Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Agriculture and Natural Resources

journal homepage: http://www.journals.elsevier.com/agriculture-and-natural-resources/

Original article

Soil and water conservation on steep slopes by mulching using rice straw and vetiver grass clippings

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This research investigated the performance of mulching using rice straw mulch (RC) and vetiver grass clippings as mulch (VGM) in reducing soil loss and runoff during the early stages of cultivation on an agricultural area. The effects of the rainfall intensity and mulch rate in conserving runoff and trapping sediment were determined by field experiments on land with a steep 30% slope. Three rainfall intensities of 35 mm/h, 65 mm/h and 95 mm/h were applied using an artificial rainfall simulator. The effects of five mulch rates (1.0, 1.5, 2.5, 5.0 and 7.5 t/ha) with conventional tillage were compared with un-mulched treatment. Both VGM and RC showed good potential for reducing runoff and soil loss. For a given rainfall intensity of 65 mm/h and a mulch rate of 1.5 t/ha, RC reduced runoff and soil loss less than VGM. For higher mulch rates, RC performed better than VGM. For example, at the 5.0 t/ha mulch rate, RC reduced runoff and soil loss by about 47.5% and 62.9%, respectively, compared to VGM with a corresponding reduction of 42.4% and 53.7%, respectively. It is recommended that application of 5.0 t/ha of RC or 7.5 t/ha of VGM is the most suitable for soil and water conservation.

Introduction

Soil erosion caused by heavy rainfall and surface runoff is a serious problem in agricultural areas especially on inclined slopes where the soil loss can reduce soil productivity and increase sediment and other pollution loads in receiving waters (Coppin and Richards, 1990). Soil erosion often occurs on steep slopes due to improper land use, monoculture and the use of tillage tools that leave the soil bare and pulverize it excessively (Morgan, 1995). After such treatments, the soil can be carried away by heavy rains. This problem affects crop productivity and the incomes of farmers. Soil erosion by runoff is often accepted as an unavoidable phenomenon associated with agriculture on sloping land. However, erosion removes the topsoil which is the part of the soil profile highest in nutrients and organic matter (Zheng et al., 2005; Polyakov and Lal, 2008). Organic matter forms complexes with soil particles so that the erosion of soil particles will also eliminate nutrients (Pardini et al., 2003), thereby reducing the capability of plants to thrive. This has effects on potential

productive capacity (Barton et al., 2004; Ge et al., 2007). Erosion control can be achieved in two ways: 1) by reducing the forces applied to the soil (reducing erosivity) and 2) by reducing the susceptibility of the soil to erosion and increasing the capability of soil to resist the forces applied by erosive agents (reducing erodibility). Several concepts are used to control soil erosion under various land uses. These concepts include maintaining vegetative cover, maintaining ground cover, incorporating biomass into wctthe soil, minimizing soil disturbance, adding soil amendments to reduce erodibility, adding supporting practices, preventing excessive rill erosion, avoiding long field length and using barriers (Morgan, 1995).

Using structural practices to control soil erosion has been successful in developed countries, but is not practiced due to its high cost in developing countries (Grimshaw and Helfer, 1995). Using mulching cover on the soil surface to protect soil and water losses has been widely applied and recognized as an alternative technology in many developing countries (Sidhu and Beri, 1989; Bhatt and Khera, 2006; Ramakrishna et al., 2006). Nevertheless, it will be more effective when locally available species are used (Spaan et al., 2005; Marques et al., 2007). The major effects of mulching in protecting soil erosion are: the interception of rainfall by absorbing the energy of raindrops and thus reducing surface

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sealing and runoff, the retardation of erosion by decreased surface flow velocity and the physical restraint of soil movement (Coppin and Richards, 1990; Jepsen et al., 1997). However, the effectiveness of a mulching barrier depends on its characteristics and quantities. Nevertheless, it will be more effective when locally available species are used for soil surface cover (Spaan et al., 2005).

The use of rice straw mulch (RC) as ground cover for seedling nursing, shading and insect damage prevention is popular in Southeast Asia. However, RC is not easily found in the field especially in the highlands as most rice field are located in lowland. Farmers have to spend a lot of money to buy RC when they need it for agricultural practices. Nowadays, a vetiver grass hedge is a bioengineering method to control soil erosion and conserve runoff, which in recent years has proven to be successful in conserving natural resources in over 120 countries because vetiver has many characteristics that can perform this task much better and more cheaply than others (Truong, 2002). In Thailand, vetiver grass hedging has been promoted and used for protecting soil erosion especially in the highlands. In order to manage a hedgerow, the vetiver grass hedge must be systematically cut which produces a large quantity of mulch material from vetiver grass clippings which can be used as vetiver grass mulch (VGM) to conserve runoff and soil loss.

