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OPINIONBUSINESSWORLD

Stop the Hurricane Climate-Change Babble

Global warming may not influence storm severity but definitely affects grid reliability.

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Florida is one of America's fastest-growing states, with four million people moving in since 2005. I pick the starting date for a reason: 2005 was the year Hurricane Katrina showed a global audience what happens when a powerful storm lands directly on a large U.S. population center.

And yet four million people moved to Florida.

Any hurricane that doesn't directly hit Jacksonville, Miami or Tampa is a good outcome for Florida. Ian landed on Fort Myers and Naples, also booming but not as densely settled. So far, 120 people are known to have died, mostly from drowning. Ian is both Florida's deadliest storm in decades and also a demonstration of how much better Florida has become at surviving hurricanes. Example: The Category 4 storm that landed on Miami in September 1926 killed 372 at a time when Dade County's population was barely 100,000. Since then, the sea off the Miami coast has risen 10 inches, the CO2 component of the atmosphere has increased by 50%—and Miami-Dade County's population has grown 27-fold.

This suggests something: The declining menace to life and safety from hurricanes is a major factor explaining Florida's population growth despite the known risk of tropical cyclones as well as the widely heard forecast that such storms will become more deadly because of climate change.

People are wealthier and better able to manage even a growing risk. Building standards are better. Emergency services are better. Most crucially, information is better. Anyone with a smartphone can now know with great precision when the moment has come to gather up the kids, dog and family photos and head for higher ground.

For comparison's sake, Texas reports 246 died from its 2021 winter blackout, with private estimates as high as 700 based on excess mortality figures. Grid failures, unlike hurricanes, are not (yet) assumed by the public to be a routine, seasonal threat, though this is changing as signaled by the proliferation of private generators (whose emissions are left out of state utility accounting).

Grid failures can't (yet) be predicted by looking at a weather app but outages increasingly are a focus of TV news weather reporting.

Inordinately, climate change intrudes in the media discussion of hurricanes but not grid failures that arise partly due to climate-driven energy policies. Think about it: The role of climate in creating Hurricane Ian is speculative and impossible to determine. For the record, both the United Nations climate panel and the U.S. government say no clear signal is yet visible in storm frequency and severity. In contrast, the decision by Texas and other states to prioritize renewables over grid resiliency is a human decision—as shown again last week by a New York grid operator report warning of a shrinking margin of safety because of the state's mandated phaseout of conventional energy sources.

Let's have a moment of realism. Weather is always a product of climate: If we had a different climate we'd have different hurricanes, but we'd still have hurricanes. Even if less CO₂ were in the atmosphere, the chances of a storm landing on you would be basically unchanged from today and still remain beyond anyone's control.

The least random, most controllable factor, on the other hand, is the adaptation and learning of human beings in the face of predictable risks, making it possible for 21 million now to enjoy Florida's low taxes, strong business climate and readily available healthcare as well as the presence of many relocated friends and neighbors from elsewhere despite the well-advertised tropical cyclone danger.

Before and after Ian, a cornucopia of news stories correctly dwelled on the huge increase in Florida's population and mostly harrumphed aimlessly about it. Few bothered to notice the one unambiguously perverse government role, namely the provision of taxpayer-subsidized flood insurance and generous rebuilding aid to encourage more people to put themselves in harm's way than would do so otherwise.

A Washington Post contribution to the genre, in its first sentence, chose to frame Florida's development boom against the "existential" threat of climate change. This is a word, Oxford tells us, "relating to existence" or "theories of existentialism." Neither of these meanings

seem to fit the Post's usage, which implies that climate change poses a threat to humanity's continued existence without actually saying so, because then the paper would have to produce evidence.

The rather more obvious truth is that climate processes, even when influenced by greenhouse gases released by human beings, operate on much longer time-scales than do human adaptation and innovation. With so many people and their wealth arriving in their state, Floridians will be well-supplied with the means and incentive to adapt to the risks that come from living in hurricane alley.



A waterfront littered with debris in Fort Myers Beach, Fla., Oct. 5.

PHOTO: REBECCA BLACKWELL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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