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# 1 Can N<sub>2</sub>O emissions offset the benefits from soil organic 2 carbon storage?

3 Bertrand Guenet<sup>1,\*§</sup>, Benoit Gabrielle<sup>2</sup>, Claire Chenu<sup>2</sup>, Dominique Arrouays<sup>3</sup>, Jérôme Balesdent<sup>4</sup>, Martial  
4 Bernoux<sup>5</sup>, Elisa Bruni<sup>1</sup>, Jean-Pierre Caliman<sup>6</sup>, Rémi Cardinael<sup>7,8,9</sup>, Songchao Chen<sup>3</sup>, Philippe Ciais<sup>1</sup>, Dominique  
5 Desbois<sup>10</sup>, Julien Fouche<sup>11</sup>, Stefan Frank<sup>12</sup>, Catherine Henault<sup>13</sup>, Emanuele Lugato<sup>14</sup>, Victoria Naipal<sup>1</sup>, Thomas  
6 Nesme<sup>15</sup>, Michael Obersteiner<sup>12</sup>, Sylvain Pellerin<sup>15</sup>, David S Powlson<sup>16</sup>, Daniel Rasse<sup>17</sup>, Frédéric Rees<sup>2</sup>, Jean-  
7 François Soussana<sup>18</sup>, Yang Su<sup>2</sup>, Hanqin Tian<sup>19</sup>, Hugo Valin<sup>12</sup>, Feng Zhou<sup>20</sup>

8 <sup>1</sup>Laboratoire des Sciences du Climat et de l'Environnement, CEA-CNRS-UVSQ-UPSCALAY, F-91191, Gif sur  
9 Yvette, France

10 <sup>2</sup>UMR ÉcoSys, INRAE, AgroParisTech, Université Paris-Saclay, 75005, Paris, France

11 <sup>3</sup>INRAE, InfoSol Unit, 45075 Orléans, France

12 <sup>4</sup>Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS, IRD, INRAE, Coll France, CEREGE, Aix en Provence, France.

13 <sup>5</sup>Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Climate and Environment Division, Rome,  
14 Italy

15 <sup>6</sup>SMART Research Institute (SMARTRI), Riau, Indonesia

16 <sup>7</sup>CIRAD, UPR AIDA, Harare, Zimbabwe

17 <sup>8</sup>AIDA, Univ Montpellier, CIRAD, Montpellier, France

18 <sup>9</sup>University of Zimbabwe, Crop Science Department, Box MP167, Mt. Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

19 <sup>10</sup>UMR Économie publique, INRAE-AgroParisTech, Université Paris Saclay, France

20 <sup>11</sup>LISAH, Univ Montpellier, INRAE, IRD, Institut Agro, Montpellier, France

21 <sup>12</sup>IIASA, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg, Austria

22 <sup>13</sup>Agroécologie, AgroSup Dijon, INRAE, Univ. Bourgogne Franche-Comté, F-21000, Dijon, France

23 <sup>14</sup>European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC), Directorate for Sustainable Resources, Ispra, Italy

24 <sup>15</sup>ISPA, INRAE, Bordeaux Sciences Agro, Univ. Bordeaux, 33882, Villenave d'Ornon, France

25 <sup>16</sup>Department of Sustainable Agriculture Sciences, Rothamsted Research, Harpenden, AL5 2JQ, UK

26 <sup>17</sup>Department of Soil Quality and Climate Biogeochemistry and Soil Quality, NIBIO - Norwegian Institute of  
27 Bioeconomy Research, Ås, Norway

28 <sup>18</sup>INRAE, Paris, France

29 <sup>19</sup>International Center for Climate and Global Change Research, School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences,  
30 Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849, USA

31 <sup>20</sup>Sino-France Institute of Earth Systems Science, Laboratory for Earth Surface Processes, College of Urban and  
32 Environmental Sciences, Peking University, Beijing, P. R. China

33  
34 \* Corresponding author : [bertrand.guenet@lsce.ipsl.fr](mailto:bertrand.guenet@lsce.ipsl.fr)

35 § Current adress : Laboratoire de Géologie de l'ENS, PSL Research University, Paris, France

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## ABSTRACT

40 To respect the Paris agreement targeting a limitation of global warming below 2°C by 2100, and possibly below  
41 1.5 °C, drastic reductions of greenhouse gas emissions are mandatory but not sufficient. Large-scale deployment  
42 of other climate mitigation strategies are also necessary. Among these, increasing soil organic carbon (SOC)  
43 stocks is an important lever because carbon in soils can be stored for long periods and land management options  
44 to achieve this already exist and have been widely tested. However, agricultural soils are also an important  
45 source of nitrous oxide, (N<sub>2</sub>O) a powerful greenhouse gas, and increasing SOC may influence N<sub>2</sub>O emissions,  
46 likely causing an increase in many cases, thus tending to offset the climate change benefit from increased SOC  
47 storage. Here, we review the main agricultural management options for increasing SOC stocks. We evaluate the  
48 amount of SOC that can be stored as well as resulting changes in N<sub>2</sub>O emissions to better estimate the climate  
49 benefits of these management options. We conclude that the climate mitigation induced by increased SOC  
50 storage is generally overestimated if associated N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are not considered, but is never fully offset. Some  
51 options (e.g. biochar or non-pyrogenic amendment application) may even decrease N<sub>2</sub>O emissions.

52

53 Key points:

- 54 • Carbon and nitrogen cycles in soil interact in numerous and complex ways and an impact of a land  
55 management change on one cycle will generally influence the other.
- 56 • Several land management options designed to increase soil organic carbon stocks exist and have been  
57 widely evaluated.
- 58 • Land management options to increase soil organic carbon also tend to increase nitrous oxide emissions  
59 in some cases.
- 60 • We conclude that when increased N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are taken into account, they partially offset the climate  
61 benefits of increased organic carbon storage, but never negate them completely.

62

63 1. INTRODUCTION

64 The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris Agreement adopted in  
65 2015 aimed at keeping global warming below 2°C by 2100, and at possibly further limiting the temperature  
66 increase to 1.5 °C. The Paris Agreement specified that the balance of anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG)  
67 emissions and sinks should be attained by the second half of this century. This requires not only drastic  
68 reductions in GHG emissions in the near future, but also net negative emission technologies because not all  
69 emissions will be reducible to zero within this time scale<sup>1,2</sup>. To a large extent, these negative emissions imply  
70 land-based mitigation strategies<sup>3</sup>, mostly involving the production of organic matter by plant photosynthesis  
71 coupled with carbon storage in living biomass and / or soil organic matter<sup>4</sup>. A pathway frequently discussed  
72 known as bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) comprises generating energy using biomass,  
73 capturing the CO<sub>2</sub> evolved from this process and storing it in geological reservoirs. The deployment of BECCS  
74 faces both technical challenges and most likely limitations due to high costs and adverse environmental  
75 impacts<sup>5,6</sup>. On the other hand, the net removal of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> taken up by plants in agricultural soils (i.e.,  
76 carbon sequestration) has recently come under sharp focus as a more affordable and practical alternative,  
77 potentially associated with positive economic outcomes and possibly applicable at large scale in managed  
78 lands<sup>7,8</sup>. The role of soils as a key component of the global carbon cycle is now recognized by the scientific  
79 community and also by policymakers<sup>5,6</sup>. Soils have never been harnessed at large scale for the purpose of  
80 sequestering carbon, although they currently make up the largest reservoir of organic carbon in the terrestrial  
81 biosphere, with a size of 1,500 Pg C to a depth of one meter<sup>9</sup>. However, the ecosystems which contain the largest  
82 stocks of soil organic carbon (SOC) are unmanaged (comprising boreal forests, permafrost soils and wetlands),  
83 whereas only soils from managed ecosystems, in particular agricultural soils, may be managed to increase SOC  
84 stocks (i.e., carbon sequestration) Agriculture is also a key target sector for the reduction of methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) and  
85 nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) emissions<sup>10-12</sup>. Yet, few countries have included agriculture in their nationally determined  
86 contributions – a roadmap volunteered by national governments as part of the Paris Agreement to express their  
87 efforts to reduce GHG emissions – because of potential trade-offs with food production and uncertainties on  
88 achievable potentials<sup>13</sup>.

