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Emerging Microbial and Biosurfactant Technologies for Environmental Bioremediation

Jalal Manli*

Department of Biotechnology Hacettepe University, Ankara, Türkiye

DESCRIPTION

Bioremediation has emerged as one of the most promising, sustainable, and economically feasible strategies for mitigating pollution in petroleum-impacted ecosystems. With expanding global dependence on petroleum resources and increasing incidences of accidental releases, the need for efficient remediation technologies is more urgent than ever. Bioremediation defined as the use of microorganisms, plants, or their enzymatic systems to degrade, transform, or immobilize pollutants provides an avenue to restore contaminated environments while minimizing secondary environmental damage.

Petroleum hydrocarbons, including alkanes, aromatics, resins, and asphaltenes, pose significant ecological and human-health risks when released into soil and aquatic environments. Traditional remediation methods such as excavation, incineration, and chemical treatments can be costly, disruptive, and often generate new waste streams. In contrast, bioremediation leverages naturally occurring or intentionally introduced organisms to break down contaminants in situ or ex situ, offering a more sustainable and often more effective alternative.

Microbial bioremediation is one of the most widely applied approaches. Hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria and fungi including genera such as *Pseudomonas, Alcanivorax, Rhodococcus, Mycobacterium,* and *Phanerochaete* possess metabolic pathways capable of utilizing petroleum hydrocarbons as carbon and energy sources. Under suitable environmental conditions, these microorganisms convert toxic compounds into less harmful metabolites such as carbon dioxide, water, and biomass. The success of microbial bioremediation depends on factors such as nutrient availability, oxygen levels, temperature, pH, and contaminant composition. In nitrogen and phosphorus deficient environments, biostimulation supplementing limiting nutrients can significantly enhance microbial activity and promote more rapid biodegradation. Bioaugmentation, the addition of specialized microbial strains to contaminated sites, is another strategy applied when native populations lack sufficient degradative capacity.

Phytoremediation represents another biologically based approach, utilizing plants and their associated rhizospheric microbes to remediate contaminated soils. Species such as *Populus, Vetiveria zizanioides,* and various grasses have been shown to absorb, degrade, or stabilize petroleum hydrocarbons. The plant root zone creates a favorable microenvironment for hydrocarbon-degrading microorganisms by supplying oxygen, root exudates, and structural support. Although phytoremediation may require longer time scales compared to microbial remediation alone, it offers the added benefits of soil stabilization, habitat restoration, and improved ecosystem services.

Emerging biotechnological tools are further enhancing the potential of bioremediation. Metagenomics and other omics-based approaches allow for detailed analysis of microbial communities and their functional genes, enabling researchers to select or engineer strains with optimized degradative pathways. Synthetic biology is being explored to create microbes with enhanced tolerance to toxic environments or improved degradation efficiencies for complex petroleum compounds such as Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs). Additionally, biosurfactants biologically produced surface-active compounds can increase the bioavailability of hydrophobic pollutants, making them more accessible for microbial degradation.

Despite its advantages, bioremediation is not without challenges. Environmental variability, heterogeneity in contaminant distribution, and the presence of co-contaminants such as heavy metals can limit microbial activity. In some cases, the slow rate of biodegradation or incomplete breakdown of complex hydrocarbons may require integration with physico chemical methods to achieve regulatory compliance. Therefore, hybrid remediation strategies that combine biological and conventional approaches are increasingly being investigated to improve treatment efficiency.

Corresponding to: Jalal Manli, Department of Biotechnology Hacettepe University, Ankara, Türkiye, E-mail: Jalalmanli@1456.tr

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In conclusion, environmental bioremediation remains a vital tool for managing petroleum-related pollution in a manner that is both ecologically and economically sustainable. Its adaptability, minimal environmental disturbance, and alignment with natural processes make it an attractive option for industry and regulators alike. Continued advancements in microbial ecology, molecular biology, and environmental engineering are likely to further enhance the effectiveness and reliability of bioremediation. As global energy demands evolve and environmental stewardship becomes increasingly prioritized, bioremediation will play an essential role in safeguarding ecosystems impacted by petroleum contaminants.