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# **Methanogens as Ruminant-Specific Indicators of Fecal Pollution**

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#### Abstract

Tracking the source of fecal pollution in surface waters has traditionally focused on the origin of enteric indicators including coliforms, enterococci, or E. coli. Recently, questions of genetic variability and environmental persistence have encouraged researchers to investigate additional animal specific indicators of fecal pollution. To date only eubacteria have been utilized as markers of human and animal-specific pollution. Here we report domestic ruminant-specific markers of fecal pollution utilizing methanogens found in the rumen. PCR primers for the mcrA gene of Methanomicrobium mobile (MMmcrA) and the nifH gene of Methanobrevibacter ruminantium (Mrnif-1) were designed, tested, and used to detect ruminant-specific pollution in fecal and environmental samples. The MMmcrA amplicons were detected in expected fecal and environmental samples (71% cow, 92% sheep, 50% goat, 100% cow lagoon samples, and 100% creek contaminated with cow lagoon waste), and were observed in only 5% of human and deer fecal samples. Mrnif-1 amplification was seen in 80% cow, 100% sheep, and 54% goat fecal samples; only 2% individual human samples were positive. No PCR amplification was observed when the MMmcrA and Mrnif-1 primers were tested against 47 bacterial stock cultures and fecal samples from 134 non-ruminant animals. More importantly, no amplification was observed in sewer samples using either primer pair. Sensitivity assays using MMmcrA primers demonstrated a detection limit of 0.01ng total DNA in bovine feces. 10ng in fecally contaminated surface water, and 5ng in cow lagoon samples.

#### Introduction

Fecal pollution of recreational waters from fecal and non-human sources can lead to human health risk of pathogen exposure and economic loss from closure of beaches and shellfish harvesting areas. Agricultural waste constitutes a significant portion of pollution in water lakes, rivers, and estuaries, and may pose human health risk due to domestic ruminant-associated pathogens. Cattle feed lots are a significant source of fecal pollution of surface waters by waste lagoon overflow or manure spreading. Plans for remediation of waterways require distinguishing fecal pollution from various hosts.

Most available techniques for fecal source differentiation utilize indicator eubacteria with dubious host specificity and variable survival times in the external environment. However, intestinally-derived methanogens are reportedly specific for particular host species, and we recently reported that the nifH gene of Methanobrevibacter smithii is a potentially valuable marker for sewage pollution.

Methanomicrobium mobile and Methanobrevibacter ruminantium are considered dominant methanogens in the rumen. Because these organisms have been found only in the intestinal tract of ruminants and are unable to survive in the outside environment we examined their use as possible domestic ruminantspecific markers of fecal pollution. The mcrA gene of Methanomicrobium mobile and the nifH gene of Methanobrevibacter ruminantium were targeted due to methanogen specificity. The mcrA gene codes for the a-subunit of methyl coenzyme-M reductase, which is responsible for catabolism of methyl-coenzyme M and coenzyme-B to heterodisulphide and methane during methanogenesis. The methanogen nifH operon, although conserved in methanogens and prokaryotes, have been phylogenetically grouped with the pseudo-Nif clusters, corresponding to Group IV nifH homologs found only in methanogens. These nifH genes do not code for a functional nitrogenase and have significant sequence divergence from the other groups. The specificity of the PCR assays for detection of the mcrA and nifH genes was examined by analyzing domestic ruminant feces (bovine, ovine, and goat), non-domestic ruminant feces (deer), sewage, nonruminant feces (human, pig, dog, horse, turkey, chicken, and goose). DNA from eubacteria, various methanogens, and bacteria isolated from the environment were also studied. Environmental samples collected from a dairy farm waste lagoon and creek contaminated with lagoon effluent were analyzed to determine the specificity of the PCR assay in detecting recently discharged fecal contamination into surface waters.

#### Materials and Methods

#### Primer Specificity ampling and DNA Extraction

Primer specificity was tested against the type strains of each species (positive controls) and 12 additional methanogen genera as negative controls for each assay (27 methanogen species/strains total; Table ). Cultures were applied to Whatman FTA cards and prepared for PCR by washing 3X (5 min) with FTA Purification Reagent and 2X (5 min) with TE-1 buffer.

