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Microbial remediation for Sustainable Agriculture: A Green Solution for Soil Health

Ved Prajapati* and Satish Suman
Department of Agronomy,
Rajasthan College of Agriculture, MPUAT, Udaipur, Rajasthan 313001

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Introduction

The rapid rise of urbanization and industrialization has resulted in significant environmental pollution, particularly through the release of various pollutants into soil and water ecosystems. Heavy metals such as chromium and mercury from dye-producing wastewater as well as aluminum, copper, zinc, nickel, lead and arsenic from agricultural practices, pose serious threats to environmental and human health. Additionally, untreated industrial wastes, crude oil spills, mining activities, and pharmaceutical effluents contribute to the contamination of both aquatic and terrestrial habitats. These heavy metals are highly toxic and can cause severe health issues in humans including central nervous system disorders, liver and kidney dysfunction, cardiovascular diseases and reproductive system malfunctions. Improper disposal of these pollutants further exacerbates the problem, leading to fish kills, bio-magnification and chronic diseases in both humans and animals. Conventional remediation methods such as physical and chemical techniques have limitations including the need for expertise and specialized equipment as well as high costs. This has underscored the importance of exploring alternative solutions, with bioremediation emerging as a promising option. Bioremediation which utilizes biological organisms like microorganisms and plants to degrade or detoxify pollutants offers a more efficient, eco-friendly and cost-effective approach. While both plants and microorganisms can be employed in bioremediation, microbes are favored due to their faster action and ease of manipulation. Microbial bioremediation not only mitigates heavy metal pollution but also enhances soil fertility and plant development. However, there are challenges such as the variability of soil conditions, specificity of microbial strains and time required for remediation. To enhance the efficacy of microbial bioremediation, research efforts should focus on understanding the types, mechanisms and factors influencing microbial remediation. Strategies for improving microbial activity and promoting their application in both aquatic and terrestrial environments should be explored. By harnessing the power of

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microbial bioremediation, we can address environmental pollution effectively while promoting sustainable land and water management practices.

Microbial remediation strategies

1. **Ex-situ method:** In cases where contaminated soils are excavated and remediated elsewhere to mitigate risks of groundwater or air pollution. It includeds following methods.
   - Bio-piling
   - Composting
   - Land farming
     - **Bio-pilling:** Bio-piles also known as bio-cells/bio-heaps/bio-mounds serve as an ex-situ bioremediation technique to reduce petroleum pollutants in excavated soils. It involves stacking soil onto an inert liner with air supplied through a system of piping and pumps to enhance microbial activity & degradation of contaminants. Essential components include a treatment bed, aeration, irrigation, nutrient supply and leachate collection systems with control of moisture, heat, nutrients, oxygen and pH for effective degradation that typically takes 20 days to 3 months to complete the process.
     - **Land farming:** It is a simple and less-equipment bioremediation technique involves excavating contaminated soil and spreading it on a prepared bed, periodically tilling until pollutants degrade. Typically confined to treating upper 10-35 cm of soil. Land farming stimulates native microorganisms for aerobic degradation. It is crucial for pesticide breakdown that involves sandwiching excavated soil between clean layers to uphold natural degradation.
     - **Composting:** An age-old ex-situ bioremediation practice applied across various scales from home composting to large-scale operations. It involves the natural action of microorganisms (i.e. earthworms & soil insects) to decompose organic materials often facilitated aerobically to achieve efficient decomposition. The process completed within a variable timeframe.
2. **In-situ method:** Treating contaminated soil directly at its original location without excavation or removal. This approach involves stimulating the natural biological processes within the soil through the introduction of microorganisms or amendments to degrade or detoxify pollutants and restore the soil's health. It includes,

- Bio-sparging
- Bio-venting
- Bio-augmentation
- Bio-stimulation

➢ **Bio-sparging:** Biosparging involves pressurized injection of air beneath groundwater to enhance oxygen levels promoting microbial degradation of pollutants and volatilization. Like bioventing, biosparging stimulates microbial activity in soil by injecting air. It specifically targets the saturated zone, facilitating upward movement of volatile compounds for enhanced bio-degradation.

