

# *Climate Disasters Daily? Welcome to the ‘New Normal.’*

Around the United States, dangerous floods, heat and storms are happening more frequently.



**By David Gelles**

David Gelles reported from the Hudson Valley, where rain poured into his home in the middle of the night. He is the new writer of the “Climate Forward” newsletter.

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Catastrophic floods in the Hudson Valley. An unrelenting heat dome over Phoenix. Ocean temperatures hitting 90 degrees Fahrenheit off the coast of Miami. A surprising deluge in Vermont, a rare tornado in Delaware.

A decade ago, any one of these events would have been seen as an aberration. This week, they are happening simultaneously as climate change fuels extreme weather, prompting Governor Kathy Hochul of New York, a Democrat, to call it “our new normal.”

Over the past month, smoke from Canadian wildfires blanketed major cities around the country, a deadly heat wave hit Texas and Oklahoma and torrential rains flooded parts of Chicago.

“It’s not just a figment of your imagination, and it’s not because everybody now has a smartphone,” said Jeff Berardelli, the chief meteorologist and climate specialist for WFLA News in Tampa. “We’ve seen an increase in extreme weather. This without a doubt is happening.”

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It is likely to get more extreme. This year, a powerful El Niño developing in the Pacific Ocean is poised to unleash additional heat into the atmosphere, fueling yet more severe weather around the globe.

“We are going to see stuff happen this year around Earth that we have not seen in modern history,” Mr. Berardelli said.

And yet even as storms, fires and floods become increasingly frequent, climate change lives on the periphery for most voters. In a nation focused on inflation, political scandals and celebrity feuds, just 8 percent of Americans identified global warming as the most important issue facing the country, according to a recent NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll.

As climate disasters become more commonplace, they may be losing their shock value. A 2019 study concluded that people learn to accept extreme weather as normal in as little as two years.

“This is not just a complicated issue, but it’s competing for attention in a dynamic, uncertain, complicated world,” said Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

Lilian Lovas, a 77-year-old lifelong Chicagoan, said she has seen climate change affect her hometown, but that she avoids the news in order to stay positive.

“It used to get so cold here in the winter but now we only get a couple real bitter days a year,” she said. “I vote and do my part but things are really out of my hands.”



The Chicago skyline was obscured by haze from Canadian wildfires on June 27. Kiichiro Sato/Associated Press



A parking attendant in Phoenix on July 5, when temperatures reached 111 degrees Fahrenheit. Ross D. Franklin/Associated Press

Kristina Hengl, 51, a retail worker in Chicago, said she wasn't so sure the weather extremes were anything that hadn't happened before.

"I'm not a scientist so it's hard for me to make a judgment call," she said, before offering an inaccurate explanation. "Our planet has always had changes and this may be just the cycle of life. You have to consider that deserts used to have lakes, Lake Michigan wasn't always a lake."

In spite of the growing alarm among climate scientists, there are few signs of the kind of widespread societal change that would reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that are dangerously heating the planet.

"Even though storms and other extremes of the climate are happening, if they are at a distance, we just as soon pretend it doesn't affect us, because we don't want to do the things that are needed to deal with this threat," said Paul Slovic, a professor at the University of Oregon who specializes in the psychology of risk and decision making.

"More and more people recognize climate change as a problem, but they don't like the solutions," Mr. Slovic added. "They don't want to have to give up the comfort and conveniences that we get from using energy from the wrong sources, and so forth."

Last Thursday, on what researchers say was the hottest day in modern history, a record number of commercial flights, each one emitting more planet-warming gasses, were in the air, according to Flightradar24.

As wildfires and sea level rise wipe out communities from California to North Carolina, residents

continue to rebuild in disaster-prone areas.

And while more electricity is being generated by wind, solar and other clean energy, the world is still largely powered by fossil fuels such as oil, gas and coal, the primary sources of planet-warming emissions.

The cumulative effects of all those greenhouse gases are now on terrifying display around the globe. The planet has warmed by an average of 1.2 degrees Celsius compared with preindustrial levels, fueling a dizzying array of extreme weather events.

Studies show that the deadly flooding in Pakistan last year, the heat dome that baked the Pacific Northwest in 2021 and Hurricane Maria, which battered Puerto Rico in 2017, were all made worse by climate change.

“Climate change is here, now,” said Michael Mann, a climate scientist at the University of Pennsylvania. “It’s not far away in the Antarctic and it’s not off in the future. It’s these climate change fueled extreme weather events that we are all living through.”



A sweltering day in Beijing on July 6, when the government ordered a stop to outdoor work because of the soaring temperatures. Andy Wong/Associated Press



Cooling off in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, after a power failure on July 5. Jose Luis Gonzalez/Reuters

Weather disasters that cost more than \$1 billion in damage are on the upswing in the United States, according to a Climate Central analysis of data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In 1980, the average time between billion-dollar disasters was 82 days. From 2018-22, the average time between these most extreme events, even controlled for inflation, was just 18 days.

“Climate change is pushing these events to new levels,” said Bernadette Woods Placky, chief meteorologist at Climate Central. “We don’t get breaks in between them to recover like we used to.”

Human activity has had such a significant impact on the planet’s ecosystems and climate that scientists are now discussing whether to declare that Earth has entered a new interval of geologic time: the Anthropocene.

And with emissions still rising globally, scientists are warning that there is only a short amount of time to drastically change course before the effects become truly catastrophic.

“This is the last slap upside the head we’re going to get when it might still matter,” said Bill McKibben, a longtime climate activist. “It’s obviously a pivotal moment in the Earth’s climatic history. It also needs to be a pivotal moment in the Earth’s political history.”

In the United States, climate change is a partisan issue, with many Republican leaders questioning established climate science, promoting fossil fuels and opposing renewable energy.

Climate scientists and environmentalists hold out hope that each new hurricane and hailstorm could nudge Americans toward action.

A survey of adults this spring found a majority are now concerned about climate change and support federal action to combat global warming and promote clean energy, according to a recent survey by Yale.

Even in Florida, a state that has grown more conservative in recent years, a growing number of residents believe humans are causing climate change, including a record number of Republicans, according to a survey by Florida Atlantic University.

“The polling data has shifted over the last few years, and I would bet that it’s going to lurch again,” Mr. McKibben said. “At a certain point, if you see enough fires and floods, who are you going to believe?”

Reporting was contributed by Cara Buckley, Robert Chiarito, Delger Erdenesanaa and Raymond Zhong.

***A correction was made on July 11, 2023: An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of a contributing reporter. He is Robert Chiarito, not Charito.***

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