POTENTIAL ENERGY | IN PARTNERSHIP WITH: CLIMATE CENTRAL

A guide to reporting on unnatural disasters

As climate change progresses and intensifies extreme weather, millions of Americans across the country are put at risk of more severe storms, more intense heat waves, and longer droughts. In fact, the average time between billion-dollar disasters in 2023 was just 12 days—compared to 82 days in the 1980s. Extreme weather events, however, also serve as a window of opportunity to educate the public about climate change's influence on extreme weather. As eyes and ears across the country tune to the stories around these events, better communications can help make a clear link between climate change, extreme weather, and their solutions. Backed by years of rigorous communications research on climate and extreme weather, this document serves as a resource to communicators who would like to better educate and engage with the public when extreme weather strikes.

What the science says about extreme weather + climate change

Here's what you accurately can say around any extreme weather event:

- **Extreme heat**: More frequent and intense extreme heat—the deadliest weather-related hazard in the U.S.—is a direct result of climate change.
- **Hurricanes and tropical cyclones**: More than 90% of the excess heat caused by climate change is going into the oceans, fueling stronger hurricanes that: intensify more rapidly, produce more rain, and bring more damaging storm surge. While the number of tropical cyclones per year has not changed globally, climate change has increased the occurrence of the most intense and destructive storms, which gives communities less time to recover in between intense storms.
- **Storm surges**: Storm surges are higher due to climate change-driven sea level rise.
- **Droughts**: Rising global temperatures due to climate change are altering the water cycle and increasing the risk of drought in parts of the U.S.
- **Floods**: Climate change is increasing flood risk in many parts of the U.S. by heating up the air, allowing it to hold more water and bring heavier rainfall extremes.
- **Coastal floods**: The frequency of coastal floods has risen sharply in recent decades due to sea level rise caused by climate change. Rising sea levels will continue to increase both tidal flooding and flooding from extreme weather events in the years ahead.
- **Wildfires**: Climate change creates more frequent hot, dry, windy conditions that set the stage for larger, more explosive wildfires, especially when combined with poor land management.

For more information, check out the following resources from leading climate scientists:

- Climate Shift Index from Climate Central
- Reporting extreme weather and climate change from World Weather Attribution
- Climate Explainers from Yale Climate Connections

What people currently believe

Despite more than a decade of reporting and scientific consensus on the topic, research shows that the majority of Americans still don't see the link between extreme weather events and climate change. In fact, several knowledge gaps go against conventional wisdom:

- **People are getting acclimated**: 84% of respondents say they have experienced some form of extreme weather, but only 16% of Americans say extreme weather poses a high risk to their community.
- **Few point to climate change as the driver**: Only 1 in 3 Americans believe climate change is affecting extreme weather "a lot."
- **Changes are seen as "natural"**: 73% of Americans believe the world's climate is undergoing a change that's causing more extreme weather patterns, but 50% of respondents see those changes as being driven by "natural changes" rather than "carbon pollution from burning fossil fuels."

In short, the public is in need of a cohesive, compelling frame that helps them clarify the story: carbon pollution from burning fossil fuels is causing climate change and worsening extreme weather.

How you can help them connect the dots

We need to shift the conversation from *natural to unnatural*.

Our research shows that **using the phrase "unnatural disasters" to describe extreme weather events is twice as effective at helping people make the connection** to climate change and carbon pollution as using the phrase "extreme weather" alone.

This term isn't new. In fact, a paper by the World Meteorological Organization made a call to reframe the conversation to "(un)natural disasters" in 2016.

Meteorologists are the most trusted people to deliver this

2 in 3 Americans trust television weather reporters as a source of information on climate change, and a longitudinal study in 2016 found that audiences who watched reporters cover climate change as part of local news broadcasts had a significantly greater understanding of climate change than they did before watching the broadcasts.

The words that shift the narrative

We conducted significant research to understand which messages make climate change feel real and relevant. Referring to extreme weather events as "**unnatural disasters**" increases support for immediate climate action by 10 percentage points.

Below is a list of additional research-backed language tweaks that can help communicators better connect with everyday people on the issue:

Less of this	More of this
Warming	Overheating
Greenhouse Emissions	Carbon pollution
Decarbonize	Reduce pollution
Ban	Upgrade
100-year storm	20-fold increase in severe storms

Resources you can use when unnatural disasters occur

Talk to an expert about attributing a specific weather event to climate change:

- Climate Central, contact: pgirard@climatecentral.org

Interview a scientist for your show/reporting:

- Science Moms, contact: hailey@potentialenergycoalition.org

Include a graph on the air to show the trend in extreme weather becoming more frequent and intense: NOAA

Check out a short guide on communicating simply about climate change: Talk Like a Human

Please contact cbehringer@potentialenergycoalition.org with any questions.