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## Review

# Effects of anaerobic digestion on digestate nutrient availability and crop growth: A review

Anaerobic digestion (AD) for biogas production leads to several changes in the composition of the resulting digestates compared to the original feedstock (ammonia content, pH, carbon to nitrogen ratio, etc.), which are relevant for the plant availability of macro- and micronutrients after field application. Increased  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N content in digested slurries compared to undigested slurries does not guarantee improved uptake efficiency of slurry nitrogen and increased savings in fertilizer nitrogen. AD of crop residues and cover crops leads to an increase in the total amounts of mobile organic manures within the farming system, resulting in a higher nitrogen use efficiency and an increased scope for target-oriented nitrogen application in time and space, when needed by the crop, as an alternative to the site-bound soil incorporation as green manures. AD of dairy manure appears to reduce the fraction of immediate plant available phosphorus and micronutrients. This does, however, not affect short-term crop availability under field conditions. More studies are needed to improve current knowledge on sulfur losses during AD and fertilizer value of digestates.

**Keywords:** Digestate treatment / Micronutrients / Nitrogen / Phosphorus / Sulfur

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## 1 Introduction

Manures from stables, crop residues, wastes from food industry, municipal wastes, and dedicated energy crops are the main feedstocks for anaerobic digestion (AD) in biogas plants (Fig. 1). During AD about 20–95% of the feedstock organic matter (OM) is degraded, depending on feedstock composition. The residual product of AD, called digestate (= biogas effluents = biogas residues, or biogas slurry, when animal manures are digested), is usually used as fertilizer. For Germany, it was estimated that in the year 2011, approximately 20% of the animal wastes and the biomass harvested from an area of approximately 1.1 million ha are used as feedstock in biogas plants [1]. No data were found about the annual total amounts of available digestates in Germany. Own calculations indicate that the German biogas plants currently produce a total amount of approximately 65.5 million cubic meters of digestates, containing a total amount of 390,153 Mg nitrogen (N), 74,075 Mg phosphorus (P), and 331,472 Mg potassium (K) (Table 1). Digestates are either directly spread as manures, or treated (solid–liquid separation, drying, dilution, filtration, etc.) before field application (Fig. 1).

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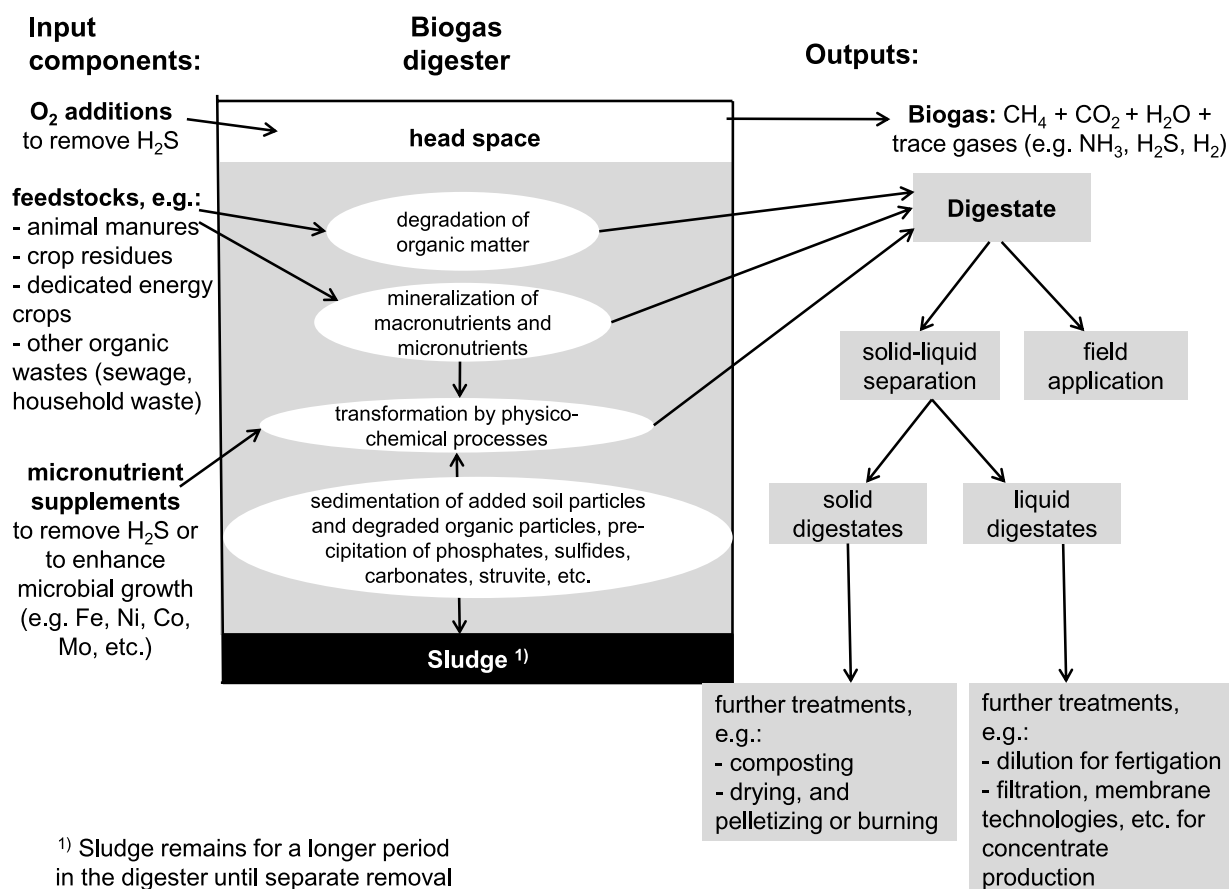
**Abbreviations:** AD, anaerobic digestion; DM, dry matter; FM, fresh matter; OM, organic matter

This paper addresses the effects of AD on digestate composition and their fertilizing effects, as well as the available digestate treatment procedures. It will give an overview of the state of the art and further research needs. Not included is potassium, as it does not become part of structural components in the plant. Therefore, most of the  $\text{K}^+$  in plants remains dissolved in the cell sap and is therefore also found in dissolved form in manures and digestates.

## 2 Effects of anaerobic digestion on manure composition

Early studies about the effect of AD on manure characteristics compared the composition of digestates and solid farmyard manures. They found similar differences as commonly described when comparing liquid slurry with solid farmyard manure [2–7]. Recently, characterizations have been made mainly for liquid undigested and digested animal slurries as well as for digestates derived from dedicated energy crops; available data indicate a wide range of nutrient contents (Table 2).

Digestates have higher ammonium ( $\text{NH}_4^+$ ):total nitrogen (N) ratios, decreased OM contents, decreased total and organic carbon (C) contents, reduced biological oxygen ( $\text{O}_2$ ) demands (factor 5–13), elevated pH values, smaller carbon to nitrogen ratios (C:N ratios), and reduced viscosities than undigested animal manures [8–17]. The digestate  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N content is directly



**Figure 1.** Overview of the matter flows and processes during anaerobic digestion and possible treatments of the resulting digestates.

related to the original feedstock total N content [18]. Digestates from feedstocks with a high degradability (e.g. cereal grains, poultry and pig manures with a diet high in concentrates) are characterized by high NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N:total N ratios and narrow C:N ratios [8, 10, 14, 19, 20]. Cattle manures or fibrous feedstocks low in N (e.g. silage maize) lead to a low NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N:total N ratio [8, 14, 21].

