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Journal

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 115(47)

ISSN

0027-8424

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Publication Date

2018-11-20

DOI

10.1073/pnas.1808035115

Peer reviewed



Peculiarly pleasant weather for US maize

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Edited by Inez Fung, University of California, Berkeley, CA, and approved October 4, 2018 (received for review May 9, 2018)

Continuation of historical trends in crop yield are critical to meeting the demands of a growing and more affluent world population. Climate change may compromise our ability to meet these demands, but estimates vary widely, highlighting the importance of understanding historical interactions between yield and climate trends. The relationship between temperature and yield is nuanced, involving differential yield outcomes to warm (9–29 °C) and hot (> 29 °C) temperatures and differing sensitivity across growth phases. Here, we use a crop model that resolves temperature responses according to magnitude and growth phase to show that US maize has benefited from weather shifts since 1981. Improvements are related to lengthening of the growing season and cooling of the hottest temperatures. Furthermore, current farmer cropping schedules are more beneficial in the climate of the last decade than they would have been in earlier decades, indicating statistically significant adaptation to a changing climate of 13 kg·ha⁻¹·decade⁻¹. All together, the better weather experienced by US maize accounts for 28% of the yield trends since 1981. Sustaining positive trends in yield depends on whether improvements in agricultural climate continue and the degree to which farmers adapt to future climates.

agriculture | maize | climate | trends | adaptation

Increased agricultural production over the 20th century is a celebrated achievement of modern science (1). Continuation of these trends is essential to meeting future food and nutritional demands (2, 3), although our ability to do so may be compromised by climate change (4–6). To better understand how climate change will interact with future trends in crop yield, it is important to establish both how climate influenced historical crop yields and how farmers have responded to these changes. To explore these issues, we focus on maize, an important food, feed, and fuel crop in the US Midwest that is both highly productive and strongly influenced by temperature (7, 8).

Previous studies of US maize found that warming suppressed yield trends in Wisconsin (9) and that short-term cooling increased yield trends across the country (10, 11). These earlier studies did not, however, distinguish between moderate temperatures that are beneficial and hot temperatures that are damaging (7, 12), instead using growing-season temperature averages as explanatory variables. This distinction is especially relevant for the US Corn Belt because daily minimum temperatures have risen nearly ubiquitously (13, 14), whereas the hottest growing-season temperatures have cooled by ~1–2 °C over the last century (13, 15).

Recent work indicates that increasing yield trends are linked to earlier planting and longer maturing varieties (16–19). However, studies have found no evidence of US agricultural adaptation to historical changes in climate (7, 20). The combination of warming and absence of adaptation leads to alarming scenarios regarding climate-induced reductions in yield (7). However, the presumption of no adaptation seems at odds with the ingenuity of farmers, a characterization that is supported by evidence of regional adaptation to climate (8, 21) and patterns of insurance coverage that indicate careful apportionment of weather-related risks (22).

Yield Trends from Changes in Climate and Crop Timing

Here, we use a recently developed statistical growth model (21) to analyze how changes in temperature distributions and crop phenology influence maize yield. Yield is modeled according to accumulated growing degree days (GDDs) and killing degree days (KDDs), the latter of which measure exposure to damagingly-high temperatures (8, 20, 23). To account for the fact that temperature sensitivity varies greatly over the course of crop development (24, 25), yield sensitivity to GDDs and KDDs varies across vegetative, early-, and late-grain-filling growth phases (Fig. 1 and *SI Appendix, Fig. S1*). The model accounts for 72% of the interannual variance in maize yield in the median county (*SI Appendix, Fig. S2*).

It is useful to distinguish between the influence of climate trends and timing trends associated with planting and crop development. We first isolate influences associated with climate trends by fixing planting and growth-phase dates to their average values between 1981 and 2017. Averaging across the Midwest, GDDs increase during every phase with a total increase of 14 °C days per decade (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3*). By contrast, KDDs decreased during every growth phase, for a net change of –10 °C days per decade (*SI Appendix, Fig. S4*). These remarkable improvements in weather combine to increase yields by 0.2 tonnes/ha per decade (95% CI 0–0.5; Figs. 2*A* and *B* and 3).

Increasing GDDs is consistent with general warming driven by increasing greenhouse gases, whereas suppression of the high-temperature extremes that produce KDDs appears to be a fortuitous by-product of more productive row-crop agriculture and corresponding increases in evapotranspiration (15, 26). Strong associations between increasing summer crop productivity and cooler extreme temperatures are found in the Midwest (15) as well as other major cropping regions (27–29). Increased irrigation also cools surface air temperature (30, 31), but we

Significance

Over the course of the 20th century, US maize yields have improved by more than a factor of five. Whereas this trend is often attributed exclusively to technological improvements, here, we also identify contributions from improved temperatures during the growing season. More than one-quarter of the increase in crop yield since 1981 is estimated to result from trends toward overall warmer conditions, but with cooling of the hottest growing-season temperatures, and from adjustments in crop timing toward earlier planting and longer maturation varieties.

