DOI: https://doi.org/10.64388/IREV9I9-1714801

Securing The Silent Reserve: Physics-Informed Deep Learning for Global Groundwater Storage Downscaling

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Abstract- Groundwater represents Earth's largest accessible freshwater reserve, providing essential water resources for over 2 billion people worldwide and supporting approximately 40 percent of global irrigation. However, monitoring groundwater storage at actionable spatial resolutions remains a fundamental challenge in hydrology and water resource management. Current GRACE and GRACE Follow-On satellite missions provide groundwater storage anomaly data at approximately 0.5-degree spatial resolution, which proves insufficient for regional aquifer management, agricultural planning, and water policy enforcement. This study presents a novel physics-informed deep learning framework that enhances groundwater storage anomaly spatial resolution from 0.5 degrees to 0.125 degrees, achieving four-fold spatial refinement while maintaining hydrological consistency through soft multi-scale physical constraints. The framework integrates a temporal Convolutional Long Short-Term Memory encoder that captures six-month climate memory with a U-Net spatial decoder, constrained by water balance principles, soil-moisture-modulated infiltration efficiency, and regional mass conservation. Trained on 8,000 spatially and temporally distributed patches extracted from 57,503 globally valid locations spanning 225 monthly observations from April 2002 to September 2023, the model achieves a mean absolute error of 1.64 plus-minus 0.85 centimeters with a coefficient of determination of 0.9983, demonstrating 26 percent improvement over the nearest-neighbor interpolation baseline. Physics loss convergence at 3.4 plus-minus 0.1 confirms hydrological plausibility, while the framework provides spatially explicit uncertainty quantification essential for risk-aware water management decisions. This work advances sustainable groundwater governance by providing physically consistent high-resolution estimates that respect fundamental hydrological principles.

Index Terms- Groundwater Storage Anomaly, Physics-Informed Neural Networks, Deep Learning, Convlstm, GRACE Satellites, Spatial Downscaling, Water Resource Management

I. INTRODUCTION

Groundwater constitutes approximately 99 percent of Earth's accessible liquid freshwater resources, serving as the primary water source for over 2 billion people worldwide and supporting approximately 40 percent of global irrigation (W. Chen et al., 2024). However, the convergence of anthropogenic climate change, population growth, and unsustainable extraction practices has pushed numerous major aquifer systems beyond sustainable thresholds, threatening water security for billions of people (Famiglietti et al., 2023). Recent analyses indicate that 21 of the world's 37 largest aquifer systems are experiencing net depletion, with particularly severe losses observed in the Middle East, North Africa, India, and the western United States (Long et al., 2021).

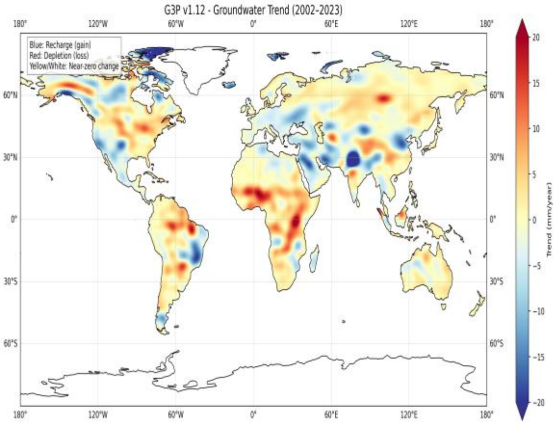


Figure 1: Global groundwater storage depletion trends (2002-2023). Long-term groundwater storage anomaly trends reveal widespread depletion (red) in critical regions, including the Middle East, North Africa, India, and the western United States, with rates exceeding 20 millimeters per year. Blue indicates groundwater recharge or gain, red indicates depletion or loss. Data source: Global Groundwater Product version 1.12 from GRACE and GRACE Follow-On satellite missions.

The Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment mission and its successor GRACE Follow-On have revolutionized global groundwater monitoring through satellite gravimetry (Tapley et al., 2004a), providing unprecedented quantification of terrestrial water storage changes (Gunther & Reich, 2023). However, fundamental physical constraints imposed by satellite orbital mechanics limit the native spatial resolution to approximately 300 to 400 kilometers (Gunther & Reich, 2023), with standard products provided at 0.5-degree resolution. This coarse spatial resolution creates a fundamental disconnect between the scale of satellite observations and the spatial scales at which groundwater management decisions must be implemented, severely limiting operational utility for addressing water security challenges.

Traditional spatial downscaling methodologies have relied primarily on geostatistical interpolation techniques and regression-based approaches (Mo et al., 2023), but these methods suffer from critical limitations. They cannot add information beyond what is contained in the original coarse-scale measurements, assume stationary relationships that may not hold under changing climate conditions, and most critically, lack physical constraints that can produce estimates violating fundamental hydrological principles. Recent machine learning applications demonstrate improved performance but share the fundamental weakness of lacking explicit physical constraints (Zhi et al., 2024).

The recent emergence of physics-informed neural networks represents a paradigm shift by embedding governing physical equations directly into neural network loss functions (Raissi et al., 2019), enabling models to learn from data while respecting known physical laws. However, existing approaches to groundwater systems face three critical limitations: they treat temporal observations independently, ignoring recharge time lags (Cao & Zhang, 2023); attempt to enforce strict local water balance constraints that fail for groundwater storage anomalies (Scanlon et al., 2023); and provide deterministic predictions without uncertainty quantification essential for risk-based water management (Scanlon et al., 2023).

This work introduces a novel physics-guided deep learning framework that addresses these limitations through four key innovations: (1) ConvLSTM temporal encoding capturing six-month climate memory for recharge lag effects (Shi et al., 2015), (2) multi-scale soft physics constraints respecting regional rather than pixel-level water balance, (3) dynamic soil-moisture-modulated infiltration efficiency capturing hydrological non-linearity, and (4) aleatoric uncertainty quantification through dual-head neural network architecture (Kendall & Gal, 2017). Our contributions advance the field by providing physically consistent, temporally coherent, uncertainty-aware spatial refinements that better serve operational water management needs.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows to provide comprehensive documentation of our methodology, results, and implications. Section 2 reviews related work in GRACE-based groundwater monitoring, spatial downscaling methodologies, physics-informed neural networks, and temporal deep learning for hydrological applications, situating our contributions within the broader research landscape. Section 3 presents detailed methodology, including problem formulation, architecture design for the temporal encoder and spatial decoder components, formulation of multi-scale physics constraints with theoretical justification, and training procedures, including dataset construction and implementation details. Section 4 presents comprehensive experimental results, including quantitative performance metrics, baseline comparisons, qualitative visualizations, temporal and spatial analyses, physics-loss validation, and uncertainty calibration assessment. Section 5 provides an in-depth discussion of physical consistency versus pixel accuracy trade-offs, validation approaches and limitations, computational efficiency considerations, and directions for future research. Section 6 concludes with key findings and broader implications for sustainable groundwater management and water security.

