

Greenhouse Gas Retrievals for the CO2M mission using the FOCAL method: First Performance Estimates

by S. Noël et al.

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Reply to Referee 2 (Philipp Hochstaffl)

We thank the referee for the review and the comments. They will be considered in the revised version of the paper. In the following, the original reviewer comments are given in *italics*, our answer in normal font.

Comprehension

The manuscript presents an assessment of the FOCAL-CO2M retrieval algorithm's capabilities in quantifying CO2 and CH4 enhancements from space. The study communicates its limitations, is concise and articulated with good clarity throughout most parts. However, there are some aspects that should be improved.

General comments

- 1. The SCIATRAN setup does not fully represent the complex and varied conditions of the actual atmosphere. While useful for controlled testing and isolating error analysis it raises questions about the algorithm's performance in real-world scenarios, especially under unpredictable atmospheric conditions. I am concerned that the budget, especially in terms of the mean noise error, could be depleted if we incorporate additional error sources. I'd like to see a more in-depth exploration of the limitations. To examine meteorology's influence, one could alter variables such as humidity and temperature profiles in SCIATRAN, aligning them with their respective uncertainties.*

We agree with the referee, that the SCIATRAN simulations (as any simulations) are not fully representative for real-world conditions. Indeed, we expect to have larger systematic errors for real measurements, because many error sources have not been considered. This is why we list all these limitations and explicitly do not state that we will fulfil the requirements for real measurements, but we think we are on a good way, see e.g. the last sentence of the conclusions:

“the current results give good confidence that the FOCAL-CO2M retrieval is able to fulfil the product quality requirements of the CO2M mission.”

Regarding meteorology, we assume in the retrieval (also for real data) that the provided a-priori data are on average correct, which is a reasonable assumption for CAMS data. Of course, for single soundings meteorology will not be perfect, which will then result in an additional bias for the retrieved data products. This will then increase the scatter of the data and therefore affect also the systematic error estimate, which is derived from the standard deviation of the bias. Because these are noise-like errors, we expect no large effect on the global/continental scale (low-pass filtered) data. For the local scale (high-pass filtered data), this has an impact, but these data are dominated by (non-systematic) instrumental noise, which leaves some margin for additional errors. Therefore we think that uncertainties in the meteorological data would not much affect the statistical results for the systematic errors.

Note that – since we are dealing with statistical quantities here – it is in general not possible to quantify the effect of uncertainties in the meteorology on the systematic errors by a limited set of tests with varying variables. We would have to re-produce at least a month of spectral data (probably more,

depending on how many variables we vary), process them, update the post-processing and apply it. Then, we would still not be sure how representative our simulations are for real measurements.

Therefore, we think it is better to assess these issues with real measurements.

As written in the title of the paper, we only present a first performance assessment here, which just shows that our algorithm is capable to fulfil the requirements for a specific set of test data.

2. *Are there alternative reference spectra for CO2M that employ a more sophisticated instrument model? Assuming a perfect instrument model presents a limitation.*

We think that the used instrument model is appropriate for the application addressed in this manuscript, where the focus is on retrieval algorithm related errors. Note that instrument related errors have been investigated in detail in the context of several ESA studies (e.g., Buchwitz et al., 2020), resulting in detailed instrument requirements (ESA, 2020). (All references are given in the paper.)

3. *It might be beneficial to create a distinct section for the post-processing phase, as it involves more than just basic threshold filtering, unlike the pre-processing step.*

We will add more information about post-processing (especially bias correction) in the revised version of the paper.

4. *Does SCIATRAN's treatment of aerosols or the aerosol input include assumptions or simplifications that are advantageous to the FOCAL setup? Additional details would aid in interpreting the results, especially regarding Figures 13 and 14.*

In general, aerosols are described in SCIATRAN by microphysical parameters and specific scattering functions. In FOCAL, only a single effective scattering layer is considered which has to account for all kinds of scattering including Rayleigh, aerosols, and scattering of residual clouds if present. We also do not use any external a-priori information on aerosols in FOCAL. So, the treatment of aerosols is completely different.

We will add some more information on aerosol treatment by SCIATRAN in the revised paper.

5. *What is the consequence of an imperfect cloud screening during the pre-processing phase? In reality, there may be subpixel residual clouds (smaller than 400 x 400 m²) that go undetected.*

For the simulated data we currently only have fully cloudy or cloud-free scenes, no partially cloudy scenes. Therefore we cannot give quantitative information about the impact of subpixel residual clouds. However, we agree that we would need a quite strict cloud filtering for real data and still there could be remnant clouds. From experience with other satellite missions we know that this problem can be handled, e.g. by an additional cloud filtering method. Real data are needed to make this decision.

Since the requirements on systematic errors are applicable to cloud-free scenarios, undetected clouds do not affect the fulfilment of the requirements.

