International Journal of Research Studies on Environment, Earth, and Allied Sciences (IJRSEAS)
| *Volume-2 Issue-2 |April-2025 | ISSN: 3066-0637 | Website:* https://eesrd.us

Manuscript ID:
IJRSEAS-2025-0202010

OPEN ACCESS

Quick Response Code:

Website: https://eesrd.us

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15093608

DOI Link:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15093608

Volume: 2

Issue: 2

Pp. 33-36

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 3066-0637

Submitted: 27 Feb 2024

Revised: 25 Mar 2025

Accepted: 22 Apr 2025

Published: 30 Apr 2025

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How to cite this article:
Jagzap, K. L., Shaikh, Y., Sonwane, R. D., Kamble, S. G., & Raut, R. R. (2025). Crop Residues: Boon for Agriculture- A Review. International Journal of Research Studies on Environment, Earth, and Allied Sciences, 2(2), 33–36. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15093608

Crop Residues: Boon for Agriculture- A Review

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Abstract

Crop residues, the byproducts left after the harvesting of crops, represent a valuable yet often underutilized resource in sustainable agricultural systems. These residues, which include plant stems, leaves, roots, and other parts not consumed by humans or livestock, have the potential to significantly enhance soil health, improve crop yields, and contribute to more sustainable farming practices. This review synthesizes recent literature on the multifaceted role of crop residues in modern agriculture, examining how their proper use can support vital soil processes such as nutrient cycling, organic matter replenishment, and moisture retention. By improving soil structure and increasing microbial activity, crop residues can foster healthier, more fertile soils, which in turn support higher and more resilient crop yields. However, the management and utilization of crop residues come with challenges, such as competition with other uses (e.g., for animal feed or bioenergy production), potential risks of disease transfer, and the need for proper residue decomposition to avoid nutrient imbalances. The review further explores various management strategies for integrating crop residues into agricultural practices, including mulching, composting, and incorporating residues into no-till farming systems. These strategies can optimize the benefits of crop residues, reducing the need for synthetic fertilizers and improving overall environmental sustainability. Emphasizing the importance of crop residues in supporting soil organic matter, nutrient cycling, and ecological health, this review highlights their crucial role in advancing sustainable agricultural practices and fostering long-term environmental stewardship.

Keywords: *Crop residues, nutrient cycling, soil health, sustainable agriculture, residue management, soil organic matter.*

Introduction

Crop residues are the plant materials remaining after the harvest of crops, including straw, stalks, leaves, and roots. Traditionally seen as waste, these residues are increasingly recognized for their potential benefits to agricultural systems. Proper management of crop residues can improve crop productivity; sustainable farming practices and soil health (Lal, 2020). The literature surrounding the utilization of crop residues in agricultural systems reveals a complex interplay between environmental sustainability, livestock management, and soil health. In their 2013 study, (Homann et al., 2013) highlight the significance of household-specific and site-specific dynamics in the use of crop residues within smallholder crop-livestock systems in Southern Africa. They argue that while the integration of crop and livestock markets may not significantly influence residue use, the increasing demand for livestock products is likely to heighten competition for crop residues. Their findings suggest that as farmers expand croplands to meet food demands, the pressure on crop residues for livestock feed will intensify, necessitating technical innovations to enhance biomass production and improve residue efficiency ((Homann et al., 2013)).

Building on this foundation, (J. Duncan et al., 2016) examine the allocation of crop residues across a productivity gradient in Eastern Africa, emphasizing the critical balance between livestock feed and soil improvement. Their research indicates that intensifying livestock production may lead to a reduction in crop residue returned to the soil, which poses long-term risks to soil productivity. The authors underscore the reciprocal relationship between crops and livestock in mixed farming systems, where nutrient cycling is essential for maintaining soil health. They identify a significant trade-off: while residues are vital for sustaining livestock, their removal can lead to nutrient depletion and soil degradation, ultimately threatening agricultural sustainability ((J. Duncan et al., 2016)). Further exploring the implications of residue management, (Hiel et al., 2018) investigate the effects of crop residue management practices on soil chemistry and crop production over a seven-year period in temperate climates. Their findings reveal that returning straw to the field can improve soil organic matter and develop water retention.

However, the impact of residue management on crop yields is nuanced, with varied outcomes depending on weather conditions. This complexity highlights the need for tailored management strategies that consider local pedo-climatic conditions to optimize the benefits of crop residues ((Hiel et al., 2018)). This review provides multifaceted role of crop residues in agriculture, emphasizing the necessity for integrated approaches that balance the competing demands of livestock feeding, soil fertility, and crop productivity. The ongoing challenges and trade-offs associated with crop residue management underscore the importance of adaptive strategies in enhancing agricultural resilience.