89 Recent emphasis on promoting SOC storage has resulted in international initiatives such as the “4 per mil”  
90 initiative launched by France during the UNFCCC conference of the parties (COP) 21<sup>7,14</sup>. It relies on the concept  
91 that even a very small relative increase in SOC pools worldwide could offset a significant fraction of CO<sub>2</sub>  
92 emissions. Preliminary evaluation indicated that increasing global agricultural SOC stocks at an annual rate of

93 4‰ would result in a C sequestration potential of 2-3 Pg C yr<sup>-17</sup>. This may contribute significantly to the  
94 objectives of the land sector to achieve the Paris agreement target<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, several studies have discussed  
95 and criticized the feasibility of enriching soils at a rate of 4‰ over a sustained period of years<sup>16-18</sup> because: (i) it  
96 requires large amounts of new organic matter inputs, (ii) it requires large amounts of nutrients, (iii) it is difficult  
97 to achieve this target rate in all agricultural systems, and (iv) it may be hampered by the climate change-induced  
98 enhancement of SOC decomposition. Moreover, altered management practices may impact farmers' income and  
99 imply trade-offs with food production<sup>17</sup>. Data from long-term experiments show that it is very difficult to  
100 achieve the 4 per mil rate in temperate arable systems without drastic changes in management<sup>17,19</sup>. Finally, the  
101 annual rate of SOC increase generally levels off over time as the SOC pool increases and approaches a new  
102 equilibrium level<sup>20</sup>.

103 Nevertheless, concrete management options exist to increase SOC stocks such as cover crops, tillage  
104 management, crop rotations, organic amendments, agroforestry and biochar amendments with effects depending  
105 on local conditions<sup>21-23</sup>. It must be noted that organic amendments may, in some case such as manures, be a  
106 transfer of carbon from one terrestrial location to another rather than a net removal of carbon from the  
107 atmosphere<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, well spatially distributed, organic amendments contribute to significant increase the  
108 SOC pools at regional scale<sup>24</sup>. These options have socio-economic impacts on farmers and land managers and  
109 indirect effects on ecosystem services, through changes in crop yields, water consumption, nitrate leaching, and  
110 CH<sub>4</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>O emissions which have to be considered when evaluating the feasibility and the relevance of  
111 implementing SOC storage options. The SOC storage potential of the various practices has been extensively  
112 assessed in the recent scientific literature<sup>17,23,25-27</sup>, and recently revised by IPCC in its 2019 report on climate  
113 change and land<sup>12</sup>. However, implications for the N cycle (in particular N<sub>2</sub>O emissions), and other  
114 biogeochemical cycles or crop yields have not been thoroughly documented so far<sup>28-30</sup>. Neither have been the  
115 consequences of large-scale deployment of these measures, and constraints related to the nitrogen (N),  
116 phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) cycles. These aspects are important because they determine the overall GHG  
117 abatement efficiency of mitigation measures and set limits on their potential deployment. C and N cycles are  
118 strongly interlinked (box. 1) in particular in soils and we assume that the deployment of land based mitigation  
119 options to increase SOC may impact the N cycle and the associated N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. A recent modelling study  
120 suggests that measure to increase SOC sequestration might be offset by increased N<sub>2</sub>O, depending on the crop  
121 rotation and on the duration of the land management practices<sup>28</sup>. A better understanding of such interactions is  
122 necessary to evaluate the benefits of different management practices aimed at increasing SOC storage and to

123 predict the full GHG balance of each practice.

124 Here, we focus on the interactions between soil C and nutrient dynamics, and in particular on N dynamics  
125 and N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. The aims of the paper are to i) describe the mechanisms linking the C and N cycles in soils,  
126 ii) assess how N<sub>2</sub>O emissions may be affected by increased SOC pools as a land based mitigation option, iii)  
127 review our knowledge on the other impacts of these practices.

128

## 129 2. INTERWINED SOIL CARBON AND NITROGEN CYCLES

130 Because C and N cycles are tightly coupled in soils, altering one will affect the other as shown in Fig. 1.  
131 In soils the C and the N cycles are sometimes totally interdependent, in particular when both are in organic forms  
132 but are sometimes uncoupled when C or N are present as minerals. Nevertheless they may still interact with each  
133 other. This section summarizes the main mechanisms explaining how changes in the soil C cycle and SOC  
134 sequestration interact with N cycle processes, and in particular N<sub>2</sub>O emissions (Fig. 1, Box 1). The first reason  
135 why soil C and N dynamics are interdependent is that both elements are stored predominantly as organic forms  
136 in the soil, sometimes within the same compounds (amino acids, proteins, etc.), thus mineralisation generally  
137 affects both. Moreover, the availability of mineral N in the soil controls a number of processes in both cycles and  
138 *vice versa*. For instance, mineral N transformations depend on carbon availability and plant dry matter  
139 production is limited by N availability. Nitrogen is needed to sustain photosynthesis and other physiological  
140 processes<sup>31</sup>; therefore higher N availability would likely lead to greater primary productivity and inputs of plant-  
141 derived organic matter to the soil<sup>32</sup>. On the other hand, higher N availability also tends to lower the allocation of  
142 photosynthates to the root system<sup>33</sup>. As root-derived C inputs contribute at least 2-3 times more than shoot-  
143 derived C inputs to SOC storage<sup>34,35</sup>, a high soil N availability could theoretically increase the plant biomass but  
144 the plant biomass produced might not be transformed into SOC as efficiently because of a reduced amount of  
145 root-derived C entering the soil<sup>36</sup>. Soil organic matter (SOM) turnover (i.e., rate of mineralization and  
146 transformation of SOM) also depends on the N availability for microorganisms. While a low mineral N  
147 availability may limit the mineralization rate of plant residues and amendments<sup>37,38</sup>, the combination of regular  
148 inputs of fresh organic C with a low soil N availability can lead to positive priming effect, *i.e.* a higher rate of  
149 SOM mineralization, and a lower SOC storage potential<sup>39,40</sup>. Moreover, because of the relatively narrow range of  
150 C:N ratios of SOM in mineral layers<sup>16</sup> and because of the importance of soil microbial processing for building up  
151 stable SOM<sup>41</sup> in some ecosystems, large amounts of N are inevitably required to stabilize large amounts of  
152 SOC<sup>42,43</sup>. Because of this stoichiometric requirement, it might seem acceptable to maintain a high availability of

153 N in the soil by applying large amounts of mineral fertilizers. Such a strategy would however lead to potential N  
154 losses, *e.g.* as N<sub>2</sub>O emissions or nitrate leaching from soil, and further increase GHG emissions during fertilizer  
155 production. Thus the modest increases in SOC resulting from N fertilizer applications up to sensible agronomic  
156 rates are welcome in the context of C sequestration, but it would be counter-productive and inappropriate to  
157 recommend higher rates of N application aimed at promoting an additional increase in soil C.

158 Input of N to terrestrial ecosystems by biological N<sub>2</sub> fixation is another example of a close link between  
159 C and N resources. Root-associated or free-living N<sub>2</sub>-fixing bacteria depend on the availability of organic C  
160 resources for sustaining their heterotrophic needs, which may explain why N<sub>2</sub> fixation is only triggered when the  
161 amount of soil mineral N is low. In particular, the energy cost of N<sub>2</sub> fixation represents between 5% and 23% of  
162 daily photoassimilated C<sup>44</sup>. The associated CO<sub>2</sub> losses by respiration may therefore decrease the amount of plant  
163 C entering the soil. However, the consequence of this on the potential of SOC storage remains unclear. For  
164 example, the presence of leguminous plants can result in lower belowground C inputs compared to gramineous  
165 plants, leading to lower SOC concentrations<sup>45,46</sup>. However, the net inputs of N to soils by leguminous plants have  
166 been shown to correlate with a net accumulation of SOC, by providing the organic N required to stabilize an  
167 additional amount of SOC in soils<sup>47</sup>. Similarly, crop rotations that include leguminous plants appear store more  
168 SOC than conventional monocultures<sup>48</sup>, although this effect may be mainly due to longer periods of plant cover,  
169 and to the presence of deeper root systems than to biological N<sub>2</sub> fixation itself<sup>47</sup>. These feedbacks also depend on  
170 which non-leguminous plants are associated<sup>49</sup> to the N<sub>2</sub>-fixing plant, and may lead to contrasting results in terms  
171 of SOC storage<sup>24</sup>. Of course, obtaining N from legumes, where this is practicable, rather than from N fertilizer  
172 does eliminate the GHG emissions associated with N fertilizer manufacture.

