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Sensitivity of the dynamics of Pine Island Glacier, West Antarctica, to climate forcing for the next 50 years

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Abstract

Pine Island Glacier, a major contributor to sea level rise in West Antarctica, has been undergoing significant changes over the last few decades. Here, we employ a three-dimensional, higher-order model to simulate its evolution over the next fifty years in response to changes in its surface mass balance, the position of its calving front and ocean-induced ice shelf melting. Simulations show that the largest climatic impact on ice dynamics is the rate of ice shelf melting, which rapidly affects the glacier speed over several hundreds of kilometers upstream of the grounding line. Our simulations show that the speedup observed in the 1990s and 2000s is consistent with an increase in sub-ice-shelf melting. According to our modeling results, Pine Island Glacier will continue to change rapidly over the coming decades and remain a major contributor to sea level rise, even if ocean-induced melting is reduced.

1 Introduction

Pine Island Glacier is one of the most active glaciers in Antarctica, with an ice discharge of more than 130 Gtyr^{-1} in 2013 (Mouginot et al., 2014). It has experienced dramatic changes over the past decades: its velocity has increased by more than 40 % between 1996 and 2007 and its grounding line has been retreating at a rate of about 1 km yr^{-1} between 1992 and 2011, which resulted in the progressive ungrounding of its ice plain (Corr et al., 2001; Mouginot et al., 2014). Satellite observations reveal an average rate of mass loss multiplied by 4 between 1995 and 2006 on the main trunk (Wingham et al., 2009). The changes in ice dynamics have been attributed to the presence of warm, subsurface water in the ocean (Rignot, 1998; Payne et al., 2004), which was observed for the first time in the 1990s (Jacobs et al., 1996). The recent increase in speed was attributed to the intrusion of warm water through a widening gap in the ice shelf cavity resulting from ice shelf thinning (Jacobs et al., 2011). It was however noted that since 2009 the glacier speed at the grounding line has reached a steady value (Mouginot

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et al., 2014), which has been suggested to indicate a temporary stabilization of the glacier based on a two-dimensional model simulation (Joughin et al., 2010).

Earlier simulations with a two-dimensional model indicated a 10 % increase in velocity from a 13 % reduction in ice shelf extent, and a 70 % speed up from the collapse of the entire ice shelf (Schmeltz et al., 2002). Thomas et al. (2004b) studied the impact of grounding line migration using a flow line (1-dimensional) model. They found that the grounding line retreat of Pine Island Glacier reduced the buttressing force on the grounded part of the glacier and had a stronger effect on glacier flow than changes in ice shelf extent or thickness. They showed that grounding line perturbations were transmitted almost instantaneously over long distances inland. Their model correctly predicted that the entire ice plain would unground in the following years if ice thinning rates remain unchanged and that the ice shelf would reach a flow speed of 4 km yr^{-1} . Using a 2-D/3-D mixed model, Payne et al. (2004) showed that the increase in ice shelf melting would reduce basal friction at the grounding line and changes would be transmitted upstream, more than 200 km inland, on a decadal timescale, by a diffusive process. More recently, Joughin et al. (2010) used a simplified 2-D planview model with constrained grounding line dynamics and ice shelf margins to conclude that the grounding line retreat will be reduced in the future and the mass loss should remain steady. Using a volume continuity model, however, Thomas et al. (2011) found that grounding line retreat will be maintained and yield glacier speeds in excess of 10 km yr^{-1} within a few decades. Williams et al. (2012) concluded from a model study that high frequency forcings (decadal to sub-decadal) are transmitted by membrane stress and not by driving stress, and propagate rapidly several tens of kilometers inland. Favier et al. (2014) used a three-dimensional (3-D) Full-Stokes (FS) model and parameterization of the ocean-induced melting rate to study the grounding line retreat of Pine Island Glacier. They showed that the grounding line of Pine Island Glacier is likely to have started an irreversible retreat on the downward sloping bed of the main trunk and that its contribution to sea level rise could reach 100 Gt yr^{-1} in the next 20 years.

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Here, we use a 3-D model that includes grounding line dynamics, data assimilation for basal friction and a high-resolution mesh to analyze the impact of external forcings on the ice flow dynamics of Pine Island Glacier. These external forcings are: (1) surface mass balance (SMB), (2) calving front position and (3) ice-shelf melting. We discuss the impact of each external forcing on ice dynamics, i.e., on the velocity pattern over the entire basin. We compare our results with observations and conclude on the possible evolution of the glacier over the next 50 years.

