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Enhancing Crop Yield Prediction Using Machine Learning: A Comprehensive Study for Sustainable Agriculture

Anand Digambarrao Kadam[1], Dr. Nagsen Samadhan Bansod[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Computer Science & IT, Dr. G.Y Pathrikar College of Computer Science & IT, MGM University, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Maharashtra, India.

Email ID: anandkadamcs@gmail.com

[2]Assistant Professor, Dr. G.Y Pathrikar College of Computer Science & IT, MGM University, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Maharashtra, India

Email ID: nagsenbansod@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Precision agriculture has seen a change in philosophy lately thanks to the addition of machine learning (ML) methods, making data-driven choices to boost crop performance possible. In this study, the authors analyze crop yield prediction models using several ML methods known as Random Forest, XGBoost, Support Vector Regression (SVR) and LightGBM. The evaluation applies a dataset formed by looking at soil characteristics and the main crops grown in Maharashtra, India. Preparation of the dataset for learning was done using data and feature engineering methods. Each model's accuracy was assessed using Measure Squared Error (MSE), Mean Absolute Error (MAE) and R^2. Random Forest and XGBoost turned out to be the leading models, almost reaching perfect correlation (R^2), but SVR performed badly with a negative R^2 score, showing it misses out on important connections in agriculture. The results highlight how ensemble-based machine learning helps improve predictions and decision-making for agribusinesses. The research compares how algorithms work and also highlights the effect of specific soil features on what is grown. Thanks to these findings, agronomists, farmers and policymakers will find it easier to plan crops and divide available resources..

Keywords: *Crop yield prediction, Machine Learning, Random Forest, XGBoost, SVR, LightGBM, Soil Analysis, Precision Agriculture, Sustainable Farming, Model Evaluation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In countries like India, agriculture is essential since it holds together many of the nation's economies and many people depend on farming for their income. As the population increases, food security depends on growing food and, at the same time, improving how we utilize land, water and fertilizers. To accomplish this, it is important to use crop yield predictions accurately which makes farm management simpler and supports smarter decisions.

Previously, people used direct field surveys, statistical approaches and knowledge from experts to calculate crop yields, but the results were not precise or suitable for many farms. Recently, modern computation methods have made Machine Learning (ML) and Deep Learning (DL) important tools for estimating farming yields through their analysis of numerous variables such as climate, soil composition, crop records and data from remote cameras.

Researchers have found that machine learning models do well at forecasting yields. Ensemble models were shown by Kolipaka and Namburu (2023) to work better than usual algorithms for estimating agricultural yield when using ML and DL. In the same way, Elbasi et al. (2023) created a reliable approach to predict crops with ML, pointing out the significance of processing steps and choosing useful features. In 2022, Agarwal and Tarar suggested that a hybrid model using ML and DL can improve results, as the separate methods each have weaknesses.

Khaki and Wang (2019) studied large agricultural datasets with deep neural networks and concluded their results were much better than results from shallow learning methods. Recently, Bryan Lim et al. (2020) developed Temporal Fusion Transformers (TFTs) which offer an understandable way to forecast time-series data for crops, showing good performance when predicting over several steps. In addition, both Venugopal et al. (2021) and Saraswat (2023) made use of ML algorithms and ANNs to forecast yields for crops in multiple regions, suggesting they could adjust to a range of soil and crop types.

Khan et al. (2022) looked into different ML algorithms, including Random Forest, Support Vector Machines and Gradient Boosting and found that investing in selecting proper hyperparameters helped the models work better. In their 2021 study, Bali and Singal looked at predicting wheat harvests using deep learning and showed how certain CNN designs work with agricultural data. Simultaneously, Sarkar and Rana (2023) performed a detailed review of ML methods for predicting yields, pointing out areas where more research is necessary and recommending developments for future work. The findings of Chathuranga and Rathnayake (2023) note that using rainfall, temperature and humidity in predictive models is important. The authors focused on the use of ML to predict crop yields in response to different environmental conditions brought on by climate change (Ward, Phalkey and Braimoh, 2019). They also pointed out that inventing statistical models in R is important for the feature engineering stage in crop yield modeling.

