

This paper discusses soil salinity.

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March 2003

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#### I. SALINE SOILS IN BRIEF

Soils can be saline due to geo-historical processes or they can be man-made. The formation is determined by the water and salt balance, just like in oceans and seas where more salt comes in than goes out. Here, the incoming waters from the land bring salts that remain because there is no outlet and the evaporating water does not contain salts.

Geo-historically formed saline soils can be found along the seacoast, at lakesides, or in dry lands that were previously under marine or lacustrine conditions.

Man-made saline soils are mostly found in (semi) arid lands as the result of the introduction of irrigation for agriculture. All irrigation water brings salts even when the water is of good quality. For example, fresh irrigation water with an electric conductivity of 0.5 dS/m (corresponding to a salt concentration of 0.3 g/l = 0.3 kg/m<sup>3</sup>) applied in irrigations of 10000 m<sup>3</sup>/ha per year bring 3000 kg salt per ha per year, mainly sodium chloride. When the irrigated land is insufficiently drained, the salts accumulate in the root zone.

Saline soils have a very limited agricultural production and often they are abandoned, leaving a bare surface with occasional shrubs. Details on the agricultural production of saline soils are given in chapter 2.

The estimates of the occurrence of saline soils in the world run in the hundreds of millions of hectares (R.Brinkman in Land Reclamation and Water Management, in ILRI (ed.), ILRI publication 27, Wageningen, The Netherlands) and many irrigation projects suffer from salinisation in 10 to 30% of the land. Further, irrigation of high lands may cause water logging and/or salinisation in adjacent (or even far away) lowlands as the deep percolation losses of the irrigation water, and the salts dissolved herein, can be transported down slope through an underground aquifer.

Prevention and reclamation of soil salinity consists of improving the salt balance and increasing the salt export to where it does no harm, e.g. the sea. To maintain a proper salt balance of the soil one must assure that it is flushed once in a while and that the flushing water is removed. If the natural drainage to the underground is impeded, which is noticeable when the water table after an irrigation is close to the soil surface, it must be supplemented by an artificial drainage system, e.g. ditches, drain pipes or wells (chapter 3). A proper outlet for the drain and well water must be assured and, in the absence of a gravity outlet, the drain water must be lifted.

One can accomplish the flushing by applying additional irrigation water (i.e. additional to the crop consumptive use), if available, or making use of occasional rainfall if occurring in sufficient quantity.

Technically, with properly designed drainage systems, it is almost always possible to desalinise the land. The socio-economic feasibility and the environmental desirability of land drainage for salinity control, however,

entirely depend on local conditions and it is difficult to give general statements.

See also R.J. Oosterbaan, 1992. Agricultural land drainage: a wider application through caution and restraint. In: Annual Report 1991, p. 9 - 21. ILRI, Wageningen, The Netherlands. This paper can be downloaded from [www.waterlog.info](http://www.waterlog.info) or [www.waterlog.info/faqs.htm](http://www.waterlog.info/faqs.htm)

## II SOIL SALINITY AND PLANT GROWTH

Soil salinity refers to the presence of high concentrations of soluble salts in the soil moisture of the root zone. These concentrations of soluble salts, through their high osmotic pressures, affect plant growth by restricting the uptake of water by the roots. All plants are subject to this influence, but sensitivity to high osmotic pressures varies widely among plants species. Salinity can also affect plant growth because the high concentration of salts in the soil solution interferes with a balanced absorption of essential nutritional ions by the plants.

The main effects of salinity on plant growth and crop production are:

- Slow and insufficient germination of seeds, a patchy stand of the crop;
- Physiologic drought, wilting, and desiccation of plants;
- Stunted growth, small leaves, short stems and branches;
- Blue-green leaf colour;
- Retarded flowering, fewer flowers, sterility, and smaller seeds;
- Growth of salt-tolerant or halophilous weed plants;
- As a result of all these unfavourable factors, low yields of seeds and other plant parts.

