Meteorology, not emissions, helps explain an upward trend in atmospheric methane across the US

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Key Points:

- Meteorology helps explain an upward trend in observed atmospheric methane concentrations in the United States between years 2007 and 2015.
- Trends in local meteorological processes (e.g., annually-averaged horizontal wind speed) correlate with atmospheric methane trends at many locations.
- This work supports for the conclusion that there was little or no trend in US methane emissions during this time.

Abstract

US natural gas production increased by ~43% between 2005 and 2015, but there is disagreement in the scientific literature on whether this growth led to increased methane emissions. In this study, we evaluate the possible contributions of emissions versus meteorology to an upward trend in US atmospheric methane observations during 2007-2015. We find that interannual variability (IAV) in meteorology yields an apparent upward trend in atmospheric methane across much of the US. We further find that IAV in atmospheric methane at several observation sites is correlated with IAV in local wind speed. Overall, our results show that US trends in atmospheric methane largely reflect variability in meteorology, and are unlikely to be a direct reflection of trends in emissions. The results of this study therefore lend support for the conclusion that there was little upward trend in US methane emissions during this time.

Plain Language Summary

US natural gas production increased from 18 to 27.1 trillion cubic feet per year between 2005 and 2015 as a result of the shale gas boom and the associated technological breakthrough of combining horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing. This increase in natural gas activity has caused concern about methane emissions, since methane is the primary constituent of natural gas and an important greenhouse gas. However, estimates of trends in US methane emissions have been ambiguous and controversial, and existing studies have reached conflicting conclusions. Furthermore, atmospheric methane levels at many US observation locations have increased faster than the global mean, raising questions about whether increasing US natural gas production has led to increased emissions. In this study, we explore the roles of changing emissions versus changing meteorology in explaining recent increases in atmospheric methane levels across the US. And we find that changing meteorology can explain this recent atmospheric methane increase. The results of this study elucidate the complex relationships between emissions and atmospheric observations and shed light on recent changes in US methane emissions.

1 Introduction

The US is one of the largest anthropogenic emitters of methane, behind only China and India (Saunois et al. 2020). Numerous recent studies indicate that US methane emissions are 48% - 76% higher than estimated by the EPA Inventory of US Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks (GHGI) (Alvarez et al. 2018; Barkley et al. 2019, 2021; Caulton et al. 2019; Robertson et al. 2020; Zavala-Araiza et al. 2015). One reason for this discrepancy is that methane emissions are challenging to quantify. For example, recent studies indicate that 5% of oil and gas facilities account for over 50% of emissions (Brandt et al. 2016; see also Omara et al. 2018; Rella et al. 2015; Zavala-Araiza et al. 2015, 2017). These facilities can be difficult to find, effectively monitor, and subsequently account for in an emissions inventory that is based upon a limited number of emissions factors.

In addition, a marked increase in natural gas activity over the past 15 years has caused concern over possible increases in US methane emissions. US natural gas production increased by 43% between years 2005 and 2015, and this increase is coincident with the deployment of hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling technologies (US EIA, 2016). Several studies argue that increased natural gas production activity likely means increased fugitive methane emissions (Howarth et al. 2019). By contrast, EPA's GHGI indicates that total US anthropogenic methane emissions decreased by 5.0% between years 2005 - 2015 and that emissions from the natural gas sector decreased by 8.8% (US EPA, 2021). EPA attributes most of this change in natural gas emissions to decreasing exploration and distribution emissions and reports decreasing emissions factors across many areas of the natural gas sector (US EPA, 2021). These decreasing emissions factors explain why the trend in EPA's emissions inventory is opposite the trend in natural gas production.

In addition to the EPA inventory, a handful of studies based on atmospheric observations estimate trends in US methane emissions. However, these studies do not agree on whether US methane emissions increased. Turner et al. (2016) examine trends in atmospheric observations from a site in Oklahoma and from the Greenhouse Gases Observing Satellite (GOSAT). They estimate that US emissions increased by 2.5 - 4.7% per annum between years 2010 and 2014, depending on the observations analyzed. Sheng et al. (2018), also using GOSAT, report a similar upward emissions trend of 2.5±1.4% per annum between years 2010-2016. By contrast, a handful of additional studies find a much smaller increase or no increase at all. For example, Lan et al. (2019) report a trend in US emissions of 0.7±0.3% per annum (2006-2015) using in situ observation sites, Maasakkers et al. (2021) estimate a trend of 0.4% per annum (2010-2015) using observations from GOSAT, and Lu et al. (2021) estimate a trend of 0.1±0.2% per annum (2010-2017) using both GOSAT and in situ observation sites.

