

# Tornadoes: Background and Forecasting

December 13, 2021

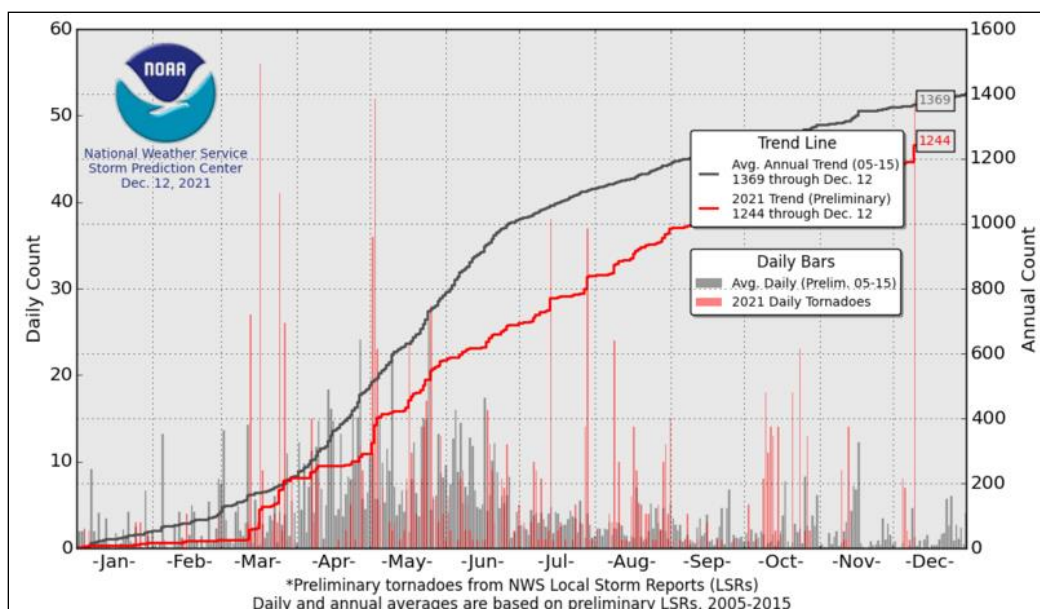
## Background

Severe thunderstorms and tornadoes affect communities across the United States every year, causing fatalities, destroying property and crops, and disrupting businesses. **Tornadoes** are narrow, violently rotating columns of air that extend from the base of a thunderstorm to the ground, sometimes producing winds that exceed **300 miles per hour**. Tornadoes have been reported on **all continents** except Antarctica; however, they occur most commonly in North America and particularly in the United States, which reports approximately **1,200 tornadoes per year**. Tornadoes occur across the **United States** but form most commonly in three regions, shifting seasonally: (1) southern Plains (e.g., Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas), (2) Gulf Coast, and (3) northern Plains and upper Midwest (e.g., North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota). Depending on geographic location, tornadoes occur mostly during **spring and summer** (**Figure 1**) and usually during the late afternoon or early evening. However, tornadoes can occur at any time. For example, a **deadly storm system** with several reported tornadoes, including a “significant long track tornado,” touched ground overnight in Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, and Tennessee between December 10 and 11, 2021. **Preliminary estimates** report that peak winds of the long-track tornado reached between 158 and 206 miles per hour. Aspects of the event were rare, such as its timing, potential track length, and geographic location.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11826

**Figure 1. U.S. Tornadoes Daily Count and Running Annual Trend**

**Source:** National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Storm Prediction Center, "[Daily Counts and Annual Running Trend](#)."

## Classification

Experts estimate the strength or wind speed of a tornado by examining the damage it caused rather than by measuring actual wind speeds during an event. The [Fujita, or F-scale](#), estimation method, developed in 1971, was used for over three decades, but its limitations prompted the development and adoption of a new scale in 2007, called the enhanced [F-scale, or EF-scale](#) ([Table 1](#)). The EF-scale is intended to be a more robust and precise method of assessing a tornado's strength, and it uses 28 different types of damage indicators, such as building type, structures, and trees.

