

**The mobilisation of soil phosphorus in surface runoff from  
intensively managed pastures in south-east Australia**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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# Table of Contents

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LIST OF FIGURES .....	VI
LIST OF TABLES .....	VIII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	IX
ABBREVIATIONS .....	XI
ABSTRACT.....	XII
DECLARATION .....	XIV
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND SYNOPSIS .....</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1 PHOSPHORUS, AGRICULTURE AND THE WATER QUALITY PROBLEM .....	15
1.2 THE EXPERIMENTS .....	17
1.3 CONCLUSIONS.....	22
<b>CHAPTER 2 PHOSPHORUS TRANSFER IN SURFACE RUNOFF FROM INTENSIVE PASTURE SYSTEMS AT VARIOUS SCALES: A LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION .....	23
2.2 CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF P TRANSFER .....	25
2.2.1 <i>Phosphorus sources</i> .....	26
2.3 PHOSPHORUS MOBILISATION.....	28
2.3.1 <i>Physical processes of mobilisation</i> .....	30
2.3.2 <i>Chemical processes of mobilisation</i> .....	31
2.3.3 <i>Incidental mobilisation</i> .....	35
2.4 P TRANSPORT – PATHWAYS AND PROCESSES.....	36
2.4.1 <i>Hillslope hydrology</i> .....	36
2.4.2 <i>Major pathways of P transfer</i> .....	39
2.4.3 <i>Variable source area (VSA)</i> .....	40
2.5 SCALE AND LANDSCAPE EFFECTS ON P MOBILISATION AND TRANSPORT.....	42
2.5.1 <i>The effects of scale on processes determining P mobilisation</i> .....	43
2.5.2 <i>The effect of landscape on processes determining P mobilisation</i> .....	45
2.5.3 <i>The effect of changing flow conditions on runoff P</i> .....	46
2.5.4 <i>Overland flow hydrological theory</i> .....	46
2.5.5 <i>Effect of time of contact and water:soil ratio</i> .....	47
2.6 RAINFALL SIMULATION.....	50
2.6.1 <i>Rainfall/runoff intensity</i> .....	51
2.6.2 <i>Plot size (length)</i> .....	51
2.6.3 <i>Modelling the effect of rainfall simulation parameters</i> .....	52
2.7 CONCLUSIONS.....	53
<b>CHAPTER 3 GENERAL MATERIALS AND METHODS .....</b>	<b>55</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION .....	55
3.2 THE STUDY SITES .....	55
3.2.1 <i>Flaxley</i> .....	55
3.2.2 <i>Camden</i> .....	57
3.3 ANALYTICAL QUALITY ASSURANCE .....	60
3.4 RAINFALL SIMULATION.....	60
3.5 WATER SAMPLE HANDLING AND ANALYSIS .....	62
3.5.1 <i>Sample handling and filtration</i> .....	62

