

Frequently Asked Questions

FAQ 12.2 | How Will the Earth's Water Cycle Change?

The flow and storage of water in the Earth's climate system are highly variable, but changes beyond those due to natural variability are expected by the end of the current century. In a warmer world, there will be net increases in rainfall, surface evaporation and plant transpiration. However, there will be substantial differences in the changes between locations. Some places will experience more precipitation and an accumulation of water on land. In others, the amount of water will decrease, due to regional drying and loss of snow and ice cover.

The water cycle consists of water stored on the Earth in all its phases, along with the movement of water through the Earth's climate system. In the atmosphere, water occurs primarily as a gas—water vapour—but it also occurs as ice and liquid water in clouds. The ocean, of course, is primarily liquid water, but the ocean is also partly covered by ice in polar regions. Terrestrial water in liquid form appears as surface water—such as lakes and rivers—soil moisture and groundwater. Solid terrestrial water occurs in ice sheets, glaciers, snow and ice on the surface and in permafrost and seasonally frozen soil.

Statements about future climate sometimes say that the water cycle will accelerate, but this can be misleading, for strictly speaking, it implies that the cycling of water will occur more and more quickly with time and at all locations. Parts of the world will indeed experience intensification of the water cycle, with larger transports of water and more rapid movement of water into and out of storage reservoirs. However, other parts of the climate system will experience substantial depletion of water, and thus less movement of water. Some stores of water may even vanish.

As the Earth warms, some general features of change will occur simply in response to a warmer climate. Those changes are governed by the amount of energy that global warming adds to the climate system. Ice in all forms will melt more rapidly, and be less pervasive. For example, for some simulations assessed in this report, summer Arctic sea ice disappears before the middle of this century. The atmosphere will have more water vapour, and observations and model results indicate that it already does. By the end of the 21st century, the average amount of water vapour in the atmosphere could increase by 5 to 25%, depending on the amount of human emissions of greenhouse gases and radiatively active particles, such as smoke. Water will evaporate more quickly from the surface. Sea level will rise due to expansion of warming ocean waters and melting land ice flowing into the ocean (see FAQ 13.2).

These general changes are modified by the complexity of the climate system, so that they should not be expected to occur equally in all locations or at the same pace. For example, circulation of water in the atmosphere, on land and in the ocean can change as climate changes, concentrating water in some locations and depleting it in others. The changes also may vary throughout the year: some seasons tend to be wetter than others. Thus, model simulations assessed in this report show that winter precipitation in northern Asia may increase by more than 50%, whereas summer precipitation there is projected to hardly change. Humans also intervene directly in the water cycle, through water management and changes in land use. Changing population distributions and water practices would produce further changes in the water cycle.

Water cycle processes can occur over minutes, hours, days and longer, and over distances from metres to kilometres and greater. Variability on these scales is typically greater than for temperature, so climate changes in precipitation are harder to discern. Despite this complexity, projections of future climate show changes that are common across many models and climate forcing scenarios. Similar changes were reported in the AR4. These results collectively suggest well understood mechanisms of change, even if magnitudes vary with model and forcing. We focus here on changes over land, where changes in the water cycle have their largest impact on human and natural systems.

Projected climate changes from simulations assessed in this report (shown schematically in FAQ 12.2, Figure 1) generally show an increase in precipitation in parts of the deep tropics and polar latitudes that could exceed 50% by the end of the 21st century under the most extreme emissions scenario. In contrast, large areas of the subtropics could have decreases of 30% or more. In the tropics, these changes appear to be governed by increases in atmospheric water vapour and changes in atmospheric circulation that further concentrate water vapour in the tropics and thus promote more tropical rainfall. In the subtropics, these circulation changes simultaneously promote less rainfall despite warming in these regions. Because the subtropics are home to most of the world's deserts, these changes imply increasing aridity in already dry areas, and possible expansion of deserts. *(continued on next page)*

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Increases at higher latitudes are governed by warmer temperatures, which allow more water in the atmosphere and thus, more water that can precipitate. The warmer climate also allows storm systems in the extratropics to transport more water vapour into the higher latitudes, without requiring substantial changes in typical wind strength. As indicated above, high latitude changes are more pronounced during the colder seasons.

