

# High-efficiency retron-mediated single-stranded DNA production in plants

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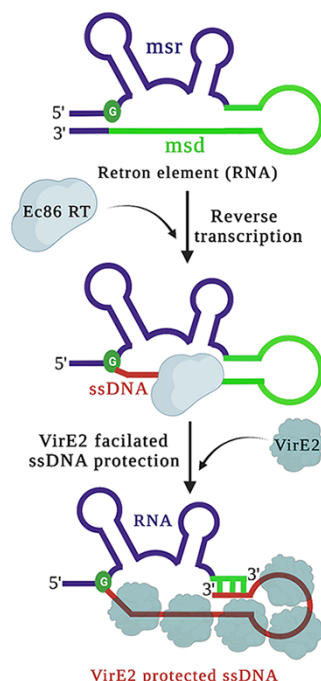
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## Abstract

Retrons are a class of retroelements that produce multicopy single-stranded DNA (ssDNA) and participate in anti-phage defenses in bacteria. Retrons have been harnessed for the overproduction of ssDNA, genome engineering and directed evolution in bacteria, yeast and mammalian cells. Retron-mediated ssDNA production in plants could unlock their potential applications in plant biotechnology. For example, ssDNA can be used as a template for homology-directed repair (HDR) in several organisms. However, current gene editing technologies rely on the physical delivery of synthetic ssDNA, which limits their applications. Here, we demonstrated retron-mediated overproduction of ssDNA in *Nicotiana benthamiana*. Additionally, we tested different retron architectures for improved ssDNA production and identified a new retron architecture that resulted in greater ssDNA abundance. Furthermore, co-expression of the gene encoding the ssDNA-protecting protein VirE2 from *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* with the retron systems resulted in a 10.7-fold increase in ssDNA production *in vivo*. We also demonstrated clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats-retron-coupled ssDNA overproduction and targeted HDR in *N. benthamiana*. Overall, we present an efficient approach for *in vivo* ssDNA production in plants, which can be harnessed for biotechnological applications.

**Key words:** retron; ssDNA; VirE2; HDR; CRISPR-Cas9

## Graphical Abstract



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## 1. Introduction

Single-stranded DNA (ssDNA) has been widely used for various bioengineering and synthetic biological studies. For instance, ssDNA is used in DNA nanotechnology, DNA repair, drug delivery, molecular diagnostics and DNA-based data storage (1). In genome engineering, ssDNA is used as a donor repair template (DRT) to introduce the desired mutations in the target DNA via homology-directed repair (HDR) (2, 3). *In vitro*-synthesized ssDNA is artificially delivered into cells through different physical approaches (4, 5). However, delivery of exogenous ssDNA in the target host remains challenging. Delivery strategies of exogenous ssDNA vary by host and are generally do not provide sufficient amounts of ssDNA for efficient HDR *in vivo* (4, 5). To accelerate the applications of ssDNA, a potential technology for the *in vivo* production of ssDNA is indispensable.

Retrons are a class of retroelements found in diverse prokaryotic cells (6, 7). In nature, retrons function as phage defense systems in bacteria (8). A wild-type (WT) retron usually comprises two components in a continuous polycistronic genomic cassette: a bacterial reverse transcriptase (RT) and retron non-coding RNA (ncRNA). The retron ncRNA generally includes the *msr* and *msd*. *msr* is the immediate precursor during multicopy single-stranded DNA (msDNA) production, while *msd* encodes the template sequence for reverse transcription. Upon transcription, the *msr* and *msd* RNAs form a unique secondary structure, which can be recognized by the bacterial retron RT, which initiates reverse transcription of the *msd* sequence using the conserved priming guanosine residue in the *msr* and produces msDNA molecules. The bacterial retron RT and the paired *msr* are crucial for the conversion of the *msd* template into msDNA. However, the internal *msd* sequence can be replaced with a DNA template containing any desired mutations (7).

Considering the potential of retrons as promising tools in molecular biology, two important improvements, enhancing ssDNA production by retrons and adapting retrons to work in more host organisms, are essential. Lopez *et al.* (9) demonstrated different strategies to improve ssDNA production in mammalian cells. Remarkably, the extension of the  $\alpha 1/\alpha 2$  region of the retron ncRNA facilitated higher ssDNA production in mammalian cells (9). Viswanathan *et al.* (10) downregulated the expression of the endogenous exonuclease and showed efficient retron-mediated genome editing in *Escherichia coli*. Their study showed the importance of protecting *in vivo* ssDNA from the cellular exonuclease. We hypothesized that the ssDNA could be protected by natural ssDNA-protecting proteins, such as VirE2 from *Agrobacterium tumefaciens*, which is involved in the protection of larger T-DNA molecules during *Agrobacterium*-mediated transformation. VirE2 can bind the T-strand cooperatively, protecting it from degradation in plant cells (11, 12). Therefore, we hypothesized that VirE2 could aid retron-generated ssDNA protection and accumulation in the plant cells.

The development of efficient genome engineering tools has transformed the biotechnology field (13–17). Clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR)/CRISPR-associated protein (Cas) genome editing systems have revolutionized plant biotechnology by allowing for precise genome modifications (14, 18–20), but targeted editing via HDR remains challenging, especially in multicellular eukaryotes, including plants (2). HDR requires a repair template at the break site to edit the DNA sequence (21). Multiple approaches have been used

to augment HDR efficiency. For example, DNA damage response factors, such as RAD18, stimulate HDR in mammalian cells (21). Prime editing uses a chimeric fusion protein of an RNA-guided DNA nickase and reverse transcriptase (M-MLV RT) to extend the genetic information engineered in an RNA template into the target sequence (22). Researchers have repurposed retrons as powerful tools for genome engineering in several organisms (6, 7, 23). For example, retrons have been coupled with CRISPR-Cas9 tools to enrich ssDNA templates at the targeted editing site for HDR in the yeast, bacteria, mammalian cells and plants (9, 24–26).