3.5.2	<i>Runoff sample analysis</i> .....	63
3.6	SOIL SAMPLING, HANDLING AND ANALYSIS .....	65
3.6.1	<i>Sampling collection and preparation</i> .....	65
3.6.2	<i>Soil sample analysis</i> .....	66
3.7	ANCILLARY MEASUREMENTS .....	68
<b>CHAPTER 4 PROCESSES OF P MOBILISATION AND CONCENTRATIONS IN RUNOFF – EFFECT OF PLOT SCALE AND RAINFALL INTENSITY.....</b>		<b>70</b>
4.1	INTRODUCTION .....	70
4.2	MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	72
4.2.1	<i>Location and site management</i> .....	73
4.2.2	<i>Runoff plots and rainfall simulations</i> .....	73
4.2.3	<i>Structure of rainfall simulation experiments</i> .....	77
4.2.4	<i>Soil sampling and analysis</i> .....	78
4.2.5	<i>Runoff sample analysis</i> .....	78
4.2.6	<i>Statistical analysis</i> .....	79
4.3	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	79
4.3.1	<i>General soil characteristics</i> .....	79
4.3.2	<i>Plot hydrology and runoff</i> .....	80
4.3.3	<i>The effect of CaCl<sub>2</sub>-P, method and event on P in runoff</i> .....	82
4.4	CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .....	86
<b>CHAPTER 5 THE EFFECT OF RAINFALL INTENSITY ON THE PROCESSES OF P MOBILISATION AND THE RESULTANT CONCENTRATION OF P IN RUNOFF .....</b>		<b>88</b>
5.1	INTRODUCTION .....	88
5.2	MATERIALS AND METHODS - RAINFALL INTENSITY EFFECTS ON P FORM AND CONCENTRATION.....	90
5.2.1	<i>Soil sampling and analysis</i> .....	91
5.2.2	<i>Runoff sampling and analysis</i> .....	91
5.2.3	<i>Statistical analysis</i> .....	91
5.3	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION - RAINFALL INTENSITY EFFECTS ON P FORM AND CONCENTRATION.....	92
5.3.1	<i>Effect of rainfall intensity on runoff P mobilisation</i> .....	92
5.3.2	<i>Is P mobilisation source or rate limited?</i> .....	95
5.4	MATERIALS AND METHODS - MODELLING HYDROLOGICAL EFFECTS ON RUNOFF P CONCENTRATIONS.....	98
5.4.1	<i>Background theory</i> .....	100
5.4.2	<i>Measurement and/or derivation of hydrological parameters for rainfall simulations</i> .....	103
5.4.3	<i>Derivation of P release kinetic parameters</i> .....	104
5.4.4	<i>Statistical analysis</i> .....	106
5.5	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION - MODELLING HYDROLOGICAL EFFECTS ON RUNOFF P CONCENTRATIONS.....	106
5.5.1	<i>Prediction of the relationship between rainfall simulation and hillslope runoff P concentrations - Camden</i> .....	109
5.5.2	<i>Sensitivity analysis and limitations of this modelling approach</i> .....	111
5.6	CONCLUSIONS.....	112
<b>CHAPTER 6 THE EFFECT OF SOIL P STATUS ON RUNOFF P CONCENTRATIONS .....</b>		<b>115</b>
6.1	INTRODUCTION .....	115
6.2	MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	117

6.2.1	<i>Soil P mapping</i> .....	117
6.2.2	<i>Rainfall simulation</i> .....	118
6.2.3	<i>Ancillary measurements</i> .....	119
6.2.4	<i>Comparison of Flaxley soil and runoff data with other data</i> .....	119
6.2.5	<i>Statistical analysis</i> .....	120
6.3	RESULTS .....	121
6.3.1	<i>Flaxley site characteristics</i> .....	121
6.3.2	<i>Rainfall simulation characteristics</i> .....	122
6.3.3	<i>Relationship between soil P measures</i> .....	124
6.3.4	<i>Soil P-runoff P relationships</i> .....	126
6.3.5	<i>Comparison of Australian and North American soil P - runoff P relationships</i> ..	130
6.4	CONCLUSIONS.....	133
<b>CHAPTER 7 STRATIFICATION, FORMS AND MOBILITY OF PHOSPHORUS IN THE TOPSOILS OF CHROMOSOLS USED FOR DAIRYING .....</b>		<b>135</b>
7.1	INTRODUCTION .....	135
7.2	METHODS .....	137
7.2.1	<i>Soil sampling</i> .....	137
7.2.2	<i>Soil preparation and analysis</i> .....	138
7.2.3	<i>Calculation of the effective depth of interaction (EDI)</i> .....	138
7.2.4	<i>Runoff generation and collection</i> .....	139
7.2.5	<i>Runoff analysis</i> .....	140
7.2.6	<i>Ultrafiltration of runoff samples</i> .....	140
7.2.7	<i>Statistical analysis</i> .....	142
7.3	RESULTS .....	143
7.3.1	<i>General soil properties</i> .....	143
7.3.2	<i>Soil P forms</i> .....	146
7.3.3	<i>P stratification</i> .....	147
7.3.4	<i>Labile soil P forms</i> .....	150
7.3.5	<i>Effective depth of interaction</i> .....	151
7.3.6	<i>The physical and chemical distribution of P in runoff: the effect of soil P status</i> .....	151
7.3.7	<i>Ultrafiltration of runoff samples and the importance of colloidal P</i> .....	153
7.4	CONCLUSIONS.....	158
<b>CHAPTER 8 EXAMINATION OF SOIL P FORMS USING SOLID-STATE <sup>31</sup>P NMR .....</b>		<b>159</b>
8.1	INTRODUCTION .....	159
8.2	MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	161
8.2.1	<i>Site description and soil sampling</i> .....	161
8.2.2	<i>Soil analysis</i> .....	161
8.2.3	<i>NMR Spectroscopy</i> .....	162
8.3	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	165
8.3.1	<i>Wet chemical P analyses</i> .....	165
8.3.2	<i>Comparison of <sup>31</sup>P CP and DP NMR spectra for soil M-H</i> .....	166
8.3.3	<i>Spin counting</i> .....	170
8.3.4	<i>The effect of paramagnetic iron on NMR observability</i> .....	177
8.4	CONCLUSIONS .....	181
<b>CHAPTER 9 EVALUATION OF DE-STRATIFICATION TO REDUCE RUNOFF P CONCENTRATIONS .....</b>		<b>182</b>
9.1	INTRODUCTION .....	182

