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**Nutrient Cycling in *Eucalyptus* Short Rotation  
Forests**

**Sustainable production linked with meatworks effluent land treatment**

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in  
Agricultural Engineering  
at  
Massey University  
Palmerston North, New Zealand

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**1998**

## ABSTRACT

Short rotation forests have the potential to provide a renewable energy source and thus reduce the demand for fossil fuels. They absorb CO<sub>2</sub> quickly during their rapid growth, which then is recycled during the energy conversion process. However, short rotation forests are highly nutrient-demanding, and cause great depletion of soil nutrients from the site after frequent harvests. Effluents, such as from meatworks, contain high levels of nutrients which could be irrigated on to land to aid crop productions in land treatment. In many instances, this is more acceptable than disposal to waterways. Application to short rotation forests is an ideal option as it may lead to a sustainable production system. The successful link between short rotation forests and effluent land treatment depends on good management based on knowledge of nutrient cycling in the system.

The objective of this study was to investigate the nutrient cycling in *Eucalyptus* short rotation forests linked with land treatment of meatworks effluent, through monitoring soil change, tree nutrient uptake, nutrient return via litter fall, and nutrient release via litter decomposition. A series of field experiments and one growth cabinet experiment were conducted from 1993 to 1997 at the Richmond Meat Processors & Packers Ltd. processing plant at Oringi, Dannevirke, and at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Application of meatworks effluent increased soil nutrient levels and enhanced tree biomass production. Compared with non-irrigated crops, biomass was increased by 17%, 25% and 80%, and nitrogen uptake by 15%, 64% and 77% among the three studied species (*E. botryoides*, *E. globulus* and *E. ovata*). *E. globulus* showed the best performance of the three species, whether without irrigation or irrigated with effluent. When *E. globulus* stands were irrigated with effluent, 90 oven dry t/ha of above ground total biomass was produced after 3 year growth with a total of 859 kg nitrogen uptake.

The amount of litter fall and nutrient return depended on the degree of biomass production and nutrient uptake in the stands. Up to 13.4 oven dry t/ha/y litter fall with up to 160 kg/ha/y of nitrogen was recorded. During the 3 year period, up to 20% of total above ground biomass

produced fell as litter and up to 24% of total nitrogen uptake was returned to soil surface via litter. Litter decomposition and subsequent nutrient release from the litter were significantly influenced by internal factors (species, litter source, and the initial contents of cellulose, lignin and magnesium) and external factors (planting density, plantation age, effluent irrigation, water irrigation, temperature and light condition).

The concept of growing short rotation forest linked with effluent land treatment has good potential to provide both a sustainable renewable energy source and a sustainable effluent treatment system. If they are designed and managed rationally according to the nutrient cycling within the system, the environment will be protected. The system design and management include: species selection (on the basis of biomass production, nutrient uptake, litter characteristics), tree planting density, effluent irrigation, rotation length, time of harvest, and litter management.

**Key words:** nutrient cycling, short rotation forests, *Eucalyptus*, biomass production; effluent land treatment.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My sincere thanks go to my chief supervisor, Associate Professor Ralph E. H. Sims, for his great supervision, guidance, advice and patience throughout this study. My special thanks also go to my co-supervisors, Dr. David J. Horne, Institute of Natural Resources, and Professor Gavin L. Wall, for their enthusiastic encouragement, and constructive suggestions, which helped make this study productive.

I also like to thank Professor John Hodgson for his introducing me to this university and an excellent chief supervisor even though in late stage he resigned from my supervisor board. My special thanks are extended to Bruce Bulloch and Ian Mason for their useful suggestions and help though they also resigned from my supervisor board lately.

Many thanks to entire staff of the former Department of Agricultural Engineering, and of Institute of Technology and Engineering, particularly to Leo Bolter, Gerard Harrigan, Mrs. Joan Brookes, Dexter McGhie, and Mrs. Helen Harker. The assistance by Tavale Maiava is noted.

I also like to say thanks to the following people who provided technical assistance or help for the project: Lance Currie, Bob Toes, Ian Furkert, Glenys Wallace for the soil and herbage analysis, Lorraine Davis for the help on the experiment in growth cabinets.

My special thank to the Richmond Meat Processors & Packers Ltd. processing plant at Oringi, and the chief engineer, Gary Newnham for so much help and the permit to do research work in their field.

The financial assistance from Helen E. Akers Scholarship, D. J. McGowan Scholarship, and C. Alma Baker Trust, and the funding from Massey University Graduate Fund, and NZ Land Treatment Collective for some of the experiments are highly appreciated.

I also appreciate the enjoyable times that I shared with all my fellow graduate students here, particularly Guzni Abbas, Hamish Lowe and Kingiri Senelwa. My friends, both in China and in New Zealand, their friendship and help cannot be forgotten.

There is a special place to me, the home in China. I am indebted to my parents, Wunxun Guo, and Lanzheng Ye, for their encouragement and supports which allowed me to study for this degree in this country. I am also indebted to my brothers and sisters-in-law, Lanjie Guo and Xiourong Gu, Lanjin Guo and Xiaoping Wen, for their encouragement and taking care of home while I have been away. Special thanks to my nephew, Shiyi Guo, and niece, Pinhui Guo for their keeping their grandparents 'busy' at home. I also like to say thanks to my mother-in-law, sisters-in-law and two nieces for their encouragement, support and helps.

I am extremely indebted to my late father-in-law, Maxibatu, who died in an accident after I "took" his daughter far away from him. Rest in peace, dear dad, your sole grandson will carry your spirit forward.

Finally I want to specifically thank my wife, Lina Ma, for her love, patience, support and help both at home and laboratory. Last, but no mean least, to my son, Kevin Shixiao Guo, who was born during this study. He always keeps us busy and brings cheer and happiness, sometimes with some 'spices'.

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