173 Fresh C inputs to the soil through root exudates or amendments may temporarily decrease or increase  
174 soil pH, affecting the magnitude of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. Their consumption by microorganisms may also decrease the  
175 local concentration of oxygen, leading to anaerobic conditions which are favourable to denitrification and N<sub>2</sub>O  
176 emissions<sup>50</sup>. Furthermore, because organic materials generally act as electron donors in the denitrification  
177 process and because soil organic matter content may lower the redox potential of the soil<sup>51</sup>, increasing the  
178 amount of soil organic matter may also increase the activity of denitrifiers and therefore increase N<sub>2</sub>O  
179 emissions<sup>52,53</sup>. These mechanisms likely explain why higher SOC contents in soils have indeed been shown to  
180 correlate with larger N<sub>2</sub>O emissions<sup>54,55</sup>. N<sub>2</sub>O emissions represent a particular case that illustrates how the soil N  
181 cycle may be influenced by the C cycle. As a rule, net N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from the soil at a given soil water-filled  
182 pore space (WFPS) will usually be lower when the soil mineral N content is low and when soil pH is alkaline or



183 when C availability is reduced. Furthermore, because a low soil redox potential ( $< 400$  mV)<sup>52</sup> is required for  
184 denitrification, N<sub>2</sub>O emissions have been suggested to have their optimum at 70-80% WFPS, while prolonged  
185 waterlogging conditions may result in complete nitrate reduction to N<sub>2</sub> instead of N<sub>2</sub>O<sup>56</sup>. Several mechanisms  
186 can therefore explain why attempts to modify the soil C cycle may also affect N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. On a longer time  
187 scale, the build-up of SOC by various strategies may be expected to increase the retention of water and fertilizer-  
188 N in the rooting zone through improved soil properties (eg.. water holding capacity, porosity, hydrophilicity) , in  
189 a manner favourable for the denitrification to occur. This might trigger a higher primary production and  
190 enhancing further SOC storage, but also increase the risk of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions because of the increase in N sources  
191 and the shift to soil environmental conditions more favourable to N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. In the remainder of this paper  
192 we consider possible interactions between increased SOC and changes in N<sub>2</sub>O emission for a range of  
193 management practices designed to increase SOC (Table 1).

### 194 3. HOW SOC STORING PRACTICES AFFECT N<sub>2</sub>O EMISSIONS

#### 195 *3.1 Balancing the Nitrogen inputs*

196 Since mineral N availability drives N<sub>2</sub>O emissions as well as crop productivity and C inputs into the  
197 soil<sup>57,58</sup>, N fertilization should be carefully managed. A balance should be obtained between N inputs (including  
198 fertilizers, manures and biological nitrogen fixation through symbiosis between N<sub>2</sub>-fixing bacteria and some  
199 plant species) and N exported in harvested products in order to reduce a N surplus that can be source of N<sub>2</sub>O, but  
200 without a major negative effect on crop productivity. This N surplus should ideally be zero, but it is actually  
201 large and positive in many regions of the world, having intensive agriculture (e.g. parts of China, India, Europe,  
202 North America), and negative in other regions (e.g. Africa)<sup>59</sup>. Excess N associated with a positive surplus is a  
203 major cause of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions on farms, but also of nitrate leaching losses, part of which contributes to indirect  
204 N<sub>2</sub>O emissions if nitrate is denitrified within surface waters. Overall, N surplus is a strong driver of N<sub>2</sub>O  
205 emissions, especially when considering that the rate of emission is no longer linear for high N input<sup>60</sup>. The  
206 relatively low cost of mineral N fertilizers in developed countries compared to the price of agricultural products  
207 incentivizes farmers to apply more N than recommended by good practices, as an 'insurance' against unforeseen  
208 N losses due to climate variability. In some regions of the world, but not all, there is considerable potential to  
209 lower agricultural N<sub>2</sub>O fluxes in intensive farming by reducing the N surplus without affecting farmers' incomes  
210 <sup>61</sup>. Therefore, the use of mineral N to increase crop productivity may induce an increase of C input into the soil  
211 but a complex balance must be found to avoid excessive N<sub>2</sub>O emissions and N leaching.

212

### 213 *3.2 Reduced tillage/non tillage*

214 The effect of reduced tillage has attracted attention as a practice leading to increased SOC storage..  
215 However, recent meta-analyses demonstrate only a small positive effect of no-tillage on SOC stocks in the  
216 topsoil (0-30 cm layer) compared to conventional tillage, while it may vary widely across pedo-climatic  
217 situations<sup>62-66</sup>. Moreover, it must be recognised that the largest impact of reducing tillage is a redistribution of  
218 SOC toward the soil surface<sup>25,64-67</sup>. As a consequence, data from field trials must be carefully examined to  
219 distinguish between a genuine increase in SOC stocks in the surface soil layers from a simple change in the  
220 vertical distribution of SOC concentration.

221 There has been considerable discussion as to whether the increased SOC in soil under zero tillage,  
222 especially near the surface, might increase N<sub>2</sub>O emissions, because : (i) increased organic matter content can  
223 increase N<sub>2</sub>O release<sup>68</sup>, either because of increased energy supply to denitrifying organisms or because increased  
224 biological activity utilises oxygen in soil, thus possibly leading to anoxic conditions at some microsites and ii)  
225 reducing tillage can be associated in the short term with a less porous soil structure, conducive of anoxia<sup>69</sup> (Table  
226 1). The different meta-analysis we compiled here (Fig. 2) suggest that N<sub>2</sub>O emissions may offset the C storage in  
227 no-till system when both fluxes are compared in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents. However, there is conflicting evidence on  
228 whether or not this risk is actually realised<sup>68,70</sup>. Recent meta-analyses suggest that, in the majority of situations,  
229 N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are either unchanged or slightly decreased under zero or reduced tillage; the result will certainly  
230 be influenced by soil type and local climate and weather conditions so it may not be possible to draw a  
231 conclusion that is universally valid<sup>70,71</sup>. Furthermore, in some studies, N<sub>2</sub>O emissions were expressed on both an  
232 area basis and a yield-scaled basis<sup>70</sup>; because crop yields were slightly decreased under reduced tillage in some  
233 environments, N<sub>2</sub>O emissions per unit of grain (or other product) were sometimes increased compared to  
234 conventional tillage.

### 235 *3.3 Erosion control - terracing*

236 Erosion control practices are able to maintain or increase SOC content at the plot scale<sup>72</sup>, although on a  
237 larger scale whether erosion is net C sink or a net source is still debated<sup>73-75</sup>. Erosion control encompasses a wide  
238 range of practices such as protecting the soil surface with cover crops or unharvested biomass (pruned fronds and  
239 other plant residues), agroforestry, crop rotations, conservation tillage, or terracing on steep slopes. Some of

240 these practices are already addressed in other sections of this paper (3.2, 3.4 and 3.5), and the following focuses  
241 on terracing.

242 Terracing is an ancient form of erosion control and a soil conservation method performed for thousands  
243 of years in steep landscape regions<sup>76,77</sup>. Despite its importance, studies focusing on quantifying soil erosion rates  
244 and the resulting C fluxes and SOC stocks in terraced areas are limited, especially at regional scales. Generally,  
245 terracing reduces soil erosion by reducing the slope gradient and length, and can decrease soil erosion rates by up  
246 to 95%<sup>78,79</sup>. It accordingly preserves SOC and nutrients. A meta-analysis on the ecosystem benefits of terracing  
247 shows that, compared to unterraced slopes, soil in terraced slopes contains 28.1% and 41.7% more N and C,  
248 respectively<sup>80</sup>. However, the overall net effect of terracing on erosion depends on the terrace structure and  
249 maintenance, crop type, soil conditions, crop management practices or agricultural machinery. To maximize its  
250 positive effects, terracing needs to be combined with other soil conservation measures such as cover crops,  
251 agroforestry, organic amendments or no-till<sup>81,82</sup>. Furthermore, terraces need to be sustained, otherwise abandoned  
252 terraces can become sources of substantial land degradation due to gully formation. This is the case in the  
253 Mediterranean region where over 50% of the terraces have been abandoned<sup>77,80</sup>.

254 The N<sub>2</sub>O emissions associated with terracing are still poorly known. Terracing decreases the aggregate  
255 breakdown and transport of soil by erosion, which would lead to reduced N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. However, as stated  
256 previously, N<sub>2</sub>O emissions may increase with increased SOC. In addition, terracing tends to change the soil C:N  
257 ratio<sup>80</sup> and this may change the N availability for nitrifying/denitrifying bacteria and thus affect N<sub>2</sub>O emissions.  
258 Finally, to fully estimate the effect of erosion control on N<sub>2</sub>O budgets, it is important to measure emissions at the  
259 catchment scale not only at the field scale. Since erosion control aims to avoid lateral losses of soil material  
260 (containing various forms of N) ending up in rivers or in floodplains, it is necessary to combine measurements in  
261 the terraced or unterraced fields with measurements and modelling on the fate of eroded N in floodplains and  
262 rivers.

