

1 **Assessing the consistency between short-term global temperature trends in**  
2 **observations and climate model projections**

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32 **Abstract**

33

34 Assessing the consistency between short-term global temperature trends in observations  
35 and climate model projections is a challenging problem. While climate models capture  
36 many processes governing short-term climate fluctuations, they are not expected to  
37 simulate the specific timing of these somewhat random phenomena—the occurrence of  
38 which may impact the realized trend. Therefore, to assess model performance, we  
39 develop distributions of projected temperature trends from a collection of climate models  
40 running the IPCC A1B emissions scenario. We evaluate where observed trends of length  
41 5 to 15 years fall within the distribution of model trends of the same length. We find that  
42 current trends lie near the lower limits of the model distributions, with cumulative  
43 probability-of-occurrence values typically between 5% and 20%, and probabilities below  
44 5% not uncommon. Our results indicate cause for concern regarding the consistency  
45 between climate model projections and observed climate behavior under conditions of  
46 increasing anthropogenic greenhouse-gas emissions.

47

48 **1. Background**

49

50 While global warming is often described as accelerating, in fact, the rate of increase in  
51 global average surface temperatures has slowed in recent years. However, the  
52 significance of this slowdown has not been well-established as most discussions about the  
53 issue lack sufficient grounding in the full distribution of the expectations to which the  
54 observations are being compared. Recent research has begun to focus on this issue, but

55 has only done so in a limited scope. *Easterling and Wehner* [2009] determined the  
56 probability distribution for projected trends from a collection of climate models, but  
57 limited their analysis to trends of 10 years in length, while *Knight et al.* [2009] looked at  
58 the projected ranges for a variety of trend lengths, but from only one climate model.

59

60 Here we extend the results of previous analyses to determine the probability distribution  
61 of short-period trends in global temperature (in length from 5 to 15 years) as projected by  
62 a collection of climate models run under the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change  
63 (IPCC) A1B (“business-as-usual”) emissions scenario. We then evaluate where the  
64 current values of the observed trends of similar length fall within the model distributions.

65

## 66 **2. Data and Methods**

67

### 68 *2.1 Climate Model Projections*

69

70 Monthly output from 20 climate models (51 model runs) incorporated in the IPCC *Fourth*  
71 *Assessment Report* [2007] run under the IPCC’s A1B emissions scenario [*Nakićenović*  
72 *and Swart, 2000*] was obtained from Coupled Model Intercomparison Project 3 (CMIP3)  
73 [*Meehl et al., 2007*] database archived at the Program for Climate Model Diagnosis and  
74 Intercomparison (PCMDI) at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. From these  
75 model projections, monthly global-average anomalies of surface and lower troposphere  
76 temperature were developed (see Auxiliary Material).

77

78 The model average temperature trend is very consistent for all trend lengths within the  
79 first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century but begins to increase in the decades immediately  
80 thereafter. We therefore limit our analysis to the period January 2001 through December  
81 2020 and consider this period to represent the expected behavior of the observed global  
82 average temperature during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

83

84 Since the model runs contain internal (random) climate variability in addition to a  
85 response to the prescribed changes in radiative forcing, trends in model projections  
86 cannot be expected to match trends in observations over relatively short time spans—a  
87 few years to a decade or two. However, climate models do capture many characteristics  
88 of the primary processes driving short-term variability [*IPCC*, 2007, Chapter 8].  
89 Therefore, the distribution of short-term temperature trends (of all lengths) from model  
90 projections should with high probability encompass the trends (of similar length) in the  
91 observed data if the model projections are accurately capturing climate behavior. While  
92 the observed trend falling within the model distribution of trends is not conclusive proof  
93 of the validity of climate model projections, it does serve as a necessary condition.

