

20

21 **Abstract**

22 The nitrogen (N) cycle represents one of the most well studied systems yet the
 23 taxonomic diversity of the organisms that contribute to it is mostly unknown, or
 24 linked to poorly characterized microbial groups. While progress has allowed
 25 functional groups to be refined, they still rely on *a priori* knowledge of enzymes
 26 involved, and the assumption of functional conservation, with little connection to the
 27 role the transformation plays for specific organisms. Here, we use soil microcosms to
 28 test the impact of N deposition on prokaryotic communities. By combining chemical,
 29 genomic and transcriptomic analysis we are able to identify and link changes in
 30 community structure to specific organisms catalyzing given chemical reactions. Urea
 31 deposition led to a decrease in prokaryotic richness, and a shift in community
 32 composition. This was driven by replacement of stable native populations, which
 33 utilize energy from N-linked redox reactions for physiological maintenance, with fast
 34 responding populations that use this energy for growth. This model can be used to
 35 predict response to N disturbances and allows us to identify putative life strategies of
 36 different functional, and taxonomic, groups thus providing insights into how they
 37 persist in ecosystems by niche differentiation.

38

39

40 **Introduction**

41 Modern microbiology techniques have given us unprecedented access to the
42 microbial world (Spiro 2012; Rinke *et al.* 2013), yet soil microbial communities
43 remain poorly understood (Delmont *et al.* 2015). While many studies have focused on
44 the diversity or abundance of key populations (Taylor *et al.* 2012; Wei *et al.* 2015;
45 Gubry-Rangin *et al.* 2015), fewer have looked at the transcriptional profiles over time
46 (Nicol *et al.* 2008; Morales & Holben 2013), and even less have done so for multiple
47 groups at the same time (Liu *et al.* 2010; 2014; Brenzinger *et al.* 2015). This is
48 particularly true of organisms involved in nitrogen (N) cycling in soils. The
49 complexity of the underlying processes combined with the diversity of microbes
50 contributing to each process provides a large challenge to identifying mechanisms
51 active at any given time (Butterbach-Bahl *et al.* 2013). Currently we lack enough
52 information to understand basic ecological concepts linked to N cycling *in situ* such
53 as: i) substrate competition at both inter and intra species level, ii) full diversity of
54 both present and active N cycling populations, iii) and the life strategies of these
55 populations which in turn control their responses (both as observed growth or
56 transcriptional changes).

57 The initial discovery of ammonia oxidizing archaea (AOA) and recognition as
58 important players in the N cycle (Leininger *et al.* 2006; Hatzenpichler 2012; Stahl &
59 la Torre 2012) highlighted the unexpected gaps in knowledge. Later studies have
60 suggested different life strategies for AOA when compared to ammonia oxidizing
61 bacteria (AOB) (Stemgren *et al.* 2015), but this may be complicated by variance
62 across strains (Bayer *et al.* 2015). One major unknown is whether observations made
63 in studies, or organisms, from one ecosystem translate to others.

64 It is well established that individual intermediates in the N cycle can be used
65 for specific reasons (i.e. ammonia oxidation provides electrons, while denitrification
66 intermediates accept reducing equivalents), but the purpose of the reactions for any
67 organism is another major unknown. That is, while some organisms carry out these
68 processes for electrogenic purposes that can result in growth, others do it in order to
69 maintain redox homeostasis (e.g. to dissipate excess reductants) (Green & Paget
70 2004). Unfortunately examples where an organism harbours multiple versions of the
71 same enzyme for completely different purposes (respiration vs. redox balance) exist
72 (Hartsock & Shapleigh 2011), and are likely to limit generalizations.

73 Despite this, studies focusing on population changes in response to
74 manipulations have consistently recorded conserved patterns (e.g. growth of AOB but
75 not AOA (Jia & Conrad 2009; Di *et al.* 2009; Pratscher *et al.* 2011)) suggesting that
76 responses by specific populations in a given location or ecosystem are predictable.
77 However, the debate continues on whether niche specialization and differentiation can
78 be determined based solely on correlations, without analyzing the wider array of
79 processes that contribute or influence any given N transformation (Prosser & Nicol
80 2012). This is relevant in ecosystems such as agricultural grassland where an
81 understanding of N cycling is crucial for management of both productivity and
82 greenhouse gases (Herrero *et al.* 2016), of which nitrous oxide (N₂O) is a key player
83 (Reay *et al.*, 2012).

84 In grazed pastures (i.e. agricultural grasslands) N deposition through ruminant
85 urine drives the emissions of N₂O (Saggar *et al.* 2013). In this system a full cascade of
86 transformations begin with urea and can result in accumulation of any intermediate
87 depending on conditions, but with a final end product of N₂ or N₂O. While the
88 chemical transformations have been explored (Hamonts *et al.* 2013; Baral *et al.* 2014;

de Klein *et al.* 2014a; b), mechanistic understanding of the populations catalyzing the reactions, and the purpose they serve for the organisms is less clear. In this study, we aimed to identify active N-transformation pathways as well as changes in microbial populations/taxa abundance and transcriptional activity for organisms involved in N loss (through gases) in response to urea (simulated ruminant urine deposition event) and varying moisture content. Observed chemical transformations were linked to changes in genotype (functional potential through DNA; a proxy for population changes), expression of genotype (RNA profiles), and total community composition (specific taxonomically defined populations based on the 16S ribosomal rRNA gene). We hypothesized that sequential transformation of nitrogenous intermediates would be coupled to changes in expression of functional genes catalyzing production and consumption of intermediates. Alternatively, transformations not linked to population, or expression changes, would be driven by other (abiotic) pathways. We also hypothesized that changes in transcription, or population size, could serve to determine life strategies of microbes utilizing each intermediate (whether they are used for growth vs. physiological maintenance). To test this we mimicked a ruminant urine-N deposition event using repacked soil cores (soil bulk density= 1.1 Mg m⁻³) on tension tables monitored for 63 days. Soils were treated with urea under two different moisture contents: high (near saturation; -1.0 kPa) and low (field capacity; -10 kPa) moisture. Simultaneous measurements of soil chemistry, gas kinetics, microbial community composition (by 16S rRNA gene amplicon sequencing) and functional gene abundance (for nitrification and denitrification) at DNA (gene) and RNA (transcript) levels were performed to determine the active populations and pathways.

114 **Materials and methods**

115 *Sample collection and experimental design*

116 A detailed methodology can be found in (Clough *et. al.*, In review). In brief,
 117 soil was collected from a permanently grazed agricultural grassland (dairy pasture) in
 118 March (early spring) at the Teagasc Moorepark Research Centre, County Cork,
 119 Ireland (8°15'W, 52°9'N). The soil is classified as a Typical Brown earth from the
 120 Clashmore Series (Gardiner & Radford 1980). Soil was sampled after the turf was
 121 removed and a spade was used to randomly sample the A-horizon (5-20 cm depth,
 122 excluding grass layer). To avoid fresh N loading, fields had not been grazed for over a
 123 month. Field moist samples were immediately shipped to Lincoln University, New
 124 Zealand and kept at 4°C until processed. Prior to use, soil was sieved (≤ 2 mm) to
 125 remove any stones, plant roots or earthworms and packed into stainless steel rings
 126 (7.3 cm internal diameter, 7.4 cm deep) to a depth of 4.1 cm at *in situ* soil bulk density
 127 (1.1 Mg m^{-3} with a gravimetric water content (θ_g) of $0.24 \text{ g water g}^{-1} \text{ soil}$). The
 128 resulting cores had a total porosity of $0.58 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ pores cm}^{-3} \text{ soil}$ and were arranged in a
 129 factorial experiment replicated four times. Soil cores were maintained at two moisture
 130 contents: high (near saturated; -1.0 kPa) and low (field capacity; -10 kPa) moisture
 131 using tension tables (Romano et al., 2002). These moisture contents, -1 and -10 kPa
 132 respectively, corresponded to 53% and 30% volumetric water content, or 91% and
 133 52% water-filled pore space (WFPS). Nitrogen was applied as a urea solution at 2141
 134 kg urea/ha dry soil (equivalent to a single urination event at the higher rate expected
 135 under bovine urine deposition of $1000 \text{ kg N ha}^{-1}$). Four treatments in total were
 136 carried out (replicated four times each for a total of 112 cores analyzed) representing
 137 two levels of urea and two levels of moisture: urea + high moisture (HM +N; Urea _-
 138 1.0kPa), urea + low moisture (LM +N; Urea _-10kPa), no urea + high moisture (HM

139 –N; No Urea _-1.0kPa) and no urea + low moisture (LM –N; No Urea_-10kPa). All
140 cores were held at 20°C for a period of 63 days.