Author contributions: E.E.B., N.D.M., and P.H. designed research; E.E.B. performed research; E.E.B. analyzed data; and E.E.B., N.D.M., and P.H. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

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Data deposition: Code to download and organize the data as well as perform analyses and produce the figures are available from https://github.com/eebutler/us_maize_trends.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1808035115/-DCSupplemental.

Published online November 5, 2018.

focus on rainfed counties because only $\sim 20\%$ of counties in the Midwest have at least 10% of their harvested acreage equipped for irrigation.

The effects of changes in the timing of the growing season is explored by specifying a fixed seasonal climatology. Timing is controlled by planting date and the temperature-modulated time needed by a cultivar to develop, also referred to as the maturity rating (32). Planting dates have shifted by almost 3 d earlier per decade. This shift has been attributed to hardier hybrid stocks, improved planting equipment, and chemical seed coatings (16, 33, 34), but also coincides with early-season warming across most of the Midwest (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3*). Earlier planting has been accompanied by increases in maturity rating such that harvest dates have remained relatively constant, with 90% of the additional duration of the growing season accounted for by a longer grain-filling phase (*SI Appendix, Fig. S7*). Prior work has also documented the yield benefits of earlier planting (16, 17) and longer season varieties (18, 19), although without differentiating the influence of the distinct trends in moderate and hot temperatures.

Trends toward earlier planting change GDDs during the vegetative phase by -16°C days per decade, but this decrease is more than counterbalanced by an increase of 26°C days per decade during grain filling on account of this stage lengthening and shifting into a warmer part of the seasonal cycle. This repartitioning of GDDs from the vegetative to grain-filling phases is clearly beneficial on the whole (Fig. 2C) because yield is >10 times more sensitive to GDDs during grain filling (*SI Appendix, Table S1*). The longer growing season in northern counties only mildly increases exposure to damaging temperatures because KDDs are uncommon (Fig. 2D and *SI Appendix, Fig. S4*). In more southern counties, KDDs accrue more regularly, and early grain filling incurs the greatest additional exposure on account of both lengthening and shifting into a hotter part of the seasonal cycle (*SI Appendix, Figs. S5 and S7*).

Weather-related increases in yield are unevenly distributed across the Midwest with a northwest gradient toward increasing yields (Fig. 2E and F). States that benefit the most experience greater GDDs, particularly during the critical late grain-filling stage, while also enjoying declining KDDs. Kentucky, by contrast, has experienced a decline in the duration of late grain filling by nearly 2.5 d per decade, accounting for a reduction in GDDs and a drag on its yield trend of -0.2 tonnes/ha per decade (Fig.

2C). On average across the Midwest, climate and timing trends together account for a yield trend of 0.36 tonnes/ha per decade, or 28% of the total 1.28 tonnes/ha per decade trend across the Midwest since 1981 (Fig. 3).

Adaptation to Climate Change

To this point, our analysis has treated changes in climate and farmer-controlled adjustments independently, but their union is needed to assess adaptation to climate change. That is, to constitute adaptation to climate change, adjustments should give higher yields under recent climate conditions than gains obtainable under earlier climate conditions (35). We test whether changes in planting schedule constitute adaptation to climate change by comparing expected maize production over 1981–2017 when fixing developmental timing to the 1981–1990 average versus the 2008–2017 average (Fig. 1). The difference in expected yield, δY_t , gives a time series whose mean indicates adaptation to climatology and whose trend indicates adaptation to climate change (Fig. 4).

Adaptation to seasonal climatology gives a δY_t of 0.4 tonnes/ha for the average county. This difference is highly statistically significant ($P < 0.01$, one-sided test), consistent with contemporary longer-maturing cultivars being successful adaptations to the climatological seasonal cycle. The only year in the last decade with notable yield loss from the recent development schedule is 2012, when extreme heat occurred during early grain filling, the most sensitive period of development. Using the 1980s development schedule, the 2012 drought and heatwave would have predated this sensitive period and been less damaging in some counties.