The purpose of this work is to help reconcile the disparate trends reported by recent studies that use atmospheric methane observations. Specifically, we hypothesize that meteorology produced an upward trend in atmospheric methane across the United States between years 2007-2015, and that this upward trend in meteorology can help explain the disagreement among existing atmospheric estimates of methane emissions trends. To answer this hypothesis, we develop meteorology and emissions trend scenarios to evaluate the plausible impacts of meteorology versus emissions on trends in atmospheric methane levels. In subsequent analyses, we further examine the correlations between inter-annual variability (IAV) in our modeled methane scenarios and IAV in specific meteorological parameters. This analysis sheds light on the specific meteorological processes that correlate with atmospheric methane trends.

2 Data and methods

2.1 Atmospheric modeling

We model atmospheric methane mixing ratios (MMR) between years 2007 and 2015 at 8 tower measurement sites in the continental US that are part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric (NOAA) Global Monitoring Laboratory (GML) Cooperative Air Sampling Network (Andrews et al, 2014). Tall tower observations in the US greatly expanded in 2007, and the 8 tower sites included in this study have observations available during all years of the study period. We further model MMR at 80,914 GOSAT sounding locations across the continental US (CONUS) between years 2009 and 2015. GOSAT sounding locations are specifically taken from the UoL Proxy XCH_4 Retrieval Version 9 (Parker et al. 2020). This data product provides total column averaged atmospheric methane mixing ratios at GOSAT sounding locations and is used in several recent studies of methane emissions (Maasakkers et al. 2021; Sheng et al. 2018).

We model atmospheric MMR at these locations using simulations from the Stochastic Time-Inverted Lagrangian Transport model (STILT) (e.g., Lin et al. 2003). The simulations used here were generated as part of the NOAA CarbonTracker-Lagrange project (e.g., Hu et al. 2019).

STILT is a particle trajectory model; it tracks a large set of tracer particles (500 in this study), and the dispersion of those particles in the atmosphere is used to generate an influence footprint (in the units of atmospheric mixing ratio per unit of emissions). As a result of this setup, we model methane at each location and time by multiplying an individual footprint by a methane emission estimate (described below). Note that the STILT particles are driven by meteorology from the Weather Research and Forecast (WRF) model (Skamarock et al. 2008). To date, WRF-STILT has been used for atmospheric transport in numerous existing regional methane and greenhouse gas modeling studies (Hu et al. 2019; Miller et al. 2013, 2014, 2015; Nehrkorn et al. 2010). The WRF simulations have a nested spatial resolution of 10 km over CONUS and 40 km over remaining regions of North America. The STILT footprints are run for a total of 10 days back in time, with a spatial resolution of 1° latitude by 1° longitude.

We further use several methane flux estimates to account for multiple different methane source types in the atmospheric modeling simulations. Specifically, we use the US EPA gridded methane emissions inventory across CONUS (Maasakkers et al. 2016) and the Emission Database for Global Atmospheric Research (EDGAR) gridded methane emissions version 5 (Crippa et al. 2019) for anthropogenic fluxes outside CONUS. Maasakkers et al. (2021) argue that the EPA inventory underestimates oil and gas emissions but that emissions from other anthropogenic sectors in the US are roughly consistent with atmospheric observations. Hence, we scale US oil production emissions by a factor of 1.59 and gas production emissions by 1.33 to match the inverse modeling estimate of Maasakkers et al. (2021). We additionally use wetland methane fluxes calculated using the model in Pickett-Heaps et al. (2011) (and as used in Miller et al. 2014, 2016). Several atmospheric modeling studies have argued that the wetland flux model from Pickett-Heaps et al. (2011) has a magnitude and spatiotemporal distribution that is generally consistent with in-situ atmospheric methane observations across Canada and the northern US (Miller et al. 2014, 2016; Pickett-Heaps et al. 2011). We further use biomass burning methane fluxes from the Quick Fire Emissions Dataset (QFED v2.4, Darmenov & da Silva, 2013). Maasakkers et al. (2021) find that the overall magnitude of QFED emissions is generally consistent with GOSAT observations. Each of these fluxes are regridded to a 1° latitude by 1° longitude spatial resolution for the atmospheric modeling simulations, though the native spatial resolution of these flux products is higher. Furthermore, anthropogenic and wetland fluxes have a monthly time resolution while QFED has a daily time resolution.

