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Enhancing Maize Productivity through Mulching Practices in Semi-Arid Regions: Impact on Yield, Water Use Efficiency, and Economic Viability

ABSTRACT

Plastic film mulching (PF) was extensively used to improve maize yields, but its continuous application with ridge-furrow practices led to a significant depletion of soil organic carbon (SOC) and soil water storage (SWS). A study conducted during the 2018–19 rabi season on sandy loam soils evaluated the impact of different mulching techniques—Reflective Silver Plastic Mulch (RSPM), Rice Straw Mulch (RSM), Biodegradable Mulch (BM), and control without mulching (CK)—under irrigation regimes defined by IW/CPE ratios of 0.6, 0.8, and 1.0. The highest grain yields were achieved with an IW/CPE ratio of 1.0, with Reflective Silver Plastic Mulch significantly outperforming other treatments in grain yield (7086.57 kg/ha) and water use efficiency (WUE), followed by Biodegradable Mulch and Rice Straw Mulch. Reflective Silver Plastic Mulch also enhanced all major yield attributes, particularly when combined with the highest irrigation level, while the lowest values were observed under minimal irrigation and no mulch. The study concluded that irrigation at an IW/CPE ratio of 1.0 combined with Reflective Silver Plastic Mulch optimized maize yield, water use efficiency, and economic returns under drip irrigation.

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Keywords: Plastic mulch, productivity, Biodegradable mulch, irrigation regimes, yield, WUE, B: C Ratios)

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1. INTRODUCTION

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Maize (*Zea mays*) was recognized as one of the most important and adaptable cereal crops globally, contributing significantly to food security in many developing nations. Water, being essential for all biological processes, played a crucial role in enhancing crop yields. High-quality water was used for various purposes, including irrigation, industrial activities, power generation, livestock needs, and domestic consumption in both urban and rural areas. In arid and semi-arid regions, annual crop evapotranspiration (ET_c) often exceeded total precipitation, with nearly half of the evapotranspiration occurring through the soil surface. Farmland irrigation primarily relied on groundwater (Chauhan et al., 2009; Alaamer and Alsharifi 2020), but its overuse often led to scarcity. The water requirement for maize, ranked as the third most important cereal crop globally, ranged between 500 and 800 mm during the growing season (Alaamer et al.,2023).

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An effective irrigation schedule required proper timing and the right quantity of water application. Developing water-saving strategies was also crucial for achieving stable or increased grain yields, especially in water-limited regions. Studies highlighted the growing preference for advanced irrigation techniques, such as sprinkler, drip, and subsurface drip

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31 systems (Zeng et al., 2009; Merza et al., 2023). Drip irrigation, in particular, proved effective
32 in reducing soil evaporation and irrigation frequency while increasing efficiency by up to 90%
33 (Yang et al., 2023). Improved irrigation efficiency further enhanced soil moisture retention
34 under mulch with appropriate application frequency.

35 Mulching techniques included flat plastic covers (Zhang et al., 2015), plastic film mulching on
36 ridges (Wang et al., 2009; 2015; 2016), and ridge-furrow mulching (Gu et al., 2016). Since
37 the 1970s, advancements in modern industry enabled the widespread adoption of plastic film
38 mulching for dryland agriculture in arid and semi-arid regions (Dong et al., 2009). These
39 practices conserved soil moisture by regulating the balance between soil evaporation and
40 plant transpiration. Both organic and plastic mulching significantly improved crop yields by
41 enhancing soil moisture (Wang et al., 2009), reducing evaporation (Wang et al., 2009, 2011),
42 preventing nutrient loss, fostering a favorable microclimate, and maintaining optimal topsoil
43 temperatures (Wang et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2009).

