

Constraining urban GHG emissions from space: A simulation study and evaluation against observations

Roisin

Commane

Columbia University

Sean Crowell, LumenUs Scientific, LLC

Rory Barton-Grimley, NASA Langley Research Center

Jonathan Franklin, Harvard University

Andrew Hallward-Driemeier, Columbia University

Amin Nehrir, NASA Langley Research Center

Chris O'Dell, Colorado State University

Maryann Sargent, Harvard University

Luke Schiferl, Columbia University

Yuwei Zhao, Columbia University

Oral

Urban areas emit 70% of global fossil fuel related carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Urban fluxes of CO₂ and methane (CH₄) are of great interest to city and state governments who wish to evaluate the efficacy of their climate mitigation policies. While a few cities have implemented arrays of surface-based greenhouse gas (GHG) sensors, space-based observations may provide the only practical approach for monitoring most large urban areas, especially those in the rapidly developing world. Existing and planned space-based GHG sensors have struggled to monitor CO₂ and CH₄ fluxes from cities, especially coastal cities, because they do not have the combination of spatial resolution and sensitivity to detect and quantify concentration anomalies contributed by a complex, distributed array of sources.

Here, we investigate the requirements for space-based resources for monitoring CO₂ and CH₄ emissions from the largest city in the US: New York City (NYC). With a population of 20M in the metro area, NYC is the largest urban source of CO₂ in the US. Our airborne and in situ observations of methane, as well as co-emitted species ethane and CO, indicate that widely-used methane inventories underestimate methane by a factor of 3 to 5 depending on the season. Airborne active and passive remote sensing projects (HALO on NASA STAQS and MethaneAIR) sampled over the NYC area in summer 2023. We generated profiles of surface influence footprints using a Lagrangian transport model (STILT) driven by 3 km HRRR meteorology. By coupling the surface influence footprints with various inventories, we calculated the expected XCO₂ and XCH₄ for New York City. Our results highlight the need for high spatial resolution ground coverage (< km) to resolve carbon fluxes in coastal areas and a wide swath to capture signals from the entire city. Given the climate impacts of urban GHG fluxes and the ability of cities to implement mitigation policies, future space-based observations need to incorporate these requirements to constrain CO₂ and methane fluxes for large urban areas.

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