

1 **Future Climate Change in the Thermosphere under**
2 **Varying Solar Activity Conditions.**

3 **M. K. Brown^{1,2}, H. G. Lewis², A. J. Kavanagh³, I. Cnossen³, S. Elvidge¹**

4 ¹Space Environment and Radio Engineering Group (SERENE), University of Birmingham

5 ²University of Southampton

6 ³British Antarctic Survey

7 **Key Points:**

- 8 • WACCM-X has been used to model future thermospheric density reductions un-
9 der increasing carbon dioxide concentrations and solar activity
10 • The reductions in density have been mapped onto the Shared Socioeconomic Path-
11 ways to show future scenarios while accounting for solar cycles
12 • Densities at 400 km are 13 to 30 % lower under high and low solar activity respec-
13 tively in the SSP1-2.6 scenario when CO₂ peaks at 474 ppm

Corresponding author: Matthew K. Brown, m.brown.12@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

Increasing carbon dioxide concentrations in the mesosphere and lower thermosphere are increasing radiative cooling in the upper atmosphere, leading to thermospheric contraction and decreased neutral mass densities at fixed altitudes. Previous studies of the historic neutral density trend have shown a dependence upon solar activity, with larger F10.7 values resulting in lower neutral density reductions. To investigate the impact on the future thermosphere, the Whole Atmosphere Community Climate Model with ionosphere and thermosphere extension (WACCM-X) has been used to simulate the thermosphere under increasing carbon dioxide concentrations and varying solar activity conditions. These neutral density reductions have then been mapped onto the Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs) published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The neutral density reductions can also be used as a scaling factor, allowing commonly used empirical models to account for CO₂ trends. Under the “best case” SSP1-2.6 scenario, neutral densities reductions at 400 km altitude peak (when CO₂ = 474 ppm) at a reduction of 13 to 30% (under high and low solar activity respectively) compared to the year 2000. Higher CO₂ concentrations lead to greater density reductions, with the largest modelled concentration of 890 ppm resulting in a 50 to 77 % reduction at 400 km, under high and low solar activity respectively.

Plain Language Summary

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentrations are increasing throughout the atmosphere, not just at ground level. While this results in global warming in the lower atmosphere, the much less dense upper atmosphere does not trap the radiated heat, resulting in cooling of the upper atmosphere. As the upper atmosphere cools, it contracts, reducing the atmospheric density at a fixed altitude. Satellites travelling in low Earth orbit, such as the International Space Station at 400 km altitude, experience atmospheric drag, slowly reducing their altitude until they ‘re-enter’ and burn up in the lower, denser atmosphere. Reducing neutral densities will increase satellite orbital lifetimes as they experience less drag. The upper atmosphere has been simulated under increasing CO₂ concentrations and solar activity conditions. This has also been linked to potential future CO₂ concentration scenarios. Scaling factors have been created allowing simpler, faster models to account for CO₂ density reductions. Under a best-case scenario (SSP1-2.6) where CO₂ concentrations peak in around the year 2065 and then decline, densities at 400 km are 13 to 30% lower compared to the year 2000 at the CO₂ peak concentration, and then recover as CO₂ reduces. However, densities continue to reduce if CO₂ concentrations keep rising.

1 Introduction

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) exists throughout the atmosphere (shown in Figure 1) (Yue et al., 2015) with a roughly constant concentration in the turbulent atmosphere below the homopause (around 90 km altitude). Gravitational separation asymptotically decreases the concentration with altitude trending towards zero in the lower thermosphere (around 200 km).

Carbon dioxide can gain energy via collisions with molecules or ions in the atmosphere, or absorbing infra-red (IR) radiation. It can then lose that energy via collisions, or emission of IR radiation (at 15 μm). In the dense lower atmosphere, collisions dominate, and any emitted IR radiation has a short mean free path, being quickly recaptured and trapping heat locally, leading to the greenhouse effect. In the less-dense upper atmosphere, collisions are much less frequent, so CO₂ is more likely to lose energy via IR emission, which has a much longer mean free path, allowing heat to escape the locale, cooling the upper atmosphere. As the upper atmosphere cools, it contracts, resulting in the neutral density reducing at a given, fixed altitude.

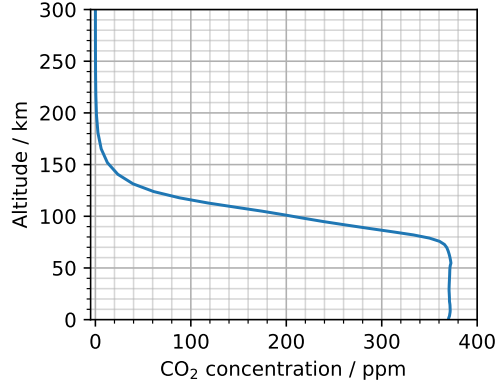


Figure 1. Altitude profile of carbon dioxide concentration, from ground-level through to the lower thermosphere. This example is a global average of WACCM-X output for the year 2000.

64 Similarly to CO₂, Nitric oxide (NO) also cools the upper atmosphere with IR emis-
 65 sion at 5.3 μm . Concentrations of NO, and also atomic oxygen (O), vary with solar ac-
 66 tivity levels (Mlynczak et al., 2014). This changes the ratio of NO to CO₂, as well as the
 67 temperature and collision rates with O, such that the magnitude of neutral density re-
 68 ductions in the upper atmosphere is dependent on solar activity. The largest reductions
 69 are seen under low solar activity, when CO₂ is relatively more important for the ther-
 70 mosphere’s energy budget. The large amount of molecular nitrogen (N₂) in the lower at-
 71 mosphere acts as a reservoir, such that additional nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) released as a
 72 greenhouse gas is assumed to have minimal impact on NO concentrations.

73 A large number of previous studies have both modelled and observed the reduc-
 74 ing density trend first predicted by Roble and Dickinson (1989). Observed neutral den-
 75 sity reductions are summarized in Table 1, modelled values in Table 2, and Figure 2 shows
 76 the altitude profile of both observed and modelled reductions in literature. All values
 77 have been standardized to a density trend given in ‘% per decade’. While the magnitude
 78 of the reductions vary across the literature, all studies agree on a reducing density trend
 79 within the upper atmosphere. The studies that also binned density trends by solar ac-
 80 tivity agreed that the trend is larger in magnitude under low solar activity.

