The roots of the rotation effect run deep

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Highlights:

* Over eight years, maize grown in the four-year (extended) rotation yielded an average of 8% higher than maize grown in the two-year (short) rotation
* The maximum rooting depth of maize grown in the extended rotation averaged 11% deeper compared to in the short rotation
* Maize grown in the extended rotation invested less root biomass in the 0-15 cm soil profile compared to the short
* Maize grown in the extended rotation had a ‘steeper and deeper’ root structure compared to in the short

Abstract

Context or problem

It is well-established that maize (*Zea mays* L.) grown in extended rotations produces higher grain yields compared to maize grown in one- or two-phase rotations, even when nitrogen (N) is not limiting. Understanding the mechanisms driving this phenomenon, commonly referred to as ‘the rotation effect’, is important for designing cropping systems that use land and resources efficiently. Differences in root systems can influence resource acquisition and therefore yield, but it is unknown if such differences play a role in the rotation effect.

Research question

We hypothesized that maize grown in an extended rotation system exhibits different root characteristics compared to maize grown in alteration with one crop, and that these characteristics would be correlated with differences in grain production.

Methods

Using a long-term experiment established in 2001, we measured maize rooting depth across the growing season, root biomass in 15 cm increments from 0-60 cm, and grain yields in the maize phase of two contrasting rotations: a 2-year rotation of maize-soybean (*Glycine max* [L.] Merr) using inorganic sources of nitrogen (N) and maximum tillage depths of 15 cm (hereafter the ‘short rotation’), and a 4-year rotation of maize-soybean-oat (*Avena sativa* L.)/alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.)-alfalfa using a mix of organic and inorganic N sources and inversion tillage to 25 cm depths (hereafter the ‘extended rotation’). Additionally, we measured soil penetration resistance and soil moisture, and performed a growth analysis on aboveground maize biomass.

Results

From 2013-2020, maize grain yields in the extended rotation were equal to or higher than in the short, averaging 8% higher across eight years (11.0 and 10.2 dry Mg ha-1, respectively). The maximum rooting depth of maize in the extended rotation was consistently deeper compared to the short by an average of 11% (82 versus 76 cm, respectively), however the timing (e.g., early season, late season) of the extended rotation’s maize growth advantage over the short rotation was not consistent across years. At physiological maturity, the two systems had similar amounts of root biomass from 0-60 cm but the maize grown in the extended rotation invested significantly less of that biomass (30% compared to 47% in the short rotation) into the soil surface layer (0-15 cm). The soil penetration resistances of the two systems differed in a manner consistent with the differing tillage regimes of the two rotations, however the patterns could not explain the root differences in the two systems.

Conclusions

We posit that the investment in roots deeper in the soil profile seen in the extended rotation does not guarantee higher maize yields, but instead increases the likelihood the plant can withstand unfavorable growing conditions and thus produce higher grain yields in some years compared to maize grown in the short rotation.

Implications

To our knowledge, this is the first report attempting to mechanistically link root structures with plant growth in the context of the ‘rotation effect.’ This study enhances our understanding of how cropping system histories impact yields, and provides new data on yields and roots, both of which are highly relevant in this new era of soil carbon focus. While the present study focused on physical measurements, it suggests more detailed exploration of how biological drivers impact root architecture in these systems is needed to gain a mechanistic understanding of the ‘rotation effect.’

Keywords

Maize; crop rotation, roots, penetration resistance; alfalfa

# Introduction

Over the past 60 years, the diversity of maize (*Zea mays* L.) production systems in the Midwestern United States (US) has been reduced from multi-species rotations that included small grains and forage legumes to maize monocultures or simple alternations of maize and soybean (*Glycine max* [L.] Merr) (Aguilar et al., 2015; Hijmans et al., 2016; Crossley et al., 2021). Presently, five states in the Midwestern US produce approximately one-sixth of the world’s maize and soybean grain (FAO, 2020; USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service 2021), and it follows that in the Midwestern US a significant amount of agricultural land is dedicated to a simplified maize/soybean system (Boryan et al., 2011; USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service Cropland Data Layer, 2021). Several unintended, but nonetheless undesirable outcomes have accompanied this simplification including but not limited to increased rates of soil erosion, increased risk of flooding, and increased risks of nitrate pollution (Hatfield et al., 2009, 2013; Schilling et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2018; Pasley et al., 2021). While there are numerous barriers to re-diversifying Midwestern systems (Mortensen and Smith, 2020; Weisberger et al., 2021), there is value in understanding the mechanisms that may enable crop diversification to mitigate these negative outcomes.

Midwestern maize-based systems fall into three main categories: (1) continuous maize systems, wherein maize is grown for two or more consecutive seasons; (2) simple rotated maize systems, wherein maize is rotated with soybean; and (3) extended maize rotations, wherein maize is grown in a rotation with two or more years between maize crops, often including a small grain and/or a forage crop. As maize cropping systems move from monocultures to short rotations or from short to extended rotations, maize yields in the Midwest increase by approximately 10 and 5%, respectively (Crookston et al. 1991; Gentry et al. 2013; Liebman et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2012). The former phenomenon is commonly referred to as the ‘continuous maize penalty’, and the latter ‘the rotation effect’. To our knowledge it is unclear whether they are distinct expressions of unique mechanisms, or if they represent a continuum of the same mechanistic underpinnings.

There have been numerous studies in the US Midwest exploring the continuous maize penalty (Dick and Doren, 1985; Peterson et al., 1990; Meese et al., 1991; Crookston et al., 1991; Porter et al., 1997; Varvel, 2000; Stanger and Lauer, 2008; Gentry et al., 2013; Al-Kaisi et al., 2015; Farmaha et al., 2016; Seifert et al., 2017; Vogel and Below, 2018; Bowles et al., 2020). There is evidence it is due, at least in part, to yield suppressive mechanisms in the monoculture system, potentially due to soil biological conditions that may constrain root development and therefore resource capture (Crookston et al., 1988; Johnson et al., 1992; Nickel et al., 1995; Goldstein, 2000). The maize yield advantage accrued from extending short rotations to include small grains and forage legumes has received less attention compared to the continuous maize penalty, but has likewise been well-documented (Liebman et al., 2008; Stanger and Lauer, 2008; Coulter et al., 2011). To our knowledge the mechanisms driving the rotation effect remain uncertain, partially due to the complex changes in management extended rotations can require. For example, extended maize-based rotations in North America often incorporate perennial crops such as alfalfa or pasture (Bowles et al. 2020). These additions have unique plant physiologies compared to annual crops (e.g. higher root biomass), may require different tillage regimes (e.g. longer periods between soil disturbance, deep-tillage termination), and have links to livestock and their attendant impacts (e.g. organic sources of fertilizers), making it difficult to attribute the yield increases resulting from extended rotations to a particular driver.

