**Article Title:** "Optimal coordination and progressive nitrogen limitation control plant responses to elevated CO2 at different scales"

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**Summary paragraph**

Plants respond to elevated atmospheric CO2 concentrations by reducing leaf nitrogen content and photosynthetic capacity, acclimation responses that coincide with increased growth rates and total leaf area over short time scales that dampen with time1,2. Progressive nitrogen limitation has been hypothesized to be the primary mechanism driving these responses, as nitrogen availability limits net primary productivity globally3,4, in part due to high nitrogen requirements to build and maintain photosynthetic enzymes5,6. Recent work calls aspects of this hypothesis into question, suggesting that leaf responses to elevated CO2 are independent of nitrogen availability and are instead the result of optimal resource investment to photosynthetic capacity. Despite empirical support for both hypotheses7–9, studies that examine leaf and whole plant responses to elevated CO2 concurrently in the same experiment are rare. Here, we show that reductions in photosynthetic capacity under elevated CO2 are independent of nitrogen fertilization or nitrogen-fixing bacteria inoculation status in *Glycine max*. We also show that increased whole-plant growth and total leaf area under elevated CO2 are enhanced with increasing fertilization and inoculation, a pattern associated with increased plant nitrogen uptake with increasing fertilization and inoculation. Results from this experiment resolve discrepancies between optimal resource allocation and progressive nitrogen limitation, showing that optimal resource allocation to photosynthetic capacity drives leaf acclimation responses to elevated CO2, while patterns expected from progressive nitrogen limitation drive whole-plant responses to elevated CO2. Importantly, our results suggest that optimal resource allocation under elevated CO2 may result in nitrogen savings at the leaf level that may alleviate progressive nitrogen limitation at the whole-plant level. The differential role of soil nitrogen availability on leaf and whole-plant responses to elevated CO2 build on previous work suggesting that land surface models may improve their simulation of photosynthetic processes under future novel environments by adopting frameworks that include optimality principles7,10,11.

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