

Lightning, severe storms to blame for several area cases of property damage and injury

By ANDREW WALKER • August 14, 2010

MUNCIE -- The battle between those who subscribe to the theory of global warming and those who don't rages on. But no matter what the case might be, this year, the numbers don't lie.

The global average land surface temperatures in 2010 have been the warmest on record, reports the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), and this trend has certainly been felt locally this summer, as high humidity and an unstable atmosphere are to blame for several dangerous severe storms.

But David Call, an assistant professor of geography at Ball State University, said because last summer was relatively quiet on the local front, this summer's weather could appear to be a lot worse than it really is.

"This year, our (storm) season was just a bit delayed," Call said. "But one summer, given how quiet last summer was, I don't think you can use one summer to suggest anything. It certainly has been really humid, and that's what's been fueling these storms."

Already this year, lightning has been the cause of multiple property fires and injuries across East Central Indiana.

In June, a lightning strike near Riggin Road was believed to be the cause of a substantial power outage at Ball State.

In July, lightning was to blame for a house fire in Cowan, as well as the blaze and ultimate loss of a building at Albany's Littler Diecast factory.

Then, on Thursday, a fitter-welder at Indiana Bridge in Muncie was treated for injuries after being shocked by an apparent lightning strike to the company's building.

Indiana Associate State Climatologist Kenneth Scheeringa said storms in Indiana this year have been forming high in the atmosphere, which, in turn, can increase severity.

"When you have taller storms ... it's just more

distance to play with," said Scheeringa, who served as the acting Indiana state climatologist from 1988 to 2004. "They just get bigger, and bigger and bigger until everything gets too heavy, and it eventually just falls out of the atmosphere as hail and heavy rain and severe lightning."

The rise in worldwide land surface temperatures is creating a trend that several climate scientists believe is leading not only to more intense heat waves, but more intense rainfalls.

Though climatologists like Call and Scheeringa typically refrain from directly blaming global warming for the recent rise in severe storms, Charles J. Hanley of the Associated Press reported recently that the World Meteorological Organization has said this summer's heat corresponds with international scientists' predictions of "more frequent and more intense extreme weather events due to global warming."

Hanley reports scientists are blaming the warming mostly on carbon dioxide pouring into the atmosphere, primarily from vehicles and power plants.

Scheeringa disagrees. He said carbon dioxide "might play a small part" in the recent rise of temperatures, but anything felt this particular summer isn't cause for much concern.

"We're just going to have these once in a while," he said. "Part of nature is you're going to have extremes once in a while. This summer happens to be one of those extremes."

In Indiana, statistics indicate average summer temperatures from 1850-2010 are actually in decline. According to the [NOAA](#), the typical Hoosier summer in 1850 averaged around 73 degrees, while that number in 2010 is approaching 72 degrees.

Patrick Michaels, a nationally-known climatologist who is a senior fellow at both the Cato Institute and George Mason University in Washington, D.C., is a known global warming skeptic. Michaels said simply looking at Indiana's decline in average summer temperatures is enough evidence that this summer is one of those extremes Scheeringa referred to.

"If you're talking about a local situation (in Indiana), there's just nothing," Michaels said. "You can't say that something is happening where you are is a result of warming when it's not warming in the summer. And that's a fact."

Lightning problems across East Central Indiana in 2010

- **June 21:** A lightning strike at an American Electric Power substation near Riggins Road was believed to be the cause of a power outage on the campus of Ball State University, temporarily knocking out power to classrooms and office lights, air conditioning units, computers and other wall plug-in devices.
- **July 8:** One of Albany's largest employers, Little Diecast, saw one of its buildings go up in flames after lightning struck the facility. Albany Fire Chief Derek Mays speculated the building would be declared a total loss. Nobody was injured in the blaze.
- **July 20:** A fire at a home near Cowan ignited when lightning struck the roof, investigators said. Because of the quick reactions of local firefighters, however, the house was not at a complete loss, and flames didn't spread much farther than the family's rec room in the attic.
- **July 24:** Local Christian TV station WMUN, also known as ACTS-TV, was forced to end operations after 28 years of broadcasting when it was determined the station's equipment could not be repaired following a damaging lightning strike in late June.

August 11: A fitter-welder at Indiana Bridge was shocked after the building was struck by lightning. He was immediately treated and released from Ball Memorial Hospital.

What's the difference between climate and weather?

Ken Scheeringa, who was acting Indiana State Climatologist from 1988 to 2004, said the general public often tends to misinterpret weather and climate.

Scheeringa said weather is "very much short term, what happens day-to-day, extremely

variable, changeable patterns in the atmosphere that change in a very quick basis, such as day- to-day or weekly."

But climate, Scheeringa said, is "the conditions on an average. For example, what you would normally expect for Indiana is different than what you would expect, say, in Alaska."

Heat warning continues through today

- A heat spell that the National Weather Service called the longest in 22 years in Indianapolis was expected to continue across Indiana.

The weather service issued an excessive heat warning through tonight for most of central and southern Indiana. The heat index was forecast between 105 and 110 degrees.

The weather service said it recorded a high of 96 degrees Thursday at Indianapolis International Airport, marking a fourth straight day of temperatures above 94. It said that last occurred in August 1988. High temperatures were forecast to approach 96 both Friday and today.

The Associated Press