Here, we set out to build, test and establish an efficient retron system to enable enhanced ssDNA production in *Nicotiana benthamiana*. We harnessed the Ec86 retron system for ssDNA production. We employed *Tobacco rattle virus* (TRV)-RNA2 vectors for the expression of Ec86 ncRNA and pK2GW7 vector for Ec86 retron reverse transcriptase (Ec86 RT). We also tested various retron ncRNA architectures and found that Ec86 ncRNA containing an extension of the  $\alpha 1/\alpha 2$  region up to 27 bp and a 6-bp *msd* stem length improved ssDNA production in *N. benthamiana*. For *in vivo* ssDNA protection, we co-expressed VirE2, encoding an ssDNA binding protein from *Agrobacterium*, together with the retron reagents in *N. benthamiana*. Additionally, we achieved precise genome editing using the CRISPR-Cas9-coupled retron systems and showed the potential applications of retron-mediated ssDNA production in plants.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1 Plasmid design and construction

For ssDNA production, we cloned the Ec86 RT driven by the cauliflower mosaic virus 35S (CaMV35S) promoter into the pK2GW7 vector. To test the genome engineering possibilities, we cloned the Cas9-fused Ec86 RT under the CaMV35S promoter into the pK2GW7 vector. We built different Cas9 and Ec86 RT fusions (Retron-Editors) using a short flexible linker (XTEN) and a self-cleaving linker (T2A). To measure protein expression, we customized the Retron-Editors expression sequence downstream of the 3xFLAG sequence. All the above vectors were custom synthesized by GenScript Biotech.

For both the ssDNA production and Retron-Editors-mediated HDR studies, we placed the DRT within the *msd* loop of the retron and the Cas9 sgRNA at the 3' end of both Ec86 ncRNA and modified Ec86 ncRNA designs termed *Retro-sgRNA* and *mRetro-sgRNA*, respectively. We selected two regions inside the *NbPDS* (phytoene desaturase) gene (PDS-1 and PDS-4) for targeted repair and designed the corresponding *Retro-sgRNA* and *mRetro-sgRNA* substrates. The complete *Retro-sgRNA* and *mRetro-sgRNA* sequences were ordered as gBlocks from Integrated DNA Technologies. Further, we digested the gBlocks with restriction enzymes (PDS-1 with XbaI and SacI, and PDS-4 with XbaI and XhoI) and cloned them under the Pea early browning virus (PEBV) promoter at corresponding restriction sites in the TRV-RNA2 vector (27).

For VirE2 expression, we isolated *A. tumefaciens* (strain GV3101) total genome and amplified the VirE2 gene sequence using full-length gene-specific primers (VirE2 KpnI forward—5'-AAGGTACCATGGATCCGAAGGCCGAAGGC-3' and VirE2 SpeI reverse—5'-TTACTAGTCTACAGACTGTTTACGGTTGGGCCGCG-3'), appending the KpnI and SpeI restriction sites at the 5' and 3' ends. The VirE2 amplicons were then cloned under the CaMV35S promoter at KpnI and SpeI sites in the pMDC43 vector.

## 2.2 Plant material and *Agrobacterium*-mediated genetic transformation

Two- to three-week-old WT *N. benthamiana* plants grown under long-day conditions (16 h light/8 h dark at 25°C) were used for all leaf infiltration experiments. We transfected the *pK2GW7* vectors containing Cas9-RT protein effectors and the TRV-RNA2 vectors containing the retron-sgRNA substrates into *Agrobacterium* GV3101 cells, independently. *Agrobacterium* cells harboring Cas9-RT protein effectors and retron-sgRNA substrates were co-infiltrated into *N. benthamiana*. For the ssDNA protection experiments, the *Agrobacterium* cells harboring the *pMDC43* vector carrying a *VirE2* gene expression unit were co-infiltrated together with the *pK2GW7* and TRV-RNA2 vectors (27).

## 2.3 Western blot analysis

To check the Cas9-RT fusion protein accumulation, we conducted Western blot analyses. The infiltrated leaves were frozen and ground thoroughly in liquid nitrogen, and whole protein was extracted following a previously described method (28). Then, 30 µl of the protein was separated by an 8% polyacrylamide gel. The protein was transferred from the gel onto a polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane as described by Mahas et al. (29). The membranes were incubated with primary antibody against α-FLAG antibody (1:2000, Invitrogen) and then anti-mouse antibody (1:1000, Invitrogen) to detect FLAG fusion proteins. Finally, the membrane was treated with an ECL detection reagent (Thermo Scientific) and observed under a chemiluminescent scanner.

## 2.4 Southern blot analysis

*In vivo* ssDNA production was detected by Southern blot analysis. ssDNA can be extracted together with the total RNA (30). Therefore, we isolated total RNA from all the infiltrated leaves using Invitrogen™ TRIzol™ reagent as described in the manufacturer's protocol. Total extracted RNA (20 µg) from each target was used for the Southern blot experiment. We conducted independent Southern blot experiments for each target using 60 pg of the 140-bp amplified *msd*-DRT-*msd* fragment as a size range positive control. We used total RNA isolated from plants lacking the *Ec86* RT (only transfected with *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* or *pK2-Cas9/RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* and the WT) as negative controls. To distinguish the ssDNA from the total RNA, the same RNA samples without any nuclease treatment, with RNase treatment and with DNase treatment were run side by side in the same agarose gel for each target. In the case of plants containing modified retron architectures, such as *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1*, *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-2* and *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-3*, we treated all the samples with RNase and ran them on an agarose gel. We then conducted the Southern blot experiment as described by Ali et al. (30).

