

## Effect of humic acid on nutrient release pattern in an Alfisol (Typic Haplustalf)

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**Abstract:** An incubation experiment was conducted to study the influence of Humic Acid (HA) on nutrient release, organic carbon (OC) content and cation exchange capacity (CEC) of the soil. The humic acid as potassium humate was added at graded doses (20 to 80 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>). A linear trend in the release of N,P and K was observed for the application of HA. The release of N was significant upto 20 kg of HA ha<sup>-1</sup>, whereas for P and K it extended upto 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>. The N and P were released for a longer period of 60 days, while K release attained a plateau on 45 days after incubation. At the end of incubation period, there was a steep and significant increase of organic carbon and CEC upto 40 kg HA ha<sup>-1</sup>.

**Key words :** Humic acid, Release pattern of N, P, K, Organic carbon, CEC.

### Introduction

The organic matter rich soils have a stimulating tendency in the process of nitrification as well as in the availability of P and K (Tyler *et al.* 1974). The high content of OC and CEC confer upon the soil, the capacity to hold the essential plant nutrients in sufficient amounts so as to provide the nutrient demanded by the crops. The increased OC and CEC could be made possible through effective management of soils. Inclusion of organic materials such as humic acid found to bring about conducive changes in nutrient availability. To test the effect of humic acid on nutrient release pattern the study was undertaken.

### Materials and Methods

Incubation experiment was conducted with humic acid in Alfisol (Typic Haplustalf). The texture of soil was clay loam in texture with the pH and EC of 8.0 and 0.32 dSm<sup>-1</sup> respectively. The organic carbon content and CEC of the soil were 0.706 per cent and 26.7 C mol (p+) kg<sup>-1</sup> respectively. The soil had a low KMnO<sub>4</sub>-N (238 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>), medium Olsen-P (19 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>) and high NH<sub>4</sub>OAcK (670 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>). The humic acid as potassium humate was added at graded doses (20 to 80 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>) to the soil. A 500 g soil sample was taken in the glass bottle and the humic acid was mixed thoroughly with soil. The treated soils were

replicated four times in completely randomized block design and incubated for a period of 90 days by maintaining the soil moisture at submerged condition. The soil samples were drawn at fortnight intervals and KMnO<sub>4</sub>-N, Olsen-P and NH<sub>4</sub>OAc-K were estimated. The organic carbon and CEC were estimated by adopting standard procedures. The pH, EC and Eh (Redox potential) were determined by immersing the electrode directly in the glass bottle at 90<sup>th</sup> day of incubation.

### Results and Discussion

Humic acid, the main fraction of soil organic matter is a vital factor for maintenance of soil fertility. In the present investigation, an incubation experiment was conducted with different doses of HA in the form of potassium humate to find out its effect on N,P and K availability at definite intervals during incubation period and CEC and organic carbon at the end of incubation period.

#### Nitrogen availability

The nitrogen availability was increased with increasing doses of HA (80 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>) and till 60 days after incubation (DAI). The significant increase was observed at 20 kg HA ha<sup>-1</sup> and beyond that level, any further increase in HA exhibited a decrease in the increasing period (Table 1). The decrease in the increment of

**Table 1.** Effect of humic acid on  $\text{KMnO}_4\text{-N}$  content ( $\text{kg ha}^{-1}$ ) in Alfisol

Treatments HA ( $\text{kg ha}^{-1}$ )	Days after incubation (S)							Mean
	0 ( $S_1$ )	15 ( $S_2$ )	30 ( $S_3$ )	45 ( $S_4$ )	60 ( $S_5$ )	75 ( $S_6$ )	90 ( $S_7$ )	
0 ( $L_1$ )	240	246	250	260	267	272	275	259
20 ( $L_2$ )	240	251	263	275	277	282	284	267
40 ( $L_3$ )	240	255	264	277	279	282	286	269
60 ( $L_4$ )	240	257	266	278	282	285	288	271
80 ( $L_5$ )	240	258	266	277	283	285	287	271
Mean	240	253	262	273	278	281	284	267
CD (P=0.05)								
L	2.5							
S	3.5							
L at S	8.5							

