



November 2025

Precision Irrigation Management

Executive Summary

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Water is the foundation of irrigated and rainfed agricultural productivity and national and global food security. It supports everything from crop and livestock production to processing and distribution. However, about 70% of global freshwater withdrawals are for agricultural purposes, primarily for irrigation, and climate change is intensifying the pressure on this resource. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and more frequent and prolonged droughts threaten yields and increase uncertainty for producers. To meet projected global food needs—estimated to require 60% more production by 2050—farmers must produce more with equal or fewer water resources, all while safeguarding the environment.

The Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) paper “Precision Irrigation Management” (September 2025) outlines how advanced irrigation technologies can transform water use efficiency in agriculture and enhance crop production efficiency. Authored by a multidisciplinary team led by Professor and Department Head of Agricultural and Biological Engineering at Penn State University, the paper provides an in-depth analysis of current technologies, economic considerations, and policy implications for scaling precision irrigation.

What Is Precision Irrigation?

Precision irrigation refers to the application of water at the right time, in the right place, and in the right amount to meet specific crop needs. It integrates automation, sensors, data analytics, and decision support systems to tailor irrigation applications to varying field conditions.

Key technologies include:

- Variable Rate Irrigation (VRI): allows producers to adjust water (and nutrient) delivery by zone or individual or set of nozzles based on soil, crop and topographic data.
- Soil and plant sensors: measure moisture, plant stress, and root-zone soil water dynamics in real time.
- Satellite, drone, and canopy imaging: provide spatial maps to identify water variability within fields.
- Computer and mobile applications: simulate soil water balance, track evapotranspiration, and automate irrigation scheduling.

By integrating these tools, producers can improve water productivity, reduce waste, and maintain crop yields even under challenging climatic conditions.

Benefits

Precision irrigation offers measurable economic, agronomic, and environmental advantages:

- Water savings of 10–50% as compared with uniform irrigation systems, depending on soil, climate, management and other factors.
- Increased crop yield and quality, particularly in specialty and high-value crops such as fruits and vegetables.
- Reduced energy use and operational costs through automation and targeted irrigation scheduling.
- Lower environmental impact, with reduced runoff, nutrient leaching, and salinity buildup.
- Enhanced climate resilience, enabling producers to respond dynamically to drought and temperature stress.
- Enables utilizing low-capacity water well outputs to irrigate fields using deficit irrigation management.

Collectively, these outcomes make precision irrigation a key strategy for achieving sustainable intensification—producing more food while conserving limited resources.

Economic Considerations

While the benefits are clear, adoption depends heavily on economic feasibility. CAST’s analysis found that:

- Variable rate irrigation (VRI) can improve profitability by up to \$200 per hectare per year under favorable market and crop conditions.
- Profitability depends on factors such as soil variability, soil type, crop type, input costs, water pricing, water availability, and other factors.
- Uniform irrigation may remain cost-effective in fields with low variability or inexpensive and abundant water.
- High initial investment in hardware, maintenance, and data management remains a key barrier, particularly for small and medium size farms.

To enhance adoption, policies and incentives that offset upfront costs and demonstrate long-term economic returns are essential.

Challenges and Research Needs

Adoption of precision irrigation technologies is growing but remains below potential. Barriers for adoption include:

- Limited technical expertise and training at the farm level,
- High initial and integration costs,
- Connectivity gaps in rural areas that limit real-time data transfer, and

- Uncertainty around how benefits scale across different crops and regions.

Further research and coordinated outreach can help address these barriers by validating systems under diverse production environments and by creating user-friendly, interoperable platforms that integrate sensors, apps, and irrigation controls.

Policy and Program Recommendations

To accelerate implementation and maximize impact, CAST recommends that policymakers and industry leaders:

1. Support research and extension programs to demonstrate precision irrigation under local conditions.
2. Invest in data and connectivity infrastructure, including weather networks, evapotranspiration (ET) monitoring, and rural broadband.
3. Create financial incentives—such as cost-share programs, water-use efficiency credits, and tax breaks—to offset technology costs.
4. Encourage public–private partnerships that promote interoperability, open data standards, and farmer-centered innovation.
5. Integrate precision irrigation into climate-smart agriculture and conservation programs, aligning water management with carbon and biodiversity goals.

Conclusion

Precision irrigation is more than a technology—it is a strategy for sustainable food production in a resource-constrained world, especially considering negative implications of climate change on agricultural lands. By combining science, data, and innovation, it allows farmers to apply water where and when it is most needed, ensuring productivity and production efficiency while protecting water resources and environmental services for future generations. It is also key for the university scientists/researchers, industry partners, government agencies, policy/decision-makers, non-profit organizations and other professionals to work together to make sure that science-based technologies, programs and strategies are implemented in production fields to ensure sustainability of agricultural production and water resources for current and future generations.

CAST emphasizes that irrigation should not be viewed merely as a water consumer, but as a science-driven solution to the challenges of drought, climate variability, and global food demand. Precision irrigation represents a practical, proven path toward sustainable intensification and water stewardship—helping agriculture feed tomorrow with smarter use of every drop today.

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