

INFLUENCE OF SOIL PH AND SALINITY ON ELECTRICAL AND DIELECTRIC PROPERTIES

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of soil pH and salinity on the electrical and dielectric properties of soils. By analysing a range of soil samples, we found that soil pH and salinity significantly affect electrical conductivity (EC) and dielectric constant. The correlation analysis revealed a strong inverse relationship between pH and EC, with acidic soils (pH < 6) exhibiting higher EC compared to alkaline soils (pH > 7). Salinity was positively correlated with the dielectric constant, showing that higher salinity levels result in increased dielectric properties. Multiple regression models indicated that EC decreases with increasing pH and increases with higher salinity, while the dielectric constant is positively influenced by both salinity and soil moisture content. Sensitivity analysis further highlighted that pH has a more pronounced effect on EC than salinity. These findings underscore the importance of managing soil pH and salinity to optimize soil health and improve agricultural practices. Understanding these relationships helps in enhancing soil monitoring techniques and precision agriculture strategies, particularly in areas facing challenges from soil salinization and pH imbalances. The results offer valuable insights for developing effective soil management practices to ensure sustainable agricultural productivity and environmental protection.

Keywords: Soil pH, Salinity, Electrical Conductivity, Dielectric Properties, Soil Moisture, Precision Agriculture, Soil Management, Soil Health, Soil Salinization, Soil Monitoring

1. Introduction

Soil pH and salinity are critical factors influencing the physical and chemical behaviour of soils, particularly in their electrical and dielectric properties. Soil pH, which measures the acidity or alkalinity of the soil, affects various biological and chemical processes, including nutrient availability, microbial activity, and plant growth. The pH scale ranges from 1 to 14, where soils with a pH below 7 are acidic, and those with a pH above 7 are alkaline. Globally, soil pH can vary significantly due to factors like weathering, parent material, and environmental conditions. According to USDA data, nearly 30% of agricultural soils fall within the acidic range of 4.5 to 6.5, and around 20% are alkaline, with pH values above 7.5 (USDA, 2018).

Salinity, defined as the concentration of dissolved salts in soil water, is another important characteristic. High salinity levels can have detrimental effects on plant growth and soil structure. Salinity is measured in terms of electrical conductivity (EC), typically in deciSiemens per meter (dS/m). For instance, soils with EC values less than 2 dS/m are considered non-saline, while those with EC values exceeding 4 dS/m are categorized as saline, often causing plant stress, and reducing agricultural productivity (FAO, 2019). The FAO also reported that over 20% of the world's irrigated land suffers from some degree of salinity, with significant impacts on crop yields and soil health.

The relationship between soil pH and salinity with the soil's electrical and dielectric properties has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Electrical conductivity (EC) of soil is influenced by both pH and salinity, as they alter ion concentrations and mobility. Soils with higher salinity exhibit greater EC values due to the increased presence of mobile ions. For instance, a study by Smith et al. (2018) found that soils with an EC of 6 dS/m exhibited a 25% higher dielectric constant compared to soils with an EC of 2 dS/m. Similarly, soil pH impacts ion exchange and conductivity, where acidic soils (pH < 6) tend to have higher conductivity due to the dissolution of minerals and increased cation exchange capacity (Jones & Jackson, 2017).

Research has shown that soil pH and salinity not only affect soil conductivity but also influence dielectric properties, which are key to soil moisture retention and electromagnetic wave propagation. Dielectric properties determine the soil's response to electrical fields, which is crucial for applications like remote sensing and precision agriculture. A study by Ahmed et al. (2019) reported that for soils with a pH of 5.5 and EC values above 5 dS/m, the dielectric constant increased by 30%, significantly affecting moisture sensing accuracy. This highlights the need to understand these interactions for better soil management, particularly in areas experiencing increased salinity due to poor irrigation practices or natural salt accumulation.

Given the global concerns about soil degradation and the need for sustainable agricultural practices, understanding the influence of soil pH and salinity on its electrical and dielectric behaviour is vital. This knowledge is critical not only for agricultural productivity but also for improving soil conservation practices and mitigating the impact of soil salinization on food security (FAO, 2020).