2 Data and methods

We initialize our numerical model to match the satellite observations of 2008. The surface elevation is from Bamber et al. (2009), the bed topography from ALBMAP (Le Brocq et al., 2010), the ice-shelf thickness from Griggs and Bamber (2011) and the sea-floor bathymetry under the floating part of Pine Island is from NASA's Operation IceBridge (OIB) (Studinger et al., 2012). We employ surface temperature and SMB forcings (ice accumulation) from Ettema et al. (2009) and the geothermal heat flux from Maule et al. (2005). The model domain corresponds to the extent of Pine Island Glacier catchment basin, which is constrained by topography and flow vector direction, with grounding line position from Rignot et al. (2011). We rely on melting rates reconstructions from the MITgcm using the OIB bathymetry (Schodlok et al., 2012). The melting rate is an average over a year and is kept constant throughout the simulation, so no additional melting is introduced if ice starts floating. Figure 2 shows the basal melt rate distribution under the floating ice of Pine Island Glacier as well as its distribution with depth. As bathymetric and bed data remain sparse and do not match at the grounding line, we lower the bathymetry in the first 10 km upstream of the grounding line so that hydrostatic equilibrium is consistent with the grounding line position. This adjustment restrains grounding line advance, which is consistent with recent observations (Rignot et al., 2011).

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We use the Ice Sheet System Model (ISSM) to perform our numerical experiments (Larour et al., 2012). A 3-D higher-order approximation (Blatter, 1995) of the full-Stokes equations is applied to a 225 000 element mesh. The mesh horizontal resolution varies from 500 m near the grounding line to 10 km in the mountainous regions and is vertically extruded in 14 non-uniform layers (thinner layers at the base). To initialize the model, the coefficient of basal friction is inferred using assimilation of surface velocity data of 2008 (Rignot et al., 2011) on grounded ice, as described in Morlighem et al. (2010) (Fig. 1a). Basal friction is assumed to follow a linear viscous law. Ice rigidity is based on the values provided in (Cuffey and Paterson, 2010) assuming thermal steady-state on grounded ice and is inferred using data assimilation of surface velocity on floating ice. Ice temperature and hardness are updated at each step during data assimilation of basal friction for consistency (Morlighem et al., 2010). No additional tuning, such as melting rate correction or ad-hoc time dependent friction coefficient, is applied.

The data used to initialize the model are acquired on different years, with different instruments and at resolutions that range from 300 m for observed surface velocities (Rignot et al., 2011) to several kilometers for bedrock topography (Le Brocq et al., 2010). These data are not always consistent and lead to large ice flux divergence anomalies in ice flow simulations (Seroussi et al., 2011). We therefore relax the model for 10 years using present-day forcings in order to reduce the spurious oscillations in ice thickness that exhibit large anomalies in the first years caused by the uncontrolled interpolation of ice thickness data on regular grids. An alternative would be to use mass continuity to improve the bedrock topography of the grounded part of Pine Island Glacier (Morlighem et al., 2011, 2013) but is beyond the scope of this study.

Simulations are run forward for 50 years with time steps of three weeks to satisfy the CFL condition (Courant et al., 1967). At each time step, the ice velocity, topography and grounding line position are updated. We use a floatation criterion for grounding line retreat: ice starts floating if it becomes thinner than the floatation thickness. Ice temperature is kept constant during the simulation and ice thickness change is computed

decrease (Fig. 4f). The time series of ice volume diverges with time, because the glacier mass balance is affected by both changes in ice dynamics and enhanced basal melting. Multiplying the basal melting by a factor of two leads to an additional ice volume loss of 5 mm of sea level equivalent.

Figure 5a–c and g show the pattern of velocity change in the first 15 years of simulation in the case of a basal melting rate increase by 50 %. The acceleration has the same pattern as the velocity and is not limited to the main trunk of Pine Island Glacier but affects almost its entire drainage system: a velocity increase of more than 200 m yr^{-1} in the first 15 years affects all tributaries flowing above 500 m yr^{-1} .

