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# Measured methane emissions from a metropolitan wastewater treatment lagoon in Victoria Australia are substantially higher than report emissions based on emission factors

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**Abstract.** Wastewater treatment facilities contribute ~8 % of global anthropogenic methane ($CH_4$) emissions. Accurate measurements of $CH_4$ emissions not only improve greenhouse gas (GHG) emission estimates from the facilities but also expand our understanding of operational impact on emissions, thus enabling the development of effective mitigation strategies. In this study, $CH_4$ emissions were measured during summer and winter seasons at an aerobic lagoon at a large sewage treatment plant in Australia. Line-averaged $CH_4$ concentrations were measured by open-path lasers and $CH_4$ fluxes were calculated using inverse-dispersion modelling. Methane fluxes showed temporal and spatial variations over the measurement periods, and correlated with wastewater dissolved methane, flow rate, and aerator operation. The annual GHG emission of 79,593 $tCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$, represents ~25 % of $CH_4$ production captured by the anaerobic digestion pot, and is approximately 2–3 times higher than the National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Scheme (NGERS) reported emissions of the aerobic lagoon.

**Keywords:** methane emissions, sewage treatment lagoon, surface aerators, inverse-dispersion modelling, open-path laser sensors

**Abbreviations**: BOD, biological oxygen demand, COD, chemical oxygen demand, IDM, inverse-dispersion modelling, NGERS, National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Scheme, OPL, open-path laser, WWTPs, wastewater treatment plants

## 1. Introduction

Wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) are a significant source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions resulting from the environments that have high supply of organic matter and nutrients (Czepiel et al., 1993; Daelman et al., 2012). Substantial methane ($CH_4$) emissions from wastewater treatment facilities have been reported (Guisasola et al., 2008; Song et al., 2023), with this sector contributing to ~5–8 % of global anthropogenic $CH_4$ emissions (Ye et al., 2022), following livestock (32 %), oil and gas (25 %), land fill (13 %), and coal mine (11 %). Methane contributes to climate change with a global warming potential 27 times that of carbon dioxide ($CO_2$) in a 100–year time span and 80 times $CO_2$ considering a 20–year timeframe (Ipcc, 2021). To achieve the goal of the Paris Agreement (e.g., limiting global temperature rise to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels), reducing

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


WWTP's GHG emissions is an important climate action to help to prevent the worst impacts of climate change. Furthermore, assessing the environmental impacts of GHGs, has become a necessity for the long-term sustainability of WWTPs (Mohsenpour et al., 2021). To reduce GHG emissions from WWTPs and achieve the Australia Water sector's goal of net zero emissions by 2035, it requires a better understanding of current GHG emission rates from facilities, as well as an evaluation of the main drivers of emissions, to implement appropriate mitigation measures. Currently there are large uncertainties in estimating these emissions, as WWTPs use generalised, default emission factors (National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Scheme (NGERS), method 2) (Bartram et al., 2019; Nger, 2022), which may not accurately represent local conditions and the specific management practices.

Across various nations, anaerobic ponds are commonly used as the first step in municipal sewage treatment. Raw sewage enters anaerobic ponds and settles into different layers, with a liquid layer over the sludge to prevent oxygen from reaching it during microbial digestion. Anaerobic microbes present in the sludge digest the organic matter in influent raw sewage and settle to the bottom of the pond along with organic and inorganic solids. Sludge can be removed and reused for land application. Aerobic ponds are used following the anaerobic ponds where aerators are deployed to introduce air into the water column. This allows for aerobic respiration to occur, where oxygen and other microbes in the wastewater are mechanically churned, helping to break down organic matter. The bacterial-containing chunks settle to the bottom of the pond. During these processes, $CH_4$, $N_2O$, and $NH_3$ emissions are emitted into the atmosphere.

This study focussed on measuring $CH_4$ emissions at a large lagoon-based sewage treatment facility in Victoria, Australia. It occupies a site of more than 10,000 ha, serving up to 2.5–3 million residents. The area of focus for this emissions measurement research is known as 25W Pond 1, which is adjacent to a covered anaerobic digestion pot, where the raw sewage influent undergoes preliminary treatment. The majority of the treated wastewater after the anaerobic pot enters directly into the Pond 1 (25W) for aerobic treatment with surface aerators, the rest of the wastewater is pumped into an anoxic-aerobic activated sludge plant for secondary treatment. The waste activated sludge generated from the activated sludge plant is returned to the Pond 1 for treatment. The 25W Pond 1 system has 53 surface aerators distributed across the pond (the layout of aerators is shown in Supplementary Materials), and the aerators operational time is often controlled by the flow rate. Furthermore, the aerators (when on) increase the oxygen content in their immediate vicinity, while the water region far from the aerators has less or no oxygen (Nguyen et al., 2024). This operating regime contributes to the spatial and temporal variation of the conditions within the pond (Li et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). This makes it very challenging to accurately measure GHG emissions (Delre et al., 2017).

Different measurement technologies have been reported for measuring GHG emissions in the WWTPs either for integration emission quantification or identification of specific facilities (He et al., 2025). In many jurisdictions the chamber technique is a regulatory standard for direct gas emission measurements (Ye et al., 2022; Morales-Rico et al., 2024; Parravicini et al., 2022). However, chamber measurements are susceptible to the disturbances that result from isolating the source inside a chamber (e.g. it is challenging to measure the emissions from surface aerators (Morales-Rico et al., 2024)). The small measurement footprint of chambers (covering less than 1 $m^2$ of surface) is likely to be a tiny fraction of the source area. Chambers are also poorly suited for long-term measurements due to the labour cost.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


World-wide efforts are underway to implement measurement methodologies that are more accurate than chambers (and cheaper and logistically simpler to use) (Reinelt et al., 2017; Yver Kwok et al., 2015; Jensen et al., 2017; Delre et al., 2017; Samuelsson et al., 2018). One such alternative is the inverse-dispersion modelling (IDM) approach (Flesch et al., 2011), which is the basis of this study. This technique follows the simple idea that an emission source increases the downwind gas concentration, and that a measurement of downwind concentration (above the upwind background level) can be used to quantify the emission rate from the source area. The correlation between the emission rate and concentration is calculated with an atmospheric dispersion model (Flesch et al., 1995). IDM is a non-interference/non-intrusive technique that does not alter the measurement environment. It has modest measurement requirements and is well suited for long-term deployment. We recently reported our studies of measuring $CH_4$, $N_2O$, and $NH_3$ emissions from a sludge drying pan at a WWTP using IDM methods coupled with open-path spectroscopic techniques (Bai et al., 2023; Bai et al., 2025).

