Using X-ray Absorption Spectroscopy to Probe Metallocluster Biosynthesis in the Nitrogenase Enzyme System

Mary C. Corbett1, Yilin Hu2, Farzad Naderi2, Aaron W. Fay2, Markus W. Ribbe2, Britt Hedman3, and Keith O. Hodgson1,3

1Department of Chemistry, Stanford University, 2Department of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, University of California, Irvine, and 3Stanford Synchrotron Research Laboratory, SLAC, Stanford University

Ninety-percent of biological fixed nitrogen production, the process by which atmospheric nitrogen is reduced to ammonia, is catalyzed by the nitrogenase enzyme system. Two unique iron-containing metalloclusters, FeMoco and the P-cluster, have been identified as critical to nitrogenase activity. The assembly of these metalloclusters in vivo is a complex bioinorganic process of significant current interest. In Azotobacter vinelandii, the nitrogen fixation (nif) genes control nitrogenase protein and metallocluster assembly. Genetic studies have targeted the specific nif genes involved in cluster biosynthesis; however, little is known about the molecular mechanisms by which these clusters are constructed. Using primarily x-ray absorption spectroscopy, we have determined the structures of metalloclusters at different stages in the biosynthetic pathway. These structures have lent new insights into the biosyntheses of this complex enzyme and its component clusters.