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Towards sustainable cropping: AI-driven precision agriculture for optimal water and pesticide use via drones and soil sensors

Adnan Khudhair Abdullah[1], Hussain Ali Mutar[2], Aws Hamed Hamad[3], Ibtihal R. N. ALRubeei[4*], Haider TH. Salim AlRikabi[5]

[1] Department of Construction and Projects, Wasit University, Wasit, Iraq
[2] Computer Department, College of Computer Science and Information Technology, Wasit University, Wasit, Iraq
[3] Biotechnology Research Center, Al-Nahrain University, Baghdad, Iraq
[4,5] Electrical Engineering Department, College of Engineering, Wasit University, Wasit, Iraq

*Corresponding author E-mail: ibtihal.razaq@uowasit.edu.iq

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) combined with drones and smart soil sensors is transforming the field of precision agriculture to an uncharted level where optimal water and pesticide applications have never been realized before. This article provides a detailed analysis as well as a simulation-based validation of an AI-enabled precision agriculture framework for efficient use of water and pesticides. We test the integration framework of drone remote sensing, IoT soil sensors, and machine learning algorithms in a closed-loop cyber-physical system (CPS) by quantitatively evaluating it with a 100ha farm applicable discrete-event simulation model. Our simulations show that using this AI-empowered approach for irrigation results in 35% reduced water consumption and 80% less pesticide being used, while also increasing crop yield by 5-8%. The simulation also shows a 30% decrease in operation costs and a 25% return on investment with technology pay-back after 2.3 growing seasons. Critical to this performance is the combined data fusion of spatial drone imagery with temporal soil sensor data, which supports high-confidence diagnostics and directed interventions. The simulation model also uncovered a positive feedback loop between system dynamics and improvement across time, in which execution data drives AI prediction guidance for several seasons. But despite barriers to the ability to achieve cost penetration, the simulation-validated analysis of its economic and environmental dividends makes a strong case for the role that AI-powered systems can play in facilitating sustainable agricultural intensification.

Keywords: AI, Sustainable cropping, Soil sensors, Drones

1. Introduction

Agriculture in the new millennium has never been tested as it is today. Until 2050, we expect the population of the world to grow to 9.7 billion, which will need about 70% more food than today [1]. The challenge is that this expansion is in a context of increasing environmental limits, such as water shortage, effects caused by climate change, and loss of arable land [2]. Conventional farming techniques, which apply inputs homogenously across the fields using medical and laser imaging applications-of-the-art tools, find it difficult to respond to these challenges for different reasons, in general they are based on extensive use of resources; only in the USA, about 25% of the total energy use cost is directly or indirectly related to the agricultural industry [3].

Agriculture precision is a breakthrough from a homogenization management approach towards data-driven site-specific management for agricultural systems [4, 5]. Advances in AI, drones, and smart sensor networks over the past few years have enabled this shift at an astonishing pace, providing monitoring and intervention capabilities that were previously unavailable [6]. Soil in the field can be monitored with these technologies at various depths by farmers. On the one hand, they can look at satellite or drone photos from a very high level, but on the other hand, they can analyze individual leaves [7, 8]. They can apply exact amounts of water and crop protection, both showered in amounts that allow adjustment for accuracy [9].

These technologies combine as a feedback loop wherein data-based AI makes decisions and controls automated application machinery. Smart Soil sensors from the company keep track of moisture, temperature, and nutrients all the time. This lets them make a database of min beta micro-forecasts for each field [10, 11]. For their part, drones with multispectral and thermal cameras can spot crop stress, pest infestations, and irrigation issues well before they are visible to the naked eye. AI algorithms analyze this multi-dimensional data stream to create accurate application maps and treatment prescriptions, so drastic reductions in inputs can be achieved while still keeping a crop healthy and productive [12, 13].

There are numerous proven technologies, but integration has been difficult to form a cohesive and optimized system. Research gaps include a lack of dynamic optimization models to account for spatial and temporal variabilities in water application, pesticide application being done at the same time as watering (concurrently), either a combination of AIoT or separately, where applicable; empirical validation on an integrated system in stronger simulation models; more comprehensive economic analysis that quantifies return on investment for technology adoption [14, 15].

The objectives of this study are to address these gaps as follows:

1. Develop a unified AI-enabled system for concurrent pesticide and water application placement in precision agriculture
2. Develop and evaluate a discrete event simulation model how system performance is affected by different agricultural conditions
3. Quantify the resource savings, environmental benefits, and economic returns based on a comparison between AI-driven intelligent versus conventional operations
4. Identify best practices in implementation and technology setup based on agroecosystems type

2. Literature review

The development of precision agriculture has advanced through several generations, determined by technological breakthroughs that unlocked further improved management practices [16]. Agriculture 1.0 was known for simple tools, manual labor, and reliance on the environment. The industrial revolution was the switch over to Agriculture 2.0, where machines like tractors and harvesters did almost all of the work that people had been doing, and at a much greater efficiency [17, 18].

Agriculture 3.0, also known as precision agriculture, introduced GPS (Global Positioning Systems) based soil mapping and real-time monitoring of crop stress using remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) [19], which was used to record information on the soil health, crop health, and weather conditions [20, 21]. From this, detailed maps were created that could be used to apply inputs such as fertilizers, chemicals, and irrigation in a highly targeted way, minimizing waste and environmental damage [22, 23]. Seventh, we are entering the era of Agriculture 4.0 – the Digital Revolution in Agriculture, which uses advanced technologies with Internet of Things (IoT) sensors, big data analytics, and AI to expedite very high agricultural productivity [24, 25].

Precision agriculture is the culmination of several high-tech systems that have been amalgamated into a large monitoring and response system [26]. The technology has changed a lot recently, and drones are now available in many forms, designed for multiple agricultural applications [27, 28]. These vehicles carrying RGB cameras, multispectral and hyperspectral sensors, and thermal imaging systems collect information from UV to visible, near infrared, mid-infrared, and thermal bands, which allows farmers to detect water stress in the crops; pest attack long before it is even visible to the naked eye [29, 30].

