Alfalfa vein mottling virus, a novel potyvirid infecting *Medicago sativa* L.

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Abstract

We have recently identified a novel virus detected in alfalfa seed material. The virus was tentatively

named alfalfa-associated potyvirus 1, as its genomic fragments bore similarities with potyvirids. In this

study, we obtained a complete genome sequence of the virus and classified it as a tentative species in

the new genus, most closely related to the members of the genus *Ipomovirus* in the family *Potyviridae*.

This assumption is based on the genome structure, phylogenetic relationships, transmission electron

microscopy investigations and, in part, on serological cross-reactivity of the virus. We also demonstrated

its mechanical transmission to the indicator plant *Nicotiana benthamiana* and to the natural host

Medicago sativa, both of which developed characteristic symptoms therefore suggesting a pathogenic

nature of the disease. Consistent with symptomatology, the virus was renamed to alfalfa vein mottling

virus. A name Alvemovirus was proposed for the new genus in the family *Potyviridae*, of which alfalfa

vein mottling virus is a tentative member.

Keywords: plant viruses; positive-strand RNA viruses; *Potyviridae*; alfalfa vein mottling virus;

Alvemovirus; alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.).

Introduction

Research on alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.), a major forage crop worldwide, greatly benefited from the latest advances in high throughput sequencing (HTS) technologies that enabled the completion of its genome assembly [1] revealing new insights into the mechanisms of the crop's resistance to abiotic and biotic stresses [2,3,4,5], identification of genetic markers associated with important agronomic traits [6,7,8] and discovery of numerous microorganisms infecting alfalfa, primarily viruses [9-12]. Viruses were found to be an integral part of multi-pathogenic infections collectively forming the alfalfa pathobiome, a diverse community of pathogenic microbes within the biotic environment of the plant [13,14]. Recently, during the initial seed screenings of alfalfa germplasm accessions maintained by the USDA ARS National Plant Germplasm System (NPGS), we have detected a broad range of viruses in the mature seeds of different germplasm sources [15]. Among them were fragments of a poty-like virus with a genomic organization typical for *Potyviridae* that were ~ 26%-32% identical to a few members of the family. We provisionally named it alfalfa-associated potyvirus 1 [15]. In this research, aimed at surveying alfalfa varieties grown in the U.S. to identify, characterize, and prevent the spread of novel and emerging viruses in the country, we found AaPV1 in plant samples collected from commercial alfalfa fields in Arizona, USA. A coding-complete genome of the virus was assembled from overlapping sets of contigs and a phylogenetic relationship with other members of the family *Potyviridae* established. The virus was further categorized as a novel species, tentatively related to the genus *Ipomovirus* and potentially representing a new genus in the family *Potyviridae*. Consistent with symptomatology in the natural host *Medicago sativa* L., the virus was designated as **al**falfa **ve**in **mo**ttling virus (AVMV), a representative member of the new taxon, provisionally named Alvemovirus.

Materials and Methods

Plant material

47   Five alfalfa plants (stems and leaves) were sampled from each of the four different fields, 10-15 acres in

48   size, located in Yuma country, Arizona, USA. Geographic coordinates of the alfalfa fields and the

49   adjacent crops are shown in Table 1.

50   **Total RNA extraction, RNA sequencing, RT-PCR, and 5'RACE**

51
Five leaves were pooled from each of the 20 plants for RNA extraction. Total RNA was extracted using

Promega Maxwell® RSC Plant RNA Kit (Promega Corp., Fitchburg, WI) according to the manufacturer's

directions. cDNA libraries were prepared using Illumina TruSeq Stranded Total RNA with Ribo-Zero

Library Prep Kit (Illumina Inc., San Diego, CA USA) and RNA sequencing was performed by Psomagen

(Psomagen Inc., Rockville MD USA) on a NovaSeq6000 S4 platform (150PE, 1Gb, 20 million total reads).

Reverse transcription–polymerase chain reactions (RT-PCR) were performed using the SuperScript One-

Step RT-PCR System according to the manufacturer's directions (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Waltham,

MA USA) or utilizing SuperScript™ III First-Strand Synthesis System Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham,

MA USA) following by PCR amplification with AmpliTaq Gold DNA Polymerase Thermo Fisher Scientific).

Total RNA was extracted using TRIzol Reagent (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Waltham, MA USA).

