

DESIGN AND ENGINEERING OF A MULTI-TARGET (MULTIPLEX) DNA SIMULANT TO EVALUATE NUCLEIC ACID BASED ASSAYS FOR DETECTION OF BIOLOGICAL THREAT AGENTS

Mónica Carrera and José-Luis Sagripanti

Edgewood Chemical Biological Center (ECBC)
Research Development and Engineering Command,
Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland.

ABSTRACT

We designed and engineered a non-infectious Bio-threat simulant that included the nucleic acid signature of *Bacillus anthracis*, *Yersinia pestis*, *Coxiella Burneti*, *Brucella* sp., *Francisella tularensis*, *Enterohemorrhagic E. coli*, O157:H7, *Burkholderia mallei*, *Burkholderia pseudomallei* and *Variola virus* (smallpox virus). A chimera of 2040 bp was engineered to produce PCR amplicons of different sizes in a single Multiplex reaction designed for the rapid identification of the threat agents selected above.

1. INTRODUCTION

1. 1. Significance and Impact of the Study

Nucleic acids-based technologies are a mainstay of DOD strategy to detect and identify biological threat agents. PCR amplification tests, in particular, have several advantages which include higher sensitivity and often lower cost than other approaches. However, most PCR methods target only one biological agent (amplifying only one primer pair at a time). Lack of standardized controls and protocols has contributed to the high rate of false positives and false alarms reported for PCR and other nucleic acid technologies. In addition, current biological simulants (*B. anthracis* [known before as *B. globigii*], *Erwinia herbicola* [renamed *Pantamoeba agglomerans*], and phage MS2) are particularly inadequate to evaluate specificity and sensitivity of nucleic acid-based tests, since the simulants do not share nucleic acid targets with any threat agent.

Using the actual bio-threat agents for testing is impractical since producing a number of different threat bacteria and viruses, isolating and characterizing them under adequate bio-containment, and preparing a representative control of each agent for test method evaluation represent nearly insurmountable logistic and economic difficulties. Therefore, our goal was to design and engineer a non-infectious simulant that included the nucleic acid signature of many bacterial and viral biological threat agents, within a single chimeric construct

1. 2. Background of the selective agents.

Bacillus anthracis is the etiological agent of anthrax and was the biological weapon used during the 2001 mail bioterrorist attacks. To date, several *B. anthracis* strains had been sequenced, but most are not available as full and annotated sequences. The only virulent strain of *B. anthracis* available in public databases is the “Ames ancestor” strain or A0581 strain. (Read et al, 2003)

Yersinia pestis, is the causative agent of the systemic invasive infectious disease classically referred to as “plague”, and has been responsible for three devastating human pandemics separated by centuries. Due to the use by Japan during World War II and more recently to the identification of strains resistant to drugs (Galimand, M. et al, 1997), *Y. pestis* is an agent of biological warfare relevance.

Francisella tularensis is one of the most infectious pathogens known and is the etiological agent of tularemia, a disease of human and animals. Although this bacterium is nutritionally fastidious, it was developed as a weapon by Imperial Japan, the former Soviet Union, and the US. (Larsson, P. et. al, 2005). The sequenced strain corresponds to a fully virulent human isolate of *Francisella tularensis* subsp *tularensis* (strain SCHU S4, Larsson, P. et al, 2005)

Brucella species are etiological agents of brucellosis, a zoonotic disease endemic in many areas of the world, characterized by chronic infections in animals leading to abortion and infertility, and a systemic, febrile illness in humans. (Paulsen, I.T. et al 2002). *Brucella suis* was the first pathogenic organism weaponized by the US military during 1950s (Paulsen, I.T. et al, 2002). Since brucellosis threatens the food supply and causes undulant fever, a long, debilitating disease in humans, *Brucella* species are recognized as potential agricultural, civilian, and military bioterrorism agents.

Rickettsia are classified into two groups; the spotted fever group (SFG), which includes *R. conorii*, *R. sibirica*, and *R. rickettsii*, and the typhus group (TG), which includes *R. prowazekii* and *R. typhi*, according with the type of affection that they can cause. Both Japan, during World War II, and the former Soviet Union, during the

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 01 NOV 2006		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Design And Engineering Of A Multi-Target (Multiplex) Dna Simulant To Evaluate Nulceic Acid Based Assays For Detection Of Biological Threat Agents				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Edgewood Chemical Biological Center (ECBC) Research Development and Engineering Command, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland.				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES See also ADM002075., The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 8	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Cold War, investigated the use of Rickettsiae as biological weapons. (McLead, M.P. et al 2004).

