



Irrigation de précision : un choix économique?
Analyse de la pertinence de gérer les irrigations à l'aide de
tensiomètres dans la culture de la fraise au Québec et en
Californie

Mémoire

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Résumé

L'analyse de la pertinence économique de l'irrigation de précision dans la culture de la fraise en plein champ, au Québec et en Californie, s'inscrit dans un contexte d'augmentation de la population et de rareté accrue de l'eau à l'échelle mondiale. Il y a donc nécessité d'améliorer les pratiques d'irrigation de façon à faire une utilisation rationnelle de l'eau. Dans un premier temps, une comparaison entre la méthode de gestion de l'irrigation conventionnelle et celle basée sur le potentiel matriciel du sol (ou tension) dans la culture de la fraise en Californie a été faite et la rentabilité de la seconde approche a été chiffrée. Puis, la pertinence économique de l'irrigation de déficit a été évaluée. Dans un deuxième temps, une analyse a permis de comparer l'irrigation fractionnée basée sur la tension dans le sol avec la pratique équivalente non fractionnée et de déterminer si le fractionnement de l'irrigation permettait d'investir dans un système d'irrigation automatisé au Québec. Les résultats de la première étude ont révélé que la gestion de l'irrigation basée sur la tension était hautement rentable par rapport à la régie conventionnelle et qu'elle était de surcroît plus économique en eau, peu importe la région en Californie. Les résultats ont aussi mis en lumière le fait que toute économie d'eau générée par une stratégie d'irrigation de déficit était coûteuse pour les producteurs de fraises. Les résultats de la deuxième étude ont quant à eux révélé que l'irrigation fractionnée permettait de générer des bénéfices additionnels par rapport à la régie non fractionnée dans un sol hautement perméable et que ces gains permettaient de rentabiliser l'investissement dans un système d'irrigation automatisé.

Abstract

The analysis of the economic relevance of precision irrigation for field-grown strawberries in Quebec and California takes place in a context of increased water scarcity worldwide and global population growth. There is a critical need to improve irrigation practices in order to make a rational use of water. In this study, the irrigation management based on soil matric potential (or tension) was first compared to the conventional practice in strawberry cultivation in California and the profitability of the tension-based method was calculated. The economic relevance of deficit irrigation was also evaluated. As a second step, an analysis comparing a tension-based pulsed irrigation with the equivalent non-pulsed irrigation procedure was conducted to determine if pulsed water applications generated enough additional benefits to cover the cost of the investment in an automatic irrigation system in Quebec. The results of the first study revealed that irrigation management based on tension was highly cost-effective in addition to being a water saving approach relative to the conventional practice, whatever the location in California. The results also demonstrated that any amount of water saved by a deficit irrigation strategy was costly for strawberry growers. The results of the second study revealed that pulsed irrigation generated more benefits than non-pulsed irrigation in a highly permeable soil, and that the additional benefits were high enough to offset the cost of an automatic irrigation system.

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Liste des abréviations et des sigles

ψ : potentiel matriciel du sol (soil matric potential)
 ψ_{irr} : potentiel matriciel du sol au déclenchement des irrigations (soil matric potential reached before irrigations)
IT: seuil de déclenchement des irrigations (irrigation threshold)
TTS: technologie de tensiométrie avec transmission de données sans fil
WTT: wireless tensiometer technology
PEC: productivité de l'eau de la culture
CWP: crop water productivity
RCBD: randomized complete block design
MLR: multiple linear regression
FMY: fresh market yields
UE: utilisation d'eau
WU: water use
BEP: break-even point
EV: expected value
DI: deficit irrigation
 ET_c : évapotranspiration d'une culture
 ET_0 : évapotranspiration potentielle de référence

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Avant-propos

Le présent mémoire de maîtrise est divisé en trois parties. La première partie présente une revue de littérature détaillant les contextes scientifique et économique liés à l'étude et énonce la problématique du présent travail. La deuxième partie présente un essai relatif aux résultats d'une première étude. Elle est rédigée en anglais sous la forme d'un article scientifique et a pour titre « Real-time and conventional irrigation managements : do water savings generate economic benefits? ». Finalement, la troisième partie présente un second essai rédigé en anglais sous forme d'article scientifique ayant pour titre « Using pulsed water applications and automation technology to fine-tune irrigation practices for strawberry production ». Les deux articles, dont je suis l'auteure principale, ont été rédigés sous la supervision de MM. Jean Caron et Raymond Levallois qui ont agi tant au niveau de la mise en œuvre des analyses qu'au niveau de la structure de l'article. Alors que le premier article sera soumis au journal *HortScience*, le deuxième article sera soumis au journal *HortTechnology*.

Introduction générale

La perspective d'un réchauffement climatique fait miroiter plusieurs changements dans différents secteurs économiques et sociaux mondiaux, et parmi eux : l'agriculture (Fereres *et al.*, 2011). Avec la hausse des températures et la récurrence de phénomènes climatiques extrêmes comme les sécheresses (OMM, 2014), la demande évapotranspirative des cultures est appelée à augmenter (Rodríguez Díaz *et al.*, 2007). Alors que l'irrigation est déjà centrale en agriculture dans plusieurs régions du globe avec 70% de toute l'eau tirée des aquifères, des cours d'eau et des lacs qui est utilisée à des fins de production végétale (FAO, 2011), ces changements provoqueront vraisemblablement une hausse de la demande en eau d'irrigation. De plus en plus, des coûts seront rattachés à l'eau.

En Californie comme au Québec, la fraise est une culture à haute valeur ajoutée. Alors que l'État californien produit à lui seul plus de 90% des fraises des États-Unis, le Québec est le premier producteur de fraises au Canada, assurant plus de 50% de la production nationale de ce petit fruit (Statistique Canada, 2016; USDA, 2016a). Or, le fraisier est une plante exigeante en eau et son système racinaire superficiel la rend sensible à la sécheresse (Liu *et al.*, 2007; MAFRD, 2015). Dans la perspective où la culture de la fraise se fait majoritairement sous paillis de plastique (Morillo *et al.*, 2015), il y a nécessité pour les producteurs d'adopter des méthodes d'irrigation efficaces afin d'optimiser la production de fruits et d'améliorer l'efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau (ou productivité de l'eau). Bien que l'utilisation répandue de l'irrigation localisée (goutte-à-goutte) dans cette culture (California Department of Water Resources, 2012; Parent, 2004) constitue un bon point de départ à ce sujet, elle présente des défis importants dans la production de fraises, considérant sa capacité à n'humidifier qu'un faible volume de sol sous les goutteurs (Coelho & Or, 1998). L'utilisation rationnelle de l'eau devient donc une préoccupation croissante chez les producteurs pour satisfaire à la fois les besoins de la plante et les objectifs de réduction du gaspillage de l'eau. La nécessité est de répondre à deux questions clés : quand irriguer et quelle quantité d'eau appliquer?

En Californie, la décision d'irriguer est généralement basée sur le jugement du producteur et sur les conditions climatiques ambiantes, notamment, via le calcul de l'évapotranspiration de la culture. Au Québec, si certains producteurs se fient toujours à leurs observations personnelles pour déterminer quand irriguer, plusieurs ont fait le pas vers une gestion plus précise des irrigations, soit via l'adoption de la gestion de l'irrigation basée sur les mesures de potentiel

matriciel dans le sol (ou tension) avec suivi en continu. Plusieurs études ont été réalisées pour déterminer le seuil de déclenchement optimal de l'irrigation (IT) en termes de potentiel matriciel du sol dans la culture de la fraise. Ce dernier se situerait entre -10 kPa et -15 kPa dans les sols sableux et les loam argileux (Guimerà *et al.*, 1995; Hoppula & Salo, 2007; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015; Peñuelas *et al.*, 1992; Serrano *et al.*, 1992), où des rendements significativement plus élevés ont été obtenus à un seuil de déclenchement de -10 kPa comparativement à des régions plus sèches déclenchées à des seuils entre -30 kPa et -70 kPa, et entre -13 et -18 kPa dans des loam argileux avec forte proportion de particules grossières (Bergeron, 2010; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015).

L'adoption de la gestion des irrigations basée sur le potentiel matriciel du sol avec suivi en continu demeure toutefois restreinte dans la production californienne de fraises en raison de l'investissement plus important associé à cette technologie par rapport à la méthode dite « conventionnelle », essentiellement basée sur des données météorologiques et en lien avec le stade de la culture. Quant au Québec, les essais réalisés par Létourneau *et al.* (2015) ont démontré un effet limité de la gestion des irrigations par tension dans les loams argileux hautement perméables. Bref, l'optimisation des irrigations en termes de rendements et de productivité de l'eau demeure un objectif à atteindre dans les deux régions, et une telle optimisation sera possible par l'adoption de méthodes d'irrigation plus précises et/ou complémentaires à celles déjà employées. Surtout, la viabilité économique des alternatives proposées devra être démontrée de façon à ce que ces dernières puissent être adoptées à grande échelle.

Dans cette optique, il apparaît d'abord pertinent de comparer entre elles les deux principales méthodes de gestion de l'irrigation utilisées en Californie afin de cerner les bienfaits potentiels d'une gestion plus précise des irrigations comme celle basée sur la mesure de la tension dans le sol. De même, avec la sécheresse historique qui perdure dans cet État de l'Ouest américain, il apparaît approprié d'évaluer les bénéfices possibles d'une stratégie d'irrigation de déficit qui permettrait de réaliser des économies notables d'eau dans la culture de la fraise. Finalement, au Québec, l'évaluation de la pertinence économique d'une méthode d'application de l'eau mieux adaptée au type de sol hautement perméable étudié, l'irrigation dite « fractionnée », et de son automatisation possible pour faciliter la gestion des irrigations par le producteur est d'un grand intérêt pratique. Le présent travail vise ainsi à répondre à ces différentes questions de nature technico-économique relativement à l'adoption de différentes stratégies d'irrigation de précision et constitue par le fait même une synthèse de cinq années de recherche réalisées sur l'irrigation de la fraise cultivée en plein champ, au Québec et en Californie.

Chapitre 1 : Revue de littérature

Contexte de la culture de la fraise

Caractéristiques du fraisier

Le fraisier cultivé commercialement (*Fragaria x ananassa* Duch.) est un hybride de deux espèces diploïdes (*Fragaria chelonensis* Duch. et *Fragaria virginiana* Duch.). Il s'agit d'une plante herbacée vivace poussant surtout sous un climat tempéré dont les fruits sont riches en vitamines et minéraux (Parshant *et al.*, 2014). La plante possède un système racinaire peu profond alors que 90% des racines se situent dans les premiers 15 cm de sol dans le cas du fraisier à jour court et dans les premiers 7 à 10 cm de sol dans le cas du fraisier à jour neutre (MAFRD, 2015). Considérant que, par ailleurs, le plant n'est capable d'utiliser facilement que 15% de la réserve en eau du sol (Gallichand, 2015), le fraisier est très sensible aux déficits hydriques (Liu *et al.*, 2007; Krüger *et al.*, 1999). L'irrigation est donc particulièrement importante dans cette culture.

Deux principales variétés de fraisier sont utilisées en production agricole. Alors que le fraisier à jour court est caractérisé par une floraison initiée lorsque la longueur du jour est inférieure à 14h et la température est inférieure à 15°C (Reiger, 2007), les plants à jour neutre ne sont pas sensibles à la photopériode et peuvent fleurir et porter des fruits tout au long de la saison (AAFRD, SAFRR et MAFRI, 2005). Les variétés à jour neutre sont largement utilisées en Californie et au Québec. Dans la province, elles sont particulièrement pertinentes pour étaler la saison de production, contrairement aux variétés à jour court qui ne produisent des fruits qu'en début de saison, soit de la mi-juin à la mi-juillet. De plus, les variétés à jour neutre présentent un potentiel de rendement supérieur aux variétés à jour court (CRAAQ, 2014; CRAAQ, 2012).

Régie de culture

La culture de fraises s'est traditionnellement faite à l'aide de variétés à jour court en rangs nattés, soit avec des plants disposés en rangs simples à faible densité, protégés à l'aide de paille (CRAAQ, 2003). L'introduction de variétés à jour neutre a grandement contribué à changer le paysage de la production de fraises. Les fraisiers à jour neutre sont implantés à racines nues sur des buttes recouvertes de paillis de plastique noir en début de saison et la récolte débute à la mi-juillet, ce qui contraste avec la production des fraisiers à jour court qui débute généralement à partir de l'année suivant son implantation (Parent, 2004). Les buttes peuvent accueillir de 2 à 4 rangées de plants disposés en quinconce (AAFRD, SAFRR et MAFRI, 2005). La densité de

plants varie selon l'espacement entre les rangs et entre les plants et est d'environ 50 000 plants ha⁻¹ (CRAAQ, 2014). L'utilisation du paillis permet le réchauffement rapide du système racinaire en début de saison, un meilleur contrôle des mauvaises herbes et de l'évapotranspiration et, de ce fait, permet d'augmenter les rendements de 50% par rapport à une régie sans paillis (Dale & Pritts, 1990). Dans ces conditions de production, l'irrigation localisée est largement utilisée et des tubes goutte-à-goutte sont ainsi disposés entre les rangs sous la surface du sol.

Alors qu'en Californie, les producteurs conservent les fraisiers à jour neutre durant une seule saison, il peut arriver que les producteurs québécois conservent les plants durant plus qu'une année en les protégeant des conditions hivernales à l'aide d'une couverture de paille. Toutefois, les rendements obtenus à la deuxième année de production diminuent d'environ 25% par rapport à la première année (Dale & Pritts, 1990).

Production et consommation de la fraise

Le Québec assure près de 57% de la production de fraises au Canada (Statistique Canada, 2016b). En Amérique du Nord, la province occupe la troisième place quant aux superficies récoltées en fraises après les États de la Californie et de la Floride, avec environ 1200 ha récoltés en 2015 comparativement à 16 400 ha en Californie et 4400 ha en Floride la même année (ISQ et MAPAQ, 2016a; USDA, 2016a). En 2015, la quantité de fraises fraîches et transformées commercialisées par le Québec se chiffrait à 12 800 tonnes tandis qu'elle s'élevait à 1,3 million de tonnes en Californie (Statistique Canada, 2016; USDA, 2016a).

Au Québec, près de 40% des fraises du Québec sont cultivées dans les séries de sols Orléans et Saint-Nicolas en régions de la Capitale-Nationale et de la Chaudière-Appalaches (Annexe A). Ces séries de sols, composées de loams sablo-argileux et de loams limono-argileux (MAPAQ, 2016) ont la particularité de comporter une forte proportion de fragments de schistes caillouteux, ce qui en fait des sols fortement drainants. Des stratégies d'irrigation adaptées doivent ainsi être adoptées dans la culture de la fraise dans ces régions afin de maximiser la productivité du système et éviter le gaspillage de l'eau. Cela est d'autant plus important que cela touche potentiellement près de 25% de la production de fraises canadiennes.

Malgré la faible part de marché qu'il occupe, le Québec demeure un joueur important dans l'industrie nord-américaine de fraises, ses producteurs étant reconnus comme des leaders en

matière d'innovation dans la production de fraises (Dumont, 2010). Au cours des dernières décennies, les producteurs québécois ont adopté les variétés de fraisiers à jour neutre plantées à racines nues en début de saison. Plusieurs ont aussi adopté les plants en mottes démarrés en pépinière et plantés la même année environ deux mois avant la saison hivernale, et ce, de façon à étaler la saison de production (Urbain, 2010). De plus, la plantation de plants dormants au début juin gagne en popularité de par la possibilité que cette approche présente de combler le creux historique de production connu au Québec au cours des deux dernières semaines de juillet. Cela est sans parler de la culture hors-sol qui présente un potentiel intéressant en Amérique du Nord (Cormier *et al.*, 2016; Depardieu *et al.*, 2016a; Depardieu *et al.*, 2016b). Bref, la courte saison de culture québécoise incite les producteurs à innover.

De son côté, la Californie assure à elle seule plus de 90% de la production de fraises américaines (USDA, 2016a), ce qui est non négligeable considérant que les États-Unis sont le 2^e principal producteur de fraises au monde avec 18% de la production, après la Chine (39%) (FAOSTAT, 2015). La Californie bénéficie d'une saison de production de 12 mois, ce qui lui permet d'enregistrer des rendements particulièrement élevés à l'hectare, plus élevés que dans n'importe quelle autre région des États-Unis (Huang, 2013). Ces derniers varient entre 40 000 kg ha⁻¹ et 60 000 kg ha⁻¹ (Bolda *et al.*, 2014; Bolda *et al.*, 2010; Dara *et al.*, 2011; Daugovish *et al.*, 2011), dépendamment de la région et de l'année de culture, comparativement à des rendements d'environ 10 000 kg ha⁻¹ à 20 000 kg ha⁻¹ au Québec (Bergeron, 2010; Cormier, 2015).

Au Canada comme aux États-Unis, les fraises ont grandement gagné en popularité au cours des dernières décennies. La quantité de fraises fraîches disponibles¹ pour les consommateurs canadiens est passée 2,0 à 3,1 kg par personne par année entre 1996 et 2015, soit une augmentation de 55% en près de 20 ans (Statistique Canada, 2016a). Pendant ce temps, la consommation de fraises aux États-Unis a été multipliée par près de deux, passant de 1,3 kg à 3,6 kg de fraises fraîches per capita (Economic Research Service, 2015). Si les consommations canadienne et américaine ont considérablement augmenté ces dernières années, ce n'est pas le cas de la production canadienne de fraises qui a plutôt diminué de 29% au cours de la même période (Statistique Canada, 2016b). Ainsi, le Canada ne parvient pas à répondre à la demande

¹ En poids de détail. Données ne tenant pas compte des pertes pouvant survenir dans les magasins, les foyers, etc. (Statistique Canada, 2016a).

intérieure en fraises et le pays était, en 2013, le principal importateur des fraises en provenance de la Californie (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Prix de la fraise

Bien qu'il existe trois grandes régions productrices de fraises en Californie possédant chacune son propre calendrier de production de façon à répartir les volumes produits au cours de l'année, des fluctuations de l'offre persistent, ce qui a un impact sur le prix de la fraise reçu par le producteur. La période où les prix sont les plus élevés s'étend généralement du mois de novembre au mois de février en Californie alors que l'offre locale est à son plus bas, tandis que les prix atteignent un certain plancher au cours des mois de forte production, une période qui coïncide d'ailleurs avec la saison de production québécoise. En 2015, le prix moyen reçu par le producteur pour les fraises fraîches vendues durant la période où l'offre était la plus grande en Californie (d'avril à septembre) était de 1.6 \$ kg⁻¹ comparativement à 4.22 \$ kg⁻¹ en novembre et décembre de la même année (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2016).

Au Québec, le prix annuel moyen pondéré de la fraise d'automne au Marché central de Montréal était de 4.13 \$ kg⁻¹ de 2005 à 2013 (en dollars canadiens courants; APFFQ, 2013). En comparaison, le prix de la fraise californienne reçu par le producteur au cours d'une période similaire (2005-2014; les données de 2013 n'étant pas disponibles) était de 2,08 \$ kg⁻¹ (en dollars américains courants; National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2016), tandis qu'au Marché central de Montréal, les fraises en provenance de la Californie se vendaient 3.06 \$ kg⁻¹ en moyenne de 2005 à 2011. Bref, il semble qu'en général, le prix reçu par les producteurs de fraises du Québec soit plus élevé que pour les fraises de la Californie.

Gestion de l'eau en agriculture

L'irrigation dans le monde : quelques chiffres

À l'échelle mondiale, 20% des terres agricoles sont irriguées (FAO, 2015) et fournissent 40% de la production agricole mondiale et 60% de la production céréalière (FAO, FIDA et WPF, 2015). Au Canada, ce sont 591 000 ha de terres agricoles qui étaient irriguées en 2012 et, de ce nombre, 12 750 ha (2%) l'étaient au Québec (Statistique Canada, 2015). En Californie, 98% des terres cultivées étaient irriguées en 2012, ce qui représente un peu plus de 3 millions d'hectares (USDA, 2012).

L'irrigation permettant de combler les déficits en eau de manière à maximiser les rendements (Gallichand & Broughton, 1993), elle est nécessaire dans les régions où les précipitations inadéquates sont un facteur limitant à la production agricole. Les précipitations sont inadéquates lorsqu'insuffisantes, comme c'est le cas en Californie, où certaines régions agricoles, comme la Vallée centrale, reçoivent moins de cinq pouces d'eau annuellement (U.S. Climate Data, 2016). Elles sont aussi inadéquates pour certaines cultures au Québec, comme les légumes ou les petits fruits (Ferland, 2006), étant donné leur répartition inégale au cours de la saison de croissance.

Relation eau-plante

L'eau assure la croissance régulière du plant, le transport des éléments nutritifs et permet de lutter contre le gel (Zerouala, 2002). Une bonne gestion de l'irrigation permet de répondre aux besoins de la culture, c'est-à-dire de fournir la bonne quantité d'eau au meilleur moment possible pour la plante. Les situations de déficit et d'excès d'eau sont à éviter; par contre, elles peuvent rapidement survenir si la gestion des irrigations n'est pas adéquate. Alors qu'un déficit hydrique cause un stress à la plante susceptible de diminuer la production et l'expansion des feuilles, le nombre de fleurs produites ainsi que la taille des fruits (Hancock, 1999), les excès d'eau diminuent les rendements ainsi que la qualité et le poids des fruits (AAFRD, SAFRR et MAFRI, 2005). Ils peuvent aussi provoquer une asphyxie des racines et les prédisposer aux infections par les champignons et les bactéries (Lacroix, 2010), en plus d'augmenter les risques de percolation de l'eau d'irrigation, entraînant les fertilisants hors de la zone racinaire (Krüger *et al.*, 1999). À ce titre, le lessivage des nutriments présente le double inconvénient de (1) risque accru de pollution des nappes et de (2) pertes de fertilisants coûteux qui ne bénéficient pas à la culture, en plus d'augmenter inutilement les coûts de l'utilisation de l'eau.

Systèmes d'irrigation

Différents systèmes d'irrigation existent dans le monde, soit l'irrigation gravitaire, par aspersion ou localisée (goutte-à-goutte), et contribuent à ce que des pratiques d'irrigation soient plus ou moins efficaces. Alors que chaque système présente une efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau variable, l'irrigation localisée est la plus efficace avec plus de 90% de l'eau appliquée qui peut effectivement être utilisée par la culture (Bergeron, 2013; FAO, 1989). Il s'agit d'ailleurs du système le plus répandu dans la culture de la fraise à jour neutre (California Department of Water Resources, 2012; Parent, 2004), une fois le plant établi.

Productivité de l'eau

L'efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau est un concept fréquemment utilisé en gestion de l'irrigation, car il permet de statuer sur l'efficacité de différentes pratiques d'irrigation. Généralement calculée comme le rapport du rendement en fruits commercialisables sur le volume d'eau transpiré par la culture (Grant *et al.*, 2010), l'efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau sera exprimée en termes de rendement en fruits frais par rapport à la quantité d'eau d'irrigation appliquée dans la présente étude (Wang *et al.*, 2007). On y réfèrera sous le terme général de « productivité de l'eau ».

