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**FACTORS AFFECTING PHOSPHATE
CONCENTRATIONS IN SURFACE AND
SUBSURFACE RUNOFF FROM STEEP EAST
COAST HILL COUNTRY**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Eutrophication is a problem receiving much attention within New Zealand and throughout the rest of the world. Problems associated with eutrophication cause major financial, aesthetic and recreational costs to not only commercial and recreational water users but to society in general.

The major nutrient of concern in relation to eutrophication is phosphorus (P) as it is often considered to be the limiting factor. The two major areas from which P enters waterways are point sources and non-point sources. Point sources are relatively easy to identify and quantify. Non-point sources however, are less easy to quantify due to the size of areas from which P is sourced and the number of varying factors which can affect the amount of P which is lost to water-ways.

This study investigated P concentrations in surface runoff and subsurface flow from steep east coast hill country. Factors studied included aspect, soil P status, season and fertiliser addition.

The study was carried out on grazed pasture farmlets, in which there were 'High P' and 'Low P' fertiliser regimes. Each regime had north and south facing aspects. Four sites were used in the study. High P North (HPN), High P South (HPS), Low P North (LPN) and Low P South (LPS). Simulated rainfall was applied to the sites and surface runoff samples were collected and analysed for dissolved reactive phosphate concentration (DRP). Superphosphate fertiliser was then applied at 20 kg P ha⁻¹ to each site and the runoff procedure was repeated 7 weeks and 14 weeks after fertiliser application. Subsurface runoff water samples were also collected on the southerly sites during each Run. At the time of each runoff measurement soil samples were collected and analysed for Olsen P, water extractable P and soil moisture content. The soil P retention was also measured for each site.

At each Run the HPN site produced the highest DRP concentrations followed by the LPN site with the southerly sites producing the lowest DRP concentrations. The DRP concentrations in runoff for each site increased between Run 1 and 2 (except for the HPS site) corresponding to fertiliser addition, but interestingly all sites increased markedly in runoff DRP concentration between Run 2 and 3. This corresponded to a time of decreasing soil moisture.

Concentrations of DRP in surface runoff were therefore influenced by a number of factors. These included - fertiliser addition, aspect and season. In general, soils that had previously received large inputs of P fertiliser had higher DRP concentrations in surface runoff than soils with lower fertiliser inputs. The magnitude of this fertiliser effect however, varied with aspect. Generally the impact of fertiliser on DRP concentrations was higher on north facing slopes than on south facing slopes. South facing slopes were wetter and had slightly higher P retention (although in a conventional agronomic sense the P retention across the whole trial was low (< 36 %)). This combination of higher P retention and soil moisture would assist in the immobilisation of added fertiliser P. This was also reflected in the lower P soil test values on the south-facing slopes.

A water extractable P test provided a better correlation with runoff DRP concentrations for individual runoff events than the Olsen P test. Both tests however, provided poor correlations when all of the Runs were combined. This was due largely to the large increase in DRP concentrations in surface runoff in Run 3 with no corresponding increase in soil tests.

There was no apparent relationship between fertiliser regime ie. soil P status, and the concentration of DRP in subsurface runoff. In Run 3 however, there was a marked increase in subsurface DRP concentration for both sites which was consistent with the surface runoff results and supported the theory of soil moisture playing a major role in determining the DRP concentration in water.

The study suggests that the greatest risk of P loss from soil to surface waters will be from northerly aspects with high fertiliser histories during the summer months when soil moisture levels are low.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	V
LIST OF TABLES	IX
LIST OF FIGURES	X

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION.....	1
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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Soil Phosphorus and Retention Mechanisms.....	3
2.1.1 Phosphorus compounds in mineral soils.....	3
2.1.2 Phosphorus fertilisation	4
2.1.3 Phosphorus retention.....	4
2.2 Eutrophication.....	6
2.2.1 Introduction.....	6
2.2.2 Eutrophication process.....	6
2.2.3 Sources of Phosphorus.....	7
2.2.4 Forms of phosphorus lost from agricultural non-point sources.....	8
2.2.5 Methods for measuring P in water.....	10
2.3 Soil P tests.....	11
2.3.1 Soil test available for correlation.....	12
2.4 Factors affecting the amount of phosphorus lost in runoff.....	15

2.4.1 Weathering of native P.....	16
2.4.2 Erosion.....	16
2.4.3 Soil type.....	17
2.4.4 Slope length and angle.....	17
2.4.5 Duration of runoff event.....	18
2.4.6 Temperature.....	18
2.4.7 Surface cover and characteristics.....	18
2.4.8 Soil moisture.....	19
2.5 Subsurface loss of P.....	19
2.6 Reducing P losses from non-point sources.....	21
2.6.1 Source management.....	22
2.6.2 Transport management.....	23
2.7 Conclusions.....	24