For the corresponding PDS-1 and PDS-4 targets, we used 100-bp (only the DRT) DIG-labeled denatured DNA sequences as probes for the *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* and *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA* combinations in Southern blotting experiments. After the DIG-probe hybridization, the membrane was washed and treated with anti-digoxigenin-AP Fab fragments (Roche). The anti-digoxigenin-AP Fab fragments were then washed out, and the membrane was treated with CDP-star chemiluminescent substrate (Sigma life sciences). Finally, the membrane was imaged under the ChemiDoc imaging system (Bio-Rad) and evaluated by Image J software.

## 2.5 Amplicon deep sequencing

Amplicon deep sequencing was used to test the Retron-Editors-mediated precise genome engineering in *N. benthamiana*. We isolated the total genomic DNA from three independent infiltration

experiments for each target (three different biological replicates) and performed deep amplicon sequencing. Subsequently, the ~300-bp Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) fragment was amplified using high-fidelity Phusion polymerase with gene-specific primers mentioned in Primers\_GeneFragments.fa file. The PCR amplicons were further purified and used for MiSeq library preparation. The library was prepared using TruSeq Nano DNA Library Prep kit following the manufacturer's instructions. The libraries were run on the MiSeq platform, and the data were analyzed using online Cas-analyzer software (31). The HDR frequencies were determined as the ratio of HDR reads among the total reads with both indicators.

## 2.6 Statistical analysis

The raw data were analyzed and visualized by GraphPad Prism 9. All numerical data were presented as mean ± standard deviation. We included three independent biological replicates in amplicon deep sequencing experiments. For each replicate, both HDR and indel frequencies of the WT group and six experimental groups were measured. Two-tailed Student's *t*-tests were selected for statistical analysis to measure the differences among the indicated groups.

## 3. Results

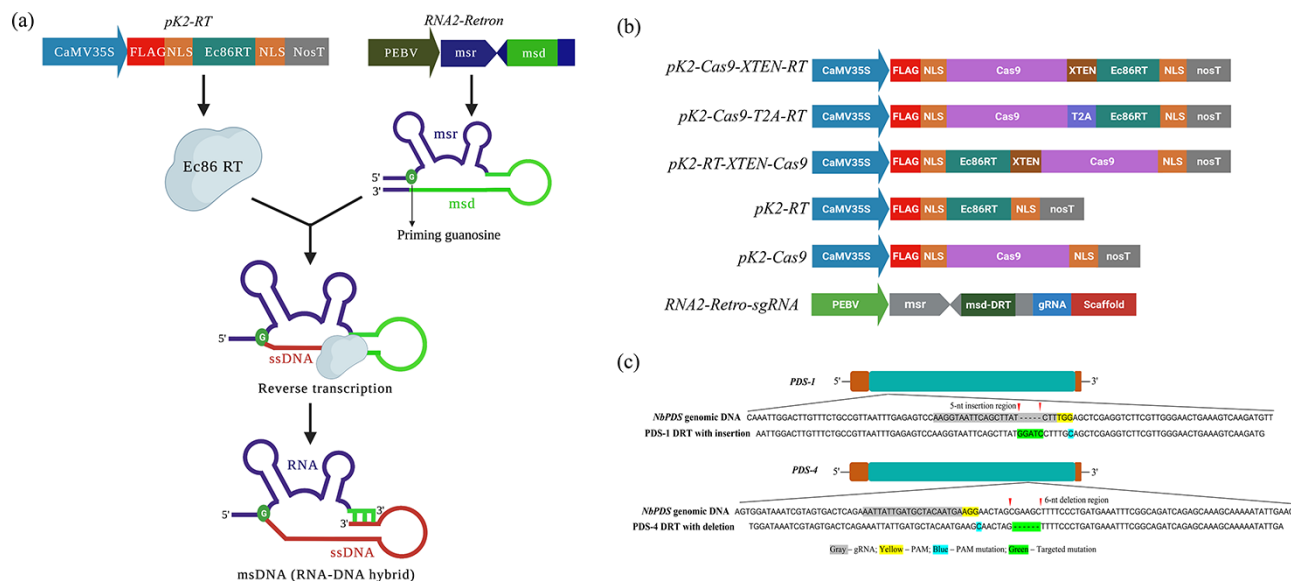
### 3.1 Design and construction of retron systems for *in planta* expression

To harness the retrons for ssDNA production in plants, we designed and cloned *EC86-RT* downstream of the *CaMV35S* promoter in the *pK2GW7* vector to construct the *pK2GW7-RT* vector and tested it in transient expression assays (Figure 1a). We adopted different strategies to exploit the retron functions for genome engineering applications (Figure 1b). We fused Cas9 and *EC86-RT* together using two different linkers, XTEN and T2A, to express the *EC86-RT* and Cas9 as a single or separate protein, respectively. Cas9 was located at the N-terminus, while *EC86-RT* was located on the C-terminus of the linkers. In another modality, we designed the *EC86-RT* on the N-terminus and Cas9 on the C-terminus using XTEN as the linker (Figure 1b). We cloned these cassettes under the control of the *CaMV35S* promoter on the *pK2GW7* backbone. The *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9* constructs were used as controls for our experiments (Figure 1b).