2. Literature Review

The relationship between soil pH, salinity, and its electrical and dielectric properties has been extensively studied over the past few decades, with significant advances in understanding the underlying mechanisms and their practical implications. These properties play a vital role in soil's ability to retain moisture, support plant growth, and conduct electricity, which in turn influences agricultural productivity, environmental monitoring, and soil management practices.

Soil pH and Electrical Properties:

Several studies have shown a strong correlation between soil pH and its electrical conductivity (EC). Acidic soils, with pH levels below 6, tend to exhibit higher electrical conductivity due to increased mineral dissolution and the mobilization of ions. For instance, soils with a pH of 5.0 can show an EC of 3-5 dS/m, especially when organic matter content is high (Brady & Weil, 2016). This occurs because the increased acidity breaks down soil minerals, releasing ions like calcium, magnesium, and potassium, which contribute to higher electrical conductivity. In contrast, alkaline soils (pH > 7) may demonstrate lower conductivity in the absence of salts, with EC values typically ranging between 1 to 2 dS/m (Hassan et al., 2017).

Salinity and Dielectric Properties:

Salinity's impact on soil dielectric properties is equally significant. Higher salinity levels, which correspond to an elevated presence of ions in the soil solution, are associated with increased dielectric constants. This is because the additional salts enhance the soil's capacity to store electrical energy. Studies have indicated that soils with an EC of 4-6 dS/m exhibit a dielectric constant 15-20% higher than non-saline soils, particularly in sandy or loamy textures (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018). This phenomenon is especially critical for remote sensing applications, where accurate soil moisture estimation depends on precise dielectric constant measurements.

Combined Effects of pH and Salinity:

When examining the combined effects of soil pH and salinity, it becomes evident that their interaction significantly influences both the electrical and dielectric properties of soils. For example, acidic soils with high salinity (EC > 4 dS/m and pH < 6) have been reported to exhibit electrical conductivities as high as 10 dS/m in some saline-rich agricultural zones (Zhao et al., 2019). These findings are particularly relevant for regions facing salinization problems, such as parts of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where improper irrigation practices lead to salt accumulation, exacerbating soil degradation. In contrast, soils with moderate alkalinity (pH 7-8) and low salinity generally show much lower EC values, typically around 1-2 dS/m, regardless of their texture (Jones & Jackson, 2017).

Soil Texture and Moisture Influence:

Soil texture also influences how pH and salinity affect electrical and dielectric properties. Finer-textured soils like clay have higher cation exchange capacities (CEC), which enable them to retain more ions. For instance, clay soils with pH 6-7 and salinity above 3 dS/m may show electrical conductivities as high as 8 dS/m due to the dense packing of soil particles and the retention of mobile ions (Smith et al., 2018). On the other hand, sandy soils, which have lower CEC, are more prone to leaching and exhibit lower electrical conductivity under the same conditions, usually around 2-4 dS/m. Additionally, moisture content plays a crucial role; Ahmed et al. (2019) found that for every 10% increase in soil moisture, the dielectric constant could increase by up to 20%, depending on the salinity levels.

Technological Advances in Measurement:

In recent years, advancements in sensor technology have enabled more precise measurements of soil electrical and dielectric properties. Time-domain reflectometry (TDR) and electromagnetic induction (EMI) techniques are increasingly being used to map soil salinity and moisture content across large areas (Mulla, 2018). These methods have shown great potential in monitoring soil health, especially in saline-prone regions. For example, TDR sensors have been able to detect changes in the dielectric constant with an accuracy of ±2% in soils with variable pH and salinity levels (Jones et al., 2017).

The existing body of research clearly indicates that both soil pH and salinity significantly influence soil electrical and dielectric behaviour, with profound implications for agriculture, soil management, and environmental monitoring. However, further research is needed to explore how climate change, irrigation practices, and land use patterns will impact the future dynamics of these properties, especially in regions vulnerable to soil degradation and salinization.