Beyond shifts in the mean, a positive trend in δY_t indicates that changes in the timing of crop development are more beneficial under recent climate and, thus, represent adaptation to changes in climate. A least-squares fit to all counties gives a trend of 13 kg/ha per decade (Fig. 4) that is also highly significant ($P < 0.01$, one-sided), but varies considerably from state to state (*SI Appendix, Fig. S8*). Note that, although climate adaptation is typically considered in the context of mitigating damages (35), in the present context, adaptation serves to accentuate trends toward increased yield. Along similar lines, a process model analysis of maize growth in China (36) also found that a warming trend allowed for longer growing seasons and that selection of appropriate cultivars lead to improved yields, even

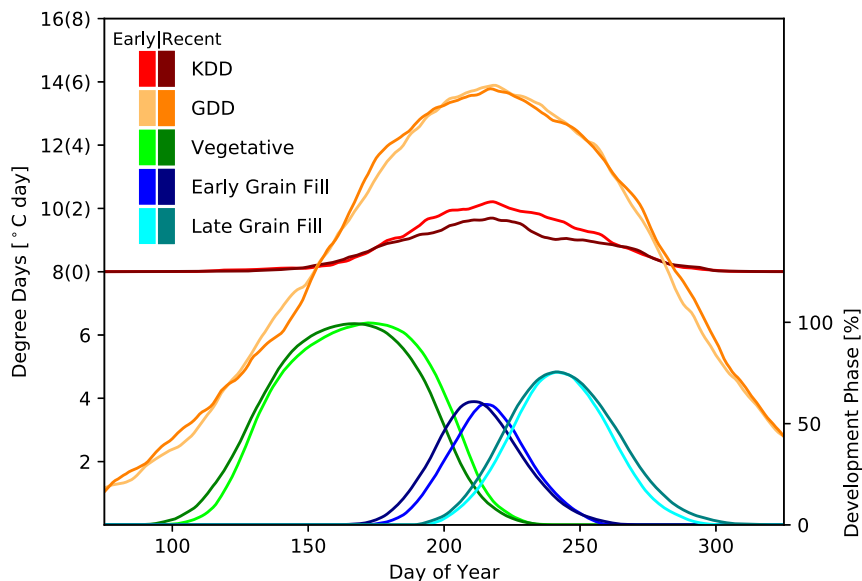


Fig. 1. Regional climate and development. Midwestern US maize develops through vegetative (green), early grain-filling (blue), and late grain-filling (cyan) growth phases beginning as early as April and ending as late as October. Also shown is the climatology of GDDs (orange) and KDDs (red) over the growing season after smoothing with a 30-d window for purposes of clarity. KDDs are shifted upward such that 0 KDDs and 8 GDDs are level. Light shading indicates the earliest decade in the analysis (1981–1990) and dark the latest (2008–2017), where more recent growing seasons begin earlier and end later, have lower KDD exposure, and have higher GDD exposure related to longer maturation.