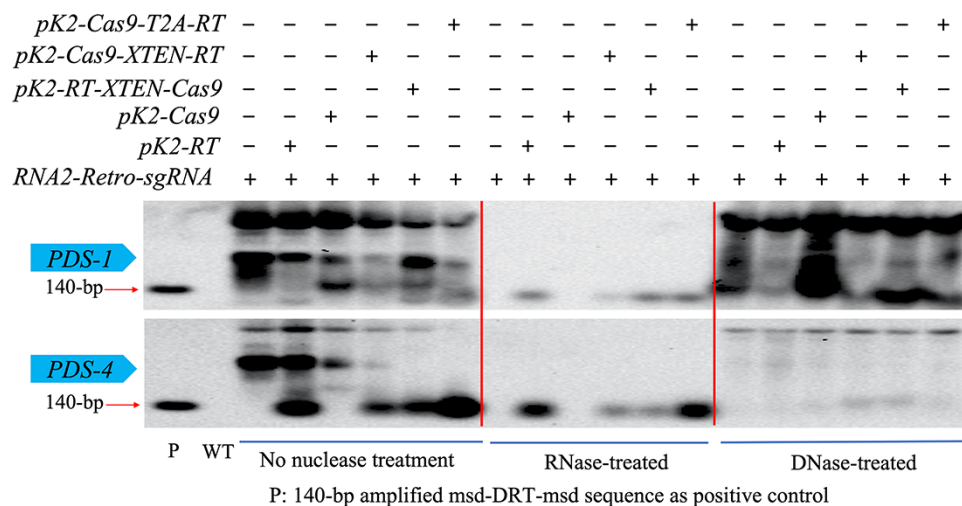
We replaced the WT *Ec86* ncRNA *msd* loop sequence with our 100-bp DRTs comprising the ~47-bp homology arms and desired mutations for PDS-1 or PDS-4 targets (Figure 1b and c). The DRT sequences comprise different targeted mutations, including a 5-nt insertion (PDS-1) and a 6-nt deletion (PDS-4) (Figure 1c). To avoid re-targeting, we destroyed the protospacer adjacent motif sequences in the DRTs via a 1-nt substitution (Figure 1c). Employing the above-mentioned DRTs and sgRNA sequences of the PDS-1 and PDS-4 targets, we designed a basic *Retro-sgRNA* architecture that contained the 6-bp *msd* stem and a 12-bp a1/a2 arm (Figure 1b). We used the TRV-RNA2 vector system to express the *Retro-sgRNAs* under the PEBV promoter (Figure 1b). The annotated sequence plasmids are included in PlasmidSeqs.zip file.

### 3.2 Retron-mediated ssDNA production in *N. benthamiana*

To test whether retrons produce ssDNA in plants, we co-infiltrated the *pK2-RT* and *RNA2-Retro* vectors via *Agrobacterium* into young *N. benthamiana* leaves. We hypothesized that the *RNA2-Retro* vectors generate *Retro-sgRNA* transcripts *in vivo*, and then *EC86-RT* reverse transcribes the *Retro-sgRNA* transcripts to produce ssDNA



**Figure 1.** Schematic representation of retron-mediated production of exogenous ssDNA *in vivo* in *N. benthamiana* and design of vectors and donor templates for ssDNA production and genome engineering in *N. benthamiana*. (a) Retron Ec86-RT and Retron Ec86-ncRNA are expressed independently. Later, the Ec86 RT recognizes the hairpin structure in msr and initiate reverse transcription from the priming guanosine to synthesize msDNA. The mature msDNA, a DNA-RNA hybrid, consists of ssDNA and msr ncRNA. (b) Different vector backbones (*pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT*, *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT*, *pK2-RT-XTEN-Cas9*, *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9*) used for the transient expression studies in *N. benthamiana*. (c) The *N. benthamiana* PDS gene sequence and the DRT sequences employed for repair by the Retron-Editor system.



**Figure 2.** Southern blot analysis for the detection of ssDNA. Total RNA was isolated from *N. benthamiana* to detect PDS-1 and PDS-4 targets and run without any nuclease treatment, with RNase treatment, and with DNase treatment on an agarose gel side by side, together with the 140-bp amplified PDS-1 or PDS-4 msd-DRT-msd as a positive control. We used a 100-bp DIG-labeled DRT as a probe for the corresponding target. The membrane was imaged with the ChemiDoc imaging system (Bio-Rad).

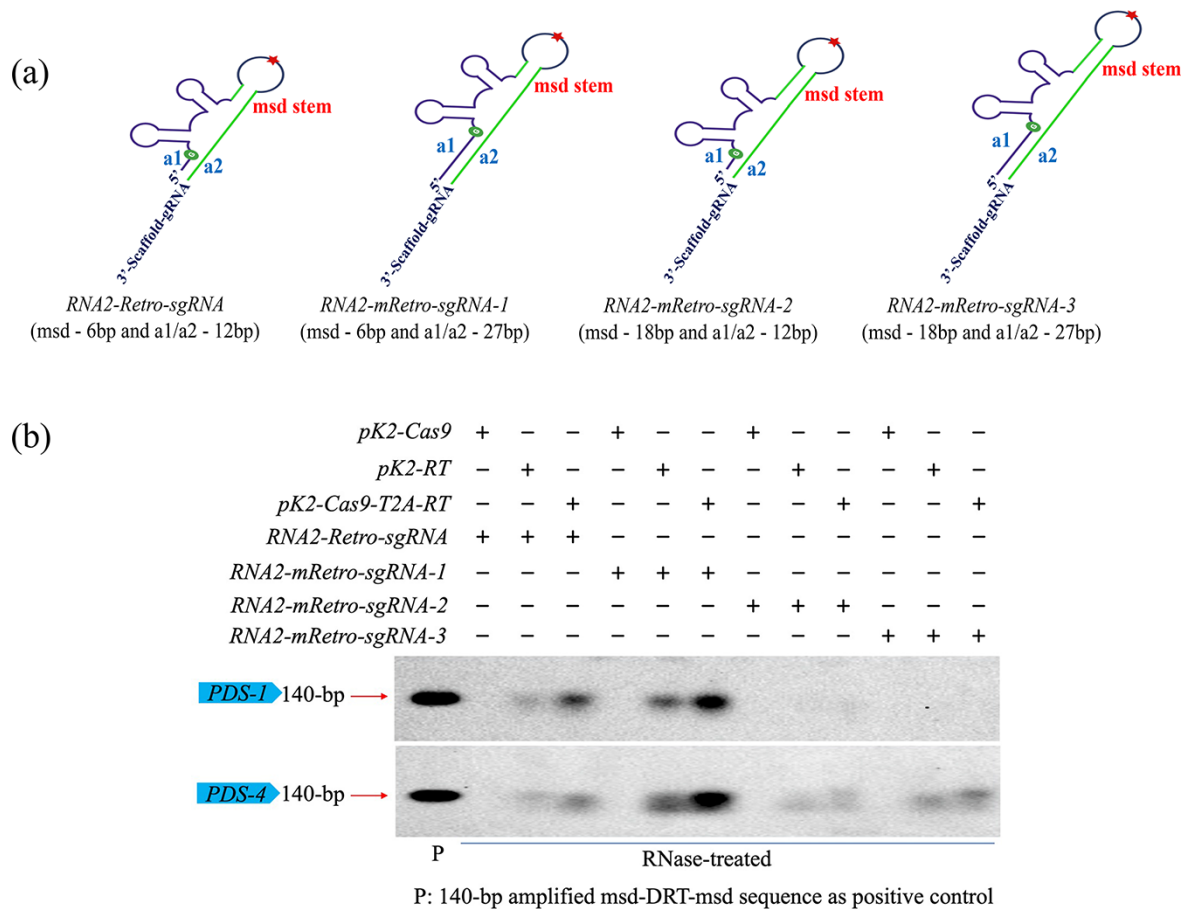
*in vivo*. Leaves were sampled 3 days post-infiltration and used for molecular analysis.