9.2	MATERIAL AND METHODS.....	184
9.2.1	<i>Laboratory incubation</i> .....	184
9.2.2	<i>De-stratification in runoff trays</i> .....	185
9.3	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....	185
9.3.1	<i>Laboratory incubation</i> .....	185
9.3.2	<i>De-stratification in runoff trays</i> .....	187
9.3.3	<i>Possible limitations on the benefits of de-stratification</i> .....	188
9.4	CONCLUSIONS.....	190
<b>CHAPTER 10</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS AND INDUSTRY IMPLICATIONS .....</b>	<b>191</b>
10.1	SUMMARY OF FINDINGS .....	191
10.2	FUTURE RESEARCH .....	193
<b>CHAPTER 11</b>	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>196</b>

# List of Figures

FIGURE 2-1. CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF PHOSPHORUS (P) TRANSFER.....	26
FIGURE 2-2. THE PHOSPHORUS (P) CYCLE IN THE SOIL-PLANT CONTINUUM.....	27
FIGURE 2-3. SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE SOIL/PLANT SYSTEM.....	29
FIGURE 2-4. BASIC COMPONENTS OF HILLSLOPE HYDROLOGY.....	37
FIGURE 2-5. COMMON ZONES OF MOISTURE ACCUMULATION IN THE LANDSCAPE.....	39
FIGURE 2-6. SCHEMATIC DIAGRAM OF CHANGING SATURATION ZONES DURING A RAINFALL EVENT.....	39
FIGURE 2-7. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AMOUNT OF PHOSPHORUS DESORBED AND TIME AND PHOSPHORUS AMENDMENT LEVELS AND SOLUTION TO SOIL RATIO (W).....	49
FIGURE 3-1. LOCATION OF THE TWO STUDY SITES IN RELATION TO DAIRYING REGIONS OF AUSTRALIA.....	56
FIGURE 3-2. AVERAGE MONTHLY RAINFALL AND TEMPERATURE AT FLAXLEY.....	57
FIGURE 3-3. MONTHLY AVERAGE RAINFALL AND TEMPERATURE FOR CAMDEN.....	59
FIGURE 3-4. RAINFALL SIMULATOR (FLAXLEY, SA) DURING CALIBRATION PHASE.....	61
FIGURE 3-5. CALIBRATION CURVES FOR THE ROTATING DISC RAINFALL SIMULATOR.....	62
FIGURE 3-6. APPARATUS FOR EXTRACTING SOIL WATER FROM MOIST SOIL SAMPLES.....	67
FIGURE 3-7. CALIBRATION DATA FOR THETA PROBE.....	69
FIGURE 4-1. RUNOFF PLOTS AT CAMDEN SHOWING THE RUNOFF COLLECTION DRAIN, AND THE LOCATION OF THE FLOW MEASUREMENT AND SAMPLING EQUIPMENT.....	74
FIGURE 4-2. COMPARISON OF DRP AND TP CONCENTRATIONS IN RUNOFF (FROM LARGE PLOTS) BETWEEN ARTIFICIAL AND NATURAL RUNOFF EVENTS (TIME 1 – LEFT; TIME 2 – RIGHT).....	76
FIGURE 4-3. SWINGING BOOM RAINFALL SIMULATOR USED AT CAMDEN.....	77
FIGURE 4-4. PLOT ARRANGEMENT AT CAMDEN SHOWING THE RAINFALL SIMULATION PLOTS (SH) NESTED WITHIN THE LARGER (LL) PLOTS (NOT TO SCALE).....	78
FIGURE 4-5. RUNOFF HYDROGRAPHS (AVERAGES ACROSS ALL TREATMENTS) FROM LL AND SH METHODS AT E <sub>1</sub> AND E <sub>2</sub> . NOTE DIFFERENT Y-SCALES BETWEEN SH AND LL METHODS.....	81
FIGURE 4-6. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CaCl <sub>2</sub> -P (0-0.01 M) AND DRP IN RUNOFF AT E <sub>1</sub> AND E <sub>2</sub> . (◊ – LARGE-PLOT, LOW-INTENSITY - LL; ◆ - SMALL-PLOT, HIGH-INTENSITY - SH).....	83
