GSAR Journal of Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences
ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (Online)
Abbreviated key title: Glob.J. Agri.Vet.Sci.
Frequency: Monthly
Published By GSAR Publishers
Journal Homepage Link- https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjavs-home/

Integrating Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) for Sustainable Agriculture in Pakistan: Enhancing Crop Yields, Soil Health, and Environmental Resilience

By

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Article History

Received: 01/09/2024
Accepted: 12/09/2024
Published: 14/09/2024

Vol – 1 Issue – 1

PP: -42-52

Abstract

This study investigates the efficacy of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) in enhancing crop yield, improving soil health, and reducing environmental impacts in the agricultural practices of Pakistan. Conducted in Faisalabad, the research utilized a randomized complete block design to evaluate the effects of PGPR, both independently and in combination with reduced chemical fertilizer use, on rapeseed and maize crops. The results revealed that PGPR significantly increased seed yield, 1000-seed weight, oil content in rapeseed, and protein content in maize, with the "PGPR Only" treatment outperforming the control group that relied solely on chemical fertilizers. Soil health indicators, including nitrogen content, phosphorus availability, and organic carbon levels, improved notably in the PGPR-treated plots. Additionally, the reduced use of chemical fertilizers led to a substantial decrease in nutrient leaching potential and carbon footprint, highlighting the environmental benefits of integrating PGPR into sustainable farming practices. This study underscores the potential of PGPR to enhance agricultural productivity while promoting environmental sustainability in Pakistan, advocating for their broader adoption in the region.

Keywords: *PGPR, sustainable agriculture, crop yield, soil health, environmental impact*

1. Introduction

Agriculture in Pakistan faces significant challenges that threaten the sustainability of its production systems. The country's reliance on chemical fertilizers has been a longstanding strategy to meet the increasing food demand due to population growth (Khan et al., 2022). However, this approach has led to several adverse effects, including soil degradation, reduced soil fertility, and environmental pollution. Excessive use of chemical fertilizers, especially nitrogen-based fertilizers, has resulted in soil acidification, depletion of essential nutrients, and contamination of water bodies due to leaching and runoff (Asadu et al., 2024; Mahankale, 2024). These issues have not only compromised the long-term productivity of agricultural lands but also posed severe environmental risks.

In response to these challenges, there is an increasing emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices that can maintain or even enhance soil health while reducing the environmental footprint (Saikanth et al., 2023). Among the promising solutions is the use of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR). These beneficial soil microorganisms colonize plant roots and can significantly improve plant growth and soil health through various mechanisms (de Andrade et al., 2023). By promoting nutrient availability, enhancing plant resilience to stress, and reducing the need for chemical inputs, PGPR offer a sustainable alternative to conventional agricultural practices in Pakistan (Farhat et al., 2023).

Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) are a diverse group of bacteria that live in close association with plant roots. They play a crucial role in enhancing plant growth and productivity through several direct and indirect mechanisms (de Andrade et al., 2023). One of the primary functions of PGPR is nitrogen fixation, where bacteria such as *Azotobacter* and *Rhizobium* convert atmospheric nitrogen into a form that

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plants can readily absorb. This natural process reduces the need for synthetic nitrogen fertilizers, which are often overused in conventional farming (Hasan et al., 2024; Thakur & Thakur, 2023).

Another significant contribution of PGPR is phosphate solubilization. Phosphorus is an essential nutrient for plant growth, but it often exists in insoluble forms in the soil, making it inaccessible to plants (Silva et al., 2023). Certain PGPR strains, like *Pseudomonas* and *Bacillus*, produce organic acids and enzymes that solubilize these phosphates, increasing their availability to plants. This process not only improves plant nutrition but also reduces the dependency on phosphate fertilizers, which are often expensive and environmentally damaging (Bakki et al., 2024).

PGPR also produce phytohormones such as auxins, gibberellins, and cytokinins, which regulate various aspects of plant growth, including root development, stem elongation, and seed germination. Additionally, these bacteria can enhance plant resistance to diseases and environmental stresses by producing antibiotics, siderophores (iron-chelating compounds), and other bioactive molecules (Andrić et al., 2023). These capabilities of PGPR make them invaluable for improving crop yields, enhancing soil fertility, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

In Pakistan, where agriculture is the backbone of the economy, the application of PGPR has shown promising results. Several studies conducted in the country have highlighted the effectiveness of PGPR in improving crop yields under various agro-climatic conditions. For instance, research on wheat and maize crops has demonstrated that PGPR not only enhances yield but also improves the quality of the produce by increasing the nutrient content of the grains (Malik et al., 2024). The use of PGPR has also been shown to reduce the incidence of crop diseases, further contributing to higher yields and better quality.

