

# Next-Generation Ecosystem Experiments—Arctic

ngee-arctic.ornl.gov



Advancing predictive understanding of the structure and function of Arctic terrestrial ecosystems in response to climate change

Characterized by vast amounts of carbon stored in permafrost, Arctic tundra is rapidly evolving as permafrost degrades in response to a changing climate. The mechanisms responsible for this system-wide reorganization have been unpredictable and difficult to isolate because they are initiated at very fine spatial scales, and because of the large number of interactions among the individual system components. To address this challenge, the Terrestrial Ecosystem Science (TES) program within the Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Biological and Environmental Research (BER) is supporting a next-generation ecosystem experiments project in the Arctic (NGEE–Arctic).

The goal of the NGEE concept is to improve the representation of critical environmental processes in Earth system models (ESMs) by focusing on systems that are globally important, climatically sensitive, and understudied or inadequately represented in ESMs. In this approach, modeling and process research are closely and iteratively connected so that model structure and needs are considered in the development of process studies whose outcomes in turn are designed to directly inform, challenge, and improve models.

Ultimately, the NGEE–Arctic project is developing a process-rich ecosystem model, extending from the bedrock to the top of the vegetative canopy, in which the evolution of Arctic ecosystems in a changing climate can be modeled at the scale of a high-resolution ESM grid. A similar TES initiative under way in the tropics (NGEE–Tropics) is examining how tropical forest ecosystems will respond to climate and atmospheric change.

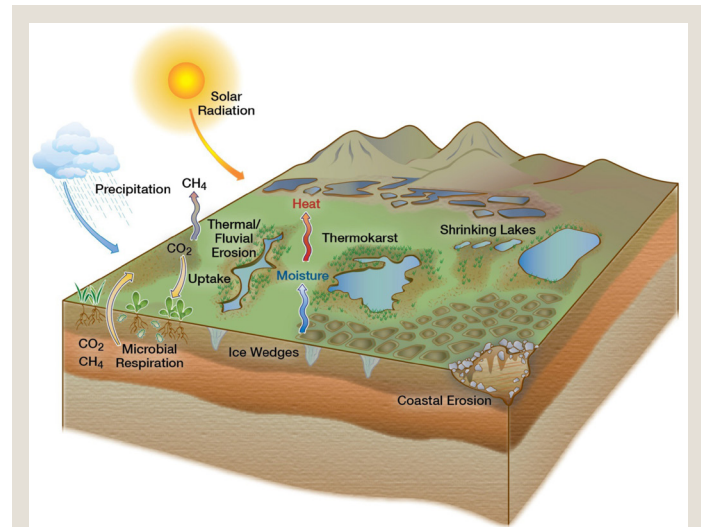
## Key NGEE–Arctic Science Questions

The NGEE–Arctic project seeks to understand how thawing of permafrost affects feedbacks to the climate system. Related research experiments and modeling efforts on Alaska's North Slope and Seward Peninsula are designed to answer the following questions:

- How does landscape structure and organization control the storage and flux of carbon, water, and nutrients in a changing climate?
- What will control rates of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) fluxes across a range of permafrost conditions?
- How will warming and permafrost thaw affect above- and below-ground plant functional traits, and what are the consequences for carbon, water, and nutrient fluxes?

Knowledge derived from these studies will help answer two integrated questions concerning the Arctic's future in a changing climate:

- What controls the current distribution of Arctic shrubs, and how will shrub distributions and associated climate feedbacks shift with expected warming in the 21st century?
- Where, when, and why will the Arctic become wetter or drier, and what are the implications for climate forcing?



**Landscapes in Transition.** A mechanistic understanding of what controls the rates, scales, and feedbacks of permafrost degradation is needed for system-wide prediction of permafrost dynamics in response to warming. NGEE–Arctic research activities are designed to identify and quantify the mechanisms underlying processes that control carbon and energy transfer in the Arctic biosphere, as well as how those processes play out in a changing Arctic landscape.

## Integration Across Scales

Variations in landscape structure and organization—including ridges, valleys, and watershed basins—provide the organizing framework for integrating process studies and observations from the pore or core scale (micron to tens of centimeters) to plot (meter to tens of meters) and landscape (kilometer) scales. Multiscale research activities organized around these components are designed to help determine whether the Arctic is, or in the future will become, a negative or positive feedback to anthropogenically forced climate change. These activities include landscape heterogeneity, soil biogeochemistry, plant traits and shrub dynamics, and watershed hydrology.

