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# Biofiltration vs. conventional activated sludge plants: what about priority and emerging pollutants removal?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper compares the removal performances of two complete wastewater treatment plants (WWTP) for all priority substances listed in the Water Framework Directive and additional compounds of interest including flame retardants, surfactants, pesticides and personal care products (PCP) (n=104). First, primary treatments such as physico-chemical lamellar settling (PCLS) and primary settling (PS) are compared. Similarly, biofiltration (BF) and conventional activated sludge (CAS) are then examined. Finally, the removal efficiency per unit of nitrogen removed of both WWTPs for micropollutants is discussed, as nitrogenous pollution treatment results in a special design of processes and operational conditions. For primary treatments, hydrophobic pollutants ( $\log K_{ow} > 4$ ) are well removed (> 70%) for both systems despite high variations of removal. PCLS allows an obvious gain of about 20% regarding pollutant removals, as a result of better suspended solids elimination and possible coagulant impact on soluble compounds. For biological treatments, variations of removal are much weaker and the majority of pollutants are comparably removed within both systems. Hydrophobic and volatile compounds are well (> 60%) or very well removed (> 80%) by sorption and volatilization. Some readily biodegradable molecules are better removed by CAS indicating a better biodegradation. A better sorption of pollutants on activated sludge could be also expected considering the differences of characteristics between a biofilm and flocs. Finally, comparison of global processes efficiency using removals of micropollutants load normalized to nitrogen shows that PCLS + BF is as efficient as PS + CAS despite a higher compactness and a shorter hydraulic retention time (HRT). Only some groups of pollutants seem better removed by PS + CAS like alkylphenols, flame retardants or DEHP, thanks to better biodegradation and sorption resulting from HRT and biomass characteristics. For both processes, and out of the 68 molecules found in raw water, only half of them are still detected in the water discharged, most of the time close to their detection limit. However, some of them are detected at higher concentrations (> 1 µg/L and/or > Environmental Quality Standards) what is problematic as they represent a threat for aquatic environment.

## KEYWORDS

Priority pollutants; emerging pollutants; biofiltration; conventional activated sludge; physico-chemical lamellar settling; wastewater treatment plant; nitrification

## INTRODUCTION

The fate of micropollutants in the environment has become an increasing issue last decades, especially in heavily urbanized areas. To struggle against water contamination, the European Community adopted a control policy strategy materialized by the European Water Framework Directive (WFD, Decision No. 2455/2001/EC) (EC 2001). This regulation requires Member States to achieve a good ecological and chemical status in surface waters by 2015, 2021 or 2027. Concretely, 41 chemicals were defined as priority substances because they represent a significant risk for the aquatic environment, and Environmental Quality Standards (EQS) have been set for 33 of them. In parallel of WFD pollutants, a large number of molecules such as pesticides, pharmaceuticals and personal care products (PPCP), flame retardants, etc. are detected in the environment and also represent a potential threat for it (Heberer 2002, Jørgensen and Halling-Sørensen 2000, Rogers 1996).

Furthermore, the fate of pollutants within the WWTPs is today well studied and WWTP effluents are generally considered as an important source of contamination for a long time, especially in urban areas (Heberer 2002). This implies a better understanding of micropollutants behaviors within wastewater treatment processes.

1  
2 Generally, wastewater treatment includes pre-treatment, primary and biological treatments. For primary treatments,  
3 primary settling (PS) and physico-chemical lamellar settling (PCLS) are commonly used. While PS has been initially  
4 and widely employed, PCLS is more and more frequent since this technique operates more compactly and allows a  
5 wider flexibility of configuration and use. To our knowledge, some papers exist on one or another technology  
6 (Alexander et al. 2012, Carballa et al. 2005, Choubert et al. 2011) but there is no study neither comparing both  
7 technologies nor examining the impact of coagulant and flocculant on the pollutant removal at industrial scale.

8 Concerning biological treatments, they are most of the time designed to achieve a high removal of nitrogenous  
9 pollution, and two types of treatments exist. Classical biological units, using suspended growth systems (flocs) such as  
10 conventional activated sludge, have already been well documented (Clara et al. 2005, Joss et al. 2005, Katsoyiannis and  
11 Samara 2005, Ruel et al. 2010). Moreover, some studies have compared conventional activated sludge (CAS) process  
12 with membrane bio-reactor (Bernhard et al. 2006, De Wever et al. 2007, González et al. 2007, Sipma et al. 2010),  
13 another suspending growth technology, but only a few of them have compared conventional treatments with biofilm  
14 technologies such as biofiltration (Choubert et al. 2011, Joss and Maurer 2006). Biofiltration (BF) is a fixed bed  
15 technique consisting in the development of a specific biofilm on a filtration material. Thus, it combines a physical  
16 retention of particles and a biological treatment of dissolved molecules by microorganisms. Its compactness (small  
17 footprint), modularity (ability to adapt operating parameters to match the wastewater flow) and intensiveness (short  
18 hydraulic retention time - HRT) have contributed to the development of this technology since the 80s, particularly in  
19 urban areas, where it is the most suitable. Despite these strengths, BF remains very poorly studied regarding efficiency  
20 for priority and emerging pollutants.

21  
22 Within the framework of the OPUR (Observatory of Urban Pollutants, Paris) research program, different studies were  
23 carried out on primary and secondary treatments. PCLS and BF were first studied by (Gasperi et al. 2010) for priority  
24 pollutants and by (Gilbert et al. 2012) for alkylphenols and polybromodiphenylethers (PBDE). The same methodology  
25 was also applied for PS and CAS. More recently, triclosan, triclocarban and parabens were also investigated for both  
26 processes (Geara-Matta 2012).

27 This paper aims at synthesizing and completing all data and knowledge provided by these different studies on two  
28 WWTPs treating wastewater from the same catchment (west of Paris). First, each facility performance was assessed to  
29 compare PS with PCLS and BF with CAS. Then, overall treatment systems efficiencies were examined. To achieve this  
30 goal, the pollutant removals normalized to the nitrogen pollution removals were used, not to correlate micropollutant  
31 removal to nitrogen removal, but as a comparison of both treatment systems performances. This normalization is  
32 particularly relevant because achieving an efficient nitrogen removal has a huge impact on processes design especially  
33 for operational conditions. Thus, this work is innovative because BF is studied and compared to CAS and treatment  
34 systems are compared not only by percentage but by efficiency normalized to a parameter widely used by water  
35 managers to describe WWTP performances (nitrogen). This methodology enables a relevant comparison of both  
36 WWTPs and can provide relevant information since they are principally designed to treat carbonaceous and nitrogenous  
37 pollutions.

38 Therefore, a large panel of molecules including all WFD compounds and some emerging pollutants (n=104) like  
39 parabens, biocides (triclosan and triclocarban) or pesticides was monitored. For each compounds, both dissolved and  
40 particulate concentrations were measured. Thus, this work provides comparative information about removal  
41 performances of processes and explains experimental results by theoretical mechanisms and physico-chemical  
42 properties of chemicals. To achieve this goal, the monitoring of conventional parameters like C/N/P was crucial.

## 43 44 METHODS

### 45 46 WWTP description and sampling points

47  
48 Two WWTPs were studied (Figure 1) upstream (Seine Amont) and downstream (Seine Centre) Paris. Both are run by  
49 the Parisian public sanitation service (SIAAP).

