The rate of permafrost carbon release under aerobic and anaerobic conditions and its potential effects on climate

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Abstract

Recent observations suggest that permafrost thaw may create two completely different soil environments: aerobic in relatively well-drained uplands and anaerobic in poorly drained wetlands. The soil oxygen availability will dictate the rate of permafrost carbon release as carbon dioxide (CO₂) and as methane (CH₄), and the overall effects of these emitted greenhouse gases on climate. The objective of this study was to quantify CO₂ and CH₄ release over a 500-day period from permafrost soil under aerobic and anaerobic conditions in the laboratory and to compare the potential effects of these emissions on future climate by estimating their relative climate forcing. We used permafrost soils collected from Alaska and Siberia with varying organic matter characteristics and simultaneously incubated them under aerobic and anaerobic conditions to determine rates of CO₂ and CH₄ production. Over 500 days of soil incubation at 15 °C, we observed that carbon released under aerobic conditions was 3.9–10.0 times greater than anaerobic conditions. When scaled by greenhouse warming potential to account for differences between CO₂ and CH₄, relative climate forcing ranged between 1.5 and 7.1. Carbon release in organic soils was nearly 20 times greater than mineral soils on a per gram soil basis, but when compared on a per gram carbon basis, deep permafrost mineral soils showed carbon release rates similar to organic soils for some soil types. This suggests that permafrost carbon may be very labile, but that there are significant differences across soil types depending on the processes that controlled initial permafrost carbon accumulation within a particular landscape. Overall, our study showed that, independent of soil type, permafrost carbon in a relatively aerobic upland ecosystems may have a greater effect on climate when compared with a similar amount of permafrost carbon thawing in an anaerobic environment, despite the release of CH₄ that occurs in anaerobic conditions.

Keywords: active layer, Alaska, carbon isotopes, methane, radiocarbon, relative climate forcing, substrate quality, yedoma

Introduction

In the past century, high latitude ecosystems have undergone drastic changes due to global scale warming (Serreze et al., 2000; ACIA, 2005). Increased air and soil temperatures have contributed to increased temperatures of deep permafrost (ground that is frozen more than two consecutive years) (Osterkamp & Romanovsky, 1999; Hinzman et al., 2005). Permafrost is distributed across 14% of the global land surface within boreal forest, tundra and arctic desert (Tarnocai et al., 2009). A recent estimate projected that permafrost soil stores over 1600 Pg of carbon (C), which represents approximately 50% of global terrestrial C as soil organic matter and is approximately double the C present in the atmospheric pool (Schuur et al., 2008; Tarnocai et al., 2009). The frozen conditions of permafrost have prevented active decomposition of plant litter inputs and soil organic matter, which has been accumulating since the end of the last glacial period (Harden et al., 1992) and beyond in some locations (Schirrmeister et al., 2002; Zimov et al., 2006). Therefore, increased permafrost temperatures as a result of climate change may expose a large pool of stable C stored in permafrost to microbial decomposition.

In ice-rich permafrost areas, permafrost thaw is often followed by land surface subsidence called thermokarst due to melting of the ice wedges and lenses that formerly sustained the ground structure (Davis, 2001; Jorgenson et al., 2006). As a result of thaw effects on surface hydrology, soil organic matter emerging from permafrost can be exposed to either aerobic or anaerobic conditions. In areas of relatively well-drained soils
such as slopes or uplands, thermokarst creates patchy microtopographic depressions (Schuur et al., 2008). Well-drained soils in the thermokarst zone may create optimum soil moisture conditions for microbial decomposition of soil organic matter (Zimov et al., 2006). In contrast, expansion of thaw lakes in lowlands, as seen in areas of continuous permafrost (Smith et al., 2005; Jorgenson et al., 2006; Jorgenson & Shur, 2007) often leads to waterlogging and anoxia (oxygen limitation) resulting in slower decomposition of soil organic matter. Lastly, shrinking thermokarst ponds and lakes has been observed in the discontinuous permafrost zone (Yoshikawa & Hinzman, 2003; Smith et al., 2005; Riordan et al., 2006; Marsh et al., 2009), which may lead to faster decomposition of soil organic matter as aerobic conditions become more prevalent in some landscapes.

In addition to differences in C release rate, the decomposition of permafrost C under different environmental conditions affects the type of greenhouse gas that is released. Northern wetlands within the permafrost zone are reported as a long-term sink of atmospheric CO2, but a source of CH4 as C is used as an alternate electron acceptor when oxygen is limited (Smith et al., 2007; Conrad, 2009). Drained lakes may shift from being a sink for CO2 and source of CH4, to being a source of CO2, whereas CH4 release decreases due to oxidation of CH4 by surface methanotrophs or the cessation of CH4 production. Under anaerobic conditions, a wide range of CO2 to CH4 ratios have been observed. However, in general, C release as CO2 is greater than as CH4 (Sengers, 1998). Although the magnitude of CH4 production is smaller than CO2, CH4 has a greater global warming potential (GWPCO2 = 25) than CO2 (GWPCH4 = 1) over a 100-year time period (IPCC, 2007). This suggests that although total C release can be attenuated under anaerobic conditions, emission of a more potent greenhouse gas such as CH4 may contribute more to climate change when compared with CO2 emissions alone from aerobic conditions. Therefore, the full magnitude of the climate effect from permafrost C release depends in large part on the soil environment experienced by thawing permafrost C, which will control the rate and form of C release.

The objective of this study was to quantify CO2 and CH4 release over a 500-day period from permafrost soil under aerobic and anaerobic conditions and to compare the potential effects of these emissions on future climate change by estimating their relative climate forcing in these two different soil environments. In addition, we investigated soil quality factors that could affect variability in the rate of permafrost C release and its effect on climate. We conducted laboratory incubations using permafrost soils collected from Alaska and Siberia that spanned a wide range of site and soil characteristics across the permafrost zone. We hypothesized that total C release would be greater under aerobic conditions, but the potential climate forcing from the C release may be greater under anaerobic conditions because microbes are more active under aerobic conditions, whereas CH4 has greater effects on climate. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the potential effects on climate from aerobic and anaerobic production of greenhouse gases would be positively correlated to soil pH and various soil substrate qualities such as soil C, nitrogen (N), and C to N ratio, in particular, because soil pH may dictate the availability of electron transport needed for methanogenesis and these substrates may be limiting factors to microbial activity.