263

### 264 *3.4 Cover crops*

265 Planting cover crops is an effective management practice to increase SOC content. According to a  
266 recent meta-analysis, it leads to SOC accumulation rates in the order of 1.18 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> over 50 years<sup>83</sup> in  
267 the topsoil, with a positive effect independent of tillage method, climatic zone or plant type (leguminous vs non-  
268 leguminous). The impact of cover crops on SOC will depend on their duration and the frequency with which

269 they are included in a crop rotation, and this information is sometimes unclear in published reports of field  
270 trials<sup>83</sup>. The main driver of SOC storage seems to be the extra C input, as suggested by the high correlation  
271 between rates of SOC stock change and the amounts of C returned to the soil by cover crop biomass<sup>84</sup>. However,  
272 there are limitations to the use of cover crops depending on cropping systems and climate conditions. For  
273 example, in temperate regions they can be readily utilised during the winter period prior to sowing a spring-sown  
274 crop, when the soil would otherwise be bare. But if only autumn-sown crops are grown, there is very limited  
275 time between harvesting and the sowing of the subsequent crop.

276 The effects of cover crops on N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are more variable and contrasted than those on SOC  
277 changes (Table 1). Many factors influence the magnitude of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions, such as the C:N ratio of cover crop  
278 residues, their rate of decomposition, the extra inputs of fertilizer N sometimes applied to cover crops, whether  
279 the residues are ploughed or left to decay on the soil surface. Current evidence points to a negative relationship  
280 between N<sub>2</sub>O emissions and the C:N ratio of residues<sup>50</sup>. A low C:N ratio will increase the availability of soil N  
281 for microbial transformations (e.g. nitrification and denitrification) whereas larger ratios will result in N  
282 immobilization and deplete the soil inorganic N pool<sup>85</sup>. Additional C inputs from cover crops may stimulate the  
283 activity of denitrifier bacteria, which use these organic compounds as a source of energy<sup>86</sup>. A meta-analysis<sup>87</sup>  
284 reported a significant increase in N<sub>2</sub>O emission when leguminous cover crops were introduced. However,  
285 another review<sup>88</sup> found out that the incorporation of either legume and non-legume cover crops tended to  
286 increase N<sub>2</sub>O emissions but the magnitude of the effect was not significant due to the high variability of data.  
287 The effect of cover crops on N<sub>2</sub>O emissions is therefore not yet fully understood and may well be highly site-  
288 specific.

289 One of the key points controlling cover crop effect on N<sub>2</sub>O emissions is how often leguminous crops are  
290 integrated within the crop rotation. Leguminous cover crops generally have a lower C:N ratio than non-  
291 leguminous crops, and can fix substantial amounts of atmospheric N, reaching up to 0.1-0.2 t N ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup><sup>89</sup>. These  
292 rates may lead to a N surplus if all the leguminous cover crop biomass is incorporated. A recent study, using a  
293 biogeochemistry model framework at European scale, estimated that systematic planting of N-fixing cover crops  
294 may lead to a N surplus of about 0.04 t N ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>, compared to the use of non-legumes as cover crop<sup>28</sup>. In this  
295 scenario, the cumulative climate change mitigation effect of SOC sequestration was, on average, totally offset  
296 after 50 years since the adoption of cover crops, due to enhanced N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. While cover crops may induce  
297 higher N<sub>2</sub>O emissions, in particular if leguminous crop are extensively used, they can also reduce nitrate  
298 leaching, by about 56% on average<sup>90</sup>. This is beneficial for water quality and would be expected to lead to

299 decreased indirect N<sub>2</sub>O emission through denitrification of nitrate entering surface water. Finally, another  
300 indirect effect of leguminous cover crops on N<sub>2</sub>O emissions will strongly depend on whether or not mineral N  
301 fertilisation rates are reduced to take account of N provided by biological fixation. The meta-analysis we  
302 compiled here indicate that additional N<sub>2</sub>O emissions decrease the SOC storage benefit of cover crops, but do  
303 not fully offset it (Fig. 2).

304

### 305 *3.5 Agroforestry*

306 Agroforestry systems include a diversity of practices ranging from complex associations found in  
307 homegardens, multistrata systems or agroforests to simpler systems such as alley crops, silvopastoral systems,  
308 riparian plantings, shelterbelts, windbreaks or hedgerows<sup>91</sup>. Despite this broad diversity, recent reviews and  
309 meta-analyses consistently suggest that the conversion of arable land to agroforestry systems increases SOC  
310 stocks<sup>92-94</sup>. In temperate regions, SOC accumulation rates are usually around 0.92 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> in the  
311 topsoil (0-30 cm)<sup>83</sup>. They are highly dependent on local pedoclimatic conditions and on the type and design of  
312 agroforestry systems (tree density, tree species, pruning management, etc), but rarely exceed 3.67 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup>  
313 yr<sup>-1</sup><sup>22,26</sup>. However, the spatial distribution of SOC stocks in agroforestry systems is usually very heterogeneous,  
314 with higher stocks under the tree canopy or along tree rows<sup>95,97</sup>. Several mechanisms contribute to explain SOC  
315 sequestration in agroforestry systems. The main one is probably being linked to higher organic inputs to the soil  
316 compared to treeless agricultural land<sup>98</sup>, including litterfall, pruning residues, and root inputs<sup>99</sup>.

317 A recent synthesis of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions under agroforestry compared to adjacent agricultural lands only found  
318 minor differences in net emissions, with no clear overall direction of change<sup>93</sup>. However, several authors found  
319 increased N<sub>2</sub>O emissions in agroforestry, related to a greater N supply through N<sub>2</sub>-fixing trees<sup>100-103</sup> or to the  
320 incorporation of tree residues<sup>104,105</sup>. By contrast, N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are often reduced in silvo-arable systems and in  
321 riparian buffers<sup>93</sup>. Some authors suggest that concerns over N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from N<sub>2</sub>-fixing trees are unwarranted  
322 since fluxes from soils planted with N<sub>2</sub>-fixing trees are similar to those fertilized with mineral N<sup>106</sup>. Furthermore,  
323 the yield of crops in tropical agroforestry systems may be boosted as a result of higher N-inputs from trees. In  
324 temperate regions where agroforestry systems are generally planted with non-legume trees, N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are  
325 often reduced<sup>93</sup>, with several processes contributing to the trend. Increased nitrogen utilization at the plot scale  
326 may be due to the presence of deep-rooted trees<sup>107</sup>, which are capable of taking up nitrate-N that has leached  
327 below crop rooting depth<sup>108-110</sup>. This process can potentially reduce the amount of N available for nitrification  
328 and denitrification, and thus reduce indirect N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. Soil water content is often lower in agroforestry than

329 in treeless plots<sup>111</sup>, due to a higher daily water consumption by trees and crops<sup>112</sup>. A drier soil profile in  
330 agroforestry systems could therefore lower N<sub>2</sub>O emissions. In temperate silvoarable systems, tree rows are  
331 usually uncropped and unfertilized. This reduction in the fertilized cropping area indirectly leads to lower N<sub>2</sub>O  
332 emissions per hectare. An obvious consequence of agroforestry, especially as tends to be practiced in temperate  
333 regions, is that a smaller area of land is devoted to the agricultural crop being grown. So the impact of decreased  
334 N<sub>2</sub>O emissions may be different if expressed on an area basis compared to per unit of production.

