
*International Journal of Plant & Soil Science*
*14(4): 1-6, 2017; Article no.IJPSS.31892*
*ISSN: 2320-7035*

**SCIENCEDOMAIN** *international*
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# Testing Selected Soils from Bamyan Center Agricultural Research Farms for Initial Macro and Micro Nutrients with Focus on Phosphorus Availability

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***Authors' contributions***

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

***Article Information***

DOI: 10.9734/IJPSS/2017/31892
Editor(s):
(1) Radim Vacha, Deputy Director of Research and Development, Research Institute for Soil and Water Conservation, Czech Republic.
Reviewers:
(1) Anélia Marais, Werstern Cape Department of Agriculture, South Africa.
(2) Mercy Ijenyo, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
(3) Mónica Guadalupe Lozano Contreras, National Institute of Forest Research Agricultural and Livestock (INIFAP), México.
Complete Peer review History: http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history/18106

***Original Research Article***

***Received 29th January 2017***
***Accepted 28th February 2017***
***Published 9th March 2017***

## ABSTRACT

Phosphorus (P) and micronutrients deficiencies are common in alkaline soils. Alkaline soils make up some of the most productive agricultural lands in the Bamyan center of Bamyan province in central Afghanistan and little is known about the phosphorus fertility status of these soils. The objectives of this study were to determine the soil fertility status of 4 soils collected from the four research farms in Bamyan center and also to conduct P incubation studies on these soils to determine the fixation and availability of added P. The experimental design was a randomized complete block with 3 replications of each treatment. Soils used in this study had pH > 8.0, free $CaCO_3$ contents of 9.3-10% and texture ranged from silty clay loam to sandy loam. Seven rates of P (0, 5.6, 10.9, 16.4, 21.8, 32.8, 43.7 mg $kg^{-1}$) were added as monocalcium phosphate [Ca $(H_2PO_4)$ $\cdot 2H_2O$]. Soils were incubated at approximately 0.03 MPa soil tension for 15, 30, 45, 60, 75 and 90 days at 25℃ and the Mehlich 3 soil test was used to determine available P. Mehlich 3 extractable P did not change consistently with time so data were averaged over all 6 sampling periods to

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determine the effects of P rate on Mehlich 3 P soil test levels. Soils segregated into two groups of two soils each that responded similarly in their response to P applications. Approximately 70 percent of the applied P remained available in one group of soils, while in the other group of soils, approximately 50 percent of the applied P remained available.

*Keywords: Bamyan soil characteristics; calcareous soil; phosphorus; Mehlich 3 soil test.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Phosphorus (P) is an essential nutrient for plant growth and its deficiency is common in calcareous soils. Soil P is often not available at the minimum level needed for plant growth and available soil P can be improved by adding P fertilizers [1]. Because P is a finite resource, proper management of fertilizer P is necessary to maximize crop production while minimizing the risk of P loss to the environment. Phosphorus in agricultural soils appears in three fractions: organic P (25-30%), insoluble inorganic P (about 75%) and a small soluble P fraction. Less than 10% of the total P in soil is available in the plant-animal life cycle [2].

Phosphorus makes up approximately 0.2% of plant dry weight and P is a component of key molecules such as phospholipids, nucleic acids and ATP, so plants cannot grow well without a sufficient supply of P [3]. Although the total amount of P in soils can be relatively high, because most of this P is not present in plant-available forms it is important to make sure that optimum P fertilizer management strategies are developed to ensure plant productivity.

Little research has been conducted on calcareous soils of Afghanistan, and these are the most highly productive agricultural lands in the country.

Not all of the P fertilizer applied to soils is available to plants due to surface adsorption and precipitation processes, particularly in calcareous soils [4]. For example, there was a negative correlation between P fertilizer and $CaCO_3$ content when available P was measured as resin extractable P in 20 calcareous soils of the continental USA [5]. For another group of calcareous soils from several countries, researchers found that P availability after both 30 and 180 days of incubation was closely correlated to $CaCO_3$ content [6]. Larsen and Widdowson [7] reported that P sorption in calcareous soils increased with increased $CaCO_3$ content.

Ryan et al. [8] found that solid phase $CaCO_3$ proved to be the most dominant phase controlling P reactions in the soils they studied. However, some studies argue that the reactivity of $CaCO_3$ could be more dependent on the specific surface area, which is related to$CaCO_3$ particle size distribution, than total $CaCO_3$ when relating soil properties to P reactions in calcareous soils [9]. The same idea has been confirmed by Borrero et al. [10].

Soil pH affects P solubility and plant uptake [11]. Researchers suggest that phosphate adsorption capacity increases as pH decreases (Bolan and Hedley [12]. According to some researchers, it is important to understand the effect of pH on P partitioning to explain differences in observed P sorption levels in soil [13]. Tunesi et al. [13] found that in Na-saturated soils, phosphate partitioning into the solid phase decreased as pH increased. Moreover, according to these researchers, at higher pH values lower P sorption can be observed at the initial portion of the isotherm. Tunesi et al. [13] also suggested that a higher pH value could decrease the solubility of Ca-P mineral phases and increase precipitation, which would further decrease solution P.

