



Unexpected slowdown of US pollutant emission reduction in the past decade

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Ground and satellite observations show that air pollution regulations in the United States (US) have resulted in substantial reductions in emissions and corresponding improvements in air quality over the last several decades. However, large uncertainties remain in evaluating how recent regulations affect different emission sectors and pollutant trends. Here we show a significant slowdown in decreasing US emissions of nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and carbon monoxide (CO) for 2011–2015 using satellite and surface measurements. This observed slowdown in emission reductions is significantly different from the trend expected using US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) bottom-up inventories and impedes compliance with local and federal agency air-quality goals. We find that the difference between observations and EPA's NO_x emission estimates could be explained by: (i) growing relative contributions of industrial, area, and off-road sources, (ii) decreasing relative contributions of on-road gasoline, and (iii) slower than expected decreases in on-road diesel emissions.

nitrogen oxides | emission regulations | decadal scale variation

To achieve and maintain air-quality standards, US regulations have required significant reductions in the key ozone (O₃) precursor emissions of NO_x and CO since the 1960s (1). These emission reductions, confirmed by both ground (2–4) and satellite measurements (5–7), have resulted in substantial improvement in air quality in the last few decades through reduction in surface O₃ in many populated areas (8, 9). In addition to emission regulations, technology innovations and changes in patterns of human activity also alter energy demand, industrial practices, goods movement, and vehicular travel, and thus have important and complicated effects on pollutant emissions. For example, a recent study (10) has demonstrated larger vehicular primary NO₂ emission reduction in Europe than assumed in policy projections.

In October 2015, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revised the O₃ standard (11) from 75 ppb (2008 standard) to 70 ppb. The new O₃ standard requires stricter controls on O₃ precursor emissions in the subsequent years; for example, the South Coast Air Quality Management District recently released the Air Quality Management Plan (12), and requires 45% reduction of NO_x emissions in Southern California in the period of 2016–2023. To better understand the variation of O₃ precursor emissions, we evaluate trends in EPA's NO_x and CO emission inventory data (*Methods*) between 2005 and 2015 by combining datasets including top-down anthropogenic NO_x and CO emission estimates from inverse analysis studies (6, 7), remotely sensed NO₂ measurements from the Ozone Monitoring Instrument (OMI), CO measurements from Measurement of Pollution in the Troposphere (MOPITT), surface in situ NO₂, CO, and O₃ measurements from the US Air Quality System (AQS), and emission estimation using fuel-based bottom-up methods.

Results

Comparison of Top-Down and Bottom-Up Estimates of NO_x Emission Changes. In a recent study, Miyazaki et al. (6) estimated global NO_x emissions in the period of 2005–2015 using multiple satellite measurements (*SI Appendix*). The top-down NO_x emissions were obtained using an ensemble Kalman filter, while improving the representation of the chemical system (e.g., NO_x lifetime) affecting tropospheric NO₂ by assimilating multiple chemical species including CO and O₃ concentrations. Fig. 1A (green line) shows percent changes of the top-down anthropogenic NO_x emissions (normalized at 2009), indicating a dramatic slowdown (76%) in US NO_x emissions reduction from $-7.0 \pm 1.4\%/y$ (2005–2009) to $-1.7 \pm 1.4\%/y$ (2011–2015), as shown in Table 1. Uncertainties represent 1 σ and include the error budget described in *SI Appendix*. Average top-down anthropogenic NO_x emissions for the 11-y period are shown in Fig. 2A, demonstrating the strongest emissions in the northeast United States. Fig. 2B and C shows the differences of top-down anthropogenic NO_x emissions from 2005–2006 to 2008–2009, and from 2011–2012 to

Significance

Emissions of nitrogen oxides (NO_x) have a large impact on air quality and climate change as precursors in the formation of ozone and secondary aerosols. We find that NO_x emissions have not been decreasing as expected in recent years (2011–2015) when comparing top-down estimates from satellites and surface NO₂ measurements to the trends predicted from the US Environmental Protection Agency's emission inventory data. The discrepancy can be explained by the growing relative contribution of industrial, area, and off-road mobile sources of emissions, decreasing relative contribution of on-road gasoline vehicles, and slower than expected decreases in on-road diesel NO_x emissions, with implications for air-quality management.

