Site preparation burning to improve southern Appalachian pine-hardwood stands: nitrogen responses in soil, soil water, and streams

JENNIFER D. KNOEPP and WAYNE T. SWANK

USDA Forest Service, Southeastern Forest Experiment Station, Coweeta Hydrologic Laboratory, Otto, NC 28763, U.S.A.


Three paired watersheds treated with a fell and burn prescription were studied to determine the effects on soil, soil water, and stream water. Soil nitrification and mineralization were measured by in situ closed-core incubation. Soil water was collected with porous cup lysimeters placed at 30 and 60 cm depths, and water samples were collected from streams draining control and burned areas on one of the three sites. All data were collected for 6 months prior to and 12 months after treatment. Soil ammonium (NH₄⁺) content increased significantly in all three sites after burning, but the magnitude differed greatly among sites. However, there was no change in soil nitrate (NO₃⁻) content. In situ measurements of net mineralization showed increased rates with increasing burn severity. Net nitrification displayed no treatment response. Slight and nonsignificant increases in soil water NO₃⁻ concentration occurred after burning in two of the three streams. Stream water NO₃⁻ concentrations increased in the one stream sampled. Thus, while prescribed burning increased available soil N, there was little change in N transformation rates or movement of dissolved inorganic N off site during the first year after burning.

Introduction

Few studies have examined the consequences of site preparation burning in an ecosystem context. As Swift et al. (1993) explain in detail, a major study is being conducted in the southern Appalachians to understand the effects of a fell and burn site preparation treatment on basic ecosystem processes and the integrated response to disturbance. The intent is to determine whether site preparation goals are met without adversely affecting long-term site productivity. This paper examines the influence of the site preparation treatment on soil nitrogen (N) content and transformations and soil and stream water N during the first year after treatment.

Generally, fire in forested systems decreases total ecosystem N (Neary et al. 1984; Rapp 1990). This loss is due to the volatilization of N contained in wood, leaf materials, and the forest floor during the fire. Fire affects the chemical, biological, and physical properties of soil (DeBano 1991); it alters N transformations and the amount and form of soil N. Initial increases in soil-extractable NH₄⁺ concentrations are generally attributed to the downward movement of volatilized N and its subsequent condensation in the cool soil layers below. This increase has been noted by several researchers (for example, Adams and Attiwill 1986; Klopatek et al. 1990; White 1986) and in many cases is observed for less than 1 year. Fire also can affect soil microorganisms directly or indirectly. Heating the soil can decimate microbial populations at the soil surface and alter the availability of carbon and soil nutrients as well as the soil climate. These factors can produce noticeable changes in N transformation rates. Nitrifying microorganisms are particularly sensitive to increases in soil temperature (Dunn et al. 1985). Soil physical properties affected by fire are those dependent on the soil organic matter. These include soil structure, aggregation, and pore space. All of these factors influence soil microbial processes through changes in soil moisture holding capacity, aeration, and heat transfer. The actual impact of fire on soil physical properties depends on both the severity and intensity of the fire.

The effects of fire on long-term productivity vary widely among forest systems. Sutherland et al. (1991) simulated a decrease in ponderosa pine (Pinus ponderosa Laws.) growth for 2 years following burning. Waldrop et al. (1987) examined the long-term effects of periodic and annual summer and winter burns on total soil N pools in Pinus taeda L. forests of the southern Coastal Plain. They found that after 30 years soil N was actually increased slightly by annual burning. The increase was attributed to increased symbiotic N₂-fixation. Vance and Henderson (1984) found that the NH₄⁺ concentration of soils in the Missouri Ozarks was lower on burned than on control plots. They also found that rates of N mineraliza-
tion decreased, indicating that available N was lower on the burned sites. High-intensity fires can result in increased soil erosion (Tiedemann et al. 1979) and therefore N losses. However, prescribed burns characteristic of this study seldom result in excessive erosion (see Swift et al. 1993). Binkley (1991) concluded that sustained production of western forests is possible over the long term, even with the losses of N that occur with fire, because of atmospheric deposition and N$_2$ fixation over the forest rotation. He noted that it may be possible to improve site productivity by decreasing N losses associated with burning and other treatments.