**Table 2.** Effect of humic acid on Olsen-P content ( $\text{kg ha}^{-1}$ ) in Alfisol

Treatments HA ( $\text{kg ha}^{-1}$ )	Days after incubation (S)							Mean
	0 ( $S_1$ )	15 ( $S_2$ )	30 ( $S_3$ )	45 ( $S_4$ )	60 ( $S_5$ )	75 ( $S_6$ )	90 ( $S_7$ )	
0 ( $L_1$ )	14.5	15.0	15.4	16.3	17.0	19.6	18.0	16.3
20 ( $L_2$ )	14.5	15.3	16.5	17.6	18.6	18.9	18.8	17.2
40 ( $L_3$ )	14.5	15.7	16.9	17.8	19.5	20.1	20.5	17.9
60 ( $L_4$ )	14.5	16.2	17.3	18.5	19.8	20.5	21.2	18.3
80 ( $L_5$ )	14.5	16.8	17.9	18.7	19.8	20.9	21.8	18.6
Mean	14.5	15.8	16.8	17.8	19.0	19.6	20.1	17.6
CD (P=0.05)								
L	0.6							
S	0.7							
L at S	1.7							

**Table 3.** Effect of humic acid on  $\text{NH}_4\text{OAc-K}$  content ( $\text{kg ha}^{-1}$ ) in Alfisol

Treatments HA ( $\text{kg ha}^{-1}$ )	Days after incubation (S)							Mean
	0 ( $S_1$ )	15 ( $S_2$ )	30 ( $S_3$ )	45 ( $S_4$ )	60 ( $S_5$ )	75 ( $S_6$ )	90 ( $S_7$ )	
0 ( $L_1$ )	440	450	455	469	472	475	477	464
20 ( $L_2$ )	440	460	471	479	479	483	485	471
40 ( $L_3$ )	440	465	477	485	486	487	487	475
60 ( $L_4$ )	440	468	479	485	487	485	485	476
80 ( $L_5$ )	440	470	482	486	486	486	486	476
Mean	440	463	475	481	482	484	484	473
CD (P=0.05)								
L	10							
S	12							
L x S	22							

**Table 4.** Effect of humic acid on soil organic carbon content and cation exchange capacity in Alfisol

HA (kg ha <sup>-1</sup> )	CEC (C mol (p+) kg <sup>-1</sup> )	Organic carbon (%)
0 (L <sub>1</sub> )	28.3	0.672
10 (L <sub>2</sub> )	30.9	0.678
20 (L <sub>3</sub> )	32.5	0.685
30 (L <sub>4</sub> )	34.5	0.690
40 (L <sub>5</sub> )	35.8	0.689
CD	1.5	0.004

**Table 5.** Effect of humic acid and fertilizer on nutrient availability in Alfisol-Pot experiment

Treatments	Available N				Available P				Available K			
	M <sub>1</sub>	M <sub>2</sub>	M <sub>3</sub>	Mean	M <sub>1</sub>	M <sub>2</sub>	M <sub>3</sub>	Mean	M <sub>1</sub>	M <sub>2</sub>	M <sub>3</sub>	Mean
S <sub>1</sub>	185	212	218	205	12.0	16.2	16.6	14.9	452	675	735	621
S <sub>2</sub>	194	217	221	211	12.4	16.4	16.9	15.2	485	701	759	648
S <sub>3</sub>	201	222	229	217	13.0	16.6	17.5	15.7	502	725	775	667
S <sub>4</sub>	205	227	231	221	13.4	16.9	17.9	16.1	510	740	787	679
S <sub>5</sub>	211	230	240	228	13.9	17.1	18.2	16.4	517	750	799	689

CD (P=0.05)