Soil salinity can be expressed as the salt concentration of an extract of a saturated paste of the soil expressed in:

- g salt per 100 g water (% , percent or parts per hundred),  
g salt per 1 water (i.e. parts per mil or per thousand) or: mg salt per 1 water (parts per million, 1 ppm = 0.001 per mil and 1 ppm = 0.0001 %);
- eq. (equivalent) or milli eq. (meq) salt per 1 water;
- electric conductivity (ECe) at 25 degrees C in milli mho/cm (mmho/cm) or, with the same value, dS/m (deci Siemens per m).

The relation between the above magnitudes is roughly:

- 1 g/l ~ 1.7 m mho/cm ~ 17 m eq/l
- 1 m mho/cm ~ 0.6 g/l ~ 10 m eq/l
- 1 m eq/l ~ 0.1 m mho/cm ~ 0.06 g/l

The relation between the salt concentration of the extract of a **saturated paste** (EC<sub>e</sub>) and the salt concentration of the soil moisture at **field capacity** is about 1:2

The relation between the **EC<sub>e</sub>** and the soil salinity expressed in **g salt per 100 g soil** is about **20:1**.

The extract of a saturated paste needs centrifuging, whereas the measurement in the 1:2 suspension can be done directly. In general one finds: **EC<sub>e</sub> = 4 to 5 EC<sub>1:2</sub>** (see figure).

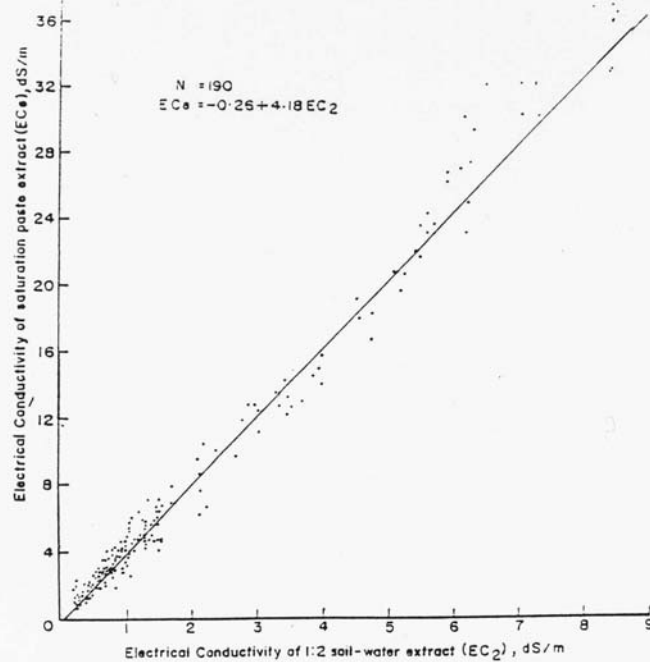


Figure 5.1 Relation between EC values of a saturated paste and a 1:2 soil water suspension. Data from Dr. D.P.Sharma, Central Soil Salinity Research Institute, Karnal, India.

The term 'salt tolerance' indicates the degree of salinity a plant can withstand without being appreciably affected in its growth or development. In field experiments with some principal crops Bernstein (1974) determined the salinity levels causing yield reduction of 10%, 25% and 50%. For comparison, rice showed a reduction in yield of 10%, 25% and 50% at an EC<sub>e</sub> of 5, 6 and 8 respectively, whereas the same yield reductions for barley were found at higher EC<sub>e</sub> values of 12, 16 and 18 respectively.