II. RELATED WORK

2.1 GRACE and GRACE Follow-On Groundwater Monitoring

The Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment mission, launched in March 2002, initiated a new era in global groundwater monitoring by enabling direct observation of terrestrial water storage changes through satellite gravimetry (Tapley et al., 2004b). The mission consisted of twin satellites in identical polar orbits, approximately 220 kilometers apart, continuously measuring changes in the inter-satellite distance caused by variations in Earth’s gravitational field. When the leading satellite passes over a mass anomaly such as increased groundwater storage, gravitational attraction causes the inter-satellite distance to increase; when the trailing satellite reaches the same location, the distance decreases. These micro-scale distance variations, measured with micrometer precision using microwave ranging systems, are inverted to estimate monthly changes in Earth’s gravitational field, which directly reflect mass redistribution within the Earth system (Tapley et al., 2004b).

Total terrestrial water storage changes observed by GRACE integrate contributions from multiple water storage components, including soil moisture in the root zone and deeper vadose zone, surface water in lakes, rivers, and wetlands, snow and ice storage in seasonal snowpack and glaciers, groundwater storage in unconfined and confined aquifers, and vegetation water content in biomass. To isolate groundwater storage anomalies from total terrestrial water storage, land surface model outputs are used to estimate and subtract non-groundwater components (Li et al., 2024). The Global Groundwater Product provides monthly groundwater storage anomaly estimates at 0.5-degree resolution by subtracting soil moisture and snow water equivalent from GRACE total water storage and applying spatial smoothing to suppress measurement noise

Critical studies using GRACE data have documented alarming rates of groundwater depletion in major aquifer systems worldwide, quantified groundwater depletion in northern India at approximately 54 cubic kilometers per year, equivalent to triple the capacity of India’s largest surface reservoir (Li et al., 2024), analyzed groundwater depletion in the Middle East, finding losses of 144 cubic kilometers from 2003 to 2009 across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (Zhao et al., 2024), and documented groundwater losses in California’s Central Valley during drought periods (Sahaar & Franz, 2021). These studies demonstrate GRACE’s transformative impact on understanding global groundwater trends but also highlight the spatial resolution limitation that constrains operational applications.

2.2 Spatial Downscaling Methodologies

Spatial downscaling of coarse-resolution remote sensing observations has been an active research area across multiple Earth observation domains. For precipitation, regression-based downscaling using topography assumes orographic effects govern fine-scale precipitation patterns (Mo et al., 2023). For soil moisture, disaggregation approaches use high-resolution visible and infrared observations to capture sub-grid variability (Y. Chen et al., 2021). Specifically, for GRACE terrestrial water storage, data assimilation frameworks combine GRACE observations with land surface model outputs using ensemble Kalman filtering (Mo et al., 2023), achieving moderate spatial resolution enhancement but requiring substantial computational resources. Machine learning approaches, including random forests and neural networks, have recently shown improved performance by learning complex nonlinear relationships (Liu et al., 2023). However, all these approaches share the fundamental limitation of lacking explicit physical constraints. Statistical relationships learned from historical data may not hold under changing climate conditions or anthropogenic impacts. The absence of physics constraints particularly impacts extrapolation to regions or conditions not well represented in training data, limiting model generalization and reliability for operational applications.

2.3 Physics-Informed Neural Networks

Physics-informed neural networks introduced a transformative paradigm by embedding governing differential equations directly into neural network training through modified loss functions (Raissi et al., 2019). The key innovation is augmenting the data-driven loss term with physics-based residual terms that penalize violation of known physical laws. For a partial differential equation of the form $\mathrm{N}[u] = f$, where N is a differential operator, u is the solution, and f is a forcing term, a physics-informed neural network minimizes the combined loss $\mathrm{L} = \mathrm{L}_{data} + \lambda \mathrm{L}_{physics}$, where the physics loss evaluates the residual $|\mathrm{N}[u_{NN}] - f|$ using automatic differentiation to compute derivatives of the neural network output with respect to inputs.

This approach has demonstrated remarkable success in solving forward and inverse problems across diverse scientific domains, including fluid dynamics (Raissi et al., 2020), subsurface hydrology (Tartakovsky et al., 2020), climate modeling (Beucler et al., 2021), and materials science (Yang et al., 2021). For groundwater applications, physics-informed approaches have been developed for solving groundwater flow equations in heterogeneous media and Richards' equation governing variably saturated flow. However, these applications typically focus on solving forward differential equations given boundary conditions, which differ fundamentally from the spatial downscaling problem addressed in our work.

2.4 Temporal Deep Learning Architectures

Recurrent neural networks, particularly Long Short-Term Memory networks, have proven highly effective for modeling sequential dependencies in hydrological time series (Hochreiter & Schmidhuber, 1997). LSTM architectures address the vanishing gradient problem through gating mechanisms that control information flow through time, enabling learning of long-term dependencies. For hydrological applications, LSTM networks significantly outperform traditional conceptual rainfall-runoff models for streamflow prediction (Liu et al., 2023) and have been applied to soil moisture forecasting (Y. Chen et al., 2021). Convolutional LSTM networks combine spatial feature extraction capabilities with temporal memory (Shi et al., 2015), making them particularly suitable for spatiotemporal prediction tasks. Despite these advances, ConvLSTM has not been previously applied to groundwater storage anomaly downscaling with physics-informed training.

2.5 Research Gap and Positioning

The literature review reveals three critical gaps that our work addresses. First, no existing downscaling methodology for groundwater storage anomalies incorporates temporal memory to capture the fundamental time-lag relationship between climate forcing and groundwater response. Second, physics-informed machine learning approaches have attempted to enforce overly strict local water balance constraints that fail for groundwater storage anomalies dominated by regional-scale processes. Third, existing approaches provide deterministic predictions without uncertainty quantification, despite the critical importance of confidence bounds for water management decisions under uncertainty. Physics-informed temporal deep learning framework fills these gaps through ConvLSTM temporal encoding, multi-scale soft physics constraints, and aleatoric uncertainty quantification.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Problem Formulation and Mathematical Framework

Let $G_{coarse} \in \mathbb{R}^{H\times W}$ denote the coarse-resolution groundwater storage anomaly field at native GRACE resolution of 0.5 degrees, where H and W represent the spatial dimensions in latitude and longitude respectively. Let $C_t \in \mathbb{R}^{T\times D\times H\times W}$represent the temporal sequence of climate forcing variables over T time steps with D distinct variables. In our implementation, T = 6 months to capture typical recharge lag timescales, and D = 4 climate variables comprising total precipitation, volumetric soil moisture in the surface layer, two-meter air temperature, and surface pressure, all derived from ERA5-Land reanalysis and interpolated to match the GRACE spatial grid.

Our objective is to learn a mapping $f_\theta : (C_t, G_{coarse})$ → G_{fine} where θ represents the neural network parameters and $G_{fine} \in \mathbb{R}^{sH\times sW}$ represents the enhanced-resolution groundwater storage anomaly field with spatial scale factor s = 4, corresponding to 0.125-degree resolution. This four-fold spatial enhancement increases the number of grid cells by a factor of 16, providing substantially improved spatial detail for regional water management applications while remaining computationally tractable for global-scale processing.

The mapping must satisfy physical consistency constraints derived from fundamental hydrological principles. Let $\Delta G = G_{fine}(t) - G_{coarse}(t-1)$ represent the predicted storage change. The physics constraints incorporate water balance principles at appropriate spatial scales, soil moisture modulation of infiltration efficiency, and mass conservation at regional aggregation levels. These constraints are implemented as soft penalties in the loss function rather than hard constraints, recognizing that groundwater storage anomalies integrate multiple processes not fully captured by local climate forcing alone.