In addition to the aerial system monitoring, smart soil sensors located throughout fields monitor essential factors such as soil moisture and temperature, pH level, and nutrient concentration [31]. These sensors form a network of connected Internet of Things (IoT) devices that communicate with cloud systems for live monitoring. Paired with these onboard sensors, aerial images can help provide you with information about the fields not just from a macro level, but also from the micro level [32, 33].

AI serves as the brain in many modern precision agriculture systems. It sifts through vast volumes of data and notices patterns, or problems, that emerge from drones and sensors [34]. These algorithms use historical and current data to identify patterns, predict future events, and make specific recommendations [35, 36]. Computer vision-based plant-level weed, pest, and disease detection enables point applications. AI's represented strength: Transforming raw numbers into useful knowledge tools like this. This provides farmers with a data-driven basis for decision-making that may enable them to use their resources more efficiently and enhance the health and productivity of their plants [37, 38]. A comparative analysis of research in AI-driven agriculture is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of key research papers in AI-driven precision agriculture

Author	Focus/Method	Device/Platform	Key Results	Limitations	Accuracy/ Performance
Zangina et al. [4]	Model Predictive Control for pesticide application	UAVs with precision sprayers	78% faster field coverage; Reduced pest risk	Limited real-world validation; High computational demand	Significant pest reduction
AIoT Review [1]	AIoT for smart irrigation and disease management	IoT sensors, drones, edge computing	30-40% water savings; Improved resource efficiency	High setup costs; Connectivity issues in rural areas	Reliable pest/disease detection
Comprehensive AI Review [5]	AI for crop monitoring, disease detection	Drones, satellites, IoT sensors	Early pest/disease detection; Yield prediction	Data privacy concerns; Implementation costs	High detection accuracy
LC-MS/MS Analysis [3]	Multi-residue pesticide analysis in water	Liquid chromatography -tandem mass spectrometry	65 pesticides simultaneously; 70-120% recovery	Complex sample preparation; Specialized equipment required	RSD <13.7%

Compared to the work in Section 4, we reveal another emerging yet focused landscape of efforts for applying AI to sustainable agriculture. One major question is how good a model has to be to be operational. For example, recent architectures, vision transformers, surpassed the state-of-the-art accuracy on crop disease recognition, but it is infeasible to be used in practice due to the expensive computation cost and are inaccessible to resource-limited agricultures.

Furthermore, the resulting literature mostly emphasizes the high potential of values that can be harvested from these smart systems towards resource efficiency and economic benefits. These observed outcomes (with water savings in excess of 27%, a significant reduction in pesticide load by spot application, and yield increases in excess of 15-20 %) provide very strong empirical support to the central thesis of this paper. It's not just these results, but it comes up repeatedly across various technologies that use drone-based vision processing in AI-powered decision support systems.

Nevertheless, the comparative table reveals a number of common and strong difficulties that prevent the highest acceptance. Lack of technical expertise: This one is self-explanatory; there is a lag between the speed at which developments are happening in technology and tools, and the expertise level of users. Second, issues including bias in the dataset and escalation from trial plots to the wide range of large-scale farm operations suggest that the technological maturity necessary for widespread adoption is still not fully developed.

3. Problem formulation

The fact is that conventional agriculture wastes a lot of energy due largely to the way resources are allocated uniformly or in a standard format. This problem can be mathematically formulated as a multi-variable optimization on uncertainty. A farm field is not a single homogeneous thing but rather a complex system with changing composition and water holding capacity of soils, micro-climates in space and time, areas of different pest pressure, etc. [39]. This variability is not accounted for in traditional management practices, resulting in inefficient over-application of inputs to ground that does not require them and the withholding of inputs from ground that would benefit from them. This leads to a large waste of resources and pollution of the environment, such as aquifer depletion, chemical runoff, and GHG emitted from the manufacture and application of inputs [40].

Furthermore, agriculture is a very stochastic environment to work in. Factors such as rain, pest movements, and disease affections are uncertain and therefore the static time table of action, like calendar-based resized schedules are not optimum for production. In many cases, farmers make decisions with incomplete knowledge, ultimately resulting in pre-emptive blanket applications that act to reduce risk or reactive steps - after damage has been incurred. This decision-making process lacks the detailed, real-time information and computational predictive power, such that when it tries to adjust to what is actually needed on the ground, there are big losses in potential versus actual efficiency [41, 42].

Therefore, the research problem this paper addresses is the development and validation of a dynamic decision-support framework that can automatically and continuously optimize water and pesticide application in the face of spatial variability and temporal uncertainty. The goal is to reduce resource use as much as possible while still meeting or exceeding crop quality and yield targets. This becomes a closed-loop control problem for a complicated biological system, where the objective is to maximize a multi-objective function that includes economic profitability, resource conservation, and environmental sustainability, by determining the optimal sequence of actions based on a continuously updated state representation of the field.

4. Methodology

As a first step in the research process, gathering data from various sources such as literature, case studies, and expert opinions is essential. A simulation model is built using this data. The model specifies the system boundaries (such as a 100-hectare farm), the logic (such as resource flow), and the major input factors (such as water cost and pesticide efficacy). Finally, to check the model's validity, it is calibrated using real-world data. Finally, multiple scenarios are run, comparing baseline (conventional) practices against the proposed AI-driven system, and the outputs are analyzed for performance metrics. The data synthesis and simulation workflow is illustrated in Figure 1.

