DOI: 10.1111/afe.12053

Correlation between infection by ophiostomatoid fungi and the presence of subterranean termites in loblolly pine (Pinus taeda L.) roots

John J. Riggins*, Nathan S. Little† and Lori G. Eckhardt‡

*Department of Biochemistry, Molecular Biology, Entomology and Plant Pathology, Mississippi State University, Box 9775, Mississippi State, MS, 39762, U.S.A., †Southern Insect Management Unit, USDA-ARS, 141 Experiment Station Road, Stoneville, MS, 38776, U.S.A., and ‡School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, Auburn University, 602 Duncan Drive, Suite 3301, Auburn, AL, 36849, U.S.A.

- Abstract 1 Observations of subterranean termites feeding in pine sapwood containing ophiostomatoid fungi prompted the present study aiming to investigate the effect of infection by Leptographium fungi on the probability of encountering subterranean termites in loblolly pine (Pinus taeda L.) roots.
 - Root samples were collected from 2350 loblolly pine trees in Alabama, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi using hand tools. The presence or absence of subterranean termites in the roots was recorded. Samples were plated on malt extract agar and cycloheximide-streptomycin malt agar and incubated to determine which, if any, fungal species were present.
 - 3 The presence of Leptographium procerum, Leptographium terebrantis or both was significantly associated with an increased presence of subterranean termites in loblolly pine roots.
 - The results obtained in the present study indicate that complex ecological interactions may exist between ophiostomatoid fungi, as carried by root-feeding bark beetles, and subterranean termites.

Keywords Blue-stain fungi, Leptographium, loblolly pine roots, ophiostomatoid, Pinus taeda L., subterranean termites.

Introduction

Subterranean termites are one of the most ecologically and economically important insect groups and annually account for over \$22 billion in treatment and repair costs to wooden structures worldwide (Rust & Su, 2012). They are primary decomposers of woody materials in forests and also directly regulate ecosystem level processes such as soil nutrient availability and carbon budgets (Ausmus, 1977; Kitchell et al., 1979). These activities, along with their importance as food sources for many species of vertebrate and invertebrate predators, have led to the consensus that termites are keystone taxa in many ecosystems.

The literature is replete with descriptions of termite ecology in tropical and subtropical forest ecosystems (Harris, 1966; Bignell et al., 1997; Black & Okwakol, 1997) but, in general, very little is known about their ecological associations and

Correspondence: John J. Riggins. Tel.: +16623252085; fax: +1 662 325 8837; e-mail: jriggins@entomology.msstate.edu

influences in temperate forests (Lee & Wood, 1971; Lobry de Brun & Conacher, 1990; Hanula, 1993). Despite the lack of information describing interactions between subterranean termites and other organisms, many fungi are well-documented termite symbionts (Hendee, 1934), with relationships ranging from antagonistic to mutualistic (Martin, 1992). For example, wood infected by the brown-rot fungus Gloeophyllum trabeum (Pers. ex. Fr.) Murr. can attract and stimulate feeding in some subterranean termites (Esenther et al., 1961). This discovery, along with the identification of the responsible chemical compounds (Smythe *et al.*, 1967; Matsumura *et al.*, 1968, 1969, 1976), led to commercial applications of this fungal metabolite in termite bait stations.

Because decay fungi break down structural components of wood (cellulose, hemicellulose and lignin), it was hypothesized that chemicals produced during this breakdown are the mechanism behind the attraction and feeding preference of subterranean termites (Cornelius et al., 2002). Based on that hypothesis, it became common to assume that only decay fungi might be capable of attracting subterranean termites and stimulating feeding preferences within them. For this reason, nondecomposing fungi have been overlooked as symbionts of subterranean termites.

The only example of wood containing nondecay fungi causing a positive feeding response from subterranean termites was discovered recently. Wood wafers from bark beetlekilled southern yellow pines containing blue-stain fungi in the genus Ophiostoma were found to elicit feeding preferences from Eastern (Little et al., 2012a) and Formosan subterranean termites (Little et al., 2012b) in laboratory choice feeding assays. Additionally, field stake tests using southern vellow pine inoculated with Ophiostoma and Leptographium bluestain fungi were degraded more rapidly than unstained stakes (Little et al., 2013). Ophiostomatoid fungi do not degrade any structural components of wood (Schirp et al., 2003; Valiev et al., 2009) and therefore do not result in losses to wood strength or structural integrity. The mechanism(s) behind subterranean termite feeding preference for blue-stained wood remain under investigation.

