



## Effect of different ammonia sources on acetoclastic and hydrogenotrophic methanogens

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## Accepted Manuscript

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1 **Effect of different ammonia sources on acetoclastic and**  
2 **hydrogenotrophic methanogens**

3

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## 13 Abstract

14 Ammonium chloride ( $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ ) was usually used as a model ammonia source to simulate  
15 ammonia inhibition during anaerobic digestion (AD) of nitrogen-rich feedstocks. However,  
16 ammonia in AD originates mainly from degradation of proteins, urea and nucleic acids, which  
17 is distinct from  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ . Thus, in this study, the inhibitory effect of a “natural” ammonia  
18 source (urea) and  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ , on four pure methanogenic strains (aceticlastic: *Methanosarcina*  
19 *thermophila*, *Methanosarcina barkeri*; hydrogenotrophic: *Methanoculleus bourgensis*,  
20 *Methanoculleus thermophilus*), was assessed under mesophilic ( $37^\circ\text{C}$ ) and thermophilic ( $55^\circ\text{C}$ )  
21 conditions. The results showed that urea hydrolysis increased pH significantly to unsuitable  
22 levels for methanogenic growth, while  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  had a negligible effect on pH. After adjusting  
23 initial pH to 7 and 8, urea was significantly stronger inhibitor with longer lag phases to  
24 methanogenesis compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ . Overall, urea seems to be more toxic on both aceticlastic  
25 and hydrogenotrophic methanogens compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  under the same total and free  
26 ammonia levels.

## 28 Keywords

29 Ammonia inhibition; Ammonium chloride; Anaerobic digestion; Pure strain; Urea.

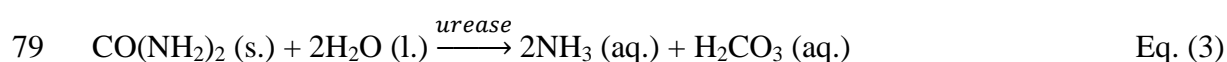
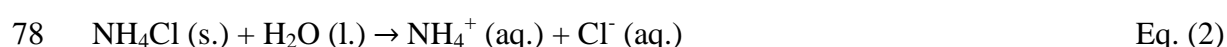
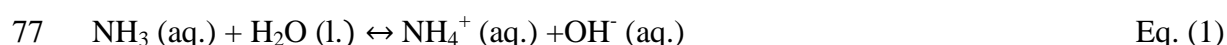
## 30 1 Introduction

31 Biogas (a mixture of CH<sub>4</sub> and CO<sub>2</sub>) is an attractive renewable energy (Holm-Nielsen et al.,  
32 2009), which is formed during anaerobic digestion (AD) of different biomasses. As one of the  
33 most promising and widely used green technologies, AD is a complex biological process with  
34 different microorganisms involved, which can reduce the waste pollution and offset part of the  
35 energy usage (Chynoweth et al., 2001). However, it is reported that some potential substrates  
36 are toxic to AD process by inhibiting the microorganisms' activity (Chen et al., 2008). Among  
37 these substrates, nitrogen-rich substrates stand out, due to the ammonia formation during their  
38 degradation. A low ammonia concentration (< 200 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N L<sup>-1</sup>) is beneficial to AD  
39 process; nevertheless, relatively high ammonia levels (> 2000 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N L<sup>-1</sup>) would inhibit  
40 AD, causing instability and even process failure (Liu and Sung, 2002). Total ammonia (TAN)  
41 in aqueous solutions is the sum of ammonium ions (NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>) and free ammonia (FAN, NH<sub>3</sub>).  
42 The NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup> and NH<sub>3</sub> exist in an equilibrium (Eq. (1)), which is affected by the temperature and  
43 the pH (Emerson et al., 1975). Specifically, FAN, which was suggested to be the most toxic  
44 form of ammonia (Massé et al., 2014), increases along with temperature and pH.  
45 Methanogenesis, the last step of AD process, is more sensitive to ammonia than hydrolysis,  
46 acidogenesis and acetogenesis steps (Yenigün and Demirel, 2013). Furthermore, in most of  
47 the studies, hydrogenotrophic methanogens were reported to be more robust to ammonia  
48 toxicity than acetoclastic methanogens (Schnürer et al., 1999; Werner et al., 2014; Dai et al.,  
49 2017). However, controversial results can also be found (Calli et al., 2005; Karakashev et al.,  
50 2005).

51 Considering ammonia inhibition is such a serious and highly debated topic, a great  
52 number of studies focusing on the impact of ammonia levels and on inhibition mechanism  
53 have been conducted in different reactor types (Angelidaki and Ahring, 1993; Sung and Liu,  
54 2003; Cuetos et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2016). As a result, it is reviewed that

55 50% inhibition was caused by TAN concentrations ranging from 1700 to 14000 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N  
 56 L<sup>-1</sup> depending on different experimental conditions (Chen et al., 2008). However, in most of  
 57 the aforementioned studies, ammonium chloride (NH<sub>4</sub>Cl) was used as the inhibitor (ammonia  
 58 source), and only few experiments can be found using other ammonia sources (Sterling et al.,  
 59 2001; Westerholm et al., 2012; Dai et al., 2017). As a salt, NH<sub>4</sub>Cl can dissociate immediately  
 60 after addition into aqueous solutions and release chloride anions and ammonium cations, as  
 61 shown in Eq. (2). However, since chloride anions could also be a potential inhibitor to AD  
 62 process (Riffat and Krongthamchat, 2006; Viana et al., 2012), it is difficult to differentiate if  
 63 the inhibitory effect only comes from ammonia. Moreover, in the real AD applications, when  
 64 nitrogen-rich substrates are used as feedstocks, ammonia is usually formed by the degradation  
 65 of proteins, urea and nucleic acids (Rajagopal et al., 2013). Furthermore, urea is the main part  
 66 of animal urine besides water; thus abounds in animal slurry (e.g. poultry, mink pig, cattle)  
 67 and slaughterhouse wastewater (Møller et al., 2004). Without urease, which is the enzyme that  
 68 catalyses urea hydrolysis, urea in aqueous solutions has a negligible reaction rate constant of  
 69  $6.3 \times 10^{-9} \text{ s}^{-1}$  and a half-life of 3.5 years (Krajewska, 2009). However, urease can be  
 70 synthesized by different microorganisms, including some bacteria involved in AD process,  
 71 which can accelerate the hydrolysis of urea by nearly  $10^{14}$  times faster than the uncatalysed  
 72 decomposition (Ciurli et al., 1999). As shown in Eq. (3), the direct hydrolysed product of urea  
 73 is the most toxic ammonia form (i.e. FAN) (Zimmer, 2000). In addition, hydrolysis of urea  
 74 causes sudden pH increase, which could negatively affect the AD process (Mobley et al., 1995;  
 75 Ciurli et al., 1999).