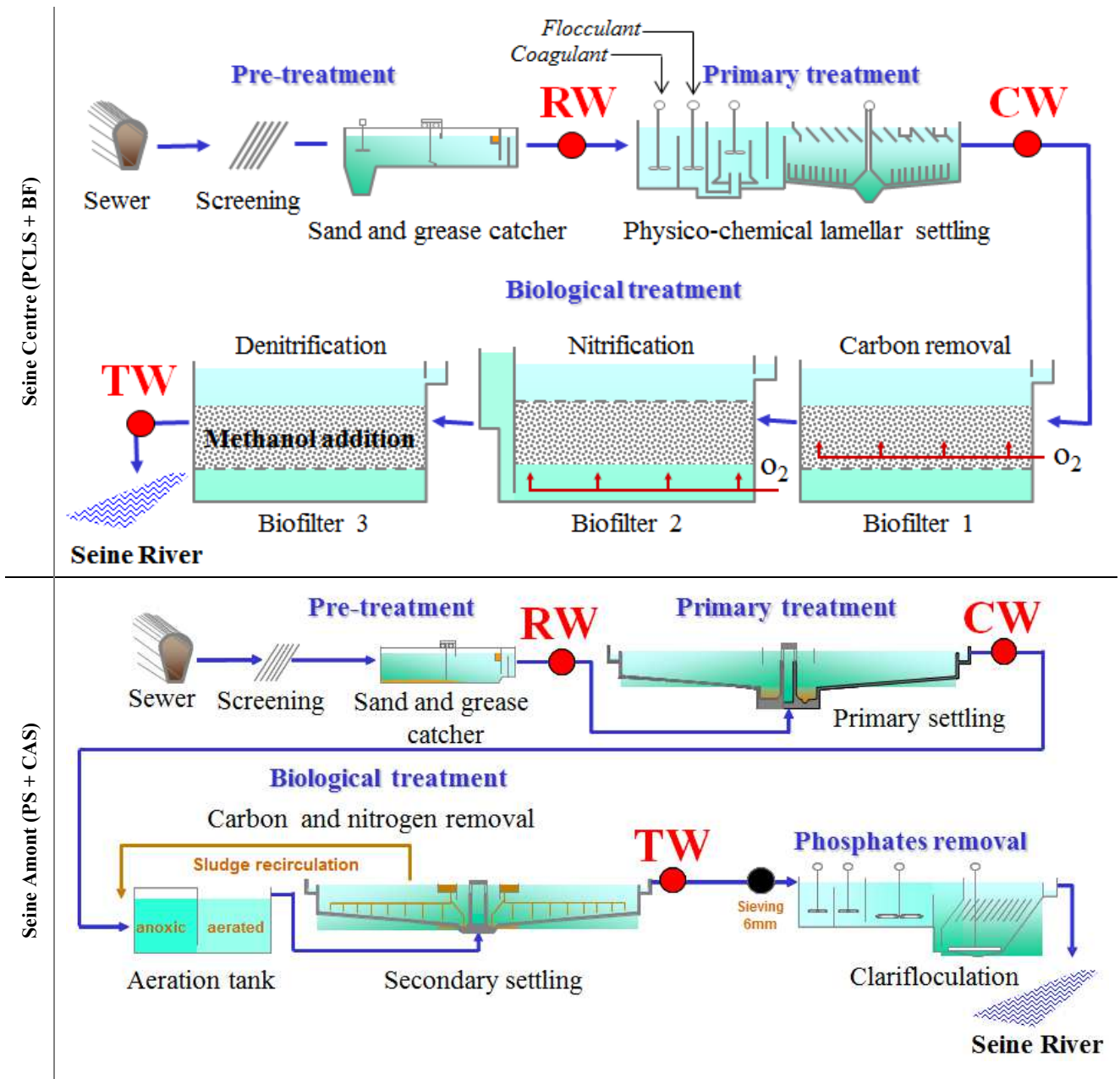
50 The Seine Amont plant receives 600 000 m<sup>3</sup> of wastewater per day. Wastewater is first pre-treated (screening and  
51 grit/oil removal), and then settled by PS tanks to remove a large amount of particles. An extended aeration activated  
52 sludge unit (biological reactor combined with a secondary settling tank) allows carbon and nitrogen removal. This  
53 configuration of activated sludge unit belongs to the most efficient existing one as it operates at very low load (< 0.32  
54 kg BOD<sub>5</sub>/(m<sup>3</sup>.d), (Gaïd 2008))<sup>1</sup>. The first zone operates in anoxic conditions to remove nitrates and the second zone  
55 operates in aerobic conditions and allows the carbon removal and the total nitrification. Finally, the effluent undergoes a  
56 tertiary treatment by clariflocculation to complete particle and orthophosphate removal.

57 The Seine Centre plant receives 240 000 m<sup>3</sup> of wastewater per day and its design consists in a pre-treatment (screening,  
58 grit/oil), a PCLS unit (Densadeg<sup>®</sup>) with coagulant (ferric chloride) and flocculant (anionic polymer) injection, and a

---

<sup>1</sup> BOD<sub>5</sub>: biochemical oxygen demand 5-day test.

1 three-stage BF unit. The first stage (Biofor<sup>®</sup> - type filters with biolite as the medium) is designed for carbon removal in  
 2 aerated conditions, the second one (Biostyr<sup>®</sup> - type filters with biostyrene as the medium) achieves a total nitrification in  
 3 aerated conditions and the third one (Biofor<sup>®</sup> - type filters) consists in a denitrification step in anoxic conditions. This  
 4 three-stage BF configuration (downstream denitrification) is the most efficient one for nutrients, as shown by (Rocher et  
 5 al. 2012). Once treatments are achieved, both effluents are discharged into the Seine River.  
 6



7 **Figure 1. Layouts of the two studied wastewater treatment plants**

8  
 9 Three sampling points for both plants were considered: raw water (RW), clarified water (CW) and treated water (TW).  
 10 Considering the quantity of particles required for analysis (from 0.2 to 2.0 g), large volumes of water were collected (10  
 11 L for RW, 30 L for CW and TW) using automatic refrigerated samplers (at 4°C) equipped with glass bottles and  
 12 Teflon<sup>®</sup> pipes to avoid any contamination. These samples were 24-h composite samples to be representative. Dissolved  
 13 fraction was analyzed within 24-h after sampling while particulate fraction was analyzed within 48-h.  
 14

15 Conventional wastewater quality parameters

16  
 17 Table 1 displays concentrations of the main conventional wastewater quality parameters during all sampling campaigns  
 18 and total removals (R, in %). These parameters include total suspended solids (TSS), chemical oxygen demand (COD),

1 total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN), total nitrogen (TN) and total phosphorous (TP). For each parameter, minimum -  
 2 maximum and mean (below) values of all campaigns are given. R is calculated between RW and TW.