FIGURE 4-7. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADJUSTED (PARTIAL RESIDUALS) DISSOLVED REACTIVE PHOSPHORUS CONCENTRATIONS IN RUNOFF AND, A) SOIL CaCl <sub>2</sub> -P (0-0.01 M), B) SIMULATION METHOD (LL - LARGE PLOTS - LOW INTENSITY; SH - SMALL SCALE - HIGH INTENSITY), AND C) EVENT (E <sub>1</sub> AND E <sub>2</sub> ).....	84
FIGURE 4-8. CONCENTRATION OF DRP DURING RUNOFF EVENTS E <sub>1</sub> AND E <sub>2</sub> FOR BOTH LL AND SH METHODS.....	87
FIGURE 5-1. EFFECT OF RAINFALL INTENSITY ON MEAN DRP CONCENTRATION IN RUNOFF.....	93
FIGURE 5-2. RUNOFF RATES (AVERAGE OF FOUR REPLICATES) FOR EACH OF THE RAINFALL INTENSITIES AS A FUNCTION OF TIME AND APPLIED RAINFALL.....	95
FIGURE 5-3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RAINFALL INTENSITY AND AVERAGE RESIDENCE TIME (T <sub>AV</sub> - ◆) AND AVERAGE DEPTH (D <sub>AV</sub> - ◊) OF RUNOFF ON 1 M <sup>2</sup> PLOTS.....	95
FIGURE 5-4. CHANGE IN DRP DURING AN EVENT.....	97
FIGURE 5-5. CHANGES IN RUNOFF RATES (○) AND RELATIVE P CONCENTRATION (●) IN RUNOFF (C <sub>T</sub> /C <sub>0</sub> = CONCENTRATION AT TIME ‘T’ RELATIVE TO THAT AT TIME = 0) AFTER THE COMMENCEMENT OF RUNOFF FOR RAINFALL INTENSITIES OF 20MM/HR (LEFT) AND 150 MM/HR (RIGHT).....	98
FIGURE 5-6. THE EFFECT OF TIME AND SUSPENDED SEDIMENT (SS) CONCENTRATION ON THE CONCENTRATION OF DRP IN SOLUTION.....	100
FIGURE 5-7. SHALLOW RUNOFF FLOWING OVER THE SOIL SURFACE DURING RAINFALL SIMULATION ILLUSTRATING THE STABILITY OF THE SOIL SURFACE AND THE PROTECTION FROM RAINDROP IMPACT AFFORDED BY THE PASTURE BIOMASS.....	100
FIGURE 5-8. CROSS SECTION OF INTACT CORE ARRANGEMENT FOR DETERMINING A AND B PARAMETERS FOR USE IN EQ. [6].....	105
FIGURE 5-9. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTUAL (● & SOLID LINE) AND PREDICTED (○ & DASHED LINE) AVERAGE RUNOFF DRP CONCENTRATION RELATIVE (AT VARIOUS INTENSITIES) TO THAT AT AN INTENSITY OF 20 MM/HR (I.E. DRP <sub>i</sub> :DRP <sub>20</sub> ) AS, A) A FUNCTION OF RAINFALL INTENSITY, AND B) AS A FUNCTION OF RUNOFF RATE.....	108
FIGURE 5-10. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTUAL (● & SOLID LINE) AND PREDICTED (○ & DASHED LINE) CONCENTRATION OF DRP (UNDER CONSTANT HYDROLOGICAL CONDITIONS DURING THE LAST 5 MINUTES OF RUNOFF) RELATIVE TO THAT AT AN INTENSITY OF 20 MM/HR (I.E. DRP <sub>i</sub> :DRP <sub>20</sub> ) AS, A) A FUNCTION OF RAINFALL INTENSITY, AND B) AS A FUNCTION OF RUNOFF RATE.....	109
FIGURE 5-11. COMPARISON OF THE MEASURED AND PREDICTED RATIOS OF RUNOFF DRP BETWEEN THE CAMDEN LARGE PLOT-LOW INTENSITY (LL) AND SMALL PLOT-HIGH INTENSITY (SH) RAINFALL SIMULATIONS.....	110
FIGURE 5-12. SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF SEVERAL KEY COMBINATIONS OF PARAMETERS IN THE MODEL.....	111
FIGURE 6-1. OLSEN P (0-0.01 M) MAP OF FLAXLEY EAST.....	121

