Sequential post-heading applications for controlling wheat blast: a summary of fungicide performance

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Wheat blast, caused by *Pyricularia oryzae* *Triticum* (PoT) lineage, is a major constraint to wheat production, mainly in the tropics of Brazil where severe epidemics are more frequent. We analyzed disease and wheat yield data from 42 uniform field trials conducted during nine years (2012 to 2020) in order to assess whether the percent control and yield response were influenced by fungicide type, region (tropical or subtropical), and year. Six treatments were selected, all evaluated in at least 19 trials. Two fungicides were applied as solo active ingredients: MANCozeb, and TEBUconazole, and four were premixes: AZOXistrobin + TEBU, TriFLoxistrobin + PROThioconazole, TFLX + TEBU, and PYRAclostrobilin + EPOXiconazole. Percent control, calculated from back-transforming estimates by a meta-analysis network model fitted to the log of the means, ranged from 43% to 58%, with all but PYRA + EPOX showing efficacy greater than 52% on average, not differing among them. The variation in both efficacy and yield response were explained by region and all but TEBU performed better in the subtropics than in the tropics. Yield response from using three sequential sprays was around two times greater in the subtropics (319 to 532 kg/ha) than in the tropics (149 to 241.3 kg/ha). No significant decline in fungicide efficacy or yield response were observed in nine years of study for any of the fungicides. Our results reinforce the need to improve control by adopting an integrated management approach in the tropics given the poorer performance and lower profitability, especially for the premixes, than in the subtropics.

Pyricularia oryzae | chemical control | profitability | meta-analysis

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Introduction

Wheat blast is caused by *Pyricularia oryzae* Triticum lineage (PoT, syn *Magnaporthe oryzae*, MoT), an ascomycete fungus first found in 1985 in the state of Paraná, Brazil (Igarashi et al. 1986). Since then, PoT has spread to other wheat-growing countries in South America, including Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, and Uruguay (Cruz and Valent 2017; Ceresini et al. 2018). About thirty years after its discovery, the global concern with wheat blast epidemics increased significantly after its report in South Asia (Malaker et al. 2016), and East Africa (Zambia) (Tembo et al. 2020).

The fungus infects both the leaves and the heads of the wheat plant, but infections that occur during the reproductive stage are more frequent and of major economic significance; complete bleaching of heads may occur that severely affects grain filling (Cruz and Valent 2017; Ceresini et al. 2018). Foliar infections are generally mild in wheat but may increase in severity and importance for head infections when warm and wet weather prevails during the early season (Cruz et al. 2016; Perelló et al. 2017). An early yield loss study reported a 27% reduction in yield due to wheat blast (Goulart et al. 1990), but up to 70% of the yield can be reduced depending on the infection timing, weather conditions, and cultivar susceptibility (Goulart and Paiva 2000).

Although the disease is present in a wide range of latitude, the most severe epidemics have been reported in wheat-growing regions in the tropics, during the summer/fall season plantings, such as those in Central Brazil and Bolvia (Pagani et al. 2014), and more recently, in Bangladesh (Islam et al. 2019). Once PoT is introduced, the necrotrophic fungus is capable of infecting and surviving in other grasses nearby wheat fields which are assumed to serve as a source of inoculum for epidemics in wheat if they are present prior to the wheat season (Tosa and Chuma 2014; Urashima et al. 2017; Ceresini et al. 2019). The ability of the fungus to disperse long distances is not entirely known but evidence has shown that *Pyricularia* spores can disperse through air currents up to 1 km distant from the source (Urashima et al. 2007), or across continents via infected seeds (Ceresini et al. 2018). Although several control methods have been explored in research, including biological control agents (Chakraborty et al. 2020a, 2020b), the combination of cultural (Coelho et al. 2016), genetic, and chemical control have been commercially feasible and more effective in disease management (Cruz et al. 2019; Cruppe et al. 2020).

Several chemicals have been evaluated for the control of the disease since the first blast epidemics at the hotspot regions in Brazil (Goulart and Paiva 1993).

Research in the country has shown that two to three sequential applications of fungicides may be required for disease control, yet with relatively modest levels of control being achieved (Santana et al. 2013). Currently, fifty-three commercial fungicides have been registered for wheat blast control in Brazil (AGROFIT 2021). These include quinone outside inhibitor (QoI) and demethylation inhibitor (DMI) marketed solely or mixed together, but also multi-site mode of action fungicides such as mancozeb.