141

142 *Soil pH, and inorganic-N measurements*

143 Soil pH was monitored throughout the experiment using a flat surface pH
144 electrode (Broadley James Corp., Irvine, California). Inorganic N concentrations
145 (NH_4^+ , NO_2^- , NO_3^-) were determined by destructively sampling batches of soil cores.
146 Each core was homogenized and a subsample was extracted (10 g dry soil: 100 ml 2M
147 KCl shaken for 1 hour), filtered (Whatman 42) and analyzed using flow injection
148 analysis (Blakemore et al., 1987). N_2O flux was determined by placing a soil core into
149 a 1-L stainless steel tin fitted with a gas-tight lid and rubber septa. The headspace was
150 sampled after 15 and 30 minutes and analyzed using an automated gas chromatograph
151 (8610; SRI Instruments, Torrance, CA), linked to an autosampler (Gilson 222XL;
152 Gilson, Middleton, WI) as previously described (Clough et al., 2006).

153 *Nucleic acids extraction*

154 Samples for RNA and DNA extraction were collected simultaneously with
155 samples for inorganic N analysis, but only samples at 0, 7, 14, 21, 35, 63 days were
156 processed for nucleic acids. Each biological replicate was extracted and analyzed
157 separately. For each extraction 2 g (wet weight) of soil were processed using the
158 PowerSoil Total RNA Isolation and DNA Elution Accessory Kits (MoBio, Carlsbad,
159 CA) as per manufacturer's instructions, with slight modifications. Bead beating was
160 done in a Geno/Grinder 2010 (SPEX SamplePrep, LLC, Metuchen, NJ) using two
161 rounds of beating (1750 strokes/min) for 15 s with a 1 min pause in between. The
162 total elution volume for RNA and DNA was 60 µl and 100 µl respectively. RNA was

163 treated with DNase I (RNase-Free) (New England Biolabs, USA) as per the
164 manufacturer's protocol. RNA quality was assessed by denaturing gel electrophoresis.
165 RNA and DNA concentration, purity and humic acid contamination were determined
166 using a Nanodrop Spectrophotometer, ND-1000 (Thermo Scientific). All extractions
167 were stored at -80 °C until downstream analyses.

168

169 *Reverse transcription (RT)*

170 Triplicate cDNA conversions (technical replicates) were performed for each
171 RNA extraction using the Maxima H Minus First Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit
172 (Thermo Scientific) according to manufacturer's protocol. Each 20 µl reaction
173 contained: 13 µl of RNA (208 ng Total RNA), 1 µl of random hexamers (100 pmol),
174 1µl of dNTP mix (0.5 mM final conc.) and 5 µl of master mix (4 µl of 5X RT buffer
175 and 1 µl Maxima H Minus reverse transcriptase). All technical replicates for a sample
176 were combined and stored at -80°C until further analysis. All further analyses were
177 performed on the same cDNA pool for each sample.

178

179 *16S rRNA gene amplicon sequencing*

180 16S rRNA gene amplicon sequencing was performed using primers
181 515F/806R (V4 region of the 16S gene) and the Earth Microbiome Project conditions
182 (Version 4_13) (Caporaso *et al.* 2012). All samples were run simultaneously on a
183 single Illumina MiSeq run. Sequences were first processed in Qiime (version 1.9.1)
184 using default parameters (Caporaso *et al.* 2010). Sequences were clustered into
185 Operational Taxonomic Units (OTUs) at 97% sequence similarity using the SILVA

(version 119) reference library (Quast *et al.* 2012) and UCLUST (Edgar 2010) following the open-reference Operational Taxonomic Unit (OTU) picking protocol. Taxonomic identification was done using BLAST against the SILVA database (max-e value = 0.001) (Altschul *et al.* 1990). Subsampling and rarefactions (10 times) were performed to equal read depths of 7,400 per sample, and samples below that threshold were removed. After rarefaction, all 10 OTU tables were merged and exported for further processing in R (R Development Core Team 2008). The 16S amplicon sequences are available in the NCBI SRA database (accession numbers SRP091980).

194

195 *Quantification of gene and transcript abundance*

196 Quantitative PCR (qPCR) was performed in 384-well plates using the ViiA7
197 real-time PCR system (Applied Biosystems, Carlsbad, CA). Absolute quantification
198 was done using a 10-fold serial dilution (10^8 to 10^1) of known copy numbers of
199 pGEM-T easy (Promega, Madison, Wisconsin, USA) cloned templates as standards.
200 For all targets qPCR runs included cloned standards, no template control and no
201 reverse transcription controls (RNA) run in triplicate. No inhibition or positive
202 amplification on negative controls was observed for any target. All DNA and cDNA
203 samples were run in quadruplicates to determine abundance of: prokaryotes (16S
204 rRNA gene), ammonia oxidizers (archaeal [AOA] & bacterial [AOB] ammonia
205 monooxygenase gene; *amoA*), denitrifiers (cytochrome cd1-type nitrite reductase
206 gene; *nirS*, and Clade I nitrous oxide reductase gene; *nosZI*) and nitrogen fixers
207 (nitrogenase gene; *nifH*).

208 All reactions were performed in 10 μ l volumes containing: 1 $\times$ Master Mix
209 (Fast SYBR Green Master Mix, ABI), 0.2-0.6 μ M of each primer [0.2 μ M for AOA

(Tournai *et al.* 2008), 0.6 μ M for AOB (Rotthauwe *et al.* 1997; Avrahami *et al.* 2003); 0.5 μ M for 16S rRNA (Hartman *et al.* 2009); *nirS* (Throbäck *et al.* 2004; Yergeau *et al.* 2007), *nosZI* (Henry *et al.* 2006) & *nifH* (Rösch & Bothe 2005)], 2 μ l of template [DNA (1 ng total) or cDNA (80 $\times$ diluted RT reaction, i.e. total 0.13 ng RNA)] and autoclaved Milli-Q H₂O to a final volume of 10 μ l. Primers and qPCR conditions are summarized in Table S1. A melt curve analysis (95°C for 15 s, 60°C for 1 min then increasing 0.05°C/s (data acquisition) until 95°C) was performed to test for specificity and to confirm no amplification in the negative controls.

218

219 *Statistical analyses*

220 All statistical analyses were performed in R (R Development Core Team 2008) using the phyloseq (McMurdie & Holmes 2013), pvclust (Suzuki & Shimodaira 2006), vegan (Oksanen *et al.*) and mpmcorrelogram packages. Detailed descriptions can be found in supplemental methods.

224

225 *Growth rate estimation and prediction of rRNA operon (rrn) copy numbers*

226 *rrn* copy numbers for identified OTUs were predicted using the ribosomal RNA operon copy number database (rrnDB) (Stoddard *et al.* 2015). For each OTU, information from the closest strain available was selected. In instances where a closely related organism was not available, the mean copy number for the closest taxonomic group (i.e. genus, class, etc.) was used. Copy numbers were then compared to the maximum observed abundance and the maximum observed fold change (calculated based on lowest observed abundance for the same organism in a preceding time point for OTUs showing growth or succeeding time points for those

decreasing in abundance). An estimated growth rate was calculated for OTUs showing increases in population size in response to N using the following formula:

$$N_t = N_0 \cdot e^{rt}$$

where: N_t : The amount at time t; N_0 : The amount at time 0; r: exponential growth rate; t: Time passed

Fit model for rrn copy numbers

Both non-linear (Michaelis-Menten) and linear regressions were used to fit *rrn* copy numbers and population changes (i.e. maximum abundance and fold-change), and growth rate (per day). The fit model was performed in R using “drc” and “ggplot2” packages.

