



*Citation for published version:*

Liu, S, Song, W, Meng, M, Xie, M, She, Q, Zhao, P & Wang, X 2022, 'Engineering pressure retarded osmosis membrane bioreactor (PRO-MBR) for simultaneous water and energy recovery from municipal wastewater', *Science of the Total Environment*, vol. 826, 154048. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.154048>

*DOI:*

[10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.154048](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.154048)

*Publication date:*

2022

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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1 **Engineering pressure retarded osmosis membrane bioreactor (PRO-**  
2 **MBR) for simultaneous water and energy recovery from municipal**  
3 **wastewater**

4  
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23 **Abstract**

24 Osmotic membrane bioreactors (OMBR) have gained increasing interest in wastewater  
25 treatment and reclamation due to their high product water quality and fouling resistance.  
26 However, high energy consumption (mostly by draw solution recovery) restricted the  
27 wider application of OMBR. Herein, we propose a novel pressure retarded osmosis  
28 membrane bioreactor (PRO-MBR) for improving the economic feasibility. In  
29 comparison with conventional FO-MBR, PRO-MBR exhibited similar excellent  
30 contaminants removal performance and comparable water flux. More importantly, a  
31 considerable amount of energy can be recovered by PRO-MBR (4.1 kWh/100 m<sup>2</sup>·d),  
32 as a result of which, 10.02% of the specific energy consumption (SEC) for water  
33 recovery was reduced as compared with FO-MBR (from 1.42 kWh/m<sup>3</sup> to 1.28 kWh/m<sup>3</sup>).  
34 Membrane orientation largely determined the performance of PRO-MBR, higher power  
35 density was achieved in AL-DS orientation (peak value of 3.4 W/m<sup>2</sup>) than that in AL-  
36 FS orientation (peak value of 1.4 W/m<sup>2</sup>). However, PRO-MBR suffered more severe  
37 and complex membrane fouling when operated in AL-DS orientation, because the  
38 porous support layer was facing sludge mixed liquor. Further investigation revealed  
39 fouling was mostly reversible for PRO-MBR, it exhibited similar flux recoverability  
40 (92.4%) to that in FO-MBR (95.1%) after osmotic backwash. Nevertheless, flux decline  
41 due to membrane fouling is still a restricting factor to power generation of PRO-MBR,  
42 its power density was decreased by 38.2% in the first 60 min due to the formation of  
43 fouling. Overall, in perspective of technoeconomic feasibility, the PRO-MBR  
44 demonstrates better potential than FO-MBR in wastewater treatment and reclamation

45 and deserves more research attention in the future.

46 **Keywords:** pressure retarded osmosis; forward osmosis; membrane bioreactor; energy  
47 recovery; wastewater treatment

## 48 **1. Introduction**

49 An osmotic membrane bioreactor (OMBR) that integrates an activated sludge  
50 process with a forward osmosis (FO) membrane was firstly proposed by Cornelissen et  
51 al. at 2008 ([Cornelissen et al., 2008](#)). In the past decade, OMBR technology has aroused  
52 increasing interest in the field of wastewater treatment and reclamation due to the  
53 advantages of better product water quality and lower fouling tendency as compared  
54 with traditional membrane bioreactors (MBRs) (Nguyen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2017;  
55 Xu et al., 2020). However, there are still bottlenecks in OMBR that hinder its wider  
56 application in wastewater treatment and reclamation, e.g., low water flux, salt  
57 accumulation, membrane fouling and draw solute recovery (Lee and Hsieh, 2019; Wang  
58 et al., 2016a). Draw solute recovery is an essential component in OMBR, by which the  
59 draw solute is recycled and the high-quality product water is obtained. Currently, the  
60 common approaches for draw solute recovery, including reverse osmosis (RO),  
61 nanofiltration (NF) and membrane distillation (MD), consume a large amount of energy  
62 to drive the separation process (Eriksson et al., 2005; Luo et al., 2017; Vinardell et al.,  
63 2020), directly resulting in a substantial increase in energy consumption and operational  
64 cost of OMBR. This is regarded as one of the biggest obstacles on the development and  
65 application of OMBR for wastewater treatment and reclamation.

66 In the operation of FO filtration, there is a natural concentration gradient between

67 the two sides of membrane, i.e., a high concentration draw solution (DS) and a low  
68 concentration feed solution (FS). Osmotic energy is generated upon the water passes  
69 through semipermeable membrane and mixes with the draw solution in the FO process  
70 (R. Pattle, 1954). Recent years, osmotic energy has attracted increasing interest because  
71 it is a new clean energy that can be sustainably generated with no constraints of the  
72 meteorological and geographical conditions (Einarsson and Wu, 2021; Shi et al., 2021).  
73 Pressure retarded osmosis (PRO) is one of the most promising technologies for  
74 harnessing osmotic energy (Helfer et al., 2014; Son et al., 2016; Thorsen and Holt,  
75 2009). During PRO operation, the DS is pressurized and fed into membrane module by  
76 a high-pressure pump, and the water from FS permeates into the DS side through the  
77 membrane against the hydraulic pressure, then the volume-expanded DS is  
78 depressurized via a hydro-turbine to convert osmotic energy to electric power.  
79 Compared with conventional FO, the PRO process not only demonstrates similar solute  
80 rejection performance but also recovers osmotic energy (Patel et al., 2014; Sakai et al.,  
81 2016; Wan and Chung, 2015). The obtained energy can be further utilized to  
82 compensate for the energy need of water recovery process.

83 Inspired by osmotic energy recovery in the PRO process, replacing the FO process  
84 in OMBR with a PRO process with aim to simultaneously recover osmotic energy and  
85 clean water seems to be a potential way to improve the energy efficiency of OMBR.  
86 Based on this, present study proposed a novel PRO-MBR of integrating the bioreactor  
87 with the PRO process. Existing studies on PRO process mostly employed clean water,  
88 river water or low-strength wastewater as FS to evaluate the power generation

89 performance (Kim et al., 2015; O'Toole et al., 2016; Wan and Chung, 2015). The power  
90 density of PRO varied significantly with different FS since the concentration and  
91 composition of FS closely relate to the water flux and membrane fouling in PRO, which  
92 directly or indirectly determines the energy recovery efficiency (Bar-Zeev et al., 2015;  
93 She et al., 2017a, 2013; Yip and Elimelech, 2011). To the best of our knowledge, there  
94 has been no study focusing on the power generation performance of PRO with sludge  
95 mixed liquor as FS. Only one previous paper of ours reported the fouling characteristics  
96 in PRO coupled with activated sludge process (Meng et al., 2020). Thus, the power  
97 generation performance of PRO-MBR and how much the energy consumption can be  
98 reduced as compared with conventional FO-MBR, as well as how the membrane  
99 fouling influences the power generation performance in PRO-MBR deserve to be  
100 further studied.

101 To this end, a lab-scale PRO-MBR system was established and a comparative  
102 study with conventional FO-MBR was then conducted under AL-DS (active layer  
103 facing FS) and AL-FS (active layer facing DS) mode. The contaminants removal  
104 performance, water flux, power generation performance, membrane fouling behavior  
105 and fouling reversibility were comprehensively investigated for both PRO-MBR and  
106 FO-MBR with the aim to assess the potential of the PRO-MBR for wastewater  
107 treatment and energy recovery.