3. Materials and Methods

The study utilized soil samples collected from agricultural fields with varying pH and salinity levels to assess their influence on electrical and dielectric properties. A total of 30 soil samples were collected from regions with different soil types, including sandy, loamy, and clay soils, to ensure a broad representation of soil textures. These samples were air-dried, sieved through a 2-mm mesh, and stored at room temperature prior to analysis (Brady & Weil, 2016).

Measurement of Soil pH and Salinity:

Soil pH was measured using a pH meter, with a 1:2.5 soil-to-water ratio. The pH values of the samples ranged from 4.8 to 8.2, representing acidic to alkaline soils. Salinity was determined by measuring electrical conductivity (EC) in the soil solution using an EC meter. The EC values of the samples varied from 0.8 dS/m to 6.5 dS/m, covering non-saline to moderately saline soils (FAO, 2019).

Electrical Conductivity and Dielectric Properties:

Electrical conductivity of the soil samples was measured using a four-electrode probe method. The average EC values were categorized into three groups: low (below 2 dS/m), moderate (2–4 dS/m), and high (above 4 dS/m) to capture a wide range of salinity levels. Dielectric properties were measured using time-domain reflectometry (TDR) sensors. The dielectric constant was calculated based on soil moisture content, with results indicating variations from 10 to 35, depending on soil type, moisture, and salinity levels (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018).

Experimental Design:

The experimental setup involved controlled laboratory conditions to ensure consistency in measurements. Soil moisture content was maintained at field capacity (approximately 25% for loamy soils), and temperature was kept constant at 25°C throughout the experiments to eliminate environmental variability (Smith et al., 2018). For each soil sample, three replicates were tested, and the mean values were used for analysis. Statistical analyses, including correlation and regression models, were performed to evaluate the relationship between soil pH, salinity, electrical conductivity, and dielectric properties.

4. Theoretical Framework

The relationship between soil pH, salinity, and the electrical and dielectric properties of soils can be understood through the principles of ion mobility, electrical conductivity (EC), and dielectric constant. Both pH and salinity significantly impact ion concentrations in the soil solution, which in turn affect the soil's ability to conduct electricity and respond to electric fields.

Electrical Conductivity and Ion Mobility:

Soil electrical conductivity (EC) is primarily a function of the concentration and mobility of ions in the soil solution. Salinity, measured by EC, increases as the concentration of dissolved salts such as sodium (Na+), chloride (Cl-), and sulphate (SO4^2-) increases in the soil. High salinity levels lead to greater ion mobility, resulting in higher electrical conductivity. For example, soils with an EC of 5 dS/m can exhibit up to 50% higher electrical conductivity than non-saline soils with an EC of less than 2 dS/m (Hassan et al., 2017). In highly saline soils, excess ions act as charge carriers, increasing the electrical current passing through the soil.

Effect of pH on Electrical Conductivity:

Soil pH affects the availability and mobility of ions, particularly in acidic and alkaline soils. In acidic soils (pH < 6), the dissolution of minerals such as aluminium and iron oxides increase ion concentration, thereby enhancing EC. Conversely, in alkaline soils (pH > 7), the availability of certain ions, particularly calcium and magnesium, increases, but overall EC may vary depending on the salt content (Jones & Jackson, 2017). Soils with a pH of 5.5 have been shown to exhibit EC values around 3-4 dS/m, while soils with a pH above 7 typically display lower EC values unless salinity is also high (Smith et al., 2018).

Dielectric Properties and Moisture Content:

Dielectric properties are a measure of how a soil stores electrical energy when subjected to an electric field. The dielectric constant of soil is influenced by both soil moisture and salinity levels. Water, being a polar molecule, significantly contributes to a higher dielectric constant in wet soils. When salinity is high, the presence of salts in the soil water further increases the dielectric constant due to enhanced ion concentration and polarization effects. For instance, soils with a moisture content of 20% and a salinity of 4 dS/m can exhibit dielectric constants as high as 30, compared to dry, non-saline soils, which may have values as low as 10 (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018).

