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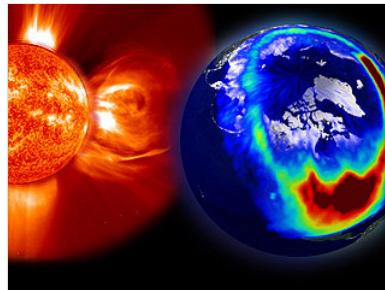
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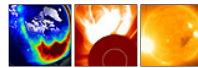
Powerful Solar Storm Could Shut Down U.S. for Months

Friday, January 09, 2009 | [FoxNews.com](#)
By Robert Roy Britt

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Solar storms can cause colorful auroras, often seen in higher latitudes on Earth. NASA



A new study from the **National Academy of Sciences** outlines grim possibilities on Earth for a worst-case scenario solar storm.

Damage to power grids and other **communications systems** could be catastrophic, the scientists conclude, with effects leading to a potential loss of governmental control of the situation.

The prediction is based in part on a **major solar storm in 1859** that caused telegraph wires to short out in the United States and Europe, igniting widespread fires.

It was perhaps the worst in the past 200 years, according to the new study, which says the modern world's power grids and satellites, much more is at risk.

"A contemporary repetition of the [1859] event would cause significantly more extensive (and possibly catastrophic) social and economic disruptions," the

researchers conclude.

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'Command and control might be lost'

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When the sun is in the active phase of its 11-year cycle, it can unleash **powerful magnetic storms** that disable satellites, threaten **astronaut** safety, and even disrupt communication systems on Earth.

The worst storms can knock out power grids by inducing currents that melt transformers.

Modern power grids are so interconnected that a big space **storm** — the type expected to occur about once a century — could **cause a cascade of failures** that would sweep across the United States, cutting power to 130 million people or more in this country alone, the new report concludes.

Such widespread power outages, though expected to be a rare possibility, would affect other vital systems.

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Stormy past

Solar storms have had significant effects in modern time:

— In 1989, the sun unleashed a tempest that knocked out power to all of Quebec, Canada.

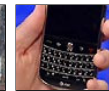
— A **remarkable 2003 rampage** included 10 major **solar flares** over a two-week period, knocking out two Earth-orbiting satellites and crippling an instrument aboard a Mars orbiter.

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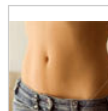
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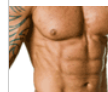
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"Obviously, the sun is Earth's life blood," said Richard Fisher, director of the Heliophysics division at NASA. "To mitigate possible public safety issues, it is vital that we better understand extreme space weather events caused by the sun's activity."

"Space weather can produce solar storm electromagnetic fields that induce extreme currents in wires, disrupting power lines, causing wide-spread blackouts and affecting communication cables that support the Internet," the report states. "Severe space weather also produces solar energetic particles and the dislocation of the Earth's radiation belts, which can damage satellites used for commercial communications, global positioning and weather forecasting."

Rush to prepare

The race is on for better forecasting abilities, as the next peak in solar activity is [expected to come around 2012](#).

While the sun is in a lull now, activity can flare up at any moment, and severe space weather — how severe, nobody knows — will ramp up a year or two before the peak.

Some scientists expect the next peak to bring more severe events than other recent peaks.

"A catastrophic failure of commercial and government infrastructure in space and on the ground can be mitigated through raising public awareness, improving vulnerable infrastructure and developing advanced forecasting capabilities," the report states. "Without preventive actions or plans, the [trend](#) of increased dependency on modern space-weather sensitive assets could make society more vulnerable in the future."

The report was commissioned and funded by NASA. Experts from around the world in industry, government and academia participated. It was released this week.

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