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Table 2. Trends and uncertainties for CO datasets and eastern US AQS O₃

Period	EPA CO	Top-down CO	MOPITT CO	AQS CO	AQS O ₃
2005–2009	–7.0%	–4.5 ± 1.1%	–2.7 ± 0.6%	–7.9 ± 1.3%	–1.6 ± 1.0%
2011–2015	–4.6%	–1.4 ± 1.1%	–1.4 ± 0.6%	–2.7 ± 1.3%	–0.4 ± 0.9%

All trends are relative to the average of each data period (2005–2009 and 2011–2015) and based on a linear trend model. Uncertainties represent 1 σ and include the error budget discussed in *SI Appendix*. AQS O₃ includes measurements over eastern US only (eastward of 100°W), whereas other datasets cover the whole US.

period of 2001–2015 using MOPITT CO measurements (*SI Appendix*). The top-down CO emissions were obtained using a four-dimensional variational approach, and the role of long-range transport was accounted for by optimizing boundary conditions around the North American continent. Fig. 2D shows the 11-y averages of top-down anthropogenic CO emissions (7), excluding biomass burning and oxidation sources. Fig. 2E and F shows the differences of top-down anthropogenic CO emissions from 2005–2006 to 2008–2009, and from 2011–2012 to 2014–2015, respectively. In the first period, 2005–2009, we observe a large decrease in both NO_x and CO emissions.

Fig. 3G and H shows the differences of mean MOPITT surface layer CO mixing ratio, from 2005–2006 to 2008–2009, and from 2011–2012 to 2014–2015, respectively. These show a similar slowdown of the decrease of CO mixing ratios in the most recent years, particularly over the northeast United States. However, unlike OMI NO₂ retrievals, MOPITT CO retrievals (even surface layer CO mixing ratio) are not an ideal proxy for local emissions, because of the longer CO lifetime (compared with NO_x lifetime) and the coarse vertical resolution of MOPITT profile retrievals (21). For example, *SI Appendix*, Fig. S2C shows a significant reduction in top-down biomass burning CO emissions (7) in Mexico in the most recent years. These emissions influence CO concentrations in the southeast United States through regional transport, and explain the continued decrease of CO emissions in 2011–2015 for the southeast United States (Fig. 2F).

Fig. 4C and D shows the differences of mean surface CO concentrations, as measured by the AQS network, from 2005–2006 to 2008–2009, and from 2011–2012 to 2014–2015, respectively. As shown in Table 2, the trends in the MOPITT surface layer CO mixing ratio, AQS in situ CO measurements, and

top-down US anthropogenic CO emission estimates from Jiang et al. (7) all exhibit similar slowdowns in reduction in recent years. Besides NO₂ and CO, AQS in situ O₃ measurements over the eastern United States (Table 2) show a similar 75% slowdown of surface O₃ concentration reduction from –1.6%/y to –0.4%/y, suggesting the importance of diminishing rates of decrease for anthropogenic CO, VOCs, and NO_x.

Revisions to Bottom-Up Emission Estimates. What are the potential explanations for this dramatic slowdown of reductions of US anthropogenic NO_x and CO emissions in the recent years? For CO emissions, a slowdown in reductions is expected due to diminishing returns to improved three-way catalytic converters on gasoline engines (22). Past studies have shown that transportation emissions of CO are highly correlated with VOCs found in gasoline fuel and tailpipe exhaust (20, 22), implying that decreases in gasoline-related VOC emissions are also slowing down as well. However, the slowdown in anthropogenic NO_x emissions is surprising. Since the late 1990s, large decreases in NO_x emissions were driven by efforts to regulate power plant emissions (23), fuel switching of electric power generation from coal to natural gas (24), and controls on transportation emissions (25). Since 2005, stack monitors suggest that NO_x emissions from power plants are still declining (*SI Appendix*, Table S1), tailpipe emission standards on light-duty gasoline vehicles have gotten stricter, and selective catalytic reduction (SCR) systems have begun to be installed on 2010 model year and later heavy-duty diesel trucks. Therefore, US NO_x emissions are expected to decline at a similar rate in the 2011–2015 time period as during 2005–2009.

