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An Integrated Cloud–IoT–WSN Framework for Reinforcement Learning-Based Smart Irrigation: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

Smart irrigation has emerged as an important application of precision agriculture for improving water-use efficiency, crop productivity, and sustainable agricultural management. This paper reviews the evolution of irrigation systems from conventional and sensor-based approaches to intelligent systems integrating Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs), Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Reinforcement Learning (RL). Particular emphasis is placed on RL-based irrigation because irrigation scheduling is inherently a sequential decision-making problem influenced by dynamic soil, weather, and crop conditions. The review examines conventional Machine Learning, Deep Learning, and RL approaches, including Q-Learning, Deep Q-Networks (DQN), and Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO), and analyzes their advantages and limitations for autonomous irrigation. Finally, emerging directions such as Edge AI, Explainable AI, Federated Learning, Multi-Agent RL, Digital Twins, and multi-objective optimization are discussed. The review highlights the potential of integrated RL-enabled architectures to support adaptive, autonomous, and sustainable irrigation management.

KEYWORDS: Smart Irrigation; Reinforcement Learning; Wireless Sensor Networks; Internet of Things; Cloud Computing; Deep Reinforcement Learning; Precision Agriculture; Sustainable Water Management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is fundamental to global food security, economic development, and environmental sustainability. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the increasing global population, projected to approach 9.7 billion by 2050, will substantially increase the demand for agricultural production while intensifying pressure on already limited freshwater resources. Agriculture accounts for nearly 70% of global freshwater withdrawals, making irrigation one of the largest consumers of water worldwide. Consequently, improving irrigation efficiency has become a critical research priority for achieving sustainable agricultural production and addressing the dual challenges of water scarcity and climate change. Traditional irrigation practices, including flood irrigation and manually scheduled watering, often suffer from poor water-use efficiency because irrigation decisions are generally based on fixed schedules or farmers' experience rather than real-time field conditions. Such approaches frequently result in over-irrigation, under-irrigation, nutrient leaching, increased energy consumption, and reduced crop productivity [1].

The emergence of precision agriculture has transformed conventional farming by integrating sensing, communication, computation, and intelligent decision-making technologies into agricultural operations. Precision agriculture emphasizes site-specific crop management through continuous monitoring of environmental parameters and automated decision support. Within this paradigm, smart irrigation systems have attracted significant attention because they enable irrigation scheduling based on real-time measurements of soil, crop, and atmospheric conditions instead of predetermined irrigation intervals. Recent advances in Internet of Things (IoT) technologies have further accelerated the deployment of intelligent irrigation systems by enabling seamless connectivity among distributed sensing devices, cloud computing platforms, and user applications. These developments facilitate continuous environmental monitoring, remote supervision, predictive analytics, and automated irrigation control, thereby improving water-use efficiency while maintaining or enhancing crop yield.

Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) constitute one of the most important enabling technologies in modern smart irrigation systems. A WSN typically consists of spatially distributed sensor nodes equipped with sensing units, microcontrollers, wireless transceivers, and power sources capable of continuously monitoring critical environmental variables such as soil moisture, soil temperature, air temperature, relative humidity, pH, water level, rainfall, solar radiation, and other agronomic parameters. The collected measurements are transmitted through wireless communication protocols including ZigBee, LoRaWAN, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE), NB-IoT, or GSM to gateway devices that aggregate sensor data before forwarding it to cloud-based services for storage, analysis, visualization, and decision making. Compared with traditional wired monitoring systems, WSNs offer lower deployment cost, higher scalability, flexible installation, easier maintenance, and improved suitability for geographically distributed agricultural environments.

Cloud computing further extends the capabilities of IoT-enabled agricultural systems by providing virtually unlimited storage, high-performance computing resources, and advanced data analytics. Cloud platforms facilitate the integration of heterogeneous data sources, including sensor observations, weather forecasts, historical irrigation records, crop growth information, and geographical information systems. These integrated datasets support sophisticated analytical models capable of identifying complex relationships among environmental variables and irrigation requirements. Furthermore, cloud-based architectures simplify large-scale deployment, centralized management, and remote accessibility while supporting interoperability among heterogeneous agricultural devices. Nevertheless, the transmission of massive volumes of sensor data to centralized cloud servers may introduce communication latency, increased bandwidth consumption, higher energy expenditure, and potential privacy concerns, motivating the development of hybrid cloud–edge architectures for future smart farming applications [2].

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful decision-support technology for precision agriculture by enabling intelligent interpretation of large-scale agricultural datasets. Machine learning algorithms have been extensively applied to crop yield prediction, disease diagnosis, irrigation scheduling, evapotranspiration estimation, soil moisture forecasting, nutrient management, and weather prediction. Supervised learning techniques such as Support Vector Machines (SVM), Random Forests (RF), Artificial Neural Networks (ANN), Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost), and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks have demonstrated promising performance in agricultural prediction tasks. However, these approaches generally require extensive labeled datasets and primarily perform predictive analysis rather than sequential decision optimization. Since irrigation management is inherently a sequential decision-making problem involving dynamic interactions among soil, crop, and environmental conditions, predictive models alone are often insufficient for determining optimal irrigation policies under changing environmental scenarios [1].

Reinforcement Learning (RL) has recently emerged as a promising paradigm for autonomous irrigation management because it enables intelligent agents to learn optimal irrigation strategies through continuous interaction with the environment rather than relying solely on predefined rules or historical labeled data. In RL, an agent observes the current environmental state, selects irrigation actions, receives rewards based on irrigation outcomes, and gradually learns a policy that maximizes long-term cumulative rewards. This framework naturally models irrigation scheduling as a Markov Decision Process (MDP), where irrigation decisions influence future soil moisture dynamics, crop health, water consumption, and overall system performance. Compared with conventional threshold-based controllers, RL-based irrigation systems exhibit greater adaptability to environmental uncertainty and changing climatic conditions. Recent advances in Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL), particularly Deep Q-Networks (DQN) and Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO), have further enhanced the capability of autonomous irrigation systems to solve complex decision problems characterized by high-dimensional state spaces and nonlinear environmental dynamics [3].

