Field-scale Soil Moisture Retrieval from Drone-based L-band Radiometry with Optical and Thermal Infrared Priors

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Abstract. Accurate field-scale near-surface soil moisture is essential for infiltration, runoff generation, land-atmosphere exchange, and agricultural water management. Drone-based low-frequency (L-band) radiometry offers a promising intermediate scale between in situ measurements and satellite observations, but retrieval remains ill-posed because brightness temperature depends jointly on soil dielectric properties, vegetation attenuation, surface temperature, and sub-footprint heterogeneity. This study develops an uncertainty-aware Bayesian retrieval framework that integrates unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) dual-polarized L-band brightness temperature with red-green-blue (RGB) and thermal infrared (TIR) information through footprint-consistent priors. Optical fraction vegetation cover, thermal state, and texture descriptors are used to constrain vegetation optical depth (τ) and its uncertainty at the scale of the radiometric footprint. The method was evaluated over heterogeneous cropland in Pengzhou, China, using independent calibration (4 scenes, about 1.3 ha) and validation datasets (13 scenes, about 12.6 ha). The proposed approach reduced root mean square error (RMSE) from about 0.057 to about 0.024 $m^3\ m^{-3}$ and largely eliminated the systematic dry bias of the conventional tau-omega inversion. The uncertainty diagnostics suggest that, in this experiment, sub-footprint heterogeneity was expressed more strongly through tau-related uncertainty and residual representation error than through posterior soil-moisture variance alone. Overall, the results show that physically informed multi-source priors can improve both accuracy metrics and interpretability for field-scale hydrological soil-moisture observation.

1. Introduction

Soil moisture regulates energy partitioning, infiltration and runoff processes, and plant water use, making it a key state variable in hydrology and land-atmosphere interactions (Su et al., 2014; Li et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Satellite passive microwave missions such as SMOS and SMAP have established L-band radiometry as a physically meaningful approach for large-scale soil moisture monitoring due to its sensitivity to near-surface dielectric properties and reduced influence from vegetation (Kerr et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2022; Jääskeläinen et al., 2025).

Unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)-borne L-band radiometry offers a useful middle scale between plot measurements and satellites. Compared with satellite sensors, drone platforms provide much finer spatial resolution, more flexible acquisition timing, and better control over repeat surveys. The PoLRa platform is one example of a portable L-band system designed for field deployment and UAV integration (Houtz et al., 2020). Recent studies have shown that portable or UAV-compatible L-band radiometers can retrieve meaningful soil moisture under both bare and vegetated conditions, and can be used to test retrieval concepts before transfer to coarser airborne or spaceborne applications (Zhang et al., 2024; Lv et al., 2024; Krishnan et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024).

However, high spatial resolution does not remove the core inversion difficulty of passive microwave retrieval. L-band brightness temperature still integrates multiple physical controls, including soil dielectric properties, vegetation attenuation, single-scattering albedo, soil surface temperature, and local roughness. In practice, the τ–ω forward model is often calibrated with simplified assumptions, and different combinations of soil moisture and vegetation optical depth can explain similar brightness temperatures. This leads to compensation effects, biased solutions, and uncertainty that is difficult to quantify when the inversion is performed with weak or static priors (Wigneron et al., 2007; Ebtehaj et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023; Gibon et al., 2024). Related studies on error propagation in joint microwave retrievals have shown that uncertainty in vegetation terms can directly amplify soil moisture uncertainty, particularly under mixed cover conditions (Feldman et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2025). For field-scale UAV applications, where crop type can change within a short distance, these issues become even more pronounced.

Optical and thermal remote sensing provide a natural complement to L-band radiometry because they describe canopy cover, surface temperature state, and fine-scale spatial organization at a much higher resolution than the microwave footprint. RGB (Red-Green-Blue) and TIR (thermal infrared) data cannot replace L-band observations, but they can constrain the physically plausible range of vegetation attenuation and indicate whether the microwave footprint is homogeneous or internally mixed. This idea is consistent with broader optical-thermal soil moisture research. Surface temperature and energy-balance approaches can inform root-zone or shallow soil wetness patterns (Alburn et al., 2015; Sahaar et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2022), while drone-based RGB-TIR studies show that thermal and visible cues can improve field-scale soil moisture estimation under crop canopies when local structure is considered explicitly (Li et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2024; Vahidi et al., 2025). Reviews of UAV thermal remote sensing in agriculture also emphasize that thermal imagery becomes more informative when linked to canopy structure and field context rather than interpreted as a standalone moisture proxy (Messina et al., 2020).

Another unsolved issue is the mismatch between the coarse effective support of L-band radiometry and the much finer support of RGB and thermal products. Even at low UAV altitudes, the radiometric footprint remains several meters wide, so the observed brightness temperature represents an area-integrated signal rather than a point measurement (Gruber et al., 2020). When the footprint contains mixed crops, exposed soil, or strong small-scale thermal contrasts, the inversion becomes a nonlinear averaging problem, for which retrieval from averaged brightness temperature is not equivalent to averaging pointwise retrievals. Previous studies have shown that such sub-pixel heterogeneity can distort passive microwave soil moisture retrievals, with errors depending on vegetation and land-cover contrasts within the support area (Burke et al., 2003; Lakhankar et al., 2009; Barrée et al., 2021). In addition, the effective sensing depth of L-band radiometry is itself moisture-dependent, further complicating the relationship between surface measurements and footprint-scale observations (Escorihuela et al., 2010; Shen et al., 2021).

Recent studies have increasingly addressed scale mismatch in soil moisture retrieval by combining microwave observations with high-resolution optical, thermal, or spatial-context information. Operational τ–ω satellite algorithms are physically interpretable but remain limited by coarse footprints and simplified vegetation assumptions, whereas empirical or machine-learning fusion methods can exploit fine-scale auxiliary data but often depend on site-specific training and scale-consistent calibration (Peng et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2024; Vahidi et al., 2025). However, existing approaches still rarely incorporate high-resolution RGB-TIR information into a UAV L-band retrieval in a way that is explicitly matched to the microwave footprint and accompanied by posterior uncertainty quantification.

This study addresses these challenges by developing an uncertainty-aware Bayesian joint retrieval framework that integrates UAV L-band radiometry with RGB and thermal infrared information, explicitly accounting for footprint-scale heterogeneity. The approach has three key advances. First, it introduces physically informed priors, in which RGB-TIR features constrain vegetation optical depth and temperature-related states in a scene-dependent manner. Second, it formulates the retrieval as an uncertainty-aware inversion, enabling joint estimation of soil moisture and posterior uncertainty. Third, it incorporates footprint-consistent texture integration, ensuring that high-resolution optical and thermal information is aggregated in a manner consistent with the radiometric support.

The framework is evaluated over heterogeneous agricultural fields in the Pengzhou irrigation district, Sichuan Province, using independent calibration and validation datasets. This design allows us to assess not only retrieval accuracy, but also how sub-footprint heterogeneity influences retrieval uncertainty and representation error. In this way, the study provides a physically interpretable pathway for improving field-scale soil moisture estimation and its use in hydrological analysis under heterogeneous land-surface conditions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Area and Observation Targets

The study area is located in Pengzhou irrigation district, Sichuan Province, China, on the northwestern margin of the Chengdu Plain (31.0°N, 103.9°E) shown in Figure 2 (a-b). The region has a humid subtropical monsoon climate, characterized by abundant precipitation, frequent rainfall events during the growing season, and relatively high soil moisture variability. The region is an intensively managed agricultural landscape with relatively flat terrain and mixed land use. The campaign focused on cropland parcels containing wheat, garlic, bare soil, rapeseed, lettuce, maize, and rice. According to field notes and local land-use context, the cultivated soils are dominated by paddy-derived and alluvial agricultural soils that are typical of irrigated plains in the basin margin. The target variable of the study was volumetric surface soil moisture. Scene boundaries and field positions were recorded in campaign geospatial files and were used together with orthomosaics and

GPS information for scene registration and validation.

The chosen landscape is suitable for testing the proposed framework because it combines moderate regional uniformity with strong field-scale variability. Adjacent parcels often differ in canopy cover, row structure, irrigation history, and exposed soil fraction. This creates local contrasts in vegetation optical depth, surface temperature, and sub-footprint heterogeneity. From a retrieval perspective, these differences challenge any inversion that assumes one homogeneous land surface inside the radiometric support area. From an application perspective, they reflect the actual conditions faced by precision agriculture and smallholder field management in the Chengdu Plain.

