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He thinks he can stop a hurricane

Skeptics abound, but one entrepreneur is brainstorming big on weather modification, a field whose means are scientifically unproven

By James Janega
Tribune staff reporter
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The businessman, 45, is chief executive of an absorbent-products company called Dyn-O-Mat--named for its first product, a mat to absorb oil spills under garaged cars.

The absorbent element, a non-toxic polyacrylamide, can be made into powder. In water it turns instantly to cool jelly, then dissolves again in salt water. This is what he wants to drop on hurricane clouds.

The closest Cordani came to doing it was July 19, 2001, when he leased a plane to drop several hundred pounds of prototype gel on a thunderstorm 10 miles off West Palm Beach, Fla.

TV cameras rolled from helicopters and nearby boats, with video of the falling powder showing the cloud collapsing on itself like a falling building.

Cordani might be dismissed altogether if not for the possibility that his idea could work--not by making a hurricane disappear but by disrupting the orderly growth of its winds.

"It would seem to tend to weaken a storm," said Peter Ray, a hurricane researcher at Florida State University, supporter of Cordani and proponent of computer modeling. "How it all plays out is difficult to say without a careful scientific analysis. If that were done properly, we would know with a high degree of confidence whether it would work."

Feeling he hasn't gotten a fair shake from the rest of academic and governmental officialdom, Cordani has turned his attention to stringent computer models.

He has made overtures for funding from oil companies, insurance businesses and the government. Figuring he might need to drop a lot of powder, he's working with an Oregon company that modified a 747 to fight forest fires. His first tests with it may come this summer.

Taking on a hurricane might take a fleet of four or five planes, Cordani guesses, perhaps flying more than once. Field tests and computer models will determine how much powder and how many planes, he says.

Still, for a man greeted with frozen smiles at hurricane conferences and

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one whose office is wallpapered with news clippings about hurricane devastation, Cordani is demonstrably optimistic about his chances.

He keeps two bags packed with product samples and information, in case a last-minute summons comes to make his case before the people who draft U.S. weather policy.

"All of a sudden," he said, "in the last couple of months, weather modification is a good thing again."

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