## 108 **2. Materials and methods**

### 109 2.1 Experimental setup

110 A laboratory-scale PRO-MBR comprised of a bioreactor and an FO membrane

111 module was established in this study (Fig. S1). The bioreactor with an effective volume  
112 of 1.7 L was full of activated sludge (collected from municipal WWTP), and an aeration  
113 diffuser was placed at the bottom. The membrane module was constituted by two  
114 identical flow channels (85 mm × 50 mm × 1.5 mm) for FS and DS streams, respectively,  
115 with membrane coupon mounted between the two channels. A commercial FO  
116 membrane made of cellulose triacetate (CTA) (supplied by Hydration Technologies  
117 Innovations, Albany, OR) with an effective membrane area of 25.5 cm<sup>2</sup> was used in this  
118 study. Both the active layer and the support layer of the FO membrane were filled with  
119 a tricot-type spacer (She et al., 2017b). The mixed liquor in the bioreactor was  
120 circulated by a peristaltic pump (BT100-2J, Longer Precision Pump, China) through  
121 the FS flow channel with a cross-flow velocity of 10.3 cm/s, meanwhile a NaCl solution  
122 with a concentration of 2 M (osmotic pressure of 9.9 MPa) was pressurized and  
123 circulated by a high-pressure pump (DP-130, Xinxishan, China) through the DS flow  
124 channel, with a cross-flow velocity of approximately 177 cm/s. The DS tank was placed  
125 on a digital balance (PL6001E, Mettler Toledo, China), and the DS weight change was  
126 continuously recorded by a computer. To make a fair comparison, a FO-MBR with the  
127 entire system the same except without applied hydraulic pressure on DS stream was  
128 operated in parallel. The DS solution was circulated by another identical peristaltic  
129 pump through the DS flow channel with a cross-flow velocity of 10.3 cm/s.

## 130 2.2 Operation conditions

131 During the whole experiment, the PRO-MBR and FO-MBR were operated at  
132 temperature of 25 ± 1 °C. The hydraulic retention time (HRT) varied in the range of 32

133 to 74 h along with the flux variation in the operation of FO, and no sludge was  
134 discharged during the experiment. Synthetic domestic wastewater was used as the feed  
135 water with chemical oxygen demand (COD), total organic carbon (TOC), total  
136 phosphorus (TP), total nitrogen (TN) and  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N concentrations of  $373.3 \pm 17.2$  mg/L,  
137  $81.96 \pm 1.68$  mg/L,  $2.08 \pm 0.13$  mg/L,  $38.24 \pm 1.68$  mg/L and  $24.88 \pm 1.50$  mg/L,  
138 respectively. The composition of synthetic wastewater was set according to that  
139 reported in literature (Wang et al., 2014). The sludge collected from a secondary  
140 sedimentation tank at the Taihu Xincheng Wastewater Treatment Plant (Wuxi, China)  
141 was employed as the seed sludge. It was cultivated in the same bioreactor with synthetic  
142 wastewater for approximately 15 days before starting the operation. The initial sludge  
143 concentration in the PRO-MBR and FO-MBR were both 3.0 g/L for mixed liquor  
144 suspended solids (MLSS) and 2.1 g/L for mixed liquor volatile suspended solids  
145 (MLVSS). The aeration rate was approximately 100 L/h, and the corresponding DO  
146 concentration in the bioreactors were maintained in the range of 4-5 mg/L.

147 Membrane orientation is a critical factor that largely determines the water flux and  
148 membrane fouling behavior in FO and PRO processes (Kim et al., 2016). Therefore,  
149 both AL-FS orientation and AL-DS orientation were applied in the operation of PRO-  
150 MBR and FO-MBR. As for PRO-MBR, the additional hydraulic pressure applied on  
151 the DS side was set as 6 bar (0.6 MPa), which ensured that the FO membrane was  
152 maintained mechanically stable in both orientations. The pristine FO membrane was  
153 first preconditioned for 4 h in the membrane module in advance to obtain its stable  
154 initial water flux (She et al., 2017a).



155 In addition, at the end of each experiment, the fouled membrane was *in situ*  
156 physically cleaned for 1 h using 0.08 M NaCl as the FS and deionized water as the DS  
157 (i.e., osmotic backwash), according to the method reported in previous literature (Yuan  
158 et al., 2015). The DI water flux was retested for the membranes after cleaning and  
159 compared with that of pristine membrane, based on which the fouling reversibility was  
160 then assessed.

## 161 2.2 Analytical methods

162 The contaminants concentrations in the permeate, mixed liquor supernatant and  
163 feed water were periodically measured for both PRO-MBR and FO-MBR. The  
164 concentrations of  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$ ,  $\text{PO}_4^{3-}\text{-P}$ , TN, TO, MLSS and MLVSS were determined  
165 according to the standard method (APHA, 1998), and the TOC concentration was  
166 analyzed by a TOC analyzer (TOC-Vcsh, Shimadzu, Japan).

167 The water flux ( $J_w$ ) was calculated via the variation of DS weight (according to  
168 Eq. (1)), which was continuously recorded by a digital balance connected to a computer.

$$169 \quad J_w = \frac{\Delta V}{A \times \Delta t} \quad (1)$$

170 where  $\Delta V$  (L) is the collected permeate volume over a pre-determined duration  $\Delta t$  (h),  
171  $A$  is the active membrane area ( $\text{m}^2$ ). To eliminate the impacts of the initial water flux of  
172 different FO membranes, the normalized flux was used to characterize the water flux  
173 performance during the operation of PRO-MBR and FO-MBR. The water flux was  
174 normalized by Eq. (2).

$$175 \quad J' = \frac{J_w}{J_0} \quad (2)$$

176 where  $J'$  is the normalized flux,  $J_0$  is the initial water flux of the FO membrane ( $\text{L}/(\text{m}^2$

177 h)). In addition, the water fluxes after fouling and after physical cleaning were measured  
178 to evaluate the flux recoverability in PRO-MBR and FO-MBR. The flux recovery rate  
179 was calculated by Eq. (3).

$$180 \quad R = \frac{J_2 - J_1}{J_0 - J_1} \quad (3)$$

181 where R is the flux recovery rate (%),  $J_1$  is the water flux of the fouled FO membrane  
182 before physical cleaning ( $L/(m^2 h)$ ), and  $J_2$  is the water flux of the fouled FO membrane  
183 after physical cleaning ( $L/(m^2 h)$ ).

184 Power density is widely used to assess the power generation performance of PRO.  
185 It is defined as the osmotic energy output per unit membrane area (Han et al., 2016b)  
186 and it can be calculated by Eq. (4).

$$187 \quad W = \frac{J_w \times \Delta P}{36} \quad (4)$$

188 where W is the power density ( $W/m^2$ ),  $J_w$  is the water flux of the FO membrane ( $L/(m^2$   
189 h)), and  $\Delta P$  is the effective hydraulic pressure difference across the membrane (bar).

190 Specific energy consumption (SEC) was usually used to evaluate the energy  
191 efficiency of water recovery process (Seo et al., 2019). SEC is defined as the energy  
192 consumed for generating one unit volume of product water and it can be calculated for  
193 PRO and FO by Eq. (5).

$$194 \quad SEC = SEC_{pumping} + SEC_{DS\ regeneration} - SEG \quad (5)$$

195 where  $SEC_{pumping}$  is the energy consumption of pumping FS/DS,  $SEC_{DS\ regeneration}$  is the  
196 energy consumption of DS generation process, specific energy generation (SEG) is the  
197 energy generated by PRO while unit volume of product water is generated. The  
198  $SEC_{pumping}$  of pump was calculated by Eq. (6). and the  $W_{pump}$  of high-pressure pump

199 (for pressurizing DS) with energy recovery device was calculated by Eq. (7) (Kim et  
200 al., 2013).

$$201 \quad SEC_{pumping} = \frac{W_{pump} \times 24h}{V_{product\ water}} \quad (6)$$

$$202 \quad W_{pump} = \Delta P \times Q_{DS} \times (1 - \eta_{ERD}) \quad (7)$$

203 where  $W_{pump}$  is the pump power,  $Q_{DS}$  is the DS flow rate,  $\eta_{ERD}$  is the efficiency of energy  
204 recovery device (95% in present study),  $V_{product\ water}$  is the product water volume per day  
205 ( $m^3$ ). RO is the normally employed way for DS regeneration in FO, thus  $SEC_{DS\ regeneration}$   
206 is calculated based on the RO as DS regeneration process in present study. The software  
207 ROSA 9.1 (Dow Filmtec) was used to simulate and calculate the SEC of RO for DS  
208 generation (to be 1.38 kWh/ $m^3$ ); Meanwhile, the SEC of RO for DS regeneration  
209 (under similar operation conditions) reported in literature was in the range of 1.37-1.5  
210 kWh/ $m^3$  (Chia et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2015; Seo et al., 2019; Zaviska et al., 2015).