Pertinence de l'irrigation dans la culture de la fraise

L'irrigation est nécessaire dans la culture de la fraise, non seulement parce que la culture se fait majoritairement sur buttes recouvertes d'un paillis de plastique (Morillo *et al.*, 2015), mais aussi en raison des caractéristiques du fraisier (court système racinaire, faible capacité d'extraire l'eau du sol) qui en font une plante particulièrement sensible à la sécheresse (Liu *et al.*, 2007; MAFRD, 2015). L'utilisation répandue de l'irrigation localisée dans cette culture présente des défis étant donné la capacité de ce système à n'humidifier qu'un faible volume de sol sous les goutteurs (Coelho & Or, 1998), cela étant dû en partie au fait que le point de contact entre un goutteur et le sol est minime comparativement à d'autres approches d'irrigation comme les systèmes par aspersion (Boivin *et al.*, 2011). Conjointement au fait que l'écoulement de l'eau se fait surtout de façon verticale dans le sol, le faible portée des goutteurs contribue à assécher le sol en bordure de l'andain (Boivin *et al.*, 2011). Ainsi, non seulement l'irrigation est nécessaire dans la culture de la fraise à jour neutre, mais elle doit aussi être bien gérée de façon à répondre aux besoins en eau importants de la culture et éviter le gaspillage de l'eau. Finalement, en plus de permettre de procéder, si nécessaire, à la fertigation (application de fertilisants en même temps que l'irrigation), l'irrigation localisée peut servir à abaisser la température du sol et des plantes pour prévenir une baisse de production de fruits en cas de températures chaudes (25°C et plus) (AAFRD, SAFRR et MAFRI, 2005).

L'eau est une ressource rare et, de par son importance, les coûts d'utilisation qui y sont reliés sont appelés à augmenter, notamment en agriculture. L'impact positif d'une bonne gestion de la ressource peut ainsi se faire ressentir tant sur le plan environnemental qu'économique. L'utilisation rationnelle de l'eau devient donc une préoccupation croissante chez les producteurs : quand irriguer et quelle quantité d'eau appliquer?

Méthodes de gestion de l'irrigation

Il existe différentes méthodes de gestion de l'irrigation pouvant aider au processus de décision quant au moment auquel déclencher l'irrigation et quant à la quantité d'eau à appliquer. Cette décision peut être basée sur le jugement du producteur (observations visuelles des plants, toucher du sol pour en évaluer la teneur en eau), sur les conditions climatiques ambiantes ou encore sur des mesures prises sur les plantes ou dans le sol (Lea-Cox, 2012). Parmi ces modes de gestion de l'irrigation, l'approche basée sur l'évapotranspiration et celle basée sur la mesure du potentiel matriciel sont les plus communes. En effet, alors que les producteurs de fraises californiens visent à appliquer 100% de l'évapotranspiration de la culture, leur décision d'irrigation pouvant aussi être influencée par leur jugement, au Québec, plusieurs producteurs utilisent déjà des outils de gestion de l'irrigation qui mesurent l'humidité du sol comme les tensiomètres (C. Boivin, communication personnelle, 16 décembre 2015).

Méthode basée sur le calcul de l'évapotranspiration de la culture

Définition de l'approche

La méthode basée sur l'évapotranspiration permet d'évaluer les besoins en eau de la culture selon son stade de croissance considérant qu'en cours de croissance, la plante transpire et l'eau du sol s'évapore. Alors qu'un fort taux d'évapotranspiration est associé à des rendements élevés, si l'eau est limitante pour la culture, il s'en suit la fermeture des stomates qui réduit le taux d'évapotranspiration et la productivité du plant. Pour maintenir une activité maximale de la plante, les apports en eau doivent permettre l'évapotranspiration maximale (Gallichand, 2015) et correspondre à la quantité d'eau perdue durant une période déterminée. En négligeant l'effet de la remontée capillaire et du lessivage, les besoins en eau se calculent comme suit (Éq.1) :

$$IR = ET_c - P_e \quad [1]$$

où IR représente les besoins en irrigation, ET_c (l'évapotranspiration de la culture) est l'expression de la quantité d'eau transpirée par la plante et évaporée par le sol au cours d'une période donnée et P_e (la précipitation efficace) représente la différence entre les précipitations réelles et la quantité d'eau de pluie perdue par ruissellement (Gallichand, 2015), toutes les variables étant exprimées en mm.

L'évapotranspiration varie d'une culture à l'autre et en fonction des conditions climatiques. Des stations météorologiques, comme le *California Irrigation Management Information System*

(CIMIS) en Californie ou « Agrométéo Québec », collectent des données climatiques (rayonnement solaire, température et humidité de l'air, vitesse du vent) propres à une région et utilisent l'équation de Penman-Monteith pour estimer l'évapotranspiration de référence (ET_0) correspondante, soit le flux d'évapotranspiration d'une parcelle de gazon sous ces conditions (Pepin & Bourgeois, 2012). L' ET_0 est ensuite utilisée pour estimer les besoins en eau d'autres cultures se développant sous les mêmes conditions (Grattan *et al.*, 1998). Pour calculer l' ET_c , l' ET_0 est combinée à un coefficient de culture (k_c), tel que présenté ci-dessous (Éq. 2) :

$$ET_c = k_c * ET_0 \quad [2]$$

L'estimation juste de l' ET_c dépend grandement de la précision avec laquelle le k_c est évalué. Le k_c peut être déduit en fonction du pourcentage de couverture du plant ou en fonction du temps après la plantation (Grattan *et al.*, 1998). Bien que la validité des coefficients culturaux ait été démontrée à maintes reprises dans la littérature (Pepin & Bourgeois, 2012), le k_c en fonction du temps présente la limite de ne pas prendre en compte des facteurs environnementaux et culturaux pouvant fortement influencer le développement de la culture (Grattan *et al.*, 1998).

Pertinence de la méthode

La pertinence de l'approche basée sur l'évapotranspiration comme outil d'aide à la décision en matière d'irrigation dans la production de fraises a été démontrée dans plusieurs études (Krüger *et al.*, 1999; Yuan *et al.*, 2004). De plus, elle est simple d'utilisation et peu coûteuse. Cependant, elle présente les inconvénients de ne pas être aussi précise que des méthodes basées sur des mesures directes prises soit dans le sol ou sur la plante (Lea-Cox, 2012), de ne pas être adaptable rapidement aux conditions météorologiques changeantes (Létourneau *et al.*, 2015) et de ne pas tenir compte du statut hydrique du sol. Finalement, en visant à compenser les pertes passées en évapotranspiration (Allen *et al.*, 1998), cette approche utilise les besoins en eau passés de la culture pour évaluer les besoins en eau futurs, ce qui élimine la possibilité de répondre aux besoins de la plante en temps réel.

Méthode basée sur la mesure du potentiel matriciel dans le sol

Définition de l'approche

L'approche par tension mesure le potentiel matriciel du sol, soit la force que la plante doit exercer sur la matrice du sol pour puiser l'eau dont elle a besoin, les particules de sol exerçant sur l'eau des forces de capillarité et d'adsorption (Caron & Gumiere, 2015). Le potentiel matriciel est

mesuré au moyen de tensiomètres remplis d'eau et comportant une bougie poreuse à leur extrémité. Dans une situation d'assèchement du sol, l'eau contenue dans le tensiomètre se déplace vers l'extérieur, soit vers la matrice de sol exerçant des forces de capillarité et d'adsorption sur l'eau du tensiomètre. Comme ce dernier est fermé hermétiquement, il s'en suit un vide de pression à l'intérieur de l'appareil qui est mesuré par un manomètre ou par un capteur de pression numérique. La lecture de tension s'exprime en pression négative (-kPa). Dans la culture de la fraise, les sondes sont insérées dans le sol à des profondeurs respectives de 15 cm et 30 cm, soit d'une part dans la zone racinaire, et d'autre part sous la zone racinaire (Bergeron, 2010). Plusieurs tensiomètres peuvent ainsi être répartis dans un champ de manière à connaître le comportement de la teneur en eau du sol en divers endroits. La sonde placée à 15 cm de profondeur donne le signal quant au déclenchement de l'irrigation lorsqu'un certain seuil moyen de tension est atteint, tandis que la sonde à 30 cm indique à quel moment il est recommandé d'arrêter l'irrigation (généralement à un seuil de -5 kPa).

Relation tension-teneur en eau

Le potentiel matriciel du sol est directement lié à la teneur en eau du sol. Cette relation s'illustre par une courbe de rétention en eau propre à chaque type de sol. Ainsi, plus le potentiel matriciel est élevé (plus près de 0), plus la teneur en eau est grande. Inversement, plus la tension est faible (plus négative), plus la teneur en eau du sol est faible. Le potentiel matriciel à la capacité au champ (θ_{cc}) peut être évalué grâce à cette courbe. Il correspond à la teneur en eau du sol au-delà de laquelle il y a écoulement de l'eau sous la zone racinaire (Gallichand, 2015). La teneur en eau critique (θ_c), soit la teneur en eau en-deçà de laquelle le taux d'évapotranspiration chute rapidement (ainsi que la productivité de la culture), peut aussi être associée à une tension dans le sol. La différence entre la teneur en eau à capacité au champ et la teneur en eau critique représente la réserve facilement utilisable par la plante (RFU) (Gallichand, 2015). Bref, il est possible, à l'aide des tensiomètres, de connaître le statut hydrique du sol et la capacité ou non de la plante de subvenir à ses besoins.

Pertinence de la méthode

Plusieurs recherches ont démontré que la gestion de l'irrigation basée sur la tension dans le sol a le potentiel d'augmenter les rendements et la productivité de l'eau par rapport aux méthodes standards d'irrigation (consistant en de longues applications d'eau deux à trois fois par semaine) dans la production de tomates et de palmiers (Afael *et al.*, 2003; Migliaccio *et al.*, 2008). D'autres études conduites dans la culture de la fraise ont rapporté les mêmes tendances (Anderson, 2015;

Létourneau *et al.*, 2015). Ces dernières ont démontré que l'utilisation des tensiomètres avec un seuil de déclenchement de l'irrigation autour de -10 kPa engendrait des gains de rendements et pouvait améliorer la productivité de l'eau par rapport à la gestion standard des irrigations, soit une approche privilégiant de longues et peu fréquentes irrigations. Par exemple, une expérience réalisée dans un loam argileux a démontré qu'une gestion basée sur la tension utilisant un seuil de déclenchement de l'irrigation à -16 kPa permettait d'obtenir les meilleurs rendements en fraises destinées au marché frais, conjointement avec le traitement fournissant 100% de l'ET_c, mais qu'elle augmentait l'efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau de 26% par rapport à ce dernier traitement (Anderson, 2015). Une autre expérience réalisée dans le même type de sol a permis de démontrer qu'une gestion de l'irrigation à l'aide de tensiomètres avec un seuil de déclenchement de l'irrigation à -10 kPa permettait d'augmenter l'efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau de 33% par rapport à la régie du producteur (Létourneau *et al.*, 2015). Cela concorde avec les résultats d'études précédentes conduites dans la culture de la fraise sous divers climats, attestant que le seuil de déclenchement de l'irrigation optimal se situerait entre -10 kPa et -18 kPa, dépendamment du type de sol (Bergeron, 2010; Evenhuis & Alblas, 2002; Guimerà *et al.*, 1995; Hoppula & Salo, 2007; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015).

Technologie de tensiométrie avec transmission de données sans fil

Les avancées technologiques permettent aujourd'hui de suivre en temps réel et à distance le statut hydrique du sol grâce à la transmission de données sans fil. En effet, à partir de stations de contrôle installées au champ, la technologie de tensiométrie avec transmission de données sans fil (ou suivi en continu) permet de mesurer le potentiel matriciel du sol ainsi que d'autres paramètres tels que la température et l'humidité relative de l'air. Les stations de contrôle (WEB-ST4; Hortau, Québec, Qc, Canada), fonctionnant indépendamment grâce à l'énergie solaire, comportent quatre ports auxquels sont fixées des sondes telles que les tensiomètres et les sondes de température et de pression. La transmission de données sans fil permet ensuite au producteur d'effectuer un suivi à distance de sa culture et de gérer les irrigations avec précision.

De par sa précision et son côté pratique, la technologie de tensiométrie avec suivi en continu (aussi appelée méthode basée sur le potentiel matriciel dans la présente étude) facilite l'adoption de stratégies d'irrigation sensibles telles que l'irrigation de déficit et l'irrigation fractionnée. L'irrigation de précision telle qu'abordée dans le présent travail réfère ainsi à l'ensemble des gestions de l'irrigation qui sont possibles grâce à l'adoption de la technologie de tensiométrie avec transmission de données sans fil.

Gestion sensible des irrigations

Irrigation de déficit

L'irrigation de déficit consiste à appliquer moins d'eau que nécessaire pour la culture à des stades spécifiques de la croissance d'un plant présentant une certaine tolérance à la sécheresse (Geerts et Raes, 2009). Bien que cette pratique occasionne généralement une baisse de rendement, elle permet néanmoins d'augmenter la productivité de l'eau de différentes cultures (Geerts et Raes, 2009; Fereres et Soriano, 2007; Zwart et Bastiaanssen, 2004). Elle est donc particulièrement intéressante dans la perspective où elle permet de réaliser des économies d'eau. Pour une régie d'irrigation basée sur les tensiomètres dans la production de fraises, Hoppula et Salo (2007) ont montré que la meilleure productivité de l'eau était obtenue à un seuil de déclenchement des irrigations de -60 kPa au lieu de -15 kPa, même si au cours d'une année d'expérimentation, le rendement total en fraises a été diminué par la régie à -60 kPa par rapport à la régie plus humide à -15 kPa. Létourneau *et al.*, (2015) ont aussi montré que la productivité de l'eau était augmentée et que des économies d'eau étaient réalisées par l'adoption de régies d'irrigation sèches (-26 kPa) par rapport à des régies humides (-10 kPa).

Irrigation fractionnée

L'irrigation fractionnée peut quant à elle bénéficier aux cultures en sols fortement drainants. Dans ce type de sol, la faible capacité du sol à retenir l'eau entraîne des mouvements rapides de l'eau sous la zone racinaire. Puisqu'une partie importante de l'eau peut ainsi être perdue par percolation lors de longues irrigations, entraînant le gaspillage de l'eau, la perte de nutriments et la pollution des eaux souterraines (Dukes *et al.*, 2003; Skaggs *et al.*, 2010), il peut s'avérer pertinent d'appliquer de courtes irrigations fréquentes dans de tels types de sol. L'irrigation fractionnée pourrait ainsi améliorer la distribution de l'eau dans le sol (Assouline *et al.*, 2006; Coolong *et al.*, 2011; Eid *et al.*, 2013). Dans la fraise cultivée dans un loam argileux avec une forte proportion de fragments de schistes caillouteux (particules > 2 mm), l'irrigation fractionnée a généralement permis d'augmenter les rendements en utilisant la même quantité d'eau, améliorant ainsi la productivité de l'eau (Cormier *et al.*, 2016; Létourneau *et al.*, 2016). Dans l'optique où une telle méthode d'application de l'eau est adoptée, des mesures de l'humidité dans le sol, telles que le potentiel matriciel, sont très utiles (AAFRD, SAFRR et MAFRI, 2005).

L'irrigation à l'aide de tensiomètres présente donc un potentiel intéressant par rapport aux méthodes conventionnelles de gestion de l'irrigation dans la culture de la fraise en plein champ,

en plus de permettre d'adopter des stratégies d'irrigation complémentaires (irrigation de déficit et fractionnée). Les coûts associés à l'irrigation de précision pouvant toutefois être un frein à son adoption par certains producteurs, il importe d'évaluer le potentiel économique de chaque stratégie. Dans le présent mémoire, les questions économiques seront abordées sur la base du calcul de la rentabilité des investissements.

Rentabilité des investissements en agriculture

Budget partiel

L'adoption d'un changement dans un système de production mérite que l'on s'y attarde d'un point de vue économique, car bien que des bénéfices lui soient rattachés, des coûts liés à son adoption demeurent présents. La nécessité est de savoir si le projet est rentable, c'est-à-dire si les bénéfices attendus sont plus importants que les coûts associés au projet. Pour réaliser une telle évaluation, le budget partiel est fréquemment utilisé (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011). Prenant la forme d'une analyse coûts-bénéfices, il tient compte à la fois des éléments favorables et défavorables associés à un projet. Ainsi, partant d'une situation de référence, les coûts ainsi que les bénéfices additionnels associés à une situation « objectif » sont déterminés. Alors que les éléments défavorables incluent les charges totales (fixes et variables) additionnelles ainsi que la diminution des produits, les éléments favorables sont associés à un accroissement des produits et à une réduction des charges totales. Il est à noter que les charges fixes sont liées à la structure de production (ex. : les équipements), tandis que les charges variables sont liées aux intrants de production. De ce fait, ces dernières varient en fonction du volume de production (Levallois, 2010).

Le budget partiel peut être élaboré selon deux approches. Alors que l'approche par trésorerie évalue la rentabilité de l'investissement en considérant les entrées et les sorties nettes d'argent, ce qui implique de tenir compte des charges liées à l'investissement selon la procédure de remboursement des emprunts et les frais financiers en vigueur, l'approche économique considère les intérêts payés en moyenne annuellement ainsi que la charge annuelle de l'investissement, soit son amortissement (Levallois, 2010), ce dernier étant estimé par la méthode linéaire (Penson *et al.*, 2002). Dans les deux cas, la différence entre les éléments favorables et défavorables permet d'évaluer le gain ou la perte économique associée au projet et l'investissement sera globalement intéressant si le bénéfice d'opération (ou résultat net) est positif (s'il y a gain net).

Lors d'analyses par budget partiel, il peut être pertinent d'établir différents scénarios en fonction des tailles de fermes caractéristiques du milieu à l'étude. Toutefois, dans le cas où les résultats nets ne changent pas significativement en fonction de la taille de la ferme, l'analyse peut être effectuée sur la base d'une clé de répartition particulière (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011). Dans le présent mémoire, la clé de répartition est à l'hectare, tous les montants impliqués dans les analyses coûts-bénéfices étant exprimés sur une base annuelle en \$ ha⁻¹.

Analyse de sensibilité et point mort

L'analyse de rentabilité d'un investissement sous forme de budget partiel requiert de poser certaines hypothèses comme le prix des denrées produites, le coût de certains intrants comme l'eau en Californie et les gains de rendement envisagés. Or, la volatilité des prix de même que les conditions climatiques dont le secteur agricole est fortement tributaire peuvent avoir un impact considérable et imprévisible sur la production agricole. L'analyse de sensibilité s'avère donc pertinente dans l'évaluation de la rentabilité d'un investissement, car elle permet d'évaluer les conséquences de variations (par exemple : de prix, de rendement) sur le bénéfice d'opération. L'analyse de sensibilité permet ainsi d'identifier la mesure dans laquelle ces variables peuvent évoluer de façon à ce que le bénéfice d'opération demeure positif ou nul (Levallois, 2010). Le point mort, ou seuil de rentabilité, qui représente le prix minimum que devrait avoir une denrée ou encore le gain (par exemple, de rendement) minimum qui devrait être obtenu pour générer un résultat net nul, peut ainsi être calculé (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011).

Pour générer un aperçu de la rentabilité de l'investissement, le délai de récupération peut être calculé, conjointement avec la valeur actuelle nette (VAN) et le taux de rendement interne (TRI) (Zamalloa *et al.*, 2011). Toutefois, on retiendra que les calculs de la VAN et du TRI sont comparables et mènent à la même conclusion quant à l'acceptation ou non d'un projet d'investissement.

Délai de récupération de l'investissement

Le délai de récupération (DR) permet de déterminer le temps (généralement en années) requis pour récupérer l'investissement initial (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011). Il se calcule comme suit (Éq. 3) :

$$DR = \frac{D_0}{C_m}$$

[3]

où D_0 représente le capital investi (ou dépense initiale d'investissement), C_m représente les recettes annuelles dégagées par l'investissement (résultat net) hormis les dotations aux amortissements (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011).

Généralement, un délai de récupération inférieur à 5 ans est considéré très bon, un délai entre 5 et 10 ans est considéré bon tandis qu'un délai supérieur à 10 ans est considéré médiocre (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011). L'interprétation du délai de récupération peut aussi se faire par rapport à la durée de vie utile de l'investissement. Puisque, dans un analyse par budget partiel, un résultat net positif (gain) est nécessairement associé à un délai de récupération à l'intérieur de la durée de vie utile l'investissement, plus le gain net est important, plus le délai de récupération de l'investissement est rapide et plus le projet est économiquement intéressant.

Valeur actuelle nette (VAN)

Par opposition au délai de récupération, la valeur actuelle nette (VAN) tient compte de l'évolution de la valeur de la monnaie dans le temps. Elle est calculée en actualisant les recettes annuelles futures dégagées par l'investissement et en soustrayant de la somme de ces recettes actualisées, la dépense initiale d'investissement (Éq. 4).

$$VAN = \left(\sum_{i=1}^n \frac{C_n}{(1+r)^n} \right) - D_0 \quad [4]$$

où n représente le nombre d'années à l'étude, C_n représente les recettes annuelles dégagées par l'investissement hormis les dotations aux amortissements et les frais financiers, r représente le taux d'actualisation et D_0 , la dépense initiale d'investissement.

Un projet d'investissement est dit rentable si la VAN est positive au taux d'actualisation choisi qui varie généralement entre 5% et 10% (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011; Zamalloa *et al.*, 2011).

Taux de rendement interne (TRI)

Le calcul du taux de rendement interne (TRI) devient pertinent dans l'éventualité où il est difficile de choisir un taux d'actualisation. Le TRI, obtenu par tâtonnement, représente le taux d'actualisation pour lequel la VAN de l'investissement est nulle. Pour juger de la rentabilité d'un investissement, le TRI est comparé au taux de rentabilité exigé d'un projet compte tenu de son risque. Par exemple, en agriculture, un projet d'investissement pourra être retenu si le TRI est supérieur au taux d'intérêt bancaire. Si le TRI calculé permet d'apprécier la rentabilité de

l'investissement à un taux de 20% avant financement, la rentabilité associée au même investissement passera à 15% si un emprunt à un taux d'intérêt de 5% est réalisé. Dans ce cas, l'investissement présentera une bonne rentabilité si celle-ci (15%) est supérieure à la rentabilité financière de l'entreprise. Si tel est le cas, le projet permettra d'augmenter le taux de rendement moyen de l'entreprise (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011).

