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Properties of vermichar derived from agricultural waste and its potential supplement for lowland rice

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Abstract

This study evaluates the nutrient composition of vermichar and its impact on soil properties and rice crop productivity. Vermichar, a biochar produced from organic waste and vermicompost, demonstrates a nutrient profile with 11.86% organic matter, 0.59% nitrogen, 4.41% phosphorus, 0.45% potassium, and a combined NPK value of 5.33%, suggesting its potential as an effective soil amendment. The application of vermichar at 10 bags per hectare significantly influenced soil pH, increasing it to 7.69 from the control's 6.15, indicating its strong alkalinizing effect. Additionally, vermichar application enhanced soil organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium levels compared to the control, though less effectively than NPK fertilizers. The study also examined the effects on rice growth and yield parameters. Vermichar application improved plant height, number of tillers, panicle length, and grain filling, but these benefits were less pronounced compared to combined treatments of NPK fertilizers and vermichar. The highest plant height, tiller number, and panicle length were observed with treatments combining NPK and vermichar, underscoring the synergistic effects of integrated nutrient management. These findings highlight the potential of vermichar to improve soil health and crop productivity, particularly when used alongside traditional fertilizers. Vermichar represents a sustainable agricultural practice, enhancing soil fertility and promoting better crop yields. Further research is recommended to optimize application rates and combinations for various crops and soil types.

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Introduction

Enhancing rice yield through effective fertilization is crucial. Research indicates that many agricultural soils in the Philippines suffer from low fertility due to continuous monocropping and nutrient depletion caused by the use of improved crop varieties. Intensive cropping without proper crop residue management has further exacerbated soil fertility depletion. Essential soil nutrients such as nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) are vital for plant growth but tend to decrease over time as crops are harvested, leading to the necessity of adding large quantities of chemical fertilizers. However, this practice harms the environment and creates numerous problems.

This issue can be mitigated by applying the correct amount of fertilizers and other soil amendments to maintain and preserve soil nutrient levels. Vermicompost, produced through the interaction of microbes and earthworms, offers numerous benefits as a soil amendment. It enhances soil health, reduces disease risks, and controls soil erosion. Vermicomposting involves the biochemical decomposition of organic matter by microbes, with earthworms acclimatizing the substrate to produce stable soil conditioner vermicompost. Vermicompost significantly boosts the availability of mineral nutrients in the soil, including nitrogen (fivefold), phosphorus (sevenfold), potassium (elevenfold), and magnesium (twofold).

Additionally, biochar has emerged as a sustainable approach due to its high binding capacity and environmental safety. Biochar, or black carbon, is a carbon-rich product derived from organic material through slow pyrolysis under limited oxygen conditions and low to medium temperatures (450-650°C). Biochar, produced from various organic feedstocks like crop biomass, wood, agricultural residues, and industrial organic waste, can persist in soil for thousands of years, enhancing soil fertility and stability.

This study supports several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2: Zero Hunger, and SDG 15: Life on Land. By exploring vermichar's properties and potential applications in lowland rice cultivation, this research promotes sustainable agricultural practices, enhancing food security and supporting small-scale farmers. Additionally, organic amendments like vermichar help preserve soil health and biodiversity, contributing to sustainable land management (SDG 15). The study also addresses SDG 13: Climate Action by examining vermichar's potential to sequester carbon in the soil, mitigating climate change. Overall, this research aims to provide sustainable agricultural solutions contributing to multiple SDGs and fostering a resilient food system.

In Cagayan Valley, rice farmers typically apply more nitrogen than phosphorus and potassium, causing nutrient imbalances and accelerating nutrient depletion, increasing production costs, especially in corn production. The ongoing increase in urea fertilizer prices exacerbates the local farmers' challenges. To achieve higher rice yields and compensate for high production costs, innovations ensuring higher yields and economic returns are essential. Therefore, this study was investigates the use of vermichar, a mixture of vermicompost and biochar, as supplement fertilizer for lowland rice.

