

Sun to hit 'solar max' of activity in 2014

BY PAUL BEDARD | AUGUST 3, 2013 AT 7:05 AM

<http://washingtonexaminer.com/sun-to-hit-solar-max-of-activity-in-2014/article/2533829>

Potentially threatening solar activity will peak late this year or early next year, according to NASA, as seen in the last "ejection" two weeks ago that spit out solar particles at twice the common speed of other recent events.

According to space experts at NASA's Goddard Flight Center just outside Washington in Greenbelt, Md., the 11-year cycle of the sun will hit "solar maximum" by early 2014 and the number of so-called "coronal mass ejections," or CMEs, that can threaten technology, especially electrical grids, is likely to increase.

Alex Young, a heliophysicist at NASA Goddard, said the space agency is keeping a watchful eye on the sun's increased activity, but downplayed the chances of a catastrophic hit on Earth.

Young compared the solar maximum activity to the peak of hurricane season when storms seem to line up, though most are typically weak. The analogy, he said, "is like during hurricane season, if someone were to say there's a better potential for a [category] five than a one," he said. A category five is the worst.

Young said that the event two weeks ago on July 22 event did not reach the potentially damaging level that officials with the newly formed EMP Coalition warned about this week. Members of that commission, headed by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former CIA Director James Woolsey, told Secrets that there was the potential for mass electric outages across the country had Earth been in the way of that CME.

Young said in an interview that the CME would not have knocked the electric grid out had it hit Earth directly. "It probably would have caused moderate to minor geomagnetic storm, so we would have seen some extend aurora in the northern U.S., probably power grids would have experienced fluctuations, but nothing that they couldn't handle," he explained.

However, NASA officials did report that there was a "blockbuster" event in July 2012 that could have inflicted some damage had it been directed at

Earth, though not a total meltdown. NASA said the CME from July 22 had a speed of about 1,200 kilometers per second and is classified as "occasional." The CME from July 2012 had was going about 3,500 kilometers per second and was classified as "extremely rare."

NASA studies all aspects of solar activity and it's effects on the Earth and technology. But NASA primary operational space weather duty is to monitor the impact of space weather on the large fleet of NASA equipment around the Earth and throughout the solar system. NOAA has a Space Weather Prediction Center (<http://swpc.noaa.gov>) that handles space weather forecasts, alerts, watches and warnings for Earth directed space weather.

In the video above, Young concludes that while the sun has the potential to deliver a hard punch to Earth, as it did in 1859 when telegraph lines in Europe and North America melted, "this superstorm that is going to wipe out the Earth simply isn't going to happen."

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