Materials and methods

Soil sampling and preparation

Twelve different types of frozen soils were collected from seven geographical locations in Alaska and Siberia (Fig. 1; Itkillik I, Itkillik II, Sagavanirktok, Toolik Karst, EML, Fox, and Siberia). All of the soil samples were collected in the continuous and discontinuous permafrost zone; however, they varied in soil C and N content, type of aboveground vegetation, parent material, parent material age, and pH. Three soil cores were collected at each sampling location as replicates. Soil cores were collected from four different locations on the North Slope of the Brooks Range in Alaska near Toolik Lake Biological Station (68.63N, -149.72E). The moist acidic tussock tundra sites were located on the Itkillik I glacial drift (hereafter, Itkillik I), the non-acidic tundra sites were on the Itkillik II glacial drift (hereafter, Itkillik II) (Hobbie et al., 2002). The Sagavanirktok glacial drift (hereafter, Sagavanirktok) is much older in parent material age and is considered acidic tundra (Walker & Everett, 1991). The fourth set of soil samples was collected from a recently formed thermokarst gully near Toolik Lake (Toolik Karst); this site is also located on the Sagavanirktok glacial drift (Bowden et al., 2008).

Additional soil cores were collected from a moist acidic tundra site at Eight Mile Lake (EML) research site located in the Interior Alaska, on the foothills of the Alaska Range just outside of Denali National Park (63.88N, -149.25E). The EML gradient sites were established on a natural gradient containing three different intensities of permafrost thaw and thermokarst development (Minimal Thaw, Moderate Thaw, and Extensive Thaw; hereafter EML-mMin, EML-mMod, and EML-mExt for mineral soils and EML-oMin, EML-oMod, and EML-oExt for organic soils) (Schuur et al., 2007, 2009; Osterkamp et al., 2009; Vogel et al., 2009). Three of these locations are the closest to one another geographically, with all sites within 1 km.

Soil cores were collected from near the town of Fox, Alaska (64.95N, -149.72E) along the Steese Highway, where deep soils were visible in vertical exposures due to land use (hereafter, Fox). Soil cores were also collected from Zelenyi Mys (68.80N, 161.38E) along the Kolyma River in Siberia (hereafter, Siberia). Both these sites consist of loess silt deposition with
the local term in Siberia for this soil type being Yedoma (Zimov et al., 2006). The soil samples were collected within 1 m from the ground surface, mostly within the surface permafrost, except Fox and Siberia, which were collected from a depth of approximately 10 m from the ground surface within permafrost layer.

For all the soils, only the deepest mineral soil layers of each soil core were used, with the exception of the surface organic soils from the three EML gradient sites, which were used as reference surface organic soils. All soil samples were kept frozen at −80 °C after collection and shipped frozen to the University of Florida for further analysis. The soils were thawed and separated into organic and mineral layers at the laboratory prior to the incubation set up.

Soil analyses

Soil C and N content were analysed using an elemental analyzer (Costech ECS 4010, Valencia, CA, USA). Calibration was done with NIST standard peach leaves (SRM 1547, National Institute of Standards and Technology, Gaithersburg, MD, USA): C 44.65%, N 2.93%. Based on repeated measurements of SRM 1547, the 1σ precisions for C and N measurements were ±0.6% and ±2.2%, respectively, of the measured values. Soil pH was measured using oven dried (60 °C) soil samples. The soils were diluted 1 : 5 using deionized water and stabilized. We measured the pH of stabilized soil solution using Orion pH metre (Thermo Orion model 250; Orion Instruments, Beverly, MA, USA). We corrected the measured soil pH to deionized water pH of 7.0, because the deionized water used for this measurement was pH 5.1, which resulted in lower soil pH than expected.

Laboratory incubation experiment and the rate of CO₂/CH₄ production

We prepared 1-L canning jars with airtight lids and attached Luer-lock™ stopcocks on the lid for gas sampling. Approximately 50–100 g of soil with field moisture content were placed in each jar and kept at 15 °C for aerobic soil incubations. Aerobic jars were flushed periodically when the headspace CO₂ concentrations reached over 10 000 ppm with humidified CO₂-free air to minimize build up of CO₂. The incubation temperature was chosen at 15 °C with the intention of comparing our results with the previous soil incubation study that used the same subset of Siberian soils (Dutta et al., 2006).

The aerobic soils were kept at field moisture conditions, most of which were near field capacity (free draining) moisture levels due to high ice content. For anaerobic soil incubations, we added 150 mL of deionized water to each jar to completely submerge the soil and flushed them with helium gas (He) to remove any dissolved oxygen in the soil, water, and head space of the jar. For calculations of CO₂ and CH₄ production rates, we corrected CO₂ and CH₄ concentrations using solubility constant of these gases in water (1.959 g L⁻¹ for CO₂ and 0.019 g L⁻¹ for CH₄ at 15 °C). We used anaerobic indicator strips (BBL GasPak™; BD, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA) to confirm that the environment in the jar was completely anaerobic. We observed slightly lower pressure in the anaerobic incubation jars that are resulted from gas sampling over time (from small difference created between sampling headspace gas and injecting back equivalent volume of He gas), which confirms that there was no mixing between the headspace gas and outside air. The jars remained closed...
throughout the experiment to maintain anaerobic conditions for anaerobic jars and to maintain humidity for aerobic jars. Soils were incubated under these conditions for over 500 days.