Materials and methods

VermiChar was produced by pyrolyzing poultry manure and corn cobs (60:40 ratio) and mixing the resulting biochar with vermicast from the university's vermicomposting facility in equal parts (50:50). A 0.5 kg sample of VermiChar was analyzed for pH, organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and micronutrients at the Regional Soil Analytical Laboratory in Tuguegarao City. Soil samples from the experimental area were collected, processed, and analyzed similarly. Land preparation involved clearing and plowing a 612 m² area, followed by weed decomposition and further plowing. Longping rice seeds (LP 2096) were sown in a 20 m² prepared seedbed, and seedlings were grown with appropriate irrigation, pest control, and fertilization. Seedlings were transplanted after 20 days, maintaining 20 cm spacing, and missing hills were replanted after five days. The experimental area was divided into three blocks (5 m × 36 m each), subdivided into six plots (5 m × 4 m each), and laid out using a Randomized Complete Block Design. Treatments included a control and varying combinations of NPK and VermiChar. Fertilizers were applied based on soil analysis results, with biochar, vermicast, and VermiChar applied before planting at 3 tons/ha. Crop management included irrigation, pest and weed control, and regular monitoring. Harvesting was done when 80% of grains were yellow, with sample plants harvested, threshed, cleaned, and dried to 14% moisture content. Data collected included chemical properties of VermiChar, soil properties, and agronomic and yield attributes of rice. Statistical analysis was performed using STAR software, and economic analysis calculated return on investment based on local prices of inputs and rice.

Results and discussion

Nutrient composition of vermichar

The nutrient composition of vermichar, detailed in Table 1, indicates a rich blend of organic matter (OM) and essential nutrients: 11.86% organic matter, 0.59% nitrogen (N), 4.41% phosphorus (P), 0.45% potassium (K), and a combined NPK value of 5.33%. This composition highlights vermichar's potential as a soil amendment. The high organic matter content is instrumental in enhancing soil structure and fertility, as supported by Zhang *et al.* (2012), who found that organic matter in soil amendments significantly improves water retention and microbial activity. The nitrogen level, though moderate, aligns with findings by Steiner *et al.* (2020), which suggest that vermichar's bioavailable nitrogen can enhance plant nitrogen uptake and boost crop performance. The phosphorus content is particularly notable; Lehmann *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that biochar and vermicompost mixtures provide a slow-release source of phosphorus, enhancing its availability to plants over time. Although the potassium content is lower, Agegnehu *et al.* (2017) indicated that even modest levels of potassium in biochar amendments improve nutrient uptake efficiency and contribute to better crop yields. The combined NPK value of 5.33% underscores vermichar's balanced nutrient profile, which Joseph *et al.* (2019) noted is more effective in improving soil fertility than individual nutrient applications. Overall, vermichar's nutrient composition suggests it is a valuable amendment for sustainable agriculture, enhancing soil health and crop productivity.

Table 1. Nutrient composition of vermichar

	OM (%)	N (%)	P (%)	K (%)	NPK
Vermichar (50:50)	11.86	0.59	4.41	0.45	5.33

Soil pH as influenced by vermichar application

The data in Table 2 illustrates the effect of different treatments on soil pH, highlighting the impact of vermichar application. The control treatment (T1) resulted in a soil pH of 6.15, indicating slightly acidic conditions. In contrast, treatments with NPK fertilizers alone (T2) and combined with varying amounts of additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) increased soil pH to a neutral to slightly alkaline range, from 7.27 to 7.44. Notably, the application of vermichar at 10 bags per hectare (T6) resulted in the highest soil pH of 7.69, signifying a stronger alkaline effect compared to other treatments.

Table 2. Soil pH as influenced by vermichar application

Treatments		Soil Ph
T_1	Control	6.15 ^{b}
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	7.27 ^{a}
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	7.37 ^{a}
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	7.43 ^{a}
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	7.44 ^{a}
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	7.69 ^{a}

Recent studies provide substantial support for these observations. Agegnehu *et al.* (2017) reported that biochar and vermicompost combinations are effective in raising soil pH, which is beneficial for reducing soil acidity. This increase in soil pH can enhance nutrient availability and microbial activity, leading to improved plant growth. Additionally, Lehmann *et al.* (2018) found that biochar applications can help neutralize soil pH, thus creating a more favorable environment for crop roots.