2.2 UAV Remote-Sensing System

Two UAV sensing systems were used. The microwave observations were acquired with a DJI Matrice 600 platform carrying the PoLRa v3.1 drone-mounted portable L-band radiometer. PoLRa operates at approximately 1.4 GHz, records dual-polarized brightness temperatures, and is designed for field deployment where a lightweight, portable radiometric package is needed (Houtz et al., 2020). The use of dual polarization is important because the joint response of horizontal and vertical channels improves sensitivity to soil dielectric conditions while still retaining information on vegetation attenuation and scene thermal state.

High-resolution optical and thermal data were acquired with a DJI Mavic 2 Enterprise Advanced. The visible sensor provided RGB imagery for orthomosaics, vegetation fraction proxies, and luminance-based texture analysis, while the thermal sensor provided surface temperature patterns and thermal texture descriptors.

Brightness temperatures in horizontal and vertical polarization (TBH and TBV) were obtained from the system-level radiometric processing of the PoLRa instrument and then screened for physically implausible values, unstable attitude, and poor spatial matching. Incidence-angle consistency was controlled mainly by the fixed sensor mounting, low-altitude flight design, and attitude screening. The exact radiometric uncertainty of individual TBH/TBV samples was not independently quantified during this campaign; residual radiometric and incidence-angle uncertainty is represented in the retrieval by the microwave likelihood spread and retained as a measurement-noise limitation.

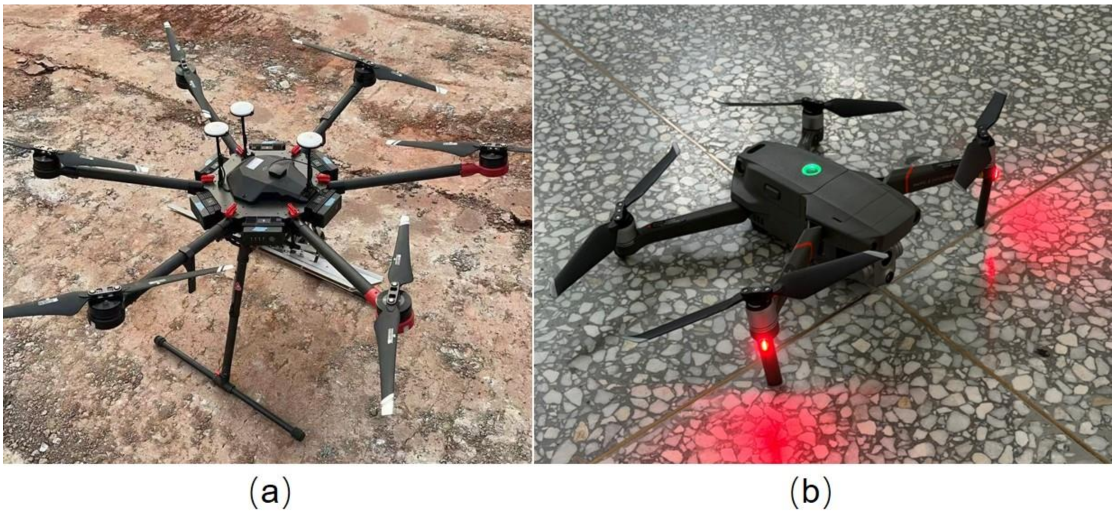

Figure 1. Field deployment of the UAV sensing system, including the (a) DJI Matrice 600 platform carrying the PoLRa v3.1 dual-polarized L-band radiometer and the (b) DJI Mavic 2 Enterprise Advanced used for RGB-TIR survey.

2.3 Flight Experiment Design and Ground Data Collection

The PoLRa flights were conducted at approximately 6 m above ground with a nominal incidence angle of 40°. According to the PoLRa hardware design described by Houtz et al. (2020), this flight geometry corresponds to an effective microwave footprint of about 4 m × 7 m. We therefore used a heading-oriented ellipse with this size for footprint-scale aggregation, while treating it as an approximate effective support rather than a measured antenna-pattern-weighted footprint. The 5 m × 5 m square experiment was therefore used as a sensitivity test for footprint-shape uncertainty. The RGB-TIR flights were conducted at approximately 25 m, with 80% forward overlap and 70% side overlap. The resulting products reached an optical ground resolution of about 8 mm and a thermal resolution of roughly 10 cm after mosaicking. These settings provided sufficient detail to summarize sub-footprint structure while still covering each scene efficiently.

Reference soil moisture was measured using a portable time-domain reflectometry (TDR) probe (HydraGO, Stevens Water Monitoring Systems, USA). At each sampling location, repeated probe readings were averaged to reduce point-scale noise. For validation, TDR observations were matched to the effective microwave support rather than to a single point. Ground measurements falling within the assumed radiometric footprint were averaged to form footprint-scale validation labels. The heading-oriented 4 m × 7 m ellipse was used as the primary footprint, while the 5 m × 5 m square was used in the footprint-shape sensitivity test. This aggregation reduces support mismatch with the L-band observation, although it inevitably smooths some point-scale variability. High-resolution RGB and TIR data remain useful after this validation aggregation because they preserve sub-footprint structure, allowing vegetation fraction, thermal state, and texture descriptors to be summarized over the microwave footprint rather than sampled at a single pixel.

The calibration subset consisted of four scenes collected on 2026-04-03, covering approximately 1.3 ha and 52 calibration points. The independent validation subset was based on repeated experiments conducted over five days (2026-04-04, 2026-04-05, 2026-06-01, 2026-06-02, and 2026-06-03), collectively covering approximately 12.6 ha of agricultural land and 219 matched validation points. Rainfall events of approximately 3 mm and 4 mm occurred in the early hours of 2026-04-05 and 2026-06-02, respectively. All experimental observations were conducted between 11:00 and 16:00 local time. Selected representative measurement transects and ground sampling points are shown in Figure 2.

All remote-sensing products were aligned in a common spatial frame using GPS information and manual co-registration checks. The RGB and thermal images were mosaicked, and the thermal products were converted to temperature layers using the available DJI thermal processing workflow; no independent field emissivity calibration was available. Accordingly, the thermal data were used mainly as relative scene-level temperature and texture information, with thermal calibration and emissivity uncertainty retained as limitations. The microwave flight lines were screened using TBH/TBV plausibility, attitude, and co-registration checks before interpolation to scene grids for visualization and point matching. Because the support area of the L-band radiometer is larger than the RGB-TIR pixel support, optical and thermal variables were summarized inside the assumed microwave footprint rather than sampled at a single pixel. This preprocessing, footprint-consistent aggregation, Bayesian retrieval, validation, baseline comparison, and uncertainty evaluation are summarized in Figure 3.