In all the above scenarios, variations in grounding line position are small, which is consistent with Joughin et al. (2010) and follows one of the two retreat modes modeled in the ensemble runs of Gladstone et al. (2012), the other mode of retreat being grounding line retreat rates of several hundreds of kilometers per century. In our simulations, grounding line position retreats by no more than 10 km during the 50-year simulations on the glacier main trunk, experiments with increased basal melting lead to the largest grounding line retreat.

4 Discussion

Both changes in SMB and basal melting affect Pine Island Glacier's volume, but basal melting under floating ice is the only modeled forcing that affects the glacier's dynamics on the timescales under study here. Increased basal melting causes thinning of floating ice that leads both to a reduction in buttressing from the ice shelf and a grounding line retreat. Experiments focusing on ice front retreat also confirm that limited ice front retreat over an unconfined part of the ice shelf, due to calving events for example, have no long-term effect on the glacier's dynamics.

In their study of Pine Island Glacier, Favier et al. (2014) show that the grounding line of Pine Island Glacier is engaged on an unstable 40 km retreat and that the glacier is controlled by marine ice sheet instability. Their results also show that limited ice front

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retreats do not affect grounding line dynamics while changes in basal melting rates under floating ice strongly impact grounding line motion. In their control experiment, the basal melting is parameterized to match certain recent observations (Dutrieux et al., 2013). A small reduction in grounded ice area is observed in this case, which is similar to the results reported here. Their simulations show that if basal melting increases and extends to a larger portion of the ice shelf, the grounding line starts an unstable retreat along the 40 km retrograde slope. In our simulations, even in the case of doubled melting rate, the grounding line position does not retreat more than 10 km. This is probably caused by the different patterns of melting rates: basal melting rates in Favier et al. (2014) are as high as 100 myr^{-1} over large areas, while only a few points have melting rates above 50 myr^{-1} in our study.

Our simulations reveal that even if increased basal melting causes limited grounding line retreats, it reduces the buttressing from the ice shelf as the ice is thinning, which leads to a speed up of Pine Island Glacier. A change in basal melting not only affects ice velocity in the floating part of the glacier: acceleration propagates inland, and reaches the flanks of the ice divide, as predicted by Williams et al. (2012) for decadal forcings. Our simulated accelerations propagate further inland than in prior studies: we obtain a velocity increase about 100 myr^{-1} up to 200 km upstream of the grounding line, through the transmission of membrane stress and not by driving stress or diffusive processes. In previous studies, a similar speed up is confined to the first 70 km upstream of the grounding line in Payne et al. (2004) and to the first 120 km in Thomas et al. (2004a). In Joughin et al. (2010), the acceleration is confined to the floating area, except in the case of a plastic bed for which it propagates over the first 50 km upstream of the grounding line.

Comparison of the first 15 years of simulation with satellite observations of previous acceleration of Pine Island Glacier in the 1990s and 2000s (Mouginot et al., 2014) (Fig. 5d–f) provides qualitative estimates as model and observations are from different years. It shows that the patterns of modeled acceleration due to enhanced sub-ice-shelf melting ($\alpha = 1.5$) are in agreement with the observed glacier acceleration, with similar

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patterns after 10 and 15 years. Modeled velocities differ from observations along the side margins of the ice shelf: in this region, ice accelerates more in the model than in the observations (1000 m yr^{-1} in the first ten years of simulation vs. 800 m yr^{-1} between the 1996 and 2006 observations). Our simulation shows an acceleration of the main trunk and most of its tributaries (Fig. 5b and e) similar to previous changes observed in the past decades. Acceleration in the area just upstream of the grounding line is smaller in our simulations than in the observations (700 m yr^{-1} on average in the ice plain after 15 years of simulations vs. 900 m yr^{-1} in the observations, Fig. 5g), suggesting that our results underestimate the actual speed up of Pine Island Glacier. This acceleration is difficult to compare to that inferred in prior studies, which mainly focused on the glacier centerline.

