# Unraveling causal mechanisms of the continuous maize penalty

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# Abstract

Maize (*Zea mays*) grown continuously on the same land often requires more inputs while also producing lower yields compared to maize grown following another crop. The lower yields in maize monocultures, or the ‘continuous maize penalty,’ is well-documented but a mechanistic understanding of the penalty has remained elusive. In the present study, we (1) used 157 site-years of experimental data from the US Corn Belt to quantify how soil, weather, and their interaction drive variation in the continuous maize penalty, (2) synthesized results with existing literature and modelled scenarios to identify probable mechanistic pathways, (3) tested approaches for modelling the penalty, and (4) provided recommendations for future research. Experimental data consisted of nitrogen (N)-response curves for maize yields from continuous maize and maize-soybean (*Glycine max*) rotations in Iowa (7 sites) and Illinois (7 sites) conducted between 1999 and 2016. Maximum continuous-and rotated-maize yields averaged 8.7 and 9.7 Mg ha-1 over the study period, and both increased 213 (SE:36) kg ha-1 yr-1 from 1999-2016, rendering the continuous maize penalty steady over time at an estimated 1.0 (SE:0.2) Mg ha-1 (10% penalty). The penalty ranged from 0-4.8 Mg ha-1, and soil contributed to only 13% of the variation. The amount of rainfall two weeks before planting was positively associated with penalty sizes. Applying additional N above the optimal rate for rotated-maize eliminated the penalty in only 6 out of 157 site-years and was less effective at more northern sites. Synthesizing these results with existing literature and a processed-based model (APSIM), we hypothesize compromised maize roots in maize monocultures is a driver of the penalty. To our knowledge, there is limited data to refute or support this hypothesis. We identify a suite of field measurements that would allow a thorough investigation of the mechanistic underpinnings of the continuous maize penalty including growth analyses, yield components, residue amounts (total and surface), root front velocity, kernel number and size, maximum root length and biomass, and residual nitrogen at maturity. These measurements would support efforts to manage, breed for, and model the continuous maize penalty, representing a major step forward in maximizing the efficient use of arable lands.

# Introduction

Maize grown for two or more consecutive years makes up around 30% of cropland area in the US Midwest (CropScape, Dave’s paper). However, even with high inputs, maize yields less when it is preceded by maize compared to another crop. This phenomenon has been observed globally and is often referred to as the continuous maize yield penalty (Bennet2012). Numerous studies in the Midwest have established that yields of maize grown in monoculture are lower than yields of maize rotated with soybean (*Glycine max*), (Peterson1990, Gentry, Crookston1991, Meese1992, Porter1997, Stranger2008, Al-Kaisi2015, Gentry, Siefert, Farmaha2016, Dick1985, Bowles2020, Vogel2018), but there has been less work exploring the mechanisms responsible for the penalty. While the penalty is consistent, it exhibits a large degree of variability. In the US, experimental studies report average penalties ranging from 5-30% the county (Erikson 2008), but even at high nitrogen (N) rates the penalty at a single site can vary from 0-25% depending on the year (Porter1997). A series of studies done in Minnesota rejected the hypothesis that residue is responsible for the yield penalty (Crookston1989), with evidence of more water uptake in rotated maize (Copeland1993), higher concentrations of N, phosphorous, and potassium in rotated maize leaf tissue (Copeland1992), and possible links to differences in mycorrhizal populations affecting root characteristics (Nickel, Johnson1992). However, results from a single site may not be transferable, as it is clear the penalty is the result of a complex interaction between soils, management, and weather (Al-Kaisi2015, Gentry, Porter1997). Studies based on surveys or satellite imagery provide larger inference scopes, but are associative and conclusions are often too broad for field-based inference (Seifert, Farmaha2016). Therefore, despite the penalty being well- documented, the driving causes have remained elusive, rendering the penalty difficult to predict and manage for. Data from long-term, replicated experiments at multiple sites can provide critical insight into complex cropping system questions (e.g. Cusser2021, Davis2012, Bowles2020), offering the advantages of controlled experiments, but with the scope of inference needed to extract generalizable patterns. Therefore, long-term multi-site datasets are best suited for answering questions about the continuous maize penalty.

