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Interactive comment on "Causes of uncertainty in observed and projected heterotrophic respiration from Earth System Models" *by* Cary Lynch et al.

Anonymous Referee #2

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General comments:

This manuscript uses a pattern scaling approach to compare CMIP5 models and observational data related to heterotrophic respiration (RH). In terms of absolute RH, on average the models substantially overestimate global RH; the models also predict a substantial increase in RH over the next century. Some but not all models predict an increase in temporal variability of RH as well. Models show spatial biases and are not particularly well correlated with the dataset. RH correlations with temperature, precipitation, and NPP vary zonally in the models, but not in the same way as the observations. Furthermore, models vary dramatically in their local RH sensitivity to global changes in RH, NPP, and climate variables.

I think it is a useful and important exercise to compare ESM outputs of RH. This analy-

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sis is novel and complements previous work on soil carbon stocks and NPP. That said, the paper could benefit from an improved explanation of its goals, expectations, and approaches.

Goals: At the end of the intro, the goal is to determine if pattern scaling can be used to evaluate models. Of course it can. But more importantly, can it yield new insight into the underlying biases or problems with the models? Hopefully so, and the intro could do a better job at identifying the issues that are most likely to be revealed by the technique.

Expectations: It was very difficult to interpret the myriad results in the paper without a better indication of how to use the results for model diagnosis. This problem could be addressed by including some pseudo-hypotheses about expected patterns in the model comparisons. For instance, if the processes in a model are overly sensitive to temperature, then what pattern in Fig. 4a might be expected? It was really hard to know what a reader should be looking for when viewing the results, especially with so many different models.

Approaches: I was not previously familiar with the pattern scaling approach, and although it looks powerful, I had a hard time understanding it from the manuscript text. The methods section on pattern scaling could use some elaboration. In particular, I struggled to understand how a single value could be used as the X with multiple Y values in a regression analysis. I was also unclear about the temporal change component. Was the regression relating the change in Y with the change in X over some time interval? The equation presented in this section needs to be explained more clearly or in more detail (or both).

Specific comments:

I wonder if the authors should consider the implications of non-independence among the models. Previously it has been found that ESMs with the same underlying biogeochemical model have very similar predictions of soil carbon spatial distributions and

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are not independent. Clearly not all 25 model variants in this paper are independent as some of them generate essentially identical outputs. Is it necessary to show all 25 models? Can they be grouped or aggregated in some sensible way?

Finally, the manuscript seemed to be missing an overall conclusion about the models and recommendations for future model development. There are a lot of discrepancies with the data and across models identified in the paper. Where should the ESM community be moving with respect to improving predictions of RH? It seemed like some models, like GISS, were outliers, but are there other areas that need attention?

Editorial comments:

Abstract fails to give a set of general conclusions specific to this study analysis.

1:41- Not clear what "This" refers to; here an throughout, specify directly.

2:34- I suggest a different formulation of the objective. Almost anything "can" be done. I suspect you were interested in specific aspects of the changes and uncertainty. Can this objective be more informative?

2:46- fix reference formatting

5:39- "does not"

6:32- missing "is"

8:24- missing a word in here somewhere

9:33- fix reference formatting

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