Despite laboratory and field assays suggesting that ophiostomatoid fungi can affect subterranean termite feeding responses in lumber, no studies have yet investigated whether this phenomenon occurs in living trees. Leptographium bluestain fungi such as those investigated by Little et al. (2013) are primarily vectored to living trees by below-ground feeding bark beetles and weevils, such as Hylobius and Hylastes spp. (Coleoptera: Curculionidae) (Eckhardt et al., 2004a). Leptographium fungi are similar to Ophiostoma species, in that they do not decompose structural components of wood and are often vectored to stressed or dying trees by bark beetle symbionts.

In view of the recent discovery of subterranean termite feeding preference for above-ground portions of trees infected with ophiostomatoid fungi (Little et al., 2012a,b, 2013), the present study aimed to investigate whether subterranean termites are correlated with the presence of Leptographium fungi in roots of living loblolly pines.

Materials and methods

As part of previous studies conducted to investigate the pathogenicity of Leptographium fungi to loblolly pine roots (Eckhardt et al., 2004a,b, 2007), root samples were collected during 2000-2012 from 2350 loblolly pine (Pinus taeda L.) trees in Alabama, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi using hand tools, in accordance with a two-root excavation method modified from Otrosina et al. (1997). Root data were collected in 1/16th acre plots in accordance with forest health monitoring protocols (Dunn, 1999). Fifty-percent of plots exhibited pine crown dieback/thinning and foliage chlorosis, whereas the remaining 50% of plots appeared healthy. Sampling plots were almost evenly distributed among the states (Texas had slightly fewer plots) and evenly distributed among military installations, National Forests with up to 30% hardwood mix and private industry monoculture plantations. Six dominant/codominant trees nearest to the plot centre were selected for root excavation. Two lateral root segments > 3 cm in diameter from each of the three trees were excavated with hand tools from opposite sides

of the tree to the approximate crown drip line. Root depth was recorded and lateral roots were examined visually for primary root damage, fine root presence, absence or damage, as well as the presence or absence of subterranean termites. Primary roots were defined as the major lateral roots extending from the base of the tree to the drip line. All remaining roots were categorized as fine roots. During excavation, the presence or absence of subterranean termites, other insects, fire damage, mechanical damage and staining were recorded for each root

The roots were divided into 20-cm-long sections, starting 16 cm from the root collar of each tree and continuing out to the crown dripline, and placed in plastic bags. The number of root sections collected per tree varied depending on the length of the root being sampled. All fine and feeder roots were cut from lateral roots and placed in plastic bags. All root samples were chilled for transport to the laboratory. Roots were stored at 4°C (approximately 2-3 days) and then examined for the presence of insect damage and fungi, and classified as alive, dead or stained (Klepzig et al., 1991). The root sections from each tree were processed similarly to that described by Otrosina et al. (1997) to determine the presence or absence of two species of ophiostomatoid fungi [Leptographium procerum (W.B. Kendr.) M.J. Wingf. and Leptographium terebrantis Barras and Perry]. Surface sterilization was carried out with a solution consisting of commercial bleach, ethanol and deionized water (10:10:80 v/v/v). One hundred and sixty root pieces were plated (four per plate and 40 plates per sample) from each tree on malt extract agar and cycloheximidestreptomycin malt agar and incubated at 25 °C under fluorescent lighting (460 µmol/m²/s). After 2 weeks, the plates were examined for fungal growth and putative Leptographium isolates were identified and recorded for each tree. Data (i.e. the presence/absence of subterranean termites, L. procerum or L. terebrantis) were pooled for each tree, and subsequent analyses were conducted at tree level.

