Peer Reviewed

Title: Assessment of the importance of ice-shelf buttressing to ice-sheet flow

Author: Dupont, T. K, University of California, Irvine
        Alley, R. B.

Publication Date: January 1, 2005

Series: Faculty Publications

Permalink: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1n3171cf

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1029/2004GL022024

Keywords: Boundary layers, Glaciers, Sea level, Stresses, Boundary-layer formulation, Contiguous ice streams, Ice-sheet flow, Ice-shelf buttressing, Ice, ice flow, ice shelf, sea ice, sea level change

Supporting material: Table 1. Values of Scales, Constants and Parameters
                      Table 2. Experiment Parameter Sets
                      Table 3. Summary of the Results of Various Experiments

Copyright Information: Copyright 2005 by the article author(s). This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license, http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Assessment of the importance of ice-shelf buttressing to ice-sheet flow

T. K. Dupont and R. B. Alley

Department of Geosciences and EMS Earth and Environmental Systems Institute, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Received 17 November 2004; revised 5 January 2005; accepted 19 January 2005; published 25 February 2005.

1. Introduction

The non-floating portions of the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets represent the largest potential sources of sea-level rise on time-scales of human economies. Response times to some environmental forcings are reassuringly long [e.g., Alley and Whillans, 1984], but recent observations from numerous regions show short-time-scale changes (few-annual and shorter) with potential to affect sea level rapidly [Zwally et al., 2002; Anandakrishnan et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2004; Scambos et al., 2004; Rignot et al., 2004; Joughin et al., 2004; Shepherd et al., 2004]. Of particular importance is the ice-sheet response to changes in their floating extensions, called ice shelves. Shearing of ice shelves past slower-moving ice or rock causes a backstress [Thomas and MacAyeal, 1982], so ice-sheet thinning or loss leads immediately (stress transmission at the speed of sound) to acceleration of ice-sheet flow contributing to sea-level rise. Ice shelves can be affected rapidly by environmental changes, including increase in basal melting of O(10 m/year) for warming of sub-ice-shelf waters by 1°C [Shepherd et al., 2004], and very rapid collapse (order of days or less) when meltwater wedges open crevasses. Speed-up of ice flow in response to ice-shelf changes is strongly implicated in changes now occurring in places including Jakobshavn Isbrae in Greenland, the former site of the Larsen B ice shelf along the Antarctic Peninsula, and the glaciers draining the West Antarctic ice sheet into Pine Island Bay.

[1] We have developed a simple, fast tool for assessing the importance of ice-shelf buttressing to inland-ice behavior, and the early stages of response to loss of that buttressing. For a reference case similar to the Pine Island Glacier (P.I.G.) ice stream, West Antarctica, loss of buttressing offsetting half of the tendency for ice-stream/ice-shelf spreading leads to sea-level rise of about 1 mm from the ice stream itself, with a response time of about a decade. Response will be greater for ice streams with more buttressing, less side drag, more basal drag, and higher driving stress.

2. Model Description

[4] We use a mass- and momentum-balance model of a coupled ice-stream/ice-shelf system, loosely following MacAyeal [1989] as derived by Dupont [2004], solved using what we believe is a glaciologically novel Petrov-Galerkin approach [Dupont, 2004] providing high accuracy rapidly. All variables are non-dimensional unless otherwise noted, with dimensional scales listed in Table 1. The primary variables solved for are the ice thickness $h(x, t)$ and along-flow velocity $u(x, t)$. As shown in Figure 1, the ice stream flows from $x = 0$ to $x = 1$ from left to right, through a parallel-sided, unit-width channel. Lateral thickness variation is neglected, so that ice is always the same thickness on the sides and in the stream. Side and basal drags are applied in boundary layers, with basal shear replaced by water pressure where ice is afloat.

[5] The elevation of the channel's bed $z_i$ is specified as

$$z_i(x) = -r_{sw}^{-1} + \beta(x - 1)$$

where $r_{sw}$ is the ratio of the density of seawater to ice, and $\beta$ is the gradient in bed elevation. Note that given this bed elevation, the flotation thickness $h_f$ is

$$h_f(x) = 1 + r_{sw}\beta(1 - x)$$

This is the maximum floating-ice thickness, such that ice is grounded if $h > h_f$, and floating otherwise.

2.1. Momentum Balance

[6] We model the momentum balance following MacAyeal [1989], as derived by Dupont [2004, equation (2.65)] with specified channel bed elevation:

$$\partial_t \left( 2h \partial_x u - \frac{A}{2} h^2 \right) - G_s h \partial_x \partial_t h =$$

$$\begin{cases} A h \partial_x \partial_t h^2, & h > h_f \\ - \frac{A}{2r_{sw}} \partial_x h^2, & h \leq h_f \end{cases} = 0$$