Results:

Soil pH and N transformation dynamics in response to urea

Soil pH increased from acidic (pH = 5.5 ± 0.1 , i.e. mean $\pm$ SD) to alkaline reaching a maximum (pH = 8.7 ± 0.2) at day 3 in urea treated soils. Return to baseline pH was modulated by soil moisture with high moisture (HM; -1.0kPa) soil reaching baseline at day 35 and low moisture soils (LM; -10kPa) doing so at day 53 (Fig. 1). This shift in pH was linked to a successive N transformation process initiated with urea hydrolysis and leading to nitrification and denitrification: urea $\rightarrow$ NH_4^+ $\rightarrow$ NO_2^- $\rightarrow$ NO_3^- $\rightarrow$ N_2O $\rightarrow$ N_2 (Fig. 1). Sequential peak activity was observed for each transformation with the response modified by moisture. Maximum production (mean $\mu\text{g N g}^{-1}$ soil) for each transformation was observed at day 3, 21 and 35 respectively

for NH_4^+ (HM+N = 1758; LM+N= 1730), NO_2^- (HM+N = 79.2; LM+N= 39.7) and
 NO_3^- (HM+N = 429.2; LM+N= 335). Two distinct production peaks were observed
for N_2O , with a short pulse (0 to 5 days) reaching a maximum at day 2 for HM soils
($11602.8 \mu\text{g m}^{-2} \text{h}^{-1}$) and day 3 for LM soils ($46.8 \mu\text{g m}^{-2} \text{h}^{-1}$) (Fig. 1 and
Supplementary Fig. S1). A second, longer duration (10 to ~50 days), N_2O pulse
reached a maximum at day 28 for HM soils ($6405.1 \mu\text{g m}^{-2} \text{h}^{-1}$) and day 30 for LM
soils ($448.9 \mu\text{g m}^{-2} \text{h}^{-1}$). The large N_2O spike (first peak) between days 0 to 5 in the
HM+N treatment was about 11.6% of the total N_2O cumulative flux over 63 days,
whereas in the LM+N treatment the 0 to 5 day periods accounted for 22.3% of the
total N_2O cumulative flux over 63 days.

267

268 *Population and transcription dynamics for nitrogen related functional groups*

Significant changes (ANOVA, $p < 0.05$) in relative activity (mRNA
abundance/16S rRNA gene abundance) were observed promptly between day 0 & 3
for all functional groups (except AOA and N-fixers in HM soil) in response to urea
(Fig. 1). However, maximum relative transcription did not match maximum
production peaks for corresponding substrates, or products, for each functional group.
Nitrifiers (ammonia oxidizers) displayed niche differentiation, with time, length and
strength of response differing between bacterial (AOB) and archaeal ammonia
oxidizers (AOA). Relative activity of AOA increased (4.6-fold for LM and 1.6-fold
for HM) under urea treatments at day 3 only, with a subsequent decrease (-19.3-fold
for LM and -7-fold for HM) resulting in lower expression than in untreated soils (Fig.
1). AOB relative activity also increased but was sustained for a much longer period
(3-63 days), with maximum activity (>11-fold change) seen at 21 and 35 days for

281 HM+N and LM+N respectively (Fig. 1). Denitrifiers (both nitrite and nitrous oxide
282 reducers) showed similar responses as AOA, with peak activity at day 3 and a rapid
283 return to baseline, in the case of nitrite reducers decreasing to levels below those
284 observed in non-urea treated soils (Fig. 1). To account for endogenous sources of N,
285 N₂ fixers were monitored through the activity of the nitrogenase gene (*nifH*). No
286 significant changes were observed except for day 3 (LM +N only), with a subsequent
287 decrease in activity below background. This decrease below background was
288 observed for all N treated samples.

289 Changes in the relative contribution to total community composition were
290 calculated by normalizing functional gene abundance to total 16S rRNA gene
291 abundance per sample for each functional group (Fig. 1). The maximum observed
292 relative abundance of each functional group differed for each group (HM and LM
293 respectively): AOB, 19 & 12 %; AOA, 8 & 13 %; *nirS*, 6.3 & 2.9 %; *nosZI*, 3.3 & 3.4
294 %; *nifH*, 4.7 & 4.32 %. Further, large population changes over time were mostly
295 limited to AOB. Generally, AOB comprised <1 % of the total community, but in
296 response to urea increased up to 29-fold to make up 19 % (day 21 for HM) and 20-
297 fold to make up 12 % (day 35 for LM) of the community in urea treated soils. In
298 contrast, AOA were found at consistently high levels (median=4.2 %) in untreated
299 soils, but numbers decreased >7-fold in response to urea (~1.3 % at least 63 day).
300 Similarly, other functional groups (*nosZI*, *nifH*) decreased or remained stable (*nirS*) in
301 response to urea. Similar patterns for both activity and population changes were
302 observed when absolute values were analyzed (Supplementary Fig. S2).

303

304 *N* deposition induces both a genotypic and a transcriptional response at the
305 community level that is modified by soil moisture content

306 Urea deposition imposed a general negative selective pressure leading to
307 decreases in OTU level prokaryotic diversity (Shannon, -1.2-fold change), richness (-
308 1.5-fold change) and evenness (-1.1-fold change) at DNA level (Fig. 2a,
309 Supplementary Fig. S3). The same pattern was observed when active microbes (based
310 on RNA) were analyzed with decreases in OTU level prokaryotic diversity (Shannon,
311 -1.3-fold change), richness (-1.9-fold change) and evenness (-1.2-fold change).
312 Moisture was found to have a smaller, but significant, effect compared to urea, with
313 LM samples consistently resulting in lower diversity and richness when compared to
314 their HM pairs. Richness and diversity losses were not recovered even after 63 days.
315 In contrast, samples where no urea was applied remained stable (i.e. constant diversity
316 and richness).

317 Urea deposition significantly altered community structure (Adonis test: $F=$
318 18.04, $p < 0.001$ for 16S rDNA and $F= 26.27$, $p < 0.001$ for 16S rRNA) as shown in a
319 non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) plot using a Bray-Curtis dissimilarity
320 matrix (Fig. 2b and Supplementary Fig. S4). At both DNA and RNA level community
321 changes along the first axis corresponded with changes in response to urea treatment,
322 with the second axis accounting for changes in moisture. A pvclust analysis
323 (hierarchical clustering with p-values calculated via multiscale bootstrap resampling,
324 Supplementary Fig. S5) confirmed two major clusters [100% AU (Approximately
325 Unbiased) and 100% BP (Bootstrap Probability)] formed by urea treated (HM+N and
326 LM+N samples, excluding day 0), vs. untreated soils (HM-N, LM-N, field samples,
327 and HM+N & LM+N at Day 0). Temporal variance within each cluster was

confirmed using a Mantel correlogram analysis (Fig. 2c). Urea treated samples had significant changes in community composition immediately upon treatment (Day 0 to 7), with no return to baseline conditions by the end of the experiment. In contrast, untreated samples did not change significantly over time (Supplemental Fig. S6)

Changes in community structure were associated with shifts in major taxonomic lineages (Fig. 3). In general, phylum level changes in abundance and transcription were correlated to each other (Supplementary Table S2 and Fig. S7, S8). Urea deposition induced temporal changes in phylum level abundance with observed maximum fold changes per group (HM & LM at DNA level) being: Acidobacteria, -4.6 & -3.7; Actinobacteria, 2.4 & 5.3; Bacteroidetes, 4.6 & 2.2; Candidate Division WS3, -10.5 & -7; Chloroflexi, -2.9 & -2.6; Firmicutes, 10.8 & 16.2; Gemmatimonadetes, 2 & 3.3; Nitrospirae, -3.2 & -2; Planctomycetes, -3.7 & -2.5; Thaumarchaeota, -5.2 & -3.6; Verrucomicrobia, -2.5 & -2; Alphaproteobacteria, 1.4 & 1.7; Betaproteobacteria, 4 & 2; Deltaproteobacteria, -2.2 & -1.4; Gammaproteobacteria, 1.5 & 2.6. Normalized transcriptional activity (reads of 16S rRNA/reads of 16S rDNA) identified the Firmicutes and members within classes of the Proteobacteria as the most transcriptionally active. While abundant phyla tended to have high levels of normalized transcription, less abundant organisms like the Thaumarchaeota, were observed to have high normalized transcriptional activity especially under background conditions (Supplementary Fig. S7). In contrast, groups traditionally considered slow growers (e.g. Nitrospirae and Gemmatimonadetes) had low normalized transcription. It was also noted that while normalized transcription levels remained stable without urea, N deposition induced changes. These changes in normalized activity did not always match trends observed at individual DNA or RNA level (e.g. Firmicutes).