Most previous researchers have studied the conditions for the use of a vetiver grass hedgerow to protect against soil erosion. Furthermore, only a few studies have been carried out using VGM for soil erosion control (Babalola et al., 2007; Donjadee and Chinnarasri, 2012). They found that the VGM has a great potential for reducing soil loss compared with similar plots with and without VGM. However, these studies were on a gentle slope. Therefore, this study quantified the effect of the mulch rate of RC and VGM on runoff and soil loss on a steep slope.

Materials and methods

Experimental plots

The experiment was carried out on plots with bare soil, with RC cover and with VGM cover. The plots were 2 m × 10 m in size and located on a slope of 30%. The plots were demarcated except at the downstream end by concrete bunds of about 30 cm. All plots were laid out in an identical fashion with one control plot (bare soil without mulch) and five mulched plots (bare soil with mulch).

Mulched characteristics

Rice straw mulch (RC) is the vegetative part of the rice plant after the grain and chaff have been removed. The shape of RC is 40−60 cm long and 0.4−0.8 cm wide. The vetiver grass mulch (VGM) is composed of the leaves of vetiver grass which are 40−60 cm long and 0.6−1.2 cm wide. Both RC and VGM were dried in the sunlight for 1 wk before being used in this study.

Soil characteristics

The soil texture of this experiment was characterized as a sandy loam type based on United States Department of Agriculture (Soil Survey Staff, 1998). The particle characteristics of the soil consisted of sand 57.1%, silt 33.6% and clay 9.3%. The organic matter contents at 0−20 cm depth ranged from 1.1% to 1.2% of soil weight. The soil bulk density ranged from 1.12 g/cm^3 to 1.24 g/cm^3 when plowed. The initial soil moisture content varied from 19.0% to 25.2%.

Rainfall simulator

A rainfall simulator similar to that described by Donjadee et al. (2010) was used. The rainfall simulator was set up beside the experimental plot. The simulator consisted of an array of spraying nozzles that can produce raindrops with median drop size diameters of 0.5−4.3 mm. The flow to each nozzle was controlled by a compression stop valve and a pressure regulator. The rainfall intensity was adjusted by the pressure and nozzle spacing. The calibration tests indicated that the Christiansen uniformity (Christiansen, 1941) of the rainfall intensities over the test plot was 81−89%. The nozzles were installed at a height of 7.0 m along the centerline of the tested plot (Fig. 1). The drops could reach a vertical distance of at least 0.5 m above the nozzle before starting to fall as rain, so that the raindrops fell on the soil surface from a vertical distance of at least 7.5 m. They had kinetic energy of at least 95% of natural rainfall (Morgan, 1995). In this study, three rainfall intensities of 35 mm/h, 65 mm/h and 95 mm/h were selected with a duration of 1 h for a 2−200 yr return period in Northern Thailand.

Plot preparation and test procedure

Simulated rainfall erosion tests were performed with three rainfall intensities (35, 65 and 95 mm/h), and five mulch rates (1.0, 2.0, 2.5, 5.0, and 7.5 t/ha) plus one control plot (bare soil plot) on land with a 30% slope. Each test had three replications, resulting in 99 combinations (3 rainfall intensities × 1 land slope × (5 RCs + 5 VGMs + 1 control plot) × 3 replications) of erosion tests being carried out.

The experimental plots were prepared by conventional tillage; therefore, the soil was plowed to a depth of 25 cm. The soil surface was smoothed by rake to produce a similar surface for all testing due to different soil surfaces having different dynamics of soil loss (Helming et al., 1998). Cylindrical sampling cores of 5 cm diameter and 5 cm height with sharp cutting edges were used to collect undisturbed soil samples from 0 to 15 cm depth at 2 m intervals down the slope. These core samples were then oven-dried for 24 h at 105 °C in the laboratory. Soil moisture was gravimetrically determined at the same time. In the VGM plots, a design quantity of vetiver grass clipping was applied as mulch over the plot.