2.2 Modeling scenarios and trend fitting

We create two emissions scenarios (one with an emissions trend and one without an emissions trend) and two meteorology scenarios (one with IAV in meteorology and one without). In total, we analyze four modeling scenarios: with trends in emissions and IAV in meteorology (scenario 1), with trends in emissions and without IAV in meteorology (scenario 2), no trends in emissions and with IAV in meteorology (scenario 3), and no trends in emissions and without IAV in meteorology (scenario 4).

The emissions scenarios are generated based on the methane flux estimates described in Sect. 2.1. For the scenario with no emissions trend, we use the monthly US EPA inventory estimate for year 2012 in all years of the WRF-STILT model simulations. Similarly, we use monthly wetland fluxes and daily QFED fluxes also for year 2012. For the scenario with an emissions trend, we scale oil and gas emissions in each state relative to monthly U.S. dry natural gas production data (US EIA, 2018) from years 2007 to 2015. At the time of writing, emissions from the US EPA gridded inventory are only available for year 2012, and we scale oil and gas emissions up or down relative to 2012 inventory numbers. For the simulations here, we do not add a trend to other methane source types because we are primarily interested in how a plausible trend in oil and gas emissions would manifest at the atmospheric observation sites, all else being constant. Some recent studies argue that US methane emissions trends are likely being driven by the oil and gas sectors (e.g., Sheng et al. 2018, Turner et al. 2016), and we therefore create a hypothetical emissions scenario that focuses on that sector.

We further generate meteorology scenarios that include IAV in meteorology and scenarios that do not include IAV in meteorology. For the former scenarios, we run WRF-STILT using standard protocols as described in Sect. 2.1. For the latter scenarios, we average footprints from different years to remove IAV in meteorology. Specifically, at each in-situ monitoring site, we average the footprints from each month of the year across all years of modeling simulations. In other words, we average the WRF-STILT footprints from all Januarys (across 2007-2015), across all Februarys, etc. This approach preserves seasonal variability in the footprints but removes IAV. For the GOSAT observations, we group the observations into 4° latitude by 4° longitude grid boxes across the United States. Within each box, we average the footprints from each month as described above.

We subsequently fit trend lines to the model outputs for each scenario. We can then compare and contrast the impact of meteorology versus emissions on apparent trends in MMR. We specifically fit trend lines using the procedures outlined in Lan et al. (2019) for in situ observations and Sheng et al. (2018) for GOSAT observations. We use line-fitting procedures from these studies to ensure that the results presented here are directly comparable to existing research and to ensure that any differences from these existing studies are not due to differences in the trend-fitting procedure. Technical details of trend line fitting can be found in the SI Sect. S1.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Meteorology yields an upward trend in atmospheric methane across the United States

We find that meteorology has a large impact on inter-annual variability (IAV) in modeled methane mixing ratios. For example, we calculate the maximum and minimum values in annually-averaged MMR at each observation site in the NOAA Global Monitoring Laboratory tall tower network. For these calculations, we use anthropogenic emissions that do not contain any trend (e.g., scenario 3 described above), such that IAV in MMR does not reflect variability in emissions. In these simulations, we find, on average, that IAV in MMR at the observation sites is equal to 40% of the total average atmospheric methane signal from North America (Fig. S1 – S8). At some sites, particularly sites that are close to large agricultural or oil and gas emissions sources, this IAV is as high as 59% of the average MMR (e.g., at Eerie, Colorado, site BAO). By contrast, at sites that are distant from large methane emissions, this IAV can be as small as 20% of the average MMR (e.g., at Argyle, Maine, site AMT).

In fact, IAV in meteorology also yields an apparent upward trend in MMR at all of the tall tower observation sites. Figure 1 displays the results of the four modeling scenarios at these sites. The individual bars in the plot display the trend (i.e., percent annum change) in MMR at each observation site estimated using a linear regression (Sect. 2). Specifically, the yellow bars display the results for scenarios that include a plausible upward trend in emissions while the blue bars display the results for scenarios that do not include a trend in emissions. Furthermore, dark-shaded bars display results for scenarios that include IAV in meteorology while light-shaded bars show scenarios where IAV in meteorology has been removed (Sect. 2). Note that we estimate negative trends at a few sites in a few scenarios. In most cases, the standard error bars encompass zero. In two other instances (S2 at STR and WGC), the negative trend estimate occurs at sites that have a very large seasonal cycle in MMR and have sustained data gaps; the combination makes trend estimation at these sites prone to error (discussed in Sect. S2).