76



80

81 Thus, in order to separate the inhibition only caused by ammonia and simulate this  
82 process closer to realistic conditions, urea was used as ammonia source in reactors fed with  
83 cattle manure (Sterling et al., 2001). However, among the limited studies using urea as  
84 ammonia source, nothing can be found about its effect on methanogens. Considering  
85 methanogenesis is the most sensitive step of AD process (Chen et al., 2008), it is important to  
86 understand the urea effect on different methanogens. In addition, to date, there are no studies  
87 assessing simultaneously the effect of  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  and urea on methanogenic archaea.

88 Therefore, the main aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of two different  
89 ammonia sources on four pure methanogenic strains (i.e. two acetoclastic and two  
90 hydrogenotrophic), under mesophilic ( $37^\circ\text{C}$ ) and thermophilic ( $55^\circ\text{C}$ ) conditions. To fulfil this  
91 aim, firstly, the effect on pH caused by the  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  dissociation and urea hydrolysis in AD  
92 batch reactors was investigated. Secondly, under controlled pH conditions (i.e. 7 and 8), five  
93 different TAN levels (i.e. ten different FAN levels) were applied on each pure methanogenic  
94 strain to evaluate the effect of the two ammonia sources on the cultures, independently of the  
95 pH.

## 96 **2 Materials and methods**

### 97 **2.1 Pure strains, ammonia sources and enzyme**

98 Four pure methanogenic strains (acetoclastic: *Methanosarcina thermophila* TM-1 DSM  
99 No.1825 and *Methanosarcina barkeri* MS DSM No. 800; hydrogenotrophic: *Methanoculleus*  
100 *thermophilus* CR-1 DSM No. 2373 and *Methanoculleus bourgensis* MS2<sup>T</sup> DSM No. 3045)  
101 were purchased from DSMZ GmbH Company and used throughout the study. *M. thermophila*  
102 and *M. thermophilus* are thermophilic, while *M. barkeri* and *M. bourgensis* are mesophilic  
103 methanogens. All the pure strains were cultivated in the specific growth media suggested by

104 DSMZ GmbH Company. Specifically, the growth media used were medium 120 (DSMZ,  
105 2014a) for *M. thermophila*, medium 120a (DSMZ, 2014b) for *M. barkeri*, medium 141  
106 (DSMZ, 2017) for *M. thermophilus*, and medium 332 (DSMZ, 2014c) for *M. bourgensis*. The  
107 carbon sources that were used for each strain were: acetate and methanol for *M. thermophila*;  
108 CO<sub>2</sub> for *M. thermophilus*; methanol for *M. barkeri*; and formate and CO<sub>2</sub> for *M. bourgensis*.  
109 Ammonium chloride (Sigma-Aldrich, CAS no. 12125-02-9) and urea (Sigma-Aldrich,  
110 CAS no. 57-13-6) were used as ammonia sources for the main experiment. Urease (Type IX,  
111 Sigma-Aldrich, CAS no. 9002-13-5) from *Canavalia ensiformis* (jack bean) seeds was used as  
112 enzyme to hydrolyse urea. A buffer solution consisted of 0.2 M sodium phosphate with pH  
113 7.3 was prepared for the dissolution of the enzyme before use.

## 114 2.2 Experimental setup

115 Two batch experimental assays were performed in this study to investigate the effect of  
116 different ammonia sources on pH fluctuation of the reactors (Assay I) and on the  
117 methanogenic process efficiency (Assay II). Before the experiments started, the pure strains,  
118 bought from DSMZ (DSMZ GmbH Company, Germany), were cultivated according to its  
119 corresponding cultivation protocols (DSMZ, 2014c; DSMZ, 2014b; DSMZ, 2014a; DSMZ,  
120 2017). After several (4-6) generations, the cultures were used as inocula in the two  
121 experimental assays of the current study with a 20/80 (v/v) inoculum to medium ratio  
122 throughout the experiment. Meanwhile, urease was added to all batch reactors regardless of  
123 the ammonia source. Furthermore, all the experiments were conducted in triplicates.

