

LETTER • **OPEN ACCESS**

Crop rotations sustain cereal yields under a changing climate

To cite this article: Lorenzo Marini *et al* 2020 *Environ. Res. Lett.* **15** 124011

View the [article online](#) for updates and enhancements.

You may also like

- [Sustainability assessment of virtual water flows through cereal and milled grain trade among US counties](#)
Lokendra S Rathore, Danyal Aziz, Betelhem W Demeke et al.
- [El Niño and positive Indian Ocean Dipole conditions simultaneously reduce the production of multiple cereals across India](#)
Madhulika Gurazada, Sonali McDermid, Ruth DeFries et al.
- [Severity of drought and heatwave crop losses tripled over the last five decades in Europe](#)
Teresa Armada Brás, Júlia Seixas, Nuno Carvalhais et al.



UNITED THROUGH SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

 **The Electrochemical Society**
Advancing solid state & electrochemical science & technology

**248th
ECS Meeting**
Chicago, IL
October 12-16, 2025
Hilton Chicago

**Science +
Technology +
YOU!**

**SUBMIT
ABSTRACTS by
March 28, 2025**

SUBMIT NOW

Environmental Research Letters



LETTER

Crop rotations sustain cereal yields under a changing climate

OPEN ACCESS

RECEIVED
10 July 2020

REVISED
20 October 2020

ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION
30 October 2020

PUBLISHED
23 November 2020

Original content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence](#).

Any further distribution of this work must maintain attribution to the author(s) and the title of the work, journal citation and DOI.



Lorenzo Marini¹, Audrey St-Martin², Giulia Vico³, Guido Baldoni⁴, Antonio Berti¹, Andrzej Blecharczyk⁵, Irena Malecka-Jankowiak⁵, Francesco Morari¹, Zuzanna Sawinska⁵ and Riccardo Bommarco²

¹ University of Padova, Department of Agronomy, Food, Natural resources, Animals and Environment, Viale dell'Università 16, 35020 Padova, Italy

² Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Ecology, Ulls väg 16, SE-750 07 Uppsala, Sweden

³ Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Crop Production Ecology, Ulls väg 16, SE-750 07 Uppsala, Sweden

⁴ University of Bologna, Department of Agricultural and Food Sciences, Viale Fanin 44, 40127 Bologna, Italy

⁵ Poznań University of Life Sciences, Department of Agronomy, Dojazd 11, 60-632 Poznań, Poland

E-mail: lorenzo.marini@unipd.it

Keywords: barley, break crops, diversification, drought, temperature warming, wheat

Supplementary material for this article is available [online](#)

Abstract

Agriculture is facing the complex challenge of satisfying increasing food demands, despite the current and projected negative impacts of climate change on yields. Increasing crop diversity at a national scale has been suggested as an adaptive measure to better cope with negative climate impacts such as increasing temperatures and drought, but there is little evidence to support this hypothesis at the field scale. Using seven long-term experiments across a wide latitudinal gradient in Europe, we showed that growing multiple crop species in a rotation always provided higher yields for both winter and spring cereals (average +860 and +390 kg ha⁻¹ per year, respectively) compared with a continuous monoculture. In particular, yield gains in diverse rotations were higher in years with high temperatures and scant precipitations, i.e. conditions expected to become more frequent in the future, rendering up to c. 1000 kg ha⁻¹ per year compared to monocultures. Winter cereals yielded more in diverse rotations immediately after initiation of the experiment and kept this advantage constant over time. For spring cereals, the yield gain increased over time since diversification adoption, arriving to a yearly surplus of c. 500 kg ha⁻¹ after 50–60 years with still no sign of plateauing. Diversified rotations emerge as a promising way to adapt temperate cropping systems and contribute to food security under a changing climate. However, novel policies need to be implemented and investments made to give means and opportunities for farmers to adopt diversified crop rotations.

1. Introduction

Global demand for food is predicted to increase by 50%–70% in the coming 40 years (Jaggard *et al* 2010, United Nations 2019). Global trend analyses show that, although yields continue to increase in many regions, across c. one third of the growing areas of major staple crops yields either never improved, stagnated or even collapsed (Ray *et al* 2012). There are multiple causes for these trends, notably climate change (Lobell *et al* 2011, Asseng *et al* 2017, Gammans *et al* 2017), depletion of soil fertility and salinization, soil erosion, pest and disease build-up (Timsina and Connor 2001), and geopolitics (Cottrell *et al* 2019). In the last decades, cereal yields appeared

to be especially sensitive to temperature warming and precipitation deficits (Brisson *et al* 2010, Asseng *et al* 2015, 2017, Moore and Lobell 2015, Zhao *et al* 2017) and, without rapid adaptation, further yield losses are expected in both temperate and tropical regions (Godfray *et al* 2010, Ortiz-Bobea *et al* 2019). Hence, climate adapted cropping practices need to be developed to support crop yield under climate change (Rasmussen *et al* 2018). Besides relatively straightforward improvements of current cropping systems, such as changing planting dates or switching to better adapted varieties (Deryng *et al* 2011, Himanen *et al* 2013), effective adaptation would require more costly measures including crop breeding, expansion of irrigation, and more radically transformed

cropping systems (Lobell *et al* 2008, Gaudin *et al* 2015, Ortiz-Bobea *et al* 2018, Bowles *et al* 2020).