In an additional experiment (Fig. 6a) we increase sub-ice-shelf melting for a limited time. In this simulation, basal melting from the MITgcm is multiplied by 1.5 for the first five or fifteen years and then switched back to its initial value. The ice shelf velocity increases and reaches $\sim 4.9 \text{ km yr}^{-1}$ in both cases after 50 years compared with 5.0 km yr^{-1} when increased basal melting (also multiplied by 1.5) is kept constant over the entire 50 year simulation. In the control run where basal melting from MITgcm is directly used, the ice shelf velocity after 50 years is 4.5 km yr^{-1} . This indicates that a temporary increase in basal melting rates has a long-term impact on ice dynamics and that Pine Island Glacier will not slow down and stabilize even if ocean conditions were to return to what they were a few decades ago. This conclusion is consistent with the marine instability hypothesis that states that glaciers on downward sloping bed inland are intrinsically unstable (Weertman, 1974; Schoof, 2007) and with recent studies of Pine Island Glacier (Favier et al., 2014). Change in glacier volume after 50 years is almost identical if basal melting rate is increased for 5 or 15 years (Fig. 6b) and about 0.4 mm of sea level equivalent lower than if increased melting is kept constant for 50 years.

Our study provides estimates of climate sensitivity of Pine Island Glacier based on a 3-D higher-order formulation, with a high resolution in the grounding line area. No

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melting rate or surface accumulation correction is introduced to start with a model in steady-state condition (Joughin et al., 2010; Cornford et al., 2013), and no additional parameterization is needed to include buttressing, reduction of basal friction, contrary to most of the studies performed with flowband models. We have shown in another study that errors in ice rigidity and basal friction do not affect the results significantly for these short-term simulations (Seroussi et al., 2013). Our model has however some limitations, such as a fixed ice front that can only be changed manually, no rheological weakening of the floating ice and a grounding line that is not based on contact mechanics, which would be too computationally intensive for this kind of sensitivity experiments.

In all our simulations, the pattern of basal melting is kept constant with time. Additional experiments (not shown here) show that introducing moderate melting rates under ungrounding ice does not affect our results, as grounding line retreat remains limited in our 50-year simulations. This is confirmed by results of Favier et al. (2014): they run two experiments with similar basal melting parameterization. In the first one, basal melting is turned on as ice starts floating while in the second one, basal melting is limited to the initial floating part of the glacier. Results of these two experiments are very similar in terms of both grounded area and sea level rise. The assumption made in our experiments should therefore not affect our results.

Melting rates are kept constant throughout the simulations, while we know that changes in ice shelf cavity will affect their amplitude and spatial distribution (Schodlok et al., 2012). We choose not to change the pattern of basal melting, as we do not know how changes in ice shelf cavity will impact oceanic circulation and basal melting rates, and our results are therefore conservative estimates of changes. Melting rate parameterizations (Pollard and DeConto, 2009; Little et al., 2009) provide a first estimate but do not include specifics for each glacier. Results from the MITgcm highlight that no simple parameterization of basal melting rate based on ice shelf depth for example can be derived (Fig. 2). Recent observations in the bay adjacent to Pine Island glacier also report the large temporal variability of ocean heat and oceanic induced melting in this

area (Dutrieux et al., 2014). Our results show that precise estimates of basal melting under floating ice are required and essential for constraining the evolution of the glacier dynamics. To achieve this goal, however, progress is necessary in the modeling of ice–ocean interactions beneath the ice shelves with coupled ice-sheet/ocean/atmosphere models (Schodlok et al., 2012). Finally, our simulations suggest that the mass loss from Pine Island Glacier will continue for decades to come, even if the oceanic conditions return to their state prior to the 1990s. Similarly, if more ocean heat reaches the grounding line area, the mass loss will continue to increase for decades to come, with no sign of stabilization.

5 Conclusions

Our study shows that Pine Island Glacier is highly sensitive to basal melting under its floating extension, this parameter controls most of the dynamics of this glacier, even if grounding line retreat remains limited. Changes in sub-ice-shelf melting not only affect the floating tongue and grounding line area but are rapidly transmitted hundreds of kilometers inland. Increase in sub-ice-shelf melting for only five year destabilizes the glacier for several decades and has a long-term impact on its dynamics. A qualitative comparison of our model results with satellite observations of the 1990s and 2000s shows the good qualitative agreement between modeled and observed accelerations and suggests that the glacier speed-up is consistent with increased basal melting under the ice shelf, although not exactly from the same time period. Coupling of ice sheet with ocean circulation models is therefore desired for future studies to conduct more accurate simulations, as the glacier is controlled by the pattern of ocean induced melting rates. Overall, Pine Island Glacier is likely to keep accelerating over the coming decades, even if ocean circulation changes and melting remains constant.