3  
 4 **Table 1. Conventional wastewater quality parameters in RW, CW and TW effluents**

	Seine Amont (n=5) PS + CAS				Seine Centre (n=5) PCLS + BF			
	RW	CW	TW	R (%)	RW	CW	TW	R (%)
<b>TSS</b> (mg/L)	330.0 - 600.0 426.5	84.0 - 251.3 120.5	4.0 - 14.8 7.8	95.5 - 99.3 98.2	229.0 - 302.6 269.7	24.0 - 65.7 42.1	3.0 - 10.6 6.6	95.4 - 99.0 97.6
<b>COD</b> (mgO <sub>2</sub> /L)	564.0 - 1630.0 764.3	249.0 - 365.0 317.8	17.0 - 39.0 25.1	93.1 - 98.9 96.7	426.0 - 546.0 491.3	150.0 - 218.0 175.4	28.3 - 59.0 39.2	86.2 - 94.8 92.0
<b>CODs</b> (mgO <sub>2</sub> /L)	-	-	-	-	134.0 - 151.0 139.2	104.3 - 118.7 111.5	23.3 - 32.0 28.1	76.1 - 84.6 79.8
<b>TKN</b> (mgN/L)	56.0 - 78.7 68.6	48.8 - 62.7 57.8	1.2 - 1.9 1.6	96.6 - 98.5 97.7	40.0 - 53.0 47.3	36.0 - 53.0 40.5	1.5 - 8.3 4.8	79.3 - 97.2 89.9
<b>TN</b> (mgN/L)	56.0 - 78.7 68.6	48.8 - 62.7 57.8	14.3 - 23.2 19.8	58.6 - 81.8 71.1	43.0 - 53.9 49.1	38.6 - 45.0 41.9	3.8 - 14.7 11.9	65.8 - 92.9 75.8
<b>TP</b> (mgP/L)	10.0 - 14.2 12.0	7.0 - 9.1 8.0	1.3 - 2.7 2.1	73.0 - 90.8 82.5	5.5 - 7.3 6.3	0.9 - 2.2 1.6	0.2 - 0.4 0.3	92.7 - 97.3 95.2

5  
 6 As shown by mean removals (Table 1), both plants achieve quite similar and high elimination of TSS and COD (> 90%)  
 7 and to a lesser extent of TN (71-75%) and TP (> 80%). Overall performances obtained with BF process are relevant  
 8 with annual performances reported by (Rocher et al. 2012). Difference for TP (TP<sub>PCLS+BF</sub> > 95% vs. TP<sub>PS+CAS</sub> < 85%)  
 9 results from precipitation of orthophosphates thanks to coagulant addition in PCLS (Jiang and Graham 1998, Metcalf  
 10 and Eddy 2003). As regards nitrogen removal, both WWTPs seem as efficient to remove TN in percentage, but actually  
 11 PS + CAS removes a slightly higher quantity of TN per liter (48.8 mgN/L for PS + CAS vs. 37.2 mgN/L for PCLS +  
 12 BF) because of a higher raw water concentration (68.6 mgN/L for PS + CAS vs. 49.1 mgN/L for PCLS + BF). In  
 13 addition, both PS + CAS and PCLS + BF achieve a total nitrification, with high removals of TKN and NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup> (not  
 14 presented). Finally, both WWTPs are designed to intensively and efficiently remove nitrogen.

15  
 16 **Pollutants and analytical procedures**

17  
 18 A total of 104 pollutants were monitored. Depending on the substance, two methodologies were deployed. First, a large  
 19 panel of 81 priority and emerging pollutants (Zgheib et al. 2008) was selected (Table 2) to be screened during three  
 20 campaigns in 2008 (March, September, December) for PCLS + BF and 2010 (July, November, December) for PS +  
 21 CAS. Those analyzes were carried out by IPL-Bretagne, a French accredited laboratory (COFRAC - French official  
 22 accreditation committee). For metals, samples were digested during 2-h using a concentrated mixture of nitric and  
 23 hydrochloric acids. For organic pollutants, the dissolved compounds were extracted by liquid-liquid extractions (hexane  
 24 or dichloromethane) for most of them or by solid phase extraction - SPE (polystyrene/divinylbenzene-copolymer  
 25 cartridges) for pesticides. After lyophilization, particulate matter was extracted by assisted solid extractions  
 26 (acetonitrile/water for pesticides, hexane/dichloromethane for the remaining organic compounds). Different analytical  
 27 procedures were used depending on the molecules (Table 2).

28  
 29 Additional analyses were carried out internally on 23 other molecules. Five campaigns were performed for alkylphenols  
 30 and polybromodiphenylethers (PBDE) in 2010 and three for biocides (triclosan and triclocarban) and parabens in late  
 31 2010 - early 2011. Whatever the period considered and as confirmed by the globally similar removals of conventional  
 32 wastewater parameters, the operational conditions and performances on both plants were similar.

33  
 34 For alkylphenols and PBDEs, after filtration, the dissolved phases are spiked with alkylphenol deuterated standards (n-  
 35 OP-d17 and NP1EO-d2) and PBDE quantification standards (BDE 77, BDE 181 and BDE 209-<sup>13</sup>C). They are then  
 36 extracted within 24-h by SPE (Oasis HLB<sup>®</sup> for alkylphenols and C18 Chromabond<sup>®</sup> for PBDEs). For the particulate  
 37 fraction, particles are microwave extracted with 20 mL of dichloromethane/methanol (90:10, v/v). Alkylphenols are  
 38 analyzed by ultra performance liquid chromatography coupled with mass tandem spectrometry (UPLC-MSMS), while  
 39 PBDEs are analyzed by gas chromatography coupled with mass spectrometer. More details on analytical method are  
 40 available in (Gilbert et al. 2012). For parabens (6 congeners) and biocides (triclosan and triclocarban - TCS and TCC),  
 41 acidified dissolved phases are spiked with deuteured internal standards (PrP-d4 - PrP: propylparaben - and TCS-d3),  
 42 after filtration. Extraction is performed by SPE on Oasis HLB<sup>®</sup> cartridges. Then, analytes are eluted with 10 mL of  
 43 methanol and two surrogates are added (MeP-d4 - MeP: methylparaben - and TCC-d4) before analyzing by UPLC-  
 44 MSMS. Extraction of particular phases is performed by microwave during two successive cycles after spiking by 50 µL  
 45 of internal standards (TCS-d3 and PrP-d4) from two different solutions. 20 mL of a dichloromethane/methanol (90/10,  
 46 v/v) mix are added as extraction solvent. After purification, Oasis HLB<sup>®</sup> cartridges allow to collect two fractions

1 containing parabens and TCS, or TCC, which are spiked with 50 µL of surrogates (MeP-d4 and TCC-d4) before being  
 2 analyzed by UPLC-MSMS. More details on analytical method are available in (Geara-Matta 2012). Particulate and  
 3 dissolved concentrations are measured individually for each sample except for metals and BTEXs/HVOCs analyzed on  
 4 total fraction.

5  
 6 **Table 2. Groups of pollutants and analytical methods**

Groups <sup>a</sup>	Total <sup>b</sup>	n <sup>c</sup>	Standards	Methods <sup>d</sup>	Phase <sup>e</sup>
Phenols	2	3	ISO 18857-1	GC-MSMS	P + D
BTEXs	5 (1)	3	NF EN ISO 11423-1	GC-MS	T
Chloroalkanes	1 (1)	3	IPL Internal method	GC-ECD	P + D
Chlorobenzenes	5 (3)	3	EN ISO 6468	GC-MS	P + D
HVOCs	7 (4)	3	NF EN ISO 10301 + 6468	GC-MS	T
PAHs	16 (8)	3	ISO 17993	HPLC-Fluo	P + D
Metals	8 (4)	3	NF EN ISO 11885 + 1483	ICP and AAS	T + D
Organotins	3 (3)	3	NF EN ISO 17353	GC-MS	P + D
PCBs	8	3	NF EN ISO 6468	GC-MSMS	P + D
Phtalates	1 (1)	3	Internal method	GC-MS	P + D
Pesticides	25 (12)	3	NF EN ISO 11369 + IPL Internal method	GC-MS UPLC-MSMS	P + D
<i>Screening</i>	<i>81 (37)</i>				
Alkylphenols	6 (2)	5	Internal method (Gilbert et al. 2012)	UPLC-MSMS	P + D
PBDEs	9 (6)	5	Internal method (Gilbert et al. 2012)	GC-MS	P + D
Biocides	2	3	Internal method (Geara-Matta 2012)	UPLC-MSMS	P + D
Parabens	6	3	Internal method (Geara-Matta 2012)	UPLC-MSMS	P + D
<i>Additional analyses</i>	<i>23 (8)</i>				

a Groups: BTEXs = benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylenes, HVOCs = halogenated volatile organic compounds, PAHs = polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, PBDEs = polybromodiphenylethers, PCBs = polychlorobiphenyls.

