

1 **Development of a sensitive and specific whole-cell biosensor for arsenic**
2 **detection**

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19 **Abstract**

20 Whole-cell biosensors (WCBs) have been designed to detect As(III), but most suffer
21 from poor sensitivity and specificity. In this paper, we developed an arsenic WCB with
22 a positive feedback amplifier in *Escherichia coli* DH5 α . The output signal from the
23 reporter mCherry was significantly enhanced by the positive feedback amplifier. The
24 sensitivity of the WCB with positive feedback is about one order of magnitude higher
25 than that without positive feedback when evaluated using half-saturation As(III)
26 concentration. The minimum detection limit for As(III) was reduced by one order of
27 magnitude to 0.1 μ M, lower than the World Health Organization standard for the
28 arsenic level in drinking water, 0.01 mg/L or 0.13 μ M. Due to the amplification of the
29 output signal, the WCB was able to give detectable signals within a shorter period,
30 and fast response is essential for *in-situ* operations. Moreover, the WCB with the
31 positive feedback amplifier showed exceptionally high specificity toward As(III) when
32 compared with other metal ions. Collectively, the designed positive feedback amplifier
33 WCB meets the requirements for As(III) detection with high sensitivity and specificity.
34 This work also demonstrates the importance of genetic circuit engineering in
35 designing WCBs and the use of genetic positive feedback amplifiers is a good
36 strategy to improve the performance of WCBs.

37 **Importance** Arsenic poisoning is a severe public health issue. Rapid and simple
38 methods for the sensitive and specific monitoring of arsenic concentration in drinking

39 water are needed. In this study, we designed an arsenic WCB with a positive
40 feedback amplifier. It is highly sensitive and able to detect arsenic below the WHO
41 limit level. In addition, it also significantly improves the specificity of the biosensor
42 toward arsenic, giving a signal about 10-20 times stronger in response to As(III) than
43 to other metals. This work not only provides simple but effective arsenic biosensors
44 but also demonstrates the importance of genetic engineering, particularly the use of
45 positive feedback amplifiers, in designing WCBs.

46 **Keywords:** positive feedback amplifier, whole-cell biosensor (WCB), arsenic
47 resistance, sensitivity, specificity

48

49

50 Introduction

51 Arsenic (As) contaminated groundwater, occurring from mining or agriculture or
52 natural contamination due to the abundance of arsenic in the earth's crust, is a
53 serious global health issue. Long-term exposure to arsenic can result in various
54 diseases including cancers [1, 2]. It is estimated that over 100 million people
55 worldwide may be at risk from consuming water contaminated with arsenic [3]. The
56 World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended 0.01 mg/L (0.13 μ M) as the
57 safe permissible level for arsenic in the drinking water [4], and the Food and
58 Agriculture Organization (FAO) has set a maximum contamination level (MCL) of
59 arsenic at 0.01 mg/L in irrigation water [5]. Due to its toxicity and strict arsenic
60 standards for drinking water, cost-effective and sensitive environmental monitoring
61 tools to detect arsenic are needed.

62 To date, many methods have been reported to detect arsenic at low concentrations,
63 such as chemiluminescent immunoassay [6], inductively coupled plasma optical
64 emission spectrometry (ICP-OES) [7], and atomic absorption spectrometry (AAS) [8].
65 However, these methods often require complicated and expensive instruments and
66 trained professionals to pretreat and analyze samples, making them hard to use *in*
67 *situ* [9, 10]. To overcome these limitations, biosensors using enzymes, antibodies,
68 and microorganism cells have garnered interest for using in the detection of arsenic in
69 drinking water [11, 12].

