Push–pull farming systems
John A Pickett¹, Christine M Woodcock¹, Charles AO Midega² and Zeyaur R Khan²

Farming systems for pest control, based on the stimuludeterrent diversionary strategy or push–pull system, have become an important target for sustainable intensification of food production. A prominent example is push–pull developed in sub-Saharan Africa using a combination of companion plants delivering semiochemicals, as plant secondary metabolites, for smallholder farming cereal production, initially against lepidopterous stem borers. Opportunities are being developed for other regions and farming ecosystems. New semiochemical tools and delivery systems, including GM, are being incorporated to exploit further opportunities for mainstream arable farming systems. By delivering the push and pull effects as secondary metabolites, for example, (E)-4,8-dimethyl-1,3,7-nonatriene repelling pests and attracting beneficial insects, problems of high volatility and instability are overcome and compounds are produced when and where required.

Addresses
¹ Rothamsted Research, Harpenden, Hertfordshire AL5 2JQ, UK
² International Centre for Insect Physiology and Ecology, PO Box 30772, Nairobi, Kenya

Corresponding author: Pickett, John A (john.pickett@rothamsted.ac.uk, angela.cornford@rothamsted.ac.uk) and

Introduction
All farming systems require crop protection technologies for predictable and economic food production. Pesticides currently serve us well, with no convincing evidence for legally registered pesticides causing problems of human health or environmental impact [1*]. In terms of risk analysis, risks associated with use of pesticides have been extremely low for some time [2]. However, for sustainable pest management, seasonal inputs requiring external production and mechanical application need to be replaced by approaches involving direct association with the crop plants themselves [3]. Current synthetic chemical pesticides have often been designed from natural product lead structures or are themselves natural products and, although they are in no way more benign than synthetic pesticides, there are, in nature, genes for their biosynthesis which could be exploited for delivery to agriculture via crop or companion plants, or via industrial crops. Production by the latter is not sustainable because of the need for extraction and then application to the crop, although on-farm extraction, or at least some processing, could be employed where the necessary quality control and safety can be achieved. Many crop plants incorporate biosynthetic pathways to natural pesticides which could be enhanced by breeding. Alternatively, pathways can be added by genetic engineering, for example, for Bacillus thuringiensis endotoxin production or with genes for entire secondary pathways, for example, for toxic saponins such as the avenacins [4**], including from other plants or organisms entirely.

Pheromones and other semiochemicals have long been regarded as presenting opportunities for pest management and many biosynthetic pathways have been elucidated [5]. For semiochemicals, there is a further advantage in that beneficial organisms can also be advantageously manipulated [6]. Thus, semiochemicals that recruit predators and parasitoids (parasites that kill their hosts), or in other ways manage beneficial organisms, can be released by crop or companion plants, thereby providing new approaches to exploiting biological control of pests. Although biological control is sustainable in the example of exotic release of control agents, registration may not be granted because of potential environmental impact, and inundative release requires production and delivery. Therefore, managing the process of conservation biological control, which exploits natural populations of beneficial organisms, expands the potential value of releasing semiochemicals from crops or companion plants [7*]. Many semiochemicals are volatile, for example those acting at a distance as attractants or repellents. Also, in order that the signal does not remain in the environment after use, these compounds are often highly unstable chemically, which again promotes the concept of release from plants.

From the attributes of a natural product pest control agents, as described above, follows the concept of stimulo-deterrent or push–pull [8] farming systems (Figure 1). The main food crop is protected by negative
Push-pull: the concept

Natural product pest control agents are, by definition, biosynthesised naturally. The genes for semiochemical biosynthesis expressed in companion plants, or in the crop plants themselves, give a “push” to pests and attract predators and parasitic insects (e.g. parasitoids). At the same time, companion plant genes associated with semiochemicals attractive to pests provide a “pull”. Genes for toxicant biosynthesis can be expressed in the latter in order to reduce pest populations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Push”</th>
<th>Crop</th>
<th>“Pull”</th>
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<td>Produce repellent semiochemicals against the pest, for example (1) from non-host taxa, e.g. organic isothiocyanates, typical of brassicaceous crops, against non-brassicaceous plant feeding pests; (2) feeding stress related semiochemicals that denote pest infestation and also recruit predators and parasitoids.</td>
<td>Provided with attributes of “push” plants via advanced breeding technologies or GM.</td>
<td>Produce attractant semiochemicals, e.g. associated with host plants and effects heightened by maximising these signals.</td>
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<td>Provided with attributes of “push” plants via advanced breeding technologies or GM.</td>
<td>Produce attractive semiochemicals, e.g. produced in host plants, e.g. benzoxazinoids in certain cereals or from non-host plants, e.g. glucosinolates from brassicaceous plants.</td>
<td>Producers repellent semiochemicals against the pest, for example (1) from non-host taxa, e.g. organic isothiocyanates, typical of brassicaceous crops, against non-brassicaceous plant feeding pests; (2) feeding stress related semiochemicals that denote pest infestation and also recruit predators and parasitoids.</td>
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Push–pull for smallholder cereal farming in sub-Saharan Africa