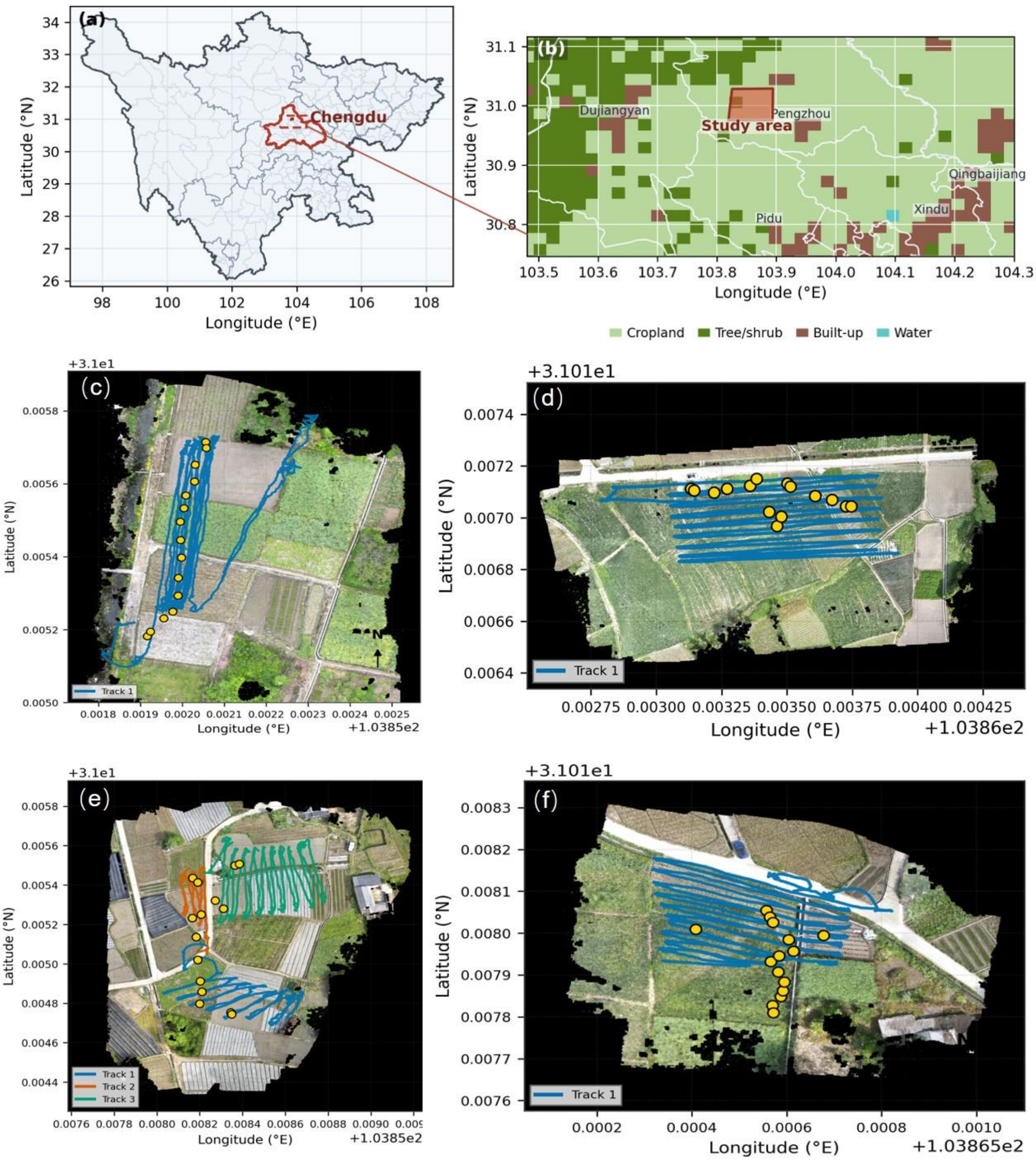

Figure 2. Study location and validation layout in Pengzhou, Chengdu Plain, Sichuan Province, China. Panels (a-b) show the regional and field locations; panels (c-f) show representative partial RGB orthomosaic backgrounds with UAV flight tracks and in situ soil-moisture measurement points. Blue lines denote flight tracks, and yellow circles denote in situ soil-moisture measurement locations.

2.4 Soil Moisture Retrieval Algorithm

The whole framework of the algorithm is shown in Figure 3 (a). The retrieval core is the dual-polarized τ–ω emission model. For polarization p, the brightness temperature can be written as:

$$TB_p = T_g[(1-\omega)(1-\Gamma)\left(1+r_p\Gamma\right)+(1-r_p)\Gamma] \quad (1)$$

where Tg is the effective ground or vegetation-soil composite temperature, ω is the single-scattering albedo, r_p is the soil reflectivity at polarization p, and $\Gamma = \exp(-\tau / \cos\theta)$ is the canopy transmissivity with optical depth τ and incidence angle θ. The reflectivity term is linked to the complex dielectric constant through the Fresnel equations, while the dielectric constant is related to soil moisture with the Dobson mixing model (Dobson et al., 1985). Equation (1) is standard in L-band passive microwave retrieval and forms the physical backbone of both the baseline and the proposed methods (Wigneron et al., 2007).

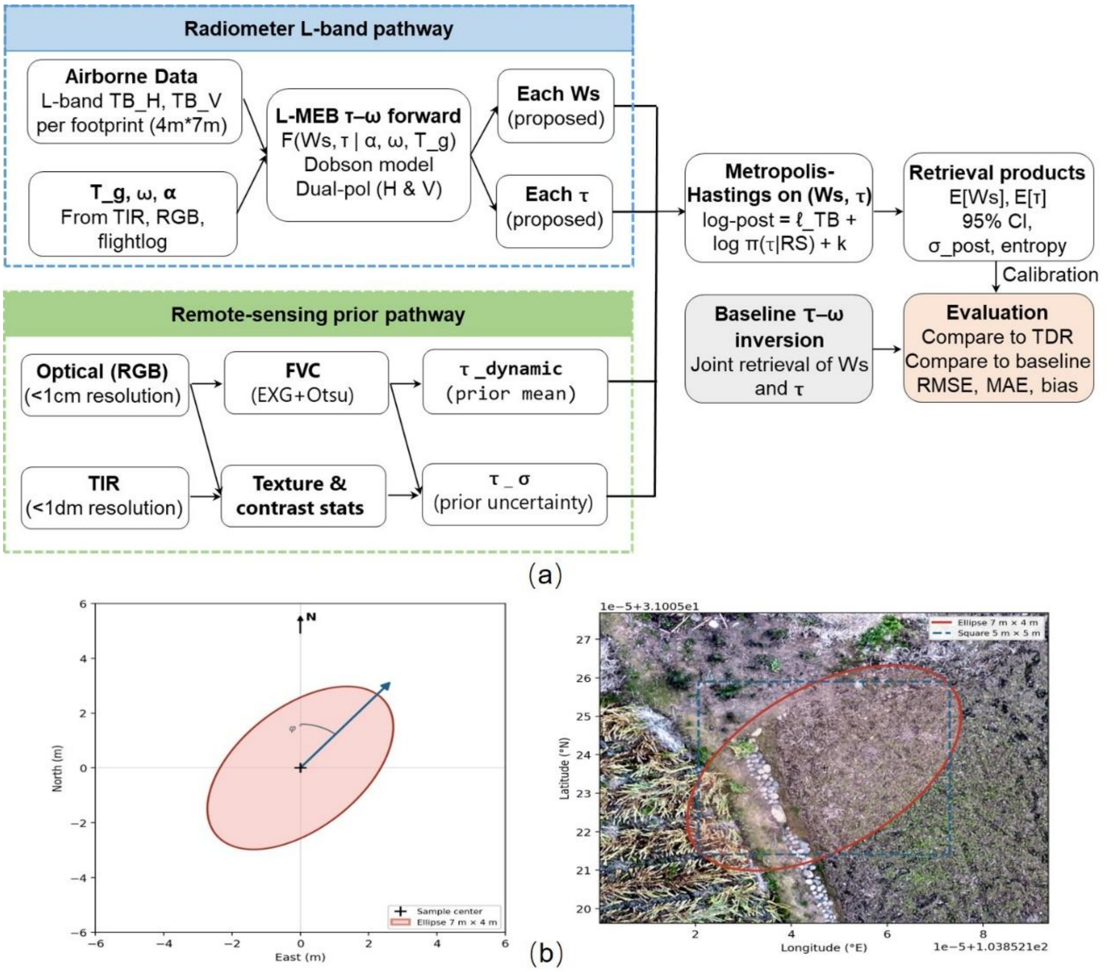

Figure 3. Workflow of the Bayesian joint retrieval. The workflow includes data preprocessing, radiometric brightness-temperature quality control, footprint-consistent RGB-TIR aggregation, Bayesian retrieval with RGB-TIR-informed priors, TDR validation labels, baseline comparison, and uncertainty evaluation. Panel (b) illustrates the physically matched 4 m x 7 m heading-oriented ellipse footprint used to summarize high-resolution optical and thermal information before Bayesian inversion.

The effective temperature Tg was treated as a sample-wise vegetation–soil composite temperature in the forward model. In the implementation, Tg was initialized from the sampled thermal-raster temperature when valid, or from a fallback reference temperature otherwise, and then adjusted using a bounded empirical correction: $Tg = T_{base} + \Delta T$. The correction term was defined as $\Delta T = 1.5(I - 0.5) - 1.0(FVC - 0.5) - 0.5(H - 0.5)$, with an additional safeguard bound of ± 4 K. Here, I is normalized optical intensity, FVC is fraction vegetation cover, and H is the normalized heterogeneity index. This correction was used to represent scene-level differences in effective emitting temperature rather than to provide an independently calibrated thermodynamic temperature. No independent field emissivity calibration was available; therefore, the thermal data were used as relative support for Tg and texture rather than as fully traceable absolute radiometric temperature.

The single-scattering albedo was parameterized as $\omega = \text{clip}(\omega_0 + 0.03H, 0.00, 0.20)$, where ω_0 is the baseline single-scattering albedo and H is the normalized heterogeneity index. The τ prior mean was defined as $\tau = \text{clip}(\tau_0 + 0.18FVC + 0.10H, 0.00, 0.80)$, where τ_0 is the calibration-derived intercept term and H allows footprint heterogeneity to increase the prior attenuation level. These bounds were used to prevent nonphysical solutions and to keep the inversion within the range supported by the calibration scenes and sensitivity tests, rather than to prescribe universal crop-independent constants.