Crop diversification has been suggested as a general strategy to sustain yields and reduce risk of yield losses from adverse conditions through improved soil fertility, enhanced beneficial soil biota and reduced accumulation of weeds, pests and diseases (Snapp *et al* 2010, Bennett *et al* 2012, Mcdaniel *et al* 2014, Tiemann *et al* 2015, Angus *et al* 2015). However, the current trend in most cropping systems worldwide, and particularly in intensive conventional crop production, is to grow cereals in increasingly short rotations, and even in continuous monoculture (Bennett *et al* 2012, Seymour *et al* 2012, Plourde *et al* 2013, Wang and Ortiz-Bobea 2019). From national to regional spatial scales, growing a greater diversity of crops increases the temporal stability of the total regional harvest of all crops combined, with crop complementarity buffering climate variability (Renard and Tilman 2019). However, changes in cropping practices at the management unit level will be a key component in adapting agriculture to climate change (Howden *et al* 2007, Snapp *et al* 2010, Gaudin *et al* 2015). To this end, it remains unclear whether alternating different crops in the same field, i.e. a diverse rotation, can buffer cereal yields against climate change. The only substantial evidence to date is from maize and soybean, where increased rotational diversity of crop species at the field scale improved yields over time and growing conditions (Gaudin *et al* 2015, Bowles *et al* 2020). Using data from seven long-term experiments spanning a wide latitudinal gradient across Europe, we investigate whether diverse rotations support yields of small grain cereals compared to monocultures, and whether diverse rotations vs. monocultures modify yield response to variable weather conditions.

2. Methods

2.1. Long-term experiments

We quantified the yield benefit of the long-term adoption of a diverse rotation vs. a cereal monoculture and tested if a diverse rotation reduced yield sensitivity to temperature warming, precipitation deficits, and their joint effects. We tested these hypotheses for spring (barley and wheat) and winter cereals (oat, wheat and rye), grown under conventional management with optimal applications of mineral fertilizers. For this, we gathered data from spring and winter cereals grown in seven, long-term rain-fed experiments along a wide latitudinal gradient across Europe, including 291 site-years (figure 1). Each experiment had a sampling design with a crop rotation treatment comparing a cereal monoculture to the same cereal species and variety grown in a diverse crop rotation with a minimum of four and a maximum of six crop species (table 1). All experiments were designed such that

the focal cereal crop could be sampled from both the diverse rotation treatment and the monoculture every year. For the focal cereal under monoculture, the plots remained the same during the whole duration of the experiment, while under rotation the focal cereal returned on the same plot after one full cycle (4–6 years depending on the rotation). We only considered yield observations from treatment receiving the locally recommended NPK mineral fertilizer rate (table S1 (available online at <https://stacks.iop.org/ERL/15/124011/mmedia>)). Sites differed widely in climate, ranging from sub-arctic to humid subtropical, and in other major environmental factors, such as soil features (tables S1–S2). Within each site, weeds, pests and diseases were controlled equally across treatments according to local recommendations. Cereals were harvested at physiological maturity with a combined harvester. Fresh weight was measured and dry matter determined. Plot yield was recalculated on a dry matter basis and the harvested area was used to determine annual yield per unit area (kg ha^{-1}).

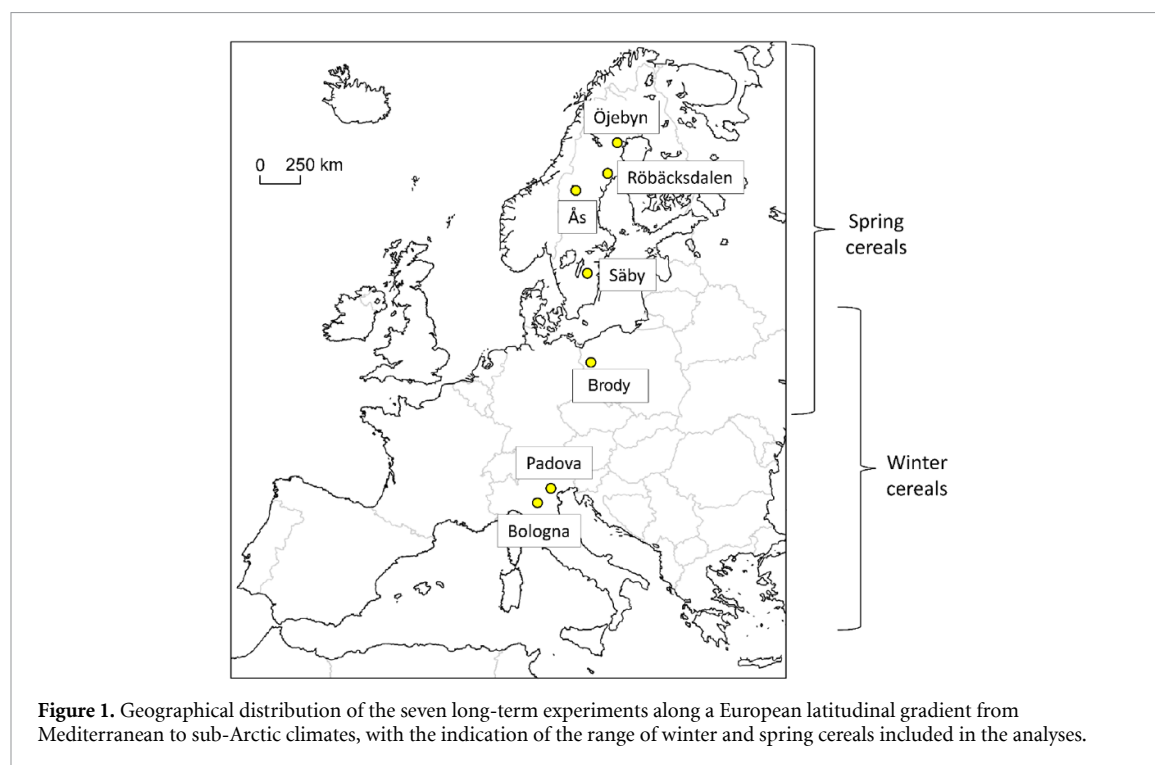
2.2. Crop phenology

We limited our exploration of climate effects on crop yield to weather conditions occurring during the entire growing season from spring to maturity, and the early (spring growth to flowering) and late (flowering to maturity) parts of this period. To this end, we identified these three phenological periods for each crop in each experimental site. With the exception of winter rye in Brody (see below), no precise information was available on the timing of the active growing season and flowering, aside from generic information on the typical beginning and ending of the growing season in the region. We determined the sowing date for spring cereals, and the beginning of the active growing season for winter cereals, flowering date and maturity date for each site, crop and year as described below. The resulting dates (table S3) were remarkably stable over the years, with the exception of the sowing date. Because we had no information on how sowing time in each experiment was changed according to the specific conditions in a year, we averaged over the duration of each experiment and use the mean values as boundaries for the growing season and time of flowering.