81 These secular trends in neutral density have an impact on the space debris envi-
 82 ronment in low Earth orbit (LEO), reducing atmospheric drag acting on orbiting objects
 83 and increasing their orbital lifetimes (Lewis et al., 2011). Models of the space debris en-
 84 vironment make use of computationally fast empirical atmospheric models to propagate
 85 orbits while accounting for atmospheric drag, however these empirical atmospheric mod-
 86 els do not account for secular CO₂ trends. The aims of this study are therefore twofold.
 87 Firstly to build upon the future neutral density reductions under low solar activity re-
 88 sults of Brown et al. (2021), by understanding how the magnitude of the density reduc-
 89 tion varies with increasing solar activity and CO₂ concentration. Secondly to provide
 90 scaling factors which allow empirical atmospheric models to account for long-term trends
 91 caused by CO₂ emissions. These scaling factors maintain the speed and ease-to-run ad-
 92 vantages of empirical models over numerical models, while allowing for CO₂ induced trends
 93 to be included in orbital lifetime estimation and debris environment modelling.

Table 1. Summary of observed (derived) neutral density trends at 400 km altitude. “Model used” refers to the atmospheric model used to remove the dominant solar cycle variation, and detrend the data.

Study	Model Used	F10.7 (sfu)	Period	Density Trend (% per decade)
Keating et al. (2000) ^a	MET99	~75	1976, 1986, 1996	-4.9 ± 1.3
Emmert et al. (2004)	NRLMSISE-00	<90	1996 - 2001	-3.8
Emmert et al. (2004)	NRLMSISE-00	All	1996 - 2001	-2.8 ± 1.0
Marcos et al. (2005)	NRLMSISE-00	All	1970 - 2000	-1.7 ± 0.2
Emmert et al. (2008)	GAMDM	<75	1967 - 2007	-5.5 ± 1.4
Emmert et al. (2008)	GAMDM	170 to 220	1967 - 2007	-2.1 ± 0.9
Saunders et al. (2011)	NRLMSISE-00	<90	1970 - 2010	-7.2
Saunders et al. (2011)	NRLMSISE-00	All	1970 - 2010	-5.4 ± 3
Saunders et al. (2011)	NRLMSISE-00	>90	1970 - 2010	-4.0
Emmert and Picone (2011)	GAMDM	All	1967 - 2005	-1.94 ± 0.68
Emmert (2015)	GAMDM2.1	60 to 75	1967 - 2005	-3.1 ± 1.6
Emmert (2015)	GAMDM2.1	60 to 75	1967 - 2013	-7.2 ± 1.2
Emmert (2015)	GAMDM2.1	180 to 500	1967 - 2005	-3.0 ± 0.7
Emmert (2015)	GAMDM2.1	180 to 500	1967 - 2013	-3.0 ± 0.8
Weng et al. (2020)	ANNM	All	1967 - 2013	-1.7

^a 350 km altitude**Table 2.** Summary of the modelled historic neutral density trends at 400 km altitude.

Study	Model Used	F10.7 (sfu)	Period	Density Trend (% per decade)
Qian et al. (2006)	TIME-GCM (1D)	70	1970 - 2000	-2.5 ^a
Qian et al. (2006) ^b	TIME-GCM (1D)	All	1970 - 2000	-1.7
Qian et al. (2006)	TIME-GCM (1D)	210	1970 - 2000	-0.75 ^a
Solomon et al. (2015)	TIME-GCM	70	1996 - 2008	-4.9 or -6.8 ^c
Solomon et al. (2015)	TIME-GCM	200	1996 - 2008	-1.8 or -2.1 ^c
Solomon et al. (2018)	WACCM-X	70	1974 - 2003	-3.9
Solomon et al. (2019)	WACCM-X	200	1974 - 2003	-1.7
Cnossen (2020)	WACCM-X 2.0	All	1950 - 2015	-2.8 ± 0.6
Brown et al. (2021)	WACCM-X	70	1975 - 2005	-5.8

^a Average of the 350 km and 450 km values^b Result was re-presented by (Qian & Solomon, 2011)^c k_q , CO₂-O collisional deactivation rate, of 1.5×10^{-12} or $3.0 \times 10^{-12} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ s}^{-1}$

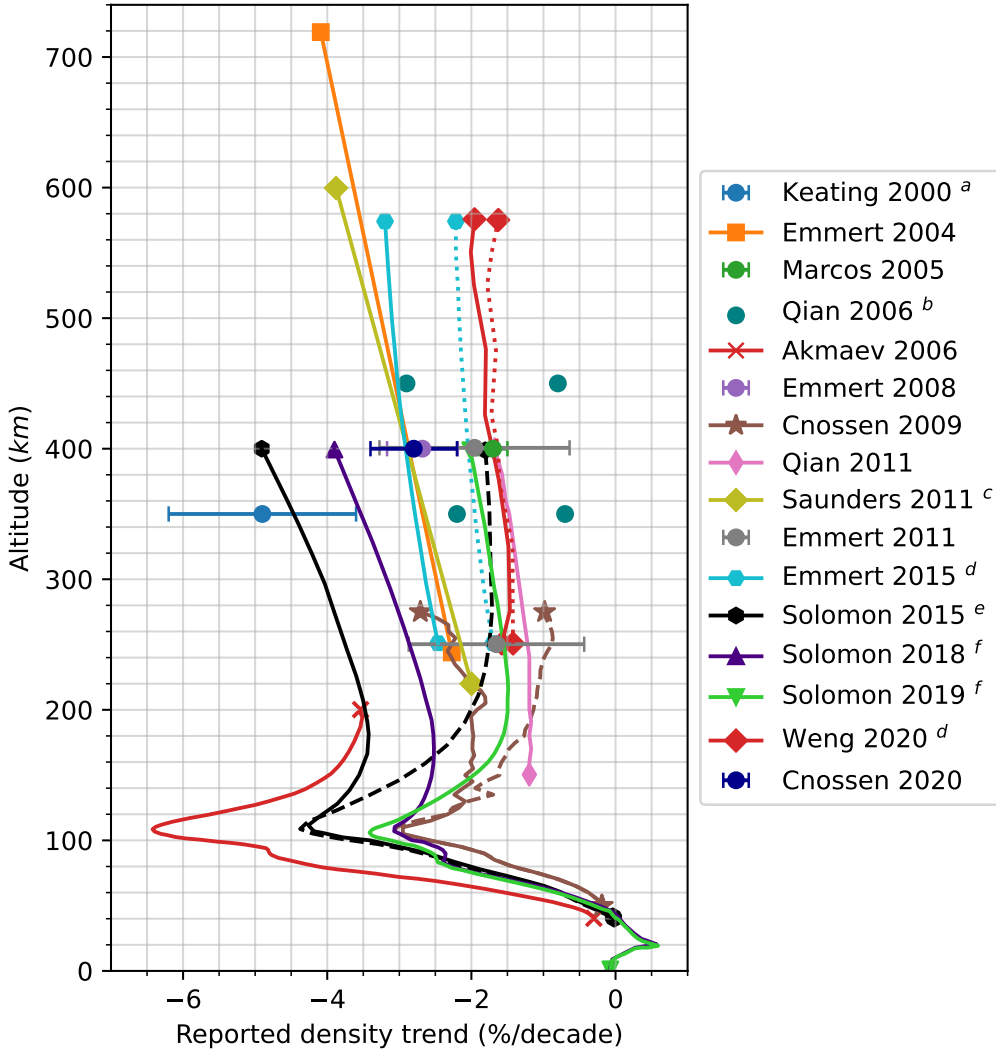


Figure 2. Summary of historical density trends at 400 km in the literature for varying solar activity levels, with detail on values used given in Tables 1 and 2. Error bars are provided where available. Updated version of similar figures in Emmert et al. (2008) and Solomon et al. (2015).

