

1 **A Canonical Response of Precipitation Characteristics to Global Warming**
2 **from CMIP5 Models**

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Key Points :

1. A canonical global rainfall response to global warming is found in CMIP5 models
2. Increased heavy rain events and droughts are connected globally under global warming
3. Global warming induced changes in rainfall types are more detectable than in total rainfall

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Abstract

In this study, we find from analyses of projections of 14 CMIP5 models a robust, canonical global response in rainfall characteristics to a warming climate. Under a scenario of 1% increase per year of CO₂ emission, the model ensemble projects globally more heavy precipitation ($+7\pm 2.4\%K^{-1}$), less moderate precipitation ($-2.5\pm 0.6\%K^{-1}$), more light precipitation ($+1.8\pm 1.3\%K^{-1}$), and increased length of dry (no-rain) periods ($+4.7\pm 2.1\%K^{-1}$). Regionally, a majority of the models project a consistent response with more heavy precipitation over climatologically wet regions of the deep tropics especially the equatorial Pacific Ocean and the Asian monsoon regions, and more dry periods over the land areas of the subtropics and the tropical marginal convective zones. Our results suggest that increased CO₂ emissions induce a global adjustment in circulation and moisture availability manifested in basic changes in global precipitation characteristics, including increasing risks of severe floods and droughts in preferred geographic locations worldwide.

Index terms: Precipitation (1854), Global Climate Models (1626), Water Cycle (1655)

51 **1. Introduction**

52 One of the key findings of the Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) of the Intergovernmental
53 Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is that “*anthropogenic influences have contributed to*
54 *intensification of extreme precipitation at the global scale*” [IPCC, 2007]. The AR4 also noted
55 that while climate models generally project a global increase in rainfall, the projected rate of
56 change and regional signals are highly uncertain, due to coarse model resolution and inadequate
57 model physics. In recent years, many record breaking heavy rain, and prolonged heat waves and
58 droughts events have been reported worldwide [Field et al., 2012]. This is consistent with a
59 growing body of contemporaneous studies suggesting that there is an increased risk of extreme
60 rain events in a warmer climate [Allan et al., 2010; Groisman et al., 2005; Lau and Wu, 2007,
61 2011; Liu et al., 2012; Min et al., 2011; O’Gorman and Schneider, 2009; Trenberth et al., 2003;
62 Trenberth 2011]. However the regional distribution of the increased extreme rain and attribution
63 of precipitation variability to specific climate forcing are still uncertain, and increasing the
64 confidence of future projection of rainfall pattern remains a challenge [Kharin et al., 2007; Sun
65 et al., 2012]. In preparation for the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5), IPCC has organized the
66 Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 5 (CMIP5), coordinating major international
67 research institutions and groups to conduct climate projection experiments using state-of-the-art
68 models with higher resolution and more realistic physics. The results presented in this paper are
69 based on climate projection experiments from 14 CMIP5 models available at the time of this
70 study. While the 14 models have diverse resolutions (Table S1 in the auxiliary material) and
71 representations of physical, chemical, hydrological and oceanic processes, they are subject to the
72 same set of prescribed GHG emission scenarios [Taylor, 2012]. Here, we assess CMIP5 model
73 projections of global and regional rainfall response to greenhouse gases (GHG) warming,
74 specifically to increased CO₂ emissions. This study differs from previous global warming

75 rainfall studies in that they were mostly focused on extreme rain, or on severe drought separately
76 based on total rain, while we emphasize the changes in rainfall characteristics (types, intensity
77 and duration), and connections between extreme rain and drought events. We will examine
78 rainfall changes not only in total rain, but also changes in the entire rainfall probability
79 distribution function (PDF), including heavy, moderate, light, and no-rain events.