353

354 *Shifts in N and moisture status trigger OTU response linked to divergent life*
355 *strategies*

356

357 Since Fig. 3 only represents a taxonomic summary of all OTUs (irrespective
358 of their response to treatments), it does not provide a clear indication of who is
359 changing and why. To account for this, urea responsive OTUs were identified
360 independently in RNA and DNA profiles (under each treatment) through a SIMPER
361 analysis. OTUs accounting for 50% of the variance were analyzed (Fig. 4). Response
362 patterns for detected OTUs were conserved between RNA and DNA profiles.
363 However, while some OTUs responded similarly to urea under varying moisture
364 conditions, marked differences were observed with no detectable pattern based on
365 taxonomy.

366 OTUs within the Proteobacteria identified in the SIMPER analysis did not
367 display a conserved response to urea, however when lower taxonomic levels were
368 examined patterns emerged. A consistent positive response was seen for OTUs within
369 the class Betaproteobacteria and the family Hyphomicrobiaceae, amongst others.
370 Positive responses to urea were also observed at the phylum level for the Firmicutes,
371 Bacteroidetes, Actinobacteria, Gemmatimonadetes and Planctomycetes, although the
372 level of response varied across lower taxonomic levels. In contrast, with only some
373 exceptions, OTUs within the phyla Acidobacteria, Verrucomicrobia, Nitrospirae,
374 Candidate Division WS3 (also referred to as candidate phylum Latescibacteria) and
375 the Thaumarchaeota all were negatively impacted by urea deposition.

376 To account for response patterns over time, we focused on OTUs that
377 accounted for 30% of the variance in the SIMPER analysis (36 total), with individual

OTU contributions ranging from 5 to 0.1 percent at the DNA level and 5 to 0.06 percent at the RNA level (Table S3). Temporal patterns were conserved between DNA and RNA profiles (Supplementary Fig. S9, S10), despite differences in absolute abundance. Once again, moisture acted as a modulator of response with the extent of impact dependent on the OTU (Fig. 5 and 6). While most functional groups responded immediately (at both DNA and RNA level), positively affected OTU responses were observed along all time points creating a succession of positively selected organisms. In contrast, negatively affected OTUs all responded within the first 2 time points indicating an immediate negative selective pressure (Fig. 6). Large variances in absolute changes were observed, even within similar organisms (e.g. *Pedobacter*), with fold changes ranging from -10.5 to 410 across both positively and negatively affected OTUs. Despite this, OTU response was noted to correspond to taxonomy, with both the effect (positive or negative) and the extent of response (fold change or total abundance) in line with predicted ecological growth strategies (r vs. k) predicted for different taxa. To test this, we predicted rRNA operon copy numbers (*rrn*) for all 36 OTUs and compared them to the observed maximum abundance, max fold change in population or observed growth rate per day. We consistently observed a non-linear response with an asymptote reached at higher copy numbers (Fig. 7). These trends were consistent independent of which moisture conditions were present at the time of response. To account for preferential response due to moisture, we selected the highest response for each organism and saw no clear difference in patterns. To account for potential biases due to uneven representation, OTUs were grouped into low (1-2 copies of *rrn*) or high (>2) copy number organisms (Supplementary Table S4). While significant changes ($p < 0.05$, Supplementary Fig. S11) were observed in most instances, exceptions were noted (e.g. growth rate under HM).

403 Discussion

404 Functional profiling (identification and quantification of specific functional
405 genes/transcripts) is normally utilized to link chemical transformations to specific
406 microbial populations capable of catalyzing reactions. However, functional groups are
407 comprised of taxonomically diverse species of microbes with different lifestyle
408 strategies that are unlikely to share a conserved response to an ecosystem disturbance
409 (Ho *et al.* 2012). While functional profiling allows us to measure the net response of a
410 functional group, and could serve as a proxy for determining the importance of the
411 group in a sample, it does not identify how specific organisms benefit from a
412 catalyzed transformation. Here we used a controlled microcosm experiment to
413 measure the response of soil communities to a disturbance in the form of changes in
414 moisture and nitrogen (urea) deposition. Functional analysis (qPCR) demonstrated a
415 biological response to urea, but differing responses to moisture depending on group
416 (Fig. 1). Responses are potentially linked to different life strategies amongst these
417 groups. Ammonia oxidizers displayed contrasting population and expression profiles,
418 suggesting niche differentiation driven by time and/or substrate concentration. AOA
419 responded early, and declined as new N was made available while AOB responded
420 later with population swings spanning from near detection limit to most dominant
421 group. These observations match prior reports showing AOA prefer low N
422 concentrations, while AOB respond vigorously to N deposition (Di *et al.* 2010;
423 Sterngren *et al.* 2015). This has been interpreted as evidence for differing lifestyles
424 for AOB and AOA, with AOA preferring nutrient poor conditions and AOB
425 dominating in rich ones (Sterngren *et al.* 2015). However, prior assertions that AOB
426 are solely important for driving nitrification might be overstated given that
427 transcriptional activity for both groups is comparable if compared at peak time (Di *et*

428 *al.* 2009). This contrasting use of energy between functionally redundant organisms
 429 might explain the low correlations between processes and the abundance of their
 430 respective functional populations (Rocca *et al.* 2015). When we examine the response
 431 of other functional groups benefiting from influxes of N, like denitrifiers, we see no
 432 significant change in population sizes suggesting that either energy is being utilized
 433 for physiological maintenance or otherwise for redox balance/homeostasis (Hartsock
 434 & Shapleigh 2011; Li *et al.* 2012; Dietrich *et al.* 2013). The distinction here being that
 435 we use the term physiological maintenance as it refers to the state of energetics in a
 436 cell where the energy consumed is used for functions other than the production of new
 437 cell material (i.e. growth) (van Bodegom 2007; Lipson 2015). Alternatively, redox
 438 balance reactions are used to maintain viable metabolic processes by controlling the
 439 redox state of all the cellular components (Green & Paget 2004). In contrast, organism
 440 adapted to low N concentrations, like N fixers, decline in response to exogenous N
 441 demonstrating real time selective pressure in a complex ecosystem. These responses
 442 also highlight the temporal nature of these relationships and how by following niche
 443 differentiation high number of functionally redundant organisms can be maintained
 444 (Stempfhuber *et al.* 2016). However, the use of very high concentrations of urea
 445 (leading to rapid hydrolysis to ammonium followed by substantial nitrification) has
 446 major consequences for soil pH, physicochemical parameters, and potentially other
 447 factors (e.g. osmolarity). Without accounting for those it is unclear what the direct
 448 mechanism causing an increase or decrease in the relative abundance of a specific
 449 population is.

450 Despite this, our observations highlight how lifestyle preferences for
 451 organisms may be reflected in their dominance in the ecosystem. Prior work suggests
 452 that AOA dominate in soils with low N inputs, but AOB numbers are higher at times

of high N loading or in ecosystems with consistent N deposition (Gong *et al.* 2013; Venterea *et al.* 2015; Sterngren *et al.* 2015; Li *et al.* 2016). This would suggest that a dynamic ecosystem with varying nutrient levels would select for a higher diversity of organisms that maintain ecosystem processes stable over time and space (Wang and Loreau, 2014). Indeed, our data supports this with alpha diversity (calculated based on 16S amplicon analysis at both DNA and RNA) decreasing in response to urea. This is inconsistent with plant responses to nutrient deposition in which multiple resources need to be added to elicit a response (Harpole *et al.* 2016), although contrasting results have been observed (Suding *et al.* 2005; Bai *et al.* 2010; Song *et al.* 2011; 2012). For microbes, high site to site variance is reported (De Schrijver *et al.* 2011; Leff *et al.* 2015), but similar negative responses are suggested and could be linked to increased competition in the absence of natural ecosystem variability. However, links between microbial and plant response suggest interplay between the response of macro and microbiota (Zeng *et al.* 2016). While previous work suggests an important role for moisture in controlling community composition (Waldrop & Firestone 2006), we only observed a modifier role in our experiment.