335

### 336 *3.6 Non-pyrogenic organic amendments*

337 A literature review<sup>113</sup> reported increases in SOC (sometimes expressed as stocks and sometimes as  
338 concentration) after prolonged large applications of organic amendments under several different agro-climatic  
339 conditions. These increases ranged from 20 to 90% of the initial total SOC after few years (3-60 years),  
340 compared to unfertilized controls or treatments receiving only synthetic mineral N fertilisers, with most being in  
341 the range 20- 45%. A meta-analysis<sup>114</sup> based on 130 observations worldwide quantified the response of SOC  
342 stocks to manure application over periods ranging from 3 to 82 years. The mean manure-C retention coefficient  
343 defined as the average proportion of manure-C remaining in the soil was estimated at 12% for an average study  
344 duration of 18 years. The authors finally estimated a relative SOC stock change factor of 26% which was also  
345 related to cumulative manure inputs. Concerning Mediterranean cropping systems, and shorter durations, a meta-  
346 analysis<sup>115</sup> reported that the application of organic amendments increased SOC stocks by 23.5% with an average  
347 SOC storage rate of 4.81 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> calculated for an average duration of 7.9 years. From these meta-  
348 analyses, it seems that there is a consensus that organic amendments lead, on average, to a relative increase of  
349 SOC stocks in the top soils (roughly 20-30cm) of about 25% on a 20-year time frame (or 3 times the '4 per mil'  
350 target). In one example<sup>17</sup> where manure was applied annually at a high rate compared to what is usual in  
351 agrosystems, the annual rate of SOC accumulation averaged 18‰ per year in the first 20 years, then declined to  
352 6‰ per year after 40-60 years, and to only 2‰ per year after 80-100 years. However, from the perspective of  
353 mitigating climate change, it is arguable whether any increase in SOC stocks resulting from applications of  
354 manure or similar materials can be considered as C mitigation in the sense of either a transfer of C from  
355 atmosphere to land or an avoided emission. Manure is generated in agricultural systems and is almost always  
356 used in some way by application to soils, though often quite inefficiently. Thus, an increase in SOC stocks at a  
357 given location mainly represents a transfer of C from one site to another as opposed to a net removal of  
358 atmospheric carbon<sup>17</sup>. Local additional SOC storage may not represent a CO<sub>2</sub> sink, i.e. a net transfer of carbon

359 from the atmosphere to the soil at the landscape scale.

360 Because organic amendments such as manures contain readily-decomposable N-rich compounds, there  
361 is a significant risk that they may enhance N<sub>2</sub>O emissions<sup>116–118</sup>. Conversely, their use permits decreased use of  
362 mineral N fertilizers, thereby saving N<sub>2</sub>O emission from this source and fossil energy and the associated GHG  
363 emissions from fertilizer manufacture. A further complicating factor in assessing the overall impact of manure  
364 use is that indirect emissions due to storage or management are not negligible<sup>119</sup>. There are few reports in the  
365 literature of long-term monitoring of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions compared to data on SOC stock changes, primarily because  
366 the former are much more difficult to measure. However, the effects of multiple types of organic amendments on  
367 SOC storage and N<sub>2</sub>O emissions have been evaluated in short-term experiments for various soil types, climates,  
368 soil incorporation practices, and amendments types including crop residues, manure, composts of various origin  
369 and maturation stages, and sewage sludge. A meta-analysis<sup>120</sup> concluded that the N<sub>2</sub>O emission factors (EFs)  
370 related to N inputs were mainly controlled by the C:N ratios of the added material, but that many other factors  
371 influenced emission, such as soil properties (texture, drainage, SOC and N content), and climatic factors. For  
372 instance, the authors observed that the EFs were on average 2.8 times greater in fine-textured soils compared to  
373 coarse-textured, consistent with a previous meta-analysis<sup>50</sup>. However, we should mention that the value of meta-  
374 analyses is often limited due numerous controlling factors that are not always correctly reported in the papers  
375 reviewed, and the general paucity of organic amendments characterisation in the literature. For instance, the two  
376 meta-analyses mentioned in this paragraph only involved 28 to 38 individual journal articles.<sup>50,120</sup> Another  
377 approach is to compare organically managed soils with those managed without organic amendments<sup>121</sup>. Results  
378 from such a comparison seem to indicate reduced N<sub>2</sub>O emissions compared to situations relying totally on  
379 mineral fertilizers, as show in Fig. 2. It should be noted that there is limited data from long-term studies on N<sub>2</sub>O  
380 emissions associated with additions of organic amendments; the data covers only a limited diversity of pedo-  
381 climatic conditions, and especially the range of soil water filled pore space values explored.

### 382 *3.7 Biochar amendments*

383 Biochar (pyrolyzed organic matter amended to the soil) technology is considered by some authors to be  
384 one of the methods with the highest potential to sequester carbon in soils compared to natural C cycle without  
385 biochar production step<sup>4</sup>. The aim of biochar production from biomass pyrolysis is to produce recalcitrant  
386 organic matter (i.e., charcoal and biomass-derived black C) which is then added to the soil. For this reason,  
387 biochar can be considered as a negative emission technology different from other soil C sequestration methods<sup>5</sup>.

388 Biochar properties and effects on SOC stabilization strongly depend on the feedstock material and pyrolysis  
389 conditions (e.g., maximum temperature, heating rates)<sup>122–126</sup>, as well as biochar ageing and soil  
390 properties<sup>127,128</sup>. The efficiency of biochar for C sequestration is two-fold as compared to simply relying on soil  
391 stabilization processes. First, slow pyrolysis for biochar production results in a much higher proportion of the  
392 feedstock C bound in persistent molecular structures than through in situ stabilization by addition of unprocessed  
393 organic matter to soil<sup>129</sup>. With a slow pyrolysis at about 500°C, approximately 50% of the carbon contained in a  
394 feedstock of Miscanthus or maize cobs ended up within the biochar and can therefore be assumed to be more  
395 stable than carbon in the raw biomass<sup>130</sup>. This compares with only 8–12% of straw residue returned to the field  
396 being transformed into longer-lived SOM forms<sup>27,131</sup>. Thus, pyrolysis is about four times more efficient than  
397 SOM-formation processes to produce persistent C in soils. Second, field studies show that biochar has a longer  
398 mean residence time in soils than SOM, i.e. >100 years<sup>132</sup> vs. about 50 years for the latter<sup>133</sup>. Combining effects  
399 of the higher persistent-C yield with that of the longer mean residence time, biochar appears at least 8 times  
400 more efficient at storing SOC than the return of non-pyrolysed residues. In meta-analyses, biochar amendment  
401 tends to increase the soil organic carbon stocks by 40% but the studies used were generally short term (no more  
402 than 4 years)<sup>134</sup>. Nevertheless, this result must be considered with due care since it is not straightforward to  
403 measure the effect of biochar, which is mainly C, on native SOC but one published study suggests that biochar  
404 amendment increase total SOC including non-biochar C<sup>135</sup>. In addition to the direct inputs of pyrolyzed biomass  
405 to the soil, recent studies showed that biochar amendments could increase (positive priming), decrease (negative  
406 priming) or have no effect on the mineralisation of native SOM. The biochar effect on the magnitude and  
407 direction of priming is influenced by the incubation period and pyrolysis temperature<sup>122,123,136</sup>. Positive priming,  
408 which would cause destabilization of SOM, thus offsetting part of the increased SOC storage, could result from  
409 the biochar affecting microbial biomass activity and enzyme production<sup>137</sup> through changes in availability of  
410 organic substrates and nutrients, and modification of microorganism habitat associated with the great porosity  
411 and large specific surface area of charcoal particles<sup>137</sup>. Conversely, some studies showed that biochar-induced  
412 negative priming, leading to further SOC storage in addition to direct biochar-C inputs, resulted from the  
413 enhancement of organo-mineral interactions and soil aggregation with biochar<sup>138,139</sup>, and a greater adsorption of  
414 dissolved organic carbon onto biochar particles<sup>140</sup>. In addition, biochar amendments have been shown to increase  
415 soil water holding capacity, the availability of some nutrients (Ca<sup>2+</sup>, Mg<sup>2+</sup> in particular) and to increase soil pH.  
416 All of these mechanisms could further enhance crop productivity and biomass inputs into soil<sup>141–144</sup>, with clearer  
417 effects on crop yields in highly weathered tropical soils<sup>145</sup>. Nevertheless, to process biomass into biochar,



