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Influence of Solar Flares on Long-Term Cosmic Rays Intensity Variations

Mrs. Antima Singh, Research scholar
Maharaja Chhatrasal Bundelkhand University Chhatarpur, (M.P)
Email - Singhantima2021@gmail.com
Dr. Neelam Singh, Assistant Professor of Physics
Rani Avantibai Lodhi Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar
Email - upc.neelam@gmail.com

Abstract:- Solar flares represent some of the most energetic phenomena in our solar system, releasing up to 10^{32} ergs of energy in a matter of minutes. While the immediate effects of solar flares on space weather are well-documented, their contribution to the long-term modulation of galactic cosmic rays (GCRs) remains an area of active investigation. This paper examines The ways in which solar flares influence cosmic ray intensity over extended timescales, including their role in altering the heliospheric magnetic field structure, generating interplanetary coronal mass ejections (ICMEs), and contributing to the overall solar modulation function. Through analysis of multi-decade observational data and theoretical modeling, we demonstrate that solar flares, particularly during periods of maximum solar activity, contribute significantly to the ~11-year cosmic ray modulation cycle. We further explore the relationship between flare frequency, solar cycle phase, and flow of cosmic rays variations, providing evidence that cumulative flare activity establishes persistent turbulent regions in the heliosphere that extend modulation effects beyond individual event timescales.

Keywords: solar flares, galactic cosmic rays (GCRs), interplanetary coronal mass ejections (ICMEs)

Introduction:- Galactic cosmic rays (GCRs) are high-energy particles originating primarily from supernova remnants beyond our solar system, consisting mainly of protons (~90%), alpha particles (~9%), and heavier nuclei (~1%) (Mewaldt, 2012). As these particles traverse the heliosphere—the region of space dominated by the solar wind and the Sun's magnetic field—they undergo significant modulation in intensity and energy spectrum. This solar modulation of cosmic rays exhibits both short-term variations associated with individual solar events and long-term variations correlated with the 11-year solar activity cycle (Potgieter, 2013). Solar flares are sudden, intense bursts of electromagnetic radiation and energetic particles emanating from the Sun's atmosphere, typically occurring in active regions associated with complex magnetic field configurations (Priest & Forbes, 2002). These events are classified according to their X-ray brightness in the 1-8 Ångström wavelength band, with X-class flares representing the most powerful category, followed by M-class, C-class, B-class, and A-class in descending order of magnitude. A single X-class flare can release energy equivalent to millions of hydrogen bombs, dramatically affecting the near-Earth space environment (Benz, 2017). The relationship between solar activity and cosmic ray intensity has been recognized since the pioneering work of Forbush (1938), who identified sudden decreases in cosmic ray intensity following geomagnetic storms—phenomena now known as Forbush decreases. While individual solar flares produce transient effects on cosmic ray flux, the cumulative impact of frequent flare activity during solar maximum periods contributes to sustained modulation over timescales of months to years (Cane, 2000). Understanding this long-term modulation is crucial for predicting radiation exposure for astronauts, assessing risks to satellite electronics, and potentially understanding solar influences on Earth's climate system (Vainio et al., 2009).

Physical Mechanisms of Cosmic Ray Modulation:- Heliospheric Magnetic Field Structure -The primary mechanism by which solar flares contribute to long-term cosmic ray modulation involves alterations to the heliospheric magnetic field (HMF) structure. The HMF, carried outward by the solar wind, forms a complex three-dimensional configuration known as the Parker spiral (Parker, 1958). Solar flares, particularly when accompanied by coronal mass ejections (CMEs), inject large-scale magnetic structures into the heliosphere that persist for extended periods as they propagate outward at speeds ranging from 300 to over 2000 km/s (Gopalswamy, 2016). These magnetic irregularities create barriers to cosmic ray propagation through a process known as magnetic mirroring and scattering. Cosmic rays gyrating along magnetic field lines encounter enhanced turbulence and magnetic field compressions associated with CME-driven shocks and the compressed plasma regions behind them, collectively termed magnetic clouds or flux ropes (Burlaga et al., 1981). The cumulative effect of multiple such structures during periods of high flare activity significantly increases the total path length cosmic rays must traverse to reach the inner heliosphere, thereby reducing their observed intensity (Jokipii & Levy, 1977).

