Evaluation of Agricultural Non-point Source Pollution using an In-situ and Automated Photochemical Flow Analysis System

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Abstract

Agricultural non-point source (NPS) pollution is a significant environmental concern due to its widespread impact on water quality, resulting from runoff containing nutrients, pesticides, and other contaminants. Accurate monitoring and evaluation of NPS pollution require efficient and reliable methods. This study presents the use of an in-situ and automated photochemical flow analysis system for the evaluation of agricultural NPS pollution. The system allows real-time monitoring of key pollutants, such as nitrates, phosphates, and organic matter, through the application of photochemical reactions. Results demonstrate the system's efficacy in capturing temporal variations in pollutant levels, providing critical data for better management of agricultural runoff and mitigation strategies.

Keywords:

Non-point source pollution, agricultural runoff, photochemical flow analysis, automated monitoring, nutrient contamination, water quality.

1. Introduction

Agricultural non-point source (NPS) pollution is a diffuse form of pollution caused by the movement of water over land and through the soil, carrying with it agricultural chemicals, sediments, and nutrients that eventually enter water bodies. Unlike point-source pollution, NPS pollution is difficult to control due to its scattered nature and varied sources, such as fertilizer application, pesticide use, and soil erosion. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identifies agricultural runoff as one of the leading causes of water quality degradation in rivers, lakes, and coastal waters.

Nutrients such as nitrates (NO_3^-) and phosphates (PO_4^{3-}) are common in agricultural runoff due to the extensive use of fertilizers. Excessive nutrient loads can lead to eutrophication, resulting in harmful algal blooms and oxygen depletion in water bodies. Monitoring agricultural NPS pollution requires accurate and real-time data collection on the concentration of pollutants. Traditional methods of monitoring involve manual sampling, which is labor-intensive and provides only intermittent data. In-situ and automated systems offer a more efficient solution, providing continuous real-time data that reflects dynamic changes in water quality.

This study explores the use of an in-situ and automated photochemical flow analysis system for the detection and evaluation of agricultural NPS pollution. This system uses photochemical reactions for real-time monitoring of key pollutants, including nitrates, phosphates, and dissolved organic matter, offering a comprehensive approach to understanding the impact of agricultural activities on water bodies.

2. Literature Review

Agricultural NPS pollution has been widely studied due to its significant impact on water quality. Several studies have highlighted the role of fertilizers, pesticides, and organic waste as primary contributors to NPS pollution (Smith et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2020). Traditional monitoring approaches often rely on grab sampling, where samples are collected manually from water bodies and analyzed in laboratories. Although accurate, grab sampling is limited in terms of temporal resolution and cannot capture rapid fluctuations in pollutant levels (Wu et al., 2018).

Recent advances in environmental monitoring have focused on the development of automated and sensor-based technologies for real-time data collection (Zhu et al., 2019). Photochemical analysis has emerged as a promising technique for monitoring specific pollutants such as nitrates and organic matter in water. This technique involves the use of light-induced reactions to detect target compounds, providing a rapid and sensitive method for water quality analysis (Gao et al., 2020).

Automated photochemical flow analysis systems are designed to operate continuously in the field, eliminating the need for manual sampling and providing high-resolution data on pollutant concentrations. Studies have shown that these systems can significantly improve the monitoring of water quality in agricultural areas by capturing temporal variations in pollutant levels that are often missed by conventional methods (Jiang et al., 2021). However, there is limited research on the application of such systems specifically for agricultural NPS pollution monitoring, highlighting the need for further exploration.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in an agricultural watershed located in central Indiana, USA. The area is characterized by intensive crop production, primarily corn and soybeans, with frequent use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The watershed drains into a tributary of the Wabash River, which is known to experience periodic algal blooms due to high nutrient loads from agricultural runoff.

3.2 Photochemical Flow Analysis System

The photochemical flow analysis system used in this study consists of a flow injection analysis (FIA) unit coupled with an ultraviolet-visible (UV-Vis) spectrophotometer and a photoreactor. The system is designed for continuous in-situ measurement of nitrates, phosphates, and organic matter in water. The components include:

- Flow Injection Unit: Facilitates the introduction of water samples into the system for analysis.