Espérance mathématique

L'espérance mathématique est utilisée pour calculer la valeur moyenne attendue d'une variable aléatoire. Elle correspond à une moyenne pondérée des résultats en fonction de la probabilité de chacun des résultats de se produire dans le temps. Elle se calcule comme suit (Éq. 5) :

$$E(X) = \sum_{i=1}^k x_i p_i \quad [5]$$

où x_i représente les différentes valeurs de X pouvant être obtenues et p_i , la probabilité de chaque valeur de X d'apparaître dans le temps (Medhi, 1992).

Le calcul de l'espérance mathématique peut s'avérer intéressant dans le cas du passage d'une situation de référence à une situation « objectif » où différents effets peuvent être mesurés d'une année à l'autre, chacun selon une probabilité propre de survenir dans le temps. L'espérance mathématique permet alors de donner un aperçu de l'effet moyen pouvant être attendu par le producteur après un certain nombre d'années (ex. : 5 ans).

Irrigation de précision : un choix économique?

À ce jour, bien qu'un travail similaire ait été réalisé dans la culture de la canneberge au Québec (Jabet *et al.*, 2016), aucune étude ne recense des données de nature économique relativement à l'adoption de la technologie de tensiométrie avec transmission de données sans fil au lieu de la pratique conventionnelle dans la culture de la fraise. De plus, on sait que l'irrigation de déficit entraîne généralement une baisse de rendement et des économies d'eau. Dans le contexte où la plupart des producteurs agricoles californiens payent pour l'eau, il serait intéressant de connaître les potentiels impacts économiques d'une telle stratégie sur la rentabilité des entreprises productrices de fraises. Aucune étude n'a rapporté des données de ce type dans la culture de la fraise en Californie. Finalement, sachant qu'une gestion manuelle des irrigations fractionnées

peut représenter des défis pour les producteurs puisque nécessitant plus de suivi et pouvant augmenter les coûts de main d'œuvre, l'automatisation du système d'irrigation devient d'un grand intérêt pratique. Elle est d'autant plus accessible que les systèmes d'irrigation gérés à l'aide de tensiomètres avec suivi en continu peuvent facilement être automatisés (Lea-Cox, 2012).

Ainsi, bien que l'optimisation des irrigations dans la culture de la fraise apparaisse possible par l'adoption de l'irrigation de précision, la viabilité économique des différentes stratégies abordées doit être évaluée. Considérant les divers coûts mais aussi les bénéfices qui peuvent être associés à ces différentes stratégies, la nécessité est de savoir si le jeu en vaut la chandelle. Investir dans l'irrigation de précision représente-t-il un choix économique pour les producteurs de fraises?

Hypothèses et objectifs

Hypothèses

Volet 1 : Californie

- La technologie de tensiométrie, lorsqu'utilisée avec des seuils de déclenchement à -10 kPa et d'arrêt à -5 kPa, présente un délai de récupération à l'intérieur de la durée de vie utile de l'équipement attribuable aux gains économiques générés par cette régie par rapport à la régie conventionnelle.
- L'irrigation de déficit à l'aide des tensiomètres, soit le déclenchement de l'irrigation à un potentiel matriciel plus faible (-15 kPa, -20 kPa, -30 kPa), présente un avantage économique par rapport à une régie humide (-10 kPa).

Volet 2 : Québec

- L'irrigation fractionnée régie par tensiométrie permet de réaliser des gains économiques par rapport à l'irrigation par tension non fractionnée.
- L'automatisation du système d'irrigation destinée à gérer les applications d'eau fractionnées avec un seuil de déclenchement à -15 kPa (ou -18 kPa) génère des bénéfices économiques additionnels par rapport à la pratique standard non-fractionnée utilisant le même seuil.

Objectifs

Les objectifs de recherche sont, pour le volet 1, (1) d'établir la relation entre le rendement en fraises fraîches et la tension moyenne au déclenchement de l'irrigation ainsi que (2) celle entre l'utilisation de l'eau et la tension moyenne au déclenchement de l'irrigation, dépendamment de la méthode de gestion de l'irrigation utilisée, (3) d'évaluer la rentabilité de l'investissement dans la technologie de tensiométrie en comparant ses effets à ceux de la gestion conventionnelle et (4) de vérifier les effets d'une régie d'irrigation de déficit par rapport à une régie humide. En ce concerne le volet 2, les objectifs sont (1) de chiffrer les bénéfices additionnels générés par l'irrigation fractionnée basée sur la tension par rapport à la régie équivalente non-fractionnée et (2) d'évaluer l'intérêt économique de l'investissement dans un système d'irrigation automatisé pour gérer les irrigations fractionnées.

Chapitre 2: Real-time and conventional irrigation managements: do water savings generate economic benefits?

Résumé

Bien que la Californie fasse face à une sécheresse sans précédent depuis maintenant plus de 5 ans, l'État demeure le principal producteur de fraises aux États-Unis, fournissant plus de 90% des volumes annuellement. De plus en plus, il y a nécessité d'optimiser les rendements et la productivité de l'eau (PEC) des cultures, telle qu'influencée par les pratiques de gestion de l'irrigation. Même si des études ont démontré que la gestion de l'irrigation basée sur la tension (ψ) avait le potentiel d'augmenter les rendements et la PEC comparativement à la pratique conventionnelle, le coût de la technologie peut être limitant pour certains producteurs. Le principal but de cette étude était d'évaluer l'efficacité technico-économique de la technologie de tensiométrie avec transmission de données sans fil (TTS) en la comparant à la pratique conventionnelle dans la production de fraises en Californie. Dans un deuxième temps, le but était d'évaluer la pertinence économique de l'irrigation de déficit. Sur 8 sites, le rendement en fruits frais, l'utilisation d'eau (UE) et le potentiel matriciel moyen au déclenchement de l'irrigation (ψ_{irr}) ont été mesurés dans chaque traitement. Des régressions linéaires multiples utilisant ces données ont été réalisées pour décrire la relation entre (1) le rendement en fruits frais et le ψ_{irr} et (2) l'utilisation d'eau et ψ_{irr} , considérant la méthode de gestion de l'irrigation utilisée. Des analyses coûts-bénéfices ont été conduites pour évaluer, d'une part, la rentabilité de la TTS comparativement à la pratique conventionnelle et, d'autre part, l'intérêt économique de l'irrigation de déficit. Les résultats ont révélé que la TTS est un outil de gestion de l'irrigation très rentable lorsqu'on la compare à la pratique conventionnelle. De plus, pour un rendement similaire, elle permet d'économiser de l'eau par rapport à la pratique conventionnelle. Finalement, les résultats ont révélé que toute économie d'eau réalisée sur la base d'une stratégie d'irrigation de déficit est coûteuse pour les producteurs.

Mots-clés: sondes de tension, efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau, irrigation de précision, analyse économique, durabilité

Abstract

Although California is facing a severe drought, the state accounts for more than 90 per cent of the total strawberry production in the United States. There is thus a critical need to optimize yield and crop water productivity (CWP), as influenced by irrigation management practices. Although studies have reported that irrigation management based on soil matric potential (ψ) has the potential to increase yield and CWP compared to conventional practices, the cost of this technology may be a limiting factor for some growers. The main purpose of this study was to assess the technical and economic effectiveness of wireless tensiometer technology (WTT) for field-grown strawberries in California in comparison with the conventional irrigation practice. As a second step, we aimed to evaluate the economic relevance of deficit irrigation. Using data from eight sites, multiple linear regressions (MLR) were calculated to describe the relationship between: (1) the fresh market yield and the average soil matric potential reached before irrigation was initiated (ψ_{irr}) and (2) water use and ψ_{irr} . Based on the MLR results, the technical performance of each irrigation management method was evaluated and cost-benefit analyses were conducted. The results of the study showed that adopting a precise irrigation scheduling tool such as WTT is highly cost-effective and leads to water savings relative to the conventional approach. The results also revealed that any water savings associated with a deficit irrigation strategy are costly for strawberry growers.

Key words: Tension sensors, water use efficiency, precision irrigation, cost-benefit analysis, sustainability

Introduction

With more than 1.3 million metric tonnes of strawberries (*Fragaria x ananassa* Duch.) produced each year, the United States is the world's second largest supplier for both fresh and frozen markets (FAOSTAT, 2016). Remarkably, California is the leading state in terms of agricultural receipts in the United States (USDA, 2013a) and accounts for more than 90 per cent of the nation's total strawberry production (USDA, 2013b). Because of sustained and severe drought conditions, the major strawberry growing regions of California have been experiencing substantial water supply problems for more than five years now (USDA, 2016b). The state relies heavily on irrigation with much of the surface irrigation water supplied by state and federal water projects (USDA, 2016b). In drought years, however, many farmers compensate for reduced surface water delivery by increasing water withdrawals (USDA, 2016b). The western United States in particular is currently facing a number of difficulties, including long-term aquifer depletion, potential land subsidence, and saline intrusion and nitrate contamination in local aquifers (California Department of Water Resources, 2014; Fulcher *et al.*, 2016; Gallardo *et al.*, 1996; Gray *et al.*, 2015; Scanlon *et al.*, 2012). This situation is particularly critical since aquifers are mostly non-renewable resources given the naturally low recharge rates in many areas (Gleeson and Wada, 2012; USDA, 2016b). Consequently, there is a critical need to increase crop water productivity (CWP) to ensure rational freshwater use in areas of intensive agricultural activity (Lea-Cox *et al.*, 2013).

Strawberry plants are particularly sensitive to water stress (Hanson, 1931) due to their shallow root system (MAFRD, 2015). When the crop is drip irrigated, adequate irrigation management is required to meet plant water requirements because only limited volumes of soil are wetted (Coelho and Or, 1998). The effectiveness of such irrigation is highly dependent on its scheduling, and it is thus important to determine the best timing and duration of watering events to limit over-watering, which often results in wasted water and lower crop yields (Saleem *et al.*, 2013; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015). Irrigation management practices have been studied extensively in field-grown strawberries (El-Farhan and Pritts, 1997), and the methods most commonly used in California are based either on crop evapotranspiration (ET) or on soil moisture measurements.

The ET approach estimates the quantity of water used by the crop during a given time period based on weather data and a field estimate of crop coefficients (K_c) (Grattan *et al.*, 1998). Several studies have reported that the ET-based method has the potential to optimize irrigation in

strawberries (Cahn *et al.*, 2016; Hanson and Bendixen, 2004; Yuan *et al.*, 2004). Despite being an inexpensive decision-making tool, this approach is not, however, as accurate as direct-measurement methods (Lea-Cox, 2012). It does not take into account rapid changes in climatic conditions (Létourneau *et al.*, 2015) nor soil water status. Aimed at compensating for crop evapotranspiration losses (Allen *et al.*, 1998), the ET approach uses previous water requirements in order to predict future water applications, thus eliminating the possibility of managing irrigation in real-time. While common grower practices aim for water applications equivalent to approximately 100 per cent of crop ET, recent studies suggest that improved irrigation scheduling methods, such as irrigation based on soil matric potential (ψ), can generate water savings without compromising strawberry yields and fruit quality, once an optimal irrigation threshold (IT) has been defined (Afael *et al.*, 2003; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015; Migliaccio *et al.*, 2008; Shae *et al.*, 1999). By optimizing irrigation efficiency, the ψ -based method is likely to enable strawberry farmers to better meet sustainability and economic objectives.

Wireless soil sensors technology (WTT) combines traditional soil matric potential (ψ) monitoring with wireless communication, thus allowing real-time data reporting and irrigation management (Chappell *et al.*, 2013; Lea-Cox *et al.*, 2013). Previous studies have reported that irrigation management based on ψ successfully optimized yield and CWP compared to conventional practices, once an optimal irrigation threshold (IT) was defined. Indeed, Migliaccio *et al.* (2008) showed that tensiometer automated irrigation using an IT of -15 kPa significantly reduced water use without affecting the growth of royal palms in South Florida compared to the grower practice. Similar conclusions were reported on a commercial tomato farm where tomato yields were maintained using tensiometers at an irrigation setpoint of -15 kPa, while up to 73% less water was used relative to the standard commercial practices (Afael *et al.*, 2003). In California, it has been shown that ψ -based irrigation at an optimal IT of -10 kPa could increase yields and CWP in field-grown strawberries compared to conventional practices (Anderson, 2015; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015). These results are consistent with other research studies, where significantly higher strawberry yields were obtained using an IT of -10 kPa compared to ITs ranging from -30 to -70 kPa (Guimerà *et al.*, 1995; Peñuelas, 1992; Serrano *et al.*, 1992). Although most growers are receptive to the idea of wireless sensor networks, they have so far been reluctant to adopt WTT because it is more costly than the conventional approach (Majsztrik *et al.*, 2013; Lea-Cox, 2012). However, no economic analysis of the potential profitability of this technology has been conducted for strawberry production in North America.

WTT also opens up a range of possibilities for fine-tuned irrigation strategies, such as deficit irrigation (DI), which has been shown to reduce water use and improve CWP in many crops (Geerts and Raes, 2009; Fereres and Soriano, 2007; Zwart and Bastiaanssen, 2004). In strawberries, Létourneau *et al.* (2015) obtained higher CWP in drier treatments (lower ITs) than in wetter treatments (-26 kPa vs -10 kPa; -15 kPa vs -8 kPa). Likewise, in Finland, in a strawberry crop grown in a sandy soil, Hoppula and Salo (2007) obtained higher CWP with irrigation initiated at -60 kPa instead of -15 kPa. Considering that most Californian strawberry growers must pay for water, a controlled dry-irrigation management strategy that uses tension sensors to save water would likely be advantageous.

The main objective of this study was to assess the potential profitability of ψ -based irrigation management using WTT with an optimal IT of -10 kPa in field-grown strawberries in California, in comparison with conventional irrigation scheduling. A second step aimed to evaluate the economic impact of deficit irrigation using WTT by simulating a set of reduced-irrigation scenarios.

Materials and methods

Site description and experimental designs

The data analysed in this study were collected over five growing seasons and on eight experimental sites covering a range of soil properties, cultivation periods, strawberry cultivars and farming practices used in field strawberry production in California, USA (Table 1). Treatments in all sites except site 1 were arranged in a randomized complete block design (RCBD) with three to five replicates. All sites were located in a typical temperate, Mediterranean climate. They were further divided into two groups according to their location: the northern strawberry growing region (Group N: sites 1-4) and the southern strawberry growing region (Group S: sites 5-8). Strawberry plants were grown on raised beds covered with a plastic mulch according to conventional farming practices, with two (Group N) or four (Group S) plant rows per bed. In Group N, day-neutral strawberries (*Fragaria* × *ananassa* Duch.) were planted in November in silty clay and clay loam soils. The trials ran from April to October on sites 1, 3 and 4, and from mid-April to late June on site 2. In Group S, short-day strawberries were planted in sandy loam soils in October with the fresh market harvest period falling between January/February and May/June.

Irrigation system specifications and ψ_{irr} measurements

Sprinkler irrigation was used in both groups in the early stages of plant growth. Subsequently, plants were drip-irrigated until the end of the season. The growing beds were irrigated by two (Group N) or three (Group S) drip lines (0.34-0.70 L h⁻¹ per emitter, depending on the site, with 20-cm emitter spacing). Field monitoring stations reporting real-time ψ measurements through wireless networks and web servers (Hortau, Quebec, Qc, Canada) were installed in all treatments in one or two blocks (Group N) or in one to three blocks (Group S) (Table 1). A monitoring station consisted of two tensiometers, buried at two different depths (15 and 30 cm), that measured the ψ at 15-min intervals. In the ψ -based treatments, the shallow probe, located in the root zone, indicated when a set IT was reached and irrigation should be initiated. The deep probe, located below the root zone, indicated when to stop irrigation to prevent water percolation and fertilizer leaching under the root zone. In the conventional treatments, the probe at a 15-cm depth reported the average ψ_{irr} while the deep probe monitored the soil water status at a 30-cm depth.

Irrigation treatments

A total of twenty-five ψ -based treatments consisted of different irrigation initiation thresholds ranging from -8 kPa to -35 kPa (Table 1). Irrigation events were initiated manually when the ψ at the 15-cm depth reached the predetermined IT, and were stopped once the ψ at 30-cm depth reached -5 kPa. The “-35/-10 kPa” and “Variable” treatments were based on ψ , with variable ITs throughout the season, as thoroughly described by Anderson (2015). The eight conventional irrigation treatments included the ET-based managements as well as the grower procedures (Table 1). While the grower treatments aimed to replace 100% of the water lost through evapotranspiration (Létourneau *et al.*, 2015), the three ET-based treatments (100%, 75% and 50% ET_c) were managed according to the estimated crop evapotranspiration (ET_c) and aimed to meet 100%, 75% or 50% of the crop’s water requirements. Crop water requirements in the ET treatments were determined using the CropManage web application (UC Cooperative Extension, Davis, CA, USA), as fully explained by Anderson (2015). The grower treatments and ET-based treatments were grouped into a single category since plant water needs were essentially estimated from weather data, without any direct measurement of soil water status, in contrast with ψ -based management. Moreover, the ET-based treatments reflected the irrigation frequency (two to three times weekly) typically used by strawberry growers in California.

Crop yield and water use

Strawberries in the picking plots were harvested weekly by the research team, on either a total or partial basis (Table 1). Group N fruits were classified by size and color as berries intended for the fresh market (referred to as “fresh market yield” in the present study) or as processing strawberries (for lower quality berries). On Group S sites, the harvesting period consisted of a first stage, when strawberries were intended for the fresh market only (first four or five months of the harvesting period), and then a second stage, when berries were intended for processing only (last couple of months). Only fresh market yields were used for the analyses in the present study. The amount of water applied in each treatment during the fresh market harvesting period was measured weekly by water meters.

Data analysis

All data analyses were generated using SAS software, Version 9.3. (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA). Multiple linear regressions (MLR) with dummy variables were used to develop models for predicting fresh market yields and water use (WU) from ψ_{irr} . Predictors comprised a continuous variable (ψ_{irr} ; in kPa) as well as categorical variables such as (1) the region where the experiment took place (R: northern or southern region), (2) the year of experimentation (Y: from 2011 to 2015), and (3) the irrigation management method used (IM: conventional or ψ -based).

Prediction of fresh market yield from ψ_{irr}

The first MLR was performed to predict fresh market yields (FMY) from ψ_{irr} , taking into consideration the effect of the experimental site (region and year) on yields. Fifty-three (53) observations were used to perform the analysis. Data of total fresh market yield associated with the average ψ_{irr} value in each block where a monitoring station was installed were used to conduct the first analysis. Giving that there were two or more picking plots per block in some cases, the position effect of the picking plots on the fresh market yield was tested using a Student’s t-test (significance level of 0.05). If significant, the fresh market yield closest to the monitoring station was selected for further analyses. Otherwise, we calculated the average fresh market yield of all the picking plots. Depending on the site, either total or partial fresh market yields were harvested in the picking plots (Table 1). Where applicable, partial yields were extrapolated to obtain total yields, as detailed in Annexe B. The extrapolated and measured total fresh market yields were then used for the MLR analysis. The model included 7 predictors and 45 error degrees of freedom.

Prediction of WU from ψ_{irr} and IM

The second MLR analysis examined the relationship between the total volume of water used (WU) per treatment during the fresh market harvesting period and the corresponding average ψ_{irr} in each treatment over the whole season. Each WU was further associated with the irrigation scheduling method (conventional or ψ -based). The model, which also accounted for the WU differences between sites (region and year), was based on 34 observations (N) and included 9 predictors and 24 error degrees of freedom.

Given that both regression models involved a high-order interaction effect, the data were centered on their respective reference intercepts (site 8; R_sY_{2015}) to facilitate the visual detection of a data pattern (Aiken *et al.*, 1991). Water productivity (CWP) was further calculated as the ratio of predicted fruit production to predicted units of water applied, as deduced from the regression models (Fereres and Soriano, 2007; Gendron *et al.*, 2016).

Frequency distribution of ψ_{irr} under conventional practice

Data from the eight treatments aimed at applying 100% of the crop ET (grower and 100% ET_c treatments) were used to determine the frequency distribution of ψ_{irr} under conventional management systems. These observations were used to define the scenarios for the economic analysis.

Economic analyses

Economic analyses were performed to determine the profitability of (1) WTT using an optimal IT of -10 kPa, and of (2) deficit irrigation controlled by WTT.

As a first step, a partial budgeting analysis was used to compare the additional costs and benefits associated with the adoption of optimal irrigation management based on ψ , using an IT of -10 kPa, instead of the conventional irrigation management. The benefits were calculated based on water savings and yield gains, while the costs included both variable costs and fixed costs. Depending on the scenario studied, variable costs included the water costs associated with increased water use as well as the operating costs associated with yield gains. Fixed costs included the investment in the WTT, which was calculated on an annual basis and included depreciation of the equipment, the annual service fees and depreciated initial costs. Depreciation of the investment and of initial fees was estimated using the straight-line method (Penson *et al.*, 2002) considering a life span of five years for the WTT. Based on the production practices

commonly used in California, we assumed that one monitoring station would be installed for every 4 ha of production surface.

Along with the cost-benefit analyses, the expected value (EV) was calculated to estimate the long-run average value of the net change in profit. The EV was calculated as the sum of the net change in profit values associated with each scenario studied, multiplied by the probability of their occurring over the years. The profitability of the WTT was determined by calculating the payback periods, i.e., the number of years required to generate sufficient revenue to reimburse the initial investment (Gaudin *et al.*, 2011; Levallois, 2010), as well as the net present values (NPV) (Arnold, 2014). In this last case, given that the WTT had an assumed life span of five years, the proposed irrigation practice was considered profitable if the NPV, calculated as the difference between the present value of net cash inflows and the total initial investment costs over a period of five years, was positive. An annual discount rate of 10% was assumed (Arnold, 2014). Finally, a break-even point (BEP), defined as the minimum net gain necessary to generate a payback period within the useful life of the equipment, was also calculated. Sensitivity analyses were then conducted to assess the impact of both strawberry and water price variations on payback periods in the different scenarios studied.

As a second step, cost-benefit analyses were done to assess the economic effectiveness of the deficit irrigation scenarios (IT of -15, -20, -30 kPa) controlled by WTT in comparison with the ψ -based strategy, using an IT of -10 kPa. The analyses accounted for the variations in yield and water use when DI strategies were adopted instead of the optimal IT of -10 kPa. Sensitivity analyses were conducted to assess the impact of water price variations on the profitability of deficit irrigation.

The economic analyses were conducted on a one-hectare basis, since farm size had a negligible impact on net changes in profit (data not shown). FMY and WU values were predicted from the fitted regression models. Input costs and output prices used for all analyses performed in the present study as well as details regarding the prices of each item are reported in Annexe C.