FIGURE 6-2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE VARIOUS MEASURES OF SOIL P (0-0.01 M) FOR THE RAINFALL SIMULATION SOILS. ....	125
FIGURE 6-3. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OLSEN P (0-0.01 M) AND RUNOFF TP AND DRP FOR THE FLAXLEY FIELD RAINFALL SIMULATIONS.....	128
FIGURE 6-4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-P}$ (0-0.01 M) AND RUNOFF TP AND DRP FOR THE FLAXLEY FIELD RAINFALL SIMULATIONS.....	129
FIGURE 6-5. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SWP (0-0.01 M) AND RUNOFF TP AND DRP FOR THE FLAXLEY FIELD RAINFALL SIMULATIONS.....	130
FIGURE 6-6. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BRAY P (0-0.01 M) AND RUNOFF DRP FOR THE FLAXLEY SITE AND SEVERAL OTHER AUSTRALIAN STUDIES.....	131
FIGURE 6-7. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEGREE OF P SORPTION SATURATION (ADJUSTED TO 0-0.01 M) AND RUNOFF DRP FOR THE FLAXLEY SITE AND SEVERAL OTHER AUSTRALIAN STUDIES .....	132
FIGURE 7-1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TOTAL P AND OLSEN (LEFT) AND $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-RP}$ (RIGHT) IN THE 0-0.01M INCREMENT OF THE FLAXLEY (♦) AND CAMDEN (◇) SOILS. ....	144
FIGURE 7-2. P SORPTION ISOTHERMS FOR SELECTED FLAXLEY (LEFT) AND CAMDEN (RIGHT) SOILS (0-0.01 M)...	145
FIGURE 7-3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OLSEN P AND EPC IN THE 0-0.01 M INCREMENT OF THE FLAXLEY (♦) AND CAMDEN (◇) SOILS.....	145
FIGURE 7-4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOIL P STATUS (OLSEN P) AND ORGANIC CARBON FOR THE FLAXLEY (♦) AND CAMDEN (◇) SOILS. ....	146
FIGURE 7-5. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONCENTRATIONS OF TOTAL SOIL P AND ORGANIC ( $\text{P}_o$ - ●) AND INORGANIC ( $\text{P}_i$ - ○) FORMS OF P IN THE TOP 0.01M OF SOIL (LEFT), AND PROPORTIONS OF ORGANIC AND INORGANIC P IN THE TOP 0.01 M OF THE SOIL EXPRESSED AS PERCENTAGES OF TOTAL SOIL P (RIGHT). ....	147
FIGURE 7-6. EXAMPLES OF DEPTH DISTRIBUTION OF $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-P}$ FOR FLAXLEY (LEFT) AND CAMDEN (RIGHT) SOILS .....	148
FIGURE 7-7. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOIL FERTILITY (EXPRESSED AS OLSEN P; 0-0.10 M) AND DEGREE OF P STRATIFICATION FOR THE FLAXLEY (◇) AND CAMDEN (♦) SOILS (EXPRESSED AS RATIO OF $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-P}$ MASS IN THE 0-0.01 M INCREMENT TO THAT IN THE 0-0.10 M INCREMENT, I.E. $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-P}_1$ : $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-P}_0$ ). ....	150
FIGURE 7-8. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OLSEN $\text{P}_1$ AND THE PROPORTION OF $\text{CaCl}_2$ EXTRACTABLE P PRESENT AS $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-UP}$ (UN-REACTIVE P) OF THE 0-0.01 M INCREMENTS OF THE FLAXLEY (◇) AND CAMDEN (♦) SOILS. ....	151
