

## The effect of digestate, cattle slurry and mineral fertilization on the winter wheat yield and soil quality parameters

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### ABSTRACT

This study compares the effect of application of digestate, straw, cattle slurry and inorganic fertilizers on crop yield and soil organic matter content. Total organic carbon (C), total organic nitrogen (N), hot water soluble C, microbial biomass C and hydrophobic soil components were evaluated in soil from the field experiment in Prague-Ruzyně (Orthic Luvisol, clay loam) with winter wheat. All fertilized treatments significantly increased grain yield above the level of non-fertilized control (5.68 t/ha), and the sequence was as follows: digestate (9.88 t/ha) > NPK (9.80 t/ha) > cattle slurry (9.73 t/ha) > digestate + straw (9.35 t/ha). Average organic C content in the soil ranged from 1.668–1.704% and the effect of different fertilization was not significant. The highest increase of microbial biomass C was recorded in digestate + straw (43.2% increase compared to control). Highly significant correlations were found between hydrophobic soil components and hot water soluble C ( $r = 0.988$ ;  $P \geq 0.05$ ) and microbial biomass C ( $r = 0.964$ ;  $P \geq 0.05$ ). Total organic N content ranged from 0.157–0.160% and differences among treatments were insignificant. Fertilization with digestate itself brings an effect in increasing crop yield, but does not improve the level of soil organic matter significantly.

**Keywords:** digestion; energy crops; *Triticum aestivum*; macronutrients; animal slurry

The anaerobic digestion of biomass such as energy crops, organic residues and animal wastes for biogas production is considered as one of the most efficient ways of renewable energy production (Vaneekhaute et al. 2013). Subsidy policy through the EU funds contributes to a rapid development of biogas plants in Europe. In the Czech Republic, rather massive development in the implementation of biogas stations has been recorded in the last three years. Along with the growing number of biogas stations, whose number is currently around 550, there is an increasing production of digestate as a by-product of the biogas production. Liquid digestates (fugates) contain more mineral nitrogen (usually 5–6% in dry weight) and less organic carbon than the non-digested input materials (Johansen et al. 2013), and C/N ratio in digestate can be ten times lower than that of farmyard manure (Alburquerque et al. 2012). Digestates also have higher ammonium:total ni-

trogen ratios, decreased organic matter contents, elevated pH values, and reduced viscosities compared to undigested animal manures (Möller and Müller 2012). Due to the increasing use of digestate as a substitute for farmyard manure in practice it is necessary to monitor the effect of the digestate on soil, its quality and fertility. Recently, studies on the fertilizing effects of different types of digestate have been performed (Tambone et al. 2010) as well as short-term incubation experiments comparing the effect of digestate additions and other organic and mineral fertilizers on microbial communities in soil, organic C and N, CO<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>O emissions (Johansen et al. 2013), nutrient content in the soil, microbial biomass and mineralization (Galvez et al. 2012). Longer-term monitoring of the impact of digestate on crop yield and soil properties in field conditions and comparison with different other fertilizers is still missing, due to the short period of massive application of digestate in agriculture.

However, studies published so far have shown that digestate can be a good source of quickly available nitrogen and other macro- and micro-nutrients for plants and can partly replace cattle slurry application or mineral fertilization (Garfi et al. 2011, Albuquerque et al. 2012, Šimon and Kunzová 2013). On the other hand, less organic C is available for growth and activity of the soil microbial community and the soil organic matter stock can gradually deplete with time (Arthurson 2009). When applying digestate, it is therefore appropriate to simultaneously deliver soil organic matter from other sources, mainly by incorporating crop residues and straw. In the present study, the liquid digestate used as a fertilizer for winter wheat under field conditions was evaluated over a three-year period and the effect on crop production and soil properties (regarding the quantity and quality of soil organic matter) was compared with those of a mineral fertilizer and traditional cattle slurry.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study site was located in Prague-Ruzyně, Czech Republic (50°05'15"N, 14°17'28"E). Altitude of the site is 370 m a.s.l., average annual temperature is 8.2°C and the average annual precipitations are 450 mm. The taxonomical soil unit is Orthic Luvisol, clay loam, developed on diluvial sediments mixed with loess (clay content = 27%,  $\text{pH}_{\text{KCl}} = 7.0$ ). The experiment has been running since 2012 and it was established in a randomized design with five fertilization treatments: Control – without organic or mineral fertilization; Dig – digestate; Dig + St – digestate + straw; NPK – mineral fertilization; CSI – cattle slurry. Main characteristics of the digestate and cattle slurry used in the experiment are given in Table 1. The plot size was 3 m × 10 m (30 m<sup>2</sup>). Each of the five treatments had four replicates. Annual doses and nitrogen input by organic and mineral fertilizers applied are shown in Table 2. 30 kg P and 90 kg K was applied per ha annually in mineral and/or organic form. Digestate and cattle slurry were applied to the soil surface with hose applicator and immediately ploughed followed by presowing soil preparation and sowing. Winter wheat (cv. Mulan) was cultivated in 2012–2014; the seed rate was 180 kg/ha and the dates of sowing were September 26,