We employed a phenological model that was calibrated and validated across a wide latitudinal and climatic gradient in Europe for winter wheat, spring wheat, oats, and maize (Olesen *et al* 2012). The model was applied to our sites with the parameterization reported in the original study. The same phenological model was used also for spring barley, assuming a photoperiod dependence until flowering but not after that, similarly to wheat and oats. Lacking extensive data on barley phenology extending over the latitudinal range considered here, the seven model parameters were defined as follows. The base temperature was

Table 1. Duration, reference crop in monoculture, average yield over the study period, and crops included in the rotation.

Site	Study period	Crop in monoculture	Average yield (kg ha ⁻¹ per year)	Crops in the rotation
Öjebyn	1967–2009	Barley	2907	Barley—Ley—Ley—Pea/oat—Potato—Ryegrass
Röbäcksdalen	1966–2009	Barley	3034	Barley—Ley—Ley—Pea/oat—Potato—Ryegrass
Ås	1966–2009	Barley	3348	Barley—Ley—Ley—Pea/oat—Potato—Ryegrass
Säby	1974–2011	Barley Oat	3952 3772	Fallow—Oilseed rape—Winter wheat—Oat—Barley—Spring wheat
Brody	1958–2013	Spring wheat Barley Winter rye	3827 3289 4053	Potato—Barley—Winter triticale—Alfalfa—Alfalfa—Winter wheat—Winter rye
Padova	1989–2009	Winter wheat	4738	Maize—Sugar beet—Maize—Winter wheat—Alfalfa—Alfalfa
Bologna	1967–2011	Winter wheat	4907	Maize—Winter wheat—Maize—Winter wheat—Alfalfa—Alfalfa—Alfalfa



set at 0 °C (Juskiw *et al* 2001, Alqudah and Schnurbusch 2014). While it has been suggested that barley has even lower base temperature and that such temperature depends on the developmental stage and variety (Saarikko and Carter 1996), such choice allowed us to exploit literature data for the parameterization of the photothermal unit thresholds for flowering and maturity. The dependence on latitude of the threshold temperature for sowing was assumed to match that of spring wheat (Olesen *et al* 2012); we note that sowing date is only marginally affected by these parameters for our sites. Finally, the dependence

of photothermal unit thresholds on local long-term average temperature was determined based on data relative to 32 *Hordeum vulgare* L. accessions of different provenances, grown in soils in Gatersleben, Germany for one year (Alqudah and Schnurbusch 2014), and for 5 cultivars, grown in three locations in Alberta, Canada (Juskiw *et al* 2001). While the latitudes of these sites are comparable (~52 °N), the climatic conditions are different and extend over almost the entire range of our sites (average annual mean temperature in Gatersleben is 9 °C, comparable to Brody; average annual temperature in the Alberta

sites is ~ 2 °C, comparable to R ob acksdalen). Based on the average photothermal thresholds reported by the two studies and the local average temperatures, we determined the following dependencies of the thresholds for flowering (subscript fl) and maturity (subscript mat) of the long-term average temperature, T_m (in °C): $S_{fl} = 803 + 4.3 T_m$ and $S_{mat} = S_{fl} + 647 - 2.1 T_m$. These values are in line with those obtained by a model calibration for Finland (i.e. at latitudes comparable to the Swedish sites) (R otter *et al* 2011). With this parameterization, the resulting flowering and maturity dates are comparable to those observed in Northern and Central Sweden (Lister *et al* 2009), in Finland (Saarikko and Carter 1996), but are slightly earlier than average observations for Southern Poland (Szulcowski *et al* 2010).

Finally, observations for winter rye in Brody, Poland, were available over the period 1958–2012 (Blecharczyk *et al* 2016). We thus employed the average observed dates of full flowering (50% of anthers mature, BBCH65) and harvest (BBCH89-92) (Lancashire *et al* 1991).

2.3. Climate metrics

For each long-term experiment, basic meteorological data (daily minimum, maximum and average air temperature; daily precipitation totals) were obtained from local meteorological station or nearby stations within the national meteorological service (table S2). For each year and each of the three phenological periods (the whole growing season from spring growth to maturity; and the two subsets of growing season spring growth to flowering, and flowering to maturity), we calculated the following climatic variables: the total recorded precipitation over the period (mm) and the average daily mean temperature over the period (°C). When a single day of data was missing, the temperature for that day was assigned to be the average between the previous and subsequent days, while precipitation was assumed to be 0. To limit the effects of missing data, phenological periods with more than 5% of missing daily data were considered as lacking adequate meteorological information and were excluded from further analyses. We excluded 7 years in  s and 1 year in  jebyn and R ob acksdalen, while all the other time-series were complete.

2.4. Statistical analyses

We created a categorical variable of crop rotation diversity by selecting yield observations of cereals grown either in monoculture or in diverse rotations. Prior to analyses, grain yields from each experiment were de-trended to account for technological improvements driving yield increases over time, such as changed crop varieties and fertilization practices, as well as other site-specific factors (figure S1). We

de-trended the yield time series by pooling the treatments (rotation vs. monoculture) within each site and crop species. Within each site, any long-term effects are shared between the two treatments (rotation vs. monoculture). Hence, the de-trending removed any potential underlying long-term trends not related to the treatment, while preserving the difference in yield between monoculture and rotation. A visual evaluation revealed that each experimental site presented different yield trend patterns, which were often non-linear (figure S1). We therefore fitted for each site and crop combination a Gaussian GAM model with year as independent variable and observed yield as dependent variable. We fixed the number of knots to five to capture only long-term trends and avoid removing inter-annual variation caused by climatic conditions. After fitting the GAM model, we extracted the yield deviations, i.e. the model residuals which are the differences between the observed and fitted values from GAM model. Yield deviations were used as the response variable in all the analyses. It is important to stress that we did not test for the effect of climate on raw yield, but on how the rotation affected the yield deviation depending on the inter-annual variation in temperature and precipitation.

