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# **Copper and zinc dynamics and bioavailability in soils amended with biosolids**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
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# Abstract

Global sewage sludge (biosolids) production is increasing as a result of rapidly growing human population and ensuing industrial activities. Land application of this waste is becoming a serious environmental issue because the high levels of heavy metals in biosolids can upset soil microbial activity and nutrient balance when the waste is added to forest or agricultural lands. It is widely accepted that bioavailability, rather than total soil concentration, is more important when assessing the risk associated with metal contamination. The bioavailability of a heavy metal is dependent on the chemical nature of the metal, the chemical, physical and biological properties of biosolids that contain the metal and of soil that receives the biosolids. It also depends on the interaction of the biosolids with soil, plants and soil microorganisms. The overall aim of this thesis was to assess the bioavailability of biosolids-derived Cu and Zn and the comparative effects of these metals on plant and soil microbial activity, with special attention to mycorrhiza, and the effects of application of lime and Al dross as ameliorants for the reduction of bioavailability of these two metals.

Biosolids were collected from the Palmerston North City Council Waste Water Treatment Plant (PNCCWTP) sludge lagoon in Palmerston North, New Zealand. Because the metal concentrations were low, for research purposes these biosolids were spiked separately with three levels of Cu (to give final concentrations of 50, 150 and 250 mg/kg soil) and Zn (to give final concentrations of 150, 450 and 750 mg/kg soil) added as metal sulphate salts. The biosolids were anaerobically incubated, and it was found that a shorter period of equilibration (2 months) than the previously used 6–9 months was sufficient for Cu and Zn to be fully incorporated into the biosolids matrix. As biosolids in New Zealand are currently applied to forest lands, two important forest plants, poplar and pine, were considered for the study in this thesis. The effects of elevated concentrations of Cu and Zn in a soil amended with metal spiked biosolids on poplar plants were investigated in a 147 day glasshouse pot trial. The findings of this trial showed that at the same total soil metal concentration, biosolids-derived Cu was more

toxic than Zn to soil microorganisms, whereas Zn was more toxic to poplar and ECM fungi. In a similar glasshouse study lasting 312 days with pine, Cu did not show a phytotoxic effect, but Zn was phytotoxic to pine. However, both metals were toxic to microorganisms and neither metal influenced ECM fungi colony development. The currently recommended maximum metal concentration limits for New Zealand soils of 100 mg/kg for Cu and 300 mg/kg for Zn appear to be high for both metals with respect to soil microbial activity, but low for Cu and high for Zn with respect to poplar and pine growth.

A laboratory incubation trial with Cu- and Zn- spiked biosolids added to eight soils representing the major Soil Groups collected from across the North Island of New Zealand (biosolids added to give final soil concentrations of 150 mg/kg for Zn or 450 mg/kg for Cu), showed that crystalline Fe oxide was the dominant factor explaining 90% of the variability in exchangeable Cu. For Zn, clay content and pH were the controlling soil factors that together explained 73% of the variability in exchangeable Zn. An increased content of crystalline Fe oxide increased the soil exchangeable Cu concentration. Decreasing pH and increasing clay content increased the soil exchangeable Zn concentration.

The effect of lime (0.1 and 0.5%), Al dross (2 and 6%) and a combination of lime and Al dross (0.1% lime+2% Al dross) as soil amendments for the amelioration of the toxic effect of biosolids-derived Cu (144 mg/kg in soil) and Zn (417 mg/kg in soil) on microorganisms and poplar were also studied. Results revealed that application of lime and Al dross (pH 10) as a mixture (0.1% lime+2% Al dross) was able to ameliorate Cu and Zn phytotoxicity, and significantly increase the DM yield of poplar, ECM fungi population and microbial activity in the Cu and Zn contaminated soils.

The findings of the studies in this thesis are applicable to environmental regulations with respect to heavy metal limits that seek to protect agricultural and forest land, human and animal health, and soil and drinking water quality, in scenarios where biosolids are applied to soil.

