

Get Real: Hurricane Irene Should Be Renamed "Hurricane Hype"



By Patrick Michaels / *Forbes* – Fri, Aug 26, 2011

Over the years the National Hurricane Center (NHC) has employed the world's best experts on Atlantic tropical cyclones, from "Dr. Bob" Simpson, to the mediagenic Neil Frank and on to the current director, Bill Read.

The lifesaver-in-chief was probably Frank, who indefatigably crisscrossed the nation educating the public to the dangers—hidden and obvious—that accompany these curiously seductive weather systems. His era was one of many innovations, including extensive use of satellites, and tailoring the "names" of storms to the culture where they roam in order to attract attention.

One of Frank's nightmare scenarios goes like this: A strong hurricane threatens a heavily-populated resort area with few escape routes, such as the North Carolina Outer Banks. Vacationers reluctantly abandon their \$20,000/week palaces on Pine Island for 36 hours in an immobile SUV conga line, drenching tropical showers, and no toilets. The storm falls apart or unexpectedly turns away from land. Lotsa folks rent for more than a week, so they return, an equally strong storm shows up, and they don't leave. The title of this movie is "how to die in a 10,000 square foot house-boat".

We have just lived through something pretty close to this nightmare. Last April 27, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 41 died because they disregarded a weather warning.

While the number of strong tornadoes is hardly changing (there may even be a slight decline), the number of tornado warnings has increased exponentially as Doppler radar picks up twisting circulations embedded in thunderstorms that could produce a ground tornado.

The number of false positives has so cheapened the currency of tornado warnings that few now bother to interrupt their work when one is given. While the very good forecasters at the National Weather Service were not at all happy when veteran TV meteorologist James Spann blamed a large number of Tuscaloosa deaths on the very high false alarm rates, he had a point.

Now on to Hurricane Irene:

Up until now (Friday evening) Irene has been very similar to 1985 hurricane Gloria, though a bit weaker. But the level of hype—because of its projected path near all of the I-95 major cities—is similar to that of 26 years ago.

See the track [here](#).

When Gloria didn't kill enough people to suit CBS's Dan Rather—a serial hurricane hyper who made his career on 1961 Hurricane Carla—he yelled at poor Neil Frank on live TV.

What had happened is that the night before landfall, Gloria took a sudden 40-mile jog to the east. The cyclone slid harmlessly east of the big cities, showing her weaker western side instead of the destructive northeast corner.

Irene has put on a remarkably similar show. Within the limits of forecasting error, Irene's projected path makes it was impossible to rule out a major disaster. But, as a dangerous Category 3 storm within two days of land, something similar to what happened to Gloria occurred. Instead of going slightly off course, the power of her winds dropped markedly, at least as measured by hurricane hunter aircraft. Because it is prudent to not respond to every little tropical cyclone twitch (such as Gloria's jog or Thursday's wind drop), the Thursday evening forecast was virtually unchanged, the Internet went thermonuclear, and the Weather Channel's advertising rates skyrocketed. From that point on, it became all Irene, all the time. With this level of noise, the political process has to respond with full mobilization. Hype begets hype.

A day later, the smart money is still riding a very Gloria-like track, but with a cyclone that will be weaker than projected. It is doubtful that Irene will even cough up eight bodies (the number killed by Gloria), though power outages east of where the center makes landfall (probably on Long Island) may be extensive.

As I complete this, there's another tropical depression out in the Atlantic, and a couple more on the way in the very near future. Suppose one of these takes a similar path, except that it improbably threads the needle of the Mid-Atlantic Bight and makes landfall immediately to the west of New York City as a Category 3 storm. How many people will the hyping of Irene have killed?

That's how Hurricane Hype followed by Hurricane Insanity leads to hurricane death.

I see a solution, in all places, in Washington DC, where a group of crackerjack weather forecasters, led Jason Samenow, have set up the Capital Weather Gang (www.capitalweathergang.com). It's become the go-to group for potentially severe winter storms here (including hurricanes), and, because they are serving a smaller community than, say, NHC, they aren't under the massive scrutiny of a politicized media. Is it time for similar diversity to develop all over the high-stakes world of tropical cyclones?

Or would that be an abject disaster? Consider if there are five competing hurricane forecasters, four suggesting evacuation while the fifth says "stay put", and the fifth one is wrong. Surely most people would choose to stay, with disastrous results. Given the nature of the Internet, such an experiment is sure to run in the near future.