

Frequently Asked Question 10.1

Are Extreme Events, Like Heat Waves, Droughts or Floods, Expected to Change as the Earth's Climate Changes?

Yes; the type, frequency and intensity of extreme events are expected to change as Earth's climate changes, and these changes could occur even with relatively small mean climate changes. Changes in some types of extreme events have already been observed, for example, increases in the frequency and intensity of heat waves and heavy precipitation events (see FAQ 3.3).

In a warmer future climate, there will be an increased risk of more intense, more frequent and longer-lasting heat waves. The European heat wave of 2003 is an example of the type of extreme heat event lasting from several days to over a week that is likely to become more common in a warmer future climate. A related aspect of temperature extremes is that there is likely to be a decrease in the daily (diurnal) temperature range in most regions. It is also likely that a warmer future climate would have fewer frost days (i.e., nights where the temperature dips below freezing). Growing season length is related to number of frost days, and has been projected to increase as climate warms. There is likely to be a decline in the frequency of cold air outbreaks (i.e., periods of extreme cold lasting from several days to over a week) in NH winter in most areas. Exceptions could occur in areas with the smallest reductions of extreme cold in western North America, the North Atlantic and southern Europe and Asia due to atmospheric circulation changes.

In a warmer future climate, most Atmosphere–Ocean General Circulation Models project increased summer dryness and winter wetness in most parts of the northern middle and high latitudes. Summer dryness indicates a greater risk of drought. Along with the risk of drying, there is an increased chance of intense precipitation and flooding due to the greater water-holding capacity of a warmer atmosphere. This has already been observed and is projected to continue because in a warmer world, precipitation tends to be concentrated into more intense events, with longer periods of little precipitation in between. Therefore, intense and heavy downpours would be interspersed with longer relatively dry periods. Another aspect of these projected changes is that wet extremes are projected to become more severe in many areas

where mean precipitation is expected to increase, and dry extremes are projected to become more severe in areas where mean precipitation is projected to decrease.

In concert with the results for increased extremes of intense precipitation, even if the wind strength of storms in a future climate did not change, there would be an increase in extreme rainfall intensity. In particular, over NH land, an increase in the likelihood of very wet winters is projected over much of central and northern Europe due to the increase in intense precipitation during storm events, suggesting an increased chance of flooding over Europe and other mid-latitude regions due to more intense rainfall and snowfall events producing more runoff. Similar results apply for summer precipitation, with implications for more flooding in the Asian monsoon region and other tropical areas. The increased risk of floods in a number of major river basins in a future warmer climate has been related to an increase in river discharge with an increased risk of future intense storm-related precipitation events and flooding. Some of these changes would be extensions of trends already underway.

There is evidence from modelling studies that future tropical cyclones could become more severe, with greater wind speeds and more intense precipitation. Studies suggest that such changes may already be underway; there are indications that the average number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes per year has increased over the past 30 years. Some modelling studies have projected a decrease in the number of tropical cyclones globally due to the increased stability of the tropical troposphere in a warmer climate, characterised by fewer weak storms and greater numbers of intense storms. A number of modelling studies have also projected a general tendency for more intense but fewer storms outside the tropics, with a tendency towards more extreme wind events and higher ocean waves in several regions in association with those deepened cyclones. Models also project a poleward shift of storm tracks in both hemispheres by several degrees of latitude.

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Frequently Asked Questions

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