

Journal of Human, Environment, and Health Promotion

Journal homepage: www.zums.ac.ir/jhehp

Neighbor Presence of Plant Growth-promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) and Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi (AMF) Can Increase Sorghum Phytoremediation Efficiency in a Soil Treated with Pb Polluted Cow Manure



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ARTICLE INFO

Article type: Original article

Article history: Received: 16 May 2019 Revised: 22 June 2019 Accepted: 18 August 2019

DOI: 10.29252/jhehp.5.4.2

Keywords: Lead Phytoremediation Pollution Environmental studies

ABSTRACT

Background: The present study aimed to evaluate the effects of PGPR and AMF on the changes in sorghum phytoremediation efficiency in the soil amended with lead (Pb)-polluted cow manure.

Methods: Treatments consisted of applying two rates of Pb $[0 (Pb_0) \text{ and } 800 (Pb_{800}) \text{ mg/kg}]$ polluted cow manure $[0 (C_0) \text{ and } 30 (C_{30}) \text{ t/ha}]$, two levels of AMF [without (AMF-) and with (AMF+)] and PGPR (without (PGPR-) and with (PGPR+) inoculation. Pseudomonas sp. R9 was considered as a PGPR bacteria. The plant used in this experiment was sorghum. Plant Pb concentration was measured using atomic absorption spectroscopy.

Results: The highest plant Pb concentration belonged to the cultivated plant in the soil treated with 30 t/ha Pb-polluted cow manure, while the lowest that was observed in the soil without amending cow manure in the absence of PGPR or AMF. The presence of AMF significantly increased the Pb translocation value and sorghum phytoremediation efficiency by 8% and 13.4%, respectively.

Conclusion: According to the results, the inoculated plant with PGPR and AMF had positive effects on increasing Pb phytoremediation efficiency that, which is notable in environmental studies. However, the effects of soil chemical properties on Pb phytoremediation efficiency cannot be overlooked.

1. Introduction

The appearance of various modern industries, including chemical fertilizer and pesticide industries, and the uncontrolled use of these agrochemicals have largely contributed to extensive heavy metal contamination in agricultural soils, thereby causing severe environmental pollution and threatening human health. Heavy metals such as lead (Pb) and cadmium (Cd) are considered to be particularly problematic in this regard since they are persistent in nature, non-biodegradable, and could bioaccumulate in living organisms and plants [1]. These elements enter the environment mainly through anthropogenic sources, such as smelting processes, mining, fuel production, and industrial effluents [2]. Therefore, use of proper approached to the reduction of heavy metal availability is essential. Conventional remediation approaches for contaminated soils, sediments, and groundwater are based on the technologies that have been developed over the past two decades [3], including a wide variety of physical, chemical, and thermal treatment alternatives and their combinations, as well as engineering



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strategies to accelerate or reduce mass transport in the contaminated matrix. The success of these highly engineered technologies is attributable to their relative insensitivity to heterogeneity in the contaminant matrix, their effectiveness over a wide range of oxygen concentrations, pH, pressure, temperature, and osmotic potentials, and their ability to produce relatively rapid contaminant mitigation rates [4]. Several techniques are currently available for the removal of heavy metals, such as ion exchange, solvent extraction, oxidation reduction, reverse osmosis, phytoremediation, membrane separation, and precipitation. Among these methods, phytoremediation is the most cost-efficient and involves the 'green technology' that only exploits living plants for the removal of heavy metals from soil and water [5]. In this method, metals are taken up into shoots and harvested, so that they could be removed from the polluted area [6].

The applications of phytoremediation could be classified based on the processes impacting the mitigation of contaminants in the plant-soil system; these classifications include degradation, extraction, immobilization, containment or a combination of these processes. Phytoremediation is defined as the use of plants to destroy, sequester, and remove toxicants from the environment. It is notable that phytoremediation is associated with some limitations, such as the emergence of rhizospheric microorganisms as an acceptable agronomic remediation technology [7].

The interaction between plants and microbes in the rhizosphere plays a key role in enhancing the efficacy of phytoremediation through a process known as bio-assisted phytoremediation. The microorganisms that are present in soil and around plant roots are referred to as plant growthpromoting rhizobacteria (PGPR) and arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF), which use various mechanisms to promote plant growth and minimize stress [8]. Furthermore, PGPR and AMF contribute to plant growth enhancement and the bioremediation of contaminated soil through the sequestering or degradation of heavy metals and other toxicants. Therefore, bioremediation is a viable option to destroy or render various contaminants harmless based on natural biological activity [9].