The digestate pH value is mainly controlled by the species NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup> ↔ NH<sub>3</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub> ↔ HCO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> ↔ CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup>, and CH<sub>3</sub>COOH ↔ CH<sub>3</sub>COO<sup>-</sup> [22, 23]. A pH increase is usually due to formation of ammonium carbonate ((NH<sub>4</sub>)<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>) [18, 24] and the removal of CO<sub>2</sub> [25] as a result of the transformation of CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup> and 2H<sup>+</sup> to CO<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O (Figs. 2 and 3). Furthermore, the fatty acid contents of feedstocks were reduced by AD (factor 2.5–13) [16, 26]. Digestate pH is also affected by the concentration of basic cations (e.g. Ca<sup>2+</sup>, K<sup>+</sup>); they increase digestate pH because the electric charge balance of the solution has to be neutral, thus, decreasing the concentration of H<sup>+</sup> [23]. Simultaneously, precipitation of carbonates (e.g. calcite CaCO<sub>3</sub>) reduces manure pH [23]. Mineralization and reduction of multivalent ions in feedstocks (e.g. SO<sub>4</sub><sup>2-</sup>, Fe<sup>III</sup>(OH)<sub>3</sub>) increase pH, as well as the addition of Fe<sup>III</sup>-ions to remove hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S). Precipitation of Fe<sup>2+</sup>-phosphates releases protons decreasing the pH [23]. Also, the reaction between Mg<sup>2+</sup>-, NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>- and PO<sub>4</sub><sup>3-</sup>-

ions (to form struvite) causes the release of H<sup>+</sup> ions in solution (Fig. 2) [27].

Analyses of particle size distributions in raw and digested slurries showed a general shift in distribution toward larger sizes. Larger particles (i.e. >10 μm) are more resistant to degradation [28].

It has been stated that digestates contain bioactive substances, such as phytohormones (e.g. gibberellins, indoleacetic acid), nucleic acids, monosaccharides, free amino acids, vitamins and fulvic acid, etc., with the potential to promote plant growth and to increase the tolerance to biotic and abiotic stress [29, 30]. Digestates have higher contents of indoleacetic acid than the original plant feedstock [31]. This increase could only be explained by a microbial synthesis during the digestion process.

Contradictory results have been found concerning phytotoxicity of digestates. Some authors reported that digestate application has no phytotoxic effects [32, 33], others have found phytotoxic reactions [34–36]. Phytotoxicity is related to NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N [36, 37] and organic acid concentrations [34, 36, 37]. No data were found on the duration of possible phytotoxic effects of digestates. It is expected that the possible negative effect of any kind of digestate phytotoxicity will decrease within a short period of time after field application.

**Table 1.** Assessment of the annual total amounts of digestates currently produced by biogas plants in Germany, and the related amounts of nutrients

Feedstocks		Total nutrient amounts (Mg) <sup>a)</sup>			Amounts <sup>c)</sup> (1000 m <sup>3</sup> )
		N	P	K	
<b>Dedicated energy crops</b>	Assumed area (ha) <sup>d)</sup>				Digestate FM <sup>b)</sup>
Silage maize	629 063	131 474	24 219	128 014	26 295
Cereals	163 090	16 146	3 425	4 893	245
Whole plant silage (cereal)	58 247	8 155	1 456	5 679	1 092
Other (potatoes, sugar beets, etc.)	58 247	7 405	1 631	11 727	1 797
Grassland	191 354	59 320	9 185	52 431	4 736
<b>Sum</b>	<b>1 100 000</b>	<b>222 499</b>	<b>39 916</b>	<b>202 744</b>	<b>34 165</b>
<b>Animal excrements</b>	Assumed amounts (1000 Mg FM)				
Cattle slurry	18 641	80 158	12 303	77 361	18 641
Pig slurry	4 924	22 651	4 530	9 011	4 826
Mixed slurries	5 116	22 766	4 042	15 297	5 065
Solid farmyard manures	1 727	12 259	3 246	9 894	1 606
Poultry manures	1 533	26 820	10 038	17 165	1 165
<b>Sum</b>		<b>164 654</b>	<b>34 159</b>	<b>128 728</b>	<b>31 302</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>387 153</b>	<b>74 075</b>	<b>331 472</b>	<b>65 467</b>

a) Calculations based on nutrient contents and mean yields provided by [136].

b) FM = Fresh matter.

c) Calculations based on assumed feedstock availability and “volume reduction factors” provided by Heidenreich (cited by [21]).

d) Data based on the assumption that feedstocks are produced on an area of 1,1 Mio ha, including 5% of the total German grassland area; arable land feedstock composition: 69% silage maize, 18% cereal grains, 6.5% whole plant silage, and 6.5% others [1].

**Table 2.** Digestate characteristics

	Absolute values	Change <sup>a)</sup>	References
DM (%)	1.5–13.2	−1.5 to −5.5	[21, 137–141]
Organic DM (% DM)	63.8–75.0	−5 to −15	[12, 137, 141]
Total N (% DM)	3.1–14.0%	b)	[8, 12, 14, 137, 141]
Total N (kg Mg <sup>−1</sup> FM)	1.20–9.10	≈ 0	[8, 10, 14, 138, 139, 142]
Total NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> (kg Mg <sup>−1</sup> FM)	1.5–6.8	?	[139]
NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> share on total N (%)	44–81%	+10 to +33	[8, 12, 14, 16, 140]
Total C content (% DM)	36.0–45.0	−2 to −3	[12]
C:N ratio	3.0–8.5	−3 to −5	[12, 14, 142]
Total P content (% DM)	0.6–1.7	b)	[10, 21, 137, 141]
Total P (kg Mg <sup>−1</sup> FM)	0.4–2.6	≈ 0	[21, 138, 139, 142]
Water soluble P (% of total P)	25–45	−20 to −47	[65, 143]
Total K (% DM)	1.9–4.3	b)	[10, 21, 137, 141]
Total K (kg Mg <sup>−1</sup> FM)	1.2–11.5	≈ 0	[21, 138, 139]
Total Mg (kg Mg <sup>−1</sup> FM)	0.3–0.7	≈ 0	[137, 141, 142]
Total Ca (kg Mg <sup>−1</sup> FM)	1.0–2.3	≈ 0	[10, 141, 142]
Total S (kg Mg <sup>−1</sup> FM)	0.2–0.4	?	[142]
pH	7.3–9.0	+0.5 to +2 units	[8, 10, 12, 14, 18, 26, 112, 142, 144]

a) In comparison to undigested liquid animal manures, absolute values.

b) Increases with degree of DM degradation.

DM = Dry matter.

FM = Fresh matter.

? = No data found/no data available.