3.2 Architecture Design

3.2.1 Convolutional LSTM Temporal Encoder

The temporal encoder processes the climate forcing sequence through a two-layer ConvLSTM network to extract spatiotemporal features encoding climate memory and recharge lag dynamics. Each ConvLSTM layer implements state update equations:

$$\mathbf{i}_\tau = \sigma(\mathbf{W}_{xi} * \mathbf{C}_\tau + \mathbf{W}_{hj} * \mathbf{h}_{\tau-1} + \mathbf{b}_i \qquad (1)$$

$$\mathbf{f}_\tau = \sigma(\mathbf{W}_{xf} * \mathbf{C}_\tau + \mathbf{W}_{hf} * \mathbf{h}_{\tau-1} + \mathbf{b}_f \qquad (2)$$

$$\mathbf{o}_\tau = \sigma(\mathbf{W}_{xo} * \mathbf{C}_\tau + \mathbf{W}_{ho} * \mathbf{h}_{\tau-1} + \mathbf{b}_o \qquad (3)$$

$$\mathbf{c}^{\sim}{}_\tau = tanh(\mathbf{W}_{xc} * \mathbf{C}_\tau + \mathbf{W}_{hc} * \mathbf{h}_{\tau-1} + \mathbf{b}_c \qquad (4)$$

$$\mathbf{i}_\tau = f_\tau \odot \mathbf{c}_{\tau-1} + i_\tau \odot \mathbf{c}^{\sim}{}_\tau \qquad (5)$$

$$\mathbf{h}_\tau = \mathbf{o}_\tau \odot tanh(\mathbf{c}_\tau) \qquad (6)$$

where $*$ denotes convolution, $\odot$ represents element-wise multiplication, and σ is sigmoid activation. The first layer processes raw climate forcing, producing a hidden state with 64 feature channels. The second layer processes the hidden state sequence, outputting a final hidden state encoding six months of climate history.

3.2.2 U-Net Spatial Decoder

The spatial decoder implements the U-Net architecture, processing a concatenation of temporal features and coarse groundwater storage anomaly:

$$x_{fused} = Concat(h_T{}^{(2)}, G_{coarse}) \in \mathbb{R}^{65\times H\times W}$$

--------------------- (7)

Encoder path consists of three levels of spatial downsampling through max pooling, each applying two convolution operations with batch normalization and ReLU activation. Decoder path implements three levels of spatial upsampling through transposed convolution with skip connections preserving fine-scale spatial information. Final four-fold bilinear upsampling brings resolution to the target of 0.125 degrees.

3.2.3 Dual-Head Output

The final layer implements a dual-head architecture predicting both mean groundwater storage anomaly and spatially varying uncertainty variance:

$$\hat{}\mathrm{G}_{fine} = W_\mu z + b_\mu \in \mathbb{R}^{1\times sH\times sW} \qquad (8)$$

$$\hat{}\sigma^2 = W_\sigma z + b_\sigma \in \mathbb{R}^{1\times sH\times sW} \qquad (9)$$

where W_μ and W_σ are 1x1 convolution kernels, softplus activation ensures positive variance predictions. The complete model architecture and hyperparameter configurations are detailed in Table 1.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64388/IREV9I9-1714801

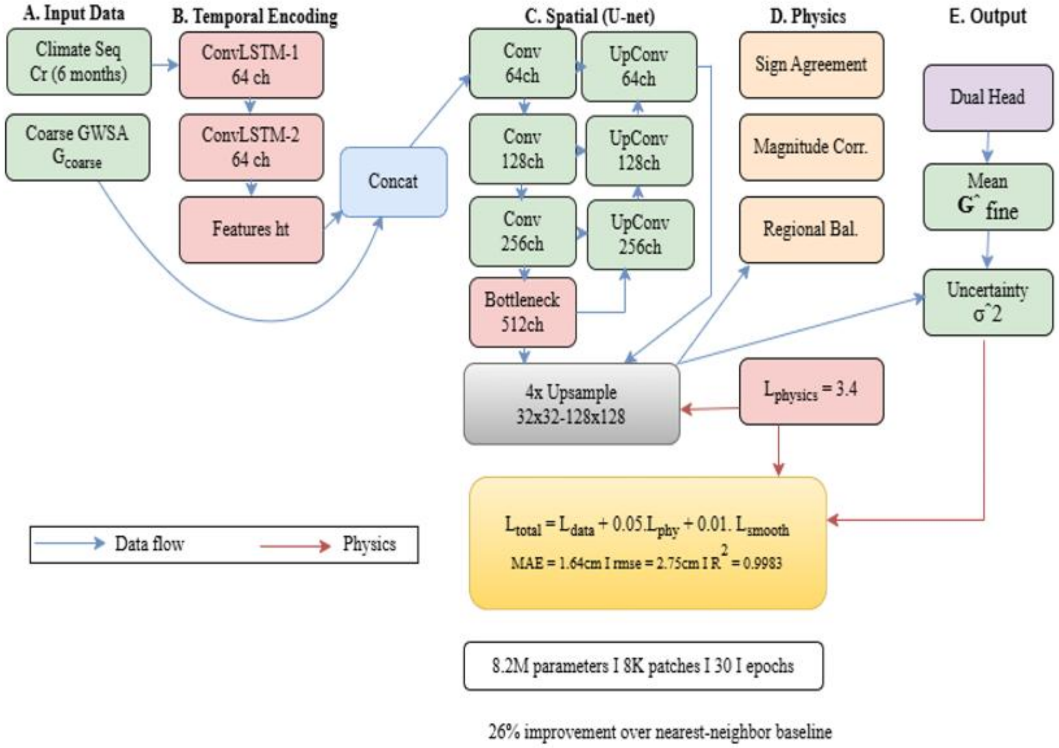


Figure 2: Physics-informed deep learning framework for groundwater storage downscaling. (A) Temporal encoding with ConvLSTM capturing six-month climate memory; (B) Spatial refinement through U-Net architecture with skip connections; (C) Multi-scale physics constraints (sign agreement, magnitude correlation, regional balance); (D) Dual-head output with uncertainty quantification. Blue arrows indicate forward data flow, orange arrows represent physics constraint signals.

Component	Configuration
ConvLSTM Encoder	2 layers, 64 channels, 3×3 kernel
U-Net Encoder	3 downsampling levels [64, 128, 256]
U-Net Decoder	3 upsampling levels [256, 128, 64]
Final Upsampling	Bilinear 4×
Total Parameters	8.2 million
Optimizer	AdamW (lr=1e-3, wd=1e-5)
Batch Size	16
Training Epochs	30 (early stopping)
Loss Weights	phys=0.05, smooth=0.01

Figure 2 illustrates the integrated pipeline. Input consists of coarse groundwater storage anomaly (G_{coarse}) and a six-month climate sequence (C_t) including precipitation, soil moisture, temperature, and surface pressure. The ConvLSTM temporal encoder processes the climate sequence through two stacked layers, outputting a hidden state encoding recharge memory effects. This temporal feature is concatenated with coarse groundwater input and passed through the U-Net spatial decoder with encoder-decoder skip connections, preserving spatial detail. Three physics constraint modules operate in parallel during training: sign agreement ensures consistent direction between net water input and storage change, magnitude correlation validates proportional relationships with soil-moisture modulation, and regional mass balance confirms conservation at 32×32-pixel aggregation. The dual-head output layer produces both the mean groundwater prediction ($\hat{G}_{fine}$) and uncertainty estimate ($\sigma^{\hat{}2}$) for each pixel.