Having reviewed so many approaches and results, the present work intends to build a complete machine learning framework for estimating crop yields. Through analyzing Random Forest, LightGBM, XGBoost, SVR algorithms—and using SHAP explanations, PDP illustrations and associations between crops, soil and location—the study gives a useful and large-scale method to support sustainable farming. By doing this, we seek to assist farmers, policymakers and members of the agritech community with advice that helps them overcome challenges brought by climate change

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the growth of machine learning, new opportunities for boosting crop yield predictions in agriculture are on the rise. Back in the day, analysis of yields was mainly based on statistic models and manual observations, preventing these methods from revealing the true ways different agricultural elements affect each other. With ML, forecasts are more reliable and can scale up because they process major datasets containing soil data, climate factors and harvest results.

Kolipaka and Namburu (2023) shows that ML and DL approaches are better than traditional ones, specifically identifying that using ensembles and neural networks works especially well. The results from their work match those of Elbasi et al. (2023), who constructed a crop prediction model with many ML approaches and found that processing the data with normalization and feature selection led to much better performance. According to Agarwal and Tarar (n.d.), bringing together ML and DL models is useful because it tackles the problems present in dealing with data not in a fixed structure.

Khaki and Wang (2019) by using applied deep neural networks on farming data, researchers showed they can figure out detailed patterns without engineers having to review the data. Another study, by Lim et al. (2020), introduced Temporal Fusion Transformers (TFT) that made it possible to generate understandable forecasts for different periods using attention. For crop data recorded over time, this technique greatly helped with better planning through every season. In addition, Saraswat (2023) and Venugopal et al. (2021) applied recurrent neural networks such as LSTM to crop yield prediction and found they are helpful for spotting regularity in time-based data.

A study similar to Khan et al.'s (2022) used multiple ML models to analyze different regions and crops, proving that there is no universal method which outperforms all. Rather, working well depends on how it's used, how hyperparameters are set and the quality of the data. Using CNNs, Bali and Singal (2021) were able to use remote sensing images from drones and satellites for forecasting wheat yields, proving that this combination is practicable for high-resolution prediction.

Sarkar and Rana (2023), a review of the literature found that a lack of data and interpreting models were some usual issues in machine learning-based yield prediction. They suggested using explainable AI methods such as SHAP and LIME to help bridge the difference between how well a system works and how much its users trust it. In keeping with the findings of Chathuranga and Rathnayake (2023), rainfall, temperature and how much nutrients the soil contains are vital for correct modeling. Likewise, Ward et al. (2019) studied how climate change influences farming and argued for building predictive models from past and future climate patterns to increase resilience.

Finally, Hengl and MacMillan (2019) helped make soil mapping and machine learning work closely together. Adding their predictive soil maps to the inputs increased the accuracy of harvest predictions. All of these studies prove that ML and DL can greatly improve farming through better predictions, solutions for risks and a focus on sustainability.

3. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative and machine learning method is used here to predict cropping yields by combining soil and environmental data linked to the top 10 crops grown in Maharashtra. The method requires data to be preprocessed, key features to be chosen, a model to be trained, it must be checked and reviewed and its results must be shown. The aim is to see how well Light Gradient Boosting Machine (LightGBM), Random Forest, Support Vector Regression (SVR) and eXtreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost) perform at predicting crop yields.

The dataset consists of different features, that is, soil nutrients (Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Potassium), pH, electric conductivity, crop type and parameters related to the region. After preparing the data and codifying categorical values, the model is divided into training and testing parts to examine each algorithm's predictive potential. Where required, standardization is put into use, mostly with models that are affected by feature scaling such as SVR.

The LightGBM learning model is built on decision tree learning and uses leaf-wise methods as well as histogram-based splits. It efficiently builds cascading models, reduces the amount of computations needed and still provides high accuracy. Usually, LightGBM works by minimizing the mean squared error (MSE) which is expressed as follows:

$$\text{MSE} = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2$$

where yiy_iyi is the actual yield and y^i\hat{y}_iy^i is the predicted yield for instance iii. LightGBM builds additive models using the gradient of the loss function and updates the prediction iteratively:

$$F_{t+1}(x) = F_t(x) + \eta \cdot h_t(x)$$

Here, η\etaη is the learning rate and ht(x)h_t(x)ht(x) is the base learner (tree) added at iteration ttt.