Drift Effects and Field Polarity:- Cosmic ray modulation is also influenced by large-scale drift patterns that depend on the polarity of the solar magnetic field, which reverses approximately every 11 years at solar maximum (Potgieter et al., 2014). During periods of positive polarity (when the field points outward in the northern solar hemisphere), positively charged cosmic rays preferentially drift inward over the solar poles and outward along the heliospheric current sheet. This polarity reverses during negative field configurations. Solar flares and their associated CMEs contribute to the complexity of the heliospheric current sheet, increasing its tilt and waviness, which in turn affects drift patterns and enhances modulation (Smith & Thomas, 1986). The modification of drift patterns by flare-induced disturbances is particularly significant for cosmic rays in the energy range of 1-10 GeV, which are most sensitive to drift effects (Strauss & Potgieter, 2010). During solar maximum, when flare frequency peaks, the enhanced turbulence and distorted current sheet geometry reduce the efficiency of drift transport, contributing to the observed anti-correlation between solar activity and cosmic ray intensity.

Turbulence and Diffusion:- Solar flares generate magnetohydrodynamic (MHD) turbulence that cascades through the heliosphere, affecting cosmic ray diffusion coefficients (Bieber et al., 1994). The turbulent magnetic field fluctuations cause cosmic ray particles to undergo pitch-angle scattering, which randomizes their trajectories and reduces their mean free path. The diffusion tensor, which characterizes cosmic ray transport, becomes highly anisotropic in the presence of flare-enhanced turbulence, with parallel diffusion (along field lines) being suppressed relative to quiet-time conditions (Shalchi, 2009). Theoretical models of cosmic ray propagation incorporate these effects through the cosmic ray transport equation, which includes terms for convection, diffusion, adiabatic energy changes, and drift (Gleeson & Axford, 1968). The modulation parameter φ, which quantifies the overall reduction in cosmic ray intensity, increases during periods of enhanced solar activity, with solar flares contributing to this increase both through individual events and through their cumulative effect on heliospheric conditions (Usoskin et al., 2005).

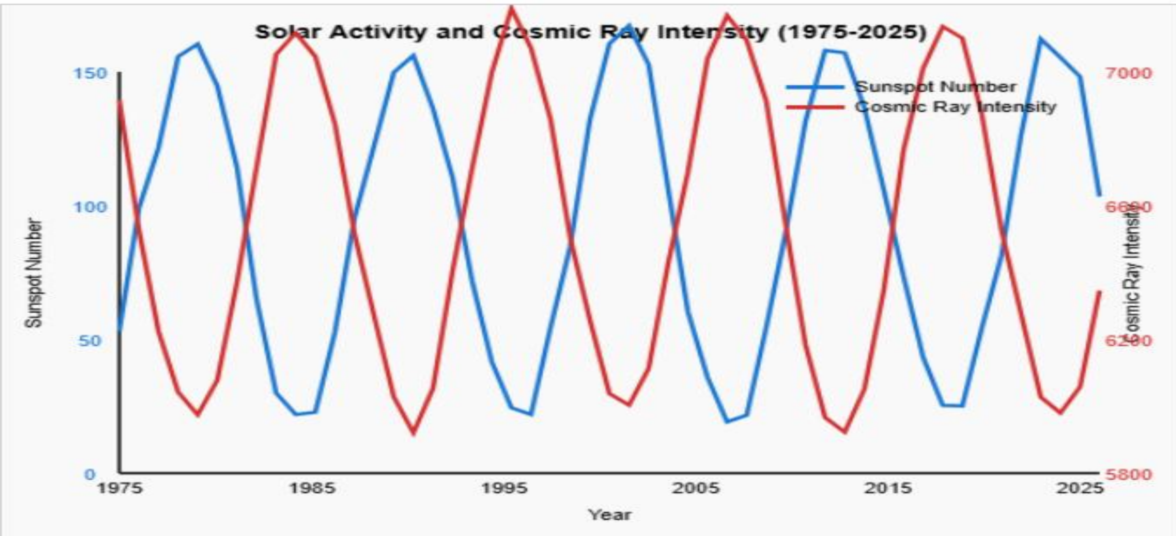

Figure 1: Solar cycle variation showing the inverse relationship between sunspot number (blue line, left axis) and cosmic ray intensity (red line, right axis) from 1975 to 2025. Data illustrates the ~11-year modulation cycle, with cosmic ray minima corresponding to solar activity maxima. The shaded regions indicate periods of enhanced solar flare activity during solar cycles 21-24.

