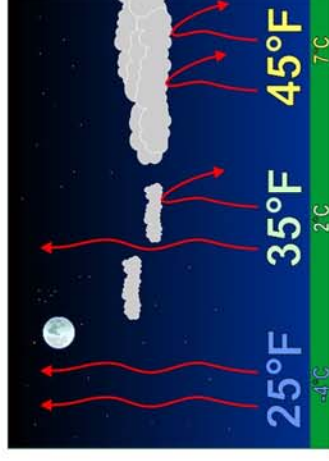


NOAA - THE EARTH-ATMOSPHERE ENERGY BALANCE

<http://www.srh.noaa.gov/srh/jetstream/atmos/energy.htm>

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The earth-atmosphere energy balance is the balance between incoming energy from the Sun and outgoing energy from the Earth. Energy released from the Sun is emitted as shortwave light and ultraviolet energy. When it reaches the Earth, some is reflected back to space by clouds, some is absorbed by the atmosphere, and some is absorbed at the Earth's surface.

However, since the Earth is much cooler than the Sun, its radiating energy is much weaker (long wavelength) infrared energy. We can indirectly see this energy radiate into the atmosphere as heat, rising from a hot road, creating shimmerers on hot sunny days. The earth-atmosphere energy balance is achieved as the energy received from the Sun balances the energy lost by the Earth back into space. In this way, the Earth maintains a stable average temperature and therefore a stable climate.

The absorption of infrared radiation trying to escape from the Earth back to space is particularly important to the global energy balance. Energy absorption by the atmosphere stores more energy near its surface than it would if there was no atmosphere. The average surface temperature of the moon, which has no atmosphere, is 0°F (-18°C). By contrast, the average surface temperature of the Earth is 59°F (15°C). This heating effect is called the greenhouse effect.

Greenhouse warming is enhanced during nights when the sky is overcast. Heat energy from the earth can be trapped by clouds leading to higher temperatures as compared to nights with clear skies. The air is not allowed to cool as much with overcast skies. Under partly cloudy skies, some heat is allowed to escape and some remains trapped. Clear skies allow for the most cooling to take place.

