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EARTH: The Dangers of Solar Storms

Alexandria, VA – Throughout history, humanity has steadily increased its dependence upon technology. Although technology has vastly improved the quality of life for billions of people, it has also opened us up to new risks and vulnerabilities. Terrorism and natural disasters might be at the forefront of the minds of policymakers and the U.S. population, but a significant threat lurks over our heads: the sun. A massive solar storm, the size last seen a century and a half ago, could easily leave hundreds of millions of people in the dark for days, weeks or even months.

The sun follows a roughly 11-year cycle of activity, measured by the number of sunspots on its surface. The solar maximum – when sunspot activity peaks, with a corresponding increase in solar flares and billion-ton blobs of magnetic field-generating solar plasma known as coronal mass ejections (CMEs) launched from the sun's surface – is forecast to occur later this year. How would the power grid, fuel pipelines, communication, and water treatment plants be affected were a massive solar storm to strike Earth? Read the story online and find out at http://bit.ly/106mE7a.

Check out this story and more in the February issue of EARTH Magazine. Learn how a magma aquifer might link Hawaiian volcanoes; see how cataclysmic celestial collisions created beautiful meteorites; and discover an ancient ancestor of the giant panda all the way in Spain in this month's issue of EARTH.

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Keep up to date with the latest happenings in Earth, energy and environment news with EARTH magazine online at http://www.earthmagazine.org/. Published by the American Geosciences Institute, EARTH is your source for the science behind the headlines.

The American Geosciences Institute is a nonprofit federation of geoscientific and professional associations that represents more than 250,000 geologists, geophysicists and other earth scientists. Founded in 1948, AGI provides information services to geoscientists, serves as a voice of shared interests in the profession, plays a major role in strengthening geoscience education, and strives to increase public awareness of the vital role the geosciences play in society's use of resources, resiliency to natural hazards, and interaction with the environment.