



Biocide action of chlorine on *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* biofilm  
by Ewout van der Wende

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Civil Engineering  
Montana State University  
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**Abstract:**

Biofouling by sessile microorganisms causes many problems for industry. Chlorine is often applied as a biocide to remove biofilm or prevent biofilm accumulation. The goal of this study was to determine the kinetics and stoichiometry of disinfection and detachment of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* biofilm by chlorine. Much of the work was done on in situ biofilm in a RotoTorque reactor. Biofilm cell detachment and disinfection were observed during biocide treatment. Free chlorine reacted with biofilm and suspended cells in the RotoTorque reactor. The reaction rates were observed and described with separate kinetic expressions for the reaction with biofilm and suspended cells.

Results indicate that disinfection dominates detachment in eliminating viable cells from the biofilm, especially at higher chlorine doses. The reaction of free chlorine with biomass resulted in the formation of combined chlorine. Combined chlorine may play a significant role in biofilm detachment but is relatively ineffective in biofilm cell disinfection.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Civil Engineering

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

March 1991

D378  
V2862

ii

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Ewout van der Wende

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the research and the production of this thesis. Special thanks goes to Bill Characklis for all his advice, encouragement, and hospitality over the years. Frances Ludwig and Darrell Smith from the South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority are acknowledged for sponsoring my research during my first two years at Montana State University. Their wonderful welcome after my arrival in the U.S. was the best start I could have had, and made me feel at home here from the very first day. Diane Williams is acknowledged for all her help with the production of this thesis. I thank Virginia Matheson for everything she did for her "adopted son" and Roy Walton for his indefatigable efforts to make a cowpuncher out of me. "Danke sehr" to Chrysti Scoville for giving me a home during the most difficult months in Bozeman. Finally, I want to thank my parents for their continuous love and support. I dedicate this thesis to them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
ABSTRACT .....	xv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Problem .....	1
Research Goal .....	2
Research Objectives .....	3
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
<u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> .....	4
Biofilm and Biofilm Processes .....	5
Chlorine Chemistry .....	6
Disinfection Chemistry of Chlorine .....	12
Mechanisms .....	12
Suspended Cells and Biofilm .....	13
MATERIAL BALANCE EQUATIONS .....	16
Specific Cell Detachment Rates .....	16
Tracer Study .....	21
EXPERIMENTAL SYSTEMS AND METHODS .....	23
Experimental Systems .....	23
RotoTorque Reactor System .....	23
Chemostat Reactor .....	27
Analytical Methods .....	28
Total Organic Carbon .....	28
Soluble Organic Carbon .....	28
Glucose .....	29
Dry Weight .....	29
Biofilm Thickness .....	29
Biofilm Micrographs .....	29
Viable Cells .....	30
Total Cells .....	30
Metabolic Activity .....	30
Chlorine .....	32
Uranin .....	32
Biofilm Sampling .....	32
Homogenizing .....	33
EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN .....	34
RotoTorque Tracer Study .....	34

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (contd.)