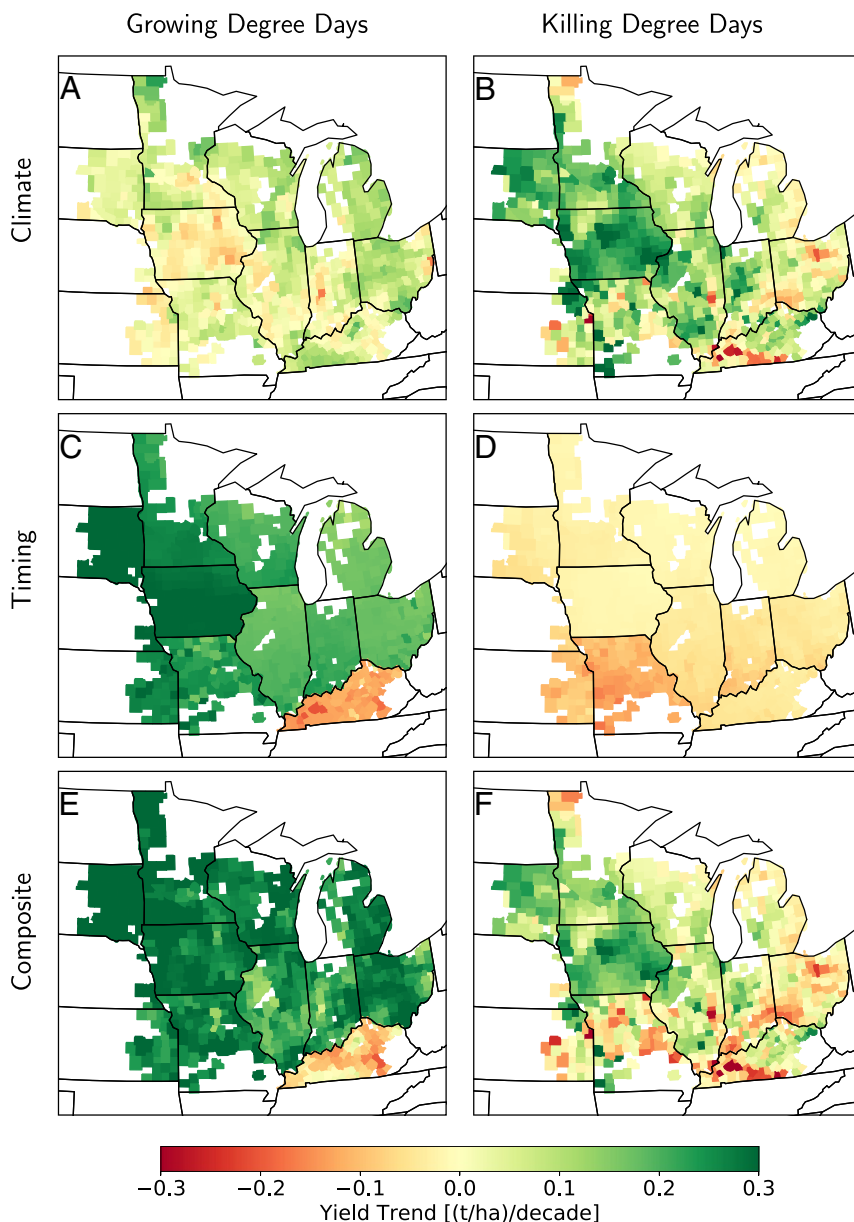


Fig. 2. Spatial components of the yield trend. (A–D) Yield trends are broken into those attributable to climate from GDDs (A) and KDDs (B) and those attributable to timing from GDDs (C) and KDDs (D). (E and F) The combined influence on yield trends from GDDs (E) and KDDs (F) is also shown. Trends are in tonnes per hectare per decade and are computed between 1981 and 2017.

as warming trends led to greater exposure to damage from high temperatures.

The form of adaptation identified here is associated with earlier planting and selecting cultivars that take advantage of a longer growing season. As noted, this earlier planting is facilitated by technological advances (16, 33, 34), but warming of average daily-minimum temperatures in the Midwest by $0.1^{\circ}\text{C}/\text{decade}$ in April and May have almost certainly aided this shift. Furthermore, there is strong evidence of phenological indicators in unmanaged ecosystems shifting earlier (37–39). At one midwestern site, an average shift of -1.2 d per decade is documented for a range of species and phenophases (40). Maize trends exceed those of the unmanaged landscape by more than a factor of two, illustrating the dual role of management and climate in setting the developmental timing of agro-ecosystems.

Discussion and Conclusions

The combined changes that farmers, crop breeders, and agronomists have realized for US maize production have better aligned

the timing of crop growth with historical seasonal conditions. This result is consistent with those from crop models used to explore the implication of longer maturing varieties in both the United States (18) and China (36). At the same time, improvements in Midwest weather have led to more GDDs and fewer KDDs. The combined effects of changes in climate and crop timing lead to further yield increases that constitute a modest but statistically significant adaptation to climate change. Together, these improvements represent more than a quarter of Midwestern trends in maize yield since 1981. This estimate is comparable to a recent analysis of maize phenology using satellite data (19) that attributes 23% of the maize yield trend from 2000–2015 to lengthening grain filling.

Recognition that historical improvements in yield partly depend on improvements in climate suggests that sustaining positive yield trends depends more on climate than previously appreciated. Purely technological improvements are smaller than previously assumed, inasmuch as historical temperature trends are responsible for improved yields, as opposed to temperature trends being essentially inconsequential (11) or reducing yields

Lack of explicitly resolving silking and tasseling may therefore account for underestimation of damage. Further, despite covariance between drought and extreme heat (57), our model does not explicitly resolve crop stress from low soil moisture.

Bootstrap CIs are constructed to assess the uncertainty associated with each of the statistical models by using 1,000 samples that account for contributions from errors in trend estimates, sensitivity parameters, as well as D' and therefore KDD* and GDD* terms. County-years are used as the unit of replication. To be more conservative with respect to regional estimates, we also explore the implication of spatial autocorrelation using a K -means clustering algorithm on longitude, latitude, and mean yield to generate 108 clusters. This number of clusters reflects numbers of agricultural districts that average nine per state (SI Appendix, Fig. S9). The 95% CI of the adaptation trend is 13–20 kg/ha per decade when resampling on county-years,

4–21 kg/ha per decade when resampling on spatial clusters and years, and –3 to 32 when resampling on yearly regional averages. We view the final estimate involving regional averages as overly conservative on account of ignoring within-season independence amongst different parts of the Midwest, but include it to illustrate how the associated reduction in spatial degrees of freedom influences the results (SI Appendix, Table S3).

All regional trends that aggregate individual county trends reported in the work are computed as a weighted average according to average area planted. Individual country areas are computed as the average planted area across years.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. E.E.B. was supported by Packard Foundation Award 2009-34709; P.H. was supported by National Science Foundation Award 1521210; and N.D.M. was supported by USDA Grant 2016-67012-25208.

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