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The number of weather catastrophes that pass the billion-dollar mark when adjusted into constant dollars is increasing with each decade. In the 1980s, the country averaged slightly more than one a year. In the 1990s, it was 3.8 a year. It jumped to 4.6 in the first decade of this century. And in the past two years, it has averaged 7.5.

Other years had higher overall damage figures because of one gargantuan disaster, including Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and a 1988 drought.

But this isn't just about numbers.

"Each of these events is a huge disaster for victims who experience them," NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco said in an email. "They are an unprecedented challenge for the nation."

Half the billion-dollar disasters were tornado outbreaks in one of the deadliest years on record. More than 540 people were killed in those six tragedies. In four days in April, there were 343 tornadoes in the largest outbreak on record, including 199 in one day, which is another record.

Texas had more than a million acres burned by wildfire, a record for the state, and Oklahoma set a record for the hottest month ever in the U.S. The Ohio Valley had triple the normal rainfall, which caused major flooding along the Mississippi River.

"Too little water in the South, too much water in the North," said Andrew Weaver, a climate scientist at the University of Victoria in Canada. "It's a story we are hearing more and more often."

That's why the world has to do two things, said Princeton University geological sciences professor Michael Oppenheimer: try to slow global warming by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and prepare better for extreme weather.