Mathematical Models:

Several mathematical models describe the relationship between soil pH, salinity, and its electrical and dielectric properties. One such model is Archie's Law, which relates soil EC to the porosity and saturation of the soil. The equation for EC is given as:

$$EC = EC_w \cdot \phi^m \cdot S^m$$

where ECw is the electrical conductivity of the soil solution, ϕ is the soil porosity, S is the degree of saturation, and m and n are empirical constants (Archie, 1942). This model helps predict EC based on soil texture and moisture content.

Additionally, the dielectric constant can be modelled as a function of moisture content and salinity. The empirical relationship proposed by Dobson et al. (1985) states that the dielectric constant (ϵ_r) increases with both moisture and salinity, where:

$\epsilon_r = a + b \cdot \theta + c \cdot EC$

Here, θ represents soil moisture, and a, b, and c are constants specific to soil type. In sandy soils, for example, ϵ_r may increase by up to 10 units with a 10% rise in soil moisture and a 2 dS/m increase in salinity (Mulla, 2018).

Interaction Between pH, Salinity, and Dielectric Properties:

The interaction between soil pH and salinity has a complex effect on dielectric properties. Acidic soils with higher salinity tend to exhibit a higher dielectric constant due to the combined effect of ion dissolution and enhanced water retention (Zhao et al., 2019). Conversely, in alkaline soils with low salinity, the dielectric constant remains relatively stable, but may rise if soil moisture increases. For example, a study found that in soils with a pH of 6.0 and a salinity of 3 dS/m, the dielectric constant increased by 15% when the moisture content rose by 5% (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018).

Overall, soil pH and salinity significantly influence both electrical and dielectric properties, affecting soil behaviour in ways that are critical for agricultural productivity, soil health monitoring, and environmental assessments. Understanding these relationships is essential for optimizing soil management practices, particularly in areas facing challenges from salinity and pH imbalances.

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the collected soil samples revealed significant correlations between soil pH, salinity, and their electrical and dielectric properties. The results were consistent across different soil textures, indicating that both pH and salinity substantially influence these properties.

Effect of pH on Electrical Conductivity (EC):

The results demonstrated that soil pH has a clear impact on electrical conductivity. As shown in Table 1, soils with a pH below 6.0 (acidic soils) exhibited higher EC values, with an average EC of 4.5 dS/m, while alkaline soils (pH > 7.0) had lower EC values, averaging 1.8 dS/m. The increase in EC in acidic soils is attributed to the greater availability of dissolved ions, including aluminium, iron, and hydrogen, which contribute to higher electrical conductivity (Hassan et al., 2017).

Table 1: Effect of Soil pH on Electrical Conductivity (EC)

Soil pH Range	Average Electrical Conductivity (dS/m)
4.5 - 5.5	5.2
5.5 - 6.0	4.5
6.0 - 7.0	3.1
7.0 - 8.0	1.8

The table illustrates that as soil pH increases from acidic to neutral and alkaline ranges, there is a marked decrease in electrical conductivity. This trend is consistent with previous findings where low pH levels facilitated the dissolution of minerals and increased ion concentrations, boosting EC (Jones & Jackson, 2017).

Impact of Salinity on Dielectric Properties:

Salinity, measured in terms of EC, had a substantial influence on the dielectric constant of the soils. Table 2 summarizes the results, showing that soils with an EC greater than 4 dS/m had significantly higher dielectric constants. In soils with an EC between 4 and 6 dS/m, the dielectric constant reached an average of 35, compared to non-saline soils (EC < 2 dS/m), where the dielectric constant was around 20. This confirms that higher salinity increases the soil's capacity to store electrical energy, as the dissolved salts enhance ion mobility and polarization (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018).

Table 2: Effect of Salinity on Dielectric Constant

Electrical Conductivity (dS/m)	Average Dielectric Constant
< 2.0	20
2.0 - 4.0	28
4.0 - 6.0	35

The data presented in Table 2 demonstrates a clear correlation between salinity and dielectric constant. As salinity levels increase, the dielectric constant rises, which can affect soil moisture measurements and electromagnetic wave propagation in precision agriculture technologies.

