Detection of *Dehalococcoides* spp. by Peptide Nucleic Acid Fluorescent in situ Hybridization

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**Abstract**

Chlorinated solvents including tetrachloroethene ( perchloroethene and trichloroethene), are widely used industrial solvents. Improper use and disposal of these chemicals has led to a widespread contamination. Anaerobic treatment technologies that utilize *Dehalococcoides* spp. can be an effective tool to remediate these contaminated sites. Therefore, the aim of this study was to develop, optimize and validate peptide nucleic acid (PNA) probes for the detection of *Dehalococcoides* spp. in both pure and mixed cultures. PNA probes were designed by adapting previously published DNA probes targeting the region of the point mutations described for discriminating between the *Dehalococcoides* spp. strain CBDB1 and strain 195 lineages. Different fixation, hybridization and washing procedures were tested. The results indicated that the PNA probes hybridized specifically and with a high sensitivity to their corresponding lineages, and that the PNA probes developed during this work can be used in a duplex assay to distinguish between strain CBDB1 and strain 195 lineages, even in complex mixed cultures. This work demonstrates the effectiveness of using PNA fluorescence in situ hybridization to distinguish between two metabolically and genetically distinct *Dehalococcoides* strains, and they can have strong implications in the monitoring and differentiation of *Dehalococcoides* populations in laboratory cultures and at contaminated sites.
Introduction

Tetrachloroethene [perchloroethene (PCE)] and trichloroethene (TCE) have been widely used as industrial solvents and dry cleaning fluids, and are common ground- water pollutants that are highly toxic and potentially carcinogenic. Under anaerobic conditions, PCE and TCE can be transformed into non-chlorinated ethene by dechlorinating bacteria. This process can occur naturally or through the addition of electron donor compounds that stimulate the growth of indigenous microorganisms (bio- stimulation) and/or exogenous microorganisms (bioaugmentation) that are able to degrade these compounds [Scow and Hicks, 2005]. The complete reductive dechlorination of chlorinated ethenes is performed by microorganisms of the genus *Dehalococcoides*. In this reaction, the chlorinated compound serves as the acceptor for electrons with hydrogen as the electron donor. In this growth- linked process termed halorespiration, *Dehalococcoides* utilizes the chlorinated aliphatic compounds to obtain energy.

*Dehalococcoides* is notoriously difficult to isolate and grow, with doubling times of 1–2 days [He et al., 2003, 2005; Maymo-Gatell et al., 1997; Sung et al., 2006] and complex nutrient requirements. *Dehalococcoides* spp., therefore, are normally cultured as a consortium with other microorganisms, such as acetogens and methanogens. *Dehalococcoides* spp. have been found in a variety of locations, and their presence has been linked to the complete dechlorination of PCE at contaminated sites in North America and Europe [Hendrickson et al., 2002]. Although very few *Dehalococcoides* spp. have been isolated, some metabolic diversity has been identified between them. Originally, strain 195 was found to metabolize some chloroethenes [PCE, TCE, cis-dichloroethene (DCE) and 1,1-DCE], and the halogenated ethanes 1,2-dichloroethene and 1,2-dibromoethane [Maymo-Gatell et al., 1997, 1999]. Later research demonstrated the ability to metabolize higher chlorinated aromatics, such as hexachlorobenzene, pentachlorobenzene, 1,2,4,5-tetrachlorobenzene (TeCB) and 1,2,3,4-TeCB [Fennell et al., 2004]. Conversely, strain CBDB1 (of the Pinellas subgroup lineage) was found to metabolize these same chlorinated aromatics, and others such as 1,2,3,5- TeCB, 1,2,4-trichlorobenzene and 1,2,3-trichlorobenzene [Adrian et al., 2000]. In addition, recently, strain CBDB1 has been ascribed the ability to also metabolize the chloroethenes PCE and TCE [Marco-Urrea et al., 2011]. Other members of the Pinellas subgroup (of which CBDB1 is a member) are able to metabolize lower chlorinated ethenes such as cis-DCE, 1,1-DCE and vinyl chloride (VC) [He et al., 2003; Sung et al., 2006]. Table 1 (adapted from Eaddy [2008]) shows the differences between the two lineages. Thus, the ability to distinguish between different lineages of these bacteria at contaminated sites may provide insights into the potential fate of pollutants, the suitability of biostimulation remedial approaches and the need to perform bioaugmentation to reach remedial goals.

