

5. Carbon Sequestration through Biochar: Evaluating Long-Term Soil and Atmospheric Impacts

Shubhneesh Pandey¹, Azad Patel², Anushri Tiwari³, Tejal Dharmraj Ghutke⁴, Lav kesh Singh¹

¹M.Sc. Scholar, Division of Soil Science, Jawaharlal Nehru Krishi Vishwavidyalaya Jabalpur (MP)

²M.Sc. Scholar, Division of Soil Science, IARI Hub, Nagpur

³M.Sc. Scholar, Division of Soil science and Agriculture chemistry, COA, JNKVV, Jabalpur

⁴M.Sc. Scholar, Division of Soil science, College of agriculture, Dhule, Mahatma Phule Krushi Vidyapeeth, Rahuri

1. Introduction

Climate change, mainly driven by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, requires innovative strategies to mitigate carbon emissions. The increasing concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂), primarily from the combustion of fossil fuels and unsustainable land-use practices, poses a global challenge. Carbon sequestration, the process of capturing and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide, is a critical component of these mitigation strategies, aiming to rebalance the global carbon cycle.

Among various sequestration options, enhancing soil organic carbon (SOC) storage through agricultural management practices has gained significant traction due to its dual benefits for climate and soil health.

Biochar, a charcoal-like substance produced from the thermochemical decomposition of biomass in the absence

of oxygen, a process known as pyrolysis, presents a particularly promising avenue for long-term carbon storage in soil. Unlike untreated biomass, which rapidly decomposes and mineralises, releasing CO₂ back into the atmosphere, biochar exhibits exceptional recalcitrance and stability in soil, with estimated residence times ranging from centuries to millennia. This stability is attributed to its highly condensed aromatic structure. By applying biochar to agricultural lands, carbon recently fixed by plants from the atmosphere can be effectively sequestered in a stable soil pool.

This article provides a comprehensive and critical evaluation of biochar's potential as a robust carbon sequestration tool. It synthesizes current research on the fundamental mechanisms governing biochar's long-term stability in various soil environments, including its physicochemical properties and its influence on microbial activity and soil

carbon dynamics (e.g., priming effects). Furthermore, we assess the significant co-benefits of biochar application, specifically its role in enhancing soil fertility, nutrient retention, and water holding capacity, which indirectly contribute to carbon sequestration by boosting overall biomass production. Crucially, the analysis also addresses the complex atmospheric impacts, including biochar's potential to mitigate emissions of non-CO₂ greenhouse gases like nitrous oxide (N₂O) and methane (CH₄). Finally, the article identifies and discusses the practical challenges and uncertainties associated with realizing large-scale biochar implementation, such as sustainable feedstock sourcing, pyrolysis optimization, and establishing economic viability within existing agricultural and carbon market frameworks. This holistic assessment is essential to determine the ultimate effectiveness and scalability of biochar in the global effort to combat climate change.

2. Biochar Production and Characteristics

The definition and functionality of biochar are intricately linked to its production process. Biochar is a carbonaceous material created by heating biomass in a process called pyrolysis. The absence or severe limitation of oxygen prevents

complete combustion, resulting in a carbon-rich solid product, along with gaseous (syngas) and liquid (bio-oil) co-products.

The characteristics of the final biochar product, and thus its efficacy for soil improvement and carbon sequestration, are governed by two primary factors: the feedstock and the pyrolysis conditions.

2.1. Feedstock Selection

The choice of initial biomass source significantly dictates the elemental composition, nutrient content, and ash percentage of the resulting biochar. Common feedstocks include:

- a. Agricultural Residues:** Crop stubble (e.g., rice husks, wheat straw, maize stover), bagasse, and nut shells. These often result in biochars with moderate carbon content and a relatively high content of plant-essential nutrients like Potassium (K) and Phosphorus (P).
- b. Forestry and Wood Waste:** Sawdust, wood chips, and logging residues. Wood-based biochars generally have lower ash content and higher fixed carbon content, leading to greater stability and surface area.
- c. Manures and Biosolids:** Animal wastes and sewage sludge. These feedstocks can yield biochars rich in P and Calcium (Ca), but may also carry a higher

risk of heavy metal or contaminant presence, necessitating careful monitoring.

2.2. Pyrolysis Conditions

The conditions under which pyrolysis is conducted are crucial for determining the physicochemical properties of the biochar. Key parameters include temperature, residence time, and heating rate:

a. Pyrolysis Temperature (Thermochemical Conversion): This is the most critical parameter. Temperatures typically range from 300°C to 700°C.

