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Title: **A Review of Current Best Practices and Future Directions in Assimilating GRACE/-FO Terrestrial Water Storage Data into Numerical Models**

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Reply to Anonymous Referee #1: 30 Aug 2025

This paper reviews data assimilation techniques and applications that combine GRACE water storage data with hydrological modeling to improve estimation of water storages and fluxes. The paper is of interest to the HESS readership and generally informative and well written. Overall, I enjoyed reading the paper, but I think there is room for increasing impact and accessibility of the work. My comments are detailed below.

Reply: We greatly appreciate your thoughtful review and valuable feedback. Thank you for your helpful comments and suggestions, which we address point by point below. Please note that your comments are presented in italics, our replies in standard font, and suggested changes to the manuscript are highlighted in blue.

Comment 1 *Contribution of the paper: the introduction asserts that "a thorough synthesis of existing studies is not yet available" (line 119). There have been previous review papers on GRACE data assimilation, so this statement needs clarification and the specific contribution of this review paper needs to be articulated better.*

Reply: Many thanks for highlighting this issue. We agree that the addressed statement requires clarification. Previous papers have focused on specific components of the assimilation system, for example the computation and application of assimilation increments (Girotto et al., 2016) or particular applications such as improving snow estimates (Girotto et al., 2020). The dedicated review by Soltani et al. (2021) provides a method-oriented overview of how GRACE data can be assimilated into hydrological models, with a strong emphasis on error modeling and data assimilation algorithms, but also some thoughts about existing challenges. In our contribution, we aim to provide a thorough synthesis of existing studies, which have almost doubled since the 2021 review, highlighting the different areas of application and offering a systematic analysis of the applied models and the common settings used in current data assimilation frameworks. In addition, we assess the present lack of consensus within the community and outline directions that may support convergence and guide future developments. We suggest to add these aspects to the revised manuscript in the introduction, in the following way:

Previous review papers have focused on providing an overview of methods for assimilating GRACE data into hydrological models, with an emphasis on error modelling and data assimilation algorithms (e.g. Soltani et al., 2021). This paper aims to provide a thorough synthesis of existing studies, highlighting the various application areas and offering a systematic analysis of the common settings within current DA frameworks. Additionally, we synthesize the current state of research, evaluate the present lack of consensus within the community regarding DA strategies, and outline directions that may support convergence and open up perspectives on new directions.

Comment 2 *Structure of the paper: the paper could benefit from a more systematic structure. For example, the authors could start by introducing the three main components of a GRACE DA system (observation model and errors, hydrological model and errors, DA algorithm and setup) and then systematically present previous work, best practices, open problems, and future directions for those three components. I mention these three components, because that is what the conclusions section ("synthesis" section 7) uses. The other sections of the paper do not really follow this pattern (or at least less* *obviously so). A more consistent structure could help readability and coherence.*

Reply: Thank you very much for your thoughts on the structure of our paper. After careful consideration, we have come to the following conclusion. We would like to keep the current structure of the manuscript that we agreed on previously. In data assimilation, the observation model is typically tailored to the filter algorithm and the hydrological model setup, or adapted/simplified as needed. A sequential description as suggested here does not fully reflect this flexibility and adaptation. Section 2 provides essential background on the models and observations forming the basis of the data assimilation approach. The GRACE observation model and errors have already been discussed in many GRACE-related and hydrology studies, e.g., Chen et al. (2022); therefore, we do not consider an in-depth discussion necessary here. As the treatment of model and observation errors is already an integral part of the assimilation strategy, we would prefer to address these aspects in Section 3, where we present the setup of the data assimilation frameworks. Furthermore, most best practices are closely linked to specific components of the data assimilation system. To avoid repetition, we therefore prefer to discuss best practices within the relevant sections, for example in the context of assimilation algorithms or observation errors. We would like to have separate sections on 'Current challenges and open issues' and 'Future directions', as we particularly want these aspects to be highlighted at a glance in our paper. Yet, we will adjust the order of "model" and "observations" in the synthesis section to ensure consistency with the structure introduced in Section 2.

Comment 3 *It's interesting that a paper on data assimilation manages to avoid any mathematical equations. On the one hand, this makes the material readable, but on the other hand it can also make things less precise/concrete. For example, section 3.5 introduces "innovations" and "increments" without defining these in an equation. The meaning of these terms is described on lines 458-460, but for readers not familiar with data assimilation the connection between them may remain a bit vague without an equation. Do the authors think this is a problem?*

Reply: We appreciate your suggestions on this topic! Indeed this comment was also made by the other reviewer. As we prefer to keep equations out of the main text, and it is not possible to include equations for all types of filters, we have decided to present them in a figure. We plan to add the key equations to the current Figure 2 of the manuscript (see Fig. 1), making terms such as 'innovations' and 'increments' more accessible to the reader.