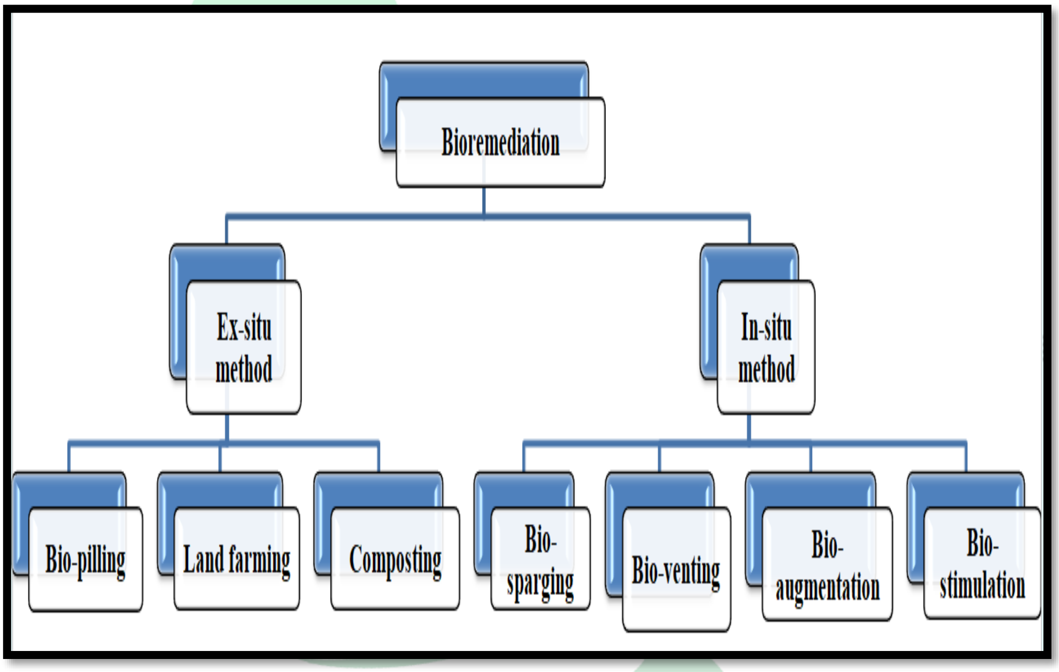

Table 1: Types of Microbial remediation based on origin

➢ **Bio-venting:** It involves injecting oxygen and nutrients i.e. nitrogen and phosphorus into contaminated sites to facilitate aerobic degradation. Oxygen typically supplied above the water table through wells, proving most effective with deep water tables. It is commonly employed for removing petroleum-based contaminants with varying effectiveness that depends on soil texture and hydrocarbon composition.

➢ **Bio-augmentation:** A biodegradation mechanism involves introducing specific microorganisms (mainly exogenous microorganisms) to contaminated sites to enhance the existing populations and promote the process of waste degradation.

- **Bio-stimulation:** Bio-stimulation involves adding specific nutrients like carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus to soil that enhance the activity of indigenous microorganisms, often achieved through liquid or gaseous injections. This strategy stimulates native bacteria and fungi communities, their metabolism and enzymatic pathways for effective bioremediation of contaminants like petroleum hydrocarbons, sulphate and polyester polyurethanes.

Conclusion:

In summary, a broad spectrum of microbial remediation strategies, compassing both ex-situ and in-situ methodologies, exhibit considerable potential in mitigating environmental pollution and revitalizing soil health. Ex-situ techniques like bio-piling, land farming and composting offer effective soil treatment options while in-situ approaches such as bio-sparging, bio-venting, bio-augmentation and bio-stimulation provide targeted interventions at contaminated sites. Through the utilization of natural processes & capabilities of microorganisms along with innovative bioremediation methodologies, we can address pollution in an environmentally sustainable manner. Continued research and implementation of these strategies are crucial for safeguarding our ecosystems and fostering long-term agricultural sustainability.

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