Three years of on-farm evaluation of dynamic variable rate irrigation: What have we learned?

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Abstract. This paper will present a dynamic Variable Rate Irrigation System developed by the University of Georgia. The system consists of the EZZone management zone delineation tool, the UGA Smart Sensor Array (UGA SSA) and an irrigation scheduling decision support tool. An experiment was conducted in 2015, 2016 and 2017 in two different peanut fields to evaluate the performance of using the UGA SSA to dynamically schedule Variable Rate Irrigation (VRI). For comparison reasons strips were designed within the fields. These strips were irrigated according to either UGA SSA or IrrigatorPro recommendations. The results showed that IrrigatorPro is very conservative irrigation method. On the other hand the UGA SSA recommendations worked very well with the VRI system and in all three years it suggested 45% less water (average) than the IrrigatorPro.

Keywords. Prescription, peanuts, water use efficiency, central pivot, decision support system.

Introduction

Irrigation is becoming an essential component of farming in many areas of the world. But demands on agricultural water supplies are likely to increase over time as alternative nonfarm uses of water continue to grow. At the same time climate change is expected to reduce the water supplies and consequently the water demands. If irrigated agriculture is to expand in order to meet growing demands for food, then new irrigation practices and tools must be developed for more efficient water use. Precision irrigation offers this promise (Vellidis *et al.,* 2013). However water use efficiency is ultimately determined by management. A good management requires collection of accurate data and very quick data analysis.

Precision irrigation and irrigation decision support tools

During the last decade ground water is depleting at an alarming rate in many agriculture areas. Thus, different decision support tools have been developed and applied in the most intensive agriculture areas in the world from the early 90's. Smith, (1992) described the CropWat which estimates the crop water demands under different irrigation strategies. It utilizes the Penman-Monteith equation to calculate the crop evapotranspiration and a crop growth model to estimate growth and yield in conjunction with the evapotranspiration. Steduto *et al.* (2009) developed the AquaCrop model, which calculates the yield productivity in relation with the amount of water used. However, the model is complicated and uses several data such as air temperature, reference evapotranspiration, soil evaporation, stomatal conductance, water productivity coefficient, and many other indices. The great concern about the environmental consequences of farming activities led to the development of the Hydrologic (Richards *et al.,* 2008) model. The aim of this model was the evaluation of the economic and environmental aspects of several irrigation methods, the increase of the water use efficiency in cotton as well as the optimization of cotton yield. Thysen and Detlefsen, (2006) developed the PlanteInfo Irrigation manager. This manager was utilizing a crop and water model while it was able to download weather data. The downloading of weather data and remote-sensing images were essential for IrriSatSMS (Car *et al.,* 2012) as well. The IrriSatSMS was manipulating weather data, crop coefficient (Kc) measurements and data from satellite images on a server in order to calculate the daily water balance. Additionally, a website was also a part of the system where the computer server was visualizing the results. Another decision support tool is the CropSyst model (Stockle *et al.,* 2003), which recommends the optimum allocation of water use in pear orchards based on the plant water potential. The calculation of the plant water potential was estimated from the tree transpiration by using Ohm's law analogy. The WaterSense (Inman-Bamber *et al.,* 2007) is another decision support tool which was developed to optimize the yield with a given soil type, precipitation and irrigation events. For better yield optimization, it uses crop models and algorithms to identify optimal irrigation strategies.

One efficient irrigation application system is the center pivot equipped with VRI system. Usually, a VRI system allows farmers to define custom Irrigation Management Zones (IMZs) and to load them into the VRI controller. After that the system irrigates the field in accordance with the imported zones. The different rates of irrigation are achieved due to sprinklers ability to turn on and off or pulse at the precise speed. This sprinkler ability is an advantage for the system because the sprinklers are used more efficiently and can be turned off over drains, tracks, crops and wet areas. Also the ability of the system to lower the application rates reduces runoff and leaching at the high risk areas. Finally, the fact that the VRI system can be programmed to irrigate a specific part of a field corresponds to the decrease of the power consumption.