Results

Multiple linear regressions

Prediction of fresh market yield from ψ_{irr}

The multiple linear regression performed to predict fresh market yield (FMY; in kg ha⁻¹) based on soil matric potential reached before irrigation was initiated (ψ_{irr}) showed that both ψ_{irr} and the R*Y interaction were significant predictors of the total fresh market yield ($p<.0022$ and $p<.0001$, respectively). The final model ($F(7,45)=45.93$, $p<.0001$, with an R^2 of 0.877 and $R^2_{adj} = 0.858$) is defined by the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} FMY = & 44\,363.715 + (25\,490.986 * R_N Y_{2011}) + (-3177.392 * R_N Y_{2013}) \\ & + (34\,054.153 * R_N Y_{2014}) + (3047.615 * R_S Y_{2012}) \\ & + (-7523.017 * R_S Y_{2013}) + (18\,782.244 * R_S Y_{2014}) - (288.643 * \psi_{irr}) \end{aligned} \quad [6]$$

where R_i is the growing region (N: northern region; S: southern region), Y_j is the year of experimentation, and ψ_{irr} is the average soil matric potential (-kPa) reached before initiating irrigation. The term $R_i Y_j$ corresponds to individual experimental sites and is referred to as “site effect” in the present paper. The most recent experimental site, site 8 ($R_S Y_{2015}$), was used as the reference site to perform this analysis, which means that the intercept for this site corresponds to the initial intercept of the equation (44 363.715 kg ha⁻¹).

The significant effect of the R*Y interaction on fresh market yield was attributable to differences in the duration of the fresh market harvest periods, in cultural practices and in climatic conditions among the sites (Table 1). The interaction effects for R* ψ_{irr} and Y* ψ_{irr} were non-significant (p -values of 0.9146 and 0.1263, respectively; data not shown). Since the effect of ψ_{irr} on FMY was the same regardless of the experimental site, the fresh market yield data were centered on the reference fresh market yield intercept to eliminate the site effect (R*Y) and facilitate a visual interpretation of the results obtained. The centered regression line is presented in Figure 1A. For an IT ranging from -44.7 to -7.1 kPa, the results showed that each 1-kPa increase in ψ_{irr} corresponded to a 288.643 kg ha⁻¹ increase in fresh market yield, confirming that the crop is sensitive to variations in ψ .

Prediction of WU from ψ_{irr} and IM

The second multiple linear regression performed to predict water use (WU; in $\text{m}^3 \text{ ha}^{-1}$) based on ψ_{irr} revealed that ψ_{irr} ($p < .0001$), experimental sites (R^*Y : $p < .0001$) and IM ($p < .0001$) were significant predictors of total WU. Significant differences in WU between sites can be explained by inter-site variations in duration of the harvesting periods and in climatic conditions. The final model ($F(9,24)=44.13$, $p < .0001$, $R^2 = 0.943$ and $R^2_{adj} = 0.915$) is described by the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} WU = & 2924.088 + (865.966 * R_N Y_{2011}) + (77.221 * R_N Y_{2012}) + (2150.255 * R_N Y_{2013}) \\ & + (4165.668 * R_N Y_{2014}) + (624.108 * R_S Y_{2012}) + (-503.006 * R_S Y_{2013}) \\ & + (1382.357 * R_S Y_{2014}) + (1031.357 * IM) - (81.693 * \psi_{irr}) \end{aligned} \quad [7]$$

where R_i is the growing region (N: northern region; S: southern region), Y_j is the year of experimentation, IM is the irrigation management and is coded as 1 = conventional and 0 = ψ -based management, and ψ_{irr} is the average soil matric potential (-kPa) reached before initiating irrigation. The term $R_i Y_j$ represents the site effect. The most recent experimental site, site 8 ($R_S Y_{2015}$), was again used as the reference site, which means that the intercept for this site corresponds to the initial intercept of the equation (2924.088).

The $Y * \psi_{irr}$, $R * \psi_{irr}$, $R * IM$ and $Y * IM$ interactions were not significant (p -values of 0.9457, 0.0869, 0.0644 and 0.3486, respectively; data not shown). Since the effect of ψ_{irr} on WU of each IM was the same regardless of the experimental site, the WU data were centered as described above and further increased by $3333.074 \text{ m}^3 \text{ ha}^{-1}$ (a number obtained by multiplying the lowest average ψ_{irr} reached by a treatment, $|-40.8 \text{ kPa}|$, by the slope of the regression line, 81.693) in order to obtain positive values of WU on the entire range of ψ_{irr} and to facilitate the visual detection of a data pattern. The centered regression line is shown in Figure 1B.

Considering ITs ranging from -40.8 to -7.9 kPa, a positive relationship was found between water use and ψ_{irr} , with a predicted WU increase of $81.693 \text{ m}^3 \text{ ha}^{-1}$ per kPa. Moreover, the irrigation management method had a significant effect on the amount of water applied. Indeed, the conventional management used constantly more water ($1031 \text{ m}^3 \text{ ha}^{-1}$) than the ψ -based method (Figure 1B). Hence, the results indicate that an increase in CWP can be expected with the use of

ψ -based irrigation management with WTT instead of conventional irrigation management (see Annexe D).

Frequency distribution and studied scenarios

The frequency distribution presented in Figure 2 illustrates the variability of the conventional irrigation scheduling. Six of the eight conventional treatments represented relatively dry management strategies while the other two corresponded to relatively wet irrigation approaches.

Based on these observations, we defined five conventional management scenarios (C1-C5) for the economic analyses (Figure 3A). Scenarios C1-C5 corresponded to the variations in water use, fresh market yield and water productivity (CWP) associated with the adoption of ψ -based management with an optimal IT of -10 kPa (new practice) instead of conventional irrigation management (reference practice). Since the conventional practice was shown to be variable in terms of ψ_{irr} , the reference practice varied between the scenarios. Each scenario took into account an average ψ_{irr} that could be observed under conventional practice (-10, -15, -25, -35 and -40 kPa). The BEP scenario, with a reference practice triggering irrigation at about -11.2 kPa, was also reported in Figure 3A.

In all scenarios except C1, ψ -based irrigation with an IT of -10 kPa resulted in a higher total yield relative to the reference practices. In scenarios C1 and C2, the new practice decreased water use compared to the reference practices; in scenarios C3-C5, however, it increased water use compared to the reference practices, which represented drier conventional strategies. For a same irrigation strategy (C1), CWP increased by 33% with the use of WTT with an IT of -10 kPa relative to conventional practice. CWP also increased in scenarios C2 and C3, but decreased in scenarios C4 and C5. The latter results can be explained by the fact that dry irrigation managements, such as the reference practices used in scenarios C4 and C5 (ψ_{irr} of -35 and -40 kPa), are associated with more efficient water use than wet management strategies (Feres and Soriano, 2007; Geerts and Raes, 2009; Hoppula and Salo, 2007; Serrano *et al.*, 1992; Zwart and Bastiaanssen, 2004).

Three deficit irrigation scenarios (D1-D3) were also defined for the economic analyses (Figure 3B). These scenarios represent the variations in predicted water use and fresh market yield associated with the adoption of a deficit irrigation strategy controlled by WTT (IT of -15, -20 and -30 kPa; new practices) instead of optimal irrigation management based on ψ with an IT of

-10 kPa (reference practice). In all cases, deficit irrigation generated both water savings and yield losses relative to optimal ψ -based irrigation at -10 kPa. Nonetheless, the deficit irrigation scenarios improved predicted CWP by 12%-85% compared to the reference treatment, consistent with previous findings (Feres and Soriano, 2007; Geerts and Raes, 2009; Gendron *et al.*, 2016; Hoppula and Salo, 2007; Serrano *et al.*, 1992; Zwart and Bastiaanssen, 2004).

Economic analysis

Profitability of the WTT

A cost-benefit analysis was conducted to measure the additional costs and benefits associated with the adoption of WTT in conjunction with an optimal IT of -10 kPa in comparison with conventional practice (scenarios C1-C5; Table 2). Under wet irrigation management for both conventional and ψ -based approaches (scenario C1), a net loss of \$356 ha⁻¹ was observed when WTT was used instead of the conventional approach. In contrast, when compared with relatively dry conventional irrigation managements (ψ_{irrs} at -15, -25, -35 and -40 kPa; scenarios C2-C5), ψ -based irrigation at -10 kPa led to net gains ranging from \$1179 to \$8876 ha⁻¹. Except for scenario C1, where a net loss was generated, the payback periods for all scenarios (C2-C5) were under one year (0.9 to 0.1 year). Considering the different conventional irrigation strategies (wet to dry) and the probability of their occurring over the years, the expected long-run average net change in profit is a net gain of \$4068 ha⁻¹ (Table 2). This average net gain corresponds to a payback period of 0.3 years and to a net present value (NPV) of \$15 114 ha⁻¹.

The influence of different annual strawberry prices on payback periods was also evaluated (Table 3). Overall, excluding scenario C1, the payback periods obtained ranged from 1 month to 2.6 years. For scenario C2, where the conventional method was associated with a drier irrigation strategy (ψ_{irr} of 15 kPa) compared to optimal ψ -based management with an IT of -10 kPa, the payback periods decreased from 2.6 years to 7 months as fruit prices rose from \$1.54 to \$2.65 kg⁻¹. The same trend was observed for the other scenarios studied (C3-C5). At the break-even point (BEP), an annual yield gain as small as 350 kg ha⁻¹ was enough, at an average yearly fruit price of \$2.20 kg⁻¹, to generate a payback period equal to the useful life of the equipment (5 years). Given that the annual strawberry price has been above \$1.54 kg⁻¹ since 2007 (see historical price data in Annexe C), payback periods of less than or equal to 1.6 years are attainable for most growers.

Another sensitivity analysis was done to measure the impact of varying water prices on payback periods for WTT used with an IT of -10 kPa relative to conventional management (Table 4). In California, water prices for the 2016-17 period varied from \$150 to \$5000 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$0.12 to \$4.05 m⁻³) (see Annexe C). Under conventional management with irrigation initiated at an average ψ of -10 kPa (C1), a water price of \$575 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$0.47 m⁻³) was necessary to obtain a net gain with the ψ -based approach through water savings alone. In this case, the payback period was 4.9 years. At a water price of \$150 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$0.12 m⁻³), increases in fruit yield from 1440 to 8660 kg ha⁻¹ (scenarios C2-C5) under ψ -based irrigation management compared to conventional practice led to short payback periods (less than one year) for all fruit prices despite increased WU in some scenarios (Figure 3A). Notably, increased WU had little effect on payback periods.

Profitability of a deficit irrigation strategy

The net changes in profits associated with the deficit irrigation strategies are presented in Table 5. The cost-benefit analyses revealed that deficit irrigation strategies were not always economically effective compared to the reference treatment (wet management with WTT and an IT of -10 kPa). Despite predicted water savings of 7% compared to wet management (scenario D1; Figure 3B), net losses of \$1537 to \$92 ha⁻¹ were recorded at water prices ranging from \$150 to \$4500 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$0.12 to \$3.65 m⁻³). This result is attributable to predicted yield losses of 3% (1440 kg ha⁻¹). The same trends were revealed in the other deficit irrigation scenarios, with greater yield losses (-7% and -14%). However, it is important to note that net gains were obtained in all deficit irrigation scenarios when the price of water reached \$5000 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$4.05 m⁻³).

Discussion

Optimal irrigation management for field-grown strawberries

The results of the present study indicated that an irrigation management based on ψ was more profitable for strawberry growers than conventional practice. Given that the conventional irrigation approach is highly variable, representing either dry or wet management, better control of crop yield and water use is obtained with ψ -based management. Indeed, the first multiple linear regression (MLR) analysis showed that the highest fresh strawberry yields were obtained with an IT of about -10 kPa, consistent with previous work (Guimerà *et al.*, 1995; Hoppula and Salo, 2007; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015; Peñuelas *et al.*, 1992). It also established that consistent yield losses are to be expected with the adoption of dry irrigation management strategies compared to optimal management with an IT of -10 kPa. Interestingly, the analysis showed that site-specific

characteristics, such as soil type, cultivar, general cultural practices and climatic conditions, did not change the response of yield to the average ψ_{irr} . It can thus be concluded that optimal irrigation is attained with an IT of -10 kPa in open-field strawberry production in California.

In addition, the results of the second multiple linear regression revealed that both the ψ_{irr} and the irrigation management method used had a significant impact on WU in field-grown strawberry production in California, in both the northern and southern regions. The results indicated that conventional practice used more water than the ψ -based WTT irrigation approach to obtain a similar yield. The ψ -based approach thus appears to allow for more efficient water use than conventional practice, regardless of the growing region.

Adopting WTT: economic considerations

The economic analyses showed that the profitability of WTT was mainly dependent on yield. A payback period within the useful life of the equipment was calculated for a yield increase of only 350 kg ha⁻¹ with WTT. Likewise, given that the equipment is expected to last for 5 years, short payback periods for the investment in WTT (under one year) were obtained with high predicted yield gains (4330-8660 kg ha⁻¹), even though these yield gains were associated with increased water use. This suggests that the current cost of water is fairly low since it has little influence on the payback period. Similarly, payback periods were relatively short (1.6-2.6 years) even at very low strawberry prices, between \$1.54 and \$1.76 kg⁻¹, suggesting that the profitability of the technology is not likely to be affected by strawberry price variations.

In the case where the use of the WTT instead of conventional practice had no effect on yield but did generate water savings (C1 scenario; Table 4), the current water price, ranging from \$150 to \$350 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$0.12 to \$0.28 m⁻³) depending on the growing region, was too low to generate a net gain for the grower. Indeed, a minimum water price of \$575 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$0.47 m⁻³) would be required to ensure the profitability of the technology. This suggests that current water prices are not high enough to support an investment in water-saving technologies such as wireless tensiometers.

Deficit irrigation: unfortunately for the environment, an unprofitable strategy so far

The economic analyses for deficit irrigation showed that the money savings associated with reduced water use are minimal relative to the reduction in income associated with the consequent yield losses. Indeed, for all the deficit irrigation scenarios studied, net losses were obtained with

all water prices between \$150 and \$4500 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$0.12 and \$3.65 m⁻³), while net gains were only obtained with a water price as high as \$5000 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$4.05 m⁻³).

Practical implications

Faced with the increasing problem of water scarcity, California strawberry growers must optimize irrigation management to ensure that production remains economical and sustainable. Among the irrigation strategies that support sustainable water use, WTT is a highly profitable option that uses less water than conventional irrigation management, as demonstrated in this study. As previously observed in Florida (Migliaccio *et al.*, 2008), the adoption of such precision irrigation scheduling is likely to lead to more sustainable agricultural production systems in California.

This study also shows that despite the current context of water scarcity in California, as long as the price of water for agricultural purposes remains low in most areas, policies restricting water use that would force growers to adopt a deficit irrigation strategy would likely have an adverse effect on the profitability of strawberry farms, due to consequent yield losses. Water prices would have to reach \$5000 acre-ft⁻¹ (\$4.05 m⁻³) for deficit irrigation to become profitable. As the situation stands now, as a first step in encouraging growers to improve crop water productivity, it would be more judicious to promote the adoption of WTT than to impose water restrictions.

In California, it is likely that the ongoing water shortage, combined with increasing competition for freshwater resources among industrial, urban and agricultural sectors, in addition to population growth (State of California, 2016), will drive up the price of water in the state (Fulcher *et al.*, 2016; Majsztrik *et al.*, 2013). The ecological costs of water use are of increasing concern as well, and, if accounted for, will further increase water prices (Fulcher *et al.*, 2016). Since water resources are currently under tremendous stress in the area, it will be crucial to assess the financial and ecological value of water in order to make the best planning decisions and ensure the rational use of freshwater resources in the future.

Conclusion

This comparative study shows that the ψ -based irrigation strategy implemented in farm-scale strawberry trials in California is an accurate irrigation management method. Maximum yields are obtained at an irrigation threshold of about -10 kPa, in both the southern and northern regions.

The study also reveals that ψ -based management substantially improves CWP relative to the conventional irrigation approach, regardless of the strawberry growing region.

The economic analyses confirm that the use of WTT with a defined IT of -10 kPa has the potential to be highly profitable for strawberry growers, given the short payback periods (less than one year) obtained with yield gains ranging from 1440 to 8660 kg ha⁻¹, although in some cases, these yield gains were associated with increased water use. Nonetheless, a yield gain as small as 350 kg ha⁻¹ was enough to generate a payback period equal to the useful life of the equipment. Because the cost of water is presently low, the profitability of the investment compared to conventional practice is at this time more contingent on yield gains than water savings.

Finally, our results show that, for the time being, there are no economic benefits associated with increasing water productivity through the use of a deficit irrigation strategy in strawberry production in California, since the benefits associated with water savings are negligible compared to the consequent yield losses. These findings suggest that, at current water prices, it would be of more benefit to growers to improve CWP by adopting a more accurate irrigation management tool than by adopting a deficit irrigation strategy.

Overall, our results constitute a useful decision-making tool for growers with regard to the adoption of WTT for open-field strawberry production in California.

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Tables

Table 1. Site description, field equipment, measurements and irrigation treatments (Anderson, 2015; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015; unpublished data).

Group	Site	Location	Year	Fresh market harvest period / trial duration	Soil type	Site area	Bed length/width	Number of beds per plot	Experimental Design	Number of picking plots	Number of monitoring stations/trt	Harvest frequency	Treatments (irrigation management)	
		(lat; long)				(ha)	(m)					P^b or T^c	Conventional	ψ -based
N	1	Watsonville, CA, USA (36,88°; -121,81°)	2011	April to October	Silty clay	0.28	55/0.80	14	No treatment replicate	3	1	P	Grower	-10 kPa -20 kPa
N	2	Salinas, CA, USA (36,69°; -121,65°)	2012	Mid-April to early July	Silty clay loam	0.56	127/0.80	4	RCBD ^a 3 reps	2	1	P		-8 kPa -13 kPa -18 kPa
N	3	Watsonville, CA, USA (36,89°; -122,67°)	2013	April to October	Clay loam	0.28	32/0.80	2	RCBD 4 reps	1	1	T	Grower	-10 kPa -17 kPa -25 kPa
N	4	Watsonville, CA, USA (36,89°; -121,67°)	2014	April to October	Clay loam	0.19	34/0.80	1	RCBD 4 reps	2	2	P	50% ET _c 75% ET _c 100% ET _c Grower	-10 kPa -35kPa/-10kPa
S	5	Oxnard, CA, USA (34,15°; -119,15°)	2012	February to mid-June	Sandy loam	0.70	130/1.22	3	RCBD 3 reps	2	1	T		-8 kPa -11 kPa -13 kPa
S	6	Oxnard, CA, USA (34,19°; -119,19°)	2013	January to May	Sandy loam	NA	NA	2	RCBD 3 reps	2	1	P	Grower	-13 kPa -13 kPa -18 kPa
S	7	Oxnard, CA, USA (34,19°; -119,19°)	2014	January to June	Sandy loam	0.55	127/1.22	1	RCBD 5 reps	2	3	P	Grower	-10 kPa -35 kPa -35 kPa/-10 kPa Variable thresholds
S	8	Oxnard, CA, USA (34,19°; -119,19°)	2015	January to June	Sandy loam	0.55	119/1.22	1	RCBD 5 reps	2	3	P		-10 kPa -35 kPa -35 kPa/-10 kPa Variable thresholds Grower (ψ -based) ^d

^a RCBD: Randomized Complete Block Design

^b P (partial yield): when harvest by the research team was done less often than that of the grower.

^c T (total yield): when harvest by the research team was done as often as that of the grower.

^d The grower treatment on site 8 was included in the ψ -based treatments since wireless tensiometer technology was used to manage irrigation.

Table 2. Cost-benefit analyses of five scenarios associated with the adoption of wireless tensiometer technology with an optimal IT of -10 kPa instead of the conventional practice. Results are presented in dollars per hectare^a. Payback periods are reported in years.

	SCENARIOS ^b					<i>Expected Value</i>
	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	
ADDITIONAL BENEFITS (\$ ha ⁻¹)						
Yield gain ^c	-	3 168	9 526	15 884	19 052	
Water savings ^d	124	74	-	-	-	
Total additional benefits (\$ ha⁻¹)	124	3 242	9 526	15 884	19 052	<i>9 170</i>
ADDITIONAL COSTS (\$ ha ⁻¹)						
Variable costs						
Increased water use	-	-	23	121	170	
Operating costs	-	1 584	4 763	7 942	9 526	
Fixed costs (WTT) ^e						
Technology depreciation	245	245	245	245	245	
Interest (0%)	-	-	-	-	-	
Annual service fees	225	225	225	225	225	
Depreciation of initial fees	10	10	10	10	10	
Total additional costs (\$ ha⁻¹)	480	2 064	5 265	8 543	10 176	<i>5 102</i>
NET CHANGE IN PROFIT (\$ ha⁻¹)	(356)	1 179	4 261	7 341	8 876	<i>4 068</i>
Payback period (years)	NPB ^f	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.1	<i>0.3</i>
Net present value (\$ ha⁻¹)	(1 658)	4 161	15 843	27 521	33 339	15 114

^a 1 \$ ha⁻¹ = 0.40 \$ acre⁻¹

^b The conventional scenarios aimed at measuring the impact of adopting the ψ -based approach using an optimal irrigation threshold of -10 kPa instead of the conventional practice. Since the conventional practice was shown to be variable, five scenarios representing five possible conventional managements were established. For scenario C1, the average soil matric potential reached before initiating irrigation by the conventional practice was -10 kPa; for C2, -15 kPa; for C3, -25 kPa; for C4, -35 kPa and for C5, -40 kPa.

^{c,d} Fresh market yield and water use are predicted from the regression lines.

^e In this study, we assumed that one monitoring station would be installed for every 4 ha (10 acres) of production surface.

^f NPB: No payback on investment.

Table 3. Matrix of payback periods assessing the impact of strawberry price variations on the profitability of wireless tensiometer technology, when adopted with an irrigation threshold of -10 kPa instead of the conventional practice. Expected payback periods^a are placed in the middle of the matrix and are reported in years.

Conventional scenarios ^b	Annual fresh market strawberry prices (\$ kg ⁻¹) (\$ lb ⁻¹)					
	1.54	1.76	1.98	2.20	2.43	2.65
	0.70	0.80	0.90	1.00	1.10	1.20
C1	NPB ^c	NPB	NPB	NPB	NPB	NPB
C2	2.6	1.6	1.1	0.9	0.7	0.6
C3	0.8	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.2
C4	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1
C5	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1
<i>BEP^d</i>	<i>NPB</i>	<i>NPB</i>	<i>NPB</i>	4.7	3.6	2.9

^a Payback periods are calculated based on fresh market yield and water use predicted from the regression lines.

^b The conventional scenarios aimed at measuring the impact on yields and water use of adopting the ψ -based approach with an optimal irrigation threshold (IT) of -10 kPa instead of the conventional practice. Since the conventional practice was shown to be variable, corresponding either to a dry or to a wet management, five scenarios representing five possible conventional managements were established. For scenario C1, the average soil matric potential reached before initiating irrigation by the conventional practice (reference) was -10 kPa; for C2, -15 kPa; for C3, -25 kPa; for C4, -35 kPa and for C5, -40 kPa.

