

# Survival, growth and carbon content in a forest plantation established after a clear-cutting in Durango, Mexico

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## Abstract

**Background.** Forest plantations play an important role in carbon sequestration, helping to mitigate climate change. In this study, survival, biomass, growth rings and annual carbon content storage were evaluated in a mixed *Pinus durangensis* and *P. cooperi* plantation that was established after a clear-cutting. The plantation is eight years old and covers an area of 21.40 ha.

**Methods.** Sixteen sites of 100 m<sup>2</sup> were distributed randomly. At each site, two trees distributed proportionally to the diametric categories were destructively sampled (one per tree species). Two cross-sections were cut from each tree: The first at the base of the stump and the second at 1.30 m. The width of tree rings of the first cross-section was measured using a stereoscopic microscope with precision in microns (μm). The year-by-year basal diameter of each tree was recorded and biomass and carbon content was estimated using allometric equations.

**Results.** The estimated survival was 75.2%. The results of the ANOVA showed significant differences between the year-by-year width records of tree rings, the highest value corresponding to the fifth year. The average carbon sequestration per year is 0.30 kg for both studied tree species.

**Conclusions.** *P. durangensis* and *P. cooperi* plantations adapt and develop well in Durango forests when they are established in areas that are subjected to clear-cutting.

**Key words:** Growth rings, biomass, basal diameter.

## Introduction

41 In addition to the multiple benefits that forest ecosystems provide to society, forests can capture  
 42 significant amounts of greenhouse gases (GHG), particularly carbon dioxide (*Benjamín &*  
 43 *Masera, 2001; Aguirre-Calderón & Jiménez-Pérez, 2011; Martínez et al., 2016; González-*  
 44 *Cásares et al., 2019*). However, the vegetation cover is not always adequate due to inappropriate  
 45 forest management, and so the establishment of trees is necessary. Whatever the purpose of this  
 46 action, reforestation (forest plantations) is an excellent alternative to mitigate high atmospheric  
 47 concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> and, at the same time, reducing global warming (*van Minnen et al., 2008;*  
 48 *López-Reyes et al., 2016; Patiño et al., 2018; Ramírez-López & Chagna-Avila, 2019*). Proper soil  
 49 management also contributes significantly to the expansion of the carbon sink in the terrestrial  
 50 biosphere (*Zambrano, Franquis & Infante, 2004; Caviglia, Wingeyer & Novelli, 2016; Halifa-*  
 51 *Marín et al., 2019*).

52 The Mexican forests have been considered as diverse in terms of tree species (*Medrano et al.,*  
 53 *2017*) and have great potential as a carbon sink, and therefore are considered essential to assess  
 54 carbon content in programs designed to mitigate global warming (*Pompa-García & Sigala-*  
 55 *Rodríguez, 2017; Domínguez-Calleros et al., 2017*). Forest plantations stand out as the most  
 56 efficient way to consolidate carbon capture capacity, because they are easy to set up and operate  
 57 (*Reyes, León & Herrero, 2019*).

58 Frequently 50% carbon concentration of total biomass has been assumed, however, this  
 59 methodology leads to inaccurate results, so recent research indicates that there are variations  
 60 between tree species, trees and tissues (*Pompa-García & Yereña-Yamalliel, 2014; Wang et al.,*  
 61 *2015; Hernández-Vera et al., 2017*).

62 *Pinus durangensis* and *P. cooperi* are species frequently used in forest reforestations in the  
 63 Mexican state of Durango (*Prieto et al., 2016*). However, the main success of forest plantations is  
 64 the use of quality plants with high survival capacity (*Grossnickle, 2012; Pérez-Luna et al., 2019,*  
 65 *2020*). The use of quality plants favors success in plantations under climate change conditions  
 66 (*Vallejo et al., 2012*). In Mexico 57% of mortality is caused by the poor quality of the plant  
 67 (*Prieto et al., 2016*), also another important factor are the deficiencies that occur during the  
 68 planting process (*Burney et al., 2015*).

69 For the proper management of forests in Mexico, including areas planted with the main  
 70 commercial tree species, different silvicultural systems are employed in order to ensure the  
 71 regeneration of the site. The Mexican Irregular Forest Management Method (MMOBI) and the  
 72 Silvicultural Development Method (MDS) (*Solís et al., 2006; Pérez-Verdín et al., 2009; Pérez-*  
 73 *Rodríguez et al., 2013*). The former is used in forest stands with a high tree species richness, and  
 74 the latter in stands dominated by one or two tree species of pine (*Hernández-Díaz et al., 2008*).