This paper describes a three year study which was conducted to evaluate the performance of a linked dynamic VRI system driven by real-time soil moisture data from the University of Georgia Smart Sensor Array (UGA SSA). The study was conducted in two commercial peanut fields. Two different irrigation strategies (UGA SSA and the original version of IrrigatorPro) were used to schedule irrigation.

Material and Methods

The experiment was carried out in 91 ha commercial field in 2015 and 2017 and a 118 ha commercial field in 2016. Both fields are located in the area of Leary of Georgia, USA and they were planted with peanuts. Initially the fields were divided into IMZs by using electric conductivity, elevation data and data from satellite images such as Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and Normalized Difference Water Index (NDWI). The IMZs were delineated by using the EZZone software. This software is a free online resource for delineating Agricultural Management Zones from univariate georeferenced data. After IMZ delineation, the fields were divided into alternating conventional irrigation and dynamic VRI strips with each strip 120 rows wide in 2015 and 2017 and 132 rows wide in 2016. In 2015 in three of the six strips, irrigation scheduling was based on Irrigator Pro recommendations and water applied uniformly. The other three strips were divided into IMZs which were irrigated individually based on UGA SSA recommendations (Figure 1). The experimental design in 2016 was the same as in 2015 but the IrrigatorPro recommendations were applied uniformly in four strips while the other four strips were irrigated individually based on the UGA SSA recommendations. In 2017 the experimental design was the same as in 2015 but two more strips were designed at the eastern side of the field. After planting, UGA SSA sensors were installed in each of the IMZs. The UGA SSA control system which was installed in the field consists of a wireless soil moisture sensing array with a high density of sensor nodes and a web-based user interface. A detailed description of the UGA SSA system was presented from Liakos *et al.* (2015).

UGA SSA irrigation recommendations

The UGA SSA system was developed to monitor the soil moisture variability within the fields. However the web-based user interface of the UGA SSA offers irrigation recommendations (Figure 1). As it was mentioned above the EZZone software was used to delineate irrigation management zones. At least one UGA SSA node was installed in every zone depending on the size of the zone and the within variability. Continuously the soil water tension readings of each zone were converted into volumetric water content expressed in inches. The conversion was done by applying a modified Van Genuchten model which was described by Liang *et al.* 2016.

The UGA SSA irrigation recommendations are presented in a window which displays an aerial image of the field (Figure 1). The aerial image is overlaid by the layer including the delineated IMZs. At the bottom left corner of the window, a legend presents the irrigation recommendations for each irrigation zone individually. Irrigation recommendations are provided for shallow rooted (up to 0.38m) and deeper rooted (up to 0.76m) crops or for immature and mature crops. This is necessary because different volumes of irrigation water are required to replenish a shallow versus a deep soil profile. For easy visualization, if an IMZ is clicked then all the area polygons which belong at the same zone are highlighted. Additionally, the corresponding irrigation recommendation at the legend is also highlighted. Alternatively, by clicking on an irrigation recommendation at the legend the corresponding zones are highlighted on the map.
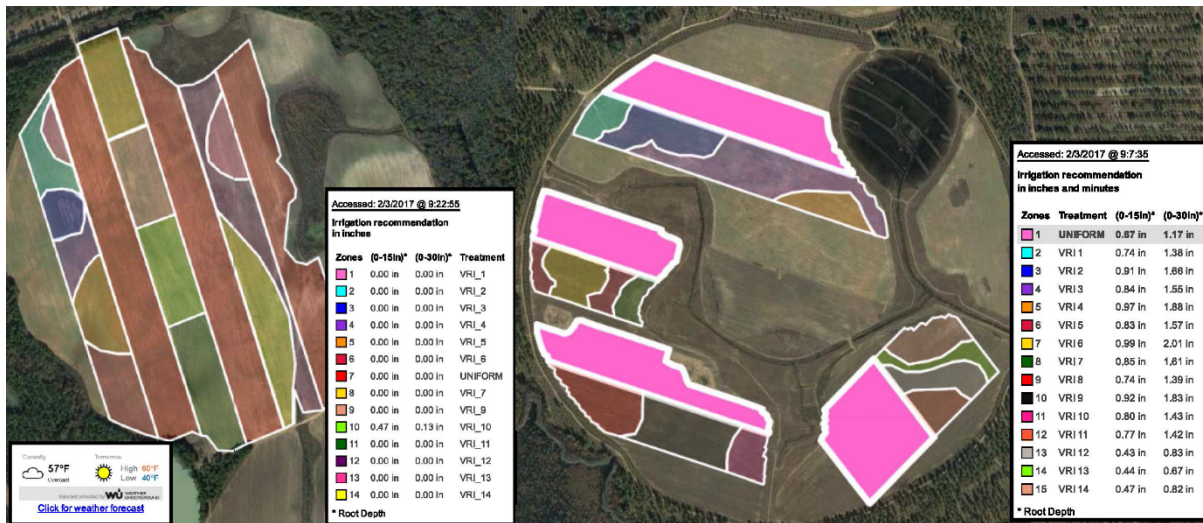
Fig 1. The UGA SSA webpage where the irrigation recommendations are presented. Farmers have to select one of the two irrigation recommendations provided by the UGA SSA webpage based on the root zone length, a) irrigation recommendations for 2015 and 2017 and b) irrigation recommendations for 2016.

