

2006 HURRICANE SEASON A DAMP SQUIB



Image: The Saharan Air Layer at work over the Canary Islands. Courtesy: NOAA SeaWiFs.

Despite portentous forecasts by most hurricane research groups, the 2006 Atlantic hurricane season proved to be more of a damp squib than a raging repeat of 2005. The season is officially over and so it looks as if everyone - the insurance business included - is breathing a great sigh of relief, with the death toll limited to 11, and economic losses to a measly US\$183 million. But why has the season fallen so far short of the early predictions that, pre-season, forecast up to 17 named storms, including nine hurricanes, and Atlantic Basin and US land-falling hurricane activity as high as 60 percent above the 1950-2005 norm?

By August, forecasts were already being downgraded, with a growing Pacific El Niño being cited as the cause of quieter than expected activity. Another reason for the subdued season seems to be a particularly vigorous Saharan Air Layer or SAL. This is an elevated layer of hot, dry, dust-laden air that periodically pushes westwards from the Sahara across the eastern tropical Atlantic - the main breeding ground for Atlantic hurricanes. In 2006, the SAL covered much of this region, where its very dry air, temperature inversion, and strong wind shear acted to break up tropical disturbances and hinder hurricane intensification. The result has been just nine named storms, of which only five have achieved hurricane status. This is two-thirds down on 2005, which saw a staggering 28 named storms, of which 15 developed to hurricane strength. Those living in the hurricane belt, and those insurers and reinsurers who are currently rubbing their hands with glee should, however, make the most of the lull. 2007 could well see a return to far more lively conditions (see 'the storm after the calm').