

Hurricane Michael leaves trail of death and destruction in southeastern US

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As the remnants of Hurricane Michael push out to sea, images of the catastrophic destruction are only beginning to appear. Six people are confirmed dead as of late Thursday, spanning Florida, Georgia and North Carolina. The death toll will almost certainly rise as emergency personnel gain access to more communities devastated by the storm.

The eye of Michael made landfall Wednesday near Mexico Beach, Florida as a category four hurricane with top sustained wind speeds of 155 miles per hour. The National Hurricane center estimated a peak storm surge of nine to 14 feet along the Florida coast. Michael was the first recorded category four storm to hit the Florida Panhandle and the third most intense, measured by minimum pressure in the eye, of any hurricane to make landfall in the continental United States.

Entire towns throughout the region have been wiped out, with homes, schools, shopping centers and other structures reduced to rubble. Drone footage from Mexico Beach shows a sea of debris, houses lifted off their foundations, torn apart, leaving only the concrete slabs behind.

Emergency crews continued to search for victims, though many roads remain closed from downed trees, power lines and collapsed roadbeds. Much of Interstate 10, the region's main expressway, was closed Thursday for debris removal. The coastal route, US-98, and numerous other roads inland were impassible.

Power is out for more than one million people across Florida, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia. In the hardest hit areas, utilities warned that restoration will take weeks.

Approximately 375,000 people in Florida were warned to evacuate prior to the storm, but the state and national governments provided no significant resources for the mass evacuation. Left to fend for themselves,

many stayed behind.

Florida resident Aja Kemp explained to the Associated Press just prior to the storm why she was staying put. After spending over \$800 to flee Hurricane Irma last year, she said, "I just can't bring myself to spend that much money. We've got supplies to last us a week. Plenty of water. I made sure we've got clean clothes. We got everything tied down."

Officials also refused to evacuate institutional residents. At Chattahoochee's main mental hospital, the storm damage has cut off all land access to the facility. Officials were forced to begin air dropping supplies Thursday.

The Florida Panhandle, southern Alabama and Georgia are home to some of the country's highest poverty rates. Many do not have the means to evacuate even if they wanted to.

Much of the housing stock in the area consists of old structures not built to withstand major hurricane force winds. According to a review of census data by *USA Today*, about three quarters of the homes in the Florida Panhandle were built prior to 2000. In 2002, the state updated its building codes to limit the destruction from hurricanes like Andrew, which struck a decade earlier. Existing homes were not required to be updated, nor were any resources provided to assist homeowners in doing so.

A significant number of residences in the area are trailer homes, which are typically more vulnerable to high winds. In Liberty County, in the direct path of Michael, mobile homes make up nearly 45 percent of all residences.

The impact of the storm is only beginning to emerge. Many of the areas likely to be hit hardest are still cut off from help.



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