

ATLAS/ICESat-2 L3A Sea Ice Freeboard Quick Look, Version 5

USER GUIDE

How to Cite These Data

As a condition of using these data, you must include a citation:

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FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THESE DATA, CONTACT NSIDC@NSIDC.ORG

FOR CURRENT INFORMATION, VISIT https://nsidc.org/data/ATL10QL



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1 DATA DESCRIPTION

NOTE: ATL10QL is the quick look version of ATL10. The ATL10QL products are based on the same algorithms that generate the ATL10 final data products. Once final ATL10 files are available the corresponding ATL10QL files will be removed. For details on quick look data quality see section 2.4.1.

1.1 Parameters

Sea ice freeboard, calculated using three different approaches, plus leads used to establish the reference sea surface.

1.2 File Information

1.2.1 Format

Data are provided as HDF5 formatted files. HDF is a data model, library, and file format designed specifically for storing and managing data. For more information about HDF, visit the HDF Support Portal.

The HDF Group provides tools for working with HDF5 formatted data. HDFView is free software that allows users to view and edit HDF formatted data files. In addition, the HDF - EOS | Tools and Information Center web page contains code examples in Python (pyhdf/h5py), NCL, MATLAB, and IDL for accessing and visualizing ICESat-2 files.

1.2.2 ATLAS/ICESat-2 Description

NOTE: The following brief description of the Ice, Cloud and land Elevation Satellite-2 (ICESat-2) observatory and Advanced Topographic Laser Altimeter System (ATLAS) instrument is provided to help users better understand the file naming conventions, internal structure of data files, and other details referenced by this user guide. The ATL10 data product is described in detail in the Ice, Cloud, and land Elevation Satellite-2 (ICESat-2) Project Algorithm Theoretical Basis Document (ATBD) for Sea Ice Products (ATBD for ATL07/ATL10/ATL20 | V05, DOI: 10.5067/189WL8W8WRH8).

The ATLAS instrument and ICESat-2 observatory utilize a photon-counting lidar and ancillary systems (GPS and star cameras) to measure the time a photon takes to travel from ATLAS to Earth and back again and to determine the photon's geodetic latitude and longitude. Laser pulses from ATLAS illuminate three left/right pairs of spots on the surface that as ICESat-2 orbits Earth trace out six ground tracks that are typically about 14 m wide. Each ground track is numbered according to the laser spot number that generates it, with ground track 1L (GT1L) on the far left and ground track 3R (GT3R) on the far right. Left/right spots within each pair are approximately 90 m apart in the across-track direction and 2.5 km in the along-track direction. The ATL10 data product

is organized by ground track, with ground tracks 1L and 1R forming pair one, ground tracks 2L and 2R forming pair two, and ground tracks 3L and 3R forming pair three. Each pair also has a Pair Track—an imaginary line halfway between the actual location of the left and right beams (see Figures 1 and 2). Pair tracks are approximately 3 km apart in the across-track direction.

The beams within each pair have different transmit energies—so-called weak and strong beams—with an energy ratio between them of approximately 1:4. The mapping between the strong and weak beams of ATLAS, and their relative position on the ground, depends on the orientation (yaw) of the ICESat-2 observatory, which is changed approximately twice per year to maximize solar illumination of the solar panels. The forward orientation corresponds to ATLAS traveling along the +x coordinate in the ATLAS instrument reference frame (see Figure 1). In this orientation, the weak beams lead the strong beams and a weak beam is on the left edge of the beam pattern. In the backward orientation, ATLAS travels along the -x coordinate, in the instrument reference frame, with the strong beams leading the weak beams and a strong beam on the left edge of the beam pattern (see Figure 2). The first yaw flip was performed on December 28, 2018, placing the spacecraft into the backward orientation. ATL10 reports the spacecraft orientation in the sc_orient parameter stored in the /orbit_info/ data group (see Section 1.2.4 Data Groups). In addition, the current spacecraft orientation, as well as a history of previous yaw flips, is available in the ICESat-2 Major Activities tracking document (.xlsx).

The Reference Ground Track (RGT) refers to the imaginary track on Earth at which a specified unit vector within the observatory is pointed. During nominal operating conditions onboard software aims the laser beams so that the RGT is between ground tracks 2L and 2R (i.e. coincident with Pair Track 2). The ICESat-2 mission acquires data along 1,387 different RGTs. Each RGT is targeted in the polar regions once every 91 days (i.e. the satellite has a 91-day repeat cycle) to allow elevation changes to be detected. Cycle numbers track the number of 91-day periods that have elapsed since the ICESat-2 observatory entered the science orbit. RGTs are uniquely identified, for example in file names, by appending the two-digit cycle number (cc) to the RGT number, e.g. 0001cc to 1,387cc.