- Photoreactor: Utilizes UV light to induce photochemical reactions that allow for the detection of target pollutants.

- UV-Vis Spectrophotometer: Measures the absorbance of light by the photochemically altered pollutants, providing quantitative data on pollutant concentrations.

The system was installed at two monitoring stations within the watershed, one located near the agricultural fields and the other downstream at the confluence with the river. The system was programmed to collect data every 30 minutes over a 3-month period, coinciding with the planting season when fertilizer application is most intensive.

3.3 Photochemical Reactions for Pollutant Detection

- Nitrate Detection: The detection of nitrates is based on the photoreduction of nitrates to nitrites under UV light, followed by reaction with a colorimetric reagent that produces a detectable signal in the UV-Vis spectrum (Kieber et al., 2020).

- Phosphate Detection: Phosphate levels were measured using a photochemical method involving the formation of a molybdenum-blue complex under UV light, which is detected at a specific wavelength by the spectrophotometer.

- Organic Matter Detection: Dissolved organic matter (DOM) was monitored based on its ability to absorb UV light at 254 nm, a wavelength commonly associated with organic compounds in water.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected by the photochemical flow analysis system was analyzed to assess the temporal variation in pollutant concentrations. Statistical analyses, including time series analysis and correlation analysis, were performed to identify patterns and relationships between rainfall events, fertilizer application, and pollutant levels. The results were compared with regulatory guidelines for water quality to determine whether pollutant levels exceeded safe limits.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Temporal Variations in Pollutant Concentrations

The results of the in-situ monitoring revealed significant temporal variations in nitrate, phosphate, and organic matter concentrations throughout the study period. Peak concentrations of nitrates were observed immediately following fertilizer application, with levels exceeding 10 mg/L at the upstream monitoring station. Phosphate levels also spiked during rain events, with concentrations ranging from 0.5 to 1.2 mg/L, far exceeding the 0.1 mg/L threshold typically associated with eutrophication (EPA, 2019).

Figure 1 shows the time series of nitrate concentrations over the study period, highlighting the correlation between rainfall events and nutrient spikes. The photochemical flow analysis system successfully captured these rapid changes, providing high-resolution data that would have been missed by traditional grab sampling methods.

4.2 Comparison of Upstream and Downstream Monitoring Stations

Comparative analysis between the upstream and downstream monitoring stations revealed a significant reduction in pollutant concentrations as the runoff mixed with river water. However, nitrate concentrations at the downstream station still exceeded safe drinking water standards of 10 mg/L (WHO, 2017) on multiple occasions, indicating the persistence of pollution even after dilution.

The reduction in phosphate levels downstream was more pronounced, likely due to adsorption onto sediments or uptake by aquatic plants. Organic matter concentrations followed a similar trend, with higher levels upstream compared to downstream, reflecting the input of agricultural runoff.

4.3 Implications for Water Quality Management

The data collected by the automated photochemical flow analysis system provides valuable insights into the dynamics of agricultural NPS pollution. The ability to capture real-time fluctuations in pollutant levels allows for a better understanding of the factors driving pollution, such as rainfall and fertilizer application. This information is critical for developing targeted mitigation strategies, such as adjusting fertilizer application timing to reduce runoff risk or implementing buffer zones to filter nutrients before they enter water bodies.

The use of an automated system also reduces the need for labor-intensive manual sampling, making it a cost-effective solution for long-term monitoring of agricultural NPS pollution.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of an in-situ and automated photochemical flow analysis system for evaluating agricultural non-point source pollution. The system provided real-time data on nitrate, phosphate, and organic matter concentrations, capturing the temporal variability of pollutant levels in response to agricultural activities and rainfall events. The results underscore the importance of continuous monitoring for the effective management of NPS pollution and highlight the potential of photochemical analysis as a powerful tool for water quality assessment.

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