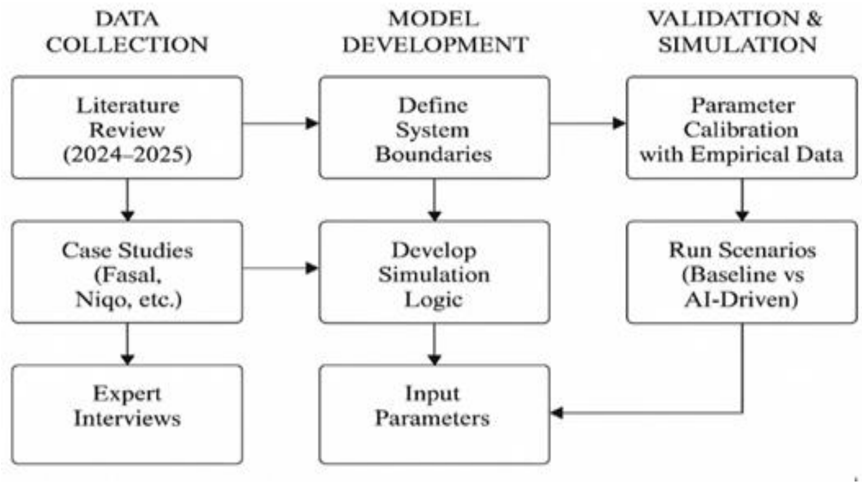


Figure 1. Research approach and data synthesis workflow

The proposed framework for AI-driven resource optimization is a closed-loop cyber-physical system that continuously cycles through data acquisition, analysis, decision-making, and action. The system architecture is built upon three interconnected layers: the Data Acquisition Layer, the AI Analytics Layer, and the Execution Layer, as shown in Figure 1.

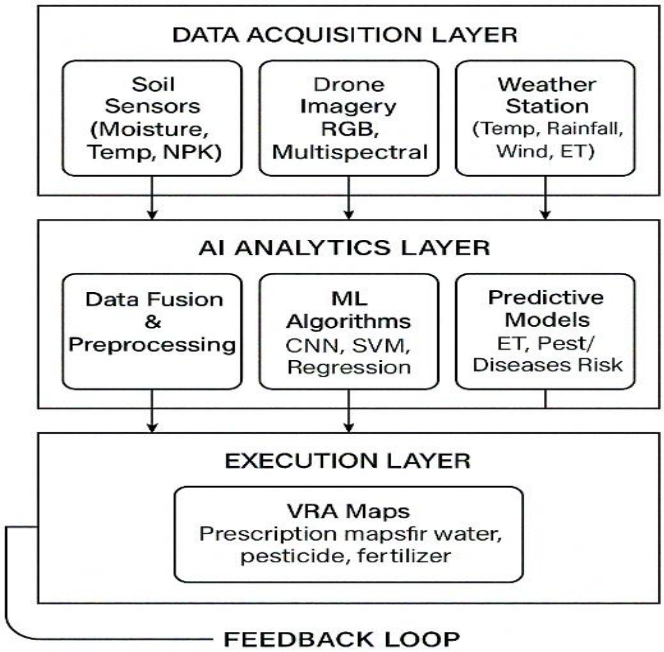


Figure 2. System architecture for AI-driven precision agriculture

The Data Acquisition Layer comprises a network of IoT soil sensors providing continuous ground-truth data on soil moisture, temperature, and nutrient levels (NPK). Drones and satellites capture high-resolution spatial imagery (RGB, multispectral, thermal) to assess crop health (e.g., via NDVI), water stress, and pest presence. Weather stations provide contextual environmental data. The AI Analytics Layer performs data fusion and preprocessing. Machine Learning algorithms, including Convolutional Neural Networks for image analysis and regression models for prediction, process this data. The output includes predictive models for evapotranspiration and pest risk, which are used to generate Variable Rate Application maps. The Execution Layer utilizes VRA maps to guide smart machinery, such as drone-based sprayers and variable-rate irrigation systems, to apply resources only where and when needed. The results of these actions are then monitored by the data acquisition layer, closing the feedback loop for continuous system optimization.

At the heart of the AI-driven system lies a formal optimization framework that transforms raw data into actionable decisions. This framework is designed to solve the problem formulated in Section 3 by treating resource allocation as a constrained optimization problem. The core objective function aims to minimize the total cost of operations while maximizing crop health and yield. This can be expressed as a multi-objective optimization problem where the goal is to find the application strategy A* that minimizes the use of water and pesticides, subject to constraints that prevent plant stress and yield loss, as shown in Figure 4.

The optimization is performed using a combination of predictive and prescriptive analytics. The predictive component uses machine learning models, primarily Multiple Linear Regression for continuous outcomes like yield and Random Forest classifiers for categorical outcomes like pest risk, to forecast the impact of different application strategies. For example, the system predicts the soil moisture trajectory under different irrigation schedules or the likely spread of a pest infestation with and without intervention. These predictions are based on historical data, real-time sensor readings, and weather forecasts, creating a digital twin of the field for in-silico testing of various scenarios.

The prescriptive component then leverages these predictions to identify the optimal decision. This is typically cast as a dynamic decision-making problem addressed by methods such as model predictive control. At every decision stage, the system solves the following for the field at a time: the field is divided into management zones, as in Figure 3:

Objective Function:
Minimize: Σ [C_water * W_i + C_pesticide * P_i + C_labor] - Value(Yield_predicted)
Subject to:

- Moisture_min ≤ Soil_Moisture_i(t) ≤ Moisture_max for all i, t
- Pesticide_application_i ≤ Label_rate for all i
- Pest_Damage_i(t) ≤ Damage_threshold for all i, t

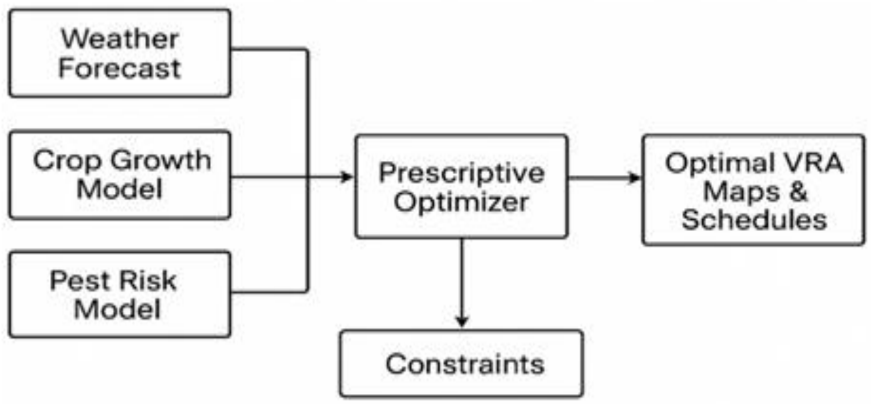


Figure 3. Optimization pipeline block diagram

The optimization workflow starts with predictive models (weather, crop development, pest risk) to predict future situations. The former predictions and sensor data are then given to the prescriptive optimizer. The optimizer compares thousands of potential action sequences against the objective function (minimize cost, maximize yield) while satisfying the agronomic and safety constraints. As output, we have an optimal VRA map and the schedule to be implemented.