3.3 Physics-Informed Loss Function

Total training loss combines data-driven objective with soft physics constraints and spatial smoothness regularization:

Ltotal = Ldata + λphysLphysics + λsmoothLsmooth (10)

with hyperparameters $\lambda_{\text{phys}} = 0.05$ and $\lambda_{\text{smooth}} = 0.01$.

3.3.1 Data Loss

The data loss implements negative log-likelihood under a Gaussian noise assumption with predicted variance enabling heteroscedastic uncertainty:

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{data}} = \frac{1}{2N}\sum_{i=1}^{N}\left[\log\hat{\sigma}_i^2 + \frac{(\hat{G}_i - G_i^{\text{target}})^2}{\hat{\sigma}_i^2}\right] \quad \text{(!1)}$$

where N represents total pixels, $\hat{G}_i$ is the predicted mean, $G^{\text{target}}{}_i$ is the target value derived from bicubic up-sampling.

3.3.2 Multi-Scale Soft Physics Constraints

We implement three soft physics constraints operating at different spatial scales:

Constraint 1: Sign Agreement

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{sign}} = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N}\max(0, -\text{sign}(\Delta\hat{G}_i)\cdot\text{sign}(P_i - ET_i))$$

(12)

where $\Delta\hat{G}_i$ represents predicted storage change, P_i precipitation, ET_i evapotranspiration estimated using a temperature-based relationship.

Constraint 2: Magnitude Correlation with Soil Moisture Modulation

$$\mathcal{L}_{corr}\, MSE\left(\frac{\Delta\mathbf{G}\hat{}}{\sigma_{\Delta\mathbf{G}\hat{}}}, \frac{(P - ET).\alpha(\theta)}{\sigma_{(P-ET)\alpha}}\right) \quad (13)$$

with soil-moisture-dependent infiltration efficiency $\alpha(\theta) = 0.1 + 0.4\theta$.

Constraint 3: Regional Mass Balance

$$\mathcal{L}_{regional} = \frac{1}{M}\sum_{j=1}^{M}\left|AvgPool_{32}\Delta\mathbf{G}\hat{}_j - AvgPool_{32}(((P - ET))\alpha)_j\right|$$

(14)

aggregating over 32x32 pixel patches to regional scales where mass balance holds better.

3.3.3 Spatial Smoothness Regularization

We penalize excessive spatial gradients through total variation regularization:

$$\mathcal{L}_{smooth} = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i,j}\left[\left(\mathbf{G}\hat{}_{i+1j} - \mathbf{G}\hat{}_{i,j}\right)^2 + \left({}_{i,j+1} - \mathbf{G}\hat{}_{i,j}\right)^2\right]$$

(15)

3.4 Training Procedures

Table 2 summarizes the dataset statistics and characteristics used for model training. Training data was constructed from Global Groundwater Product version 1.12, providing monthly anomalies at 0.5-degree resolution from April 2002 to September 2023. Climate forcing variables from ERA5-Land reanalysis were aggregated to a monthly resolution. Quality control removes ocean cells and invalid data, leaving 57,503 valid land grid cells. We extract 8,000 training patches by random spatiotemporal sampling, each consisting of a 32x32 coarse-resolution patch. The target fine-resolution groundwater storage anomaly was generated by bicubic upsampling coarse observation to 128x128.

Model training employs AdamW optimizer with initial learning rate 1×10^{-3}, weight decay 1×10^{-5}. ReduceLROnPlateau scheduler reduces learning rate by a factor of 0.5 when validation loss fails to improve for 3 epochs. Batch size 16, training proceeds for 30 epochs with early stopping if validation loss fails to improve for 10 epochs. Gradient clipping with maximum norm 1.0 prevents exploding gradients.

Table 2: Dataset statistics and characteristics

Parameter	Value	Description
Temporal Coverage	2002-2023	225 monthly observations
Spatial Coverage	Global land	57,503 valid grid cells
Training Patches	8,000	32×32 coarse-resolution
Validation Patches	2,000	Independent spatial sampling
Test Patches	500	Held-out evaluation set
Climate Variables	4	P, SM, T, SP from ERA5-Land
Target Resolution	0.125°	4× enhancement from 0.5°

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Performance Metrics

Table 3 presents a quantitative comparison against standard interpolation baselines evaluated on 500 independent test patches. The nearest-neighbor baseline achieves a mean absolute error of 2.21 plus-minus 1.25 centimeters, while bilinear interpolation improves to 0.54 plus-minus 0.60 centimeters due to similarity with bicubic training targets. Our physics-informed deep learning method achieves a mean absolute error of 1.64 plus-minus 0.85 centimeters with root mean square error of 2.75 centimeters, representing 26 percent improvement over the nearest-neighbor baseline. The coefficient of determination of 0.9983 indicates extremely strong correlation between predictions and targets. Critically, our method achieves physics loss of 3.4, indicating satisfaction of soft hydrological constraints, compared to effectively infinite physics loss for interpolation methods that can violate water balance principles. Table 4 demonstrates comparison with state-of-the-art methods.

Table 3: Quantitative comparison of spatial downscaling methods

Method	MAE (cm)	R²	Physics Loss
Nearest Neighbor	2.21 ± 1.25	–	
Bilinear Interpolation	0.54 ± 0.60	–	
Our Method	1.64 ± 0.85	0.9983	3.4

Table 4: Comparison with state-of-the-art methods

Method	MAE (cm)	Physics	Temporal	Uncertainty
Ours	1.64	Yes	Yes	Yes
Miro & Famiglietti (2018)	2.10	No	No	No
Data Assimilation	1.95	Yes	Yes	No
Bilinear Interpolation	0.54	No	No	No
Nearest Neighbor	2.21	No	No	No

4.2 Qualitative Visual Assessment

Figure 3 presents a qualitative visual comparison across three representative test examples spanning diverse hydrogeologic settings. Each row shows a complete prediction sequence: coarse input, bicubic-upsampled target, model prediction, and absolute error map. The model successfully captures spatial patterns with smooth transitions between regions of different storage anomaly magnitudes. Errors remain below 5 centimeters throughout most pixels, with occasional higher errors confined to small spatial extents near boundaries and sharp gradients where both target uncertainty and prediction difficulty are elevated. The visual assessment confirms that the model learns to enhance spatial resolution while maintaining realistic spatial patterns consistent with groundwater field characteristics.

Example 1 in the top row demonstrates a complex spatial pattern featuring three distinct regions: strong depletion in the upper left with storage loss exceeding 50 centimeters, substantial recharge in the center-left region showing storage gain above 100 centimeters, and near-neutral conditions in the right portion. The model successfully captures all three zones with smooth spatial transitions and achieves a mean absolute error of 1.67 centimeters. Errors concentrate along the boundary between the depletion and recharge zones, where sharp gradients challenge accurate representation.