An incubation study on three calcareous soils of the UK indicated that decreasing soil pH could increase soil P solubility [11]. They also pointed out that the formation of insoluble Ca minerals was the key factor in decreasing P availability, particulary in higher pH soils. Laboratory studies also have indicated that P sorption can vary with pH [14]. These researchers also believe that P sorption decreases as pH increases and as a result, the surface charge becomes more negative.

The effect of soil pH on the dissolution of phosphate rocks and the availability of inorganic P to plants has been studied by many researchers. For example, Bolan and Hedley [12] showed an increase in plant-available P from phosphate rocks with decreased soil pH.

Keeping in mind on the above information about the low P availability in alkaline soil, the present investigation was conducted during 2016 -2017 at soil science laboratory, Bamyan university, in Bamyan center with the latitude of 34o N and Longitude of 67o E with the following objectives:

1) To determine the soil fertility status of soils to be collected from the Bamyan University farms and Department of Agriculture Research Farms and;
2) To conduct P incubation studies on these soils to determine the fixation and availability of added P.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Routine Soil Analyses

Four soils were collected from four agricultural research farms of Bamyan. Soil samples were air dried and ground to pass through a 2-mm sieve for all laboratory analyses.The Bamyan University soil fertility laboratory was used to conduct all the analysis.

### 2.2 Phosphorus Incubation Study

The incubation experiment will be a split plot design with three blocked replicates. Whole unit treatments of 4 soils from Bamyan, with P applied at 7 different rates (0, 5.6, 10.9, 16.4, 21.8, 32.8, 43.7 mg P $kg^{-1}$). Subsamples were taken 6 times after 15, 30, 45, 60, 75and 90 days of incubation and Mehlich 3 P was measured on each sample. Finally, the statistical analysis (ANOVA) has been conducted to analyze the data.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Soil Chemical and Physical Properties

The 4 soils used in this experiment varied in their initial P contents and other soil chemical and physical properties (Table 1 and Table 2). The soils' initial total P ranged from 19.5 to24.6 mg $kg^{-1}$ (Table 1). Soils pH and percent $CaCO_3$ ranged from 8.3 to 8.7 and 9.3 to 10.7%, respectively. Soil textural class ranged from silty clay loam to sandy loam and clay content ranged from 18-36% (Table 2).

### 3.2 Effect of Applied Phosphorus on Mehlich 3 Phosphorus

Mehlich 3 soil test P increased with P additions at all sampling times, but the magnitude of increase in soil test P varied among incubation times and did not follow any pattern that could be explained based on soil properties or time. Therefore, the treatment response was averaged over time and only the effect of P rates on the change in Mehlich 3 soil P test level was considered. Soils 1 and 2 responded similarly to each other, but significantly different ($P < 0.01$) from soils 3 and 4, with respect to the change in Mehlich 3 soil test P with P additions (Table 3). Even though soils 1 and 2 differed in texture, pH, and initial P content responded similarly to P application rate (Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3). These soils all had greater initial soil P levels compared to soils 3 and 4 (Table 1).

The predicted values for the increase in Mehlich 3 soil test P with P addition for these two soils were described by the following equation:

$$Y= 8.97+ 0.01X^2$$

Where Y equals the change in soil test P and X equals P addition with both variables expressed in mg P $kg^{-1}$ soil. The slope and intercepts were different from zero ($P < 0.0001$) and the correlation between P application and change in Mehlich 3 soil test P level was highly significant ($r^2 = 0.93$; $P < 0.0001$; Table 3). At the greatest P addition of 43.7 mg P $kg^{-1}$, The Mehlich 3 soil test P value changed approximately 30 mg P $kg^{-1}$. Approximately 70% of the added P remained available in these soils.

Bolan and Hedley [12] suggested that phosphate adsorption capacity increases as pH decreases. Moreover, Ortas and Rowell [11] reported that soil pH affects P solubility and plant uptake. Soil 2 had a lower clay content (18%) compared to soil 1 (36%). We expected that less P might have been sorbed by soil 1 compared to all other soils. Fox and Kamprath [15] reported a positive correlation between the clay content and P adsorption capacity of soils and Jones et al. [5] found a negative correlation between P fertilizer and $CaCO_3$ content and changes in resin extractable P with P additions in 20 calcareous soils of the continental USA. Sharply et al. [6] also found that P availability after 30 and 180 days of incubation was closely correlated to the $CaCO_3$ content of calcareous soils from several countries. Soils 3 and 4 also responded similarly to P additions as expressed by the change in Mehlich 3 soil test P values. Soils 3 and 4 were both silty clay loam with a pH ranges from 8.6-8.7 (Table 1).