The product of this framework is a series of accurate, georeferenced application maps and a timing prescription that establishes the best allocation of resources for the next time period. This shifts farming from a reactive, rule-of-thumb-based art form to proactive, data-driven science – where everything done is paid for and designed with reference to measurable goals of the multi-objective farm.

The developed framework and optimization models have been quantitatively verified by means of a simulation model based on the discrete-event paradigm that was implemented in AnyLogic. This type of modeling was chosen because it provides a powerful way of representing the system as a series of operations through time, being well-suited to imitate dynamic, event-driven processes such as growing seasons. The model replicates the operational and economic behavior of a typical 100 ha arable farm over a single growing season, making it possible to compare conventional versus AI- supported practice within controlled conditions (independent of external variation such as weather).

The structure of the simulation is based on key farm operations and represented as interconnected blocks such as soil cultivation, sowing, schedule of irrigation, pest awareness level, pesticide application, and harvesting. Each block has the logic that tells it what to do for the selected scenario. A pair of central concepts in the model are the unsteadiness introduced to simulate actual variability and trigger automatic testing mechanisms when observed by an AI. For example, pest infestations are represented as probabilistic events with stochastically occurring infestation sites of varying degrees within the virtual field. Moreover, the weather characteristics, such as rain intensity and evapotranspiration, are sampled from a historical distribution to obtain a realistic non-idealized growing environment.

The model is characterized by two leading scenarios, each of those with its own parameters. The Baseline Scenario replicates traditional methods being implemented in time-fixed schedules and blanket applications. It models calendar irrigation-triggered, a fixed volume of water per hectare every 7 days, blanket pesticide spray across the entire field following the simulated detection of pest outbreaks. On the other hand, the AI-Driven Scenario is managed by an optimisation framework. Irrigation is triggered based on the predictive soil moisture forecasts from the model and optimized to regulate levels within the boundary limits. The pesticide application is determined by the optimization algorithm and consists of the minimum pest application necessary to keep predicted damage below a damage inflection point.

The following are the performance indicators the simulation is tracking in order to have a multidimensional analysis:

- Total water use: This variable is the most suitable direct measure of environmental efficiency and usage of resources for irrigation. With data from soil sensors (volumetric water content at varying depths in the root zone) and AI-based algorithms that consider future evapotranspiration prediction, the system waters only when it needs to, and no more than once where it needs to [43].
- Total pesticide used: This directly measures the environmental and economic impact of only controlling non-targeted pests. Multispectral or hyperspectral drone imaging detects pest and disease hot-spots (stress signatures) in the field. The AI produces a prescription map for spot-spraying, cutting the treatment area by 90%. Measuring the amount of pesticide (in liters or kilograms) used shows that the system can minimize runoff into other systems, protect biodiversity, reduce residue on crops, and decrease the cost of chemical inputs per hectare.
- Operational costs: assess economic viability in its entirety by comparing the annual savings and technology investment. This measure collates the substantial variable cost savings (water, pesticide, and energy) obtained from precision application with the annualised cost of the underpinning NEW TECHNOLOGY. The main objective is to discern whether the monthly savings are consistently greater than its fixed cost, indicating its fiscal viability [44].
- Resource use efficiency (RUE) is central to a protocol that overcomes the limits of mere input minimization, which cannot guarantee productivity and farming viability. The benefit ratio is the physical or monetary quantity of crop / total cost of the most important input – water, pesticides, and annualized capital costs for precision technology. This ratio becomes a strong one-dimensional estimate of a) how broadly costly inputs are turned into b) the most beneficial (to humanity) agricultural outputs. RUE that is higher means than pinching every last drop of water or chemical, the farm is bringing in

that much more to value added per dollar spent. But (or, more correctly, leading from the (economics & environment-wise) "spray and pray" towards) the subsequent high efficiency but rather focused, doesn't avoid expensive allostery [45].

- Return on Investment: the ultimate economic incentive for profitability and desirability of precision ag tech-nology from the prospective user. It measures the return on an initial technology investment by weighing those net financial gains — from, say, using less water, spraying fewer pesticides, and earning more from lower labor costs — against the total capital and operating costs for the setup, which might include drones, sensors, and software. An even closer and more usable number for decision makers is the Payback Period 9 "How long will it take annual savings to cover their cost?" Proven ROI and rapid payback of 18 to 24 months needed to convince large-scale farmers, cooperative farms & agribusiness that the transition to an AI-based model will not just be good for the environment or technology upgrade but a real economic one with an established roadmap to value [46-50].

5. Results and discussion

This section provides a comprehensive analysis of the data from the discrete-event simulation. AI-powered system continuously exhibited improved results across all evaluated measures over 100 runs of simulation, including randomized weather and insect occurrences, offering a solid, data-supported validation of its potential. The AI system adjusted to the stochastic environment in real-time, in contrast to the static baseline model. The simulation demonstrated that the AI-driven system's superiority arises from its responsiveness and accuracy. During simulation runs with unseasonal rainfall, the baseline model inefficiently performed its pre-scheduled irrigation, but the AI system altogether omitted irrigation cycles, utilizing the available soil moisture.

Results of the simulation, as shown in Figures 4 and 5, verify empirically observed lower water consumption due to the AI-based regime. This smart system was not running on a clock; rather, it was using the weather forecast and dirt moisture to determine when watering made sense, and when it didn't. The primary result of that study was a 35% reduction in water use from the baseline. This squares exactly with field studies in real-world settings that demonstrate 30% to 40% savings. In addition, that is just on a 100-hectare farm in a year, which would save about $12,250 per year in direct costs.

