

Major flooding inundates New Orleans as Tropical Storm Barry heads towards landfall

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Heavy rains from Tropical Storm Barry caused massive flooding in New Orleans, Louisiana on Wednesday morning and into the afternoon. Tornado warnings and flash flood warnings were issued in the city as residents dealt with flooded homes and vehicles.

As many as eight inches of rain fell in only three hours, causing flash floods that took many residents by surprise. However, the city is expected to receive between 10 and 20 inches of rain over the weekend as Barry, which is still in the Gulf of Mexico as of this writing, is projected to strengthen to a Category One hurricane before it makes landfall Saturday morning with wind speeds up to 95 miles per hour.

New Orleans Mayor Latoya Cantrell has issued a state of emergency, although she declined to call for mandatory evacuations, while President Donald Trump has issued a federal disaster declaration. A mandatory evacuation order has already been issued to residents of nearby Plaquemines Parish along the east bank of the Mississippi River.

On Wednesday, residents waited for drainage pumps to empty flooded streets, as cars floated down city roads and drivers swam to safety. Several restaurants and stores were forced to close as workers were stranded in their homes, unable to travel the dangerously flooded streets.

Drivers abandoning their vehicles were forced to wade through waist high floodwaters, potentially exposing themselves to a toxic slew of bacteria and chemicals usually contained in city floodwater. Hours-long traffic jams slowed travel through the city as flooded and abandoned vehicles littered city streets.

Affected neighborhoods included areas that do not normally experience flooding during rainstorms, including areas of the city that occupy higher grounds along the river. For example, residents could be seen on

Wednesday afternoon kayaking down Magazine street in Uptown. The famed French Quarter entertainment district, which did not flood even during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, was inundated with water on Wednesday afternoon.

“I don’t ever remember the Irish Channel really getting flooded like this before,” one retail employee told Nola.com.

Barry is expected to be the first hurricane of the season, and an unusually strong one this early in the year. Affected cities in the region will include not only New Orleans, but inland cities such as Baton Rouge and Shreveport. Towns in Mississippi and Alabama are also bracing for damage from the storm.

Although the storm is expected to be only tropical storm strength when it makes landfall, a confluence of heavy rains, storm surges and an already-swollen Mississippi River makes this storm potentially deadly. Alex Kolker, a professor at the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium, wrote on Twitter, “In Louisiana we can flood three ways. We can flood from water flowing down the Mississippi River, from local rainstorms, or from a storm surge from the Gulf. This week, we’ll have to deal with all three at once.”

Of particular concern is the danger that storm surges could cause the Mississippi River to top the lowest-lying levees which protect New Orleans. The river, which was already at the unusually high level of 16 feet, could be pushed up to 19 feet by storm surges, just barely under the 20-foot floodwalls protecting the city. The neighborhoods of Algiers and the Lower 9th Ward, as well as sections of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes, are at risk if the levees are overtopped.

This hurricane season is the second since the Army Corps of Engineers announced completion of its 11-year, \$14 billion project to update the levees after

Hurricane Katrina killed 1,800 and nearly destroyed the Crescent City in 2005. The Corps announced last year that this undertaking will be ultimately insufficient because the soft soils of Louisiana are causing levees and floodwalls to sink at a faster pace than previously expected.

Nearly 14 years after Katrina, flooding has become a semi-regular event in New Orleans. The past two years have seen no less than four major flooding events. Earlier this year, a drainage pipe that was over 100 years old burst, causing flooding and water contamination in heavily populated sections of the city.

New Orleans is prone to catastrophic flooding. Because of its unique bowl-shaped geography, with the center of the city lying below sea level between elevated strips along Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River, floodwaters which enter the city cannot be drained naturally and must be pumped out by an elaborate system of drainage pumps. The failure of these pumps during Katrina left standing floodwaters in more than 80 percent of the city for months.

No significant improvements have been made since Katrina to the city's drainage system, which is a century old and in a state of serious disrepair. A major flood in 2017 after a heavy rainstorm revealed a cover-up of the real state of the drainage system by Sewerage and Water Board (S&WB) officials and the former city administration of Mitch Landrieu.

While a S&WB spokesman said that 118 of the 120 available pumps were in operation on Wednesday, it remains to be seen whether this is true, as similar claims in 2017 were quickly exposed as lies. However, even when it is operating as designed, the drainage system is unable to cope with such heavy rainfall.

Officials have already called this the "wettest year on record" in the last 124 years. The Mississippi River has been swollen above record water marks after heavy rains drenched areas of the Midwest earlier this year and has been cresting to within four feet of flood walls in Louisiana since January of this year.

Reports released last year by climate experts reveal that due to global warming and climate change, more frequent and more intense flooding should be expected in the Southeast and Midwest regions of the United States and already these regions are seeing the effects.

Global sea levels have been rising steadily and record rainfalls have battered the region ever since the Katrina

disaster brought the issue to the forefront. Still, experts warn that the city's levees will not be high enough to withstand another massive hurricane event if they are not strengthened and raised to appropriate levels. The Army Corps requested another \$800 million from Congress last year in order to meet these requirements and upgrade other flood protections across the country.



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