

The New York Times

The Lede

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AUGUST 19, 2011, 3:00 PM

A Year Full of Weather Disasters and an Economic Toll to Match

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The weather this year has not only been lousy, it has been as destructive in terms of economic loss as any on record.

Normally, three or four weather disasters a year in the United States will cause at least \$1 billion in damages each. This year, there were nine such disasters. They included the huge snow dump in late January and early February on the Midwest and Northeast, the rash of tornadoes this spring across the Midwest and the more recent flooding of the Missouri and [Souris Rivers](#). The disasters are responsible for at least 589 deaths, including 160 in May when [tornadoes ripped through Joplin, Mo.](#)

These nine billion-dollar disasters tie the record set in 2008, according to a report by [the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#). The total damage done by all storms, tornadoes, flooding and heat waves so far this year adds up to about \$35 billion. The National Climatic Data Center says it estimates the costs in terms of dollars and lives that would not have been incurred had the event not taken place. Insured and uninsured losses are included in damage estimates and are likely to change as assessments become more complete. With four months to go in 2011, this year's total amount of damage is likely to rise. Forecasters are already predicting further meteorological mayhem as hurricane season intensifies.

Over the last 30 years, there have been about 108 natural disasters that have caused \$1 billion in damages each, according to NOAA. The total damage from all natural disasters since 1980 is about \$750 billion.

“The increasing impacts of natural disasters, as seen this year, are a stark reminder of the lives and livelihoods at risk,” Jack Hayes, director of NOAA’s National Weather Service, said in a statement.

Part of the problem is that more people are living in high-risk areas, particularly coastal regions, NOAA said. This makes communities “increasingly vulnerable to severe weather events, such as tornado outbreaks, intense heat waves, flooding, active hurricane seasons, and solar storms that threaten electrical and communication systems,” the statement said.

NOAA, along with other private and public agencies, is taking several steps to try to make the nation more “weather-ready,” including more precise forecasts, improved ability to alert local authorities about the risks and the development of specialized mobile-ready emergency response teams.

The National Weather Service is also planning several test projects involving emergency response and ecological forecasting. Test projects are to start soon at strategic locations in the Gulf Coast, South and mid-Atlantic region. They include improvements to a system in Charleston, W.Va., for alerts three hours ahead of severe weather instead of the current half-hour.

The nine weather events that have caused at least \$1 billion in damages so far this year are:

[Central/East Groundhog Day blizzard](#) (Jan. 29-Feb. 3). This storm was tied to 36 deaths. The losses totaled more than \$2 billion.

[Midwest/Southeast tornadoes](#) (April 4-5). Nine people were killed. Total losses were more than \$2 billion.

[Southeast/Midwest tornadoes](#) (April 8-11). Resulted in more than \$2 billion in losses.

[Midwest/Southeast tornadoes](#) (April 14-16). Caused 38 deaths. Total losses are more than \$2 billion.

[Southeast/Ohio Valley/Midwest tornadoes](#) (April 25-30). Caused 327 deaths. Losses total more than \$9 billion.

[Midwest/Southeast tornadoes](#) (May 22-27). Caused 177 deaths. Total losses are more than \$7 billion.

[Southern Plains/Southwest drought, heat waves, wildfires](#). Direct losses are more than \$5 billion.

Mississippi River flooding. At least two deaths and losses ranging from \$2 billion-\$4 billion.

Upper Midwest flooding. Losses estimated at \$2 billion.

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