Under normal operating conditions, no data are collected along the RGT; however, during spacecraft slews, or off-pointing, some ground tracks may intersect the RGT. Off-pointing refers to a series of plans over the mid-latitudes that have been designed to facilitate a global ground and canopy height data product with approximately 2 km track spacing. Off-pointing began on 1 August 2019 with RGT 518, after the ATLAS/ICESat-2 Precision Pointing Determination (PPD) and Precision Orbit Determination (POD) solutions had been adequately resolved and the instrument had pointed directly at the reference ground track for a full 91 days (1,387 orbits).

Users should note that sometimes, for various reasons, the spacecraft pointing may lead to ICESat-2 data collected not along the nominal RGT, but offset at some distance from the RGTs.

Although not along the nominal RGT, the geolocation information and data quality for these data is not degraded. As an example, from 14 October 2018 and 30 March 2019 the spacecraft pointing control was not yet optimized. To identify such time periods, refer to the ICESat-2 Major Activities file.

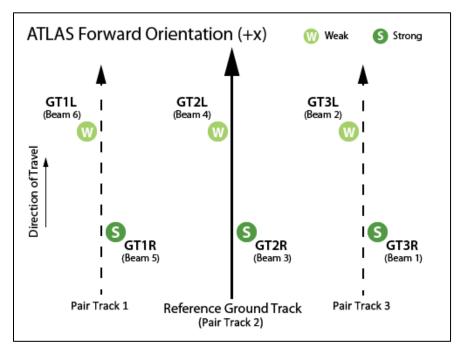


Figure 1. Spot and ground track (GT) naming convention with ATLAS oriented in the forward (instrument coordinate +x) direction.

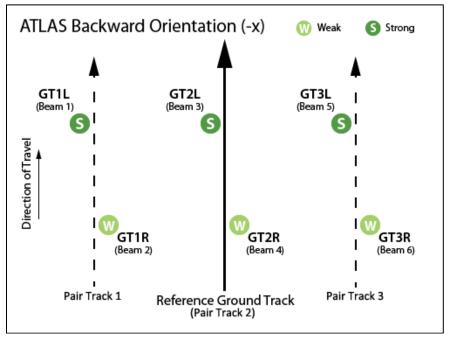


Figure 2. Spot and ground track (GT) naming convention with ATLAS oriented in the backward (instrument coordinate -x) direction.

NOTE: ICESat-2 reference ground tracks with dates and times can be downloaded as KMZ files from NASA's ICESat-2 | Technical Specs page, below the Orbit and Coverage table.

1.2.3 File Contents

Data files (granules) contain the sea ice retrievals (freeboard) for one of ATLAS's 1387 orbits, provided as separate files for Northern Hemisphere and Southern Hemisphere overpasses. Fifteen (and occasionally 16) granules are available per hemisphere per day.

1.2.4 Data Groups

Within data files, similar variables such as science data, instrument parameters, and metadata are grouped together according to the HDF model. ATL10 data files contain the top-level groups shown in Figure 3.

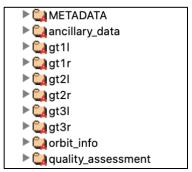


Figure 3. ATL10 top-level data groups shown in HDFView.

The following sections summarize the structure and primary variables of interest in ATL10 data files. Additional details are available in "Section 5.2 | Output of Freeboard Estimation Algorithm" and Appendix A of the ATBD for ATL07/ATL10/ATL20/ATL21. The ATL10 Data Dictionary contains a complete list of all ATL10 parameters.

1.2.4.1 METADATA

ISO19115 structured summary metadata.

1.2.4.2 ancillary_data

Information ancillary to the data product such as product and instrument characteristics and processing constants.

1.2.4.3 freeboard_swath_segment

WARNING: The freeboard_swath_segment group is not included in Version 5 of this product. The Science Team plans to add this group in a future version.

Parameters at the freeboard swath segment rate related to quality and corrections to the freeboard values.