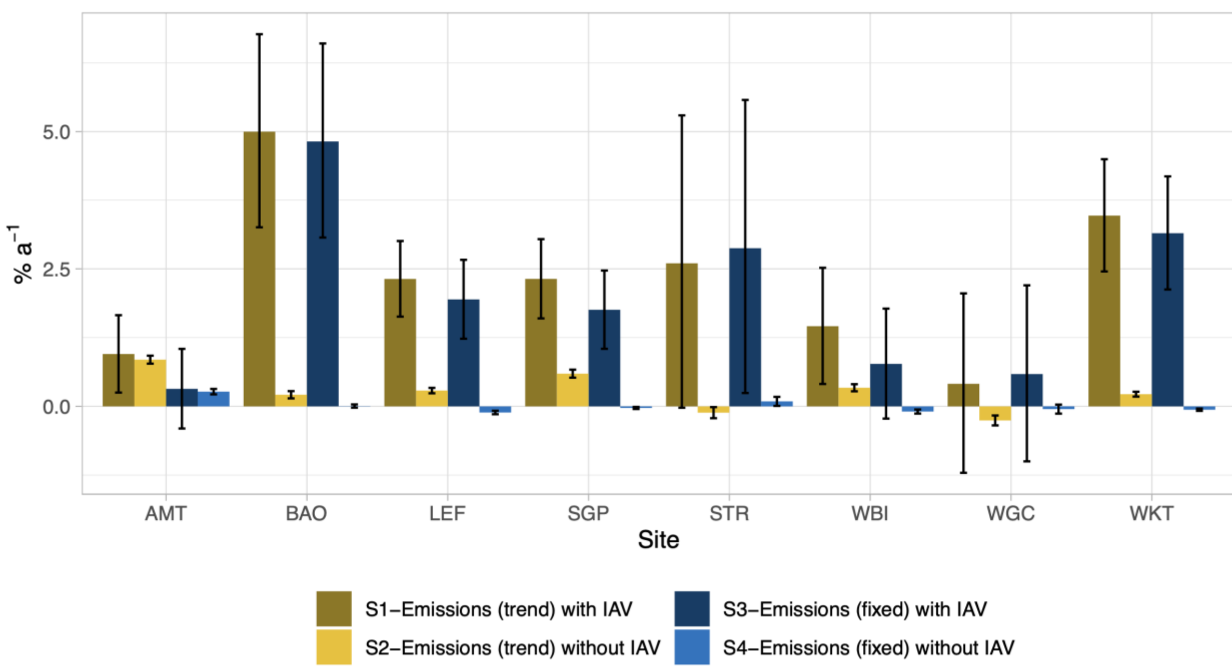

Figure 1. Estimated trends with uncertainty in MMR at different in-situ observation sites (years 2007-2015) and for different modeling scenarios. Sites include Argyle, Maine (AMT); Erie, Colorado (BAO); Park Falls, Wisconsin (LEF); Billings, Oklahoma (SGP); Sutro Tower, San Francisco, California (STR); West Branch, Iowa (WBI), Walnut Grove, California (WGC), and Moody, Texas (WKT) (Andrews et al. 2014). We find that IAV in meteorology has a much larger impact on estimated trends than does variability in emissions. Note that Figs. S1-S8 display the trends in observed MMR at these sites for reference.

We find an upward trend in MMR at all sites, irrespective of whether we include a trend in emissions (e.g., scenarios S1 and S3). By contrast, when we remove IAV in meteorology, the upward trend in MMR largely disappears (e.g., scenarios S2 and S4). We therefore conclude that meteorology is likely driving the trend in model outputs. Furthermore, even when we do not include a trend in emissions, the trend in the model outputs is often between 2-4% per annum and ranges from 0.2% per annum (at Argyle) to 5.5% per annum (at Erie) (scenario 3). These numbers are comparable in magnitude to the US methane emissions trend estimated by several recent atmospheric studies (e.g., Sheng et al. 2018, Turner et al. 2016). These studies attribute trends in observed atmospheric mixing ratios to emissions, while our results suggest that IAV in meteorology can yield comparable trends.

