



## Investigation the Effect of Conservation Tillage on Soil Organic Matter (SOM) and Soil Organic Carbon (SOC) (The Review)

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 19 February 2015;

Received in revised form:

15 July 2015;

Accepted: 23 July 2015;

#### Keywords

 Conservation tillage,  
 Soil organic matter,  
 SOC.

### ABSTRACT

Pores and organic matter take a multitude of forms in soil and their characteristics change in space and time following a change in tillage practices as a new “steady state” is approached. Information on the variation with depth (stratification) in the characteristics of pores and organic matter and the rates of changes in these characteristics are vital to interpreting the short- and long-term impacts of the reduction of using conventional tillage on the productivity and hydrology of agricultural soils. This information is also of value in estimating the effect of a reduction in tillage on the sequestration of carbon in agricultural soils. The influence of tillage on bulk density, macro porosity and organic matter content was found to be documented more extensively than the effects on pore size distribution, soil organic matter fractions and their interactions at different soil depths. Many of the reports documenting tillage-induced changes in soil porosity and organic matter were based on measurements at a specific time after initiating the tillage trial. The potential advantages of conservation tillage in organic farming are reduced erosion, greater macro porosity in the soil surface due to larger number of earthworms, more microbial activity and carbon storage, less run-off and leaching of nutrients, reduced fuel use and faster tillage. Conversion from conventional (CT) to no-tillage (NT) resulted in an immediate change in the placement of aboveground crop residue and the reduced fragmentation of the soil matrix may also slow the mineralization of SOC.

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### Introduction

Soil porosity and organic matter content play a critical role in the biological productivity and hydrology of agricultural soils. Pores are of different size, shape and continuity and these characteristics influence the infiltration, storage and drainage of water, the movement and distribution of gases, and the ease of penetration of soil by growing roots. Organic matter is composed of living biomass and materials that differ in stage of decomposition and degree of association with mineral material. These different forms of organic matter collectively represent a reservoir of nutrients that are critical to plant growth. Recently, a number of studies have shown that the amount of soil organic matter (SOM) increased at 0–20 cm soil depth with the application of conservation tillage. Frequent tillage destroys SOM fractions, and urges the transfer of SOM to deep soil layers. The elimination of tillage favored the accumulation of SOM. Conservation tillage covers a range of practices which conserve soil moisture and reduce soil erosion by maintaining a minimum of 30% of the soil surface covered by residue after drilling. Generally, conservation tillage includes a shallow working depth without soil inversion, i.e. no tillage or reduced or shallow tillage equipped with tines or discs. Shallow plowing, to no more than 10 cm, should be included in conservation tillage because burial of crop residues is usually incomplete. Conventional systems of tillage leave less than 30% of land by crop residues – and often none – on the soil surface after crop establishment. Conventional tillage is invariably deeper (20–35

cm) with inversion of the soil by moldboard plow, disc plow or spading machine.

Conservation tillage leaves an organic mulch at the soil surface, which reduces run-off, increases the surface soil organic matter (SOM) promoting greater aggregate stability which restricts soil erosion (Franzluubbers, 2002a). Other beneficial aspects of conservation tillage are preservation of soil moisture and increase of soil biodiversity (Holland, 2004). Conservation tillage omitting annual deep plowing is accepted to reduce water erosion, to improve soil quality (Franzluubbers, 2002), to sequester carbon in soils and, thus, to alleviate global climate change (Lal et al., 1999;). In the past decade, application of conservation tillage practices has considerably increased in several regions of Germany. About 25% of the national sugar beet crop was grown with conservation tillage in 2002. Although the environmental benefits are obvious, for the farmers cost reductions is the primary driving force to apply conservation tillage practices, predominantly consisting of non-inverting shallow-mixing tillage operations. The potential for reduction of machinery costs is especially high if these techniques are implemented for all crops grown on a farm during at least several consecutive years. Long-term conservation tillage may, however, decrease yields due to soil compaction in the lower layers of the previously plowed horizon (Ahl et al., 1998) or due to increased weed and slug infestation (El Titi, 2003a, 2003b), mostly caused by management decisions inappropriate for the local conditions.