Irrigator Pro for peanuts

Irrigator Pro is a computerized expert system designed to manage peanut irrigation and pest management decisions. The version of IrrigatorPro used in this study uses precipitation and soil and ambient temperature to make irrigation decisions. It is widely used in the southeastern USA by consultants and some farmers to schedule irrigation. It is used regularly by the grower who cooperated with us in this study.

Irrigation scheduling and VRI system

The pivots used at the experiment were well maintained pivots with VRI system installed on them. The VRI system consisted from solenoid valves which allowed different water flow in each pivot zone. The Farmscan 7000 (Farm Scan Ag, Australia) was playing the role of the solenoid controller. The Farmscan used was an upgraded version of the 7000 series which allowed to upload prescription maps by using USB jump drive or through internet. Because the fields were far away the authors were uploading the prescription maps through internet. Thus, a cellular modem was connected with the Farmscan.

During the growing season of the first year of the experiment, at the beginning of each week, Irrigator Pro recommendations and UGA SSA recommendations were applied at the strips. Usually, it took three days for the pivot to make a complete circle due to the big size of the field. Because of that and the fact that some places within the field were drying very fast, it made the authors to change the prescription maps sometimes up to three times per week. At the end of each week the results were evaluated. During the growing season of the second and third year of the research, the irrigation strategy used was the same as the first year but new prescription maps were created every morning. The reason why prescription maps were created so often is the experience the authors obtained from the first year of the research and the fact that several places within the field were drying fast due to the elevation differences of the terrain. The prescription maps had been designed by using the Irrigation Manager software version 2.1.0.11 (Control the Rain, Claremont, Australia). This friendly user software allows users to select the field areas where the irrigation should take place. Additionally, users can choose the desired irrigation rates for each selected area (Figure 2).
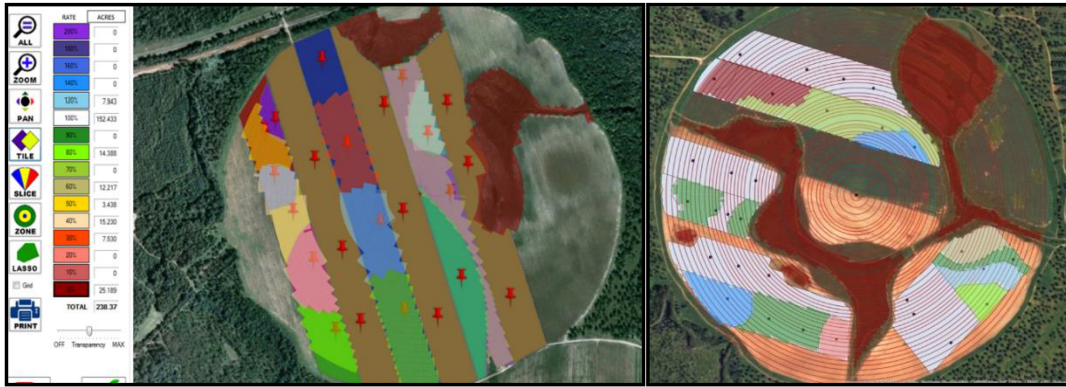
Fig 2. Irrigation Manager Environment. Each color represents a specific irrigation rate. The picture at the left shows a prescription map used in 2015and 2017 while the prescription map at the right used in 2016. The red circles on the 2016 prescription map represent the variable rate pivot zones. Based on the previous experience, users should draw the pivot zones to increase the accuracy of the prescription maps.