^a Keating et al. (2000) value at 350 km.

^b Plotted line is mean of 350 and 450 km trends in Qian et al. (2006).

^c Saunders et al. (2011) used large binning for F10.7, so the lines denote trends found for F10.7 less than or greater than 90 sfu.

^d Emmert (2015) and Weng et al. (2020) calculated the trend over different periods. The solid line denotes 1967 to 2005 and the dotted line denotes 1967 to 2013.

^e CO₂-O quenching rate, k_q , affects the CO₂ cooling rate and therefore the magnitude of trend. Solomon et al. (2015) used the default k_q of the model, 1.5×10^{-12} (solid line), and also 3.0×10^{-12} (dashed line).

^f Solomon et al. (2018) and Solomon et al. (2019) use the same methodology, but at low and high solar activity values respectively.

2 Model

The Whole Atmosphere Community Climate Model with thermosphere and ionosphere extension (WACCM-X) was used to model the thermospheric response to increasing levels of CO₂, with the model fully described by Liu et al. (2010). The model is part of the Community Earth System Model (CESM) (Hurrell et al., 2013), maintained by the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR). Version 1.2.2 of the model was used rather than the newer 2.0 (Liu et al., 2018) to build upon the reprocessed results of Brown et al. (2021) and allow for direct comparison. As a whole atmosphere numerical model, WACCM-X solves for the physics, chemistry and dynamics of the atmosphere, starting from some initial state and moving forwards in time. This allows ground-level CO₂ to propagate upwards to the thermosphere. A 1.9 by 2.5 degree latitude by longitude grid with quarter scale height vertical resolution was used up to a maximum model height of 4×10^{-10} hPa. This top level of the model varies in altitude between around 350 to 600 km depending upon energy input.

3 Methodology

WACCM-X has been used to simulate the whole atmosphere under different, fixed carbon dioxide concentrations, under low and high solar activity conditions, as well as varying solar activity conditions at one fixed, high CO₂ concentration. As a numerical model, WACCM-X requires a spin-up time for the model to move from its initial conditions towards a steady state more representative of the input conditions. A sudden, large increase in ground-level CO₂ takes a substantial amount of time to propagate through to the upper atmosphere. To speed up the spin-up process, the CO₂ profile in the initial state of the year 2000 (Figure 1) is scaled by the relative increase in ground-level CO₂ concentration. Above 60 km, photodissociation breaks CO₂ into carbon monoxide (CO) and O, which can then reform, such that CO₂ and CO exist in chemical equilibrium in the thermosphere. Therefore the CO profile is scaled similarly to CO₂. After this scaling, WACCM-X has 4 months of spin-up before data is used for analysis. This allows for a steady state to be reached, for example by allowing the scaled CO₂ and CO concentrations to reach a chemical equilibrium via WACCM-X chemical reactions at the currently modelled solar activity level.

Geomagnetic activity was held at a Kp value of 0 throughout the simulations to remove geomagnetic activity effects, and to match results with Brown et al. (2021). It is noted that the most commonly occurring Kp value is 1, and may have been a better choice as the default. However, Emmert (2015) identified no significant difference between these two values in historic observed trends.

With increasing traffic to LEO orbits, there is a strong need to understand the neutral density trends in this region. The US Naval Research Laboratory’s Mass Spectrometer and Incoherent Scatter radar model (NRLMSISE-00) (Picone et al., 2002) shows that helium can contribute over 15% of the total, globally averaged neutral density at altitudes higher than around 500 km during low solar activity, but helium is not modelled by WACCM-X. The neutral density extrapolation technique used in Brown et al. (2021) failed to account for helium, so extrapolation and neutral density trends were limited in altitude to 500 km. In this study, a different extrapolation technique which includes helium is used instead (which is also applied to the Brown et al. (2021) results). As helium is chemically inert, it can be added by an uncoupled model (Kim et al., 2012; Sutton et al., 2015). In post-processing, NRLMSISE-00 is used to calculate atomic oxygen and helium number densities under similar solar activity, times, and grid points as the WACCM-X simulations. These NRLMSISE-00 helium profiles are then scaled by the atomic oxygen fractional difference between the NRLMSISE-00 and WACCM-X profiles, as in:

$$\text{He}_{\text{WACCM-X}} = \frac{\text{O}_{\text{WACCM-X}}}{\text{O}_{\text{NRLMSISE-00}}} \text{He}_{\text{NRLMSISE-00}} \quad (1)$$

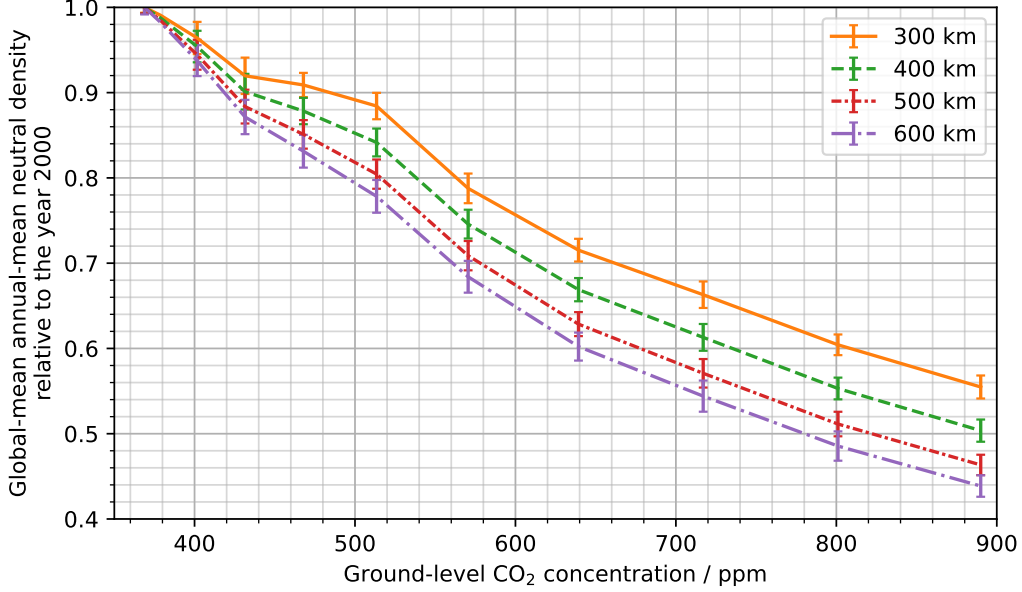


Figure 3. Neutral density reductions relative to the year 2000, at F10.7 of 200 sfu, under increasing ground-level carbon dioxide concentrations. These can be used as scaling factors for an empirical thermospheric model to include CO₂ density reductions, under high solar activity conditions.