b Number of substances listed in the WFD is in bracket.

c Number of campaigns.

d Analytical methods: ICP = inductively coupled plasma, AAS = atomic absorption spectrometry, GC = gas chromatography, GC-ECD = GC with electron capture detector, GC-MS = GC with mass spectrometry, GC-MSMS = GC with tandem mass spectrometry, HPLC-Fluo = high performance liquid chromatography with fluorescent detector, UPLC-MSMS = ultra performance liquid chromatography with tandem mass spectrometry,

e Phase considered with D = dissolved, P = particulate, T = total/bulk sample.

7  
 8  
 9 **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

10 **Comparison of primary treatments performances**

11  
 12 The removals (in %) of priority and emerging pollutants, grouped by families (vertical lines), by PS and PCLS are illustrated in

13 Figure 2 for each campaign (n=3-5, Table 2). Out of the 104 molecules monitored, 68 were detected in raw water. Globally, the pollutant pattern found and the orders of magnitude are quite comparable with those reported in literature (Clarke et al. 2010, Deblonde et al. 2011, Fatone et al. 2011, Gasperi et al. 2008, Karvelas et al. 2003, Komori et al. 2006). As expected, high levels of metals (12-354 µg/L), DEHP (13-66 µg/L), BTEXs/HVOCs (0.65-7.5 µg/L), chloroalkanes (38-59 µg/L) and alkylphenols (2.71-3.57 µg/L) were found (Supplementary data - Table 1). Similarly, parabens (1.79-7.38 µg/L) and TCS (2.82-6.58 µg/L) were found at high levels, preferentially in dissolved fraction (> 94%) for parabens. This is interesting as their occurrence in French wastewater is still not well documented. Finally, a quite similar quality was observed in influent of both WWTPs for the majority of compounds, resulting in a similar micropollutant pattern.

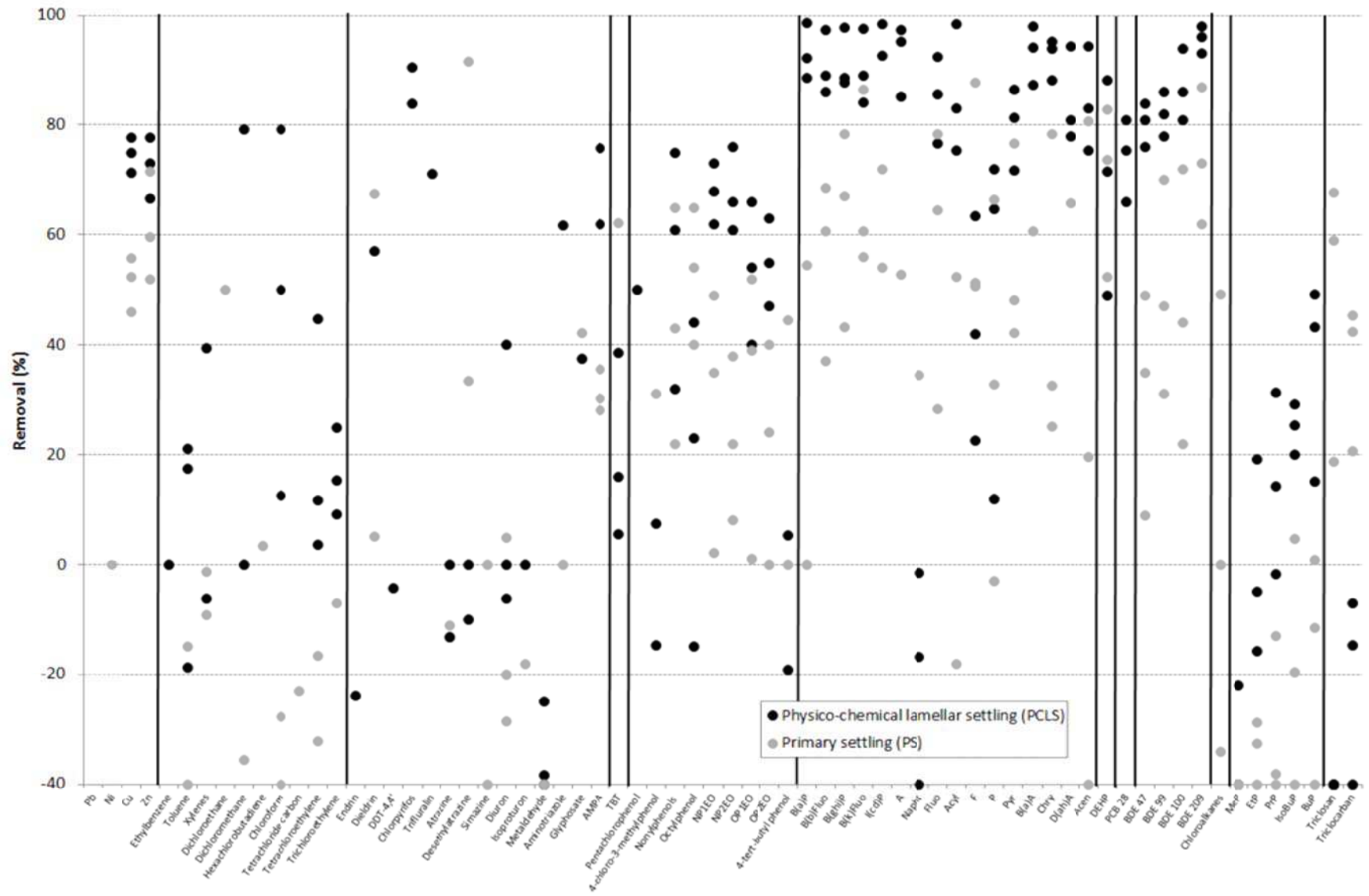


Figure 2. Removal of priority and emerging pollutants by primary treatments

1  
2  
3  
4

1  
2 Figure 2 displays the high variation of removal for the majority of compounds. Except for metals or some PAHs and  
3 PBDEs exhibiting high and less variable removals, most of pollutants show removals varying from 20 to 60%. These  
4 variations appear weaker in the PCLS unit than in PS unit, maybe because of chemicals added which may have a  
5 stabilization effect as particles removal is more efficient and homogenous in the unit. Despite the high variations, three  
6 groups are distinguishable regarding their removals. Globally, hydrophobic pollutants ( $\log K_{ow} > 4$ ) like PCB-28,  
7 DEHP, PBDEs or high molecular weight PAHs, are well or very well removed ( $> 70\%$ ) while hydrophilic ones ( $\log K_{ow}$   
8  $< 3-4$ ) are not or just slightly removed (pesticides, parabens, BTEXs/HVOCs). Alkylphenols, metals (zinc, copper),  
9 biocides and tributyltin are moderately removed (20-70%). These removal results are in accordance with other studies  
10 (Bergé et al. 2012, Choubert et al. 2011, Gasperi et al. 2010). Moreover,

11 Figure 2 displays higher removals (10-30%) with PCLS than PS, reflecting the impact of coagulation/flocculation on  
12 removal of micropollutants. This can mainly be explained by an improvement of TSS removal. Actually, the difference  
13 in hydrophobic compounds and metals removal rates (about 20%) is directly correlated to the better settling of particles  
14 in PCLS (Table 1). Improvement of particulate pollutant removal by coagulation/flocculation has already been  
15 highlighted in the literature (Alexander et al. 2012, Bratby 2006, Duan and Gregory 2003, Gasperi et al. 2012).

