The Influence of Soil Moisture on Macroscopic Sulfur Dioxide Injury to Pinto Bean Foliage

J. A. Davids, D. D. Davis, and S. P. Pennypacker

Former graduate student, professor, and associate professor, respectively, Department of Plant Pathology and Center for Air Environment Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park 16802. Current address of senior author: Castle & Cooke Inc., Soquel, CA 95073.

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ABSTRACT


The influence of soil moisture stress on sulfur dioxide (SO₂) injury to pinto bean foliage was investigated in relation to stomatal conductance rate, soil moisture content, and plant water potential. Pinto bean plants were grown at four soil water potentials (–1/3, –1, –3, and –5 atm) and exposed to 5,720 µg/m² (2.2 ppm) SO₂ for 3 h. Macroscopic injury was severe on plants grown at –1/3 and –1 atm soil water potential and negligible on plants grown at –3 and –5 atm water potential. Injury was highly correlated with percentage of soil moisture, and both injury and soil moisture were highly correlated with stomatal conductance rate and water potential of the plants. The duration of soil moisture stress (1, 2, or 3 days) did not affect the amount of macroscopic injury induced by SO₂, the stomatal conductance rate, or plant water potential. Stomatal conductance rates of plants grown at –1/3 and –1 atm soil water potential decreased when the plants were exposed to SO₂, while those of plants grown at –3 and –5 atm soil water potential were not affected by exposure to SO₂.

Changes in soil moisture have been reported to influence plant sensitivity to sulfur dioxide (SO₂); however, most of the experiments have been very general in nature. Alfalfa (Medicago sativa L.) and buckwheat (Fagopyrum esculentum Moench) plants grown under optimal water conditions were generally more sensitive to SO₂ than those grown under water stress, even when adequate soil moisture was available to both groups at the time of exposure (19). Katz (9) reported that "turgid" plants grown in soil containing 12.8% moisture sorted more SO₂ and were more sensitive to SO₂ than wilted plants grown in soil with 6.2% moisture. Temporary dehydration of leaf tissue in broadbean (Vicia faba L.) and barley (Hordeum vulgare L.) induced by drought stress raised tolerance to SO₂ and decreased sorption of SO₂ compared with plants grown at field capacity (14). Schramel (18) reported that chronic SO₂ gassing of six drought-stricken crops (including V. faba 'Hangdown White') caused stomata to widen but had no effect on stomatal resistance measured with a pressure porometer. Dehydrated plants grown under drought stress showed increased stomatal resistance, which was correlated with greater tolerance to SO₂.

In most of these studies, soil moisture content was not critically controlled or accurately measured. Interrelationships among SO₂ injury, soil moisture, and plant water potential have not all been investigated at once. We attempted to evaluate the influence of soil moisture regimes on the sensitivity of pinto bean plants (Phaseolus vulgaris L. 'Pinto 111') to SO₂, as related to plant water potential, stomatal conductance rate, soil moisture content, and plant growth. Data were collected from December 1978 through May 1979.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Establishing soil water potential. Soil water potential can be maintained at desired levels by varying concentrations of polyethylene glycol (PEG) in the root zone (10,16,23,26-29). However, plants grown hydroponically in this solution may absorb some PEG (7,11), altering physiologic processes, which in turn may influence plant responses to other stresses such as exposure to SO₂. This problem may be minimized by separating the soil and roots from the PEG with a cellulose dialysis membrane that excludes compounds with molecular weights (mol wt) greater than 12,000 and using a 20,000 mol wt PEG (23). The technique we used is a modification of that presented by Tingey and Stockwell (23).

Pinto bean seeds were germinated in trays of vermiculite in a "prexposure" growth chamber maintained at 27 ± 0.5°C and 75 ± 2% relative humidity (RH), with a 12-h photoperiod of 33 klx beginning at 0600 hours. Six days after seeding (2 days after cotyledon emergence), 32 seedlings of uniform development were transplanted into steam-aerated Hagerstown silt loam that had been strained through a 7-mm mesh screen and drenched with distilled, deionized water. The soil was contained in 20 × 4.9 cm tubes of cellulose dialysis membrane that excluded compounds with molecular weight greater than 12,000, thereby preventing phytotoxicity from the 20,000 mol wt PEG. The tubes were sealed at one end.

