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Modelling Biofilm Formation in a Dairy Wastewater Irrigation System

A thesis presented in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Process Engineering

at

Massey University
Manawatū, New Zealand

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2018
Frontispiece

SEM picture of the extreme biofilm isolated from a dairy wastewater irrigation system.

Credit: Manawatū Microscopy imaging centre.
Abstract

The increase in international demand for milk products has resulted in a corresponding increase in dairy wastewater from dairy manufacturing plants that requires treatment. Every stage of the manufacturing process generates wastewater with up to 10 L produced for every litre of milk processed.

This thesis focuses upon a case study from a New Zealand milk powder plant, which experienced an extreme biofilm formation that blocked the irrigator nozzles of a primary treated dairy wastewater irrigation system. The total microbial population entering the wastewater system and the biofilm formation of the culturable fraction were determined in an attempt to understand the cause of the extreme biofilm formation. Next Generation Sequencing (NGS), showed Gram-negative dominated the microbial population, which was reflected in the culturable isolates from the extreme biofilm and wastewater samples taken after the extreme biofilm event. 16s rRNA sequencing identified 23 isolates: 10 *Citrobacter* (43.5%), six *Klebsiella* (26%), two *Pseudomonas* (8.7%), three *Enterobacter* (13%), one *Raoultella* (4.4%) and one *Bacillus cereus* (4.4%). The *Raoultella* spp was considered unique as it was only cultured from the extreme biofilm, however, this genus was also detected in the wastewater using NGS.

Four isolates from the extreme biofilm where assessed for their responses (biofilm formation, growth rates, yield, and saturation constants) to varying environmental conditions. Nutrient level, temperature and Ca\(^{2+}\) significantly affected the biofilm formation individually while Na\(^+\) and Mg\(^{2+}\) had interactions with other effects. Growth rates were dependent on the nutrient level and ion content, however, growth in aerobic and anaerobic environments was found to be statistically (P < 0.05) indistinguishable. Bacteria exhibited slowest growth in the presence of Ca\(^{2+}\), however, Ca\(^{2+}\) significantly increased the yields over other ions in three of the four bacteria. These different effects on the growth rates, yields, saturation constants and biofilm forming ability suggest that more than one mechanism is involved in the use of these ions. These ions could influence the excretion and production of extracellular polymeric substances, metabolic pathways, or divalent cation bridging (DCB).
The developed model predicted the planktonic and biofilm populations of the four isolates taken from the extreme biofilm. Two trials were performed to test the capabilities, a high nutrient (optimal levels as found in laboratory) 20% TSB and a low nutrient (levels at average wastewater conditions) 4% TSB. It was found that the model accurately predicted the biofilm population level in the low nutrient environment while over predicting the observed levels by 0.5 log CFU/m² in the high nutrient environment. Planktonic predictions in both environments were approximately 1 log CFU/m³ below the observed levels. It was also noted that predicted steady state levels in the planktonic populations were reached approximately 7 hours after those observed. This is most likely due to either the measured bio-transfer rate being slightly different in the reactor trials or death of bacteria in the system. However, the two trials show the model providing good predictions of the biofilm levels with varying nutrient contents. Therefore, this will allow for the quick assessment of the biofilm levels in the dairy wastewater irrigation system with changing conditions.

**Limitation of the study**

1. The high through put microtiter plate assay did not replicate the flow conditions of the dairy wastewater irrigation system
2. The lab scale reactor did not match the turbulent flow in the dairy industry as this was impractical
3. This is only applicable to the site in question that the model was developed for
4. The model was developed using Monod kinetics
5. This was performed on the observation that the ions Ca²⁺, Mg²⁺, and Na⁺ were limiting microbial growth
List of Publications


List of Presentations


Michael Dixon


**Dixon, M.** (2016) Update Fonterra Environment Technical group PhD progress

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my parents for their love and support they gave me throughout each step of this journey. Miriam, your love and support during the final stages of this and your understanding in the many late nights was amazing. I would also like to acknowledge Fonterra Environment Technical Group for sponsoring this research.

During this PhD I have had a wonderful team of supervisors offering their support and advice. I would like to thank Prof Steve Flint for the practical advice you gave and always being ready to proof read my work. Dr Jon Palmer for all the advice on fungi and bacteria; sorry the fungi didn’t become a big part of this. Dr Richard Love for always being willing to sit down and help me with the model coding. Dr Bram Beuger for the industry advice and experience.

A multitude of techniques and tests were required to complete this project. Thank you to all the lab staff: Ann-Marie Jackson, Julia Good and Kylie Evans, for your advice and help. To Bryon McKillop for building me all the different biofilm reactors I required. Dr Tom Seviour (SCELSE: Singapore Centre for Environmental Life Sciences Engineering) for your analysis of my extreme biofilm EPS matrix.

Thank you to the wastewater team at the factory I was associated with: William Jenkins, Ryan Nicholas and Anna Dyer. The help I received while there and the times you would go out of your way, so I could run my experiments was amazing,

A great big thank you goes out to my fellow PhD candidates that I met along the way. The companionship and discussion we had on the best way to do experiments was invaluable and allowed me to do more than I could have by myself. Thank you to the interns that I had during my time here, Janice Tan Sze Ling, Felix Mändle and Cyril Chabas. Your work throughout was exceptional, even when I myself did not quite know what was going on.

Finally, I would like acknowledge Jesus in all that I do and without his love, compassion, and guidance this would not have been possible. Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”
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