80 We analyze the outputs of 14 CMIP5 models based on a 140-year experiment with a
81 prescribed 1% per year increase in CO₂ emission. This rate of CO₂ increase is comparable to that
82 prescribed for the RCP8.5, a relatively conservative business-as-usual scenario [Riahi *et al.*,
83 2011], except the latter includes also changes in other GHG and aerosols, besides CO₂. A 27-
84 year period at the beginning of the integration is used as the control to compute rainfall and
85 temperature statistics, and to compare with climatology (1979–2005) of rainfall data from the
86 Global Precipitation Climatology Project (GPCP). Two similar 27-year periods in the
87 experiment that correspond approximately to a doubling of CO₂ emissions (DCO₂) and a tripling
88 of CO₂ emissions (TCO₂) compared to the control are chosen respectively to compute the same
89 statistics (for details, see Section S1 in the auxiliary material). The rainfall response to global
90 warming is defined as the difference in the statistics between the control and DCO₂, and TCO₂
91 respectively. Since the responses based on DCO₂ and TCO₂ are similar except with stronger
92 and more robust signal in the latter, unless otherwise stated, results presented are for TCO₂.

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94 **2. Model rainfall climatology**

95 The rainfall PDFs and cumulative PDFs (CPDFs) for rainfall occurrences and amount, as
96 well as climatological global, and zonal mean rainfall distributions for the model ensemble mean
97 have been computed and found to be in reasonable agreement with GPCP and Tropical Rainfall

98 Measuring Mission (TRMM) observations (see Section S2 and Fig. S1 in the auxiliary material).

99 To facilitate discussion regarding rainfall characteristics in this work, we define, based on
100 the ensemble model PDF, three major rain types: light rain (LR), moderate rain (MR), and heavy
101 rain (HR) respectively as those with monthly mean rain rate below the 20th percentile (<0.3
102 mm/day), between the 40–70th percentile (0.9–2.4 mm/day), and above the 98.5% percentile (> 9
103 mm/day). An extremely heavy rain (EHR) type defined at the 99.9th percentile ($> 24 \text{ mm day}^{-1}$)
104 will also be referred to, as appropriate. The geographic distributions of the three rain types
105 agree quite well between the model ensemble mean and GPCP (Fig. S2 and Section S2 in the
106 auxiliary material), with HR most dominant over the deep convection zone of the tropics, and
107 monsoon regions, MR over midlatitude storm tracks over the continents and the Southern
108 Oceans, and LR over the desert and semi-arid zones, and the subtropical stratocumulus region off
109 the west coast of the Americas and South Africa. Previous studies [*Lau and Wu 2007; 2011*]
110 have found that based on a similar classification, LR, MR and HR can be identified with rainfall
111 subsystems dominated by warm-rain/low clouds, mixed-phase/congestus, and ice-phase
112 rain/deep convection respectively in the tropics. Hence, to a first order approximation, the
113 aforementioned rain types provide a natural separation of rainfall subsystems associated with
114 major climatic regimes. It should also be pointed out that the rain type definition used here is
115 based on global scaling with monthly mean data to facilitate a global narrative. Obviously, this
116 definition has limitations and cannot be used for detailed regional or singular extreme event
117 applications, for which a local relative scaling, with daily or hourly rainfall should be used.

118

119 **3. Response in total rainfall**

120 All models show a clear increase in global (60°S – 60°N) mean temperature due to

121 increased CO₂ emissions, with a rate of 0.2–0.36 K decade⁻¹ among models, and an ensemble
122 mean of 0.26 K decade⁻¹ (Fig. 1a). Similarly, all models exhibit a clear upward trend in the
123 annual global mean precipitation, with an ensemble mean rate of 0.012 mm day⁻¹decade⁻¹ or
124 0.38% decade⁻¹ (Fig. 1b). In the zonal mean, most models show increased rainfall in the deep
125 tropics (10°S–10°N) and mid-to-high latitudes (Fig. 1c). Reduced rainfall is found in the
126 subtropics, more pronounced in the Southern Hemisphere (SH) than the Northern Hemisphere
127 (NH), with large variability among models. The model ensemble response (Fig. 1d) shows three
128 distinct zones of rainfall increase: 10°S–10°N, south of 45°S, and north of 40°N; a wide rainfall-
129 reduction zone near 10°S–40°S, and a rainfall-neutral zone near 20°N–40°N. These signals are
130 highly significant (>95–99% c.l.) based on a Student-t test, in the deep tropics and high (>45°)
131 latitudes, but less so in the subtropics. Additional analyses of zonal mean profiles over selected
132 longitudinal sectors (Section S3 and Fig. S3 in the auxiliary material) show rainfall reduction in
133 the NH subtropics over North America, and the Europe-Africa sectors, but enhancement over the
134 subtropical central Pacific and Asian monsoon sectors. These regional rainfall anomalies
135 compensate to produce in the zonal mean a near neutral zone over the NH subtropics (Fig. 1d).
136 The rainfall anomalies are consistent with observations of a narrowing of the deep convection
137 zone in the tropics, and a widening of the subtropical belt in recent decades [*Seidel et al.*, 2008;
138 *Hu and Fu*, 2007; *Zhou et al.*, 2011].