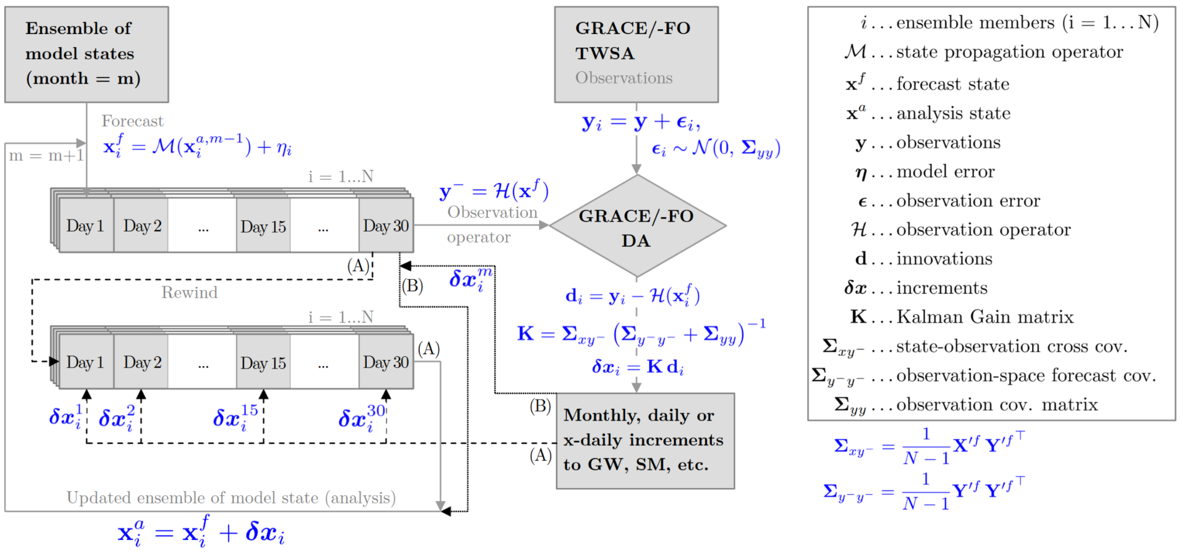

Figure 1: General concept for assimilating monthly GRACE/-FO-derived TWSA into GHMs and LSMs along with most relevant Ensemble Kalman Filter (EnKF) equations showing two options for applying the assimilation increments: After computing the increments, the model is either (A) rewound and re-run over the month with the increments $\boldsymbol{\delta x}_i^1 ... \boldsymbol{\delta x}_i^{30}$ distributed across all days, or (B) updated by applying the full monthly increment $\boldsymbol{\delta x}_i^m$ at the end of the month. Please note that the equations provided refer to the EnKF and are expressed for each ensemble member i. The Kalman Gain matrix determines the update weights based on the state and observation error covariance matrices. X'^f and Y'^f are matrices of forecast state anomalies and forecast state observation-space anomalies, respectively. Each column represents the deviation of one ensemble member from the ensemble mean. For further details on the equations for other DA algorithms, refer to the literature cited in Section 3 of the manuscript.

Comment 4: Observation errors

Comment 4a *The use of grid scaling factors to restore some of the signal in GRACE data is mentioned on lines 180-181: is any advancement or alternative approach needed here since these scaling factors are derived from hydrological models and therefore contaminated by various errors (as also acknowledged on lines 224-225)?*

Reply: Thank you for this comment. We agree and now list several methods available that attempt to restore some of the lost signal in GRACE data and then explicitly refer to a method that does not depend on hydrological models. Four popular approaches that are model-dependent are:

- the multiplicative approach by Longuevergne et al. (2010)
- the additive approach by Klees et al. (2007)
- the scaling approach by Landerer and Swenson (2012)
- the unconstrained forward modeling approach by Chen et al. (2015)

To overcome dependency on hydrological models (and their associated errors),

- Vishwakarma et al. (2017) developed a data-driven approach.

