Opinion: Massive Winter Storms Are Wreaking Havoc Just When Government Science Is Being Cut

We're Facing Our Fourth Major Winter Storm of 2026 — and the Government Stopped Tracking Them

— March 16, 2026 — America is heading into its fourth major Extreme Winter Storm of 2026, and the federal agency best equipped to document the damage has gone dark.

The week of March 16 will bring another Extreme Winter Storm to the United States — the fourth in less than three months. A potentially historic Winter Storm struck the heavily populated corridor from Virginia to Maine in February, affecting more than 70 million people. In January, two massive Winter Storms with Arctic cold air outbreaks swept the country, affecting up to 200 million people; in some states, wind chills dropped to minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit. Now meteorologists are warning that a phenomenon called Sudden Stratospheric Warming, or SSW, may contribute to another severe storm within days — arriving alongside extreme heat developing across Southern and Central California and parts of the Southwest.

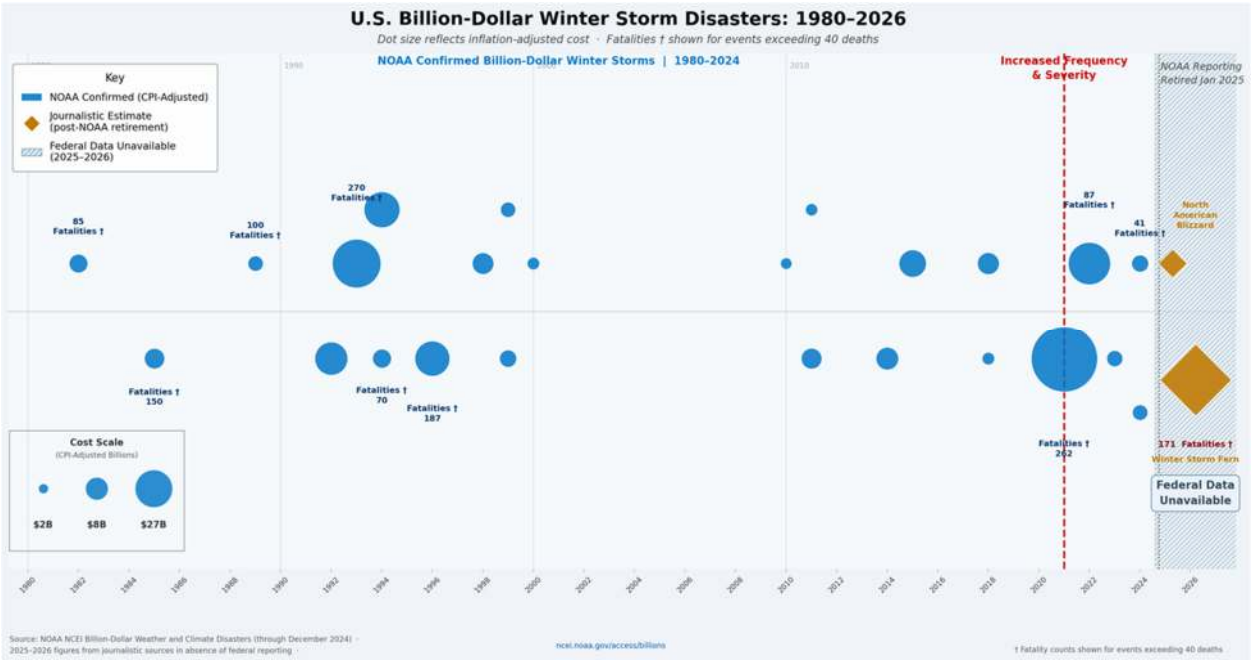
The 2026 Winter Storms appear to be causing worse impacts than those in 2025. Yet the federal agency responsible for tracking them stepped back from that mission at precisely the wrong moment.

The trend is in the numbers

The evidence for an accelerating pattern is clear. For 45 years, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tracked weather disasters through its "Billion Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters" report — a standardized federal database covering seven event categories, including Winter Storms, with damage assessed against a defined Billion Dollar threshold (a normalized economic impact metric) and rated on a severity scale on which Extreme is the highest designation. That record covers disasters through December 2024.