Two representatives of the *Burkholderia* genus with potential bio-warfare use have been completely sequenced, *B. mallei*, the etiologic agent of glanders, and *B. pseudomallei*, causative agent of melioidosis. A non-pathogenic specie, *B. thailandensis*, was also completely sequenced (Kim HS, et al 2005).

Coxiella burnetii, a highly virulent zoonotic pathogen and category B bioterrorism agent, was sequenced by the random shotgun method (Seshadri R. et al 2003)

Although the lifestyle and parasitic strategies of *C. burnetii* resemble that of Rickettsiae and Chlamydiae, their genome architectures differ considerably in terms of presence of mobile elements, extent of genome reduction, metabolic capabilities, and transporter profiles (Seshadri R. et al 2003)

Enterohemorrhagic Escherichia coli (EHEC) O157:H7 is a worldwide threat to public health and has been implicated in many outbreaks of hemorrhagic colitis, some of which included fatalities caused by hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). (Hayashi T. et al, 2001).

Variola virus, which causes smallpox, belongs to a genus of viruses known as Orthopoxvirus. Smallpox outbreaks involve either variola minor or the more deadly variola major.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Database and alignment of genomes

The genomes of many of the threat agents are public domain. All genomes used in this work were downloaded from NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information) (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). The Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/BLAST) was used to find regions of local similarity between sequences. This program compares nucleotide or protein sequences to sequence databases and calculates the statistical significance of matches. BLAST was used to infer functional and evolutionary relationships between sequences as well as help identify members of gene families.

2.2. Software and scripts.

The alignment of different strains were performed by ClustalX software (a windows interface to ClustalW multiple sequence alignment software) (Thompson, J.D et al 1997). All potential primers were generated by FastPCR, a program to design primers by Ruslan Kalendar (2006) "FastPCR, PCR primer design, DNA and protein tools, repeats and own database searches program" (www.biocenter.helsinki.fi/bi/programs/fastpcr.htm).

Several scripts were developed in Perl language to facilitate the analysis of the considerable amount of information that we generated during whole genome comparisons. Perl is a programming language that

facilitates manipulation of strings (a set of consecutive characters) and has several modules specific for biological information handling (particularly BioPerl Project, www.bioperl.org).

3. RESULTS

3.1. Search and download the available complete genome of each agent

For some of the agents, more than one complete genome is available. In those cases, all genomes were downloaded and used in some instance in this study.

