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Supplement of

Decomposability of soil organic matter over time: the Soil Incubation Database (SIDb, version 1.0) and guidance for incubation procedures

Christina Schädel et al.

Correspondence to: Christina Schädel (christina.schaedel@nau.edu)

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1 **Supplement of:**
2 **Decomposability of soil organic matter over time: The Soil Incubation Database (SIDb,**
3 **version 1.0) and guidance for incubation procedures**

4
5 In the main manuscript, we focused on essential variables to measure and report for inclusion in
6 the Soil Incubation Database (SIDb). Here, we focus on suggested variables to measure and
7 methods to consider that go beyond what is required for inclusion in SIDb but are nevertheless
8 important to consider prior to and during soil incubations, both to increase interpretability of
9 results and to allow for inter-site comparisons. Most of the recommendations made here are
10 applicable for incubation studies using soils from any regions; however, some ecosystems may
11 require reporting of additional variables.

12
13 **Additional information on soil characteristics**

14 As explained in the main manuscript Table 1), soil depth and soil carbon (C) are the two most
15 important and necessary soil characteristics to report for incubated soil samples.

16 In addition, it can be useful to measure pH values in the soil solution on a regular basis
17 during the incubation for the following reasons; first, if the soil pH is more neutral or basic, C
18 mineralization might be confounded by high carbonate concentrations (Billings et al., 2004);
19 second, pH values are known to change over the course of an incubation, thereby possibly
20 affecting both the microbial community composition (Fierer et al., 2007) and the solubility of
21 CO₂ in the soil water, which has to be considered when calculating CO₂ flux rates from
22 incubation studies. Additionally, microbial growth and many microbial nutrient cycling
23 processes (e.g. N mineralization, nitrification and denitrification), and mineral-organic
24 associations are affected by pH (Kalbitz and Kaiser, 2008).

25 Another variable to consider, particularly for anaerobic incubations, are soil redox
26 conditions as they can have an important effect on the oxidation state of mineralized soil C
27 released (Knorr and Blodau, 2009; Peters and Conrad, 1996). Accurately measuring soil redox
28 potential in an incubation can be difficult and costly due to large spatial heterogeneity of soil
29 redox conditions, however obtaining this information is valuable when interpreting results in the
30 context of the potential for a soil to produce methane. Anoxic processes can occur at redox
31 potentials (Eh) between +300 to -300 mV (DeLaune and Reddy, 2005). At higher redox values,

32 facultative anaerobic processes occur (e.g. NO_3^- reduction) followed by iron and sulfate
33 reduction. Fermentation can occur over a wide range of redox values, and multi-step
34 fermentation may be important in full mineralization under anoxic conditions (Meronigal et al.,
35 2004). Before methanogenesis can occur, terminal electron acceptors higher on the redox ladder
36 (e.g. NO_3^- , Fe(III), SO_4^{2-}) must be depleted (Peters and Conrad, 1996) and the redox potential
37 must be sufficiently negative (DeLaune and Reddy, 2005). Observations of methanogenesis at
38 higher redox potentials have been made (Peters and Conrad, 1996), which is likely due to micro-
39 scale variability in soil redox potential (Sexstone et al., 1985). Thus, the activity of soil
40 microorganisms in anaerobic incubations has a large effect on the redox potential, and therefore
41 the gas flux, as microbes exhaust electron acceptors that yield more energy than methanogenesis,
42 which then finally allows methanogenic conditions to occur (Peters and Conrad, 1996; Tveit et
43 al., 2013).

44 Simple microbial parameters that are usually well correlated with heterotrophic
45 respiration rates are microbial biomass and microbial stoichiometry (Čapek et al., 2015).
46 Microbial biomass is often estimated by the chloroform-fumigation extraction method, which
47 also allows measuring microbial C and/or nitrogen and thus allows stoichiometric analyses.
48 Other measures of microbial biomass use biomarkers, such as DNA or phospholipid fatty acids
49 to estimate microbial biomass or activity-based methods, such as the substrate-induced
50 respiration method.