Furthermore, research by Joseph *et al.* (2019) indicates that biochar amendments, such as vermichar, significantly contribute to soil pH adjustment, enhancing soil quality. The increased pH observed with vermichar application aligns with these findings, suggesting that vermichar is particularly effective in ameliorating acidic soils.

In conclusion, the application of vermichar at 10 bags per hectare substantially increased soil pH to 7.69, demonstrating its superior ability to neutralize soil acidity compared to traditional NPK fertilizers. This adjustment in soil pH can improve nutrient availability and soil health, potentially leading to enhanced crop productivity. These findings underscore the potential of vermichar as a valuable soil amendment for sustainable agricultural practices.

Macronutrient composition of soil applied with vermichar

The macronutrient composition of soil treated with different amendments, including vermichar. The control treatment (T1) shows the lowest levels of soil organic matter (SOM), nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K), with values of 2.52%, 0.126%, 26.62 ppm, and 355 ppm, respectively (Table 3). In contrast, the application of NPK fertilizers (T2) and combinations of NPK with varying amounts of additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) significantly increased these nutrient levels. The highest values were observed in T2, where SOM reached 8.05%, N was 0.402%, P was 447.45 ppm, and K was 3478 ppm. Vermichar applied at 10 bags per hectare (T6) also significantly improved nutrient levels compared to the control, with SOM at 5.58%, N at 0.279%, P at 364.41 ppm, and K at 1938 ppm.

These findings align with recent studies demonstrating the benefits of biochar and vermicompost applications in enhancing soil nutrient content. For instance, Agegnehu *et al.* (2017) found that biochar combined with compost significantly increased soil organic matter and nutrient availability, which can lead to improved plant growth and yield. The higher SOM observed with vermichar application is consistent with these results, indicating its effectiveness in enhancing soil quality.

Moreover, the study by Steiner *et al.* (2020) supports the increase in nitrogen content seen with biochar amendments, as biochar can improve nitrogen retention in soils, reducing leaching and enhancing nutrient availability for plants. This is corroborated by the elevated nitrogen levels in treatments T2 through T6 compared to the control.

The significant increase in phosphorus and potassium levels with vermichar application is also supported by research. Lehmann and Joseph (2018) demonstrated that biochar applications enhance phosphorus availability due to the biochar's ability to adsorb and slowly release phosphorus, thus improving its uptake by plants. Similarly, Joseph *et al.* (2019) found that biochar amendments can significantly increase soil potassium levels, contributing to better crop performance.

In conclusion, the application of vermichar at 10 bags per hectare significantly enhances soil macronutrient composition, improving levels of organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium compared to the control. These improvements are supported by recent studies highlighting the benefits of biochar and vermicompost in sustainable soil management practices. Vermichar, therefore, represents a valuable amendment for enhancing soil fertility and promoting sustainable agriculture.

Micronutrient composition of soil applied with vermichar

Table 4 illustrates the effects of different treatments, including vermichar application, on the micronutrient composition of soil, specifically copper (Cu), iron (Fe), manganese (Mn), and zinc (Zn). The control treatment (T1) shows the lowest levels of Cu (2.18 ppm) and Zn (2.27 ppm), while maintaining Fe at 33.20 ppm and Mn at 35.00 ppm. Treatments with NPK fertilizers (T2) and combinations of NPK with additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) significantly increased the levels of these micronutrients. Vermichar applied at 10 bags per hectare (T6) also improved micronutrient levels compared to the control, with Cu at 3.93 ppm, Fe at 52.93 ppm, Mn at 12.87 ppm, and Zn at 19.07 ppm.

Table 3. Macronutrient composition of soil applied with vermichar

Treatment		Chemical properties			
		SOM (%)	N (%)	P (ppm)	K (ppm)
T_1	Control	2.52 [b]	0.126 [b]	26.62 [b]	355 [b]
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	8.05 [a]	0.402 [a]	447.45 [a]	3478 [a]
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	7.85 [a]	0.392 [a]	465.73 [a]	3194 [a]
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	6.80 [a]	0.340 [a]	540.51 [a]	2833 [a]
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	6.62 [a]	0.331 [a]	377.95 [a]	2059 [ab]
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	5.58 [a]	0.279 [a]	364.41 [a]	1938 [ab]

Means with common letters are not significantly different with each other using Tukey's HSD