Although broad observations align with ecological theory, precise identification of responsive organisms is rarely carried out. Here we note that while at phylum level clear responses (+/- fold change) are observed, variance is seen at the OTU level suggesting intra-taxonomic (i.e. same phylum but different species or OTUs) diversity. We hypothesized this reflects the life history strategies of the different organisms. Attempts to link specific transformations to organisms failed, potentially due to the succession of functionally redundant organisms that respond at different time with non-overlapping optima. That is, while functional gene abundance provides the population size of organisms capable of carrying out a process, the group

may be composed of many OTUs with divergent life strategies or metabolic potentials that affect when they can respond. This makes functional gene measurement an average of all OTU subpopulations carrying that gene. However, community response allows us to identify OTUs responsive to N deposition, which when analyzed independently, provides insights into metabolic preferences (i.e. aerobic vs. anaerobic, nitrifier vs. denitrifier) based on time and response to treatments. Taxonomic groups regularly recognized as native to, or abundant in, oligotrophic conditions declined in the presence of urea. Most of these groups are still poorly understood, and included the Acidobacteria, Verrucomicrobia, Nitrospirae, Candidate Division WS3 (also referred to as candidate phylum Latescibacteria) and the Thaumarchaeota. These organisms are predicted to be slow growers with the Thaumarchaeal response confirming the AOA patterns observed at the functional level. In contrast, positively responding organisms are those generally associated with groups considered eutrophic or capable of fast response. This discrepancy based on life history strategies has been proposed and applied to microbes previously, and suggests that an organisms' ability to grow, utilize carbon, generate proteins and efficiently transform resources to biomass, amongst others, is related to its rRNA operon copy number (Klappenbach *et al.* 2000; Stevenson & Schmidt 2004; Dethlefsen & Schmidt 2007; Roller *et al.* 2016). When applied to communities, it is associated with microbial successions in which decreases in copy numbers are associated with later stages of succession including in soils (Nemergut *et al.* 2015). For example, two OTUs matching the Verrucomicrobial OTU DA101 were found to be negatively affected by urea, and at least one was found to be highly abundant under background conditions. DA101 seems to be a common soil (and grassland) organism identified throughout the world (Felske & Akkermans 1998; O'Farrell & Janssen 1999; Brewer *et al.* 2016). Based on

503 growth (Sangwan *et al.* 2005) and genome reconstructions (Brewer *et al.* 2016), these
504 organisms are predicted to be slow but efficient growers (k strategists). In contrast,
505 most of the positively affected organisms seemed to possess higher *rrn* copy numbers
506 and included members of the Proteobacteria and Bacteroidetes in line with prior
507 predictions (Fierer *et al.* 2007). Statistical analysis supported this interpretation with
508 low copy numbers (1-2) significantly associated to a negative response to N
509 deposition, while high copy numbers (>2) were linked to increased capacity for
510 growth, growth rate and maximum abundance. However, we found a non-linear
511 relationship between increased *rrn* copy numbers and growth capacity, best fitted by
512 models reaching an asymptote. These are first order models that suggest that while a
513 benefit exists where increased copy numbers lead to increased growth rate, after a
514 certain threshold other variables might limit any benefit. Alternatively, a decrease in
515 growth rate might be observed with increasing copy numbers once a tradeoff
516 threshold is passed (Lipson 2015). However, when *rrn* copy numbers are log2
517 transformed, a significant linear fit was observed as seen in prior studies (Roller *et al.*
518 2016). In our study these predictions are made complicated due to the observed intra-
519 taxonomic variance that can arise from the lack of accurate knowledge of copy
520 numbers for many organisms, or from metabolic plasticity at higher taxonomic levels.
521 In addition, our analysis focused on N responsive organisms only, and with only 38
522 identified it indicates that most organisms were neither positively nor negatively
523 affected. This could explain why certain organisms (e.g. Actinobacteria) expected to
524 be k strategist, based on their ability to produce secondary metabolites (Abdelmohsen
525 *et al.* 2015) and compete with other organisms (Barka *et al.* 2015), showed a positive
526 response to N deposition. Alternatively, the low number of responsive organisms
527 could indicate that our false discovery rate corrections were too restrictive.

528 These findings help us get closer to understanding not just the metabolic
529 potential of organisms in soils, but the role specific pathways play for an organism. It
530 also allows us to understand the repercussion of disturbances and management of soils
531 on below ground biodiversity. The knowledge gained through these type of
532 observations, and integration of life history strategies into microbial ecology, will get
533 us one step closer to microbiome management as part of soil care.

534 **Acknowledgements**

535 This work was funded by the New Zealand Government through the New
536 Zealand Fund for Global Partnerships in Livestock Emissions Research to support the
537 objectives of the Livestock Research Group of the Global Research Alliance on
538 Agricultural Greenhouse Gases (Agreement number: 16084) awarded to SEM and the
539 University of Otago.

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Figures

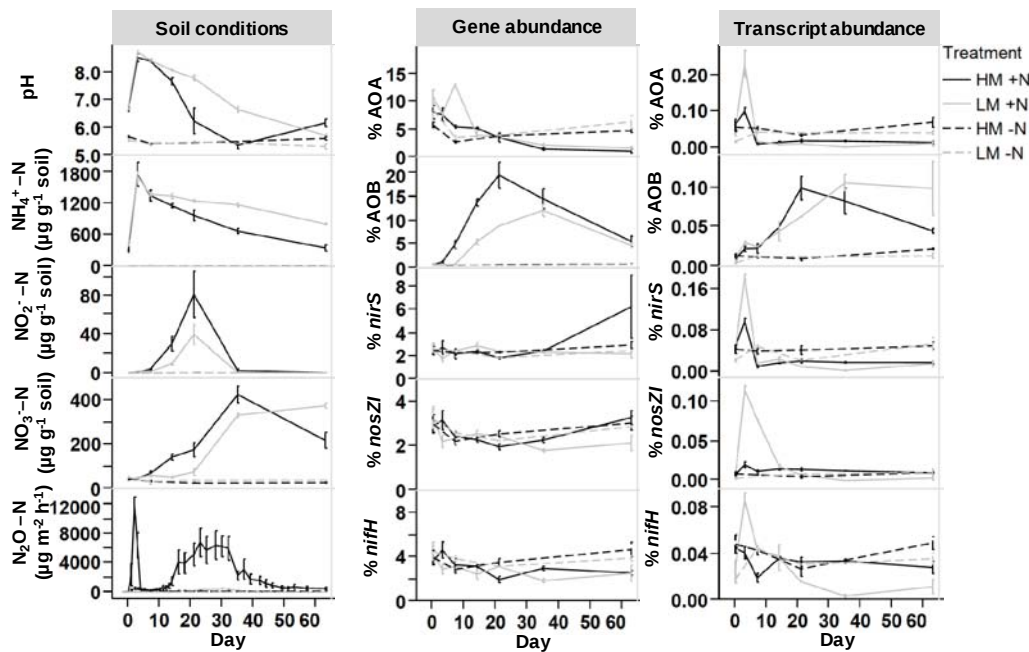


Fig. 1 Chemical transformations and biological (functional group) response in soils treated with urea (+/- 1000 µg N/g dry soil) under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]). Error bars are the standard error of the mean ($n \geq 3$, except gene abundance data of day 7 [$n=1$; LM soil] and day 21 [$n=1$; LM soil]) for replicate mesocosms. Gene and transcript abundance were measured by qPCR targeting: nitrifiers (AOA, ammonia oxidizing archaea; AOB, ammonia oxidizing bacteria), denitrifiers (*nirS*, cytochrome cd₁-containing nitrite reductase; *nosZI*, nitrous oxide reductase) and nitrogen fixers (*nifH*, nitrogenase reductase). All qPCR results are normalized to 16S rRNA copy numbers and presented as percent of the nucleic acid pool.

