

29. SEVERE FROSTS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA IN SEPTEMBER 2016

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Human influence may have enhanced the circulation pattern that drives cold outbreaks and frost risk over southwest Western Australia in September 2016, but larger thermodynamic changes may have still made these events less likely.

Introduction. The wheat belt of southwest Western Australia (SWWA) experienced several severe frosts just before harvest in September 2016, leading to a loss of one million tonnes of grain crops (GIWA 2016). Using the Jones et al. (2009) gridded observation dataset, there were 18 frost-risk nights ($T_{\min} < 2^{\circ}\text{C}$) somewhere in the grain belt through the month and the September frost area and frequency was extensive (Fig. 29.1a), the highest since 1956. The highest count at any grid cell was 13 frost-risk nights, with 9 severe frost-risk nights ($T_{\min} < 0^{\circ}\text{C}$). Many places saw the highest number of September frost nights since reliable records began in 1910, with most of the region in the top five years (Fig. 29.1b). SWWA also saw below-average rainfall and humidity, southerly monthly wind anomalies, and cool sea surface temperatures (SSTs) immediately adjacent to SWWA in September. There were weak La Niña and negative Indian Ocean Dipole conditions during September.

The effect of human influence on cold extremes is the net result of two influences: rising temperatures of the climate mean state and forced changes to circulation. The SWWA region has warmed by around 1°C since 1910, suggesting a reduction in frost risk (BOM and CSIRO 2016). However, greenhouse gas forcing may drive an increase in the frequency or intensity of

some cold extremes through an effect on circulation features, offsetting or countering the effect of the rising mean temperature. There is a hypothesized link between climate change and a shift in circulation linked to increased cold extremes in the northern hemisphere (e.g., Cohen et al. 2014; Zhang et al. 2016; Mann et al. 2017). In some regions of southern Australia, frost frequency and the length of the frost season has been increasing despite an increase in mean temperature in all seasons (Crimp et al. 2016). The driver of the increase is not completely clear but may be linked to circulation changes forced by greenhouse gases. An increase in pressure around the midlatitudes has been attributed to greenhouse gases (e.g., Gillett et al. 2013). This trend has included an intensification of the subtropical ridge, but the ridge has only a weak connection to frost risk through promoting clear skies. The link to frosts may be more a function of the particular mean sea level pressure (MSLP) anomalies.

Cold outbreaks and frost risk in SWWA are often associated with a positive MSLP anomaly over the Indian Ocean west of Australia and a negative MSLP anomaly across southern and southeastern Australia, advecting cold air from the south of Australia over SWWA (Ashcroft et al. 2009; Pook et al. 2011). Numerous days in September 2016 showed this MSLP signature, expressed as slow moving blocking highs in the Indian Ocean sector at $\sim 40^{\circ}\text{S}$. An important question, therefore, is whether this circulation anomaly was made more likely due to greenhouse forcing. The peak of blocking in the southeast Australian sector in winter is projected to weaken and move eastward (Grose et al. 2017). However, blocking in the Indian Ocean sector in spring may have a different response. Indeed, exceptionally high MSLP south of Australia in August 2014 was more likely due to human influence (Grose et al. 2015), and this was linked to blocking highs.

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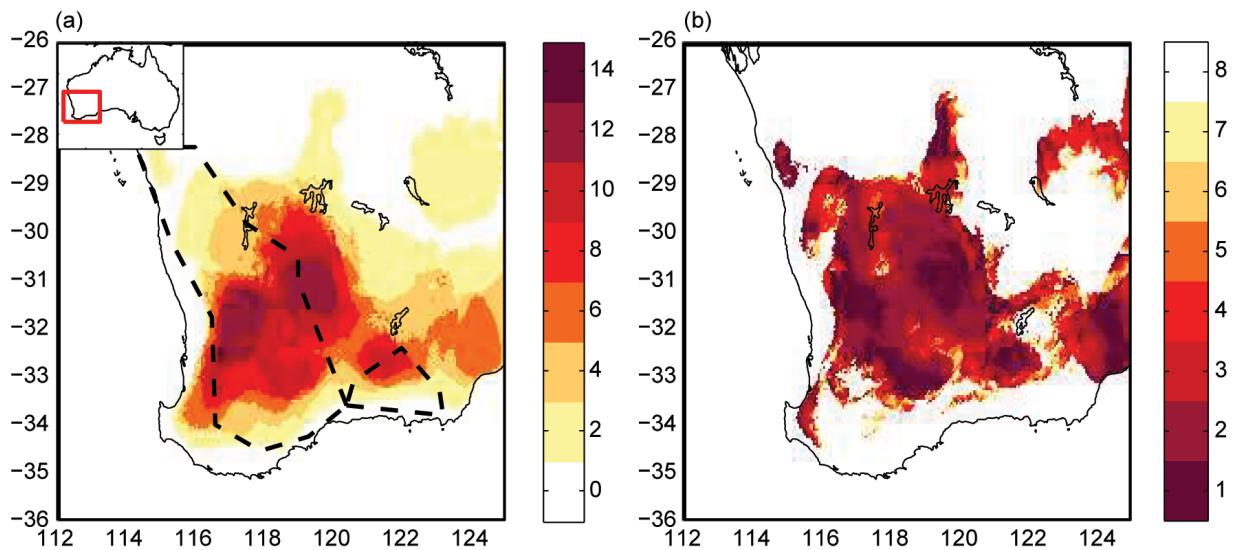