Despite substantial progress in IoT-enabled smart irrigation, several challenges continue to limit the deployment of fully autonomous and scalable irrigation systems. Many existing solutions rely on static threshold values or rule-based controllers that cannot effectively adapt to changing weather conditions, seasonal variability, crop growth stages, or heterogeneous soil characteristics. Numerous studies focus primarily on isolated components, such as sensor network design, cloud infrastructure, or machine learning models, without considering an integrated architecture that combines distributed sensing, cloud computing, intelligent decision-making, and automated irrigation control. Furthermore, many reported systems are evaluated using small experimental datasets or laboratory-scale implementations, limiting their applicability to realistic agricultural environments. Challenges related to sensor reliability, communication latency, energy efficiency, cybersecurity, interoperability, scalability, and explainability also remain open research problems requiring further investigation [1].

2. EVOLUTION OF IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

Irrigation has been one of the most significant technological developments in the history of agriculture, enabling crop cultivation in regions with inadequate or irregular rainfall. Since the emergence of early civilizations, irrigation practices have continuously evolved in response to increasing food demand, changing climatic conditions, and advancements in engineering and information technologies. The progression from traditional surface irrigation to intelligent, autonomous irrigation systems represents a paradigm shift in agricultural water management. Modern irrigation systems no longer focus solely on water delivery but increasingly emphasize water-use efficiency, environmental sustainability, crop productivity, and data-driven decision-making. This evolution has been accelerated by the convergence of Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs), the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), and, more recently, reinforcement learning (RL), which collectively enable autonomous irrigation scheduling based on real-time environmental conditions [4].

2.1 TRADITIONAL IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

Historically, irrigation relied primarily on manual operation and naturally available water resources. Early irrigation techniques, such as basin irrigation, furrow irrigation, flood irrigation, and canal irrigation, were designed to distribute water across agricultural fields using gravity. These methods significantly contributed to agricultural expansion by enabling cultivation in arid and semi-arid regions. However, irrigation scheduling was generally based on fixed calendars, farmers' experience, or visual assessment of soil conditions rather than quantitative measurements of crop water requirements.

Although traditional irrigation methods are inexpensive and relatively simple to implement, they exhibit several inherent limitations. Flood irrigation, one of the oldest and most widely practiced techniques, typically suffers from low application efficiency because large quantities of water are lost through surface runoff, deep percolation, and evaporation. Furrow irrigation provides somewhat better control but still depends heavily on soil type, land slope, and manual supervision. Canal irrigation requires extensive infrastructure and is susceptible to conveyance losses and unequal water distribution among fields. Consequently, these conventional approaches often lead to excessive water consumption, nutrient leaching, soil salinization, and reduced crop productivity, particularly under increasing climate variability [5].

Another limitation of traditional irrigation systems is their inability to respond dynamically to changing environmental conditions. Irrigation decisions are usually independent of real-time variations in soil moisture, temperature, humidity, rainfall, evapotranspiration, or crop growth stage. As a result, crops frequently receive either insufficient or excessive irrigation, adversely affecting both agricultural productivity and water-use efficiency. These shortcomings have become increasingly significant as freshwater resources become scarcer and agricultural production faces mounting pressure from population growth and climate change [6].

2.2 EMERGENCE OF EFFICIENT IRRIGATION TECHNOLOGIES

The limitations of conventional irrigation encouraged the development of more efficient irrigation techniques during the twentieth century. Sprinkler irrigation introduced pressurized water distribution that improved application uniformity compared with flood irrigation, making it suitable for a wider range of soil types and terrains. Subsequently, drip irrigation emerged as one of the most water-efficient irrigation methods by delivering water directly to the plant root zone through emitters, thereby minimizing evaporation losses, runoff, and weed growth.

Drip irrigation significantly improved irrigation efficiency and enabled precise control of water application rates. Numerous studies have demonstrated that drip irrigation can substantially reduce water consumption while maintaining or improving crop yield compared with conventional surface irrigation systems. Nevertheless, even modern drip irrigation systems often rely on predefined irrigation schedules or manually configured timers that cannot adequately account for rapidly changing environmental conditions. Consequently, although hydraulic efficiency improved considerably, decision-making remained largely static and dependent on human intervention.

During this period, irrigation management also began incorporating meteorological observations and crop evapotranspiration models to estimate irrigation requirements more accurately. Although these methods represented an improvement over fixed scheduling, they still required periodic manual measurements and were unable to provide continuous field-scale monitoring across large agricultural areas [4].

2.3 PRECISION AGRICULTURE AND SENSOR BASED IRRIGATION

The emergence of precision agriculture fundamentally transformed irrigation management by introducing data-driven approaches that optimize agricultural inputs according to spatial and temporal field variability. Rather than treating an entire field uniformly, precision agriculture recognizes that soil characteristics, moisture availability, crop growth, and nutrient requirements vary across different locations and throughout the growing season.

Sensor technologies became central to this transformation. Soil moisture sensors, temperature sensors, humidity sensors, rainfall sensors, solar radiation sensors, water-level sensors, and nutrient sensors enabled continuous monitoring of field conditions with much higher temporal resolution than traditional manual measurements. These sensors provided objective information regarding crop water requirements, allowing irrigation decisions to be based on actual field conditions rather than assumptions or fixed schedules.