16  
17 For the dissolved fraction, there is no clear trend displaying a benefit from chemicals in PCLS especially because of the  
18 high variations of removal, even if coagulant and flocculant have an impact on CODs (10-20%) and  $PO_4^{3-}$  (10-15%)  
19 removal (Table 1). The removal of dissolved fraction of organic pollutants induced by coagulation/flocculation has  
20 already been displayed (Bratby 2006, Vigneswaran et al. 2009). Similarly, some soluble compounds are slightly better  
21 removed (10-20%) in presence of coagulant and flocculant like alkylphenols, PBDEs or parabens (

22 Figure 2). This can be explained by adsorption on flocs and/or impact of coagulation/flocculation on colloids which can  
23 be a sorption site for some pollutants by hydrophobic interactions or adsorption (Bratby 2006, Elimelech et al. 1995,  
24 Vigneswaran et al. 2009). Moreover, a precipitation mechanism can occur, in which coagulant neutralizes anionic sites  
25 of organic molecules, changing radically their solubility (Duan and Gregory 2003). The colloidal fraction elimination  
26 was mentioned for endocrine disrupting compounds (Zhou et al. 2006) and PBDE (Song et al. 2006), or proved for  
27 metals (Li et al. 2002). For the treatment of combined sewer overflows by ballasted clariflocculation, (Gasperi et al.  
28 2012) also observed a more or less marked removal of dissolved fraction. Similarly, authors reported high variations  
29 from pollutant to pollutant and for a given pollutant. However, the impact of coagulant and flocculant is higher by far  
30 on the particulate phase than on the dissolved phase in terms of micropollutants removal.

31  
32 Biological treatments

33  
34  
35 Figure 3 illustrates the removals for each pollutant by CAS and BF (n=3-5) treatments, ranked by families (vertical  
36 lines).

37



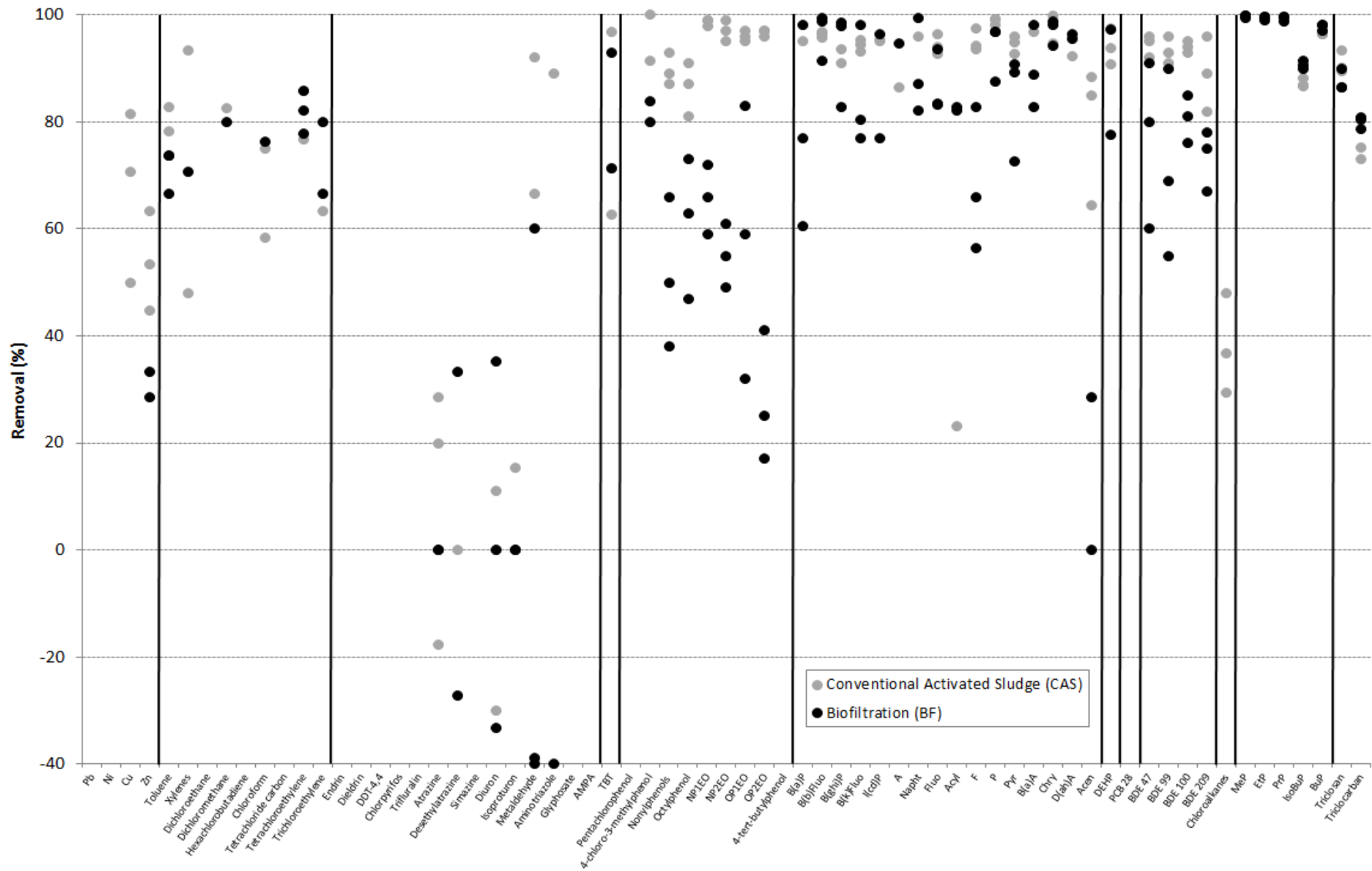


Figure 3. Removal of priority and emerging pollutants by biological treatments

1  
2  
3  
4

1 First of all,  
2 Figure 3 displays a much weaker variation of removal for most pollutants than for primary treatments, except for  
3 pesticides. Removals are quite stable for both units with a maximal variation of 20% most of the time. However, these  
4 variations seem slightly weaker with CAS than with BF. This could be due to the lower HRT in BF units (20-30 h for  
5 CAS vs. 45-60 min for BF), resulting in influent peak loads being less averaged over time, according to the lower  
6 reactor volume. All compounds are eliminated from moderately to efficiently (20-80%, or > 80%), except pesticides  
7 which are not removed by any units. For pesticides, this is in good accordance with the study of (Ruel et al. 2012).  
8 Results for biocides and parabens are particularly interesting as variations are very low and removals very high for both  
9 units (> 70-80% for biocides and > 90% for parabens). This is a quite important observation regarding the lack of  
10 literature data about their occurrence and fate in WWTPs. Nevertheless, high removals (> 90%) have also been reported  
11 for parabens (Andersen et al. 2007), mainly during biological treatments (Eriksson et al. 2009), and for biocides with  
12 BF or CAS (Heidler and Halden 2007, Sabaliunas et al. 2003).