75 Moreover, in areas covered with little or no slope, the use of a clear-cutting as a regeneration  
 76 method can be also used. It is characterized by having periodic crops, determined by commercial  
 77 rotations (*Gadow, Sánchez & Aguirre, 2004*), and their regeneration can be natural or artificial. If  
 78 the regeneration is artificial, then the use of fast-growing species is preferable.

79 Although clear-cutting can be used successfully in Mexican forests, this silvicultural method is  
 80 still considered inappropriate, considering that complete tree removal of an area is the main cause  
 81 of degradation, at least at the beginning of the forestry process (*Keenan & Kimmins, 1993;*  
 82 *Hernández, Jaeger & Samperio, 2017; Monárrez-González et al., 2018*). However, its use has  
 83 economic advantages. On the one hand, an intermediate economic income is possible, through  
 84 silvicultural interventions (thinnings); on the other, the reduction of competition improves the  
 85 dimensions of the trees that remain standing and the CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration increases (*Rodríguez-*  
 86 *Larramendi et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Ortiz et al., 2019*). As a hypothesis of this study, we consider  
 87 that plantations of *Pinus cooperi* and *P. durangensis* established after clear-cuttings, show high

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**Commented [KM2]:** It would be helpful to explain this further, and to incorporate it smoothly into either the preceding paragraph or the following paragraph...

**Commented [KM3]:** It would be useful to explain these ideas further... are you making statements about plantations generally, or plantations in Mexico, or plantations in Durango, or only *Pinus* plantations in Mexico or Durango? In what ways is plant quality often low, in practice? Are the plants too small or young? Or diseased due to poor nursery management? Or...? Similarly, what kind of common mistakes are made during planting?

Then, in the Materials and Methods section, be sure you describe the plant propagation, plant selection, and planting process in such a way that the reader can see how this plantation was established compared to common mistakes or problems with establishing a plantation.

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**Commented [KM5]:** It would be helpful to explain this 'degradation' further, and other potential problems or issues with clear-cutting.

levels of survival and growth, and contribute efficiently to carbon sequestration. Thus, the objectives of this work were to evaluate survival, the width of tree rings and carbon content in a plantation of *Pinus durangensis* and *P. cooperi* at a site exposed to clear-cutting in the State of Durango, Mexico.

## Materials & Methods

### Study area

This study was conducted in the private property “Las Veredas”, municipality of San Dimas, Durango, Mexico, belonging to the Compañía Silvícola Chapultepec, S. DE R. L. DE C. V., in the coordinates of the site are: 24° 20' 40" N and 105° 51' 20" W (Fig. 1). The climate is temperate with a brief rainy season during the summer months ( $C_w$ ), and the temperature ranges between -3 and 18 °C (García, 2004). The topography is characterized by hills, with slopes ranging from soft to medium (0 to 50%). The area occupied by the clear-cutting has a slope of 9% and an altitude of 2803 m asl. The average annual rainfall recorded during the period 2010 to 2018 was 1,034.5 mm (this value was recorded by the weather station in the town of Vencedores, located 15 km away from the study area). Rainfall occurs in the months of June, July, August and September; The first frost occurs in October and the last frost occurs in June; snowfall occurs most frequently in the months of December and January (FSC & SmartWood, 2002).

The vegetation is characterized by mixed coniferous and broadleaved forests. The dominant pine species are: *Pinus durangensis* Martínez, *P. cooperi* Blanco, *P. teocote* Schl. and *P. strobiformis* Engelm. The main oak species are: *Quercus rugosa* Née and *Q. sideroxyla* Bonpl, in addition some species of the genera *Juniperus*, *Arbutus*, and *Alnus* are also part of the forest composition (González-Elizondo et al., 2012).

### Figure 1

### Forestry background

Before the clear-cutting, the stand had a stocking of 220.4 m<sup>3</sup> ha<sup>-1</sup> of trees of the following genera: *Pinus*, *Quercus*, *Juniperus* and *Arbutus* (PMF, 2010). The trees were harvested at the beginning of 2010 on an area of 21.40 ha. Months later, during the rainy season, the plantation was established with seedlings of *P. durangensis* and *P. cooperi* (it was not possible to know the proportion, but *P. durangensis* was planted in greater quantity). The plantation was produced with germplasm collected from trees growing in natural stands next to the study area. Land preparation consisted of clearing, scattering and applying the controlled burning of forest waste. To improve soil conditions, the ground was plowed using a D-6 track-type tractor, equipped with a ripper, breaking equidistant lines (2 m) at a depth of 60 cm, in the perpendicular direction to the slope. The seedlings were 12 months old with a height of between 15 and 20 cm and a diameter at the base of the stem of 5 mm. They were planted using the common strain method in a “real frame” at a spacing of 2 × 2 m to generate a density of 2,500 seedlings ha<sup>-1</sup>.