Initially, sensor-based irrigation systems employed threshold-based control algorithms. When measured soil moisture fell below a predefined threshold, irrigation systems automatically activated pumps or valves until the desired moisture level was restored. Compared with manual irrigation, threshold-based systems significantly reduced labor requirements and improved irrigation efficiency. However, these systems also exhibited several limitations. Threshold values are often crop-specific and location-dependent, requiring expert calibration. Moreover, they generally fail to incorporate multiple environmental variables simultaneously or adapt to seasonal changes, weather uncertainty, and long-term crop development. As a result, although sensor-based automation represented a major advancement, irrigation decisions remained largely reactive rather than predictive or adaptive [7].

2.4 INTERNET OF THINGS AND SMART IRRIGATION

The rapid advancement of the Internet of Things has significantly expanded the capabilities of precision irrigation systems. IoT enables distributed sensing devices to communicate continuously through wireless communication technologies, allowing environmental information to be transmitted from agricultural fields to centralized computing platforms in real time.

Modern IoT-enabled irrigation systems typically integrate multiple sensing devices, microcontrollers, wireless communication modules, cloud platforms, and user interfaces into a unified architecture. Environmental measurements—including soil moisture, temperature, humidity, pH, rainfall, and water level—are collected by distributed sensor nodes and transmitted through communication technologies such as ZigBee, LoRaWAN, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE), GSM, or NB-IoT to gateway devices. The collected information is subsequently processed within cloud computing environments where advanced analytics, visualization, historical storage, and automated decision support can be performed.

Compared with earlier sensor-based systems, IoT-enabled smart irrigation offers several important advantages. Real-time monitoring allows farmers to observe field conditions remotely through web or mobile applications. Automated alert mechanisms notify users of abnormal environmental conditions, while cloud-based storage facilitates long-term trend analysis and predictive modeling. Furthermore, IoT architectures improve scalability by supporting thousands of distributed sensing devices across geographically separated agricultural fields. These capabilities have substantially improved water-use efficiency, reduced labor costs, and enabled more precise irrigation scheduling. However, large-scale IoT deployments continue to face challenges related to interoperability, communication reliability, energy consumption, cybersecurity, and standardization [8].

2.5 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE-DRIVEN IRRIGATION

As agricultural datasets increased in both volume and complexity, Artificial Intelligence emerged as a natural extension of IoT-enabled smart irrigation. Machine learning algorithms began to support irrigation scheduling through predictive modeling using environmental observations, weather forecasts, crop characteristics, and historical irrigation records. Supervised learning algorithms such as Random Forest, Support Vector Machines, Artificial Neural Networks, and Long Short-Term Memory networks demonstrated promising performance for soil moisture prediction, evapotranspiration estimation, rainfall forecasting, crop stress detection, and irrigation demand prediction.

Despite these advances, conventional machine learning primarily focuses on prediction rather than sequential decision optimization. Irrigation management is inherently dynamic because each irrigation action influences future soil moisture, crop growth, and subsequent irrigation requirements. Predictive models alone cannot determine the optimal sequence of irrigation actions over an extended cultivation period, particularly under uncertain environmental conditions. Consequently, researchers increasingly recognized the need for intelligent systems capable of learning adaptive irrigation policies rather than merely forecasting environmental variables [7].

2.6 EVOLUTION TOWARDS REINFORCEMENT LEARNING-BASED SMART IRRIGATION

Recent developments in Reinforcement Learning represent the latest stage in the evolution of intelligent irrigation systems. Unlike traditional rule-based controllers or supervised machine learning algorithms, RL enables autonomous agents to learn optimal irrigation strategies through continuous interaction with agricultural environments. Irrigation scheduling is naturally formulated as a Markov Decision Process (MDP), in which the irrigation controller observes environmental states, selects irrigation actions, receives feedback through reward functions, and continuously improves its decision policy.

Deep Reinforcement Learning algorithms, including Deep Q-Networks (DQN) and Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO), have further enhanced the ability of autonomous irrigation systems to address nonlinear environmental dynamics and high-dimensional state spaces. When integrated with IoT-enabled sensing infrastructure, cloud computing, and Wireless Sensor Networks, these algorithms enable irrigation systems to adapt automatically to seasonal variation, changing weather conditions, and heterogeneous field characteristics without relying on manually selected thresholds.

Nevertheless, current research remains fragmented. Many published studies investigate individual components—such as IoT platforms, cloud architectures, machine learning models, or WSN communication protocols—in isolation. Fully integrated frameworks that combine real-time environmental sensing, scalable Cloud–IoT infrastructure, Wireless Sensor Networks, and Deep Reinforcement Learning for autonomous irrigation management remain comparatively limited. Additionally, issues related to scalability, interoperability, cybersecurity, explainability, and long-term field validation continue to restrict widespread deployment. These research gaps provide the primary motivation for the integrated Cloud–IoT–WSN framework proposed in this study [9].