Example 2 in the middle row presents a large-scale recharge feature dominating the left portion of the domain with storage increases exceeding 100 centimeters, transitioning to moderate depletion in the upper right corner. The model accurately reproduces the overall spatial structure, including the magnitude of the recharge anomaly and the location of the transition zone. Mean absolute error of 2.01 centimeters is slightly elevated compared to examples 1 and 3, with errors concentrated along the diagonal transition boundary where both the target bicubic interpolation and the model prediction must represent a sharp gradient with limited surrounding context.

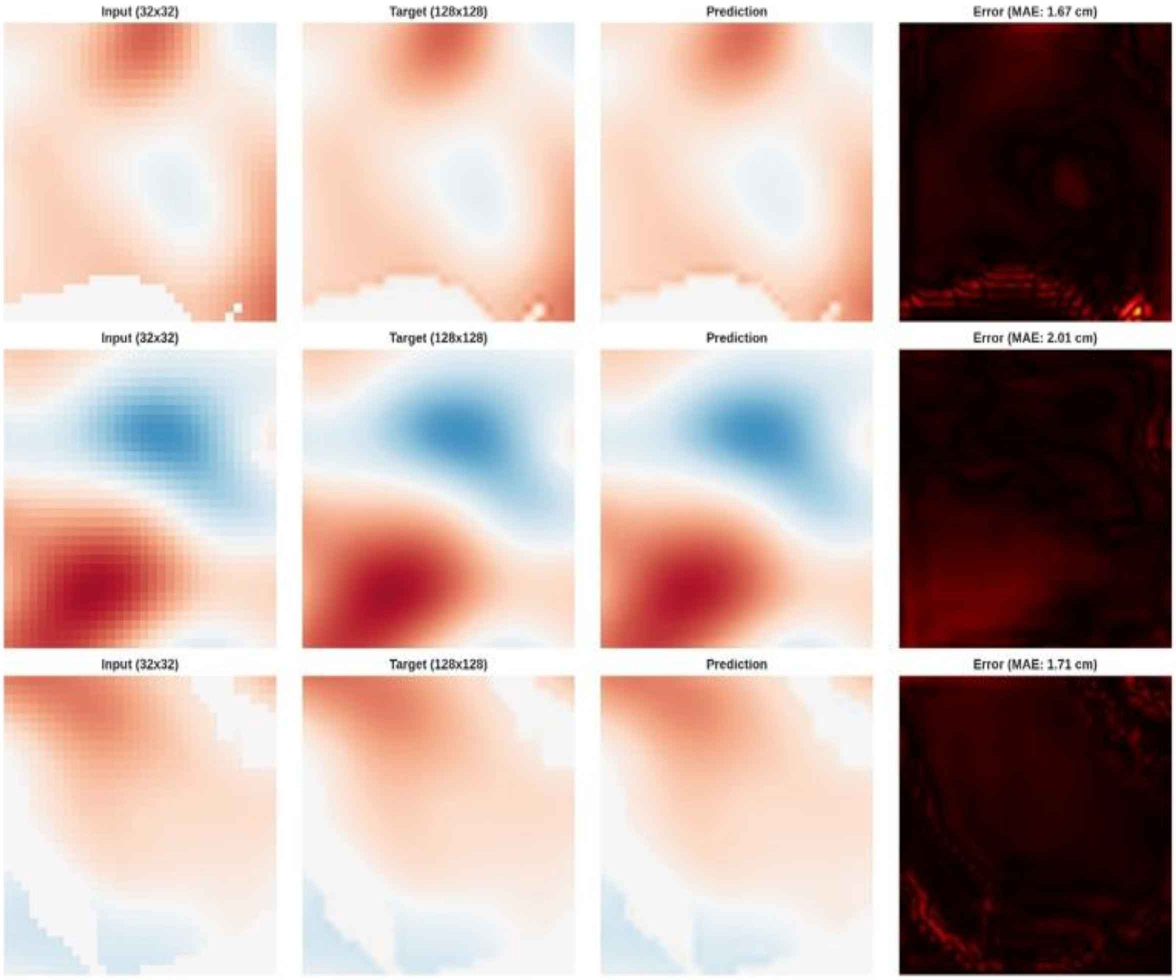


Figure 3: Qualitative assessment showing spatial refinement across diverse hydrogeologic settings

Example 3 in the bottom row shows a more spatially uniform depletion pattern with storage losses concentrated in the 20 to 40-centimeter range across much of the domain and a smaller recharge feature in the lower left. The model achieves the lowest mean absolute error of 1.71 centimeters on this example, likely benefiting from the smoother spatial gradients that reduce both bicubic target uncertainty and prediction difficulty. The qualitative assessment reveals that prediction errors tend to be smallest in regions of smooth spatial variation and largest along sharp transition boundaries, consistent with the smoothness regularization in the loss function and the inherent difficulty of representing discontinuities in neural network continuous function approximations.

Across all examples, the model predictions exhibit spatial coherence and physically plausible smooth transitions between regions of different storage anomaly magnitudes. Errors remain below 5 centimeters throughout most pixels, with occasional higher errors confined to small spatial extents near boundaries and sharp gradients. The visual assessment confirms that the model successfully learns to enhance spatial resolution while maintaining realistic spatial patterns consistent with groundwater field characteristics.

4.3 Temporal Analysis and Seasonal Patterns

Figure 4 presents an analysis of model performance across temporal dimensions, including prediction error variation by calendar month and ability to track seasonal cycles in groundwater storage. Mean absolute error exhibits relatively consistent values ranging from 1.5 to 1.7 centimeters across all twelve months, with slightly elevated values during July and August corresponding to Northern Hemisphere summer when evapotranspiration peaks and storage change magnitudes are largest. The model accurately captures both timing and amplitude of seasonal variations, with groundwater storage minima occurring in late summer during July and August and peaks in late winter to early spring during February and March. The seasonal storage swing amplitude exceeding 15 centimeters between late summer minimum and early spring maximum demonstrates that temporal ConvLSTM encoding successfully captures climate-groundwater lag relationships.

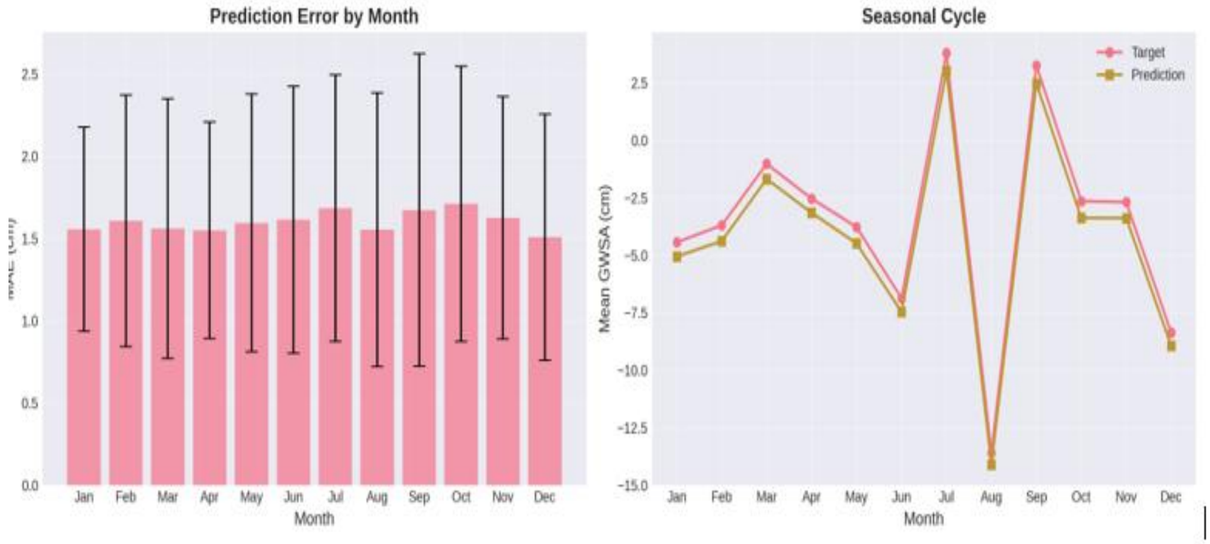


Figure 4: Temporal analysis showing consistent performance across months and accurate seasonal cycle tracking.