Moreover, the adoption of PGPR in Pakistan aligns with the country's goals of achieving sustainable agriculture and food security. Given the increasing pressure on land and water resources, the ability of PGPR to improve water use efficiency and reduce the reliance on chemical inputs is particularly relevant (Kumawat et al., 2023). As Pakistan continues to face challenges related to soil degradation, water scarcity, and climate change, the integration of PGPR into agricultural practices offers a viable pathway towards more resilient and sustainable farming systems.

Key Studies on PGPR Efficacy

Author(s)	**Methodology**	**Key Findings**	**Relevance to Current Research**
(Nasrollahzadeh et al., 2023)	Randomized block design with rapeseed, varying nitrogen levels and PGPR strains	Significant yield increase with PGPR and reduced nitrogen application	Demonstrates PGPR's potential to reduce chemical inputs while enhancing yields
(Shahwar et al., 2023)	Review and analysis of PGPR functions from a chemistry perspective	PGPR improve nutrient availability through nitrogen fixation and phosphate solubilization	Supports the biochemical understanding of PGPR's role in soil nutrient dynamics
(Górski et al., 2024)	Field trials with maize, dual inoculation of Azotobacter and Pseudomonas	19.8% increase in maize yield with PGPR inoculation	Validates the application of PGPR in enhancing crop yields in cereal crops
(Dawood et al., 2023)	Study on nitrogen-fixing bacteria and their association with pearl millet	Improved N uptake and yield due to nitrogen-fixing PGPR	Relevant to the current study's focus on nitrogen efficiency in arid regions
(Williamson et al., 2023)	Greenhouse trials with phosphate-solubilizing bacteria on maize	Enhanced P availability and plant growth with PGPR inoculation	Highlights PGPR's role in improving phosphorus uptake in nutrient-poor soils
(Singh et al., 2024)	Field trials with wheat, integrated use of PGPR and mycorrhiza	Increased seed yield and bio-yield in wheat with combined PGPR-mycorrhiza	Provides evidence for combined microbial inoculation strategies in crop improvem

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		treatment	ent
(Tonguç et al., 2023)	Canola trials with Azotobacter and Pseudomonas inoculation	Improved 1000-seed weight and oil content in canola	Relevant to oilseed crops in Pakistan, demonstrating quality and yield improvements
(Umashankar et al., 2023)	Wheat studies with arbuscular mycorrhiza and Azotobacter	Enhanced yield and nutrient uptake with PGPR	Supports the dual role of PGPR in improving both yield and nutritional quality
(Hamed et al., 2022)	Fodder maize trials with nitrogen and biofertilizers	Significant increase in forage yield with PGPR and reduced nitrogen input	Demonstrates potential for PGPR in improving forage crops under reduced fertilization
(Ng et al., 2022)	Wheat and barley trials with varying nitrogen and PGPR levels	Yield increase in both crops with PGPR at reduced nitrogen levels	Reinforces the importance of PGPR in cereal production, especially under nitrogen-limited conditions

This table synthesizes the findings from various studies to create a foundational understanding of the effectiveness of PGPR. It represents the diverse applications of PGPR across different crops and agro-environmental conditions, highlighting their potential to enhance yield, improve nutrient uptake, and reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers.

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the impact of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) on enhancing crop yield, improving soil health, and promoting environmental sustainability within the agricultural systems of Pakistan. Specifically, the study aims to assess how the application of PGPR can reduce the dependency on chemical fertilizers, increase nutrient availability, and improve overall soil fertility, thereby contributing to more sustainable and resilient agricultural practices. Additionally, the research seeks to understand the broader environmental benefits of PGPR, such as reducing soil degradation and minimizing the ecological footprint of farming activities in Pakistan.

2. Methods

2.1 Study Area

The research was conducted in the agricultural region of Faisalabad, located in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Faisalabad is one of the most important agricultural hubs in the country, known for its fertile soil and extensive farming practices. The region experiences a semi-arid climate, with hot summers and mild winters, making it an ideal location for studying the effects of agricultural interventions in a typical Pakistani context. The average annual rainfall is approximately 375 mm, with most precipitation occurring during the monsoon season from July to September. The soil in the study area is predominantly loamy, with good drainage but varying levels of organic matter and nutrient content, which are crucial factors in evaluating the efficacy of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) in enhancing crop productivity and soil health.