**Materials and methods**

Historic land abuse, oak decline, and southern pine beetle infestations have created a sparse pine-hardwood overstory and a dense understory dominated by mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia* L.) on xeric sites in the southern Appalachians. Mountain laurel thickets nearly preclude regeneration of overstory species. The prescription for these highly degraded sites is to fell all woody vegetation on the site, allow it to dry, then burn it under precise environmental conditions (Swift et al. 1993). Sites are then planted with white pine (*Pinus strobus* L.) on a wide spacing (4 x 4 m) to obtain a mixed pine-hardwood forest.

We chose three sites (Jacob Branch East (JE), Jacob Branch West (JW), and Devil Den (DD)) in the Wayah District of the Nantahala National Forest of western North Carolina (35°N, 83°W). They were selected from a large number of sites for which the fell and burn treatment was prescribed by National Forest managers. All sites have a south to southwesterly aspect with soils in the Cowee-Evard series, fine-loamy, mixed, mesic Typic Hapludults. Five 15 x 33 m treatment plots were established at each site. Four control plots of equal size were located on adjacent untreated areas. Plots were placed along the elevation gradient present on each area.

The three sites were clear-felled in June through August 1990. Site preparation burning was done on September 18, 19, and 21, 1990, at JE, JW, and DD, respectively. Based on flame temperatures, woody fuel and forest floor consumption, and heat penetration into the soil, fires were characterized as high intensity (above-ground temperature) and light severity (heat penetration into the soil). Fire intensity and severity were greatest at JE (Swift et al. 1993). Control plots were neither clear-felled nor burned.

Soil N transformation rates were determined in situ by the core incubation method (Adams and Attiwill 1986). Measurements began in April 1990, 6 months prior to burning. Initial postburn samples were collected within 48 h of treatment. Soil N content and transformation rates were determined monthly for 6 months prior to and 2 months after treatment. Subsequently, soil N sampling was reduced to a bimonthly schedule. September soil data are the first taken after burning. Two pairs of 4.3-cm PVC pipes were placed 25 cm apart in the soil to a depth of 10 cm on each of the five treated and four control plots. One of each pair was returned to the laboratory for processing ($t = 0$); the other was capped and left in the field for 28 days ($t = 1$). Soils cores were collected, kept cool, returned to the laboratory, and stored at 4°C until processed, normally within 24 h. The two soil cores were composited by plot. Soils were sieved to <6 mm and extracted for 1 h in 2 M KCl at a 1:4 soil to extractant ratio, then centrifuged. NO$_3^-$-N and NH$_4^+$-N concentrations in KCl solutions were determined on a Technicon AutoAnalyzer using the hydrogen sulfide reduction (Environmental Protection Agency No. 353.1) and alkaline phenol (Technicon Industrial Methods 108-71 W) methods, respectively. Rates of nitrification and mineralization are calculated as the difference in NO$_3^-$-N or NO$_2^-$-N plus NH$_4^+$-N concentrations in soil cores at $t = 0$ and $t = 1$. All soil concentrations and rates of N transformation are reported on a 105°C oven dry weight basis. Bulk density was determined for the 10-cm soil cores on the <6-mm fraction for conversion of data to an area basis.

Soil samples were collected for chemical analysis during the growing season prior to treatment, following the first substantial post-treatment precipitation less than 1 month after burning and 6 months and 1 year following treatment. The A and AB, BA, or Bt surface horizons were collected from control and burned plots. Samples represent composites of 24 to 36 individual 2.5-cm soil probe samples separated by horizon. Samples were air dried and sieved <2 mm prior to analysis. Bulk densities were determined on intact soil cores collected from representative soil pits at each site. In Table 1 weights per hectare are estimated from actual horizon depths for each soil layer. Total N and carbon were determined via dry combustion with a Perkin-Elmer 2400 CHN Analyzer.