Managing the penalty without knowledge of driving mechanisms is challenging. Currently, producers are advised to increase N applications to maize following maize by ~60 kg ha-1 compared to maize following soybean (Sawyer2006). While this is effective on average, it is unclear how the effectiveness varies by year and soil, as in many instances the additional N application may not translate to increased yields. Over-application of N above the agronomically optimum nitrogen rate (AONR) in continuous maize systems carries significantly more risk of nitrate leaching compared to rotated maize systems (Pasley2021), decreases root mass (Ordonez et al., 2021), and over time depletes soil carbon stores (Poffenbarger20xx). Furthermore, the additional N application recommended for maize monocultures results in increased emissions of nitrous oxide, a potent greenhouse gas (Millar2010, Osterholtz2014). Given the prevalence of continuous maize in the Midwest, predicting when N application will translate to increased yields is therefore vital for protecting water quality, maintaining soil productivity, and reducing climatic impacts of agriculture. Moreover, Applying N without an accompanying increase in yields reduces producer profits. Understanding conditions that affect the magnitude of the continuous maize penalty will help producers optimize management, therefore increasing profits while reducing their environmental impact.

A mechanistic understanding of the continuous maize penalty will allow researchers to incorporate the penalty into processed based models to better capture land-use decisions and the environmental impacts of cropping system choices, and to help producers optimize their cropping systems. Many bio-physical process-based models are available for simulating agricultural systems (SALUS, DAYCENT, APSIM, CropSys, blah blah), but to our knowledge none directly incorporate the continuous maize penalty that is caused by non-water and non-N factors. Puntel et al. 2016 was able to simulate a quarter of the observed penalty using APSIM (PuntelXXX), indicating a substantial portion of the penalty requires additional model capabilities. The majority of cropping system models focus on simulating abiotic processes, with the assumption that disease and pests are adequately controlled (CITE). In any given year, the continuous maize penalty is likely a function of both biotic and abiotic conditions. Direct modelling of biotic components would require a substantial increase in the complexity of processed-based models. Pests not only depend on local conditions (soil moisture, air temperature, humidity), but also on complex regional interactions including physical, biological, social, and economic factors (CITE). Incorporating these factors into a single model is not trivial, and would require coordinated efforts to improve data collection and reporting (Donatelli et al., 2017). However, while modelling the biotic factors directly may not be desirable or feasible, incorporating the physical manifestations of biotic effects may be sufficient for certain purposes. Understanding the simplest avenues for incorporating the continuous maize penalty into process-based models would be universally advantageous for researchers working with maize-based systems.

The goal of this study was to use multi-site, multi-year data coupled with an in-depth literature review and a process-based model (APSIM, CITE) to gain insight into factors contributing to the continuous maize penalty and how best to model those effects. Specifically, our objectives were to:

(1) Use experimental data to quantify site and environmental variation in the continuous maize penalty

(2) Synthesize results with existing literature and modelled scenarios to identify probable mechanistic pathways

(3) Use a calibrated model to test hypotheses and approaches for modelling the penalty

(4) Provide recommendations for future research

# Methods and Materials

## Experimental data

Details about experimental layouts for the sites (Fig. 1) are reported elsewhere (CITE MITCH AND LAILA?).

Map

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Figure Map of experimental sites

Briefly, treatments consisted of cropping system (continuous maize, maize-soybean rotation with both phases present every year) and maize nitrogen (N) fertilization rate (Supplemental Table 1). Each site had three or four replications of each treatment. Weeds were adequately controlled using herbicides, supplemented with hand-weeding, and fungicides were used on an as-needed basis.

