

Q18: Is depletion of the ozone layer the principal cause of climate change?

No, ozone depletion itself is not the principal cause of climate change. However, because ozone absorbs solar radiation and is a greenhouse gas, ozone changes and climate change are linked in important ways. Stratospheric ozone depletion and increases in global tropospheric ozone that have occurred in recent decades both contribute to climate change. These contributions to climate change are significant but small compared with the total contribution from all other greenhouse gases. Ozone and climate change are indirectly linked because both ozone-depleting gases and substitute gases contribute to climate change.

Radiative forcing of climate change. Human activities and natural processes have led to the accumulation in the atmosphere of several long-lived and radiatively active gases known as “greenhouse gases.” Ozone is a greenhouse gas, along with carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and halogen source gases. The accumulation of these gases in Earth’s atmosphere changes the balance between incoming solar radiation and outgoing infrared radiation. Greenhouse gases generally change the balance by absorbing outgoing radiation, leading to a warming at Earth’s surface. This change in Earth’s radiative balance is called a *radiative forcing of climate change*.

A summary of radiative forcings resulting from the increases in long-lived greenhouse gases in the industrial era is shown in Figure Q18-1. All forcings shown relate to human activities. Positive forcings generally lead to

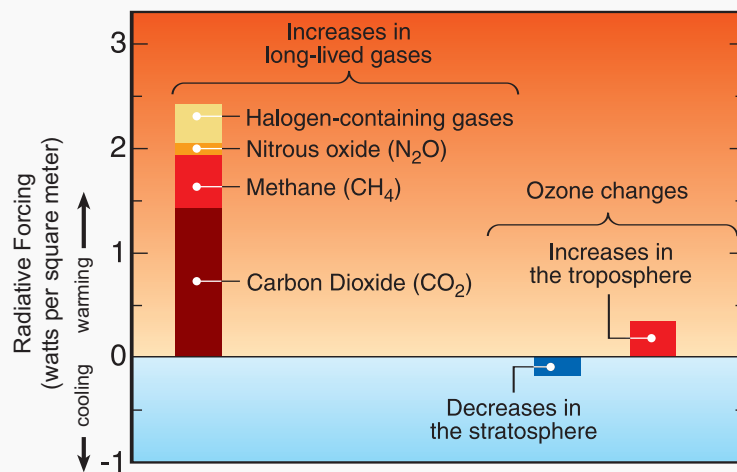
warming and negative forcings lead to cooling of Earth’s surface. The accumulation of carbon dioxide represents the largest forcing term. Carbon dioxide concentrations are increasing in the atmosphere primarily as the result of burning coal, oil, and natural gas for energy and transportation; and from cement manufacturing. The atmospheric abundance of carbon dioxide is currently about 35% above what it was 250 years ago, in preindustrial times. In other international assessments, much of the observed surface warming over the last 50 years has been linked to increases in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas concentrations caused by human activities.

Stratospheric and tropospheric ozone. Stratospheric and tropospheric ozone both absorb infrared radiation emitted by Earth’s surface, effectively trapping heat in the atmosphere. Stratospheric ozone also significantly absorbs solar radiation. As a result, increases or decreases

Figure Q18-1. Radiative forcing of climate change from atmospheric gas changes.

Human activities since the start of the Industrial Era (around 1750) have caused increases in the abundances of several long-lived gases, changing the radiative balance of Earth’s atmosphere. These gases, known as “greenhouse gases,” result in radiative forcings, which can lead to climate change. Other international assessments have shown that the largest radiative forcings come from carbon dioxide, followed by methane, tropospheric ozone, the halogen-containing gases (see Figure Q7-1), and nitrous oxide. Ozone increases in the troposphere result from pollution associated with human activities. All these forcings are positive, which leads to a warming of Earth’s surface. In contrast, stratospheric ozone depletion represents a small negative forcing, which leads to cooling of Earth’s surface. In the coming decades, halogen gas abundances and stratospheric ozone depletion are expected to be reduced along with their associated radiative forcings. The link between these two forcing terms is an important aspect of the radiative forcing of climate change.

Radiative Forcing of Climate Change from Atmospheric Gas Changes (1750-2000)



in stratospheric or tropospheric ozone cause radiative forcings and represent direct links of ozone to climate change. In recent decades, stratospheric ozone has decreased due to rising chlorine and bromine amounts in the atmosphere, while troposphere ozone in the industrial era has increased due to pollution from human activities (see Q3). Stratospheric ozone depletion causes a negative radiative forcing, while increases in tropospheric ozone cause a positive radiative forcing (see Figure Q18-1). The radiative forcing due to tropospheric ozone increases is currently larger than that associated with stratospheric ozone depletion. The negative forcing from ozone depletion represents an offset to the positive forcing from the halogen source gases, which cause ozone depletion.