The evaluation of the pivot performance was done by rain gauges. In 2015 nine rain gauges were installed in the irrigation zones randomly while in 2016 were installed twenty one rain gages. These zones were either in the VRI strips or Unifrm strips. More rain gages were installed in 2016 and 2017 because authors wanted to monitor the pivot performance at the places with different elevation within the fields.

Results and discussion

IrrigatorPro soil moisture data vs UGA SSA soil moisture data

One of the options of the UGA SSA website is to present the soil water tension data in the forms of time-series graphs. In this view, users can monitor the hourly soil moisture variability of the three different depths in real time from the installation date onwards. To help farmers interpret the data, a color-coded background of blue, yellow, and red is used. The soil water tension range for the blue area is 0 kPa to 50 kPa indicating adequate soil moisture for most crops, for the yellow area 50 kPa to 100 kPa indicating drying soils, and for the red area 100 kPa to 200 kPa indicating dry soils. The soil water tension range, of each color was selected based on the authors' experience and may be different for places with different climate and soil types.
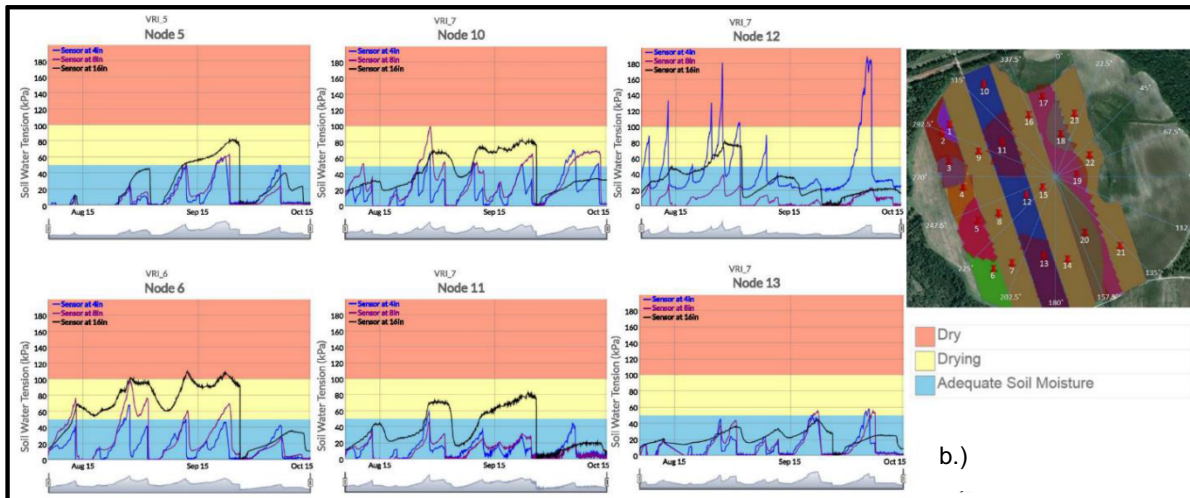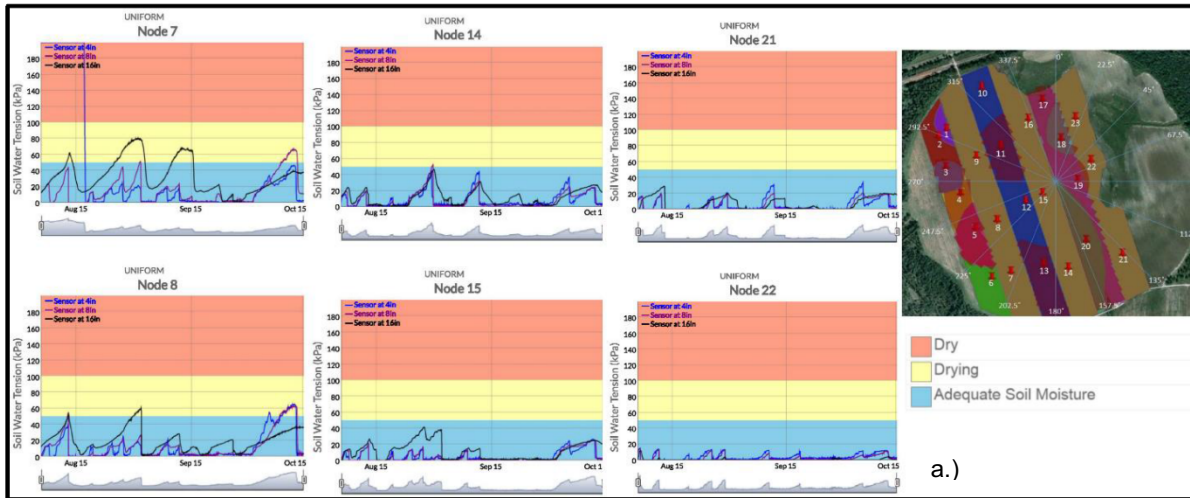
Fig 3. 2015 soil moisture data representation with graphs a) the zones where the nodes were installed were irrigated based on the IrrigatorPro, b) the zones where the nodes were installed were irrigated based on the UGA SSA recommendations.
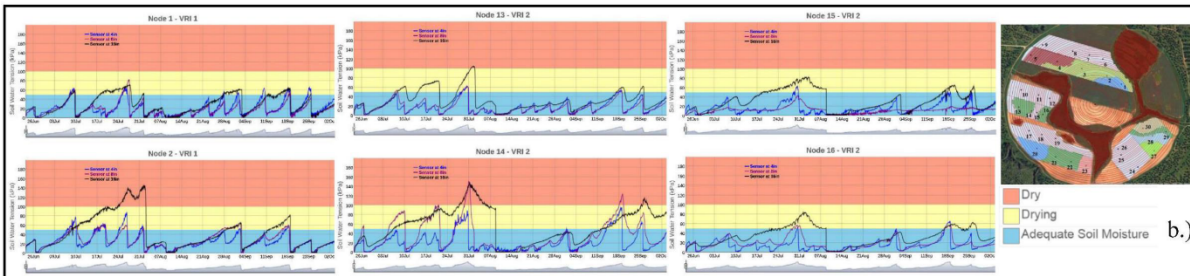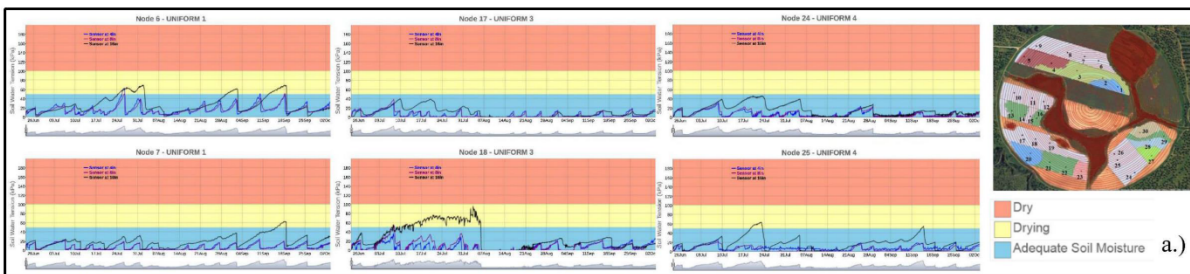

Fig 4. 2016 soil moisture data representation with graphs a) the zones where the nodes were installed were irrigated based on the IrrigatorPro, b) the zones where the nodes were installed were irrigated based on the UGA SSA recommendations.

UGA SSA vs IrrigatorPro

The comparison of the two strategies is crucial to understand how each irrigation scheduling tool works. The use of rain gages was proved beneficial to the evaluation of the strategies since it gave a clear view of the recommended irrigation events.