Table I. Evolution of Irrigation Systems

Generation	Primary Technology	Decision Method	Key Characteristics	Major Limitations
Traditional Irrigation	Flood, Basin, Canal, Furrow	Manual	Low infrastructure cost, simple operation	High water losses, labor intensive, poor efficiency
Modern Irrigation	Sprinkler, Drip	Timer-based	Improved water distribution, reduced evaporation	Static scheduling, limited adaptability
Sensor-Based Irrigation	Soil moisture and environmental sensors	Threshold-based	Automatic irrigation using field measurements	Manual threshold selection, reactive control
IoT-Based Smart	IoT devices,	Rule-based	Real-time monitoring,	Communication latency,

Generation	Primary Technology	Decision Method	Key Characteristics	Major Limitations
Irrigation	WSNs, cloud platforms	automation	remote access, cloud storage	interoperability, cybersecurity
AI-Driven Smart Irrigation	Machine Learning, Deep Learning	Predictive analytics	Intelligent forecasting and decision support	Requires labeled data, limited sequential optimization
Reinforcement Learning-Based Irrigation	RL, DQN, PPO, Cloud–IoT–WSN	Adaptive learning	Autonomous irrigation, continuous policy improvement, dynamic optimization	Computational complexity, training requirements, limited large-scale field validation

3. INTERNET OF THINGS (IoT) IN SMART AGRICULTURE

The rapid advancement of the Internet of Things (IoT) has significantly transformed modern agricultural practices by enabling real-time monitoring, intelligent automation, and data-driven decision-making. In recent years, IoT has become one of the fundamental technologies underpinning precision agriculture, facilitating the seamless integration of sensing devices, communication networks, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. Unlike conventional agricultural management, which relies heavily on manual observation and periodic intervention, IoT-based systems continuously collect, transmit, and analyze environmental data to support autonomous and optimized farming operations. This technological paradigm has led to the emergence of Smart Agriculture (Agriculture 4.0), where agricultural processes are monitored and controlled through interconnected intelligent devices, thereby improving productivity, resource utilization, and environmental sustainability [4].

3.1 EVOLUTION OF IoT IN AGRICULTURE

The concept of IoT refers to a network of interconnected physical objects equipped with sensors, communication modules, embedded processors, and software capable of exchanging information over the Internet with minimal human intervention. Originally introduced to support industrial automation and smart cities, IoT has rapidly expanded into agriculture because of its ability to provide continuous monitoring of field conditions and enable intelligent resource management.

Early agricultural automation primarily relied on standalone sensors and programmable controllers that operated independently without network connectivity. These systems were limited by local data storage, restricted communication capabilities, and the absence of centralized decision-making. The integration of wireless communication technologies, cloud computing, and mobile Internet transformed these isolated monitoring systems into interconnected agricultural ecosystems capable of collecting environmental information from geographically distributed farms and delivering actionable insights in real time.

Today, IoT-enabled agriculture supports a broad spectrum of applications, including smart irrigation, greenhouse automation, livestock monitoring, precision fertilization, crop health assessment, pest detection, yield prediction, machinery management, and supply chain traceability. These applications collectively contribute to increased agricultural productivity while reducing water consumption, fertilizer usage, labor requirements, and operational costs [2].

4. WIRELESS SENSOR NETWORKS FOR SMART IRRIGATION

Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) have emerged as one of the most important enabling technologies for precision agriculture and intelligent irrigation management. By facilitating continuous monitoring of environmental parameters and reliable wireless communication across distributed agricultural fields, WSNs provide the sensing infrastructure required for data-driven irrigation systems. Unlike conventional wired monitoring systems, WSNs offer low-cost deployment, scalability, flexibility, and minimal infrastructure requirements, making them particularly suitable for large-scale agricultural environments. Over the past two decades, significant research has focused on improving WSN architectures, communication protocols, energy efficiency, and network reliability to support sustainable agricultural applications. The integration of WSNs with the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, edge computing, and artificial intelligence has further expanded their capabilities, enabling autonomous irrigation scheduling, predictive crop management, and real-time environmental monitoring. This section critically reviews the role of WSNs in smart irrigation, highlighting their architecture, sensing technologies, communication protocols, routing strategies, energy-efficient mechanisms, and existing research challenges [4].

4.1 EVOLUTION OF WIRELESS SENSOR NETWORKS IN AGRICULTURE

The concept of Wireless Sensor Networks originated from distributed sensing applications in military surveillance, environmental monitoring, and industrial automation. Their adoption in agriculture began with the increasing demand for continuous monitoring of crop and soil conditions without the limitations associated with wired communication systems.

Early agricultural monitoring systems primarily employed isolated sensors connected through wired networks, which suffered from high installation costs, complex maintenance, and poor scalability. The introduction of low-power wireless communication technologies enabled the deployment of distributed sensor nodes capable of self-organizing into wireless networks. This development significantly improved the practicality of environmental monitoring in geographically dispersed agricultural fields.

As sensing technologies matured, WSNs became increasingly integrated with IoT platforms, cloud services, and intelligent decision-support systems. Modern agricultural WSNs not only collect environmental data but also support automated irrigation control, crop health assessment, greenhouse management, weather monitoring, precision fertilization, pest detection, and livestock management. Consequently, WSNs have evolved from simple data acquisition systems into intelligent cyber-physical infrastructures that form the sensing backbone of smart agriculture [10].

5. EVOLUTION OF CLOUD COMPUTING IN AGRICULTURE

The application of cloud computing in agriculture has evolved alongside advances in sensing technologies, wireless communication, and data analytics. Early agricultural information systems primarily relied on local databases and standalone software applications that were limited in storage capacity, computational power, and accessibility. As sensor networks became increasingly widespread, these traditional systems proved inadequate for managing the continuous streams of data generated by distributed field devices.

The introduction of cloud computing transformed agricultural data management by enabling centralized storage, remote accessibility, and high-performance processing. Farmers and agricultural organizations could now access real-time field information through web-based dashboards and mobile applications regardless of geographical location. Moreover, cloud platforms facilitated the integration of multiple data sources, including sensor measurements, satellite imagery, weather forecasts, historical crop records, and geographical information systems (GIS), thereby enabling comprehensive decision-support systems.

Recent developments have further expanded cloud computing capabilities through the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), deep learning (DL), and reinforcement learning (RL), enabling predictive analytics and autonomous decision-making for precision agriculture. These advancements have positioned cloud computing as a central component of intelligent agricultural ecosystems [2].

6. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN SMART IRRIGATION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most transformative technologies in modern agriculture, enabling intelligent decision-making through data-driven analysis, predictive modeling, and autonomous control. The rapid expansion of Internet of Things (IoT) devices, Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs), cloud computing, satellite remote sensing, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has generated unprecedented volumes of agricultural data. Converting these heterogeneous datasets into actionable knowledge requires advanced computational techniques capable of learning complex relationships among environmental variables, crop conditions, and management practices. AI provides this capability by enabling agricultural systems to analyze historical and real-time data, recognize patterns, predict future events, and optimize resource allocation with minimal human intervention. Consequently, AI has become a cornerstone of Agriculture 4.0, facilitating intelligent irrigation, precision fertilization, disease diagnosis, yield prediction, weed management, and autonomous farming [4].

Among various agricultural applications, irrigation management has particularly benefited from AI because irrigation scheduling involves complex interactions among soil properties, weather conditions, crop growth stages, evapotranspiration, and water availability. Traditional irrigation systems rely on fixed schedules or manually defined thresholds that are unable to adapt effectively to continuously changing environmental conditions. AI-based irrigation systems overcome these limitations by continuously learning from environmental observations and optimizing irrigation decisions to improve water-use efficiency while maintaining crop productivity. As a result, AI has become an essential component of next-generation smart irrigation systems that integrate sensing technologies, cloud computing, and autonomous control [1].

6.1 EVOLUTION OF WIRELESS SENSOR NETWORKS IN AGRICULTURE

The application of AI in agriculture has evolved through several technological phases, reflecting advances in computational intelligence, sensing technologies, and data availability. Initially, agricultural decision-support systems relied on expert systems, which encoded agricultural knowledge into manually defined rules developed by domain experts. Although expert systems provided useful recommendations for irrigation scheduling, fertilizer application, and pest management, their performance depended heavily on predefined knowledge bases and lacked adaptability to changing environmental conditions.

The availability of large agricultural datasets during the past two decades facilitated the adoption of Machine Learning (ML) algorithms capable of automatically discovering relationships between environmental variables and agricultural outcomes. Machine learning significantly improved prediction accuracy for soil moisture estimation, crop yield forecasting, weather prediction, and disease diagnosis.

Subsequently, advances in computational power and cloud computing enabled the widespread adoption of Deep Learning (DL) techniques capable of learning hierarchical feature representations from large-scale datasets. Deep neural networks demonstrated remarkable performance in image-based crop monitoring, remote sensing, disease detection, and time-series forecasting.

More recently, Reinforcement Learning (RL) has emerged as a promising paradigm for agricultural automation because it addresses sequential decision-making problems rather than static prediction tasks. Unlike supervised learning algorithms that require labeled datasets, RL enables autonomous agents to learn optimal irrigation policies through continuous interaction with agricultural environments. This progression from rule-based systems to adaptive learning algorithms reflects the increasing intelligence and autonomy of modern agricultural management systems [4].

6.2 MACHINE LEARNING FOR SMART IRRIGATION

Machine Learning has become one of the most widely adopted AI techniques in precision agriculture due to its ability to identify complex relationships within multidimensional agricultural datasets. ML algorithms utilize historical observations to construct predictive models that support agricultural decision-making.

In smart irrigation, machine learning has been successfully applied to:

- Soil moisture prediction
- Crop water requirement estimation
- Evapotranspiration modeling
- Rainfall prediction
- Irrigation demand forecasting

- Crop yield estimation
- Water consumption optimization

Common supervised learning algorithms include:

Support Vector Machine (SVM)

Support Vector Machines construct optimal decision boundaries that maximize separation between classes or regression outputs. SVM has been widely employed for soil moisture estimation, crop classification, and irrigation demand prediction because of its robustness in high-dimensional feature spaces.

Random Forest (RF)

Random Forest combines multiple decision trees through ensemble learning to improve prediction accuracy and reduce overfitting.

Advantages include:

- High prediction accuracy
- Robustness against noisy data
- Feature importance estimation
- Good generalization capability

Random Forest has demonstrated excellent performance for crop yield prediction, soil moisture estimation, and irrigation scheduling.

Artificial Neural Networks (ANN)

Artificial Neural Networks model nonlinear relationships among environmental variables through interconnected processing units.

ANNs have been applied to:

- Crop growth prediction
- Irrigation scheduling
- Weather forecasting
- Soil property estimation

Their nonlinear modeling capability makes them particularly suitable for agricultural systems characterized by complex environmental interactions.

Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost)

XGBoost improves prediction performance through gradient boosting of decision trees.

Applications include:

- Crop yield prediction
- Water demand forecasting
- Soil nutrient estimation
- Disease prediction

Its computational efficiency and predictive accuracy have contributed to its widespread adoption in agricultural analytics. Although machine learning algorithms have significantly improved agricultural prediction, they primarily solve supervised prediction problems rather than dynamic decision optimization. Consequently, they cannot directly determine optimal irrigation strategies over extended cultivation periods because irrigation decisions influence future environmental states.

6.3 DEEP LEARNING IN SMART IRRIGATION

Deep Learning extends traditional machine learning by employing multi-layer neural networks capable of automatically extracting hierarchical features from complex datasets. The increasing availability of cloud computing, Graphics Processing Units (GPUs), and large agricultural datasets has accelerated the adoption of deep learning in precision agriculture. Common deep learning architectures include:

Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs)

CNNs are primarily employed for image analysis.

Agricultural applications include:

- Crop disease detection
- Weed identification
- Leaf classification
- Fruit recognition
- Remote sensing image analysis

CNNs have achieved state-of-the-art performance in image-based agricultural monitoring.

Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM)

LSTM networks specialize in sequential data analysis.

Applications include:

- Soil moisture forecasting
- Weather prediction
- Irrigation demand forecasting
- Crop growth prediction
- Time-series environmental modeling

Since agricultural variables exhibit strong temporal dependencies, LSTM networks have become particularly valuable for smart irrigation applications.

Autoencoders

Autoencoders perform unsupervised feature extraction and anomaly detection.

Applications include:

- Missing data reconstruction
- Sensor fault detection
- Environmental anomaly detection

Despite their predictive capability, deep learning models generally require:

- Large labeled datasets
- Extensive computational resources
- Significant training time

Furthermore, like conventional machine learning, deep learning primarily performs prediction rather than sequential decision optimization.

6.4 REINFORCEMENT LEARNING FOR SMART IRRIGATION

Unlike supervised learning algorithms, Reinforcement Learning addresses decision-making rather than prediction.

In RL, an intelligent agent interacts continuously with its environment by:

1. Observing environmental states
2. Selecting irrigation actions
3. Receiving rewards
4. Updating its policy

This iterative learning process enables the agent to maximize long-term cumulative rewards. For smart irrigation:

State

Typically includes:

- Soil moisture
- Temperature
- Humidity
- Crop growth stage
- Weather conditions

Action

Common irrigation actions include:

- Irrigate
- Do not irrigate
- Variable irrigation amount

Reward

Reward functions generally encourage:

- Optimal soil moisture
- Water conservation
- Crop health
- Energy efficiency

Because irrigation management naturally involves sequential decision making, RL provides a more appropriate optimization framework than conventional predictive algorithms.

6.5 DEEP REINFORCEMENT LEARNING

Recent advances have combined reinforcement learning with deep neural networks to create Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL).

DRL overcomes the limitations of classical RL by handling:

- High-dimensional state spaces
- Continuous observations

- Complex nonlinear environments

Among DRL algorithms, the most widely adopted include:

Deep Q-Network (DQN)

DQN approximates the Q-value function using deep neural networks.

Advantages:

- Handles continuous state variables
- Learns nonlinear decision policies
- Better scalability than tabular Q-learning

Limitations:

- Overestimation bias
- Training instability
- Sensitive hyperparameters

Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO)

PPO is a policy-gradient algorithm that updates policies while constraining excessive policy changes.

Advantages:

- Stable learning
- High sample efficiency
- Robust convergence
- Better exploration

PPO has become one of the most widely adopted DRL algorithms for robotics, autonomous control, and smart agriculture.

Soft Actor-Critic (SAC)

SAC introduces entropy maximization to encourage exploration.

Advantages include:

- High sample efficiency
- Stable learning
- Continuous action support

Although SAC has demonstrated promising results in robotics and autonomous systems, its application to smart irrigation remains comparatively limited.

The following table summarizes the characteristics of major AI techniques employed in intelligent irrigation systems.

Table II. Comparison of Artificial Intelligence Techniques in Smart Irrigation

AI Technique	Typical Algorithms	Primary Purpose	Strengths	Limitations
Expert Systems	Rule-based inference	Irrigation recommendation	Simple implementation	No adaptability
Machine Learning	SVM, RF, XGBoost	Prediction	High predictive accuracy	Requires labeled data
Deep Learning	CNN, LSTM	Complex feature learning	Excellent nonlinear modeling	Computationally expensive
Reinforcement Learning	Q-Learning	Sequential decision-making	Learns through interaction	Slow convergence in large state spaces
Deep Reinforcement Learning	DQN, PPO, SAC	Autonomous control	Adaptive optimization, continuous learning	Higher computational complexity

7. EXISTING RL-BASED IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

Reinforcement Learning (RL) has emerged as one of the most promising artificial intelligence paradigms for autonomous irrigation management because it formulates irrigation scheduling as a sequential decision-making problem rather than a static prediction task. Unlike conventional machine learning approaches, which learn from labeled historical datasets, RL agents continuously interact with the agricultural environment, observe its state, execute irrigation actions, receive reward feedback, and iteratively improve their decision policies. This capability makes RL particularly suitable for smart irrigation, where irrigation decisions have long-term effects on soil moisture dynamics, crop growth, water consumption, and energy utilization. Recent advances in Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) have further accelerated research by enabling agents to learn directly from high-dimensional environmental observations collected through Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs), IoT devices, cloud platforms, and crop growth simulators [11].

Despite this growing interest, RL-based irrigation remains a relatively young research area. A recent systematic review of weather-aware intelligent irrigation identified nearly 50 studies employing RL or DRL across environmental control applications, yet only a small fraction directly addressed autonomous irrigation control, indicating that the integration of RL with IoT-enabled irrigation systems is still in its early stages [12].

7.1 EARLY RL-BASED IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

The earliest RL-based irrigation studies primarily employed tabular Q-Learning, where the agricultural environment was represented using a finite number of discrete states corresponding to soil moisture levels, weather conditions, or irrigation stages. The action space was similarly discretized into simple irrigation decisions such as "irrigate" and "do not irrigate." These studies demonstrated that RL could learn adaptive irrigation schedules without explicitly programmed rules. Compared with timer-based or threshold-based controllers, Q-Learning agents gradually improved water-use efficiency by balancing soil moisture maintenance and irrigation costs through repeated interactions with simulated agricultural environments.

However, tabular RL approaches suffered from several practical limitations:

- State-space explosion as environmental variables increased.
- Inability to process continuous sensor measurements directly.
- Poor scalability for realistic agricultural systems.
- Slow convergence in large environments.
- Limited generalization capability.

Consequently, although these studies established the feasibility of autonomous irrigation learning, their applicability to real-world smart irrigation systems remained restricted [11].