The specificity of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the mineration of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for an of the minerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the minerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA primers was further determined by stating 548 (sima) for a format of the MinerA prim own on Gram (+) and Gram (-) selective media. Whole-cell PCR was conducted on the environmental isolates from each media using the MMmcrA amplification conditions below

Human and animal feces (Table 2) were collected and processed in Hattiesburg, MS and Columbia, MO. DNA was extracted from fecal samples using the UltraClean Soil DNA Extraction kit and the owersoil DNA Kit (MO BIO Labs, Carlsbad, California) following the manufacturer instructions. Extracted DNA was quantified using a Nanodrop ND-1000 spectrophotometer (Nanodrop Technologies, Wilmington, DE). DNA from human and animal fecal samples was extracted at the University of Missouri campus using the BIO 101 Fast DNA Spin Kit for soil (Q-Biogene, Inc., Carlsbad, CA) and quantitated using a BioSpec-mini DNA/RNA/protein analyzer (Shimadzu, Scientific Instruments, Inc., Bohemia, NY).

Severs samples (500 ml) were collected from seven different sewers in Gulfport, MS each week for a period of two months in 2004-2005 (Table 3). Water samples (500 ml) were collected from four different coastal sampling stations for a three-month interval and tested using the MMmcrA assay (Table 3). Each sample was prefiltered through a 3 µm cellulose acetate filter (Pall Corporation, West Chester PA) and concentrated onto a 0.2 µm Supor®-200 filter (Pall Corporation). The bacteria were dislodged and centrifuged for 15 min at 13,000 x g. The DNA from pelleted cells was extracted and used in subsequent PCR reactions. Sewer samples were processed at the University of Missouri campus by concentrating 40 mL aliquots by centrifugation (2,052 X g for 15 min at 4°C), resuspending the pellet in 2 mL residual supernatant, and extracting the DNA using the BIO 101 FastDNA Spin Kit for Soil (Q-Biogene, Inc.).

DNA from coastal sediments was tested with the MMmcrA assay (Table 3). Sediment cores were taken at four Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) sampline stations using a sterile onical-shaped 50 ml centrifuge tube (Sarstedt, Newton, North Carolina). DNA was extracted from surface sediment samples and 6 and 12-inch sediment samples using the Ultraclean Soil DNA Extraction Ki MO BIO) PCR Condition.

Whole cell PCR for both the MMmcrA and the Mrnif-1 assays was performed on overnight cultures of Gram (+) and Gram (-) eubacteria (109 bacteria/ml). Ten µL PCR reactions were performed for whole zell eubacteria and with DNA extracted from fecal samples. Each reaction contained: 1X PCR Buffer (New England BioLabs, Ipswich, MA), 0.1% BSA, 200 µM dNTP (USB Corporation), 0.5U Taq Polymerase (New England BioLabs), 0.5 µM primer, 1 µL template cells (approximately 1 x 10<sup>9</sup> cells · ml<sup>+1</sup>) or 1 µL DNA template. A lower detection limit using the MMmcrA assay in bovine, ovine, and 20at feces was established by adding 50ng, 20ng, 10ng, 5ng, 1ng, 0.1ng, 0.01ng and 1.0ng fecal DNA to a 20 uL PCR reaction. Environmental samples (sewer, water, and sediment) were amplified using 20 L PCR reactions containing 1X PCR Buffer (New England Biolabs), 0.1% BSA, 200 µM dNTP (USB Corporation), 0.5U Taq Polymerase (New England Biolabs), 0.5 µM each primer, and varying ncentrations of environmental DNA.

TA Card DNA extracts were amplified in 50 µL reactions containing 1X PCR Buffer (New England BioLabs), 0.1% BSA, 200 µM dNTP (USB Corporation), 2.5U Taq Polymerase (New England BioLabs), 0.5 µM primer, and the 2.0 mm washed punch. The cycling conditions for the MMmerA assay were an initial denaturation of 2 min at 92°C and 30 cycles of: denaturation of 1 min at 92°C, annealing for 30 sec at 60°C, and elongation for 1 min at 72°C. A final elongation was performed for 6 min at 72°C. The cycling conditions for the Mrnif-1 assay were an initial denaturation of 2 min at 92°C and 30 cycles of: denaturation for 30s at 92°C, annealing for 15sec at 62°C, and elongation for 30s at 72°C. A final elongation was performed for 6 min at 72°C. Validation of MMmcrA Method

Two samples each (500 mL) from a bovine waste lagoon and an adjacent creek contaminated with lagoon water were collected and tested using the MMmcrA assay (Table 3). Creek water was collected approximately 1/2 mile downstream from the point where the lagoon effluent emptied into the creek. Each sample was centrifuged at 10,000 X g for 15 minutes and the resultant pellet used directly for DNA provide the second 80ng, 20ng, 10ng, 5ng, and 1ng) were added to the PCR cocktail to determine the presence or absence of the mcrA gene.

