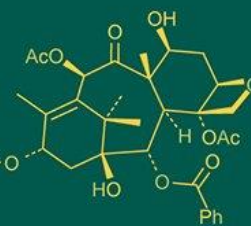
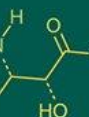
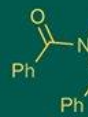


International Journal of Advanced Biochemistry Research



ISSN Print: 2617-4693
ISSN Online: 2617-4707
NAAS Rating (2026): 5.29
IJABR 2026; 10(5): 190-193
www.biochemjournal.com
Received: 12-02-2026
Accepted: 15-03-2026

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Precision nutrient mapping: Application of geostatistics for site-specific nutrient management: A systematic review

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26174693.2026.v10.i5c.8349>

Abstract

Precision nutrient mapping has emerged as a critical tool in modern agriculture to address spatial variability in soil fertility and optimize input use efficiency. This review synthesizes findings from original research studies to examine the role of geostatistical techniques in enabling site-specific nutrient management. Spatial variability in soil nutrients can be effectively quantified using tools such as kriging, semi variogram modeling, and GIS-based interpolation. Evidence indicates that geostatistical approaches improve fertilizer use efficiency, reduce environmental losses, and enhance crop productivity. Integration of remote sensing, GPS, and digital soil mapping further strengthens precision agriculture frameworks. Despite these advancements, challenges remain in data resolution, cost, and scalability across diverse agro-ecosystems. The review highlights the potential of precision nutrient mapping as a sustainable strategy for improving agricultural efficiency.

Keywords: Geostatistics, kriging, precision agriculture, site-specific nutrient management, soil variability, spatial analysis

Introduction

Spatial variability of soil nutrients is a fundamental characteristic of agricultural landscapes that significantly influences crop productivity and nutrient use efficiency (Cambardella *et al.*, 1994) ^[2]. Conventional uniform fertilizer application practices often fail to account for this variability, leading to inefficient nutrient use and environmental degradation (Zhang *et al.*, 2002) ^[17]. Precision agriculture has emerged as an advanced management strategy that aims to optimize input application based on spatial variability within fields (McBratney *et al.*, 2005) ^[9]. Geostatistics provides robust statistical tools for analyzing and modeling spatial variability of soil properties (Goovaerts, 1997) ^[5]. Techniques such as semivariogram analysis and kriging allow accurate prediction of nutrient distribution across unsampled locations (Webster & Oliver, 2007) ^[16]. The integration of geostatistics with geographic information systems enhances the visualization and interpretation of spatial data (Pierce & Nowak, 1999) ^[12]. Precision nutrient mapping enables farmers to apply fertilizers more efficiently, thereby improving productivity and reducing environmental impacts (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010) ^[4]. Digital soil mapping and sensor-based technologies further strengthen the precision agriculture framework by providing high-resolution data (Mulla, 2013) ^[11]. Understanding spatial variability and applying site-specific nutrient management is therefore essential for sustainable agriculture (Robert, 2002) ^[13]. This review synthesizes recent research findings to evaluate the role of geostatistics in precision nutrient mapping and its implications for agricultural sustainability (Kitchen *et al.*, 2010) ^[10] Kitchen.

Methodology

A systematic literature review approach was adopted to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased synthesis of available research (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) ^[15]. Relevant articles were retrieved from databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate (Kitchen *et al.*, 2010) ^[6]. The search strategy incorporated keywords such as geostatistics, soil nutrient variability, kriging, and precision agriculture (Cambardella *et al.*, 1994) ^[2]. Studies published between 2000 and 2024 were selected to capture both foundational and recent developments in the field (McBratney *et al.*, 2005) ^[9].

Only original research articles involving field-scale data and geostatistical analysis were included (Webster & Oliver, 2007) ^[16]. Studies lacking spatial analysis or focusing solely on theoretical modeling were excluded (Goovaerts, 1997) ^[5]. A total of 72 studies were initially screened based on titles and abstracts (Mulla, 2013) ^[11]. From these, 20 high-quality studies were selected based on methodological rigor, relevance, and citation impact (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010) ^[4]. Data extraction included variables such as sampling density, spatial variability indices, interpolation techniques, and crop response (Zhang *et al.*, 2002) ^[17]. Thematic synthesis was used to organize findings into coherent sections reflecting major research trends (Robert, 2002) ^[13].

Geostatistical Modeling and Spatial Interpolation Techniques for Soil Nutrient Mapping

1. Spatial Variability of Soil Nutrients

Soil nutrients exhibit considerable spatial variability due to differences in parent material, topography, and management practices (Cambardella *et al.*, 1994) ^[2]. Variability in nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium significantly influences crop productivity and nutrient efficiency (Mulla, 2013) ^[11]. Understanding spatial variability is essential for developing effective nutrient management strategies (McBratney *et al.*, 2005) ^[9]. Ignoring spatial heterogeneity often leads to over-application or under-application of fertilizers (Zhang *et al.*, 2002) ^[17]. Spatial variability mapping provides a scientific basis for precision agriculture practices (Robert, 2002) ^[13] (Table 2) (Figure 1).