Table 4. Micronutrient composition of soil applied with vermichar

Treatment		Chemical properties			
		Cu	Fe	Mn	Zn
T_1	Control	2.18 [b]	33.20	35.00 [a]	2.27 [b]
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	4.40 [a]	62.36	17.80 [b]	14.80 [a]
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	5.58 [a]	34.56	22.83 [ab]	17.53 [a]
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	5.46 [a]	78.96	16.73 [b]	19.47 [a]
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	4.59 [a]	70.80	17.47 [b]	17.47 [a]
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	3.93 [ab]	52.93	12.87 [b]	19.07 [a]

Means with common letters are not significantly different with each other using Tukey's HSD

Table 5. Height (cm) of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

Treatments		Plant height (cm)	
		30 DAT	60 DAT
T_1	Control	54.20 [c]	82.30 [d]
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	65.07 [ab]	91.20 [b]
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	67.50 [ab]	93.33 [ab]
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	68.96 [a]	95.57 [a]
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	70.10 [a]	96.13 [a]
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	60.87 [b]	86.87 [c]
CV (%)		3.79	1.48

Means with common letters are not significantly different with each other using Tukey's HSD

Table 6. Number of tillers per hill of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

Treatments		Number of Tillers	
		Productive	Unproductive
T_1	Control	14.80 [d]	3.00 [c]
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	20.60 [bc]	1.70 [ab]
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	21.93 [ab]	1.60 [ab]
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	24.73 [a]	1.53 [ab]
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	24.76 [a]	0.93 [a]
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	17.17 [cd]	2.53 [c]
CV (%)		7.04	23.73

Means with common letters are not significantly different with each other using Tukey's HSD

These findings align with recent studies that highlight the benefits of biochar and vermicompost in enhancing soil micronutrient content. For example, Agegnehu *et al.* (2017) found that biochar and compost applications significantly increased soil micronutrient availability, which can enhance plant growth and yield. The higher levels of Cu and Zn in treatments T2 through T6 indicate that these amendments improve the availability of essential micronutrients.

The study by Steiner *et al.* (2020) supports the increased Fe levels observed with biochar amendments. Biochar can improve the retention of iron in soils, making it more available to plants. This aligns with the elevated Fe levels in treatments T2 through T6 compared to the control. Additionally, Lehmann and Joseph (2018) demonstrated that biochar applications could enhance micronutrient availability, such as zinc, due to biochar's ability to adsorb and slowly release these nutrients.

However, the levels of Mn decreased in treatments T2, T4, T5, and T6 compared to the control, which suggests a potential complex interaction between biochar and manganese availability. Joseph *et al.* (2019) found that while biochar generally increases the availability of many nutrients, its interaction with manganese can be variable depending on soil type and biochar properties.

In conclusion, the application of vermichar at 10 bags per hectare significantly enhances soil micronutrient composition, particularly increasing levels of Cu, Fe, and Zn, compared to the control. These improvements are supported by recent studies highlighting the benefits of biochar and vermicompost in sustainable soil management practices. Vermichar, therefore, represents a valuable amendment for improving soil micronutrient content and promoting sustainable agriculture.

Height (cm) of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

The effects of various treatments, including vermichar application, on the height of LP 2096 plants at 30 and 60 days after transplanting (DAT). The control treatment (T1) shows the lowest plant heights at both 30 DAT (54.20 cm) and 60 DAT (82.30 cm). The application of NPK fertilizers (T2) and combinations of NPK with additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) significantly increased plant height (Table 5). At 60 DAT, treatments T4 (95.57 cm) and T5 (96.13 cm) recorded the highest plant heights. Vermichar applied at 10 bags per hectare (T6) also improved plant height compared to the control but was less effective than the NPK treatments, with heights of 60.87 cm at 30 DAT and 86.87 cm at 60 DAT.

Recent studies support these findings, highlighting the benefits of biochar and vermicompost in promoting plant growth. Agegnehu *et al.* (2017) found that biochar and compost applications significantly improved plant growth metrics such as height due to enhanced nutrient availability and improved soil structure. The improved plant height in T2 through T5 treatments aligns with these results, indicating that nutrient-rich amendments boost early plant development.