FIG. 29.1. (a) Frost risk nights ($T_{\min} < 2^{\circ}\text{C}$) in Sep 2016 in the AWAP gridded dataset [number of nights (out of 30)], dashed line shows rough outline of SWWA wheat belt, inset shows the location of SWWA within Australia; (b) rank of Sep 2016 frost frequency within the 1910–2016 record.

While there have been studies on trends in frosts (e.g., Crimp et al. 2016), there have been no previous studies showing a link between a particular cold extreme event or frosts and human influence. Here we examine the SWWA September frosts and whether the MSLP and blocking may have offset or countered the mean warming effects.

Methods. We examined daily minimum temperature, MSLP, the blocking index and blocking events using the Tibaldi and Molteni (1990) index in ERA-Interim reanalysis (Dee et al. 2011), the global *weather@home* modeling system version 2 (Guilod et al. 2017) and the seasonal climate forecasting system Predictive Ocean Atmosphere Model for Australia (POAMA; Hope et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2016).

We examined the difference in circulation between 165 *weather@home* simulations of September 2016 with observed forcings (Factual simulations) and 287 *weather@home* simulations of a counterfactual September 2016 without human influence (Counterfactual simulations). Ensembles were generated by running the model with perturbed atmospheric initial conditions. The Factual simulations used observed SSTs and sea ice, as well as present-day atmospheric composition (long-lived greenhouse gases, ozone, and aerosols). The Counterfactual simulations used SSTs modified to remove different estimates of the warming attributable to anthropogenic forcing and preindustrial atmospheric composition. Estimates of the SST changes due to anthropogenic forcing were separately calculated using twelve CMIP5 models

(Taylor et al. 2012) and the mean of those models (Table ES29.1). These patterns are the difference between the SSTs in the CMIP5 models' historical and historicalNAT simulations and are not the same as warming in observed datasets. The number of simulations from each model did not yield a sufficient sample size, so we examine 287 Counterfactual simulations as a group. Climatologies of 1986–2015 for Factual and Counterfactual were also examined.

POAMA forecasts were initialized after the first week of September 2016 and run for the last 3-week period of the month, see Hope et al. (2018) for more detail. Two 44-member ensemble forecasts were made—one under current levels of carbon dioxide (Factual) and another that removes the influence of the last 55 years of carbon dioxide increase on the ocean warming, atmospheric radiation balance, and land (Counterfactual; see Wang et al. 2016). Note that the POAMA system accounts for changes in greenhouse gases; it does not account for changes in ozone or aerosol. Climatologies for the years 2000–14 under both high and low levels of carbon dioxide were also examined.

The seasonal means of *weather@home* geopotential height in the region are similar to reanalysis (Guilod et al. 2017), and some midlatitude circulation features relevant to extreme temperatures in the northern hemisphere are well reproduced but with too many short-lived blocking events (Mitchell et al. 2017). The Tibaldi and Molteni blocking index and frequency of detections near SWWA is fairly similar between *weather@home* and ERA-Interim

(Fig. ES29.1). POAMA is similar to reanalysis in terms of broad circulation (Wang et al. 2016), but underestimates the strength and frequency of blocking (Marshall et al. 2014).

Results. Examining the observed circulation component of the frost risk, we see enhanced September MSLP west of SWWA and a low anomaly in southeast Australia and a southerly 850-hPa wind anomaly of 2.3 m s^{-1} at the south coast of SWWA (Fig. 29.2a), which is consistent with the typical cold outbreak events (Ashcroft et al. 2009). The monthly MSLP anomaly reflects the presence of persistent highs adjacent to SWWA on many days (not shown), particularly through the middle of the month. In

daily data, MSLP was enhanced at 70° – 110°E by up to 18 hPa and/or diminished in the region 110° – 140°E with southerly wind anomalies over SWWA on many of the days.