Observational Evidence:- Multi-Decade Cosmic Ray Measurements - Ground-based neutron monitor networks have provided continuous cosmic ray measurements since the 1950s, offering a comprehensive dataset for studying long-term modulation patterns (Simpson, 2000). Analysis of these records reveals a clear anti-correlation between solar activity indices (such as sunspot number or solar radio flux at 10.7 cm) and cosmic ray intensity, with cosmic ray flux typically reduced by 20-30% during solar maximum compared to solar minimum (Moraal, 2013). This modulation exhibits hysteresis effects, where cosmic ray recovery lags behind the decline in solar activity, suggesting the persistence of modulation structures in the outer heliosphere (Alanko-Huotari et al., 2007). Space-based instruments, including those aboard the ACE, SOHO, and Voyager spacecraft, have complemented ground-based observations by providing direct measurements of cosmic ray spectra and composition at various heliospheric locations (Stone et al., 2013). These measurements confirm that modulation is energy-dependent, with lower-energy cosmic rays experiencing greater percentage reductions during active periods. The Voyager 1 spacecraft, which crossed the heliopause into interstellar space in 2012, has provided unprecedented data on the difference between modulated and unmodulated cosmic ray spectra, enabling validation of heliospheric transport models (Cummings et al., 2016).

Correlation Studies:- Statistical analyses have established correlations between solar flare occurrence rates and cosmic ray modulation strength. Gil & Mursula (2017) demonstrated that the cumulative X-ray flux from solar flares, integrated over periods of several months, shows significant correlation with cosmic ray decreases measured by neutron monitors. This correlation is strongest during the ascending and maximum phases of the solar cycle, when both flare frequency and the background level of heliospheric turbulence are elevated. Furthermore, studies of major solar energetic particle (SEP) events, which are often associated with large solar flares, have revealed that the heliospheric disturbances created by these events can persist for weeks to months after the initial flare (Richardson & Cane, 2010). During solar cycle 23 (1996-2008), approximately 60% of major Forbush decreases were associated with fast CMEs originating from flare-productive active regions, suggesting a strong physical link between flare activity and cosmic ray modulation (Belov et al., 2014).

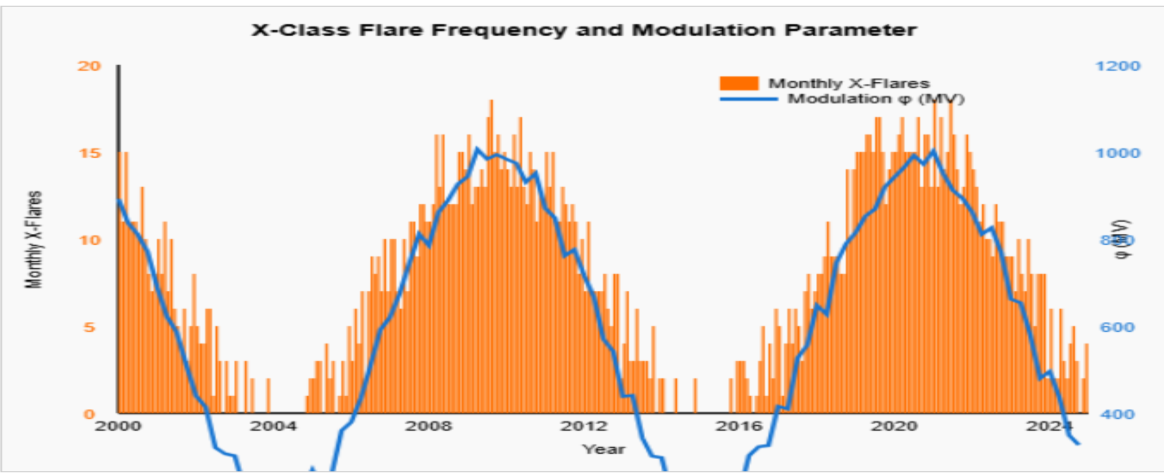

Figure 2: Correlation between monthly X-class solar flare frequency (bars) and cosmic ray modulation parameter φ (line) from 2000 to 2024. The graph demonstrates how periods of enhanced flare activity contribute to increased cosmic ray modulation, particularly during solar cycle 23 and 24 maxima (approximately 2001-2002 and 2014-2015).