Figure 5 shows four graphs and each graph represents a specific case in 2015, 2016. Node 5 was installed in 2015 in an irrigation management zone which received irrigation based on the UGA SSA recommendations with VRI tehnology. Node 22 was installed also in 2015 in a strip which was irrigated uniformly based on the IrrigatorPro recommendations. It is clear that at the UGA SSA the range of the soil water tension is from 0 kPa to 60 kPa. On the other hand, the soil water tension of the IrrigatorPro case ranges between 0 kPa and 17 kPa. Node 22 received 104 mm of irrigation water from the beginning of the growing season until the middle it while node 5 received 71 mm throughout the growing season. Moreover node 4 and 8 were installed in 2016 at the a the strips where UGA SSA and IrrigatorPro recommendations were applied respectively. Node 4 received 91.4 mm of irrigation while node 8 137.1 mm. In both cases the range of the soil moisture tension was approximatelly 10 kPa more than in 2015. The range of the soil moisture between the two irrigation treatments proved that the IrrigatorPro tends to keep the soil profile wet throughout the growing season. However, UGASSA keeps the soil profile wet enough without stressing the plants and recommends irrigation only when the plants need watering. A more careful look at the observed irrigation is making clear that in both years there was no difference at the number of the irrigation events. However the events took place in different periods. This means the UGA SSA recommends less water that IrrigatorPro according to the plants' need for irrigation.

The analysis of the irrigation data of both years of the research showed big differences at the recommended water allocations from the two irrigation strategies (Table 1). In 2015 the average water allocations of UGA SSA recommendations is 74.4 mm while the average water allocations of the Irrigator Pro is 101.9 mm. This means that the Irrigator Pro suggested 27.5 mm (average) more water allocations than UGA SSA. Considering that farmers pay 0.96 euros for every mm of water per hectare, if the farmer adopted the UGA SSA strategy throughout the growing season then he would saved 2502.5 mm of water and 2402.4 euros. In 2016 the IrrigatorPro suggested 30 mm more water for irrigation than the UGA SSA which means that the it could be saved 3540 mm of water and 3398.4 euros during the growing season. In 2017 the UGA SSA recommended to use 60 mm less water than the IrrigatorPro and consequently it could be saved 5460 mm of water and 5242 euros.
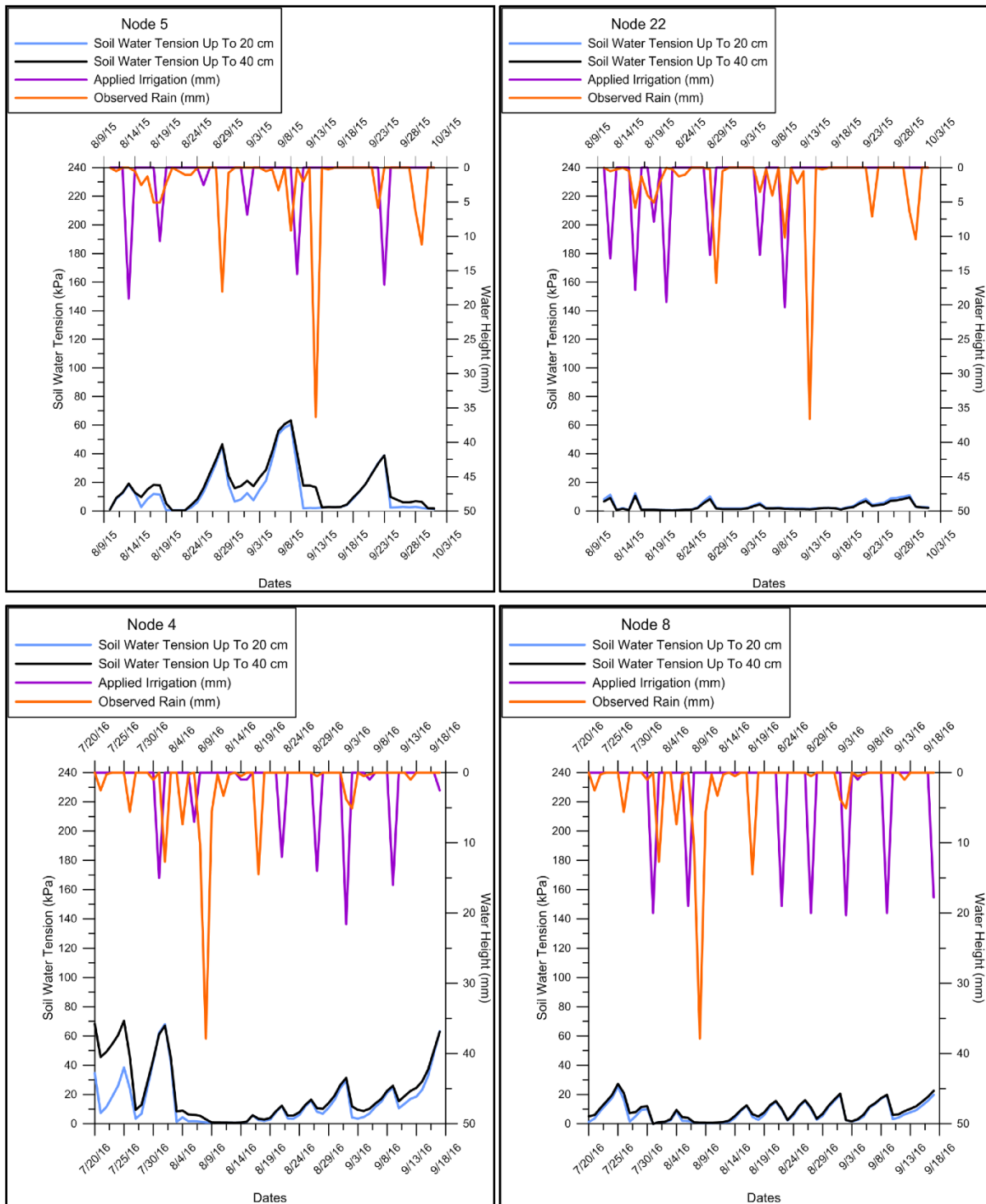
Fig 5. Example of the comparison between the two irrigation strategies. In both graphs the blue and black lines represent the weighted average of two shallow sensors and the three sensors respectively. a) The strip where node 5 and 4 were installed received irrigation water based on UGASSA recommendations. b) The area where node 22 and 8 were installed received irrigation water uniformly based on IrrigatorPro recommendations.