211 Therefore, present study takes 1.4 kWh/ $m^3$  for the following calculation in reference of  
212 both the simulated value and the reported value. The energy generated by PRO process  
213 can be further utilized to reduce the SEC. The SEG can be calculated as per Eq. (8).

$$214 \quad SEG = \frac{W \times \eta \times 10^{-3} \times 24h \times A}{V_{product\ water}} \quad (8)$$

215 where  $\eta$  is the energy conversion efficiency (95% in present study).

216 At the end of experiments, the fouled FO membranes were carefully collected for  
217 fouling characteristic analyses. A field emission scanning electron microscope (FESEM)  
218 (S-4800, Hitachi, Japan) and an energy-dispersive X-ray (EDX) analyzer (Falcon,  
219 EDAX Inc., USA) were used to characterize the morphology and chemical composition  
220 of the fouled FO membranes. In addition, a confocal laser scanning microscope (CLSM,

221 LSM 710, ZESIS, Germany) was applied to characterize the distributions of organic  
222 foulants and biofoulants on the fouled FO membrane surfaces and within porous  
223 support layer. The target foulants, including  $\alpha$ -D-glucopyranose and  $\beta$ -D-  
224 glucopyranose polysaccharides, proteins and microorganisms, were stained by  
225 concanavalin A (ConA), calcofluor white (CW), fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) and  
226 SYTO 63, respectively, before characterization. Details of the specific methods of the  
227 SEM, EDX and CLSM analyses can be found in our previous publications ([Wang et al.,](#)  
228 [2016b; Yuan et al., 2015](#)).

### 229 **3. Results and discussion**

#### 230 3.1 Contaminants removal performance

231 Firstly, contaminants removal performance of PRO-MBR and FO-MBR were  
232 investigated and compared. The two identical MBRs were operated in parallel for more  
233 than 30 days to achieve stable biological treatment performance before the start-up of  
234 PRO-MBR and FO-MBR. Table 1 summarizes the concentrations of TOC,  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N, TN  
235 and TP in the influent, supernatant and permeate, as well as their corresponding removal  
236 rates in PRO-MBR and FO-MBR.

237 Excellent removal performances of organic matters and nutrients were achieved in  
238 both PRO-MBR and FO-MBR regardless of the membrane orientation. The TOC  
239 removal rate and  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N removal rate were  $> 96\%$  and  $> 98\%$ , respectively, for both  
240 PRO-MBR and FO-MBR; moreover, no TOC and  $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N accumulation was observed  
241 in the supernatant, thus this result should be mainly attributed to the biodegradation of  
242 microorganisms in the bioreactor. In addition, effective removal of TN ( $> 96\%$ ) and TP

243 (approximately 100%) were also achieved in both PRO-MBR and FO-MBR.  
244 Considering the dominating aerobic condition in the MBRs, such high removal  
245 performance of TN and TP should be mainly attributed to the high rejection ability of  
246 FO membrane to nitrite, nitrate and phosphate. As a result, high-quality product water,  
247 with TOC < 3 mg/L,  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  < 1 mg/L, TN < 1 mg/L and TP not detected, were  
248 achieved in both PRO-MBR and FO-MBR. Overall, the contaminants removal  
249 performance of the PRO-MBR was comparable with that of FO-MBR, and consistent  
250 with previous reports on the osmotic MBRs for treating municipal wastewater (Qiu et  
251 al., 2016; Vinardell et al., 2021). PRO-MBR (same as FO-MBR) combines the  
252 biodegradation and bioconversion effects of bioreactor with the high retention effect of  
253 FO membrane, by which high-efficiency pollutants removal was achieved and high-  
254 quality water recovery can be guaranteed.

255 It is noteworthy that in a typical PRO process with wastewater as FS, the  
256 contaminants cannot be removed but be retained and accumulated in the FS side. Hence,  
257 management of the concentrate should be carefully considered. However, there was no  
258 TOC and  $\text{NH}_4^+\text{-N}$  accumulation phenomenon in the FS during the operation of PRO-  
259 MBR, as suggested by the contaminant concentrations in the supernatant (shown in  
260 Table 1), due to the biodegradation and bioconversion effects of microorganisms in the  
261 bioreactor. With regard to TN, it can be readily removed by applying A/O-MBR or  
262 employing biofilm system. Therefore, the treatment of PRO concentrate, which could  
263 inevitably increase the cost and induce secondary pollutants, can be avoided and the  
264 sustainability and technoeconomic of PRO process will be improved. In addition,

265 previous study reported that OMBR exhibited lower fouling propensity compared with  
 266 direct FO process for municipal wastewater in long-term operation, because much of  
 267 the potential organic foulants in wastewater was degraded by bacteria in MBR (Sun et  
 268 al., 2016). Thus, a combination of MBR with PRO should be advantageous to fouling  
 269 control in PRO. In summary, such a novel PRO-MBR system is potentially able to  
 270 achieve simultaneous energy and water recovery in a sustainable way.

271 **Table 1**

272 TOC, NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N, TN and TP concentrations in the influent, sludge supernatant and FO permeate and  
 273 their removal rates (average ± standard deviation from triple measurements) in FO-MBR and PRO-  
 274 MBR.

Contaminants	Concentrations and removal rates	PRO-MBR	PRO-MBR	FO-MBR	FO-MBR
		AL-DS	AL-FS	AL-DS	AL-FS
TOC	Influent (mg/L)	78.49 ± 4.73	77.49 ± 3.56	78.88 ± 1.57	77.56 ± 2.83
	Sludge supernatant (mg/L)	4.99 ± 2.41	3.50 ± 2.75	3.86 ± 1.15	4.36 ± 0.95
	FO permeate (mg/L)	2.77 ± 1.51	2.07 ± 1.45	2.86 ± 0.76	2.74 ± 0.10
	Removal rate (%)	96.47 ± 1.10	97.33 ± 1.12	96.37 ± 0.51	96.46 ± 0.10
NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> -N	Influent (mg/L)	25.06 ± 1.64	25.43 ± 0.89	24.86 ± 0.75	25.34 ± 0.75
	Sludge supernatant (mg/L)	0.28 ± 0.21	0.46 ± 0.28	0.34 ± 0.12	0.51 ± 0.19
	FO permeate (mg/L)	0.37 ± 0.07	0.32 ± 0.03	0.26 ± 0.05	0.39 ± 0.04
	Removal rate (%)	98.52 ± 1.18	98.74 ± 0.26	98.95 ± 0.69	98.46 ± 0.62
TN	Influent (mg/L)	28.73 ± 2.34	28.36 ± 1.85	29.64 ± 1.95	28.49 ± 2.18
	Sludge supernatant (mg/L)	30.58 ± 2.17	30.47 ± 1.24	31.24 ± 1.55	29.98 ± 1.87
	FO permeate (mg/L)	0.78 ± 0.06	0.89 ± 0.05	0.85 ± 0.08	0.61 ± 0.09
	Removal rate (%)	97.29 ± 1.28	96.86 ± 0.39	97.13 ± 0.90	97.86 ± 0.68
TP	Influent (mg/L)	1.95 ± 0.05	2.08 ± 0.04	2.06 ± 0.01	2.12 ± 0.03
	Sludge supernatant (mg/L)	0.28 ± 0.20	0.34 ± 0.18	0.12 ± 0.09	0.36 ± 0.13
	FO permeate (mg/L)	ND	ND	ND	ND
	Removal rate (%)	100	100	100	100