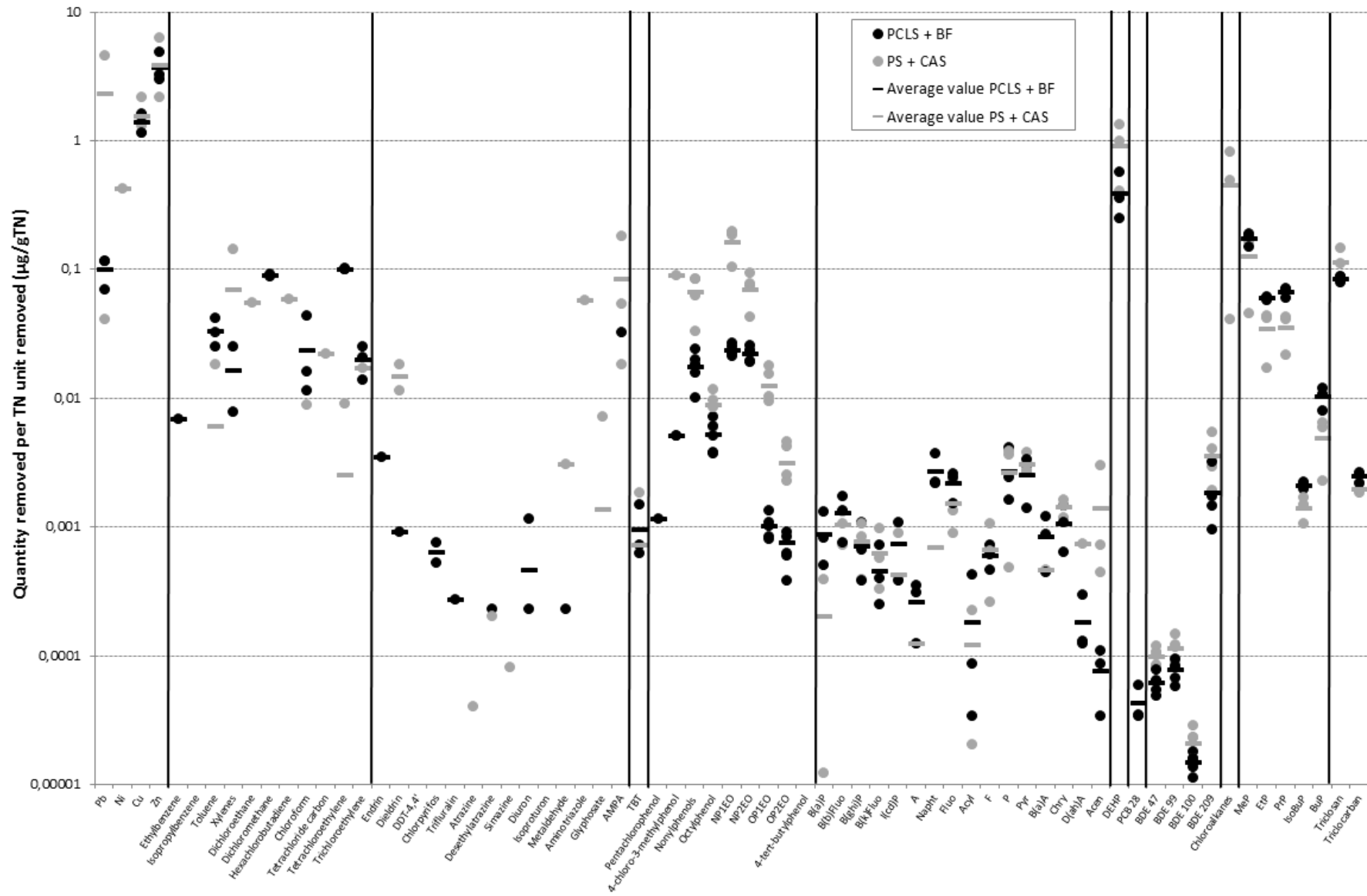
13  
14 Both biological systems (CAS and BF) give comparable results despite different inlet concentrations, what is consistent  
15 with results of (Choubert et al. 2011). They obtained removals in the same range for 70% of the 125 molecules they  
16 searched (pesticides, pharmaceuticals, PAHs, phthalates, alkylphenols, HVOCs, metals, etc.) with 2 BF and 5 low load  
17 CAS WWTPs. The differences between BF and CAS were only observed for some pharmaceuticals, explained by better  
18 biodegradation. In our case, it is particularly true for BTEXs/HVOCs, PAHs, DEHP, biocides, parabens and tributyltin.  
19 Globally, moderate or high removals for PAHs and PBDEs were also reported in the literature (Clarke et al. 2010,  
20 Fatone et al. 2011, Manoli and Samara 2008, Rayne and Ikononou 2005, Song et al. 2006). The very high elimination  
21 (> 80%) of hydrophobic compounds ( $\log K_{ow} > 4$ ) is consistent with high TSS removal in both systems (85% with CAS;  
22 94% with BF), and it highlights the removal mechanism of sorption of dissolved fraction on particles trapped in  
23 biological reactor. Volatile molecules like BTEXs and HVOCs have also high removals (> 70%) in both systems which  
24 are intensively aerated allowing transfers to atmosphere by air stripping. However, tetrachloroethylene is always  
25 detected in BF effluent contrary to CAS but it can be explained by a significantly higher inlet concentration. This is in  
26 accordance with the domestic origin of wastewater in the BF WWTP which classically contains high levels due to dry  
27 cleaning equipment discharges (Lohman 2002). Biodegradation can be highlighted by the decrease of dissolved  
28 concentration observed in both processes for some biodegradable compounds (DEHP, some PAHs, PBDEs and  
29 alkylphenols). Decrease of dissolved concentration for alkylphenols, like nonylphenols (NP), octylphenol (OP) or  
30 nonylphenol monoethoxylate (NP1EO), is clearly higher in CAS. In fact, other studies displayed the biodegradation of  
31 these compounds: PAHs (McNally et al. 1998), alkylphenols (Bertanza et al. 2011, Clara et al. 2007, Ying et al. 2002)  
32 PBDEs (Langford et al. 2007) and DEHP (Bergé et al. 2013, Fauser et al. 2003). Finally, the three main removal  
33 mechanisms (biodegradation, sorption and volatilization) identified in the literature (Byrns 2001, Cirja 2008, Mozo et  
34 al. 2012) for biological treatments are highlighted by this study.

35  
36 Even if globally both biological units exhibit comparable efficiencies, some compounds are slightly better removed by  
37 CAS like Zn, 4-chloro-3-methylphenol, alkylphenols and PBDEs (to a lesser extent). Alkylphenols better removal by  
38 CAS, confirmed by a higher dissolved concentration decrease, could be explained by biodegradation and sorption  
39 mechanisms. In fact, a higher biodegradation could be expected in CAS, regarding its higher HRT, as well as a higher  
40 sorption on activated sludge flocs than on biofilm due to the physico-chemical properties of biomass (floc size and  
41 morphology, specific surface, etc.). Organic pollutants like DEHP, alkylphenols or PBDEs may be potentially more  
42 sorbed on activated sludge similarly to metals for which it was observed (Tian et al. 2006, Wang et al. 2010). Specific  
43 studies comparing sorption capacity of biofilms and activated sludge flocs should be held to validate this hypothesis.  
44 However, (Clara et al. 2007) showed that biodegradation is the main removal pathway for alkylphenols in CAS  
45 WWTPs, representing more than 85% of the removal while sorption onto sludge represents only 15% of it. This tends to  
46 validate the hypothesis of a biodegradation enhancement by CAS compared to BF.