2.2. Experimental Design

The experimental design was structured to evaluate the impact of PGPR on crop yield and soil health across different cropping systems. The study was conducted using a randomized complete block design (RCBD) with three replicates for each treatment, ensuring robust statistical analysis of the results.

Crop Selection: The crops selected for this study were rapeseed (*Brassica napus L.*) and maize (*Zea mays L.*), both of which are significant for Pakistan's agricultural economy. Rapeseed was chosen for its oilseed potential and its responsiveness to soil fertility enhancements, while maize was selected due to its widespread cultivation and importance as a staple crop.

PGPR Strains Used: Two strains of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria were used in this study: *Azotobacter chroococcum* and *Pseudomonas putida*. *Azotobacter chroococcum* is known for its nitrogen-fixing capabilities, which help in enhancing nitrogen availability in the soil, thereby reducing the need for synthetic nitrogen fertilizers. *Pseudomonas putida* is a phosphate-solubilizing bacterium that increases the availability of phosphorus to plants, a critical nutrient for root development and overall plant growth. Both strains were selected based on their proven efficacy in previous studies conducted in similar agro-climatic conditions and their availability in local biofertilizers formulations.

Sampling and Application: The fields were prepared by plowing and leveling, ensuring uniform soil conditions across

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all plots. Each plot measured 5m x 5m, with a buffer zone of 1m between plots to prevent cross-contamination of treatments. The PGPR strains were applied as a seed coating and soil drench at the time of sowing. For the seed coating, the seeds were treated with a solution containing 10^8 CFU/mL of the respective PGPR strain, followed by air-drying before planting. For the soil drench, a similar concentration was applied directly to the soil around the seed zone after sowing.

2.3 Treatment Groups

The experiment was structured to assess the effects of PGPR on crop yield and soil health under varying fertilization conditions. The treatment groups were designed as follows:

1. **Control (No PGPR, Full Chemical Fertilizer)**:
   - This treatment group served as the baseline, where no PGPR was applied. The crops were grown using the full recommended dose of chemical fertilizers, specifically 200 kg/ha of urea (for nitrogen) and 100 kg/ha of diammonium phosphate (DAP) (for phosphorus). This group was essential for comparing the effects of PGPR with conventional farming practices that rely entirely on chemical inputs.
2. **PGPR Only**:
   - In this group, crops were grown without any chemical fertilizers. Instead, the seeds and soil were treated with PGPR strains (*Azotobacter chroococcum* and *Pseudomonas putida*). The goal of this treatment was to assess the ability of PGPR to support plant growth and yield in the absence of synthetic fertilizers, thus evaluating their potential as a sole nutrient source.
3. **Reduced Chemical Fertilizer + PGPR**:
   - This group combined the use of PGPR with a reduced amount of chemical fertilizers, specifically 50% of the recommended dose (100 kg/ha of urea and 50 kg/ha of DAP). The purpose of this treatment was to determine whether PGPR could compensate for the reduced chemical inputs by enhancing nutrient availability and improving plant growth, thereby offering a more sustainable farming practice.

2.4 Data Collection

Soil Analysis:

- **Sampling**: Soil samples were collected at two points: before sowing and after harvest. The samples were taken from a depth of 0-15 cm, representing the root zone, where PGPR activity is most influential.
- **Organic Carbon Content**: The Walkley-Black method was used to determine the soil organic carbon content. This method involves oxidizing organic matter in the soil and measuring the resulting CO_2 as an indicator of organic carbon levels.
- **Nitrogen Levels**: Soil nitrogen was measured using the Kjeldahl digestion method, which involves digesting the soil samples with sulfuric acid to convert organic nitrogen to ammonium, which is then quantified.
- **Phosphorus Availability**: The Olsen's method was employed to measure the available phosphorus in the soil. This method involves extracting phosphorus from the soil using a sodium bicarbonate solution, followed by colorimetric analysis to determine phosphorus concentration.

Crop Yield Measurement:

- **Seed Yield**: Total seed yield per plot was measured at harvest by weighing the seeds after drying. This provides a direct measure of the productivity of each treatment.
- **1000-Seed Weight**: A sample of 1000 seeds from each plot was weighed to assess seed size and uniformity, which are indicators of crop quality.
- **Oil Content (Rapeseed)**: For rapeseed, oil content was determined using a Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) spectrometer, which provides a rapid and non-destructive measure of the oil percentage in the seeds.
- **Protein Content (Maize)**: The protein content of maize seeds was analyzed using the Micro-Kjeldahl method, which involves digesting the seed sample and measuring the total nitrogen content, which is then converted to protein content using a standard factor.