Kinetics and Stoichiometry of Chlorine Reaction with System Components .....	35
Protective Mechanisms in Biofilm Disinfection .....	36
Cell Phenotype of Sessile Cells versus Suspended Cells .....	37
Biofilm Mass Transfer Limitation .....	38
Biofilm Cell Interaction .....	38
Disinfection and Detachment .....	39
Disinfection and Detachment with Free Chlorine .....	40
Effects of Repeated Free Chlorine Addition .....	42
Disinfection and Detachment with Combined Chlorine .....	42
<b>RESULTS AND DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>44</b>
RotoTorque Tracer Study .....	44
Kinetics and Stoichiometry of Free Chlorine Reaction with System Components ..	49
Protective Mechanisms in Biofilm Disinfection .....	53
Cell Phenotype of Sessile Cells Versus Suspended Cells .....	53
Biofilm Mass Transfer Limitation .....	59
Biofilm Cell Interaction .....	63
<u>In Situ</u> Biofilm Treatment with Free Chlorine .....	64
<u>In situ</u> Biofilm Treatment (1.1 mg/l free chlorine) .....	66
<u>In situ</u> Biofilm Treatment (10.8 mg/l free chlorine) .....	69
<u>In situ</u> Biofilm Treatment (5.8 mg/l free chlorine) .....	75
<u>In situ</u> Biofilm Treatment (3.5 mg/l free chlorine) .....	79
Repeated <u>In Situ</u> Biofilm Treatment with Free Chlorine .....	82
Cell Disinfection and Detachment with Combined Chlorine .....	88
Kinetics of Biofilm Cell Disinfection .....	94
Free Chlorine Reaction Kinetics .....	99
Free Chlorine Reaction Kinetics with Suspended Cells .....	101
Free Chlorine Reaction Kinetics with Biofilm .....	105
<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>LITERATURE CITED .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>113</b>
A: Dimensions of the RotoTorque .....	114
B: Preliminary Free Chlorine Decay Studies .....	116
C: Biofilm and Suspended Cell Disinfection in Batch Reactor with Free Chlorine. ....	121
D: Biofilm and Suspended Cell Disinfection in Batch Reactor with Combined Chlorine. ....	125
E: <u>In situ</u> Biofilm Treatment with Free Chlorine .....	128
F: <u>In situ</u> Biofilm Treatment with Combined Chlorine .....	136
G: Repeated <u>In situ</u> Biofilm Treatment with 5.8 mg/l Free Chlorine .....	139

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1 RT and chemostat influent composition. RT influent consists of concentrated buffer (1 ml/min) and mineral salt/organic carbon solution (1 ml/min) diluted with distilled water (30 ml/min). The values presented are after dilution. ....	25
2 Composition of phosphate buffer used for cell dilution series etc. ....	30
3 Experimental conditions of the RT tracer studies. ....	35
4 Procedures of <u>in situ</u> biocide treatment. ....	41
5 Biofilm TOC and dry weight. Standard deviations of analysis and <u>not</u> sample standard deviations are presented. ....	85
6 Total organic carbon in a biofilm cell suspension and a yeast extract solution before and after exposure to 10 mg/l free chlorine for 60 min. ....	104
7 Chlorine decay in RT influent ....	117
8 Chlorine decay in RT dilution water. ....	117
9 Chlorine decay in phosphate buffer. ....	118
10 Chlorine decay in RT effluent. ....	119
11 Chlorine decay in clean RT. ....	120
12 Intact biofilm; thickness is 21 $\mu\text{m}$ . ....	122
13 Suspended biofilm cells. ....	123
14 Intact biofilm; thickness is 8 $\mu\text{m}$ . ....	124
15 Suspended cells. ....	126
16 Intact biofilm. ....	127
17 <u>In situ</u> biofilm treatment with 1.1 mg/l free chlorine. ....	129
18 <u>In situ</u> biofilm treatment with 10.8 mg/l free chlorine. ....	131
19 <u>In situ</u> biofilm treatment with 5.8 mg/l free chlorine ....	133
20 <u>In situ</u> biofilm treatment with 3.5 mg/l free chlorine ....	135

LIST OF TABLES (contd.)

Table		Page
21	Treatment with combined chlorine .....	137
22	Biofilm analysis .....	140
23	Effluent analysis .....	141