### 124 2.2.1 Assay I: Effect on pH

125 All the pure strains were tested under different ammonia levels as depicted in Table 1.  
126 Serum vials were used with 40 and 118 mL working and total volume, respectively. After  
127 adding the corresponding medium, each vial was closed with butyl rubber stopper and sealed  
128 with aluminium caps, then flushed with a mixture gas of N<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> (80/20, v/v) to create anoxic



129 conditions and autoclaved to provide sterile conditions. Other solutions that could not be  
130 autoclaved according to the instructions ( $\text{NaHCO}_3$ ,  $\text{Na}_2\text{CO}_3$ , Vitamin, Methanol, L-cysteine-  
131  $\text{HCl}\cdot\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and  $\text{Na}_2\text{S}\cdot 9\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ) were introduced by using sterilized, 0.2  $\mu\text{m}$  pore size, Minisart<sup>®</sup>  
132 NML Syringe Filters (Sartorius Stedim Biotech GmbH, Germany) to avoid any contamination.  
133  $\text{Na}_2\text{S}\cdot 9\text{H}_2\text{O}$  solution was added as a reducing agent after inoculation. In addition, pure  $\text{H}_2$   
134 (62.4 mL) and  $\text{CO}_2$  (15.6 mL) were added in the headspace of the batch reactors of the  
135 hydrogenotrophic strains. Afterwards, all the batch reactors were incubated at their  
136 corresponding temperatures ( $37\pm 1^\circ\text{C}$  for mesophilic and  $55\pm 1^\circ\text{C}$  for thermophilic). The pH  
137 was measured after the urea hydrolysis finished (approximately 20 hours after the incubation  
138 stated based on preliminary hydrolysis test, and the details were provided in the E-supplement  
139 file).

#### 140 **2.2.2 Assay II: Effect on methanogenesis**

141 In this assay, two different ammonia sources with five different TAN and ten different  
142 FAN levels (as shown in Table 2) were tested on all the methanogens. For all the strains,  
143 serum vials with 40 mL working volume was used, while total volume of 245 mL was used  
144 for *M. thermophila* and *M. thermophilus* cultivation, and total volume of 118 mL was used for  
145 *M. barkeri* and *M. bourgensis*. The reactors were closed with rubber stoppers, sealed with  
146 aluminium caps, and flushed with a mixture  $\text{N}_2/\text{CO}_2$  gas (80/20, v/v) after the addition of  
147 medium. All the reactors containing medium were autoclaved before inoculation. Chemical  
148 solutions, which could not be autoclaved, were added through sterilized filters afterwards. In  
149 addition, for hydrogenotrophic *M. thermophilus* and *M. barkeri*,  $\text{H}_2/\text{CO}_2$  (80/20, v/v) mixture  
150 gas was injected into the headspace of the reactor to form 1 bar overpressure. Furthermore, a  
151 pH adjustment strategy (the details were provided in the E-supplement file) was performed to  
152 ensure the same pH levels (7 and 8) for each individual experiment using 4 M HCl and/ or  
153 NaOH solutions. Specifically, for reactors with  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ , where the dissociation happened

154 immediately, pH adjustment was performed before the incubation started. However, for  
155 reactors containing urea and the hydrolysis happened slowly, the pH was adjusted several  
156 times until the hydrolysis finished (the details were provided in the E-supplement file). Finally,  
157 all the batch reactors were incubated in their corresponding temperatures ( $37\pm 1^\circ\text{C}$  for  
158 mesophilic and  $55\pm 1^\circ\text{C}$  for thermophilic).

### 159 **2.3 Analytical methods**

160 Methane accumulation in the headspace of the batch reactors was determined by a gas  
161 chromatographer (Trace 1310 GC-TCD, Thermo Fisher, Denmark) equipped with a  
162 TracePLOT TG-BOND Q 26004–6030 column (30 m x 0.32 mm I.D., film thickness 10  $\mu\text{m}$ )  
163 (Thermo Fisher), and helium was used as carrier gas (Tian et al., 2017). The pH of each  
164 reactor was measured with PHM99 LAB pH meter (Radiometer TM).

### 165 **2.4 Calculations and statistics**

#### 166 **2.4.1 Free ammonia**

167 The free ammonia concentration was calculated based on the following equation (Siles et  
168 al., 2010):

$$169 \quad \text{FAN} = \frac{\text{TAN}}{1 + \frac{10^{-\text{pH}}}{K_a}} \quad \text{Eq. (1)}$$

170 where  $K_a$  is the dissociation constant affected by temperature, which equals to  $1.29 \times 10^{-9}$   
171 and  $3.91 \times 10^{-9}$  in this study for mesophilic and thermophilic condition, respectively.

#### 172 **2.4.2 Methane production inhibition**

173 The methane production inhibition was defined as the ratio of the difference between  
174 theoretical and practical methane production divided by the maximum theoretical methane  
175 production. Maximum theoretical production, for the different carbon sources in the medium,  
176 was calculated according to Angelidaki et al. (2011) and it was 122, 373 and 525  $\text{mL CH}_4 \cdot \text{g}^{-1}$

177 VS for formate, acetate and methanol. Meanwhile, for the H<sub>2</sub>/CO<sub>2</sub> mixture gas, it was  
178 calculated based on that 1 mL CH<sub>4</sub> forms from 4 mL H<sub>2</sub> and 1 mL CO<sub>2</sub>.

### 179 2.4.3 Maximum specific growth rate

180 Maximum specific growth rate ( $\mu_{\max}$ ) was calculated through the OriginLab program  
181 (OriginLab Corporation, Northampton, Massachusetts) by calculating the slope of the linear  
182 part of the semi-logarithmic graph of the methane production of the reactors versus time  
183 (Gray et al., 2009).

### 184 2.4.4 Statistical analysis

185 The OriginLab program was used for statistical analyses and data plotting. One-way and  
186 two-way ANOVA were used to evaluate the statistically differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) of ammonia  
187 inhibition under different parameters (e.g. different ammonia sources, ammonia levels and pH  
188 levels). Single outliers test was applied to the triplicate measurements if needed.

