

# Extreme weather events in Europe

## Preparing for climate change adaptation: an update on EASAC's 2013 study

### 1. Introduction

EASAC report number 22 (EASAC, 2013) examined trends in extreme weather within Europe. That report was published because, from an economic perspective, risks are not just through the change in the mean of climate variables such as temperature, precipitation or wind, or in derived variables like storm surge or water runoff, but also the changes in their extremes. As a result, that study looked at trends in the specific extremes of heat and cold, precipitation, storms, winds and surges, and drought. The report found evidence for overall increases in the frequency and economic costs of extreme events, which emphasised the importance of society adapting its future planning to allow for these new extremes.

In 2017, members of the original expert group, under the auspices of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters and the Norwegian Meteorological Institute, updated some of the statistics on which the original report was based. There has also been more recent evidence on some of the underlying drivers, which include weakening of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) and other phenomena such as a weakening and meandering jet stream. This short addendum to our earlier report presents these findings, which update and extend the previous analysis and confirm the conclusions in the original report.

### 2. Quantitative update

The original report included a figure (Figure 2.1 in EASAC, 2013) on the number of natural catastrophes worldwide for the period 1980–2012. This has been updated with 4 years' additional data and is shown in Figure 1 on the next page. As with the original report, these data are not peer-reviewed.

The updated figures show a continuation in the trends previously observed whereby climate-related extreme events are rising, with particularly sharp rises in hydrological events. However, such trends need to take into account socio-economic developments that influence exposure to and reporting of natural hazards that result from climate variability. As far as reporting is concerned, this has improved through the use of the Internet, and smaller events in particular are better recorded today than they were 30 years ago. This effect accounts for part of the trend in increasing numbers of loss events. However, trends in reporting are unlikely to have any significant impact on the loss amount trend, since annual losses are dominated by the major loss events, which have always been recorded.

From the economic perspective, assessing past loss events according to today's economic standards requires two adjustments: firstly, adjusting the costs of the events to today's money; and secondly, assessing what damage that event would