70 Recently, whole-cell biosensors (WCBs) have been extensively studied for the
71 specific and sensitive detection of toxic heavy metal ions. Often, the regulatory
72 elements from a heavy metal resistance operon, including the transcriptional
73 regulator and its cognate promoter, are coupled to a reporter gene such as
74 fluorescence, luminescence, or enzyme assays, so that the signal strength from the
75 reporter is correlated to the concentration of the heavy metal to be detected. The key
76 to developing a sensitive and specific whole-cell biosensor (WCB) is to identify the
77 regulatory elements and then optimize the performance by engineering the regulatory
78 elements or the genetic circuit. A relatively well-studied arsenic resistance operon is
79 the one found in *Escherichia coli*, which contains *arsR* (transcriptional regulator), *arsB*
80 (arsenite permease), and *arsC* (arsenate reductase) [13, 14]. When arsenic is absent,
81 the transcription regulator ArsR binds to the ArsR-binding-site (ABS) within the *ars*
82 promoter and blocks transcription. Once arsenic is present, it binds to ArsR and
83 changes the local structure of the promoter to activate the transcription of the *ars*
84 genes and clear arsenic in the cell [14-16]. The *arsR* regulator and the promoter of
85 this operon have been used to construct arsenic WCBs in various microorganism
86 hosts [17-19]. However, low sensitivity and specificity are major issues to use them
87 for arsenic detection below the WHO recommended level [20-22].

88 In this study, we used *E. coli* as the host to construct arsenic WCBs since it naturally
89 contains the *ars* operon. Genetic circuit engineering was done to improve the
90 performance of the WCB. Positive feedback is common in nature and well known for

91 signal amplification [23]. It has been used to improve the sensitivity of WCBs in
92 response to various analytes including antibiotics, amino acids, and heavy metals [24].
93 This work introduced a positive feedback loop using the LuxR auto-regulatory
94 elements to arsenic WCBs for the first time to improve its sensitivity and specificity.
95 The comparison of the designs with and without the positive feedback amplifier in this
96 work provides useful insights for the development of WCBs in future.

97 **Materials and methods**

98 Bacterial strains, reagents, and growth conditions

99 Construction and characterization of the designed WCBs were performed in *E. coli*
100 DH5 α . Cells were grown in Luria-Bertani (LB) broth (10 g/L peptone, 5 g/L NaCl, 5 g/L
101 yeast extract). Solid plates were made using the same medium added with 1.5 % (w/v)
102 agar. All experiments were performed at 37 °C unless otherwise noted. Antibiotics
103 were used at the following concentrations: streptomycin (Sm) at 50 μ g/ml,
104 chloramphenicol (Cm) at 30 μ g/ml.

105 PCR reagents, restriction endonucleases, and T4 DNA ligase were purchased from
106 TransGen Biotech. NaAsO₂, Pb(NO₃)₂, ZnCl₂, CuCl₂, CdCl₂ were purchased from
107 Shandong western chemical industry co. LTD., China. Oligo primer synthesis and
108 sequencing were performed by GENEWIZ (China).

109 Construction of the sensor plasmids

110 The plasmid of arsenic-resistance biosensor was made first by PCR amplification of
111 the arsenite sensing element (P_{ars} and *arsR*) (Accession no. NC 000913.3) [22] using
112 *E. coli* DH5 α genomic DNA as the template. The primers were designed as follows
113 with the restriction enzyme cutting sites underlined: 1F (5' –
114 CGGGATCCCTCCTTTCAAATGAATAGCC– 3') and 1R (5' –
115 GGAATTCTTAACTGCAAATGTTC– 3'). The amplified DNA fragment was purified
116 and digested with BamHI and EcoRI. The BamHI EcoRI DNA fragment was
117 subsequently inserted into the pCDFDuet-1 plasmid, yielding pCDF-As. The *mCherry*
118 gene was amplified from the plasmid pmCherry using primers 2F (5' –
119 GGAATTCCGTATTTAAATCAGGAGTGGAATGGTGAAGCGGGCGAGG– 3') and
120 2R (5' –ATAAGAATGCGGCCGCCTACTTGTACAGCTCGTCCATGC– 3'). The
121 resulting fragment was then cloned into the EcoRI and NotI restriction sites of the
122 pCDF-As, yielding the plasmid pCDF-As-mCherry.