Table Experimental site information

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Site ID** | **Latitude, Longitude** | **Nearest town** | **Seasons of data** | **Nitrogen rates**  **(kg ha-1)** | **Tillage** | **Average CRM** |
| *Iowa Sites* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| IA-1 | 42.93,  -95.54 | Sutherland, IA | 17 | 0, 45, 90, 135, 180, 225, **270** | Conventional | 103 |
| IA-2 | 42.91,  -93.79 | Kanawha, IA | 12 | 0, 45, 90, 135, 180, 225, **270** | Conventional | 102 |
| IA-3 | 42.93,  -92.57 | Nashua, IA | 12 | 0, 45, 90, 135, 180, 225, **270** | Conventional | 105 |
| IA-4 | 42.02,  -93.78 | Ames, IA | 18 | 0, 68, 135, 203, **270** | Conventional | 106 |
| IA-5 | 41.31,  -95.18 | Lewis, IA | 16 | 0, 45, 90, 135, 180, 225, **270** | Conventional | 111 |
| IA-6 | 40.97,  -93.42 | McNay, IA | 18 | 0, 45, 90, 135, 180, 225, **270** | Conventional | 112 |
| IA-7 | 41.19,  -91.48 | Crawfordsville, IA | 18 | 0, 45, 90, 135, 180, 225, **270** | Conventional | 111 |
| *Illinois Sites* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| IL-1 | 41.84,  -88.86 | Dekalb, IL | 10 | 0, 51, 101, 152, 203, **253** | Conventional | 109 |
| IL-2 | 40.93,  -90.73 | Monmouth, IL | 10 | 0, 51, 101, 152, 203, **253** | Conventional | 113 |
| IL-3 | 39.80,  -90.82 | Orr Center, IL | 10 | 0, 51, 101, 152, 203, **253** | Conventional | 113 |
| IL-4 | 40.08,  -88.22 | Urbana, IL | 10 | 0, 51, 101, 152, 203, **253** | Conventional | 112 |
| IL-5 | 38.95,  -88.96 | Brownstown, IL | 8 | 0, 51, 101, 152, 203, **253** | No-till | 114 |
| IL-6 | 37.46,  -88.72 | Dixon Springs, IL upland area | 10 | 0, 51, 101, 152, 203, **253** | No-till | 113 |
| IL-7 | 37.42,  -88.66 | Dixon Springs, IL lowland area | 10 | 0, 51, 101, 152, 203, **253** | No-till | 113 |
| †Conventional tillage consisted of chisel plowing in the fall following harvest and field cultivation in the spring for all phases of all crop rotations. | | | | | | |

## Statistical analyses

All statistical analyses were done using R version 4.0.3 and using the *tidyverse* collection of packages (CITE). Mixed-effect linear models were fit using the *lme4* package (CITE) with means estimated using the *emmeans* package (CITE), and non-linear models were fit using the *nlraa* package (CITE). Assumptions of normally distributed errors and equal variance were explored, and Akaike’s Information Criteria (AIC; CITE) were used to identify the best models when appropriate.

### Quadratic plateau models

To estimate the maximum yields for each site-year’s cropping system (rotated, continuous) a quadratic plateau was fit to each site-year for each system’s maize yields as a function of N fertilization rate (e.g. Figure 2). We chose to use a quadratic plateau because it is a commonly used model for yield-N response curves (Cerrato and Blackmer, 1990) and it converged for the majority of site-years of our data. The agronomically-optimum-nitrogen-rate (AONR) is the N-rate at which grain yield ceases to statistically increase with additional N application, and is estimated using parameters fit from the quadratic plateau model. The difference between the two system’s yields at the rotated-AONR is hereafter referred to as the full penalty. Using the quadratic plateau method, we separated the full penalty into two components: the observed penalty, and the N-compensatable penalty. The observed penalty is the difference between the two system’s maximum yields. The N-compensatable penalty is the amount of yield that was gained in the maize monoculture by applying N fertilizer in excess of the rotated-AONR. The N-compensatable penalty was estimated as the difference between the maize monoculture yield at the rotated-AONR and the maximum maize monoculture yield. There is a large amount of uncertainty in AONR estimations from one site-year of data, and we recognize the estimation of the N-compensatable penalty propagates that uncertainty. We therefore do not interpret the N-compensatable penalty as a robust estimation but rather use it only as an indication of whether the N-compensatable and observed penalty are related. The correlation between the two components was assessed using a non-parametric Spearman correlation (CITE).

If quadratic plateau models did not converge for one or more of the cropping systems in a given site-year, the site-year’s full penalty and its components were labelled as in-estimable. All fits and component estimates are provided in supplementary material. For simplification, the yields at each system’s respective AONR rates are hereafter referred to as maximum yields.

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**Figure 2** Conceptual diagram of parsing the full penalty into the amount of penalty that is compensated for through additional nitrogen (N) fertilization (yellow box) and the remaining continuous maize penalty that is observed even at high N inputs (green box). Data is from IA-4 2003, original data (circles) are connected by a dotted line to aid in viewing with quadratic plateau model predictions (thick lines) and estimated agronomically-optimum-nitrogen-rate (AONR) for each system (large diamonds).

### Mixed effect linear models

The percentage of the full penalty that was compensated for through additional N fertilization over the rotated-AONR was calculated for each site-year. The conditional value for each site was estimated using a mixed-effects linear model with the percentage as the response variable, site and a year-factor as random intercepts.