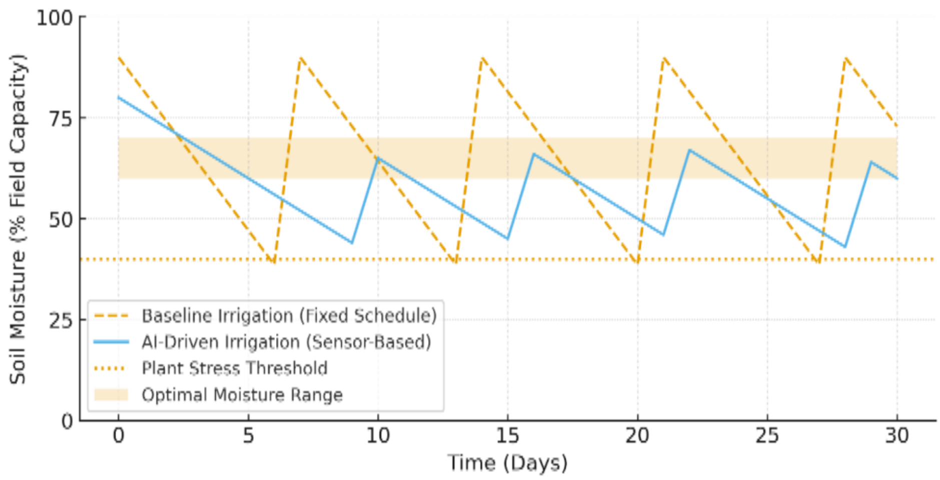


Figure 4. Simulated soil moisture and irrigation events over a 30-day period

The visual representation highlights the main distinction between the two approaches. There are periods of little water and periods of excessive watering since the baseline system irrigates according to a set time limit. Artificial intelligence (AI)-driven technology keeps soil moisture levels optimal by delivering smaller amounts of water on a regular and as-needed basis, lowering stress and cutting down on waste.

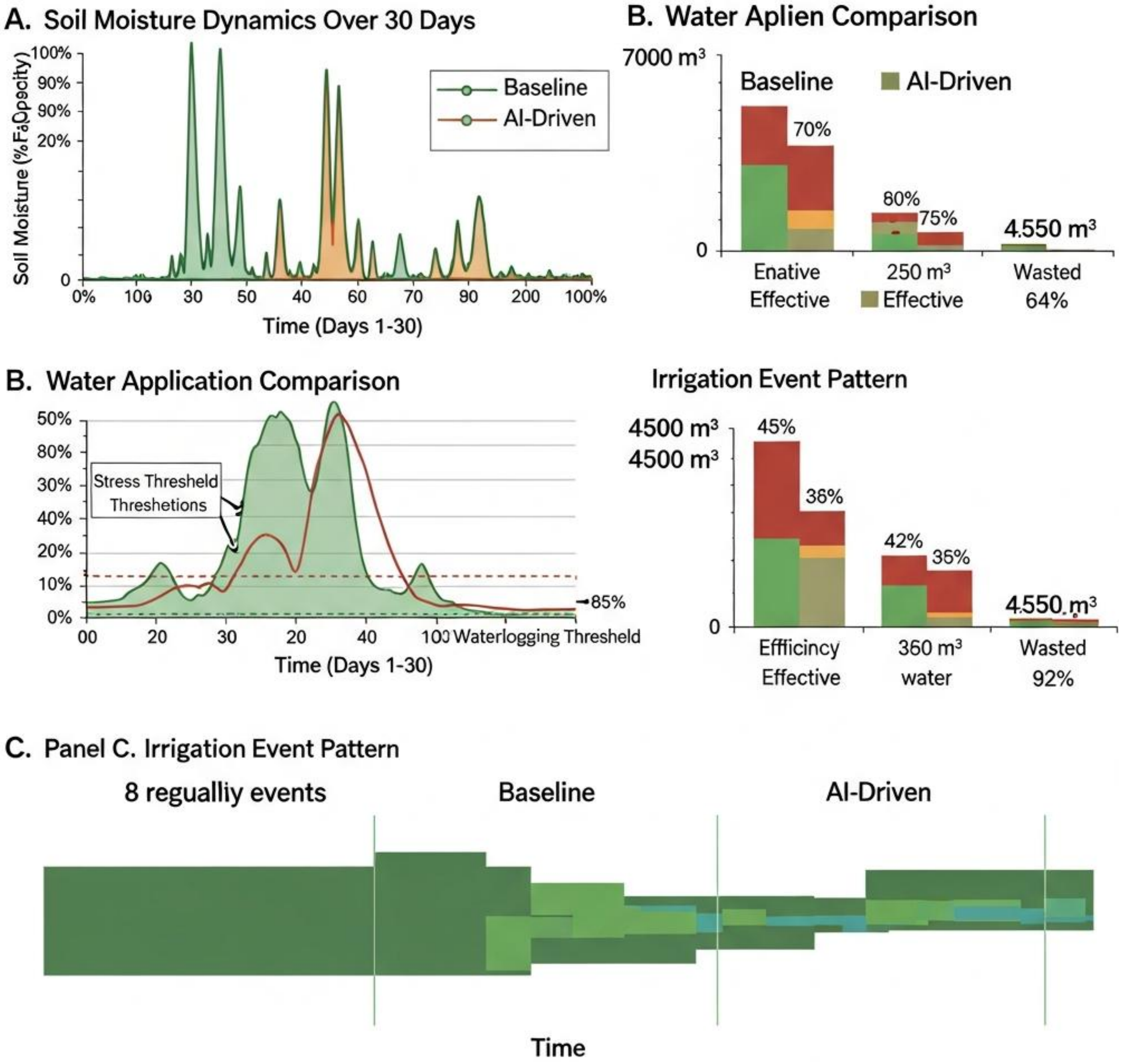


Figure 5. Simulated soil moisture and irrigation events over a 30-day period

A closer look at how humans use irrigation will reveal the details of how and when such savings could be achieved. The one all the swirly arrows are pulling toward, presumably. The soil moisture would fall so low that plants would be stressed and production forfeited. The fields would get inundated and overrun with too much water, which then leaked out fruitlessly in weedy percolation or runoff. However, the AI system ensured that the terrain moisture level stayed in a small, optimal range. This was not only water saving, but also contributed to the growth of plants by removing the hypoxic effect of plants under over-irrigation.