When above-ground crop products are valued, it is desirable for plants to optimize investments in belowground growth. In nitrogen- or water-limited environments, ‘steep, cheap and deep’ root ideotypes have been identified as the most efficient use of root investments (Lynch, 2013; Tron et al., 2015; Thorup-Kristensen and Kirkegaard 2016; Thorup-Kristensen et al. 2020). It is therefore feasible that maize grown in extended rotations is benefiting from this more favorable architecture ideotype. Many characteristics of extended rotations may promote deeper crop roots. In a long-term cropping systems research experiment in Iowa (Liebman et al., 2008; Davis et al., 2012) researchers have found differences in the vertical distributions of resources, microbial communities, and nutrient cycling activity in soil profiles of simple and complex maize systems (Lazicki et al., 2016; King and Hofmockel, 2017; Osterholz et al., 2018; Poffenbarger et al., 2020; Baldwin-Kordick et al., 2022), all of which may impact, or be impacted by, root architectures. Indeed, Lazicki et al. (2016) found differences in maize root distributions in plots with varying cropping system histories, but the data were limited to shallow depths (0-20 cm) and did not control for previous crop root carryover, which may impact interpretations (Hirte et al. 2017).

We hypothesized that maize grown in extended rotations develops a root structure that is better able to capture resources with less biomass investment compared to the short rotation. To test this hypothesis, we made the following measurements in the maize phase of short (maize-soybean) and extended (maize-soybean-oats/alfalfa-alfalfa) rotations:

1. Maize grain yields (2013-2020)
2. Maize root biomass from 0-60 cm soil depths as a proxy for the resources invested by the maize crop into roots (2019-2020)
3. Maximum maize rooting depth as a proxy for the soil space made available for resource capture by that investment (2018-2020)

Additionally, we complemented these measurements with detailed aboveground maize growth analysis throughout five seasons (2013, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020); soil penetration resistance measurements (2018-2020); and soil moisture measurements (2018-2019).

# Methods and Materials

## Study location

The experimental site was located at the Iowa State University Marsden Farm, in Boone County, Iowa, USA (42°01’ N; 93°47’ W; 333 m above sea level). Dominant soil series were Clarion loam, Nicollet loam, and Webster clay loam Mollisols. Before the initiation of the experiment, the site had been managed for at least 20 years with a maize-soybean rotation receiving conventional fertilizer and herbicide inputs. Baseline soil samples (0-20 cm) showed a mean buffer pH of 6.8 and mean organic matter concentration of 51 g kg–1 (Liebman et al., 2008). The experiment was arranged as a randomized complete block design with each crop phase of each rotation system present every year in four replicate blocks (Payne, 2015). Plots were 18 m by 85 m, with the entire experiment comprising ~9 hectares. Weather data were collected from a weather station approximately one kilometer from the field site (Iowa Environmental Mesonet, 2021).

## Sampling

This study utilized two of the three maize-based rotations present in the larger study: a 2-year rotation of maize-soybean (hereafter the short rotation), and a 4-year rotation of maize-soybean-oat/alfalfa-alfalfa that periodically received composted cattle manure (hereafter the extended rotation). Detailed accounts of plot management are reported elsewhere (Liebman et al., 2008; Hunt et al., 2020) and a summary is presented in **Table 1**. Maize grain yield was measured in 2013-2020, and additional measurements were taken in select years during that period (**Table 2**).

Table 1. Summary of agronomic management of the two rotation treatments sampled in this study; only the maize phase (bolded) was sampled in this study; for more details see Liebman et al. 2008 and Hunt et al. 2020

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Rotation** | **Crop sequence** | **Nitrogen sources** | **Tillage regime** |
| Short 2-year | Soybean-  **Maize** | Mean total of 180 kg ha-1 inorganic nitrogen applied to maize phase, with 112 kg ha-1 applied at planting and the remaining at V6 side-dressing based on soil nitrate sampling | Fall chisel plowing and spring field cultivation preceding soybean planting, spring surface cultivation preceding maize planting |
| Extended 4-year | Soybean-Oat/Alfalfa-Alfalfa-  **Maize** | Mean of 140 kg ha-1 organic nitrogen applied as composted cattle manure the fall preceding the maize phase, and 32 kg ha-1 inorganic N applied at V6 side-dressing | Fall chisel plowing and spring surface cultivation preceding soybean planting, no tillage events preceding oat/alfalfa planting, fall moldboard plowing of the alfalfa crop followed by spring disking and surface cultivation preceding maize planting |

## Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using *R version 4.0.2* (R Core Team, 2020) with the *tidyverse* suite of packages (Wickham et al., 2019) or JMP Pro 15.0 (SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina, USA). Additional R packages were used for specific analyses as described below. Significance for statistical tests was set at α=0.05 unless noted otherwise. In all cases several statistical models were fit and compared using Akaike’s Information Criteria (AIC; Kuha, 2004) and residual plots, but only the model chosen as providing the best fit is reported. All data used in this manuscript is available in csv format and as an R package available for download (<https://github.com/vanichols/maRsden>). The R code used to perform these analyses and create manuscript figures is available in a public Github repository (will be made public once manuscript is accepted for publication).

## Grain yields, harvest indices, grain weights, root-to-shoot ratios

The effect of rotation treatment (short, extended) on maize grain yields was assessed using a linear mixed effects model with rotation, year-factor, and their interaction as fixed effects, and block nested within a year-factor as a random intercept using R package *lme4* (Bates et al., 2015). The R packages *emmeans* (Lenth et al., 2018) and *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova et al., 2017) were used for comparisons and statistical summaries of the model, using a Tukey adjustment for multiple comparisons.

