Four Extreme Winter Storms, No Data: How the Government Left Communities Flying Blind

NOAA spent 45 years measuring exactly this kind of disaster. It went dark in January 2025. Four storms later, the cost is becoming clear.

By RB Sydney · Science Writer and Analyst, Northern California · April 2026

One of only 27 Category 5 “Extreme” blizzards recorded since 1900 tore through the United States in March. And NOAA, the federal agency that spent 45 years measuring exactly this kind of disaster, went dark in January 2025.

The Extreme Mid-March Blizzard & Cold Snap (March 13–17) not only rated as a Category 5, the most Extreme snow category on the Regional Snowfall Index (rated zero through five), it ranks as the eighth worst blizzard since 1900. The storm was also reported to have brought 51 tornadoes and caused power outages for around 500,000 homes, with three fatalities. It was the fourth Extreme Winter Storm of 2026.

At the same time the devastating blizzard was striking the eastern half of the country, the West was breaking records in a heat wave that started March 16 and continued for 11 days through March 26. March also included 191 tornadoes in a month that averages 80.

From extreme winter cold to extreme summer heat happening in one day just after the first day of spring is alarming.

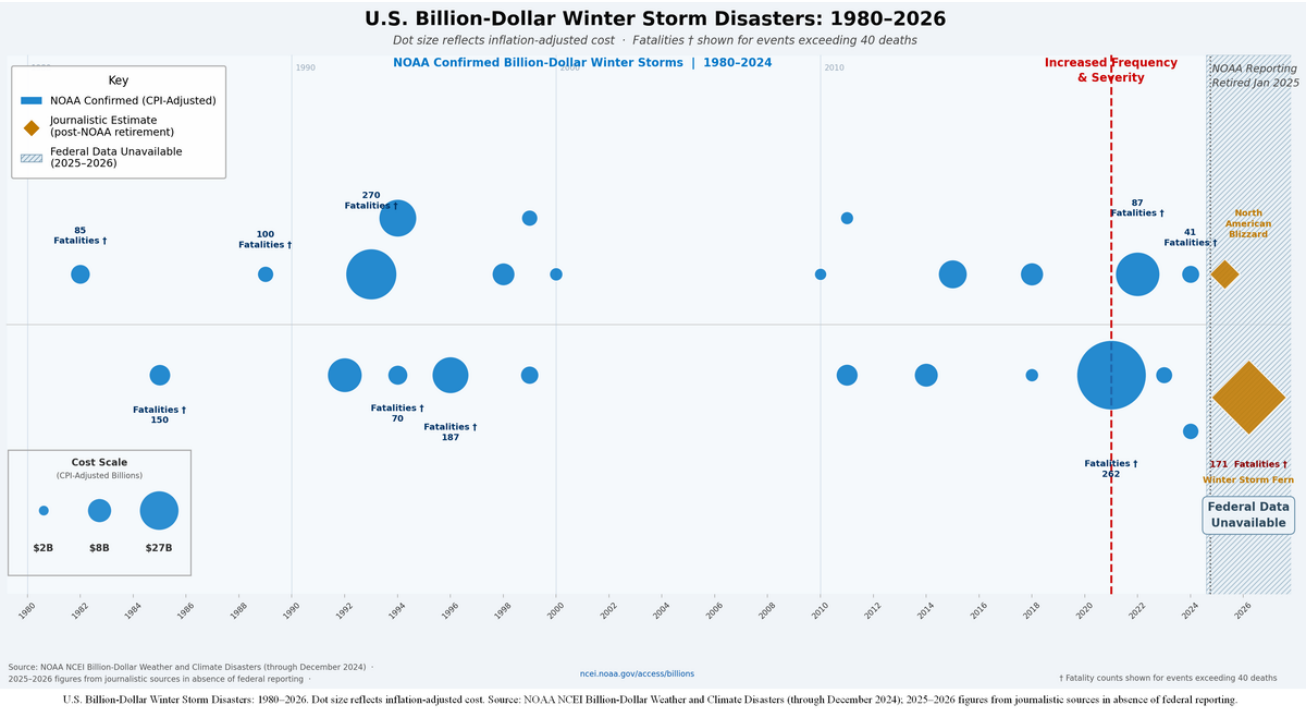
Three Extreme Winter Storms started before this most Extreme event. The first was a large and Extreme Winter Storm Fern (Jan. 23–27), with estimated impacts: damage more than $4 billion and possibly significantly higher (2026 USD), 174 fatalities.

Then came a comparatively less severe Pre-Groundhog Day nor'easter, a Category 2 "Significant" event (Jan. 31–Feb. 2). It involved damage that has yet to be determined but included 13 fatalities and up to 22.3 inches of snow.

Then the 2026 Late February Blizzard (Feb. 20–24) showed up as a Category 3 "Major." A powerful, historic and severe blizzard caused extensive impacts including 30 fatalities, a maximum snow depth of 37.9 inches and unknown damage costs.