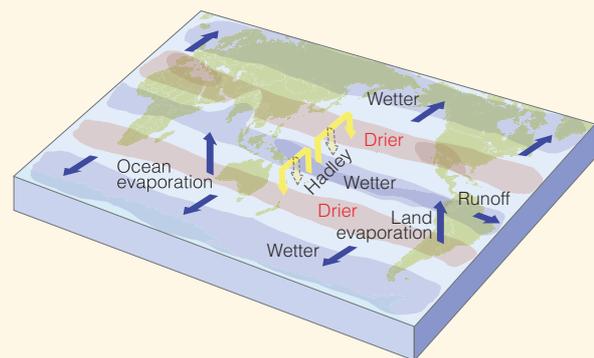
Whether land becomes drier or wetter depends partly on precipitation changes, but also on changes in surface evaporation and transpiration from plants (together called evapotranspiration). Because a warmer atmosphere can have more water vapour, it can induce greater evapotranspiration, given sufficient terrestrial water. However, increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reduces a plant's tendency to transpire into the atmosphere, partly counteracting the effect of warming.

In the tropics, increased evapotranspiration tends to counteract the effects of increased precipitation on soil moisture, whereas in the subtropics, already low amounts of soil moisture allow for little change in evapotranspiration. At higher latitudes, the increased precipitation generally outweighs increased evapotranspiration in projected climates, yielding increased annual mean runoff, but mixed changes in soil moisture. As implied by circulation changes in FAQ 12.2, Figure 1, boundaries of high or low moisture regions may also shift.

A further complicating factor is the character of rainfall. Model projections show rainfall becoming more intense, in part because more moisture will be present in the atmosphere. Thus, for simulations assessed in this report, over much of the land, 1-day precipitation events that currently occur on average every 20 years could occur every 10 years or even more frequently by the end of the 21st century. At the same time, projections also show that precipitation events overall will tend to occur less frequently. These changes produce two seemingly contradictory effects: more intense downpours, leading to more floods, yet longer dry periods between rain events, leading to more drought.

At high latitudes and at high elevation, further changes occur due to the loss of frozen water. Some of these are resolved by the present generation of global climate models (GCMs), and some changes can only be inferred because they involve features such as glaciers, which typically are not resolved or included in the models. The warmer climate means that snow tends to start accumulating later in the fall, and melt earlier in the spring. Simulations assessed in this report show March to April snow cover in the Northern Hemisphere is projected to decrease by approximately 10 to 30% on average by the end of this century, depending on the greenhouse gas scenario. The earlier spring melt alters the timing of peak springtime flow in rivers receiving snowmelt. As a result, later flow rates will decrease, potentially affecting water resource management. These features appear in GCM simulations.

Loss of permafrost will allow moisture to seep more deeply into the ground, but it will also allow the ground to warm, which could enhance evapotranspiration. However, most current GCMs do not include all the processes needed to simulate well permafrost changes. Studies analysing soils freezing or using GCM output to drive more detailed land models suggest substantial permafrost loss by the end of this century. In addition, even though current GCMs do not explicitly include glacier evolution, we can expect that glaciers will continue to recede, and the volume of water they provide to rivers in the summer may dwindle in some locations as they disappear. Loss of glaciers will also contribute to a reduction in springtime river flow. However, if annual mean precipitation increases—either as snow or rain—then these results do not necessarily mean that annual mean river flow will decrease.



FAQ 12.2, Figure 1 | Schematic diagram of projected changes in major components of the water cycle. The blue arrows indicate major types of water movement changes through the Earth's climate system: poleward water transport by extratropical winds, evaporation from the surface and runoff from the land to the oceans. The shaded regions denote areas more likely to become drier or wetter. Yellow arrows indicate an important atmospheric circulation change by the Hadley Circulation, whose upward motion promotes tropical rainfall, while suppressing subtropical rainfall. Model projections indicate that the Hadley Circulation will shift its downward branch poleward in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, with associated drying. Wetter conditions are projected at high latitudes, because a warmer atmosphere will allow greater precipitation, with greater movement of water into these regions.