

Florida: Record floods kill two and devastate Panhandle region

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A massive and historic storm system brought floods and torrential rain to Florida's panhandle and sections of southern Alabama on Tuesday and Wednesday. At least two people have directly died from the floods, meanwhile hundreds have been evacuated.

Local authorities are struggling to clean up the flood, which destroyed regional infrastructure and thousands of homes and cars. In addition, the storm system, which is responsible for 38 deaths due to tornadoes in other parts of the South, also caused a gas explosion which left two more dead and hundreds injured.

The storm is considered to be far worse than Hurricane Ivan, which seriously damaged the area in 2004. From Tuesday to Wednesday, in a 24-hour period, Florida's "Panhandle" received between 15 and 20 inches of rain. The rain dropped by the storm was almost half of the region's average annual precipitation.

Waters surged and brought flash flooding throughout the area. Thousands of residents left their homes to seek shelter from the rising water. Hundreds of residents had to be rescued either by neighbors, church groups, or the local authorities.

A police captain told NPR that he and a team had rescued a family from a trailer where they were trapped. Authorities had received a call before midnight, Tuesday, but could not get to the family until eight hours later on Wednesday. By that time the rains had gotten so high that the water was only two feet below the roof of the trailer. A firefighter rescued the family by cutting a hole through the roof with an axe.

Authorities received hundreds of 911 calls for help, mainly residents needing to be rescued from their homes. Two pastors set up a makeshift command post at their church and went out in their trucks trying to find people needing help. They rescued 14 families,

many of whom had to be taken off balconies and rooftops. The *New York Times* quoted Mark Hindsman, one of the pastors, as saying his biggest concern was getting electrocuted by live power lines that had been downed.

At least 50,000 people were without electricity on Wednesday. On Thursday morning, 24,000 customers of Gulf Power remained without electricity. Another power company, Gulf Coast Electric Cooperative, said it was trying to restore power to about 1,000 consumers.

Roads in the area, as well as highways, have been severely damaged. Over 30 major roads have been shut down, awaiting repairs. One picture on the Internet shows a huge section of a scenic highway that was entirely swept away, with several cars piled up in the massive pit that was left.

At a news conference on Wednesday, Brad Monroe, deputy chief of Florida's Bay County emergency services, stated that the threat was far from over. "The situation may continue for the next two or three days... We have a high percentage of rain [on Thursday] and also Friday, so our situation could be more complex than it is right now."

Twenty-six counties are in a state of emergency and rescue efforts are underway to reach people who are still trapped by the floods. In the city of Pensacola officials received 300 or so emergency rescue calls. Only 201 of these calls, at the time of writing, have been attended to.

Various county and local officials expressed concern about not having the proper resources to deal with the emergency. The Walton County Sheriff, Mike Adkinson, told *Northwest Florida Daily News*, "I'm gathering the wood to build an ark." Bay County Sheriff Frank McKeithen told the *News Herald*, "I can

tell you there are more overflowing ditches than there are county personnel and deputies out there working.” He continued, “This is something we can’t control... If you don’t have to go anywhere, don’t go anywhere.”

The true extent of the damage is unclear. The Pensacola metropolitan area is populated by about a half million people. Based on initial reports, it seems like thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people’s homes have been severely damaged. Many people have had their possessions ruined. Pictures on the Internet and from local news agencies show cars wrecked, overturned and flooded.

The damage in the area is being compared to the aftermath of a hurricane. The flooding was far worse than Hurricane Ivan, which in total caused about \$18 billion worth of damage. Repair cost estimates and timeframes have yet to be calculated. Bill Pearson, spokesman for Escambia County, Florida, told the *New York Times*, “We definitely have roads that are impassible and will take a significant amount of time and cost to repair.” According to the *Times* he anticipated an “extensive recovery process.”

While extreme floods cannot be squarely blamed on global warming, global warming is thought to have already increased their frequency throughout the low-lying areas of the world. According to the National Wildlife Foundation, “Recent decades have brought more heavy summer rainfall events along with increased likelihood of devastating floods.” In the past year alone there have been record floods in Australia, the UK, Indonesia and Brazil.



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