

Jacksonville area staggered by flooding, power outages from Hurricane Irma

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Across the city of Jacksonville and the surrounding counties in northeast Florida, residents this week struggled to adapt to the destruction brought by Hurricane Irma. Widespread power outages, flood-damaged homes and businesses and the uncertain prospects of recovery combined with the oppressive late-summer heat to create an atmosphere of dread for the hundreds of thousands affected.

The storm knocked out power for 60 percent of the city, some 288,000 homes, according to the Jacksonville Electrical Authority (JEA), the utility company that provides power for the region. As of Thursday 66,000 remained without electricity.

The JEA release estimates that 1.5 million gallons of raw sewage had been released into various rivers and creeks throughout the area due to power losses at pump stations during the storm, a number that is sure to rise. In the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew last October, 7 million gallons of sewage spilled into area waterways.

In a press release Thursday, the company stated that 33 different pump stations went offline at various points during the storm. The company also stated that a major disaster was averted when eight JEA employees manually pumped fuel to keep a wastewater treatment center in the Mandarin neighborhood operational after its backup generator failed during the worst of the storm.

Throughout the region, many of the worst-hit areas were along the various creeks and smaller rivers that are tributaries of the St. Johns River, which flows through Jacksonville. Along the Trout and Ribault rivers in northwest Jacksonville, fallen trees and waist-high water destroyed many homes and businesses and left residents without power.

Along the Black Creek in neighboring Clay County, dozens of homes were either destroyed or suffered

major damage when the water crested at a record 28.5 feet. Approximately 300 residents along the Black Creek were evacuated by boat in the following days. Throughout Clay County, there are an estimated 37,500 homes without power.

In the Jacksonville beaches communities, which had also been hard hit by Hurricane Matthew last year, ocean waters flooded thousands of homes. The damage at the beaches and throughout northeast Florida was aggravated by a powerful nor'easter storm that inundated the area with heavy rains in advance of the hurricane.

Within Jacksonville, major flooding has damaged low-lying areas throughout the city, with the flood waters subsiding by Wednesday. In downtown Jacksonville, which experienced its worst flooding in recorded history, work crews labored to clean up the massive amounts of sludge and debris that the flooding brought ashore. Many businesses were damaged by the heavy winds, with broken windows and downed power lines throughout the area. Some of the largest employers, such as EverBank, CSX, and Wells Fargo, avoided serious damage and had already resumed operations.

Across the river in the low-lying San Marco area, where flooding had reached up to four feet, hundreds of homes and small businesses were destroyed. In the Riverside area adjacent to downtown, where flood waters had extended four blocks from the river and many residents were evacuated by boat, dozens of power company and landscaping crews worked to clean up debris and restore electricity.

In the Broadview Towers condominium building along the river, dozens of residents, many of them elderly, were trapped inside the 14-story building when flood waters covered the first floor and knocked out the building's power, including its elevators and air

conditioning. Restoring power took on a newfound urgency after it was revealed on Wednesday that eight residents of a Hollywood, Florida, nursing home died from the extreme heat caused by a lack of air conditioning.

Outside the city, the surrounding counties that make up the greater Jacksonville area were also hard hit. South of Jacksonville in St. Johns County, damage from the storm surge was compounded by multiple tornadoes that tore the roofs off of many homes. In St. Augustine, which had been hard hit by Hurricane Matthew last year, flood waters covered the historic downtown and spread out into surrounding areas. In Hastings, a rural community in St. Johns County, sections of the town were under as much as eight feet of water. Throughout the county, there are an estimated 40,000 homes still without power.

To the north of Jacksonville, in Nassau County, hundreds of homes were damaged by the hurricane and from multiple tornadoes that touched down in the region. More than 20,000 homes lost power. As of Thursday, over 10,000 still had no electricity. Dozens of roads were made impassable from flood water and fallen trees, and the Fernandina Beach municipal airport was closed until further notice. County officials report that a citizen in one of the cities shelters had died during the storm.

In tiny Baker County, along the border with Georgia, It was reported that 97 percent of residents lost power.

Throughout Northeast Florida, thousands of residents will suffer from not only the immediate damage caused by the storm but also the loss of income from being unable to work in the aftermath. Thousands of workers will be unemployed due to businesses that will be closed due to lack of electricity and flood damage. Thousands more will be unable to work due to damaged cars, blocked roads, and bridges, and the necessity to provide child care for the region's thousands of students while the public school system is shut down.



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