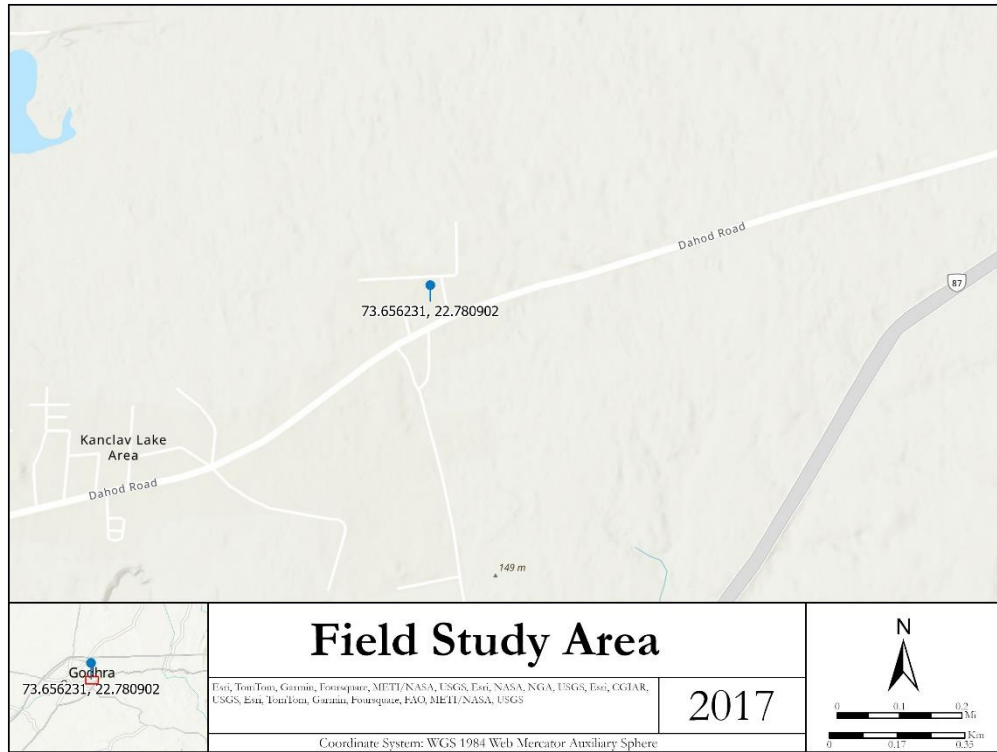
44 Mulch films served multiple beneficial purposes, including water retention, temperature
45 regulation, disease prevention, insect resistance, weed suppression, and the enhancement
46 of crop growth, yield, and economic returns. These functions highlighted the importance of
47 proper irrigation scheduling and the use of effective mulching techniques to maximize maize
48 productivity while maintaining soil health. Effective scheduling involved selecting appropriate
49 irrigation methods, applying the right quantity of water, and incorporating suitable mulching
50 materials. By addressing these factors, it was possible to not only boost crop yields but also
51 ensure long-term soil sustainability.

52 With this understanding, a study was conducted in 2018 at the College of Agricultural
53 Engineering and Technology, Anand Agricultural University, Godhra, to evaluate the
54 combined effects of various irrigation regimes and mulch conditions on maize performance.
55 The research aimed to explore innovative strategies for enhancing productivity while
56 optimizing resource use. Specifically, the study focused on two objectives: assessing the
57 impact of drip irrigation regimes on maize productivity and evaluating the techno-economic
58 feasibility of integrating drip irrigation with mulching practices. This research was novel in its
59 approach, as it investigated the synergy between advanced irrigation techniques and
60 mulching in improving maize yield, resource efficiency, and economic viability under semi-
61 arid conditions, addressing critical challenges in sustainable agriculture.

62 63 **2. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

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65 An experiment was conducted at the College Farm, College of Agricultural Engineering and
66 Technology, Dholakuva, Godhra (Fig 1), to evaluate the effects of different drip irrigation
67 levels (0.6 IW/CPE, 0.8 IW/CPE, and 1.0 IW/CPE) combined with various mulch types
68 (silver-black plastic mulch, rice straw mulch, and biodegradable plastic mulch) and a control
69 treatment (drip and furrow or ridge-furrow system) on the productivity of GAYMH-1 (Gujarat
70 Anand Yellow Maize Hybrid-1). The experimental design followed a strip plot layout with
71 twelve treatment combinations, each replicated four times.

