

U.S. hits record for costly weather disasters: \$306 billion

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WASHINGTON — With three strong hurricanes, wildfires, hail, flooding, tornadoes and drought, the United States tallied a record high bill last year for weather disasters: \$306 billion.

The U.S. had 16 disasters last year with damage exceeding a billion dollars, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Monday. That ties 2011 for the number of billion-dollar disasters, but the total cost blew past the previous record of \$215 billion in 2005.

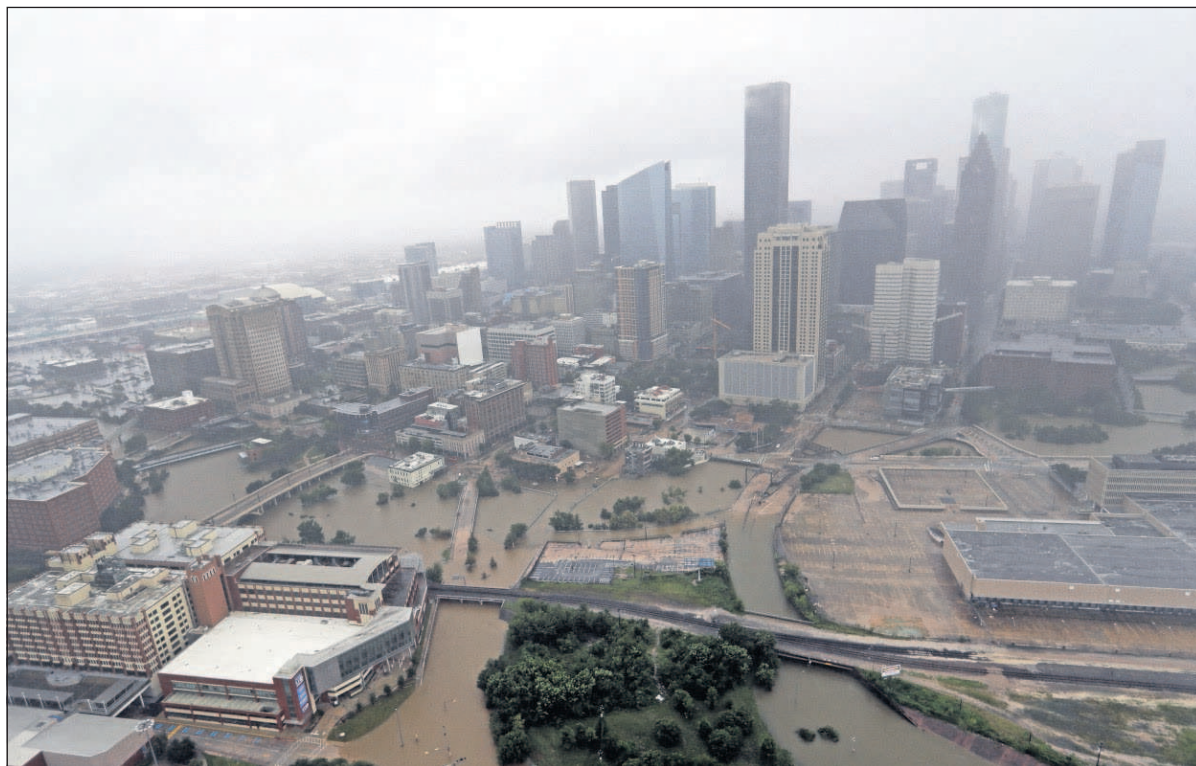
Costs are adjusted for inflation and NOAA keeps track of billion-dollar weather disasters going back to 1980.

Three of the five most expensive hurricanes in U.S. history hit last year.

Hurricane Harvey, which caused massive flooding in Texas, cost \$125 billion, second only to 2005's Katrina, while Maria's damage in Puerto Rico cost \$90 billion, ranking third, NOAA said. Irma was \$50 billion, mainly in Florida, for the fifth most expensive hurricane.

Western wildfires fanned by heat racked up \$18 billion in damage, triple the U.S. wildfire record, according to NOAA.

