Role of the *Synechococcus* PCC 7942 nitrogen regulator protein PipX in NtcA-controlled processes

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The *Synechococcus* sp. PCC 7942 nitrogen regulator PipX interacts in a 2-oxoglutarate-dependent manner with the global nitrogen transcription factor NtcA and the signal transduction protein P_{II}. *In vivo*, PipX is involved in the NtcA-dependent induction of *glnB* and *glnN* genes. To further investigate the extent to which PipX is involved in global nitrogen control, the effect of *pipX* inactivation on various nitrogen-regulated processes was determined. The PipX-deficient mutant was able to use nitrate as a nitrogen source and to efficiently inhibit the nitrate transport upon ammonium addition but showed decreased nitrate and nitrite reductase activities and a delay in the induction of nitrate utilization after transfer of cultures from ammonium- to nitrate-containing media. In contrast to the wild-type, glutamine synthetase activity was not upregulated upon depletion of combined nitrogen from cultures of the mutant strain. Inactivation of *pipX* impaired induction of *nblA* and delayed phycobilisome degradation, but did not affect recovery of nitrogen-deprived cultures. Taken together, the results indicate that PipX interacts with NtcA to facilitate efficient acclimation of cyanobacteria to conditions of nitrogen limitation.

Received 19 October 2006

Revised 23 November 2006

Accepted 23 November 2006

INTRODUCTION

Cyanobacteria are phototrophic organisms that perform oxygenic photosynthesis. Autotrophic growth requires the constant assimilation of ammonium via the glutamine synthetase–glutamate synthase (GS-GOGAT) cycle (Muro-Pastor *et al.*, 2005), resulting in consumption of the carbon-skeleton of 2-oxoglutarate to yield glutamate. Glutamine synthetase, which catalyses the incorporation of ammonium into glutamate to yield glutamine is the key enzyme of nitrogen assimilation. Two types of glutamine synthetase are produced by the non-diazotrophic cyanobacterium *Synechococcus* sp. PCC 7942 (hereafter called *Synechococcus*): GSI, a typical eubacterial glutamine synthetase encoded by *glnA*, and GSIII, encoded by *glnN*. The GSIII class is strongly induced in nitrogen-depleted cultures and appears to play a role in acclimation to conditions of nitrogen starvation (Sauer *et al.*, 2000). Due to the lack of 2-oxoglutarate dehydrogenase in cyanobacteria, synthesis of 2-oxoglutarate represents the final step in the oxidative branch of the TCA cycle and directly links 2-oxoglutarate levels to nitrogen assimilation (Herrero *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, the cellular 2-oxoglutarate concentration is an excellent indicator of the cell carbon to nitrogen balance. 2-Oxoglutarate modulates the activity and/or binding properties of three key cyanobacterial nitrogen regulators: the signal transduction protein P_{II}, the transcriptional activator NtcA and the regulatory factor PipX (Forchhammer, 2004; Espinosa *et al.*, 2006).

In cyanobacteria, multiple metabolic and developmental processes are induced by nitrogen starvation. NtcA, the global regulator for nitrogen control, activates genes involved in nitrogen assimilation, heterocyst differentiation and acclimation to nitrogen starvation (Herrero *et al.*, 2001; Luque *et al.*, 2001; Sauer *et al.*, 2000). NtcA belongs to the CAP/CRP (the catabolite activator protein or cyclic AMP receptor protein) family of transcriptional activators. 2-Oxoglutarate stimulates complex formation between PipX and NtcA (Espinosa *et al.*, 2006), binding of NtcA to target sites (Vazquez-Bermudez *et al.*, 2002) and transcription activation *in vitro* (Tanigawa *et al.*, 2002). NtcA plays a key role in cyanobacterial nitrogen assimilation, being required for the expression of multiple genes repressed by ammonium, the preferred nitrogen source (Herrero *et al.*, 2001). Genes or operons directly regulated by NtcA in *Synechococcus* include the *nirA* operon, encoding the *nirA*–*nrtABCD*–*narB* genes for nitrate assimilation, the *nirB* operon, encoding genes for maximum nitrate assimilation, the *glnA* and *glnN* genes for GSI and GSIII, respectively, the *glnB* for P_{II}, the *nblA* gene required for phycobilisome degradation (Luque *et al.*, 2001) and the *ntcA* gene itself. In agreement with this, *Synechococcus* NtcA-deficient mutants are highly pleiotropic, being unable to assimilate nitrate, upregulate glutamine synthetase (Vega-Palas *et al.*, 1990), or acclimate appropriately to nitrogen starvation (Sauer *et al.*, 1999).