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# Table of contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of contents .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of figures .....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>List of tables .....</b>	<b>xiv</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Literature review and research objectives .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.1.1 Biosolids, definition, disposal and use	1
1.1.2 Biosolids production in New Zealand and the world-wide	2
1.2 Heavy metals in biosolids	2
1.3 Biosolids disposal methods	6
1.3.1 Incineration	7
1.3.2 Landfill Disposal	7
1.3.3 Land application	8
1.4 Soil limits for biosolids derived heavy metals	9
1.5 Chemical forms of heavy metals in biosolids and soils	10
1.5.1 Solid phase	11
1.5.1.1 Soluble and exchangeable metal ions	12
1.5.1.2 Specifically sorbed	13
1.5.1.3 Iron and manganese oxides	13
1.5.1.4 Organic matter	13
1.5.1.5 Residual fraction	14
1.5.2 Liquid phase	15
1.5.2.1. Measurements	16
1.5.2.2. Model predictions	16
1.6 Fate of biosolids–derived heavy metals in soil	17
1.6.1 Soil properties that influence the availability of Cu and Zn in soil	20
1.7 Soil Cu and Zn availability to plants	22

1.7.1	Cu and Zn deficiency	23
1.7.2	Cu and Zn toxicity	23
1.7.3	Soil tests for bioavailability	26
1.7.4	Zn and Cu availability to pine and poplar	30
1.7.4.1	Pine	30
1.7.4.2	Poplar	32
1.7.5	Rhizosphere	34
1.7.6	Mycorrhizae	35
1.8	Copper and zinc toxicity to microorganisms	38
1.8.1	Comparative effect of metal toxicity in plants, microorganisms and mycorrhiza	40
1.9	Methods to reduce soil heavy metal toxicity	42
1.9.1	Zeolite, iron oxide and lime as amendments to immobilise metals in soil	43
1.9.1.1	Zeolites	44
1.9.1.2	Iron and aluminium oxides, fly ash and by-products	45
1.9.1.3	Lime	46
1.10	Research justification	47
1.11	Objective of the study	49

<b>Chapter 2: Copper and zinc spiking of biosolids: Effect of incubation period on changes in metal chemical forms and bioavailability .....</b>		<b>50</b>
2.1	Introduction	50
2.2	Materials and methods	52
2.2.1	Sampling and experimental setup	52
2.2.2	Chemical analysis	53
2.2.3	Dehydrogenase activity	56
2.2.4	Estimation of microbial population	56
2.2.5	Quality control measures	57
2.2.6	Data analysis	58
2.3	Results and Discussion	59
2.3.1	pH, Eh and BOD	59

2.3.2	Metal fractionation in biosolids solid phase	61
2.3.3	Metal speciation in the biosolids liquid phase	65
2.3.4	Total microbial population	67
2.3.5	Dehydrogenase activity	68
2.4	Conclusions	72

### **Chapter 3: Comparative tolerance of poplar, mycorrhiza and microbial activity to copper and zinc toxicity in a**

#### **biosolids–amended soil ..... 73**

3.1	Introduction	73
3.2	Materials and methods	75
3.2.1	Trial treatments and design	75
3.2.2	Plant harvest and soil sampling	76
3.2.3	Chemical analysis	76
3.2.4	Dehydrogenase activity	77
3.2.5	Mycorrhiza counting	78
3.2.6	Quality control measures	78
3.2.7	Data analysis	79
3.3	Results and discussion	79
3.3.1	Poplar yield and metal accumulation	79
3.3.2	Metal concentration in soil solution	82
3.3.3	Metal fractions in soil solid phase	85
3.3.4	Mycorrhizal colonization	88
3.3.5	Dehydrogenase activity	89
3.4	Conclusions	94

### **Chapter 4: Response of *Pinus radiata* and soil microbial activity to increasing copper and zinc contamination in a soil**

#### **treated with metal–amended biosolids ..... 96**

4.1	Introduction	96
4.2	Materials and methods	98
4.3	Results and discussion	99
4.3.1	Dry matter yield and metal availability to the plants	99