Soil organic matter (SOM) is an important indicator of soil fertility and productivity because of its crucial role in soil chemical, physical and biological properties (Gregorich et al., 1994). Therefore, maintenance of satisfactory level of SOM is necessary for sustainable agroecosystems. There are two ways to increase soil organic C (SOC): (1) increase of C input, or (2) decrease of SOC loss and decomposition. Carbon input can be increased and decomposition decreased by adopting residue management and using conservation tillage (no-tillage or reduced tillage). However, short- and medium-term SOC changes are difficult to detect because of high background C content and its temporal and spatial variability (Bosatta and Agren, 1994). A suite of labile C fractions is typically required to assess SOM quality because of the multifunctional role of SOM (Haynes, 2005; Soon et al., 2007).

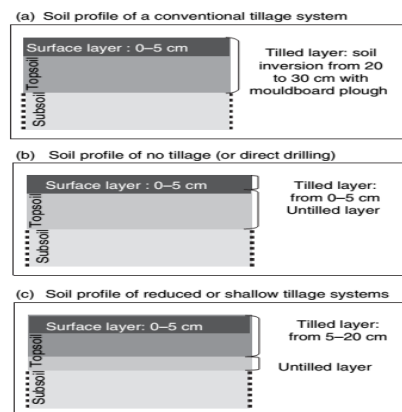
Reducing the intensity of soil tillage decreases energy consumption and the emission of carbon dioxide, while increasing carbon sequestration (Holland, 2004). Reducing the intensity of tillage increases the sustainability of tillage systems by speeding up crop establishment and reducing labour demand (Davies & Finney, 2002). Organic production of field crops generally consumes up to 20% less energy than non-organic agriculture (Williams et al., 2006). However, environmental burdens, such as global warming potential or eutrophication, can be greater under organic farming (Williams et al., 2006). Thus conservation tillage may improve the environmental and economic performance of organic farming.

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements standards (IFOAM, 2002) recommend that organic farmers should minimize loss of topsoil through minimal tillage, contour plowing, crop selection, maintenance of soil plant cover and other management practices that conserve soil and 'should take measures to prevent erosion, compaction, salinization, and other forms of soil degradation'. Effectively, organic farmers are encouraged to adopt conservation tillage, especially if they are located in areas susceptible to erosion. Conservation tillage offers benefits that could improve the soil fertility, soil quality and the environmental impact of organic crop production. However, Koepke (2003) reported that organic farmers generally use the moldboard plow, working to a greater depth (Munro et al., 2002) or to a lesser depth (Watson et al., 2002) than in conventional agriculture.

#### Preservation of soil quality and fertility

##### Residue distribution within the soil profile

The different types of tillage system involve different stratification of the soil layers (Figure 1a-c). The soil is divided into three layers: the surface, the topsoil and the subsoil layers. The surface layer corresponds to the seedbed. The topsoil is historically the plow depth (20–40 cm). The subsoil is the undisturbed part of the soil profile below the topsoil. The tilled layer varying from 5 to 40 cm contains the crop residues. Less crop residue is left on the soil surface with reduced or shallow tillage than with no tillage. The reduced tillage method leaving least residues at the surface is shallow plowing. Furthermore, disc harrows incorporate more crop residues than chisel tines. The main impacts of the different tillage systems on seedbed quality are due to changes in the thickness, extent of soil inversion and extent of mixing of crop residue caused by the implement. The extent of residue incorporation is influenced by the degree of disintegration of the residues, e.g. straw length. The quantity of SOM in the whole topsoil varies due to the interacting influences of climate, topography, soil type and crop management history (fertilizer use, tillage, rotation and time) (Kay & VandenBygaart, 2002).



