

The Post's View Opinion

Another hurricane is about to batter our coast. Trump is complicit.
Opinion | Climate change is political when you deny it's happening

Hurricane Florence is one of many signs of climate change, and those who deny it are complicit in the destruction, meteorologist Eric Holthaus says. (Gillian Brockell, Kate Woodsome, Adriana Usero/The Washington Post)

By Editorial Board

September 11 at 7:45 PM

YET AGAIN, a massive hurricane feeding off unusually warm ocean water has the potential to stall over heavily populated areas, menacing millions of people. Last year Hurricane Harvey battered Houston. Now, Hurricane Florence threatens to drench already waterlogged swaths of the East Coast, including the nation's capital. If the Category 4 hurricane does, indeed, hit the Carolinas this week, it will be the strongest storm on record to land so far north.

President Trump issued several warnings on his Twitter feed Monday, counseling those in Florence's projected path to prepare and listen to local officials. That was good advice.

[Category 4 Hurricane Florence drawing closer to Carolinas and threatens 'catastrophic' flooding]

Yet when it comes to extreme weather, Mr. Trump is complicit. He plays down humans' role in increasing the risks, and he continues to dismantle efforts to address those risks. It is hard to attribute any single weather event to climate change. But there is no reasonable doubt that humans are priming the Earth's systems to produce disasters.

Kevin Trenberth, a climate researcher at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, co-wrote a May paper showing that Harvey's cataclysmic wetness came from the unusually hot Gulf of Mexico water that fed the hurricane before it slammed into Texas. "Harvey could not have produced so much rain without human-induced climate change," he and his colleagues concluded. Now Florence is feasting on warm Atlantic Ocean water. "The ocean is warming up systematically," Mr. Trenberth said, explaining that, though natural variation can turn surface temperatures up or down a bit, the oceans' energy content is inexorably rising. "It is the strongest signal of global warming," Mr. Trenberth added.

Scientists also warn that climate change may be slowing the wind currents that guide hurricanes, making storms more sluggish and, therefore, apt to linger longer over disaster zones. Tropical cyclone movement has slowed all over the planet. Harvey's stubborn refusal to leave the Houston area was a decisive factor in its destructiveness. Florence may behave similarly.

And human-caused sea-level rise encourages higher storm surges and fewer natural barriers between water and people.

With depressingly ironic timing, the Trump administration announced Tuesday a plan to roll back federal rules on methane, a potent greenhouse gas that is the main component in natural gas. Drillers and transporters of the fuel were supposed to be more careful about letting it waft into the atmosphere, which is nothing more than rank resource waste that also harms the environment. The Trump administration has now attacked all three pillars of President Barack Obama's climate-change plan.

The president has cemented the GOP's legacy as one of reaction and reality denial. Sadly, few in his party appear to care.