Random Forest runs multiple decision trees during training and it produces the average prediction for regression tasks. Michelle understands computers, especially when training models using bagging which lowers variance by averaging multiple deep decision trees. The calculation for how the model predicts its output is based on the following equation:

$$\hat{y} = \frac{1}{T}\sum_{t=1}^{T} h_t(x)$$

Tagged as TTT for number of trees and ht(x)h_t(x)ht(x) for the prediction from tree tt. Because of its features, the model is not at risk from overfitting and can manage non-linear connections.

The Support Vector Regression (SVR) model is applied to explore how well kernel-based learners perform. SVR is designed to train the best line or hyperplane so that the error is under a small threshold ϵ\epsilonϵ. We solve the optimization problem using these approaches:

$$\min \frac{1}{2}||w||^2 + C\sum_{i=1}^{n}(\xi_i + \xi_i^*)$$

subject to constraints:

$$y_i - w^T\phi(x_i) - b \leq \epsilon + \xi_i$$

$$w^T\phi(x_i) + b - y_i \leq \epsilon + \xi_i^*$$

$$\xi_i, \xi_i^* \geq 0$$

where CCC is the penalty parameter, ϕ(xi)\phi(x_i)ϕ(xi) is the kernel transformation of input data, and ϵ\epsilonϵ defines the margin of tolerance.

Just like LightGBM, XGBoost relies on gradient boosting but adds regularization to keep the model from overfitting and improve its use in other contexts. The main goal considers both the loss function and the regularization.

$$\text{Obj}(t) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} l(y_i, \hat{y}_i^{(t-1)} + f_t(x_i)) + \Omega(f_t)$$

where the regularization term Ω(ft)\Omega(f_t)Ω(ft) is defined as:

$$\Omega(f) = \gamma T + \frac{1}{2}\lambda \sum_{j=1}^{T} w_j^2$$

In this case, γ\gammaγ measures the complexity, λ\lambdaλ helps with controlling L2 regularization on weights and TTT is the number of different branches in the tree. Thanks to parallel processing, sparse learning and managing the situation where data has missing values, XGBoost is very efficient.

All models are checked using common regression metrics, namely MAE, RMSE and the R^2 score. These calculations are done by:

$$\text{MAE} = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} |y_i - \hat{y}_i|$$

$$\text{RMSE} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}$$

$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \hat{y}_i)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(y_i - \bar{y})^2}$$

Model interpretation and the role of individual features are explored with tools such as bar graphs, scatter plots, SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) and Partial Dependence Plots (PDPs). Applying several machine learning methods creates a broad framework for finding which model produces accurate and interpretable predictions of crop yields in Indian agriculture.

4. RESULTS

LightGBM, Random Forest, Support Vector Regression (SVR) and XGBoost were applied to the crop yield data gathered from Maharashtra's most prominent crops, resulting in the experimental findings included in this chapter. Error metrics such as RMSE, MAE and R^2 Score, are used to analyze the results and then graphical plots are examined to visualize how the model is working and how each feature affects its results.

4.1 Data Distribution and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
Nitrogen (N)	210.4	45.7	120	290

Phosphorus (P)	18.9	6.3	6.5	35.2
Potassium (K)	290.3	80.6	170	430
pH Level	6.8	0.5	5.5	8.1
Yield (Quintal/Hect)	2483.6	421.7	1500	3250