Differences in harvest indices, 500-grain weights, and the root-to-shoot ratios were assessed using a linear mixed effects model with rotation, a year-factor, and their interaction as fixed effects and a random block intercept, with a Tukey adjustment for multiple comparisons.

## Rooting depth

We modeled rooting depth as a function of the cumulative maize growing-degree-days (GDDs) accrued since planting (base temperature 10⁰C, maximum temperature 30⁰C) to facilitate comparisons between years. Non-linear models were fit using the R package *nlraa* package (Miguez, 2021). We tried several non-linear models fit to both the raw data and the data filtered to remove measurements taken after the season’s maximum depth had been reached (**Figure S1**). We found a three-parameter logistic curve (Archontoulis et al., 2015) fit to the filtered data produced the best fit according to AIC and inspection of residuals:

Eqn. 1

where *rootdepth(GDD)* is the maximum rooting depth at a given cumulative GDD after planting and *Asym*, *xmid*, and *scal* are estimated parameters. *Asym* represents the maximum rooting depth achieved, *xmid* represents the cumulative GDD value at which half of the maximum rooting depth was achieved, and *scal* describes the steepness of the curve (Miguez et al., 2018). We found the best model fit incorporated a fixed effect of rotation on *Asym*, *scal*, and *xmid*; a random effect of a year-factor on *Asym*, *xmid*, and *scal*; a random effect of block on *Asym*; and a power variance structure (Pinheiro and Bates 2022).

Table 2. Summary of measurements used for this study

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Measurement** | **Years** | **Description** |
| Maize grain yield | 2013-2020 | Maize grain yield was determined using a 6-row combine equipped with a yield monitor and moisture meter. Sampling areas for yield were the middle rows of the plots, approximately 4.6 m x 84 m. All yields are reported on a dry weight basis. |
| Maize above-ground biomass | 2013, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020 | Maize above-ground biomass was measured approximately every two weeks throughout the season. Eight plants were cut at ground level, separated into leaf, stem, and reproductive components, dried at 60⁰C for at least 72 hours, then weighed. |
| Maize maximum rooting depth | 2018, 2019, 2020 | Maximum maize rooting depth was measured starting at 20, 23, and 41 days after planting in 2018, 2019, and 2020, respectively. Sampling was repeated approximately every 2 weeks until 84, 106, and 151 days after planting in 2018, 2019, and 2020, respectively. Maximum rooting depth was determined visually using the protocol of Ordóñez et al. (2018). A soil core was drawn with a 19-mm-diameter soil probe, white roots were identified, and their depth estimated to the nearest cm using a meter stick. Samples were repeatedly taken from the same core location until no white roots were identified in the core. Four cores were taken per plot at each sampling date. |
| Soil moisture and temperature at 15 and 45 cm depths | 2018, 2019 | 5TM soil moisture and temperature sensors (METER Group Inc., Pullman, WA, USA) were installed at two depths (15 and 45 cm) in each plot. Data were recorded hourly during the growing season using EM50 data loggers. |
| Penetration resistance | 2018, 2019 | Penetration resistance was measured using a FieldScout 900 Soil Compaction Meter (Spectrum Technologies, Inc., Aurora, IL, USA). Values were recorded every 2.54 cm to 45 cm depth immediately following planting and/or approximately 60 days after planting. Ten measurements were taken randomly throughout each plot. Measurements were taken within two days after a saturating rain to avoid capturing differences due to soil moisture. |
| Maize root mass 0-60 cm | 2019, 2020 | Maize root mass to a soil depth of 60 cm was measured at 3 and 105 days after planting in 2019, and at 4 and 117 days after planting in 2020. Four soil samples per plot were drawn at a location 10 cm from maize rows in 15 cm depth increments using a 32-mm-diameter soil probe. Soil from each depth increment within a plot was composited and roots were recovered using a sequence of elutriation (washing), flotation, recovery from organic debris using tweezers and a stereo microscope, drying, and weighing (Dietzel et al., 2017). |

## Root mass

Distinguishing newly added root biomass from the previous year’s crop and weed root biomass is difficult using visual sorting, and failure to address these background levels of roots can lead to overestimates of root mass with the overestimate varying by cropping history (Hirte et al. 2017). To address this issue, the three main options currently available to field researchers include the use of isotopes, correction for background levels of root material by using a baseline measurement or root growth cores, or maintaining a crop- and weed-free area to track background levels throughout the season. We chose to take a background sample shortly after the maize crop was planted. Additional details of sampling protocols are presented in **Table 2**. When interpreting the data, we used the two extreme assumption cases concerning the percentage of the sampled background roots that decayed between the start of the maize growing season (3 days after planting (DAP) in 2019 and 4 DAP in 2020; **Table 2**) and the last sampling date near maize physiological maturity: 0% background root decay, and 100% background root decay. The true amount of background roots present at the time of sampling falls between the extreme assumptions, and we therefore report the production of new crop root biomass as a range of possible values.

The Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) method for linear mixed effect models in JMP Pro 15.0 was used to evaluate the effects of rotation treatment on maize root mass production within four soil depth increments (0-15 cm, 15-30 cm, 30-45 cm, and 45-60 cm) for each of the extreme assumption cases. Year, rotation system, soil depth, and date were treated as fixed factors, and block and its interactions with the fixed factors were treated as random effects. Sampling depth was nested within year and rotation. Due to the inherently high variability of root measurements, for these analyses contrasts (as allowed by degrees of freedom) were investigated when significance of effects was p<0.10.

## Growth analysis

We modeled above-ground biomass as a function of day-of-year using a three-parameter logistic curve (Eqn. 1), as it provided the best fit of all the non-linear models assessed (logistic, Richards, Gompertz, Weibull, Beta; Miguez et al. 2018) based on AIC criteria. A model using GDDs produced similar results, but we chose to report the model using calendar days for ease in interpretation. A separate model was fit for each rotation in each year to allow for derivatives to be taken for each rotation in each year. The first- and second-order derivatives of the fitted equation were used as estimates of the absolute and relative growth rates, respectively. The effect of rotation on fitted parameters was assessed using the *confint* function of base R.

