



Potential of Biochar to Sequester Carbon and Mitigate Greenhouse Gas Emissions

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Biochar is a solid material obtained from the carbonization of any biomass including weeds, crop residues and other wastes of plant origin. Biochar plays an important role in climate change mitigation by sequestering carbon in the soil and reducing nitrous oxide (N₂O) and methane (CH₄) gas emissions to the environment through enhancing soil absorption. Here we review the potential of biochar to reduce N₂O and CH₄ emissions from agricultural practices and sequester atmospheric CO₂ in the soil including potential mechanism behind observed effects. However, some fundamental mechanism and manipulation of biochar remain understandable and need further investigation.

Keywords: Biochar; carbonization; greenhouse gas emissions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Global warming (GW) is the rise in the average earth surface temperature as a result of increase in the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) including methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), water vapor, ozone (O₃), chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and carbon dioxide (CO₂)” [1]. “One of the most pervasive GHGs is CH₄, which is released from wetlands, paddy fields, coal mines, ruminants, and human activities including rearing livestock and natural gas leakage” [2]. “Continuous anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, such as CO₂, CH₄, and N₂O have been identified as the primary cause of today's climate change” [3]. According to data estimated by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) in 2020, agricultural operations accounted for a considerable share of overall GHG emissions (about 11%), owing primarily to inadequate soil management techniques [4]. “Biochar has been widely reported as a promising substance for reducing GHG emissions, particularly CH₄ emissions from paddy land” [5,6]; (Wu et al. 2019a). Furthermore, a meta-analysis on biochar found that applying various forms of biochar to soil significantly reduces CH₄ emissions [5]. These findings imply that the environmental benefit of biochar application on CH₄ emissions has been widely shown. Biochar is a fine-grained, carbon-rich, porous substance that remains after plant biomass has been thermochemically converted (pyrolyzed) at low temperatures (350-600°C) in an oxygen-depleted environment [7]. “Biochar increases soil's physical (e.g., water holding capacity, O₂ content, and moisture level), chemical (e.g., pollutant immobilisation and carbon sequestration), and biological (e.g., microbial abundance, variety, and activity)” [8]. These biochar properties eventually contribute to soil carbon sequestration [9], as well as reduced greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions [10]. “Furthermore, it has been suggested that using biochar as a soil amendment could help slow down climate change by long-term carbon sequestration while also enhancing the characteristics and capabilities of soil” [11-13]. Zhang et al. [14] also revealed that “biochar amendment results in lower methane and nitrous oxide emissions from agricultural soils, which helps to mitigate the consequences of climate change”.

“Moreover, biochar characteristics and soil management practises have the potential to

lower N₂O emissions by up to 80%” [15] “The postulated mechanisms include N₂O trapping in watersaturated soil pores and microbial activity associated with biological denitrification, both of which would reduce the N₂O/(N₂O + N₂) ratio” [16]. “It is believed that the intensive use of nitrogen fertilisers in agriculture was responsible for two-thirds of the N₂O emissions” [17,18] and “for mitigating those emissions, the application of biochar may limit N availability to crops, reducing N losses through direct and indirect N₂O emissions while enhancing crop output” [19]. “The use of chemical fertiliser in conjunction with biochar is an innovative method that contributes to climate change mitigation, lowers chemical fertiliser application rates, increases crop production, and improves water retention, all of which contribute to more sustainable agriculture” [20].

2. BIOCHAR C SEQUESTRATION AND GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSION REDUCTION

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from the usage of fossil fuels are widely recognized as the primary cause of climate change [21]. Capturing this atmospheric carbon can help to reduce rising greenhouse gas emissions. Large amounts of biochar can be utilized to store carbon in the agriculture sector [21]. This makes biochar appealing as a carbon sequestration option, in addition to its potential for improving soil quality and reducing pollution emission [22]. “Climate change mitigation through carbon sequestration is significant biochar application apart from improved crop yield” [23]; (Majumder et al., 2019). The application of biochar has the potential to sequester carbon due to the high stability of C compounds created during biomass pyrolysis [24] and their consequent slow decomposition in soil [25]. “Soil carbon (C) sequestration through biochar amendment has been proposed as an effective countermeasure for the rising concentration of atmospheric GHGs” [26,27]. The recalcitrant nature of biochar draws carbon from the atmosphere, providing a carbon sink to terrestrial ecosystems whilst improving water and soil quality [28]. Reducing N₂O and CH₄ emissions as a result of biochar application is gaining a lot of interest because these gases have far higher global warming potentials than CO₂ [29,30]. “Biochar can play a larger role in short-term CH₄ emission reduction to assist meet the 2050 GHG targets because methane's GWP20 (for a 20-year time horizon) value of 84 is substantially higher than its

GWP100 due to its short residence duration in the atmosphere” [31]. Soils are responsible for over 62% of the atmospheric N₂O emissions [32]. “The application of nitrogen-based fertiliser to fields at high rates emits N₂O into the environment. Biochar addition to soil effectively reduces soil N₂O emissions, and the reduction can be attributable to the suppression of either the nitrification or denitrification stages, as observed in both field and laboratory investigations” [33,17,34]. “The use of biochar can also reduce direct and indirect greenhouse gas emissions by retaining nitrogen in soils and reducing the need for synthetic fertilizer inputs to produce crop yields, increasing crop productivity per unit land area, and possibly requiring less energy to irrigate due to improved soil water retention capacities” [35]. These biochar characteristics eventually contribute to soil carbon sequestration [9], greenhouse gases (GHGs) emission reduction [10], and therefore contribute to an overall improvement in soil health [36].