PGPR and AMF assist phytoremediation directly or indirectly through several mechanisms, such as increased nutrient uptake, suppression of pathogens by producing antibiotics, siderophores or bacterial/fungal antagonistic substances (e.g., hydrogen cyanide), phytohormone production (e.g., indoleacetic acid), and nitrogen fixation [10]. Cow manure is also used as an organic amendment to affect plant growth and increase phytoremediation efficiency [11].

The present study aimed to evaluate the effects of PGPR and AMF on increasing sorghum phytoremediation efficiency in the soil treated with Pb polluted cow manure.

2. Materials and Methods

To investigate the effect of PGPR and AMF on sorghum phytoremediation efficiency in the soil treated with Pb-polluted cow manure, non-Pb-polluted soil with low organ carbon was collected from the surface layer of soil (0-15 cm) in Shahr-e Kord, Iran. Table 1 shows the selected physico-chemical properties of the soil sample.

The cow manure used in this experiment was eightmonth decomposed and contained high concentrations of plant nutrients and organic matters, which could be used on farmlands as a fertilizer. Table 1 shows the selected chemical properties of the organic amendments.

This research was conducted as a factorial experiment in the layout of randomized complete block design in the three triplicates. Treatments consisted of applying two levels of Pb (0 (Pb₀) and 800 (Pb₈₀₀) mg/kg) polluted cow manure [0 (C₀) and 30 (C₃₀) t/ha], two levels of AMF [without (AMF-) and with (AMF+)] and PGPR [without (PGPR-) and with (PGPR+)] inoculation. It is notable that Pseudomonas sp R9 was considered as a PGPR bacteria.

The cow manure used in this experiment was spiked with Pb(NO₃)₂ as a Pb salt at the rates of 0 and 800 mg Pb/kg and incubated for two weeks. Following that, the soil sample was amended with Pb-polluted cow manure and incubated for two weeks, and placed in five-kilogram pots.

To obtain the AMF inoculum, soil samples were collected from around the roots of sorghum plants grown in the studied soil before starting of the experiment. To this aim after growth duration the roots of plants together with the soils around it has taken and crashed completely to use as AMF inoculum. We used this method to have indigenous soil AMF as it has been reported that indigenous AMF species can improve better plant growth and nutrient uptake than non-indigenous species due to their better adaption to the soil condition [12]. Indigenous AMF ecotypes result from long period adaptation to soils with extreme characteristics [13,14]. Following that the experimental pots filled with 5 Kg of the treated soil and then half of that inoculated with AMF. For AM fungus inoculations 20 g of inoculum was placed in a layer at a depth of 3 cm from the soil surface.

The bacteria used in this study were previously isolated from sorghum rhizosphere, identified, and tested. Thereafter, the seeds of sorghum (Pegah cultivar) were surface-sterilized in 70% ethanol for one minute followed by dipping seeds in 5% sodium hypochlorite solution for 10 min and rinsed several times with sterilized distilled water, inoculated by immersion in the appropriate PGPR suspension (at 109 CFU mL⁻¹) for 2 h on a rotary shaker at 80 rpm, air dried [15], and immediately were transferred to the treated soil. Ten seeds were sown in each pot and thinned to five plants per pot after the germination of the first leaf. After 60 days, plants were harvested and the plants Pb concentration was measured using atomic absorption spectroscopy (AAS). DTPA-extractable Pb in soil (soil Pb availability) was measured according to method described by the Lindsay and Norvell (1978) [16]. Dry ash extraction method was used to determine plant heavy metal concentration. Accordingly, two g of each plant sample was put in a porcelain crucible.

The samples were placed in an oven for 2 hours at 550°C. After that, 5 ml of HCl 2N was added to the samples. Then, the samples were filtered and the plant heavy metals concentration was determined using the atomic absorption spectrophotometer (AAS) [17].

The soil pH in various treatments was measured in the suspension of 1:5 (w/v), and soil phosphorous concentration was determined using the method proposed by Mkhabela et al. (2005)[18].