FIGURE 7-9. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OLSEN P (0-0.01 M) AND P CONCENTRATIONS AND FORM (DUP% OF TDP) IN RUNOFF FROM FLAXLEY (LEFT) AND CAMDEN (RIGHT). DISSOLVED REACTIVE P (MG/L DRP - ▲) AND DISSOLVED UN-REACTIVE PHOSPHORUS (% DUP - ●) .....	152
FIGURE 7-10. PHOSPHORUS CONCENTRATIONS AND FORMS IN VARIOUS SIZE FRACTIONS OF THE FLAXLEY RUNOFF SAMPLES .....	155
FIGURE 7-11. PHOSPHORUS CONCENTRATIONS AND FORMS IN VARIOUS SIZE FRACTIONS OF THE CAMDEN RUNOFF SAMPLES .....	156
FIGURE 7-12. PROPORTION OF ANALYTES IN VARIOUS SIZE RANGES (AVERAGE OF 5 SAMPLES AT EACH SITE) IN RUNOFF SAMPLES FROM FLAXLEY AND CAMDEN.....	157
FIGURE 8-1. EFFECT OF RECYCLE DELAY ON $^{31}\text{P}$ DP NMR SIGNAL INTENSITY FOR SOIL L-H, THE ASHED RESIDUE OF SOIL M-H, THE $\text{NaOH-EDTA}$ EXTRACT OF SOIL M-H AND THE $\text{HF}$ -TREATED RESIDUE OF SOIL M-H. ..	164
FIGURE 8-2. $^{31}\text{P}$ CP AND DP NMR SPECTRA OF SOIL M-H, AND $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ TREATED, ASHED AND $\text{HF}$ TREATED RESIDUES OF SOIL M-H. SPINNING SIDE-BANDS ARE MARKED WITH AN ASTERISK (*).....	167
FIGURE 8-3. $^{31}\text{P}$ CP AND DP NMR SPECTRA OF SOILS FROM LOWER ELEVATIONS OF THE EXPERIMENTAL SITE, M-L, M-M AND M-H. THE VERTICAL SCALES HAVE BEEN ADJUSTED TO ALLOW DIRECT COMPARISON BETWEEN CORRESPONDING CP AND DP SPECTRA FOR EACH SOIL (SEE TEXT). SPINNING SIDE BANDS ARE MARKED WITH AN ASTERISK (*).....	174
FIGURE 8-4. $^{31}\text{P}$ CP AND DP NMR SPECTRA OF SOILS FROM INTERMEDIATE ELEVATIONS OF THE EXPERIMENTAL SITE, M-L, M-M AND M-H .....	175
FIGURE 8-5. $^{31}\text{P}$ CP AND DP NMR SPECTRA OF SOILS FROM THE UPPER ELEVATIONS OF THE EXPERIMENTAL SITE, U-M AND U-H .....	176
FIGURE 8-6. $^{31}\text{P}$ CP AND DP NMR SPECTRA OF RESIDUE AND EXTRACT (UN-AMENDED AND NEUTRALISED) FRACTIONS FROM $\text{NaOH-EDTA}$ EXTRACTION OF SOIL M-H .....	179
FIGURE 9-1. SPATIAL CONTRIBUTION TO MODELLED P LOAD EXPORTED IN RUNOFF FROM FLAXLEY EAST (DAVIES <i>ET AL.</i> 2005B). ....	184
FIGURE 9-2. EFFECT OF DE-STRATIFICATION ON SOIL PROPERTIES FROM LABORATORY INCUBATION EXPERIMENTS .....	186
FIGURE 9-3. THE DEGREE OF STRATIFICATION ( $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-P}_1$ : $\text{CaCl}_2\text{-P}_0$ ) OF STRATIFIED (●) AND DE-STRATIFIED (○) SOILS AS A FUNCTION OF SOIL P STATUS.....	187
FIGURE 9-4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOIL P (OLSEN $\text{P}_{10}$ ) AND RUNOFF TP (LEFT) AND DRP (RIGHT) FOR STRATIFIED (●) AND DE-STRATIFIED (○) SOILS. ....	188
FIGURE 9-5. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN P ACCUMULATION AND THE CHANGE IN SOIL P. ....	189