^c NPB: No payback on investment.

^d BEP represents the scenario from which the adoption of wireless tensiometer technology with an irrigation threshold of -10 kPa becomes interesting at a water price of 150 \$ acre-ft⁻¹, due to the fresh market yield gains and to the water savings that the technology allows to generate compared to the conventional practice.

Table 4. Matrix of payback periods assessing the impact of water price variations on the profitability of wireless tensiometer technology, when adopted with an irrigation threshold of -10 kPa instead of the conventional practice. Expected payback periods^a are placed in the middle of the matrix and are reported in years.

Conventional scenarios ^b	Water Price (\$ m ⁻³) (\$ acre-ft ⁻¹)					
	0.12	0.28	0.41	0.47	0.81	4.05
	150	350	500	575	1000	5000
C1	NPB^c	NPB	NPB	4.9	2.1	0.3
C2	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.3
C3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
C4	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.4
C5	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.4
<i>BEP^d</i>	<i>4.7</i>	<i>2.5</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>1.9</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>0.3</i>

^a Payback periods are calculated based on fresh market yield and water use predicted from the regression lines.

^b The conventional scenarios aimed at measuring the impact on yields and water use of adopting the ψ -based approach using an optimal irrigation threshold (IT) of -10 kPa instead of the conventional practice. Since the conventional practice was shown to be variable, five scenarios representing five possible conventional managements were established. For scenario C1, the average soil matric potential reached before initiating irrigation by the conventional practice (reference) was -10 kPa; for C2, -15 kPa; for C3, -25 kPa; for C4, -35 kPa and for C5, -40 kPa.

^c NPB: No payback on investment.

^d BEP represents the scenario from which the adoption of wireless tensiometer technology using an irrigation threshold of -10 kPa becomes interesting at a water price of 150 \$ acre-ft⁻¹, due to the fresh market yield gains and to the water savings that the technology allows to generate compared to the conventional practice.

Table 5. Matrix of net changes in profit assessing the impact of water prices variations on the profitability of deficit irrigation. Expected net changes in profit^a are placed in the middle of the matrix and are reported in dollars per hectare^b. Net losses are indicated in brackets.

Deficit irrigation scenarios ^c	Water prices (\$ m ⁻³) (\$ acre-ft ⁻¹)					
	0.12	0.28	0.41	0.81	3.65	4.05
	150	350	500	1000	4500	5000
D1	(1 537)	(1 471)	(1 421)	(1 255)	(92)	75
D2	(3 086)	(2 953)	(2 853)	(2 521)	(194)	138
D3	(6 162)	(5 898)	(5 700)	(5 039)	(414)	247

^a The net changes in profit are calculated based on fresh market yield and water use predicted from the regression lines.

^b 1 \$ ha⁻¹ = 0.40 \$ ac⁻¹

^c The deficit irrigation scenarios consisted of ψ -based treatments with irrigation thresholds (IT) lower than the optimal IT of -10 kPa (reference ψ -based treatment). For D1 scenario, the irrigation threshold tested was -15 kPa; for D2, -20 kPa and for D3, -30 kPa.

Figures

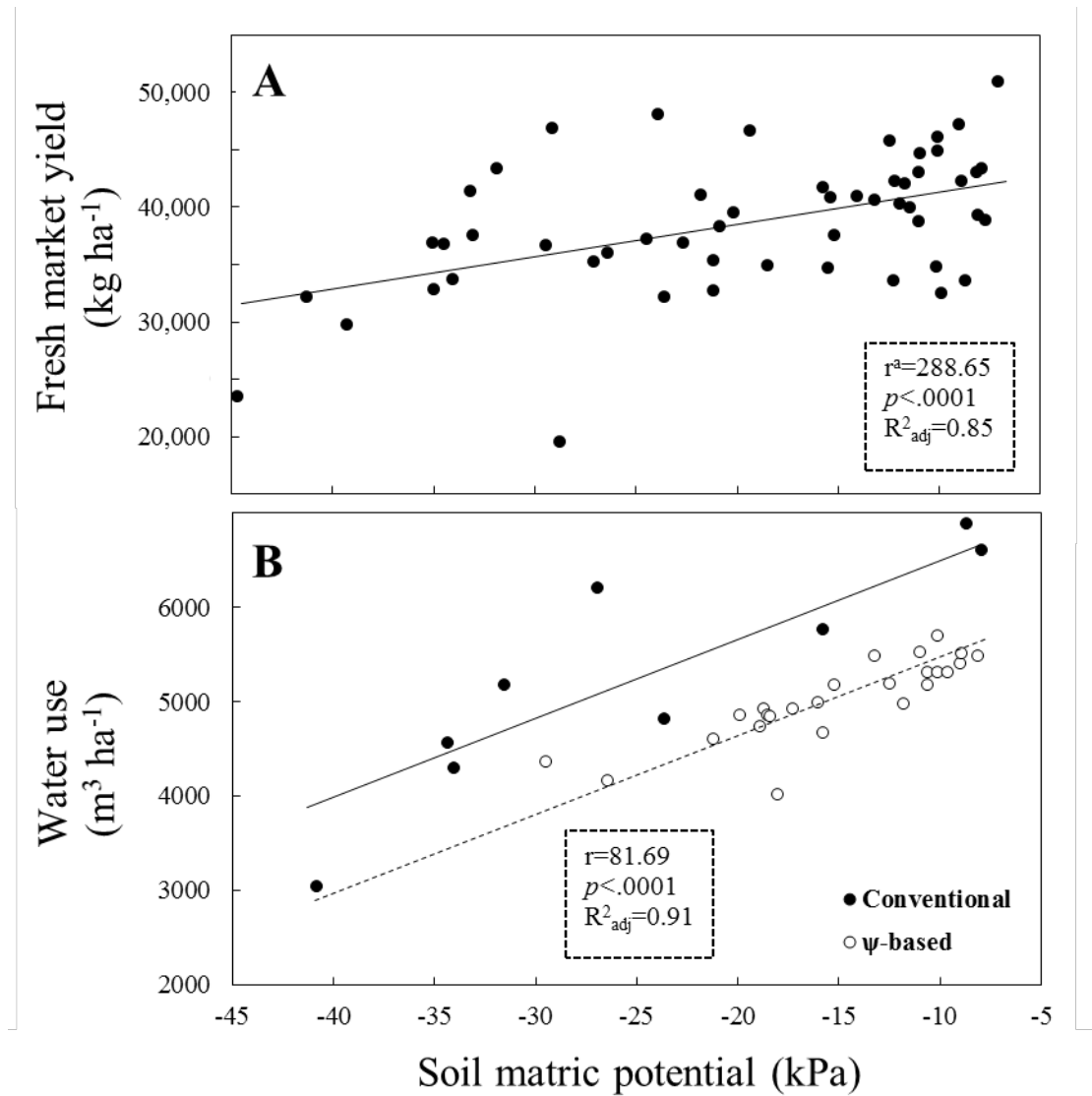


Figure 1. Centered regression lines describing the relationship between: **(A)** the predicted total fresh market yield and the average soil matric potential reached before initiating irrigation (ψ_{irr}); and **(B)** between the predicted total water use and ψ_{irr} , for the irrigation management methods used. Data from eight experimental sites were used to conduct the analyses. In both models, the site effect ($R_j Y_i$) was significant. The multiple regression lines obtained were centered on the reference intercept of each model in order to facilitate the visual detection of data pattern.

^a On each figure, “ r ” corresponds to the effect of the predictor variable (ψ_{irr}) on fresh market yield and water use. In other words, it corresponds to the slope of the regression lines.

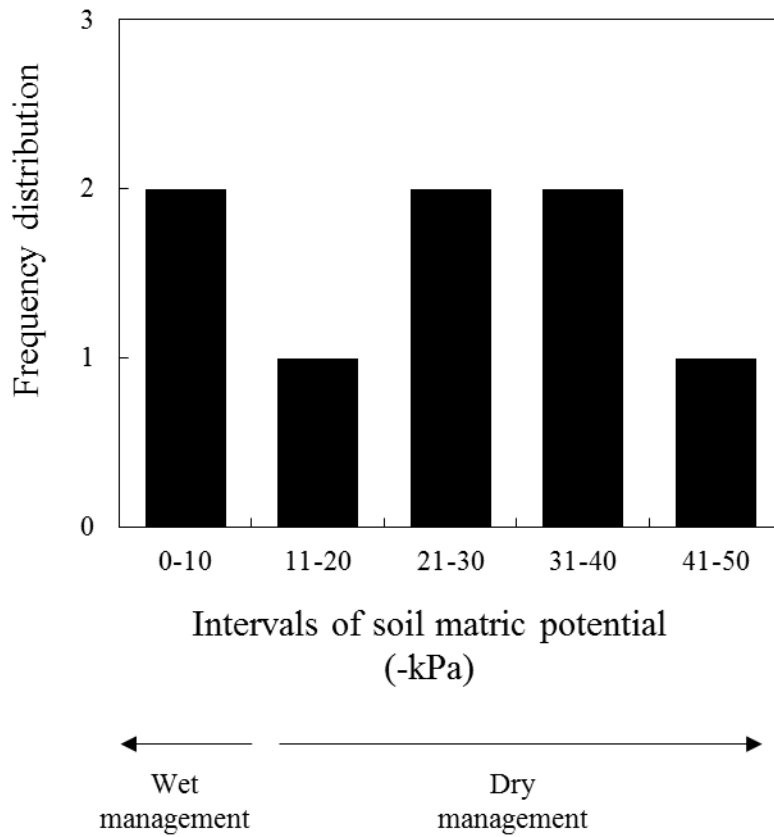


Figure 2. Frequency distribution of the average ψ_{irr} for eight treatments under conventional irrigation management. The treatments aimed to replace 100% of crop water lost through ET and consisted of the grower procedures and one of the ET treatments.

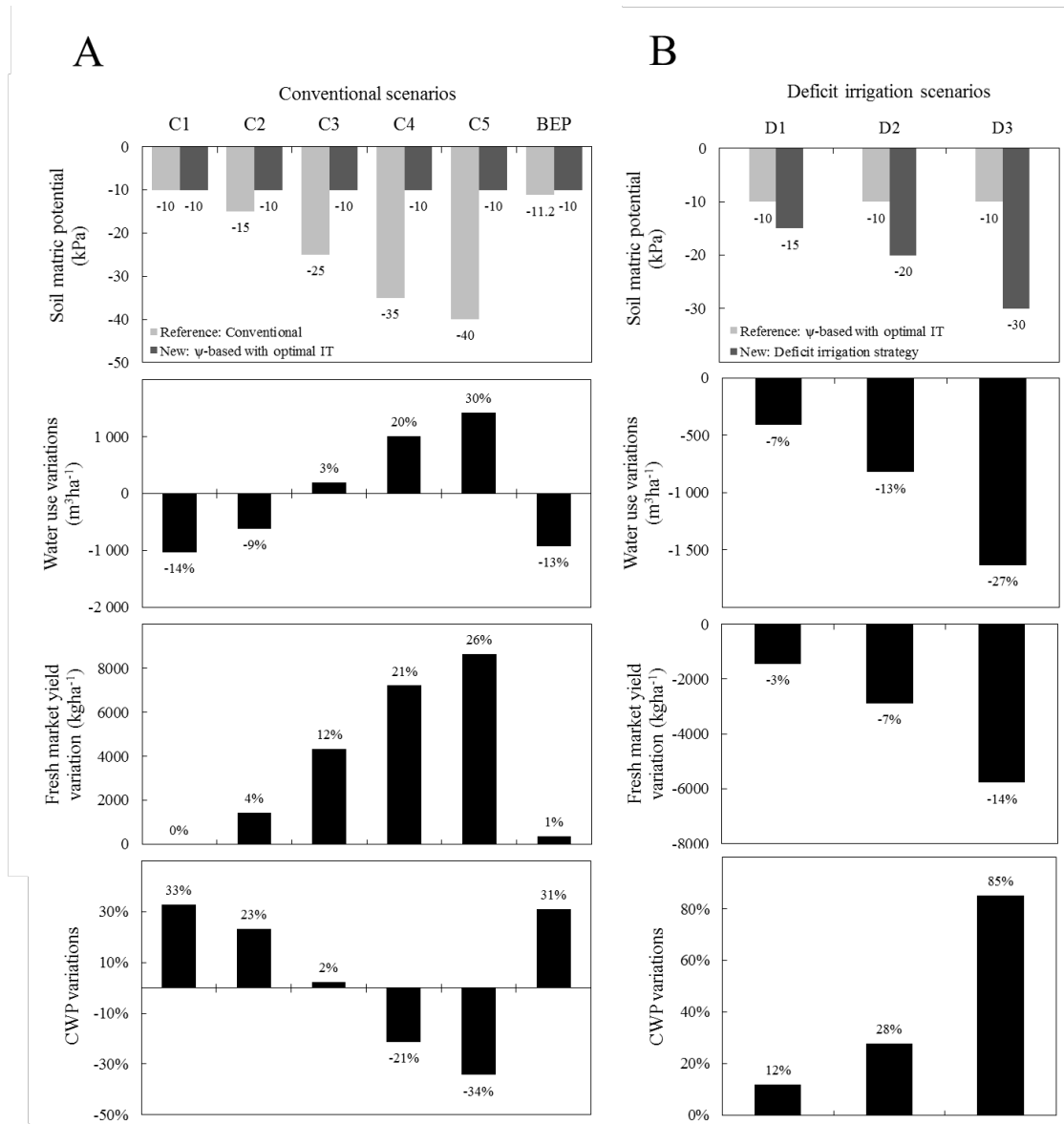


Figure 3. Scenarios representing the variations in fresh market yield^a, water use^b and water productivity^c associated with the adoption of: **(A)** wireless tensiometer technology with an optimal irrigation threshold of -10 kPa instead of the conventional practice^d (scenarios C1-C5); and of **(B)** a deficit irrigation strategy controlled with wireless tensiometer technology instead of the optimal tension-based management at -10 kPa^e (scenarios D1-D3). The BEP scenario **(A)** represents the break-even point^f.

^{a,b,c} The corresponding units are: $1 \text{ m}^3 \text{ ha}^{-1}$ ($3.28 \times 10^{-4} \text{ acre-ft ac}^{-1}$), 1 kg ha^{-1} (0.89 lb ac^{-1}) and $\text{kg}_{\text{fruit}} \text{ m}^{-3} \text{ water}$, respectively.

^d Since the conventional practice was shown to be variable, five possible conventional managements (reference practices) were compared to the optimal tension-based management at -10 kPa (new practice). For C1 scenario, the average soil matric potential reached before initiating irrigation by the conventional practice was -10 kPa; C2, -15 kPa; C3, -25 kPa; C4, -35 kPa and C5, -40 kPa.

^e The deficit irrigation scenarios consisted of ψ -based treatments with irrigation thresholds (IT) lower than the optimal IT of -10 kPa (reference practice). For D1 scenario, the IT tested (new practices) was -15 kPa; D2, -20 kPa and D3, -30 kPa.

^f The BEP scenario represents the scenario from which the adoption of wireless tensiometer technology using an irrigation threshold (IT) of -10 kPa becomes interesting at a water price of $150 \$ \text{ acre-ft}^{-1}$, on account of the fresh market yield gains (+1%) and the water savings (-13%) allowed by the new practice compared to the reference practice.

Chapitre 3: Using pulsed water applications and automation technology to fine-tune irrigation practices for strawberry production

Résumé

Après la Floride et la Californie, le Québec est le troisième principal producteur de fraises en Amérique du Nord. Dans le contexte de rareté accrue de l'eau à l'échelle mondiale et les besoins élevés en eau de la culture, il y a nécessité pour les producteurs de fraises d'optimiser la gestion de l'irrigation pour augmenter davantage la productivité de l'eau de la culture (PEC). Au Québec, l'irrigation fractionnée basée sur la tension dans le sol s'est révélée être une approche permettant d'augmenter les rendements en utilisant la même quantité d'eau par rapport à la pratique équivalente non fractionnée, améliorant ainsi la PEC. Toutefois, de courtes et plus fréquentes applications d'eau peuvent augmenter les frais de main d'œuvre. Le but de cette étude était d'abord d'évaluer l'impact économique de l'irrigation fractionnée dans la fraise cultivée dans un loam argileux hautement perméable au Québec et d'ensuite déterminer si cette méthode générerait suffisamment de bénéfices pour rentabiliser un projet d'automatisation du système d'irrigation, une façon plus pratique de gérer les irrigations fractionnées à l'échelle de la ferme. Les données de trois sites expérimentaux ont été utilisées pour déterminer les effets sur les revenus bruts du fractionnement de l'irrigation par rapport à l'irrigation non fractionnée. Des analyses coûts-bénéfices ont été réalisées pour évaluer la rentabilité de l'investissement dans un système automatisé de l'irrigation en se basant sur les gains nets associés à l'adoption d'une méthode d'application d'eau fractionnée par rapport à la pratique standard. Les résultats ont révélé que des applications d'eau plus fréquentes et plus courtes constituaient une bonne façon de gérer les irrigations dans un sol hautement perméable, augmentant généralement les revenus bruts par rapport à la pratique commune. Les résultats ont aussi révélé que l'irrigation fractionnée générerait suffisamment de bénéfices additionnels pour rentabiliser un système d'irrigation automatisé, générant de courts délais de récupération de l'investissement (à l'intérieur d'un an).

Mots-clés : Irrigation fréquente, efficacité d'utilisation de l'eau d'irrigation (EUEI), tensiomètre, analyse économique

Abstract

Quebec is the third largest strawberry producer in North America, behind Florida and California. In view of increasing global water scarcity and the high water requirements of strawberry production, there is a critical need for growers to optimize irrigation practices to improve crop water productivity (CWP). In Quebec, pulsed irrigation has been shown to increase yields in strawberry crops while using the same amount of water as standard (non-pulsed) irrigation, thus improving CWP. Labor costs can increase considerably, however, when the more frequent and shorter-duration water applications are managed manually. The first purpose of this study was thus to assess the economic impact of pulsed irrigation compared to the standard procedure in a strawberry crop grown in a highly permeable clay loam soil in Quebec. The second aim was to determine if pulsed irrigation would generate enough benefits to offset the cost of an automated irrigation system, a more convenient way of managing pulsed irrigation at the farm scale. Data from three sites were used to determine the effect of pulsed irrigation on marketable yields and gross revenues compared to non-pulsed irrigation. Cost-benefit analyses were conducted to assess the profitability of an automated irrigation system based on the net gains associated with pulsed irrigation management. The results of the study showed that more frequent and shorter-duration irrigation events were appropriate for water application in strawberries grown in a highly permeable soil, generally leading to significant gross revenue increases relative to the standard irrigation procedure. The results also revealed that pulsed irrigation generated enough additional benefits to cover the cost of an automated irrigation system, with a short payback period of less than one year.

Key words: High-frequency irrigation, irrigation water use efficiency (WUE), tensiometer, economic analysis

Introduction

Despite its rigorous climate and relatively short growing season, Quebec, with 12 800 tonnes of strawberries marketed in 2015 (Statistique Canada, 2016; USDA, 2016a), is the third largest strawberry (*Fragaria × ananassa* Duch.) producer in North America, behind the states of California and Florida. The province accounts for more than 50 per cent of strawberry production in Canada (Statistique Canada, 2016b). In a context of increasing water scarcity worldwide (Fereres *et al.*, 2011), one of the greatest challenges for Quebec's strawberry producers is to achieve more sustainable water use through the large-scale adoption of best irrigation management practices.

Although Quebec has a relatively humid climate, irrigation is a requirement for strawberry production in the province, since the crops are often field-grown under plastic mulch. Because strawberry plants have high water requirements and a shallow root system, they are particularly susceptible to water stress (Liu *et al.*, 2007; Krüger *et al.*, 1999; MAFRD, 2015). These considerations point to the critical need for strawberry growers to adopt appropriate irrigation scheduling methods to optimize plant growth and yields, in addition to crop water productivity (CWP). Irrigation management studies have been conducted on a wide range of crops, soil types and climatic conditions. In drip-irrigated strawberries, irrigation scheduling based on soil matric potential (ψ) has been shown to positively affect crop yield and CWP at irrigation thresholds (IT) ranging from -10 kPa to -15 kPa compared to drier regimes (Bergeron, 2010; Evenhuis and Alblas, 2002; Guimerà *et al.*, 1995; Hoppula and Salo, 2007; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015).

In silty clay loam to clay loam soils presenting a high proportion of schist fragments, Létourneau *et al.* (2015) reported however that the advantages of the ψ -based method could be limited by soil properties and the wetting patterns of the subsurface drip-irrigation system. Indeed, the low soil water holding capacity of the highly permeable soils that are typical of nearly 40 per cent of the strawberry production area in Quebec (D. Bergeron, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2016) leads to rapid water movement below the root zone, resulting in water and nutrient losses and groundwater pollution (Dukes *et al.*, 2003; Skaggs *et al.*, 2010). Nonetheless, more frequent and short-duration (pulsed) irrigation events have been shown to better match plant water uptake by improving soil water distribution (Assouline *et al.*, 2006; Coolong *et al.*, 2011; Eid *et al.*, 2013), and irrigation can be managed on a time- or soil-measurement basis (Afael *et al.*, 2003). The positive effects of pulsed irrigation have been demonstrated for several crops grown in sandy

soils (Dukes *et al.*, 2003; Eid *et al.*, 2013; Muñoz-Carpena *et al.*, 2005) and in silt loam soils (Coolong *et al.*, 2011), where yields were maintained despite reductions in the amount of water applied compared to non-pulsed water applications. For strawberries grown in a highly permeable silt clay loam to clay loam soil, ψ -based pulsed irrigation significantly increased yields and CWP compared to non-pulsed irrigation based on ψ (Cormier *et al.*, 2016; Létourneau and Caron, 2016).

Although manual ψ -based pulsed irrigation does not require production or irrigation system modifications relative to non-pulsed water applications based on ψ , it may significantly increase labor costs for watering. Since Ançay *et al.* (2013) showed that an automated irrigation system could improve pulsed irrigation relative to manual pulsed management by lowering labor costs and water use in a strawberry crop in Switzerland, automatic-control pulsed irrigation based on pre-set ψ limits (Muñoz-Carpena *et al.*, 2005) may be a profitable strategy for strawberries grown in highly permeable soils, in addition to being a more convenient way to manage irrigation (Dukes *et al.*, 2003). Thus far, however, no economic analyses have been done to determine whether pulsed irrigation generates enough additional benefits to cover the cost of an automated irrigation system for strawberry production in North America.

In this study, we aimed to assess the additional benefits of adopting of pulsed irrigation instead of non-pulsed irrigation, considering that both methods are ψ -based with the same IT. As a second step, we aimed to assess the economic effectiveness of investing in an automated irrigation system, given the potential gains associated with pulsed water applications.