143 at each grid point. The number density profile of each species is then extrapolated to
 144 higher altitudes using Bates-Walker (Walker, 1965) profiles via

$$n(i|z) = n(i|\infty) \exp \left[- \frac{m_i g_{ref} (z - z_\infty)(R + z_{ref})}{k T_\infty (R + z)} \right] \quad (2)$$

145 where $n(i|z)$ is the number density of constituent i at altitude z , m_i is the mass of the
 146 constituent, g_{ref} is the gravity at the reference altitude z_{ref} (taken as the level below
 147 the top level of WACCM-X), k is the Boltzmann constant and R is the Earth's radius.
 148 T_∞ is the exospheric temperature, which is assumed to be the WACCM-X top level tem-
 149 perature. z_∞ is the altitude at which the exospheric temperature is taken. The number
 150 density profiles are converted to mass densities, and neutral mass density is then obtained
 151 by summing the O and He profiles.

152 4 High Solar Activity Results

153 WACCM-X was used to simulate carbon dioxide concentrations which correspond
 154 to Representative Concentration Pathway 8.5 (RCP8.5) (Intergovernmental Panel on Cli-
 155 mate Change (IPCC), 2014) for a snapshot every 10 years from 2015 to 2095 inclusive,
 156 as well as the year 2000 as a reference point. These concentrations were chosen to match
 157 (Brown et al., 2021), but 2005 was neglected due to the small change expected with re-
 158 spect to the year 2000. Each of these was run cyclically for five years and the global-mean
 159 annual-means taken, where five years was chosen to better understand the standard devi-
 160 ation between different model realizations. Results are shown in Figure 3. Global-mean
 161 annual-means are taken to remove seasonal dependencies.

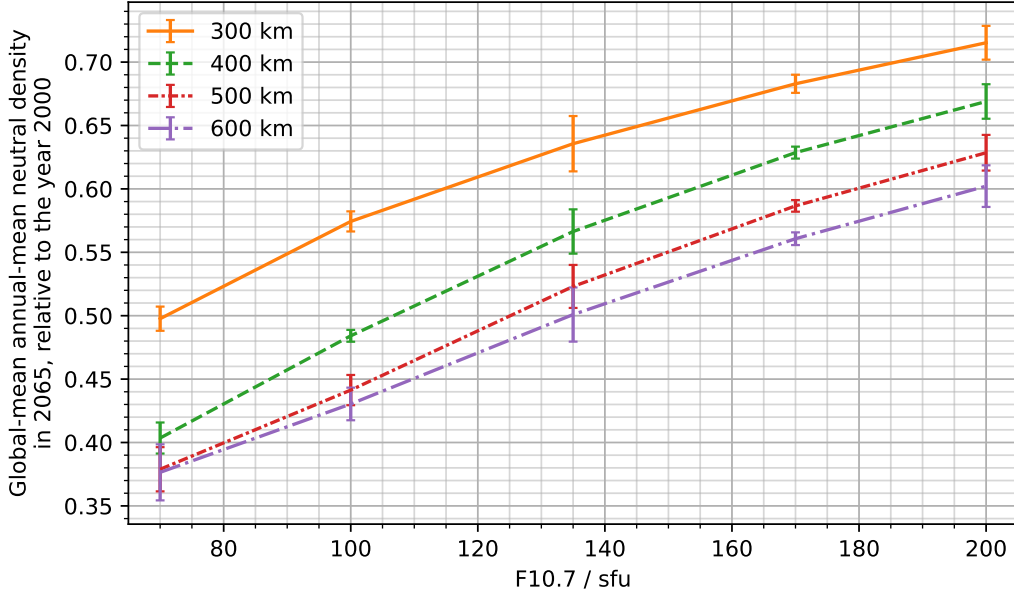


Figure 4. Neutral density reductions relative to the year 2000, at a CO₂ concentration of 639 ppm, under varying solar activity conditions.

5 Varying Solar Activity Results

Historic studies, and the above results (compared against the low solar activity results of Brown et al. (2021)), show that neutral density reductions are smaller in magnitude during high solar activity. To understand how the reduction depends on solar activity conditions in more detail, WACCM-X was used to simulate the years 2000 and 2065 (639 ppm) under F10.7 values of 100, 135, and 170 sfu. This provided enough points to outline the relationship (linear vs nonlinear) with the limited computing resources available. The year 2065 (639 ppm) was chosen as a large enough CO₂ concentration to result in larger neutral density reductions to identify the trend, while being low enough that it appears in most RCP and Shared Socioeconomic Pathway (SSP) scenarios. Each of these was run cyclically for 2 years and the global-mean annual-means taken, where 2 years was chosen due to computing time limitations. Results are shown in Figure 4, along with the equivalent 70 sfu values from the reprocessed results of Brown et al. (2021) using the updated methodology, and 200 sfu of Figure 3.

To combine the low, high and varying solar activity results, Figure 5 uses 2D cubic interpolation on each altitude shell to obtain the F10.7-CO₂ combinations which were not simulated with WACCM-X. This inherently assumes the relationship shown in Figure 4 maps to other CO₂ concentrations, and is scaled to the lower and upper limits of the low and high solar activity runs. This provides scaling factors relative to the year 2000, dependent upon solar activity (70 to 200 sfu), altitude (200 to 1000 km), and CO₂ concentrations (around 370 to 890 ppm).