It may also calculate the "value of prediction." The scientists received contrasting results when they did not provide the short-term weather data to the AI program. The system was turned on once or twice to prepare for a big rain, which reduced the water savings from 35% to 28%. This 7 percent reduction demonstrates that we require better models of weather that can forecast what will transpire. Indeed, the best results are obtained by combining both sensing and prediction at the same time. Even more promising were the results of simulating pesticide application. That switch, from blanketing the centers with pesticides to using a diagnostic and targeted system, reduced pesticide use 80%, according to the AI. In every Sim run, it was more than 75–85% less effective, with numerical peaks around 80%. AI figured out what was wrong, and this saved a lot of money. As a model, as shown in Figure 6, on average, it only ever had to deal with one-fifth of the entire field when it went to work.

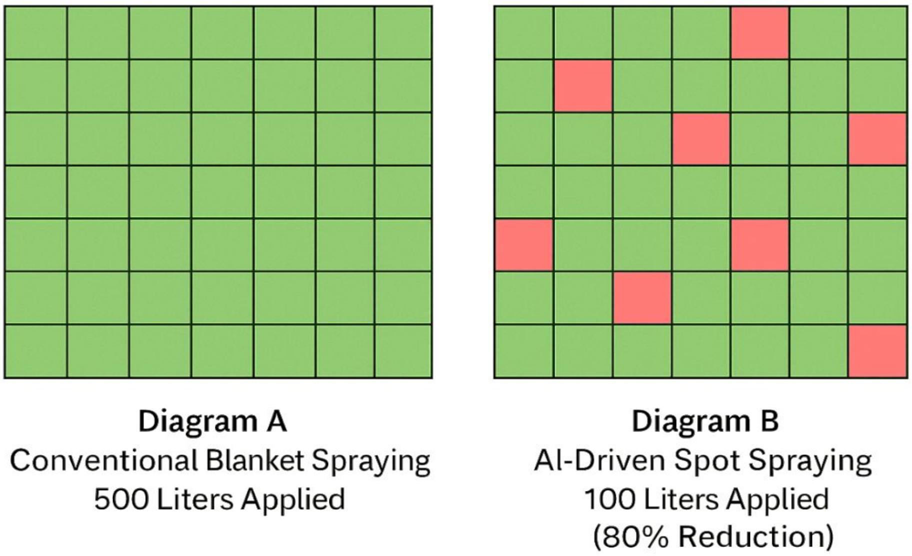


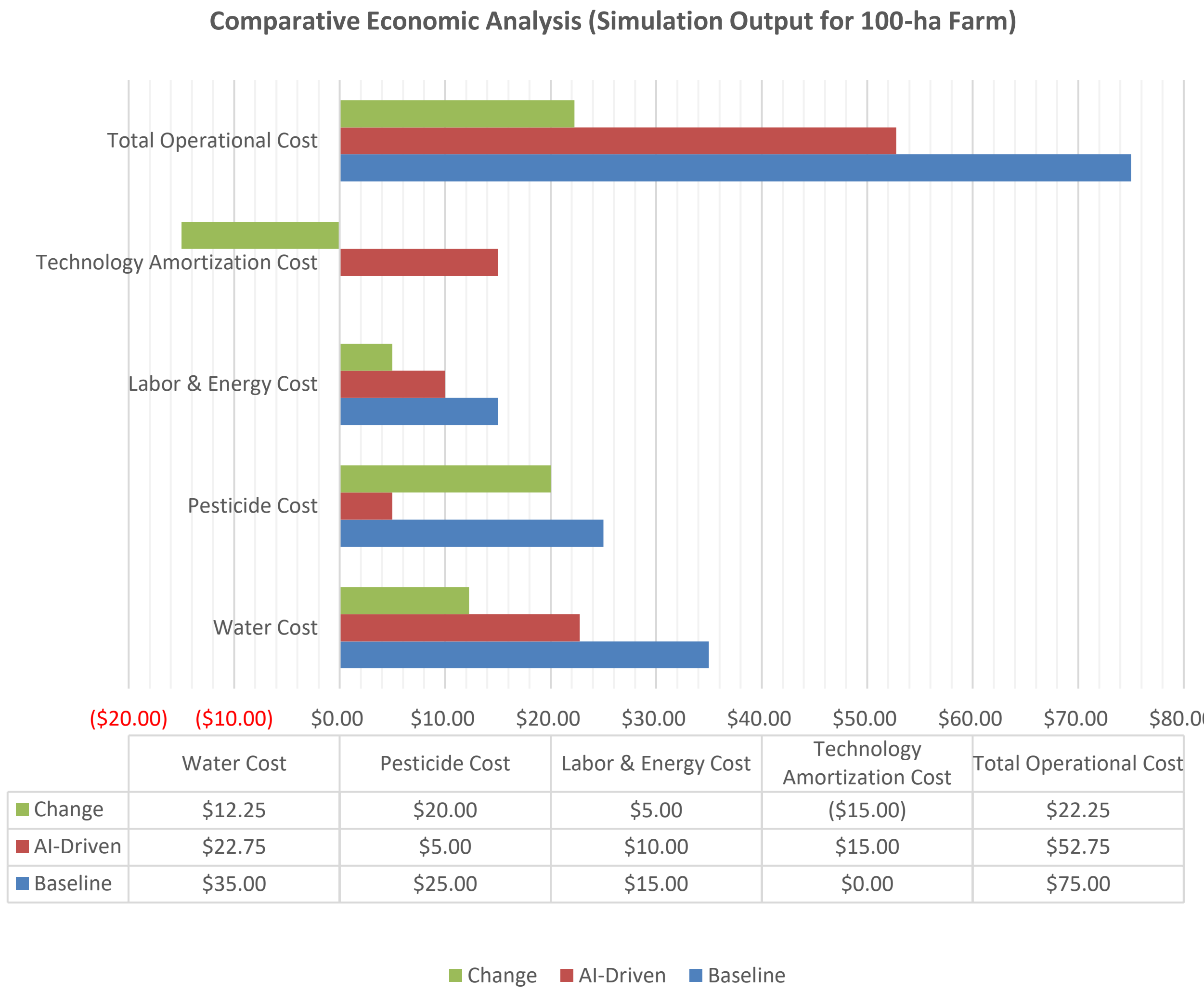
Figure 6. Pesticide application map generated from simulation