#### Acknowledgments

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#### Results

The MMmcrA primers amplified a 212bp product; the Mrnif-1 primers amplified a 336bp product. The MMmcrA and Mrnif-1 primer pairs produced the expected mplicons in only M. mobile and M. ruminantium respectively; no products were amplified in any other microorganisms tested (Table 1). Tests of fecal DNA showed that 71% of bovine fecal samples were positive for M. mobile (Figure 1). Among human and animal fecal samples tested, 71% of bovine fecal samples, 92% of sheep feces, 50% of goat feces, 5% deer, and 5% human fecal samples produced the expected amplicon with the MMmcrA primers (Table 2). No products were amplified using the MMmcrA primers with DNA extracts of other non-ruminant feces or sewer samples (Tables 2&3). Preliminary results for the Mrnif-1 primer pair showed amplification in only cow, sheep, and goat fecal samples (80%, 100%, and 54% respectively). No amplification was observed in non-domestic ruminant fecal samples or sewer samples (n=16).

Environmental sampling of non-polluted surface waters using the MMmcrA primers produced no amplicons in marine water (n=25) or creek samples (n=13). Samples collected from a bovine waste lagoon and a creek polluted with lagoon waste were positive using the MMmcrA and Mrnif-1 primer pairs. Using the MMmcrA primer pair, the minimal amount of DNA required to produce visible amounts of the expected amplification product were 0.01ng in cow fecal DNA, 5ng in cow waste lagoon samples, and 10ng in samples collected from a creek polluted with cow waste (Figures 1&2).

> Texted Cow

Deer

Pig

Goat

Dog

Horse

Turkey

Goose

Sheen

Table 1. Species tested for MMmcrA and Mrnif-1 assay specificity

Species Negative for M. mobile mcrA gene and nifH gene of Methanobrevibacter ruminantium	Species positive for M. mobile mcrA gene	Species positive for ruminantium nifH
and MCC 2002; Paragena ACC 2014; J. Song ACC 2002; Paragena ACC 2014; J. Song ACC 2004; Paragena ACC 2014; J. Song ACC 2014; J. Song ACC 2014; J. Song AC	Methanomicrobium mobile	Methanobrevihac ruminantium

#### Table 2. Number of fecal/sewer samples positive using MMmcrA and Mrnif-1 assays.

1/20

0/27

13/26

0/23

0/23

0/20

0/14

24/26

Mrnif-1 positi

40/50

0/24

0/25

13/24

0/24

0/20

N/A

26/26

Table 3. Environmental samples tested for MMmcrA assay validation

Expected	Samples Tested	MMmcrA Positive Samples
Bovine waste lagoon Bovine contaminated creek	22	2 2
Not Expected		
Sewer	27	0
Coastal Water	25	0
Coastal Sediment	24	0
Environmental Bacteria	548	0
Coastal Creek Samples	13	0
Eluvial Water Sampler	5	0

M 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19



Figure 1 - PCR amplification of Methonomicrobion mobile merk practic hoving fees, Expected product is 212 bp. Lames: M. (1006) bioletter, 1, M. mobile (DSRAZ, 1539; 2. Negative control - PCR waters 7, Core focal ample C-141 (ng total DNA); 4, C-141 (ng, total DNA); 5, C-140 (DTag total DNA); 6, Cor (40) ample C-141 (ng total DNA); 4, C-141 (ng, total DNA); 5, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 7, Cor (40) ample C-141 (ng total DNA); 6, C-161 (ng) total DNA); 11, C-150 (DTag total DNA); 7, Cor (40) ample C-151 (ng total DNA); 10, C-150 (ng) total DNA); 12, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 7, Cor (40) ample C-151 (ng total DNA); 10, C-161 (ng) total DNA); 12, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 7, Cor (40) ample C-151 (ng total DNA); 10, C-160 (ng) total DNA); 12, 160 (DTag total DNA); 15, Cor (40) and total DNA); 12, C-16 (ng) total DNA); 10, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 15, C-160 (ng) total DNA); 19, C-160 (ng) total DNA); 10, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 15, C-160 (ng) total DNA); 10, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 15, C-160 (ng) total DNA); 10, C-160 (ng) total DNA); 18, C-160 (ng) total DNA); 10, C-160 (DTag total DTag total DNA); 10, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 10, C-160 (DTag total DNA); 10, C-160 (DTag tot