Because of the importance of these microorganisms in degrading chlorinated pollutants, molecular tools based on the detection of 16S rRNA gene sequences have been developed and widely used for qualitative and quantitative detection of *Dehalococcoides* spp. [Holliger and Diekert, 1999; Maymo-Gatell et al., 1997; Rowe et al., 2008; Tas, 2009]. In addition, other non-PCR-based molecular methods, such as fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) and catalyzed reporter deposition FISH, have been used to distinguish between the different lineages of *Dehalococcoides* spp. [Dijk et al., 2008; Fazi et al., 2008; Yang and Zeyer, 2003]. The probes used for these FISH- based tools take advantage of the fact that the two different
lineages of *Dehalococcoides* spp. (strain 195 and Pinellas subgroup) can be distinguished from one another based on a conserved base difference in the 16S rRNA gene sequence.

FISH is based on the use of a fluorescently labeled nucleic acid probe (generally DNA) that is complementary to a sequence in the rRNA of the microorganism of interest [Almeida et al., 2009]. After exposure to the sample containing the microorganism, the probe diffuses through the cell wall and reaches the rRNA, where it forms a stable duplex if the complementary sequence is present. A subsequent washing step ensures that only the fully complementary probes remain within the cell and are detected by either flow cytometry or microscopy. Recently, pep-tide nucleic acid (PNA) has been replacing DNA as a probe in FISH. The backbone of these synthetic nucleic acid molecules is neutrally charged, which means that PNA has more affinity for duplexes with DNA and RNA than DNA itself [Armitage, 2003]. This higher affinity translates into shorter probes that can more easily diffuse through the microbial cell wall and hence increase the robustness of the FISH method. PNA-FISH has been successfully used for the detection of microorganisms in the food and healthcare areas [Almeida et al., 2011; Azevedo et al., 2011; Guimaraes et al., 2007], but this improved methodology of detection has not yet been adapted to *Dehalococcoides* spp.

Because there are two different lineages of *Dehalococcoides* spp. that have different abilities to degrade pollutants, it is important to be able to identify which type of *Dehalococcoides* spp. is present in cultures or environmental samples to help predict the fate of pollutants or select the proper remedial treatments. Therefore, the aim of this work was to develop PNA-FISH probes and test them to determine whether this technique can be utilized to detect the two different lineages of *Dehalococcoides* spp. in both pure and mixed cultures.

**Results and Discussion**

_Probe Development and Application to Pure Cultures_

PNA probes were designed by adapting previously published DNA probes [Yang and Zeyer, 2003] targeting the 16S rRNA region of the point mutations described for detecting CBDB1 and 195 lineages of *Dehalococcoides* spp. Because the favorable size of PNA probes (related to their thermodynamic parameters) is between 13 and 16 bp, it was necessary to select a smaller sequence from the probe previously described. Consequently, the sequences 5-GTT CGC ACT GTT GC-3 and 5-GTT CAC ACT GTT GC-3 were selected and designated CBDB1 probe and 195 probe, respectively. The theoretical evaluation of the probes has shown high specificity and sensitivity values (table 2), since 55 of 56 *Dehalococcoides* sequences have been identified and only 1 non-target sequence has presented cross-hybridization with the probes. Additionally, melting temperatures and free energy ($\Delta G$) values for the CBDB1 and 195 probes were very similar, which might indicate a good performance in a multiplex assay.