Porous cup lysimeters were installed for soil water collection on all nine plots at each of the three sites at 30 and 60 cm depths. Soil water collection began in April 1990 and have continued through the present. Postburn lysimeter data are first presented as October 1990 data. Sampling depths were chosen from Soil Conservation Service Soil Survey information, which indicated that these depths bracketed the Bt2 horizon for these soil types. Soil water samples were collected weekly and composited to obtain a weighted monthly sample. NO$_3^-$- and NH$_4^+$-N concentrations were determined using Dionex ion chromatograph and Technicon AutoAnalyzer alkaline phenol methods, respectively.

JE was the only site with a perennial stream draining the treated area and an adjacent untreated area. These two streams were sampled via weekly grab samples. Weekly samples were composited to obtain a monthly sample. NO$_3^-$- and NH$_4^+$-N concentrations were determined using Dionex ion chromatograph and Technicon AutoAnalyzer alkaline phenol methods, respectively.

Sites were selected for their similarity in topography and soils; however, there were numerous differences. These differences included site history, pretreatment vegetation composition (Vose and Swank 1993), and fire treatment characteristics, intensity, and severity (Swift et al. 1993). We used site as a dummy variable in initial statistical analyses and found that site differences overwhelmed any significant treatment effect. Therefore, in further analyses each of the three sites were analyzed separately. Owing to the seasonal response in N transformations, each sample date was analyzed separately. Analysis of covariance by site for each post-treatment sample date was performed using pretreatment data as the covariate for KCl-extractable soil NO$_3^-$-N, NH$_4^+$-N, N transformation rates, lysimeter N concentrations, and total soil N contents. These analyses showed that none of the covariates were significant. This led to our use of the I-test to compare treatment means by site and sample date. Variance homogeneity was tested with a folded F statistic. When variances were unequal, an approximate t-test and Satterthwaite’s approximation for computing degrees of freedom were used (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, N.C.). Graphs present site means (treatment, $n = 5$; control, $n = 4$). Stream NO$_3^-$-N and NH$_4^+$-N concentrations represent the monthly composited sample from the stream draining the treated area of JE only. One stream was sampled; therefore no statistical analysis was possible.

**Results**

Soil samples collected within 48 h after burning showed an immediate pulse of NH$_4^+$ at all three sites, but differences were not statistically significant for all sites (Fig. 1). Content changes were largest on JE, the most severe bum, with values increasing from $<1$ to $>3.5$ kg N ha$^{-1}$ the first 3 months after burning. NH$_4^+$ content pulse was smallest on DD, the least intense bum treatment. Soil NH$_4^+$ content remained elevated for the 12 months after treatment. The magnitude and continuity of the increase varied with site and was only significant during some dates. Soil NO$_3^-$ content displayed no consistent response to burning.

The rate of mineralization increased at JW in August after vegetation was felled, before site burning (Fig. 2). Clear-felling responses were not significant at other sites. Nitrogen mineralization was quite variable during the months after burning. The response generally increased with burning intensity, JE >
**Ammonium Nitrogen**

**Jacob Branch East**

- Values represent means of four and five plots for the control and burn plots, respectively. Date of clear-felling and site burning are indicated. September means are the first postburn data. + and * indicate significant difference between control and treatment means at p ≤ 0.1 and 0.05, respectively.

**Nitrate Nitrogen**

**Jacob Branch East**

**Jacob Branch West**

**Devil Den**

Fig. 1. Ammonium and nitrate nitrogen content of soils before and after fell and burn treatment for control and burn plots. Values represent means of four and five plots for the control and burn plots, respectively. Date of clear-felling and site burning are indicated. September means are the first postburn data. + and * indicate significant difference between control and treatment means at p ≤ 0.1 and 0.05, respectively.

