Artificial intelligence in hydroponic crop management

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***Abstract*—Artificial intelligence can assist hydroponic crop management by interpreting sensor streams, images and system records to support prediction, classification, optimisation and decision support. Its practical value, however, is constrained by the quality and meaning of input data, the validity of management objectives, and the extent to which models have been tested beyond their development conditions. This paper synthesises evidence on AI-enabled sensing, environmental control, nutrient management and optimisation in hydroponic and related controlled-environment systems. The evidence shows that AI can support image-based plant assessment, predictive monitoring, lighting design and integrated control platforms, but that performance metrics alone do not establish agronomic reliability. Measurements such as electrical conductivity, dissolved oxygen and light can be informative while remaining incomplete representations of crop state. Demonstrations are commonly limited by narrow datasets, controlled conditions, short validation periods, omitted biological variables and untested transfer to other crops or facilities. AI should therefore be treated as a decision-support capability rather than evidence of autonomous crop management. Progress depends on representative data, explicit objectives linked to crop outcomes, external validation, uncertainty reporting and human oversight.**

I. Introduction

Hydroponic crop management increasingly combines sensing, connectivity and automated actuation with data-driven analysis. Reported Agriculture 4.0 applications include sensor platforms, image analysis using neural networks, automated environmental control, and low-cost computing hardware that can collect and process operational data close to the crop [1]. These capabilities create opportunities to detect patterns that would be difficult to identify through manual inspection alone, particularly where nutrient solution, climate and plant observations change together. Yet the presence of connected devices does not itself make a system intelligent or reliable. Artificial intelligence contributes only when its input data represent the management problem, its outputs inform an appropriate action, and the resulting action is evaluated against meaningful crop outcomes rather than technical convenience alone [2].

The technical challenge begins with measurement. Dissolved oxygen monitoring illustrates how conventional analytical, electrochemical and optical approaches each have distinct operating principles and susceptibility to interference. Intelligent signal processing and compensation may improve interpretation of sensor output, but their performance must be assessed through calibration, error, response and correlation evidence under the intended conditions [3]. An AI model cannot correct a poorly characterised signal merely by processing it more extensively. For hydroponic management, this means that prediction and diagnosis should be understood as extensions of metrology and crop physiology, not as substitutes for them. The reliability of a recommendation remains bounded by sensor behaviour, calibration range and the environmental conditions represented during development [4].

Electrical conductivity demonstrates why convenient indicators can become misleading management targets. In lettuce nutrient-film cultivation, conductivity did not fully represent individual nutrient concentrations, and maintaining a constant conductivity could conceal nutrient imbalance [5]. Such a result is consequential for machine learning because a model trained to preserve a proxy may optimise the proxy while failing to preserve nutrient balance or crop performance. Cultivar mismatch, inferred loss mechanisms, repeated-measures constraints and controlled-environment conditions also limit straightforward generalisation from one study to another [5]. This paper evaluates what AI can realistically contribute to hydroponic crop management by examining prediction, classification, optimisation and decision support alongside the evidence limits that should govern their use [6].

II. Background and Scope

AI in hydroponics should be distinguished from the underlying sensing and control infrastructure. Established dissolved-oxygen measurement approaches provide direct operational information, whereas intelligent compensation and adaptive signal-processing approaches seek to improve the interpretation of measurements affected by changing conditions [3]. The latter may be valuable where sensor interference or drift complicates real-time control, but it does not remove the need to verify the sensor against an appropriate reference. This distinction matters because automated decisions are often presented as evidence of AI capability even when they primarily implement fixed thresholds. A more defensible account separates measurement, inference, recommendation and actuation, then evaluates the reliability of each link in that chain [7].

Reviews of soilless controlled-environment agriculture identify AI applications for processing real-time sensor data, nutrient optimisation, harvest prediction, nutrient-deficiency detection, predictive maintenance, climate control and fertigation control [8]. These applications cover several distinct tasks.

Prediction estimates a future or unmeasured state, classification assigns an observed condition to a category, optimisation searches for settings that satisfy selected objectives, and decision support presents information or recommendations for a human operator. Their shared dependence on data should not obscure their differing evidence requirements. A classifier may perform well on held-out images yet provide limited support for a dosing decision, while an optimisation model requires objectives that reflect crop outcomes rather than only device efficiency [9].

The scope of claimed benefit must also be disciplined. Reported resource-efficiency gains in soilless systems may depend on crop, facility design, climate and management conditions, and can reflect idealised operating scenarios [8]. Energy demand, capital requirements and technical complexity may further complicate simple claims of efficiency. Consequently, this paper does not treat AI as an independently beneficial technology. It considers AI as a set of analytical methods embedded in physical production systems, where performance must be judged against representative operating conditions, valid objectives and evidence that extends beyond isolated prototypes [10].

III. Core Concepts and Mechanisms

Optimisation illustrates both the promise and the necessary caution of AI-assisted management. A lighting-design study combined optical simulation with multi-objective optimisation and compared optimisation objectives with dry-weight outcomes from repeated cultivation tests. The reported correlations indicate that model-guided lighting design can help identify configurations suited to defined cultivation purposes [11]. This is stronger evidence than a purely simulated result because crop performance was included in the validation pathway. Even so, the model was bounded by its crop duration and environmental representation. An optimisation result should therefore be interpreted as a conditional recommendation for a specified system, not as a universally transferable lighting prescription [12].