Data were analyzed using a PROC LOGISTIC procedure in SAS (SAS Institute Inc., 2008) to determine whether the presence of two Leptographium spp. had an impact on the likelihood of termite presence or absence in loblolly pine roots. First-order (main effects) interactions and two-way interactions between L. procerum and L. terebrantis were tested.

Results

Subterranean termites were encountered in only 38.5% of trees when both species of Leptographium fungi were absent (the control group) versus 84.7% in trees that were infected with one or both Leptographium fungi (Table 1). Subterranean termites were present in 86.1%, 77.5% and 84.7% of trees that had L. procerum, L. terebrantis or both L. procerum and L. terebrantis present in root samples, respectively.

The presence of L. procerum or L. terebrantis in tree roots each had a highly significant positive effect ($\chi^2 = 278.90$, d.f. = 1, P < 0.0001 and $\chi^2 = 68.20$, d.f. = 1, P < 0.0001, respectively) on the frequency of subterranean termites or termite damage. Both L. procerum and L. terebrantis were present in 352 (15.0%) of trees sampled and significantly

Table 1 Frequency of encountering subterranean termites in conjunction with the presence of two species of ophiostomatoid fungi [Leptographium procerum (W.B. Kendr) M.J. Wingf and L. terebrantis Barras and Perry] in root samples from 2350 loblolly pine (Pinus taeda L.) trees in Alabama, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi

Fungus detected	Number of trees	Percentage with termites (%)
Neither Leptographium procerum Leptographium terebrantis	473 1169 356	38.5 86.1 77.5
Both	352	84.7

 $(\chi^2 = 86.09, \text{ d.f.} = 1, P < 0.0001)$ increased the frequency of subterranean termites (84.7%) versus trees with unstained roots.

Discussion

Pine mortality in the southeastern U.S.A. that is not caused by primary pests such as the southern pine beetle (*Dendroctonus frontalis* Zimmermann) can be a rather slow and obscure process. Long-term biotic and abiotic stressors such as droughts and site conditions often slowly and inconspicuously increase physiological age of trees until they are susceptible to a host of other pests and pathogens (Franklin *et al.*, 1987; Mueller-Dombois, 1987). In the southeastern U.S.A., the most common predisposing factors are directly related to topsoil erosion or off-site planting of pines in abandoned cotton plantations (Richter *et al.*, 1999).

After tree defences are sufficiently weakened, acute droughts, lightning strikes, improperly managed or unmanaged fires, wounds, mechanized root compaction events, or other biotic and abiotic inciting factors can push the tree across a susceptibility threshold that is often irreversible (Manion, 1991). Humans are often unaware that the process is occurring at this phase because above-ground portions of affected trees often appear healthy.

Conspicuous above-ground signs and symptoms often do not occur until tree mortality is imminent. Above-ground bark beetles, ophiostomatoid fungi, *Monochamus* long-horned beetles and Annosum root rot [caused by *Heterobasidion irregulare* Garbelotto & Otrosina (formerly *Heterobasidion annosum*)] (Otrosina & Garbelotto, 2010) are all good examples of conspicuous factors that contribute to mortality in Southern pine forests. Even when tree mortality is imminent, belowground contributing factors such as root-feeding weevils and bark beetles (e.g. *Hylastes* and *Hylobius* spp.) are seldom noticed by the casual observer. However, infestations of root-feeding weevils and bark beetles (and the blue-stain infections they facilitate) often occur long before tree mortality is imminent (Eckhardt *et al.*, 2004a).

Subterranean termites are not generally considered as a contributing factor in pine tree mortality and thus are usually relegated solely to the role of decomposers in forest ecosystems. Observations of subterranean termites feeding in blue-stained portions of trees recently attacked by bark beetles were the first indication that the ecological role of the subterranean termite in pine forests of the southeastern U.S.A. might begin

before actual tree death and decomposition occurs (J. J. Riggins, personal observation). Subsequently, laboratory feeding choice assays utilizing wood infected by bark beetle associated bluestain fungi elicited subterranean termite feeding preference in both native (Little *et al.*, 2012a) and Formosan (Little *et al.*, 2012b) subterranean termites. The existence of this fungally-mediated biological interaction between termites and bark beetles was further corroborated by field trials using wood stakes infected with various root-feeding weevil and bark beetle blue-stain fungal isolates (Little *et al.*, 2013).