## 189 3 Results and discussion

### 190 3.1 Impact on pH from two different ammonia sources

191 The impact of urea hydrolysis and NH<sub>4</sub>Cl dissociation on pH was significantly different  
192 ( $p < 0.05$ , Fig. 1). Specifically, after urea hydrolysis completed, except for the basic TAN  
193 levels, the pH increased to around 9 for *M. thermophila*, *M. barkeri*, and *M. bourgensis*,  
194 which was outside of the pH limits (6.5-8.5) for AD process (Lay et al., 1998). This increase  
195 in pH after urea hydrolysis, was in agreement with a previous study (Udert et al., 2003) where  
196 elevated pH was observed alongside the extent of urea hydrolysis. The pH of *M. thermophilus*  
197 increased alongside the urea concentration, and it was about 8.5 at the highest TAN level  
198 (5000 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N·L<sup>-1</sup>). This different performance of *M. thermophilus* from the other strains  
199 could be explained by the stronger buffer capacity in *M. thermophilus* medium compared to  
200 the other media due to the higher NaHCO<sub>3</sub> concentration. In contrast, NH<sub>4</sub>Cl dissociation did

201 not have any significant effect on the pH of batch reactors, with a maximum pH drop of  
202 approximately 0.3 units at the highest TAN levels (10000 mg  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ ). Therefore, it  
203 seems that  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  is not a representative ammonia source to simulate ammonia inhibition in  
204 AD reactors because, contrary to urea, it does not have an analogous pH effect.

205 Meanwhile, it also can be seen that a medium with strong buffer capacity could mitigate  
206 the effect of urea hydrolysis on pH (e.g. *M. thermophilus* case); thus, it is reasonable to  
207 suspect that the pH of manure-based AD reactors (high buffer capacity) would not increase in  
208 such a great extent. At the same time, without pH adjustment, the pure strains are not expected  
209 to grow with urea (except in the basic TAN concentrations), due to the unfavourable pH levels  
210 (> 8.5). Therefore, all the following methanogenesis batch experiments in assay II, were  
211 designed with a pH adjustment strategy (adjust the initial pH level to 7 and 8, respectively) to  
212 compare the effect of the two different ammonia sources on the pure methanogenic strains,  
213 independently of the pH.

## 214 3.2 Methanogenesis performance of different methanogens

### 215 3.2.1 Aceticlastic *M. thermophile* and *M. barkeri*

216 Urea had similar or significantly higher ( $p<0.05$ ) inhibitory effect on both aceticlastic  
217 strains compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  in the majority of the tested TAN levels. For example,  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$   
218 inhibited the methane production of *M. thermophila* by 58% at 5000 mg  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$  (pH=8);  
219 at the same time, urea inhibited the same strain more than 90% at 5000 mg  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$  for  
220 pH=7 and at all TAN levels above 3000 mg  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$  for pH=8 (Fig. 2a). The different  
221 inhibition effects were also reflected on the longer lag phases at the same ammonia levels for  
222 urea compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ . To be specific, up to threefold longer lag phase periods were in urea  
223 reactors compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  reactors (Table 3). Furthermore, at lower FAN levels (< 151 mg  
224  $\text{NH}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ ),  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  of *M. thermophila* was between 0.04-0.06  $\text{h}^{-1}$  for both urea and  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$   
225 reactors coinciding with  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  values reported before (Sowers et al., 1984; Mladenovska and

226 Ahring, 2000). However,  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  reactors had significantly higher  $\mu_{\max}$  compared to urea  
227 reactor for FAN levels above  $151 \text{ mg NH}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ , which indicates a stronger inhibitory effect  
228 of urea (Fig. 2c).

229 *M. barkeri* was the most sensitive methanogenic strain to ammonia compared to all the  
230 other tested strains. Almost 100% inhibition was observed at  $64 (5000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}, \text{pH}=7)$   
231 and  $89 \text{ mg NH}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1} (7000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}, \text{pH}=7)$  for reactors with urea and with  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ ,  
232 respectively (Fig.2b). These results were in accordance to previous studies reporting 50%  
233 inhibition of *M. barkeri* growth at  $42 \text{ mg NH}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$  and more than 95% inhibition at  $88 \text{ mg}$   
234  $\text{NH}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$  (Sprott and Patel, 1986; Hajarnis and Ranade, 1993). However, although complete  
235 inhibition occurred in most ammonia levels, for FAN levels lower than  $64 \text{ mg NH}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ ,  
236 where methanogenesis was observed, urea was clearly stronger inhibitor than  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ .  
237 Furthermore, urea prolonged the lag phase up to fourfold compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  (Table 3). Even  
238 though *M. barkeri* was the most sensitive methanogenic strain tested in the present study, it  
239 had the highest  $\mu_{\max}$  of  $0.11\text{-}0.12 \text{ h}^{-1}$  (optimal conditions), which decreased alongside with the  
240 increase of ammonia levels (Fig. 2d). Similar specific growth rates ( $0.10\text{-}0.14 \text{ h}^{-1}$ ) of *M.*  
241 *barkeri* were reported by Jarrell et al. (1987) when TAN was below  $1.4 \text{ NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ , and more  
242 than 50% reduction was detected around  $4 \text{ NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ . However, no significant difference  
243 ( $p>0.05$ ) of the  $\mu_{\max}$  can be found between urea and  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  reactors.

### 244 3.2.2 Hydrogenotrophic *M. thermophilus* and *M. bourgensis*

245 Overall, hydrogenotrophic methanogens were, as expected (Werner et al., 2014), more  
246 tolerant to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  than the acetoclastic methanogens tested in the current study. Interestingly,  
247 it was also found that hydrogenotrophic methanogens were more tolerant to urea than  
248 acetoclastic methanogens. Nevertheless, similar to acetoclastic strains, urea also had a higher  
249 inhibitory effect on the hydrogenotrophic methanogens compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ . However, there  
250 was an exception for *M. thermophilus* at low TAN levels ( $< 3000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ ), where

251  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  seemed to be more toxic than urea (Fig. 3a). The reasons might be firstly, the pH of  
252 the urea reactors did not increase due to the strong buffer capacity of *M. thermophilus*  
253 medium as discussed previously; Secondly,  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  reactors suffered higher toxicity than urea  
254 reactors at the beginning because of the higher ammonia concentration from instant  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$   
255 dissociation compared to from the gradual urea hydrolysis process. However, at higher TAN  
256 levels ( $> 3000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ ), urea inhibited *M. thermophilus* significantly stronger ( $p<0.05$ )  
257 than  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ . All the *M. thermophilus* reactors had a lag phase smaller than 1.2 days (Table 4)  
258 maintaining a  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  between  $0.03\text{-}0.04 \text{ h}^{-1}$  indicating that *M. thermophilus* was able to cope  
259 with the strong ammonia toxicity. This was in agreement with Wang et al. (2015) reporting no  
260 significant drop ( $p>0.05$ ) on methane production at ammonia levels up to  $7000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$   
261 <sup>1</sup> for *M. thermophilus* with a  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  around  $0.03 \text{ h}^{-1}$ .