The objectives of this study are to measure $CH_4$ emissions from the 25W Pond 1 using IDM coupled with open-path laser techniques, explore the main drivers of emissions from the facility, and validate the NGERs estimate.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Experimental site

This study was conducted at the sewage treatment plant, located in Victoria, Australia. One of two identical aerobic treatment lagoons, 25W Pond 1 was chosen for this study. Wastewater after being treated at from the anaerobic Pot flows directly into 25W Pond 1, and flows through the pond in an east-west direction. The 25W Pond 1 has dimension of 250 × 1010 × 3 m (width × length × depth) (Fig. 1). There are also several lagoons located on the south of the Pond 1, while to the north of Pond 1 the terrain is flat, covered with short grass, and there are no trees or buildings nearby. Further north, there is a corn field, about a few hundred meters north of the pond. A sludge drying pan area is located ~200 m to the west of the pond. This layout allows for $CH_4$ measurements when there are winds tending from the north, because to the north within a radius of a couple of hundred meters, there are no other $CH_4$ sources interfering with the measurements. The average minimum/maximum ambient temperature was approximately 18 °C and 26 °C for summer, 12 °C and 19 °C for winter, respectively. A total of 1.4 and 37.4 mm of precipitation was observed over the summer and winter measurement period, respectively.

Figure 1

### 2.2 $CH_4$ concentrations measured with open-path laser sensors

Three open-path lasers (OPL) were deployed in each campaign measuring line-average $CH_4$ concentration (in ppm-m). Two of the three laser sensors used in this study were from Unisearch Associates Inc. Canada (LasIRView, OPL_C33, OPL_C34), the third laser was from Boreal Laser Inc. Canada (Gasfinder 2.0, OPL_C1013). The concentration sensor sends a collimated beam from a tunable infrared laser diode to the retro reflector mirror, from which the beam is reflected back to the receiver optics and a detector. The outgoing beam is altered by $CH_4$ molecules over the measurement path (between the laser and retro reflector), giving a measure

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


of concentration. Line-averaged $CH_4$ concentration is obtained every few seconds. The precision of $CH_4$ concentration at a 100 m path length is: < 1 ppb for the Unisearch laser, 20 ppb for the Boreal laser.

To avoid surrounding ponds contributing to the emission of target source Pond 1, our experimental layout was designed for only northerly winds, and data collected with other wind directions was not counted for the flux calculation. In each campaign, two lasers were set up at the south of the pond to measure the downwind concentrations: OPL_C33 was located the western side of the pond (west laser) and OPL_C1013 was located the eastern side (east laser), close to the anaerobic Pot cover area. The third laser OPL_C34 (background laser) was located at the north of the pond measuring the upwind concentration (Fig. 1).

Each laser and retro reflector were mounted on a separate tripod at approximate 1.50 m above the ground, with the pathlength of 100–150 m between the laser and retro reflector. Each OPL was powered by a 12-v battery coupled with solar panels. Prior to the measurements, three lasers were conducted cross-calibration on site for at least 48 hours to examine their stability and performance under same climate conditions. Gas emission measurements were begun from 8 February to 12 March 2024 for the summer campaign, and from 15 August to 5 October 2024 for the winter campaign. Measurements from both campaigns are included in this paper.

### 2.3 Pond 1 wastewater samples collected using drone

To examine the Pond 1 effluent chemical and physical property and understand how these factors are associated with the flux measurements, wastewater samples were collected in September using a drone along the middle of the pond at 5, 50, 100, 150, 200, 275, 350 and 500 m from the Pot covered area (sampling locations are shown in Supplements Fig. 1). For each sample, the temperature, redox, pH, and dissolved oxygen were analysed immediately on site. Subsamples (850 mL each) were also taken at each location and analysed in the laboratory for other properties analysis.

### 2.4 $CH_4$ flux calculations using IDM technique

The IDM technique is a classic micrometeorological method that calculates emissions from gas measurements taken in the free air. The micrometeorological methods are generally preferable to other approaches, as they are non-intrusive techniques that are suitable for long-term measurements. Consider a treatment pond that is emitting gas to the atmosphere at an unknown rate $Q$, which causes the average gas concentration ($C$) downwind of the pond to rise above the background value ($C_b$). In the IDM technique, the measurement ($C-C_b$) is used to determine $Q$ with the aid of an atmospheric dispersion model (Windtrax). Because the $Q$ vs $(C-C_b)$ relationship depends on wind conditions, one must also make wind measurements.

In this study, open-path $CH_4$ sensors were located to the south and north of the experimental pond. During northerly winds, this configuration allowed upwind (*Cupwind*) and downwind (*Cdownwind*) measurements from the experimental pond, but not the southern ponds. Following Flesch et al. (2004), the $CH_4$ flux $Q_{IDM}$ is calculated using IDM method following the equation (Eq.1):

$$Q_{IDM} = (Cdownwind - Cupwind)/(C/Q)_{sim} \quad (1)$$

where $Q_{IDM}$ is the $CH_4$ gas emission rate (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$), and *Cdownwind*, *Cupwind* is the line-average gas concentrations (in ppm) measured by downwind and upwind laser sensor, respectively (Fig. 1). The value of

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


$(C/Q)_{sim}$ is the simulated ratio of line=average concentration and emission rate, calculated by WindTrax modelling based on the ambient temperature and pressure, wind statistics, and atmospheric turbulent parameters.