139 Globally, rainfall increases by 4.5%, with a sensitivity (dP/P/dT) of 1.4 % K⁻¹ (Table S2
140 in the auxiliary material), substantially lower than the 7% K⁻¹ increase in saturated water vapor
141 governed by the Clausius-Clapeyron relation, consistent with previous findings [*Held and Soden*,
142 2006; *Andrews et al.*, 2010; *Frieler et al.*, 2011; *Vecchi et al.*, 2006; *Giorgi et al.*, 2011]. The
143 highest sensitivity +6.3% K⁻¹ is found over southern mid-to-high-latitudes (50–80°S). The

144 northern mid-to-high-latitudes (50–80°N) and the equatorial region (10°S–10°N) also show high
145 (+3% K⁻¹) sensitivity. Negative sensitivity is found over the NH subtropics, SH subtropics and
146 mid-latitudes, suggesting the importance of large-scale circulation forcing and dynamical
147 feedback [Lau and Wu, 2011; Chou *et al.*, 2012].

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149 **4. Changes in rainfall characteristics**

150 The changes in rainfall characteristics are analyzed based on the monthly PDFs of rainfall
151 frequency of occurrences (FOC) (Fig. 2a) and amount (Fig. 2b). The ensemble-mean FOC (Fig.
152 2a, line graphs in logarithmic scale) clearly show that there is a tendency for increase in HR
153 events globally due to CO₂ warming. However, the logarithmic scale in the mean FOC plot
154 masks changes in lower rain rates. For a different perspective, the FOC difference plot (Fig. 2a,
155 bar chart) displays a consistent and robust model response *i.e.*, more HR, less MR and more LR.
156 When the rainfall sensitivity is plotted as a function of rain types, a systematic, canonical pattern
157 in response to CO₂ warming is evident, *i.e.*, *higher positive sensitivity for increasingly heavy*
158 *rain, negative sensitivity for moderate rain, and positive sensitivity for light rain* (Fig. 2b). The
159 sensitivity is quite high (4–10% K⁻¹) for HR bins (9–15 mm day⁻¹), and increases dramatically
160 (30–100% K⁻¹) for EHR bins (> 24 mm day⁻¹). For MR and LR bins, the sensitivity is negative
161 2–4% and positive 1–4% K⁻¹, respectively. Analyses of changes of rainfall PDFs over land,
162 ocean separately, and for different latitudinal zones (Section S4 and Fig. S4 in the auxiliary
163 material) show that the same canonical rainfall redistribution pattern is captured, provided
164 sufficiently large domains are chosen. The canonical rainfall distribution in response to global
165 warming is similar to that shown in a CMIP3 study over tropical land by *Lintner et al.* [2012].
166 The rainfall sensitivities remain approximately constant for total rain, and for LR and MR,

167 respectively in DCO2 and TCO2 (Table 1), indicating that the overall rainfall response may have
168 reached quasi-steady state under both scenarios. However for heavy rain, the sensitivity is still
169 evolving, with slightly reduced magnitude averaged for HR, but increased for averaged EHR
170 from 27% K⁻¹ to 32% K⁻¹ between the two scenarios. We further note that the sensitivity of the
171 most extreme rain events (rain rate > 60 mm/day) is more than double (from 46% to 102% K⁻¹)
172 from DCO2 to TCO2 (compare Fig. S5 in the auxiliary material and Fig.2). These results
173 suggest that the canonical rainfall response to CO₂ warming is highly nonlinear and scale
174 selective, with increasing sensitivity in the most extremely heavy rain events as CO₂ emissions
175 increase.

