Federated Learning-Based Multi-UAV Collaboration for Adaptive Pest Detection and Precision Spraying in Smart Agriculture

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Abstract

The integration of unmanned aerial vehicles into precision agriculture has created new opportunities for scalable pest monitoring and targeted chemical application. However, the reliance on centralized data aggregation for training deep learning models compromises data sovereignty, increases communication overhead, and introduces latency that is incompatible with real-time field decisions. This paper proposes a federated learning-based multi-UAV collaboration framework that enables distributed pest detection and adaptive spraying without requiring raw imagery to leave individual farm nodes. The architecture decouples local model training on each UAV or edge gateway from a global model aggregation server, thereby preserving privacy, reducing bandwidth consumption, and allowing the system to adapt to heterogeneous agro-ecological conditions. We examine the structural trade-offs inherent in this design, including the tension between model convergence speed and communication efficiency under constrained wireless links, the impact of non-independent and identically distributed (non-IID) data across farms on global model accuracy, and the need for Byzantine-robust aggregation mechanisms. The paper also addresses infrastructure requirements such as edge computing resources, cellular or satellite backhaul, and energy-aware mission scheduling. Beyond technical aspects, we discuss governance challenges related to data ownership, fairness of pest risk assessment across smallholders versus large agribusinesses, and policy frameworks for shared model liability. Cross-domain comparisons with federated learning in healthcare and autonomous driving are drawn to illuminate generalizable principles. A case illustration of irregular farmland spraying demonstrates how the required coordination can be achieved through swarm-inspired path planning. The analysis reveals that federated learning offers a viable pathway toward resilient, equitable, and sustainable precision spraying operations, provided that system architects carefully balance local autonomy with global coherence.

Keywords

Federated Learning, Multi-UAV Collaboration, Precision Agriculture, Pest Detection, Smart Spraying, Adaptive Systems.

1. Introduction

The escalating global demand for food production, coupled with the environmental and economic costs of blanket pesticide application, has accelerated the adoption of precision agriculture technologies. Among these, unmanned aerial vehicles equipped with multispectral cameras and sprayers have emerged as powerful tools for detecting pest infestations at early stages and delivering agrochemicals only where needed. Yet the effectiveness of such systems depends critically on the underlying machine learning models that interpret sensor data and trigger spraying decisions. Traditional approaches that aggregate all field data into a central cloud server for model training present several barriers: high data transmission costs, vulnerability to single-point failures, privacy concerns over farm imagery, and inability to adapt rapidly to local pest dynamics. Federated learning offers a compelling alternative by shifting the training process to the edge. Each UAV or farm-side gateway trains a local model on its own data, sharing only model updates with a central server that aggregates them into a global model. This paradigm preserves data locality, reduces communication overhead, and enables continuous adaptation across diverse agricultural environments. This paper develops a comprehensive system-level analysis of federated learning-based multi-UAV collaboration for adaptive pest detection and precision spraying. We examine architectural choices, deployment constraints, robustness mechanisms, and socio-technical implications, drawing on insights from related domains to inform design guidelines for next-generation smart agriculture platforms.

2. Background and Related Work

Precision spraying using UAV swarms has been studied extensively in the agricultural robotics literature, with early work focusing on coverage path planning and optimal chemical distribution [1]. More recently, deep learning models such as convolutional neural networks have been applied to detect pests from aerial imagery with high accuracy, motivating the need for on-board inference capabilities [2]. However, the majority of these systems assume that training data can be centrally aggregated, which is increasingly untenable given data privacy regulations and the proprietary nature of farm datasets. Federated learning, introduced by McMahan et al. (2017), provides a distributed training framework where clients collaboratively learn a shared model without exchanging raw data [3]. Subsequent research has addressed challenges such as communication efficiency [4], heterogeneous client capabilities [5], and robustness to malicious updates [6]. In agricultural contexts, preliminary studies have applied federated learning to crop yield prediction and disease classification, but few have considered the real-time coordination requirements of multi-UAV spraying missions [7]. Meanwhile, swarm intelligence techniques for multi-UAV path planning have demonstrated the ability to handle irregular field boundaries and dynamic obstacles [8]. The convergence of federated learning and swarm robotics remains underexplored, particularly regarding the coupling of model training cycles with mission execution schedules. This paper bridges that gap by proposing an integrated architecture that jointly optimizes learning and control.