6 Discussion

In both the low solar activity results of Brown et al. (2021) and the high solar activity results of Figure 3, there is a sudden decrease in the rate at which neutral densities reduce between CO₂ concentrations of around 440 and 520 ppm, which then recovers by 550 ppm. This does not correlate with any of the input parameters to WACCM-

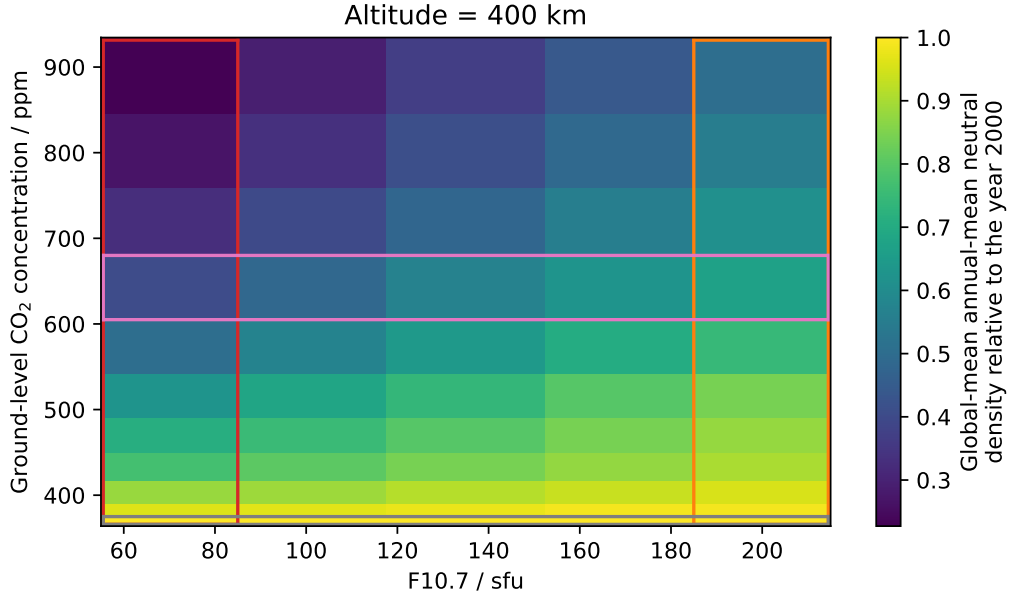


Figure 5. Neutral density reductions (scaling factors) at 400 km altitude. Bins outlined in red indicate low F10.7 runs at 70 sfu (reprocessed from Brown et al. (2021)), orange are high F10.7 (200 sfu of Figure 3), pink are varying F10.7 runs at a fixed 639 ppm (shown in Figure 4), and grey is the reference line (year 2000) where all ratios equal 1. Other bins are obtained by 2D cubic interpolation.

188 X, so it cannot be readily attributed to it being an artifact of the model itself, a com-
 189 bination of input parameters, or an unidentified physical phenomenon.

190 While the historic trends summarized in Figure 2 often present results in units of
 191 “% per decade”, this inherently includes the historic increase in carbon dioxide during
 192 the period the trend is calculated over. Extrapolating “% per decade” trends forward
 193 assumes the rate of increase in CO₂ concentrations will remain constant. Figure 6 and
 194 Table 3 show the observed trends of Table 1 mapped into carbon dioxide concentration-
 195 based trends, with the year 2000 (CO₂ = 369 ppm) taken as the reference point. This
 196 was done by assuming the stated trends are fixed over each study’s period, calculating
 197 the scaled neutral densities at the start and end of the period, then by assuming the den-
 198 sity reduction for each ppm drop in carbon dioxide concentration is consistent, this per-
 199 centage change in neutral density per CO₂ ppm can be calculated. Providing trends in
 200 units of ‘% / ppm’ allows for validation through direct comparison with the density re-
 201 duction results from the period 2000-2020 of this study. The low solar activity results
 202 are the middle of the range of historic observed trends. The high solar activity trend is
 203 smaller in magnitude within the range of these studies. Observed trends in Table 1 cal-
 204 culated over ‘all’ solar activity levels were neglected as they did not match to the fixed
 205 solar activity levels used in the WACCM-X simulations.

206 Recent trends calculated through the solar minima of 2008 and 2020 have had to
 207 contend with the uncommonly low solar activity of these solar minima years, during which
 208 the empirical thermospheric models used to remove solar variability before trend calcu-
 209 lation over-predict neutral densities. This changes calculated long-term trends, as demon-
 210 strated by Emmert (2015) and their two trends calculated over different periods, as sum-
 211 marized in Table 1. This phenomenon convoluted validation through comparison of the

Table 3. Summary of observed (derived) neutral density trends at 400 km altitude under low and high solar activity levels, converted to trends stated in carbon dioxide concentration (%/ppm). Period has been included to highlight if the trend was calculated through the 2008 solar minimum.

Study	Solar Activity	Period	% / ppm
Keating et al. (2000)	Low	1976 - 1996	-0.329
Emmert et al. (2004)	Low	1996 - 2001	-0.223
Emmert et al. (2008)	Low	1967-2007	-0.370
Saunders et al. (2011)	Low	1970-2010	-0.466
Emmert (2015)	Low	1967-2005	-0.208
Emmert (2015)	Low	1967-2013	-0.462
This Study	Low	2000-2020	-0.402
Emmert et al. (2008)	High	1967-2007	-0.139
Saunders et al. (2011)	High	1970-2010	-0.255
Emmert (2015)	High	1967-2005	-0.201
This Study	High	2000-2020	-0.157

212 scaled neutral densities of empirical models with accelerometer-derived densities from
 213 satellites such as GRACE (Siemes et al., 2023), and the TLE-derived densities of Emmert
 214 (2015).

215 The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has published the Shared
 216 Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs) which contain future possible CO₂ concentrations (Lee
 217 et al., 2023). These reduce the extensive possibilities in the literature to a limited num-
 218 ber of scenarios which can be commonly used between studies. Four of the SSPs (SSP1-
 219 2.6, SSP2-4.5, SSP3-7.0, and SSP5-8.5), shown in Figure 7, represent a subset of the SSPs
 220 which range across the possible CO₂ concentration projections, while also being simi-
 221 lar to the older RCPs. For additional context, SSP1-2.6 represents a "best-case" scenario
 222 where the CO₂ concentration peaks at 474 ppm around the year 2065, and then begins
 223 to reduce as carbon capture technologies remove more CO₂ than is emitted. In contrast,
 224 SSP5-8.5 represents a "worst-case" scenario where this is continued and accelerating CO₂
 225 emissions through increasing fossil fuel usage. SSP2-4.5 and SSP3-7.0 are then chosen
 226 to represent middle CO₂ concentration projections between the two extremes, represent-
 227 ing "middle-of-the-road" and "minimal adaptation" scenarios respectively.