262 *M. bourgensis* was the most ammonia tolerant methanogenic strain tested in the current  
263 study, in which no more than 15% inhibition was observed, and independently of the  
264 ammonia sources, ammonia levels and pH levels (Fig.3b). This high tolerance was expected  
265 because *M. bourgensis* was reported (Fotidis et al., 2014) to thrive under high ammonia levels  
266 ( $5000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N L}^{-1}$ ). Moreover, Westerholm et al. (2015) observed that *M. bourgensis* was  
267 the dominant archaeon in AD reactors operated under high FAN levels ( $900 \text{ mg NH}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ ),  
268 and Wang et al. (2015) also demonstrated that *M. bourgensis* can work properly at TAN  
269 levels up to  $7000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$ . However, even with this tolerant methanogen, urea was  
270 proven more toxic than  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ , resulting in lag phases up to ten days for TAN levels above  
271  $5000 \text{ mg NH}_4^+\text{-N}\cdot\text{L}^{-1}$  (pH 8), compared to only two days lag phase for the  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  at the  
272 highest TAN levels. The same trend was observed among the specific growth rates, with  
273 significantly lower  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  for the urea reactors compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  reactors in majority of the  
274 tested ammonia levels.

### 2753 **The ammonia sources and the inhibition mechanism**

276 In general, urea was a significantly stronger inhibitor than  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  (Table 5). This could be  
277 explained by the different manners that urea and  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  introduce TAN and FAN into the  
278 reactors. Specifically,  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$ , as an easily soluble salt, can fully dissociate in aqueous phase  
279 immediately after its addition and the direct dissociative products are ammonium ions (Eq. 2),  
280 instead of the more toxic FAN form (Massé et al., 2014). On the contrary, urea, which is an  
281 organic compound, can only be hydrolysed slowly with the presence of urease, and produce  
282 directly FAN (Eq. (3)), which is the most toxic ammonia form (Zimmer, 2000). Therefore,  
283 relatively high FAN levels develop instantly after urea hydrolysis, before the final  
284  $\text{NH}_4^+ \rightleftharpoons \text{NH}_3$  equilibrium (Eq. 1) is established, driven by the pH and the temperature  
285 (Emerson et al., 1975). Compared to low FAN levels after  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  dissociation, this  
286 momentary exposure of the methanogenic cells to such high FAN concentrations after urea  
287 hydrolysis, could have a greater impact in their metabolic activity. Furthermore,  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$   
288 dissociation does not have a significant effect on the pH of the reactor and thus does not create  
289 unfavourable pH conditions for the methanogens. On contrary, urea hydrolysis without pH  
290 control could increase the pH of the reactor into unfavourable levels. Even though pH was  
291 adjusted constantly in the current experiment, until the hydrolysis of urea was completed, it  
292 was impossible to avoid a temporal pH increase during the urea hydrolysis period (details are  
293 provided in the E-supplement file). Thus the combined effect of momentary high FAN  
294 concentrations and pH increase, even for short time periods during the hydrolysis phase, is  
295 proposed as the main mechanism for the stronger inhibitory effect of urea compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$   
296 on the pure methanogenic strains tested in this study.

### 297 **4 Conclusions**

298 The current study demonstrated that urea was significantly more toxic compared to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$   
299 during AD process. Furthermore, urea hydrolysis resulted in a great pH increase to

300 unfavourable levels for methanogenic growth. However, a high buffer capacity can mitigate  
301 the pH increase and lower the ammonia toxicity from urea. Additionally, hydrogenotrophic  
302 methanogens were more tolerant, not only to  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  but also to urea, compared to acetoclastic  
303 methanogens. Finally, considering only pure strains were tested in this study, further studies  
304 in a more complex environment of real AD digesters are still needed to analyse the inhibition  
305 effect of urea.

## 306 **Appendix A. Supplementary material**

307 E-supplementary data for this work can be found in e-version of this paper online: Fig. S1.  
308 Preliminary urea hydrolysis test at different ammonia and pH levels with/ without urease  
309 under two different incubation temperatures, a) for thermophilic *M. thermophila* and b) for  
310 mesophilic *M. bourgensis*. Fig. S2. pH adjustment strategies to 7 and 8 at different urea  
311 concentrations for a) *M. thermophila*, b) *M. barkeri*, c) *M. thermophilus*, d) *M. bourgensis*

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- 429  
430  
431

432 **Figure legends**

433 **Fig. 1.** pH value after the hydrolysis of the urea and the dissolution of the  $\text{NH}_4\text{Cl}$  at different  
434 ammonia levels, a) *M. thermophila*, b) *M. barkeri*, c) *M. thermophilus*, d) *M. bourgensis*

435 **Fig. 2.** Final methane production inhibition and  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  of *M. thermophila* and *M. barkeri* under  
436 different ammonia sources, ammonia levels and pH levels, a) inhibition of *M.*

437 *thermophila*, b) inhibition of *M. barkeri*, c)  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  of *M. thermophila*, d)  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  of *M.*

438 *barkeri*.