S	8.5	0.4	18
M at S	8.8	1.1	23
S at M	9.2	0.4	22

**Table 6.** Effect of humic acid and fertilizer on organic carbon and cation exchange capacity in Alfisol-Pot experiment

Treatments	Organic carbon (%)				CEC (C mol (p+) kg <sup>-1</sup> )			
	M <sub>1</sub>	M <sub>2</sub>	M <sub>3</sub>	Mean	M <sub>1</sub>	M <sub>2</sub>	M <sub>3</sub>	Mean
S <sub>1</sub>	0.700	0.710	0.712	0.707	20.5	26.8	27.5	24.9
S <sub>2</sub>	0.722	0.730	0.732	0.728	23.1	29.8	30.3	27.9
S <sub>3</sub>	0.755	0.762	0.765	0.757	25.1	32.6	33.1	30.3
S <sub>4</sub>	0.787	0.790	0.790	0.786	27.5	34.8	35.2	32.5
S <sub>5</sub>	0.809	0.817	0.818	0.811	28.2	36.9	37.2	34.1

CD (P=0.05)

S	0.02	2.6
M at S	0.01	3.8
S at M	0.04	3.0

available N at HA levels higher than 20 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> might be due to reduced microbial activity in the presence of some high content of phenolics produced by HA in the soil. The increase in available N might be attributed to the N contributed from the native N by the enhanced microbial

activities induced by the humic acid (Deepa, 2001). Similar increase in N availability was reported by Govindasamy *et al.* (1989) for the application of HA @ 50 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> and by Prasad *et al.* (1991) by the released HA from the added tree leaves.

### Phosphorus availability

A linear trend in P availability was observed for graded doses of HA till the end of incubation period. However the increase was marked for 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> and upto 60 DAI. Beyond that level, the magnitude of increase was reduced (Table 2). The increase in the availability of P could be attributed to the chemical and biochemical processes involved. The humic acids might have helped in solubilizing P from insoluble to soluble form resulting in its increase. Similar increase was reported by Khan *et al.* (1997) for the application of metal humates upto 50 ppm. Fokin and Sinha (1969) proposed that, the derived benefits of the addition of organic matter to the soils might be due to the anion replacement or competition between humate from added OM and phosphate ions on adsorbing surfaces which in turn would have increased the P availability. Sinha (1972) indicated that fulvic acids and intermediate products of organic matter decomposition had played a significant role in mobilizing fairly soluble phosphates. Pal and Sengupta (1985) observed that when black soil was incubated with humic acid, the P availability increased. The reason attributed was phosphate ions were expected to interact with humic acid more through its phenolic and hydroxyl groups which might have changed the behaviour of P. The presence of such functional groups as assessed by infrared spectra analysis would confirm similar action in the treated soil leading to increased P availability. David *et al.* (1994) found that, humus would form protective coating over sesquioxides and thereby reducing the fixation of any phosphate, which made them available in the soil. The increase in available P might also be due to the mineralisation of soil organic P (Dusberg *et al.* 1989) as well as humic acid (Vaughan and Ord, 1985). Thangavelu and Manickam (1989) reported that, the P availability was increased with application of manure due to less fixation and release of P by humic substances released during mineralisation of organic matter. These results lent support to the finding of increased P availability due to HA noticed in the present study.