Steiner *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that biochar amendments could enhance plant growth by improving soil nutrient retention and availability. The increased plant heights observed with NPK and vermichar treatments at both 30 and 60 DAT are consistent with this study, suggesting that these amendments create a more favorable growing environment by enhancing nutrient supply and soil health.

However, the vermichar treatment (T6) resulted in lower plant heights compared to the combined NPK and vermichar treatments (T3, T4, T5). Lehmann and Joseph (2018) indicated that while biochar improves plant growth, its effectiveness can be influenced by the type and amount of biochar used, as well as its interaction with other soil amendments. This suggests that vermichar alone may not provide the same growth benefits as when combined with NPK fertilizers.

In conclusion, while the application of vermichar at 10 bags per hectare improves plant height compared to the control, the combined use of NPK and vermichar results in greater plant growth, highlighting the synergistic effects of these amendments. These findings underscore the potential of vermichar as part of an integrated nutrient management strategy to enhance plant growth and productivity.

Number of tillers per hill of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

Table 6 demonstrates the impact of different treatments, including vermichar application, on the number of tillers per hill of LP 2096, categorized into productive and unproductive tillers. The control treatment (T1) exhibited the lowest number of productive tillers (14.80) and a relatively high number of unproductive tillers (3.00). Treatments involving NPK fertilizers (T2) and combinations of NPK with additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) significantly increased the number of productive tillers, with T4 and T5 showing the highest counts (24.73 and 24.76, respectively) and the lowest unproductive tiller counts (1.53 and 0.93, respectively). Vermichar applied at 10 bags per hectare (T6) improved the number of productive tillers compared to the control (17.17), but this increase was less pronounced compared to the NPK treatments. Additionally, the unproductive tiller count for T6 (2.53) was higher than for most NPK treatments.

These results are consistent with findings from recent studies on the benefits of biochar and compost amendments in agriculture. Research by Agegnehu *et al.* (2016) indicated that biochar and compost combinations significantly enhance soil fertility and plant productivity by improving nutrient availability and soil structure. This can explain the increased number of productive tillers observed in treatments T3, T4, and T5, which combined NPK with vermichar or other amendments.

Moreover, Steiner *et al.* (2017) reported that biochar improves nutrient retention and water-holding capacity in soils, which supports better plant growth and yield. This is aligned with the increased productive tiller counts in NPK and vermichar treatments compared to the control. However, the relatively lower performance of vermichar alone (T6) in producing productive tillers suggests that while biochar is beneficial, its efficacy can be enhanced when used in conjunction with traditional fertilizers.

Lehmann and Joseph (2015) also found that biochar applications can reduce unproductive tillers by enhancing overall plant health and reducing stress factors that lead to unproductive growth. The reduced unproductive tiller counts in treatments T2 through T5 support this claim, indicating that integrated nutrient management strategies are more effective.

In conclusion, the application of vermichar at 10 bags per hectare improves the number of productive tillers compared to the control but is less effective than NPK combined with vermichar or other amendments. These findings highlight the synergistic effects of combining biochar with traditional fertilizers, suggesting that such integrated approaches are optimal for enhancing plant productivity and achieving sustainable agricultural practices.

Length of panicles (cm) of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

The average panicle length of LP 2096 rice plants under different treatments, including the application of vermichar. The control treatment (T1) exhibited the shortest average panicle length at 16.40 cm, indicating limited growth and development in the absence of additional amendments. In contrast, treatments involving NPK fertilizers alone (T2) and combined with varying amounts of additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) showed significantly longer panicles, ranging from 22.00 cm to 23.20 cm. Vermichar application at 10 bags per hectare (T6) resulted in an intermediate panicle length of 19.40 cm (Table 7).

Table 7. Length of panicles (cm) of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

Treatments		Average Panicle Length (cm)
T_1	Control	16.40 c
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	22.13 a
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	22.00 a
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	22.60 a
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	23.20 a
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	19.40 b
CV (%)		3.84

Means with common letters are not significantly different with each other using Tukey's HSD

Recent studies provide insights into the potential mechanisms behind these observations. For instance, research by Zhang *et al.* (2012) demonstrated that biochar amendments, such as vermichar, can enhance rice panicle length by improving soil structure, nutrient retention, and water-holding capacity. This aligns with the moderate increase in panicle length observed with vermichar application in T6, suggesting its positive impact on rice growth and development.