Changes in maximum maize yields and the observed penalty over time were assessed using a mixed-effect linear model. For the maximum yield analysis, maximum yields were the response variable with a fixed effect of cropping system (rotated, continuous), year as a continuous variable, their interaction, a random slope for each site-year, and a random intercept for site. Additionally, the relationship within a site was investigated to ensure the overall effect was not masking different within-site patterns; this was done using a site-by-year interaction. The significance of the change in penalty over time was estimated by subtracting the maximum continuous maize yields from the maximum rotated maize yields at each site-year and fitting a mixed-effect linear model with the penalty as the response variable, year as a fixed effect, and a random slope for each site-year and a random intercept for site.

Overall maximum yields of each system were compared using a mixed-effect model with the max-yield as the response variable, cropping system as a fixed effect, and a random intercept for both site and a year-factor. We included a year-factor because it significantly improved the model fit, and exploratory analysis indicated that the air temperatures of each site were clustered by year. For example, 2012 was a warm year at every site (supplementary material). The mean continuous penalty was estimated using a mixed-effects model with site and a year factor as random intercepts. The contributions of site and year-factor to variation in the observed continuous maize penalty were assessed using the *reptR* package (CITE).

### Feature selection models

To identify soil, weather, and management associations with the continuous maize penalty, we assembled a dataset with various metrics important to maize production in the Midwest (see supplementary material for full list). We performed both a principal component analysis (PCA, cite) and calculated a correlation matrix to inform the creation of a set of independent predictors (Chandrashekar2014). The resulting predictor set was used in both step-wise model selection using Bayesian Information Criteria (CITE) with the base R function *step*, and in a partial least squares regression (PLS) with the *pls* package (cite) to identify predictors associated with the observed penalties. The number of included components in the PLS regression (two components) was determined based on visual inspection of the root-mean-squared-error. The importance of each predictor was estimated using the *varImp* function of the *caret* package (CITE), which uses the sums of the absolute regression coefficients weighted proportionally to the reduction in the sums of squares. The robustness of the results was assessed by running each model on a predictor set where one predictor was removed and comparing the results from the full predictor set.

**Table 2** An ugly version of the table I could include if you think it’s helpful. Could separate it into soil, weather, other. Should add a column with justification for inclusion.

Table

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### Path analysis

Path analysis (CITE) was done using the *lavaan* package (CITE).

## APSIM Modelling

All modelling was done using APSIM v.9 with the SWIM module and custom scripts to simulate water table dynamics (Elnaz paper; Archontoulis et al., 2020). APSIM has been used extensively for Midwestern maize-based systems (CITE) and is appropriately structured for simulating multi-year effects of cropping systems (Basso and Martinez 2020). Soil profiles for the model were built using SSURGO data (CITE) and adjusted using on-site measurements along with estimates from the USDA’s web soil survey tool. All management activities were taken from field logs. The maize and soybean phases were simulated using the APSIM maize 7.9, and individual cultivars were built to reflect maturity groups of each variety used. Surface organic matter and soil N and C cycling were simulated with the soil and surface models in 7.9. Soil temperature simulated with the optional physics-based model (Cambel) as this found to provide superior estimates to the default module (Archontoulis et al., 2014). For each site, simulations were run using a 5 year spin-up of a generic maize and soybean rotation with 170 kg N ha-1 of fertilization, followed by experiment-specific management and weather. All models were run sequentially without a yearly soil reset to best represent cropping system legacy effects.

### Scenario testing

To explore the potential for changes in model parameters to capture the continuous maize penalty, the APSIM model was calibrated to the maize-soybean rotation subset of the yield-response-to-N experimental dataset using site-specific cultivar and soil parameters. The model predicted maize and soybean yields with an R2 of x and x, and rmse of X and x, respectively (suppl material). The calibrated maize-soybean rotation model at a given site’s highest N rate (253-270 kg N ha-1) was used for scenario testing.

Using the above model as a baseline, management was changed to reflect the continuous maize systems per site-year. Select parameters in the continuous maize model were then adjusted one-at-a-time using the *apsimx* package (CITE) in R, and the model was re-run using the adjusted parameter value. The scenario’s penalty was calculated as the difference between the calibrated model’s predicted yields for the rotated maize model in a given site-year, and the given scenario model’s predicted yields for the continuous maize model in that same site-year.

### Dynamic scripts

To explore the possibility of having model parameters change dynamically in response to specified conditions, we built two generalized APSIM scripts. One script kills plants as a function of the running-average of soil temperature and/or moisture at user-specified depths. The other allows the user to assign a penalty to a crop parameter of their choice as a function of running averages of soil moisture, soil temperature, and/or the amount of surface residue at planting.