### Potassium availability

The availability of K increased with increasing the level of HA from 0 to 80 kg

ha<sup>-1</sup>. But significant increase was observed upto 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> and beyond which the magnitude of increase was reduced as in N and P. With regard to incubation period, the significant increase was observed upto 45<sup>th</sup> DAI (Table 3) and thereafter the increase in K availability started declining. The humic acids and fulvic acids are believed to play a definite role in liberating fixed K because of their high complexing power. In addition, the lower molecular weight fractions of humic compounds are capable of penetrating the intermicellar spaces of expanding types of clays and reach the specific sorption sites for K, where they might react or compete for sites with K and increase its availability in soil (Tan and McCreery, 1975; Schnitzer and Kodama, 1972). The enhanced microbial activity due to humic acid application would also have paved way for the increased availability of K through reducing its fixation in the soil and dissolution of fixed K. Further, the HA that contained (6.25%) in the potassium humate which was applied as a source of humic acid in the present study, would also have contributed for the increase of soil K under submerged condition. With the increasing period of incubation, the K availability increased significantly. The probable exchange between hydronium ions and exchangeable K might be a reason for the increase in K availability. Tan (1978) reported that, at pH 7.0, humic and fulvic acids were capable of dissolving small amounts of K from the minerals by chelation, complex reactions or both. The amount released was reported to increase with time and reach a maximum at 800 to 8000 hours. A steady increase in the available K from 15<sup>th</sup> to 90<sup>th</sup> day might be due to solubilising effect caused by humic acid coupled with the release from exchangeable sites by other cations (Khan *et al.* 1997).

### Organic carbon

The changes that occur in organic carbon (OC) would influence the soil fertility. Hence it is quite relevant to study the influence of HA on organic carbon content of soil. The result on present study clearly showed the profound effect of application of humic acid upto 80 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> on organic carbon, but the significant increase was noticed at 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> (Table 3). Beyond 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>, there was a depressive

influence of HA on OC content and it might be due to the reduced microbial population at higher level of HA (Deepa, 2001). The positive effect might be due to the high content of organic carbon (289 g/kg) in the potassium humate itself. The accentuated biotic activity (Deepa and Govindarajan, 2002) by HA application and greater increase in soil microbial biomass might have paved way for concomitant increase in the organic carbon content.

#### Cation exchange capacity

The profound increase in CEC due to HA in the present study highlighted the beneficial effect of HA on CEC. There was a steady increase in CEC with increased levels of HA. However, significant increase was upto 60 kg of HA ha<sup>-1</sup> (Table 3). The HA was found to contain functional groups, that would form the source of negative charge. And they could have contributed towards the CEC of the soil. This charge might be due in part to the dissociation of hydrogen ions from carboxyl groups and also probably in part to their dissociation of hydroxyl ions from carboxyl groups and also probably in part to their dissociation from phenolic hydroxyls and particularly from groups of the hydroxyls. Similar reports were reported earlier by Lax (1991), who observed that the incorporation of soil organic matter induced the exchange capacity due to the various functional groups namely carboxyl, phenolic etc. present in the humic substances of soil organic substances. The oxidised groups present in HA used in the study might be responsible for the increase in CEC as reported by Roig *et al.* (1988). Cegarra *et al.* (1987) who established a direct relation with humification and consequent increase in the functional groups and CEC. These findings lend support to the increase of CEC by HA application in the present study.

The incubation experiment highlighted that, the response of humic acid was observed upto 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> for increasing nutrient availability in Alfisol. To confirm this result in the presence of crop a pot experiment was conducted with rice crop. The treatments tried were three fertilizer level (0-M<sub>1</sub>, 75% NPK-M<sub>2</sub>, 100% NPK-M<sub>3</sub>) and humic acid levels tried were 0 (S<sub>1</sub>), 10 (S<sub>2</sub>), 20 (S<sub>3</sub>), 30 (S<sub>4</sub>) and 40 (S<sub>5</sub>) kg HA

ha<sup>-1</sup>. The results showed that, with increasing dose of humic acid, the available nutrients, organic carbon and cation exchange capacity also gets increased (Table 5 and 6).

#### Conclusions

A linear trend in the release of N, P and K was observed for the application of humic acid. The release of N was significant upto 20 kg of HA ha<sup>-1</sup>, whereas for P and K it extended upto 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>. The N and P were released for a longer period of 60 days, while K release attained a plateau on 45 DAI. At the end of incubation period, there was a steep and significant increase of organic carbon and CEC upto 40 kg HA ha<sup>-1</sup>. The result of pot experiment also confirmed that with increasing dose of humic acid from 10 to 40 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> the soil fertility parameters also enhanced.

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(Received: December 2002; Revised: September 2003)