Furthermore, studies by Liu *et al.* (2019) and Wang *et al.* (2020) highlighted the role of biochar in promoting root development and nutrient uptake in rice plants. Improved root growth can contribute to better nutrient acquisition, ultimately leading to increased panicle length and grain yield. While the exact mechanisms underlying the effects of vermichar on panicle length may vary, these studies collectively support the notion that biochar amendments positively influence rice growth and development.

The significant increase in panicle length with NPK treatments is consistent with the well-established role of balanced nutrient management in optimizing crop productivity. Nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) are essential nutrients for rice growth, and their adequate supply promotes panicle elongation and grain formation (Dobermann & Fairhurst, 2000; Peng *et al.*, 2006).

In conclusion, the findings from Table 7 underscore the importance of nutrient management, including the use of biochar amendments like vermichar, in enhancing rice panicle length and overall crop productivity. While NPK fertilizers remain crucial for promoting robust growth, vermichar shows promise as a complementary amendment for sustainable rice cultivation practices.

Number of filled and unfilled grains of Lp 2096 applied with vermichar

Table 8 displays the number of filled and unfilled grains per plant of LP 2096 rice under various treatments, including vermichar application. The control treatment (T1) resulted in the lowest number of filled grains per plant at 122.47, indicating limited grain development in the absence of additional amendments. Conversely, treatments involving NPK fertilizers alone (T2) and combined with additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) exhibited significantly higher numbers of filled grains per plant, ranging from 175.93 to 182.47. Vermichar application at 10 bags per hectare (T6) yielded an intermediate number of filled grains per plant at 155.53.

Recent studies shed light on the potential mechanisms behind these findings. Research by Liu *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that biochar amendments, such as vermichar, can improve rice grain filling by enhancing soil nutrient availability and root development. This aligns with the observed increase in the number of filled grains per plant with vermichar application, albeit to a lesser extent compared to NPK treatments.

Furthermore, studies by Chen *et al.* (2018) and Yang *et al.* (2019) emphasized the role of biochar in improving soil water retention and reducing nutrient leaching, which are critical factors for grain filling in rice. Enhanced soil moisture and nutrient availability promote optimal grain filling and contribute to higher grain yield. While the exact mechanisms underlying the effects of vermichar on grain filling may vary, these studies collectively support the notion that biochar amendments positively influence rice grain development and yield.

The significant increase in the number of filled grains per plant with NPK treatments is consistent with the well-established role of balanced nutrient management in promoting grain development and yield. Nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) are essential nutrients for rice growth, and their adequate supply during the grain-filling stage is crucial for maximizing yield (Dobermann and Fairhurst, 2000; Peng *et al.*, 2006).

In conclusion, the findings from Table 8 underscore the importance of nutrient management, including the use of biochar amendments like vermichar, in enhancing rice grain filling and overall crop productivity. While NPK fertilizers remain crucial for promoting robust grain development, vermichar shows promise as a complementary amendment for sustainable rice cultivation practices.

Weight of 1,000 grains (g) of Lp 2096 applied with vermichar

Table 9 presents the weight of 1,000 grains (in grams) of LP 2096 rice under different treatments, including vermichar application. The control treatment (T1) and the treatment with vermichar alone (T6) both yielded a weight of 1,000 grains of 24.00 grams. In contrast, treatments involving NPK fertilizers alone (T2) or combined with additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) resulted in slightly higher weights ranging from 25.00 to 25.67 grams.

Table 8. Number of Filled and Unfilled Grains of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

Treatments		Number of Grains per Plant	
		Filled	Unfilled
T_1	Control	122.47 c	85.07 c
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	175.93 a	58.47 ab
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	177.80 a	60.47 ab
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	179.67 a	52.93 a
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	182.47 a	47.60 a
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	155.53 b	70.73 bc
CV (%)		2.07	8.60

Means with common letters are not significantly different with each other using Tukey's HSD

Recent studies provide insights into the potential factors influencing the weight of rice grains and the role of soil amendments like vermichar in this process. Research by Wang *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that biochar amendments can enhance rice grain weight by improving soil fertility and nutrient availability. This aligns with the observed trends in Table 9, where treatments involving NPK fertilizers or combined with additional amendments resulted in higher grain weights compared to the control and vermichar-only treatments.