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1	Dissociation of hypochlorous acid as a function of pH. . . . . 7
2	Chlorine residuals during the reaction between free chlorine and ammonia nitrogen. Source: G.C.White, Handbook of Water Chlorination (1972). . . . . 9
3	Chlorine residuals during the reaction between free chlorine and a mixture of organic and ammonia nitrogen. Source: G.C.White, Handbook of Water Chlorination (1972). . . . . 11
4	Schematic diagram (1:3,4) of the <u>RotoTorque</u> biofilm reactor. . . . . 24
5	Schematic diagram of the chemostat used for inoculation of the RotoTorque. . . . . 27
6	Schematic drawing of bioassay tube. . . . . 31
7	Calculated dye concentration in the effluents of all 4 RT of a RotoTorque System (= 4 RotoTorques in series) after a step increase of the influent dye concentration of RT 1 from 0 to 1. . . . . 46
8	Calculated dye concentration in the effluents of all 4 RT of a RotoTorque System (= 4 RotoTorques in series) after a pulse addition of dye in RT 1 at $t = 0$ . . . . . 46
9	Biocide dose in the RT during step, pulse, and combined step/pulse biocide addition. . . . . 47
10	Dye concentration in the effluent of the last RotoTorque (RT 4) in a RotoTorque System (4 RotoTorques in series) after a step increase in the influent dye concentration of RT 1 from 0 to 1 (dimensionless concentration). Rotational speed of the inner drums was <u><math>0.92 \text{ m s}^{-1}</math></u> . . . . . 48
11	Dye concentration in the effluent of the last RotoTorque (RT 4) in a RotoTorque System (4 RotoTorques in series) after a pulse increase in the influent dye concentration of RT 1 from 0 to 1 (dimensionless concentration). Rotational speed of the inner drums was <u><math>0.092 \text{ m s}^{-1}</math></u> . . . . . 49
12	Free chlorine concentration in RotoTorque influent (stirred batch) after the addition of 2.47 mg/l free chlorine. . . . . 50
13	Free chlorine concentration in RotoTorque dilution water (stirred batch) after the addition of 2.47 mg/l free chlorine. . . . . 51
14	Free chlorine concentration in RotoTorque phosphate buffer after addition of 5.3 mg/l free chlorine. . . . . 51

## LIST OF FIGURES (contd.)

Figure	Page
15	Free chlorine concentration in RotoTorque effluent. Chlorine free effluent was collected from a RT operating at steady state. 2.47 mg/l free chlorine was added at time zero in a stirred batch reactor. . . . . 52
16	Free chlorine concentration in a clean RotoTorque filled with chlorine demand free water after the addition of 2.35 mg/l free chlorine at time zero. The drum speed was 0.92 m s <sup>-1</sup> . . . . . 53
17	Viable cells in intact biofilm and dispersed biofilm cell suspension after treatment with 1.05 mg/l free chlorine (stirred batch). Suspended cells numbers are expressed in terms of their areal concentration in the original biofilm. . . . . 54
18	Metabolic activity of biofilm cells and suspended biofilm cells after treatment (stirred batch) with 1.05 mg/l free chlorine. Results for suspended cells are expressed in terms of their areal concentration in the original biofilm. . . . . 55
19	Free chlorine concentration during treatment of biofilm and biofilm cell suspension in a stirred batch. . . . . 56
20	Total cells in biofilm and biofilm cell suspension after treatment with 1.05 mg/l free chlorine (stirred batch). Results for suspended cells are expressed in terms of the original biofilm. . . . . 57
21	Total organic carbon of biofilm and biofilm cell suspension treated with 1.05 mg/l free chlorine (stirred batch). Results for suspended biofilm cells are expressed in terms of the original biofilm. . . . . 58
22	Dry weight of biofilm and biofilm cell suspension treated with 1.05 mg/l free chlorine (stirred batch). Results for suspended biofilm cells are expressed in terms of the original biofilm. . . . . 59
23	Chlorine concentration during treatment of biofilm with different thickness ( $8 \pm 1$ and $21 \pm 3 \mu\text{m}$ ) in a stirred batch. . . . . 60
24	Viable cells in biofilm with different thickness ( $8 \pm 1$ and $21 \pm 3 \mu\text{m}$ ) after treatment with a dose of 1 mg/l free chlorine in a stirred batch. . . . . 60
25	Metabolic activity of biofilm with different thickness ( $8 \pm 1$ and $21 \pm 3 \mu\text{m}$ ) after treatment with a dose of 1 mg/l free chlorine in a stirred batch. . . . . 61
26	Total organic carbon of biofilm with different thickness ( $8 \pm 1$ and $21 \pm 3 \mu\text{m}$ ) treated with a dose of 1 mg/l free chlorine in a stirred batch. . . . . 61