Halogen source gases and HFCs. An important link between ozone depletion and climate change is the radiative forcing from halogen source gases and hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). Halogen source gases are the cause of ozone depletion (see Q7) and HFCs are substitute gases (see Q15). Both groups of gases cause radiative forcing in the atmosphere, but with a wide range of effectiveness. The principal gases in each group are intercompared in Figure Q18-2 (top panel) using their “ozone depletion potentials” (ODPs) and “global warming potentials” (GWPs), which indicate the effectiveness of each gas in causing ozone depletion and climate change, respectively. The ODPs of CFC-11 and CFC-12, and the GWP of CO₂ all are assigned a value of 1.0. For ozone depletion, the halons are the most effective gases (for equal mass amounts) and HFCs cause no ozone depletion (see Q7). For climate change, all gases make a contribution, with CFC-12 and HFC-23 having the largest effect (for equal mass amounts). Montreal Protocol actions (see Q15) that have led to reductions in CFC concentrations and increases in HCFC and HFC concentrations have also reduced the total radiative forcing from these gases. It is important to note that, despite a GWP that is small in comparison to many other greenhouse gases, CO₂ is the most important greenhouse gas related to human activities because its atmospheric abundance is so much greater than the abundance of other gases.

The relative importance of total emissions of halogen source gases and HFCs to ozone depletion and climate change is illustrated for a single year (2004) of emissions in the bottom panel of Figure Q18-2. The values displayed are proportional to the product of 2004 annual global emissions and the ODP or GWP. The results in the lower panel are shown relative to CFC-11, because it is often

used as a reference gas. The comparison shows that the importance of CFC emissions in 2004 to future ozone depletion exceeds that of the halons, despite the higher halon ODP values, because CFC emissions are larger. Similarly, the contributions of CFC and HCFC-22 emissions in 2004 to climate change are currently larger than the halon or HFC contributions. These 2004 results represent only incremental contributions of these gases to either ozone depletion or climate change. The overall contribution of a gas depends on its total accumulation in the atmosphere, which in turn depends on its long-term emission history and atmospheric lifetime (see Q7 and Q16). In the case of ozone depletion, the relative contributions of the halogen source gases can be compared through their respective contributions to effective stratospheric chlorine (see Q16).

As a group, the principal halogen source gases represent a positive direct radiative forcing in the Industrial Era that is comparable to the forcing from methane, the second most important greenhouse gas. In the coming decades, the abundances of these ozone-depleting gases and their associated positive radiative forcings are expected to decrease (see Q16). Future growth in HFC emissions, while uncertain, will contribute a positive forcing that will counter the decrease from ozone-depleting gases. Finally, reductions in ozone-depleting gases will be followed by reductions in stratospheric ozone depletion and its associated *negative* radiative forcing.

Impact of climate change on ozone. Certain changes in Earth’s climate could affect the future of the ozone layer. Stratospheric ozone is influenced by changes in temperatures and winds in the stratosphere. For example, lower temperatures and stronger polar winds could both affect the extent and severity of winter polar ozone depletion. While the Earth’s surface is expected to warm in response to the net positive radiative forcing from greenhouse gas increases, the stratosphere is expected to cool. A cooler stratosphere would extend the time period over which polar stratospheric clouds (PSCs) are present in polar regions and, as a result, might increase winter ozone depletion. In the upper stratosphere at altitudes above PSC formation regions, a cooler stratosphere is expected to increase ozone amounts and, hence, hasten recovery, because lower temperatures favor ozone production over loss (see Q2). Similarly, changes in atmospheric composition that lead to a warmer climate may also alter ozone amounts (see Q20).

