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

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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 (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 (CO$_2$). The overall objectives of this project therefore were:

- To determine if the biosynthesis of CH$_4$ can occur in the treatment system
- To determine if the subsequent biological aerobic 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 CH$_4$ was formed in the pond sediments across the entire treatment system (with rates significantly higher near the inlet). CH$_4$ is therefore available in the treatment system for aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation.

The presence of aerobic conditions and the absence of dissolved CH$_4$ in the water column (part of the pond where wastewater flows above the sediment), showed that aerobic 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 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 CH$_4$ oxidation to methanol can cause the BOD increase at the outlet. The model found that the rates (CH$_4$ production in the sediment and 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 CH₄ 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 CH₄ 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 CH₄ within a pulp mill aerated pond.
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# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................... III

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................... V

LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................... IX

LIST OF TABLES ......................................................................................................... XI

1 INTRODUCTION .....................................................................................................1

2 LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................................4

  2.1 BIOCHEMISTRY AND MICROBIOLOGY OF AEROBIC CH₄ OXIDATION .................4
      2.1.1 Methanogenesis ....................................................................................4
      2.1.2 Aerobic CH₄ Oxidation .......................................................................5
      2.1.3 Reaction Pathway ..............................................................................5

  2.2 PARAMETERS AFFECTING CH₄ OXIDATION ......................................................7
      2.2.1 Temperature .....................................................................................7
      2.2.2 pH .....................................................................................................7
      2.2.3 DO and CH₄ Concentrations ...............................................................8
      2.2.4 Inhibitory Compounds .......................................................................8

  2.3 CH₄ AND PULP AND PAPER MILL AERATED PONDS ...........................................9

  2.4 FATE OF CH₄ IN LAKES ...................................................................................9
      2.4.1 Sediment ..........................................................................................10
      2.4.2 Water Column ..................................................................................11
      2.4.3 Emission to Atmosphere .................................................................12

  2.5 LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY ....................................................................12

3 METHODOLOGY ....................................................................................................14

  3.1 SAMPLE COLLECTION AND PREPARATION ....................................................14
      3.1.1 Sites ..................................................................................................14
      3.1.2 CH₄ Gas Emission .............................................................................15
      3.1.3 Dissolved CH₄ ..................................................................................15
      3.1.4 Methanol and Volatile Fatty Acids (VFAs) .........................................16
      3.1.5 Biochemical CH₄ Potential (BMP) Assay .........................................16
      3.1.6 Aerobic CH₄ Oxidation Assay ...........................................................17
      3.1.7 Fluorescent In Situ Hybridization (FISH) ...........................................18

  3.2 ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES ..........................................................................18
8.1 CALCULATIONS .............................................................................................59
  8.1.1 CH₄ Gas Emission Rate Calculations...................................................59
  8.1.2 Dissolved CH₄ Concentration Calculations...........................................61
  8.1.3 Production/Consumption Rates for CH₄ Oxidation Assays...................65
  8.1.4 Process Model Calculations.................................................................66
8.2 EFFECT OF SEASONAL CHANGES TO CH₄ GAS EMISSION AND DISSOLVED CH₄
  CONCENTRATION......................................................................................................72
8.3 POTENTIAL CH₄ OXIDATION ASSAY CONTROLS ...............................................73
  8.3.1 Water Column Controls........................................................................73
  8.3.2 Sediment Controls ...............................................................................74
8.4 METHODS .....................................................................................................75
  8.4.1 BMP Measurements ............................................................................75
  8.4.2 Methanol & VFA Method......................................................................75
  8.4.3 FISH Method........................................................................................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 CH₄ 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 CH₄ gas emission rates for the five sampling sites........ 25
Figure 4-5: Dissolved CH₄ profile of Pond 19......................................................... 27
Figure 4-6: Boxplot of dissolved CH₄ concentration at the P19 In, P19 Middle, P19 Out sampling sites ........................................................................................................ 27
Figure 4-7: Cumulative CH₄ production for sediment samples ................... 28
Figure 4-8: Gas concentrations for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) water column samples during the aerobic CH₄ oxidation assay.............................. 31
Figure 4-9: Production/consumption rates for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) water column samples during the aerobic CH₄ oxidation assay................. 31
Figure 4-10: Gas concentrations for P19 Middle (left) and P23 Out (right) sediment samples during the aerobic CH₄ oxidation assay................................... 32
Figure 4-11: Production/consumption rates for P19 Middle (left) and P23 Out sediment samples during the aerobic CH₄ 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 CH₄ in the treatment system................................................. 38
Figure 8-1: CH₄ gas emission rates for the five sampling sites during different seasons .......................................................................................................................... 72
Figure 8-2: Dissolved CH₄ concentration for the sampling sites where dissolved CH₄ was detected during different seasons .............................................. 72
Figure 8-3: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation assay for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) N$_2$+O$_2$ control .................................................................73
Figure 8-4: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation assay for P19 In (left) and P19 Middle (right) NaN$_3$ control .................................................................73
Figure 8-5: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation assay for P19 In and P19 Middle blanks. NaN$_3$+H$_2$O blank (left) and H$_2$O Blank (right) .........................73
Figure 8-6: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation assay for P19 Middle sediment N$_2$ + O$_2$ control (left) and NaN$_3$ control (right) ...........................................74
Figure 8-7: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation assay for P19 Middle sediment NaN$_3$ & water blank (left) and H$_2$O blank (right) ...............................74
Figure 8-8: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation assay for P23 Out sediment N$_2$ + O$_2$ control (left) and NaN$_3$ control (right) ...........................................74
Figure 8-9: Gas concentrations during aerobic CH$_4$ oxidation assay for P23 Out NaN$_3$ + H$_2$O blank ........................................................................................................75
List of Tables

Table 4-1: Comparison of CH₄ gas emission rates observed from the treatment system to literature values................................................................................................................. 26
Table 4-2: CH₄ production rate and ultimate CH₄ potential for the sediments collected from the five sampling sites.............................................................................................................................. 29
Table 4-3: Bubble to water column CH₄ 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 CH₄ production rate................................................................................................................................. 45
Table 6-1: Estimated CH₄ gas emission cost for the treatment system ....................... 50
Table 6-2: Comparison of GHG emission costs for the P19 aerators and CH₄ gas emissions for the treatment system................................................................................................. 50
Table 8-1: Example of CH₄ gas emission rate calculation ........................................... 61
Table 8-2: Example of dissolved CH₄ concentration calculation .................................. 64
Table 8-3: Example of consumption/production rate calculation.............................. 66
Table 8-4: Example of maximum sediment CH₄ production rate calculation .......... 67
Table 8-5: Example of CH₄ consumption rate calculation.......................................... 68
Table 8-6: Example of CH₄ gas bubble transfer to the water column calculation ....... 70
Table 8-7: Example of dissolved CH₄ consumption rate calculation ....................... 71