Despite the importance of wheat blast, the number of publications on chemical control of wheat blast is relatively small and the results are inconsistent. Successful control with efficacy as high as 90% has been achieved when combining the use of QoI + DMI premix and less susceptible cultivar (Rios et al. 2016). However, levels as low as 45% efficacy have been reported in susceptible cultivars grown at very favorable environments for blast outbreaks in the Brazilian Cerrado (Pagani et al. 2014). In Bangladesh, 19-commercial fungicides had their efficacy tested on a susceptible cultivar, and the blast control levels ranged from 43% to 96% (Roy et al. 2020). A 23-environment fungicide trial conducted in Brazil and Bolivia reported various levels of efficacy for QoI, DMI, and multi-site fungicides depending on disease pressure (Cruz et al. 2019).

Meta-analytic approaches have become standard to summarize the effect of treatments for fungicide testing data, including wheat diseases (Paul et al. 2008, 2018a; Machado et al. 2017; Barro et al. 2019, 2020). Uniform fungicide trials targeting wheat blast control were established in 2011 and performed yearly following a standardized protocol. The main goal of the network is to gather information on disease control and yield loss prevention across the main growing regions. The results have been published as technical reports (Santana et al., 2014; 2016a; 2016b; 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b).

Our objectives were to: 1) obtain meta-analytic estimates of WB control efficacy and yield response; 2) evaluate whether the estimates vary over time, space, and on different levels of disease or yield; and 3) calculate fungicide profitability based on the break-even probabilities.

Material and Methods

Data source

Data were obtained from 44 field trials conducted by researchers of the wheat blast cooperative fungicide trial network (*Rede de Ensaos Cooperativos de Brusone do Trigo*) during nine years (seasons) (2012-2020). The

data have been published primarily in yearly single reports for ranking fungicide efficacy (Santana et al. 2014, 2013, 2016b, 2016c, 2016a, 2019b, 2019a, 2020a, 2020b). Data from the 2020 season has not been published.

The trials were conducted in eleven municipalities across six Brazilian States: Paraná (PR), São Paulo (SP), Distrito Federal (DF), Mato Grosso (MT), Mato Grosso do Sul (MS), and Minas Gerais (MG) (Fig. 1). The trials were grouped into two climatic regions: Tropical (19 trials [DF, MT, MS, MG]) and Subtropical (25 trials [PR, SP]).

Wheat blast and grain yield assessments

Head blast incidence (INC) (proportion of diseased head) and conditional severity (SEV) (proportion of diseased spikelets in the diseased head) (Maciel et al. 2013) were visually assessed in 2m-lines at wheat grain soft dough stage (85 of Zadoks growth stages) (Zadoks et al. 1974). Wheat blast index was calculated as $WBI = (INC \times SEV) / 100$. At least 5m²-plants were harvested at full maturity. Grain weight and moisture were obtained for each treatment plot (fungicide + untreated). Crop yield was expressed in kg/ha at 13% moisture.

Fig. 1. Geolocation of eleven municipalities across six Brazilian states where 44 fungicide trials were conducted from 2012 to 2020 (Campo Mourão - PR, Guarapuava - PR, Campo Verde - MT, Dourados - MS, Itaberá - SP, Londrina - PR, Palmeira - PR, Palotina - PR, Patos de Minas - MG, Planaltina - DF, Uberaba - MG). Dots were colored by climatic region and the size of the circle is proportional to the number of trials conducted at each location.

Fungicide treatment selection

To be included in the analysis, a fungicide treatment should have been tested in at least 19 trials conducted in at least four years and compared with an untreated check in the same trial. Six fungicides met the criteria, including four DMI + QoI premixes, and two single active ingredients (Table 1). After treatment selection, WBI and grain yield data were available in 42 trials each.

Network meta-analysis and inconsistency

The data were available at the plot level for all treatments for each variable of interest (WBI and grain yield). These were aggregated at the trial level, which is a typical approach used in the meta-analysis (Madden et al. 2016). We fitted an arm-based network model, also known as a two-way unconditional linear mixed model, directly to the treatment means (log-transformed or untransformed) to further obtain control efficacy and yield response (Paul et al. 2008; Machado et al. 2017). Given the statistical properties of the data (Fig. S1), means of WBI were log-transformed, while no transformation was required to obtain the mean difference in yield. The arm-based model can be written as

$$Y_i \sim N(\mu, \Sigma + S_i), \quad (1)$$

where Y_i is the vector of L (log of the means of WBI) or absolute yield (D) for the six treatments plus the untreated check for the i th study, μ is a vector representing the mean of Y_i across all studies, Σ is a 7×7 between-study variance-covariance matrix (for the six treatments plus the untreated check), and S_i is a within-study variance-covariance matrix for the i th study. N indicates a multivariate normal distribution.

For this approach, a measure of within-study variability is required to weight studies based on the inverse function of the sampling variance (Paul et al. 2008, 2010). Given the availability of data at the plot level, the within-study variability of L and D was calculated from the mean square error (MSE) obtained from a linear mixed model fitted to each individual trial, as described (Machado et al. 2017). Maximum likelihood estimation models were fitted to the data using the *rma.mv* function of *metafor* package (Viechtbauer 2010) of R (R Core Team 2021).