**Figure 1** (a) Soil profile of a conventional tillage system, (b) soil Profile of no tillage (or direct drilling), (c) soil profile of reduced or shallow tillage systems

Thus, in conservation tillage, SOM and microbiological activity are stratified in the soil profile, according to the burial depth of crop residues and manures (Needelman et al., 1999; Franzluebbers, 2002a). However, several authors have shown that there is no significant increase in the overall mass of soil organic carbon (C) (Table 2) or of soil microbial biomass (Table 1) in the whole topsoil in different tillage systems. SOM, organic C and soil microbial biomass increase in the tilled layer and are unchanged or decreased in the untilled layer below conservation tillage compared with conventional tillage (Table 1). Similarly, total N, organic N and mineralizable N, phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) follow the same pattern as C and SOM, with greater concentration in the soil surface layer (tilled layer) in conservation tillage, but without a significant increase in the whole topsoil. In a pan-European study, Ball et al. (1998) concluded that additional carbon fixation by the storage of organic matter and oxidation of atmospheric methane was very limited under reduced tillage and likely to last for a short period only. The authors also considered that soil nitrate was vulnerable to loss by denitrification, particularly in wet, fine-textured soils. However, less N is likely to be lost as a result of run-off and leaching than under conventional tillage. According to Sisti et al. (2004), the combined action of conservation tillage and the input of fresh organic matter as leguminous residues increased the soil C and, in the long term, improved the mineral N supply to crops. In a long-term study, Fließbach & Mäder (2000) and Pfiffner & Mäder (1997) showed that soil microbial biomass and its activity increased in organic farming compared with conventional management. Comparing properties of organically and conventionally managed soils of 28 sites on commercial farms, Munro et al. (2002) concluded that soils in organic systems contained more organic matter and total N than conventionally farmed soils. Frequent input of fresh organic matter, with no pesticide use, is the most probable cause of the increasing percentage of organic matter and biological activity found in organic systems. However, according to Shepherd et al. (2002) (cited in Stockdale et al. (2002)), few differences in organic matter content exist between organically and conventionally managed pastures in the UK. The main difference in SOM was found between conventional and organic arable land, where fresh organic matter was applied more frequently in organic systems. Moreover, no consistent difference was found in the quantity of nutrient reserves held in organic forms, between organically and conventionally managed soils (Stockdale et al., 2002). The quantity and quality of crop residues and animal manures will determine the amount of N which becomes available (Berry et al., 2002).

**Table 1. Effects of tillage systems on SOM, organic C and N, soil microbial biomass**

Soil components	Comparison of conservation tillage relative to conventional tillage	References
Organic matter	More in the tilled layer Similar in the untilled layer	Andrade et al. (2003) Key & VandenBygaart (2002)
Organic carbon	More in the tilled layer Similar in the untilled layer Similar throughout the topsoil	Tebrugge & During (1999) and Andrade et al. (2003) Balesdent et al. (2000) and Deen & Katakai (2003) Anken et al. (2004)
Total carbon	More in the 0-5 cm layer similar in the 5-20 cm layer under no tillage	Six et al. (1999)
Microbial biomass	More in the tilled layer  Similar in the untilled layer More active microbial biomass in the 0-5 cm layer under no tillage No difference in total soil microbial biomass in the 0-5 cm layer under no tillage	Stockfisch et al. (1999) and Key & VandenBygaart (2002) Aon et al. (2001) and Key & VandenBygaart (2002) Alvarez & Alvarez (2000)
Microbial diversity	More fungi than bacteria in crop residue at soil surface	Kladivko (2001)
Micro-organisms	<i>Specific effects:</i> More Anacid species More endogeic species during a short period If plough pan is present in conservation tillage: less endogeic species <i>Effect on quantity:</i> More Earthworms. Nematodes Depends on tillage depth and intensity (no tillage > reduced tillage) and also on time and soil type	Rasmussen (1999)     Chan (2001). Kladivko (2001) and birkas et al. (2004) Chan (2001)

**Table 2. Effects of tillage systems on N, P and K**

Soil components	Comparison conservation vs. conventional tillage	References
Total nitrogen	More in the tilled layer with shallow tillage Similar in the untilled layer	Stockfisch et al. (1999)
Organic nitrogen	More in the tilled layer Similar in the untilled layer	Balesdent et al. (2000) Balesdent et al. (2000) and Aon et al. (2001)
Mineralizable nitrogen	More in the tilled layer Similar in the whole topsoil	Six et al. (1999) and Balesdent et al. (2000) Six et al. (1999)
Mineralizable nitrogen	More in the tilled layer Similar in the untilled layer More in the tilled layer after 10 years Less in the whole topsoil after 10 years More in the whole topsoil in long term Less in the whole topsoil in short term	Kandeler et al. (1998) and Young & Ritz (2000)  Ahl et al. (1998)  Andrade et al. (2003)
Available phosphorus	More in the tilled layer Similar in the untilled layer	Rasmussen (1999)
Available potassium	More in the tilled layer under shallow tillage Similar in the untilled layer	Rasmussen (1999)