Characteristic	Unit	A	Amount		
		Soil	Cow Manure		
Soil texture		loamy			
рН		7.1	7.2		
EC	dS/m	0.7	6.8		
Soil Pb availability	mg kg ⁻¹	1.2	0.3		
Soil Cd availability	mg kg ⁻¹	0.1	0.2		
Soil As availability	mg kg ⁻¹	0.2	0.1		
Organic carbon	%	0.3	30.8		
CaCO ₃	%	8%			

Pb translocation factor (TF) was calculated using the following formula [19]:

$TF = H_{shoot}/H_{root}$

Where H $_{\rm shoot}$ and H $_{\rm root}$ are heavy metal concentrations in plant shoot and root.

The soil microbial respiration was measured as evolved CO_2 . For this purpose, samples of each treatment were incubated for three days at 26 °C in 250-ml glass containers closed with rubber stoppers. The evolving CO_2 was trapped in NaOH solution and the excess in alkali was then titrated with HCl [20].

2.1. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were calculated according to the ANOVA procedure. The differences between means were evaluated using the least significant difference (LSD) test. The P = 0.05 value was considered to determine the significant difference.

3. Result and Discussion

According to the obtained results, PGPR could increase soil nutrient availability by lowering the soil pH (Figure 1-a), and the soil phosphorous availability increased 1.8 times (Figure 1-b) in the presences of PGPR. However, the presence of AMF had no significant effect on the soil pH (Figure 1-b). On the other hand, the interactive effects of PGPR and AMF could significantly increase the soil nutrient availability (e.g., phosphorous) (Figure 1-b), thereby improving the plant biomass. According to the findings of the current research, the highest plant phosphorous concentration belonged to the plant cultivated in the soil containing both AMF and PGPR (Table 2).

According to the results of the current research, the presence of PGPR had more significant effects compared to AMF (Figure 1-b) as PGPR more significantly increased the soil phosphorous (38%) compared to AMF. In a study in this regard, Lin et al. assessed the effects of PGPR on corn growth with fertility sources, concluding that PGPR had significant effects on corn plant growth; this is consistent with our findings. However, the role of soil properties and vegetative growth stages in PGPR efficiency cannot be overlooked [21].

In another research, Namli et al. (2017) investigated the effects of phosphorus solubilizing bacteria on some soil properties, wheat yield, and nutrient contents, concluding that the application of PGPR with lower amounts of chemical fertilizers could reduce the use of chemical fertilizers, while it also has the potential to enhance soil health in the long run [22].

 Table 2: Effects of PGPR, AMF, and applying Pb-polluted cow manure on plant phosphorous concentration (%)

	Cow Manure (t/ha)										
Pb		PGF	PR ⁺			PGPR ⁻					
Concentration	AN	1F +	* AMF-		AN	AMF *		AMF-			
	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30			
0	0.43 ^g	0.88 ^a	0.35 ^h	0.72 ^b	0.30 ⁱ	0.65 ^d	0.27 ^j	0.61 ^{e*}			
800	0.35 ^h	0.72 ^b	0.26 ^j	0.68 ^c	0.23 ^k	0.60 ^e	0.18 ^k	0.51 ^f			

*Data with the similar letters are not significant (P= 0.05).



Figure 1: Effect of AMF and PGPR on soil pH (a) and soil phosphorous (b), columns with the similar letters are not significant (P = 0.05)

Table 3: Effect of PGPR, AMF and applying Pb-polluted cow manure on plant Pb concentration and Pb TF value

	Cow Manure (t/ha)										
Pb		PGP	PR ⁺			PGPR-					
Concentration	AMF *		AN	AMF ⁻		AMF ⁺		ΛF⁻			
	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30			
	Soil Pb concentration										
0	ND *	ND									
800	35.9 ^b	37.3ª	30.1 ^d	32.4 ^c	28.5 ^e	30.6 ^d	20.3 ^g	24.2f **			
Root Pb concentration											
0	ND *	ND									
800	66.1 ^b	69.1 ^a	59.3 ^d	62.1 ^c	52.6 ^f	55.3 ^e	46.8 ^h	50.5g **			
			Shoot	Pb concentration	on						
0	ND *	ND									
800	46.9 ^b	55.2ª	39.7 ^d	45.9°	28.9 ^f	35.9 ^e	23.4 ^h	27.7 ^g			
Pb TF value											
0	NC *	NC									
800	0.716 ^b	0.803 ^a	0.672 ^d	0.749 ^c	0.551 ^f	0.658 ^e	0.502 ^g	0.554 ^f			

*ND: not detectable by atomic absorption spectroscopy (limit of detection is equal to 0.1 ppm), *NC: not calculated, ** data with the similar letters in each parameter are not significant (*P*= 0.05).

