Biostimulation of Iron Reduction and Uranium Immobilization: Microbial and Mineralogical Controls

Joel E. Kostka1, Lainie Petrie1, Nadia North1, David L. Balkwill2, Joseph W. Stucki3, and Lee Kerkhof4

1Department of Oceanography, 2College of Medicine, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, 32306
3 Natural Resources and Environ. Sciences Department, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana, IL
4 Inst. of Marine and Coastal Sciences, Rutgers Univ., New Brunswick, NJ

Abstract

The overall objective of our project is to understand the microbial and geochemical mechanisms controlling the reduction and immobilization of U(VI) during biostimulation in subsurface sediments of the Field Research Center (FRC) which are cocontaminated with uranium and nitrate. The focus will be on activity of microbial populations (metal- and nitrate-reducing bacteria) and iron minerals which are likely to make strong contributions to the fate of uranium during in situ bioremediation. The project will: 1) quantify the relationships between active members of the microbial communities, iron mineralogy, and nitrogen transformations in the field and in laboratory incubations under a variety of biostimulation conditions, 2) purify and physiologically characterize new model metal-reducing bacteria isolated from moderately acidophilic FRC subsurface sediments, and 3) elucidate the biotic and abiotic mechanisms by which FRC aluminosilicate clay minerals are reduced and dissolved under environmental conditions resembling those during biostimulation. Active microbial communities will be assessed using quantitative molecular techniques along with geochemical measurements to determine the different terminal electron-accepting pathways. Iron minerals will be characterized using a suite of physical, spectroscopic, and wet chemical methods. Monitoring the activity and composition of the denitrifier community in parallel with denitrification intermediates during nitrate removal will provide a better understanding of the indirect effects of nitrate reduction on uranium speciation. Through quantification of the activity of specific microbial populations and an in-depth characterization of Fe minerals likely to catalyze U sorption/precipitation, we will provide important inputs for development of in situ U bioremediation strategies.

In collaboration with Jack Istok and Lee Krumholz, we have begun to study the change in microbial community composition of FRC sediments during in situ biostimulation in single well push-pull tests. Microbial communities were stimulated in the acidic subsurface via pH neutralization and addition of electron donor to wells. Examination of sediment chemistry in cores sampled immediately adjacent to treated wells revealed that sediment pH increased substantially (by 1-2 pH units), while nitrate was largely depleted. Following the in situ biostimulation, previously cultured metal-reducing delta-Proteobacteria 16S rRNA gene sequences substantially increased from 5% to nearly 40% of clone libraries. Quantitative PCR revealed that Geobacter-type 16S rRNA gene sequences increased in biostimulated sediments by one to two orders of magnitude at two of the four sites tested, thereby corroborating information obtained from clone libraries, and indicating that members of the delta-Proteobacteria (including Anaeromyxobacter dehalogenans-related and Geobacter-related organisms) are important metal-reducing bacteria in FRC sediments. Many of the metal-reducers detected were closely affiliated with cultured organisms (Geobacter, Anaeromyxobacter, Desulfotobacterium) capable of coupling the reduction of nitrate, iron, or halogenated compounds to growth.

Conclusions

Iron Mineralogy
- Iron in the FRC subsurface is distributed 64.5% in iron oxide and 35.5% in silicate phases (Fig. 1).
- Silicate phases were partially reduced and iron oxides were dissolved during biostimulation (Fig. 2).
- Reliable Mossbauer results for iron phase distribution can be obtained only at 4 K.

Microbial Community Analysis
- 16S rRNA gene sequences affiliated with the delta-Proteobacteria increased from 5% to 40% of clone libraries during biostimulation.
- Quantitative PCR revealed that Geobacter-type sequences increased by one to two orders of magnitude after biostimulation.
- Many of the metal-reducers detected were closely affiliated with cultured organisms (Geobacter, Anaeromyxobacter, Desulfotobacterium) capable of coupling the reduction of nitrate, iron, or halogenated compounds to growth.

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