176

177 **5. Geographic distributions**

178 Geographic distributions are shown for the ensemble mean response for total rain, HR,
179 MR and LR respectively (Fig. 3). Here, to emphasize model consistency, a grid-point
180 ensemble value is displayed only if 10 or more models show the same sign of response. There is
181 a large increase in total rain, most pronounced in climatologically wet regions of the tropics,
182 especially over the equatorial western Pacific and the Asian monsoon regions including the
183 northern Indian Ocean, South and Southeast Asia (Fig. 3a). Rainfall is also moderately
184 increased over the extratropics of both hemispheres poleward of 50° latitude. A general
185 reduction of rainfall is found in the climatologically dry subtropical oceans, as well as in land
186 regions of Central America and southwestern US, southern Europe/Mediterranean, and South
187 Africa. The CMIP5 projected changes in total rain shown in Fig. 3a are consistent with the
188 CMIP3 projected changes shown in the AR4 of IPCC (see Fig. 10.12a in IPCC 2007). Our
189 analyses further indicate, as shown in Fig. 3b, most of the increased rainfall in the deep tropics is

190 contributed by HR. Notably, very few regions experience a reduction in HR anywhere in the
191 globe. This is akin to the outcome of throwing a loaded dice with heavy odds in favor of
192 increased HR events due to global warming.

193 In contrast to HR, there is an overall reduction in MR over extensive regions in the
194 subtropical and midlatitude oceans (Fig. 3c). Interestingly, significant increase of MR is found
195 over high latitude land regions of North America and Eurasia, and the high latitude of the
196 Southern Oceans ($> 50^{\circ}\text{S}$). It can also be seen that the anomalous dry regions over southwestern
197 US, and southern Europe/Mediterranean noted previously (Fig. 3a) may be attributed to changes
198 in MR. These features may reflect the change in storm tracks in conjunction with the poleward
199 migration of the jetstream induced by global warming [Yin, 2005; Scheff and Frierson, 2012].
200 Overall, LR (Fig. 3d) has a distribution similar but with opposite signs to those of MR. The
201 presence of many regions where the collocated rainfall responses have different signs in HR, MR
202 and/or LR may indicate change in the vertical structure of hydrometeors in clouds and rain
203 systems over the regions [Lau and Wu, 2011].

204 For drought assessment, we use the first rain bin ($< 0.024 \text{ mm day}^{-1}$) to represent trace
205 amount or no-rain events. The occurrence of such an event at each grid location will be hereafter
206 referred to as a “dry month” for that location. Using this definition, dry months occur about 3–
207 10 % (ensemble mean = 5%) globally during the control period, but with negligible contribution
208 to the rain amount (Fig. S1b in the auxiliary material). The geographical distribution of
209 climatologically dry months simulated by the ensemble model mean (Fig. 4a) agrees reasonably
210 well with that of the GPCP observation. Overall, the ensemble model mean over-estimates the
211 aridity in subtropical land, but underestimates the dry oceanic stratocumulus zone off the west
212 coast of Americas, and Africa (see Section S6 and Fig. S6 in the auxiliary material). From Fig.

213 4a, pronounced no-rain periods can be identified with deserts and arid regions of North Africa
214 /Middle East/Pakistan, northwestern China, and southwestern US in NH, and South Africa,
215 northwestern Australia, coastal central America, and northeastern Brazil in SH.

