

Overview of Activated Sludge System

A Biological Wastewater Treatment Method

Activated sludge systems have been a cornerstone of biological wastewater treatment for over a century. These systems rely on microorganisms to degrade organic matter and remove pollutants from wastewater. The operation and efficiency of these systems are well-documented.

History

The activated sludge process was first developed in England in 1914 by Arden and Lockett. Over several decades, the activated sludge process has evolved through innovations in aeration technology, microbial selection, and process optimization. By the 1970s, research expanded to include enhanced nitrogen and phosphorus removal, leading to the development of multi-stage biological nutrient removal (BNR) systems. Advances in oxygen transfer technology, process monitoring, and automation have further improved the efficiency and reliability of activated sludge treatment systems (Metcalf & Eddy, 2014).

Biological Process Details

The activated sludge process is a biological wastewater treatment method that uses mixing and aeration to promote microbial growth, which breaks down organics and reduces nutrients. The biomass grown and maintained in these systems is often referred to as mixed liquor suspended solids (MLSS).

The activated sludge process can involve one, or several, key biological reactions, which occur under different environmental conditions:

- **Aerobic Conditions:** Promote carbonaceous oxidation and nitrification.
- **Anoxic Conditions:** Facilitate denitrification and partial nitrogen removal.
- **Anaerobic Conditions:** Enable phosphorus release and enhanced biological phosphorus removal (EBPR).

Microbial metabolism in these different zones determines the effectiveness of wastewater treatment, influencing sludge yield, effluent quality, and energy efficiency (Grady et al., 2011).

After flowing through one or a series of different zones, the MLSS flows into a clarifier, where solids settle, producing a treated effluent that can be discharged or further processed. A portion of the settled biomass, known as return activated sludge (RAS), is recirculated to the aeration tank to maintain a high concentration of active microorganisms. The remaining portion, called waste activated sludge (WAS), is removed to control biomass levels and ensure proper solids retention time for efficient treatment.



Aerobic, Anoxic, and Anaerobic Overview

Unlike traditional aeration systems, our Dissolved Gas Infusion (DGI®) technology is designed with all moving parts and maintenance components located outside the treatment basin, with the exception of the channel injectors. This unique configuration ensures installation and maintenance operations are straightforward, without the need for divers or draining the basin. The external placement of components also results in less wear and tear, extending the lifespan of the equipment and reducing downtime.

	Aerobic Conditions	Anoxic Conditions	Anaerobic Conditions
Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carbonaceous oxidation, nitrification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Denitrification (nitrate to nitrogen gas) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phosphorus release, fermentation, hydrolysis
Microorganisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heterotrophic bacteria (carbon removal) Ammonia-oxidizing bacteria (AOB) Nitrite-oxidizing bacteria (NOB) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facultative heterotrophs (denitrifiers) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phosphate-accumulating organisms (PAOs), fermenters
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dissolved Oxygen (DO): Typically maintained at 2-4 mg/L Oxidation-Reduction Potential (ORP): +50 to +200 mV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DO Levels: <0.5 mg/L ORP: -50 to +50 mV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DO Levels: Near zero ORP: -100 to -250 mV
Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organic matter degradation and ammonia conversion to nitrate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction of nitrate, nitrogen gas release, alkalinity recovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phosphorus release and fermentation products that fuel denitrification

Interplay between Aerobic, Anoxic, and Anaerobic Conditions

Combining these conditions strategically enhances nutrient removal:

- Nitrification in Aerobic Tanks:** Ammonia is oxidized to nitrate by AOB and NOB.
- Denitrification in Anoxic Zones:** Nitrate is reduced to nitrogen gas by denitrifying bacteria.
- Enhanced Biological Phosphorus Removal (EBPR):** PAOs release phosphorus under anaerobic conditions and uptake it under aerobic conditions.

By sequencing these zones in a treatment plant, engineers and operators can achieve high removal efficiencies for carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus (Water Environment Research, 2019).

Recent Advancements

Modern advances in activated sludge systems focus on:

- **Aeration Optimization:** Fine bubble diffusion, pure oxygen infusion and advanced control systems increase oxygen transfer while minimizing energy consumption.
- **Membrane Bioreactors (MBRs):** Improve effluent quality and allow for higher biomass retention.
- **Real-time Monitoring and AI:** Enhances process control and predictive maintenance.

Conclusion

Activated sludge systems remain the most widely used biological treatment process for wastewater. By integrating aerobic, anoxic, and anaerobic conditions, treatment facilities can efficiently remove organic matter and nutrients. Continued research and technological advancements will further enhance system efficiency and sustainability, ensuring compliance with increasingly stringent environmental regulations.

References

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