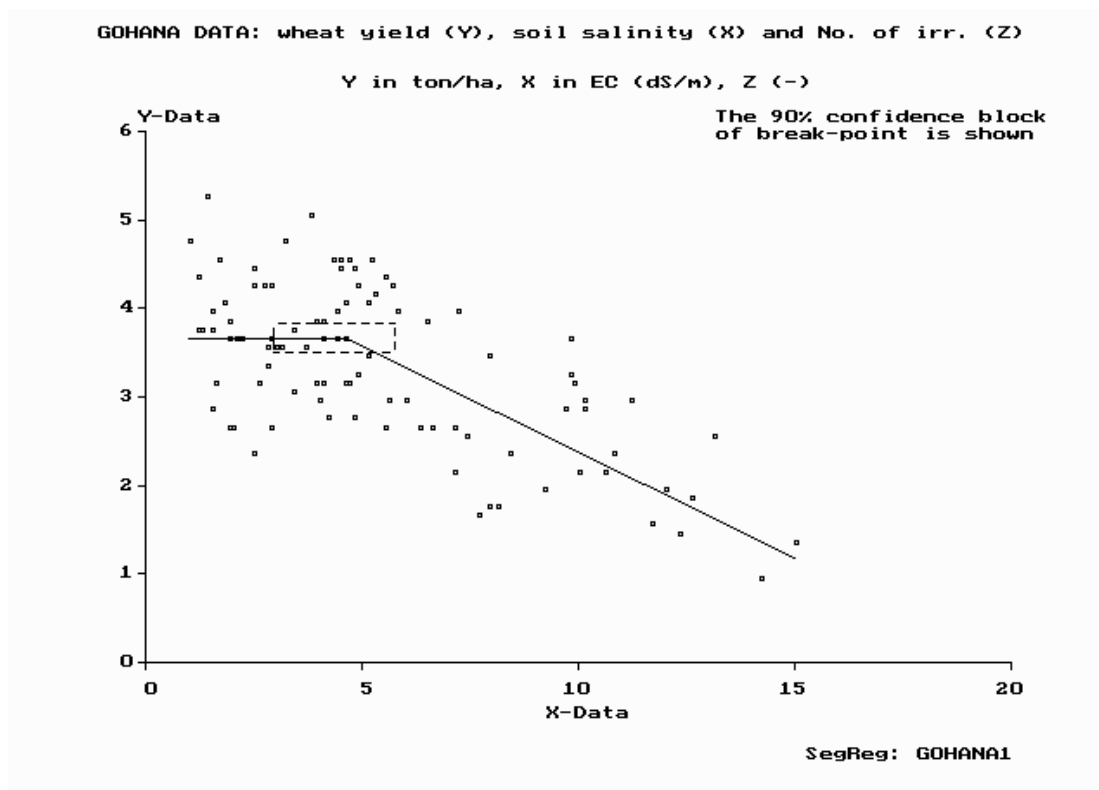
It appeared that most field crops (e.g. wheat, oats, rice and rye) have a salt tolerance of EC<sub>e</sub> of 4 to 8 mmho/cm.

Some field crops (barley, sugar beet, cotton), vegetables (garden beets, kale, spinach, asparagus), and fruit crops (date palm, mulberry, olive pomegranate, jujube) have a higher salt tolerance of EC<sub>e</sub> is 8 to 16 mmho/cm. Some grasses such as Sporobolus, Pucinelia, Cynodon dactylon (Bermuda

grasses), *Chloris gayana* (Rhodes grass) and *Agropyron elongatum* (tall wheatgrass) also have a high salt tolerance (ECe is 8 to 16 mmho/cm).

Beans are salt-sensitive, having a salt tolerance of ECe = 2 to 4 mmho/cm.

Examples of crop production as a function of salinity under field conditions (see figure) are also given in the software program SegReg on the web site [www.waterlog.info](http://www.waterlog.info) or [www.waterlog.info/software.htm](http://www.waterlog.info/software.htm) or [www.waterlog.info.segreg.htm](http://www.waterlog.info.segreg.htm) .



Data from Mexico, Carrizo irrigation district, on wheat yield (Y) and soil salinity (ECe, dS/m) measured at 0-30 cm (EC1) and 30-60 cm (EC2) depth yielded the following multiple regression equation (data from IMTA, Cuernavaca, Mexico):

$$Y = 7.8 - 0.49 \times EC1 + 0.02 \times EC2.$$

The standard error of the regression coefficient of EC1 is 0.09, hence it is highly significant. The regression coefficient of EC2 is relatively small and insignificant. This means that measurement of EC1 is sufficient to characterize the soil salinity.

If the land is liable to become saline, adequate irrigation, if necessary together with drainage (when natural drainage is insufficient), will remove or reduce these dangers, thus ensuring a better crop production.