123 The *luxR* expression plasmid was constructed first by amplifying the *luxR* gene from
124 the plasmid pGN68 [24] using primers 3F (5' –GGAATTCAACTAAAGATTAAC– 3')
125 and 3R (5' –ATAAGAATGCGGCCGCTTATTAATTTTAAAG– 3'). The 304 bp DNA
126 fragment was digested with EcoRI and NotI and then inserted into plasmid pCDF-As
127 to give pCDF-As-luxR.

128 The reporter gene *mCherry* was amplified using primers 4F (5' –
129 GGAATTCATGGTGAGCAAGGGCGAGGAG– 3') and 4R (5' –

130 CGGGATCCCTACTTGTACAGCTCGTCCATGC– 3'). The resulting PCR product was
131 digested with EcoRI and BamHI and then sub-cloned into the respective sites of
132 pGN68, yielding plasmid pGN68-mCherry. All constructs were confirmed by PCR/gel
133 electrophoresis and Sanger sequencing.

134 Growth curve of the WCB strains

135 A single colony of *E. coli* harboring the sensor plasmid(s) was grown overnight in LB
136 medium containing appropriate antibiotics at 37 °C. The OD₆₀₀ of the overnight
137 cultures was adjusted to 2.0 with fresh LB medium, and then they were used as the
138 seed to inoculate the subculture by adding 0.5 ml of the seed culture to 50 ml fresh
139 liquid medium containing As(III) at different final concentrations (0, 0.1, 1, 10, 100,
140 200, 300, 400, 500, 600 µM). The subcultures were incubated at 37 °C in an orbital
141 shaker at 220 rpm. The optical density at 600 nm was first measured by
142 spectrophotometric (Unico UV-2000, USA) after two hours of incubation, and then
143 measured every hour.

144 Fluorescence Measurement

145 An overnight culture with OD₆₀₀ adjusted to 2.0 was used as the seed culture to
146 inoculate the 5 ml subculture with a dilution rate of 1:100. The heavy metal inducer,
147 NaAsO₂, Pb(NO₃)₂, ZnCl₂, CuCl₂, or CdCl₂ was added to a specific concentration [25].
148 The culture was incubated at 37 °C in an orbital shaker. Every hour, 200 µl of each
149 subculture was transferred to a 96-well microplate, and the optical density at 600 nm

150 and the fluorescence intensity were measured by the fluorescence microplate reader
151 (M2, SpectraMax, America) with the excitation/emission at 580/610 nm. All
152 experiments were performed in triplicate, and *E. coli* DH5 α strain containing the
153 plasmid pCDFDuet-1 was used as the negative control.

154 The fluorescence induction ratios (FIRs) were calculated using the formula
155 $FIR = AFU/BFU$, where the arbitrary units of fluorescence (AFU) are defined as the
156 relative fluorescence unit (RFU) divided by the optical density at 600 nm at specific
157 arsenic concentration and time points. The background fluorescence unit (BFU) was
158 defined by dividing the RFU of *E. coli* DH5 α culture containing no metal (negative
159 control) by its optical density at 600 nm. The fluorescence induction ratios (FIRs) of all
160 other samples were normalized to BFU.

161 Results

162 Design and construction of the biosensors

163 As shown in **Fig. 1**, two arsenic WCBs were constructed in *E. coli* DH5 α . The first one
164 simply coupled the arsenic-inducible promoter (P_{ars}) and its regulatory gene (*arsR*)
165 with the reporter gene *mCherry*. The signal from mCherry is directly correlated to the
166 concentration of the inducer arsenic. No positive feedback circuit was involved. In the
167 second one (**Fig. 1B**), the transcriptional activator, a variant of *luxR*, was used to
168 replace *mCherry*, and it was regulated by the *arsR*- P_{ars} circuit, while *mCherry*
169 together with a second *luxR* was placed under the promoter P_{luxI} , which was activated

170 by LuxR. When arsenic is present, it activates the expression of LuxR in the first
171 plasmid which turns on the expression of *mCherry* and LuxR from the second plasmid.
172 The second LuxR activates its own expression as well as that of *mCherry* and forms a
173 positive feedback loop to enhance the output signal from mCherry in the second
174 plasmid. These two plasmids work together as the arsenic WCB with the positive
175 feedback amplifier.