Negative control reactions were performed with RNA obtained from uninfected *N. benthamiana* or with

sterile RNAse-free water processed for cDNA preparation the same way as RNA extracted from the

infected alfalfa plants. Three virus-specific sets of primers were designed based on the results of the HTS

analysis: 1) LN1077/LN1078 (forward, 5' CTCCCTTTGGTACTCGGTATTG, 3', pos. 7679-7701 and reverse,

5' CTCTAATGTGCGGACCTTTCT 3', pos. 8072-8093, size 414 bp); 2) LN1079/LN1080 (forward, 5'

TGACAGCGAGTTCTCATTCC 3', pos. 9165-9184, and reverse, 5' GTCAGTCAAACCAGCCTTTATTC 3', pos.

9800-9822, size 658 bp); 3) LN1095/LN1096 (forward, 5' CCAGGGTGTTGTTGATGATTTG 3', pos. 4176-

4197, and reverse, 5' TCTCAGTCACATTCCGCATAAA 3', pos. 4579-4600, size 425 bp). PCR products were

either sequenced directly or cloned into TOPO II vector (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Waltham, MA

USA) and sequenced. 5'RACE was performed with SMARTer RACE 5'/3' Kit (Takara Bio USA, Inc. San Jose,

CA USA) according to the manufacturer's directions.

Bioinformatic analysis

A schematic representation of the bioinformatics pipeline used in this study is shown in **Fig.1**. Briefly,

sequence reads were first trimmed using Trimmomatic [16], followed by their assembly with SPAdes

[17]. The resulting contigs were screened using BLASTx searches [18] against a virus database containing

all plant virus protein sequences from the NCBI RefSeq database

(https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/refseq/). The potential plant viral hits were searched once again using

BLASTx against the full NCBI nr protein database. BBMap [19] was used to generate sequencing

coverage values for the identified contigs. For the prediction of cleavage sites for viral proteases,

polyproteins from 109 different members of the family *Potyviridae* were aligned by four different

Multiple Sequence Alignments (MSA) software: ClustalW, ClustalO, MUSCLE, and CLC Genomics

Workbench 23, very accurate setting (QIAGEN LLC, Germantown MD USA). Cleavage sites obtained by

each MSA method were compared and the most likely sites were selected by another comparison with

previously reported consensus sites [20].

Phylogenetic analysis

87 Phylogenetic analysis was performed with polyproteins of the selected members of the family

88 *Potyviridae*. Sequences were aligned with Clustal W and the unrooted tree was built with RAxML-NG

89 [21] using maximum likelihood algorithm, a maximum of 1000 bootstrap replicates, and bootstopping

90 (autoMRE, cutoff: 0.030000). Boostrapping converged after 150 replicates.

Mechanical inoculation of *Nicotiana benthamiana* Domin. and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.)

plants

Symptomatic leaves from field alfalfa plants were homogenized in cold 20 mM potassium phosphate

buffer, pH 7.0, using a sterile pestle and mortar. The resulting suspension was briefly centrifuged to

precipitate plant debris and ten microliters of the supernatant were rubbed onto carborundum-dusted

leaves of three-weeks old *N. benthamiana* plants using sterile inoculating loops. Carborundum-dusted

leaves of the three weeks-old seedlings of two alfalfa cultivars, cv. CUF 101 and cv. Maverick, were rub-

inoculated with purified viral preparations using sterile inoculating loops.

Virus purification

The virus was partially purified from 20 grams of symptomatic *N. bentamiana* leaves using a protocol

developed for *Poinsettia mosaic virus* [22].

Transmission electron microscopy

For TEM observations, TEM grids were incubated on the drop of purified viral preparation for 2 minutes,

rinsed with one milliliter of sterile water and stained with 1% phosphotungstate (PTA) solution. The grids

were examined in a Hitachi H-7700 Electron Microscope at the Electron and Confocal Microscope Unit,

Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

Western blot assays

Western blots (WB) were performed as previously described [23]. Membranes were probed with

polyclonal antiserum to sweet potato mild mottle virus (SPMMV; DSMZ, Braunschweig, Germany) in the

company's recommended dilution (1:1000).

Results

Symptoms displayed on the infected alfalfa plants

According to the results of HTS, out of 20 examined plants, eight plants (40%) originating from three

different fields, were infected with the virus. These plants displayed a variety of virus-like symptoms

such as mottling, chlorosis, vein clearing, and bright yellow blotches (**Fig. 2**). The symptoms were likely

triggered by multiple co-infecting pathogens, including the virus in question [14].