We sampled 10 mL from the headspace in the jars using an air-tight syringe and measured CO₂ with an infrared gas analyzer (LI-COR 6252; LI-COR Biosciences, Lincoln, NE, USA) attached to an injection valve and loop (Valco 6-port injection valve, 5 mL injection loop; Valco Instrumental Company Inc., Houston, TX, USA) calibrated with certified CO₂-in-air standards with concentrations of 608, 1000, and 10,000 ppmv. We used a gas chromatograph (Shimadzu GC-FID, Column 1/8° SS 45/60 Carboxen 1000; Shimadzu Scientific Instruments, Columbia, MD, USA) to measure CH₄ from anaerobic incubations using 1% CH₄ as a standard. For aerobic incubations, we collected gas samples daily for 2 weeks, then every other day for 1 month, weekly for the next month, biweekly for the subsequent 2 months and then monthly thereafter. For anaerobic incubations, we collected gas samples weekly for 2 months, biweekly for 2 months, and monthly thereafter. We injected the same amount of He gas back into the anaerobic jars when the gas samples were drawn out for measurement to equilibrate negative pressure created in the jars from sampling. The same procedure was used for aerobic jars, but humidified CO₂-free air was used instead of He gas. Replacing the sampled amount of headspace gas by CO₂-free air or He gas resulted in dilution of the CO₂ and CH₄ concentrations in the jars. We accounted for this dilution factor when calculating CO₂ and CH₄ concentrations and rates of gas production.

Soil enzyme assay
We measured potential β-glucosidase activity to assess microbial activity involved in the extracellular breakdown of soil organic matter. We analysed β-glucosidase both at the outset, and during the aerobic and anaerobic incubations. One subsample of soil (approximately 3 g of soil with field moisture content) was taken at the initial step of the soil incubation and analysed for soil enzyme activity. The other sub-samples were incubated separately under the same conditions as described previously in separate 25 mL glass vials under aerobic and anaerobic conditions. The aerobic vials were maintained at field moisture conditions and the anaerobic vials were filled anaerobic conditions. The aerobic vials were maintained at field moisture conditions and the anaerobic vials were filled with CO₂-free air to remove any atmospheric CO₂. Respired CO₂ then reaccumulated in the jars for several days to accumulate 1 mg of respired CO₂-C. In the laboratory, the molecular sieve traps were heated to 625 °C to desorb CO₂, then purified and analysed for ¹³C (Bauer et al., 1992). The δ¹³C-CO₂ was analysed via direct injection into an isotope ratio mass spectrometer attached to a Gas Bench gas chromatograph (GC-IRMS; Finnigan Delta S, Bremen, Germany).

The headspace gas of the aerobic jars was trapped for δ¹³C-CO₂ analysis after approximately 1 year of soil incubation. Air was pumped from the headspace at 1 L min⁻¹ for 10 min through a molecular sieve (13X) to trap the entire volume of CO₂ to prevent fractionation of ¹³C. Before sampling for isotopic analysis, the headspace of the jars was scrubbed with CO₂-free air to remove any atmospheric CO₂. Respired CO₂ then reaccumulated in the jars for several days to accumulate 1 mg of respired CO₂-C. In the laboratory, the molecular sieve traps were heated to 625 °C to desorb CO₂, then purified and analysed for ¹³C (Bauer et al., 1992). The δ¹³C-CO₂ was analysed via direct injection into an isotope ratio mass spectrometer attached to a Gas Bench gas chromatograph (GC-IRMS; Finnigan Delta S, Bremen, Germany).

Stable isotope measurements
We quantified stable isotopes of C and N in the soils used in the incubation to compare isotopic composition of soils and the gas emitted from these soils. The δ¹³C/¹²C and the δ¹⁵N/¹⁴N isotopic ratios were measured with a Finnigan Delta Plus XL continuous flow mass spectrometer (Finnigan MAT GmbH, Bremen, Germany) coupled to a Costech CN Analyzer (Costech Instruments, Milan, Italy). Results were expressed as delta (δ) values and %₀ deviations from standard reference materials. We used NIST certified sucrose standard and peach as working standards (SRM 1547). From these data, apparent fractionation factors for N₀ calculated from repeated measurements of SRM 1547.

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The headspace gas of the aerobic incubation gas samples was collected after approximately 1-year of soil incubation using a 22-gauge needle attached to 25 mL plastic syringe. Two full syringes were injected sequentially into an evacuated 25 mL serum vial fitted with a butyl rubber septum, which was then transferred under positive pressure to the laboratory for δ¹³C-CO₂ and δ¹³C-CH₄ analyses. A portion of each sample was analysed via direct injection into the GC-IRMS (Finnigan Delta S) to determine δ¹³C-CO₂, δ¹³C-CH₄ and CH₄ concentration (Chanton et al., 2006). Laboratory standards were calibrated against NIST standards; precision for δ¹³C measurements was ±0.2‰ on the basis of repeated measurements of a working standard. From these data, apparent fractionation factors for ¹³C/¹²C were determined for each location and site. The apparent fractionation factors for CO₂ → CH₄ (α) were calculated after (Hines et al., 2008). Variability in α reflect differences in the relative importance of methanogenic pathways, where larger α values are typical of CO₂ reduction and smaller
Cumulative production of aerobic CO2 were analysed to check the accuracy of the 14C results, which were corrected for any mass-dependent fractionation of 13C (Stuiver & Polach, 1977). The negative precisions of reduced after the late 1950s (Trumbore, 2000). Typical 14C agreed with their reported consensus values within 1σ limits of error.

Radioarbon measurements

We collected CO2 from the headspace of aerobic jars as an indicator of approximate age of CO2 derived from the incubation after approximately 1 year of soil incubation. The samples were collected using the same method used for 14CO2 analysis described in the previous section. In the laboratory, the molecular sieve traps were heated to 625 °C to desorb CO2, and cryogenically purified in a vacuum line by slowly passing the air through a water-trap (at –70 °C) and a liquid nitrogen (LN2) trap. Purified CO2 samples were sealed in Pyrex tubes that were prebaked at 550 °C.