216 Under TCO₂, the frequency of dry months in the ensemble mean increases by 16% at a
217 rate of 4.7% K⁻¹ globally. Our results regarding the increase in HR and drought are consistent
218 with the study of *Giorgi et al.* [2011] who show a projected increase (4.8% K⁻¹) in the dry spell
219 length as well as a general increase in hydroclimatic intensity from global model projections.
220 Geographically, prolonged dry months occur predominantly over land areas in the subtropics or
221 convective zones at the margins of climatological wet regions in both hemispheres (Fig. 4b).
222 Specifically, the model ensemble projects a pronounced increase in dry months over a long and
223 narrow east-west zone extending from North Africa/Mediterranean /Southern Europe to Iran, and
224 over southern Africa. Prolonged dry months are also found in southwestern US/Mexico region,
225 and northeastern Brazil. Much weaker dry zones are found over Southeast Asia and southern
226 Australia. The dry regions generally coincide with reduced rainfall zones in the total rainfall
227 distribution shown in Fig. 3a. However, because of the positive-definite nature of rainfall, a
228 prolonged period of no rain in climatologically dry regions will not always show up as a major
229 anomaly in a rainfall map (Fig. 3), but will be captured in a map of dry month distribution (Fig.
230 4). Hence, regions shown in Fig. 4b could be interpreted as those that have a higher risk of
231 experiencing drought-like conditions under TCO₂. Comparing with the model dry month
232 climatology (Fig. 4a), the model ensemble projects under TCO₂, an expansion of the desert or
233 arid-zones, both equatorward and poleward, over major continental land regions. Again, CMIP5
234 models project no spatially coherent *reduction* in dry months anywhere in the globe, analogous
235 to the outcome of throwing a loaded dice with overwhelming odds in favor of increased droughts

236 due to global warming.

237

238 **6. Conclusions**

239 The IPCC CMIP5 models project a robust, canonical global response of rainfall
240 characteristics to CO₂ warming, featuring an increase in heavy rain, a reduction in moderate rain,
241 and an increase in light rain occurrence and amount globally. For a scenario of 1% CO₂
242 increase per year, the model ensemble mean projects at the time of approximately tripling of the
243 CO₂ emissions, the probability of occurring of extremely heavy rain (monthly mean > 24
244 mm/day) will increase globally by 100–250%, moderate rain will decrease by 5–10% and light
245 rain will increase by 10–15%. The increase in heavy rain is most pronounced in the equatorial
246 central Pacific and the Asian monsoon regions. Moderate rain is reduced over extensive oceanic
247 regions in the subtropics and extratropics, but increased over the extratropical land regions of
248 North America, and Eurasia, and extratropical Southern Oceans. Light rain is mostly found to be
249 inversely related to moderate rain locally, and with heavy rain in the central Pacific. The model
250 ensemble also projects a significant global increase up to 16% more frequent in the occurrences
251 of dry months (drought conditions), mostly over the subtropics as well as marginal convective
252 zone in equatorial land regions, reflecting an expansion of the desert and arid-zones. The most
253 pronounced increased risks of drought are found over an east-west fetch spanning North Africa,
254 Mediterranean Sea, southern Europe to Iran, and another one over southern Africa. A secondary
255 region of increased risk of drought is found over Southwest US/Mexico, and northeastern Brazil.
256 Weak signals of increased drought signals are found over southern Australia, and Indo-China.
257 The propensity for prolonged dry months over tropical land regions and marginal tropical
258 convective zones over large landmass is most likely due to the fact that land regions are moisture

259 limited from evaporation while oceanic regions are not. As a result, in a competition of
260 moisture availability, the land regions lose out. This also suggests the importance of land-
261 atmosphere feedback through changes in soil moisture and surface evaporation in leading to
262 severe droughts [*Brubaker and Entekhabi, 1996; Sheffield and Wood, 2008*]. Also note that the
263 increased risk of drought due to global warming can be exacerbated in regions undergoing large
264 deforestation or land use change [*Lee et al., 2011*].

265 Previous satellite data studies have identified correspondence of light, moderate and heavy
266 rain types with warm rain/low clouds, mixed-phase rain/congestus, and ice-phase rain/high
267 clouds respectively [*Lau and Wu, 2007, 2011; Masunaga and Kummerow, 2006*]. Hence, the
268 canonical global rainfall response to CO₂ warming captured in the CMIP5 model projection
269 suggests a global scale re-adjustment involving changes in circulation and rainfall characteristics,
270 including possible teleconnection of extremely heavy rain and droughts separated by far
271 distances (Lau and Kim, 2012). This adjustment is strongly constrained geographically by
272 climatological rainfall pattern, and most likely by the GHG warming induced sea surface
273 temperature anomalies (Xie et al., 2009) with unstable moister and warmer regions in the deep
274 tropics getting more heavy rain, at the expense of nearby marginal convective zones in the
275 tropics and stable dry zones in the subtropics. Our results are generally consistent with so-called
276 “the rich-getting-richer, poor-getting-poorer” paradigm for precipitation response under global
277 warming [*Allan et al., 2010; Lau and Wu, 2011; Zhou et al., 2011; Chou and Neelin, 2004; Chou*
278 *et al., 2009*]. We add that the increase in aridity in marginally convective zones in the tropical
279 land under global warming is analogous to a “the-middle-class-also-getting-poorer” scenario.
280 Further, our results suggest that there should be changes in rainfall types and cloud structures
281 associated with a global shift in the climate norms induced by CO₂ warming. Ongoing studies

