e-Edition Plus

A current events feature for teaching with electronic editions.

By Sara Shahriari

Deadly tornadoes just keep coming and coming in U.S.

Tornadoes are spinning columns of air, and in 2011 the United States has been hit by so many that it could make your head spin, too.

This year more than 1,000 tornadoes have been confirmed in the United States in Missouri, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Kansas and other states.

But why are so many tornadoes in the United States so destructive this year?

The answer is more complicated than usual.

Tornadoes form when cold air sits over warm, wet air and winds start to blow in different directions. They usually form out of giant storms called supercell thunderstorms.

But the nation's jet stream, a large current of air that flows over the country, can affect where tornadoes form because it affects what areas get unsettled weather.

This year the jet stream has often been located farther south than usual and the air has been particularly wet and warm from the middle of the country on south.

At the same time, the air north of the jet stream is colder than usual, and when the warm and cold air collide, it creates perfect conditions for thunderstorms and tornadoes.

In April, the town of Tuscaloosa, Alabama was hit by a mile-wide tornado that wiped out entire neighborhoods. Weeks later Joplin, Missouri was destroyed by a tornado with 200-mile-per-hour winds.

Nearly 180 people died in those two storms alone, and more than 500 people have died in tornadoes this year in the nation as a whole.

That makes this the deadliest year for tornadoes since 1953.

It is also one of the most destructive. Thousands of people have been left homeless by this year's tornadoes, and rebuilding could take years.

Powerful and scary

As a tornado grows out of a thunderstorm, the air starts to spin rapidly, and a tube, or funnel, reaches down from a cloud to the land below.

At first, a funnel appears white from the water droplets inside it, but it later changes color as it sweeps up dirt and debris from the ground.

The winds of the worst tornadoes can be so strong they can blow houses apart and toss cars around like toys.

The National Weather Service measures tornadoes according to a system called the Enhanced Fujita Scale, which measures a tornado based on the damage that it causes.

The weakest tornadoes, which cause damage such as broken tree branches and uprooted signs, are EF0 on the scale. The Joplin tornado was an EF5 and left the city in ruins.

U.S. is tops

Tornadoes have been recorded on every continent except Antarctica, but the United States experiences more than any other country in the world.

Tornadoes have occurred in each of the 50 U.S. states, but most happen each year in the Midwest — giving the region the nickname "Tornado Alley."

If you ever find yourself in a tornado, the most important thing to do is move away from windows and doors to a basement or a small room, like a bathroom, on the first floor.

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In a typical year, about 1,300 tornadoes will strike in the United States. This year the nation has already had more than 1,000, and the peak of tornado season isn't over for another month.

Talk About the News

- **Many people in the United States have lost their homes in tornadoes or floods over the last month. With your class, talk about the basic things that people who have lost homes might need. Then discuss how your class or school might organize a drive to gather some basic supplies that you could send to people who have lost their homes.**

Learning Standards: Engaging peers in constructive conversations about topics of interest or importance; identifying and researching issues of importance that confront adolescents, their community and the nation.

Explore Your e-Edition

- **Recovering from a natural disaster takes time and money. Look through the e-Edition for a story about people who are recovering from a natural disaster in their area. Read the story and make a list of the biggest challenges the people are facing as they try to rebuild their homes and businesses. Imagine you are a person recovering from a disaster and write a letter to the editor of the e-Edition describing a challenge you face and its effect on your family.**

Learning Standards: Responding to visual, written and electronic texts by making connections to students' personal lives and the lives of others; using language in a natural, fresh and vivid way.

- **When disasters strike, governments are often asked to help. Find a story in the e-Edition about the tornadoes in the U.S. over the past two months. Read the story and write a paragraph summarizing what the story says the government is doing to help victims of the tornadoes.**

Learning Standards: Acquiring information from a variety of written, visual and electronic sources; organizing and analyzing the information; writing fluently for multiple purposes.

- **Natural events can be frightening, but they also can be inspiring. Think of all the ways a tornado affects people. Then search the e-Edition for adjectives like "amazing" or "powerful" that might describe a tornado. Use what you find to write a short poem, rhyme or rap about tornadoes. Share with the class.**

Learning Standards: Writing fluently for multiple purposes to produce compositions, such as stories, poetry, reports, letters, plays and explanations of processes; acquiring information from multiple sources.

How Well Did You Read?

Understanding what you read is a skill that will help you all your life. Review the story about tornadoes by answering the questions below.

1. What is the jet stream?

A. A current of air
B. A tornado
C. A column of air
D. A cloud

2. How many tornadoes have occurred in the U.S. this year?

A. More than 10
B. More than 100
C. More than 1,000
D. More than 10,000

3. What country experiences the most tornadoes?

A. Canada
B. Missouri
C. Alabama
D. The United States

4. Which city in Missouri was recently destroyed by a tornado?

A. Joplin
B. Tuscaloosa
C. Dallas
D. Kansas

5. What scale is used to measure the strength of tornadoes?

A. The Richter Scale
B. The Fujita Scale
C. The National Weather Service
D. The Tornado Alley Index

ANSWERS: 1-A. 2-C. 3-D. 4-A. 5-B.