Due to the inherent differences in crop physiology and development, we ran separate analyses for spring and winter cereals. First, to assess how crop rotation (monoculture vs. diverse rotation) affected yield deviation, we used general linear-mixed effect models (GLMM). All models shared the same random structure with site-crop combination and plot within site-crop as random factors, to account for the spatial and temporal dependence in the experimental design. The first model included time (duration of the experiment) and rotation and their interaction as fixed effects:

Model (1) Yield deviation = $f(\text{Rotation} + \text{Time} + \text{Rotation} \times \text{Time})$, random = $\sim 1|\text{Site-crop/plotID}$

Model (1) tested if yield differed between the two treatments and if this difference varied with time, irrespective of climate.

To assess how crop rotation (monoculture vs. diverse rotation) affected yield response to climatic variation, we fitted the following second GLMM:

Model (2) Yield deviation = $f(\text{Temperature} + \text{Precipitation} + \text{Precipitation}^2 + \text{Temperature} \times \text{Precipitation} + \text{Rotation} \times \text{Temperature} + \text{Rotation} \times \text{Precipitation} + \text{Rotation} \times \text{Temperature} \times \text{Precipitation})$, random = $\sim 1|\text{Site-crop/plotID}$

Model (2) explicitly tested the interaction between precipitation and temperature. We included also the quadratic term of precipitation as cereals are expected to be sensitive both to scant and heavy rainfall (M akinen *et al* 2018). The interaction between rotation and climate metrics tested whether yield response to climate varied between treatments. To test for potential multi-collinearity between climate metrics, we fitted the model with only the main

effects and extracted the variance inflation factors (vif) for our variables. All the vif values were below 1.2, indicating very low collinearity. Within each site, temperature and precipitation metrics were only weakly related (table S2) and therefore could be included in the same models. Model (2) was fitted using climate metrics calculated over the three distinct phenological periods: the whole growing season (i.e. from spring growth to maturity), from spring growth to flowering, and from flowering to maturity. The three models were fitted using a maximum likelihood method (ML) and compared using Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). The best model selected by AIC was re-fitted using restricted maximum likelihood (REML). We graphically validated the underlying statistical assumptions of GLMMs using residual diagnostic plots. The model residuals presented very little temporal autocorrelation, evaluated using the 'acf' function implemented in R (R Development Core Team 2015). Years when no crops were harvested were included as missing values (<2%). In preliminary analyses, we also included crop species as fixed effect. As the inclusion of crop species did not change the results, we present the model without this variable. All analyses were generated using package 'nlme' (Pinheiro *et al* 2017) in R version 3.4.1 (R Development Core Team 2015).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Yield responses to diverse crop rotations

On average, winter and spring cereals produced more under a diverse rotation than under monoculture, 860 and 390 kg ha⁻¹ per year, respectively. Comparing the long-term effect of rotation with the raw average yield of monoculture (table 2), the benefit of adopting a diverse rotation corresponds to a 20%–25% yield gain. Because our experiments spanned several decades, we tested whether yield gain from adopting a diverse rotation changed over time (table 2). For winter cereals, the yield advantage of a diverse rotation emerged few years after implementation and then remained remarkably constant over time (figure 2(A)). For spring cereals, the yield trajectories of the monoculture and rotation diverged distinctly over time (figure 2(B)). In the first years of adoption, rotation gained little over monoculture, but then the benefit increased linearly over time, reaching over 500 kg ha⁻¹ per year after 50–60 years, with no sign of plateauing.

The long-term negative effect of continuous monoculture is probably related to the deterioration of soil properties and biotic factors reducing yield, such as accumulation of specialized soil-borne pathogens and altered rhizosphere microbiome (Angus *et al* 2015, Bakker *et al* 2018), and increased weed (Weisberger *et al* 2019) and pest pressures (Bennett *et al* 2012). A diverse rotation can sustain beneficial soil communities by increasing the quality and chemical

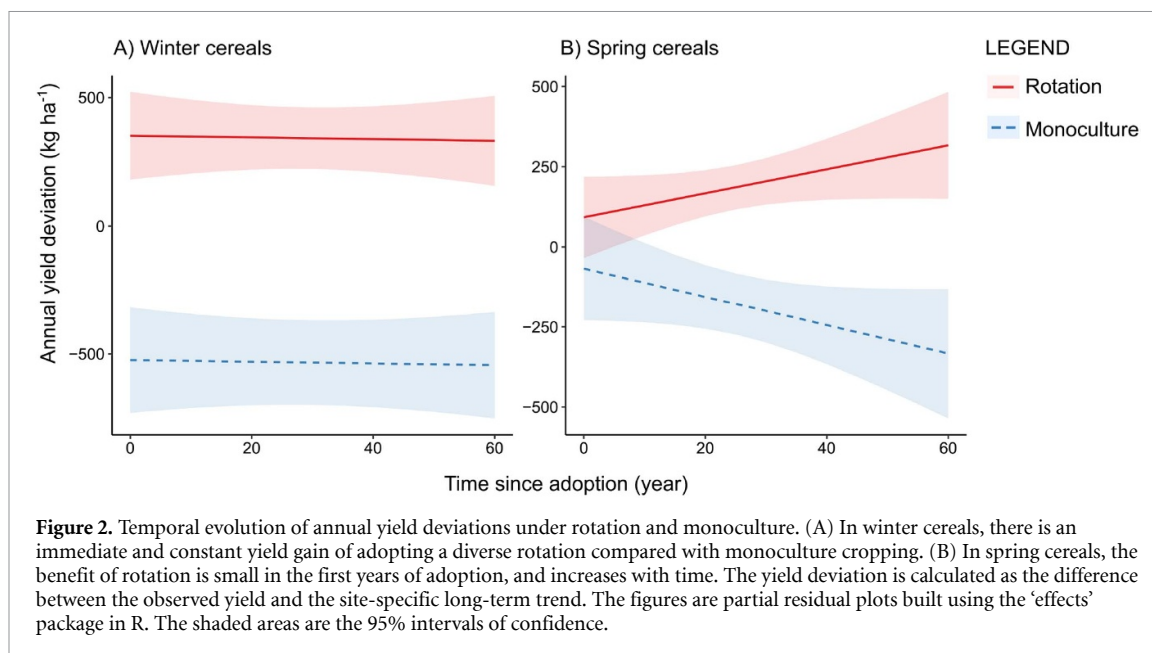
Table 2. Results of the linear mixed-effects models testing rotation, duration of the experiment (Time) and their interaction on yield deviation over the whole season for (a) winter and (b) spring cereals. The yield deviation is calculated as the difference between the observed yield and the site-specific long-term trend. The model included site by crop and plot ID as random factors. Main effect of time was not significant due to the de-trending.