94

95 We develop the distributions of projected short-term temperature trends both for the  
96 surface and the lower troposphere. Through each individual model run, we calculate the  
97 moving linear trends through the first 20 years of monthly projections for time periods  
98 with lengths ranging from 5 years (60 months) to 15 years (180 months). For each model  
99 run, we develop the set of all available trends of each length. For example, for 5-year  
100 trends, we calculate the trend for the period January 2001-December 2005, February

101 2001-January 2006, March 2001-February 2006, successively stepping one month at a  
102 time thorough all 60-month periods and ending with January 2016-December 2020. The  
103 total number of trends determined from each model run declines with the increasing trend  
104 length, from 180 5-year trends, to 60 15-year trends. For each trend length, we then  
105 combine the set of trends calculated from each of the 51 model runs—weighted to  
106 produce an equal contribution from each climate model (regardless of the number of  
107 available runs)—into a single distribution representing a sample of the overall population  
108 of potential realities contained in the collection of climate models [*Annan and*  
109 *Hargreaves*, 2010]. Weighting each model run equally does not materially affect our  
110 results. The distribution of 5-yr trends contains contributions from 9,180 (180 x 51)  
111 elements, a number which declines to 3,060 for 15-yr trends (60 x 51). However, all  
112 individual elements are not independent of each other as the moving trends within a  
113 single model run are to some degree correlated.

114

## 115 *2.2 Observed Temperature Record*

116

117 We use observed records of global average surface temperature anomalies compiled  
118 monthly by the Climate Research Unit of the University of East Anglia and the Hadley  
119 Centre (HadCRU) [*Brohan et al.*, 2006], by the Goddard Institute for Space Studies  
120 (GISS) [*Hansen et al.*, 2006] and by the National Climatic Data Center (NCDC) [*Smith et*  
121 *al.*, 2008]. Additionally we use observed records of global average lower troposphere  
122 temperatures measured by Microwave Sounder Units (MSU) aboard satellites as

123 complied by the University of Alabama-Huntsville (UAH) [*Christy et al.*, 2003] and by  
124 Remote Sensing Systems (RSS) [*Mears and Wentz*, 2009].

125

126 From the observed global temperature anomalies in each dataset, we calculate the linear  
127 trends using simple least squares regression of lengths 5 years (60 months) to 15 years  
128 (180 months) ending with the most recent data available (December 2009) (see Auxiliary  
129 Table 1 for the observed trend values).

130

131 Observed trends of length greater than 9 years include data from a period of time prior to  
132 the IPCC AR4 climate model projections (which generally begin in January 2001).  
133 However, the rate of increase of radiative forcing from anthropogenic emissions changes  
134 very little between the mid-1990s and the first few decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century under the  
135 A1B emissions scenario [*IPCC*, 2007] so a comparison between observed behavior over  
136 the past 15 years and the model expected behavior during the period 2001-2020 is  
137 appropriate. We do not extend our analysis into trends of length greater than 15 years as  
138 the observed trend begins to be influenced by the 1991 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo—a type  
139 of natural forcing not included in the A1B emissions scenario.

140

### 141 **3. Results and Discussion**

142

143 There are several options to assess the cumulative probability of a particular trend value  
144 within the model distributions of projected trends. For instance, the cumulative  
145 probability of a 10-yr trend in global average surface temperatures with a value less than

146 or equal to zero can be determined directly from the elements of the distribution of model  
147 projected 10-yr trends by using ranked percentiles (which yields a cumulative probability  
148 of 6.3%), by using Student's t-distribution conservatively with 31 degrees of freedom  
149 representing the weighted combination of the 51 model runs (which yields a cumulative  
150 probability of 8.4%), or by fitting a normal distribution (which yields a cumulative  
151 probability of 7.9%). The results of these three solutions are very similar across all trend  
152 lengths, indicating that the determination of the cumulative probability is not overly  
153 sensitive to the choice of method. As such, subsequently we will only report the results  
154 using the assumption of normality.