Table 1. Complete bacterial genome sequences

Genome	Access numbers	Size (bp)
<i>B. anthracis</i> strain Ames ⁽¹⁾	NC_003997	5,227,293
<i>B. anthracis</i> Ames "Ames ancestor" ⁽¹⁾ Read et al., 2003	NC_007322 pXO1	181,677
	NC_007323 pXO2	94,830
	NC_007530	5,227,419
<i>B. anthracis</i> strain Sterne Okinaka et al., 1999	NC_005945	5,228,663
	NC_001496 pXO1	181,654
<i>B. anthracis</i> strain Pasteur Direct submission	NC_002146 pXO2	96,231
<i>Brucella abortus</i> strain 9-941 Halling et al., 2005	NC_006932	2,124,241
	NC_006933	1,162,204
<i>Brucella melitensis</i> DelVecchio et al., 2002	NC_003317	2,117,144
	NC_003318	1,177,787
<i>Brucella abortus</i> strain 2308 Chain et al., 2005	NC_007618	2,121,359
	NC_007624	1,156,948
<i>Brucella suis</i> strain 1330 Paulsen et al., 2002	NC_004310	2,107,794
	NC_004311	1,207,381
<i>Francisella tularensis</i> Larsson, P. et al., 2005	NC_006570	1,892,819
<i>Rickettsia conorii</i> Ogata et al., 2001	NC_003103	1,268,755
<i>Rickettsia felis</i> Ogata et al., 2005	NC_007109	1,485,148
	NC_007110	62,829
<i>Rickettsia typhi</i> McLeod et al., 2004	NC_007111	39,263
	NC_000963	1,111,523
<i>Yersinia pestis</i> CO92 Parkhill et al., 2001	NC_006142	1,111,496
	NC_003131	70,305
	NC_003132	9,612
	NC_003134	96,210
<i>Yersinia pestis</i> KIM Deng et al., 2002	NC_003143	4,653,728
	NC_004088	4,600,755
	NC_004838	100,990
	NC_005810	4,595,065
<i>Yersinia pestis</i> 91001 Song et al., 2004	NC_005813	70,159
	NC_005814	21,742
	NC_005815	17,626
	NC_005816	9,609
	NC_006153	68,526
<i>Yersinia pseudotuberculosis</i> Chain et al., 2004	NC_006154	27,702
	NC_006155	4,744,671
	NC_006348	3,510,148
<i>Burkholderia mallei</i> Nierman et al., 2004	NC_006349	2,325,379
	NC_006350	4,074,542
<i>Burkholderia pseudomallei</i> Holden et al., 2004	NC_006351	3,173,005
	NC_007650	2,914,771
<i>Burkholderia thailandensis</i> Kim et al., 2005	NC_007651	3,809,201
	NC_002127	3,306
<i>E. coli</i> O157 H7 Perna et al., 2001	NC_002128	92,721
	NC_002695	5,498,450
	NC_002655	5,528,445
<i>E. coli</i> O157 H7 EDL933 Makino et al., 1998 Hayashi et al., 2001	NC_002971	1,995,281
<i>Coxiella burnetii</i> Seshadri R. et al 2003		

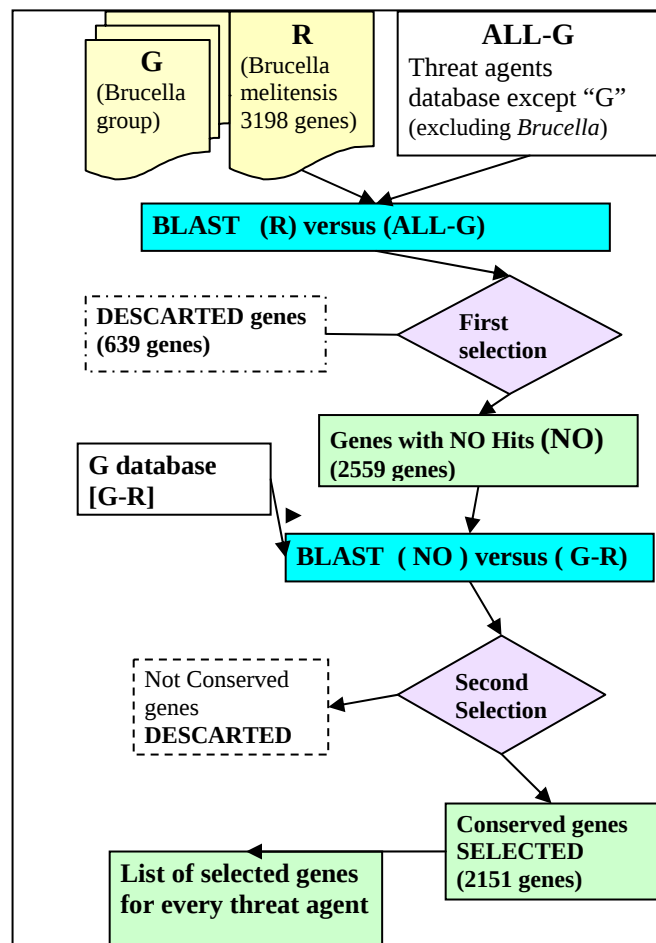
Because the availability of the complete genome for very closely related species, or even strains, comparisons within these groups of organisms were done separately, since levels of similarity are in a different order. Consequently, we selected one specie or strain as a “representative” of the group. The selection was made based on the importance of the threat to humans.

The complete list of genome sequences used is listed in **Table 1**. Additional genomes used for several comparisons were: *Bacillus cereus* ATCC 14579 (Ivanova N et al, 2003) and *Escherichia coli* K12 (Blattner FR et al 1997).