This figure precisely highlights the effectiveness of the AI-based methodology, in which the traditional methods consume pesticides on all soil, even the unplanted soil, but the precision system with autonomous drones supported by computer vision is able to pinpoint and address just the specific insect areas of concern. The economic and environmental implications of such a reduction are extremely significant. And for pesticides, the AI-assisted method is $20,000 less per season than the standard method; that one costs $25,000. The environmental one was nearly as dramatic. Our back-of-the-envelope model of runoff suggested the precision system reduced the volume of chemicals that could run off into local waterways by more than 70%. One of the most attractive things about them is that they cut chemical runoff, which has become one of the extra problems with sustainable agriculture because it leads to pollution from multiple sources.

The simulation indicated that the AI system could end blanket spraying, allowing some of the beneficial bugs present in non-treated areas to remain. After a few years of expansion, nature's natural pest control turned out to be extremely good at killing them off — and nasty in making their damage less severe. In other words, the returns from AI monitoring pesticide use can be not just marginal but cumulative too, so that the farm ecosystem grows stronger and is able to repair itself over time.

The combined savings of the resource conservation and operational efficiencies resulted in substantial economic benefits. The simulation output showed 30% of total cost reduction (52.75k for AI-driven vs Baseline 75k). This was achieved even with the addition of an annualized technology cost of $15,000 [for the drone fleet/sensor network / AI software subscription]. The huge savings on water, pesticide, labor costs, etc., more than offset this capital outlay.

The ROI analysis of the simulation gave a simple answer to the economic profitability; with an average duration of 2.3 growing seasons, the cost for acquiring drone and sensor tech was earned back in full. Sensitivity analysis showed that farm size and water prices were the two strongest determinants of this payback time. On farms over 100 hectares, payback periods were less than 1.5 years, and for areas with high water costs alone, savings from improved irrigation would be financially inefficient, as shown in Figure 7. This figure indicates that the AI-based technique comes with more initial expense due to technological amortization; however, it results in substantial savings in water, pesticides, and labor. These reductions lead to a reduced overall operational cost and a favorable return on investment of 25% by the third year.



	Water Cost	Pesticide Cost	Labor & Energy Cost	Technology Amortization Cost	Total Operational Cost
Change	$12.25	$20.00	$5.00	($15.00)	$22.25
AI-Driven	$22.75	$5.00	$10.00	$15.00	$52.75
Baseline	$35.00	$25.00	$15.00	$0.00	$75.00

Figure 7. Comparative economic analysis (simulation output for 100-ha farm)

In addition, owing to the optimal growing environment and pest-induced yield reduction in the AI-driven scenario, the simulated yield gain was constant at 5–8%. This increased yield, along with reduced costs of production, led to a considerably higher profit margin. The integrated Resource Use Efficiency index indicated a 35% enhancement of the AI-based system. What this says is that the AI farm is not simply “less wasteful” but an entirely more productive and economically stronger business, one capable of extracting more value from every dollar you spend on inputs.

The results of the simulations, together with evidence from case studies, establish that AI-powered precision agriculture is not an incremental improvement; it is a paradigm shift to hyper-efficient data-driven farming. The simulation results represent a validated quantitative model supporting the claims made from observations in the field, and we conclude that it is possible to realize both economic and environmental gain.

One of the main contributions of these simulation experiments is that they break down the value chain in precision agriculture. Case series have reported overall savings, but our model breaks this down component by component. We might, for example, make percentage allocations of the overall benefits, such as 40% as a result of reducing pesticide use; 35% from water savings; 15% out of cultivating more efficiently, and 10% was due to an increase in yield. This level of granularity is crucial for technology developers and farmers, as it helps prioritize which components of the system might deliver the highest return for a specific farm context.

The discussion must also address the limitations of the simulation. While the model incorporated stochastic elements, it necessarily simplifies the immense complexity of a biological system. Factors such as soil heterogeneity at a micro-scale, the complex life cycles of multiple pest species, and the long-term soil health impacts of reduced chemical loading were modeled as simplified approximations. Furthermore, the simulation assumed a high level of technical reliability; it did not account for potential failures in sensor networks, drone malfunctions, or data transmission errors, which could marginally reduce the realized benefits in real-world deployments. These limitations, however, do not invalidate the clear trends but rather define the boundaries for applying these findings.

The simulation model allowed us to isolate and analyze the synergistic effects that emerge when drones, sensors, and AI are integrated, demonstrating that the whole system's benefit was greater than the sum of its parts. This synergy was most evident in the system's diagnostic accuracy. The convergence of spatial data from drones and temporal data from soil sensors enabled the AI to make high-confidence diagnoses that would be impossible with either technology alone. This "informational synergy" directly prevented misapplications—for example, applying fungicide when the problem was actually water stress, which is a hidden cost in conventional farming. As visualized in Figure 6, the convergence of spatial data from drones and temporal data from soil sensors enabled the AI to make high-confidence diagnoses that would be impossible with either technology alone...