1.2.4.4 sea_ice_segments

Six ground track groups (gt1I - gt3r), each with /freeboard_beam_segment/ and /leads/ subgroup:

- /freeboard_beam_segment/beam_freeboard/ contains the freeboard estimate and
 associated height segment parameters for the specified ground track. Data within this
 group are stored at the variable segment rate. Parameters include freeboard height for the
 beam (beam_fb_height); acquisition time, latitude and longitude, and distance from the
 equator to the segment center (seg_dist_x); plus quality indicators for the freeboard
 estimate.
- /leads/ contains parameters associated with the leads (sea surface height segments) used
 to compute the reference sea surface and local freeboard. Parameters include: acquisition
 times, latitudes and longitudes, lengths, heights, standard deviations, and the number and
 indices of height segments used as leads.

1.2.4.5 orbit_info

Orbit parameters that are constant for a granule, such as the RGT number, cycle, and spacecraft orientation (sc orient).

1.2.4.6 quality_assessment

Quality assessment data for the granule as a whole, including a pass/fail flag and a failure reason indicator.

1.2.5 Naming Convention

Data files utilize the following naming convention:

Example:

- ATL10QL-01 20181016004646 02660101 005 01.h5
- ATL10QL-02_20181016004646_02660101_005_01.h5
- ATL10QL-[HH]_[yyyymmdd][hhmmss]_[ttttccss]_[vvv_rr].h5

The following table describes the file naming convention variables:

Table 1. File Naming Convention Variables and Descriptions

Variable	Description
ATL10QL	ATLAS/ICESat-2 L3A Sea Ice Freeboard Quick Look product
HH	Hemisphere code. Northern Hemisphere = 01, Southern Hemisphere = 02
yyyymmdd	Year, month, and day of data acquisition for the given RGT
hhmmss	ICESat-2 data acquisition start time, hour, minute, and second (UTC) for the given RGT (not the start of ATL07 data production)
tttt	Four digit Reference Ground Track number. The ICESat-2 mission has 1,387 RGTs, numbered from 0001 to 1387.
СС	Cycle Number. Each of the 1387 RGTs is targeted in the polar regions once every 91 days. The cycle number tracks the number of 91-day periods that have elapsed since ICESat-2 entered the science orbit.
SS	Segment number. Not used for ATL10QL. Always 01.
vvv_rr	Version and revision number*

*NOTE: *From time to time, NSIDC receives duplicate, reprocessed granules from our data provider. These granules have the same file name as the original (i.e. date, time, ground track, cycle, and segment number), but the revision number has been incremented. Although NSIDC deletes the superceded granule, the process can take several days. As such, if you encounter multiple granules with the same file name, please use the granule with the highest revision number.

Each data file has a corresponding XML file that contains additional science metadata. XML metadata files have the same name as their corresponding .h5 file, but with .xml appended.

1.2.6 Browse File

NOTE: The swath browse images, and freeboard_swath_segment group are not available in Version 5 of this product. The Science Team plans to add this group in a future version.

Browse files are provided as HDF5 formatted files that contain images designed to quickly assess the location and quality of each granule's data. The following browse images are available:

1.2.6.1 Line plots (beams)

- estimate of freeboard height for the entire swath
- · estimate of freeboard height for individual beams
- Number of leads (per swath)
- Number of leads (per beam)
- reference mean surface (per swath)
- reference mean surface (per beam)

1.2.6.2 Histogram

- freeboard height distribution (swath)
- freeboard height distribution (per beam)
- distribution of reference mean surface (swath)
- distribution of reference mean surface (per beam)

Browse files utilize the same naming convention as their corresponding data file, but with _BRW appended. For example:

- ATL10QL-01_20181016004646_02660101_005_01.h5
- ATL10QL-01_20181016004646_02660101_005_01_BRW.h5

1.2.7 File Size

Data files range in size from approximately 5 – 300 MB.

1.3 Spatial Information

1.3.1 Coverage

Spatial coverage includes regions in the ice-covered oceans of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres that have > 50% sea ice concentration and lie > 25 km away from the coast.

1.3.2 Resolution

The ATLAS instrument transmits laser pulses at 10 kHz. At the nominal ICESat-2 orbit altitude of 500 km, this yields approximately one transmitted laser pulse every 0.7 meters along ground tracks. Note, however, that the number of photons that return to the telescope depends on surface reflectivity and cloud cover (which obscures ATLAS's view of Earth). As such, the spatial resolution varies.

Freeboard is estimated from ATL07 sea ice height segments that vary in length depending on the distance over which approximately 150 signal photons are accumulated and the availability of a reference sea surface. The along track length of these of input height segments is stored in gt[x]/freeboard_beam_segment/height_segments/height_segment_length_seg.