Besides Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico, California, Colorado, Minnesota, Nebraska, Missouri,



AP Photo/David J. Phillip, File

In this Aug. 29, 2017 file photo, highways around downtown Houston are empty as floodwaters from Tropical Storm Harvey overflow from the bayous around the city in Houston.

Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and North Carolina all had more than \$1 billion in damage from the 16 weather disasters in 2017.

"While we have to be careful about knee-jerk cause-effect discussions, (many scientific studies) show that some of today's extremes

have climate change fingerprints on them," said University of Georgia meteorology professor Marshall Shepherd, a past president of the American Meteorological Society.

NOAA announced its figures at the society's annual conference in Austin, Texas.

The U.S. averages six of the

billion-dollar weather disasters each year, costing a bit more than \$40 billion annually.

The increase in billion-dollar weather disasters is likely a combination of more flooding, heat and storm surge from climate change along with other non-climate changes, such as where buildings

are put, where people move and how valuable their property is, said Deke Arndt, NOAA's climate monitoring chief.

"Perhaps it is time to mandate urban development in a more resilient and sustainable manner given the increasing frequency of weather extremes, especially along the nation's coasts," Susan Cutter, director of the University of South Carolina's Hazards and Vulnerability Research Institute, said in an email.

The weather agency also said that 2017 was the third hottest year in U.S. records for the Lower 48 states with an annual temperature of 54.6 degrees — 2.6 degrees warmer than the 20th century average. Only 2012 and 2016 were warmer. The five warmest years for the Lower 48 states have all happened since 2006.

Arndt said the U.S. — which has had above normal annual temperatures for 21 straight years — is showing the same warming effects as the rest of the world. The burning of coal, oil and gas emits heat-trapping gases that change Earth's climate.

This was the third straight year that all 50 states had above average temperatures for the year.

Five states — Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and New Mexico — had their warmest year ever.

Temperature records go back to 1895.

BRIEFLY

Two Koreas seek breakthrough at rare border talks

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Senior officials from the rival Koreas said Tuesday they would try to achieve a breakthrough in their long-strained ties as they sat for rare talks at the border to discuss how to cooperate in next month's Winter Olympics in the South and other issues.

The Koreas' first talks in two years were arranged after North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un recently made an abrupt push for improved ties with South Korea after a year of elevated tensions with the outside world over his expanding nuclear and missile programs. Critics say Kim may be trying to divide Seoul and Washington in a bid to weaken international pressure and sanctions on the North.

"I think we should be engaged in these talks with an earnest, sincere manner to give a New Year's first gift — precious results (of the talks) to the Korean nation," chief North Korean delegate Ri Son Gwon said at the start of the negotiations, according to media footage from the venue. Ri wore a lapel pin with the images of Kim's father and grandfather, late North Korean rulers Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung.

Ri's South Korean counterpart, Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon, said he also hopes they would come up with a "good gift" that would satisfy Korean people's wishes for better ties. "There is a saying 'well begun is half done.' I'd like us to have will and patience to resolve (issues) at the negotiation," Cho said.

The talks were being held at the village of Panmunjom, the only place on the tense border where North and South Korean soldiers are feet away from each other. A North Korean soldier late last year defected to the South amid a hail of bullets fired by his comrades. He was hit five times but survived.

AP source: Mueller conveys interest in questioning Trump

WASHINGTON (AP) — Special counsel Robert Mueller's team of investigators has expressed interest in speaking with President Donald Trump as part of a probe into potential coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign, a person familiar with the matter said Monday.

The prospect of an interview with the president has come up in recent discussions between Mueller's team and Trump lawyers, but no details have been worked out, including the scope of questions that the president would agree to answer if an interview were to actually take place, according to the person. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing investigation.

When or even if an interview would occur was not immediately clear, nor were the terms for the interview or whether Trump's lawyers would seek to narrow the range of questions or topics that prosecutors would cover. Trump's lawyers have previously stated their determination to cooperate with Mueller's requests.

It's not surprising that investigators would ultimately seek to interview the president given his role in several episodes under scrutiny by Mueller. Any interview of Trump would be a likely indication that the investigation was in its final stages — investigators typically look to interview main subjects in their inquiries near the end of a probe.