439 **Fig. 3.** Final methane production inhibition and  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  of *M. thermophilus* and *M. bourgensis*

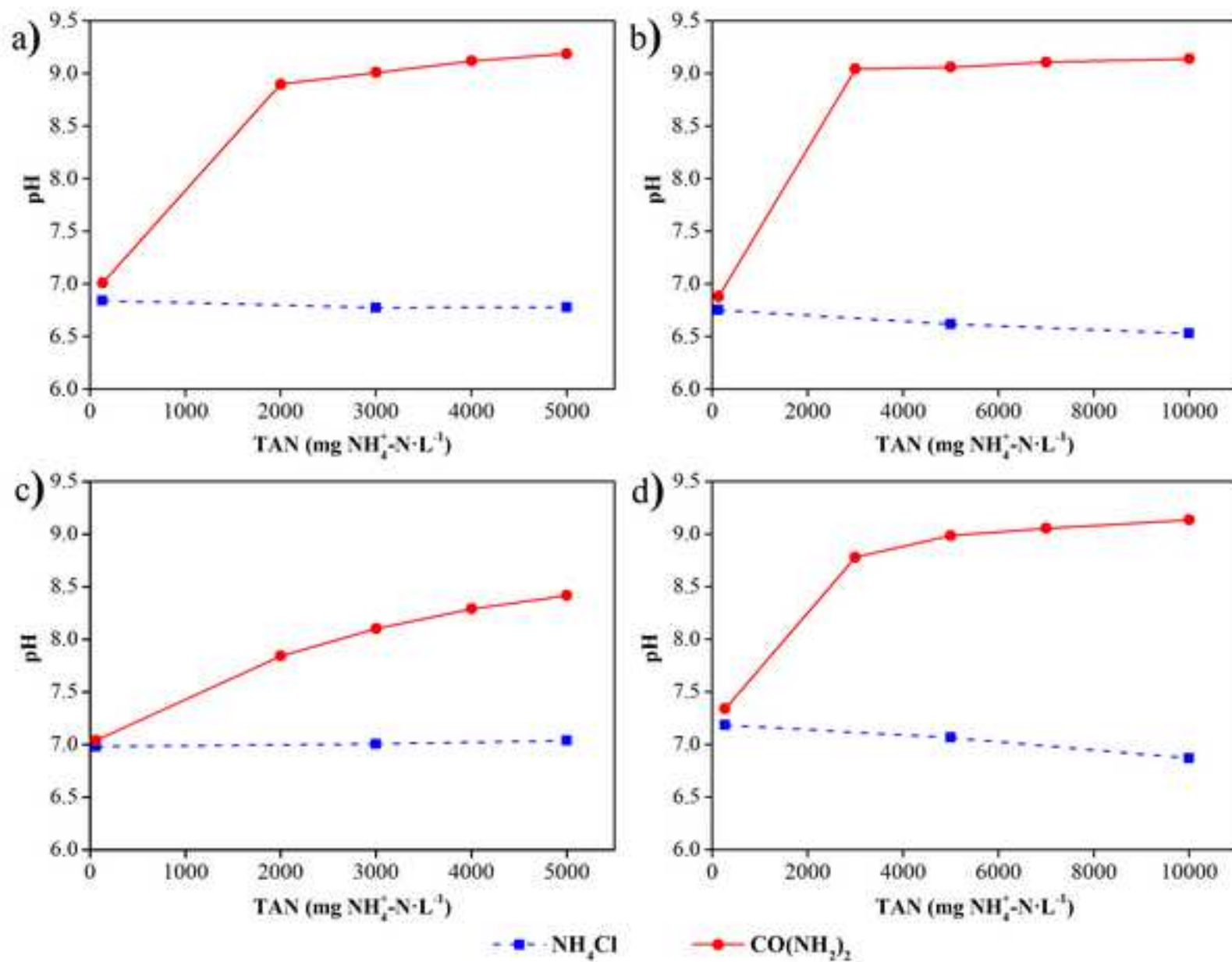
440 under different ammonia sources, ammonia levels and pH levels, a) inhibition of *M.*