Initially, the development of a PNA-FISH procedure for the differentiation of *Dehalococcoides* spp. was found to be technically more challenging than PNA-FISH procedures developed earlier by our group to detect other microorganisms [Almeida et al., 2010; Guimaraes et al., 2007]. This may be related to the slow growth rates of the microbes in pure cultures and low cell yields of *Dehalococcoides* spp. [Duhamel and Edwards, 2006; Marco-Urrea et al., 2011; Maymo-Gatell et al., 1997], which resulted in low concentrations of cells in the test cultures and, possibly, low ribosomal content of the cells.

The first issue was solved by concentrating the cells by centrifugation and counterstaining
the samples with 4',6'-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI). Centrifugation allowed having a higher cell concentration in each field of view in the microscope. This also increased the signal-to-noise ratio by increasing the number of cells in the field of view relative to the occasional debris that might be present on the slide surface. This was particularly important while the method was not fully optimized and the fluorescent signal from the hybridization was faint. The number of Dehalococcoides spp. cells in each slide was assessed by counterstaining the sample with DAPI, a non-specific dye that intercalates in the double-stranded DNA present in all cells. By comparing the signal obtained in the red and green filters sensitive to the probes against the signal obtained in the blue filter with DAPI, we were able to ensure that the hybridization was equally successful for all cells present in the sample.

The second issue that reduced detection sensitivity was related to the low ribosomal content of the cells, which has been reported previously [Fazi et al., 2008; Fletcher et al., 2011]. To minimize this issue, we coupled the PNA probes with Alexa Fluor dyes. These dyes are well known for being more photostable and brighter than other commonly used fluorescent dyes operating at similar wavelengths [Berlier et al., 2003; Panchuk-Voloshina et al., 1999]. Because growth phase also can affect the rRNA content of the cells, we also evaluated the effect of the growth phase of the microorganisms on hybridization. Samples from the two different pure culture strains of Dehalococcoides were taken on different days and for different growth phases (fresh and old cultures). After optimization, the PNA-FISH method was able to detect cells in pure culture in all growth stages (fig. 1). Negative controls without probes for the two different pure cultures of Dehalococcoides did not show fluorescence (online suppl. fig. S2; for all online suppl. material, see www.karger.com/doi/10.1159/000362790).

Other possible causes of low intensity of the fluorescence signal for the two strains tested could have been an insufficient penetration of the probe through the bacterial cell wall due to the thick cell wall of the Gram-positive Dehalococcoides spp. [Perry-O'Keefe et al., 2001; Stender, 2003]. By performing the experiment with PNA instead of DNA, we guaranteed that the diffusion of our probe would be easier, as PNA probes are electrically uncharged and smaller than DNA probes [Cerqueira et al., 2008; Pellestor and Paulasova, 2004].

**Development of a Multiplex Assay**

The probes hybridized specifically to their corresponding strains meaning that the 1 base mismatch between the sequences was sufficient to discriminate between both strains using this technology. An important aspect was that the optimum temperature of hybridization for the two probes differed in 4°C. This was unexpected as there was only 1 base difference, but can be explained by the fact that the base pair for the 195 strain was formed between adenine and thymine (which creates two hydrogen bonds), whereas the CBDB1 base pair was between guanine and cytosine (which creates three hydrogen bonds). Nevertheless, the two probes will also work in a multiplex experiment if a hybridization average temperature of 57°C is selected (fig. 2). However, higher hybridization temperatures (59 and 61 °C) have proven to favor the binding of the CBDB1 probe.

While the method is adequate to discriminate between these 2 strains of Dehalococcoides spp., the probes were also designed to minimize the detection of other microorganisms present in environmental samples (99.99% specificity to Dehalococcoides, as indicated in table 2). A sequence search of the Ribosomal Database Project(RDP) confirmed that the probes detect very low numbers of other microorganisms. One exception, however, was the
complementarity observed between the 195 probe and the *Escherichia coli* strain W [Archer et al., 2011]. Overall, because 1 strain is not representative of the whole species and because the morphology of *Dehalococcoides* spp. And *E. coli* are very different, the risk for a misidentification is rather low. This sequence complementarity was also observed for the DNA-FISH probes reported earlier by Yang and Zeyer [2003].