## List of Tables

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TABLE 2-1. HYDROLOGICAL PROCESSES AND APPROXIMATE TIMEFRAMES FOR THEIR OCCURRENCE.....	38
TABLE 2-2. PHOSPHORUS TRANSFER FROM INTENSIVE PASTURE SYSTEMS BY SURFACE AND SUB-SURFACE PATHWAYS. ....	40
TABLE 3-1. MORPHOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF TYPICAL SOIL PROFILE IN THE MID-SLOPE POSITION AT FLAXLEY .	58
TABLE 3-2. MORPHOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF TYPICAL SOIL PROFILE FROM CAMDEN .....	59
TABLE 4-1. KEY CHEMICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RUNOFF PLOT SOIL.....	79
TABLE 4-2. MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF RIVER WATER USED IN RAINFALL SIMULATIONS .....	80
TABLE 4-3. HYDROLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SH AND LL METHODS FOR RUNOFF EVENTS E <sub>1</sub> AND E <sub>2</sub> ....	80
TABLE 4-4. MODEL PARAMETER ESTIMATES (EQ. 4-3) FOR RUNOFF P CHARACTERISTICS .....	83
TABLE 5-1. RUNOFF CHEMICAL CHARACTERISTICS FOR VARIOUS RAINFALL INTENSITIES .....	92
TABLE 5-2. SUMMARY OF KEY HYDROLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AT DIFFERENT RAINFALL INTENSITIES.....	94
TABLE 5-3. MEANS OF LOADS OF RUNOFF P FORMS AS A FUNCTION OF RAINFALL INTENSITY .....	96
TABLE 6-1. SUMMARY OF THE HYDROLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RAINFALL SIMULATIONS.....	122
TABLE 6-2. SUMMARY OF SOIL CHARACTERISTICS (0-0.01 M) AT SITES USED FOR THE RAINFALL SIMULATIONS..	123
TABLE 6-3. SUMMARY OF RUNOFF CHEMICAL CHARACTERISTICS. ....	124
TABLE 6-4. COMPARISON OF LABILE SOIL P (MEASURED AS CaCl <sub>2</sub> -P) AT OLSEN P CONTENTS OF 20, 60 AND 100 MG/KG FOR THE FLAXLEY SOILS WITH THAT OF OTHER SOILS REPORTED IN THE LITERATURE.....	127
TABLE 7-1. KEY PROPERTIES OF THE 0-0.01 M SOIL INCREMENTS.....	144
TABLE 7-2. SLOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OLSEN P <sub>10</sub> AND CaCl <sub>2</sub> -P FOR EACH OF THE DEPTH INCREMENTS SAMPLED.....	148
TABLE 7-3. PHOSPHORUS AND CARBON CONTENTS OF SAMPLES SUBJECT TO ULTRAFILTRATION. ....	153
TABLE 8-1. SUMMARY OF KEY SOIL SAMPLE PROPERTIES .....	165
TABLE 8-2. SUMMARY OF SOIL P FRACTIONS.....	166
TABLE 8-3. <sup>31</sup> P NMR OBSERVABILITY IN WHOLE AND TREATED SOIL FRACTIONS MEASURED BY SPIN-COUNTING. ....	172



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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my late Grandfathers,  
Raymond ‘The Chief’ Jones and Sir Ivan ‘Gramps’ Dougherty who  
both believed in environmental stewardship long before it became  
fashionable. For you both, I hope my research can make some small  
contribution to a better environment.

## Abbreviations

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CaCl <sub>2</sub> -P	–	molybdate reactive P in 10 mM calcium chloride soil extracts
CaCl <sub>2</sub> -TP	–	total P in 10 mM calcium chloride soil extracts
CaCl <sub>2</sub> -UP	–	un-reactive P in 10 mM calcium chloride soil extracts
DOC	–	dissolved organic carbon
DRP	–	dissolved (<0.45 μm) molybdate reactive P
DUP	–	dissolved (<0.45 μm) un-reactive P (TDP minus DRP)
EC	–	electrical conductivity
EPC	–	equilibrium P concentration
EDI	–	effective depth of interaction
ICPAES	–	inductively coupled plasma emission spectroscopy
LLD	–	lower limit of detection
LSD	–	least significant difference
NMR	–	nuclear magnetic resonance
OC	–	organic carbon
P	–	phosphorus
P <sub>i</sub>	–	soil inorganic P
P <sub>o</sub>	–	soil organic P
SE	–	standard error
TDP	–	total dissolved (<0.45 μm) P
TP	–	total soil P
*	–	<i>P</i> <0.05 (in statistical analysis and interpretation)
**	–	<i>P</i> <0.01 (in statistical analysis and interpretation)
***	–	<i>P</i> <0.001 (in statistical analysis and interpretation)

## Abstract

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The application of substantial quantities of phosphorus (P) has been required to increase productivity on many Australian soils. Unfortunately, these applications have often resulted in increased concentrations of P in surface runoff that contributes to excessive algal growth in surface waters and consequently a decline in their quality. The concentrations of P in runoff from intensively managed pastures are often high (1-5 mg/L) and typically at least an order of magnitude higher than water quality targets. Although a substantial amount of research has been devoted to the problem of P accumulation and mobilisation in arable systems (in which P is typically mobilised by the action of raindrop impact and subsequently transported in particulate form), there has been substantially less research in intensively managed pasture systems. Consequently, there is a paucity of knowledge concerning the fundamental processes and factors responsible for P in runoff from these systems and a dearth of truly effective remedial strategies.