Mueller for months has led a team of prosecutors and agents investigating whether Russia and Trump's Republican campaign coordinated to sway the 2016 election, and whether Trump has worked to obstruct an FBI investigation into his aides, including by firing the FBI director, James Comey.



Korea Pool via AP

South Korean Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon, left, poses with head of North Korean delegation Ri Son Gwon while shaking hands during their meeting at the Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone in Paju, South Korea, Tuesday.

Tillerson tells AP Cuba still risky; FBI doubts sonic attack

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States would be "putting people intentionally in harm's way" if it sent diplomats back to Cuba, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson says in an Associated Press interview, even as a new FBI report casts doubt on the initial theory that Americans there have been hit by "sonic attacks."

Following months of investigation and four FBI trips to Havana, an interim report from the bureau's Operational Technology Division says the probe has uncovered no evidence that sound waves could have damaged the Americans' health, the AP has learned. The report, dated Jan. 4, doesn't address other theories and says the FBI will keep investigating until it can show there's been no intentional harm.

Tillerson said he's not convinced that what he calls the "deliberate attacks" are over. He defended his September decision to order most U.S. personnel and their relatives to leave Cuba and said he won't reverse course until Cuba's government assures they'll be safe.

"I'd be intentionally putting them back in harm's way. Why in the world would I do that when I have no means whatsoever to protect them?" Tillerson told the AP on Jan. 5. "I will push back on anybody who wants to force me to do that."

"I still believe that the Cuban government, someone within the Cuban government can bring this to an end," Tillerson added. Washington has never claimed Cuba perpetrated the attacks but has insisted the island's communist-run government must know who did. Cuba adamantly denies both involvement and knowledge of any attacks.

Trump gets a national anthem moment at title game

ATLANTA (AP) — President Donald Trump got his own national anthem moment Monday when he took the field before Alabama and Georgia faced off in the College Football Playoff National Championship.

Months after wading into the culture war over protests during the anthem, the president was greeted by tens of thousands in Atlanta with cheers and a smattering of boos. After ROTC members escorted him onto the field, the president stood with his hand over his heart and an American flag pin on his lapel. He sang a few words as Georgia's Zac Brown Band and a gospel choir performed the anthem.

Trump has criticized professional football players who kneel during the anthem to protest racial injustice, as well as the NFL itself for allowing it.

Oprah speech has Democrats buzzing about possible run

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Oprah Winfrey's impassioned call for "a brighter morning even in our darkest nights" at the Golden Globes has Democratic Party activists buzzing about the media superstar and the 2020 presidential race — even if it's only a fantasy.

Even so, for Democrats in early voting states, and perhaps for a public that largely disapproves of President Donald Trump's job performance, the notion of a popular media figure as a presidential candidate is not as strange as it once seemed, given the New York real estate mogul and reality TV star now in the White House.

"Look, it's ridiculous — and I get that," said Brad Anderson, Barack Obama's 2012 Iowa campaign director. While he supports the idea of Winfrey running, it would also punctuate how Trump's candidacy has altered political norms. "At the same time, politics is ridiculous right now."

Winfrey's speech as she accepted the Cecil B. DeMille lifetime achievement award on Sunday touched on her humble upbringing and childhood wonder in civil rights heroes.

Salvadorans fear country not ready for returnees

SANTA TECLA, El Salvador (AP) — Being deported to an El Salvador he hadn't seen in more than three decades was a trauma Hugo Castro recalls clearly.

The 51-year-old said Monday that his country must begin preparing now to receive the nearly 200,000 Salvadorans who may have to return following the Trump administration's decision to lift their temporary protected status next year.

"The main problem for deportees is that they're made invisible. They're rejected, there's no work. They don't help us," said Castro, who was deported from the U.S. in 2015.

The U.S. announcement brought fears that a major source of income for this poor Central American nation will be cut off and that families could be separated. But there was also a hint of optimism that Salvadorans with many years of experience in the U.S. could bring expertise and investment to spur the economy.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen said Salvadorans who have stayed in the U.S. with temporary protected status — only a fraction of the estimated 2 million Salvadorans living there — would have to leave by Sept. 9, 2019, unless Congress came up with a solution allowing them to stay.

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