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NASA: Cosmic 'superstorm' more crippling than 20 Katrinas

Solar flare forecast renews concern over power grids, communications

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By Bob Unruh

WorldNetDaily

A new government forecast warns a coming possible solar storm could eliminate - at least temporarily across large swaths of the world - power grids, air travel and communications, including those operating financial services and emergency systems, as well as GPS functions and even cell phones.

"The sun is waking up from a deep slumber, and in the next few years we expect to see much higher levels of solar activity," said Richard Fisher, head of NASA's Heliophysics Division, in the [report released just days ago](#).



Solar flare (NASA image)

"At the same time, our technological society has developed an unprecedented sensitivity to solar storms," he said.

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[WND first reported last year that NASA held high levels of concern over solar flare activity that appeared to be running in cycles](#). The new forecast suggests the solar storm could be at its peak activity in 2012 or 2013.

(Story continues below)

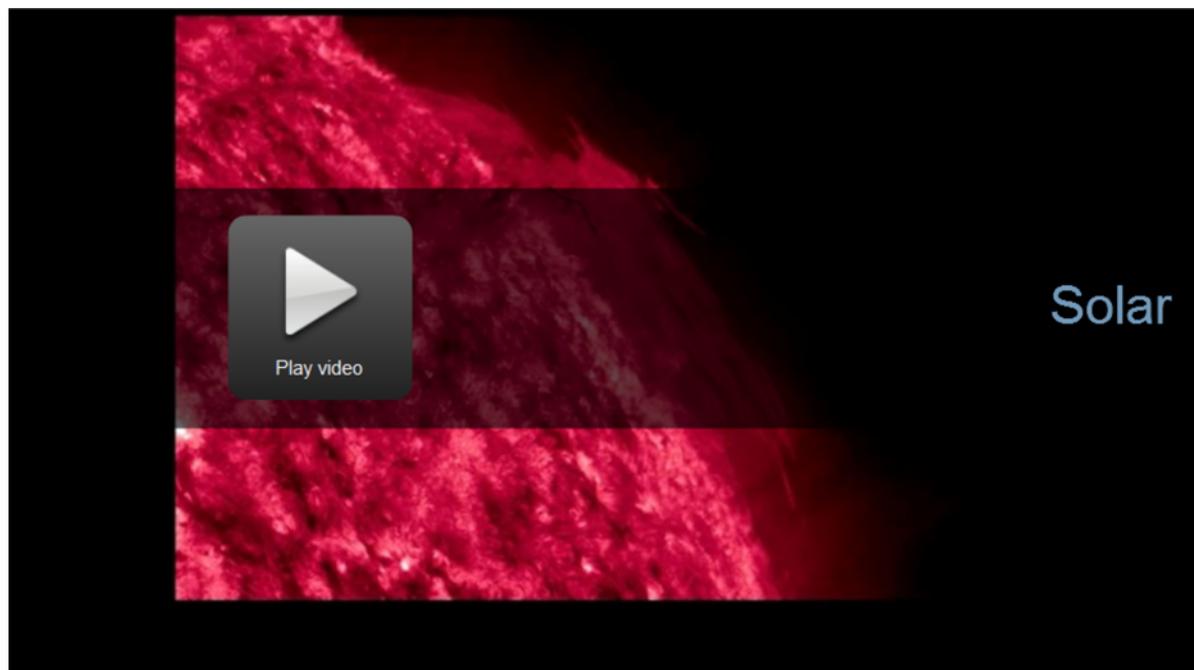
At that time, NASA forecast the possibility of a rerun of the May 1921 "superstorm" or the so-called Carrington event of 1859, which was described by Space.com as "the most powerful onslaught of solar energy in recorded history."

The new NASA report cited a National Academy of Sciences explanation from two years ago - "Severe Space Weather Events - Societal and Economic Impacts" - that documented how 21st-century civilization relies on high-tech systems for the basics of life.

Without power grids, there is no fuel pumped from underground tanks into vehicles. Without cell towers, communications could be stricken. Without servers, banking systems could revert to paper receipts. Even the supply of food could be disrupted should delivery systems be unable to track trains, trucks and shipments.

"A century-class solar storm, the Academy warned, could cause 20 times more economic damage than Hurricane Katrina," the new NASA warning stated.

As support for its concerns, NASA said one of the most massive sun flare eruptions in years was observed April 19, although the Earth was not in the line of fire this time.



The video was speeded up to reveal four hours of actual time and some 70,000-80,000 miles of space. Analysts say the entire planet Earth could fit between the plasma streamers with room to spare.



Solar flare (NASA image)

NASA reports said astronomers have seen eruptions like this before but rarely so large.

So important is the issue that officials recently held a Space Weather Enterprise Forum in Washington to begin dialogue over the potential problem.

NASA's report said much damage can be minimized if a storm forecast is accurate.

"Putting satellites in 'safe mode' and disconnecting transformers can protect these assets from damaging electrical surges," the report said.

Thomas Bogdan, director of the Space Weather Prediction Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Boulder, Colo., said rapid steps are being made, but it still is not an advanced science.

"Space weather forecasting is still in its infancy," he said.

Three NASA projects are expected to contribute to the information that will be available about the coming situation, including the pair of Solar Terrestrial Relations Observatory units stationed on opposite sides of the globe.

The Solar Dynamics Observatory also will help, because the new project, launched in February, can photograph solar active regions with much higher resolution than ever before.

Also involved will be Advanced Composition Explorer, in use since 1997, which monitors solar wind activity.

"I believe we're on the threshold of a new era in which space weather can be as influential in our daily lives as ordinary terrestrial weather," Fisher said. "We take this very seriously indeed."

Among the subjects considered at the recent Washington conference were how to build resilience across society, especially in critical infrastructure protection and support.

According to a report in the Daily Galaxy, the flares that appear to move in 22-year cycles could cause power grids to overheat and navigational devices and satellites to stop.

It's estimated that during solar storms, temperatures on the sun reach 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

"We know it is coming but we don't know how bad it is going to be," Fisher told The Daily Telegraph. "It will disrupt communication devices such as satellites and car navigations, air travel, the banking system, our computers, everything that is electronic. It will cause major problems for the world. Large areas will be without electricity power and to repair that damage will be hard as that takes time.



Solar flare (NASA image)

"Systems will just not work," he warned. "The flares change the magnetic field on the earth that is rapid and like a lightning bolt. That is the solar effect."

Tom Chivers, the Telegraph's strategic events editor, said his sources agreed that there should be concern.

He reported speaking to Ruth Bamford, a plasma physicist at the Rutherford-Appleton Lab, who said, "The sun has been particularly quiet for the last few years in a protracted solar minimum. It has just woken up, as it were, and started its usual 11-year cycle a bit later than most."

He noted documentation that the 1859 solar storm "burned out telegraph wires across Europe and the United States."

"It's a real thing, and we should be concerned. But preventive measures can be taken - satellites can be sent offline during big flares, power grids and communication networks can be shielded against electromagnetic radiation and so on," Chivers wrote.

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