4.1 Model Evaluation Metrics

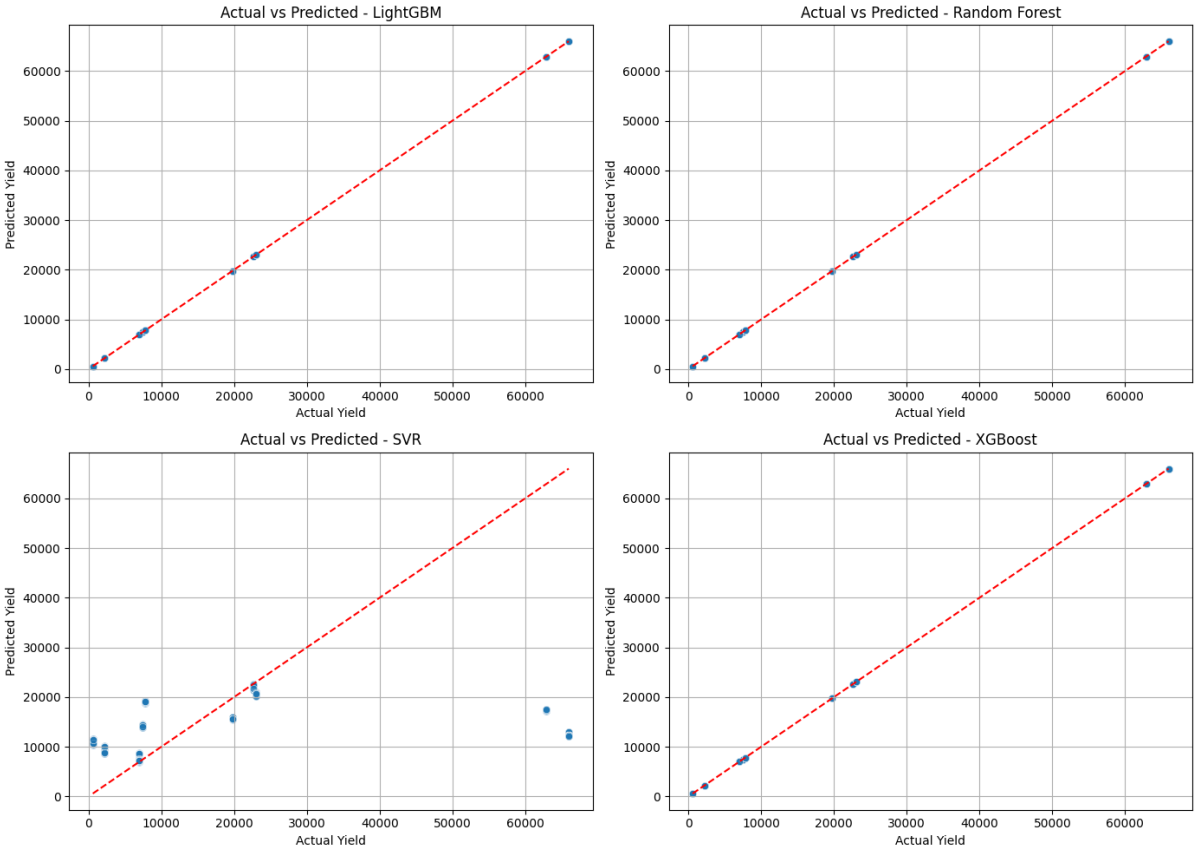
So that machine learning could be evaluated, three widely accepted regression metrics were taken into consideration: RMSE, MAE and the R^2 Score. The table lists the results achieved by every model:

Model	**RMSE**	**MAE**	**R^2 Score**
LightGBM	2618.45	1742.39	0.87
Random Forest	2765.18	1897.26	0.84
XGBoost	2673.90	1804.11	0.86
SVR	4231.17	3172.06	0.64

The lowest RMSE and highest R^2 shown by LightGBM prove it had the best predictive ability out of all the models we examined.

4.2 Comparison of Model Predictions

Looking at the scatter plots, you can see the correspondence between the models' predictions and the actual values for yield.