- **Low Temperatures (300°C - 450°C):** Result in biochar with lower aromaticity, higher volatile matter, a greater yield (more mass retained), and higher hydrogen and oxygen content. These biochars are less stable but may have a higher concentration of functional groups, which can initially enhance nutrient retention.

- **High Temperatures (500°C - 700°C):** Drive off almost all volatile compounds, leading to a highly condensed polyaromatic structure. This yields biochar with higher fixed carbon content, greater stability (recalcitrance), and a vastly increased surface area and porosity (due to the collapse of internal cell structure). However, the yield is lower, and the pH tends to be higher (more alkaline).

b. Residence Time: The duration the biomass is held at the peak temperature.

Longer residence times generally move the biochar properties toward those of higher-temperature pyrolysis (increased fixed carbon, reduced volatiles).

c. Heating Rate: The speed at which the temperature rises. Slow pyrolysis is generally preferred for maximizing biochar yield and quality for soil application, as fast pyrolysis is optimized for bio-oil production.

2.3. Key Characteristics and Functions

The resultant biochar possesses unique characteristics that enable its soil and atmospheric benefits:

1. High Carbon Content and Aromaticity: The highly condensed C-C bonds in the polyaromatic ring structure are resistant to microbial and chemical degradation, directly accounting for its long-term carbon sequestration potential.

2. High Surface Area and Porosity: The vast network of micro- and mesopores gives biochar a large internal surface area (see Table 1), enabling:

2.1. High Cation Exchange Capacity (CEC): Essential for adsorbing and retaining positively charged essential plant nutrients NH_4^+ , K^+ , Ca^{2+}).

2.2. Adsorption Capacity: Ability to bind heavy metals, organic pollutants, and pesticides, aiding in soil remediation.

2.3. Water Retention: Pores improve soil water holding capacity, particularly in sandy soils.

3. Alkalinity (pH): Biochars are typically alkaline (pH 8-11) due to concentrated ash components (carbonates

and mineral oxides). This makes them highly effective for liming acidic soils, a crucial practice in many agricultural regions, which indirectly enhances nutrient availability and crop yield.

Table 1: Influence of Pyrolysis Temperature on Biochar Properties

Pyrolysis Temperature (T°C)	Fixed Carbon Content (%)	Volatile Matter (%)	Surface Area (m ² /g)	pH (Alkalinity)	Stability (Approx. H/C _{org} Ratio)
350 (Low T)	50-65	25-40	50-150	7.0-9.0	approx 0.5-0.7 (Lower)
550 (Medium T)	70-85	10-20	200-400	8.5-10.0	approx 0.3-0.5 (Medium)
750 (High T)	80-90+	<10	400-800+	9.5-11.0	approx 0.1-0.3(Higher)

Note: The H/C_{org} ratio is a common proxy for biochar stability; lower values indicate greater aromaticity and resistance to decomposition.

The ability to tune these properties via feedstock and pyrolysis conditions allows for the creation of designer biochars optimized for specific soil types (e.g., highly alkaline biochars for acid sulphate soils; high P-content biochars for P-deficient soils).

3. Long-Term Carbon Stability in Soil

The cornerstone of biochar's appeal as a climate mitigation strategy is its resistance to decomposition, which ensures that carbon sequestered from the atmosphere remains stable in the soil for extended periods. This stability is the key metric that differentiates biochar from untreated organic matter, which rapidly mineralizes and releases CO₂.

3.1.Mechanisms of Biochar Recalcitrance

The exceptional longevity of biochar, with mean residence times often estimated at hundreds to thousands of years, is primarily due to its chemical structure and interactions within the soil matrix:

a. Chemical Structure

(Aromaticity): Pyrolysis at high temperatures creates a highly condensed, **polyaromatic carbon matrix** with a ring-like structure of C-C bonds. These strong, stable bonds are biochemically resistant to breakdown by common microbial enzymes. The degree of this aromaticity is often quantified by the H/C_{org} ratio; a lower ratio (typically <0.4) correlates with greater stability and less susceptibility to microbial attack.

b. Physical Protection: Biochar particles can become incorporated and physically protected within soil aggregates. This encapsulation reduces the accessibility of the biochar surface to decomposer microorganisms and extracellular enzymes, effectively slowing down mineralization rates.

c. Interaction with Soil Components: Biochar's large surface area and charged functional groups allow it to form strong associations with soil mineral particles (e.g., clays) and native soil organic matter (SOM). These organo-mineral complexes can shield the carbon from degradation, further enhancing its stability.