118   **Viral genome assembly and structure**

119   Assembled contigs generated from each of the eight plants exceeded 9-10 kb in length and represented

120   variants of the same virus (**Table S1**). The longest contig with 4940 x per-nt average coverage consisted

121   of 10,323 nucleotides (nt) and included a poly (A) tail, thus indicating that the 3'-terminal portion of the

122   viral genome is complete. Multiple 5'RACE reactions adjusted the HTS-derived length of the viral

123   genome to 10,037 nt, excluding the poly(A) tail (75 nt). According to the sequenced 5'RACE PCR

124   products, the 5' non-coding region of the virus contains 107 nt; an open reading frame (ORF) encoding a

125   large polyprotein comprises 9,732 nt (108-9,839 nt); and the 3' non-coding region of the virus appears

126   complete, enclosing 198 nt (9,840-10,037), without the poly (A) tail.

127   In PSI-BLAST search, the top three hits for the viral polyprotein (excluding AaPV1 submissions) were:

128   eggplant ipomovirus A (GenBank ID: BCG55390.1; 32.8% identity, query cover 78%; E-value=0.0); rose

129   yellow mosaic roymovirus (GenBank ID: BBI90117.2; 31.6% identity; query cover 87%; E-value=0.0); and

130   *Potyvirus* spp. polyprotein (GenBank ID: QHB15167.1; 31.3% identity, query cover 85%; E-value=0.0).

131   Among other hits were squash vein yellowing virus (genus *Ipomovirus*; GenBank ID: AEV45694.1; 34,4%

132   identity; query cover 65%, E-value=0.0); chili ringspot virus (genus Potyvirus; GenBank ID: APW85806.1;

133   28.7% identity; query cover 79%; E-value=0.0), and numerous species from different genera of the

134   family *Potyviridae*.

135   The InterPro tool for functional analysis of proteins [24], predicted nine protein domains in the viral

136   ORF: Potyviridae P1 protease domain (IPR002540); Helper component proteinase domain (PR001456);

137   Protein P3 of potyviral polyprotein (IPR039560); Superfamilies 1 and 2 helicase ATP-binding type-1

138   domain (IPR014001); Superfamilies 1 and 2 helicase C-terminal domain (IPR001650; Potyviridae

139   polyprotein domain (IPR013648); Potyvirus NIa protease (NIa-pro) domain (IPR001730); Viral RNA-

140   dependent RNA polymerase domain (IPR001205); and Potyvirus coat protein domain (IPR001592). The

tentative genome structure of the virus and predicted cleavage sites, obtained by multiple alignment of

109 different potyvirids, are shown in **Fig. 3**.

The virus does not appear to have a highly conserved $G_{1-2} A_{6-7}$ motif preceding overlapping PIPO ORF

characteristic for *Potyviridae* and located within the P3 cistron [25], Instead, there is an A_7 motif, which

is embedded in the overlapping ORF, presumably (according to the ORF Finder;

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/orffinder/) starting at the position 3122 nt (+3 ORF relative to the

polyprotein) and followed by 63 codons with a termination codon TGA at pos. 3311-3313.

Phylogenetic analysis

Phylogenetic analysis deduced from the alignment of the viral polyprotein and representative

polyproteins of different members of the family *Potyviridae*, clustered the virus into a distinct outgroup,

branched out of the genus *Ipomovirus* (**Fig. 4**). This concurs with the significant divergence of the viral

genomic and amino acid sequences from other members of the genus and likely indicates that the virus

is a member of a new, not yet established, genus in the family.

Mechanical transmission to *N. benthamiana* plants

Since potivirids are readily transmissible mechanically

(https://ictv.global/report/chapter/potyviridae/potyviridae), we attempted mechanical transmission of

the virus to *N. benthamiana*, a common indicator host for diagnosis of many plant viruses [26] (Hull,

2002). *N. benthamiana* plants mechanically inoculated by a sap produced from infected alfalfa leaves,

developed distinct symptoms two-three weeks post inoculation. The symptoms could be visually

characterized as chlorosis, mottling, and chlorotic lesions spots on non-inoculated leaves. The plants

were also stunted (**Fig. 5**). The infection of *N. bentamiana* plants was additionally confirmed by RT-PCR

assay with primers LN1095/96 developed based on the HTS data and specific for the virus (**Fig.6**). The

amplicon was of the correct size predicted by the analysis of the HTS-derived assembly and Sanger

sequencing verified it is a fragment of the virus.