Table 1. Fungicide treatments evaluated for controlling wheat blast in 44 independent field trials conducted across six Brazilian states (PR, SP, DF, MT, MS, and MG) from 2012 to 2020.

Fungicide a.i. ^a	Chemical group ^b	Brand name	Nº trials	Dosage (mL/g ha ⁻¹)	Cost ^d (US\$/ha)
AZOX+TEBU	QoI+DMI	Azimut	28	750	73
MANC	DTC	Unizeb Gold	41	3,000	50
PYRA+EPOX	QoI+DMI	Opera	28	500	45
TEBU	DMI	Tebuco Nortox	19	500	52
TFLX+PROT	QoI+DMI	Fox	44	500	82
TFLX+TEBU	QoI+DMI	Nativo ^c	44	750	75

^a a.i. (active ingredient); AZOX + TEBU = azoxystrobin + tebuconazole; MANC = mancozeb; PYRA + EPOX = pyraclostrobin + epoxiconazole; TEBU = tebuconazole; TFLX + PROT = trifloxystrobin + prothioconazole; TFLX + TEBU = trifloxystrobin + tebuconazole.

^b QoI = Quinone-oxidoreductase inhibitors; DMI = Sterol demethylation inhibitor; DTC = Dithiocarbamate.

^c Included in all trials as positive control to wheat blast.

^d Overall costs (US\$/ha) considering commercial prices of the 2019/20 crop season and three applications (operational cost for each application used was US\$10.00/ha).

The yield response ($\bar{D}$) was calculated directly after model fitting by subtracting estimated means of fungicide treatment and untreated check (Madden et al. 2016). For percent wheat blast control ($\bar{C}$), we calculated the differences of the estimated means of the logs ($\bar{L}_{IND}$) which equals the ratio of the two means (Paul et al. 2008). The $\bar{C}$ values and their 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were obtained by back-transforming $\bar{L}_{IND}$ and the respective upper and lower limits of their 95% CIs as described in Equation 2.

$$\bar{C} = (1 - \exp(\bar{L}_{IND})) \times 100 \quad (2)$$

Network inconsistency, or the extent to which different sources of evidence are compatible, is an important component to assess when performing a

multi-arm network meta-analysis (Higgins et al. 2012). The most important source is a design-by-treatment interaction, also known as "design inconsistency", which provides a useful general framework for investigating inconsistency (Piepho 2014; Madden et al. 2016). To test for network inconsistency, we used a factorial-type ANOVA model to determine the significance of the *treatment* x *design* interaction, evaluated based on the Wald test statistic. The null hypothesis suggests that the network is consistent (Piepho 2014; Madden et al. 2016). Eight different designs (here design refers to the set of fungicide treatments in the trial) were found in the trials reporting both WBI and yield response (Table S1).

Fig. 2. Box plots depicting the means of wheat blast index (%) and wheat grain yield (kg/ha) (across years and locations) of the untreated (CHECK) and fungicide-treated plots (A-D); and the means of the same variables in the untreated plots within-region (B-E) and within-year (C-F) measured from a set of 44 field trials conducted from 2012 to 2020. Climatic regions defined in our study were: Tropical (DF, MT, MS, MG) and Subtropical (PR, SP). The thick horizontal line inside the box represents the median, the limits of the box represent the lower and upper quartiles, and the circles represent the yearly means of each treatment. See Table 1 for information on the fungicide treatments.

Moderator effects

Categorical or continuous moderator variables that could explain, at least a portion of the heterogeneity of the effects across trials, were included in the network model (Equation 1) (Madden et al. 2016). The expanded model is given by

$$Y_i \sim N(\mu + \delta_i, \Sigma + S_i), \quad (3)$$

where δ_i is the vector representing the moderator variable effect for the i th study (Paul et al. 2010). All other terms were defined previously at Equation 1.

As categorical, we created baselines for WBI and wheat grain yield based on the median of the mean values in the untreated check. For baseline disease index, the trials were divided into two groups, representing WBI_low (WBI < 10%) and WBI_high (WBI ≥ 10%) disease scenarios. The baseline yield was defined as YLD_low (< 1200 kg/ha) or YLD_high (≥ 1200 kg/ha) based on the median yield in the untreated check plot. Finally, we created an additional categorical variable based on climatic region where trials were grouped into Tropical (DF, MT, MS, MG) and Subtropical (PR, SP) regions as mentioned previously (Fig. 1). As continuous moderators, year was included in the model to check whether there was any trend of decline in fungicide efficacy or yield response over time (Dalla Lana et al. 2018).

The moderator variables included in the model were tested using a Wald-type chi-square test to determine if their inclusion directly affected the differences in logs of WBI and the untransformed yield values (Paul et al. 2008).