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73 The soil at the experimental site was sandy loam in texture, neutral in reaction, and non-
74 saline, consisting of 61% sand, 21% silt, and 18% clay whose physio-chemical properties
75 were tested in the lab (Piper, 1950). The soil's hydraulic conductivity was 2.8 cm h^{-1} , with a
76 moderate infiltration rate. The organic matter content was 0.42%, while the total nitrogen,
77 available phosphorus, available potassium, and inorganic nitrogen levels were 21.43, 62.5,
78 and 204 kg ha^{-1} , respectively, indicating a medium-fertility status for organic carbon,
79 nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium.



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Fig 1 Base map of Study area, CAET, AAU, Godhara

Drip irrigation was applied every three days, tailored to the crop's water requirement during its growth period, while the furrow method followed a conventional schedule with 36 irrigations. The maize hybrid was planted with a spacing of 60 cm x 20 cm, and standard agronomic practices recommended by Anand Agricultural University were followed. Morphological parameters and yield attributes were monitored throughout the crop cycle to assess treatment effects on maize productivity. This study provided valuable insights into optimizing irrigation and mulching practices for improved yield and resource efficiency.

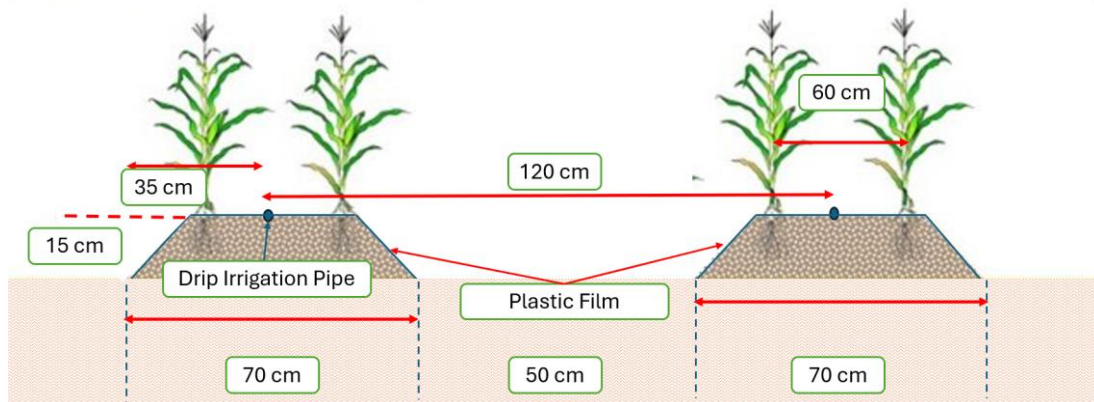
Table -1 Treatment combination for irrigation regimes and mulching

Treatments	Irrigation Regimes, (I) (IW/CPE)	Mulch Type, (A)	Treatments Combinations
1.	0.6	No Mulch (A ₀)	I ₁ A ₀
		Reflective Silver Plastic Mulch (A ₁)	I ₁ A ₁
		Straw Mulch (A ₂)	I ₁ A ₂
		Biodegradable Plastic Mulch (A ₃)	I ₁ A ₃
2.	0.8	No Mulch (A ₀)	I ₂ A ₀

		Reflective Silver Plastic Mulch (A ₁)	I ₂ A ₁
		Straw Mulch (A ₂)	I ₂ A ₂
		Biodegradable Plastic Mulch (A ₃)	I ₂ A ₃
3.	1.0	No Mulch (A ₀)	I ₃ A ₀
		Reflective Silver Plastic Mulch (A ₁)	I ₃ A ₁
		Straw Mulch (A ₂)	I ₃ A ₂
		Biodegradable Plastic Mulch (A ₃)	I ₃ A ₃

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Silver-black plastic mulch made of 25-micron LDPE with a 1.2 m width and biodegradable plastic mulch of 20 microns were chosen based on the row-to-row spacing of the maize crop. Round holes with a 5 cm diameter were punched at the center of the mulch film, and both ends of the film were anchored 3 inches into the soil. The mulching films were manually laid out. The configuration of the mulch and drip irrigation system is illustrated in Fig. 2.



