EXPLAINING EXTREME EVENTS OF 2015 FROM A CLIMATE PERSPECTIVE

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©Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty Images—A vehicle drives through flooded streets caused by a combination of the lunar orbit which caused seasonal high tides and what many believe is the rising sea levels due to climate change on September 30, 2015, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. South Florida is projected to continue to feel the effects of climate change, and many of the cities have begun programs such as installing pumps or building up sea walls to try and combat the rising oceans.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................................................................................... ii

1. Introduction to Explaining Extreme Events of 2015 from a Climate Perspective ........................................... 1
2. Multimodel Assessment of Anthropogenic Influence on Record Global and Regional Warmth During 2015 ......................................................................................................................................................... 4
4. An Assessment of the Role of Anthropogenic Climate Change in the Alaska Fire Season of 2015 ........................................................................................................................................................................... 14
5. The 2014/15 Snowpack Drought in Washington State and its Climate Forcing ........................................... 19
6. In Tide's Way: Southeast Florida's September 2015 Sunny-day Flood ...................................................... 25
7. Extreme Eastern U.S. Winter of 2015 Not Symptomatic of Climate Change ........................................ 31
8. The Role of Arctic Sea Ice and Sea Surface Temperatures on the Cold 2015 February Over North America ........ 36
9. The 2015 Extreme Drought in Western Canada .............................................................................................. 42
10. Human Contribution to the Record Sunshine of Winter 2014/15 in the United Kingdom ...................... 47
11. The Role of Anthropogenic Warming in 2015 Central European Heat Waves ........................................... 51
12. The 2015 European Heat Wave .......................................................................................................................... 57
13. The Late Onset of the 2015 Wet Season in Nigeria ......................................................................................... 63
14. Human Influences on Heat-Related Health Indicators During the 2015 Egyptian Heat Wave ...................... 70
15. Assessing the Contributions of Local and East Pacific Warming to the 2015 Droughts in Ethiopia and Southern Africa ................................................................................................................................. 75
16. The Deadly Combination of Heat and Humidity in India and Pakistan in Summer 2015 .......................... 81
17. The Heavy Precipitation Event of December 2015 in Chennai, India ...................................................... 87
18. Attribution of Extreme Rainfall in Southeast China During May 2015 .................................................... 92
20. Human Influence on the 2015 Extreme High Temperature Events in Western China ............................ 102
21. A Persistent Japanese Heat Wave in Early August 2015: Roles of Natural Variability and Human-Induced Warming ........................................................................................................................................... 107
22. Climate Change and El Niño Increase Likelihood of Indonesian Heat and Drought ............................... 113
23. Southern Australia's Warmest October on Record: The Role of ENSO and Climate Change ..................... 118
24. What Caused the Record-Breaking Heat Across Australia in October 2015? ........................................... 122
25. The Roles of Climate Change and El Niño in the Record Low Rainfall in October 2015 in Tasmania, Australia .............................................................................................................................................. 127
26. Influences of Natural Variability and Anthropogenic Forcing on the Extreme 2015 Accumulated Cyclone Energy in the Western North Pacific ...................................................................................... 131
27. Record Low Northern Hemisphere Sea Ice Extent in March 2015 ........................................................... 136
28. Summary and Broader Context .......................................................................................................................... 141
This fifth edition of explaining extreme events of the previous year (2015) from a climate perspective continues to provide evidence that climate change is altering some extreme event risk. Without exception, all the heat-related events studied in this year’s report were found to have been made more intense or likely due to human-induced climate change, and this was discernible even for those events strongly influenced by the 2015 El Niño. Furthermore, many papers in this year’s report demonstrate that attribution science is capable of separating the effects of natural drivers including the strong 2015 El Niño from the influences of long-term human-induced climate change.

Other event types investigated include cold winters, tropical cyclone activity, extreme sunshine in the United Kingdom, tidal flooding, precipitation, drought, reduced snowpack in the U.S. mountain west, arctic sea ice extent, and wildfires in Alaska. Two studies investigated extreme cold waves and monthly-mean cold conditions over eastern North America during 2015, and find these not to have been symptomatic of human-induced climate change. Instead, they find the cold conditions were caused primarily by internally generated natural variability. One of these studies shows winters are becoming warmer, less variable, with no increase in daily temperature extremes over the eastern United States. Tropical cyclone activity was extreme in 2015 in the western North Pacific (WNP) as measured by accumulated cyclone energy (ACE). In this report, a study finds that human-caused climate change largely increased the odds of this extreme cyclone activity season. The 2015 Alaska fire season burned the second largest number of acres since records began in 1940. Investigators find that human-induced climate change has increased the likelihood of a fire season of this severity.

Confidence in results and ability to quickly do an attribution analysis depend on the “three pillars” of event attribution: the quality of the observational record, the ability of models to simulate the event, and our understanding of the physical processes that drive the event and how they are being impacted by climate change. A result that does not find a role for climate change may be because one or more of these three elements is insufficient to draw a clear conclusion. As these pillars are strengthened for different event types, confidence in the presence and absence of a climate change influence will increase.

This year researchers also link how changes in extreme event risk impact human health and discomfort during heat waves, specifically by looking at the role of climate change on the wet bulb globe temperature during a deadly heat wave in Egypt. This report reflects a growing interest within the attribution community to connect attribution science to societal impacts to inform risk management through “impact attribution.” Many will watch with great interest as this area of research evolves in the coming years.