Uniform rainfall at a constant intensity was applied for 1 h to the experimental plots. Runoff samples were collected at 2.5 min intervals until the rainfall was stopped and then was continuously recorded at 3.0 min intervals up to 90 min. Thereafter, the clear water was removed from the collected runoff by pipette, and the remaining sediment was oven-dried at 105 °C for 24 h. Next, the tested soil in the plot was left for at least 2 d before the next test. The tested soil was raked to loosen material from the previous testing. Before each testing, about 5−10 cm of surface soil was removed and replaced by fresh soil.

Results and discussion

Runoff

This study compared the runoff from conventional tillage on a bare soil plot, with runoff from plots covered with different mulches. The two runoff parameters assessed in the mulched plots and bare soil plot in this study were the runoff rate and runoff volume (runoff depth). The runoff rate increased with time and reached a steady state within the first few minutes. This period increased with an increasing mulch rate. The runoff rate of the bare soil plot increased more rapidly than that of the mulched plots in the initial stage of runoff. This behavior was also found by Pan and Shangguan (2006) who studied the runoff hydraulic characteristics
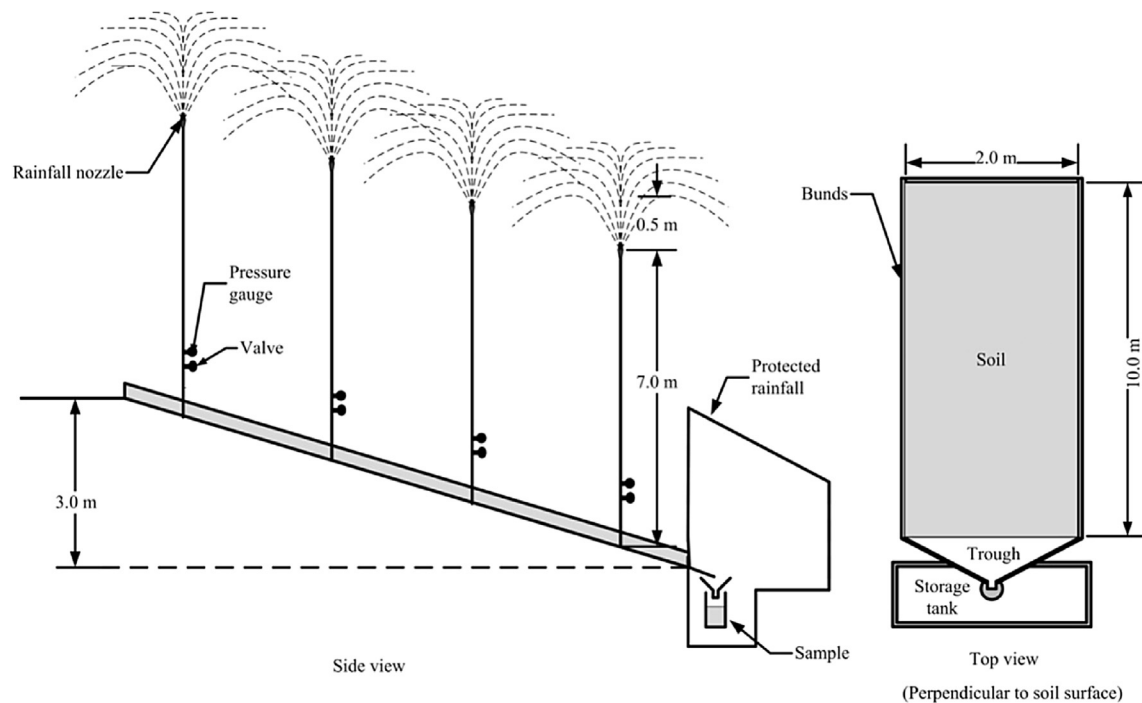
Fig. 1. Field experimental setup (not drawn to scale).

in grass plots on a slope of 26.8%. After the runoff rate had reached a steady state, it remained constant with small fluctuations. The peak runoff rate was also observed in this stage. In the bare soil plot, the peak runoff rate occurred when rainfall stopped, as was also reported by Bissonnais and Singer (1992). However, the peak runoff rate differed in the steady state of the mulched plots. The average runoff rate and peak runoff rate increased progressively with the rainfall intensity and decreased with an increasing mulch rate. After the rainfall stopped, the runoff rate decreased with time until the runoff ceased.