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Fig: 2 Schematic diagram for maize crop pattern with drip line and mulching

For the rice straw mulch treatment, air-dried rice straw collected from the previous rice crop was applied uniformly at the rate of 6 t/ha (600 g/m²) immediately after sowing. This rate created a 3 cm thick straw layer on the soil surface, providing effective coverage. To monitor growth, plants from a 1.2 m² area within each net plot were selected and labeled for accurate identification. Observations included plant height, the number of leaves, the number of cobs per plant, grains per plant, grain weight per plant, and the number of grain rows per cob. These measurements provided a comprehensive assessment of the effects of the treatments on the maize crop's growth and productivity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Yield attributes

114 Incorporating mulch with drip irrigation significantly improved seed maize yield compared to
115 treatments without mulch. Data on grain yield, as influenced by different irrigation schedules
116 and mulching treatments (Fig. 3), revealed that both factors had a significant impact. (Table
117 2) Maize grain yield increased consistently with crop maturity, irrespective of the treatment
118 combinations. The highest grain yield (8164.06 kg/ha) was recorded in the treatment

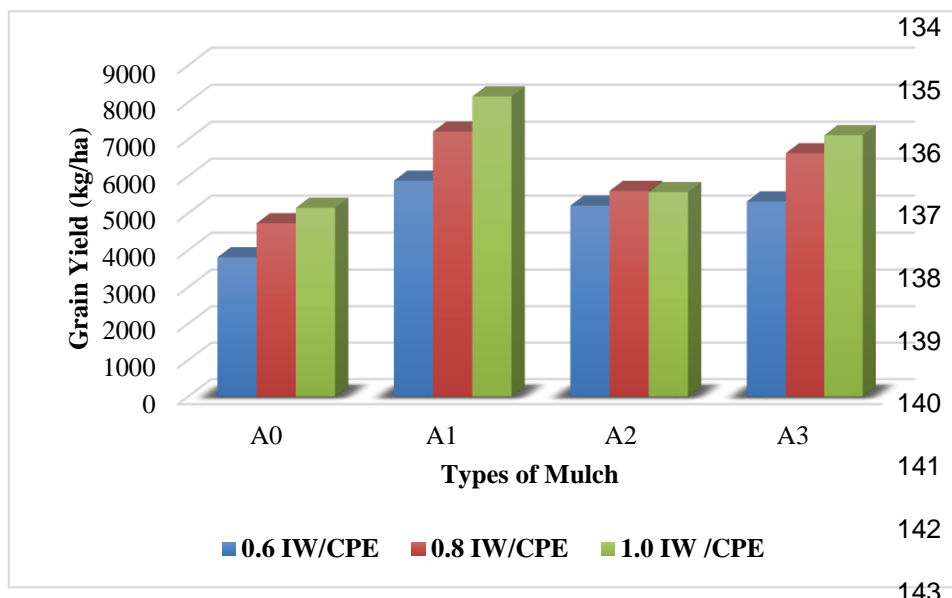
119 combining a 1.0 IW/CPE ratio with reflective plastic mulch (I₃A₁), outperforming all other
 120 combinations. Treatments I₂A₁ and I₁A₁ produced yields comparable to I₃A₁. In contrast, the
 121 lowest yield (3812.84 kg/ha) was observed in the treatment with a 0.6 IW/CPE ratio and no
 122 mulch (I₁A₀).