6. *I can't find a discussion how a priori estimates affect the error margins in the FOCAL retrieval. Are the priors used in the FOCAL fit, other than the target quantities, equivalent to their true values?*

For CO₂, CH₄ and H₂O we use the (true) CAMS values as a-priori. The a-priori for the surface albedo is estimated from the measured reflectances. All other a-priori values are fixed. This information is given in Table 4 (state vector elements).

As shown in the paper, the retrieval results for a fixed 400 ppm CO₂ a-priori are very similar to the ones using the true values as a-priori. We also assume quite large a-priori errors (see the discussion on uncertainty reduction later). This indicates that the choice of the a-priori does not affect the estimation of systematic errors in a significant way.

7. *Once real data becomes available in 2026, what will the post-processing strategy entail? Will parameters be computed on a monthly, quarterly, or yearly basis? Could you provide insights into any existing plans or considerations on this matter?*

To our knowledge, this strategy is not fixed yet. As written in the paper, there will be an update of the post-processing data base during the commissioning phase. The decision if later updates are required has to be taken based on validation and monitoring results.

Note that for our GOSAT data processing with FOCAL (see references in paper) a single post-processing data base determined from one year of data was successfully applied to the whole time series 2009–2021.

8. *What is the rationale behind selecting a 5-layer profile fit? What kind of analysis lead to this choice. Could you provide information on the errors associated with each of these layers?*

Nadir measurements have only a limited vertical information, there are typically only 2-3 independent information points for CO₂ and CH₄ profiles. There is therefore no use in a large number of retrieval layers. Our choice of 5 layers (each containing the same number of particles) is based on the experience with previous missions (OCO-2, GOSAT, GOSAT-2) and simulations (Reuter et al. FOCAL papers, references in the paper). Note that pressure and temperature profiles used in the FOCAL forward model have 20 layers.

We get uncertainties for each layer, these are then combined in the total XCO₂ and XCH₄ uncertainty. This is provided together with the XCO₂ and XCH₄ and corresponding averaging kernel matrices in the L2 data product. The profiles themselves are not part of the operational data product, and there are no requirements on these, therefore there is no need to discuss them in the paper.

9. *To what extent is the 400 ppm a priori profile scaled in each atmospheric layer, and does the lowest layer contain the majority of the enhancement? Additionally, what advantages does fitting five layers offer, particularly in the study of anthropogenic emissions, when it's known that most emissions are concentrated in the lower levels?*

Although the data product is only the total column, fitting a (coarse) profile has proven to give more accurate results than simply scaling an a-priori profile. This is especially useful for anthropogenic emissions, where the enhancement is at the lower altitudes. In case of the plumes, the retrieved enhancement for the 400 ppm a-priori is indeed only visible in the two lowest layers.

10. *A more fundamental error analysis such as information on the reduction in uncertainty from priori to the a posteriori state would be appreciated.*

The total a-posteriori error of XCO₂ (XCH₄) is about 0.6 ppm (5.8 ppb), i.e. very similar to the corresponding noise errors. This compares to an assumed a-priori uncertainty (see table 4) of 5 ppm (corrected number) for CO₂ and 45 ppb for CH₄. This means the CO₂ uncertainty is reduced by the retrieval by a about a factor of 8.

We will add this information in the paper.

11. *Is the term “full physics” (FP) appropriate when the forward model in FOCAL is notably simpler than models like SCIATRAN and relies on approximations and parameterizations for various physical aspects? Additionally, considering that bias correction in the post-processing step is primarily necessary due to the limitations of the forward model, the use of the term “full physics” may be open to question. Nevertheless, I understand that it's a recognized term within the scientific community.*

The term “full physics” is indeed not well defined, but it is commonly used. As written in the paper, we mainly use it to distinguish between the directly retrieved products and the proxy products derived from ratios of retrieved quantities and model data.

To our understanding, a FP model describes the propagation of light through the atmosphere while considering physical processes like absorption and scattering. Each model uses different assumptions and limitations or parameterisations, those for FOCAL are just different to those for e.g. SCIATRAN. Having a post-processing to filter/correct the retrieved values does not make a method “non physical”. In fact, all greenhouse gas retrievals require a bias correction to meet the stringent requirements.