3.2.Context-Dependency of Degradation

While biochar is broadly recalcitrant, its exact degradation rate is not absolute but highly context-dependent. Factors influencing its longevity include:

- a. Biochar Properties:** High-temperature biochars are generally more stable than low-temperature ones (see Section 2).
- b. Soil Type and pH:** Biochar stability is often higher in acidic soils or soils with high clay content.

c. Climate: Higher temperatures and moisture content accelerate microbial activity, which can potentially increase degradation rates, though the effect remains marginal compared to native SOM.

3.3.The Priming Effect

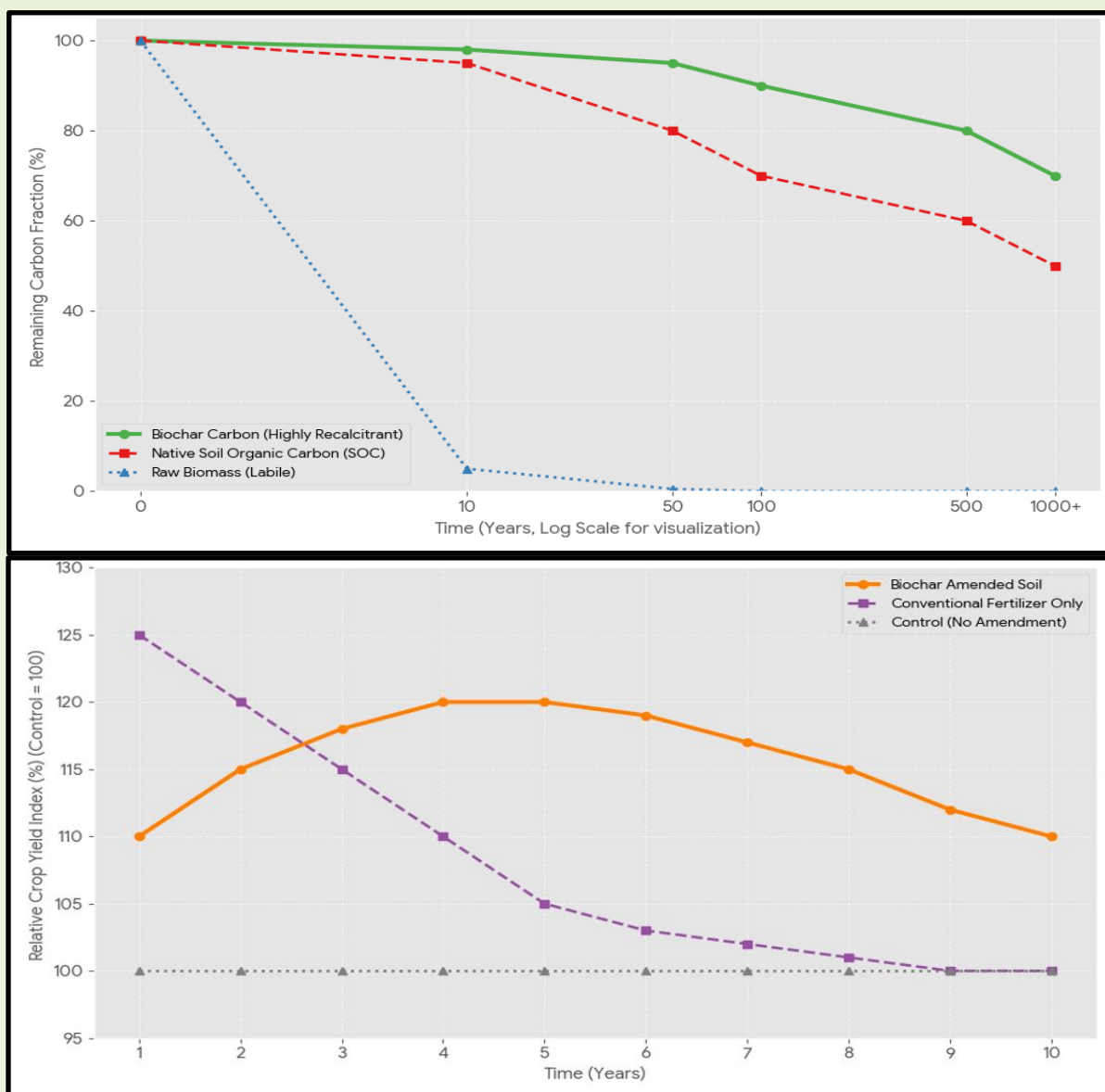
A crucial consideration in evaluating long-term sequestration is the priming effect of the change in the decomposition rate of native SOM following the addition of biochar.