It was found that the runoff volume (runoff depth) decreased with an increasing mulch rate but increased with rainfall intensity. The values of runoff volume ranged from 15.0 mm to 50.7 mm with a rainfall intensity range from 35 to 95 mm/h on the bare soil plot. Fig. 2 shows the plot of runoff volume versus the mulch rate for both the RC and the VGM. Fig. 2 shows that the runoff depth decreased with an increased mulch rate for both RC and the VGM. In the RC plots, the runoff volume reduced from 42.2 mm to 24.9 mm while the RC rate increased from 1.0 t/ha to 7.5 t/ha for a rainfall intensity of 95 mm/h.

Percentage reduction in runoff

The runoff reduction was considered by comparing the runoff from the mulched plots with the bare soil plot. Fig. 3 shows the average percentage reduction in runoff volume versus the mulch rate from the three rainfall intensities. The percentage reduction in runoff volume increased with an increasing mulch rate for both the RC and the VGM plots. It was found out that the quantity of mulch in the RC plots and the VGM mulch plots reduced runoff volume by 25.8—52.5% and 24.7—49.8%, respectively, compared with the bare soil plot. This could be attributed to the mulch breaking the impact of raindrops on the soil surface, spreading out runoff and allowing more water infiltration into the soil (Babalola et al., 2007) thus reducing the runoff due to higher roughness (Welle et al., 2006). The percentage reduction in runoff volume in the current study showed a similar trend to that reported by Babalola et al. (2007)

who observed that 2 t/ha of VGM reduced the runoff volume by 40.8% on a 7% slope in the sub-humid region of Southern Nigeria. However, it is a little less than the results of Donjadee and Chinnarasri (2012) who pointed out that VGM can reduce runoff by 33.0—71.0% on a 3% land slope.

Erosion rate and soil loss

The erosion rates were different between the mulch plots and the bare soil plot due to the effect of the mulching applied. Like the current study, Rodriguez (1997) reported similar results where the erosion rate increased sharply with time in the early stage and this was expedited during the transport limit regime. In other words, the sediment detachment rate was higher than the flow transport capacity. The duration of this regime was increased with an increasing mulch rate. Then, the erosion rates reached a peak value before declining to an almost steady rate because the erosion rate shifted from a transport limit regime to a detachment limit regime (Assouline and Ben-Hur, 2006).

To investigate the effects of the mulch rate and rainfall intensity on soil loss, the soil loss versus the mulch rate for the two mulches under the three rainfall intensities were plotted as shown in Fig. 4. It was found that the soil loss decreased with the increased mulch rate for both RC and VGM plots. The soil loss increased with the rainfall intensity. The values of soil loss ranged from 1.5 t/ha to 16.7 t/ha with the rainfall intensity ranging from 35 t/ha to 95 mm/h on the bare soil plot. In the RC plots, the soil loss reduced from 5.3 t/ha to 2.6 t/ha when the RC rate increased from 1.0 t/ha to 7.5 t/ha for a rainfall intensity of 65 mm/h. Accordingly, in the VGM plots, the soil loss reduced from 4.9 t/ha to 3.1 t/ha.