In the baseline inversion, soil moisture Ws and vegetation optical depth τ are solved jointly from the observed TBH and TBV, using fixed or weakly varying ancillary terms and no learned remote prior. This is a practical benchmark because it follows the common strategy of using the microwave observation itself to determine both dielectric and attenuation terms. However, in heterogeneous scenes this joint inversion can become under-constrained. Similar brightness temperatures may be reproduced by a wetter soil with a lower attenuation or by a drier soil with a higher attenuation, especially when independent information on canopy state is limited (Ebtehaj et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2021).

The proposed framework introduces a Bayesian prior pathway driven by RGB and thermal features. First, RGB orthomosaics were converted into vegetation-sensitive descriptors, including excess green and an Otsu-thresholded fraction vegetation cover term (Meyer and Neto, 2008). Second, both RGB and thermal data were summarized into footprint-scale texture descriptors. In practice, the local standard deviation of optical luminance and the local standard deviation of thermal temperature were computed inside moving windows matched to the microwave support area. These variables provide simple and robust proxies for footprint-scale dispersion in optical brightness and surface temperature, which may partly reflect internal heterogeneity caused by mixed vegetation cover, exposed soil, and thermal contrast, but they do not explicitly encode directional texture features such as row orientation or canopy-gap structure. The retrieved feature set can be written as:

$$f = [FVC, T_{opt}, T_{tir}, H] \tag{2}$$

where Topt denotes optical texture, Ttir denotes thermal texture, and H is a heterogeneity-related descriptor assembled from the footprint-scale statistics. Texture descriptors were defined as local dispersion metrics computed over a footprint-matched neighborhood. For each sample location i, a spatial window Wi was extracted to match the effective microwave support, implemented as a heading-oriented ellipse (approximately 7 × 4 m) or, when disabled, a square approximation shown in Figure 3 (b).

Optical texture was computed from the luminance channel derived from RGB imagery (L=0.2989R+0.5870G+0.1140B) (ITU-R, 2012), while thermal texture was computed from the co-registered surface temperature field. These texture descriptors were computed as the standard deviation within the footprint window.

Using the four calibration scenes, the feature vector f was mapped to a prior mean and prior uncertainty for τ:

$$\mu_{\tau,i} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 f_{c,i} \tag{3}$$

$$log\sigma_{\tau,i} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 H_i + \gamma_2 f_{c,i} \tag{4}$$

$$\sigma_{\tau,i} = clip[\exp(log\sigma_{\tau,i}), \sigma_{min}, \sigma_{max}] \tag{5}$$

Here, H is the footprint-scale heterogeneity descriptor. The coefficients β and γ were estimated from the calibration dataset. Calibration targets for τ were obtained by inverting the τ–ω forward model using matched in situ soil moisture observations. Because τ is inferred rather than directly observed, errors in TDR soil moisture, brightness temperature, effective temperature, surface roughness, co-registration, and footprint support may be absorbed into the inverted τ targets through the simplified forward model. These errors can therefore bias or broaden the τ targets used to train the RGB-TIR-informed prior. The prior-uncertainty term partly accounts for this dependency, but it is not a formal error-propagation or variance-decomposition analysis.

In the implementation, these scene-dependent estimates were stored as sample-wise variables and used together with auxiliary fields such as effective temperature, vegetation fraction, and heterogeneity level. Rather than assuming a universal τ prior, the method leverages high-resolution imagery to adapt both the expected attenuation level and its associated uncertainty to each microwave sample. The prior mean is primarily controlled by vegetation fraction, while the prior uncertainty is modeled through a log-linear function of heterogeneity and vegetation conditions. This strategy is consistent with previous findings that retrieval performance improves when passive microwave inversions are constrained by physically informed priors reflecting local vegetation state (Feldman et al., 2021; Barrée et al., 2021).

The posterior distribution is then defined as the probability of plausible pairs of soil moisture Ws and vegetation optical depth tau after combining the microwave observations, the τ–ω forward model, and the RGB-TIR-informed prior:

$$p(Ws, \tau \mid TB, f) \propto p(TB \mid Ws, \tau, T_g, \omega) \cdot p(\tau \mid f) \cdot p(Ws) \tag{6}$$

with a Gaussian likelihood:

$$p(TB \mid Ws, \tau, T_g, \omega) \propto e^{\left[\frac{-(TB_{obs} - TB_{mod})^2}{(2\sigma_{TB}{}^2)}\right]} \tag{7}$$

and a feature-informed prior:

$$\tau \mid f \sim N(\mu_\tau(f), \sigma_\tau{}^2(f)) \tag{8}$$

The soil moisture prior was weak and mainly used to keep the solution within the physically admissible range. Posterior inference means estimating the set of plausible Ws and tau pairs that are consistent with the observed horizontal and vertical brightness temperatures (TBH and TBV), the forward model, and the feature-informed tau prior. Metropolis-Hastings Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) sampling was used to sample this posterior distribution rather than returning only a single optimized solution. The sampler used multiple independent chains, bounded random-walk proposals, burn-in removal, retained posterior samples, acceptance-rate screening, and chain-length sensitivity checks; the settings and diagnostics are reported in Table S1.

2.5 Accuracy Evaluation and Baseline Comparison

Accuracy was evaluated using root mean square error (RMSE), mean absolute error (MAE), and bias, which quantify error magnitude and systematic deviation relative to the validation measurements. Bayesian retrieval uncertainty was evaluated separately using posterior standard deviation and 95% posterior credible intervals for soil moisture, which describe the spread of plausible estimates conditional on the forward model, brightness-temperature observations, and RGB-TIR-informed priors.

The independent validation used experiments from 13 different scenes (about 12.6 ha, 219 validation points). Calibration was performed exclusively on four scenes (about 1.3 ha, 52 calibration points) collected on 2026-04-03. The calibrated hyperparameter settings were selected using the calibration scenes, with RMSE as the primary criterion and posterior behaviour and physical bounds used as diagnostic checks; the independent validation dataset was then used only for evaluation. The calibration dataset included bare soil, garlic, and wheat fields, while the validation dataset included bare soil, garlic, rapeseed, wheat, maize, rice and lettuce fields.

The principal baseline was a Dobson-based dual-parameter τ–ω inversion that jointly solved soil moisture and vegetation optical depth without using RGB-TIR-informed Bayesian priors. To identify the contribution of each information source, we further evaluated three progressively constrained configurations using the same calibration-validation split and retrieval settings. The +FVC configuration used fraction vegetation cover to constrain the τ prior mean, while the TIR and texture terms were disabled. The +FVC+TIR configuration additionally used the thermal-raster-based effective-temperature support, but did not include footprint-scale texture descriptors.

For the validation metrics, 95% bootstrap confidence intervals were computed by resampling matched validation points. For the Bayesian retrieval, RMSE, MAE, and bias were calculated from posterior-mean (Ws) estimates, and their bootstrap intervals describe finite-sample uncertainty in the overall metrics rather than posterior uncertainty of individual retrievals.

Additional analyses were performed by land-cover class, by footprint representation, by the relationship between texture and retrieval uncertainty, and by key-parameter sensitivity.

3. Results

3.1 Overall retrieval performance and component-wise comparison

The component-wise comparison in Figure 4 shows that the proposed Bayesian joint retrieval substantially improved independent validation performance relative to the baseline across all 219 matched validation points. The conventional baseline produced RMSE = 0.057 m^3 m^{-3}, MAE = 0.052 m^3 m^{-3}, and bias = -0.050 m^3 m^{-3}, indicating a clear systematic dry bias. Introducing the fraction vegetation cover (FVC) prior reduced the errors to RMSE = 0.037 m^3 m^{-3} and MAE = 0.033 m^3 m^{-3}, while shifting the bias to 0.012 m^3 m^{-3}. Further adding TIR information slightly improved the results, with RMSE = 0.033 $m^3 m^{-3}$, MAE = 0.031 $m^3 m^{-3}$, and bias = -0.006 $m^3 m^{-3}$. The full configuration, which combines FVC, TIR information, and footprint-scale texture descriptors, achieved the best overall performance, with RMSE = 0.024 $m^3 m^{-3}$, MAE = 0.020 $m^3 m^{-3}$, and bias = 0.008 $m^3 m^{-3}$.