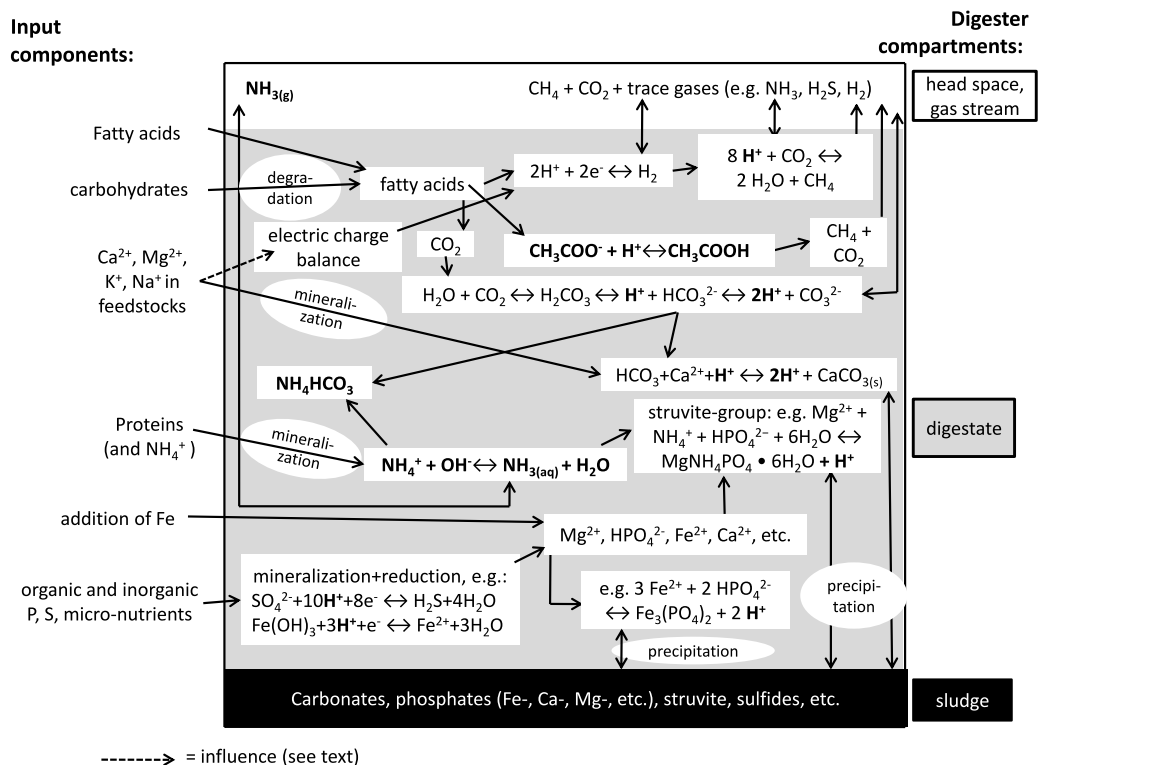


Figure 2. Factors affecting pH-value of digestates.

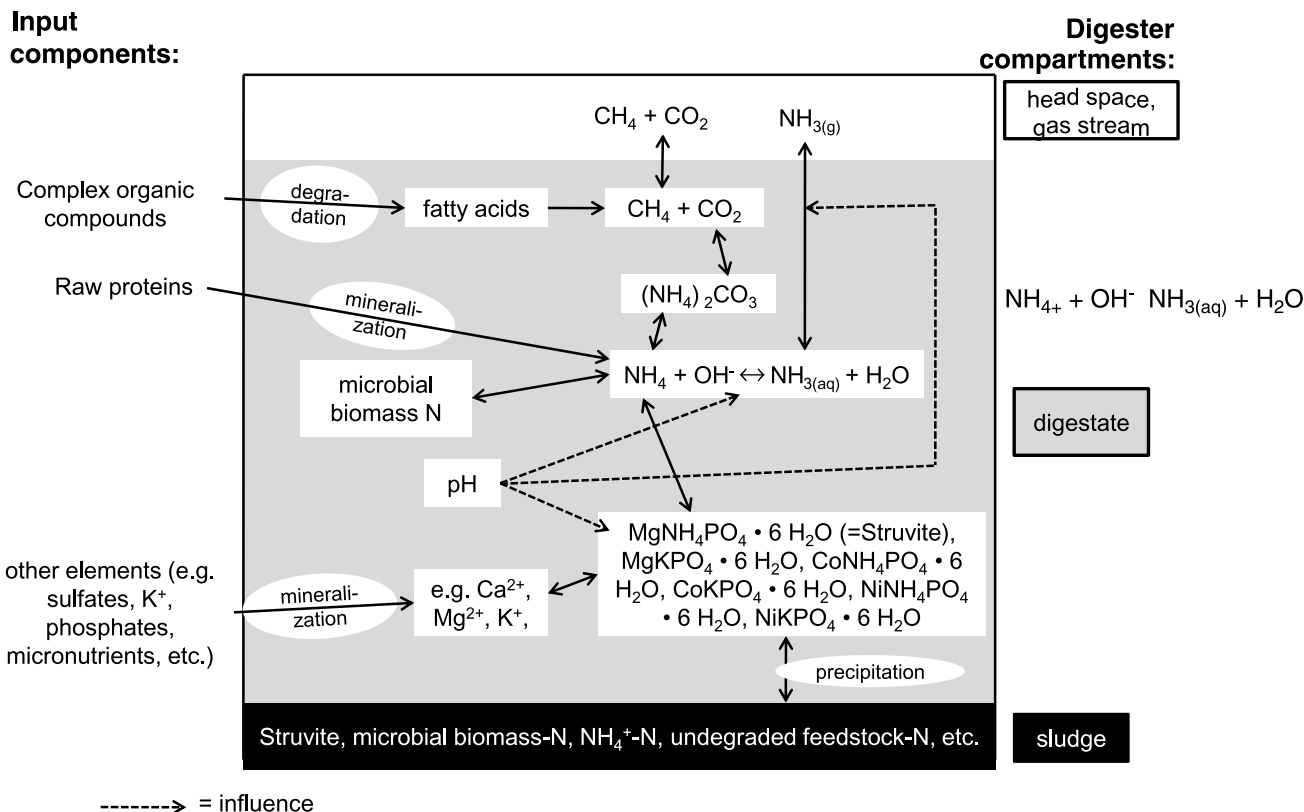


Figure 3. Nitrogen turnover in biogas digesters.

### 3 Effects of anaerobic digestion on nutrient availability after digestate application

#### 3.1 Nitrogen

Complex organic N compounds are mineralized to  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  in the digester. A part of the  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  is used by the digester microorganism for growth. Further processes are formation of struvite and ammonium carbonate, traces are volatilized in the biogas stream (<1%) (Fig. 3). The essential major element N is found in the plant in both inorganic and organic forms. A range of processes is triggered by field application of digestates. Priming effects [38], as well as an inorganic N immobilization [39–41], have been detected. A significant, negative correlation between net N-mineralization and mineralized-C has been reported [41]. Remaining organic compounds induce soil biological activity, partially immobilizing inorganic N [39, 41]. However, the fundamental environmental changes (anoxic conditions in the digestate stores, oxic or semioxic conditions in the soil) may also induce decomposition of compounds, which need oxic conditions for decomposition, as present in the soil after field application [42]. The biochemical  $\text{O}_2$  demand, the dissolved organic C, and the corresponding organic C:total N ratio of dissolved substances can be considered the most reliable indicators in describing digestate biodegradability [41].

