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LIFE+IPNOA mobile prototype for the monitoring of soil N₂O emissions from arable crops: first-year results on durum wheat

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Abstract

Agricultural activities are co-responsible for the emission of the most important greenhouse gases: carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄) and nitrous oxide (N₂O). Development of methodologies to improve monitoring techniques for N₂O are still needful. The LIFE+IPNOA project aims to improve the emissions monitoring of nitrous oxide from agricultural soils and to identify the agricultural practices that can limit N₂O production. In order to achieve this objective, both a mobile and a stationary instrument were developed and validated. Several experimental field trials were set up in two different sites investigating the most representative crops of Tuscany (Central Italy), namely durum wheat, maize, sunflower, tomato and faba bean. The field trials were realized in order to test the effect on N₂O emissions of key factors: tillage intensity, nitrogen fertiliser rate and irrigation. The field trial on durum wheat was set up in 2013 to test the effect of tillage intensity (minimum and conventional tillage) and nitrogen fertilisation rate (0, 110, 170 kg N ha⁻¹) on soil N₂O flux. Monitoring was carried out using the IPNOA mobile prototype. Preliminary results on N₂O emissions for the durum wheat growing season showed that mean daily N₂O fluxes ranged from –0.13 to 6.43 mg m⁻² day⁻¹ and cumulative N₂O-N emissions over the period ranged from 827 to 2340 g N₂O-N ha⁻¹. Tillage did not affect N₂O flux while increasing nitrogen fertilisation rate resulted to significantly increase N₂O emissions. The IPNOA mobile prototype performed well during this first year of monitoring, allowing to catch both very low fluxes and peaks on N₂O emissions after nitrogen supply, showing a good suitability to the field conditions.

Introduction

Atmospheric greenhouse gas (GHG) concentration has increased continuously since pre-industrial era to nowadays. The 5th Assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) underlined the necessity of severe actions of mitigation and adaptation to avoid the risk of irreversible effects on global climate (IPCC, 2013). Therefore, the European Commission on 23 October 2014 undersigned new targets of GHG emissions reduction by at least 40% below the 1990 level by 2030 (European Commission, 2014).

Beside carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O) is one of the main GHG contributing to global warming and atmosphere ozone depletion. Atmospheric nitrous oxide (N₂O) concentration has increased by 19% since 1750 to an average global value of 324 ppb in 2011 (IPCC, 2013). The interest in understanding N₂O emission processes and in investigating the most effective mitigation techniques is also due to the long lasting persistence of this gas in atmosphere (about 121 years) and its global warming potential, which is about 298 times higher respect to CO₂ (IPCC, 2013).

Agriculture activities are co-responsible of the release in atmosphere of significant amount of CO₂, CH₄ and N₂O (Smith et al., 2008). In particular, nitrous oxide is the main GHG from agriculture and contributes from 30% to 45% of global anthropogenic N₂O emissions (Fowler et al., 2009). Around 70% of the global annual flux of N₂O derives both from managed and natural soils, mainly as an intermediate product of the two microbiological processes of nitrogen (N) trans-
The key parameter for N$_2$O production in soil (Rochette et al., 1995). This technology permits an immediate visualization of the gas concentration increase inside the chamber. Moreover, the chamber deployment time can be shorter than the closure time requested by the NFT-NSS technology, thus improving the flux estimation (Heinemeyer and McNamara, 2011).

The LIFE+ Improved flux Prototypes for N$_2$O emission from Agriculture (IPNOA) project (2012-2016, LIFE/11 ENV/IT/502, www.ipnoa.eu) is coordinated by West Systems S.r.l. (Pontedera, Italy) with the partnership of the Institute of Life Sciences of Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna, the French National Institute For Agricultural Research (INRA) UMR Environnement et Grandes Cultures and the Tuscany Region. The main objectives of the IPNOA project are: i) to develop and validate two prototypes (mobile and stationary) for measuring the soil N$_2$O fluxes directly in the field, thus improving the monitoring of these emissions from agricultural soils; ii) to implement several experimental trials concerning the main arable crops cultivated in Tuscany, in order to identify the best management practices (BMPs) help in reducing N$_2$O emissions; iii) to calibrate and to validate a model to estimate the N$_2$O annual budget and scale up the results and the so-identified BMPs to regional scale.

Specifically, the aim of this paper is to present the innovative mobile prototype developed in the LIFE+IPNOA and to show the N$_2$O flux results for the 2013-2014 growing season on durum wheat, cultivated under different tillage intensities and N fertilisation rates.