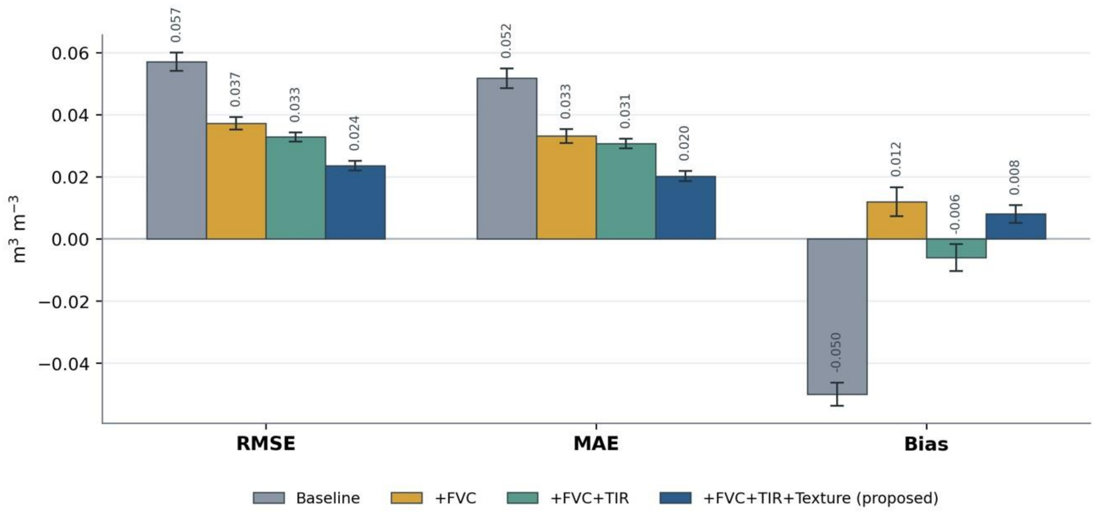

Figure 4. Component-wise comparison of validation accuracy for the baseline inversion and three progressively constrained retrieval configurations. The four configurations are the conventional baseline, the retrieval with fraction vegetation cover (+FVC), the retrieval with both fraction vegetation cover and thermal infrared information (+FVC+TIR), and the full proposed configuration with FVC, TIR, and footprint-scale texture descriptors (+FVC+TIR+Texture). Error bars denote 95% bootstrap confidence intervals computed by resampling matched validation points.

These results indicate that the improvement was not caused by a single correction term, but was associated with the progressive introduction of physically relevant auxiliary information. The largest first-order improvement occurred after adding FVC, suggesting that vegetation attenuation is an important source of ambiguity in the unconstrained τ–ω inversion. The additional gains from TIR information and footprint-scale texture descriptors were more modest, but they are consistent with the added constraints on surface thermal state and sub-footprint heterogeneity. Overall, the full RGB-TIR-texture prior pathway markedly reduced the dry bias of the baseline and improved both RMSE and MAE, supporting the value of incorporating footprint-consistent optical and thermal information into the Bayesian retrieval framework.

The retrieved-versus-observed scatter plots in Figure 5 provide a point-level evaluation of retrieval performance. The baseline retrieval is systematically shifted below the 1:1 line, especially at moderate to high soil-moisture levels, consistent with its dry bias of -0.050 $m^3 m^{-3}$. In contrast, the proposed retrieval is more closely distributed around the 1:1 line, with lower RMSE and MAE and a higher correlation coefficient than the baseline (R = 0.941 versus 0.917). The remaining slight wet bias (0.008 m³ m⁻³) and residual spread indicate that sub-footprint heterogeneity and support mismatch still affect some individual retrievals.

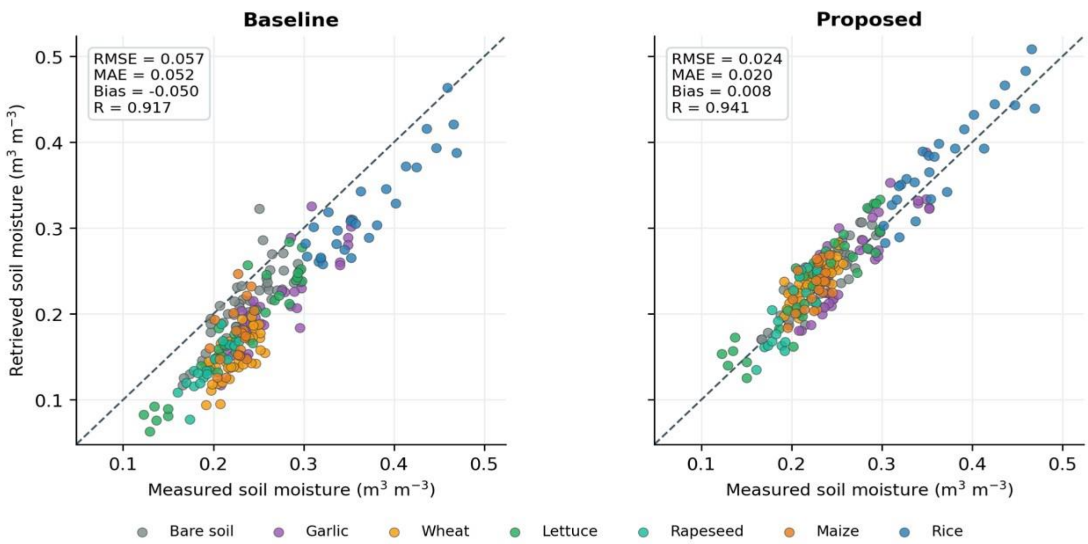

Figure 5. Retrieved versus observed surface soil moisture for the baseline inversion and the proposed Bayesian joint retrieval. The 1:1 line indicates unbiased retrieval, and points represent matched validation observations grouped by land-cover class.

Figure 6 presents representative retrieval maps overlaid on optical orthomosaics for two moisture states, with panels (a-d) corresponding to relatively drier conditions on 2026-04-04 and panels (e-h) corresponding to wetter conditions on 2026-04-05 after the early-morning rainfall event. In both cases, the proposed retrieval preserves broad field-scale soil-moisture patterns while reducing the pronounced dry shift visible in the baseline maps. Under drier conditions, the proposed product maintains spatial gradients without collapsing toward unrealistically low values, whereas under wetter conditions it reflects the overall wetter state while remaining coherent with field boundaries and within-field structure. The comparison is intended as a representative spatial visualization; quantitative validation is provided by the point-based metrics and scatter plots in Figures 4 and 5.