Transmission electron microscopy of the purified viral preparations

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) can provide reliable information on particle dimensions and

morphology, based on which a virus can be placed to a particular taxonomic group [27]. TEM

examinations showed that the virions were flexuous filaments with a modal length of 800-1050 nm and

the modal diameter of about 11–13 nm (**Fig.7**). This morphology is indicative of the members of the

family *Potyviridae* and the larger particle length suggests a relationship with the genus *Ipomovirus*.

Mechanical transmission to alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.) plants

Among several plants of two inoculated alfalfa cultivars, only a single plant of cv. CUF 101 developed

obvious symptoms ~ 20 days post inoculation. Symptoms can be visually described as mottling and vein

yellowing (**Fig. 8**). The symptomatic plant was tested, and the infection confirmed by RT-PCR assay with

two different sets of primers developed based on the HTS data and specific for the virus (**Fig.9**). PCR

products were sequenced and found to have originated from the virus in question.

Serological examinations

In Western blot (WB) assays, virus-infected tissues did not react with broad spectrum monoclonal

antibodies (Abs) to potyviruses (PTY 1), [28], (results not shown). However, they appeared to weakly

cross-react with polyclonal antisera to SPMMV (DSMZ, Braunschweig, Germany) when indirect WB assay

(membranes were probed with primary Abs to SPMMV following by secondary Ab-alkaline phosphatase

conjugate) was used. This reaction was accompanied by a high background and non-specific reactivity,

common for indirect serological detection protocols (**Fig. S1A**). When membranes were probed with

SPMMV primary Abs conjugated with AP (direct assay), the only reactive band derived from the purified

viral preparation, likely due to the large concentration of the viral coat protein rather than to cross-

reactivity with SPMM antiserum. No cross-reactivity was observed with virus-infected plant tissues (**Fig**

S1B). This experiment indicated a possible distant serological relationship between the novel virus and a

type species of the genus *Ipomovirus*. Although percent amino acid identity between the SPMMV CP and

presumptive CP of the alfalfa ipomovirus is quite low (31%), the latter may possess some epitopes

recognized by the SPMMV polyclonal Abs.

Discussion

We report here the identification and characterization of a new virus infecting alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*

L.) and belonging to the family *Potyviridae*. Genomic fragments of the same virus were previously found

in mature alfalfa seeds [15]. Since they were to some degree (~30%) identical to several potyvirids from

different genera of the family, we tentatively designated the virus AaPV1. In this study, based on the

complete genome sequence and structure, phylogenetic relationships, TEM observations,

symptomatology, and in part by serological reactivity, we reclassify and rename AaPV1 to alfalfa vein

mottling virus (AVMV), a novel species tentatively related to the genus *Ipomovirus*. However, considering

a distinct clustering of AVMV in the phylogenetic tree and low identity levels with other members of the

genus *Ipomovirus*, AVMV is likely to be a representative species of a different taxon, most closely related

to ipomoviruses, for which we propose a name Alvemovirus.

The characteristic symptoms caused by the virus on indicator plant *Nicotiana benthamiana* and on the

natural host alfalfa, suggest a pathogenic nature of the disease. Successful mechanical inoculation of *M.*

sativa with virus purified from the indicator plant followed by RT-PCR detection of the AVMV in

mechanically inoculated alfalfa, satisfies Koch's postulates and establishes the virus as cause of the

disease.

Ipomoviruses, to which AVMV is presumably related, infect a wide range of hosts, including economically

important crops such as tomato, cucumber, squash, sweet potato, watermelon, and others. To our

knowledge, they have not been diagnosed in alfalfa. Our findings indicate that *M. sativa* can be a natural

reservoir for the AVMV and thus, considering its possible relationship to ipomoviruses transmitted by

whiteflies, the virus could potentially be transmitted via the same (or different) vector to other crops

growing in the vicinity. Since all alfalfa samples used in this study were taken within 100 m of the melon

fields (**Table 1**), testing this crop would further clarify the virus origin and host range.

Conclusions

This work reports the discovery and characterization of a novel plant viral pathogen naturally infecting

alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.), a major forage crop worldwide. The virus identified is a member of the large

and economically important family *Potyviridae*, in which it tentatively belongs to the new genus

designated as Alvemovirus.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization: LGN. Sample collection and evaluation: JCP and WMW; Methodology: OAP, LGN, SG.