Each of four sets of eight plants, with roots and soil enclosed in the cellulose membrane, was placed in a 10-L vessel containing a solution of distilled, deionized water and PEG 20,000. The tubes were held upright by a piece of foam insulation 17 mm thick. The ratio of PEG to water in the four vessels was varied to maintain soil water potentials (26) at –1/3, –1, –3, or –5 atm (1 atm = 1.013 bars). Water used by the plants was replaced to maintain a maximum amount of solution in each vessel.

Increasing nutrient concentrations in the soil or in the PEG solution reportedly lead to rapid deterioration of dialysis membranes (27). Plant growth and visible response to SO₂ were similar for plants grown in unamended topsoil placed in either a mixture of distilled, deionized water and PEG or in Hoagland’s solution (5) and PEG mixture (J. A. Davids, unpublished). Soil was analyzed and found to be adequate for normal plant growth without a nutrient supplement; therefore, to prolong the usefulness of the dialysis membrane, all plants were grown in unamended topsoil surrounded by a water and PEG solution.

Characterization of plant material. Seedlings were transplanted 6 days after sowing; four sets of eight plants were then grown for 4 days in membrane-encased soil surrounded by the PEG solution (preliminary experiments revealed that plants reached maximum sensitivity to SO₂ 10 days after seeding). At this time, the biomass of...
the roots and shoots was determined for each of the four soil water potentials. Subsets of six plants were removed from each solution, the dialysis membranes were removed, and the roots were washed thoroughly. Fresh weight of roots, shoots, and leaves was recorded. Plant parts were placed in an oven at 100°C until they reached a constant weight, when dry weight was determined. Leaf area was determined with a portable area meter (Lambda Instrument Corp., Lincoln, NE 68501). This experiment was replicated three times and was separate from the following experiments. Data were analyzed by analysis of variance, and means were separated ($P = 0.05$) with Duncan’s new multiple range test (22).

**SO$_2$ exposure system.** The SO$_2$ dosage at which foliar injury developed on plants growing under the lowest soil moisture stress was found to be $5,720 \mu g/m^2$ (2.2 ppm). Ten days after seeding, plants growing at the four levels of soil water potential were exposed simultaneously to $2.2 \mu g$ SO$_2$ for 3 hr at $27 \pm 5\%$ RH, and $45 \times 10^3$ light intensity within a controlled-environment exposure chamber (Model M-2, Environmental Growth Chambers, Chagrin Falls, OH 44022). All exposures began at 1000 hr. The SO$_2$ was delivered from a tank of 100% SO$_2$ through stainless steel lines to the exposure chamber, where it mixed with incoming charcoal-filtered air before reaching the plants. Sulfur dioxide concentrations in the chamber were monitored with a pulsed fluorescent SO$_2$ analyzer (Thermo Electron Corp., Hopkinton, MA 01748) calibrated periodically with certified permeation tubes (15) that were weighed in our laboratory.

After exposure, the plants were returned to the preexposure chamber and maintained in the same environmental conditions in which they were grown. Twenty-four hours after exposure, the percentage of visibly injured tissue of each unifoliolate leaf was estimated. In addition, values of 1, 5, 95, and 99% were included at the extremes.

**Duration of soil moisture stress.** Preliminary studies revealed that each desired soil water potential was attained 24 hr after the elaced soil was placed in the PEG solution. That is, plants grown for 4 days in the solution were subjected to at least 3 days of the desired water potential. Plants to be subjected to only 1 or 2 days of stress were maintained in the tubes in distilled, deionized water for 2 days or 1 day, respectively, before being transferred to the PEG solution.

Before exposure to SO$_2$, two plants were selected randomly from each treatment. Stomatal conductance was measured at 0900 hours on the abaxial surface of one unifoliolate leaf per plant with an electrical diffusive resistance meter (Lambda Instrument Corp.) periodically calibrated with a calibration plate of known resistance.