176 Growth curve of the WCB strains

177 To understand the toxic effects of arsenic on the engineered strains, the growth
178 curves of DH5 α /pCDF-As-mCherry and DH5 α /pCDF-As-luxR + pGN68-mCherry at
179 different concentrations of arsenic were measured. Arsenic at a final concentration of
180 0, 0.1, 1, 10, 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, 600 μ M was added to the subculture, and
181 OD₆₀₀ was measured every hour for 10 hours. As shown in **Fig. 2**, for both strains, no
182 significant effect on the growth was observed when the concentration of As(III) was
183 below 10 μ M. The bacteria entered the logarithmic phase after incubation for 2 hours
184 and the stationary phase after about 6 hours. When the concentration of As(III) was at
185 or above 100 μ M, cells grew much slower. The arsenic toxic effect was more obvious
186 and cells barely grew when the As(III) concentration was above 200 μ M. Therefore, 0
187 to 200 μ M of As(III) was used to obtain the arsenic dose response curve in the next
188 section.

189 Arsenic sensitivity and specificity of WCBs

190 The expression of the reporter mCherry from these WCBs accumulates along with
191 time. Not only As(III) concentration but also the exposure time affect the output signal
192 of the arsenic WCBs [25-27]. Therefore, the time-response curves were measured
193 before examining the sensitivity and specificity of the two arsenic WCBs.

194 *Time-dependent response*

195 The response time of a WCB is an essential factor for practical application.. In
196 addition, a potential issue using genetic amplifier in WCBs is that the basal-level
197 expression, either from the sensing module or the amplifying module, may be
198 self-reinforcing and cause a high level of false-positive signal over time. Therefore,
199 the time-dependent responses of the two WCBs were monitored for 10 hours after
200 adding 0 μM , 0.01 μM , 0.1 μM or 10 μM of As(III). As shown in **Fig 3**, the background
201 signal without As(III) slightly increased when the incubation time was above 6 hours
202 for both WCBs. After incubated for 10 hours without arsenic, the fluorescence signal
203 from the positive-feedback biosensor was 5.4 times of that incubated for 1 hour, while
204 the non-positive feedback biosensor showed a 4.8-time increase. Therefore, the
205 basal level expression was comparable for the biosensors with and without the
206 positive-feedback amplifier. False signal from the amplification of potential leaky
207 expression was not noticed.

208 The response of the positive feedback amplifier biosensor to As(III) was faster and
209 the signal was much higher than that of the one without positive feedback. After As(III)

210 was added at the concentration of 0.1 μM for 6 hours, the WCB with the positive
211 feedback amplifier exhibited fluorescence about 3-fold stronger than that without the
212 positive feedback. In addition, the output signal of the positive feedback amplifier
213 biosensor exposed to 10 μM As(III) for 4 hours was 11 times higher than that of the
214 biosensor without positive feedback.

215 *Dose-dependent response to arsenite*

216 The amplification effect of the positive feedback loop with different initial
217 concentrations of arsenic was analyzed. The two WCBs were compared after
218 exposed to As(III) at 0 to 200 μM for 9 hours at 37 °C.

219 Both WCBs displayed a similar dose-dependent pattern with the fluorescence
220 intensity positively correlated with the concentrations of As(III) (**Fig. 4**). Also, it is
221 noted that the sensitivity of the WCB with the positive feedback amplifier was higher
222 by approximately one order of magnitude compared to the WCB without positive
223 feedback. The half-saturation As(III) concentration that gave half of the maximum
224 mCherry fluorescence intensity for the WCB with positive feedback was about 0.5 - 1
225 μM , while the half-saturation As(III) concentration for the WCB without positive
226 feedback is about 10-50 μM . Moreover, the WCB with positive feedback significantly
227 amplified the output signal, about 2.5-5.5 times of that from the WCB without positive
228 feedback when As(III) went from 0.1 to 100 μM . The expression of *mCherry* gene was
229 noticeable when As (III) was added at a concentration as low as 0.1 μM ($p < 0.01$) for