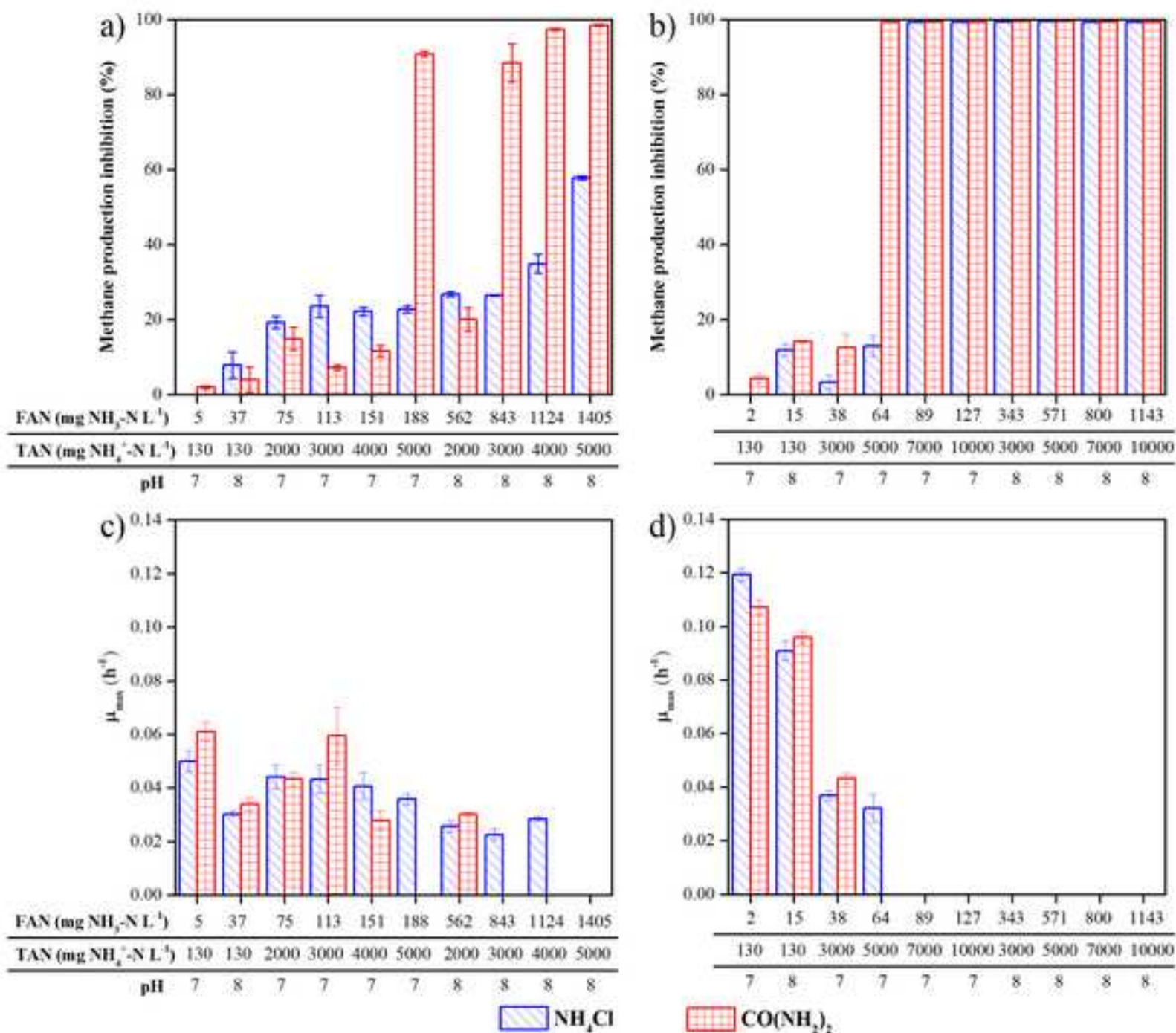
441 *thermophilus*, b) inhibition of *M. bourgensis*, c)  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  of *M. thermophilus*, d)  $\mu_{\text{max}}$  of *M.*

442 *bourgensis*.

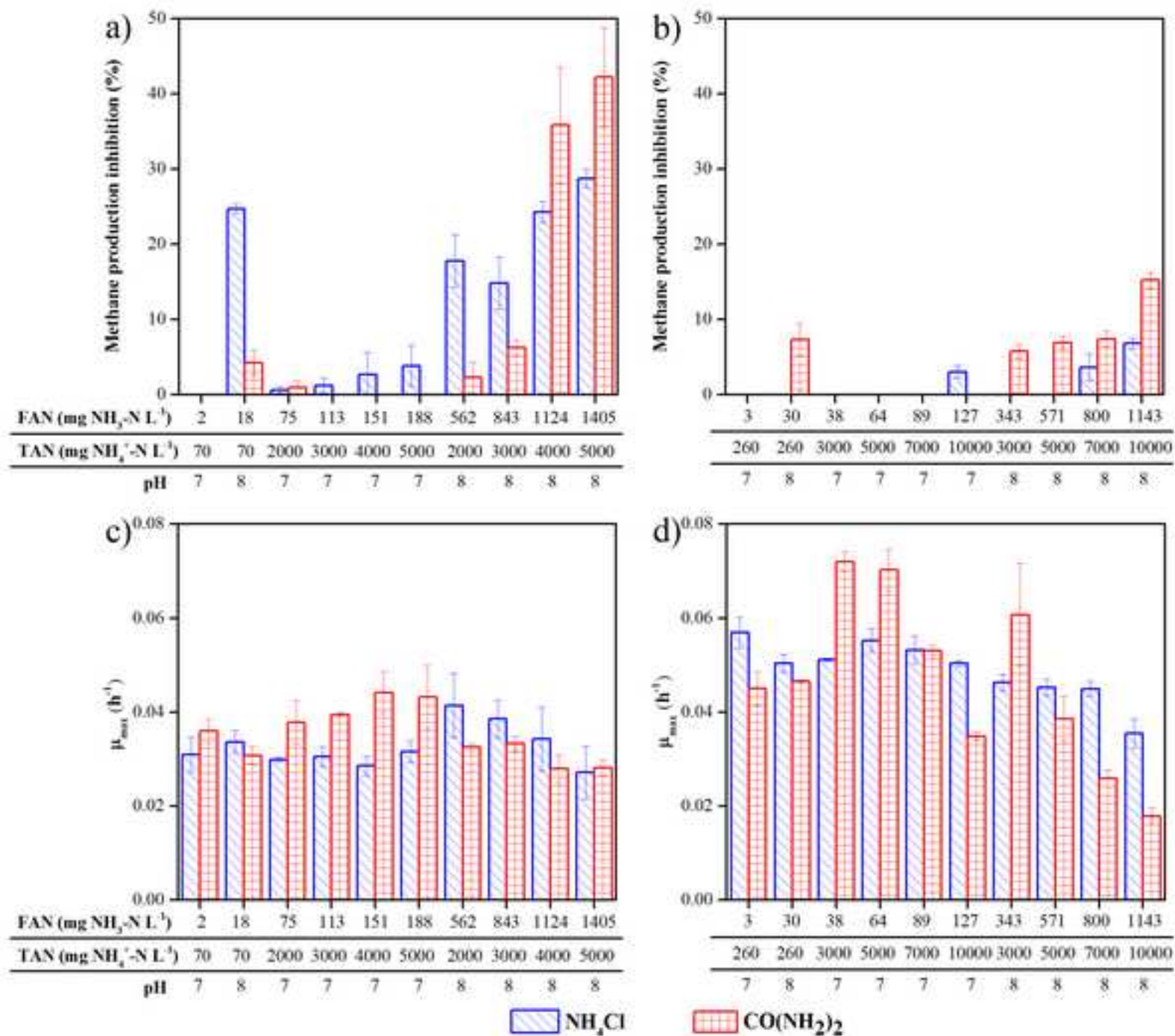
443

444









445 **Table 1.** Different ammonia levels for the two ammonia sources in Assay I.