We will add the above references to the manuscript in l. 193 as follows:

To account for spatial leakage effects, several methods have been developed that attempt to restore the lost signal in GRACE/-FO data. Commonly used approaches that depend on hydrological model outputs are the multiplicative approach by Longuevergne et al. (2010), the additive approach by Klees et al. (2007), the grid factor scaling approach by Landerer and Swenson (2012), and the unconstrained forward modeling approach by Chen et al. (2015). Vishwakarma et al. (2017) developed a data-driven approach to overcome the dependency on hydrological models and their associated uncertainties.

Comment 4b *Line 240: why are the relationships nonlinear? It would help to specify which variables we are talking about here. For example, the relations between fine-scaled storages and fluxes (precipitation, ET...) and large-scale storage are actually linear, since both the water balance and spatial averaging are linear operations.*

Reply: We appreciate the reviewer's comment regarding the linearity of the water-balance equation and spatial averaging. In principle, if all relevant water-cycle processes were perfectly observed, the relationship between high-resolution precipitation (P), evapotranspiration (ET), and runoff (R) and large-scale water storage would be linear. However, in practice, GRACE does not observe many short-timescale fluxes or individual storage components; it only measures the net mass change integrated over large regions. Consequently, while GRACE captures the integrated mass-change signal resulting from processes such as soil-moisture dynamics, infiltration, recharge, runoff generation, groundwater–surface-water interactions, and anthropogenic water use, it does not directly observe these processes individually; their effects are embedded collectively in the coarse-scale TWS signal. These processes respond in ways that depend on the current storage state (e.g., soil moisture controls ET and infiltration rates, groundwater level controls baseflow and recharge). Because GRACE senses only the combined effect of these internal dynamics rather than each component separately, the resulting signal reflects nonlinear behavior, creating a nonlinear relationship between GRACE TWSA and fine-scale variables. Additionally, when using model-derived TWSA as a predictor, nonlinear process formulations in land-surface and groundwater modules further break linear proportionality with GRACE TWSA. Therefore, although the continuity equation itself is linear, the empirical relationship between fine-scale fluxes/model TWSA and GRACE-derived TWSA becomes nonlinear because GRACE senses only the aggregated outcome of numerous unobserved, nonlinear processes and uncertainties. This practical discrepancy motivates the use of flexible statistical and Bayesian approaches capable of representing and quantifying these nonlinear dependencies. We will add this explanation in the revised manuscript.

Comment 4c *Line 259, "DA methods take care of the horizontal and vertical downscaling by design": what if the modeling domain does not fully cover all GRACE 'grid' cells that overlap with the modeling domain?*

Reply: This can be avoided when working with spherical harmonics solutions: The GRACE/-FO data can be prepared in a way that the modelling domain and GRACE data coverage match, e.g., by computing (sub-)basin averages considering the hydrological boundaries that are also considered in the model or by computing GRACE/-FO gridded data for the specified model domain. In case of working with Mascon solutions, it is possible that the model domain and GRACE gid cells do not overlap completely, e.g., along coast lines or basin boundaries. In this case, special care has to be taken to match the model and observation domain prior to data assimilation.One approach in coastal areas is to consider only those GRACE grid cells that are covered by the model grid above a chosen percentage threshold.
We will add the following clarification to line 259:

Prior to DA, it has to be ensured that the GRACE/FO data coverage matches with the modeling domain.

Comment 4d *Line 281-282, "the trend of the GRACE/-FO observations is kept to correct missing trends in the model". To what extent is the trend in GRACE observations also subject to error (e.g. different GRACE products showing different trends)?*

Reply: The trend in GRACE/GRACE-FO observations can be subject to significant uncertainty, and different processing indeed can yield different trend estimates depending on region, time period, and processing choices. For example,Rodell et al. (2018) provided linear TWSA trend errors (2002-2016) derived by comparing three different Mascon solution. In many regions of the world the trend errors are between 5 and 30%, except for North America near Hudson Bay, where trend errors reached 100% probably due to the GIA correction. This global study is also confirmed by more regional studies that include different GRACE/-FO data products for the comparison of trends, e.g., Zhao and Li (2017) found 30% in the Tarim basin (2002-2015). Nonetheless, as in the data assimilation framework observation and model error is weighted against each other to derive the update state; the errors are considered for both. As future gravity missions enable the extension of the TWSA observations, it will be possible to estimates trends more certainly in the future. We suggest to add the following sentence to the manuscript to clarify this point:

The GRACE/-FO trend errors are in many regions between 5–30% (or higher in regions strongly affected by GIA e.g., Rodell et al. (2018); Zhao and Li (2017)) and are implicitly considered in the DA framework by weighting both observation and model forecast error.

