

Storm with 106-mph gusts hits flooded Britain (Update)

February 12 2014, by Jill Lawless



A truck is seen after being blown off the road on the A628, Woodhead Pass, near Preston between Manchester and Sheffield, England, Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2014. Winds gusting at speeds approaching 100mph are battering parts of the UK after the Met Office issued its first "red warning" of the winter. (AP Photo/Jon Super)

Britain's weather service says it sees the tentacles of climate change in a spate of storms and floods battering the country, but has stopped short of saying that global warming directly caused the extreme conditions.

The latest round of bad weather slammed into Britain's west coast on Wednesday with torrential rain and winds gusting up to 106 mph (170 kph). Trucks were toppled, trees were felled and a major chunk of the railway was closed.

The website of rail operator Virgin Trains greeted visitors with the words: "Do Not Travel."

England, which has been lashed by wind and rain since December, had its wettest January since records began in 1766.

The resulting floods have drenched the southwestern coast of England, the low-lying Somerset Levels and the Thames Valley west of London, where hundreds of properties have been swamped after the Thames burst its banks.

Britain's Met Office, the nation's weather agency, said in a paper published this week that "there is no definitive answer" on the role played by climate change in the recent weather and floods. But it said there is "an increasing body of evidence that extreme daily rainfall rates are becoming more intense," probably due to a warming world.

Met Office chief scientist Julia Slingo told the BBC that "all the evidence suggests there is a link to climate change."



A local resident pushes belongings on a cart through the flooded part of the town of Staines-upon-Thames, England, as a police van patrols the area, Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2014. Prime Minister David Cameron insisted Tuesday that money is no object in the battle against the widespread flooding that has engulfed parts of England. Canceling a visit to the Middle East to oversee flood-fighting efforts, he told journalists that "whatever money is needed for this relief effort will be spent" as Britain deals with some of its wettest weather in 250 years. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

It was the latest in a series of assertions by weather agencies linking extreme weather events with human-made global warming. Last year the Met Office and the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said events ranging from Superstorm Sandy flooding to U.S. heat waves to extreme rainfall in Australia and New Zealand had all been made more likely by climate change.

The Met office study discusses evidence of increasingly extreme weather

events and links both Britain's damp winter and the extreme cold that has hit the United States and Canada to "perturbations" in the jet stream over the Pacific Ocean and North America. But it does not say outright that global warming caused the flooding. To do that, scientists take months, sometimes years, to conduct detailed computer simulations—and the report said such research was needed in this case.

In the United States, NOAA research meteorologist Martin Hoerling said the Met Office study "identifies many challenges for research" rather than drawing firm conclusions.

But Pennsylvania State University climate scientist Michael Mann said it was "a remarkably blunt report for a group that is typically characterized by a staid approach."

"The bottom line is this: we are indeed now seeing with our very eyes the impacts of climate change on severe weather, record heat, drought, more intense hurricane activity," Mann said in an email. "The only question at this point is how far downstream this treacherous torrent we are going to paddle."

A similar question—when will it end?—was being asked by many Britons, from flooded farmers to riverside residents piling sandbags against the encroaching waters of the Thames.

"I tried to prepare for this, I bought 100 pounds of sand and I called the council," said Suhair Al-Fouadi, a resident of the town of Egham, who woke Wednesday to find a foot of water in her house. "But they would do nothing. Now I have water from the sewer coming in through my doors."



Celia, last name not given, a local resident pushes her dog in a wheelbarrow, in the flooded part of the town of Staines-upon-Thames, England, Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2014. Prime Minister David Cameron insisted Tuesday that money is no object in the battle against the widespread flooding that has engulfed parts of England. Canceling a visit to the Middle East to oversee flood-fighting efforts, he told journalists that "whatever money is needed for this relief effort will be spent" as Britain deals with some of its wettest weather in 250 years. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

The Met Office issued its highest-level red warning of "exceptionally strong winds" Wednesday for west Wales and northwest England. It said a gust of 106 mph (170 kph) was recorded at Aberdaron in northwestern Wales.

Railway operator Network Rail said the main west coast train line would close for several hours Wednesday evening because of the wind.

London itself was expected to be safe from the flooding since it's protected by the Thames Barrier, a series of 66-foot (20-meter) high metal gates across the entire river. The massive gates can be closed to stop the tide from coming up the Thames, which gives more space for the river to handle excess water from upstream. At low tide, the Thames barrier is then opened and the floodwaters flow to the sea.

Yet the Met Office says there will be no quick end to Britain's flood misery.

At least one more storm is forecast for later this week. It says some areas could get up to 2.75 inches (7 centimeters) of rain—a month's worth—by Friday.

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