

Death toll from Hurricane Michael continues to climb

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The death toll from Hurricane Michael rose to 18 on Sunday as emergency crews continued to sift through the wreckage in search of survivors. State officials have said that the possibility of rescuing more people trapped by the storm grew less and less likely as the days pass and that the focus of operations had shifted to recovering the dead.

“We’re going into recovery mode, unfortunately,” Panama City fire chief Alex Baird told Reuters, “At sunrise, we’ll start again on our search. We hope that we’ll find more survivors, but it’s more and more doubtful.”

There have been casualties related to the storm so far in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Florida Governor Rick Scott told the media that the state had deployed 300 ambulances to the affected area, and 1,700 rescue workers. They are using both cadaver dogs as well as unmanned drones to locate victims of the storm, and heavy construction equipment to dig through the rubble.

Electricity and telephone service is down throughout the affected area, and it could be weeks or months until service is fully restored. Much of the worst-hit area is in remote, rural parts of the state, and emergency responders are still trying to account for all those impacted by the storm. State officials have reported that there at least 250,000 residents who have lost power.

Survivors continued to suffer from a lack of food, fresh water, and medicine. On Saturday, Reuters reported that rescue crews in Panama City discovered a mother and daughter who had been trapped within a closet inside their mobile home since the storm hit. Both diabetics, the women were near death from a lack of insulin when they were found.

Many residents who had not evacuated were unprepared for the storm’s destructive winds and storm

surge. The region had never experienced a storm of this magnitude before, which grew from a category two storm into a category four storm in the course of a day, with sustained winds of up to 155 miles per hour.

In Bay County, where the storm first made landfall in the small town of Mexico Beach, residents were entirely cut off from the outside world initially. Aerial footage shows the entire city destroyed, save for a few homes. The storm surge there climbed as high as 14 feet. Surveying the area, the town’s former Mayor Tom Bailey told the *Los Angeles Times*, “I’m telling people, if you live on the south side of Highway 98, don’t bother to come back.”

Much of Mexico Beach’s emergency infrastructure was destroyed by the storm. Mark Bowen, the chief of emergency services in Bay County, told ABC News, “Fire stations were destroyed, police stations were destroyed, public safety agencies are only taking highest priority calls right now ... heart attacks, you know, major trauma ... An enormous amount of 911 calls are going unresponded to because we’ve got this priority to search and rescue. So it’s a terrible thing.”

In nearby Panama City, the storm winds did similar damage, growing so strong at one point that they overturned a cargo train.

At Tyndale Airforce base, which is located between Mexico Beach and Panama City and was evacuated in advance of the storm, Hurricane Michael did similar damage, wrecking the runway there and destroying airplane hangars and fighter jets.

The storm retained much of its strength as it moved inland, passing through Georgia as a category three hurricane, with wind speeds of 115 miles per hour. It is the first major hurricane to impact that part of the state since 1898. An 11-year-old girl was the only reported casualty in Georgia so far. She was killed when part of

a metal carport crashed into the mobile home she lived in with her parents and struck her in the head.

The storm also inflicted billions of dollars in agricultural damage in that state. The southwestern corner of Georgia is an important growing region for cotton, peanuts, pecans, and livestock. A reported two million chickens were killed, and billions of dollars in damage was done to pecan and cotton crops, which are currently in their harvest season. In addition to the immediate losses experienced by farmers, the damage to crops in Georgia, a major agricultural state, may cause prices to spike across the US.

In North Carolina, still recovering from the devastation brought by Hurricane Florence, Michael brought eight inches of rain. A Charlotte resident was killed when a tree fell on his car. Two more died when they hit a downed tree in their car. An estimated 500,000 residents have lost power in North Carolina, with an additional 90,000 in South Carolina.

The weakened storm remained deadly as far north as Virginia, where five people were killed, four of them from drowning. The storm knocked down thousands of trees and caused widespread flooding throughout that state. At least 520,000 people have lost power in Virginia, and rivers throughout the state are expected to continue flooding into next week.

The full extent of the storm's damage will continue to grow in the coming weeks. Hurricane Michael has now been assessed to be the third most powerful storm to impact the continental United States, exceeded only by Hurricane Camille in 1969 and the unnamed Labor Day storm of 1935.



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