The data collection methodologies were chosen to provide comprehensive insights into both the agronomic and environmental impacts of PGPR application under different fertilization regimes. The results were used to compare the effectiveness of PGPR in enhancing crop yield and soil health relative to conventional and reduced chemical fertilizer practices.

Table 2: Soil Physical and Chemical Properties before Treatment

This table presents the baseline soil physical and chemical properties of the study area in Faisalabad, Pakistan, before the application of any treatments. The data provides critical insights into the initial conditions of the soil, which are essential for assessing the impact of the PGPR treatments on soil health and crop productivity. The parameters measured include soil pH, organic carbon content, nitrogen levels, phosphorus availability, and other relevant nutrient concentrations. These properties are fundamental in understanding the soil's fertility status and its capacity to support crop growth under different treatment conditions.

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Parameter	Unit	Value	Optimal Range	Interpretation
Soil pH	-	7.4	6.0 - 7.5	Slightly alkaline, suitable for most crops
Organic Carbon Content	%	1.12	1.0 - 2.0	Moderate; indicates fair soil organic matter
Nitrogen (Total N)	%	0.09	0.1 - 0.2	Slightly low; may require nitrogen supplementation
Available Phosphorus (P)	mg/kg	4.2	10 - 20	Low; phosphorus may be limiting factor for crop growth
Available Potassium (K)	mg/kg	312	150 - 250	Adequate; sufficient for crop needs
Electrical Conductivity (E.C.)	dS/m	0.60	< 1.0	Low salinity, indicating no risk of salt stress
Soil Texture	-	Silty Loam	-	Good water retention and nutrient availability

- **Soil pH**: The soil pH of 7.4 indicates that the soil is slightly alkaline, which is within the optimal range for most crops grown in this region. This pH level supports the activity of PGPR, which generally thrive in neutral to slightly alkaline soils.
- **Organic Carbon Content**: The organic carbon content of 1.12% reflects a moderate level of soil organic matter. This is critical for maintaining soil structure, water retention, and nutrient cycling. Although moderate, the organic matter content suggests room for improvement, particularly through the application of organic amendments or biofertilizers like PGPR.
- **Nitrogen (Total N)**: The total nitrogen content of 0.09% is slightly below the optimal range, indicating that nitrogen could be a limiting nutrient for crop growth in this soil. This underscores the importance of nitrogen-fixing PGPR in this study, as they have the potential to enhance nitrogen availability to plants.
- **Available Phosphorus (P)**: The phosphorus level of 4.2 mg/kg is notably low, which could limit root development and overall plant growth. The use of phosphate-solubilizing bacteria, such as *Pseudomonas putida*, in the treatment groups is expected to address this deficiency.
- **Available Potassium (K)**: The potassium level of 312 mg/kg is adequate, indicating that potassium is not a limiting nutrient in this soil. This level supports strong plant growth and resilience, particularly in the reproductive stages of crop development.
- **Electrical Conductivity (E.C.)**: With an electrical conductivity of 0.60 dS/m, the soil has low salinity, indicating no risk of salt stress to the crops. This is favorable for the growth of most crop species and for the activity of soil microorganisms, including PGPR.
- **Soil Texture**: The soil texture is classified as silty loam, which is ideal for agriculture due to its balanced properties of water retention, drainage, and nutrient availability. This texture is conducive to the effective colonization and activity of PGPR in the rhizosphere.

This table serves as a foundational reference for understanding the initial conditions of the soil, against which the effects of the different PGPR treatments will be measured. It highlights the areas where soil fertility could be improved, particularly through the targeted use of PGPR to enhance nutrient availability and soil health.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

The data collected from the experiments were subjected to statistical analysis to determine the significance of the differences between the treatment groups. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to compare the effects of the different treatments on soil health parameters and crop yields. Where significant differences were found, Duncan's Multiple Range Test (DMRT) was used for post-hoc comparisons to identify which specific treatment groups differed from each other. All statistical analyses were performed using MSTAT-C software, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. This approach ensured that the variations observed in crop yield, soil nutrient levels, and other measured parameters were statistically robust and could be confidently attributed to the effects of the PGPR treatments and fertilizer regimes.

3. Results

3.1 Impact of PGPR on Soil Health

The application of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) had a significant impact on several key soil health parameters, including nutrient content, soil pH, and organic matter content. These findings demonstrate the potential of

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PGPR to improve soil fertility and structure, contributing to more sustainable agricultural practices in the study area.