## LIST OF FIGURES (contd.)

Figure	Page	
27	Total cells in biofilm with different thickness ( $8 \pm 1$ and $21 \pm 3 \mu\text{m}$ ) treated with a dose of 1 mg/l free chlorine in a stirred batch. . . . .	62
28	Dry weight of biofilm with different thickness ( $8 \pm 1$ and $21 \pm 3 \mu\text{m}$ ) treated with an approximate dose of 1 mg/l free chlorine in a stirred batch. . . . .	62
29	Chlorine disinfection efficiency in cell suspension of biofilm and free chlorine pretreated biofilm. . . . .	64
30	Cell specific detachment rates of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>1.1 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type addition to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	66
31	Total organic carbon of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>1.1 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of step type free chlorine addition to RotoTorque influent (1.1 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	67
32	Viable cell numbers of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>1.1 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of step type free chlorine addition to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	68
33	Chlorine in RotoTorque effluent during <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment with a dose of <u>1.1 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of step type free chlorine addition to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	69
34	Calculated cell specific detachment rates of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>10.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (10.8 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	70
35	Total organic carbon of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>10.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (10.8 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (10.8 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. . . . .	71
36	Viable cell numbers of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>10.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. . . . .	72
37	Glucose concentration in the RT during biofilm accumulation, biocide treatment, and biofilm recovery. . . . .	72
38	Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm just before biocide treatment, magnification 6000x. . . . .	73

## LIST OF FIGURES (contd.)

Figure	Page
39	Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm four hours after free chlorine treatment (10.8 mg/l) ceased, magnification 600. . . . 73
40	Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm four hours after free chlorine treatment (10.8 mg/l) ceased, magnification 6000x. Note the presence of lysed cells. . . . . 74
41	Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm eighty hours after free chlorine treatment (10.8 mg/l) ceased, magnification 6000x. Biofilm recovery is progressing. . . . . 74
42	Chlorine in RotoTorque effluent during <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment with a dose of <u>10.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (10.8 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (10.8 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. . . . . 75
43	Calculated cell specific detachment rates of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (5.8 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (5.8 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. . . . . 75
44	Total organic carbon of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (5.8 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (5.8 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. . . . . 77
45	Viable cell numbers of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. . . . . 78
46	Chlorine in RotoTorque effluent during <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (5.8 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (5.8 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. . . . . 78
47	Calculated cell specific detachment rates of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>3.5 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (3.5 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (3.5 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. . . . . 79
48	Total organic carbon of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>3.5 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (3.5 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (3.5 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. . . . . 80

76

## LIST OF FIGURES (contd.)

Figure	Page
49	81
Viable cell numbers of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>3.5 mg/l</u> free chlorine. ....	
50	81
Chlorine in RotoTorque effluent during <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment with a dose of <u>3.5 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Treatment consisted of a step type free chlorine addition to RT influent (3.5 mg/l) from time 0 to 60 min. An additional pulse (3.5 mg/l) directly into the RT was given at time 0. ....	
51	83
Calculated cell specific detachment rates of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during repeated treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Free chlorine was added to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min in addition to a pulse directly into the RotoTorque at time 0. ....	
52	83
Total organic carbon of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during repeated treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Free chlorine was added to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min in addition to a pulse directly into the RotoTorque at time 0. ....	
53	84
Viable cell numbers of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during repeated treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. ....	
54	86
Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of steady state <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm before biocide treatment, magnification 1000x. ....	
55	86
Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm during progressed stage of biofilm recovery, magnification 1000x. Note the "patchy" biofilm distribution. ....	
56	87
Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm, magnification 6000x. Thin strands of Extracellular Polymeric Substance (EPS) connect the cells. (EPS morphology may have been affected by sample preparation.) ....	
57	87
Chlorine in RotoTorque effluent during repeated <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment with a dose of <u>5.8 mg/l</u> free chlorine. Free chlorine was added to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min in addition to a pulse directly into the RotoTorque at time 0. ....	
58	88
Viable cells in biofilm and biofilm cell suspension during treatment with an approximate dose of 1.2 mg/l combined chlorine (stirred batch). ....	
59	89
Combined chlorine concentration during treatment of biofilm and biofilm cell suspension in a stirred batch. ....	