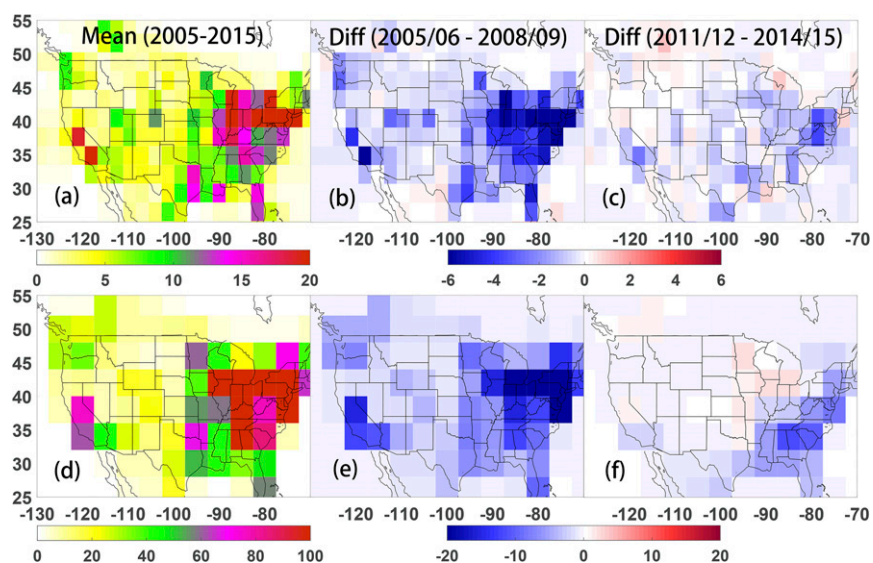


Fig. 2. (A) Mean top-down anthropogenic NO_x emissions from inverse analysis in the period 2005–2015. (B and C) Difference of top-down anthropogenic NO_x emissions from 2005–2006 to 2008–2009, and from 2011–2012 to 2014–2015. (D–F) same as A–C, but for top-down anthropogenic CO emissions. The unit is 10¹⁰ mole/cm²/s.

reduction rates of AQS surface in situ NO_2 measurements are $-7.8 \pm 2.0\%/y$ (2005–2009) and $-2.6 \pm 2.1\%/y$ (2011–2015) for the northeast United States, and $-6.7 \pm 2.3\%/y$ (2005–2009) and $-0.1\% \pm 2.6\%/y$ (2011–2015) for the southeast United States, indicating a dramatic slowdown. Similar to AQS measurements, the slowdown of emission reductions over the southwest US suggested by OMI tropospheric NO_2 columns (e.g., NASA product sampled at AQS NO_2 measurement locations and times in Fig. 5) is also much weaker: the reduction rates are $-8.6 \pm 4.0\%/y$ (2005–2009) and $-5.6 \pm 3.6\%/y$ (2011–2015) over the southwest United States, compared with $-10.2 \pm 1.8\%/y$ (2005–2009) and $-3.2\% \pm 1.6\%/y$ (2011–2015) over CONUS.

California is expected to have more stringent emission regulations than other states of the United States. For example, California is accelerating the turnover of the heavy-duty vehicle fleet, such that by 2023, almost all truck and buses operating in the state will require a 2010 engine or later model year. In other regions of the United States, there has been increasing scrutiny of glider-kit trucks, which are heavy-duty trucks with refurbished engines installed on a new chassis. However, EPA suggests that NO_x emissions from such glider-kit trucks significantly exceed the emission standards promulgated in 2010 (37), which could contribute to a slowdown in NO_x emission reductions in regions where glider-kit trucks are operating in significant numbers.