A portion of the sample CO2 was converted to graphite by reacting with H2 in presence of Fe catalyst (Vogel et al., 1987). The graphite samples were pressed into targets and sent to the W. M. Keck Carbon Cycle Accelerator Mass Spectrometry facility at University of California, Irvine (Southon et al., 2004) for 14C analysis. All 13C results were expressed as Δ14C after correcting for any mass-dependent fractionation of 13C (Stuiver & Polach, 1977). The negative Δ14C values of the samples indicate old C whose 14C content significantly decreased from its original amount by radioactive decay, whereas positive values of Δ14C indicate presence of excess nuclear bomb 14C produced after the late 1950s (Trumbore, 2000). Typical 1σ precisions of Δ14C measurements for modern samples were better than ±0.3‰. The average background Δ14C measured on coal blanks was –998.0 ± 0.5‰. Samples from Fourth International Radiocarbon Intercomparison exercise (Scott, 2003) were analysed to check the accuracy of the 14C results, which agreed with their reported consensus values within 1σ limits of error.

Data analyses

Carbon mineralization from the soil incubation experiment was calculated by multiplying the number of days by mean CO2 and CH4 production rates for those days. Cumulative C mineralization was calculated from the sum of C mineralization over 500 days of soil incubation. The cumulative C release under anaerobic conditions was also expressed in CO2 equivalents calculated by adding cumulative C release as CO2 with cumulative C release as CH4 multiplied by 25 (GWP of CH4). This accounts for the stronger warming potential of CH4 relative to CO2. Relative climate forcing (Schuur et al., 2008) was estimated for a single soil type using the ratio between cumulative C released as CO2 production under aerobic conditions divided by C release under anaerobic conditions as CO2 and CH4 production, expressed in CO2 equivalents by multiplying the CH4 by a GWP of 25 [Eqn (1)].

\[
\text{Relative climate forcing} = \frac{\text{Cumulative production of aerobic CO2}}{25 \times \text{cumulative production of anaerobic CH4}}
\]

Pearson’s correlation was used to examine the relationship among soil characteristics and relative climate forcing from cumulative gas production. Paired t-tests were used to compare initial β-glucosidase activity with activity after 125 days of incubation. Statistical analyses were conducted using JMP 7.0.2 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA) and R 2.11.1 (R Development Core Team).

Results

Soil substrate quality

The permafrost soils used in this study by design showed a wide range of mean soil%C; the lowest soil% C was found in deep Yedoma soils from Fox, Alaska and Siberia (1.1%), whereas the highest was found in surface organic horizons from the EML gradient sites in interior Alaska (Table 1). The %C and N were mass based calculation and highest %C in the permafrost mineral soil was 16.5 ± 0.3%, which is typical of cryoturbated organic matter mixed within the mineral soil at depth. The %N in soils ranged from 0.1% to 1.0%, which resulted in a range of C to N ratios from 5.4 to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Soil type</th>
<th>Location (N, E)</th>
<th>Depth (cm)</th>
<th>%C</th>
<th>%N</th>
<th>C : N</th>
<th>pH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Itkillik I</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(68.6, -149.7)</td>
<td>42-66</td>
<td>6.1 (0.2)</td>
<td>0.3 (0.0)</td>
<td>19.3 (0.4)</td>
<td>6.0 (0.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itkillik II</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(68.6, -149.7)</td>
<td>40-55.5</td>
<td>9.3 (4.0)</td>
<td>0.6 (0.3)</td>
<td>14.3 (0.8)</td>
<td>6.7 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sagavanirktok</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(68.6, -149.7)</td>
<td>42.5-66</td>
<td>5.0 (0.8)</td>
<td>0.2 (0.0)</td>
<td>19.8 (2.5)</td>
<td>6.2 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EML-mMin</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(63.9, -149.3)</td>
<td>56-76</td>
<td>13.3 (11.1)</td>
<td>0.6 (0.5)</td>
<td>23.8 (3.7)</td>
<td>6.5 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EML-mMod</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(63.9, -149.3)</td>
<td>62-90</td>
<td>9.4 (5.8)</td>
<td>0.3 (0.2)</td>
<td>26.2 (4.1)</td>
<td>6.6 (0.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EML-mExt</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(63.9, -149.3)</td>
<td>70-83</td>
<td>16.5 (0.3)</td>
<td>0.7 (0.0)</td>
<td>21.9 (0.9)</td>
<td>5.9 (0.7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ToolikKarst</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(68.6, -149.7)</td>
<td>Below 1 m</td>
<td>2.7 (0.6)</td>
<td>0.2 (0.0)</td>
<td>14.3 (0.0)</td>
<td>7.2 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(65.0, -149.7)</td>
<td>Within 10 m</td>
<td>1.1 (0.6)</td>
<td>0.1 (0.0)</td>
<td>6.8 (2.3)</td>
<td>9.1 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siberia</td>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>(68.8, 161.4)</td>
<td>Within 10 m</td>
<td>1.1 (0.1)</td>
<td>0.1 (0.0)</td>
<td>8.9 (0.0)</td>
<td>8.4 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EML-oMin</td>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>(63.9, -149.3)</td>
<td>5-15</td>
<td>40.6 (1.5)</td>
<td>1.0 (0.1)</td>
<td>40.7 (6.4)</td>
<td>5.3 (0.1)</td>
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<td>EML-oMod</td>
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<td>5-15</td>
<td>41.4 (0.8)</td>
<td>1.0 (0.2)</td>
<td>45.5 (9.9)</td>
<td>5.2 (0.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EML-oExt</td>
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<td>(63.9, -149.3)</td>
<td>5-15</td>
<td>40.1 (3.3)</td>
<td>0.9 (0.0)</td>
<td>45.8 (3.4)</td>
<td>5.5 (0.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
45.8 (Table 1). Soil pH ranged from 5.2 to 9.1, where surface organic soils were slightly more acidic than deeper mineral soils in the same sampling locations. The deep mineral soils with low %C showed higher soil pH levels than shallow mineral soils ranging from pH 7.2 to 9.1. Soil pH presented in our study was slightly higher than those reported for typical soil pH of the North Slope (Gough et al., 2000), likely because the reported values were pH of surface organic soil. Whereas, our soils were mineral layer soils collected within the surface 1 m below the organic layer.