In the present study, the highest soil Pb availability was observed in the soil amended with 30 t/ha Pb enriched cow manure in the presence of PGPR and AMF, while the lowest that has belonged to the soil without amended without receiving cow manure in the absence of PGPR and AMF.

In addition, soil Pb availability significantly increased in the soil amended with 30 t/ha of the cow manure in the presences of PGPR (23.1%) (Table 3); this could be attributed to the effects of PGPR on the soil pH. Therefore, it could be concluded that the presence of PGPR significantly lowered the soil pH (0.2 unit) as opposed to the control soil. Previous studies have also denoted increased soil Pb availability due to the reduction of soil pH [16, 23]. It is also notable that the primary concentrations of the heavy metals in the cow manure were lower than the standard values suggested by the US Environmental Protection Agency [24].

In a study in this regard, Abdelkrim et al. (2018) evaluated the effects of Pb-resistant PGPR inoculation on plant growth and Pb uptake by Lathyrus sativus, concluding that PGPR inoculation had significant potential to improve the phytoremediation of Pb-polluted soils; this finding is in congruence with the results of the present study. Furthermore, the mentioned study indicated the Pb uptake was affected by the incubation time, demonstrating that Pb accumulation was associated with cell growth and enhancement of the cell biomass [25]. According to these results, the potential to enhance Pb²⁺ retention in the selected PGPR was not only due to cell-surface binding, but it also was due to intracellular accumulation [25]. Similar results have also been reported by Jebara et al. (2015) [26], denoting that PGPR microorganisms may reduce soil pH and increase soil Pb availability through releasing organic acids (e.g., carboxylic acid) [27].

According to the current research, the simple effects of the presence of AMF and PGPR on the root Pb concentration was significant. Moreover, the root Pb concentration was significantly higher in the presence of PGPR compared to AMF (Figure 2-a). However, the highest root Pb concentration belonged to the soil amended with Pbenriched cow manure in the presence of PGPR and AMF, while the lowest concentration was observed in the soil without Pb-enriched cow manure in the absence of PGPR and AMF (Table 3).

According to the results of the present study, applying 30t/ha Pb-enriched cow manure significantly increased the root Pb concentration by 12.4 % in the presence of AMF and

PGPR. However, our findings indicated that plant Pb concentration was affected by the symbiosis type, as the root Pb concentration was higher in the presence of PGPR compared to the AMF inoculation. The Pb resistance of the plants was also higher in the presence of PGPR compared to the AMF-inoculated plants as the highest plant biomass (data was not shown) was observed in the plant inoculated with PGPR as opposed to AMF. Their synergistic effects positively influenced the plant biomass, thereby increasing the plant Pb uptake.

In a similar research, Sadaghiani et al. (2016) assessed the effects of PGPR and AMF on the growth and some physiological parameters of *Onopordum acanthium* in a Cd-contaminated soil, concluding that PGPR and AMF inoculation could be sustained and promoted plant growth in phytoremediation processes [28]; this is in line with the results of the present study. In general, PGPR could increase plant growth in contaminated soils through improving nutrient availability (especially soil phosphorus) and producing growth hormones and root exudate [29]. A similar trend was also observed for the shoot concentration of Pb in the current research (Table 3).

In the present study, the highest Pb TF has belonged to the soil amended with 30 t/ha Pb-enriched cow manure in the presence of AMF and PGPR, while the lowest value was observed in the soil without the cow manure in the absence of PGPR or AMF inoculation (Table 3). On the other hand, the Pb TF value significantly increased in the presence of PGPR as opposed to AMF inoculation, which could be attributed to the greater role of PGPR inoculation in plant resistance to Pb stress. In this regard, Zaefarian et al. (2012) investigated the effectiveness of PGPR in the facilitation of Pb and nutrient uptake by *littleseed canarygrass*, reporting that the Pb TF value was >1 in the inoculated treatments with in the in the soil Pb concentration range of 200-400 mg/kg. However, the findings of the mentioned research indicated that in the Pb-polluted soil (> 800 mg/kg), the TF value was less than one even in the inoculated treatments [30]. Despite the contradictory reports regarding the effects of Pb toxicity on the plants Pb TF value [31,32], most of the findings have indicated that PGPG and AMF inoculation could reduce abiotic stress, such as heavy metal toxicity [33].