This non-dimensional, width-averaged and depth-integrated stress-equilibrium equation is appropriate for thin, channelized flow within ice streams and shelves. A fundamental
The dimensionless parameters $A$, $G_s$, and $G_b$ are determined from the scales adopted as follows

$$A \equiv \frac{\rho g H}{B_i \left( \frac{U}{L_x} \right)^2}$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

$$G_s \equiv \frac{L_x \tau_v}{L_y B_i \left( \frac{U}{L_x} \right)^2}$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)

$$G_b \equiv \frac{L_x \tau_h}{HB_i \left( \frac{U}{L_x} \right)^2}$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

where $H$ is the thickness scale, $L_x$ the longitudinal length scale, $L_y$ the lateral or width length scale, $U$ the velocity scale, $\tau_v$ the lateral shear-stress scale, $\tau_h$ the basal shear-stress scale, and $B_i = A_i^{-2}$ is the ice hardness parameter, with $A_i$ being the usual softness parameter. The dimensionless parameters $A$, $G_s$, and $G_b$ measure the respective strengths of the driving stress, lateral shear stress and basal shear stress relative to the stress required to produce a longitudinal strain rate $U/L_x$.

Two momentum-balance boundary conditions are applied, one at each end of the domain. At the upstream end ($x = 0$) the velocity is a prescribed constant,

$$u(0,t) = u_0$$  \hspace{1cm} (8)

where accumulation is neglected and $t$ is the non-dimensional time coordinate, whose dimensional scale is $T$. Equation (1) is derived from continuity and states that the time-rate-of-change in thickness is dictated by the convergence of depth-integrated flux.

The upstream-end thickness is prescribed, serving as the one mass-balance boundary condition,

$$h(0,t) = h_0$$  \hspace{1cm} (11)

3. Experiments and Results

We seek to assess the sensitivity of an ice-stream/ice-shelf system to buttressing changes. We discretize the equations spatially using linear finite elements, and tempo-
rally using semi-implicit finite differencing. Dupont [2004, Appendix B] gives the details of the what we believe is a novel (in the context of computational glaciology) Petrov-Galerkin approach employed for the discretization of the evolution equation (1).

[12] Here, we start all the experiments from an initial steady state appropriate for f = 0.5 (50% buttressing). We then set f = 0 (unbuttressed) and let the system evolve to a new steady-state. Table 2 lists the parameter values adopted for each experiment. One experiment was designated the reference experiment. The values chosen for this reference experiment are roughly appropriate for P.I.G. Sensitivity of the results to our parameter-value choices is listed in Table 3.

[13] For the reference experiment, Figure 2 shows that the removal of buttressing increases velocity greatly at the downstream end. Thinning ensues until a new steady-state is achieved. Relative thinning >10% extends upstream >30%. Figure 3 indicates that the bulk of the evolution is accomplished within the first unit of non-dimensional time. This corresponds to a time scale of 41 years, given our P.I.G.-like length and velocities scales noted in Table 1; choosing a larger length scale or a smaller velocity scale would yield a longer time scale for the response. Also shown in Figure 3 is the evolution of the integrated volume of ice above flotation (V AF), which would directly contribute to sea-level rise. The grounding line retreated about 18% of the domain length in total, which would correspond to an 18 km retreat given a 100 km length scale. The net loss in V AF is 0.11 or roughly one third of the initial value of 0.342; this would correspond to roughly 300 km³ of ice (or 1 mm sea-level equivalent) added to the ocean given length, thickness and width scales of 100, 1, and 3 km respectively.

[14] Table 3 shows the sensitivity of the results to parameter-value changes within glaciologically reasonable scales. Results in all experiments shown are qualitatively the same as the reference experiment. Quantitatively, an increase in side drag, as measured by \( G_s \), modestly decreases grounding-line retreat and V AF loss, whereas an increase in driving-stress or basal-drag strength, as measured by \( A \) and \( G_b \), respectively, increases V AF loss. This suggests that, in terms of V AF loss and thus sea-level rise, buttressing changes matter more to systems with higher basal drag, higher driving stress, and lower side drag.

4. Conclusions

[15] We find that a reduction in buttressing causes notable grounding-line retreat and loss in volume of ice above flotation. Response extends far upstream from where the buttressing change was imposed. In fact, the upstream extent of the response we estimate is a minimum given that we hold the upstream velocity and thickness (and thus the flux) constant in time, and we do not allow flow into the ice stream from the sides. Without these restrictions, which...
introduce an artificial stability to the system, we expect the thinning would continue upstream beyond \( x = 0 \) in a manner similar to the diffusive response in kinematic wave theory [Kamb, 1964; Alley and Whillans, 1984], as well as laterally into the regions flanking the ice stream. The results are also conservative in light of our neglect of accumulation in equation (1), because ice ungrounding and exposing the basal surface to ocean water is likely to cause substantial melting [Jacobs et al., 1996; Shepherd et al., 2004; Payne et al., 2004]. This feedback, which would represent the introduction of a strong mass-loss to the system, would tend to augment the grounding line retreat and loss of volume above flotation. Including such a feedback and freeing the upstream boundary may well allow for a much greater response [e.g., Hughes, 1980], perhaps faster than can be stabilized by negative feedbacks such as isotatic rebound. In addition, our choice of unbuttressing from an initial state of 50% buttressing is likely conservative for some ice streams, such as the essentially 100% buttressed Whillans ice stream [Whillans and Van der Veen, 1993].