(a) Winter cereals	χ^2	P
Rotation	117.02	< 0.0001
Time	0.02	0.8788
Rotation \times Time	1.12	0.2896
(b) Spring cereals	χ^2	P
Rotation	36.948	< 0.0001
Time	0.05	0.8208
Rotation \times Time	6.696	0.0017

diversity of residues, with positive feedbacks on soil organic matter and fertility (Mcdaniel *et al* 2014, Tiemann *et al* 2015) and ultimately on the quantity of residues. The incremental effect of diversification we found for spring cereals has also been observed from long-term rotation experiments in maize and soybean (Gaudin *et al* 2015, Bowles *et al* 2020) and could be a common response for spring sown crops in temperate climates. Grassland diversification experiments also show that plant community species richness is a main explanatory driver for a continuous increase in biomass production over time compared with species poor communities, where nutrient cycling and use efficiency are likely to play substantial role (Tilman *et al* 2012). An important difference compared with crop rotation experiments is that the grassland species were grown intermixed and not in a sequence over time. However, information gained from intermixed stands are likely to be valuable also for species grown in sequence since year to year soil legacies emanating from plant-soil feedback appear strong (Heinen *et al* 2020).

3.2. Yield responses to climate

It has been shown in several independent studies that cereal production is vulnerable to temperature warming (Lobell *et al* 2008, Zhao *et al* 2017, Asseng *et al* 2017) and temperature and precipitation extremes (Lesk *et al* 2016) and that a rapid development of adaptation measures is needed to counteract these negative trends (Lobell *et al* 2008, Lin 2011, Challinor *et al* 2014). However, lack of long-term empirical data results in high uncertainties about which measures are most effective, in particular at the management unit scale (Howden *et al* 2007, Challinor *et al* 2014). We found that crop rotation reduced yield losses caused by climatic extremes for both spring and winter cereals, providing large benefits in particular under dry conditions. Both winter and spring cereals responded strongly to precipitation deficits during the whole growing season, while temperature



was important only for spring cereals (table 3). We also analyzed climate effects separately for the early and late season effects, but found that both winter and spring cereals responded more strongly to the climatic conditions during the entire growing season (table S4). For winter cereals, the diverse rotation reduced crop sensitivity to severe precipitation deficits, and provided c. 1000 kg ha⁻¹ per year higher yield than in monoculture in the driest years (figure 3(A)). There was also a pervasive negative effect of increasing temperatures on yield under both monoculture and diverse rotation (figure 3(B)). For spring cereals, warming temperatures had a negative effect in dry years and a positive effect in wet years (figure 3(C)). A diverse rotation buffered against adverse climatic conditions, in particular in the warmest and driest years in the experiment, when the yield gain of rotation over monoculture reached c. 750 kg ha⁻¹ per year (figure 3(C), first panel). These results complement the outcomes from long-term rotation experiments of other major staple crops, which clearly demonstrate how adverse weather conditions potentially leading to water and heat stress are mitigated by diverse rotations across North America (Gaudin *et al* 2015, Bowles *et al* 2020).

