

Fire effects and short-term changes on water repellency in a Lithuanian grassland soil



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I. Introduction

Soil water repellency (WR) can influence soil hydrological properties because it reduces infiltration and enhances surface runoff, and consequently soil erosion. Soil WR has important implications in water available to the plants, plant growth and soil surface and subsurface hydrology. It is well-known that fire can induce, enhance or destroy soil WR depending on temperatures reached and background levels of WR. This has been studied in several ecosystems, especially in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, few studies have been done about fire effects on WR in temperate-boreal ecosystems. The aim of this work is to study the effects of fire and short-term changes on WR in a Lithuanian grassland soil.

II. Materials and Methods

The fire occurred on April 14th in an urban/forest interface from unknown causes and affected an area of 4 ha, in a recently abandoned agricultural field. Spring grassland fires are quite common in Lithuania that frequently become uncontrolled and cause serious economic and social impacts (Figure 1). Four days after the fire we collected 20 soil samples (0-5 cm depth of A mineral horizon) in a gentle slope from the fire-affected area, and another 20 soil samples from a control (unburned) area contiguous with the same soil and geomorphological characteristics. In the burned area we identified ash color that covers the soils and we measured ash thickness. Two and five months after the fire we repeated similar soil samplings in the burned area. In the laboratory soil water content was measured by drying (105°C) a part of each sample. The other part of samples were air-dried at room temperature (20-25°C), sieved carefully to <2 mm and exposed to a controlled laboratory atmosphere (20°C and 50% of relative humidity) during 3 days previous to do the WR measurements. Soil WR was measured in all samples with the Water Drop Penetration Time test (WDPT). The statistical comparisons between control, burned, burned 2 months and burned 5 months were performed with ln transformed data after checking different transformations to fit a normal distribution with the Shapiro-Wilk test. An ANOVA One-Way test was used. If significant differences among treatments were identified, we applied a Fisher LSD post-hoc test in order to identify differences between treatments. All differences were considered significant at a $p < 0.05$. Statistical analysis was carried out with Statistica 7.0.



Figure 1. Study area

III. Results and conclusions

The ash that covered soil samples was in the majority black (45%), light grey 35%, white 15% and in lower percentages, dark grey (5%) (Figure 1). On average, in all ash samples, ash thickness was 14.3 mm (not shown). Per ash color group, black ash had 18.9 mm, light grey 10.9 mm, white 5.33 mm and dark grey 24 mm. In the control area, soils were classified as hydrophilic in 85% of samples (<5s) and only 15% of samples were water repellent (in the lowest classes of WDPT, from 10 to 60 s). The fire increased the WR to 75% of samples with a WDPT = 55 s as an average value for burned samples, that slightly decreased two months after the fire (60% of water repellent samples; mean value of WDPT = 22 s). However, five months after the fire soil WR increased considerably showing WR in 85% of samples and with higher values of WDPT (mean value of WDPT = 320s) (Figure 2 and 3).

Soil water content varied from 25% in control to 14% in recently burned and 17% and 9% in the burned at 2 and 5 months respectively (Figure 4A). We identified a significant negative correlation ($-0.71, p < 0.01$) between soil water content and Log WDPT (Figure 5). We classify the fire as of low severity taking into account the soil water content and the ash color measured. With these data we suspect that changes in WR immediately after fire were caused only as an indirect consequence of the loss of water due to the heat supplied by the fire and the ash. The increase observed in the samples taken 5 months later seems to be a consequence of the dry period previous to the sampling. In addition, we observed that ash thickness presents a positive correlation ($0.69, p < 0.01$) with soil water content (Figure 6). This reflects the importance of ash in increasing the water content of the soil, which can thus reduce the potential WR that can be present in this type of soil. Further studies are ongoing to verify the hypothesis suggested with these preliminary results.

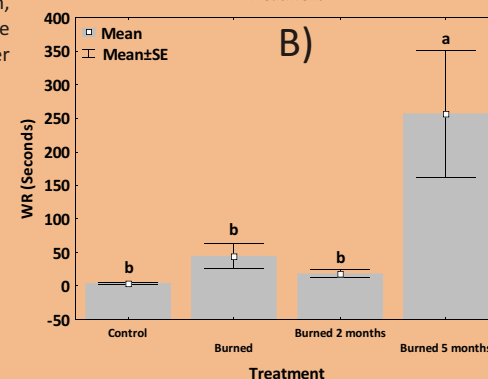
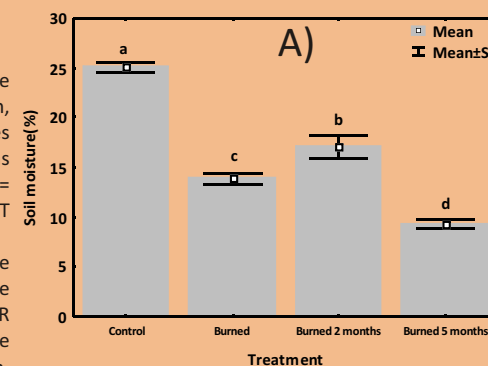


Figure 4. Summary of ANOVA results and Fisher LSD test for A) soil moisture and B) soil hydrophobicity of control, burned area and studied periods. Different letters mean significant differences at a $p < 0.05$. (N=80).

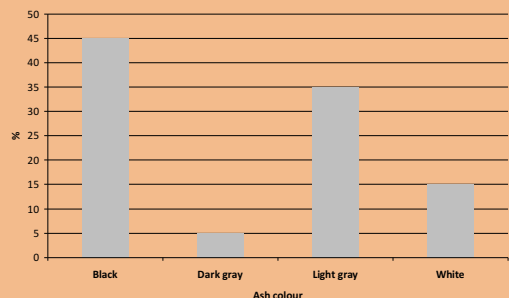


Figure 2. % of Ash color in the burned area (N=201).

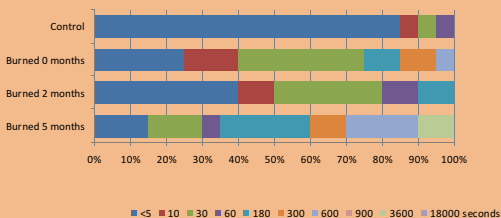


Figure 3. Relative frequency of water repellency classes for soils collected in control and burned area (N=80).

IV. Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge to the projects, CGL2007-28764-E/BTE, CGL2008-01632-E/BTE, and CGL2009-06861-E/BTE, that financed FUEGORED (Fire effects on soil properties network), to the HYDFIRE project (CGL2010-21670-C02-01). We also appreciated the help of the sun during the field work.

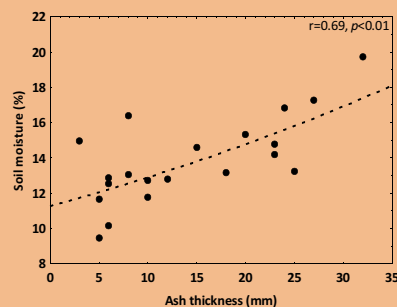


Figure 6. Correlation between ash thickness and soil moisture.

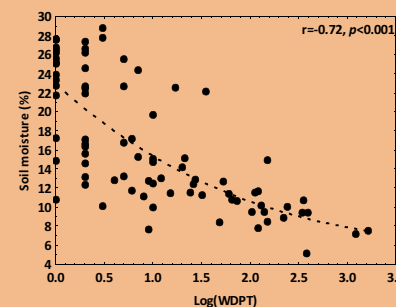


Figure 5. Correlation between Log(WDPT) and soil moisture.