**BIOLOGICAL UTILIZATION OF H₂S**

Sulfur oxidizing bacteria (SOB) are lithoautotrophs; *lithos* meaning rock or mineral, for their ability to feed on elemental sulfur (S⁰); *autotroph* meaning self-feeding, for their ability to produce the complex compounds needed for cell growth [carbohydrates, proteins, fats, nucleic acids] from simple substances [energy from hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) and oxygen (O₂)], and carbon from carbon dioxide (CO₂)]. The biological breakdown of H₂S can be described by reactions 1 - 4.[¹]

1. \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \leftrightarrow \text{H}^+ + \text{HS}^- \) (non-biological)
2. \( \text{HS}^- + 0.5 \text{O}_2 \rightarrow \text{S}^0 + \text{OH}^- \) (biological)
3. \( \text{HS}^- + 2 \text{O}_2 \rightarrow \text{SO}_4^{2-} + \text{H}^+ \) (biological)
4. \( \text{SO}_4^{2-} + \text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow \text{H}_2\text{SO}_3 + \text{O}_2 \) (non-biological)

Using biotrickling filters (BTFs) as an example, when O₂ from air is limiting (reaction 2) S⁰ is preferentially produced. When O₂ is not limiting (reaction 3) sulfate (SO₄) is preferentially produced. Elemental sulfur will accumulate in a BTFs. This is not ideal and is why the media needs to be removed and cleaned several times a year. Sulfate, however, will dissolve in water and form sulfuric acid (reaction 4), the acid that makes the pH inside a BTFs so low. The formation of the acid is prefered as the dissolved sulfur can be flushed from the BTFs and doesn’t accumulate.

Anaerobic biofilters can be designed where SOBs use nitrate (NO₃⁻) instead of O₂ (reactions 5 & 6). As O₂ in air, unlike NO₃-salts, is freely available, anaerobic H₂S removal from biogas is not typically used.

\[
\begin{align*}
3\text{H}_2\text{S} + \text{NO}_3^- &\rightarrow 3\text{S}^0 + 0.5\text{N}_2 + 3\text{H}_2\text{O} \quad \text{(biological)} \\
3\text{H}_2\text{S} + 4\text{NO}_3^- &\rightarrow 3\text{SO}_4^{2-} + 2\text{N}_2 + 6\text{H}^+ \quad \text{(biological)}
\end{align*}
\]

**OPTIMAL SOB GROWTH CONDITIONS**

SOBs belong to several different groups of bacteria known as genera. These include the *Acidithiobacillus*, *Halothiobacillus*, *Paracoccus*, *Sulfurimonas*, *Thiobacillus*, and *Thiimonas*. The optimal growth temperatures for these genera are 82-95°F. Most SOB have optimal activities at pH 6-8. At neutral pH, species of *Thiobacillus* are typically dominate in BTFs. Some SOBs have optimal activities under more acidic conditions (pH 2-4). BTFs operated under acidic conditions are typically dominated by species in the genus *Acidithiobacillus* like *Acidithiobacillus thiooxidans* (Figure 1).[²]

![Figure 1. Scanning electron micrograph of A. thiooxidans][³]

**BIOFILMS**

SOB bacteria typically grow as *biofilms*, or aggregations of cells, their metabolites and deposits of their wastes (S⁰), attached to the surfaces of BTF media. These biofilms help protect SOB from acidic conditions while providing enhanced surface area for desulfurization. Excessive biofilm growth and the deposition of S⁰ can clog BTFs (Figure 2.).
In counter-flow BTFs where biogas and the trickling-phase are opposite, most H₂S elimination occurs in the lower portion of the reactor where biogas and O₂ are loaded. SO₄ is also preferentially produced here due to high O₂ supply, while S⁰ formation is more prevalent in the upper portions of the system. In BTFs where flow is co-current with the trickling-phase, most H₂S elimination occurs in the upper portion of the reactor with S⁰ formation more prevalent in the lower portions of the system. SOB communities are recognized to partition in biogas desulfurization systems along these concentration gradients⁴.

Improved knowledge of the microbial interactions in BTFs and their responses to operational conditions could support the development of 1) inoculations that speed the establishment of an active microbial consortium, 2) selection methods for robust hydrogen sulfide reducing capacities, and 3) optimizations that limit the formation of S⁰ and biofilm clogging. In the meantime, BTF are successfully managed to ensure H₂S reductions by using regular tower flushing, media backwashing, and re-seeding with collected trickling-phase after cleaning.

FACT SHEET SERIES
Hydrogen Sulfide Removal from Biogas
Part 1: Available technologies for hydrogen sulfide removal from biogas
Part 2: Microbial underpinnings of H₂S biological filtration
Part 3: Biotrickling filters for H₂S - Overview of configuration and design
Part 4: Biotrickling filters for H₂S - Improvement opportunities

AUTHORS
Jason P. Oliver, PhD  jpo53@cornell.edu (607) 227-7943,  Curt Gooch, PE  cag26@cornell.edu (607) 225-2088

REFERENCES