The P_{II} signal transduction protein is one of the most conserved and widespread signal transduction proteins in nature and plays key roles in nitrogen-assimilatory processes (Arcondeguy *et al.*, 2001; Ninfa & Jiang, 2005). Signal transduction by P_{II} (*glnB* product) in cyanobacteria displays unique features with respect to both covalent modification and downstream signalling (Forchhammer, 2004). Physiological studies showed that P_{II} mediates the short-term ammonium inhibition of nitrate transport (Lee *et al.*, 2000) and controls nitrate uptake in response to light availability (Kloft & Forchhammer, 2005). Furthermore, nitrate reductase in *Synechococcus* may be directly regulated by P_{II} (Takatani *et al.*, 2006). However, in these cases, no physical interaction with P_{II} was reported. Using yeast two-hybrid approaches, three cyanobacterial P_{II} receptors could recently be identified: the enzyme *N*-acetylglutamate kinase (NAGK) (Burillo *et al.*, 2004; Heinrich *et al.*, 2004) and the regulatory factor PipX (Burillo *et al.*, 2004; Espinosa *et al.*, 2006) in *Synechococcus*, and the non-conserved membrane protein PamA in *Synechocystis* sp. PCC 6803 (Osanai *et al.*, 2005). The physiological role of the P_{II} interaction with these protein receptors is only understood in the case of NAGK. The P_{II}–NAGK regulatory interaction has been conserved across domains of life during the evolution of oxygenic photosynthetic organisms (Burillo *et al.*, 2004; Chen *et al.*, 2006; Sugiyama *et al.*, 2004). P_{II} stimulates NAGK activity and relieves arginine inhibition to different extents in *Synechococcus* and *Arabidopsis thaliana* (Chen *et al.*, 2006; Heinrich *et al.*, 2004; Maheswaran *et al.*, 2004).

Binding of PipX to P_{II} and NtcA is inversely affected by 2-oxoglutarate (Espinosa *et al.*, 2006). Complex formation between PipX and P_{II} was impaired by 2-oxoglutarate in the

presence of ATP, while the binding of PipX to NtcA could only be observed in the presence of 2-oxoglutarate. *In vivo*, PipX activated NtcA-dependent promoters *glnB* and *glnN* under conditions of nitrogen deficiency, corresponding to high intracellular levels of 2-oxoglutarate, supporting a role for PipX in the activation of NtcA-dependent promoters under nitrogen starvation. In order to investigate the involvement of PipX in nitrogen assimilation and acclimation to nitrogen deficiency, we now analyse the impact of the genetic inactivation of *pipX* on previously characterized NtcA-controlled processes.

METHODS

Molecular genetic techniques and growth conditions. The strains and plasmids used in this work are listed in Table 1. Cloning procedures were carried out with *Escherichia coli* DH5 α , using standard techniques. *Synechococcus* strains were grown photoautotrophically at 30 °C while shaking under constant illumination (75 μ E m⁻² s⁻¹) provided by cool white fluorescent lights in BG11 medium (nitrate-containing), BG11₀ (no added nitrogen) or BG11-NH₄ (BG11₀ supplemented with 10 mM NH₄Cl, 10 mM HEPES/NaOH pH 7.8). For growth on plates, the medium was solidified by addition of 1% (w/v) agar. Plates were incubated at 30 °C under constant illumination. For initiation of nitrogen deprivation, mid-exponential cultures (OD₇₅₀ 0.5) were harvested by centrifugation, washed twice with BG11₀ and finally resuspended in BG11₀. Whenever appropriate, cultures contained kanamycin (10 μ g ml⁻¹) or chloramphenicol (5 μ g ml⁻¹).