230 the WCB with positive feedback and 0.5 μM ($p < 0.001$) for the one without positive
231 feedback. The detection limit of the WCB with positive feedback is lower than the
232 WHO drinking water standards, and could be potentially developed as arsenic
233 biosensors in real application. These results suggested that compared with the WCB
234 without positive feedback, the one with positive feedback amplifier functions well in
235 enhancing the fluorescence intensity, increasing the detection range, and improving
236 sensitivity.

237 *Specificity of the WCBs*

238 In addition to sensitivity and strength of output signal, specificity toward arsenic is
239 also an important factor to evaluate the WCB. Both WCBs were exposed to NaAsO_2 ,
240 $\text{Pb}(\text{NO}_3)_2$, ZnCl_2 , CuCl_2 , and CdCl_2 , at a final concentration of 0.01 μM , 0.1 μM , 1 μM
241 or 10 μM , and the fluorescence of mCherry was measured after 8 hours. As shown in
242 **Fig. 5A**, compared to As(III), the response of the WCB with positive feedback to other
243 metals was negligible at either 1 μM or 10 μM , less than 2% or 10% of that to As(III).
244 At 0.1 μM , the signal from other metal was about 10% to 60% of that from As(III).
245 However, the fluorescence response of the WCB without positive feedback to other
246 metals was about 37-71% at 0.1 μM , 20-30% at 1 μM , and 15% at 10 μM of that from
247 As(III). By introducing the positive feedback amplifier into the arsenic WCB, the
248 output signal was enhanced so much that the specificity of the WCB toward arsenic

249 was also significantly increased, which is remarkable as no other designs have been
250 reported to be able to improve the specificity of a WCB through circuit engineering.

251 Discussion

252 WCBs have been extensively explored in order to detect toxic heavy metals and
253 metalloids in environments such as cadmium, lead, mercury, and arsenic [28-31].
254 Although many WCBs have been constructed and studied for the detection of arsenic
255 [32-34], most of these WCBs have not been used for environmental monitoring,
256 because of the high requirements of sensitivity and specificity [35-38]. K. de Mora and
257 colleagues have reported a sensitive biosensor for arsenic in which pH is an input
258 signal, and a color change is the output signal [35]. It can detect less than 10 µg/L (10
259 ppb) of As(III) with static overnight incubation. Nevertheless, the incubation time is too
260 long for practical applications. L. A. Pola-Lopez et al. developed a new vector where
261 the RNA polymerase of bacteriophage T7 was used as an amplifier with GFP as the
262 reporter [32]. The detection range of this biosensor was between 5 and 140 µg/L.
263 As(III) concentration below WHO standards can be detected. However, in contrast to
264 our designs, the amplifier did not translate into an improvement of biosensor
265 performance, and the amplification effect was not evaluated using the unamplified
266 biosensor as a control.

267 Genetic amplifiers have been used to construct WCB biosensors to intensify the
268 output signal and increase the sensitivity to the analytes [23,24], but the effect of

269 positive feedback loop on increasing the sensitivity of the circuit is different from case
270 to case, depending on the genetic context and the regulatory element it is coupled
271 with. The LuxR positive feedback loop has been used for designing various WCBs,
272 either increasing the output signal or improving the sensitivity, but has not been
273 reported for detecting arsenic. Our work showed that when coupled with the arsR
274 regulatory circuit, the LuxR positive feedback circuit not only increased its sensitivity,
275 but also improved its selectivity toward As(III).