Evaluation of Selected Ozone-Depleting Substances and Substitute Gases

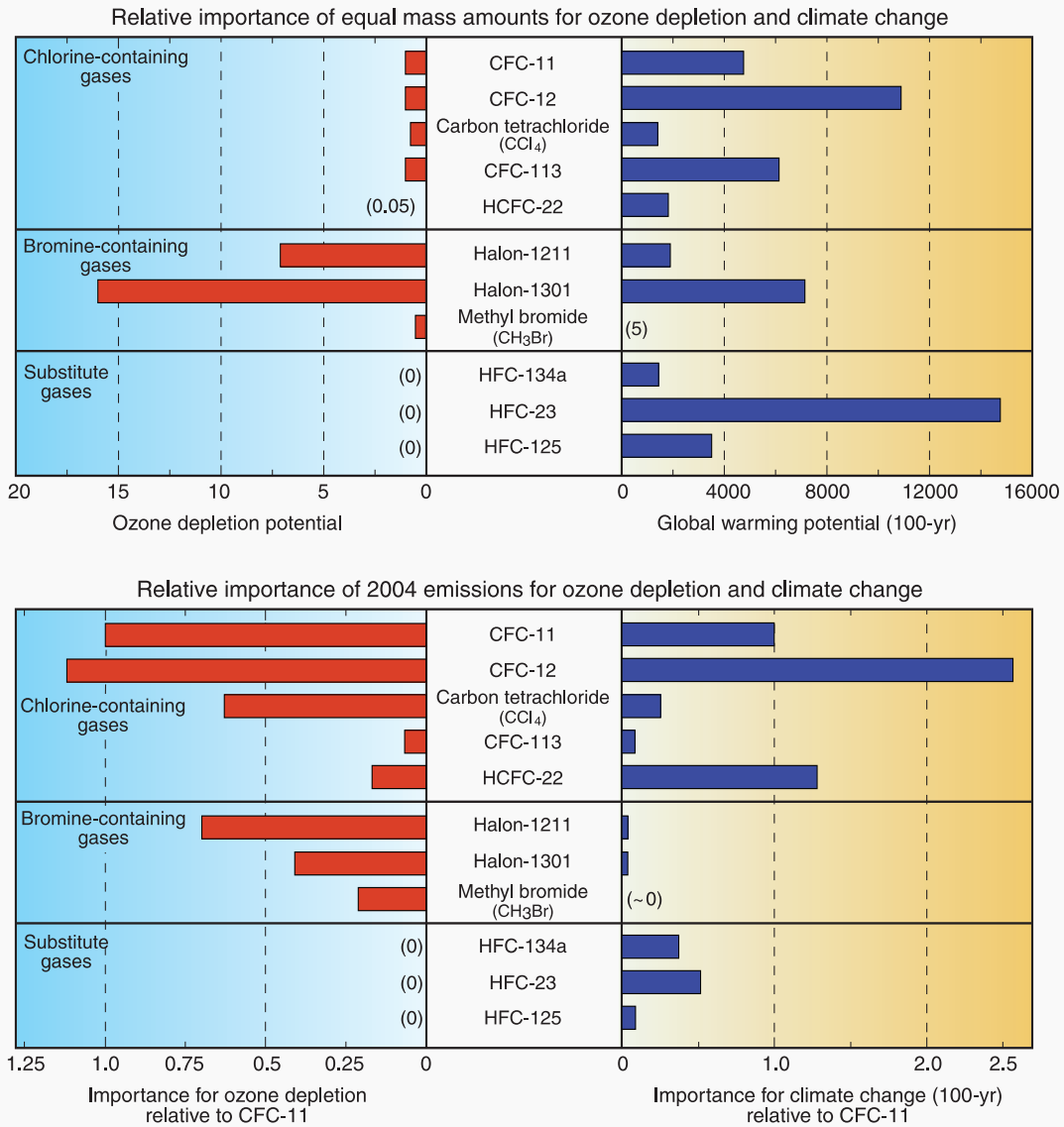


Figure Q18-2. Evaluation of ozone-depleting gases and their substitutes. Ozone-depleting gases (halogen source gases) and their substitutes can be compared via their ozone depletion potentials (ODPs) and global warming potentials (GWPs). The GWPs are evaluated for a 100-yr time interval after emission. The CFCs, halons, and HCFCs are ozone-depleting gases (see Q7) and HFCs, used as substitute or replacement gases, do not destroy ozone. The ODPs of CFC-11 and CFC-12, and the GWP of CO₂ have values of 1.0 by definition. Larger ODPs or GWPs indicate greater potential for ozone depletion or climate change, respectively. The top panel compares ODPs and GWPs for emissions of equal mass amounts of each gas. The ODPs of the halons far exceed those of the CFCs. HFCs have zero ODPs. All gases have non-zero GWPs that span a wide range of values. The bottom panel compares the contributions of the 2004 emissions of each gas, using CFC-11 as the reference gas. Each bar represents the product of a global emission value and the respective ODP or GWP factor. The comparison shows that 2004 emissions of ozone-depleting gases currently contribute more than substitute gas emissions to both ozone depletion and climate change. Future projections guided by Montreal Protocol provisions suggest that the contributions of ozone-depleting gases to climate change will decrease, while those of the substitute gases will increase.