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Neeley: Lack of hurricanes helps climate change skeptics

By Josiah Neeley | September 10, 2013

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"Rick Perry leaves a trail of death." So reads the headline in a fake weather report, part of a new campaign to name hurricanes after noted climate change skeptics. The group, 350.org, hopes that associating politicians with destructive storms will make them more willing to enact restrictions on carbon emissions as a means of fighting global warming.

The campaign is tasteless, but it helps to highlight an otherwise largely overlooked fact: Hurricanes have been largely absent this year.

For the first time in 11 years, August came and went without a single hurricane forming in the Atlantic. The last intense hurricane (Category 3 or above) to hit the United States was Hurricane Wilma, in 2005. According to Phil Klotzbach, head of Colorado State University's seasonal hurricane forecast, accumulated cyclone energy is 70 percent below normal this year.

Hurricanes have become a major part of the public relations campaign for radical action on climate change. After Hurricane Sandy hit the Eastern Seaboard last fall, the left quickly dubbed it a "Frankenstorm," and nearly fell over itself attempting to claim that the intensity of the storm was a result of greenhouse gas emissions.

That's not so surprising. Despite decades of effort, the environmental movement has largely failed to persuade the American public to accept the draconian restrictions that stopping climate change would entail, and linking hurricanes to climate change may be their best chance to change all that.

A look at the science, however, tells a somewhat different story. While the overall number of recorded hurricanes has increased since 1878 (when existing records begin), this is at least partly due to an improved ability to observe storms rather than an increase in the number of storms.

As Thomas Knutson of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration noted recently, "the rising trend in Atlantic tropical storm counts is almost entirely due to increases in short-duration (less than 2-day) storms alone [which were] particularly likely to have been overlooked in the earlier parts of the record, as they would have had less opportunity for chance encounters with ship traffic." As such, "the historical Atlantic hurricane record does not provide compelling evidence for a substantial greenhouse warming induced long-term increase."

Similarly, the increase in damages from storms over time has less to do with their increased frequency or intensity than with the fact that we have gotten richer. Had Hurricane Sandy swept through New Jersey 100 years ago, it would have done far less damage simply because, back then, there was less of value to destroy. These days Americans are not only wealthier, but we are more inclined to build closer to the water, due to subsidized flood insurance. When University of Colorado professor Roger Pielke looked at the numbers, he found that correcting for these factors completely eliminated the supposed increase in hurricane damage.

Unsurprisingly, then, a leaked draft of the Fifth Assessment Report of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (due to be released later this month) downgraded the likelihood of a connection between past temperature rises and extreme weather events. According to the report, there is "low confidence" in any association between climate change and hurricane frequency or intensity.

The U.N. panel could, of course, be wrong. Congress recently held hearings examining the science behind

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climate change claims, and should continue to do so. In this case, however, the attempts to slander climate change skeptics by linking them to today's storms is scientifically flawed to say the least.

Whenever a climate change conference is greeted by a record snowfall or cold snap, environmentalists are quick to point out that weather is not the same as climate. Yet when it comes to storms, many have been willing to fall into exactly the same trap.

Neeley is a policy analyst with the **Texas Public Policy Foundation**, an Austin-based nonprofit, free-market research institute.



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