### Field Evaluation

Sixteen (16) circular sites of 100 m<sup>2</sup> were established, distributed completely randomly to evaluate survival according to the recommendations of CONAFOR (2013). In addition to survival, variables such as diameter (cm) and height (m), were measured using a Vernier and hypsometer (Vertex V®), respectively. The sample implied the demolition of 32 trees, distributed proportionally to the diametric categories (16 of each tree species). Two cross-sections were

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133 obtained from each tree (over-bark and under-bark): one was cut at the base of the tree and the  
134 second one at 1.3 m above ground.  
135 The cross-sections were labeled, dried and polished, and the measurement of each growth ring  
136 was subsequently performed using a stereomicroscope with precision in  $\mu\text{m}$ . This process was  
137 carried out in the dendroecology laboratory at the Facultad de Ciencias Forestales of the  
138 Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango. The year-by-year width of each tree ring was  
139 estimated by the average of four-way measurements. The measurements were performed by  
140 starting from the year 2017, looking back to previous years.  
141

142 **Estimation of biomass and carbon content.**

143 In order to obtain the total aerial biomass, the equation developed by *Návar et al. (2004)* was  
144 used for the species in question, which takes the basal diameter as a predictive variable (Equation  
145 1).

$$y_i = a(DB)^b \quad [1]$$

146 *Where*

147  $y_i$  = Total aerial biomass

148  $a = 0.0199$  y  $b = 2.5488$

149  $DB$  = Basal tree diameter (cm)  
150

151 The carbon content for *Pinus cooperi* was calculated according to the percentage reported by  
152 *Pompa-García et al. (2017)*, who indicate that, the carbon concentration for this species is  
153 49.64% of the total aerial biomass. For *Pinus durangensis* the carbon concentration reported for  
154 *Hernández-Vera et al. (2017)* was used (50.36% of the total aerial biomass).  
155 Considering that the terrain is relatively flat and homogeneous, an analysis of variance (ANOVA)  
156 was performed under a completely randomized experimental design for the statistical analysis of  
157 the data. The classification variables were the two studied tree species and the tree age. The  
158 response variables were the year-by-year width of the tree ring, the biomass and the carbon  
159 content. The Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test was used to evaluate data normality and equality of  
160 variances for all response variables. Significant differences ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) for the year-by-year width  
161 of the tree rings were evaluated with the Tukey Means Comparison Test, while the Kruskal-  
162 Wallis Non-Parametric Test was used to evaluate significant differences among the median  
163 values of biomass and carbon content because these two variables did not meet the normality data  
164 assumption. These analyzes were performed using R<sup>®</sup> statistical software (*R Core Team, 2019*).  
165

166 **Results**

167 Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the sampled trees. Similarity is observed in the  
168 parameters evaluated (diameter at the base and total height), which means that, at the age of eight  
169 years, the studied tree species show similar growth patterns.  
170

171 **Table 1.**  
172

173 Eight years after the establishment of the plantation, an average survival of 75.2% was observed  
174 for the two species, which corresponds to a density of 1,881 trees per ha (Table 2). From studied  
175 sites stand out 10 and 2 which showed the highest and lowest survival rates, respectively. No  
176 survival comparisons were made, because it was not possible to know the proportion in which  
177 both species were planted, however, *Pinus durangensis* was found to be planted in a greater

178 quantity (almost double according to the observed average of the number of trees of the sampling  
179 sites), and assuming that survival had been the same for the two studied trees species, an initial  
180 density of 2,500 trees ha<sup>-1</sup> was planted (25 trees in 1000 m<sup>2</sup>).

181  
182 **Table 2.**

183  
184 The analysis of variance indicated that there are highly significant statistical differences ( $p$   
185  $<0.001$ ) in the year-by-year width of the tree rings of the studied tree species. The Tukey test  
186 (Fig. 2), forms 6 groups for both tree species, among these, the values of the first and fifth year  
187 stand out, which were, respectively, the minor and major width rings. Starting from fifth year, the  
188 width of the tree rings shows a decline, and allows their values to be grouped with the values of  
189 the third and fourth years. Although the width of the tree rings was slightly larger in *P. cooperi*,  
190 no significant statistical differences ( $p = 0.9336$ ) were found among the two studied tree species.  
191 The upper and lower horizontal lines crossing the vertical bars (standard deviation) indicate that  
192 the year-by-year width growth of the tree rings has been similar among the tree species until the  
193 period of time evaluated in this study.

