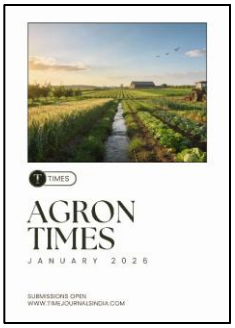

Role of Permethrin in Positive Crop Yield and Its Harmful Environmental Effects

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Received: April 02, 2026
Accepted: May 21, 2026
Published: May 22, 2026

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ABSTRACT

Permethrin, a synthetic pyrethroid insecticide, has been extensively employed in agricultural systems worldwide to manage a broad spectrum of economically damaging insect pests. Its efficacy against lepidopteran, coleopteran, and hemipteran pests has contributed significantly to improvements in crop yield and quality. However, the widespread use of permethrin has raised substantial concerns regarding its ecological and toxicological impacts on non-target organisms, including beneficial arthropods, aquatic fauna, and vertebrates. This review synthesizes current evidence on the dual role of permethrin in agricultural productivity enhancement and its associated harmful effects, drawing on peer-reviewed literature to evaluate its agronomic benefits against environmental and health risks. A balanced understanding of permethrin's role is essential for informing integrated pest management (IPM) strategies that maximize crop output while minimizing ecological damage.

KEYWORDS: Permethrin; Pyrethroid; Crop Protection; Insecticide Toxicity; Environmental Contamination; Non-Target Organisms

1. INTRODUCTION

The global demand for food has intensified pressure on agricultural systems to maximize productivity per unit area. Among the suite of chemical inputs used to achieve this goal, synthetic pyrethroids occupy a central position, owing to their broad-spectrum activity, rapid knockdown effect, and relatively low mammalian toxicity compared to organophosphate predecessors. Permethrin (3-phenoxybenzyl (1RS)-cis,trans-3-(2,2-dichlorovinyl)-2,2-dimethylcyclopropane carboxylate) is among the most widely used synthetic pyrethroids globally, applied to a diverse range of crops including cotton, cereals, vegetables, and fruit trees.

Originally developed in the 1970s as a photostable analogue of natural pyrethrin, permethrin acts by disrupting sodium channel function in insect nervous systems, leading to paralysis and death. Its stability under field conditions, cost-effectiveness, and relatively low application rates have made it a preferred choice among growers. Despite these agronomic advantages, permethrin's persistence in soil and water systems, its acute toxicity to aquatic invertebrates and fish, and its documented sublethal effects on beneficial insects such as honeybees and natural enemies have generated increasing regulatory scrutiny.

This article reviews the scientific literature on permethrin's role in enhancing crop yield, the mechanisms through which it achieves pest control, and the range of harmful effects documented across ecological and human health domains. Understanding this dual nature is critical for developing sustainable pest management frameworks that do not compromise long-term agricultural or environmental integrity.

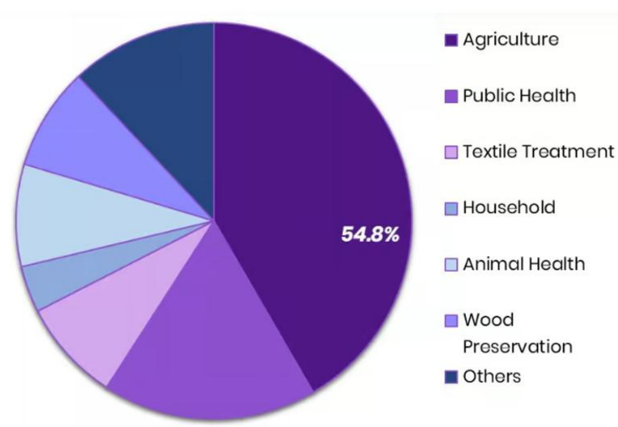

Fig. 1. Global use of permethrin in different fields (www.market.us)

2. PERMETHRIN IN CROP PROTECTION AND YIELD ENHANCEMENT

Permethrin has demonstrated consistent efficacy in suppressing insect pest populations that cause significant pre-harvest and post-harvest crop losses. In cotton production systems, permethrin has been shown to effectively control bollworm species (*Helicoverpa armigera* and *Pectinophora gossypiella*), where timely application has been associated with substantial reductions in boll damage and corresponding improvements in lint yield. Field trials conducted in Pakistan and India have reported yield increases of 20-35% in permethrin-treated cotton plots relative to untreated controls, underscoring its practical agronomic value in high-pest-pressure environments.

In vegetable cropping systems, permethrin has been applied against aphids, whiteflies, and caterpillar pests that affect marketable yield and quality. Ahmed et al. (2019) reported that permethrin applications in brassica crops significantly reduced diamondback moth (*Plutella xylostella*) infestations, resulting in a 28% improvement in marketable head weight compared to untreated plots. Similarly, in cereal production, permethrin has been used to control aphid vectors of barley yellow dwarf virus, thereby indirectly protecting yield by reducing virus transmission efficiency.

The compound's systemic distribution on plant surfaces following foliar application ensures prolonged residual activity, reducing the frequency of spray applications needed per season. This characteristic is economically advantageous for smallholder farmers in developing countries who face resource constraints. Furthermore, permethrin formulations have been utilized in stored grain protection, where losses attributed to storage pests such as *Sitophilus granarius* and *Tribolium castaneum* are estimated to affect 10-30% of harvested grain in tropical regions annually.

Research by Damalas and Eleftherohorinos (2011) highlighted that when integrated with agronomic practices such as crop rotation and resistant varieties, pyrethroid insecticides including permethrin contribute to holistic pest management outcomes without necessitating increased chemical inputs. The compatibility of permethrin with several fungicides and fertilizers in tank-mix applications further enhances its practical utility in integrated crop management systems.