There was no treatment response in soil water NH₄⁺ concentrations at either 30 or 60 cm depths (data not shown). Felling and burning did increase soil water concentrations of NO₃⁻ at both depths for all three sites, but the differences were rarely statistically significant (Fig. 3). The increase in NO₃⁻ concentration was roughly proportional to the intensity of the burn; it was greatest on JE. While the response to treatment was quite striking graphically, actual concentrations in solutions from the 30-cm lysimeters were less than 0.5, 0.2, and 0.02 mg L⁻¹ for JE, JW, and DD, respectively. Concentrations of NO₃⁻ at 60 cm depth were lower, ranging from less than 0.3 for JE to 0.02 mg L⁻¹ for DD.

The small response of soil water NO₃⁻ to the fell and burn treatment was also reflected by a small response observed in the stream draining JE (Fig. 4). Concentrations of stream water NO₃⁻ increased after treatment, from <0.01 mg L⁻¹ up to a maximum of 0.075 mg L⁻¹ and remained elevated until June of the following year. At that time NO₃⁻ concentrations in the stream returned to pretreatment levels. The small early increases in September may be partially attributed to the cutting treatment.

**Discussion**

The treatment applied in the present study differs from some types of prescribed burning previously studied. Unlike
the green fuels present during wildfires, our large and small fuels were dry. In understory site preparation burns, fuel loading is low and consists mainly of small woody fuels and forest floor materials. The resulting fire has a low intensity. The fell and burn technique can produce fires of high intensity, similar to the broadcast burns of the western United States. The presence of large woody fuel and considerable amounts of small fuels (mountain laurel) produced total fuel loads from 126 Mt·ha⁻¹ on DD to 224 Mt·ha⁻¹ on JE. The resulting fires were high in intensity. Site topography, with slopes up to 60%, caused the fires to be of short duration and therefore low severity, with minimal heat pulse into the soil (Swift et al. 1993).

**Soil nitrogen and transformations**

Increases in soil NH₄⁺ result from two processes: (i) volatilization of organic N from the soil surface and its condensation after downward movement into cooler soil horizons below and (ii) increases in N mineralization rates. Evidence for NH₃ condensation was provided by Rauch (1991) in an experiment done in conjunction with our study. Prior to burning, he replaced the forest floor with "N-labeled litter both in the field and in a controlled laboratory experiment using soil cores 10 cm in diameter and 10 cm deep. Movement of "N-labeled N in the field experiment was extremely variable, making results nonconclusive. However, under controlled laboratory burning conditions, 4% of the ¹⁵N-label was consistently found in KCl-extractable NH₄⁺ in the A horizon of soil cores. Increases in NH₄⁺ levels observed after the fire, in the September samples, were probably a result of volatilization and condensation. These samples were collected within 24 to 48 h after burning, not enough time for an increase in N mineralization. Elevated NH₄⁺ at later sample dates could be residual NH₄⁺ added during the fire or from N mineralization.

The amplitude of the soil NH₄⁺ response to treatment followed the same order as the fire intensity; i.e., JE > JW > DD. This relationship has been identified by others examining soil...
responses to fire. Marion et al. (1991) found that soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) concentration increased with fire severity in chaparral systems, and similar trends were observed by Kovacic et al. (1986) on ponderosa pine sites in New Mexico. Levels of soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) remained elevated for 1 year after burning. While increases in extractable \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) are normally found after fires, the duration of increases is quite variable. Phillips and Goh (1985), Adams and Attiwill (1986), and Klopatek et al. (1990) found \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) increases were short-lived, i.e., 3-4 months. Jurgensen et al. (1981), White (1986), Ryan and Covington (1986), and Kutiel and Naveh (1987a, 1987b) found increases in soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) for 6 to 14 months after burn treatments. Duration of elevated soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) response is probably influenced by the timing (season) of burning, variability in \( N \) immobilization rates as suggested by Adams and Attiwill (1986), and environmental conditions.

