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High storm cycle is here to stay!!!

The increase in hurricane activity in recent years is not as unusual as some might think -- and it is the wave of the future, said meteorology experts.

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Charley, Frances and Ivan. Three major hurricanes. Two assaults on Florida already. Get used to it. This is the new normal.

Scientists say we are in a period of enhanced hurricane activity that could last for decades, ending a 24-year period of below-average activity. They also say the law of averages has caught up with Florida, with a change in atmospheric steering currents turning the state into a hurricane magnet.

"People are suddenly alert, suddenly paying attention," said Stanley Goldenberg, a meteorologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's hurricane research division on Virginia Key. "They can see now that we are in an active era. . . . People should realize that it is very unlikely that Frances is the last storm we will see this year."

"The season is still young," said Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center in West Miami-Dade. "It certainly seems from my perspective that we're in the active period that has been predicted. The only surprise is that Florida hasn't been hit more often in the last few years."

Now, the combination of complacency bred during a long lull between 1971 and 1994, the new hyperactivity since 1995 and the ongoing mega-development of Florida's coasts frightens emergency managers and scientists.

"The implications are much-increased damage when storms make landfall," Goldenberg said, "and the potential for major loss of life in the event of an evacuation foul-up during a rapidly intensifying storm."

He has more than academic interest in this. Goldenberg and his family were nearly killed when Hurricane Andrew crushed their South Dade home in 1992.

DISTINCT PATTERNS

Research he later conducted with NOAA scientist Chris Landsea, private expert William Gray and others found distinct patterns of low-activity hurricane periods and high-activity periods, each of which endured for decades. These patterns, unrelated to the current concern over global warming, are caused by regular cycles of oceanic and atmospheric phenomena, such as unusually warm water in hurricane breeding grounds.

MAJOR STORMS

In the past few years, and particularly this year, the statistics related to the number, power and duration of storms appear to verify the report's depressing conclusions, especially when major hurricanes are considered. This is significant because, though relatively few in number, major hurricanes -- Category 3 or higher -- cause 80 percent of all damage from tropical weather.

"We're not talking about stronger hurricanes than in the past," Goldenberg said. "We're talking about more of the stronger hurricanes."

The long-term average, including relatively quiet periods and busy periods, is 2.6 major hurricanes a year. Between 1971 and 1994, only four years had more than two major hurricanes and none had more than three. Between 1995 and 2003, a much shorter period, seven years had three or more major hurricanes. And we've already had four major storms this year -- Alex, Charley, Frances and Ivan.

All the other numbers tell the same tale: total storms, total strength, total duration, Caribbean hurricanes, October and November hurricanes are each at least 100 percent -- and in some cases 500 or 1,000 percent -- higher since the lull.

"That's a humongous increase," Goldenberg said. "This is striking. This is not a little signal. It would be like saying the average temperature is 15 degrees warmer than last summer. It's huge. It's huge."

Worse, atmospheric steering currents have changed to our disadvantage.

During the beginning of this active period, a persistent and beneficial bend in the jet stream carried hurricanes away from Florida. Now, that phenomenon has disappeared, replaced by a persistent ridge of high pressure over the Atlantic that is pushing them toward Florida.

What can you do?

Only one thing: Prepare.

"People should realize that, active year or slow year, we can still get hit," Goldenberg said. "Remember, Andrew hit during a below-average year. The higher activity is just all the more reason to remind people that they can't let their guard down."