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# Solar flares could play havoc with communications

United Press International

WASHINGTON — Sunspot activity is at an 11-year peak, and resulting radiation outbursts in coming months could touch off magnetic storms on Earth, interrupt radio communications and cause computers to go haywire, U.S. forecasters say.

Solar flares that are associated with sunspots have already caused varied problems on the Earth, including communications blackouts for transoceanic airliners and communications and control problems for satellites.

"We had one report that flare activity might have set off a civil defense circuit in Canada, throwing radio stations automatically in an alert mode," said Gary Heckman, head of the Space Environment Services Center in Boulder, Colo., in a report released Sunday.

Sunspots — dark blemishes that appear on the solar surface — increase and decrease in a regular fashion over an 11-year cycle. No one knows why, but the most frequent and violent solar flares usually occur after a peak in sunspot activity.

Flares are great outbursts of radiation and gases from the sun. The largest release energy equal to 10 trillion one-megaton hydrogen bombs.

Scientists say the buildup in sunspots during the past few months indicates the upcoming flare peak will be the second most active since Galileo discovered sunspots in the early 1600's. The first peak was in 1957.

But the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration says with technology advancing every day, the practical effect on Earth of the upcoming flare peak is likely to be unprecedented.

Over the coming months, enormous solar flares are expected to touch off "storms in the earth's magnetic field, which in turn play havoc with earthly electronics," the agency said.

The solar flares could cause occasional disruptions in radio communications and power transmission, haywire computers, even false alarms in civil defense networks, the agency warned.

Solar forecasters monitor the sun and its earthly effects from the Colorado center, operated jointly by NOAA and the Air Force, using telescopes, satellites and a worldwide network of magnetometers.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration launched a satellite earlier this month to study solar flares in an attempt to help scientists develop ways to predict the occurrence of flares.

Heckman said there is new evidence that high-energy particles from large solar flares could be responsible for certain computer failures.

The effects are not all bad, however. Between flares, shortwave radio operators sometimes enjoy unusually good reception, because the high radiation levels that accompany sunspots strengthen the Earth's ionosphere, and signals can be bounced easily into the southern hemisphere.

The type of events caused by solar flares happen almost every year, but they are more frequent and more severe during the solar maximum. And this solar maximum, the NOAA said, "is turning out to be one of the most spectacular of this century."

# Agriculture proponents argue opposing policies

United Press International

WASHINGTON — Tom Benson is a grain and livestock farmer from Appleton, Minn., the son of former Minnesota Gov. Elmer Benson. The politically active younger Benson supported Bob Bergland when he was his congressman.

Benson is the treasurer of the 2½-year-old American Agriculture Movement which is lobbying in Washington this month for the third winter in a row.

Benson is adamant in his belief that farmers need higher price supports to keep from going broke, that farmers do not make enough return on their investment and that prosperity in agriculture would generate prosperity throughout the economy.

Bergland is a grain farmer from Roseau, Minn. who was active in Democratic Farmer Labor Party politics in Minnesota, a former National Farmers Union activist and a protege of the late Sen. Hubert Humphrey.

Until he was appointed agriculture secretary, Bergland was a congressman for six years and a vocal spokesman for higher farm prices.

Bergland says he gained a new constituency when he became agriculture secretary.

His constituents are not only American consumers, who want the cheapest food possible, but also people around the world, including those from poor nations, who depend on American abundance for part of their food.

Benson and Bergland have been rubbing each other the wrong way for the past three years. Benson is angry because Bergland left behind his past support for parity prices for agriculture. He says Bergland has "sold out."

Some people believe that Bergland had Tom Benson, among others, in mind last year, when he labeled protesting farmers "greedy."

Each man represents a different way of looking at agriculture. Benson is an advocate of putting a floor under farm prices at 90 percent of parity, a standard based on farmers' buying power from 1910-14. Prices now average 64 percent of parity.