Modeling and Theoretical Framework:- Transport Equations - The transport of cosmic rays through the heliosphere is described by the Parker equation, a Fokker-Planck type equation that incorporates the dominant physical processes (Parker, 1965). In its most general form, this equation can be written as:

$$\partial f/\partial t + (V + \langle v_d \rangle)\cdot\nabla f - \nabla\cdot(K\cdot\nabla f) + (1/3)(\nabla\cdot V)(\partial f/\partial \ln P) = Q$$

where f is the cosmic ray distribution function, V is the solar wind velocity, v_d is the drift velocity, K is the diffusion tensor, P is the cosmic ray momentum, and Q represents sources and sinks. Solar flares modify this equation primarily through their effects on the diffusion tensor K and the drift velocity v_d, both of which depend on the magnetic field configuration and turbulence level (Potgieter, 2013).

Numerical solutions of this transport equation, using inputs derived from solar wind and magnetic field observations, successfully reproduce the observed cosmic ray modulation patterns. Modern computational models, such as those developed by Strauss et al. (2012), incorporate realistic three-dimensional magnetic field geometries and time-dependent boundary conditions that account for the influence of transient solar events, including flares and CMEs.

Modulation Parameter Evolution:- The modulation parameter φ, measured in units of MV (megavolts), provides a useful single-number characterization of the overall modulation state. This parameter can be extracted from cosmic ray measurements by comparing observed spectra with the local interstellar spectrum (LIS). Values of φ typically range from ~400 MV during solar minimum to ~1200 MV during solar maximum for cosmic rays measured at Earth (Herbst et al., 2010).

Usoskin et al. (2011) developed a reconstruction of φ extending back several centuries using cosmogenic isotope records (^{10}Be and ^{14}C produced by cosmic rays in Earth's atmosphere). This long-term reconstruction reveals that periods of enhanced solar activity, characterized by high flare rates inferred from sunspot observations, consistently correspond to elevated modulation parameters. The relationship is not instantaneous; rather, there exists a lag of several months between peak flare activity and maximum cosmic ray suppression, reflecting the time required for flare-induced disturbances to propagate through the heliosphere and establish large-scale modulation structures.

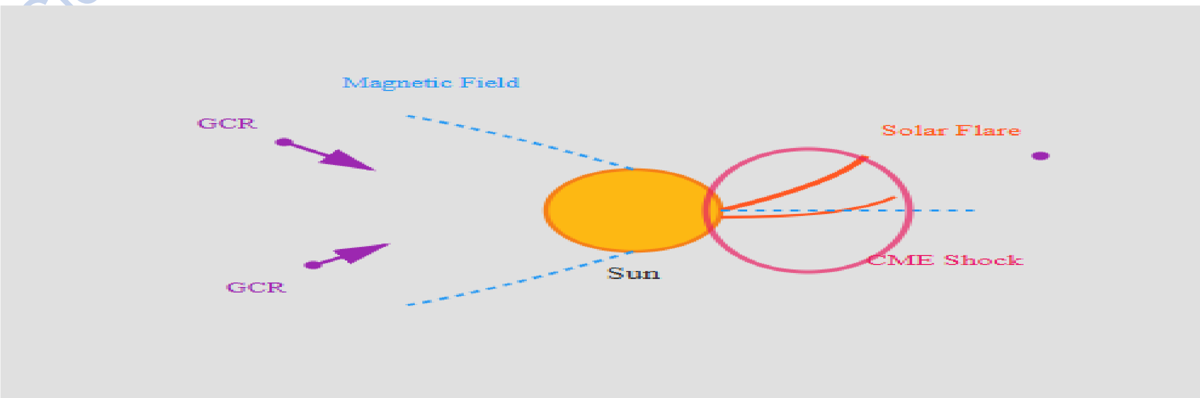

Figure 3: Schematic illustration of cosmic ray (GCR) modulation by solar flare-generated disturbances. The diagram shows a solar flare ejecting a coronal mass ejection (CME) with an associated shock front. The disrupted magnetic field lines and shock structure scatter and deflect incoming galactic cosmic rays, reducing their intensity in the inner heliosphere.

