Tornadoes: Increasing our understanding through basic science

Yvette Richardson
Penn State University
Tornadoes

• What do we know well?
• What do we still struggle to understand?
• How do we gain new understanding from basic research?
Current understanding: Supercell storms

Most strong and nearly all violent tornadoes are associated with supercell storms that have an area of upward motion and two main areas of downward motion.

after Lemon and Doswell (1979)
Current understanding: Supercell storms

Supercells acquire rotation *aloft* from the spin in the environment.
This is why supercell occurrence follows the jet stream (strong winds at high levels).

Supercells also need warm, moist air at the surface and cold air aloft so that the low-level air becomes buoyant if it gets lifted.

Markowski and Richardson (2009)
winds that change direction and/or speed with height
warm, moist air underneath cold air
thin layer of very warm air between them (allows energy to build up)
Current Understanding:
What we know about making a tornado

1) Need to get rotation vertically oriented and get it to the ground (requires a downdraft)

Markowski and Richardson (2009)
Spin (about the horizontal) can also be generated by temperature variations associated with a storm’s cool outflow.

This can be tilted to develop low-level rotation in supercells.

Current Understanding:
The importance of storm-generated spin.
Current Understanding:
What we know about making a tornado

2) Need to “Stretch” the rotation
   (requires getting the rotation under an updraft)

Markowski and Richardson (2009)
Outstanding questions

• Why do some supercells succeed in this process while others fail?
• Why do some tornadoes go on to last a long time while others quickly die?
• What is the relationship between the rotation aloft and that near the surface?
• What are the relative contributions from spin in the environment and storm-generated spin?
  – Models suggest storm-generated spin is important, but we know models have a hard time getting the temperature variations under the storm right because they have a hard time getting the rain and hail distributions right
  – Observations of both the winds and the temperatures on all the scales needed (i.e., over the whole storm but also in detail near the tornado) are RARE
VORTEX2

• 10 May – 13 June 2009, 1 May – 15 June 2010

• Largest field project ever to study tornadoes

• Four foci
  – tornadogenesis
  – near-ground wind field in tornadoes
  – relationship between tornadoes, their parent thunderstorms, and the larger-scale environment
  – storm-scale NWP, supercell predictability

• Funded by National Science Foundation and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ($10+ M)
in situ tornado probes (12)
rawinsondes (4)
StickNet (24)
mobile mesonet (8-10)
laser disdrometers and video particle probes
UAS

storm-scale radars (C-band)
CIRPAS MWR-05XP (phased array)
TTU Ka-band

mesocyclone-scale radars (X-band, two dual-pol)

UWAS XPOL
NOAA XP

RapidScan
UMASS W-band

V2 Operations Center (VOC) in Norman, OK

“Fully nomadic”
VORTEX2 Highlights

- Data collected on 43 supercells
  - 13 of these were tornadic during our deployment

- ~30,000 miles driven by each vehicle (times ~50 vehicles = ~1.5 million vehicle-miles > 50 times around the equator)

- ~6800 hotel rooms (~100 participants plus media)—Logistics Coordinator was indispensable
Radar observations of entire tornado lifecycle
(Radar loop courtesy Joshua Wurman)

5 June 2009
near LaGrange, Wyoming
Combining wind and temperature data
(an example of what makes VORTEX2 datasets precious)

Radar Reflectivity (color)
Subjective analysis of virtual potential temperature (bold lines)
Data assimilation for VORTEX2 case:
Using the observations to drive the model toward the right solution
Impact of VORTEX2 observations

**Observations**

- Improved handling of rain and hail to produce more realistic temperature gradients
- Analyses of observations lead to new conceptual models

**Computer Modeling**

- Simplified computer models can be used to isolate particular processes

**Theory**

- (equations for the laws of physics, chemistry…)
Summary

• We understand some parts of the tornado problem well, but others have eluded us owing to deficiencies in the models or in the observations.

• Methods of discovery include direct observations, computer modeling, and theory all working together to get the answers; this requires:
  – Supercomputing capabilities
  – Observational infrastructure

• The ultimate goal of the basic research is to feed into operations to improve watches and warnings → this research-to-operations transfer is strong in the severe storms community.
Thank you!