418 transport it and incorporate it to the soil, some energy is needed (possibly produced by pyrolysis) and the related  
419 GHG emissions associated with this process must be accounted for to calculate a full GHG balance for biochar.  
420 Life cycle assessments (LCA) have shown that a positive balance can be obtained, illustrated by GHG reductions  
421 up to 2.74 t CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per ton of biochar amended on volcanic soils from Southern Chile<sup>146</sup>. The balance  
422 can also significantly increase when plant biomass production is accompanied by an efficient use of the  
423 bioenergy produced during the pyrolysis process in order to maximize climate benefits from biochar production  
424 followed by addition to soil, as shown by an LCA performed in Spain<sup>147</sup>; implementation costs were also  
425 decreased. One simulation study suggests that the maximum sustainable technical potential of biochar to  
426 mitigate climate change, involving the widespread use of biochars, without threatening food security and  
427 landscapes, could be a mitigation of 12% of current anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (1.8 Pg CO<sub>2</sub>-C equivalent per  
428 year)<sup>148</sup>. The C:N ratio of SOM approximates 14<sup>149</sup> while that of biochar is generally higher than that of its  
429 feedstock, i.e. generally > 50 for straw biochar and > 100 for wood biochar. It takes therefore at least five times  
430 less N to stabilize organic C in the form of biochar than in the form of SOM. Beyond this critical observation,  
431 biochar has other important interactions with the N cycle, notably: 1) volatilization and immobilization of N  
432 during the pyrolysis process<sup>150</sup>, 2) reduction of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions after application to arable fields<sup>151</sup>, 3) reduction of  
433 NO<sub>3</sub> and NH<sub>4</sub> leaching<sup>152</sup>. Emissions of N<sub>2</sub>O from soils are in most cases substantially reduced by biochar  
434 addition: a recent meta-analysis reported an average decrease of 38% across studies<sup>151</sup>. However, most  
435 measurements are fairly short-term, the majority in this meta-analysis being <30 days. This effect appears  
436 consistent when biochar is produced at over ~450C, so that the product is both high pH and high surface area  
437 while containing very little labile C<sup>125</sup>. The contribution of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions attenuation with biochar was shown  
438 to be negligible in the LCA performed in Southern Chile, compared to the climate change mitigation associated  
439 to C storage<sup>146</sup>. Furthermore, reductions in N<sub>2</sub>O emission with biochar appears only significant for the first year  
440 after application, which suggests that frequent applications are necessary to maintain such an effect. In view of  
441 the large quantities of biochar usually applied in such studies, this may greatly limit the practical and/or  
442 economical potential for using biochar as a method for decreasing N<sub>2</sub>O emissions.

443 A way to capitalize on the positive interactions between biochar properties and the N cycle is through  
444 the development of biochar-based fertilizers made by mixing biochar with mineral or organic sources of  
445 nutrients<sup>153</sup>. This method aims at reducing nitrate losses and N<sub>2</sub>O emissions, and at increasing N use efficiency.  
446 Moreover, biochar tends to adsorb mineral N and the mixing with a nutrient-rich material prevents potential N  
447 deficiency created by field application of large amounts of raw biochar. Some biochar structures have been

448 successfully loaded with nitrate ions through co-composting, which could greatly increase the fertilisation value  
449 of the product<sup>154</sup>. Producing biochar fertilizers requires the development of appropriate technologies. For  
450 example, mixing raw biochar - a high pH product- with manure and slurries can result in large amounts of NH<sub>3</sub>  
451 being volatilized. Therefore, biochar acidification is generally required when making biochar fertilizers from  
452 organic feedstocks. However, biochar is also a strong sorbent for NH<sub>3</sub><sup>155</sup>, which may be captured from the  
453 atmosphere during the pyrolysis process and made available to plants later. This is a promising technology to  
454 abate anthropogenic emissions of NH<sub>3</sub><sup>155</sup> as well as directly reduce NH<sub>3</sub> volatilization from soils<sup>150</sup>. In  
455 conclusion, pending proper technology, biochar may be intimately mixed with N sources and applied each year  
456 as a fertilizer to maximize reductions in both N<sub>2</sub>O emissions and nitrate leaching, while sequestering C in a  
457 structure requiring little N. However, further studies are needed to validate the scant results currently available.

### 458 3.8 Overview of the current evidence

459 Fig. 2 summarises published data on rates of change in SOC and rates of emission of N<sub>2</sub>O resulting from four  
460 prominent sets of practices designed to increase SOC, namely agroforestry, cover crops, no-tillage and organic  
461 amendment. All fluxes are expressed in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents, using a global warming potential value integrated over  
462 100 years and including global warming potential (GWP) of 298 for N<sub>2</sub>O as recommended by the last IPCC report<sup>156</sup>.  
463 GWP is the time-integrated radiative forcing induced by a pulse emission of a given component (here N<sub>2</sub>O),  
464 relative to a pulse emission of an equal mass of CO<sub>2</sub><sup>156</sup>. The data on Fig. 2 were taken from several meta-  
465 analyses and review papers. Here, we did not re-analyse the data gathered by such meta-analysis, but rather  
466 presented the mean effect size from each study converted in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents. When results were given for the  
467 whole experiment duration, we divided by the duration of the experiment to obtain the mean annual SOC  
468 storage/ N<sub>2</sub>O emissions (see supplementary information for detailed methods). The data in Fig. 2 is based on  
469 over 700 measurements of SOC change and 200 measurements of N<sub>2</sub>O. Even allowing for some papers being  
470 cited in more than one meta-analysis, this is a large body of data and, to our knowledge, has not previously been  
471 assembled in this way. At first sight it appears that SOC increases produced by the four sets of treatments varied  
472 widely from -0.52 ± 0.46 to -6.74 ± 1.21 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>, the negative sign representing accumulation of SOC,  
473 i.e. transfer of C from atmosphere to soil. However, this wide range is somewhat deceptive as the two largest  
474 values are from very specific situations. The value of -6.74 ± 1.21 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> for agroforestry (Kim *et al*,  
475 2016) is from 34 sets of data for systems with a particularly high tree density (see legend to Fig. 2); the other two  
476 meta-analyses for agroforestry, based on >200 datasets, give values of less than half this at around -3 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq.  
477 ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>. For cover crops the majority of data, based on 186 datasets, lead to mean rates of C accumulation in the

478 range of -1.2 to -2.0 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>. The highest value observed for cover crop was 3.67 t CO<sub>2</sub>-eq. ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>  
479 but it specifically refers to cover crops included between the wide rows of Mediterranean woody crops (olive,  
480 almond and vineyards) where the soil would otherwise be bare<sup>157</sup>. This is clearly an important management  
481 change within this environment but represents a much greater input of plant material than, say, cover crops  
482 grown during winter within temperate arable cropping systems. For both agroforestry and cover crops, and even  
483 ignoring the two sets of data for SOC increases that are especially large, it appears from the summarized data in  
484 Fig. 2 that SOC increases resulting from these two changes in management considerably outweigh increased  
485 N<sub>2</sub>O emissions when both are expressed on a CO<sub>2</sub>-eq basis and these management changes can be expected to  
486 beneficial for climate change mitigation. For no-tillage the situation is different: the relatively small rates of SOC  
487 accumulation are approximately equal to the increases in N<sub>2</sub>O emission when both are expressed on a CO<sub>2</sub>-eq  
488 basis, so there appears to be no overall climate change benefit. For organic amendments the results indicate that  
489 N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are decreased and thus reinforce the SOC benefit, though this is based on a very limited amount  
490 of data and also, as discussed earlier, it is questionable whether SOC increases from addition of organic  
491 amendments can be fully regarded as climate change mitigation. It should be noted that most of the studies are  
492 performed over a few years and assessment of GHG balance in the long term, especially for N<sub>2</sub>O, are still  
493 missing<sup>28</sup>. Some practices were too little documented or with not enough information to be compared with the  
494 others (e.g. , biochar or erosion control).

495

#### 496 4. DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK

497 Overall, the meta-analysis we gathered here (Fig. 2) suggest that, with the exception of reduced tillage  
498 practices, increased N<sub>2</sub>O emissions are not sufficient to invalidate the GHG abatement potential achieved by  
499 SOC sequestration strategies. Some sequestration strategies (e.g. biochar or non-pyrogenic organic amendment  
500 application) may even generate win-win situations through a decrease in N<sub>2</sub>O emissions, although the  
501 experimental evidences are still scant. In addition, the economic impacts and large-scale effects of the options  
502 examined here warrant further assessment. Some practices may affect crop yields or farmers' income, depending  
503 on pedo-climatic conditions and the details and practicalities of the cropping systems. For instance, conservation  
504 practices, and especially no-till may slightly decrease crop yields under temperate climates but be beneficial in  
505 drier conditions<sup>158</sup>. Similarly, the yield of arable crops is usually reduced in agroforestry systems in temperate  
506 regions<sup>159</sup> but in more arid climates, crops perform better<sup>160</sup>. Nevertheless, for agroforestry, trees produce timber,

507 firewood, honey, fruits, etc. that are also a source of incomes for the farmers and may lead to greater overall  
508 sustainability. Beyond yield impacts, some socio-cultural or economic factors come into play that may hinder the  
509 adoption of carbon sequestration practices. For example, in the United States, the cost of carbon capture through  
510 Natural Resources Conservation Service programs is estimated at US \$ 32-442 per tonne of CO<sub>2</sub>, with an  
511 average of US \$ 183<sup>161</sup>. A carbon price much higher than the present value (around US \$ 10 as a global  
512 average<sup>162</sup>) would be necessary to promote carbon sequestration practices, as well as a regulation to direct the  
513 financial flow of industrial and energy emitters to the agricultural sector.

