

Hurricane Center director talks forecasting in interview

by AP-News

MIAMI (AP) — Substantially improving the accuracy of hurricane intensity predictions could take years and tens of millions of dollars, the National Hurricane Center's director said Tuesday.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Bill Read said reducing by half the errors made in tasks such as determining whether a storm would remain a Category 1 or grow stronger would be a costly and long-term effort.

Predicting a storm's intensity is much harder for meteorologists than estimating where it will go. Since 1990, forecasters have reduced by more than half their errors in predicting a storm's path, but over the same time the accuracy of their intensity forecasts has remained virtually unchanged.

"To really get after that you're talking tens of millions of dollars, if not more, to reach an ambitious goal," Read said. "We've made a steady gain in the improvement of the track forecasts, and we haven't figured out how to do that yet for rapid intensification."

That could take between five and 10 years, he said.

Read said he's satisfied for now with the \$3 million the government is spending this year for research into improving intensity forecasts. Long-term improvement, however, would require a sustained investment.

Read took the helm of the National Hurricane Center in January. The six-month Atlantic hurricane season which officially began June 1 is his first as director. The center monitors the movement and strength of tropical weather systems and issues storm watches and warnings for the U.S. and surrounding areas.

Read said he expects to spend a lot of time talking about preparing for storms, as other directors have. He said it's denial, not complacency, that keeps many people from being prepared. They just don't think a storm will hit, and that's what emergency managers and others have to overcome, he said.

Read also talked about the sensitive issue of a suggested link between global warming and hurricanes, acknowledging it carries "so much emotional baggage" it can be "really hard to sift out the science."

Read said he agreed with others at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and that the link between global warming and hurricanes "is still to be determined." While people who model climate largely believe "global warming is real and it's going to get worse," Read said, there is much more disagreement about the effect of warming on tropical storms and whether the number and intensity of storms will be affected.

"All of that comes out as different numbers. I think there are a lot of unresolved issues in the science," Read said.

By JESSICA GRESKO

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