



Copper and zinc tolerance in two Montana grass species growing on copper mill tailings
by John Edward Surbrugg

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF SCIENCE
in Land Rehabilitation
Montana State University
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Abstract:

Copper smelter operations have been in existence in Anaconda, Montana since the late 1800's. The tailings material, deposited just east of the city, is essentially devoid of vegetation. However, *Deschampsia cespitosa* and *Agrostis tenuis* grasses were found colonizing areas of the tailings. Tailings from a vegetated area were analyzed and upon examination it was determined that copper and zinc were possibly toxic to the plants. The purpose of this study was therefore to determine the tolerance of *Deschampsia cespitosa* and *Agrostis tenuis* to copper and zinc. .

A greenhouse study using a sand, drip culture apparatus was used to determine metal tolerance. Commercial seed populations of the same genus and species were used as controls. An "in parallel" technique utilizing 4 concentrations of each metal allowed regression analysis of root growth on test concentration. Statistical analysis was used to identify differences in metal tolerance between the tailings and the control populations.

Results indicated that the mill tailings population of *Deschampsia cespitosa* was significantly more tolerant of copper and zinc than the commercial population. *Agrostis tenuis* from the mill tailings was found to possess significant copper tolerance only. Commercial and mill tailings populations of *Agrostis tenuis* were statistically similar in their response to zinc. A stimulating effect on root growth was observed at moderately low levels of zinc in the tailings plant species. This often observed stimulus may itself be related to tolerance.

An economic and viable method for stabilizing metalliferous sites is vegetative stabilization involving naturally occurring metal tolerant species. The confirmed tolerance to zinc and copper of the grass species colonizing the copper mill tailings at Anaconda, Montana indicates these species may be suitable for use in revegetating copper and zinc contaminated sites.

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GROWING ON COPPER MILL TAILINGS

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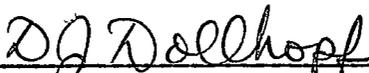
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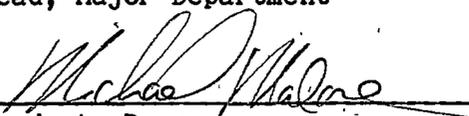
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Vita.ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents.iv
List of Tables	v
List of Figures. . . . .	.vi
Introduction	1
Literature Review.	5
The Genetics and Evolution of Tolerance	5
Physiological and Biochemical Aspects of Tolerance.	7
Laboratory Methods for Metal Tolerance Determinations	9
Benefits of Metal Tolerance in Revegetation . . . . .	.13
Materials and Methods. . . . .	.17
Collection of Plant Material. . . . .	.17
Collection and Analysis of Soil Material. . . . .	.18
Metal Tolerance Testing . . . . .	.20
1. Experimental Technique. . . . .	.20
2. Apparatus . . . . .	.22
3. Aeration. . . . .	.23
4. Sand Preparation. . . . .	.25
5. Nutrient Solution and Test Concentrations . . . . .	.26
Statistical Analysis. . . . .	.29
Results and Discussion . . . . .	.31
Copper Tolerance in <u>Deschampsia cespitosa</u> . . . . .	.31
Copper Tolerance in <u>Agrostis tenuis</u> . . . . .	.34
Zinc Tolerance in <u>Deschampsia cespitosa</u> . . . . .	.37
Zinc Tolerance in <u>Agrostis tenuis</u> . . . . .	.40
Multiple Metal Tolerance in Tailings Populations. . . . .	.42
Summary and Conclusions. . . . .	.45
Appendix . . . . .	.47
Literature Cited . . . . .	.51

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Soil analysis from two sites on Anaconda copper mill tailings . . . . .	.19
Table 2. Mechanical analysis of sand . . . . .	.25
Table 3. Composition of Hoagland and Arnon nutrient solution (1938). . . . .	.27
Table 4. Copper and zinc concentrations used for tolerance measurements. . . . .	.28
Table 5. Analysis of variance of <u>Deschampsia cespitosa</u> root growth at four levels of copper. . . . .	.48
Table 6. Analysis of variance for the tailings population of <u>Deschampsia cespitosa</u> root growth at four levels of copper . . . . .	.48
Table 7. Analysis of variance of <u>Agrostis tenuis</u> root growth at four levels of copper. . . . .	.49
Table 8. Analysis of variance of <u>Deschampsia</u> <u>cespitosa</u> root growth at four levels of zinc . . . . .	.49
Table 9. Analysis of variance of <u>Agrostis tenuis</u> root growth at four levels of zinc. . . . .	.50