**Table 3. Effects of tillage systems on soil porosity and aggregate stability**

Soil components	Comparison of conservation tillage vs. conventional tillage	References
Aggregate stability	More stable in surface layer More clay decreases differences between tillage system	Ball et al. (1996), Arshad et al. (1999) and Stenberg et al. (2000) Tebrugge & During (1999)
Total porosity	Greater or no difference in surface layer (0-5 cm) with no tillage No difference in tilled layer with shallow tillage Less in the untilled layer and the whole topsoil	Guerif (1994) and Rasmussen (1999)  Ball & O'Sullivan (1987) and Key & VandenBygaart (2002)
Soil bulk density	Smaller or no difference in surface layer (0-5 cm) with no tillage Greater in the untilled layer and the whole topsoil  No difference or higher in the subsoil	Tebrugge & During (1999)  Arshad et al. (1999), Rasmussen (1999) and Deen & Katakai (2003) Tebrugge & During (1999)
Pore size distribution	More micro and mesopores in conservation tillage Fewer pores with diameter from 30 or 100 $\mu\text{m}$ More boipores (diameter 100-500 $\mu\text{m}$ ) Fewer irregular and elongated shaped pored > 1000 $\mu\text{m}$ Greater connectivity of vertical biological porosity in long term	Guerif (1994) and Key & VandenBygaart (2002)  Chan (2001) Ball & O'Sullivan (1987) and Key & vandenBygaart (2002)  Chan (2001) and Anken et al. (2004)

Hence, although we expect that the combined effects of organic farming and conservation tillage could improve the SOM content and consequently the soil nutrient reserves in organic stockless system, further research on the combined effects is required. The number of earthworms and their activity increase in conservation compared with conventional tillage (Table 1). Plowing disrupts earthworm soil habitats, especially deep burrowing species (anecic), and exposes earthworms to predation and desiccation (Holland, 2004). In the same way, the increase of fresh organic matter in organic farming is an additional resource stimulating trophic and burrowing activity of earthworms (Gerhardt, 1997; Glover et al., 2000; Shepherd et al., 2000). Thus, both organic farming and conservation tillage improve the activity of earthworms. This is especially important in arable systems where generally earthworm activity is much reduced compared with grassland.

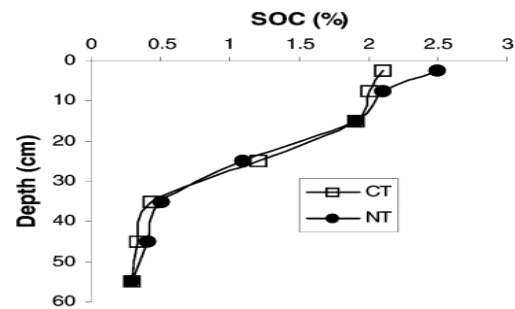
#### Aggregate stability

One of the main objectives of conservation tillage is to reduce soil erosion (Holland, 2004). Soil organic matter, concentrated near the soil surface with conservation tillage (Table 1), and especially labile organic matter (Ball et al., 2005), encourages microbial activity leading to increased soil aggregate stability (Table 3) and improved soil structure. In the same way, fungal hyphae, more abundant in the surface layer in conservation tillage (Table 1), play an important role in aggregating and stabilizing soil structure. Also, with no tillage, crop residues at the soil surface prevent surface crusting (Azooz & Arshad, 1996). This improved aggregate stability tends to enhance infiltration rate which in turn results in less run-off containing dissolved nutrients and adsorbed P.

Organic matter plays an important role in the maintenance of soil structure. Shepherd et al. (2002) assessed soil structure in over 90 arable fields managed under organic and conventional systems. They found that the potential for structural improvement in soils under organic production was greater than in conventional soils due to the greater biological and earthworm activity enhanced by regular application of organic matter, improving aggregate stability and biological porosity. Helfrich (2003) found that increasing the duration of the ley phase in an organic ley-arable rotation increased aggregate stability. Voorhees & Lindstrom (1984) (cited in Munkholm et al., 2001) considered that a period of about 3–5 years from adoption of conservation tillage is required to improve the friability of the surface layer of fine-to-medium-textured soils.