228 The F10.7 and CO₂ dependence of the neutral density reductions at 400 km are
 229 shown in Figure 5. By assuming an empirical model gives a true representation of the
 230 year 2000, these neutral density reductions can be used as scaling factors. The neutral
 231 densities output by an empirical model (i.e. NRLMSISE-00) can be multiplied by the
 232 scaling factors to account for the CO₂ induced neutral density reductions. The scaling
 233 factors (neutral density reductions) can then also be mapped to each SSP's future CO₂
 234 concentrations, as shown in Figure 8. These scaling factors are included in the published
 235 data, with altitude, F10.7 and CO₂ dependence, or mapped to the SSPs so only the fu-
 236 ture F10.7 dependence needs to be specified. This allows empirical models to be used
 237 for long-term orbital propagation or debris environment modelling while accounting for

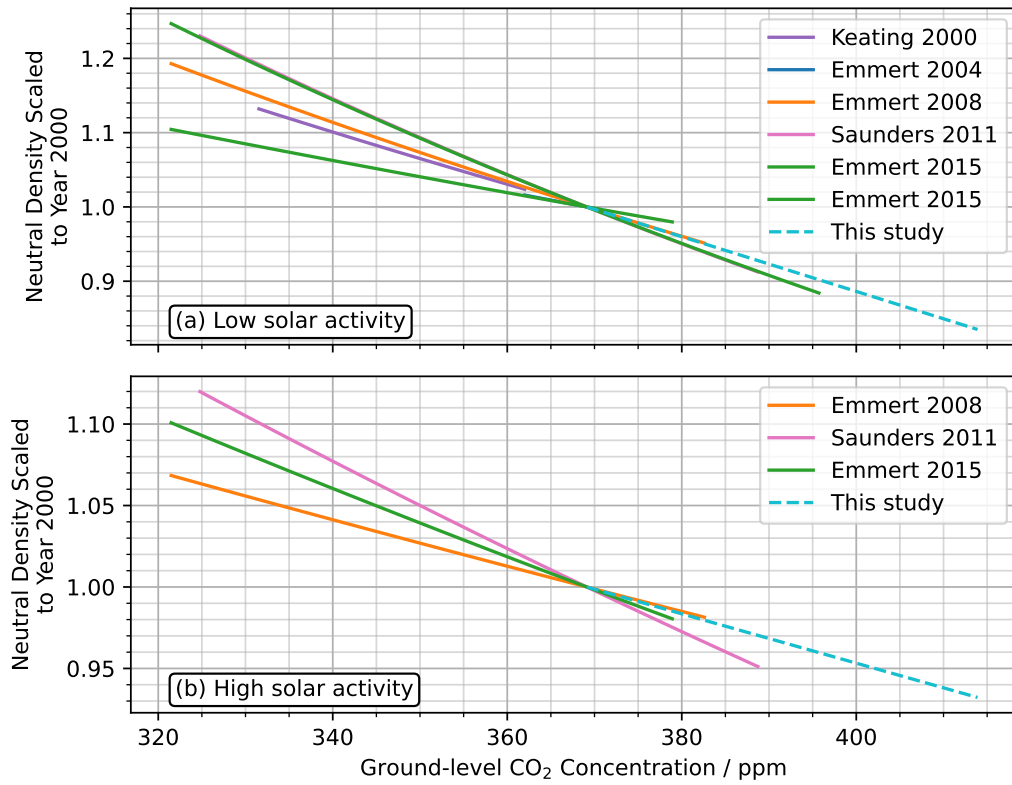


Figure 6. Historic density trends at 400 km of Table 1 mapped into CO₂ concentrations and taking the year 2000 as a reference point, along with the 2000 to 2020 density reductions modelled in this study. Subfigures show low and high solar activity conditions. Emmert (2015) appears twice as the trend was calculated over two different periods.

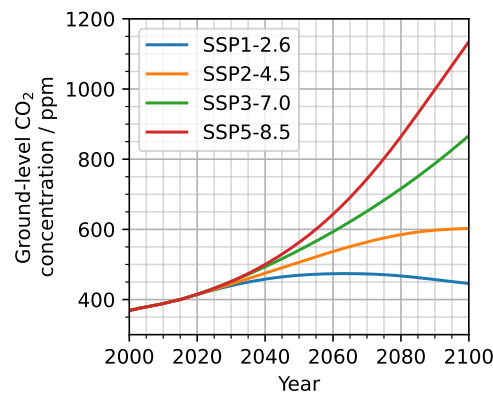


Figure 7. Future carbon dioxide concentration taken from four of the Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (SSPs) published by the IPCC (Lee et al., 2023).

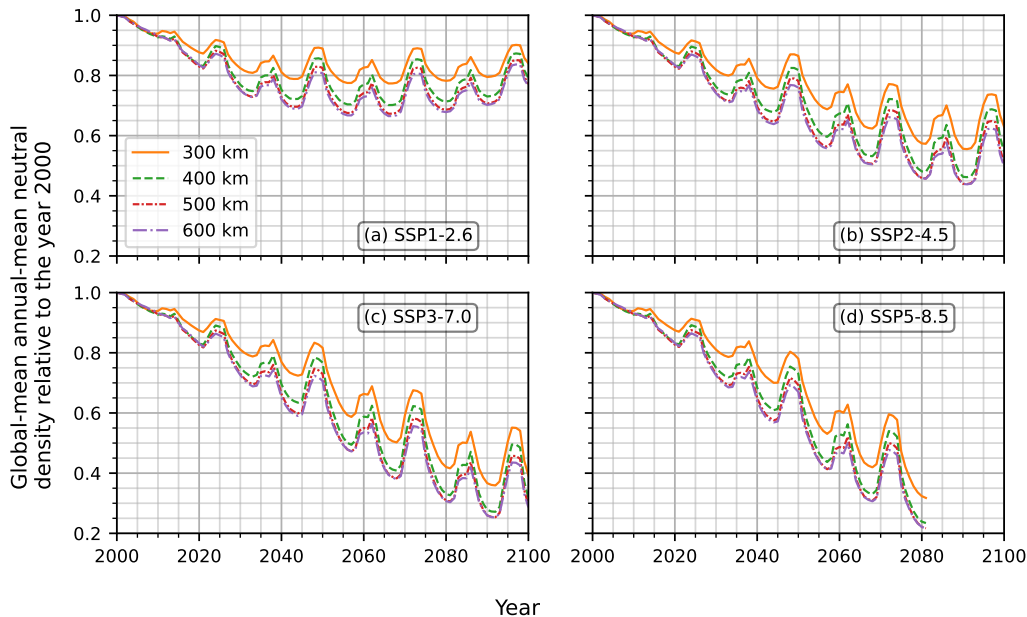


Figure 8. Density reductions (scaling factors) under the four SSPs shown in Figure 7. Solar cycles 23 and 24 are repeated into the future to demonstrate the impact of solar activity. Subfigure d, showing SSP5-8.5, ends in 2080 as higher CO₂ values were not modelled.