1.3.3 Geolocation

Points on Earth are presented as geodetic latitude, longitude, and height above the ellipsoid using the WGS 84 geographic coordinate system (ITRF2014 Reference Frame). The following table contains details about WGS 84:

Table 2. Geolocation Details

Geographic coordinate system	WGS 84
Projected coordinate system	N/A
Longitude of true origin	Prime Meridian, Greenwich
Latitude of true origin	N/A
Scale factor at longitude of true origin	N/A
Datum	World Geodetic System 1984
Ellipsoid/spheroid	WGS 84
Units	degree
False easting	N/A
False northing	N/A
EPSG code	4326
PROJ4 string	+proj=longlat +datum=WGS84 +no_defs
Reference	https://epsg.io/4326

For information about ITRF2014, see the International Terrestrial Reference Frame | ITRF2014 webpage.

1.4 Temporal Information

1.4.1 Coverage

Quick look data are published ~72 hours after satellite observation and removed once the final files arrive or after 3 months if the final file does not get released due to quality issues.

NOTE: ATL10QL granules will be removed once the final ATL10 granule is available and the temporal coverage will therefore be a sliding window.

1.4.2 Resolution

Each of ICESat-2's 1387 RGTs is targeted in the polar regions once every 91 days (i.e. the satellite has a 91-day repeat cycle).

Note that satellite maneuvers, data downlink issues, and other events can introduce data gaps into the ICESat-2 suite of products. As ATL03 acts as the bridge between the lower level, instrumentation-specific data and the higher-level products. On the data set landing page under technical references users can download and consult a regularly updated list of ATL03 data gaps (.xlsx).

2 DATA ACQUISITION AND PROCESSING

2.1 Background

The ATLAS/ICESat-2 sea ice products are derived from geolocated, time-tagged photon heights plus other parameters passed to them by the ATLAS/ICESat-2 L2A Global Geolocated Photon Data (ATL03) product. The following figure illustrates the family of ICESat-2 data products and the connections between them:

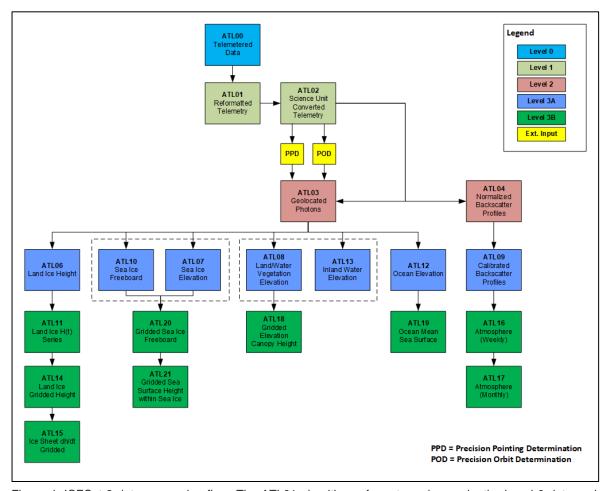


Figure 4. ICESat-2 data processing flow. The ATL01 algorithm reformats and unpacks the Level 0 data and converts it into engineering units. ATL02 processing converts the ATL01 data to science units and applies instrument corrections. The Precision Pointing Determination (PPD) and Precision Orbit Determination (POD) solutions compute the pointing vector and position of the ICESat-2 observatory as a function of time. ATL03 acts as the bridge between the lower level, instrumentation-specific products and the higher-level, surface-specific products.

NOTE: The following description briefly outlines the inputs, product coverage, and approach used to generate the ATL10 product. ATL10 is derived predominantly from ATL07, the ATLAS/ICESat-2 L3A Sea Ice Height product. Users seeking a detailed description of how ATL10 along-track freeboard is

generated should consult "Section 4 | Algorithm Description: ATL07" and "Section 5 | Algorithm Description: ATL10" of the ATBD for ATL07/ATL10/ATL20/ATL21.

2.2 Acquisition

Along-track, sea ice freeboard is estimated for every sea ice height segment computed in ATL07. These segments are passed to ATL10 along with available sea surface height segments (leads) that are flagged by ATL07 as suitable for establishing a local, reference sea surface height that can be used to compute freeboard. The along-track length of the ATL07 sea ice segments is determined by the distance over which approximately 150 signal photons are accumulated, which changes with varying surface types up to a maximum of 150 meters. Cloudy conditions are identified using parameters input from ATL09 (the ATLAS/ICESat-2 L3A Calibrated Backscatter Profiles and Atmospheric Layer Characteristics data product) and height estimates are not produced for segments contaminated by clouds.