275

### 276 3.2 Water flux performance

277 The water flux profiles of PRO-MBR and FO-MBR with different membrane  
 278 orientations are shown in Figure 1a and Figure 1b, respectively. Generally, water flux  
 279 in the FO-MBR was slightly higher (stable flux of 12.1 and 10.8 LMH for AL-DS and  
 280 AL-FS, respectively) than in PRO-MBR (stable flux of 11.3 and 8.5 LMH for AL-DS  
 281 and AL-FS, respectively) in both two membrane orientations. In PRO system, the draw  
 282 solution is pressurized in order to convert the osmotic power to mechanical energy (Shi

283 [et al., 2021](#)). This additional hydraulic pressure reduces the permeation driving force  
284 (osmotic pressure difference) across the membrane thus inducing water flux decline. In  
285 present study, a hydraulic pressure of 0.6 MPa was applied on DS side which was much  
286 lower than the osmotic pressure difference across membrane (approximately 9.0 MPa)  
287 with 2 M NaCl as DS and domestic wastewater as FS. Therefore, PRO-MBR can  
288 achieve comparable water flux with that in conventional FO-MBR.

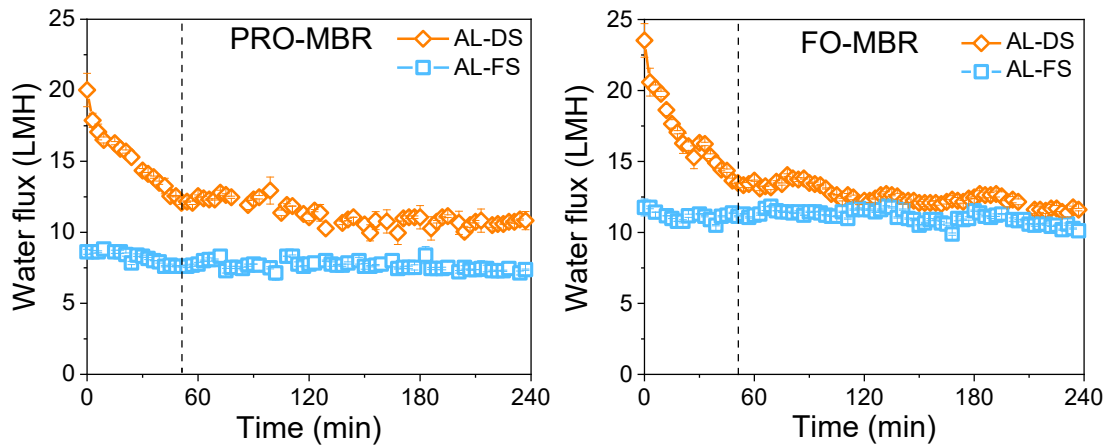
289 Membrane orientation is a critical operational parameter for FO and PRO  
290 processes, which substantially influences the water flux performance, the fouling  
291 propensity and the membrane stability. The water flux performances of PRO-MBR in  
292 AL-DS and AL-FS orientation were compared, consequently. In general, the water flux  
293 of membrane operated in AL-DS orientation was consistently higher than that of under  
294 AL-FS orientation, i.e., both a higher initial flux (20.0 LMH versus 8.6 LMH) and a  
295 higher stable flux (10.6 LMH versus 7.5 LMH) were achieved under the AL-DS  
296 orientation. Similar result was also obtained in FO-MBR. The better water flux  
297 performance under AL-DS orientation, which was expectable in FO, can be attributed  
298 to the less severe internal concentration polarization (ICP) effect under AL-DS  
299 orientation than that under AL-FS orientation ([McCutcheon and Elimelech, 2006](#); [Tang](#)  
300 [et al., 2010](#)). As for PRO operated in AL-FS orientation, with the porous and thick  
301 support layer facing DS, the mixing of high concentration DS and permeate from FS  
302 was retarded in support layer, thus resulting in the dilution of DS at the interface of  
303 active layer and support layer, and consequently the reduction of osmotic pressure  
304 difference across the membrane (permeation driving force). While in AL-DS

305 orientation, with support layer facing FS, the concentrative ICP effect in support layer  
306 is relatively lower because the low concentration of FS, thus the influence on osmotic  
307 pressure difference is much lower than that in AL-FS orientation. The higher the water  
308 flux is, the higher the power density can be achieved in PRO process, therefore the AL-  
309 DS orientation is normally adopted for PRO.

310 In contrast, the FO-MBR is normally operated under AL-FS orientation to avoid  
311 serious membrane fouling in the support layer of the FO membrane (Honda et al., 2015).  
312 Indeed, as shown in Figure 1, the water flux decline in AL-DS orientation was more  
313 significant than that in AL-FS orientation for both FO-MBR and PRO-MBR, though  
314 the initial flux in AL-DS orientation was much higher. The water flux profiles of  
315 membrane operated in AL-DS orientation exhibited typical 2-stage decline curve for  
316 both FO-MBR and PRO-MBR, i.e., the water flux in AL-DS orientation dropped  
317 rapidly in the first 50 minutes and then stabilized, however, the water flux maintained  
318 a relatively stable level in AL-FS orientation during the whole operation period. In AL-  
319 DS orientation, where the porous support layer facing mixed liquor, the pollutants can  
320 be easily carried into and adsorbed within support layer, moreover the activated sludge  
321 also can be directly deposit on support layer surface, which collectively caused rapid  
322 flux decline at the beginning of operation; and once a stable cake layer was formed on  
323 support layer surface, the penetration of pollutants into support layer might be slowed  
324 down due to barrier effect of cake layer, therefore the flux variation proceeded to a  
325 gradual decline phase. This result implied that membrane fouling behavior was highly  
326 dependent on the membrane orientations in PRO-MBR. Considering the power



327 generation efficiency, PRO is normally operated in AL-DS orientation, however the  
328 fouling propensity need to be seriously considered for PRO-MBR in which sludge  
329 mixed liquor is used as FS (facing the support layer of membrane).



330

331 **Figure 1** Water flux profiles in PRO-MBR and FO-MBR with different membrane orientations  
332 (i.e., AL-DS and AL-FS)

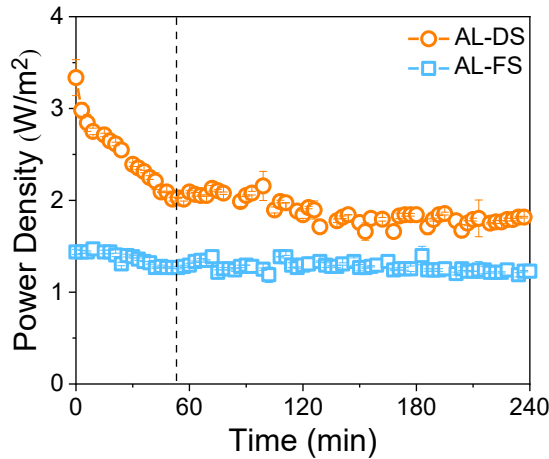
### 333 3.3 Power generation performance

334 Previous studies demonstrated that substantially different power generation  
335 performances were obtained in PRO process in different membrane orientations (AL-  
336 FS and AL-DS). Though PRO was normally recommended to operate in AL-DS  
337 orientation considering the higher power density and better membrane stability, there is  
338 still controversy on which orientation is better when wastewater (with high fouling  
339 potential) is used as FS. In AL-DS orientation, membrane is more prone to fouling with  
340 porous support layer facing wastewater, as a consequence, the advantage of high power  
341 density and techno-economic will be compromised.

