

## Hurricane Hysteria

by Patrick J. Michaels



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**B**esides being darned good forecasters, the good people at the National Hurricane Center are also paragons of social sensitivity. They give storms names reflective of the cultures through which they are likely to pass. Hurricanes in the Atlantic basin are given anglicized names or ones that are roughly similar in both English and Spanish: Alberto, Bob, Gloria. In the Eastern Pacific, where storms frequently hit western Mexico, almost all the names are pure Spanish.

In this vein, I'd like to vote that this year's "H" storm in the Atlantic be given the name Hysteria. As in, caused-by-global-warming-hysteria. As in, the perception that there's been a tremendous increase in the damage done by these storms caused by global warming.

The name should be "Hysteria," because that's simply, flatly, untrue.

Last month, Roger Pielke, Jr., director of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado, released the most comprehensive paper ever published on the subject of damage trends in Atlantic hurricanes. The article will appear soon in the peer-reviewed journal *Natural Hazards Review*.

Is the planet warmer than it was? Yes. Is there any trend in hurricane-related damages in the United States, where good records of damages exist? After accounting simultaneously for inflation, population, and property values, no.

The problem with these storms is that Americans have a peculiar proclivity to take money and bury it in a sand dune on a hurricane-prone beach, i.e. a beach house. As a result, the number of beach homes is going up and up, and because the supply is limited (there's only so much beach), prices have risen astronomically. And the costs and sizes of the homes have also risen, given that increases in real wealth have outpaced inflation.

Pielke's very clever (and elegant) methodology, employing a simple algebraic equation, gives hurricane damages in 2005-dollar equivalents. That year's Katrina, a monster by any standard, caused \$81 billion worth of damage. Applied Insurance Research, using a totally different method, estimated \$82 billion.

But Katrina pales in comparison to the Great Miami hurricane of 1926. Pielke gives two estimates, averaging around \$148 billion. AIR pegs it at \$160 billion. Given the trajectory of property values and population in Florida, Pielke notes that a \$500 billion hurricane (in today's dollars) should be quite

likely by the 2020s.

A little history. After the Great Miami and Katrina, the remaining top ten storms (in descending order) occurred in 1900 (Galveston 1), 1915 (Galveston 2), 1992 (Andrew), 1983 (New England), 1944 (unnamed), 1928 (Lake Okeechobee 4), 1960 (Donna/Florida), and 1969 (Camille/Mississippi). There is no obvious bias toward recent years. In fact, the combination of the 1926 and 1928 hurricanes places the damages in 1926-35 nearly 15% higher than 1996-2005, the last decade Pielke studied.

What's more interesting are the trends. After allowing only for inflation, hurricane damages are indeed increasing. Rather, it's the other factors — the huge coastal population increases and the rapidly appreciating property values — that negate any trends.

The silence associated with this important finding is deafening, and the results are consistent with other science that is being ignored in the current climate. One of Pielke's co-authors, Chris Landsea, from the National Hurricane Center, has also found no trends in hurricane frequency or intensity when they strike the U.S. Sure, as is known to anyone who has studied hurricane data, there has been an increase in the number of strong storms in the past decade, but there were also a similar number of major hurricanes in the 1940s and 1950s, long before such activity could be attributed to global warming.

As Pielke writes, "The lack of trend in twentieth century normalized [inflation and wealth-adjusted] hurricane losses is consistent with what one would expect to find given the lack of trends in hurricane frequency or intensity at landfall."

Hysteria begets cost, especially when politics gets involved. For years now, Europe's big reinsurance companies — the people who insure the insurers — has been raising rates, claiming that global warming is making hurricane damages worse. Interestingly, the American companies, using the AIR data, are not as strident.

This works out to an interesting market competition. People will obviously tend towards the lower cost insurance, after adjusting for coverage differences. Someone is going to go out of business. Who will win here: Hurricane Hysteria, or the real world?