Partitioning Nitrous Oxide (N₂O) Emissions from Ammonia Oxidizing Bacteria (AOB) and Ammonia Oxidizing Archaea (AOA) in Corn and Switchgrass Ecosystems

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Project Goals:

Our goal in this project is to understand the relative importance of ammonia oxidizing bacteria (AOB) and ammonia oxidizing archaea (AOA) as sources of nitrate and nitrifier-derived nitrous oxide (N₂O) in potential bioenergy cropping systems. In particular we aim to understand how AOA and AOB respond to nitrogen fertilizer in switchgrass vs. corn cropping systems. We use 1-octyne, a recently developed and tested chemical inhibitor of AOB (Taylor et al., 2013, Taylor et al., 2015) to distinguish activities and emissions from AOA vs. AOB.

Abstract:

Nitrous oxide (N₂O) is a potent greenhouse gas with a global warming potential 300 times higher than CO₂. The atmospheric N₂O abundance has increased from a preindustrial baseline of 270 to 329 ppb, as of 2016 (http://cdiac.ornl.gov, accessed on December 20, 2016), largely due to human activities. N₂O also reacts with electronically excited oxygen atoms O (¹D) in the stratosphere to form nitric oxide (NO), which catalyzes ozone depletion (Portmann et al., 2012). Gross anthropogenic N₂O emissions of 6.2 Tg N₂O-N yr⁻¹ are dominated by agriculture (Davidson and Kanter, 2014). As agricultural soils contribute N₂O more than any other anthropogenic components, understanding sources of N₂O from agricultural soils is critically important for developing N₂O mitigation practices (Paustian et al., 2016).

Soil N₂O emissions mainly result from two microbial processes including denitrification and nitrification. Nitrification converts ammonia (NH₃) to nitrite (NO₂⁻) and nitrate (NO₃⁻), with N₂O as a byproduct (Robertson and Groffman, 2015). Nitrification is performed mainly by two taxa: ammonia oxidizing bacteria (AOB) and ammonia oxidizing archaea (AOA). Recent studies have confirmed that both AOA and AOB are able to produce N₂O (Stieglmeier et al., 2014). However, the relative contribution of AOA and AOB to N₂O is still unclear. Our understanding of the mechanisms regulating N₂O production from AOA and AOB is hindered mainly by the difficulties of isolating pure cultured ammonia oxidizers. For example, there is currently only one pure culture of soil AOA (Nitrososphaera viennensis EN76) available for physiological studies.
In this study, we examined the seasonal responses of AOA and AOB following nitrogen fertilizer application to annual (corn) and perennial (switchgrass) cropping systems. We took soil samples before and 1, 5, 13, 21, and 42 days after fertilization in late fall of 2015 and spring and summer of 2016. Using 1-octyne as a selective inhibitor targeting AOB in short-term (24h) incubations, we were able to separate the N$_2$O and NO$_3^-$ contributed by AOA and AOB, respectively.

Our results show that: 1) In both corn and switchgrass ecosystems, AOB were the main contributors to nitrate accumulation in spring and summer (60-75% of accumulated nitrate) while in late fall AOA and AOB contributed equally; 2) AOB dominated N$_2$O emissions (> 80%) in spring and summer in both corn and switchgrass ecosystems, but in late fall AOA and AOB contributed equally to N$_2$O in corn while AOB were the major N$_2$O contributors (60%) in switchgrass ecosystems; 3) AOB but not AOA produced more nitrate in response to fertilization in both corn and switchgrass; the AOB response lasted 42 days; and 4) both AOA and AOB produced more N$_2$O in response to fertilization in corn but not in switchgrass.

We conclude that AOA and AOB have different responses to nitrogen fertilization in different cropping systems. In most seasons more nitrate and N$_2$O was produced by AOB than AOA, and AOB also tended to be more responsive to fertilizer additions.

References

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