#### Total organic matter

Soil inversion by moldboard plowing tends to concentrate plant residue at the bottom of the plow layer (Allmaras et al., 1996); however annual inversion results in a progressive homogenization of soil organic carbon (SOC) in the plow layer (Yang and Wander, 1999; McCarty et al., 1998; Wander et al., 1998). Shallow tillage will also homogenize SOC within the depth of tillage (Franzluebbers and Arshad, 1996b), but may result in some stratification of SOC with depth (Yang and Wander, 1999). The degree of stratification is usually a function of intensity of disking and plowing, with the amount of surface residue remaining after tillage acting as the most important variable (Duiker and Lal, 1999). Conversion from CT to NT results in an immediate change in the placement of aboveground crop residue and the reduced fragmentation of the soil matrix may also slow the mineralization of SOC. Crop residue that was mechanically distributed throughout the tillage zone under CT remains at the soil surface under NT. Leaching of organic solutes and redistribution by soil faunal activities become the primary physical transport mechanisms under reduced tillage.



**Fig 3. SOC concentration as a function of soil depth in NT and CT at the end of 22 years in a silt loam in southern Ontario**

Initial changes in SOC under NT would be expected to primarily reflect changes in the placement of C, with C being gained in the vicinity of the soil surface and lost at lower depths. The balance between the two processes could change with time. In a silt loam from Ontario, SOC under NT for 22 years was greater than under CT at a depth of 0–5 cm, but not different below 5 cm (Fig. 3). Tillage-induced changes in bulk density extended to 10 cm and calculations on an equivalent mass basis resulted in significant accumulation of SOC (3 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup>) to a depth of 10 cm (Yang and Kay, unpublished data). During the first 3 years of converting a silt loam in Maryland from CT to NT management SOC increases at 0–5 cm, but decreased at 12.5–20 cm (McCarty et al., 1998). There was no detectable change in SOC content to 20 cm on an equivalent weight basis. From six different cool, humid soils of eastern Canada, SOC was not different between CT and NT comparisons of 3–11 years at a depth of 0–60 cm (Angers et al., 1997). Soil organic C in the top 10 cm was greater than under CT, but was lower at a depth of 20–40 cm and not different at a depth of 40–60 cm. At a depth of 0–15 cm, SOC increased significantly in a silt loam from Ohio between 18 and 32 years after implementing NT, but decreased slightly at 22.5–30 cm (Dick and Durkalski, 1998). Total SOC to a depth of 30 cm at the end of 32 years was significantly greater (1.7 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup>) under NT than under CT. Variability in processes across landscapes may alter the storage potential of SOC with conservation tillage. VandenBygaart et al. (2002) found that erosion/deposition within landscape units on several farms in southern Ontario had a very strong influence on the dynamics of SOC. At shoulder slope landscape positions where there had been a history of soil loss during CT, there was primarily a gain in SOC stored in the profile at the end of 15 years of NT. However, in depositional, concave landscape positions where there was evidence of soil deposition during CT, a majority of the sites had lost SOC since NT had been implemented. Therefore, SOC dynamics under conservation tillage are affected by previous soil loss and redistribution and extrapolations beyond research domains should be minimized. The storage potential of SOC with conservation tillage may also be influenced by management decisions made in previous years. In a side-by-side comparison of CT and NT for 19 years on a private farm in southern Ontario, SOC in the profile (on an equivalent mass basis) was 70 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> greater under NT than CT (Yang and Kay, 2001b). Tile drainage had been installed 7 years before the tillage comparison had been initiated. Soil organic C was declining in both tillage treatments at the end of 6 years. The remarkably large difference in SOC was not due to sequestration of SOC, but rather a reduction in the rate of SOC mineralization under NT.

Research indicates that SOC accumulates near the soil surface and is lost at lower depths soon after a conversion from CT to NT practices. More information is required on how the

balance between these processes changes with time in soils of different texture, drainage and under different climates. In addition, more information is required on the depths at which these processes are dominant. Information on how these processes interact with processes that vary across landscapes will be particularly critical to estimations of C budgets arising from widespread adoption of conservation tillage.