4.3.2	Metal speciation in soil solution phase	104
4.3.3	Metal fractions in the soil solid phase	106
4.3.4	Mycorrhiza colonization	109
4.3.5	Dehydrogenase activity	111
4.3.6	Comparative effect of biosolids–derived Cu and Zn on poplar and pine	114
4.4	Conclusion	116

## **Chapter 5: Effect of soil properties on the bioavailability of copper and zinc in eight soils treated**

### **with metal–amended biosolids ..... 119**

5.1	Introduction	119
5.2	Materials and methods	121
5.2.1	Laboratory incubation setup	122
5.2.2	Particle size distribution	122
5.2.3	Chemical analysis	122
5.2.5	Data analysis	123
5.3	Results and discussion	125
5.3.1	Solid phase fractionation	125
5.3.2.	Correlation study	130
5.4	Conclusions	134

## **Chapter 6: Effect of lime and Al waste on poplar yield, and Cu and Zn uptake from a biosolids-amended soil ... 136**

6.1	Introduction	136
6.2	Materials and methods	139
6.2.1	Soils	139
6.2.2	Amendments	139
6.2.3	Glasshouse trial	140
6.2.4	Microbial biomass carbon (MBC)	141
6.3	Results and discussion	142
6.3.1	Poplar yield and metal accumulations	142
6.3.2	Al phytotoxicity in Al dross treatments	146

6.3.3	Beneficial effect of combined application of lime and Al dross	147
6.3.4	Bioconcentration factor	148
6.3.5	Available soil metal concentrations	149
6.3.6	Mycorrhizal colonization	151
6.3.7	Dehydrogenase activity and microbial biomass carbon	152
6.4	Conclusions	156

## **Chapter 7: Overall conclusions and recommendations for**

	<b>future work .....</b>	<b>157</b>
7.1	Need for the study	157
7.2	Research outline	158
7.3	Important findings of this study	159
7.3.1	A short period of equilibration (2 months) than the previously used 6–9 months may be sufficient for Cu and Zn to be fully incorporated into the biosolids matrix (Chapter 2)	159
7.3.2	Biosolids–derived Cu was more toxic to microorganisms than Zn, but Zn was more toxic to poplar and mycorrhiza (Chapter 3)	160
7.3.3	Ectomycorrhiza fungi symbiosis with pine was well developed and not affected by Cu and Zn. As for poplar, both Cu and Zn were toxic to microorganisms, but Zn was more toxic than Cu. Only Zn reduced pine growth (Chapter 4)	160
7.3.4	The total solution–phase (mg/L) and solid–phase exchangeable (mg/kg) Cu and Zn concentrations for 50% microbial activity (dehydrogenase activity) reduction (EC <sub>50</sub> ) were as follows; (Chapter 2, 3 and 4)	161
7.3.5	Crystalline Fe oxide was found to be the main soil property controlling the exchangeable soil Cu concentration. Whereas for exchangeable Zn, the dominant soil properties were soil clay content and pH (Chapter 5)	161

7.3.6	Application of 0.1% lime and 2% alkaline Al dross as a mixture ameliorated the toxic effect of biosolids-derived Cu and Zn in poplar, improved microbial activity and mycorrhiza colony development (Chapter 6)	162
7.4	Recommendations for future work	162
	<b>References .....</b>	<b>165</b>
	<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>210</b>