Specific comments

1. *l. 5: XCO₂ and XCH₄, but no XNO₂?*
Yes, NO₂ is provided as total column, not column mixing ratio.
2. *l 15: Any reason for choosing 2015?*
2015 was chosen because EUMETSAT provided the observational geometry data for this year.
3. *15: Maybe “caused” instead of “due”?*
Will be changed.
4. *19-20: Does this imply that the mission requirements could potentially be met without the MAP instrument?*
The current study shows that FOCAL-CO₂M may (based on the specific set of simulated input test data) meet the requirements without MAP. However, due to the mentioned limitations, it is not sure if this will be the case for real data. In any case, we will investigate if the inclusion of MAP data (once available) will improve our results.
5. *26: Is “However, ...” applicable here? Consider rephrasing.*
We will slightly rephrase this sentence.
6. *41-44: In principle, would a single satellite be sufficient to fulfill the mission? Is the MVS considered operational with just one CO₂M satellite instrument in orbit?*
In principle, monitoring of CO₂ and CH₄ is possible with a single satellite, but multiple satellites are beneficial to increase spatial and temporal coverage.
7. *125: Is the thickness of the single scattering layer dependent on the vertical atmospheric grid utilized in the forward model? Could you please specify the thickness of the layer in the context of this study?*
The optical thickness (optical depth) of the scattering layer is derived during the fit (together with the layer height and the Ångström coefficient). All these quantities are not related to the layering of the atmosphere. In terms of geometrical thickness, the scattering layer in FOCAL is actually assumed to be infinitely thin.
We will remove “thin” in this sentence to avoid a misleading interpretation.
8. *143-144: Does this require an updated FOCAL version which includes MAP instrument data?*
Data over ocean / glint can be processed with the same FOCAL version. However, the post-processing data bases need to be adapted, this work is currently ongoing.
9. *145: Why is a single Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR) threshold established when the requirement on line 64 specifies different reference albedos for various channels? Additionally, is the average SNR within each band used, or is the SNR specified at a particular channel position taken into account?*
The SNR limit is only used to (roughly) filter out data with low signal before the inversion. We use for this the signal at spectral regions outside of strong absorption (the chosen wavelengths given in the paper).
This SNR filter is not related to the requirement on random errors, which is specified and only valid for a certain scenario.
10. *166: Does this paragraph refer to the second filtering step?*
Yes, we will clarify this.
11. *170: This should be mentioned earlier, maybe already around line 164 or 166.*
This paragraph describes the bias correction (which we already mention in line 156), the paragraphs before are related to filtering. Therefore we think this paragraph should stay at this position.

12. 175-179: *Consider to improve clarity.*

We will try to clarify this with references to the methods described above.

13. 195: *Consider providing additional details on how the forward model error differs when applied to real data compared to theoretical or simulated data.*

The forward model error is determined from the relation between the specified noise on the spectra and the fit residuals, i.e. it depends on the input data. We do not have any real data yet, so we do not know how this will change.

14. 241-243: *Consider to rephrase, in particularly “It should be noted ...” as is not very clear to me.*

We will try to clarify this in the revised version.

15. 242-243: *The standard deviation after application of filters is 0.2 and 0.5 ppm. Confirm that the latter represents the mean noise error? Also confirm that the smaller mean difference value suggests that the high-pass standard deviation is dominated by (random) noise?*

The latter (high-pass filtered) value contains systematic errors (those which we want to verify) as well as random (noise) errors. The noise error (given also in the plots) is mainly determined by the instrument noise and of similar magnitude as the high-pass filtered value. This indicates that the high-pass filtered value is dominated by noise and thus the systematic error is much lower.

This is not related to the mean difference, which is not relevant for the standard deviation.

16. 263: *Please confirm whether the 0.5 ppm standard deviation, observed after applying filters, represents the mean noise error. Also, does the smaller mean difference value indicate that the high-pass standard deviation is predominantly influenced by random noise?*

See answer to previous question.

17. Fig. 8: *Do you have an estimate of the extent to which an inaccurate prior (a priori that doesn't represent the truth) might impact the fitting of CH₄ on the various levels?*

We have not explicitly checked the impact of e.g. a constant CH₄ a-priori on the retrieval results, but we expect that this impact is as for CO₂ rather small.

18. 278-280: *Is there a specific reason why a recalculation of the post-processing database for the entire year 2015 is not being conducted? Is it due to cost constraints, technical limitations, or other factors?*

We could have determined the post-processing data base using the measurements of the entire year as input. In fact, this would improve the results, because also seasonal variations could be taken into account. We decided to limit the input data for the post-processing to one month for the following reasons:

- (a) We wanted to be as close to “real” conditions as possible. During the commissioning phase we need to re-determine the post-processing data base, and there will be most likely only a limited amount of data available at that time.
- (b) With the current setup it is possible to show that the post-processing is working also for data / time periods which were not used during generation of the data base.

We will add this information in the revised version.

19. Fig. 9: *Any idea, what causes the positive or negative biases in some areas?*

This is not clear. Zooming into the figure you can see that there are usually positive and negative deviations at the same place. This confirms that a significant contribution to the variation is due to noise. Some areas seem to have overall a more positive or negative bias. The reasons for this are currently unclear. This could be related to surface properties or maybe aerosols, but there seems to be no systematic in there, otherwise the bias correction would have probably handled this.