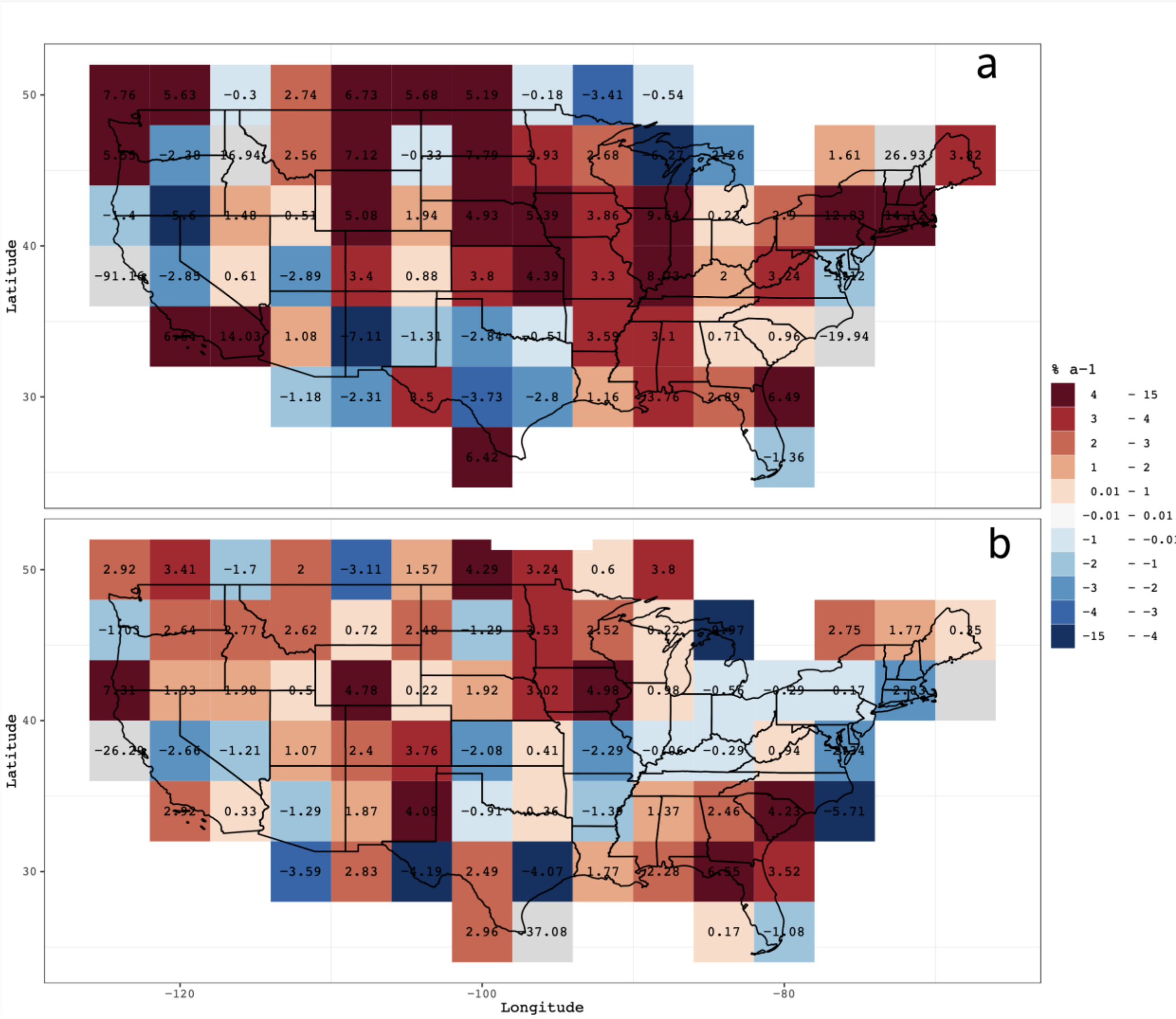

Figure 2. Estimated trends in MMR at GOSAT observation sites (years 2009-2015). Panel (a) displays the result of modeling scenario 3 (IAV in meteorology and no trend in emissions), while panel (b) displays the estimated trend in GOSAT observations. The modeled trend (a) has a similar overall magnitude to the observed trend (b), even though the former does not contain an emissions trend. Note that Fig. S18 – S21 display modeled trends for the three remaining scenarios not shown here.

By contrast, we find that plausible trends in emissions have a smaller impact on estimated trends in MMR relative to meteorology. For example, scenarios 1 and 3 in Fig. 1 display the results when we do and do not, respectively, include a plausible trend in anthropogenic emissions. The differences in estimated trends between these two scenarios is generally small; the difference is between 0.5 - 1.1% per annum, except at Argyle, a remote site in northern

Maine far from large emissions sources. In other words, the impact of an emissions trend is small relative to the overall trend in MMR.