Materials and methods

Site, experimental design and crop description

The data analysed in this study were collected over three growing seasons in St-Jean-de-l'Île-d'Orléans, Quebec, Canada (latitude 46°54'N; longitude -70°56'W) (Table 6). On all sites, the field experiments were conducted from May to October in a typical humid continental climate, with strawberries (*Fragaria x ananassa* Duch.) planted in a highly permeable silt loam to clay loam soil. Bare-root strawberry plants (site 1: day-neutral cv. 'Seascape'; sites 2 and 3: short-day cv. 'Monterey') were grown in double rows, at a density of 54 800-56 000 plants ha⁻¹, on raised beds covered with a black polyethylene mulch. The treatments were arranged in a randomized complete block design with 3-4 replicates (sites 1 and 2), or in a randomized incomplete block

design with 6 replicates (site 3). Sprinkler irrigation was used during the early stages of plant growth. Subsequently, plants were drip-irrigated until the end of the season. The growing beds were irrigated by one drip line ($1.5\text{--}2.5\text{ L h}^{-1}\text{ m}^{-1}$, with 10-20 cm emitter spacing) buried in the center of the bed, 3-5 cm under the soil surface. Soil matric potential (ψ) measurements were taken and transmitted online for real-time monitoring using field monitoring stations (Hortau, Lévis, Qc, Canada). The monitoring stations, consisting of wireless tensiometers buried at two depths (15 and 30 cm), were installed in all replicates (site 1) or in 3 replicates (sites 2 and 3). On site 1, irrigation was triggered independently in each replicate once the ψ measured by the 15-cm-deep probe reached the predetermined IT. On sites 2 and 3, irrigation was triggered simultaneously in all replicates once the average ψ measured by the shallow probes reached the target value. Except for irrigation management, all cultural operations were carried out by the grower following conventional farming practices, as described in more detail by Cormier *et al.* (2016) and Létourneau and Caron (2016).

Irrigation treatments

On all sites, two ψ -based irrigation treatments were tested and consisted of a control treatment (or non-pulsed treatment) and a pulsed treatment. Because the highly permeable soils under study had low soil water holding capacity leading to rapid water movements below the root zone (Bergeron, 2010), pulsed irrigation events were expected to better match plant water uptake by improving the soil water distribution (Assouline *et al.*, 2006; Coolong *et al.*, 2011; Eid *et al.*, 2013).

For both treatments, irrigation was triggered once the ψ reached a predetermined IT (site 1: -18 kPa; sites 2 and 3: -15 kPa), in accordance with previous studies conducted in a similar soil type (Bergeron, 2010; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015). While irrigation events in the control treatment lasted 45 to 60 min, consistent with common practice, irrigation in the pulsed treatment, intended to improve water application, was divided into two events lasting between 20 to 30 min each, separated by a period of 2 to 3 hours (site 1) or 1 hour (sites 2 and 3).

Crop yield and gross revenues

Depending on the weather and the crop growth stage, fresh strawberries (also referred to as marketable yields in the present study) were harvested by the farm crew two or three times weekly from July to October, from either a fraction of the plot area (site 1) or the entire plot area (sites 2 and 3). The quantity of fresh strawberries picked (g) was divided by the surface area

harvested to obtain total marketable yield per hectare (kg ha^{-1}). For the purposes of this study, it was assumed the berries would be packed into pint baskets (560 ml) and sold wholesale in Quebec. Strawberry prices for high quality strawberries were obtained from the APFFQ (Association des producteurs de fraises et de framboises du Québec) and were reported about every two days in dollars per 12 pints of fresh strawberries (see Annexe E). Based on an estimated average pint weight of 375 g (CRAAQ, 2014), the marketable yields (kg ha^{-1}) were then converted into the number of harvested 12-pint units harvested per hectare. Finally, weekly gross revenues were calculated by multiplying the average weekly strawberry price by the number of pints harvested per week.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SAS software, Version 9.4. (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA). Analyses of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures were conducted using PROC MIXED to assess the impact of the treatments (T), the date (D) of harvest, and the T*D interaction on both marketable yields and gross revenues. Blocks were used as the random effect. Different covariance structures were tested for the repeated statement in order to select the appropriate covariance model. The selected covariance structures varied between sites but were the same for the analyses of yields and gross revenues done for each individual site (Table 6). The covariance structure used for the random effect was, in all cases, variance components (VC). In all analyses, log transformations were applied to the data sets to meet the assumption of homogeneity of variances. The least square means were compared when the ANOVA model was significant at $p=0.05$.

Economic analyses

Economic analyses were performed to assess if pulsed irrigation generated enough benefits to cover the cost of an automated irrigation system to facilitate pulsed irrigation management at the farm scale. As a first step, a partial budget analysis was conducted to compare the positive and negative effects of adopting an automated irrigation system for pulsed water applications instead of the non-pulsed, manual management system that is commonly used in the area (referred to as the standard procedure in this study). While the positive effects, or benefits, were calculated based on yield gains, the negative effects were calculated based on the additional operating costs associated with those yield gains (variable costs) and the capital expenditure required to automate the irrigation system (fixed costs). Fixed costs included the investment in an electronic diesel

pump, an automated system and a control panel, as detailed in Annexe E; these costs were reported on an annual basis and included depreciation of the equipment, annual maintenance costs or service fees and depreciated initial costs. Annual depreciation of the investment and of initial service fees was estimated using the straight-line method (Penson *et al.*, 2002). A 10-year life span was estimated for the pump and a 5-year life span for both the automated system and the control panel. Using a conservative approach, we assumed that one set, comprising one electronic diesel pump, one automated system and one control panel, was installed for every 4 ha of production surface. It was also assumed that growers would require financing, and the interest rate was fixed at 5 per cent. Since the standard (non-pulsed) water application method relies on ψ measurements for managing irrigation, in this study, we assumed that investment in field equipment, such as monitoring stations (tensiometers and web base) for irrigation management, was not necessary (the growers having already purchased the technology). Net changes in revenues were calculated as the difference between positive and negative effects (Djidonou *et al.*, 2013). Along with cost-benefit analyses, the mean value of the net change in revenues was calculated to estimate the long-run average economic result associated with the adoption of the ψ -based pulsed automatic irrigation management to replace the standard procedure. To assess the profitability of automating the irrigation system for pulsed irrigation, payback periods (i.e., the number of years required to generate sufficient revenue to reimburse the initial investment) were calculated for each year under study as well as for the Mean-value scenario (Zamalloa *et al.*, 2011).

As a second step, a sensitivity analysis was conducted to evaluate the effect of changes in strawberry prices and marketable yield gains on the net returns of automatic, ψ -based pulsed irrigation. Profitable investments were associated with positive net returns and payback periods within the useful life of the equipment. Since different useful lives were under study, a weighted life span depending on the useful life of each item was calculated based on the share of each piece of equipment in the total initial investment. Break-even points (BEP), defined as the minimum marketable yield that would need to be obtained annually at a certain strawberry price to avoid a loss with the investment in an automated irrigation system, were also calculated.

Results

Effect of pulsed irrigation on marketable yields

The data analyses performed to compare the effect of pulsed and non-pulsed irrigation on marketable yields in 2012, 2013 and 2014 revealed that pulsed water applications can improve strawberry production relative to the standard non-pulsed procedure (Figure 4). On sites 1 and 2, pulsed irrigation increased marketable yields relative to the non-pulsed irrigation method, generating yield gains of 5221 and 2342 kg ha⁻¹, respectively. Although on site 1, the analysis revealed that the positive effect of pulsed irrigation on marketable yields ($p=0.0011$) was the same regardless of the harvesting date (Figure 5A), on site 2, more frequent and short-duration water applications positively affected marketable yields at specific moments during the harvesting period as highlighted by the significant T*D interaction ($p<.0001$) (Figure 5B). Indeed, the significant yield increases associated with pulsed irrigation relative to the standard procedure corresponded to a period of high prices for fresh strawberries in early August 2013. As for site 3, no significant difference between pulsed irrigation and non-pulsed irrigation regarding marketable yields was noted, either cumulatively (seasonal marketable yields) (Figure 4) or per harvesting date (Figure 5C).

Effect of pulsed irrigation on gross revenues

The data analyses performed to measure the effect of pulsed irrigation versus non-pulsed irrigation on gross revenues revealed the same tendency as for marketable yields, i.e., pulsed irrigation generally increased gross revenues compared to non-pulsed irrigation (Figure 4). On site 1, seasonal gross revenues associated with pulsed irrigation were significantly higher than those associated with the standard procedure ($p=0.0019$), with cumulative additional benefits of \$24 036 ha⁻¹. In this case, specific harvesting dates did not significantly impact gross revenues (Figure 5A). Similarly, data analyses for site 2 revealed that incomes were significantly increased by pulsed water applications relative to the standard procedure. On this site, however, differences in gross revenues also depended on the harvesting date, as highlighted by the significant T*D interaction ($p<.0001$) (Figure 5B). Additional gross revenues of \$14 762 ha⁻¹ were noted on site 2 for pulsed irrigation relative to non-pulsed irrigation, based on the 2013 price data. No such increase was noted in 2014, either cumulatively (Figure 4) or per harvesting date (Figure 5C).

Economic analysis

A partial budget analysis was conducted to measure the additional costs (negative effects) and benefits (positive effects) associated with the investment in an automated irrigation system based on the data collected on the three sites under study. In the two first scenarios, corresponding to sites 1 and 2, pulsed water applications generated enough additional benefits compared to non-pulsed irrigation to cover the cost of an automated irrigation system, with net gains of \$14 295 ha⁻¹ on site 1 and \$9356 ha⁻¹ on site 2. The payback period in these scenarios was less than one year. In the third scenario (site 3), however, no significant gross revenue increases were noted with the adoption of pulsed irrigation relative to the standard procedure; instead a net loss of \$1880 ha⁻¹ was recorded (Table 7). The Mean Value scenario, which considers that each of the three scenarios studied has an equal chance of occurring over the years, presented a net gain of \$7257 ha⁻¹ and a short payback period of 1.2 years, on account of an average yield gain of 2530 kg ha⁻¹ (at an average weighted price of \$23 for 12 pints of strawberries). The payback periods calculated here are very short considering that the weighted life span of the equipment is of about 8 years (data not shown).

The effects of strawberry price and marketable yield variations on net changes in revenues and payback periods was measured with sensitivity analyses, and the results relative to payback periods are presented in Table 8. These results show that, at a conservative average yearly price of \$20 for 12 pints of fresh strawberries, a yield gain as small as 590 kg ha⁻¹ (BEP-1), corresponding to additional gross revenues of \$2622 ha⁻¹, would be enough to generate a net gain in revenue and a payback period equal to the weighted useful life of the equipment (7.9 vs 8.0 years). Likewise, if the average price for 12 pints of strawberries dropped to \$15, a conservative price considering historical strawberry prices in Quebec (see Annexe E) and which also corresponds to the minimum strawberry price required to ensure the general profitability of a farm, the marketable yield gain needed to generate a net gain and a payback period within the weighted useful life of the equipment was 950 kg ha⁻¹ (BEP-2). These are low marketable yield gains, considering that the adoption of pulsed irrigation generated yield gains as high as 2342 and 5221 kg ha⁻¹ on two out of three sites studied and that the average marketable yield gain that can be expected over the years is 2530 kg ha⁻¹.

Discussion

Pulsed irrigation: a profitable water application technique for field-grown strawberries

The results of this study showed that pulsed irrigation has the potential to significantly increase marketable yield and thus greatly improve gross revenues in strawberry crops grown in a highly permeable soil relative to non-pulsed irrigation initiated at the same IT. Indeed, for two out of the three years of experimentation, gross revenue gains of \$24 036 and \$14 762 ha⁻¹ were noted when pulsed irrigation replaced non-pulsed water applications with the same IT. Notably, the Mean Value scenario indicated that average long-run additional gross revenues of \$12 933 ha⁻¹ could be expected annually with pulsed irrigation relative to non-pulsed water applications. This represents a significant amount of money and yet is a conservative estimate considering that the Mean Value scenario takes into account a year in which no significant differences between pulsed and non-pulsed irrigation were noted, most likely because of technical difficulties (Cormier *et al.* 2016). In addition, this study demonstrates that the marketable yield gains associated with the adoption of pulsed irrigation could coincide with high strawberry prices in Quebec (site 2), providing interesting opportunities for local growers.

Towards more convenient pulsed irrigation with automation

In addition to increasing gross incomes relative to the standard irrigation procedure, pulsed irrigation generated enough additional benefits relative to the non-pulsed procedure to cover the cost of an automated tensiometer-controlled irrigation system. Interestingly, the study shows that the profitability of the investment was not greatly affected by strawberry prices, but rather was tied to marketable yield gains and the corresponding increases in gross revenues. To determine how the profitability of the investment in automation would vary depending on the pint weight used for the calculations, we also did the economic analyses considering pint weights of 227 g and 454 g, respectively (APFFQ, personal communication, 2016; ACIA, 2013). While gross revenues increased with a pint weight of 227 g, generating shorter payback periods (7 months for the Mean Value scenario; data not shown), the gross revenue gains decreased when a pint weight of 454 g was used, leading to longer payback periods (1.6 years on average; data not shown). In all cases, however, the conclusions remain unchanged: pulsed irrigation generated enough additional benefits compared to the non-pulsed irrigation procedure to cover the cost of an automated irrigation system, with payback periods within the useful life of the equipment.

Considering its convenience relative to manual management, automatic irrigation is certainly a practice that growers can adopt for pulsed water applications (Dukes *et al.*, 2003; Muñoz-Carpena *et al.*, 2005). For strawberries grown in highly permeable soils, previous studies revealed that pulsed irrigation improved CWP compared to non-pulsed irrigation initiated at the same IT by increasing marketable yields without increasing the amount of water used (Cormier *et al.*, 2016; Létourneau and Caron, 2016), in keeping with the objective of sustainable water use (Lin *et al.*, 2013). If pulsed irrigation can generate higher yields than the standard procedure using a same amount of water, it follows that each drop of water is not being used to its full potential with non-pulsed water applications in such soil types. Finally, it must be emphasized that additional gains could be expected after adopting an automated irrigation system for pulsed irrigation since Ançay *et al.* (2013) found that automatic pulsed irrigation based on ψ led to water savings relative to manual ψ -based pulsed water applications without negatively affecting strawberry yields. Further research is needed to assess the profitability of this practice in highly permeable soils in Quebec.

Practical implications

In the light of world's population growth and increased competition for freshwater resources, there is an increasing pressure on growers to improve crop water productivity, which will require optimizing irrigation practices on a large scale. Previous studies have already highlighted the benefits of irrigation management based on ψ was beneficial for strawberries grown in a highly permeable silt clay loam to clay loam soil, using an optimal IT ranging from -13 kPa to -18 kPa (Bergeron, 2010; Létourneau *et al.*, 2015). Recent studies also revealed that irrigation practices could be further fine-tuned by splitting irrigation into short duration events (20-30 minutes) separated by a period of 1 to 3 hours (Cormier *et al.*, 2016; Létourneau and Caron, 2016).

The present study reveals that the adoption of pulsed irrigation based on ψ is a more profitable strategy than non-pulsed irrigation initiated at the same IT in silt clay loam to clay loam soils with a high proportion of schist fragments. In addition to improving yields and CWP (Cormier *et al.*, 2016; Létourneau and Caron, 2016), ψ -based pulsed irrigation generated significant gross revenue increases in gross revenues relative to the standard non-pulsed procedure, increases that were either consistent throughout the season or corresponded to specific harvesting dates. Pulsed irrigation therefore constitutes a sustainable and economic practice that strawberry growers operating in such highly permeable soil can adopt, possibly in combination with an automated system, as this study also highlighted the high profitability of automation technology for pulsed

irrigation in these conditions. These conclusions are particularly relevant considering that about 40 per cent of the Quebec's strawberry production area is characterized by similar soil properties (D. Bergeron, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2016). Hence these findings potentially apply to more than 20 per cent of the Canada's strawberry production.

Since these findings might not apply to more impermeable soils, more experiments would be required to assess the impact of pulsed irrigation and irrigation automation in other soil conditions.

Finally, it is important to note that the benefits of pulsed irrigation described in this study may not apply to one of the world's largest strawberry producing areas, California, because of the different soil types found there. However, since the potential profitability of irrigation management based on soil matric potential has been demonstrated (Gendron, Létourneau, Anderson, et al., 2016), it is highly possible that Californian strawberry farms could benefit from the same system, especially since irrigation systems using wireless tension sensors are particularly easy to automate. Considering that strawberry plants are highly sensitive to soil water status, irrigation automation would enable Californian growers to respond rapidly to changes in soil water availability and so avoid decreases in crop productivity due to water stress in plants. Further work on the subject would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Consistent with previous studies conducted in similar soil conditions, this study reveals that a proper water application technique such as ψ -based pulsed irrigation can positively affect gross revenues relative to an equivalent non-pulsed strategy by increasing fresh strawberry yields and CWP (Cormier *et al.*, 2016; Létourneau *et al.*, 2016). The present study also confirms that the additional benefits generated by pulsed irrigation can easily cover the cost of an automatic tensiometer-controlled irrigation system, given the short payback period obtained with the Mean Value scenario (1.2 years) and an annual average gross revenue increase of \$12 933 ha⁻¹. Remarkably, an increase in gross revenues as little as \$2622 ha⁻¹ (corresponding to a yield gain of 590 kg ha⁻¹) was enough to ensure a payback period within the weighted useful life of the equipment. Moreover, strawberry prices were not found to have a major impact on the profitability of the automated system for pulsed irrigation.

In conclusion, our results provide a useful tool for growers who are considering the adoption of a pulsed water application technique, possibly combined with an automation technology, for greater convenience in managing pulsed irrigation at the farm scale.

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Tables

Table 6. Site description, field equipment, measurements and irrigation treatments (Cormier et al., 2016; Létourneau and Caron, 2016; unpublished data)

Site	Year	Location	Site area	Individual plot area	Number of beds per plot	Harvest measurement area	Experimental design	Soil type	Rainfall	Treatments (water application method)	Selected covariance Structure†††
		<i>(lat; long)</i>	<i>(ha)</i>	<i>(ha)</i>					<i>(mm)</i>		<i>(repeated statement)</i>
1	2012	Île d'Orléans, QC, Canada (46,88°; -71,00°)	2.67	0.11 to 0.15	9	6 full-length beds per plot	RCBD† 3 reps	Silt loam to silty clay loam	377	Non-pulsed (control): -18 kPa Pulsed: -18 kPa	Autoregressive(1): AR(1)
2	2013	Île d'Orléans, QC, Canada (46,88°; -71,00°)	2.29	0.05 to 0.06	2	Total plot area	RCBD 4 reps	Silty clay loam to clay loam	385	Non-pulsed (control): -15 kPa Pulsed: -15 kPa	Compound symmetry: CS
3	2014	Île d'Orléans, QC, Canada (46,88°; -71,00°)	1.34	~0.03	2	Total plot area	RIBD†† 6 reps	Silty clay loam to clay loam	539	Non-pulsed (control): -15 kPa Pulsed: -15 kPa	Heterogeneous AR(1): ARH(1)

†RCBD: Randomized complete block design

†† RIBC: Randomized incomplete block design

††† For both yield and gross revenue analyses.

Table 7. Partial budget analysis associated with the adoption of pulsed irrigation based on soil matric potential in tandem with an automated irrigation system compared to the equivalent manual, non-pulsed procedure. Data are presented in dollars per hectare, except for the payback periods which are reported in years. Net loss is indicated in brackets.

	Scenarios†			Mean Value
	1	2	3	
POSITIVE EFFECTS (\$ ha ⁻¹)				
Gross revenues	24 036	14 762	-	12 933
Total positive effects (\$ ha⁻¹)	24 036	14 762	-	12 933
NEGATIVE EFFECTS (\$ ha ⁻¹)				
Variable costs				
Operating costs (labor costs)	7 860	3 526	-	3 795
Fixed costs				
<i>Electronic diesel pump:</i>				
Irrigation pump depreciation (10 years)	723	723	723	723
Interest (5%)	217	217	217	217
Annual maintenance costs	63	63	63	63
Initial costs depreciation (10 years)	20	20	20	20
<i>Automated system:</i>				
Automated system depreciation (5 years)	300	300	300	300
Interest (5%)	47	47	47	47
Initial costs depreciation (5 years)	15	15	15	15
Annual service fees	119	119	119	95
<i>Control Panel:</i>				
Control panel depreciation†† (5 years)	200	200	200	200
Interest (5%)	30	30	30	30
Initial costs (installation)	147	147	147	147
Total negative effects (\$ ha⁻¹)	9 741	5 406	1 880	5 676
NET CHANGE IN REVENUE (\$ ha⁻¹)	14 295	9,356	(1 880)	7 257
Payback period (years)				
	0.6	0.9	NPB†††	1.2

† The scenarios refer to each site under study (scenario 1 = site 1; scenario 2 = site 2; scenario 3 = site 3). For scenario 1, the irrigation threshold (IT) for both control and pulsed treatments was -18 kPa; for scenarios 2 and 3, the IT for both control and pulsed treatments was -15 kPa. As for the Mean Value scenario, it considers that each of the three scenario studied (sites 1-3) has an equal chance of occurring over the years.

†† Includes equipment installation, programming and testing.

†† No payback on investment.

Table 8. Matrix of payback periods assessing the impact of variations in strawberry prices and marketable yield gains on the profitability of the investment in an automated irrigation system for pulsed irrigation. Expected payback periods are placed in the middle of the matrix and are presented in years.

Marketable yield gain (kg ha ⁻¹)	Average price for 12 pints of strawberries (\$ kg ⁻¹)					
	15	20	22	25	30	35
	3.33	4.44	4.89	5.56	6.67	7.78
0	NPB†††	NPB	NPB	NPB	NPB	NPB
590 (BEP-1†)	NPB	7.9	6.5	5.2	3.8	3.0
950 (BEP-2††)	7.9	4.3	3.6	2.9	2.2	1.8
2 530	2.4	1.4	1.2	1.0	0.8	0.6
3 600	1.6	1.0	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.4

† BEP-1: Break-even point defined as the minimum marketable yield gain necessary to generate a payback period within the useful life of the equipment at a strawberry price of \$20 for 12 pints of strawberries.

†† BEP-2: Break-even point defined as the minimum yield gain necessary to generate a payback period within the useful life of the equipment at the lowest strawberry price acceptable of \$15 for 12 pints of strawberries.

††† No payback on investment.