Carbon mineralization under aerobic and anaerobic conditions

Overall, the magnitude of CO₂ production rates per gram of dry soil were an order of magnitude greater under aerobic conditions than anaerobic conditions and in organic soils than in mineral soils (Fig. 2). Organic soils showed sharp peaks or sharp decline in the rate of CO₂ production in the beginning, whereas mineral soils showed a gradual increase over the first 3–5 days of the incubation and thereafter gradually declined. Under aerobic conditions, CO₂ production rates reached a quasi steady-state baseline level by 30 days of incubation, whereas under anaerobic conditions CO₂ production rates did not reach a baseline level until 150 days of incubation. On the other hand, the CH₄ production rates from some soil samples, such as Itkillik I and II and organic layers from the EML gradient sites did not reach steady-state until 300 days of incubation. The CH₄ production rates were extremely low in mineral soils especially in the soils with low %C content.

Cumulative C release under aerobic and anaerobic conditions

In this study, we expressed cumulative C release in two different forms; first, cumulative C release per gram of dry soil that shows quantitative release of C (expressed as mg C gdw⁻¹ soil) and second, cumulative C release

Fig. 2 The rate of CO₂ and CH₄ production over 500 days of permafrost incubation at 15 °C under aerobic and anaerobic conditions. Error bars indicate standard errors (n = 3). Note that the x-axes for aerobic CO₂ are split between 0 and 30 days and 30–600 days, and the scale of y-axes are different for each panel.
per gram of soil C that shows the qualitative nature of the stored C (expressed as mg C g⁻¹ C) independent of C quantity.

On a per gram soil basis, cumulative C release was 4–10 times greater under aerobic conditions than anaerobic conditions over 500 days of incubation at 15 °C (Table 2). In addition, the magnitude of C release was over 20 times greater in organic soils than in mineral soils (Table 2). Although, the magnitude of C release was greater under aerobic conditions, C release under anaerobic and aerobic conditions was highly correlated (Data S1 and S2). Cumulative C released under aerobic conditions over 500 days of incubation ranged from 1.07 to 3.42 mg C g⁻¹ soil in mineral soils and from 39.60 to 71.89 mg C g⁻¹ soil in organic soils (Fig. 3 and Table 2). Under anaerobic conditions, total C release was from 0.16 to 0.54 mg C g⁻¹ soil (up to 0.12 mg C g⁻¹ soil as CH₄) in mineral soils and from 5.85 to 7.04 mg C g⁻¹ soil (0.18 to 0.59 mg C g⁻¹ soil as CH₄) in organic soils (Fig. 3a, b and Table 2). Total C release was greater in organic soils than mineral soils from the North Slope, whereas Alaska soils (Itkillik I, Sagavanirktok, and Toolik-Karst) showed the highest CH₄ contribution to total C release (up to 27% of total anaerobic C release as CH₄ Table 2). In most other mineral soils under anaerobic conditions, cumulative C released as CH₄ was as low as 0.2% of total C release.

The patterns of cumulative C release across sites altered when fluxes were expressed per gram of soil C as this metric eliminates differences in C quality (amount) leaving only differences in C concentration (Fig. 3c, d). The range of fluxes under aerobic conditions was 15.70–182.08 mg C g⁻¹ C both in mineral and organic soils over 500 days of permafrost soil incubation. Cumulative C released per gram of soil C in Siberia and Fox soil samples were statistically not different than the three organic soils and were generally higher than the other mineral soils. The range of cumulative C released per gram of soil C under anaerobic conditions was 2.72–35.19 mg C g⁻¹ C (0.02–1.44 mg C g⁻¹ C as CH₄) in mineral and organic soils over 500 days of permafrost soil incubation, with the Siberia and Fox soils having the highest C release of all samples by this metric, even greater than the organic soils.

The CO₂ and CH₄ released under anaerobic conditions, expressed together in CO₂ equivalents, ranged from 0.17 to 20.51 CO₂ equivalent per gram of dry soil and 3.63 to 50.40 CO₂ equivalent per gram of soil C, which resulted in relative climate forcing ranging from 1.4 to 7.1 across all soil types (Table 2). Mean relative climate forcing values are all over 1, which represents that the net warming effect of the aerobic incubations was greater than the anaerobic incubations. Soils with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>CH₄-C</th>
<th>CO₂-C</th>
<th>CO₂-C/CH₄</th>
<th>RCF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itkillik II</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
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<td>Sagavanirktok</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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<td>EML-mExt</td>
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<td>1.27</td>
<td>5.7</td>
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<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
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<td>1.28</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siberia</td>
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<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
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<td>6.77</td>
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<td>EML-oExt</td>
<td>71.89</td>
<td>7.04</td>
<td>9.70</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**: Cumulative C release per gram of dry soil and per gram of soil C for over 500 days of incubation at 15 °C under aerobic conditions. Cumulative C release under aerobic and anaerobic conditions was highly correlated (Data S1 and S2). Cumulative C released under aerobic conditions over 500 days of incubation ranged from 1.07 to 3.42 mg C g⁻¹ soil in mineral soils and from 39.60 to 71.89 mg C g⁻¹ soil in organic soils (Fig. 3a, b and Table 2). Under anaerobic conditions, total C release was from 0.16 to 0.54 mg C g⁻¹ soil (up to 0.12 mg C g⁻¹ soil as CH₄) in mineral soils and from 5.85 to 7.04 mg C g⁻¹ soil (0.18 to 0.59 mg C g⁻¹ soil as CH₄) in organic soils (Fig. 3a, b and Table 2). Total C release was greater in organic soils than mineral soils from the North Slope, whereas Alaska soils (Itkillik I, Sagavanirktok, and Toolik-Karst) showed the highest CH₄ contribution to total C release (up to 27% of total anaerobic C release as CH₄ Table 2). In most other mineral soils under anaerobic conditions, cumulative C released as CH₄ was as low as 0.2% of total C release.