It shows 19 Extreme Winter Storms occurred between 1981 and 2020 — roughly one every two years. Between January 2021 and December 2024, five Extreme Winter Storms occurred, a rate of 1.25 per year — more than double the previous 40-year average.

The financial toll tells an equally stark story. From 1980 to 2020, Billion Dollar Winter Storms cost an average of $1.56 billion per year. From 2021 to 2024, that figure rose to $8.3 billion per year — more than five times higher. Two of the costliest Billion Dollar Winter Storms on record occurred within that four-year window: the Central and Eastern Winter Storm of December 2022 and the Coast-to-Coast Winter Storm and Cold Wave of February 2021.



Then, in January 2025, NOAA retired the report. The data stopped. According to the agency's NESDIS May 9 notice of changes, the program was discontinued effective that month.

That absence has immediate consequences. For the Jan. 23-27 storm, Winter Storm Fern, preliminary journalistic estimates put damages at up to $13.4 billion and 171 lives lost — figures that would qualify it as a Billion Dollar disaster and potentially rank it as the third costliest Winter Storm on record in the United States. No official federal data exists to confirm or refine those figures. For the other two major Winter Storms of early 2026, even rough estimates are scarce. In the absence of NOAA reporting, sources such as Wikipedia are filling the gap — a circumstance that speaks for itself.

Now a fourth Extreme event is unfolding. If even two of these four storms qualify as Billion Dollar disasters, 2026 would already be running at more than eight times the historical rate compared with the 40-year period ending in 2020.

The cost information gap extends well beyond immediate storm damage. Insured losses from Extreme Winter Storms can run into the billions, threatening the stability of insurance markets and driving long-term rate increases for homeowners, businesses, and communities. Uninsured costs can double those totals — losses that fall directly on households, local governments, and small businesses with no safety net to absorb them. California is already grappling with those dynamics in the aftermath of its devastating wildfires.

A public safety obligation

These risks are not theoretical. They are already reaching communities across the country through collapsed power grids, damaged infrastructure, disrupted transportation, devastated crops and livestock, and interrupted essential services. The

consequences fall hardest on those least able to absorb them. Compounding the problem, recent budget changes have reduced federal disaster relief funding — cutting the safety net at the very moment it is most needed.

The data infrastructure that emergency managers, infrastructure planners, and local communities depend on has been reduced at the very moment the science demands it be expanded. Restoring and strengthening federal Extreme weather reporting is not a political request. It is a public safety requirement.

That urgency belongs to elected officials at every level of government — and to the voters who put them there. Ours is a "Democratic Republic" — a system defined by elected representatives who are accountable to the people they serve. In such a system, protecting citizens from foreseeable harm is not optional governance. It is the obligation the entire system rests on.

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Author's Note to Editor

Submit with manuscript — do not publish

Three terms in this piece are used as formal classifications from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's "Billion Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters" report and are intentionally capitalized throughout: Winter Storm (one of seven official event categories in the NOAA database), Billion Dollar (a defined federal impact threshold based on normalized economic damage metrics), and Extreme (the highest rating on NOAA's official severity scale).

This capitalization is deliberate and should be preserved in editing. The terms are introduced with their definitions on first substantive use in the data section. Their consistent capitalization thereafter is intended to distinguish formal NOAA classifications from generic descriptive language — a distinction the argument depends on.

The preliminary damage and casualty figures cited for Winter Storm Fern are presented intentionally as journalistic estimates in the absence of official federal data. This uncertainty is not a reporting gap — it is the central evidence for the op-ed's argument. The characterization as "preliminary journalistic estimates" and "no official federal data exists to confirm or refine those figures" is precise and purposeful and should be retained as written.

Note also that “extreme heat” in the second paragraph is intentionally lowercased. It describes weather conditions in Southern California and the Southwest, not the formal NOAA Extreme severity classification applied to the Winter Storm events. The differing capitalization is deliberate.