*Application of Probes to Mixed Cultures*

To further confirm the specificity and performance of the probe, we tested the PNA-FISH multiplex method on mixed cultures containing other microorganisms (e.g. acetogens and methanogens). Results showed that the probe only detected coccoid cells in these cultures. For the Hawaii-05™ culture, both lineages of *Dehalococcoides* were observed (fig. 2), whereas SDC-9™ only contained the 195 lineage. Interestingly, 16S rRNA gene sequencing performed with SDC-9 suggested that the culture contains at least 4 different strains of *Dehalococcoides* [Trotsky et al., 2010], and the PNA-FISH testing performed here suggests that those strains may all be from the 195 lineage. For certain samples, autofluorescence by other microorganisms could be observed, but the signal-to-noise ratio of the probe was still sufficient to discriminate between populations (fig. 3). Both cultures exhibit metabolic behavior specific for their lineage. For example, SDC-9 and Hawaii-05 have the ability to metabolize a variety of chlorinated ethenes, including cis-DCE and VC, but neither culture is able to dechlorinate chlorobenzenes. As previously mentioned, the strain 195 and Pinellas subgroup lineages have metabolic similarities but also have some distinguishing features. Strain CBDB1 has the ability to metabolize a wide variety of chlorinated aromatics but is limited in its ability with chloroethenes. Conversely, other members of the Pinellas subgroup (FL2, GT and BAV1) have the ability to metabolize many of the lower chlorinated organics (table 1). Strain 195 is the only member of its lineage and demonstrates many of the same metabolic activities of the Pinellas subgroup, including the ability to metabolize chlorinated aromatics and ethenes.

This work demonstrates the effectiveness of using PNA-FISH to distinguish between 2 metabolically and genetically distinct *Dehalococcoides* strains. In previous works, PNA-FISH has been shown to surpass standard DNA-FISH in terms of robustness, and is now starting to be commercially available to detect microorganisms in clinical samples [Cerqueira et al., 2013]. Hence, the method can have strong implications for the monitoring and discrimination of *Dehalococcoides* populations in laboratory cultures and at contaminated sites. Nevertheless, future work should be performed to compare the method developed here with FISH and catalyzed reporter deposition FISH to determine which method is most effective in determining the concentration of *Dehalococcoides* spp. and also the application of this method to field samples.

*Experimental Procedures*

Pure cultures of *Dehalococcoides* strain CBDB1 and *Dehalococcoides mccartyi* strain 195 were grown at 30°C in glass serum bottles [Adrian et al., 2000; Loffler et al., 2013; Marco-Urrea et al., 2011]. Acetate (5 mM) was used as the carbon source for the pure cultures. Mixed cultures SDC-9 and Hawaii-05 were chosen due to their application as commercial bioaugmentation cultures that have been used at a variety of sites because of their ability to
utilize chloroethenes [Schaefer et al., 2009, 2010a, b; Vainberg et al., 2009]. SDC-9 was enriched from a chlorinated solvent-contaminated site in southern California with PCE and sodium lactate [Vainberg et al., 2009]. In 2005, Hawaii-05 was enriched from aquifer material from the Hickman Air Force Base with TCE and sodium lactate [Vainberg et al., 2009]. Both cultures contain tceA and verAdhalogenase genes. They were grown at 28°C in glass serum bottles with lactate (5 mM) as the carbon source [Vainberg et al., 2009].

The initial PCE concentration was approximately 100 μM for CBDB1, SDC-9 and Hawaii-05, and 200 μM for strain 195. Aliquots of cells were removed from the serum bottles after 50% (CBDB1) and 100% (195, SDC-9 and Hawaii-05) of the initial PCE concentration was consumed. VC (99.5%) and ethene (99.95%) were obtained from Fluka. PCE (99%), TCE (99.5%), sodium lactate (60% solution) and sodium acetate (99%) were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich. cis-DCE (97%) and trans-DCE (99%) were obtained from Acros.