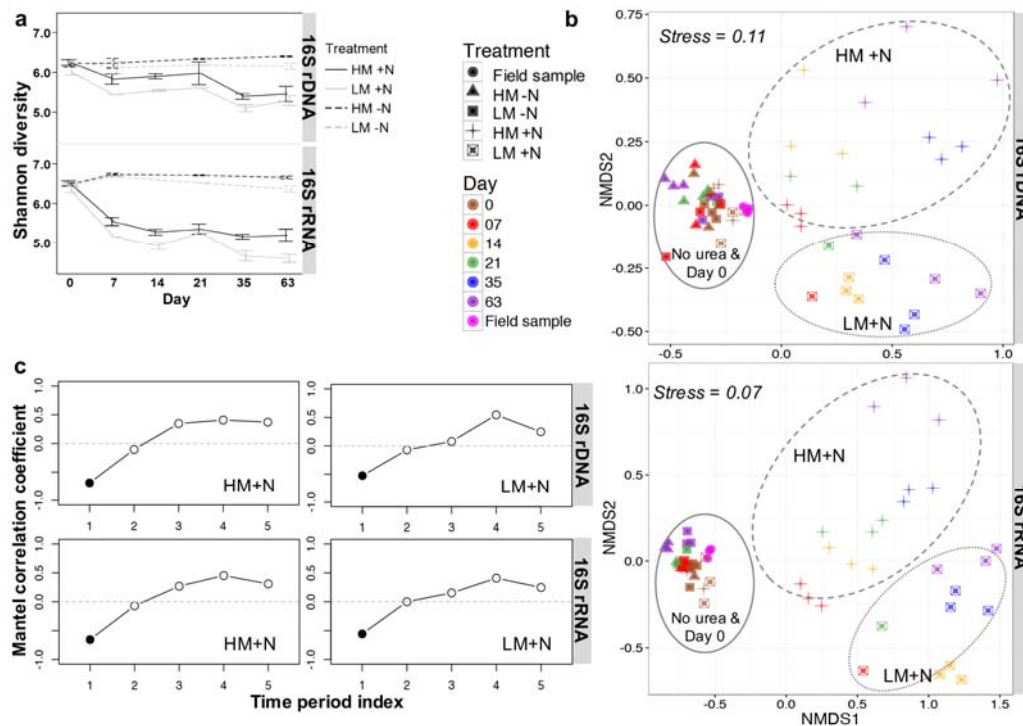


Fig. 2 Total microbial community response (based on 16S rRNA gene amplicon profiling and clustering of sequences at OTU level (97% sequence similarity)) to urea (+/-1000 $\mu\text{g N/g dry soil}$) under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]) at both DNA and RNA level. Error bars are the standard error of the mean ($n = 3$, except day 7 [$n=1$; LM soil] and day 21 [$n=1$; LM soil]) for replicate mesocosms. (a) Changes in microbial diversity (Shannon) index over time in response to treatment. (b) Non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) ordination plots based on Bray-Curtis distances showing relationships among samples based on OTU level changes in community composition. (c) Mantel correlogram showing autocorrelation on community composition by performing sequential Mantel tests between the Bray-Curtis dissimilarities and the grouping of samples using a time period index (index 1 represents 0-7 days; 2 represents 7-14; 3 represents 14-21; 4 represents 21-35; 5 represents 35-63). Filled circles represent significant correlation ($p < 0.05$) in community composition at specific time periods, with open circles indicating no significant correlation.

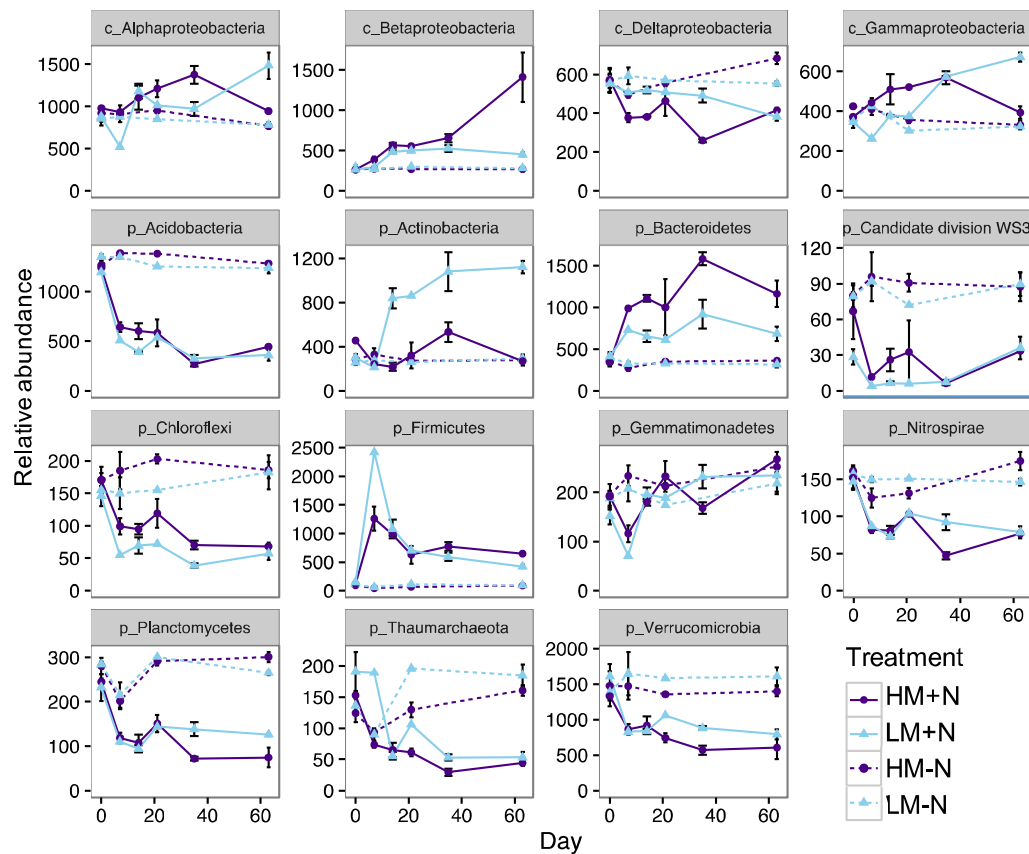
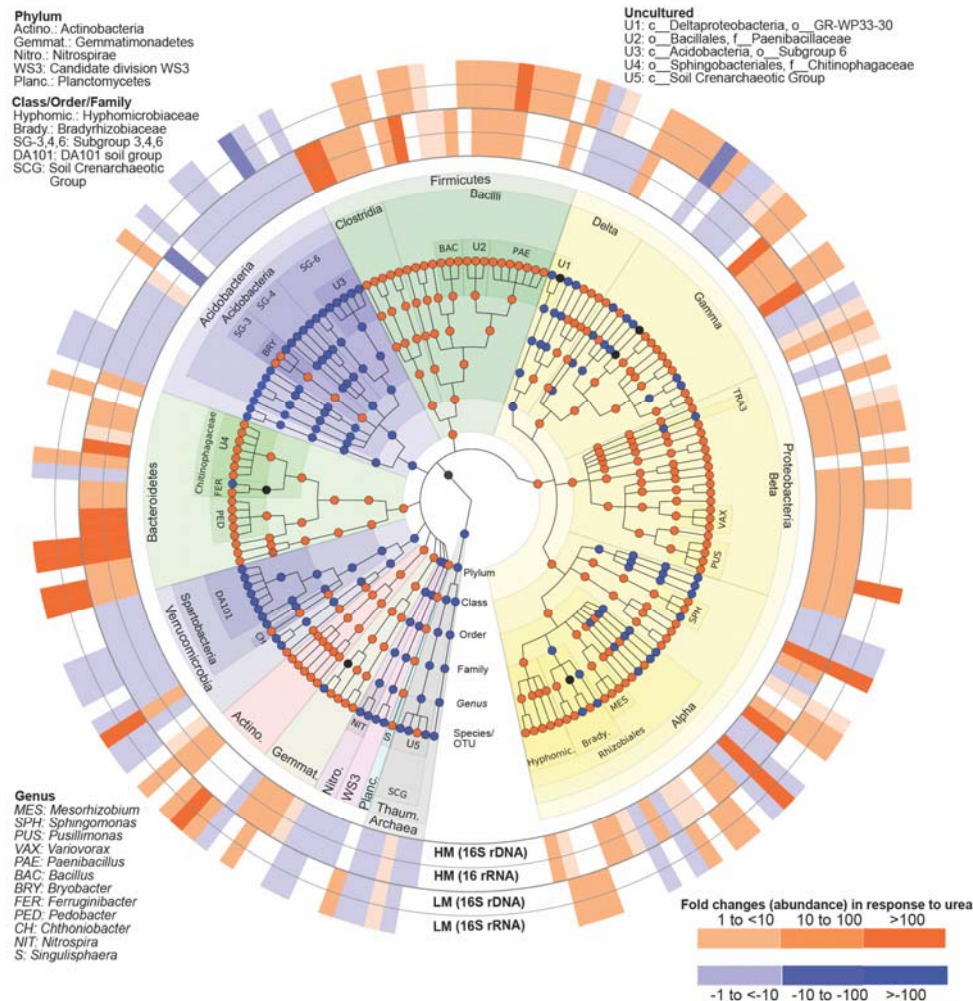