Note that we conduct two sensitivity tests for observation sites in oil and gas producing regions (SGP and WKT) – one test that explores the impact of the meteorological product used in STILT and one that explores the impact of observation sampling time and frequency (Figs. S35-36). In simulations using both meteorology products, the impact of a trend in emissions is small relative to IAV due to meteorology, though the models do not always agree on the exact magnitude of MMR in specific months. In the second test, we find that variations in sampling time have little impact on MMR at one site (WKT) but do impact the results at another site (SGP); hence, we cannot rule out the role of observation sampling frequency and time on estimates of atmospheric methane trends.

We find similar results for simulated GOSAT methane observations. Figure 2 displays the estimated trend in MMR from scenario 3 (panel a) and from the GOSAT observations (panel b) (Fig. S18, S19, and S21 displays scenarios 1, 2, and 4.). The figure shows the trend (% per annum) for model outputs and observations aggregated into 4° by 4° latitude-longitude grid boxes (Sect. 2). The model simulations shown here do not include a trend in emissions, yet the overall trend in MMR is roughly comparable in magnitude to the overall trend in the GOSAT observations. Thus, it is plausible that variability in meteorology is driving much of the observed trend in GOSAT observations. Note that a small number of grid boxes yield unrealistic trend estimates (e.g., coastal northern California and northern Vermont). These grid boxes contain a limited number of observations that are not evenly distributed across seasons and years during the study period, making trend estimation challenging. Also note that Figs. S22-S28 display detailed modeled and observation time series at several prototypical locations across the United States.

We note that the results described above could differ if analyzed across a longer time horizon (e.g., across multiple decades). If there were sustained emissions trends across multiple decades, it might be easier to identify directly from atmospheric observations, even given large IAV in meteorology. With that said, existing studies of methane trends have examined similar time periods to this study (e.g., Lan et al. 2019, Maasakkers et al. 2020, Sheng et al. 2018, Turner et al. 2016). Furthermore, observations that span multiple decades are rarely available, except at a handful of global monitoring sites (at the time of writing), and shorter time periods, like those evaluated in this study, are also helpful for evaluating the impacts of emissions policies in a timely manner (e.g., Miller et al. 2019).

3.2 Local meteorological processes correlate with atmospheric methane trends

In Sect. 3.1, we argue that meteorology yields large IAV in MMR, and a natural follow-up question is to evaluate what specific aspects of meteorology correlate with this IAV. We find that IAV in local meteorological processes show a strong correlation with IAV in MMR. To evaluate this question, we examine the correlation between annually-averaged MMR and the “local” STILT footprint. The STILT footprint estimates the impact of emissions in a given location on the observation site (in units of ppb per unit emission). Here, we define the local footprint as the 1° latitude/longitude grid box where the observation is located, and we then average this footprint across each year. We compare these local footprints against annually-averaged MMR. Figure 3 displays the results of this analysis for model outputs at GOSAT observation locations (panel a) and in situ observation locations (panel b). We find that the correlation (r) between MMR and the local footprint is strong -- greater than 0.8 in many locations for the GOSAT simulations and greater than 0.5 at most locations. The correlation is similarly strong for the simulations at in situ observation sites -- between 0.8 and 1.0.

