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Study finds climate change is costing billions in hurricane damage alone

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This stairway to nowhere, in New Orleans after Katrina, tells the story of economic losses from hurricanes due to climate change.
Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images

A peer reviewed [study](#), published in Nature Geoscience October 19, found that man-made [climate change](#) has added billions of dollars in costs in hurricane damage in the United States alone. The cost of hurricane damage in the United States has increased dramatically from 1900 to 2005 according to the economic study.

"The rise in losses is consistent with an influence of [global warming](#) on the number and intensity of [hurricanes](#), an influence which may have accounted for 2% to 12% of the U.S. hurricane losses in 2005," according to the study. In 2005 alone, climate change was likely responsible for close to \$14 billion of additional damage, including devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Climate change has made the storms much more severe.

The study claims that the extra costs in recent decades do not just stem from more homes, businesses and infrastructure that have been built near the coastlines. "Increases in wealth and population alone cannot account for the observed trend in hurricane losses," according to Francisco Estrada, an economist at Mexico's National Autonomous University and lead author of the study. Hurricane damage has increased everywhere including communities established centuries ago and far removed from the coast such as New Orleans.

Meteorologist Steve Bowen of global reinsurance firm Aon Benfield, said the study seems to use a reasonable approach to determine the results. "From my perspective," Bowen [told USA Today](#), "it is always healthy for there to be robust conversation within the scientific research community to challenge conventional thinking to better understand any trends that we're seeing."

As usual, "experts" who deny climate change disagree with the findings. University of Colorado's Roger Pielke, who was not involved in the study, said it should have included hurricane damage data from just the past 10 years (2006-2015), which have been quiet for hurricane activity. He said it's "misleading" to end an analysis with the "exceptional" hurricane year of 2005. "The period 2006-2015 has been well below average in terms of damage and U.S. hurricanes," [Pielke said](#).

The point of this study and other studies is not that the number of weather events necessarily change. It is that the storms are more severe. For example, a category 5 hurricane is now more severe than category 5 storms in the past. Hurricane Patricia, which hit Mexico last week, was a cat 5 storm packing 200 MPH winds. This is much stronger than the historical wind speeds in cat 5 storms. Due to climate change, we probably need to add additional categories to measure storms.

Another unrelated [study](#), published in Nature October 21, found that unmitigated increases in the average global temperature will reduce average global incomes about 23 percent by 2100. The study, conducted by Marshall Burke, Solomon Hsiang, and Edward Miguel, found that optimal economic productivity occurs at an average annual temperature of 13 degrees Celsius (55.4 degrees F), with sharp declines occurring at warmer temperatures.

As temperatures rise, the study found, fewer countries will be in or near the ideal 13-degree zone, leading to global productivity losses. Such a large impact on global GDP, according to co-author Hsiang, has long been considered "a low-probability catastrophe," but their study indicates "it's more like the middle-of-the-road forecast." The study notes that the poorest 40 percent of the global community may suffer an economic hit of 75 percent.

The bottom line is that doing nothing about climate change is resulting in costs today. These costs will increase exponentially over the short term. It might make more sense to make the investments to reduce the global warming that is causing storms to be more severe. This is not likely to happen with Congress controlled by members who are climate change deniers and at the same time, beneficiaries of hundreds of million dollars in campaign contributions and lobbying by the fossil fuel industry. It will be interesting to see what happens in the 2016 elections.

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