123 The interaction between irrigation levels and mulching significantly influenced maize yield.
 124 The superior performance of the I₃A₁ combination was attributed to enhanced soil moisture
 125 availability, facilitated by reduced evaporation and better moisture conservation under the
 126 reflective mulch. Additionally, mulching regulated soil temperature, further contributing to
 127 improved growth and yield components. Enhanced soil moisture in the upper 30 cm layer
 128 under drip irrigation increased plant water status, as indicated by higher relative water
 129 content and reduced leaf water potential, aligning with findings by liu et.al., 2017. These
 130 results corroborate the findings of Khurshid et al. (2006), who reported that maize yields
 131 responded positively to higher soil water content in mulched plots due to minimized
 132 evaporation losses.

Table 2 Combine the Influence of irrigation regimes and mulching material on seed yield at different days

Treatment	A ₀	A ₁	A ₂	A ₃
I ₁	3812.84	5883.15	5209.72	5323.26
I ₂	4733.85	7212.50	5608.67	6626.73
I ₃	5152.08	8164.06	5576.38	7113.54
S.Em. ±	353.01			
C.D. @ 5 %	NS			
C.V	12.031			

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144 **Fig. 3 Irrigation Regimes and Mulching Effect on Grain Yield of Maize**

145 **3.2 Irrigation water**

146 A total of 36 irrigations were administered to maize across all treatments during the growing
 147 season, with the amount of irrigation water applied ranging from 222 mm to 370.19 mm.
 148 Seasonal crop water use values varied between 176.17 mm and 370.19 mm, with the
 149 highest usage observed in the full irrigation treatment due to an adequate soil water supply
 150 and the lowest in the non-irrigated treatment (Fig.4). These variations were influenced by
 151 climatic conditions and irrigation scheduling. Comparatively, seasonal crop water use of
 152 maize has been reported 169–547 mm (Dagdelen et al., 2006) and 385.4–537.1 mm
 153 (Igbadun et al., 2006). Moosavi (2012) noted that reductions in irrigation volumes affected
 154 ear diameter and length within thresholds of 0–400 mm. A positive linear relationship
 155 between crop water use and maize yield has been consistently observed (Payero et al.,
 156 2006; Dagdelen et al., 2006; Zou et al., 2021).