Soil texture and organic matter content play an important role in losses or removal of \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) from a site following burning. In a review of fire effects in the southern region, Christensen (1987) suggests that losses of nutrients due to leaching vary greatly with the adsorptive capacity of the soils. The clay accumulation in the Bt horizon in our study soils would prevent any losses of \( \text{NH}_4^+ \), even in the event of low plant uptake. Christensen (1987) also points out that ash is a long-term source of \( N \) and other nutrients in burned sites. Our prolonged elevated \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) levels are thus explainable. The Bt horizon prevents leaching or movement of \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) with soil water, and the ash on site acts as a \( N \) source, replenishing any \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) lost from the soil by plant uptake or transformation to \( \text{NO}_3^- \). The potential for rapid movement or transformation of \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) is discussed by Rapp (1990). Immediately after fire in a Mediterranean forest he found a fourfold increase in soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) in the 0-2 cm soil layer, but no increase was apparent at the 2–10 cm depth. Six weeks later, \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) and \( \text{NO}_3^- \) were elevated at 0-2 cm, but only \( \text{NO}_3^- \) increased at the 2-10 cm depth. Covington and Sackett (1986) examined the long-term effects of burning on \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) levels in soils of a ponderosa pine stand. They found elevated \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) levels in plots burned every 1, 2, or 4 years. On a 5-year cycle, however, soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) levels were equal on treated and control plots.

While burning substantially increased the amount of soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) in our study, the response of \( \text{nitrification} \) varied by site. Response was again linked to fire severity, being greatest at JE and less pronounced at JW and DD. Other prescribed burning studies also show a wide range of response for these processes. Schoch and Binkley (1986) found no change in rates of \( N \) mineralization 1 day after burning, but after 6 months, increases in the top 10 cm of soil were noted. Klopatek et al. (1990) performed burns under controlled laboratory conditions using microcosms. They reported an increase in soil \( \text{NH}_4^+ \) concentrations but no increase in mineralization. However, over the 90 days during which they incubated the burned soil cores, nitrification did occur. Kutiel and Naveh (1987a) found increasing soil \( \text{NO}_3^- \) content for the 8 months they sampled after a very intense summer burn. In a southern pine stand, 2 years after chopping and burning, Burger and Pritchett (1984) found a decrease in \( N \) mineralization rates compared with the control plots. These conflicting results point out the variability of microbial response to fires. Adams and Attiwill (1986) found that fire increased mineralization and the amount of mineralizable \( N \) in \( Eucalyptus \) spp. They suggest that sites with high productivity and \( N \) capital are the most susceptible to \( N \) losses after site disturbance. This conclusion contradicts our findings. In our study the site with the highest soil \( N \) capital is DD, with 650-750 kg ha\(^{-1}\) in the A horizon. However, this site showed the least response to burning, the lowest inorganic \( N \) concentrations, and the lowest \( N \) transformation rates. In our study it seems more likely that response differences result from differences in soil temperatures reached during the fire, carbon availability, and the amount of soil organic matter consumed. Hungerford et al. (1991) concluded that the presence of readily available carbon determines whether mineralization and nitrification increase after site burning or other disturbance.

The literature indicates that the effect of burning on total soil \( N \) is highly variable. In our study, there was no change in total \( N \). Klopatek et al. (1990) and Covington and Sackett (1986) reported similar findings in western conifer stands. Burger and Pritchett (1984) measured a decrease in total \( N \) 2 years after burning with chopping. Loss of \( N \) from the soil and forest floor is directly proportional to the amount of organic matter consumed by the fire (DeBano 1991). In our study Vose and Swank (1993) found that only the Oi layer of

