

Global warming activists turn storms into spin

Hurricanes feed off of warm water. So the one-two punch to the Gulf Coast from Katrina and Rita has naturally led many people to wonder: Is global warming to blame for back-to-back major hurricanes slamming into the United States? (**Related:** [Opposing view](#))

European officials and some environmentalists have been quick to assert a connection. After Katrina, Germany's environmental minister, Jurgen Trittin, called America "climate-polluter headquarters." As Rita bore down on the Texas coast, British scientist John Lawton cited it as evidence that the United States' policies on curbing pollution were responsible.

Not so fast. The science backing a link between global warming and devastating storms is preliminary, skimpy and contradicted by many hurricane experts. Even the researchers who suggest there may be a link caution against leaping to conclusions without lots more study.

That sensible restraint hasn't slowed those who would exploit a tragedy to score political points and advance their agendas. Global warming is real, and reducing emissions from burning fossil fuels requires urgent action worldwide, according to the National Academy of Sciences and 10 other leading world bodies. But jumping out ahead of the science sensationalizes the issue, polarizes the debate and damages the credibility of those who make outlandish claims.

Because hurricanes form and intensify over warm ocean water, and water temperatures have risen slightly in recent years, it's understandable why there's much speculation that global warming is causing the increased number and ferocity of storms. But there's far more reason to be skeptical:

- Science doesn't support a link between global warming and recent hurricane activity, notes Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center. Katrina and Rita are part of a natural cycle. The increase in number and intensity of storms since 1995 is hardly unprecedented, says William Gray, a leading hurricane expert based at Colorado State University. He points out that two major hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast only six weeks apart in 1915, mimicking the doubly whammy of Katrina and Rita.
- If global warming were to blame for recent storms, there should have been more typhoons in the Pacific and Indian oceans since 1995, Gray says. Instead, there has been a slight decrease — at the same time China and India have increased their industrial output and emissions of greenhouse gases.
- The impact of hurricanes might seem more severe because of the intensity of news coverage and because more people are living in hurricane alley. That means more property damage and more loss of life.

The current cycle of more and deadlier storms could last 15 to 20 more years, notes the National Hurricane Center. It's worth researching whether global warming is affecting the frequency and intensity of those storms, but there's certainly no proof at the moment. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions without wrecking economic growth is an important challenge. Blaming Katrina and Rita on global warming just adds to the hot air surrounding the issue.

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