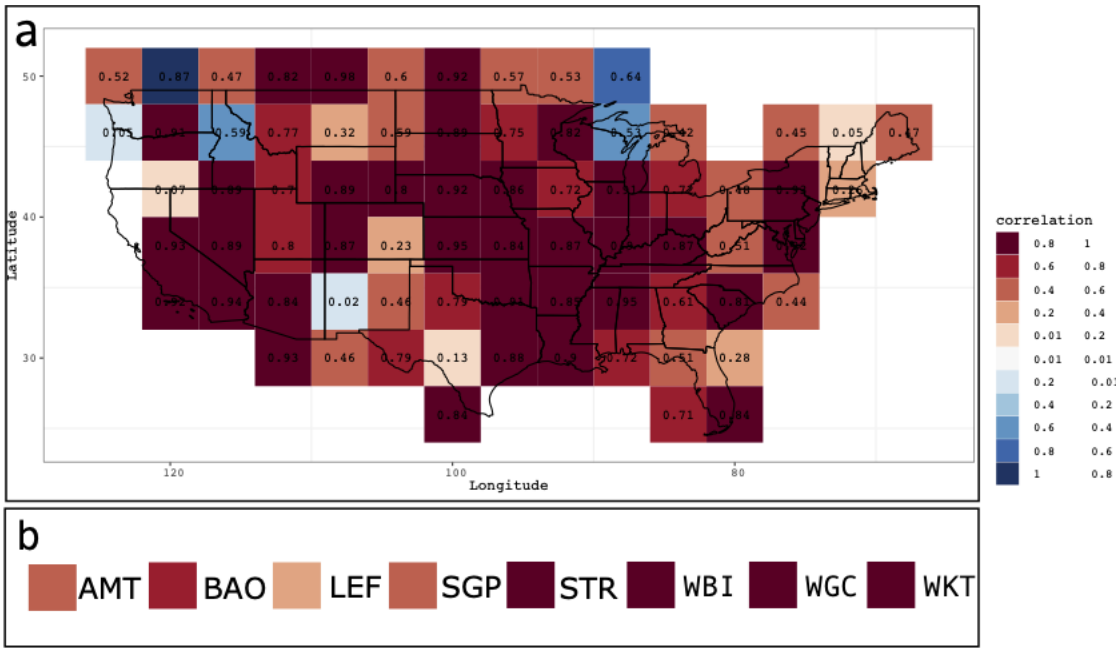

Figure 3. The correlation (*r*) between annually-averaged MMR and the local footprint (Sect. 3.2), both at GOSAT and in-situ observation locations. We find a close correlation at most locations, suggesting that local meteorological processes play a key role in IAV of MMR.

We further explore the relationships between IAV in MMR and IAV in several specific, local meteorological processes -- including planetary boundary layer (PBL) height, vertical wind speed (Ω), and total wind speed at the observation location and modeling height (i.e., the Euclidean sum of u and v wind speed). In this specific study, we use estimates for these parameters from North American Regional Reanalysis (NARR, NCEP, 2005). At the in situ observation sites, we often find the strongest anti-correlations between IAV in MMR and IAV in annually-averaged local wind speed, particularly at sites near large sources (e.g., WGC and WKT). When local winds are stagnant, methane (presumably from local sources) accumulates around the observation site. By contrast, faster winds likely promote greater ventilation and thereby decrease methane at the observation sites. Urban sites (e.g., STR, BAO), however, exhibit a stronger anti-correlation with PBL height. At these sites, larger PBL heights are associated with dilution of the urban pollution dome. Curiously, MMR at two sites (LEF, AMT) is positively correlated with PBL height. At these remote sites, higher PBL heights could be associated with greater transport of methane from distant source regions.