A three-dimensional (3–D) sonic anemometer (CSAT–3, Campbell Scientific, Logan, Utah, USA) coupled with a datalogger (CR23X, Campbell Scientific, Logan, Utah, USA) was located at the south of the Pond 1 at a height of 2.34 m above the ground (Fig. 1), to record wind statistics at a frequency of 10–Hz that are needed for IDM calculation. Fifteen-min statistics includes the friction velocity ($u_*$, m $s^{-1}$), turbulent velocity (u, v, w, T), and its variance ($u^2$, $v^2$, $w^2$, $T^2$) and covariance (uT, uv, uw, vT, vw, wT) in three dimensions, as well as ambient temperature (°C), wind speed (m $s^{-1}$), and wind direction. Ambient pressure (mb) and rainfall (mm) were obtained from Bureau of Meteorology.

The concentrations of $CH_4$ were averaged into15–min intervals then merged with wind variables as inputs for the IDM flux calculation using SAS software (SAS 9.4, SAS Institute Inc. Cary, NC, USA). The atmospheric turbulent parameters including Obukhov stability length (L, m), surface roughness (z0, m), and turbulent velocity fluctuation ($\sigma u/u_*$, $\sigma v/u_*$, and $\sigma w/u_*$) were also calculated for the IDM simulation.

### 2.5 $CH_4$ flux calculation filtering criteria

Following Flesch et al. (2016), the data for $CH_4$ emission calculations using the IDM methods were not counted when:

1) atmospheric turbulent conditions were poor: $u_* < 0.1$ m $s^{-1}$, $|L| < 2$ m, $z0 > 0.05$ m,
2) the laser light level returned by the retro reflector was < 6,000 or > 12,000,
3) the relationship between the measured external and reference signal $R^2$ was < 96,
4) The difference in concentration between the upwind measurement and background level simulated by IDM (WindTrax model) was > 0.02 ppm,
5) The upwind laser concentration measurement was < 1.8 ppm,
6) The percentage of source area covered by the touchdowns was < 20 %,
7) Wind direction was > 40 ° and < 330 °

### 2.6 Average Pond 1 $CH_4$ flux calculation

The classic way to do post-stratification when using stratified sampling is to weight the estimate by the area that each strata represents (i.e., take a weighted average). In summer campaign, the pond was divided into two strata of similar size, the total emission was thus (0.5 times flux1 + 0.5 times flux2) × total pond area. Because the east laser was much closer to the Pot end covered area for the winter campaign, we used a weight of 0.67 for the west laser (flux 1) and a lower weight of 0.33 for the east laser (flux 2), therefore, the total emission was thus (0.67 times flux 1 + 0.33 times flux 2) × total pond area. For a more conservative estimate, a weight of 0.25 was used for east laser and 0.75 for west laser, the total emission was thus (0.75 times flux 1 + 0.25 times flux 2).

### 2.7 $CH_4$ flux uncertainty

There are four sources of uncertainty in our flux estimate: instrument precision (± 0.02 %), inversion dispersion model (± 20 %) (Laubach and Kelliher, 2005), sampling uncertainty (i.e., the s.e. calculated using the number of

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


observations and standard deviation among the 15-min measurements, which contributes around 1.2 to 4.0 %), and the pond area represented by each laser in our weighted average (50–50 % for the summer campaign; from 25 to 33 % for laser 1013 and 75 to 67 % for laser 33 for the winter campaign, which corresponds to a 5 % relative error for winter and 0 % error for summer). These four sources of uncertainty are added in quadrature (sqrt ($e_1$^2 + $e_2$^2 + $e_3$^2 + $e_4$^2), where the $e_i$'s are the different error terms) to propagate the uncertainty and get our final estimates: 417.0 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ (± 20.4 %, total uncertainty) in summer and 349.1 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ (± 20.7 %, total uncertainty) in winter. The average emission for Pond 1 over the two campaigns is 383.1 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ (± 20.5 %, total uncertainty). Note that the total uncertainty is dominated by the inverse-dispersion model term as the terms are added in quadrature.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Spatial and temporal variations of $CH_4$ fluxes

Fifteen-minute $CH_4$ fluxes from Pond 1 varied spatially between the eastern and western pond areas (Fig. 2). Higher fluxes were observed at eastern pond area, ranged from ~200 to over 1900 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$, and lower fluxes ranged from ~13 to over 570 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ were observed at western pond area. Furthermore, a clear 24–h diurnal pattern in the fluxes was observed at the eastern pond area, with lower emissions around midday and higher emissions at night-time or early morning. This diurnal pattern of maximum $CH_4$ emission at 8 am was also reported in Glaz et al. (2016). In contrast, no obvious diurnal pattern of the emissions was observed at the western measurement location.

Daily averaged $CH_4$ fluxes varied among the seasons (Fig. 2). In the summer season, the daily average of $CH_4$ flux was 252.0 (± 9.4, n = 139) (± s.e. for sampling uncertainty, n, observation numbers) and 582.1 (± 23.3, n = 185) μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ from the western and eastern pond area over the 5-week measurement period, respectively. In the winter season, the daily averaged $CH_4$ flux was 134.7 (± 2.3, n = 797) and 874.2 (± 10.6, n = 692) μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ from western and eastern pond area over the 7-week measurement period, respectively. The emissions at eastern pond area were ~2–6 times higher than that at western pond area, during both winter and summer measurements. The much higher eastern flux measurement in the winter campaign was mainly due to the laser measurement location being much closer to the anaerobic Pot covered area than during the summer measurement campaign. In contrast, the laser's locations at the western pond area remained the same during both summer and winter campaigns and the pond measurements were higher in summer than that in winter by 46 %.