For the year of application of organic manures, it is generally assumed that the fraction of plant available N is closely associated to the manures'  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  contents [14, 43–45]. Comparisons of digestate applications with mineral N fertilizers based on equivalent amounts of total N have been shown lower fertilizer N-values than the mineral N fertilizers [46]. However, if the application was only based on equivalent amounts of the  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  fraction in the digestate, comparable apparent  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  recoveries of digestates and mineral fertilizers were reported [14, 20, 47]. Simultaneously, with digestate field application soil organic nitrogen ( $\text{N}_{\text{org}}$ )-accumulation takes place, enhancing soil  $\text{N}_{\text{org}}$ -mineralization even after a single digestate application [14]. The net  $\text{N}_{\text{org}}$ -mineralization within a six-month experimental period was 12% [47]. Though, it might be difficult to transfer these results to other kinds of digestates, as the C:N ratio of digestates varies widely in range, and the total carbon to organic N ratio ( $\text{C}_{\text{org}}:\text{N}_{\text{org}}$  ratio) is a crucial factor for the short-term N availability [12, 14]. Even organic manures with a similar C:N ratio may mineralize different amounts of N, due to differences in their chemical composition [48].

Comparisons between digested and undigested slurry in pot experiments, with equivalent amounts of applied  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$ , indicate a higher apparent N recovery for digested than for undigested slurry [20]. Field experiments with the application of equivalent amounts of total N indicate that the uptake of N from liquid digested animal slurry equaled that of undigested slurry after surface application, despite the higher  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  content of the digestate [12, 49]. A significant effect of AD on crop yields and N uptake could only be found in experiments where the manures are incorporated into the soil shortly after field application [12], indicating that substantial parts of N might have been volatilized as  $\text{NH}_3$  [11, 50]. This is supported by pot experiments based on application of equivalent amounts of total N, where the N uptake from digestates from animal

slurry exceeded that from undigested slurry by about 10% to 25% [8, 16, 51, 52].

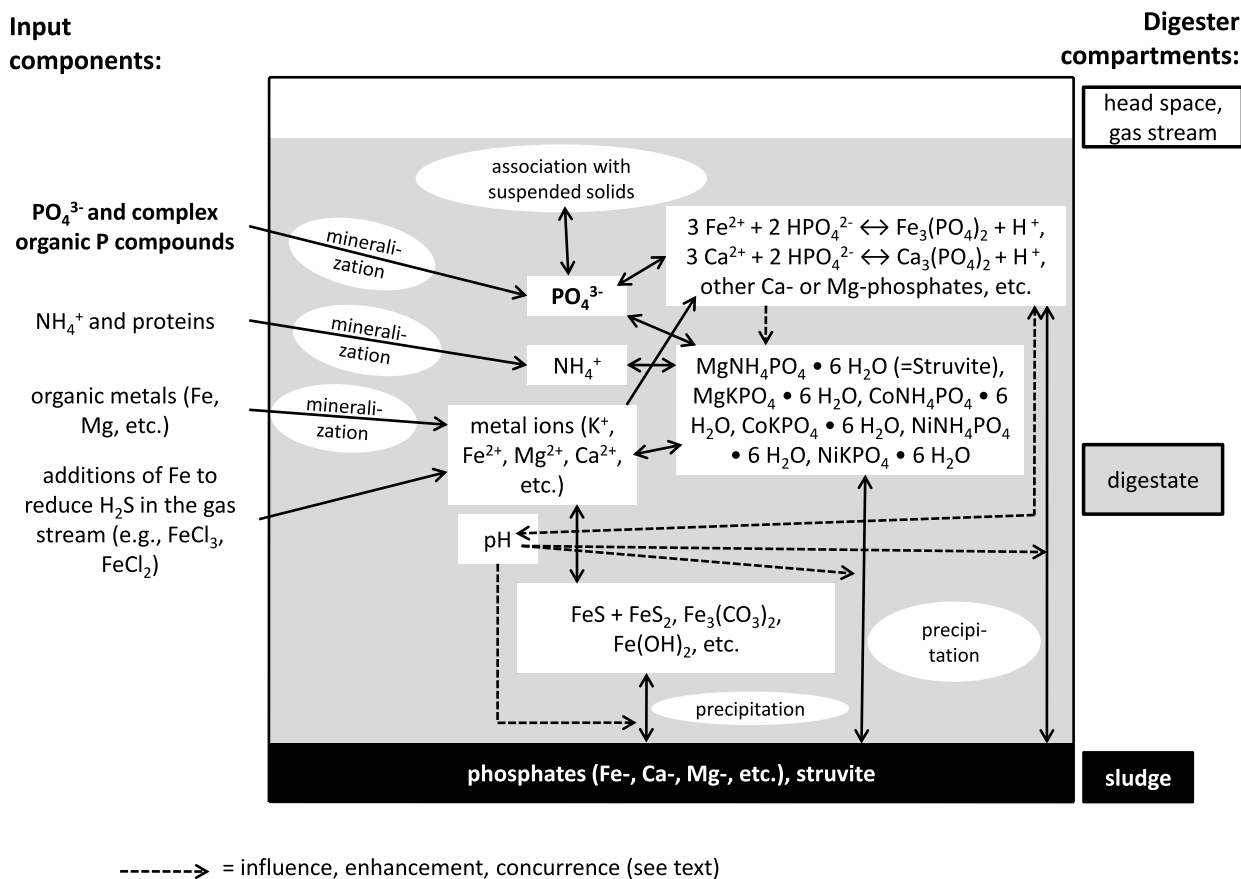
#### 3.2 Phosphorus

As a constituent of adenylates, nucleic acids and phospholipids, phosphorus is an important plant macronutrient. The natural supply of P in most soils is small and the availability of P in the soil solution is usually very low. It is often stated that degradation processes during AD will improve phosphorus (P) plant availability [53–55]. However, most available results from field experiments indicated no effects of AD on manure P availability [56–58]. AD has potentially the opposite influence on crop P availability, as often stated. Manure pH strongly influences the solubility of P and micronutrients. Raising the pH moves the chemical equilibrium toward the formation of phosphate ( $\text{HPO}_4^{2-} \rightarrow \text{PO}_4^{3-}$ ) and subsequent precipitation as calcium (Ca)- or magnesium (Mg)-phosphate (e.g.  $\text{Ca}_3(\text{PO}_4)_2$ ) [23, 59–61] (Fig. 4). Simultaneously, the binding form of other elements such as iron (Fe) may also be influenced by AD, affecting P turnover and precipitation processes during AD [62–64]. The fraction of dissolved P, mineralized during AD, associates with suspended solids [65]. The water-extractable P-fraction and ratios of extractable nutrient:total-nutrient for Ca and Mg decreased substantially during AD (Table 2) [65]. Mineralization of N, P, and Mg combined with a substantial increase of the manure pH can enhance the formation and crystallization of struvite [23, 27, 66]. This process can be used to remove N and P from manures to reduce the P and N loadings [64, 66]. Many ionic species (e.g.  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ,  $\text{K}^+$ ,  $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$ ) can influence struvite formation by reacting with its component ions [27]. Therefore, digestates contain only trace amounts of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ,  $\text{Mg}^{2+}$ , and inorganic P in solution [22, 23].

Concerning the effects of AD on P losses, while passing through the biogas plant, small amounts of P (<10%) are lost [65, 67, 68]. Few papers indicate much higher P losses up to 25% [69] or even 36% [28]. The probable causes are partial retention in the digesters due to the precipitation processes [28, 65, 67, 69], (Fig. 4). No studies about the effects of AD on P losses via leaching and runoff after field application were found. The loss of P in surface runoff occurs as sediment-bound and in dissolved forms [70].