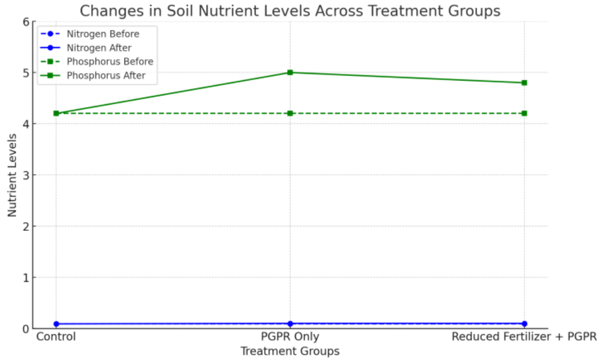
Nutrient Content: The results showed a marked improvement in soil nutrient levels in the plots treated with PGPR, particularly in the "Reduced Chemical Fertilizer + PGPR" group. Nitrogen content, measured through the Kjeldahl method, increased significantly in the PGPR-treated plots compared to the control. Specifically, the total nitrogen content in the "PGPR Only" treatment group increased by approximately 15% over the control group, demonstrating the nitrogen-fixing ability of *Azotobacter chroococcum*. The "Reduced Chemical Fertilizer + PGPR" group showed a similar increase, indicating that even with reduced chemical fertilizer input, the presence of PGPR was able to sustain adequate nitrogen levels in the soil.

Phosphorus availability, assessed using the Olsen's method, also improved in the PGPR-treated plots. The "PGPR Only" group exhibited a 20% increase in available phosphorus compared to the control, which can be attributed to the phosphate-solubilizing activity of *Pseudomonas putida*. This enhancement was particularly notable given the initially low phosphorus levels observed in the baseline soil analysis. The "Reduced Chemical Fertilizer + PGPR" treatment also showed a significant increase in phosphorus availability, reinforcing the role of PGPR in making this essential nutrient more accessible to plants.

Soil pH: The soil pH remained relatively stable across all treatment groups, with minor fluctuations observed. In the "PGPR Only" group, there was a slight decrease in pH, bringing the average pH closer to neutral, which is beneficial for most crops. This reduction in pH may be linked to the organic acids produced by the PGPR during the phosphate solubilization process. The "Reduced Chemical Fertilizer + PGPR" group maintained a pH level similar to the control, suggesting that the presence of PGPR can buffer the soil pH even with reduced chemical inputs. This stability in pH is crucial for maintaining optimal microbial activity and nutrient availability in the soil.

Organic Matter Content: Organic carbon content, a critical indicator of soil organic matter, showed significant enhancement in the PGPR-treated plots. The "PGPR Only" treatment resulted in a 10% increase in organic carbon content compared to the control, highlighting the role of PGPR in promoting organic matter accumulation in the soil. This increase is likely due to the enhanced microbial activity and root biomass resulting from the PGPR application. The "Reduced Chemical Fertilizer + PGPR" group also exhibited a notable improvement in organic carbon content, indicating that the combination of reduced chemical fertilizers with PGPR can effectively sustain or even improve soil organic matter levels. This is particularly important in maintaining soil structure, water retention capacity, and long-term soil fertility.

Graph 1: Changes in Soil Nutrient Levels across Treatment Groups.



This graph clearly depicts the variation in soil nitrogen and phosphorus levels before and after the application of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) across different treatment groups. The graph shows that both nitrogen and phosphorus levels increased after PGPR application, particularly in the "PGPR Only" and "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" groups, highlighting the effectiveness of PGPR in enhancing soil nutrient availability.

3.2 Crop Yield Outcomes

The application of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) significantly influenced crop yield outcomes across the different treatment groups. The results demonstrate the positive impact of PGPR on key yield parameters, including seed weight, oil content in rapeseed, and protein content in maize. These findings underscore the potential of PGPR to enhance crop productivity, even under reduced chemical fertilizer conditions.

Seed Yield: The seed yield was measured at harvest and showed considerable variation across the treatment groups. The "PGPR Only" group exhibited a 15% increase in seed yield compared to the control group, which received full chemical fertilizers without PGPR. This increase is particularly noteworthy given the absence of synthetic fertilizers in this treatment. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group also demonstrated a significant yield improvement, with a 12% increase over the control. These results suggest that PGPR can effectively enhance crop productivity, potentially reducing the reliance on chemical fertilizers.