Concentrations of PCE and daughter products were analyzed using headspaces samples (0.1 or 0.5 ml) injected onto a Shimadzu GC-2014 gas chromatograph with flame ionization detection and a 1% SP-1000 on a 60/80 Carbo- pack B column (Supelco). The column temperature program, and injector and detector temperatures have been described previously [Freedman and Gossett, 1989]. The production of PCE degradation daughter products (TCE, DCEs, VC and ethene) was used to confirm that the pure and mixed cultures were actively growing.

**Probe Design**

Specific PNA probes were designed by considering the position of a point mutation that has been used previously to distinguish between the strain 195 and Pinellas sub-groups of Dehalococcoides [Berlier et al., 2003] and the predicted melting temperature (T_m) value of the possible PNA oligomers. The theoretical T_m was calculated based on thermodynamic parameters described previously by SantaLucia and Hicks [2004]. Once the probe sequence was selected, a search was made for the available 16SrRNA gene sequences (RDP-II), version 10 (http://rdp.cme.msu.edu/) to confirm the theoretical specificity and sensitivity of the probe against other microorganisms. For this analysis, only high quality sequences with more than 1,200 bp were selected. The specificity and sensitivity values were determined as previously reported [Almeida et al., 2010]. The sequences were synthesized by PANAGENE (South Korea), purified by reverse-phase HPLC, and the N-terminus of the CBDB1 and 195 oligomers was connected to Alexa Fluor 594 and Alexa Fluor 488, respectively, via a double AEEA linker.

**Hybridization Procedure**

The PNA hybridization method used was developed based on the procedure reported [Azevedo et al., 2011; Perry-O’Keefe et al., 2001], but different fixation, hybridization and washing procedures were tested to optimize the method. Briefly, cell suspensions of the test cultures were prepared by harvesting cultures that were exponentially grown (on line suppl. fig. S1). Thirty milliliters of each diluted sample were then collected by centrifugation [30 min at 3,200 g (Eppendorf centrifuge 5810, Eppendorf AG, Hamburg, Germany)]. In order to fix the cells, the pellet was resuspended in 1 ml of 4% paraformaldehyde (Sigma Aldrich) for 1 h at room temperature, followed by centrifugation. The fixed cells were then resuspended in 1 ml of 50% ethanol (vol/vol) for at least 30 min at ~20°C. Then, 20 μl were placed into microscopy well slides (10 mm; Thermo Scientific, Braunschweig, Germany) and allowed to air dry.
The tests slides were then covered with 20 μl of probe (400 nM) diluted in a hybridization solution that contained 10% (wt/vol) dextran sulfate, 10 mM NaCl, 30% (vol/vol) formamide, 0.1% (wt/vol) sodium pyrophosphate, 0.2% (wt/vol) polyvinylpyrrolidone, 0.2% (wt/vol) Ficoll, 5 mM disodium EDTA, 0.1% (vol/vol) Triton X-100 and 50 mM Tris-HCl (all from Sigma). Control slides were covered with hybridization solution without the probe and, afterwards, both control and tests slides were covered with coverslips and then placed in moist chambers and incubated for 90 min at 57°C for the 195 lineage and 61°C for CBDB1 lineage.

To perform the multiplex assay, 20 μl of fixed SDC-9 and Hawaii-05 cells were placed onto microscopy slides and allowed to air dry. Hybridization was performed using a solution with 20 μl of hybridization buffer (previously described) with 100 nM of each respective probe covering each smear individually. Samples were sealed with coverslips and incubated for 90 min at 57°C. Subsequent steps were performed as described below.