The measured winter flux at western pond area was much higher than the higher range of the reports, e.g., the anerobic ponds in Australia (7 ± 1 g $m^{-2}$ $day^{-1}$) (Hernandez-Paniagua et al., 2014), duckweed treatment ponds of 1276 ± 299 mg $CH_4$ $m^{-2}$ $d^{-1}$ in the US (Sims et al., 2013), organic matter enriched sludge treatment wetlands of 1900 mg $CH_4$ $m^{-2}$ $d^{-1}$ in Norway (Søvik and Kløve, 2007), and 5400 mg $CH_4$ $m^{-2}$ $d^{-1}$ Spain (Uggetti et al., 2012). Different measurement techniques, wastewater composition, climate conditions and operation management could introduce variability of methane fluxes (Reinelt et al., 2017).

Figure. 2

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


### 3.2 Main drivers of $CH_4$ fluxes from 25W Pond 1

#### 3.2.1 Wastewater chemical and physical properties and flow rate

The composition and load of the wastewater played important roles in the spatiotemporal dynamics of gas emissions (Glaz et al., 2016). The wastewater sampling collected along the middle section of Pond 1 in September showed that dissolved methane, biological oxygen demand (BOD), chemical oxygen demand (COD), and wastewater temperature decreased with distance from the Pot covered area (Fig. 3), in contrast, dissolved oxygen, pH, and redox positively correlated with distance from the anaerobic Pot covered area ($P < 0.05$). This decreasing trend of dissolved methane would explain the spatial variation of pond emissions and the difference in measured $CH_4$ fluxes between the eastern and the western part of the pond. Linear correlations with correlation coefficient ($R$) and $P$ value are shown in Figure 4.

Wastewater flow rates (Fig. 5) showed a 24–h diurnal trend through the pot-pond area: lower flow rates before midday and higher flow rates in the evening and early morning. The winter measurement as an example is shown in Figure 5. This diurnal pattern of flow rates was similar to the $CH_4$ flux diurnal variation, but the latter showed a time lag of ~1–2 h (Fig. 5, red dots and red line). This is not surprising as, together, Pond 1 and the Pot covered area are a large area, and it takes 1–2 h for the wastewater to flow into the area where the laser measures the footprints of emissions. Besides this, hourly mean fluxes from the eastern pond area were positively correlated to hourly mean wastewater flow rates ($R = 0.49$, $P < 0.001$). This relationship was also reported in Glaz et al. (2016). However, the mean flux from the western pond area did not show an obvious correlation to the flow rate. As stated previously, the emission variation was associated with wastewater dissolved methane concentrations. At the western end of the pond the concentration of dissolved methane was negligible and therefore, there were lower $CH_4$ fluxes.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

#### 3.2.2 Aerators operation

The surface aerators closest to two downwind measurement lasers were examined, and the fluxes were compared before the surface aerators were all switched off, when they were off, and when they were switched on again. For the aerators close to the east laser, the hourly fluxes were 830.2, 296.8, 1453.0 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ for before these aerators were all switched off, when they were off and when they were switched on again, respectively, on 23 August, and 1139.8, 251.2, 766.0 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$, respectively, on 6 September 2024. In contrast, on the west end of the pond, the hourly fluxes were 90.0, 81.0 and 130.0 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ on 23 August for the before, during and after the off event, respectively, and 191.0, 121.0 and 125.0 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$ on 6 September 2024, respectively. Therefore, the surface aerators off events at the eastern pond area substantially decreased the emissions flux by 80 %.

#### 3.2.3 25W Pond 1 daily $CH_4$ flux and annual GHG emissions

The average daily $CH_4$ flux from 25W Pond 1 was 8.79 and 7.36 t $day^{-1}$ over the summer and winter measurement period, respectively, by taking the mean of both fluxes at eastern and western pond area and multiplying by the total pond area (~244,000 $m^2$) (Table 1). It was found that during the summer campaign, the fluxes over the

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


western pond area were almost 2 times higher than that of the winter campaign (252 vs 134 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$). This is likely associated with the sludge dredging events at Pond 1 between June and July 2024 (only weeks before the start of winter campaign). The dredging took place at the location where the western laser was measuring. It should also be noted that prior to the dredging in 2024, Pond 1 was last dredged in April–August 2023, which was approximately 6 months before the summer campaign. This means that removed sludge could have resulted in the lower emissions at 25W Pond 1 during the winter campaign. Noting that most emissions measured at the western pond area are likely from the sludge rather than the wastewater given the very low dissolved methane concentration in the western pond area.

Methane emissions from Pond 1 showed temporal and spatial variations over the measurement periods, with an average of 381.1 μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$, equivalent to annual $CH_4$ emission of 2,948 t (Table 1). The annual $CH_4$ emission was then calculated as $CO_2$ equivalent ($CO_2$-e) by multiplying this value by a factor of 27 ($CH_4$'s global warming potential in 100 years) (Ipcc, 2021), resulting in an annual GHG emission of 79,593 $tCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$ (Table 1). The emissions at the eastern pond area were comparable to the measurements from wastewater treatment facilities in the US using remote sensing techniques (Thorpe et al., 2021).

According to the daily average effluent flow of 108.6 ML $day^{-1}$, we calculated net daily COD change in Pond 1 (ΔCOD, mg $L^{-1}$) using the difference in the COD value between the average influent COD value (measured at the east end) and the average effluent COD value at the outlet. The ΔCOD for the summer and winter campaign was 306.2 and 379.8 ML $day^{-1}$, corresponding to 36.58 and 41.25 tCOD $day^{-1}$ processed by the Pond 1, respectively. Therefore, the accumulative $CH_4$ flux per tCOD change accounted for 178.4 $kgCH_4$ $t^{-1}$ΔCOD for winter campaign, comparable to the value of 240.3 $kgCH_4$ $t^{-1}$ ΔCOD for summer campaign (Table 1).

