

The Detroit News

FEMA asks Michigan to do the impossible

Patrick J. Michaels

April 9, 2015

Last fall, the Federal Emergency Management Agency issued a draft proposal that will require Michiganders to do the impossible or face the loss of disaster relief funds. Specifically, state governments will be required to assess the risk of future disasters in a changing climate.

FEMA has solicited public comments and will, as per usual, ignore most if not all of them when it issues its final rulemaking later this year. So what can Michigan expect global warming to do to its most significant natural hazard, the tornado?

Michigan's peculiar geography makes it home to some very diverse and bizarre weather, from the wintertime burial of Houghton to some particularly violent tornadoes. While there aren't many total tornadoes per year, some of them, such as the one that mowed down Flint in 1953, are the stuff of nightmares.

Nonetheless, FEMA will require Michigan to provide "a summary of the probability of future hazard events that includes projected changes in occurrence for each natural hazard in terms of location, extent, intensity, frequency, and/or duration. Probability must include ... the effects of climate change on the identified hazards."

Let's be blunt: FEMA hasn't a clue about climate change, probably because they read the reports of federal climatologists. For example, the federal government's National Assessment of climate change says mental illness increases as it gets warmer. Do Michiganders really believe that people in the balmy vineyards of Paw Paw are loonier than they are in chilly Sault Ste. Marie?

Anything one can say about climate change and future hazards, such as hurricanes, has to be based upon some kind of forecast model, and there are a lot out there. In its most recent compendium on climate change, for instance, the United Nations uses 107 versions, all of which predict slightly different futures. None have been correct about the climate of the past two decades.

In those last two decades, according to the global satellite-sensed temperature record environmentalists used to love, there has been no net global surface warming whatsoever. Is it realistic to think we could use these same models to reliably predict how many tornadoes will hit Michigan in 2050?

It simply can't be done. Not only have these models failed to accurately predict global temperatures, but hurricanes are too small to be captured by them.

Then there's the Upper Peninsula snow off Lake Superior. Does it get more crippling in a warmer world? As the lake warms (swimmers tell us it could use a tad more heat), a big blast of Canada's coldest could produce even more snow. Or less, if the cold air attenuates more than the lake warms. Who knows? Some bureaucrat in Lansing?

FEMA expects Michiganians to magically know which of these is right, and how climate change will affect the "intensity, frequency, and/or duration" of not just snowstorms, but only those snowstorms that unleash their wrath upon the state, as well as monster tornadoes — or else they might withhold the tax dollars paid to them in case of emergency. It seems as though FEMA's morals are as bad as their grasp of climate science.

Patrick J. Michaels is director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute.