

Semi-intensification of an extensive grassland by plant and soil conditioning

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In the last century, the area of European grasslands was declining, as a significant part of them were turned to built-up areas, broken or afforested (Carboni et al., 2015). In addition to the area reduction, in a significant part of Central, Northern and Western Europe, cultivation has been intensified in the cases of former natural and semi-natural, mostly extensively cultivated grasslands in order to produce higher biomass (Szemán, 2005; Komarek, 2007a; Horváth and Komarek, 2016). Pesticides, organic and mineral fertilizers are also used on the lawns, the frequency of mowing increased and the lawns were reseeded (Török et al., 2014). The structural of grasslands also changed significantly (Komarek, 2007b, 2008).

Recently, 57% of the territory of Hungary is agricultural land, of which 81% is arable land, where wheat and maize production is dominant (Jakab et al., 2017a, b). Grasslands occupy almost 15% of our agricultural land, which can provide a large amount of potential forage base (KSH, 2018).

As grassland management is in the service sector, the crisis of ruminant livestock farming significantly influenced the Hungarian grasslands (Horváth and Mikó, 2016; Halász et al., 2016), especially in terms of nutrient supply, irrigation and reseeding (Kovács et al., 2005). Generally, only soils with poor water regime and low nutrient-content are utilized as grasslands. These conditions allow extensive grassland use, producing low hay yields of 1.5-2 t ha⁻¹ (Szemán et al., 2009). 90% of the grasslands are natural or almost natural, 80% are located in plain areas with unfavourable conditions (Micheli et al., 2015).

The ratio of grasslands on chernozem soils with good fertility is only 9%. Therefore, 70% of the grasslands have low, while only 5% have good productivity. Yields are low. Less than 1% of the Hungarian GDP originates from grassland utilization (Kozák, 2008). According to Szabó (2003), due to the decrease in profitability and the volume of animal husbandry, the grassland management methods have narrowed down in Hungary, the potential of pastures and meadows was not exploited (Komarek, 2008).

According to Várallyay (1997), the need for rational grassland management is indisputable. 50% of grasslands are potentially valuable from a nature conservation aspect, 30% of protected plant species are found there (Kozák, 2008; Penksza et al., 2008, 2009a, b; Szabó et al., 2011), and grasslands are also important habitats for wildlife (Torma et al., 2019;

Kiss and Tokody, 2011). Designated Natura 2000 grasslands may only be managed in compliance with the land use restrictions set out in the "Government Decree 269/2007 (X. 18.) on the land use rules for the maintenance of NATURA 2000 grasslands". The role and importance of grassland management is becoming increasingly complex in the European Union's agricultural policy. The support structure puts farmers in a decision-making situation choosing between intensive farming with low support and extensive farming with higher support (Marticsek et al., 2011). Many authors are of the opinion (Barcsák et al., 1978; Vinczeffy, 1993) that intensive grassland use is not rational from economic aspect, but the capacity (in both quantity and duration) of extensive grasslands to keep animals is low.

There is a strong correlation between soil and lawn quality. The humus stocks are constantly increasing due to the biological activity of grassland soils (Vinczeffy, 1974). Agricultural areas, including grasslands, play an important role in the carbon cycle between the biosphere and the atmosphere. We know relatively little about the carbon exchange and carbon sequestration of grassland ecosystems, although their role in the global carbon cycle is significant (Soussana et al., 2007).

It is exponentially true for grassland management that weather is the most important risk factor (Bajnok et al., 2011; Tasi et al., 2013, 2014; Lukács et al., 2015; Valkó et al., 2012; Penksza et al., 2013; Házi et al., 2012; Szentes et al., 2009a, b; Magyar et al., 2017). Among the climate induced factors, drought and inland water have the most harmful effects.

Their effects are enhanced in compacted soils with unfavourable water regime, just like the case we studied. The subject of our research was a grassland near the Karcag, at the border of the Great Hungarian Plain with its unique ecological conditions. This region is one of the driest areas of Hungary, the most extreme in terms of temperature fluctuations. The lowest amount of precipitation of the Great Plain – which is associated with a climatic moisture deficit of about 100-150 mm during the vegetation period – is limiting the effectiveness of grassland management (Zsembeli et al., 2019a).

That water shortage is associated with the regular atmospheric drought from March till September every year. Drought has a significant impact not only on plants but also on the soil. The studied extensive grassland is located next to the sheep farm of the

Research Institute of Karcag and utilized as a pasture and a hay meadow. That grassland is significantly exposed to the extreme weather and soil conditions.

Our aim was to reduce the negative impact of the poor weather and soil conditions by using plant and soil conditioners. The tested conditioners meet with the requirements of the Natura 2000 and AKG regulations. In our research, we tested three plant conditioners (Natur Agro, Timac Agro, PRP-EBV) in a small-plot experiment. According to the manufacturers' descriptions, these plant conditioners are capable to directly increase the nutrient content of grasses. We also tested a soil conditioner (Z-Fix), also approved by the environmental authorities, to improve the water, air, and nutrient regime of the soil by creating a more favourable structure of the root zone of grasslands.

In croplands, soil conditioners were successfully applied to increase yields by improving the water and salt regime of the soil (Szűcs and Zsembeli, 2014; Zsembeli et al., 2019b), but their application on a grassland is novel. In our study, the coenological composition, the harvested green biomass, and the chemical composition of the hay were determined for two years with different weather conditions.

Keywords: *soil conditioning, plant conditioning, natural grassland*

RESULTS

As Johns (1972) found, in dry climates, the first growth of grasslands gives nearly 80% of the total annual yield, which was also well observed in our experiment. The coenological and green mass results did not confirm the effect of the treatments. We observed that the element contents of the second growth were higher. This is due to the fact that the shoot growth of grasses consists mainly of leaves of guide grasses and dicotyledonous weeds, which have a higher ash content (Kota et al., 1993).

We found a slight increase of Mg content in the yield. In 2017, Natur Agro and Z-Fix, while in 2018, Natur Agro and Timac Agro treatments increased the Mg content. In the year with average weather conditions (2017), the PRP-EBV treatment resulted in the highest Mn content, while in the dry year, each treatment increased the Mn content. Examining the Zn content of the plant samples, we found that in 2017, all the three studied plant conditioners resulted in a slight increase. In 2018, only Natur Agro treatment increased the Zn content.

The effect of the soil conditioner was figured out by determining the CO₂ emission (as an indicator of the root respiration from the soil) and the moisture content of the soil. The soil conditioner had a positive effect on the moisture content of the soil and also increased CO₂ emission, which was in harmony with our preliminary studies in a pot experiment (Zsembeli et al., 2017).

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