3. 1. 1. Database and genome comparison between microorganisms

For each particular threat agent, our goal was to identify specific gene sequences having two characteristic: a) to be absent in the other species listed in Table 1 and b) to be conserved within their own specie group.

Figure 1. Scheme of gene selection



G = group of a selected agent.
 R = representative agent from a determined group
 BLAST = comparison of sequences
 In parenthesis we used *Brucella sp.* as an example.

Each threat genome was compared against all the other species genomes listed in Table 1 using BLAST as described in Materials and Methods. A systematic procedure for each individual gene was followed. Figure 1 shows a scheme representing all the steps that were performed using *Brucella sp.* as an example.

As shown on Figure 1, BLAST databases were created with all species genomes in Table 1 excluding the genomes of the specie group containing the agent in question. In the example shown in Figure 1, *Brucella melitensis*, is compared to all other species (*Bacillus anthracis*, *Yersinia*, *Coxiella*, *Francisella*, *E. coli*, *Burkholderia* and *Variola virus*) listed in Table 1, but not to the other *Brucella* strains. This database was called ALL-G. The agent compared to all the rest of the species (*Brucella melitensis* in Figure 1) is called “representative agent”(R).

After the initial comparison with BLAST, (First Comparison in Figure 1) the resulting genes were grouped according to producing none, one, two, three, or more hits with the ALL-G database. A hit was considered a matching sequence between the “representative agent” with the genomes in the ALL-G database (with an error lower than 0.001). Alignment of at least 20-25 nucleotides were detected using these parameters. All genes that had some degree of similarity (more than one hit) were discarded and the genes with no hits were selected. These genes sequences specific for each threat organism were thus (negatively) selected for further analysis.

To select conserved genes within the same specie groups, a second comparison or BLAST was performed. This second alignment was done by creating an agent-specific database that included the complete genomes of all strains or specie within a group listed in Table 1 except the representative agent. Using Figure 1 example, *Brucella melitensis* (NO Hits) was compared against all strains in the *Brucella* group except *Brucella melitensis*. This new database was called G-R. Now the “representative agent” (R) was used as a query for a G-R database. The products of a positive selection in this comparison are the conserved genes within the different strains studied.

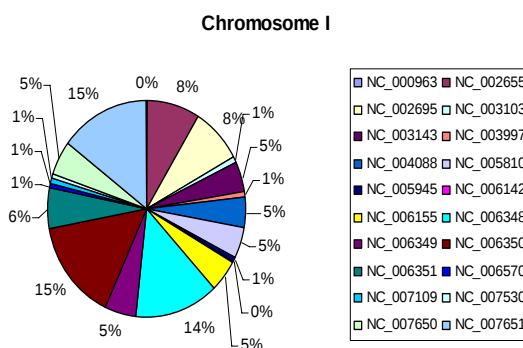
Our approach involving a two step analysis (consisting in a negative selection followed by positive selection) defined a set of genes conserved within closely related species or group (e.g. among all *B. anthracis* or among all *Brucella*) but with no sequence similarity with any of the others of the species groups listed in Table 1. Each group was analyzed separately taking into account the special characteristics that each of these different species have. Results from analysis of a few groups are described bellow as examples.

3. 1. 5. *Brucella* group

Based on the comparative genomics studies we chose *B. melitensis*, as a representative of the group since this organism shared a relatively larger number of genes with the other *Brucella* species. This allowed a better identification of common genes conserved among the *Brucella* group. A total of 639 genes were discarded (433 genes corresponded to chromosome I and 206 to chromosome II) after the First selection. A total of 2559 genes (1626 and 933 for Chromosome I and II respectively) did not show any similarities with the “ALL minus *Brucella*” database and therefore, were selected for further analysis.

Most of the hits in the genome of the *Brucella* group corresponded to genes in the *Burkholderia* genus (Figure 4). Sixty % and 65% of hits corresponding to chromosomes I and II of *Brucella*, respectively, were with genes belonging to the three *Burkholderia* genomes in the database (*B. mallei*, *B. pseudomallei* and *B. thailandensis*). This genetic similarity may be related to a common lifestyle shared between *Brucella* and *Burkholderia* (particularly *B. mallei*.) since organisms in both groups infect animals and are obligate parasites. Thus, these similarities could result from related genes associated with microbial survival. The similarities founded with *B. pseudomallei* could be related to the common backbone shared between *Brucella* and the *Burkholderia* genus, in spite of their differences in lifestyle, pathogenesis and genome content.