CHAPTER 3

RUNOFF RESULTS

3.1 Introduction.....	26
3.2 Materials and Methods.....	26
3.2.1 Site Description.....	26
3.2.2 Runoff Measurements.....	27
3.2.3 Dissolved Reactive Phosphate analyses.....	29
3.2.4 Sequential water extractions.....	29
3.3 Results and Discussion.....	29
3.3.1 DRP concentrations in runoff for Runs 1, 2 and 3.....	30
3.3.2 DRP concentrations in subsurface flow for Runs 1, 2 and 3.....	33
3.3.3 DRP concentrations in surface runoff from the LPN, HPN, LPS, and HPS sites...35	
3.3.4 DRP concentrations in subsurface flow for the LP and HP sites.....	38

3.3.5 Sequential extractions.....	39
3.4 Conclusion	41

CHAPTER 4

SOIL TEST RESULTS

4.1 Introduction.....	42
4.2 Materials and Methods.....	42
4.2.1 Olsen P	42
4.2.2 Phosphate Retention	43
4.2.3 Water Extractable Phosphate.....	43
4.2.4 Soil Moisture.....	43
4.3 Results and Discussion	44
4.3.1 Soil Moisture.....	44
4.3.2 Phosphate Retention	44
4.3.3 Olsen P to 80 mm depth at Run 1	45
4.3.4 Olsen P changes in the 0-20 mm soil depth.....	46
4.3.5 Water extractable P changes in the 0-20 mm soil depth.....	47
4.4 Conclusion	48

CHAPTER 5

CORRELATION OF RUNOFF DATA WITH SOIL TESTS

5.1 Introduction.....	49
5.2 Results and Discussion	49
5.2.1 Runoff DRP concentration in relation to Olsen P	49

5.2.2 Runoff DRP concentration in relation to water extractable P	53
5.2.3 Runoff DRP concentration in relation to soil moisture	57
5.2.4 Subsurface flow in relation to soil P	61
5.3 Conclusion	63

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION	65
REFERENCES	67

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 3

3.1 Average flow weighted DRP concentration (mg dm^{-3}) in surface runoff for Runs 1, 2 & 3.	31
3.2 Average flow weighted DRP concentration (mg dm^{-3}) in subsurface flow.....	33

CHAPTER 4

4.1 Average soil moisture content (%) on each site at the time of the three Runs.	44
4.2 P retention in the top 20 mm soil depth for the four sites	45
4.3 Average Olsen P values (mg dm^{-3}) at 20 mm depth intervals for each site before fertiliser application.....	46
4.4 Average Olsen P value (mg dm^{-3}) in the 0-20 mm soil depth for each Run.....	47
4.5 Average water extractable P values (mg dm^{-3}) in the 0-20 mm soil depth for each Run.	47

CHAPTER 5

5.1 Correlation coefficients for Olsen P, water extractable P and soil moisture content with average flow weighted DRP values for each Run.	50
5.2 Average Olsen P values and average flow weighted DRP concentrations in runoff for each site at each Run.....	51
5.3 Average water extractable P values and average flow weighted DRP concentrations in runoff for each site at each Run.	54
5.4 Average soil moisture values and average flow weighted DRP concentrations in runoff for each site at each Run.....	59
5.5 Average Olsen P in the 20-80 mm interval and the average flow weighted DRP concentrations in subsurface flow for Runs 1, 2 & 3.....	62

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 3

3.1 Average DRP concentration in runoff over time for Run 1.....	31
3.2 Average DRP concentration in runoff over time for Run 2.....	32
3.3 Average DRP concentration in runoff over time for Run 3.....	32
3.4 Average DRP concentration in subsurface flow over time for Run 1	34
3.5 Average DRP concentration in subsurface flow over time for Run 2	34
3.6 Average DRP concentration in subsurface flow over time for Run 3	35
3.7 Average DRP concentration in runoff over time for LPN	36
3.8 Average DRP concentration in runoff over time for HPN.....	36
3.9 Average DRP concentration in runoff over time for LPS.....	37
3.10 Average DRP concentration in runoff over time for HPS	37
3.11 Average DRP concentration in subsurface flow over time for LP	38
3.12 Average DRP concentration in subsurface flow over time for HP.....	39
3.13 Water extractable P concentration vs. extraction number for sequential extractions before fertiliser application	40
3.14 Water extractable P concentration vs. extraction number for sequential extractions after fertiliser application	40

CHAPTER 5

5.1 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. Olsen P in top 20 mm for Run 1.....	51
5.2 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. Olsen P in top 20 mm for Run 2.....	52
5.3 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. Olsen P in top 20 mm for Run 3.....	52
5.4 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. Olsen P in top 20 mm for all three runs.	53

5.5 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff water vs. water extractable P in the 0-20 mm soil depth for Run 1	55
5.6 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff water vs. water extractable P in the 0-20 mm soil depth for Run 2.	55
5.7 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff water vs. water extractable P in the 0-20 mm soil depth for Run 3.	56
5.8 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. water extractable P in the 0-20 mm soil depth for all three runs.	56
5.9 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. gravimetric soil moisture for Run 1.....	59
5.10 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. gravimetric soil moisture for Run 2.....	60
5.11 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. gravimetric soil moisture for Run 3.....	60
5.12 Average flow weighted DRP concentration in runoff vs. gravimetric soil moisture for all three Runs.	60