51

52 **Incubation setup**

53 Experimental incubation setups commonly consist of either incubation jars, such as mason jars
54 fitted with Swagelok bulkhead fittings and gas-tight septa, or incubation vials with silicone septa,
55 which contain the incubated soil and ensure an airtight headspace for analytical measurements.
56 Incubation vessels should always be cleaned and sterilized prior to beginning the experiment.
57 One consideration in selecting the size of the incubation jars or vials is the size of the sample and
58 potential for CO_2 and/or CH_4 production; the headspace must be small enough to detect a change
59 in gas concentrations but not so small that the headspace reaches levels of CO_2 beyond those
60 expected in the field or under anoxic conditions.

61 Soil preparation includes the decision to homogenize soil via sieving or other methods, to
62 remove roots, to maintain oxic or anoxic conditions, to optimize soil moisture, and whether to

63 pre-incubate the soils. Drying and grinding of soils should be avoided as this leads to
64 mineralization of C released from organisms killed by drying and rapid rehydration as well as
65 potentially releasing C that was physically protected, e.g. via aggregation (Carter and Gregorich,
66 2007).

67 Avoiding disturbance effects caused by soil homogenization can be accomplished by
68 cutting soil cores into sections and incubating each intact section. However, with intact cores,
69 recently cut live roots remain in the soil and may artificially increase substrate availability and
70 result in artifacts in the initial rates of CO₂ production. For anaerobic incubations, minimizing
71 soil disturbance and exposure to oxygen during sampling, preparation and incubation is critical
72 as exposure to oxygen can disrupt fermentation and methanogenesis, which can decrease the
73 potential rates of CH₄ production (Nilsson and Öquist, 2013), at least during the initial stages of
74 incubation. However, keeping soil cores and soil aggregates intact can result in anaerobic
75 microsites within the soil during aerobic incubations (Knorr and Blodau, 2009), which may
76 affect interpretation. Homogenizing soils disturbs the structure of soil aggregates and may
77 eliminate the spatial disconnect between microbes and organic matter, thus leading to increased
78 mineralization rates.

79 When examining long-term changes in aerobic C dynamics over time, it can be favorable
80 to start out the incubation with multiple subsets of the same soil core in one jar and then
81 repeatedly taking out one subset for detailed soil and microbial analysis over the course of
82 incubation (there needs to be enough soil left for reliable flux measurements after samples are
83 taken out for analysis). In summary, keeping soils intact without homogenizing prior to
84 incubation will keep soils closer to field conditions but it will require a higher number of
85 replicates to incubate as heterogeneity will be higher without homogenizing.

86 Pre-incubating soils is generally recommended as it reduces a confounding effect of high
87 initial respiration rates that are due to a short-lived flush of respiration caused by sample
88 collection and preparation even if soils are kept intact. Pre-incubation duration varies widely,
89 from 0 to 180 days (Whitman et al., 2014). For studies in which soils are dried and rewetted, 2
90 9 days is typical for soils to return to basal respiration rates of undried controls (Hamer et al.,
91 2007) but may not return to basal rates even after more than 50 days depending on soil texture
92 (Chowdhury et al., 2011). Based on the literature and our personal experience, we recommend at

93 least 4 days and preferably 7 days of preincubation, but caution that specific study questions may
94 dictate shorter or longer preincubation periods.

95 Initial experimental setup requires recording jar weights of empty jars, determining soil
96 moisture, and adding the prepared soil for incubation, and weighing and recording the soil plus
97 jar weight. Using this weight as a benchmark and checking weekly to adjust soil moisture can
98 ensure that soils do not become either waterlogged or water-stressed, both of which affect C
99 fluxes. If anoxic conditions are desired, this step can be conducted in a glove box to ensure
100 anoxia.

101

102 **Flux measurements**

103 The length and frequency of flux measurements are important for characterizing C fluxes in soil
104 incubations. Aerobic respiration rates follow an exponential decline which requires frequent
105 measurements at the beginning of the experiment to capture the depletion of fast cycling C.