**Table 1. Enhanced F-Scale**

EF Number	3-Second Gust (mph)	Damage Level
0	65-85	Weak
1	86-110	Moderate
2	111-135	Significant
3	136-165	Severe
4	166-200	Extreme
5	Over 200	Catastrophic

**Source:** NOAA, Storm Prediction Center, "[Enhanced F Scale for Tornado Damage](#)."

**Notes:** Three-second gusts are estimated at the point of damage based on a judgment of 8 levels of damage to the EF-scale's 28 indicators. These estimates vary with height and exposure. The 3-second gust is not equivalent to wind speeds measured in standard surface observations.

## Forecasting, Detection, and Communication

Exactly [how and why](#) tornadoes form is not completely understood. Tornado formation is believed to be dictated mainly by storm-scale conditions in and around rotating thunderstorms with well-defined circulation. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA's) National Weather Service (NWS), at the discretion of the Secretary of Commerce, has statutory authority for weather forecasting and for issuing storm warnings ([15 U.S.C. §313](#)). NWS provides weather, water, and climate [forecasts and warnings](#) for the United States, its territories, adjacent waters, and ocean areas. In addition, several NWS programs, including the [National Severe Storm Laboratory](#), focus on research to improve observations, modeling, and instrument development, among other activities.

### Forecasting and Detection

Severe thunderstorm and tornado forecasts are made by the NWS Storm Prediction Center (SPC) and by [local weather forecast offices](#) (WFOs). [SPC forecasters](#) use [weather observations](#), numerical weather prediction models, and ensemble forecasting (running several models at one time) to determine if atmospheric conditions, temperature, and wind flow patterns may lead to the formation of severe weather. SPC issues three-day forecasts ([convective outlooks](#)) on a daily basis and [mesoscale discussions](#) of severe thunderstorm potential for the next six hours, with an emphasis on the next one to three hours, as warranted.

If conditions favorable for either multiple tornadoes or a single intense tornado continue to develop, SPC issues a [tornado watch](#) that typically lasts six to eight hours. Such watches alert the public, emergency managers, storm spotters, broadcast media, and local WFOs that conditions have become favorable for the development of tornadoes. SPC aims to issue watches at least two hours before the first tornado event.

Forecasters and storm spotters recognize certain storm [features](#) from visual cues, such as the [rear-flank downdraft](#), and particular patterns in [Doppler radar](#) images, such as the *tornadic vortex signature* (a region of intense concentrated rotation). WFOs issue [tornado warnings](#) when a tornado has been sighted or indicated by weather radar. The warning contains specific language about areas at risk, time frames, specific hazards, recommended safety precautions for those at risk, and the WFO issuing the warning.

### Communication

[Several methods](#) exist to communicate warnings to the public, including outdoor warning sirens, local television and radio stations, cable television systems, cell phone applications, and NOAA Weather Radio All Hazards (NWR). NWS maintains and operates [NWR](#), a nationwide network of radio stations broadcasting continuous weather information directly from the nearest WFO 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. NWR works with the [Emergency Alert System](#), an automated system that allows NWS warnings to be disseminated over broadcasters, satellite digital audio services, direct broadcast satellite providers, cable television systems, and wireless cable systems.

## Considerations

It is [not clear](#) whether the average number of tornadoes each year has changed over time, due to reporting issues, and if [climate change](#) has, or may, impact tornado frequency or intensity overall or in certain circumstances (see [here](#) for more about the differences between weather and climate). Congress may consider whether and how federal agencies should continue research into potential connections between climate change and tornado activity and whether there are ways to mitigate any climate change impacts. Additional considerations for Congress may include how social, behavioral, and demographic factors play

a role in tornado-related fatalities and federal responsibilities in preventing and responding to damages from windstorms, such as tornadoes.

## Author Information

Eva Lipiec  
Analyst in Natural Resources Policy

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.