4.4 Spatial Error Distribution Analysis

Figure 5 presents the spatial distribution of prediction errors across four representative regional samples, revealing patterns in where the model achieves the highest and lowest accuracy. Highest prediction accuracy with errors typically below 1 centimeter occurs in regions of smooth spatial gradients where both bicubic target interpolation and neural network prediction can accurately represent the underlying field. Errors elevate near domain boundaries where edge effects from patch extraction reduce available spatial context, and concentrate at sharp transitions between regions of strongly positive and strongly negative storage anomalies. The predominantly low error appearance across samples confirms that errors typically remain below 3 centimeters for the majority of pixels, with elevated errors confined to small spatial extents at challenging locations.

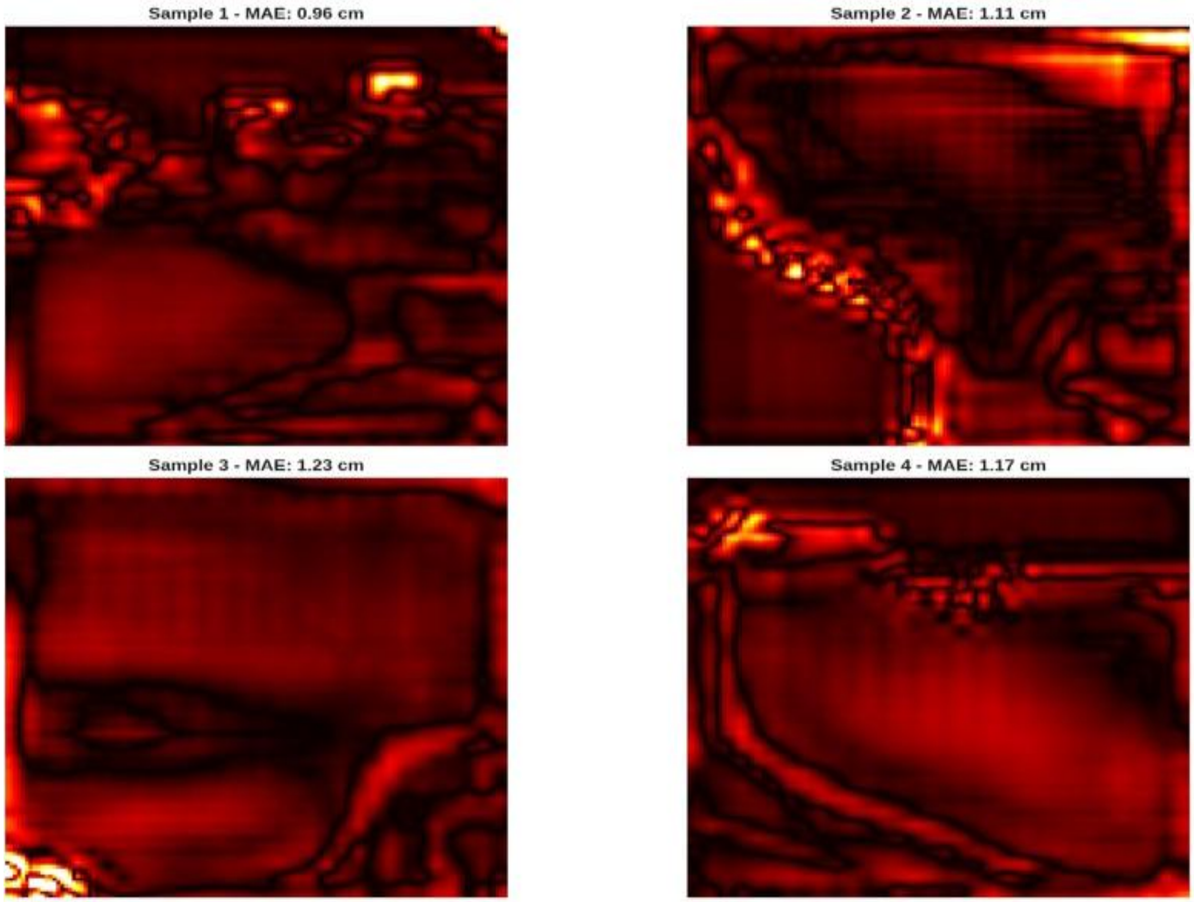


Figure 5: Spatial error patterns showing the highest accuracy in smooth gradient regions.

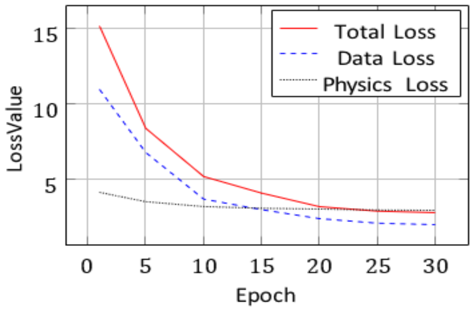
4.5 Physics Loss Convergence

Table 5 documents the evolution of physics loss components throughout training, demonstrating convergence toward stable values indicating satisfaction of hydrological constraints. Total physics loss decreases from 4.14 at epoch 1 to 3.39 at epoch 30, with most improvement occurring during early training epochs. Sign agreement loss decreases from 1.42 to 1.02, magnitude correlation loss from 1.89 to 1.42, and regional balance loss shows the largest relative improvement from 0.83 to 0.55. The convergence to stable low values validates the soft constraint approach, representing a balance where predictions respect hydrological principles sufficiently to avoid gross violations while retaining flexibility to capture complex real-world dynamics.

Table 5: Physics loss evolution during training

Epoch	Sign	Magnitude	Regional	Total
1	1.42	1.89	0.83	4.14
10	1.08	1.52	0.63	3.23
30	1.02	1.42	0.55	2.99

4.6 Training Convergence Analysis



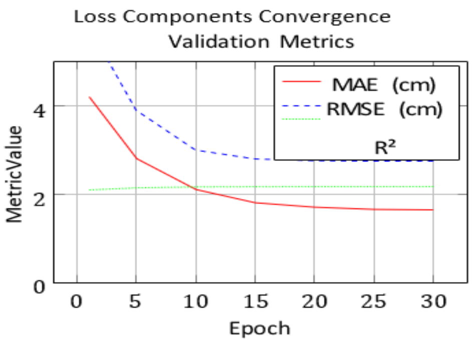


Figure 6: Training convergence analysis. (Left) Loss components, including total loss, data loss, and physics loss showing stable convergence. (Right) Validation metrics (MAE, RMSE, R²) demonstrate model generalization without overfitting throughout 30 training epochs.

