

2008 Hurricane Forecast Update

August 6, 2008

Interview with Dr. Gerry Bell, hurricane forecaster with NOAA's Climate Prediction Center

NOAA: Hello, this is Susan Buchanan with the NOAA Office of Communications. We're here today with Dr. Gerry Bell of NOAA's Climate Prediction Center. Dr. Bell is a lead hurricane forecaster.

Dr. Bell is here today to give the updated 2008 Atlantic Season Hurricane Forecast. Welcome, Dr. Bell.

Dr. Bell: Oh, it's a pleasure to be here, Susan.

NOAA: We have just a few questions for you today. So, what is the updated forecast?

Dr. Bell: Well, the updated outlook calls for an 85% chance of an above-normal season. We're expecting a lot of activity for the remainder of the year. For the season as a whole, we're expecting 14 to 18 named storms, seven to 10 hurricanes, and three to six major hurricanes.

NOAA: And I understand you gave the original outlook back in May, and what has changed in the forecast since then?

Dr. Bell: Well the main thing that's changed is that where there's an increased likelihood and an increased confidence that the season will be above normal. In May, we had indicated a 65% chance of an above-normal season, and now we're indicating an 85% chance that the season will be above-normal.

NOAA: Well, why has the likelihood for an above-normal season increased since May?

Dr. Bell: Well there are two main reasons. The first is that the expected wind and ocean temperature and climate patterns that we had predicted in May are now in place as we had expected, and those conditions are conducive to an above-normal season. The second main reason is the stronger early season activity that we've had during July. And typically when you have strong activity during July, that's also a very strong indicator the remainder of the season will be above-normal.

NOAA: And what are some of those conditions that are currently in place?

Dr. Bell: Well, some of the key conditions are warmer than normal Atlantic Ocean temperatures; reduced wind shear — wind shear refers to the change in winds as you go up through the atmosphere. Hurricanes require that the wind shear be not very strong. With the weather patterns now in place, the wind shear is weak, and that certainly favors more hurricane activity. Another key factor is very favorable winds coming off of Africa. And those favorable winds allow more of the African disturbances to strengthen into tropical storms and hurricanes as they move across the Atlantic.

NOAA: So, you've said we've already had a strong season this year. What has already occurred this season in hurricanes?

Dr. Bell: Well, so far we've had five named storms, two of those became hurricanes and one became a major hurricane. The key thing is that we've seen quite a bit of activity in the tropical Atlantic — the area between the Caribbean Sea and the west coast of Africa. When you have early season activity in that area, that's often a strong indicator that the season will be above normal.

NOAA: So the hurricane outlook that you produced tells us how many hurricanes that we can expect and how strong those hurricanes might be. But what about where these hurricanes might fall? Can you tell us anything about that?

Dr. Bell: Well no, we can't at this time, not on a seasonal-time scale. The seasonal outlook really reflects the overall activity that we expect for the entire hurricane season. It is not a seasonal landfall forecast, and it does not imply levels of activity for any particular region. And the reason is quite simple. Where and when a hurricane strikes really depends on the weather patterns in place at the time a hurricane approaches, and those weather patterns just generally aren't predictable more than five to seven days in advance.

NOAA: Ok, well what's next? What is the next advancement that you're striving for with the hurricane outlook?

Dr. Bell: Well, I think the future of seasonal hurricane predictions will really focus on three scientific issues. The first is to further advance El Niño and La Niña predictions, and that's important because those predictions are currently a main source of uncertainty for the outlooks. The second area of advancement I think is to further develop the climate models, which are now starting to be used to provide additional information about the hurricane season. We think that in time, these models will be able to provide very useful and confident and consistent information about the upcoming season. And a third advance is to ultimately develop confident and reliable seasonal hurricane landfall predictions.

NOAA: Ok, well thank you for this great information, and as we close out, what's the take-away message about people and hurricanes that NOAA would like people to know?

Dr. Bell: By far, the most important thing that people can do in a hurricane season is to have a hurricane preparedness plan and a hurricane safety plan in place. So this outlook should be your reminder, if you're in a hurricane prone area, to either review your plan and update it, or to make a plan if you don't have one because we see time and time again that by far people that have a safety and preparedness plan in place fair much better than those that have not if a hurricane strikes your area.

NOAA: And we understand that it's not just people at the coast who need to worry about hurricanes.

Dr. Bell: Well, that's right. As we've seen in past several years since this active hurricane era began in 1995, many of these major hurricane strikes, with many of these major hurricane

strikes, the hurricanes have tremendous tracks over land, and they can produce in-land flooding over a large area. And it turns out that in-land flooding is now the major cause of death from hurricanes.

NOAA: Well that's very useful information, Dr. Bell. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Dr. Bell: Thank you.