Table 1

The average annual flux as a proportion of production ranged from 23.4 to 25.3 %, reflecting that the measured emissions are approximately 25 % of the $CH_4$ captured by the anaerobic Pot. Our measurements are ~3.2–3.4 times higher than the NGERS reported emissions from Pond 1 (adopting the emissions factor of Unmanaged Aerobic Lagoon, Method 2, NGERS) which averaged 36,843 $tCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$ for financial years 2023 and 2024 (Table 2). These results are comparable to other studies on $CH_4$ emissions from WWTPs, which found that measured emissions were almost 2 times IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change)/EPA estimates that use emission factors (Moore et al., 2023; Song et al., 2023).

Table 2

In Australia, approximately 737 of the 1,234 WWTPS primarily use treatment ponds, accounting for ~60 % of the total WWTPs nationwide. The NGERS estimate across the 737 WWTPs is 18.5 $MtCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$, based on our study the actual national GHG emissions from the treatment lagoons could be considerably higher than the estimate. In fact, while fugitive $CH_4$ emissions from coal, oil, and gas plants have been the focus in Australia and globally, little attention has been paid to $CH_4$ emissions from sewage treatment ponds. The potentially underestimated $CH_4$ emissions are often overlooked in climate change calculations. Meanwhile, climate change-induced warming in Australia and Melbourne's growing population will likely enhance $CH_4$ emissions from

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


WWTPs. These issues must be addressed, and concrete actions to reduce GHG emissions from the wastewater sector are urgently needed.

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

Methane emissions from 25W Pond 1 showed the temporal and spatial variations over the measurement periods. The average annual flux as a proportion of $CH_4$ production ranged from 23.4 % to 25.3 %, reflecting that the measured emissions are approximately 25 % of the methane captured by the Pot. Our measurements are ~3 times higher than the NGERS estimate. We therefore recommended that the options for mitigating $CH_4$ emissions include examining the impacts of changing management practices. Such practices could involve increasing the dredging frequency of Pond 1, increasing the efficacy of capturing $CH_4$ from the covered area (e.g., by extending its length), optimizing the aerator operating time to prolong the period that dissolved methane remains in the wastewater, or adding substances to the pond (e.g. microalgae). However, in practice these proposals might not be viable options. In the long run, to substantially reduce fugitive $CH_4$ emissions from WWTPs that contributes to achieving carbon neutrality, it will be necessary to implement a new primary treatment plant and move away from the current anaerobic treatment followed by aerobic pond design.

To facilitate the investigation on methane reduction, a study of the microbial community within the wastewater and sludge will help to better understand the methane production processes. In addition, this study has shown that inverse-dispersion modelling combined with open-path spectroscopic techniques are useful tools to continually monitor emissions at a large scale. Measuring a suite of gas emissions including $CH_4$, $N_2O$, and $NH_3$, would better allow the development of effective mitigation strategies. This is especially important once the methane oxidizers and producers in a wastewater treatment pond are identified.

## 5. Author contributions

MB, PJ, DC designed the experiments and MB carried them out. MB prepared the manuscript with contributions from all co-authors.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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## 7. Data Availability

The data will be available before publication.

## 8. Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
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## Figures

Figure 1


**Figure 1.** The layout of experimental site with one upwind open-path laser (light blue line with triangles), and two downwind open-path lasers (green and purple for summer campaign, green and blue for winter campaign). The Red triangle shows the weather station location during the summer campaign, while the dark blue triangle shows the weather station location during the winter campaign. (Source: Image ©2024 Airbus, Google Earth).

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


503 **Figure 2**

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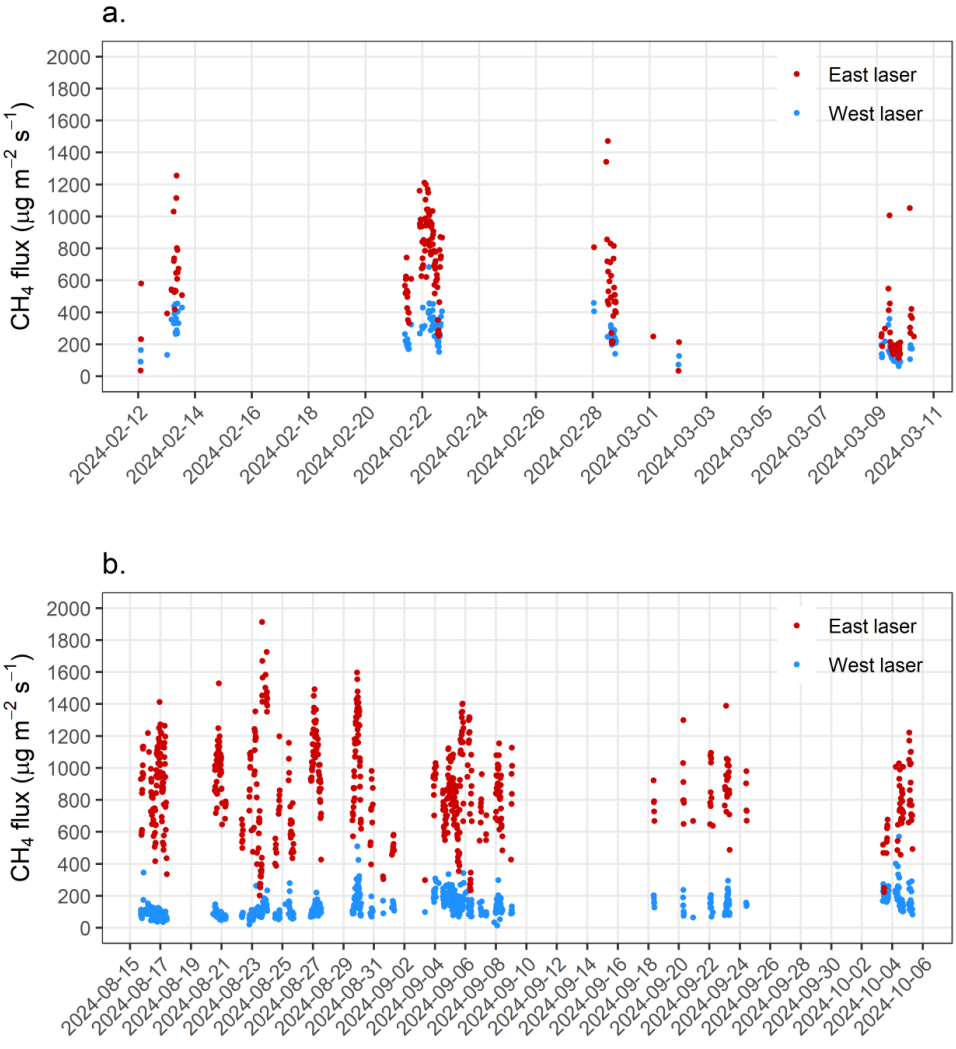