Hylastes and other root feeding weevils utilize roots primarily when they are living or during the very early stages of decomposition (Goheen & Cobb, 1978; Harrington & Cobb, 1983; Witcosky & Hansen, 1985; Day et al., 2004; Eckhardt et al., 2004b). Ophiostomatoid fungi are inoculated into pine root systems when root-feeding weevils and belowground bark beetles consume fine feeder and lateral roots (Alexander et al., 1988; Wingfield et al., 1988; Klepzig et al., 1991; Nevill & Alexander, 1992a,b; Harrington, 1993; Malloch & Blackwell, 1993; Eckhardt et al., 2007; Menard, 2007). The present study is the first to indicate that the infection of pine tree roots by ophiostomatoid fungi can affect subterranean termite behaviour. It is possible that damage from subterranean termites contributes to ongoing tree health problems in a positivefeedback loop, and could increase tree susceptibility to other contributing factors (such as aboveground bark beetles) by damaging roots and decreasing water and nutrient uptake in affected trees. Further research is needed to investigate the role of ophiostomatoid fungi in mediating interactions between above and below-ground herbivores and the process of pine senescence in the southeastern U.S.A.

In conclusion, the results obtained in the present study indicate that subterranean termites may begin to play a role in temperate pine forest ecology before tree death and decomposition occurs. We propose that complex multitrophic ecological interactions occur between senescing pine trees, their dominate herbivores (above- and below-ground feeding bark beetles) and their dominate invertebrate decomposers (subterranean termites).

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the USDA Forest Service Southern Research Station; the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station; and the Forest Health Cooperative at Auburn University.

References

Alexander, S.A., Horner, W.E. & Lewis, K.J. (1988) *Leptographium procerum* as a pathogen of pines. *Leptographium Root Diseases on Conifers* (ed. by T. C. Harrington and F. W. Cobb Jr), pp. 97–112. The American Phytopathological Society, St Paul, Minnesota.

Ausmus, B.S. (1977) Regulation of wood decomposition rates by arthropod and annelid populations. *Soil Organisms as Components of Ecosystems*, Natural Science Research Council Ecological Bulletin 25 (ed. by U. Lolum and T. Persson), pp. 180–192. Natural Science Research Council, Sweden.