## Root-to-shoot ratios

A root-to-shoot ratio for each experimental unit was estimated using the range in possible root additions in the 0-60 cm soil profile and the maximum above-ground biomass as predicted by the growth analysis (see Section 2.7). In Iowa, roots in the 0-60 cm depth increment account for more than 90% of total root mass (Nichols et al. 2019) but will nonetheless provide an underestimate of the root-to-shoot ratio (Ordóñez et al. 2020). We therefore calculated the ratio to be interpreted as relative values, rather than absolute.

## Penetration resistance

Penetration resistance was statistically modelled separately for each year and date of sampling using a generalized additive mixed model with a fixed intercept effect of rotation treatment, a fixed ‘wiggle’ component of rotation treatment, five knots, and a random ‘wiggle’ effect of block. Generalized additive models can model highly non-linear relationships and are useful when the goal is to compare treatments rather than to create predictions. The *gamm* function of the R package *mgcv* (McCulloch and Neuhaus, 2005; Wood, 2011) was used, and the *emmeans* package was used to assess pairwise comparison significance. Models were fit using both the raw and square-root-transformed data. Although the model on the transformed data produced a better fit according to inspection of residuals, statistical conclusions were not different in the two models so the results from the untransformed data are presented for ease in interpretation.

## Soil moisture and temperature

The hourly soil moisture and temperature data were averaged over a 24-hour period (12:00 am to 11:59 pm) for analysis. The daily means were statistically modelled as a function of day-of-year separately for each year and depth using a generalized additive mixed model with a fixed intercept effect of rotation treatment, a fixed ‘wiggle’ component of rotation treatment, 35 knots, and a random ‘wiggle’ effect of block using the R package *mgcv*.

# Results

## Grain yields and weather

Maize yields ranged from 7.0 to 12.7 dry Mg ha-1 over the 2013-2020 study period. The effect of rotation depended on year (p<0.001; **Figure 1**), with the maize grown in the extended rotation producing significantly higher (p<0.01) grain yields in five (2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2018) of the eight years. Averaged over all years, maize grown in the short rotation yielded a mean of 10.2 dry Mg ha-1, while maize grown in the extended rotation yielded 8% higher with a mean grain yield of 11.0 dry Mg ha-1.

Over the past 30 years, from 15-April through 15-October the research site averaged 597 mm of precipitation with a mean air temperature of 19⁰C. From 2013-2020, growing season weather conditions varied considerably compared to these long-term averages, with the grain yield dataset capturing conditions in all four temperature/precipitation combinations (**Figure 1**). Years that included growth analyses were likewise represented in all four quadrants, and the three years with full datasets (grain yields, growth analysis, root data) represented all but cool and wet conditions.

Figure 1. Maize yields and growing season weather

; (left) mean maize grain yields (n = 4) in the complex (dark blue, solid, triangles) and simple (pink, dashed, squares) rotations from 2013-2020 (lines connecting points for ease in viewing) and significantly different yields (p<0.01) indicated with asterisks and bolded year font; (right) growing season precipitation and mean air temperatures of each measurement year as compared to 30-year means (dotted lines) with size of points proportional to the extended rotation’s maize mean yield advantage over the short rotation and point color representing the measurement set for that year.

## Rooting depth

The rooting depth of maize grown in the extended rotation trended consistently deeper in the majority of sampling times in all three growing seasons (**Figure 2**). The maximum rooting depths in 2018 were shallow (~50 cm) due to an extremely wet year (**Figure 1**) that caused consistently shallow water tables as documented at a nearby experimental site (Ebrahimi et al. 2019). Rotation affected maize maximum rooting depth (*Asym*; p<0.01; **Table S1**), estimated at 11% deeper in the extended rotation compared to the short rotation (82 cm and 76 cm, respectively). While the extended rotation roots also descended faster, the effect was not statistically significant (*xmid*; p=0.19).

A graph of growth and growth of a number of different degrees

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure 2. Maize rooting depth across three growing seasons (2018, 2019, 2020; refer to Figure 1 for weather conditions) in short (2-year, pink) and extended (4-year, dark blue) rotations; points represent individual measurements, lines represent the non-linear model fits, italic text is the maize stage; model uncertainty is omitted for simplicity but is available in supplemental material; first points at 0 depth indicate maize planting date.

## Root mass

Root mass present at maize planting (hereafter ‘background’ root mass) ranged from 68 to 2753 kg ha-1, with the extended rotation tending to have higher amounts (**Table S2**). Year interactions were not significant, (**Table S2**), so results are presented as marginal estimates over years. At the 0-15 cm depth increment, the root mass added in the two systems differed significantly (p = 0.02; **Table S3**), regardless of background root decomposition assumptions. The short rotation added between 314 (SE:110) and 506 (SE:56) kg ha-1, while maize grown in the extended rotation added between 101 (SE:110) and 321 (SE:55) kg ha-1 of root mass (**Figure 3**). The extended rotation’s lower maize biomass relative to the short in the top 15 cm was counterbalanced by higher biomass relative to the short in soil layers deeper than 15 cm (**Figure 3**). Although these differences were not significant (**Table S3**), this resulted in the total root biomass of the two rotations being statistically equal. Another study using in-growth root cores found maize added 480-560 kg ha-1 in root material over the growing season in the top 30 cm of soil (Dietzel et al. 2017). These values are comparable to those found in our study (**Figure 3**).

A graph of different colored bars

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure 3. (Left) Possible ranges in mean maize root mass production (n=8) depending on assumed rate of decomposition of root mass present at planting (e.g. ‘background’ roots) for maize grown in the short (pink) and extended (dark blue) rotations separated by depth and (right) totals root biomass ranges for 0-60 cm.

## Growth analysis

The maximum aboveground maize biomass (*Asym*; Eqn. 1) as estimated from the growth analysis was significantly higher in the extended rotation in the years when the extended rotation yielded significantly higher grain yields (**Table 3; Figure S2; Table S1**). The date at which the maize achieved half of its maximum biomass (*xmid;* Eqn. 1) was significantly earlier in the extended rotation in 2013 (p = 0.05) and exhibited higher absolute growth rates compared to the short early in the season (before maximum growth rates were achieved; **Figure S2**). Conversely, *xmid* for the extended rotation occurred significantly later than for the short in 2018 (p < 0.01) and had higher absolute growth rates later in the season (after maximum growth rates were achieved). They were not significantly different in any other year. The maximum growth rates in the two rotations (*scal;* Eqn. 1) were likewise not significantly different in any year. The harvest index and 500-kernel weights were consistently higher in years with large rotation effects on grain yield but did not differ in years that lacked a strong rotation effect (**Table 3**).