Table 1. UGA SSA and Irrigator Pro irrigation recommendations throughout the growing seasons.

Year	UGA SSA		Irrigator Pro	
	Node Number	Irrigation water (mm)	Node Number	Irrigation water (mm)
2015	4	83.8	7	104.1
	5	71.1	14	97.7
	6	77.7	22	104.1
	11	76.4		
	13	71.1		
	17	66.5		
Average		74.4		101.9
2016	1	101.6	8	137.1
	2	86.3	10	119.3
	3	89	18	119.3
	4	91.4	26	127
	5	91.4		
	13	86.3		
	14	76.2		
	15	88.9		
	16	76.2		
	20	73.6		
	21	96.5		
	22	88.9		
	23	60.9		
	27	93.9		
	28	86.3		
	29	88.9		
	30	83.8		
Average		95.6		125.6
2017	2	48.5	9	150
	4	59.2	17	150
	6	100.1		
	8	96.3		
	11	80.5		
	12	84.1		
	14	81.0		
	19	77.2		
	21	132.1		
	25	90.7		
	27	152.7		
Average		91.1		150

Conclusions

The UGA SSA web-based decision support tool and the soil moisture sensor array potentials to increase the water use efficiency are great. The monitoring of the soil moisture is very important to avoid water stressing the plants. Additionally the integration of the sensor array with the web-based decision support tool enables the whole system to make fast irrigation calculations and consequently accurate high definition irrigation prescription maps.

The use of strips to apply different irrigation scheduling strategies gave the opportunity to evaluate the UGA SSA recommendations. The results showed that UGA SSA recommends less water allocations than the IrrigatorPro. UGA SSA can be beneficial for the farmers because it helps them to make decisions about the water allocations they should use in variable rates and understand better the spatial variability of soil moisture conditions.

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