342 This study, for the first time, investigated the power generation performances of  
343 PRO-MBR (with sludge mixed liquor as FS) operated in AL-DS and AL-FS orientation.  
344 Figure 2 presents the power density curves of PRO-MBR in AL-DS and AL-FS

345 orientation. The power density profiles of PRO-MBR (for both two orientations) were  
346 observed to follow the similar variation trend of membrane fluxes (as shown in Fig. 1).  
347 Based on the fact that the power density is directly proportional to the water flux  
348 (according to Eq. (4)), PRO-MBR operated in AL-DS orientation (with a better flux  
349 performance than in AL-FS orientation) undoubtedly achieved a higher power density,  
350 i.e., the power density ranged from 3.4-1.8 W/m<sup>2</sup> in the AL-DS orientation while it was  
351 only around 1.4 W/m<sup>2</sup> in the AL-FS orientation. Likewise, this can be simply explained  
352 by the fact that the dilutive ICP in AL-FS mode was more severe than the concentrative  
353 ICP in AL-DS mode, thus leading to lower flux and poorer power density.

354 It was reported that with the same membrane orientation of AL-DS, similar DS  
355 concentration (2 M NaCl) and applied pressure (6.0-6.5 bar) on the DS side, the peak  
356 power density of the PRO process was normally around 4.0 W/m<sup>2</sup> (Kim et al., 2016;  
357 She et al., 2013, 2012b). On the other hand, it was reported that the power density of a  
358 PRO process was largely compromised due to membrane fouling when real wastewater  
359 was used as the feed (Wan and Chung, 2015). Thus, considering the high concentration  
360 and complexity of sludge mixed liquor as FS, it is reasonable that the maximum power  
361 density achieved in PRO-MBR (3.4 W/m<sup>2</sup> in AL-DS orientation) was lower than that  
362 in ideal condition.



363

364

**Figure 2** Power density profiles of PRO-MBR operated in different membrane orientations (i.e., AL-DS and AL-FS).

365

### 366 3.4 Techno-economic analysis

367

To evaluate how much energy consumption can be reduced by replacing FO with

368

PRO in a OMBR system, the specific energy consumption (SEC) of FO and PRO under

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AL-DS orientation were analyzed and compared (as shown in Table 2). Energy

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consumption of a conventional FO system was basically comprised of two aspects: the

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pumping for FS and DS and the RO process for DS regeneration. As shown in Table 2,

372

the SEC of conventional FO system was 1.427 kWh/m<sup>3</sup>, in which RO for DS

373

regeneration was the dominant energy consuming component (1.4 kWh/m<sup>3</sup>). This

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accounted for 98.2% of the total energy consumption. In contrast, besides the equal

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energy consumption of RO for DS regeneration, additional hydraulic pressure was

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applied on DS side in the PRO process, thus the energy consumption was relatively

377

higher (1.451 kWh/m<sup>3</sup>) than that of conventional FO process.

378

However, osmotic energy was harvested during the PRO process, then the osmotic

379

energy can be further converted to electricity energy as energy supplement by a turbo

380

device. In present study, 0.168 kWh energy was generated along with per m<sup>3</sup> water

381 production by PRO process. Considering this additional energy supplement, the net  
382 specific energy consumption of the PRO process eventually came to 1.297 kWh/m<sup>3</sup>, a  
383 reduction of 10.09% was achieved via replacing FO with PRO in a OMBR system with  
384 otherwise conditions identical. Overall, with the ability of recovering osmotic energy  
385 while wastewater treatment, the PRO-MBR showed better economicalness than  
386 conventional FO-MBR in the fields of wastewater treatment and reclamation.

387 It is noteworthy that membrane fouling is a critical factor affecting the power  
388 generation performance in PRO-MBR. As shown in Figure 2, PRO exhibited the  
389 maximum power density (as high as 3.4 W/m<sup>2</sup>) at the very beginning of operation,  
390 however it declined rapidly as the operation proceeded and stabilized at 1.8 W/m<sup>2</sup>.  
391 Correspondingly, the energy generation performance decreased from 0.317 kWh/m<sup>3</sup> to  
392 0.168 kWh/m<sup>3</sup> (a reduction of 47.05%). This can be attributed to the formation of  
393 fouling layer on support layer of FO membrane during the initial filtration (as discussed  
394 in Section 3.2). If such membrane fouling can be mitigated (e.g., applying bio-carriers,  
395 quorum quenching strategy, fabricating FO membrane with low S value, etc.), the  
396 power density and technoeconomic competitiveness of PRO-MBR could be largely  
397 improved. Furthermore, in present study, a relatively low applied hydraulic pressure (6  
398 bar) was employed in PRO with the aim to prevent membrane deformation under long-  
399 term operation. The applied hydraulic pressure is lower than the theoretical optimum  
400 (around 45 bar for present study) for power generation. Therefore, fabricating FO  
401 membrane with high mechanical strength (able to withstand high hydraulic pressure)  
402 could be another approach to improve the power generation performance of PRO-MBR.

403 In summary, the results of present study preliminarily demonstrated the good techno-  
 404 economic potential of the PRO-MBR, while there is still a big room for improvement.

405 **Table 2**

406 The specific energy consumption of FO and PRO

	FS/DS feeding pump <sup>a</sup> (kWh/m <sup>3</sup> )	High-pressure pump on DS <sup>b</sup> (kWh/m <sup>3</sup> )	RO for DS regeneration <sup>c</sup> (kWh/m <sup>3</sup> )	Specific Energy generation <sup>d</sup> (kWh/m <sup>3</sup> )	Specific energy consumption (kWh/m <sup>3</sup> )
FO	0.027	-	1.4	-	1.427
PRO	0.011	0.040	1.4	0.168	1.283

407 <sup>a</sup> The feeding pump energy consumption was calculated as:  $W_{\text{pump}} \times 24 \text{ h} / V_{\text{water production}}$ .

408 <sup>b</sup> The energy consumption of high-pressure pump with energy recovery device was calculated as:  $\Delta P \times Q_{\text{DS}} \times (1 - \eta_{\text{ERD}}) \times 24 \text{ h} / V_{\text{water production}}$ .

410 <sup>c</sup> Energy consumption of RO for DS regeneration was calculated to be 1.38 kWh/m<sup>3</sup> by ROSA 9.1 (Dow Filmtec)  
 411 was; moreover, the SEC of RO for DS regeneration reported in literature was in the range of 1.37-1.5 kWh/m<sup>3</sup> (Chia  
 412 et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2015; Seo et al., 2019; Zaviska et al., 2015); present study takes 1.4 kWh/m<sup>3</sup> for the following  
 413 calculation in reference of both the simulated value and the reported values.

414 <sup>d</sup> The specific energy generation of PRO was calculated as:  $W_{\text{PRO}} \times \eta_{\text{PRO}} \times 10^{-3} \times 24 \text{ h} \times A / V_{\text{water production}}$ .

415  $W_{\text{pump}}$  and  $V_{\text{water production}}$  refer to pump power and water production per day;  $\Delta P$ ,  $Q_{\text{DS}}$ ,  $\eta_{\text{ERD}}$  refer to applied pressure  
 416 on DS, DS flow rate and energy recovery efficiency, respectively;  $W_{\text{PRO}}$ ,  $\eta_{\text{PRO}}$  and  $A$  refer to power density of PRO,  
 417 energy conversion efficiency of PRO and the effective membrane area, respectively.

### 418 3.5 Membrane fouling characteristics

419 It was showed in previous section that the power density in PRO-MBR was  
 420 highly influenced by membrane fouling. Understanding the fouling characteristics in  
 421 PRO-MBR is quite essential for developing effective fouling control strategy, and  
 422 thereby further improving the power density and sustainability of PRO-MBR.