Two plants were selected randomly from each treatment and excised with a razor blade 2 cm below the cotyledons. Plant water potential was measured with a pressure bomb (25) before exposure. The cellulose membrane tubes of the sacrificed plants remained in place until after the vessels were removed from the chamber. The lowest 10 cm of the tube was then excised, and about 40 g of root-free soil was removed. The soil was dried at 105°C and percentage of soil moisture was determined on a dry-weight basis.

The remaining six plants at each soil moisture potential were exposed to SO$_2$ as described above after 1, 2, or 3 days of soil moisture stress, and the percentage of SO$_2$ injury on the 12 unifoliolate leaves of the six plants in each treatment was estimated. Correlation coefficients were calculated among percentage of soil moisture, percentage of macroscopic injury, stomatal conductance rate, plant water potential, and soil water potential.

Plants were always stressed and treated in groups containing all four soil water potentials ($-1/3$, $-1$, $-3$, and $-5$ atm). Four replicates of each treatment were exposed to SO$_2$ at each of the three stress times (1, 2, and 3 days). The design was a nested factorial (treatments within days of stress) using a total of 384 plants. Transformation of percentage of soil moisture and percentage of macroscopic injury data was not necessary; the original data had more suitable variance properties for analysis. Data were analyzed by analysis of variance, and means were separated ($P = 0.05$) with Duncan’s new multiple range test (22).

**Stomatal conductance.** Sets of eight plants were grown at the four soil moisture levels for 3 days (4 days in PEG) and exposed to SO$_2$ as described above from 1000 to 1300 hr. Stomatal conductance was measured on one unifoliolate leaf per treatment at approximately 30-min intervals before (0930 and 0955 hr), during (1030, 1100, 1130, 1200, and 1230 hr), and after (1255, 1330, 1400, 1430, and 1500 hr) exposure to SO$_2$. Percentage SO$_2$ injury was estimated as described above on both unifoliolate leaves of each plant. This experiment was replicated three times, using a total of 96 plants (eight plants, four treatment levels, and three replicates). Stomatal conductance was also measured on one leaf of 64 unexposed plants. Data were analyzed by analysis of variance, and means were separated ($P = 0.05$) with Duncan’s new multiple range test (22).

**RESULTS**

**Characterization of plant material.** Leaves from pinto bean plants grown at $-1/3$ and $-1$ atm treatments appeared to develop normally and were significantly larger than those grown at $-3$ and $-5$ atm treatments. Mean leaf area was not significantly different between the $-1/3$ and $-1$ atm treatments or between the $-3$ and $-5$ atm treatments (Fig. 1). Fresh and dry weights of roots, shoots, and leaves were greatest on plants grown at $-1/3$ atm of soil water potential and were generally lower at the $-1$ and $-3$ atm treatments. Plant part weights from the $-5$ atm treatment were generally not significantly different from those from the $-3$ atm treatment.

**Foliar response to SO$_2$.** The length of treatment ($1, 2,$ or 3 days of moisture stress) had no significant influence on percentage of macroscopic SO$_2$ injury, percentage of soil moisture, stomatal conductance rate, or plant water potential values. Therefore, data were pooled and an overall mean value for each variable was calculated (Table 1). The degree of tan, intercellular necrosis caused by SO$_2$, percentage of soil moisture, and rate of stomatal conductance were greatest at $-1/3$ atm and lessened with decreasing soil water potential. However, mean values from the $-3$ and $-5$ atm treatments did not differ significantly from each other (Table 1). Plant water potential values also became more negative with decreasing soil water potential; however, only the means at

![Fig. 1](image-url)

**Fig. 1 Fresh weight, dry weight, and leaf area of pinto bean plants grown for 3 days at soil water potentials of $-1/3, -1, -3,$ and $-5$ atm. Columns within a group topped by the same letter do not differ significantly ($P = 0.05$) according to Duncan's new multiple range test. The letters of significance should not be compared among plant parts or between fresh and dry weight.**
−1/3 and −5 atm were statistically different.