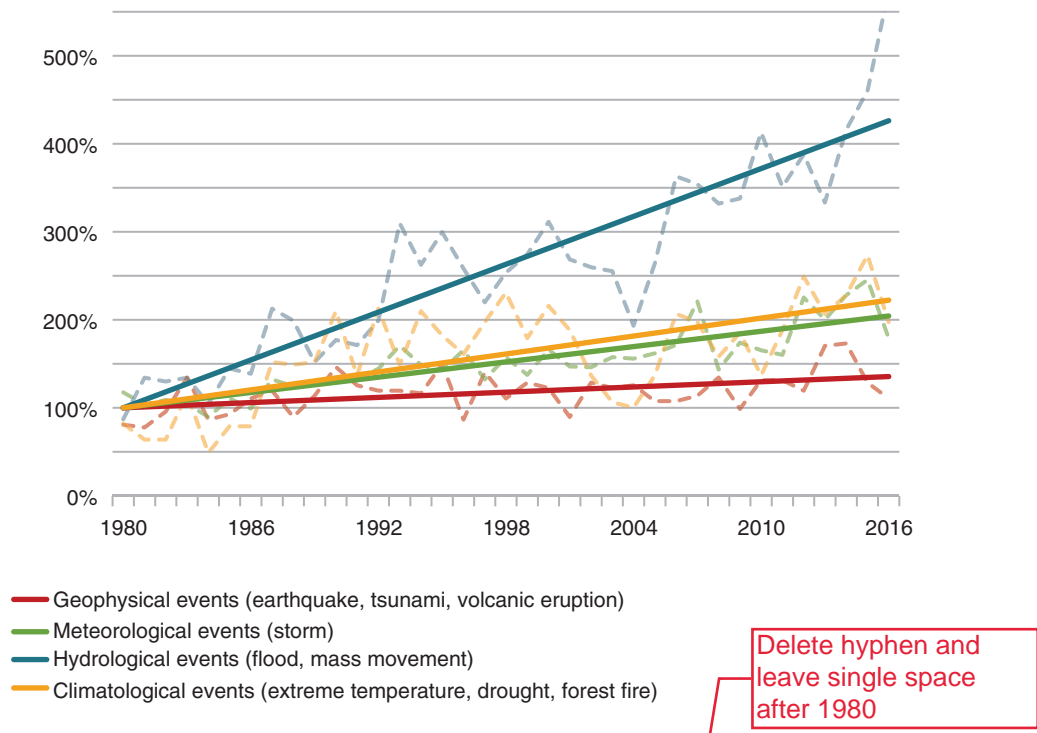


Figure 1 Trends in different types of natural catastrophe worldwide 1980–2016 (1980- levels set at 100%). MunichRe NatCatSERVICE.

have caused today (taking into account changes in infrastructure vulnerability, etc.).

The first adjustment merely involves applying inflation to the historically determined loss data. This can use an established price index, which should represent the actual development of prices in the region in question and be based on the currency of the country concerned.

The second adjustment needs to take into account changes in the exposed assets and their vulnerability, which involves assessing the effects of development on the values in the area affected. Such an adjustment is known as normalisation (Eichner *et al.*, 2015). Such data are not available for all losses worldwide, but two examples of trends that have been normalised are shown in Figure 2: for losses due to thunderstorms in North America and for flood losses in Europe. Whereas there are meteorological reasons for the increase in the normalised losses from severe thunderstorms, protection measures that have been implemented must also be taken into account in explaining the near-static trend in flood losses (Eichner *et al.*, 2015).

A second figure in the original report (Figure 2.4; updated in Figure 3 below) showed trends in large European floods. As pointed out in that report, **severity** class 1 includes large flood events, often causing significant human and economic damage, with an estimated (commonly from news reports) mean return

period (recurrence interval) of the order of 10–20 years. Severity class 1.5 contains very large events whose return period is greater than 20 years but less than 100 years. Finally, severity class 2 includes truly extreme events, with an estimated return period equal to or greater than 100 years. Flood **magnitude** is the product of duration in days, severity as given above and the area affected in square kilometres. It is given on a logarithmic scale, similar to the Richter scale for earthquakes. Flood magnitudes of 7, 8 or 9 represent very large events.

The spatial distribution of large floods in Europe can also be shown as in Figure 4 over the entire 32-year time interval (1985–2016) for which records are available.

### 3. Other recent findings

EASAC’s original report (EASAC, 2013, page 6) also mentioned a weakening of the AMOC and amplified Arctic warming influencing the behaviour of the jet stream as potential sources of future disruptions in weather patterns. We thus include a brief summary of recent findings on these aspects.

#### 3.1. AMOC (Gulf Stream)

A recent review by McCarthy *et al.* (2017) assessed the overall evidence on trends in the AMOC against the predictions that it will decline in the 21st century

