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CATO Institute scholar: FEMA tells Oklahoma to do the impossible ... or else

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Last fall, the Federal Emergency Management Agency issued a draft proposal that will require Oklahoma 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 Oklahoma confidently expect global warming to do to its significant natural hazards?

Oklahoma's peculiar geography makes it home to some of the most violent weather on Earth, in almost every flavor and hue. In fact, in the developed world, you'd be hard put to find a place with a combination of more tornadoes, droughts, deluges, and wild temperature swings — and these climatological facts are not going to change due to the slight changes in surface temperature that may be associated with human emissions of carbon dioxide.

Nonetheless, FEMA will require Oklahoma 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.”

Anything one can say about climate change and future hazards, such as tornados, has to be based upon some kind of forecast model, and there are a lot out there. For example, in its most recent compendium on climate change the United Nations uses 107 different versions, all of which predict slightly different futures and none of which 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. This is unfortunate because planners are often constrained to use their two scenarios for future guidance, even as evidence continues to mount that both have predicted considerably more warming than will occur this century.

Is it realistic to think we could use these same models to predict reliably how many tornados will hit Oklahoma 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.

The relationship between tornadoes and global warming is also not very clear. While global warming is supposed to result in increasingly buoyant surface air (and hence, faster or bigger thunderstorm development), it also reduces the thermal contrast that powers the jet stream — which is what provides the spin required to form a destructive vortex.

Some Oklahoma tornadoes are whoppers — long-path Fujita 5 killers like the 1999 and 2013 Moore tornadoes. Moore's experience reveals an important story; while it was plenty tragic, with 36 fatalities, if the 1999 storm had hit in an era without rapid communication and sophisticated weather technology, it would have killed many hundreds, maybe even a thousand more, than it did.

The fact is people adapt to weather hazards, and not just tornadoes. Climate alarmists tell us as urban heat waves become more frequent and/or severe, many more will die. In fact, the numbers show the opposite — the more frequent they become, the fewer people die. And when they do die, as they tragically did in the 1995 Chicago heat wave disaster, the political process takes a licking and the public demands adaptive responses such as cooling centers and aggressive education campaigns. The next heatwave, three years later, killed far, far fewer people.

The adaptive responses — better technology and better communication — do orders of magnitude more good than the bad any speculative change in tornado frequency would visit upon Oklahoma.

FEMA expects Oklahoma to magically know which of these is right, and how climate change will effect the “intensity, frequency, and/or duration” of not just tornados, but only those tornados that visit 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.

We can make one projection with confidence: as long as the most substantial barrier between the North Pole and Oklahoma City is a barbed wire fence, one thing is not going to change — the panoply of violent weather is the climate of Oklahoma.

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