- Bignell, D.E., Eggleton P., Nunes, L. & Thomas, K.L. (1997) Termites as mediators of carbon fluxes in tropical forest: budgets for carbon dioxide and methane emissions. Forests and Insects (ed. by A. D. Watt, N. E. Stork and M. D. Hunter), pp. 109-134. Chapman and Hall, U.K
- Black, H.I.J. & Okwakol, M.J.N. (1997) Agricultural intensification. soil biodiversity and agroecosystem function in the tropics: the role of termites. Applied Soil Ecology, 6, 37-53.
- Cornelius, M.L., Daigle, D.J., Connick, W.J. Jr., Parker, A. & Wunch, K. (2002) Responses of Coptotermes formosanus and Reticulitermes flavipes (Isoptera: Rhinotermitidae) to three types of wood rot fungi cultured on different substrates. Journal of Economic Entomology, **95** 121–128
- Day, K.R., Norlander, G., Kenis, M. & Hallordson, G. (2004) General biology and life cycles of bark weevils. Bark and Wood Boring Insects in Living Trees in Europe, a Synthesis (ed. by F. Lieutier, K. R. Day, A. Battisti, J. C. Gregoire and H. F. Evans), pp. 331-349. Springer, The Netherlands.
- Dunn, P.H. (1999) Forest Health Monitoring Field Methods Guide. United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Washington, District of Columbia.
- Eckhardt, L.G., Goyer, R.A., Klepzig, K.D. & Jones, J.P. (2004a) Interactions of Hylastes species (Coleoptera: Scolytidae) with Leptographium species associated with loblolly pine decline. Journal of Economic Entomology, 97, 468-474.
- Eckhardt, L.G., Jones, J.P. & Klepzig, K.D. (2004b) Pathogenicity of Leptographium species associated with loblolly pine decline. Plant Disease, 88, 1174-1178.
- Eckhardt, L.G., Weber, A.M., Menard, R.D., Jones, J.P. & Hess, N.J. (2007) Insect-fungal complex associated with loblolly pine decline in central Alabama. Forest Science, 53, 84-92.
- Esenther, G.R., Allen, T.C., Casida, J.E. & Shenefelt, R.D. (1961) Termite attractant from fungus-infected wood. Science, 134, 50.
- Franklin, J.F., Shugart, H.H. & Harmon, M.E. (1987) Tree death as an ecological process. BioScience, 37, 550-556.
- Goheen, D.J. & Cobb, F.W. Jr. (1978) Occurrence of Verticicladiella wageneri and its perfect state, Ceratocystis wageneri sp. nov., in insect galleries. Phytopathology, 68, 1192-1195.
- Hanula, J.L. (1993) Relationship of wood-feeding insects and course woody debris. Biodiversity and Coarse Woody Debris in Southern Forests, Proceedings, Workshop on Coarse Woody Debris in Southern Forests: Effects on Biodiversity, General Technical Report SE-94 (ed. by J. W. McMinn and D. A. Crossley), pp. 55-81. US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station, Asheville, North Carolina.
- Harrington, T.C. (1993) Diseases of conifers caused by species of Ophiostoma and Leptographium. Ceratocystis and Ophiostoma: Taxonomy, Ecology, and Pathogenicity (ed. by M. J. Wingfield, K. A. Seifert and J. E. Webber), pp. 161-172. APS Press, St Paul,
- Harrington, T.C. & Cobb, F.W. Jr. (1983) Pathogenicity of Leptographium and Verticicladiella spp. isolated from roots of western North American conifers. *Phytopathology*, **73**, 596–599.
- Harris, W.V. (1966) The role of termites in tropical forestry. Insectes Sociaux, 13, 255-266.
- Hendee, E.C. (1934) The association of termites and fungi. Termite and Termite Control, 2nd edn (ed. by C. A. Kofoid), pp. 105-116. University of California Press, Berkley, California.
- Kitchell, J.F., O'Neill, R.V., Webb, D., Gallepp, G.W., Bartell, S.M., Koonce, J.F. & Ausmus, B.S. (1979) Consumer regulation of nutrient cycling. BioScience, 29, 28-34.
- Klepzig, K.D., Raffa, K.F. & Smalley, E.B. (1991) Association of an insect-fungal complex with red pine decline in Wisconsin. Forest Science, 37, 1119-1139.