We confirmed the protein expression from different Cas9-linker-Ec86 RT fusions in *N. benthamiana*. We observed a 200 kDa band corresponding to 3XFLAG-Cas9-XTEN-Ec86 RT and 3XFLAG-RT-XTEN-Cas9 from the *pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT* and *pK2-RT-XTEN-Cas9* constructs, respectively. We also observed an extra 170 kDa band corresponding to 3XFLAG-Cas9 in *pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT* construct (Supplementary Figure S1). We assumed that the orientation of Cas9-XTEN-Ec86 RT fusion is unstable. The *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* construct produced a 170 kDa band corresponding to 3XFLAG-Cas9, indicating that the self-cleaving T2A linker was completely cleaved. Overall, our results

confirmed that Cas9-linker-Ec86 RT was successfully expressed in *N. benthamiana*.

To detect and corroborate the production of ssDNA, we performed Southern blotting analysis and probed for the PDS-1 and PDS-4 targets. We extracted the total RNA and used it directly without any treatment. The same RNA was also treated with RNase to digest all the RNA and/or with DNase to digest all DNA. The RNA without treatment, RNase-treated and DNase-treated samples were run on the same blot to distinguish between RNA and DNA. The RNA without treatment showed strong signals, indicating the presence of various transcripts along with ssDNA (Figure 2). The DNase-treated samples also showed strong signals, representing the presence of retron transcripts (Figure 2). The RNase-treated





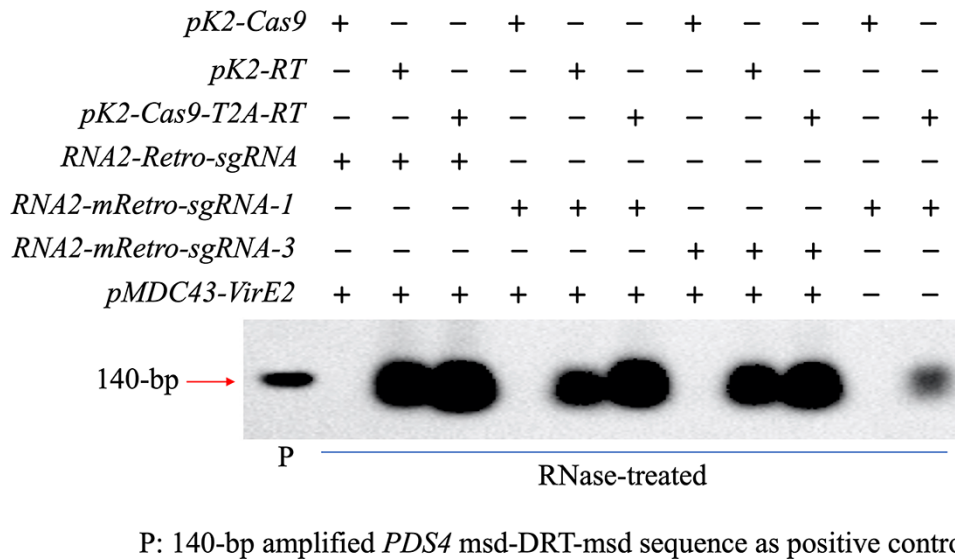
**Figure 3.** Illustration of different retron structure modifications and Southern blot analysis for the detection of ssDNA in *N. benthamiana* containing different retron modifications. (a) Representation of the different retron structural modifications in msr and msd sequence lengths. (b) Total RNA was isolated from *N. benthamiana* to detect PDS-1 and PDS-4 targets and the RNase-treated samples were run on an agarose gel together with the 140-bp amplified PDS-1 or PDS-4 msd-DRT-msd as a positive control. We used a 100-bp DIG-labeled DRT as a probe for the corresponding target. The membrane was imaged with the ChemiDoc imaging system (Bio-Rad).

samples showed a single band at 140 bp in all the targets with *pK2-RT*, *pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT*, *pK2-RT-XTEN-Cas9* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* backbones together with the corresponding *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* construct, suggesting the production of ssDNA (Figure 2). However, the *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* alone, *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* with *pK2-Cas9* and WT plants did not produce any ssDNA (Figure 2). The *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* backbones showed much higher ssDNA production compared with the *pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT* and *pK2-RT-XTEN-Cas9* backbones (Figure 2). Overall, these results indicate that EC86-RT and *Retro-sgRNA* were expressed in the plant cells to produce ssDNA. However, *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT*, where Cas9 and RT are produced as two separate proteins, showed higher ssDNA compared to the other designs.