505

506 **Figure 2.** Fifteen-minute $CH_4$ fluxes from western (blue) and eastern area (red) of sewage treatment 25W Pond 1
507 measured over the summer season (a) from 12 February to 10 March 2024, and the winter season (b) from 15
508 August to 5 October 2024 in Victoria, Australia.

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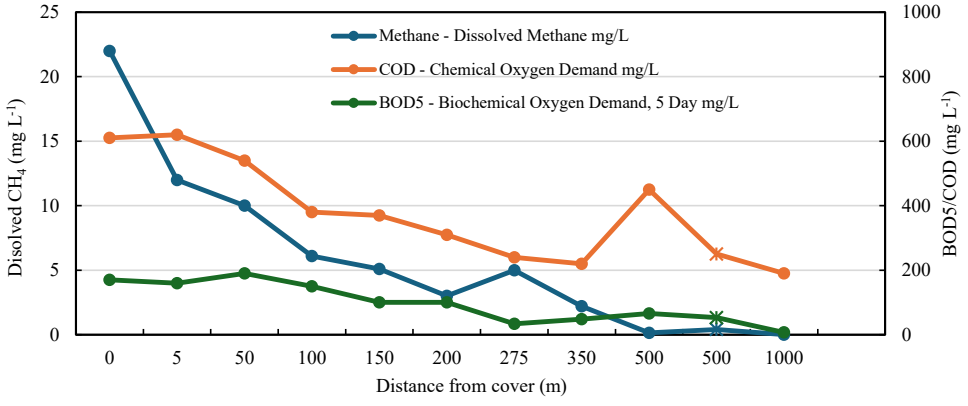
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


511 Figure 3

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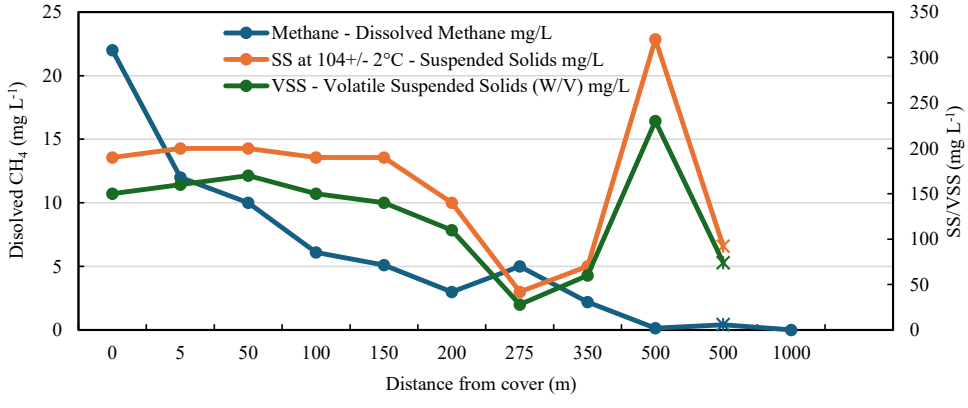


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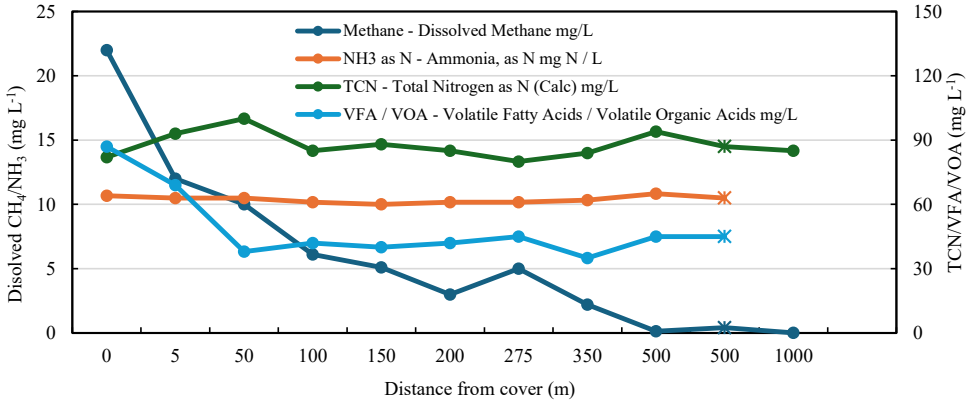


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https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