The standard is periodically revised so it is not as outmoded as it sounds, but agriculture policymakers have been trying to bury the concept for a generation, charging that it ignores gains in farm productivity.

Policymakers also prefer to minimize the government's role in agricultural production.

Benson was one of five AAM leaders who met with Bergland Friday to discuss farm policy.

Bergland told farmers the administration did not support any more increases in price supports, but he invited them to come up with proposals for further discussions — as long as they were not "dream world" proposals.

When the question of party politics came up, Benson and Bergland began to argue about parity.

Benson said Bergland campaigned successfully for Congress in support of 90 percent of parity. Bergland denied that he campaigned on that issue.

In response to a question from Benson at a meeting in Alexandria, Minn., Bergland said he once voiced support for a House resolution calling for farm prices at 90 percent of parity

Benson called the resolution "flim-flam" and said it was a big mistake.

Bergland circulated a letter to congressmen asking for their support of the resolution and blamed the effort on Rep. Richard Nolan, D-Minn., an AAM backer who is retiring from Congress at the end of this term.

"He engineered that whole nit-wit exercise," Bergland said.

Benson asked, "You mean you were never for 90 percent of parity?"

Bergland replied, "I was not campaigning on 90 percent of parity."

Benson asked again, "Never? Never? Hubert Humphrey never did?"

Bergland said, "I don't know about that. I'm not going to get into that with you."

Another farmer interjected and told the men to argue their old political wars some other time.

# Iowa grain shortage scandal leaves farmers in bind

United Press International

DES MOINES, Iowa — Shaken farmers in Stockport are counting their losses from a grain shortage scandal that has triggered the worst elevator collapse in Iowa history, and are wondering where they will get the money to pull them out of their fiscal hole.

State investigators know 1.2 million bushels of corn and soybeans — worth $4.3 million — were missing from the Prairie Grain Co. the day operator Raymond Keller shot himself. Keller's body was found a few hours after state auditors arrived to look into reports of bad checks.

Investigators believe Keller was speculating in the rollercoaster commodities market and was selling grain to make up for his losses.

When overdrafts, grain payments and other debts are tallied, losses stand at $7 million. The FBI is looking into the possibility of bank fraud while auditors still labor over elevator records, checking entries to see if there are more shortages.

The scandal has brought calls for a legislative overhaul of grain trading laws. It also inspired a group of farmers to file claims with a state review board, asking the state to pay for grain they lost.

"The crash of '29 has hit Van Buren County," one man blurted when details of the scandal began to trickle out. Collapse of the Stockport elevator has hit dozens of southeast Iowa families.

"It's unbelievable the losses these people have taken, especially the ones who can't afford it — those getting ready to retire and the young farmers trying to get started," said Sen. Forrest Schwengels, R-Fairfield, a representative for many of the farmers.

Some farmers lost twice — they lost grain that was going to retire last year's debts and bankroll spring planting.

Attorney General Tom Miller has filed suit, asking for restitution by the elevator and its stockholders. Officials estimate, however, it will be a year before a settlement is made and it may be far less than what the grain was worth.

Farmers at the local tavern sip their beer and quietly tally their losses.

"The farmer has to pay for this thing," farmer Beryl Lane said at Passke's Pub last week. "We were just one big happy family around here and then this thing. It's bigger than I ever thought it would be."

Authorities say some farmers lost tens of thousands of dollars in the scandal that unfolded following Keller's death Jan. 31.

Now they are beginning to wonder how Keller's problems escaped detection. State law calls for two audits a year, but there are only seven investigators to handle 840 elevators.

Prairie Grain was audited in April 1979, but no problems were discovered. There were rumors of bad checks last fall, but no one complained to state officials until late January.

"You had a huge problem down there and no one can overstate the misery," said Maurice Van Nostrand, former chairman of the Iowa Commerce Commission.

Some farmers face an uncertain financial condition. The traditional deadline for land payments is March 1.

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