

Eighteen killed in Mississippi, Georgia as tornadoes descend on southeastern US

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Eighteen people died over 48 hours in tornadoes that swept across broad swathes of the southeastern United States over Saturday and Sunday.

Dangerous weather continued throughout Sunday night and early this morning. National Oceanic Atmospheric Administrations (NOAA) storm prediction center has warned that particularly dangerous situations (PDS) exist for areas ranging from central Florida into northern Georgia and central South Carolina, with a high risk of even more tornadoes.

NOAAs Storm Prediction Center (SPC) issued a “high risk” severe weather outlook for the remainder of Sunday evening. This was the first time since June 2014 that the center has issued such a warning.

The destruction began in the predawn hours on Saturday morning. Tornadoes tore through southeast Mississippi, killing four in Hattiesburg and its suburbs and laying waste to hundreds of homes in the area. Portions of Interstate 59 were closed because of debris littering the roadway; it is estimated that it will take weeks to completely clear up the damage. Many residential areas remain without electricity. Power is not expected to be restored for at least another week.

Edna Smith of Hattiesburg related to the Associate Press (AP) how the storm sheared the roof from her brick home. Smith had moved to Hattiesburg from New Orleans in 2005 as a survivor of Hurricane Katrina. “I don’t know what I’m going to do now,” she said to the AP as she picked through the rubble of her house in the rain. “I’m going to try to get some help.”

As the day progressed, multiple waves of tornadoes swept through portions of southern Louisiana, eastern Texas, northern Florida, southern Alabama, and southern Georgia. Around 30 separate reports of tornadoes were counted by NOAA’s Storm Prediction Center from Saturday morning to Sunday morning.

Twelve people were killed by the storms in Georgia, with most of the deaths concentrated in Cook County.

Speaking to the AP, Cook County Coroner Tim Purvis reported that an apparent tornado “leveled” mobile homes in the Sunshine Acres mobile home park near Adel. The trailer park accommodates 40 mobile homes; half of those were destroyed by the storms. First responders combed the wreckage for possible survivors throughout the morning. Two of the deaths in Georgia occurred in the same home in Barney, in Brooks County, when the house was lifted off its foundation and deposited upon Highway 122.

Historically, winter tornadoes have been a rarity. In the Southeast, tornadoes typically occurred in spring, beginning in the latter part of February as the temperatures warm, with a spike in April. That has changed in recent years, however, with the period from November to early January being marked as a secondary tornado season in the region.

Dangerous winter tornadoes have become almost commonplace in the South since December 16, 2000, when a freak tornado leveled a Tuscaloosa, Alabama trailer park and killed 35 throughout the state. Particularly along the Gulf Coast and the lower Mississippi Valley, winter tornadoes now occur frequently.

Since 1954, the average number of tornadoes in outbreaks has increased. The chance of extreme tornadoes, which cause widespread property damage and claim lives, has increased since then as well. Climate scientists are still investigating the link between climate change, which has been well-documented, and the increase in tornadoes. While most of them hesitate to assign global warming as the causative factor in these increases, the correlation certainly exists.

Part of the difficulty in pinning down why tornadoes are more frequent and more severe is the lack of historical, long-range studies. The issue certainly warrants more scientific investigation; lives are at stake, first of all, in the immediate present. Secondly, identifying the factors by which tornadoes could be predicted in the future, as global warming continues to rise, would assist in planning and building better structures in tornado-prone areas. Such studies, though, are already politically charged.

Since Republican President Donald Trump's inauguration, the fate of future climate change studies hangs in the balance. Moreover, many scientists fear that the data that has already been collected could be destroyed by Trump's administration.

At the precise moment of Trump's inauguration on January 20, all mention of climate change disappeared from the White House website. Dr. James Concha, a geochemist, wrote in *Forbes* on Sunday morning: "It's not like the new administration is going to start burning books or flushing files down the toilet, but website access will disappear, reports will be put in deep storage, and datasets will become more difficult to access, or will degrade in quality, as funding is cut from the agencies maintaining them."

The purge of climate change information on the White House website has been presaged by budget cuts to agencies that research climate and weather: the Department of Energy, NOAA, and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) have all seen their budgets fall in recent years.

Trump has appointed several climate change denialists to key positions in his cabinet. His Chief of Staff, Reince Priebus, told Fox News in November that Trump believes that "most" of climate change science "is a bunch of bunk." His nominees have all carefully avoided such strong wording in their confirmation hearings, but have still made it clear that they feel that human impact on global warming is debatable.

Trump's administration will obviously invest itself in protecting energy companies from science that might impact their profits. On top of this other industries also stand to lose should tornadic activity and climate change gain greater scrutiny. The Manufactured Homes Association, which lobbies for mobile home builders, has expended a great amount of effort to convince the public—but more especially the government—that their

products are as safe as any other form of housing in tornadoes.

The MHA has gone so far as to lobby NOAA to try to convince it to drop its recommendations that all mobile home parks be required to provide storm shelters to their residents. The association has mounted absurd claims, based upon manipulation of statistical evidence, that manufactured homes could even be safer than other structures. This flies in the face of research conducted by both NOAA and the National Weather Service (NWS).

According to the NWS, mobile homes and manufactured homes—which are overwhelmingly chosen by the poor who cannot afford traditional housing—are more prone to damage by low-speed winds than are traditional homes. In addition, residents of mobile homes are more than 22 times likely to die in a tornado than are residents of traditional homes, according to NOAA studies. Even when allowances are made for the fact that tornadoes occur more frequently in areas where mobile homes are used as shelter, the fatality rate is greater than ten times that for people living in homes with foundations.

Should the Trump administration proceed as expected, scientific research will be ever more subordinated to the interests of profit. This subordination is not new: lobby groups such as the MHA have managed to convince lawmakers for years that the death traps they sell are safe in tornadoes. The deaths in Georgia and Mississippi attest to the deadly intersection of climate change and profit-driven housing standards. That intersection stands to become much more dangerous under Trump.



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