

“Monster” Hurricane Florence approaches South Carolina

Ed Hightower
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Hurricane Florence, a massive category three storm with winds as high as 140 miles per hour, is currently projected to make landfall just south of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina early Friday morning. Forecast models predict that the storm will then slowly move west, dumping up to 40 inches of rain on some parts of North and South Carolina as it approaches the Appalachian Mountains.

Portions of Georgia and Virginia can also expect sustained high winds of up to 35 miles per hour and 15-20 inches of rain. A segment of the Atlantic coastline stretching from the Hampton Roads region of Virginia to Jacksonville, Florida faces days of flooding from heavy rains and storm surges, a term that describes sea water pushed toward land by a hurricane’s counter-clockwise rotation. Some areas in Florence’s path will see the storm surge reach a height of 13 feet.

The storm is between 200 and 250 miles wide. An airplane from the National Hurricane Center measured 83-foot-high waves near the eye of Florence. By all meteorological accounts, the storm is incredibly dangerous.

The governors of North and South Carolina and Virginia have all declared states of emergency, issuing well-publicized warnings about the severity of the hurricane and the need to evacuate coastal areas immediately. As of this writing, some 1.7 million people are under a state advisory to leave their homes.

Virginia governor Ralph Northam issued a mandatory evacuation order for the most flood-prone neighborhoods in the cities of Norfolk, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, Hampton and Newport News. Residents in the mandatory evacuation zones will not receive state assistance in their efforts to find shelter. The mandatory evacuation order merely means that

emergency service providers will not respond to calls from these areas, and residents unable to flee to safety will be left to fend for themselves.

On Ocracoke island on North Carolina’s Outer Banks, the last ferry to the mainland left Wednesday morning. The Ferry Division reported that it transported over 1,500 people from the island as Florence approached.

A press contact at the North Carolina Department of Emergency Management (NCDEM) told this reporter that he had no figures on how many people have fled the region or how many remain in the storm’s path. Evacuation orders typically come at the county level, but Governor Roy Cooper issued a mandatory evacuation order for most of the Outer Banks, as North Carolina’s barrier islands are known.

It was likewise up to the county-level agencies to decide how, and whether, to help people unable to evacuate on their own. No buses were being mobilized for this purpose, and it was not clear if any state vehicles would be used to take residents to safety.

At of this writing, several coastal counties in Florence’s possible path—Currituck, Carteret, Onslow, New Hanover and Brunswick—do not fall under a mandatory evacuation order. The NCDEM employee was not sure of the state’s definition of mandatory evacuation.

South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster told a press conference Wednesday that 300,000 people had already evacuated from the state’s coastal counties, far short of the 1 million who were ordered to leave when McMaster declared a state of emergency on Tuesday. State officials do not plan to evacuate the 934 inmates at Ridgeland Correctional Institution in the low-lying county of Jasper. One inmate died at this facility when Hurricane Matthew struck the state in 2016. Likewise,

the 651 inmates at MacDougall Correctional Institution in Dorchester County will not be transported inland, even though the county is under mandatory evacuation.

A major regional energy firm warned that up to 75 percent of its 4 million customers in North and South Carolina could lose power during Florence. Area residents scrambled to purchase food, water, electrical generators and other necessities throughout the week. Schools and businesses have closed.

The Navy, Air Force and Army have been moving ships and aircraft out of the region all week. Thousands of Marines and their families evacuated from Camp Lejeune.

Many residents and tourists in the area faced flight cancellations and packed roadways as they attempted to leave. Michelle Stober of Cary, North Carolina told *The Times of India* that she drove around for an hour Tuesday morning looking for gasoline. “Everyone was sold out,” she said.

“This is not going to be a glancing blow. This is going to be a Mike Tyson punch to the Carolina coast,” said Jeff Byard, the associate administrator for the Office of Response and Recovery in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). By midday Wednesday, Byard was attempting to reassure reporters that a \$9.8 million transfer of funds from FEMA to the border patrol would not affect the Trump administration’s response to Hurricane Florence.

Aside from the immediate dangers associated with flying debris, collapsing structures and drowning, Florence presents considerable risk of severe environmental contamination. Pits filled with industrial wastes, including coal ash; sewage ponds filled with livestock waste; and waste from six nuclear power plants stand in Florence’s projected path. The combination of these latent environmental factors, the severity of the storm itself, and the social factors of poor infrastructure and government indifference and incompetence makes the potential consequences of Hurricane Florence almost impossible to calculate.

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