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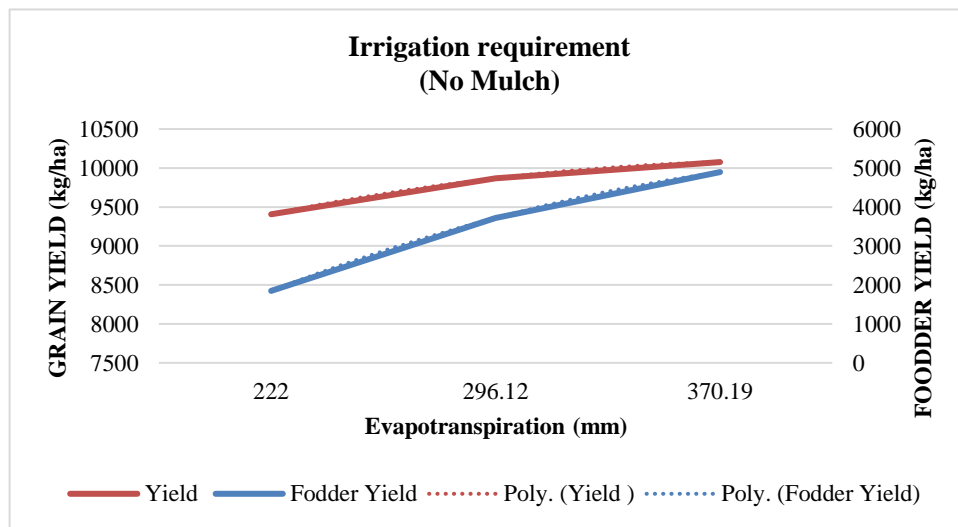
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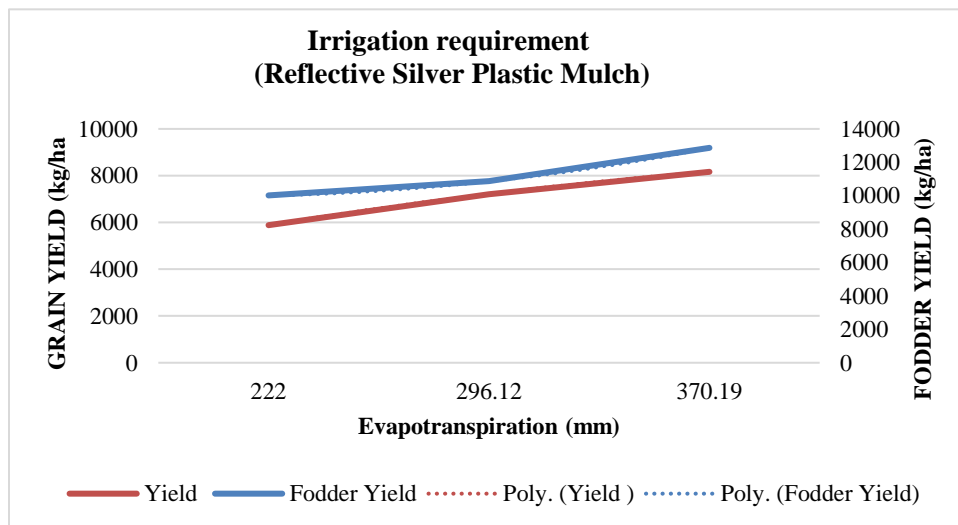
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