155

156 These results in the previous example can be compared with other assessments of model  
157 trend probabilities. *Easterling and Wehner* [2009] used a similar statistical methodology,  
158 but used model projections from the SRES A2 scenario to determine the probability of a  
159 10-yr trend less than or equal to zero. They reported a probability of "about 10%" for  
160 such an occurrence during the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This value is slightly greater  
161 than the value from our methodology, mostly likely, because the A2 scenario examined  
162 by *Easterling and Wehner* [2009] includes less forcing during the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup>  
163 century than does the A1B scenario we used. *Knight et al.* [2009] examined variability  
164 within the trends produced by the HadCM3 climate model when run under a variety of  
165 emissions scenarios and model settings. *Knight et al.* [2009] found that a 10-yr trend falls  
166 just inside the 90% range of trends produced by the HadCM3 model—a value apparently  
167 similar to ours.

168

169 In Figure 1 we present a general depiction of the model probability distributions for  
170 trends of length 5 to 15 years for surface temperatures. As the length of the trend  
171 increases, the probably range tightens. This general solution can be used to assess the  
172 model-based probability of any and all short-term trends within the first 20 years of the  
173 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, the probability of a trend in global average temperatures that is  
174 less than or equal to zero becomes 5% or less at a length of about 11 years (132 months).  
175 The probability distributions for the projected trends in the lower troposphere are very  
176 similar (see Auxiliary Figure 1). The average model projected trend in the lower  
177 troposphere is about 20% larger than the surface (0.025°C/yr vs. 0.020°C/yr) and the  
178 spread about the mean is slightly larger as well.

179

180 The spread of the distributions of model projected trends is governed both by statistical  
181 uncertainty about the best-fit linear trend that results from random variability that is  
182 independent from month-to-month, as well as by the influence of random (over the  
183 longer-term) low-frequency variability that is correlated over times scales of months to  
184 decades and which may alter the value of the short-term trends for an extended time  
185 period. Our working hypothesis is that these random processes operate to influence  
186 model trends to the same degree as they do observed trends. Therefore, we assume that  
187 the model trend distributions represent the spread of potential realities (including these  
188 uncertainties), of which the single realization of the observed trend is a member.

189

190 One notable exception to this assumption concerns the true observational errors, such as  
191 those arising from incomplete spatial coverage, station number changes, and non-



192 climatological influences on the temperature measurements. These errors do not occur in  
193 the model projections for which the temperature is precisely known. Estimates of the size  
194 of observational errors are available for each observed dataset and we incorporate them  
195 into Monte Carlo simulations to ascertain their influence on variability of trends ranging  
196 from 5 to 15 years in length. We add this variability to the variability in the model trend  
197 distributions (see Auxiliary Material). This results in a slight broadening of the  
198 distributions.

199

200 From these adjusted distributions, derived separately for the surface and the lower  
201 troposphere, we determine the cumulative probability of occurrence of the value of the  
202 observed trend (ending in December 2009) ranging in length from 5 to 15 years in each  
203 of the five observed datasets—three compilations of surface temperatures and two  
204 compilations of lower tropospheric temperatures (Figure 2).

205

206 The cumulative probabilities of the observed trend values typically are less than 20%  
207 (with the exception of GISS dataset). In all datasets the cumulative occurrence  
208 probability of the current 8-yr trend is about 10% or less, and in all datasets except the  
209 GISS dataset, there is less than a 10% probability of current values for trends of 7, 8, 9,  
210 12, and 13 years in length. The values for these same trend lengths from some datasets  
211 fall beneath the 5% cumulative probability indicating an expectation of occurrence of less  
212 than 1 in 20 (a typical measure of statistical significance). In general, the cumulative  
213 probabilities of the observed trends are lower for the lower troposphere than for the  
214 surface.

215

216 **4. Conclusions**

217

218 For most observational datasets of global average temperature, the trends from length 5 to  
219 15 years lie along the lower tails of the probability distributions from the collection of  
220 climate model projections under the SRES A1B emissions scenario. Typically the  
221 probability of occurrence of the observed trend values lies between 5% and 20%,  
222 depending on the dataset and the trend length. In the HadCRU, RSS, and UAH observed  
223 datasets, the current value of trends of length 8, 12, and 13 years is expected from the  
224 models to occur with a probability of less than 1 in 20. Taken together, our results raise  
225 concern about the consistency between the observed evolution of global temperatures in  
226 recent years and the climate model projections of that evolution.

227

228 Possible reasons for why current trends are unusual when set among model projections  
229 include unknown errors in the observational temperature record, differences in the true  
230 vs. A1B-defined anthropogenic forcing changes, insufficiencies of the climate models to  
231 accurately replicate the characteristics of natural variability, inaccuracies in climate  
232 model transient climate evolution, and the overestimation by climate models of the actual  
233 climate sensitivity. These are in addition to the possibility that current trends represent  
234 simply a rare but not impossible situation that is generally captured by the climate  
235 models.

236

237 As global emissions of carbon dioxide—the primary anthropogenic climate forcing  
238 agent—have been increasing during recent years at a rate similar to that specified in the  
239 A1B scenario [*Nakićenović and Swart, 2000; EIA, 2008*], it is unlikely that the difference  
240 between observed and projected trends arises from a significant underestimate of the  
241 changes in climate forcing prescribed by the A1B scenario. Similarly, while there are  
242 clearly differences among the observed trend values derived from the various  
243 observational datasets, all trends through the observed data fall in the lower tails of model  
244 projections, so it is unlikely that errors in the observations (which may include a warming  
245 bias in surface observations in recent years, [e.g., *McKittrick and Michaels, 2007;*  
246 *Klotzbach et al., 2009*] are the primary cause of the observed/projected differences. This  
247 leads to the conclusion that a large part of the differences between the observed trends  
248 and model-projected trends lies with the internal workings of the models. This conclusion  
249 is supported by results which indicate that natural variations in ocean/atmospheric  
250 circulation patterns are in part responsible for the recent slowdown in the rate of global  
251 temperature rise [*Keenlyside et al., 2008; Swanson and Tsonis, 2009*] and that  
252 inadequately-modeled decadal-scale variations in stratospheric water vapor have a  
253 significant influence on global temperature trends, including contributing to a reduced  
254 trend in recent years [*Solomon et al., 2010*]. Further, some results indicate that the model  
255 determinations of climate sensitivity may be too large [e.g., *Wyant et al., 2006; Spencer*  
256 *and Braswell, 2008*]. It can also be noted that the discrepancy between observed trends  
257 and projected trends is greater for satellite than surface observations.

258

259 Our results stand in contrast to results such as *Rahmstorf et al.* [2007] which concluded  
260 that observed trends through global average temperatures are increasing at a rate near the  
261 upper end of the IPCC projected range. The primary reasons for the contrasting  
262 conclusions are that our analysis is based upon updated climate model runs, more recent  
263 observed data, and a more comprehensive analysis of model projections.

264

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341

342 **Figure Captions**

343

344 Figure 1. Cumulative probability distribution of trend values for trends ranging in length  
345 from 5 to 15 years derived from 20 models under SRES A1B for the period January 2001  
346 through December 2020 for global average surface temperatures. The 95% confidence  
347 range is shaded in grey and a zero trend is indicated by the horizontal black line.

348

349

350 Figure 2. Cumulative probabilities of the current observed values of the trends ranging in  
351 length from 5 to 15 years (each ending in December 2009) through average global  
352 surface temperature anomalies and lower troposphere temperature anomalies as compiled  
353 within five observed temperature datasets.