2.3 Processing

2.3.1 Product Coverage

The marginal ice zone is defined as that part of the ice cover with < 15% ice concentration, determined from daily ice concentration fields from satellite passive microwave brightness temperatures. Returns with ice concentrations < 15% are not processed in ATL07/ATL10.

2.3.2 Freeboard Estimation

NOTE: The freeboard_swath_segment group is not available in Version 5 of this product. The Science Team plans to add this group in a future version.

The ATL10 product contains sea ice freeboard calculated in three different ways, each determined inside swath segments that are 10 km along-track (nominally) and 6 km across-track (the span of the six beams). These freeboard swath segments contain the leads that are used to establish a sea surface reference for each type of freeboard calculation. The first type is a mean freeboard height (/freeboard_swath_segment/fbswath_fb_height) for the entire freeboard swath, based on a reference surface computed as the weighted mean of all the leads within that freeboard swath. The second type is a freeboard height for each ATL07 sea ice height segment within the freeboard swath (across all six beams) based on the same reference surface (/freeboard_swath_segment/gt1l/swath_freeboard/fbswath_fb_height). The third is a freeboard height computed for each ATL07 sea ice height segment based on a beam reference surface (/gt[x]/freeboard_beam_segment/beam_freeboard/beam_fb_height) determined by using only the

leads along the beam (each beam has its own reference surface). For convenience, ATL10 also maintains the ATL07 segment heights used for the freeboard calculations. (see "Section 5.1 | Basis for freeboard estimation" and "Appendix H | Organization of lead data in ATL10" in the ATBD for ATL07/ATL10 for details).

The algorithm first finds the leads—collections of height segments flagged by ATL07 as sea surface—and then uses the leads to estimate the height of a reference surface for computing the local freeboard over a region of 10-km extent. To construct the reference surface, each L-km long segment is first estimated for each beam and the results then synthesized across all six beams to create a single L-km long reference surface for each L-km segment. Freeboards are then calculated from the individual height-segments using the sea surface references (per beam and for all the beams). The output is a swath segment that contains freeboards and freeboard distributions from all six beams (i.e. 3 beam pairs). The relationship between sea surface height segments (SSHseq), leads, and the reference surface (refsurf) is shown in the following figure:

Erroneous reference surfaces are filtered out by identifying the conditions where the reference surface observations are near to land and/or in areas of low ice concentration (sea state influences the reference surface near the ice edge, resulting in surfaces that can be many 10s of centimeters below the local mean sea surface). This filtering procedure is designed to use collections of reference surfaces within ATLAS sub-regions (approximately 20 degrees of latitude). As multiple ATL03 granules can be processed into one ATL07 and ATL10 granule, the algorithm uses the defined latitude boundaries and increasing/decreasing latitudes (i.e., ascending/descending tracks) in time to delineate these regions.

Analysis of reference surfaces in the Northern Hemisphere are performed within the following latitudinal bounds:

- 27° < latitude < 60° and Δ latitude increasing (ascending tracks);
- 60° < latitude < 80° and Δlatitude increasing (ascending tracks);
- Latitude > 80°;
- 60° < latitude < 80° and Δlatitude decreasing (descending tracks);
- 27° < latitude < 60° and Δlatitude decreasing (descending tracks).

Analysis of reference surfaces in the Southern Hemisphere are performed within:

- -79° < latitude < -50° and Δlatitude decreasing (descending tracks);
- -79° < latitude < -50° and Δlatitude increasing (ascending tracks).

¹gt[x]/freeboard_beam_segment/height_segment_ssh_flag=1

Further details about the filtering procedure are provided in Section 5 of the ATBD for ATL07/ATL10/ATL20/ATL21 under the subsection "5.1.4 | Procedure to Filter and Fill Missing Surface Reference (refsurf) Estimates Along Track." For a list of parameters output by the freeboard algorithm, see "Section 5.2 | Output of Freeboard Estimation Algorithm" in the ATBD for ATL07/ATI10/ATL20/ATL21.

2.4 Quality, Errors, and Limitations

Errors in height retrievals from photon counting lidars like ATLAS can arise from a variety of sources. For example:

- Sampling error: ATLAS height estimates are based on random point samplings of the surface height distribution;
- Background noise: sampled photons include some random outliers that are not from the surface;
- Misidentified photons: the retrieval algorithms do not always utilize the correct photons as surface photons when estimating surface height;
- Atmospheric forward scattering: photons traveling downward through a cloudy atmosphere
 may be scattered through small angles and yet still be reflected by the surface within the
 ATLAS field of view. As such, these photons will be delayed and produce an apparently
 lower surface:
- Subsurface scattering: photons may be scattered many times within ice or snow before returning to the detector, and as such may yield surface height estimates with a low bias.
- First-photon bias: this error, inherent to photon-counting detectors, results in a high bias in the mean detected photon height that depends on signal strength.

