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MINERALISATION OF SOIL ORGANIC SULPHUR
IN THE TOKOMARU SILT LOAM

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

Using recently published data, a model of the sulphur (S) cycle for an established pasture, grazed by dairy cattle on Tokomaru silt loam, was constructed by assuming that organic S had reached an equilibrium level. The annual rate of net mineralisation, calculated in the model as 19 kgS ha^{-1} , was the single most important contribution to the plant-available pool of S.

In a field pot experiment involving growing plants under natural rainfall and temperature conditions, the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils, differing in their organic matter contents, ranged from 10.9 kgS ha^{-1} to 22.9 kgS ha^{-1} . The relatively high rates of S mineralisation in 2 of the soils collected from the most well-developed pastures suggested that these soils may be approaching the organic matter equilibrium assumed in the model. Such models may therefore be useful in predicting fertiliser inputs to these soils. In contrast, other soils under less well-developed pastures had very much lower mineralisation rates and are apparently still far from equilibrium.

Highly significant relationships were obtained between the amounts of S mineralised in the field and the total S content of the soils. The accumulation of soil organic S within a soil type as indicated by the total S content may be a useful indicator of the approach to equilibrium and hence the extent of net S mineralisation.

The presence of growing plants significantly enhanced S mineralisation in the field in most soils and reduced leaching losses

of S from all soils.

In conjunction with the field pot experiment, a long term field incubation and a series of shorter term incubations (both in the field and laboratory) were conducted to investigate the effects of temperature, moisture content, pH and soil pretreatments on S mineralisation. The amounts of S mineralised in the long term field incubation were found to vary markedly with time. In contrast, the actual levels of soil sulphate during the incubation period were less variable and were highly correlated with the amounts of S mineralised in the field pot experiment. If such incubation techniques are to be used, the amounts of sulphate at the end of the incubation may be a better indication of the ability of a soil to mineralise S in the field than the actual amounts of S released during the incubation.

There were significant relationships between the final levels of sulphate at the end of all the incubation experiments and the total S content, again suggesting that within a soil type, total S content may be used to indicate the ability of the soil to mineralise S.

In all incubation experiments there were negative relationships, for each soil, between the levels of sulphate initially present at the start of the incubation period and the amounts of S mineralised during that period. This indicates some type of 'end product regulation' which may involve sulphatase enzymes.

No significant effects of temperature or moisture content were observed on the rate of mineralisation of soil organic S under the conditions of these incubations.

The addition of lime was found to increase S mineralisation in all soils. The amounts of S mineralised after liming were significantly related to the pH attained in all soils, although in 2 soils they were better related to the amounts of lime added.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF APPENDICES	xiii
 CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	 1
 CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE	
2.1 The role of mineralisation of soil	
organic sulphur in grazed pastures	8
2.1.1 Inputs of sulphur	9
2.1.2 Losses of sulphur	12
2.1.3 Recycling of sulphur	15
2.2 Soil organic sulphur	16
2.3 Mineralisation of soil organic sulphur	22
2.3.1 Initial enzymatic breakdown	22
2.3.2 Further degradation of sulphur- containing amino acids	24
2.3.3 Hydrolysis of sulphate esters	26
2.4 Factors affecting mineralisation of soil organic sulphur	28
2.4.1 Soil organic matter	28
2.4.2 Soil temperature	30
2.4.3 Moisture and aeration	31
2.4.4 Soil pH	34
2.4.5 Effects of plants	35

2.5	Techniques used to study the mineralisation of soil organic sulphur	36
2.5.1	Laboratory incubations	37
2.5.2	Glasshouse and growth cabinet experiments	44
2.5.3	Field experiments	48
2.5.4	Field incubations	49

CHAPTER 3 MATERIALS AND ANALYTICAL METHODS

3.1	Introduction	52
3.2	Soils	52
3.2.1	Description	52
3.2.2	Sampling	53
3.3	Analytical and extraction methods	53
3.3.1	Sulphur analysis	53
3.3.2	Total carbon and total nitrogen . . .	54
3.3.3	Extraction of sulphate	54
	(a) Phosphate extractable sulphate . .	54
	(b) Calcium chloride extractable sulphate	54
3.3.4	Soil pH	54
3.3.5	Moisture content	54

CHAPTER 4 FIELD POT EXPERIMENT

4.1	Introduction	56
4.2	Materials and methods	58
4.3	Results and discussion	61
4.3.1	Chemical characterization of the soils	61
4.3.2	Field pot experiment	61
4.4	Conclusions	83