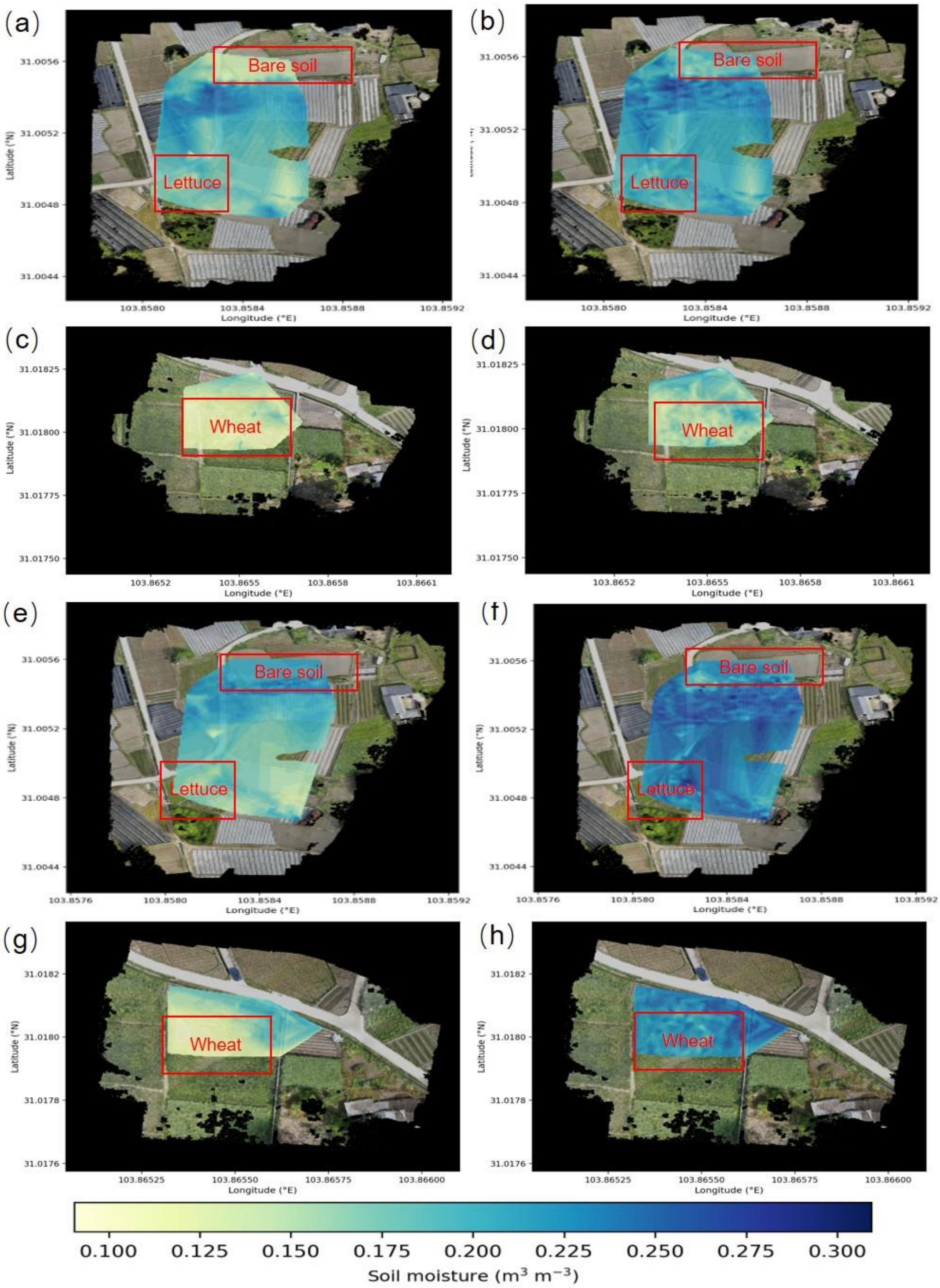

Figure 6. Representative soil moisture maps overlaid on optical orthomosaics. Panels (a-d) correspond to 2026-04-04 (relatively dry conditions) and panels (e-h) to 2026-04-05 (post-rainfall, relatively wet conditions). Panels (a, c, e, g) show the baseline retrieval, and panels (b, d, f, h) show the proposed Bayesian joint retrieval. In each group, panels for the baseline retrieval and proposed Bayesian joint retrieval use a common soil-moisture color scale to support direct visual comparison.

3.2 Retrieval performance under varying land cover

Land-cover stratification shows that the gain of the proposed method was class-dependent but generally positive across the validation categories. Table 1 reports the sample size n and 95% bootstrap confidence intervals for each land-cover class. The largest absolute RMSE reductions occurred for wheat (0.076 to 0.020 $m^3\ m^{-3}$, n = 38) and maize (0.058 to 0.021 $m^3\ m^{-3}$, n = 20), while bare soil improved from 0.034 to 0.020 $m^3\ m^{-3}$ (n = 45). Lettuce, garlic, rapeseed, and rice also improved, although the smaller sample sizes in rapeseed and maize mean that class-specific conclusions should be interpreted with the reported confidence intervals in mind. Overall, the proposed retrieval improved land-cover-specific accuracy and bias behaviour across contrasting surface conditions, without demonstrating crop-independent transferability.

Table 1. Validation accuracy by land-cover type for the baseline retrieval and the proposed Bayesian joint retrieval

Type	n	Baseline			Bayesian joint retrieval		
		RMSE	MAE	Bias	RMSE	MAE	Bias
Bare soil	45	0.034 [0.030, 0.039]	0.030 [0.025, 0.035]	-0.025 [-0.031, -0.017]	0.020 [0.017, 0.022]	0.016 [0.013, 0.020]	0.008 [0.003, 0.013]
Garlic	36	0.062 [0.055, 0.069]	0.058 [0.051, 0.065]	-0.057 [-0.065, -0.049]	0.028 [0.025, 0.031]	0.025 [0.021, 0.029]	-0.004 [-0.013, 0.006]
Wheat	38	0.076 [0.070, 0.082]	0.074 [0.068, 0.080]	-0.074 [-0.080, -0.068]	0.020 [0.016, 0.023]	0.017 [0.014, 0.020]	0.015 [0.010, 0.019]
Lettuce	35	0.052 [0.047, 0.057]	0.049 [0.043, 0.055]	-0.048 [-0.054, -0.041]	0.026 [0.022, 0.030]	0.022 [0.017, 0.026]	0.013 [0.005, 0.020]
Rapeseed	18	0.058 [0.051, 0.065]	0.056 [0.049, 0.063]	-0.056 [-0.063, -0.050]	0.024 [0.018, 0.028]	0.021 [0.015, 0.026]	0.002 [-0.009, 0.013]
Maize	20	0.058 [0.048, 0.067]	0.052 [0.040, 0.063]	-0.050 [-0.063, -0.037]	0.021 [0.015, 0.026]	0.017 [0.011, 0.022]	0.009 [0.000, 0.017]
Rice	27	0.053 [0.045, 0.060]	0.048 [0.039, 0.056]	-0.047 [-0.056, -0.038]	0.026 [0.023, 0.030]	0.024 [0.021, 0.028]	0.011 [0.002, 0.020]

Note: Values are reported in $m^3\ m^{-3}$. Brackets denote 95% bootstrap confidence intervals computed by resampling validation points within each land-cover class. Lower RMSE and MAE indicate better performance. Positive bias indicates wet overestimation, and negative bias indicates dry underestimation.

A clear pattern is that the baseline retrieval exhibited a systematic negative bias across nearly all land-cover types, whereas the proposed method substantially reduced this dry bias and in some cases slightly overcorrected it. For example, wheat and maize biases shifted from -0.074 and -0.050 m^3 m^{-3} to 0.015 and 0.009 m^3 m^{-3}, respectively. This pattern is consistent with the overall result in Figure 4, where the unconstrained baseline showed a strong dry bias and the RGB-TIR-informed retrieval reduced that bias.

The magnitude of improvement varied among land-cover classes. Wheat and maize showed large RMSE reductions, whereas lettuce, garlic, rapeseed, and rice showed more moderate improvements. These differences indicate that retrieval performance was not uniform across surface conditions. Because the land-cover classes differed in sample size, canopy structure, exposed soil fraction, and moisture state, the class-specific results should be interpreted as descriptive evidence rather than as a definitive attribution of error sources.

4. Discussion

4.1 Sub-footprint heterogeneity and its role in soil moisture observation uncertainty

The uncertainty analysis highlights a key implication of footprint-scale observations: not all forms of sub-footprint heterogeneity contribute equally to the ambiguity of soil moisture retrieval. Figure 7 summarizes the relationships between optical and thermal texture metrics across different land-cover types and their associations with tau prior uncertainty, posterior retrieval uncertainty, and absolute soil-moisture error.

Figure 7 shows that footprint-scale texture was more clearly associated with posterior τ uncertainty than with soil-moisture retrieval error. Optical texture, quantified as the standard deviation of optical luminance inside the assumed microwave footprint, showed a weak but significant positive relationship with posterior soil-moisture uncertainty (Spearman $\rho = 0.14$, $p = 0.035$) and a stronger relationship with posterior τ uncertainty ($\rho = 0.32$, $p = 1.4 \times 10^{-6}$). However, its relationship with absolute soil-moisture error was not significant ($\rho = 0.09$, $p = 0.17$). Thermal texture showed weaker associations overall: it was weakly but significantly related to posterior τ uncertainty ($\rho = 0.15$, $p = 0.025$), but not to posterior soil-moisture uncertainty or absolute soil-moisture error. These results indicate that optical texture was the more informative texture descriptor in this experiment, whereas thermal texture acted as a secondary and more scene-dependent indicator.