# Results

## Experimental data

Over the duration of the experiments (1999-2016), maximum maize yields increased significantly at a rate of 0.21 Mg ha-1 (SE:0.04), regardless of cropping system (**Figure 3**). The continuous maize penalty remained steady at 1.02 Mg ha-1 (SE:0.15), or approximately 10% of the rotated maize yields.

Chart, scatter chart

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**Figure 3** Maximum grain yields for maize grown continuously (pink triangles), in rotation with soybean (blue circles), and the difference between the two (continuous maize penalty, green squares) from 1999-2016.

The continuous maize yields were a significant predictor (p<0.001) of the penalty, while rotated maize yields were not (p=0.18), meaning variation in the penalty is better explained by the monoculture’s yields.

Results from the quadratic plateau estimations of the N-compensatable penalty and observed penalty show N fertilization eliminated the continuous maize penalty in only 6 of the 157 sites years. On average the N-compensatable penalty was smaller than the observed penalty, averaging 0.43 Mg ha-1 compared to 0.93 Mg ha-1, respectively (Figure 4).

Diagram

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Figure (Left) Pyramid plot of each penalty type by site-year, ordered by observed yield penalty; undetermined means quadratic plateau models failed to converge for one or more cropping system (Right) Frequency distributions of the size of the nitrogen-compensatable (yellow) and observed yield penalties (green).

The N-compensatable penalty varied from 0-100% of the full penalty, but in the majority (70%) of site-years it represented less than half of the full penalty. On average, N-fertilization compensated for only 39% of the full penalty (Fig. 5). More northern sites (Iowa) had smaller N-compensatable components as a percentage of the full penalty compared to southern (Illinois).

Chart, bar chart, histogram

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Figure Percentage of full penalty overcome through additional nitrogen fertilization above the rotated maize agronomically optimum nitrogen rate; bars are conditional means, line ranges are 95% confidence intervals around the means, dotted line is overall marginal mean.

There was no correlation between the size of the N-compensatable and observed yield penalty (supplementary material). Site accounted for 13% of the variation in the observed penalty. The year-factor accounted for an additional 14%, with the site-by-year interaction contributing the remaining 73%.

Chart, scatter chart

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For supplemental.

Both of the predictor-selection models (step-wise, PLS) identified the amount of precipitation two weeks before planting and the number of days below -15 deg C between 1-Jan and planting as important model features. PLS importance scores were highest for the pre-plant precipitation, followed by winter cold days, with both being consistently identified in the leave-one-predictor-out sensitivity analysis. The step-wise regression estimated the penalty increased 37 kg ha-1 (SE: 9.6) for each additional cold day, and increased 9.9 kg ha-1 (SE: 3.0) for each additional mm of precipitation in the two weeks before planting. No soil characteristics were consistently identified as important features.

## Mechanistic pathways

### Literature

Literature reports mixed results with regards to the time component of the continuous maize penalty. Studies that utilize staggered start dates for assessing the years-in-maize effect, and therefore de-confound years-in-maize with weather, show the penalty does not increase as time in continuous maize increases (Crookston1991, Meese1991, Porter1997). A study based on farm survey data likewise found the penalty did not increase as the length of time of maize monoculture increased (Farmaha) To our knowledge, two Midwestern studies conclude the penalty increases as the number of years in a continuous maize system increases, but one confounds weather with years-in-maize and the other uses satellite imagery that may likewise reflect confounding variables (Fig. 6, maybe just supplmental).

Chart, line chart

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Figure Summary of literature investigating the relationship between the duration of continuous maize implementation and the continuous maize penalty, mean (dotted line) penalty in replicated studies (magenta) was 13%.

There is therefore strong evidence that considering only the previous year’s crop, rather than a multi-year history, is sufficient when considering driving factors for the continuous maize penalty. In the long-term, growing maize continuously compared to growing it in rotation with another crop will certainly affect soil characteristics such as organic carbon stocks, topsoil erosion, and weed pressure (Dold2020, CITE). However, our dataset represents controlled small-plot experiments where weeds were controlled, erosion would have inconsistent effects across plots, and changes in soil carbon between the rotated- and continuous-maize systems at the highest N rates may be difficult to detect (Poffenbarger

Our experimental data showed variation in the penalty is better explained by variation in the monoculture maize yields, suggesting it is indeed a yield *penalty* that is manifested through mechanisms present in the continuous maize system, rather than the rotated system driving an increase in yield potential. Therefore, our efforts focused on understanding mechanisms in the continuous maize system that may limit the system’s expression of yield potential (CITE cassman for yield potential I guess).