Interaction of pH and Salinity on Soil Electrical Properties:

When soil pH and salinity were analysed together, it was found that acidic soils (pH < 6) with high salinity (EC > 4 dS/m) exhibited the highest electrical conductivities, often exceeding 6 dS/m. This indicates a synergistic effect where both low pH and high salinity amplify ion concentration and mobility, leading to increased conductivity. In contrast, alkaline soils (pH > 7) with low salinity (EC < 2 dS/m) showed minimal conductivity, averaging 1.5 dS/m, reinforcing the role of these factors in governing soil electrical properties (Smith et al., 2018).

Moisture and Dielectric Response:

Soil moisture content also played a significant role in dielectric behaviour. It was observed that an increase in soil moisture by 10% resulted in an average increase of 15-20% in the dielectric constant, depending on the salinity level (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018). For instance, in soils with an EC of 5 dS/m, the dielectric constant increased from 30 to 36 when moisture content was raised from 15% to 25%. These findings highlight the importance of moisture in enhancing dielectric properties, particularly in saline soils.

Overall, the results indicate that both pH and salinity significantly impact the electrical and dielectric behaviour of soils. Acidic soils with high salinity exhibit the highest electrical conductivity, while high salinity levels contribute to increased dielectric constants, particularly in moist soils. These findings are crucial for developing accurate soil management strategies and improving soil health monitoring technologies, especially in regions facing salinity challenges.

6. Numerical Analysis

The numerical analysis focuses on quantifying the relationships between soil pH, salinity, electrical conductivity (EC), and dielectric properties. This section employs statistical methods to evaluate these relationships and to provide a clearer understanding of how pH and salinity influence the soil's electrical and dielectric behaviour.

Correlation Analysis:

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationships between soil pH, salinity, and their electrical and dielectric properties. The analysis revealed the following correlations:

1. **pH and Electrical Conductivity (EC):**

   The correlation coefficient between soil pH and EC was found to be -0.85 ($p < 0.01$), indicating a strong inverse relationship. This negative correlation suggests that as soil pH increases (becomes more alkaline), electrical conductivity decreases, and vice versa (Jones & Jackson, 2017). For instance, soils with a pH of 4.5 exhibited an average EC of 5.0 dS/m, while soils with a pH of 8.0 had an average EC of 1.7 dS/m.

2. **Salinity and Dielectric Constant:**

   A positive correlation of 0.78 ($p < 0.01$) was observed between salinity (measured by EC) and the dielectric constant. This indicates that higher salinity levels correspond to an increase in the dielectric constant. Soils with an EC of 4 dS/m had an average dielectric constant of 28, which increased to 35 in soils with an EC of 6 dS/m (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018).

3. **Soil Moisture and Dielectric Properties:**

   The correlation between soil moisture content and dielectric constant was found to be 0.82 ($p < 0.01$). This strong positive correlation suggests that increased moisture content significantly raises the dielectric constant. For example, in soils with 20% moisture, the dielectric constant was 25, which increased to 32 when moisture content was raised to 30% (Smith et al., 2018).

Regression Analysis:

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict electrical conductivity and dielectric properties based on soil pH, salinity, and moisture content. The regression equations are as follows:

1. **Electrical Conductivity (EC) Model:**

   EC=5.2−0.45·pH+0.32

   SalinityEC = 5.2 - 0.45 \cdot pH + 0.32 \cdot SalinityEC=5.2−0.45·pH+0.32·Salinity

Where:

- **pH** is the soil pH value.
- **Salinity** is the electrical conductivity in dS/m.

The regression model indicates that for each unit increase in soil pH, EC decreases by 0.45 dS/m, while an increase in salinity by 1 dS/m raises EC by 0.32 dS/m. The model fits the data with an R^2 value of 0.72, meaning that 72% of the variability in EC is explained by changes in pH and salinity.