423 Because of the fact that hydraulic conditions in PRO-MBR was different with  
 424 that in FO-MBR, the fouling characteristics in PRO-MBR would be distinct from that  
 425 in FO-MBR as well. In addition, unlike the AL-FS membrane orientation that is  
 426 normally adopted in FO, PRO process is usually operated in AL-DS mode (porous  
 427 support layer facing FS) to achieve higher power density. Therefore, in the case of  
 428 sludge mixed liquor as FS, the fouling process could be even more complex in PRO-  
 429 MBR. With the aim to clarify the fouling characteristics in PRO-MBR, the fouled  
 430 membranes of FO-MBR and PRO-MBR (in both AL-DS and AL-FS orientations) were

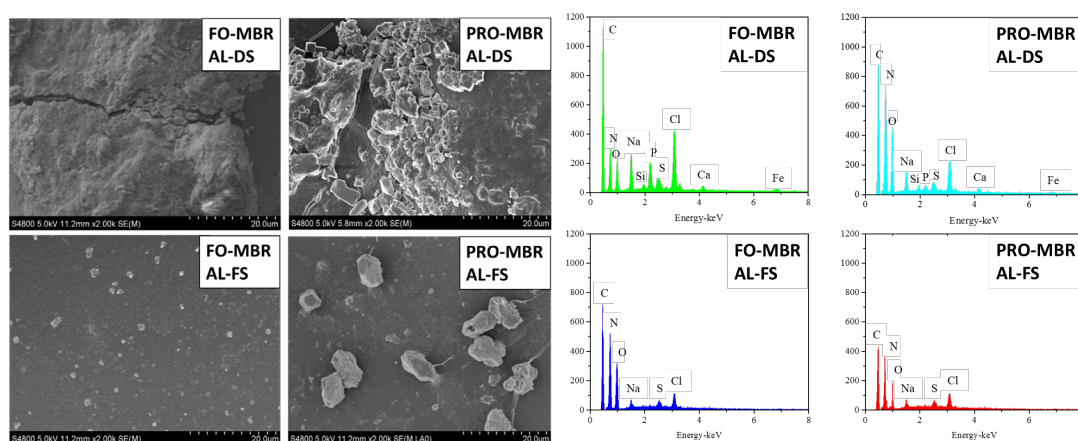
431 collected at the end of experiments and characterized by SEM, EDS and CLSM.

432 Figure 3 presents the SEM images of the side of membranes facing FS (sludge  
433 mixed liquor). It is obvious that a sludge cake layer had formed on membranes in AL-  
434 DS orientation (support layer facing FS) for both FO-MBR and PRO-MBR, while the  
435 fouling on membranes in AL-FS orientation (active layer facing FS) was negligible.  
436 Compared to the dense and smooth active layer, the support layer with porous and thick  
437 structure was very prone to fouling. It was reported that in the PRO process treating  
438 municipal wastewater, most of the fouling occurred in the pores of the support layer  
439 (Han et al., 2016a; She et al., 2017b). However, the observed significant sludge cake  
440 layer on support layer of membranes in present study indicated that with activated  
441 sludge mixed liquor as FS (in AL-DS orientation), the fouling was not only distributed  
442 within the pores of support layer but also deposited on the surface of support layer.

443 The element composition of the fouling layers on membranes were further  
444 analyzed by EDS. As shown in Figure 3, C, N, O, Na, Cl, P and S were the major  
445 elements on membranes fouled in AL-DS orientation for both PRO-MBR and FO-MBR.  
446 The presence of Na and Cl on fouled membrane surfaces was the result of reverse salt  
447 transport from DS side (Luján-facundo et al., 2017). Additionally, since the pristine  
448 CTA-FO membrane only contains C and O, the abundant N element and considerable  
449 P and S content suggested that organic fouling or biofouling was formed on membrane  
450 surfaces, which was consistent with the finding of sludge cake layer via SEM images.  
451 Furthermore, Ca element was also observed on membrane fouled in AL-DS orientation,  
452 though with a low intensity, which suggested inorganic ions was involved in the

453 membrane fouling (via complexation or scaling effects). In contrast, the Ca and P  
 454 element were undetected on the membranes fouled in AL-FS orientation for both PRO-  
 455 MBR and FO-MBR, moreover, the peak intensities of other elements were generally  
 456 lower than those on membranes fouled in AL-DS orientation. This result further  
 457 confirmed that membrane fouling in AL-DS orientation was more severe and complex.

458 Considering the complexity of membrane fouling in the AL-DS orientation  
 459 (porous support layer facing mixed liquor), the cross-section of the membranes fouled  
 460 in the AL-DS orientation was further investigated by SEM-EDS. As shown in Figure  
 461 2S, fouling took place as expected within the porous support layer of membranes in  
 462 both FO-MBR and PRO-MBR. It is noteworthy that unlike the fouling layer on the  
 463 surface of support layer, intensive accumulation of Ca and P within support layer of  
 464 membranes was observed from the EDS mapping images, implying that inorganic  
 465 scaling as a result of the precipitation of Ca and P ions probably took place within  
 466 support layer (She et al., 2017a).



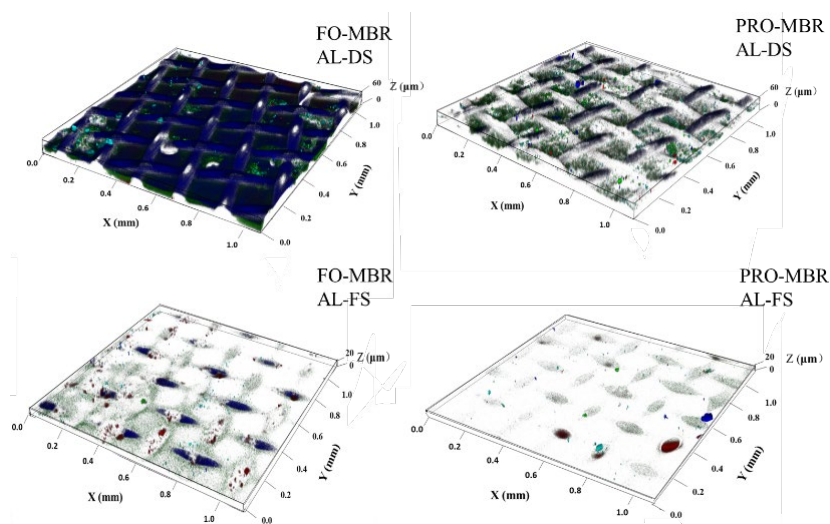
467  
 468 **Figure 3** SEM images (left) and EDS spectra (right) of the fouled FO membranes in the PRO-  
 469 MBR and FO-MBR.

470 Biofouling is normally regarded as the dominant fouling type in membrane

471 bioreactor. To achieve a deeper understanding of the biofouling characteristics in PRO-  
472 MBR, the distributions and the contents of bio-foulants (e.g., polysaccharides, proteins  
473 and microorganisms) on fouled membranes were further analyzed by CLSM coupled  
474 with multiple fluorescence labeling (Li et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016b; Yuan et al.,  
475 2015). As shown in Figure 4, the surface of membranes fouled in AL-DS orientation  
476 (for both PRO-MBR and FO-MBR) were covered with thick biofouling layers (both  
477 around 60  $\mu\text{m}$  thick); Since the support layer of FO membrane was approximately 30  
478  $\mu\text{m}$  thick, it can be inferred that the foulants were indeed located not only within the  
479 pores but also on the surface of the support layer. By contrast, the biofouling layers on  
480 membranes fouled in the AL-FS orientation were much thinner (approximately 20  $\mu\text{m}$   
481 thick), and the foulants were all deposited on the surface of the active layer. This finding  
482 was in consistence with above observations of the fouled FO membranes via SEM and  
483 EDX, that membrane fouling was more severe and complex in the AL-DS orientation.