Figure 4. Hits distribution of *Brucella* genes against the complementary database.



Similar strategy as that described above was followed to analyze the *Rickettsia* group, *Burkholderia* genus, *Escherichia* group and *Coxiella burnetii*.

Since the probability to find a specific DNA sequence absent in other organism is dramatically higher for bacterial genomes than for the smaller viral genomes, the analysis carried out with *Variola virus* (smallpox virus) genome differed from the approach indicated above. Conserved regions among all the 3 isolates of the *Variola virus* genome were selected by aligning the

sequences using ClustalW (see Software and Scripts) algorithm for multiple sequence alignment.

3. 2. 1. Sizes selection

Once we had determined the specific target sequences in each selected microorganism, we established the size for each genome of the DNA fragment that would result by PCR amplification. An engineered chimera was designed to produce PCR amplicons of different sizes than the amplified fragments from the original pathogenic genome to identify false positives by knowing that simulant and pathogen should produce different size fragments.

Table 2 describes the sizes of the amplified products chosen for primer design. The indicated sizes were utilized as parameter for primer design using the FastPCR software. Two fragment sizes corresponding to each plasmid in *Bacillus anthracis* were selected because the absence of a plasmid in *B. anthracis* considerably reduces the pathogenicity. Thus, only strains or isolates carrying both plasmids are fully virulent. Therefore, the identification of virulent isolates of *B. anthracis* must be done by detecting both plasmids.

Table 2. Selected sizes for pathogenic microorganism and simulant amplified fragments

Organism or group	Preferred size in pathogen	Size in simulant
<i>Bacillus anthracis</i> pXO1	150	205
<i>Bacillus anthracis</i> pXO2	169	220
<i>Yersinia</i> group	200	235
<i>Francisella tularensis</i>	230	100
<i>Burkholderia</i> group	260	115
<i>Rickettsia</i> group	290	130
<i>Coxiella burnetii</i>	310	145
<i>Brucella</i> group	330	160
<i>Escherichia coli</i> O157:H7 group	350	175
<i>Variola virus</i>	380	190

3. 2. .2. Primer design

Primers 22-26 nucleotides long were designed with an annealing temperature above 55°C and a PCR product with the desired length indicated in Table 2 by using the FastPCR software as indicated in Materials and Methods. To generate a more extensive potential primer pair list, the amplified size parameter used was within a range of ± 20 nucleotides of the selected sequence. All the remaining parameter settings were the default of the software. The whole gene sequences of the selected bacteria genes were used for primer design. All the

possible primers were predicted for each DNA sequence selected. Then, a list of all the possible “primer pairs” able to generate an amplified DNA fragment of the expected length was generated. A Microsoft Excel file containing all the primers and primer pairs was generated for each selected gene as output from FastPCR. (Data not shown).

3. 2. 3. Further selection of primer pairs.

Possible yet unspecific primers (able to bind to non-related genomes in Table 1) were discarded by a preliminary selection step. All primers were subjected to an “in silico” PCR prediction using FastPCR. Those primers that showed more than 80% similarity and 5 matches in the 3’ end of the last 7 bases generating an amplified fragment in any genome were discarded. Using a Perl script specifically designed for this purpose, we made a list of primers for the selected genes that showed 100% similarities with the target genome and a similarity lower than 80% with any other genome in this study.

3. 2. 4. Multiplex design

After identifying a considerable number of potential primer pairs, we focused on the generation of primer groups to build the chimeric positive control and test all threat organisms in an in silico multiplex reaction. A primer pair for each genome fragment was selected from the primer pair list constructed with the Pearl script indicated above based on these following criteria

- 1) Preferably primers length of 26 bp
- 2) Quality value of the primers (high)
- 3) Similar annealing temperature among the group of primers
- 4) Theoretical amplified fragment size closest to that indicated in Table 2.

This criterion allowed creating several primer groups. The groups were tested in two different ways for their use in a multiplex reaction. First, we did the FastPCR function “List of primers to test” that check for dimer formation among the group and second, we did an in silico PCR against each genome.