Comment 4e *Line 393, "uniform and uncorrelated errors": I suppose "uniform" means "spatially uniform"? Would be good to also specify which probability distribution is used for the random errors, e.g. Gaussian.*

Reply: Many thanks for pointing out this potential source of misunderstanding. We will add the term spatially for clarity. You are also correct that Kalman filters typically assume Gaussian noise, which we discuss in Section 3.2 (line 356 and following).

Comment 4f *Section 3.3: this section discusses how random errors in GRACE observations are modeled, separate from systematic errors (bias) discussed in section 2.5. However, how the two are modeled (noise and bias) is linked, i.e. a modeling choice in one affects the other, so I wonder why the two are discussed separately.*

Reply: Thank you very much for your question. In this paper, we discuss bias and noise separately because bias correction is considered part of the preprocessing of observations, whereas the noise model is an integral component of the data assimilation system. To help readers understand this connection, we will add a reference to Sections 3.3 and 3.4 in the Section on bias correction.

Comment 5: Forecast errors

Comment 5a *More thorough and critical review could be useful here. For example, a table that summarizes how forecast errors are computed in different GRACE DA studies (e.g. which variables are perturbed, by how much, and how; whether there is accounting for spatial/temporal correlation in forcing...). This can lead to identifying gaps and give pointers for future studies. Section 5.3 does identify some open issues with forecast errors, but it's not clear how these should be tackled. E.g. how can the suggestions in section 6.1 help with the issue of bias due to nonlinearity mentioned in section 5.3?*

Reply: Many thanks for this very good idea! We will add Table 1 (see below) to the manuscript

to summarize the perturbed state and forcing variables, along with the perturbation errors, used in several GRACE DA studies. Although the list is not exhaustive, as many studies do not provide such information, the table provides information on typical ranges of perturbation errors. Most studies account for spatial and temporal correlations, so these details are not included in the table.
Furthermore, a paragraph will be added to the end of section 6.1 to discuss several approaches that can be used to address non-Gaussian related ensemble biases, as follows:

To mitigate ensemble biases associated with non-Gaussian behaviors of hydrological variables, we recommend tuning the model prior to GRACE/-FO DA so that simulated TWS is better aligned with GRACE/-FO observations. This step reduces the need for large perturbation errors, and consequently, minimizes ensemble biases. Tuning model parameters to reduce systematic errors is also critical for improving the performance of EnKF based approaches, which are designed to correct random errors rather than systematic errors; in addition, it helps reduce mass imbalances caused by large DA updates. As noted earlier, the particle filtering method (Crisan, 2001) is not restricted to specific statistical distributions and therefore can address the non-Gaussian issue; however, a large ensemble size is needed to effectively represent a highly skewed distribution. Similarly, transforming functions have been used for non-Gaussian data assimilation within a 3-D variational method (Van Loon and Fletcher, 2023) and their application in variants of the EnKF warrants future investigation.

Table 1: Summary of perturbations applied in various hydrological and land surface models for GRACE/-FO DA, including the types of state variables, meteorological forcing variables, and calibrated parameters perturbed. CD: Catchment deficit, SE: Surface excess, SMC: soil moisture; SWE: snow water equivalent; GWS: groundwater storage; PCP: precipitation; SWR: shortwave radiation; LWR: longwave radiation; RAD: radiation; TEMP: air temperature; minT/maxT: minimum/maximum air temperature; PET: potential evapotranspiration; infR: infrared surface temperature; SysE: systematic error; radE: random error; TRMM: Tropical Rainfall Measuring Mission; maxDrain: maximum subsurface drainage rate; DrainRt: drainage rate; TWS: terrestrial water storage, see Table 1 in the main manuscript for model abbreviations.