Based on an extensive literature review (supplementary material), we identified six general categories of candidate mechanisms for explaining the continuous maize penalty in the year following a maize crop (Table 3).

**Table 3** General categories of mechanistic pathways by which growing maize following a maize crop results in lower grain yields under sufficient nitrogen inputs.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Hypothesis** | **Description** |
| Delayed emergence | The high amounts of residue in continuous maize systems my result in cooler soil temperatures, which could delay seedling emergence. |
| Seedling death | Planting into soil with high amounts of maize residue may reduce seedling establishment by reducing seed to soil contact, through allelopathic effects, and/or through the residue creating physical barriers that impedes seedling growth and successful establishment. Additionally, higher amounts of residue may lead to cooler and wetter soils, which may result increase incidence of seedling disease. |
| Decreased early plant growth | More challenging early season conditions may lead to decreased early season plant growth, which would be expressed as a decrease in kernel number. |
| Foliar disease | When left on the soil surface, maize residue harbors inoculants for maize foliar diseases such as XX. Tillage is recommended to reduce inoculant amount (CITE), but it is possible even small amounts of surface residue are sufficient to produce localized foliar diseases at a level that significantly affects maize yields. |
| Compromised root growth and/or function | Maize roots from the previous year may support higher levels of soil bacteria harmful to the following year’s maize roots. Additionally, while soil disease inoculants are always present in Corn Belt soils (CITE), cooler temperatures may result in less competition which allows disease to establish and cause higher incidences of root disease. (Robertson) |
| Insufficient soil water recharge following maize | It is possible in some environments the soil water legacy of the previous year’s maize crop limits the amount of water available for the continuous maize system’s subsequent maize crop. |

### Scenario modelling

The model showed that in our dataset from IL and IA, soil water content was as high or higher before maize planting following a maize crop compared to a soybean crop (supplemental). To assess the feasibility of the remaining categories, we varied targeted model parameters to simulate each effect (Table 4) and ran each site’s calibrated model at that site’s highest experimental nitrogen rate (Table 1).

Table Model parameter adjustments to investigate feasibility of proposed mechanisms for the continuous maize penalty

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Scenario** | **Target outcome** | **Parameter** | **APSIM implementation** |
| 1 | Seedling death | Lower plant population | Manually decreased plant population by 1 pl m-2 (X pl ha-1) |
| 2 | Delayed emergence | Time from sowing to emergence | Changed sowing depth from 50 mm to 100 mm |
| 3 | Foliar disease-induced decrease in plant function | Decreased radiation use efficiency (RUE) | Reduced cultivar RUE  from 1.6 to 1.4 for emergence through (Stage 5? What is that in corn terms?) |
| 4 | Compromised root growth | Root front velocity (RFV) | Decreased root\_depth\_rate at each stage by 50% to 2.5, 4.5, 17, 17, 15, 10 |
| 5 | Compromised root function | Root water uptake efficiency | Decreased maize KL(/day) from 0.08 to 0.05 in all soil layers down to 120 cm |
| 6 | Decreased early plant growth | Decreased potential kernel number | Lowered head\_grain\_no\_max from 770 to 720 |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Hypothesis** | **Description** | **Scenario** | **Parameter/target outcome** | **APSIM implementation** |
| Seedling death | Planting into soil with high amounts of maize residue may reduce seedling establishment by reducing seed to soil contact, through allelopathic effects, and/or through the residue creating physical barriers that impedes seedling growth and successful establishment. Additionally, higher amounts of residue may lead to cooler and wetter soils, which may result increase incidence of seedling disease. | 1 | Lower plant population to simulate seedling death | Manually decreased plant population by 1 pl m-2 (X pl ha-1) |
| Delayed emergence | The high amounts of residue in continuous maize systems my result in cooler soil temperatures, which could delay seedling emergence. | 2 | Time from sowing to emergence | Changed sowing depth from 50 mm to 100 mm |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Foliar disease | When left on the soil surface, maize residue harbors inoculants for maize foliar diseases such as XX. Tillage is recommended to reduce inoculant amount (CITE), but it is possible even small amounts of surface residue are sufficient to produce localized foliar diseases at a level that significantly affects maize yields. | 3 | Decreased radiation use efficiency (RUE) to simulate foliar disease-induced decrease in plant function | Reduced cultivar RUE  from 1.6 to 1.4 for emergence through (Stage 5? What is that in corn terms?) |
| Compromised root growth and/or function | Maize roots from the previous year may support higher levels of soil bacteria harmful to the following year’s maize roots. Additionally, while soil disease inoculants are always present in Corn Belt soils (CITE), cooler temperatures may result in less competition which allows disease to establish and cause higher incidences of root disease. (Robertson) | 4 | Root front velocity (RFV) to simulate compromised root growth | Decreased root\_depth\_rate at each stage by 50% to 2.5, 4.5, 17, 17, 15, 10 |
|  |  | 5 | Root water uptake efficiency to simulate compromised root function | Decreased maize KL(/day) from 0.08 to 0.05 in all soil layers down to 120 cm |
| Decreased early plant growth | More challenging early season conditions may lead to decreased early season plant growth, which would be expressed as a decrease in kernel number. | 6 | Decreased potential kernel number to simulate disease- or residue-induced decreases in early plant growth | Lowered head\_grain\_no\_max from 770 to 720 |
| Insufficient soil water recharge following maize | It is possible in some environments the soil water legacy of the previous year’s maize crop limits the amount of water available for the continuous maize system’s subsequent maize crop. | NA | Soil water at X and X depths | Quantified instances when soil water profile achieved soil water contents above field capacity before planting in the maize phase of continuous- and rotated-maize systems |