2012 and September 30, 2013. Grain and straw were harvested in July both in 2013 and 2014 and yield from individual plots was recalculated for t/ha at 85% dry matter. In the period 2013 to 2015, soil sampling was carried out from topsoil in the depths of 0–0.2 m at four sites of each individual plot before mineral fertilization at the beginning of April.

**C fractions and total N.** Microbial biomass C ( $C_{\text{mic}}$ ) was determined by the chloroform fumigation-extraction method (Vance et al. 1987). Hot water soluble C ( $C_{\text{hwl}}$ ) content in the soil samples was determined according to Schulz (1997). Total organic C ( $C_{\text{tot}}$ ) and total organic N ( $N_{\text{tot}}$ ) were determined on a Vario Max analyser (Elementar Analysensysteme GmbH, Hanau, Germany) in air-dried soil samples. The FTIR spectra were measured on the Thermo Nicolet Avatar 320 FTIR spectrometer, equipped by a Smart Diffuse Reflectance Accessory (Nicolet, Madison, USA) in a homogeneous mixture of bulk soil with KBr (FTIR grade, Aldrich, Germany) (Šimon 2007). The FTIR spectra were analysed at absorption bands that indicate the hydrophobic (CH-groups) functional groups. For hydrophobic methyl and methylene groups the CH bands occurred at 3000–2800/cm (Ellerbrock et al. 2005). The area of absorption bands of hydrophobic groups in the FTIR spectra was integrated with spectrometer software (Omnic, version 6a, Nicolet, USA) and was defined as intensities.

**Statistics.** The basic statistical values i.e. averages, standard deviations (SD) and Pearson's

Table 1. Main characteristics of digestate and cattle slurry used in the field experiment

Parameter	Unit	Digestate	Cattle slurry
pH		8.65	8.22
Dry matter (DM)	(%)	6.2	7.0
Total N		6.10	4.80
N <sub>org</sub>		2.44	2.26
N <sub>min</sub>		3.66	2.54
P	(% DM)	1.03	0.78
K		6.70	3.91
Ca		3.08	2.20
Mg		0.83	0.85
Na		0.50	0.52

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Table 2. Average annual doses of organic matter and nitrogen input by organic and mineral fertilizers in the plots of the field experiment

Treatment	Fertilizer (in fresh matter) (t/ha)	Organic nitrogen	Mineral nitrogen	Total nitrogen
		(kg/ha)		
Control	–	–	–	–
Dig	20	30.3	45.3	75.6
Dig + St	20 + 2.5	30.3 + 16.1	45.3	91.7
NPK	–	–	120	120
CSl	30	47.5	53.3	100.8

Control – without organic or mineral fertilization; Dig – digestate; Dig + St – digestate + straw; NPK – mineral fertilization; CSl – cattle slurry

correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) were calculated using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, USA) and Statistica CZ 12.0 (StatSoft. Inc., Tulsa, USA) software. Data for each year were analysed by an analysis of variance. Tukey's *HSD* test was used to determine significance of differences among individual treatments. The data followed by the same letter do not differ significantly ( $P \geq 0.05$ ).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Crop yield.** Average values of winter wheat grain and straw yields in the fertilization treatments are shown in Figure 1. All fertilized treatments significantly increased grain and straw yield compared to non-fertilized control. The increase of grain yield ranged from 39.6–47.4% and the sequence was as follows: digestate > NPK > cattle slurry > digestate + straw. Similarly, Makádi et al. (2012) confirmed that due to the high available nutrients content, digestate application resulted in significantly higher aboveground biomass yields in the case of winter and spring wheat than the farmyard manure and undigested slurry treatment. Field experiments with the application of equivalent amounts of total N indicate that the uptake of N from liquid digested animal slurry equaled that of undigested slurry after surface application, despite the higher  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  content of the digestate (Möller et al. 2008). On the contrary, the application of straw together with digestate increased C/N ratio and partially slowed down mineralization and utilization of nitrogen contained in the digestate by plants. Vegetation pot and field trials with vegetables show that the digestate application resulted in comparable or