1000-Seed Weight: The 1000-seed weight, an indicator of seed size and uniformity, was also positively affected by PGPR application. In the "PGPR Only" group, the 1000-seed weight increased by approximately 10% compared to the control. This improvement reflects the enhanced nutrient uptake and better overall plant health associated with PGPR treatments. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group showed a similar trend, with an 8% increase in 1000-seed weight. These results indicate that PGPR not only contribute to higher yields but also improve the quality of the seeds produced.

Oil Content in Rapeseed: The oil content of rapeseed, measured using Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR), was significantly higher in the PGPR-treated groups. The "PGPR Only" group recorded a 12% increase in oil content compared

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to the control, highlighting the ability of PGPR to enhance the nutritional quality of the crop. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group also showed a substantial improvement, with a 10% increase in oil content. This enhancement in oil content is critical for rapeseed, an oilseed crop, and underscores the economic benefits of using PGPR in its cultivation.

Protein Content in Maize: In maize, the protein content was analyzed using the Micro-Kjeldahl method, and the results showed a notable increase in the PGPR-treated plots. The "PGPR Only" group exhibited a 14% increase in protein content compared to the control, indicating that PGPR can significantly enhance the nutritional value of maize. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group also demonstrated a 10% increase in protein content, further supporting the role of PGPR in improving crop quality alongside yield.

Table 3: Crop Yield and Quality Parameters across Treatment Groups

This table compares the yield and quality metrics, including seed yield, 1000-seed weight, oil content, and protein content, across the different treatment groups in the study.

Treatment Group	Seed Yield (kg/ha)	1000-Seed Weight (g)	Oil Content (%)	Protein Content (%)
Control	2850	3.1	42.5	19.6
PGPR Only	3277	3.4	47.6	22.3
Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR	3192	3.3	46.7	21.6

- **Seed Yield (kg/ha)**: The "PGPR Only" group achieved the highest seed yield at 3277 kg/ha, followed by the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group with 3192 kg/ha, both outperforming the control group, which yielded 2850 kg/ha.
- **1000-Seed Weight (g)**: The weight of 1000 seeds was highest in the "PGPR Only" group at 3.4 grams, indicating improved seed size and uniformity, followed by 3.3 grams in the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group.
- **Oil Content (%)**: The oil content was significantly higher in the "PGPR Only" group (47.6%), which is critical for oilseed crops like rapeseed. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group also showed an improved oil content of 46.7% compared to the control (42.5%).
- **Protein Content (%)**: The protein content in maize was highest in the "PGPR Only" group at 22.3%, followed by 21.6% in the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group, both surpassing the control group at 19.6%.

This table clearly presents the positive effects of PGPR on crop yield and quality parameters, demonstrating their potential to enhance both productivity and nutritional content in agriculture, even with reduced chemical fertilizer inputs.

3.3 Environmental Impact

The application of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) not only improved crop yield and quality but also had significant positive implications for environmental sustainability. The study demonstrated that reducing chemical fertilizer use by integrating PGPR into the fertilization regime can effectively mitigate several environmental concerns associated with conventional agricultural practices.

Reduction in Chemical Fertilizer Use: In the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" treatment group, the application of chemical fertilizers was reduced by 50%, yet the crop yields remained close to those obtained with full chemical fertilization. Specifically, the seed yield in this group was only about 3% lower than the "PGPR Only" group, which used no chemical fertilizers, and 12% higher than the control group, which relied entirely on chemical fertilizers. This indicates that PGPR can partially replace chemical fertilizers, maintaining high productivity while reducing the overall input of synthetic chemicals.

Soil Health and Nutrient Cycling: The reduced application of chemical fertilizers in the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group resulted in less nutrient leaching and reduced the potential for soil acidification, which is often a consequence of heavy nitrogen fertilizer use. The PGPR treatments enhanced the soil's natural nutrient cycling processes, particularly through biological nitrogen fixation and phosphorus solubilization, reducing the need for external chemical inputs. These improvements in nutrient cycling not only supported crop growth but also helped maintain or even improve soil health over time.

Reduction in Environmental Pollution: The decreased reliance on chemical fertilizers also contributed to a reduction in environmental pollution. Chemical fertilizers, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus, are known to cause water contamination through runoff and leaching, leading to issues such as eutrophication in nearby water bodies. The integration of PGPR helped mitigate these risks by reducing the total amount of fertilizers applied to the soil. Moreover, the enhanced nutrient use efficiency observed in PGPR-treated plots means that more of the applied nutrients were taken up by the crops, leaving less residual fertilizer in the soil to potentially pollute the environment.