- Lee, K.E. & Wood, T.G. (1971) Termites and Soil. Academic Press, New York, New York.
- Little, N.S., Riggins, J.J., Schultz, T.P., Londo, A.J. & Ulyshen, M.D. (2012a) Feeding preference of native subterranean termites (Isoptera: Rhinotermitidae: Reticulitermes) for wood containing bark beetle pheromones and blue-stain fungi. Journal of Insect Behavior, 25,
- Little, N.S., Blount, N.A., Londo, A.J., Kitchens, S.C., Schultz, T.P., McConnell, T.E. & Riggins, J.J. (2012b) Preference of Formosan subterranean termites for blue-stained southern yellow pine. Journal of Economic Entomology, 105, 1640-1644.
- Little, N.S., Schultz, T.P., Diehl, S.V., Nicholas, D.D., Londo, A.J., Musser, F.M. & Riggins, J.J. (2013) Field evaluations of subterranean termite preference for sap-stain inoculated wood. Journal of Insect Behavior, 26, 649-659.
- Lobry de Brun, L.A. & Conacher, A.J. (1990) The role of termites and ants in soil modification: a review. Australian Journal of Soil Research, 28, 55-93.
- Malloch, D. & Blackwell, M. (1993) Dispersal biology of the ophiostomatoid fungi. Ceratocystis and Ophiostoma: Taxonomy, Ecology, and Pathogenicity (ed. by M. J. Wingfield, K. A. Seifert and J. E. Webber), pp. 195-260. APS Press, St Paul, Minnesota.
- Manion, P.D. (1991) Tree Disease Concepts. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.
- Martin, M.M. (1992) The evolution of insect-fungus associations: from contact to stable symbiosis. American Zoologist, 32, 593-605.
- Matsumura, F., Coppel, H.C. & Tai, A. (1968) Isolation and identification of termite trail-following pheromone. Nature, 219, 963 - 964.
- Matsumura, F., Tai, A. & Coppel, H.C. (1969) Termite trail-following substance, isolation and purification from Reticulitermes virginicus and fungus-infected wood. Journal of Economic Entomology, 62,
- Matsumura, F., Nishimoto, K., Ikeda, T. & Coppel, H.C. (1976) Influence of carbon sources on the production of the termite trailfollowing substance by Gloeophyllum trabeum. Journal of Chemical Ecology, 2, 299-305.
- Menard, R.D. (2007) An assessment of the risk mapping system for the use of managing loblolly pine decline sites within red-cockaded woodpecker habitat. Thesis, Louisiana State University.
- Mueller-Dombois, D. (1987) Natural dieback in forests. BioScience, **37.** 575-583.
- Nevill, R.J. & Alexander, S.A. (1992a) Transmission of Leptographium procerum to eastern white pine by Hylobius pales and Pissodes nemorensis (Coleoptera: Curculionidae). Plant Disease, 76, 307 - 310.
- Nevill, R.J. & Alexander, S.A. (1992b) Root- and stemcolonizing insects recovered from eastern white pines with procerum root disease. Canadian Journal of Forest Research, 22, 1712–1716.
- Otrosina, W.J. & Garbelotto, M. (2010) Heterobasidion occidentale sp. nov. and Heterobasidion irregulare nom. Nov.: a disposition of North American Heterobasidion biological species. Mycological Research,
- Otrosina, W.J., Hess, N.J., Zarnoch, S.J., Perry, T.J. & Jones, J.P. (1997) Blue-stain fungi associated with roots of southern pine trees attacked by the southern pine beetle, Dendroctonus frontalis. Plant Disease, 81, 942-945.
- Richter, D.D., Markewitz, D., Trumbore, S.E. & Wells, C.G. (1999) Rapid accumulation and turnover of soil carbon in a re-establishing forest. Nature, 400, 56-58.
- Rust, M.K. & Su, N.-Y. (2012) Managing social insects of urban importance. Annual Review of Entomology, 57, 355 - 375.

- SAS Institute Inc (2008) SAS® 9.2 User's Guide. SAS Institute Inc., Cary, North Carolina.
- Schirp, A., Farrell, R.L., Kreber, B. & Singh, A.P. (2003) Advances in understanding the ability of sapstaining fungi to produce cell wall-degrading enzymes. *Wood and Fiber Science*, **35**, 434–444.
- Smythe, R.V., Coppel, H.C., Lipton, S.H. & Strong, F.M. (1967) Chemical studies of attractants associated with *Reticulitermes flavipes* and *R. virginicus*. *Journal of Economic Entomology*, **60**, 228–233.
- St-Germain, M., Drapeau, P. & Buddle, C.M. (2007) Host-use patterns of saproxylic phloeophagous and xylophagous Coleoptera adults and larvae along the decay gradient in standing dead black spruce and aspen. *Ecography*, **30**, 737–748.
- Valiev, A., Ogel, Z.B. & Klepzig, K.D. (2009) Analysis of cellulose and polyphenol oxidase production by southern pine beetle associated fungi. *Symbiosis*, **49**, 37–42.
- Wingfield, M.J., Capretti, P. & MacKenzie, M. (1988) Leptographium spp. as root pathogens of conifers: an international perspective. *Leptographium Root Diseases on Conifers* (ed. by T. C. Harrington and F. W. Cobb Jr), pp. 113-128. The American Phytopathological Society, St Paul, Minnesota.
- Witcosky, J.J. & Hansen, E.M. (1985) Root colonizing insects recovered from Douglas-fir in various stages of decline due to black-stain root disease. *Phytopathology*, **75**, 399–402.

Accepted 29 December 2013 First published online 13 February 2014