Strains	Ammonia sources	TAN (mg NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> -N·L <sup>-1</sup> ) *
<i>M. thermophila</i>	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	130, 2000, 3000, 4000 and 5000
	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	130, 3000 and 5000
<i>M. barkeri</i>	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	130, 3000, 5000, 7000 and 10000
	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	130, 5000 and 10000
<i>M. thermophilus</i>	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	70, 2000, 3000, 4000 and 5000
	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	70, 3000 and 5000
<i>M. bourgensis</i>	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	260, 3000, 5000, 7000 and 10000
	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	260, 5000 and 10000

446 \* The lowest TAN level is the basic ammonia levels of the medium.

447

448 **Table 2.** Different ammonia and pH levels under the two different ammonia sources of Assay  
 449 II.

Strains	TAN (mg NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> -N·L <sup>-1</sup> ) *	Ammonia sources	pH levels
<i>M. thermophila</i>	130, 2000, 3000, 4000 and 5000	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl, CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	7, 8
<i>M. barkeri</i>	130, 3000, 5000, 7000 and 10000	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl, CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	7, 8
<i>M. thermophilus</i>	70, 2000, 3000, 4000 and 5000	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl, CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	7, 8
<i>M. bourgensis</i>	260, 3000, 5000, 7000 and 10000	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl, CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	7, 8

450 \* The lowest TAN level is the basic ammonia levels of the medium.

451

452 **Table 3.** Lag phase (days) of *M. thermophila* and *M. barkeri* under different experimental  
 453 conditions.

Strains	Ammonia sources	pH	TAN levels (mg NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> -N·L <sup>-1</sup> )					
			130 (130) *	2000 (3000)	3000 (5000)	4000 (7000)	5000 (10000)	
<i>M. thermophila</i>	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	7	0	0	0	0	0	
		8	7.0 ± 3.0	11.0 ± 6.2	17.5 ± 7.5	32.6 ± 7.6	ND **	
	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	7	0	0	3.6 ± 0.5	4.4 ± 0.5	ND	
		8	3.6 ± 1.9	33.0 ± 6.2	ND	ND	ND	
	<i>M. barkeri</i>	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	7	1.0	6.9	32.8 ± 5.9	ND	ND
			8	0.9	ND	ND	ND	ND
CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>		7	1.1	24.8 ± 8.0	ND	ND	ND	
		8	1.2	ND	ND	ND	ND	

454 \*Numbers outside parentheses were ammonia concentrations for *M. thermophila*, and the ones inside for *M.*  
 455 *barkeri*.

456 \*\* ND: Not defined.

457

458

459 **Table 4.** Lag phase (days) of *M. thermophilus* and *M. bourgensis* under different experimental  
 460 situation.

Strains	Ammonia sources	pH	TAN levels (mg NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> -N·L <sup>-1</sup> )				
			70 (260)*	2000 (3000)	3000 (5000)	4000 (7000)	5000 (10000)
<i>M. thermophilus</i>	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	7	0	0	0	0	0
		8	0	1.2 ± 0.5	1.2 ± 0.5	1.2 ± 0.8	0.9 ± 0.7
	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	7	0	0	0	0	0
		8	0	0	0	0	0
<i>M. bourgensis</i>	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	7	0	0	0	0	0
		8	0	0	0	0	2.0
	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>	7	0	0	0	0	0
		8	0	1.0	2.7 ± 0.5	4.3	10.1

461 \*Numbers outside parentheses were the ammonia concentrations for *M. thermophilus*, and the ones inside for *M.*  
 462 *bourgensis*.

463

464 **Table 5.** Overall comparison of highest methane production inhibition of all strains.

Strains	pH	NH <sub>4</sub> Cl	CO(NH <sub>2</sub> ) <sub>2</sub>
<i>M. thermophila</i> *	7	22.9 ± 0.9 %	91.0 ± 0.8 %
	8	57.9 ± 0.5%	98.5 ± 0.2 %
<i>M. barkeri</i> **	7	99.4 ± 0 %	99.4 ± 0.1 %
	8	99.5 ± 0 %	99.6 ± 0.1 %
<i>M. thermophilus</i> *	7	3.8 ± 2.7 %	0%
	8	28.7 ± 1.2 %	42.2 ± 6.6 %
<i>M. bourgensis</i> *	7	3.1 ± 0.8 %	28.7 ± 1.2 %
	8	6.8 ± 0.7 %	15.2 ± 1.0 %

465 \* Detected under the highest ammonia levels, specifically, for both pH levels, 5000 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N·L<sup>-1</sup> for *M.*

466 *thermophila* and *M. thermophilus*, and 10000 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N·L<sup>-1</sup> for *M. bourgensis*.

467 \*\* Detected under a relatively low ammonia levels, specifically, 7000 and 5000 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N·L<sup>-1</sup> at pH 7 for

468 NH<sub>4</sub>Cl and urea, respectively, and 3000 mg NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N·L<sup>-1</sup> at pH 8 for both.

469

470 **Highlights**

- 471 • Urea hydrolysis increases reactor pH significantly more than ammonium chloride
- 472 • Urea is more toxic to methanogenic archaea than ammonium chloride
- 473 • Combined high free ammonia and pH levels is the toxicity mechanism of urea
- 474 • Hydrogenotrophic methanogens are more robust than acetoclastic methanogens to urea

475

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