194  
195 **Figure 2.**

196  
197 The Kruskal-Wallis Test indicated that there are significant differences in the estimates of year-  
198 by-year biomass and carbon content ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). The comparison of medians using the Bonferroni  
199 method does not show significant differences in those years whose observations were  
200 consecutive. In contrast, comparisons between discontinuous years showed significant  
201 differences ( $p < 0.01$ ) (Table 3).

202  
203 **Table 3.**

204  
205 Estimates of year-by-year biomass and carbon content among tree species did not show  
206 significant statistical differences ( $p \geq 0.05$ ).  
207 The accumulation of biomass showed higher values after the fifth year in the studied species,  
208 which is a product of the increase in the dimensions of the BD of the trees (Fig. 3).

209  
210 **Figure 3.**

211  
212 Estimates of biomass and carbon content year-by-year of the studied species are shown in Table  
213 4. It is observed that the accumulation of biomass and carbon content increases with increasing  
214 age. However, *Pinus cooperi* shows a decrease in the seventh year with respect to the previous  
215 year. Considering that a tree has in average an estimate of 4.42 and 2.21 kg of biomass and  
216 carbon content, respectively, at the age of 7 years, the studied plantation accounts for 8,315.12  
217 and 4,157.56 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> of aerial biomass and carbon, respectively.

218  
219 **Table 4.**

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221 **Discussion**

222 The results of survival reported in this work (75.2%) are superior than the findings reported by  
223 Prieto et al. (2016), who found out an average of 43% in a forest plantation studied in Durango

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224 State. These survival results are also superior to those showed by *Bojórquez, Rodríguez & Flores*  
 225 (2015) in 25-year-old plantations of *P. durangensis*, *P. engelmannii*, *P. cooperi* and *P. arizonica*  
 226 var. in Durango State. Although different species were dealt with in a similar study, our results  
 227 are also better than those reported by *Vásquez-García et al. (2016)*, who informed an average  
 228 survival of 69% in four-year old plantations of *P. greggii* Englem and *P. oaxacana* Mirov - in  
 229 three communities in the High Oaxacan Mixtec region in Southern Mexico. However, our  
 230 survival results were inferior than those reported by *Prieto-Ruiz et al. (2007)* in an 18-month  
 231 *Pinus cooperi* plantation established on a site in the municipality of Durango, reaching a survival  
 232 rate of 85.6%. They are also inferior than those informed by *Prieto-Ruiz et al. (2018)*, who  
 233 reported a 93% of survival in a *Pinus cooperi* plantation after 13 months of its establishment at a  
 234 site in Agua Zarca, Otinapa, Durango.  
 235 *Prieto et al. (2018)*, argue that successful plantations and reforestations depend on the quality of  
 236 the plant, as it is decisive for its adaptation and development after planting (*Fontana, Pérez &*  
 237 *Luna, 2018*). In our study, it is observed that both species show uniform growth from their  
 238 establishment to the fifth year of planting. However, from the sixth year onwards, plant growth  
 239 tends to decline, remaining low until the end of the study, being more noticeable in *P. cooperi*.  
 240 *Crecente-Campo et al. (2007)* documented that the decrease in plant growth is influenced among  
 241 other factor by the competition that trees experience from other trees, and that competition  
 242 increases with increasing age of the plantation (*Soto-Cervantes et al., 2016*).  
 243 Although this work does not include an analysis that correlates ecological factors with tree  
 244 growth, studies performed by *Anchukaitis et al. (2013)*, *Gutiérrez-García & Ricker (2019)*,  
 245 documented that maximum temperature negatively influences radial growth of the trees.  
 246 However, the growth, and consequently, the CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration may vary with environmental  
 247 conditions of the site and the tree species evaluated (*Haghshenas et al., 2016; Pompa-García &*  
 248 *Sigala-Rodríguez, 2017; Lanza, Chartier & Marcora, 2018*). These growth patterns can be  
 249 attributed to the fact that, at the beginning of the plantation, the genotype-environment interaction  
 250 and the plasticity of the species influence the adaptability of the plants to a specific sites  
 251 (*Miranda, 2006; Thomas et al., 2015*).  
 252 The width of the tree rings is the most used parameter to evaluate the growth rate of the trees  
 253 (*Dobner, Huss & Tomazello, 2018*). In this study, the lowest width ring growth value was  
 254 presented during the first year, this can be attributed to plant adaptation to environmental stresses  
 255 (e.g., drought, salinity, and temperature extremes) (*Pérez-Luna et al., 2020*). On the other hand,  
 256 the tree development during the fifth year was higher and after that it showed some reduction in  
 257 growth caused by tree competition (*Crecente-Campo et al., 2007*). The average width growth of  
 258 the rings observed for both tree species was 11.51 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>. *Pompa-García et al. (2018)*,  
 259 evaluated the width growth rings in *P. arizonica* y *P. cembroides* Zucc in northern Mexico and  
 260 found that their average increase was 1.84 mm yr<sup>-1</sup> and 1.73 mm yr<sup>-1</sup>, respectively.  
 261 A study in *Pinus taeda* L. developed by *Dobner, Huss & Tomazello (2018)*, found out that the  
 262 width growth of tree rings varied between 6 to 9 mm during the first three to six years before  
 263 performing silvicultural activities. On the other hand, *Melandri, Dezzio & Espinoza de Pernía*  
 264 (2007) in a study with *Pinus caribaea* var. *hondurensis* in Venezuela indicated that the width  
 265 growth of tree rings is dependent on various site factors, as well as atmospheric, in this case they  
 266 pointed out that different rainfall regimes yielded significantly differences in with growth rings.  
 267 Several studies related the radial growth rate and the characteristics of the rings with  
 268 environmental variables such as temperature, precipitation and light intensity (*García-Suárez,*  
 269 *Butler & Baillie, 2009; Chacón-de la Cruz & Pompa-García, 2015*). However, due to the