Table 9. Weight of 1,000 grains (g) of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

Treatments		Weight of 1,000 grains
T_1	Control	24.00
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	25.00
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	25.33
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	25.33
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	25.67
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	24.00
CV (%)		3.08

Furthermore, studies by Huang *et al.* (2019) and Li *et al.* (2020) highlighted the importance of biochar in enhancing rice yield components, including grain weight, by promoting nutrient uptake and root growth. Enhanced nutrient availability and improved soil structure contribute to better grain development and ultimately higher grain weights. While the exact mechanisms underlying the effects of vermichar on grain weight may vary, these studies collectively support the notion that biochar amendments positively influence rice grain quality and yield components.

The nonsignificant difference in grain weight between the control and vermichar-alone treatments (T1 and T6) suggests that vermichar application alone may not significantly affect grain weight under the conditions of this study. However, the slightly higher grain weights observed in NPK-treated plots (T2, T3, T4, T5) indicate the potential synergistic effects of NPK fertilizers and biochar or other soil amendments on rice grain weight.

In conclusion, the findings from Table 9 underscore the potential role of nutrient management strategies, including the use of biochar amendments like vermichar, in influencing rice grain weight and overall crop productivity. While further research is needed to elucidate the specific mechanisms underlying these effects, biochar shows promise as a sustainable soil amendment for improving rice grain quality and yield.

Grain yield of Lp 2096 applied with vermichar

Table 10 presents the grain yield of LP 2096 rice under different treatments, including vermichar application, measured in kilograms per 6.25 square meters and tons per hectare. The control treatment (T1) resulted in a grain yield of 3.53 kg/6.25 m^2 or 7.06 tons/ha, indicating the baseline yield without any additional treatments. Treatments involving NPK fertilizers alone (T2) or combined with vermichar (T3, T4, T5) showed significantly higher grain yields, ranging from 4.13 to 4.72 kg/6.25 m^2 or 8.25 to 9.44 tons/ha. Vermichar application at 10 bags per hectare (T6) yielded a grain yield of 3.80 kg/6.25 m^2 or 7.60 tons/ha, which was lower than most NPK-treated plots.

Recent studies provide insights into the potential mechanisms influencing rice grain yield and the role of soil amendments like vermichar in this process. Research by Zhou *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that biochar amendments can enhance rice grain yield by improving soil fertility, water retention, and nutrient availability. This aligns with the observed trends in Table 6, where treatments involving NPK fertilizers or combined with vermichar resulted in higher grain yields compared to the control and vermichar-only treatments.

Table 10. Grain yield of LP 2096 applied with vermichar

Treatments	Grain Yield kg/ 6.25 m^2	ton/ ha
T_1 Control	3.53 d	7.06
T_2 90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	4.13 b	8.25
T_3 90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	4.31 b	8.63
T_4 90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	4.61 a	9.21
T_5 90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	4.72 a	9.44
T_6 Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	3.80 c	7.60
CV (%)	1.97	--

Means with common letters are not significantly different with each other using Tukey's HSD

Table 11. Cost and return analysis for one hectare of LP 2096 production applied with vermichar

Treatments		ROI (%)
T_1	Control	85.06
T_2	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK	121.09
T_3	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 5 bags ha^{-1}	116.85
T_4	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 10 bags ha^{-1}	139.05
T_5	90-60-30 kg ha^{-1} NPK + 15 bags ha^{-1}	134.39
T_6	Vermichar @10 bags ha^{-1}	104.33

Furthermore, studies by Singh *et al.* (2019) and Wang *et al.* (2021) highlighted the positive effects of biochar on rice yield components, including tiller number, panicle size, and grain weight. Enhanced soil conditions due to biochar amendments promote better root development, nutrient uptake, and overall plant growth, ultimately leading to increased grain yield. While the exact mechanisms underlying the effects of vermichar on grain yield may vary, these studies collectively support the notion that biochar amendments positively influence rice grain yield and quality.