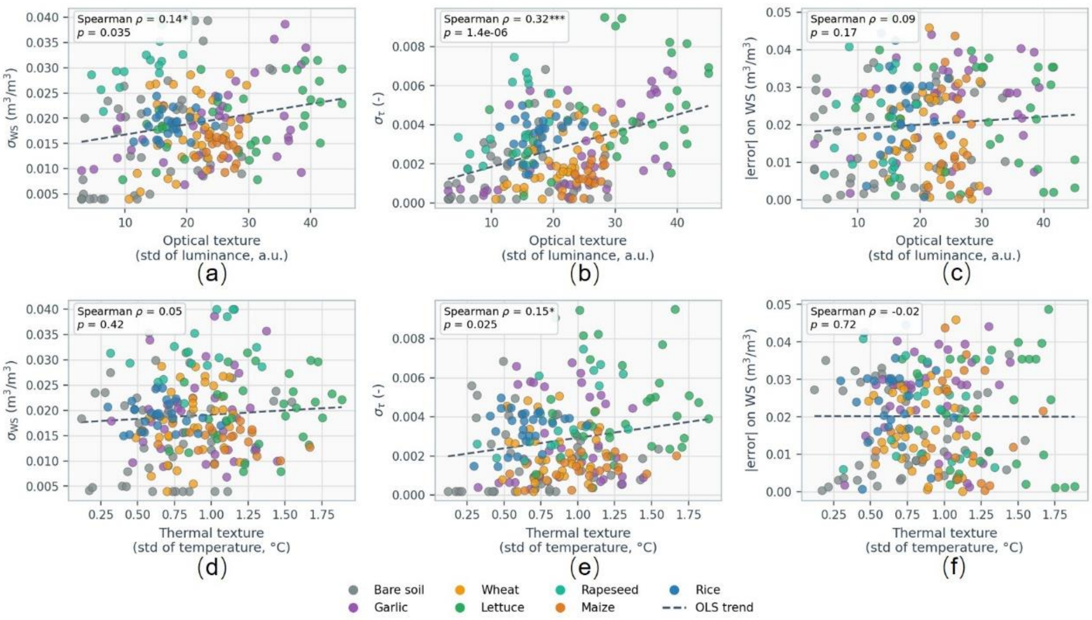

Figure 7. Relationships between footprint-scale optical and thermal texture and retrieval uncertainty. Panels (a)-(c) show optical texture versus posterior soil-moisture standard deviation, posterior tau uncertainty, and absolute soil-moisture error. Panels (d)-(f) show the corresponding thermal-texture relations.

A physical interpretation of these associations is as follows. The L-band radiometer measures an area-integrated brightness temperature over a footprint several meters wide. When the support area contains mixed canopy density, row structure, exposed soil patches, residue, or irrigation patterns, the observed brightness temperature represents a nonlinear mixture of multiple sub-footprint states. The inversion must then explain this aggregated signal using an effective pair of soil moisture and vegetation optical depth. Because the τ–ω forward model is nonlinear, averaging before inversion is not equivalent to inversion before averaging, which can increase ambiguity in heterogeneous scenes (Burke et al., 2003; Lakhankar et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2016). Similar effects have also been reported in L-band retrievals over heterogeneous scenes and in coupled soil-moisture and vegetation-optical-depth retrievals (Barrée et al., 2021; Feldman et al., 2021).

The present results therefore provide exploratory evidence that sub-footprint heterogeneity was more clearly associated with τ-related posterior uncertainty than with a direct increase in soil-moisture retrieval error. This interpretation is consistent with the role of τ in controlling vegetation attenuation in the τ–ω model, but it remains correlation-based rather than a mechanistic attribution. Different canopy and soil-background mixtures can produce similar aggregate transmissivity, increasing uncertainty in τ even when the final soil-moisture estimate remains relatively stable. However, the texture metrics used here are only proxies for broader sub-footprint heterogeneity, not proven causal drivers. Posterior covariance analysis, formal variance decomposition, and additional directional or object-based texture descriptors would be needed to attribute these uncertainty pathways more rigorously.

The footprint experiment supports, but does not by itself prove, the importance of physically consistent support matching. The 4 m x 7 m ellipse generally outperformed the 5 m x 5 m square, but Table 2 shows that the improvement was numerically small and class-dependent. Garlic, lettuce, rapeseed, and maize showed significant RMSE or MAE differences, whereas bare soil and rice did not show significant RMSE improvement, and wheat slightly favored the square case for RMSE. Thus, the result is best interpreted as evidence that footprint geometry matters when high-resolution auxiliary data are injected into passive microwave retrieval, while exact footprint size and antenna-pattern weighting remain important sources of uncertainty for future work.

Table 2. Comparison of retrieval accuracy between the physically matched 4 × 7 m ellipse footprint and a simplified 5 × 5 m square footprint

Land cover	n	Δ RMSE (5x5 - 4x7)	p-value	Δ MAE (5x5 - 4x7)	p-value	Δ Bias (5x5 - 4x7)	p-value
Bare soil	45	0.001 [-0.001, 0.003]	0.395	0.001 [-0.001, 0.003]	0.513	0.000 [-0.002, 0.003]	0.763
Garlic	36	0.007 [0.004, 0.009]	<0.001***	0.006 [0.004, 0.009]	<0.001***	0.004 [0.001, 0.007]	0.017*
Wheat	38	-0.002 [-0.003, 0.000]	0.015*	-0.001 [-0.003, 0.000]	0.043*	-0.001 [-0.003, 0.001]	0.263
Lettuce	35	0.006 [0.003, 0.008]	<0.001***	0.006 [0.004, 0.008]	<0.001***	0.003 [0.001, 0.006]	0.011*
Rapeseed	18	0.002 [0.000, 0.003]	0.027*	0.002 [0.001, 0.003]	0.004**	0.001 [0.000, 0.003]	0.075
Maize	20	0.007 [0.002, 0.011]	0.007**	0.007 [0.002, 0.011]	0.004**	0.004 [-0.002, 0.009]	0.161
Rice	27	-0.002 [-0.005, 0.000]	0.071	-0.002 [-0.004, 0.001]	0.12	-0.001 [-0.004, 0.002]	0.436

Note: Δ values are computed as the 5 m x 5 m square result minus the 4 m x 7 m ellipse result; positive Δ therefore indicates better performance for the ellipse. Brackets denote 95% bootstrap confidence intervals. Asterisks denote significance levels (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$).

4.2 Sensitivity Analysis of Core Hyperparameters

The sensitivity analysis indicates that the proposed framework was not excessively fragile to the tested one-at-a-time hyperparameter perturbations. Figure 8 summarizes the effects of four key parameters: the microwave likelihood spread σ_{TB}, the scale applied to the τ prior mean, the prior-strength parameter κ, and the scale applied to the τ prior width. Across the tested ranges, validation RMSE varied only moderately, and the calibrated settings generally lay within a relatively stable neighbourhood of the response curves. This suggests that the retrieval did not depend on a single sharply tuned parameter value in the present dataset.

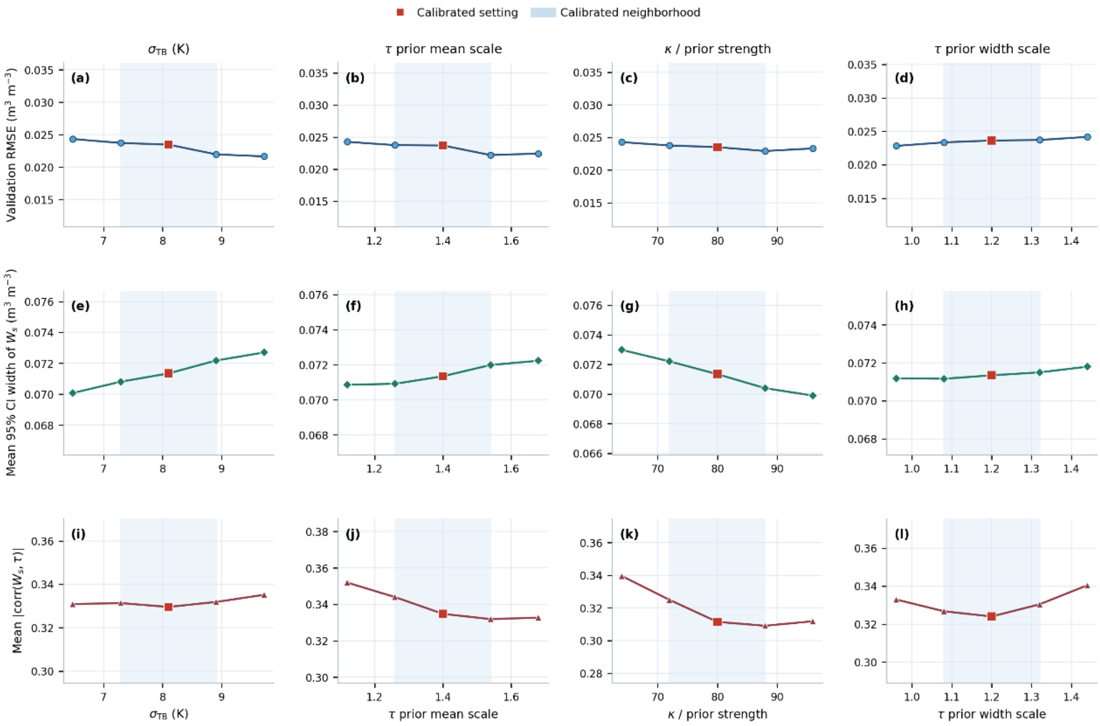

Figure 8. One-at-a-time sensitivity diagnostics for four key hyperparameters: microwave likelihood spread σTB, τ-prior mean scale, prior strength κ, and τ-prior width scale. The first row shows validation RMSE, the second row shows the mean 95% posterior credible-interval width of Ws, and the third row shows the mean posterior correlation between Ws and τ. The credible-interval width was calculated from the 2.5th-97.5th percentile range of posterior (Ws) samples and averaged over validation points. Red squares indicate the calibrated settings, and shaded areas indicate the calibrated neighbourhood.