## LIST OF FIGURES (contd.)

Figure	Page	
60	Total organic carbon of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>2.7 - 1.8 mg/l</u> combined chlorine. Combined chlorine was (exclusively) added to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	90
61	Viable cell numbers of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>2.7 - 1.8 mg/l</u> combined chlorine. Combined chlorine was (exclusively) added to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	91
62	Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of steady state <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm before biocide treatment (2.7 - 1.8 mg/l) combined chlorine, magnification 1000x. . . . .	91
63	Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) picture of <u>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</u> biofilm 10 min after biocide treatment (2.7 - 1.8 mg/l combined chlorine) has ceased, magnification 1000x. . . . .	92
64	Combined chlorine concentration in RotoTorque influent during <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment. . . . .	92
65	Observed cell specific detachment rates of <u>in situ</u> biofilm during treatment with a dose of <u>2.7 - 1.8 mg/l</u> combined chlorine. Combined chlorine was (exclusively) added to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	93
66	Combined chlorine in RotoTorque effluent during <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment with a dose of <u>2.7 - 1.8 mg/l</u> combined chlorine. Combined chlorine was (exclusively) added to RotoTorque influent from time 0 to 60 min. . . . .	94
67	Observed and calculated viable cells during treatment of intact biofilm in a batch reactor with 1.05 mg/l free chlorine. . . . .	96
68	Observed and calculated viable cells during treatment of suspended biofilm cells in a batch reactor with 1.05 mg/l free chlorine. . . . .	96
69	Biofilm cell specific disinfection rate of <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment in the RT as a function of free chlorine <u>dose</u> . . . . .	98
70	Biofilm cell specific disinfection rate of <u>in situ</u> biofilm treatment in the RT as a function of free chlorine concentration. . . . .	99
71	Chlorine decay in RT effluent and in a RT with partial biofilm . . . . .	101
72	Chlorine concentration in RT with 3.2% biofilm. . . . .	107

## ABSTRACT

Biofouling by sessile microorganisms causes many problems for industry. Chlorine is often applied as a biocide to remove biofilm or prevent biofilm accumulation. The goal of this study was to determine the kinetics and stoichiometry of disinfection and detachment of Pseudomonas aeruginosa biofilm by chlorine. Much of the work was done on in situ biofilm in a RotoTorque reactor. Biofilm cell detachment and disinfection were observed during biocide treatment. Free chlorine reacted with biofilm and suspended cells in the RotoTorque reactor. The reaction rates were observed and described with separate kinetic expressions for the reaction with biofilm and suspended cells.

Results indicate that disinfection dominates detachment in eliminating viable cells from the biofilm, especially at higher chlorine doses. The reaction of free chlorine with biomass resulted in the formation of combined chlorine. Combined chlorine may play a significant role in biofilm detachment but is relatively ineffective in biofilm cell disinfection.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Problem

Accumulation of aquatic microbial cells on surfaces, usually referred to as biofilm, causes many problems for industry and often results in costly damage. Loss of heat transfer capacity in cooling towers and other heat exchangers is frequently a result of biofilm accumulation. Paper mills suffer biofilm-related damage when paper quality is affected by biofilm particles that slough from equipment surfaces and become entrained in the process stream. Hydraulic resistance in pipelines increases if biofilm is present, resulting in reduced flow rates or higher pumping costs. Corrosion is often attributed to the presence of sessile microorganisms in aerobic as well as in anaerobic environments although the mechanisms are not well understood.

Various methods are used to mitigate biofouling problems. Mechanical cleaning of pipelines includes the use of "pigs", i.e., brushes forced through a pipeline by water pressure. This practice is common for injection water pipelines used by the oil industry and is even used to clean drinking water mains. Anti-fouling coatings have been used with limited success. Chemical additives, biocides, are used in combination with mechanical procedures or as the sole treatment. Besides removing biofilm, many cells in the remaining biofilm are killed during this type of treatment resulting in increased biofilm recovery times. Oxidizing biocides such as chlorine can only be used effectively in predominantly aerobic systems. The application of chlorine is common because of its effectiveness and low price. However, its application in power plants in the United States has become limited after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lowered the allowable discharge concentrations of total chlorine residuals to 0.2 mg/l

(as  $\text{Cl}_2$ ) and restricted discharge to 2 hours a day per plant. The draft Clean Water Act of 1987 proposes even stricter regulations. Thus, application of chlorine and its influence on biofilm processes has become more important in recent years.

This thesis focusses on the relationship between chlorine dose and biofilm detachment and disinfection. Pseudomonas aeruginosa biofilms were grown in a continuous flow stirred tank biofilm reactor under strictly controlled conditions and treated with chlorine. Material balance analyses were employed in determining process rates. Preliminary studies were conducted to determine the advective fluid transport characteristics in the biofilm reactor and the free chlorine demand of system components.