#### 47 48 Comparison of WWTP performances

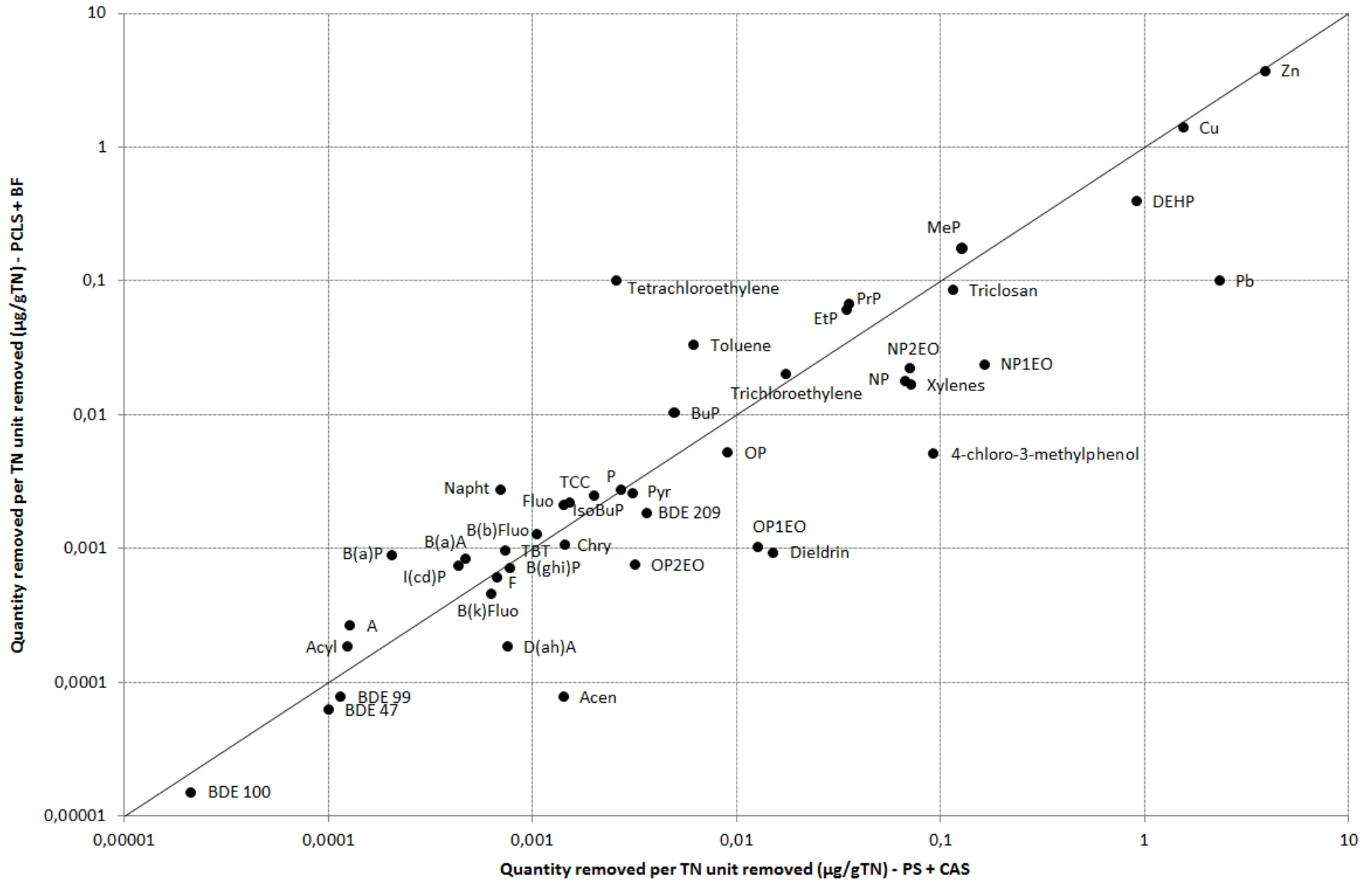
49  
50 According to the biological treatment chosen, requirements for clarified effluents vary. CAS needs the presence of  
51 biodegradable carbon in influent for denitrification whereas BF requires a quite low level of TSS to avoid operational  
52 problems like fouling. That is why the more intense unit regarding particles removal (PCLS) precedes BF as primary  
53 treatment while the less intense unit (PS) precedes CAS. Given this, the comparison of treatment systems (primary +  
54 biological treatments) gives different information about efficiency and appears more relevant than simple comparison of  
55 units. The global performances can be evaluated conventionally (in %), but in this study a more relevant method is also  
56 used. Actually, the quantity of pollutant removed per unit of nitrogen removed was calculated (Figure 4 and Figure 5).  
57 Moreover, the choice of nitrogen as normalization parameter rather than COD or TSS is logical since the treatment of  
58 nitrogen in water implies important modifications on processes (biomass nature and diversity, hydraulic and sludge  
59 retention times) in comparison to WWTPs treating carbonaceous and particulate pollution. This parameter represents  
60 then a good indicator of the global operation of current WWTPs. Thus, quantity of each micropollutant removed

1 between RW and TW was calculated and divided by the quantity of nitrogen removed in the process. About 48.8  
2 mgN/L of TN are removed by PS + CAS while PCLS + BF allows about 37.2 mgN/L of TN removal (Table 1).



1  
2  
3

Figure 4. Micropollutant removal normalized to nitrogen removal in both WWTPs



1  
2  
3

Figure 5. Comparison of both WWTPs efficiencies for micropollutants regarding removal normalized to nitrogen removal

1 According to  
2 Figure 4, variations of results are quite weak in both WWTPs except for pesticides which are never removed. Even so,  
3 some pollutant removals exhibit higher variations, which may originate from high RW concentration variations (Pb and  
4 xylenes) or from inherent variations in removal mechanisms (acenaphthene - Acen and acenaphthylene - Acyl). Finally,  
5 variations of removal seem slightly higher for PS + CAS than PCLS + BF, resulting from higher variations in PS than  
6 PCLS (stabilization effect of chemicals). This representation allows observing that when 1 g of TN is eliminated, a  
7 removal of 0.5-1 µg of DEHP, 0.02-0.07 µg of NP, 0.07-0.12 µg of TCS, 0.1-0.3 µg of MeP or 3.7-3.9 µg of Zn could  
8 be expected in such WWTPs. To our knowledge, this kind of information is not available yet but can be used to predict  
9 pollutant removal in WWTPs.

10 Globally, both treatment systems have similar performances regarding removals of BTEXs/HVOCs, PAHs, metals (Cu  
11 and Zn), pesticides (poorly removed), biocides and TBT. Thus, comparable efficiencies are obtained for the majority of  
12 compounds despite a higher compactness and a much lower HRT for PCLS + BF. This is confirmed by Figure 5 where  
13 almost all mean removals are distributed along the  $y = x$  straight line (same µg of pollutant removed for 1 g of TN  
14 removed). This confirms previous observations (Göbel et al. 2007, Joss et al. 2004) reporting comparable efficiencies  
15 (in %) between CAS and fixed bed WWTPs for some well removed micropollutants. Moreover, both WWTPs have a  
16 very high and comparable efficiency for TSS, resulting in a high and comparable removal of particulate fraction of  
17 micropollutants, which is the main pathway for the more hydrophobic compounds.

