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# THE FATE OF METHANE IN A NEW ZEALAND PULP AND PAPER MILL WASTEWATER TREATMENT SYSTEM



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

Master of Engineering  
in  
Environmental Technology & Sustainable Energy

at Massey University, Palmerston North,  
New Zealand

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**2011**

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## Abstract

The wastewater produced by Carter Holt Harvey's Kinleith pulp and paper mill in Tokoroa is currently treated by a series of aerobic ponds, designed to remove organic pollutants. The treatment system has experienced increases in Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD, a measure of organic pollution strength) at the outlet. The increases in BOD happened when no significant changes in wastewater influent flow and/or characteristics were recorded. The surge in BOD has caused the outlet discharge limit to be exceeded in the past. Based on previous studies, we believe that aerobic oxidation of methane ( $\text{CH}_4$ ), by microorganisms called methanotrophs, can cause the generation of methanol (a compound that can cause an increase in BOD load in waste streams), under conditions that repress the further conversion of methanol into biomass and carbon dioxide ( $\text{CO}_2$ ). The overall objectives of this project therefore were:

- To determine if the biosynthesis of  $\text{CH}_4$  can occur in the treatment system
- To determine if the subsequent biological aerobic  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation to methanol can occur in the treatment system
- Whether enough methanol can be generated to affect the treatment system's performance in terms of BOD removal.

Evidence was found that confirmed  $\text{CH}_4$  was formed in the pond sediments across the entire treatment system (with rates significantly higher near the inlet).  $\text{CH}_4$  is therefore available in the treatment system for aerobic  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation.

The presence of aerobic conditions and the absence of dissolved  $\text{CH}_4$  in the water column (part of the pond where wastewater flows above the sediment), showed that aerobic  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation can occur in the water column of the treatment system (except at the oxygen limited inlet). Laboratory testing also confirmed that aerobic  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation can occur and methanotrophs are present (albeit in small numbers) in the water column.

A model was used to determine if aerobic  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation to methanol can cause the BOD increase at the outlet. The model found that the rates ( $\text{CH}_4$  production in the sediment and  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation in the water column) needed to cause the surge in BOD was significantly higher than the maximum rates calculated from laboratory tests of

samples collected from the treatment system. Aerobic  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation was therefore unlikely to cause the BOD increase at the outlet.

It is possible that the BOD increase is due to benthic feedback (anaerobic sludge layer becomes buoyant, suddenly releasing soluble compounds into the aerobic water column of a pond). The BOD increase experienced at the outlet followed similar characteristics associated with benthic feedback (event was random, occurred at a pond with an oxygen limited sludge layer and aerobic water column). If the cause of the BOD increase needs to be determined in the future, further investigation into benthic feedback is recommended.

To conclude, aerobic  $\text{CH}_4$  oxidation to methanol can occur in the treatment system, but is unlikely to cause the BOD increase at the outlet of the treatment system.

The technical capabilities and knowledge developed during the project will likely benefit those in the pulp mill industry. Methods and techniques have been developed to investigate the generation and fate of  $\text{CH}_4$  within a pulp mill aerated pond.

## Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Benoit Guieysse, Professor Andy Shilton and Kim McGrouther for their support and assistance during this Masters thesis. Your knowledge and expertise were invaluable.

I thank the staff at Scion, especially Dr Daniel Gapes and Dr James Strong for their assistance and sharing their knowledge in areas regarding anaerobic CH<sub>4</sub> production and CH<sub>4</sub> cycling in aquatic environments. I would also like to thank Sarah Addison for her help on the FISH analysis; Ben McDonald for his help on the TOGA system; Keryn Tutt for her help in the methanol and VFA sample preparation and analysis and Alison Slade for initiating the project with the mill and my supervisors at Massey.

I would also like to thank the environmental staff at Kinleith Pulp and Paper mill, especially Yvette Hejl for her technical assistance regarding the wastewater treatment system.

I express my gratitude to Carter Holt Harvey and the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST) for their financial assistance, without which this project would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents for their love and support during this project.

# Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>V</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>IX</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>XI</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>4</b>
2.1    BIOCHEMISTRY AND MICROBIOLOGY OF AEROBIC CH <sub>4</sub> OXIDATION.....	4
2.1.1 <i>Methanogenesis</i> .....	4
2.1.2 <i>Aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> Oxidation</i> .....	5
2.1.3 <i>Reaction Pathway</i> .....	5
2.2    PARAMETERS AFFECTING CH <sub>4</sub> OXIDATION.....	7
2.2.1 <i>Temperature</i> .....	7
2.2.2 <i>pH</i> .....	7
2.2.3 <i>DO and CH<sub>4</sub> Concentrations</i> .....	8
2.2.4 <i>Inhibitory Compounds</i> .....	8
2.3    CH <sub>4</sub> AND PULP AND PAPER MILL AERATED PONDS .....	9
2.4    FATE OF CH <sub>4</sub> IN LAKES .....	9
2.4.1 <i>Sediment</i> .....	10
2.4.2 <i>Water Column</i> .....	11
2.4.3 <i>Emission to Atmosphere</i> .....	12
2.5    LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY .....	12
<b>3 METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>14</b>
3.1    SAMPLE COLLECTION AND PREPARATION .....	14
3.1.1 <i>Sites</i> .....	14
3.1.2 <i>CH<sub>4</sub> Gas Emission</i> .....	15
3.1.3 <i>Dissolved CH<sub>4</sub></i> .....	15
3.1.4 <i>Methanol and Volatile Fatty Acids (VFAs)</i> .....	16
3.1.5 <i>Biochemical CH<sub>4</sub> Potential (BMP) Assay</i> .....	16
3.1.6 <i>Aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> Oxidation Assay</i> .....	17
3.1.7 <i>Fluorescent In Situ Hybridization (FISH)</i> .....	18
3.2    ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES .....	18

3.2.1	<i>Gas Composition</i> .....	18
3.2.2	<i>Total Suspended Solids (TSS) and Volatile Suspended Solids (VSS)</i> ..	19
3.2.3	<i>Methanol and VFAs</i> .....	19
3.2.4	<i>Temperature and DO Measurement</i> .....	19
3.2.5	<i>FISH</i> .....	20
3.2.6	<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	20
<b>4</b>	<b>RESULTS &amp; DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>21</b>
4.1	WASTEWATER CHARACTERISTICS .....	21
4.1.1	<i>DO Concentration</i> .....	22
4.1.2	<i>Temperature</i> .....	23
4.1.3	<i>Methanol and Volatile Fatty Acids (VFA) Concentration</i> .....	24
4.2	CH <sub>4</sub> PRODUCTION IN THE TREATMENT SYSTEM.....	25
4.2.1	<i>CH<sub>4</sub> Gas Emission from Pond Surface to Atmosphere</i> .....	25
4.2.2	<i>Dissolved CH<sub>4</sub> Concentration in the Water Column of the Treatment System</i> .....	26
4.2.3	<i>Biochemical CH<sub>4</sub> Potential (BMP) Assays</i> .....	28
4.3	EVIDENCE OF AEROBIC CH <sub>4</sub> OXIDATION IN THE TREATMENT SYSTEM .....	29
4.3.1	<i>Aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> Oxidation Potential Assay</i> .....	30
4.3.2	<i>FISH Analysis</i> .....	33
4.4	FATE OF CH <sub>4</sub> IN THE TREATMENT SYSTEM.....	34
4.5	POSSIBILITY OF AEROBIC CH <sub>4</sub> OXIDATION INCREASING BOD LOAD .....	37
4.5.1	<i>Objectives</i> .....	37
4.5.2	<i>Assumptions</i> .....	38
4.5.3	<i>Explanation of Model Rate Calculations</i> .....	40
4.5.4	<i>Explanation of Experimental Rate Calculations Used to Compare with the Model</i> .....	42
4.5.5	<i>Model Results</i> .....	43
4.5.6	<i>Uncertainty Analysis</i> .....	45
4.6	ALTERNATIVE CAUSES TO THE INCREASED BOD LOAD AT THE OUTLET .....	46
<b>5</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>FUTURE WORK</b> .....	<b>49</b>
6.1	BENTHIC FEEDBACK MONITORING .....	49
6.2	CH <sub>4</sub> GAS EMISSION MONITORING.....	49
<b>7</b>	<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>52</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>59</b>

8.1	CALCULATIONS .....	59
8.1.1	<i>CH<sub>4</sub> Gas Emission Rate Calculations</i> .....	59
8.1.2	<i>Dissolved CH<sub>4</sub> Concentration Calculations</i> .....	61
8.1.3	<i>Production/Consumption Rates for CH<sub>4</sub> Oxidation Assays</i> .....	65
8.1.4	<i>Process Model Calculations</i> .....	66
8.2	EFFECT OF SEASONAL CHANGES TO CH <sub>4</sub> GAS EMISSION AND DISSOLVED CH <sub>4</sub> CONCENTRATION .....	72
8.3	POTENTIAL CH <sub>4</sub> OXIDATION ASSAY CONTROLS .....	73
8.3.1	<i>Water Column Controls</i> .....	73
8.3.2	<i>Sediment Controls</i> .....	74
8.4	METHODS .....	75
8.4.1	<i>BMP Measurements</i> .....	75
8.4.2	<i>Methanol &amp; VFA Method</i> .....	75
8.4.3	<i>FISH Method</i> .....	77

