Uncertainties in Projections of Human-Caused Climate Warming

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Mankind's activities have increased carbon dioxide (CO_2) in the atmosphere. This increase has the potential to warm the earth's climate by the "greenhouse effect" (*1*) in which CO_2 absorbs infrared radiation and then re-radiates it back toward the surface of the planet. Other gases also act as greenhouse gases and may warm the climate even further (*2*), although human-produced airborne sulfate particles can cause cooling that offsets some of the warming (*3*). Computational models that include these factors predict that the climate will warm significantly over the next century.

These forecasts of likely climate changes have forced a realization that it is necessary to reduce human-caused emissions of greenhouse gases. But because of the potential social disruptions and high economic costs of such reductions, vigorous debate has arisen about the size and nature of the projected climate changes and whether they will actually lead to serious impacts.

A key element of these spirited—and often acrimonious—debates is the credibility (or lack thereof) of the mathematically and physically based climate models (*4*) that are used to project the climate changes resulting from a sustained buildup of atmospheric CO_2. Some skeptics ask, to put it bluntly, why should we believe such models' attempts to describe changes in such a dauntingly complex system as Earth's climate? The cheap answer is that there are no credible alternatives. But the real answer is that the climate models do a reasonably good job of capturing the essence of the large-scale aspects of the current climate and its considerable natural variability on time scales ranging from 1 day to decades (*4*). In spite of these considerable successes, the models contain weaknesses that add important uncertainty to the very best model projections of human-induced climate changes.

I express here a "policy-independent" evaluation of the levels of current scientific confidence in predictions emanating from climate models. This climate model uncertainty is distinct from the high social uncertainty associated with future scenarios of greenhouse gas and airborne particle concentrations. I assume that detailed future greenhouse and airborne particle scenarios are part of the policy question and thus do not discuss them further.

A fair-minded and exhaustive attempt to find a broad consensus on what science can say about this problem is contained in the most recent 1996 IPCC Working Group I Assessment (*3*). Some of my evaluations differ in detail from those of IPCC 1996, mostly because of the addition of new research insights and information since 1994. A good guideline for evaluating contrary "expert" opinions is whether they use the IPCC science as a point of departure for their own analysis. In effect, if we disagree scientifically with IPCC, we should explain why. Without such discipline, contrary arguments are not likely to be scientifically sound.

Virtually Certain "Facts"

These key aspects of our knowledge of the climate system do not depend directly on the skill of climate model simulations and projections:

- Atmospheric abundances of greenhouse gases are increasing because of human activities.
- Greenhouse gases absorb and re-radiate infrared radiation efficiently. This property acts directly to heat the planet.
- Altered amounts of greenhouse gases affect the climate for many centuries. The major greenhouse gases remain in the atmosphere for periods ranging from a decade to centuries. Also, the climate itself has considerable inertia, mainly because of the high heat capacity of the world ocean.
- Changes in other radiatively active substances offset somewhat the warming effect of increased greenhouse gases. Observed decreases in lower stratospheric ozone and increases in sulfate particles both produce cooling effects. The cooling effect of sulfate particles remains insufficiently quantified.
- Human-caused CO_2 increases and ozone decreases in the stratosphere have already produced more than a 1°C global average cooling there. This stratospheric cooling is generally consistent with model predictions.
- Over the past century, Earth's surface has warmed by about 0.5°C (±0.2°C).
- The natural variability of climate adds confusion to the effort to diagnose human-induced climate changes. Apparent long-term trends can be artificially amplified or damped by the contaminating effects of undiagnosed natural variations.
- Significant reduction of key uncertainties will require a decade or more. The uncertainties concerning the responses of clouds, water vapor, ice, ocean currents, and specific regions to increased greenhouse gases remain formidable.