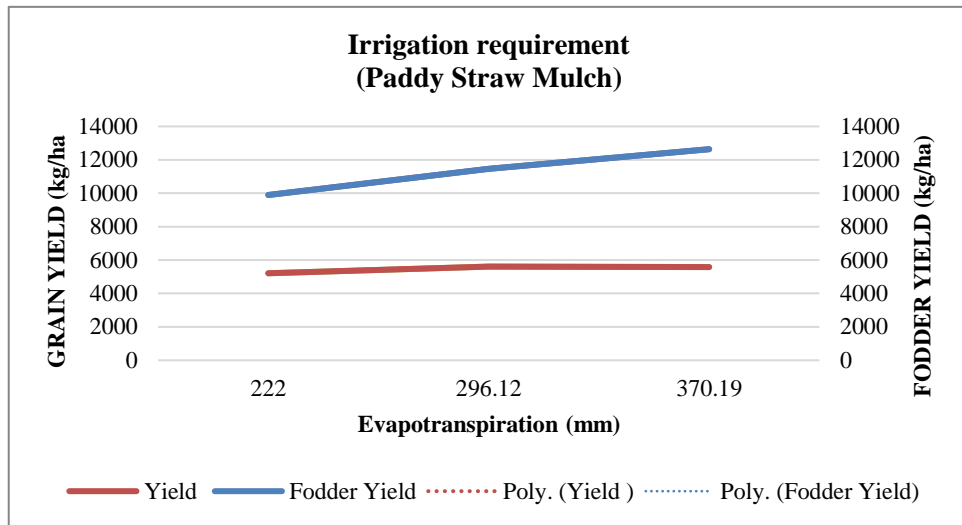
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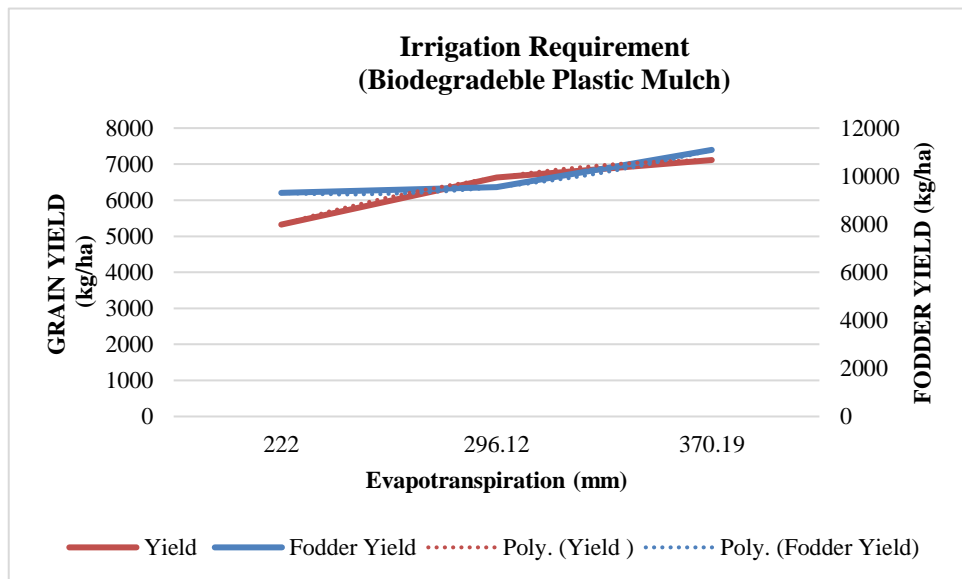
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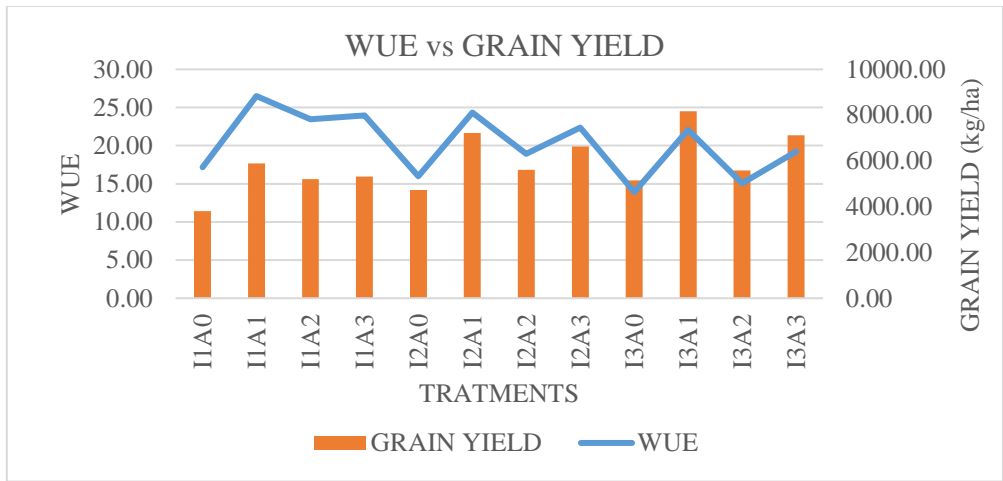
(D)