For additional details, see "Section 2.2.5 | Potential Error Sources" in the ATBD for ATL07/ATL10/ATL20/ATL21.

2.4.1 Quick Look Data Quality

The ATL10 quick look products (ATL10QL) are based on the same algorithms that generate the ATL10 final data products. There are two primary differences between final and quick look products: (a) the geolocation uncertainty of the segment, and (b) the uncertainty in the reported segment heights.

Analysis to date shows that between 1 and 2% of granules have substantially larger errors than reported below. The ICESat-2 Project Science Office is working to identify and withhold these from further distribution.

2.4.1.1 Geolocation Uncertainty

The final data (ATL10) are based on the best possible solutions for the position of the observatory in space through time. These data use the final orbits of the GPS constellation tracked by the GPS receiver aboard ICESat-2. These products have a geolocation uncertainty of < 5 m. That is, the latitude and longitude of the segments in the ATL10 product are accurately located with less than a 5 m uncertainty.

The ATL10QL data use less precise orbits of the GPS constellation tracked by the GPS receiver aboard ICESat-2. These quick look data have a geolocation uncertainty of ~100 m. That is, the latitude and longitude of the segments in the ATL10QL data are accurately located with approximately 100 m uncertainty.

2.4.1.2 Height Uncertainty

As a result of the larger uncertainty on the position of the ICESat-2 observatory in space, there is a corresponding impact on any ATL07QL absolute heights which are directly passed along to ATL10QL. For ATL10QL data the reported absolute heights (e.g. heights relative to a reference surface) are lower than the absolute heights on the final data products by 2.7 m and have a standard deviation of ~7 m. To get the most accurate heights, users can add 2.7 m to the absolute heights reported on ATL10QL data; the resulting heights will have a mean bias (measured over a month) of approximately zero, and a standard deviation of approximately 7 meters.

The height biases and variation of the ATL10QL data in comparison to the final ATL10 data products appear to occur over long length scales and thus have only a small impact on the determination of relative height measurements such as sea ice freeboard. Figure 5 shows an example comparison of sea ice segment heights from final ATL07 and quick look ATL07QL data. (Note: The plotted ATL07 segment heights are passed along to ATL10.). The absolute height bias in the quick look data is readily apparent.

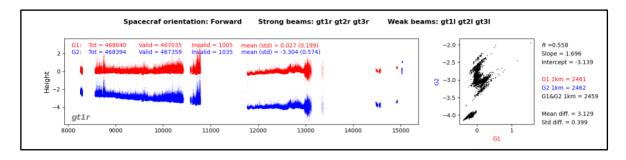


Figure 5. Comparison of sea ice segment heights from the final ATL07 (G1, red) data and the ATL07QL (G2, blue) data. Note: The plotted ATL07/ATL07QL segment heights are passed on directly to ATL10/ATL10QL.

2.4.1.3 Freeboard Uncertainty

As noted above, the additional uncertainties in the quick look data product tend to occur over large length scales and thus have much less impact on measurements of relative height such as sea ice freeboard. Comparisons of ATL10QL and final ATL10 sea ice freeboard results show a mean bias of approximately zero and have a standard deviation of differences of ~0.02 m. There does appear to be a small difference in the number of valid freeboard segments retrieved between the final and quick look products. An example comparison of two granules is shown in Figure 6. Overall, we expect the quick look sea ice freeboard results to be unbiased but with an additional uncertainty of ~0.02 m in comparison to the final data product.

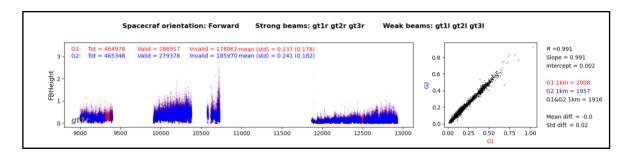


Figure 6. Comparison of sea ice freeboard from final ATL10 data (G1) and quick look ATL10QL (G2) data. A zero mean difference is seen along with a standard deviation of differences of 0.02 m.

3 VERSION HISTORY

Version 5 (March 2022) - initial release

4 CONTACTS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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5 DOCUMENT INFORMATION

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