Economic analysis

Monte Carlo simulations were used to produce distributions of profits that each fungicide would have in each region (Subtropical and Tropical) based on their respective yield return (D , kg/ha). The profit was calculated from the difference between the income (I , US\$/ha) and spraying cost (US\$/ha), where I is the product of D and the wheat price (P , US\$/kg). D was assumed to follow a truncated normal distribution between 0 and $+\infty$, $D \sim TN(\mu_D, \sigma_D)$, where μ_D is the mean D given by the estimated yield return ($\bar{D}$), and the σ_D is the standard deviation which was given by standard error of $\bar{D}$, i.e. $SE(\bar{D})$. P was assumed to follow a Gamma distribution, $P \sim \text{Gamma}(\alpha, \beta)$, where α and β are the shape and the rate parameters, respectively. To

estimate these parameters, we gathered wheat price historical data from the AGROLINK database from January 2012 to May 2021 (AGROLINK 2021). Two methods were used to estimate the parameters: nonlinear regression using least-squares to fit the empirical cumulative distribution function to the gamma cumulative distribution function, and maximum likelihood estimation (MLE). We used a two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (KS-test) to evaluate the best estimates, in which the parameters that produce distribution with higher P -value in the KS-test against the empirical cumulative distribution.

The overall fungicide spraying cost (x) accounting for fungicide price of 2019/20 crop season, and operational cost of 10 US\$/application for three applications are described in Table 1. The spraying cost (S_c) was assumed to follow be uniformly distributed with values varying from 5% above and below the overall fungicide spraying cost (x), therefore, $S_c \sim \text{Unif}(0.95x, 1.05x)$.

We ran a total of 50,000 Monte Carlo simulations for each variable (P , D , and S_c), the distribution of I was obtained and then the distribution of profits was derived. Break-even probabilities were calculated as the relative frequency of values that the income was equal to or higher than the fungicide spraying cost ($I \geq C$).

Results

Wheat blast index (WBI) and yield data at the trial level

There was considerable variation in WBI and grain yield in the untreated plots across seasons, regions, and locations/trials (each dot in Fig. 2 represents a single trial). WBI in the untreated plots of the trials ranged from 0 to 100% (median 11.06%). The median WBI was higher (12.3%) in the Tropical than in the Subtropical (8.1%) region (Fig. 2 B). Across growing seasons, the highest (89.8%) and the lowest (0.8%) WBI medians in the untreated check were recorded in the 2019 and 2017 seasons, respectively (Fig. 2 C).

Baseline yield ranged from 15.6 to 4,276.2 kg/ha (median = 1,203.5 kg/ha) across the trials. The median yield was lower in the Tropical (1,000 kg/ha) than in the Subtropical region (1,281 kg/ha) (Fig. 2E). The highest median yield (2,173 kg/ha) was observed in 2014 and the lowest (571.6 kg/ha) in the 2019 crop season (Fig. 2F). As expected, lower WBI and higher grain yield was observed in the fungicide treatments compared with the untreated check (Fig. 2A-D).

Table 2. Overall means of Wheat Blast control efficacy ($\bar{C}$) and wheat yield response ($\bar{D}$) for each fungicide treatment, relative to the untreated check, not conditioned (Overall) and conditioned (moderator analysis) to two climatic regions (Tropical [DF, MT, MS, MG] and Subtropical [PR, SP]), conducted during nine years (2012-2020) across six Brazilian states.

Fungicide ^a	Region	Control efficacy (%)					Yield return (Kg/ha)				
		k ^b	$\bar{C}$	CI _L ^c	CI _U ^c	P-value ^d	k ^b	$\bar{D}$	CI _L ^c	CI _U ^c	P-value ^d
MANC	Overall	33	58.0	49.8	64.8		35	420.1	315.6	524.6	
	Tropical	13	42.1	26.1	54.7		14	241.3	94.7	387.9	
	Subtropical	20	66.5	40.6	81.1	0.0011	21	532.1	195.3	868.9	0.0027
TFLX + PROT	Overall	39	53.9	44.6	61.6		42	299.7	221.9	377.5	
	Tropical	15	40.8	22.9	54.5		17	149.3	44.7	254.0	
	Subtropical	24	59.9	26.4	78.2	0.0262	25	396.5	154.5	638.4	0.0004
TEBU	Overall	18	53.6	43.2	62.1		19	319.5	221.6	417.3	
	Tropical	8	47.2	28.2	61.1		9	209.0	52.7	365.3	
	Subtropical	10	56.9	13.3	78.6	0.3076	10	351.1	-14.6	716.8	0.1836
AZOX + TEBU	Overall	18	54.8	43.5	63.9		19	301.5	215.7	387.2	
	Tropical	7	47.1	26.2	62.1		8	157.0	52.7	261.3	
	Subtropical	11	58.4	10.9	80.6	0.2704	11	410.3	162.2	658.4	0.0006
TFLX + TEBU	Overall	39	52.2	43.5	59.6		42	245.3	172.9	317.8	
	Tropical	15	42.4	26.1	55.2		17	123.9	25.7	222.1	
	Subtropical	24	57.4	24.3	76.0	0.0685	25	323.4	94.6	552.2	0.0028
PYRA + EPOX	Overall	19	43.2	31.8	52.8		22	181.1	114.8	247.5	
	Tropical	8	24.2	2.81	40.9		10	29.1	-49.8	108.1	
	Subtropical	11	54.3	17.5	74.7	0.0037	12	255.0	65.4	444.6	<0.0001