Soil loss reduction by RC and VGM

Fig. 5 shows the average percentage reduction in soil loss versus the mulch rate. The percentage soil loss reduction by mulch rate is the percentage soil loss from bare soil plot minus the soil loss from the mulched plot divided by the soil loss from the bare soil plot. The
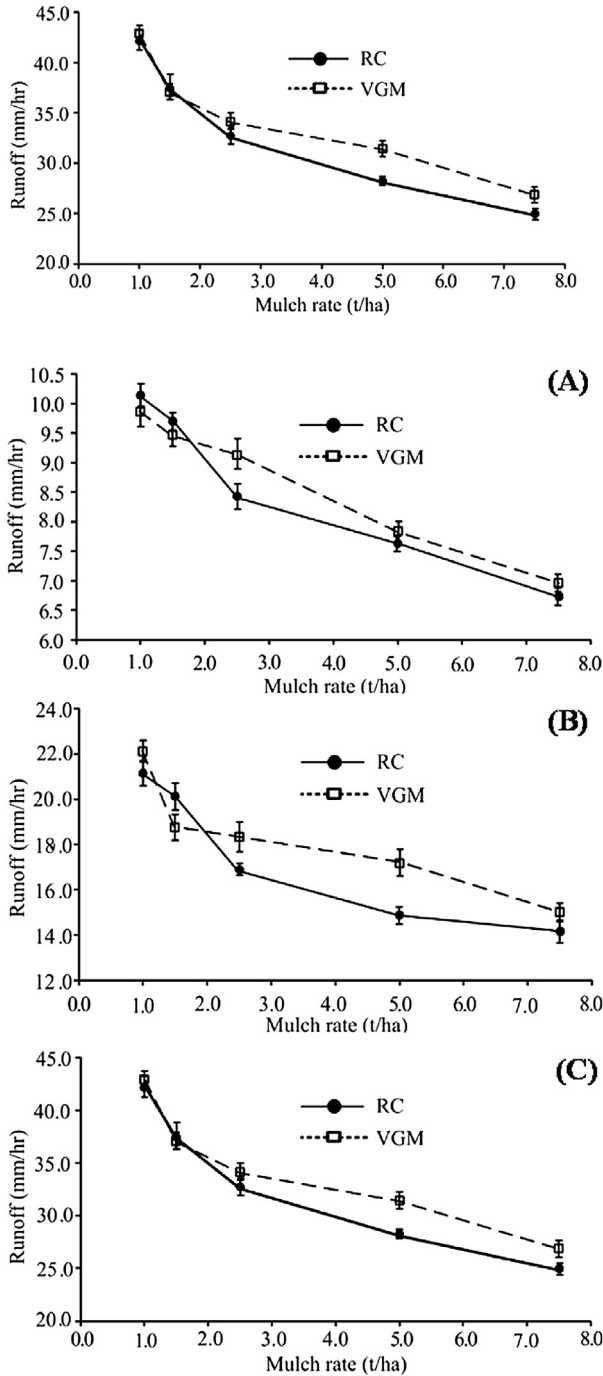
Fig. 2. Runoff as a function of mulch rate: (A) Rainfall intensity = 35 mm/h; (B) Rainfall intensity = 65 mm/h; (C) Rainfall intensity = 95 mm/h (Error bars = ±SD; RC = rice straw mulch; VGM = vetiver grass clipping).

Fig. 3. Average percentage runoff reduction versus mulch rates from three rainfall intensities (Error bars = ±SD).

Fig. 4. Relationships of soil loss versus mulch rate: (A) Rainfall intensity = 35 mm/h; (B) Rainfall intensity = 65 mm/h; (C) Rainfall intensity = 95 mm/h (Error bars = ±SD; RC = rice straw mulch; VGM = vetiver grass clipping).

percentage reduction in soil loss increased with an increasing mulch rate for both the RC and the VGM plots. The mulch rates of 1.5, 2.5 and 5.0 t/ha of rice straw reduced the soil loss by 37.2%, 48.1% and 62.9%, respectively, compared to the bare soil plot, while in VGM plots, the soil loss was reduced by 37.8%, 44.1% and 53.7%, respectively, compared to the bare soil plot.