### 3.3 Modifications in the retron architecture increased ssDNA production

To improve ssDNA production, we modified the retron architecture with different msd and a1/a2 arm lengths (Primers\_Gene-Frags.fa file). We designed *mRetro-sgRNA-1* with a 6 bp msd stem and extended the a1/a2 arm up to 27 bp; in *mRetro-sgRNA-2*, we extended the length of the msd stem up to 18 bp and kept the a1/a2 arm length up to 12 bp. Similarly, in *mRetro-sgRNA-3*, the msd stem was extended up to 18 bp and the a1/a2 arm up to 27 bp (Figure 3a and Supplementary Figure S2a).

We tested the ssDNA production of the *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1*, *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-2* and *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-3* architectures together with the *pK2-Cas9*, *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* backbones by Southern blot analysis. In order to compare the improvement of the modified retron designs, we also included the unmodified *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* version together with the *pK2-Cas9*, *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* backbones in the same Southern blotting experiment. Compared to the unmodified *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* version, the new *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* version together with the *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* backbones showed improved ssDNA production for both PDS-1 and PDS-4 targets (Figure 3b). However, the *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-2* and *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-3* architectures together with the *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* backbones showed very little or no ssDNA production of the PDS-1 or PDS-4 targets (Figure 3b). As expected, all retron architectures with the *pK2-Cas9* backbone did not show ssDNA production (Figure 3b). The extension of the a1/a2 region in the *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* version significantly improved ssDNA production, while the msd stem extension in both *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-2* and *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-3* architectures did not aid ssDNA production. The *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* version with a 6 bp msd stem and a 27 bp a1/a2 arm showed higher ssDNA production compared to the other designs. This further showed that modifications in the retron architecture affect ssDNA production.



**Figure 4.** Southern blot analysis for the detection of ssDNA in *N. benthamiana* co-expressing VirE2 and retron systems. Total RNA was isolated from *N. benthamiana* to detect the *PDS-4* target, where RNase treated and the samples were run on an agarose gel together with the 140-bp amplified *PDS-4* msd-DRT-msd as a positive control. We used a 100-bp DIG-labeled DRT as a probe. The membrane was imaged with the ChemiDoc imaging system (Bio-Rad).

### 3.4 VirE2 facilitated successful ssDNA production

We reasoned that in addition to retron architecture, there must be other factors that impact ssDNA production. One of these factors is the stability of the ssDNA after synthesis via reverse transcription. VirE2 is involved in the protection of ssDNA during *Agrobacterium*-mediated transformation (11). Therefore, we cloned VirE2 gene from *Agrobacterium* under the CaMV35S promoter in the *pMDC43* vector and built the *pMDC43-VirE2* vector (Supplementary Figure S2b). We performed Southern blotting with the *N. benthamiana* leaves co-infiltrated with the *pMDC43-VirE2* vector together with the Cas9-RT effectors (*pK2-Cas9*, *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT*) and the retron substrates (*PDS-1*: *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* and *PDS-4*: *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA*, *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* and *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-3*). We included *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* together with *pK2-Cas9* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* without *pMDC43-VirE2* as the experimental controls. Total RNA, including ssDNA from all the samples, was RNase-treated, and then Southern blotting was performed. As previously observed, *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* and all the *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA* sequences with the *pK2-Cas9* backbone did not produce ssDNA. Interestingly, the co-expression of *pMDC43-VirE2* with retron substrates (*PDS-1*: *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* and *PDS-4*: *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA*, *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* and *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-3*) and *pK2-RT* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* showed a significant amount of ssDNA production compared to the samples without *pMDC43-VirE2* (Figure 4 and Supplementary Figure S3). We analyzed the difference in ssDNA production between *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* co-expressed with VirE2 and without VirE2 by ImageJ software and found a 10.7-fold and 9-fold enhancement of ssDNA for *PDS-1* and *PDS-4* with VirE2 co-expression (Supplementary Figure S4a and b). These results demonstrated that VirE2 protected the ssDNA from degradation and therefore significantly enhanced the amount of ssDNA.