I further illustrate these climate uncertainties using two extrapolations of the IPCC idealized scenarios of increases of 1% equivalent atmospheric CO_2 concentration per year (*5*). The first case levels off at a CO_2 doubling after 70 years; the second levels off at a CO_2 quadrupling after 140 years. Both correspond to simple extrapolations of current trends in greenhouse gas emissions. Considering the long residence time of CO_2 at such large concentrations, these leveled-off scenarios are physically plausible but are presented as illustrations, not as social predictions.

Virtually Certain Projections

These projections have a greater than 99 out of 100 chance of being true within the predicted range (*6*):

- The stratosphere will continue to cool significantly as CO_2 increases. If ozone continues to decrease, the cooling will be magnified. There is no known mechanism to prevent the global mean cooling of the stratosphere under these scenarios.
- Global mean amounts of water vapor will increase in the lower troposphere (0 to 3 km) in approximately exponential proportion (roughly 6% per 1°C of warming) to the global mean temperature change. The typical relative humidities would probably change substantially less, in percentage terms, than would water vapor concentrations.

Very Probable Projections

These projections have a greater than 9 out of 10 chance of being true within the predicted range:

- The global warming observed over the past century is generally consistent with *a posteriori* model projections of expected greenhouse warming, if a reasonable sulfate particle offset is included. It is difficult, but not impossible, to construct conceivable alternate hypotheses to explain this observed warming. Using variations in solar output or in natural climate to explain the observed warming can be appealing, but both have serious logical inconsistencies.
- A doubling of atmospheric CO_2 over preindustrial levels is projected to lead to an equilibrium global warming in the range of 1.5° to 4.5°C. These generous uncertainty brackets reflect remaining limitations in modeling the radiative feedbacks of clouds,

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details of the changed amounts of water vapor in the upper troposphere (5 to 10 km), and responses of sea ice. In effect, this means that there is roughly a 10% chance that the actual equilibrium warming caused by doubled atmospheric CO_2 levels could be lower than 1.5°C or higher than 4.5°C. For the answer to lie outside these bounds, we would have to discover a substantial surprise beyond our current understanding.

- Essentially all climate models predict equilibrium global temperature increases that are nearly linear in the logarithm of CO_2 changes. This effect is mainly due to increasing saturation of many of the infrared absorption bands of CO_2. That is, a quadrupling of CO_2 levels generally produces projected warmings that are about twice as large as those for doubled CO_2.
- Models predict that by the year 2100, global mean surface temperature changes under these two idealized scenarios would be 1.5° to 5°C.
- Sea level rise could be substantial. The projections of 50 ± 25 cm by the year 2100, caused mainly by the thermal expansion of sea water, are below the equilibrium sea level rise that would ultimately be expected. After 500 years at quadrupled CO_2 levels, the sea level rise expected due to thermal expansion alone is roughly 2 ± 1 m. Long-term melting of landlocked ice carries the potential for considerably higher values but with less certainty.
- As the climate warms, the rate of evaporation must increase, leading to an increase in global mean precipitation of about 2 ± 0.5% per 1°C of global warming.
- By 2050 or so, the higher latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere are also expected to experience temperature increases well in excess of the global average increase. In addition, substantial reductions of northern sea ice are expected. Precipitation is expected to increase significantly in higher northern latitudes. This effect mainly occurs because of the higher moisture content of the warmer air as it moves poleward, cools, and releases its moisture.

Probable Projections

The following have a greater than two out of three chance of being true:

- Model studies project eventual marked decreases in soil moisture in response to increases in summer temperatures over northern mid-latitude continents. This result remains somewhat sensitive to the details of predicted spring and summer precipitation, as well as to model assumptions about land surface processes and the offsetting effects of airborne sulfate particles in those regions.
- Climate models imply that the circum-Antarctic ocean region is substantially resistant to warming, and thus little change in sea-ice cover is predicted to occur there, at least over the next century or two.
- The projected precipitation increases at higher latitudes act to reduce the ocean's salinity and thus its density. This effect inhibits the tendency of the water to sink, thus suppressing the overturning circulation.
- Very recent research (*7*) suggests that tropical storms, once formed, might tend to become more intense in the warmer ocean, at least in circumstances where weather and geographical (for example, no landfall) conditions permit.
- Model studies project that the standard deviations of the natural temperature fluctuations of the climate system would not change significantly. This indicates an increased probability of warm weather events and a decreased probability of cold events, simply because of the higher mean temperature.

