

## ***Interactive comment on “Revisiting the relationship between soil moisture and N<sub>2</sub>O production pathways by measuring <sup>15</sup>N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomers” by Kate A. Congreves et al.***

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Received and published: 29 July 2019

Anonymous Referee #1

Received and published: 11 June 2019

SOIL Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/soil-2019-27>

Revisiting the relationship between soil moisture and N<sub>2</sub>O production pathways by measuring <sup>15</sup>N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomers

General comments

C1

The authors present a very nice and high quality dataset of N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomers from soil incubated over a gradient of moisture content. The study, however, has some major shortcomings in relating the dataset to the state of the art in N<sub>2</sub>O research. I encourage the authors to elaborate in 3 areas: 1) Latest approaches to interpret N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomer data 2) Consultation of literature on the effect of soil moisture on sources of N<sub>2</sub>O based on isotope tracer work 3) Literature on factors controlling N<sub>2</sub>O reduction With a more in depth analysis of the data and discussion of the results in relation to current literature, I believe this study can become a valuable and much appreciated contribution to the discipline.

Authors: Thank you for the comprehensive review. Revisions have been made to bolster references to previous literature, relating our work to previous N<sub>2</sub>O research.

The reviewer has no intentions of promoting or favoring own or colleagues' work in the comments. The cited literature is intended as a resource and starting point for a more in-depth literature search.

Specific comments Title: p

1) P 1 The word 'revisiting' in the title implies to me that our understanding was wrong, but the isotopomers confirm what we already knew.

Authors: Both Reviewer#1 and #2 requested that the word 'revisiting' be changed. We have given this some thought and can see the reviewers' point; thus we have modified the title to:

“A new look at an old concept: Using <sup>15</sup>N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomers to understand the relationship between soil moisture and N<sub>2</sub>O production pathways”.

Abstract:

2) P 1 Line 14: the authors mention 'three soils'. I suggest adding a sentence explaining the difference between the three soils

C2

Authors: The following statement has been added to the revised text (page 1/line 15):

“For each of three soils differing in nutrient levels, organic matter and texture soil microcosms were arranged . . .”

3) P 1 Line 24: I assume x is soil moisture in this equation. Please specify and explain to the reader the potential relevance or importance of these equations

Authors: Revised to specify the equation variables for x, FN, and FD. As well, we added the following sentence to explain the potential relevance:

“The presented equations may be helpful for other researchers to estimate N<sub>2</sub>O source partitioning when soil moisture falls within the transition from nitrification to denitrification”. (added at page 1/line 29)

Introduction:

4) P 2 Lines 3-4 and Lines 8-13: There are several studies that investigated the effect of soil moisture on mechanisms underlying N<sub>2</sub>O emissions using <sup>15</sup>N tracers. A few examples: - Stevens et al. 1997. Measuring the contributions of nitrification and denitrification to the flux of nitrous oxide from soil. *Soil Biology and Biochemistry* 29: 139-151 - Bateman and Baggs 2005. Contributions of nitrification and denitrification to N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from soils at different water-filled pore space. *Biology and Fertility of Soils* 41: 379-388

Authors: We have added a sentence acknowledging the use of <sup>15</sup>N tracers:

“Indeed, our understanding of the relationship between N<sub>2</sub>O production and soil moisture has benefited greatly from the use of <sup>15</sup>N tracers (Bateman and Baggs, 2005; Stevens and Laughlin, 1997; Groffman et al., 2006).” (added at page 2/line 6)

However, the point we intended to make is that despite the advancements in understanding N<sub>2</sub>O and soil moisture, the precise relationships remains fairly unclear, especially during the transition. To better convey this message, the text was revised to

C3

include the following statements:

“However, there remain surprising grey-areas in our understanding of the underlying mechanisms, one such area being the precise relationship between soil moisture and N<sub>2</sub>O production pathways, especially during the transition from one dominant pathway to another (Bateman and Baggs 2005). (added at page 2/line 8)

and

“While previous research has provided important steps towards better quantifying the relationship using <sup>15</sup>N enrichment and acetylene inhibition techniques (Bateman and Baggs 2005), natural abundance <sup>15</sup>N techniques may provide superior information by imposing fewer confounding effects on step-wise N transformations.” (added at page 2/line 19)

5) P 2 Line 19: Early studies on the use of isotopomers appeared in the early years 2000 by Ostrom et al., Well et al., and Toyoda et al. Please cite key early studies on the use of N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomers to source partition N<sub>2</sub>O.