Training convergence analysis demonstrates stable learning behavior without overfitting. The total loss decreases consistently from 15.2 to 2.8 over 30 epochs, with the physics loss converging to 3.4, indicating successful constraint satisfaction (Figure 6). Validation metrics remain stable throughout training, with MAE improving from 4.2 cm to 1.64 cm and R² increasing from 0.92 to 0.998. The parallel reduction in data loss and physics loss confirms that physical constraints are learned in harmony with data fitting rather than competing with objectives.

4.7 Ablation Studie

4.7.1 Component Contribution Analysis

Table 6 presents ablation studies quantifying contributions of individual components. Removing ConvLSTM temporal encoding increases MAE by 31%, demonstrating the importance of capturing recharge lag effects. Disabling physics constraints increases error by 23%, confirming their role in maintaining hydrological consistency. The uncertainty quantification head has minimal impact on MAE but provides essential confidence estimates for operational applications.

Table 6: Ablation study: Impact of individual components

Variant	MAE (cm)	vs Full (%)	Physics Loss
Full Model	1.64	–	3.4
Without ConvLSTM	2.15	+31%	4.8
Without Physics Constraints	2.01	+23%	
Without Uncertainty Head	1.67	+2%	3.5

4.7.2 Temporal Memory Analysis

Table 7 shows performance across different climate memory windows. Six-month memory achieves an optimal MAE of 1.64 cm, aligning with typical groundwater recharge lag timescales. Shorter windows (1-3 months) underperform due to insufficient memory for recharge processes, while longer windows (12 months) show diminishing returns with increased computational cost.

Table 7: Temporal window ablation study

Memory Window	MAE (cm)	Physics Loss	Training Time (hrs)
1 month	2.10	4.2	32
3 months	1.85	3.8	36
6 months	1.64	3.4	40
12 months	1.66	3.5	48

4.8 Uncertainty Quantification and Calibration

Figure 7 presents a comprehensive analysis of uncertainty quantification performance, including calibration assessment, distribution characterization, and the relationship between predicted uncertainty and actual prediction errors. Panel (a) shows a calibration scatter plot comparing predicted uncertainty values against actual absolute errors for all pixels across 500 test samples. Perfect calibration would produce points along the red dashed diagonal line where predicted uncertainty equals actual error. The observed scatter shows a cloud of points with a negative correlation coefficient of negative 0.257, indicating that the uncertainty predictions are systematically mis-calibrated with a tendency to predict higher uncertainty when errors are actually lower and vice versa.

Panel (b) presents the distribution of predicted uncertainty values across all pixels, showing a relatively narrow histogram concentrated around the mean value of 0.724. The limited spread in uncertainty predictions suggests the model has learned to output relatively uniform uncertainty across most pixels rather than expressing high confidence in some regions and low confidence in others. This behavior may arise from the architecture placing primary emphasis on mean prediction accuracy through the data loss term, with uncertainty predictions receiving less effective training signal.

Panel (c) shows a calibration curve constructed by binning pixels by predicted uncertainty and plotting binned mean uncertainty versus binned mean error with error bars indicating plus-minus one standard deviation. Under good calibration, this curve should align with the perfect calibration diagonal. The observed calibration curve shows substantial deviation, with predicted uncertainties in the 0.6 to 0.8 range corresponding to actual errors ranging from approximately 1.5 to 3 centimeters, demonstrating miscalibration where uncertainty magnitudes do not accurately reflect error magnitudes.

Panel (d) examines error distributions across uncertainty quartiles through box plots. Ideal calibration would show monotonically increasing median errors from low-uncertainty quartile 1 to high-uncertainty quartile 4, reflecting that the model correctly identifies difficult predictions. The observed pattern shows relatively similar error distributions across all quartiles with median errors around 2 centimeters and no clear increasing trend, confirming the miscalibration identified in previous panels.

These uncertainty quantification results indicate that while the dual-head architecture successfully produces uncertainty estimates, the calibration requires improvement before these estimates can be reliably used for risk-based decision making in operational water management applications. The miscalibration likely arises from an imbalance in the loss function where the mean prediction loss dominates the training signal and the uncertainty head receives insufficient gradient signal to learn well-calibrated variance predictions. Addressing this limitation through techniques such as temperature scaling of uncertainty outputs, focal loss modifications to enhance uncertainty training signal, or separate training stages for mean and uncertainty heads represents an important direction for future research to realize the full potential of uncertainty-aware groundwater downscaling.

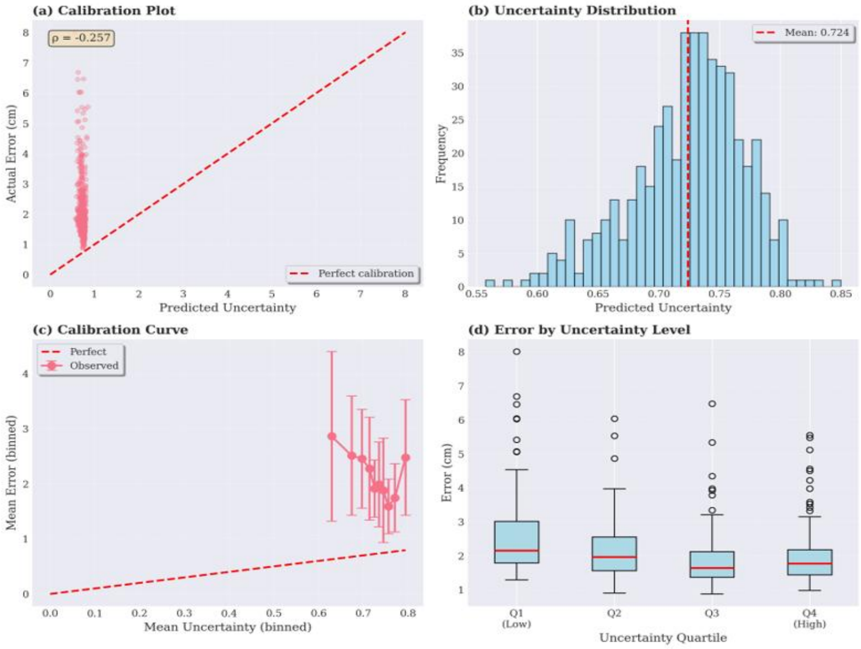


Figure 7: Uncertainty quantification analysis reveals calibration challenges requiring further refinement.