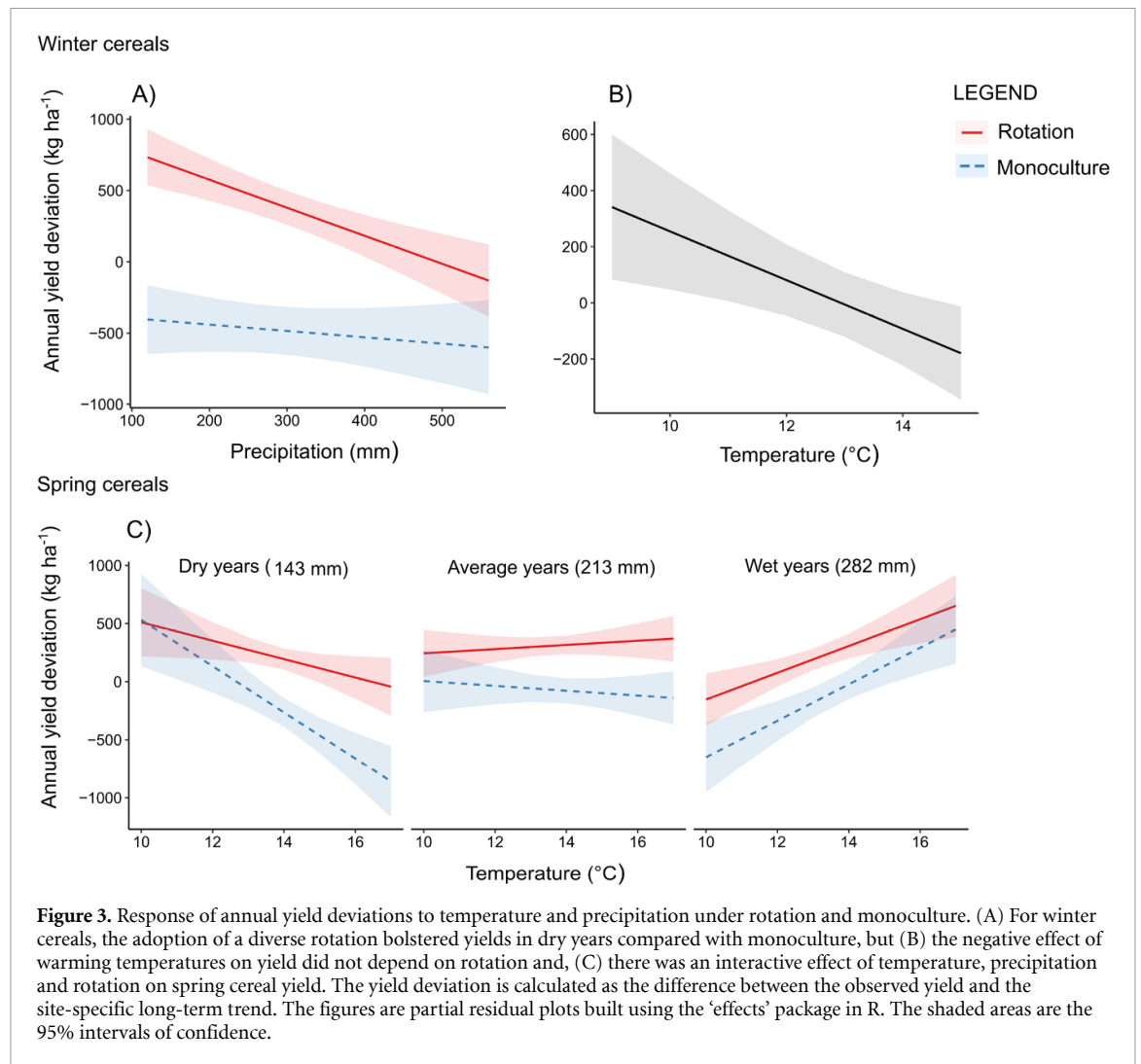
The mechanisms underpinning the mitigating effect of crop rotation on yield losses under drought can be through enhanced beneficial soil biota (Tiemann *et al* 2015), improved soil structure, organic matter content and water retention capacity (Rawls *et al* 2003, Gaudin *et al* 2015), and increased availability of residual nutrients (Kirkegaard *et al* 2008), while synergistic negative effects on the plants from root diseases and drought are reduced (Seymour *et al* 2012). Even small changes in the amount and composition of soil organic matter can increase soil water retention capacity in diverse rotations,

Table 3. Results of the linear mixed-effect model testing the effects of rotation, climate metrics during growing season (from the start of the spring growth to maturity and their interactions on yield deviation over the whole growing season for (a) winter and (b) spring cereals. The yield deviation is the difference between observed yields and the site-specific long-term trend. The model included site by crop and plot ID as random factors.

(a) Winter cereals	χ^2	P
Rotation	126.61	<0.0001
Temperature	7.93	0.0048
Precipitation	15.13	0.0001
^a Precipitation ²	—	—
Rotation × Temperature	0.09	0.7590
Rotation × Precipitation	4.83	0.0279
Temperature × Precipitation	1.34	0.2466
Rotation × Temperature × Precipitation	0.245	0.6207
(b) Spring cereals	χ^2	P
Rotation	41.61	<0.0001
Temperature	1.50	0.2212
Precipitation	64.20	<0.0001
Precipitation ²	16.04	<0.0001
Rotation × Temperature	0.34	0.5586
Rotation × Precipitation	0.52	0.4697
Temperature × Precipitation	44.04	<0.0001
Rotation × Temperature × Precipitation	5.18	0.0229

^aPrecipitation² was removed from the final model since the effect was linear.

and improved aggregates can enhance soil infiltration rate, with potentially large consequences in medium to coarse soils and in years with conditions conducive to crop water stress (Lal 2006, Gaudin *et al* 2015). This is likely to be especially important for spring sown crops, which establish in the often dry and warm spring, develop shorter roots and mature later, when compared with autumn



sown crops, which establish in the moister and cooler conditions of the autumn (Reckling *et al* 2018). Hence, improved water retention capacity and nutrient cycling are expected to be more relevant for spring- than autumn-sown crops, and are particularly needed near the soils surface when roots are still shallow.

4. Conclusions

Diverse rotations reduced cereal annual yield losses in years with high temperatures and scant precipitations by c. 1000 kg ha^{-1} . After the experiments were started, winter cereals quite immediately yielded more in diverse rotation and kept that surplus constant over time. The spring cereal yield gain in diverse rotations increased steadily over time attaining a yearly benefit of 500 kg ha^{-1} after 50–60 years with no sign of plateauing. Crop rotation appears to be a promising measure for sustainable intensification of temperate cereal systems under a changing climate. Without effective adaptation measures, the projected climate changes can cause large drops in cereal yield under medium to high emissions scenarios (Lobell

et al 2008, Jaggard *et al* 2010, Liang *et al* 2017). We show that diversifying crop production at the field scale by adding crop species to the rotation needs to be incorporated in the set of adaptation measures for farmers to adopt. The benefits of growing a diversity of crops are supported by recent advances in plant sciences, showing consistent evidence that increased plant diversity enhances biomass production and stability across different spatial scales (Gaudin *et al* 2015, Angus *et al* 2015, Isbell *et al* 2017, Renard and Tilman 2019, Bowles *et al* 2020).

Although the yield gains and the insurance rendered by growing a portfolio of crop species can improve farm profitability (Davis *et al* 2012), the local production of a larger number of crops would also require major transformations. Investments into knowledge (Kleijn *et al* 2019), supportive technologies and inputs, and infrastructure for processing and distribution will be needed for a larger number of crop species. Importantly, a shift of policies and subsidies that support widespread adoption of diversification rather than specialization are needed to provide farmers with the means and opportunities to diversify (van der Ploeg *et al* 2019).