Materials and methods

IPNOA mobile prototype description and N$_2$O monitoring protocol

A mobile prototype was developed by West Systems S.r.l. in order to evaluate N$_2$O emissions at field scale using a fast chamber technique (Figure 1). While the stationary station, equipped with six automated chambers, allows a better estimation of the temporal variability of fluxes from soil, the mobile prototype responds better to the necessity to investigate spatial variability and, in agricultural trials, to test different replicated treatments. The main challenge was to develop a mobile system capable of moving on various field surfaces, equipped with very reliable N$_2$O gas analyser, electrically autonomous and enough robust to face up field conditions.

The prototype was equipped with an LRG N$_2$O/CO detector for N$_2$O and with an LGR ultraportable greenhouse gas analyser (CH$_4$, CO$_2$, H$_2$O) [Los Gatos Research (LRG), Inc., Mountain View, CA, USA]. Both detectors were installed on a light tracked vehicle appropriate to access agricultural fields (total dimensions: 1.49 m height, 1.16 m width and 1.46 m depth; total weight: around 600 kg). The instrument was connected to a chamber through a 20 m long tube of 4 mm diameter. The chamber (flow-through non-steady state steel chamber) had a height of 10 cm and a diameter of 30 cm; the headspace volume was 6868 cm$^3$ (West Systems S.r.l.). The pumping flow was about 240 scm$^3$ min$^{-1}$. A PVC collar with the same diameter as the chamber (30 cm) was placed in each plot and inserted in the soil to a depth of about 5 cm. To guarantee a tight seal with the collars, the chamber was provided with a rubber ring that fits into the collar lip. An internal fan maintained the homogeneity of the air mixture within the chamber during the meas-
urements. N₂O concentration within the chamber was measured at a time step of 1 s (ppb s⁻¹), and the increase in the headspace was checked for linearity for a period of 2-3 min. Data were recorded by a palmtop connected via Bluetooth®.

N₂O flux was measured in all the experimental fields bimonthly, and samplings were intensified immediately after N fertilisation events and after residue incorporation with tillage, when measurements were carried out twice a week for two/three consecutive weeks. Depending on the row spacing, the collar was placed in the interrow space or the crop was left uncut within the collar. At every measurement soil temperature and volumetric water content were recorded in the proximity of each collar by a dielectric probe (GS3; Decagon Devices, Inc., Pullman, WA, USA) inserted into the soil at a depth of 5 cm and linked to the prototype by a Bluetooth® connection. Water filled pore space (WFPS) was calculated from total porosity using bulk density, measured by the soil core method and considering a particle density of 2.65 g cm⁻³.

The mobile prototype was validated before the beginning of the monitoring campaign through three experiments. The first was conducted in Scotland (Edinburgh) during the Easter Bush international campaign organised by the Integrated non-CO₂ Greenhouse-gas Observing System (InGOS) project in June 2013. The Easter Bush site is located 10 km south of Edinburgh, Scotland UK (3°12' W, 55°52' N, 190 m a.s.l.). The area is situated between two intensively-managed grassland fields. The test compared the mapping of N₂O emissions obtained using the mobile prototype with measurements of N₂O fluxes using the Eddy covariance methodology. Measurements with IPNOA mobile prototype were made on a large grid of 1 ha with more than 30 sampling points on 24, 25 and 26 June 2013. IPNOA chamber measurements were compared with eddy covariance measurements during the period from 24 to 26 June. Overall, identical magnitudes of fluxes were observed between the two methodologies (Laville et al., 2015).

On July 2013, a second experiment was conducted at Grignon (France) on barley crop. The cross validation was conducted in a field of 1 hectare close the EGC INRA building (48°50’ N 1°56’ E, 127 m a.s.l.). In this case, tests were conducted to compare performances of different gas analysers, different chambers (auto or manual chambers) and a test to detect IPNOA chamber response time (Laville et al., 2015).

Performances of IPNOA LGR N₂O spectrometer were compared with other three INRA gas analysers, such as a filter correlation spectrometer (Thermo 46C; Thermo Environmental Instruments, Inc., Franklin, MA, USA), a quantum cascade laser tunable infrared laser differential absorption spectroscopy (QCL-TILDAS; Aerodyne Research Inc., BillERICA, MA, USA) and with a gas chromatograph (GC; Varian CP-3000; Varian, Inc., Santa Clara, CA, USA). Calibrated gas cylinders were used to estimate the response time.