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Soil \(\beta\)-glucosidase activity decreased in aerobic and anaerobic incubations over 125 days, corresponding with the observed decrease in respiration through time. Initial soil \(\beta\)-glucosidase activity ranged from 0.035 to 2.12 mmol g\(^{-1}\) h\(^{-1}\) (Fig. 4), and was over 30 times greater in organic soils than in mineral soils. After incubation, however, the ratio between the rate of \(\beta\)-glucosidase activity for both under organic soils and mineral soils decreased to 15 and 8 under aerobic conditions and anaerobic conditions respectively. The range of soil \(\beta\)-glucosidase activity in mineral soils was 0.035–0.11 mmol g\(^{-1}\) h\(^{-1}\), and spanned 1.36–2.12 mmol g\(^{-1}\) h\(^{-1}\) in organic soils. After 125 days of incubation under aerobic and anaerobic conditions, mean soil \(\beta\)-glucosidase activity was significantly lower than initial activity in both aerobic \((P = 0.013)\) and anaerobic conditions \((P = 0.002)\). In all cases, soil \(\beta\)-glucosidase activity was lower in the soils incubated under anaerobic conditions \((P = 0.029)\) than that under aerobic conditions, but this did not show any clear patterns between mineral and organic soils.

Correlation between C release and soil characteristics
Cumulative C released per gram of dry soil over 500 days of incubation, expressed in CO\(_2\) equivalents for both the anaerobic and aerobic incubations, was
positively correlated to %C, %N and C to N ratios of soil and negatively correlated to soil pH \((P < 0.001\text{ for all regressions}; \text{Data S3})\), confirming the quantitative aspects of soil C and N in controlling permafrost C release. The variability in relative climate forcing was not statistically correlated to any of the substrate quality measured in our study (regression not shown). Correlations of cumulative C released per gram of soil C and soil%C, %N and pH (Fig. 5) were not as apparent than that shown with C released per gram of dry soil (Data S3); there seem to be U-shape correlation between C release and %C in soil and soil pH suggesting that soil quality has some important defining parameters not captured by bulk soil characteristic measurements.

Isotopic signatures of soil and gases produced during the incubation

The \(\delta^{13}C\) signatures in bulk soils were statistically not different in mineral and organic soils, but ranged from \(-24\%\) to \(-30\%\) across sites reflecting the imprint of the \(\text{C}_3\) plant photosynthetic pathway combined with decomposition processes (Table 3). The \(\delta^{15}N\) signatures showed difference in mineral and organic soils and were correlated to the approximate depth of the soils \((P = 0.002, \ r = 0.787)\). The mineral soils were more enriched in \(\delta^{15}N\) \((0.42-2.86\%\)\) than the organic soils \((-0.68-0.04\%\)\), and soil \(\delta^{15}N\) was negatively correlated to soil%N \((P = 0.023, \text{Table 1})\). The \(\delta^{13}C\) and \(\delta^{15}N\) bi-plot showed clear cluster of soil types (Data S4) and were multicorrelated to the depth of soils \((P < 0.001, \ r = 0.810)\).

Most of the \(\delta^{13}C\)-CO\(_2\) from aerobic respiration was significantly enriched relative to the \(\delta^{13}C\) signatures of bulk soil material (Table 3). Among the samples, \(\delta^{13}C\)-CO\(_2\) from aerobic respiration ranged from \(-27.56\) to \(-20.39\%\). On the other hand, \(\delta^{13}C\)-CO\(_2\) and \(\delta^{13}C\)-CH\(_4\) from anaerobic respiration showed differences within the samples reflecting the importance of CH\(_4\) production overall in addition to CH\(_4\) production pathway in our incubation study. The range of \(\delta^{13}C\)-CO\(_2\) in anaerobic incubation was from \(-23.45\) to \(-11.01\%\), and the range of \(\delta^{13}C\)-CH\(_4\) in anaerobic incubation was from \(-78.62\) to \(-44.57\%\). Enriched \(\delta^{13}C\)-CO\(_2\) over the level of atmosphere in some samples was not a result of mixing with atmospheric CO\(_2\), but presumably due to CH\(_4\) production. The apparent fractionation factors \((\alpha)\) indicated that there was a shift in CH\(_4\) production pathway from organic \((\alpha > 1.050, \text{CO}_2\text{ reduction})\) to mineral \((\alpha < 1.050, \text{acetate decarboxylation})\) soils collected from the three EML sites. All mineral soils showed \(1.030 < \alpha < 1.050\), which indicates that the dominant CH\(_4\) production pathway was acetate decarboxylation (Fig. 6).

The \(\Delta^{14}CO_2\) values of respired CO\(_2\) in the aerobic incubations ranged from \(-390\) to \(-207\%\) in mineral soils (Table 3), which represent a radiocarbon age of 1800–3910 years before present, although this is likely to be derived from soil C representing a mixture of ages. This radiocarbon age was positively correlated to the approximate depth of soil samples used in this incubation study \((P = 0.103, \ r = 0.725)\). Respired CO\(_2\) in the organic surface soil layer that we sampled for radiocarbon showed a positive value, reflecting the influence
of modern atomic weapons testing. It is important to note that the CO2 trapped for 14C analysis was conducted after 1 year of permafrost soil incubation and the most labile soil C had already been released, but does indicate that old C is available for microbial decomposition at that time in the incubation.