#### 3.3 Sulfur

Sulfur (S) is a major essential nutrient, and S deficiency becomes problematic in a growing number of regions [71]. Redox level is an important factor when determining S reactions in a system [73]. Therefore, degradation of OM forms sulfate, which, in the absence of  $\text{O}_2$ , reacts with protons to  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  and other molecules [72–74] increasing the digester pH and leading to a strong decrease of sulfate concentration and increase of sulfide and C-bonded S concentrations, metal-sulfide precipitation, and sulfur volatilization (Fig. 5). The formation of  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$ , methanethiol ( $\text{CH}_3\text{-SH}$ ), dimethyl-sulfide ( $(\text{CH}_3)_2\text{S}$ ), and dimethyl disulfide ( $\text{CH}_3\text{SSCH}_3$ ) in slurry is redox dependent, while carbonyl sulfide ( $\text{COS}$ ) and carbon disulfide ( $\text{CS}_2$ ) are relatively constant and in low amounts at all redox levels. Most of the S emanating from



**Figure 4.** Phosphorus turnover in biogas digesters.

the slurry is produced under anaerobic conditions between 0 and -200 mV [74].  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  contents are proportional to feedstock S contents [72, 73]. Protein-rich feedstocks may increase  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  content in biogas [72, 75], as S is introduced mainly as a constituent of amino acids.

No data were found addressing the digestate plant S availability. Sulfate ( $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ ) is the plant available sulfur form [71, 76]. Sulfide is expected to be readily oxidized to sulfate under oxic conditions [75]. Lloyd [77] found an effectiveness of S as plant nutrient in cattle slurry of 55% compared with S in gypsum. However, there are also reports of very low plant availabilities of slurry S [75]. Possible causes are S-volatilization (e.g.  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$ ,  $\text{CS}_2$ , COS,  $\text{CH}_3\text{SSCH}_3$ , etc.), soil S-immobilization as metallic sulfides (e.g.  $\text{FeS}_2$ , FeS), or sorption to soil constituents [75, 78]. In most cases, more than 50% of S is potentially volatile sulfide or C-bonded S [75]. Although no data were found about S volatilization after field application of digestates, a high volatilization risk during manure storage and after manure spreading can be expected due to the high proportion of potentially volatile S compounds in digestates.

There are only few data available regarding S losses in biogas plants. Some reports indicate that a part of the S is retained or lost during AD [28, 69]. Less than 50% of S leaves the biodigester via digestates [69]. A part of the introduced S may potentially leave the digester with the gaseous products (Fig. 5) [79]. The lower the pH and temperature, the higher the  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  concentration

in solution. Several methods are used to partially remove  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  from the biogas stream. A common technique is to convert the  $\text{S}^{2-}$  in  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  to  $\text{S}^0$  after biooxidation [72]. Iron-salts also remove  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  from the gaseous products.

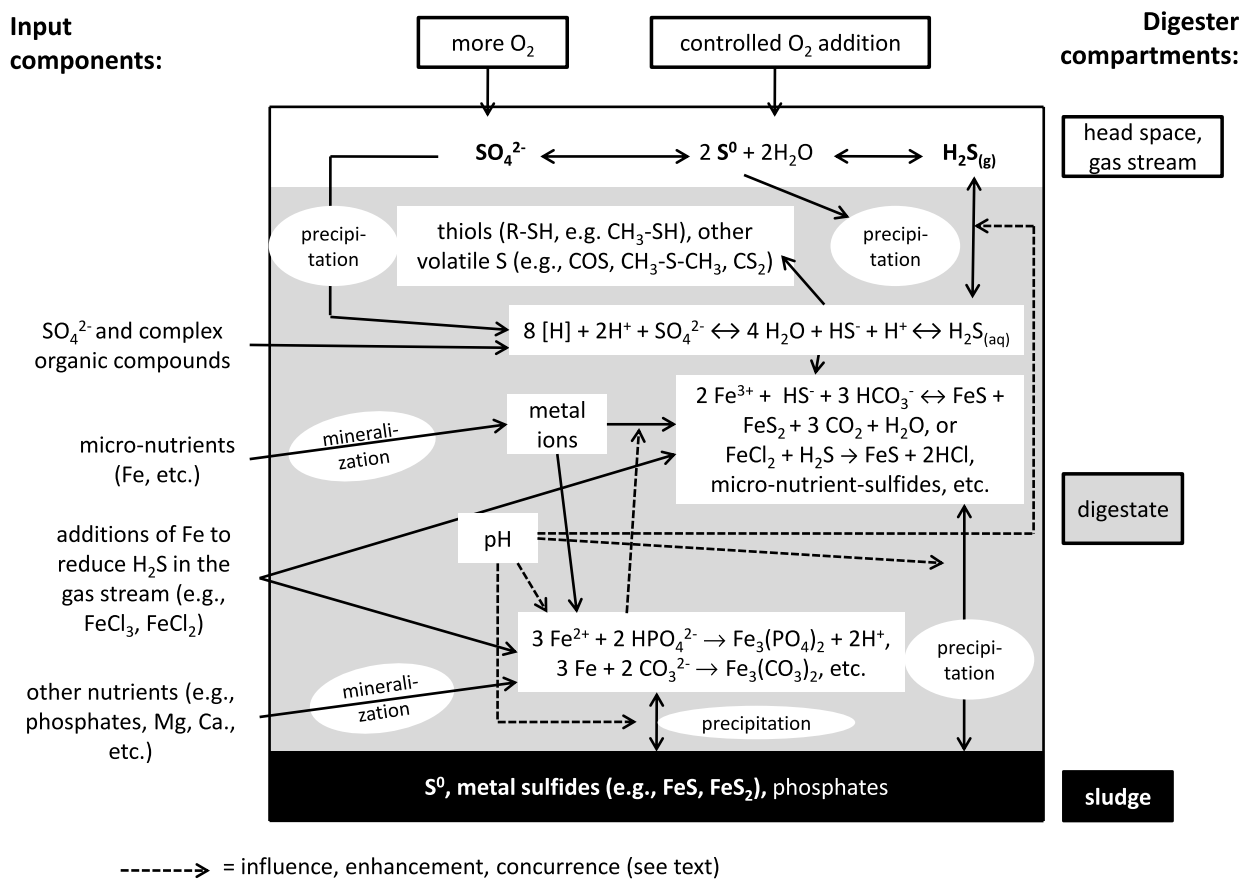
More research is needed to assess the S turnover processes in the digester depending on the inputs into the biogas plant. For example, there is no research available on the influence of different technologies for  $\text{H}_2\text{S}$  removal from the biogas stream on S losses and S speciation in digestates. Research addressing the influence of S- and Fe-loads via feedstocks (or via addition of supplements) on nutrient speciation and precipitation in the sludge is also needed. Current knowledge about the S fertilizer value of digestates is very scarce.

### 3.4 Ca, Mg, and micronutrients

Many studies dealt with the effect of AD on micronutrient distribution and bioavailability in sewage sludge, but rarely any with digestates. Because of the complexity of the processes in the matrix, micronutrients may be involved in many physico-chemical processes including:

- precipitation as sulfide (except Cr), carbonate, phosphates, and hydroxides,
- sorption to the solid fraction, either biomass or inert suspended matter, and





**Figure 5.** Sulfur turnover in biogas digesters.

- (iii) formation of complexes in solution with intermediates and product compounds produced during AD [62, 80, 81].