The root-to-shoot ratios ranged from 0.002 to 0.015 depending on the assumed background root decomposition (**Figure S3**), and produced inconclusive trends due to the variation produced by the assumptions leading to its calculation. While these root-to-shoot ratios are lower than those reported in literature for maize (e.g., 0.09 from Ordóñez et al. 2020), our root measurement methodology and driving questions differed, and our total root biomasses are consistent with other studies that control for background root amounts (e.g. Dietzel et al. 2017).

Table 3. Summary of extended rotation’s maize characteristics relative to short rotation’s including grain yields (Figure 1), root characteristics (Figures 2, 3) growth analysis (Figure S2, Table S4), and yield components (Figure S2) for years with growth analysis data, ordered by magnitude of grain yield differentials; ratios of values are presented to simplify visual comparisons of rotations

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Ratio of extended:short system maize grain yield**† | **Extended rotation’s maize maximum rooting depth/surface roots relative to short rotation** | **Timing of extended rotation’s maize growth advantage**‡ | **Ratio of extended:short harvest index** | **Ratio of extended:short 500-kernal weight** |
| 2018 | 1.20 | Deeper/- | Late season | 1.08 | 1.13 |
| 2013 | 1.10 | - | Early season | 1.04 | *-* |
| 2014 | 1.06 | - | ns | ns | *-* |
| 2020 | ns | Deeper/steeper | ns | ns | ns |
| 2019 | ns | Deeper/steeper | ns | ns | ns |
| †Ordered by largest to smallest estimated rotation effect on maize grain yield  ‡Early season refers to periods before the maximum maize growth rate occurred, late season to periods after  \* ns: not significant at p=0.05  - indicates those data were not collected that year | | | | | |

## Penetration resistance

Penetration resistance above 30 cm soil depth was consistently lower in the extended rotation, regardless of year or sampling period (planting, late season; **Figure S4**). From 0-30 cm, the simple and extended rotations had mean penetration resistances of 0.7 and 0.6 MPa at planting, and 1.5 and 1.1 MPa at late season sampling, respectively. This corresponded to a 23 and 37% increase in resistance in the top 30 cm in the simple system at planting and late-season sampling, respectively. From 30 to 45 cm the complex system tended to have higher penetration resistance by an average of 15% regardless of year or sampling time (1.1 MPa/0.9 MPa at planting, and 1.7/1.4 MPa in the late season, respectively).

## Soil moisture and temperature

In both years of measurement, the extended rotation’s soil moisture at 15 cm depth was significantly lower than in the short’s for the first month following planting (**Figure S5**). After that period, the effects of rotation on soil moisture were not consistent across years; in 2018 the short rotation soil was consistently wetter than the extended rotation at both 15 cm and 45 cm depths, but in 2019 there was no difference. In 2018, the extended rotation’s lower soil moisture at 15 cm was concomitant with a significantly higher soil temperature compared to the short rotation by ~0.5 deg Celsius, but otherwise showed no consistent trends (**FigureS5**).

# Discussion

Consistency of root characteristics across years (cite Lazicki), they occur independently of yield advantage. Posit it is a consistent difference, positions the plant to capture more resources when they are available in deeper soil layers? Differences in roots not correlated with differences in penetration resistance, soil moisture, or soil temperature.

(Concerning root amounts) Another study using in-growth root cores found maize added 480-560 kg ha-1 in root material over the growing season in the top 30 cm of soil (Dietzel et al. 2017). These values are comparable to those found in our study (400-670 kg ha-1, Figure 3).

In 2019

Extended rotation maize root mass and soil penetration relative to short rotation demonstrate mismaize values relative to short rotation

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Soil depth | Roots | Soil penetration resistance | Soil moisture at planting |
| 0-15 cm | Less roots | Less resistance | Drier |
| 15-30 cm | More roots | Less resistance | Drier |
| 30-45 cm | More roots | More resistance |  |
| 45-60 cm | More roots | - |  |
| *+60 cm* | *Maximum rooting depths* | *-* |  |

Compared to maize grown in a short rotation, we found maize grown in the extended rotation had equal or higher grain yields, consistently deeper maximum rooting depths, and a root system that was more evenly distributed from 0-60 cm. While our data do not establish direct cause-effect relationships, we posit that the ‘steeper and deeper’ root architecture exhibited in the extended rotation does not guarantee higher maize yields, but rather it increases the likelihood the plant can withstand certain unfavorable growing conditions.

The reasons for the ‘steeper and deeper’ root architecture are not clear.

The deeper maximum rooting depth in the extended rotation was consistent across three years, with one of those years (2018) exhibiting the highest yield differential between the two rotations observed (>2 Mg ha-1), and two years (2019, 2020) when there was no yield differential. While the root distribution measurements (2019, 2020) both occurred in years without a yield differential, root measurements taken at this site in 2009 likewise showed higher root densities in the short rotation maize in the top 0-10 cm compared to the extended rotation maize, and coincided with a year exhibiting a significant yield differential (Lazicki et al. 2016, **Figure S6**). Combined, these data suggest the differences in root distributions and maximum rooting depths are consistent across years. However, the timing of the maize growth advantage, when it occurred, was not consistent across years (**Table 3**). This suggests the ‘steeper and deeper’ root layout in the extended rotation provided resilience against unfavorable growing conditions, regardless of the timing, leading to increased resource acquisition and significantly higher grain yields in some years. Our study suggests this is a ‘no-cost’ benefit, as evidenced by the maize grown in the extended rotation achieving equal or higher grain yields compared to the maize grown in the short rotation (**Figure 1**). While our dataset is not conclusive, it provides novel information that enriches our knowledge base on the rotation effect.