The responses of the prototype were very satisfactory in the comparisons with other devices (auto or manual chambers) and gas analysers (Thermo 46C, GC, QCL-TILDAS). The response time is short allowing limiting deployment time of the chamber, in fact 90 s were enough to start gas accumulation phase and 5 min of chamber deployment were...
enough to estimate fluxes with a high resolution (Laville et al., 2015). Finally, IPNOA chamber was validated through the participation to the INGOS N$_2$O chamber inter-comparison campaign 2014 at Hyytiälä Forestry Field Station (Finland), where 22 chambers of different sizes, shapes and attributes (fan, vent-tube, sampling, seals) from different research groups were tested against a known reference flux of N$_2$O. The IPNOA chamber performed well showing a good fitting of the measured flux with linear regression and a low leakage rate.

**Field trials description**

The IPNOA experimental field trials are located in two representative sites within Tuscany region: i) the Centre for Agro-Environmental Research E. Avanzi (CIRAA), located in San Piero a Grado (Pisa); and ii) the Centre for Agricultural Technologies and Extension Services (CATES), located in Cesa (Arezzo). The GHG monitoring is conducted on different crops: durum wheat (Triticum durum Desf., var. Tirex), maize (Zea mays L., var. DKC4316), sunflower (Helianthus annuus L., var. Pacific), tomato (Solanum lycopersicum L., var. perfectpeel) and faba bean (Vicia faba minor L., var. vesuvio). Key factors for each crop were identified to design the experimental trials: tillage intensity and N rate for durum wheat and sunflower; irrigation and N rate for maize and tomato; tillage intensity for faba bean. This paper presents preliminary results on the durum wheat field trial at CIRAA.

**Durum wheat field trial at CIRAA**

Durum wheat was cultivated from November 2013 at CIRAA, in the Pisa (central Italy) coastal plain, characterised by a Mediterranean climate. The soil is a silty clay loam derived from alluvial sediments (Soil Survey Staff, 1975). A split-plot design with four replicates was used. The main plot was assigned to the tillage intensity factor, which consisted in conventional tillage (CT) (ploughing, 30 cm depth) and minimum tillage (MT) (10 cm depth). The sub-plot was assigned to the N fertilisation factor, which consisted in three N fertilisation rates: no fertilisation (N$_0$), 110 kg N ha$^{-1}$ (N$_1$) and 170 kg N ha$^{-1}$ (N$_2$). Nitrogen fertiliser was distributed three times: i) after sowing (26 November); ii) during tillering (7 March); and iii) during stem elongation (8 April). Durum wheat was sown on 14 November 2013 and harvested on 30 June 2014 (Table 1). The previous crop was berseem clover (Trifolium alexandrinum L.).

**Data analysis**

N$_2$O flux was calculated by performing a linear regression on the logged N$_2$O concentration data, which was corrected for atmospheric pressure and air temperature. A linear mixed-effects model was used to analyse N$_2$O log transformed flux data using the R lme4 package (Bates et al., 2014). To analyse the whole dataset, tillage, N fertilisation rate and date were considered as fixed variables, while collar and blocks were considered as random factors. Significance was determined using the R LMERConvenienceFunctions package (Tremblay and Ransijn, 2013). Significance was tested also analysing each sampling date separately. Cumulative N$_2$O emissions over the period were calculated by linear interpolation of two neighbouring sampling dates and the numerical integration over time. A linear mixed effects model was used for cumulative values. Tillage intensity and nitrogen fertilisation rate were considered as fixed variables, while blocks were considered as a random factor. Tukey’s honest significant difference post hoc test ($\alpha=0.05$) was used to reveal significant differences among treatments.

**Table 1. Crop practices on durum wheat at CIRAA during the 2013-2014 growing season.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tillage</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>CT (Ploughing 30 cm depth)</th>
<th>MT (Minimum tillage 10 cm depth)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N fertilisation level</td>
<td>(kg N ha$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>N$_0$=0, N$_1$=110, N$_2$=170</td>
<td>N$_0$=0, N$_1$=110, N$_2$=170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After sowing</td>
<td>(kg urea ha$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>N$_0$=0, N$_1$=78.5, N$_2$=78.5</td>
<td>N$_0$=0, N$_1$=78.5, N$_2$=78.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At tillering</td>
<td>(kg ammonium nitrate ha$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>N$_1$=110; N$_2$=200</td>
<td>N$_1$=110; N$_2$=200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At stem elongation</td>
<td>(kg urea ha$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>N$_1$=80.4; N$_2$=145.7</td>
<td>N$_1$=80.4; N$_2$=145.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P fertilisation</td>
<td>(kg triple super phosphate ha$^{-1}$)</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pest control</td>
<td>Curative</td>
<td>Curative</td>
<td>Curative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weed control</td>
<td>Post-emergence</td>
<td>Post-emergence</td>
<td>Curative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residues</td>
<td>Removed</td>
<td>Removed</td>
<td>Removed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CT, conventional tillage; MT, minimum tillage; N, nitrogen; N$_0$, 0 kg N ha$^{-1}$; N$_1$, 110 kg N ha$^{-1}$; N$_2$, 170 kg N ha$^{-1}$; P, phosphorus.