Construction of plasmids and *luxAB* reporter strains. To construct plasmid pUAGC103, a 206 bp fragment corresponding to the upstream region of the *nblA* gene was PCR amplified using primers 5'-GGCGCTGCCTGGGAAAGTCACGCC-3' and 5'-GGA-GCCTCCGGCACTGCAGATG-3' and cloned into the neutral site II

Table 1. Strains and plasmids

Strain or plasmid	Relevant characteristics	Source or reference
<i>E. coli</i> DH5 α	F ⁻ ϕ 80dlacZ Δ M15 Δ (<i>lacZYA</i> – <i>argF</i>)U169 <i>endA1 recA1 hsdR17</i> (r _K ⁻ m _K ⁺) <i>deoR thi-1 supE44 gyrA96 relA1 λ</i> ⁻	Hanahan (1985)
<i>Synechococcus</i> sp. PCC 7942	Wild-type <i>Synechococcus</i> sp. PCC 7942	Pasteur culture collection
<i>Synechococcus</i> SA591	PipX ⁻ (kanamycin resistance cartridge inserted into the <i>pipX</i> gene of strain PCC 7942)	Espinosa <i>et al.</i> (2006)
<i>Synechococcus</i> MNtcA	NtcA ⁻ (kanamycin resistance cartridge inserted into the <i>ntcA</i> gene of strain PCC 7942)	Sauer <i>et al.</i> (1999)
<i>Synechococcus</i> NblR45	NblR ⁻ (kanamycin resistance cartridge inserted into the <i>nblR</i> gene of strain PCC 7942)	Luque <i>et al.</i> (2001)
<i>Synechococcus</i> WT-C103	Cm ^r derivative of strain PCC 7942; P _{<i>nblA</i>} :: <i>luxAB</i> inserted into chromosome neutral site	This work
<i>Synechococcus</i> SA591-C103	Cm ^r derivative of strain SA591; P _{<i>nblA</i>} :: <i>luxAB</i> inserted into chromosome neutral site	This work
<i>Synechococcus</i> MNtcA-C103	Cm ^r derivative of strain MNtcA; P _{<i>nblA</i>} :: <i>luxAB</i> inserted into chromosome neutral site	This work
pAM1580	Amp ^r Cm ^r derivative of pAM1573 plasmid carrying <i>luxAB</i> reporter genes	Andersson <i>et al.</i> (2000)
pRK2013	Km ^r helper plasmid	Figurski & Helinski (1979)
pRL443	Amp ^r conjugal plasmid	Elhai <i>et al.</i> (1997)
pUAGC103	pAM1580 derivative with P _{<i>nblA</i>} :: <i>luxAB</i> fusion	This work

targeting vector pAM1580. Plasmids pRK2013 and pRL443 were used as a helper and conjugative plasmid, respectively, to transfer pUAGC103 into *Synechococcus* strains (Elhai *et al.*, 1997). Transformants were selected on chloramphenicol-containing BG11 or BG11-NH₄ plates.

Enzymic activities. Nitrate uptake activity was assayed by measuring nitrate depletion from the external medium as described previously (Lee *et al.*, 1998). BG11 cultures grown to mid-exponential phase were used to determine nitrate and nitrite reductase activities at 30 °C using dithionite-reduced methyl viologen as the electron donor. Nitrate reductase activity (Herrero *et al.*, 1985) was measured in permeabilized cells by including mixed alkyltrimethylammonium bromide (MTA) in the reaction mixture at a final concentration of 50 µg ml⁻¹. Nitrite reductase activity (Herrero & Guerrero, 1986) was also assayed in cells made permeable with MTA (250 µg ml⁻¹). Production (nitrate reductase) or disappearance (nitrite reductase) of nitrite during the reactions was measured as described previously (Snell & Snell, 1949). One unit of enzymic activity corresponded, respectively, to 1 µmol nitrite formed or disappeared per min.