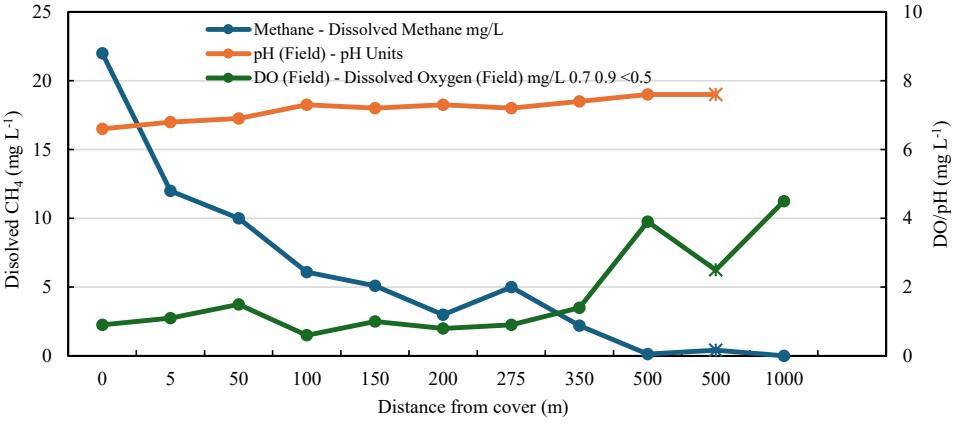


**Figure 3.** Variations of dissolved methane, BOD, COD, SS, VSS, $NH_3$, TCN, VFA, pH, and dissolved oxygen shown with increasing distance from the cover area. Wastewater samples were collected by drone along the middle part of Pond 1 between 10:00–12:30 on the 10 September 2024 at 5, 50, 100, 150, 200, 275, 350, and 500 m from the cover, and extra samples were also collected at the PotCod, the jetty area (marked with an "ж") and Pond 1 outlet (0, 500, and 1000 m from the cover, respectively) on the same day.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


Figure 4

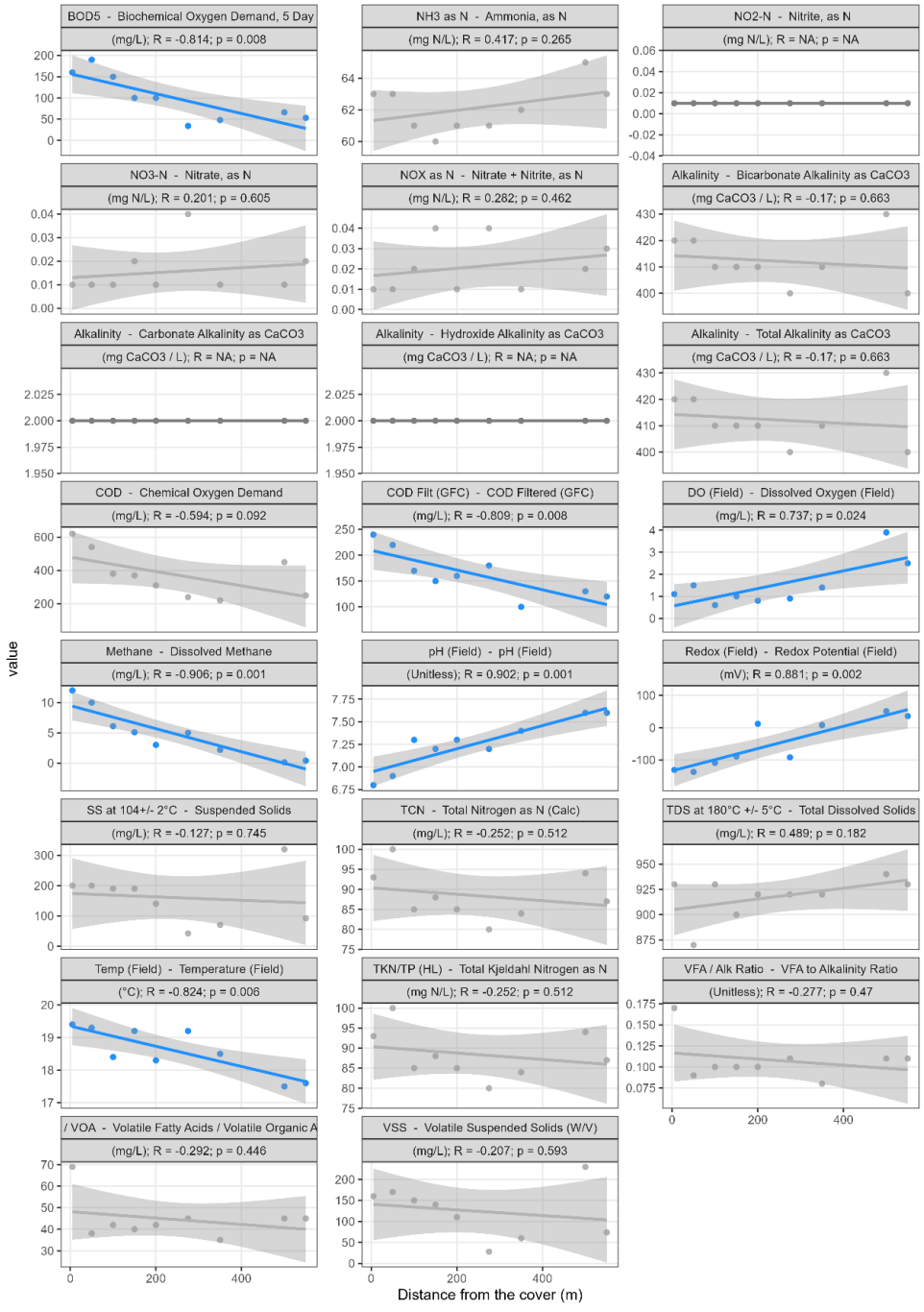


**Figure 4.** Correlations between wastewater sample contents including dissolved methane, BOD, COD, SS, VSS, N-$NH_3$, TCN, VFA, pH, and dissolved oxygen and the distance from the anaerobic cover. Samples were collected

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


by drone along the middle part of Pond 1 between 10:00–12:30 on the 10 September 2024 at 5, 50, 100, 150, 200, 275, 350, 500 m from the anaerobic cover, extra samples were also collected at the PotCod and the jetty area (0 and 500 m from the cover) on the same day. Linear correlation coefficient (*R*) and *P* value are also shown.

