

Final report dated 10/28/2019

Ad-hoc Committee on Naming Winter Storms

Subcommittee of Committee on Effective Communication of Weather and Climate Information (CECCWI)

Committee member list: Lance Bosart, John Dwyer, Greg Fishel, Gail Hartfield, Jennifer Henderson, Doug Hildebrand, Danielle Koslowski, Megan Linkin, Chris Michaels, Marshall Moss, Bryan Norcross, Dave Novak, Adam Rainear (co-Chair), David Robinson, Dan Satterfield, Jennifer Sprague, Gary Szatkowski (co-Chair)

Report:

The naming of tropical systems goes back over 60 years. Multiple studies have shown naming tropical systems does draw customer/public attention to the storm and promotes life-saving decision making communication by information providers and users in the weather enterprise.

For many years, a number of local media providers and various foreign countries have had some naming convention for winter storms. Beginning in the Winter of 2012-13, The Weather Channel (TWC) began naming winter storms, which has drawn much public and professional attention and discussion. Beginning in winter season 2015-16, The Irish Meteorological Service (Met Eireann) and U.K. Meteorological Service (UK Met Office) also began a system of naming winter storms.

This committee (a subcommittee of the CECWCI) studied the meteorological, social, communication, decision-making and media aspects, and pros and cons of developing a weather enterprise wide supported system/procedure for naming winter storms in the US.

The initial charge for this ad-hoc committee was as follows:

1. Should the US weather enterprise adopt a process, with NWS as the lead, to name "significant" winter storms before "major" social/economic impacts? Can committee reach agreement on terms "significant" or "major"?
2. If the answer to (1) is YES, what might be the framework for an enterprise wide process to define the parameters of observation, forecast, possible impacts, communication, users, timing, others which will guide when to name or not? If committee answer to (1) is NO the committee will provide a summary recommendation for that answer.
3. If answer to (1) is YES, what is realistic time goal to begin a enterprise wide accepted winter storm naming system?
4. Final report as "keynote" part of symposium as special communication element at AMS Annual meeting Austin 2018

The committee requested presentations from a number of sources. The presentation list is as follows:

Tom Niziol (Weather Channel) - A review of their operational experience with naming winter storms

Jen Henderson, Adam Raine, Jen Sprague & Gina Eosco (Committee members) - Social Science and Named Winter Storms

Gerald Fleming (Met Eireann) and Will Lang (UK Met Office) - A review of their operational experience with naming winter storms

Cara Cuite (Rutgers) - Differing perceptions of Hurricanes and Nor'easters

Dee Cotgrove (formerly with UK Met Office) and Helen Chivers (UK Met Office) - A deeper dive into UK Met Office initial decision-making and an update on their operational experience

Key points from the Tom Niziol presentation for the Weather Channel:

Started naming winter storms in 2012

Goal was effective communications on social media

After some initial adjustments, decision-making process for naming storms has been relatively stable. Criteria are NWS Winter Warnings and population impact.

They view it as a success; have requested NWS take on the responsibility.

Their work continues into 2019-20 winter season.

Key points from the Henderson, Raine, Sprague, Eosco presentation:

Generally speaking, a lacking research base to draw from (but growing w/ subject interest)

Discussed challenges:

- Geography and differing impacts in locations

- Repeat events/repeated snow

- The consumer, audience, individuals

Discussed functions

Categorize and communicate risk for individuals to easily access and recall

Organization of information

Audience?

Public?

EM and Weather community?

Everyone?

Key points from the Fleming (Met Eireann) and Lang (UK Met Office) presentation:

Operational experience starting in Winter 2015-16 (now done year round)

Initial motivation was to take control of a messy situation where media were using different names for winter storms and to inject authority, to have an authoritative voice in the European network.

Viewed as a success; They continue to name winter storms; Practice has expanded to France, Spain, Portugal bloc (with different naming list)

Key points from the Cuite (Rutgers) presentation:

Investigated the idea that Nor'easters aren't officially named, while tropical systems are

When the forecast is held equal, do people perceive these storms differently?

Severity; evacuation likelihood, importance, and recommending evacuation; preparatory behaviors, all higher in hurricanes

Emotional responses to storm type were not different in either type

Key points from the Cotgrove, Chivers (UK Met Office) presentation:

Dee Cotgrove, former Director of Communications for the UK Met Office, described her decision-making to initially proceed with naming winter storms.

Perceived effectiveness of how we handled naming Hurricane/Superstorm Sandy allowing coverage of all associated impacts (tropical and non-tropical) was a positive.

First year saw strong usage by media and political leaders. Evaluation showed significant usage of storm naming and that people were better prepared for weather impacts.

UK Met Office and Met Eireann won 2016 award from the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication.

Surveys have shown that storm naming can increase the reach of official warnings and encourage preparedness before they hit.

Derrick Ryall, head of public weather services at the Met Office, said in September 2018: “Naming storms has been proved to raise awareness of severe weather in the UK, crucially prompting people to take action to prevent harm to themselves or their property.”

Comments from the Committee were solicited and received in the following areas:

General themes around process:

- Committee members feel more informed, yet have unchanged opinions from start

- Many attribute this to lacking research before making an “informed” opinion

Best course of action (if any):

- Move issue up to Board of Enterprise Comm., more workshopping with the individual subsets involved to understand impact (EMs, Climate, Broadcast, Operational, DOT, etc.)

- Better assessment of the current criteria, to understand what is “best” to trigger a name

Any recommendation to AMS:

- Better understanding where naming fits within winter weather priorities

- Understanding any potential harm of naming

- AMS propose, and NWS examine the question based off success of Europe (akin to other social science projects)

NWS-specific considerations were as follows:

The arbiter of naming winter storms each year would need to be in a position to act as an honest broker (e.g., government agency, professional society)

Collaboration would be needed with Canada and Mexico to minimize any deleterious international border impacts

Any NWS participation in research on naming winter storms does not imply full endorsement or commitment to an operational change

NWS does not currently have plans to invest appropriated funds in this area

Recommended next steps:

Write up a report (this report)

Who should be next AMS committee? Board of Best Practices? Board of Enterprise Communications?

Examine why UK Met Office thinks winter storm naming produces an effective public response

And find out why they won an award for it from a professional organization that judges communication (The International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication [www.amecorg.com])

Why do some of the NWS WeatherReady Nation partners/other key partners use TWC Winter Storm naming? (see list below, conducted on social media searching for 'Winter Storm Toby')

What is their motivation? How is it working for them?

List: The Weather Channel, Lancaster PA, Washington DC, Harvey Cedars NJ, Delmarva Power, PSE&G (Long Island), Lehigh Valley International Airport, Southeast PA Transportation Authority (SEPTA), New Jersey State Police, New York Police Department, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, Sheetz, American Diabetes Association, United States Capitol, Senator Tina Smith (MN), Governor Tom Wolf (PA), United States Postal Service, United States National Park Service, Federal Aviation Administration.

And other social science research as needed

One final uncomfortable observation:

Dee's observation as to why control of the decision-making and policy regarding if/how winter storms were to be named remained in the UK Met Office Media shop: "Communication is too important to be left to the meteorologists."