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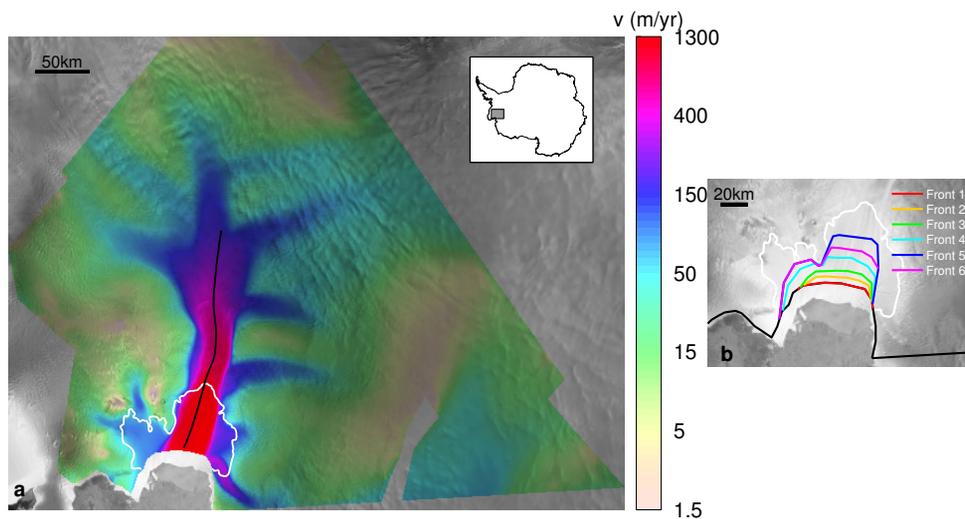


Fig. 1. (a) Initial modeled 2008 velocity of Pine Island Glacier, overlain on a MODIS Mosaic of Antarctica with initial grounding line (white) and centerline (black). (b) Ice front positions used in the sensitivity study.

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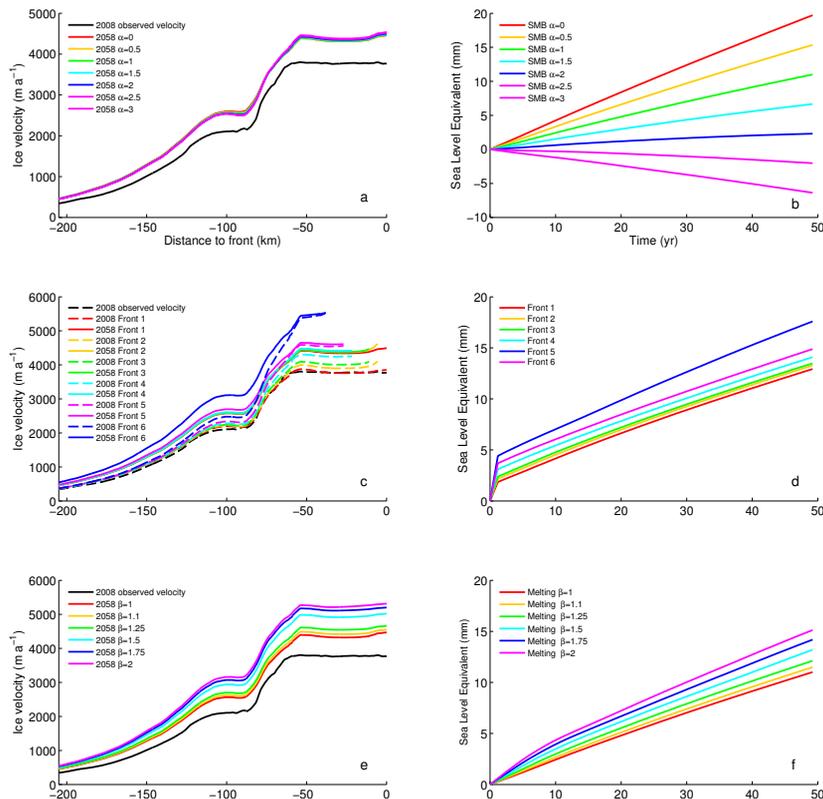


Fig. 4. Modeled velocity sensitivity (left column) and volume sensitivity (right column) to (a and b) surface mass balance; (c and d) ice front position and (e and f) ice shelf melting.