484 A quantitative analysis was further conducted on the fouling layers. The  
485 biovolume of various bio-foulants in fouled membrane was calculated by *PHLIP*  
486 software (Yuan et al., 2015) and the results are summarized in Table 3. The total  
487 biovolume of polysaccharides, proteins and microorganisms on membranes fouled in  
488 AL-DS orientation were 30.98  $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$  and 16.92  $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$  for FO-MBR and PRO-  
489 MBR, respectively, which were much higher than those in membrane fouled in AL-FS  
490 orientation, i.e., 3.29  $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$  in PRO-MBR and 4.84  $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$  in FO-MBR. This result  
491 further demonstrated that biofouling on membranes fouled in AL-DS orientation was  
492 much more significant.





493

494 **Figure 4** CLSM images of the fouled FO membranes in different membrane orientations in the  
 495 PRO-MBR and FO-MBR (the cyan, blue, green and red colors represent  $\alpha$ -D-glucopyranose,  $\beta$ -D-  
 496 glucopyranose, proteins, and microbial cells, respectively).

497

498 **Table 3**

499 Biovolume of the foulants on the fouled FO membranes in PRO-MBR and FO-MBR (calculated by  
 500 PHLIP).<sup>a</sup>

		$\alpha$ -D- glucopyranose ( $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ )	$\beta$ -D- glucopyranose ( $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ )	Proteins ( $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ )	Total cells ( $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ )	Sum ( $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ )
PRO-	AL-DS	$0.21 \pm 0.07$	$7.13 \pm 0.71$	$6.51 \pm 0.33$	$3.07 \pm 0.66$	$16.92 \pm 1.77$
MBR	AL-FS	$0.88 \pm 0.14$	$0.63 \pm 0.06$	$1.06 \pm 0.21$	$0.72 \pm 0.08$	$3.29 \pm 0.49$
FO-	AL-DS	$2.01 \pm 0.64$	$11.13 \pm 1.03$	$9.99 \pm 0.42$	$7.85 \pm 0.78$	$30.98 \pm 1.87$
MBR	AL-FS	$2.00 \pm 0.09$	$1.07 \pm 0.04$	$1.37 \pm 0.08$	$0.40 \pm 0.03$	$4.84 \pm 0.24$

501

<sup>a</sup> Values are given as the mean values  $\pm$  standard deviation (number of measurements: n = 3).

502

Above results collectively indicated that membrane orientation largely  
 503 determined the fouling behavior in PRO-MBR and FO-MBR. The PRO-MBR, in which  
 504 membrane was normally operated in AL-DS orientation, suffered more severe and  
 505 complex membrane fouling, as compared with FO-MBR (membrane normally operated  
 506 in AL-FS orientation). From another point of view, AL-FS orientation could be a more  
 507 promising option in the scenario of PRO-MBR if the shortcomings of severe ICP and  
 508 membrane stability (leading to poor power density and membrane damage) can be well

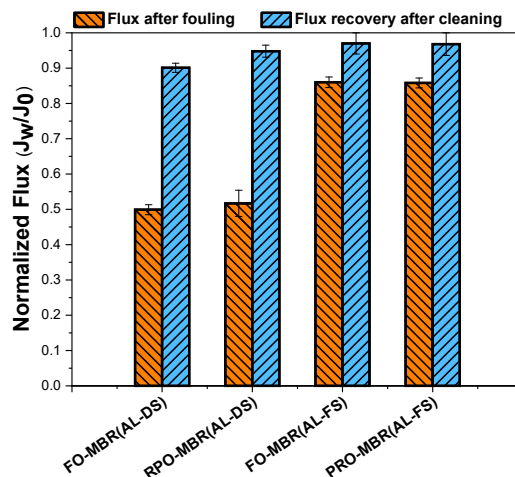
509 addressed.

510 Additionally, it is interesting to observe that the biofouling in PRO-MBR was  
511 obviously less than those in FO-MBR when they were both operated in AL-DS  
512 orientation (as shown in Figure 4). The biovolume of polysaccharides, proteins and  
513 microorganisms on membranes fouled in PRO-MBR (in AL-DS orientation) were  $7.33$   
514  $\pm 1.77$ ,  $6.51 \pm 0.33$  and  $3.07 \pm 0.66 \mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ , respectively, which were all lower than  
515 those in FO-MBR (polysaccharides of  $13.14 \pm 1.69 \mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ , proteins of  $9.99 \pm 0.42$   
516  $\mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$  and microorganisms of  $7.85 \pm 0.78 \mu\text{m}^3/\mu\text{m}^2$ ). In total, the biofoulants on  
517 membrane fouled in PRO-MBR was 45% (in volume) less than those in FO-MBR. Such  
518 reduction of biofouling in support layer of membrane in PRO-MBR could be attributed  
519 to the result of reverse salt transport. Due to the applied additional hydraulic pressure  
520 on DS side, the reverse salt transport was enhanced, thus more salts passed through the  
521 active layer, and accumulated in support layer because of the ICP effect. The high  
522 salinity stress induced strong inhibitory effect on bioactivity, hence the biofouling was  
523 largely restrained. Previous studies generally believed that reverse solute diffusion will  
524 enhance the organic fouling in PRO process because the divalent ions (e.g.  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ) from  
525 DS can promote aggregation of alginate and induce severe pore clogging and cake layer  
526 formation (She et al., 2013, 2012a). However, local salinity stress in support layer  
527 induced by RSD and its inhibitory effect on the biofouling were not considered in  
528 previous studies. Our study provided a new understanding to the effect of RSD on  
529 membrane fouling in PRO process.

530 3.6 Fouling reversibility

531 Fouling reversibility is an important factor that determines the sustainability and  
532 technoeconomic of MBR system (Song et al., 2018, 2017). At the end of experiment,  
533 the fouled membranes in PRO-MBR and FO-MBR were physically cleaned and the  
534 fouling reversibility was then evaluated.

535 Figure 5 shows the normalized fluxes of the fouled membranes in PRO-MBR and  
536 FO-MBR before and after physical cleaning. Generally, the flux loss of membranes  
537 fouled in AL-FS orientation was significantly larger than that in AL-DS orientation for  
538 both PRO-MBR and FO-MBR. The normalized flux of membrane after fouling was  
539 only 0.51 for PRO-MBR in AL-DS orientation, which was much lower than those for  
540 FO-MBR and PRO-MBR in AL-FS orientation (0.85 and 0.86, respectively). This  
541 result was in agreement with the result of previous sections that membrane fouling was  
542 more severe in AL-DS orientation. In AL-DS orientation, the porous and thick support  
543 layer of FO membrane faced the sludge mixed liquor, complex foulants in sludge mixed  
544 liquor was easily deposited within the pores, and the aeration scouring effect at  
545 membrane surface was unable to completely remove the foulants in support layer, thus  
546 leading to inevitable flux decline.



547

548 **Figure 5** Normalized fluxes of the fouled FO membranes in the PRO-MBR and FO-MBR before  
549 and after physical cleaning.

550 After osmotic backwash of 3 h, the membrane flux was almost completely  
551 recovered (both above 95%) for membranes operated in AL-FS orientation for both  
552 PRO-MBR and FO-MBR, which indicted that fouling formed in AL-FS orientation (on  
553 active layer surface) was mostly reversible. As for membranes oriented in AL-DS  
554 orientation, a comparable flux recovery rate of 92.4% was also achieved by physical  
555 cleaning for PRO-MBR, suggesting that most of the fouling in support layer was  
556 reversible too. Previous study reported that the membrane fouling in FO-MBR (in AL-  
557 FS orientation) normally presented high reversibility, the flux recovery rate of 98% was  
558 easily achieved by just osmotic backwash (Yuan et al., 2015). This should be mainly  
559 attributed to the very low hydraulic pressure applied in FO process. Unlike that in RO  
560 and NF processes (driven by high hydraulic pressure), the FO process was driven by  
561 osmotic pressure (exclusively on water molecules) difference across the semipermeable  
562 membrane, thus the force driving foulants to membrane is much weaker.