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1. Location map showing site of
Anaconda tailings dump 2
- Figure 2. Naturally occurring grasses colonizing
Anaconda tailings dump 3
- Figure 3. Sand, drip culture apparatus used
in metal tolerance measurements.21
- Figure 4. Apparatus tray containing two
treatments and individual cells.23
- Figure 5. Root growth of mill tailings and commercial
seed populations of Deschampsia cespitosa
in response to 4 levels of copper.32
- Figure 6. Root growth of mill tailings and commercial
seed populations of Agrostis tenuis in
response to 4 levels of copper35
- Figure 7. Root growth of mill tailings and commercial
seed populations of Deschampsia cespitosa
in response to 4 levels of zinc.38
- Figure 8. Root growth of mill tailings and commercial
seed populations of Agrostis tenuis in
response to 4 levels of zinc41

ABSTRACT

Copper smelter operations have been in existence in Anaconda, Montana since the late 1800's. The tailings material, deposited just east of the city, is essentially devoid of vegetation. However, Deschampsia cespitosa and Agrostis tenuis grasses were found colonizing areas of the tailings. Tailings from a vegetated area were analyzed and upon examination it was determined that copper and zinc were possibly toxic to the plants. The purpose of this study was therefore to determine the tolerance of Deschampsia cespitosa and Agrostis tenuis to copper and zinc.

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INTRODUCTION

Anaconda, Montana has been the site of copper smelter operations since the late eighteenth century (Figure 1). Nearly 75 years of waste material from the smelting process has been deposited just east of the city of Anaconda in a tailings dump (Anaconda Copper Company 1979). The extraction process removes much of the mineral from the ore, but may leave behind as much as one percent of the primary mineral. This may be accompanied by other metals in the ore which were not worth extracting (Bradshaw 1971).

Typical reclamation techniques for tailings dumps have included regrading, veneering the surface with crushed limestone, covering the tailings with topsoil and seeding (Anaconda Copper Company 1979). This traditional revegetation effort may be adequate under some spoil physical and chemical conditions but has potential to fail under the adverse conditions of tailings dumps. Tailings characteristically have high acid-generating potential and, without continuous applications of lime, vegetation may not survive.

The European method of mine reclamation may be quite different than the modern American approach. For almost 30 years, investigators in the United Kingdom have been successfully establishing metal tolerant vegetation on metalliferous mine sites. They have found that populations of certain species growing in soils containing large amounts of heavy metals may be tolerant of the metal, and will grow

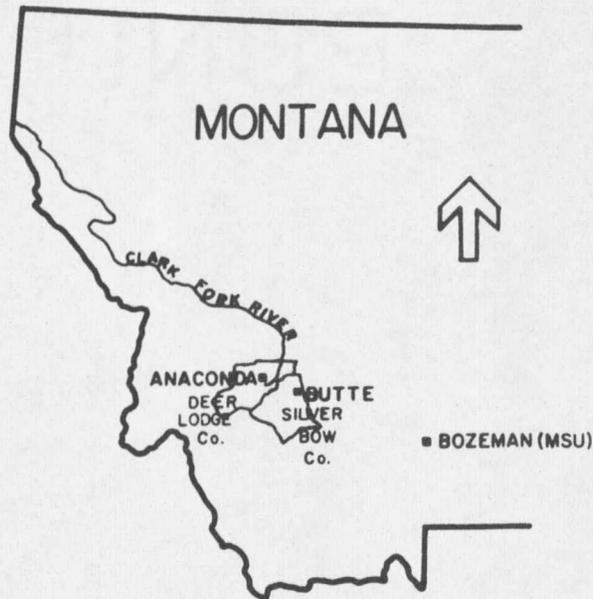


Figure 1. Location of Anaconda, Montana

better on such soils than transplants from uncontaminated soils (Bradshaw 1952).

Techniques for identifying tolerant vegetation have been developed. These techniques measure the degree to which plants will tolerate concentrations of heavy metals in solution culture (Wilkins 1957; Jowett 1958). These measurements along with field trials have produced commercial varieties of grass with specific tolerances to certain metals.

There is a great need to stabilize tailings dumps and other