18  
19  
20 Some pollutants are better removed by one or another system. Overall, PS + CAS seems allowing a better removal per  
21 nitrogen removed for alkylphenols, DEHP, PBDEs, 4-chloro-3-methylphenol and Pb, while tetrachloroethylene and  
22 parabens (slight difference) seem to be better eliminated by PCLS + BF. Differences for tetrachloroethylene and Pb can  
23 be explained by their significant difference of RW concentration in both WWTPs (Supplementary data - Table 1). For  
24 parabens, a slightly better performance of PCLS + BF is observed since a slightly higher quantity of TN (Table 1) was  
25 removed within this WWTP during the campaigns performed. In contrary, the better removal of alkylphenols, PBDEs,  
26 DEHP and 4-chloro-3-methylphenol by PS + CAS system comes from removal mechanisms. As efficiencies over TSS  
27 in both WWTPs are equivalent (> 95%, Table 1), the difference tends to highlight the better removal of dissolved  
28 fraction (dissolved + colloidal) of pollutants in the CAS unit, as previously stated.

29  
30 Actually, dissolved pollutants can be removed by different mechanisms, like sorption on sludge or biodegradation. As  
31 exposed in the literature, and more especially for CAS, biodegradation can be affected by different parameters like HRT  
32 or concentration, diversity and activity of biomass (McAdam et al. 2010a). Biomass characteristics are strongly affected  
33 by conditions required for the growth of nitrifying biomass (HRT and SRT), leading to a better dissolved pollutant  
34 removal than other biological conditions (Clara et al. 2005, McAdam et al. 2010a). Nitrification is then a crucial step for  
35 dissolved micropollutants removal and total nitrification allows higher removal than partial nitrification as it was  
36 observed in literature (Margot et al. 2011). In the total nitrification configuration, biodegradation is enhanced (Clara  
37 et al. 2005, Margot et al. 2011) especially through stimulation of micropollutant cometabolism (Carballa et al. 2011,  
38 Fernandez-Fontaina et al. 2012). Biomass is affected by SRT which increases the adaptation and diversity of  
39 microorganism (Cirja et al. 2008). (Clara et al. 2005) reported a critical value of 10-15 days for the removal of the  
40 majority of biodegradable compounds by CAS, which is in the same range as SRT required for nitrification (at least 15-  
41 18 days, (Carballa et al. 2011)). Furthermore, HRT has a proven impact on removal of biodegradable compounds as it  
42 drives the reaction time (Fernandez-Fontaina et al. 2012, Vieno et al. 2007).

43  
44 In our case, both PS + CAS and PCLS + BF globally achieve comparable removal of classical wastewater quality  
45 parameters such as TSS and TN (Table 1). In particular, they both operate in the most favorable configuration, total  
46 nitrification. Nevertheless, HRT in PS + CAS is more than 20 times higher than in PCLS + BF, which theoretically and  
47 for the above mentioned raisons would lead to highly different results. Contrariwise, results for biodegradable  
48 compounds previously cited (alkylphenols, PBDEs, DEHP and 4-chloro-3-methylphenol) are not hugely different  
49 between both WWTPs, even if the CAS WWTP is slightly more efficient, displaying the existence of a process  
50 balancing the very short HRT. The difference of biomass structure, which could allow a higher intensiveness of  
51 biodegradation in the case of a biofilm, may be this process, but specific measurements are required to demonstrate this  
52 assumption.

53  
54 The slight difference of efficiency in favor of the the CAS WWTP can then be logically explained by the HRT, as  
55 observed in the literature for pharmaceuticals (Carballa et al. 2011, Fernandez-Fontaina et al. 2012, Joss et al. 2008) and  
56 alkylphenols (McAdam et al. 2010b) within different CAS WWTPs, or to a difference of sorption capacity. (Mahendran  
57 et al. 2012) have compared activated sludge flocs and biofilm from a unique water treatment biological reactor and they  
58 have shown that flocs were more hydrophobic and negatively charged, in addition to their higher quantity of  
59 extracellular polymeric substances (EPS). EPS plays a crucial role in the removal of micropollutants as they represent  
60 the main sorption pathway thanks to binding sites they contain (Sheng et al. 2010). These observations tend to indicate a

1 probable higher propensity to sorb on activated sludge flocs than on biofiltration biofilm for micropollutants. This could  
2 lead to a higher biodegradation as a part of micropollutants are degraded when sorbed to the biomass, depending on the  
3 compounds (Pomiès et al. 2013).

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

9 This study has investigated the differences in removal of priority and emerging pollutants between two main WWTP  
10 treatment systems. PS + CAS represents the most common system, well studied and known whereas PCLS + BF is still  
11 widely unknown concerning micropollutants despite its practical increasing interest (compactness, modularity and  
12 intensiveness).

14 As concern the two primary treatments, coagulation/flocculation offers a real gain in terms of micropollutants removal.  
15 This gain occurs mainly on particulate pollutants by the way of TSS removal, even if a slight improvement seems to be  
16 possible for some groups of soluble pollutants, removed with the colloids. Despite its existence, this effect is not  
17 obvious and clear because of the high variations of results. Jar test and laboratory test are maybe requested to really  
18 demonstrate the impact of coagulant and flocculant. The partitioning of pollutants in the dissolved phase, between  
19 colloidal and soluble fraction, has also to be better studied to characterize the precise effect of coagulation/flocculation  
20 on micropollutants. BF appears to be able to remove most of micropollutants as efficiently as CAS in percentage. Yet,  
21 some pollutants are slightly better removed by CAS (alkylphenols, metals, some PAHs, 4-chloro-3-methylphenol and  
22 PBDEs) due to better biodegradation and/or sorption.

24 Considering the treatment systems, both configurations seem as efficient but removals between primary and secondary  
25 treatments vary. This tendency is even more obvious when removals are represented per nitrogen removed; both  
26 systems are globally comparable at equivalent nitrogen removal. Some biodegradable compounds are rather slightly  
27 better removed by PS + CAS thanks to higher HRT and flocs characteristics. This normalization could appear relevant  
28 in the future since WWTPs are generally designed to treat nitrogen, so the knowing of efficiency for this parameter  
29 could allow estimating efficiency for micropollutants. Removal depends on influent concentration as all molecules with  
30 comparable concentrations in raw water are removed comparably in quantity, but also on nitrification rate. The  
31 development of such approaches could be useful for WWTP managers.

33 Finally, in the water discharged, most of compounds are not detected or just promptly. In particular, many compounds  
34 detected in raw water are never detected in treated water, showing the positive effect of wastewater treatments on many  
35 micropollutants. Despite that, some environmentally harmful species are still present at a µg/L level, like metals,  
36 pesticides, DEHP or chloroalkanes, because of their high influent concentration or the weakness of treatments on them  
37 (pesticides). Although the majority of compounds are below EQS in discharges, TBT, BDE 209 and chloroalkanes are  
38 found at concentrations significantly higher than their EQS (factor 5-10) while diuron, chloroform, NP and OP are very  
39 close from them. This issue incites to reinforce the idea of the existing installations improvement and/or addition of a  
40 tertiary treatment to complete their elimination.

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