7.2 DEEP Q-NETWORK-BASED IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

The introduction of Deep Q-Networks (DQN) represented a significant advancement over classical Q-Learning by replacing the tabular Q-function with deep neural networks capable of approximating action-value functions for high-dimensional state spaces.

Recent irrigation studies employ DQN using environmental observations such as:

- Soil moisture
- Air temperature
- Relative humidity
- Weather forecasts
- Crop growth stage
- Rainfall prediction
- Historical irrigation records

as input features.

Instead of manually enumerating every possible environmental state, DQN learns nonlinear representations directly from sensor observations, enabling substantially improved scalability.

Several studies further enhanced DQN by incorporating weather forecasts into the state representation. Rather than reacting only to current soil moisture conditions, the RL agent anticipates future rainfall and adjusts irrigation decisions accordingly, thereby reducing unnecessary irrigation events and improving water-use efficiency [13].

A recent IEEE study integrated IoT sensor networks with DQN for smart irrigation, using real-time soil moisture measurements, weather forecasts, and crop-specific constraints to dynamically optimize irrigation scheduling. Experimental results reported approximately 30% lower water consumption than conventional fixed-time irrigation while maintaining desirable soil moisture conditions [14].

Similarly, recent conference research proposed Smart Irrigation 4.0, where DQN maintained soil moisture within predefined optimal ranges by continuously learning adaptive irrigation policies instead of relying on manually configured thresholds [15].

Despite these improvements, DQN-based irrigation systems continue to encounter several challenges:

- Overestimation bias
- Hyperparameter sensitivity
- Training instability
- Large training data requirements
- Difficulty handling continuous action spaces.

7.3 POLICY GRADIENT AND PPO-BASED IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

More recent research has increasingly adopted policy-gradient algorithms, particularly Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO), because of their superior learning stability and robustness.

Unlike DQN, which estimates action-value functions, PPO directly learns the policy responsible for selecting irrigation actions while constraining excessive policy updates during training. This clipped optimization strategy substantially improves convergence stability.

Several recent simulation studies have demonstrated that PPO consistently achieves:

- Faster convergence
- More stable learning
- Better cumulative rewards
- Improved water-use efficiency
- Higher robustness under environmental uncertainty

compared with traditional value-based methods.

A comprehensive comparative investigation using the gym-DSSAT crop simulation environment evaluated PPO and DQN under identical irrigation, fertilization, and mixed crop-management scenarios. The authors reported that PPO consistently outperformed DQN for irrigation optimization under the same reward functions, environmental settings, and hyperparameter configurations, demonstrating stronger policy learning for sequential agricultural decision-making [16]. These findings suggest that PPO is particularly well suited for irrigation scheduling problems characterized by stochastic weather patterns, nonlinear crop responses, and long planning horizons.

7.3 RL USING CROP GROWTH SIMULATORS

One important direction in recent literature is the integration of RL with crop growth simulation models rather than simplified irrigation environments. Researchers have increasingly employed agricultural simulators such as APSIM and gym-DSSAT to train RL agents under realistic agronomic conditions.

For example, Saikai *et al.* developed a DRL framework using the APSIM-Wheat crop model, where the agent considered nine environmental state variables—including phenological stage, soil water in multiple layers, cumulative rainfall, and cumulative irrigation—and selected daily irrigation depths. Across multiple evaluation years, the learned policy consistently outperformed a conventional rule-based irrigation strategy, achieving profit improvements of up to 17% under Australian wheat production scenarios [17].

Likewise, gym-DSSAT has become one of the most widely adopted benchmarking environments because it allows standardized comparison of RL algorithms under identical crop growth conditions. Comparative evaluations using this environment indicate that RL policies can equal or exceed expert-designed irrigation strategies while adapting more effectively to environmental variability [18].

7.4 RL USING CROP GROWTH SIMULATORS

Modern irrigation optimization increasingly considers multiple objectives simultaneously instead of maximizing only soil moisture.

Recent RL reward functions incorporate combinations of:

- Water conservation
- Crop yield
- Profit maximization
- Energy consumption
- Pump operation cost
- Environmental sustainability
- Carbon footprint

The transition from single-objective optimization toward multi-objective reward engineering reflects the broader goals of sustainable precision agriculture. Systematic reviews indicate that DRL is particularly well suited for balancing these competing objectives because reward functions can naturally encode multiple performance criteria [11].

7.5 INTEGRATION OF RL WITH IoT AND WSNs

Although RL algorithms have demonstrated promising simulation results, relatively few studies integrate RL with complete Cloud–IoT–WSN architectures. Existing implementations typically follow a workflow where:

1. Wireless sensor nodes continuously monitor soil moisture, temperature, humidity, and other environmental variables.
2. Sensor measurements are transmitted through IoT communication networks.
3. Cloud servers preprocess environmental observations.
4. RL agents generate irrigation decisions.
5. Commands are transmitted back to irrigation actuators.

This closed-loop architecture enables adaptive irrigation scheduling based on real-time environmental information.

However, recent systematic reviews emphasize that only a limited number of published studies currently implement complete IoT-RL integration, with most existing work relying on simulation environments or offline datasets rather than continuous real-world deployment [12].