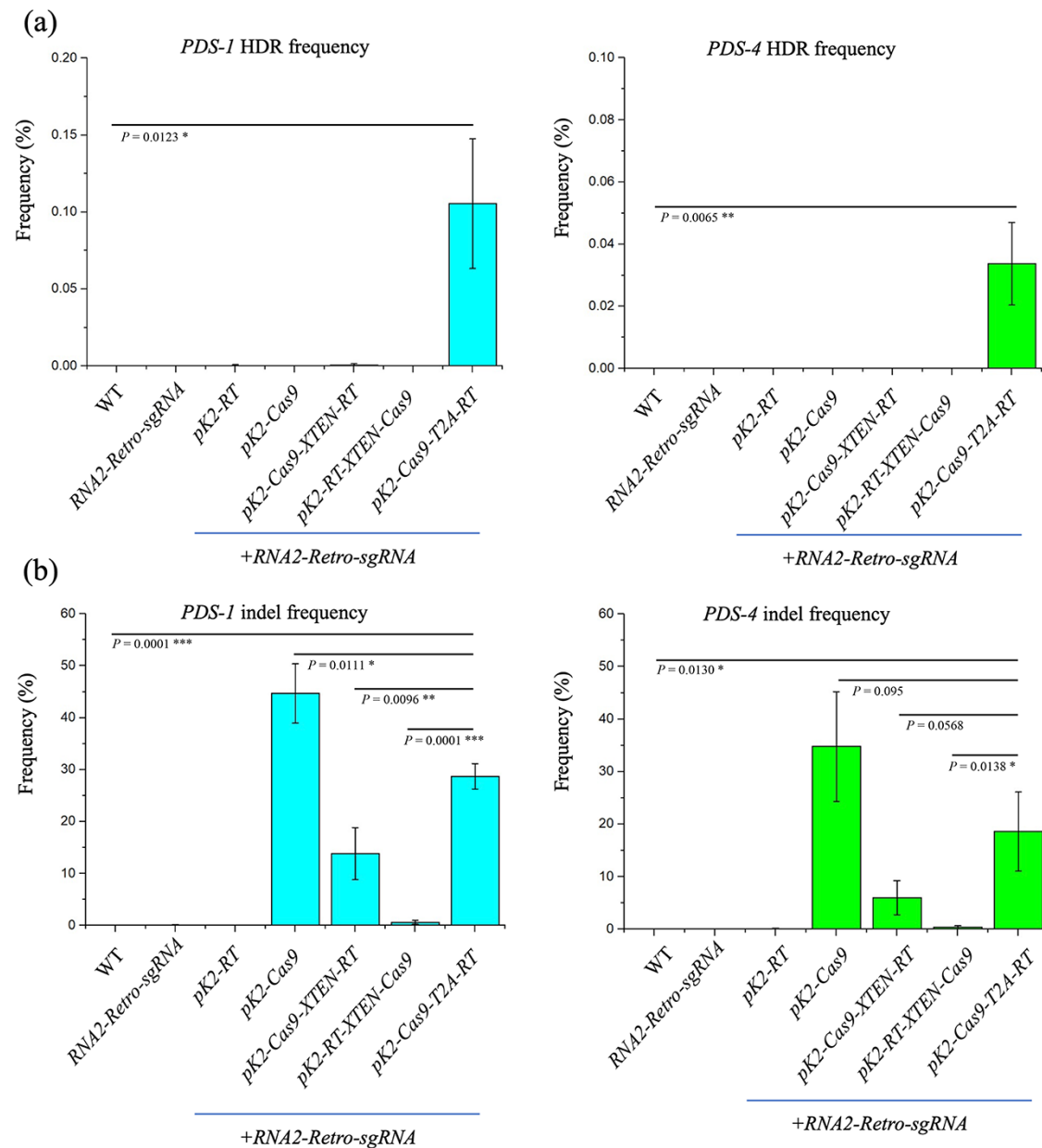
### 3.5 Retron-Editors-mediated precise HDR in *N. benthamiana*

Because retron-mediated ssDNA has been used for HDR in the yeast and mammalian cells (9, 25), and because we success-

fully produced ssDNA with our retron designs, we hypothesized that retron-mediated ssDNA overproduction might facilitate HDR in *N. benthamiana* cells (Supplementary Figure S5). To test this, we extracted total genomic DNA from the infiltrated leaf samples (three independent biological replicates for each target), amplified the target DNA by PCR and used the PCR amplicons for deep sequencing. We initially tested the ability of all the Cas9-RT effectors, including *pK2-Cas9*, *pK2-RT*, *pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT*, *pK2-RT-XTEN-Cas9* and *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT*, for HDR. The *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* construct with different *RNA2-Retro-sgRNAs* showed greater HDR frequencies:  $0.1\% \pm 0.04\%$  for *PDS-1* and  $0.03\% \pm 0.01\%$  for *PDS-4* targets (Figure 5a). However, the *pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT*, *pK2-RT-XTEN-Cas9* and *pK2-RT* constructs with different *RNA2-Retro-sgRNAs* did not show substantial HDR (Figure 5a). No HDR events were detected when only *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* or *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* was transfected with *pK2-Cas9* (Figure 5a). The results showed that the Cas9-RT effectors mediated HDR editing in a RT and Cas9-dependent manner.

Simultaneously, we examined double-strand break repair via non-homologous end joining (NHEJ), which produces insertions and deletions (indels). Among the three fusion backbones, we observed greater indel frequencies with *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* in all the targets, viz.,  $28.7\% \pm 2.4\%$  (*PDS-1*) and  $12.2\text{--}18.6\% \pm 7.5\%$  (*PDS-4*) (Figure 5b). *pK2-Cas9-XTEN-RT* and *pK2-RT-XTEN-Cas9* showed minimal indel frequencies (Figure 5b). As expected, *pK2-Cas9* showed greater indel frequencies, whereas no indels were observed in only *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* and *pK2-RT* with *RNA2-Retro-sgRNA* (Figure 5b).

To check whether higher ssDNA abundance can improve the HDR efficiency of Retron-Editors, we also conducted deep amplicon sequencing for the plants carrying the improved *RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1* architecture with *pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT* and with and without co-expression of the *pMDC43-VirE2* vector. Unfortunately, we did not observe improvement in HDR efficiency with these modifications (Supplementary Table S1) and co-expression of the *pMDC43-VirE2* vector (Supplementary Table S2). Overall, these results showed poor HDR frequencies in plant cells, and further



**Figure 5.** Examination of Retron-Editor-mediated precision HDR and Cas9 indel frequencies in *N. benthamiana*. Deep amplicon sequencing of *PDS-1* and *PDS-4* targets with different Retron-Editors showed variable (a) HDR and (b) indel frequencies. Data are expressed as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation ( $n = 3$ ). P values were obtained using two-tailed Student's t-tests in e and f. \* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

modifications in the designs are needed to improve the repair efficiencies.