Discussion

Our measurements of permafrost C release under aerobic and anaerobic conditions over 500 days showed that the rate of total C release (quantity of C) was approximately six times greater under aerobic conditions than anaerobic conditions regardless of soil type (Table 2). Supporting this, β-glucosidase activity was twice greater under aerobic conditions compared with anaerobic conditions (Fig. 4). In general, higher soil enzyme activity indicates faster breakdown of C bonds, and suppressed enzyme activity results in lower rate of C release. Lower enzyme activity in an anaerobic incubation compared with aerobic incubation in our study corresponds with lower rate of C release. Variability in relative climate forcing compared with total C release was due to variability in CH4 production with its high GWP. The disparity between total C release and relative climate forcing implies that the effects on climate from anaerobic C release were greater than simple quantitative C loss.

The patterns of aerobic and anaerobic C release were highly correlated (Data S1), suggesting that substrate quality of the soil samples influenced both aerobic and anaerobic decomposition similarly. Relative climate forcing was most correlated to variability in CH4 production (Data S1 and S2), indicating that the form of C

Table 3 Stable isotopic signatures of C and N in permafrost soils used in the incubation. Stable isotopic signatures of C from respired CO2 and CH4 and radioactive carbon signatures of respired CO2 from aerobic incubations. The values are mean of three samples, and values in parenthesis are standard errors. The respired CO2 and CH4 for δ13C and Δ14C analyses were trapped at day 365 from the beginning of soil incubation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>δ13C (%o)</th>
<th>δ15N (%o)</th>
<th>Aerobic δ13CO2 (%o)</th>
<th>Anaerobic δ13CO2 (%o)</th>
<th>δ13CH4 (%o)</th>
<th>Δ14C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Itkillik I</td>
<td>-26.28 (0.03)</td>
<td>1.90 (0.07)</td>
<td>-22.80 (2.41)</td>
<td>-11.01 (2.13)</td>
<td>-44.57 (5.03)</td>
<td>-390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Itkillik II</td>
<td>-26.27 (1.03)</td>
<td>0.79 (0.11)</td>
<td>-22.73 (1.15)</td>
<td>-15.81 (1.90)</td>
<td>-54.80 (4.91)</td>
<td>-235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sagavanirktok</td>
<td>-29.52 (2.42)</td>
<td>0.42 (0.37)</td>
<td>-25.82 (0.67)</td>
<td>-16.71 (1.39)</td>
<td>-47.75 (3.40)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.76 (0.09)</td>
<td>-24.17 (0.61)</td>
<td>-16.03 (0.61)</td>
<td>-48.31 (3.70)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EML-mMod</td>
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<td>-26.18 (0.21)</td>
<td>-23.41 (0.50)</td>
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<td>-300</td>
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<td>EML-mExt</td>
<td>-26.96 (0.12)</td>
<td>0.84 (0.06)</td>
<td>-26.27 (0.17)</td>
<td>-23.12 (0.20)</td>
<td>-56.16 (--)</td>
<td>-368</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toolik Karst</td>
<td>-25.40 (0.19)</td>
<td>1.13 (0.45)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-7.52 (0.81)</td>
<td>-60.42 (9.65)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox</td>
<td>-25.87 (0.55)</td>
<td>2.19 (1.04)</td>
<td>-22.82 (--)</td>
<td>-22.26 (0.39)</td>
<td>-55.07 (--)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siberia</td>
<td>-24.36 (0.33)</td>
<td>2.86 (0.04)</td>
<td>-24.48 (1.90)</td>
<td>-23.45 (0.43)</td>
<td>-51.42 (--)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EML-oMin</td>
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<td>0.04 (0.64)</td>
<td>-24.61 (0.91)</td>
<td>-17.59 (1.98)</td>
<td>-71.81 (10.91)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>EML-oMod</td>
<td>-26.40 (0.21)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.31)</td>
<td>-24.78 (1.01)</td>
<td>-13.97 (4.56)</td>
<td>-78.62 (5.46)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>EML-oExt</td>
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<td>-0.68 (0.26)</td>
<td>-26.69 (0.44)</td>
<td>-20.52 (1.40)</td>
<td>-65.14 (4.32)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
release is as important as the quantity of C release in understanding the potential effects on climate from total C release. However, even with high GWP of CH₄, the potential effects on climate from permafrost C release were greater under aerobic conditions because of the offsetting factor of lower overall C release quantity under anaerobic conditions. Therefore, our results suggest that it is crucial to understand the balance between CO₂ and CH₄ release to better predict effects on present and future climate change under dynamic permafrost landscape and soil conditions that influence the rate and quality of greenhouse gas release.

On a per gram of soil basis, the magnitude of C release was over 20 times greater in organic soils than mineral soils (Fig. 3a, b). Typically, organic matter mineralizes at a much faster rate in organic soils than in mineral soils not only due to larger quantity of labile C available in organic soils but also due to more diverse microbial community present in organic soils than mineral soils (Schimel & Chapin, 2006). Dominant microbial community was shown to be different in active layer and deep permafrost soil, but this may reflect a lower diversity of organic substrates in the deeper soil (Waldrop et al., 2010). On a per grams C basis, however, C release in organic and mineral soils were statistically not different under aerobic and anaerobic conditions (Fig. 3c, d). Faster C release per gram C shown in some of the soils with lowest C content (i.e. Fox and Siberia) supports previous studies that suggest deep permafrost C may be very labile especially in Yedoma soils, where surface accumulation of mineral soil trapped relatively fresh organic matter in syngenetic permafrost (Dutta et al., 2006; Zimov et al., 2006; Waldrop et al., 2010).

The role of soil C and N in organic matter decomposition is well understood; organic matter decomposes faster when larger quantity of C and N are labile and the quality of N (represented as C to N ratio) is higher (Aerts, 1997). Therefore, the rate of C release per gram of dry soil should be linearly correlated to %C (Data S3), but correcting the rate of C release per gram of soil C removes the bias of C quantity embedded in soil C. The U-shape correlation between cumulative C release per gram of soil C and soil%C (Fig. 5) shown in our study suggest that deep permafrost soils are very labile to microorganisms to utilize even though there is less C available and they may have distinct characteristics compared with other mineral soils within the surface 1 m. This may result from the differences in original permafrost C preservation between loess and alluvial deposited Yedoma soils (Zimov et al., 2006) and surface permafrost soils accumulated as a result cryoturbation.