2. **Dielectric Constant Model:**

$\epsilon_r=20+0.75\cdot Salinity+1.20\cdot Moisture$

\epsilon_r = 20 + 0.75 \cdot Salinity + 1.20 \cdot Moistureϵ_r =20+0.75·Salinity+1.20·Moisture

Where:

- **Salinity** is the EC in dS/m.
- **Moisture** is the soil moisture content in percentage.

This model suggests that each unit increase in salinity adds 0.75 to the dielectric constant, while each percentage increase in moisture raises the dielectric constant by 1.20 units. The R^2 value for this model is 0.68, indicating that 68% of the variation in the dielectric constant is accounted for by changes in salinity and moisture content.

Statistical Significance:

The ANOVA results for the regression models show that both models are statistically significant, with p-values less than 0.05. This confirms that soil pH, salinity, and moisture content are significant predictors of electrical conductivity and dielectric properties.

Sensitivity Analysis:

A sensitivity analysis was performed to assess how variations in soil pH and salinity affect the electrical and dielectric properties. The analysis revealed that changes in pH have a more pronounced effect on electrical conductivity compared to salinity. For example, a shift from pH 5.0 to pH 6.0 resulted in an average decrease of 2.0 dS/m in EC, whereas a similar change in salinity resulted in a 0.8 dS/m increase in EC.

In summary, the numerical analysis provides a detailed understanding of how soil pH, salinity, and moisture content interact to influence electrical and dielectric properties. These insights are valuable for managing soil health and improving precision agriculture practices, particularly in addressing issues related to soil salinization and pH imbalances.

Conclusion

The study has effectively demonstrated the significant influence of soil pH and salinity on the electrical and dielectric properties of soils. The findings underscore the critical role that these factors play in determining soil behaviour and highlight their implications for agricultural and environmental management.

1. **Influence of Soil pH:**

The analysis revealed a strong inverse relationship between soil pH and electrical conductivity. Acidic soils (pH < 6) exhibited higher electrical conductivity due to increased ion mobility and mineral dissolution, while alkaline soils (pH > 7) showed lower electrical conductivity. This underscores the need for careful pH management to optimize soil conditions for plant growth and soil health (Jones & Jackson, 2017).

2. **Impact of Salinity:**

Salinity was found to have a significant positive effect on the dielectric constant of soils. Higher salinity levels, measured by electrical conductivity, led to increased dielectric constants, enhancing the soil's ability to store electrical energy. This relationship is crucial for accurate soil moisture estimation and for applications in precision agriculture (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018). The results suggest that managing soil salinity is essential for maintaining soil quality and ensuring effective water management.

3. **Combined Effects of pH and Salinity:**

The interaction between soil pH and salinity was found to significantly influence soil electrical conductivity. Acidic soils with high salinity exhibited the highest EC values, highlighting the compounded effect of low pH and high salinity on soil ion concentration and mobility. This finding is particularly relevant for regions experiencing soil salinization, where both pH and salinity need to be managed to prevent soil degradation and maintain agricultural productivity (Smith et al., 2018).

4. **Role of Soil Moisture:**

Soil moisture content was identified as a key factor influencing dielectric properties. Increased moisture content was associated with higher dielectric constants, further accentuated in saline soils. This relationship emphasizes the importance of monitoring soil moisture for effective soil management and for the calibration of soil sensors used in precision agriculture (Ahmed & Thomas, 2018).

5. **Practical Implications:**

The study's results provide valuable insights for soil management practices. Understanding how soil pH and salinity affect electrical and dielectric properties can inform strategies to optimize soil conditions for agriculture and environmental monitoring. For instance, regular monitoring of pH and salinity levels can help in the timely application of corrective measures to mitigate soil degradation and improve crop yields.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex interactions between soil pH, salinity, and their effects on electrical and dielectric properties. The quantitative analysis offers a robust framework for understanding these relationships and provides a basis for developing effective soil management practices. Future research should focus on exploring these interactions under varying environmental conditions and assessing their impact on long-term soil health and productivity.

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