# List of figures

Figure 1.1	Origin and fate of metals during treatment of wastewater (ADEME 1995)	3
Figure 1.2	Dynamics of Cu and Zn reactions in soil (Adriano 2001; Kabata-Pendias and Pendias 2001; Loganathan <i>et al.</i> 2008)	18
Figure 2.1	(a,c) Palmerston North City Council Waste Water Treatment Plant and (b) biosolids lagoon where samples were collected and (d) stored after metal spiking	53
Figure 2.2	Percentage distribution of Cu fractions (a) and Zn fractions (b) in the solid phase of biosolids (SE=standard error for individual fractions, n=3)	63
Figure 2.3	Relationship between the sum of all metal fraction concentrations and the total metal concentration determined by acid digestion	64
Figure 2.4	Bacteria counts in metal spiked biosolids (Solution + Solid phases)	67
Figure 2.5	Dehydrogenase activity in biosolids spiked at different levels of Cu (a) and Zn (b) for different time intervals. Means Bars with different letters are significantly different ( $P \leq 0.05$ )	69
Figure 2.6	Relationship of dehydrogenase activity (TPF) with liquid phase Cu (a), exchangeable Cu (b), liquid phase Zn (c) and exchangeable Zn (d)	71
Figure 3.1	Relationship of poplar leaf DM with $Zn^{2+}$ ( $\mu M$ ) in soil solution	85
Figure 3.2	Percentage distribution of Cu and Zn fractions in rhizosphere and bulk soils amended with biosolids under poplar	87
Figure 3.3	Mycorrhiza hyphae count in poplar roots at different levels of Cu and Zn. Bars with different letters are significantly different ( $P \leq 0.05$ )	88
Figure 3.4	Dehydrogenase activity (TPF) in bulk and rhizosphere	

	soils at different levels of Cu and Zn. Bars with different letters are significantly different ( $P \leq 0.05$ ). Simple letters indicate the variance among the bulk soils and capital letters for the rhizosphere soils	90
Figure 3.5	Relationship of dehydrogenase activity (TPF) with (a) soil solution Cu, (b) exchangeable Cu, (c) soil solution Zn and (d) exchangeable Zn. Equation 1 in Materials and method section was used for (a) and (b); Equation 2 was used for (c) and (d)	92
Figure 4.1	Effect of Cu and Zn on growth in pine (312 days after planting): Figure shows no toxic effect of Cu on plant growth, but an increasing phytotoxic effect of Zn with increasing concentration of Zn in soil.	101
Figure 4.2	Relationship of pine needle DM with the $Zn^{2+}$ concentration ( $\mu M$ ) in soil solution	106
Figure 4.3	Percentage distribution of Cu and Zn fractionation in rhizosphere and bulk soils amended with biosolids under pine	108
Figure 4.4	Mycorrhiza hyphae counts on pine roots as a function of Cu and Zn treatments of the soil. No significant difference ( $P \leq 0.05$ ) between treatments	110
Figure 4.5	Dehydrogenase activity (TPF) in bulk and rhizosphere soils at different levels of Cu and Zn. Bars with different letters are significantly different ( $P \leq 0.05$ ). Simple letters indicate the variance among the bulk soils and capital letters are the rhizosphere soils	111
Figure 4.6	Relationship of dehydrogenase activity (TPF) with (a) soil solution Cu, (b) exchangeable Cu, (c) soil solution Zn and (d) exchangeable Zn. Equation 1 in section 4.2 was used for (a) and (b); Equation 2 was used for (c) and (d)	113
Figure 5.1	Distribution of Cu in various soil fractions in the eight soils amended with biosolids. (a) Control and (b) added Cu after 0, 147 and 257 days of incubation (s.e.=standard	

	error, $n=2$ ). Added Cu = Cu treatment minus Control	128
Figure 5.2	Distribution of Zn in various soil fractions in eight soils amended with biosolids. (a) Control and (b) added Zn after 0, 147 and 257 days of incubation (s.e.=standard error, $n=2$ ). Added Zn = Zn treatment minus Control	129
Figure 6.1.	Leaf chlorosis and browning in poplar treated with ZnA2	145
Figure 6.2	Ectomycorrhiza hyphae count in roots of poplar grown in lime and Al dross treated soils contaminated with Cu and Zn derived from biosolids. Bars with different letters are significantly different ( $P\leq 0.05$ ). Simple letters indicate the variance among the Cu contaminated soils and capital letters for the Zn contaminated soils	152
Figure 6.3	Dehydrogenase activity (TPF) and MBC for lime and Al dross treated rhizosphere soils in Cu and Zn contaminated soils. Bars with different letters are significantly different ( $P\leq 0.05$ ). Simple letters indicate the variance among the Cu contaminated soils and capital letters for the Zn contaminated soils	155