106 Generally, at the beginning of an incubation, measurements are taken at short intervals for the
107 first few weeks (every 2-3 days) and then extended to weekly measurements. Depending on the
108 length of incubation, later measurements can be taken monthly or even yearly as there is little
109 change in respiration rates once fast cycling C has been respired. Flux values should be closely
110 monitored and the frequency of measurements adjusted if needed. Frequent flux measurements
111 are especially important to characterize the shape of the time series curve when using inverse
112 modeling to separate soil C into fast and slower cycling pools as discussed earlier. Frequent
113 measurements even after the initial decline in respiration rate improve the detection limit of
114 small differences in the slower cycling C pools (Schädel et al., 2013). Before beginning an
115 incubation, jars should be flushed to ensure ambient CO₂ concentrations.

116 The duration of anaerobic incubations needs to be sufficiently long enough to achieve
117 favorable conditions for CH₄ production, which can be inhibited by availability of alternate
118 electron acceptors (Knorr and Blodau, 2009) and by methanogen communities (Tveit et al.,
119 2013). During anaerobic incubations, CO₂ fluxes should be measured alongside CH₄ fluxes.

120

121 **Isotope Incubations**

122 The C isotope composition (¹³C and ¹⁴C) of the bulk soil C pool as well as that of respired CO₂
123 and CH₄ reveals information on C dynamics and the age of soil C pools and of respired C

124 (Trumbore, 2000). In most cases, multiple measurements of the isotopic composition of respired
125 gases are not possible during an incubation, however, radiocarbon measurements of the respired
126 CO₂ at the end, or multiple measurements during the course of an incubation can provide
127 valuable information on the age of the C being respired (Dioumaeva et al., 2002; Nowinski et al.,
128 2010), giving insights into the decomposition of different C pool fractions over the course of an
129 incubation. The isotopic signature (¹³C and ¹⁴C values) of respired CO₂ in combination with
130 different soil fractions (Biasi et al., 2005; Crow et al., 2006; Czimczik and Trumbore, 2007;
131 Dioumaeva et al., 2002; Dutta et al., 2006) can be useful to identify the C sources that contribute
132 to total C efflux.

133 Radiocarbon incubations, where the ¹⁴C of respired CO₂ is measured, are a common type
134 of incubation designed to use the radiocarbon signature to trace the transit time of C in the soil
135 (e.g. Nagy et al., 2018; Schuur and Trumbore, 2006) or to partition heterotrophic and autotrophic
136 respiration, which have different signatures (Carbone et al., 2011; Hicks Pries et al., 2013;
137 Schuur and Trumbore, 2006). They are commonly short-term, involving one single radiocarbon
138 measurement made at the end of the incubation. In contrast, standard non-radiocarbon
139 incubations are often longer. In the design of incubation experiments, there are opportunities to
140 combine radiocarbon and time series incubations as complementary methods to address related
141 questions of C pool structures and transit times. Studies using ¹⁴C should report time series of
142 CO₂ in addition to the total duration in supplemental information or a data repository. Long-term
143 incubation studies should be aware of the benefit of adding multiple ¹⁴C measurements to further
144 constrain the source or dynamics of the C pool/s respired. Since long-term incubations should
145 initially release C predominantly from faster pools and then from slower pools, this behavior
146 could be confirmed with measurements of the ¹⁴C content of the respired CO₂ at different times
147 during incubation.

148 Laboratory setup of radiocarbon incubations is similar to common setups used for time
149 series measurements, with some additional considerations. First and foremost, sufficient CO₂
150 must be accumulated in the headspace to make a radiocarbon measurement (typically ~0.5mg C),
151 which leads to the build-up of relatively high CO₂ concentrations. When deciding how to
152 standardize the duration of the incubation across samples, three criteria are commonly used: (1)
153 total amount of time elapsed (days), (2) total amount of C respired (mg C), or (3) fraction of
154 initial soil C respired. In all cases, the criterion used should be reported, and the % of C respired

155 should be calculated and reported. Finally, although temperature and moisture should be highly
156 controlled for time series incubations, the ^{14}C signature of the respired C is much less sensitive to
157 temperature, as the same C is consumed by microbes independent of incubation temperature,
158 merely at a faster rate under warmer conditions (Hicks Pries et al., 2017) .

159

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