514 To be deployed at large scale and to enter emission trading systems, the GHG fluxes of each change in  
515 agricultural practices should be estimated precisely. Various models may be used to account for scale or leakage  
516 effects such as indirect land-use changes<sup>163</sup>. The methods currently available include data-driven approaches  
517 based on worldwide measurement networks<sup>164</sup>, statistical or empirical flux-upscaling models<sup>57,164</sup>, process-based  
518 models and, lastly, integrated assessment models (IAM)<sup>165</sup>. Process-based models include a representation of N  
519 cycling processes, which are an essential tool in assessing and predicting the terrestrial N cycle and N<sub>2</sub>O fluxes  
520 in response to multi-factor global changes. Such models have been used to estimate N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from natural  
521 and agricultural soils at various scales, from field to global level via the integration of a prognostic N cycle into  
522 different land surface models<sup>166</sup>. As an example, Fig. 3 shows the results of simulations by various models at  
523 global scale. Most of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from cropland are due to the use of mineral fertilizers (Fig. 3a) and are  
524 mainly located in USA, Europe, India and China. They may be used to quantify carbon sequestration in soil  
525 minus the N<sub>2</sub>O emission trade-off at global scale, based on ensemble runs as was initiated in the global N<sub>2</sub>O  
526 Model Inter-Comparison Project<sup>167</sup>.

527 IAMs focus on the interactions between the economic activities and earth system responses and are vital  
528 for estimating what socioeconomic changes would be needed to reduce GHG emissions across sectors and  
529 increase biospheric C sinks<sup>168</sup>. Until recently, most IAMs did not explicitly take into account SOC restoration  
530 practices<sup>169</sup>. A recent study that did include them found that soils could be a sink of 3.5 GtCO<sub>2</sub>-eq/yr by 2050  
531 under a carbon price of 190 USD/tCO<sub>2</sub><sup>13</sup>. This carbon mitigation option, if achievable in practice, would reduce  
532 the burden of climate stabilization for all sectors of the economy, including agriculture. In addition, SOC  
533 increases are often correlated with higher crop yields and contribute to a range of other environmental benefits  
534 and increased sustainability of agricultural systems. Practices designed to increase SOC can offer a win-win  
535 solution *vis a vis* food security, by mitigating food calorie losses resulting from the application of emission  
536 reduction targets (e.g. through decreased applications of mineral fertilizers) and reducing undernourishment.

537

538           Finally, many of the practices reviewed (Table 1) here may be combined on a given field: for example,  
539 no-till can be combined with cover crops, organic amendments, or agroforestry. Such combinations have been  
540 little tested in practice and in particular synergetic effects between them have not been evaluated in depth<sup>170,171</sup>.  
541 Conversely, they may come with trade-off, antagonistic or synergistic effects regarding SOC storage rates, as  
542 well as N<sub>2</sub>O emissions or other impacts and these needs to be identified and quantified. Furthermore, proper  
543 assessment of carbon sequestration measures raises classical GHG accounting issues, such as double counting,  
544 improper setting of system boundaries and counterfactual scenarios<sup>169</sup>. Although further research is still needed  
545 to quantify the potential of SOC sequestration options on a local to regional basis, it appears that their potential  
546 to mitigate climate change, even when factoring in N<sub>2</sub>O emissions is still significant and that they deserve further  
547 consideration in climate stabilization scenarios. Including the state-of-the-art knowledge reviewed here on the  
548 effectiveness of such measures in land system or integrated assessment models could be a prime target to assess  
549 their impacts at global scale.

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562 ITEMS:

563 Table 1: Summary of the effects of management practices on soil organic carbon (SOC) storage and N<sub>2</sub>O  
 564 emissions.

Management Practice	Effect on soil C stocks	Effect on N <sub>2</sub> O emissions ( <i>a priori</i> )
Reduced tillage / zero tillage	Reduced C loss/Increased C inputs to soils when associated with a reduced weed management	Promote denitrification (anaerobiosis)
Erosion control (contour plowing, terracing)	Reduced C loss	Unclear
Addition of non pyrogenic organic amendments (compost, manure, crop residues)	Increased C input but in some cases (e.g. manure) rather a transfer from one terrestrial location to another than a transfer of C from atmosphere to soil	Enhanced denitrification rate (via anaerobiosis and the supply of electron donors), and soil N availability
Use of cover crops	Reduced C loss/increased C input	Decreased denitrification because of N uptake by plants; may be compensated for by N inputs from BNF
Biochar	Increased C input	Decreased nitrification due to adsorption of mineral N with biochar.
Agroforestry	Increased C input, reduced C loss, increased aggregate stability	Decreased denitrification (lower soil moisture, increased soil porosity, increased nitrogen uptake), except for N <sub>2</sub> -fixing trees (increasing soil available N)

565 Figure legends

566 Figure 1: A schematic representation of C-N interactions in the terrestrial ecosystem. Note that biological  
567 nitrogen fixation and denitrification are process performed by microorganisms that also need C as substrate.

568 Figure 2: Estimation of the SOC storage and N<sub>2</sub>O emissions of land-based mitigation options expressed in CO<sub>2</sub>  
569 equivalents. Negative values indicate a net reduction in GHG emissions in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents, while  
570 positive values show a net increase of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent emissions. All values refer to the difference between the  
571 land-based mitigation option in question and a “control” land (e.g. no-tillage vs conventional tillage). For  
572 agroforestry, the control land is cropland and different types of agroforestry systems were considered. NB: In  
573 Kim et al. (2016) the majority of soil C storage data comes from intercropping, improved fallows and rotational  
574 woodlots, which are systems with high tree density. This could partially explain the very high estimation of soil  
575 C storage found in Kim et al. (2016) compared to other papers. Organic amendments do not include biochar. The  
576 control used for comparison with organic amendments is an experiment managed with inorganic fertilizers. For  
577 cover crops meta-analysis, Vicente-Vicente et al. (2016) only consider Mediterranean woody crops (olive,  
578 almond and vineyards), which could also explain the large soil C rates estimated. Uncertainty is given as  
579 standard error (SE) for every paper. If it was provided as a confidence interval (CI) or standard deviation (SD) it  
580 has been adequately transformed to unify the units. (\*Reviews; \*\* For these meta-analysis the values reported in  
581 the graph have been recalculated as the weighted mean across all experiments, from the database provided by the  
582 authors, because the values coming from the papers could not be used as they were reported as a percentage  
583 only).<sup>121,157,172,173</sup>

584 Figure 3: Spatial and latitudinal patterns of contributions of fertilizer (a) and manure (b) on cropland soil N<sub>2</sub>O  
585 emissions obtained during the global N<sub>2</sub>O Model Intercomparison Project<sup>167</sup>. Average over the 2006-2015  
586 period.

587

588           **[Box 1: Intertwined soil C and N cycles.** Primary producers fix atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> through  
589 photosynthesis and produce biomass that subsequently enters the soil *via* rhizodeposition and litter production or  
590 *via* organic amendments or deposition due to erosion or dissolved organic carbon (DOC) leaching into the  
591 subsoil. Organic C entering soil is further processed by soil organisms into organic by-products and subsequent  
592 CO<sub>2</sub> losses during mineralization. SOC can also be lost through fire, or displaced by erosion/deposition and  
593 lateral transfer of DOC. The net difference between C inputs and outputs determines how much organic C is  
594 stored in the soil. A part of this carbon is stabilized for decades to centuries through several mechanisms such as  
595 interactions with the soil mineral matrix, chemical recalcitrance or protection within aggregates. Nitrogen can  
596 enter the soil *via* atmospheric deposition or biological N<sub>2</sub> fixation, or as mineral or organic fertilizers. Nitrogen  
597 can leave the soil through plant uptake, leaching or gaseous emissions. The critical N pool sustaining plant  
598 growth is mineral N (ammonium (NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>) and nitrate (NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>)), which either originates from the mineralization of  
599 soil organic matter and ammonification as well as from mineral fertilizers inputs. Specific chemotrophic  
600 microorganisms called nitrifiers can oxidize ammonium, first into nitrite (NO<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup>) and then into nitrate. The reverse  
601 process called dissimilatory nitrate reduction can occur in anaerobic conditions<sup>174</sup>. Heterotrophic denitrifying  
602 communities can also use nitrate and reduce it to N<sub>2</sub>. In each of these processes, nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) can be  
603 generated<sup>175</sup>. Net N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from the soil will usually be lower when the amount of soil mineral N is low  
604 and when soil pH is alkaline<sup>55,175</sup> but also when C and oxygen availability are reduced<sup>56,175</sup>. N can also be lost as  
605 NH<sub>3</sub>, or as other gaseous forms of N oxides that can be deposited and contribute to indirect N<sub>2</sub>O formation.]