Smallholder farmers in developing countries traditionally use companion crops to augment staple crops such as cereals. Development of the push–pull farming system for these farmers employed the companion cropping tradition in establishing an entry point for the new technology. “Push” and “pull” plants were identified initially by empirical behavioural testing with lepidopteran (moth) stem borer adults. Having begun experimental farm trials in 1994 and moving on-farm in 1995, farmers very swiftly adopted the most effective companion crops [9,10] (Figure 2) and the benefits soon became apparent (Figure 3). The semiochemistry underpinning the roles of the companion plants in this push–pull system was then investigated by taking samples of volatiles released from companion plants and analysing by gas chromatography, coupled with electrophysiological recordings from the moth antennae [11**]. In addition to well-known attractants from the trap plants (“pull”), including isoprenoidal compounds such as linalool [9] and green leaf alcohols from the oxidation of long chain unsaturated fatty acids, other semiochemicals arising through the oxidative burst caused by insect feeding offered negative cues for incoming herbivores. These are isoprenoid hydrocarbons, for example, (E)-ocimene and (1R,4E,9S)-caryophyllene, and some more powerful negative cues, the homoterpenes, that is, homo-isoprenoid, or more correctly, tetranor-isoprenoid hydrocarbons [11**] (Figure 4). Most importantly, these latter compounds also act as foraging recruitment cues for predators and parasitoids of the pests [11**], and molecular tools for investigating other activities are being developed [12**]. Technology transfer for this push–pull system requires new approaches, and although such transfer benefits by a tradition of companion cropping, training is required for extension services and farmers, and availability of seed or other planting material, although, being perennial, these companion plants are one-off inputs. All the companion plants are valuable forage for dairy (cow and goat) husbandry and potentiate zero grazing, which is advantageous in the high population density rural areas in which most of the population live in sub-Saharan Africa. The legume intercrop plants, Desmodium spp., also fix nitrogen, with D. uncinatum being able to add approximately 110 kgN/ha/yr and contributing approximately 160 kg/ha/yr equivalent of nitrogen fertilizer [13*]. Desmodium spp. intercrops also
control parasitic striga weeds, for example, *Striga hermonthica* [13*], via release of allelopathic C-glycosylated flavonoids [14**], which represents another facet of push–pull in providing weed control [15]. Overall, there is a high take-up and retention in regions where the technology is transferred; for example, in western Kenya in 2013, nearly 60,000 farmers are using these techniques [16*]. Although this represents a very small percentage of the millions of people who could benefit, so far there have been very few resources for technology transfer. A recent

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**Figure 2**

Conventional push–pull field showing maize intercropped with silverleaf desmodium (*Desmodium uncinatum*) and with Napier grass (*Pennisetum purpureum*) planted as a border crop (left); climate-adapted push–pull field showing sorghum intercropped with drought tolerant greenleaf desmodium (*D. intortum*) and *Brachiaria cv mulato II* as a border crop (right).

**Figure 3**

Benefits of push–pull technology, now and under future climate change [10,16*].
EU-funded research initiative, ADOPT (“Adaptation and Dissemination Of the ‘Push–pull’ Technology”), has sought companion plants that can deal with drought, a rapidly growing problem in sub-Saharan Africa as a consequence of climate change, and new companion crops have already been identified and taken up by farmers [16*] (Figure 2).

The “push” plants imitate damaged crop plants, particularly maize and sorghum which produce the homoterpenes, and although normally too late to be of real value in economic pest management, production of these compounds is induced by the pest. Recently, we found that this can also be caused by egg-laying, specifically on the open pollinated varieties of maize normally grown by the smallholder farmers [17*], but not on hybrids [11**]. An egg-related elicitor enters the undamaged plant and the signal travels systemically, thereby inducing defence and causing release of the homoterpenes. Exploitation of this phenomenon (see later) will offer new approaches to push–pull farming systems.