The 2026 Winter Storms have clearly caused worse impacts than those in 2025. Yet the federal agency responsible for tracking them, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NOAA, stepped back from that mission at precisely the wrong moment. The data stopped on the first day of January 2025, according to the federal NESDIS May 9, 2025, notice of changes.

The trend is in the numbers



U.S. Billion-Dollar Winter Storm Disasters: 1980–2026. Dot size reflects inflation-adjusted cost. Source: NOAA NCEI Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters (through December 2024); 2025–2026 figures from journalistic sources in absence of federal reporting.

U.S. Billion-Dollar Winter Storm Disasters: 1980–2026 · Source: NOAA NCEI Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters (through December 2024); 2025–2026 figures from journalistic sources in the absence of federal reporting.

For 45 years, NOAA tracked “Billion Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters” as a standardized federal database defining and quantifying the impacts of Winter Storm events, one of seven weather related concerns. The events all cross the Billion Dollar threshold, a normalized economic impact metric, which is considered an Extreme category. The event impacts draw on Snow Index Categories and they have related fatalities and connect to definable risk categories.

Government reports are important for their science-based processes and consistent data-gathering methods that provide comparable data year-to-year.

The data shows 19 Extreme Winter Storms occurred between 1980 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.

Both Winter Storm Fern and the Mid-March Blizzard are strong Billion Dollar storm candidates. The 2026 Late February Blizzard is also a strong candidate for that designation pending better data. It is possible but less likely the Pre-Groundhog Day nor’easter may qualify; it is only classified as a Category 2 “Significant” snow event despite 13 fatalities.

If even three of these four storms qualify as Billion Dollar disasters, 2026 would already be running at approximately six times the historical annual rate for such events compared with the 40-year period ending in 2020. If all four storms qualify, the rate would exceed eight times that baseline.

It looks like a clear case for three possibly four qualifying Billion Dollar Disaster events in 2026 — at least it would be if the government were paying attention.

In the absence of NOAA reporting, sources such as Wikipedia and reputable journalism are filling the gap — a circumstance that speaks for itself and one that creates inconsistent information.

The details of the Jan. 23–27 Winter Storm Fern reporting show the need for consistent analysis. A reputable weather service was reporting in real time during the storm and anticipated costs of more than $100 billion. A combination of reports from reputable insurance analysts put the cost estimate at up to $13.4 billion, and Wikipedia puts the damage at more than $4 billion. Those figures would all be based on different information, including different types of damage and different estimating methods.

Any of these figures would qualify it as a Billion Dollar disaster. The cost at $13.4 billion would rank Fern as the third costliest Winter Storm on record.

No official federal data exists to confirm or refine those figures.

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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RB Sydney

RB Sydney is a science writer and analyst in Northern California. He holds an M.S. in International Agricultural Development from UC Davis and a B.A. in Biological Science, with more than 50 years of experience in agricultural and environmental science. His analytical work was published by the California Governor's Office and by nonprofit publications including the Northcoast Environmental Center. He authored several books, including *Energy and EV Secrets*. He has tracked bioregional conditions across North America since 1972.

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Author's Note to Editor

"Four Extreme Winter Storms, No Data" · RB Sydney · April 2026

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS AND THE TERM "EXTREME"

This piece draws on two distinct federal classification systems, both capitalized consistently throughout.

First, the NOAA "Billion Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters" database. Three terms are used as formal classifications: *Winter Storm* (one of seven official event categories), *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.

Second, the Regional Snowfall Index (RSI), a NOAA-developed scale rated zero through five. The storm severity categories used in the opening section — Category 2 "Significant," Category 3 "Major," and Category 5 "Extreme" — are formal designations from this system. Source: NOAA NCEI, ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/rsi. RSI data enters the Billion Dollar assessment through the NOAA Storm Events Database and NOAA Storm Prediction Center; see ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions.

"Extreme" is capitalized throughout as a formal technical designation, not a descriptive intensifier. It functions as the highest defined level across multiple independent NOAA and NWS classification systems — including the RSI, the Winter Storm Severity Index (WSSI), the drought monitor, fire weather, and space weather scales. The WSSI uses a five-level scale (Limited, Minor, Moderate, Major, Extreme) identical in structure to the RSI. This consistent formal use across independent federal systems is the basis for the capitalization. All such styling is deliberate and should be preserved in editing.

`Winter Storm` `Billion Dollar` `Extreme` `Category 2 "Significant"` `Category 3 "Major"`

WINTER STORM FERN DATA

The preliminary damage and casualty figures cited for Winter Storm Fern are presented intentionally as estimates from journalistic and insurance sources 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 of these figures as estimates and the statement that no official federal data exists to confirm them are precise and purposeful and should be retained as written.

GRAPHIC

The accompanying graphic — *U.S. Billion-Dollar Winter Storm Disasters: 1980–2026* — is available in two formats: RB_Sydney_winter_storms_1980-2026_print.png (high-resolution for print) and RB_Sydney_winter_storms_1980-2026_web.png (web-optimized for digital editions). Sourcing and methodology are embedded in the graphic itself. Placement is recommended immediately below the subhead "The trend is in the numbers."

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