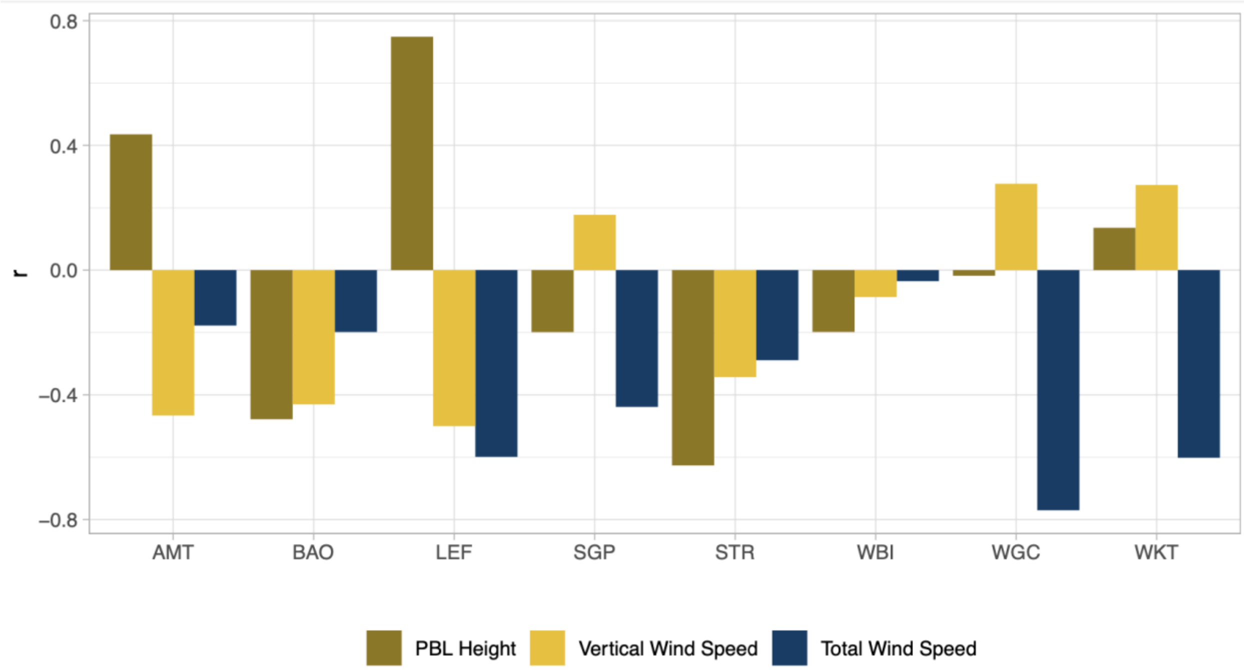

Figure 4. The correlation (*r*) between annually-averaged MMR and various meteorological factors at the in-situ observation sites. We find that MMR is often anti-correlated with local wind speed, though the strength of that relationship varies by site. By contrast, at urban sites (STR and BAO), we find the strongest anti-correlation with PBL height.

Note that we are not able to identify meaningful correlations between IAV in MMR and specific meteorological parameters for the GOSAT simulations. GOSAT observes methane mixing ratios across an entire vertical atmospheric column. As a result, IAV in MMR is likely influenced by a complex mixture of meteorological parameters across different altitudes.

Our findings on methane trends are in parallel with several other studies that report on the role of atmospheric transport in air pollutant and GHG variability (e.g., Keppel-Aleks et al. 2011, Kerr et al. 2020, 2021, Samaddar et al. 2021, Torres et al. 2019). These studies generally find that transport plays a dominant role in explaining meso- and synoptic-scale variability in trace gas mixing ratios. For example, Keppel-Aleks et al. (2011) report that variations in total column CO_2 mixing ratios are forced both by local CO_2 fluxes and advection on diurnal scales, and on synoptic scales, CO_2 variations arise due to large-scale eddy-driven disturbances of the meridional gradient. Torres et al. (2019) report similar findings using CO_2 observations from the Orbiting Carbon Observatory 2 (OCO-2). Kerr et al. (2020, 2021) further argue that daily, continental-scale variations of O_3 are largely meteorology driven and are influenced by the meridional flow related to the jet stream. In the present study, we also find that transport plays a dominant role in trace gas (i.e., CH_4) mixing ratios, albeit at annual instead of the daily/synoptic scales examined in the aforementioned studies.

4 Conclusions

Natural gas production activities in the US increased during the shale gas boom, leading to concerns about increasing methane emissions. In fact, several studies report increasing MMR across the US relative to the global mean. However, we find that meteorology, not emissions, can explain this upward trend MMR between 2007 and 2015. We then explore which meteorological factors correlate with this upward trend. Using a footprint analysis, we argue that IAV in MMR is likely correlated with local meteorological processes. At in situ monitoring sites, we also find higher correlations between MMR and IAV in local wind speed than with meteorological parameters related to vertical mixing.

Overall, our results show that IAV in MMR reflect variability in meteorology as much or more than variability in emissions. This finding poses an inherent challenge for detecting trends in emissions because, at least in the case of methane, the atmospheric signal of that emissions trend is comparatively small. This result is especially applicable given the limited time span of many existing in situ and satellite observation records. This study further cautions against interpreting trends in atmospheric greenhouse gas mixing ratios as a direct proxy for trends in emissions.

This work also lends support for existing studies that show little or no trend in US methane emissions. Specifically, existing studies fall into two categories: studies that directly interpret trends in atmospheric observations (e.g., Lan et al. 2019, Sheng et al. 2018,Turner et al. 2016) and studies that estimate emissions using inverse modeling, which accounts for meteorology using a modeled and/or reanalysis product (e.g., Benmergui et al. 2015, Lu et al. 2021, Maasakers et al. 2020). Studies that directly interpret trends from atmospheric observations find an upward emissions trend during a similar time period as the present study (2.5 - 4.7% per annum). By contrast, studies that account for atmospheric transport through the use of inverse modeling find little upward trend in methane emissions (e.g., 0.1 - 0.7% per annum). Inverse modeling studies account for trends in MMR due to meteorology instead of aliasing the trends on emissions, and the present studies therefore helps explain these seemingly irreconcilable results.

Acknowledgments

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Open Research

The in situ observations used in this study are available from the NOAA Global Monitoring Laboratory ObsPack (Cooperative Global Atmospheric Data Integration Project 2020). The GOSAT methane observations (UoL Proxy XCH_4 Retrieval Version 9) are available at http://dx.doi.org/10.5285/18ef8247f52a4cb6a14013f8235cc1eb. In addition, STILT footprints from CarbonTracker-Lagrange are available at https://gml.noaa.gov/ccgg/carbontracker-lagrange/.

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