There is also regional variability in trends of NO_x emissions from energy generation. Stack monitors on power plants indicate that NO_x emissions have consistently declined by 7–10% over the 2005–2009 and 2011–2015 time periods in the Northeast and Southeast regions, consistent with reporting under the Acid Rain Program and the Cross State Air Pollution Rule (38). However, in the Southwest region, the decrease in power plant emissions of NO_x has slowed from -20% in 2005–2009 to -8% in 2011–2015. In some oil and natural gas basins, including in Texas and North Dakota, satellite NO_2 columns have been shown to be increasing (5).

Conclusions

Using a synthesis of recently estimated top-down anthropogenic NO_x and CO emissions from inverse analysis studies (6, 7), remotely sensed NO_2 measurements from OMI, CO measurements from MOPITT, surface in situ NO_2 and CO measurements from AQS, and emission estimation using fuel-based bottom-up methods, we evaluate trends in EPA's emission inventory data between 2005 and 2015. In contrast to the larger European emission reduction as suggested by Grange et al. (10), we find an unexpected, significant slowdown in the reductions of US NO_x and CO emissions in the most recent years. The similar slowdown of surface O_3 concentration reduction suggests a potential important influence from variations in pollutant emissions on the formation of secondary pollutants, and consequent socioeconomic costs resulting from degraded air quality.

Our analysis suggests the slowdown in decreasing NO_x emissions observed in 2011–2015 is mainly driven by the growing relative contribution of industrial, area, and off-road mobile sources of emissions, decreasing relative contribution of on-road gasoline vehicles, and slower than expected decreases in on-road diesel NO_x emissions. Meanwhile, the slowdown in decreasing CO emissions is likely due to diminishing returns from the large fraction of gasoline vehicles that have already significantly reduced CO emissions. While this study demonstrates the large-scale effects of changing emission trends and identifies the likely causes of the observed slowdown in declining pollution trends, a more quantitative attribution of emission changes for NO_x and CO and their subsequent effects on O_3 and other air pollutants will require models and data with finer (e.g., urban and roadway environments) spatial scales. This work highlights the importance of satellite and model inversion technologies to monitor changes in pollutant emissions and interpret the effects of regulations and economic activities.

