in promoting and supporting the adoption of conservation agriculture practices through policy incentives, funding, and capacity building [5].

c) **Knowledge sharing and capacity building:** Collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can help facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices, as well as the development of training programs to build the capacity of farmers and extension workers [5].

d) **Integration with other sustainable agriculture practices:** Conservation agriculture should be integrated with other sustainable agriculture practices, such as organic farming, agroforestry, and agroecology, to maximize its benefits and contribute to a more resilient and sustainable food system [38].

Conclusion

CA practices, such as IPM, agroforestry, and agroecology, can contribute to sustainable and resilient food systems by reducing reliance on chemical pesticides, improving soil health, increasing biodiversity, and minimizing environmental impact. To scale up conservation agriculture practices globally, continued investment in research and development is crucial. Governments and international organizations can play a key role in promoting and supporting the adoption of these practices through policy incentives, funding, and capacity building. Collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers is essential for knowledge sharing, capacity building, and the development of training programs to empower farmers and extension workers. Integration of conservation agriculture with other sustainable agriculture practices, such as organic farming, can maximize its benefits and contribute to a more resilient and sustainable food system. Overall, conservation agriculture offers innovative solutions to address global challenges, and its successful implementation requires interdisciplinary research, policy support, knowledge sharing, and integration with other sustainable practices.

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