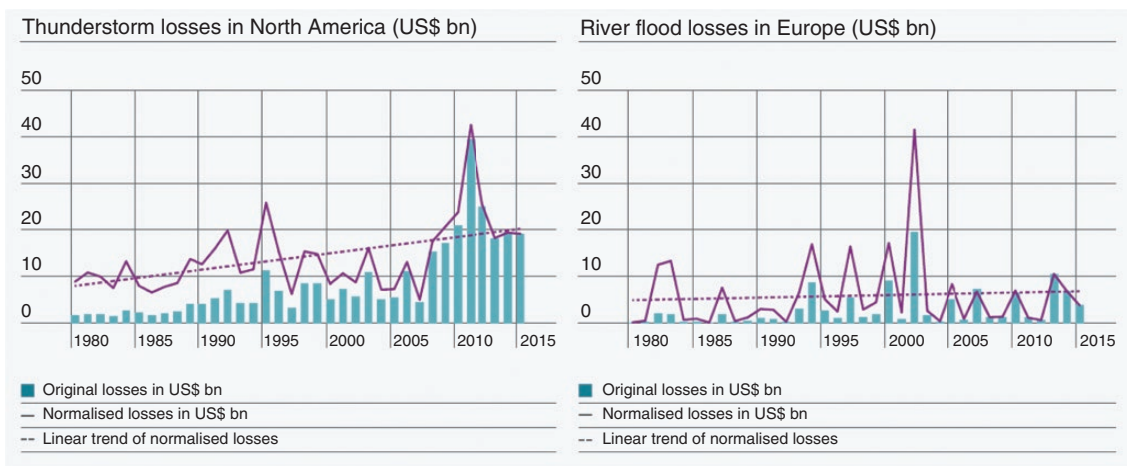


Figure 2 Nominal and normalised annual losses from severe thunderstorms in North America (left) and flood losses in Europe (right).

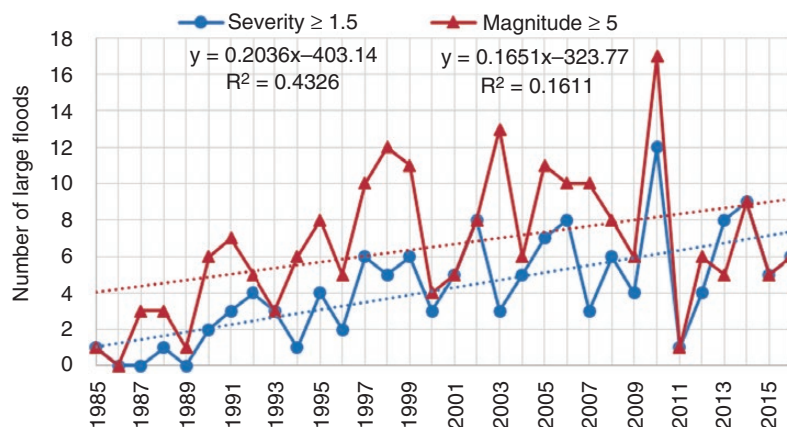


Figure 3. Number of large floods of severity  $\geq 1.5$  and magnitude  $\geq 5$  in Europe each year during 1985–2016, based on Dartmouth Flood Observatory (USA) records (from Kundzewicz *et al.*, 2017).

in response to a changing climate<sup>1</sup>. There is consensus on the forces driving this (warming and increased precipitation in the high latitudes is predicted to increase the stability of the water column and inhibit the formation of the deep, cold branch of the AMOC), but the magnitude of decline varies widely between models. Moreover, Hansen *et al.* (2016) and Rahmstorf *et al.* (2015) have suggested that ongoing melting in the Arctic could provide a sufficient perturbation to the formation of the deep, cold branch of the AMOC to make a contemporary shutdown of the AMOC possible, with dramatic climate consequences (although at present, such an impact of high latitude melt on the AMOC has not been detected (Böning *et al.*, 2016)).

With potentially substantial implications for the climate of Northwest Europe, it is clearly desirable to quantify this risk further. Unfortunately, historical data on the flows of the AMOC are limited but in 2004, direct observations of ocean heat transport and the AMOC at key locations started with the UK-led RAPID array, which directly measures ocean transport across 26.5° N in the North Atlantic (McCarthy *et al.*, 2015). This has provided data on the AMOC's seasonal and decadal variability, including a 30% drop in the strength of the AMOC in 2009–10. McCarthy *et al.* (2017) note that much of the inter-annual and shorter-term variability recorded seems to have been wind driven and is consistent with climate models.

<sup>1</sup>The IPCC (2013) predicted that an AMOC slowdown is 'very likely' (90–100% probability) over the coming century in response to human-made climate change, but that "It also remains *very unlikely* that the AMOC will undergo an abrupt transition or collapse in the 21st century for the scenarios considered."