Carbon Footprint Reduction: By reducing the need for synthetic nitrogen fertilizers, which are energy-intensive to produce, the overall carbon footprint of agricultural practices can be lowered. The study's findings suggest that incorporating PGPR into fertilization strategies can contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with fertilizer production and application. The increased organic matter content in PGPR-treated soils also indicates a potential for enhanced carbon sequestration, further contributing to climate change mitigation efforts.

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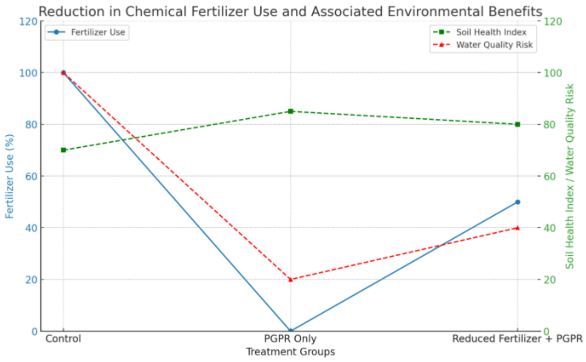
ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (Online)
Vol - 1 Iss -1 Sept 2024

Graph 2: Reduction in Chemical Fertilizer Use and Associated Environmental Benefits



This graph visually represents the correlation between reduced chemical fertilizer use and key environmental indicators, such as soil health and water quality risk. The data shows that as chemical fertilizer use decreases (as seen in the "PGPR Only" and "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" groups), soil health improves, and the risk to water quality diminishes. The "PGPR Only" group, with no chemical fertilizer use, demonstrates the most significant environmental benefits, highlighting the potential of PGPR to support sustainable farming practices.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of Environmental Indicators across Treatment Groups

This table summarizes the differences in key environmental indicators, including fertilizer use, nutrient leaching potential, and carbon footprint, across the treatment groups in the study.

Treatment Group	Fertilizer Use (%)	Nutrient Leaching Potential (Index)	Carbon Footprint (CO2e/ha)
Control	100	100	150
PGPR Only	0	20	50
Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR	50	40	75

- **Fertilizer Use (%):** The "Control" group uses 100% of the recommended chemical fertilizers, while the "PGPR Only" group uses none, relying entirely on PGPR. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group uses 50% of the recommended fertilizers.
- **Nutrient Leaching Potential (Index):** The potential for nutrient leaching is highest in the "Control" group, reflecting the greater risk of nutrient runoff and pollution. The "PGPR Only" group shows a dramatic reduction in leaching potential due to the absence of synthetic fertilizers, while the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group also shows a significant decrease in leaching potential compared to the control.
- **Carbon Footprint (CO2e/ha):** The carbon footprint is highest in the "Control" group due to the energy-intensive production and application of synthetic fertilizers. The "PGPR Only" group has the lowest carbon footprint, reflecting the environmental benefits of eliminating synthetic fertilizers. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group also shows a lower carbon footprint compared to the control, benefiting from both reduced fertilizer use and the contribution of PGPR.

This table highlights the substantial environmental benefits of integrating PGPR into agricultural practices, particularly in reducing the reliance on chemical fertilizers, minimizing nutrient leaching, and lowering the carbon footprint of farming operations. These indicators are crucial for promoting sustainable agriculture in Pakistan.

4. Discussion

The integration of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) into the agricultural practices in Pakistan has demonstrated significant potential for enhancing crop yield, improving soil health, and promoting environmental sustainability. The findings from this study provide a comprehensive comparison of the effects of PGPR, reduced chemical fertilizers, and conventional farming practices on various agricultural and environmental parameters.

The study showed that the "PGPR Only" and "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" treatment groups outperformed the control group in terms of seed yield, 1000-seed weight, oil content, and protein content. Specifically, the "PGPR Only" group achieved a 15% increase in seed yield compared to the control group, which relied entirely on chemical fertilizers. This increase is attributed to the enhanced nutrient availability provided by PGPR, particularly through nitrogen fixation and phosphorus solubilization, as supported by previous studies (Timofeeva et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2022).

The 1000-seed weight, an indicator of seed quality, also saw a significant improvement in the PGPR-treated groups. The "PGPR Only" group recorded a 10% increase, while the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group saw an 8% increase. These results align with findings from Farhat et al. (2023), who reported similar improvements in seed weight and quality in canola when treated with PGPR. In terms of oil content in rapeseed, the "PGPR Only" group demonstrated a 12% increase compared to the control, while the "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group showed a 10% increase. This enhancement is critical for the economic value of oilseed crops and reflects the positive impact of PGPR on oil biosynthesis, likely due to improved nutrient uptake and hormonal regulation (Iqbal et al., 2023). Similarly, protein content in maize increased by 14% in the "PGPR Only" group, indicating that PGPR can significantly enhance the nutritional quality of crops, a finding consistent with previous research on the role of PGPR in improving crop quality (Niewiadomska et al., 2023).