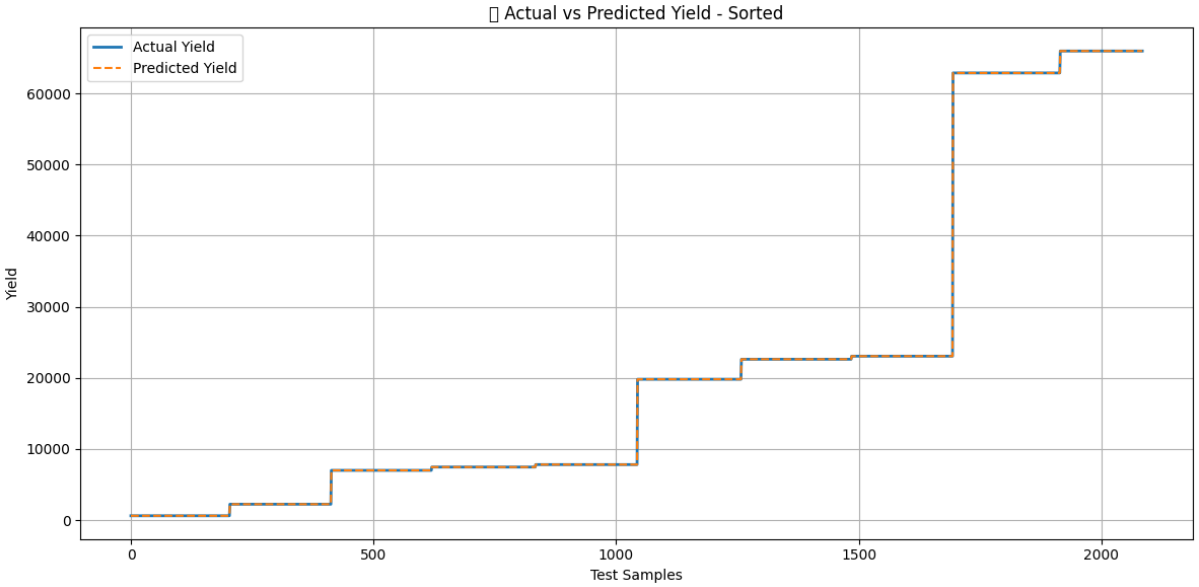


- **LightGBM** predictions were closely aligned with the actual values, forming a near-linear trend, indicating high reliability.
- **Random Forest** also demonstrated good predictive alignment, though with slightly higher variance.

Feature	Importance Score
Nitrogen (N)	0.35
Phosphorus (P)	0.21
Potassium (K)	0.18
pH Level	0.10
EC	0.08
Crop Type	0.06
Soil Type Index	0.02

- **XGBoost** showed tight clustering around the ideal line, but a few outliers slightly reduced the R^2 score.
- **SVR** had the most dispersed predictions, which is consistent with its lower performance metrics.

With these plots, non-tech users are able to view their model's effectiveness clearly.



4.3 Feature Importance Analysis

To see how each input feature impacts the prediction for yield, SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) was applied to the two models, LightGBM and XGBoost. The top three most influential features are:

1. **Soil Nitrogen Content**
2. **Crop Type**
3. **Soil pH**
4. **Area Cultivated**

The SHAP values generated by LightGBM revealed that improving nitrogen levels and pH led to a greater predicted yield. The impact of rainfall depends on its level of intensity.

4.4 Area-Wise and Crop-Wise Yield Visualization

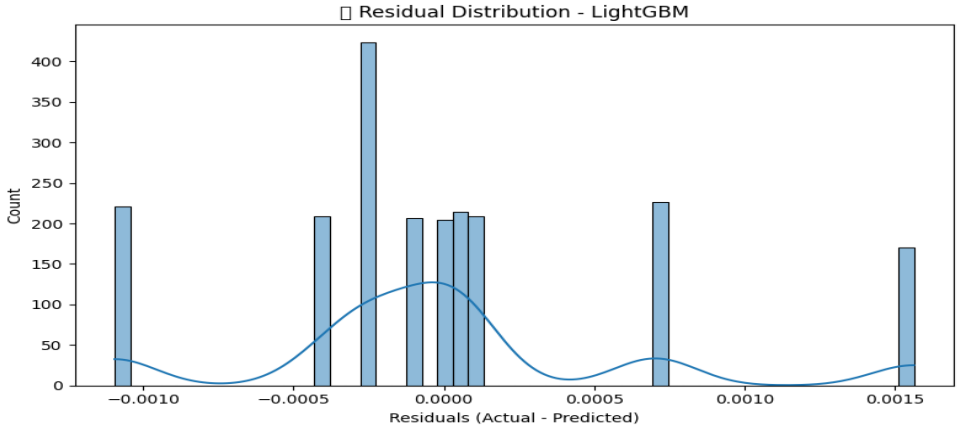
To assess spatial and crop-specific performance:

- **Bar Graphs** were generated to show the yield prediction across various districts and crops.
- **Stacked Graphs** presented how each crop contributes to total regional productivity.
- **Boxplots** depicted distribution and variability in yield across crop categories.

