

Hurricane Michael brings death, devastation to US Southeast

Kate Randall
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Hurricane Michael moved off the US Atlantic coast Thursday night as a post-tropical cyclone, leaving behind a trail of death and destruction from Florida to Virginia. As of Friday afternoon the death toll stood at 13. That number is expected to rise as authorities begin the grim job of combing through the wreckage left behind by the storm. More than a million people remain without electricity across seven states.

Michael made landfall Wednesday in the Florida Panhandle as a Category 4 hurricane, charging ashore with 155 miles per hour winds and a storm surge as high as 13 feet. The storm, the strongest on record to hit the area and the third strongest to hit the continental US in recorded history, left in its wake crushed and flooded homes and residents reeling from the loss of their homes and possessions.

Hardest hit was Bay County, Florida and the city of Mexico Beach. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) personnel were assessing the damage in the small seaside town on Friday. Nearby Panama City was also badly hit.

Mexico Beach, known for its pristine beaches, fishing and boating, resembles a war zone, with the vast majority of its structures demolished. Cars, boats, furniture and debris were lifted by the winds and storm surge and slammed into houses far from their original locations. The fire department said that 95 percent of structures were uninhabitable. There is no power and little food.

FEMA head Brock Long told reporters in Washington that those who had evacuated the Panhandle coast should not return to their homes. "It's still not safe to return, particularly to Bay County, Florida," he said. "There is no infrastructure there to support you and quite honestly it's a dangerous area to go back into." He said it would be "a long time before

they're actually able to go back and return to those places because it was heavily damaged."

People who had remained in Mexico Beach to ride out the storm, along with those who did return, ventured out Thursday and Friday to assess the damage. The vast majority found that little remained of their homes. Dawn Vickers, who stayed in the city during the storm, had been taking shelter in one of the few condos still standing, invited in by a local resident. Her house and vehicles were demolished. She told CNN, "This has been the worst nightmare I've ever been through in my life."

Media outlets began referring to Mexico Beach as Michael's "ground zero." The city is largely cut off from the rest of the state, with roads blocked by debris and cell phone coverage mostly out. Residents borrowed reporters' satellite phones to contact loved ones. Scott Boutwell described to CNN how his walls collapsed and someone else's couch had been swept inside. "Our lives are gone here. All the stores, all the restaurants, everything," he said. "There's nothing left here anymore."

The city's Jinks Middle School was torn apart by Michael. In a bitter irony, the school had welcomed children displaced by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico last year.

Gadsden County in northwest Florida took a direct hit from Michael as it moved northward on Wednesday. The Sheriff's Office reported four deaths that were "in relation to or occurred during the storm," including one man who was killed when a tree crashed through the roof of his house.

In Georgia's Seminole County, on Florida's border, officials reported the death of an 11-year-old girl in a mobile home, killed when she was hit in the head by a metal carport tossed in the air by Michael's winds.

Georgia officials also reported severe damage to pecan, cotton, vegetable and peanut crops.

The rainfall from Michael as it churned north triggered flash floods in parts of Virginia and the Carolinas, areas still reeling in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence last month. North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper reported that first responders rescued nearly 100 people and evacuated many more due to the flash flooding threat. A 38-year-old man was killed Thursday afternoon in Iredell County when a tree fell on the vehicle he was driving.

Five hurricane-related deaths were confirmed Friday morning in Virginia. Four of the deaths occurred when people were swept away in floodwaters along roads. The fifth to die was a firefighter who was killed when a tractor-trailer hit him as he was trying to help with a crash along Interstate 295.

As in similar disasters, authorities are quick to chastise residents who don't heed evacuation orders, but they provide minimal assistance in helping them to do so. FEMA's Long said the storm posed a direct threat to people living on the coastlines who ignored warnings and evacuation orders, given the forecast severe winds and storm surge. "Very few people live to tell what it's like to experience storm surge," he said coldly.

The elderly and infirm face particular challenges in evacuating. Others are unable to find a shelter that will accept them with their pets. Low-income households often simply cannot afford the cost of evacuating. Those unable to evacuate often live in mobile homes and other substandard structures that are unable to withstand the fury of a hurricane, especially one with the power of Michael.

The FEMA website advises the public what to do in the face of a hurricane. First, people must "evacuate if told to do so." But state-provided transportation is not organized in the form of buses or trains. People are advised to keep their cars in good working order with a full gas tank. This assumes that people can afford to keep their cars in good shape and pay to fill their gas tanks, if they even own a car.

They are also urged to stock their "emergency preparedness kits" with food and water sufficient for at least three days, along with medications, first aid supplies and cash. All of these things are a considerable expense and pose an economic burden for many

households in hurricane-prone areas. In the wake of disasters, government agencies rely on charities like the Red Cross and Salvation Army and the kindness of neighbors and bonds of communities to take the place of a systematic government response.

Hurricane Michael came ashore with limited notice from the National Hurricane Center, which issued its first public advisory on Saturday, October 6. It was not even a named storm then, but simply called "Potential Tropical Cyclone Fourteen," which the center noted was "getting better organized over the northwestern Caribbean Sea." By Monday it had a name; on Wednesday it was pummeling the Florida Panhandle.

A study this year in *Geophysical Research Letters* said that since 1986 the intensification of storms like Michael has increased by about 13 miles per hour. In 2015, research at Florida State University on how ocean temperatures affect hurricane intensity in the North Atlantic found that intensification increases by 16 percent for every 1.8 degree increase in average sea-surface temperatures.

According to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), human-caused greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are creating an energy imbalance with more than 90 percent of the remaining heat trapped by the gases going into the oceans. While there might not be an increased number of storms, most studies show storms getting stronger, producing more rain, and packing a bigger storm surge.

The strength and speed of Hurricane Michael may be an indication of the effect of this climate change on storms. Such warnings will fall on the deaf ears of global warming denier-in-chief Donald Trump. This is the same president who disputed official Puerto Rican figures that said 2,975 died as a result of Hurricane Maria, and claimed that his administration had done a "fantastic job" responding to the storm.



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