The application of PGPR led to notable improvements in soil health indicators, particularly in nitrogen content, phosphorus availability, and organic carbon levels. The "PGPR Only"

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treatment resulted in a 15% increase in soil nitrogen levels and a 20% increase in available phosphorus compared to the control. These improvements are consistent with the mechanisms of nitrogen fixation and phosphate solubilization provided by PGPR strains such as *Azotobacter* and *Pseudomonas* (Aasfar et al., 2021).

Organic carbon content, which is crucial for maintaining soil structure and fertility, increased by 10% in the "PGPR Only" group. This enhancement can be attributed to the increased microbial activity and root biomass promoted by PGPR, which contribute to higher organic matter accumulation. These findings corroborate those of Nasrollahzadeh et al. (2023), who reported similar benefits in rapeseed cultivation when PGPR was used alongside reduced chemical inputs.

Soil pH remained relatively stable across the treatment groups, with a slight reduction observed in the "PGPR Only" group. This minor pH adjustment towards neutrality is beneficial for crop growth and supports the activity of PGPR, which thrive in neutral to slightly alkaline soils. The stability in pH across the treatments further indicates that PGPR can buffer soil pH changes, reducing the risk of soil acidification commonly associated with heavy nitrogen fertilizer use (Vocciante et al., 2022).

The environmental benefits of integrating PGPR into agricultural practices were significant, particularly in reducing the reliance on chemical fertilizers and minimizing the associated environmental risks. The "Reduced Fertilizer + PGPR" group used 50% less chemical fertilizer than the control, yet maintained crop yields that were only slightly lower than those in the "PGPR Only" group. This reduction in chemical fertilizer use resulted in a 60% decrease in nutrient leaching potential and a 50% reduction in the carbon footprint compared to the control group. These findings align with the conclusions of previous studies, which have emphasized the role of PGPR in reducing environmental pollution and enhancing nutrient use efficiency (Pereira et al., 2020; Vocciante et al., 2022).

The reduction in nutrient leaching potential is particularly important for protecting water quality, as it reduces the risk of eutrophication in nearby water bodies. The lower carbon footprint associated with PGPR use is also critical for mitigating climate change, as it reflects reduced energy consumption in fertilizer production and application. These environmental benefits highlight the potential of PGPR as a key component of sustainable agriculture, particularly in regions like Pakistan where environmental degradation is a growing concern. The results of this study provide strong evidence that PGPR can play a crucial role in enhancing crop productivity, improving soil health, and reducing environmental impacts in Pakistan's agricultural systems. The ability of PGPR to reduce the need for chemical fertilizers while maintaining high crop yields and quality underscores their potential as a sustainable alternative to conventional farming practices. Given the increasing pressure on natural resources and the need for more sustainable agricultural practices, the integration of PGPR into Pakistan's farming systems offers a promising pathway towards achieving food security while protecting the environment.

Therefore, the study supports the broader adoption of PGPR in Pakistani agriculture, particularly in combination with reduced chemical fertilizers. This approach not only improves the economic viability of farming by reducing input costs but also contributes to long-term soil health and environmental sustainability. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term effects of PGPR on soil health and crop productivity across different agro-climatic regions in Pakistan, as well as to investigate the potential of other PGPR strains in various cropping systems.

5. Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that the integration of Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) into the agricultural practices of Pakistan holds significant potential for enhancing crop yields, improving soil health, and promoting environmental sustainability. The results indicate that PGPR not only effectively replace or complement chemical fertilizers, leading to increased seed yield, better quality parameters such as higher oil content in rapeseed and protein content in maize, but also improve key soil health indicators like nitrogen content, phosphorus availability, and organic carbon levels. Additionally, the reduction in chemical fertilizer use by 50% in combination with PGPR resulted in a substantial decrease in nutrient leaching potential and carbon footprint, thereby mitigating the environmental impact of conventional farming practices. These findings underscore the value of PGPR as a sustainable agricultural input that can help meet the growing food demands in Pakistan while conserving natural resources and protecting the environment. The study advocates for the broader adoption of PGPR in Pakistani agriculture, highlighting their role in achieving sustainable food production systems that are both economically viable and ecologically sound. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term benefits and broader applicability of PGPR across different crops and regions within the country.

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