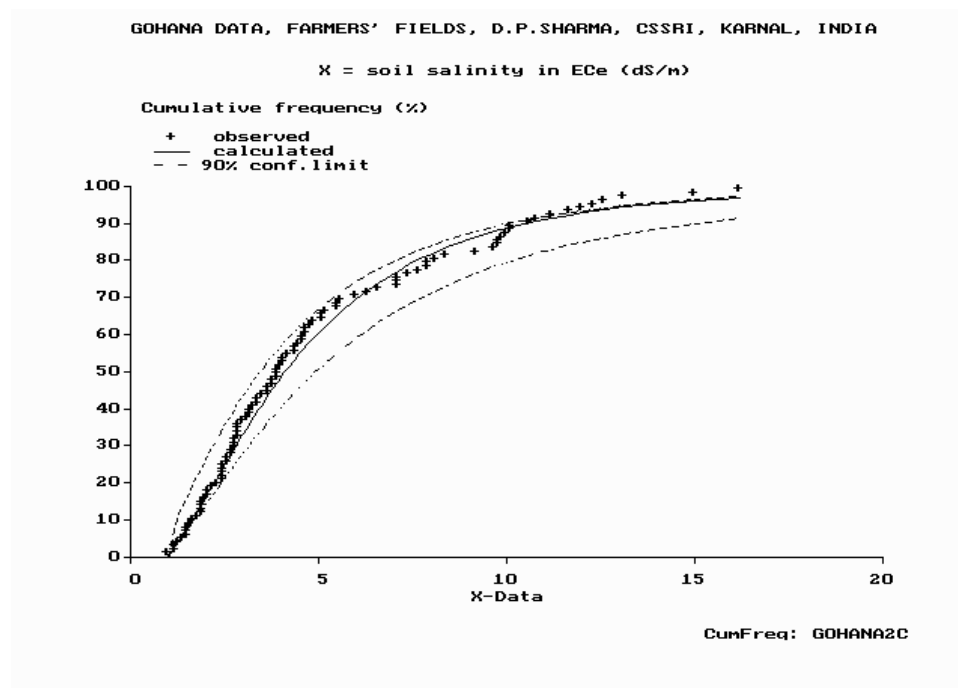
If the land is already saline it can be reclaimed with a good combination of drainage and irrigation. Often the introduction of a reclamation crop will accelerate the process of reclamation.

For example, lowland rice is often used during reclamation in sub-tropical and tropical climates. The flooded conditions of the fields promote a continuous leaching of salt from the soil, and also a dilution of the salt in the soil water. Moreover the fact that rice seedlings may be grown in nurseries, under less saline conditions, makes it possible to grow the more tolerant transplanted rice during the early phase of reclamation.

Grasses (Bermuda grass or tall wheat grass) and barley may be chosen as reclamation crops in climates less favourable for rice production.

### III. FURTHER INFORMATION

Soil salinity has large spatial variability (see next figure). The figure was made with the CumFreq program for that can be downloaded from [www.waterlog.info/software.htm](http://www.waterlog.info/software.htm) or [www.waterlog.info/cumfreq.htm](http://www.waterlog.info/cumfreq.htm)



Examples of statistical analysis, using a segmented regression, of the relation of crop yield and soil salinity, stemming from data collected in farmers' fields, are given in the article "Data analysis in drainage research" on the "Articles page" [www.waterlog.info/articles.htm](http://www.waterlog.info/articles.htm) of website [www.waterlog.info](http://www.waterlog.info)

Drainage and leaching of saline soils is elaborated in "Agricultural hydrology/salinity, salt/water balances and leaching" on the "FAQs page" of website [www.waterlog.info](http://www.waterlog.info) : [www.waterlog.info/faqs.htm](http://www.waterlog.info/faqs.htm)

An exercise on the calculation of water and salt balances is given in the Chacupe case study that can be downloaded from this web site on the "FAQs page".

More elaborate analyses can be made through the agro-hydro-salinity models SaltMod and Sahysmod that can be downloaded from this web site under Software: [www.waterlog.info/software.htm](http://www.waterlog.info/software.htm) .