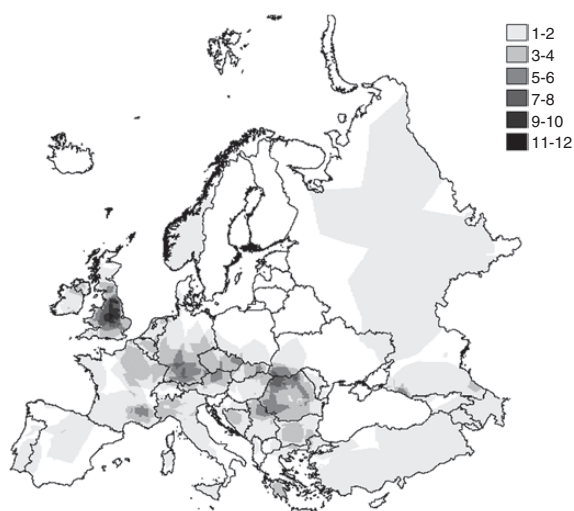


Figure 4. Spatial distribution of floods of losses of severity equal to or greater than 1.5 (from Kundzewicz *et al.*, 2017).

Studies before the establishment of the RAPID array had already suggested a decline of around 30% in the strength of the AMOC over 50 years (Bryden *et al.*, 2005), but this had been based on very limited data. However, the increased quality of observations in recent work (Smeed *et al.*, 2014) provides much more confidence in the observed multi-year decline since the mid-2000s. This is also supported by data on Labrador Sea density changes (Robson *et al.*, 2014). Together with a substantial cooling of the subpolar North Atlantic, McCarthy *et al.* (2017) note that there is gathering evidence of an emerging negative phase of the Atlantic multi-decade variability<sup>2</sup>, driven by a declining AMOC.

A major point of debate remains whether the AMOC will just decline or could switch 'off' entirely with substantial implications for Northwest Europe's climate. Most earlier climate models did not support stable 'off' states, but more complex models including the influence of increased Arctic melting (see, for example, Böning *et al.*, 2016; Hansen *et al.*, 2016) suggest that the AMOC could have stable 'on' and 'off' states. A critical point of uncertainty is the net flow of freshwater across the Atlantic. Since measuring precipitation and river flows for this vast area is difficult, it is more realistic to infer from salinity gradients, which can be measured easily from ships. Many models predicting a resilient AMOC do not match such observed salinity distributions, and Liu *et al.* (2016) investigated the sensitivity of AMOC

future forecasts to this uncertainty. Models on the AMOC's response to a doubling of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels (Figure 5) showed that, when their climate model showing a resilient AMOC was adjusted to a freshwater flow that matched salinity observations, the AMOC did break down, which would lead to cooling of the land masses in Greenland, Iceland, UK and Scandinavia of up to 9 °C.

The second uncertainty arises from the potential influence of Greenland's ice cap melt. Bakker *et al.* (2016) found in their model that, with the IPCC high-emissions scenario (RCP8.5 scenario) and taking into account Greenland meltwater, the Gulf Stream system weakens by 37% (by 2100) and continues to fall by 74% by 2290–2300. Another study by Böning *et al.* (2016) has also indicated that meltwater from Greenland is likely to weaken the AMOC considerably within a few decades.

Overall, while the decline in the AMOC has been confirmed, it is still not possible to resolve considerable uncertainties on the rate and magnitude of possible future changes. Recent evidence questioning the long-term stability of the AMOC makes it important to use the data emerging from the RAPID array and other sources to improve and validate climate models, in order to provide a more reliable forecast of impacts of global warming on the AMOC.

### 3.2. Polar amplification and the jet stream

Evidence on polar amplification and the potential implications for the jet stream have been reviewed by the US National Academy of Sciences (NRC, 2016). They noted studies that had indicated influences of sea-ice change on large-scale atmospheric dynamics, which some had linked to an amplified jet stream and cold winters in middle latitudes (Francis and Vavrus, 2012, 2015). However, NRC (2016) concluded that any such changes were not yet detectable above natural variability (Barnes *et al.*, 2014). Since then, however, Mann *et al.* (2017) have examined the persistent episodes of extreme weather in the Northern Hemisphere summer that had been shown to be associated with the presence of high-amplitude quasi-stationary atmospheric Rossby waves<sup>3</sup>. They suggested a mechanism<sup>4</sup> and provided evidence of an increase in the conditions favourable to the formulation of these extreme weather-associated

<sup>2</sup> The Atlantic multi-decadal variability (AMV) or oscillation (AMO) is a natural climate cycle involving changes in the sea surface temperature of the North Atlantic, which in turn is related to the likelihood of hurricane formation.