Glutamine synthetase activity (transferase assay) from mid-exponential cultures was measured in permeabilized cells as described by Bender *et al.* (1977).

Determination of chlorophyll *a*. Chlorophyll *a* concentration was determined from methanolic extracts as described by Mackinney (1941).

Determination of luciferase activity. To determine bioluminescence, 1 ml of cultures was adjusted with fresh medium to an OD₇₅₀ of 0.5, supplemented with decanal to a final concentration of 0.25 mM from a 50 mM stock solution made up in 10% dimethyl sulfoxide. Light emission was recorded in a Berthold LB9509 luminometer. Bioluminescence was recorded every 20 s for 10 min. Light emission increased to a maximum and then declined. Maximum luminescence at the peak, presented as RLU (relative light units) by the instrument, is the value used at each selected time point.

Determination of pigment contents spectrophotometrically. Wild-type and PipX⁻ strains were grown in BG11 or BG11-NH₄ until they reached mid-exponential phase (OD₇₅₀ 0.4–0.5) and then cultures were centrifuged, washed and finally resuspended in BG11₀. A whole-cell absorbance spectrum was carried out in order to estimate pigment contents. One millilitre of culture was taken at the indicated times, diluted with fresh medium to an OD₇₅₀ of 0.5 and absorbance spectra (550–750 nm) was recorded on a UV/Visible Ultrospec 3100 pro (Amersham). Pigment content was calculated based on absorbance maxima at 631 nm for phycocyanin and 684 nm for chlorophyll *a*.

RESULTS

Nitrate assimilation in the PipX⁻ strain

The expression of genes required for nitrate assimilation in *Synechococcus* depends on NtcA. Therefore, NtcA-deficient strains do not grow on nitrate, and have undetectable nitrite reductase activity and low levels of nitrate reductase (Vega-Palas *et al.*, 1990). In addition to the NtcA-dependent induction in response to the absence of ammonium, the *nirA* operon is also subject to activation by the nitrite-dependent activator NtcB (Aichi *et al.*, 2004; Maeda *et al.*, 1998). The fact that the PipX⁻ strain grows well in nitrate-containing medium, where it was originally selected, appeared at odds with our previous suggestions of PipX

cooperating with NtcA-dependent activation of target promoters (Espinosa *et al.*, 2006). To investigate the involvement of PipX in the regulation of the nitrate-assimilation genes, we analysed the functions encoded by the *nirA* operon in a PipX-deficient mutant.

Nitrate and nitrite activities were assayed in cells from the wild-type and PipX⁻ strains adapted to nitrate. As shown in Fig. 1, nitrate and nitrite reductase activities were significantly reduced in the PipX⁻ mutant, thus supporting the implication of PipX in positive regulation of the *narB* and *nirA* genes. Nitrate consumption by PipX⁻ strains grown in nitrate-containing media was significantly slower than nitrate consumption by the wild-type strain (compare Fig. 2a, b), thus indicating that PipX deficiency has a negative effect on nitrate assimilation. As is the case with wild-type cells, addition of ammonium to PipX⁻ cells caused an immediate inhibition of nitrate utilization (Fig. 2a, b), indicating that post-translational regulation of nitrate assimilation by P_{II} does not require PipX.

Since ammonium-repressed cultures of *Synechococcus* can not utilize nitrate, the rate of nitrate assimilation after transfer of ammonium-grown cultures to medium containing nitrate was compared between wild-type and PipX⁻ cultures. Nitrate consumption was determined 3 h after shifting ammonium-repressed cultures to nitrate-containing medium. The NtcA⁻ strain, which is unable to utilize nitrate, was included as a negative control. As shown in Fig. 2(c), the PipX⁻ culture removed nitrate from the medium at a rate significantly lower than the wild-type strain, thus strongly suggesting that PipX has a role on the induction of the *nirA* operon.

Taken together, the results indicate that the *Synechococcus* PipX⁻ mutant assimilates nitrate with less efficiency than its wild-type counterpart. The defect is more pronounced in cultures previously grown with ammonium, suggesting that

Fig. 1. Nitrate and nitrite reductase activities from *Synechococcus* cells. Mean values and standard deviations from five independent assays are presented. Grey bars, nitrate reductase; white bars, nitrite reductase; WT, wild-type; PipX⁻, PipX null mutant.