The additional uncertainty diagnostics provide a more cautious interpretation than RMSE alone. The mean 95% credible-interval width of Ws and the posterior correlation between Ws and τ changed smoothly with the tested parameters, indicating that the prior and likelihood settings affect not only retrieval accuracy but also posterior uncertainty and parameter coupling. For example, changes in κ and the τ-prior settings influenced the Ws–τ posterior correlation, reflecting the balance between microwave information and prior constraints on vegetation attenuation.

However, this analysis was conducted by perturbing one parameter at a time while holding the others fixed. It therefore supports local stability within the tested ranges, but it does not constitute a full global sensitivity analysis. In particular, it cannot fully capture parameter interactions, nonlinear coupling, or compensating effects among likelihood weighting, τ-prior mean, prior strength, and τ-prior width. Therefore, the calibrated settings should be interpreted as field-scale calibrated parameters for the present dataset, rather than as universally transferable values. Because the calibration dataset remains limited, some calibration-set dependence or overfitting risk cannot be fully excluded.

4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations remain. The independent validation dataset includes 219 matched validation points covering approximately 12.6 ha and spans broader field conditions and cross-seasonal observations. However, all validation data were collected within the Pengzhou study area. Therefore, although the results provide a field-scale evaluation under local agricultural conditions, they should not yet be interpreted as evidence of general transferability across regions. The current experiment remains limited in terms of geographic diversity, soil background, crop-management conditions, and regional climate settings. Transfer to other regions will require additional validation across contrasting soil types, crop systems, irrigation regimes, surface roughness states, moisture regimes, and seasonal conditions, together with further testing of whether the RGB-TIR-informed priors remain stable under different environmental settings.

Another limitation concerns the vertical representativeness of the retrieved variable. The UAV L-band retrieval developed here targets surface or near-surface field-scale soil moisture, which is directly relevant to infiltration, runoff generation, evaporation partitioning, and the validation of microwave soil-moisture retrievals. However, it should not be interpreted as a direct observation of root-zone soil moisture, which is more closely linked to plant water availability and agricultural drought stress. Root-zone moisture conditions would require additional constraints, such as vegetation water indices including the Normalized Difference Infrared Index (NDII), evaporation-driven water-balance estimates of root-zone storage capacity, land-surface models, or data assimilation frameworks (Sriwongsitanon et al., 2016; Wang-Erlandsson et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2024). Therefore, the root-zone relevance of the proposed UAV L-band framework is indirect: it may provide useful near-surface constraints, but its extension to root-zone moisture estimation requires coupling with complementary hydrological or ecohydrological information.

The RGB-TIR feature pathway can also be expanded. In the present study, optical and thermal information was summarized using simple and robust descriptors, especially fraction vegetation cover and local standard-deviation texture metrics. These descriptors capture footprint-scale dispersion in optical brightness and surface temperature, and therefore provide useful first-order proxies for mixed vegetation cover, exposed soil fraction, and thermal contrast. However, they do not explicitly represent directional canopy structure, row orientation, canopy gaps, spectral variability, or viewing-geometry effects. Future work could incorporate additional texture metrics, object-based canopy descriptors, and multispectral or hyperspectral information to better separate canopy effects from soil-background effects. This direction is supported by recent optical-thermal soil moisture studies that obtained additional gains when canopy context was described more explicitly (Sahaar et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2024; Vahidi et al., 2025).

Another useful extension would be broader uncertainty partitioning. The present framework quantifies posterior uncertainty conditioned on the chosen forward model and prior pathway, but it does not separately decompose measurement errors, support-matching errors, and model-structure errors. These include radiometer brightness-temperature noise, TDR support mismatch, geolocation and co-registration uncertainty, footprint-shape assumptions, thermal calibration and emissivity uncertainty, vegetation-prior uncertainty, and structural simplifications in the τ–ω model. Future work could use hierarchical error models, antenna-pattern-weighted aggregation, posterior covariance analysis, or formal variance decomposition to better separate these contributions and improve the interpretability of Bayesian remote-sensing retrievals (Jing et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

This study developed a Bayesian joint retrieval framework for drone-based L-band near-surface soil moisture estimation that integrates RGB and thermal infrared information through physically consistent, footprint-scale priors. The results demonstrate improved field-scale accuracy metrics and reduced dry bias relative to an unconstrained tau-omega baseline, while also showing that retrieval remains constrained by sub-footprint heterogeneity and observation support mismatch.

Three main conclusions can be drawn.

(1) Incorporating RGB-TIR-informed priors significantly improved retrieval performance and reduced the systematic dry bias of the conventional τ–ω inversion, demonstrating the value of physically constrained auxiliary information.

(2) The texture-uncertainty analysis showed that footprint-scale texture was more clearly associated with τ-related posterior uncertainty than with absolute soil-moisture error or posterior Ws variance. This suggests that, in the present fields, sub-footprint heterogeneity affected the retrieval mainly through vegetation-attenuation uncertainty and canopy-soil mixing, but this interpretation remains correlation-based and requires formal uncertainty decomposition for stronger mechanistic attribution.

(3) Physically consistent support matching, implemented through an ellipse-shaped footprint, modestly improved retrieval performance for several classes. This supports the value of matching auxiliary RGB-TIR aggregation to microwave support, while leaving footprint-size and antenna-pattern uncertainty as future work.

Overall, the findings suggest that improving field-scale soil moisture retrieval requires both algorithmic constraints and better representation of observation scale, surface heterogeneity, and physical processes.

The current results are based on a field-scale dataset from a single study region. Broader cross-regional validation and formal uncertainty propagation, such as posterior covariance analysis or variance decomposition, are still needed before claiming general transferability.

Appendix

Table S1. Metropolis-Hastings sampling settings and convergence diagnostics for the Bayesian joint retrieval.

Item	Setting / diagnostic
Sampler	Random-walk Metropolis-Hastings
State variables	Ws and τ

Number of chains	3 independent chains per retrieval
Iterations	1000
Burn-in	200
Retained samples	800 per chain
Initial values	Ws = 0.25; tau initialized from feature-informed prior mean; independent chains used different random seeds.
Proposal distribution	Gaussian random-walk proposal
Proposal SD for Ws	0.012 $m^3 m^{-3}$
Proposal SD for τ	0.006 dimensionless
Bounds for Ws	0.0–0.8 $m^3 m^{-3}$
Bounds for τ	0.0–1.0
Acceptance rate	Mean = 0.34, range 0.27-0.42
Convergence diagnostic	Convergence was assessed using post-burn-in trace stability, acceptance-rate screening, and consistency of posterior means and standard deviations across three independent chains.
Chain-length test	Increasing the chain length from 1,000 to 2,000 iterations produced negligible changes in validation metrics, which remained unchanged to three decimal places: RMSE = 0.024 $m^3 m^{-3}$, MAE = 0.020 $m^3 m^{-3}$, and Bias = 0.008 $m^3 m^{-3}$.

Glossary of abbreviations

UAV: unmanned aerial vehicle; RGB: red-green-blue imagery; TIR: thermal infrared imagery; L-band: approximately 1.4 GHz microwave frequency range; TDR: time-domain reflectometry; TBH/TBV: horizontally/vertically polarized brightness temperature; FVC: fraction vegetation cover; VOD or tau: vegetation optical depth; RMSE: root mean square error; MAE: mean absolute error; CI: confidence interval; MCMC: Markov chain Monte Carlo; Metropolis-Hastings: a random-walk sampler used to draw plausible posterior Ws and τ values.

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Data availability

The running Python codes are available at Zenodo (Li, 2026).

Author contributions

ZL: Conceptualization; Data curation; Model development; Investigation; Methodology; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

YL: Conceptualization; Investigation; Methodology; Writing – review & editing

RT: Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Supervision; Writing – review & editing.

PC: Investigation; Methodology; Writing – review & editing.

FT: Funding acquisition; Methodology; Supervision; Writing – review & editing.

YZ: Investigation; Validation; Writing – review & editing.

Competing interests

At least one of the (co-)authors is a member of the editorial board of Hydrology and Earth System Sciences. The peer-review process was guided by an independent editor, and the authors also have no other competing interests to declare.

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