### Permafrost Landscapes.

Degradation of ice-rich permafrost causes subsidence and increased variability in topography across the Arctic landscape. Associated changes in hydrology, vegetation, and biogeochemistry create “hot spots” (i.e., locations

within an ecosystem that exert a disproportionately large influence on the flow and processing of nutrients) for CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> fluxes.



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**Climate Feedbacks.** Landscape topography on Alaska's North Slope determines the distribution of water and vegetation across the Alaskan tundra and thus influences feedbacks to climate. Surface and pore water geochemistry experiments (**inset**), including isotopic analyses, are important indicators for fluxes of CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> from degrading permafrost.

**Landscape heterogeneity** research considers how vegetation, biogeochemistry, and hydrology are influenced by regional landforms such as ridges, valleys, and drainage basins. A key challenge is simplifying the variations in landscape properties and processes for input into models, while still retaining those fine-scale features that have the strongest influence on important ecosystem feedbacks to climate.

**Soil biogeochemistry** focuses on temperature, moisture, and nutrient variations and the influence of these variations on microbial dynamics and soil organic matter decomposition. Given the need to improve predictions of net carbon exchange in Arctic systems, assessing geochemical and hydrological influences on CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> fluxes under conditions of thawing permafrost is critical.

**Plant traits and shrub dynamics** provide a critical link among plant communities, tundra biogeochemistry, and feedbacks of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. NGEE–Arctic research efforts have greatly improved model representation of plant traits regulating photosynthesis for Arctic vegetation types and led to new approaches for collecting plant traits using remotely sensed data. Further research is focused on better understanding and modeling the expansion of deciduous shrubs throughout the Arctic landscape.

**Watershed hydrology** research activities focus on determining the spatial distribution and temporal dynamics of soil saturation and inundation and, in turn, surface and subsurface ecosystem responses, CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> fluxes, and the local- to regional-scale energy balance. These observations are important for identifying key model improvements required to enhance prediction of past, present, and future distributions of snow, soil moisture and inundation, and surface and subsurface water flow in the Arctic landscape.

## Connecting Observations to Models

This comprehensive suite of NGEE–Arctic process studies and observations is being strongly linked to model development and application requirements for improving process representation, initializing multiscale model domains, calibrating models, and evaluating model predictions. A fundamental challenge for the NGEE–Arctic modeling activity is to relate new process knowledge gained at fine and intermediate spatial scales to states and fluxes relevant for integration in global-scale climate system models. Consequently, a nested hierarchy of models is being engaged at fine, intermediate, and climate scales, connecting process studies to models and models to each other in a quantitative upscaling and downscaling framework.

The overall objective is general knowledge and understanding through direct observation and fine-grained simulation of Arctic tundra ecosystems and the mechanisms that regulate their form and function. Specifically, this generalization is providing improved representation

of Arctic tundra states and dynamics in the land model component of a coupled ESM.

## Leveraging NGEE–Arctic Investments

Led by Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the NGEE–Arctic project's collaborative effort includes scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory, Brookhaven National Laboratory, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, University of Alaska Fairbanks, and partners at universities and other state and federal agencies. In addition to TES, other BER programs involved in the NGEE–Arctic project include:

- Atmospheric Radiation Measurement Climate Research Facility
- Atmospheric System Research program
- Genomic Science program
- Climate and Earth System Modeling program, including the Accelerated Climate Model for Energy (ACME)
- Subsurface Biogeochemical Research program

NGEE–Arctic also is affiliated with other federal and international monitoring projects.

All NGEE–Arctic data generated from observations, experiments, and models are made available at [ngee-arctic.ornl.gov](http://ngee-arctic.ornl.gov). These data include automated data collected from weather stations and trace-gas systems; observations from remote-sensing platforms; large campaign-based field work collections; and discrete datasets generated from chemical, biochemical, and molecular characterizations of soil, ice, water, and microbial or plant samples. BER provides research funding to leverage the NGEE investment through regular Funding Opportunity Announcements posted at [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov).

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