There are only few studies available addressing aspects of Ca, Mg, and micronutrient turnover in digester. For example, on average, 8.7% of Ca, 21.0% of Mn, 18.4% of Zn, and 41.5% of Cu was retained in bioreactors [69]. However, the authors did not find a statistically significant K, Fe, Mg, and sodium retention in the digesters. Significant losses have also been observed for Ca, Mg, and manganese with 44%, 32.5%, and 32% of the respective elements, respectively [28]. They partially crystallize out as phosphates and carbonates.

The total metal concentration, the conditions during digestion such as pH and redox potential, and the kinetics of reduction, precipitation, complexation, and adsorption are expected to play a key role influencing the chemical speciation of micronutrients in liquid manures [62, 80, 82]. The increasing pH decreases solubility of metals in the matrix [59, 83]. The precipitation of metals by sulfide (S<sup>2-</sup>), carbonate (CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup>), and phosphate (PO<sub>4</sub><sup>3-</sup>), and their deposition in the bioreactor sludge plays an important role in the nutrient turnover of macro- and micronutrients [28, 62, 84, 85]. There is also probably a strong interaction of added Fe and the micronutrients in the matrix: micronutrients may react with the Fe-sulfide releasing Fe<sup>2+</sup> [81, 86] (Fig. 5). The resulting Fe<sup>2+</sup> may form precipitates as hydroxides

(Fe(OH)<sub>2</sub>) or carbonates (FeCO<sub>3</sub>) [80]. Consequently, bioreactors have a considerable ability to sequester Fe<sup>2+</sup>-ions in the sludge [87]. Simultaneously, nonalkali metals (e.g., Ca<sup>2+</sup>, Mg<sup>2+</sup>) form soluble ion pairs with a number of anions: HCO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>, CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup>, OH<sup>-</sup>, SO<sub>4</sub><sup>2-</sup>, S<sup>2-</sup>, Se<sup>2-</sup> [62]. A possible advantage of the precipitation processes is that the heavy metal loads in digestates can be reduced.

Complexation reactions play an important role in bioreactors making a particular metal either more or less bioavailable [62]. The level of soluble metals in the presence of CO<sub>3</sub><sup>2-</sup> and S<sup>2-</sup> may be increased by a factor of up to 10<sup>4</sup> by complexation [83], avoiding precipitation as carbonates or sulfides. Several authors describe a shift of micronutrients away from mobile forms toward more stable and less reactive and bioavailable forms during AD [84, 88–90]. However, in a growth chamber experiment, it has been found that AD does not reduce the plant bioavailability of micronutrients [90]. The relevant processes driving the underlying effects are not well understood. Furthermore, no data were found concerning the effects of a long-term digestate field application on the heavy metal accumulation in the soil and their bioavailability to plants.

No data are available on the nutrient and micronutrient loads of the sludge of biogas reactors. It is probable that the nutrient loads are very high in the reactor sludge, demanding an accurate management of the sludge after removal from the bioreactor, in

order to avoid high application of nutrients or pollutants on a small area.

#### 4 Effects of feedstocks on the digestates' fertilizer values

To address the effects of different feedstocks on the digestates' quality and on crop growth after digestate application, three approaches should be discussed separately:

- (i) The digestion of animal manures alone, AD is commonly an additional intermediate step in the whole nutrient cycle. The effects on the overall inner farm nutrient flows are limited [91].
- (ii) The digestion of green manure crops and crop residues in combination with animal manures does not alter the total amounts of available organic manures, however it modifies the manure flows within the farming system, influencing their allocation in time and space [91].
- (iii) The digestion of dedicated energy crops alone or in combination with animal manures leads to additional amounts of organic manures [91, 92].

Concerning (i), contradictory effects on crop yields have been found between undigested and digested cattle slurry after surface application under field conditions: some authors report no effects on crop yield [10, 12, 56], others report a positive effect of AD on crop yields [93]. On grassland, it seems that AD of slurry positively affects yields, but only in some years [12, 94, 95]. In pot experiments, however, a significant positive effect of AD of slurries on the manuring effect and crop yields have been congruently found [8, 16, 39, 51, 52, 96]. The contradictions of the results obtained with pot experiments versus field conditions with surface amended digestates were likely based on methodological reasons. In pot experiments, digestates were usually mixed immediately with soil, reducing N losses [12]. Probable causes of the reported inhomogeneous results depending on manured crop and application technique are:

- (a) Higher ammonia losses after spreading digested slurry, because manure AD increases  $\text{NH}_4^+$  concentration as well as pH value and both factors promote gaseous N losses [10, 12, 50, 97].
- (b) Vegetation periods in pot experiments are often short and soil volume is often limited, reducing the fertilization effects to immediately available nutrients, for nitrogen mainly  $\text{NH}_4^+$ , promoting digestates with a higher share of  $\text{NH}_4^+$  on total N. In field experiments with a longer vegetation period and a larger rooting area  $N_{\text{org}}$  of undigested manures may, however, have enough time to become partially mineralized and available to crops [12, 52, 98].

Regarding AD of green manure crops and crop residues (ii) increased soil N availability, crop yield and N use efficiency in comparison to direct soil incorporation of feedstocks have been found [12, 91, 99, 100]. Short-term availability of plant N is increased when digestates are returned to soil, compared with direct soil incorporation as green manure or crop residues af-

ter harvest. Another factor that must be considered when green manure and crop residues are used for AD is the spatial nutrient translocations within the farming system. A yield increase of between 15% and 28% have been found for organic cropping systems, where fertilization is based on AD of crop residues and green manure crops and reallocation via digestates [99, 100]. Instead of a site-bound manure incorporated directly by soil tillage, AD, thus, enables the farmer to remove the plant biomass, including their nutrients for digestion, leading to a "mobile" manure. The "degree of freedom" of fertilization organic manures is increased, as they can be applied to crops with higher N demand at an optimal application time. In conventional cropping systems, such mass and nutrient reallocations within the cropping system will result in an equivalent reduction of mineral fertilizer requirements. In organic cropping systems, the reallocation opens for a more target-oriented application of fertilizers, thus, reducing potential losses by an improved synchronization of crop nutrient demand and nutrient availability.

AD of dedicated energy crops (iii, e.g. silage maize) generally results in additional amounts of available organic manures within the farming system, as animal stocking is often only slightly influenced by the implementation of biogas plants [92]. Very often, additional feedstocks are purchased from surrounding farms. In principle, these factors lead to similar consequences and risks as reported for increased animal stocks, e.g. higher nutrient surpluses, increased manure application in autumn in order to clear the stores, lower N use efficiency, etc. [91, 92]. Thus, challenges in manure handling and allocation are increasing so that high nutrient use efficiencies and low emissions can be obtained.

#### 5 Digestates as fertilizers for vegetable crops

Few publications address the use of digestates as fertilizers for vegetables demonstrating that digestates are an effective nutrient source [29, 101, 102]. Digestates may be most beneficial in organic vegetable cultivation, where quick release fertilizers are lacking [101, 102]. Incubation studies carried out under different soil temperatures (8 and 16°C) demonstrate that the short-term N-release of digestate N is similar (e.g. blood meal, vinasse, etc.) or even higher (e.g. castor cake, poultry solid manure, feather meal, meat and bone meal, etc.) than the N-release of many commercial organic fertilizers often used as manures in organic vegetable crops, especially under low soil temperatures [102]. This indicates the high suitability of digestates as a fertilizer even in the cool season (e.g. early spring), especially for high N demanding vegetables with a short growing period.

