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## Busy Hurricane Seasons Typically a Breeze for Floridians

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### Description

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Forecasters have predicted an above average number of hurricanes this year, and, oddly enough, that may bode well for Florida, a Florida State University researcher says.

After studying 52 hurricane seasons from 1950 through 2001, geography Professor James Elsner said the probability a hurricane will hit Florida peaks slightly during seasons that have an average number of hurricanes - not the seasons with the most hurricanes.

"During a normal season, the chance of seeing at least two Florida hurricanes increases from 10 to 15 percent," Elsner said. "In fact, assuming the seasonal forecast is perfectly reliable and the present climate is no different than the past, a forecast of an average season is the most ominous to the residents of Florida."

The finding is surprising because one would expect the chances of a Florida landfall to increase along with the total number of hurricanes. As expected, the likelihood of a Florida landfall was the least during below average seasons.

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Elsner theorized that Florida may be more likely to avoid a landfall hurricane during above average years because more storms track through the Caribbean to the south of the state during those seasons. He studied data from 1950 through 2001. On average, there were five to seven hurricanes each year.

Forecasters are predicting the 2003 hurricane season, which began June 1 and ends Nov. 30, will have between six and nine hurricanes. Two to four of the hurricanes are expected to be severe, meaning Category 3, 4, or 5 storms, which pack winds of 111 mph or more.

Elsner's work gives Floridians perspective on the forecasts and their chances of actually being affected by a hurricane.

"Forecasts are more accurate than simple guesswork, but since most hurricanes remain out at sea, the forecast has little relevance to your chance of experiencing storm-induced high winds or surge," Elsner said.

A case in point is the 1992 season when a below average year of four hurricanes resulted in a devastating blow to Florida in the form of Hurricane Andrew. By comparison, 2001 was an above-average hurricane year with nine hurricanes, but none made it to the United States.

Scientists are working on making seasonal hurricane forecasts more relevant by focusing on landfalls, and Elsner's research has identified climate signals that indicate where storms will track. For example, a weak North Atlantic oscillation pattern likely contributed to more landfalls in 1979, he said.

"Every year, we learn more, and seasonal forecasts will get better and more specific," he said. "Meanwhile, the advice is to be prepared regardless of what the prognosticators say."

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