better yields in comparison to mineral fertilizers for kohlrabi (Lošák et al. 2011), tomatoes and green peppers (Kouřimská et al. 2012) and summer watermelon (Albuquerque et al. 2012). Garfí et al. (2011) in a field trial experiment documented that the digestate is an appropriate substitute of manure pre-compost for potato fertilization.

**Soil characteristics.** Average  $C_{\text{tot}}$  content in the soil ranged from 1.668–1.704% and the effect of different fertilization was not significant (Table 3). Application of digestate increased  $C_{\text{tot}}$  content by 2% above the level of non-fertilized treatment. It is well documented that positive changes in the organic carbon content in the soil become evident after long-term application of organic fertilizers

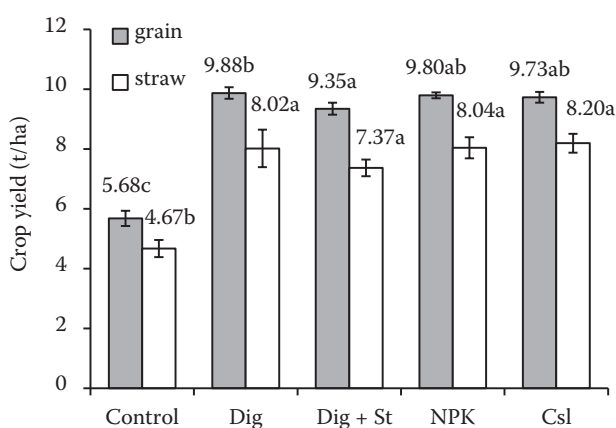


Figure 1. Average winter wheat yield in plots under different fertilization treatments. (experimental site: Prague-Ruzyně). Columns with the same letter do not differ significantly ( $P < 0.05$ ). Bars – standard deviation. Control – without organic or mineral fertilization; Dig – digestate; Dig + St – digestate + straw; NPK – mineral fertilization; CSl – cattle slurry

Table 3. Average content of carbon (C) fractions in soil samples from plots under different fertilization treatments (experimental site: Prague-Ruzyně)

Treatment	C <sub>tot</sub> (%)	C <sub>hwl</sub>	C <sub>mic</sub>	C <sub>mic</sub> /C <sub>tot</sub>
		(μg C/g)		
Control	1.671 ± 0.014	342.0 ± 9	126.7 ± 27.9	0.760 ± 0.173
Dig	1.704 ± 0.001	352.0 ± 23	149.2 ± 72.4	0.875 ± 0.424
Dig + St	1.694 ± 0.047	369.0 ± 20	181.5 ± 65.4	1.061 ± 0.357
NPK	1.691 ± 0.015	344.0 ± 17	150.9 ± 52.5	0.890 ± 0.302
CSl	1.668 ± 0.005	346.0 ± 1	142.2 ± 40.6	0.852 ± 0.241

Control – without organic or mineral fertilization; Dig – digestate; Dig + St – digestate + straw; NPK – mineral fertilization; CSL – cattle slurry;  $C_{\text{tot}}$  – total organic C;  $C_{\text{hwl}}$  – Hot water soluble C;  $C_{\text{mic}}$  – microbial biomass C

(Kubát and Lipavský 2006, Merbach and Schulz 2013). However, the change in the source of organic fertilization may induce changes in the content of soil organic matter (SOM). Such starting changes can be documented by monitoring the content of easily decomposable carbon in the soil in the form of  $C_{\text{hwl}}$ . This SOM fraction accounts for about 2–3% of the  $C_{\text{tot}}$  and is assumed to be the most sensible to changes in organic fertilization (Sparling et al. 1998). All fertilized treatments showed increased  $C_{\text{hwl}}$  content in topsoil as compared with non-fertilized control (Table 3). Application of digestate with straw increased  $C_{\text{hwl}}$  content by 8%, the highest increase of  $C_{\text{hwl}}$  in this treatment is associated with application of straw as a source of degradable organic matter.