The predicted values for the increase in Mehlich 3 soil test P with P additions for these two soils were estimated by the following equation:

$$Y= 2.90+ 0.01X^2$$

Where Y equals the change in soil test P and X equals P addition with both variables expressed in mg P $kg^{-1}$ soil. The slope and intercepts were different from zero (*P* < 0.0001) and the correlation between P application and change in Mehlich 3 soil test P level was highly significant ($r^2 = 0.93$; $P < 0.0001$; Table 3). In these soils we found roughly a 21 mg P $kg^{-1}$ increase in Mehlich 3 soil P test level after adding 43.7 mg P $kg^{-1}$. Approximately 50% of the added P remained available in these soils, which was significantly less than in Soils 1 and 2. These results were not unexpected and Soils 3 and 4 had lesser initial soil test P values than Soils 1 and 2. Soil 4 had the greatest pH. In an incubation study on three calcareous soils of the UK, Ortas and Rowell [11] found that decreasing soil pH could increase soil P solubility, and Fox and Kamprath [15] found a positive correlation between clay content and soil P adsorption capacity. The percent free $CaCO_3$ for Soils 3 and 4 also were ranged from 10.1-10.6 % and according to previous researchers, P sorption in calcareous soils increased with increased $CaCO_3$ content [7].

**Table 1. Origin and selected properties of soils collected from the Bamyan center in the Bamyan province of Central Afghanistan**

| Soil ID | Soil origin | pH | EC | CEC | OM | N | P | K | Ca | Mg | $CaCO_3$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | ds $m^{-1}$ | cmol $kg^{-1}$ | % | ------------mg $kg^{-1}$-------------- | | | | | % |
| 1 | Bamyan Uni. Ag. Farm A. | 8.4 | 0.5 | 29.1 | 0.9 | 51.4 | 24.6 | 92.5 | 4900 | 780 | 9.3 |
| 2 | Bamyan Uni. Ag. Farm B. | 8.3 | 1.3 | 30.4 | 1.1 | 44.8 | 23.7 | 106 | 5300 | 685 | 10.7 |
| 3 | Mollagholam A. | 8.6 | 0.6 | 26.1 | 0.6 | 48.2 | 22.1 | 86.4 | 5150 | 700 | 10.1 |
| 4 | Mollagholam B | 8.7 | 0.3 | 25.6 | 0.5 | 44.7 | 19.5 | 94.2 | 5400 | 650 | 10.6 |

**Table 2. Origin and selected properties of soils collected from the Bamyan center in the Bamyan province of Central Afghanistan**

| Soil ID | Soil origin | S | Mn | Fe | Cu | Zn | Sand | Silt | Clay | Textural class |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | ------------mg $kg^{-1}$-------------- | | | | | --------%------------ | | | |
| 1 | Bamyan Uni. Ag. Farm A. | 9.3 | 64 | 27 | 4 | 3 | 48 | 16 | 36 | Sandy clay |
| 2 | Bamyan Uni. Ag. Farm B. | 12.7 | 71 | 23 | 6 | 2 | 65 | 17 | 18 | Sandy loam |
| 3 | Molla gholam A. | 9.5 | 65 | 25 | 7 | 3 | 18 | 50 | 32 | Silty clay loam |
| 4 | Molla gholam B | 7.8 | 67 | 18 | 5 | 4 | 19 | 52 | 29 | Silty clay loam |

**Table 3. Analysis of variance and regression coefficients for the effect of applied phosphorus on Mehlich 3 P in four Bamyan center soils**

| **R-Square** | **Pr>F** | **Coeff Var** | **Root MSE** | | **M-3 P** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **0.93** | **<0.0001** | **16.84** | **2.12** | | **12.52** |
| **Source** | **Df** | **Type ll SS** | **Mean square** | **F value** | **Pr>F** |
| Soil | 1 | 330.28 | 330.28 | 73.52 | <0.0001** |
| $R^2$ | 1 | 1657.1 | 1657.1 | 368.52 | <0.0001** |
| **Parameter** | **Estimate** | **Stand error** | **T Value** | **Pr> t** | |
| Soil 1 2 | 8.960 | 0.60824 | 14.73 | <0.0001** | |
| Soil 3 4 | 2.902 | 0.60824 | 14.76 | <0.0001** | |
| $R^2$ | 0.0102 | 0.00052 | 19.2 | <0.0001** | |

*** = significant at P ≤ 0.01, * = significant at P ≤ 0.05, and ns = non-significant*

## 4. CONCLUSION

The 4 calcareous soils from Bamyan center varied in their initial macro and micro nutrients content and many other soil properties. The rate and time effects varied among all 4 soils and time effect on change in Mehlich 3 soil test P levels were not consistent. Soil Mehlich 3 P increased with added P and the availability of added P differed between two groups of soils. These two groups of soils were separated between high P testing soils and low P testing soils.

## 5. RECOMMENDATION

1) Based on results, the organic content in Bamyan soil is low, so recommended to apply the different sources of organic fertilizers, especially composted animal manures on the cultivated land.
2) According to many studies, the application of both chemical and organic fertilizers highly increase the efficiency of chemical fertilizers [16]. So, recommended to apply both chemical and organic fertilizer simultaneously on the field.
3) In mechanical agriculture, the application of fertilizers must be according to availability and amount of essential nutrients in the soil and needs of cultivated plants. So, the results from this research should be able to at least assist farmers in applying the correct doses of chemical fertilizers.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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