3. System Architecture and Design Considerations

The proposed system comprises three tiers: the UAV swarm layer, the edge gateway layer, and the cloud aggregation layer. Each UAV is equipped with a lightweight on-board computer running a local model for pest detection. During a mission, the UAV captures imagery, runs inference, and triggers spot spraying when the confidence exceeds a threshold. Simultaneously, it records a subset of labeled or pseudo-labeled data for incremental model updates. After each flight or at scheduled intervals, the UAV connects to a farm-level edge gateway via a short-range wireless link. The edge gateway aggregates updates from multiple UAVs that operated within its coverage area, performs local training if resources permit, and transmits compressed model parameters to the cloud server. This design reduces the communication load on the cellular backhaul because only model parameters, not raw images, travel over wide-area networks. A key architectural trade-off involves the frequency of global aggregation relative to local training. Frequent aggregation accelerates convergence but incurs higher energy and bandwidth costs. Conversely, infrequent aggregation may cause the global model to lag behind rapidly changing pest patterns. A second trade-off concerns the degree of model personalization. Because pest distributions vary by crop type, soil condition, and microclimate, a single global model may perform poorly on out-of-distribution farms. Federated learning can be extended with personalization techniques such as multi-task learning or meta-learning, but these add complexity to the aggregation protocol. The architecture must also tolerate intermittent connectivity, as UAVs may fly beyond network range. A store-and-forward mechanism, where model updates are buffered until reconnection, is essential for robustness. Furthermore, the system must support heterogeneous UAV hardware, with varying computational capabilities and sensor suites, requiring model compression and knowledge distillation to ensure compatibility.

4. Federated Learning Framework for Distributed Pest Detection

The federated learning process in this agricultural setting begins with an initial global model pre-trained on a public dataset of pest images. Each participating farm or UAV cohort receives a copy of this model. During a training round, each client trains the model on its local data using a standard optimization algorithm, such as stochastic gradient descent, for a fixed number of epochs. The client then sends the updated model weights to the central server, which aggregates them using the Federated Averaging algorithm [3]. However, the agricultural domain introduces unique challenges. Field data are highly non-IID because pest densities and types vary across farms, seasons, and even within a single field due to microclimate effects. This non-IID distribution can cause the global model to be biased toward common pest patterns while underperforming on rare or regional infestations. To mitigate this, the aggregation scheme may incorporate importance weighting based on dataset size or use clustering techniques to group similar clients and maintain multiple global models, each specialized for a cluster. Another challenge is the presence of label noise: manual annotations from farm operators may be inconsistent or erroneous. Federated learning can be extended with noise-robust loss functions, but this increases computational overhead. The system must also defend against Byzantine clients that may send corrupted updates, either unintentionally due to sensor faults or maliciously to sabotage the model. Robust aggregation rules, such as median or trimmed mean, provide a defense at the cost of convergence speed [6]. Communication efficiency is paramount given the limited bandwidth and energy of UAVs. Techniques such as gradient compression, sparsification, and quantization can reduce the size of transmitted updates by orders of magnitude while preserving accuracy [4]. The choice of compression ratio involves a trade-off between model fidelity and communication cost that must be evaluated empirically.

5. Multi-UAV Coordination and Adaptive Spraying Strategies

While federated learning enables continuous model improvement, the spraying missions themselves require real-time coordination among UAVs to avoid overlaps, cover irregular field shapes, and respond to dynamic pest outbreaks. We adopt a swarm-based approach where each UAV follows a decentralized path planning algorithm that considers the field boundaries, no-fly zones, and current pest density maps generated from the local model inference. The overall mission is partitioned into subregions, with UAVs assigned via a market-based negotiation protocol to balance coverage and ensure redundant coverage only in high-risk zones [9]. The feedback loop between detection and spraying is critical: a UAV that observes a high concentration of pests in a particular area can communicate this information to neighboring UAVs through ad-hoc mesh networking, allowing them to adjust their spray trajectories. This local coordination complements the federated learning loop, which operates on longer timescales. The spraying intensity and droplet size can be modulated based on the confidence of the detection model, reducing chemical use when uncertainty is high [10]. Furthermore, the system can incorporate reinforcement learning to optimize spraying policies over multiple missions, using the aggregated model updates from the federated learning server as a prior. For instance, if certain pest types are consistently misclassified, the system can assign higher exploration weight to those regions during the next flight. This coupling of learning and control creates a closed-loop precision agriculture system that adapts at both the mission and the season level. The required reference work by Zhou (2025) presents a detailed path planning algorithm for multi-UAV cooperative coverage in irregular farmlands using swarm intelligence, which aligns with the coordination strategy described here [11].

6. Deployment Challenges and Infrastructure Requirements

Deploying a federated learning-based multi-UAV system in real agricultural settings demands robust infrastructure. Edge gateways must be installed at farms, preferably with computational capabilities sufficient for local training on a single GPU or TPU. Many rural areas lack reliable high-speed internet; therefore, the system should operate with intermittent connectivity, using compression and asynchronous updates. Energy autonomy is a limiting factor for UAVs: on-board computation for inference and local training drains batteries faster than mere data capture. Trade-offs exist between using simpler models that run faster but detect fewer pest types and deeper models that improve accuracy but reduce flight time. Hybrid approaches, where inference is performed on the UAV and training is offloaded to the edge gateway, can balance these constraints. The radio communication subsystem must handle both control signals and model updates, with prioritization for safety-critical commands. Security is another dimension: model updates must be encrypted to prevent interception, and the aggregation server must authenticate clients to prevent impersonation. The system also needs to comply with agricultural regulations regarding pesticide application, airspace usage, and data privacy. For example, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation may classify farm imagery as personal data if it includes workers' faces or identifiable equipment, reinforcing the privacy advantage of federated learning [12]. Liability for incorrect spraying decisions must be allocated among the UAV manufacturer, the software provider, and the farm operator. The federated learning framework, where the global model is continuously updated by multiple parties, complicates deterministic accountability. Policy makers may need to establish audit trails of model versions and training contributions to adjudicate disputes.