Authors: We do refer to seminal papers by Toyoda, Ostrom, and Sutka further down this paragraph, but we have now revised the first sentence of the paragraph to acknowledge this body of early work up front.

“... (Van Groenigen et al., 2015). Early work focused on the intramolecular distribution of <sup>15</sup>N within the linear N<sub>2</sub>O molecule (Sutka et al., 2006; Toyoda et al., 2005), investigations of atmospheric or oceanic N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomers (Popp et al., 2002; Toyoda and Yoshida, 1999; Yoshida and Toyoda, 2000), and soil emitted N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomers (Perez et al., 2001; Yamulki et al., 2001).” (added at page 3/line 3)

6) Materials and methods: P 4 Line 25 – P 5 Line 20: A number of studies have been published on how to interpret N<sub>2</sub>O isotopomer data. Lewicka-Szczeback published an elegant method for calculating N<sub>2</sub>O from nitrification, denitrification and the fraction of N<sub>2</sub>O reduced to N<sub>2</sub> based on SP and d<sup>18</sup>O of N<sub>2</sub>O. Details

C4

on the calculation approach can be found here. I recommend that the authors revise their calculation of the sources of N<sub>2</sub>O based on more recently published approaches. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328135133\\_Mapping\\_approach\\_model\\_after\\_Lewicka-Szczebak\\_et\\_al\\_2017\\_-\\_detailed\\_description\\_of\\_calculation\\_procedure](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328135133_Mapping_approach_model_after_Lewicka-Szczebak_et_al_2017_-_detailed_description_of_calculation_procedure)

Authors: We confirmed that the calculation for the sources of N<sub>2</sub>O we performed were indeed the same approach as described by Lewicka-Szczebak. We cited the mixing model as described by Deppe et al. 2017, which is parallel to that used by Lewicka-Szczebak et al 2017. We now make reference to both papers that employed this approach (page 5/line 7).

The mapping approach that we employed is that used by Deppe et al. (2017) and Lewicka-Szczebak et al. (2017) has been used before – but based on  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  SP and  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  bulk to estimate the fraction of bacterial N<sub>2</sub>O (Zou et al, 2014). As described by both Deppe et al (2017) and Lewicka-Szczebak et al (2017), they decided to base the mixing model on the relationship between  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  SP and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  values (rather than bulk  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ ) for more robust interpretations; accordingly, we followed their recommendations.

7) The approach used by the authors has some major limitations, outlined below.

The authors use soil-specific end-members in their isotope mass balance, based on data from their experiment. While it cannot be excluded that isotope values characteristic of nitrification and denitrification are to some extent soil-dependent, the authors' approach relies on the assumption that at low moisture content, nitrification was the sole source of N<sub>2</sub>O, while denitrification was assumed to be the sole source of N<sub>2</sub>O at one of the medium range moisture contents. There is no independent measurement of the contribution of nitrification, denitrification and N<sub>2</sub>O reduction to N<sub>2</sub>. Limitations and assumptions of their approach need to be clearly stated.

Authors: As requested, we added an explanation, and acknowledge the underlying assumptions and limitations (see page 5/lines 19–29 of the revised manuscript):

C5

“Rather than relying on average literature-derived endmembers like previous work (Deppe et al., 2017; Lewicka-Szczebak et al., 2017), we used soil-specific endmembers derived from our data to perform the linear mixed model. This is because we measured a wide range of soil WFPS treatments with high frequency between dry and moist conditions for each soil, enabling us to determine the point at which the  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  SP or  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  values either dropped or increased as soil WFPS changed – as precisely as the data permitted. This approach is consistent with earlier recommendations that data is collected at high enough frequencies to capture gradual changes in isotope values as influenced by traditional proxies (i.e., gradual changes in soil WFPS) (Decock and Six, 2013a). However, it must be noted that the underlying assumption is that the soil-specific endmembers are more reflective of transition from nitrification to denitrification in each of the soils tested herein, than general literature-derived endmembers would be for any one soil. Moreover, it is assumed that the endmembers represent N<sub>2</sub>O fluxes when the sole source was either nitrification or denitrification.” (added at page 5/line 19)