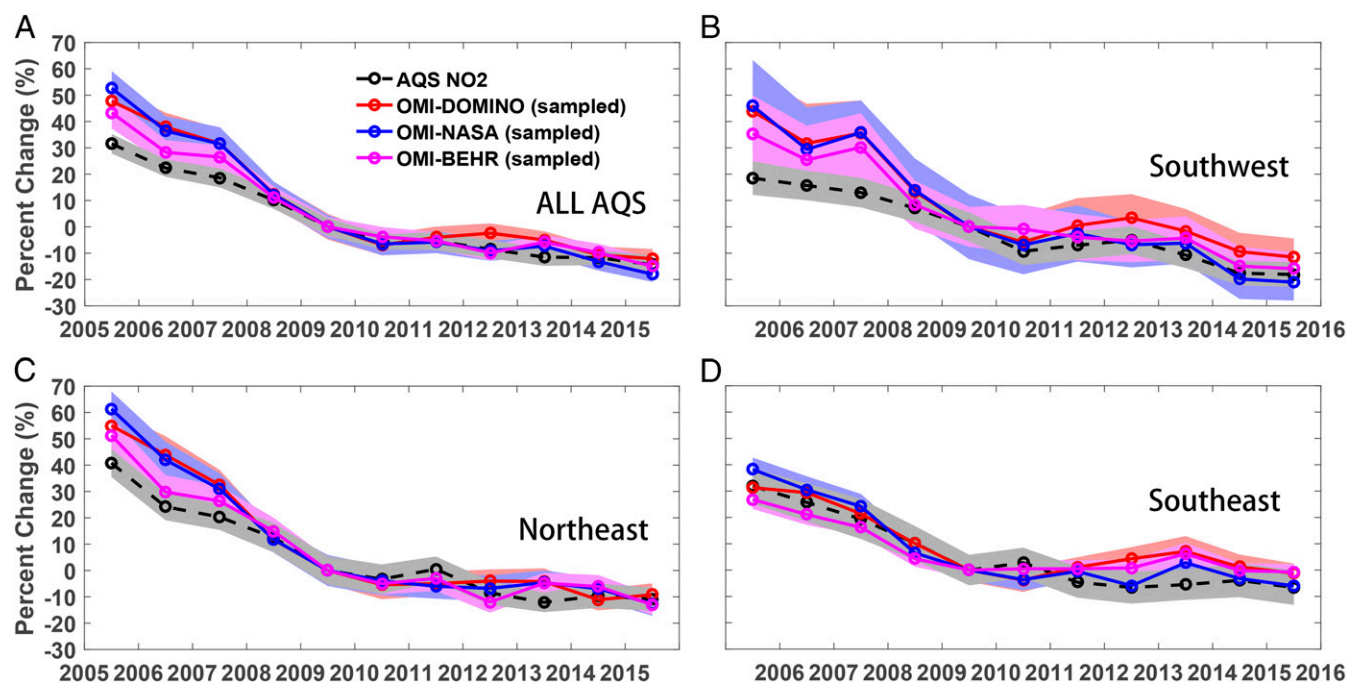


Fig. 5. (A–D) Percent changes (annual means normalized at 2009) of AQS surface in situ NO_2 measurements and tropospheric OMI NO_2 columns for various regions. Both AQS and OMI measurements are averaged with monthly resolution; the averaged OMI (monthly) data are sampled at AQS NO_2 (monthly) measurement locations and times; annual means are calculated based on monthly means. The region definition is shown in Fig. 3A. The shaded areas represent $1\text{-}\sigma$ uncertainties for random and sampling errors.

Methods

Bottom-Up NO_x Emission Data. The EPA inventory used in this study is from the Air Pollutant Emissions Trends Data downloaded at: <https://www.epa.gov/air-emissions-inventories/air-pollutant-emissions-trends-data>. The emissions are updated through the NEI 2014v1. To better reconcile bottom-up emission inventories with top-down observations for NO_x, we modify anthropogenic emissions only. First, we update electric power generation emissions with the latest CEMS data downloaded at: <https://ampd.epa.gov/ampd/>. Xing et al. (26) outlined a fuel-based methodology to consistently estimate industrial, residential, and commercial fuel combustion emissions for long-term atmospheric modeling simulations (1990–2010). We employ their approach here, and update energy use statistics through 2015 (39). The largest decreases in industrial NO_x emission factors occur before 2005 and are relatively constant thereafter (26). We maintain this trend and hold NO_x emission factors constant after 2010. Other emissions associated with industrial processes are left unmodified from the EPA inventory.

We revise mobile source emissions using a fuel-based approach for estimating both on-road (1, 25) and off-road engines (27, 28). Briefly, fuel-use statistics for on-road and off-road engines are available annually from the Federal Highway Administration and Energy Information Administration (40–42). Emission factors (in g/kg fuel) are based on a metaanalysis of roadway studies (1, 25), laboratory measurements of off-road gasoline engines (43–45), and the EPA NONROAD model for off-road diesel engines.

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More details about emission factors for on-road vehicles are provided in *SI Appendix*.

Other Datasets and Statistical Analysis. The descriptions for the top-down NO_x and CO emission data, tropospheric OMI NO₂ column data, MOPITT CO data, AQS surface in situ measurements, and statistical analysis associated with trends and uncertainties are provided in *SI Appendix*.

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