Figures

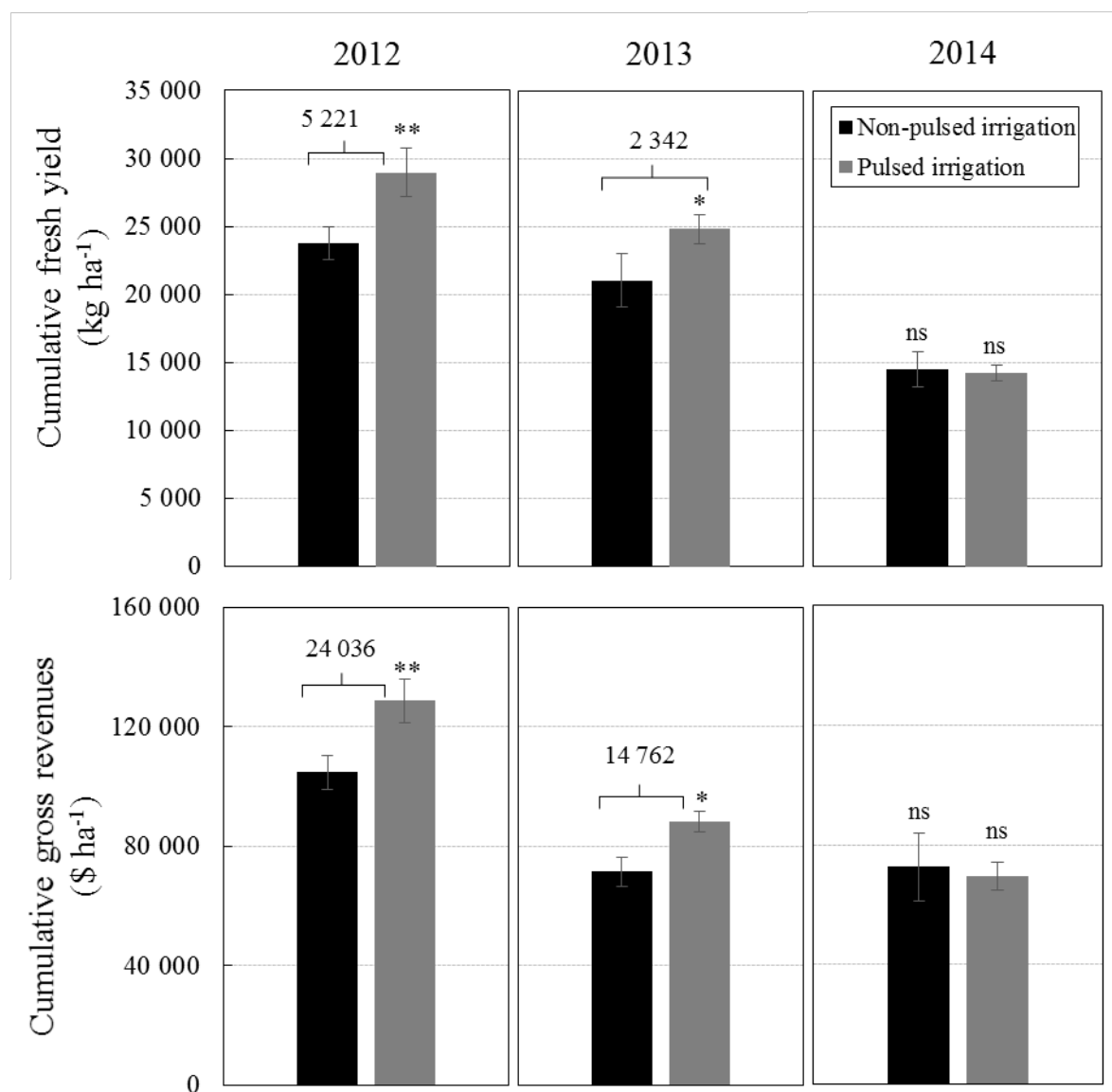


Figure 4. Treatment effect on cumulative yields and gross revenues as well as yield and gross revenue gains associated with the adoption of pulsed irrigation instead of non-pulsed irrigation. Means are presented (2012: $n=3$; 2013: $n=4$; 2014: $n=6$), with standard errors (SE) representing the variation between the minimum and the maximum yield and gross revenue per block. The P -values obtained from the generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) used to fit the data are reported for the treatment (T) effects as follows: ns: not significant; (*)= $P<0.05$; (**)= $P<0.01$; (***)= $P<.0001$.

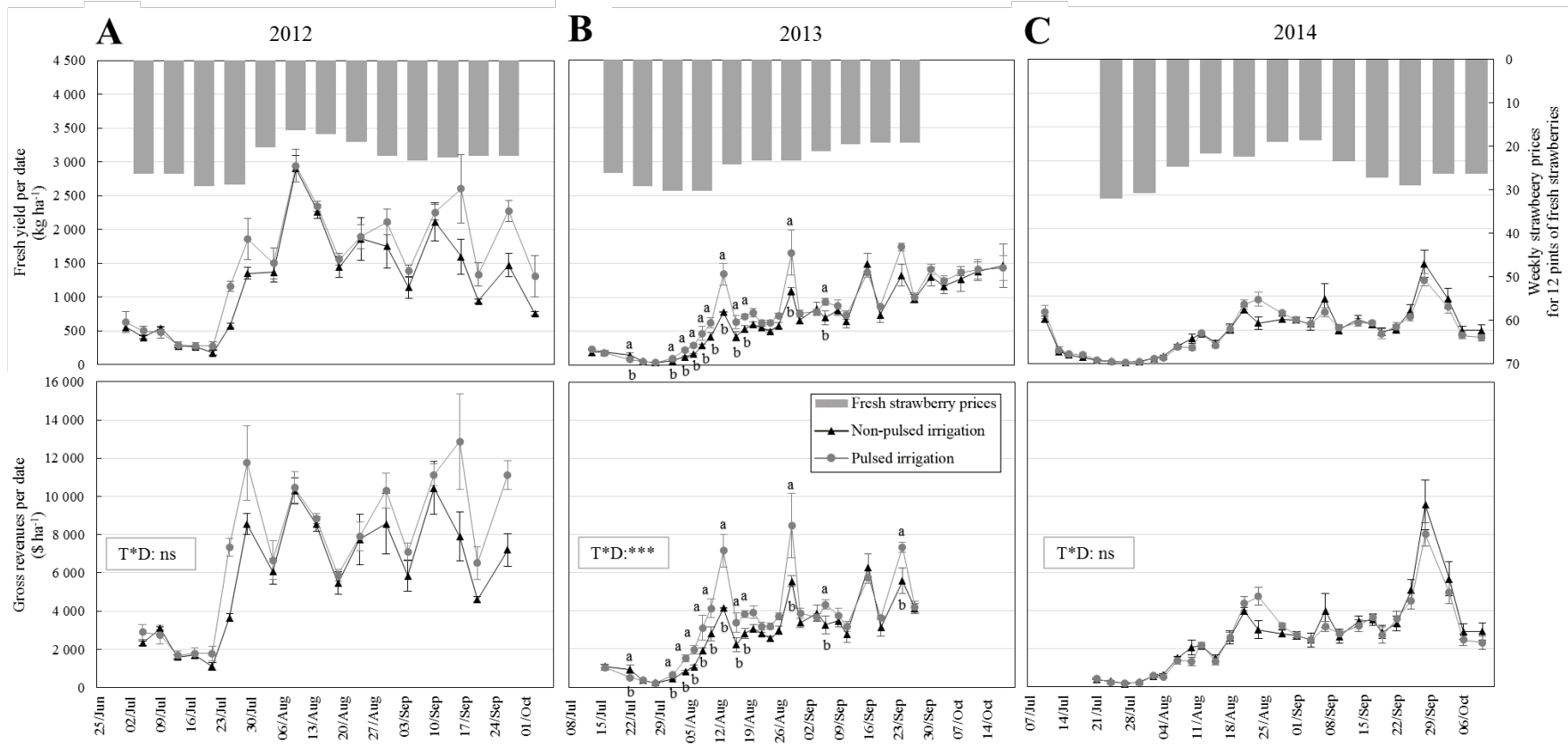


Figure 5. For each treatment, in the upper part of the figure: fresh strawberry yields by harvesting date (main vertical axis) and average weekly fresh strawberry prices[†] in Quebec (secondary vertical axis); in the lower part of the figure: corresponding gross revenues by harvesting date. In 2012 (A), data from July 1 to Oct. 3 were used; in 2013 (B), from July 13 to Oct. 18 and in 2014 (C), from July 10 to Oct. 10. Means are presented (2012: n=3; 2013: n=4; 2014: n=6), with standard errors (SE) representing the variation between the minimum and the maximum yield and gross revenue by date. Different letters indicate significant differences at $p=0.05$. The P-values obtained from the generalized linear mixed model (GLMM) used to fit the data are reported for the interaction treatment*date (T*D) effect as follows: ns: not significant; (*)= $P<0.05$; (**)= $P<0.01$; (***)= $P<0.0001$.

[†] \$1 for 12 pints of strawberries = $\$0.222 \text{ kg}^{-1}$

Conclusion générale

L'objectif général de ce travail était d'évaluer la pertinence économique de l'irrigation de précision dans la culture de la fraise en plein champ au Québec et en Californie.

La première étude a révélé que la gestion de l'irrigation basée sur le potentiel matriciel du sol est plus intéressante économiquement que la pratique conventionnelle, et ce, peu importe la région en Californie, ce qui confirme la première hypothèse de recherche. En effet, l'étude a démontré que l'approche basée sur la tension pouvait bien s'implanter à l'échelle de la ferme et que les rendements maximums étaient obtenus à un seuil de déclenchement des irrigations autour de -10 kPa, conformément à ce qui avait auparavant été démontré dans la littérature. De plus, il a été démontré que cette méthode de gestion plus précise des irrigations améliorait la productivité de l'eau de façon substantielle par rapport à la pratique conventionnelle. Ainsi, les analyses économiques ont révélé que l'investissement dans la technologie de tensiométrie avec suivi en continu utilisant un seuil d'irrigation de -10 kPa était hautement rentable, car les bénéfices engendrés par la technologie par rapport à la pratique conventionnelle étaient supérieurs aux coûts additionnels qui lui étaient associés. Des délais de récupération de l'investissement très courts, soit à l'intérieur d'un an, ont été obtenus grâce à des gains de rendement allant de 1440 à 8660 kg ha⁻¹, et ce, même si la hausse de rendement était parfois associée à une utilisation accrue d'eau, confirmant que la rentabilité de l'investissement est principalement influencée par les gains de rendement plutôt que par les économies d'eau par rapport à la pratique conventionnelle en raison du faible coût de l'eau. D'ailleurs, il a été démontré qu'un gain de rendement aussi faible que 350 kg ha⁻¹ était suffisant pour générer un délai de récupération égal à la durée de vie utile de l'équipement.

La première étude a aussi permis de statuer sur la pertinence économique de l'irrigation de déficit en Californie considérant le coût actuel de l'eau. Les résultats ont révélé que, bien qu'elle permette l'augmentation de la productivité de l'eau, l'irrigation de déficit n'est pas une stratégie économiquement avantageuse pour les producteurs de fraises californiens au prix actuel de l'eau dans les régions étudiées. En effet, les pertes de rendement qu'elle génère sont trop importantes par rapport aux bénéfices associés à l'économie d'eau. Pour être rentable, la stratégie d'irrigation de déficit devrait se faire dans un contexte où le prix de l'eau est beaucoup plus élevé qu'actuellement (5000 \$ acre-pi⁻¹ au lieu de 150-300 \$ acre-pi⁻¹). Ainsi, l'étude n'a pas permis de confirmer la deuxième hypothèse de recherche. Les résultats suggèrent plutôt qu'un objectif

économique et durable est d'augmenter la productivité de l'eau sur la base de l'adoption d'outils de gestion de l'irrigation plus précis plutôt que sur la base d'une stratégie d'irrigation de déficit.

La deuxième étude a démontré qu'une autre façon d'adopter l'irrigation de précision, soit en pratiquant l'irrigation fractionnée à l'aide de tensiomètres avec seuils de déclenchement à -15 kPa ou -18 kPa, permettait de réaliser des gains économiques significatifs dans la culture de fraises dans un sol fortement drainant au Québec, confirmant la troisième hypothèse de recherche. Ainsi, il a été démontré que l'irrigation fractionnée permettait de réaliser des bénéfices additionnels se chiffrant à près de 13 000 \$ ha⁻¹ en moyenne par rapport à la méthode équivalente non fractionnée, ce qui représente une augmentation du profit net pour le producteur. La quatrième et dernière hypothèse de recherche, à savoir que l'automatisation du système d'irrigation destinée à gérer les applications d'eau fractionnées présente un projet rentable pour les producteurs, s'est aussi avérée dans le cadre de la deuxième étude. En effet, les résultats ont montré que les bénéfices additionnels générés par l'irrigation fractionnée par rapport à l'irrigation non fractionnée permettaient de générer un délai de récupération d'un peu plus d'un an grâce à une augmentation moyenne de rendement de 2530 kg ha⁻¹, ce qui est très rapide considérant la durée de vie utile moyenne pondérée (8 ans) des équipements nécessaires pour un tel projet. De telles conclusions sont particulièrement importantes pour l'industrie de la fraise québécoise, près de 40% des fraisières du Québec étant implantées dans un sol au comportement similaire. Il est ainsi possible de penser qu'environ un cinquième de la production canadienne de fraises pourrait bénéficier d'une telle gestion précise des irrigations.

En somme, les résultats du présent mémoire indiquent que l'irrigation de précision, telle que décrite dans ce projet, est généralement un choix économique pour les producteurs cultivant la fraise en plein champ, au Québec et en Californie.

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Annexe A: Importants types de sol dans la culture de la fraise

En 2016, 594 ha de fraises étaient cultivées dans les séries de sols Orléans et Saint-Nicolas, tel qu'illustré à la Figure 6. Les superficies cultivées apparaissent relativement stables année après année, sinon en légère baisse depuis 2011 (ISQ et MAPAQ, 2016b; ISQ et MAPAQ, 2014), il est réaliste de penser que la superficie en culture de fraises au Québec en 2016 était sensiblement la même qu'en 2015, avec 1558 ha (1218 ha récoltés). Ainsi, il est possible de constater que près de 40% des fraises du Québec sont cultivées dans ces séries de sol particulières.

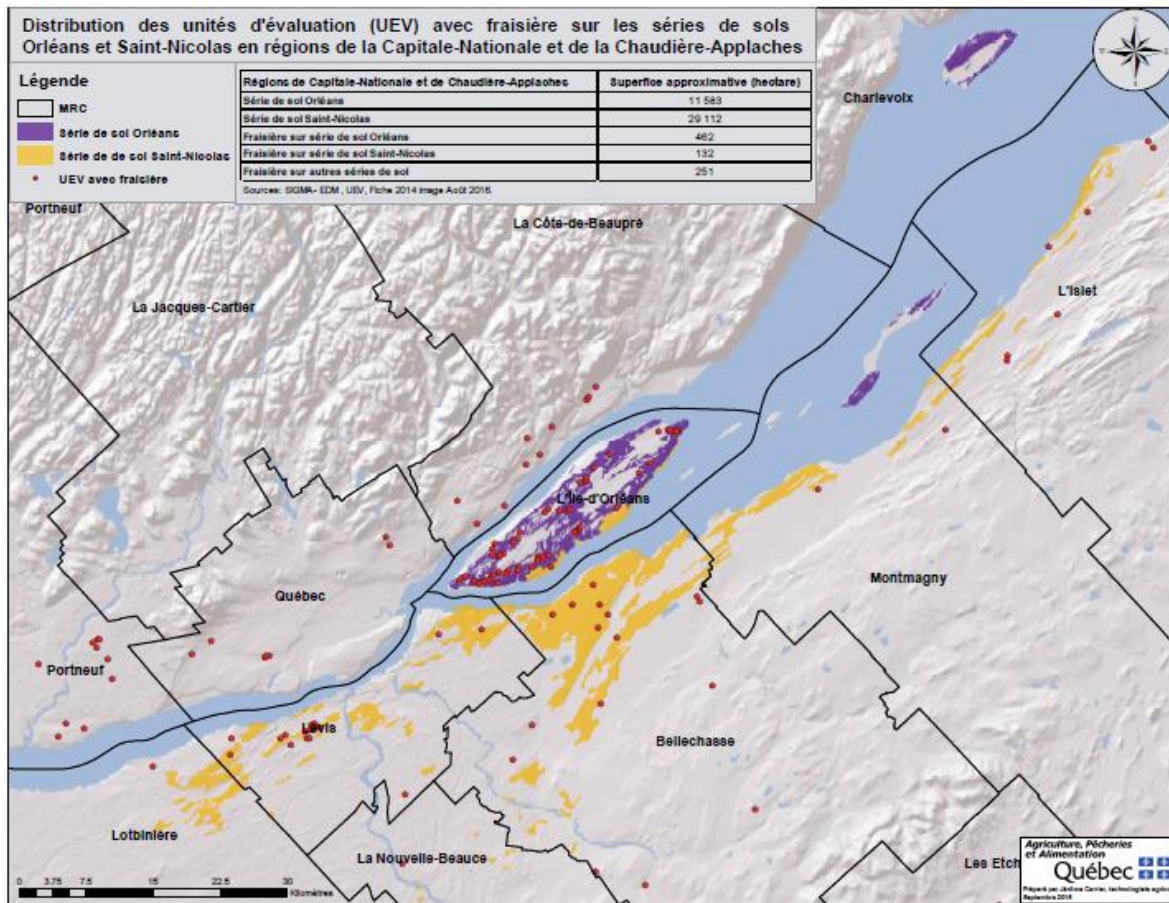


Figure 6. Distribution des unités d'évaluation (UEV) avec fraisières sur les séries de sols Orléans et Saint-Nicolas en régions de la Capitale-Nationale et de la Chaudière-Appalaches.

Considérant que le Québec produit 57% des fraises canadiennes (Statistique Canada, 2016b), et en posant l'hypothèse que la productivité de la culture est comparable d'une région à l'autre au Canada, il est réaliste de penser que près de 25% des fraises canadiennes sont produites dans cette région.

Il s'agit donc d'une région d'importance non négligeable dans l'industrie de la fraise tant québécoise que canadienne.

Annexe B: Extrapolated fresh market yield calculation (chapt. 2)

At some sites, fresh market yields (FMY) harvested by the experimenters represented only a fraction of the total fresh strawberries harvested over the entire season. In order to perform the first multiple linear regression (MLR) analysis, total FMY were used. Partial yields were extrapolated into total yields. To do so, partial fresh yields harvested in the grower plots by the research team were compared to the total fresh yields harvested by the grower outside of the experiment. When no such data from the grower were available, average FMY of the corresponding growing region was used as a reference. An adjustment factor (AF) was calculated, using the equation presented below (Eq. 8).

$$AF = \frac{\text{Total FMY (grower's data or regional data)}}{\text{Partial FMY harvested in grower plots by the research team}}$$

[8]

Partial yields of all treatments were then multiplied by the adjustment factor in order to obtain estimated total fresh market yields (Table 9). Estimated and measured total fresh market yields were then used to perform the MLR analysis.

Table 9. Calculation of the adjustment factor used for converting partial yields into total yields (“estimated total yields”) in order to perform the first MLR.

Site	Total fresh market yields ^a		Partial fresh market yields ^b	Adjustment factor (AF)
	(lb acre ⁻¹)	(kg ha ⁻¹)	(kg ha ⁻¹)	
1	60 000	67 251	19 893	3.38
2 ^c	-	-	-	-
4	57 820	64 808	22 025	2.94
6	32 430	36 349	10 040	3.62
7	50 520	56 625	41 167	1.38
8	33 000	36 988	17 325	2.14

^a Harvested by the grower or obtained from regional data (Personal communications, 2015; Klonsky et Moura, 2010).

^b In grower plots (harvested by the research team).

^c Partial grower yields could not be extrapolated for this site as there were no truly replicated grower plots in the experiment. Site 2 was not included in the first MLR analysis.

Annexe C: Description of input and output prices (chapt. 2)

Summary of input and output prices

Table 10. Summary of input and output prices used to perform the economic analyses. Prices in \$ kg⁻¹ refer to fresh market strawberries. All prices are expressed in USD.

Item	Prices	
Water (\$ m ⁻³) (\$ acre-ft ⁻¹)	0.12	(150)
Operating costs (\$ kg ⁻¹) (\$ lb ⁻¹)	1.10	(0.50)
Wireless tensiometer technology (\$ ha ⁻¹) (\$ acre ⁻¹):		
Capital costs	1224	(490)
Annual service fees	225	(90)
Initial costs (installation, shipping)	49	(19.5)
Price of strawberries in California (\$ kg ⁻¹) (\$ lb ⁻¹)	2.20	(1.00)

Details regarding the related costs and prices used in the study are found below.

Water prices in California

Water prices in the two regions under study

In this study, three of the four experiments performed in the Northern strawberry growing region (Group A: sites 1-4) were located within the Pajaro Valley Water Management District (PVWMA) boundaries. The PVWMA delivers recycled² water to agricultural users. Growers may also pump water in the Pajaro Valley Groundwater Basin. There is a surcharge to users who pump groundwater in the zone where recycled water is available. As for the Southern strawberry growing region, where four experiments took place (Group B: sites 5-8), groundwater wells are the most common source of irrigation water (T. Morgan, personal communication, July 20, 2015). Therefore, the cost for pumped water was collected and used as reference water price. Agricultural users operating a well within the Oxnard Plain area must pay fees to both the Fox Canyon Groundwater Management Agency (FCGMA) and the United Water Conservation District (UWCD) (FCGMA, 2016; UWCD, 2016).

The cost for operating electric, gas or diesel pumps is \$0.08 m⁻³ (100 \$ acre-ft⁻¹) and includes energy and amortization costs (PVWMA, 2016). Water prices in the two regions under study vary from \$0.11 to 0.29 m⁻³ (\$130 to 360 acre-ft⁻¹) for the 2016-2017 period, as shown in Table 11.

² Treated wastewater that can be used for agricultural purposes (SCVWD, 2016).

Table 11. Water prices for agricultural purposes in two of the main strawberry growing regions of California for the 2016-2017 period.

	Regions	
	Northern	Southern
Water Agencies/District	PVWMA	FCGMA UWCD
Delivered recycled water (\$ acre-ft ⁻¹)	359	-
Groundwater pumped from private wells (\$ acre-ft ⁻¹):		
A	203 ^a	53.75 ^c
B	258 ^b	34.05 ^d
Pumping costs	100	100
Total cost for water pumped from private wells (\$ acre-ft ⁻¹):		
A	303	154
B	358	134
Reference water prices (\$ acre-ft⁻¹) (\$ m⁻³)	303 – 359 (0.25 – 0.29)	134 – 154 (0.11 – 0.12)

^a Water charge for groundwater pumped in the Pajaro Valley Groundwater basin.

^b Water charge for groundwater pumped in the area where recycled water is available.

^c Water charge within the UWCD groundwater charge zone A (\$10+\$43.75 per acre-ft).

^d Water charge within the UWCD groundwater charge zone B (\$10+\$24.05 per acre-ft).

Irrigation allowance

Water price is subject to substantial increase depending on the area and the grower practice. Growers located within certain areas where an Irrigation Allowance Program is running are allowed to pump a certain amount of water and, if this amount is exceeded, they are required to pay a surcharge rate that ranges from \$1.05 to 1.45 m⁻³ (\$1315 to \$1815 acre-ft⁻¹). The PVWMA does not have any Irrigation Allowance Program.