Fig. 5 indicates that at a RC rate of less than 1.5 t/ha, the soil loss reduction was less than with the VGM. On the other hand, when the mulching rate was 1.5 t/ha, both RC and VGM produced nearly the same soil loss reduction. When the mulching rate was higher than 2.5 t/ha, the soil loss reduction using RC was greater than for the
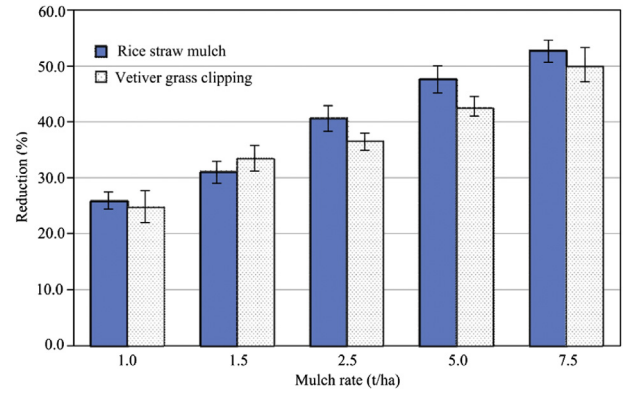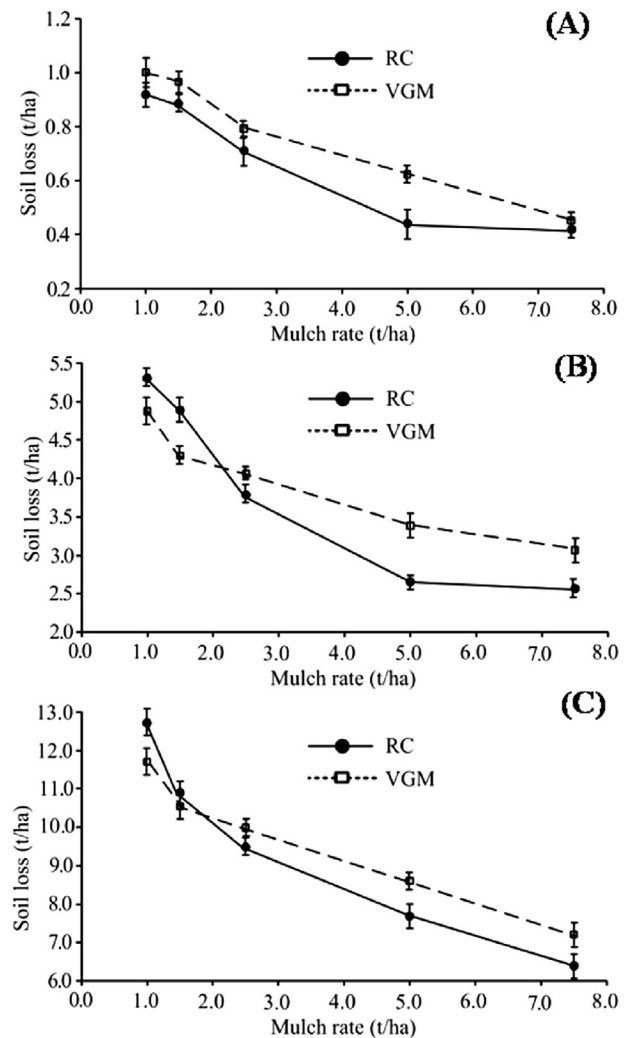
VGM. However, the RC was able to reduce the average soil loss by 30.2% with 1.0 t/ha mulching and by 66.3% with 7.5 t/ha mulching. Accordingly, for VGM, the soil loss reduction was 32.4% and 61.7% when 1.0 and 7.5 t/ha mulch, respectively, were applied.

RC and the VGM as mulch can both be effective in most applications for controlling runoff and soil loss in agricultural areas. Both
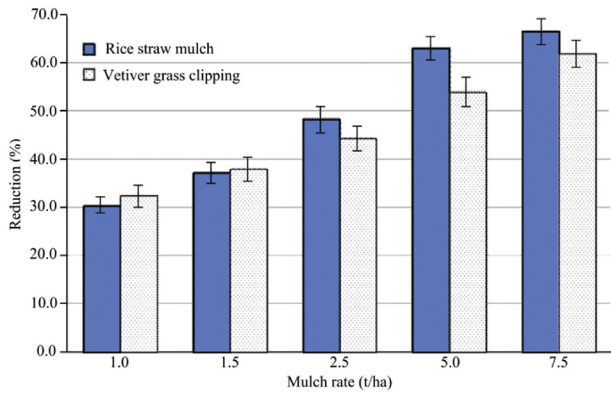
Fig. 5. Average percentage soil loss reduction versus mulch rates from three rainfall intensities (Error bars = ±SD).

mulches break the impact of raindrops on the soil surface, enhance water entry into the soil, and thus reduce runoff and soil loss. On 30% slopes, the results from this study showed that the RC reduced runoff and soil loss by 25.8—52.5% and 30.2—66.3%, respectively, compared to the bare soil control. VGM reduced runoff and soil loss by 24.7—49.8% and 32.4—61.7%, respectively, compared to the control. The runoff volume was reduced when the mulch rate was increased thus decreasing the soil loss. For the three rainfall intensities of 35, 65 and 95 mm/h, the soil loss was found to increase with increasing rainfall intensity. The RC was more effective than the VGM when applied at a rate of 5.0 t/ha or more. The results suggest that a RC rate of 5.0 t/ha and a VGM mulch rate of 7.5 t/ha, respectively, were the most suitable for soil and water conservation in agricultural areas. It is suggested that farmers should select high performance residual mulches that can be easily found locally as these will have a lower cost and result in better environmental conservation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

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