In the current research, applying 30 t/ha cow manure increased the Pb TF value (0.1 unit) in the presence of AMF

and PGPR. Therefore, it could be concluded that the cow manure could increase the plant resistance to Pb-induced stress through increasing the plant nutrient uptake, which in turn increased the Pb TF value. On the same note, the presence of AMF or PGPR could also increase the soil nutrient availability, thereby enhancing the plant biomass (data was not shown). Some studies have demonstrated that soil contamination with heavy metals prevents plant growth by decreasing nutrient uptake (e.g., nitrogen and iron).

According to the study by Zaefarian et al. (2012) high concentrations of Pb in soil could significantly reduce the nitrogen content of plant roots [30]. In addition, rhizobacteria were reported to produce various growthpromoting hormones (e.g., auxins, gibberellins, and B vitamins), which stimulated root exudate production [30]. Similarly, Abou-Shanab et al. (2006) reported that bacterial inoculants could affect the nickel uptake by Alyssum murale from the soils containing low, moderate, and high levels of nickel [34].

In the present study, the highest plant phosphorous concentration belonged to the plants cultivated in the soil treated with 30 t/ha of the non-polluted cow manure in the presence of AMF and PGPR (Table 2), while the lowest concentration was observed in the soil without the cow manure in the presence of PGPR or AMF. On the other hand, applying 30 t/ha of the non-polluted cow manure significantly increased the plant phosphorous concentration in the soil non-inoculated and inoculated with PGPR and AMF (29.3% and 24.1%, respectively). Soil amending with organic residues (e.g., cow manure) could influence phosphorus dynamics through competition low-molecular-weight between organic acids and phosphates for sorption sites, which often favors the adsorption of organic acids and delays phosphorus adsorption [35]. However, Pb contaminated cow manure could increase plant nutrient availability.

According to the current research, increasing the Pb concentration in the cow manure from zero to 800 mg/kg caused the plant phosphorous concentration to decrease by 18.4% in the absence of PGPR and AMF. The previously reported interactive effects of Pb and soil phosphorus are consistent with our findings [36].

In the present study, the highest soil microbial respiration was observed in the soil amended with 30 t/ha of the nonpolluted cow manure in the presence of PGPR and AMF, while the lowest rate belonged to the soil without the cow manure in the absence of PGPR or AMF (Table 4).

In another research, Yolcu et al. (2011) investigated the effects of PGPR and organic amendments on the yield and quality propitiates of Italian ryegrass in semi-arid conditions, concluding that the presence of PGPR and organic amendments could affect the plant biomass owing to their interactive effects [37]. However, Pb pollution may decrease the soil microbial respiration as applying 30 t/ha of the Pb-polluted cow manure reduced the soil microbial respiration by 9.1% in the present study.

In a similar study, Shi et al. (2017) assessed the effects of Cd pollution on soil microbial activities, reporting that heavy metals adversely affected soil microbial respiration. Although the mentioned study indicated that soil heavy metals variably affected soil microbial activity, the obtained results indicated that at lower Cd concentrations, soil microbes became resistant to heavy metals [38]; this is in line with our findings. According to the results of the present study, although increased soil contamination with Pb reduced microbial population, soil microbial respiration remained higher compared to the control soil samples.

According to the current research, applying the organic amendment significantly increased the soil microbial respiration, as well as the plant Pb TF value. Therefore, it could be concluded that the applied cow manure significantly improved the soil and plant nutrient availability, thereby increasing the plant biomass (data was not shown). On the other hand, plant root exudates (e.g., amino acids) may enhance the soil microbial activity, thereby increasing plant resistance to the stress induced by heavy metals. However, the synergetic effects of PGPR and AMF on the improvement of such resistance cannot be overlooked. Therefore, it could be inferred that increased plant resistance to abiotic stress due to higher soil microbial activity could also enhance phytoremediation efficiency. It is notable that heavy metal concentrations could determine the soil microbial activity as Osborne et al. (2010) reported that PGPR strains were able to survive up to 300 mg/l of Cd [39].

In the current research, the simple effects of the presence of PGPR and AMF were significant, as the plant Fe concentration significantly increased in the soil containing PGPR and AMF (15% and 11.2%, respectively) (Figure 2-b).



