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Storm Season

This could be a year of powerful hurricanes, with more bad years to follow.

By Steve Pomplun

Conditions are right for a rough Atlantic hurricane season, according to an expert on storm frequency. James Elsner is a geographer at Florida State University. He studies the historical patterns of hurricanes and calculates their probability.

Elsner says we're in a period of stormy Atlantic weather that began in 1995. He says conditions are much the same as in the 1930s, which saw a long stretch of frequent and powerful storms.

"I think we're definitely in a new period of major hurricane activity, and I think it's going to be similar to the activity we saw in the 30s and 40s. How long that will last is uncertain. I would expect at least five to ten, maybe 15 more years."

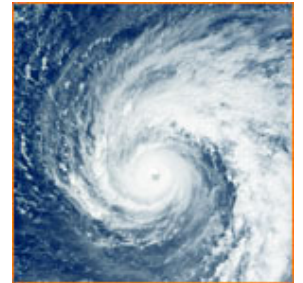
Elsner points to a phenomenon called the North Atlantic oscillation, a change in atmospheric pressure over the sea. He says a period of powerful hurricanes develops when the oscillation switches from one extreme to another, which it did in 1995.

Elsner says these pressure changes, and the storms that follow, are natural. He does not see any connection to global climate change.

"The question is, is the increase in hurricane activity linked to global warming? Not likely. At least my data is completely ambiguous in terms of answering that question. For one thing, we see that the activity was very high during the 30s and 40s, and then it dropped off in the 60s and 70s and 80s, when in fact the temperatures were rising fairly significantly over those three decades."

Elsner says the North Atlantic oscillation also determines where most hurricanes will go. He says this year they're more likely to head for Florida and the Gulf of Mexico rather than up the East Coast. Elsner says we can expect three or four major hurricanes this season.

Script for Wednesday, May 24, 2000





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