Fig. 3 Phylum and class level (for Proteobacteria only) changes in abundance (DNA) representing relative contribution >1% of all detected phyla (based on OTUs clustered at 97% sequence similarity). A total of 7,400 sequences were examined per sample. Error bars are the standard error of the mean (n = 3, except day 7 [n=1; LM soil] and day 21 [n=1; LM soil]) for replicate mesocosms. Treatments = +/- N [+/-1000 µg N/g dry soil] under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]). Abbreviations: c: Class; p: Phylum. See supplemental Fig. S8 for relative abundance



814

815 **Fig. 4** Taxonomic summary of OTUs responsive to urea treatment identified through
 816 similarity percentages (SIMPER) analysis (representing top 50% cumulative sum).
 817 The 4 outer rings represent fold changes in response to urea under high and low
 818 moisture content (MH & LM respectively) at either DNA or RNA level, with blank
 819 gaps indicating OTUs not identified in SIMPER analysis under the specified ring
 820 condition. Nodes on the tree (moving outwards from center) correspond to taxonomic
 821 level [Domain, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus and Species/OTUs]. Nodes are
 822 colored based on dominant response (>50% conserved fold change response across
 823 OTUs within a node) with black nodes indicating equal representation of positive and
 824 negatively responding OTUs. Shaded areas of branches delineate defined taxonomic
 825 groups. See Supplementary file (Table S3) for full classification.
 826

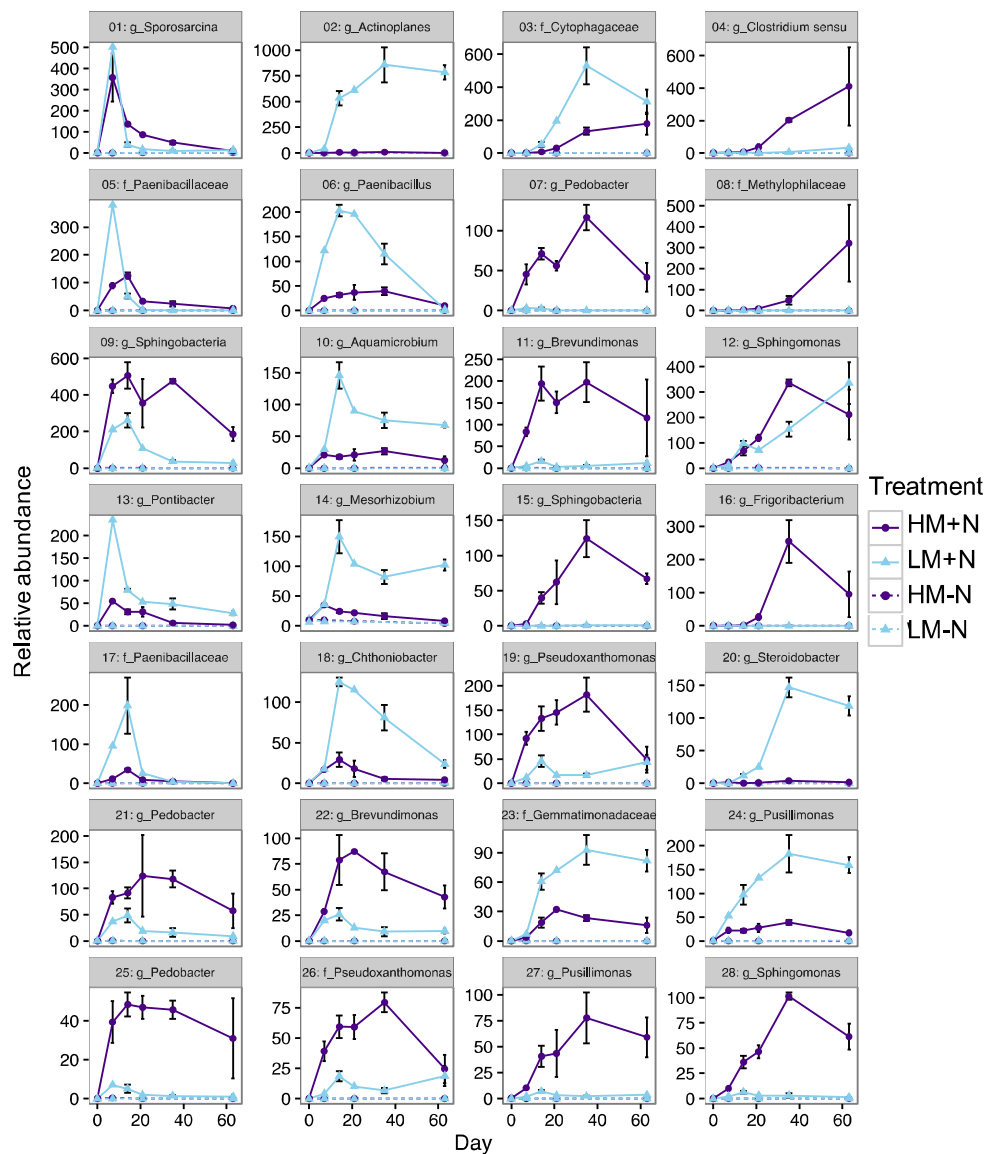


Fig. 5 Population (16S rDNA) changes (abundance based on 7400 reads per samples) for OTUs identified as positively responsive to urea treatment based on similarity percentages (SIMPER) analysis (representing top 30% cumulative sum). Treatments = +/- N [$\pm 1000 \mu\text{g N/g dry soil}$] under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]).

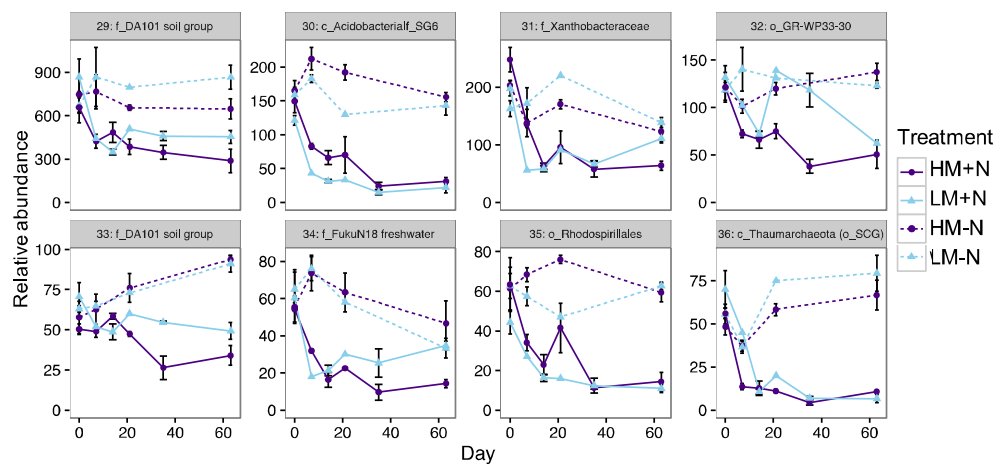


Fig. 6 Population (16S rDNA) changes (abundance based on 7,400 reads per samples) for OTUs identified as negatively responsive to urea treatment based on similarity percentages (SIMPER) analysis (representing top 30% cumulative sum). Treatments = +/- N [+/-1000 µg N/g dry soil] under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]).