8) Whether end-members are likely soil-dependent was discussed in a literature review by Decock and Six 2013. How reliable is the intramolecular distribution of  $^{15}\text{N}$  in N<sub>2</sub>O to source partition N<sub>2</sub>O emitted from soil? *Soil Biology and Biochemistry* 65: 114-127. Empirical studies since have further tested the effect of soil on end members, for example, Lewicka-Szczebak et al. 2014. Experimental determinations of isotopic fractionation factors associated with N<sub>2</sub>O production and reduction during denitrification in soils. *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta* 134:55–73. The results of the presented study should be discussed in relation to other studies published on this topic.

Authors: Revisions have been made to discuss this study in relation to others. We reference the review by Decock and Six (2013a and b), and Lewicka et al (2014):

“Despite similarities among soils in the robust patterns of how SP values are influenced by soil moisture (Fig. 2; Table 2), SP exhibited a significant ( $P < 0.0001$ ) soil  $\times$  moisture region interaction. This finding agrees with earlier suggestions that, at finer

C6

scales, the  $^{15}\text{N}_2\text{O}$  isotopic signatures and SP values are likely regulated by the active soil microbial community, process rates, soil heterogeneity (Decock and Six, 2013a; Lewicka-Szczebak et al., 2014).” (added at page 8/line 32)

9) The authors use the relationship between  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  and SP at higher soil moisture content as the line representative of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduction. It should be noted, however, that a  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduction line is only applicable if  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduction was the only process affecting  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$ . In the presented experiment,  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  production and reduction likely occurred simultaneously. How simultaneous production and reduction of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  affects isotope maps is discussed in great detail in Decock and Six. 2013. On the potential of  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  and  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  to assess  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduction to  $\text{N}_2$ . European journal of soil science 64:610-620.

Authors: We have revised the text to address the reviewer’s concerns; transparently identify the limitations of our study; and discuss our study in context to others:

“Previously, the fractionation of SP due to  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduction was constrained to a variation of -2‰ to -8‰ (Jinuntuya-Nortman et al., 2008; Lewicka-Szczebak et al., 2014; Well and Flessa, 2009). Ostrom et al. (2007) showed that . . . “ (added at page 9/line 4)

“Reduction slopes for our three soils averaged 0.28, which is similar to the literature-derived average of 0.35 or 0.33 used by Deppe et al. (2017) and Lewicka-Szczebak et al. (2014), respectively . . . ” (added at page 9/line 13)

“This finding echoes earlier work which suggested that during soil conditions when processes of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  production and reduction occur simultaneously, the reduction line approach may be limited (Decock and Six, 2013b).” (added at page 10/line 7)

#### Results and discussion

10) P 6 Figure 2: It would be useful to see results of a statistical analysis on the effect of soil on  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  fluxes and isotopomer values across the moisture gradient. In addition, it would be interesting to see the fraction of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  derived from nitrification, denitrification and  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduction for each soil over the moisture gradient, including

C7

statistical analysis.

Authors: First, we apologize for a miscommunication regarding  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  fluxes; i.e., we did not measure  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  fluxes; rather, we measured the total amount of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  produced during the 24-h incubation. This has been made more clear in the revised text (Section 3.1; see response to comment #4 by Reviewer #2).

As for the Reviewer’s second point, we are not entirely sure what is being asked for here. To evaluate the influence of soil moisture on  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  production and isotopomers, we analyzed the relationship between WFPS and SP or source fraction during key moisture gradients via linear regressions – see Figure 4 and Table 2. As such, the statistical analysis was approached in two ways: 1) linear regression to characterize  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  isotopic changes as influenced by moisture (see Table 2), and 2) by developing linear models within the transition zone to model the changes in  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  source fraction (Eq 6 & 7), see Fig 4. We believe the way we approached the analyses is best suited for our objectives of this study. To evaluate the influence of soil attributes on  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  and isotopomers, a future study could be designed and carried out to best test numerous different soil types and soil attributes on  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  and isotopomers.