Recently the influence of tillage on various fractions of soil organic matter has been investigated. Effects of tillage on organic matter fractions have been based on segregation by particle-size (Angers et al., 1993), particle density (Alvarez et al., 1998), fractions in soil aggregate size classes (Beare et al., 1994; Bajracharya et al., 1997), and in biological (Angers et al., 1993; Franzluebbers et al., 1995; Needelman et al., 1999) and chemical (McCallister and Chien, 2000) fractions of soil. A reduction in tillage would be expected to initially affect microbial biomass and relatively undecomposed crop residue. Soil microbial biomass C in the 0–5 cm depth under NT for 4 years increased 10–23% compared with shallow tillage, but this increase was gradually offset with time by a decline at lower depths (Carter, 1986). Needelman et al. (1999) found that NT affected the vertical distribution, but not the overall amount of SOC and particulate organic matter (POM) under NT for 5 years compared with CT in soils from Illinois. Concentration of SOC and POM in the upper 5 cm of soil was greater under NT than under CT, but lower in the 5–15 cm depth. Similar results were observed by Wander et al. (1998). Yang and Kay (2001b) found there was about twice as much total loose POM and occluded POM in the top 5 cm of a soil under NT for 19 years compared with CT at a private farm in southern Ontario. However, at 10–20 cm depth POM was lower under NT than under CT.

Texture may have a significant effect on the protection of organic C fractions when soils are converted to NT. At the end of 19 years, sequestration of SOC occurred primarily in the POM fraction in a sandy loam (Yang and Kay, 2001b). However, in the clay loam portion of the field, sequestration of SOC was dominant in the heaviest or humic fraction of the soil. POM tended to accumulate more under NT than under CT in soils with higher clay content in northern Alberta and British Columbia (Franzluebbers and Arshad, 1997).

Based on this review, POM and total SOM become concentrated near the soil surface in NT systems, presumably due to the lack of incorporation of crop residue by tillage. The distribution of microbial biomass C may be related to the placement of crop residue. More research is needed on the changes in forms of organic matter that are most humified or most closely associated with the mineral fraction following a change in tillage practices. This information is critical to understand SOC dynamics and potential sequestration upon conversion to conservation tillage. More information is needed on the influence of texture and climate on the changes in SOC fractions with conservation tillage.

### Conclusions

The maintenance of soil organic matter levels and the optimization of nutrient cycling are essential to the sustained productivity of agricultural systems. Both are related closely to the bioturbating activities of macrofauna and the microbially-driven mobilization and immobilization processes, which the activities of large invertebrates also encourage. Maintaining soil organic matter content requires a balance between addition and decomposition rates. As changes in agricultural practices can engender marked changes in both the pool size and turnover rate of soil organic matter, it is important to analyse their nature and impacts. Crop production worldwide has generally resulted in a

decline in soil organic matter levels and, consequently, in a decline of soil fertility. Converting grasslands and forestlands to arable agriculture results in the loss of about 30 percent of the organic C originally present in the soil profile. On reasonably fertile soils with reliable water supply, yields in long-term arable agricultural systems have been maintained at very high levels by applying substantial amounts of fertilizer and other soil amendments. In low-input agricultural systems, yields generally decline rapidly as nutrient and soils organic matter levels decline. However, restoration is possible through the use of fallow lands, mixed crop-livestock and agroforestry systems, and crop rotations, conservation tillage.

Traditional mold-board plow and disc-tillage cropping systems tend to cause rapid decomposition of soil organic matter, leave the soil susceptible to wind and water erosion, and create plow pans below the cultivation depth. By contrast, reduced- or zero-tillage systems leave more biological surface residues, provide environments for enhanced soil activity, and maintain more intact and interconnected large pores and more soil aggregates, which are better able to withstand raindrop impact. Water can infiltrate more readily and rapidly into the soil with reduced tillage and this helps protect the soil from erosion. In addition, organic matter decomposes less rapidly under reduced-tillage systems. No-tillage systems have proved especially useful for maintaining and increasing soil organic matter.

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