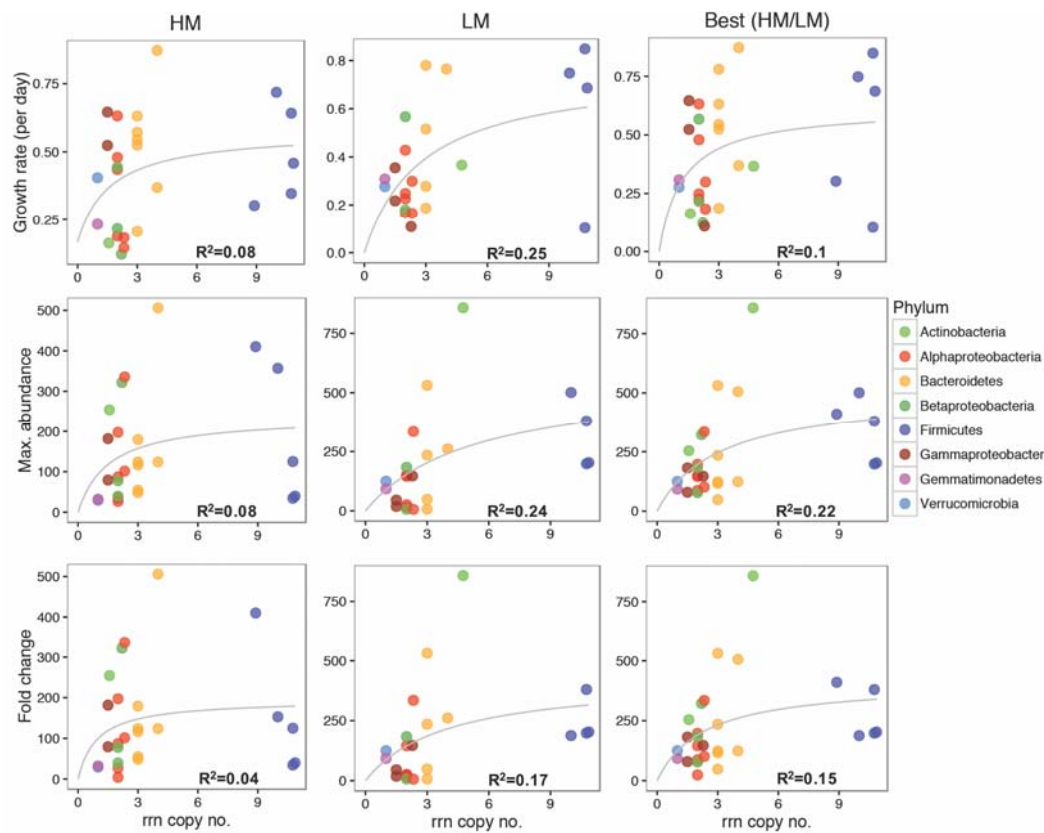


Fig. 7 Relationship between predicted ribosomal RNA operon (rrn) copy numbers and growth rate (per day), maximum observed population change, or fold change in response to N treatment under both high moisture (HM) content, low moisture (LM) content and best growth either in HM or in LM (based on maximum observed growth). Copy number was estimated using rrn database (Stoddard *et al.* 2015). Copy number values were obtained by finding the closest match (lowest taxonomic level possible) to each OTU and retrieving the mean rRNA copy number for that group.

876 **Supporting information**

877 **Fig. S1** N₂O response in soils treated with urea (+/- 1000 µg N/g dry soil) under two
878 moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]).

879 Error bars are the standard error of the mean ($n \geq 3$) for replicate mesocosms.

880 **Fig. S2** Functional group response (absolute quantification) in soils treated with urea
881 (+/-1000 µg N/g dry soil) under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-
882 10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]). Gene and transcript abundance were
883 measured from DNA template (1 ng of DNA) and cDNA template (1 ng RNA). Error
884 bars are the standard error of the mean ($n = 3$, except day 7 [$n=1$; LM soil] and day 21
885 [$n=1$; LM soil]) for replicate mesocosms. Absolute gene and transcript abundance
886 were measured by qPCR targeting: 16S (total prokaryotic community), nitrifiers
887 (AOA, ammonia oxidizing archaea; AOB, ammonia oxidizing bacteria), denitrifiers
888 (*nirS*, cytochrome *cd*₁-containing nitrite reductase; *nosZI*, nitrous oxide reductase)
889 and nitrogen fixers (*nifH*, nitrogenase reductase).

890 **Fig. S3** Changes in microbial a) Richness and b) Evenness (Pielou's) over time in
891 response to treatment.

892 **Fig. S4** Stress plots for Fig. 2b.

893 **Fig. S5** Pvcust tree displaying sample clustering based on Bray-Curtis distances
894 calculated from 16S rRNA gene community composition and indicating significant
895 clusters based on p values ([AU (approximately unbiased) BP (bootstrap
896 probability)]) for each node. Red boxes mark clusters with 95% confidence. Bootstrap
897 replication ($n=1000$). Two clusters: with urea (light red box) and no urea + day 0 N
898 treated samples (light green box).

899 **Fig. S6** Mantel correlogram showing autocorrelation on community composition by
900 performing sequential Mantel tests between the Bray-Curtis dissimilarities and the

grouping of samples using a time period index (index 1 represents 0-7 days; 2 represents 7-21; 3 represents 21-63). Opened circles represent no significant correlations ($p > 0.05$) in community composition at specific time periods.

Fig. S7 Changes in abundance (DNA), activity (RNA) and RNA/DNA ratio for phyla, or classes, representing top 11 phyla (based on OTUs clustered at 97% sequence similarity). A total of 7,400 sequences were examined per sample. Error bars are the standard error of the mean ($n = 3$, except day 7 [$n=1$; LM soil] and day 21 [$n=1$; LM soil]) for replicate mesocosms. Treatments = +/- N [$\pm 1000 \mu\text{g N/g dry soil}$] under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]). Abbreviations: Firmi., Firmicutes; Verru., Verrucomicrobia; Bact., Bacteroidetes; Acido., Acidobacteria; Actino., Actinobacteria; Planct., Planctomycetes; Gemma., Gemmatimonadetes; Thaum., Thaumarchaeota; Chloro., Chloroflexi, Nitro., Nitrospirae.

Fig. S8 Phylum level changes (relative abundance) in genome (16S rDNA) and transcript (16S rRNA) levels representing relative contribution $>1\%$ of all detected phyla (based on OTUs clustered at 97% sequence similarity). A total of 7,400 sequences were examined per sample. Treatments = +/- N [$\pm 1000 \mu\text{g N/g dry soil}$] under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]).

Fig. S9 Transcriptional (16S rRNA) and population (16S rDNA) changes (absolute abundance based on 7400 reads per samples) for OTUs identified as positively responsive to urea treatment based on similarity percentage (SIMPER) analysis (representing top 30% cumulative sum). Treatments = +/- N [$\pm 1000 \mu\text{g N/g dry soil}$] under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]).

Fig. S10 Transcriptional (16S rRNA) and population (16S rDNA) changes (absolute abundance based on 7400 reads per samples) for OTUs identified as negatively responsive to urea treatment based on similarity percentage (SIMPER) analysis (representing top 30% cumulative sum). Treatments = +/- N [+/- 1000 µg N (urea)/g dry soil] under two moisture conditions (LM = low moisture [-10kPa]; HM = high moisture [-1.0kPa]).

Fig. S11 Relationship between predicted ribosomal RNA operon (rrn) copy numbers and observed growth rate (per day), maximum observed population change, or fold change in population abundance for OTUs responsive to N treatment under both high moisture (HM) content. Copy number was estimated using rrn database (Stoddard *et al.* 2015). Predicted rrn copy numbers represent the mean rRNA copy number for the closest taxonomic match (at the lowest taxonomic level possible) for each OTU. The rrn copy numbers were log2 transformed before linear regression analysis. Significant “p” value is marked with an asterisk (*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001)

Table S1 Primer pairs used in this study

Table S2 Pairwise correlation between observed phylum (or class) abundance at DNA and RNA level for urea (+N) treated soils. Correlation analysis was done between DNA (16S rDNA) and RNA (16S rRNA) samples based on mean absolute abundance (per 7,400 sequence reads) at each time point (day 0, 7, 14, 21, 35, 63). Only Proteobacteria shown at class level.

Table S3 Top OTUs cumulatively contributing 50% of the variance between groups (+Urea; -Urea) at 16S rDNA and 16S rRNA levels based on SIMPER analysis.

Table S4: Two sample t-test for mean comparison between low copy number rrn (rRNA operon) samples (1-2) and high copy number of rrn samples (>2). The significant correlation (p<0.05) are showed as bold.