^a See Table 1 for complete information on the fungicides;

^b number of trials that each fungicide was evaluated.

^c upper (CI_U) and lower (CI_L) limits of the 95% confidence interval around $\bar{C}$ and $\bar{D}$.

^d probability value (significance level) for the effect of fungicide on disease reduction and yield response (at the selected climatic regions).

Overall meta-analytic estimates of control efficacy and yield response

For all fungicides tested in the meta-analytic model, the overall WBI log response ratio ($\bar{L}_{IND}$) differed ($P < 0.0001$) from the untreated CHECK (Table S2). Overall estimates of percent control efficacy ($\bar{C}$), obtained from back-transforming differences of the estimates of log of WBI ($\bar{L}_{IND}$) between the fungicide-treated and untreated plots, ranging from 43.2% and 58.0%. MANC, AZOX + TEBU, TFLX + PROT, TEBU, and TFLX + TEBU reduced WBI by at least 52% and did not differ significantly among them ($P > 0.12$) based on linear contrasts. PYRA + EPOX was the least effective treatment (43.2%) and did not differ from TEBU (53.5%; $P = 0.07$) and TFLX + TEBU (52.2%; $P = 0.06$) (Table S2). The difference in percent control efficacy between the most and least effective fungicide was 14.8 percent

points (Table 2). The Wald test for the treatment x design interaction showed that the network was consistent ($P = 0.70$).

Yield response ($\bar{D}$) was significantly higher ($P < 0.0001$) in all single a.i. and dual mixtures compared with the untreated CHECK (Table S3). The mean estimates of $\bar{D}$ ranged from 181.15 kg/ha to 420.10 kg/ha. The two single a.i. treatments, MANC (420.10 kg/ha) and TEBU (319.46 kg/ha) provided the greatest yield response, and linear contrasts showed no difference between them ($P = 0.065$). These were followed by AZOX + TEBU (301.48 kg/ha) and TFLX+PROT (299.73 kg/ha), which were not different between them ($P = 0.90$), but differed from TFLX+TEBU (245.34 kg/ha; $P < 0.0001$). All fungicides differed from PYRA + EPOX (181.15 kg/ha) with regards to yield response. The difference between the highest and lowest yield response among the treatments was 238.95 kg/ha (Table 2, Table S3). The Wald test for the

treatment $\times$ design interaction showed that the network was inconsistent, meaning that results were dependent on the design ($P = 0.01$).

Effect of moderator variables

The categories of WBI and wheat grain yield as baselines did not affect WBI or yield ($P > 0.05$). Similarly, year did not affect wheat grain yield ($P = 0.26$) or WBI ($P = 0.74$), suggesting no decline in fungicide efficacy or yield response over time.

Based on the Wald test ($P < 0.0001$), the expanded model including the categorical moderator variable region differed statistically from the simpler model for both disease index and yield response. The control efficacy in the Subtropical region was numerically higher compared to the Tropical region for all treatments. A difference of at least 19.1 percent points in $\bar{C}$ between regions was significant ($P < 0.05$) for three fungicides (PYRA + EPOX, TFLX + PROT and MANC) (Table 2). Similarly, yield response from the use of fungicides was generally higher in the Subtropical than in the Tropical region. There was a statistical difference in $\bar{D}$ between regions for all fungicides, except TEBU ($P = 0.1836$). Significant differences in yield responses

between regions ranged from 200 to 291 kg/ha (Table 2).

In general, there was a similar pattern in the relationship between yield response and fungicide efficacy among regions. The treatment leading to the greatest mean yield response in both Tropical and Subtropical regions was MANC (Fig. 3). Similarly, MANC was the numerically most effective treatment in reducing disease index in the Subtropical region. For the Tropical region, TEBU and AZOX + TEBU exhibited a high control efficacy (~47%). Again, PYRA + EPOX provided the least yield response in both Tropical and Subtropical regions (Fig. 3).