276 One concern incorporating positive feedback circuit in WCBs in general is high noise
277 level and the false positive signal from amplification of the basal-level expression
278 from leaky promoters. Karan Bansa et al. had applied the positive feedback amplifier
279 to modulate the expression kinetics of membrane proteins [39]. It showed a
280 statistically significant increase in the rate of production of the bd oxidase membrane
281 protein. In addition, the positive feedback plays a role in implementing bistability
282 which is conventionally named high/low or ON/OFF steady-state levels of gene
283 expression. In other words, the gene expression levels of the biosensor is determined
284 by the initial concentration of the inducer, and the level of the initial input inducer can
285 cause changes in gene expression between the two steady-states levels. Single-cell
286 measurements showed that whether positive feedback amplifiers increased cell noise
287 compared with non-positive feedback controls depends on the activity of LuxR
288 proteins. Similar noise level was observed for both the positive feedback and
289 non-positive feedback system. In contrast, the increased noise at higher inducer

290 concentrations may be a result of increased system burden by the reduced growth
291 rates of the cells. In our work, the variation of fluorescence from the WCB with
292 positive feedback was actually slightly lower than that from the WCB without positive
293 feedback. The time response curve in absence of As(III) showed that the output
294 signal accumulated to roughly the same extent for the two WCBs. Amplification of
295 leaky signals was not observed.

296 The arsenic biosensor with the positive feedback amplifier we designed has a
297 broader detection range and a lower detection limit compared with the one without
298 positive feedback, because the positive feedback loop can amplify the output signal,
299 which also increases the sensitivity, as the accumulation of fluorescent proteins
300 occurs at a low concentration of inducer arsenic. The positive feedback biosensor
301 constructed in this study can detect arsenic as low as 0.1 μM and is more sensitive
302 compared with the biosensors constructed thus far [40, 41]. The half-saturation As(III)
303 concentration of the biosensor with positive feedback is about one order of magnitude
304 lower than that without positive feedback. An amplifier has been applied to detect
305 cadmium and lead. It used T7 RNA polymerases to modulate multiple circuits by
306 decoupling the transcription from the host and enhancing the expression [42, 43]. It
307 can reduce the detection limit for cadmium ions, but has little effect on the minimum
308 detection limit of lead ions. In addition to improving the sensitivity of biosensors, the
309 positive feedback amplification system demonstrated improved specificity toward
310 arsenite, as it significantly amplified the signal in response to arsenite but only

marginally increased the signal in response to other metals. So overall it showed a dramatic difference in the fluorescence in response to arsenite and other metals. Many arsenite WCBs have specificity issue [40, 44]. Generally, the specificity may be improved by protein engineering to modify the interaction between the regulator and the inducer metal ions. It is surprising that the positive feedback loop introduced to the arsenite WCB in this study differentially enhance the output signal in response to arsenite and other metals. Arsenite induced signal was 10-40 fold higher than that from other metals, which is sufficient to detect As(III) in the presence of other metals. The minimum detection limit of heavy metal biosensors often refers to the final concentration of the metal in the medium under optimal culture conditions [45]. In this work, the same definition was used to describe the detection limit of the biosensors so that it can be compared with the work from other groups. A concern for the practical application is the difference between the real detection limit and the final concentration, since the analyte is diluted when adding the sample water to the culture. It may not be detectable with high dilution ratios even if the original concentration is within the reported detection limit. One potential solution is to make LB directly from the sample water and inoculate it with the WCBs, but the cells may grow slower with an initial high concentration of heavy metals. Another method is to use high sample water culture ratios to minimize the difference. We tested the growth of the two biosensors in media with diluted nutrients. WCBs were grown in a medium with nutrients concentration two times higher than that in LB and the same NaCl

332 concentration to maintain electrolyte balance. Sodium chloride solution (10 g/L) was
333 mixed with the culture in a ratio of 5:1 or 10:1. In both cases, the growth of the two
334 WCBs was similar to that cultured in regular LB. So for practical applications, the
335 concentration detected largely represent the concentration in the original sample if
336 using a very low dilution ratio. Due to the variation of live systems, WCBs are mainly
337 for qualitatively or semi-quantatively analysis. With a low dilution ratio, the biosensors
338 we designed can be used for an initial test whether the sample is polluted.