Figure 5

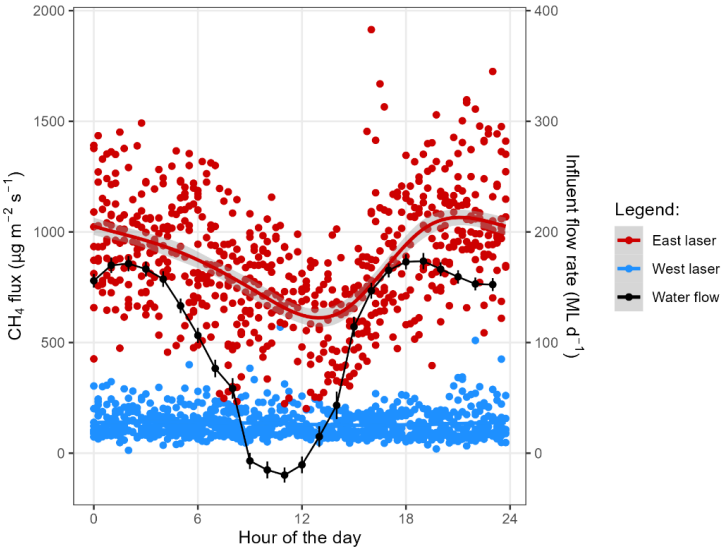


**Figure 5.** 24-h diurnal variation of average wastewater flow rate and $CH_4$ fluxes during a winter campaign at 25W Pond 1 from 15 August to 5 October 2024.

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


## Tables

Table 1

**Table 1. Daily average of $CH_4$ flux (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) from the western pond area and eastern pond area measured at 25W Pond 1 from 8 February to 10 March 2024 (summer campaign) and 15 August to 5 October 2024 (winter campaign). The accumulative GHG flux ($CO_2$ equivalent, $CO_2$-e) and accumulative methane per net load COD (ΔCOD) (kg$CH_4$ $t^{-1}$ΔCOD) are also shown.**

| | **Summer campaign** | | **Winter campaign** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Western pond area emissions (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) | Eastern pond area emissions (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) | Western pond area emissions (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) [§] | Eastern pond area emissions (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) |
| | 252.01 (n = 139) | 582.06 (n = 185) | 134.68 (n = 797) | 874.19 (n = 692) |
| Daily averaged flux (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) | 50 %:50 % weight<br><br>417.0 | 417.04 | Low range<br>High range<br><br>349.1 | 319.6<br>378.7 |
| Daily averaged Pond 1 flux (t $day^{-1}$) [δ] | 8.79 | | 7.36 | |
| Daily ΔCOD load (t $day^{-1}$) [#] | 36.58 | | 41.25 | |
| kg$CH_4$ $t^{-1}$ΔCOD | 240.3 | | 178.4 | |
| | | | | |
| Average Pond 1 $CH_4$ emission (μg $m^{-2}$ $s^{-1}$) [#] | 381.1 | | | |
| Annual Pond 1 $CH_4$ emission (t) [#] | 2,947.9 | | | |
| Annual GHG emissions ($tCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$)[≠] | 79,593.3 | | | |

[δ], the 25W Pond 1 area is 244,007 $m^2$

[§] n, the number of good measurements [§] the s.e. for the mean represents the total uncertainty [#] COD, chemical oxygen demand. The mean daily net load of COD (ΔCOD) is 379.8, 306.2 mg $L^{-1}$ for winter and summer campaign, respectively. ΔCOD is determined by the difference between the average influent COD value measured at the east end and the average wastewater COD value at the outlet, $\Delta COD_{summer}$ = 445.0 –138.8 = 306.2 mg $L^{-1}$, $\Delta COD_{winter}$ = 581.3 – 201.4 = 379.8 mg $L^{-1}$. Daily flow rate is 108.6, 119.5 ML $day^{-1}$ for winter and summer campaign, respectively. The daily net load of COD in t $day^{-1}$= 379.8 ×$10^{-9}$ mg $L^{-1}$ × 108.6 ×$10^6$ L $day^{-1}$ = 41.25 tCOD $day^{-1}$ (winter campaign). For summer campaign, the daily net load of COD in t $day^{-1}$= 306.2×$10^{-9}$ mg $L^{-1}$ × 119.5 × $10^6$ L $day^{-1}$ = 36.58 tCOD $day^{-1}$.

[#] total uncertainty associated with the averages is 20.7 and 20.4 % for the eastern and western measurements, respectively. The total uncertainty for both campaigns is 20.5 % using the equation: square root of (0.5*(20.7 %)$^2$+0.5*(20.4 %)$^2$) and is dominated by the inverse dispersion model uncertainty.

[≠] annual Pond 1 emission (t) × 27 of global warming potential for $CH_4$

https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-2026-6
Preprint. Discussion started: 3 March 2026


583 Table 2

584 **Table 2. Flux measurements from this study compared to NGERS reporting, the mass balance of liquid**
585 **emission and methane production from the anaerobic Pot.**

| | **Summer campaign** $tCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$ | **Winter campaign** $tCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$ |
|---|---|---|
| NGERS Reporting based on emissions factor for FY2024≠ | **25,079** | |
| NGERS Reporting based on emissions factor for FY2023≠ | **48,607** | |
| Mass balance (not including sludge) emissions | 25,019 | 23,298 |
| OP laser spectroscopy flux measurements (upper) | 89854 | 81599 |
| **Average annual flux measurements (upper)** | **85,727** | |
| OP laser spectroscopy flux measurements (lower) | 89,854 | 68,852 |
| **Average annual flux measurements (lower)** | **79,353** | |
| | 12,128 $CH_4$ t $yr^{-1}$ | |
| | **339,573 $tCO_2$-e $yr^{-1}$** | |
| | **25.3%** | |
| | **23.4%** | |

586 ≠NGERS, national greenhouse and energy reporting scheme

587