Under soilless conditions, digestates from animal slurries are an effective nutrient source in vegetable production. Undiluted digestates with high electrical conductivity are not suitable [29]. The key problems obstructing their application in soilless culture are the variability of components and the imbalance in the elemental composition [103]. Appropriate dilutions are 1:4 to 1:8 (digestate:water) [29].

Also hydroponic production of lettuce using digestates or the liquid fraction after a solid-liquid separation in adequate



dilution was comparable to a commercial hydroponic fertilizer regime [104, 105]. In tomatoes, a conversion of  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N to nitrate and a supplementation with Mg were required before digestate application in hydroponic culture [105, 106]. This was necessary because of the high sensitivity of tomatoes to high  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N levels, and the low content and availability of Mg in digestates [105], due to struvite formation and precipitation during AD. Other studies have reported that supplementation by addition of P and micronutrients (particularly Fe) increases the shoot biomass of lettuce [103]. Such a supplementation balances the relative P deficiency compared to N and improves Fe availability [103].

Most investigations have shown that the vegetable nitrate content decreased significantly, when applying digestates as an alternative to mineral fertilizers under soilless [29] and sand culture [107], as well as in pot experiments [108]. The reduction in nitrate content has been related to differences in N composition. In contrast to nutrient solutions supplying nitrate, biogas digestates supply  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N and as organic components mainly amino- and amide-N [29, 107]. In one study, no effects were found under field conditions [101]. It seems that described effects are most relevant when vegetables are fertilized with nutrients solution.

Results on the effect of application of digestates derived from animal wastes on vitamin C content of vegetables are inconsistent [103, 108]. The use of concentrated digestates (fertilizer obtained after solid–liquid separation, filtration, etc., see Fig. 1) from animal manures had significant effects on tomato fruits, including decreases in water content, and increases in electrical conductivity, contents of total N, total P, amino acids, proteins, soluble sugars,  $\beta$ -carotene, tannins, and vitamin C [30].

## 6 Agronomical relevant effects of digestate treatment

Manure treatment technologies include physical (e.g. solid–liquid separation), chemical (e.g. flocculation, precipitation), and biological (e.g. composting) approaches. Commonly, the first step of each digestate treatment procedure is the physical solid–liquid separation (Fig. 1), e.g. with a screw-press separator. Mostly, the resulting solid manure high in dry matter (DM) and the liquid manure low in DM is directly applied as fertilizer [1]. Further treatments, for example drying of solid digestates or water removal from the liquids by membrane technologies to produce concentrates are not widespread.

### 6.1 Solid–liquid separation

Separation of digestates creates two products, a liquid and a fibrous material, both need to be stored and handled separately (Fig. 1). Separation is performed in approximately 7% of the German biogas plants [1] and facilitates controlling the nutrient content of manure fractions and the  $\text{NH}_3$  losses from the liquid fractions [109]. The solid phase often comprises approximately 20–25% of the total digestate fresh matter derived from dedicated energy crops (with a high silage maize and grass share) and has DM contents similar to solid farmyard manure

(Table 3). The higher the DM content of the inflow to the separator, the lower the proportion of the liquid phase [110, 111]. The composition of separated solid digestates can vary greatly (Table 3). The relatively high mineral N content of solids indicates a high potential for N losses during manure handling and application [112–115], in particular ammonia volatilization, leaching and gaseous losses by denitrification after nitrification of the  $\text{NH}_4^+$  to  $\text{NO}_3^-$  during (partially) aerobic storage and handling [21 and references therein]. Most of the total P is allocated to the solid phase. The liquid phase is characterized by low DM and P contents and high N and K contents [14, 21]. Therefore, N and K of digestates are partitioned according to the proportion of solid and liquid phases [12, 21, 105, 111]. A total of 45–80% of the N in the liquid phase is present as  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N.

No data were found about the influence of a single feedstock on the separation index (ratio of solid to liquid fractions) and on the nutrient content of both components. Furthermore, no data are available addressing the N-turnover processes (e.g. N-immobilization and -(re)mineralization) after application of separated liquid or solid digestates, and how these processes are influenced by the digestate composition, as previously done for example for separated animal slurries [116]. Field application of digested and separated liquids resulted in similar yields and N uptake in comparison to plots treated with commercially available N fertilizers [14, 105, 117, 118]. Available data indicate that a considerable share of  $\text{N}_{\text{org}}$  fractions, in separated liquid digestates, is rapidly mineralized in soil [14]. Application of the solids results in significant lower yields compared to the liquids and to reference plots with mineral fertilizer [14, 105, 117]. Incubation experiments indicated a net N immobilization after application of separated solid digestates [14, 119]. Other studies indicate that considerable N losses during storage reduced the plant available N [114].

In summary, the solid phase may be characterized as an organic fertilizer comparable with solid animal manure, but, with highly available N and P contents having a high potential for gaseous N losses, best suited to application on arable land in order to increase soil humus reproduction and to substitute P losses via harvested P-rich biomass such as grains. Separated liquid digestates are characterizes as N–K fertilizers comparable to mineral N–K fertilizers or animal urine. A digestate solid–liquid separation, with a target-oriented separate application of the liquid and solid phase, is, therefore, a technique for further improvement of the nutrient use efficiency after field application due to the following effects:

- (i) Production of a liquid fraction, which is easy to handle and therefore allows the implementation of more sophisticated field application techniques, such as liquid manure injection with a reduced risk of blockages of tubes [59].
- (ii) Implementation of application strategies that increase the agronomic value of manure by matching the crop nutrient requirements more closely, both in amount and in time [21, 69].
- (iii) Production of liquids with distinctly reduced levels of P and heavy metals [59, 120].
- (iv) Improved plant uptake of digestate-derived N in the liquid phase due to a high  $\text{NH}_4^+$ :total N share, lower organic carbon contents and therefore lower N immobilization after

**Table 3.** Digestate characteristics after solid–liquid separation

	Liquid fraction of digestates	Solid fraction of digestates	References
DM (%)	4.5–6.6	19.3–24.7	[21, 111, 139, 140, 111]
Organic DM (% DM)		40–86	[145]
Total N (% DM)	7.7–9.2	2.2–3.0	[21, 140]
Total N (kg Mg <sup>-1</sup> FM)	4.0–5.1	4.6–6.5	[21, 111, 139, 140]
Total NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> (kg Mg <sup>-1</sup> FM)	1.8–3.0	2.6–2.7	[21, 139, 140]
NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> share on total N (%)	40–80	26.0–49.4	[12, 14, 21, 105, 139, 140]
Total C (% DM)	48.0	39.6–40.0	[12, 111, 145]
C:N ratio	3.7–4.8	11.2–19.3	[12, 21]
Total P (% DM)	0.4–0.7	1.9	[12, 21]
Total P (kg Mg <sup>-1</sup> FM)	0.7–1.0	2.0–2.5	[21, 111, 139]
Total K (% DM)	3.9	3.6	[12, 21]
Total K (kg Mg <sup>-1</sup> FM)	3.5–5.2	3.4–4.8	[12, 21, 111, 139]
Total Mg (% DM)	?	0.2–0.4	[12]
pH	7.9	8.5	[140]

DM = Dry matter; FM = Fresh matter.