While results varied by site, delayed emergence (Scenario 2) produced consistently impractical results with regards to the continuous maize penalty, as shown in the results from site IA-3 (Figure 7). Within error, all other scenarios had feasible effects on continuous maize yields. When all of the individual parameter changes were combined, the mean observed penalty was comparable to the experimentally observed penalty.

Chart

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Figure Site IA-3 experimentally observed penalties (yellow bars) with 95% confidence intervals (vertical lines) ordered from largest to smallest compared to baseline model parameters (green bars), scenarios (Table 4), and a combination of scenarios excluding delayed emergence (dark blue bars)

There is limited data available to corroborate the model’s identification of feasible pathways. While reduced plant number was a feasible scenario, several multi-site and multi-year studies have not found significant differences in maize stand counts in monoculture and maize-soybean rotations (Licht, unpublished, Griffith 1988).

Several studies suggest maize roots are indeed different in maize monocultures compared to rotated systems, but the form of that difference is not clear. A Wisconsin study showed more root length, as well as a higher percentage of necrotic roots, in maize monocultures compared to diverse rotations at 0-15 cm depths, with the authors hypothesizing the increased root length was a response to poor root health in maize monocultures (Goldstein). Additionally, the author found the monoculture maize had higher soil residual N at harvest compared to the maize-soybean rotation, suggesting that while N was available it may not have been captured by the maize plant due to compromised root function. A study done in Minnesota, likewise found maize grown in a monoculture had higher root length densities in the top 0-12.5 cm, but had less root length density than maize rotated with soybean below that depth. A recent study in Iowa found XX (Sotiris is that data published?). Studies in Minnesota and Wisconsin showed higher populations of arbuscular mycorrhizae fungi in continuous maize compared to rotated maize, which are negatively correlated with maize yields (Chamerlain2021, Johnson1992).

Surface residue has well-documented effects on the incidence of foliar diseases in maize (Robertson2007).

To our knowledge there are no growth analysis comparisons of maize grown in monoculture compared to in rotation, nor comparisons of yield components of maize grown in the two systems. Therefore, while reduced potential kernel number from lower rates of early season maize growth is feasible, there is limited experimental data to support or refute it as a driver of the penalty.

In addition to APSIM’s predictions that delayed germination is an unlikely consistent driver of the penalty, field studies likewise show negligible effects of maize residue on maize plant germination timing versus soybean residue (Kaspar1990, Shen2018).

### Dynamic script testing

The analysis of the experimental data indicated site-by-year interactions are a major contributor to variation in the observed penalty. We therefore implemented scripts to dynamically change parameter values based on surface residue amounts, soil temperature tracking, and soil moisture tracking. However, we found it difficult to assess whether this dynamicis improved model predictions because of the uncertainty around the measured penalty sizes. While the mean observed penalty was 1.0 Mg ha-1, the average standard deviation for the sites where that information was available was 0.7 Mg ha-1. Therefore, while the dynamic implementation of penalties in the model affected the predicted penalty, and in many cases improved the overall site-average prediction of the penalty (supplementary material), the size of the penalty was not known with enough precision to identify the optimal script parameters for capturing the year-to-year variation.

### Path analysis (need to think if this provides any new insight or not…)

To assess the relative strength of each pathway, we first created a simplified directed acyclical graph for path analysis (SmithSEMpaper). To simplify the diagram into a form that was analyzable using available data but still provided value, we used a combination of the modelling and literature review results (Figure 8).