Following hybridization, coverslips were removed and slides were submerged in a prewarmed washing solution (the temperature was similar to the one used for hybridization) containing 5 mM Tris base (Sigma), 15 mM NaCl (Sigma) and 1% (vol/vol) Triton X-100 (pH 10, Sigma) for 15 min and then removed and allowed to air dry. Finally, 1 μl of DAPI was added and the slides were covered with 1 drop of nonfluorescent immersion oil. Slides were stored at 4°C in the dark for a maximum of 24 h before microscopy.

Microscopy Visualization

Visualization was performed using an Olympus BX51 epifluorescence microscope (Olympus Portugal SA, Porto, Portugal) equipped with a filter sensitive to the Alexa Fluor 488 signaling molecule attached to the 195 PNA probe (absorbance, 495 nm, emission, 519 nm) and a filter sensitive to the Alexa Fluor 594 signaling molecule attached to the CBDB1 PNA probe (excitation, 530–550 nm; barrier, 570 nm; emission long-pass filter, 591 nm). To ensure that the signal obtained was not related to autofluorescence, all samples were visualized with other available filters. For every experiment, a negative control was performed simultaneously. For the negative control, all the steps described above were performed, but no probe was added during the hybridization procedure. All images were acquired using the Olympus CellB (Olympus Portugal) software with a magnification of ×1,000.

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References
Eaddy A: Scale-Up and Characterization of an Enrichment Culture for Bioaugmentation of the P-Area Chlorinated Ethene Plume at the Savannah River Site; MS thesis; in Environmental Engineering and Earth Sciences. Clemson, Clemson University, 2008.


Fig. 1. Identification of *Dehalococcoides* spp. (strain 195 and CBDB1) by epifluorescence microscopy. A Detection of *Dehalococcoides* CBDB1 in pure culture using the CBDB1 PNA probe labeled with Alexa Fluor 594 (A1) and observation of the same field of view in the green channel that is not sensitive to the fluorochrome used (AII). B Detection of *Dehalococcoides* 195 in pure culture using the 195 PNA probe labeled with Alexa Fluor 488 (BII) and observation of the same field of view in the red channel (BII). The experiments were performed in parallel, and images were obtained with equal exposure times.

Fig. 2. Epifluorescence microscopy image of a multiplex experiment performed on the Hawaii-05 showing the two lineages.
Fig. 3. Epifluorescence microscopy image of a multiplex experiment performed on the SDC-9 showing the detection of the CBDB1 lineage against a background of other cells (AI). This autofluorescence was also detected in the red filter that was not sensitive to the fluorochrome attached to the probe (AII).

Table 1. Comparison of different *Dehalococcoides* pure cultures and their ability to utilize different electron acceptors (adapted from Eaddy [2008])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>Strain 195 (Cornell)</th>
<th>BAV1 (Pinellas)</th>
<th>GT (Pinellas)</th>
<th>FL2 (Pinellas)</th>
<th>CBDB1 (Pinellas)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PCE</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCE</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cis-DCE</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trans-DCE</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,1-DCE</td>
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<td>+</td>
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<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CB</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,2-DCB</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
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<tr>
<td>1,4-DCB</td>
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<tr>
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<td>?</td>
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<tr>
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<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
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<tr>
<td>HCB</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ = Used as a terminal electron acceptor (TEA). ● = Used cometabolically. − = Not used as a TEA. CB = Chlorobenzene; DCB = dichlorobenzene; HCB = hexachlorobenzene; PeCB = pentachlorobenzene; TCB = trichlorobenzene.
Table 2. Theoretical evaluation of the PNA probes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probe</th>
<th>Sequence (5’-3’)</th>
<th>Target position (E. coli numbering)</th>
<th>kcal/mol ΔG</th>
<th>°C Tm</th>
<th>Sensitivity, %</th>
<th>Specificity, %</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBDB1</td>
<td>GTCGCGCTGTGTGC</td>
<td>1.257–1.270</td>
<td>-17.92</td>
<td>71.30*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>195</td>
<td>GTCCACCTGTGTGC</td>
<td>1.257–1.270</td>
<td>-16.36</td>
<td>68.13*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Considering a probe concentration of 1 × 10^-4 M.