Experiments with combined chlorine were conducted after the observation that combined chlorine and not free chlorine was the predominant chlorine species during treatment with free chlorine. The combined chlorine resulted from the reaction of free chlorine with biomass in the reactor.

Results indicate that the combined chlorine has little or no impact on biofilm disinfection but may play a role in biofilm detachment.

#### Research Goal

The goal of the research presented in this thesis is to establish a phenomenological basis for evaluating the effectiveness of a biocide on control of biofilm and biofilm activity.

### Research Objectives

- 1) Develop and/or test methods necessary to adequately characterize the biofilm for the process analysis.
- 2) Compare the kinetics of disinfection of planktonic cells versus biofilm cells.
- 3) Determine the kinetics and stoichiometry of disinfection and detachment in the RotoTorque reactor due to chlorine addition.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Pseudomonas aeruginosa

Pseudomonas aeruginosa is a bacterium commonly found in natural aquatic environments. A capsule of extracellular polymer substances (EPS) and attached growth on surfaces gives it some degree of protection against bacteriophages and predation by protozoa. It has been studied extensively in the form of suspended cells and in biofilms. Some important characteristics of this organism (Buchanan et al., 1974) are:

- 1) morphology: rod shaped, 0.5 - 0.8  $\mu\text{m}$  by 1.5 - 3.0  $\mu\text{m}$
- 2) gram stain: negative
- 3) metabolism: chemoorganotroph able to utilize many different substrates
- 4) respiration: aerobe able to use nitrate as an electron acceptor under anaerobic conditions
- 5) motility: through polar monotrichous flagellation

- 6) EPS composition: polyuronic acids; mainly D-mannuronic acid and variable amounts of L-guluronic acid (Carlson and Matthews, 1966; Mian et al., 1978)
- 7) Optimal temperature: 35 - 37 C° (Buchanan and Gibbons; 1974)
- 8) Optimal pH: 6.8 (Buchanan and Gibbons; 1974)

### Biofilm and Biofilm Processes

A bacterial biofilm consists of bacterial cells immobilized at a substratum and often embedded in a polymer matrix of bacterial origin. Inorganic solids may be entrapped in the biofilm.

Cell densities in biofilms can be remarkably low. Trulear (1983) calculated that the total volume of viable cells in a Pseudomonas aeruginosa biofilm was only 1 to 10 % of the biofilm volume. Characklis and Cooksey (1983) reported biofilm dry mass densities ranging from 10 - 50 kg/m<sup>3</sup> in biofilms collected from various fluid flow systems.

Biofilm accumulation is the result of the following processes:

- 1) Adsorption of cells that are transported to the substratum.
- 2) Growth and reproduction of cells in the biofilm
- 3) Detachment of cells from the biofilm.

Microbial cells can be transported from the bulk fluid to a substratum surface by many

different forces including: diffusion, gravity, taxis and fluid dynamic forces. Once cells have been transported to the substratum adsorption can take place. Some researchers have distinguished between reversible and irreversible adsorption (Marshall et al., 1971). In general adsorption becomes more irreversible when polymers produced by the cell anchor cells more firmly to the substratum. Cells obtain nutrients from the bulk fluid and/or from the substratum. Assimilation of these nutrients results in cell growth and cell reproduction. Biofilm activity is most prevalent in systems with fluid flow. Cell detachment from the biofilm occurs as a result of shear forces imposed on the biofilm by the flowing fluid. Steady state biofilm accumulation is reached when the total of biofilm accumulation processes results in no further change in biofilm areal density.

Biofilm detachment can result from erosion or sloughing. Erosion refers to the continuous removal of small biofilm particles and is highly dependent on the fluid dynamic conditions. Sloughing refers to massive removal of biofilm and has been attributed to oxygen or nutrient depletion in the biofilm (Howell and Atkinson, 1976). Bakke (1983) observed a drastic increase in detachment rates after the substrate loading rate was suddenly doubled. Turakhia et al. (1983) observed increased detachment rates after the addition of chelants. These researchers did not distinguish between biofilm erosion and sloughing. Most research on biofilm detachment has concentrated on indirect measurements including changes in frictional resistance and heat transfer resistance.