Model	**Perturbed state variable**	**Perturbed meteorological forcing variable**	**Perturbed parameters (input or calibrated)**	**Reference**
AWRA-L	–	PCP (50%), RAD (30%), minT (0.3°), maxT (0.25°)	–	Shokri et al. (2018)
CABLE	–	SWR (10%), TEMP (10%), PCP (TRMM product)	Soil texture (10%), Saturated fraction (10%), maxDrain (10%), DrainRt (10%)	Tang et al. (2020)
CLM	–	PCP (30%), SWR (30%), LWR (30 W/m2), TEMP (2°)	Soil texture (10%)	Su et al. (2010); Springer et al. (2019)
CLM-ParFlow	–	PCP (10%)	Soil texture (10%)	Soltani et al. (2024)
CLSM	CD (0.02 mm), SE (0.05 mm), SWE (0.12%)	PCP (50%), SWR (30%), LWR (50 W/m2)	–	Reichle et al. (2007); Girotto et al. (2016)
MESH	SWE (0.0004 mm)	PCP (50%), SWR (30%), LWR (20 W/m2)	–	Bahrami et al. (2021)
MGB	–	PCP (25% SysE and 70% radE)	Several storage, residence time and river related parameters	Wongchuig et al. (2024)
Noah	–	PCP, TEMP, RAD, infR, TEMP (1% of mean)	–	Liu et al. (2021)
Noah-MP	SMC (10^{-5}-10^{-4}mm3/mm3), GWS (0.01 mm)	PCP (30%), SWR (30%), LWR (50 W/m2)	–	Nie et al. (2019)
PCR-GLOBWB	–	TEMP (2°), PET (30%), PCP (TRMM product)	15 TWS-related parameters (20%)	Tangdamrongsub et al. (2017)
wflow_hbv	–	PCP (10%), TEMP (15%), PET (15%)	SMC and runoff routine parameters (10%)	Tangdamrongsub et al. (2015)
WGHM	–	PCP (30%), TEMP (2°)	22 parameters	Eicker et al. (2014); Schumacher et al. (2016)
W3RA	–	PCP (60%), SWR (50 W/m2), TEMP (2°)	–	Tian et al. (2017)

Comment 5b *It seems generating the forecast ensemble is mostly done offline, e.g. the authors mention sensitivity analysis. Are there opportunities for calibrating forecast uncertainties as part of the DA system, i.e. in an automated fashion?*

Reply: Thank you for the comment. Indeed, modern DA systems also provide opportunities to calibrate forecast uncertainties automatically during runtime. We will add some more clarification to Section 3.4 to address this, as following:

Furthermore, modern DA systems also provide opportunities to calibrate forecast uncertainties automatically during runtime, rather than relying solely on offline perturbation design. Techniques such as adaptive covariance inflation (Anderson, 2007) and relaxation-to-prior-spread (RTPS) or relaxation-to-prior-perturbations (RTPP) (Whitaker and Hamill, 2012) dynamically adjust ensemble spread using innovation statistics to compensate for under- or over-dispersive ensembles. In addition, stochastic model error estimation and hierarchical Bayesian approaches allow perturbation magnitudes or model error parameters to be updated online (Ruiz et al., 2013; Berry and Harlim, 2017). These automated strategies reduce the reliance on extensive offline sensitivity analyses and enable forecast uncertainties to evolve consistently with model–observation discrepancies.

Comment 6: DA algorithm and setup

Comment 6a *The paper would benefit from more clearly discussing the relation between the intended goal of the DA application and how DA is implemented. The first sentence of the abstract suggests that the main goal here is reanalysis, i.e. create consistent historical datasets of water storage and fluxes that incorporate information from GRACE. However, it seems most of the paper discusses studies and implementations that are more related to operational DA (for use in e.g. early drought warning systems), as evidenced by the focus on filtering implementations (or smoothing implementations that only look at the last month) where DA is used to update initial storages for the next forecast. For reanalysis purposes it seems more appropriate to use smoothing implementations that make use of the entire historical record. Do the authors agree with this? If so, it would be helpful to include papers that use smoothing (not just last month) to assimilate GRACE data.*

Reply: We agree with the reviewer. For reanalysis purposes, it would be more appropriate to use a smoothing implementation that crosses multiple months, if we wanted to focus on long-term variability. However, to our knowledge, the few existing land re-analysis products have traditionally always used a 'filter-like' approach. This is because TWS varies at shorter timescales and because of technical limitations: smoothing over the entire historical record would require a lot of memory, and doing so for continental or global applications would be prohibitive.
We will update the text as follows:

L.43: DA can be used to produce long-term reanalysis estimates of TWS to support land system understanding (Baatz et al., 2021), or obtain the best current state estimate for operational forecasting, as is needed for early warning systems (e.g. drought). Given the monthly resolution of GRACE/-FO observations, the line between both is vague, and we loosely use the term reanalysis for both.
L.296: All currently available continental to global-scale land reanalysis products typically use this 'filter-like' approach, i.e. using a filter or a smoother with non-overlapping short one-month windows, for computational efficiency and because TWS varies at timescales of less than a month. For long-term reanalysis, longer or moving smoothing windows could be explored in the future, as is done for atmospheric or oceanographic reanalyses.