**Biotechnological development of push–pull for industrialised farming**

New approaches to breeding by alien introgression of genes from wide crosses, including from the wild ancestors of modern crops [18*], as well as incorporation of heterologous gene incorporation by GM [19,20], genome engineering [21–23] and creation of synthetic crop plants by combining approaches including new crop genomic information [24], can contribute to push–pull farming systems. Mixed seed beds are now in use for cereals, even in industrial agriculture, and push–pull could be created without separated “push” and “pull” plants, including regulated stature facilitating selective harvesting. The new generation of GM and other biotechnologically derived crops [3] could revolutionise the prospects for push–pull in industrialised farming systems by...
offering crop plants that could themselves embody the “push” trait, thereby obviating the need for labour to manage the intercrop.

**Toxins for population reduction**

The expression of *B. thuringiensis* derived genes against certain insect pests has been highly successful [25], but we are now able to manipulate secondary metabolite pathways to produce pesticides, related to the synthetic versions, with a much greater range of activities, for example, cyanogenic glucosides [26], glucosinolates [27,28,29] and avenacins [30]. The latter, and also the benzoazoxinoids (hydroxamic acids) [31–35], are biosynthesised by pathways involving a series of genes co-located on plant genomes, potentially facilitating enhancement or transfer to crop plants by GM [4**]. These pathways could be expressed in “pull” plants for population control. They could also enhance the “push” effect. However, for both, attention must be directed towards obviating interference with the “push” and “pull” mechanisms.

**Repellents for pests and attractants for beneficials**

Already, in sub-Saharan African push–pull, the value of the homoterpenes can be seen [11**,17**]. Laboratory studies have demonstrated the principle, more widely, of enhancing production by GM [12**]. Biosynthesis of both the alcohol precursors [36**] and the homoterpenes has been demonstrated with, for the latter, Cyp82G1 being the enzyme in the model plant *Arabidopsis thaliana* [37]. This is now being explored for insect control in rice (BBSRC International Partnering Award BB/J02028/1 and the BBSRC China UK Programme in Global Priorities BB/L001683/1).

Pheromones also offer opportunities and, after demonstrating the principle in *A. thaliana* [38], the heterologous expression of genes for the biosynthesis of (E)-β-farnesene, the alarm pheromone of many pest aphid species, after success in the laboratory, is being field tested (BBSRC grant BB/G004781/1, “A new generation of insect resistant GM crops: transgenic wheat synthesising the aphid alarm signal”) as a means of repelling aphids and attracting parasitoids to the crop. Nonetheless, as well as overcoming the demanding issues of GM, these sophisticated signals will need to be presented in the same way that the insects themselves do, which, for the aphid alarm pheromone, is as a pulse of increased concentration. Indeed, as well as demands of behavioural ecology, complicated mixtures may also be necessary to provide the complete semiochemical cue. However, it is already proving possible to make relatively simple targeted changes in individual components of mixtures [39], which could allow an economic GM approach. The latter is likely to become even more appealing with the development of new technologies arising from genome editing [21–23]. Genes for biosynthesis of the aphid sex pheromone could be used to establish a powerful “pull” for the highly vulnerable overwintering population, but would need to be isolated from the insects themselves so as to avoid the presence of other plant-related compounds that inhibit the activity of the pheromone. Recent discoveries in plant biosynthesis of compounds related to aphid sex pheromones [40] will facilitate this quest. Attractant pheromones of moth (Lepidoptera) pests may also become available as a consequence of attempts to use GM plants as “factories” for biosynthesis (Christer Löfstedt, Lund University, personal communication).

**Induction of push–pull**

A number of biosynthetic pathways to plant toxicants and semiochemicals are subject to induction or priming [41,42]. Elicitors can be generated by pest, disease or weed development. Volicitin (N-(17-hydroxylinolenoyl-1-glutamine)) [43–45] and related compounds produced in the saliva of chewing insects induce both direct and indirect defence, often involving the homoterpenes, but require damage to transfer the signal to the plant. The egg-derived elicitor (see above) [11**] should overcome the problem. Plant-to-plant interactions mediated by volatile compounds, for example, methyl jasmonate and methyl salicylate, related to plant hormone stress signalling, are associated with these effects and can induce defence. However, there can be deleterious or erratic effects in attempting to use such general pathways [46]. *cis*-Jasmonate signals differentially to jasmonate [47] and, without phytotoxic effects, regulates defence, often by induction of homoterpenes [48] in crops even without genetic enhancement, for example, in wheat [49], soy bean [50], cotton [51] and sweet peppers [52]. In addition to aerially transmitted signals that could be used to induce “push” or “pull” effects, signalling within the rhizosphere directly [53,54***], or via the mycelial network of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi [55***], is now showing exciting promise. The “pull” effect can be enhanced by raising the levels of inducible attractants, provided there is no interference with the population controlling components of the push–pull system. However, attractive plants, without population control or with a late expressed control, could be valuable as sentinel plants. Thus, highly susceptible plants, either engineered or naturally susceptible, could, on initial pest damage, release signals via the air or rhizosphere that could, in turn, switch on defence in the recipient main crop plants, creating elements of the push–pull farming system as a fully inducible phenomenon activated without external intervention.