563 Nevertheless, the severe flux loss during operation of PRO-MBR in AL-DS  
564 orientation, though mostly reversible, signifies the requirement of high cleaning  
565 frequency and operational cost. Additionally, power density is directly proportional to  
566 the membrane flux in PRO process, thus the decline of flux also means decrease of  
567 power generation performance. Hence, flux decline due to membrane fouling is a  
568 critical restricting factor to the performance of RPO-MBR. In view of this, operating  
569 PRO-MBR in AL-FS orientation seems a potential way to alleviate membrane fouling,  
570 however, as mentioned previously, the severe ICP and membrane stability need to be

571 addressed before.

### 572 3.7 Implications

573 Comparative analysis (as summarized in Table 4) showed that the PRO-MBR  
574 exhibited similar excellent contaminants removal performances to that of FO-MBR for  
575 municipal wastewater treatment. Additionally, operating flux comparable with that in  
576 FO-MBR was also obtained in PRO-MBR under identical operation conditions. More  
577 importantly, with the application of PRO process, a considerable amount of energy can  
578 be extracted from the osmosis process (not available in FO-MBR), and be further  
579 utilized to reduce system energy consumption. Energy consumption is an important  
580 factor that determines the feasibility of osmotic MBR in practical application. In this  
581 sense, the PRO-MBR system exhibited better application potential than conventional  
582 FO-MBR in the field of wastewater treatment and reclamation.

583 Membrane fouling was an important hindrance to the performance of PRO-MBR.  
584 About 40% of the power density was compromised by membrane fouling in PRO-MBR.  
585 The power generation performance of PRO-MBR could be further improved if effective  
586 fouling control strategies can be developed, e.g., applying bio-carriers, quorum  
587 quenching bacteria or antifouling FO membrane material. Furthermore, given the more  
588 complex fouling mechanisms, especially biofouling, in PRO-MBR, future research  
589 attention should also focus on clarifying its fouling characteristic.

590 The choice of membrane orientation is of paramount importance for PRO-MBR.  
591 Present study found that the energy generation efficiency achieved in AL-DS  
592 orientation (4.1 kWh/100 m<sup>2</sup>·d) was 28.1% higher than that in AL-FS orientation (3.2

593 kWh/100 m<sup>2</sup>·d) with otherwise conditions identical. The relatively lower energy  
 594 generation efficiency in AL-FS orientation should be attributed to the more severe ICP  
 595 in support layer for FO membrane operated in AL-FS orientation, which induced lower  
 596 operating flux, and lower power density as well. Furthermore, the membrane stability  
 597 was also a big concern for PRO process in AL-FS orientation. However, the inherent  
 598 advantage of less prone to fouling makes the AL-FS orientation still a potential option  
 599 for PRO-MBR, in which the severe fouling problem is a critical factor limiting its power  
 600 density. Therefore, future study on ICP mitigation strategy in AL-FS orientation and  
 601 high-strength FO membrane should be very necessary.

602 **Table 4**

603 Performance comparison between the FO-MBR and the PRO-MBR.<sup>a</sup>

	FO-MBR		PRO-MBR	
	AL-DS	AL-FS	AL-DS	AL-FS
Operating flux (LMH)	13.54 ± 2.31	11.09 ± 0.45	12.19 ± 2.08	7.79 ± 0.42
Removal rate (%)	TOC	96.51 ± 0.51	96.66 ± 0.10	96.47 ± 1.10
	TP	100	100	100
	NH <sub>4</sub> <sup>+</sup> -N	97.49 ± 0.69	98.68 ± 0.62	98.52 ± 1.18
	TN	96.51 ± 0.90	95.96 ± 0.68	97.29 ± 1.28
Flux recovery rate (%)	90.10 ± 1.31	97.04 ± 3.45	94.83 ± 1.71	96.82 ± 3.22
Specific energy consumption <sup>b</sup> (kWh/m <sup>3</sup> )		1.427	1.283	1.288
Energy generation efficiency <sup>c</sup> (kWh/100 m <sup>2</sup> ·d)	-	-	4.1	3.2

604 <sup>a</sup> Values are given as the mean values ± standard deviation (number of measurements: n = 3).

605 <sup>b</sup> Energy generated by PRO was also considered.

606 <sup>c</sup> Energy generation efficiency was defined as the energy generated by unit membrane area per day.

#### 607 4. Conclusion

608 A novel PRO-MBR was proposed and compared with conventional FO-MBR in this  
 609 study. PRO-MBR exhibited comparable contaminants removal and water flux  
 610 performances as compared with FO-MBR. Additionally, a considerable amount of  
 611 energy (4.1 kWh/100 m<sup>2</sup>·d) was generated in PRO-MBR, by which the SEC for water  
 612 recovery was reduced by 10.02% as compared with FO-MBR. The performance of

613 PRO-MBR was largely determined by membrane orientation, peak power density of  
614  $3.4 \text{ W/m}^2$  was achieved in AL-DS orientation, while that in AL-FS orientation was only  
615  $1.4 \text{ W/m}^2$  (because of the severe ICP). However, PRO-MBR suffered more severe and  
616 complex membrane fouling when operated in AL-DS orientation. Flux decline induced  
617 by membrane fouling restricted the power generation performance of PRO-MBR,  
618 especially in AL-DS orientation, the power density was decreased by 38.2% due to the  
619 formation of fouling. Future study on PRO-MBR should focus on the control of severe  
620 membrane fouling in AL-DS orientation; Moreover, AL-FS orientation could also  
621 become a potential option if severe ICP issue was mitigated.

#### 622 **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

623 **Shuyue Liu:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing -  
624 original draft. **Weilong Song:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Methodology, Data  
625 curation, Review & editing, Project administration. **Manli Meng:** Methodology,  
626 Investigation, Data curation. **Ming Xie:** Review & editing. **Qianhong She:** Review &  
627 editing. **Pin Zhao:** Project administration, Review & editing. **Xinhua Wang:**  
628 Conceptualization, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

#### 629 **Acknowledgments**

630 This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China [grant  
631 number 51978312]; the Six Major Talent Peaks of Jiangsu Province [grant number  
632 2018-JNHB-014]; and the Program to Cultivate Middle-aged and Young Science  
633 Leaders of Colleges and Universities of Jiangsu Province.

#### 634 **Supporting information**

635 Detailed information on additional figures and foulants extracting method can be found  
636 in the Supporting Information

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820

## 821 **Table Captions**

822 **Table 1** TOC, NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>-N, TN and TP concentrations in the influent, sludge supernatant  
823 and FO permeate and their removal rates (average ± standard deviation from triple  
824 measurements) in FO-MBR and PRO-MBR.

825 **Table 2** The specific energy consumption of FO and PRO.

826 **Table 3** Biovolume of the foulants on the fouled FO membranes in PRO-MBR and FO-  
827 MBR (calculated by PHLIP).<sup>a</sup>

828 **Table 4** Performance comparison between the FO-MBR and the PRO-MBR.<sup>a</sup>

829

## 830 **Figure Captions**

831 **Figure 1** Water flux profiles in PRO-MBR and FO-MBR with different membrane  
832 orientations (i.e., AL-DS and AL-FS).

833 **Figure 2** Power density profiles of PRO-MBR operated in different membrane



834 orientations (i.e., AL-DS and AL-FS).

835 **Figure 3** SEM images (left) and EDS spectra (right) of the fouled FO membranes in  
836 the PRO-MBR and FO-MBR.

837 **Figure 4** CLSM images of the fouled FO membranes in different membrane  
838 orientations in the PRO-MBR and FO-MBR (the cyan, blue, green and red colors  
839 represent  $\alpha$ -D-glucopyranose,  $\beta$ -D-glucopyranose, proteins, and microbial cells,  
840 respectively).

841 **Figure 5** Normalized fluxes of the fouled FO membranes in the PRO-MBR and FO-  
842 MBR before and after physical cleaning.

843