Profits and break-even probabilities

Estimates of parameters of the Gamma distribution for the distribution of wheat prices for the 2012-2020 period that produced higher P-value in the KS-test were obtained using non-linear regression (P-value = 0.9375). The P-value in the KS-test for the parameters estimated using MLE was 0.11. The estimates of the shape (α) and the rate (β) parameters were 19.4 and 0.54, respectively.

Fig. 3. Relationship between fungicide efficacy and wheat grain yield relative to the untreated check, for six selected fungicide treatments evaluated during nine years (2012 to 2020) across 44 field trials conducted across six Brazilian states (PR, SP, DF, MT, MS, and MG). Bars show the upper and lower limits of 95% confidence intervals around point estimates for both responses. See Table 1 for complete information on the evaluated fungicides.

Discussion

This study provides an updated summary of the effects of different chemistry applied sequentially (three sprays starting at the heading stage) for managing wheat blast. For such, we gathered data from 44 uniform field trials conducted during nine growing seasons (2012–2020) across several wheat-producing states in Brazil. Despite previous reports using meta-analysis (17 trials conducted from 2012 to 2014) also with the goal of comparing fungicide treatments (Cruz et al. 2019), this work is considering the larger number of environments for wheat blast control using fungicides, reinforcing its importance.

Results of our analysis corroborate one of the main findings of that study for the Brazilian trials, which also reported a similar performance among the QoI+DMI premixes and a protectant fungicide. Similarly, a recent single field experiment (2019/20 season) conducted in Bangladesh reported a relatively high efficacy (65%) for MANC, which was close to our upper limit (95% confidence interval) estimate (Roy et al. 2020). The yield gain from using MANC in the Bangladeshi study (744 kg/ha) was within the expected gain (close to the upper limit) of estimated trials conducted in the Subtropical region of Brazil. Among several differences in experimental conditions, it is worth noting the difference in the concentration of MANC that was a bit higher (800 g/kg) in that study compared with the recommended dose used in the Brazilian experiments (750 g/kg), which may explain the higher levels of efficacy and yield response.

Commercial premixes of QoI+DMI have been tested more extensively than MANC in independent research. For instance, in the meta-analysis conducted by Cruz et al. (2019), the authors reported a relatively high control efficacy (58 to 68%) for picoxystrobin + cyproconazole, trifloxystrobin + tebuconazole, azoxystrobin + cyproconazole and pyraclostrobin + epoxiconazole applied twice across six field trials conducted in Bolivia from 2014 to 2015. Average yield responses obtained from applying those premixes in that study were extremely high, in the magnitude of 1,834 kg/ha (Cruz et al. 2019).

In Brazil, contrary to our findings, replicated field studies have reported higher levels of efficacy of PYRA+EPOX – ranging from 60% (Pagani et al. 2014) to 85% (Rios et al. 2016), compared with our estimates (95%CI 31 to 52%) regardless of the region. Overall, we found that this commercial premix performed the poorest among all treatments. Nevertheless, improved efficacy similar to those obtained in Bolivia, using PYRA + EPOX, can be expected especially in the southern region of Brazil, but with a high level of uncertainty (95% CI 17% to 74%).

Overall, fungicides were more profitable in the subtropical region, with break-even probabilities, $P(I \geq C)$, values higher than 0.99 for all fungicides (Fig. 4). In this region, the most profitable fungicide was MANC, with a mean profit of US\$269.73/ha. The least profitable fungicide in the subtropical region was PYRA+EPOX, with a mean profit of US\$118.17/ha. In the tropical region, break-even probabilities of fungicides were much lower than those obtained in the subtropics. The $P(I \geq C)$ values ranged from 0.17 (PYRA+EPOX) to 0.97 (MANC) (Fig. 4). The most profitable fungicide was again MANC, with a mean profit of US\$95.00/ha and the least profitable was PYRA+EPOX, with a negative mean profit of -US\$17.66/ha.

Fig. 4. Half-eye plots (density and point intervals) of profits (50,000 simulation runs) based on the meta-analytic estimate of yield return (kg/ha) for six fungicide treatments conditioned of two climatic regions (Tropical and Subtropical) evaluated during nine crop-seasons (2012 to 2020). The thinner error bars depict the 2.5 and 97.5 percentile of the distribution, while the thicker error bars represent 25 and 75 percentiles, and the solid-colored point gives the median profit for each fungicide and region. p gives the break-even probabilities, i.e, income greater than the cost of each fungicide in each respective region. The numbered black dots represent the spraying costs in US\$/ha of each fungicide.

Tebuconazole is an affordable option widely used by Brazilian growers not only for controlling wheat blast, but also for managing other important wheat diseases such as *Fusarium* head blight (Machado et al. 2017; Duffeck et al. 2020; Barro et al. 2020). The mean estimates of TEBU applied solo (54%) as well as the premix TFLX + TEBU (52%) reported in our meta-analysis were very similar to a two-year study (TEBU = 57%; TFLX + TEBU = 50%) conducted in Midwest Brazil during 2010 and 2011 crop seasons (Pagani et al. 2014). Moreover, the yield responses from using the TEBU based fungicides reported in that study (~400 kg/ha) (Pagani et al. 2014) were within the expected range, mainly for trials conducted in the Subtropics where yield response was greater than in the Tropical region.

