

Hurricane Barry makes landfall in Louisiana as New Orleans avoids danger

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Hurricane Barry, the first hurricane of the year, made landfall in Louisiana on Saturday at 1 o'clock in the afternoon local time. The storm quickly weakened to a tropical storm after making landfall.

Flooding was reported along rivers in rural areas throughout the state, including Mandeville, a commuter town on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, and large swaths of southwestern Louisiana. The danger of flash floods prompted closure of several roads in Lafayette, southwest Louisiana's largest city and cultural center, as well as all roads in nearby New Iberia.

In Plaquemines Parish, storm surges overtopped levees along the Mississippi River, forcing a limited evacuation. A levee in Terrebonne Parish, located on the state's central coast, was overtopped, and flooding occurred along the Atchafalaya River in nearby Morgan City. Portions of Highway 1 were flooded out, cutting off the coastal towns of Port Fourchon and Grand Isle.

No fatalities have yet been reported. However, 12 residents had to be rescued from Isle de Jean Charles in Terrebonne Parish. Roughly 130,000 people lost power over the weekend.

Although the storm weakened to a tropical depression, officials have warned that the effects of the storm are still ongoing, with more rain expected through the end of the week. The National Hurricane Center stated that the danger still existed for "life-threatening" floods in the region. Yesterday, approximately 11 million people throughout the region remained under a flash flood watch.

As always, the storm demonstrated the grossly inadequate level of disaster preparedness and infrastructure in what is supposedly the richest country on earth. Even though the region, one of the wettest in the United States, is constantly prone to seasonal

flooding from the Mississippi River, heavy rainfall and hurricanes, few resources have been made available to mitigate these dangers. This is especially true in more remote rural areas, where drainage often consists of little more than ditches along the side of the road.

The remnants of the storm are expected to move up through Arkansas into the Midwest through the middle of the week. Arkansas already experienced record floods last month, and portions of the state are forecast to receive as many as 8 inches of rain.

However, the impact of the storm has proven to be much less than initially feared. Storm surges and rainfall have proven to be below most predictions. Crucially, the storm also passed further west than expected, almost entirely bypassing Baton Rouge and New Orleans, by far the state's largest cities, which received only light rainfall over the weekend.

However, if Barry had hit New Orleans with the force originally forecast, a confluence of factors would have created an unusually dangerous situation for a Category 1 hurricane. The 8 to 20 inches of rain originally predicted would have overwhelmed the city's aging drainage system, at the center of which is a system of 120 drainage pumps used to push water out of the low-lying city.

Only last week, a major rainstorm resulted in widespread floods throughout the city, including in higher elevation neighborhoods which rarely flood, like the French Quarter. This was only the latest in a series of floods after heavy rains over the past two years, which are becoming a semi-regular occurrence in the city.

A major factor has been the fact that large portions of the city's pumping system have been virtually inoperative. While officials with the Sewerage and Water Board (S&WB) insist that the city's pumps are

operating at near-full capacity, flooding in 2017 exposed a coverup by officials of the real state of the system, which was barely functioning. At one point, only one out of the five turbine generators used to power the pumps were operating, leaving only enough power for 38 out of 58 pumps in the most heavily populated core of the city.

Flooding from rainfall would have combined with the more serious threat of flooding from the Mississippi River. The water level on the river has already been officially at flood stage for the longest period in recorded history, swollen with water from rain and snow from the Midwest. In March, the US Corps of Engineers opened the Bonnet Carre Spillway to the west of New Orleans, in order to divert water from the Mississippi into Lake Ponchartrain. While the spillway is typically open for only a few days or weeks, it is currently still open more than four months later.

An additional two to three feet of storm surge in the river, it was feared, could have overtopped the lowest levees in the area. Data suggested that the New Orleans neighborhoods of Algiers and the Lower Ninth Ward (which was destroyed and left depopulated after Katrina), as well as suburban communities in St. Bernard Parish, were most at risk.

Even though these predictions did not come to pass (many businesses even remained open in the city during the weekend), the fact that such predictions could have been reasonably made, in response to a relatively modest storm by the standards of the region, demonstrates the degree of unpreparedness nearly 14 years after Hurricane Katrina.



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