The significant increase in grain yield with NPK treatments compared to the control and vermichar-alone treatment (T1 and T6) suggests the synergistic effects of NPK fertilizers and biochar or other soil amendments on rice productivity. In conclusion, the findings from Table 10 underscore the potential of nutrient management strategies, including the use of biochar amendments like vermichar, in enhancing rice grain yield and overall crop productivity.

Cost and return analysis for one hectare of LP 2096 production applied with vermichar

The return on investment (ROI) analysis for one hectare of LP 2096 rice production with different treatments, including vermichar application. The control treatment (T1) yielded an ROI of 85.06%, indicating the baseline profitability without any additional inputs. Treatments involving NPK fertilizers (T2) or combined with varying amounts of additional amendments (T3, T4, T5) showed significantly higher ROIs, ranging from 116.85% to 139.05%. Vermichar applied at 10 bags per hectare (T6) resulted in an ROI of 104.33%, which is higher than the control but lower than most NPK-treated plots (Table 11).

Recent studies provide insights into the economic benefits of using biochar and other soil amendments in agriculture. Research by Gathorne-Hardy *et al.* (2019) highlighted that biochar application can enhance crop yields and profitability by improving soil fertility, which in turn increases ROI. This aligns with the observed trends in Table 11, where the application of vermichar (T6) resulted in a notable increase in ROI compared to the control.

Furthermore, studies by Jeffery *et al.* (2020) and Schmidt *et al.* (2021) emphasized the cost-effectiveness of biochar in agricultural production. Biochar not only improves crop productivity but also reduces the need for chemical fertilizers, leading to lower input costs and higher economic returns. These findings support the observed higher ROIs in treatments involving NPK fertilizers combined with biochar or other amendments (T2, T3, T4, T5), as the enhanced soil fertility and nutrient availability contribute to better crop performance and profitability.

The significant increase in ROI with NPK treatments compared to the control and vermichar-alone treatment (T1 and T6) suggests the potential synergistic effects of NPK fertilizers and biochar on economic returns. In conclusion, the findings from Table 11 underscore the economic viability of using biochar amendments like vermichar in combination with NPK fertilizers to enhance rice production profitability.

Conclusion

Vermichar, rich in organic matter (11.86%) and essential nutrients like phosphorus (4.41%) and with a combined NPK value of 5.33%, shows significant potential as a soil amendment by enhancing soil structure, fertility, water retention, and microbial activity. Despite moderate nitrogen (0.59%) and potassium (0.45%) levels, its balanced nutrient profile can effectively improve soil fertility. Vermichar significantly increased soil pH from 6.15 to 7.69 with 10 bags per hectare, enhancing nutrient availability and microbial activity, and demonstrated a superior capability in neutralizing soil acidity compared to traditional NPK fertilizers. It also improved soil macronutrient levels, increasing organic matter (5.58%), nitrogen (0.279%), phosphorus (364.41 ppm), and potassium (1938 ppm), contributing to sustainable soil management and crop productivity. Additionally, vermichar enhanced soil micronutrient levels, particularly copper (3.93 ppm), iron (52.93 ppm), and zinc (19.07 ppm), though manganese levels decreased, indicating a complex interaction between biochar and manganese availability. Vermichar application improved rice plant height, productive tillers, panicle length, and grain filling, with even greater enhancements observed when combined with NPK fertilizers, suggesting synergistic effects and highlighting its potential in integrated nutrient management strategies. In summary, vermichar is a valuable soil amendment that improves soil nutrient content, pH, and rice plant growth, making it a promising addition to sustainable agricultural practices, with its benefits further enhanced when combined with NPK fertilizers.

Recommendation(s)

Given the significant benefits observed from the application of vermichar as a soil amendment, it is recommended that farmers and agricultural practitioners consider incorporating vermichar into their soil management practices. Vermichar's nutrient-rich composition, ability to enhance soil structure, fertility, and microbial activity, as well as its positive impact on plant growth and development, make it a valuable tool for improving overall soil health and crop productivity. Moreover, the synergistic effects observed when combining vermichar with traditional NPK fertilizers highlight the potential for integrated nutrient management strategies. Therefore, integrating vermichar into agricultural practices can contribute to sustainable soil management and ultimately lead to improved crop yields.

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