In general, the levels of control were superior and, on average, 18 percent points greater in the Subtropical region (54 to 66%) compared with the Tropical region (24 to 47%). The only exception was tebuconazole fungicide for which efficacy was not influenced by region. Our findings demonstrated a similar pattern of disease control related by single studies carried out at Tropical (60%) or Subtropical trials (85%) (Pagani et al. 2014; Rios et al. 2016).

Results of our profitability analysis using the means and respective uncertainty of the estimates of yield return showed that, regardless of the region, the most profitable fungicide was MANC, given its lower price, and similar efficacy and yield response compared with the premixes. Although mancozeb was introduced in 1962, it is still important in the fungicide market worldwide and known to be a cost-effective fungicide (Gullino et al. 2010; Thind and Hollomon 2018). In fact, the probabilities of breaking even on costs of the commercial premixes of fungicides were generally lower, especially in the Tropical region, for all premixes (which are most costly) than MANC and TEBU, for which high break-even probabilities (> 92%) are expected.

In Brazilian tropical wheat growing region it is important to mention that there are two different systems able to produce wheat contrasting for the disease presence. The first one is in an irrigated system with the higher yield and quality wheat production in Brazil and where the blast is not a big concern and the dry condition where we had the trials. In this case the planting date range from February to May (end of summer to begin of autumn) having better environmental conditions for the development of the disease.

The combination of resistant cultivars and fungicide protection has been explored to improve disease management. For instance, Rios et al. (2016) found the greatest overall efficacy in reducing wheat blast incidence (~73%) and severity (~94%) by applying PYRA + EPOX in a moderate resistant cultivar (BR-18)

compared to a susceptible one (Guamirin). Moreover, the combination of PYRA + EPOX and BR-18 resulted in the highest mean yield (1,135 kg/ha) (Rios et al. 2016).

The use of premixes of single-site amended with multi-site fungicides is an ongoing strategy to improve wheat blast control. Preliminary data from the uniform fungicide trials (Santana et al. 2019b, 2019a, 2020a, 2020b) have shown benefits from adding a multi-site fungicide (mancozeb) in the mixture and more data will become available in the near future to confirm this observation. Additionally, the use of multi-site fungicides is important for managing fungicide resistance (FRAC-BR 2021). In fact, less sensitive PoT populations to QoIs and DMIs in Brazil have been reported, associated with mutations in cytochrome b gene (mainly G143A substitution) (Castroagudín et al. 2015) or CYP51 gene (several mutation points) (Dorigan et al. 2019; Poloni et al. 2021). However, using a relatively long time series we did not find evidence of a decline in fungicide efficacy over the years for all commercial premixes amended with QoI as well as TEBU applied solo. Whether QoIs are less effective or losing efficacy over the years could not be inferred given that none of the fungicides had QoI as a sole active ingredient. If that happens to be true and confirmed by field research, it is possible that the DMI component is responsible for the control. Further research in this area will be important to contribute to the debate around the risk associated with the use of strobilurins for wheat blast control (Castroagudín et al. 2015; Oliveira et al. 2015; Poloni et al. 2021).

In conclusion, the definition of the best options in fungicide programs for managing wheat blast should take into account region-specific factors that affect the performance of fungicides and also the need to extend control to other diseases, a case where QoI + DMI premixes have found use not only in Brazil (Blandino et al. 2006; Willyerd et al. 2012; Barro et al. 2017; Paul et al. 2018b). Management tactics such as application of site-specific fungicides amended with multi-site fungicides programs; use of adapted wheat cultivars carrying resistance genes against blast; and shifts in sowing time to escape conducive blast weather at heading stage should be considered as integrated management against wheat blast. Overall, this work demonstrated the profitability of site-specific and multi-site fungicides, their efficacy, and yield return by controlling wheat blast in a high conducive region (Tropical) and a moderately conducive (Subtropical) to blast occurrence, which may aid during decision-making when defining fungicide programs.

Acknowledgements

The first and senior author acknowledges the financial support provided by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq/Brazil) for scholarship and research fellowship (PQ-306857/2015-4), respectively. We also acknowledge the financial support provided by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais (Fapemig/Brazil) for a research grant (APQ-03945-16). All other authors are thankful to their institutions and teams for providing the support during the conduction of field experiments and collection of the data.

Data availability statement

The data and R scripts that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Open Science Framework project at osf.io/y7sgd/. A website was generated to better visualize the scripts where all data and analyses are documented and reproducible (git.io/JGVCM).