The causes for the deeper and steeper root investments in the extended rotation cannot be discerned from this study alone, and might be physical, chemical, or biological. The root legacy of the crop preceding maize may impact the maize’s root distribution. One study using mini-rhizotrons showed that when a maize crop followed an alfalfa crop, the maize root distribution closely mimicked the alfalfa root distribution, with 41% of the maize roots following old alfalfa root channels (Rasse et al. 1998). Alfalfa root systems tend to be deeper than maize, with estimated maximum rooting depths of 177 cm compared to 118 cm (Fan et al. 2016). Therefore, even with moldboard plowing (20-25 cm depth) used in our study, there would be intact decaying alfalfa root channels that the maize roots may have followed. Furthermore, decayed alfalfa roots can increase soil water infiltration (Guo et al. 2019), which could lead to better drainage and contribute to the lower soil moisture levels seen in the extended rotation early in the season.

The reasons for the deeper and steeper root architecture are not clear. Previous work has shown the depth to the water table is associated with differences in maize root distributions (Nichols et al. 2019), but in the present study, we measured water table heights in two plots in 2019 (unpublished data) and found the rotation treatment had no discernible effect on water table dynamics, indicating the differences in root distributions between the treatments were not due to differences in the depth to the water table. Various aspects of the extended rotation have been shown to impact rooting dynamics, including deeper tillage (XX), inorganic sources of nitrogen (Thorup?), decayed alfalfa root channels (XX), and XX. Previous work has shown soil carbon (Lazicki et al. 2016), microbial activity (King and Hofmockel 2017), and nitrogen (Osterholz et al. 2018) are more evenly distributed through the 0-20 cm soil profile in the extended rotation. While this may partially explain the differences in root distributions we observed, .

Microbes in the

A previous study took soil from the top 20 cm of each rotation, homogenized the soil, and grew maize for 21 days (Bay et al. 2021). They found that even in the homogenized soil, the maize grown in the extended rotation soil had a maximum rooting depth ~30% deeper compared to the maize grown in the short rotation soil, as well as significantly thinner but more numerous roots, with.

This suggests that while physical characteristics such as decaying alfalfa root pores may be contributing to the deeper root systems in the extended rotation, biological factors

settingbut the differences found in the current study extended beyond those depths. Alfalfa roots can extend beyond 1 m in temperate areas with deep soils (Fan et al. 2016), which is well below the maximum tillage depth in the extended rotation (**Figure S4**). so it is possible that in the extended rotation, where maize follows alfalfa, the maize roots in the extended rotation Undistiburted While the root distributions may simply be reflecting these differences, the maximum rooting depths extended below , and it is possible the roots are simply reflecting these differences.

However, to our knowledge there are no reports of cropping system histories affecting maize rooting depths. In the present study, we measured water table heights in two plots in 2019 (unpublished data) and found the rotation treatment had no discernible effect on water table dynamics, indicating the differences in root distributions between the treatments were not due to differences in the depth to the water table. In addition to adding less root mass to the shallow soil profile (0-15 cm), maize grown in the extended rotation achieved a deeper maximum rooting depth in all three years of measurement, which covered widely ranging environmental conditions (**Figure 1**).

While the rotation benefit was realized in a range of weather conditions (**Figure 1**), it was large in both the wettest (2018) and driest (2013) years. Climate change scenarios project increased occurrences of precipitation extremes (Zhang et al. 2013), suggesting extended rotations may play an important role in building cropping system resilience to climate change. Even under those conditions, the maize grown in the extended rotation had a deeper maximum rooting depth, and the yield differential between the complex and short rotation maize was the highest recorded from 2013-2020 (**Figure 1**; **Table 2**). In 2019 and 2020, years with more average amounts of precipitation, the maximum rooting depths were consistent with the ranges found by Ordóñez et al. (2018) across 10 site-years in Iowa, with the maize in the extended rotation again achieving a deeper maximum rooting depth in both of those years.

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Across the entire 0-60 cm soil profile, the investment in total maize root mass was greater in the short rotation than in the more extended rotation (**Figure 3**). There was no significant effect of year on the differences in root mass, suggesting the root differences may be consistent across years. While the lower investment in shallow roots and deeper rooting depths were consistent characteristics of maize grown in the more extended rotation, the part of the growing season in which the deeper roots are advantageous will differ from year to year, as evidenced by the inconsistency in the maize growth advantage timing, and the fact that the extended rotation did not have higher grain yields compared to the short rotation in every year (**Table 3**). The root layout may provide the plant with greater nitrogen uptake (Osterholz et al. 2018), greater mobilization of resources to support grain growth resulting in a higher harvest index when those processes are limiting factors in the simple systems.

The causes for the deeper and steeper root investments in the extended rotation cannot be discerned from this study alone, and might be physical, chemical, or biological. The root legacy of the crop preceding maize may impact the maize’s root distribution. One study using mini-rhizotrons showed that when a maize crop followed an alfalfa crop, the maize root distribution closely mimicked the alfalfa root distribution, with 41% of the maize roots following old alfalfa root channels (Rasse et al. 1998). Alfalfa root systems tend to be deeper than maize, with estimated maximum rooting depths of 177 cm compared to 118 cm (Fan et al. 2016). Therefore, even with moldboard plowing (20-25 cm depth) used in our study, there would be intact decaying alfalfa root channels that the maize roots may have followed. Furthermore, decayed alfalfa roots can increase soil water infiltration (Guo et al. 2019), which could lead to better drainage and contribute to the lower soil moisture levels seen in the extended rotation early in the season.

In addition to root legacies, changes in bulk density may also contribute to differences in root structures and investments. The extended rotation may have caused reduced soil bulk density due to moldboard plowing of the alfalfa crop during the fall prior to maize planting as well as greater particulate organic matter from manure additions (Lazicki et al. 2016; Poffenbarger et al. 2020). Bulk density differences were supported by the lower penetration resistance at planting above the moldboard plowing depths which were observed in the present as well as past studies (Baldwin-Kordick et al., 2022). While neither system had absolute resistances high enough to meaningfully impede root penetration, the resistances were measured in wet soils and therefore represent minimum values. The differences in penetration resistance (0.1-0.4 MPa) were of a magnitude that could affect root elongation; a study done with intact soil cores found resistances of only 0.3-0.5 MPa reduced maize seeding root elongation by 50-60% in a sandy loam soil (Bengough and Mullins, 1991).