	Page
CHAPTER 5 LONG TERM FIELD INCUBATION	
5.1 Introduction	86
5.2 Materials and methods	87
5.3 Results and discussion	88
5.4 Conclusions	103
 CHAPTER 6 SHORT TERM FIELD INCUBATIONS	
6.1 Introduction	106
6.2 Materials and methods	106
6.2.1 Bulk sample incubation	106
6.2.2 Incubation of field moist soils . . .	107
6.2.3 Liming experiment	108
6.3 Results and discussion	108
6.3.1 Bulk sample incubation	108
6.3.2 Incubation of field moist soils . . .	115
6.3.3 Liming experiment	125
6.4 Conclusions	136
 CHAPTER 7 LABORATORY INCUBATION	
7.1 Introduction	139
7.2 Materials and methods	139
7.3 Results and discussion	140
7.4 Conclusions	144
 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	149
BIBLIOGRAPHY	154
APPENDICES	165

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1.1	Model of a sulphur cycle for an established pasture grazed by dairy cattle on Tokomaru silt loam	2
2.1	The chemical fractionation of soil S	18
4.1	Experimental arrangement for a replicate of one soil in the field pot experiment. The pot containing plants and the plant-free pot drain into separate leachate collecting bottles placed in the same hole. . .	59
4.2	Relationship between the amounts of S leached from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in the presence of plants and the initial soil sulphate levels	65
4.3	Relationship between the amounts of S leached from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in the absence of plants and the initial soil sulphate levels	68
4.4	Relationship between the amounts of S mineralised from 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils and the total amounts of S lost from the soils by leaching and plant uptake	71
4.5	Relationship between the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in the absence of plants and the amounts of S leached	81
4.6	Relationship between the amounts of S mineralised from 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils in the absence of plants and the total S content of the soils	82
5.1	Amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils during a 20-week field incubation	89
5.2	Sulphate levels in 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils during a 20-week field incubation	96
5.3	Relationships between the amounts of S mineralised during 7 successive 2-week incubation periods and the initial sulphate levels at the start of each period for 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils	100
6.1	Amounts of S mineralised during 6 consecutive 2-week field incubations of air-dried samples of 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils	109

Figure		Page
6.2	Sulphate levels (c) in 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils collected from the field at intervals during the period from February to June, 1980, together with soil temperature (a) and rainfall data (b) for the same period	110
6.3	Amounts of S mineralised from field moist samples of 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils during 6 consecutive 2-week field incubations	117
6.4	Final levels of sulphate after 6 consecutive 2-week field incubations of field moist samples of 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils	124
6.5	Relationships between soil pH after incubation and the amounts of lime added to 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils	128
6.6	Relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils and the amounts of lime added prior to incubation	130
6.7	Relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils and the final soil pH values attained after incubation with various amounts of lime	131
7.1	Amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils during a 4-week laboratory incubation	141
7.2	Relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils during each of 4 weeks and the level of sulphate initially present at the start of that week	145
7.3	Sulphate levels in 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils during a 4-week laboratory incubation	146

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1.1	A balance sheet showing inputs to and outputs from the available S pool in soil	5
4.1	Some chemical and physical properties of the 6 Tokomaru silt loam top soils (0 - 8 cm) used in the study	62
4.2	Changes in levels of soil sulphate, amounts of S removed by plant uptake and leaching, and the calculated mineralisation of S in the presence and absence of plants in a field pot experiment conducted on 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils	63
4.3	Leaching losses of soil S, in the presence of plants, from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in a field pot experiment	69
4.4	Correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils and selected soil properties	73
4.5	Multiple correlation coefficients (R) for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils and selected soil properties	75
4.6	Amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in the presence of growing plants in a field pot experiment expressed as a percentage of total soil S and as kgS ha ⁻¹	77
4.7	Increases in the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils due to the presence of growing plants in a field pot experiment	79
5.1	pH values after 0, 12 and 20 weeks of a field incubation of samples of 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils . . .	92
5.2	Amounts of S mineralised from samples of 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in a long term (20 weeks) field incubation and in the presence of growing plants in a field pot experiment	93
5.3	Correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils at weeks 4, 8, 16 and 20 of a long term field incubation and selected soil properties	95