282 (papers in preparation) by the authors have confirmed the importance of forcing from global
283 warming induced anomalous sea surface temperature and vertical motions in governing the
284 canonical spatial pattern of the global rainfall response to CO₂ warming. Finally, we stress that to
285 better project future changes in rainfall characteristics and distribution, further work is needed to
286 unravel the rainfall response to climate forcing not only from CO₂ and other greenhouse gases,
287 but also from local and regional forcing such as sea surface temperature, aerosols, land use
288 change, and dynamical feedback processes.

289

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384 Satellite Cloud Climatology Project data, *J. Geophys. Res.*, *116*, D09101,
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386

387 Table 1. Sensitivity ($dP/P/dT$) of the ensemble-mean global (60°S to 60°N) precipitation to CO_2
 388 induced warming for different rain types. Uncertainties are estimated from inter-model standard
 389 deviation for different rain types. Units are in $\% \text{ K}^{-1}$.

<i>Rain types</i>	<i>ALL</i>	<i>Extremely Heavy (EH)</i>	<i>Heavy (HR)</i>	<i>Moderate (MR)</i>	<i>Light (LR)</i>
DCO2	1.31± 0.38	26.8± 19.2	7.25± 2.32	-2.51± 0.62	1.86± 1.30
TCO2	1.35± 0.38	32.1± 26.6	6.98± 2.40	-2.51± 0.56	1.81± 1.27

390

391

392 **Figure Captions**

393 Figure 1. CMIP5 projections of changes in global mean surface temperature and precipitation
394 induced by increased CO₂ emissions. Time series of global (60°S–60°N) annual mean
395 (a) surface temperature and (b) rainfall from Year 1 to Year 140, based on experiment
396 with 1% increase CO₂ emissions per year; (c) the difference in the zonal mean rain rate
397 of the control and TCO₂ for each of the 14 CMIP5 models as a function of latitude; and
398 (d) the ensemble averaged zonal mean rain rates of the control (blue) and TCO₂ (red),
399 the ensemble-mean response (TCO₂ minus control, black) and the inter-model 1- σ
400 deviation (yellow shading).

401

402 Figure 2. Response in global (60°S–60°N) annual mean precipitation for TCO₂ as a function of
403 rain rate. (a) Change in the frequency of occurrence (FOC) and (b) sensitivity of
404 precipitation amount to temperature change. Response of each of the 14 CMIP5 models
405 is denoted by different color marks, and the model ensemble mean is denoted by the bar
406 chart. Also shown in (a) are the ensemble mean FOC of the control and TCO₂ (solid
407 curves), in logarithmic scale.

408

409 Figure 3. Geographic distribution of the model ensemble-mean response in rain amount for
410 TCO₂. Changes in ensemble-mean annual accumulation (mm/year) for (a) total rain,
411 (b) heavy rain, (c) moderate rain, and (d) light rain. Only regions with high
412 consistency, *i.e.* responses of 10 or more out of the 14 CMIP5 models are of the same
413 sign, are shown. All model outputs are interpolated to a common grid resolution (1.125°
414 longitude x 1.07° latitude; 320 x 192 arrays).

415

416 Figure 4. Geographic distribution of the model ensemble annual dry-month duration (a)
417 climatology, and (b) changes due to TCO₂ scenario. Units are in number of dry months
418 per year. Superimposed in (b) is the ensemble-mean precipitation (in mm/day) for the
419 control period in contour lines. As in Fig. 3, only regions with high consistency are
420 shown in (b).

421