3. HARMFUL EFFECTS OF PERMETHRIN

3.1 Toxicity to aquatic organisms

Permethrin is classified as highly toxic to aquatic invertebrates and fish. Its lipophilic nature facilitates bioaccumulation in aquatic food webs, and its strong binding affinity to sediment particles results in prolonged environmental persistence in waterway systems adjacent to treated agricultural fields. Schimmel et al. (2002) documented LC_{50} values for permethrin in rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) as low as 2.5 microg/L, indicating extreme sensitivity among salmonid species. Run-off events following rainfall shortly after field application represent a primary route of permethrin entry into freshwater systems, with concentrations in drainage ditches frequently exceeding regulatory thresholds.

Benthic invertebrate communities, which serve as critical components of aquatic food webs and indicators of ecosystem health, are particularly vulnerable. Studies in California's Central Valley have documented significant declines in amphipod populations in agricultural drainage channels during periods of peak pyrethroid application, with permethrin frequently identified as the primary contributing compound. These ecological disruptions have cascading consequences for fish that depend on invertebrate prey and for the broader trophic structure of affected water bodies.

3.2 Impacts on beneficial arthropods

The non-selectivity of permethrin presents significant risks to beneficial arthropods, including pollinators and natural enemies of crop pests. Honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) are acutely sensitive to permethrin, with contact LD_{50} values ranging from 0.024 to 0.054 microg per bee. Sublethal exposures have been associated with impaired navigation, reduced foraging efficiency, and compromised colony thermoregulation. Given the critical role of pollinators in crop production, with an estimated one-third of global food supply dependent on animal pollination, the inadvertent exposure of bees to permethrin during field applications represents a significant agronomic and ecological concern.

Predatory insects such as ladybird beetles (*Coccinella septempunctata*) and parasitic wasps (*Trichogramma* spp.) are similarly susceptible to permethrin at field-use concentrations. The suppression of these natural enemy populations can trigger secondary pest outbreaks and undermine the long-term efficacy of biological control components in IPM programs. Desneux et al. (2007) demonstrated that sublethal permethrin concentrations significantly disrupted the parasitism rate of *Aphidius ervi*, a key parasitoid of cereal aphids, highlighting the compound's potential to destabilize natural pest regulation mechanisms in agroecosystems.

3.3 Human and mammalian health concerns

Although permethrin exhibits relatively low acute toxicity to mammals compared to older insecticide classes, chronic exposure has been associated with a range of adverse health outcomes. Occupational exposure among agricultural workers has been linked to neurological symptoms including paraesthesia, dizziness, and fatigue. Mechanistically, permethrin's disruption of voltage-gated sodium channels in neuronal membranes is thought to underlie these effects, although the reversible nature of binding limits acute toxicity at typical human exposure levels.

Epidemiological studies have raised concerns regarding the endocrine-disrupting potential of permethrin. Evidence suggests that permethrin may interfere with androgen receptor signaling pathways, with implications for reproductive health in chronically exposed populations. Residue monitoring in food commodities has demonstrated that permethrin residues can persist in treated produce and soil matrices beyond harvest, raising concerns about dietary exposure for consumers, particularly in populations with high vegetable consumption. Soderlund et al. (2002) provided a mechanistic framework explaining how repeated low-dose neuronal sodium channel disruption may contribute to cumulative neurotoxic risk, informing regulatory decisions on acceptable daily intake thresholds for permethrin residues in food.

4. DISCUSSION

The evidence reviewed herein reveals a fundamental tension inherent in permethrin use: its agronomic benefits are real and quantifiable, yet they are accompanied by a substantial ecological footprint that warrants careful management. The compound's continued registration and widespread use in many jurisdictions reflects the agronomic value placed on its pest control efficacy, particularly in high-value and export-oriented crop systems where cosmetic and yield standards are stringent.

Reconciling these competing interests requires a shift toward precision application strategies that minimize off-target exposure. Buffer zones adjacent to water bodies, application timing that avoids peak pollinator activity periods, and improved spray technology to reduce drift are among the practices that can meaningfully reduce permethrin's ecological impact without forgoing its agronomic utility. Regulatory frameworks that mandate good agricultural practice guidelines and residue monitoring programs are essential components of this approach.

The development of resistance to permethrin in several key pest species, including H. *armigera* and the tobacco whitefly *Bemisia tabaci*, further complicates its role in modern pest management. Resistance management strategies, including rotation with insecticides of alternative modes of action and the integration of biological control, are critical to preserving the efficacy of permethrin and reducing selection pressure for resistance alleles. Long-term sustainability of permethrin as a crop protection tool is contingent on its judicious use within diversified pest management frameworks.

5. CONCLUSION

Permethrin occupies a complex position in contemporary agriculture, valued for its broad-spectrum efficacy and contribution to yield protection, yet associated with significant risks to aquatic ecosystems, beneficial arthropods, and human health under conditions of excessive or poorly managed use. A nuanced, evidence-based approach to its application, embedded within integrated pest management frameworks, is essential to maximize agronomic benefits while safeguarding ecological and public health. Future research should focus on the development of precision delivery systems, enhanced monitoring of environmental residues, and the refinement of risk assessment models to better capture the ecological costs of permethrin use across diverse agroecosystems.

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Author Contributions
All the authors conceived the concept, wrote and approved the manuscript.

Acknowledgements
Not applicable.

Funding
Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials
Not applicable.

Competing interest
The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics approval
Not applicable.

Citation: Gurbir Singh and Zorawar Singh (2026) Role of Permethrin in Positive Crop Yield and Its Harmful Environmental Effects. Agron TIMES 1(1): 35-37.