Comment 6b *Likewise, when the aim is in generating consistent estimates of the various water storages and fluxes, it is interesting that the paper reports (line 669) that most DA studies violate the water balance (which clearly introduces inconsistency in the estimates). I guess this relates to which variables are being updated by the DA system. Most DA studies cited in the paper only update the storages, but there are various studies that use Kalman filtering and smoothing techniques to update other variables of the water balance as well with the aim of maintaining a closing water balance.*

Reply: Exactly, we point out in line 669 that most GRACE DA implementations violate the water balance. As the reviewer notices, this is related to the fact that most GRACE DA studies update the water storages, but also since the vast majority of GRACE DA implementations rely on ensemble filters (as opposed to variational approaches). It is a well-known property of ensemble Kalman filter

DA that mass conservation is violated, not only in case of GRACE DA but also for other assimilated variables. We would be glad to cite papers here that overcome this problem but in fact we do not know of any, and we appreciate if the reviewer could provide their suggestions. On the other hand, the suite of data sets used in the model/data system may very well violate the water balance from the start, due to unavoidable data errors, and some degree of violation cannot be avoided at all while making use of the data. To clarify this, we suggest to expand our statement in the manuscript to

... violates the water balance (...) to some extent, which is the price to be paid to nudging a model run closer to real observations. Techniques exist to mitigate this effect.

Comment 6c *Line 357, "the EnKF and EnKS are optimal and unbiased only when assuming Gaussian errors": these algorithms are 'optimal' when you assume the errors are Gaussian or when that assumption is correct?*

Reply: Thanks for asking for clarification! These algorithms are statistically 'optimal' when the assumption is correct, i.e. the errors are Gaussian. We will modify the sentence to

Furthermore, strictly speaking the EnKF and EnKS are optimal and unbiased only when errors are Gaussian; however unless strong nonlinearities lead to violations of this assumption they usually work in a satisfactory way.

Comment 7 *Abstract: would benefit from a rewrite, as it currently reads more like an introduction and does not contain concrete information on the findings ("best practices and future directions" as promised by the title of the paper).*

Reply: We get your point! We will rewrite the second part of the abstract addressing best practices and future direction as following:

Effective assimilation strategies incorporate robust modifications of the classical ensemble Kalman filter and localization techniques, explicitly account for correlated observation errors, and address biases contained in the observations as well as those arising from model perturbations. Unmodeled processes must be carefully handled through signal separation, multisource assimilation, or removal prior to assimilation. Future directions include developing low-latency products for near-real-time assimilation, integrating enhanced and combined satellite observations, and employing machine-learning approaches for downscaling and hybrid assimilation. Collectively, these strategies provide a pathway toward more accurate, physically consistent, and operationally useful water cycle reanalyses.

Comment 8 *Conclusions: several open issues identified in the text don't find their way into the conclusions.*

Reply: We are not entirely sure which specific point the reviewer is addressing. We assume it relates to Section 7, the Synthesis, but from the comment it is not entirely clear what the reviewer considers to be missing. In this section, our goal was to summarize the most important open issues that we believe should be highlighted and addressed next. In particular, we explicitly discuss:

- Physical realism and representation of anthropogenic processes in models,
- Minimizing water budget imbalances caused by DA,
- Model forecast uncertainty,

- Bias correction and correction of geophysical signals,
- Observation model error and future gravity products,
- Spatial resolution mismatch, localization, and handling of spatial correlations,
- State vector setup and computation of innovations,
- Application of assimilation increments, and
- Handling of temporally downscaled products, as well as strategies for systematic validation of DA experiments.

We deliberately do not discuss in detail issues such as ensemble generation methods, as we aimed to keep the synthesis focused on the most pressing and broadly relevant topics. However, we will add one important aspect to the first bullet point of the synthesis:

Most current GRACE–FO DA systems rely on Gaussian assumptions, which can restrict the representation of skewed or heavy tailed uncertainties in water storage dynamics, so future work should develop more flexible assimilation approaches that allow advanced statistical descriptions of errors, including non Gaussian methods.

Comment 9 *Edits: (line 30) at the other hand –¿ on the other hand, (line 381) weighing –¿ weighting, (line 247) GARCE –¿ GRACE.*

Reply: Applied - thanks for your attention!

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