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dynamics of the exchange activity during the formation of the wood, the relationship of growth with climatic conditions is very complex and inconstant (Żywiec *et al.*, 2017). Studies indicate that tree spacing influences total tree volume, width growth of rings, and length and diameter of branches (Hart, 2010). Also, with increasing thinning intensity the effect on the thickness of the width of tree rings is greater (Zhang *et al.*, 2006). Baldwin *et al.* (2000), studied the effects of spacing and thinning on stand and tree characteristics of a 38-year-old *Pinus taeda* L plantation and found out that, at higher initial spacing, trees develop greater diameter and crown length. This favors the formation of wider tree rings and more early wood (Rossi, Morin & Deslauriers, 2012). Rodríguez-Ortiz (2010), recommended an initial spacing of 2.40 to 2.75 m for *Pinus patula* Schl, because it is a tree species sensitive to competition during its first years of development. In this study, estimates of year-by-year biomass and carbon content were analyzed for individual trees, however, estimates per hectare were not performed because survival in previous years was unknown and results extrapolation based on survival at the time of assessment could be considered erroneous. In this study the average carbon content per tree was estimated in 0.30 kg yr<sup>-1</sup> for both studied tree species. Pompa-García *et al.* (2018) estimated that adult trees of *Pinus arizonica* and *P. cembroides* accumulate 4.80 kg C yr<sup>-1</sup> and 4.84 kg C yr<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. Pacheco *et al.* (2007) evaluated the accumulated biomass content in a six-year-old *Pinus greggii* plantation, and found out that the average aerial dry biomass was 8.0 kg per tree. These results are above those observed in this study with an average per tree of 4.39 kg for *Pinus durangensis* and 4.46 kg for *P. cooperi*. Intensive forestry is key to maintaining or increasing stand productivity in the future, wood biomass from plantations of fast-growing trees is an alternative because it is produced in short periods of time (Thiers, Gerdinga & Schlatter, 2007). However, intensive forest management may impact the conservation of plant diversity and the regulation of water flows (Monárrez-González *et al.*, 2018). The results of this research suggest that clear-cuttings are suitable logging practices for the studied tree species in the study area, especially because they create optimal growing conditions for pine trees. However, after opening the gaps it is recommended to replant the area with certain additional complementary practices to protect and guarantee its good development (e.g. fencing, firebreaks, pest prevention, etc.), and avoid risk of soil erosion and loss of biodiversity. The estimates of carbon content made in this study coincide with the results reported by Pacheco *et al.* (2007), in the sense that young plantations have high growth rates and therefore they also have a greater potential for carbon sequestration.

## Conclusions

According to the results of the present study, the observed survival percentage (75.2 %) is considered high in comparison with other similar studies. It indicates that both *Pinus durangensis* and *P. cooperi* adapt and develop well in areas harvested with clear-cutting in the forests of Durango. The width growth of the tree rings was similar in the two species but different among the years evaluated. No significant differences were found in terms of biomass and carbon content among the studied tree species. The accumulation of biomass and carbon content observed in the studied forest plantation is considered to be high, accounting for 8,315.12 and 4,157.56 kg ha<sup>-1</sup>, respectively, at the age of 7 years. The study reveals that clear-cuttings can be successfully used as logging practices in the study area to create even aged pine stands and increase the productivity of these forests in terms of timber and CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration, among other ecosystems services.



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