Although the correlation between the rate of permafrost C release per gram of soil and soil%C, %N and pH was apparent (Data S3), the correlation between C release per gram C and the same soil characteristics seemed less clear (Fig. 5). The role of soil pH seems more complex: soil pH and the rate of C release or the rate of organic matter decomposition has shown a positive relationship (Chapin et al., 2002; Fierer & Jackson, 2006), negative relationship (Bridgham et al., 1998), U-shape relationship (Ste-Marie & Pare, 1999) and no-relationship (Cotrufo et al., 1994). Several studies have shown that soil pH affects the rate of CH₄ production (Goodwin & Zeikus, 1987), but less is known about the controls on the rate of organic matter decomposition under anaerobic conditions and the balance between CO₂ and CH₄ production. In addition, soil pH alters soil microbial community (Lauber et al., 2009). In our study, majority of the lower pH soils belonged to organic soil layer, and we were not able to clearly understand the effects of soil pH either on the rate of C release, nor the quality of C release from suite of permafrost soils we incubated.

In contrast to our expectations, soil substrate quality as measured did not explain the variability in CH₄ production (Data S3), nor did it explain relative climate forcing (graph not shown). We investigated variability in the pathway of CH₄ production, to better understand its production characteristics. The two major pathways of methanogenesis are acetate decarboxylation and CO₂ reduction. The ratio between δ¹³ C-CH₄ and δ¹³C-CO₂ (Fig. 6) suggest that CO₂ reduction was relatively dominant in organic soils, and acetate decarboxylation was dominant in mineral soils. Globally, the dominant pathway of CH₄ production is generally by acetate decarboxylation (Lovley & Klug, 1986; Conrad, 2009). However, CO₂ reduction is known to be the major pathway of CH₄ production in northern peatland environments (Hornibrook et al., 1997; Horn et al., 2003), with the exception of upper layers of nutrient rich fens (Kelley et al., 1992; Chasar et al., 2000) and Siberian mires (Kotsyurbenko et al., 2004), where acetate decarboxylation is the dominant mechanism. Unfortunately, illumination of the dominant pathway of CH₄ production still did not explain the variability in relative climate forcing from our study. It is important to note that our observations of δ¹³C-CO₂ and δ¹³C-CH₄ were taken at exactly 1 year after the starting of the incubation. As the jars have not been opened for the duration of 1 year incubation for the anaerobic conditions, our results from mixture of full year C release may be different from the observations taken during the early stages of soil incubation or field measurements that emphasizes C release from the labile pool. We speculate that the rate of CH₄ production may be influenced by availability of electron acceptors than the common substrate qualities or...
dominant mechanism of CH₄ production such as Fe (III) (Dubinsky et al., 2010).

The CO₂ and CH₄ production estimated from our study represented the potential C release and climate effects from permafrost soils under aerobic and anaerobic conditions. However, our laboratory observations do not project a complete and realistic balance between uptake and release of different greenhouse gases in permafrost zone on a landscape scale. A proportion of CH₄ may be consumed by methanotrophs in the soil surface and become oxidized even before it mixes with atmosphere (Raghoebarsing et al., 2005; Kip et al., 2010). Spotty CH₄ production including CH₄ ebullition from thermokarst lakes (Walter et al., 2006) can only be observed on a large scale, but they can be a significant source of greenhouse gas production, although our incubations should have measured total CH₄ release due to complete flushing while sampling (Walter et al., 2007). Lastly, it is important to indicate that there may be soil CH₄ uptake under aerobic conditions (Nesbit & Breitenbeck, 1992; Le Mer & Roger, 2001) that would reduce warming effects on climate.

We addressed the overall question of whether thawing permafrost C is likely to have a greater influence on climate if it decomposes in an aerobic environment or an anaerobic environment. In summary, our study showed that permafrost C released in relatively aerobic upland systems is likely to result in greater effects on climate compared with permafrost C released in an anaerobic wetland environment, despite the release of CH₄ that occurs from anaerobic conditions. Although numerous studies have shown permafrost C release, we show additional effects of greenhouse gas emissions on further climate change under aerobic and anaerobic conditions that may be created as a result of permafrost thaw and thermokarst development. Furthermore, our results will help parameterize and validate ecosystem and climate models of C release from permafrost thaw and soil inundation, which creates a positive feedback to further climate change via greenhouse gas emissions.

Acknowledgements
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References

CLIMATE EFFECT OF PERMAFROST C RELEASE

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article.

Data S1. Correlation matrix for C release over 500 days of permafrost incubation at 15 °C under aerobic and anaerobic conditions per gram of dry soil. Each panel indicate total CO2-C release under aerobic conditions (aeroCO2), total CO2-C release under anaerobic conditions (anaeroCO2), total CH4-C release under anaerobic conditions (anaeroCH4), total C release under anaerobic conditions (anaero-total), and relative climate forcing (RCF). The correlation coefficients are indicated in the table.

Data S2. Correlation matrix for C release over 500 days of permafrost incubation at 15 °C under aerobic and anaerobic conditions per gram of soil C. Each panel indicate total CO2-C release under aerobic conditions (aeroCO2), total CO2-C release under anaerobic conditions (anaeroCO2), total CH4-C release under anaerobic conditions (anaeroCH4), total C release under anaerobic conditions (anaero-total), and relative climate forcing (RCF). The correlation coefficients are indicated in the table.

Data S3. The relationship between %C, %N, C to N ratio, and soil pH in soils and CO2 equivalent climate forcing from C mineralized per soil dry weight after 538 days of incubation at 15 °C under aerobic and anaerobic conditions. The correlations shown here were all statistically significant (P < 0.001).

Data S4. The patterns of soil δ13C and δ15N used in the incubation study (A) and their distribution with approximate depth of soil profile (B).

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Supporting Information