Acknowledgments

We thank Kerstin Huss-Danell for providing data from Öjebyn, Röbbäcksdalen and Ås. We thank Aimee Classen (University of Vermont, USA), Matt Liebman (Iowa State University, USA) and Christine Watson (SRUC, UK) for constructive criticism. The Swedish long-term experiments were funded by the SLU Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences, and the Swedish Infrastructure for Ecosystem Science (SITES) for Röbbäcksdalen. The Brody/Poznań University of Life Sciences long-term experiments were funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. L M and R B acknowledges funding from the EU 7th framework programme to the project LIBERATION (331781). G V and R B acknowledge funding from the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development FORMAS (Grant No. 2018-02872). G V acknowledges also partial support by the Swedish Research Council Vetenskapsrådet (Grant No. 2016-04910).

Authors contributions

L M conceived the study; G B, A Bl, A Be, K H-D, F M, I M-J and Z S maintained the long-term experiments and provided the yield data. A S-M collated the yield dataset. G V compiled the meteorological data and computed crop phenology; L M analyzed the data; L M, A S-M, G V and R B interpreted the results and led the writing. All authors contributed to the drafting of the manuscript.

Competing financial interests

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the authors.

ORCID iDs

Lorenzo Marini  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7429-7685>

Audrey St-Martin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4957-1803>

Giulia Vico  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7849-2653>

Zuzanna Sawinska  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7030-3221>

Riccardo Bommarco  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8888-0476>

References

Alqudah A M and Schnurbusch T 2014 Awn primordium to tipping is the most decisive developmental phase for spikelet survival in barley *Funct. Plant Biol.* **41** 424–36

- Angus J F, Kirkegaard J A, Hunt J R, Ryan M H, Ohlander L and Peoples M B 2015 Break crops and rotations for wheat *Crop Pasture Sci.* **66** 523–52
- Asseng S et al 2015 Rising temperatures reduce global wheat production *Nat. Clim. Change* **5** 143–7
- Asseng S, Cammarano D, Basso B, Chung U, Alderman P D, Sonder K, Reynolds M and Lobell D B 2017 Hot spots of wheat yield decline with rising temperatures *Glob. Change Biol.* **23** 2464–72
- Bakker P A H M, Pieterse C M J, de Jonge R and Berendsen R L 2018 The soil-borne legacy *Cell* **172** 1178–80
- Bennett A J, Bending G D, Chandler D, Hilton S and Mills P 2012 Meeting the demand for crop production: the challenge of yield decline in crops grown in short rotations *Biol. Rev.* **87** 52–71
- Blecharczyk A, Sawinska Z, Małecka I, Sparks T H and Tryjanowski P 2016 The phenology of winter rye in Poland: an analysis of long-term experimental data *Int. J. Biometeorol.* **60** 1341–6
- Bowles T M et al 2020 Long-term evidence shows that crop-rotation diversification increases agricultural resilience to adverse growing conditions in North America *One Earth* **2** 284–93
- Brisson N, Gate P, Gouache D, Charmet G, Oury F X and Huard F 2010 Why are wheat yields stagnating in Europe? A comprehensive data analysis for France *F. Crop. Res.* **119** 201–12
- Challinor A J, Watson J, Lobell D B, Howden S M, Smith D R and Chhetri N 2014 A meta-analysis of crop yield under climate change and adaptation *Nat. Clim. Change* **4** 287–91
- Cottrell R S et al 2019 Food production shocks across land and sea *Nat. Sustain.* **2** 130–7
- Davis A S, Hill J D, Chase C A, Johanns A M and Liebman M 2012 Increasing cropping system diversity balances productivity, profitability and environmental health *PLoS One* **7** e47149
- Deryng D, Sacks W J, Barford C C and Ramankutty N 2011 Simulating the effects of climate and agricultural management practices on global crop yield *Glob. Biogeochem. Cycles* **25** GB2006
- Gammans M, Mérel P and Ortiz-Bobea A 2017 Negative impacts of climate change on cereal yields: statistical evidence from France *Environ. Res. Lett.* **12** 054007
- Gaudin A C M, Tolhurst T N, Ker A P, Janovicek K, Tortora C, Martin R C and Deen W 2015 Increasing crop diversity mitigates weather variations and improves yield stability *PLoS One* **10** e0113261
- Godfray H C J, Beddington J R, Crute I R, Haddad L, Lawrence D, Muir J F, Pretty J, Robinson S, Thomas S M and Toulmin C 2010 Food security: the challenge of feeding 9 billion people *Science* **327** 812–8
- Heinen R, Hannula S E, De Long J R, Huberty M, Jongen R, Kielak A, Steinauer K, Zhu F and Bezemer T M 2020 Plant community composition steers grassland vegetation via soil legacy effects *Ecol. Lett.* **23** 973–82
- Himanen S J, Ketoja E, Hakala K, Rötter R P, Salo T and Kahiluoto H 2013 Cultivar diversity has great potential to increase yield of feed barley *Agron. Sustain. Dev.* **33** 519–30
- Howden S M, Soussana J-F, Tubiello F N, Chhetri N, Dunlop M and Meinke H 2007 Adapting agriculture to climate change *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **104** 19691–6
- Isbell F et al 2017 Benefits of increasing plant diversity in sustainable agroecosystems *J. Ecol.* **105** 871–9
- Jaggard K W, Qi A and Ober E S 2010 Possible changes to arable crop yields by 2050 *Philos. Trans. R. Soc. B* **365** 2835–51
- Juskiw P E, Jame Y-W and Kryzanowski L 2001 Phenological development of spring barley in a short-season growing area *Agron. J.* **93** 370
- Kirkegaard J, Christen O, Krupinsky J and Layzell D 2008 Break crop benefits in temperate wheat production *F. Crop. Res.* **107** 185–95
- Kleijn D, Bommarco R, Fijen T P M, Garibaldi L A, Potts S G and van der Putten W H 2019 Ecological intensification: bridging the gap between science and practice *Trends Ecol. Evol.* **34** 154–66