Table		Page
5.4	Correlation coefficients for relationships between the levels of sulphate in 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils at weeks 4, 8, 16 and 20 of a long term field incubation and selected soil properties . . .	97
5.5	Multiple correlation coefficients (R) for the relationship between the final levels of sulphate in 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils at week 20 of a long term field incubation and selected soil properties	99
5.6	Single and multiple correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils in the periods between each sampling date in a long term field incubation and selected soil properties	102
6.1	Correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised in a series of 2-week field incubations, each involving similar, air-dried samples of 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils, and selected temperature parameters	111
6.2	Single and multiple correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised in a series of 2-week field incubations, each involving similar, air-dried samples of 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils, and selected soil properties . .	113
6.3	Correlation coefficients for relationships between the final levels of sulphate in 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils after each of a series of 2-week field incubations and selected soil properties	114
6.4	Multiple correlation coefficients (R) for the relationship between the final levels of sulphate in 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils after a 2-week field incubation and selected soil properties	116
6.5	Single and multiple correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised in a series of 2-week field incubations of freshly collected, field moist samples of 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils and selected parameters	119
6.6	Initial moisture contents of field moist samples of 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils prior to incubation	120

6.7	Single and multiple correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised in a series of 2-week field incubations of freshly collected, field moist samples of 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils and selected parameters	122
6.8	Single and multiple correlation coefficients for relationships between the differences in the amounts of S mineralised during a series of 2-week field incubations of field moist and similar, air-dried samples of 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils and the initial sulphate levels and moisture contents of the field moist soils	123
6.9	Single and multiple correlation coefficients for relationships between the final levels of sulphate in a series of 2-week field incubations of freshly collected, field moist samples of 3 Tokomaru silt loam soils and selected soil properties.	126
6.10	Soil pH values and the maximum pH increases in 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils after a 2-week field incubation with 5 rates of added lime	127
6.11	Amounts of S mineralised ($\mu\text{gS g}^{-1}$) from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils after a 2-week field incubation with 5 rates of added lime	129
6.12	Single and multiple correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils, in a 2-week field incubation after addition of various rates of lime, and selected soil properties	133
6.13	Amounts of S mineralised ($\mu\text{gS g}^{-1}$) from samples of 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils within 3 hours of the addition of 4 rates of lime	134
6.14	Amounts of sulphate extracted by 0.04M $\text{Ca}(\text{H}_2\text{PO}_4)_2$, 0.01M CaCl_2 , and the calculated amounts of 'adsorbed' sulphate in 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils	135
7.1	Amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in a 4-week laboratory incubation	142
7.2	Correlation coefficients for relationships between the amounts of S mineralised from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils during a 4-week laboratory incubation and selected soil properties	143
7.3	Correlation coefficients for relationships between the final levels of sulphate in 5 Tokomaru silt loam pasture soils in a 4-week laboratory incubation and selected soil properties	147

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix		Page
I	Description and location of soil sampling sites . . .	165
II	Dry matter yields of ryegrass after a 13-week growth period on 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in a field pot experiment	167
III	Total volumes of leachate collected from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in a field pot experiment after 13 weeks	168
IV	Leaching losses of S from 6 Tokomaru silt loam soils in the presence and absence of plants in a field pot experiment	169

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the escalating costs of superphosphate and sulphur (S) have focussed attention on the efficiency of use of these fertilisers in New Zealand. Many farmers are already being forced to consider a reduction in the use of superphosphate, and in the future it has been suggested that phosphate rock, which contains very little S, may become more widely used. Since the S requirements of New Zealand pastures in the past have generally been satisfied through the use of superphosphate, this new trend may lead to an increase in the incidence of S deficiencies. In order to avoid this, a sound knowledge of the S cycle in the soil-plant-animal system will be required.

Recent work by Smith (1979), in which the major inputs and outputs of S in a grazed pasture system were measured, has enabled a simple S cycle to be constructed (figure 1.1). The model pertains to an established pasture, grazed by dairy cattle, on Tokomaru silt loam. The following assumptions apply:

(i) The pasture has been established for a large number of years and has received regular topdressing such that the accumulation of organic S has now reached an equilibrium plateau.

(ii) There is no significant pool of adsorbed S in Tokomaru silt loam soils.