238 thermospheric CO₂ trends and maintaining the computation speed of empirical mod-
 239 els required for these applications.

240 Solar activity has a substantial impact on neutral density reductions, but solar ac-
 241 tivity forecasts on the order of years to decades are notoriously difficult (Nandy, 2021).
 242 To demonstrate the solar activity impact, solar cycles 23 and 24 are repeated in Figure
 243 8. These density reductions are applied in addition to the order-of-magnitude change in
 244 neutral density caused by solar activity, and can be applied to output from empirical mod-
 245 els (by assuming that model is an accurate representation of the year 2000). In the SSP1-
 246 2.6 scenario, as CO₂ concentrations peak and decline, neutral densities begin to recover.
 247 However, looking at this “best-case” scenario, the reduced neutral densities are between
 248 13 to 30% lower during the peak CO₂ period, which will substantially increase orbital
 249 lifetimes. In general, this will increase the likelihood of collision during an object’s life-
 250 time, creating more fragments, which further increases the likelihood of collision in a feed-
 251 back loop. This is being investigated in further work.

252 7 Conclusions

253 WACCM-X has been used to simulate the thermospheric response and contraction
 254 to increasing CO₂ concentrations under varying solar activity conditions. In general, the
 255 neutral density reductions increase in magnitude with altitude, increase with carbon diox-
 256 ide concentration, and decrease with solar activity (F10.7). Through use of the CO₂ con-
 257 centration scenarios from the SSPs, neutral density reductions (scaling factors) can be
 258 mapped onto future years. These scaling factors are being made available as a method
 259 of including carbon dioxide-induced neutral density reductions in empirical models, as
 260 a much faster solution compared to numerical models. This requires assuming the em-
 261 pirical model, is an accurate representation of the year 2000. However, this opens up in-
 262 cluding long-term trends into applications such as orbital propagation, lifetime estima-

263 tion, or space debris environment evolution, and without the need to fully replace the
 264 currently used atmospheric models.

265 8 Open Research

266 The authors acknowledge the contributions of those who helped develop CESM and
 267 WACCM-X. These models are publicly available from <http://www.cesm.ucar.edu/models/>.
 268 The data produced and processed for this study is available at:
 269 <https://doi.org/10.5285/09198c58032d4b8197fd7c6748b92785>

270 The scaling factors allowing empirical models to account for CO₂ reductions are
 271 available at:
 272 <https://doi.org/10.25500/edata.bham.00001075>

273 Acknowledgments

274 The authors acknowledge the use of the IRIDIS High Performance Computing Fa-
 275 cility, and associated support services at the University of Southampton, in the comple-
 276 tion of this work. This research was supported by the International Space Science In-
 277 stitute (ISSI) in Bern, through ISSI International Team project #544 (Impacts of Cli-
 278 mate Change on the Middle and Upper Atmosphere and Atmospheric Drag of Space Ob-
 279 jects). M. K. Brown and S. Elvidge are supported by the UK Space Weather Instrumen-
 280 tation, Measurement, Modelling and Risk (SWIMMR) Programme, National Environ-
 281 mental Research Council (NERC) Grants NE/V002643/1 and NE/V002708/1. I. Cnossen
 282 was supported by a Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) Independent Re-
 283 search Fellowship (NE/R015651/1). A. J. Kavanagh was supported by the British Antarc-
 284 tic Survey Polar Science for Planet Earth Programme, funded by NERC as part of the
 285 UKRI.

286 References

- 287 Brown, M. K., Lewis, H. G., Kavanagh, A. J., & Cnossen, I. (2021). Future de-
 288 creases in thermospheric neutral density in low Earth orbit due to carbon
 289 dioxide emissions. *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres*, *126*(8),
 290 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2021JD034589>
- 291 Cnossen, I. (2020). Analysis and attribution of climate change in the upper at-
 292 mosphere from 1950 to 2015 simulated by WACCM-X. *Journal of Geophys-
 293 ical Research: Space Physics*, *125*, e2020JA028623. [https://doi.org/10.1029/
 294 2020JA028623](https://doi.org/10.1029/2020JA028623)
- 295 Emmert, J. T. (2015). Altitude and solar activity dependence of 1967–2005 ther-
 296 mospheric density trends derived from orbital drag. *Journal of Geophys-
 297 ical Research: Space Physics*, *120*, 2940–2950. [https://doi.org/10.1002/
 298 2015JA021047](https://doi.org/10.1002/2015JA021047)
- 299 Emmert, J. T., & Picone, J. M. (2011). Statistical uncertainty of 1967–2005 ther-
 300 mospheric density trends derived from orbital drag. *Journal of Geophysical Re-
 301 search: Space Physics*, *116*. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2010JA016382>
- 302 Emmert, J. T., Picone, J. M., Lean, J. L., & Knowles, S. H. (2004). Global change
 303 in the thermosphere: Compelling evidence of a secular decrease in density.
 304 *Journal of Geophysical Research: Space Physics*, *109*. [https://doi.org/
 305 10.1029/2003JA010176](https://doi.org/10.1029/2003JA010176)
- 306 Emmert, J. T., Picone, J. M., & Meier, R. R. (2008). Thermospheric global average
 307 density trends, 1967–2007, derived from orbits of 5000 near-Earth objects. *Geo-
 308 physical Research Letters*, *35*. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2007GL032809>
- 309 Hurrell, J. W., Holland, M. M., Gent, P. R., Ghan, S., Kay, J. E., J., K. P., et al.
 310 (2013). The Community Earth System Model: A framework for collaborative