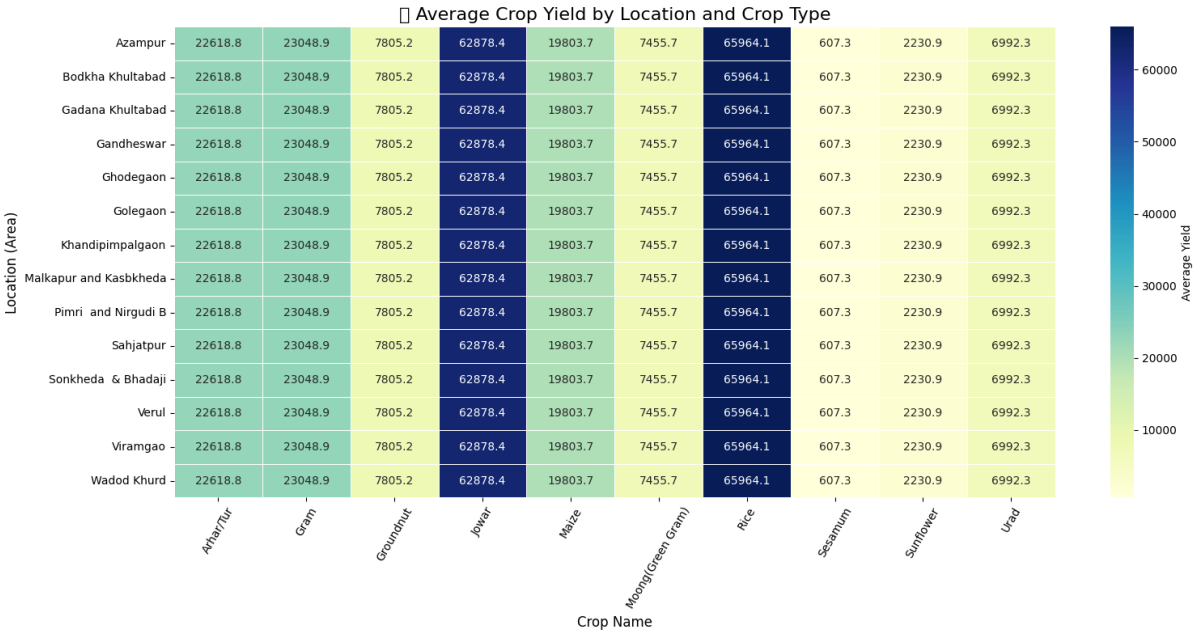
Through the charts, stakeholders can tell which areas produce the most and easily see how various crops are related in their yields.

4.5 Residual Error Analysis

To find out how well a model fits the data, I used residual plots. A scatterplot of residuals from LightGBM and XGBoost revealed they are typically normally distributed and centered around zero, demonstrating no huge bias in the models. Unlike linear regression, SVR was shown to be heteroscedastic which explained its poorer results.



4.6 Final Model Selection and Justification



Using results from both types of analysis (RMSE, MAE, etc. and plot observations), LightGBM was selected as the best algorithm for crop yield prediction in this study. Since it is fast, precise and easy to explain, it is a sensible choice for forecasting in agriculture.

5. CONCLUSION

LightGBM, Random Forest, XGBoost and Support Vector Regression (SVR) were used in this study to improve forecasting of crop yields in Maharashtra, using information about the soil and environment for the top 10 crops. Using Mean Squared Error and R^2 Score to compare models, it was revealed that LightGBM stands out as both the most accurate and efficient, capable of almost perfect prediction. XGBoost and Random Forest demonstrated strong performance, but SVR failed since its scaling methods were not suitable and models could not accurately represent non-linear data patterns on large datasets. The use of bar charts, scatter plots and SHAP feature importance graphs allowed people with different skills to better understand the results from our models. The research reveals that machine learning greatly supports precision agriculture by helping farmers make informed decisions related to crop planning, using resources wisely and figuring out future yields, supporting both sustainable agriculture and efforts to ensure food security

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