

Mother Nature more of a threat to U.S. than terrorism

By Christopher Dickey, Newsweek

Paul Stockton, the Pentagon's point man for security in the homeland, plans for the kind of apocalyptic events that could forever change the lives of millions of Americans. Assistant Secretary of Defense Stockton, a lifelong academic who speaks passionate jargon, calls them "complex catastrophes" with "cascading effects," and, like Sept. 11, 2001, these new tragedies could have gut-wrenching social and political consequences. Yet the horrors he's preparing for are far bigger than 9/11: tens of thousands of people killed, the economy devastated, national security gravely compromised. And the terrorist who will be responsible for these atrocities is Mother Nature. Stockton's yardstick for cataclysms is not "worse than 9/11," it is "disasters even more severe than Hurricane Katrina."



Hail in South
Lake Tahoe in
July 2010.
Photo/LTN file

They're coming. Of that, Stockton and other disaster-management specialists have little doubt. Last month the East Coast suffered the psychological shock of a relatively small earthquake and what turned out to be a pretty weak hurricane

after some pretty strong hype. "Apocalypse Not," headlined the New York Post. New York City "dodged a bullet," as Mayor Michael Bloomberg put it. But New Jersey, upstate New York, and several states in New England didn't. In Connecticut alone, a record 650,000 households lost power, many of them for several days. In Vermont, food had to be airlifted to towns cut off by flooding. All told, Hurricane Irene killed 43 people in the United States, and estimates of the damage range up to \$20 billion.

That's just a little taste of things to come. Whatever the cause—greenhouse gases, natural warming, or both—rising temperatures and sea levels already are breeding bigger, more intense hurricanes and more dangerous storm surges. Former vice president Al Gore, the teller of so many inconvenient truths about climate change, says it is "absolutely" a national-security issue. "We can expect continued increases in the frequency and severity of extreme floods, droughts, wildfires, storms and other events," he says. "We need to begin the process now of preparing for the disasters that are to come."

According to Gore, "some scientists are considering adding a Category 6 classification to the Saffir-Simpson hurricane scale, which uses wind speed to measure hurricane intensity." (Irene hit the Northeast as a low-grade Category 1 and then was downgraded to a tropical storm; Katrina hit New Orleans as a Category 3. A Category 5 hurricane has sustained winds greater than 155 miles per hour; Category 6 would be upwards of 175 or 180mph.) And each notch on that scale means an exponential increase in destructive power.

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