# List of tables

Table 1.1	Annual production of biosolids (NZWWA 2003)	2
Table 1.2	Heavy metal concentrations (mg/kg dry weight) in biosolids (*and soils) from selected studies in different countries	5
Table 1.3	Methods of disposal of biosolids in selected countries	6
Table 1.4	Restrictions on biosolids handling methods (Fytili and Zabaniotou 2008)	8
Table 1.5	Soil limits and biosolids classification by contaminant levels (mg/kg dry weight) in New Zealand (NZWWA 2003)	10
Table 1.6	Sequential Extraction procedure (McLaren and Clucas 2001; Tessier <i>et al.</i> 1979)	12
Table 1.7	Soil properties influencing the dynamics of biosolids derived Cu and Zn	19
Table 1.8	Approximate concentrations of Cu and Zn in mature leaf tissue generalized for various plant species (mg/kg dry weight)	24
Table 1.9	Relative phytoavailability of different species of metals in soils (Kabata-Pendias and Pendias 2001)	26
Table 1.10	Lower critical concentrations in soil extracts (mg/kg DM) (Alloway 2008a; Brennan <i>et al.</i> 1993; Srivastava and Gupta 1996)	29
Table 1.11	Upper critical concentrations in soil extracts (mg/kg DM)	29
Table 1.12	Selected studies on metal influence on forest plants	31
Table 1.13	Critical concentrations of Cu and Zn (mg/kg DM) in pine at different growth stages (Boardman <i>et al.</i> 1997)	32
Table 1.14	Proposed thresholds of soil Cu concentrations for tolerance by poplar (Stobrawa and Lorenc-Plucinska 2008)	33
Table 1.15	Zn <sup>2+</sup> concentration at EC <sub>50</sub> for ECM isolates (Hartley <i>et al.</i> 1997a)	37
Table 1.16	Critical Cu and Zn concentrations affecting microbial activities (conc. unit mg/kg; exception (mg/L) indicated in table)	39

Table 2.1	pH, Eh and BOD (mean±s.e., n=3) of the biosolids	60
Table 2.2	Metal concentrations (mean±s.e., n=3) in solid biosolids	61
Table 2.3	Metals in liquid phase (0.45 µm) as a percentage of total metals (mean±s.e., n=3) in biosolids suspension	65
Table 2.4	Percentage of metal species in the liquid phase of biosolids at different times after metal spiking	66
Table 3.1	Effect of Cu and Zn on soil pH, soil solution metal concentration, poplar metal concentration and DM yield	81
Table 3.2	Percentage of metal species in soil solution	83
Table 4.1	Effect of Cu and Zn on total soil metal concentration, soil pH, pine needle metal concentration and DM yield	103
Table 4.2	Percentage of metal species in soil solution	105
Table 4.3	Comparative effects of Cu and Zn in poplar (Chapter 3) and pine (Chapter 4) trials	114
Table 5.1	Physical and chemical properties of biosolids amended soils	124
Table 5.2	Total and exchangeable metal concentrations (mg/kg) of biosolids amended soils (control) at various incubation periods	125
Table 5.3	Simple linear correlation coefficients (r) for exchangeable metals versus properties of eight soils	133
Table 5.4	Simple linear correlation coefficients between the properties of eight soils	134
Table 6.1	The average concentrations (mg/kg) of chemical elements in the Al dross sample	140
Table 6.2	Effect of lime (L) and Al dross (A) applications on poplar DM yield and metal concentration	144
Table 6.3	CaCl <sub>2</sub> (0.01M) extractable and exchangeable (1M KCl) Aluminium (mg/kg) in soils	146
Table 6.4	Effect of lime and Al dross applications on soil pH	148
Table 6.5	Effect of lime and Al dross applications on soil metal fractions (mg/kg)	150