Author's contribution

JPA and JPB contributed equally to this study. JPA, JPB and EMD conceived the idea, analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. KSA analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. FMS planned and coordinated the experiments; JMVP, JLN, DL, GAMT, CCS, CDSS, ACPG, AABS, CAS, DFC, MAOC, TDNM, DRA, AAPC, LSOM, CMU, WV, and RCSG conducted the field trials and shared the data. All authors provided feedback and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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Supplemental Material

Fig. S1: Histograms for the distribution of Wheat blast index - WBI (A) and wheat grain yield (C) to check normality; B: log-transformed WBI data for normalizing the distribution and use in the meta-analysis models.

Table S1. Designs (set of fungicide treatments by each trial) identified in 44 independent trials conducted from 2012 to 2020 in 11 municipalities across six Brazilian states (PR, SP, DF, MT, MS and MG).

Design	Fungicides a.i. + untreated check ^a	WB index ^b	Yield ^b
1	CHECK; AZOX+TEBU; MANC; PYRA+EPOX; TEBU; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	4	4
2	CHECK; AZOX+TEBU; PYRA+EPOX; TEBU; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	5	5
3	CHECK; AZOX+TEBU; MANC; TEBU; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	8	9
4	CHECK; AZOX+TEBU; MANC; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	1	1
5	CHECK; MANC; PYRA+EPOX; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	10	13
6	CHECK; MANC; TEBU; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	1	1
7	CHECK; MANC;; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	9	7
8	CHECK; TFLX+PROT; TFLX+TEBU	1	2

^a See Table 1 for complete information about the treatments;

^b Number of trials that each design of treatments was identified for both WB index and yield.

Table S2. Overall means and respective confidence intervals of log response ratio (L_{IND}) and calculated percent control ($\underline{C}$) of Wheat Blast (WB) relative to untreated check provided by six fungicides evaluated during nine years (2012 to 2020) across 44 studies conducted in six Brazilian states (PR, SP, DF, MT, MS and MG).

Fungicide ^a	k^b	Effect Size					WB Control (%)		
		$\underline{L}_{IND}$	SE($\underline{L}$)	CI _L ^c	CI _U ^c	P value	$\underline{C}$	CI _L ^c	CI _U ^c
MANC	33	-0.8677	0.0904	-1.0449	-0.6905	<0.0001	58.00	49.86	64.82
AZOX + TEBU	18	-0.7946	0.1144	-1.0188	-0.5704	<0.0001	54.82	43.46	63.89
TFLX+PROT	39	-0.7745	0.0938	-0.9583	-0.5907	<0.0001	53.90	44.60	61.64
TEBU	18	-0.7678	0.1035	-0.9706	-0.5650	<0.0001	53.59	43.16	62.11
TFLX+TEBU	39	-0.7395	0.0854	-0.9068	-0.5722	<0.0001	52.26	43.56	59.61
PYRA+EPOX	19	-0.5669	0.0939	-0.7509	-0.3829	<0.0001	43.27	31.81	52.80

^a See Table 1 for complete information of the evaluated fungicides;

^b number of trials that each fungicide was evaluated;

^c upper (CI_U) and lower (CI_L) limits of the 95% confidence interval around $\underline{L}_{IND}$ and $\underline{C}$.

Table S3. Overall means and respective confidence intervals of unstandardized difference in wheat grain yield ($\underline{D}$) between fungicide-treated and untreated plots, and percent yield increase ($\underline{Y}$) for six selected fungicide treatments evaluated during nine years (2012 to 2020) across 44 studies conducted in six Brazilian states (PR, SP, DF, MT, MS and MG).

Fungicide ^a	k^b	Effect size					Yield Return (%)		
		$\underline{D}$	SE($\underline{D}$)	CI _L ^c	CI _U ^c	P value	$\underline{Y}$	CI _L ^c	CI _U ^c
MANC	35	420.10	53.30	315.62	524.57	<0.0001	47.55	32.25	64.62
TEBU	19	319.46	49.91	221.63	417.29	<0.0001	38.68	26.54	51.98
AZOX + TEBU	19	301.48	43.75	215.73	387.24	<0.0001	37.01	23.07	52.51
TFLX+PROT	42	299.73	39.69	221.92	377.53	<0.0001	32.42	21.84	43.93
TFLX+TEBU	42	245.34	36.98	172.85	317.83	<0.0001	29.08	19.13	39.86
PYRA+EPOX	22	181.15	33.85	114.79	247.50	<0.0001	23.76	14.62	33.64

^a See Table 1 for complete information on the fungicides;

^b number of trials that each fungicide was evaluated;

^c upper (CI_U) and lower (CI_L) limits of the 95% confidence interval around $\underline{D}$ and $\underline{Y}$.