Soil microbial biomass is the living component of SOM and it is involved in nutrient transformation and storage. C-biomass content ranged in the assessed time period from 127–181 μg/g soil, low  $C_{\text{mic}}$  was found in non-fertilized control. Both organic amendments (digestate and cattle slurry) as well as the mineral fertilization caused increases in  $C_{\text{mic}}$  compared to the control non-fertilized soil. The highest increase of  $C_{\text{mic}}$  was recorded in Dig + St (43.2% increase) (Table 3). Straw application together with the digestate is a good source of organic C, easily mineralizable N from digestate supports the degradation of straw and increases microbial biomass and soil microbial activity. Alburquerque et al. (2012) mentioned that digestate addition to soil did not provoke any significant effect on total organic carbon but caused increases in  $C_{\text{mic}}$  and  $N_{\text{mic}}$  compared to the control soil. Since actual C-biomass responds to seasonal weather, crop input and fertilization,

measurements of a simple index, such as  $C_{\text{mic}}/C_{\text{tot}}$  ratio can clarify the carbon availability for microorganisms, degree of conversion to microbial biomass C and the stabilisation or losses of soil carbon (Melero et al. 2007). In our experiment, high  $C_{\text{mic}}/C_{\text{tot}}$  ratio (39.7% higher compared to control) was recorded for digestate + straw where the increase of C-biomass was the highest as compared with other treatments. Liu et al. (2010) found the lowest ratios in N fertilized or control soils, and the highest in farmyard manure + NP.

Average intensities of hydrophobic components derived from FTIR spectra for individual treatments are shown in Table 4. All kinds of fertilization increased the amount of hydrophobic components in SOM as compared to non-fertilized control. Statistically significant increase (by 45.5%) was recorded for application of digestate + straw followed by digestate without straw. High positive correlations were found between hydrophobic components in SOM and  $C_{\text{hwl}}$  ( $r = 0.988$ ;  $P \geq 0.05$ ) and  $C_{\text{mic}}$  ( $r = 0.964$ ;  $P \geq 0.05$ ). Demyan et al. (2012) found a positive correlation between the same peak area of FTIR spectra and  $C_{\text{hwl}}$  as the present study. Such a positive correlations indicate the hypothesized labile nature of the compounds related to this peak area.

$N_{\text{tot}}$  content ranged in the assessed time period from 0.157–0.160% and differences among treatments were minimal (Table 4) although nitrogen doses varied and for example mineral NPK fertilization gave 120 kg N/ha. From the results it is evident that most of the applied mineral N from NPK and mineralized nitrogen from digestate and cattle slurry was utilized by plants during vegetation or was partly lost from soil by denitrifica-

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Table 4. Average hydrophobic components of soil organic matter and total organic nitrogen ( $N_{\text{tot}}$ ) in soil samples from plots under different fertilization treatments (experimental site: Prague-Ruzyně)

Treatment	Hydrophobic components (intensity FTIR spectra)	$N_{\text{tot}}$ (%)	$C_{\text{tot}}/N_{\text{tot}}$
Control	$0.536 \pm 0.025$	$0.157 \pm 0.001$	$10.66 \pm 0.01$
Dig	$0.639 \pm 0.038$	$0.160 \pm 0.001$	$10.69 \pm 0.07$
Dig + St	$0.780 \pm 0.035$	$0.159 \pm 0.002$	$10.62 \pm 0.17$
NPK	$0.588 \pm 0.019$	$0.158 \pm 0.002$	$10.71 \pm 0.20$
CSL	$0.599 \pm 0.068$	$0.160 \pm 0.002$	$10.45 \pm 0.17$

Control – without organic or mineral fertilization; Dig – digestate; Dig + St – digestate + straw; NPK – mineral fertilization; CSL – cattle slurry;  $C_{\text{tot}}$  – total organic carbon

tion, volatilization or leaching (Meng et al. 2005). C/N ratio in the soil does not differ significantly between individual treatments and ranged from 10.45–10.71 (Table 4). The results obtained in this field experiment indicate that digestate with the density of the liquid phase (dry weight 6.2%) and N content (6.1% in dry weight) is close to cattle slurry (dry weight 7%, N content in dry weight 4.8%) but it is rather similar to mineral N fertilizer by form of the contained nitrogen and rate of N utilization by plant. Fertilization with digestate brings an effect on crop yields increase, but does not improve significantly the level of organic matter in the soil, so in longer-term it is necessary to add organic matter from other sources.

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