<sup>3</sup> Rossby waves are the large meanders in high-altitude winds resulting from the rotation of the planet and which are associated with pressure systems and the jet stream.

<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of quasi-resonant amplification (QRA) of synoptic-scale waves.

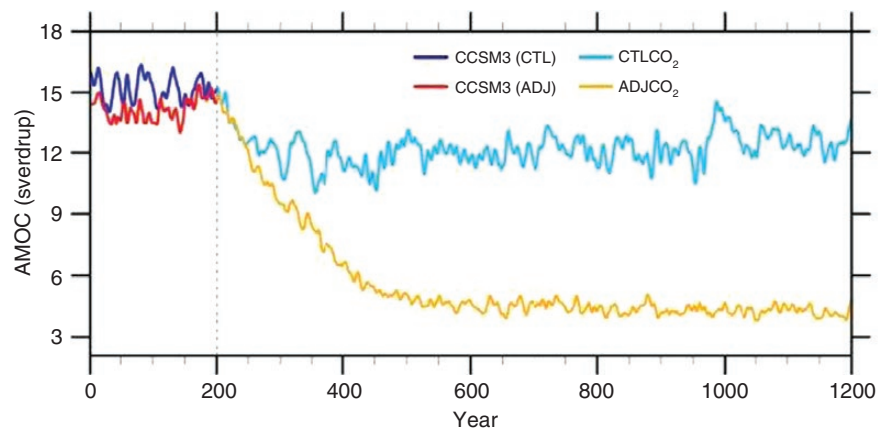


Figure 5 Time series of the Atlantic flow (AMOC) in the two model variants: without correction (blue) and with correction (orange). In model year 201, the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the model is doubled and then left at this level. Source: Liu *et al.*, 2016.

states, possibly linked to amplified Arctic warming and thus a climate change influence. Both models and observations suggest this signal has only recently emerged from the background noise of natural variability. It remains to be seen whether further observations will continue to support the mechanism proposed.

### 3.3. Attributing the contribution of climate change to specific extreme weather events

Historically, it has been difficult to analyse the contribution of anthropogenic warming on individual extreme weather events against the backdrop of natural variability. However, the increased sophistication of models and access to computing resources have allowed researchers to simulate the probability of specific weather events with and without the additional effects of climate change on temperature, atmospheric water content and other factors associated with warming (Differbaugh *et al.*, 2017). Such studies are too numerous to review in this short update (see, for example, the annual analyses of extreme weather events by the American Meteorological Society (such as Herring *et al.*, 2016)), and include those where an influence of climate change is not found. However, events where climate change is concluded to have increased the probability (in some cases substantially) of extreme events include the following:

- Heatwaves in Australia (see, for example, Perkins and Gibson, 2015; Hope *et al.*, 2016; Black *et al.*,

2016); China (see, for example, Sun *et al.*, 2014) and Europe (see, for example, Uhe *et al.*, 2016; King *et al.*, 2015);

- Increased risks of wildfires (see, for example, Yoon *et al.*, 2015; Abatzoglou and Williams, 2016);
- Extreme rainfall and associated floods (see, for example, van de Wiel *et al.*, 2017; Pall *et al.*, 2011);
- Coastal flooding due to sea-level rise (see, for example, Sweet *et al.*, 2016).

## 4. Conclusion

This update on some of the figures and underlying drivers of extreme weather raised in EASAC report number 22 (EASAC, 2013), confirms the earlier conclusions on the importance of increasing the adaptability of Europe's infrastructure and social systems to a changing climate. However, evidence on AMOC and the effects of amplified Arctic warming continue to emerge from ongoing research and monitoring programmes. In view of the importance of these large-scale phenomena to Europe's climate, EASAC will keep a watching brief on this and other findings to provide further updates in the future.

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