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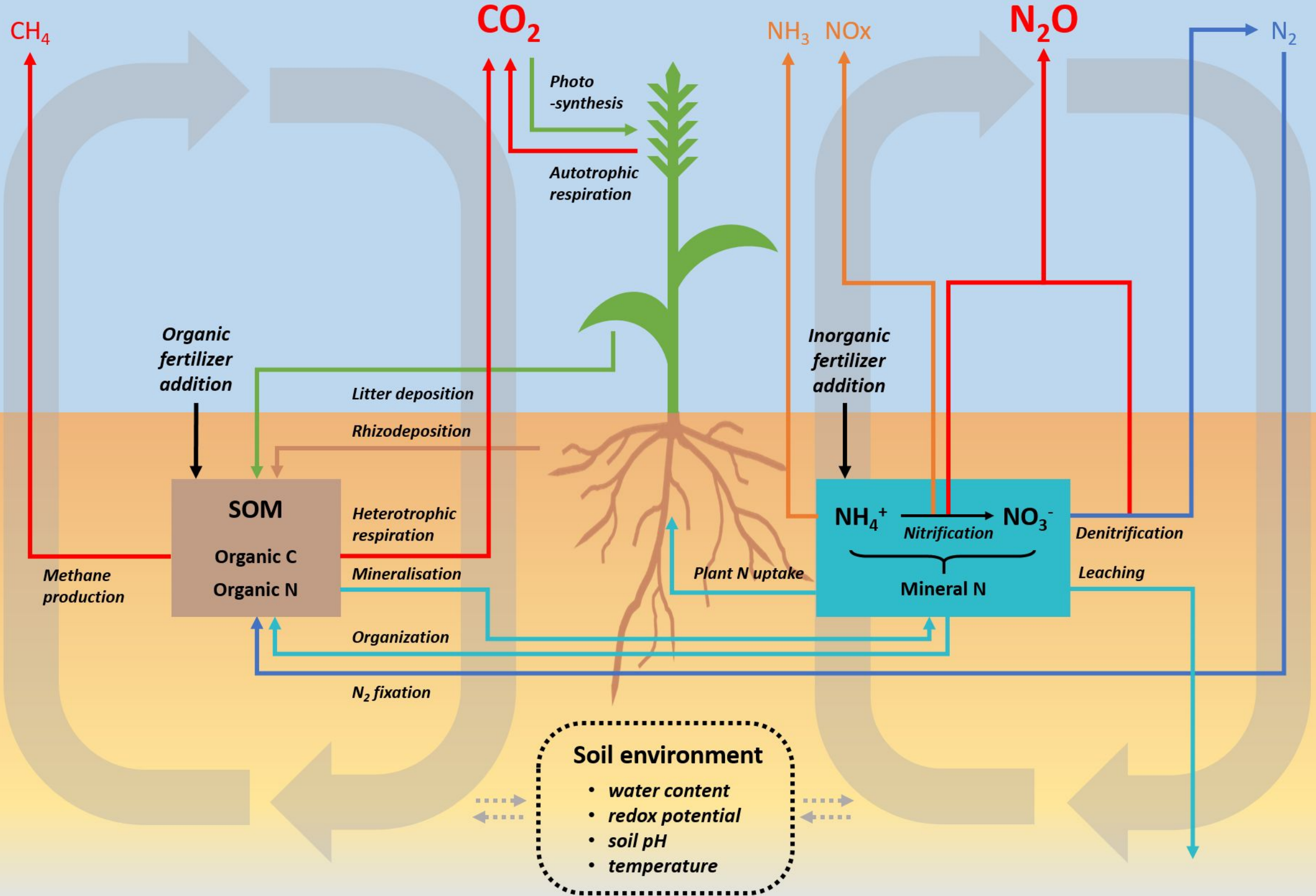


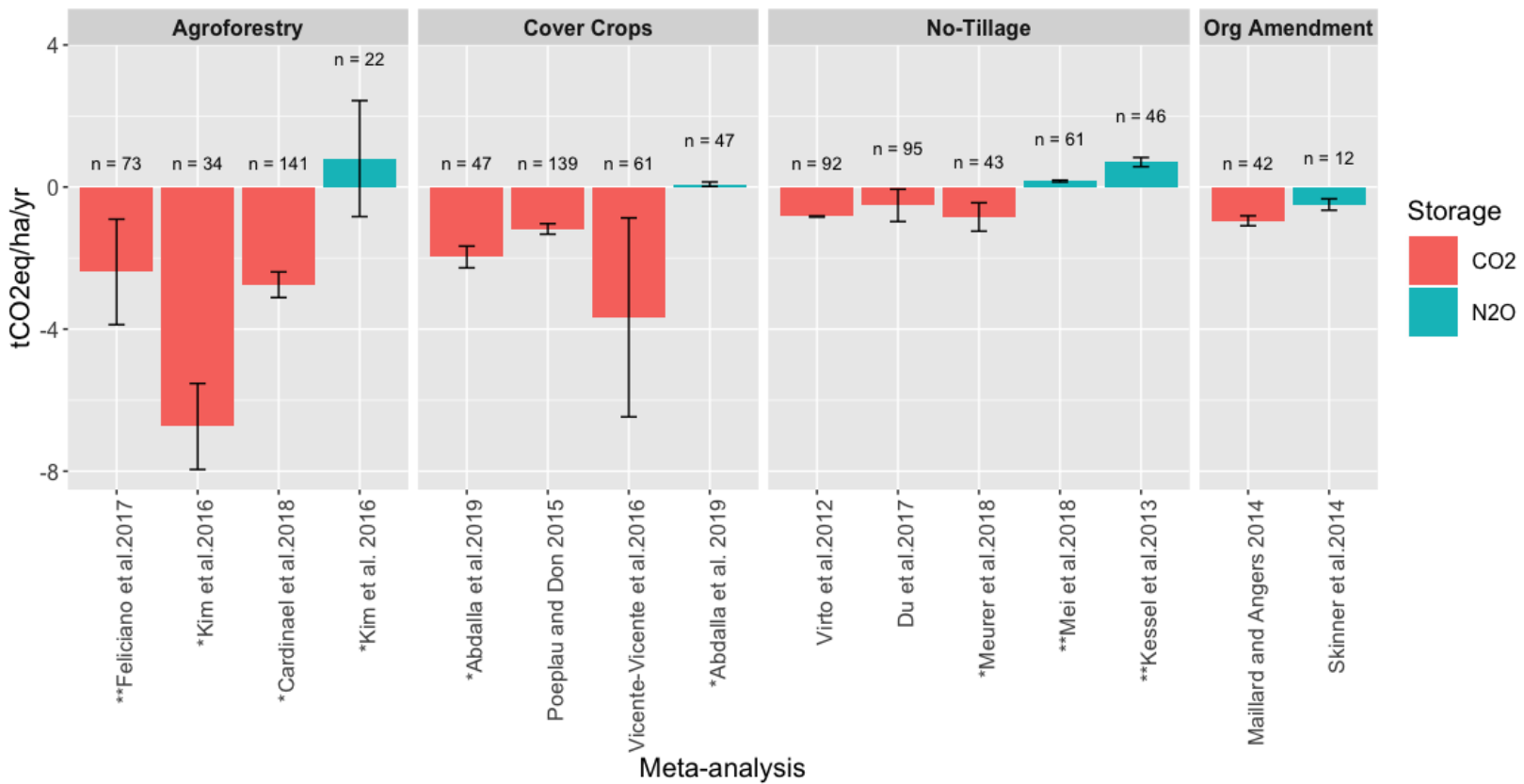
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# Soil C cycle

# Soil N cycle





Meta-analysis

n = number of experiments