200 Fig. 4 (A), (B), (C) and (D) Irrigation water requirement for different mulches treatment

201 3.3 Water Use Efficiency

202 The mean water use efficiency (WUE) for various treatments is presented in Fig. 5. Due to
 203 the high water-holding capacity of mulches, soil moisture was better retained in the surface
 204 layers. A graphical summary of WUE data as influenced by irrigation regimes and mulching
 205 shows that the highest water productivity was observed in the I₂A₁ treatment, while the
 206 lowest was recorded in I₃A₀. Treatments such as I₁A₀, I₂A₀, I₃A₀, and I₃A₂ demonstrated
 207 statistically similar WUE values. Across all irrigation schedules, the use of plastic mulch
 208 consistently resulted in higher WUE compared to their respective schedules without mulch.

209 In treatments with mulches, WUE decreased as the IW/CPE ratio increased. Among all
 210 mulches, reflective silver plastic mulch exhibited superior WUE performance compared to
 211 other materials. Variations in IWUE are influenced by factors such as irrigation frequency
 212 and method, plant density, and microclimate conditions, as highlighted by Domínguez et al.
 213 (2012) and Grassini et al. (2013).



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215 **Fig.5 Effect of Grain Yield and WUE on difference treatments of Irrigation regimes**
 216 **and mulches for maize**

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218 **3.4 Economics**

219 The economics of drip irrigation combined with silver-black plastic mulch, rice straw mulch,
 220 drip without mulch, and furrow irrigation under varying irrigation regimes were estimated for
 221 one hectare based on the prevailing rates of 2019. The higher crop value resulted from even
 222 a marginal increase in yield, which significantly boosted the value of the crop output.
 223 According to Dhawan (2000), this increase in value was also attributed to the improved
 224 market price realization, stemming from better quality crops and earlier market arrival of drip-
 225 irrigated produce. The highest and lowest benefit-cost ratios (BCR) were 2.3 and 1.035 for
 226 the I₃A₁ and I₁A₃ treatments, respectively. Paddy straw mulch yielded a BCR of 1.68, mainly
 227 due to the lower market price of paddy straw. However, reflective silver plastic mulch
 228 resulted in significantly higher grain yields compared to biodegradable plastic mulch and
 229 other treatments.

Table -3 Techno Economic Analysis Maize with Mulching and Drip Irrigation

Treatment	Seed Yield (kg/ha)	Fodder Yield (kg/ha)	Variable Cost (Rs/ha)	Fixed Cost (Rs./ha)	TCC (Rs./ha)	Gross Income (Rs./ha)	NR (Rs./ha)	BCR
I ₁ A ₀	3812.85	8423.61	18490	39204.37	57694.37	101528	43833.41	1.76
I ₁ A ₁	5883.16	10017.36	80740	39204.37	119944.37	147715	27770.91	1.23
I ₁ A ₂	5209.72	9895.83	56290	39204.37	95494.37	133882	38387.57	1.40
I ₁ A ₃	5323.26	9305.56	95890	39204.37	135094.37	138958	3863.63	1.03
I ₂ A ₀	4733.85	9357.64	18490	39204.37	57694.37	122750	65055.63	2.13
I ₂ A ₁	7212.50	10868.06	80740	39204.37	119944.37	176854	56909.80	1.47
I ₂ A ₂	5608.68	11467.01	56290	39204.37	95494.37	146575	51080.28	1.53
I ₂ A ₃	6626.74	9548.61	95890	39204.37	135094.37	161181	26086.19	1.19
I ₃ A ₀	5152.08	9947.92	18490	39204.37	57694.37	132885	75191.05	2.30
I ₃ A ₁	8164.06	12864.58	80740	39204.37	119944.37	201875	81930.63	1.68
I ₃ A ₂	5576.39	12637.15	56290	39204.37	95494.37	149439	53944.87	1.56
I ₃ A ₃	7113.54	11093.75	95890	39204.37	135094.37	175552	40457.71	1.30

234 **4. CONCLUSION**

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236 Drip irrigation combined with silver-black plastic mulch scheduled at 0.8 ET_c showed
237 superior performance in terms of morphological variables, yield attributes, and water use
238 efficiency (WUE) compared to rice straw mulch, drip without mulch, and furrow irrigation
239 systems. The benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of maize was calculated as the ratio of net seasonal
240 return to the cost of cultivation, with the highest BCR of 2.3 observed for the I₃A₁ treatment
241 and the lowest of 1.035 for I₁A₃. Paddy straw mulch yielded a BCR of 1.68, mainly due to its
242 lower market value. Reflective silver plastic mulch outperformed biodegradable plastic mulch
243 in terms of grain yield. Furthermore, the combination of mulch and drip irrigation resulted in a
244 60% water saving over furrow irrigation. The highest BCR of 3.2 and an internal rate of
245 return (IRR) of 94.83% were observed for the silver-black plastic mulch scheduled at 0.8
246 ET_c, making it the most economically viable and water-efficient option.

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255 **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

256 Anurag Bhargav – writing and conceptualizing manuscript

257 R. Subbaiah- evaluating and conceptualizing manuscript

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