Fig. 2. Nitrate uptake by *Synechococcus* strains. Nitrate taken up is plotted as a function of time. (a, b) Uptake assays were performed on nitrate grown cells from (a) wild-type or (b) *PipX*[−] cultures incubated for 0–30 min in the presence of nitrate, with (□) or without (■) addition of ammonium. Mean values and standard deviations from four independent assays are presented. (c) Induction of nitrate uptake from ammonium-repressed cultures. Nitrate taken up was measured during 60 min on previously ammonium-grown cells, which were incubated in ammonium-free, nitrate-supplemented BG11 medium for 3 h. Mean values and standard deviations from four independent assays are represented. ■, wild-type; ○, *PipX* null mutant; ●, *NtcA* null mutant.

PipX is required for rapid acclimation to ammonium withdrawal. On the other hand, the finding that the *PipX*[−] mutant retains the ability to tune down nitrate uptake efficiently when the nitrate-adapted cultures are suddenly faced with ammonium suggests that *PipX* is not required for the regulation of P_{II} functions under conditions of nitrogen sufficiency (low levels of 2-oxoglutarate).

Glutamine synthetase activity is positively regulated by *PipX*

Nitrogen assimilation by *Synechococcus* cells requires glutamine synthetase activity, provided mainly by GSI, and under nitrogen-deficiency conditions, also by GSIII. To determine the impact of *pipX* inactivation on global glutamine synthetase activity, we compared the ability of wild-type and *PipX*-deficient strains of *Synechococcus* to induce glutamine synthetase activity upon transfer of cultures from ammonium- or nitrate-supplemented media to media lacking a combined nitrogen source. Comparison of wild-type and *PipX*[−] strains indicated that *PipX* is required for appropriated induction of glutamine synthetase activity (Fig. 3). Glutamine synthetase levels were significantly lower in the mutant strain, an effect observed when the nitrogen source of cultures was either nitrate (compare time 0 in Fig. 3a) or ammonium (compare time 0 in Fig. 3b). In addition, no induction of glutamine synthetase activity was observed in the *PipX*-deficient strain when cultures were deprived of nitrogen, thus indicating an important deficiency of glutamine synthetase activity in the *PipX*[−] mutant. The basal levels of glutamine synthetase activity found in the *PipX*[−] strain were indistinguishable from those of the *NtcA*[−] strain grown with ammonium or in cells starved of nitrogen for up to 2 days (data not shown).

Therefore, *PipX* exerts a positive role in the nitrogen regulation of the glutamine synthetase activity in *Synechococcus*. As is the case with *NtcA*, *PipX* is required both for basal levels of glutamine synthetase activity (as seen in ammonium-grown cultures) and for appropriate up-regulation of glutamine synthetase under nitrogen-limiting conditions.

PipX is involved in induction of chlorosis but not in the recovery of cultures from nitrogen starvation

When *Synechococcus* cultures are subjected to nutrient limitation and other stress conditions, they modify the composition of the photosynthetic machinery by degrading their light-harvesting antennae, the phycobilisomes (Schwarz & Forchhammer, 2005). The loss of phycobilisomes and reduction of the chlorophyll *a* content are responsible for the yellow appearance of the chlorotic cultures. This acclimation process, known as chlorosis or bleaching, requires strong expression of the *nblA* gene, which is subject to positive control by *NtcA* (Luque *et al.*, 2001) and *NblR*, a response regulator involved in general acclimation (Schwarz & Grossman, 1998). *NblR* deficiency results in a strong *non-bleaching* phenotype, but the *NtcA*-deficient mutant is still able to enter chlorosis although it shows a delay in phycobilisome degradation and a faster reduction of the chlorophyll *a* content (Sauer *et al.*, 1999).