Incorrect Projections and Policy Implications

There are a number of statements in informal writings that are not supported by climate science or projections with high-quality climate models. Some of these statements may appear to be physically plausible, but the evidence for their validity is weak, and some are just wrong.

There are assertions that the number of tropical storms, hurricanes, and typhoons per year will increase. That is possible, but there appears to be no credible evidence to substantiate such assertions.

Assertions that winds in midlatitude (versus tropical) cyclones will become more intense do not appear to have credible scientific support. It is theoretically plausible that smaller-scale storms such as thunderstorms or squall lines could become stronger under locally favorable conditions, but the direct evidence remains weak.

There is a large demand for specific climate change predictions at the regional and local scales where life and life support systems are actually affected. Unfortunately, our confidence in predictions on these smaller scales will likely remain relatively low. Much greater fidelity of calculated local climate impacts will require large improvements in computational power and in the physical and biological sophistication of the models. For example, the large uncertainty in modeling the all-important responses of clouds could become even harder at regional and local levels. Major sustained efforts will be required to reduce these uncertainties substantially.

Characterizations of the state of the science of greenhouse warming are often warped in differing ways by people or groups with widely varying sociopolitical agendas and biases. This is unfortunate because such distortions grossly exaggerate the public's sense of controversy about the value of the scientific knowledge base as guidance for the policy deliberation process.

It is clear that much is known about the climate system and about how that knowledge is expressed through the use of physically based coupled models of the atmosphere, ocean, ice, and land surface systems. This knowledge makes it obvious that human-caused greenhouse warming is not a problem that can rationally be dismissed or ignored. However, the remaining uncertainties in modeling important aspects of the problem make it evident that we cannot yet produce a sharp picture of how the warmed climate will proceed, either globally or locally.

None of these recognized uncertainties can make the problem go away. It is virtually certain that human-caused greenhouse warming is going to continue to unfold, slowly but inexorably, for a long time into the future. The severity of the impacts can be modest or large, depending on how some of the remaining key uncertainties are resolved through the eventual changes in the real climate system, and on our success in reducing emissions of long-lived greenhouse gases.

References and Notes

1. The greenhouse effect for CO_2 was first calculated over 100 years ago by S. Arrhenius, *The London, Edinburgh and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* **41**, 237 (1896).
2. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change, the IPCC Scientific Assessment*, J. T. Houghton *et al.*, Eds. (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1990).
3. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 1995, The Science of Climate Change*, J. T. Houghton *et al.*, Eds. (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1996).
4. Climate models are mathematically based models that attempt to calculate the climate, its variability, and its systematic changes on a first-principles basis. The fundamental equations solved are the conservation of mass, momentum, and energy. The interactions among the atmosphere, ocean, ice, and land surface systems are calculated on rather widely separated computational points on Earth (typical spacings are 200 to 400 km in the horizontal and 1 to 3 km in the vertical).
5. S. Manabe and R. J. Stouffer, *Nature* **364**, 215 (1993); *J. Clim.* **7**, 5 (1994).
6. The approach used here was tested and challenged in E. Barron, *Forum on Global Change Modeling, U.S. Global Change Research Program Report 95-02* (U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, 1995). Earlier evaluations were published in J. D. Mahlman, *Climate Change and Energy Policy*, L. Rosen and R. Glasser, Eds. (American Institute of Physics, Los Alamos National Laboratory LA-UR-92-502, New York, 1992) and in J. D. Mahlman, U.S. Congressional Record, 16 November 1995, House Science Committee Hearing on Climate Models and Projections of Potential Impacts on Global Climate Change (1995).
7. T. R. Knutson, R. E. Tuleya, Y. Kurihara, in preparation.