**Conclusions**

Push-pull is not only a sustainable farming system, but can also protect the new generation of GM crops against development of resistance by pests. Although considerable work still needs to be done for all the new tools of biotechnology to be exploited in push–pull, agriculture must sustainably produce more food on less land as it is
lost through diversion to other uses and climate change, and so presents an extremely important target for new biotechnological studies.

Acknowledgements
Rothamsted Research receives grant-aided support from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) of the United Kingdom, specifically including BBSRC grants BB/G004781/1 (A new generation of insect resistant GM crops: transgenic wheat synthesising the aphid alarm signal), BB/F01017/1 (Elucidating the chemical ecology of belowground plant to plant communication), BB/002278/1 (Enhancing diversity in UK wheat through a public sector pre-breeding programme) and BB/J01371/1 (‘Smart’ cereals for management of stemborer pests in staple cereals in Africa). The International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (icipe) appreciates the core support from the Governments of Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, France, Kenya, and the UK. The work on push–pull technology was primarily funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, Kilimo Trust and the European Union, with additional support from the Rockefeller Foundation, Biovision, McKnight Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the UK Government Department for International Development (DFID).

References and recommended reading
Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

1. Pickett JA: Food security: intensification of agriculture is essential, for which current tools must be defended and new sustainable technologies invented. Food Energy Security 2013 http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/fes3.32.

Food production must be intensified on land that is presently farmed. Governments, particularly those in the EU, must embrace risk analysis in which advantages, as well as potential hazards, are accommodated.


Describes approaches for the identification of secondary metabolic gene clusters in plants through forward and reverse genetics, map-based cloning, and genome mining and gives examples of methods used for the analysis and functional confirmation of new clusters.


Successes in exploiting insect semiochemicals in the interests of better agriculture and animal husbandry are exemplified, and potential new ways of learning more about reception and detection for deception are discussed.


Natural enemies respond to herbivore-induced plant volatiles (HIPVs), but an often overlooked aspect is that there may be genotypic variation in these ‘indirect’ plant defence traits within plant species. Egg deposition by stemborer moths (Chilo partelli) on maize landrace varieties caused emission of HIPVs that attract parasitic wasps.


Identified homoterpenene biosynthesis genes in Arabidopsis and related genes from other plant species provide tools to engineer homoterpenene formation and to address questions of the regulation and specific activities of homoterpenenes in plant-herbivore interactions.


Results confirm the efficacy of D. uncinitum in S. hermonthica suppression leading to better growth and yields of maize. The effects of N application, mulching and a combination of both treatments in S. hermonthica control in maize were also observed, although these effects were much weaker.


Food insecurity is a chronic problem in Africa and is likely to worsen with climate change and population growth. ‘Push–pull’, based on specific locally available companion plants, has doubled yields on many farms. Details are discussed within the framework of improving food insecurity while ensuring environmental sustainability of farming.


Herbivore-induced plant volatiles (HIPVs) were collected from plants exposed to egg deposition by the stemborer Chilo partelli. The parasitic wasp Cotesia sesamiae preferred samples containing HIPVs from plants with eggs to samples collected from plants without eggs.


Use of alien introgression for crop improvement is important for meeting the challenges of global food supply, and the monocots such as the forage grasses and cereals, together with recent technological advances in molecular biology, can help meet these challenges.

Predator responses to the transgenic plant volatile TMTT depend on various background volatiles endogenously produced by the transgenic plants. The manipulation of TMTT is an ideal platform for pest control via the attraction of generalist and specialist predators in different manners.


Sobhy IS, Erb M, Lou Y, Turlings T: The prospect of applying chemical elicitors and plant strengtheners to enhance the...

Plant strengthener is a generic term for several commercially available compounds or mixtures of compounds that can be applied to cultivated plants in order to “boost their vigour, resilience and performance”. Studies into the consequences of boosting plant resistance against pests and diseases on plant volatiles have found a surprising and dramatic increase in the plants’ attractiveness to parasitic wasps.