Benefits of Crop Residues in Agriculture

Soil Health Improvement

Crop residues contribute significantly to soil health by improving water retention capacity, increasing organic matter content and enhancing soil structure, The decomposition of residues adds essential nutrients to the soil, fostering microbial activity and promoting a healthy soil ecosystem (Powlson et al., 2011).

Nutrient Cycling

Residues play a vital role in nutrient cycling by returning vital nutrients, such as potassium nitrogen and phosphorus to the soil. This process reduces the need for synthetic fertilizers, lowering production costs and minimizing environmental pollution (Gao et al., 2018).

Erosion Control and Soil Conservation

The presence of crop residues on the soil surface helps protect against soil erosion by reducing the impact of raindrops and wind. This protective layer preserves soil integrity and prevents the loss of topsoil, which is essential for maintaining soil fertility (Blanco-Canqui & Lal, 2009).

Enhanced Crop Yields

Studies have shown that the integration of crop residues can lead to improved crop yields. The residues improve soil fertility and moisture retention, providing a better growing environment for subsequent crops (Verhulst et al., 2010).

Challenges in Utilizing Crop Residues

Decomposition Rates

The rate of residue decomposition varies based on the type of crop and environmental conditions. Slow decomposition can lead to the accumulation of residues on the field, potentially interfering with planting and other agricultural operations (Six et al., 2002).

Pest and Disease Management

Crop residues can harbor pests and diseases, posing a risk to future crops. Proper management techniques, such as crop rotation and timely incorporation of residues, are essential to mitigate these risks (Cook et al., 2010).

Labor and Equipment Requirements

Incorporating crop residues into the soil often requires additional labor and specialized equipment. Small-scale farmers, in particular, may find it challenging to adopt residue management practices without adequate support and resources (Kumar et al., 2015).

Management Strategies for Crop Residues

Mulching

Mulching involves spreading crop residues on the soil surface to conserve moisture, suppress weeds, and enhance soil fertility. This technique is particularly beneficial in dry regions (Teame et al., 2017).

Composting

Composting crop residues accelerates the decomposition process, producing nutrient-rich organic matter that can be returned to the soil. This practice improves soil health and reduces waste (Liang et al., 2018).

Incorporation into Soil

Direct incorporation of residues into the soil using plows or other tillage equipment helps to integrate organic matter and nutrients, promoting soil fertility and structure (Franzluebbers, 2002).

Biochar Production

Converting crop residues into biochar through pyrolysis provides a stable form of carbon that improves soil fertility and sequesters carbon, which contributes in climate change mitigation (Lehmann & Joseph, 2015).

Case Studies and Regional Practices

India

In India, the crop residues can be used as mulch and organic fertilizer has gained popularity in sustainable agriculture practices. Studies have shown significant improvements in crop yields and soil health in regions practicing residue incorporation (Jat et al., 2019).

China

China has implemented large-scale residue management programs, focusing on composting and biochar production. These initiatives have demonstrated positive impacts on crop productivity and soil quality (Zhang et al., 2017).

United States

In the United States, residue management practices such as no-till farming and cover cropping are widely adopted. These practices help to retain soil organic matter and decrease erosion, contributing to sustainable agricultural systems (Lal et al., 2018).

Future Directions

Innovative Technologies

Advancements in agricultural technology, such as precision farming and residue management equipment, are expected to enhance the efficiency of crop residue utilization. Innovations in biotechnology may also improve the decomposition and nutrient release processes (Bastidas et al., 2020).

Policy Support and Farmer Education

Effective policies and educational programs are crucial for promoting the adoption of crop residue management practices. Government incentives, training programs, and extension services can help farmers in applying sustainable practices (Kassam et al., 2019).

Research and Development

Continuous research is needed to optimize crop residue management practices and develop region-specific strategies. Collaborative efforts between farmers, policymakers and scientists, will be crucial to address the challenges and bind the full potential of crop residues (Lal, 2020).

Conclusion

Crop residues offer numerous benefits for sustainable agriculture, including improved soil health, enhanced nutrient cycling, and increased crop yields. Despite challenges, effective management strategies can maximize these benefits and contribute to the sustainability of agricultural systems. Continued research, technological advancements, and supportive policies will be essential to fully realize the potential of crop residues as a boon for agriculture.

Acknowledgements

Authors are thankful to the Principal and Head Department of Zoology, Yogeshwari Mahavidyalaya Ambajogai, District Beed, for granting permission to conduct the research.

Financial Support and Sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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