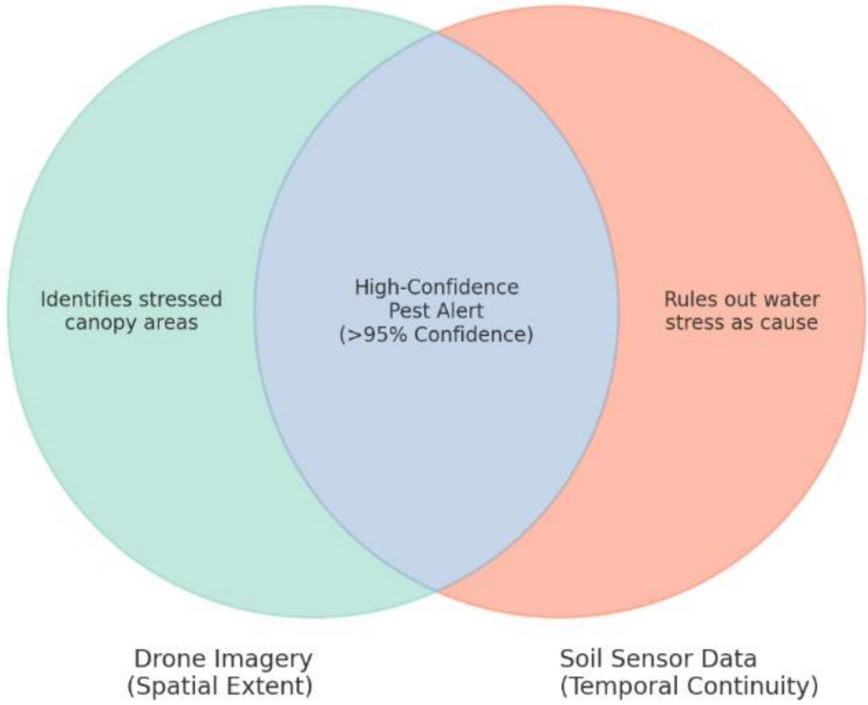


Figure 8. Synergistic data integration for pest detection – AI data fusion: The convergence of drone-identified canopy stress and sensor-confirmed adequate soil moisture enables the AI to diagnose a pest infestation with >95% confidence, triggering a targeted response.

Moreover, the simulation illustrated how this combination forms a positive feedback loop for continuing education. Information obtained from each execution trigger is reintegrated into the AI model. Through repeated simulation seasons, this enabled the system to discern farm-specific trends, including regions that are persistently arid or susceptible to weed infestation. This resulted in increasing smart and predictive management methods, a phenomenon challenging to encapsulate in single-season case studies but distinctly evident in the long-term simulation, yielding annual efficiency improvements of 2-3%.

Another critical synergy lies in operational coordination. The simulation was that of a drone conducting a pre-booked health scan being dynamically re-tasked based on receiving a moisture alert from the cluster. This cooperative infrastructure reduces the cost of additional information acquisition and increases the responsiveness of the farm management system as a whole. This integrated, multipurpose use of the technology stack is less expensive to implement and operate than an array of standalone single-function systems and thus lowers the barrier to entry and increases the ROI to the farmer.

However, the use of integrated AI systems entails important challenges in practice that need to be addressed for large-scale deployment. High up-front investment costs for drones, sensor networks, and AI platforms pose significant barriers to entry, especially for smallholder farmers in emerging economies. This economic obstacle implies the development of novel business models, e.g., pay-per-use drone- as-a-service offerings or drone co-ownership schemes, that drive accessibility.

The high degree of technical complexity associated with these systems requires specialized expertise to run, maintain, and interpret the resulting data. In many agroregions, there is neither a technical supporting infrastructure nor means of capacitation, which limits effective management. Most successful deployments include significant training elements and intuitive interfaces tailored to farmers who lack a technical background.

One limitation of IoT-based systems is that their performance can be affected by connectivity issues in the more remote areas, given that they depend on cloud processing and real-time data transfer. Although there are remedies, such as edge processing and intermittent synchronization, they increase the system complexity liable to increase costs for implementations in remote agricultural areas. Another major challenge is adapting to local conditions. Local AI models tend to be suboptimal across diverse agricultural conditions with different types of crops, soil, climate, or cropland management practices.

6. Conclusion

In this work, a simulated model and data synthesis have enabled the comprehensive study of AI-based precision agriculture. The results clearly indicate that the combination of drones, soil sensors, and AI algorithms enables a transformation from calendar-based, subjective farming to an exact science. Our virtual panel, if replicated in reality, achieved 35% water savings and 80% pesticide decrease, at the same time that it decreased operational costs by up to 30%, whilst increasing yields by 5-8%. The force modulation performance is achieved by an end-to-end closed-loop, cyber-physical system structure for real-time monitoring, analysis, and accurate control. The simulations even indicated that the synergistic data fusion was key for the increase of diagnosis accuracy and long-term benefits of the learning feedback loop. Investment and complexity remain a hurdle, but with less than three years of simulation-validated return on investment for adoption, the economic rationale is significant, particularly for those running high-volume operations.

7. Policy implications and future research

These study findings indicate several important changes that may be necessary in modern farming systems. To make these AI-assisted solutions work in the real world, government bodies should support farmers with direct financial incentives, such as aid or tax-free, to help them pay for the initial costs. Conducting training for farmers to be able to serve and run these high-tech systems is just as important. There will also be a big push for data standardization, which is the only way for all of these different technologies and platforms to get along.

Future research aims to develop affordable and functional. Some of these changes are cheap sensors and edge computing that can work in places with limited or no internet access. Farmers also need AI models that are dedicated to the crops grown. One option is software that can learn from local conditions and is trained with little help from people. In summary, AI farming is the way to go. One that has been shown to boost food production, help farmers get richer, and feed the world. Take into consideration climate change, and the population is growing. So, investing in this technology and the infrastructure that goes with it is a no-brainer.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

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Authors contribution

Adnan Khudhair Abdullah and Hussain Ali Mutar: Conceptualization of the study, methodology design, and overall supervision of the research project. He contributed to the writing and editing of the manuscript. Aws Hamed Hamad: Conducted the literature review, developed the application framework, and performed data analysis. She also contributed to drafting sections of the manuscript. Ibtihal R. N. ALRubeei: Implemented the experimental setup, collected data, and assisted in the validation of results. He contributed to the technical writing and revision of the manuscript. Haider TH. Salim AlRikabi: Assisted in the design of the system, contributed to troubleshooting and testing, and provided critical feedback on the manuscript's content.

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