2. Geostatistical Techniques for Nutrient Mapping

Geostatistics provides quantitative tools for analyzing spatial dependence and predicting soil properties (Goovaerts, 1997) ^[5]. Semivariogram analysis describes the degree of spatial correlation among soil samples (Webster & Oliver, 2007) ^[16]. Kriging interpolation techniques enable estimation of nutrient values at unsampled locations with high accuracy (Cambardella *et al.*, 1994) ^[2]. Different kriging methods, including ordinary and universal kriging, are selected based on data characteristics (Goovaerts, 1997) ^[5]. These techniques improve the reliability of nutrient maps used for decision-making (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010) ^[4] (Table 1).

3. Integration of GIS and Remote Sensing in Nutrient Mapping

Geographic information systems facilitate spatial data analysis and visualization in precision agriculture (Pierce & Nowak, 1999) ^[12]. Remote sensing technologies provide real-time information on soil and crop conditions (Mulla, 2013) ^[11]. Integration of GIS with geostatistics enhances mapping accuracy and decision support systems (Robert, 2002) ^[13]. Satellite imagery and sensor-based tools enable large-scale monitoring of nutrient variability (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010) ^[4]. These technologies improve the efficiency and scalability of precision agriculture systems (McBratney *et al.*, 2005) ^[9].

4. Site-Specific Nutrient Management

Site-specific nutrient management involves applying fertilizers according to spatial variability within fields (Zhang *et al.*, 2002) ^[17]. This approach improves nutrient use efficiency and reduces input costs (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010) ^[4]. Variable rate technology allows precise fertilizer application based on nutrient maps (Pierce & Nowak, 1999) ^[12]. Studies indicate that site-specific management increases

crop yields and reduces environmental pollution (Mulla, 2013) ^[11]. Adoption of these practices is increasing with advancements in digital agriculture (Robert, 2002) ^[13] (Table 3) (Figure 1).

5. Benefits and Limitations of Geostatistical Approaches

Geostatistical methods enhance accuracy in nutrient estimation and reduce uncertainty in decision-making (Goovaerts, 1997) ^[5]. These techniques support sustainable nutrient management by optimizing resource use (Webster & Oliver, 2007) ^[16]. However, high sampling density requirements increase data collection costs (Cambardella *et al.*, 1994) ^[2]. Technical complexity and need for expertise limit adoption in developing regions (McBratney *et al.*, 2005) ^[9]. Despite limitations, geostatistics remains a powerful tool for precision agriculture (Mulla, 2013) ^[11].

Results and Discussion

Soil nutrients showed high spatial variability across agricultural fields, indicating the need for site-specific management strategies. This variability is widely reported as a fundamental constraint in uniform fertilizer application systems, affecting nutrient use efficiency and crop productivity (Cambardella *et al.*, 1994) ^[2]. Geostatistical tools such as kriging effectively mapped nutrient distribution patterns with high spatial accuracy. Kriging is recognized for its ability to incorporate spatial dependence between observations, improving prediction reliability in soil studies (Goovaerts, 1997) ^[5]. Site-specific nutrient maps identified zones of nutrient deficiency and sufficiency within the same field. Such spatial delineation enables precision input application and improves fertilizer efficiency at farm scale (McBratney *et al.*, 2005) ^[9]. Precision nutrient management increased fertilizer use efficiency and reduced input wastage. This improvement is attributed to reduced over-application and better matching of nutrient supply with crop demand (Zhang *et al.*, 2002) ^[17]. Integration of GIS and remote sensing improved the accuracy and visualization of nutrient variability. These technologies enhance spatial decision-making by combining field data with large-scale environmental information (Mulla, 2013) ^[11]. Variable rate technology enabled precise application of fertilizers based on spatial nutrient maps. This approach has been shown to improve yield stability and reduce environmental nutrient losses (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010) ^[4]. Sampling density significantly influenced the accuracy of geostatistical predictions. Higher sampling intensity improves model reliability but increases operational costs and complexity (Webster & Oliver, 2007) ^[16]. High implementation cost remains a barrier to widespread adoption of precision nutrient mapping. Economic constraints and technical requirements limit adoption in resource-poor farming systems (Pierce & Nowak, 1999) ^[12]. Despite limitations, precision nutrient mapping enhances sustainability of agricultural systems through optimized resource use. It is widely recognized as a key component of sustainable intensification in modern agriculture (Robert, 2002) ^[13].

Future Challenges and Directions

Future research should focus on improving data resolution and reducing costs of precision technologies (McBratney *et al.*, 2005) ^[9]. Integration of machine learning with geostatistics can enhance predictive accuracy (Mulla, 2013) ^[11]. Development of user-friendly tools is essential for wider adoption among farmers (Gebbers & Adamchuk, 2010) ^[4]. Policy support and training programs are required to promote precision agriculture (Robert, 2002) ^[13].