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**Table 1.** Total soil nitrogen content of A horizon and total surface to 20 cm depth (A + AB-BA-Bt 1 horizons) for one preburn and three postburn dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Soil*</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Burn</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p &gt; t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JE</td>
<td>A horizon (4.2 cm)</td>
<td>Preburn</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.65</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postburn</td>
<td>1 month</td>
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<td>344</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>6 months</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (20 cm)</td>
<td>Preburn</td>
<td>1157</td>
<td>986</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1280</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>6 months</td>
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<td>1120</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>1375</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>6 months</td>
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<td>430</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>259</td>
<td>405</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>6 months</td>
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<td>1369</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>12 months</td>
<td>1248</td>
<td>1268</td>
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<td>DD</td>
<td>A horizon (5.1 cm)</td>
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<td>644</td>
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<td>Postburn</td>
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<td>594</td>
<td>667</td>
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<td>598</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>12 months</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1867</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1854</td>
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<td>0.20</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>12 months</td>
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<td>1420</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Values represent plot means (n = 5 and 4 for burn and control plots, respectively).

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the forest floor was consumed by the fire. Burning produced no significant change in the total Oe + Oa layer. However, taken across sites, N losses from aboveground vegetation plus the Oi layer were about 20% of the total soil N pool to 20 cm depth (Vose and Swank 1993). The soil heat pulse from our fires did not greatly elevate temperatures (Swift et al. 1993). Retention of the Oe and Oa layers and low soil temperature during the fire contributed little to initial effect on the soil organic matter. The longer term effects on soil and forest floor N pools will continue to be measured.

**Soil and stream water nitrogen**

Decreases in nitrate concentration in soil water between 30 and 60 cm in our study are consistent with trends found in other studies in southern Appalachian forests (Swank and Swank 1984; Waide et al. 1988). The 30-cm sample is collected from soil in the very active rooting zone of the soil profile, whereas the 60-cm samples represent water that can potentially be lost from the site. The depletion of $\text{NO}_3^-$ in soil water moving from 30 to 60 cm decreases further in moving to the stream. Even during the 8 months when $\text{NO}_3^-$ levels were elevated, a maximum concentration of 0.075 $\text{mg} \cdot \text{L}^{-1}$ was not great enough to result in net losses of N from the site, since inorganic N inputs from rainfall (average annual concentration of 0.30 $\text{mg} \cdot \text{L}^{-1}$) would more than compensate for this loss.

Stream N increases due to disturbance vary greatly with the site and the type of disturbance. Neary and Courier (1982) studied the impact of wildfire on pine sites in the South Carolina Blue Ridge Mountains. Wildfires covering more than 30% of the watershed resulted in a threefold increase in $\text{NO}_3^-$ concentration of stream water compared with a control watershed.

**Fig. 3.** Nitrate nitrogen per litre of soil solution collected using tension lysimeters, at 30 and 60 cm depths. Values represent means of four and five plots for the control and burn plots, respectively. October means are the first postburn data. + and * indicate significant difference between control and treatment means at $p \leq 0.1$ and 0.05, respectively. Note that scales for the three sites are different.
Values of 0.004 mg N·L⁻¹ increased to 0.012 mg N·L⁻¹; this increase, though small, was statistically significant. There was no change in NH₄⁺ concentration. Douglas and Van Lear (1983) examined the effects of site preparation burning in the Piedmont of South Carolina. They found no increases in NO₃⁻ or other nutrients after burning. In Oregon, Tiedemann et al. (1983) found that harvest without burning resulted in no NO₃⁻ in stream water. However in clearcuts with as little as 17% of the area machine piled and burned, there were significant increases in stream NO₃⁻ concentration.

Summary

Soil NH₄⁺ content increased immediately after prescribed burning on pine-hardwood stands in the southern Appalachians because of the volatilization and condensation of N, though values were not always significant. However, levels of extractable NO₃⁻ and rates of in situ mineralization and nitrification showed small and highly variable responses to the treatment. Soil water NO₃⁻ levels responded to the disturbance, resulting in slight increases during the growing season after treatment. Stream water draining one of the treated areas showed an increase in NO₃⁻ concentration immediately following the treatment. Losses of N in ground and stream water are below levels of concern for either water quality or site productivity. The fell and burn prescription carried out on these sites resulted in increased N availability without soil N losses in the first year after treatment.