As shown in Fig. 4(a), nitrogen-deprived cultures of the *PipX* null mutant showed the same phenotype as the *NtcA*[−]

Fig. 3. Glutamine synthetase (transferase) activity from *Synechococcus* strains. Cultures were grown in BG11 (a) and BG11-NH₄ (b), transferred to BG11₀ and assayed immediately (time 0) and at 16 and 24 h. Mean values and the corresponding standard deviations from three independent experiments are reported. Grey bars, wild-type; white bars, PipX⁻.

strain, a weak and transient *non-bleaching* appearance. Pigment analysis revealed the same pattern of pigment degradation that has been reported for the NtcA strain

under nitrogen starvation, a delay in phycocyanin degradation and a faster loss of chlorophyll *a* content (Fig. 4b–d). As expected for a protein specifically involved in 2-oxoglutarate

Fig. 4. Pigment degradation by *Synechococcus* strains. (a) Cultures of wild-type (WT) and mutant derivatives (PipX⁻, NtcA⁻, NblR⁻) grown in BG11-NH₄ (+N) or incubated in BG11₀ (-N) for 48 and 96 h. (b) Absorbance spectra from wild-type (orange) and PipX⁻ (blue) strains in BG11-NH₄ (+) or incubated in BG11₀ (-) for 2, 4 and 10 days. The absorbance peaks of phycocyanin (PC) and chlorophyll *a* (Chl) are indicated. Groups of spectra were shifted along the y axis for clarity. (c, d) Relative amount of phycocyanin (c) and chlorophyll *a* (d) as a function of time. ■, Wild-type; ▲, PipX null mutant.

signalling, induction of chlorosis by sulfur starvation was not affected in the PipX[−] strain (data not shown).

NtcA is required for cell survival of chlorotic cultures, since NtcA[−] cells subjected to nitrogen starvation rapidly lose the ability to reinitiate growth on nitrogen-containing media (Sauer *et al.*, 1999). To determine the involvement of PipX in cell survival after chlorosis, wild-type, NtcA[−] and PipX[−] mutant strains were tested for their ability to survive for up to 9 days in nitrogen-depleted media. In contrast with the NtcA[−] strain, the ability of the PipX[−] strain to resume growth was very similar to that of the wild-type strain (Fig. 5), indicating that PipX is not required for the NtcA-dependent survival of nitrogen-starved cultures.

PipX activates the *nblA* gene under nitrogen deficiency

To confirm that the delayed phycocyanin degradation in cultures of the PipX[−] strain during nitrogen-induced chlorosis was related to defects in NtcA-dependent activation of the *nblA* gene, promoter fusions to *luxAB* reporter genes were used to analyse the consequences of *pipX* inactivation on the nitrogen-dependent induction of the *nblA* gene. The *P_{nblA}::luxAB* construct included the previously characterized regulatory region containing five transcription start sites, three NtcA-binding sites and putative NblR-binding sites (Luque *et al.*, 2001). It also includes a recently reported putative light-responsive element (HLR1) involved in negative regulation (Kappell *et al.*, 2006).

Reporter expression was determined by bioluminescence measurements from cultures of wild-type, NtcA[−] and PipX[−] mutant derivatives grown with ammonium and shifted to nitrogen-depleted medium. As shown in Fig. 6, the nitrogen starvation response was impaired in both the NtcA[−] and PipX[−] mutants but the extent of the impairment was different. Consistent with previous results using *luxAB*

Fig. 5. Survival of *Synechococcus* strains after nitrogen starvation. Drops of cultures incubated for 4–9 days on BG11₀ medium were spotted onto BG11-NH₄ plates and incubated for 2 weeks. WT, wild-type; PipX[−], PipX null mutant; NtcA[−], NtcA null mutant.

Fig. 6. Time-course of *P_{nblA}::luxAB* induction in *Synechococcus* strains. Cells were grown in the presence of ammonia and when they reached mid-exponential phase, they were shifted to combined-nitrogen-free medium. After the initiation of nitrogen deprivation at time point 0, bioluminescence from the reporter strains was recorded. A representative time-course experiment is shown from three independent experiments that yielded similar results. ■, Wild-type; □, PipX null mutant; ▲, NtcA null mutant.

fusions to other NtcA-dependent promoters (Espinosa *et al.*, 2006), the contribution of PipX to *nblA* upregulation was very significant, but smaller than that of NtcA, indicating that PipX is also involved in the NtcA-dependent transcriptional induction of the *nblA* gene.