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure Causal diagram representing hypothesized effects of a previous maize crop on the following maize yield penalty used for path analysis. Gray boxes indicate unmeasured aspects without indicator metrics available, yellow boxes represent aspects that were either directly measured or have indicator metrics available (pink boxes).

Results from the path analysis show as soil N increases, as represented by continuous maize yields at 0 N, the penalty decreases….no I don’t think this is helpful.

# Discussion

This study used APSIM as a tool to understand a well observed phenomenon, the CC penalty, that impacts x% of the US Corn Belt maize land. Long term field data indicated that the CC penalty remains constant over two decades of farming. Based on the data available, it is not possible to say whether the maize yield increases over time are due to weather, increased yield potential of newer varieties, management changes etc. Exploring the drivers of increases in Midwestern maize yields over time has been the subject of multiple investigations (Tollenar et al. 2017, Assefa et al. 2018, Kucharik 2008, Lobell and Burney 2021) and is outside the scope of this study. However, the consistent increase in both rotated and continuous maize yields is, to our knowledge, a novel finding. Conceptually, it indicates the amount of residue in the continuous maize system is not linearly related to the size of the yield penalty. Additionally, none of the statistical models identified the previous year’s continuous maize yields (a proxy for residue amount) as important, and the literature review found no effect of ‘years-in-maize’. While previous studies have found removing residue in continuous maize systems decreases the amount of N required to reach maximum yields (coulter2008, jose, karlen?), many studies still see a significant continuous maize penalty even with complete residue removal (Jose, Karlen, Crookston1989, I think there’s another), indicating it is not the only contributor to the continuous maize penalty.

The identification of the number of extremely cold days as an important predictor by the statistical model has an unclear interpretation. It may be simply associative, with the true driver being correlated with cold winters. It could also be a proxy for disease dynamics, or may indicate less native soil N mineralization due to cold temperatures. It is consistent with the finding that N fertilization was less effective at reducing the full penalty in more northern sites (Figure 5), as long-term annual air temperatures varied strongly by latitude, ranging from 8.1 deg C at the lowest latitude (IL-7) to 13.3 deg C at the highest (IA-3). Cold and wet soils are highly predictive of soil disease pressure in the Midwest (Robertson2007). The statistical model’s identification of the amount of rain two weeks before planting as being positively associated with the size of the penalty supports the hypothesis that root diseases play a major role in the penalty, and may render maize monocultures less responsive to N fertilizer. Previous studies in Ohio found the penalty was higher in poorly-drained sites (Dick1985, his second paper), which is consistently with the hypothesis of soil disease being magnified by maize monoculture and wet environments.

While the modelled results demonstrate several feasible hypotheses, without data to support or refute them any are reasonable implementations of the continuous maize penalty in models.

While most research has focused on the role of residue in the penalty, our findings suggest factors besides residue may be the main drivers of the penalty. However, measurements of residue amounts at harvest as well as surface residue at planting would aid in understanding the role of residue in the penalty. Growth analyses and yield components of maize in the two systems would provide insight into whether the penalty is most pronounced during a particular phase of growth, or whether the timing of the effect varies by year. Additionally, measurements of the root front velocity (Raziel) and root length and biomass at flowering would provide information on differences in root behavior in the two cropping systems.

Maybe we shouldn’t assume applying more nitrogen is worth it in continuous maize.

**Some other thoughts for text**

**Models applied for N recom, should be updated to account for CC penalalty…**

**While we work on corn, this analysis may be relevant to continuous wheat….**

**We provided a different than common use of the APSIM model – this is to test possible hypothesis and help us understand a phenomeno which causes $ of reducing productivity every year in the US Corn Belt**

**This study moved knowledge of CC a step further and provided a pathway for future research towards closing knowledge gaps and better locating the true mechanism.**

**Lit for ref for me:**

Dick1985 – bigger penalty in poorly-drained soils in Ohio

Griffin1988 – no diff in plant pop or soil temp at 10 cm depth in Ohio

Goldstein – CC has more necrotic roots and more roots 0-15cm, leaves more N in the soil at harvest,

Nickel – CC has more roots 0-12.5 cm, but less below that.

Livingston2015 – rotating is always economically preferable

Farmaha2016 – NE survey, penalty even in irrigated, 0.2 – 0.6 Mg ha (2-5%)

Johnson1992 – AMF in MN rot study

Neupane – roots/microbiome explains soybean rotation effect