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Effect of snow depth on pan-Arctic permafrost thermal regimes

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This study quantitatively evaluated how insulation by snow depth (SND) affected the soil thermal regime and permafrost degradation in the pan-Arctic area, and more generally defined the characteristics of soil temperature (T_{SOIL}) and SND from 1901-2009. This was achieved through experiments performed with the land surface model CHANGE, to assess sensitivity to winter precipitation as well as air temperature. Simulated T_{SOIL}, active layer thickness (ALT), and SND were generally comparable with in-situ or satellite observations at large scales and over long periods. Northernmost regions had snow that remained relatively stable and in a thicker state during the past four decades, generating greater increases in the T_{SOIL}. Changes in SND have led to changes in the thermal state of the underlying soil, which is strongly dependent on both the magnitude and the timing of changes in snowfall. Simulations of the period 2001-2009 revealed significant differences in the extent of near-surface permafrost, ranging from 15.6 to 18.7 million km^2. This spread was the result of differences in the model$'$s treatment of meteorology. Permafrost loss was greater when SND increased in the autumn rather than in the winter, due to insulation of the soil from the early cooling. Simulations revealed that T_{SOIL} tended to increase over most of the pan-Arctic from 1901-2009, and this increase was significant in northern regions, especially in northeastern Siberia where SND is responsible for 50% or more of the changes in TSOIL at a depth of 3.6 m. In the same region, ALT also increased at a rate of approximately 2.3 cm per decade. The most sensitive response of ALT to changes in SND appeared in the southern boundary regions of permafrost, in contrast to permafrost temperatures within the 60^o-80^oN region, which were more sensitive to changes in the SND. Finally, the modeling performed in this study suggests that snow cover contributes to the warming of permafrost in northern regions and could play a more important role under conditions of future Arctic warming.

Keywords: active layer thickness, land surface model, permafrost, snow depth, soil temperature