

# MOLECULAR DISSECTION OF THE CELLULAR MECHANISMS INVOLVED IN NICKEL HYPERACCUMULATION

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AWARD NUMBER: DE-FG07-98ER20295

PROGRESS REPORT: 2000 – 2001

## PROJECT SUMMARY

Hyperaccumulator plant species are able to accumulate between 1-5% of their biomass as metal. However, these plants are often small, slow growing, and do not produce a high biomass. Phytoextraction, a cost-effective, *in situ*, plant based approach to soil remediation takes advantage of the remarkable ability of hyperaccumulating plants to concentrate metals from the soil and accumulate them in their harvestable, above-ground tissues (Salt et al., 1998). However, to make use of the valuable genetic resources identified in metal hyperaccumulating species, it will be necessary to transfer this material to high biomass rapidly growing crop plants (Persans and Salt (2000)). These plants would then be ideally suited to the phytoremediation process, having the ability to produce large amount of metal-rich plant biomass for rapid harvest and soil cleanup. Although progress is being made in understanding the genetic basis of metal hyperaccumulation (Salt and Krämer, 1999) a more complete understanding will be necessary before we can take full advantage of the genetic potential of these plants. Research funds provided by the DOE EMSP (DE-FG07-98ER20295) have been used to start to uncover the genetic processes involved in the hyperaccumulation of Ni in *Thlaspi goesingense*.

Our strategy has focused on isolating and characterizing the key genetic information needed for expression of the metal-hyperaccumulation phenotype. In the last reporting period we determined that nickel tolerance was the key difference between the hyperaccumulator *T. goesingense* and the non-accumulator *Thlaspi arvense*. We also established that this nickel tolerance was primarily due to an enhanced ability to compartmentalize Ni in the leaf cell vacuoles of the hyperaccumulator. During the 2000-2001 reporting period we have been investigating the molecular genetic mechanism of this enhanced vacuolar accumulation of Ni in the hyperaccumulator.

## MOLECULAR MECHANISM(S) OF VACUOLAR NICKEL SEQUESTRATION

We are now making progress in determining the molecular mechanism of this enhanced vacuolar accumulation. Recently, we cloned three cDNAs from the Ni hyperaccumulator *T. goesingense* using RT-PCR, and termed them Metal Tolerance Proteins (MTP) due to their ability to confer metal tolerance when heterologously expressed in yeast (Persans et al., 2001). These *T. goesingense* MTP proteins (TgMTPs) form a novel subfamily of the cation efflux family of proteins, and are distinct from related genes in non-accumulator species including *Arabidopsis thaliana* genes (*AtZAT*, *AtMTPA*, *AtMTPB*, and *AtMTPC*) *Thlaspi arvense* (*TaMTP*) and *Brassica juncea* (*BjMTP*). The TgMTP's are also uniquely overexpressed in the hyperaccumulator *T. goesingense* compared to the non-accumulators *A. thaliana*, *T. arvense*, or *B. juncea*. The TgMTP genes are constitutively expressed in *T. goesingense* and expression levels are unaffected by Ni treatment. Genomic southern and PCR analyses indicates that the TgMTP proteins appear to be derived from a single gene in the *T. goesingense* genome and that the *TgMTP1t1*, *TgMTP1t2* arise from alternate splicing of this gene.

We assume that for Ni to be safely and efficiently compartmentalized in the vacuole in *T. goesingense* a "shuttle molecule" must exist that chaperons Ni<sup>2+</sup> from the plasma membrane, across the cytoplasm to the vacuole. Initially we hypothesized that this compound may be free histidine, as histidine is known to chelate Ni strongly at cytoplasmic pH's. However, comparative investigations of *T. goesingense* and *T. arvense*, reported in the 1999-2000 progress report, support the conclusion that Ni chelation by histidine is not rate limiting for Ni accumulation in the vacuole. However, we have recently discovered that a *T. goesingense* cDNA encoding serine acetyltransferase (SAT) confers a high degree of Ni-resistance when expressed in *E. coli* (Freeman et al., 2000). Serine acetyltransferase catalyzes the biosynthesis of O-

acetylserine from serine and acetylCoA. At present we are investigating the role of SAT in Ni hyperaccumulation in *T. goesingense*. Based on recent data our working hypothesis is that SAT causes the overproduction of OAS, inducing the cysteine biosynthetic pathway. An unknown intermediate in this biosynthetic pathway then chelates the Ni within the plant. Both genetic and biochemical evidence strongly suggests that cysteine is not involved in chelating Ni but rather some other nitrogen/oxygen containing ligand. We feel that further studies in progress will uncover the role of SAT and identify the Ni chelate involved in conferring Ni resistance in *T. goesingense*.

Once we have established the role of the *SAT* and *MTP* genes in Ni hyperaccumulation we hope to use these genes to manipulate Ni accumulation in high biomass plants such as corn or Indian mustard. We also hope to modify this genetic material to allow the hyperaccumulation of other metals such as Cd. However, this work is out of the scope of the present funding.

Our continued efforts at using X-ray spectroscopy to investigate the in vivo speciation of metals in plants has recently given rise to a new technique for the quantitative imaging of Se in intact leaf tissue (Pickering et al., 2000). We feel that this technique will be valuable in analyzing transgenic plants, develop in the future, that over expressing genes determined to be involved in metal hyperaccumulation. During the period of this progress report, the PI has also been invited to contribute to several published reviews of the phytoremediation literature (Salt, 2000; Salt and Baker, 2000; Salt, 2001a, Salt, 2001b; Guerinot and Salt, 2001 ).

## PUBLICATIONS

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