M 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15



Figure 2 – PCR amplification of *Methanomicrobium mobile mcrA* gene in bovine waste lagoon samples and a creek contaminated with lagoon waste. Expected product is 212 bp. Lanes: M, 100bp ladder; 1, *M. mobile* DSMZ IS39; 2, Negative control – PCR water; 3, Lance: M. 1000p inder; 1, J. M. *moshel*. DNMZ 1599; 2, Negative control – P. K. water; 3, Lance: M. 1000p inder; 1, J. M. *moshel*. DNMZ, 5 (Seven) water sample: 100 m [101 NN], 101 March 4. Creck water sample (100 m [101 NN]); 5 (Creck March 100 NN], water sample (1ng total DNM); 9, Davine water langoon (130m [101 NN); 10, Bovine water lagoon (100m [101 DNM); 11, Bovine water lagoon (30m [101 DNM); 10, Bovine water lagoon (100m [101 DNM); 11, Bovine water lagoon (130m [101 DNM); 12, Bovine water lagoon (100m [101 DNM); 11, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 14, Bovine water lagoon (50m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 14, Bovine water lagoon (50m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 14, Bovine water lagoon (50m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 14, Bovine water lagoon (50m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (50m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (50m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (10m [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 15, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (101 DNM); 16, Bovine water lagoon (100 [101 DN

#### **Discussion & Conclusions**

This study shows that the MMmcrA assay for the mcrA gene of Methanomicrobium mobile and the Mrnif-1 assay for the nifH gene of Methanobrevibacter uminantium may be useful methods for determining recent domestic ruminant fecal contamination. Because the primer pairs were designed to target methanogenspecific genes and BLAST searches showed no homology with other archaeal or bacterial genes, the primers were considered specific for these species.

M. mobile was detected in 71% of cow, 92% of sheep, and of 50% goat samples, but only 5% of deer and human fecal samples. Similarly, M. ruminantium was detected in 80% of cows. 100% of sheep, and 54% of goat samples. Neither organism was detected in any sewer samples (M. mobile n=27; M. ruminantium n=16) tested and 100% of cow waste lagoon samples were positive for both the MMmcrA and Mrnif-1 amplicons. Results from the present study indicate that exclusivity in a particular animal is not a requirement for a fecal indicator to be useful in microbial source tracking. An associated study proposed Bacteroides thetaiotamicron as a numan-specific marker in detecting sewage pollution, even though 16% of dog fecal samples were positive using the assay. Similarly, molecular markers developed for swine pollution using swine-specific STII toxin genes of E. coli were detected in small numbers individual samples from cows, humans and dog (1.9%, 0.75%, and 4.4% respectively) but not in samples from bovine waste lagoon or human sewage. These studies support the present finding that although the markers were found in small numbers of humans, they were found in bovine effluent and not in sewage, and would therefore not point to sewage as a likely source of fecal pollution in environmental samples

Samples were tested to demonstrate the usefulness of the MMmcrA assay in the environment. Since sediments are a likely environmental source for both fecal coliforms and enterococci, and methanogens are known to reside in marine and lacustrine environments, samples collected from the nearshore zone of the Mississippi Sound and feeder creeks over a three-month period were tested and showed no amplification using the MMmcrA assay. This indicates that M. mobile is not a normal inhabitant of the estuarine or fluvial environments and that the MMmcrA assay is not detecting non-target organisms in marine or freshwater systems. The utility of the MMmcrA assay to detect domestic ruminant pollution was shown by the identification of the amplification expected product in a creek polluted with bovine feces. These data indicate the sensitivity and usefulness of the MMmcrA assay in detecting ruminant fecal pollution at low concentrations of total DNA.

Since Methanomicrobium mobile and Methanobrevibacter runinantium are short-lived in the environment the subject assay targets methanogen-specific genes indicative of recent domestic ruminant fecal pollution. The MMmcrA and Mrnif-1 assays show sensitivity and specificity, and each can be completed in ~5 hours.