- Lal R 2006 Enhancing crop yields in the developing countries through restoration of the soil organic carbon pool in agricultural lands *Land Degrad. Dev.* **17** 197–209
- Lancashire P D, Bleiholder H, Boom T V D, Lageluddeke P, Stauss R, Weber E and Witzinger A 1991 A uniform decimal code for growth stages of crops and weeds *Ann. Appl. Biol.* **119** 561–601
- Lesk C, Rowhani P and Ramankutty N 2016 Influence of extreme weather disasters on global crop production *Nature* **529** 84–87
- Liang X-Z, Wu Y, Chambers R G, Schmoltd D L, Gao W, Liu C, Liu Y-A, Sun C and Kennedy J A 2017 Determining climate effects on US total agricultural productivity *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci.* **114** 2285–92
- Lin B B 2011 Resilience in agriculture through crop diversification: adaptive management for environmental change *Bioscience* **61** 183–93
- Lister D L, Thaw S, Bower M A, Jones H, Charles M P, Jones G, Smith L M J, Howe C J, Brown T A and Jones M K 2009 Latitudinal variation in a photoperiod response gene in European barley: insight into the dynamics of agricultural spread from 'historic' specimens *J. Archaeol. Sci.* **36** 1092–8
- Lobell D B, Burke M B, Tebaldi C, Mastrandrea M D, Falcon W P and Naylor R L 2008 Prioritizing climate change adaptation needs for food security in 2030 *Science* **319** 607–10
- Lobell D B, Schlenker W and Costa-Roberts J 2011 Climate trends and global crop production since 1980 *Science* **333** 616–20
- Mäkinen H et al 2018 Sensitivity of European wheat to extreme weather *F. Crop. Res.* **222** 209–17
- Mcdaniel M D, Tiemann L K and Grandy A S 2014 Does agricultural crop diversity enhance soil microbial biomass and organic matter dynamics? A meta-analysis *Ecol. Appl.* **24** 560–70
- Moore F C and Lobell D B 2015 The fingerprint of climate trends on European crop yields *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **112** 2670–5
- Olesen J E et al 2012 Changes in time of sowing, flowering and maturity of cereals in Europe under climate change *Food Addit. Contam. A* **29** 1527–42
- Ortiz-Bobea A, Knippenberg E and Chambers R G 2018 Growing climatic sensitivity of U.S. agriculture linked to technological change and regional specialization *Sci. Adv.* **4** eaat4343
- Ortiz-Bobea A, Wang H, Carrillo C M and Ault T R 2019 Unpacking the climatic drivers of US agricultural yields *Environ. Res. Lett.* **14** 064003
- Pinheiro J, Bates D, Debroy S, Sarkar D and Core Team R 2017 nlme: linear and nonlinear mixed effects models *R Packag. version 3.1-131* (available at: <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=nlme>)
- Plourde J D, Pijanowski B C and Pekin B K 2013 Evidence for increased monoculture cropping in the Central United States *Agric. Ecosyst. Environ.* **165** 50–59
- R Development Core Team R 2015 R: a language and environment for statistical computing (Vienna: R Foundation for Statistical Computing) (www.R-project.org)
- Rasmussen L V, Coolsaet B, Martin A, Mertz O, Pascual U, Corbera E, Dawson N, Fisher J A, Franks P and Ryan C M 2018 Social-ecological outcomes of agricultural intensification *Nat. Sustain.* **1** 275–82
- Rawls W J, Pachepsky Y A, Ritchie J C, Sobecki T M and Bloodworth H 2003 Effect of soil organic carbon on soil water retention *Geoderma* **116** 61–76
- Ray D K, Ramankutty N, Mueller N D, West P C and Foley J A 2012 Recent patterns of crop yield growth and stagnation *Nat. Commun.* **3** 1293
- Reckling M, Döring T F, Bergkvist G, Stoddard F L, Watson C A, Seddig S, Chmielewski F-M and Bachinger J 2018 Grain legume yields are as stable as other spring crops in long-term experiments across northern Europe *Agron. Sustain. Dev.* **38** 63
- Renard D and Tilman D 2019 National food production stabilized by crop diversity *Nature* **571** 257–60
- Rötter R P, Palosuo T, Pirttioja N K, Dubrovsky M, Salo T, Fronzek S, Aikasalo R, Trnka M, Ristolainen A and Carter T R 2011 What would happen to barley production in Finland if global warming exceeded 4 °C? A model-based assessment *Eur. J. Agron.* **35** 205–14
- Saarikko R A and Carter T R 1996 Phenological development in spring cereals: response to temperature and photoperiod under northern conditions *Eur. J. Agron.* **5** 59–70
- Seymour M, Kirkegaard J A, Peoples M B, White P F and French R J 2012 Break-crop benefits to wheat in Western Australia – insights from over three decades of research *Crop Pasture Sci.* **63** 1
- Snapp S S, Blackie M J, Gilbert R A, Bezner-Kerr R and Kanyama-Phiri G Y 2010 Biodiversity can support a greener revolution in Africa *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci.* **107** 20840–5
- Szulczewski W, Żyromski A, Biniak-Pieróg M and Machowczyk A 2010 Modelling of the effect of dry periods on yielding of spring barley *Agric. Water Manag.* **97** 587–95
- Tiemann L K, Grandy A S, Atkinson E E, Marin-Spiotta E and Mcdaniel M D 2015 Crop rotational diversity enhances belowground communities and functions in an agroecosystem *Ecol. Lett.* **18** 761–71
- Tilman D, Reich P B and Isbell F 2012 Biodiversity impacts ecosystem productivity as much as resources, disturbance, or herbivory *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci.* **109** 10394–7
- Timsina J and Connor D 2001 Productivity and management of rice–wheat cropping systems: issues and challenges *F. Crop. Res.* **69** 93–132
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2019 *World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights ST/ESA/SER.A/423*
- van der Ploeg J D et al 2019 The economic potential of agroecology: empirical evidence from Europe *J. Rural Stud.* **71** 46–61
- Wang H and Ortiz-Bobea A 2019 Market-driven corn monocropping in the U.S. midwest *Agric. Resour. Econ. Rev.* **48** 274–96
- Weisberger D, Nichols V and Liebman M 2019 Does diversifying crop rotations suppress weeds? A meta-analysis *PloS One* **14** e0219847
- Zhao C et al 2017 Temperature increase reduces global yields of major crops in four independent estimates *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **114** 9326–31