#### 4. Discussion

*In vivo* ssDNA production would allow for expanded applications in various fields of study, including synthetic biology and nanotechnology, and for various bioengineering applications (1). Furthermore, the localized production of exogenous ssDNA to serve as a template for HDR is an important goal for genome editing studies. In genome engineering, the synthetic ssDNA is delivered into the targeted tissues by several physical methods (4, 5). Despite efforts, devising an efficient modality for *in vivo* ssDNA production remains a challenge. Retron systems produce ssDNA *in vivo* continuously in several organisms (7). Moreover, retrons enable ssDNA production in germline cells where the HDR machinery is

predominant, leading to precise genome editing (25). Besides, the capability of retron-mediated ssDNA production has been further applied for continuous self-evolution (35), biological data storage (36, 37) and high-throughput functional variant screening (38). The exploration of retron functions in *planta* would adapt these retron toolkits for plant biological applications. Considering retron Ec86 system has been well studied for ssDNA production and HDR in bacteria, yeast and mammalian cells (9, 25), we selected the retron Ec86 system to produce ssDNA in *N. benthamiana*. ssDNA production is dependent on the retron ncRNA structure and the retron RT (9, 32). Instead of using WT Ec86 ncRNA, we replaced the WT msd template with our DRT sequences (100 bp) at the msd loop region as suggested by Sharon et al. (25). Our results showed successful ssDNA production in *N. benthamiana*. Moreover, the production of ssDNA was more efficient with the pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT

and pK2-RT constructs, which contain free RT protein. Since the abundance of ssDNA is directly related to the availability of retron RT, we assumed that the greater production of ssDNA with pK2-Cas9-T2A-RT was due to the availability of the independent Ec86 RT protein. The lower abundance of ssDNA in the XTEN-fused Retron-Editors, which produce Cas9-XTEN-RT fusion proteins, may result from steric hindrances and the functional inhibition of the RT protein. Our results also confirmed that ssDNA production is retron RT dependent, since no ssDNA was detected when RNA2-Retro-sgRNA with pK2-Cas9 or only RNA2-Retro-sgRNA was transfected into *N. benthamiana* leaves.

Lopez et al. (9) showed that extension of the length of the a1/a2 arm could aid in ssDNA production in *E. coli*, yeast and mammalian cells. In line with this, our modified retron architectures, such as RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-1 harboring a 6-bp msd stem and an a1/a2 arm (msr) extension up to 27 bp, showed that the a1/a2 extension improved ssDNA production. Since the a1/a2 region acts as a primer for reverse transcription, a longer a1/a2 region may better facilitate reverse transcription to improve ssDNA production (9). However, our results showed that extension of the msd stem length in RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-2 and RNA2-mRetro-sgRNA-3 caused adverse effects on ssDNA production. One potential explanation is that the secondary structure of retron ncRNA (reverse transcription region) becomes more complicated with the extension of msd stem region which would affect the reverse transcription for retron ssDNA (Supplementary Figure S6). We also speculated that the *in vivo*-produced ssDNA would be severely degraded by cellular exonucleases in plant cells and that ssDNA protection from cellular exonucleases might increase the abundance of ssDNA *in vivo*. VirE2 functions in T-DNA protection during *Agrobacterium*-mediated transformation (11). Therefore, we co-expressed VirE2 with the retron systems and found a 10.7-fold improvement of ssDNA production. Overall, we established a high-efficiency ssDNA production method via co-expression of VirE2 with the retron systems in *N. benthamiana*.

Additionally, we tested retron-based genome editing platforms (Retron-Editors) in *N. benthamiana*. Deep amplicon sequencing showed successful HDR repair by Retron-Editors, indicating that ssDNA can be harnessed as the repair template for HDR in plants. This also demonstrated the accuracy of ssDNA produced in plants. For Retron-Editors, the fusion of Ec86 RT with Cas9 on either N-terminal or C-terminal might affect the Cas9 activity. Therefore, the self-cleavage linker (T2A linker) should be selected for the linker between Ec86 RT and Cas9 for higher genome editing efficiency. After confirming the positive effects of VirE2 and the extension of the a1/a2 region on ssDNA production, we also tested these designs for genome editing. However, the new designs did not improve the HDR frequency, indicating that the abundance of ssDNA is not the limiting factor. Conversely, Lopez et al. (9) obtained around 60% of HDR edit in yeast cells via Cas9/retron-mediated precise genome editing in 48 h. The differentiation in the abundance of retron-produced ssDNA in yeast cells and *planta* could cause the difference. Compared with two-nucleotide modification, five-nucleotide modifications in this study are more difficult which might also result in lower HDR frequencies. Further efforts are needed to improve the HDR editing efficiency of Retron-Editors in plants. For example, VirE2 binding proteins (VIP1 and VIP2) have been reported to target the T-strand to regions of chromatin, promoting integration. The co-expression of VIP proteins and VirE2 may improve the targeting of ssDNA to chromatin so as to improve HDR efficiency (33). Suppressing the NHEJ pathways has also been reported to stimulate HDR repair significantly. Qi et al. (34) achieved a 5-fold to 16-fold enhancement

in HDR editing in a ku70-mutant *Arabidopsis*. In the future, the downregulation of NHEJ key factors would also be tested to improve Cas9/Retron system. Additionally, we tested two loci in the PDS gene which showed clear variations in genome editing efficiencies in this study. Therefore, higher HDR efficiencies might be achieved if other target genes were tested in the future. In summary, this study proposed a new strategy for *in vivo* ssDNA production in plants, which will have great potential for various biological applications.

## Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at SYNBIO online.

## Data availability

The sequence reads for amplicon deep sequencing experiments are now available under the BioProject ID PRJNA889753 in the NCBI databases.

## Material availability statement

Materials used in this study can be made available upon request.

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## Author contributions

M.M. conceived the project; W.J., G.S.R., R.A., H.B., R.K., and K.S. conducted the experiments; W.J., G.S.R., and M.M. analyzed the data; and W.J., G.S.R., H.B., and M.M. wrote the manuscript.

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## Abbreviations

msDNA: multicopy single-stranded DNA  
ssDNA: single-stranded DNA  
HDR: homology-directed repair  
DRT: donor repair template  
RT: reverse transcriptase

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