### Chlorine Chemistry

Chlorine is a strong-smelling, greenish yellow gas and extremely irritating to mucous

membranes. It received its name from the Greek word "chloros" meaning green. When chlorine is dissolved in water it rapidly forms the oxidizing agent hypochlorous acid (Morris, 1946).



The reaction is virtually complete at a pH > 3 and a total  $[\text{Cl}_2] < 1000 \text{ mg/l}$ . Hypochlorous acid is a weak acid, at pH 7.5 and 20 °C, only 50% dissociates into  $\text{H}^+$  and the conjugated base, hypochlorite ion (Figure 1):

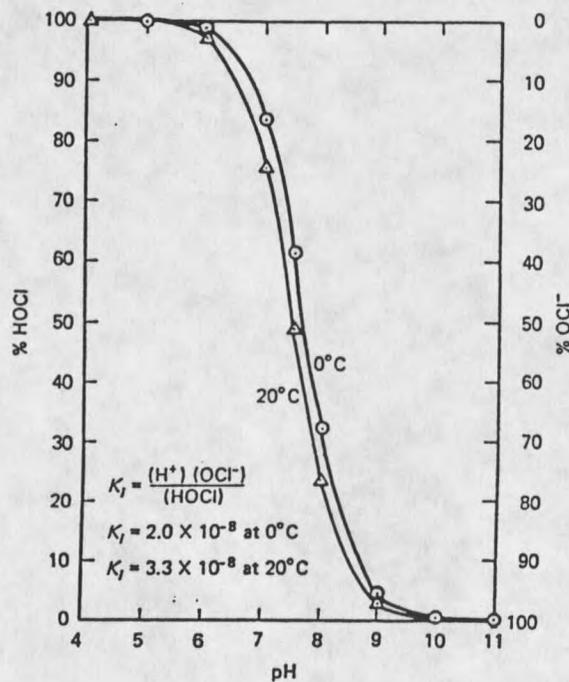


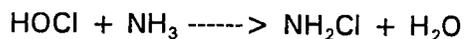
Figure 1. Dissociation of hypochlorous acid as a function of pH

The sum of hypochlorous acid and hypochlorite ion concentration form the free chlorine concentration. Free chlorine reacts quickly with reduced compounds commonly found in aqueous environments: ammonia, organic nitrogen (aminoacids, polypeptides, proteins and organic amines), iron ( $\text{Fe}^{++}$ ), manganese ( $\text{Mn}^{++}$ ), sulfide, and nitrite. Most of the reactions are simple and remove free chlorine quickly from the system. However, the most important aspects of aqueous chlorine chemistry, its reaction with various forms of nitrogen, is much more complex.

Free chlorine reacts with any compound containing a nitrogen atom with one or more hydrogen atoms attached.

The reaction product is a chloramine or N-chloro compound. There are two distinct classes of chloramines; organic and inorganic. Nitrogen appears in most natural waters and in varying amounts as either organic or inorganic nitrogen. In estuarine waters, Helz et al. (1978) measured (organic) amino nitrogen to be about ten times greater than inorganic nitrogen.

Inorganic chloramines are formed during the reaction with ammonia and organic chloramines during the reaction with organic nitrogen. The sum total of chloramine concentration is the combined chlorine concentration. The combination of free chlorine and combined chlorine is the total chlorine concentration. When free chlorine reacts with a relatively large amount of ammonia (molar ratio [free chlorine]/[ammonia] = 2) almost 100 % monochloramine will be formed.



[3]

The resulting combined chlorine concentration will be about half the initial free chlorine

concentration. When more free chlorine is added a disproportionation reaction begins forming dichloramine from free chlorine and monochloramine:



[4]

At the same time, the combined chlorine concentration starts to drop while the free chlorine concentration remains zero. This reaction proceeds in competition with reaction Eq.3 until the dose ratio of free chlorine to ammonia reaches 4. At this point, the so-called breakpoint has been reached (Figure 2). Monochloramine and dichloramine exist in approximately equal amounts, total chlorine is at a local minimum, free chlorine will start to appear while ammonia-nitrogen will start to disappear through oxidation by free chlorine. Ammonia-nitrogen is converted into elemental nitrogen. Further addition of free chlorine will add proportionally to the free chlorine residual.