DISCUSSION

The results presented here provide insight into the role of PipX in nitrogen control. *Synechococcus* PipX[−] cells showed decreased activity of nitrogen assimilation enzymes (glutamine synthetase, nitrate reductase and nitrite reductase), retarded induction and slower rate of nitrate consumption, and, when subjected to nitrogen starvation, retarded phycobilisome degradation and a faster reduction of the chlorophyll content. Therefore, the PipX-deficient mutant shows a pleiotropic phenotype reminiscent of that of the NtcA[−] strains. For some traits the PipX[−] and NtcA[−] phenotypes were very similar, while for others the PipX[−] phenotype was less severe than the NtcA[−]. Assays for glutamine synthetase activity (Fig. 3 and data not shown) and induction of chlorosis (Fig. 4a and data not shown) gave similar results with the two mutant strains. Nitrate assimilation, an ability lost in the NtcA[−] strain, was impaired but still operative in the PipX-deficient mutant (Fig. 2). Given that, at promoters strictly dependent on NtcA for activation, PipX plays a positive but non-essential role for transcription (Espinosa *et al.*, 2006), it is not surprising that PipX[−] mutants display a less severe or leaky NtcA[−] phenotype. The auxiliary role of PipX at NtcA-dependent promoters can also be inferred from induction

experiments with the $P_{nblA}::luxAB$ reporter fusion (Fig. 6). The nitrogen-specific role of PipX in chlorosis strongly suggests that PipX participates in the NtcA-dependent activation of the *nblA* gene. The finding that PipX is not required for survival of cultures after nitrogen starvation (Fig. 5) also supports the view that PipX is involved in the early induction, but not in the long-time maintenance, of NtcA activity.

Taken together, the results presented here strongly suggest that, in addition to the previously analysed *glnB* and *glnN* genes (Espinosa *et al.*, 2006) and the *nblA* promoter studied here (Fig. 6), operons or genes for nitrate assimilation (*nirA* and probably *nirB*), glutamine synthesis (*glnA*) and additional genes for pigment regulation are also under PipX control. Thus, the relatively small but representative sample of NtcA-dependent genes analysed so far at the level of transcriptional induction and/or protein activity demonstrates the importance of PipX in global nitrogen regulation. The mechanism and molecular details involved in transcriptional activation by PipX at NtcA-dependent promoters is presently being addressed.

In vivo, PipX–NtcA and PipX– P_{II} complexes are likely to form under high and low intracellular levels of 2-oxoglutarate, respectively. Consistent with this, the genetic analyses performed so far show the implication of PipX in NtcA activation when the intracellular 2-oxoglutarate levels rise as a consequence of depletion of combined nitrogen from cultures. On the other hand, complex formation between PipX and the P_{II} protein should be expected when cultures are faced with ammonium. Since the P_{II} -dependent inhibition of the nitrate uptake exerted by ammonium remained functional in the PipX[−] strain (Fig. 2b), the PipX protein does not play a role in the P_{II} -mediated regulation of NRT. Considering that *Synechococcus* P_{II} proteins are very abundant, able to interact with different partners, and sense and adopt different conformations and modification status according to the nitrogen/carbon ratio, it seems more likely that PipX– P_{II} complexes serve to modulate PipX availability and/or activity. In other words, although the physiological significance of the PipX– P_{II} complexes remains to be established, the experimental evidence gathered so far favours the idea of PipX being a P_{II} target rather than a P_{II} regulator.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to R. Blasco for technical help, I. Luque for constructing plasmid pUAGC103, the Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia for grants BMC2002-01156 and BFU2005-02231 and a predoctoral fellowship to J. E., to the Generalitat Valenciana for grant GV04B-525 and to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for grant Fo195/4.

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Edited by: R. van Spanning