339 Another major concern about WCBs is whether they are functional in field
340 applications since the samples may contain highly toxic components or contaminating
341 species, which interfere with cell growth or the accuracy of sensing. We used bacteria
342 as the host in this work, as many other WCBS do [35-37], because bacteria do not
343 require strict conditions for rapid growth and reproduction. They can survive at room
344 temperature and have relatively low requirements for pH and humidity. Though
345 relatively more robust, bacterial WCBs are still subject to environmental fluctuations
346 since the expression of the reporter protein relies on cell growth [46-47]. To solve this
347 issue, the biosensing components have to be decoupled from cell growth. One
348 potential strategy is to use cell-free expression system, and it is becoming feasible
349 with the decreasing costs. Another method is based on the differential interaction
350 between the transcription factor and its cognate promoter in response to the analyte
351 to develop a quick detection assay *in vitro*. This work has demonstrated the sensitivity
352 of the regulatory elements in As(III) detection and the effect of positive feedback on

353 improving the sensitivity of the biosensor. The same regulatory elements could be
354 applied for the design of *in vitro* As(III) biosensors to avoid these issues of using live
355 cells.

356 Overall, our results indicate that the positive feedback WCB is superior to the one
357 lacking positive feedback in terms of response time, sensitivity, and specificity. This
358 amplifier biosensor is able to detect arsenic below the WHO and FAO standards and
359 could be potentially used as a test tool *in situ* to routinely monitor arsenic levels in
360 drinking water. Our work shows the importance of genetic circuit engineering in
361 improving the performance of WCBs and provides insights to the design of other
362 biosensors. Positive feedback loop, though maybe having different effects on the
363 gene circuit depending on the genetic context, is a useful strategy for designing and
364 optimizing WCBs to detect other heavy metals or pollutants.

365 **Acknowledgments**

366 The authors wish to acknowledge the financial support provided by the National Basic
367 Research Program of China ("973" Program: 2014CB745100), the National Natural
368 Science Foundation of China (No. 21576197), and Tianjin Key Research &
369 Development Program (No. 16YFXTSF00460). Moreover, we would like to thank
370 Accdon for providing linguistic assistance during the preparation of this manuscript.

371 **Conflict of Interest**

372 The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of
373 this article.

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508 Figure captions

509 **Fig. 1.** Schematic of the arsenic WCBs with the positive feedback (B) and without (A).

510 (A) The typical arsenic WCB consists the ArsR-regulated promoter P_{ars} , the regulator
511 *arsR*, and the reporter gene *mCherry*. (B) The positive feedback WCB consists of the
512 *arsR*- P_{ars} regulatory circuit and a positive feedback amplifier where LuxR produced in
513 response to arsenite activates the expression of mCherry and LuxR from the P_{luxI}
514 promoter. The LuxR from the P_{luxI} promoter activates its own expression and forms a
515 positive feedback loop.

516 **Fig. 2.** Growth curves of the two WCBs at different concentrations of arsenite. (A) the
517 WCB without positive feedback; (B) the WCB with positive feedback.

518 **Fig. 3.** Time-dependent response of arsenic biosensors. (A) with and (B) without the
519 positive feedback. Biosensors cells were grown for 10 hours at 0 μ M, 0.01 μ M, 0.1 μ M,
520 and 10 μ M of As(III). Statistical significance was shown as * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

521 **Fig. 4.** Dose-response curves of arsenic biosensors with (black solid squares) and
522 without (red solid squares) the positive feedback amplifier. Biosensors were grown for
523 9 hours at different arsenite concentrations from 0 μ M to 200 μ M. The right y-axis
524 indicates that the maximum FIRs value is set to 1. Statistical significance was shown
525 as * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

526 **Fig. 5.** Arsenic specificity of the biosensors with (A) and without (B) the positive
527 feedback amplifier. Fluorescence intensity of the biosensors was measured after

528 exposure to various metals at concentrations of 0.01 μM , 0.1 μM , 1 μM , and 10 μM for
529 8 hours.