Other agricultural water prices in California (overview)

It is generally cheaper to pump well water than to buy recycled water or surface water from a local agencies in order to irrigate crops, especially as “overlying landowners in most basins [can] pump as much [water] as they need” (Gray *et al.*, 2015). In several regions surveyed, either no taxes or fairly low water rates such as \$0.004 m⁻³ (5.05 \$ acre-ft⁻¹) were charged to growers for the water pumped during the 2015-16 period. In many cases, local agencies neither monitored nor received fees for well water use. The cost of water in this case is the cost of operating electric, gas or diesel pumps (\$0.08 m⁻³ or \$100 acre-ft⁻¹). Surface water is generally more expensive than groundwater. Prices varied from \$0.08 to \$1.44 m⁻³ (\$100 to \$1800 acre-ft⁻¹) for the 2015-16 period depending on the regions surveyed (Personal communications, 2015).

These data aimed at defining ranges of water prices to be used in the sensitivity analyses performed in the present study. The water savings or water use increases (\$ ha⁻¹) were calculated by multiplying the different water prices by the expected water use variations.

Fresh strawberry prices in California

Prices for fresh strawberries exhibited consistent variations from year to year (Figure 7). Considering the data collected from 2004 to 2014, annual prices fall in the range of \$1.60 to \$2.59 kg⁻¹ (\$0.72 – \$1.17 lb⁻¹). These historical data were used to define ranges of prices to be used in the sensitivity analyses. Gross revenues were calculated by multiplying the average annual price by the fresh yield variation.

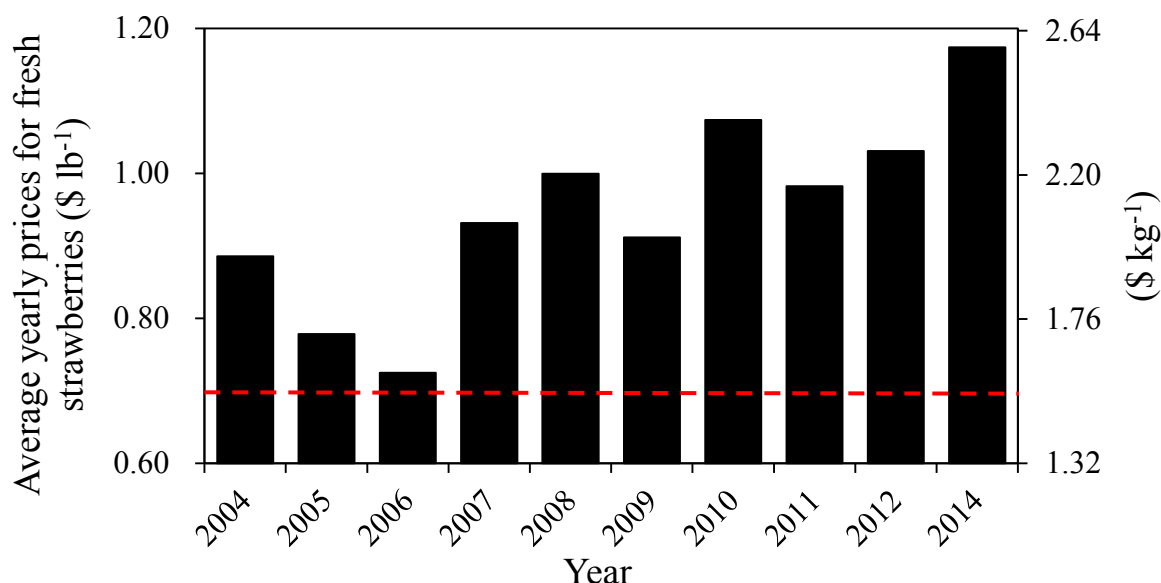


Figure 7. Average yearly prices received by growers for fresh strawberries in California from 2004 to 2014 (data from 2013 not available) in \$ lb⁻¹ and \$ kg⁻¹ (USDA, 2015).

Operating costs to produce strawberries

Operating costs associated with the harvest of fresh strawberries were obtained from University of California Cooperative Extension's studies (Bolda *et al.*, 2014; Daugovish *et al.*, 2011; Bolda *et al.*, 2010). Table 12 shows that the operating costs ranged from \$0.66 to \$1.12 kg⁻¹. In order to perform conservative analyses, a high operating costs value of \$1.10 kg⁻¹ was used in our study. The operating costs included the harvest costs (labor for fruit harvesting; load and haul of the fresh strawberries; fuel, lube and repairs costs associated with these manipulations), the cooling of fresh strawberries, assessments as well as selling costs.

Table 12. Operating costs associated for fresh yield harvest in the two growing regions.

Reference	Counties	Region	Year	Operating Costs (\$ kg ⁻¹) (\$ lb ⁻¹)
Bolda <i>et al.</i> , 2014	Santa Cruz Monterey San Benito	North	2014	1.12 (0.51)
Daugovish <i>et al.</i> , 2011	Ventura (Oxnard Plain)	South	2011	0.66 (0.30)
Bolda <i>et al.</i> , 2010	Santa Cruz Monterey	North	2010	1.08 (0.49)

Cost of the WTT

The wireless tensiometer technology (WTT) is purchased on a rent-to-own basis. The technology is offered at 0% interest. Growers pay monthly fees for having and using monitoring stations as well as service fees during 36 months. After 36 months, the technology (monitoring stations) is the grower's property. Only service monthly fees per monitoring station have to be paid thereafter.

To account for variations in the initial investment and service fees associated with the maintenance of the WTT, four different farm sizes were used (Table 13). Notably, both initial and services fees differed from one farm size to another. In the present study, the highest initial fees and service fees were used to perform conservative analyses. The initial investment in monitoring stations as well as the initial fees (shipping and installation of the equipment at site; software set up) were depreciated over 5 years.

Table 13. Cost of the WTT for different farm sizes (2015 prices), considering that one smart station covers approximately 4 ha^a. Minimum farm size prices used in the economic analyses.

Item		Farm Size (ha)				<i>Minimum farm size (ha)</i>
		10	20	40	100	4
Monitoring stations	Average number of ST4 required	2	5	10	25	1
	Monthly cost per unit (\$ unit ⁻¹ month ⁻¹)	136	136	136	136	136
	Investment required (36 months) (\$)	9792	24 480	48 960	122 400	4896
	Investment per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	979	1224	1224	1224	1224
	Annual depreciation (5 years) (\$ ha ⁻¹ year ⁻¹)	196	245	245	245	245
Service fees ^b	Monthly cost per unit (\$ unit ⁻¹ month ⁻¹)	75.0	50.0	37.5	35.0	75.0
	Annual cost (\$ unit ⁻¹ year ⁻¹)	1800	3000	4500	10 500	900
	Annual cost per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹ year ⁻¹)	180	150	113	105	225
Initial fee ^c	Total cost (\$)	450	975	1850	4475	195
	Cost per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	45	49	46	45	49
	Annual depreciation (5 years) (\$ ha ⁻¹ year ⁻¹)	9	10	9	9	10

^a 1 ha = 2.47 acres

^b Includes fees for the web base and Irrolis.

^c Includes shipping, installation of field equipment and software set-up.

Annexe D: Crop water productivity (CWP) comparisons (chapt. 2)

Crop water productivities (CWP) were calculated as the ratio of predicted fresh market yield by predicted water use (WU) deduced from the regression equations using average intercepts in both multiple linear regression models (Gendron *et al.*, 2016). In this case, the average intercepts were calculated as the weighted arithmetic mean based on the variance of each interaction's intercept ($R \cdot Y$). Figure 8 compares the CWP associated with each method (conventional vs ψ -based irrigation management) based on a same amount of water used and a same ψ reached before irrigation.

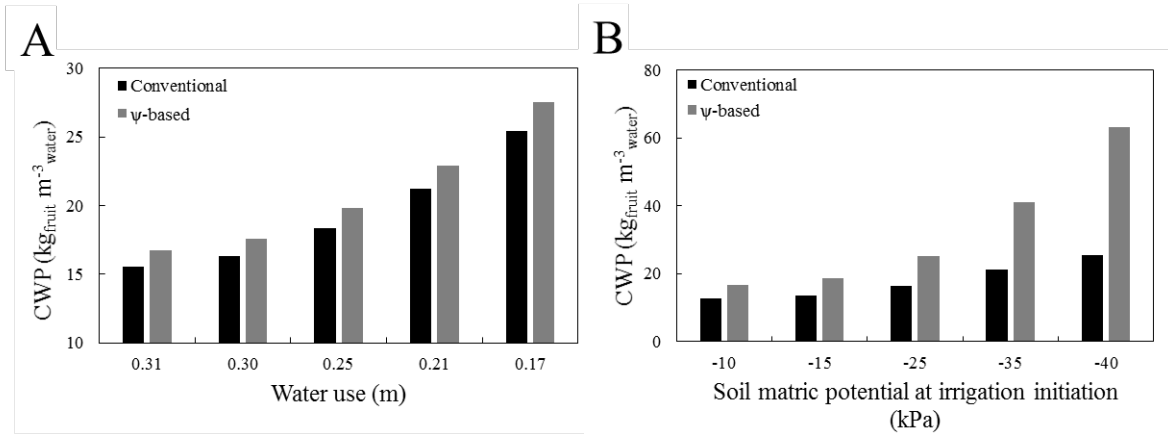


Figure 8. CWP associated with the irrigation management under study (conventional and ψ -based). CWP was calculated from a same amount of WU (A) and from a same soil matric potential reached before irrigation (ψ_{irr}) (B). Adapted from Gendron *et al.* (2016).

Figure 8A shows that, for a same amount of water used, the ψ -based management increased CWP compared to the conventional method, by 7.5% to 8.3% depending on the amount of water used. Thus, the ψ -based management generates more yield than the conventional management using a same amount of water. As for Figure 8B, it shows that, for a same average ψ_{irr} , which generated a certain fresh market yield, the conventional management applies more water than the ψ -based approach. CWP is therefore increased with the ψ -based management compared to the conventional practice, from 33% to 148%.

Annexe E: Description of input and output prices (chapt. 3)

Fresh strawberry prices in Quebec

Weekly variations of fresh strawberry prices in Quebec

Fresh strawberry prices were extracted from daily reports provided by the APFFQ (Association des producteurs de fraises et framboises du Québec). We calculated weekly average prices that corresponded to the harvest time in our study. Two sources of strawberry prices were analysed: (1) prices at the Central Market in Montreal and (2) recommended prices by the provincial committee. Average prices obtained from both sources are presented in CAD in Figure 9.

While the Montreal central market prices corresponded to the prices received by the producer for day neutral strawberries sold at the market place in Montreal, the recommended prices referred to suggested prices for high quality strawberries delivered to the retailer's platforms and warehouses in Montreal and Quebec City. Since the quality of the berries sold at the Central market was sometimes lower than that of the berries sold to the retailers, the Montreal market prices exhibited a lower tendency compared to the recommended prices. In the present study, we assumed that high quality strawberries were packed into pints of 560 ml (weighing ~375 g) and sold wholesale through the province. Thus, the recommended prices were considered the most representative and were used for further analyses.

Figure 9 shows marked temporal variations in strawberry prices throughout the season. At all years, the highest prices were recorded from about mid-July to early August, which corresponds to a historical short period of low strawberry production in the province of Quebec.

The weekly price data were used to calculate gross revenues, multiplying the average weekly recommended prices by the corresponding weekly fresh strawberry yields measured in both treatments. It has to be noticed that no recommended price was available for the week of Sept. 16, 2014. In order to calculate weekly gross revenues, we estimated the missing data based on the price evolution (see the grey dot in Figure 9C).

Average seasonal strawberry prices in Québec

The average seasonal strawberry prices, calculated as the mean of weekly prices over the season, indicated that average seasonal price for 12 pints of strawberries increased from 2012 to 2014 (see red dotted lines in Figure 9), with minimum and maximum prices ranging from \$16 to \$32 for 12 pints of strawberries. These average seasonal prices were used to define price ranges for the sensitivity analysis.

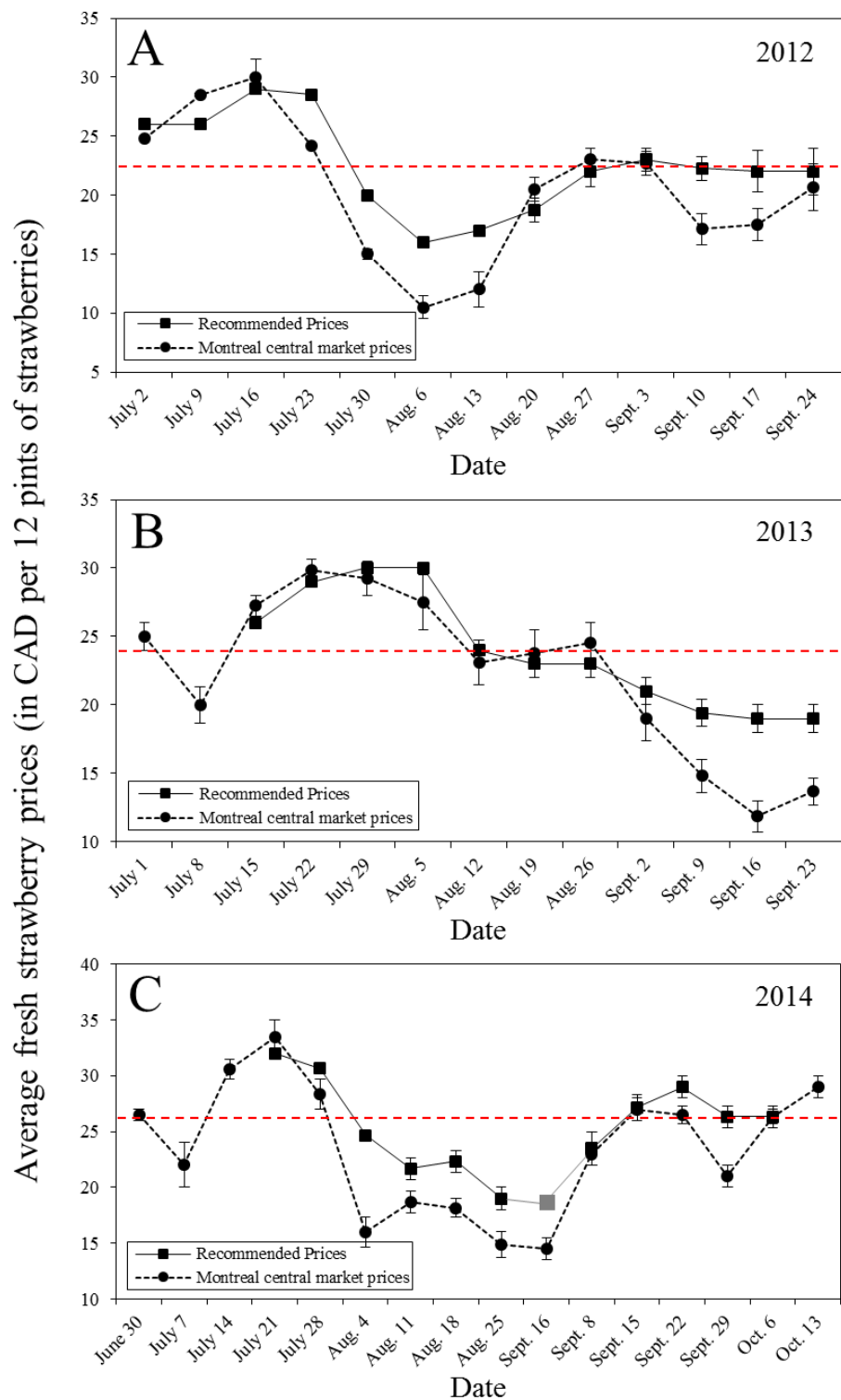


Figure 9. Weekly recommended prices for 12 pints of fresh day-neutral strawberries in Quebec in (A) 2012, (B) 2013 and (C) 2014 (APFFQ, personal communication, 2016) (\$1 per 12 pints = \$0.222 kg⁻¹). Means are presented, with SE representing the variation between the minimum and maximum prices. As opposed to 2014, in 2012 and 2013 the recommended prices for the first weeks of October were not available.

Historical fresh strawberry prices in Québec

Prices for day-neutral fresh strawberries sold at the Central Market in Montreal exhibited consistent variations from year to year (Figure 10). It is assumed that recommended prices experienced a similar time evolution. Considering the data provided by the APFFQ from 2005 to 2013, annual prices fall in the range of \$14.05 and \$20.74 per 12 pints of strawberries.

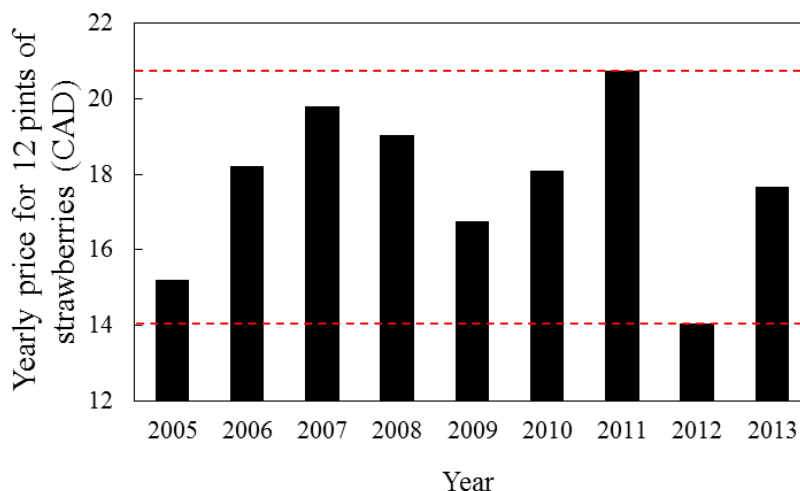


Figure 10. Historical prices data for 12 pints of day-neutral fresh strawberries sold at the Montreal central market, provided by the APFFQ (\$1 per 12 pints = \$0.222 kg⁻¹).

Since fresh strawberry prices at the Central Market in Montreal sometimes refers to lower quality berries, these historical data were used to define conservative price ranges for the sensitivity analysis.

Operating costs for fruit harvesting

As significant differences in marketable yields were noted between treatments, it was expected that total expenses for fruit harvesting varied between each treatment under study. Operating costs associated with the harvest of fresh strawberries were obtained from a commercial farm located in the area where the experiments were conducted. The labor costs were established at \$1.50 kg⁻¹ and included both fruit harvest and the disposal of fresh strawberries into common packages. Additional details can be found in Cormier *et al.* (2016).

Other operating costs, such as those related to the land preparation, plant establishment, fertilization, irrigation, pest management, equipment operating costs and year-end clean-up, were not considered to be significantly different between treatments.

Costs for automating the irrigation system

Cost of the equipment (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)

As a conservation approach, we assumed that a set of one pump, one automated system and one control panel was installed by a production surface of 4 ha, and that each pump relied on a different source of water (Table 14). Depending on the item, the initial investment and initial costs were depreciated over 10 or 5 years, although the salesman assessed a useful life of 25 years for the pump. In addition to equipment costs, when applicable initial costs (e.g.: installation of field equipment) as well as service fees are reported in Table 14. In the economic analyses, we also assumed that all items were purchased at 5% interests.

Table 14. Cost of the equipment for irrigation automation, considering that one unit of each item is required to cover 4 ha. All prices are presented in Canadian dollars (CAD).

Item	Costs	4-ha production surface <i>(\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)</i>
Electronic diesel pump†	Investment required (\$)	28 920
	Investment per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	7230
	Pump depreciation per ha (10 years) (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)	723
	Annual service fees per pump (\$ year ⁻¹)	250
	Annual service fees per pump per ha (\$ year⁻¹ ha⁻¹)	63
	Initial costs (\$)	800
	Initial costs per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	200
	Initial costs depreciation per ha (10 years) (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)	20
Automated system	Investment required (\$)	6000††
	Investment per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	1500
	Automated system depreciation per ha (10 years) (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)	300
	Annual service fees (\$ year ⁻¹)	475
	Annual service fees per system per ha (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)	119
	Initial costs (\$)	300
	Initial costs per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	75
	Initial costs depreciation per ha (5 years) (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)	15
Control panel	Total cost (\$)	3992
	Cost per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	998
	Control panel depreciation per ha (5 years) (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)	200
	Initial costs (\$)	2945
	Initial costs per ha (\$ ha ⁻¹)	736
	Initial costs depreciation per ha (5 years) (\$ ha⁻¹ year⁻¹)	147

† All items were purchased at a 20% discount.

†† In this study, each pump was assumed to rely on different sources of water. If all pumps were rather relying on the same source of water, the investment cost of the automated system would have been of \$2500 per pump instead of \$6000.

Technical specifications

Electronic diesel pump

The electronic diesel pump consisted of an Isuzu engine (model 4LE2TABW01415C) and a Berkeley pump (B3ZQM). The characteristics of each item are listed below. Prices are detailed in Table 15.

Table 15. Engine and pump's characteristics for irrigation automation of a 4-ha surface.

Isuzu engine (model 4LE2TABW01415C)	Berkeley pump (B3ZQM)
• 35 HP @ 2000 RPM • Engine mounted on two wheels with a frame and a galvanised cabinet • 3 stabilizers • Security guard • Muffler • Primer exhaust • Electronic control panel • Electric cables • 12 V battery	• Maximum capacity of 500 GPM @ 50 PSI • Vertically positioned foot valve (5" Klamplox Alu) • Suction port (5" × 30" Marani) • 5" mal input Marani • 4" output F.P.T.

Automated system

Field monitoring stations (tensiometers with real-time ψ measurements reporting) were interfaced to the electronic diesel pump for automating the irrigation system. The equipment needed for pump automation and prices are detailed in Table 16.

Table 16. List of the items needed for automating the irrigation system composed of an electronic diesel pump interfaced to field monitoring stations on a 4 ha-production surface.

Automated system features
• Pump auto start equipment • A 30' tower for data transmission with the devices installed in the field (control units) • Pressure sensor for maintaining the pressure at the right level • Solar panel and 12 V battery for feeding the pump auto start equipment • Electric cable for connecting the pump auto start equipment to the control panel

Control panel

A control panel LOFA (model CP760G2R) with wire and other components was required for remotely controlling the power unit (pump). Technical details are presented in Table 17.

Table 17. Characteristics of the control panel needed for remote control of irrigation on a 4 ha-production surface.

Control panel features
• (1) 975-2079-4051 Panel CP760G2R Aflx Hortau D C, LT • (1) 010-1001-56 Kit Rly PH 70A Glow Plug 12V GND CP760 • (1) 010-1001-26 Kit Rly 80A Starter 12V • (1) 812-7110-32 Harn Eng Generic CP 10ft • (1) Sonde à température et pression d'huile moteur