Table III. Representative Reinforcement Learning-Based Smart Irrigation Studies

Study	RL Algorithm	Environment	State Variables	Key Contribution	Reported Limitation
Chen *et al.*	DQN	Simulated irrigation	Soil moisture + weather forecast	Weather-aware irrigation scheduling	Simulation-based validation only [19]
Saikai *et al.*	Deep RL	APSIM-Wheat	Crop stage, soil water profile, rainfall, irrigation	Daily adaptive irrigation improved farm profit	Limited to simulated wheat production [20]
gym-DSSAT comparative study	PPO, DQN	gym-DSSAT	Standard crop-management states	PPO outperformed DQN in irrigation tasks	Simulator-based evaluation [18]
IEEE Smart Farm Framework	DQN	IoT-enabled smart farm	Soil moisture, weather, crop limits	~30% reduction in water consumption	Limited experimental deployment [14]
Smart Irrigation 4.0	DQN	Smart irrigation simulation	Soil moisture	Maintained optimal moisture through adaptive learning	Preliminary implementation [15]

Table IV. Comparative Analysis of Existing Smart Irrigation Approaches

Approach	Typical Technologies	Decision Strategy	Advantages	Major Limitations
Conventional Irrigation	Manual operation	Farmer experience	Simple implementation	Low water-use efficiency, labor intensive
Sensor-Based Irrigation	Soil moisture sensors, timers	Fixed threshold	Low cost, automatic monitoring	Reactive control, limited adaptability
WSN-Based	Distributed sensor	Rule-based	Real-time	Battery constraints,

Approach	Typical Technologies	Decision Strategy	Advantages	Major Limitations
Irrigation	nodes, ZigBee, LoRaWAN		environmental monitoring	network reliability
IoT-Based Irrigation	IoT devices, mobile applications	Threshold/rule-based	Remote monitoring and control	Limited intelligent decision-making
Cloud-Based Irrigation	Cloud databases, dashboards	Data analytics	Scalable storage, remote accessibility	Latency, Internet dependency
Machine Learning-Based Irrigation	SVM, RF, ANN, XGBoost	Predictive models	Accurate forecasting, nonlinear modeling	Requires labeled datasets, not adaptive
Deep Learning-Based Irrigation	CNN, LSTM	Deep prediction	Superior feature extraction, time-series modeling	High computational requirements, prediction-oriented
Q-Learning-Based Irrigation	Tabular RL	Sequential learning	Adaptive irrigation scheduling	Poor scalability, discrete state space
DQN-Based Irrigation	Deep Reinforcement Learning	Value-based optimization	Handles high-dimensional observations	Training instability, hyperparameter sensitivity
PPO-Based Irrigation	Policy Gradient RL	Policy optimization	Stable convergence, robust learning	Higher computational complexity
Proposed Framework	WSN + IoT + Cloud + RL (Q-Learning, DQN, PPO)	Adaptive autonomous decision-making	Real-time sensing, cloud analytics, comparative RL evaluation	Computationally intensive; requires reliable communication infrastructure

8. DISCUSSION

A comparative assessment of existing smart irrigation systems reveals a clear technological progression from conventional automation toward intelligent autonomous control. Early WSN and IoT-based systems primarily emphasized data acquisition, enabling continuous environmental monitoring through distributed sensing networks. Cloud computing subsequently addressed issues related to data storage, remote accessibility, and large-scale analytics. The introduction of Machine Learning and Deep Learning improved predictive capabilities by accurately estimating soil moisture, crop water demand, and weather conditions. However, these methods generally remain dependent on predefined irrigation rules and therefore lack the capability to optimize sequential irrigation decisions in dynamic environments.

Reinforcement Learning represents a significant advancement because it enables irrigation policies to be learned directly through interaction with the environment. Nevertheless, the existing literature indicates that most RL studies remain simulation-oriented and frequently evaluate a single algorithm using application-specific reward functions and environmental assumptions. Comprehensive comparative analyses involving multiple RL algorithms under identical experimental conditions remain relatively scarce. Furthermore, the integration of RL with complete Cloud–IoT–WSN ecosystems, incorporating realistic sensor networks, cloud-based analytics, seasonal environmental dynamics, and statistical performance validation, has received comparatively limited attention.

Another notable observation is the lack of standardized evaluation methodologies across existing studies. Performance metrics vary considerably, including cumulative reward, water savings, irrigation frequency, crop yield, and economic return, making direct comparison difficult. Similarly, state representations differ substantially, with some studies considering only soil moisture while others incorporate weather forecasts, crop growth stages, or multi-layer soil profiles. These inconsistencies hinder reproducibility and limit the generalizability of reported findings.

9. FUTURE RESEARCH TRENDS

Recent literature indicates several emerging directions in AI-enabled smart irrigation:

- Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) for transparent irrigation decisions.
- Federated Learning to enable collaborative model training while preserving data privacy.
- Edge AI for low-latency, on-device decision-making in remote agricultural environments.
- Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (MARL) for coordinated irrigation across multiple fields or irrigation zones.
- Digital Twins for virtual simulation and optimization of agricultural systems.
- Integration of UAVs, satellite imagery, and AI for comprehensive crop monitoring.
- Hybrid AI models that combine machine learning, deep learning, optimization techniques, and reinforcement learning to improve decision accuracy and robustness.

These developments aim to address the limitations of existing AI systems and support scalable, adaptive, and sustainable agricultural management.

10. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that substantial progress has been achieved in sensing technologies, wireless communication, cloud computing, and AI-driven irrigation management. However, existing systems often address these technologies in isolation rather than as components of an integrated intelligent irrigation ecosystem. Conventional IoT and WSN platforms excel at environmental monitoring but generally rely on static decision rules. Machine Learning and Deep Learning improve predictive accuracy but do not inherently optimize long-term irrigation decisions. Reinforcement Learning offers adaptive decision-making capabilities but is still predominantly evaluated in simulated environments with limited integration into end-to-end Cloud–IoT–WSN architectures.

These observations reveal several unresolved challenges, including the need for unified architectures, standardized evaluation frameworks, realistic environmental simulations, comprehensive benchmarking of multiple RL algorithms, and robust integration of sensing, communication, cloud computing, and autonomous control.

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