We find that sensitivity to buttressing changes is greater for systems with weaker side drag, larger basal drag, or larger driving stress strength, as measured by the dimensionless numbers \( G_s, G_b \), and \( A \), respectively. Thus, with all other things equal, the wider an ice stream, the ‘stickier’ its bed, or the larger its driving stress, the more sensitive it will be to perturbations in buttressing.

The parameter values chosen here are appropriate for P.I.G. Recent observations there indicate rapid ice-sheet thinning from warming of subjacent water, leading to grounding-line retreat with grounded-ice speed-up and thinning over years, especially downglacier [Thomas et al., 2004; Shepherd et al., 2004]. We lack sufficient information on pre-perturbation buttressing and the timing of buttressing loss to conduct an accurate diagnosis of the ongoing changes, but the broad similarity of modeled and observed changes improves confidence in our model and the published diagnoses.

Rutford Ice Stream has high driving stress and high basal drag similar to P.I.G., and thus might be expected to show similar sensitivity to buttressing changes. The Siple Coast ice streams generally have lower driving stress but some are wider, with opposing effects on sensitivity, so an additional suite of experiments will be required. Our tool can be used to assess the sensitivity of any other present or past [e.g., Hulbe et al., 2004] ice streams to buttressing changes. It is evident from the experiments to date that buttressing cannot be ignored in assessing ice-sheet response to environmental change except in extreme limiting cases.

Acknowledgments. We thank D. MacAyeal, B. Parizek, S. Anandakrishnan, and the rest of the Penn State ice & climate group, as well as T. Hughes and an anonymous reviewer, for helpful comments. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the NSF Office of Polar Programs and the Gary Comer Foundation for partial support.

References

Alley, R. B., and I. M. Whillans (1984), Response of the East Antarctic ice sheet to sea-level rise, J. Geophys. Res., 89, 6487–6493.

Anandakrishnan, S., D. E. Voigl, R. B. Alley, and M. A. King (2003), Ice stream D flow speed is strongly modulated by the tide beneath the Ross Ice Shelf, Geophys. Res. Lett., 30(7), 1361, doi:10.1029/2002GL016329.

Dupont, T. K. (2004), Abrupt changes in ice shelves and ice streams: Model studies, Ph.D. thesis, Pa. State Univ., University Park.

Hughes, T. J. (1980), The weak underbelly of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, J. Glaciol., 27(97), 518–525.

Hulbe, C. L., D. R. MacAyeal, G. H. Denton, J. Klemm, and T. V. Lowell (2004), Catastrophic ice shelf breakup as the source of Heinrich event icebergs, Paleoceanography, 19, PA1004, doi:10.1029/2003PA000890.

Jacobs, S. S., H. H. Hellmer, and A. Jenkins (1996), Antarctic ice shelf melting in the southeast Pacific, Geophys. Res. Lett., 23(9), 957–960.

Joughin, I., W. Abdalati, and M. Fahnestock (2004), Large fluctuations in speed on Greenland’s Jakobshavn Isbrae glacier, Nature, 432(7017), 608–610.

Kamb, B. (1964), Glacier geophysics, Science, 146(3642), 353–365.

MacAyeal, D. R. (1989), Large-scale ice flow over a viscous basal sediment: Theory and application to Ice Stream B, Antarctica, J. Geophys. Res., 94(B4), 4071–4087.

Payne, A. J., A. Vieli, A. P. Shepherd, D. J. Wingham, and E. Rignot (2004), Recent dramatic thinning of largest West Antarctic ice stream triggered by oceans, Geophys. Res. Lett., 31, L23401, doi:10.1029/2004GL021284.

Rignot, E., G. Casassa, P. Gogineni, W. Krabill, A. Rivera, and R. Thomas (2004), Accelerated ice discharge from the Antarctic Peninsula following the collapse of Larsen B ice shelf, Geophys. Res. Lett., 31, L18401, doi:10.1029/2004GL020697.

Scambos, T. A., J. A. Bohlander, C. A. Shuman, and P. Skvarca (2004), Glacier acceleration and thinning after ice shelf collapse in the Larsen B embayment, Antarctica, Geophys. Res. Lett., 31, L18402, doi:10.1029/2004GL020670.

Shepherd, A., D. Wingham, and E. Rignot (2004), Warm ocean is eroding West Antarctic Ice Sheet, Geophys. Res. Lett., 31, L23402, doi:10.1029/2004GL021106.

Thomas, R., and D. R. MacAyeal (1982), Derived characteristics of the Ross Ice Shelf, J. Glaciol., 28, 397–412.

Thomas, R., et al. (2004), Accelerated sea-level rise from West Antarctica, Science, 306(5694), 255–259.

Weertman, J. (1974), Stability of the junction of an ice sheet and an ice shelf, J. Glaciol., 13(67), 3–11.

Whillans, I. M., and C. J. Van der Veen (1993), New and improved determinations of velocity of ice streams B and C, West Antarctica, J. Glaciol., 39(133), 483–490.

Zwally, H., W. Abdalati, T. Herring, K. Larson, J. Saba, and K. Steffen (2002), Surface melt-induced acceleration of Greenland ice-sheet flow, Science, 297(5579), 218–222.