Monthly *weather@home* MSLP was higher in Factual compared to Counterfactual west of SWWA (Fig. 29.2b), creating a higher monthly southerly 850 hPa wind anomaly at the south coast of SWWA (Counterfactual mean was 2.1 m s^{-1} ; Factual mean was 2.4 m s^{-1} , giving an enhancement of $+0.3 \text{ m s}^{-1}$). Even though these wind anomalies do not penetrate inland, they suggest greater transport of cold air into the broader region and an enhancement of the circulation anomaly favoring frost nights in SWWA. The negative MSLP anomaly in southeast Australia was

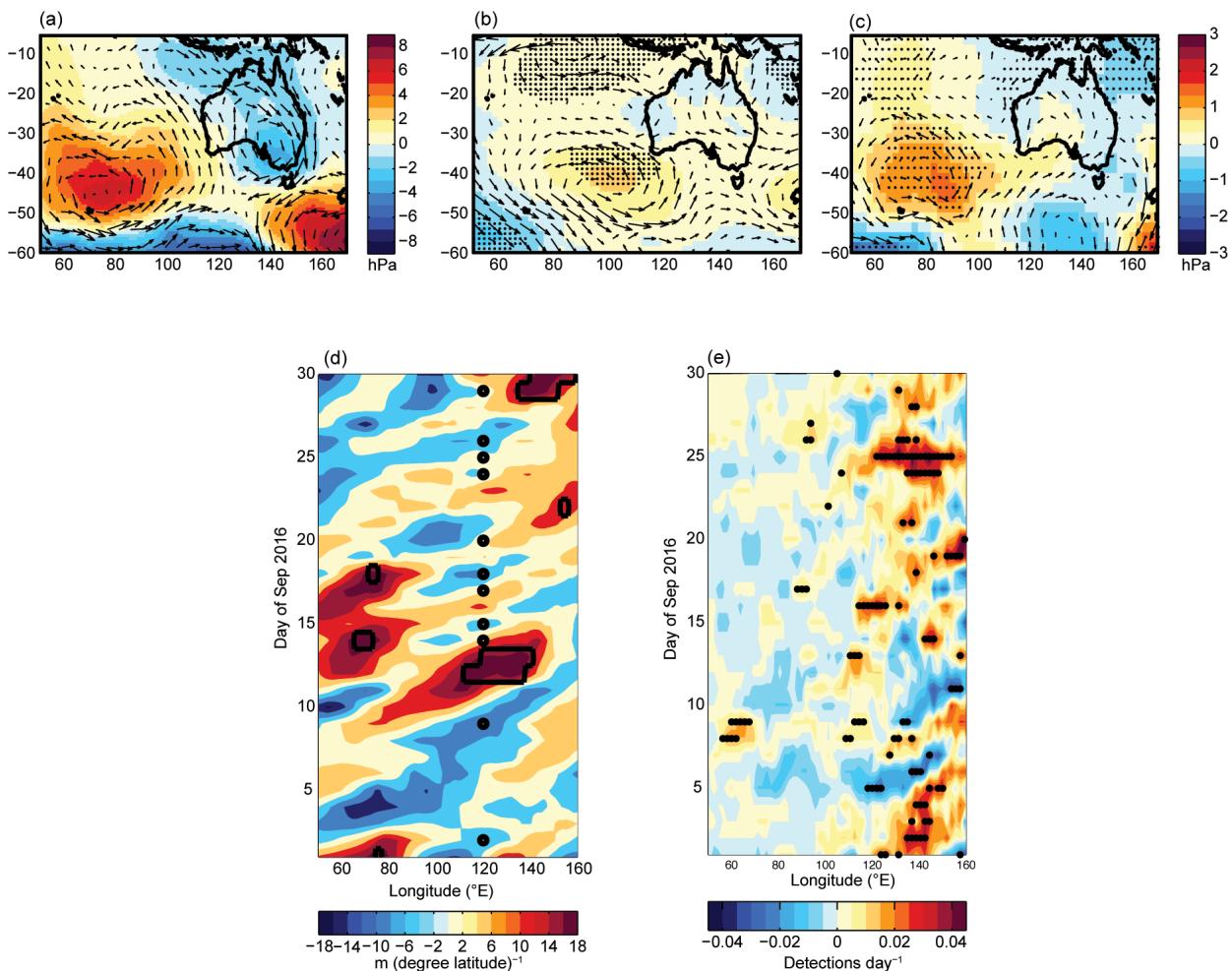


FIG. 29.2. MSLP, wind, and blocking in ERAint and models in Sep 2016; (a) ERAint monthly MSLP anomaly from 1979–2016 mean, arrows indicate the 850-hPa wind anomaly; (b) Factual–Counterfactual MSLP difference in *weather@home* mean, stippling shows where the difference is significant at the 10% level (t test), arrows show the Factual–Counterfactual 850-hPa wind difference; (c) as in (b) in POAMA; (d) ERA-Interim daily blocking index anomaly from 1979–2016 mean, black outlines indicate detected blocking events (no minimum event length threshold applied) and black circles indicate frost events at the approximate longitude of SWWA; (e) Factual–Counterfactual Blocking mean blocking event detections (detections day^{-1}) in *weather@home*, stippling shows where the difference is significant at the 10% level (t test).

not enhanced in Factual compared to Counterfactual (Fig. 29.2b). In daily data, there was higher MSLP west of SWWA and a southerly 850-hPa wind anomaly over SWWA in the ensemble mean of Factual compared to Counterfactual in 14 of the 30 days, with some anomalies over 2 hPa (Fig. ES29.2). POAMA shows a similar MSLP difference in Factual–Counterfactual for the month as *weather@home*, and an enhancement of the southerly wind anomaly at the south coast of SWWA (1.7 m s^{-1} in Counterfactual; 2.1 m s^{-1} in Factual, giving an $+0.4 \text{ m s}^{-1}$ anomaly; Fig. 29.2c). The wind signal over the wheat belt itself is weaker in POAMA than in *weather@home*; however, the MSLP signal west of SWWA is stronger.

Enhancement of MSLP west of SWWA was also found in the difference between the *weather@home* 1986–2015 Factual September climatology and the equivalent for Counterfactual, and between the POAMA 15-year September climatology of 2000–14 under current levels of carbon dioxide relative to the climatology with low levels (not shown). The consistency between the 2016 results and the climatologies suggests that the pattern is related to the change in the mean state of the atmosphere. The fact that POAMA shows a change similar to *weather@home* suggests that the changes in global carbon dioxide levels are of most importance in driving this signature, rather than ozone or aerosol changes (POAMA accounts only for changes in greenhouse gases; *weather@home* accounts for all forcings).