**Table 2. Mean N$_2$O flux for the three-fertilisation rates ± standard error (n=8) and post hoc test results.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N level</th>
<th>Mean N$_2$O flux (mg m$^{-2}$ day$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>SE (mg m$^{-2}$ day$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N$_0$</td>
<td>0.61$^a$</td>
<td>±0.22</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_1$</td>
<td>0.91$^a$</td>
<td>±0.20</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_2$</td>
<td>1.69$^a$</td>
<td>±0.45</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_0$ - N$_1$</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.047$^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_0$ - N$_2$</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.001$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N$_1$ - N$_2$</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SE, standard error; N$_0$, 0 kg N ha$^{-1}$; N$_1$, 110 kg N ha$^{-1}$; N$_2$, 170 kg N ha$^{-1}$; $^a$Different letters represent significant differences in treatments; $^*P<0.05$; $^{**}P<0.01$. 

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Figure 2. Pattern from November 2013 to July 2014 of: A) air temperatures and rainfall; B) water filled pore space (WFPS) and soil temperature; C) N₂O flux as average value among tillage levels (N₀=0 kg N ha⁻¹; N₁=110 kg N ha⁻¹; N₂=170 kg N ha⁻¹). Significant differences among N treatment in each sampling data is reported (*P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001).
Results and discussion

Climate, soil conditions and N₂O emissions patterns

The pattern of air temperature and rainfall from 29 November 2013 to 10 July 2014 are reported in Figure 2A. The mean air temperature varied from 4.5°C in November to 25.6°C in June, with an average mean temperature of 13°C over the period. Cumulated rainfall from December to June was equal to 810 mm, a value much higher than the long term average around 470 mm (1986-2013). The rainiest months were January (363 mm), February (158 mm) and March (101 mm).

The soil temperature and WFPS are presented in Figure 2B, as mean values of all the treatments. From November to July mean soil temperature varied from 9.4°C to 29°C, with a mean value over the period of 18.3°C. WFPS showed a mean value around 43%, with minimum mean value (8%) registered in June and the maximum values around 70% in March and April.

The N₂O emissions through durum wheat growing season showed very low values (<0.5 mg m⁻² day⁻¹) during most sampling days, with the exception of the period immediately after sowing (29 Nov - 19 Dec) and the three-fertilisation events (Figure 2C).

Tillage did not affect significantly N₂O emissions over the whole monitoring period, while nitrogen rate, date and their interaction were highly significant (P<0.001). Overall, N₂O emissions ranged from – 0.13 to 6.43 mg N₂O m⁻² day⁻¹ (average value 0.07±0.19 mg N₂O m⁻² day⁻¹). Post hoc test highlighted no significant differences between N₁ and N₀ (Table 2).

N₂O flux at the beginning of the monitoring period presented a decreasing pattern with relatively high values with no significant differences among nitrogen treatments (P>0.05). A possible explanation of this trend could be related to the nitrogen mineralisation of clover residues, enhanced by tillage practices before sowing. In fact, the increase of N₂O emissions after crop residues incorporation has been reported by many studies, in particular residues with low C:N ratios produced higher emissions (Baggs et al., 2000; Lehtinen et al., 2014).

High peaks observed after nitrogen fertilisation events were significant different among N levels, as reported in Figure 2C. N₂O peaks after topdressing fertilisation was observed after about 14-16 days, with maximum values of N₀ around 6.43 mg N₂O m⁻² day⁻¹ on 24 March and 4.81 mg N₂O m⁻² day⁻¹ on 22 April. On the contrary, fertilisation at sowing produced N₂O peak emissions after 21 days. In fact the period after fertilisation (from 26 November to 19 December) was characterised by low temperature (6.5°C) and low rain (3.6 mm), while a N₀ peak was registered after a week with 50 mm of rain. The magnitude of N₂O flux is strongly influenced by the amount and the distribution of rainfall, since maximum N₂O emission rates from all treatments may occur after rewetting of dry soil (Ruser et al., 2006; Tellez-Rio et al., 2015).

