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Weather
When will the big nor'easters return? Boston in midst of second-longest streak without hefty snowfalls.

Dave Epstein
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Have you noticed a lack of major snowstorms over the past several winters here in New England? Perhaps you're wondering if this is a new permanent pattern. Snowfall across New England is highly variable, particularly here in the Boston area and the rest of Southern New England, where we lie on the southern edge of consistent snowfall.

First, let's look at how radically different winter snowfall can be. On Feb. 25, 2022, Boston received 8½ inches of snow. That was the last time the city saw a 6-inch snowfall, which is meteorologically considered a "major snowfall" in New England (accumulation of at least 6 inches of snow). Roughly 1,414 days later and counting, we are now in the midst of our second-longest streak devoid of 6-inch snowfalls, since data was first recorded in 1872. You have to go back to 1988-92 to find a similar "major snow" drought. That streak lasted 1,772 days.

As a side note, the Boston area would have to make it through this entire winter without a major snowstorm to move into the No. 1 spot. Will we do it?

These gaps in significant snowstorms might be considered mini snow droughts, but when they end, the winter weather pattern tends to shift in the other direction. For example, when that streak ended in 1992, it ushered in three of four blockbuster winters, including one that dumped over 107 inches of snow in the winter of 1995-96.

This very snowy mid-'90s was followed by highly variable snowfall seasons with as little as 15 inches of snow in 2001-02 and as much as nearly 87 inches of snow several years later during the 2004-05 winter season.

Then, starting in 2008 and lasting until 2018, we experienced the snowiest decade on record in Greater Boston with a total of 543 inches of snowfall.

If you move the starting point to winter 2015-16 and conclude through 2025, we received only 333 inches of snow, marking the lowest 10-year period of snowfall on record. This is where we currently sit, and it makes sense with the lack of major nor'easters nearing New England over the past several winters.

Even winter storm warnings issued by the National Weather Service have fallen. Check out the chart below, and you'll notice that the past several years have seen fewer than six winter storm warnings issued.

All of this should not lull you into a false sense that we are in some new paradigm without major coastal storms or that it's not going to be snowy again. On the contrary, nor'easters are actually getting stronger and are generating more precipitation than they used to. According to research published last summer on the intensification of the strongest nor'easters, noted climate scientist Michael **Mann** and five of his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania looked at how our famous coastal storms have changed over the past several decades.

"Our analysis of nor'easter characteristics reveals that the strongest nor'easters are becoming stronger, with both the maximum wind speeds of the most intense nor'easters and hourly precipitation rates increasing since 1940," the researchers said.

The reason why I'm mentioning this while also talking about the lack of snow in our region is that both can be true. As we have seen, snowfall itself is very cyclical. That cycle is occurring amid a backdrop of a warming climate. With more and more anthropogenic CO2 — carbon dioxide emissions resulting from human activity,

primarily the burning of fossil fuels — average temperatures have increased, and that rise has led to an availability of more energy for coastal storms.

As the oceans warm, they provide more latent heat or fuel for these nor'easters. Additionally, with warmer temperatures and still an availability of cold air to the north, there's an increase in temperature contrast, or what meteorologists call "baroclinicity." This is a critical feature and aids in the rapid intensification or bombogenesis of low-pressure areas east of the Atlantic Seaboard.

The Perfect Storm back in 1991, the Storm of the Century in 1993, the so-named Snowmageddons in February 2010 and winter 2015, and the January 2018 blizzard are all examples of unusually strong nor'easters.

The trend in maximum wind speed in nor'easters has increased since the middle of the last century. You can see from the **Mann** paper some of the actual data used to reach this conclusion.

In addition, hourly precipitation has also increased in these coastal storms. This means that crippling snow and flooding rain are becoming more likely in spite of the recent dearth of these types of storms locally.

In the same way that we haven't had a hurricane reach the shores of New England since 1991, so too are we overdue for a major nor'easter. Both are in our future. It's just a matter of when.

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