7. Robustness, Fairness, and Governance Implications

Robustness in federated learning is primarily concerned with the stability of the global model under diverse data distributions and attack vectors. Beyond Byzantine attacks, the system must cope with data drift caused by seasonal changes, emergence of new pest species, or sensor degradation. Continuous learning with a fixed model capacity may lead to catastrophic forgetting of rare pest patterns. Elastic weight consolidation or rehearsal-based methods can mitigate this, albeit with increased memory requirements [13]. Fairness arises because smallholder farms may have less data and computational resources than large agribusinesses, causing their contributions to be undervalued in the global model. Weighted aggregation schemes that normalize by data size can help, but they may still penalize farms with unique pest profiles. A more equitable approach is to allow clients to opt for personalization, where they receive a global model as a base and fine-tune it locally. This ensures that even farms with limited data benefit from the collective knowledge while retaining the ability to specialize. Governance structures must define who owns the aggregated model, who can access it, and how the benefits are shared. One model is to form a cooperative among participating farms, with a neutral third party operating the aggregation server and issuing licenses for the global model. Alternatively, a commercial entity could provide the infrastructure but would need to offer incentives such as reduced spraying costs or improved yields to attract participants [14]. Transparent auditing of the training process, including the ability to verify that the aggregator did not tamper with updates, builds trust. Blockchain-based federated learning has been proposed as a solution for immutable audit trails, although the energy overhead may be prohibitive for resource-constrained rural deployments [15].

8. Case Illustrations and Cross-Domain Comparisons

To ground these discussions, consider a scenario of a large farm with irregularly shaped fields interspersed with water bodies and steep slopes. A swarm of five UAVs performs daily scouting flights. The federated learning system initially uses a pretrained model; after the first week, each UAV collects thousands of images. The non-IID nature is evident: one region has a heavy aphid infestation while another has fungal spots. The global model trained with standard FedAvg converges to a mediocre middle ground. The system then switches to clustered aggregation, grouping farms by pest syndrome, and accuracy improves significantly. The required path planning algorithm from Zhou (2025) enables the UAVs to cover the irregular boundaries efficiently, reducing flight time by 20% compared to a lawnmower pattern [11]. Meanwhile, a smallholder farm with only one UAV and intermittent internet connectivity participates in the federation using asynchronous updates, sending model weights only when connectivity is available. The fairness mechanism ensures that its data, though sparse, is not outweighed by the large farm's data. Cross-domain comparisons with federated learning in healthcare reveal similar trade-offs: patient data privacy is paramount, yet non-IID distributions across hospitals (e.g., differing imaging protocols) necessitate clustered models [16]. In autonomous driving, federated learning is used to train perception models across vehicle fleets, but bandwidth constraints and latency for safety-critical updates are more stringent than in agriculture [17]. These parallels suggest that the structural solutions developed for federated learning in other domains, such as hierarchical aggregation and differential privacy, can be adapted for agricultural UAV systems with appropriate parameter tuning.

9. Future Directions and Policy Recommendations

Future research should investigate the integration of federated learning with meta-learning to enable rapid adaptation to unseen pest types with only a few examples. The use of digital twins—virtual replicas of the farm that simulate pest dynamics—could provide synthetic training data to augment real samples without privacy leakage. On the deployment side, standards for model update formats and interoperability between different UAV manufacturers are needed to avoid vendor lock-in. Policy recommendations include the creation of regulatory sandboxes for federated learning in agriculture, where innovative architectures can be tested under relaxed compliance requirements. Subsidies for edge computing hardware in rural areas could accelerate adoption. Additionally, liability frameworks should recognize that federated models are collectively maintained, shifting the burden from individual farmers to the consortium. International cooperation on pest detection models could facilitate cross-border sharing of anonymized pest occurrence patterns, enabling early warning systems for invasive species while respecting data sovereignty [18]. The sustainability dimension is also critical: precision spraying reduces chemical runoff, but the energy consumed by UAVs and edge devices must be accounted for. Renewable-powered charging stations and lightweight model compression are viable mitigation strategies.

10. Conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive system-level analysis of federated learning-based multi-UAV collaboration for adaptive pest detection and precision spraying. The architecture addresses fundamental tensions between data privacy, communication efficiency, model accuracy, and real-time coordination. By distributing model training across farm nodes and aggregating only parameter updates, the system preserves data sovereignty while enabling continuous improvement. The synergy with swarm intelligence path planning creates a resilient operational framework capable of handling irregular terrain and dynamic pest outbreaks. Infrastructure requirements, security, fairness, and governance challenges were examined, leading to actionable recommendations for stakeholders. The analysis demonstrates that federated learning is not merely a privacy-preserving technique but a foundational principle for building equitable, scalable, and sustainable precision agriculture systems. As climate change and population growth intensify pressures on food production, the combination of aerial robotics and decentralized machine learning offers a promising pathway toward more intelligent and responsible crop protection.

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