In this thesis, the accumulation of P in soil under intensively managed pastures used for dairying and the processes responsible for its mobilisation in surface runoff were investigated. This research was undertaken at two research sites in South-east Australia, i.e. Camden in New South Wales and Flaxley in South Australia.

A number of factors relating to scale and hydrology may influence the processes of P mobilisation and its concentration in runoff. A comparison was made of the forms and concentrations of P in runoff between a typical rainfall simulation methodology and large runoff plots. The effect of rainfall intensity on the forms and concentrations of P was also investigated. The concentrations of P in runoff from small-scale, high-intensity rainfall simulations were on average 33% lower than those from large plots (approximating hillslopes) although the processes of mobilisation (as evidenced by runoff P forms) were similar. Increasing rainfall intensity resulted in decreasing P concentrations, but similar forms of P. It was hypothesised that changes in hydrological characteristics (residence time and depth of runoff) were responsible for the differences in the P concentrations. A model of P mobilisation (incorporating hydrological and P-release characteristics) was developed and shown to successfully predict runoff P concentrations under a range of rainfall intensities. These findings and the subsequent model were used in the successful modelling of landscape-

scale nutrient exports based on rainfall simulation data as part of a separate, but complementary project.

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that Australian soils are relatively 'leaky' in terms of P in runoff compared to soils overseas. Consequently, comparisons of the labile soil P characteristics and soil P-runoff P relationships were made between Australian soils and soils of similar fertility from the USA, UK and New Zealand (using both experimental data and data sourced from the literature). It was concluded that Australian soils leak more P than soils of similar fertility in the USA, UK and New Zealand, although it was beyond the scope of the thesis to make more detailed comparisons between Australian and overseas soils.

The accumulation and mobilisation of P in two soils used for intensive pasture production in Australia were investigated. In intensive pasture systems P accumulated in the shallowest zones of the soil and principally as inorganic P. The concentrations of labile P were 3-5 times higher in the top 0.01 m than in the top 0.1 m. Using a simple model, it was estimated that only the top several mm of soil influence runoff P concentrations. The dominant form of P in runoff was shown to be orthophosphate although in low to moderate fertility soils, dissolved organic P can constitute a substantial proportion of the P in runoff. These results confirm the need to reduce the pool of P available for mobilisation in the immediate topsoil in order to reduce runoff P concentrations.

Because P is stratified, it was hypothesised that one method to reduce the pool of P available for mobilisation is to de-stratify the soil (i.e. mix the topsoil). The effect of this technique on runoff P concentrations was investigated in laboratory and rainfall simulation experiments. These experiments revealed that reductions in runoff P concentrations between 45 and 70% can be achieved by de-stratification of soils under permanent pastures. It was hypothesised that the benefits of de-stratification could be maximised using a combination of information relating to catchment hydrology and the spatial distribution of soil P and that this would result in large reductions in P exports with a relatively small degree of inconvenience to land managers. Given the limited opportunities identified in previous research to reduce P exports in runoff, the strategic utilisation of de-stratification is a potentially important option in water quality management for the dairy industry and warrants further investigation.

## Declaration

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This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in a university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis being made available in the University Library.

Components of the research described in this thesis have been published (as listed below). The author acknowledges that copyright of published material contained within this thesis resides with the copyright holders of those works.

**Warwick J Dougherty** .....

### Publications arising from this thesis

- **Dougherty WJ**, Fleming NK, Cox JW, Chittleborough DJ (2004) Phosphorus transfer in surface runoff from intensive pasture systems at various scales: A review. *Journal of Environmental Quality* **33**, 1973-1988.
- **Dougherty WJ**, Smernik RJ, Chittleborough DJ (2005) Application of spin counting to the solid-state P-31 NMR analysis of pasture soils with varying phosphorus content. *Soil Science Society of America Journal* **69**, 2058-2070.
- **Dougherty WJ**, Nash DM, Chittleborough DJ, Cox JW, Fleming NK (2006) Stratification, forms and mobility of phosphorus in the topsoil of a Chromosol used for dairying. *Australian Journal of Soil Research* **44**, 277-284.