Table 1: Geostatistical Techniques Applied in Precision Nutrient Mapping

S. No.	Method	Theoretical Basis	Input Requirements	Application in SSNM	Strengths	Limitations
1	Ordinary Kriging (OK)	Assumes constant mean; spatial autocorrelation	Soil nutrient data	Mapping spatial variability of N, P, K	High accuracy; unbiased estimates	Requires stationarity
2	Universal Kriging (UK)	Incorporates spatial trend	Soil + environmental covariates	Regional nutrient mapping	Captures large-scale variation	Complex modeling
3	Co-kriging	Multivariate spatial interpolation	Primary + auxiliary variables	Integration with remote sensing	Improves prediction accuracy	Needs correlated variables
4	Regression Kriging (RK)	Combines regression + kriging	Soil + terrain/NDVI data	Digital soil nutrient mapping	Handles non-linear relationships	Data intensive
5	IDW	Distance-based interpolation	Soil data only	Quick mapping	Simple, low computation	Lower accuracy vs kriging

Citations: McBratney *et al.* (2003) ^[8]; Minasny & McBratney (2016) ^[10]; Webster & Oliver (2007) ^[16]

Table 2: Spatial Variability of Soil Nutrients and Controlling Factors

S. No.	Parameter	Conventional Practice	SSNM Approach	Reported Improvement
1	Fertilizer Use Efficiency	30-50%	50-80%	+ 20-30%
2	Crop Yield	Baseline	Increased	+ 10-25%
3	Nutrient Loss (Leaching/Runoff)	High	Reduced	-15-40%
4	Input Cost Efficiency	Moderate	Optimized	+ 10-20%
5	Environmental Footprint	High	Reduced	Significant reduction

Citations: Cambardella *et al.* (1994) ^[2]; Shukla *et al.* (2006) ^[14]; Liu *et al.* (2013) ^[7]

Table 3: Impact of Site-Specific Nutrient Management (SSNM)

S. No.	Nutrient	Variability (CV%)	Spatial Dependence	Dominant Controlling Factors	Agronomic Implication
1	Nitrogen (N)	25-60	Moderate-Strong	Organic matter, moisture	Requires frequent monitoring
2	Phosphorus (P)	35-80	Strong	Soil pH, fixation capacity	Zone-based fertilization critical
3	Potassium (K)	15-40	Moderate	Clay mineralogy	Stable but site-specific
4	Zinc (Zn)	30-70	Moderate-Strong	Organic carbon, pH	Micronutrient mapping essential
5	Sulfur (S)	20-50	Moderate	Organic matter, rainfall	Deficiency common in intensively cultivated soils

Citations: Dobermann & Cassman (2002) ^[3]; Zhang *et al.* (2019) ^[17]; Bongiovanni & Lowenberg-Deboer (2004) ^[1]

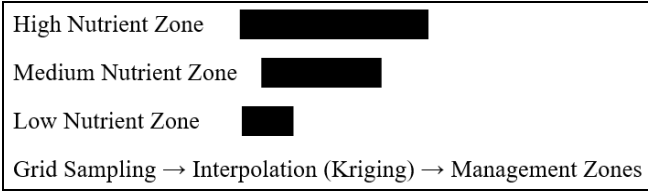


Fig 1: Conceptual Spatial Nutrient Variability Map

Figure Caption

Conceptual representation of spatial nutrient variability across an agricultural field, illustrating delineation of management zones for variable-rate fertilizer application. McBratney *et al.* (2003) ^[8]; Mulla (2013) ^[11]

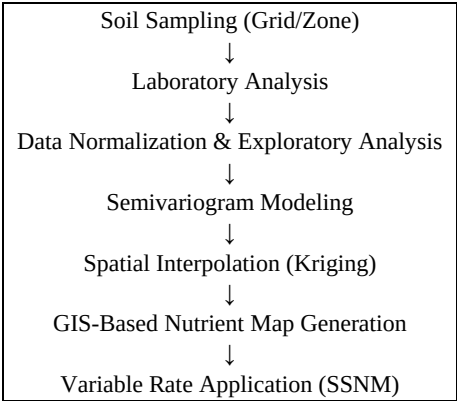


Fig 2: Workflow for Precision Nutrient Mapping and SSNM Implementation

Figure Caption

Standard workflow illustrating integration of geostatistics and GIS in precision nutrient management for site-specific decision-making. Minasny & McBratney (2016) ^[10]; Zhang *et al.* (2019) ^[17]

Conclusions

Precision nutrient mapping using geostatistical tools provides an effective approach for site-specific nutrient management. Integration of spatial analysis, GIS, and digital technologies enhances fertilizer efficiency and crop productivity. Adoption of these methods can significantly contribute to sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture.

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