(iii) The pasture is a ryegrass-clover mixture producing $10,000 \text{ kg ha}^{-1}$ of dry matter annually, with an average S concentration of 0.3 per cent (Metson, 1973). Thus there will be $30 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$ incorporated in plant tops. Assuming a top-root

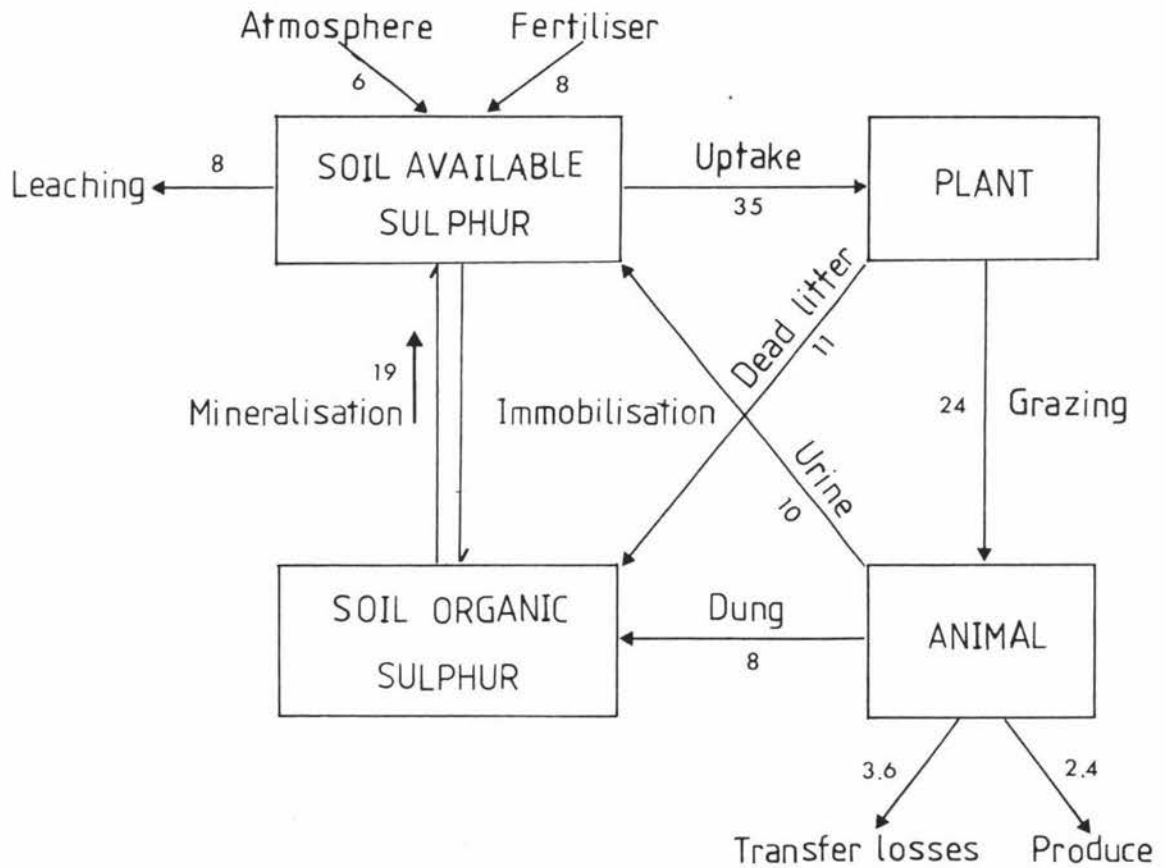


Figure 1.1

Model of a sulphur cycle for an established pasture grazed by dairy cattle on Tokomaru silt loam. (Transfer rates between pools are expressed as kgS ha⁻¹ year⁻¹).

production of 3:1 and a root S content of 0.15 per cent (Gregg, 1976), another 5 kgS ha^{-1} will be incorporated annually in roots. The total plant uptake is therefore estimated to be $35 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$.

(iv) The pasture utilisation is assumed to be 80 per cent thus giving 24 kgS ha^{-1} consumed by animals and the remainder (11 kgS ha^{-1} including root material) returned as dead litter. The S in dead plant residues is assumed to be mostly in organic combination.

(v) Of the herbage S consumed by the dairy cattle ($24 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$), 10 per cent is retained in animal products (During, 1972) and the remainder ($21.6 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$) excreted. A proportion (15 per cent, During, 1972) of excreta is returned to non-grazing areas and is thus lost from the cycle.