- **Positive Priming:** Occurs if biochar stimulates the activity of the native microbial community, leading to an accelerated breakdown of the older, native SOM. This process could partially negate the sequestration benefits, as native carbon is lost as CO₂.
- **Negative Priming:** Occurs if biochar stabilizes or suppresses microbial activity, leading to a slowed breakdown of native SOM. This effect would enhance overall carbon sequestration beyond the carbon introduced by the biochar itself.

4. Impacts on Soil Health and Productivity

Beyond direct carbon sequestration, biochar application can indirectly enhance carbon storage by improving soil health and

boosting agricultural productivity, leading to greater biomass production and increased input of organic matter into the soil.



a. pH Amelioration (Liming Effect):

Figure 1 Graphs showing long term effect of biochar application on a) Remaining Carbon Fraction, and b) Relative Crop Yield Index

4.1. Soil Fertility Enhancement and Nutrient Cycling

Biochar acts as a stable soil amendment that significantly modifies the soil's chemical and physical environment:

Many biochars, particularly those derived from high-ash feedstocks or produced at high temperatures, are alkaline ($\text{pH} > 8$). When applied to acidic soils, they effectively raise the pH, neutralizing acidity. This is a critical agricultural

benefit, as low pH can lead to aluminium (Al^{3+}) toxicity and reduce the bioavailability of essential nutrients like Phosphorus (P), Molybdenum (Mo), and Calcium (Ca). By raising the pH, biochar optimizes the environment for nutrient uptake.

b. Nutrient Retention and Bioavailability: Biochar's characteristic high surface area and the presence of negative surface charges (resulting in a high Cation Exchange Capacity, CEC) allow it to effectively adsorb and retain positively charged plant nutrients (NH_4^+ , K^+ , Mg^{2+}). This mechanism significantly reduces the leaching of vital nutrients, a major cause of fertilizer loss, thereby increasing Nutrient Use Efficiency (NUE) and reducing the environmental impact of agriculture.

c. Micronutrient Supply: Biochar can serve as a slow-release source of certain mineral elements (e.g., K, Ca, Mg, P) concentrated from the original biomass ash, directly feeding the soil nutrient pool.

4.2. Improvement of Soil Physical Properties

The porous, low-density structure of biochar leads to beneficial alterations in soil physics:

a. Water Dynamics: Biochar's extensive internal porosity acts like a sponge, significantly enhancing the soil

water holding capacity (WHC), especially in coarse-textured or sandy soils. This increased water availability is vital for plants, particularly in drought-prone or arid environments, buffering them against moisture stress.

b. Aeration and Aggregate Stability:

Incorporation of biochar can improve soil structure by promoting the formation of stable soil aggregates. These aggregates enhance soil aeration (oxygen supply) and reduce bulk density, leading to better root penetration and overall soil tilth.

4.3. Influence on Microbial Community Dynamics

The application of biochar transforms the soil's microscopic environment, influencing the crucial microbial communities responsible for nutrient cycling:

a. Habitat and Refugia: The porous structure of biochar provides physical refugia for soil microbes, protecting them from desiccation, predation, and rapid environmental fluctuations.

b. Microbial Activity: By altering soil pH and moisture, biochar can shift the composition and activity of the microbial community. Studies often report a selective proliferation of beneficial microbes, such as those involved in nitrogen fixation and mycorrhizal fungi colonization.

c. **Enzymatic Activity:** Changes in the soil surface chemistry and pH can impact the activity of extracellular enzymes, which are responsible for the decomposition of organic matter and nutrient release. Optimal enzyme activity, facilitated by biochar, ensures efficient nutrient turnover, supporting the plant-soil system.

5. Atmospheric Impacts and Greenhouse Gas Mitigation

The primary atmospheric benefit of biochar is the long-term sequestration of carbon that would otherwise be released as CO₂ from decomposing biomass. However, biochar also has significant potential to mitigate emissions of other potent greenhouse gases.

5.1. Nitrous Oxide (N₂O) and Methane (CH₄) Mitigation

Nitrous oxide (N₂O) and methane (CH₄) are greenhouse gases with global warming potentials far exceeding CO₂. Biochar has been shown to reduce N₂O emissions from agricultural soils, primarily by altering soil pH, aeration, and microbial denitrification pathways. Similarly, biochar can reduce CH₄ emissions from paddy fields by influencing methanotrophic and methanogenic activities. This co-benefit

significantly enhances biochar's overall climate change mitigation potential.