Data analysis: SG and LGN. Experimentation: LGN and OAP. Writing – original draft preparation: LGN.

Writing – review and editing: all authors.

Data Availability Statement

The genomic sequence of the alfalfa vein mottling virus has been deposited in GenBank on 08/24/2023

under the accession number OR483877.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Bioinformatics pipeline

Figure 2. Diverse symptomatology of alfalfa plants in the field. **A**, asymptomatic plants. **B-D**, plants

displaying different virus-like symptoms.

Figure 3. Tentative genome structure of the new virus infecting alfalfa. Black arrow heads indicate

putative cleavage sites in the polyprotein. P1: protein 1 protease; P3: protein 3; PIPO: Pretty Interesting

Potyviridae ORF (Chung et al. 2008); 6K1: 6 kDa peptide 1; CI: cylindrical inclusion; 6K2: 6 kDa peptide 2;

VPg: virus protein genome-linked; Nia-Pro: nuclear inclusion a protease; NIb: nuclear inclusion b, RNA-

directed RNA polymerase; CP: coat protein.

Figure 4. Phylogenetic relationships of alfalfa vein mottling virus with other members of the family

Potyviridae. The unrooted tree was deduced from the Clustal W alignment and built with RaxML-NG [18]

(Kozlov et al. 2019) tool using maximum likelihood algorithm, 1000 bootstrap replicates and

bootstopping (autoMRE, cutoff: 0.030000).

Figure 5. Symptoms developed on *Nicotiana benthamiana* plants after mechanical inoculation with

AVMV-infected alfalfa. **A**, uninfected *N. benthamiana* plant. **B-D**, symptomatic plants.

Figure 6. RT-PCR assay with total RNA extracted from symptomatic *Nicotiana benthamiana* plants. Virus-

specific primers used in the assay were developed based on the HTS data. **M**, 1 Kb Plus DNA Ladder

(Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA USA). **1**, RT-PCR amplicon obtained from the virus-infected plant

using primer pair LN1095/LN1096. **2**, no RT-PCR amplicons were obtained from the uninfected *N.*

benthamiana plants.

Figure 7. Transmission electron microscopy photograph of partially purified viral preparations.

Magnification: 30,000. Scale bar: 500 nm.

Figure 8. Symptoms developed on leaves of alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.) cv. CUF101 after mechanical

inoculation with partially purified viral preparations.

Figure 9. RT-PCR assay with symptomatic leaves of mechanically inoculated alfalfa plants. **M**, 1 Kb Plus DNA Ladder (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA USA). **1**, PCR amplicon obtained from the symptomatic leaves of alfalfa cv. CUF101 using primer pair LN1077/LN1078. **2**, no PCR amplicon was obtained from control reaction using the same primers. **3**, PCR amplicon obtained from the symptomatic alfalfa leaves using primer pair LN1079/LN1079. **4**, no PCR amplicon was obtained from control reaction with the same primers.

Table 1. Geographic locations of alfalfa fields.

Table S1. Different viral contigs generated from each of the eight plant samples infected with the virus.

Figure S1. Western blot assays with polyclonal antibodies specific to sweet potato mild mottle virus (SPMMV). **A: M**, ColorBurst protein marker (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO USA); **1**, virus-infected tissues of *Nicotiana benthamiana*; **2**, uninfected tissues of *N. benthamiana*; **3**, mechanically inoculated, symptomatic tissues of alfalfa; **4**, uninfected alfalfa sample; 5, partially purified viral preparation. **B: M,** ColorBurst protein marker (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO USA); 1-4, virus-infected *N. benthamina* and alfalfa leaf tissues; 5 and 6, healthy *N. benthamina* and alfalfa leaf tissues; 7, partially purified viral preparation.

361   **Table 1.** Geographic locations of alfalfa fields

Alfalfa fields, №	GPS coordinates		Adjacent crops	№ of plants collected
24E	32° 40' 56.58"N	114° 13' 42.72"W	Cantaloupe, lettuce, cauliflower	5
32E	32° 42' 38.62"N	114°05' 28.21" W	Cantaloupe, cauliflower, spinach	5
43E	32° 47' 11.44"N	113° 54' 15.81"W	Cantaloupe, lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower	5
51E	32° 46' 42.26"N	113° 45' 20.89"W	Cantaloupe, lettuce	5

Figure 1

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Figure 7

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455   **Figure 8**

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