Figure 2: The simple effects of AMF and PGPR on root Pb (a) and root Fe concentration (b)

 Table 4: Effect of PGPR, AMF and applying Pb-polluted cow manure on soil microbial respiration (mg C- CO₂/kg soil)

	Cow Manure (t/ha)										
Pb		PG	PR⁺			PGPR-					
concentration	AN	1F ⁺	AMF ⁻		AMF ⁺		AN	AMF ⁻			
_	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30			
0	3.5 ^{h*}	8.4 ^a	3.3 ⁱ	7.9 ^c	3.2 ^j	7.5 ^e	3.0 ¹	7.0 ^f			
800	3.3 ⁱ	8.1 ^b	3.1 ^k	7.5 ^e	2.9 ^m	7.7 ^d	2.8 ⁿ	6.4 ^g			
*D	1 1	and all of the set (D	0.05)								

*Data with the similar letters are not significant (P=0.05)

Table 5: Effect of PGPR, AMF and applying Pb-polluted cow manure on plant Fe concentration (mg/kg)

	Cow Manure (t/ha)									
Pb		P	GPR+			PGPR-				
concentration	AN	1F * AMF-			AMF *		AMF-			
-	0	30	0	30	0	30	0	30		
0	12.4 ^{h*}	40.1 ^a	11.3 ^j	35.7°	10.5 ¹	33.1 ^d	9.8 ^m	32.1 ^e		
800	11.9 ⁱ	37.2 ^b	10.8 ^k	33.2 ^d	9.7 ^m	30.1 ^f	9.1 ⁿ	25.4 ^g		

*Data with the similar letters are not significant (*P*= 0.05)

The highest Fe concentration belonged to the plants cultivated in the soil amended with 30 t/ha of the non-polluted cow manure containing AMF and PGPR, while the lowest concentration belonged to the soil without the cow manure in the absence of AMF or PGPR (Table 5).

According to the findings of the current research, soil pollution with Pb had significant effects on the plant Fe concentration as the increasing of the soil Pb concentration decreased the plant Fe concentration. In another study, Tabarteh et al. (2017) investigated the effects of enriched cow manure with converter sludge on the bio-availability of Fe in a Pb-polluted soil, concluding that increased soil Pb pollution could significantly decrease soil and plant Fe availability [40].

Previous studies have denoted the interactive effects of heavy metals on nutrients such as Fe or Zn [23], which is consistent with our findings. It is notable that although PGPR and AMF reduced the plant Pb concentration by increasing its Fe availability (interactive effect), the role of soil microorganism activities in increasing plant Pb resistance and phytoremediation efficiency cannot be overlooked. The significant improvement in the plant phytoremediation efficiency in the inoculated confirmed to the non-inoculated samples confirmed this finding.

4. Conclusion

According to the results, the presence of PGPR and AMF significantly increased the plant Pb efficiency. The highest plant Pb TF value was observed in the soil treated with 30 t/ha of the Pb-polluted cow manure containing AMF and PGPR. Similar results were also observed in terms of soil microbial respiration, indicating that the chemical properties of soil played a pivotal role in the changes in the plant resistance to abiotic stress (e.g., heavy metals). On the other hand, the presence of PGPR and AMF significantly increased the plant nutrient availability, thereby affecting the plant growth. Therefore, it could be concluded that increased plant growth could also enhance plant Pb phytoremediation, which is a positive impact on environmental pollution. However, the role of other physicochemical properties of soil and plant physiology in phytoremediation efficiency cannot be overlooked. In conclusion, it is recommended that the specific role of other microorganism activities in plant heavy metal phytoremediation efficiency be assessed in further

investigations, in which the findings of the current research could also be beneficial.

Authors' Contributions

This article was carried out by all the authors. A.H.B., and A.A., designed the manuscript and contributed to carry out data collection and data analysis and A.H.B., and A.A., wrote the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

Hereby, we extend our gratitude to the Islamic Azad University, Arak Branch for assisting us in this research.

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How to cite: Baghaie AH, Aghilizefreei A. Neighbor Presence of Plant Growth-promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR) and Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi (AMF) Can Increase Sorghum Phytoremediation Efficiency in a Soil Treated with Pb Polluted Cow Manure. J Hum Environ Health Promot. 2019; 5(4): 153-9.