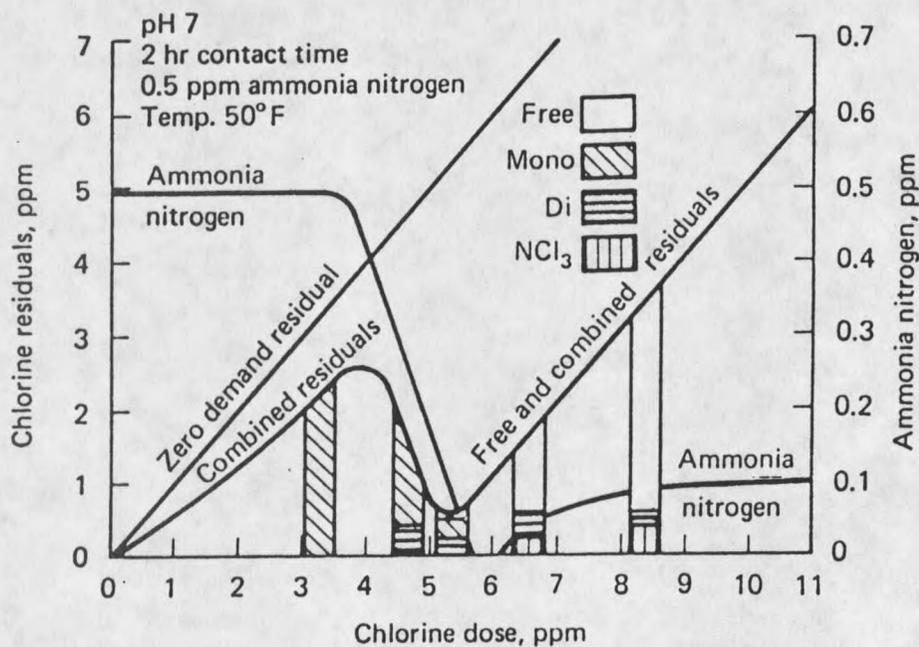


Figure 2. Chlorine residuals during the reaction between free chlorine and ammonia nitrogen. Source: G.C.White, Handbook of Water Chlorination (1972).

The reaction between free chlorine and organic nitrogen compounds results in the formation of organic chloramines. The rate and extent of the reaction depends largely on the structural complexity of the reactant (Taras, 1953). The more simple compounds are the unsubstituted amino acids. Formation of organic chloramines is relatively fast while much of the nitrogen content is lost during further oxidation. The carbon of some of these simple amino acids, such as cysteine and glycine, also exerts a free chlorine demand. For glycine, Palin (1950) noted that there are similarities to the chlorine-ammonia breakpoint phenomenon. However, after the breakpoint has been reached at a molar free chlorine/ammonia ratio = 1.5, significant amounts of free chlorine are not found until the molar chlorine/ammonia ratio reaches 4. Morris (1952) found it was carbon and not nitrogen that was being oxidized between the molar ratios 1.5 and 2. The original nitrogen was still present either as ammonia or organic nitrogen. Oxidized carbon was released as carbon dioxide. Stanbro and Smith (1979) found that the spontaneous decomposition products of N-chloroalanine (a rapidly formed chlorination product of alanine) depended on pH and consisted of acetaldehyde, ammonia, carbon dioxide and chloride or, pyruvic acid, ammonia and chloride ion. The reaction was first order in N-chloroalanine with a half life of 46 min at pH 7 and 25 °C. The reaction rate coefficient increased by a factor of more than three for each 10 °C temperature increase. It was not affected by pH within the range of 5 to 9. Apparently, N-chloroalanine formed during the chlorination of natural waters will degrade in a few hours to substantially less toxic products.

Proteins have a complex structure and formation of organic chloramines from proteins is relatively slow. Loss of nitrogen, even after prolonged contact with free chlorine, is very small. Compounds with intermediate complexity (e.g., small polypeptides) show intermediate behavior. As a result, water containing considerable organic nitrogen does not demonstrate









































































































































































































































