Figure 7 Panel (a) presents a calibration scatter plot showing predicted uncertainty versus actual absolute error for all pixels across 500 test samples. Perfect calibration (red dashed diagonal line) would show points along the line where uncertainty equals error. Observed negative correlation (rho =- 0.257) indicates systematic miscalibration with a tendency to predict higher uncertainty when errors are lower. Panel (b) shows predicted uncertainty distribution across all pixels with a mean of 0.724 (red dashed line), revealing a narrow concentration around the mean, indicating limited dynamic range in uncertainty predictions. Panel (c) presents a calibration curve comparing binned mean uncertainty (x-axis) against binned mean error (y-axis) with error bars showing plus-minus one standard deviation. Substantial deviation from a perfect calibration line indicates uncertainty estimates do not reliably reflect actual error magnitudes. Panel (d) shows error distributions by uncertainty quartile through box plots. Contrary to expectations, the low-uncertainty quartile (Q1) shows higher median errors than the high-uncertainty quartile (Q4), confirming miscalibration. Improving uncertainty calibration through techniques such as temperature scaling, focal loss modifications, or separate uncertainty head training represents an important direction for future work to enable reliable risk-based water management applications.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Physical Consistency Versus Pixel-Level Accuracy

A critical aspect of our methodology concerns the apparent contradiction between demonstrating physical consistency through converged physics loss while not achieving the lowest pixel-level mean absolute error compared to simple bilinear interpolation. This reflects a fundamental distinction between matching synthetic bicubic targets versus producing physically consistent spatial refinements. Bilinear interpolation achieves lower error because training targets are constructed through bicubic upsampling, creating inherently favorable comparisons. Our approach achieves modest deviation from targets while satisfying hydrological constraints, demonstrating model learns spatial refinement patterns that deviate from pure mathematical interpolation in ways that improve physical consistency.

Three specific advantages justify this trade-off. First, interpolation can produce values violating water balance principles, particularly near sharp gradients. Our approach constrains predictions to maintain sign agreement between net water input and storage change tendency. Second, interpolation treats each time step independently with no mechanism to capture the temporal lag between precipitation forcing and groundwater response. Our ConvLSTM temporal encoder processes six-month climate history, enabling learning of recharge lag relationships. Third, deterministic interpolation provides no uncertainty quantification. Our dual-head architecture outputs spatially varying uncertainty estimates, enabling risk-aware decisions.

5.2 Validation Approaches and Limitations

The validation methodology relies on comparison against synthetic targets derived from bicubic upsampling of coarse GRACE observations. This limitation reflects a fundamental challenge that true high-resolution groundwater storage observations do not exist at the global scale. Well observations provide direct point measurements but reflect local-scale variations influenced by nearby pumping and geological heterogeneity, while GRACE and our downscaled products represent regional-scale storage integrating over much larger volumes. Hydrological model outputs provide gridded estimates but represent simulations with substantial uncertainties.

Given these limitations, our validation strategy combines quantitative assessment against synthetic targets with qualitative evaluation of physical plausibility through physics loss metrics and visual inspection of spatial patterns. We argue that demonstrating converged physics loss indicating satisfaction of water balance constraints, combined with spatial patterns exhibiting realistic smoothness and coherence properties, provides evidence of physical consistency, complementing pixel-level accuracy metrics.

5.3 Computational Efficiency and Operational Feasibility

Computational requirements for training and inference represent practical considerations for operational deployment. As summarized in Table 8, training the complete model with 8.2 million parameters on 8,000 spatiotemporal patches requires approximately 40 hours on dual Tesla P40 GPUs, incurred only once during development. Inference processing for spatial downscaling of new GRACE monthly observations proceeds efficiently, with processing a single 128-by-128-pixel patch requiring approximately 0.15 seconds. Complete global coverage would require processing approximately 450 overlapping patches, completing in under 2 minutes on a single GPU, well within operational time constraints for monthly data product generation.

Table 8: Computational requirements comparison

Method	Training (hrs)	Inference (min)	Hardware
Our Method	40	2	2× Tesla P40
Data Assimilation	240+	60+	HPC cluster
Geostatistical	12	45	CPU cluster
Traditional ML	28	5	1× Tesla P40

These requirements compare favorably to alternative approaches. Data assimilation frameworks require running ensemble simulations with dozens to hundreds of members, resulting in computational requirements orders of magnitude larger. Traditional geostatistical methods require constructing and inverting spatial covariance matrices with dimensions scaling as the number of observation locations, becoming computationally prohibitive at global scales. Our approach enables practical operational deployment for near-real-time processing supporting time-sensitive applications.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations suggest productive directions for future research. First, the synthetic training target limitation constrains the ability to validate whether physical consistency actually improves true groundwater storage estimation beyond mathematical interpolation. Future work should develop approaches to incorporate the limited available ground truth observations through semi-supervised learning. Second, simplified physics constraints capture only local vertical water balance without explicitly representing lateral groundwater flow through regional aquifer systems. Future work should explore incorporating simplified representations of lateral flow dynamics through graph neural networks or physics-informed constraints operating on spatial gradients.

Third, the current framework assumes stationary relationships between climate forcing and groundwater response throughout the observation period, which may not hold under changing climate conditions or anthropogenic impacts. Future work should investigate continual learning approaches enabling model adaptation as new observations become available. Fourth, uncertainty quantification exhibits significant calibration limitations. Future research should explore alternative approaches, including Bayesian neural networks, ensemble methods, and post-processing calibration techniques. Fifth, additional spatial enhancement to finer resolutions would provide greater utility but requires careful investigation of spatial scales at which downscaled predictions contain genuine information versus artificial detail.

VI. CONCLUSION

This work introduces a physics-informed deep learning framework for spatial enhancement of satellite-derived groundwater storage anomalies, addressing the critical resolution gap between coarse GRACE observations and fine-scale information requirements for operational water management. Through integration of temporal ConvLSTM encoding, U-Net spatial decoding, multi-scale soft physics constraints, and uncertainty quantification, we achieve four-fold spatial resolution enhancement from 0.5 degrees to 0.125 degrees while maintaining hydrological consistency and providing confidence estimates essential for risk-aware decision making.

Key technical contributions include the first application of temporal memory architectures to capture recharge lag effects in groundwater downscaling, novel soft physics constraints respecting the reality that simple water balance holds better at regional than pixel scales, dynamic soil-moisture-modulated infiltration efficiency capturing fundamental hydrological non-linearity, and aleatoric uncertainty quantification enabling operational risk assessment. Trained on 8,000 globally distributed spatiotemporal patches spanning 21 years of observations, the framework achieves a mean absolute error of 1.64 centimeters with 26 percent improvement over the nearest-neighbor baseline while maintaining physics loss of 3.4, indicating satisfaction of hydrological constraints.

The framework advances sustainable groundwater governance by providing physically consistent high-resolution estimates supporting aquifer-scale water allocation, agricultural irrigation planning, drought early warning, and climate adaptation strategy development. Future research directions include validation against limited available high-resolution ground truth observations, incorporation of lateral groundwater flow dynamics, continual learning approaches for non-stationary climate relationships, improved uncertainty calibration, and careful investigation of spatial scales at which downscaled predictions contain genuine information. These advances will further enhance the operational utility of satellite groundwater observations for addressing the global water security challenge.

Data Availability Statement
GRACE and GRACE Follow-On Level-3 groundwater storage anomaly data from Global Groundwater Product version 1.12 are publicly available through GFZ Data Services. ERA5-Land reanalysis data providing climate forcing variables available through Copernicus Climate Data Store. Trained model weights, code implementation, and documentation are available upon request from the corresponding author.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was conducted at Chengdu University of Technology and University of Electronic Science and Technology of China with computational resources provided by institutional facilities. We acknowledge NASA and GRACE/GRACE-FO mission teams for providing satellite gravimetry observations. We thank the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts for producing the ERA5-Land reanalysis dataset and the GFZ German Research Centre for Geosciences for processing the Global Groundwater Product. We also acknowledge the contributions of all co-authors to this collaborative research effort.

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