N₂O cumulative emissions in the growing season

No significant differences were found between CT and MT on N₂O-N cumulative emissions, while nitrogen rate resulted to significantly affect N₂O-N cumulative emissions (P=0.003) and it explained 45% of the overall variability. Post hoc test underlined differences among nitrogen rate levels as reported in Table 3.

Cumulative N₂O-N emissions over durum wheat growing season resulted to be higher than those reported in similar studies for winter wheat in temperate climate with values ranging from 410 to 1100 g N₂O-N ha⁻¹ y⁻¹ (Drury et al., 2008, Smith et al., 1998). Laville et al. (2011) reported values of N₂O-N cumulative emissions for a barley crop monitored with automatic chambers equal to 1700 g N₂O-N ha⁻¹ y⁻¹, a value higher than our cumulative flux (1322 g N₂O-N ha⁻¹) for N₁ (110 kg N ha⁻¹), as barley was fertilised with a similar N rate (108 kg N ha⁻¹).

Cumulative emissions in a Mediterranean environment on winter cereals from Aguilera et al. (2013) were about 300 g N₂O-N ha⁻¹, a value largely lower than the values obtained in our experiment. The high N₂O-N cumulative emissions in the IPNOA experiment might have been enhanced by the abundant rainfalls occurred during the 2013-2014 growing season, which resulted in average high WFPS. Indeed, microbial processes producing N₂O emissions increase as WFPS increases, as it regulates the oxygen availability to soil microbes (Butterbach-Bahl et al., 2013). In the durum wheat field trial, WFPS resulted to be greater than 30% in about 80% of the monitoring days.

IPNOA mobile prototype performance

During this first year of monitoring the IPNOA mobile prototype showed a good performance. A good sensitivity was registered in the entire range of emissions during the monitoring period. The precision of LGR N₂O/CO analyser is in the range of 0.1 to 0.050 ppb, therefore the detection limit of the system was around 0.04 ng N m⁻² s⁻¹ (Laville et al., 2015). These values are about 500 times higher than traditional techniques such as GC (Hensen et al., 2013). Five minutes of chamber deployment were enough to estimate flux with a high resolution, with the possibility to perform a real time check of the linearity of the flux thanks to a scan rate of 1 s. The prototype showed a good resistance to the field environment, indeed no limiting conditions occurred in the range of air temperature from 0°C to 36°C or in windy conditions. On the other hand, access to the field was difficult in very wet periods, in fact the durum wheat field trial was unreachable due to heavy precipitation from 9 January to 18 February 2014 (around 400 mm), and it resulted in a reduced sampling frequency.

The operational capacities in terms of mobility and gas analyser stability were satisfactory. The prototype demonstrated also good supply autonomy with duration of around 8 h. The remote transmission for the operation of the commands and acquisition of the data with a palmtop

Table 3. Cumulative N₂O emissions for the three-fertilisation rates ± standard error (n=8) expressed as N₂O-N and post hoc test results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N level</th>
<th>Cumulative N₂O emissions (N₂O-N g ha⁻¹ period⁻¹)</th>
<th>SE (N₂O-N g ha⁻¹ period⁻¹)</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N₀</td>
<td>827</td>
<td>±247</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N₁</td>
<td>1320</td>
<td>±180</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N₂</td>
<td>2340</td>
<td>±338</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N₀ - N₁</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N₀ - N₂</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.002**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N₁ - N₂</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.034*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SE, standard error; N₀ 0 kg N ha⁻¹; N₁ 110 kg N ha⁻¹; N₂ 170 kg N ha⁻¹. *Different letters represent significant differences in treatments; **P<0.05; ***P<0.01.
was very user-friendly. Moreover, data visualisation on the palmtop in real time allows evaluating the goodness of the measure.

Some considerations need to take into account concerning the IPNOA system, related to the prototype cost, due mainly to the value of the two detectors, and to the prototype dimension and weight. In fact, an adequate van is needed to transport the instrument close to the field.

Conclusions

The IPNOA mobile prototype performed well in field conditions, allowing recording a wide range of \( \text{N}_2\text{O} \) flux, including very low emissions. Preliminary results on durum wheat showed a decisive influence of nitrogen rate on \( \text{N}_2\text{O} \) production, while conventional and minimum tillage did not produce differences in \( \text{N}_2\text{O} \) flux. However, these first-year findings will be endorsed by data from the other site of study (CATES) and by further years of investigation.

Data on \( \text{N}_2\text{O} \) flux will be used to calibrate and to validate a process-based model for the assessment of emissions at regional scale and to develop mitigation scenarios based on alternative crop managements. Finally, the results will contribute to the drafting of the BMP for the \( \text{N}_2\text{O} \) emissions reduction in Tuscany.

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