

HOW VALUABLE ARE STORM PREDICTIONS?

William Gray expects 15 named storms but was off in recent years.

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MIAMI -- The Colorado State University professor who pioneered the science of seasonal hurricane forecasting is predicting another active season -- amid growing questions about the value of such long-range prognostications.

With much fanfare from a weather conference in the Bahamas, William Gray and associate Phil Klotzbach on Wednesday predicted 15 named storms would develop during the six-month season beginning June 1. They forecast eight will blossom into hurricanes, and four will reach at least Category 3 strength, with winds exceeding 110 mph.

Federal scientists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are poised to make their own seasonal predictions next month. But if National Hurricane Center officials have any sway, that forecast will debut with far less hype than in years past.

The reason: The center's specialists so question the value of seasonal outlooks that its new director, Bill Read, has asked their parent agency to de-emphasize its forecast, especially on the number of storms expected.

They are concerned that hurricane-vulnerable residents rely on the long-range predictions of above- or below-average activity when preparing for an upcoming season.

That, the forecasters say, is folly, as Hurricane Andrew painfully demonstrated. The catastrophic Category 5 killer walloped south Miami-Dade in 1992, a year that Gray had accurately predicted would bring below-average hurricane activity.

"Ignore the seasonal outlooks," said James Franklin, a veteran hurricane specialist at the center, when asked his best hurricane tip. "The bottom line is, it's a curiosity but doesn't affect what people should do. I think most of us have felt for some time it was getting too much attention -- more than it deserved."

Another center veteran, Richard Pasch, says NOAA's seasonal outlooks have "very little value" -- even though he is now a member of the team that began issuing them since 1999.

"Our mission is preparedness to save lives and people, and I'm not sure making these predictions before the season is helping any," Pasch said. "People need to put them aside

and continue to make vigilant preparations. If you were going to get storm shutters this spring, get it done, no matter what the outlook says."

NOAA spokesman Anson Franklin said there are differences of opinion within the agency, and there has been no decision about what changes -- if any -- to make for the May forecast.

However, Gerry Bell, head of the NOAA team based at the Climate Prediction Center in Maryland, is on record saying it would be "unconscionable" for scientists not to tell the public when they know conditions for an active season are in place -- even if they end up being wrong.

Rob Young, a coastal geologist at the Western Carolina University and a vocal critic of the outlooks, calls that sentiment "academic hubris."

"The primary problem I have with these forecasts is they contain no actionable information," Young said. "If Gray's team or NOAA predicts 15 storms instead of 12, what are you supposed to do different?"

"But the flip side is, the forecasts have been so bad over the past few years, they've actually done harm. When scientists are very publicly wrong over and over, it undermines the whole field."

None of the seasonal prognosticators foresaw that 2005, with 28 named storms, would be the busiest season on record, though they had accurately predicted the year would be above average.

But they also forecast that 2006 and 2007 would be "active" years, though each turned out to be closer to the norm of 11 named storms and six hurricanes, two of them intense.

Florida was unscathed both years.

Speaking on video in the Bahamas, Gray said neither his nor NOAA's forecasts should be judged by just two years of performance.

"You've got to look at the long haul,' he said. "When we take the last 24 years . . . we have shown skill."

Though the seasonal outlooks cannot pinpoint anyone's risk, Craig Fugate, director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management, said they still serve as excellent reminders that it's time to prepare for hurricane season.

"We have been very fortunate that the past two seasons have not produced a Florida landfall, but I caution all that it is not 'if' but 'when' will the next storm come calling on our shores?" Fugate said in a statement. "Will you be ready?"

Credit: Maya Bell, Sentinel Staff Writer