Charaterized by vast amounts of carbon stored in permafrost, Arctic tundra is rapidly evolving as permafrost degrades in response to a changing climate. The mechanisms responsible for this system-wide reorganization have been unpredictable and difficult to isolate because they are initiated at very fine spatial scales, and because of the large number of interactions among the individual system components. To address this challenge, the Terrestrial Ecosystem Science (TES) program within the Department of Energy’s (DOE) Office of Biological and Environmental Research (BER) is supporting a next-generation ecosystem experiments project in the Arctic (NGEE–Arctic).

The NGEE approach seeks to improve the representation of critical environmental processes in Earth system models (ESMs) by focusing on systems that are globally important, climatically sensitive, and understudied or inadequately represented in ESMs. In this approach, modeling and process research are closely and iteratively connected so that model structure and needs are considered in the development of process studies whose outcomes in turn are designed to directly inform, challenge, and improve models.

Ultimately, the NGEE–Arctic project is developing a process-rich ecosystem model, extending from the bedrock to the vegetative canopy-atmospheric interface, in which the evolution of Arctic ecosystems in a changing climate can be modeled at the scale of a high-resolution ESM grid cell. A similar initiative under way in the tropics (NGEE–Tropics) is examining how tropical forest ecosystems will respond to climate and atmospheric change.

Integration Across Scales

Variations in landscape structure and organization—including ridges, valleys, and watershed basins—provide the organizing framework for integrating process studies and observations from the pore or core scale (micron to tens of centimeters) to plot (meter to tens of meters) and landscape (kilometer) scales. Multiscale research activities organized around these components are designed to help determine whether the Arctic is, or in the future will become, a negative or positive feedback to anthropogenically forced climate change. These activities include landscape heterogeneity, soil biogeochemistry, plant traits and shrub dynamics, and watershed hydrology.

Permafrost Landscapes.

Degradation of ice-rich permafrost causes subsidence and increased variability in topography across the Arctic landscape. Associated changes in hydrology, vegetation, and biogeochemistry create “hot spots” (i.e., locations within an ecosystem that exert a disproportionately large influence on the flow and processing of nutrients) for CO₂ and CH₄ fluxes.
Landscape heterogeneity research considers how vegetation, biogeochemistry, and hydrology are influenced by regional landforms such as ridges, valleys, and drainage basins. A key challenge is simplifying the variations in landscape properties and processes for input into models, while still retaining those fine-scale features that have the strongest influence on important ecosystem feedbacks to climate.

Soil biogeochemistry focuses on temperature, moisture, and nutrient variations and the influence of these variations on microbial dynamics and soil organic matter decomposition. Given the need to improve predictions of net carbon exchange in Arctic systems, assessing geochemical and hydrological influences on CO₂ and CH₄ fluxes under conditions of thawing permafrost is critical.

Plant traits and shrub dynamics provide a critical link among plant communities, tundra biogeochemistry, and feedbacks of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. NGEE–Arctic research efforts have greatly improved model representation of plant traits regulating photosynthesis for Arctic vegetation types and led to new approaches for collecting plant traits using remotely sensed data. Further research is focused on better understanding and modeling the expansion of deciduous shrubs throughout the Arctic landscape.

Watershed hydrology research activities focus on determining the spatial distribution and temporal dynamics of soil saturation and inundation and, in turn, surface and subsurface ecosystem responses, CO₂ and CH₄ fluxes, and the local- to regional-scale energy balance. These observations are important for identifying key model improvements required to enhance prediction of past, present, and future distributions of snow, soil moisture and inundation, and surface and subsurface water flow in the Arctic landscape.

Connecting Observations to Models
This comprehensive suite of NGEE–Arctic process studies and observations is being strongly linked to model development and application requirements for improving process representation, initializing multiscale model domains, calibrating models, and evaluating model predictions. A fundamental challenge for the NGEE–Arctic modeling activity is to relate new process knowledge gained at fine and intermediate spatial scales to states and fluxes relevant for integration in global-scale climate system models. Consequently, a nested hierarchy of models is being engaged at fine, intermediate, and climate scales, connecting process studies to models and models to each other in a quantitative upscaling and downscaling framework.

The overall objective is general knowledge and understanding through direct observation and fine-grained simulation of Arctic tundra ecosystems and the mechanisms that regulate their form and function. Specifically, this generalization is providing improved representation of Arctic tundra states and dynamics in the land model component of a coupled ESM.

Leveraging NGEE–Arctic Investments
Led by Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the NGEE–Arctic project’s collaborative effort includes scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, University of Alaska Fairbanks, and partners at universities and other state and federal agencies. In addition to TES, other BER programs involved in the NGEE–Arctic project include:

- Atmospheric Radiation Measurement Climate Research Facility
- Atmospheric System Research program
- Climate and Earth System Modeling programs, including the Accelerated Climate Model for Energy (ACME) and International Land Model Benchmarking project (ILAMB)
- Environmental Molecular Sciences Laboratory
- Genomic Science program
- Subsurface Biogeochemical Research program

NGEE–Arctic also is affiliated with other federal and international monitoring projects, including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Arctic-Boreal Vulnerability Experiment (ABoVE) and Carbon in Arctic Reservoirs Vulnerability Experiment (CARVE). All NGEE–Arctic data generated from observations, experiments, and models are made available at ngee-arctic.ornl.gov. These data include automated data collected from weather stations and trace-gas systems; observations from remote-sensing platforms; large campaign-based field work collections; and discrete datasets generated from chemical, biochemical, and molecular characterizations of soil, ice, water, and microbial or plant samples. BER provides research funding to leverage the NGEE investment through regular Funding Opportunity Announcements posted at www.grants.gov.

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