IPCC Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007

Climate Change 2007: Working Group I: The Physical Science Basis

10.6 Sea Level Change in the 21st Century

10.6.1 Global Average Sea Level Rise Due to Thermal Expansion

As seawater warms up, it expands, increasing the volume of the global ocean and producing thermosteric sea level rise (see Section 5.5.3). Global average thermal expansion can be calculated directly from simulated changes in ocean temperature. Results are available from 17 AOGCMs for the 21st century for SRES scenarios A1B, A2 and B1 (Figure 10.31), continuing from simulations of the 20th century. One ensemble member was used for each model and scenario. The time series are rather smooth compared with global average temperature time series, because thermal expansion reflects heat storage in the entire ocean, being approximately proportional to the time integral of temperature change (Gregory et al., 2001).

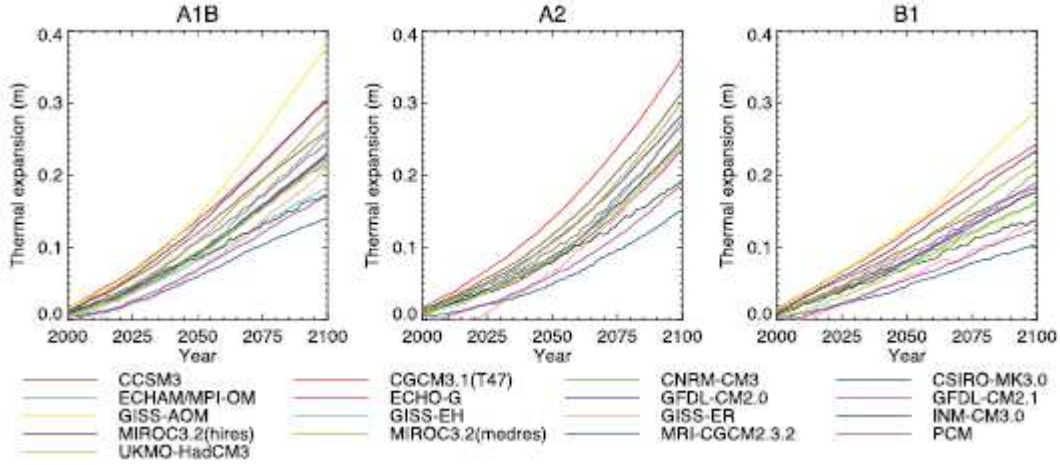

Figure 10.31. Projected global average sea level rise (m) due to thermal expansion during the 21st century relative to 1980 to 1999 under SRES scenarios A1B, A2 and B1. See Table 8.1 for model descriptions.

During 2000 to 2020 under scenario SRES A1B in the ensemble of AOGCMs, the rate of thermal expansion is 1.3 ± 0.7 mm yr^{-1}, and is not significantly different under A2 or B1. This rate is more than twice the observationally derived rate of 0.42 ± 0.12 mm yr^{-1} during 1961 to 2003. It is similar to the rate of 1.6 ± 0.5 mm yr^{-1} during 1993 to 2003 (see Section 5.5.3), which may be larger than that of previous decades partly because of natural forcing and internal variability (see Sections 5.5.2.4, 5.5.3 and 9.5.2). In particular, many of the AOGCM experiments do not include the influence of Mt. Pinatubo, the omission of which may reduce the projected rate of thermal expansion during the early 21st century.

During 2080 to 2100, the rate of thermal expansion is projected to be 1.9 ± 1.0, 2.9 ± 1.4 and 3.8 ± 1.3 mm yr^{-1} under scenarios SRES B1, A1B and A2 respectively in the AOGCM ensemble (the width of the range is affected by the different numbers of models under each scenario). The acceleration is caused by the increased climatic warming. Results are shown for all SRES marker scenarios in Table 10.7 (see Appendix 10.A for methods). In the AOGCM ensemble, under any given SRES scenario, there is some correlation of the global average temperature change across models with thermal expansion and its rate of change, suggesting that the spread in thermal expansion for that scenario is caused both by the spread in surface warming and by model-dependent ocean heat uptake efficiency (Raper et al., 2002; Table 8.2) and the distribution of added heat within the ocean (Russell et al., 2000).