In addition to the raw physical implications of lower bulk densities/resistances, there may be biophysical and chemical implications (Ball et al. 2005). Lower resistances could be indicative of better aeration, and possibly better water drainage or higher water uptake by the plants. Indeed, the soil water profiles showed drier soils after planting in the extended rotation compared to the short rotation in both years of measurement. It is possible that the drier soils drove deeper root exploration by maize in the complex system, or that higher soil temperatures promoted faster root growth. Additionally, some studies have shown ethylene build-up in soils can encourage thickening of roots and reduced branching (Moss et al. 1988). The better aerated soils for maize in the complex system may have contributed to both the deeper exploration, and a lower resource demand for creating the root system. A previous study that measured root length, rather than root mass, found that maize grown in the more complex system had higher root lengths in the 10-20 cm depth range compared to maize in the simple system (Lazicki et al. 2016), again suggesting that the root system of maize in the extended rotation achieved a more efficient root system with less resource investment.

A greenhouse study took soil from the two rotation treatments’ plots used in the present study and homogenized it to remove structural differences (Bay et al., 2021). The researchers found differences in maize roots even after soil homogenization. In particular, maize grown in soil from the extended rotation had deeper and thinner roots compared to maize grown in soil from the simple system, while simultaneously having less root biomass. This corroborates our findings from the present field-based study, and indicates the effect is at least in part biological or chemical. Growing maize in sterilized soil would aid in parsing these effects, and certainly merits further investigation. Process-based models could also aid in supporting or refuting the hypothesis of ‘deeper and cheaper’ roots in more extended rotations positioning maize crops to be better buffered against unfavorable growing environments.

# Conclusion

This study provides novel evidence that growing maize in extended rotations can result in changes to maize root structure, such as the rooting depth, as well as the investments made in root systems. The changes in root structure may affect below-ground resource acquisition by the crop, which may in turn result in higher maize grain yields under certain conditions. Differences in penetration resistance and early season moisture may contribute to the altered root structures and plant resource investments, but there are likely additional biological and/or chemical drivers. More research is needed to understand the contributions of physical, biological, and chemical characteristics of soil in simple and more extended rotations to these changes.

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# Author contributions

All authors contributed to data collection, GN and ML performed data analyses, GN wrote the initial draft of the manuscript, all authors contributed to editing of the final manuscript.

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# Appendix. Supplementary Material

The following figures are included as supplementary material:

**Figure S1** – Maximum rooting depth over time, raw dataset and unsmoothed fitted values

**Figure S2** - Yields, biomass over time, growth rate over time, harvest index, 500-kernal grain weight

**Figure S3** – Root to shoot ratios for 2019 and 2020

**Figure S4** - Soil penetration resistance by depth at various sampling points, approximate depths of tillage operations are provided for reference

**Figure S5** - Soil moisture at 30 and 45 cm depths in the maize phase of the complex (dark blue) and simple (pink) rotations;

points represent individual sensor values, lines the estimated values, and ribbons the 95% confidence interval around the estimates

**Figure S6 –** Data from Lazicki et al. 2016 shows differences in maize root structures coinciding with maize yield differences in short and extended maize rotations in 2009

The following tables are included as supplementary material:

**1**

**Table S2** - Summary of ‘background’ root samples taken shortly before maize planting

**Table S3** - Summary of fixed effect tests on root mass

**Table S4** - Summary of root mass added contrasts for the complex versus short rotation at each depth

A graph of different types of data

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

**Figure S1** – Maximum rooting depth over time, raw dataset and unsmoothed fitted values

A screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generated

**Figure S2**. Yields, biomass over time, growth rate over time, harvest index, 500-kernal grain weight

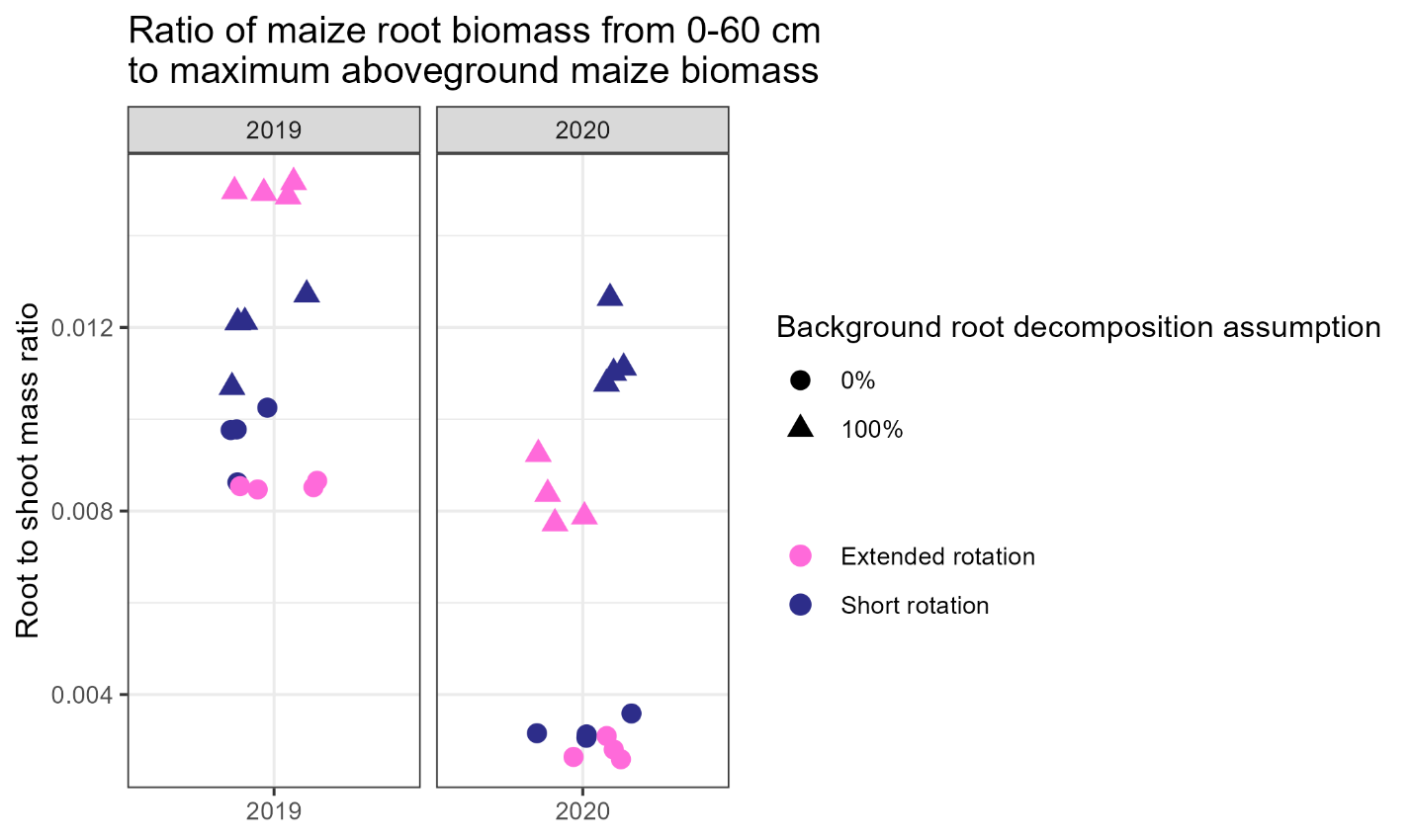


Figure S3. Root to shoot ratios for 2019 and 2020, with means and standard errors presented as large points and vertical lines

A graph of different seasons

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure S4. Soil penetration resistance by depth at various sampling points, approximate depths of tillage operations are provided for reference

A screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generated

Figure S5. Soil moisture at 30 and 45 cm depths in the maize phase of the complex (dark blue) and simple (pink) rotations;

points represent individual sensor values, lines the estimated values, and ribbons the 95% confidence interval around the estimates

A diagram of a graph

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

***Figure S6 –*** *Data from Lazicki et al. 2016 shows differences in maize root structures coinciding with maize yield differences in short and extended maize rotations in 2009*

**Table S1.** Summary of 3-parameter logistic curve fits for rooting depth analyses and above-ground growth-analyses, parameters that differed significantly by rotation (p<0.05) are bolded.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Rotation** | **Asym** | **xmid** | **scal** |
|  |  | *(cm)* | *(GDDs)* |  |
| *Rooting depth analysis* | | | | |
|  | Short | **74 (CI:50-98)** | 455 (CI:357-553) | 109 (CI:65-152) |
|  | Extended | **82 (CI:59-106)** | 436 (CI:338-534) | 109 (CI:65-153) |
| *Above-ground growth analysis* | | | | |
| 2013 | Short | **201 (CI:197-205)** | **210 (CI:209-211)** | 10.9 (CI:9.9-11.9) |
| Extended | **253 (CI:244-264)** | **207 (CI:205-210)** | 13.3 (CI:11.5-15.3) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 2014 | Short | **326 (CI:316-336)** | 204 (CI:203-206) | 16.3 (CI:15-17.6) |
| Extended | **351 (CI:341-363)** | 205 (CI:203-207) | 17.1 (CI:15.8-18.6) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 2018 | Short | **237 (CI:231-244)** | **191 (CI:190-193)** | 12.6 (CI:11.6-13.7) |
| Extended | **286 (CI:280-292)** | **196 (CI:195-197)** | 13.7 (CI:12.8-14.8) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 2019 | Short | 316 (CI:307-325) | 218 (CI:216-219) | 14.6 (CI:13.3-15.9) |
| Extended | 312 (CI:299-234) | 219 (CI:217-222) | 15.9 (CI:14.2-17.8) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 2020 | Short | 289 (CI:283-295) | 205 (CI:204-207) | 12.4 (CI:9.7-14.7) |
| Extended | 299 (CI:292-307) | 206 (CI:205-208) | 12.7 (CI:9.5-15.2) |

***Table S2.***  *Summary of ‘background’ root samples taken shortly before maize planting*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Replicate** | **Short rotation** | **Extended rotation** |
|  |  | *Root Material (kg ha-1)* | |
| 2019 | 1 | 542 | 740 |
|  | 2 | 158 | 1028 |
|  | 3 | 119 | 248 |
|  | 4 | 68 | 441 |
|  | *Mean* | *222* | *614* |
| 2020 | 1 | 2753 | 281 |
|  | 2 | 136 | 483 |
|  | 3 | 182 | 982 |
|  | 4 | 159 | 2048 |
|  | *Mean* | *807* | *949* |

**Table S3**. Summary of fixed effect tests on root mass assuming no background root decomposition

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Source** | **Assuming 0% background root decomposition** | **Assuming 100% background root decomposition** |
|  | *p-value* | *p-value* |
| Year | 0.12 | 0.05 |
| Rotation | 0.76 | 0.87 |
| Year x Rotation | 0.91 | 0.15 |
| Depth | 0.58 | <0.01 |
| Year x Depth | 0.31 | 0.92 |
| **Rotation x Depth** | **0.01** | **0.07** |
| Year x Rotation x Depth | 0.25 | 0.76 |
| *\*DF = Degrees of freedom* |  |  |

**Table S4**. Summary of root mass added contrasts for the extended versus short rotation at each depth; denominator degrees of freedom differ by depth due to missing data

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Depth** | **Numerator DF\*** | **Denominator DF** | **F Ratio** | **p-value** |
| Assuming no background root decomposition | | | | | |
| 0-15 cm | | 1 | 14.77 | 6.69 | 0.02 |
| 15-30 cm | | 1 | 16.07 | 0.08 | 0.78 |
| 30-45 cm | | 1 | 16.07 | 0.14 | 0.71 |
| 45-60 cm | | 1 | 16.07 | 0.56 | 0.47 |
| Assuming 100% background root decomposition | | | | | |
| 0-15 cm | 1 | 36.72 | 5.60 | 0.02 |
| 15-30 cm | 1 | 37.64 | 1.59 | 0.21 |
| 30-45 cm | 1 | 37.64 | 0.25 | 0.62 |
| 45-60 cm | 1 | 37.64 | 0.68 | 0.41 |
| *\*DF = Degrees of freedom* | | | | |