The blocking index was higher than average near SWWA on many days in September 2016, with seven blocked days detected within 60° – 140° E (Fig. 29.2d). Blocking was typically positive to the west of SWWA on the day of or prior to frosts (Fig. 29.2d). On 24 days during the month, there were significantly more blocking days detected in Factual simulations than in Counterfactual somewhere in the sector (stippled red regions in Fig. 29.2e), with only five days where there were significantly fewer (stippled blue). For example, on 25 September 2016 the mean detections at 140° E in Counterfactual is 0.03 detections day^{-1} , and this was enhanced by up to 0.04 detections day^{-1} in Factual. We don't expect the modeled timing of blocks to be precisely in phase with observations, so the exact timing of these differences is not the focus, but the *weather@home* results indicate a greater detection of blocked days on average across the region throughout.

weather@home showed warmer daily minimum temperatures and fewer frost risk days in the Factual simulations compared to the Counterfactual simulations (significant at the 5% level), suggesting

that the frost risk was lower due to human influence (Fig. ES29.3). Using a FAR analysis, experiencing 13 frost nights at a site in the wheat belt was in fact 45% less likely in Factual compared to Counterfactual. POAMA simulations also showed lower numbers of frost-risk days in Factual compared to Counterfactual (not shown). If the models simulated all the relevant processes regarding daily T_{min} with sufficient fidelity, then these results suggest that the circulation influence due to human influence did not fully offset the effect from a warmer mean temperature, so the net human influence was for fewer frosts. However, it is also likely that the models did not simulate all the dynamics required to produce frost nights, so the forced circulation difference may not have been expressed correctly in daily T_{min} . For example, the coarse resolution of the model may prevent the simulation of relevant mesoscale meteorological processes, and indeed the frequency in the Factual is lower than in the observed (Figs. 29.1a and ES29.3b).

Conclusion. Differences in MSLP, winds, and blocking between Factual and Counterfactual simulations from two modeling systems suggest that the circulation pattern associated with cold outbreaks was enhanced by human influence over southwest Western Australia in September 2016. However, the results also suggest warmer temperatures may have offset or countered this effect of the circulation driver on the overall frost risk for the month. Further work is needed to support this preliminary finding, including an assessment of the simulation of the circulation features and of minimum temperatures.

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