## List of Figures

Figure 1-1: Schematic diagram of Kinleith wastewater treatment system.....	1
Figure 1-2: Outlet BOD increases with no corresponding increases in Inlet BOD.....	2
Figure 2-1: Aerobic CH <sub>4</sub> oxidation reaction pathway.....	6
Figure 2-2: Different water column layers in a lake .....	8
Figure 3-1: Sampling site locations .....	14
Figure 3-2: Surface gas collectors.....	15
Figure 4-1: Boxplot example .....	21
Figure 4-2: DO concentration for the water column and sediment of the five sampling sites .....	23
Figure 4-3: Sediment and water column temperature of the five sampling sites .....	24
Figure 4-4: Boxplot of total CH <sub>4</sub> gas emission rates for the five sampling sites.....	25
Figure 4-5: Dissolved CH <sub>4</sub> profile of Pond 19.....	27
Figure 4-6: Boxplot of dissolved CH <sub>4</sub> concentration at the P19 In, P19 Middle, P19 Out sampling sites .....	27
Figure 4-7: Cumulative CH <sub>4</sub> production for sediment samples .....	28
Figure 4-8: Gas concentrations for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) water column samples during the aerobic CH <sub>4</sub> oxidation assay.....	31
Figure 4-9: Production/consumption rates for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) water column samples during the aerobic CH <sub>4</sub> oxidation assay .....	31
Figure 4-10: Gas concentrations for P19 Middle (left) and P23 Out (right) sediment samples during the aerobic CH <sub>4</sub> oxidation assay.....	32
Figure 4-11: Production/consumption rates for P19 Middle (left) and P23 Out sediment samples during the aerobic CH <sub>4</sub> oxidation assay.....	33
Figure 4-12: EUB mix probing (left), probing for Type I methanotrophs (centre), Probes combined (right) during FISH analysis of P19 In sample .....	34
Figure 4-13: Overview diagram of the monitoring results from the treatment system ..	36
Figure 4-14: Process diagram used for the model showing the likely fate of CH <sub>4</sub> in the treatment system.....	38
Figure 8-1: CH <sub>4</sub> gas emission rates for the five sampling sites during different seasons .....	72
Figure 8-2: Dissolved CH <sub>4</sub> concentration for the sampling sites where dissolved CH <sub>4</sub> was detected during different seasons .....	72

Figure 8-3: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation assay for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) N<sub>2</sub>+O<sub>2</sub> control ..... 73

Figure 8-4: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation assay for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) NaN<sub>3</sub> control ..... 73

Figure 8-5: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation assay for P19 In and P19 Middle blanks. NaN<sub>3</sub>+H<sub>2</sub>O blank (left) and H<sub>2</sub>O Blank (right) ..... 73

Figure 8-6: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation assay for P19 Middle sediment N<sub>2</sub> + O<sub>2</sub> control (left) and NaN<sub>3</sub> control (right) ..... 74

Figure 8-7: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation assay for P19 Middle sediment NaN<sub>3</sub> & water blank (left) and H<sub>2</sub>O blank (right) ..... 74

Figure 8-8: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation assay for P23 Out sediment N<sub>2</sub> + O<sub>2</sub> control (left) and NaN<sub>3</sub> control (right) ..... 74

Figure 8-9: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH<sub>4</sub> oxidation assay for P23 Out NaN<sub>3</sub> + H<sub>2</sub>O blank ..... 75

## List of Tables

Table 4-1: Comparison of CH <sub>4</sub> gas emission rates observed from the treatment system to literature values.....	26
Table 4-2: CH <sub>4</sub> production rate and ultimate CH <sub>4</sub> potential for the sediments collected from the five sampling sites.....	29
Table 4-3: Bubble to water column CH <sub>4</sub> transfer according to bubble diameter.....	41
Table 4-4: Comparison of rates predicted by the model to the experimental and observed rates from testing and monitoring.....	44
Table 4-5: The effect of changes to active sediment thickness to the sediment CH <sub>4</sub> production rate.....	45
Table 6-1: Estimated CH <sub>4</sub> gas emission cost for the treatment system .....	50
Table 6-2: Comparison of GHG emission costs for the P19 aerators and CH <sub>4</sub> gas emissions for the treatment system.....	50
Table 8-1: Example of CH <sub>4</sub> gas emission rate calculation .....	61
Table 8-2: Example of dissolved CH <sub>4</sub> concentration calculation .....	64
Table 8-3: Example of consumption/production rate calculation.....	66
Table 8-4: Example of maximum sediment CH <sub>4</sub> production rate calculation.....	67
Table 8-5: Example of CH <sub>4</sub> consumption rate calculation.....	68
Table 8-6: Example of CH <sub>4</sub> gas bubble transfer to the water column calculation .....	70
Table 8-7: Example of dissolved CH <sub>4</sub> consumption rate calculation .....	71