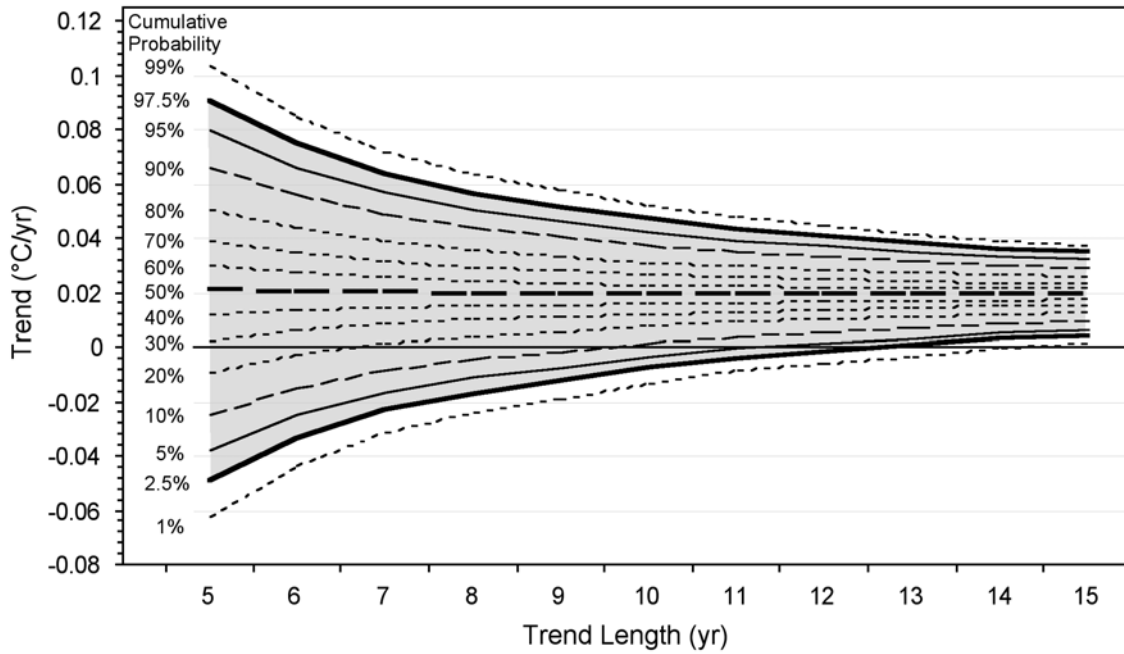
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356 Figure 1.

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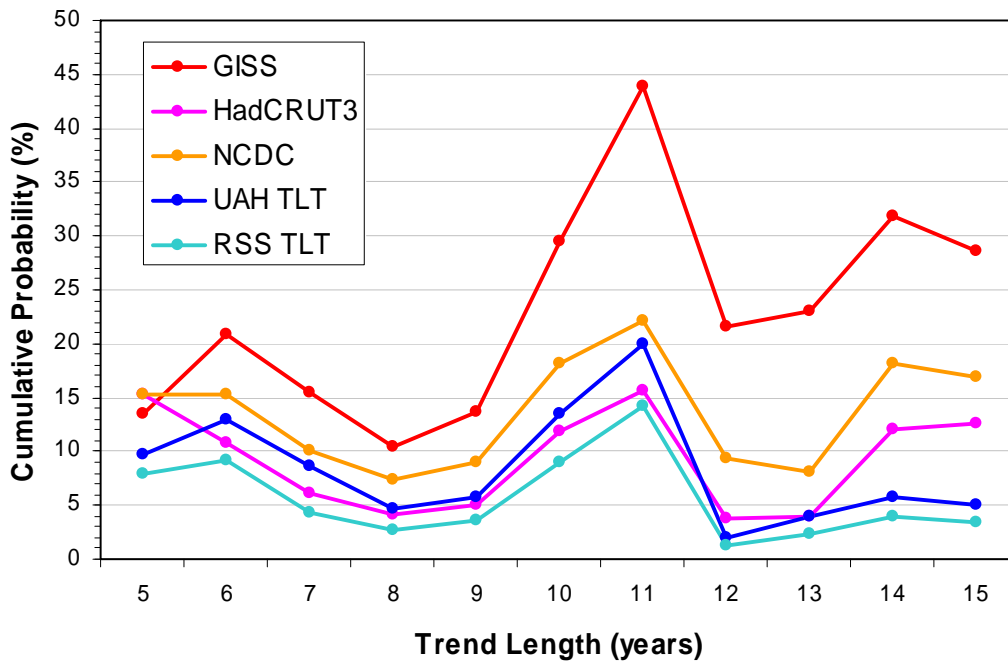
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364 Figure 2.

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