11) P 7 Line 16-18: I agree that a greater contribution of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduction is a likely explanation for the observed results. The approach by Lewicka-Szczebak would allow the authors to calculate the fraction of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  reduced to  $\text{N}_2$  based on the isotopomer data.

Authors: Thanks for the suggestion. We have adopted this approach and revised the text to reflect the outcome of the analysis:

“Correspondingly, using the mapping model approach, we estimated much larger fractions of  $\text{N}_2\text{O}$  were reduced to  $\text{N}_2$  at 95% WFPS in the Bradwell soil (0.47), compared to the Sutherland or Asquith soils (0.13 to 0.14).” (added at page 8/line 14)

12) P 7 Line 22: A lot of literature has been published on factors controlling complete

C8

denitrification. See for example - Butterbach-Bahl et al. 2013. Nitrous oxide emissions from soil: How well do we understand the processes and their controls? *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 2013 368, 20130122, - Groffman et al. 2006. Methods for measuring denitrification: Diverse approaches to a difficult problem. *Ecological Applications* 16:2091–2122 - and references therein.

13) P 7 Line 29-32: It is very likely that multiple processes underlying N<sub>2</sub>O emissions acted simultaneously to cause a higher than expected SP value. It needs to be very clear from the discussion that there was no independent measurement of nitrification, denitrification and N<sub>2</sub>O reduction to N<sub>2</sub>. To avoid this confounding factor in data interpretation, I strongly recommend the authors to use end-members from the literature for data-interpretation. Various studies have reviewed and summarized data for such end-members, for example: - Decock and Six 2013. How reliable is the intramolecular distribution of <sup>15</sup>N in N<sub>2</sub>O to source partition N<sub>2</sub>O emitted from soil? *Soil Biology and Biochemistry* 65: 114-127; - Ostrom and Ostrom 2017. Mining the isotopic complexity of nitrous oxide: a review of challenges and opportunities. *Biogeochemistry* 132:359–372; - Denk et al. 2017. The nitrogen cycle: A review of isotope effects and isotope modeling approaches. *Soil Biology and Biochemistry* 105:121-137.

Authors: The assumptions, explanations, and limitations are now more clearly described (see authors' response to Comment #7, above).

To check if data interpretation would be influenced by using the soil-specific approach vs the independent endmember/slope approach, isotopomer maps were also calculated using independent literature-derived values (see below Fig). Literature-derived endmembers were set at -2.4 to 34.4 for SPD to SPN, and 11.1 to 43.0 for δ<sup>15</sup>N<sub>18</sub>OD to δ<sup>15</sup>N<sub>18</sub>ON ; a reduction slope of 0.33 (Lewicka-Szczebak et al., 2017). For our study, using literature-derived endmembers was deemed inappropriate because it overestimated the contribution of denitrification-derived N<sub>2</sub>O under very dry soil conditions (i.e., 20 to 40% WFPS), to fractions of up to 40% of N<sub>2</sub>O produced (see figure below) – a result which is in contradiction to common knowledge (Davidson et al. 1991).

C9

In our case, N<sub>2</sub>O source partitioning using soil-specific endmembers provided an advantage over using independent endmembers because certain endmembers (Bradwell soil) were different from expected/literature-derived values; likely due to real soil biological processes such as microbial communities, the low rate of production, or soil heterogeneity (Decock and Six, 2013a; Lewicka-Szczebak et al., 2014). So, it makes more sense in our case to use soil-specific endmembers (especially because we have the isotopic data over a fine-scale WFPS change, enabling us to pin-point soil-specific endmembers as best we can). We are transparent about the approach, the assumptions, and limitations (see revisions to page 5 which clearly explains that the endmembers are assumed to represent sole nitrification or denitrification). We are open to including the below figure and explanation as a Supplemental material if you deem it necessary, but please note that our objectives were not to compare different end-member approaches. Rather, our goal was to use a reasonable endmember approach to estimate source partitions, and evaluate how soil moisture affects N<sub>2</sub>O production. See attached Figure.