5. Long-Term Effects and Persistence

5.1 Heliospheric Memory :- One of the most intriguing aspects of solar flare contribution to cosmic ray modulation is the concept of "heliospheric memory"—the persistence of modulation effects long after individual flare events have occurred (Le Roux & Fichtner, 1997). Because the solar wind travels at finite velocity (typically 400-500 km/s), disturbances created by solar flares during solar maximum can take 1-2 years to propagate to the outer heliosphere (~100 AU). These disturbances continue to affect cosmic ray transport even as solar activity begins to decline.

This memory effect is particularly evident in the asymmetric shape of cosmic ray intensity variations over the solar cycle. Cosmic ray intensity does not simply mirror solar activity indices; instead, the recovery of cosmic ray flux during the declining phase of the solar cycle is typically slower than the decrease during the rising phase (Alanko-Huotari et al., 2007). This asymmetry can be attributed to the cumulative build-up of flare-generated turbulence and magnetic structures in the outer heliosphere, which dissipate slowly over timescales of years.

5.2 Cumulative vs. Individual Event Effects:- While individual large solar flares can produce dramatic short-term effects on cosmic ray intensity—Forbush decreases of 10-20% lasting several days—the long-term modulation is dominated by the cumulative effects of numerous smaller and moderate events (Cane, 2000). During solar maximum, when X-class and M-class flares may occur several times per week, the heliosphere never fully recovers to quiet-time conditions. Instead, a persistent state of enhanced turbulence and magnetic complexity is maintained, leading to sustained cosmic ray suppression.

Statistical analyses by Belov (2009) indicate that approximately 70% of the long-term cosmic ray intensity variation can be explained by the cumulative effects of recurrent high-speed solar wind streams and CMEs associated with flare-productive active regions, rather than by individual major events. This finding underscores the importance of considering the total integrated flare activity over months to years when assessing long-term modulation effects.

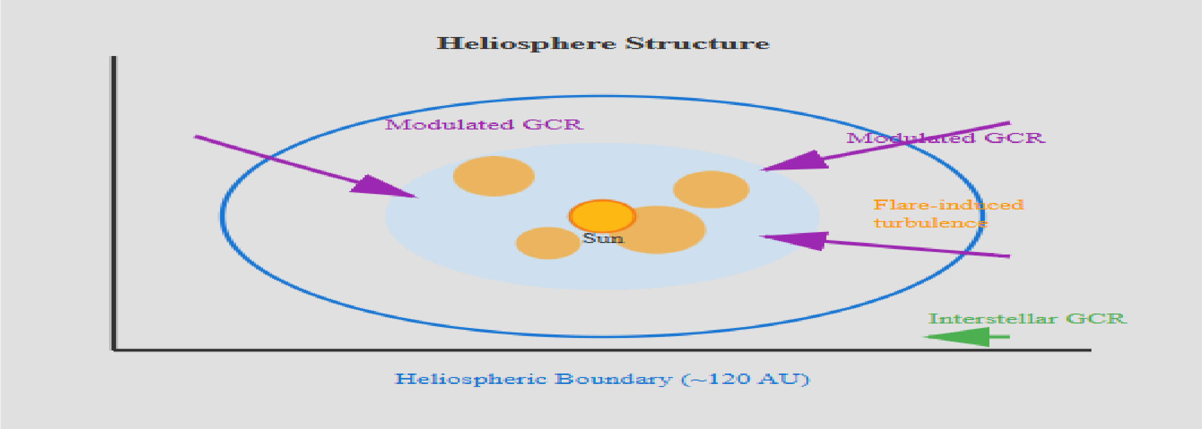

Figure 4: Cross-sectional view of the heliosphere showing the distribution of flare-induced turbulent regions (orange circles) that persist in the inner heliosphere during periods of high solar activity. Galactic cosmic rays (purple arrows) entering from interstellar space are scattered and deflected by these turbulent magnetic structures, resulting in reduced intensity in the inner heliosphere compared to unmodulated interstellar cosmic rays (green arrow).

6. Implications and Applications

6.1 Space Weather and Radiation Hazards:- Understanding the long-term modulation of cosmic rays by solar flares has direct practical applications for space exploration and satellite operations. During solar minimum, when cosmic ray flux is at maximum, astronauts and spacecraft electronics face increased radiation exposure (Cucinotta et al., 2010). Conversely, during solar maximum, although cosmic ray flux is reduced, the increased frequency of solar flares and SEP events presents different but equally significant radiation hazards. Mission planners must balance these competing risks when scheduling long-duration space missions, particularly those extending beyond low Earth orbit where Earth's magnetic field provides minimal protection (Hassler et al., 2014).