- 311 research. *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, *94*(9), 1339–1360.
 312 <https://doi.org/10.1175/BAMS-D-12-00121.1>
- 313 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2014). *Climate change 2013*
 314 *– the physical science basis: Working group I contribution to the Fifth Assess-*
 315 *ment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.* Cambridge
 316 University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324>
- 317 Keating, G. M., Tolson, R. H., & Bradford, M. S. (2000). Evidence of long term
 318 global decline in the Earth’s thermospheric densities apparently related to
 319 anthropogenic effects. *Geophysical Research Letters*, *27*(10), 1523–1526.
 320 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2000GL003771>
- 321 Kim, J. S., Urbina, J. V., Kane, T. J., & Spencer, D. B. (2012). Improvement of
 322 TIE-GCM thermospheric density predictions via incorporation of helium data
 323 from NRLMSISE-00. *Journal of Atmospheric and Solar-Terrestrial Physics*,
 324 *77*, 19–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jastp.2011.10.018>
- 325 Lee, H., Calvin, K., Dasgupta, D., Krinmer, G., Mukherji, A., Thorne, P., ... others
 326 (2023). Synthesis report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), Longer
 327 report. IPCC.
- 328 Lewis, H. G., Saunders, A., Swinerd, G. G., & Newland, R. J. (2011). Effect
 329 of thermospheric contraction on remediation of the near-Earth space de-
 330 bris environment. *Journal of Geophysical Research: Space Physics*, *116*.
 331 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2011JA016482>
- 332 Liu, H. L., Bardeen, C. G., Foster, B. T., Lauritzen, P., Liu, J., Lu, G., ... Wang,
 333 W. (2018). Development and Validation of the Whole Atmosphere Community
 334 Climate Model With Thermosphere and Ionosphere Extension (WACCM-
 335 X 2.0). *Journal of Advances in Modeling Earth Systems*, *10*(2), 381–402.
 336 <https://doi.org/10.1002/2017MS001232>
- 337 Liu, H. L., Foster, B. T., Hagan, M. E., McInerney, J. M., Maute, A., Qian, L., ...
 338 Oberheide, J. (2010). Thermosphere extension of the Whole Atmosphere
 339 Community Climate Model. *Journal of Geophysical Research: Space Physics*,
 340 *115*(A12). <https://doi.org/10.1029/2010JA015586>
- 341 Marcos, F. A., Wise, J. O., Kendra, M. J., Grossbard, N. J., & Bowman, B. R.
 342 (2005). Detection of a long-term decrease in thermospheric neutral density.
 343 *Geophysical Research Letters*, *32*(4). <https://doi.org/10.1029/2004GL021269>
- 344 Mlynczak, M. G., Hunt, L. A., Mertens, C. J., Thomas Marshall, B., Russell III,
 345 J. M., Woods, T., ... Gordley, L. L. (2014). Influence of solar variabil-
 346 ity on the infrared radiative cooling of the thermosphere from 2002 to 2014.
 347 *Geophysical Research Letters*, *41*(7), 2508–2513. <https://doi.org/10.1002/2014GL059556>
- 348
- 349 Nandy, D. (2021). Progress in solar cycle predictions: Sunspot cycles 24–25 in per-
 350 spective: Invited review. *Solar Physics*, *296*(3), 54. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11207-021-01797-2>
- 351
- 352 Picone, J. M., Hedin, A. E., Drob, D. P., & Aikin, A. C. (2002). NRLMSISE-
 353 00 empirical model of the atmosphere: Statistical comparisons and scien-
 354 tific issues. *Journal of Geophysical Research: Space Physics*, *107*(A12).
 355 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2002JA009430>
- 356 Qian, L., Roble, R. G., Solomon, S. C., & Kane, T. J. (2006). Calculated and
 357 observed climate change in the thermosphere, and a prediction for solar cy-
 358 cle 24. *Geophysical Research Letters*, *33*(23). <https://doi.org/10.1029/2006GL027185>
- 359
- 360 Qian, L., & Solomon, S. C. (2011). Thermospheric density: An overview of temporal
 361 and spatial variations. *Space Science Reviews*, *168*, 147–173. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11214-011-9810-z>
- 362
- 363 Roble, R. G., & Dickinson, R. E. (1989). How will changes in carbon dioxide and
 364 methane modify the mean structure of the mesosphere and thermosphere?
 365 *Geophysical Research Letters*, *16*(12), 1441–1444. <https://doi.org/10.1029/>

- 366 GL016i012p01441
- 367 Saunders, A., Lewis, H. G., & Swinerd, G. G. (2011). Further evidence of long-term
 368 thermospheric density change using a new method of satellite ballistic coeffi-
 369 cient estimation. *Journal of Geophysical Research: Space Physics*, *116*(A2).
 370 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2010JA016358>
- 371 Siemes, C., Borries, C., Bruinsma, S., Fernandez-Gomez, I., Hładczuk, N., den IJssel,
 372 J., ... Visser, P. (2023). New thermosphere neutral mass density and cross-
 373 wind datasets from champ, grace, and grace-fo. *Journal of Space Weather and*
 374 *Space Climate*, *13*. <https://doi.org/10.1051/swsc/2023014>
- 375 Solomon, S. C., Liu, H. L., Marsh, D. R., McInerney, J. M., Qian, L., & Vitt, F. M.
 376 (2018). Whole atmosphere simulation of anthropogenic climate change.
 377 *Geophysical Research Letters*, *45*, 1567–1576. [https://doi.org/10.1002/](https://doi.org/10.1002/2017GL076950)
 378 [2017GL076950](https://doi.org/10.1002/2017GL076950)
- 379 Solomon, S. C., Liu, H. L., Marsh, D. R., McInerney, J. M., Qian, L., & Vitt,
 380 F. M. (2019). Whole atmosphere climate change : Dependence on solar
 381 activity. *Journal of Geophysical Research : Space Physics*, *124*, 3799–3809.
 382 <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019JA026678>
- 383 Solomon, S. C., Qian, L., & Roble, R. G. (2015). New 3-D simulations of climate
 384 change in the thermosphere. *Journal of Geophysical Research: Space Physics*,
 385 *120*, 2183–2193. <https://doi.org/10.1002/2014JA020886>
- 386 Sutton, E. K., Thayer, J. P., Wang, W., Solomon, S. C., Liu, X., & Foster,
 387 B. T. (2015). A self-consistent model of helium in the thermosphere.
 388 *Journal of Geophysical Research A: Space Physics*, *120*(8), 6884–6900.
 389 [10.1002/2015JA021223](https://doi.org/10.1002/2015JA021223)
- 390 Walker, J. C. G. (1965). Analytic representation of upper atmosphere densities
 391 based on Jacchia’s static diffusion models. *Journal of Atmospheric Sci-*
 392 *ences*, *22*, 462–463. [https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0469\(1965\)022%3C0462:](https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0469(1965)022%3C0462:AROUAD%3E2.0.CO;2)
 393 [AROUAD%3E2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0469(1965)022%3C0462:AROUAD%3E2.0.CO;2)
- 394 Weng, L., Lei, J., Zhong, J., Dou, X., & Fang, H. (2020). A machine-learning
 395 approach to derive long-term trends of thermospheric density. *Geophys-*
 396 *ical Research Letters*, *47*(6), e2020GL087140. [https://doi.org/10.1029/](https://doi.org/10.1029/2020GL087140)
 397 [2020GL087140](https://doi.org/10.1029/2020GL087140)
- 398 Yue, J., Russell III, J., Jian, Y., Rezac, L., Garcia, R., López-Puertas, M., &
 399 Mlynczak, M. G. (2015). Increasing carbon dioxide concentration in the
 400 upper atmosphere observed by saber. *Geophysical Research Letters*, *42*(17),
 401 7194–7199. <https://doi.org/10.1002/2015GL064696>