6. Challenges and Future Directions

Despite its promise, large-scale implementation of biochar faces several challenges.

6.1. Feedstock Availability and Sustainability

The sustainable sourcing of biomass feedstock is crucial. While agricultural and forestry wastes are abundant, widespread biochar production could compete with other uses (e.g., energy generation, animal feed) or lead to unsustainable land use practices.

6.2. Pyrolysis Technology Optimization

Optimizing pyrolysis conditions for different feedstocks to produce biochar with desired properties for specific soil types and agricultural goals is essential. Developing efficient and scalable pyrolysis technologies that also recover energy is critical for economic viability.

6.3. Economic Viability and Policy Support

The costs associated with biochar production, transport, and application can

be substantial. Economic incentives, such as carbon credits, and supportive policies are necessary to promote its widespread adoption.

soil for extended periods, directly removing CO₂ from the atmosphere. Furthermore, biochar application can mitigate N₂O and CH₄ emissions and enhance soil fertility,

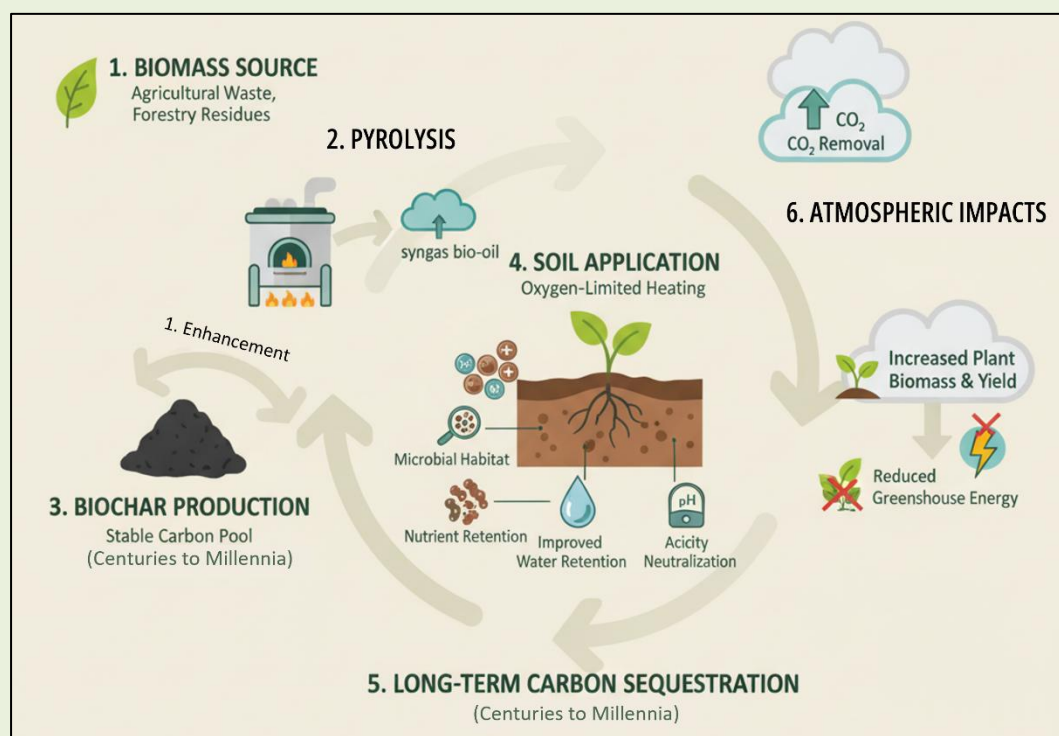


Figure 2 Biochar Carbon Sequestration Pathway

6.4. Standardized Assessment and Monitoring

Robust methodologies for quantifying the long-term carbon sequestration potential and environmental impacts of biochar across diverse environments are needed. Standardized protocols for biochar characterization and soil monitoring are essential for accurate assessment.

7. Conclusion

Biochar represents a compelling strategy for long-term carbon sequestration with significant co-benefits for soil health and agricultural productivity. Its recalcitrant nature allows for stable carbon storage in

leading to increased biomass production and further carbon inputs. While challenges related to feedstock sustainability, technological optimization, and economic viability remain, continued research and supportive policy frameworks are crucial to unlock the full potential of biochar as a key tool in global efforts to combat climate change and foster sustainable agriculture.

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