Plants grown in soil with a moisture content above 23% (independent of days of stress) were much more susceptible to SO₂ than those grown in soil with moisture content below 23% (Fig. 2). All variables measured in this phase of the study were significantly correlated (Table 2).

**Stomatal conductance.** Before exposure to SO₂ at 0930 and 0955 hours, stomatal conductance rates in the preexposure chamber were about 0.4–0.5 cm/sec for plants growing under −1/3 and −1 atm soil moisture stress and 0.1 cm/sec for plants in the −3 and −5 atm treatments (Fig. 3).

Conductance rates of leaves on plants grown in the −1/3 atm solution at first rose sharply when plants were placed in the exposure chamber containing SO₂. As exposure progressed, conductance rates fell in the −1/3 and −1 atm treatments but were largely unaffected in the −3 and −5 atm treatments.

Severe water-soaking caused by SO₂ was noted at 1130 hours on the leaves of plants in the −1/3 atm treatment, and slightly less water-soaking was observed at this time on plant leaves from the −1 atm treatment. Water-soaking corresponded to a large decrease in stomatal conductance between 1100 and 1130 hours at those two soil moisture regimes (Fig. 3).

The stomatal conductance rate of plants in the −1/3 and −1 atm treatments continued to decrease during exposure until 1400 hours, when the leaf tissue was too water-soaked to allow measurements to be taken. After exposure, the stomatal conductance rate of leaves from plants growing in the −1 atm treatment rose sharply upon return to the preexposure chamber, then fell. The stomatal conductance of plants exposed to SO₂ under −3 and −5 atm soil moisture stress was not affected by any treatment. Foliar injury induced by SO₂ averaged 96, 83, 0, and 0%, respectively, for the −1/3, −1, −3, and −5 atm treatments.

When control plants were moved from the preexposure chamber to the exposure chamber without SO₂, the stomatal conductance rate of plants grown under −1/3 and −1 atm treatments increased almost sixfold to a peak of more than 2.3 cm/sec (Fig. 4). The conductance rate of plants in the −3 and −5 atm treatments did not increase. The conductance rate of unexposed control plants decreased when the plants were returned to the preexposure growth chamber, while that of plants exposed to SO₂ remained at a minimum upon return to the preexposure chamber.

**DISCUSSION**

The range of plant water potentials from −1/3 to −3 atm is not generally considered extremely damaging to bean plants in the field (6, 24) but induced stunting in our experiment. Water was sufficient for plant viability in all treatments, and plants did not visibly wilt at any time. Apparently, processes other than those associated with visible wilting were responsible for the growth reductions observed. Effects on cell expansion, one of the processes most sensitive to water stress in plants (6), may have contributed to the reduced growth rate.

The relationship between soil moisture content and percentage of macroscopic injury resembled the general trends reported by others (9, 14, 19). However, large changes in macroscopic SO₂ injury corresponding to relatively small differences in soil moisture content have not been reported previously and illustrate that soil moisture is critical to pinto bean plant response to SO₂ in this system, especially for soil moisture contents near 23%.

### TABLE 1. Mean percentage SO₂ injury, percentage soil moisture, stomatal conductance rate, and plant water potential of pinto bean plants grown at −1/3, −1, −3, and −5 atm of soil water potential

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Soil water potential (atm)</th>
<th>SO₂ injury</th>
<th>Soil moisture</th>
<th>Conductance rate</th>
<th>Plant water potential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>−1/3</td>
<td>97.8 a</td>
<td>27.0 a</td>
<td>0.224 a</td>
<td>−1.05 a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−1</td>
<td>77.0 b</td>
<td>23.8 b</td>
<td>0.196 b</td>
<td>−1.41 ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−3</td>
<td>2.3 c</td>
<td>20.1 c</td>
<td>0.107 c</td>
<td>−2.72 ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−5</td>
<td>0.0 c</td>
<td>19.4 c</td>
<td>0.091 c</td>
<td>−3.41 b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Each mean is the average of 144 values (12 measurements, three treatment lengths, four replicates).*