3. 3. Simulant assembly

3. 3. 1. In silico test for multiplex group

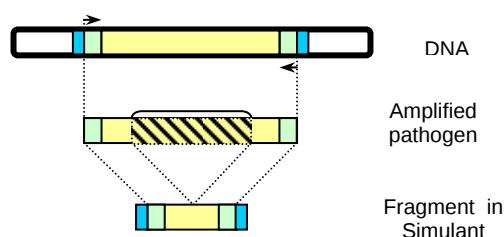
The final test was to perform in silico PCR against each genome assuring that only the desired fragment was present in the corresponding genome and none (or unlikely) unspecific fragments appeared. To this purpose, fragments of several kb in length with primer similarity to other genomes below 80% were considered acceptable. The best choice of primers for multiplex PCR was finally selected after repeated analysis of several groups of

primers, manual inspection of the output, and replacement of those primers that performed poorly.

3. 3. .2. Design of fragment for each genome

After obtaining the primers and amplified fragments for each genome, the chimerical molecule to be used as simulant in PCR reactions was designed. This molecule is being synthesized. The length of simulant amplified fragments differed from those in actual genomes, as detailed in Table 2. The fragments of the sizes indicated in Table 2 were obtained by deleting bases in the middle of the amplified sequences. At each side of the selected primers were added the 10 base-long flanking sequences present in the original genome. In this way, primers designed over approximately 40 bp around the primer selected could be used in case of experimental need (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Scheme showing the design used for each fragment.



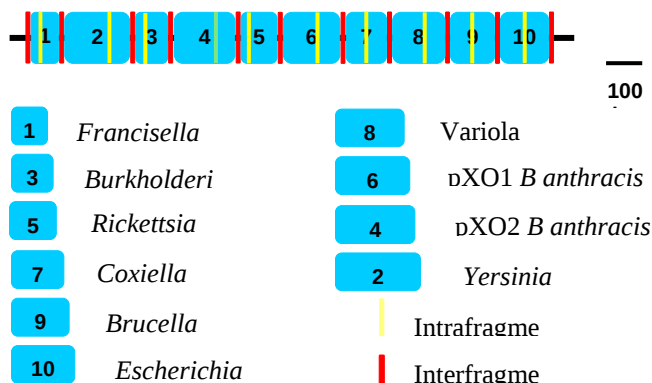
To each fragment we added two restriction sites in the middle of the sequence (EcoRI –GAATTC– and SmaI –CCCGGG–). These enzymes do not cut any of the amplified fragments from any of the genomes of interest. Therefore these two enzymes could be used to digest these fragments in case of false positive results or suspected contamination.

3. 3. .3. Chimera design and assembly

After design of all the fragments for each genome, the selected fragments in a chimerical molecule were joined. Between each of the fragments in the chimera, two additional restriction sites were added to perform a digestion step before the amplification process. This step ensures that no fragments longer than expected would be produced. This digestion was necessary, since the amplification of two consecutive fragments by primers between his extremes could possibly confound results. Thus, the specific sites for the enzymes BamHI (–GGATCC–) and HindIII (–AAGCTT–) were introduced between each fragment and also at beginning and end of the chimerical molecule.

A scheme showing this organization and the resulting chimera is showed in Figure 6.

Figure 6 A scheme showing the organization and the resulting chimera



4. CONCLUSIONS

The multiplex simulant molecule engineered here could be used to spike samples and afterward evaluate the performance of nucleic acid-based bio-detectors and diagnostic products of interest in biodefense. The proposed multiplex simulant would reduce the need of using individual bio-threat agents or their DNA as positive controls. Thus, the multiplex simulant could be used to test military detectors without exposing testers or trainees to pathogenic biological agents. In addition, a single standard multiplex simulant could be issued as positive control to evaluate and monitor nucleic acid-based biological testing platforms, including novel sensors and detectors. This multiplex simulant could be used to compare the performance of a variety of technologies used or envisioned in Biodefense. Easier, cheaper, and improved evaluation of technologies should assure continued reliability of biological detectors and reduced false alarms which degrade operational capabilities by unnecessary masking and gowning.

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