3. BIOCHAR MITIGATES N₂O EMISSION

“Nitrous oxide (N₂O) is one of the most potent greenhouse gases put into the atmosphere, with 298 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide (CO₂)” [37,38]. “Agriculture soils are responsible for 60% of anthropogenic N₂O emissions due to the widespread use of synthetic nitrogen fertilisers and inadequate management of livestock excreta” [39,40]. In soil, N₂O is created and consumed through a variety of separate but interconnected processes, including specialised abiotic redox reactions and three major biotic processes (nitrification, denitrification, and nitrifier denitrification) [41-43]. Despite the fact that these processes may co-occur and exhibit considerable geographical and temporal variability, inadequate denitrification is widely regarded as the major cause of N₂O emissions in agricultural soils [44,45]. “Biochar has been widely reported to impact N₂O emissions from the denitrification pathway as a promising soil amendment” [17]. “The majority of recent research has been on the impacts of biochar on soil denitrification kinetics and functional potentials at the community level” [46,47]. “Biochar addition may have an indirect effect on denitrifying kinetics and abundance by modifying moisture content, pH, air permeability, nutrient bioavailability, and even nitrification. Furthermore, the effect of biochar amendment on soil physicochemical properties varied depending on soil primary conditions and the nature of

biochars, as well as the structures, compositions, dosages, and surface properties of biochars made with different precursors at different pyrolysis temperatures” [48,49,46]. Biochar has the potential to reduce N₂O emissions by blocking the conversion of nitrate or nitrite to N₂O [50], and it has the potential to directly drive the microbial conversion of N₂O to nitrogen gas [51,52].

4. BIOCHAR MITIGATES CO₂ EMISSION

“Carbon dioxide (CO₂), a powerful greenhouse gas (GHG), is to blame for global climate change as its concentration in the atmosphere rises. Intensive agriculture is one source of GHG emissions” [53]. “The addition of biochar has been shown to change soil porosity, moisture content, pH, labile C and N pool sizes, all of which have a significant impact on soil CO₂ emissions” [25,54]. Previous research, however, has shown that biochar addition with different source materials and soil textures can have varying impacts (an increase, a decrease, or no effect) on CO₂ flow in laboratory or field trials [55-57]. Furthermore, when biochar addition increased, CO₂ emissions decreased [58], which may be attributed to the sorption of labile C onto the surface or into the pores of biochar [59]. Several studies have found a reduction in CO₂ emissions from biochar-amended soil with N addition [60,61]. “It was also discovered that when N fertiliser was given to the soil in the presence of biochar, total CO₂ emissions reduced” [36]. “The reduction in soil respiration might have partly contributed to the decrease in phenol oxidization activity induced by N suppression of white-rot fungi” [62]. “The addition of biochar has the ability to offset total CO₂ emissions caused by N fertiliser suggesting that the positive priming effect of biochar and N input on C mineralization was a transient accent and gradually vanished in the long term” [62]. Thus, although the addition of biochar tended to increase the total amount of CO₂ over time in the short term [14], it would be an effective strategy to reduce GHG emissions caused by the use of N fertiliser and could prevent long-term C sequestration as a relatively resistant C source in soil [28].

5. BIOCHAR MITIGATES CH₄ EMISSION

Atmospheric methane (CH₄) is recognized as a key greenhouse gas contributing to global climate change, with a global warming potential 34 times that of carbon dioxide over a 100-year

time frame, and its worldwide mean concentration has increased by 2.5 times since the pre-industrial era [63]. Paddy soils are the most significant human source of CH₄ emissions [64]. Rice cultivation generated roughly 500 Mt CO₂eq to world CH₄ emissions in 2011, and it is anticipated to increase by 7% by 2030 and another 6% by 2050 [65]. Biochar treatment in rice agriculture has previously been shown to reduce CH₄ emissions by 33.8-91% [66-68]. Its distinct characteristics can also improve soil parameters, particularly those relating to soil fertility [69]. In terms of reducing CH₄ emissions, biochar encouraged more CH₄ oxidation than CH₄ generation in rice fields [59;70;57]. Previous research has revealed that these phases of rice growth coincide with active CH₄ oxidation activity by aerobic CH₄-oxidizing bacteria (methanotrophs) [71,72]. Han et al. [6] also demonstrated that biochar could increase methanotroph activity, resulting in increased CH₄ oxidation. Biochar, with its porous structure that provides a habitat and oxygen availability, can promote bacterial growth, particularly aerobes [69,73]. Because methane oxidation occurs in the rhizosphere, where oxygen is abundant, enhanced rice growth under biochar conditions may also offer additional oxygen for this process [74]. According to Feng et al. [75] and Wang et al. [15] reduced CH₄ emissions can be explained by a decrease in the ratio of methanogens to methanotrophs, showing that biochar application inhibits methanogen growth while promoting methanotrophic growth. Hence, the participation of biochar in lowering CH₄ generation and increasing its oxidation are the two main explanations for the lower emissions attained by employing biochar. Feng et al. [75] and Chen et al. [76] also found a decrease in CH₄ flux after applying biochar to paddy soils, implying that the effects of biochar on CH₄ emission were long-lasting. Huang et al. [77] discovered that biochar addition reduced CH₄ emissions, which might be attributed to lower methanogenic archaea abundance; thus, CH₄ could be consumed by methanotrophs [78].

6. CONCLUSION

This review collects available data on sequestration of Carbon and mitigating climate change by reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases (CH₄, N₂O, CO₂) in agricultural fields through use of biochar in soil, insight of the key processes involved, offers mechanisms of some of the key processes. We suggest that further studies are needed to assess the complete effect

of different biochar application on mitigation of climate change.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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