The Mars Science Laboratory's Radiation Assessment Detector (RAD) instrument has provided critical data on the radiation environment during the cruise phase to Mars and on the Martian surface (Zeitlin et al., 2013). These measurements, conducted during the declining phase of solar cycle 24, confirm that cosmic ray dose rates are strongly modulated by solar activity and that accurate predictions require understanding both the average solar modulation state and the contribution of individual solar events.

6.2 Climate Connections:- While controversial, potential links between cosmic rays, cloud formation, and climate have been proposed through the mechanism of ion-induced nucleation (Svensmark & Friis-Christensen, 1997). According to this hypothesis, cosmic rays entering Earth's atmosphere create ionization that could influence cloud microphysics, potentially providing a solar-terrestrial climate connection mediated by cosmic ray modulation. Recent experiments at CERN (CLOUD experiment) have demonstrated that ions can indeed enhance nucleation rates under certain atmospheric conditions, though the magnitude of the effect and its climate significance remain subjects of ongoing research (Kirkby et al., 2011).

If such connections exist, the long-term modulation of cosmic rays by solar activity, including the contribution from solar flares, could represent an additional solar influence on climate beyond direct variations in solar irradiance. However, current evidence suggests that any such effect is likely small compared to anthropogenic climate forcing (Gray et al., 2010).

7. Recent Developments and Future Directions

7.1 Solar Cycle 24 and 25 Observations:- Solar cycle 24 (2008-2019) was notably weak compared to previous cycles, with reduced sunspot numbers and lower flare rates (Hathaway, 2015). Correspondingly, cosmic ray modulation during cycle 24 was less pronounced than during cycles 22 and 23, with neutron monitor count rates during the cycle 24 minimum (2019-2020) reaching the highest levels observed in the space age (Usoskin et al., 2020). This natural experiment has provided valuable data for validating modulation models and confirming the direct relationship between solar activity levels and cosmic ray intensity.

Solar cycle 25, which began in late 2019, has shown signs of being moderately stronger than cycle 24, with flare activity increasing as expected during the ascending phase. The current solar maximum (predicted for 2025-2026) offers an opportunity to test whether modulation models correctly predict cosmic ray suppression based on observed flare rates and other solar activity indices. Preliminary observations from the Parker Solar Probe, which is making unprecedented close approaches to the Sun, are providing new insights into the near-Sun magnetic field structure and the initial propagation of flare-generated disturbances (Fox et al., 2016).

7.2 Advanced Modeling Techniques:- Modern computational capabilities have enabled the development of sophisticated three-dimensional, time-dependent models of cosmic ray transport that incorporate realistic representations of the heliospheric magnetic field and turbulence (Strauss et al., 2012). These models now routinely assimilate solar wind and magnetic field measurements from multiple spacecraft, including ACE, STEREO, and the Parker Solar Probe, to create data-driven simulations of cosmic ray propagation.

Machine learning approaches are beginning to be applied to predict cosmic ray modulation based on solar activity indicators, potentially improving forecasting capabilities for space weather applications (Engelbrecht & Strauss, 2018). These techniques could enable more accurate predictions of radiation environments for planned space missions by learning complex patterns in the relationship between flare activity and cosmic ray response.

8. Conclusions:- Solar flares play a significant role in the long-term modulation of galactic cosmic rays through multiple interconnected mechanisms. Individual large flares produce transient disturbances that reduce cosmic ray intensity over periods of days to weeks, while the cumulative effect of frequent flare activity during solar maximum establishes persistent turbulent conditions in the heliosphere that maintain cosmic ray suppression over timescales of years. The primary physical mechanisms include the generation of large-scale magnetic irregularities through CMEs, enhancement of MHD turbulence that reduces cosmic ray mean free paths, and distortion of the heliospheric current sheet that affects drift patterns.

Observational evidence from six decades of cosmic ray measurements clearly demonstrates an anti-correlation between solar activity and cosmic ray intensity, with modulation amplitudes of 20-30% over the 11-year solar cycle. Statistical analyses confirm that flare occurrence rates, particularly for X-class and M-class events, correlate significantly with cosmic ray modulation strength, especially during the ascending and maximum phases of the solar cycle.

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