

Jared L. Guyer and Michael L. Moritz
NOAA/National Weather Service Hastings, Nebraska

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well established that the majority of the world's tornadoes occur in "tornado alley" of the United States plains region. The plains is generally characterized by an agrarian based economy and a relatively low population density.

While the plains region receives the bulk of the tornadoes in the United States, from a tornado climatology standpoint, the tornadoes are of a lesser F-scale rating (Fujita 1971) on average than those of the higher populated areas of the eastern United States. This geographic discrepancy of F-scale climatology has been well documented in previous research literature (Kelly et al. 1978, Doswell and Burgess 1988, Grazulis 1993). As these studies have noted, this is not necessarily attributed to a difference in tornado intensity, but instead, is an artifact of population bias and associated lack of structures.

Doswell and Burgess (1988) discussed the reality of the F-scale as a damage scale versus an intensity scale. They noted tornadoes which occur in open country oftentimes do not damage structures, hence making an F-scale estimation more difficult. Schaefer and Galway (1982) noted a population bias in tornado climatology in the western plains from Oklahoma through Kansas to the Dakotas, finding that tornadoes that strike higher populated areas tend to have a higher rating than those that remain in open country.

Furthermore, the number of structures in the plains will only continue to diminish as an ever-increasing trend toward agribusinesses or expanded family farms results in a less "usable" tornado intensity detection grid (Grazulis 1993).

Presently, F-scale definitions only provide vague guidance for damage assessment as "official" documentation favors structural-based definitions. These aforementioned factors ultimately pose special challenges to a consistent operational assignment of F-scale ratings to tornado damage in predominately agricultural areas.

To compensate for the lack of structures in the plains region, it is theorized by the authors that expanded rating considerations should be formalized for the sake of climatological and historical consistency

regarding the F-scale. Potential incorporation or standardization of rating criteria that is native to the plains region, namely agricultural structures (e.g., irrigation pivots) and crops in Nebraska in this instance, will be discussed as a potential basis for F-scale rating guidance.

2. CENTER PIVOT IRRIGATION

Due to a slightly drier climate, coupled with an abundance of underground water, Nebraska relies heavily on irrigation for crop production. There are two methods of irrigation, one being gravity or flood irrigation, and the other the use of center pivot irrigation systems. Center pivot systems are more efficient than the traditional gravity and flood irrigation methods. The four major center pivot irrigation system manufacturers are located in Nebraska and account for 90% of sales worldwide.



Figure 1. Center pivot irrigation. Image courtesy United States Geological Survey (USGS).

Over 42,000 center pivot irrigation systems are registered in Nebraska, with that number continuing a steady increase. Center pivot irrigation accounts for more than 4.6 million acres of cropland in Nebraska, roughly 62% of the total irrigated cropland. With irrigation pivots taking a more prevalent role over the last quarter of a century, the amount of irrigated cropland has tripled during the past 25 years. It is estimated that as much as 70% of Nebraska's irrigated

Corresponding author address: Jared L. Guyer, National Weather Service, 6365 Osborne Drive West, Hastings, NE 68901; e-mail: Jared.Guyer@noaa.gov

Different corn plants, or hybrids, are tested for stalk breakage. Brittle snap (also known as green snap) is a term which describes a corn plant stalk which has been broken by high winds. The brittle stalk score is a score which reflects artificial testing of a hybrid's tendency and frequency for brittle stalk breakage. A score of 9 indicates the least risk of breakage and 1 indicates the highest risk. A score of 9 does not guarantee resistance to brittle snap though. Other factors such as planting practices, fertilizing methodology, and soil conditions can also affect a plant's susceptibility to damage caused by high winds or tornadoes (Pioneer Hi-Bred International, 1999).

Too many factors (e.g., growing cycle, soil moisture variability, crop health) may be involved to reliably utilize crop damage as a sole source of an F-scale rating; nevertheless, there may be utility as a supplementary means of guidance.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND SUGGESTIONS

For the sake of consistency in operational F-scale assignment amongst geographic regions, the authors suggest the F-scale incorporate additional non-structural types of damage. The authors propose that F-scale definitions and/or guidelines be expanded to better incorporate those things native to rural and agricultural settings.

Specifically, it is suggested F-scale descriptions should be refined to incorporate such things as irrigation pivots, agricultural crops, and other types of vegetation. With more inclusive definitions, it is theorized that the discrepancy in F-scale climatology between rural and higher populated areas may at least be partially minimized.

Furthermore, the authors encourage other National Weather Service (NWS) offices to research local standards and specifications within their own area of responsibility. The authors recommend those who routinely conduct surveys in rural areas consider the unique nature of the structures and green cover in their areas. If relatively little background information is known about the structures (i.e. pivots) or green cover (crop maturity and hybrids), the authors suggest obtaining information from local producers and manufacturers to provide more consistency in tornado damage assessment. Ultimately, the locally derived information should be shared for the purposes of statewide and regional uniformity.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank T-L Irrigation for their time and consultation on this project. The various reviewers of this manuscript are acknowledged for the constructive comments and valuable input.

6. REFERENCES

Doswell, C.A., III, and D.W. Burgess, 1988: Some issues of United States tornado climatology. *Mon. Wea. Rev.*, 116, 495-501.

Fujita, T.T., 1971: Proposed characterization of tornadoes and hurricanes by area and intensity. SMRP Res. Paper 91, Univ. of Chicago, 42 pp.

Fujita, T.T., 1993: Plainfield Tornado of August 28, 1990. The Tornado: Its Structure, Dynamics, Prediction, and Hazards. Geophysical Monograph 79, 1993. American Geophysical Union.

Grazulis, T.P., 1993: A 100-Year Perspective of Significant Tornadoes. The Tornado: Its Structure, Dynamics, Prediction, and Hazards. Geophys. Monogr. 79, Amer. Geophys. Union, 467-474.

Grazulis, T.P., J.T. Schaefer, and R.F. Abbey Jr., 1993: Advances in tornado climatology, hazards, and risk assessment since tornado symposium II. The Tornado: Its Structure, Dynamics, Prediction, and Hazards. Geophys. Monogr. 79, Amer. Geophys. Union, 409-426.

Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2001: Cornhusker Economics. Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Nebraska Lincoln.

Kelly, D.L., J.T. Schaefer, R. P. McNulty, C.A. Doswell III and R.F. Abbey, Jr., 1978: An augmented tornado climatology. *Mon. Wea. Rev.*, 106, 1172-1183.

Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc., 1999: Crop Insights, Volume 9, Number 3.

Schaefer, J.T., and J.G. Galway, 1982: Population biases in the tornado climatology. Preprints 12th Conf. On Severe Local Storms, San Antonio, Amer. Meteor. Soc., 51-54.

T-L Irrigation, 2002: Personal Communication.