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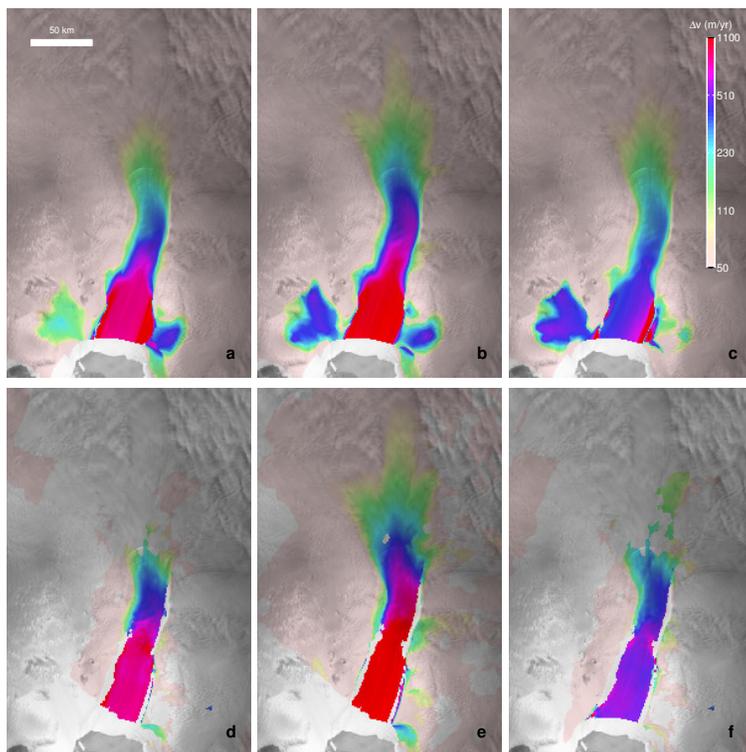


Fig. 5. Changes in observed and modeled velocities in myr^{-1} on a logarithmic scale. **(a)** Modeled year 11–year 1, **(b)** modeled year 15–year 1, **(c)** modeled year 15–year 11, **(d)** observed 2006–1996, **(e)** observed 2010–1996, **(f)** observed 2011–2006. Modeled velocities are from the increased basal melting experiment (melting multiplied by 1.5).

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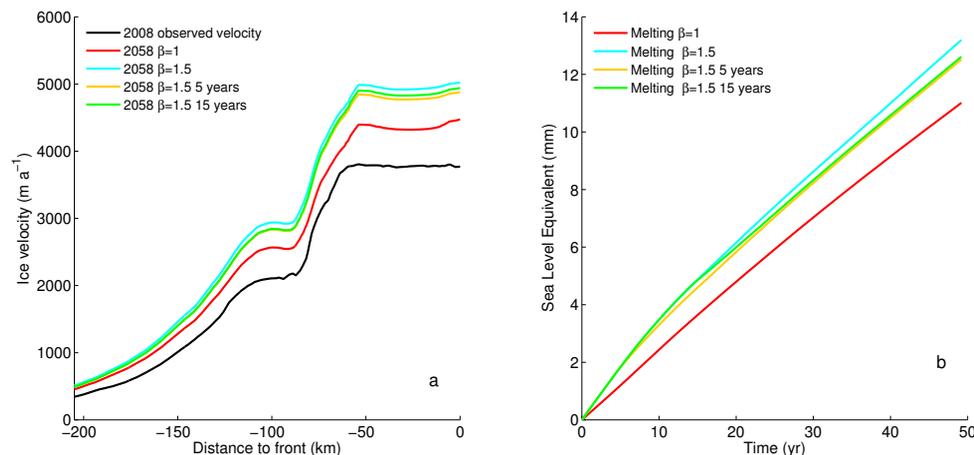


Fig. 6. Modeled velocity sensitivity (a) and volume sensitivity (b) to increased ice shelf melting over a limited time. Ice shelf melting is multiplied by 1.5 during the first 0 (red), 5 (yellow), 15 (green) and 50 (blue) years of the simulation.

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