? = No data found/no data available.

field spreading, faster soil infiltration, and higher short-term N-manuring effects resulting in a better control of the applied N [121, 122].

- (v) Reduction of the required storage volume for liquid phase [21].
- (vi) Creation of separated solid manure rich in OM and nutrients (mainly P) with higher maximum economically feasible transport distances of the manure [21].
- (vii) Lower requirement for stirring of the liquid prior to spreading.

## 6.2 Drying or composting of separated solid digestates

To improve the economically feasible transport distance, it was proposed to dry the digestates [123]. This is done in approximately 1% of the German agricultural biogas plants [1]. Drying of digestates is related to significant N losses as NH<sub>3</sub> [123, 124]. Long-term aerobic incubation experiments with thermally dried pig slurry demonstrated that such manures enhanced N availability only to a limited extent compared to an unmanured control [125]. Dried digestates can be pelletized before field spreading: no data were found on the agronomical implications of pelletizing manures or digestates (nutrient composition, nutrient availability, effects of used field spreading technology, e.g. broadcast application versus application near crop rows).

Another often discussed option for the treatment of solid digestates is composting [34, 35, 126, 127]. However, also composting is related to strong losses of N [113–115, 128]. Beside direct NH<sub>3</sub> losses, this is due to denitrification (N<sub>2</sub>O and N<sub>2</sub>), following nitrification of the NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup> component to NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup> during aerobic turnover. From application of fresh and composted solid animal manures, it is known that the effect on N availability and on soil humus reproduction of fresh manures directly applied to the soil is comparable to composts derived from the same amounts of fresh manures [129, 130]. Therefore, composting reduces the fertilizer value of digestates in terms of direct nutrient

availability and probably also the effect on long-term preservation of soil fertility, and is related to strong emissions of greenhouse gases (N<sub>2</sub>O among others). Consequently, from a plant nutrition point of view, composting is not an appropriate management option for solid digestates. After a solid–liquid separation of digestates, the solid manures should be—whenever possible—applied to the fields as soon as possible, as the main emissions take place in the first weeks of storage [131, 132], especially during the warmer season due to the temperature dependency of the emission rates [131]. If storage is unavoidable, anaerobic conditions should be maintained.

## 6.3 Effects of other digestate treatment procedures

Currently, further digestate treatment procedures are in a developing stage, as burning solid digestates, or water removal from liquid digestates by using more sophisticated technologies, e.g. membrane technologies (Fig. 1). Regarding burning, it is well known that most of the N and S compounds volatilize above 200 and 375°C, respectively [133], resulting in a loss of the fertilizer value of the remaining wastes. No data were found concerning the use of solid digestates as a feedstock for biochar production and the related agronomical implications. Similarly, only few published data were found regarding the effects of the use of membrane technologies to produce concentrates from digestates on nutrient composition and the agronomical implications of their use as fertilizer [e.g. 23, 30].

## 7 Feedstock scheduling in biogas plants

Digestates are produced throughout the year and must therefore be stored until field application. The efficiency of N applied via organic manures is much higher when field application takes place in spring and not in autumn [134, 135]. Calculations of the nutrient outputs from digesters indicated that only approximately 50% of the N outputs are available for spring application,

whereas approximately 20–25% and 25–30% are available for application in summer and autumn, respectively [21]. To achieve high N use efficiencies and to minimize N emissions, a high share of total N for late winter until early summer applications would be desirable using digestates with narrow C:N ratios. To meet this demand, three approaches can be identified to optimize the management of the biogas digester from a plant nutritional point of view:

- (i) Utilization of feedstocks high in N contents during late autumn and winter (for digestate application in spring) and utilization of feedstocks low in N contents in summer (for digestate application in autumn) [21].
- (ii) Utilization of feedstocks with a high biodegradability in late autumn and winter (for digestate application in spring), leading to a narrower digestate C:N ratio.
- (iii) Use of feedstocks with high water content especially in spring. Higher digestate water contents decrease the risk of N losses via  $\text{NH}_3$  volatilization during summer.
- (iv) Introduction of feedstocks with high DM content in autumn and winter (for digestate application in spring). Digester capacity is limited by the OM inputs. Therefore, feedstocks high in OM content and low in water content reduce the needs of reactor and in particular storage volume. The latter opens for more seasonal flexibility in storage and target-oriented application.

## 8 Conclusions

Digestates have potential benefits regarding N availability and crop yields in comparison to untreated animal manures, as shown by pot experiments. However, under field conditions, the available data on agronomic assessments of digestates from animal slurries differ in their results with small or inconsistent benefits compared to undigested slurries (Table 4). Increased slurry  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N share in digested slurries does not guarantee improved utilization efficiencies of slurry N. Significant positive effects can only be expected if the digestates are applied directly with incorporation into the soil immediately after field spreading. Handled like this, digestates provide plant available N corresponding to their  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N content plus a small part of the  $\text{N}_{\text{org}}$  fractions (10–20%). The contradiction of the results from pot and field experiments emphasizes the need of field experiments to get a reliable assessment of the most important factors driving the agronomic effects of digestate application.

There are no systematic studies available on the influence of single feedstocks on nutrient contents and nutrient speciation in digestates, also including the  $\text{C}_{\text{org}}$  and organic N ( $\text{N}_{\text{org}}$ ) components. For a better understanding of the driving factors governing N turnover in the soil, an accurate characterization of digestates' nutrient and OM composition, combined with experiments to assess the N-mineralization and N-immobilization processes after field spreading, would be essential for a better characterization of the driving factors governing N turnover in the soil. Research addressing the influence of the single feedstocks and the design of the fermentation process on composition of digestates is also needed. Furthermore, a better knowledge on the influence of single feedstocks on digestate composition is an

**Table 4.** Effects of anaerobic digestion on digestate composition and main agronomic effects depending on the kind of feedstock

	Digestates from		
	Liquid animal manures	Crop residues and green manures	Dedicated energy crops
Total amounts of organic manures within the farming system	0	0	+++
Manure handling and allocation	+	+++	+++
$\text{NH}_4^+$ /total N ratio	+	+++	+++
Manure pH	++	++	++
Biological $\text{O}_2$ demand	--	-- <sup>a)</sup>	-- <sup>a)</sup>
N availability	0	++	++
N immobilization	-	-- <sup>a)</sup>	-- <sup>a)</sup>
N use efficiency	0+	+++	-
P availability	0	0	0
S availability	?	?	?
Heavy metal solubility/availability	0-	0-	0-
Crop growth	0	++	+++

-- = Very strong reduction; - = Strong reduction; - = Small reduction; 0 = No effects or contradictory effects; + = Small increase; ++ = Strong increase; +++ = Very strong increase.

<sup>a)</sup> Assumed, as no data are available.

? = Unclear effects, no data found.

important key for optimization of the feedstock management throughout the year, in order to obtain a higher share of the circulating N for spring amendments.

AD of crop residues and cover crops leads to an increase in the total amounts of mobile organic manures within the farming system, resulting in higher N use efficiency and an increased scope for target-oriented N application. AD of dedicated energy crops often leads to an increase of the total amounts of organic fertilizers within the farming system, with all potential risks. AD of dairy manure does not affect short-term crop P availability under field conditions. AD potentially increases plant S availability, but simultaneously also the risk of S volatilization. However, current knowledge about the S fertilizer value of digestates is very scarce.

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