*Values in a column followed by different letters are significantly different (P = 0.05).*

*Each mean is the average of 24 values (two measurements, three treatment lengths, four replicates).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Soil water potential</th>
<th>Percentage SO₂ injury</th>
<th>Percentage soil moisture</th>
<th>Conductance rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage SO₂ injury</td>
<td>0.889</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage soil moisture</td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>0.905</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conductance rate</td>
<td>0.801</td>
<td>0.838</td>
<td>0.820</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant water potential</td>
<td>−0.690</td>
<td>−0.639</td>
<td>−0.591</td>
<td>−0.574</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Each correlation coefficient is significant (P = 0.05).*
Plants grown at −1/3 and −1 atm soil moisture stress had much higher stomatal conductance rates (and SO$_2$ uptake) than those grown at −3 and −5 atm, corresponding to the amount of injury induced by SO$_2$ at each treatment. These results agree with Schramel’s (18) general report that decreased SO$_2$ injury at “drought” vs “optimum moisture” conditions was correlated with decreased stomatal conductance and gas uptake. However, Schramel did not quantify this relationship, nor were soil moisture levels between the extremes included. The high correlation coefficients obtained with our data indicate that all variables were correlated with decreased SO$_2$ injury. The available soil water would have a profound effect on all variables measured in our study. Limited soil moisture induces stomatal closure, which is known to inhibit SO$_2$ uptake and subsequent foliar injury in bean plants (14,17).

Transpiration, leaf water potential, and net photosynthesis are directly related to stomatal conductance (1,6,8). Increased stomatal opening and conductance rates have been reported at relatively low concentrations of SO$_2$ (2,3,12,13,24). However, stomatal conductance rate of fully watered plants may decrease in response to high concentrations of SO$_2$ (2,9,17). Sij and Swanson (20) reported that stomatal closure in response to SO$_2$ was caused by an increase in the partial pressure of CO$_2$ within the leaf caused by the inhibition of photosynthesis by SO$_2$. In our study, the conductance rate dropped rapidly with the onset of visible water-soaking, which was the first indication of macroscopic SO$_2$ injury. This decrease could have been the result of a reversible closure of the stomata or of irreversible closure caused by death of the cells near or comprising the stomata. The conductance rate of plants grown under −1 atm soil water potential increased after exposure when the plants were returned to the re-exposure chamber, which suggests that in this case, the decrease in stomatal conductance was caused by a reversible closure of the stomata in response to the high concentration of SO$_2$.

Increased light intensity has been correlated with increased stomatal opening and increased conductance rates (4,8,21). The main environmental difference between our re-exposure and exposure chambers was light intensity (33 and 45 klx, respectively). Moving the plants from a lower to a higher light intensity probably accounts for the large rise in conductance rate of the unexposed control plants at −1/3 and −1 atm (Fig. 4). This rise contrasts sharply with the large decrease in conductance rate in plants grown under the same soil moisture regimes but then exposed to SO$_2$ (Figs. 3 and 4) and emphasizes the role of SO$_2$ in inducing stomatal closure. Stomatal conductance of plants in −3 and −5 atm soil water potential did not show an increase in stomatal conductance rate when placed in the higher light intensity of the exposure chamber without SO$_2$, nor did their conductance rate decrease in response to SO$_2$. A lack of turgor in the guard cells of plants under water stress and the inability of the plant to build up turgor could explain the relatively consistent conductance rate of plants grown at −3 and −5 atm soil water potentials and exposed to light and SO$_2$.

**LITERATURE CITED**


![Fig. 4. Stomatal conductance rates of the unifoliolate leaves of control pinto bean plants grown under varying soil water potential at 27°C, 75% relative humidity (RH), and 33 klux light intensity (A and B). Between the dashed lines, the plants were placed in the exposure chamber without SO$_2$ at 27°C, 75% RH, and 45 klux light intensity. Each point is the average of two replicates.](image-url)