14) P8 Line 1 – P 9 Line 9: Here and elsewhere, please edit based on previous comments.

Authors: This section has been revised to reflect our response to the Reviewer's previous comments. In brief, these revisions have to do with placing our results in better context with the published literature. (See tracked changes in accompanying revised manuscript.)

15) P 9 Line 10-27: This is an interesting analysis. I am interested to see models relating soil moisture to sources of N<sub>2</sub>O based on updated source calculations in line with the most recent literature. Based on the raw isotope data, I suspect a significant moisture by soil interaction with respect to sources of N<sub>2</sub>O. Statistical tests for such an interaction should be shown. Such an interaction may also have implications for the modeling approach in section 3.4 of this paper.

C10

Authors: See response to Comment #8 above in which we added a statement showing indicating that site preference exhibited a significant ( $P < 0.0001$ ) soil  $\delta^{15}N$  moisture region interaction. This provides additional support for our decision to use site-specific endmembers to calculate the source fractions attributable to nitrification and denitrification in our modeling. Further, the site-specific end-member approach effectively normalizes the source partitions among soils, enabling data to be pooled for the modeling approach (Fig 4). Refer to discussion under Comment 13.

16) P 9 Line 27-28: Please refer to isotope tracer work, as suggested earlier.

Authors: The text was revised to reference isotope tracer work in response to Comment # 4 above; however, we do not feel that it needs to be repeated here. Our purpose was to determine whether we could use  $^{15}N$  isotopomers—i.e., natural abundance, not  $^{15}N$  tracers—to better elucidate the relationship between soil moisture and  $N_2O$  production pathways. Nevertheless, we have revised the text in this section to read:

“Our results largely support the foundational studies that established the relationship between soil moisture and  $N_2O$  emissions (Davidson, 1991; Linn and Doran, 1984); however, we provide a method that moves beyond just inferring  $N_2O$  source pathways towards quantifying the pathway contributions over a range of soil moisture—and does so without having to add a  $^{15}N$  label.” (underlined text added at page 11/line9)

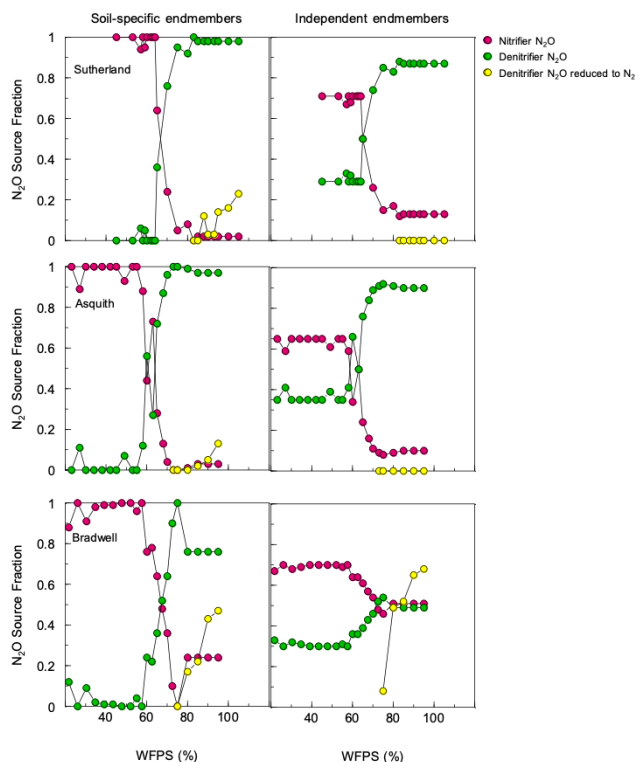
17) Conclusion Please edit commensurate with previous comments.

Authors: The conclusions have been revised to reflect previous comments.

18) Technical corrections None observed.

Interactive comment on SOIL Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/soil-2019-27>, 2019.

C11



**Fig. 1.**  $N_2O$  source fractions based on soil-specific endmember approach (left panels) and independent endmember approach (right panels).

C12