(vi) Of the S returned in excreta to productive areas ($18 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$), 60 per cent is in urine (Till, 1975). Approximately 90 per cent of the urinary S is in the form of sulphate which is considered readily available (Walker, 1957). The S in urine returned to the available pool is thus $10 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$ leaving $8 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$ in dung and urine returned to the organic pool.

(vii) Leaching losses amount to $8 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$ (Smith, 1979). These losses could be higher if fertiliser S is applied immediately prior to a prolonged period of rain.

(viii) The annual input of S in rainfall is 6 kgS ha^{-1} . This estimate is based on the amount of S (3 kgS ha^{-1}) deposited in rainfall at the site over 5 months during the winter (Smith, 1979).

(ix) Since soil organic S is assumed to have reached equilibrium, the annual inputs to the organic S pool from dead plant

material (11 kgS ha^{-1}) and dung (8 kgS ha^{-1}) must be balanced by loss through mineralisation. The net mineralisation of soil organic S should therefore amount to $19 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$.

If these assumptions are made, a balance sheet showing the inputs to, and outputs from the available S pool (table 1.1) indicates that without fertiliser addition, there is a net loss of $8 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$ from the available pool. In order to maintain a constant level of available S, this 8 kgS must be supplied by fertilisers.

It can be seen that mineralisation of organic S contributes to the available pool more than twice as much S as fertiliser and represents about 55 per cent of the total plant requirement. This clearly illustrates the significance of the mineralisation process in a situation where the conditions and assumptions mentioned above apply. Any appreciable variation, in the amounts of S mineralised, from the amount calculated in the model, will have significant consequences on the amounts of fertiliser S required.

It will be reported later in this study that Tokomaru silt loams under established pasture typically have organic S contents of 400 to $500 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ in the top 8 cm. Since organic S contents generally decrease with the depth of soil (Whitehead, 1964), it is estimated that the top 15 cm of a well-developed Tokomaru soil may contain about $450 \mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ of organic S. The annual rate of mineralisation calculated in the model ($19 \text{ kgS ha}^{-1} \text{ year}^{-1}$) therefore corresponds to an annual turnover rate of soil organic S of 2.4 per cent. This is in contrast to an annual rate of mineralisation of 1.25 per cent estimated by Walker (1957) and recently repeated by other workers (Tan, 1967; Gregg, 1976; Metson, 1979). Walker (1957) based his calculation upon an assessment of mineral nitrogen (N)

Table 1.1 A balance sheet showing inputs to and outputs from
the available S pool in soil ($\text{kgS ha}^{-1} \text{year}^{-1}$)

<u>INPUTS</u>		<u>OUTPUTS</u>	
Net mineralisation	19	Plant uptake	35
Atmosphere	6	Leaching	<u>8</u>
Urine	<u>10</u>	Total	<u>43</u>
	35 (Deficit = -8)		
Fertiliser	<u>8</u>		
Total	<u>43</u>		

production (Walker et al., 1954) in normal soils of humid temperate climates and their relatively constant N:S (10:1) relationship. According to Walker's (1957) estimate, the annual rate of S mineralisation in Tokomaru silt loams under established pasture would be between 9 and 11 kgS ha⁻¹ which is appreciably smaller than the annual turnover rate calculated in the model (19 kgS ha⁻¹).

This large discrepancy may be related to the variation in the equilibrium level of soil organic S. Walker (1957) suggested that the equilibrium level of total soil S under the "best New Zealand conditions" would be 0.12 per cent (or 1200 µg g⁻¹) and that it would take at least 50 years to attain such a level. In this study the relatively low organic S content (400-500 µg g⁻¹) in Tokomaru silt loams under established pasture would indicate that the soils are far from approaching such an equilibrium level. However, recent work by Quin (pers. comm.) on regularly topdressed pastures in Canterbury has shown that soil organic S reached an equilibrium plateau at 400 µg g⁻¹, and this within 25 years. This conflict clearly suggests that there is a need for a knowledge of the actual rate of mineralisation of soil organic S under developed pastures. More investigations are also required to establish any relationships between mineralisation and soil properties so that such properties can be used to predict the rate of mineralisation of soil organic S.

The objectives of this study are:

- (i) to determine, under field conditions, the rate of S mineralisation in a number of Tokomaru silt loam soils differing in their organic matter contents;
- (ii) to establish the relationships between mineralisation of soil organic S and soil S characteristics in order

to use such characteristics to predict the rate of mineralisation; and

- (iii) to examine the influence of soil temperature, soil pH and growing plants on the mineralisation of soil organic S.