The selection of objectives determines what an optimiser will favour. In lighting optimisation, photosynthetic performance and uniformity could align, whereas electrical energy-use efficiency involved trade-offs with other objectives [11]. Fixed plant morphology and omitted thermal or airflow effects also contributed to prediction limits, demonstrating that a technically coherent objective can remain incomplete. This is the proxy-objective problem in practical form: an AI system can efficiently improve its stated target without necessarily improving the broader crop-management outcome. Hydroponic users should therefore define objectives that include relevant agronomic constraints, examine trade-offs explicitly, and retain human judgement where the model does not represent important physical or biological conditions [13].

Prediction of solution properties can strengthen decision support when it is evaluated beyond a single fitted dataset. A conductivity model was tested against new measurements and data from multiple electrolyte systems, using relative deviation and coefficient-of-determination measures while comparing alternative models [14]. This provides a more informative foundation than reporting one fit statistic alone. However, the model's limitations varied with solvent and concentration, showing that even well-tested predictive relationships have domains of validity. In hydroponics, such models can assist interpretation of solution behaviour, but they should not be conflated with direct knowledge of nutrient availability, plant uptake or crop health [15].

IV. Evidence Synthesis

The strongest interpretation of AI evidence distinguishes demonstrable assistance from unverified system-level benefit. Water-treatment research separates established practices and reported performance from context-dependent efficacy, scalability gaps and approaches requiring further validation [16]. The same evaluative discipline applies to hydroponic decision support. A model may predict a measured variable accurately, but that does not establish that its use improves crop outcomes, reduces losses or remains reliable when water quality, crop stage or facility conditions change. Evidence for a management recommendation should therefore connect the measurement or prediction to a clearly specified decision and then to an outcome measured under conditions relevant to use [17].

Related controlled-environment evidence also warns against treating predictive mechanisms as settled facts. Aeroponic research identifies reported comparisons while labelling some explanatory mechanisms and deposition models as proposed, predictive or unresolved [18]. For AI, this distinction is important because a successful association is not necessarily a causal explanation. A model can recognise a pattern in sensor data or images while remaining unable to identify why the pattern occurs. Decision support can still be useful under that limitation, provided its uncertainty is clear and its recommendations are bounded. Claims of autonomous diagnosis or optimisation exceed the evidence when they imply reliable causal understanding that has not been demonstrated [19].

Distribution shift is a central risk because biological responses depend on conditions that may not be represented in training data. A review of photoperiod and temperature effects identifies restricted geographic coverage, uneven taxonomic representation, excluded climate drivers and methodological heterogeneity that constrain generalisation [20]. Although this evidence is not specific to hydroponic AI, it demonstrates why models trained within narrow crop, climate or developmental settings should not be assumed to transfer without testing. In hydroponic facilities, changes in cultivar, lighting regime, root-zone conditions or production architecture can alter the relationship between observed inputs and desired outcomes. External validation should therefore be treated as a requirement for deployment claims rather than an optional refinement [21].

V. Practical Implications and Limitations

Validation quality is more informative than headline accuracy because it reveals whether a model has been tested against conditions resembling its intended use. An oxygenation model was evaluated with repeated bench measurements at two temperatures using metrics including mean absolute error, root mean square error, coefficient of determination and maximum deviation [22]. This combination provides evidence about agreement and error under defined conditions, but the study also documented narrow scale, parameter and numerical limitations. Hydroponic AI should be assessed similarly: developers should report the training and test conditions, relevant error measures, calibration procedures, failure cases and the extent to which the system has been tested across production cycles, cultivars and facilities [23].

Current literature documents machine-learning, predictive-control, sensing and explainable-AI applications in hydroponic and related controlled-environment systems, including Random Forest, XGBoost, SHAP and LIME use cases [24]. Explainability can help users inspect which inputs influence a model output, but it does not independently establish that the input relationships are causal or stable. Review evidence also notes sensor failure, transferability problems and the lack of unified independent validation across reported applications [24]. Human oversight remains necessary because growers must determine whether a recommendation is plausible in the physical crop environment, whether a sensor fault is distorting the input, and whether an intervention should be delayed, modified or rejected [25].

Demonstrated capability should be separated from emerging research and speculative autonomy. Hydroponic, aquaponic and bioponic systems have established operational practices, while modelling, precision agriculture and automation claims face adoption barriers and evidence gaps [24]. AI can realistically contribute by organising complex observations, forecasting bounded variables, screening images or supporting multi-objective choices. It cannot be assumed to deliver robust autonomous crop management merely because a prototype integrates sensors, models and actuators. Priority requirements are representative datasets, transparent definitions of target outcomes, testing under changed conditions, comparison against appropriate non-AI baselines, and operator-centred workflows that preserve accountability for consequential decisions.

VI. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence can add value to hydroponic crop management where it converts well-characterised measurements into bounded predictions, classifications, optimisation options or decision-support outputs. The evidence supports applications in sensing, image analysis, environmental control and model-guided optimisation, but it also shows that proxy variables, narrow datasets, incomplete system representation and limited external validation can restrict their usefulness [5], [8], [11], [24]. The central question is therefore not whether AI can find patterns, but whether those patterns remain reliable when they inform real crop-management decisions. Progress requires validation against agronomic outcomes, testing across relevant operating conditions, explicit treatment of uncertainty and human oversight. These conditions offer a realistic path for AI to strengthen hydroponic management without overstating present evidence for autonomous control.

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